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DETECTIVE

STORIES

**TELL IT
TO THE
FEDS!**
by **TED
THOMEY**

**OPERATION
SKY-HIGH**

by **BRUCE
CASSIDAY**

— ALSO —

**RICHARD
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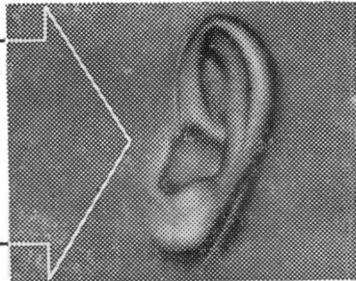
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F. B. I. DETECTIVE STORIES

Volume 2

October, 1949

Number 1

One Gripping G-man Novel

OPERATION SKY-HIGH **Bruce Cassiday** 10
FBI Agent Johnny Blood had to stick his neck out—to give an international munitions ring a Federal hot-foot.

Three Nouvelles of Feds in Action

WARRANT FOR AN OLD FLAME..... **John D. MacDonald** 62
I had to prove Uncle Sam doesn't let racketeering vultures fly the coop.

HOMICIDE, INC...... **Richard Deming** 76
G-man Sprague found it lots easier to get in the murder ring—than out.

GIFT-WRAPPED FOR THE GRAVE..... **Bill Erin** 110
Hitting a stolen-goods gang was simple—until Cory tried to steal home.

Four Exciting Short Stories

CRASH OR CREDIT..... **Paul W. Fairman** 44
Here's the way it is, friend—to be on a job for the FBI.

YOUR MURDER—MY MISTAKE..... **Francis Hamilton** 53
Mel thought the cocktail party'd be a brawl—not a deadly eight-ball.

TELL IT TO THE FEDS!..... **Tedd Thomey** 93
They called in the G-men—to cut down the extortioners' quota of kills.

SING, LITTLE SNOWBIRD!..... **Ray Marien** 105
Private-Eye Mayo went through his own private hell—to trap a hophhead gang.

Features

TRIGGER TOPIC **The Editor** 6
Here's the scoop on Roe Richmond's novelette—"When G-Guns Talk."

POPULAR FILMS **Ted Palmer** 8
Capsule comments on the latest new movies.

Next Issue Published October 21st

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TRIGGER TOPIC

FOR your reading pleasure we have a special fiction treat in the next issue, in which FBI Agent Duke Morey becomes entangled in a brand new, smooth and sinister racket. To G-man Morey that severe old brownstone building, with the fashionably tailored young men who lived in it, seemed like a very swank club. But these personable, faultlessly dressed young men were members of Ellinger's Escort Service. They were gallant gigolos who were rented out to glamorize life for lonely and forlorn maidens and tired matrons.

Federal Op Morey was tracking down a bevy of missing girls. He feared that these girls had disappeared broken hearted, ashamed, disgraced in the eyes of their families and friends. Some of these missing girls would end up in the river, in asylums, or on slabs in the morgue.

The escort service seemed a good hunch to Special Agent Morey, and, being a good-looking rugged young fellow, he filed an application to become a glamour gigolo. One of the first things Duke Morey observed was that underneath their faultlessly draped jackets, the gigolos wore shoulder holsters.

Ellinger, a naturally suspicious man, decided to test Duke Morey's loyalty. And Morey found himself in the impossible situation of being glamour escort to his own undercover government girl—who was slated to disappear. . . .

You won't want to miss this suspenseful story of G-man Morey, the missing maidens and the gun-heavy gigolos—in Roe Richmond's novelette, "When G-Guns Talk" . . . in the next issue of FBI DETECTIVE, published October 21, 1949.

The Editor.

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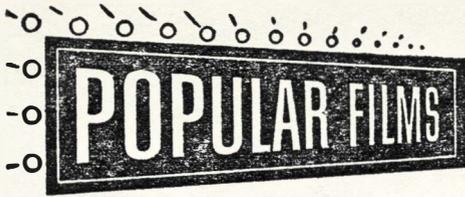
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For Mystery—"The Big Steal" with Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer and William Bendix (RKO).



When a \$300,000 Army payroll is stolen, Lt. Duke Halliday (Robert Mitchum) and Joan Grahame (Jane Greer) start across Mexico by car in pursuit of the thief. They, in turn, are pursued by Captain Vincent Blake (William Bendix) who has accused Duke of taking the money. As the chase progresses, the tension continues to mount until the swift, surprise ending. *The plot of the picture gets jumbled, but the thrill-a-minute pace will hold you in your seat.*



For Comedy-Romance—"The Lady Takes A Sailor" with Jane Wyman, Dennis Morgan, Eve Arden, Robert Douglas and Allyn Joslyn (Warner Bros.).



The lady (Jane Wyman) is president of a national research institute, impeccable, honest and engaged to a stuffy Harvard lawyer (Allyn Joslyn). People begin to doubt her integrity, however, when she returns from a sailboat trip and says that she has ridden with "Davey Jones" in a strange, underwater craft which was stalled by an octopus. Trying to straighten it out by proving that real-life Bill Craig (Dennis Morgan) was the mysterious "Davey" and that his craft was a new Navy underwater tank, is an hilarious task. *This is a daffy picture that will give you a full evening of laughter.*



For Drama—"The Great Gatsby" with Alan Ladd, Betty Field, MacDonald Carey, Ruth Hussey, Barry Sullivan, Howard Da Silva and Shelley Winters (Paramount).



Based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic about the roaring '20s, this film tells the tragic story of Jay Gatsby (Alan Ladd), who

became a bootlegger because he thought money could buy everything—even a rich man's wife. In the course of the story, Gatsby tries to crash Long Island society but finds it as false in its way of life as he is in his. In the end, awake at last to his empty daydreams, Gatsby is murdered for a crime he didn't commit. *Spottily played, this film claims its chief interest as a portrait of a wild and dizzy by-gone era.*



For Adventure—"Slattery's Hurricane" with



Richard Widmark, Linda Darnell, Veronica Lake and John Russell (20th Century-Fox).

Ex-Navy pilot, Will Slattery (Richard Widmark), now a chauffeur pilot for an importer, meets his war-time buddy, Felix Hobson (John Russell), who is hunting hurricanes for the Navy. He discovers that his one-time sweetheart, Aggie (Linda Darnell), is now Mrs. Hobson. The importer's secretary, Dolores (Veronica Lake), who is in love with Slattery, realizes that he is still interested in Aggie and disappears. While looking for Dolores and straightening out the situation between Aggie, Hobson and himself, Slattery finds that he is unwittingly involved in a narcotics smuggling ring. He finally makes amends by taking Hobson's place on a dangerous mission to locate a particularly vicious storm. *This is an exciting look into the lives of U. S. Navy hurricane hunters.*



For A Western—"Calamity Jane and Sam



Bass" with Yvonne De Carlo and Howard Duff (Universal-International). Technicolor.

Sam Bass (Howard Duff) had never fired a gun before he came to Denton, Texas. He learns fast, though, when the town banker has his horse poisoned prior to the big race of the year. Turned outlaw to recover money from the banker which is rightfully his, Bass takes to the hills with the assistance of Calamity Jane (Yvonne De Carlo). Sam's true love, Kathy Egan, convinces Sam that he should give himself up. When it looks like the jury for his trial will be packed against him by the banker, Sam escapes again with Calamity Jane's help. There's a showdown battle and Sam is fatally wounded. When he asks to be taken to Kathy, Calamity Jane realizes that Sam Bass was never for her. *There's enough action, color and different twists to make this a show that Western fans will want to see.*

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By BRUCE CASSIDAY



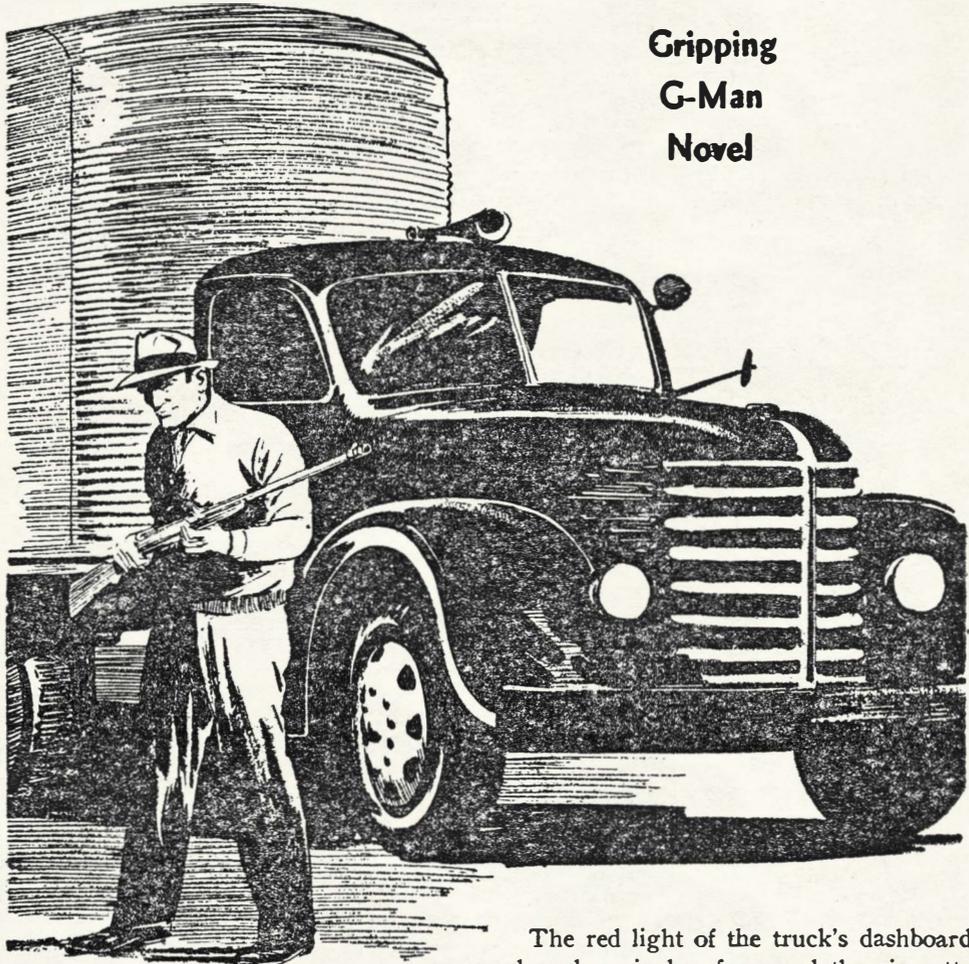
They were both grinning as they walked toward Johnny.

When he tracked the world-wide munitions ring to the High Sierras, G-man Johnny Blood's plans didn't include following his martyred buddy—to the bottom of Hangman's Lake.

SKY-HIGH



Gripping
G-Man
Novel



CHAPTER ONE

Hitch to Nowhere

SHE was a beautiful girl, with stars for eyes, cornsilk for hair, and candy for a mouth. She would have been the most beautiful girl in the world—except for the scar running jaggedly down her left cheek all the way to her chin. It was deep and red and ugly, and there was no way to cover it with makeup.

The red light of the truck's dashboard glowed up in her face, and the cigarette in her mouth hung down from one corner. Smoke crawled up into her eyes. She was spinning the heavy truck expertly along the winding macadam highway, but it took concentration, and she hunched over the wheel with care and deliberation.

She wore blue jeans and a man's white shirt, and over that a woolen sweater and a sheep-lined jacket. In the pocket of her jacket she carried a gun—a nifty little .25 Colt fully loaded. Even the lines of the man's gear she wore could not

hide the soft curves of her body, nor disguise the warm femininity that was in every move she made.

She was the cutest truck driver in the forty-eight states and all the territories.

But she was scared. She kept watching the highway ahead, kept her eyes glued to the writhing white line in the center of the snake-like strip, kept glancing covertly out into the woods beside the highway, where the jackpines and scrub oak sizzled past.

Ahead, she could see the foothills. In the distance a high, jagged peak reared into the sky. It was the highest peak anywhere around. The moonlight laid a glimmering mantle on the pines and rock. In the distance the snow cap on top glittered.

Once she glanced back through the rear view window in the cab, but all she saw was the red glow of the tail light swathing the highway she had traversed with a bloody red glow. The boxes were still piled in back, neat as a pin. Neat as a pin—and dangerous as a grenade.

The truck pounded and thundered along the roadway, its massive hulk of steel and canvas sending out combers of wind and sound into the restless pines and firs. The sign painted on the outside of the truck said: CONSOLIDATED SHIPPING COMPANY. LOS ANGELES—CHICAGO.

The girl started involuntarily. Had she heard a sound in that forest-clad slope? Had she heard a shot? Had she heard a yell, a scream? Or was it nerves?

The cigarette shook in her mouth, and her eyes widened for an instant. Her breath came faster and her heart hammered with excitement. But in a second she had command of herself again, and she clenched her hands on the big wheel, the gloves greasy and black around her hands.

The tires sang on the pavement, and the wind bit into her suddenly from

around the end of the windshield, making the cab an icebox. The chill scent of pine gum and resin drifted in to her, clean and fragrant.

She smiled. The scar twisted and curled when she smiled, but there was so much beauty in her face that it did not really matter that she was scarred. And then her eyes widened in horror and she slammed on the brakes with sudden desperation. She grabbed for the emergency and swung the big truck to one side.

A shot. Another. And still another. The woods rolled the sounds in on her, and terror twisted her face again. In the glow of the dash she looked very young and frightened. She stopped the engine and she grabbed out her little Colt .25. She pulled open the cab door and jumped down onto the cold pavement.

She had been ready for this. She ran around in back of the truck, ducking down on the side opposite the shots. For a long time she waited like that, but there was no further sound. The blackness of the gently swaying pines closed in around her with a ring of silence and peace, and she leaned there, in a torment of anxiety and suspense.

Then she heard it. A step. A faltering, blundering, dragging step. It was as if some one were coming out of the pines and onto the highway. She gripped the Colt in her hand and moved around in back of the truck, out of sight. Pressing herself tight to the truck, she eased around to a spot where she could peek along and see in front of the truck, into the streaming sea of white light the headlights gave out.

The shimmering sheet of glistening pine needles parted like a gigantic curtain, and a man came through. He was a tall man, tall and thin and tough. His hair was blond and curly, and his face was lean and long, with deep hollows for cheeks. He had blue eyes, and in the

brilliant headlights they glinted and burned. His chin was built for strength and determination. He was the kind of man you would prefer to have on your side.

He staggered as he came out into the pool of light, and then he glanced back over his shoulder. The gun in his hand was pointed downward, and he was carrying it wearily. He almost fell trying to jump the drainage ditch, but he made it all right and got to the pavement. She saw then that there was blood on his face—blood from a nick a bullet had made.

He came to one knee as he tried to make his way laboriously across the expanse of pavement to the truck. He sprawled there a moment, and then he looked up. His eyes were haunted with fatigue and pain, and he crawled along, exhausted, to the door of the cab. The gun in his hand hit the pavement and he looked down at it, then put it in his leather jacket. His jacket had rips in it.

The girl pocketed the .25 and bit her lips. She came out from in back of the truck and ran to him. She leaned over and dragged him to his feet. Grimacing in pain, he smiled gratefully at her, and hobbled along on her shoulder to the cab.

With her help he climbed inside it. She lit a cigarette for him and got in beside him. She put the cigarette in his mouth and he grinned his thanks. His face looked ancient as a statue in the Vatican.

He turned to her and looked her over. His eyes passed rapidly over the ugly crimson gash across her face, over the soft lines of her cheeks, over the rough man's clothes she wore, and then they returned to her eyes again. They were soft and brown, and they were not at all the way they should be. Lady truck drivers did not come gentle.

"Thanks," Johnny Blood said. He dragged on the cigarette and it seemed to

revive him. Instantly he remembered something, and he looked out into the dark pines again. But then he relaxed. "They're tired of following me now," he said wearily. "I hope the hell they are."

The girl touched the gun in her jacket grimly. Her brown eyes were anything but soft now. She watched him carefully and said:

"What are they— cops?"

He laughed. "Hardly. I guess I got into the wrong canyon today. Accident. I—I'm fishing up at Hangman's Lake."

She smiled ruefully. "Fishing for what? With that cannon you carry with you, I mean."

He shrugged. "So I'm a bum. So I'm stuck for dough and I need a lift to Hangman's Lake. Okay by you?"

She leaned back in the seat, reaching down for the gear shift and the brake. "Okay by me. What have I got to lose?"

She slammed the truck into gear and in no time flat they were barreling along the highway again, and pines were whizzing past and the cold air was climbing in on them from the sides of the cab.

She glanced at him and said: "They've been fishing funny things out of the lake lately. Take a tip from me, and ride the pass on through. There are better vacation spots in Nevada."

JOHNNY BLOOD, ace FBI man, sighed and slid down a bit into the seat, closing his eyes. "Hangman's Lake for me, sis. Wake me up when we get there."

She turned to him. "Now you're my responsibility, I suppose you think, eh?"

"You saved my life, sis. That makes you responsible for getting me to where I want to go." He turned his bland blue eyes on her. "That right?"

"All depends," she said slowly, "on what you were doing in the hills back there. Funny thing—I thought I heard

gun shots a while back. Now I know I heard them. What's your explanation of a strange phenomenon like that?"

Johnny Blood lifted a shoulder and dropped it again. "Beats me, sis. Must be the altitude. Everything else's the altitude around here."

She grinned tightly. "Even the unadulterated and unmitigated gall of some tall, lean, blond-type men?"

Blood laughed. "Even the predominance of luscious beauties driving trucks in the middle of the night for Consolidated Shipping Company."

She did not look at him. She could feel his eyes narrowing down on her.

"Consolidated Shipping Company," he mused. "That was the freight line that the guy worked for, wasn't it?"

She licked her lips. "Guy. What guy?"

"Al Hendricks. You know, the guy they fished out of Hangman's Lake. Now that's a mighty interesting coincidence, isn't it? He was working for Consolidated and he disappeared, and now you're working for Consolidated, too." Johnny Blood spoke like a man who had just discovered an oyster in his oyster soup.

The girl's lips pressed tight to her teeth and her face flamed crimson. She did not say a word. The truck ate up the pavement, lurching to one side as the road rounded a hump in the foothills. The yellow headlights slashed across the trunks of scrub pines by the roadbank.

"You trying to get killed, too, sis? Is that why you're driving this rig tonight? You trying to reenact the crime, or some such hooley?"

She did not smile. "Al Hendricks was one of the best spinners in our outfit, and he got killed. They found his body at the bottom of Hangman's Lake where someone had dumped it. Piled on top his body was a half ton of rock and shale—to keep it from floating up. His

shipment was never found at all. Maybe mine is next. I don't know."

She turned and glanced at him. Her eyes were on fire. "That what you want to know, mister? That interesting enough for you?"

Outside the jackpines spun by and the big tires ate up the curving ribbon of highway. The white line in the center of the lane writhed and twisted under the powerful headlights. The scent of pitch and pine gum came in to them on the wind.

She was watching him closely. "What's your name, mister? I think I might know you. I don't know why, but I think I might."

"You tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine, sis."

"Ann Martin," she said without hesitation.

Blood took out a cigarette and looked at it. This was getting difficult. No FBI man passes his name out on a calling card. And he hadn't had enough time to think the thing through. There were only a couple of names he could use.

"Okay," he said. He turned to her. "You got a light?"

She fumbled in her man's shirt for a box of matches, her eyes never leaving the road. She handed him the matches, and he took them from her gloved hand. "Cigarette?" he asked her.

She nodded. He lit two and stuck one in her mouth.

Only the bite of the tires into the pavement of the twisting mountain highway came through to them. They were alone in the separate worlds of their thoughts.

"Okay," he said. "You asked for it." He glanced at her. "Did you know Al Hendricks very well, sis?"

She stared ahead at the road, wrenching the wheel to spin the truck around a curved ravine. "I knew him," she said, licking her lips. It was almost as if

she could not speak easily about Al Hendricks at all. "Why?"

"Nice guy. One of the best, sis. I know. I'm his brother. Dan Hendricks is my name. Now you can see why I'm so interested in Hangman's Lake and everything in it—past, present, and future."

She gasped, her eyes going sick and bright in the darkness of the cab. Slowly she turned them to him. Then she suddenly braked the truck to a stop.

He could see the gun leap into her hand, but where it came from he could not guess. Shoulder holster? Belt? It didn't matter. It was trained on his stomach, and he could not reach his own in time because he had let his jacket twist around him. He stared down at the muzzle of the deadly little .25 Colt, and the sweat beaded out on his face.

His hands slowly rose beside his head to paw air. He watched her expression. There was no humor in her eyes. Just blind, unreasoning hate and a tortured fear.

CHAPTER TWO

E for Espionage

ONLY the soft sough of the breeze in the pines stirred the air about them. The hot, resting engine steamed and wheezed under the truck's hood, and its heat leaked out into the clear night. A sliver of moonlight filtered down through the pines above, and the ground was speckled with tiny slits of light and dark.

The mass of the truck reared behind her. She was facing him, her eyes big and bright with horror, the gun planted tightly in her little hand, its muzzle aimed straight at his belly. He could see only the gun muzzle and her soft face and the round curves of her body. She looked very frightened.

She was doing something she dreaded to do and yet something which she was afraid not to do. That was the way she seemed to Johnny Blood.

"Move back, Dan Hendricks," she said in a hoarse, tight voice. "Move back and stand there. And don't you dare try any tricks."

Johnny Blood backed away into the long clearing. Ann Martin had stopped the truck on a hairpin bend high in the mountains. The hairpin turn slid out over the end of Hangman's Lake, and the embankment dropped off sheer into the water thirty yards below.

Granite cliffs lunged down from the water level, and the lake looked as deep as a wineglass full of champagne. Once in that water, there would be no getting him out without grappling hooks or fish nets.

Johnny Blood backed toward the rim of the drop-off, and then stopped. He was a foot from the end of the gravel.

"Listen," she said, her voice tiny and scared. "You back up and stand right there. I guess I'm going to shoot you."

She moved toward him, her steps faltering and shaky, her face tight with excitement.

He said, "Unlimber yourself, sis. What's the trouble? I don't get it." Blood's voice was rock-steady. *Big bluff*, he grinned to himself with a grimace. *A busted flush with a sour deuce in the hole, and I'm bluffing it through.*

"You be quiet!" she cried, her voice breaking. She shivered, and walked along on the gravel as if she were walking barefoot on eggs. She was standing five feet from him. Her mouth quivered. The sight of her standing there brought a curious tightening to Johnny Blood's throat. He wondered ruefully if he was getting soft.

"So you're the great Dan Hendricks," she said, her voice feeble. "You thought you could bluff me along. Trying to make

me help you escape. Me—of all people!”

Icy claws tightened around Johnny Blood's heart. He could feel the hackles on the back of his neck rising. There was something unnerving in her voice—a half-hysterical tremor of hate and bitter fear. Why, when he could have picked any name in the world, had he chosen Dan Hendricks?

“You didn't know your brother told me everything, did you, Dan Hendricks? You didn't know he'd warned me about you!”

She straightened up, and her voice gained strength as the determination built in her. She threw back her head and looked up at him firmly, her chin a rock in the air, her feet braced firm behind her, her body stiff as a poker, her eyes fiery with indignation.

His voice came out flat and hollow. “What's the pitch, sis? Tell me more. Tell me more.”

An ironic little voice inside him said mockingly: *You wound a noose around your own neck, old buddy. Stall. Stall. It won't be pleasant fishing around in that frozen lake for a toehold, dodging flying bullets, will it? Think fast, mut-tonhead.*

She drew a deep breath and went on. “Sure. I can tell you now. You'll never pass it on. I knew Al. I knew him so well I was in love with him, Dan. I never loved anybody in my life like I loved him. And he was in love with me. *That's why he told me everything about you!*”

Blood smiled stiffly. “Yeah?”

“Everything. The stinking racket you were in, Dan Hendricks. The rotten way you double-crossed your own country—while you were supposed to be fighting overseas. The crazy way you turned into a killer—”

Her voice cracked. She ducked her head, and drew her free hand across her eyes suddenly, dashing away the silver tears with a furious gesture.

“And that girl! How you lied to her about Al. How you took her yourself. How you—oh, my Lord, Dan Hendricks! You're a maniac. You shouldn't be alive at all!”

Blood's face froze. His eyes went dark and inscrutable. His hands stayed level with his ears. He could not move them. He was too tense to move.

“Go on. Is there more?”

She moved forward defiantly. “Sure, there's more. He told me the most important thing of all—two days before he went on this run! Two days before he got killed! He told me to look out for you, Dan Hendricks, and if I ever found you, to kill you—*and ask questions later!*”

Blood's throat burned. His eyes were dark in the shadows of his brows as he studied the girl. He had never been in such a tight spot. He said: “Is that all, sis?”

“No! You killed him, Dan! He told me you would. He told me you'd come back and kill him, and he was right! You found him and you murdered him. ‘Don't let him go if you find him,’ he told me, time and time again. ‘He's a killer, and he'll get away from you! Don't let him go at all—not for an instant! Kill him! There are records to prove what kind of man he is. Kill him, and *then* ask questions!’”

HER body was a trembling fury, and the muzzle of the gun was shaking like pine needles in the wind. He saw her hand move a bit, and then suddenly it steadied. All the fear and terror inside her ran out of her like flour out of a broken sack, and the gun muzzle centered on his heart.

At that range, she couldn't possibly miss. He took one last look at the cold, bitter determination in her eyes, and he knew that inner strength that had come at the last minute to save her from the liquid fear of indecision.

The rifle shot smacked into the quiet air with the suddenness of thunder and lightning. But there was no orange stab of flame from her pistol, and Blood wondered curiously what had happened. Strangely, the hot burning lead did not crash into him. Blood stared at the girl's startled face and opened his mouth to speak.

At that moment the girl sagged in the middle, like a suit of clothes sliding off a hanger, and fell to one knee. The gun dropped out of her hand and clattered into the gravel by Blood's feet. Ann Martin's eyes closed and then opened quickly. She glanced up at him, her eyes big with pain.

Johnny Blood bent over and grasped her elbows. "What's the matter? What—?"

But even as he said it he saw the two figures stepping out from the shadow of the parked truck, sauntering over across the pavement to the spot where the girl struggled with consciousness. They were the same two road-runners he had surprised on the highway waiting to hijack the Consolidated Truck. They had gunned him out of the pines into the path of the truck, and then circled around in back and hopped in. It was all so simple—when you thought about it.

Both the men had guns. One carried a rifle—a Winchester deer rifle it looked like—and the other a sawed-off 20 gauge Mossberg. They were both grinning as they walked—a pair of killers out on a moonlight stroll.

One of the men looked like a dutch oven in action. Smoke billowed out of his face a mile a minute—big black clouds of it—from a twisted, gnarled pipe that looked like a pickled kidney.

He was full of laughs, the dutch oven was. His face had been left over from the gremlin assembly line, and his body had been loaned from a pork barrel house. His arms and legs bugged out like toy

balloons. His face was wreathed in a lot of wrinkles and his mouth was curved and grinning.

He carried the Winchester. A laugh guttered out around the edges of the smoldering kidney-shape pipe as he lifted the rifle to point it straight at Ann Martin.

Whimpering, Ann Martin bowed her head down into her body, trying to crawl inside herself. Johnny Blood stood above her, too angry to reach down and scoop up the pistol—knowing that if he did so he would be blasted back into the lake, but thinking it would be a damned good price to pay for smashing down the song-and-dance team coming at him.

The other was as lank as Dutch was round. Slim was a loose-jointed comedian with a skull for a head, and an erector-set for a body. He moved like an automatic man on a string, and his large shoes shuffled across the pavement like planks of lumber.

He was grinning from the bare top of his skull to the splayed bottoms of his outsize shoes. He lifted the sawed-off Mossberg and thumbed a shot that sizzled through Johnny Blood's hair. Blood stood immobile, anger boiling up in him like molten lava. But he did not move. To do so would have been instant death—and no chance to pay these vultures back in kind.

Dutch waved the Winchester at the girl and cried out: "Get up on your feet, girl! Come on! Fast!"

Blood's fists knotted at his ears and he opened his mouth to speak.

"Not so fast, Big Guy!" lisped Slim, winging his second shot into the air by Blood's head.

The hot boil of gunflame seared across Johnny Blood's forehead, but he did not move. He closed his mouth and clamped it shut. These two were guys he was going to remember in his will. Or maybe before his will. It didn't matter much

right now. Now or then. All the same.

Dutch leaned over the girl and tore her up off the pavement, thrusting her to her feet. Ann Martin whimpered as she stood there swaying, holding her left arm tightly to her body. Her face was drenched with perspiration.

Blood's lips cracked and he grated out: "Can't you see she's hurt? Get your filthy paws off her, Fat!"

Dutch grinned at Slim. "Hear that, Slim?"

Slim stepped over and lashed the back of his knuckly hand across Johnny Blood's face. "Yeah," said Slim. "I hear it, Dutch." He lashed the back of his hand across Johnny's face again. Blood seeped into Johnny's mouth but he stood there stiffly.

"You got tough jaw bones," grumbled Slim, looking down at his bruised knuckles.

Dutch steadied the girl in his arms, and the black stinking smoke from his pipe curled into her hair and her eyes.

"Where is it, honey? Where's the stuff you and your wise guy friend have hijacked? Where did you put it?"

The girl shook her head dazedly. Blood's temples throbbed. "Let her alone, Fat!" he shouted. "Hear me? Let her—"

Slim pasted his knuckles into Blood's face again. His flesh twitching from anger and from pain, Johnny Blood held himself in through sheer will power. His eyes glowered and his cheek kept jerking up.

Dutch lifted the girl's terrified face to his own. "We want to know where the stuff is, honey."

The girl turned agonized eyes to Johnny Blood. She hung limply there next to Dutch, too weak to push herself away, too sick to move. Blood's hands clenched tighter.

Slim's hot whisper came in Blood's ear: "One little tiny move from you, Big Guy, and I'll blast your guts out."

Dutch put his hand on the girl's chin. He leaned over her to pull her to him. Weakly, almost as if she were in a dream, Ann Martin drew back her hand and smashed it into his face. Dutch staggered back, but he still had hold of her arm. He twisted on it, and Ann Martin pitched over onto the pavement. As she went down she went into a deep faint, and was limp as a rag when she hit.

The world turned black and red for Johnny Blood. He lashed out a fist at Slim beside him and jumped for Dutch. He could remember feeling the smash as his knuckles tore into Dutch's pipe-hung mouth, but then there was nothing. The blinding, orange wash of fire and brimstone tore through him and he mercifully forgot.

He was falling down and down and down, and he kept waiting for the cold, icy thrust of water to smash into him and keep his head from spinning. But nothing happened. Nothing at all. . . .

IT HAD all seemed fairly simple and routine when Pops Brannigan had outlined it to Johnny Blood three days before in the office marked:

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
LOS ANGELES DIVISION

Old Pops Brannigan was a thin-faced, hook-nosed man with a wolf look to his eyes and a panther walk to his long legs. He prowled about the tiny office, thinking, while Johnny Blood sat opposite him, and when Pop had thought it all out he sat down. He took out a pack of colored peppermints and stuffed a couple in his mouth.

"This is a Tale of Two Cities, Blood. Two cities in two different countries in the world. Two countries that are not at war now, but would like to be at war. Indirectly, these two countries are sparring with each other on distant shores,

girding their loins, as it were, for a big skirmish later.

"It is no Boston Tea Party you're invited to attend, Blood. This is a case in Category A—and you know what that means. Espionage, with a capital E. Espionage with war growing all over it like barnacles. Munitions—big stuff, not guns. Tanks, bomber, big supplies.

"Listen awhile. An FBI man named Hendricks was killed last week, his body found in the bottom of Hangman's Lake up in the High Sierras. Worked for Consolidated Shipping, and he was on the track of a big smuggling ring. The big smuggling ring works for a country we shall call Country X. I'll tell it from the beginning.

"Year ago we nailed some wise guys shipping guns and bombs and little stuff down to Indo-China—the new proving grounds for the next war. That's where countries X and Z are slugging it out now. Well, this year a man named William Wolfe—a European correspondent—spotted new developments. There's lots more big stuff coming through, this time up in the Mediterranean area.

"We sent Al Hendricks to contact William Wolfe in Paris. Wolfe never made the meeting. You may remember reading about the Wolfe case in the papers. His body was recovered in the middle of Lake Ladoga in Italy on the Swiss Border. Lots of flurry in international circles, but nothing ever came of it. Never found out who did it. It might have been a spy for Country X, or it might have been a spy for Country Z. Both were anxious to find out the location of the stuff, and both were anxious to prevent us from finding out it was getting out.

"But William Wolfe had sent a letter to Hendricks—he'd suspected there were agents on his tail. The letter was vague, but it told a lot. It led Hendricks to a roadhouse outside Chicago. There, from a girl named Jackie Hall, Hendricks

picked up some information that was hot as burnt toast.

"The munitions were being shipped from Los Angeles to Chicago. Hendricks got a job with Consolidated Shipping Company, because that was the outfit mentioned by this Jackie Hall. Well, Jackie is dead now, Blood. We tracked her down and she had been killed 'accidentally' in a fire at the roadhouse. That's what's on the records. We figure she got it for spilling information. A cold bunch of operators, eh, Blood?"

Pop held out his hand. "Pep'mint? White ones are plenty good.

"Well, Hendricks got the job with Consolidated and just last week got his first chance at a hot load. We knew the stuff was being dumped off somewhere along the line, but we didn't know exactly where. Hendricks never reported what happened, because they got him. They got him and pushed a half ton of rock over him to hold his body down. If it hadn't been for a curious archeologist who discovered the landslide, and began wondering, we never would have found the body.

"We know now Hangman's Lake is a red area for this operation. So it's simple. All you've got to do is go up there, find out who the kingpin is, and drop him in his tracks. Smoke 'em all out, play 'em for suckers, and then rope 'em in."

"Sure, sure," Johnny Blood said.

"They're ruthless. Don't let 'em get a chance to blast you down, or they will. Play a tight game. You get in trouble, there's no one to help you out at all. It's just tough luck.

"Pep'mint? Green ones are good, too. My stomach's shot to hell. Need something to settle it."

And that had ended the interview.

So Blood had followed orders to a T. He had studied the lay of the lake from the pines, and he had scouted the forest nearby. Then, watching for the Consolidated truck, he had surprised the two

gunmen waiting to hijack the load, and had drawn their gunfire.

And now here he was sailing down into the black depths of hell itself. He knew his T's all right—but not his P's and Q's. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Mile-High Murder

THE world was gently rocking, and the cold breeze was washing over him there in the pits of eternity. There was the smell of water and tar and creosote. There was the feel of hemp ropes and rusty wire under his wrists.

He was tied by the wrists, and they were twisted around in back of him. Somehow he had fallen on his back, his hands beneath him. His legs were bound with rope, too, and his ankles were rubbed raw.

He opened his eyes. Jagged lances of pain shot across his vision. Then his vision cleared and he could see nothing but the cold blue of dark sky. Off to the left hung a curved sliver of moon like a canoe in the sky.

They rocked along, and there was no sound but the gentle throbbing of the outboard motor. Next to him he could feel the girl. She was sitting up, her hands bound too. He could make out the bare profile of her head. Then he saw the outlines of the small fishing boat they were in, and a moment later he sat up, his head splitting down the center with jagged knives of pain.

She saw him and turned her face to him. Her brown eyes studied him and then she turned away. It was almost as if she were ashamed of herself for having gotten him into this thing.

He caught the stink of the pipe then, and a moment later the rounded, grinning face of Dutch loomed up over him. The boat rocked as Dutch climbed over the

ropes toward him. Dutch lifted the pipe out of his mouth and blew smoke into Johnny Blood's face.

"Hi ya, pal," he boomed, slipping the pipe back into his mouth, folding his arms in front of him. "Nice riding job, huh?"

"Where the hell are we?" muttered Blood, tasting the bruises inside his mouth, feeling the dull ache in his side, the clotted scab on his shoulder.

"Hangman's Lake!" grinned Dutch. "That's right, isn't it, honey?"

Ann Martin turned to face Dutch, and after she glared at him a minute she turned away. Blood could see that either Dutch or Slim had bandaged up her arm. There was a lot of blood on the bandage, but apparently the wound was clean.

Blood looked around him. They were cruising along in the middle of the lake, headed north. Above him the stars twinkled in a clear, million-mile-high sky. Ahead of them loomed the pine-covered slope of the peak. He could see firs and pines and then rock boulders above the timber line, and then a cap of snow at the top.

"Hell of a nice place for fishing," grinned Dutch, his big face wreathed in wrinkles. "They'll be fishing you out one of these days, too—both of you—if you don't loosen up. Big haul. Guy and his girl. Live bait. How about that?"

The boat rocked and Slim joined Dutch, his bony skull looming up beside the fat boy's. "He woke up, Dutch! Look at that! You think they want to sing yet?"

Dutch grinned. "Not yet, Slim. Later perhaps. They'll make such beautiful music together, won't they? No matter which song they decide to sing."

Slim reached out a hand and stroked Blood's jaw tenderly. "Boy, what a lovely glass jaw this one's got, Dutch. Too bad there won't be much more chance to use it. The fish'll get it to gnaw on—if things don't turn out right."

"Hands off, Slim," murmured Dutch

gently. "Nice view of the lake, huh, kids? Take a long gander at that slab of rock over there hanging out from the rock cliff. See it?"

Johnny Blood turned sideways and stared off past the pudgy finger of the gremlin's hand. Jutting out from a smooth rock face was a long slab of rock, and the angle it took made it resemble a gallow's arm. That formation was Hangman's Rock.

"There's your epitaph—if you don't wise up, Wise Guy. Lots of bodies been turning up in the waters around here, kids. Week in and week out. Nobody ever seems to get the idea—to lay off and let us be. Well, as long as guys continue to be Wise Guys, the lake'll be loaded with dead men."

The boat edged over the water, the outboard behind them putting along smoothly. Blood studied the lake. It was formed in the shape of a giant halfmoon, and

Hangman's Rock was down at one point of it. Near Hangman's Rock there was no shore at all, only steep cliffs dropping down into the water. Judging from the formation above, it seemed that the rock dropped down sheer into a bottomless funnel. It would be hell trying to get ashore from the water under Hangman's Rock.

Along to the right, the rock cliff tapered down to the water, and the pines grew to the edge of the lake. Farther along to the right, a sandy shore spread out, narrow at first, and then wider and wider. At the spot where the shore grew widest there was a two-story lodge and in the lodge there were lights burning even now. They seemed to be flickering Coleman lamps, but it was hard to tell from the end of the lake.

Slim's skull disappeared and he went back to the rudder of the boat. Dutch remained, grinning at his prisoners.

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"Honey, you're not saying much. Cat got your tongue?"

Ann Martin turned to him and gazed at him coldly. She did not say a word.

Dutch's jaw muscles tensed up, and a big vein on his forehead knotted out. His mouth tightened across and his nostrils flared. He removed the kidney pipe and held it thoughtfully in his hand.

"You're not being very cooperative, Ann. You'd think you disapproved of our little cruise. You look out, or there'll be two scars on that face of yours—instead of the one you've already got!"

The girl's face turned deathly white. Her eyes burned and her mouth twitched at one corner. She twisted and wrenched at the ropes around her wrists and ankles, and big, glistening tears slid out of her eyes.

"Can't you leave me alone? My Lord, I'll never get away from you, will I?"

DUTCH inserted the pipe in his mouth again and sucked on it contentedly. "You didn't think you could, did you, Scarface Ann? You didn't think we'd forget—with the records and the dossiers and the photographs? After that slimy sell-out you pulled in New York last summer, you didn't think we've have any mercy left for you, did you, Ann?"

The fire went out of her and she slumped in the boat. She lay there against the gunwale, not moving a bit.

Dutch took out his pipe and jabbed it toward the girl's still body.

"An informer on our Organization," he said, chuckling to Blood. "That's what happens in the War of the Worlds. A two-timer. A sell-out. Our records are good records, my friend. We track them down if they play us for suckers, and we get them! We get them and we kill them!"

The girl's shoulders shook and she held her face in her hands, trying valiantly to stop her sobbing.

Dutch went on. "There's no use to talk now, Ann. Your day has come. With that lovely scar we gave you, it was no trouble at all to locate you. We've had men tailing you for months now. Ever since you turned up in Los Angeles. And when you hired on at Consolidated—it was a cinch.

