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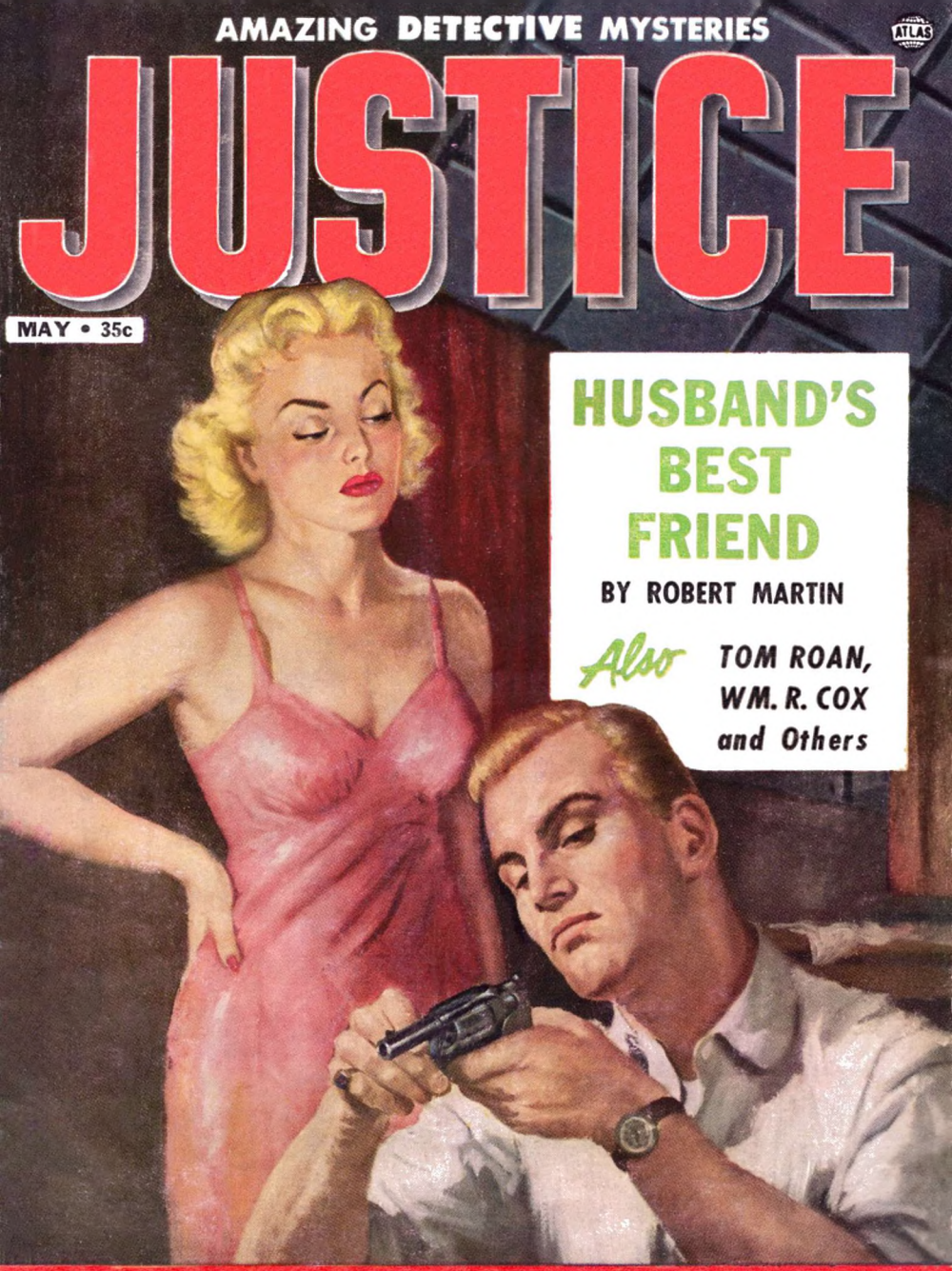

## HUSBAND'S BEST FRIEND

BY ROBERT MARTIN

*Also* TOM ROAN, WM. R. COX and Others

PLUS

A COMPLETE NOVEL OF EXCITING CRIME ADVENTURE

**WHY, KILLER, WHY?** BY DAVID KARP

JUSTICE

VOL.1,NO.1
MAY 1955

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## A COMPLETE NOVEL



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JUSTICE is published by Non-Pareil Publishing Corp., 655 Madison Avenue, New York 21, N.Y. Application for second-class entry pending at the post office at New York, N.Y. under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Clinton, Mass. Published bi-monthly.  Vol. 1 No. 1, May 1955 issue. Price 35c per copy. Subscription rate $4.50 for 12 issues including postage. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, and all manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelopes. Printed in the U.S.A.

ADVERTISING OFFICES: Sid Kalish, Advertising Director, 655 Madison Avenue, New York 21, N.Y.; William R. Stewart, Midwest, 9 South Clinton Street, Chicago 6, Ill.; Lloyd B. Chappell, West Coast, 810 So. Robertson, Los Angeles 35, Calif.

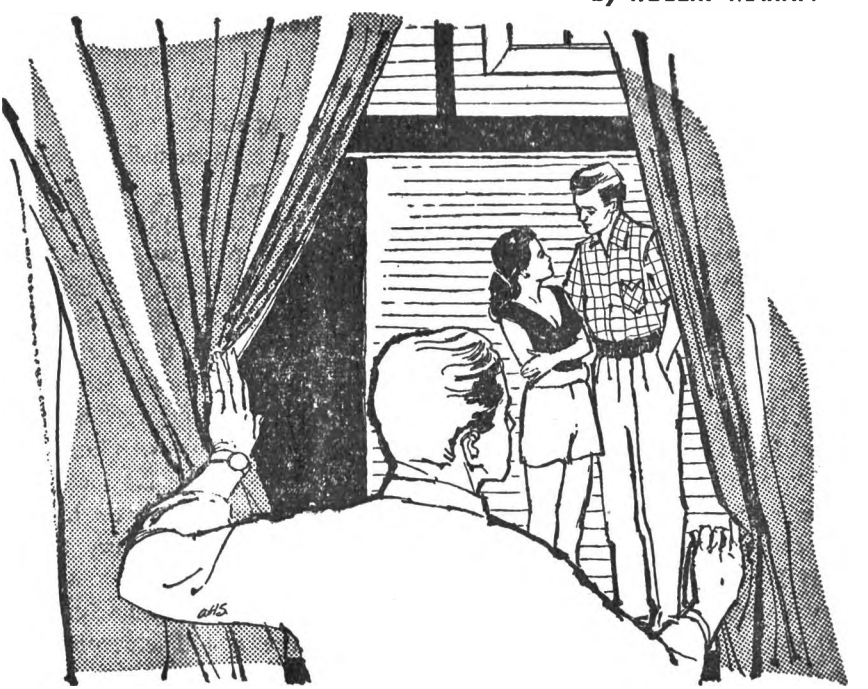
**Lee's new neighbors, their pets, and the friend of the family shaped up like a full house . . . of trouble.**

# HUSBAND'S BEST FRIEND

NOVELETTE

*by ROBERT MARTIN*

IN APRIL my apartment lease expired and when the landlord came around with a renewal I suddenly decided I'd lived in three small rooms too long. I wanted a place of my own, with maybe a little garden and a back yard where I could sit in the sun



and drink beer on Sunday afternoons. The landlord was persuasive, but I was firm. Did you know that bachelors are very desirable tenants and much sought after by landlords? Even bachelors with etchings.

I made a down payment on a little ranch-type in a new section on the west side, close to the lake. It was brick, five rooms, and priced at twice what it was worth, but I had a back yard and the sound of crickets at night. I bought a lawn mower, a hose, some garden tools, and felt like a nine-to-five husband, except that I didn't have a wife. In spite of the television dramas, a private detective has no business with a wife.

On the lot next to mine was a small shingle job complete with a breezeway and an outdoor grill. It was newly completed, with a *For Sale* sign by the front steps. There wasn't another house for a block; the two places were small islands of green in a sea of weeds waiting for lot buyers.

I moved in and settled down. The house next door remained unoccupied. The second week in May I went on a job in Chicago. I was gone a week and got home at three o'clock on a Sunday morning. That is why I didn't see my new neighbors move in.

I got up at noon, had a combination lunch and breakfast, and then, as was my habit, I retired to the back yard with the Sunday papers and a cold can of beer. It was then that I noticed the huge tractor-trailer outfit parked in the drive next door. It bore Texas license plates, was painted bright yellow, with black letters across its side: *Southwest Roadways.* I didn't see anyone about. I had finished the comics and the sports section and was pleasantly contemplating another cold can, when a soft drawling voice spoke beside me.

"Pardon me, but may I borrow your can opener?"

I started a little, dribbled some beer over my chin, and looked up at a tall rangy girl in a brief blue denim play suit. Her skin was smoothly tanned and her hair was brown and streaked with creamy lanes. She had clear blue eyes and a red mouth that was just a shade too large for her rather small features. There was a faint dusting of freckles over her short nose and her teeth were slightly crooked, but very white. She gave me a friendly smile as she held out a beer can with both hands, like a kid clutching an ice-cream cone.

I stood up, took an opener from my shirt pocket where I kept it handy, and held it out to her. "Welcome to Weedy Acres," I said.

She took the opener, and we shook hands. Her grasp was firm and cool. "I'm Beth Swann," she said. "I guess we're going to be neighbors. We moved in yesterday."

"My name's Fiske," I said.

"What's your first name?"

"Lee."

The corners of her eyes crinkled. "Howdy, Lee." She opened the beer can expertly and tilted it to her lips, making a pretty picture with her arm upraised and her long tawny hair falling to her bare shoulders. She lowered the can, handed me the opener. "Thanks, Lee."

"Keep it. I have another."

She laughed, a warm pleasant sound. "Now, that's real neighborly. Just like Texas."

"I noticed the license plates," I said, nodding at the truck.

"I hope we like Ohio," she said seriously. "Merton had a good offer to teach here, at Northwest State, and so he didn't renew his contract back home. He's a zoologist, with majors in toxicology."

"Animals and poisons," I said. "Very interesting. Merton is your husband?"

She nodded. "He and Cort have gone to buy some groceries. All we have in the refrigerator is some beer Cort bought yesterday."

"Cort?" I asked, wondering if he was their son.

"Cortland Doyle. We call him Cort. He's in the trucking business, and he offered to move us up here. He and Merton rode in the cab, and I followed in the car. I guess Cort is Merton's best friend."

"How about you?"

"I like him, too," she said. "We—Merton and I—think a lot of him." She smiled at me. "Let's call him a friend of the family."

"Let's," I said.

She tilted the beer can again and drank deeply. "I wish they'd come," she said. "We had breakfast in a restaurant, but Dudley and Clarinda are hungry. They haven't eaten since we left Texas."

I was startled. Texas was at least a three-day drive from Ohio.

Beth Swann saw my expression, and she laughed gaily. "Dudley and Clarinda aren't children. My goodness!"

"Hindus on a fast?" I suggested.

She finished her beer in a long graceful swallow. Then she said,

"They're snakes—rattlers. Merton uses them for his experiments. They eat live mice, mostly, but they refused to eat on the trip. Would you like to see them?"

My only neighbors within a half mile, and they kept snakes. I shivered a little. "No, thanks—not now."

"Oh, but they're cute. We feed them often, and they sleep most of the time—except when Merton is milking them. He milked them last night."

"Snake milk?" I mumbled.

She laughed again. Her tawny hair glinted in the afternoon sunlight. "It's just an expression. He extracts venom from their fangs. Don't you see? They use it for all sorts of things, serum and stuff. Merton will be glad to explain it to you."

A dusty red convertible turned into the drive next door and stopped behind the truck. Two men got out and walked toward the kitchen door. One of the men was tall and square-shouldered, with a lean dark face and black hair. He was wearing a bright yellow shirt and chocolate-colored slacks belted snugly over slim hips. The other man was shorter, stockier, with wispy blond hair. He wore dark-rimmed glasses and a gray tweed suit and was carrying a small wooden box with wire netting over the top. The dark man held a brown paper bag from which protruded the leafy end of a bunch of celery.

The girl beside me called to them: "Hey—here I am."

They stopped and swung their heads toward us.

She waved. "Come on over."

The men hesitated and glanced at each other. Then they placed their burdens on the steps of the back porch and came across the drive to my back yard. Beth Swann introduced us, and we shook hands. The short one was Merton and the dark one was Cort.

The girl said to them, "Lee's our neighbor. He loaned me a can opener."

"That was very kind of you," Merton said. Behind the glasses, his eyes were mild and friendly. The right side of his jaw appeared slightly swollen.

"Yes," Cort said. He was speaking to me, but his eyes were on the girl.

Merton asked her anxiously, "Did you feed them?"

"One mouse apiece—that's all we had."

"Better give them another—maybe two for Dudley," he said seriously. "They've had a difficult trip."

"All right, dear," she said, and stepped forward and gently touched her husband's cheek. "How's that bad old tooth?"

"Still hurts," he said. "I bought some white mice. I hope they like them. All the store had were white ones."

"Listen, Merton," the dark man said, "you'd better see a dentist."

"All right," Merton said absently. He nodded at me, smiled gently, and walked back across the drive.

The dark man said, "Nice to meet you, Fiske. We'll see you later."

"Sure," I said. "If you need anything, let me know."

The girl said. "Isn't he nice, Cort? So neighborly." She gazed at me admiringly.

He grinned, showing strong white teeth. "Yeah. Just like Texas."

She laughed delightedly. "That's just what I told him." She took Cort's hand and they walked across the drive together. Merton, I noticed, had gone inside with the groceries.

I returned to my chair, beer and paper. Out of the corner of one eye I saw the dark man go to the truck. The girl picked up the box with wire netting and entered the garage. In a moment I heard a faint dry buzzing sound, and then silence. Presently the girl came out. She was no longer carrying the box. As she went up the steps to the back porch the sunlight gleamed on her long tanned legs. She knew I was watching her, because just before she opened the screen door she turned and waved to me. I waved back.

Poor white mice, I thought, and decided I'd better have another beer.

2

ALTHOUGH I heard considerable pounding from inside their house, I did not see my neighbors again until six o'clock that evening. The man called Cort came over to ask if I had any dry vermouth. I found a half-filled bottle and gave it to him.

"Thanks, pal," he said. "How about joining us in a drink?" There was a kind of hot glitter in his black eyes.

I said I didn't mind, thinking that he had already had a few drinks. We walked together across the drive. As we passed the garage, I didn't hear any buzzing, and decided that Dudley and Clarinda were napping. We entered the back door of the Swann house.

The kitchen was gleaming and neat. A cupboard door was open and I saw that glasses and dishes were already neatly arranged on the shelves. Beth Swann was at the sink breaking ice cubes from a tray and dropping them into a tall mixing glass. She had changed the blue denim play suit for a brightly flowered peasant skirt and a low-necked white blouse. Her hair was smoothly combed and parted and she looked like one of the more attractive photos in a slick fashion magazine.

"Good old Lee to the rescue," she said gaily. "Cort and I decided we wanted a martini. We had some gin, but no vermouth. Thanks, neighbor."

"You're welcome," I said.

Cort leaned against the sink, his intense dark gaze going over the girl slowly. I had an uneasy feeling, and I wondered where Merton was. Cort reluctantly swung his gaze from the girl to me. He smiled, but there was a hard insolence in his eyes. "What's your business, Fiske?" he drawled.

"Insurance," I said, my standard answer. People usually lifted their eyebrows when I told them my true profession. But the answer was partly true, since I'd investigated many life insurance claims for some of the big companies.

Cort nodded approvingly. "A good racket. A man can't have too much life insurance—especially if he's married." His gaze swung once more to the girl. Her back was turned, but I saw her pause in her stirring. I had the feeling that she knew he was watching her.

"Does Merton have plenty of life insurance, Beth?" Cort asked her.

"I don't know," she said, stirring steadily. "Does it matter?"

He shrugged and looked at me again. "I'm in the trucking business myself. Three hundred outfits, out of Dallas. Started with a half-ton pick-up job. I still take a load over the road once in a while, just to get the feel of a Diesel again. Moved Beth and Merton up here, but I've got to go back in a day or two." Once more his slow heavy-lidded gaze swung to the girl.

She turned then, holding the mixing glass. There was a faint flush on her tanned cheeks, and she avoided Cort's eyes as she filled a cocktail glass and handed it to me. "No olive," she said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." I sipped the drink. It was a good martini, cold and very dry.

She poured a glass for Cort, one for herself, and opened the refrigerator to replace the ice cube tray. As she did so, a small wooden rack, like the ones used in laboratories to hold test tubes, toppled from a shelf and would have fallen if I hadn't caught it. It contained one glass vial, corked with cotton and filled with an amber fluid.

"My goodness!" Beth Swann exclaimed. "Merton's venom. Lucky it didn't break. He's keeping it here until we get the spare room fixed up for his laboratory."

A label on the vial read *Crotalus Horridus.* Beneath was yesterday's date. Gingerly I placed the rack back in the refrigerator.

Cort lifted his glass. "A toast," he said, "to Texas."

"And Ohio," Beth Swann added.

"To hell with Ohio," Cort said bitterly, and drained his glass. He refilled it immediately and drank again. The overhead light glinted on his black hair and made shadows on his lean, handsome face. His eyes seemed to glow in their deep sockets.

Beth said to him, "Must you go back so soon?"

"Yes," he said shortly. He drank and filled his glass again. "It's a long trip—alone." He drank again.

Three martinis for Cort, I thought, in about five minutes, on top of what he'd had before. But it was none of my business. After all, he was a friend of the family.

Beth gazed at him with a faint troubled frown. Then she turned to me. "Come over tomorrow, Lee. You can watch me feed Dudley and Clarinda."

"Those damned snakes," Cort said harshly.

"They're important to Merton," Beth said quietly. "You know how much his work means to him."

"There is more to life than work," Cort said.

"You worked," she said gently. "You started from nothing."

His intense gaze was on her. He didn't smile. "It was money I wanted," he said softly. "Money, Beth. I had to work to get it, sure, but I got it. Now I want some of the other things. To hell with the work."

"Merton will never stop working," she said. "I don't want him to. He doesn't make much money, but he's happy, and doing what he wants to do."

"Very noble," Cort said.

"His work is important. This new serum—"

"Will save lives," Cort broke in mockingly. "I've heard it all before."

I still had the uneasy feeling, an odd sensation of standing on the outside of something and looking in, not knowing what I was seeing. I said, "Where's Merton?"

Beth Swann pulled her gaze from Cort. "He took some aspirin and went to bed. We tried to get him to go to a dentist before we left Texas, but he wouldn't."

"Poor Merton," Cort said in mincing tones.

Beth said to him, "Cort, now listen; in the morning I want you to take him to a dentist. He won't listen to me. Promise?"

"Sure, honey. Gotta take care of good old Merton." His voice was a little thick. He winked at me.

"A toothache is no fun," I said.

"Poor Merton," Cort said.

"You said that before." My voice was harsher than I'd intended.

"So I did, so I did," he said cheerfully. "You need another drink, Fiske." He lifted the mixing glass, but it was empty.

"I'll make some more," Beth said.

"Don't bother," I told her, thinking that I would have liked another drink. After all, it was my vermouth. I moved to the door.

Cort raised his black brows. "Leaving?"

I ignored him.

Beth Swann said to me, "Merton doesn't feel like eating, and Cort and I are driving somewhere for dinner. Won't you join us?"

"No, thanks." I smiled at her.

"Oh, *do* come," Cort said. "Get your wife. We'll make it a party."

"I'm not married," I said.

"Really?" Beth Swann asked.

"Really."

Cort laughed shortly. "Neither am I."

Beth said quickly, "You'll go with us some time? When Merton can go?"

"Sure," I said, smiling at her. I didn't look at Cort as I went out. Behind me I heard him laugh. I walked into my kitchen, and opened the refrigerator.

I was frying two pork chops when I heard a car door slam. I am naturally curious and sometimes snoopy. I looked out of the kitchen window. Beth Swann and Cortland Doyle were in the red convertible backing out of the drive. I thought of Merton lying alone with a toothache, and I was tempted to go over and see

if he wanted a pork chop, but I didn't. I ate both chops, drove out to a drive-in movie, dozed through a double feature, and came home around midnight.

The Swann house was dark, and the red convertible was not in the drive. The truck from Texas was still there, though, looming huge in the moonlight.

I went to bed, but I didn't sleep for a while. The faint uneasy feeling was still with me, for no special reason that I could name. Maybe I was listening for the convertible to come back. It didn't, and when at last I slept I dreamed about snakes. . . .

The car was there in the morning, parked behind the truck, and no one seemed to be stirring around my neighbor's house, not even the snakes—at least, I didn't hear the whir of the rattles. On a sudden impulse I crossed the drive to the Swann garage, gently pushed open the door and peered cautiously inside.

They were in a raised wooden cage faced with heavy mesh wire. It was gloomy in the garage, but I could tell that they were rattlers, all right, not large ones, half coiled and lying quietly. A thin shaft of sunlight penetrated the semi-darkness and glinted on their thick, dusty, mottled bodies. As I looked, one of them raised its head slowly and I heard a faint, tentative dry buzzing. I couldn't tell if it was Dudley or Clarinda. Maybe he, or she, thought I was going to toss in a couple of mice. The buzzing grew louder. The second snake began to bunch and coil slowly. I retreated to the bright sunlight.

As I drove downtown to my office, I was thinking of Beth.

3

It was a dull day and I went home early. At four in the afternoon I turned into my drive. The Texas truck was still parked in the drive next door, but the red convertible was gone again. Merton Swann came out of the garage and waved at me absently. He was wearing the baggy tweed suit and in the sunlight his wispy yellow hair looked like a halo.

I got out of my car and called to him, "How's the tooth?"

He moved over to me and held a hand to his still-swollen jaw. "It's out. Beth made me see a dentist this morning." He peered up the street, squinting behind the glasses. "She should be back pretty soon. She went with Cort to see if he could pick up a load for Texas. He's going back to-

morrow, and he hates to pull an empty trailer."

"Nice of him to move you up here," I said.

"Yes," he said seriously. "Cort is probably my best friend—and Beth's, too. When I went to a scientific convention in Los Angeles last month, he took Beth to dinner every night, to keep her from getting too lonesome." He sighed. "We'll miss Cort."

"Seems like a nice fellow," I said politely.

He nodded in his absent manner and from his coat pocket he took a small bottle partially filled with a pink fluid. "The dentist told me to rinse my mouth every hour with this." He glanced at a wrist watch. "Time to do it again." He smiled at me and entered the house.

I went into my own house by the front door, because I wanted to get the evening paper. I carried it to my bedroom, took off my shoes and coat, loosened my tie, and stretched out on the bed. I had finished the paper, even the society section, when I heard a car come in the Swann drive. I rolled over and looked out the window, thinking wryly that I was as curious as a frustrated spinster.

Beth Swann and Cortland Doyle were getting out of the red convertible. Merton stood by the back porch smiling at them.

"Hi, dear," I heard Beth say. She went up to Merton and kissed him.

"Did you get a load to haul back to Texas?" Merton asked Cort.

"Sure," Cort said. "Castings for Galveston. I'm all set to pull out of here early in the morning."

Merton smiled again and went into the house, leaving the door open.

Beth and Cort remained on the porch, standing close. Cort slipped his arm around Beth's waist. They spoke in low voices. Then they turned and entered the house. . . .

I rolled back on to my pillow. Maybe I dozed a little.

A pounding on my back door jerked me awake. I looked at the clock on my dresser. Ten minutes past six o'clock in the evening. The dying sun cast yellow light over the floor of my bedroom. I went through the house to the back door, opened it. Cortland Doyle stood there, his lean dark face set in sober lines.

"Merton's sick," he said quickly. "Real sick. Is there a doctor in the neighborhood?"

"I don't know," I said. "I can

call one I know, but it'd take him a half hour to get here." I got my telephone book and thumbed the classified section. "What's wrong with Merton?"

Cort shrugged. "He's just sick —came on him suddenly. Maybe a heart attack. Hell, I don't know."

Halfway down the list of doctors in the book I spotted one with an office in a shopping center five blocks away. I dialed the number. A crisp feminine voice answered. "Dr. Kovac's office."

"This is an emergency," I said, and gave her my address. "Can the doctor come right away?"

"He's just leaving for dinner, but I'll tell him. He'll be there." The phone clicked in my ear. No questions, no beating around the bush. I wanted the doctor, and he was coming. Dr. Kovac, I decided, was young, just starting practice, maybe still paying for his instruments. His nurse, or secretary, hadn't even asked my name.

I said to Cort, "A doctor is coming."

"Thanks." He turned abruptly and left the porch.

I went to my bedroom, put on my shoes, lit a cigarette and stood by the window. I thought about making myself a drink, but I didn't want to leave the window. In a few minutes I heard the sound of a car coming up the street. I hurried through the house and out my front door.

A small green sedan, maybe six years old, stopped at the curb with a screech of brakes. A tall man got out, lifted a black leather bag from the seat, and turned to face me. He was young, with a tanned, serious face. He wore a gray flannel suit and a battered brown felt hat.

I moved across the grass. "Dr. Kovac?"

He nodded.

"I'm the one who called you," I said, and pointed at the Swann house. "They want you in there."

I followed as he walked swiftly across the drive. Beth Swann met us at the door. Her face was white and haunted-looking. "Doctor, he's so sick. . . ."

She stood aside for the doctor as he stepped inside. I hesitated, and then went in, too. After all, I was the helpful neighbor. I followed Beth and the doctor to a bedroom, and stood discreetly by the door.

Merton was on the bed. Except for his coat, he was fully dressed. He was breathing heavily, his lips were puffy, and his face dripped with sweat. His eyes were open, but they appeared bloodshot. His

lips moved, but no sound came out. He looked directly at me, but he didn't seem to see me, or anyone in the room.

The doctor bent over the bed and asked quick questions of Beth. "Did he fall, strike his head?"

"No."

"Had he been ill before?"

"No, doctor."

The doctor felt Merton's pulse, and then unbuttoned his shirt. Beth and Cort stood by. The doctor got a hypodermic needle from his bag, swiftly filled it, and jabbed it into Merton's upper right arm. Then he stepped back, gazed at Merton with troubled eyes, and spoke as if talking to himself. "I don't know. Looks like a cerebral hemorrhage, a lot of the symptoms, but. . . ." He turned to Beth. "Had he taken any medicine, pills or capsules of any kind?"

She shook her head.

"Get some cold water and a towel," the doctor snapped. "Better yet, an ice bag, if you have one."

Beth Swann turned and moved swiftly past me, her eyes blinded with tears, and went down the hall to the kitchen. I followed her. She opened a door and went down steps to the basement. I opened the refrigerator, took out a tray of ice cubes. As I did so, I saw the little wooden test tube rack. I started to close the door, and then paused. Something was different. I stared at the glass vial. The evening before it had been full of snake venom. Now it was only three-quarters full. Maybe Merton had used some it in his work, I thought, and closed the refrigerator door.

Beth Swann came up from the basement carrying a rubber ice bag. I took it from her, and as I filled it with ice cubes, I said casually, "Has Merton been doing any, uh, experiments today?"

She didn't answer, and when I looked at her I saw that she was gazing down the hall toward the bedroom. She hadn't heard me. I handed her the ice bag. She took it and moved away. I tagged along behind her. The doctor placed the ice bag on Merton's head. Beth Swann knelt on her knees beside the bed. Cortland Doyle stood against the wall, his dark face somber. I turned and moved into the living room.

Merton's tweed coat hung over the back of a chair. I glanced once toward the bedroom, and then felt in the coat pockets. They contained a booklet of matches, a leather tobacco pouch, a broken

toothpick, a clean folded handkerchief. Nothing else.

I walked down the short hall to the bathroom. As I passed the bedroom door, Cortland Doyle looked at me. His face was set and expressionless. The doctor and Beth were bending over Merton. I entered the bathroom, closed the door. Tub, plastic shower curtain, a shaggy bath mat, the smell of soap. Six hairpins lay on a window sill. I opened a mirrored cabinet over the wash bowl. On the glass shelves were a safety razor, a box of blades, a half-used tube of shaving cream, a tube of toothpaste, two tooth brushes, a jar of face cream, a gilt lipstick. That was all.

Something ugly began to build up in the back of my brain.

4

I LEFT the bathroom and entered the kitchen once more. A pair of glass salt and pepper shakers were on the table by a window. I put the salt shaker in the right pocket of my slacks. Then I went to the bedroom.

It seemed to me that Merton's breathing was more labored. His face was bloated and his eyes were now red slits. Dr. Kovac was carefully going over Merton's naked chest with a stethoscope. Cortland Doyle was still by the wall, watching the doctor. He didn't look at me. Beth Swann was by the bed, holding one of Merton's limp hands. Her face was whiter than before and her mouth quivered.

Dr. Kovac straightened, removed the stethoscope from his ears. "He's got to get to the hospital," he said.

Beth Swann made a kind of low moaning sound.

Dr. Kovac looked at me. "Queer symptoms," he said. "Face puffy, eyes extremely bloodshot, excessive perspiration, pulse feeble, partial paralysis."

I took a deep breath. "Doctor, he's been handling rattlesnakes."

"My God—where?"

"In his garage. He extracts venom from them."

Dr. Kovac's eyes were outraged. "Why didn't someone tell me?" He snapped his fingers. "Of course—saw a lot of snake bite in the Pacific, but I never. . . ." He strode to the door. "Take off his clothes," he said to Beth. "Look for the fang punctures. I've got to get some anti-venomous serum. Where's the phone?"

"In the kitchen," Cort said. He moved to the bed and began to

unbuckle Merton's belt. Beth untied his shoe laces.

From the kitchen I heard Dr. Kovac's excited voice. "Yes, George, snake bite. Rattler. I need serum right now." The receiver banged up, and the doctor strode down the hall to the bedroom. Except for his shorts, Merton was now naked. The doctor went over him carefully, paying particular attention to his legs, arms and hands. Beth Swann and Cortland Doyle stood by the bed.

"I can't understand it," the doctor said in a puzzled voice. "Not a mark on him, no swelling. . . ."

I started to speak, but Beth Swann said quickly, "Merton wasn't bitten. He knows how to handle the snakes. Besides, he hasn't been near them for a couple of hours. He was all right when Cort and I came home, about four-thirty this afternoon. He had a tooth pulled this morning, and he's been rinsing his mouth with an antiseptic solution the dentist gave him. He went to the bathroom at five o'clock to use it, and again at six. Shortly after six, he said he didn't feel well. Then he kind of slumped in his chair, and Cort and I carried him in here."

I said to the doctor, "The mouthwash—?"

"Just an antiseptic," he broke in impatiently. "It wouldn't hurt him, even if he swallowed it."

"Venom in the mouthwash," I heard my voice saying. "Poison entering his blood stream through the opening made by the tooth extraction."

He stared incredulously.

Beth Swann and Cortland Doyle swung toward me, their faces a pair of shocked blank masks.

I looked at them in the quiet room, and I sighed. The doctor was familiar with death, but he didn't deal with death in a special form, as I sometimes did. He probably did not have a suspicious mind, and I doubted if he'd had much contact with people who are driven to the final crime of murder, an act committed for great reasons and little reasons, sometimes for no reason at all. But love is the most popular reason for killing—love, and the many faces that love wears.

The doctor turned away from me and leaned over the bed. I heard him mutter, "No chance for a ligature and suction." Once more his fingers went to Merton's wrist. Beth Swann was still staring at me with a kind of shocked

fixation, but Cort had turned his head and was peering intently at Merton. Beth's eyes shifted and she moved a little, until she stood beside Cort, her gaze on Merton.

The doctor looked up at her. His eyes were bleak. "His pulse is very low," he said quietly. "If I'd known sooner. . . ."

Beth covered her face with her hands, and she seemed to shudder. Cort put an arm around her and patted her shoulder. She leaned against him.

We heard the wail of a siren, rising in the evening air.

The doctor said, "That'll be George Kass with the serum."

I turned, moved to the front door, and stood waiting. The siren grew louder. I went out to the front lawn. A black police cruiser was coming up the street, its siren wide open. I stepped forward and waved an arm, thinking that flagging down messengers of mercy was becoming a habit with me.

The car jerked to a stop at the curb. A slight, gray-haired man jumped out. He wore a white jacket and carried a flat leather case. I pointed at the house. He went past me on a run.

The cop behind the wheel of the police car grinned at me. "Hi, Lee."

"Hi, Johnson. Fast ride, huh?"

"Yeah," he said. "Fella bit by a rattler, I hear. Didn't know we had any around any more. This fella a friend of yours?"

"He's my neighbor," I said, and went back into Merton's house.

In the bedroom, the gray-haired man and Dr. Kovac were bending over the bed. Beth Swann and Cortland Doyle stood by the wall. She still clung to him. His bronzed hand gripped her shoulder. Both of them were watching the two men by the bed. The doctor held a hypodermic needle, poised it over Merton.

The gray-haired man said, "You are familiar with the technique? Subcutaneous injection, two cubic centimeters, in his back, between the shoulder blades. Also, in the abdomen. Perhaps some serum intravenously."

"I remember," the doctor said impatiently.

"Where's the fang puncture?" the gray-haired man asked.

"No puncture," the doctor snapped. "Damn it, roll him over."

The two men worked swiftly, oblivious of the rest of us.

I lighted a cigarette and leaned against the door jamb. Beth Swann and Cortland Doyle stood close together, watching the two men

work over Merton. I couldn't see their faces. The minutes crept by on padded paws. My cigarette burned my fingers, and I gazed around for an ash tray. I didn't see any. I stubbed the cigarette on the heel of a shoe and dropped it into my shirt pocket. I didn't want to leave, not now.

The gray-haired man straightened. "All we do now is wait," he said.

The doctor nodded gloomily, his gaze on Merton's face. "Damndest thing I ever heard of." He felt Merton's wrist, his eyes remote. "No change yet."

The gray-haired man said stubbornly, "There's *got* to be a fang puncture some place."

"If the serum works," the doctor said grimly, "we'll know if there's venom in his system."

"My God," the gray-haired man said incredulously, "don't you *know?*"

"Not for certain. He had a tooth pulled this morning, and was using some antiseptic mouthwash the dentist gave him." He nodded at me. "This man thinks there was snake venom in the mouthwash."

The gray-haired man looked at me quickly. Then he said, "That's a rough way to commit suicide."

"He didn't," I said.

"Then how the hell do you know there was snake venom in his mouthwash?"

"Have it analyzed," I said.

The doctor seemed not to have heard us. He was bending low over Merton. "No change," I heard him mutter, and I saw the tight look around his mouth.

The gray-haired man said to me, "Get the mouthwash. I'll take it back to the lab."

I became aware that Beth Swann and Cort had turned from the bed, and were listening. Maybe they had been listening all the time.

The girl said, "I'll get it," and started for the door.

Cort said quickly, "Let me, Beth. Where is it?"

"In the bathroom cabinet." She paused.

Cort moved for the door. I stood in his way. "Never mind," I told him. "I have it." I patted the slight bulge the salt shaker made in the pocket of my slacks.

He eyed me silently. Then he said quietly, "All right," turned, and moved back to the bed. He didn't look at Beth Swann as he passed her. She gazed at me with an odd, puzzled expression.

The doctor said suddenly, "His pulse is stronger!" He couldn't conceal the excitement in his

voice. After all, he was a young doctor, and one didn't often encounter snake poisoning in the suburbs of a northern metropolis. All of us in the room watched him. Presently he straightened and smiled. "He's coming around, I think." He looked at Beth Swann. "You are his wife?"

