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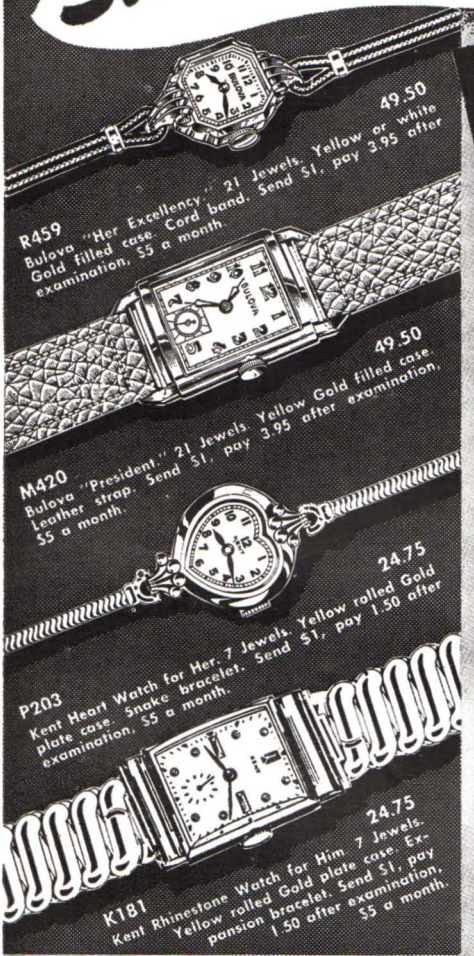

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IF I'D ONLY GIVEN THEM TO THE PURSER!
H-M-M-M, BLIGH WAS RIGHT
LATER
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MISS BISHOP'S A KNOCKOUT. YES, AND THAT REMINDS ME, I NEED A SHAVE
RAZOR PULLS, EH? TRY THIS THIN GILLETTE BLADE
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YES, THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING
OUR WINTER HOME IS IN WASHINGTON. I HOPE YOU'LL CALL ON US SOON
I'M HONORED, SIR. I CERTAINLY SHALL
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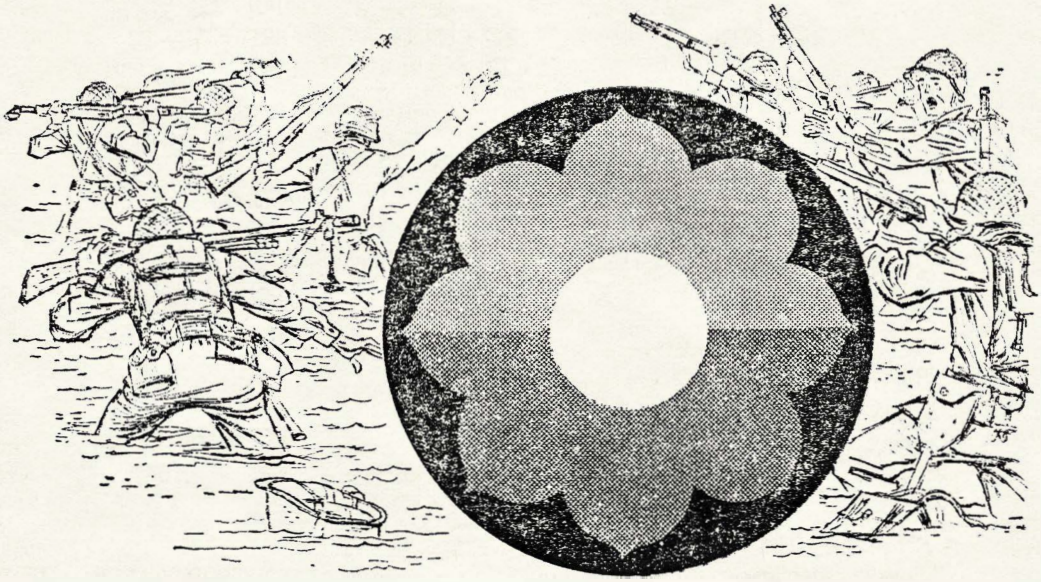
Only real men can wear it



No shoulder insignia in the U. S. Army is more proudly worn than the red-white-and-blue Octofoil of the Ninth Infantry Division. Along with it goes the Belgian Fourragere. You can wear both—if you're man enough to measure up to the standards of a great fighting tradition.

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ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

When her relatives reported Mrs. Clora McMillan of San Bernardino County, Cal., missing, and authorities found the skeleton of a woman, obviously the victim of foul play, near her home, they drew obvious conclusions. They buried the skeleton as Mrs. McMillan, arrested Lee Webb, who tremblingly admitted beating her to death. Webb trembled even more when, one day, she stood before him, with a cop on either side. It turned out, though, she wasn't a ghost. She'd simply recovered from the beating, quietly gone to another town, married another guy. Webb was released. The skeleton has never been explained.

1

Some years ago, near the town of Elmendorf, Texas, there was a roadhouse called the Sociable Inn, famous for its plump crocodiles and beautiful waitresses. The waitresses kept changing — the crocodiles didn't. People used to come to watch Joe Ball, the handsome proprietor, feed raw meat to the latter. . . .