"You were smart, all right, tracking down our ring that way. And finding the stuff tonight in that false-bottom truck and hiding it somewhere down the road. Very bright. But why didn't you think we'd climb in and wait to get you? How come you didn't think that far ahead, Ann?"

False-bottom trucks! Sure, Johnny Blood thought. That was how they sneaked through the stuff every time. They'd slip it out at an appointed spot, reassemble it all later, and then shoot it over from the assembly spot. And Hangman's Lake would be the assembly spot all right. That was the reason Al Hendricks had been killed here. He had spotted the pile and been found.

They were sailing under the big shadow of Hangman's Rock now. The lake water shimmered and danced about them, and the granite cliff reared up into a towering wall facing down on them. Ten yards or more above, the dark pines began and stretched up steeply to the boulder-strewn mountains and the ice cap above.

Dutch laughed again. He turned his head and looked up at the bizarre formation. He turned around and smirked at them over the end of his pipe.

"That's your tombstone, kids. Pretty isn't it? Nice and picturesque. Nice and symbolic, huh? Some people like to die pretty."

Dutch blew smoke thoughtfully out. "Of course, there's one chance in a million that you don't have to feed the fishes that way. One chance in a billion, let's say. I don't know if I'd be insulting your intelligence or not if I asked you—would

you two like to hear about that chance?"

The girl sat up fiercely and glared at Dutch.

"Since you asked so nice, honey—one chance. You tell me where that equipment is, honey, and I'll let you and your boyfriend here go. Scot free. No strings attached. That's it, honey."

The gremlin's face was no longer wreathed in wrinkles. It was the face of a hangman, the face of a professional executioner, happy in his work.

She shook her head stubbornly, her big terrified eyes looking across at Johnny Blood. She sobbed it out suddenly, almost as if she couldn't hold it in any longer:

"You're not Dan Hendricks, are you? You're somebody else, and I got you into this awful mess all by myself!"

Blood grinned at her. "I love trouble."

Dutch's face was closer, looming up over them like a distorted close-up on a movie screen.

"Where is it, honey? Come on, Scar-face Ann! This is your last chance to breathe like a human being! You don't want to die a mermaid, do you, honey? Talk! Where's the stuff cached?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Stifling a violent curse, Dutch puffed furiously on his pipe. It filtered out like smoke from a smudge pot. His pop-eyes glared through it at them.

Dutch glanced up in the air above them. The gallows hung out over them. Slim shut off the outboard, and there was no sound at all but the hungry lapping of waves against the edge of the boat.

"The stuff was right here, kids. Right under this boat. Hidden neat as a pin under a rock ledge. Waterproof containers. Crates and boxes of converter parts. Enough to convert all the tractors in Europe into half-tracks and machines of war! For us!"

Blood tensed. So that was it. Not the whole machines—that was too risky. But

parts—parts that could convert tractors to half-tracks, jeeps to jets, freights to bombers. Converters! No wonder the stuff was getting through.

"Tell us where you took it to," Dutch said quietly. "Tell us, or else you'll both go for a nice long dive. A one-way dive."

But once again Ann Martin shook her head stubbornly. Tears glistened in her eyes and she turned to Johnny Blood. She did not say a word, but there was enough in her eyes to tell him all he wanted to know. He nodded back reassuringly.

Dutch removed a small pocket flash light from his pocket. "Kids, take a look at this." He ran the torch over their bodies. They were both bound by the ankles and the wrists with heavy wire, twisted tight with pliers. The torch wandered down over them, and came to rest on their feet.

"Look at that," grinned Dutch cheerfully, clenching his pipe in his mouth. The torch danced over their ankles. To the wire there was riveted on another steel length of chain. The torch followed along the glistening chain and five feet from that came to a metal clasp.

Blood sucked in air, and tried to keep from gasping. The girl shuddered and sobbed out involuntarily.

The metal clasp was locked around a big smooth stone that must have been at least two feet across by three feet wide and a foot and a half thick. And there was one of these bound to the bottom of the chains on both of them.

THE torch played around on the rock and the metal clasp for a long time. Blood's lips sucked in tight to his teeth and the big veins throbbed in his forehead. His eyes burned and his neck was wet with sweat.

The torch went out. Dutch chuckled.

"Well?" he said. "How's about that little bit of information? Otherwise, it's

going to be over the side for you both.”

Blood waited in the dark, satisfied that the girl would not give in. His ankles throbbed with the pain of the twisted wire, and his wrists were rubbed raw. He could not even alter his position in the boat bottom enough to get at either of the two gunmen. But thank God they would never find the stolen goods. Where the goods really were was another problem.

A problem, Blood thought wryly, that someone else would have to solve. Along with the puzzle of—what ever happened to Johnny Blood?

“Wait!” gasped the girl. Blood swung around and stared at her. The girl’s eyes were big and sick and her mouth was trembling. The scar was livid. She did not look at Blood at all. She could not.

Blood pleaded: “Don’t tell! Don’t say a word! Sis, it’s not your fault I’m here! Don’t tell!”

But when she turned her anguished face to him, he knew that it was not for him she was selling out. It was for herself. She was broken. She had been through too much at the hands of these murderers already. She had been scarred, and hunted, and shot at too long. Even the toughest can crack under too much hell.

“I know where it is,” she said mechanically, dreamily, like someone in the middle of a nightmare. Her eyes were icy and blue, staring straight in front of her. “I’ll tell. Don’t do anything more to me! I’ll tell!”

“No!” shouted Blood. “They’ll kill you anyway! They’ll—”

Dutch’s pistol was in his hands in a flash, and he smashed it against Blood’s cheek. “Shut up!”

The girl was sobbing and crying. “Don’t hit him! Don’t! I’ll tell!”

Suddenly Dutch drew back and stood up in the boat. Slim stood up beside Dutch, and they both were staring out over the water toward the cliff near the end of the promontory.

But it was not from that direction that the noise came. It was as if the sky had become alive with a great booming, bleating cry. From up there in the pines, at the top of the cliff, came the throbbing tones of a gigantic loudspeaker, blating down at them.

“Drop your guns down there! We’ve got enough artillery up here to sink you in two seconds. Throw ’em in the water and raise your hands.”

“The hell!” cried Dutch, grabbing up his Winchester from the bottom of the boat. He winged shots up into the blackness above.

Instantly all hell cut loose from up there. Blazing blue kleig lights smashed on, and the burning illumination poured down over them in a shimmering flood. At the same time a dozen rifles opened fire and peppered hot lead into the lake.

Lead nicked the boat and tore past Blood and the girl as they lay crouched there in the blackness.

“The ranger!” cried the girl. “I called him from the coffee shop down the road and told him to watch out for me—to be prepared for trouble. We’ll be all right, I guess, mister.”

“The ranger?” Blood repeated. “The forest ranger?”

“I understand he checks all the trucks through here. I thought there would be trouble tonight. I’m a truck company detective, and these boys know who I am. I’ve been fighting them all ever since—well—” she touched her face—“this.”

Dutch howled with pain, and there was a loud splash as his gun leaped down into the water.

Slim snarled, “Damn you, Dutch! What’d you drop that thing for? I can’t hold ’em off alone!”

“Try, you yellow-bellied son!” snapped Dutch, going for a hunk of his own shirt. He ripped off a slice and bound his arm up with it. A little blood poured out onto the clean cloth, staining it a rich red. Slim

winged back a few more dutiful shots, and then he yelled at Dutch:

"I can't hold 'em off forever! Throw up the white flag, Dutch! I'm damned if I'll go out this way. I want a public trial! The hell with this martyr stuff!"

There was a long, loaded silence. "Right you are, Slim." Dutch rose slowly up in the boat, facing the blinding glare of lights, head first into the buzzing hell of flying slugs. "All right!" he said loudly. "We'll come up. Cut out the damned firing. You got us, dead to rights."

The loudspeaker opened up again, clear and unworried: "Throw that gun overboard, and we'll be down to get you."

With a snarl, Slim stood up and chucked his sawed-off Mossberg into the water. It slid down, and ripples fanned out from the spot. "Okay, I'm clean now," Slim growled. "Come and get us."

Seconds later a high-powered dory edged around the end of the rock promontory. Dutch sighed. They *had* heard a noise out there. The boat had been waiting all the time. They'd sprung a lovely

little trap. Ruefully Dutch and Slim handed themselves over into the dory, always keeping in the illumination of the bright lights.

The tall man on the cliff behind the microphone bawled down to the men in the dory:

"Don't hurt the girl. And better look out for the guy with her."

Two men helped Blood and Ann Martin into the dory, and they sat down opposite Slim and Dutch. Neither of the two gunmen had anything to say. Each sat on the board, staring glumly at his feet.

Blood and the girl kept their mouths shut. One of the two men gunned the dory motor, and the other kept a rifle trained on his prisoners.

The dory started up, and the bright lights above switched off abruptly. Smoke from the guns began to clear from the lake surface.

There was only the sound of the dory's high-powered motor as the boat turned and headed for the ranger's lodge.



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CHAPTER FOUR

Death on Rubbers

AT THE west end of the big lodge there was a bar room separated from the lobby. There were two windows in it, one facing out into the firs, and the other facing into the lake. Through the lake window Johnny Blood watched the glimmer of the water. In the distance across the lake, dark mountains reared up from the shore.

Blood was the only one in the bar room. The door was closed. Outside, a man was stationed with a shotgun, keeping the world out, and Blood in. The ranger had taken the two gunmen and Ann Martin with him.

Blood walked over to the window and stood there, looking at his watch. Two hours. Two hours and eleven minutes.

At that instant the door opened and the forest ranger strode in. He closed the door tight behind him and stood there looking down at Johnny Blood. Not many men had ever looked down on Johnny Blood before, but this one had the height to do it. He was close to six feet five.

His frame was big and wide and it had plenty of meat on it. It was corded and moulded into a whip-leather toughness. There wasn't a spare layer of fat at all. His face was full and long, and his skin was smooth and tanned. His hair was curly and brown, and there was a lick of it that kept falling down over his forehead and getting in his eye. His eyes were steady and gray. They kept watching Johnny Blood, quietly and penetratingly.

There was about the man a sense of will power and physical vitality that could crush everything about it. He looked more like a tree than a man, more like a mountain than a human being. He was a man who had supreme control of his emotions, his muscles, and his brain. And at the same time there was a fascination,

and a hard animal attraction about him.

In his hand he held a long thin metal chain. Blood's eyes followed the curve of the chain curiously. It looped down toward the floor. The chain hooked on to a golden collar. Blood's eyes narrowed in surprise. Wearing the golden collar was an immense gray bobcat, and its yellow eyes were glittering up at Johnny Blood, sizing him up.

The bobcat's ears were scarred, and its gray hide was torn and battered with countless welts and tears. It blinked its eyes at Blood, laid its ears back alongside its proud head, and flicked its bristly whiskers.

Sensing Blood's surprise and annoyance, the ranger smiled, his gray eyes flat in the half light of the bar room. He moved across the room like a stalking panther and stood beside Blood to look out the window onto the lake. When he moved, his tremendous body rippled with grace and power.

The bobcat loped along after him, its padded paws making no sound at all. It heaved himself down on its side and lay there on the floor, staring up at Johnny Blood. There was an animal arrogance in his yellow killer's eyes as it eyed Johnny Blood. Then it winked again and closed its eyes. Blood felt prickles run along his spine.

The ranger turned from the window. "Sit down, friend. No use standing up now. Rest. Relax. Do like Satan does."

The bobcat on the floor flicked its beat-up ears and opened its yellow, blinking eyes. Then it sighed and went back to sleep again, its stub tail twitching at the end of its powerful body.

The ranger crossed to a chair and sat down easily, crossed his legs, flinging one booted ankle up over the other, and pulling out a pack of Bull Durham from his shirt pocket. Expertly, he rolled himself a smoke and licked it off. His gray eyes were on Blood's face as he did so.

"I always believe in being neighborly, stranger, and I think it's only fair play for us to lay our cards on the table. I'm Sam Gray. Ranger Gray of the U.S. Forestry Division."

He smiled and snapped a match into flame with his thumb. "I'm from Texas, by way of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Oregon. That accounts for my accent, my slight drawl, my sunburn, and most of all, my unbelievable damned patience." The gray eyes glanced at Blood.

"I'll wait forever for what I want. I've found out by now that no matter how hard you push people, they're like trees, and they just won't come down. You've got to wait. Wait and listen. Listen and rest."

Ranger Gray leaned back in the seat he had taken. "Stranger, like I said, I'm Sam Gray. Would you like to tell me your name? Your real name, I mean. Not Dan Hendricks."

Blood looked down at the bobcat and glanced up at Gray. "And the bobcat's name is Satan, huh?"

Gray rubbed his cheek with his thumb. "Man has to have a companion, living out in the hills like this. Otherwise he'd go plumb loony. Yes sir, mister, this here's my companion. Old Satan. Makes a nice traveling companion, mister, once you get used to him. I let 'im loose when we're in the pines together. Nice range country for a cat."

Blood smiled. "Probably makes a fine bloodhound, too, doesn't he?"

Gray's eyes narrowed slightly. Through a veil of blue smoke he watched Blood's face closely. "That could be, Mister—uh—?"

Blood's teeth glistened in a wide smile. "Dan Hendricks. I'm Al Hendricks' brother. The man who was murdered here last week."

Casually Gray blew smoke toward the ceiling and said nothing. He loosened the

steel chain from around his wrist and laid the clasp on the edge of the chair. His mouth lifted at each corner in a slight smile. But his eyes were hard. He leaned forward slowly, his hands on his knees.

He said: "I can wait forever, stranger. Forever may be a long, long time. But right now it's closer than it was a minute ago. If you look at it that way, it may not be too long from now that you loosen up."

BLOOD looked out across the lake. "Why do you think I'm not Dan Hendricks? Is there any reason to believe I'm lying?"

Ranger Gray leaned back in his chair. He steepled his large hands together, and Blood could see how strong the supple fingers were. Satan stirred an instant at Gray's feet, restless in a dream, and then it settled down quietly. The ranger's eyes were slits in his face. The rolled cigarette hung limply from his mouth.

"Yeah. Your buddies ratted on you, friend. They wouldn't tell us your right name, but they did tell us who you were, and what you were getting out of this little wingding. You and your—friends."

Gray's face hardened. He took the smoking cigarette out of his mouth and held it in his hand. His face turned dark and it was almost like a coarse mask over his feature.

"The Boss. The Big Shot. The Chief Executive. We know who you are, friend! We know everything about you—only we don't know your name. Come on. Snap out of it. *What is it?*"

Blood leaned back in his chair, relaxed suddenly in every muscle. The swirling hatred twisting Sam Gray apart only made him laugh, after the cool game Gray had played up to now. The game of the cold, intellectual, iron-willed force, the man of inflexible iron. Oddly enough, although he knew Gray was on the same side of the fence that he was, the sight of the self-possessed giant's rage amused him.

"What about that girl, Ann Martin? Didn't you ask her questions?"

Gray's eyes were black with anger. The tough vein in his temple throbbed and knotted. His rock-hard face was only six inches from Blood's. His voice came out soft and hoarse as cotton.

"Damn the girl! She's been shot and she's weak. Who's running this job, Hendricks? Who's responsible for it? Who killed Al Hendricks? Who killed Jackie Hall in Chicago? Who killed William Wolfe in Italy? Was it you? Are you the man? Or are you only an innocent bystander? Are you another who also serves and waits—for orders?"

The sweat was rolling down Gray's face. His eyes were dilated. His mouth was a twist of gray flesh and his hair was unruly and matted with sweat. He sat there, his face close to Blood's, the hate running slowly out of him.

"You know an awful lot about all this, it seems to me," Blood said mildly. "You a detective or something, Gray?"

Gray leaned back suddenly. "Maybe I am, mister. Or maybe I'm just a forest ranger who does a lot of newspaper reading in his spare time." Gray turned his head slightly and glanced at the door to the main room of the lodge.

"Or maybe I'm a guy who has a mark on him as plain as the scar on the face of that beautiful girl—a mark that says I'll die too, the minute those fellows get me cornered!"

Blood's eyes narrowed. Gray's face was hot with tension, and fear hid in the far corners. Prickles of uneasiness ran up and down Blood's backbone.

"Look," said Gray.

Blood glanced up. Gray was twisting open his shirt front, exposing the massive bare chest. Blood's eyes widened. From the top of Gray's left shoulder, running diagonally across his chest, a livid, jagged scar slashed along, as if it had been dug there by a burning scalpel. It was the

same kind of scar that seared the cheek of Ann Martin. A brand of distinction. A brand of honor.

Gray's mouth was bent in sardonic satisfaction. Slowly he buttoned up his shirt. "Now you see, friend? The whole thing is true. The girl and I are both hunted. We have to find them before they find us. Those two stooges don't matter at all. They planted the blame on you right away, because they figured I'd fall for it."

Gray smiled down at Satan. "But I knew too much to do that. That's why I had to find out where you stood, stranger. So I bluffed. And you'll do."

Blood leaned forward. "Do?"

Gray stroked the neck of the bobcat. He glanced up, his eyes flat. In the back of them Blood suddenly saw a flicker of yellow—almost like the glint of the cat's eye.

"With your help I can trick them out into the open. Somewhere among the people in this lodge, at this lake, is the one man we want. The man who wants me—who will kill me the minute he discovers I am the man with the scar."

Blood slid back in his chair. "The scar on the girl's face—wouldn't that have tipped him off already?"

"A good logical thought," Gray nodded. "I can only answer you this. They want me worse than they want the girl. She is finished off; the kiss of death is on her already, friend. They know where she is every day of her life. Her life will always be a hell on earth. But me—it is not so easy for them to find me.

"The brand was applied a long time ago. I was only in my teens. You see? All my life I have lived in seclusion. In the desert. In the mountains. In the hills. That is why I became a ranger. And now—the end of the trail is in sight."

Blood nodded. "What can I do?"

Gray looped the clasp of the steel chain around his wrist again. He stood up and

looked through the window onto the lake. "There's a guard at your door. There is also a guard outside. Inside the lodge are still several guests. Also several deputies from Cedar City. I have no idea who is working for them and who is not. I have my suspicions, but even those mean nothing."

"So?"

"The guard at the door will doze off several hours from now. I doubt that it will be but a half hour before someone comes into this room to befriend you and help you escape. They will pump you for information, once they have you out of here. But if I know who the man is who comes to you. . . ."

Blood nodded. "Okay. Sounds legit to me. How about a gun for me? This is some damned tough chore, pal."

There was a long pause. "I'm sorry, friend. I can't do that. You're on your own from here on in. I've given you all the information I can. I can't do any more."

Blood stood up, extending his hand. "Well, that's good enough for me. You're on the square, Gray. If you'd handed me a cannon after dreaming up a weirdy like that one, I'd have known you were a phony. Thanks. I'll be waiting, and we'll

see what happens next. Okay, partner?"

RANGER GRAY'S face broke into a smile and he grabbed Blood's hand and gripped it tight. Then he wheeled around and stalked out of the room, a big man, with determination and stubbornness in his walk. Satan followed, padding soundlessly across the floor, his eyes blazing back at Blood for a swift fleeting instant. Death on rubber feet.

And Johnny Blood stood staring out into the lake, rubbing his jaw with his hand, turning things over and over in his mind. The more complex things got, the more they fell into place in the big picture. He was almost smiling as he eased back into the rawhide-covered chair to wait. . . .

She came in through the door, like a shadow, and for a moment Johnny Blood thought it was Ann Martin. But then he could see that she walked differently, that her hair was not open and free like hers. And she was wearing a dress with a light coat thrown loosely over her shoulders.

She moved by the window overlooking the lake and stood there, letting the lake light shimmer on her face. She leaned over Blood, trying to see if he was awake or asleep, and she held a snub-nosed gun in her hand. It glinted in the light.

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Her hair was curly and black. It was so black it looked like licorice. Her eyes were bright blue, the deepest blue Johnny Blood had ever seen. Her mouth was full and wide. Her cheeks were rounded and full, just the way her body was. There were two hollows in her face that would turn into dimples if she smiled.

Her eyebrows were dark and her forehead was high. She was like somebody's kid sister, or the girl across the street.

She stood in her low-heeled shoes, her face coming to Blood's shoulder. She moved over to him and touched him with her hand. Her hand was tiny and moulded and soft. It was a feminine gesture, and everything she did was feminine.

Johnny Blood got to thinking that here was danger. And when danger dressed in a woman's clothes, it was all the more important to be careful.

Johnny Blood stood up as she approached him, and looked down at her. She raised her face and her eyes were bright and glistening. Her mouth was open and her lips soft. She spoke in a breathless, hushed whisper:

"The guard is asleep. I put something in his coffee. Listen, believe me, and come along. I'll help you out of this. I know where the stuff is cached. You come along and we'll get it."

The coat she wore over her shoulder was thin but warm. Her dress was woolen and hardy. He took her by the arm without another word and they walked out through the door. From the corner of his eye Blood could see the guard slumped over, asleep in the chair.

An instant or two later they were outside. The guard at the front of the lodge had gone. Johnny turned to the girl and said:

"What's the gag, baby? You don't look old enough to sing in a high school choir. What's the story?"

She smiled, and stars danced in her eyes and dimples darkened her cheeks.

"You be quiet now for awhile, mister. We've got a long ways to go. You want that stuff, don't you? You want to get it all back so it won't get shipped across the ocean."

They went through the pines for fifteen minutes, climbing steadily. Then they crossed a jackpine ridge and descended. They went down through dense firs and across a rocky stream. They moved over tough scrub chaparral and then they came to a rocky shore. Past the rocky shore they found a deserted and sandy clearing.

"Here," said the girl.

Blood looked around. "Where?"

"Right here in my hand," said the girl. Blood looked down. It was the snub-nosed little .22, Smith and Wesson, and it was aimed right at his guts.

"You want me to raise my hands?" he grinned.

"That's what you want, mister. You want to do that if you want to live. The Boss will see you now, mister."

"You said you were going to help me," said Blood, a wounded tone in his voice, a grin pasted on his mouth. "You buckoed me into a great big gun-trap."

Her face relaxed into a smile and the dimples danced. "Yeah," she said softly. "I guess I did, at that."

"Which way?"

"Into the trees ahead. There's a big dark spot. That's a cave in the mountain. Go in. Straight ahead. You'll see the candle burning on the box. You'll see the Boss, too."

Blood moved forward cautiously. He felt the darkness close in about him, and he could see the candle in the distance, flickering. Blood could not make out the man seated opposite the candle. He moved on into the cave, the girl close behind him, breathing heavily and nervously.

As Blood stood there three yards from the box, the man suddenly turned around. His black eyes were startled, but when

they saw Blood they smiled. His mouth bent into a grin and he turned halfway in his chair. He had a clipped mustache and his hair was jet black and sleek. He was husky and tough and he wore a leather jacket, and out of the pocket of the jacket two soiled gloves protruded.

"Hello, pal," he said quietly.

Blood sucked in his breath and dropped his hands in astonishment. His mouth unhinged and he gasped. He had never seen this man before, but he knew who he was. A tough baby. A hard man to shave. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Cache

THE table at which the man sat was a folding card table. The candle guttered nearby on top an overturned soap box. The man was leaning over the table, poring over a large piece of paper spread out from one end to the other. It was a map of some kind, the lines laboriously scrawled in with pencil.

As Blood stared at him, the man laid down a pencil on the map in front of him and looked up at Blood. He smiled. As he did so his eyes glittered warningly. It was almost as if he were trying to signal Blood to be cautious, to look out, to take it easy.

That made sense. Judging from the identity of the man before him, Johnny Blood could tell some game was afoot.

The man sitting down in front of Blood was Al Hendricks—a real, live, breathing Al Hendricks, not at all dead and drowned. And obviously Al Hendricks did not want the girl with them to know his true identity. Otherwise he wouldn't have flashed that look of warning to Blood.

Blood glanced covertly at the girl. She had come in after him and was standing behind the seated man. In the glimmering candle light Blood could make out her

soft pale face, the deep dimples, the blue eyes and the rounded, full cheeks.

The girl watched him a moment and then she went over to an empty nail keg and sat on it. She folded her hands in her lap and watched Johnny Blood. She smiled at him suddenly, and her eyes were soft and blue. Blood smiled in return, and his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"What's this?" Blood asked. "Guerilla warfare? Why the lighted candles? Why the cloak and dagger stuff?"

Al Hendricks smiled wanly. He turned away from the map and the pencil in front of him and glanced around the cave. Johnny Blood's gaze followed his. He could see it then, the stuff packed away along the sides of the cave. There were loaded crates piled into the recesses in the black beyond.

So Hendricks had beat the others to the draw, Blood mused. He had located the stuff and lifted it out from under their noses. No wonder they were howling mad and after blood.

"This is Lenore Wolfe, friend," Hendricks said, nodding at the girl. "And you—I don't know your name at all, but I do know it isn't Dan Hendricks—like you told them it was."

"Let's call me Johnny Jones. That's better than John Smith."

Hendricks grinned. "I'm Al Brown myself, for the same reason."

"Well, what's the pitch?" Blood asked. "Why bring me into this thing?"

The girl fumbled with her coat pocket and got out a cigarette. "You're a very comical character, mister. You brought yourself into it, remember?"

Hendricks smiled. "It seems Lee already spotted you in a Consolidated truck, hitching a ride up here. It seems you're in this thing right up to your neck. That right, Jones?"

"Yeah, Brown. You've got me there. I *was* interested in the murder of Al Hendricks. You know anything about it?"

The girl blew smoke out and stared through it at Hendricks. "Sure. He never got killed at all. That's what I know about it. We'll come clean with you, Jones. This man here with the mustache isn't Brown. He's Hendricks. He didn't get killed at all."

Hendricks smiled at Blood, but he still did not open his mouth. He turned lazily toward Lee Wolfe and let her go on.

Lee rubbed her chin with her finger and lifted out the cigarette again. She stared at it thoughtfully and then looked up at Blood. Her eyes were very level and clear.

"I had to have help, Jones. You're on our side. You've got to be, or you wouldn't have tried to blast down those two comic opera characters—the beanpole and the pot belly."

Blood shrugged.

"The game is this," she went on. "Smuggling munitions. Did you ever hear of William Wolfe? He was a foreign correspondent in Europe and he fell into a lake and never came up again. William Wolfe was the best swimmer in Santa Barbara, California, and he never drowned that way. He was shot before they dumped him down there.

"William Wolfe was my brother. That's why I'm here now. What I want is the head man. I want to see he's paid back for what he's done to me—to my mother—to my dad. And to my best friend—the girl that was Bill's wife."

Lee Wolfe stared down into the smoke rising from her cigarette, and for a long time there was no sound in the big cavern-like room. Her blue eyes were bitter, her mouth twisted at the corners. All the gentle softness was gone from her face.

But then it passed and she glanced up and smiled. Her face lit up and the dimples showed and her teeth glistened.

"I don't know what your part is in all this, Mr. Jones. I don't care. Al Hendricks is after the loot. I'm not. I'm after

the man that runs the whole shebang. I've followed every path leading to him, and I've followed that many dead ends. This time there isn't going to be any dead end.

"I hope you gentlemen will see me through this thing. With your help—and with the benevolence of the gods—we can smash this gang. And believe me, it needs smashing, like no other murder syndicate in the history of the world."

HENDRICKS put his hand on her shoulder and said: "Okay, Lee. We'll get to the bottom of this. And you're with us all the way down the line. Why don't you take a breather outside? Watch the coast. Those jokers may have tailed Jones here."

Lee's bright eyes glanced from Blood to Hendricks. She smiled ruefully, sadly. Vengeance was not a good thing in a girl, the look in her eyes said, but that's the way it is. "Okay. I know you guys are working together. Don't leave me out of anything that takes fighting. Mister, I'm plenty good with this little artillery piece in my hand."

Blood nodded. "I can believe that, Annie Oakley."

She stood up. In the flicker of the yellow candle light her skin had almost an iridescent, velvety texture. The shadows danced about her eyes and hair. She leaned over for an instant to crush out her cigarette in the candle tray. The nearness of her threw waves of musty, penetrating perfume over Blood, and his eyes would not leave her.

Then she turned and moved abruptly down the corridor, a light in her hand, her ankles tiny flashes of trim silk beneath the tag end of her coat.

Blood turned to find Al Hendricks watching him closely. Hendricks' mouth twisted up in a grin. He nodded toward the departing figure of the girl.

"That's one hundred percent platinum, Johnny Blood. One hundred percent

perfect." And with that, Al Hendricks shot out his hand towards Blood and Blood looked down and shot his own out, and they shook hands.

"You knew me all right," Blood said.

"Sure, Blood. Never met you. Heard plenty of good stuff about you. I figured Brannigan might put somebody like you on my trail after I conked out."

Blood moved nearer, dragging up the keg of nails closer to the card table. "What the hell happened? Why'd you have to disappear like that?"

Hendricks toyed with the pencil. "Damndest thing you ever heard in your life, Blood. I knew the load's hot by the way I was suckered into the super's office during loading time, see. Well, I got set for a big play in the hills somewhere.

"Okay. That's fine. I'm riding along, and I pass the coffee shop in the foothills just before you begin to rise, and I sit back and look out of every window at once. I'm figuring this is certainly where trouble begins.

"But I get all the way up to the rim of the lake before anything happens. I'm driving along, minding my own business, and bingo, all of a sudden there's a dead guy in the road in front of me. I clamp on the binders, and pull up in a cloud of dust.

"I hop out of the cab and run over to the guy lying there stretched out smack in front of me. Funny thing, he hasn't got

any bruises on him at all. It seems he's just walking along the road with a fishing pole in his hand, and he passes out from the altitude, or what have you.

"I turn him over and study him, and he isn't dead at all. He's just out cold. Dressed in jeans and a wool shirt. A lot of fishing paraphernalia on him. So I hoist him to a sitting position on the running board of the cab and run down to the lake front ten yards from the road and scoop up some water in my dipper.

"I mosey back and the guy's still sitting there. I splash water over him and he comes around. He moans, groans, and then snaps out of it.

"'Thank you very much, sir,' he tells me, kind of sheepish. 'I must have passed out like a dead duck. I sometimes do this in the extreme heat and in the thin air of these altitudes,' he says. He's giving me this line of guff deadpan. I'm looking for a trap all over the place, but there's no guns or anything. He bends over to pick up his fish rod and then he takes off down the road.

"'Want a ride, bud?' I holler after him, but he shakes his head, no. I am beginning to think this is pretty strange—passing out and shuffling down the highway like a sick seal, so I scratch my head and get back in the cab.

"On a kind of impulse I glance back into the rear of the truck. The load's still there. Looks like it to me. The same load

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I'd started out with. But—here's the pitch—something's happened. The boxes are arranged differently. They've shifted, like the cargo on a boat shifts in a storm. Only there's been no storm, and this buggy I'm driving is no boat.

"I hop out of the cab and I run around back. Something's been removed all right while I've been pumping life back into this phony thin-air boy. I squint forward through the rear view window of the cab, and through the windshield and I see this joker trotting down the road like a jack rabbit outrunning a .22 slug.

"Altitude or no altitude, heat or no heat, I take out after this joe and I yank out my rod for the feel of confidence it gives me. I wing a shot after the lad, telling him to halt and get the hell back to me, but he continues, straining at the leash to make the curve in the road.

"I try to plug him in the leg, but I miss. I wing another shot at him and this time he disappears in a big flash over the edge of the roadbank. Hell, there's a ten yard drop-off there, so I trot over after him to peer down and find out what's left of him.

"The joker is lying down there. I jump down, gun in hand, and gingerly turn him over. He springs up at me, like a joker-in-the-box, and I wing a shot into him. The smoke burns and the gunflame slaps about us and I can't see for a second.

"We're struggling on the lip of a ledge a few yards below the shoulder of the highway. It's about nine yards down straight into the water from there. The joker grabs for my gun and misses. He twists into my coat, and starts to tear my jacket, he's pulling so hard. Then the rock he's straining against gives way and crashes down into the water.

"There's a splash that douses us both with a geyser of water and sends spray clean up onto the highway. We're dripping and cussing and bleeding, and by now this guy hasn't got a leg to stand on.

He's sliding down with the slipping rocks and shale, and a landslide starts, pitching a half ton of rock down into the lake. I'm barely hanging on up where I am, one leg looped over a rugged hunk of scrub bush.

"This joker is going down and the blood from the gunshot is all over his chest. I'm sure the guy is dead right then, but I've got to drag him back in case he's alive and knows something.

"The damned fool thinks I've got him dead to rights and that I'm trying to drag him back to the law, or something, and he tears at my coat and tries to kick me and in general acts like a damned jerk.

"The result is that he tears at me once too often, splits my jacket down the back, and slides the whole damned thing off my arms in two separate parts. The joker, my jacket, and a big cloud of rock and dust, go rapidly down with the avalanche before I can do a damned thing but stare like a boiled egg at him.

"He gets buried in under those rocks in the water. By now he's a mangled remains of Al Hendricks—due to the fact that my wallet is in that jacket. So, hell, I grasp the opportunity that presents itself and I switch parts with this joker.

"Al Hendricks is dead. Lee Wolfe was waiting for the shipment in the truck—she'd already located the rest and moved it—and she helped me get away into the hills here. I figured there was no way of telling Brannigan, simply because I had no way of getting information through to him, and besides, it's too dangerous to move around up here.

"The kingpin of this whole caper is in the woods somewhere, and he's sweating out this move as much as we are. You saw how eager he was to spot the stuff I've snaked out. Clever as hell, those guys. Lee and I had to wind that stuff up by a winch in a big bait boat. Took plenty of sweat to do it. Lucky they didn't have anybody guarding that spot or we would never have made it."

BLOOD asked: "So what's the next move? Confiscate the stuff and send it back to Brannigan?"

"No, boy. We've gotta smoke out the big gun. I don't know who it is. There's a bunch of jokers living in that resort over there, but I haven't had time to spot check all of them. Lee's been helping me, but she doesn't know all the angles you and I do.

"Besides, she's a dame. They get damned emotional about these things. She may flip her lid and blast the big joe off the face of the earth when she finds out who he is. Hell of a note. She's too nice a kid to be mixed up in a mess like this."

"What about this ranger? He any help?"

"Ranger?" Hendricks asked. "I didn't realize there was a ranger around here."

"Forest ranger. He was the one who got me sprung. Said something about me helping him out, locating the big boss, and he'd be eternally grateful—or some such nonsense. I couldn't tip him off as to what the hell I was doing. Seemed like a decent sort to me."

Hendricks leaned forward, chewing on the pencil, musing. "Too hot for you back there. You're in dutch with both sides now. Tell you what. I'll go back. What does this ranger look like?"

Blood laughed. "Wears army clothes—khaki stuff. Damned funny thing. He has a pet bobcat he carries around on a steel chain. Very colorful character."

Johnny Blood stared off into the interior of the cave, glancing about at the stacked boxes. Neat enough little cache. No wonder the gunboys were prowling hell's last acre for this stuff. It was as valuable as a one hundred percent assay. And here the FBI already had it hidden up its big fat sleeve. Amusing and—

Steel claws tore into Blood's arm. He spun around. It was Al Hendricks, clamping into him with clenched, white hands.

"Say that again!" he shouted hoarsely.

Blood tore himself from Hendricks' grasp. His own face was a mask. "Say what again? You nuts?"

"What's he look like? What's this ranger look like?"

Blood leaned back, and in the flickering light of the candle he studied Hendricks' face. Hendricks was leaning forward, tensed up like a steel spring. He was quivering with emotion. His forehead was beaded with perspiration.

"Answer me, Blood! What did this guy look like?"

Blood spoke quietly: "Tall guy. Six feet five if he's an inch. Big face, smooth skin, tanned to hell-and-gone. He's got funny gray eyes. They look through you and they laugh at you. He doesn't have a drop of red blood in him, that one. He's all muscle and bone and will power, but no heart at all."

Slowly Hendricks settled back. His eyes were round and sick. "What about the bobcat? Tell me about the cat."

"It's a big bobcat, and it looks like it had earned master-sergeant stripes in the Civil War. It's got nicks in its ears and tears and gashes in its hide. It's gray as fog, and its claws look like needles in its paws. The damned thing is a killer, sure as hell."

Absently Hendricks was drawing out a cigarette, lighting it, his eyes gazing fixedly at Blood. He was not seeing Blood, though. He was seeing something else. He was seeing memory pictures, and those pictures he saw were not pleasant ones at all.

They were pictures that made the gorge rise in a man, pictures that made him wake up sweating in the dead of night. They were pictures no man want to see, but which some few men must see, and are no better for it.

Finally Hendricks came to himself and his eyes focused once again on Blood's face.

"So I'm a nut. I'm crazy with it, Blood.

You know why? After all these years, I've found him. You ever wonder why I've come all this way with the FBI? Was it to square up accounts for my country? To be a good patriot? I'm afraid not entirely, Blood. I had another reason, too."

His eyes focused again on those far-off pictures, but this time the pictures must have been a bit more pleasant.

"He was a good guy at the start, but he went mad. He went crazy and turned killer! How it happened, the devil only knows. . . . It's my brother I'm talking about, Blood. My brother, Dan Hendricks. Nobody can explain these things. They happen like that. One minute, a sane, sensible, normal human being. The next minute, a mad-dog killer, snarling like a panther, eyes flashing yellow. . . .

"Dan Hendricks. He went crazy, Blood. Sure, it was a girl he and I fought over, really, Blood. She's dead now. He killed her. So he ended up here. He ended up here, and he's the man we're looking for. You see—he's their kingpin, Blood. It's as easy as that. Can't you see it? He's their kingpin. He sold out his country to work for them."

Hendricks' words were soft but they seemed to come torn out of his throat, laboriously, painfully.

"Yeah. He's the one I've been looking for all these years. And now here he is. And I'm going to get him. I'm going to get him and I'm going to kill him!"

The wind suddenly sprang across the table and the flame of the candle guttered. It was almost as if someone else stood in that darkened cavern with them. There was no sound at all, no smell, no shape. Just the feel of an invisible presence in that room. An evil, hated, sinister presence.

Prickles of terror walked up and down Johnny Blood's spine. And Blood was a tough man who would quail at nothing. Nothing he could get his hands on, nothing he could line in gunsights. But this. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Killers Die Hard

A FORTY-FIVE caliber Colt can be a lovely weapon. And Al Hendricks handled it with beautiful delicacy. He removed the clips, examined them carefully, slid a rag through the barrel, polished the shining blued plating, and fondled it in his hand.

Hendricks looked up at Blood. His smile was twisted and hard. "Boy, I feel like a sixteen-year-old kid going to my first prom. I'd be willing to slick up for a week for this date. Blood, you don't know what this little rendezvous means to me."

Blood spun the chamber of the .38 Smith and Wesson Hendricks had given him. Without looking at Hendricks he said: "Okay. Since you're so hot about this big showdown—what happens to the girl?"

"Lee? She'll be all right. Leave her to guard this stuff. You and I can sneak up on the lodge and storm the joint."

"I don't mean Lee Wolfe. I mean Ann Martin."

For a long time there was no sound in the cave. Nobody breathed. Blood did not look up to meet Hendricks' eyes. Finally Hendricks spoke. It sounded like a voice that had forgotten to crawl off somewhere into a hole.

"What about Ann Martin?"

"You do know a girl named Ann Martin, then?"

He knew her. His look screamed it. His voice shook it. He knew her and he could never forget her.

"She's with Gray, Hendricks."

Hendricks licked his lips. He stared at the gun in his palm. Then he slapped it shut and looked up at Blood's face. "She's with Gray? How did she get with Gray? How did she get up here at all? She's a driver for Consolidated, but she doesn't have this run."

Blood said quietly: "She did tonight. She picked me up on the road, Hendricks. She and I were the ones got picked up by Gray's gunmen on the road."

Hendricks' face was tight and dark. "That little imp outside didn't tell me that! My Lord—if Ann's with Gray, he won't let me get near him!"

Blood twirled the revolver on his gun again. It spun around slickly, purring in its oil. "What's this girl to you, Al?"

Hendricks stood up and his face was hidden from the candlelight. He tucked the gun into his belt and reached for his jacket.

"You coming with me, Blood?"

No one could have read his face but a blind man.