She nodded.

He jerked a thumb toward me. "You can thank this man for saving your husband's life. He mentioned the snakes, and that gave me a tentative diagnosis. With a diagnosis, you can give treatment. The serum seems to be doing its job." He paused and frowned. "But it's very odd. . . ."

Beth Swann said shakily. "Merton works with venom a lot. There is some in the refrigerator now. He's rather absent-minded, but I don't see how he could have gotten the venom in. . . ."

"Just one of those things." Dr. Kovac shrugged. "Maybe he can explain it when he's able to talk."

"I'm afraid not," I said.

5

THE FOUR of them stared at me. I didn't look at their faces, but turned to the door and said casually, "Well, I'll grab a sandwich and be back in a few minutes. We'll take the bottle to the laboratory."

"Yes," the gray-haired man said, "and maybe we'd better get fingerprints, too." He held out a hand. "Maybe you'd better give me the bottle."

I looked at him. His lean middle-aged face was far more world-weary than Dr. Kovac's would ever be, and his eyes were tired. "Routine," he said. "We do a lot of work for the police. I think maybe they would want a verification of the suicide attempt."

Beth Swann made a small sound, a little like a kitten mewing.

Cortland Doyle stared woodenly.

"I'll take good care of the bottle," I said, "and I'll be back before you're ready to leave."

He hesitated a moment, and then said carelessly, "All right." He turned away and began to place needles and vials into his leather case.

I left quickly.

Out at the curb the port light of the police car glowed redly in the dusk. I walked across the drive and around to the back of my house. I entered the kitchen, turned on the lights, got out bread, butter and some sliced ham and placed them on the

table. Then I entered the bathroom, turned on the light there, and started the cold water running into the wash bowl. I left it running and moved swiftly into my bedroom across the hall. In the dark I found the dresser, opened the top drawer and took out a flat .32 automatic. I stood in the darkness beside the bedroom door and waited.

It wasn't a very long wait. The only sound was the gurgle of water into the bowl in the bathroom. The first stealthy movement of shadow was reflected from the lighted kitchen into the hall. I waited, knowing that my visitor was creeping toward the bathroom, rising to the bait of the sound of the running water. A dark figure went slowly past me, half crouched, intent upon the lighted bathroom door. The figure tip-toed to the edge of the light and stood rigidly, one arm raised, the hand gripping a heavy wrench.

"Here I am," I said.

Cortland Doyle whirled, the wrench flung back.

"Drop it," I said, and I showed him the gun.

A feral glitter showed in his eyes. Slowly he lowered the wrench.

"Drop it," I said again.

I saw the gleam of his teeth. "Make me."

"That would be easy." I waggled the gun.

"Go ahead," he said. "Shoot."

"You want the bottle, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You want Beth, too."

He didn't answer.

"But she loves Merton," I said, "and you can't have her as long as he's alive. You're going back to Texas, and you may never see her again. So you keep her out late last night and try to persuade her to leave Merton, but she won't listen. Then today you see your chance. Merton has a tooth pulled. He shows you the mouthwash. You know the rattlesnake venom is in the refrigerator. It seemed simple—no doctor would dream of treating him for snake venom poisoning. He would die, and then, presently, you would have Beth. Isn't that it?"

"Give me the bottle," he whispered.

"With your fingerprints on it?"

"You damned snooper. I didn't have time to hide it very well. You must have seen me at the hub cap—" He stopped when he saw my expression.

"Thanks," I said. With my left hand I took the salt shaker from

my pocket and held it out for him to see.

He stared at it for what seemed like a long time, and at last he said in an odd reproachful voice, "You tricked me."

"Yes," I admitted, "but I knew it was you, and not Beth. She very freely told about the mouthwash, and she would never have done that if she had anything to do with this. She loves Merton, not you."

He said accusingly, "You don't sell insurance. What is your lousy racket?"

"I sell justice," I said. "Sometimes I give it away."

"Five thousand," he said thickly, "to forget it. Merton will live, and no harm has been done. I'll leave for Texas tonight."

"Five thousand is a lot of money," I said.

"What's money?" he said contemptuously. "Without Beth? Ten thousand."

I was tempted, really and truly, but I shook my head.

He hefted the wrench. I had been waiting for that, and slammed the gun against the side of his head. He hit the floor, and lay quite still.

I moved to the door, opened it. The police car loomed black at the curb, and I heard the low mutter of its radio.

"Johnson," I called. "I need you."

# LIVING BAIT

**Triangle trouble was brewing abroad.**

*by FREDERICK LORENZ*

I COULD see that Mr. Langler was boiling. He had no reason to be mad. He'd brought two tarpon to gaff. Miss Starr had only caught one, but Miss Starr's had been a good thirty pounds heavier. All three tarpon were too light for the tournament, and we turned them loose.

There's lots of guys like Mr. Langler. No matter what they do, they got to win every time or they don't like it. He was big and red-faced and built like a fullback, and you could see that he was a real tough man about everything. He seemed to have the idea that when he'd hired my

boat he'd hired the tarpon, too, and he was mad because they wouldn't do exactly what he wanted them to do, like everybody else who worked for him. He was some kind of big executive. Big executives, for some reason or other, always seem to think they're bigger than life size.

Miss Starr was a big executive, too—she owned some kind of cosmetics company—but you wouldn't think it to look at her. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Wearing those shorts and halter, there was an awful lot of Miss Starr visible to the naked eye. She had the kind of legs a man had an awful time keeping his mind on what he was doing, and the shape of her halter only made it worse. But it was Mr. Langler she was after, not me. Mr. Langler was mad at the tarpon, so nobody was getting nowheres. It was a kind of a mess.

And Wiley wasn't helping things out any either, kidding around the way he was. He didn't have much sense. I should never have brought Wiley along, I thought. He didn't mean any harm. He thought he was making Mr. Langler feel better about not catching the biggest tarpon. Still, Wiley could bait-up faster than any mate I'd ever had, even if he didn't have only one arm. He could gaff a tarpon without ripping it to pieces, the way some of them do.

I was just about to call him up to the flying bridge to keep him out of trouble, when Mr. Langler hooked into another tarpon. He grunted and the tip of the rod dipped down over the transom. A few minutes later the tarpon came up out of the water with such a surge it looked like a fountain glittering in the sun. He was big and silver, and he shook himself like a bulldog to throw the hook. His heavy underslung jaw was wide open and his mouth looked like you could put your head in it. He was a big tarpon, a hundred and fifty pounds easy, big enough to win a tournament and then some. He was really a tarpon to make you catch you breath.

Mr. Langler fought him like it was life and death and the most important thing in the world. His mouth was fixed in a kind of snarl. He cursed and ground his teeth and jerked on the rod. The way he carried on, you'd of thought that tarpon was his worst enemy.

That tarpon was really something, though. I never seen a tarpon jump the way that one did. He was up, and, no sooner

he came down, he was up again with that wrenching shake that almost pulled Mr. Langler's arms out of their sockets.

For the next two hours, that tarpon was in the air more than it was in the water. The sweat poured off Mr. Langler like rain off a tin roof. His arms were beginning to quiver from the strain, and if it kept up I knew the tarpon was going to pull that two-hundred-dollar rod and reel right out of his hands. I helped him all I could with the boat, but fighting a tarpon that big is mostly up to the fisherman.

Miss Starr stood at the side of the cockpit out of Mr. Langler's way. If it'd been me, I'd of lost that tarpon a dozen times, the way she stood there her legs all round and rich in the sun, and her chest so deep and curved.

"Oh, you're doing splendidly!" she cried. "You've almost got him. He's tiring. You fought him beautifully!"

Mr. Langler snarled, "Keep out of my way, dammit!" though she wasn't within three feet of him.

She was right. The tarpon was tiring. I came down from the bridge, pulling on a pair of gloves to grip the leader when Mr. Langler got the tarpon to the boat. Wiley leaned over the transom with the gaff.

Then it happened. Mr. Langler was just plain bushed. The tarpon had one hard jump left—and when he got to six feet of the boat, he made it. He gave his big, bulldoggy head a snap, and the hook whizzed right into the cockpit. He splashed back. I leaned over the transom and watched him swim down and down in the water till he wasn't even a shadow anymore. He was one tired fish.

Mr. Langler's eyes bulged at his slack line. He turned on Wiley and began to call him everything he could lay tongue to. He called him a one-armed clown.

"Really it wasn't the man's fault," Miss Starr tried to soothe Mr. Langler. "And it wasn't your fault, either. The tarpon threw the hook."

Mr. Langler threw down the rod and stamped into the cabin, grinding his teeth some more.

Wiley picked up the rod and looked at the reel. "He might of bent it," he said in a disapproving voice.

A few minutes later, Mr. Langler came out of the cabin with a bottle of scotch. "Tomorrow's another day," he said, and poured us all a drink. That was as close

as he could get to an apology, I guess.

I took the boat through Novidades Pass and anchored in the bay. The tide was beginning to run out and it was moving along at about fifteen miles an hour. There was a dock at the fishing village, but they soaked the hell out of you during the tarpon season. Anyways, it was too buggy with mosquitoes and things.

Wiley came down to the cabin to help me with dinner. We could hear Mr. Langler and Miss Starr arguing in the cockpit. They were always arguing, it seemed.

"What were they squabbling about all day?" I asked Wiley.

"Big business deal." He grinned. "Miss Starr, she's got a company that makes lipstick and stuff, and she wants to sell it to Mr. Langler. Mr. Langler says he's got a company that makes lipstick and stuff and he don't need another one. Can you imagine that Mr. Langler having a company that makes lipsticks?" He laughed.

"Is everything a joke to you, Wiley?"

"You got a boat to worry about, Roy. Mr. Langler and Miss Starr, they got a big business deal to worry about. Me, I ain't got nothin'. So I don't worry. It's more fun just kidding around."

"Well stop kidding around Mr. Langler. He gets sore."

"That's a fact, Roy. You hit the nail right on the head. He's a mean man. And that Miss Starr, she's a mean woman."

"You're crazy!" I said. "You must be getting old or something. That Miss Starr is just about the most gorgeous piece of female I ever seen."

He looked at me and laughed. "Man," he said, "you get mixed up with that female and you'll have first, second, and third-degree burns before you can even put on your fire hat. Maybe she don't mean no harm, but when she tells you to do something, like bait-up for instance, she looks about three feet over your head like it hurts her eyes to look at us common people. Is that the way when you're a big executive, Roy?"

"That's the way when you kid around too much, like you do. Big executives don't like to kid around with nobody but other big executives."

"Well now, that changes everything, Roy. I thought they didn't like me personal. It's just because they don't know I'm a big executive, too. A big executive is a feller that's got a monopoly on something, ain't he? Well, I got

a monopoly on all the nothing on the west coast of Florida. I got more nothing than anybody. I better go right out and tell them, and get things straight."

I couldn't help laughing at him. "You know, Wiley," I said, "when you lost that one arm, I think you lost half your brains with it."

"That's a fact, Roy. I did. The worst half. When I had all my brains, I used to worry about big-business deals like Miss Starr and Mr. Langler. You'd of thought I had a million dollars, the way I used to worry. Then I lost my left wing and half my brains, and now I ain't got a worry in the world. But all the same," he looked sore for a minute, "he don't have no call saying I'm a one-armed clown."

I patted his shoulder. "Take it easy."

We had grouper steaks, home-fries, and canned string beans for dinner. Afterwards, Mr. Langler brought out the scotch bottle again, but I excused myself. I went to my berth in the forepeak, leaving Wiley telling them how he was a big executive because he had a monopoly on all the nothing in West Florida.

Maybe I slept and maybe I just dozed, but all of a sudden I was wide awake. There was cursing and fighting in the cockpit. I jumped out of my berth and ran through the cabin. Wiley and Mr. Langler were swinging away at each other right at the transom.

I yelled, "Cut that out—" and tripped over something. I came down hard with my chin on the arm of the bed lounge, and passed out cold.

When I came to, I heard Mr. Langler swearing and Miss Starr saying sharply, "Let me do it, please!" Mr. Langler swore again. I sat up, only half there.

"Whass the matter?" I mumbled.

Miss Starr said worriedly, "Wiley's overboard. Where's the searchlight switch?"

That brought me around. I jumped up and pushed them away from the controls. The switch was way underneath. I reached in and snapped it on. We were facing into the out-going tide. The light was on the bow, so it didn't do much good. If Wiley went overboard, he would've been swept out Novidades Pass, not up into the bay, and we couldn't turn the light astern. We had to pull up the anchor, start the engine and run it in reverse to hold our position as we pointed toward the

pass. I played the beam over the dark water but I didn't see a thing that looked like Wiley's head.

I shoved the controls into forward and ran toward the Pass, working the beam all the way. I took her out into the Gulf and cruised up and down, listening and looking, but there wasn't any sign of Wiley.

"Perhaps he swam to the fishing village, Captain," Miss Starr said later.

"Could be," I said, not believing it. "We'll go see." There wasn't much point looking for Wiley in the Gulf anymore. We'd been looking for an hour now, and the water was choppy. We could of missed him a dozen times.

Mr. Langler didn't say anything. He looked pretty sick.

We chugged in to the fish-house dock. There was a gang of commercial fishermen sitting there drinking bottle beer. None of them had seen hair nor hide of Wiley. In ten minutes, there were twenty boats all over the bay looking for him. By this time we all knew there wasn't much chance of finding Wiley alive anymore, but we kept at it till two in the morning. Miss Starr and a couple of the fishermen scoured the shore for a mile in both directions.

When we got back to the fish-house dock, I was surprised to see the sheriff there with a deputy. We hadn't told the fishermen about Mr. Langler having the fight with Wiley in the cockpit, so there was no reason for them to have called him in. As far as they were concerned, Wiley had just fallen overboard. These fishermen weren't the kind who went running to the sheriff for every little thing. I had an idea right then and there that it was Miss Starr that'd done the calling. She was standing there on the dock talking to the sheriff and looking very upset.

"That poor man," I heard her say to the sheriff. "That poor, poor man!"

Mr. Langler stood with them, looking numb.

The sheriff took the three of us inside the fish house and told the fishermen to stay out. "Now let's get to the bottom of this," he said, looking straight at Mr. Langler. "What happened out there?"

Mr. Langler didn't say anything. He was slumped against the wall and his eyes looked like they were kind of rotting away. You could see he couldn't feel worse.

"Come on, what's the story?" the sheriff demanded, looking at Miss Starr this time.

Miss Starr shook her head. "Well," she said in a small, unwilling-sounding voice, "Wiley and Mr. Langler were drinking in the cockpit when I went to bed. They were rather drunk and were bickering about a large tarpon that Mr. Langler had lost that afternoon. I called to them to lower their voices. Mr. Langler just swore louder and called Wiley a one-armed moron who had no right on a boat. They started fighting. Just as I was getting out of bed to stop them, the Captain came running from his berth. He ran into me and fell down and knocked me back. Then Mr. Langler cried out that Wiley had fallen overboard. We made every effort to find him. But I'm certain, Sheriff," she gave him the big-eyes, "that Mr. Langler didn't do it on purpose."

Mr. Langler raised his head and stared at Miss Starr, and she smiled back at him sadly.

"Is that the way it went?" the sheriff asked Mr. Langler.

Mr. Langler made a limp little movement with his hands. "Yes," he said. "That's the way it went."

"You called him some names and you hit him because you were sore about losing that tarpon. Is that right?"

"I was angry at having lost the tarpon and I called him names, but I didn't hit him until he swung the gaff at me."

For the first time I saw that there was blood on his shirt under his left arm.

The sheriff saw it, too. "Is that where he got you?"

Mr. Langler pulled up his shirt and there was a narrow gash across his ribs like a gaff would make. The sheriff's face changed. Things were a little different, now. Before, it was just Mr. Langler knocking Wiley overboard because he was sore, and that would have made it tough for Mr. Langler. But now with that gash on him, it was self-defense, more or less.

"Do you know anything about that part of it?" the sheriff asked Miss Starr.

Miss Starr still gave him the big-eyes. "I was in bed. I didn't see any of it. Wiley said something after Mr. Langler called him a one-armed moron, and Mr. Langler said, 'Shut your stupid mouth or I'll shut it for you.' Then there was the sound of a slap. I don't know which of them struck the other." Her voice was low and had a throb in it

and you could tell she was all broken up inside because of this.

The sheriff gave Mr. Langler a very hard glance. That piece about the slap had sure put a hole in the gaff story. Wiley wasn't the kind that went around slapping people. He might make a pass with the gaff if he was drunk enough and sore enough, but he sure wouldn't slap anybody. It just wasn't his way of doing things, and the sheriff knew that as well as I did. When Wiley got sore, he didn't fool around with fluff-stuff like slaps. He let you have it, and he had a lot of strength in that one arm. It was Mr. Langler that slapped Wiley first, and that was just too bad for Mr. Langler.

You could see by the sheriff's face that he didn't like Mr. Langler for nothing. "I'm going to take you in," he said flatly to Mr. Langler, "and if you want my advice, you'd better get yourself a damn good lawyer."

Miss Starr cried, "Oh, please don't take my word for any of this, Sheriff! I didn't actually see anything, you know."

The sheriff patted her hand and told her not to worry about a thing.

I stood there trying to think of something so I could pat her other hand.

Before they took him away, Mr. Langler asked to have a private word with me. He looked shamed at what he'd done and hopeless because he knew he didn't have a leg to stand on. He told me to look after Wiley's family and draw on him for any amount of money. He gave me the name of his lawyer in Tallahassee and said he'd tell the lawyer to give me whatever Wiley's family needed in the way of money. I didn't tell him Wiley didn't have any family that I knew of because he might of had somebody someplace.

Then Mr. Langler said dully, "I want you to know, Captain, that I'd give a fortune if this hadn't happened. I must have been out of my head to have struck a one-armed man."

He embarrassed me because he was really all broken up about it and I couldn't feel any sympathy for him.

"Well," I said lamely, "maybe Miss Starr had it mixed up a little. Maybe it didn't happen quite that way."

He gave me a funny look and said, "That's very possible."

"Well—I'll see if there's anything I can do."

"Thanks, Captain."

After the sheriff took Mr. Langler away, Miss Starr said regretfully that she thought it would be better if she spent the night at the Inn instead of on the boat alone with me. The way she put it made me sort of tingle all over, like she really *wanted* to stay on the boat but that if she did and I tried to kiss her or something there wouldn't be anything she could do about it except give in because she couldn't resist me and it wouldn't be fair to either of us until she knew me better. She didn't say any of that, you understand, but that was the feeling I got when she looked at me. She was the most beautiful woman in the world.

I went out early the next morning in the boat. I didn't have much hope, but I hated to think of Wiley's body floating around in the Gulf. He was probably miles down the coast by this time, if the sharks hadn't got to him first. There's always a mess of shark around during tarpon season. Sometimes I think they come from all over the United States just for the season from May to August because the rest of the year you hardly see them at all.

There was one especially big shark, a twenty-footer we called Whitey on account of he's a light gray. He's turned up regularly every year for five years. I've taken dozens of shots at him with the .30-.30 but nobody can seem to knock him off. He's got a mouth like a manhole, and I've seen him take three quarters of a record tarpon in one bite. We all hated him. All Whitey's got to do is sniff blood and he's there.

If Wiley was bleeding, he wouldn't of had much of a chance with Whitey around.

The whole commercial fishing fleet hunted with me for a couple hours. Then they went off with their nets after mullet. They had a living to make. The Coast Guard had been notified, and they'd be on the lookout for a body. In the end, I had to quit too. I put down the hook just about where we'd anchored the night before.

I never felt lower in my whole life. Aside from being the best mate I'd ever had, I really liked poor old Wiley, his happy-go-lucky ways and funny sayings. I really hated Mr. Langler right then. I went down into the cabin and had a drink from one of the other bottles of scotch Mr. Langler had left, a thing I never do out on the boat.

After the second drink, I put

the bottle away because I was too much in the mood to get drunk. I didn't hate Mr. Langler so much anymore. I had the feeling that maybe he was all right underneath when he wasn't excited. The way he said to take care of Wiley's family, for instance. He could of made a big thing out of it in front of everybody to get sympathy for himself, but he had told me privately and had really seemed all broken up.

I went up on deck and looked out over the water. The tide was coming in strong, making a ripple over the bar from the end of Jarrett Key to the south. Every year that bar got longer and longer and the channel from the Gulf to the bay through Novidades Pass got more crooked. I looked at the bar a long time. I began to think, and get a little excited. The more I looked at it with the tide rippling over it, the more excited I got.

If the out-going tide got a man, it *could* of swept him right up on that little old bar out there—and he could walk ashore to Jarrett Key. But it didn't seem hardly likely because Wiley would of seen us looking all over the bay for him and he would of yelled. Yet, I couldn't get it out of my mind. Finally, I hauled up anchor and chugged over to Jarrett Key. I dropped the hook in the shallows.

I waded in and climbed over the spider-leg roots of the mangrove. It was pretty much of a wilderness in there—mangrove, seagrape, cabbage palm and palmetto. A pair of raccoons scurried into the underbrush, waddling like little fat men. A blue heron flew up with heavy flaps, his long legs trailing. I went along slowly, watching the sand in the open spaces. I came to where the bar joined the Key. My heart flopped right over—because there were the marks of Wiley's sneakers in the sand. I knew they were Wiley's because of the criss-cross pattern on the soles. I followed them down the beach, and saw where they turned into a big clump of seagrape.

"Wiley!" I called. It came out like a squeak. I called again, "Wiley!" I waited and listened.

Then I heard him say cautiously out of the seagrape, "You alone, Roy?"

"What're you hiding in there for, you dumb clunk?" I asked.

"Are they still looking for me, Roy?"

I went around the bush. He was standing by a cabbage palm with a driftwood club in his hand.

"What's the matter with you anyways?" I asked. "We looked for you all night."

"I know. I seen you. Is it all right now?"

"Is what all right?"

"They gonna stick me in the jail?"

"In the jail! If they stick you anywheres, it'll be in the looney bin. Why should they stick you in the jail?"

"On account of I hit Mr. Langler with the gaff." Then incredulously, "He didn't say nothin' about it?"

"Mr. Langler's in jail for drowning *you,* you dumb ox. Now come on, let's get him out of there." I started to go but he didn't move. "Come on," I said.

He pressed his mouth together and looked stubborn. "I ain't going. Let him stay in jail."

"Are you crazy? You don't do things like that. Now come on before I get sore, Wiley."

"I ain't going."

"Okay," I said. "I'll go back and tell them you're here."

"I won't be here when you get back. There won't be no sign of me. He can stay in jail. He called me things I don't take from nobody, and he knocked me overboard. The hell with him. He can stay in the jail for the rest of his life."

"And are you going to stay here for the rest of your life?" I asked him.

"I'll go down Key West or someplace. I got nothin' to keep me around here. I ain't getting Mr. Langler out of no jail just to do him the favor. He's got it coming."

He meant it. His face was set and stubborn. I knew there was nothing I could say to change him. He didn't care about right or wrong. He meant just what he said. He'd let Mr. Langler rot in jail.

He must of guessed what was in my mind because he tightened his hand around his driftwood club and said, "Now don't make me hit you, Roy. I ain't going back there with you."

I said, "Yes you are, Wiley," and measured him to see how I could get in under that club.

He lifted it and stood clear of the cabbage palm so he could get a good swing. "Don't make me do it, Roy," he pleaded. "If Mr. Langler's in jail, he's getting what's coming to him. I can't help it if I only got one arm, and a man that throws a thing like that in your face twice ain't no kind of man. I ain't going back

to do him no favors. That's final, Roy."

I could see I didn't have a chance of getting at him. He was fast on his feet and he had a lot of strength in that one arm. I looked around for a club of my own, because I was going to take him in, no matter what.

When I turned, there was Miss Starr. She was holding the .30-.30 taken from my boat.

"Neither of you is going back," she said. "Get over there by that tree with Wiley, Captain."

I thought she was making a joke or something. I mean, she looked so beautiful in her shorts and halter, you couldn't take that gun serious. Then her voice cracked, "Get *over* there, Captain!" and it wasn't no joke. I got over there.

Wiley's jaw sagged. "What's she mean, Roy? What's she mean?"

It came to me in a flash. "She wants Mr. Langler in jail, too," I said, "on account of that business deal they were squabbling about all yesterday."

"She came with you?" Wiley asked, dumbfounded.

Miss Starr said crisply, "No, the Captain didn't bring me. The Captain just led me here. I hired a boat and followed him. I had the same idea he had, that you were still alive."

"Well," I said, "what're we going to do, just stand here?"

"I don't know," Miss Starr said, frowning. "This situation just came up. It requires thought."

"You can't hold us here forever."

"That's very true. But on the other hand, I can't let you go back either. It's purely business. Langler owns a company that is in direct competition with mine. He's driving me out of business, and he won't buy my company. I'll be bankrupt in another six months. However, with Langler in jail, I have nothing to be afraid of. His company will break up without him. I have a lot of money at stake, Captain. A *lot* of money!"

"Is she going to shoot us, Roy?" asked Wiley, wide-eyed. "Is that what she's going to do?"

Just as he spoke, Miss Starr lifted the gun and fired. I jumped at her with Wiley's yell ringing in my ears. She tried to bring the gun around, but I knocked it up. The barrel caught her across the nose and the blood poured. I tried to grab her, but she gave me the butt of the gun on the jaw. I went down.

By the time I got up groggily,

she was a hundred yards down the beach, her beautiful long legs flashing in the sun. I got to the shore of the bay as she was roaring away in her hired speedboat. Wiley was in my boat, getting it started. We went after her.

She looked back over her shoulders and there was blood all over her face. Her nose must of been broken. She turned the speedboat and headed for the open Gulf where we'd never catch her.

Wiley gasped, "She's crazy!"

I knew what he meant. It's really rough going through the Pass to the Gulf on an in-coming tide, and even the big boats had to watch themselves. Miss Starr hit the Pass wide open, doing around thirty-five knots. The little speedboat leaped in the air like a struck tarpon and flipped over. I saw her go sailing out, spread-eagled. I eased into the rip, the boat rolling and pitching so hard we had to hang on with both hands.

All of a sudden, Miss Starr half rose out of the water with a terrible scream. We saw the flash of a long white shark belly as she was dragged under. She never came up again. She didn't have a chance with a twenty-foot shark like Whitey and that blood all over her face.

A half hour later we tied up at the fish-house dock. I went to the telephone booth and called the sheriff.

Mr. Langler gave Wiley a thousand-dollar check to make up for how mean and nasty he'd been.

Wiley disappeared twenty minutes later.

It was two weeks before he turned up on my boat, flat broke and wanting his job back.

"You mean you spent all that money?" I demanded incredulously.

"Now don't be like that, Roy," he said contentedly. "Look at all the trouble Mr. Langler and Miss Starr got into on account of money. I don't want nothin' to do with that kind of trouble. There's only one thing to do with money, and I done it." He grinned happily and reminiscently. "And you know somethin', Roy? I met the nicest little old blonde gal down Miami. She had exactly the same idea about money as I did, and we did it together."


**Tony thought it would be no crime to steal his boss' wife**

# JUSTICE IS BLIND

THE COUNTY D.A. didn't bat an eye when they brought in the verdict. He shuffled his papers together in his crisp dry hands, adjusted his eyeglasses that had a habit of sliding down his long slender nose, and walked briskly from the courtroom.

He would have continued walking briskly all the way down the old courthouse steps and to the parking lot where his battered Ford coupe squatted high and ugly among the other battered coupes owned by the other underpaid state and county employees.

And he would have forgotten by that time all about the case he had just lost. There were other cases; some of them he'd win. Justice was like that.

But he was only two steps out of the courtroom door when he heard a voice; thin, nasal, agitated. He sighed and turned his head, waiting for the owner of the voice to catch up. It was the town newspaper editor. The D.A. thought: *Why is it always an election year when you lose cases?*

"Hello, Jake," the D.A. said. "I suppose you want a quote."

"You're damned right I do," the editor squeaked. "Miscarriage of justice, if I ever saw one!"

"Jake," the D.A. said softly, "if you want a quote from me, don't put words in my mouth. You think it's a miscarriage of justice, say so on your editorial page. But don't quote me."

"Damned right I'll say so. Two-bit tramp and her murdering no-good husband. Both of them, scot free. Justice!" He stopped. They were outside now, standing in the parking lot, and the D.A.'s eyes were searching to find which battered car was his. He saw it finally and started for it, Jake a step behind. "Justice!" the editor snorted again, bitterly. He turned and looked behind him, at the courthouse, to its very top where symbolic Justice stood, ladylike and grave. He spat in the gravel. "Dumb broad!"

The D.A. stopped and looked back also. He shook his head. "You want a quote?" he said. "All right, here's a quote. But don't say I said it bitterly or I said it wistfully or I said it angrily. Just say I said it. Okay?"

The editor stared at him, suspicion lighting up his eyes. He was a crusading editor and he took himself very seriously. "I won't make any deals," he said.

The D.A. swore once. He didn't like to swear, but sometimes he did because he thought it would make him feel better. It never did. "Listen," he said. "Don't be a pompous ass. Who's talking about deals? Just tell the truth. You can do that, can't you, Jake? I know it goes against the grain of you fellows, but at least once you can tell the truth. You can, can't you?"

The editor flushed. "All right," he said. "What's the quote?"

The D.A. said blandly, "Justice is blind." He cranked the car, patiently waited for it to respond, and then got in. He drove off.

The editor stood there for a long minute and then said, "Damn, damn, damn." He went

back to his office and took out the clips on the case. Actually it had been one case that had split into two trials. One for murder, the other for assault with intent to kill. Now both trials were over, both verdicts in. Not guilty, both. He studied the clips, but nothing got any clearer. All he knew for sure was that crime and evil had triumphed, and morality lay dead at their feet. While blind justice looked unseeingly on, oblivious to the monstrous iniquity committed in her name.

He was, of course, dead wrong.

The murdered man was a young, good-looking day laborer who had come to Grasso's ranchhouse and asked for a job during the grape-picking season. Grasso liked the set of the boy, his broad shoulder, his cocky grin. He thought: this boy will-a work like-a one big horse.

He hired the boy whose working papers said he was twenty years old and his name was Anthony Jones. Grasso liked that, too. It was clean and neat, the name. Grasso said to the boy, "I call you-a Tony." He thought: *He's-a good-a boy.*

Grasso was dead wrong. The boy didn't work like one big horse. He worked like a man who wanted his pay every week, and didn't want to rupture himself for it. He pulled his weight, but not an ounce more.

But that wasn't so important. What was important was that Tony Jones wasn't a good boy at all.

Grasso had a wife. He also had a lot of money, and if he hadn't been such a simple man, he would have known that the reason he had a wife like Gina was the money. Grasso was in his sixties and he had buried one wife who had been unable to bear him a child. Now he had a second wife, forty years younger, a hot little round girl with smoky eyes; a girl who shuffled around the ranch eating grapes, a touch of purple juice on her lower lip. The men used to stop and watch her when she went by in the hot afternoons, and they sweated and stared while she wriggled beneath a cotton dress that was alarmingly tight.

When Tony Jones saw her, he didn't sweat. He got cold as ice. He knew what she was and he even knew why she was. If he had had the chance, he'd have done the same thing. But, of course, he couldn't marry lots of money the way Gina Grasso had.

The only way he could get lots of money would be to steal it. He knew he wasn't smart enough to get away with anything like that. He also was afraid to steal.

That is, he was afraid to steal money. What Gina had and which he would soon take—would not really be stealing. He could see that. So he got cold as ice, and he started to think.

But he wasn't very smart even in these ways. He couldn't plan. There was only one way a boy like him could act, and that was the obvious unplanned way. That was the way he finally took.

He saw Grasso get into his Chrysler one morning and drive off for town. So Tony walked to the kitchen and stood there respectfully. He knew Gina would come to the door and ask him what he wanted. Just before he saw Grasso get into the car, Tony had looked at the kitchen window and, sure enough, there was Gina —watching *him*.

He stood there and waited, the sun beating down on him.

The door opened and Gina said, "What do you want?"

"A drink of water." He didn't take his eyes off her face.

She looked over his shoulder at the group of men lounging near a big shade tree. A large bucket of water was sitting in the center of the group. A thin wire screen was across its top. Neat cellophane-covered glasses stood nearby. Grasso was a thoughtful man, and sanitary.

She said, "Sure, follow me." She walked through the kitchen (where the water was, of course) and into the foyer and up the long flight of stairs and into a room. He followed her, intently watching her all the way up the stairs. When he followed her inside, she turned and pushed the door shut and sank her nails into his chest.

"Hurry," she gasped.

After that it was easy. They got together whenever they had the chance. They didn't like each other—such people usually don't —so they didn't get to talk much. Their meager conversation was the talk of primitive people. She would say, "He's going to town at nine-thirty tomorrow morning. Supplies. Half hour at least."

He'd mop his brow and watch her walk by, and he'd start thinking of tomorrow.

Or, on another day, he'd say, "Get rid of him for the afternoon." And her brow would furrow slightly (not enough to start incipient wrinkles; she was a careful girl about things like that)

and she'd wonder what she might need from town that she couldn't get herself and that he wouldn't be able to send some hired hand in for.

Because she had to do what Tony said. She wanted to be with him all the time now.

People like that, of course, end up murdering the husband—when they're in crime novels. In real life, they're more practical. Gina wouldn't murder her husband, or leave him. It was too comfortable a life. She wanted Grasso's money. He'd die someday on his own hook. He had a heart condition that sometimes gave up spasms of huge pain, and the doctors thought he'd live five years more at most. It was why he got married. Gina knew that. He was an old man and very lonely and very rich. He wanted to spend his money on somebody young and lovely to look at.

Gina knew a bit more than that, but she didn't tell Tony. She knew that Grasso wanted to father a child more than anything else in the world, but that it was impossible for him. Ten doctors had told him so. He didn't even think about it any more.

And that was the tingling painful paradox for Gina. She wanted Grasso's money. But she had to be loved. So she kept meeting Tony when she had the chance. It was dangerous and she knew it, but she couldn't help it.

As for Tony, he didn't once suggest they kill Grasso or that they run away together. These thoughts never entered his head. He just drew the old man's pay and worked less and less hard for it. It was a pleasant life.

Sooner or later, they were going to get caught. This they knew. People like that, however, accept such a fact and then forget about it. When they got caught—they said to themselves—why, then, it will be all over. That's all.

That's what they thought.

They didn't know Grasso well enough. Like most people indulging in the chase for momentary pleasures, they failed to consider the third party. If they had been more articulate, they would have said—as most clandestine lovers have said throughout time—"Just so long as we don't hurt anybody, it's all right." Or, "We don't *want* to hurt anybody, but we can't help ourselves."

Like most other lovers, they were careful only because getting caught would have embarrassed and discomforted them. It was always themselves they thought about.

They didn't think of Grasso. The old man was sick. He wanted peace and comfort. He used to want a son, but the doctors had told him that was hopeless. It was so hopeless that he shared the information about his condition with his closest friends. Nobody else, of course. But to these few people, it was common knowledge. By telling them about it, he got enough of it off his chest that he could live with the knowledge. Not that it still didn't hurt. It hurt like hell.

His only joy was in his young lovely wife who would share his declining years. He liked to look at her. He liked buying her pretty things, clothes, jewelry. In his own way, and possibly mistaking pride of ownership for what he felt, he loved her, quite deeply.