Finally authorities got curious about the turnover in waitresses. It turned out that they had all been sweethearts of the handsome Joe, who regularly got tired of them—and fed them to the crocs. When the cops closed in on Joe, he put a bullet through his head.

2

A few years ago New York police ran into one of those situations that make good cops feel they should have taken up story-writing right along. Every 13 days a bank or loft safe was "burned" by bandits who seemingly moved heavy blow-torch equipment freely through locked doors and windows, leaving them perfectly intact—and still locked. Ghosts? No. Just a couple of guys, Joseph Strepka and Stanley Patrek, who'd worked out a way to remove the key-cylinder from any ordinary lock from the outside. Then they inserted their own key-cylinder, which fitted their key, opened the door, did their job—and reinserted the original cylinder. Their capture and conviction led to a minor revolution in the lock-making industry.

4

Two bullets fired through his own head should have been, in the view of Farmer Francis Morrissey of Yakima, Wash., sufficient punishment for his having murdered his wife, who had forgiven, but not forgotten his escapade with a blonde some time prior to the killing. It wasn't, though. The first bullet miraculously passed through his brain without killing him, though it knocked him out. When he came to, he fired again—and the second bullet followed the path of the first one exactly! Morrissey got life imprisonment.

3

A SOLID HIT WITH MEN EVERYWHERE

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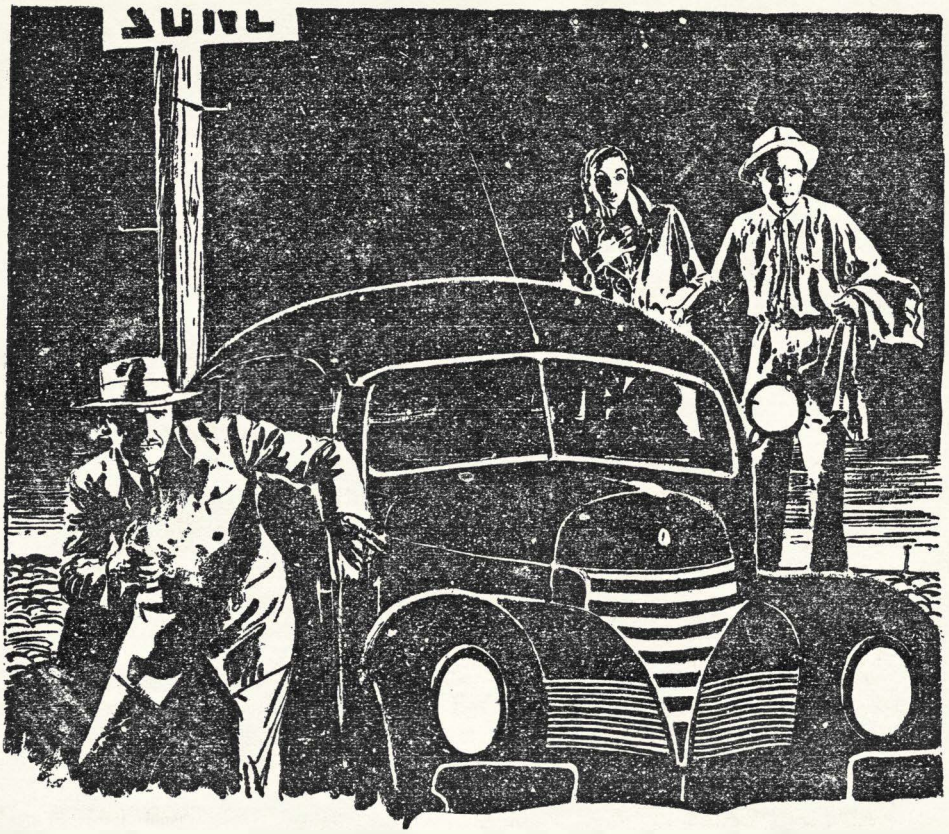


LET'S MAKE MURDER TONIGHT!

Only with boss John Ruick dead, Gannet knew, could the bullet that lay buried deep in his mountainous flesh, be examined by police. . . . Which meant that Ruick had to stay alive. . . . Even though each of that strangely assorted trio—Gannet himself, Sanders, and Sanders' beautiful, two-timing wife—had to die to keep that racket-chief off the coroner's cold slab!

Three shots crashed, one on top of the other, and Gannet spilled forward, face down.

Gripping Crime Novel

By

G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

CHAPTER ONE

Ruby

RAIN slanted across the lights in Pearl Street. Where it fell on the windows of Flinny's Tavern it clung, cold and syrupy. At one end of the crowded bar, Gannet watched the slow crawl of the rain on the glass and wondered how it would feel on his face. He didn't think it would feel too bad.

He had been there for nearly two hours, which amounted to quite a lot of rye and a little water, trying to figure out what he was going to do about Ruby. About himself and Ruby, that is. He wasn't getting anywhere. His mind, like an erratic water bug, could skate across the surface of things, but some deep undercurrent always

seemed to keep sweeping him back.