"All right," Blood said. "You're in love with her. Listen, friend. Don't throw your life away in a trap like this. Gray knows you. What good does it do for you to go and let yourself get caught in a perfect trap? You'll force yourself into an impossible position, Hendricks. Don't you see it?"

"I'll kill that guy. I've got to, Blood. Before he kills any more. I promised that to myself—a long time ago."

"He'll kill Ann Martin if you move in on him. You're walking right into a trap, and he's spent a long time building it for you. Let me go. He can't work me like that."

Hendricks zipped up the front of his

jacket and felt the gun in his belt underneath the leather. He said: "Get out of my way, Blood."

Blood moved in front of Hendricks. "Stay here with Lee. I'll settle with Gray. He thinks I'm a sucker. He'll let me come back."

Hendricks shoved at Blood with his arm. Blood stood his ground and dashed Hendricks' arm away from him with a blunt decisive move. "Don't be a fool, Hendricks. Are you putting personal vengeance ahead of your job?"

The words brought Hendricks up short. He stared at Johnny Blood, blinking. He stood clenching and unclenching his hands. "You're right, Blood," he said suddenly. "I—I guess I lost my head."

"Good boy," Blood said softly. "Don't worry—I'll handle it all right." He turned quickly and strode down the passageway.

"Al!" It was Lee Wolfe coming toward him, her voice taut with fear. "Al!" She whispered it louder the second time.

BLOOD caught her as she passed in the dark. She gasped, turned, and saw him.

"Oh. I heard something outside, mister. I heard a noise. I couldn't see anybody at all. They—they must have followed you."

Blood grasped her shoulders tight and stared at her. "Could you see anything? Could you hear footsteps? Was there anything," Blood's voice went low and flat,

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"like a pair of eyes in the dark? Yellow cat eyes?"

The girl shivered under his touch. "I don't know what you mean. I think I heard something. Maybe I'm just awful scared. Maybe I'm a lousy little gun-fighter after all."

With a sudden little sob she moved in close to Blood and clung to him in her terror. She sniffed once or twice, laying her head on his shoulder, and then she stepped away quickly in embarrassment.

"I didn't mean to do that. That just happened."

Blood grinned and said: "Get on back in the cave. All hell is about to break loose."

"They did follow you—didn't they?"

Blood lifted her chin with his finger. "Keep your chin up, Lee."

"Okay," she murmured, and moved back into the cave. Johnny Blood smiled to himself. Lee was a very attractive girl.

Suddenly Al Hendricks was behind him, a hand on his shoulder. "They're out there. It was that damned bobcat. Gray's trained him to act like a bloodhound. He tracked you here."

"If we get out into the dark, we'll be all right. The three of us can play guerilla-hell with him in the pines. We can split up and blast at him from all sides."

Hendricks called: "Lee—do you hear me? Is that okay with you?"

After a short pause her small voice said: "Yeah. Okay with me. We can do it."

"He'll have the girl with him," Blood said. "Don't shoot at her. But don't let him outflank us. We've got to keep moving."

Hendricks was prowling restlessly along the corridor. "Come on. Let's go."

The three of them moved out into the cold blast of night. Only a few slits of stars shone through the shimmering pine veil above them. They stood in the clearing an instant, and then moved forward.

Not a moment too soon. For the count of ten nothing happened at all. Then a shot cracked out from the blackness of the trees, and a shale chip exploded into powder off the cave entrance. Three more shots followed in quick succession from two different locations.

There was a long silence. The stink of cordite sneaked through the air, and smoke swirled and hung and then slowly lifted.

A voice bellowed out at them from the darkness of the firs by the shore:

"Gray speaking. Listen to this. We're coming in there to get you out. The game's over. Is the FBI chicken-gutted? Or won't you come out and fight like men?"

No one said anything. The stillness of the night lowered over the clearing.

"Gray speaking. We've got the girl with us. She doesn't like us any more than we like her. Listen, Feds. We've got her. Why don't you come and get her? She's one of your kind."

There was another long silence. Then a clear, calm voice spoke up. It was Ann Martin's voice. Blood could picture to himself the self-assurance in the scarred face of Ann Martin as she called out:

"He's the one you want. Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself. Kill him before he kills you—and smashes the world to pieces!"

Ann Martin. A nice little kid with plenty of core to her neat little framework. Blood knew now that when she had broken in front of Slim and Dutch she had been bluffing to gain time. Sharp kid.

Johnny Blood could almost hear foot-steps stalking through the whispering pine needles. Step. Step. Step. Sure enough, next time the voice spoke it came from a point nearer to him. Blood could still not pick out the exact spot. He was afraid of hitting Ann Martin.

"Gray speaking. Listen, you two. You've got a choice. One or the other. Let

me in that cave without resistance and I'll let the girl go. Or fight, and I kill her. You hear that? What do you say?"

Still no answer. Blood knew where Al Hendricks was waiting. There was no sound from that spot. He glanced over at Lee Wolfe's private pine trunk, and there was no indication of life there either. Blood grinned again. Damned fine little operation.

Step. Step. Step. Blood could almost make out the tall, big-built man, moving in on the cave entrance. He wasn't alone. There were two others with him. No, three. The girl and two other gunmen. Dutch and Slim? Blood licked his lips in anticipation.

Now the voice was scornful and lashing, with its hard ruthless tones:

"Gray speaking. Get out of that cave and come at me with your hands lifted, or I'll toss tear gas in and smoke you out like a bunch of damned hornets! You hear me?"

Step. Step. Step.

Ann Martin cried out: "We're right over here! Shoot to kill! You can get—"

Some one clapped a hand over her mouth. She struggled and writhed—Blood could hear that—but they would not let her get out another word.

Then the voice chuckled. "Gray speaking. Go ahead. Do like the lovely lady says! Shoot to kill. Advertise your position! We'll get a better bead on you! You hear me?"

THERE was silence, and then Blood heard a sound which froze his veins. There came a rasping clink of metal on metal, and he knew Sam Gray was bending over that diabolical pet of his—Satan the bobcat—loosening the chain from his collar. And at Sam Gray's order, the bobcat would spot all three of them as easy as breaking sticks.

Licking his lips, Blood slid down deeper into his gun crest between the two sharp

slabs of rock. That damned big bobcat!

Then came a different voice—a man's. It rang loud and clear in the blackness about them.

"Al Hendricks speaking. You hear me, Dan? You hear me? Tell me you hear me."

There was muffled curse and then dead silence.

Johnny Blood twisted around. Oddly enough, Hendricks' voice was coming out of an entirely different spot from the one he'd picked originally. Hendricks had circled around and found a niche above the cave entrance. The voice sounded as if it might have come from inside the cave.

Hendricks went on:

"Come and get us, Danny. There's three of us. Blood and a girl and me. You promised yourself to get me years ago, Danny. I promised myself I'd get you. Which one of us wins this time, Danny? You or me?"

A muffled scream came from the darkness, and there was a sharp slap. Then Ann Martin cried out: "Oh, Al! You're all right!" Then there was a smashing blow and no more sound.

Hendricks' voice was tight and pinched. "Ann. Leave her alone, Danny! If you kill her—"

A cool, sardonic voice floated up through the trees into the night air. "I won't kill her, Al. I'll turn her over to you. All you have to do is give me the stuff you snaked away from me, and you can have her."

"He's lying," screamed Ann Martin. "Don't hand that stuff over! He won't do what he says he will!"

Then a chuckle out of the dark. Al Hendricks' chuckle. "She knows you good, Danny. Nobody trusts you. Come and get us. We're in here, cozy and warm. Come in and help us roast our chestnuts. We just flung a couple in the fire for you to pull out."

The cold, gentle voice of Sam Gray

came out clear and neat. "I'm not coming in, Al. I'm sending in my friend. You must remember Satan. Move, Satan. They won't shoot you. They can't see you. And if they turn on a light—we'll get them!"

The flesh crawled on Blood's body. Silently he prayed that Lee Wolfe had fainted so she wouldn't scream out as that invisible death came stalking about the firs.

There was no sound at all. There was no movement in the forest. The wind stopped rustling the pine needles. Time stood still. There was nothing but dark dread in the night.

Blood heard no steps, smelled no odor of feline, saw no glitter of yellowed eyes. But there was a sudden pause in which he sensed something—something nameless, invisible, soundless—moving at him. Moving. Leaping. Pouncing.

With a stifled curse, he writhed around, clubbing the stale clump of fur and ripping claws that crashed into him from above. The bobcat Satan had circled around, followed Blood's steps, and had gotten him dead to rights.

An exultant laugh went up from Gray at the sound of Blood's curse. Immediately shots stabbed out at him. Instantly shots hurtled back at Sam Gray and his gunmen from above the cave. The night shook with the banging of gunfire.

Blood clubbed frantically at the cat with the blunt nose of his weapon, and the cat snarled and charged again. Ripping, tearing needles gouged his skin, drawing blood to the surface, slashing through cloth. The cat's teeth went for Blood's face, then for his neck.

Panicky, Blood fired at the cat. The slug missed, and gunflame singed the cat's fur and threw powder all over his own arm. The skin burned like scorched flesh. The cat snarled and howled and snaked out its battered head for Blood's jugular again.

Another shot. The weight slid off Blood like clothes off a hook. But instantly the cat was back again, on Blood's chest, clawing, working its powerful back claws into Blood's chest, searching for his stomach. Frantically snaking his hand around on the ground, Blood touched a smooth stone six inches in diameter.

Twisting aside suddenly, he brought it up and smashed it at the cat's sleek gleaming eyes. Pain ripped through Johnny Blood and blood oozed out of a dozen wounds. Black haze was closing in on him. The earth rocked and slid away from him.

Desperately Blood tried to suck in air, tried to grab hold of something to cling to, but there was nothing. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Guerillas

IT WAS quiet as a tomb for an instant, and the whole world seemed poised on a wheel of fortune. No breeze stirred. No man moved. No gun sounded. And then a half-crazy, hysterical laugh rang through the pines. It was a girl's laugh—Ann Martin's.

Instantly the charged voice of Sam Gray sounded: "Don't be a fool, Ann. Don't run! That cat will eat you alive! Ann! I've got Satan chained here. He'll follow you and tear you to pieces!"

She was running toward the cave and Al Hendricks. No one could see her, but everyone could hear her steps crashing ahead through the needles and through the rotted cones.

"Al! Al! I don't care! I'm coming for you! They can't keep me away from you!"

Snarling, cursing, Sam Gray's big voice ripped out: "You'll never get away, Ann! I'll track you down and Satan will kill you!"

Winded, gasping, crying, Ann Martin tore across the clearing, and made the cave.

"Up here!" called Al Hendricks. "I'll kill that cat if I see it! Come on up here, honey. Gosh, I'm glad you made it!"

Gray's voice came steadily and angrily. "Fan out. Slim, take that side. Dutch—that side. They're almost out of shells. Move up on them. Kill them. What's the matter with you—are you yellow? Damn it! We're better fighters than they are! Let's see some action!"

Like snakes the men slithered through the woods. . . .

Dizzily, as if he were swirling to the surface after being immersed in water for a hundred years, Johnny Blood broke surface. He had heard all the sounds through a wall of paralysis. The bobcat had disappeared. It was moving through the woods now, giving up its job on Blood for something better. For what?

Blood pulled himself to his feet and glanced around. Yellow, blinking eyes. Soft purring sound. Licking chops.

Not eight yards from him Satan stood, leaning over the girl's body. Lee Wolfe. She had passed out cold when the cat had first touched her. Unconsciousness had saved her life. Now the cat would not bother her. Satan sniffed the night and blinked his yellow eyes and loped on. He was headed for the cave entrance. Streaking through the dark, the bobcat edged up over the entrance. Streaking through the dark, the bobcat edged up over the entrance, smack into the spot where Al

Hendricks and Ann Martin were bushed up.

One, two, three shots rang out. Hissing, spitting, the huge cat smashed down through the undergrowth, tearing through bushes and trees, loping along back to his lord and master, reluctant to fight powder and bullets.

Sam Gray and his gunmen had fanned out and were moving through the trees. Blood leaned over and touched Lee Wolfe. She was unhurt, her pulse beating feebly. He touched her face gently with his hand, and looked down at her. A beautiful girl. A lovely lady.

Here was one more reason to finish up this job on Sam Gray.

Sudden gunfire sounded from the cave entrance, answered immediately by a crossfire of shots from Slim and Dutch. Blood could hear Al Hendricks curse softly, and then three more shots blazed down from up there. Without a word the heavy body of a man—Dutch—smacked into the earth and lay still.

Counting ten, Blood moved through the pines. Purposely he stepped on a twig and snapped it. It sounded as loud as an explosion of U-235. Grinning flatly, Blood continued through the woods, heading up into the ravine. If he could draw Sam Gray out, and sucker him into some kind of gun-trap. . . .

He faded behind a tree trunk. Counting ten slowly, he stood there listening. Sure



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enough. At nine, he heard the soft, rubbery tread of a man tracking him. The man behind him stopped, too, listening. Not ten yards from each other they waited, resting, listening for each other's heart beat. Each aware of what the other was doing. Each wondering if he could outsmart the other, and sure he could.

Lurching ahead suddenly, Blood sprang from his tree and ran a zig-zag course through the undergrowth. He smashed through jackpines and small firs and made the ravine. He ducked his feet in the cold trickle of running water, and then snaked up through the soft ferns and brambles without a sound. Gray would love tracking like this—a woodman's delight. But Blood had a few tricks, too.

Blood lay there panting. He was face-down on the ground, overlooking the deep-cut narrow creek ravine. Opposite him in the gloom he could see nothing move. He could hear nothing move. He could feel the presence of the other man. Sam Gray, hell in the hills.

Then he heard something else that brought a chill to his heart. He heard the soft rasping chink of a metal chain. Satan was coming to this party, too.

And then he saw the tall, raw-boned figure of Sam Gray. Rather foolish of Sam Gray to paint himself that big against the foliage. Blood dragged out his Smith and Wesson and lined it on the big figure of Sam Gray. There was a sudden pinpoint glint of moonlight on the silver chain.

Blood thumbed two quick shots at Gray, and the second one got the man. He winced, doubled there for a paralyzed moment, going to his knees, but instantly he had his own gun out and was blasting away into the night. Blood banged away twice more—and saw the cat go down with a scream.

Blood's gun was empty. He sprang from his position in the ferns and ran through the forest making for the ridge.

As he zigzagged along he reached into his belt for more slugs. Then it seemed as if the world had suddenly opened up and swallowed him whole. The belt was gone! It was no longer laced around his waist. In wrestling with that damned bobcat, the belt must have slipped off onto the ground. It was gone, there was no doubt about that. He had no more slugs.

Two steady, close shots spun through the stillness after him. Lead tore a pine cone hanging above his head, three inches away. The cone dissolved in his face and parts of it spun to the ground, while other parts of it showered him with musty wood and gummy resin. Blood stumbled ahead, twisting around behind a boulder and limping up on top it.

The stalking figure of Sam Gray came on.

BLOOD leaped into the air and sailed off the boulder, grabbing for Gray's thick neck. With a tremendous crash, both of them wrenched onto the ground, bringing themselves bouncing and twisting up into the air again in a bone-crushing arc-over.

Gray gasped and swore and twisted around to cold-cock Blood with the barrel of his gun. But Blood hit Gray in the mid-section and grabbed for the pistol. Quickly he drew it along and smashed it across Gray's temple. The blow did not land quite right. Gray was cut but he was still conscious.

He was conscious and fighting like ten giants. Blood raised his hand to strike again, but Gray heaved and bucked and brought his shoulder into Blood's hand and folded his hand back onto his wrist. Yelling in pain, Blood let go and the gun sailed out into the underbrush.

Gray curled his lip at Blood.

"I'll kill you, FBI. Why'd you have to butt in? I was going along good until you showed up!"

Blood smashed his fist into Gray's

mouth. That would keep his tongue quiet.

But then suddenly it was as if Gray had been saving up all his extra strength for one last maneuver. With muscles like steel bands, Gray tightened his long, tremendous arms around Blood's chest and flipped Blood over on his back. The pine needles dug into Blood, and stones and roots ripped his back.

Black blindness welled up inside Blood. There was nothing he could do to stay the liquid death that was seeping through his veins like blood, that was pulsing through him madly like the heart beat of death.

But deep within him, buried even further down than those last vestiges of consciousness, lay the hard core of him. And in that strong, brittle core, there was something too stubborn and tough to die.

Writhing, twisting, jack-knifing like a madman, Blood twisted in Gray's murderous grasp, doubled his knee up and drove it into Gray's chest. Gray gasped and shuddered, and suddenly the vitality all seemed to drain out of him.

Blood slugged feebly at his heart, and Gray lashed back helplessly. Then Gray dragged himself tiredly to his knees, smashing doggedly at Blood. Blood tried to rise, hit him again. Would the man ever give up?

Hours later he slugged once more, and then there was a singing in his ears and he dragged himself away and got to his knees and stumbled through the cool night, letting the air drain over his wounds like cold water. When he felt better, he went back and chained the unconscious Sam Gray to a tree with Satan's chain. . . .

Shambles. In this section of wood the forest had died, had been ripped apart, had been torn with man's wonderful tools of destruction. Here branches had died. Trees had broken. Roots had come out of the sod. Here blood had flowed and men had died and grass had withered.

She was standing there, staring at it,

and her heart was in her eyes. She had hated and she had spent her life hating, and this was the cost of her hate. This was the end of her existence.

Lee Wolfe sat down on a rock and put her head in her hands. She cried then, and the tears splashed out and ran down her bare arms. Her hair tumbled down over her arms and it was dark black and rich and lustrous. She cried and finally the sadness and despair flowed off her, and the rock-like determination that had been in her all her life wore off, and she was a little girl again, sitting in the forest.

Johnny Blood came into the sun-swept clearing, staring dazedly at the trees and the gutted declivity where the cave had been. He saw the girl sitting on the rock and he moved over to her.

"Lee. They destroyed the cave and the stuff inside it?"

She looked up at him. Her eyes brightened and they glowed with life and joy. "Johnny! Johnny Blood—that's your real name? You're all right!"

"Al. Did they kill Al?"

"No. He's all right. And so is Ann. The other two are dead—Slim and Dutch." Her eyes grew tired and sick. "But he got away. The murderer—the killer—got away!"

Johnny Blood rubbed his jaw. "No," he said. "He didn't get away."

She rose and stood in front of him. Her lips were soft and her eyes were young again. She had cast off the defeat and the old age. "Oh, Johnny," she said. "He's gone. We're safe again."

He cupped her chin in his hand. "You're safe, Lee. You'll always be safe now."

"It's like being born again, Johnny. Do you know what I mean?"

He put his arm around her waist and looked down at her. "Yeah. I know exactly what you mean."

And a moment later she knew he did.

THE END

CRASH or CREDIT

You're in the FBI now, friend. Armed with just an adding machine you set out—to smash the filthiest racket on the face of the earth.



He watches as you hunt for a clue.

By PAUL W.
FAIRMAN

YOU think it's a pretty glamorous job, don't you? You think a Federal agent's life is full of excitement and slinky blondes and plush night clubs. You've read magazines and you think every assignment is solved in blaze of gunfire with the criminal killed and the agent taking his pat on the back with all due modesty.

That's what you think, pal—but you're wrong. You're so very, very wrong. As a matter of truth a Federal agent's job is pretty dull. Most of the time it's monoton-

ous routine—a grind that goes on and on and seems to get nowhere.

You don't believe that? You'll have to be convinced? Okay. Here's the way it is, chum. The way it *really* is.

You're an FBI agent and you've got your assignment. It requires some travel, and you hit your destination at nine o'clock one bright morning. You've slept on the train, so you're in reasonably good shape. You leave your bag at the hotel where

a reservation awaits you, and then you go straight to work: an ordinary looking young fellow in a blue serge suit, walking up the street like any other sober, responsible citizen.

Except that you've got a .38 automatic under your left arm-pit? Oh no, you haven't. What do you want a gun for? You're not going to kill anybody. And if anyone's going to kill *you*, they're not going to give you a chance to haul out a .38 and defend yourself. The gun is back in your suitcase.

But, as a matter of fact, you're as safe from bodily harm as any other citizen. The bad boys don't kill Federal agents anymore. They've found that it doesn't get them anywhere. Kill one and two more pop up the next morning. It's a futile pastime—like trying to sweep back the sea with a broom.

So you haven't much to worry about as you walk toward your job. You may get killed but the odds are far against it.

You climb a flight of shabby stairs with a tool of your trade in a small black case gripped in your right hand. At the head of the stairs, you come to a door with a plate glass panel—not a very clean panel—bearing no inscription whatever. What's behind this door isn't generally known. In this city, not one citizen in a hundred thousand knows what is housed in the room beyond.

But you know, because the organization you represent is looking for something. They spent quite a little time hunting, and they finally found it at the top of these stairs. Here they located the headquarters of a character named Charlie Fent, and it's Charlie whom you are going to see.

The public knows him by various elaborate titles: The Big Boy—The Gangster—Mr. Money. In the eyes of the public, Charlie is vested in a certain glamour. He flits here and there, always walking swiftly in the center of a ring of bodyguards. If the public steps too close, to get

a good look, the swarthy young men snarl and the public shivers deliciously and jumps back. Glamour.

But not through your glasses. To you Charlie Fent is a fat, greasy thug—a skinful of filth and rottenness that would force you to go out and wash your hand if you ever grasped his. You won't shake hands with Charlie, though. That's not what you're here for. In fact you may not even set eyes on this over-touted lard barrel during your whole assignment.

You open the door at the head of those stairs and go into the headquarters of Charlie Fent.

There's a railing just beyond, with a gate in it, and beyond that, a desk at which a nonchalant young man is seated. The young man has a foot on the desk, and his hat—a flashy, expensive one—is pushed far back on his thick black hair. He's a handsome young man and he knows it.

This young man makes no effort to be cordial. He gives you a flat-eyed stare and lets his lip curl a trifle. Everything about you reads: *Working sucker*. This young man has only contempt for working suckers.

You ask your first question. You know what the answer will be, but you ask anyway:

"Is Mr. Charles Fent in?"

The young man frowns and pulls his hat forward. "You're in the wrong office, buddy. We don't want to buy nothing."

The young man looks at the badge and takes his foot off the desk, but he leaves the frown on his face. The badge puts him at somewhat of a loss, so you say;

"If you're in charge here, I'd like to look at Mr. Fent's books—his records. Are you his bookkeeper?"

He grunts an affirmative and the frown turns into a scowl. He says, "You're not looking at any books around here, pal."

That's about what you expected. You

say, "Maybe you'd better get Mr. Fent on the phone. Tell him the Government wishes to examine his records. Tell him we're willing to do it here in his office without removing them from the premises. If necessary, however, we'll get a court order and haul them away in a truck. It's up to him."

The young man doesn't take his eyes off of you as he lifts the phone and dials. He doesn't have to look at the phone. He can dial that number without looking. His stare bores into you as he relays the information.

There's little doubt in your mind as to what instructions he'll get. After all, Fent isn't a fool. Fent knows you can cart his whole office away, what with the gangster's general vulnerability, and he'd just as soon have you check them on his premises.

THE sullen young man hangs up and gives the gate a vicious kick. That of course means come in, so you pass through the gate and put your black case on a high desk against the rear wall. The young man steps to the opposite wall and pulls open a vault door. He reaches inside and snaps on a light. He turns and walks back and sits down at the desk. You aren't going to get any help from this young man.

You take off your hat and topcoat and lay them over a stool nearby, and then you open the black case and lift out your tool—a small, efficient-looking adding machine. In your profession, adding machines have vanquished a lot more thugs than guns have.

Now you're ready for your day's work. You enter the vault and emerge with a pile of ledgers. The young man watches you. There is contempt and disgust on his face, mixed with undiguised hatred. That doesn't bother you however, because you feel exactly the same way about him and *his* kind.

As you start to work, the young man gives forth with a chatty remark: "Income tax snoop, huh? You're wasting your time, fella. The Big Boy don't make mistakes like that."

You go on punching the keys of the adding machine as your finger runs down a column of figures in the ledger. You don't bother answering, although you know that the youth speaks the truth. The soft money thugs have grown cagey in these later years. Since Uncle Sam lowered the beam on a few big-name crooks, they've wised up. Now they hire expensive brains to make sure the Government gets its due. They aren't going to be caught twice in the same trap. You know that you could plow through those books until you were a doddering old man without finding a penny of unpaid tax.

That's not what you're looking for, but you'd just as soon have the young man think so. In fact the adding machine is in the nature of a blind. You're really not paying much attention to the figures you're adding. Your eyes are busy looking for something else.

You're hunting for a trace of the rottenest, filthiest racket on the face of the earth.

You know the general structure of this racket—this traffic in human degradation—its scope and its financial return. You know that, in this city, for instance, there are men and women caught and held in its vicious grip: slaves to an evil white powder that robs them of everything except the urge to get it—get it—get it—at any price.

You feel strongly about this case because you've seen this white powder work. You've seen the blanched wrecks; the terrible suffering; the plain, unadulterated horror it leaves in its wake. You've seen killers made by this powder.

You've been in the front lines of the war against dope and you know of things

you don't care to think about right now.

Kids at parties—it has happened that way—out for a good time. Good kids, who took a sniff of the stuff just for a thrill, and then said: "Huh! So that's what gets them, the poor, weak-minded devils! How can they do it? Don't they realize that it can *ruin* them?"

Some of these same kids, later, after a second sniff, and a third, you have also seen.

That pitiful, trapped look in their eyes when it dawns on them, for the first time, that they're *hooked*.

Oh, yes. You know what the white powder does. And you know that Fent is pushing the stuff, spreading it around and taking the fat end.

That's Fent. But clever. So damned clever. Sitting in the center of a spider's web without a single strand of it leading to his door. That is what the department has been up against. They've hammered at this case for months and have proven only one thing—that Fent is one of the smartest operators they've ever tangled with.

So you're hunting for a clue. What kind? You haven't the slightest idea. There's but one chance in a thousand that these books will show anything even remotely smelling of dope. It's a dull job, but you go to work hoping for a break, hoping to find just one single entry—a solitary word written on those

pages—that will give you a hole into which to jam your crowbar. You dig and dig and dig, and the hours and days go by.

You find out quite a few things about the Big Boy, but unimportant things. He's tied into four neat local rackets that pay him six and seven figure amounts each year. You aren't interested, though, because he breaks only state and local laws. You're Federal. Fent can park a slot machine in every drug store in town and it's not your business. He's paying off the local police and politicians and even if he wasn't, you couldn't touch him.

You find he's quite generous with money he'll never miss. A picnic for some slum kids cost him seven hundred dollars. Good advertising. He's a hero now, to those kids. Three hundred dollars to A's mother—whoever A is. Probably a minor hood who drew a bucket of slugs in the gut.

Yeah, Fent is a great big-hearted boy—who'd split your skull with a baseball bat if it would do him any good and he could get away with it. You know all about Fent.

SO YOU plow through the journals and ledgers until your eyes burn and water. You work with dogged determination while the handsome youth sits there staring at you with venom in his heart.

In the evenings you don't do much but

HATE TO SHAVE YOUR NECK?

Make the
**TOUGH
SPOT
TEST**



Try a Star Blade on those tough stubble patches—those spots where whiskers are wiry and skin tender. Feel the smoother, better shave you get. Sturdier Star Blades are precision-made to take and hold a sharper edge. Try better shaving at a real saving.

STAR



SINGLE OR DOUBLE EDGE BLADES 10¢ and 25¢ Pkgs.

kill time. You go to a movie and wonder what your wife is doing. But there won't be any letters from her and you can't write.

Why not? Because you're a Federal agent, chum, and that's one of the rules. When you're out on one of these glamorous assignments, no one but the right people in your organization knows where you are.

When you left home she smiled and kissed you good-by and she didn't ask you where you were going. She's an FBI agent's wife and she knows the rule.

She couldn't help but feel a little blue about it, though, because she knows other rules too. She knows that while you're on this assignment you're going to be lonely as hell. You can make no friends wherever you're going. If you should by chance stumble onto an old friend—someone who knew you way back—you can't drop in anywhere for a drink with him, because the rules say you must pay for everything yourself. While you're on an assignment, no one can buy you so much as an evening paper except Uncle Sam. There are good reasons for these rules, but nonetheless they turn you into a hermit in a city full of people.

So you go to movies and sit in restaurants and one night while you're brooding over a cup of coffee, a seedy-looking character eases by your stool and whispers: "Hello, Fed."

You get a tiny thrill—there are a few of these thrills in the game—and you turn a casual head to watch the man pay his check and ease out the door. Then you turn back and brood over your coffee some more.

After a while you get up and yawn and pay your own check. You lounge out of the place, letting the door slam behind you. You look idly up and down the street. There he is, leaning against a lamp post a half a block up.

He sees you, straightens, and moves

along the street. You start casually in his direction and see him turn into the black mouth of an alley. You keep on going. The alley-mouth comes closer.

Are you going in there? You certainly are. What's there to be afraid of? No one's going to kill you. They could do it right here in the street if they wanted to. Just ride up and blast you and ride away. Nobody would bother them.

You come to the alley and walk straight into the darkness. You walk slowly, down the center to keep from hitting garbage cans, and pretty soon there are other footsteps and someone is walking close beside you. The words that come are out of a throat burned raw by whiskey:

"You trying to tie the Big Boy up with the dope traffic?"

Here you've got to make a decision. This guy has something for you or he's trying to get something out of you. You're not eager to have your hand tipped, but there's an odd, bitter tone in his voice. He'd have to be a good actor to deliberately put that tone there. You make up your mind.

"Could be. What have you got?"

"Nothing—only a hunch. There was a girl I knew that's not around no more."

"What happened to her?"

"I think we can find out. I know a place a boat docks."

"So?"

"I know a guy that works on the boat."

You're walking a little too fast, the far mouth of the alley growing larger. You slow down and so does the seedy character.

"The boat comes in tonight. You and me could talk to the guy."

"What dock—when?"

"It's a little boat. It slides in and out from a deserted pier out beyond Ingleside. It don't show a light. Should hit about midnight."

"We'll go out and see the guy."

You are approaching the alley exit

now and you can see the man a little in the dimness. He's hunched down into his thin coat. You wonder about his angle.

"What kind of a cut are you looking for?"

He shrugs. "No cut. I'll meet you there at eleven-thirty."

He moves on out of the alley, out under the street light, and you turn and walk back through the dark tunnel. You feel pretty good—light on your feet. Maybe this is it. It's something anyhow; something to break the dull monotony of continual failure.

You look at your watch. Eight forty-five. Almost three hours. Then you'll know.

A CAB drops you in still, lonely country. There's a moon, though, that throws enough light to show you the pier. The pier is about a half-mile long, stretching out into the ocean. It's roofed over and looks somewhat like the ore docks of the Lake Superior country, only quite a lot smaller.

You approach the pier, open a door and you're in walled darkness, with moonlight sifting down through the planks above. You walk twenty-five feet and come to another door. You open that and see another. That's what this pier is—a series of walled-off sections stretching out into the ocean.

You go through one door after another until the process takes on the unreality of a dream. Open a door—ten steps—open a door—close a door—ten steps; on and on until you feel that you must have walked halfway across the ocean and opened every door ever built.

Then you come to the last room. Its far end opens onto water.

He's there—your little friend, your little informer. He got there ahead of you and he must have met someone, because he's sitting against a piling and you can see the front of him, in the moon-

light, where the blood poured down from the gaping slash they put in his throat.

You don't have to examine him. You don't even have to go close to him. You just look at that gash in his neck and you know he's dead. You stand there with the utter silence close around, pressing against you. You step to the water's edge and look out over the ocean.

No boats in sight. Just an empty expanse of water. You know that your boat will not dock there tonight or any other night from now on. The leak has been plugged. The hole stoppered.



You turn around and walk back through the nightmare of doors and hike three miles to a gas station where you call a cab.

Back in the city you stop at the first police station you see and tell the desk sergeant the score. You don't tell him too much: just that there's a body out on that pier. You show him your credentials and tell him where he can get in touch with you. Then you go back to the hotel and to bed.

You don't go to sleep right away, though. You lie there smoking cigarettes and think about the break you got and what happened to it. You think about how fast these rats move—what an efficient outfit they really are and how you'd like to smash hell out of that.

It doesn't look as though you'll do any

smashing, though because you're about ready to give up on the books. They don't show a thing. Finally you stub out your last cigarette and go to sleep.

In the morning you have callers—two plainclothes-men from Homicide. They sit around a while and seem a little nervous, a trifle wary. You can understand that—they're wondering why the FBI has moved into their city and they're being cagey, listening instead of talking.

You don't tell them much. Income tax? They ask that rather casually, but they appear to be definitely relieved when you don't deny it.

You understand their nervousness. They probably aren't crooked cops, but still they hate to see the Feds operating in their town. That could mean a lid blown off somewhere and maybe a police department shakeup. Honest cops worry about their jobs just like other people.

"This man they knifed," you ask. "Was he identified?"

"Uh-huh. A penny-ante gambler named Joe Taylor."

"Know much about him?"

"A small-time racketeer, but he drifted away from even that for a while. Got legitimate work in a laundry and quit mixing with the boys. Then blew his top for fair. His girl walked out on him, so we heard, and he started hitting the bottle. He served six months for assault and battery in a saloon after that."

They want to ask you some questions, but they hold off. They're hoping you'll volunteer with some information. When you don't, one of them says:

"The Chief would like you to drop around. He'll be in all day."

You tell them you'll be glad to and they start for the door. As they're leaving you ask: "This girl who jilted Joe Taylor. Any idea what her name is?"

There is some head scratching and then an answer; "Her last name was DeVoe, I think. Something like that. She worked

in the chorus line at the Blue Note Club."

You run some water for a bath, and while you're shaving you think maybe it's worth following. Maybe the hole isn't plugged as tight as they think. You have breakfast and look up the address of the Blue Note Club and drop down there.

Nothing glamorous about the place, not at ten in the morning anyhow. The front door is unlocked and you wander in and find no one but a barkeep polishing glassware. He eyes you up and down, and says: "Not open, buddy. We don't open till six."

You lean against the bar. "I'm not looking for a drink. It's a girl. Her name is DeVoe."

"What you want of her?"

"Frankly, it's a bill. Not a very big one. She probably forgot all about it. I think she'd want it paid and I'd like to remind her."

"She used to work here. Been gone a long time, though. Seven, eight months."

You look disappointed. "Any idea where she lives—or did live?"

"Grove Street, I think. Not sure though."

He loses interest and you thank him and drift out.

A phone book now. Maybe a dozen Devoes in the column. You run your finger down and there it is. Mrs. Sarah Devoe, 127 Grove Street. You close the book and go out and whistle down a cab.

GROVE STREET is on the wrong side of the tracks. One of those narrow thoroughfares where fire escapes are so thick they blot out the sky. You go into the hall of 127 and you know someone's having corn beef and cabbage for dinner. It smells as though they're eating it right there in the hall.

You check the battered mail boxes and find the one you want. Mrs. Sarah Devoe lives in apartment 201. And you see something else; another name on the

box that gives you one of those little thrills. There is another name there, under that of the telephone subscriber. The name is written there with a ball-point pen: *Anitra Devoe*.

You go up the stairs two at a time and knock on the door marked 201. It opens finally, and a gaunt, stern-faced woman is staring at you. Large, dark eyes—beautiful once, now dimmed by sorrows and disappointments and hard work.

"Is Anitra in?" you ask.

"Who are you?"

You hedge. "It's a bill, Mrs. Devoe. A very small bill. She probably overlooked it."

She extends a thin, pale hand. "Anitra is out of the city. Her health broke down. I'll pay the bill. How much is it?"

You'd hardly expected this. You do some more stalling. You smile and say, "Oh that isn't necessary. I don't want to run you short. Possibly I could mail it to her."

"I haven't her address. She travels a great deal, but she sends me money. I'll pay the bill."

You just thought of something. You want out of this quick. The thrill is quickening inside you. A big smile for Mrs. Devoe and:

"No no! I wouldn't think of imposing on you. It's a small bill and it's pretty old. We'll just forget it."

A trifle phony and unconvincing but

it doesn't matter. You scamper down the stairs like a school kid, and half an hour later you're in the office of the Police Commissioner.

The next morning, bright and early, you walk into the dingy headquarters of Charlie Fent. You aren't alone now. A brace of city cops are with you. The handsome youth, who has come to expect you, is sitting at the desk. You go right by him and take a ledger off a shelf in the vault and come back out and hand the youth an official paper.

"Court order. I'm taking this ledger."

One of the cops steps forward. "And we're taking you too, son. Up off your fanny."

You talk to the handsome youth in a room at police headquarters. His hair is rumpled and his face is sullen. You hold up a sheet from the ledger and ask: "Is that your handwriting?"

No answer.

A thick-necked cop steps forward. He brings his hand back in a threatening gesture. "He asked you a question, punk. Answer him!"

"Yeah, it is."

"Fine. Now this entry here: three hundred dollars to A's mother. Tell me about that. Who is A?"

"I don't remember."

The big cop's hand comes back again but there's an easier way—a better way. You wave the cop off and say:

Let George
Do It?
He's Already
Done It!

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn.
George Ploetz, barber shop
owner here, has *not* switched
to Calvert—he's *always* bought
it. "Wouldn't switch from
Calvert," he says. "Best tast-
ing whiskey made!"



CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY
86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS
CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N. Y. C.

"Never mind. We've got all we need. Go into the press room and tell the reporters the kid talked. Tell them the A stands for Anitra DeVoe and that the three hundred bucks goes to her mother—a little at a time every week to keep her from suspecting what's happened to her daughter. Then turn the kid here loose. We're through with him."

The handsome youth seems to fold into himself. His face turns sickly white. He trembles like a whipped dog.

"No! No—for the Lord's sake! You want to get me killed?"

"Of course not, son," you reply. "Who'd want to kill you? Not your boss. He's a swell fellow. He gives picnics for orphans."

An hour later the young man signs a statement. You read it, light a cigarette and take a deep drag. It tastes pretty darn good.

Then you phone Washington for some men.

After that the continuity fades and you think mostly in highlights: Mrs. DeVoe fainting dead away, dropping to the floor in a huddled heap, when she learns the real nature of Anitra's illness. It is not easy to tell a mother that her daughter is a drug addict—a far different person from the girl pictured in her mother's heart.

The witnesses. Plenty of witnesses now that the roof has caved in. Lots of rats standing in line to make a deal with the government, rats trying to save their dirty hides.

The Big Boy on trial. The whole rotten story coming out. Testimony pieced together, revealing how Anitra, who knew too much, fell into the drug-trap Fent set for others. How this posed a problem for Fent. She had to be killed or cured. Alone, she would have found quick oblivion, but she had a mother, and Fent couldn't go around killing everybody in town.

So he decided on the cure. He'd have gotten away with it if you hadn't found one small entry in those books; if you and your kind hadn't been so damn stupidly stubborn.

Highlights.

Fent on the witness stand. The grease running down his face soaking his collar. The handkerchief with which he keeps mopping his brow. The trapped look in his dark, dirty eyes. You—sitting in the courtroom when the jury comes in and the verdict is read.

Twenty-five years.

It should make you happy, but strangely it doesn't. There is a vast satisfaction, of course. You can look back on a job successfully carried through, and you know that there will be fewer tears in the night because of what you have done. You have put a road-block in the highway to hell, and you feel that a lot of people, old and young, will be a little more careful of their associations after reading the sordid details uncovered in court. A lot fewer hearts will be broken because you did your job.

Highlights.

Thoughts of seedy little Joe Taylor who went straight—for the wrong girl. You're glad he never knew how wrong she was. But you wish he could know about the twenty-five years, even though it seems distressingly mild to you. Almost a token punishment. You know of a more drastic sentence you'd like to serve on Fent. You'd carry it out with two hands around his thick neck.

But once out of the courtroom you feel better. You check and find that a plane leaves in two hours. It will get you home at three o'clock the following morning.

That terrible hour won't matter to *her*, though—your wife. She'll be waiting at the airport with the car. This is the best part of an assignment, you discover.

The time when you can go home to your wife and family.

YOUR MURDER -MY MISTAKE



Artie got the gun and wheeled around.

When Mel Clark got the message, "Cocktails from five to eight," he didn't suspect it was an invitation—with a guilt edge.

By FRANCIS
HAMILTON

“COCKTAILS from five to eight,” the typed note had said, and the address was given. Mel Clark juggled the paper napkin and the manhattan and wondered.