Thus, when the grape-picking season ended and he had to let go of his migrant help, he consented to keep Tony on—at Gina's suggestion.

"He can do odd jobs," she had said. "Drive you to town, take care of the garden, watch the woods."

He said all right, if that was what she wanted. A young man around Gina did not bother Grasso; he never gave it any thought in the beginning. If she wanted young company some of the time, instead of his older and occasionally complaining ways, why, then, she'd have younger company. And he could use the help.

True, whenever he wanted Tony to drive him to town, Tony had something else that just had to be done. But in everything else the younger man gave the impression of working hard. Grasso was starting to think of Tony as a young man and not a boy, and it may have been that suspicion that took root with that change.

But suspicion, though it grew, grew slowly and through stubborn soil.

Near the ranchhouse was Grasso's own tiny section of wooded land. A row of slender springy saplings ran in a wide circle at the edge of the lawn. Beyond it, birch and poplar grew in thin sprays. Sometimes trespassers meandered through the little woods and it was Tony's job to chase them off. Grasso was jealous of his worldly possessions.

So many a time Tony pulled the saplings apart, felt them spring back into place behind him as he ran into the woods to flush out some flower-picking, tree-carving innocent. He did this part of his job quite well. He, too,

didn't want anybody snooping around.

The end of the affair happened with breath-taking suddenness. Grasso drove his Chrysler toward town. A quarter of a mile away from the house, his front right tire blew out. He managed to stop the car without damaging it. He got out and walked slowly back to the house to get Tony to help put on the spare. In the old days he did this sort of work himself, but with his heart and with Tony available, it was now senseless.

He found Tony. He also found Gina.

At first he was stunned into incredulous immobility. Then, with a cry of animal rage he picked up a chair and brought it crashingly down on Tony's head. The young man slumped to the floor, unconscious. Gina huddled in a corner, weeping.

Grasso was a big man, and though his muscles had long since turned soft, he was able to pick up Tony as though he were a child. Then he walked out of the house with his burden. Until that moment, he had no idea of what to do. That Tony would have to be punished—and by him, by Grasso—was accepted. It was his, Grasso's, house and wife that had been poached upon, and he would have to take matters into his hands.

Avengers, like lovers, are selfish. They do not think of the county or the state as the proper instruments of justice. They do not think of justice at all. They call it vengeance.

With Grasso, this vengeance was a savage thing.

He marched across the lawn and then his eyes saw the saplings, young and resilient and tough. Maybe he knew before he saw them what he was going to do; when they were in front of him he knew for certain. He laid the young man on the ground and went into the workshack for heavy wire, a brush knife, and wire clippers. Then he came out. Tony lay, stirring gently on the soft grass. Faint shadows of the trees fell on his face. He looked strangely young then—more like a boy once more—and untroubled.

The very youth inflamed Grasso. Cursing now, he grabbed the brush knife and cut off some of the branches and foliage of two trees, planted about seven feet apart. Then he hacked away until he had cut off the tops of the trees. They were now twin poles, about seven feet tall, young

and erect. When Grasso seized one and pulled it and released it, it fairly sang through the air until it was back in place, humming slightly, proud and straight.

Grasso pulled on one tree and brought it close to the other. Then he grabbed the second and pulled it until the tops of the trees met. The strain was considerable. He could barely hold them in his sweaty hands. But he did. Though at another time, he knew, it would have been impossible.

He tied them together with the wire. Grasso looked contemptuously at Tony and then went off to the kitchen. He did not know that a glass of water, undrunk, had brought the two lovers together, and so he did not appreciate the irony that a second glass of water, undrunk, would help part them forever. Not that Grasso was in a mood for appreciating irony. He was a man gone mad, and his hand shook as he carried the glass of water outside and set it on the ground.

He lifted Tony to his feet, the boy barely conscious, while nearby Gina huddled and wept. He took Tony's wrists and wired them securely, one to each sapling, near the very top. He made sure of his knots, that they would not slip. The saplings were straining against their wire thongs, eager to spring back to place.

Grasso picked up the water and sloshed it in Tony's face. The boy came to, his face alive to what was happening.

Grasso said, "Gina, come-a here."

She crept forward.

"Look at him."

She lifted her face.

Then with the wire cutters, Grasso cut the wire that held the saplings together. They sprang apart. A great cry rose out of the boy as his body was wrecked in one single, tearing, wrenching ball of flaming pain. He hung there, no, not hung, his body was too taut to hang; he stretched there on an improvised rack, his body forming a cross.

Gina fainted. . . .

That Tony would have died in due time—a matter of days of even hours—was apparent. The three of them knew it. Tony in his occasional whimpering, waking seconds; Gina when she could make her mind face the fact of Grasso's awful retribution; and Grasso. Of the three, only Grasso was sorry.

If he could have undone his deed, he would. But the boy was

ruined—muscles, tendons and ligaments were torn; others were tearing from the pull of the saplings. Tony would not live, Grasso knew, even if he were cut down now.

Gina was afraid, for herself.

Tony kept saying, "Kill me . . . please . . . kill me." It would have been the merciful thing to do.

But Grasso had gone far enough. He could not kill Tony. Nor could he harm Gina.

Gina, when she saw that Grasso was not going to hurt her, wanted to run down the road, screaming for help. But she knew it would have meant her own involvement in the hideous event transpiring just beyond the soft green lawn of the ranch. That she would be eventually involved was another matter, to be faced later. So she huddled and wept.

Finally Grasso—it was the end of the fourth or fifth hour, and the boy was unconscious for longer periods of time—said to her softly, "Go to the kitchen and get a knife, a big knife."

Mutely she went and returned.

"Now," he said, "finish it."

Her body stiffened for a moment, and then she nodded. She stared up at the twisted, tortured face of her lover. He no longer looked like a boy or a young man; he looked like death. With a fearful, trembling cry, she drove the knife into his heart. . . .

Eventually, a trespasser came across the scene. And the forces of the law moved in.

Neither Grasso nor Gina attempted to deny the story in any way. They confirmed each other's incredible tale. When they had finished, the county D.A. went back to his office to draw up his indictments. He was a good lawyer and he knew the occasional precedent in such matters. To the layman, the D.A. knew, Grasso was guilty of murder. Possibly Gina was an accessory. More likely not, acting as she did under terror and the emotional strain of that unforgettable moment.

But laymen have to be protected from themselves. Under the law, Grasso had not murdered Tony. Gina had. Even though Grasso had caused such wounds that Tony would undoubtedly have died, Gina had brought about the death. It is the essence of such a law that keeps too many people from killing and then claiming mercy-killing for their defense. The person who wrongly, and all murder is wrong, according to the law, accelerates an impending death has committed

murder. Gina had murdered, not Grasso.

So—knowing it was not in him to argue the morals of the case; that was not what his job called for, but merely to attempt to bring to the courts of justice those who were suspected of crime—he indicted Gina for first-degree murder.

Grasso was indicted for assault with intent to kill.

The D.A. pleaded his cases well, but he knew he was beaten before he started. Into a man's home had come an interloper, taking what he wanted and what was not his to take. The unwritten law —that moral code giving a man the right to protect the inviolability of his own home—was far stronger than any of the laws of the country or the state, or even of the land.

A jury of Grasso's peers, simple ranch folks themselves, deliberated twelve minutes before acquitting him of his indicted crime.

A jury of Gina's peers, taking somewhat longer, acquitted her of murder. Though they had finally been made to understand in their minds the law that formed the basis for her indictment, their hearts refused to accept as a fact that Gina's deed was murder. She had committed a terrible sin for which she should have been horsewhipped, but she had not murdered of her own volition —not to these twelve simple laymen.

The D.A. was not maligning Justice when he said she was blind. She was blind because that is the essence of justice. She must not see, because the face of those she deals with is a terrible and confusing sight. It speaks of lust and honor, and murder and love, and sometimes the same face speaks all four. So Justice remains blindfolded while she does, with grace and whatever quantity of fairness she can summon, her very best.

But, you may ask, how do I know all this?

I know all this because I have heard the stories so often that I know them by heart. I have heard Gina's story, and Grasso's story, and I have spoken with people in the town and with the D.A. (who is an old man now) and I, too, know that Justice is blind and works to just ends in strange ways. And I know that punishment is meted out fiercely and in great, terrible doses even to those who remain on the free side of the prisons of our land.

For I am the son that grew out of Gina's and Tony's sin. I have spent twenty years in the home of my mother and my guardian at the ranch, and I have watched them torture each other by their very presence.

I have seen my mother grow horribly old before she was forty, wrinkled and ghastly, and I have thought that she possibly stays on at the ranch because she still wants Grasso's money. I have seen Grasso's eyes as he looked first at me and then at her, eyes that spoke of unendurable pain.

Poor Grasso, sometimes I think. I have thought that he possibly stays on there at the ranch because he is a lonely old man, over eighty now; his heart condition a wisp of memory that plagues him only when he changes a tire on his car, or when he looks at his wife.

That may be why they stay on, together. I think there is another reason. They have become each other's conscience, and through the sight of the other, each pays out his due to the demands of blind Justice.

# Swamp Lice

by TOM ROAN

**The fugitive killers were big and brave with their girl shields.**

IT WAS nearing midnight the fourth day of my first man-hunt when we knew we were getting close to the place where we would have to smell or taste the smoke. None of us liked it, but we had to go ahead with it as we worked the long and broad old bateau through the swampland, an eery world of moonlight and shadows where the Spanish moss in the endless tangle

of cypress ballooned into flying dragons on every hint of breeze stirring through the hot darkness of mid-August.

Even the stench of the black and stagnant water was like a poisonous vapor laden with disease and death as we wound our way through the brakes, moving so quietly we often failed to startle bullfrogs on the seas of giant lily pads or the big moccasins coiled or looped on rotted logs and snags.

We had to have a big boat to carry eight heavily armed men and five bloodhounds. The dogs had caught our nervousness. Old Bugle Bell whimpered softly a few times, a shiver of chills going down her black back. She couldn't have been cold and panting for breath at the same time. Bugle Bell knew—in that uncanny way of a dog's knowing—that death lay somewhere ahead in those dark and dismal Alabama lowlands where three men and two young women were in hiding.

Two of those men were lifers, merciless killers holding the other three as prisoners, two trigger-happy fools itching to shoot it out with us. They would use their prisoners as shields, giving us no chance to get an open shot at them if they could help it.

As a kid of eighteen, I had been more or less a flunky instead of a guard at old Flat Creek Prison. My job had been to take the morning and evening sick reports of the prisoners, to feed the hounds, and do the daily mule-backing with the incoming and outgoing mail. The first two days of running and fighting had automatically elevated me to dog warden when the real dogman and three guards were sent back to hospitals with bullets through them. Our killers ahead, having only an old trusty for a shield at that time, had knocked off eleven of our dogs in the same fight, killing seven and crippling four so badly they had to be taken out of the running.

Bugle Bell was still the queen of what was left of the pack. Her head and body had been scarred by bullets and knives, clubs and rocks so many times on man-runs she should have been retired, maybe to something like an old lady's bodyguard in a lonely house or given the run of a children's orphanage where she could have had plenty of playmates. The dog warden had often cursed her because she didn't have a mean bone in her hide.

Newspapers were trying to whoop it up behind us, but what

could they tell in their flat and emotionless style? We had the hell, the stark and raw drama, the feel of the light and the danger in our blood, in our every thought, going up the hills and down the dales, the perspiration pouring like streams of sweat running from the bellies of horses, and many times the taste of our hearts in our throats.

We first worried about old Pappy Roscoe, a prisoner close to finishing a term of six months because some fee-grabbing deputy sheriff had found a pint of whiskey aboard his little fishboat on the Tombigbee River. We wondered how old Pappy could keep going, only a ninety-pound man bent with rheumatism and nearing eighty. Maybe we quit worrying about him when we heard of the two young and pretty women caught picking berries along a lonely creek and marched away on the muzzles of guns. Bench Koley and Harp Lang, the killers, were certain to handle their prizes with the viciousness of long-hungry wolves tossed warm meat.

Bugle Bell told us we were getting close. There was no doubt about it. Something behind her sad face and that wrinkled forehead was reaching to her through the darkness and the tangle of limbs and moss ahead. She was an old veteran who had grown a little gun-shy from the many things that had been her lot in other runs. Putting her muzzle close to my cheek she whimpered again, ever so softly, the tremble once more racing down her back.

We had each brute on a leash, and we were not going to risk turning them loose and letting them run when the chance came. The dog warden had let the whole pack go. At that time seventeen of us were following on mules. Mules because they were smarter than horses, sure-footed in the rocky and dangerous places, and animals rarely known to hurt themselves even if they had to throw their riders heels-over-head in a boghole to avoid it.

Snake Island would be the one place we would want to avoid. An old grandma at a farmhouse had warned us of that when Bugle Bell led us along the last half-cold trail. She had never seen the island, but she had heard enough about it to believe that all the creeping and crawling things in the swamp made their dens in its rocks and the thick brush under its trees. It would be a rise less than a mile long and half as wide, shunned by the boldest

whiskey-makers who had long used hide-aways in the lowlands until the law finally cleaned them out.

The island was like some great-backed beast rising in the moonlight when we pushed the bateau through a final tangle of reeds and low limbs, the cypress roots scraping the bottom of the boat. Open water glinted around its abrupt slopes like the brim of a silvery hat, the tall reeds and cattails growing in close to form a wall around its base.

If Bench Koley and Harp Lang had landed on it there would be some sign of the big bateau they had stolen on the rim of the swamp, if only the markings in the mud where it had been drawn up to the bank.

Bugle Bell whimpered again, and stood to her feet in the boat, her body tense. We were still carrying pairs of soiled socks and rags of bedding taken from Koley and Lang's cell. Bugle Bell rarely needed more than a first smell, and had been known to keep to a trail for eight days. She knew, that old girl!

In spite of all we could do we would have open water to cross, in places more than a hundred yards wide. We tried to hug the jungle wall of the cypress, but the roots and knees held us away. The moon was constantly finding us, smiling down brightly as if happy to show the moving boat in a searchlight glare.

There would be no quarter. We were not fools enough to expect it, and certainly not simpletons who would waste breath offering it. Our killers would give us the same quick dose they had given the two sewer-line guards just outside the prison walls the late-afternoon the dog warden had the hounds out for a practice run.

Catching the guards a split-second off the alert, Koley had driven a heavy pick through the skull of one while Lang was cutting the other's head half-off with a long-handled shovel. Grabbing up the guards' weapons, they had backed away, each with a prisoner in front of him. We had found one of the poor devils with his head fractured a mile away, and only old Pappy had been taken along. That same night they had robbed a couple of stores, one of them a big hardware company where they had obtained rifles, revolvers and ammunition.

We were almost around the island before we spotted the break in the reeds. Another big bateau like we were using had pushed

the cattails down. The bow had gone on until it was against the foot of a rocky trail leading up to the top of low bluffs. Snakes or no snakes, our killers were up there, armed to the teeth and probably watching us, ready to open fire the moment we turned in.

"Hold your dogs." Big Dad Dunlop spoke in a whisper. He was deputy warden, an old hand on man-runs. "Don't let a whimper out of them. If one gets loose he'll only be killed."

We pulled on, turning down a dark lane of water and going away from the island as if putting it behind entirely. In the crazy quilt patterns cut by blades of moonlight we soon turned back, spending an hour keeping our distance before we saw another crack in the rocks where we might land. It was on the side of the island opposite the place where we had seen their bateau, and old Dad gave another order.

"Six will land. Two will go back and watch their boat from the shadows in case they try to sneak out on us. Watch your shooting if it comes to it. They know they're going to die, here or in prison for what they've already done, and know they haven't a thing on earth to lose. Don't hurt the women or old Pappy. That's all I ask."

We went into the place. After a given time to let the boat move on, Bugle Bell led the way up, the soldier again called to war. She was quiet about it while I held a tight leash, the others doing the same with their dogs. The break was rough and rocky. I slipped, about to slide back a couple of times, but the old hound held me, her claws dug into the rocks, her collar choking the tongue out of her.

There were snakes up there, how many we never knew, but Bugle Bell had grabbed a long black one and was whipping it to bits against her shoulders with her rapidly slinging head before we were on top more than five seconds. It was our last one for the dog to kill, possibly a harmless old blacksnake, but we heard hisses and slithering sounds in the bushes and grass as we cautiously moved on, following a rocky little wash that might have been a trail at some far time in the past.

We were getting close to the center of the island when the gunfire broke without warning ahead. It came in the double blasts of a couple of shotguns our killers had picked up as additional weapons in farm houses where

they had stopped to steal food. Buckshot raked the trees, cutting the tops from bushes, splattering bark around us.

Bugle Bell hit the ground on her belly, and I dropped beside her, only one of the other dogs beginning a startled yelping. The man holding his leash immediately silenced him. Having the deep darkness of the trees as a cloak, we hugged the ground, holding the dogs by their muzzles to keep them silent, having been forewarned by Dad Dunlop as to what we were to do.

We had to hold our fire, not daring to shoot back at the flashes of guns until we could somehow flush our killers into the open and apart from their prisoners. Even then it was going to be dangerous. In a last minute fury our killers would be fairly certain to turn their guns on Pappy and the women, if they hadn't killed the old man somewhere to get him out of the way.

The gunfire had ended, coming only in a few bursts, first from shotguns, then six-shooters. A quick silence gripped the island except for the sound of something gliding away in the grass to my left, then we heard Pappy's voice, and were relieved to know that he was still alive.

"If you want to get away," he was pleading, "you'd better stick to that bateau. All this shootin' will bring the world down on you before mornin'."

"We can at least leave you here!" ripped back a voice. "And have one less to feed!"

"An' what'll you do with the bateau?" Pappy seemed on the verge of laughing. "You two are the dumbest fellers I ever saw when it comes to doin' things."

"Keep your mouth shut!" put in another excited voice. "I told you I heard something, and I did!"

"An' if you didn't," Pappy laughed, "the whole country heard you!"

"I said shut up!"

They were not far away, but the darkness and high bushes under the trees made it as good for them as it was for us. Holding on to the dogs, we started easing forward with some hope of taking them in a rush if we could catch them in a glow of moonlight while we closed in from the blackness around them. Before we had gone far we heard one of the women cry out, and realized that they were retreating, going back to the bluffs where had left their bateau below.

It was worse than looking for

a needle in a dozen haystacks. Pappy, we later learned, was the only one who had seen our boat rounding the island, and he had not told the others. He had been sitting with his back to a tree, fastened there by a length of well chain in a little glade where they had made coffee in a stolen pot over a small fire and opened several tins of food.

All he had wanted was to stop their shooting, fearing the return of our fire to drop one or possibly both the women, yet saying enough to let us know we were close to our wanted man.

When we saw them between us and moonlight on the water we were still a long way from putting an end to the hunt. They were in a line, Pappy in front carrying a heavy gunny sack. The others were pressed in behind him, each carrying something.

In a few seconds they would be disappearing down the rocky trail to their stolen boat, but we were still helpless. Shooting at one of them would hit two or even three with a single bullet, and that was exactly what Koley and Lang wanted, knowing it would make us hold our fire.

They had seen or heard something that had brought on their hysterical outburst of shooting. It could have been a big swamp owl, possibly the top of a bush stirring with a pale glow of night sky showing behind it. Knowing we were after them, they couldn't be sure that we were closing in or not within miles of them.

Fear was their master, their nerves shattered glass. The shadow of death was upon them. They couldn't think of anything else. Every bush or shadow was a waiting gun to cut them down or a voice holding its breath to shout for their surrender, the hangman's noose soon to get them in the end.

It was going to be a get-away right in front of our eyes, and it looked as if we could only squat and hold our breath, our guns ready but useless. Once down the steep trail and they would be back in the big bateau, pushing off, and going where they pleased.

The two men in our boat somewhere in the shadows would be as helpless as we were, afraid to fire a shot or lift a voice, knowing the innocent were apt to start dropping dead in their tracks.

Bugle Bell strained beside me, set like an arrow on a bow ready for instant flight, not a sound coming out of her. I'll never know whether my tight hand did it out of sheer nervousness or the

snap on the leash came loose by itself. The leash was suddenly free, dangling like a small dead snake, and Bugle Bell was going forward, braver by far than the man trying to master her, knowing perhaps ten times more than he knew as to what was to be done, and without a moment's hesitation as to the consequences to herself.

It was the arrow from the bow, nothing short of it. There was only a swish in the grass, and Bugle Bell was gone, not with the burst of outlandish noise that almost invariably comes when a bloodhound goes charging in. She held it until the last instant and was only a yard or two behind the bulky figure on the tail end of the line when she finally gave voice. It was a burst, a sharp and desperate bugle cry, then the one harsh toll of a bell that had given the dog her name.

Harp Lang was the old dog's man. We had known that by the bulkiness of his shadow, shorter and stouter than that of the long-necked and green-eyed Bench Koley. As the dog sounded her battle cry he wheeled, a gasp, a shriek of terror tearing out of him, weapons under his arm slipping and clattering to the ground. He slung a slight little woman around in front of him with one hand, the other a fist around the butt of a six-shooter. He was trying to throw the woman straight into the face of the dog.

Bugle Bell was not interested in the suddenly screaming woman, knowing exactly who she was after. She went over the woman, hitting the man in the stomach with all her weight.

He buckled forward, the muzzle of the six-shooter a burst of fire and noise over the dog's head, his voice the scream of a maniac as he floundered to the ground.

*"Bench! Bench!* They're here!"

"They'll not kill a woman!" Koley's voice was like a frantic wail of pain. If a dog was there he knew that men were right behind it. He had swung around, dropping weapons and whatever else he was carrying, a taller and heavier woman coming around with him, a gripping arm holding her in front of him. "Shoot, damn you, and kill her!"

He had no time to help Harp Lang, and no thought of it. Lang's noise on the ground was enough to terrorize a mob. Had the dog warden seen Bugle Bell at the moment he would have sworn that she had nothing but mean bones. The devil was raging in her otherwise quiet being, her big

muzzle lunging in and out, the long ears flapping black wings, her tail in the air.

Lang had somehow lost his six-shooter, robbed of his wits by the insane fury so suddenly upon him. The crying woman was under him. Bodily, Bugle Bell was dragging him off of her, the woman rolling herself with the pull in her crazed struggling or the hound's sheer strength doing it all alone. In a wild lunge Lang managed to come up just as Koley started insanely firing a sixshooter with his arm looped over the woman he was holding.

Once Lang was clear of the woman we were pumping it into him, our gunfire turning the black world of bushes and trees into bursting blades of light and hellish noise, the rest of the hounds suddenly loosened in our own crazy excitement. Before Lang had gone six wild jumps he was down, screaming for mercy to his last breath as cold-blooded killers will, always eager to dish out pain to others but the first to yelp when stricken themselves.

As if she knew there was no need of going on, Bugle Bell had wheeled back. Any gun-shyness about her was gone. She went straight for the woman, letting out a little yelp and limping as a shot from Koley's six-shooter tore down at her. Going between the woman's kicking and twisting legs, the dog suddenly had the raging Koley by the ankle, her long fangs ripping and tearing upward and into the calf, the blood beginning to pour.

Koley's woman was tearing herself aloose from him a second later. He struck at her with the six shooter, but it was only the raking blow of a mad-man, the weapon merely glancing off her shoulder and missing her head. He had too much to do to strike a second time. Slumping into a clawing wad, he was fighting with the dog. All I had to do when I got there was to hit him a smashing blow to the side of the head with my rifle, bowling him over and breaking the grip of his hands on the old hound's throat.

Bugle Bell was hurt when I pulled her out of the mess, leaving the unconscious Koley to the others, the hangman at last sure of his mad-dog killer. The hound was whimpering, her left foreleg dangling as I laid her on the grass. In the noise and confusion Pappy Roscoe came up, dropping to his knees beside me.

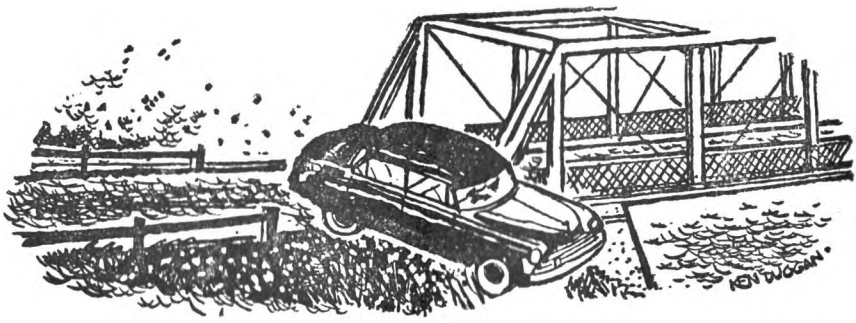
He was an old hand when it came to patching up sick or wounded animals, and had helped

me many times with the dogs. Bugle Bell was his pick and pet of the lot. I thought the old fellow was going to cry there in a patch of moonlight when he tenderly examined her leg.

"She won't ever run agin," he told us. "Her limp's gonna be so bad the other dogs will go on off an' leave her."

He carried her back to Flat Creek with a splint of twigs and torn strips of shorts on her leg, seeing to her all the way. We saw that the women got back home, and took in the body of Lang along with the snarling and threatening Koley in chains. Six weeks later our warden was giving a couple of nods.

Pappy Roscoe went out the gates of Flat Creek with a little bundle of his personal belongings on his back. He wore a cheap blue prison suit, and had his going away "gift" of five dollars in his pocket, along with a sizable bit we had collected by passing the hat. Beside him, limping but with her tail up proudly, was Bugle Bell, going home with Pappy to live out her days with him aboard the little fishboat on the Tombigbee.



by JOHN BENDER

# No Margin for Error

**A lonely wife is fair game for the wolf pack.**

You have killed her, he thought. That part of it is over . . . your wife is dead—all right, he thought. Now what do you do?

But his mind refused the next step in the plan. Not there, not in the same room with her. He felt that if he were to rise now, go out and pour himself a drink, he could work it out. How difficult was it, really, for a man of his intellectual level to arrange an accident?

Without undue haste, he adjusted his jacket and ran his hands once through his thinning hair. In the mirror above her bed he caught a glimpse of his face, and he turned away, surprised at the expression which stared back at him. He walked softly to the door, a short man with long arms and big shoulders, the suitcoat tight against them. At the door he looked back to her, slumped on top of the rumpled covers. Her dress had risen high on one of the very fine legs, exposing the thigh above the nylon. Automatically he started back, to close the

window which was pouring cold air in on her . . . until he realized that it didn't matter now.

Like the bedroom, the rest of the house was cold; it bothered his fingers.

He turned up the thermostat and closed the front door, which she had left open, as was her way, when she had come in. In was a stout oaken door, well hung, silently hinged, and he had but to touch it slightly to make it swing fully shut.

"You were too impatient to close it, my dear," he said aloud to no one. "Were you in that much of a hurry to get back to him?"

He went into the living room, poured himself as much as was left in the whiskey bottle. It looked like four, maybe five ounces. He had never had that much liquor in one drink in all his life. He had never needed it, for one thing, and for another, drinking did not help his playing. Now he imagined it appropriate to an occasion.

He sat down in the wing chair from where he could look out through the big picture window to the narrow ribbon of road below, and he turned the glass slowly in his big, strong hands, thinking about this next part of it.

The body. The body of my wife. The body of the evidence, as the police were apt to put it. A tall, exquisitely fashioned young woman, somewhat taller than he; dark as anger, lovely as a free-running cloud.

He shook his head, frowned at the glass of whiskey and put it down on the table beside him.

Think only of getting rid of a body, he commanded himself. Nothing else. Not of what it was like in the early years of marriage when you were a struggling music student. Not of what your life together might have been. That is finished. Think of how to dispose of a body.

Through the window he could see the first star of evening winking back at him. It would be dark soon, which pleased him. Though there were not too many houses in this area, the darkness would make it doubly certain that he would not be seen carrying the body to the car.

He realized that there was not much thinking to be done, after all. On the quick flight home from Boston he'd let his mind play with darker thoughts, so that now the sequence of imagined events came swiftly to him.

You simply put the body in the seat beside you, then you drive the short mile or so to the bridge, where you have noticed a dangerous gap between the road fence and the beginning of the bridge itself. A space barely wider than your car. But if a car were to skid, going fast in that ten-mile-an-hour-zone—the way she liked to drive—it is just possible a car would go through that gap, off the road and into the river below.

He was amused by the fact that there was some danger to himself attached to the maneuver. He would have to skid the car around at a pretty good rate of speed, to make the tire marks convincing, and there was the chance that he might miscalculate and strike either the bridge entry or the last upright of the fence. Even if he didn't, there was the further challenge which his memory told him lay behind the gap. The proverbial stop on a dime, after which—if there was any after which—he got out, propped her body behind the wheel and sent the car on over.

He sat sipping the raw whiskey, wondering now about himself. His hands were strong and sure. They could break a woman's neck, or fashion the finest music his concert pianist mind directed . . . or guide an automobile with infinite precision. He hoped so.

The phone rang, shattering the silence of the room. He went over and picked up the instrument.

"Yes?" he said.

He caught the not-quite buried note of surprise from the other end. A man's voice asked, "May I speak to Mrs. Porter, please?"

"No," he said, "I don't believe you can. Is this Paul?"

Hesitation and doubt hummed through the silent wire.

"Is this Paul, or isn't it?"

"Why—er, I'll call back," the man said.

"You'd better not. You'd really better not." He found himself smiling. "This is her husband. Would you like to leave a message? Would you like to tell me that you want her to come to your place? Or were you going to spend the evening here?"

The connection cut off abruptly.

He put down the phone and had the rest of his drink. Paul Stanton. What in the name of God had she ever seen in him? A thin, ill-dressed hack of a writer who wrote books that never sold and tried to persuade people that he was a liberal intellectual.

He'd never thought much about the fellow, until recently, on the

tour, when he'd happened to run into some rumors. He had discounted them at first, but then he had begun to worry. Several times he had called home—both to the city apartment and here—without getting his wife; and her explanations, when he finally talked to her, furthered his doubt. The tour did not go well; his playing showed the effects of his worry, so finally he cancelled and came back.

He did not tell her he was coming.

She did not know of his arrival until she walked into the bedroom, twenty minutes ago, and found him sitting there.

"Why, Max! Max, dear! This is a surprise—"

"Isn't it?" He did not hold out his arms to her, did not make any move at all. "Is he with you?" he asked simply, and watched the surprise give way to alarm within her dark eyes.

"Paul," he said. "Paul Stanton."

For a long moment he prayed she would deny it, give her lips to a lie, even. But he saw her shoulders wilt, her face go white and he knew he had struck her with the truth.

"Your lover," he said. "Is he waiting for you?"

"Max, please—"

He came slowly forward. "Tell me of him, good wife."

"Max!" She cowered. "Max, listen to me—"

He slapped her heavily across the mouth. Once, twice; she did not cry out. His big hand became a fist and he hammered her down.

He went into the bedroom and bent over her on the bed, hesitating for just a moment. Without touching her, his hand moved slightly, framing the curve of her dark hair against the pillow, then he shook his head and seized her roughly.

She struggled to move away.

"Are you awake?" He had thought the blow would have kept her unconscious for much longer. He had struck her with all his strength, all his anger; and it had been that sight of her, lying unconscious, that had given him the first persuasion to think of her as dead, to plan of her as dead.

"Yes, I'm awake." She pushed herself to a sitting position among the tangled blankets. "I heard you talking on the phone. It was Paul, wasn't it?"

He said nothing.

"I don't want to see him again, Max. Can you ever believe that?"

She touched the growing bruise along her jawline. "You should have killed me, Max, for the fool I am . . ."

More than the sight of her battered face, the dark eyes pleading for his forgiveness, it was her tears that tortured him. In this moment of her naked grief and shame, his heart urged him to comfort her, to clutch her tightly and admit his own failure, too. Somewhere in the pattern of their lives he had created a loneliness for her—his world of music which he had never let her enter; his tours that left her alone for such diversion as she had sought. He felt everything that they had ever meant to each other pleading with him now, and he gripped the car keys harder in his hand, squeezing, squeezing, until they cut into his fingers.

He stepped away from the bed.

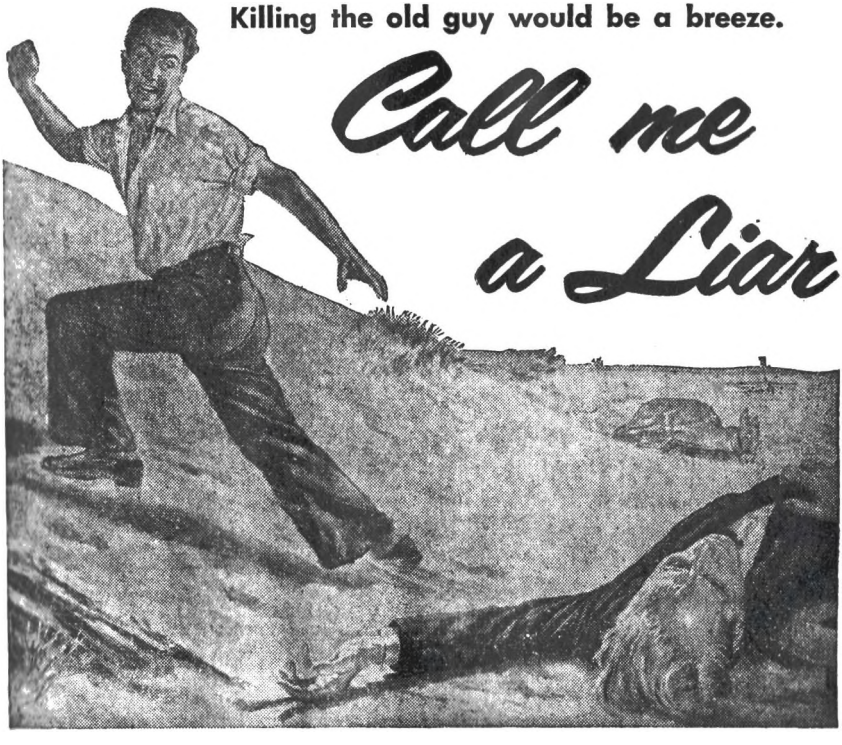
Her eyes, glistening with doubt, searched his own. "Max—?"

He smiled. "I'll be right back," he said. "I just want to put the car away."

by EDWARD A. HERRON

# Call me a Liar

**Killing the old guy would be a breeze.**



THE Starlight Rescue Mission hadn't changed much in eight years. The same old beat-up bums, the same old sniveling winos, the same preacher, and the same grub stacked up on tables waiting for guys like me to come in and eat up.

I sat down beside a relic who had gravy on his vest and yesterday's wine on his breath. He stank.

"You a stranger in town?" he asked between hiccups.

"Go to hell," I answered, politely as I could. I took a deep smell of him and shoved off to the next table. The old boy started to cry, and there was quite a commotion. Just at that moment two detectives walked into the dining hall.

I'm not saying L. A. detectives

are the best in the West. But they were good even before television. When they started looking over all those chow hounds bent over the tables, I could feel cool air between my shirt and my spine.

I tried to eat casual, and the food was choking me. I tried to drink my coffee, and my hand shook so much it was like a semaphore. I gritted my teeth. Inside, my heart was pounding. If they came for me, the guys who were looking up and down the tables, there was nothing I could do. My gun was somewhere in the Mojave Desert where I'd flipped it from the box car.

One of them started down the aisle between the tables. Italian guy, or maybe Mexican. They got lots of them on the L. A. force. He put his hand on my shoulder and I caved.

"What's your name?"

"George Anderson."