Narrow walls of a tomb-sized apartment pressed in on him. Party yak-yak was deadening. There was scarcely a recognizable face in the throng, which wasn't surprising, since he didn't know the hostess, and doubted that she knew him. His office girl, who had taken the

phoned invitation late that afternoon, must have made a mistake.

Then he heard the softly chorded piano and the woman's voice, husky, from way down deep in her throat, singing *That Old Black Magic*. Mel made a face over the last of the manhattan. He walked toward the voice, nerves tingling like the last five seconds before the kickoff.

She was seated at the baby grand, a copper-haired girl, with big, red, pouting lips and a baby-blue sheath of a dress.

Her singing stopped as he neared, but her fingers still flirted with the chords. "Hello, Mel," she said. Her voice was everything he'd remembered.

"Patty," he said.

"It's been a long time."

"It had to happen some time. How've you been?"

"Terrible," she whispered. "I missed you."

They were wrapped in each other, paying no attention to the others.

He nodded at the keys. "You remembered our old song."

"That's right." She smiled. "It was ours."

A big man with a hard, high-domed face propelled a blonde onto the bench. "'Scuse, Patty. Can we borrow the instrument a min?"

"Sure, Paul." She got up. The blonde started tearing the guts out of the grand with something hot from the jukes.

"Let's get out of here," Patty said softly.

"Sure." Mel looked at her inquiringly. "But aren't you with someone?"

Her lips went up in a half smile, half pout. She pointed at the man with the blonde on the piano bench. "Paul Rochex," she said.

Mel whistled softly. So that was Paul Rochex. *You're flying high, Patty*, he told himself, as she went for her coat.

They waited outside her apartment, the old apartment, while she fumbled for a

key. "Well, Mrs. Clark, goodnight," Mel said tensely. "It's been nice, seeing you again."

She stared at him, surprised. "Aren't you coming up?"

"And have the boy friend take me to pieces when he follows you home?" Mel was feeling sick from the manhattans.

Patty put her arms around him. He felt her, warm and trembling. He held her tight.

"I told you I missed you," she said. "Why did it ever have to happen?"

He could have told her, but why spoil it? This was everything over again, rushing down the same roller coaster, the sickening feeling inside, lurching around the curves. Lovely Patty, who thought all men were her private, personal, exclusive dupes. He kissed her.

The old apartment looked the same. New paper in the hall. He glanced around, saw the silver-mounted picture of Rochex. Patty saw his frown, folded the picture away. "I'll get some coffee," she said brightly.

Mel took his coat to the hall closet. There was some trouble with the lock. When the door came open, he choked a cry.

There was a man in the closet, a small, fragile man, dressed in loose-fitting good brown tweeds. He moved forward, toppling, and Mel put out a hand to steady him, but snatched it away.

The man fell slowly outward, crumpling, and hit hard, like a sack of sand. Mel knelt beside him, turned him over and saw the muddy dark stain on the vest. The skin was faintly warm. He felt for a pulse, found none.

Behind him, Patty gasped. Mel snapped around, looked at her. She stood staring. The cup slipped from its saucer, broke on the floor. Coffee splashed her nylons.

"So you missed me terribly," he snarled. The same Patty.

"You'll have to get him out of here,"

she said calmly. Like telling him to empty the garbage.

He grabbed her by the shoulders. "The hell I will! And who is he?" The big blue eyes filled with tears, her lips curled in their pout.

"I didn't know anything about this. I swear it Mel. She whispered the words. "He's David Babson. You know."

MEL stared at the body. He knew. David Babson, the other half of the team of Rochex and Babson. Public contractors. Bridges, sewers, street paving. Big money men about town.

He felt her arms about his shoulders. "Please?" He shook her off angrily, moved toward the phone.

"Old Black Magic," he moaned. "Anything to get a patsy." His hand clamped on the instrument. "It's been so long," he mimicked her. "Come clean up the mess in my apartment, before the boy friend sees it." A new thought struck him. "And the cops, Patsy. Where's the gun? Why did you do it?"

The doorbell buzzed. Mel held up the phone. "Better see who it is," he ordered. "I hope you can plead self defense."

She curled her lips petulently. "No. If it's Paul, he'll kill me! He won't listen."

"Yes he will," Mel said. "See who it is, or I'll call the cops right now."

Paul Rochex came in, wearing a gray homberg, a topcoat with velvet lapels. He took the hat off when he saw the body, and swore. He beckoned behind him. "Come on in, Artie," he said. "I want you to get this picture."

A compact and dapper man, about Mel's size, crowded after Rochex. He wore pale gabardine cut on the sharp side. He tightened up all over, like a spring, when he saw the body.

"Gosh, it's Mr. Babson!"

Rochex took charge. "Get off that phone," he ordered Mel.

"I was calling the cops."

"Get off that phone," he repeated firmly. "Artie!"

Artie slapped Mel across the nose. "Do what the man says."

Mel struggled up, ready to swing. Artie drove a hard right into his mouth, and Mel sat down, hard.

"Tell me about it, baby," Rochex said to Patty. "Who is this person?"

Patty turned on the tears.

"He used to be my husband." She clung to Rochex, sobbing. "He made me leave the party with him. Threatened me. So I came here with him. Dave must have seen us coming in. He followed us up, and tried to make Mel go away. Mel shot him." She broke down, crying.

"Damned lie," Mel shouted. "We just got here. This man has been dead for some time."

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Artie got up from the body. "He's still some warm, boss."

"The gun," Mel argued. "I haven't got a gun."

"Probably pitched it down the garbage chute," Artie said. "Or the airshaft. Which was it, Patty?"

"You've got to believe me, Paul," Patty said.

Rochex patted her shoulder, looking hard at Clark. "We believe you, all right."

Mel twisted on his chair, raging. "The whole thing's a frameup. All of you are in together. But you can't pin this thing on me."

Rochex laughed, enjoying himself. "I'll pin it on you, all right, if my name means anything around this town." He paused, thinking. "Artie, get on that phone. Get hold of Captain Gulick for me."

Artie glanced warily at him. "What we need Gulick for, boss? Don't you think this mug did it?"

Rochex waved a hand impatiently. "Sure. But I'm not gonna get her mixed up in it. You can imagine the scandal, the mess in the papers. Bad enough my partner gets murdered, but not in my girl's apartment. No sir."

Artie grinned. "I catch." He went to the phone.

"Gulick's a smart lad. He'll figure some angle to get this body in a—ah, more suitable environment."

"And still see that pretty boy here is hooked," Artie said, dialing.

BRIEFLY Mel considered the odds on making a break. But Rochex was big; Artie was tough. When he bent over the phone, the outline of a shoulder holster appeared under the sharp gabardine. Artie would be delighted to shoot him in the back and clean the case up there.

He tried to catch Patty's eye. She looked away. Had he read something in

gossip columns, rumblings of discord in the potent firm of Rochex and Babson? That was probably it—Rochex had shot his partner, then rung Patty in on the frame. They'd have it all fixed with this cop, and Patty would draw a big payoff for her part in producing a patsy at the right time.

"He isn't at central station. Or home," Artie said. "Where should I try, boss?"

Rochex snapped his fingers impatiently. "Lord knows where the guy is at this hour." He looked at Artie meaningfully. "Can you watch him?"

Artie patted his armpit confidently.

"I'll go look for Gulick," Rochex said. "Sit tight, I won't be too long." He went to the door. "Better pull yourself together, baby," he said to Patty.

"Yeah," Mel said, as the door closed on Rochex. "You can turn off the weeps. Patty. We all understand how you feel."

Artie frowned. "Want I should put the slug on him, baby?" he asked her. She shook her head.

"How about a drink?" Mel grumbled.

She got a bottle of bourbon from the kitchen and made highballs.

"Here's to crime," Mel said. He felt better, after the drink. "Why did you pick me out? The world is full of suckers, just as good."

Artie snickered.

She sipped her drink, pouting. "You can get off. With a good criminal lawyer," she said.

"I still might talk too much. You know my big month. Anyway, what was this guy Babson up here for? Your boy friend didn't seem too curious about that."

Artie and Patty exchanged looks. "It happened just the way I told him," she said.

"Sure, baby," Artie said. He got the gun out, an automatic, laid it on the table. "I don't think you'll talk so much, bub."

Mel shrugged. "Maybe Rochex isn't in on it, after all," he speculated. "May-

be I can convince him his partner was double-timing him.”

“Stop it!” Patty screamed. “Do you think I like this?”

Mel sensed one of her hysterical rages coming on. He worked at helping it. Nodding at the body, he said: “Between the two of them, I can’t say much for your taste, Patty. Although this guy on the floor might have the shade on Paul for looks.”

Artie got up lazily, leaving the gun on the table. He slapped Mel, hard. Patty was crying, “Let him alone, Art. He’ll shut up.” Mel slipped sideways, as if falling off the chair. Artie stepped back, uncertain, and Mel was solidly on his feet, with a rush. He swung a big left that missed and Artie scrambled back for the gun.

Mel ploughed after him, but Artie got the gun and wheeled around. Mel drove a left hook that was better, catching Artie high on the temple. Artie grinned, licking his lips, his right hand tightening around the gun, his left blocking off Mel’s straight right.

“Not the gun,” Patty screamed.

Grinning, Artie tossed it to her. He drove Mel back with stiff body punches. Mel grunted. Now was the time. Take this smart guy and the tough part was over. If he could get to the cops first. . . .

Another left hook was good. It jarred Artie, shook the grin off his face. Mel should have stayed with it. But he tried a right and it was slow, and wide. Artie let it develop until it suited his timing, then stepped inside it with a terrific straight left that knocked Mel loose from his eyeballs. He went out, falling forward, and Artie slammed him again on the chin before he hit the deck.

WHEN he felt the world coming back into focus, he first heard their voices. “Now his legs,” Artie said. “The tape, hon.”

“His car’s right outside. Here are the keys.”

Mel opened his eyes to a slit. He saw Artie working on his ankles with a roll of adhesive. His hands were already bound at the wrist. A gag held his mouth. Artie spoke again.

“It’s the best way. Paul is nuts. No matter what Gulick did, this boy could louse us up.”

“He’s not dumb,” Patty agreed.

How wrong you are, sister, Mel thought.

“He’s ready,” Artie said, finished with the tape. “When they get back here, explain that this guy socked me and made a break. I went after him.”

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Oceanside. There’s a stretch of road there. When they find him they’ll figure he cracked up trying to get away too damn fast.”

“All right,” she said. “You know best, Artie.”

“I know I know best,” he snapped. “Just keep under control until I get back.”

Patty walked ahead, down the stairs. Artie hoisted Mel to his back, carried him easily. The shoulders, Mel realized, were not all padding. He was dumped into the back seat of the sedan. He heard them murmuring outside briefly, then the engine started up.

For a few blocks he struggled to loosen his bindings. Then he saved his strength. Somewhere, he knew, Artie would have to untie him before he sent Mel and the car screaming down on their last ride.

He speculated on whether the tight binding would leave marks on the body that might tell a smart cop what had happened. Why hadn’t Artie shot him right there in the apartment? He could have explained it as a getaway attempt.

Mel’s face ached. Artie could hit. Next time he wouldn’t be so dumb with the right. Next time. . . .

The sedan wheeled up a slow curving grade. Mel sniffed the greenery. They were outside the city now. Not much time. Artie found the car radio, snapped it on. It was a good band, one that Mel liked. The tires moaned a little on the curves.

They stopped. Mel had a good idea where. On the top of the rise that headed off down into Fort Point highway. Artie would need a good hill so the car could get up rolling speed. There was no hand throttle to set.

And it would be an easy walk for Artie from the hilltop across open fields to the end of the the "C" car line in the Sunnyvale district.

Artie shut the radio off; on second thought turned it back on. A monotonously bright commercial. He got out and opened the rear door on his side. Mel closed his eyes, moaning a little. Artie hummed a little tune, the same thing the band had been beating out. He hesitated over Mel's head and a car approached, fast. Artie shut the door and walked around to the other side, shadowed by the sedan.

Mel drew his legs up, protectively. Artie opened the door and bent over close to get at the tapes.

Mel gave it to him, both feet, in a jerky blow powered with all the muscle in his doubled-up legs. The feet caught Artie powerfully, under the chin. He collapsed into the dirt. Mel inched along the bottom of the car, eased himself outside. Artie was huddled in a helpless mass. How much time?

Fumbling, he looked for Artie's cigarette lighter. He held it in his cupped, bound hands and snapped it. It burned feebly. As he tried to hold it against the tape, it went out. Desperately, he twisted it apart, removed the gasoline soaked cotton and tried to apply it against the wrists. The lighter was too weak to ignite again.

He tried to sob and to curse through the taped gag. Something sweetish trickled in his mouth; he knew he must have bitten his lip.

Artie stirred on the ground. Mel steadied himself against the car and tried to hop into the air to drive his heels again into Artie's face. He failed, but found he could move toward the front door, hopping.

He got the door open and wiggled snake-like into the front seat. The electric cigar lighter on the dash worked. He held it in until it was glowing, and, resting it face up on the seat, pressed his wrists on it. He burned himself, but the tape smoldered also.

Repeating the maneuver, he worked grimly through the thicknesses of tape. The smell of burnt hair and flesh stung his nostrils. When he could wrench his hands apart from the last turns of the tape, he ripped away the gag and the ankle bindings, and worked his joints gratefully. He shut off the radio.

ON THE way home, his wrists hurt painfully, so he stopped at a neighborhood drug store on 18th Street to get bandages. He used the pay station phone there to call central headquarters. Captain Gulick had not reported in; they didn't know where he was. Off duty tonight.

He looked up the number of his hostess of that evening and called her. She didn't know any Mr. Clark. Certainly not, she wouldn't have put a stranger's name on her guest list.

After chain-smoking three cigarettes, he decided to start all over again, from Patty's apartment. Driving up toward it from the boulevard, he saw the glow in the sky from a long way off. The street was blocked and filled with fire apparatus. He turned into the garage two blocks away where he used to leave his car. The attendant remembered him.

"Out in front, where I can pick it up fast. I won't be long," Mel told him. He walked through the jammed streets. It was the building all right, centered on the third floor. That would have been Patty's place. Already the flames were gone; it was mostly smoke now.

A young fireman came from the building, water glistening on his protective clothing. He looked sick.

"Smells of gasoline, strong up there," Mel heard him say. "One crisp for sure. Burned to nothing. Just a piece of dress and a lipstick left of her."

Mel shoved forward, his heart jumping. "Woman?" He grabbed the fireman by the shoulders. "You're sure it's not a man?"

The fireman turned a tired, smudged face. "Woman's clothes, is all I know."

"I've got to get up there," Mel said.

Rough hands grabbed him from behind. "By hell, he came back!" Paul Rochex was shouting. Mel spun around. Rochex was with a tall lean cop in plain clothes.

"Let go," Mel growled. Rochex had him by the wrist.

"Look," he said to the cop. "Burns."

The cop got a hold. "Gasoline, too," he said, sniffing.

"You guys are nuts," Mel pleaded. "Let me go. Patty's up there." The cop reached for his other hand.

Mel hit him under the nose with his wide right. The cop bumped Rochex,

blocking him off. Mel ran into the apartment-building lobby, through the open glass and gilt doors. He went right through the basement door behind the elevators, doubled back through the service alley and out into the mobbed streets in front again.

They were looking for him in the building. He hurried through crowds back to the garage. His sedan still stood out in front near the grease racks. He flung half a dollar to the attendant, started his engine and got under way. Then a strange thought struck him, and he backed up to the attendant again.

"Mrs. Clark," he said. "Does she still keep her car in here?"

"Yeah," the man looked around. "Two-tone green coupe. She took it out a while ago."

"Did she say where?" Mel asked hopefully.

"Asked the way to Fort Point Bluffs. That fire—pretty close to home, huh?"

"Very close," Mel said. He grinned.

Sirens sounded on the avenue. Police, going away from the fire. Mel cut over, keeping on the streets and alleys, angling away from the district. He was hot now.

Fort Point Bluffs. There was a chance. That was on the seacoast, south. Cold and foggy and lonely, nothing but a few artichoke farmers. It would be convenient for picking up a certain hitchhiker. Mel drove fast.

Shocking Facts about PIN-WORMS



You may think that Pin-Worm infection is rare and strikes only "careless" families—that, therefore, your children are safe.

Don't you believe it! Medical experts report that at least *one out of every three persons* examined, adults and children alike, was a victim of Pin-Worms. And this embarrassing, annoying condition can spread through entire families.

There's no need to take chances with this ugly pest. A medically approved, scientific treatment now destroys Pin-Worms easily and effectively. This remedy

is Jayne's P-W Vermifuge developed by the famous Jayne Co., specialists in worm remedies for over 100 years.

So watch for the warning signs, especially the tormenting rectal itch. Then ask your druggist for P-W, the small, easy-to-take tablets that act in a special way to bring real relief from Pin-Worms.

Just Remember:
P-W @ for Pin-Worms



HE PASSED the beginning of the long grade, where he had gotten away from Artie. He slowed now, watching the sides of the road. About a mile and a half farther, a service station. Mel filled the tank, got two quarts of oil from the old timer who worked the pumps.

"See anything of a fellow in a light suit, walking? I was supposed to pick him up in my car."

Without looking up, the man muttered, "About an hour ago. Used my phone. Said he had trouble with his auto. . . . That'll be four seventeen, mister. Some gal got him already. Came out from town, I expect."

Mel went on carefully. Fort Point Bluffs was about seven miles. He stopped at three roadhouses and bought beers and asked questions. He got hungry, had a bowl of steamed clams. It was nearly midnight before he reached the Bluffs.

It was nothing but a grocery store and saloon combined, which was now closed, and a filling station, likewise. Back from the road, overlooking the long swing of beaches down to Montara Point, was a beat-up auto camp.

A solitary unshaded electric lamp burned in the office, where a youth in heavy windbreaker dozed on back-tilted chair. Mel didn't bother him, parked the car off the highway a few hundred feet on ahead.

He came back, trying hard to be silent on the lightly graveled side areas and not succeeding. The auto court was U shaped, with stalls and cabins down each side. It had plenty of room. Only three cars were in the stalls.

One was a new two-tone coupe. Mel went back to his sedan and got a heavy wrench and put it in his side pocket.

Pitching his voice to a falsetto, Mel sang out in front of the other cabins. "Early Morning *Chronicle*. Read all about it. Big downtown apartment fire." He kept it not too loud, and rapped on

the cabin beside the green car. "Extry paper. Big fire."

Light showed through a slit in the door and Mel got his foot in it, forcing it wider. It was Patty, in a navy blue polka-dot dress. She had a little smile for him.

"But Mel," she said. "Come on in."

He walked in. Artie, coat and tie off, sat across the little room, gripping his automatic in both hands. It pointed at Mel's middle. Mel observed, irrelevantly, that Artie's tastes ran to maroon-knitted suspenders with gold buckles. Artie didn't say anything.

"Hi, sucker," Patty said brightly.

"You ought to know," Mel said. He turned to Artie. "You won't make it, pal." He turned a palm up, shrugging. "Funny thing, I believe this Gulick's an honest cop."

"I know he is," Artie said sourly. "I couldn't figure Paul going for him."

"Maybe," Mel said, "Paul is wise."

"How so?"

"You been short changing him, Artie. With Patty."

Artie grunted. Patty gazed steadily at Mel.

"His partner got ideas about that," Mel continued. "He came up this afternoon to see, and he saw—you and Patty. He got a very hard brushoff," Mel nodded at the gun.

"Patty knew she'd have a time explaining Babson to Paul. So she reached for a quick patsy, and phoned me an invitation to a convenient party. I came along like she had a leash on me, and up to a certain point things were good. Until Paul hollered for his ace cop. Then you folks changed your plans, but I loused that up, and you had to change them again. You phoned Patty. She slipped some little girl's clothes on Babson, doused him with cleaning fluid and lit him up, to cover her runout for a while, anyway."

"No," Patty said, starting to cry.

"What is that back there in the apart-

ment, anyway?" Mel snarled. "Just burnt toast?"

Artie snapped the safety off with his thumb.

"Uh, uh," Mel said. "That's the kill gun. That's why you couldn't use it on me at the apartment. They'd have compared bullets."

"I don't need it," Artie sneered, getting up quickly. He threw the first blow, a straight left, and followed it with a Sunday right. Mel beat it with his own left hook, caught Artie's jaw and slowed him down. He remembered the wrench then, and clunked Artie square on the bridge of his nose.

Artie fell satisfactorily to the bare floor. A trickle of blood ran from his nose.

Patty smiled at Mel, hopefully. Tears had turned her mascara into a multitone job. She fumbled in her handbag. "Look," she said, pulling forth a roll of bills. "I took this off Babson. There's enough for you and me, Mel."

"No."

"We could get along," she pleaded. "It was only my crazy temper that loused us up before. I admit that."

"You walked out once," Mel said. "It broke me all up in pieces. I've been a long time putting them back together again. The job was finished up there in your apartment tonight. No thanks."

"Please."

He sighed. "I'm going to the office and phone Gulick. You sit right here and make up your mind whether you're going to testify against that lump there on the floor, or make it tough for the state to convict you both. Better think hard. It may mean the difference whether you wear black in the gas chamber at San Quentin, or one of those gray aprons they drape on the women lifers down at Tehachapi."

He swung out the door, turned back a moment.

"It won't make it any easier for you to decide," he added, "but you'll look like hell in either one of them."

SLIPS THAT TRIPPED

Secret-Service men and Baltimore merchants had little trouble in recognizing phony \$10 bills that counterfeiters were attempting to unload on the city.

The steps were missing from the picture of the Treasury Building.

* * *

On the other hand, the counterfeit bill that a California man tried to pass in Los Angeles was a much better job. His mistake, which led to a jail sentence, was in the selection of the passer-by he stopped to ask to change the bill.

It turned out to be the head of the Los Angeles' Secret Service office.

* * *

An Ohio burglar's downfall was one of poor timing. Cincinnati police arrested him for entering a lady's home, stealing a

quilt and then going next door to sell it.

The lady happened to be at her neighbor's home when the burglar called.

* * *

A gem-loving lady was sentenced to jail in Lincoln, Neb., for stealing some jewelry but might have got away with it except for one little mistake.

She wore the jewelry to the policemen's ball.

* * *

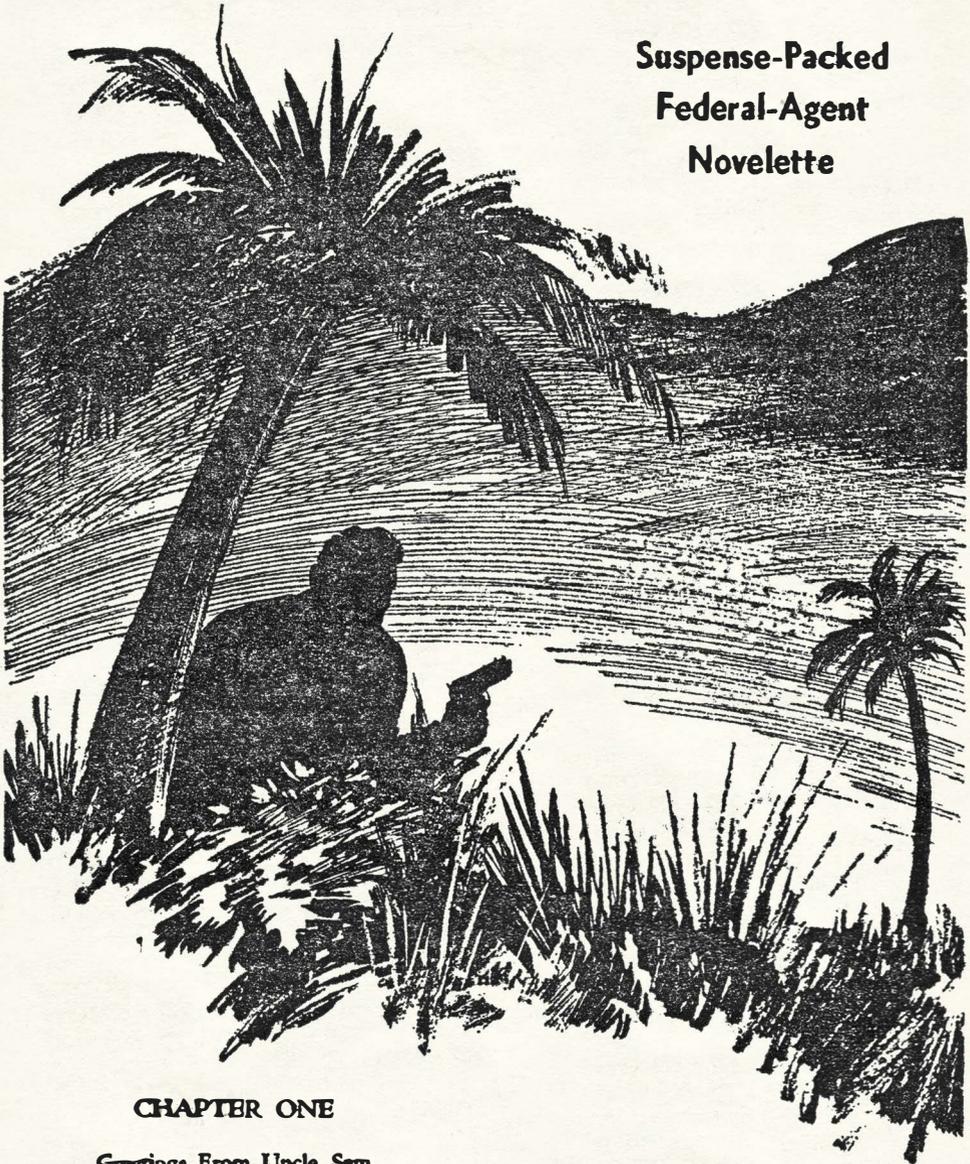
A highfakutin' saying proved the undoing of one swindler in New York City. Manhattan cops had little trouble in identifying him as the man who had swindled 114 telephone users of \$10 to \$15.

Emblazoned on his hand was the tattoo: *Death Before Dishonor.*

H. H.

WARRANT for

Suspense-Packed
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CHAPTER ONE

Greetings From Uncle Sam

I HAD one small picture of him, and not a very good one. Schaegan had always been camera shy. But I had six nice ones of her. Two of them were publicity shots, taken when she was doing that routine with the fan and the thimble-

ful of glass beads at the Grace Bar in Chicago. Those two were full-length shots, with the baby spot reflecting tiny highlights off the instruments in the brass section behind her.

Leg work is a tiresome nuisance. And

an OLD FLAME

By JOHN D.
MacDONALD



I saw a bulging
shadow. . . .

They were racketeering vultures who'd flown the coop to Mexico—and I had to cage them as stool pigeons.

Mexico City is one big town. I grew more than weary of the soft whistle from the desk clerks when I shoved the picture of her across the reception desks.

My strike came on the second day. A nice hotel, not large, out in the Chapultepec section. The desk clerk had pretty good English.

"Ah, yes. I remember. That was, let me check the exact date, eleven days ago. Mr. and Mrs. William Sandler. Suite eight." William Sandler, Walter Schaegan. The initials would match, probably to fit initials on his luggage.

"When did they leave?"

Some of the harsh excitement had crept into my tone. He tilted his head on one side. "You are a friend?"

"A dear old friend."

"But you did not know their name, sir."

I winked at him. "Very important people. Taking a rest from the newspaper reporters."

He pursed his lips. "They left seven days ago. The man who inquired about them the day before yesterday was a reporter, you think?"

I stopped breathing for a few seconds. I said carelessly, "Another friend, I guess. What did he look like?"

The clerk shrugged. "Like an American. He also had a picture of her."

I pushed a ten-peso note across the desk to him. He didn't snatch. He picked it up slowly and said, "Thank you very much."

"How did the Sandlers act while they were here? Did they see the sights?"

"They spent most of the four days in their suite. The wife went out alone twice. They sent out for liquor and had their meals served in the suite. Probably afraid they would be recognized."

I gave a tiny start, then said, "Oh, yes. By the reporters."

"By the reporters," he said with a hint of dryness in his tone.

"Where did you go from here?"

"I haven't any idea, sir."

"But you could guess?"

The clerk was smart. He said, "Mr. Sandler wore a heavy sweater under his suit coat. His wife carried a fur coat over her arm. I would imagine they planned an air trip, sir."

And that was worth the second ten-peso note.

At the airport I spent an hour locating the porter who had carried their luggage from the taxi to the loading truck. He had dark liquid eyes and not much English, but he whistled nicely at the picture of Beth Albany Schaegan and nodded his head violently.

"Si, señor. Las' week een Acapulco airsheep. Si, si."

He got a five-peso note which he snatched.

Mexico City to Acapulco is a few hundred miles from the clear high climate of the mountains to the dense tropical heat of a resort on the Pacific. The planes shuttle back and forth frequently in February. I bought a round-trip ticket for a hundred and forty pesos, and went through the old routine of holding my breath to help the skipper get the ship off the runway.

Below were the sere burned flanks of the mountains, the white jumbled mass of Mexico City tilting and sliding off astern. The passengers were half tourists and half well-to-do Mexicans heading for the white sand and blue water.

With the plane aloft, I didn't have to help the pilot any more. I unsnapped the wide strap and leaned back in the seat. Walter and Beth Schaegan. We would renew an old acquaintanceship.

Once upon a time, with Beth, it had threatened to become more. That was when she was a fresh, new, awkward kid; a hooper in a floor show at Zarro's. But that was ten years ago.

She must have been eighteen then. Her two commercial assets were a lovely body and a delicately beautiful face that had an

odd, earthy quality due to the wideness of her mouth, an uptilted nose and a faint tip-slant to her wide gray eyes. But she couldn't sing and she couldn't dance.

It took her a long time to find out that she had no talent, except that which nature had given her. At that point she could have gone back to the little town in Mississippi, and married the white-trash son of the mayor. Instead, when Zarro changed his show, she stayed on. He gave her a solo spot. I was sucker enough to try to talk her out of it.

She said, "Burnsie, I won't clerk in a store, get fallen arches in a restaurant, or bring up yours or any one else's brats. Catch my first show, Burnsie."

I did. She had designed her own act and written her own song. The act and the song were terrible. She came out in a baby pink dress, lousy with ruffles, and she carried the fan.

The song title was "Good Little Bad Girl." It had numberless verses which didn't scan too well, and she sang every word in a harsh, husky monotone. But the dress, which looked like a high-school girl's first formal, had the usual cleverly concealed hooks and eyes and snaps.

It was the first time in my life that I ever saw two men fall off two adjoining bar stools at exactly the same moment.

After that success, I had to write her off. Success did something bitter and hard and scornful to her. By that time I was one of the bright young men in the District Attorney's Office. I think I walked five hundred miles in the streets at night before I could consider myself cured.

ZARRO'S, of course, was too small to hold her. She moved up through the clubs, with a featured spot in each, and a long run in each. She made new songs and designed new dresses, but the success of the act didn't change.

She was picked up often by the police,

but the publicity raised her income and the holes in the local statutes were plenty wide for the legal talent she employed. You probably read about the demonstration of her act that was pulled in court. It got national coverage.

She saved her pennies and, in 1944, she opened her own club, though it was rumored that someone else held the fifty-one percent interest. Her club was well outside of town, located where the officials weren't so greedy about the amount of grease required for laying off.

All this I learned from the department records, as I was sitting in an overseas naval supply depot at the time she bought the club.

I went with the F B I after the war. It is policy to help other Federal agencies by loaning operatives. I was on loan to the Internal Revenue Department.

As we droned south I worried about the other character on the trail of Walter and Beth Schaegan. It would be a very definite shame to arrive in time to order flowers. I would get the cool eye on my return.

We lost altitude, down through the layers of increasing heat. The wide sea sparkled and the surf against the white beaches was tiny and distant and unreal. The airport is ten miles from Acapulco. After we settled down, taxied over to the open-sided administration building, I peeled off my coat, walked in my shirt-sleeves to a taxi. The sun stuck my shirt to my back almost immediately.

Once again it was necessary to make the rounds of the hotels—but not as difficult as there were fewer hotels. I combined two functions by asking for a room in each place.

The third hotel I tried was the Hotel de los Papagayos, set on a high hill over the harbor. They didn't have a room for me, but the cute little dark-haired girl behind the big long desk glanced at the picture of Beth and said:

"Si, señor. The lady is here. She and her 'usban' are in cottage eighteen."

I gave her my very best smile. I said, "I'd hoped to stay in the same place. If you don't have a room, maybe you have a cottage for me."

She shook her head sadly. "I am so sorry, señor."

The folded twenty-peso note made a tiny whispering sound as I rubbed it back and forth on the edge of the counter.

She tilted her pretty head to one side. "There is a honeymoon couple and they leave today by car. They are in a cottage. If you wish to wait for two, three hours. . . ."

"I wish to, thank you. Can you take care of this?" I picked up my bag, hoisted it over the counter, shoving both it and the peso note toward her.

She swung the bag down with ease for such a tiny girl. "You will have cottage twenty-one, señor. A boy can show you where it is if you wish."

"I'll find it, thanks."

I registered and took a walk around the grounds. The palms were thick on either side of the curving paths. The flowers were vivid and a few brilliant parrots, who looked as though they'd flown through a paint shop, scolded and squawked in the trees.

The huge swimming pool was occupied by about four swimmers, but there were a good score more lounging around the apron of the pool in the sun and sitting with drinks in the clusters of chairs in the shade. A tiny marimba band made the appropriate gourd noises inside the open shed-like affair that housed the bar. All very plush.

In my dark Mexico City suit, even with my coat over my arm, I felt like a very sombre blackbird among these gayly colored vacationers. A few people looked at me with idle curiosity and I could see them mentally labeling me as a recent arrival.

I stood at the end of the path and looked across the pool. Various characters of both sexes were trying to achieve the shade of whole wheat toast. A few had succeeded. One of them was a woman in a white bathing suit, stretched out on a narrow mattress on her back. Her hair was in a bandanna and she wore sun glasses with enormous white rims, startling against the tan of her face.

Circling the pool I walked up to her, stood looking down at her. I cast a shadow across her face.

Her mouth didn't change. I couldn't see her eyes. But the relaxed fingers of her right hand slowly curled into a white-knuckled fist, and then as slowly uncurled.

"Hello, Burnsie," she said in the flat, harsh voice I remembered so well. Six years since we had seen each other.

She had oiled herself with some sort of lotion. The sun had turned it into tiny beads against her brown, firm skin. I eased myself down onto the concrete, feeling the oven heat of it through my pants.

She reached for the offered cigarette. She did not raise her head as I lit it. She sucked smoke deep into her lungs and, leaving the cigarette between her lips, exhaled slowly.

"You're better looking, Burnsie. I like the lines at the corners of your eyes and around your mouth. You don't look like the boy reformer any more."

"Thanks."

"Something smartened you up, Burnsie."

"You, and a few other things. I had a bad time getting over you, Beth."

She took another drag and rubbed the cigarette out against the tiles. She propped herself up on one elbow. "You think you did get over me, Burnsie?"

"I'm sure of it."

"This isn't any accident, meeting like this, is it, Burnsie?"

She'd be too smart to fool that way. I said, "No, it isn't any accident."

"I didn't think it was." She stood up with one quick, easy motion, stood looking down at me. She was good to look at. I felt the faint twist of an old knife in a wound I thought long healed. "Get a table for two in the shade, Burnsie. I'll go scrub off this grease."

She was back in twenty minutes. As I watched her walk toward the table, I remembered the funny awkwardness she had had the first time I had seen her in the show at Zarro's. She still had that awkwardness, but a proud way of carrying herself.

She wore one of those white lace Mexican blouses with elastic in the neckline so that it can be pulled down over bare shoulders. Her hand-painted skirt was very full and quite long.

I stood up. There was amusement and irony in the gray-eyed look she gave me, along with the gamin smile.

"Burnsie, as I was dressing, I remembered the time you told me that my hair was like old silver coins in the moonlight. Remember that?"

I flushed as I sat opposite her. "I remember it, Beth. It was and it is."

There was no point in antagonizing her. And her hair was just as it had been when I first met her. Yet the planes and lines of her face had suffered a subtle thickening, a coarsening. Her nose had spread a bit, it seemed, and her brows were thicker, her cheek bones more solid, the mouth wider, heavier. She was no longer beautiful. Yet she was extraordinarily attractive. Sitting at the table with her was like trying to look at an oil painting from too close. There was an aliveness and vitality and color about her.

She wanted a planters' punch, and so I ordered two. We were sparring, avoiding the subject, mentally circling each other with guard held high.

"Wally is out impressing his personality on the sailfish today," she said. "He'll be back in two hours. Five o'clock."

"Do you think he'll be difficult?" I asked.

She shrugged her bare brown shoulders in a gesture I remembered from a long time back. "He's smart. He knows there's no case without a complaint."

"But shouldn't he be afraid of my mentioning his whereabouts to the wrong people? The people on his side of the fence?"

She smiled, almost with pity. "Poor old Burnsie! By the time you could say Acapulco to the wrong people, we'd be in Guatemala or Peru or the South of France. Our papers are in order, you know."

"But you haven't been too smart. I followed you and traced you here."

"You're smarter than they are, Burnsie."

"Not quite. There's somebody else on the trail, too."

She sat very still. One hand slid up to the slender brown column of her throat. With that hand she reached for her glass. "Don't kid me, Burnsie."

"I'm not." I looked into her eyes as I said that, and I saw her doubt change to belief and to fear.

She said, "I heard you went to work after the war for Uncle Sam."

"And so you can guess why I want to see Schaegan."

"I can guess."

CHAPTER TWO

No Time for Memories

WE HAD another punch, tall and dark and cool and strong. I had missed lunch. The punch made my lips feel numb and gave the pool an unrealistic look. It made the marimba music sound better. And it made Beth look better to me.

I wanted to find out what she really

thought. So, when the two punches melted a hole in my caution I leaned toward her and said:

"Why did you do it, Beth? I understood you were doing all right with your place. Why did you tie up with Schaegan?"

Her laugh was very short and very bitter. "Doing all right? I was going snow blind from looking at the empty tables. I was in hock to my ears. The syndicate was bleeding me. I went to see Schaegan. I thought he was top man in the syndicate. I told him that either the bite was reduced, or I would have to fold. Schaegan told me that it wasn't his decision to make, but that he'd try to make the big boss see the light. I went back to see Schaegan several times. It turned out to be—one of those things. He couldn't get the bite reduced, not even after we were married."

That answered some of my questions, my personal questions. But not the business questions. Wally Schaegan could answer those—if I could convince him that I could keep him out of trouble after he gave me the information.

"Are you happy, Beth?" I asked.

"You're getting drunk, Burnsie."

"Maybe I am. And maybe it's important to me to know if you're happy."

"You're sweet," she said softly. She reached across the small table, put her hand over my fist, squeezed hard.

"No, Burnsie. I'm not. I don't like this. I want out. Mostly because Wally isn't the kind of husband a girl dreams about. But what could I do? Go back to the fan act? Hit one of the circuits? This is a soft and easy life, Burnsie. Besides, a divorce is so messy."

I saw Schaegan coming toward us and got my hand quickly out from under hers. He came up to the table.

I met Schaegan the year before I met Beth. He was a local scandal at the time. Disbarred attorney, neatly caught bribing

a juror who was a plant from our office. He had been working on retainer for some of the town's most sinister citizens. At that time he was a hard, chunky young man with cold eyes, a trim mustache and few social graces.

Changes were evident. The cold dark eyes were the same, and so was the heavy-shouldered build, the little mustache. But his hair was gray at the temples and he walked with more assurance and poise.

After disbarment he had gone to work for the syndicate. And he had made a very good thing out of it after he had been firmly placed on the wrong side of the fence.

He put his hand on Beth's bare shoulder and said to me, with a small smile, "Greetings to the D.A.'s darling! Understand you're with the Feds now, Burns."

"You understand very nicely, Walter."

He frowned. "I'm sorry you managed to follow us, Burns. But I suppose you want to talk business."

"Correct."

He looked at his watch. "I'm tired and dirty. I want to shower and change. Come to cottage eighteen in an hour. Come along, Beth."

She got up meekly and went along with him. I noticed that she was a few inches taller than he. She walked several steps behind him. The proud way she had walked to meet me was completely gone, and only the awkwardness remained.

I had changed to sports shirt and slacks. Beth let me in. Their cottage was a bit larger than mine. Wally sat in a cane chair near the windows. They had a view of the harbor.