"Where you from?"

"Philadelphia."

"What's your trade?"

"Bricklayer. Lost my union card. Got run off the job for beating up on the walking delegate."

"Come along with me."

You'd think I'd be jumping over tables, diving through windows, racing like hell up the street with the detectives drawing beads on me. But you don't run from these fellows. They don't shoot to scare you. They got a reputation to live up to.

I went. All I could think of was, "How'd they do it? How'd they ever find me?"

There was a white-haired guy sitting at the preacher's table. He was old, but he had a face that was tanned almost brown, and he was as tough as a keg of rusty nails. Tough, until he started talking.

The detective inched me forward to the old guy.

"Mr. Silvester," the detective said, "what do you think of this fellow?"

The white-haired bird nodded his head. He looked me over like I was a turkey in the supermarket.

"Fine, fine. Have you told him, officer?"

"No, you tell him."

The white-haired guy beamed while he spoke to me. "Young man, in three days it will be Christmas. Some people come down to the Starlight Rescue Mission and give out food, presents. Me, I try to be practical. I give out jobs. Would you care to work for me?"

I blinked. A job! The detective was getting me a job with this

old stiff. Holy mackerel, this was one for the book!

Mr. Silvester saw me gulping, and he came charging in with the words. "Understand, now, it's not the finest job in the world. It's rather lonely. You'll be by yourself for months at a time. But it is a job. Perhaps by summer you'll have enough saved to get into something you would rather—"

He was lucky he was braced, because I could have leaped into his arms.

"Job?" I asked. "Sure. Why not? Anything to get a couple of bucks together."

"That's what I like to hear." Silvester banged his fist on the table. "It's back in the desert country. Caretaker at one of the talc mines in the Saline Valley." He ripped off a cud of chewing tobacco. "Some of the men have found it an excellent opportunity to break themselves of the drink habit." He looked at me anxiously. "You do drink, don't you?"

I hung my head, ashamed. "Like a fish."

The detective was taking it all in, not very impressed. He cut into the dialogue. "Listen, Mr. Silvester, before you take Anderson here out into the desert, why not let me run a check on him? Just a precaution."

"No, no, officer, thank you. We've got to begin trusting these people some time, and this is as good a time as any. I'll take Mr. Anderson here just as he stands, in good faith, just as he must take me. No, thank you, officer." He took me by the arm. I noticed the firm grip in his fingers. "We'll get started immediately. It's a 200-mile drive, and I'd like to be there in the morning."

Ten minutes later I'm in a swell car with the old gent, mentally thumbing my nose as we passed the Los Angeles City Hall and the ground floor where Sergeant Joe Friday does his television stint.

We headed north, took a bite into the Ridge Route, then swung to the right over Highway Six that leads up to Lone Pine and the desert country dropped down between the High Sierras on one side and Death Valley on the other.

I could have killed the old guy anywhere at all on the long drive through the night. Once past Mojave we had a 100-mile stretch in the darkness that was nothing but a huge cemetery. Walk 50 feet, bury a body, and it wouldn't be found for a year, or forever.

And the old boy was loaded with dough. He didn't hesitate to

spend it when we stopped off at a couple of all-night restaurants for hamburgers. Just for convenience's sake, he showed me the gun in the glove compartment.

"It's a lonely country," he said. "I make it a practice to carry a revolver at all times."

So I waited, ticked off the miles and debated the time and the place, then suddenly I shoved it out of my mind. Why be crazy? I was being carted off to a deluxe hide-out, courtesy of the Los Angeles Police. I'd be nuts to upset the applecart. And if I didn't get his car and his money that night, I would get it later. This guy, Silvester, was a messenger from the Big Rock Candy Country.

The sun was making a show over the range of mountains that blocks off Death Valley 200 miles northeast of Los Angeles when we bumped over a sand road, climbed a hill, and rolled to a stop before two tar-paper shacks. Back on the side of the mountain was a hole. Dribbling down from the hole was a refuse pile of chalky white rock—talc.

"This is the Magnet Mine," Mr. Silvester explained. "I have several others that are producing heavily. For the time being I have stopped production here at Magnet. That's why I need a caretaker to watch over the machinery and tools."

"You afraid somebody'd steal the stuff?"

Silvester chuckled and shook his head. "With the exception of an old Indian family about four miles over the hill, there isn't a soul between here and Lone Pine. No, I'm not afraid of theft. It's rust. Come with me."

He spent an hour with me, going over the place, showing me the machinery that had to be turned over once a day, the motors that had to be oiled, the pumps that had to be turned on.

"You'll find ample grub in the cookhouse. I will come by once each month to see that you are all right, to bring you anything you need, and to bring your salary, of course."

He stood by that fine car, his hand on the door. I was looking over his shoulder, imagining myself at the wheel, barreling north to Reno.

"You'll be lonely," he said, "but of course, you've got the burro for company."

Little stinking jackass that kept hanging around like a puppy dog. I had in mind to kick him right in the rear flat as soon as Silvester was out of sight. But the old guy

felt like preaching, and I couldn't shut him up.

"I've spent a lifetime in the desert, Mr. Anderson," he said. "I don't mind telling you I was once given a break by a person who believed in me when there wasn't much to go on. I've tried to do the same with others." He put his hand lightly on my shoulder. "God bless you, Mr. Anderson."

Then he got in the car, and rolled off in a cloud of dust down the sandy road. I whispered after him as that fine car topped the rise. "Take care of that car, old timer. Pretty soon I'll be driving it myself."

Then I turned around and kicked that sniffling little burro right square in the seat.

For 30 days I squirted oil, pushed buttons, ate good and lay out in the sun. Wasn't a damn thing moving as far as the eye could see except some big ravens wheeling around the sky—and the burro. The more I kicked the little fellow, the more he came bouncing back. Finally I stopped kicking. Then I started feeding him, and damned if I didn't wind up liking the little cuss. We used to walk around the desert together, the burro tagging along like a big old dog. Nights he used to sleep outside the bunkhouse door.

We were alone—until these two Indian kids showed. Neither one of them more than 14 years old. And about as friendly as two rattlesnakes.

"You kids get the hell off this property and stay off." What else could I say when I found them stealing armfuls of canned goods from the cookhouse? "I catch you around here again I'll cut your guts out and feed them to the burro."

They didn't scare easy. It was the other way around. These weren't ordinary kids. They tossed me bits of information like I was a hungry dog.

Ran away from the Indian school up in Nevada. Banging around in that desert country, raising hell in all the abandoned mining camps for 50 miles around. The old Indian couple across the mountain were grandparents to one of them.

"Git going!" I yelled at them.

The burro got into the act. He must have read the scare in my voice. He lifted on his front legs, cocked his rear and let one of the Indians have a belt in the belly. They took off.

Just before they got out of hearing one of them yelled, "We

coming back and kill that burro."

Silvester showed the next morning, and I'm so nervous and upset and worrying about what's going to happen to the little burro, I don't even have time to think about stealing the old man's car and taking it on the lam.

"I'm telling you, Mr. Silvester, those kids are dangerous. No telling what they'll do!"

"I'll call the sheriff when I get back to Lone Pine. He'll send a couple of deputies over to check up on them."

"Deputies? No. No." I said fast. "Don't bother. I can handle this. I don't want no deputies hanging around asking questions."

He looked at me close. "As you say, Mr. Anderson. But I will leave you this gun of mine. I'm going to run up the valley 50 miles. I'll be back later in the morning."

He left the gun, and when he was gone, I cradled that little Walther like it was a jewel. Heaven-sent. I laid it on the table while I took a walk back to the mine shaft for my oiling chores, and when I got back, it was gone.

I was scared. Those kids were back. They had the gun. Sure, they'd kill the burro, but would they stop there? I hid in the bunkhouse, shaking. You can't reason with a kid with a gun. I remembered threatening to cut their guts out, and the more I remembered, the more I thought of the two of them, hiding back there in the hills with that gun.

I was still hiding and shaking in the bunkhouse when Silvester came back. I told him what happened.

"I'll get that gun back," he said. Never for a minute did he doubt what I was saying. Especially when just at that moment a shot rang out. Silvester threw open the door. The little burro was stretched out on the wooden doorstep, blood pouring from its head, its feet kicking in spasms.

"They're up on the hill!" Silvester yelled, "I'll get them!"

He ran out the door, jumped over the burro, and at that second another shot rang out. Silvester crumpled and fell just beyond the burro.

He had it right in the chest. I held him in my arms, and he looked up at me gratefully. "Mr. Anderson," he whispered, "I must get to the sheriff, I must tell him the boys weren't aiming at me. I walked into the line of fire. Remember that." He pulled himself erect and dragged himself over to the car, and the blood from his chest ran over the green of the

seat cushion. He fell back in the sand.

"Steady, old guy," I said. "I'll drive you into Lone Pine. Get a doctor there."

"You can't," he whispered. "The sheriff will ask you questions."

"To hell with the sheriff," I shouted. "I'll tell the truth—they'll believe me!"

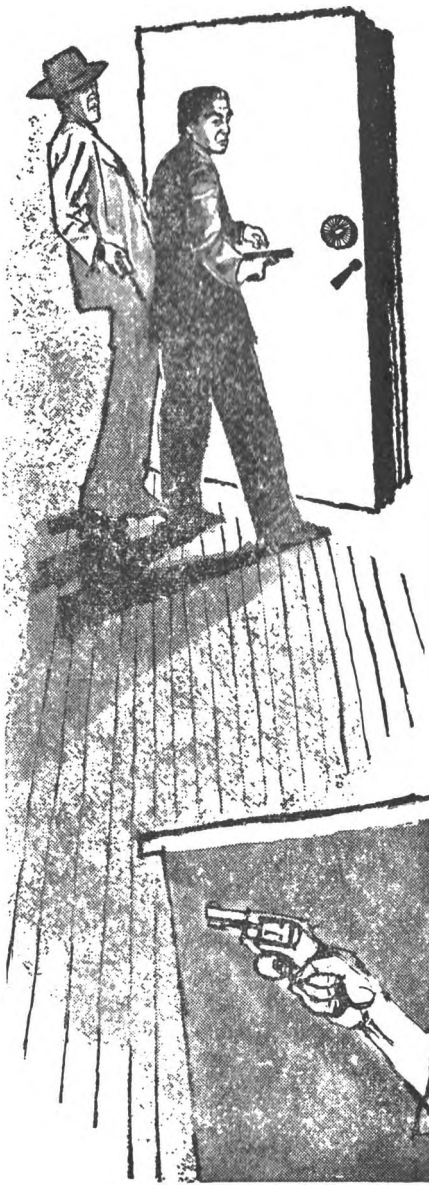
The burro stopped kicking. It was dead. Then Silvester died, too. I stretched him out on the ground, and I ran like mad up on the hill, ready to tear those two Indian kids apart with my bare hands. There was no trace of them. Only the gun in the sand. I grabbed it up and started over the hill, ready to shoot the first Indian I met.

There was a cloud of dust on the road, bearing down on me. I stopped the car. Two deputy sheriffs jumped out.

I told them my story, and they took the gun away from me carefully, and had me sit beside them while they drove on to the Magnet Mine and the dead burro and the body of Mr. Silvester.

That's my story. Call me a liar.

The jury did.



# IRON MAN

**Gridiron-warrior Amory tried to be a hero in his business life—and in his love life.**

*by WILLIAM R. COX*

AMORY CLEAVER opened his eyes and things began to swim into focus. There was a strong hospital odor and a vessel containing red blood suspended above him and a rubber tube attached to his left arm. Doc James was leaning close, very

sober and concerned, saying, "You shouldn't bother him, Matt."

That was Matt, then, out of focus at the foot of the bed. He was sweating in his uniform and apologetic. "Hell, Doc, he's a friend of mine, too. It's regulations, we got to get a statement if we can."

That was right, the police had to get details, Amory thought, but as yet he could not speak because the middle was out of him. He had a head and feet but no middle. Now he could see Nurse Hayworth in the background, starched and rail-like and distastefully dried up, something in her sterility which disgusted him and angered him. His voice came back, a little weak, but clear:

"It's all right, Matt."

Matt's bulk shut off view of everything else. His husky voice was gentle. "How'd they get in? Do you know, Amory? What'd the other two look like? They got away with the loot, you know, the two you didn't get."

"I was too slow." Amory hesitated a moment, organizing his thoughts. He had the advantage, he could take all the time he needed before he spoke. "I was working late on the books. I heard them come in that side door in time to switch off my light. The gun was right there. I tried to get to the other alarm switch. I thought I could shoot it out with them."

"It was crazy, Amory." Matt spoke with gentle reproof. "You know better. The bank's insured."

"I know."

"Okay, don't try to talk. You took the gun and went after them. They spotted you and got in the first shot. Then you killed one of them but they plugged you twice more and you never got to the alarm. They grabbed all the cash and lammed."

Amory nodded. He was becoming aware of the great weight which lay upon him. He felt no pain, but the weight was tremendous. The weakness was because of the weight.

Matt said, "Over thirty thousand, they got. I'm sorry as hell, Amory. You shouldn't have done it."

"I know," he repeated. He closed his eyes and felt Matt retire from the bedside. It was better with his eyes closed.

Matt was saying to Doc James, "Man lives twenty years quiet-like, raises a family, good sensible citizen. Somethin' like this comes up—voom! Remember when Amory played football with us?"

"I remember."

"Crazy! The chances he took. Suicide, the way he played. I thought Sarah and the kids and the bank took that all outa him."

"Such a sweet guy," sighed Doc. "We'd better leave him alone, Matt. It's nip and tuck, you know."

His ears were extremely sharp, because Doc whispered that last line. He knew Doc well enough to define the meaning of the old cliche. The door closed and he was alone with Nurse Hayworth. He opened his eyes and she was staring at him.

He said distinctly, "I know why I hate you." She gasped and he chuckled drily, "Yes, you, Hayworth. I hate you because you remind me of my mother."

She took slow steps backward, her hand going to her mouth. She reached for the door handle, made a mewing, cat sound and fled. In a moment Doc bustled in, but Amory pretended to be unconscious and actually he was not far from it and the great weight was holding him very still in the bed.

He was remembering his mother. Widowed when Amory was ten, she had really been wedded to church from adolescence, removed from worldly matters, mean as a miser, virtuous, cruel in her righteousness. His father had indubitably died from frustration and inability to cope with her.

When Amory had looked for love he had received a Verse, when he wanted understanding it was a lecture he received. When she developed cancer he waited on her, was revolted by her maunderings, watched her die cursing the God she had always worshipped. She went the year he graduated from high school.

*Fairhill High, I love you,* the old song whimpered in his ear. Football despite his mother's disapproval. Hurtling at bigger men, hearing the cheers of the crowds. Then the bank, nice and safe, and Sarah Morton, cool, pretty, aloof Sarah, who never went with another boy, only Amory. Of an exact age, they had been married when they were twenty-one and he a teller in the Fairhill First National.

Nineteen years ago, that was. Through the haze which was about him on the hospital bed the past became stronger than the present, but he knew that Doc went away, taking Hayworth with him. Amory carefully opened one eye. The blood from the bottle

was dripping into his vein with dull monotony.

His friends would be calling. Mike and Parky and Sambo and the others from the Country Club, they'd all be worrying. He was well-liked. He had wanted all of his life to be liked and that much he had gained. It wasn't enough, but it was something, and he had clung to it, perhaps too tightly.

The door opened and it was Sarah, coming close, looking down at him, cool even now, but worried, too. He made an effort to smile but Sarah remained solemn. Pretty, yes, very pretty and detached and well groomed and quiet.

"Hullo, Sarah. The kids all right?"

"As well as could be expected." She was far away, on a hilltop, looking down at him. There was regret in her, but also disapproval, he knew. "Are you in pain, Amory?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Is there anything you want to tell me?"

That was Sarah, direct. "Am I that far gone? Last wishes and all that stuff?"

"Amory, you should know you've only a small chance. If they haven't told you, they should. Three bullets in you. . . . I can't understand why you did it."

"Why shouldn't I have done it?"

She could meet his gaze, hear the irony in his voice and feel no blame. Nothing in her seemed wrong to her. After Joey was born she had found herself frigid and quite simply she had accepted it and moved into the spare bedroom. After all it had been only a small change in her.

Well, the error had been his. He knew it, looking at her, conserving his strength, becoming aware that there were a few things he still might do. It had been his fault for not making the break then, going away, starting over again. Twelve years ago he had been young enough to get away with it.

She said, "They'll give you a medal or put up a plaque in the bank, won't they? Was that it? You never got over being in the spotlight. You never outgrew high school, Amory! You never got over not being in the war."

He merely smiled, knowing how she over-simplified everything, how she could not refrain from putting him in the wrong in her cool, practical way. With her continence it had become an ob-

session to coolly put him in the wrong.

It was his acceptance which was wrong, at that. So, in a way, she was correct. He had continued to be polite to her and her friends, to live with her and maintain appearances. He had dawdled along the road to his own destruction.

She said, "The children want to see you."

He nodded. This was one of the things he had to do.

Joey was twelve and big-eyed and probably the only one who believed his father was a hero and that right was might and all would be well in the end, like television. No use to worry about Joey because nobody could tell as yet what he would be like.

It was Sally, pretty like her mother at fifteen, cool like her mother too, at least on the surface. But he thought that underneath she was as Amory had always been, and he wanted desperately for her to bring it out, no matter the consequences. Sambo's big son was in love with her and that was fine, if she could break from the cocoon, if she could avoid the heritage of Sarah. He beckoned her close.

He whispered to her, "Marry him next year. Hold onto him. Try and understand him. Love him, Sally. Love him hard and good. Don't wait, don't let it get away. It might not come again."

For a moment he thought she understood. Her eyes grew bright, her lips parted, she was lovely. Then perplexity came upon her and she drew back and turned uncertainly to her mother.

He closed his eyes, pretending unconsciousness. Everything was becoming a great effort and there was nothing he could do about the children anyway. They were not his, they were Sarah's. When they went away he slipped into a darkness which was like a blanket covering his head and his feet and the nothing in between.

When he could see again Doc was injecting something into his chest. He could feel nothing, but he could see Doc's blunt, capable hands.

Doc said, "Steady, pal."

"Sure."

"You got to stick in there."

"That's right."

"Linda's been waiting all morning to see you. She won't go away."

"Nice of her." He managed to keep his voice even.

"Is there something about the bank?"

"Yes. A big loan. She's got to know."

"She's such a nice girl. Should have been married long ago. You want to see her, Amory?"

"I ought to."

"We're understaffed. It would help if she could sort of watch you awhile. I'm due in surgery. You're stronger now, Amory."

"Don't kid me, Doc."

"You're going to be all right."

"And you're to be Queen of the May. Remember when we were all in the Red Cross, Doc? During the war? I know about belly wounds."

"I'm the doctor. You'll be all right."

"In hell, I'll be all right."

Doc looked pained and amazed, but a bit relieved, too. He went out, and after a moment Linda came in.

This was the hardest part, looking at her, knowing how it would be for her. She was slim and better than beautiful with her soft lips and wide mouth and honest, tilted nose and the unexpected depth of her bosom. Her violet eyes were wide and terrified, but she did not weep. She was not a weeping woman.

He said, "I missed the boat, darling."

"Why? Why did you do it?" There was no reproach in her voice, only wonderment, deep grief.

"It was a thing. It just went wrong. I went wrong."

"No. You weren't wrong. Maybe mistaken."

"I had to try and cover. The examiners were due."

"We could have started over. I wanted that so much. What if you went to jail for a couple of years?" She touched him with her fingertips. "I love you, Amory."

His quick response to her utter truthfulness weakened him, so that he had to fight to stay conscious. This was the only important thing, this before him. He had to get this right at last. Nothing else was any good, only this.

"I love you, Linda. But I wasn't worth your love. All the years, doing nothing about it, taking, taking. Knowing there had to be a bad ending, going straight for it."

She shook her head. She knew all there was to know about him. In the long nights they had stolen together he had talked, as he could not talk to anyone else. Drunk and sober he had poured it out on her, everything that went to make him what he was.

She said, "They did it to you. Your mother and Sarah."

"Don't blame them. Blame me, for letting them. You've got to see that, darling. I've got to make you see it. I'm a gutless wonder."

"You've got more guts than anyone in the world," she said fiercely. "Who knows better than I?"

He grabbed at remaining strength. He was failing, but he had to get enough together for this. The weight on him was terrific. He held on a moment, forcing back the black weakness.

He said slowly, "Listen to me. I want you to get quietly out of town and to New York. And live. Just live and you'll be fine, because you're you. Will you listen to me?"

She shook her head, holding back tears.

"You'll do it—when you know." He sought for the words to make it very clear and plain to her. "You know I took cash, so that the books wouldn't show I was stealing."

"You took it for us," she said. "To gamble and get us a new start. I know why you took it."

"And lost it. Never mind that. Look, Linda, I planned the robbery. I fixed the alarm and let those burglars in. If they took the cash, it would be okay, see? My thefts would be included in the loot."

She stiffened, her eyes widening, partially understanding.

"You didn't know that, did you? And if I got clear, then what? I went on living with Sarah and loving you."

"No," she protested. "Oh, no!"

"The gutless wonder. Not even straight with his girl."

"I don't care. I won't believe it!"

"Listen, Linda. I let the three men in. I went into my office. The gun was there. I sat a moment, thinking about everything. About Sarah, the kids, you. Something crackled in my head. Not anything reasonable. A crackling, like cellophane being rumpled. Everything went tasteless, wrong."

"It's not true. You're imagining things."

"I went berserk. I told them I'd changed my mind. I showed them the gun, I don't know what I said. I only knew everything in my whole life was wrong. I think I had some wild idea that if I double-crossed them and captured them I'd be forgiven for stealing." He gasped and the shadows began thickening. "Listen, Linda, listen carefully. There was nothing left,

not even you. Nothing. One of them had a .45 automatic in his hand. He merely lifted it and shot me. Linda, listen—I could have beat him to the shot. I could have—and I didn't."

She was believing him now. She knew enough about him, about the dark places in his mind, the awful futility which harassed him. He saw the horror in her and, he hoped, revulsion.

"I welcomed that shot. So help me, it was the answer. Then I fired. That was murder, Linda. I murdered that man. I had invited him into the bank. I turned on him and killed him and I would have killed the others."

"No, Amory, no! Please!"

"Now will you go away? Will you lead your own life? Will you forget?"

"I'll never forget."

"But you'll do as I ask? Please, Linda?"

She was silent. He knew she was thinking, because she had a good mind. There was a tunnel somewhere near him but he would not look into its maw until she answered.

She said, "I'll do it, Amory. I'll do what you say."

She was loose of him, then. He felt it. The weight lifted from him. The darkness grew deeper and the tunnel's mouth came closer, but that was all right. He heard her cry for Doc to hurry.

The tunnel began to revolve, quite slowly and he slipped into it, began the last slippery slide. He was exultant.

He had fooled her. Her very cleverness prevented her from believing in the coincidence of the burglary. It was too pat, coming in time to save him from exposure, coming so fortuitously at the moment he needed it worst.

It would have been perfect if the sharp-eyed burglar had not detected him crouching behind his desk. That was the one he dimly remembered having seen earlier, the one who undoubtedly had fixed the alarm during the afternoon. A good shot, that one, to plug him from twenty feet away in semi-darkness.

He had lied well. He had only partially lied. If they had got away with the cash and he had been reprieved, what would he have done? Probably he would have continued to live with his family and slowly drag Linda past the point of no return.

It both surprised and pleased him that, for a change, he was thinking of Linda. This was honestly the first time he had ever thought unselfishly of Linda. Years

ago he had meant to break with Sarah and go away with Linda. He had *meant* well. But that wasn't enough, so mother had always said. Mother had said that the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

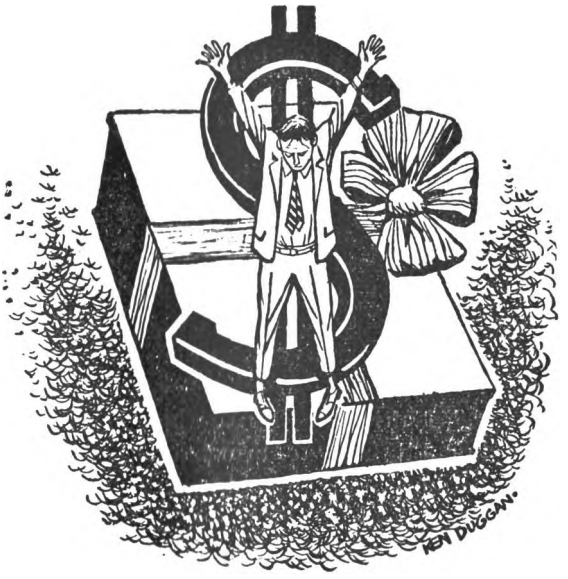
That night he had been with Linda—that special night—he had vowed to himself that he would leave Sarah. He had been strong that night. The next morning, Sarah—with her shrewd mind, unfettered by emotion—had sensed that strength in him. And Sarah had had one of her convenient heart attacks, complete with faltering step and martyr's gentle smile. Postponing the decisive moment had been easy for him. There had been a certain amount of relief in it, too. Always face a crisis by ignoring it—that had been Amory Cleaver's code.

Now, Linda would be free to try to pick up the loose ends of misspent years. Sarah would be free to continue her chaste life. And now he would be free—from indecision and doubt . . . and weakness. His strength had come from weakness.

There was that fatal weakness in him, he knew. Like his father, he remembered mother saying. How often she had said it! Over and over, weak like his father. Had his father been weak, or merely weary of mother?

That was another thing he would never know. He sighed and went gratefully down the spinning tunnel to oblivion. Better this than living and knowing, perhaps.

**The little con man had an electronic brain for detail.**




*by GEORGE C. APPELL*

# GIFT WRAPPED

WHEN I walked into Bistany's on Line Avenue I braced myself against the physical impact of the place—the neat rows of display cases with their moistly glittering jewels, the expensive hush that seemed to breathe from the soft gray pile carpeting underfoot, the elderly clerks whose frock coats and striped trousers touched them with a dignity in keeping with the place and its reputation.

One said quietly, "Good-day, sir," and declined his chin though with no effect of servility.

I nodded curtly, bracing myself once more to maintain my pose, reflecting that after all this was my fortieth birthday and I owed myself a present. Even MacQuarrie at Headquarters would agree with that. "I'd like to see a diamond brooch," I said casually.

The silver-gray clerk glanced politely at me. "If you could give me an idea of what you wish to pay—"

"Oh—anything up to ten thousand." I dipped a hand into my pocket and fingered the last ten dollars I had in the world. Business, my business, hadn't been good lately; people were getting cautious.

The clerk sat opposite me, and presently I was examining four exquisite brooches. One in particular caught my fancy; its cluster and pendant were perfect. "Personally," I intoned, "I like this one, but I'll have to bring the lady here so she can make her own choice."

"Of course. And may I say, sir, that I quite agree with you on that selection?" An expression of dreaming intentness came to his face. "You really know jewels."

He was so right.

I shrugged. "May I have your card? And also the tag number of this particular brooch."

The clerk gave them to me, rose. "Thank you, sir." He escorted me to the doors, showed me out.

On Line Avenue, I strolled for a few blocks before I went into a drug store and invested ten cents in a call to Bistany's. "I'll speak with Mr. Bistany," I said loftily.

"Who's calling, please?"

Roughly I said, "This is Mr. Carrington, J. J. Carrington."

Almost immediately, Bistany was on the phone. "This is indeed a pleasure, Mr. Carrington. What may I do for you?"

There was no unctuousness in his voice, he was too important a jeweler for that; but there was a withheld urgency that bespoke his desire to serve J. J. Carrington.

"See here, Bistany, I'm a victim of short memory. My secretary just informed me that it's Mrs. Carrington's birthday and I want to do something, naturally."

"Yes, Mr. Carrington."

I had the feeling that he was taking notes. I guessed that everybody took notes when J. J. Carrington spoke to them. "I'm absolutely tied up now, but last month after I got back from Europe, I was in your place—slumming." We laughed easily together. "A diamond brooch caught my eye, and I still have the number of it." I spoke the digits slowly. "If you could send it round to my house today, I'd appreciate it."

"Why certainly, Mr. Carrington," and Bistany repeated the number.

I breathed on my fingernails. "Gift wrapped, of course."

"Why really, Mr. Carrington!" Bistany laughed again. "The

firm's name on the box is gift wrapping."

We both laughed, I said good-by and hung up. A faint sweat damp was all over me and I went out into the fresh air again. . . .

An hour later, fortified by a stout drink, I invested another dime in a telephone call, this time to J. J. Carrington's house. "This is Bistany's," I told the butler. "Can you tell us if a package arrived for Mrs. Carrington?"

The butler was silent, as if he were looking around the hall. Then he said, "It came about twenty minutes ago."

I released a stored-up breath. "We're sorry to trouble you, but it was delivered by error. We're sending a clerk over to pick it up." I glanced at the name on the card I'd been given in Bistany's, and read it aloud.

"Very well, sir," the butler said.

I walked uptown toward Carrington's house, humming softly. So far, so good. Neat. Air-tight. It had taken some research, but all big jobs did. I'd cased J. J. Carrington for a month, more intensively than I'd ever cased a mark in my life. I knew all about his credit accounts, his clubs, his travels. Those things can be gleaned, in my business. And I knew what his voice sounded like, how he cleared his throat roughly at times, how he bit off his words and fired them out fast. I learned that by listening to him twice and at length: when he made a speech over the Universal network in defense of capitalist enterprise in today's world, and more recently when he'd come out of one of his clubs in jovial humor and had to be assisted into a cab. I know, because I assisted him, I'd been waiting night after night for just such an occasion. And as he settled back into the cab with a happy grunt, he handed me the ten dollars I still carried. Noblesse oblige.

Nearing his house now, I hailed a taxi, climbed in and gave Carrington's address. When we reached it I said, "Wait. I won't be a minute."

The butler swung the grilled doors open and surveyed me. I presented the card that the clerk at Bistany's had given me, and said off-handedly, "We called before. It's about the brooch that was delivered by mistake."

"Oh, yes." The butler wheeled majestically and entered the marble foyer; instantly he was back again, holding out a neatly-wrapped parcel, oblong, small and light.

I carried it down the steps to the waiting taxi and climbed in. My knees were tallow, my hands had no strength.

"Drive south," I croaked. "I'll give you the address later."

But the driver just sat there. Then the door I'd just closed opened swiftly and MacQuarrie from Headquarters ducked in and plumped down next to me.

"Almost, eh?" he greeted me, and gave a precinct address. He snatched the parcel and clicked on the bracelets with two smoothly-continuous cross motions of his deft hands. Then he said, "I almost forgot—Happy Birthday."

"Thanks," I said bitterly. "Where'd I slip?"

MacQuarrie snorted impatiently. "You won't be around to try this again for a long time, but if you ever do try it again, remember to do a thorough casing job."

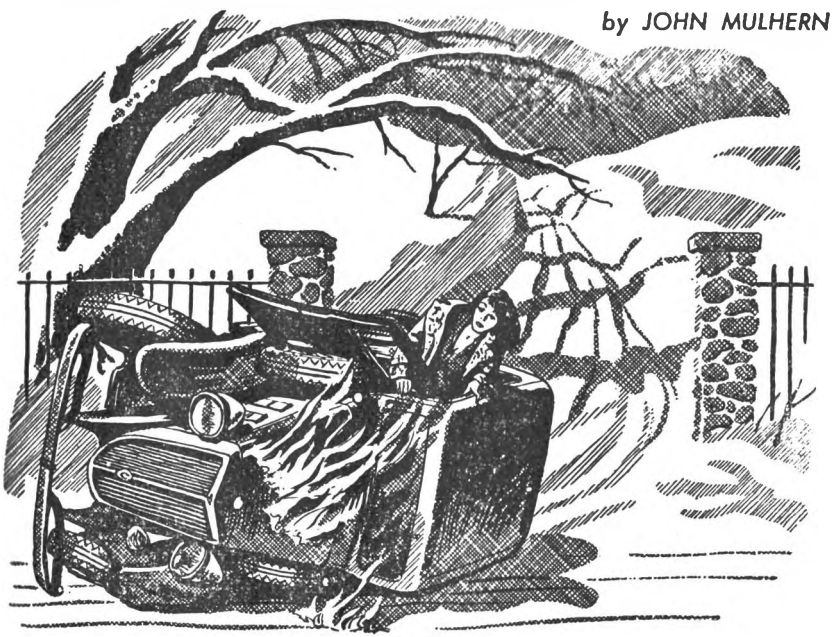
"But I—"

He waved me to silence. "Never forget this: nice ladies don't have two birthdays in the same week."

# the Trouble with Alibis

**Harry could rescue his acid-tongued wife—or let her go to blazes.**

*by JOHN MULHERN*



THE BLEATING of the kid came thinly through the cold twilight air, a fragile sound which pushed around the edges of Harry's mind. He heard it, recognized it, knew he should be doing something about it, but he could not wrench his eyes from the terrible thing at the bottom of the hill.

If he moved, he thought, he might become hysterical, though whether with fear, elation, relief, or anxiety, he could not tell. He knew he ought to go out and put

the kid back inside the warm barn. If he left it tethered outside much longer, it would freeze to death, and he would have lost it without gaining anything—for the cougar, or whatever it was that was molesting his sheep, would still be free. He ought to go now. And he would, he told himself; he'd go in just a minute.

This—this thing out here in front was important too. Maybe, just maybe, it was the most important thing that had ever happened to Harry. He was a little surprised to notice how calmly he seemed to be handling himself. But he knew, too, that he could not trust himself to move. Not yet.

He watched the fire. At first it had been only a tiny tongue of flame darting from the under part of the wreck at the bottom of the slope. It was sharply, swiftly blue for a moment and then, as it grew furiously, it was fire color —cunning, hungry, odious.

He had an impulse to run to the telephone and call the sheriff, the doctor, all the others he should be calling. But he held himself rigid. He had gone this far, and he would see it through. He had to. No one ever would—or could—accuse him of the thing of which he would be guilty. And even if they did, and if they proved it—somehow, it would all be worth it anyway.

Downslope, the old automobile, lying grotesquely on its side, was a mass of writhing flame. And Fran was there—pinned half inside, half outside the wreckage. Harry hoped she liked it. She said that she was going to have a hot time. He hoped she liked it good.

He watched it burn.

Fran pursed her lips and scowled at her outstretched fingers. "You know something, Harry?" she said as she picked up a buffer and began running it over her nails. "You're a jerk. I mean, really. When I think what I could have had. When I *think*. It makes me sick."

She went on talking, but Harry wasn't listening. It had been a long time since he had listened to her very carefully. Once she got an idea in her head, she ran it ragged; she never forgot it, and whatever she had to say, Harry had always heard it before.

Besides, it was usually some kind of complaint and Harry was tired of Fran's complaints. There had been a time—a wonderful, almost enchanted time back at

the beginning, the beginning which seemed, now, like so many centuries away—when, fooled by her, Harry listened solicitously to Fran's complaints and spent nearly all his time trying to remedy them.

But that was before—before he found out what she really was. After a while he had stopped trying. He was sorry he had ever bothered to try to satisfy her at all, and finally he grew to be sorry he had ever married her.

He fought the acknowledgment of that regret for a long time; it was not an easy thing for a man to have to admit, not an easy thing, even, for a man to have to think about. But it was there: she was there and he was there and they were, as Fran liked to put it, practically lost out in the middle of nowhere, with hardly anybody to talk to except each other.

Sometimes they went for days without seeing anybody else. That had never bothered Harry before. He liked the solitude of these backwoods foothills. It was the only place he'd ever wanted to live. And he used to daydream about getting married to some beautifully regal girl who would love him wildly and bring forth many children and help him to build some sort of glorified, if vague, prosperity out of this broken-down ranch.

And later, when he would reflect on this dream, it angered him with an intense bitterness. Why, of all people, did it have to happen to him—this girl from nowhere who had drifted into the next town one day and batted her blue eyes at every man in the county? Why him—why her, why this? There was no reckoning with it and, after a while, no living with it.

"You jerk," Fran had said, "if I had only known—" and she spread her hands in dismay. "If I just could have *known*. . . . A *ranch*, he calls it. Come and marry me and live on my *ranch*, he tells me. I come like a dope, and just look at this place. *Ranch*. Ha!"

She often talked that way, as if there were a third person in the room with them, as if she could not bear, or would not condescend, to talk to Harry, and had to use some added medium to communicate with him.

In the beginning, when they were first married, Harry would reply with something like, "Aw now, honey . . ." But that was a long time ago.

Now, he would say simply, "Go

to hell," and that would start Fran off again on some new tirade.

"You know something, Harry?" She would be flipping through a magazine, her eyes narrow with envy, her mouth pursed with the fury of having been so foully cheated. "You know, these new sports cars. They're awful cute, and I could use one to run into town with and everything . . ." and then they would fight about the three thousand bucks which the car would cost, and which Harry did not have.

Then Ted March came along. Ted March was just the first in a long string of interests Fran picked up. At first she had been reasonably discreet about the thing, but the population of the county plus Fran's indifference to gossip were things which could not for long hide the truth. Harry didn't care, not any more. From the very first he knew his anger was only something stemming from an injured pride. Jealousy simply did not exist. Fran was not that important to Harry. On the contrary, sometimes he wished one of her admirers would cart her away for good. That would suit Harry just fine. In the meantime he would continue to ignore her as much as possible.

And it was possible, in spite of her whining all the time. He decided he didn't even hate her. What he felt was, mostly, disgust. In an odd way, the difference pleased him.

This afternoon he had worked for a long time in the north pasture, far upslope behind the house. The trap was rigged for the big cat. And tonight the cat would be interested only in the kid, for Harry had herded his fifty-five sheep into the crammed safety of the barn.

It was almost twilight when he got back to the house. He stamped his feet at the kitchen door, to shake off the snow, and went inside. There was no sign of dinner being prepared, and Harry knew what that meant. Fran would be in the bedroom, fixing herself up to look like a tramp, and then she'd be off for an evening in town.

He hung his mackinaw on the back of the door and got a bottle of beer from the refrigerator. He was leaning against the sink, gulping the beer, when Fran came into the room. She was dressed to the teeth. Some queen. Ha.

"Where are you going?" he said without interest. It was a question he had come to ask

automatically and without really wanting to know, a question whose answer he already knew. He waited for her to make her usual speech.

She made it. "Well, if it's any of your business," she said, "I'm going in to town. I'm going to get a load on, too, jerk. I'm going to have a hot time. And I'm sure as hell not going to get one sitting around this dump." She walked across the room to where Harry stood and thrust her face up close to his. "See?" she said. "Does that answer your question?"

Very softly he said, "Yes."

"Furthermore," Fran went on, "if you had any gumption in you, you'd do the same thing. But not you—oh, no. Got to catch a tiger. Got to watch the lousy goat. Got to watch the thermometer so the goat don't freeze. Got to protect the stinking *ranch*. Well, not me, mister."

He took hold of her shoulders. "You can't drive in this weather," he told her, "not if you're drunk on the way back."

She laughed shortly. "Maybe I won't *be* back. How'd you like that?"

His eyebrows went up. "I'd like that fine," he said quietly.

"I'll bet you would. Jerk."

"But the car," he said, "I'll want the car back."

"Jerk."

She yanked on a pair of gloves and went to the door. She turned and opened her mouth as if to say something, then decided against it.

The door closed behind her.

She'd be back, of course. It was an empty threat—and an old one he had heard too many times to start believing in it now.

He heard the cough of the motor, and he moved to the window in the front room, watching Fran buck the car backwards in a semicircle. There was a grinding of gears, and then she was turning into the rutted road. Momentarily the car slid sideways on the ice, then caught hold and moved faster down the hill as Fran gunned it.

He drew in his breath sharply as he saw she had no intention of slowing down before making the turn at the bottom of the hill. The fool—the stupid little fool. And as he involuntarily shouted a warning to her, he saw the car suddenly tilt, shuddering crazily for a moment, and then topple on its left side. In that position it skidded another twenty yards or so, then smashed into a stone post.

In the waning twilight he thought he could see the wheels of the car still spinning. Before he could bring himself to move, he saw the right door, now facing the sky, open, and Fran's arms shoved it so it swung wide and fell back against the car's body. Then her head appeared, and then her shoulders.

And then he saw the flame.

Harry lunged for the front door and ran outside. Then, as fast as he had started for the wreck, he stopped. He stood there, stock still.

Fran was no further out of the car than she had been. He could see she was trying to hoist herself out of the top, but she must have caught her foot on something inside.

The flame was suddenly bigger. Harry backed up slowly, whirled, darted into the house and slammed the door. Leaning against the closed door, he waited—breathing heavily.

He winced as he heard a scream, and then instantly told himself it was merely the distorted bleating of the kid from the back pasture. Sure, that was it. Quickly he moved to the window. There was still time, really, still time if he ran down to Fran now, if he worked very fast and very efficiently. There was time . . .

*Time for what?*

Time to save her—*for what?* To let her live—*for what?*

He stood very still and watched.

No one would ever know. And even if they did—was it a crime? It wasn't the same as if you had gone out and kill—

He did not want to think of the word; this was not the same thing.

And he would be free.

Suddenly he could not watch the fire any longer. It was a roaring mass of flame in the near-darkness, and in a minute the gas tank would explode. He did not want to see that. That would be too much. It was enough to know that the fire had done its most important work. It was one thing to be pitiless; it was another thing, a bad thing, to be grotesque.

He forced himself to turn. He went to the kitchen, yanked open a cabinet and took out a whiskey bottle. He noticed his breathing was labored, and he had trouble unscrewing the cap of the bottle. His mind began to seethe with a thousand things—little doubts and fears flicking unpleasant ideas into his brain. He raised the bottle and drank directly from its mouth.

He had to keep his head. He had to think out—right now—what he would say. Surely he had heard the crash? Why, no, he was way up in the north pasture, probably three-four hundred yards away from the house. He had had to bring in the kid before it froze. Besides, there was that funny way sound would boom along the ridges and carry down to the valley, but how it never seemed to work the other way around. Yes, that was true, all right. A pity. A pity he hadn't been there in the house to advise her not to drive on a night like this. A pity he hadn't seen the thing happen in time to get to her.

Yes.

There was a rush of noise against the window over the sink, and Harry looked up, startled. Sleet. If Harry knew his weather, it would be snow in a few more minutes. Heavy, relentless snow. He would have to go out *now* and do his work in the pasture.

He raised the bottle again, and this time he took a long pull. He felt a little sick when he put down the bottle, but he told himself he needed the whiskey. He took a step toward the door, stopped, reached back for the bottle.

At the moment the door shut behind him there was another sound, a muffled thudding which raised the hackles on his neck. He told himself furiously that he mustn't think about *anything* connected with the accident. He had his alibi, he was in the clear.

But this bolstering thought would not set easy. And, as he saw in his mind the savagely red voraciousness of the explosion, he felt sick in his stomach. He fought down the sickness and pulled again at the bottle. Then he began running, staggering, up the path behind the house.

The wind had come up sharply when the sleet began. It was blowing down from the ridge, and he knew that because of it he could not hear anything from the low part of the slope, even if there should be anybody there by now. That much was good. He would be able to hear the kid crying easily enough, though it occurred to him, hazily, that the sound had not come now for several minutes.

The wind and snow beat against him, and he cursed himself aloud for having run out into the night without his mackinaw. He could not go back for it now. With the least bit of poor luck, such a move could be dangerous for him. He

was soaking wet and he was bitterly cold, but he forced himself to continue moving upslope.

He found himself stumbling now and then and cursed the snow and the near-darkness that blinded him. He ought to have remembered his flashlight. He was a fool.

When he began to tremble with the cold he stopped and took another drink from the bottle. He was glad he had thought to bring it with him.

He pushed ahead for what seemed an agonizingly long time. It should not, even in the snow, have taken him more than a few minutes to reach the upper point of the north pasture.

The cold ate through him.

The noise came, foreign and startling, before he realized just how close to the kid he was. But it was not the high, yearning little bleat of the young goat. He saw in an instant the reason it was not. The kid lay, no more than ten yards off, its throat ripped. Straddled over it, feeding in the steaming entrails oozing from the belly, was the cougar. Blood dripped from its mouth as it lifted its head and stared at Harry. Once more it snarled—louder, this time, as Harry stood rooted to the spot.

Harry opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. With a gigantic effort he forced himself to take one step backwards, trying to move as little as possible; but he did the thing clumsily and almost lost his balance. As he moved, the great cat also moved, putting one foot forward, bending the other one and then holding it there, poised in the air. Its teeth showed as it glared at Harry.

Harry's head was reeling. In drunkenness and in fear he felt the panic surging up inside him. The cat snarled viciously, and very, very slowly, almost imperceptibly, began to ease back its body without changing the position of its feet. It was going into a crouch.

Harry watched the crouch in terror, and curious sounds began welling up in his throat. Suddenly he whipped up his arm and squinted down beyond his elbow and— *God! The gun, where was his gun?*

Even as he screamed, he did not let go of the bottle.

And then the cat was coming at him.

# WHY, KILLER, WHY?

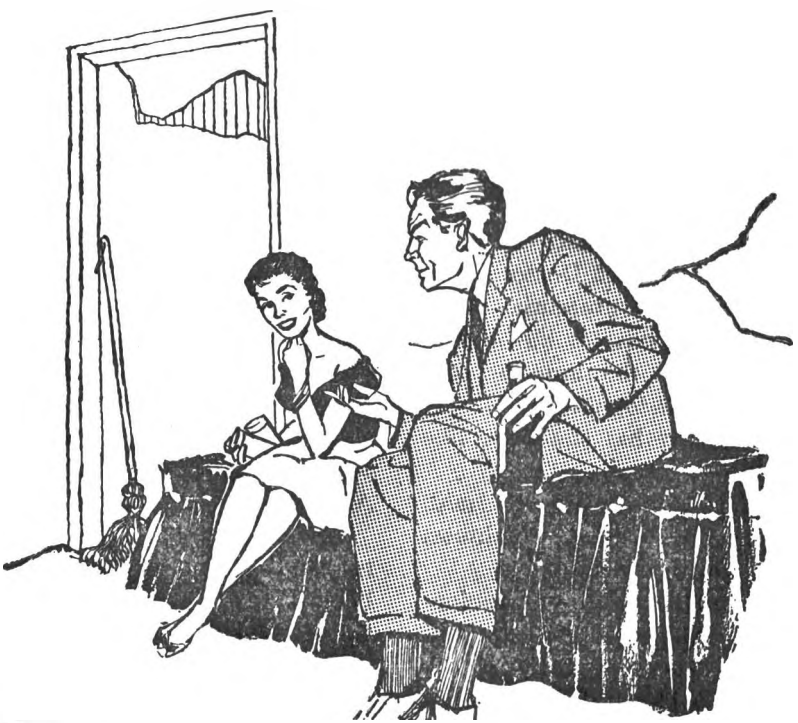
**Complete Novel of Exciting Crime Adventure**

*by DAVID KARP*

**With sixteen unsolved murders on the blotter, the police big brass looked askance at Cheval's indirect and unorthodox methods of investigation.**

## 1

WHEN the prowl car showed up at 15 Bristol Street a small crowd of people were waiting on the stoop. The players from the pool hall came out smoking cigarettes and holding their cues in their hands. The janitor led the way for the two cops. Some of the crowd dutifully trooped



after them setting up a clamor in the halls and on the stairs so that minute flakes of paint came down from the ceiling. Tenants poked their heads out of their doorways and watched the procession mount to the fourth floor.

Fifteen minutes later an ambulance crowded into the already crowded Bristol Street. Doctor Edith Foresman, the ambulance surgeon, hurried up the stairs to the fourth floor. She was a chunky, solid woman with glasses and a dark down on her upper lip. She had no eye for the shabby, threadbare appearance of the apartment. There were thousands of such apartments in the district. The woman on the bed was fat and pale, her wire-thick grey and white hair standing wildly off her head. Doctor Foresman eased her substantial rump onto the bed next to the woman and picked up the limp, fat, cold wrist. She felt for the pulse.

"How long has she been like this?"

"Don't know," the cop said, "maybe fifteen, twenty minutes since I got in the house."

The woman surgeon professionally peeled back the upper eyelids and shook her head. She opened her bag and took out her stethoscope.

"She looks dead to me," the cop said.

"Let me decide for myself, please," she said, lowering the stethoscope to the fat, bared, pale flesh just over the breasts. The cop turned away with a sour look. "Go on over to the other side," the surgeon said to the cop, "take her right arm and pull her up on her side," she said. The cop gave a heave and the big, bulky body rose heavily balanced on its side, one arm mashed flat under it. The doctor tracked the stethoscope along the old woman's broad back and then nodded to the cop. He let go and the body flopped, bouncing very slightly as the ambulance surgeon rose from the bed.

"She's dead," the doctor said. She produced a clip board from the deep pocket of her coat and began to write on the form. "Did you find out who she is?" the surgeon asked, still writing.

"Mrs. Helen Farrell, 15 Bristol Street, Female, white, American. Apartment 4 E. Officer Alfred—"

"Never mind all that," the doctor said. "Give me your report book. I'll copy it."

"Better give me the cause of death first," the cop said, taking out his pencil.

The surgeon looked at the body

on the bed for a moment. "Heart failure. Time of death—" she checked the wrist watch she got for graduation from medical school—"about six P.M."

"Did you say heart failure?" the cop asked.

"Heart failure," the ambulance surgeon said firmly as she went back to her report.

Rocca, the building janitor, didn't believe it. For the tenth time he told his wife, "She didn't have a bad heart."

"So what you want from me?" his wife demanded.

"If you don't have a bad heart you can't have a heart attack. That's just plain horse sense, ain't it?"

Rocca sat by the window and watched the rain streak down the pane and slick the streets and moved his lips talking to himself.

Then one day he talked to the cop on the beat.

"Suppose she didn't have a heart attack?" he asked the cop.

"Why suppose?" the cop asked.

"Suppose someone killed her?" Rocca asked, his eyes narrowing as he looked obliquely upwards into the cop's face to note the reaction.

The cop took out his book. "That so, Rocca?"

Rocca licked his lips, beginning to feel the first tug of misgiving.

## 2

WHEN the precinct captain heard Rocca's story he sent the janitor home and then went out to have dinner. It was nearly ten o'clock in the evening when he came back to the precinct house. He sat motionless at the desk for a long time, his innocent blue eyes darkened now with worried thought. He picked up his receiver and told the switchboard man to get him the Police Surgeon. When he got through to the surgeon he nervously evened the edges on a sheaf of papers in front of him as he talked.

"Hello, Max—"

"Hello, Captain—what's new at the precinct?"

"We've had another of those heart attack cases."

"Oh?" There was a long, thoughtful pause. "Any history of heart condition?"

"I checked with the clinic. No history."

"Who?"

"A Mrs. Helen Farrell. The ambulance surgeon was Doctor Edith Foresman. Patrolmen Schoeffler and Constantin replied to the call. The woman was dying when they arrived."

"What was the patrolman's report when he arrived?"

"The same as all the others—sweating, pallor, patient seemed to be unconscious. This particular officer had the good sense to take her pulse. It was way over two hundred."

"Mmm," the Police Surgeon thought aloud for a moment, "pallor, sweating, comatose, rapid pulse. I'll be damned, Captain, if it doesn't sound like heart attack."

"But in eight cases there's been someone to testify that the deceased had no bad heart. We've been checking into all deaths by heart attack the past year. There have been fifteen with no previous cardiac history."

"And eight of the fifteen are suspect?"

The captain's face looked a little strained. "As far as I'm concerned all fifteen are suspect."

There was a long pause while the Police Surgeon absorbed the implication. "Good God, you don't think that someone's deliberately murdered fifteen men and women?"

"I don't know what else to think. But what killed them? What could look like a heart attack but be something else?"

"There are a number of things that look like a heart attack—" the Police Surgeon suddenly stopped.

"What is it, Max?" the captain asked softly.

"I've just had a thought—but I don't like what it implies."

"What is it?"

The Police Surgeon's voice was heavy and deliberate. "An overdose of insulin will produce the same symptoms as a heart attack. In fact, unless the examining physician knows that insulin has been administered, there's no way of differentiating insulin shock from a heart attack unless a blood sugar count is taken."

"Suppose we PM'd the body. I can get an exhumation order from the District Attorney and—"

"No, no, that's the devilish thing about it. You can slice a body from head to toe through a microtome in pieces small enough to float between microscopic glass slips and never find the presence of insulin in the body. The only way to determine death by insulin shock is to examine the blood sugar content immediately after death. Then you'll know."

"That means I have to wait for someone else to get killed."

"I'm afraid so, Captain."

"Can you get insulin anywheres, Max?"

"No, not anywheres. Diabetics carry insulin. Not in large enough quantities to produce insulin shock, however."

"Well, who would carry it in such large doses?"

"A hospital, a doctor—"

"A clinic?" the captain suddenly asked, his mind vaguely troubled with a hunch.

"Yes, certainly a clinic. Why? Do you suspect the clinic in your precinct?"

"I don't know, Max," the captain said and shook his head, "thanks a lot. You've been a real help. Just one more thing—insulin—that's given by hypodermic—isn't it?"

"That's right."

"In other words, it isn't something you can slip into someone's food or drink, hunh?"

"No, it isn't."

"Thanks, Max," the captain said, and put the phone back into its cradle.

The District Attorney's office sent down a man from its own staff. He was thin and wiry, of average height with hair that was prematurely grey. His name was Cheval and the captain liked the clean, bullet lines of his head and the planes of his face. Cheval dressed neatly, spoke softly and had the kind of small, iron hard hands you found among jockeys. Cheval had done safe and loft squad work in another precinct which meant he was nimble. You didn't pick your ponderous, full-bellied cops for that sort of work. The D.A.'s office had told the captain that Cheval had had some pre-med training in college. An assistant D.A. that the captain personally knew had privately vouched for Cheval's honesty, brains and courage.

The captain handed over all the reports concerning the fifteen suspected deaths and told him to read them over.

"Give me your ideas and then we'll match them to ours and see where it leads us."

"All right, Captain," Cheval said, hefting the reports in his hand.

"By the way, this job might take some time. Could you live in the precinct for a month or so, if you have to?"

Cheval considered for a moment and then nodded.

"There's an apartment house on Bristol Street, number Fifteen. Kind've miserable. But there's a vacant apartment over there. You might take that, if you don't mind a recent death there." When

Cheval shrugged, the captain went on, "I'll contact the janitor, Rocca, there. You're a friend of mine—no connection with the Department."

"Right," Cheval nodded.

"Oh, just one thing—give me your badge and gun," the captain said and held out his hand. Cheval hesitated for a moment and then broke the pistol from his shoulder holster and handed it over. He fished out his wallet, unpinned his badge and handed that over to the captain. "Don't tell anyone you're a cop," the captain said, putting the gun and badge in his desk drawer.

Cheval's grey-green eyes scanned the captain for a moment and he nodded.

"Find yourself a desk outside," the captain said. "When you finish with the reports, check with me."

Cheval went to the detectives' room and picked out an empty desk for himself.

He drew up a small chart with the ages, occupations and family backgrounds of the fifteen corpses. As he read on, the chart was crossed with lines and figures and notes and there were at least ten or twelve sheets of borrowed paper covered with notes. Cheval finally chucked the pencil across the reports and looked at his notes. While he read his notes he shuffled the reports together with his small, hard hands. The notes told an odd story. There was absolutely no correlation between age and death or type of previous illness and death. There was a sixteen-year-old blind girl who had had a breast removed because of a cancerous growth as well as the seventy-one-year-old woman whose room Cheval had taken. Mrs. Farrell had suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. The fifteen dead included men as well as women, widows and spinsters and one woman who had a very large family and a devoted, hard-working husband. Religiously they made up a fair cross section of the precinct, Catholics and Jews and just two Protestants. Racially, there were three Negroes —two women and one man. The man was an ex-cab driver who could no longer work because of an advanced case of arrested locomotor ataxia—the bargain price one paid for syphilis before penicillin. One of the women was a chronic alcoholic.

It was murder, Cheval decided. He smelled it in the reports, caught the hairy, tingling sensation of it from the reports of patrolmen and ambulance in-

ternes and neighbors and janitors and relatives.

"They were murdered," Cheval said to the captain when he returned.

"Yes, they were," the captain said.

"I don't know how and I certainly can't figure out why," Cheval said, placing the reports back on the desk, "but they were murdered. It stinks in your nose from every word."

"We think alike," the captain said with a faint smile.

"It isn't a matter of thinking," Cheval said. "It comes from the nose and the pit of the stomach and the hair on the back of my neck."

"Yes, I know what you mean," the captain said, "and I think I know how they were murdered. I have some ideas about where it was done, too, and we'll talk about that in a minute. But there's one thing I want to know, Cheval, and I don't think we ever will know until we find out who's been doing it—" the captain leaned forward, the light from his desk lamp making his grey hair look flat and cloth-like so that it seemed to form a helmet around his pink face, "when you find the killer—ask him *why*. If you have to break every bone in his body and knock his teeth down his throat, find out *why*. I can't sleep for thinking about that."

Cheval nodded, his greenish eyes lightening as he thought. "I know what you mean," he said softly.

## 3

When Cheval finally got himself settled in the old lady's apartment at Bristol Street he and the captain had already decided that the out-patient clinic of Jefferson General was the place where they would most likely find the killer. And so Cheval, through the captain's help, got a job as a special officer at the out-patient clinic.

He was finger-printed, given a mimeographed manual for special officers employed by the hospital and sent to the clinic for a complete physical checkup.

The main waiting room was rather old, filled with banks of oaken benches and worn linoleum. There was the same familiar mingled smell of carbolic, ether and sweat in the waiting room that Cheval had caught in the dozens of hospitals he had been in during his lifetime.

Cheval's eyes drifted casually

over the faces of the people in the clinic as he waited. There was the look of suffocated pain, the glint of misery, the leaden eye of despair, the occasional sheen of fear in the faces about him. Only one face seemed out of place. A girl—rather tall, with a long white smock. She had black, wavy hair and dark eyes, her nostrils deeply voluted, giving her a wild-mare look. She stood by a small, misery-ridden family group of father, mother and two children—an older girl and a small boy looking bewildered and on the verge of tears.

Now and then she stooped to talk to the man or to the woman, both of whom seemed somewhat crumpled, tearful, clinging to one another. As she talked, Cheval's eyes caught the glint of her clean, white teeth and the hard, fine outline of her jaw. When she straightened out there was something proud and imperious and distantly angry about her carriage. Cheval's brows knit. Generally he could peg people—the dullards, the cowards, the weaklings, the thugs, the mean-spirited ones, the baffled morons, the snobs, the bullies, the gentle ones. She fit none of the categories.

Cheval watched her carefully. She had a lush body under the smock and good legs that were dulled by cotton stockings, and flat-heeled orthopedic shoes. Cheval wanted to get closer to hear her speaking when the girl at the desk called him over and sent him into one of the small cubicles off the waiting room.

"Yes, sir," a voice behind him sang out. It was a young man with a porcupine crew cut, rimless glasses and a comic's mouth. He bore a small tray on his arm filled with tubes, glasses, slides, cards and a numbering stamp.

"You're here for my blood?" Cheval asked.

"Yahhhh," the young man said, putting down his tray, "Dracula needs more. Put out your right hand, palm up."

Cheval put out his hand. The young man expertly uncorked a bottle, tipped it against a gauze square and poised the gauze over Cheval's hand. "Make a fist," he said. Cheval did. "Now which one do you want out of commission?"

Cheval extended his forefinger.

The young man gave the finger a swift, thorough scrub with the moistened gauze. He chucked the waste gauze into a can, produced a pencil-like metal plunger and rested it against the tip of Cheval's index finger. "Don't

faint when the blood comes," he leered. Cheval felt a short, small stab and the young man withdrew the metal form, pressed the blade against a glass slide and made a smear. He slipped the slide into a rack, snatched the numbering hand stamp and brought it down with a flourish on Cheval's medical report.

"Personnel?" he asked, cocking his head.

"Yes," Cheval said, "I'm going to be a new special officer in the clinic."

"Welcome," the young man said, giving him a reverse hand shake. "My name's Koontz. If you want to know who plays around here and who doesn't—ask me. I've got them sorted, classified, tabulated and cross-indexed."

"Sounds complete. Patients?"

"Ugggh," Koontz made a gagging face. "I meant the nurses and the female staff, generally speaking."

"You sound like a valuable man," Cheval said with a mild smile.

"Oh, I am, I *am!*"

"I'll keep you in mind," Cheval said.

"Glad to oblige any time, old man," Koontz said, stamping a sticker for the blood smeared slide. He swept up his tray and was off with a mock Groucho Marx crouched stride through the curtain.

Cheval was undressing when a doctor came in. He picked up Cheval's medical case history and then turned, "Personnel?"

Cheval nodded. "Special officer, doctor."

The doctor, who was putting on his stethoscope, paused and looked at Cheval, "You're not the usual sort of man who takes a job as a special officer."

"What's the usual sort, Doctor?"

"Half-educated, half-witted, semi-alcoholic—"

"You've got a half too many in there, don't you?"

"You're a man of education," the doctor said, eyeing Cheval narrowly. Cheval smiled.

"Why? Just because I know three halves are too many to make a whole number?"

"I think you know very well what I mean," the doctor said.

"Yes, I do, Doctor—er—"

"De Martin," he said, giving it the French pronunciation and putting the stethoscope to Cheval's chest.

Cheval watched De Martin throughout the examination. He watched those insolent, dark good looks as De Martin went

about examining him, trying to decide the sort of person De Martin was. Twice he caught a good look at the doctor's watch. It was one of those thin, platinum Vacheron watches Tiffany's sold for nearly a thousand dollars. The cuff links looked like solid gold and the shirt was of an expensive, lustrous silk cloth.

De Martin finally finished and told Cheval to dress. "Cheval," he mused for a moment, "you must be of French ancestry."

"Yes," Cheval said, pulling on his trousers, "my grandparents came from France right after the Franco-Prussian war."

"My family came to this country originally with the Marquis de Lafayette's staff."

"That's a long time to keep the extra two letters in your name, isn't it?"

De Martin's dark eyes looked at Cheval for a moment and the detective got the distinct impression that there was something chilled and contemptuous in the look. "It's an old, proud name. I don't see why I have to mangle it to suit the convenience of others."

"It was just an observation, Doctor," Cheval said blandly, stuffing his shirt tails into his trousers.

"Cheval is an old French name, too. Do you know that it means that there was once a knight in your family?"

"Oh?" Cheval asked politely.

"Yes, in all the romance languages the term for gentleman has something to do with horses. As *caballero* in Spanish means both gentleman and horseman, *chevalier* in French means gentleman."

"Well, that's a thought," Cheval said, "but then Cheval only means horse. Perhaps my family were just blacksmiths or grooms."

"Well, that's a thought, too," De Martin said calmly. He adjusted the cuffs of his shirt and walked out of the examining cubicle without saying another word.

Finally Cheval returned to the desk in the waiting room. He noticed that the rather plain, dumpy girl with the unfortunately too-close-together eyes was gone and there was a much prettier girl in her place. This girl had warm brown hair and eyes of the same color and warmth. She sat erect, slim, crisp, looking very professional although Cheval knew that she as well as the girl she replaced, was a volunteer from one of the women's organizations.

"Now what do I do?"

"Nothing," she smiled and her smile had a pleasantly crooked charm. "These papers will be sent up to the personnel office and they'll get in touch with you in a day or so." She smiled again and Cheval found the smile even more charming. The enunciation, he also noted, was as precise and finely polished as expensive schooling could make it.

"I take it you've replaced the other girl?"

"Yes," she said, "on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from two until five when the clinic closes."

"Then we'll be seeing each other. My name is Louis Cheval."

"Oh, will you work here, too?"

"Yes, I think so. The next time you see me I'll probably be wearing a grey uniform coat with nickel plated buttons and a badge and looking very official."

"Oh," she said with a smile that brought out dimples about her mouth.

With a quick grin, Cheval turned then and walked away. He smiled as he crossed the waiting room but as he started to go out he caught someone watching him carefully. It was the girl wearing the white smock.

She had her arm protectively draped about a small boy who seemed just over a siege of tears. Then Cheval recalled that it was the same small boy from the unhappy family group. Only his parents and his older sister were gone. Cheval checked himself at the door and turned around. He crossed to the pay phone booth near the door and stepped around to the side where the phone books were anchored to a rack. He opened one and leafed through its pages pretending he was looking for a number.

Cautiously he stole a glance and saw that the girl was still looking at him. There was something fierce and angry in her eyes. Cheval returned the book to the slot in the rack. He turned and walked directly to the girl who had been watching him. Her eyes stayed on him with a directness, a fierceness that he didn't quite understand.

"Pardon me, miss," he said as he came up and tipped his hat, "but I was wondering if you could tell me where Bristol Street is?"

"What do you want with Bristol Street—you aren't the sort who belongs there." Her voice was challenging, bitter, her eyes darkened in their anger, her man-

ner defensive and harsh at the same time.

"As a matter of fact, I'm looking for a place to live. I've applied for a special job here as special officer and I think I'll get it. You wouldn't happen to know of an inexpensive room around here I might rent?"

"Inexpensive?" she asked, looking at his clothes.

"Why, yes, the job doesn't pay very much, you know," Cheval said with a smile. But the girl wouldn't smile. She might have had a very pretty face if she smiled but Cheval somehow got the impression that this girl, unlike the pretty receptionist, smiled very little. Yet there was something equally wonderful about her face—a dark, winey character that held no place for dimples.

"I'm sorry, I don't know of any such rooms." She paused and her tone softened slightly, "However, if you're going to be on staff here—wait a while and I'll find out what I can manage for you."

"Oh, can you do things like that?"

"Occasionally," she said with a voice that was almost as weary as it was bitter. "If you're interested, wait in my office until the boy's parents come back for him."

"Oh, where are they?"

"They're finding out that his mother is riddled with carcinomas. Know what they are, mister?" the girl's mouth, ordinarily full and sensuous, was bitter, drawn, her eyes dark and angry and strangely hurt.

"Yes," Cheval said softly. He squatted down next to the boy whose face was washed pale with fear and tears. "What's your name, son?"

"Tony," the child said, his chin trembling.

"You go to school, Tony?"

"Yes, mister," he said and nodded.

"What class are you in?"

"Miss Healy's class," the boy said, his black eyes showing light pupils of fear. Cheval looked into the eyes and could think of nothing else to say. He poked lightly at the boy's jaw and grinned and then rose.

"My office is behind me. My name's on the door," the girl said, "Genovese."

"All right," Cheval said, "I'll find it."

He walked past the two of them getting the impression that the girl and the child formed an island in the midst of the room,

a dark, unhappy island apart from the rest of the world. Cheval went around a screen to a line of offices. The first office bore the inscription, "Social Service" and further down in the lower right hand corner of the door in gold leaf lettering, "Miss Rose Genovese." Cheval opened the door and stepped in. It was an office crowded with books and an immense desk. The walls bore a framed college degree and a master's degree from the school of social work in New York. Both were made out to Rose Genovese. Cheval chose one of the more comfortable chairs in the room that also contained a couch and sat down and lit a cigarette. He waited patiently.

4

CHEVAL'S first instinct was to leave when he got a look at Rose Genovese. She looked pale and shaken, her hands trembling, her lips gone white.

"For God's sakes—" he said softly, rising, taking her by the elbow. She looked at him blindly for a long instant and then doubled over as if she had an intense cramp. "Miss Genovese—" Cheval called to her and suddenly he realized she was crying in drawn, gasping sobs. He steered her to the couch and sat her down. She remained doubled over, her body shaking, her hair spilled over her hands as they covered her face.

Cheval sat with her helplessly, waiting. He had seen other women cry—seen them in police stations, screaming, beating their heads against the wall in agony, tearing at themselves, at others, wildly flinging their bodies about. It had never quite moved him because he suspected there was a seed of crooked pleasure in their grief. But this was different. It was almost silent grief, like searing that stopped up the passages of the throat against any outcry. Men in awful pain cried like that sometimes. It made you sick to watch it.

Finally she began to recover although she still trembled badly when she brought her head up. With her hair shook loose from its set there was something ancient and tortured about the face like the sightless figures carved into Greek bas reliefs. Her hair was thick and wild and rope-like and her heavy mouth was contorted, her nostrils flaring with pain, her eyes like black marble. The normally olive skin was grey and strained.

"You're all right now?" Cheval asked.

She nodded, not yet trusting herself to speak.

"How about some water?"

"Whiskey," she said in a husky, strangled voice and gestured to her desk. Cheval got up, glancing at her. She indicated the bottom drawer. Cheval pulled the drawer open and found a fifth of rye. He pulled out the bottle and pulled over a small tumbler which held some remnants of a field flower bouquet. He chucked the small flowers into the waste basket along with the small amount of water still left in the glass. He poured a healthy slug of rye, passing it to her. She took it down in one gulp with the ease of a hard drinker.

"Better now?" Cheval asked. She held the glass out again by way of answer. Cheval poured an equally strong shot. She took it down in two swallows and then put the tumbler down beside her.

"Got a cigarette?" she asked, breathing more easily.

Cheval dug out his package and passed it to her. She pulled a cigarette from it, put it directly to her lips, skipping all the nervous affected mannerisms of many women smokers and took in the match flame hungrily. She exhaled, leaving the cigarette in her mouth.

"*Now*, you feel better?" Cheval asked.

"A little," she nodded, the cigarette still in her mouth. "Scared you?"

"A little," Cheval said, echoing her pronunciation.

She smiled faintly and lowered her head, dragging hard on the cigarette, her hands clenched together in her lap. "When you see it like that it makes you sick," she said.

"You mean—the kid's mother?"

"They're so scared," she went on, wringing her hands, "they look at one another in a way that breaks your heart. I couldn't stand it any more."

"If they all affect you like that, you must lead one hell of a life," Cheval said and then paused. She looked hard at him and Cheval suddenly understood the bottle of whiskey in the desk. "I'm sorry," Cheval said softly.

"I do lead one hell of a life," she said softly and took the cigarette from out of her mouth. She passed it to him to crush in the ash tray.

"Don't you ever get used to it?" Cheval asked as he ground out the cigarette in the tray.

"No one ever does."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Cheval said calmly. "Doctors and nurses and—"

"The good ones still get sick," she said hollowly. "I'm not interested in the butchers and sadists. Nothing ever makes them sick."

"I suppose there's a lot of that, then," Cheval said, nodding at the bottle.

"Not too much," she said and then, as if she changed her mind, "and what if there were? Can you think of a better reason?"

"No, it's as good as others I've heard. But—" Cheval gestured at the wall, "all those degrees—sociology, criminology, medical social work, vocational guidance—you're the expert—you're supposed to know answers. Doubling up as if someone hit you in the pit of your stomach doesn't seem to be the scientific attitude."