Beth poured me a Bacardi cocktail from the tall frosted shaker. It was tart and good.

I sat down at Wally's invitation and said, "I won't hedge and I won't fence. I'm on loan to the Internal Revenue people. They have been working on the syndicate for nearly four years. They

have a lot to go on. Rumor has it that you kicked the props out from under the syndicate by cleaning out a tremendous hunk of the bank roll and taking off with Beth. Due to the source of the money, no complaint was made. You stole stolen money.

"Now you can help us. You're in their bad graces now, to put it very, very mildly. They can't be any more anxious to kill you than they are right now.

"So I want an affidavit from you. I don't want you to include in the affidavit that you took the dough. It would be silly to even ask you. I want an affidavit listing names of the top personnel of the syndicate, their sources of income, the way the income is split and your best estimates as to the annual take during the past five years."

Wally turned the cocktail glass idly in his fingers. He said, "And with that piece of paper from a disbarred attorney you think you can collect taxes or jail some people for fraud?"

"Not with that alone. It's just a piece in the entire puzzle."

"But it's the last piece?"

"It could be."

"Why should I do you people any favors?"

"Because, by snitching, Schaegan, you can give us a club to beat on them with. We'll keep them so damn busy they won't have time to worry about you. We particularly want the name of the top man."

"They won't find me," he said. "You can run real fast with a half million in cash stashed in the proper places where you can get your hands on it."

"But maybe you could stop running?" I said. Beth had gone around behind his chair. I said, "Besides I think you ought to know that I'm not the only one who—" I stopped as Beth's hand flashed up, finger pressed to her lips.

Schaegan leaned forward. "The only one who what?" he asked harshly.

"Who wants information from you," I said lamely. "You'll be dogged by Federal people from now on."

He leaned back, tension gone. "Let 'em find me, Burns." Suddenly he sat forward again. "Anybody follow you? Anybody tail you, knowing you were coming to see me?"

"No," I said bluntly.

He reached around, took Beth's arm, pulled her so that she stood beside his chair. He slipped his arm around her waist and smiled largely. "We're doing very nicely, Burns. Very nicely. And when the dice are being good to you, you're silly to change them, *verdad?* So there'll be no affidavits, no papers, no statements. Nothing."

I pulled my bluff. It wasn't a good one. I said, "Then the only thing we can do is build a case around you and set up extradition proceedings."

He laughed until there were tears in his eyes. "You forget, Burns, that you're talking to a lawyer. An ex-lawyer, perhaps, but I remember the precedents without too much trouble. What are you going to charge me with? Is traveling an offense? Beth and I have passports in good order. You better go back to your red tape."

I grinned. "So it didn't work, Schaegan. I'll stick around a few days and see if I can get you to reconsider."

His eyes were hard over the mustached smile. "Glad to have you aboard, lieutenant."

"See you later," I said. "Think it over." I headed for the door.

Beth said, "I'll walk with you down to the office. We need cigarettes."

Schaegan didn't object. She walked beside me in the heavy dusk. The flower scent was sweet and thick and warm. I was forced to slow my pace to hers. Dusk made the blouse look whiter, her firm skin look darker. I remembered what I had said about the silver coins.

As we passed a place where there was a break in the ranks of the small palms, she leaned heavily against me, forcing me off the path and into the palm shadows, into the velvety darkness that was more like night.

Six years since I had kissed her. Her lips were more practised. Then I held her upper arms clasped tightly in my hands, held her with her face close to mine.

"Why didn't you want me to tell him about the trail I picked up? Do you want him shot?"

"Don't ask me that, Burnsie," she whispered. "Don't even say it. I'm playing a sad and silly old game. They call it the game of what-might-have-been. I didn't want you to tell him because then we would have left here tonight. And I want a little time to pretend that I'm here with you."

"This is so sudden."

"Don't be nasty, Burnsie. How wrong can a girl be? How did I know that six years ago you were right and I was wrong?"

"You'd have looked dandy in a three-room apartment on the third floor of a brick house in Alexandria. The perfect suburban hostess, carrying twenty dollars worth of groceries back from the super market."

She leaned her forehead against my shoulder. "Burnsie, it doesn't sound bad to me now. Not bad at all, Burnsie."

I pushed her away roughly. "Break it off, princess! I'm on a job here. If he won't tell me, can you?"

"I'll tell you anything I know, Burnsie," she said. "Anything."

"He'll expect you back."

"Where are you staying?" she asked. I told her. She said, "He's afraid, you know. Way down inside he's scared to death, but he doesn't let it show. He drinks too much these days. I'll get him really loaded tonight. Be at your place. I'll be over when I can."

I SAT in my cottage with the door open, the lights off. The orchestra had stopped playing an hour and a half before. For a time a woman had sung in the distance, her voice florid and drunken. The grounds of the hotel were quiet. By listening hard I could hear the full-throated drum of distant surf on the packed sand. A distant banana boat passing the harbor hooted at the stars, a sound as mournful as the howling of a midnight cur.

Maybe I dozed. When I opened my eyes there was a figure in the doorway.

"Burnsie!" she said softly.

I went to her. The night had cooled. She looked ridiculously young in the moonlight. And when she talked in that low tone her voice wasn't harsh.

From my arms she said, "Does a lady get invited in, or do we stand out here all night?"

It seemed a time for memory. Silly memories. The years had not treated us delicately. But the clock had been turned back. The walks we used to take when she'd tell me how she was going to become a famous dancer and go to Hollywood. The amusement park. We bet kisses on our shooting gallery score. It was one game she won easily; she was good with those guns. But those years were dead. Snowed under. Way in the front of the book.

The glow of her cigarette was a slow arc which I could trace each time she lifted it to her lips. When she dragged the smoke into her lungs, the end glowed more brightly, and I could see the prominent cheekbones, the violent red of her lips.

She said, "I guess I can't add much, Burnsie. The syndicate had a tie-up with the police in such a way that you paid off or had to follow a hundred ridiculous ordinances that no one ever heard of. If you still stayed stubborn, they'd send around a few muscle men to start a brawl at the bar, or break up the show. The

syndicate wasn't really strong until after I went into business."

"Schaegan cleaned the syndicate?"

"I guess he took most of the ready cash."

"What did he do with it?"

"Don't ask me, Burnsie. He keeps plenty with him. He isn't exactly liberal with pocket money for me. I guess he's afraid I'll run out on him."

"How did he get hold of it?"

"It was kept in a private time vault. There was enough to fill two big suitcases. Schaegan knew everybody's habits. He sapped the guard and got out again in five minutes."

"We were silent for a little while. We sat facing each other in the deep cane chairs.

I said, "We have enough to go on to grab the head of the syndicate for fraud if we can lay our hands on him. If we could find out who he is. He's a good administrator. A very hard and efficient apple. He put the syndicate into bigtime operations in 1945. Before that it was just a game for peanuts."

"I don't know who was at the head of it, Burnsie."

"But Schaegan knows."

"Yes, Schaegan knows. And I don't think he'll tell you, Burnsie."

I sighed. "I'm going to proposition him, Beth. I'm going to ask him to write out the story and arrange it so that, should he die, it will be forwarded to me immediately. That can't lose him anything, and it might appeal to him from a revenge angle. If I can't get him to come out with it, I have hopes he'll fall for the second alternative. What do you think?"

"He might do that. And you might have to wait a long time to get the information. Civil service might have retired you by the time you get it."

I laughed without humor. "You wouldn't let me warn him. He might be getting it right now, Beth. In the head."

She said, "Did you ever think, Burnsie, that the head of the syndicate had to split the take up so many ways that he never made a big pile out of it?"

"Big or little, we can prove at least a thousand a month unreported income. And even if it were only fifty a month unreported, we could still make fraud stick."

She came quickly over to me. She said huskily, "Burnsie, isn't this kind of a crummy time to be working on a case? Do they pay you overtime? Don't you think somebody ought to change the subject?"

Just outside the open door a stone rattled under a careless foot. She stiffened in my arms and stopped breathing. As she stood up, I went quickly for the door.

My eyes were used to the darkness. The moistness of the night made the gun steel sweat against my hand. I saw a bulging shadow under a small twisted palm.

I kept my eyes on the shadow, grabbed the slide of the automatic, yanked it back and let it slam forward. The metallic noises seemed as loud as a shot in the night stillness.

There was a crash of shrubbery, the slap of a shoe-sole against stone. The shadow moved quickly off into the night.

I turned to Beth and said, "The time grows short, princess. You'd better head back and see if there are any holes in your husband."

I walked with her. Their cottage was dark. Her key clicked in the lock, grated slightly. The door swung open. The deep, stentorian sound of Schaegan's snoring floated from the bedroom.

She turned into my arms, kissed me hard, whispered, "Good night, darling." I stood outside the door until I heard the click of the lock. Then I walked slowly back to my place. I looked toward the east, saw the faint grayness of dawn beyond the mountains. I yawned and stretched.

Back in the cottage, I took a long shower and fell, drugged with weariness, into bed.

CHAPTER THREE

Bullets to Spare

AT TEN o'clock I was on the upper terrace of the hotel proper, eating breakfast, carefully watching cottage eighteen. After breakfast I drank one slow cup of coffee after another. It was quarter after eleven when Beth, a cape around her shoulders, her legs, long and slim and brown, accentuated by the white two-piece swim suit, came out and walked slowly toward the pool.

I caught her at the pool edge just as she was about to dive in.

There were shadows under her eyes, but she looked wide awake and alert. Her fingers were strong on my wrist. "I couldn't sleep, Burnsie. I kept thinking about a divorce. How much did you mean it about that three-room apartment?"

"I never get emotional before lunch. Princess, would you please be a good girl and stay the hell away from the cottage? I want a heart to heart talk with Schaegan. A nice long talk. I have a new idea."

She gave me a level stare. "You wouldn't be thinking of—" She doubled a brown fist and gave a respectable version of a left hook.

"How could you think such a horrible thing!" I said, grinning.

"He's tougher than you might think."

A man in swimming trunks sat on the edge of the pool on the other side, watching us. I remembered him from the day before. He was average looking, but with the flat, opaque, unreadable expression of a very rough citizen. I stared at him and he looked away. I wondered if he were the visitor in the night. Or maybe he just liked Beth's looks.

"I'll chance it," I said.

Schaegan's heavy chest was bare. He wore baggy slacks and a heavy beard and even his neat little mustache was rumped.

"Go away, Burns," he said in a scratchy voice. "Go hide."

I reached almost straight up in the air with my left hand. His hands instinctively lifted. As they did I pivoted and put my full weight into a short right hook that traveled eight fast inches and ended with a sound, half splat and half thud, against his bare diaphragm.

His mouth sagged open and his eyes rolled half out of sight. He held the door frame in both hands and sagged slowly to his knees. I grabbed him under the arms, kicked the door shut, lugged him over to a chair. He was fighting for each breath.

I had previously noticed a portable radio on the table. I dropped the front open, found some Cuban music and turned it up.

He looked greenish around the mouth. He said, "I didn't care for that, Burns. You killed any chance you might have had." He had to talk up to be heard over the music.

I had my personal hunch that he would crack wide open if I could convince him that it was my firm intention to spoil his face for all time. I was banking on his basic vanity.

I put more anger in my voice than I felt. I said, "I'm out of reach of department regulations, Schaegan. I've never liked you. I hope you're real stubborn. I hope it takes you a long, long time to make up your mind to talk. Because I'm going to get a hell of a lot of pleasure out of giving you a face that not even a mother could love." This time my bluff had to work. If I had marked him, the department would have me filling out forms for the rest of my natural life.

He licked his lips. "You're crazy, Burns," he said in a loud scratchy voice. "You people aren't allowed to get rough."

"Maybe not in the States. But here it's something else. Where would you like the first one? Like a nice flat nose, friend?"

I saw his eyes move, saw him look over my shoulder, saw his eyes widen with intense surprise.

I grinned. "Schaegan, you ought to know that you can't fool me that way. That only works in the movies."

There was a faint whisper of sound behind me, and I spun endlessly down into a black cavern where Cuban music echoed and re-echoed, faint, distant and unearthly. . . .

It couldn't have lasted long. Somebody had dragged me over the tile floor. My cheek felt like it was on fire. My head felt like it was made of rough bone fragments floating on the brain jelly.

When I opened my eyes, all colors were jangled and too harsh and the light was too bright.

The man I had seen at the swimming pool was inside the room. I was in a corner beyond Schaegan's chair. The music still clicked and thumped and rattled. The man was wet. He dripped. His feet made marks on the floor.

He held a gun in his hand. I had a childish wonder that a man in swimming trunks should suddenly appear with a gun.

I sat up and the man made a quick and threatening swing of the barrel toward me. I inched over against the wall, against something that would support my head so that it wouldn't roll off.

The music had masked the sound of the opening door. My vision seemed too intense. I could see a few dark hairs clinging to a little clot of blood near the end of the gun barrel. I knew what he'd hit me with.

Schaegan was almost yelling, his voice high and shrill. "Stevie, boy, you've got it figured all wrong! All wrong, Stevie. You shouldn't have listened. Wait and let me tell you. Stevie!"

But Stevie had that flat kiffer-look on his face, that hard cold look of a man who has killed and who has found it to be a good feeling for him and who wants that feeling again.

The door opened behind Stevie the way it had opened behind me, and he didn't hear it any more than I had. Beth came in in that white swim suit with the big straw purse in her hand.

One hand was inside the purse. It came out and I saw the gleam of steel. Her mouth was open, the parted lips shining with wetness, her eyes wide and staring.

She lifted the gun and the little whip-cracks were almost absorbed in the riotous music. Still dulled by the blow on the head, I could only marvel that it was the same piece that had been playing when I turned the radio on.

She fired eight times. Three and three more and then two. Stevie staggered and tried to spin around. As he did so, a long red line appeared across the back of his shoulder. He stood, wavering, and his swaying body concealed the gun from my view.

When he fell he went down slow, first onto his knees and then over onto his face, trying to get his arms out to protect his face from the hard floor, but not quite succeeding.

She lowered the gun just as the music stopped. The gunfire Spanish of the announcer filled the room. I hauled myself to my feet and went to her.

Schaegan sat with his chin on his chest, his hairy arms limp on the arms of the chair. One of the little slugs had penetrated right at the part in the middle of his little mustache. Another had penetrated at the corner of his left eye. I had to kneel in front of him to see the damage. The perspiration on his heavy chest had thinned the blood so that it had spread in a wide, smooth pattern.

I slammed up the front of the portable radio and the silence was like a blow.

She made a weak sound in her throat. "Oh, Burnsie, I didn't mean to kill Wally too! I saw you there on the floor. I thought that man had killed you. I just pointed the gun and pulled the trigger!"

She collapsed into a chair at the other end of the room.

"That your gun?" I asked.

"Yes. But it can't be traced, and I haven't got a license for it and I didn't declare it. Can we say that man in the swimming trunks had it?"

"I think we can say almost anything. We've got a chance to fix the story."

She stood up and clung tightly to me. She was shaking. She said, "Burnsie, Burnsie. I love you, Burnsie."

And so we rigged it. The Acapulco police seemed willing to swallow our story. She and I had come back to the cottage to find a man with two guns robbing her husband. He had hit me over the head, and in the struggle he had dropped one gun. He had already shot Schaegan. Beth had snatched up the gun and killed the stranger. He was registered at the hotel as a Mr. Robert Stevens of Kansas City.

There were endless statements to be made to interpreters and endless papers to sign. Beth was congratulated on her quickness and her courage. The necessary arrangements were made to ship the body of Schaegan to his hometown of Lockport, New Jersey, where a maiden aunt still lived.

IT TOOK six days to get the formalities over. Enough money was found on Schaegan to pay the expenses of shipping the body. I presented my credentials and received permission to go through his things. There was no clue to the hiding places of the rest of the money stolen from the syndicate.

At the end of the six days, Beth looked considerably less flamboyant. We sat at a table for two and she said:

"I'm hungry for the States, Burnsie. Take me back with you. You'll have to, I guess. I haven't the money to make it on my own."

"Glad to," I said.

"How far will you take me, Burnsie? All the way to Alexandria? All these last years sound like a bad dream when I try to tell myself they really happened. I'm the girl you knew six years ago, Burnsie."

"I know you are," I said gently.

"It'll be fun to shop in a super market, darling," she said.

"It'll be fun to come home to you, princess," I said. "We'll forget the last six years."

There was a bit of trouble with plane connections. She had surprisingly little baggage. Two suitcases and a big floppy, fat, long-legged doll that I remembered as being on her dressing table at Zarro's. It was thirty-two hours later that, still buzzing with vibration, we stepped out of the plane and waited to go through customs examination at San Antonio.

She held my arm and smiled up at me and said, "New beginning, Burnsie?"

I turned her around and held her hands in mine. I held that ridiculous doll of hers under my right arm. I looked down into her eyes and said softly, "Newer than you might think, princess."

I winked over her shoulder at Fred Sarazen elbowing his way through the crowd. He saw the way I held her and he caught wise. He reached neatly around her and snapped the handcuffs onto her slim wrists with a hearty click.

She looked up at me and her eyes narrowed. I let go of her hands and stepped back, grinning. Her face twisted into animal lines and her voice was a mad harsh screech as she jumped for my eyes with curved fingers. Bill grabbed her and yanked her back.

As he did so, I ripped open the body of the fat doll. It was there, a very hefty roll of very large sized bills, plus a little

collection of safety-deposit-box keys, each tagged with city, bank and signature used.

She looked at me with cold hate in her eyes.

I said, "Cheer up. Maybe you can land a job in the prison laundry. Ten years of that, or probably fifteen and, let me see, you'll only be about forty-five. That laundry work will put some meat and muscle on you, but you'll probably lose your tan."

She called me a string of names so foul that even Fred blushed.

Fred turned her over to his boys who took her away in the sedan. He shoved his hat back. "Burns, my lad, that is a rugged dish. Leave us partake of a beer."

Over the beer I told him how it had shaped up. Schaegan had been working his way up in the syndicate when she had come into his life. Some of this, of course, was guesswork, but we proved it later. She was a good businesswoman. She had advised Schaegan so well that within a year they were the big guns in the syndicate. He grew to defer more and more often to her judgement. She had him right around her little finger. She was the real boss, and stayed in the background. He was front man.

They smelled the tax boys closing in and she developed a plan. They delayed their payoffs until they had accumulated a good package. Some of it was theirs, but a large slice of it was money that had to be paid out if they were to stay in business.

They made a swing around the country while she planted large wads of the money here and there, under assumed names, faked credentials. Apparently Schaegan was too much taken with her to get suspicious of her planting the money where only she could get at it.

Schaegan had been necessary to pull the caper, but his usefulness was at an end.

She got in touch with the one called Stevie, and had asked him to come down and do a job on Schaegan. With Schaegan dead, no one would be able to hook her up with the boss job in the syndicate.

Stevie had arrived before I had, and he was waiting around, staying out of Schaegan's sight, waiting for Beth to set the stage properly. My showing up was a complication. She saw that I might make the best way of getting back to the states and getting out of sight. But Schaegan had to be out of the way. I moved too fast. She sent Stevie up to the cottage to knock me out and kill Schaegan. When she arrived Schaegan wasn't dead. He was talking. And I was listening.

So she did both jobs at once.

Fred, on the other side of the booth, frowned at me. "It seems to fit, Burns, but how the hell did you catch on?"

"I didn't get it until Schaegan was dead. And then a few things clicked. The only place Stevie could have gotten the gun was out of that big straw shoulder-bag Beth took down to the pool. And in her Mississippi girlhood she had learned to be a good shot. She forgot that I knew that from our early amusement-park evenings. At a distance of nine feet, she could hardly kill Schaegan by accident."

"You think she would have married you?"

"Certainly. And one fine day when the heat was off, she would have gone."

Fred sighed. "I'm always after grubby little characters that don't wash and speak baritone. What sort of luck do you have to have to go after a dish like Beth?"

I couldn't answer that. But if Bill had attended the hearing sixty days later, he wouldn't have been as intrigued.

Beth had gained twenty pounds on the starchy prison food. Her dead-white face was bloated and puffy. She made a full confession in a flat, monotonous voice without once looking toward me.

For a nominal fee the gun-slinging crew would murder anything that breathed—and undercover-man Sprague was breathing . . . down their necks!

Novelette of Goons Vs. the Government

The man near George looked startled as Mac's gun appeared.



HOMICIDE, INC.

By RICHARD DEMING

CHAPTER ONE

On His Own

MacDONALD SPRAGUE sat sidewise at the bar, frankly admiring the grave-faced blonde who sat with an escort a few feet away. But the admiration was entirely a surface



veneer covering his cold loathing for the woman.

She looks more like a kitten than a murderess, he thought, studying the grave oval face with its slightly upslanting eyes. It was a face that seemed constantly to hold the promise of a smile which never materialized, a poker face, concealing all that lay behind it, yet somehow suggesting that if the mask were lifted, only laughter and innocence would be revealed.

It was hard to imagine those soft lips tensed in a cruel line and that tiny hand deliberately pumping bullets into a man. So hard that a strange reluctance mixed with the loathing in Mac's mind for the woman he believed had killed his brother.

With his hat tilted back at a jaunty angle and with a glint of satanic humor in his eyes, no one would have suspected MacDonald Spague's thoughts were composed of anything but admiration. He had rehearsed his part until everything about him was carelessly jaunty: his dress, his speech, his expression—even the way he moved in sudden controlled bounces. In physical appearance he only faintly resembled the deceased killer whose name he had assumed, but his personality was an almost exact copy.

The girl, though obviously aware of his scrutiny, seemed neither offended nor gratified, apparently accepting male admiration as a matter of course. But the man seated beside her did not share her indifference. Repeatedly he scowled at Mac, and once made as though to rise, but was stopped by the girl's small hand touching his arm. Though it was the merest touch, he subsided immediately.

The movement re-emphasized to Mac that he was playing a game so dangerous, the slightest slip would make it fatal. For the girl's scowling escort was Thomas Cougar, sometimes referred to as "The Strangler" because of his rumored proficiency with his pale, powerful hands.

Thomas Cougar was a tall, raw-boned

man with an oddly narrow face with gray skin stretched so tightly it gave him a mummified appearance, an effect heightened by sparse, nearly colorless hair and eyebrows. Momentarily the mocking smile on Mac's lips died as his eyes unconsciously dropped to the man's enormously long and narrow fingers, which played with the stem of a cocktail glass. A mental image of those hands reaching for his throat caused Mac to shift his gaze hurriedly back to the girl.

The Town House was one of those glittering cocktail lounges of chrome and artificial leather, new but cheap, and already beginning to tarnish on the edges. It was the kind of place where the fringe of the underworld gathered—not actual criminals, but grifters and racetrack touts and petty gamblers. A forty-foot bar ran along one wall, and facing it along the opposite wall ran a forty-foot leatherette-upholstered bench before which, at spaced intervals, were set tiny cocktail tables. The blonde and her escort sat behind one of these a dozen feet closer to the door than Mac.

At this hour of the afternoon there were few customers, Mac was gratified to note, for the scene scheduled to occur at any minute was designed solely for the lovely blonde murderess. The fewer interested spectators, the better. At the moment, aside from Mac and the couple, two men seated at the bar near the door were the only customers.

George Doud slammed open the street door and stalked in exactly on schedule. Without glancing at him, Mac drained his beer, set down the glass and slid from his stool, as though preparing to leave.

Purposefully George stalked the length of the bar, his wide, flat face set in the belligerent stare of the slightly drunk, and his massive arms swinging at his sides. As he neared the table at which the blonde and her companion sat, he leered sidewise at her, slightly changed direction, and

still looking, crashed heavily into Mac.

The smaller man bounced away like a tennis ball, automatically raised both hands to sparring position, then dropped them back to his sides.

"Stick out your hand when you make a turn, mister," he advised mildly.

George stared him up and down contemptuously. "Smart apple!" he said thickly, and lashed out with a fist the size of a grapefruit.

MAC'S knees bent, lowering his head a foot, so that the blow merely swept off his hat. His left stabbed into the big man's stomach, his right immediately followed to the heart; then the heel of his left palm shoved against the other's blue-black jaw and smashed the man into the leatherette bench next to Thomas Cougar.

For a moment George remained seated, his expression dazed and his arms spread wide for support on either side. Then he whipped his arms toward each other. His right hand darted at his left sleeve, and a six-inch blade suddenly glittered.

Shifting his back toward the barkeep and the two customers near the door, Mac's fingers twinkled under his coat and out again. He held the automatic close to his body, so that only George, the blonde and Cougar could see it, but the muzzle centered unwaveringly between George Doud's eyes.

George let his mouth drop open, and the knife slipped from his fingers to the floor.

"Kick it over here," Mac said softly.

Obediently George toed the knife toward Mac. The smaller man stooped with a sudden springlike motion, and when he straightened with the knife in his left hand, the gun had disappeared.

Thomas Cougar made a furtive movement toward his shoulder.

"Don't touch it," Mac advised. "I can beat you with my back turned."

To prove it, he swung his back on all three, scooped his hat from the floor and

started toward the entrance—a gesture not so heroic as it seemed, since in addition to the probability that Cougar's motion toward his gun had been instinctive rather than overt, Mac knew George Doud would drop all of his 220 pounds on the gunman if Cougar even looked like he intended to draw.

"Wait, please," a soft voice called behind him.

Instantly Mac stopped. *She took the bait*, he thought with savage elation, but his expression was merely quizzical as he eyed her over his shoulder. When her lip corners lifted in the faintest hint of a smile, he turned around. Tossing George's knife on the bar, he said to the bartender, "Souvenir," and walked back to the table.

His eyes hard and his face expressionless, he said to George, "Scram."

George eyed the smaller man warily, licked his lips, rose to his feet and sidled widely around Mac. Like a frightened bear he lumbered toward the door and was gone.

With his face still expressionless, but with the light in his eyes turned from cold to mocking, Mac said to the girl, "Yes?"

"Sit down," she suggested, "and have a drink."

Mac shrugged, took a seat next to the girl and dropped his hat on the leather bench beside him.

"My name is Nan Tracy," she said. "And this is Thomas Cougar."

"Larry MacDowell," Mac said. "Generally called Mac." It was pure coincidence that he and the deceased gunman whose identity he had assumed answered to the same nickname, a coincidence which gave him the slight advantage of not having to learn to respond without thinking when his name was mentioned.

Mac nodded briefly at Cougar and received an equally brief nod in return. Hostility and suspicion seeped from the tall man's eyes, and his pale fingers caressed his glass stem as though he wished

it were Mac's throat. For a wild moment Mac thought the man had detected the farce with George Doud, and he shifted his gaze to Nan Tracy in order to hide the uneasiness in his eyes.

The blonde was easier to look at anyway. Again he experienced a feeling almost of unbelief that her mask of innocence concealed a coldness and cupidity rare even in criminals—a mind that deliberately planned murder for profit.

"Your best contact is Nan Tracy," Mac's chief had said, 'because Bart's last report was on her.'

The chief had paused uncomfortably after mentioning Bart's name, and Mac felt the bitterness rise in him again. Young Bart, only a year out of law school, already advancing in the bureau and engaged to be married. The kid had the world by the tail, but suddenly the bright future was snuffed out by a senseless bullet.

Mac had said harshly, "All right. What about her?"

"She seems to be the recruiter of professional killers for the organization," the chief went on. "Possibly she even heads the whole setup. We're almost certain it was she who killed Bart when they suspected he was an FBI agent. At least we're sure it was a woman, and as far as we know, she's the only woman actively connected with Homicide, Incorporated."

"Nice name they picked for themselves," Mac commented.

"Describes the organization perfectly," the chief said grimly. "It's pure murder for hire, organized down to a T. For a fee they'll kill anyone, anywhere, anytime. Already they've operated in seven states that we know of, and no telling how many we don't know about."

"How the devil do they get customers?" Mac asked.

"Mainly through tie-ins with underworld gangs who hire them to do their dirty work. But they also seem to have a plant in at least one insurance company,

because they seem to be able to find out what wives have heavily insured their husbands and vice versa, and then they quietly move in and offer to make the insurance payable for a fifty percent cut.

"Drake found out that much, which is why he began to work cooperatively with the insurance investigator from Argus Mutual. But when he and the Argus man both disappeared, we suspected the leak was at Argus, so Bart was instructed to contact no one but local police. Since his death, we don't trust anyone, and you're going in on your own. I'm giving you George Doud as an assistant, but aside from you two, myself and the big chief, no one at all will know you're a bureau man. If you slip up, it's your own fault, and not because of a leak."

AT THE time this information had been reassuring, but now that Mac was actually confronted by his adversaries, a chill skittered along his spine. He knew that at the slightest suspicion that he was a federal agent, he would follow the same road as Drake and Bart Sprague.

Nan Tracy said, "What will you drink?"

"I've had it," Mac said. "I came back for the proposition, not the drink."

Her eyes widened innocently. "Proposition?"

"I'm a direct guy," Mac said. "For a half-hour I give you the eye from the bar, and you don't even know I'm alive. Then I draw a gun faster than you've ever seen one pulled, and right away you get chummy. Your pal here has 'mug' written all over him and a heater under his arm. I can add. You've got a proposition for my gun. So spill it."

Cougar growled, "I don't like the way you talk, buster."

"Then lump it," Mac said indifferently.

The Strangler stiffened and the stem of his glass snapped between powerful fingers. The girl touched his arm, which kept

him in his seat, but his eyes turned icily cruel.

"You *are* direct," the girl said. "Where you from, Mac?"

"Out of town," Mac said shortly.

"Hot?"

Mac shook his head. "I leave places before I get hot. The only thing any cop could pin on me is carrying a gun without a license."

Nan Tracy's eyes half closed and she regarded him contemplatively through the slits. She asked slowly, "What would you be willing to do with your gun for five-hundred dollars a week?"

Mac looked at her expressionlessly for a long time before answering. "Depends," he said finally. "In a safe setup—anything. In a risky one I didn't like—nothing. And by risky, I mean gunning the law. I'll go up against other guns, if the chance of a rap is slim enough."

"Suppose we go up to my place and talk it over," the girl suggested.

"What can I lose but my time?" Mac suggested.

Nan's "place" turned out to be an apartment on the seventh floor of the exclusive Plaza Towers. Nan opened the door with a key, stepped in and then turned to face Mac with her hand out.

"I'll take your hat," she said, her face as still as usual, but her eyes smiling.

As Mac handed it to her, he heard the door click shut behind him and started to glance casually over his shoulder at Cougar, who had entered last. He stopped with his head half-turned when he felt hard metal press against his spine.

"Just don't move," said the girl, her eyes still smiling.

Mac stood motionless as her hand slid under his coat and removed his automatic. Efficiently she patted his pockets and hips for other weapons, then backed away, dropped Mac's hat on an end table and seated herself in a soft chair.

She pointed Mac's gun at him and said

softly, "All right, Thomas. You may put it away now."

The pressure disappeared from Mac's back and the Strangler carefully circled toward a sofa so that he did not pass between Mac and the automatic.

"What's the pitch?" Mac growled.

"Sit down," the girl suggested, motioning toward an easy chair directly opposite her own.

Mac sank into the chair, stretched his legs with an aplomb he did not feel and repeated, "What's the pitch?"

"Just being careful," Nan said. "Now tell me all about yourself."

"Why?"

"Because," Cougar put in sulkily, "I'll test my grip on your throat if you don't."

Mac glanced at the man's mummified face, let his eyes drop to the long narrow fingers which were gently massaging each other, and hastily looked back at the girl.

"What do you want to know?"

CHAPTER TWO

The Lady and the Strangler

NAN TRACY looked him over thoughtfully before replying. Her lovely face was strictly business. She said, "You can start by telling us your real name."

"MacDowell," Mac said. "Larry MacDowell. I told you I wasn't hot, so why should I use a fake name?"

Nan glanced inquiringly over at Cougar, who said grudgingly;

"Sounds faintly familiar, but I can't place where I heard it. A guy as fancy with a rod as this Joe, I ought to have heard of. I keep my ear pretty close to the grapevine. But he don't ring a bell."

Dissatisfaction showed in his expression and his tone became almost querulous. "You jumped at him too fast. Suppose he turns out to be a cop, or maybe a Fed? Now he knows something's up, and

you can't just kick him out. So we got a body on our hands."

Mac quirked his lips in what was meant to be an insolent grin, but which he feared more resembled a sickly one.

Nan's voice developed an edge of ice. "Since you were let in on my next higher contact, you've begun to cultivate a bad habit, Thomas. I still do your thinking for you, and if you get too big for your boots, the boss may order you buried in them."

Cougar's already pale face turned even paler and he muttered something about only trying to be helpful. Mac's mind sifted over the words, *Next higher contact*, and came to the tentative conclusion that more than one link in the organization of Homicide, Inc. existed above Nan. At the same time he experienced mild surprise that the emotionless Cougar exhibited such fear at mention of the boss. He mentally filed the knowledge for future reference.

Nan turned her attention back to Mac. "Who have you been connected with, Mac? Give us some references. Something we can check."

Her eyes still seemed to be smiling, but her lips were a hard straight line. Mac felt a flood of thankfulness that he had briefed himself for just such an emergency.

"John Hagen in New Orleans," he said. "Jimmy Dow in L.A."

"Hagen—" Cougar started to say, then stopped and looked at Nan apologetically.

"Go on, Thomas," she said.

Encouraged, he swung his gaze back to Mac, and suspicion mixed in his eyes with the hostility already there. "Hagen's dead and Dow's at Alcatraz," he said coldly.

Mac shrugged. "Barrell-Head Morgan in St. Louis."

Nan's expression showed interest. "We did some work for him once," she said to Cougar. "Put in a call."

The Strangler went into the hallway and they could hear him giving a St.

Louis number to the operator. Five minutes passed while the girl's grave eyes examined Mac without expression.

Mac employed the time to glance around the room, noting two of the doors leading off it seemed to lead to bedrooms.

Cougar came back and spat, "Morgan's on a Mediterranean cruise. How many more guys who aren't available can you dream up?" His expression had changed from suspicion to open disbelief.

Mac glanced at Nan's face, noting something new there which was not exactly suspicion, but a kind of alertness. A bead of cold sweat trickled down his side, but he managed to say unconcernedly, "Those boys were before my time. Try my last boss. Dude Emory in Philly. He was alive and present a month ago."

Cougar started to turn toward the hall again, but Nan said, "Wait, Thomas. I'll call him myself."

She waited while Cougar drew a revolver from beneath his arm and covered Mac, then lowered her own gun and went into the hall.

Again Mac sat quietly while the call went through, but this time his muscles were bunched to throw himself at Cougar at the first intimation that his masquerade had failed. For Dude Emory was his hole card, and unless he spoke the proper words, Mac knew he was as good as dead.

Only two weeks before, the FBI fingerprint department had identified as Larry MacDowell an unclaimed accident victim lying in a Brooklyn morgue. No news release had been made for the specific purpose of letting Mac use his name.

Their physical descriptions roughly tallied, but Mac was counting more on the psychology of his acting than on physical resemblance. Most persons in describing someone do not say something like, "A man weighing 240 pounds, light brown hair, gray eyes, freckles, a hook nose and a dimple in his chin." Instead they say, "A big fellow with horn-rimmed glasses,

who is always pursing his lips and talks about nothing but baseball."

Mac hoped that Emory's description would be something like, "A stocky guy of average height who sort of bounces when he moves. Wears his hat on the back of his head and always has a mocking grin, like he doesn't give a damn about anything."

There was a good possibility the stunt would work, but there was also a double risk. Possibly Larry MacDowell's death had been gangland vengeance, rather than the accident it seemed, in which case Dude Emory undoubtedly would be aware of it through the underworld grapevine. And also Emory might mention the cheek scar MacDowell bore, which MacDonald Sprague lacked. Mac found himself wishing Cougar had made the call instead of Nan for the alert light in her eyes warned him she would not be too easily fooled.

When Nan finally returned, Mac forced his gaze to meet hers, and immediately he knew he had won, for there was a faint touch of respect in her eyes.

"DUDE EMORY seems to think you're the devil on wheels with a gun Mac." She handed back his automatic butt first. "Sorry for the inconvenience, but we don't take any chances."

"That's all right," Mac said agreeably, concealing his flood of relief. "I prefer working for an outfit that doesn't."

He slipped the automatic back in its holster and stared pointedly at the revolver still in Cougar's hand. Slowly the Strangler replaced it beneath his arm, but none of the hostility disappeared from his eyes, and very little of the suspicion.

This guy is going to watch me, Mac told himself, and I better watch him if I want to stay alive.

Nan had returned to her chair and was eyeing Mac speculatively. "How would you like to work for Homicide, Incorporated?" she asked abruptly.

Mac sat up straight and forced a look of surprise on to his face. "Homicide, Inc.! I've heard of that, and it's bigger than any of the guys I mentioned. Don't tell me that outfit is run by a woman!"

"I won't tell you anything," she said in a suddenly cold voice. "Who runs it is none of your business. You'll get your orders and your salary from me. Who I get them from is something you don't have to know, and if you try to find out, Thomas will discourage the attempt by squeezing your throat until you stop breathing—permanently."

"All right," Mac said agreeably. "I won't pry. Just so I get paid regularly, and know I'll be taken care of if I get in a jam."

"You'll get five-hundred a week, and if you get in a pinch, the best legal talent in the country will be retained to defend you."

"You've got a new employee," Mac said.

For the first time Nan almost smiled; but instead of being reassured, coldness crept along Mac's spine.

She turned to Cougar and said, "You better run along now, Thomas. I want to talk to Mac for a while."

The already tight skin seemed to tighten even more across the Strangler's narrow face, and his eyes shot open hatred at Mac. But he rose obediently, muttered a good-night and left.

As soon as the door closed behind Cougar, Nan's brittle mask seemed to melt away. For a moment she stood staring at the door with a kind of uneasy relief, looking more like a bewildered young girl than a lieutenant in a murder organization. Again Mac experienced a sense of shock at the combination of sympathy and revulsion her two-faceted character aroused in him.

"I hate him!" she said in a low voice. "I've wished him dead a thousand times!"

Mac looked at her with his mouth open,

unable to correlate her obvious fear and detestation of Cougar with the cold and domineering manner in which she ordered him around. If she really wished the man dead, she was certainly in a position to get him that way. He wondered if for some obscure reason she was putting on an act, and resolved to guard his reactions carefully.

She shook herself like a kitten throwing off water, moved over to Mac's chair, took his hand and led him to the sofa. Puzzledly he sat beside her while she continued to hold his hand tightly.

"I'm afraid," she said simply. "I needed you badly."

On guard, he examined her face, noting the wild excitement deep in her eyes. For a moment he thought the excitement was amorous, and wondered how he could duck such a squeamish situation, for he had no desire to make love to his brother's murderess. But immediately he sensed it was something else—an uncertainty and something closely allied to terror.

She released his hand suddenly, clasped both of hers in her lap and looked up at him with a strange mixture of hope and wariness in her expression.

"I'm glad you've come in with me, Mac," she said, then added quickly, "With us, I mean."

A theory began to form in Mac's mind, a theory that explained her dialogue with Cougar as well as her present action, which he half suspected was a deliberate act. The theory was that Nan was the real head of Homicide, Inc., and her talk of a "next higher contact" plus her present act was deliberate red herring.

At the same time she looked so frightened, so small and so defenseless, he automatically dropped a protective arm across her shoulders, one part of his mind half-believing she really needed masculine protection, and the other part regarding himself with amazed disgust. Her head tilted upward, and in spite of his resolution, he

kissed her. For a second he completely forgot himself.

HER lips clung to his coolly. For a moment he completely forgot she was a murderess, forgot his mission, forgot everything but the soft outline of her mouth. Then recollection sent a wave of revulsion over him and he jerked back so suddenly, Nan's eyes widened in surprise.

At the same moment the door opened quietly and a woman entered from the hall.

She was a slim, shy-appearing brunette of about twenty-eight, pretty in a delicate-featured, subdued sort of way, but the type that instinctively huddle in the background and are therefore overlooked.

She gave an embarrassed cough, and stood twisting the strap of her bag uncertainly.

"Why, Claire," Nan said in a surprised voice. "Is it after five?"

"Five-thirty," Claire said apologetically.

Mac rose and Nan said, "This is Mr. MacDowell, Claire. Claire D'Arcy, Mac. She shares the apartment with me."