"The scientific attitude makes me sick," she said, glaring at him. "Tony's mother is riddled with cancers. They'll operate when they know damn well it makes as much sense to operate as it does to—" she paused, her eyes staring beyond him, drawing on images he couldn't see. "They'll go through her body like so many vultures picking at dead meat." She looked at Cheval with tight lips, "Just a butcher's idle curiosity."

"Maybe what they'd learn from Tony's mother would help them with others."

"A human being isn't a guinea pig," she said with a shocked look in her face.

"I didn't mean it that way," Cheval said, biting his lip. This girl was as easy to handle as a white-hot rivet. Odd the way he kept striking the wrong key with her.

"You talk too fast," she said angrily, "your tongue's hinged in the middle and loose at both ends."

"Sorry," Cheval said.

"You're not sorry," she said with weary disgust, "you're not one damned bit sorry. Don't be mealy mouthed."

"It looks as if I was wrong from the word go," Cheval said with a faint smile. "I'll leave now if you feel okay."

"No, wait a minute," she said, passing her hand over her face as if she were trying to clear her mind. "I'm sorry—I'm being bitchy again. It's not your fault, of course. Please sit down."

Cheval waited for a moment. Her voice was warm and exhausted at the same time. "There are times when people seem to

say all the wrong things, aren't there?"

She nodded mutely.

"You started out disliking me on sight. Mind telling me why?"

"That Junior League tramp—"

"The receptionist?" Cheval asked, trying to mask the surprise he felt.

"I can't stand her. She sits there and smiles and smiles and smiles until you want to vomit. I once asked her what in God's name she was smiling about." Rose Genovese stopped, her face crossed with an odd look of acid amusement.

"What did she say?"

"She said she thought she'd cheer people up by smiling," Rose Genovese said and shook her head wonderingly. "In God's name—where do they get those ideas?"

Cheval couldn't help smiling. The contrast between the two girls was, in many ways, overwhelming. "Well, she's trying."

"Miss Millicent Crane is trying all right. A skin like rose petals with the density of armor plate." She shook her head again, biting her lip with puzzlement.

"Don't measure the whole world by yourself," Cheval said. "You're an unusual girl."

Rose Genovese looked at him for an instant and pushed back the hair from her face with a thin, brown, slightly shaking hand. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Cheval—Louis Cheval."

"I'm sorry—I guess I forgot why you're here."

"A room," Cheval said softly, "you said you'd try and find me a room. I'm going to be a special officer here on staff at the clinic and—"

"Then you're not one of her rich friends?"

"Oh, no," Cheval smiled, "I've just met her."

"Funny, the way you two had your heads together talking and smiling and everything—I was sure you were friends."

"And you were with Tony whose mother was going to die," Cheval said softly, beginning to understand the bitter look of hatred he won for himself in the clinic's waiting room.

"Yes, you see," she put out her hands, "how damned unreasonable I can be sometimes?"

"Unreasonable, maybe," Cheval said, looking at her carefully, "but I understand."

"I think maybe you do," she said, looking at him closely as if really seeing him for the first time. "Now, you want a room,"

she said and dug her fingers into her thick hair, biting her lip with thought.

"I did have a lead to a place on Bristol Street," Cheval said quickly, wondering how he could turn down a room she might find for him. "That's all I asked you for in the first place—how to get to Bristol Street."

"Well, if you're willing to live on Bristol Street you'd live anywheres. Wait a minute." She sidled past him to get to her desk. When she sat down Cheval again noticed the lushness of her body—a fullness, a roundness, the resilient youth of a woman's body. She was no sleekly slim, half-child, half-woman like the pretty receptionist. She was, physically, what the first woman on earth must have been, and emotionally—complex and simple all at once. It was quite a combination. Cheval was so lost in thought as he watched her that he barely listened as she spoke on the phone. It was only when she suddenly winked at him and held up a finger that he realized that she had swiftly made nearly a half dozen calls and was now, very probably, successful.

"Listen to me," she said, leaning into her phone, "you know I don't ask for favors. But you went ahead with that big *Napolitano* mouth of yours and said anything, anything at all. Well, all I want is a room—a nice, clean, cheap room for someone who works here at the hospital. A nice guy. Now, come on—talk is cheap. Let's see some action." She listened and then laughed and Cheval was taken by surprise. The laugh was rich and thick and quite wonderful. When she hung up she smiled at Cheval as she scrawled something on the top page of a scratch pad. She tore off the page and handed it to him. It was an address on Crown Street.

"Just as bad as Bristol but I live in the block and I know the house. It's fairly clean," she said and smiled. The smile did a great deal for her face. It added light and warmth and brought up the corners of her eyes, making them smaller and sharper.

"You're quite an operator," Cheval said with a smile, taking the slip. She had also backed him into a corner. After going through the motions of asking for a room he couldn't very well turn it down now. It meant that he would have to move from Bristol Street but tactically the move had its good points. Rocca knew that he had something to

do with the precinct and this girl didn't. Living in the same block with Rose Genovese might be useful and if he took the apartment he made a friend. It was the easiest way to make a friend—let someone do you a favor.

"If you'll wait a little while I'll take you over there—it's on the way to my place," she said.

"Of course I'll wait."

5

It had begun to rain lightly when they left the clinic and they both turned up their coat collars and bent their heads a little. The apartment on Crown Street was smaller than the one on Bristol but Rose did such a magnificently cold-blooded job of ramming the rent down that Cheval had to take the apartment. The janitor, who was also the building owner, toasted the new tenancy in homemade grappa.

When dinner time arrived Rose insisted upon treating him to dinner. They went to a place that Cheval never suspected would serve meals. It bore an aged flaking sign outside that announced, "The Loyal Sons of Italy." Inside, a group of middle-aged men played cards, and a smaller group of silent, well-dressed young toughs lounged on ancient couches picking their teeth. They gave Rose the eye when she entered but said nothing. The older men barely glanced up from their game.

The room was an immensely long, barnlike affair that must have once served as part of a one-story warehouse. It was only partially lit and poorly so at that. The card game and the young toughs sat on one side of the room and on the other side of the room there were a few uncovered tables, and some wire back chairs. Faded, twisted green and white crepe paper wove in and out of the darkness overhead and on the wall above the card players the green and white Italian flag was crossed by a slightly larger American flag.

An old woman in a dark apron and moist, old woman's eyes greeted them and indicated a table. She came out in a short while with a very clean but faded tablecloth. Rose took her coat off but left it draped over her shoulders against the cold.

"The food's very good," she said to Cheval.

"I never would have suspected that they served meals."

"They're not supposed to," she said, breaking a breadstick. "They

don't have a license. But that doesn't mean they can't cook."

"I never would have suspected you were a law breaker," Cheval said softly with a smile.

"I'm not," she said with a grin, "but when you make as little money as I do and you hate to cook for yourself—you aren't too choosey."

The food was, as Rose said, very good. Cheval told Rose so and she spoke to the old woman in Italian evidently relaying the compliment. The old woman's eyes moistened still further and she fingered her apron with great pleasure and embarrassment.

When the young men left, Rose took off her coat. The woman who had served them came out with a bottle of whiskey and two wine glasses. There was a small piece of adhesive tape on the face of the bottle and crudely lettered in indelible pencil was the name "Rosa." When Rose saw Cheval looking at it she smiled.

"My private stock. They don't have a liquor license either. Come on," she said, rising and taking her coat with her. They walked to the rear of the barn-like room to the couches that the young men had vacated. Rose balled up her coat, put it down against the arm of one of the couches and then stretched out full length on the couch, her head resting on the pillow her coat made. Cheval sat down on the couch opposite putting the whiskey bottle down on the floor. He uncapped it, poured drinks for himself and for Rose.

It was darker in that part of the room and the smell of old dust and rotting wood was stronger. The older men at the card game smoked small, strong, twisted cigars and said little. From where they sat they could watch the rain streaking down the huge, dirty windows of the social club and restaurant. There was the tiny clatter of the dishes they had used during the meal being washed and dried and stacked.

"Don't they mind?" Cheval said, passing the drink to Rose.

"The old men? No, they don't mind. They don't particularly care so long as you keep quiet."

Cheval crossed the space to her couch and sat down beside her in the darkness, his hip crowding her warm, rounded hip. "You're not going to fall asleep on me, are you?" he asked softly, leaning slightly forward.

"No," she said in a half breath and Cheval could only see her eyes in the light, darkness masking her face and hair.

"I'm glad," Cheval said softly.

"I didn't want to think that I was bad company."

"You're not bad company," she said in a faintly husky voice and he caught the smell of whiskey on her breath. "You're good company. Damned good company."

"Oh," Cheval said and then leaned still further forward and found her mouth. It was wet and warm and the whiskey smell was very strong. She broke the kiss very lightly, without pushing.

"The old men won't exactly approve," she said with a half-whisper.

"They aren't looking," Cheval said quietly, leaning down again.

"They're watching," she said against his mouth, the words smeared against his teeth, stilled on his tongue. She sat up then, her face coming into the light, looking darkly flushed, her eyes a little over-bright. "I don't want to shock them."

Cheval got up and took the bottle. It was still a quarter full. "Shall we take this with us?"

"No," she said with a half smile, rising and swaying a little against him. For the first time he felt the warmth, the fullness of her against him. The contact was brief but complete. He helped her on with her coat. They walked to the front of the place, gave the bottle and the two glasses to the old woman who smiled benevolently at them. Cheval started to pay but she stopped him and paid for the meal herself.

"*A rivederci,*" the old woman said softly. Rose smiled and waved her hand.

The street was raw and wet and cold but the whiskey insulated them. Rose walked with the deliberateness of a practiced drunk and refused to let Cheval help her.

Her room was dark and uncluttered except for the books. They crowded the room. There were no pictures on the wall and the furniture was cheap maple of the sort the big department stores sold on time.

Rose flopped into an easy chair with her coat on and smiled distantly, drunkenly at him. "My shoes," she said in a small voice. Cheval knelt and took them off. She sighed with weary relief and made a stab at caressing them. Cheval did it for her working his fingers carefully and soothingly over the instep around the sides and across the arches. She threw her head back and breathed gratefully.

"That feels good," she said

softly to the ceiling. "You've got a magic touch, Cheval."

"Then you need the shoes?"

"Yes, of course, I do. That's the one curse my mother passed on to me—weak feet." She brought her head forward, watching him caress her feet. "It's such a horrible thing to admit that you aren't perfect. Would you mind having a girl who had big, weak feet?"

"Not a bit," Cheval said, smiling at her and working his fingers over the muscles and tendons of her feet. "No one's perfect."

"But it's such a silly thing to have wrong with you," she said with a half exhausted laugh, "weak muscles and small bones and joints that ache. I have to go through life with those silly, homely, sensible shoes."

"Do they really bother you that much?"

She looked down at him, nodding and biting her lip through a smile. "How I've wanted to wear shiny little pumps with great big spike heels. Oh, those beautiful little cripplers. I can't," she said with a sigh. Cheval smiled at her, raised her foot and deliberately kissed the arch. She bit her lip again through her smile and then reached over and drew Cheval up. "You get the nicest damned notions, Cheval," she said and kissed his mouth and eyes and cheeks.

Later, he listened to the rain outside and whispered into her ear, "Who said you weren't perfect? I'll swear an oath on it right now." She answered by turning her head and kissing his neck.

Cheval slept for a long while before he heard a noise. He opened his eyes. It was still too dark for him to see clearly but there was the tell tale glow of white in the room. He got up and waited until his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Rose was sitting at the table, her face in her hands, her elbows on the table, crying softly. Cheval waited, watching her for a moment, getting the strange feeling that she resembled a figure in a dark and classic painting, her body shaken with grief, crying ancient and mysterious tears.

"Rose," he called softly, not going to her, waiting.

"Sleep, Cheval," she said, without turning, her voice strangely without tears, controlled and yet filled with a shaking overlay of pain.

"Rose—what's wrong?"

"It's a dream," the voice again without tears.

"Can I do anything for you?"

"No," the voice again, proud, unhappy, without hope.

"Get some rest," Cheval urged gently.

"No. It won't let me sleep. It's the same dream. I've tried to sleep through it. But I can't."

"Maybe if you told me—" Cheval said gently.

Rose's head turned and she looked over her shoulder at him, her face in the dark, just the light track of tears on her cheeks. "I dream that I'm alive and living and I can't die. I want to die and I can't. I go on and on and on and on and I can't die. My body rots and my teeth and hair fall out and I can't walk or talk or see or hear and I can't die. That's the dream and I can't sleep through it."

"It's a helluva dream," Cheval said. He found her dressing gown and put it around her. His hand just brushed her cheek and it felt fever-hot. "Aren't you cold?"

"No," she said not looking at him. Cheval stood over her for a while, waiting for her to stop but she went on crying. He was close enough now to see the tears run down her face and drop onto the table. They were as pale as wax drippings. Cheval stroked her disordered hair with his hand and felt helpless. The caress seemed to be as pointless as touching a statue.

## 6

CHEVAL found a note under the door of the apartment in Bristol Street. It was from the captain.

*"Tried to reach you all night. We've got another one. No mistake this time. Call me as soon as possible."*

Cheval hustled down to the precinct house and took the stairs to the detective bureau two at a time. A sense of unease struck him when he got to the office. There were crushed cigarette butts on the floor, scuff marks, signs that there had been a sizable crowd in the detective bureau. Not cops. Cops didn't stamp on butts outside a captain's door. Others. Cheval saw the half-trampled carton for flash bulbs and knew that reporters and photographers had been in the precinct house and quite a few of them at that.

"Captain in?" Cheval asked. The uniformed cop looked at him suspiciously. "Officer Cheval, special duty. Is he in there?" The cop nodded but held up a hand to check Cheval. He got up, knocked on the door and opened it at the sound of the captain's

voice. Cheval waited until the cop turned around and nodded. Cheval pushed through, flipping the door closed behind him. The captain was seated at his desk amidst a welter of papers, some containers of coffee and remnants of sandwiches. There was a man in civilian clothes sitting with the captain and Cheval knew instinctively that this man was the highest brass—at least a first assistant Commissioner.

"Would you mind telling me where you spent the night?" the captain asked coldly.

"I could tell you but I would mind," Cheval said evenly.

The captain gave him a long hard look but apparently decided to drop the subject. "This is Commissioner Gilrain."

The commissioner, one of the prototypes of the old school, nodded a frosty eye at Cheval.

The captain said, "Last night, about two in the morning, a Mrs. Vincente Armendariz collapsed. Her husband called Jefferson General. Their ambulances were tied up with an emergency call down near the docks. They told him to call St. Agatha's. At St. Agatha they sent out an ambulance at 2:36 a.m. to the Armendariz home. A prowl car followed up the call. When the police officer on the car phoned in and said it was a heart attack I went up there along with Doctor Glucksberg." The captain paused and added parenthetically, "He's a doctor in the neighborhood I know pretty well.

"When we got there the woman was dead. Her husband was a little hysterical but he consented to a blood sugar analysis. The woman had died of insulin shock. Doctor Glucksberg estimated some two hundred units had been injected in her arm some time yesterday. There was a fresh syringe puncture in her left arm with a neat patch of tape over it. The husband told us that Mrs. Armendariz was a patient of the Jefferson General out-patient department." The captain paused again. "That makes number sixteen, Cheval. Too bad you were occupied elsewhere."

Cheval felt his stomach muscles tense. He knew that he should have been home where the captain could find him. The evening with Rose was worth a lot. But not that much.

"Now, Cheval," the commissioner spoke for the first time and his voice matched the eyes, the silver hair, the old heavy cop's hands and feet, "the story is out. Every newspaper in town will

have it this morning, this afternoon and this evening. We've told them part of the story—not all of it. But what we told them was bad enough. There are lots of what they call 'gimmicks' in these murders that they can play up. Death by hypodermic, mad scientist, stuff like that."

"If you don't mind my asking, sir," Cheval asked calmly, "just why was the story released at all?"

"To throw a scare into the killer," the captain said. "So far he has been able to murder people without attracting attention. Now he knows that we understand it's murder."

"That'll make it tougher for us," Cheval said flatly.

"Yes," the commissioner conceded heavily, "but it might save a few lives. God knows what this man has in mind killing these poor people. He has some reason. Perhaps caution will overtake his motives and he'll stop."

"He may also become more careful and change his methods," Cheval pointed out thinking that the captain and the commissioner had played themselves for fatheads. The talk about releasing the story to the press was so much warm air. The story had been grabbed from them. An alert precinct man—a curious city press association stringer, that's who had "released" it.

"Killers never change their methods," the captain said brusquely, to cover up. "They stop for a while but when they begin again they go right back to the way they have been operating."

"In any case," the commissioner said, "we haven't yet released the method of murder to the newspapers. Officially all they know is that Mrs. Armendariz and a few others have been poisoned. There's been no mention of insulin shock or our suspicions concerning the hospital outpatient department."

"Our killer is very likely to read between the lines, sir," Cheval said, knowing that he was only kicking them in the behinds in exactly the same spot in which they had kicked themselves.

"We'll take that chance," the captain said grimly. "Right now I'm waiting to hear what bright ideas you've got."

Cheval felt a flush on his cheeks. It was an old, old trick of turning the prod around. "Well, I'll probably start work at the clinic in a day or so. I've met a few people. I have some—" Cheval hesitated, "impressions. But I'll have to spend more time. The motive is

what counts. Find the motive and the killer will be easy to spot."

"Is that all you have to offer?" the commissioner's eyes appeared a bit angry.

"I have some ideas," Cheval said, "but I'd rather see how they stand up with time before I discuss them." Cheval paused again. "I know you wouldn't be particularly interested in hunches."

"We'd be interested in anything," the commissioner said levelly and waited. The wait was as heavy and deliberate as a slab of granite.

"My best hunch is that the killer is a psychopath. His motive, whatever it is, seems very good to him. We're not likely to figure it out logically. Psychopathic thinking is complicated and devious. Things aren't what they seem to be and they certainly aren't what they should be. These people might have offered this man imagined slights—words, looks, anything. There's no way of knowing what triggers the impulse towards one person and not towards another. Then again, there may not even be that thin a motive. He may merely be killing people simply because he's able to inject them with insulin without suspicion."

"That means he'd have to be on the actual staff of the clinic," the captain said, nodding grimly.

"Eliminates some people, anyway," the commissioner agreed. "Clerical force, maintenance people and so on."

"As I've said, that's my best hunch. There may be a darn good, sane, reasonable motive behind the killings. We don't know just how many there were. Probably not all sixteen."

"How many then?" the commissioner asked.

"I don't know," Cheval shrugged his shoulders very slightly, "at least one we know—Mrs. Armendariz."

"And I'm willing to guess that you have to include Mrs. Farrell," the captain added.

"Then two," Cheval said. "As for the others—we'd be guessing."

"I want to know how many," the commissioner said looking now at Cheval and the captain. The captain glanced at Cheval who dropped his eyes a bit.

"An educated guess?" Cheval asked the commissioner.

"I don't give a damn what you call it. I want a guess—a good one."

There was a pause while the captain looked at Cheval and Cheval worked on his lower lip

with his teeth. "Eight," Cheval said softly. The commissioner turned towards the captain who shrugged his shoulders very faintly and then nodded. The commissioner sighed, shook his head and rose from his seat. The captain, out of deference, followed suit.

"They're going to give us all kinds of little blue hell," the commissioner said to the captain. "You can have all the help you want. I'll send cops in here until they have to stand in line to get out of the front door. You can have women, men, midgets, soft-shoe specialists, tipsters, muscle men, lab technicians—anyone and anything you even *think* you need and I can beg, borrow or steal for you. Now, say the word." The commissioner paused, looking first at the captain and then at Cheval.

Cheval was the one who finally spoke. "I'd like to see what I can do on my own. One undercover man seems to me to be enough." The commissioner shot a glance at the captain who looked hard at Cheval and then nodded.

"All right," the commissioner said and put his hat on, "but God help you both if you leave us and City Hall in the hole." The commissioner looked at the two of them for the moment before he finally adjusted his hat. He turned and walked out without shaking their hands, the door closing softly but firmly behind him.

The captain sat down a little heavily in his chair. His head was turned away from Cheval. "We're going to have a psycho run-through late this afternoon. Every known or suspected case in this and the adjoining precincts," the captain said, his head still turned away.

"You know what you'll get, don't you?" Cheval asked a little bitterly. "Half wits, sick old men, dock stews, perverts, peeping Toms and the subway patrol. There won't be two of them in the lot who knows what insulin is let alone know how to administer it."

"We've got to show some action," the captain said stubbornly.

Cheval hated stupidity. He hated the solemn nonsense of a general pickup, the frightened faces, the whimperings, the bewilderment.

"The sooner I start in the clinic the better," Cheval said.

"I checked with the director. You ought to have a letter in the mail today. Probably start tomorrow," the captain said, senselessly opening a drawer and then slamming it shut.

"Any further instructions?" Cheval asked coldly.

"No," the captain said, his face suddenly looking grey and strained.

"Oh, by the way," Cheval said, not wanting to feel sorry for him, not wanting to forgive him for being a fool—"I'm moving to Crown Street. Number one thirty-six. There's a girl at the clinic, Rose Genovese—she took an interest in me and got me the apartment."

The captain looked up at him sharply.

"What's the matter?" Cheval asked.

"So that's where you spent the night?"

"That's my business, isn't it?" Cheval said, feeling a cold, sick feeling cross his insides. Was she just a tramp?

"Like a bee to honey," the captain said, his face angry, half sneering. "I wondered how long you'd take to latch on to that mink."

"I didn't think she had that kind of reputation."

"She's played around with every male over fourteen in this precinct. I don't give a damn how many college degrees she's got—she's a bum."

Cheval's lips moved once and then again soundlessly, his stomach turned inside out, a sickish taste in his mouth. "I want to get to know people in the clinic—all of them. I learned a lot about her in a short time."

"I'll bet you learned a lot," the captain said, biting his words off.

"One thirty-six Crown," Cheval repeated. "I'll be moving over there this afternoon." Cheval picked up his hat, turned without giving the captain a chance to answer and left the office. It was only when he got outside in the hard, cold sunlight of the late Fall morning that he passed his hand over his face and bit his lip. There was no use kidding himself. He was thirty-eight years old and he had been around. There weren't any "pure" women left in the world and he had seen too many of the stomach turning practices of so-called "decent" women to take any such tags seriously.

If ever there was a decent woman, Rose Genovese was one. He knew that he wasn't the second or the tenth or the fiftieth man in her life. There were a thousand small things she learned from men—the wild and woolly, the timid, the cruel, the gentle, the eager, the apprehensive, the dreamer, the brute. She had

learned them and he had been grateful for all the men that went before. Rose needed love, wanted it—not the way most women wanted it and needed it—but out of something deeper, darker, more frightening.

The captain knew nothing about her. Not that proper, righteous, church-going old man. He didn't know her. Not Rose. Not the dark and unhappy and tender Rose. Cheval slid the small dark door over what he had heard. It was finished. He would never remember it. But, as he thought about it, he knew that behind the door the words would fester and blacken and rot and some day creep under the door with its poisons. The damage had been done.

## 7

THE uniform they gave Cheval didn't fit as well as it might about the waist but the long grey coat covered the folds he had to make in the waist band. It gave him the same odd feeling he had had when he had first put on a police uniform. He had to accustom himself once more to the constant stream of looks and glances directed his way, prepare himself for the questions always directed at persons in official uniforms.

Miss Crane smiled at him on her way in to relieve the other girl at the desk. She was even prettier than the first time he had seen her.

Rose saluted him with her warm dark eyes a half dozen times as she went in and out of the waiting room although she was far too busy to speak to him. The clinics were invariably crowded from eight in the morning until five when they closed, and even afterwards the minor surgery clinic took on emergency work.

It was Koontz who found him shortly after three and mysteriously beckoned him to follow. Cheval went with Koontz through a maze of connecting corridors on whose ceilings clung rows of heavy, asbestos-wrapped and white painted pipes. They went into a small room that bore a sign reading, "Undertakers will be required to show certificates of release."

In the small room Cheval found the young radiologist he had met the day he appeared at the clinic for his examination. There were a few other minor lab workers sipping coffee.

"Meet the new cop," Koontz said triumphantly as he led Cheval in. The other young men nodded. The radiologist grinned.

"Sorry I didn't get much of a

chance to talk to you that day. Holzknecht is the senior in the lab and he's a bug on production. My name's Fields," the young radiologist said as he put down his coffee cup and extended his hand. Fields and Koontz rapidly made the introductions. There was a needle-nosed, sandy-haired urologist from the GU clinic named Hale, a fussy young pharmacist with glasses and a slight stutter named Levine who looked and sounded very much as if he was an over-protected only child.

Levine said, "We were talking about the mad scientist killing."

"Mad scientist, my foot," Fields said. "No scientist would kill four people for no good reason at all."

"Luce lost his fourth yesterday," Hale said quickly talking over his cup. The others turned their heads towards Hale. "A kidney case," Hale went on and stopped, "simple kidney poisoning. Luce performed an appendectomy on the basis of a blood count."

"He would!" Koontz said with a grimace.

"They'll never learn to check for uremic poisoning," Hale shrugged his shoulders. Fields winked at Cheval.

"I suppose you could've handled it yourself, Hale?" Fields asked all-handedly.

"You're damned right I would've—" Hale stopped abruptly as he saw the absorbed, waiting looks on the faces about him. "Well, anyway, you'd think a surgeon would know appendicitis from a toxic kidney."

"Most of them don't know their can from an autoclave," Koontz said.

Hale quietly finished his coffee and left.

Levine put down his cup and dug out his wallet.

"I still owe you for my share of the coffee for last week, Koontzy," Levine said, not stammering at all. He handed Koontz a dollar and came up and shook Cheval's hand again. "Glad to know you, Chevvy. See you tomorrow." He waved a hand and left.

"The trouble is," Fields began after Levine left, "is that Hale studied for medicine. Wanted to be a surgeon. Half of his family are surgeons. He couldn't handle surgery. Got rattled on his first dissection in med school. They generally do. But they get over it. Hale never did. He switched to medical chemistry and urology. It kills him when guys like Luce and De Martin do jobs that he should have been doing."

"De Martin," Cheval said, "I've met him."

"Oh, yes, the Marquis de Lafayette and his grandmother's sister were just like *this*," Koontz said, making a complicated gesture with his hands.

"Yeah," Fields laughed, "De Martin can really make you feel like a peasant when he's in the mood."

"And he's *always* in the mood," Koontz added.

"The guy's had some bad luck in the past year," Fields said. "Lost about six patients."

"He's just a lil ole butterfingers, De Martin," Koontz sneered. "Can't seem to make little cuts. Always trying the single-stroke technique," Koontz crooked a finger and drew it down from the top of his head to his hip. "Like that. Lose more darned patients that way—" Koontz snapped his fingers ruefully.

"It's not funny," Fields said grimly. "A guy with an outlook like his needs success. When he flops, it does something to him."

Koontz shot a quick, guarded look at Fields and the young x-ray technician realized that he had said something he shouldn't have said for he suddenly colored and closed up. Cheval pretended the look had escaped him.

"Tell me—the stuff you've been reading about the mad scientist," Cheval said casually. "Think it might be a doctor?"

"Well, here's a funny thing," Fields said, leaning forward in the chair he was sitting on. "You know old Doctor Glucksberg?"

"Glucky? My favorite MD been treating me for necrophilia for *years*," Koontz said.

"Well, Glucksberg told me that he did a blood sugar count on the Armendariz woman and her blood sugars were way, way down. The woman died of insulin shock." Fields looked at the two of them.

"What's that?" Cheval asked. "Something diabetics get?"

"Not generally—it's the other way around," Fields said. "Diabetics have too much sugar. People in insulin shock have their blood sugars way down. Brings on something that looks like heart attack. Glucksberg says that someone shot her full of insulin. That's what killed her."

Koontz' brows knit. "That's a helluva thing to do to your patient."

Fields glanced at his watch and then swallowed the last of the coffee in his cup. "See you guys tomorrow." He put down his cup and waved his hand at them as he went out.

"Those crumbs always leave me

with the washup job," Koontz complained.

"I'll help you," Cheval offered.

"No," Koontz shook his head. "You better get back to the floor."

Cheval thanked him for the coffee and produced a dollar from his wallet. "Count me in for next week," he said offering the bill. He walked out.

## 8

THAT NIGHT, after a long evening session with the DA's first assistant, bringing him up to date on the case, Cheval found himself in front of Rose Genovese's tenement house. He paused for an instant and rang the bell downstairs. Immediately he regretted it. It was quite possible that she had someone with her. Cheval's eyes flickered slightly at the thought. He hadn't thought of what the captain had said until this moment.

As he started to turn away, the answering buzz rattled the lock in the door. Cheval turned back and automatically caught the handle and twisted it. He stepped through and let the heavy door swing shut behind him. The tenement had an air of life restlessly asleep within it. As Cheval mounted the stairs, he heard voices engaged in a bitter argument in one of the apartments.

Cheval knocked gently at Rose's door and it opened almost instantly. He could see that there was a single light on in the living room and could glimpse a glass of milk and a sandwich on the small table near the sofa.

"I had a feeling it would be you," Rose said softly. She was wearing a heavy woolen robe with an indistinct plaid background, the belted woven cord was frayed and one of its tassels was missing. She held it closed together high on her throat with her hand. "Come on in," she said and as Cheval entered he noted that she wore shabby, backless slippers whose tops were so thin and worn that occasionally he caught the pink of her toes showing through the fabric.

"You shouldn't be so quick to open your door this late at night," Cheval said as he entered the living room.

"The door doesn't fit too well all the way around so I can see anyone who's standing in front of it," she said with a smile. She sat down on the couch, tucking her bare legs and slippered feet up under her. She kept her hand high on the robe's throat.

"The place is freezing," Cheval said as he sat down with his coat on.

"The janitor doesn't approve of people staying up late," Rose said with a rich smile. "At ten o'clock you either get into bed or freeze to death."

"Cold milk?" Cheval said looking dubiously at the glass.

"Warm," she said, sipping it.

"A drink would go better."

"That's what I thought, too. But I hate to drink alone," she said with a quick smile. "It's over there," she said, gesturing at the food cabinets near the tiny gas range. Cheval got up, opened the cabinet which contained a few cans of hash and baked beans and a fifth of Seagram's. He rinsed out two tumblers in the sink and brought them back, holding the whiskey bottle between his thumb and forefinger and the two glasses pinched between the fingers of the same hand. Rose made a place on the table for the glasses and took the whiskey from him.

"I've been reading the papers," Cheval said as he watched Rose pour. She neither paused nor gave any indication of interest. She passed him his drink gravely. "Those killings in the neighborhood sound as if a nut's loose."

Rose tipped her glass and drank.

"That's partly the reason I came up to see you tonight. I don't think it's safe for a girl to take the kind of chances you seem to take all the time."

"The whiskey's much better," she said, turning the glass in her hand.

"Did you hear me, Rose?" Cheval said as he finished his drink.

"Yes," she said, putting her tumbler down and reaching for the bottle again.

"The papers say that the killer seems to prefer women as his victims."

"Have another," Rose said, pushing his glass towards him.

"I'm serious about this. You do a lot of things I don't like. For one thing eating in that place — and then opening your door late at night the way you did for me. In some parts of this town there's nothing wrong with it. But on Crown Street—well, you ought to know better."

Rose looked at him for a long time as she sipped her second drink. "I don't understand you, Cheval," she said softly. "The papers say those women were poisoned. No one's going to force his way into my apartment to make me drink poison."

"Maybe someone won't have to force his way," Cheval said. "Maybe it'll turn out to be someone you know."

Rose paused and looked at Cheval. She had taken her hand away from the lapels of her ugly bathrobe and now it broke open far enough to show the upper cleavage of her deep, rich bosom. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, you know, Rose, all this talk about mad scientists and all that—maybe it's a doctor who's off—a doctor like—De Martin."

"De Martin?" she asked, her dark eyes puzzled, her brows knit.

"Yeah," Cheval said, finishing his drink. The liquor had warmed him enough now so that he stood up and took off his hat and coat. When he rose he could see the soft pulse of blood in her throat just over the faint suggestion of her collar bone. "He's had some bad luck with his patients—add that to an inflated snob's distaste for most people and you might get someone bitter enough, angry enough to want to kill people whom he considers beneath him. Those women, for instance. They were all patients of the OPD and they must have run into De Martin at one time or another."

"That's a hell of a thing to say about anyone," Rose said angrily, the flush of blood rising from her body so that it darkened the flesh of her throat and face and chest.

"I may as well tell you I've heard around the clinic that you've had a run in with De Martin, and I don't think he's the man to forgive or forget very easily."

"What brought all this on?" Rose asked, her dark eyes narrowing, her body straightening a little.

"I've been thinking about you," Cheval said softly and crossed to where she sat, propped up against a pillow and an arm of the sofa. He sat down on the sofa, turning sideways towards her. "I've been having dreams," Cheval said, watching her closely.

"Forget them," she said finally, looking down. "De Martin's a butcher but he's too respectable to try and kill me."

"No one's too respectable for murder—especially a man who's sick."

"Would you mind telling me where you got such a fix on De Martin?"

"Look, Rose, I'm a cop. Oh, maybe you think a special officer in a hospital doesn't know the right way to the men's room—but I'm not one of those usual slobs who takes the job. I've done a lot of private investigative work and I used to be considered a pretty fair detective before—" Cheval paused for a moment he thought would be long enough and signifi-

cant enough, "well, I lost my license. It wasn't anything crooked or wrong—but they're fairly strict with private detectives."

"I thought they could get away with anything," Rose said with a faint smile.

"Dam' that Sam Spade," Cheval said with a half grin. "He has all the fun."

"Didn't you have any fun?" Rose asked more softly.

"Not if you call standing in the rain for four hours waiting for some chiseling husband to come out of a hotel room fun. The job was real drudgery. Wait and wait and wait some more. That's mainly what the work was. No lost jewels, no beautiful women, no shady characters, just looking for divorce evidence, trying to find out how much a man could pay for alimony, doing minor jobs for small insurance companies—pretty dull work. But it gave me a feeling for sizing up people and situations. I think someone from the hospital has been killing those women and I think it's someone who isn't entirely responsible for his own actions and I think it might be De Martin."

"I hope you haven't gone to the police about those ideas," Rose said, her face turning slightly cold as she looked at him.

"That's not what I said I did nor have I even thought about it. It's pretty thin—I know. But I don't want you to take chances with De Martin. You did fight with him."

"Yes," Rose admitted, reaching for the bottle again.

"And it's my own private feeling that De Martin won't forget it—especially if others heard the argument and he came off second best in it."

"He didn't come off second best," Rose said bitterly. "The woman he murdered came off second best."

"Murdered?" Cheval asked, watching Rose carefully.

"I don't want to talk about her," Rose said, shuddering a little and crossing her arms over her breasts, holding herself as if she were suddenly cold.

"Come here," Cheval said and turned her around so that his arms went around her. She rested her back gratefully against his chest and he felt the warmth of her through the heavy bathrobe. Her hair was against his face and lips and he could smell the sweet, fresh smell of the soap. "You're not going to have the bad dreams again tonight, are you?"

"Did I tell you about them, too?"

"That night I was here you were awake, don't you remember?"

She shook her head so that the hair brushed across his face warm and alive and thick. "Tell me about De Martin," Cheval urged gently. "You don't have to tell me about the woman if you don't want to."