Nan's air of defenselessness had vanished, and her eyes were again brittle and mocking. "Claire is a working girl. Chief file clerk for Argus Mutual. She toils from eight to five while I flit from cafe to cocktail lounge, and secretly she disapproves of me."

"Why, I do no such thing!" Claire said, coloring.

Mac lowered his lids to conceal the flash of interest inspired by the name, Argus Mutual. But he made no attempt to slow his racing mind.

The leak at Argus was immediately obvious, yet so simple it was no wonder it worked. One look at Claire D'Arcy was enough to indicate that her company would regard her as above suspicion, as she probably was. Even if they knew of Nan, it would never occur to Argus that the attractive apartment-mate of their chief file clerk was part of Homicide, Inc. Nor

would it occur to the shy girl, who undoubtedly was glad of a sympathetic audience to listen to her story of the day's work, never suspecting she was furnishing information to the most ruthless murder gang in the country.

The simplicity and audacity of the plan almost shocked Mac into letting jubilation show on his face. Instead, he greeted the girl civilly and mumbled something about having to run along.

"Come take me to dinner tomorrow night," Nan told him at the door. "Be here at six and I'll make you a cocktail first." She added in a lower voice, "We can't talk in front of Claire."

As Mac's taxi pulled away from the front of the Plaza Towers, Mac saw by a glance through the rear window that another cab a quarter block back pulled out a moment later.

"Union Hotel," he told the driver. "And don't bother trying to lose our tail."

Startled, the cabbie glanced at his rear-view mirror, then shrugged and kept silent.

The other taxi went on by when Mac's driver stopped in front of the Union Hotel's main entrance. Without glancing at it, Mac paid off his driver and entered the hotel. From the corner of his eye he saw the second taxi park fifty yards down the street.

At the desk he got his key, then entered the elevator with several other passengers.

"Two," he said to the operator.

Getting out at the second floor, he walked quickly to the stairs, descended a half flight and peered over the bannister into the lobby. Thomas Cougar and a gangling, freckle-faced man who seemed to be with him were talking to the desk clerk. Something passed from Cougar's hand to that of the clerk, who glanced at it, grinned delightedly and began bobbing his head in eager subservience.

Mac drew back out of sight, mounted stairs to the third floor and let himself in-

to his room. It was only six o'clock, and he stretched himself on the bed until it got dark.

When it had grown quite dark, he went into the bathroom, turned on the light and wrote a detailed report of the day's events. Then, without turning on the room light, he crossed his bedroom to the window, noiselessly raised it and carefully scanned the street below.

A window stick used for opening and closing the upper part of the window hung from a bracket on the wall. Mac rapped its brass head sharply against the ceiling three times. A moment later a tin can suspended from a string descended from the window above him and gently settled on the outer ledge. Mac stuffed his report into the can, and it immediately rose again.

Silently closing the window again, Mac slipped on his coat to go downstairs for dinner. As he pulled shut his door, he glanced along the hall casually, and saw what he expected to see. Diagonally across the hall from his room a door stood open about an inch, and the room beyond was dark. Apparently Thomas Cougar's suspicions were far from allayed by the phone call to Dude Emory, and he intended to have every move Mac made watched.

Without glancing at the slightly ajar door again, Mac made straight for the elevator. A half hour later, when he came up again, his room had been expertly searched. So expertly that even though he had expected it, he himself had to look for ten minutes before he found evidence of the search in the form of a pair of socks replaced in an order different from the way he had memorized it.

CHAPTER THREE

A Habit Called Murder

AT EXACTLY six the next evening Mac rang the buzzer of Nan's apartment. But instead of Nan answering the door, it was opened by

Claire D'Arcy, who wore a simple blue house dress.

"Oh, Mr. MacDowell," Claire said. "Nan would have called, but she didn't know where you were staying. She was suddenly called out of town and had to catch a plane."

"Oh," Mac said, and waited blankly.

"Nan said to tell you she was sorry, and if you'd leave your number, she'd phone you tomorrow. In the meantime, I'm supposed to give you the cocktail she promised." She stepped back and held the door wide. "Won't you come in?"

"Thanks," Mac said, following her into the living room. It occurred to him that perhaps Nan's sudden trip was a stroke of luck, for he might never find another opportunity to sound out her apartment mate alone, and on impulse he said:

"If you haven't had dinner, maybe you'd substitute for Nan—unless you mind being second choice. I planned to take her to the Blue Penguin."

"I'm afraid I've already started cooking dinner," Claire said. "And besides, I'm not dressed for dining out." Hesitantly she added, "If you like, you may eat here. I always cook three times too much."

"I wouldn't want to put you to any bother."

"No bother at all," she assured him, and her eyes lighted with a shy eagerness that almost startled him, for he did not regard himself as the type of man maidens yearn for. He wrote it off as a symptom of loneliness, which might make her glad of any male company.

"Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes," she said, taking it for granted he would stay. "Please mix yourself a drink while you're waiting. You'll find everything on the sideboard."

"Thanks, but I'd prefer a bottle of beer, if you have one." Actually he preferred a cocktail, but Larry MacDowell's drink had been beer, so now it was Mac's.

"In the refrigerator," she said. "You

can drink it at the kitchen table and watch me cook, if you like."

"That's my speed," Mac grinned at her. "I feel more at home in the kitchen."

They ate at the kitchen table, and afterward Mac helped with the dishes. Accustomed to dining almost exclusively in restaurants, the domesticity of the situation had a curious effect on Mac. He found himself enjoying the evening more than he ever enjoyed the glitter of cafes and night clubs. Under the influence of his obvious enjoyment, Claire's shyness evaporated. Beneath the shyness Mac found a quiet intelligence and a nice sense of humor.

By the time the dishes were finished, they had become old friends, and Claire was laughing and chattering like a complete extrovert. Almost automatically their hands clasped together as she led him back into the front room.

When they sat together on the same sofa where Mac had been caught in the act of kissing Nan, Claire snuggled against his shoulder without a trace of her former shyness and looked up at him in almost open invitation.

With an effort Mac recalled that his purpose in staying to dinner was not pleasure, but business.

He made a face at her and asked casually, "How long have you lived here with Nan?"

"About six months. But I don't live with her. She lives with me. It was my apartment originally. I met Nan at a party." She moved away slightly. "Are you very fond of Nan?"

Mac dropped his arm across her shoulder and drew her back in place. "I barely know her. Seems like a nice girl though."

"Nicer than I?"

Mac frowned, not being particularly fond of coyness; then turned the frown into a grin. "You've got one big advantage over her. You're here."

"Rat!" she said, and started to twist out of his arms.

He pulled her back and kissed her. And suddenly her arms were about his neck and her lips were pressed against his so fiercely, he was startled. Compared to Ann's cool lips, Claire's were like fire. Mac experienced the combined sensation of wrestling with a leopard and holding one finger in a live wall socket.

When eventually he forcibly broke the kiss to prevent suffocation, she snuggled against him with her head pressed to his chest and her soft hair tickling his chin.

"You shouldn't kiss me like that," she said in a muffled voice.

Mac gazed down at her bent head in amazement. "Does seem a waste of time," he said sarcastically. "I can get the same effect by falling down a flight of stairs."

"Who are you, Mac?" she asked in the same muffled voice.

"MacDowell. Larry MacDowell. Remember?"

"I mean, what do you do?"

"I'm a C.P.A.," he said truthfully, though the only accounting work he had done since school was checking books for evidence on FBI cases.

"What's your business with Nan?"

He frowned down at the top of her head. "What business with Nan?"

SUDDENLY she straightened and moved a safe two feet away from him. "Why do so many men come to see Nan who don't seem to be men friends, but appear to have some business arrangements with her? All types of men, like that awful Thomas Cougar. Who are they, and what do they want?"

"How should I know?" Mac evaded. "I just met the girl, and don't know a thing about her. Maybe they're business friends." He paused, as though the thought had just occurred to him. "What is her business, anyway? She must have some kind of income to keep up her half of this place."

"When she suggested we share the

apartment, she said some money had been left her. She hasn't any kind of job, and doesn't do much of anything but move around socially. But lately I've gotten the impression these men who call on her have something to do with her income, and that she never inherited any money. I can't explain it. It's just a feeling, and it bothers me because I like Nan." She looked at Mac in sudden suspicion. "Maybe you're one of them, and know all about it."

"You're imagining things," Mac said, and reached for her again.

Feeling he had obtained what little information Claire had, and that further questions might cause her to suspect he was pumping her and make her mention it to Nan, Mac decided to devote the rest of the evening to pleasure. But he discovered he could not dislodge the subject from Claire's thoughts. Time and again she returned to her suspicion that Mac was one of the men somehow tied to Nan, sometimes bluntly accusing him of it, sometimes cajoling him to tell her what Nan was involved in, and never entirely accepting his protest that he had no idea what she was talking about.

In the middle of a kiss she would return to the subject, and finally Mac began to wonder who was the pumper and who the pumpee. Her probing alarmed him for her own safety, for if curiosity led her to the point of questioning Nan, her questions might lead her to the bottom of the river.

He turned over in his mind the thought of warning her, but discarded it as too dangerous to his own position in case Nan ever learned of the warning. There was nothing to do but persist in his denials, and eventually he succeeded in smothering her questions by keeping her lips occupied.

When he left the apartment at midnight, his suit was rumpled, his collar covered with lipstick and his head was spinning like a gyroscope. So far out of his mind had Claire D'Arcy succeeded in knocking

Homicide, Inc., he almost forgot to bother to check if he was still being tailed.

It was only when his eyes fell on the door of the room diagonally across from his own and noted it was still ajar that he came back to the present.

Inwardly he grinned, wondering if the spy beyond the door had noticed the red smear on his collar and would report to Cougar that his throat seemed to be cut.

* * *

At noon the next day the room phone awakened Mac. It was Nan Tracy.

"I'm sorry about last night," she said in a tight, unnatural voice.

"That's all right. What's the matter?"

"Got a business deal on." She seemed to be under terrific excitement, for her tone was so forced, her voice nearly cracked. "If you haven't had lunch, get some, because you won't have another opportunity. I'll pick you up in an hour."

"I'll be waiting in the lobby," he said quietly.

So he was to be given an assignment, he thought. Probably the result of her plane trip last night. He hoped it was a one-man assignment. Managing to fail to murder his designated victim would be easier without a witness.

But apparently it was a big mission, for Thomas Cougar and another man were with Nan when she arrived. Mac rose from the lobby sofa where he had been waiting when the three entered, and Nan introduced the second man as Arnold Link. He was a squat, broadly powerful man with "gorilla" written all over him.

Cougar said, "You three wait here a minute," and his tone made it almost an order.

Mac stared after him puzzledly as the pale killer crossed to the desk and employed the house phone, which could be used only to phone rooms. In a moment Cougar returned and all of them stood

waiting, as though expecting someone to join them.

"What's up?" Mac asked tentatively.

Nan and Cougar stared at him fixedly, as though they had not heard the question.

SQUAT Arnold Link said in a toneless monotone, "You'll find out when we get there. We don't blab in hotel lobbies."

A man who apparently had gotten off one of the elevators suddenly joined the group. Without surprise Mac noted he was the same man he had seen in the lobby with Cougar the night he peered over the bannister.

"Benny Chisholm," Cougar said briefly. "Mac MacDowell."

Benny was a tall, gangling fellow with a large nose and freckles. His wide, yokel-like eyes were blandly innocent, but the effect was spoiled by a mouth which was nothing but a cruel, lipless gash. He nodded without offering his hand.

My friend across the hall, Mac thought, and glanced at Nan. With a shock he realized she was actually smiling, but her smile did not come up to the promise at which her usual grave expression hinted. It was fixed and brittle, and her eyes glittered as though she were under intense strain.

The smile made the hair on the back of his neck rise, and something about the flat look with which the three men regarded him warned him of danger. It suddenly occurred to him that he somehow might have been found out, and the gathering might not be a mission at all, but a one-way ride for MacDonald Sprague.

"I forgot to leave my key at the desk," he said abruptly, and before anyone else could speak, turned on his heel and walked rapidly across the lobby.

Tossing his key on the desk, he said to the clerk in a quick but low voice, "Phone room 418 for me and tell Mr. Crowell I can't meet him for lunch."

Instead of immediately returning to the group, he cut diagonally across to the tobacco counter and bought a package of cigarettes. As he paid for them, he saw from the corner of his eye that the clerk was just setting down the phone. Now it was necessary to stall at least a moment in order to allow George Doud time to act on the code message.

Turning toward the group, he called, "Be right with you," then deliberately opened the cigarette pack, removed one and lit it at the tobacco counter's gas lighter.

All five of them crowded into a long black sedan which was parked in front of the hotel. Squat Arnold Link drove, Nan sat next to him in the front seat, and Mac found himself between the Strangler and the freckled Benny Chisholm.

"What's the deal, now that we're out of the lobby?" Mac asked as they pulled away.

"It'll keep a while," Cougar said shortly.

For the next hour no one said a word. The thick-shouldered chauffeur drove smoothly, obeying all traffic rules in town, and when they left the city limits, pushed up to a sedate fifty miles an hour and kept it there.

At the end of the hour, about thirty-five miles from town, the driver said, "Taxi tailing us."

Mac started to twist his head rearward, but Cougar said sharply, "Keep your face front." To Link he said, "Pull over and park."

Immediately the sedan slowed, pulled onto the shoulder and stopped. In a few moments a cab went by without slowing.

"Got butterflies in your stomach, Link?" Cougar asked contemptuously. "Just because a taxi travels the same speed we do, doesn't mean we're being tailed."

When the sedan pulled away again, the taxi was a quarter of a mile ahead. Link dropped his speed to forty, and soon it could not be seen at all. A mile farther on,

they turned to one side on a dirt road.

Twenty minutes later they turned into a private lane, drove another five-hundred yards and stopped before a large, one-story log hunting cabin. Everyone got out. As they approached the door, Nan linked her left arm through Mac's right.

Behind them Cougar said, "Thanks, Nan," and his gun pressed into Mac's back. "Now just remove that automatic from under his arm."

CHAPTER FOUR

Three Funerals

MAC stood very still as Nan, still holding his right arm, reached under his coat with her free hand and slipped the automatic from its clip holster.

As she stepped away from him, he said, "This is getting to be a habit. What's the pitch this time?"

"Get moving, copper!" Cougar snarled at his back, and emphasized the command by jabbing his spine with the gun muzzle.

At the word "copper" Mac's hopes sank. He walked forward stiffly, prodded by the Strangler's gun, and entered the cabin. Inside Mac found a long beam-ceilinged room running the entire width of the front. It was furnished with rustic furniture and had a fireplace at each end. Directly across from the entrance a drape-covered doorway led to another room in back.

When he reached the center of the room, Mac stopped and looked inquiringly over his shoulder. Cougar had paused just inside the door, and Nan stood with the two other men at one side, as though all three were merely interested observers.

"All right, copper," Cougar said. "Start explaining who you are."

Mac looked at Nan. "I thought you gave the orders around here. How come

Ugly is tossing his weight around now?"

Cougar's face darkened, but before he could speak, Nan said viciously, "Thomas is the fair-haired boy now. He brought the teacher an apple and got promoted to honor student." Her answer was to Mac's question, but she spoke directly to Cougar and the vicious tone was meant for him.

So there actually was someone higher than Nan in the organization, Mac thought. Hoping to create a diversion, he asked, "Got demoted, did you, Nan? What was the apple?"

Nan's eyes swung at him. "You were. Smarty-pants Thomas phoned Dude Emory again and asked more detailed questions. When he found out Larry MacDowell had a cheek scar, he went running to teacher instead of to me, and got marked A for effort."

"Is that all the fuss is about?" Mac asked indifferently. "Ever hear of plastic surgery?"

"Sure," Cougar said. "I thought of that, which is why I asked the color of his eyes. Explain how you changed your eyes from blue to brown, and we'll let you go."

"Shoe polish," Mac said seriously.

Benny Chisholm said, "What we waiting for? Let's get this over with."

"The boss wants her to do it personal," Cougar said, nodding at Nan. "To sort of make up for her boner."

He slipped a second gun, a vest pocket automatic, from his coat pocket and held it butt first toward Nan.

"Take him in there," he said, pointing his own gun toward the drape-covered door.

Nan's eyes brightened, almost as though she were glad of the opportunity to kill. "All right, Mac, darling," she said. "Forward march."

Tickles of cold sweat ran down Mac's sides beneath his shirt, but he managed to keep both his expression and his tone mocking. "Murder gets to be habit forming, doesn't it, Nan? You're becoming al-

most the official executioner for Homicide, Incorporated."

"What do you mean by that?" she said suspiciously.

"I won't be the first suspected cop you killed, will I? About the fourth now, isn't it?"

Cougar emitted a single hoarse guffaw, which was half laugh and half snarl.

Nan's eyes burned at the Strangler and she spat, "Don't throw so much weight around that you get in the boss' hair. You don't know how close you've come to the river before, when you got over-ambitious."

His pale features lost what little color they had, and he seemed to shrink within himself. Nan tossed her head in triumph at having at least temporarily put him in his place, then jabbed her little gun at Mac.

"I said *move*. Or do you want it right here?"

Abruptly Mac turned toward the doorway and pushed through the drapes, Nan following with the gun almost touching his back. The second room proved to be sleeping quarters and contained nothing but two double bunks, two heavy dressers and what seemed to be a closet, for at one side of the room was a second drape-covered door.

"Turn around," Nan commanded in a loud voice.

Slowly Mac turned to face her, his body tensed against the expected jolt of a bullet. Nan's face was dead white and her eyes held a gleam of unnatural excitement.

In a voice so low he could barely hear it, she said, "I haven't time to explain, but take this gun and go out shooting."

Mac's jaw hung wide as she suddenly reversed the pistol and thrust the butt into his palm.

"Now hit me," she said tensely. "Quick, so I'll have an out! Make it look like you got the gun by force."

But Mac merely stared at her.

"Quick!" she said fiercely. "Hit me! Hard!"

Recovering his mental balance, he clenched his left fist, slowly and almost reluctantly raised it chest high, then suddenly lashed out and caught Nan square on the chin. Her eyes crossed and she dropped flat on her back.

The drapes parted as Cougar pushed through, his revolver half-raised. Centering the little automatic on the Strangler's vest, Mac squeezed the trigger and stepped back.

There was nothing but a sharp click. Cougar grinned wolfishly, and as Mac stared blankly down at the empty gun, a soft chuckle came from the side of the room. Mac glanced sidewise just as Claire D'Arcy stepped from the closet, a man-sized .45 automatic clenched in her small hand.

"An interesting show, and just what I expected," Claire said.

Nan sat up and dazedly felt of her chin.

"Thanks for the demonstration, Nan," Claire said sardonically. "Did you really think we'd trust you with a loaded gun after planting a cop in our midst?"

Nan worked her lower jaw tentatively and remained both seated and silent.

"When Dude Emory told Thomas over the phone that he had informed you of Larry MacDowell's cheek scar and blue eyes, there were only two explanations possible your not branding Mac here a cop right then and there, and taking necessary action," Claire said. "Either you are awfully stupid, or you're a cop yourself. I rigged up this little act so I could listen in and learn which." She smiled, and there was a unpleasant glitter in her eyes. "Now we can have a double funeral."

THE whole picture clicked together in Mac's mind, and at the same time his mind wildly searched for a way out of the situation. Seemingly of its own accord there popped into his remembrance the

Strangler's craven fear of the "boss," and Nan's constant needling of him about the "boss' " dislike of his over-ambition. With the remembrance a wild idea occurred to him.

"You mean a triple funeral, don't you, Claire?" Mac asked insinuatingly.

She looked at him suspiciously. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"Just what I said." Mac made his voice confident. "Three people in this room are going to die."

Both Claire and Cougar frowned at him intently, and a faint uncertainty appeared in Cougar's eyes.

"I suppose you told Cougar I didn't know you were head of Homicide, Incorporated, and had been completely taken in by Nan acting as your front," Mac continued blandly. "But you see, Cougar knows you deliberately sent Nan out of town yesterday so you could talk to me alone in order to satisfy yourself I was safe. He also knows I spent six hours in your apartment, because he was having me tailed."

"So what?" Cougar asked roughly.

"So she never even suspected I was a cop then," Mac shot at him. "She didn't suspect it until you told her today. Last night she thought I was just a newly hired gun, and she gave me an assignment." His next words he spaced slowly and distinctly. "She said you were getting too big for your boots, Cougar. And she told me to kill you. That's the third funeral. She'll get you before you get out of this room."

The uncertainty in the gunman's eyes had turned to fear and suspicion. Like a trapped animal he swung his eyes from Mac to Claire and back again. Claire's expression was merely one of indulgent amusement. Apparently she did not realize the profound impression Mac was making on Cougar.

"Nice try anyway, Mac," she said, and her .45 centered on his stomach.

Cougar's eyes were still on Mac, as Mac shouted, "Look out, Cougar!"

The muzzle of the Strangler's revolver jerked toward Claire and suddenly spat flame. At the same moment Mac hurled his empty automatic straight at Cougar's narrow face. It caught the man square in the left eye. Cougar staggered backward.

Mac hit him in a headlong tackle, and the revolver skittered along the floor to a far corner. As they grappled, Cougar's elbow caught Mac under the chin.

At the moment a regular fusillade of shots came from the next room, but Mac was too busy to concern himself with anything but the Strangler, who had managed to twist on top of him and get his powerful hands on his throat.

Desperately Mac tried to claw the hands loose, but they held with the grip of a vise. The pale, mummy-like face was inches from his, and the man's teeth were bared in a sadistic smile. With his lungs bursting and waves of darkness pressing against him, Mac's struggles became weaker and weaker.

His distended eyes were nearly popping from his head when the Strangler's cruel smile suddenly faded into a vacuous grin. His grip relaxed and he collapsed.

For a moment Mac could do nothing but suck great gobs of air into his lungs. Then, as his sight cleared, he was conscious of Nan peering down at him anxiously, Cougar's revolver held in her hand like a club.

"Drop it, lady," said a flat voice.

Nan's gun clattered to the floor and her hands slowly rose at sight of the gun muzzle threatening her from the doorway. Mac pushed Cougar off and sat up.

"I thought that was probably you giving them fits out there," he said to George Doud. "Never mind Nan. She's on our side." He looked up at her wryly. "What are you anyway, Nan? A detective for Argus Mutual?"

She nodded. "I couldn't warn you today because Thomas and Claire were with me when I phoned. They never let me out of their sight for a minute."

Mac climbed to his feet and glanced over at what had been Claire D'Arcy. Cougar's bullet had caught her in the forehead, and she had died instantly.

"How about out there?" Mac asked George, nodding toward the other room.

"Both dead," George said shortly. "Neither one had their guns out when I stepped in with mine in my hand. They both decided to take a chance, but only the freckled-faced guy managed to clear his holster. But he didn't get in a shot."

"That finishes Homicide, Incorporated, then," Nan said. "You're FBI, are you?"

Mac nodded.

"I began to suspect it when all your references were so conveniently unavailable. That's why I took the last phone call myself. After Dude's description, I was almost sure, and was trying to work up to telling you who I was when Claire walked in and caught us—ah—talking."

"Was it Claire who killed Bart Sprague?" Mac asked.

"Who?"

"The FBI man who was shot a month ago. He was my kid brother."

"Oh," Nan said. "I'm sorry. I was too late to stop that. I didn't even realize he was an FBI man until it was all over. Yes, Claire handled that personally, just as she intended to handle you."

Mac glanced over at the dead woman once more and smiled a dead smile lacking the bitter satisfaction he had expected to find with revenge. Then he looked down at Nan's white face.

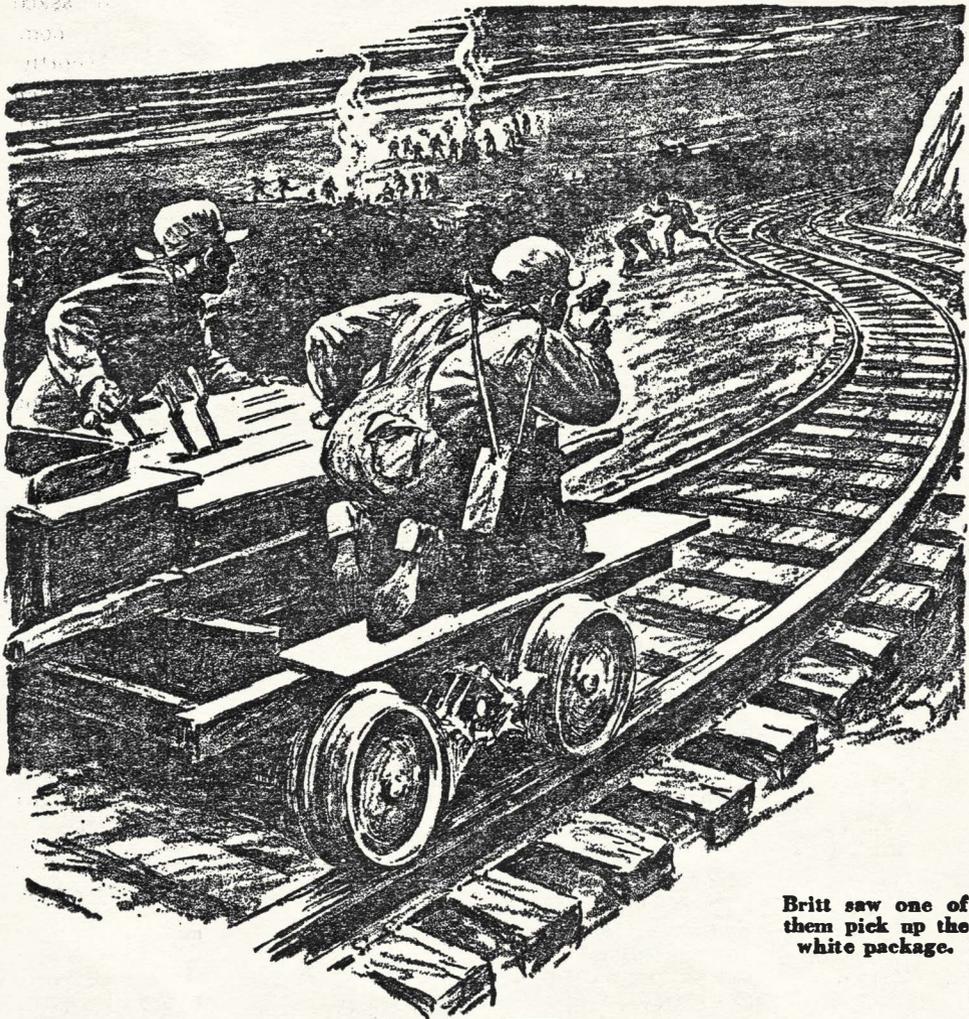
"You've got a lot of guts for a woman," he said. "With all those bullets and all this blood, most women would faint."

"You have to be tough to work for Argus Mutual," Nan said.

Then she fainted.

When a town is shaking in its boots at extortioners' threats, it's time to—

TELL IT TO THE FEDS!



Britt saw one of them pick up the white package.

★ By
TEDD
THOMEY ★

THE service porch of the apartment house was a long, slender tunnel of darkness. For the fourth time that night, Britt inspected it. All the shadows seemed in place. The rectangular, gray one was the deep-freeze unit. That round one

was undoubtedly the washing machine.

Suddenly, Britt's lean frame went rigid as rock.

A peculiar figure was squatting in the gloom near the door.

Britt had expected trouble—but not this soon. A nerve performed a quick little tap dance along his spine. His hand plunged inside his blue tweed coat and he aimed the dark .38 where he figured the guy's heart ought to be.

"Don't move!" Britt's voice was low and hairspring-taut.

The guy had apparently been caught off guard. He stayed where he was.

Britt stepped backward. He found the wall switch, and pink fluorescent light flickered across the porch. The rest of his young, deeply tanned face was expressionless as his intense brown eyes pored over the little man.

The guy was peculiar, all right.

He was sitting there quietly, naked except for his green-striped shorts. One side of his thin face was clean and shiny, the other was covered with chalky shaving soap and whiskers. He was middle-aged. He was also dead. An ice pick had been driven into the little clump of gray hairs on his bony chest.

Special Agent Britt strode over to the door. He hooked his fingers around the inner surface of the glass knob—where he would be less apt to blur fingerprints. He pulled sharply. A look of surprise crossed his straight, almost-handsome features. The door was locked. Then how the hell had the dead guy gotten in?

He unlocked it and went quickly down the half-dozen steps to the apartment building's back yard. For nearly a minute, he stood on the spongy grass, listening, the .38 alert in his broad hand. He heard nothing unusual. He went back inside, locked the door, and stepped into the immaculate, super-modern kitchen.

"Hackleton!" he called, crisply.

Immediately, there were footsteps in

the apartment's other rooms. A tall, raw-boned man came in. He said nothing, but his light blue eyes asked: *What's up?*

Britt shrugged at the porch. "Somebody just delivered a surprise package."

Hackleton strode out there. His reaction was quick. "My Lord! It's Crocker, the big orange and lemon wholesaler!" His hand darted inside his coat and he started toward the door.

"Don't bother," said Britt. "There's nobody out there—and anyway the door was locked."

"Locked? Hackleton's eyes didn't believe it. "Then how—?"

He broke off as a young man's voice, shrill and excited, shouted from the drawing room: "Britt! Britt! The phone's ringing!"

Britt loped through the kitchen, past the swanky purple and yellow dining room and down the steps into the sunken drawing room.

A plump, blond youth in his early twenties—five or six years younger than Britt—was standing before the peeling phone. His eyes were shiny with fear. He stared at the phone as if it had fangs.

"Dwight!" snapped Britt. "Come off it!" He stepped over to another phone, the one he'd had installed a few hours earlier. "I'll see that nothing happens to you."

"I wish you were that interested in me," said a sulky, feminine voice a few feet away. Lissa, Dwight's step-sister, was relaxing on the shocking-pink sofa. Her chocolate-brown eyes stared boldly at Britt.

"But I am." Britt grinned boyishly and rubbed a palm across his short, mahogany-dark hair. "I'm just bashful, that's all."

"Okay," he told Dwight. "Pick it up."

Nervously, the youth grabbed the phone. Perspiration sparkled on his round, gray cheeks.

As Britt lifted his own receiver to listen in on the conversation, he continued

to lock glances with Lissa. She was twenty-one or so. Nyloned legs crossed sleekly, she was leaning back on the sofa, her hands clasped behind her dark, gleaming hair. She wore a long gray skirt trimmed with entwined golf leaf and a black blouse.

A LOW, harsh voice crackled in Britt's ear and he transferred his gaze to Dwight. He hoped to hell the kid would follow his orders.

"Hello, Mr. Turquand?"

"Y-yes," said Dwight.

"Why'd you take so damn long to answer?" Before the youth could reply, the voice—which was obviously disguised—added:

"Never mind. Now listen to this—and get it straight. Like we said before, we want a hundred thousand. In small bills, unmarked. By the way, have you looked at your back porch lately?"

The youth shot a questioning glance at Britt. "N-no," he said. "Why?"

"Well, take a look some time," said the harsh voice. "And let it be a hint. Crocker thought we were kidding and you'll see what he got for being so foolish. If you don't do what we say, you'll get the same thing—only not so neat. You can call the cops about Crocker. But not a word to them about us or the hundred grand. Tell them and we'll kill you ten minutes later. We've got a spy in the police department so we'll know. Is that clear?"

Dwight looked blankly at Britt. Not until the Special Agent nodded sharply did the youth reply. "Yes, it's clear."

"Okay, then. Wait for further instructions by special delivery." The line clicked dead.

The phone slipped from Dwight's hands. It chipped varnish off the small desk before he caught and cradled it.

"What's it mean?" he asked Britt feverishly. "All that stuff about the porch?

If I don't pay, do you think they'll—?"

"Try to kill you?" Britt replaced his receiver. "I'll give it to you straight, kid. They will. I know that now for sure."

Slowly, Britt put his hands in his pockets of his blue tweed coat. His dark eyes were grim and his mouth was a wide, firm line. He understood now why Police Inspector Hackleton had called in the FBI on this case.

A moment passed during which no one said anything. Then Lissa uncrossed her long legs.

"Why's everybody so glum?" she inquired brightly. "It hasn't happened yet. Besides, Dwight's been dead from the neck up for years!"

"Shut up!" exclaimed Dwight. "I'd like to see how you'd act if it was you they were after! I'd like to—"

Britt interrupted curtly. "All right, that's enough. Arguing won't get us anywhere. What we need around here is some cooperation."

"Now you're talking, honey," said Lissa warmly. She patted the pink cushion beside her. "Come on. Sit down and cooperate."

Britt ignored her. He strode across the drawing room toward Hackleton.

Lissa's voice followed him mockingly: "You know, Mr. Britt, I find it awfully hard to believe the story that you're one of Dwight's fraternity brothers."

"Shut up, sis," said Dwight. "Don't you see they want to talk?"

In undertones, Britt exchanged a few words with Hackleton.

"What about Crocker?" asked Hackleton. "The kid's pretty nervous. Think we ought to let him see Crocker?"

Britt nodded. "Yeah. I want to watch his reaction. Sometimes I think he's faking all that scared-rabbit stuff." He raised his voice. "Dwight, I want to explain why that guy on the phone kept mentioning Crocker. Come on."

On the way to the service porch, Britt

told Dwight what to expect. The youth's reaction to the silent figure in green shorts was better than Britt had anticipated. Dwight's plump cheeks grew a little grayer. He swallowed awkwardly a couple of times and then he just stood there and looked at Britt expectantly.

Britt started to explain how and when he'd found the body, but the door buzzer interrupted him. "I'll answer it," he said. "Maybe it's the special delivery instructions."

He strode back to the drawing room and found that Lissa had already opened the front door. A tall, redheaded youth in a dinner jacket had stepped inside and was handing the girl an orchid in a cellophane box. He had a snub nose and a bright grin.

"Hiyuh!" He stuck out his large right hand. "You're Dwight?"

Britt shook it firmly. Before he could reply, Lissa said cheerfully:

"No. This is Mr. Britt. I don't think he's got a first name. He's one of Dwight's older fraternity brothers, but sometimes I wonder if—"

"Sigma Lambda," cut in Britt quickly. "D'you live around here, Mr.—?"

"I'm Jeff Rumble," said the redheaded youth, helping Lissa slip into a smart black coat with small gold fish on either lapel. "My folks have that horrible big white house near the high school."

"Oh, sure," said Britt. "Well, have a nice time, you two." He opened the door for them. "By the way, Lissa, when you get back, can we have a little talk?"

She smiled elfishly. "Only if you turn the lights low and hold my hand."

"Glad to," said Britt.

As he closed the door, he was hoping the little witch wouldn't blab it all over town that Dwight had been receiving threatening phone calls and letters. At the same time, he felt a dozen pleasant little sparks bounce up and down his backbone. He decided it would be a distinct pleasure

to try and paddle some sense into her.

HE RETURNED to the service porch. Without touching it, Hackleton was kneeling beside the body, making a closer inspection. Dwight was sitting on a metal stool, fluttering fingers covering his face.

"Relax, kid," said Britt. "I know it looks bad. They killed Crocker as a warning to you. But, believe me, nothing can happen while Hackleton and I are standing by." He paused. "How about answering a few questions?"

"Questions!" blurted the youth suddenly. "All the time questions. Well, damnit, it's time I asked a few. Nothing can happen to me while you two are around, huh? Well, how did that man get in here? The doors were all supposed to be locked, weren't they? Didn't you check them every half hour like you promised?" Beligerently, he stared up at Britt.

"I don't blame you for being upset," said Britt. "Sure I checked them. I agree, a dead guy coming in through a locked back door doesn't make sense. Unless it was an inside job." He paused. "Dwight, did you tell your sister about Hackleton and me?"

"What do you mean?"

"That Hackleton's a police inspector and I'm FBI?"

The plump youth shook his head. "No, she's just smart, is all. She knows about the phone calls, of course."

Britt lit a cigarette and tossed his pack to Hackleton. "Tell me, kid. You inherited all of your dad's estate, the whole five hundred thousand. Lissa, being a step-daughter, didn't get anything. D'you think it's possible she might be mixed up in this to get part of the money?"

Dwight cocked his head. "Maybe. I wouldn't put it past her. She's rotten spoiled."

Britt nodded thoughtfully.

During the next few minutes, Hackleton explained that his two plainclothes-

men, stationed in a vacant apartment several stories above, had put a tracer on the phone call. Like the previous ones, it had originated in a phone booth and the caller was gone before other plainclothes-men got there. The two wire-tappers reported that their equipment had developed a bug about the time Crocker's body was delivered. Busy repairing it, for a few minutes they had discontinued watching the doors to Dwight's apartment.

"That sort of explains," concluded Hackleton sheepishly, "how the killer—or killers—got Crocker to the porch without being seen."

"Hell," said Britt. "Don't bother apologizing, Inspector. "We were all asleep at the switch." He crushed his cigarette under his rubber heel. "Been able to find anything on Crocker?"

"Nothing. He's clean as a plucked duck. Whoever dropped him in here knew exactly what they were doing."

"May I make a suggestion?" asked Britt.

"Shoot."

"We've got to be careful," said Britt. "Just in case the killers are watching this apartment, you better have the city's homicide squad called in so everything will look routine. Do you mind letting them finish with the investigation on Crocker and not telling them about this extortion deal?"

Hackleton shook his head. "No skin off my nose."

"Good," said Britt. "The extortion angle will keep you and me plenty busy—and in the long run I think it'll solve the Crocker business." He ran his fingers through his dark hair. "Incidentally, the guy on the phone said he's got a spy in the police department. D'you believe that, Hackleton?"

The lanky detective frowned through the bluish corkscrews of his cigarette smoke. "Not a chance. If there were a spy, he'd know that you and I were on

the case and the killers would warn the kid to get rid of us or get shot up. Right?"

"Sure," said Britt, although he wasn't nearly so certain as Hackleton.

The door buzzer sounded again. He returned to the front of the apartment and accepted a small white envelope from a postal messenger.

Hackleton and Dwight watched him stiffly. Britt slit the envelope and shook the piece of bond paper out onto the desk. He sat down. Then, skillfully using two straight pins to prevent smudging any possible fingerprints, he unfolded it. And he swore.

"They're smart!" he said angrily. "It's another faint carbon copy. We'll never be able to trace that typewriter."

As his eyes scanned the neatly typed words, he felt Hackleton and Dwight press in behind him, reading the words over his shoulder.

Follow these instructions exactly. If there's any slip up, you get what Crocker got. Put the hundred thousand, in small, unmarked bills, in a cardboard box about one foot square. No smaller. Wrap it in white paper and tie it strong.

Go alone to San Diego tomorrow and get on the Santa Fe streamliner that leaves for Los Angeles at 9:15 tomorrow night. Stand on the west side of the train, between the last two cars. Open the upper half of the side door. No matter how long it takes, wait there, holding the package. Keep watching the sides of the tracks. As soon as you see two small blue lights blinking close together, toss the package down to the rails. Stay on the train till it gets to L. A.

Remember—no cops. If we think there are cops on the train, you'll be killed. There are enough of us to get you, one way or another.

Britt tilted the chair back on its two rear legs. He looked up glumly at Hackleton. And then fire flashed in his dark brown eyes.

"Brother, under those conditions, it'll be impossible to know where they'll be waiting. Damn 'em, everything's on their side!"

THE California sky, the next night, was blacker than the inside of a coal pit. But Britt was pleased, because the darkness was a shield. Decked out in grimy denim trainmen's overalls, he sat on a small, motionless handcar watching the bright, stainless-steel streamliner leave the San Diego station. He waited until it was four or five blocks away.

Then he turned to Hackleton, who was also wearing borrowed overalls. "Glue down your wig! Here we go!"

Britt released the brake and snapped open the handcar throttle. The one-lung engine snorted, and the little vehicle's steel wheels began to turn. In a few moments, they were clicking along the rails at thirty miles an hour.

Britt's mind was turning over faster than the wheels. And there were knots in his belly. The plan was so blasted complicated. In any one of a dozen ways it could slip up. Big things. Little things, too. Like the .38, for example. It was banging around in one of his overall pockets like a pipe wrench. It would take him half an hour to get it out if trouble developed.

Squinting against the wind, he watched the rear of the train. Everything looked okay. That Santa Fe vice president had really been cooperative, although Britt's plan would ruin the railroad's schedule for the rest of the night. The last car on the train—normally a streamlined one—had been replaced by a high, old-fashioned coach with an observation platform.

The engineer was following his instructions to the letter. At the moment, the train was moving slower than the handcar, to give Britt and Hackleton a chance to catch up. Later, the engineer would increase his speed, but his orders were to keep the train under forty-five all during the trip. The conductor would tell the passengers that a broken axle was causing the slowdown.

Gradually, the big, olive-drab car

loomed closer. In the darkness it looked black. Britt was relieved to see that no one was standing on the observation platform. The conductor had orders not to unlock the platform door until the train was ten minutes out of San Diego.

When they were a few feet away, both Britt and Hackleton re-adjusted their positions. Britt lay down on the little car, facing down the tracks in order to watch for the blue lights. Hackleton lay in the opposite direction, facing the observation car. By jockeying the throttle, Britt eased the handcar directly under the observation platform.

The close fit was no accident. For several hours that afternoon, Britt and Hackleton had experimented. They'd removed the safety rails and all extra equipment from the handcar so it fitted under the larger car with a slim inch to spare. About a foot of the handcar protruded behind—but that couldn't be helped.

Hackleton hitched the chain around the observation car's rear truck. When Britt felt the train pulling the handcar, he cut the throttle until the little gas engine was merely idling.

The train picked up speed—and Britt was amazed that anything could be so uncomfortable. Gravel and dust beat against his eyes and mouth. The wind ruffling his clothes was cool, but he was manufacturing sweat by the quart. His belly was flat against the handcar and his rump and shoulder blades pressed against the swaying observation platform. It was impossible to move more than one small muscle at a time.

As he jammed the walkie-talkie radio against his ear, Britt's brain was a whirlpool of questions, each clamoring for attention. When would the blue lights flash? In the next ten seconds? Ten minutes? After they got the package, would the killers try to get away by car? By plane? Maybe by helicopter?

He tuned in the radio and spoke softly.

"This is Britt. Can you hear me? Over."

Almost immediately there was a reply from the plainclothes-man in a compartment on the car just ahead of the old observation coach. "You're coming in pretty good, but there's lots of interference. From the wheels, I guess. Over."

"Everything okay?" asked Britt. "Over."

"Yeah. The boy is standing between the two cars ready to throw the package when he sees the signal. He's nervous, but I think he'll be all right. Over."

"Have you noticed any suspicious characters watching him?"

A lot of static crackled in Britt's ear before he caught the plainclothes-man's answer. "No. But I'll bet a sawbuck he's being watched, all right. Over."

"What about the three patrol cars and the other engine? Got contact? Over?"

"Contact's good," said the plainclothes-man. He added several more words, but static drowned them out. A half minute passed before Britt could understand what he was saying.

"Contact's good," repeated the plainclothes-man. "McGurney's sitting beside me on the other radio talking to the three patrol cars and the other engine. The engine is on the tracks, keeping a mile back, the way you said. The prowls are on Highway 101, trying to keep parallel with the train. They figure they're about a mile from the tracks. Over."

"Okay," said Britt. He wished the cops in the three sedans could get closer, but he knew that was impossible, since the highway and the tracks ran beside each other only part of the way.

He swallowed drily and kept watching the black ties flit by a scant two feet from his nose. Once he thought he saw the dark shape of the engine which was following behind. But he knew it was probably his imagination.

The lights of Solana Beach flashed by. A few minutes later, Cardiff.

A tense, miserable hour passed. Britt stared so hard at the darkness his eyes hurt. He wondered if the blue signal could have been flashed—and he'd missed it. What a catastrophe that would be. . . . The lights of San Onofre suddenly twinkled past.

The tracks curved and abruptly the train was rolling along the beach. On his right, Britt could see the swirling whiteness which was the surf. On the other side of the rails were cliffs and the beach houses of San Clemente. Another thirty seconds passed.

And then, as the train knifed past the little town's central beach district, Britt saw two small blue lights blink together rapidly.

HE FELT the muscles leap up rigidly along his legs. He saw the white package bounce along the ties, spinning like a dish. And then he was busier than he'd ever been before in his life.

He kicked Hackleton in the ribs—the signal to unhitch the handcar. Almost at the same time, he crushed the radio against his ear and grabbed the round knob which was the handbrake.

The voice that spoke into the radio didn't sound like his. It was smothered with urgency. "This is Britt! Package dropped! Have cars converge at San Clemente's main beach. Warn engine behind. Over."

He saw two men, black shadows in the darkness, running toward the sliding package, which was already a hundred yards behind. Wondering why the hell the plainclothes-man didn't reply, he jammed on the handbrake.

Instantly, he realized that had been a mistake. Overhead, the observation car's platform was whisked away like a curtain. The sudden deceleration nearly threw him off the handcar. But that wasn't the worst.

Sparks, a whole Fourth of July display,

flew up from the locked wheels skidding along the rails. A dead giveaway to the two men who were walking slowly now, hunting for the package.

And where the hell was that plain-clothes-man on the radio? Ten more seconds of static beat at his eardrum before he heard the faint, terse reply:

"Message received. Good luck!"

Britt dropped the radio and grabbed the throttle. It was half a decade before the car slowed enough so he could open the throttle and shift to reverse. He let in the clutch, and the car bucked and the steel wheels spun. Finally, they started to move back toward where the package had been dropped. It was a good five hundred yards away now.

For half that distance, the handcar gained speed about as fast as a snail moving across wet glue. Britt dug out the .38. As he lay there, he saw and felt a dozen things at once. The wide strip of beach was mobbed with people in bathing suits and dotted with bonfires. Red letters on a canvas sign told him why: *Church Barbecue*. Brother, he thought grimly, the killers sure picked a dilly of a night, all right. It'll be a cinch for them to lose themselves in the crowd.

Britt saw one of the men pick up the white package. He and his companion left the tracks and began walking quickly back toward the beach. They were barefooted, wore skimpy bathing trunks and carried what seemed, in the dimness, to be paper sacks. They ignored the approaching handcar.

When the car was almost opposite the two men, Britt yanked the handbrake again. While it was still skidding, he and Hackleton leaped off.

Things continued to happen all at once, flashing together like a badly spliced strip of movie film. Britt saw the men—now less than seventy-five feet away—dig inside the paper sacks. He shouted a warning to Hackleton just before the orange

muzzle blasts winked in the gloom. He took half a dozen more strides, feeling the radio—slung over his shoulder—slap against his thigh. Deep in his throat, he growled bitterly, realizing he couldn't return the fire because of the crowd just behind the two men.

Again, he saw the muzzle blasts dart from the sacks. He heard the flat, tell-tale pop of .32's.

And Hackleton suddenly was running the wrong way. He headed back toward the tracks, arms flopping loosely, and then he dived into the dirt.

Britt dived down beside him. One look was enough. The small round hole under Hackleton's left eye told the whole story. Sick inside, feeling his body throb against the soft sand, Britt lay there for a long moment watching the two men. They had taken their hands from inside the paper sacks and were threading their way through the crowd.

He continued to watch them as he kicked off the overalls. Under them, he wore gray slacks and a gray shirt. He poked his head through the leather strap and arranged the radio so it hung down his back where it would be hidden from anyone directly in front. Hoping his appearance was changed enough to lead the killers into believing they weren't being followed, he stood up.

The two men strode down the beach. No one paid them any attention. It took Britt a moment to realize why. The noise of their light guns had been little different from the sounds people made as they broke wood for their bonfires.

The two men turned after a while, and started toward a group of large, tile-roofed homes on a nearby hill. Keeping back a good distance, Britt followed.

ONCE he stopped and looked back at the tracks. The second diesel engine had arrived, pulling a flat car. He saw the dim shadows of the three cops pre-

paring to run the jeep down the ramp to the ground. They had not discovered Hackleton's body, and they seemed confused. Britt wanted to radio them, but he knew he couldn't risk changing the position of the walkie-talkie. His back still shielded it from the two men up ahead. Besides, capturing these two wouldn't break the case. Others undoubtedly were around here somewhere.

They crossed the tracks a good thousand yards south of the engine and walked up a steep, asphalt street. Cars were parked thickly on both sides. Britt used them for cover, ducking beside them and noting the progress of the two men through windshields and rear windows.

The men turned suddenly into a large, white Mediterranean-style structure with a red roof and high, arched front windows overlooking the surf.

It was what Britt had been hoping for. He sat down on the running board of a much-bruised old coupe. He put the radio up to his ear and worked the tuning dial.

Nothing happened. Not even static.

He turned it over in his hands, examining it. And then his tanned young face was lined with anger. He swore softly, but thoroughly. There was a small round hole beside the mouthpiece. On the other side, near the stubby antenna, there was a ragged cavity where the bullet had come out.

He started to pull the strap over his head. Abruptly, he froze. He knew the small hard thing jabbing his spine wasn't the eraser on a pencil. It was a different kind of an eraser. . . .

A young man's voice said dangerously: "Lay your gun on the running board. Slowly. Get tricky and, believe me, there'll be a strange click-clack in the back of your sacroiliac!"

The hairs on the back of Britt's neck stood up like tacks. As he laid down the .38, he was ordered to step away from the car. The guy who picked up the gun

wore satiny, grass-green trunks. He had a hard, flat stomach, good shoulders and looked twenty-three or so.

They walked across the sidewalk and in the front door of the big house. Three other young people were waiting in the smartly-furnished living room. Britt recognized two of them.

The golden-skinned miss in the smooth white bathing suit was Lissa. She was lounging on a peppermint-striped chair and her dark eyes roamed cynically over Britt.

The guy opening the package was Jeff—the same redheaded fellow who'd dated Lissa the night before.

Seeing them didn't particularly surprise Britt. But, standing there grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, he felt very angry. Mostly at himself, for not following up his hunch the night before and having Jeff and the girl shadowed.

The thing was so damned clear. Spoiled rich kids, that's what they were—looking for a quick way to make easy dough. The fact that Lissa was involved made things easier to understand. Obviously, she had supplied the key so Crocker's body could be delivered to Dwight's back porch.

"What'll we do with him?" asked the youth who had brought Britt in. He held Britt's gun in his left hand and a .32 in his right.

"Just a minute, Jerry!" snapped Jeff. Impatiently, he broke the cord on the package and pulled off the white paper. "One hundred thousand stones. This kind of stuff buys a lot of French fries!"

"And long, low convertibles," added Lissa.

Jeff opened the box flaps, reached inside and pulled out two thick bundles of paper. Newspapers, cut the same size as paper currency, and fastened neatly with rubber bands.

Pink cheeks quivering with rage, the red-haired man turned the box upside down, spilling out other small packets of

newspaper, made up in the same way.

"We've been tricked!" he yelled furiously. "This stuff's no good!"

"Sure it is," said Britt. He grinned sarcastically, enjoying Jeff's wrath. "There's nothing like sitting down and relaxing with a good newspaper. The small size makes it sort of inconvenient, but—"

"Shut up!" shouted Jeff, running toward Britt. "You're the one! Dwight didn't have the guts to doublecross us. You did it!"

His eyes were crazy with anger. He threw a sudden fist at Britt. His heavy ring put a deep, stinging gash in Britt's cheek. The force of his swing sent the red-haired man crashing bodily against Britt. Britt grabbed him by the throat and held him out at arm's length. He smashed his snub nose flatter with two short punches.

Jeff stumbled back. "Pull the trigger, Jerry!" he shouted, holding a hand before his red-streaming nose. "Kill him! Kill him!"

WAITING for the quick chop of the bullets, the skin on Britt's belly crawled as if circled by insects.

"Shoot!" Jeff waved violently. "He's dangerous! We can't have him around here alive!"

Jerry raised the small .32 and steadied it. But abruptly the killer expression left his eyes. Worried, he turned to Jeff.

"Gee," he said. "We can't kill him here. All that blood and everything on the rug. After all, this is my Mom's house and she'll be coming down tomorrow night for the weekend. If there's anything suspicious, she'll call the cops—maybe they'll trace us."

Instantly, the rage was wiped from Jeff's face. "You're right, Jerry," he said quietly. "It was dumb of me." The room was silent for a moment, but loaded with tension. The others watched Jeff, waiting.

"All right," he said. "I've got it. Either we stick it out here all night and hide the cop. Or we leave right now. What d'you want to do?"

The others didn't reply. They seemed unsure of themselves.

"It's this way," said Jeff. "Being so close to the beach, the house will be watched or searched sooner or later. If the cops find this guy around here—dead or alive—we're cooked. And if we're going to get out of town, we better go quick before they start watching the roads. What d'you want to do?"

Lissa untwined her long brown legs and stood up. She spoke quickly and crisply. "I say let's get out of here right away. All of us but you, Jeff, are acquainted with Dwight. The police may begin to check his friends. If we're found here, it'll look especially bad. If we can all get back to our assorted homes, we'll all have good alibis."

"Smart girl!" said Jeff, enthusiastically. "Everybody agree?"

Jerry and the other man nodded nervously.

"Thanks fellas." Lissa's dark eyes swept coldly up and down Britt's lean frame. "And about this one, here's what I think. Put him in the car, finish him when we get a couple of blocks from the house and dump him in the street. They'll never be able to trace us if—" She paused.

"If what?"

"If we use his own gun on him." She stepped over to Jerry and her red-tipped fingers touched the barrel of the .38. "May I?"

Jerry handed it to her. He continued to cover Britt with the lighter gun.

"What's more," said Lissa, putting her finger on the muzzle. "If we wrap this with a towel, no one will hear the shot."

"You're sharp, Lissa," said Jeff. "You take care of the towel. The rest of us will meet you down in the garage."

Lissa left the room. Jeff grabbed Britt

roughly by the arm and shoved him toward a hallway. As he and the three men went down wooden steps to the garage, Britt's mind was working violently, trying to think of some way to escape. But one small corner of his brain refused to cooperate. It was busily counting the minutes he had left. Five at the most, probably.

He felt naked and unprepared, although he'd always known that some day it might come to this. Those gun courses at Quantico—the study booklets the Chief was always handing him. . . . Hell, it was easy to read between the lines. Some special agents were bound to wind up with their chins in the dirt. The law of averages would always see to that.

A dark green sedan was parked in the garage. Before they got in, Jeff took the radio from Britt's shoulder. Britt was pushed onto the rear seat. Holding the radio in his lap, George sat on one side of him. Jerry sat on the other. They tried to act nonchalant, but the rapid heaving of their bare chests spoiled the effect.

Lissa hurried down the steps to the car. Through a window, she handed Jeff the black .38 and a pineapple-yellow towel.

Jeff gave both of these objects to Jerry. "I took care of Crocker," he said. "This one's yours."

JERRY nodded slightly. He twisted sideways on the cushion, wrapped the towel around the gun and pointed the football-like shape at Britt's chest.

"You drive, Lissa," said Jeff. "That'll leave us free in case."

Lissa got in. She backed the car out and the third man closed the garage doors and climbed in beside her. The wheels made little crunching noises against the driveway gravel.

In a moment, they were a block from the house. And Britt's belly was a small glacier. Watching, wondering, he sat there stiffly, his dark hair now wet with sweat.

They went another block along the dim residential street.

Then Jeff spoke, his voice savage with emotion. "All right, Jerry!"

Britt prepared to swing both fists. They wouldn't be very effective against the .38, but he couldn't just sit there.

"Wait!" warned the man up front. "Headlights. . . ."

A car was coming along slowly. When

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it got closer, Britt recognized its black fenders and white flanks. State highway patrol! One of the radio cars he'd arranged to follow the train. He'd have to take advantage of this somehow!

Jeff swore. "Cops! Take it easy, you guys. Look like kids coming home from the beach. Sing 'Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here!'"

They began to sing. Weakly at first, louder as the patrol car came closer. Britt edged out further on the seat.

"Stay where you are!" whispered Jerry grimly.

"Go to hell!" yelled Britt. He smothered his instinct for safety and jumped to his feet. His belly hit the front seat. His hands shot past Lissa's tanned bare shoulders and grasped the steering wheel. He wrenched it viciously to the left.

"Plug him!" yelled Jeff.

Jerry's voice was panic-stricken. "Can't fire! Towel or something's jamming it!"

The man sitting beside Lissa was throwing his weight on the wheel, trying to correct the sedan's swerving. Hard hands grabbed Britt's throat and tried to drag him backward. He kicked out with both feet and knew by Jeff's yell that he'd been hit. He leaned further over the seat and was amazed to feel Lissa's small hands fighting to help him spin the wheel to the left.

They plowed into the large official emblem on the radio car's left door. At that speed, it wasn't much of a crash—but the sudden halt helped Britt jump over the seat onto the other man. With a chopping right, he drove the man's head hard against the chromium dashboard. The man flopped to the floor mat. Britt followed him down, punching till the man quit struggling.

Britt slithered around on the cushion, ready to dive into the back seat and see what he could do for Jeff and Jerry. But it wasn't necessary. Two tan-uniformed patrolmen—guns drawn—were opening

both rear doors, and Jeff and Jerry were raising shaky hands. A third patrolman was taking care of Lissa.

Jeff got out and sat weakly on the running board. With both hands, he held his stomach where Britt had kicked him. His face was a muddy green. He ignored Jerry who was spouting loudly.

"Listen to me!" begged Jerry, pulling at Britt's shirt-sleeve. "I'll confess! I was just in on the money deal, not the murder. It was Jeff's idea to steal Lissa's key so we could hide Mr. Crocker on the porch. Jeff stabbed him with the ice pick, that's the truth!"

"That still makes you an accomplice," said Britt evenly. "And so's Lissa."

Jerry tugged harder at Britt's sleeve. "No, Lissa wasn't in on it. Jeff had another date with her this afternoon at the beach. He was going to keep her at the house this evening and if we didn't get the money, he was going to kidnap her and try to get the money from Dwight that way. But I was against that idea."

Jerry turned anxiously to Lissa. "Wasn't I?"

"Yes," said the girl. Her chocolate-brown eyes were calm. "I found out they were up to something, so I played along, pretending to help."

Britt mopped the sweat off his jaw. "If that was an act, sister, you were plenty convincing. Maybe too convincing!" He glared at her suspiciously. "That towel and all—and the way you worked out the most quiet means to get me a harp and a halo."

"But I *was* acting!"

"Prove it, and maybe we won't lock you up."

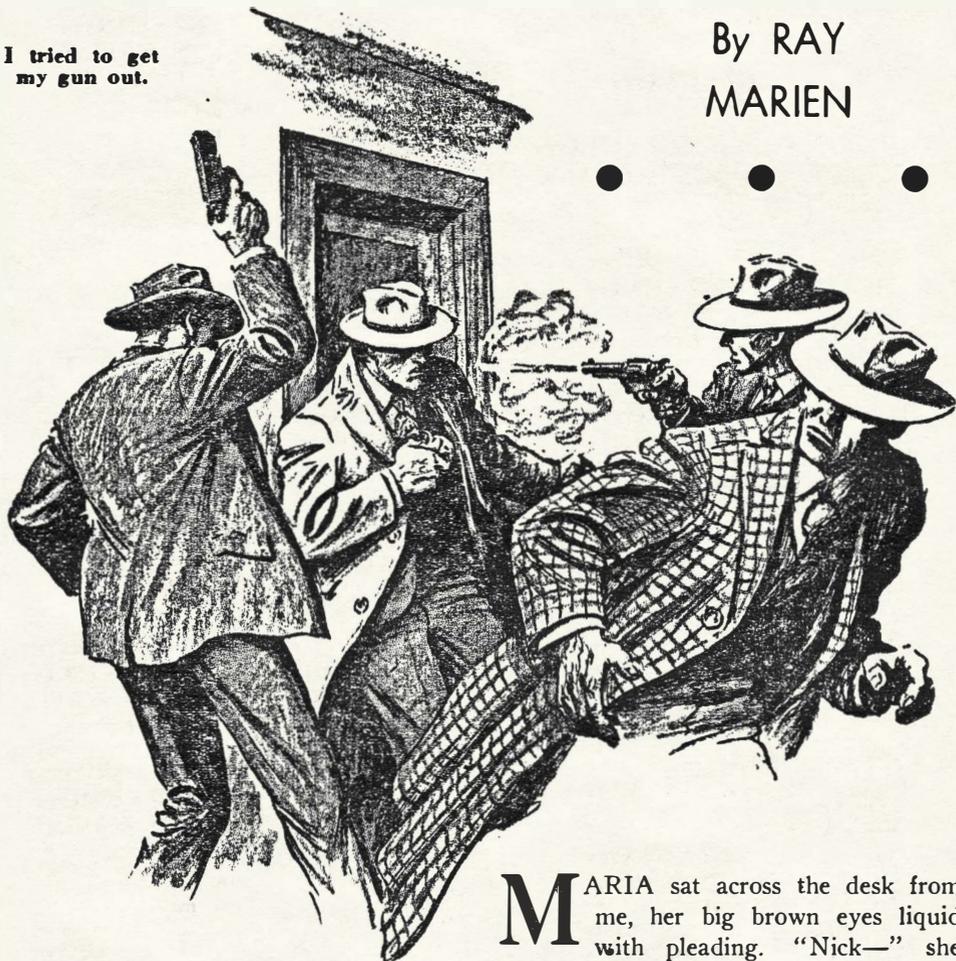
The corners of Lissa's red mouth lifted impishly. "You could be dead, you know. Wasn't it kind of funny that your gun didn't fire for Jerry?"

She reached inside the bright canvas beach-bag she carried—and brought out five copper-shirted .38 slugs.

SING, LITTLE SNOWBIRD!

I tried to get
my gun out.

By RAY
MARIEN



*Trailing a man who had died
five years ago at Anzio, Private
Detective Nick Mayo found
himself involved soul-deep
with a narcotics gang.*

MARIA sat across the desk from me, her big brown eyes liquid with pleading. "Nick—" she begged—"you're the only one I can turn to! . . . I need your help!"

I lighted a cigarette and forced myself to look out the window, around the room, anywhere—but at those eyes. I said coldly: "I never thought I'd see you again, Maria. Not after you ran off with him.

You've got more gall than I gave you credit for."

I felt the muscles tighten at the sides of my jaw. I blew out some smoke and tried to think of other things. Still it kept coming back to me—Maria might have been my wife if Phil hadn't stepped between us.

"All right, Maria," I said wearily, "get to the point."

Her small chin trembled and she reached gingerly across the desk top and touched my sleeve. I carefully moved my arm away from her fingers.

Maria's oval face whitened through her makeup. She bit her underlip. "Nick—I saw Phil today. He's alive!"

"What—?"

My mouth flapped open in surprise. The cigarette fell out and bounced off my tie onto the floor. I flicked at the tie and yanked myself up out of the chair. I grabbed her by the wrist, held her and breathed hard. "What the hell are you trying to pull? . . . Phil's been dead for five years! You know that as well as I do!"

She squeezed her eyes shut and a tear slipped out and ran down her cheek. "You're hurting me. Nick—please!"

I let go of her and dropped back into the chair. I was shaking when I set fire to another cigarette. I took a deep drag and said: "Let's hear it."

She moved forward on the edge of her seat. "It happened late yesterday afternoon. I was over on East Eighty-fourth Street. I'd just said good-by to a girl friend—when I saw Phil. I almost went crazy. I called out his name. His head seemed to lift for a second but he didn't turn. He kept right on going."

I cut in: "Wait a minute. His back was toward you—yet you spotted him?"

"Yes, Nick! . . . Back or front, I'd know him. That hunched-over walk of his, the way he swung his arms . . . You remember."

I nodded. "I remember a lot of things."

"Phil walked fast and I went right after him. He stopped for a moment at the corner and turned. I got a glimpse of his face, Nick. . . . He went around the corner and when I reached there he was nowhere in sight. I walked up one side of the street and down the other, but he was gone. I didn't see him again."

I sat there for five minutes, ignoring her, trying to think it out. Then I said: "Look, Maria, when they reported him missing at Anzio, you knew what that meant. You got a telegram from the War Department. It said: 'Missing in action and presumed lost.'"

"But there's always a chance, Nick! He could have come out alive—maybe lost his memory."

I shook my head. "Any G.I. wandering around in a daze wouldn't wander very far. Italy isn't that big. No, Maria—your Phil got it. Phil is dead—period."

I stood up and went over to the window, my back to her.

"Wishing he was alive," I said, "won't bring him back."

"Nick!" she pleaded. "Just this once! Find out for me. You can do it. I die a little each time I think of him."

"His mother died," I said. "The shock of that telegram killed her before her time."

"Nick, you've got to. For her sake, too! If she were still here—she'd want to know."

I turned slowly from the window and faced her. "All right. I'll do what I can. For her sake."

THE next day had twenty-four hours in it, just like all the rest. For nine of those twenty-four hours, from eight a. m. to five p. m., I sat behind the wheel of my coupe. I was parked near the corner of Eighty-fourth and First Avenue, smoking, watching and thinking.

Shortly after five, a slim guy in a gray

topcoat and a dark hat went past the car. I jerked upright in the seat. Maria had been correct about the walk and the way Phil had swung his arms.

I fought for the door handle and finally got it open. I almost fell out of the car in my hurry to get out after him.

Before I could yell to him he had disappeared into the doorway of a nearby house.

It was a shabby-looking house, dirty gray, with high, narrow windows and a short flight of steps leading up to it. It was one of a block of tenements, all identical on the outside.

I raced up the steps, yanked open the door—and stopped short. I was in a poorly lighted hallway leading to a flight of worn wooden stairs at the rear. There were four doors on the ground floor. He hadn't had time to go upstairs. That meant he was in one of those four apartments.

I cupped a hand around my mouth and shouted: "Phil! . . . It's me, Nick Mayo!"

I held my breath a second and waited. No answer. I shouted again. That did it.

A door on my left was thrown open violently and a frowzy-haired blonde stepped out. Her eyes were as hard as two pieces of flint and she had a voice to match.

She rasped: "What the hell are you yellin' for? There ain't nobody named Phil here. Scram outta here before I call the cops!"

I tried to keep calm. It was tough going with those firecrackers exploding in my face. I said: "Easy, sister. A guy in a gray topcoat just came in this building. He looked like someone I know. Maybe his name isn't Phil, but I want to make sure of that myself."

Her mouth twisted in a snarl but before she could say anything a hand reached out from behind the door and curled over her mouth. She was yanked back into the apartment.

The hand had an arm behind it, covered with gray tweed. It also owned a voice which said: "Shut up, Rose."

Then he stepped out into the light, and I got a good look at him. A cold numbness ran down my spine to my toes and froze me there.

He had that same lean face with the bright blue eyes. The same dark curly hair hanging loosely over his forehead. The height, the build, everything checked. He looked five years older.

I found my voice at last. "Phil!"

He stared blankly at me. Like he'd regard a total stranger who had mistaken him for someone else. He frowned and shook his head. "Sorry, pal. You've got the wrong guy."

I pushed past him into the apartment. The blonde scowled at me but kept quiet. It was a real effort on her part. I turned to him again.

"Listen, Phil—just open your shirt. There's a mark that should be on your right side, just below the ribs. Only one guy could be marked like that!"

He shook his head again, "No dice, pal. . . . Now beat it."

I said: "Okay—after I make sure."

I reached out for him. I was going to find out for myself. I grabbed his coat and that was as far as I got. Something exploded against the back of my skull and the room was suddenly filled with Roman candles. The floor was as good a place as any for a nap. I was out before I reached it.

I HEARD his voice coming from a long way off. It was saying: "He better not die."

Consciousness returned in little pieces, like parts in a jig-saw puzzle. First I heard his voice. Then I felt the bumping and was aware of the car motor purring. Finally I saw the two guys in the back with me, holding me down against the floorboards.

Every time the car took a corner or rounded a curve my head throbbed with pain. Finally we pulled up. A side door opened and cold air rushed in. Then I was shoved out of the car. I landed in some weeds at the side of the road, rolled over on my stomach and lay there motionless.

The door slammed. The motor throbbed and picked up speed. I listened to it fade into the night. I was still alive. It was a pretty good feeling so I went to sleep on it.

When I woke up the sun was blazing down on me, burning the back of my neck. I tried to move, and fire raced through my joints. I waited a moment, then tried it again. This time I made it. I got to my feet. I explored my head with a gentle finger and found, behind my left ear, a bump.

I glanced around, and recognized the neighborhood. I was standing at the edge of a large vacant lot, a nice quiet spot to dump a ride victim. For several blocks in either direction there were two-story factories and over behind them, the "E1" structure. I was in lower Long Island City, not far from Brooklyn.

Then I remembered that voice in the car: *He'd better not die!* . . .

For the next three days I didn't do much. I ate, slept and sat in my coupe at the corner of Eighty-fourth and First, watching life go on and waiting for a glimpse of Phil. It was the only thing I could do under the circumstances. I couldn't burst in there looking for him. I wanted him alone. . . .

He emerged on the third evening. I hunched low in the seat and waited until he had passed. Then I got out and caught up with him.

"Hello, Phil. Just do as you're told. This is a gun in my pocket."

He twisted around slowly just to make sure I wasn't fooling.

I motioned toward the car. "Get in."

He got in very carefully. I squeezed in beside him. His lean face was damp and his mouth worked nervously. He put his hands on the wheel.

"Drive down to Thirty-ninth and Second." I ordered. "Take it nice and slow."

He started the car and followed directions. His hands were white against the steering wheel. When we reached our destination I told him where to park. I nodded at a building halfway up the block.

"In there. Second floor front."

We walked up the one flight and along the hall to a glass-partitioned door marked: *N. Mayo, Private Investigator.*

I unlocked it and pushed him inside. I switched on the lights. There was an oak desk, a couple of filing cabinets and some chairs. The floor was covered with brown battleship linoleum. That was as far as I had gotten on the G. I. loan. I went over to the windows and closed the venetian blinds.

THEN I stepped up to him, took my right hand off the gun and out of the pocket, made a fist and smashed his face. He staggered back against the desk and raised his arm weakly. I snapped a short, hard left hook to his stomach, then crossed a right to his jaw.

His eyes rolled upwards and he slumped to the floor. I turned him over. It looked as if he'd be out for at least another ten minutes. I went to work unbuttoning his topcoat and suit jacket. Then I yanked the shirt out of his pants. There, a few inches above his waist, etched into the white skin, was a series of small round scars. They formed the letter "P."

There was no mistaking him now. When we were kids we had branded ourselves with the burning end of a cigarette. It was a ritual with the gang we both belonged to. Those scars were in the flesh to stay.

I noticed a flat cloth belt, similar to a

money belt, under the top of his pants. I loosened it and slid it free. There were flapped pockets running completely around it. Each container held a glassine envelope filled with a crystalline white powder. I touched some of it to my tongue, then spat it out.

It was pure heroin—and worth a small fortune.

I didn't try puzzling over the fact that Phil was still alive after the Army had given him up for dead, or the reason for him packing around the heroin. I wanted him to tell me about it. I filled a glass with water and emptied it into his face. He sputtered and sat up, shaking his head.

I said: "Get up, Phil—and let's hear everything. Start it at Anzio, five years ago."

He blinked and gazed down at the exposed scar on his side. His eyes searched frantically for the belt, then he saw it on the desk. He stumbled to his feet and sat down heavily in a chair. His breath came out in a long sigh. I lit a cigarette and handed it to him. He puffed deeply on it and glanced up at me.

"I knew it was wrong coming back here," Phil said wearily—"any other city but this. Eight million other people, and I stumble on to you."

"What happened at Anzio?"

His lips curled sardonically. "I deserted! When we hit the beach I found out what you must have known all the time—I had no more guts than a school-girl."

He watched the drifting smoke climb to the ceiling. Through the haze, he relived the last five years and the words poured from him in a stream.

"My platoon was butchered. We were one of the first to go ashore. A shell burst right in the middle of us. I hid out for days. I took some clothes off a dead civilian. After that there was no way back. There were others like me. Not many, but enough for self-protection. We

spoke the language fluently, we looked like natives.

"There was only one way to get food and money—take it. Our mob got to be pretty big time. A few of the boys from the old Prohibition days joined us and we grew too big for the local cops to toy with. It went on like that for four years."

HE PAUSED and studied his cigarette. "I came over here last year. I couldn't stand it there any longer. First I had to hide my identity." He held out his hands and showed me his finger-tips. They were a mass of twisted scar tissue.

"A guy in Naples did that—with acid. He swore nobody would be able to trace me by my fingerprints after he got through with me. That blonde babe—the others—no one knows anything about me.

"We came in by way of Cuba. At night, in a fast boat. It cost us plenty but we could afford it."

He nodded at the belt and the slender folders of narcotics resting on the desk—"Some people will pay any price or do anything you tell them for a few grains of that stuff."

I waited for the rest of his speech. It didn't come. I said: "You left something out, Phil. What about Maria?"

He lowered his head and ran his fingers through his dark curly hair. "I couldn't let any one know I was still alive. Not even her. I guess I didn't love her, Nick. I just wanted to take her away from you. It started as a gag."

Anger welled up in me with mounting force. I pushed it back down and swallowed it. I said bitterly:

"Maybe you didn't care for your mother either."

He looked up quickly. "How is she, Nick? How did she take it?"

"You can pay her a visit now," I said coldly, "She won't give you away."

(Please continue on page 129)

The hot-goods passer was so glad to see Special Agent Wright—he ordered him . . .



CHAPTER ONE

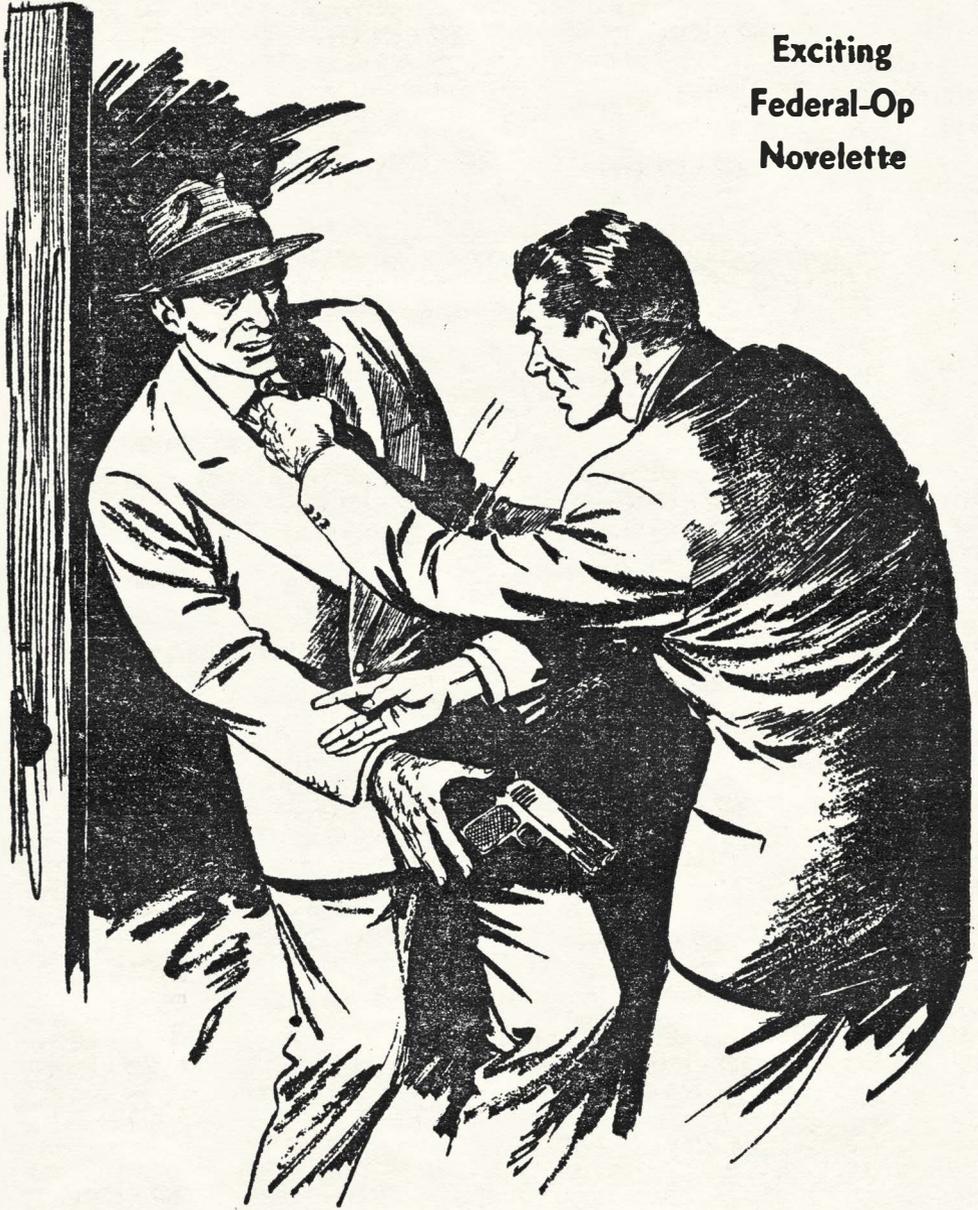
You Gotta Have Evidence

CORY WRIGHT, special agent attached to the San Francisco office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, heaved his six-foot frame cautiously up the back stairs to the third

By **BILL ERIN**

GIFT-WRAPPED FOR THE GRAVE

Exciting
Federal-Op
Novelette



Cory moved with the swiftness of a striking snake.

floor of the shabby rooming house. He looked warily down the dimly lit hallway before he advanced to one of the doors and knocked lightly. There was no answer.

Cory frowned. Don Welton had arranged the meeting himself. He tried the knob, and the door opened. Cory slipped into the room and closed the door behind him. Don was there waiting for him—that is, his mortal remains were there.

It looked as though Don had placed a loaded gun against the side of his head and pulled the trigger. Don was quite a mess. Cory walked around the edge of the room to the small desk, on which was a single sheet of paper. He examined the writing, and his jaw tightened.

Life has become too complicated and tough, it said. *I'm going to end it all.* It was signed by Don. Cory stooped to examine the writing more closely without touching the paper. He had had some instruction in handwriting at the FBI Academy, and he was familiar with Don's writing. The note looked firm and sure, and it looked like Don's doing, but Cory knew that Don wouldn't have committed suicide.

He looked down at the remains of the FBI undercover man. "Well, we must have hit pretty close, anyway, Don," he said. "We must have been riding their tail, and they had to get rid of you. They'll burn for this, boy, don't you worry about it."

Cory turned to the small desk again. He wanted to take whatever would identify Don as an FBI man, and anything which might help in the case, and then he'd have to call Lieutenant Pecchio of the San Francisco Police Department.

He felt rather than heard the door open behind him. He whirled quickly, his hand darting to his shoulder holster, but the squat little man in the doorway had him covered with a wicked-looking automatic. Even then Cory might have drawn, ex-

cept that the taller, sallow-faced man behind the smaller man also had a gun in his hand.

"We figured you'd be around sooner or later," the smaller man said.

"Yeah, glad you came sooner," said the other gungsel.

"What's the big idea?" Cory asked evenly.

"What's the big idea, he wants to know," the little man said.

"That's a gag, that is. He's a laughing-boy, this guy."

Neither of them cracked a smile, however, as they both moved into the room and closed the door.

Cory knew that in these steady gunhands and glittering, watchful eyes, he faced death more surely than at any time in his FBI career. His hand was still halfway inside his coat, and his fingers could feel the butt of his heavy revolver, but he knew it would be suicide to draw.

"You got a couple hours to live until we dump you in the bay—if you put those mitts up in the sky instead of where they are," the smaller of the two said.

"We wouldn't mind ventilating you here," the sallow-faced one said, "except it would spoil our handiwork." He nodded at the framed suicide of Don Welton.

Cory raised his hands over his head. "Who do you think you're fooling with that job?" he asked.

"The thick-headed cops, that's who. They ain't the smarties you G-men are, you know." His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"They'll see through it," Cory said. "Even if they don't, it's just a matter of time until the Bureau gets on the trail."

"That's all we want, laughing-boy, a little time," the man said. He waved at Cory with his gun and spoke to his companion. "Glom his heater," he said.

"Sure," the tall man said. He moved languidly across the floor to Cory.

Cory watched the man coming, and he

knew this was it. If he let them take his gun, he was as good as dead. They'd sap him, tie him, carry him away, weight him down, and dump him into the bay from a speeding boat late at night. He might as well act now. His life wouldn't be worth a melted penny if he waited until after his gun was gone.