"But that was the whole thing the woman he operated on. They wanted permission for the operation and her husband didn't understand much English. He was afraid to let them operate. They tried everything to make him understand she needed it. He was a Russian. They got someone to speak to him in his native language. But even the interpreter didn't help. De Martin wasn't the doctor scheduled for the operation—Pheland was the surgeon—a good one, too. Pheland had come to Jefferson especially for the job. It was one of those tricky spine tumors. The growth was benign but it just about crippled her. Removal was something that needed a lot of technique. Pheland had it. But her husband didn't want it done." She stopped there and shook slightly. Cheval gripped her a little more tightly and brought his lips down on the side of her neck where it joined her shoulder.

"Go on," he whispered into her skin.

"Pheland was finally called away. He couldn't wait any longer for them to convince her husband. Then De Martin worked some sort of deal with the Chief of Surgery for him to handle it if he could get the husband's permission. He got it all right." She paused. "Doctor De Martin had a little influence with the man's boss. They threatened to fire him. He agreed to the operation. De Martin went ahead. Made quite an issue about it when they tried to get Pheland to come back and do it. It seems that De Martin's got influence with the Board of Directors." She stopped again and when she spoke her voice had the creak of agony in it. "That was his last operation. Even the Board couldn't keep him on staff after that. Pheland heard about it and threatened to raise a stink but he didn't. They must have bought him off, too."

"The woman died then?" Cheval asked gently.

"No," Rose said softly, her voice barely audible, "it was much worse. He damaged her spinal cord. She was completely paralyzed afterwards. She died about eight months ago."

"Oh," Cheval said faintly.

"That's what your fight was about."

"Poor Anna," Rose said softly.

"That was her name?" Cheval asked.

"Yes," Rose nodded her head, "Anna Sobilieva." Rose worked her body closer to Cheval's, pressing her head back so that her cheek rested against his. "Don't go away tonight, Cheval," she said softly, her eyes closed. Cheval pressed his mouth against her throat and breathed in the smell of her flesh. A cold, cruel chill had crossed him an instant before.

Anna Sobilieva was the name of one of the sixteen corpses—a name that had not been released to the newspapers.

## 9

THERE was one thing that had to be done and done quickly, Cheval decided. The bait lines were leading to De Martin and Cheval had to know on which of them De Martin was stuck. Cheval didn't take his own idea of psychopathic motives too seriously. Even if a psychopath were responsible, De Martin didn't seem to be a psycho.

Cheval made a special effort to watch for De Martin's entrance to the clinic. When he saw De Martin, he followed him into the small dressing room reserved for the male members of the medical staff. De Martin was in the act of hanging up his expensive dark blue coat when Cheval entered, closing the door behind him. Cheval quickly checked the dressing room to be sure that he and De Martin were alone.

"Hello, Doctor," Cheval said softly as he came up.

De Martin turned slightly, a cold and bland look on his profile. "Oh, it's you. I see you got the job."

"You mean to say that this is the first time you've noticed me here? I've been at work for nearly three days."

"Sorry," De Martin said dryly, "I hadn't noticed."

"A police officer was around this morning, Doctor," Cheval said. De Martin picked out a white jacket and drew it over his own expensive suit jacket. "It seems they've been making inquiries concerning the doctors in the clinic."

"Inquiries? What for?" De Martin turned to face Cheval, buttoning the white coat.

"The police suspect that the person responsible for the killings of those people is probably connected with the hospital."

"That's a strange idea," De Martin said coldly.

"Not so strange. You see, they've decided on the cause of death. It wasn't poison—it was insulin."

De Martin's eyes flickered for an instant and he seemed perplexed. "You mean someone deliberately sent those people into acute insulin shock?"

"Yes," Cheval said, waiting now, watching closely without giving any overt indication of his awareness. "The police seem to feel that it was some doctor."

"That's malpractice," De Martin said quickly.

"Oh, it's much worse than that," Cheval said softly. "It's murder."

"Well, of course it is," De Martin said, flushing a little with annoyance and embarrassment.

"The police wanted to know if you had any idea about who might be maladministering insulin in excessive quantities."

"Don't be ridiculous," De Martin said with controlled anger. "Anyone who can read English can find the proper dosage on an insulin vial. It couldn't be an accident."

"The police didn't suggest it was an accident—they say it's murder—or didn't you hear me the first time?"

"When the police come I'll discuss this with them," De Martin said calmly, walking to the wash basins near the end of the dressing room. Cheval followed him part of the way and lounged against the tall lockers as he watched De Martin strip off his watch, push back his cuffs and begin to wash his hands with the antiseptic soap.

"The hospital security force is being asked to cooperate with the police, Doctor. I'd appreciate it if you'd give me any facts you might have at your disposal."

De Martin looked in the mirror at Cheval. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you fellows had anything to do but keep people from smoking or dropping gum on the floor."

"This is an emergency and in emergencies everyone is needed," Cheval said with a half smile that he was sure De Martin saw.

"I have no facts at my disposal," De Martin said, rinsing his hands carefully, "but if you have any specific questions you want to ask me and if I can answer them—of course, I shall." De Martin picked a sterile towel from the special basket and wiped his hands dry, working carefully between his fingers and around his nails.

"Have you treated Mrs. Helen Farrell, Mrs. Vincente Armendariz, Mrs. Lucia Albano?"

"Mrs. Farrell was an arthritic

out patient—I have nothing to do with the physio-therapy clinic. Mrs. Armendariz, I believe, was semi-paretic and Mrs. Albano was a patient of the C and T clinic. I couldn't possibly have treated them at all." De Martin tossed the towel into the waste container and smiled faintly. "My own clinic, if you'll recall, is minor surgery. I do occasional examinations as I did for you and some diagnostic work in pediatrics. Nothing else."

"How about Anna Sobilieva?" Cheval said coldly, mainly to change the heavy smirk in the doctor's face. It worked. De Martin paused, his eyes surprised, his mouth a little slack.

"What has she got to do with this?"

"The police say she died of insulin shock," Cheval said, pressing the point home with a slight nod.

"Are they certain?" De Martin asked, obviously rattled.

"Yes, they are," Cheval said.

"But how could they be?" De Martin protested. "There was no oportunity for a blood sugar analysis. The woman's been dead for nearly nine months."

"The police have been working on the case for quite some time, Doctor," Cheval said, "and there was no previous cardiac history in Mrs. Sobilieva's medical reports."

"But that isn't reason enough to suppose that—" he stopped, "or did they take a blood sugar analysis?"

Cheval said nothing, waiting.

"I suppose they did," De Martin said, biting his lip. He looked up at Cheval for an instant and then crossed to him, putting up his hand in a slightly crooked gesture that resembled a partial pleading position. "Look, Cheval, this is quite far fetched. I have no reason to kill these people. Least of all Mrs. Sobilieva. She was my patient. I operated on her."

"You mean you butchered her," Cheval said quietly, evenly.

"Now, just a minute," De Martin said, his face becoming grey around the lines of his mouth.

"I'm not going to discuss the ethics involved in obtaining surgical consent. Nor am I going to discuss the techniques which were used—or abused in the operation on Mrs. Sobilieva—that's something for the Board of Directors and the local medical association to discuss. I'm talking about murder. I'm talking about a doctor who might be angry enough, ashamed enough, bitter enough to want to erase a surgical blunder."

"This is nonsense," De Martin said, his face badly strained now.

"All I want to know, Doctor,"

Cheval said, leaning forward now, his greenish eyes glinting a little, his jaw tight and drawn, "is why you didn't finish the murder on the operating table instead of sending her home crippled and in pain? What I want to know is why you killed the others? I understand why you killed Anna Sobilieva—but why Mrs. Farrell? Why Mrs. Armendariz? Why Eugene Cannon, Isaac Cantor, Dolores Aguilar, Helen Shields, Victor Marchese, Mrs. Julius Helfner, and the others?"

"I haven't *heard* of those people!" De Martin said, his face looking anguished, confused.

"They were murdered—every one of them—sixteen men and women all told—" Cheval was close to De Martin now, holding him by the lapels of his white clinic jacket. "Shot to the gills with insulin to send them into shock, chills, fever and death. It would be so simple for a doctor to do it, De Martin, wouldn't it? What's simpler than to ask a sick and trusting patient to take a hypodermic injection? A bit of gauze soaked in alcohol, a quick, intravenous injection, a piece of sticking plaster and your patient goes home to die several hours later. Verdict? Heart failure. The oldest, the surest, the commonest cause of death man knows. Who's to ask questions? They shovel them under fast in cheap funerals in coffins that rot through in just a little time and the corpse sleeps peacefully with a modest tombstone at its head and a bed of evergreen ivy on its chest. Their apartments are rented in a week, their clothes sold in two, and the credit payments for the funeral are over in six easy installments. RIP, sucker, who trusted his doctor."

Cheval's face was pale with rage now, he felt his stomach cold and hollow, his head bursting with blood. "I don't know what your motives were, De Martin—I don't even want to guess at the snake chain of ideas that went through that sick brain of yours—but you're not getting away with this no matter how many rich and influential friends you've got here or in City Hall or in the Governor's mansion." Cheval shook the terrified doctor with the fury he couldn't control. "They're going to nail you to the cross for this, De Martin. The papers haven't got a fraction of the story yet. But they'll get it and there'll be a howl for blood in this town that'll make St. Bartholomew's Eve look like a Girl Scout initiation."

Cheval stopped, breathing hard.

De Martin was too stunned, his eyes too frozen with horror to show any comprehension. "Go ahead, Doctor," Cheval said, stroking De Martin's rumpled white lapels with his hand, "run away, Doctor, and give us the extreme pleasure of bringing you back. I'd love to see that happen."

Still unable to control his breathing, Cheval walked out of the dressing room. He closed the door behind him, his chest heaving, the blood hammering at the pit of his stomach making him weak and sick. Taking deep breaths, he crossed the main waiting room, and walked into the corridor where Rose's office was located. He knocked at the door and heard Rose answer.

"Hello, Rose," Cheval said with a faint smile as he opened the door.

"Cheval," Rose said with a smile and stood up from her seat behind the desk. She pulled him in by his coat sleeve and pressed the door closed behind him. With the same motion she brought her body up against his, her mouth on his cheek.

"You got up so early this morning," she said softly into his cheek. "It was mean of you to leave before I got up."

"I didn't want the neighbors to start talking about you," he said softly, grinning.

She barely opened her mouth to speak before Cheval's lips found it. He felt her arms cross his back, the hands caressing him. The scent of her hair and skin, the pressure of her body did something very wonderful and cleansing to him—something he had noticed the first night they were together. It was as though all of his loneliness and needs suited her completely. It was odd, he thought, how little he knew of her loneliness and needs and how well he was able to stave off the darkness for her, fill the cruelties of her life with kindness, with warmth. It took time to be able to feel with another's skin, taste with another's tongue, to breathe with another's lungs, and live with another's soul. But they had the time to fit their lives together exactly, precisely, completely.

"I've got to go out to the waiting room," she said, releasing herself from his arms. "You can wait here for me, if you like."

"I like," said Cheval. "May I use your phone?"

"It's all yours," she said with a smile and waved her hand at the desk. After she went out Cheval sat down at the desk with a faint sigh. He picked up the phone.

"Line, please," he asked the switchboard operator, waited for the dial drone and then dialed the precinct house. He got the switchboard at the precinct and asked for the captain's office. The uniformed cop answered and told him the captain was busy with some detectives. Cheval said he'd hang on.

"By the way," Cheval said, "I may have to hang up before I get the captain so don't get worried. In case I do, I'll call back later this evening."

"Right," the cop said.

Cheval tucked the phone between his shoulder and his chin and looked about for cigarettes. There were none on the desk so Cheval pulled open the middle top drawer. The drawer was a welter of papers, forms, clips, rubber bands, pencils, slips of paper with Rose's scrawled handwriting, a mimeographed, wire-bound manual of social agencies in town, a telephone book, a small broken alarm clock. Cheval smiled as he looked through the junk. It was amazing what people accumulated in their desks.

There were a few snapshots in the desk and Cheval poked them apart to look at them. In each of them Rose was wearing a tight, white bathing suit. It showed off her rich, strong lush body, the fine tan of her skin, the blackness of her hair. She was flanked by two strong, young men, very self-conscious of their weight-lifter's muscles, each of the two young men had an arm around Rose's waist, each straining his muscles a bit to get the best picture of their developments.

The other pictures were of Rose alone or with one of the two young men. Cheval thought he recognized the beach they were taken at, but he wasn't sure. He pulled the drawer further out looking for a package that might've been lost in the back of the drawer. The back of the drawer appeared to be clogged with medications—small bottles of neo-synephrine, the small bronze tins of zinc ointment, empirin tablets, iodine, mercurochrome, professional sample-sized tins and boxes and tubes of various unguents, lotions and pastes and a half dozen vials of something labeled protamine. But no cigarettes.

Cheval smiled a little. It was strange how much people dosed themselves—even someone like Rose who should know better and who had the advantage of all the free, expert medical attention she would need. It was odd and yet

quite human. We trusted ourselves, we placed the first faith in our own spirit and strength and mind. Only the weak-kneed and weak-backed trusted in others.

"Cheval?"

"Yes, Captain—"

"What is it?"

"I think I've got someone—"

"You mean it?"

"I don't have anything that would hold up in court—but he did bungle an operation on one of the women we've got in the reports. It's something of a hush-hush scandal here at the hospital. Any other doctor would've gotten his fanny kicked out—but this one has pull."

"Go on."

"I went to him and jarred him a little. He's scared and nervous and jumpy. But that's all I could do—throw a scare into him. His name is Doctor Louis de Martin. He's a resident physician here in the out-patient department."

"What do you think?"

"I've tied a string to his neck. Give it a few yanks yourself and see what happens."

"You said he had pull."

Cheval's eyes drooped a bit with annoyance. It was the old pussy-footed caution.

"I'm not playing ward politics with you," Cheval said muffling the anger he felt, "you've got sixteen corpses to account for—do what you damn well please but don't ask me to help you hedge."

"You know me better than that, Cheval."

"I don't know you at all, Captain."

"I'll pull him in on your say-so then," the captain said.

Cheval smiled wearily. It was such an old, baggy beamed dodge. "You pull him in on your own say-so. I don't know you and you sure as hell don't know me. But the District Attorney knows us both and he'll believe me before he believes you. You can muscle De Martin a little but if you bump him with an arrest, don't try to whistle me up."

"You're cute, Cheval," the captain said with a sneer.

"You know me better than that, Captain," Cheval said with a smile. There was a pause and Cheval could hear the captain thinking.

"Doctor De Martin?"

"That's right."

"Does he know who you are?"

"No. I don't much care if he does, though."

"Let's not be too quick about that. As you say, this isn't an arrest. You stay with it until we do make one."

"All right," Cheval said and then hung up without any further remarks. The hell with him. He could always explain that he had to hang up. You got away with a lot on undercover assignments, especially on special details like this one. There were small things in the world to be thankful for, after all. And one of the small things was Rose. Only she wasn't a small thing. She had, by some incredibly swift and mysterious chemistry, joined his thoughts so that every drop of blood that went through his brain contained a memory of her, her face, the touch of her skin, her voice, the scent and weight and texture of her body and hair. It wasn't love at first sight—it was an invasion.

When Rose returned, Cheval said, "I was looking for cigarettes. I couldn't find any."

"I know," she said, producing two packs from her smock, "I ran out just before you came in so I went out and got some. Here," she started to break open one of the packages.

"I needed one, too," she said, lighting one for him and passing it over. "I can't think without one."

"It's a habit," he said, puffing.

"So are a lot of things we do," she said, crossing her legs and exhaling.

"Some habits can kill you," Cheval said, putting his cigarette between his lips. "Such as this sort of thing," he said and yanked the drawer open. He reached way into the back and grabbed a handful of the medications. Cheval chucked small tins and jars and vials onto the desk. "What good is all that junk going to do you? There are dozens of doctors in the hospital who can treat you for anything from acne to ulcers and you go ahead and dose yourself—does that make sense?" Cheval smiled at her but she didn't smile back.

"I don't like people to open my desk drawers," she said in a voice that had a faint edge to it. "I generally lock the desk when I'm out of the office. I didn't expect you to go through it."

Cheval sensed that there was real anger in her voice although there was nothing about her posture to suggest it. She still sat in the easy chair, relaxed, her legs crossed, smoking, her hands steady, completely unruffled. But the voice had an indefinable quality to it that bespoke anger, cold, unforgiving anger.

"I'm sorry," Cheval said, raking the medications back into the desk drawer.

"Don't do that. You'll just make a mess. Leave them," she said, calmly tapping the ash off the end of her cigarette into a dish that served as an ash tray on her desk.

Cheval put out his own cigarette and nervously began to roll one of the vials of protamine between his palm and the desk. He *had* no right going through her desk and she had a right to resent it. But at the same time he felt a little hurt at the thought that she could get so angry with him. Cheval got up to leave. "Thanks for the cigarette." As he got to the door, her voice made him turn.

"You're taking something of mine," she said evenly. She rose and extended her hand and it was only then that Cheval realized that he had picked up the vial of protamine. As he handed it over to her he noticed for the first time that it was sealed with a special sterile cap of rubber with an aluminum ring.

"Sorry," Cheval said with a heavy sigh and went out, closing the door with great deliberateness. No other woman had ever set him so much on edge before, Cheval thought. It must be love.

He checked his watch and decided that Koontz and the others would now be having their coffee break.

When he got to the small room off the mortuary he found Koontz alone, disconsolately eyeing the cups and saucers.

"Don't feel bad, Koontzy," Cheval said, helping himself to one of the clean cups and lifting the big coffee pot. "I'll help you clean up."

Koontz said with a sigh, "I was afraid you wouldn't say it. How come you're so late?"

"Busy with one thing or another," Cheval said, pouring the coffee for himself. Koontz hastily rinsed a cup and held it out. Cheval filled his, too.

"Thanks," Koontz said, adding cream and sugar for both the cups. "But the question I'd like answered is what in hell you guys do to keep busy?"

"Somebody else asked me that question today," Cheval said mildly, sipping the coffee.

"Who?"

"De Martin."

"He's got a helluva nerve asking you that. That phoney could easily be replaced by an enema bag and a four-way cold tablet." Koontz appeared offended. "The only people who have the right to ask you *that* question are the

technicians," he added with a somewhat grand manner.

"Oh, the *technicians,*" Cheval said with a smile.

"Don't kid yourself," Koontz said seriously. "Lots of guys working in labs know more than those meat dealers upstairs," Koontz jerked his thumb upwards. "That's what I call MD's—meat dealers."

"You aren't the first person I've heard that from, either," Cheval said. "Miss Genovese seems to share the same opinion. In fact, she distrusts doctors so much that she treats herself."

"If you think that's a bad idea, you're nuts," Koontz said, bobbing his porcupine-crew cut vigorously.

"It so happens that I like Miss Genovese too much to let her go dosing herself with neo-synephrine and protamine and junk like that."

Koontz' brow wrinkled. "Protamine?"

"Yeah," Cheval said.

"Now what the hell would she want with protamine?" Koontz' blue eyes were dark with puzzlement. "I checked her out personally in the serological lab just last month. In fact, I read the report from Hale."

"What are you talking about?" Cheval asked, putting down his cup.

"Protamine. That's for diabetics. She hasn't got diabetes," Koontz said indignantly.

"Protamine?" Cheval asked, feeling something he didn't understand making his scalp crawl. "What is it?"

"It's insulin. That's the brand name for it."

## 10

At six P.M. that evening, Doctor De Martin was picked up at the out-patient department of the hospital. He was taken to the precinct and after two hours the captain walked out of the room where De Martin was being interrogated and into the small room where Cheval had sat at a long table, his chair tilted back, his legs crossed and locked on the brown table length, smoking cigarette after cigarette chain fashion.

"I'm arresting the doctor," the captain said to Cheval, reaching across the table to take one of the detective's cigarettes.

Cheval said nothing. His own mind was spinning in a sickening spiral of the activity he had gone through in the past three hours. He had been comparing the list

of dead men and women against the case work records of the social service department of Jefferson General. All but two of the sixteen names checked out as being serviced by the department and all of those had been personally interviewed and serviced by Rose Genovese.

With the keys from the hospital security desk he had entered Rose's office after she left and given the room a thorough comb out. The hypodermic needle was in a leather case that had once held a wrist watch. He also found a piece of rubber tubing used to lash the arm in order to bulge out the veins. He also found a bottle of alcohol, sterile gauze pads and a roll of surgical tape. Cheval had left the office, replacing everything carefully and had lived through those hours in an anaesthetic state —not quite feeling, not quite living, frozen with the awful implications.

"Did you hear me, Cheval?" the captain asked.

"Yes," Cheval said, his voice now as unvarying and automatic as his breathing.

"The guy's told a half dozen different lies. He tried covering up and then lied and then he confessed to one lie to save another and—well, the usual thing. So we're arresting him." When Cheval did not respond the captain stirred with a slight irritation. "Well, damn it—say something."

"What do you want me to say?"

"You're the man who gave us the lead. Haven't you got any ideas?"

"No, I don't have any ideas," Cheval said, staring through the captain at the wall behind him. "You know what you need for trial evidence. Go ahead."

"What is this? A new Cheval or something?" the captain asked irritably.

"What do you want from me?" Cheval asked and for the first time his voice took on the dim rasp of misery.

"I'd expect you to act a little more like the cock of the walk," the captain said, his eyes carefully looking Cheval over. "You've turned up our first important suspect in a lot less time than I thought we'd need. I was sure this thing would take us six months at least."

"Well, it didn't," Cheval said without inflection.

"Thanks to you," the captain said, exhaling impatiently.

"Don't pin the rose on me," Cheval said explosively, dropping his feet to the floor and straightening up in his chair.

"You deserve the credit," the captain said stubbornly.

"What is it with you, Captain? Not so sure? Still trying to hedge it? If you aren't certain that man's guilty, turn him loose right now and save yourself a lot of grief. I'm still not turning my rump to the noonday sun to take the bows now and the kick in the rear a month from now when the case falls apart in the DA's hands."

"An officer who doesn't have faith in his own judgment doesn't belong on the force," the captain said, rising, an angry look on that old man's face, the blue eyes as blue as rage could make them, the back stiff and straight.

"That would make a dandy motto to put right over the desk sergeant's wall," Cheval said, rising and walking to the door.

"Cheval," the captain said, "you can make the arrest and I'll personally make my recommendation that you be promoted two grades."

"Is that a direct order?" Cheval asked, turning part way to face the captain obliquely.

The captain's face colored. "You weaseling punk, if you don't have the guts, I'll make the arrest."

"Go ahead then," Cheval said with an indifferent shrug and walked out of the room, his hands in his pocket, his coat unbuttoned.

He walked then through the night, his head down, his forehead hot and aching with thoughts and fears and dreams. There was no pattern to the walk. Once he was down by the docks listening to the occasional hoot of a tug hauling barges. There were boats that could take a man and woman to a seaport and then across the oceans to dustier, warmer climates where a black-haired, black-eyed Rose Genovese with olive skin and a lush full body would look like a thousand other women.

Love was an awful burden for Cheval and he sweated under it, breathing hard, trying to find some way out of it.

## 11

THE NEXT day, he avoided Rose; and Rose seemed to be avoiding him. Somehow, he didn't know how, he got through that day. And, somehow, that next night he got to sleep.

He awoke suddenly. Someone was hammering on his door. Cheval got out of bed. The room was freezing but he ran on bare feet to the door and unlocked it. He glimpsed the smear of silver badge, yellow buttons and great blue coat. The figure at the door

turned and called someone and the captain came between the cops into the room.

"Good God, you're harder to raise than the dead," the captain said, brushing past him and going into the room. Cheval caught the cold air from his clothing as he walked past. He closed the door and walked to the bed and picked up the comforter and wrapped it about himself. The captain sat down in his outer clothes on the bed, looking frozen and old and despairing.

"Something go wrong?"

"There's another one," the captain said. "They're working on her. She's not dead yet. But damn near. Her name's Queral. Patient of the cancer and tumor clinic of Jefferson General. She was scheduled for major surgery for this coming week. She was hopped to the eyes with insulin."

"That clears De Martin," Cheval said, closing his eyes praying to God that the Queral woman lived.

"The hell it does," the captain said. Cheval looked at him sharply.

"Didn't you arrest him?"

The captain shook his head.

"He wasn't in the clinic today," Cheval said quickly. "I didn't see him anyway."

"Were you in the clinic all day?" the captain asked.

"No," Cheval admitted, "I got in late. Early afternoon."

"That cookie better have the best alibi in the world," the captain said. "But we do know that the Queral woman went to the clinic today. Her husband says she told him she went. She also told him she was given a shot—with a needle."

"Did she say who gave it to her?" Cheval asked, reaching for his cigarettes, praying that his hands wouldn't shake.

"No," the captain said, wagging his head sadly. "*They* gave it to her. Who in God's name is '*they*' is beyond me. The husband didn't ask at the time and she didn't elaborate, at the time. Now she can barely breathe let alone speak."

"I think you can rule De Martin out," Cheval said, lighting his cigarette and then blowing out the match and drawing the comforter back about him.

"I'll wait and see where he was today."

They waited and Cheval smoked, sick to his stomach with the cigarette but smoking because it was expected of him, smoking because it was an innocent and deceptive thing to do. Cheval

moved over to an easy chair, drew his bare feet up so that the comforter covered him from neck to feet. His body was in a cold sweat now but he stared ahead in the semi-darkness of the room, smoking slowly, mechanically.

"They know where you are?" Cheval asked.

The captain nodded. Cheval stared at the walls praying as he smoked, praying to God as he had never prayed before. He had never spilled the blood of a human life but if that woman died he was as surely her murderer as Rose Genovese. He had known about Rose before the woman's death. He could have prevented it. Cheval lowered his head.

"You sleepy?" the captain asked.

"No," Cheval said, keeping his head down, feeling the smoke sting his eyes as it came up from his lips.

"I told them to pick up De Martin."

"He's clear," Cheval said, throwing the cigarette into the middle of the floor. The captain reached out with his foot and crushed the coal out with the edge of his sole.

"If he is, I'm going to go through that goddamned clinic one by one. I'm finished pussyfooting around there. Your assignment is finished over there, Cheval. You're directly assigned to the case now in plain clothes."

There was a knock at the door and Cheval knew the news that the knock announced.

"Come in," the captain called, still sitting on the bed, but thrusting his legs out now and leaning forward on his thighs. The detective who came in was grotesquely large, with a face that looked like a massive red burn.

"She's dead," he said in a croaking voice.

"All right," the captain said, "what about De Martin?"

"They're bringing him in. He was at home with some friends most of the day. His lawyer was with him. Sounds as if he can account for the whole day."

"That settles it," the captain said, rising. "Come on down to the precinct, Cheval. You might want to hear De Martin's story."

"I don't want to hear it," Cheval said, "I believe him. But I'll come down later."

The captain turned as he walked past Cheval's chair. He opened his lips as if to speak but apparently changed his mind for he turned again and walked out, the big detective following him.

Cheval remained in the easy chair, balled up under the com-

forter, his eyes burning, his head aching. He could never forgive himself for having waited so long. That woman's death was part of his life. The two would never quite part company.

Cheval left the precinct house in the grey light of the cold six o'clock dawn. De Martin had left an hour earlier, pale, shaken, but cleared. The precinct house had been crowded with reporters and photographers almost from the instant the report of the death had been typed out on the police teletype loop. There were cameramen from the big national picture magazines and one startling blonde wearing an evening dress, a mink cape and carrying a Leica who described herself as a free-lance photographer. A large party of them trooped off to the Queral home to intrude themselves on the misery, the hysterics, and the wailings of the Querals and their relatives.

On Crown Street Cheval walked towards Rose's apartment. He leaned on the bell for a long time before there was an answering buzz. The door unlocked and Cheval went up the stairs slowly, heavily, feeling an ache grow in his chest with every step upward.

Rose let him in, looking sleepy and warm, her skin pale at her wrists and red and flushed in creases on her face where she had slept on a fold of her covers.

"You always arrive at the strangest times," she said, stifling a yawn. "It's not even six-thirty."

"You would've been getting up in a half hour anyway," Cheval said coldly.

"The hell I would," she said softly, stretching as she followed him into the apartment. "I always get up as close to eight as I can and then I rush like hell to get down to the clinic on time."

"Mrs. Queral died this morning," Cheval said, turning to face her. Rose didn't bat an eyelash. Cheval waited and the longer he waited the deeper his love and respect for her grew. She was made of the stuff that the early Christian martyrs knew.

"I'm glad," she finally said. "That was the woman I told you about—with the little boy and the older girl. The first day we met she died but she didn't know it."

"She was murdered, Rose," Cheval said, waiting, "murdered the way the other sixteen were."

Rose shrugged her shoulders and started to walk past Cheval.

He reached out and touched her arm very lightly, stopping her. She turned her black eyes with their heavy lashes at him and waited.

"I know who killed her, too," Cheval said, feeling as if his throat were tightening, as if his body didn't want him to speak. Because if he did speak now there wouldn't be any secret left between them. But speaking now was different. He was as guilty as she. There was no question of his turning her in now. He couldn't.

"So it was you," she said softly, cryptically.

"You killed her, Rose," Cheval said, "the way you killed the other sixteen men and women."

"You didn't know anything about them," Rose said, her face unchanged as she looked at Cheval.

"I know quite a lot about them."

"Did you know that they were dead already?"

"I understand your motives, Rose. We won't even discuss them. I'm not going to argue the merits of mercy killing."

"Then you know it's done all the time, don't you? Nurses let hopeless invalids catch pneumonia, doctors do it with a few extra grains of morphine. It's a blessing, it's a charity, it's a final act of kindness."

"I said I wasn't going to argue it, Rose."

"Even an officer commanding a firing squad has a duty. They call the final shot *coup de grace*—it is an act of pity."

"I could have saved Mrs. Queral. That's what has been eating my insides like a worm since two o'clock this morning."

"You couldn't have saved her for anything but agony and the casual butchery they go through on hopeless cancers. Do you know what a hopeless case is for them? A chance for instruction, for the perfection of techniques. She wouldn't have gone into the operating rooms. She would have gone into the theatre. Have you ever been in the operating theatre, Cheval? I have. It horrifies my flesh, it turns my soul and dirties it."

"Science isn't for the squeamish, Rose. The operation they could have performed on Mrs. Queral might have saved someone a month from now, a year from now, five years from now. You've cut down someone else's chances by your murders."

Rose's face was pale now and her eyes sightless, the effect of her stare gave the impression that she

was looking inward beyond any efforts Cheval might put forth to call her back. "The human being is holy and separate and distinct. The flesh, the bones, the blood, the spirit are meant to be inviolate. You can not advance the life of others on the pain and agony and butchery of the sick."

"Rose," Cheval said earnestly, "they would be trying to help her with all the techniques at their command. They would have tried to save her with all the skill and knowledge that years of study have given them. It's cruel and foolish and wicked to deny them the chance to learn what they can." Cheval put out his hands and grabbed her upper arms but she stared through him not seeing him nor the room.

"I can't abandon them, Cheval. I must not deny them the one thing God has given them to end their pains, their torments."

"You can't play God, Rose," Cheval said, his throat hoarse. Rose's eyes closed slightly and for the first time Cheval thought she was really looking at him.

"Do you really believe there's a kindly old man with a long white beard who cares about us, Cheval? Are you that thick? Are you that childish?" Her eyes seemed puzzled and filled with pain.

"I don't know, Rose. But I know that we can't set ourselves up as judges over the lives of others—to decide whether they will live or die!"

"I have never taken life from anyone for whom it's meant anything but cruelty."

"I said I wouldn't argue it with you, Rose," Cheval said, letting go of her, recognizing the hopelessness of convincing her that she was anything but completely justified.

"We're the only things in the world, in the universe," Rose said, looking at Cheval as if he were a child who still believed in Santa Claus. "There is no kindly bearded old man who cares about us, Cheval. We have to care for one another. God doesn't end our suffering. He doesn't cause it. He's indifferent. He always will be indifferent. We're each of us alone and have nothing but ourselves and one another. If we can't be kind to one another then we're lost, Cheval. Don't you see that? I've been with so many men, Cheval. Not because I'm a greedy woman or a frightened woman but because I know how lonely they are, how desperate, how frightened they must be. I've killed men and women for the same reasons. Don't you see,

Cheval, if we all cared for one another with the same lack of selfishness it would be a kinder, more friendly, purer world?"

"Rose," Cheval said, his head aching, "stop it because you're using the words all wrong."

"That's because they have always used the words wrong," she said, suddenly reaching out and stroking his hair with a light, steady hand. "They say honor and they mean cruelty. They say patriotism and they mean war. They say faith and they mean submission. They say God and they mean nothing."

"And they say murder," Cheval said levelly.

"What are you, Cheval?" Rose asked, smiling faintly.

"I'm a detective. I was assigned to the out-patient department to find a murderer."

"Yes," she said closing her eyes, "I knew it was something like that when I found the things moved."

"You mean, you knew your office had been searched?"

"You were careful, Cheval," she said, opening her eyes and smiling, "but to someone who puts things away in exactly measured positions you can't be too careful, not when distances are measured in millimeters."

"Then you must have known *before* Mrs. Queral," he said, his face drawn with the implications.

"Yes, I did know," she said, nodding slightly, caressing his face with her hand. "But I didn't know who it was."

"Rose, I have to turn you over to the precinct," Cheval said and even as he said it, he knew that he couldn't.

"When I'm gone who will be left for these poor people?" she asked softly, gently.

"Rose, can't I make you understand that I have to do this? That in the same way you feel dedicated I feel dedicated."

"It's not the same, Cheval," she said, her eyes becoming wiser and gentler. "I've examined the words and their meanings and I am satisfied that what I am doing is based on the real meanings of love, pity, life and death. Yes, even justice is a word that means something to me. Have you examined the words that run your life, Cheval?"

"I'm thirty-eight years old, Rose," Cheval said steadily. "That's far too old for a man to change the way he's lived. The words are pretty well set in concrete for me. I don't even know if I want to change their meanings now even if I could."

"Turn me in then, Cheval," she said softly, her eyes closing.

"I must," Cheval said, his face becoming grey, his mouth filling with the cold, wet taste of the grave. She came into his arms then, her eyes closed, her body warm underneath the old, ugly robe. She put her mouth to his ear and his body tingled with the rhythm of the warm air that crossed it.

"What will they do to me, Cheval?" she asked into his ear.

"Rose," Cheval said, feeling his blood thicken in his body.

"If they kill me, Cheval, will you be happy?" she asked again into his flesh and Cheval felt weak and sick. The trial would be a farce—a hanging jury would be in the box, the press howling, the crowds waiting for her. Her very beauty would be a slap in their faces, her words would be derided, her motives twisted and tortured. She would have no more chance than a seed in a forest in flames. They would consume the soul and body of Rose Genovese completely. They would drive her off the cliff naked and insane and screaming in pain. In killing her there would be no scrap of pity, no drop of kindness, not a whisper of understanding. It would be equal to clubbing a gentle-eyed doe to death. She was a mad saint and they would not understand her. They would not forgive her.

"I'll never be happy, Rose," Cheval barely choked and kissed her face and lips and eyes and hair, drugging his mind with the taste and scent and dearness of her body and her hair and her life. He would wait. God knew for what—but he would wait. He was still as guilty as she.

## 12

THEY went to the clinic together and Cheval walked into her office ahead of her. He went directly to the cabinets where he found the murder kit. It took a slight amount of effort on his part to pick up the leather watch case that contained the hypodermic syringe. From her desk he took the vials of insulin and then stuffed everything into his coat pockets.

"There's an end to this, Rose," he said, keeping his hands in his pockets.

"Cheval—" she started to say.

"No," he shook his head. "There has to be an end. In a month you'll quit your job. Two months from now we'll be married and we'll leave. I don't know where we'll go. I don't care much.

But we'll get away. And you must never breathe a word about this to anyone, do you understand me?"

"Yes, darling," Rose said and there was a light look of amused tenderness in her eyes.

"Don't look at me that way, Rose. I can't turn you in when there's blood on my own hands."

"Darling, aren't you ever going to understand that neither of us is guilty of anything?"

"Rose, stop it!" Cheval said explosively, his skin darkening, his scalp tightening. "Now, listen to me and listen carefully," he said, calming himself, checking his breathing. "There'll be an examination of everyone connected with the clinic. You'll be taken down to the precinct and questioned by a number of men. They may spend twenty minutes with you or several hours. It depends on your behavior and the things you say. Don't lie to them. Admit that you saw Mrs. Queral. Discuss it quite freely with them. Under no circumstances suggest that you knew she had had a hypodermic injection yesterday. Volunteer no information but answer their questions. And one thing, Rose," Cheval took her hands and held them fiercely, "I don't want you to discuss with them anything that has to do with your opinions as to who might have disliked Mrs. Queral or any of the other people who have—died."

"Cheval, I have nothing to be afraid of," she said calmly. "I have done nothing wrong."

"Don't argue with them, in God's name, Rose!" Cheval said, suddenly frightened. She had changed from the instant he had told her he knew she was the murderer. In a strange way he had unlocked the madness that she had beautifully disguised.

"I won't, Cheval," she said with a smile. "I know how hopeless it would be."

"Good. That's what I wanted you to say," Cheval said, easing up a little on the pressure he exerted on her hands. "I'll be down there. I may even question you. Pay no more attention to me than you do to the others." Cheval knew that she couldn't help paying more attention to him but it would be understandable—he had worked in the clinic and the captain knew that he had been with her. Nevertheless, it would help if she didn't make too much of a point of staring at him.

"Cheval, I will be very good," she said with a brave smile. "Do they still beat people in police stations?"

"No," Cheval said without a smile, "they won't beat you. They beat very few people and almost never in a police station. A sober woman is never molested. Don't worry about that."

"Cheval, I did nothing wrong," she said with a calm and steady look, watching him carefully. "You believe me, don't you? I mean, that I am satisfied I did nothing wrong?"

"I believe you, Rose," Cheval said, checking his impulse to say anything else. In an odd way, her own madness would be her salvation. Even the dullest of cops would sense a feeling of guilt in people he questioned. It was something that came from experience, something that had unmistakable signs. Guilt was something that was often so thick that it overlay the skin like grime. It showed in the eyes, in the hands, in the positions of the feet, the sweat under the armpits. Her sense of innocence would be her most powerful weapon—that and the fact that they had no idea who might be responsible.

The first problem for Cheval was the disposal of the syringe. Rose must have stolen it months and months ago so that if it were placed on one of the instrument trays it would be noticed as an extra instrument and draw attention. No matter how carefully it was replaced there would always appear the damning witness who saw it put on the tray. In empty halls, behind locked doors, in a building devoid of life there was always the improbable witness who, after the facts were known, was quite probable, quite logical —a visitor who had lost his way and was peeking through the glass pane in a door, a cleaning woman in search of a lost mop, a student nurse stealing a forbidden smoke from her duty time. Cheval decided that it was a risk not worth running. Casting it into an empty lot invited the same chances of detection and betrayal. In deserted neighborhoods killers had been identified by lovers in a parked, darkened car, by a man walking a dog late at night, by the motorist waiting at a stop signal. It was incredible how many eyes were open and looking in those desperate moments when a man most wanted to be invisible, ignored.

Cheval then did something he knew was dangerous and inadequate—he tossed the old watch case into his dresser drawer, wedged the drawer tightly closed

with the material of an old shirt and then went down into the cellar and tossed the tubing, the gauze pads and adhesive plaster into the furnace.

The alcohol he put up in the medication shelf in the bathroom, and then went down to the precinct house.

The first of the doctors and nurses of the out-patient department were going through the mill. There were four teams of men working in the rooms upstairs. The newspapers scattered about the room told their own hysterical stories of the mass murders in the Crown-Bristol area. The papers already had the insulin angle and were playing it for all its worth. There were pictures of Jefferson General and one paper had had its artist letter the legend in furry, red, dripping letters "The killer is here." Cheval chucked the paper away.

The Board of Governors of the hospital would not be too pleased with that picture and its caption. In fact, no hospital in town would be too pleased. Cheval noted that the local medical societies deplored the public's acceptance of the police theory that a doctor was responsible for the murders. "*. . . part of the Hippocratic oath which all physicians take on their solemn entrance to the world of medicine specifies that 'I shall give no harmful drugs . . .'*" The old sacred cow, the doctor, was taking a licking in the public print. Cheval noted grimly that it would get much worse before it got better. It would wind up with Senators of the United States solemnly intoning the threat to the American home and the threat to the patient-doctor relationship to suggest that a doctor might . . . Yes, Cheval decided, it would get much worse.

Fields and Levine came in together. Fields lit a cigarette, and crossed the room to Cheval.

"Hello, Cheval—"

"Hello, Fields."

"You been through it yet?"

"No," Cheval said, shaking his head.

"I suppose they've got some ideas, hunh?"

"The police always have."

"Didn't De Martin pan out?"

"I don't know. I suppose not."

"Koontzy said De Martin was arrested."

"If he was, the papers didn't say anything about it."

"Yeah," Fields said, flicking the ash from his cigarette, looking puzzled. "This is a hell of a thing to sock the out-patient department with. Makes you feel

awful. All of those people getting themselves murdered right in the clinics."

It was at that instant that Cheval saw Rose enter. He got up from his chair. Fields followed his eyes and Cheval immediately regretted his rising from his seat.

"Isn't that Rose Genovese?" Fields asked, peering through the detectives who now started to crowd the room.

"Yes, I think it is," Cheval said.

"What in God's name do they want with her?" Fields asked. "She doesn't have anything to do with the patients."

"Well, if they're going to question radiologists they might as well question the social workers at the clinic." Cheval excused himself and walked through the room to talk to the big detective with the raw, red face.

"Has the captain asked for me yet?"

"Oh, yeah, a couple of times," the detective said, looking at Cheval.

"Don't tell anyone here who I am. They still think I'm a special cop on the clinic staff."

"Right," the detective said softly. As Cheval spoke to him he watched the progress of the detectives with Rose into one of the rooms. Cheval eased himself between the people standing in the room and followed. He closed the door softly behind him. The detective who remained with Rose looked at him with a question in his eyes.

"Special detail, District Attorney's office," Cheval said. "The name's Cheval."

The other detective nodded and took up a chair near the steam, tilting it back so that he could look out of the grimy heavily-screened window in the yard between the precinct house and the tenement next door. Cheval took up a seat at the far corner of the room, straddling it so that his chin rested on the back of the chair. He inspected his nails, occasionally glancing at Rose.

She was very good. She barely looked his way. This was the temporary silence treatment, intended to put an edge on the nerves.

Rose opened her purse and took out her coin pocket. She extracted a dime and snapped the coin pocket shut, throwing it into the purse. "I wonder if I could use the telephone outside," she said, holding out the dime. Cheval stifled the smile. It was exactly the right thing to do. The other detective brought his chair down with

a sour look. "Sorry, miss, but they'll be in to question you in a minute."

"Well, they aren't here, can't I call?" she persisted.

"Look, I told you, they'll be in here in a minute," the detective said.

"They aren't here now. I'll be back in a minute," she insisted. Cheval watched her. She was as cool and self-possessed as any innocent woman who felt imposed upon. She was perfect.

"Just a minute, I'll find out," the detective said sourly, rising with an annoyed look. Cheval leaned forward on the chair, keeping his eyes on the detective, not daring to look at Rose. The detective opened the connecting door, said something unintelligible to someone within, probably the captain, and then closed the door.

"They're coming right in, miss," the detective said as he closed the door. Rose deliberately opened her purse, picked out the coin pocket, unsnapped it and just as deliberately put the dime back, snapped the coin pocket and replaced it, closing the purse with a crisp sound. Cheval sat up, full of love and respect for her. She had behaved perfectly so far.

When the connecting door opened the captain came in and saw Cheval before he saw Rose. He started to speak but changed his mind when he caught Rose sitting near the door. Two other detectives whom Cheval did not know came in with the captain. The detective near the window got up, picked up his chair and brought it forward. Cheval remained where he was, waiting.

"You're Miss Rose Genovese," the captain said, reading from a sheet attached to a clipboard that one of the detectives held out for him to look at.

"Yes," Rose said calmly. The captain pulled over the chair the detective had brought forward and sat down on it.

"Now, Miss Genovese, we're going to discuss this business of your seeing Mrs. Queral the day she died."

"All right," Rose said, not moving a muscle.

"You did see her, didn't you?" the captain asked mildly.

"Yes, I saw Mrs. Queral," Rose said and Cheval rose then and came closer. . . .

"Did I do well, Cheval?" Rose asked him softly as they walked back together through the iron-

cold wintry streets to her apartment.

"You did fine, Rose," Cheval said. And she had. Beautifully. They had levered and pried and pushed at her story but it had stood up, simple, correct, without a questionable fingerhold anywhere.

"Will you come upstairs?" Rose asked him when they got to the apartment house. Cheval said he wouldn't. He squeezed her gloved hands and looked at her closely.

"I don't think they'll come around to see you again. But if they do, don't tell them any more than you already have. And remember what you told them. Maybe I'll see you tonight." Rose leaned towards him for the kiss but Cheval stiffened and kept his distance. She opened her eyes and looked at him with a curious look of coldness.

"You're angry with me, aren't you, Cheval?"

"I'll see you tonight," he said and turned and walked away. While he walked he mentally punished himself for denying her the kiss. It was such a little thing. A bare few hours before, desire and love and fear and shame had all been hotly mingled. But now, in the cold, flat light of the street, fully dressed, chilled by the wind, fresh from the precinct house and the lies that they had both told—even a kiss was too much. He was a moral animal and it took effort for him to forget the things he had once lived by.

## 13

CHEVAL, in his own apartment, bathed and shaved and changed his clothes. He felt curiously lightheaded and exhausted while dressing and had to stop several times to keep from passing out. He hadn't eaten in two days and had barely any real rest. When he finished he went down into the street. The cold air struck him particularly hard and instead of waking him, sharpening his senses, it made him shudder and feel tired and aching. It seemed to get into his bones, slowing him, numbing his body with its chill. He had to sleep sometime. But he didn't trust himself to sleep.

When he rang the bell at Rose's apartment there was no answer so he let himself in with the key she had given him. He found the apartment dark and stuffy, so he went to the windows to open them. Rose had wedged them shut with newspapers to keep the drafts out and Cheval found he lacked

the energy to work the tightly wedged folds of paper out from the windows. He tossed his coat on the bed and sat down hard on the sofa. He waited for a while and then, out of sheer exhaustion, put up his feet and fell asleep in the warmth and darkness of the apartment.

He had slept perhaps an hour or more when he felt something touch his body and glide across his chest. Cheval opened his eyes and saw Rose stooping over him. He smiled and she smiled at him, her hand continuing to glide under his coat past his side around his back. She came down then, leaning her weight on him, bringing her mouth down on his. Cheval accepted the kiss hungrily but wearily. The warmth of the room, the darkness, and the weight of her body made Cheval feel particularly tired.

"Have you been here long?" Rose asked, her lips brushing against his as she moved her face from side to side.

"Oh, I don't know. I got here around nine. Where were you?"

"Out. I had a late dinner."

"They didn't bother you today, did they?"

"The police?"

"Mmmm."

"No, Cheval, they didn't."

"I didn't think they would." Cheval's voice was thick with weariness.

"If you're going to sleep go to bed. It's much more comfortable."

"I don't have that much energy," Cheval mumbled. "I'll sleep here."

"Let me make you comfortable," she said, beginning to rise. Cheval tightened his arm around her, holding her against him.

"Don't bother me, I'll never be more comfortable," Cheval said, closing his eyes with a sigh. He felt her lips on his mouth once more and then he was asleep.

He didn't understand what it was that wakened him. He vaguely recalled a dream in which he could not breathe. When he did open his eyes the smell of gas was unmistakable. He could hear the hiss of gas. He tried to rise and found it difficult. The odor was overpowering.

"Rose," Cheval called hoarsely as he struggled to rise. He began to breath harder and he knew that with every increase in effort, his lungs filled more with gas. He rolled off the couch falling to the floor. The air was faintly clearer near the floor but it was still foul. Cheval crawled across the room, slowly, resting occasionally, his head feeling groggy, his limbs

weighing a ton. He could die by the time he reached the window if he lost his head and used up the small store of strength and oxygen he had left.

Cheval inched along, each movement more and more difficult because muscles would not respond. His body felt sluggish, logy. It seemed hours elapsed while he worked towards the window and finally when his forehead rested against the baseboard he felt the overwhelming desire to relax, to rest a while. But that would be fatal. Cheval groped upwards with his hand. He would have to rise to get to the window. Cheval rested with his face flat against the floor.

Slowly, carefully, dragging at his muscles he brought his hands to his sides and turned his palms down flat against the floor. It seemed an eternity before he could drag his palms alongside his body until he could bring them as far up as his shoulders. Cheval knew that he dared not wait too long. Closing his throat, holding his breath he pressed with all the agonized strength he could muster down against his palms. Sweat began to break from his forehead and along the backs of his legs as his head came up and then his chest.

He willed his leg forward but there was no strength left for him to bring that leg. He could only concentrate on the palms of his hands now, thrusting his body upwards until he could come level with the window sill. His chin strained upwards and he felt as though there was a ton weight resting on the small of his back. Sweat started from his face and ran down his forehead from his hair. The air was thick with gas above the floor, sickening enough to make him want to retch. Cheval almost cried out with joy when he felt his chin touch the edge of the sill. He placed the point of his chin on the sill and tried to take the pressure off his arms. The instant of relaxation almost snapped his neck. His body sagged badly and the pain of supporting his body with his chin, drove needles into his brain, made lights flash and swim in the darkness.

But there was a whisper of cold air coming through from the outdoors and Cheval licked at it greedily, hungrily. He pulled away one hand and caught the sill and gasped from the relief of pain. It was easier now to draw up one leg and then the other. Cheval brought up the other hand and leaned against the window. He had no strength left to break it.

An eighth of an inch of ordinary glass window pane and he could not break it. The thought made him laugh inwardly.

He tottered on his feet and leaned forward, covering his face with his hands and pressed with his head against the glass. He felt it give and then there was a brittle crack and a curious tinkle as a heavy, large shard of glass slid slowly along his face and fell outwards. Air rushed at his face like a savage kiss. Cheval drank in the air and it was then he passed out with his body partially across the sill, and a thin red line of blood oozing from his neck and the side of his face where the shard of glass had made its slow, sharp progress.

## 14

CHEVAL'S first impression was that of a man, short, chunky, wearing an odd apparatus from which dangled heavy pleated coils of rubberized hose. He had on hip length rubber boots and he seemed far away, brightly but distantly lit by a yellow light from overhead. Cheval recalled the covers of science fiction magazines in which men in space suits first touched the surface of the moon. When Cheval's eyes could focus more closely he read the white stenciled lettering across the apparatus as *"Police Emergency Squad 4."* And the man with the odd uniform was not a space traveler, just one of the specialists who dealt with gas poisoning among other things.

Rose's apartment was filled with police, in uniform, in plainclothes and wearing special inhalator equipment. Special cops wrestled with a pulmotor and a young interne in a white coat sat on the bed looking at him. "St. Agatha" was stitched in red thread over the breast pocket of his uniform.

"How do you feel?" the interne asked.

"I feel like throwing up," Cheval said, fighting the nausea that surged up into his throat.

"Go ahead if you feel like it. It's good for you."

The nausea abruptly disappeared and Cheval shook his head. "Don't force it," the interne said calmly. "It'll come by itself." He slapped Cheval's thigh as he rose. "You're okay, fellow, don't worry." The interne walked out and some of the cops went with him.

Cheval sat up with the help of a cop, feeling shaky and weak. He felt the blood draining from his face and lowered his head. The

cop's big hand pressed down against the back of his neck.

"Push up, son," he heard the cop say. Cheval pushed up against the big, heavy hand and blood was forced into his head, clearing his brain. The desire to faint disappeared. "Keep pushing, son," the cop said and Cheval kept it up.

"It's okay," he said finally and the cop released him. Cheval brought his head up and took in a deep breath of air. For the first time he noticed how cold the room was. All of the windows had been broken out and the front door was wide open. There were small scratch sounds of glass being crushed underfoot as people stirred about the room. The captain finally came over to Cheval and put his hand on his shoulder.

"You're all right?" the captain asked.

"Yes," Cheval said and for the first time noticed the cop who had helped him. An old harness bull with a beefsteak face and grey hair. Cheval smiled dimly at him and the cop smiled back.

"Would you mind telling me how this happened?" the captain asked, not unkindly.

"I fell asleep," Cheval said.

"After opening all the jets on the gas range?" the captain's face was harsh although his voice was controlled, almost gentle.

"Someone must have come in and turned them on while I was asleep."

"Or maybe she turned them on after you feel asleep and before she left," the captain offered coldly.

"She wasn't here. I was alone in the apartment. The door was locked."

"How did you get in?"

"I thought you would have that figured out by now," Cheval said sourly. "Rose gave me a key a long time ago."

"I'm having her picked up, Cheval," the captain said.

"Don't be a fool. She had no reason to do this. We're getting married."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious," Cheval said, getting to his feet.

"She's my only suspect," the captain said after pausing for a long moment.

"If you pick her up I'll have her sue you for false arrest and I'll testify that I turned on the gas myself."

"Are we playing games, Cheval?" the captain asked harshly in a voice he deliberately kept down.

"If we are, then we'll play by my rules. I say she wasn't here when I came and she wasn't here

while this happened. She had nothing to do with it. I'm smart enough and savvy enough to make my testimony stick, Captain," Cheval said calmly, buttoning the shirt that must have been opened by the emergency crew; half of the buttons were ripped off.

"I don't know what sort of a fool you take me for, Cheval," the captain said tensely, "but if you stick to your story I swear to God I'll slap you with an attempted suicide charge."

"Go ahead," Cheval said, tucking the ends of his shirt into his trousers.

"It'll cost you your job and after spending a few weeks in St. Agatha's psycho ward I'll have you up on trial in front of a judge *I* know." The captain wasn't bluffing. His eyes were cold, his face set and angry.

"You do what you damn well want," Cheval said, accepting his coat from the old cop who had stood aside at a discreet distance. The captain looked at him for a long moment and then turned and walked out. Cheval followed him with his eyes for a long moment and then turned towards the old cop. "Thanks," he said as he eased himself into his jacket.

"He means it," the old cop said.

"Oh, sure," Cheval answered with a faint smile.

"A woman who would do a thing like that isn't all there," the cop observed calmly.

Cheval regarded the old cop for a long moment. "Suppose your wife came at you with a bread knife—what would you do?"

"I'd knock her bow-legged," the cop said crisply.

"So would I. But you wouldn't pull her in for assault."

The elderly cop made a face, dubiously pushing out his lower lip. "I get your point. But there's a difference."

"No difference," Cheval said, picking up his overcoat and hat. "It's still just a family brawl. Some people have shorter tempers than others."

"A family brawl, hunh?" the old cop glanced significantly at the gas range. Cheval said nothing further. He put on his hat and tipped his finger in parting salute to the old cop and walked out of the apartment. A few of the cops recognized him and looked at him curiously as he went out. . . .

Once inside his own apartment Cheval looked over the room swiftly. It looked undisturbed. But he couldn't tell. He hadn't arranged the room as a deadfall for a searcher the way Rose had ar-

ranged hers. But his eye stopped when it came to the dresser. The tell tale wedge of material that should have appeared between the edge of the drawer and the frame was gone. That drawer had been opened. Cheval crossed the room and pulled the drawer open. The wrist watch case was still there but he knew from its lack of weight even before he opened it that it was empty. He knew, too, as he looked into the empty, imitation plush lined case that Rose, not the captain, had taken the hypodermic syringe.

Cheval chucked the case back into the drawer, pulled out a fresh shirt and then stripped his clothes off. He changed his shirt and necktie, brushed his teeth to rid his mouth of the taste the gas had brought on, and then left the apartment.

He hit the street reckless of the fact that he might be followed. Rose had taken the hypodermic syringe for at least two reasons—with himself dead it might tip off the police and, too, Rose still had judgments of pity to render. When Cheval reached the clinic he was both pleased and dissatisfied with the fact that there was no police guard in evidence.

The clinic doors were locked so Cheval walked a half block to the emergency ambulance ramp and through the swing doors. A special officer on duty half rose from his chair, but Cheval walked past him so swiftly and so purposefully that the special officer didn't follow. The lights were out everywhere in the clinics, the examination rooms darkened, cold, sterile, empty. Only here and there a faint red glow marked a fire exit. When Cheval came into the main waiting room he saw the ghost of light on one wall, turning it a shade lighter than the walls that abutted it.

Cheval swallowed hard, walked more softly but swiftly crossing the space of the main waiting room. He slipped into the corridor, and the glass panel on Rose's office door showed yellow light. Cheval turned the handle and pushed the door open without knocking.

An elderly man with melting black eyes, wearing ragged, dirty working clothes, sat in a chair, his thin, wasted, pale arm bared to the middle of the upper arm. Tightly lashed to his upper arm was a length of knotted rubber tubing. Rose, wearing a white coat, held a hypodermic syringe, poised. Rose turned and faced him. Cheval noted quickly with a silent thanks to God that the bar-

rel of the syringe was full, the plunger drawn to the top of the cylinder. The old man looked at Cheval with worried, apprehensive eyes.

"You know the clinic's closed, Miss Genovese," Cheval said sharply. There was a look of shock and surprise and happiness in Rose's face that Cheval completely understood. She must have gone through all sorts of hell after she had left him in her apartment.

"It's for my rheumatics, Doc," the old man wheezed and looked hopefully at Cheval. "I can't stand it, Doc. It's killing me."

"The pain is intense," Rose said softly, meaningfully to Cheval, watching him now with eyes that ached with love for him.

"I'm sorry," Cheval said, crossing to the old man and dragging him to his feet. "The clinic is closed. It's after hours. If you want treatment you come back tomorrow and see the doctor. Miss Genovese isn't a doctor."

"She did it for a special favor," the old man said, plucking piteously at Cheval's sleeve. "Please, Doc."

"Come on," Cheval said, stripping the constrictor from the old man's blue veined upper arm. "You shouldn't be here. You know the clinic hours."

"Miss Genovese said it would be okay, Doc. God, it hurts bad."

Cheval grabbed the old man's hand and pulled him outside into the corridor. He whispered quickly and harshly in his ear:

"Look, if the special officer finds you here, he's going to make trouble for you and for Miss Genovese. You know the clinic is closed. You had no right to come up here." The old man began to protest but Cheval silenced him by squeezing his arm tight. Cheval said savagely, "Beat it!"

The old man turned and rapidly went down the corridor. Cheval breathed a little more easily. As he entered the office he felt a chill. The chill came from the opened window in the room.

Rose was gone.

## 15

THE captain looked at Cheval when he asked for the return of his gun.

"I thought you were going to stay on at the clinic for a while," the captain said.

"There's no point in it," Cheval said, "I'm not fooling anyone up there. Not now." Cheval held out his hand for his gun.

"Are you really going to marry that—Genovese?"

"Yes," Cheval said flatly, still extending his hand.

"You're worse than a fool," the captain said.

"My gun," Cheval said.

"I've seen cops do stupid things in my life," the captain said grimly, "fall in love with call girls, trust bookies, give hop-headed killers an even break, things you wouldn't believe a man in his right mind would do —but this sets some kind of a record. For one thing I think she's a psycho. For another, I think she's a killer."

"She didn't kill me," Cheval said, dropping his hand slightly and pursing his lips with impatience. He made the silent gesture of request again with his hand, crooking his fingers slightly.

"I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the others. I think she's our pigeon."

"Give me the gun and I'll find her," Cheval said, worried now. The captain was no fool. He was beginning to smell the stench of death.

"All right," the captain said with a sudden, soft tone of agreement. He pulled open his desk drawer, drew out the revolver and the small leather case with Cheval's badge. He handed them over. "Bring her in," he said. . . .

Cheval tried the door of the hall of The Loyal Sons of Italy not taking into account the hour or the fact that it might be closed. It opened slowly, stiffly, as if a new spring had been installed to keep it shut against the wind. The tables of the restaurant were neatly but definitely covered with newspapers, the kitchen door closed and heavily padlocked with a fat, ancient steel lock that looked as though it might weigh as much as a husky new born infant. The card players were gone. The hall was empty. Cheval sat down on one of the couches. He lighted a cigarette, put a hand behind his head and waited.

The hall was cold and the wind made the cold seem closer, sharper as it went down the streets singing its thin, cruel song, searching for warm flesh, for some lingering traces of heat to bleed off in its hunger. . . .

Sometime later, Cheval wasn't sure exactly how much later, the door opened at the front of the hall. Cheval looked down the length of the hall at the front door. It could have been anyone, but Cheval knew it was Rose Genovese. She had finally found him.

"I'm glad you're safe, Cheval," she said when she came up to him.

Her face was pale with cold.

"I believe you," Cheval said, looking at her. "I think you would have been even more pleased if I had died."

"Yes," she said softly, tenderly, "I could have gone on then with that man you found in the clinic."

"I'll never make you understand that it's murder—will I?"

She shook her head silently, the light catching the paleness, the waxenness of her face. She had about her the awful look of death. "I was walking the streets for hours."

"You knew I'd be here. Why did you come?" Cheval asked, feeling the bulk of the revolver against his ribs.

"Even while I was running away I was looking for you," she said and leaned her face forward so that it almost touched Cheval's coat lapel.

"They've been looking for you, Rose," he said, not daring to touch her now. The prisons might prove to be too much for him if he touched her.

"I don't know why they didn't find me," she said, now leaning against him. "I didn't go anywhere. I just walked."

"Those people are always the hardest to find," Cheval said, aching to put his arms around her but afraid. "If you're tired—you can rest on the couch."

"Yes," she said, "I'd like that." He led her to the couch and she lay down gratefully, sighing slightly. He picked up her feet and placed them on the couch.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"Freezing," she said.

Cheval took off his coat and spread it over her. She worked her body down against the aged springs of the couch with a gratefully sensuous movement.

"You'll be cold," she said, looking up at him, her hair black and smoky against the paleness of her face.

Cheval sat down on the couch opposite her. She closed her eyes and began to breathe deeply. Cheval took the revolver out of his shoulder holster and put it down on the couch behind him. He felt its hard, familiar outline against his hip. Not yet, he thought achingly. Not for a little while.

"Are we still going to run away?" she asked, almost dreamily.

"No," Cheval said carefully, "we're not going to run away, Rose."

"That's good," she said with a small sigh.

"Because you don't want to go with me," Cheval said levelly.

"How can I?" she asked, opening her eyes, smiling faintly at him.

"There's too much for you to do here, isn't there?"

"You do understand, Cheval, don't you?" she asked, looking across at him, her eyes curiously large and intense for all of their weariness.

"I understand, Rose," Cheval said.

"Perhaps you can help," Rose said calmly, looking at him.

"No," Cheval said, "I wouldn't help. I have helped. I'm as guilty as you, Rose. There's a woman dead because I hesitated."

"You couldn't have stopped me in time, Cheval," she said gently.

"Yes, I could. I should have."

"Never mind," she said wearily. "I won't argue it. You don't understand after all."

Cheval reached back for the gun and released the safety lever. He masked it now with his thigh so that she could not see it.

"Cheval, you're such a fool," she said, closing her eyes and smiling. "Let me sleep for a while. Then when I get up we can love."

"All right, Rose," Cheval said, rising, putting the revolver in his pocket. He leaned over and kissed her cold cheeks and then her cold, moist mouth. Her lips stirred sleepily under his, and she smiled.

Cheval stood over her and waited for what seemed ages, until her breathing became even and deep and regular. *Then when I get up we can love.* "Yes, darling," Cheval said softly and took the revolver out of his pocket. He sighted at her head and fired twice.

## 16

THE captain and some of the detectives from the bureau were the first to hit the hall of The Loyal Sons of Italy. The captain took one look at Rose on the sofa and then at Cheval and shook his head.

"You damned fool, couldn't you make it look any better than this?" The captain growled and yanked Cheval's coat off the dead woman. The captain whispered to a couple of the detectives. One of them went to the front door and wedged it shut with a chair. Then he went to the rear, found newspapers and clipped them together so that he could screen off all the windows in the front of the hall. The other detective went to work hauling Rose's body off the sofa. He dumped her face down on the floor, then overturned the sofa. He dragged her body over to the

spot where the bullets had entered the floor. Then he spoke to the captain.

"You'll have to hold still for this, Cheval," the captain said to him. Cheval barely listened. He stared straight ahead. The captain nodded to the detective who stepped up to Cheval.

"Sorry, pal," the detective said, grabbing hold of Cheval's coat lapel and ripping it down. He tore at Cheval's shirt and then at his collar. He took off Cheval's hat and tossed it aside. He mussed Cheval's hair and then stopped to dirty his hands so that he could dirty Cheval's face. He took the detective's hands and rubbed dust into them. "Mind sitting down on the floor," the detective asked, pressing on Cheval's shoulder. He obeyed numbly and numbly obeyed the detective's order to roll over a few times. Cheval then rose and the captain made a gesture at his own face. The detective nodded. "This is going to hurt," the detective said, "but don't pull away." Cheval felt the hot stinging stripes of the detective's nails as his face was clawed.

"Good enough," the captain said. "But let's have a bruise, near the eye. She would've hit him with something."

"Okay," the detective said and then shook Cheval slightly, "I'm going to have to give it all I've got."

Cheval nodded numbly and watched the detective cock his fist. The punch was hard and caught him exactly in the spot the captain had indicated. Cheval stumbled and fell backwards but the other detective caught him.

"Now—it looks better," the captain said, taking off his hat and wiping out the sweat band with his handkerchief.

"Feel okay?" the detective who had hit Cheval asked him solicitously.

"Yeah," Cheval said.

The captain took Cheval's arm. "You damned fool."

"I couldn't let her go up for grabs," Cheval said, mumbling a little, feeling his cheek swelling. . . .

Cheval's cheek bone was green and yellow and brown at the departmental investigation and he was freed on the charge of unintentional homicide. Commissioner Gilrain, who was on the departmental trial board, met Cheval and the captain in one of the corridors outside of the hearing rooms. The Commissioner glanced around casually before he spoke.

"I may as well tell you that I thought that trial was as phoney as a three-dollar bill."

The captain pursed his lips and said nothing. Cheval waited, also saying nothing.

"I don't know what happened in that room on Crown Street and I don't think I much care. She was guilty and if you say you killed her in the line of duty, okay, I'll go along with you on it. But if you're smart you won't open your mouth about it as long as you live. Do you understand?" Cheval saw that the last question was directed to both himself and the captain.

"Thanks very much, Commissioner," the captain said.

Gilrain looked at the two of them for a long time and shook his head, sighing slightly. "It's a good damned thing you weren't one of those horse-sized cops, Cheval. You would've had to have your brains beaten out before any one would believe that shooting."

"Yes, sir," Cheval said. He was slightly surprised to feel the unexpected pressure of the Commissioner's hand on his arm, squeezing him with a little gesture of friendliness.

"The hell with it. I'll back a good cop to the limit. You're going back to the District Attorney's roster?"

"I don't know, Commissioner," Cheval said, "whatever the department decides."

"I'd like to have him in my precinct, sir," the captain said.

"No," Cheval said quickly, almost too quickly. The two men looked at him. "I don't think I'd be much good there. Too many people in the neighborhood know me."

"We'll find something for you," Gilrain said.

"Thanks, I think that's my elevator," Cheval said, making that his excuse to leave the two old men.

"So long, Cheval," the captain said, putting out his hand. Cheval shook it quickly, looked at the captain's cold blue eyes and nodded. He hurried down to the elevator. The Commissioner and the captain looked after Cheval as he disappeared behind the closing doors of the elevator.

"Good man," Gilrain finally said heavily.

"As good as they come," the captain agreed.

"I'd hate to see him get into trouble about that shooting later on," Gilrain said.

"He won't," the captain added grimly. "Don't forget, he got a lot

of people off the griddle by shooting that woman."

"I'm not forgetting it," Gilrain said.

Cheval got down to the street quickly only to discover that he did not know where to go. What was worse, he didn't feel the desire to go anywhere.

Cheval allowed himself to be carried along by the crowds sweeping across the plazas to the wide shopping avenues in the heart of town. They had some purpose and he had none and it seemed, as he went along with them, that somehow he might be able to pick up a little of their purpose, a little of their warmth, their excitement, their hopes and desires and wishes. Now he had none of those things. They had all died with Rose Genovese.

He caught himself up short. He was blaming her again. Blaming her for the crack in his own soul. But there had been something wrong with him even before he met her. Love had served as a blue flame on that thing he called a soul. Love had played its flame on his soul and when love cooled, his soul cracked. It had been imperfect to begin with. There was a dead woman he had helped to kill and Rose's death did not quite make up the difference. He had killed Rose to save her from degrading punishment. But the honest cop, the good cop, the moral, uncompromising cop was dead.

There were crooked cops. Cheval had known a few. They looked tough, they talked hard, they threw their weight around. But they had their soft spots. One had been caught, finally, teaming up with a gang to knock over a jeweler at home. How did those cheap hoods know this was a cop with larceny in his heart? He didn't advertise it. He couldn't go to them and they didn't dare come to him. But Cheval had been to that cop's departmental trial and when the Corporation Counsel had asked the cop how the first contact had been made with the gang he said: "They came to me."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They came up to me in a cafeteria one night when I was having coffee."

"Did they know you were a police officer?"

"Yes, they did."

"What made them think that you, as a police officer, would betray the trust you held?"

"I don't know what made them think it. But they were sure. They

seemed pretty sure I was their man."

Cheval passed his hand across his mouth with a sick feeling of misery. *"They seemed pretty sure I was their man."* Of course they did. They knew with the sure instinct of the rotten, the corrupt. They were always able to scent that trace of decay, that distant overly-pungent whiff of the soul's rot.

They'd know it about *him*. No matter how tough or rough or straight he'd try to be. There would come a day when the eye would be fixed on him and the weasel word would be given. "You look like a cop who knows what's good for him." Yes, he knew what was good for him. He knew he wanted Rose Genovese and he had tossed the rule book out of the window for her and if you do it once, you'll do it again and again and again. And every time you do it your reasons get less and less important. You did it for the only woman you ever loved and one of these days you'll do it to save your own skin and then to get some money, and then to butter up a big shot thug and one day you'll do it for a blowzy tramp's smile. You'd be better off dead long before then. But you don't die that easily. Cops like that lived on and on and on, and the clean, straight, dumb, uncompromising ones were the ones who rushed trigger-happy stick-up men and got themselves shoveled under. Cheval would never again be one of those.

He found himself facing a traffic light that was about to change and because it turned green he stepped off the curb and because everyone else was crossing he crossed with them but it no longer mattered to him whether he ever got across safely or not.

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