STILL he watched, fascinated, with his hands steady in the air, as the tall gunsel moved across the floor to him. The man was just a few feet away. He stayed to one side, so as not to get in front of his companion's gun, and he reached across Cory to get the .38.

Cory moved with the swiftness of a striking snake. His right hand crashed down on the tall man's gun-wrist, and his left hand grabbed a fistful of the man's shirt-front. He pulled the man in front of him with a tremendous heave just as the little man's gun roared. He felt the hood in front of him jerk with the impact of the slugs, and then his .38 was in Cory's hand and roaring back across the small room.

He fired twice, and the deadly lead caught the little man in the chest. It slammed him back over a straight chair and against the wall. He fell into a crumpled heap, his legs raised awkwardly in the air between the chair and the wall. A small trickle of blood ran from a corner of his mouth.

Cory eased the tall man to the floor and felt for his pulse. There was none. He stepped over him, around the still figure of Don Welton, and to the small man. It was the same thing. They were both dead.

Cory took a deep breath. In a matter of seconds two vicious men had died violently the way they had lived. It was no source of comfort to him that the men had deserved to die. He liked to settle things without gunfire, in the tradition of the FBI, but sometimes it was neces-

sary to use a gun quickly and surely in order to survive.

There was a rising hubbub from the other floors in the rooming house. There were excited voices, and the patter of feet racing back and forth. In the distance there was the wail of a siren.

Cory waited patiently as the siren grew louder. He tried to reconstruct what had happened. First the racketeers had discovered that Don was an undercover man. They had framed the suicide, hoping to hold off a murder investigation. But why?

Don must have talked before he died, probably was tortured until he did, and they had decided to wait for Cory. They realized that Cory could be the fly in the ointment, because Cory would know almost as much as Don.

Yes, almost as much but not quite—and therefore not quite enough. But Cory would find what he needed in order to put in the death house the men who were responsible for Don's death. He made that vow as he waited for the police to arrive.

The two gunmen had been cheap killers, hired by the brains of the outfit, and Cory had to back-track from them. From the underworld stoolies he would have to learn who they had been associating with recently.

The heavy feet of the patrolmen shook the flimsy structure as they banged the stairs on the way up. Cory faced the door as it was thrown open, and two patrolmen stood there with drawn guns.

"Get your hands up in the air," one of them said sharply.

Cory raised his hands for the second time in a short span, but this time there was a grin on his face. "Take it easy, boys, the shooting's over."

They looked around the room, and one of them whistled. The other one looked a little sick. "It must have been hot while it lasted."

Cory shrugged. "It went fast," he said. "You sure take it easy. Doesn't it mean anything to you that three men are dead?"

Cory looked at the officer's green and blue uniform. He stepped toward Cory.

"Wait a minute," Cory said sharply. "Let's get organized. You go down to the car and call in a report. Tell them to send more cars, and the boys with the white sheets. I'll watch this guy until you get back."

There was another siren before the cop was through the door of the room. Another car was pulling up with more policemen. The confused and hysterical reports pouring into the station probably had the gunfight pegged for the second battle of the Marne.

Cory asked for Lieutenant Pecchio when he reached headquarters. At first they were reluctant to make the contact because Pecchio was really assigned to the narcotics detail. But when Cory kept insisting, they finally contacted the lieutenant.

Two patrolmen ushered Cory into Pecchio's small office, and Pecchio's poker-face didn't show a sign of recognition. He nodded to the patrolmen, and they left. Then he permitted a grin to slowly ease his face.

"What kind of a brawl did you get yourself into?" Pecchio asked with a grin. "From the reports, there was more shooting than at the Alcatraz break."

Cory grinned back. "I fired two shots, and so did the other guy. That's all there was to it."

"Other guy? I understand there were three stiff's."

Cory's face sobered. "One of the stiff's was Don Welton," he said. Pecchio looked startled. "They baited the trap with him, then the other two threw down on me.

The one guy made the mistake of getting himself off-balance, and from there it was all my show. One of the hoods shot his buddy by accident, and then I got him."

"Nice shooting," Pecchio said. "Who were they?"

Cory shrugged. "They didn't amount to much. We still have to get to the top. You've probably got their mugs on file, but if you haven't, we're sure to have."

"Don must have been close to home," Pecchio said.

"That's what I figure," Cory said. "He was working for Ribbon Dray and Cartage Company. That must be our gang."

"I'll put spotters around there," Pecchio said.

"I doubt if it'll do any good," Cory said. "They'll lay lower than a snake's belly. They won't do a thing until this has blown over, and then some."

"You may be right," Pecchio admitted.

"I'm not going to wait that long," Cory said.

"No?"

"No. Tomorrow I'm going down to the Ribbon Dray and Cartage Company and grab myself a fistful of lion beard."

Their eyes met steadily for a moment. "Want me to go with you?" Pecchio asked.

Cory shook his head. "No," he said. "Whoever's running this outfit is power-stupid. If I go alone, he might try something that'll tip his hand. He won't know how much evidence I've got."

"It might get a little hot," Pecchio said softly.

"Good," Cory said grimly. "I hope I get a chance to boot the boss of this outfit right square in the belly, just once. I'll dedicate it to Don."

WHEN Cory got back to his small apartment that night, he knew immediately that things were not right. He stood just inside the door, with the overhead light on, and looked at the small liv-

ing room. There was something glaringly wrong, but he couldn't place it.

He slipped the gun out of its holster and rested it easily in his hand as his eyes moved from one article to another. He found the solution in the ash tray next to the davenport. There was a crumpled cigarette butt in the ash tray. Cory didn't smoke cigarettes.

The white of the cigarette, glaring under the lights, had been like the ringing of a warning bell. Cory smoked pipes exclusively, and he'd had no invited visitors in the last several days.

Once again Cory carefully scanned the room. There was nothing else out of place. The small bedroom to the right, with its door open, looked empty. There were two corners of the room into which Cory couldn't see.

To his left was the tiny kitchen, and a swinging door obscured his view. In the kitchen was another outside door which led to the other leg of the corridor. Someone could be in the kitchen, or someone could have slipped out that door when Cory had come in. Cory looked again at the cigarette. It looked completely dead and cold. He sniffed the air cautiously. He couldn't smell smoke.

Cory soft-footed across the room to the swinging door. If an assassin had been lurking in wait, the man would have struck by now. Maybe.

"I'm coming in with a gun," Cory said aloud. He kicked the door with his foot, and then stepped aside. The door swung inward on the kitchen, then swung back. Cory could see into one corner of the kitchen as the door flapped. The kitchen was empty on that side.

He moved swiftly through the door with his gun leveled in the other direction—and faced himself in a small mirror. He glanced quickly around, and then relaxed. He grinned at himself in the mirror. "Cut out the cops and robbers," he said.

Cory went back across the living room to inspect the bedroom, but he was standing idly in front of the betraying cigarette when the knock came at the door. He whirled jumpily with his gun out-thrust, and then cursed himself quietly. Maybe what he needed was a nice long vacation.

The soft knock was repeated, but still Cory hesitated. If he opened the door, a quick shotgun burst could quickly end his usefulness to the FBI—or, for that matter, to anyone else.

He moved swiftly into the kitchen, eased the kitchen door open, and then was at the corner of the hallway in two long strides. He came around the corner with his gun again leveled. Standing in the hall was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen.

She stood in front of his door, her hand raised to knock again. She gasped when she saw him, and her blue eyes widened. She was the complete picture of innocence.

In his earlier days with the Bureau, Cory would hastily have put the gun away and apologized. He had learned, however, that some of the softest creatures strike the most swiftly. His gun remained in his hand as he walked swiftly toward this girl.

"May I help you?" he asked.

She looked again at the gun, and then up into his eyes. If she wasn't frightened, her performance was worth an Oscar in Hollywood.

"I—I don't know," she stammered uncertainly.

"Would it be appreciated if I put this little cannon away?" Cory asked her politely.

"It certainly would," she said with great relief.

"Then I'm sorry I can't oblige," Cory said. "If you'll take a couple of steps back, I'll open the apartment door so we can go in."

CHAPTER TWO

One-Way Exit

A SUDDEN spot of anger showed in her cheeks. The girl glared at him defiantly. "I'm not going in there with you," she said.

Cory smiled grimly as he opened the door. "Wanta bet?"

The anger flared in her eyes. "I'll scream!"

"Go ahead." Cory said. "Would you like to scream before or after I show you my FBI badge?"

"Are you Cory Wright?" she asked hastily.

"Cut it out," Cory said wearily. "You know who I am or you wouldn't have come up here. My feet hurt and I don't want to do any thinking."

"I came up here to see Cory Wright," she said indignantly. "I didn't intend to face a gun, and I didn't intend to be bullied. I want to see Cory Wright!"

"Those limpid blue eyes are gazing at the gentleman," Cory said. "Now that we've been properly introduced, step into my parlor."

"Have you anything to identify yourself?" she asked.

"Look, honey, you're mixed up," Cory said. "I'm the one who asks about identification, remember?" He waved at the open doorway. "Come on, inside. Quit the stalling."

The red was in her cheeks again, but she marched past him with her head held high. Cory followed her in after a quick look down the hall, and he kicked the door shut behind him with his heel. He stood with his back against the door, the gun still held lightly in his hand. "All right, what do you want?"

"I didn't expect to be treated this way by a member of the FBI," she said. "You act more like a hoodlum."

"I'm sorry to give that impression of

the Bureau," he said. "Under ordinary circumstances you'd find us impeccable models of courtesty, but you come at a bad time. I just had to shoot two characters in order to keep from being shot, and now I find that someone has been in my apartment while I've been gone. It makes one a little cautious, you get the idea?"

"You are Cory Wright, then?" she asked.

He bowed. "At your service."

"I'm Mary Welton," she said. "I was told I could locate Don through you."

Cory's expression didn't change, but his mind churned rapidly. How did she know he could find Don through him? Should he tell her Don was dead? The papers wouldn't have the story until after the case had been cracked.

"Wife?" he asked.

"Sister," she said.

"Ahhhh," Cory said. "I didn't think he was married."

"No, he never married," she said.

"How did you find out I could locate him for you?" he asked.

"Your office," she said. "I knew Don was in the FBI, of course. He didn't come home for mother's funeral, so I came out to see what the matter was."

Cory fingered his chin thoughtfully. The gun still rested in his hand. "He was working on a case," Cory said. "I remember I gave him one letter which upset him. That must have been it."

"Was the case that important?"

"It was," Cory said. "It puzzles me that the office would steer you to me."

"I threatened to get a lawyer," she said. "I want to see him."

Cory still wasn't sure. The office didn't hand out information very freely. Still. . .

"I want to see him," she repeated.

"I heard you," Cory said. "It can't be done just like that."

The red was back in her cheeks. She looked even better when she was angry, Cory decided.

"Don't try to stall me," she said. "Your office made me sit around two days before they told me about you. If Don's identity is that secret, he's in danger. I want to see him—tonight."

Cory pursed his lips. "If they made you wait two days, they investigated you," he said. "They'll have a file on you."

"I don't know what they did," she said. "They told me you were the only one who knew how to contact Don."

"Would you mind waiting until I make a phone call?" Cory asked.

"All right," she said.

Cory went to the phone without turning his back to her or looking away from her. The gun was still in evidence. He called the office and raised Billy Dundee. "Billy, there's a girl here who says she's Mary Welton. There should be a recent file on her there. Look it up and read me a description and pertinent facts."

She stood angrily as she realized he was checking her story. Cory waved the gun impatiently, and she sat back down immediately. Billy read a confirmation of her identity and a description which fitted perfectly. Cory replaced the phone and slid his gun into its holster.

"All right, you're in," he said. He walked to a chair and sat down facing her. "Is it very important that you see Don, or just a whim?"

"It's important," she said. "I've got mother's estate on my hands, and I don't know what to do. Don has to help me make a decision. He's half-owner of the business."

"What business?"

"A bakery," she said. "A big bakery."

CORY nodded. He filled a pipe and lit it before he answered. "We're working on a pretty big thing," he said finally. "There's a ring of crooks operating throughout Northern California which the local police can't touch because they

can't get evidence. Then the loot began to show up in Chicago and New York. Okay, transportation of stolen goods across the state line in excess of five thousand dollars is Federal business. We narrowed the field to where it looked like trucks, and then we became suspicious of one company. Don got a job driving a truck for them."

"Oh," she said. She was quiet for a moment as she thought. "Couldn't I meet him casually in a restaurant or something?"

Cory got up and walked to the window. He looked down on the street below and puffed on his pipe. How did you break something like this to a girl who had just lost her mother? How could he tell her that Don was dead?

Well, it had to be done. He turned and took a deep breath.

The glass shattered in the window behind his head. He felt the tug of a bullet as it whizzed past him. He hit the floor before the second shot smashed through the window.

"Down!" he shouted at her. "On the floor!"

She slid off the davenport with her face paper-white. He crawled quickly to the door and reached up to flip the switch and plunge the room into darkness. . . .

He could hear her breathing across the room. It was soft but excited.

"Now you know why I was a little suspicious of you," Cory said.

"They tried to kill you," she said.

"So they did," Cory said. "They used a silencer on a rifle. From the angle it must have come from, I'd say they were somewhere in the apartment building across the street."

"Do we lie here forever?" she asked.

Cory chuckled. "I'm in no hurry," he said, but he went cautiously along the wall until he reached the window. He looked at the building across the street. Here and there a window was lit up, but

there was nothing to indicate where the shots might have come from. He pulled the shades in the living room, and then turned on the bedroom light so that illumination spilled into the living room without brightly lighting it.

"They're probably beating feet away from here as fast as they can," he said. "But just to be safe, don't line yourself up with a window."

She got slowly to her feet. "This has been quite an evening. A man herds me into his apartment with a gun, and then someone tries to kill him through the window. Is this the kind of thing Don enjoys?"

Cory remembered what he had been about to say. He took another deep breath.

"Mary, this is going to hurt. But it has to be said sooner or later. Don is—dead."

Her head jerked up. "No," she said sharply.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He thought she was going to faint. She sat down slowly on the davenport and clutched the arm tightly with one hand. The other was clenched in her lap.

"When did it happen?" she asked.

"Tonight," Cory said. "I told you I shot it out with two men. They were the ones who killed Don."

"Tonight?"

"That's right," Cory said.

It was anger that kept her from collapsing. Her eyes flashed as she looked at him, and some color came back into her face. "Then if that stupid office of yours hadn't stalled me off, I'd have seen him alive!" she said.

"It was done for Don's protection," Cory said. "The gang found out some other way."

"How come you lived and he didn't?"

Cory winced. "He was dead when I got there. They tried to kill me, but I got a break."

"A break," she said bitterly. "You could probably run faster than Don!"

It was Cory's turn to feel the blood in his face, but he didn't say anything. He knew she had to do this or break down.

"Well, there's no use staying here, then," she said.

Cory blocked her way. "Just a minute. I don't think you'd better stay alone tonight."

"Why not?"

"I don't think it's safe," he said. "They might follow you from here. They might think you know what we know, and they might make a try for you. Let me arrange protection before you go."

"Protection," she said scornfully. "The same kind you gave Don? No thanks!"

"That's unfair—and foolhardy," Cory said. "We're dealing with men who approximate mad dogs in their actions. They might do anything."

"Leave me alone." She pushed past him.

He let her go. It was unlikely that they would touch her. And the less Mary was seen with him, the safer it would be for her.

Tomorrow morning he would visit the president of the Ribbon Dray and Cartage Company.

THE office was too plush for the head of a trucking company, even a company as big as Ribbon Dray and Cartage. It was more like what you would expect in an advertising agency or a radio station—something for show.

Mr. Durand, the president, was a large man, but a little on the fat side from soft living. He had a perpetual smile on his face, but hard eyes belied the smile and made it seem assumed, giving his face a mask-like effect.

Cory had announced himself as an FBI man, and it gained him immediate au-

dience with Mr. Durand. Cory felt that the time for pretending was over. He wasn't sure just what course of action he would pursue, but Don's death had shown they were on the right track.

"Sit down, Mr. Wright, sit down," Durand said. "A visit from the FBI is something new in the trucking business. I hope you have something to justify my being excited."

"I might have at that," Cory said. "To come right to the point, Mr. Durand, I'm conducting an investigation under the National Stolen Property Act. San Francisco police and those of the surrounding area have been baffled for some time by a series of thefts. In a year the take from the robberies has bounced over the million-dollar mark. These items have been stolen here and marketed in other parts of the country."

Durand was listening attentively. He nodded eagerly when Cory paused and motioned for Cory to continue.

"We've done a great deal of painstaking sifting and sleuthing. The trail seems to lead, Mr. Durand, to your trucking company as a means of transportation for the stolen goods."

Durand sat up a little straighter. "Nonsense," he said.

"That's what I came to find out," Cory said. "If it is nonsense, you have nothing to worry about. But if it's not—your company's in plenty of trouble."

"It's nonsense," Durand repeated indignantly. "Sheer nonsense. You can look at every one of our invoices for the past ten years."

Cory smiled. "They wouldn't mean anything, Mr. Durand. Naturally you're going to cover something like that. First of all, I'd like to inspect your operation, if you don't mind."

Durand's eyes narrowed. "What will that prove?"

"We're pretty certain that the goods have been going east on Ribbon trucks,"

Cory said. "I want to pin down the responsibility—find out whether or not this could be done without the company's knowledge. A company this large couldn't have everybody in on the scheme. It must be just a few drivers, and possibly a few loaders."

Durand grunted and continued to watch Cory closely.

"You see," Cory explained, meeting Durand's eyes and letting each word drop carefully, "all I have to do is interview your workers. They'd be bound to notice any discrepancies, such as the same trucks held for night loading time after time." It was a shot in the dark, but Cory could tell by the slight widening of Durand's eyes that he had scored a hit. "They'll talk, too, when I explain that this has turned into a murder investigation!"

Durand tore his gaze away from Cory's and sighed heavily. "I wish I knew how much you had told Pecchio," he said.

"What?" Cory asked sharply.

"Pecchio," Durand said. He reached forward and pushed a button on his desk. "Our good lieutenant of the San Francisco Police Department. I wish I knew just what you told him, but I guess it doesn't make much difference. We'll just have to play the hand as well as we can, and hope it all turns out."

The door opened and two dapper men walked in. They were both dressed in sharp, pin-stripe suits, but it was the gun each of them carried that attracted the eye. The guns were a rich, deep blue. They glinted ominously as they swung Cory's way. Durand had met frankness with frankness.

Cory said: "Pecchio knows plenty. He knows enough to knock over this hive if I don't show."

"Don't be entirely stupid," Durand said. "If he knew that much, you'd have strong-armed in here with a warrant instead of bluffing. The pitiful thing is

that you struck so close to home. I'd have to play it this way anyway. I've already gone whole hog and there's no turning back now."

"You don't expect to get away with this, do you?" Cory asked.

"Not indefinitely," Durand said. "I would like, however, to hold off until I get the returns on my last shipment. A load with several hundred thousand wrapped up in it. If I can get that, I and a few choice men can just disappear. The rest of the board of directors will be bewildered by your accusations. I have already sold them my stock."

Cory saw the pattern. Don had hit a hot trail, but he had uncovered himself while doing it. A big load was at stake, so they had killed him and tried to make it look like suicide. They were playing against time. If they could hold off a raid until the money came in from the payroll, they'd skip out. And that meant Cory Wright would go the same way Don had.

CHAPTER THREE

Pair in a Snare

HE GLANCED at his watch. "I have an appointment with Pecchio for lunch," he said. He looked steadily at Durand. "I'd better be there."

Durand laughed. "I'm counting on that as another bluff. If I'm wrong—" He shrugged his big shoulders. "Tell me, why didn't you call the police after we shot up your apartment last night?"

"How do you know I didn't call them?"

Durand smiled agreeably and pulled a pad toward him. "Left Don Welton's room in custody of police. Taken to central station, but after a long conference with Pecchio, returned to own apartment. Visited there by young woman who turned out to be Don Welton's sister."

Cory hid his surprise. Then they had observed Mary's entrance, and they knew who she was. She was definitely in danger!

Durand continued: "'Used phone to call his office and confirm her identity.' This was a great help to us, incidentally, Mr. Wright."

"You mean you have my phone tapped?" Cory asked. That explained the cigarette butt.

"We have," Durand said. "You're not dealing with small-time criminals now. Your estimate of a million in the past year is far below the mark."

Durand resumed his reading. "'Did not use phone after attempt on his life. This morning called his office to put a man on the apartment building across the street. Ate late breakfast and came directly to this office.'" Durand closed the little book with a snap. "Pretty neat system, eh?"

"Very good," Cory admitted. "There's just one thing, Durand. This girl, Mary Welton, doesn't know a thing about this case. She was looking for her brother, the man you killed. You touch one hair of her head, and I'll get you, personally, if it's the last act of my life."

Durand looked surprised for a moment, and then he threw back his head and roared with laughter. "In the first place, Wright, you're as good as a dead man yourself. And in the second place, we already found out the girl doesn't know anything. We've had her here all night. Once again, may I remind you that you're dealing with a real organization?"

Cory tensed. "What did you do with her?"

"Nothing—yet." Durand's face suddenly sobered. "If you're going for your gun, do it slowly. Very, very, slowly, Wright. Go ahead, take it out."

"There are more guys where I came from," Cory said.

"No doubt. Time is all I want. Now

take the gun out. That's it. Slowly! Very, very slowly. Good! Now drop it on the floor. Thank you, Mr. Wright."

The two gunsels had watched closely, their trigger fingers tensed, while Cory went through the process. They were taking no chances with Cory's swift draw.

"I'll send Mae out for a cup of coffee," Durand said to the two gunmen. "While she's gone, you scoot the G-man down the hall." He grinned wolfishly at Cory. "Our FBI hero seems to worry about the girl. Put him in the same room with her. They can spend their last hours together."

They nodded, and Durand left the room. A few moments later he opened the door and waved at them. They motioned to Cory, and Cory went out into the corridor. He had no doubt that they would shoot.

He kept his hands high. It was better to wait for the right break than to make a move prematurely. And evidently they weren't going to kill him immediately.

They reached a solid-looking door, and they stopped him. One of them men fished out a key, and they opened the door. The man motioned, and Cory started in. He stopped when he saw Mary, but apparently she had not been hurt. She stood defiantly straight against the far wall of the bare room.

One of the gunmen put his foot against Cory's back and shoved.

CORY plunged into the room on his face, and skidded across the slick, bare floor. The door slammed shut and the lock automatically took hold. He looked up at Mary and grinned, but she stood rigid and immobile against the wall, her eyes wide and her pretty face frightened.

"I don't suppose it would help the situation any for me to say 'I told you so,'" Cory said.

She shook her head shortly. "What are

they going to do to us now?" she asked.

Cory shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he lied. "I don't think they'll do anything serious. Probably just keep us locked in here until they can make a get-away."

"We may never be found."

"A police lieutenant I've been working with knows where I was going this morning," Cory said reassuringly. "If I don't show up in a day or two, he'll start looking for me."

She relaxed visibly. "I'm sorry I acted the way I did last night," she said. "I should have taken your advice."

"Forget it," Cory said. "I wasn't sure it was good advice, myself. Look what I walked into with my eyes open!"

He looked around the room. It was about twelve feet square, and completely bare. There wasn't a window in it, and only the one door. A forty-watt bulb hanging on a drop-cord provided plenty of light.

"I've been here for hours and hours already," she said.

"It's only about ten-thirty," Cory said. "When did they shove you in here?"

"It wasn't yet dawn," she said. "They asked me questions and more questions—about things I couldn't answer. They slapped my face and threatened—threatened everything. That big man—Durand—was horrible. Then they finally threw me in here."

Cory's face was set. "I'll settle with Durand personally," he said. This was a tough outfit. They were playing for big stakes and another two or three lives meant nothing to them.

But he didn't want Mary to know that. The kid was already half-scared to death—and she was Don's sister. Don had been a very special guy. His sister was pretty special, too.

"This is all in a day's work for a G-man," he said, "but I guess that's not very encouraging to you."

"These are the men who killed Don," she said.

"The men who did the shooting are dead," Cory said, "but these are the guys behind it. If we don't stop them, they'll keep on killing, like mad dogs, until they are stopped."

He felt sorry as hell for Mary. She had been drawn into this case through circumstances which certainly were not of her choosing. For himself, it was different. It was the chance he always took when fighting the country's major criminals. He tried to cheer her up through the long day.

It was one o'clock before she mentioned that she was hungry.

"They may bring some food after they eat," Cory said optimistically, and to his surprise she smiled at him.

"You're a little clumsy, but you do try hard, don't you?"

"Try what?" Cory asked gruffly.

"Try to cheer me up," she said. "You don't have to. I know we're in a jam. There's no reason why I can't face it just as well as you."

A slow smile came to Cory's face. "Okay, kid, we're in a tight," he admitted. "A real good tight. This Durand thinks he's got the world by the tail, and he might try anything. He needs a few days to clean up the loose ends and receive a wad of cash, then he's going to skip. My hope is that he leaves us in here to rot away. If he does that, we'll get out alive."

"How?" she asked.

"The local boys I've been working with know where I went this morning. Sooner or later they're going to come knocking on doors looking for me. I'm just hoping it won't be too late."

"And if Durand decides to take care of us the way he took care of Don?" There was no fear in her eyes now. She was soberly studying the question with him. Cory had to admire the courage he hadn't

expected to find in a girl like Mary.

He shrugged in answer to her question. "Just one thing. I don't intend to die passively. When I jump them, that's your cue to make a break, understand? Just run for the nearest exit and keep running."

"And leave you?"

"Don't worry about me," Cory said. "I'll either get the jump on them, or I won't, and there isn't a thing you can do about it. You run like a scared rabbit, and let your Uncle Cory take care of himself. If you're safely in the timber, I can also head for the tall stuff. You savvy?"

She nodded. "All right," she said.

THEY sat on the bare floor, alternately talking and then silent in thought. He looked at his watch frequently, and then tried to keep from doing it because the time went so slowly. He would estimate a half hour, but his watch would tell him only ten minutes had gone by. He would it to be sure that it wasn't running down and losing time.

The hunger-pangs left him, and he felt that they must also have left Mary. By nine o'clock that evening, when it must have been dark outside, Cory had almost convinced himself that Durand's plan was simply to leave them to their fate.

Mary, who had been dozing in a sitting position against the wall, stirred. "I've been here for a week," she announced.

"I know what you mean," Cory said. "I guess we can at least be glad it isn't solitary confinement."

She looked at him strangely. "I want to apologize," she said.

"For what?" he asked.

"For last night," she said. "Not so much for the way I acted, but for what I was thinking."

Cory grinned at the recollection. "I couldn't blame you much, under the circumstances," he said.

"I was so wrong," she said. "It's funny

how fast you can get to know a person under difficult circumstances."

"You've stood the test," Cory said.

"Thank you," she said. "Maybe. . . ." She didn't finish her thought.

"Maybe we can get to know each other even better after we get out of here?" Cory asked. "That's a deal."

She again smiled. "Let's just sit and think about that."

They didn't have much time to think. There was the rap of footsteps along the corridor outside, and they both came to attention. Cory rose quickly to his feet and watched the door. The footsteps stopped outside the door, and then the lock was turned and the door opened.

"Maybe it's food," Mary whispered as the door swung in on them. The two gunsels were in the doorway, guns in hand, and there was no food in evidence.

"You two had a nice chummy time?" one of them rasped. "Sorry to break it up, but we got a nice long ride planned."

Cory glanced at Mary, but she was living up to her promise to face it as well as Cory. There was the same fearless watchfulness in her eyes.

The hoods could see it in them. "Now just be good and don't try anything," one said nervously. "We don't wanta get the floor dirty in here. Come on, one at a time, and take it easy. You first, G-man. Walk out with your hands in the air, and walk like you was on eggs."

Cory put his hands in the air and walked slowly to the doorway. One of them was standing just inside and the other just outside the doorway, and Cory had to walk between them. They both had their guns leveled and they were tense. Cory relaxed and let his muscles loosen as he walked between the two guns.

Then his hands came down like flashing scythes, cracking a wrist on either side of him. The guns bounced out of the gunnies' hands before they could pull a trigger. One of them screamed in anguish.

Cory swung a whistling right at the other man's jaw, and knocked him back against the wall where he slid to a sitting position. Cory whirled on the other man, sunk a left into his stomach, and brought up a right that knocked him across the small room and into a heap in the corner, right at Mary's feet.

The first man reached for a gun on the floor, but Cory kicked the gun, and knocked it spinning down the hall. He grabbed the man by the coat and hauled him to his feet, and then his iron-like fist crashed against the man's jaw. He held the man up, and again blasted his fist home. The man slumped like a rag doll.

Cory heaved him into the room, picked up the gun still at his feet, motioned Mary out of the room, and closed the door on the two of them.

"They'll keep until someone comes along with a key," Cory said. "This lock only opens from the outside."

She took his arm in the dimly-lit corridor, and her hands trembled.

He put his free hand over hers. "You wait here," he said. "Stay against the wall in case there's any shooting. Follow along quite a way behind me. If you hear any shooting, head for the nearest exit, remember?"

She nodded, and her fingers tightened on his arm. Then he left her and advanced cautiously along the corridor which led past Durand's office before it opened onto a naked steel stairway.

This stairway went to the floor of the warehouse where there were piled cases of goods and a loading platform. With the workers gone home for the night, the warehouse was quiet and hollow-sounding, and very dark except for an occasional dim light which only accented the deep shadows.

Cory was opposite Durand's door and debating his next step when a voice on the other side said, "I wonder what's keeping them?" Before Cory could move, the

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door opened. He was face-to-face with another of Durand's handy gunmen!

CHAPTER FOUR

Dedicated to Don

THEY faced each other for a surprised second. Then the man cursed and slammed the door shut as the gun in Cory's hand barked. The bullet splintered the door. Cory moved quickly to get out of the line of fire.

He realized that he was under the stairway light, and he moved just as a gun flashed from the darkness of the warehouse. There was at least one man below.

He moved farther down the corridor, which turned into a catwalk, until he was out of the light, and crouched there. The gun flashed from below again. The bullet ricocheted off the wall uncomfortably close. He moved farther back, and looked over the situation.

The automatic he held contained seven shells when fully loaded. He couldn't check in the dark, but he had to assume that it had been fully loaded. He had used one. That left him six. He had to conserve his shots and make them count.

The ramp led out over the piled crates and bales, and to the loading platform from which operations could be supervised. He didn't know whether there was a ladder at the far end or not, but if there were it would undoubtedly be watched from down below.

The door to Durand's office was wrenched open by someone who ducked away from it immediately. The lights were out now in the office.

A gun snaked around the door jamb, and it flashed twice as two random shots were sent whistling down the ramp. If they kept raking the ramp from there, and from below, it was a matter of time until he was a dead duck.

A fusilade of shots banged up from down below, the flames orange in the darkness.

"He's layin' down," a voice shouted from below. "Roll a few along the floor."

Cory knew he had to move fast. He sprinted nimbly to where the merchandise was piled highest under the cat-walk. Sticking the gun in his belt, he climbed the railing, let himself down as far as he could with his arms, and let go.

Somebody from below shot at his falling body. He landed on some soft bales, shaken up, but not hurt.

"He jumped off the ramp," the voice said excitedly. "He's on top of the goods somewhere."

"Get around him," Durand said hurriedly. "A couple of you watch the doors. The rest of you get up high."

There was a scurrying around, but Cory remained quiet. His best bet was to lie still until he could determine where the

gunmen were. He was up against a small army and his chances were very slim. The longer he held out, the better chance Mary had. . . .

A dark figure flitted along the ramp above him and a flashlight began to probe the darkness. Cory took careful aim, and fired. The man screamed and fell back on the cat-walk.

Cory shifted his position quickly as several shots were fired in the direction of his blast. On the ramp the man he had shot began to yell.

"I'm hit! I'll bleed to death!"

"Shut up," Durand growled from the direction of the office.

The man whimpered, but he didn't say anything more.

"Turn on the overhead lights," someone suggested from the main floor.

Cory had reached a crack between two wooden crates of some size, and he slipped down between them just as the lights went



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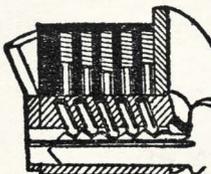
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on. There was a moment of expectant silence. Then one of the men shouted that Cory wasn't there.

"He's there somewhere," Durand said. "Find him. But watch the doors."

"He won't get out of here."

Maybe not, Cory thought grimly, but you'll have to come in here and get me.

The man lying on the ramp whimpered again, but nobody paid any attention to him. Cory could hear some moving about as the men cautiously looked. Hearing nothing near him, he stayed hidden.

"What about the girl?" he heard Durand ask suddenly.

CORY'S blood turned cold. Mary had had no chance to escape. She must be crouched at the end of the corridor. He had hoped they would forget about her. But Durand had remembered.

"She must still be back there," one of the men said. "I'll go see." His footsteps receded down the corridor.

There was the sound of a scuffle, and some swearing, and then Mary was dragged out of her hiding place.

"Okay, Wright," Durand shouted, "we've got the girl. Come on out of there or we'll give her a bad time."

Cory bit his lip but remained hidden.

"Here we go, Wright," Durand shouted. There was the sound of a sharp slap. "I just slapped her face, Wright. Remember what you said you'd do?"

Again there was the sharp crack, but still no sound from Mary. Maybe Durand was faking. Cory had to see.

Cautiously, slowly, he raised his head over the top of the crate until he could see Durand at the top of the stairs. Mary was standing there, with a gunman holding both arms behind her. Durand slapped her solidly in the face as Cory looked. He hit her so hard that her head snapped around, but she didn't even whimper.

Cory couldn't stand it. But he couldn't

Gift-Wrapped for the Grave

take a shot at Durand from this angle—Mary was in the line of fire.

The crate behind his shoulder swayed as he leaned against it. He tried it again.

It went down with a terrific crash. All eyes swung quickly in that direction. Cory slid off onto another crate in the other direction, leaped down from crate to bale.

Then all hell broke loose as guns roared and smashed and the sounds bounced against the tin roof and cascaded down around Cory's ears. Someone even brought a tommy-gun into action for the first time, but Cory had his head down and was running at full speed.

When he reached the foot of the stairs, Durand and the gunman with Mary were disappearing hurriedly into the office. A lot of courage Durand had, running away from one man!

Just then a bullet grazed Cory's cheek, burning swiftly across it, and he missed his first step on the stairs. He stumbled and went down. Mary saw him go down, and he saw her mouth open in a scream as the door slammed shut. Then Cory was up and racing from step to step.

Cory reached the door and crashed it recklessly open. The gunman wheeled with his automatic leveled, but Cory saw with horror that Durand, his face a distorted mask, had Mary on her knees with a gun to her head. Cory fired three times as fast as he could pump his gun, and Durand spun around with an amazed, stunned look on his face. He folded slowly to the floor.

The gunman fired, but he was wild. Cory snapped a shot at him, and the bullet shattered his gun arm. He went to one knee, holding his bloody arm.

"Over against the wall," Cory said. "Hurry up!" The man scurried against the wall. "Are you all right?" Cory asked Mary. She nodded.

He turned to slam the door shut and lock it against the horde of gunmen he

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expected to come up the stairs, but he stood dumbly in the open doorway. Racing up the stairs was a blue-coated San Francisco policeman with a tommy-gun.

The policeman saw Cory and dropped to a knee. The tommy-gun wheeled up and aimed at Cory. Cory couldn't move. He stood there, stupidly, watching the deadly muzzle train on him.

"Hold it!" a voice behind the policeman shouted. "Don't shoot, Saunders! Hold it, you fool, that's Wright!"

Lieutenant Pecchio reached the bottom of the stairs as Saunders slowly lowered the weapon.

* * *

"Just the same, that blue uniform was the greatest sight I've ever seen," Cory said later in Durand's office. "When did you boys arrive?"

"We were looking over the place because you didn't show up at the station today," Pecchio said. "Then the shooting started inside, so I organized the boys, and we busted the doors down. We had it hot and heavy for a couple minutes, but when I got time to look, I saw you going up the stairs out there hell-for-leather."

"It's been a nightmare," Mary said.

"Well, it's over now," Pecchio said.

"I guess we've got all the evidence we need to convict the survivors. Wait'll the papers get hold of this!"

"Remember, keep me and the FBI out of it," Cory warned.

"Sure, sure," Pecchio said. "I don't mind taking the credit. Well, I suppose you kids want to go home."

Cory looked at Mary, and he saw the same thought mirrored in her eyes.

"Not exactly," he said. "I think we've got the first of a long string of dates."

Pecchio looked from one to the other of them and saw that he was in a crowd. So he withdrew the third person and left a couple.

THE END

Sing, Little Snowbird!

(Continued from page 109)

"Where is she, Nick?" he asked, his voice unsteady.

"Fifteen minutes drive from here," I answered, "in the cemetery—where you put her."

He squeezed his head in his hands and cried. Deep, racking sobs shook his slender frame as he hunched over in the chair. I waited until he finished. Then I took the belt, folded it carefully and put it in my pocket.

"Let's go," I said, "I think I've heard enough."

I nudged him ahead of me out of the office, and turned off the lights. There was a loud explosion and flame seared into my left shoulder, slamming me up against the door. I tried to get my gun out. Two men jumped on top of me. Someone chopped down with the barrel of an automatic. It caught me on the forearm like a branding iron. The gun dropped from my paralyzed hand and bounced on the floor.

The two men hurled me back into the office. I fell against the desk and slid down.

One of them grunted: "His pockets!"

The other rifled through my coat and unearthed the belt. He checked all the compartments rapidly, then stuffed the belt into his own pocket.

"Okay, Phil. It's all here. We'll finish him off and scam."

The first man brought his gun down on me. I watched his finger tighten on the trigger.

A gun roared and he rocked in his tracks. His eyes glazed and he lurched forward and fell to the floor. A second shot crashed out and the other man clutched at his chest and groaned: "Phil, you—"

I looked past them. Phil was leaning against the door. He had my gun in his hand and he was working the trigger. He

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poured the full load into the second guy. Then something smashed him in the stomach.

The guy on the floor had shot Phil and was straining frantically at the trigger for another shot. He didn't have the strength to make it. Phil smiled and stepped over to him. He twisted the gun from his limp hand and emptied it into the dying man.

Then Phil turned to me slowly. A crooked grin was pasted on his white face and a thin trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. He swayed and began slipping toward the floor, holding on to the desk with one hand.

"The old gang—sticks together, Nick." He gasped and then he crumpled over on his face.

When I got to him I saw that he was dead.

* * *

Maria came to see me in the hospital. "I heard all about it, Nick. It was in all the papers how you killed those three men. You're a hero!"

I looked at those liquid brown eyes. They didn't bother me any longer. Not now.

I said: "Don't believe everything you read in the papers, Maria. Send the nurse in on your way out."

"Nick," she protested, "Wait, you didn't tell me about Phil. What happened?"

I closed my eyes. "Phil?—he died at Anzio, like a hero should die. The guy you thought was him, well—it was a complete stranger. I talked to him."

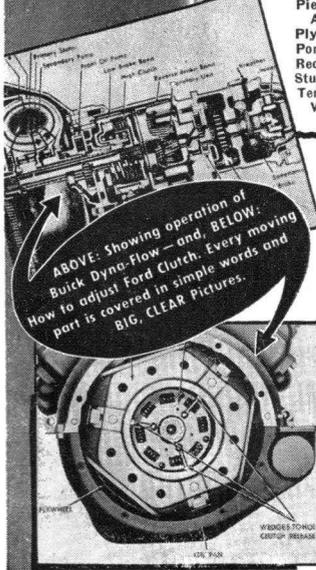
I felt her hand on my arm. She said anxiously: "Are you positive it wasn't Phil?"

I kept my eyes closed. "Of course," I said. "Do you think I wouldn't recognize my own brother?"

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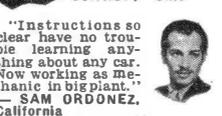
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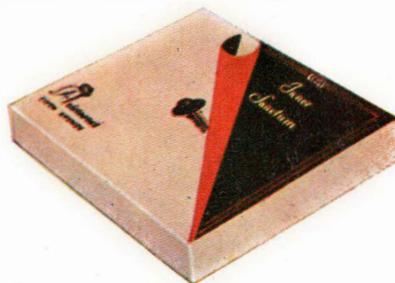
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