Ruby was Mrs. Rex Sanders. He kept coming back to that.

Gannet lifted his shot glass and smiled thinly into it. He guessed he was pretty decent. Pretty damned civilized. For a guttersnipe, anyway. A guttersnipe who'd come a long way, he decided, looking down at his hand-tailored brown worsted suit.

Well, there was no point in brooding over matters. He looked at the window and wondered if the rain would feel like he hoped it would. He tried his legs on the floor, and they were all right. He went to the tree for his tan topcoat and soft brown hat, put them on with care, and started out the back way.

There was a dice game going on in the room off the alley, and George Talbot looked up from the green cloth long enough to say, "Hi-ya, Eddie."

"George," Gannet said. He went on to the corner of the big room where Flinny had thrown up partitions of plywood which he had painted coral with some enamel left over from the ladies' room. It was a coy little box. Gannet glanced in through the door as Flinny turned from a scarred roll-top desk.

"You got a minute, Eddie?"

He was a big man, this Flinny, bald, all face and white apron. He rapped the ink-spotted pages of a ledger that lay open on the desk as Gannet stepped through the door. It was a gesture of no significance. Flinny's ledger was just something he could show investigators from the state gross income tax office.

"Eddie, I'm getting pressure from the sheriff's office."

"You are?" Gannet sounded disinterested. Somewhere between the crap game and Flinny's coral-enameled corner he had decided what he'd do about Ruby.

"Guy named Bleeker. You know him?"

"No." He watched Flinny run splayed fingers back over his head from brow to nape as though he had hair, and Gannet wondered how many years it took to break a habit like that.

"Hell, Eddie, if there's got to be a cut to both the city and county johns, where's the percentage?" Flinny complained.

"It's there." Gannet inhaled deeply. Somebody had gone out through the alley door and the smell of rain had washed in. "You may have to put on glasses to see it, though."

Flinny worked some more wrinkles into his apron. He was having a time, trying to be nice about this and at the same time stubborn. Gannet knew what Flinny was up against. All of the lottery and horse-game depots over town were feeling the pressure. It came from John Ruick, the big-money operator, who kept Sheriff McHale under his thumb. Gannet was not unsympathetic, but then he was not crying, either. Yesterday, or even ten minutes ago, he might have shed a tear with Flinny over Ruick's squeeze-out attempt to control all the games in the county.

"There's got to be some give somewhere," Flinny said, finally more dogged than docile. "Or you don't need to send any more tickets over here."

Gannet paused, looked back at the big man out of the ends of narrow green eyes. "You got a proposition from Ruick that beats anything Rex and I have given you?"

The heavy face opened wide in protest. "Hell, Eddie, I wouldn't listen to Ruick. You know that."

Lying, Gannet thought. Yet it did not seem important. Not now. "That's fine," he said in a neat dry voice as he left by the back door.

The rain felt even better than he'd thought it would. Cold. Clean.

THE MAN with the bullet in his chest lay in the gutter along dark Koenig Street, somewhat on his side so that the shadow of the high curb fell heavily over his face. The sound of his breathing was not easily distinguished from the other liquid sounds of the night.

Gannet crouched in the street. He took hold of a bulky shoulder and rolled the man over onto his back and out of the water. Gannet's hand shook a little as he opened his lighter and thumbed the spark wheel. He pieced the face of the man together by flickering glimpses—large loose mouth with a muddy trickle out of one corner, eyes buttoned tightly in pockets, a lump of nose, compactly kinky grey hair like steel wool, eyebrows to match that scowled unconsciously with the effort to

live a while longer. The breathing was shallow and quick.

Gannet stood up. He put his lighter away, wiped his hands on his handkerchief. A black Cadillac coupe was parked nearby, its wide door hanging open across the sidewalk. He stared at it a moment. Distant motor noise brought him around with a jerk. Where Koenig Street jogged, five blocks to the east, a car poked yellow lights into the rain. Gannet whirled and sprang up on to the curb. He glanced back once after he had started to sprint along the deserted sidewalk. The car lights were gone, but he kept right on running.

Halfway down the next block of small business establishments, Gannet stopped before a two-story, red-brick building. The place had a dusty display window where faded red and green crepe paper streamers, left from some Christmas, fanned up behind a pyramid composed of quart cans of motor oil. Dark green block lettering on the door read: OIL DEALERS' GAZETTE.

Gannet let himself in with a key, went back through the swinging gate in the oak rail into the dummy office where a night light burned. There was a second door, also locked, and from behind it came the slap and clatter of the small job press. He stood in front of the door for a moment, the hollow of one cheek plumped out by his tongue. Then he walked over to a desk, sat down on a swivel chair. His eyes raked the dog-eared green cover of the phone directory before he pulled the phone toward him. He dialed the police. When there was someone to talk to he spoke rapidly in low nasal tones which, he hoped, in no way resembled the voice of Ed Gannet.

"There's a guy in a street halfway along the sixteen hunnert block on Koenig. I think he was shot."

He clamped the receiver onto the hook and stood up. He felt edgey. He moved toward the door of the back room, fingering a cigarette out of a vest pocket. He lighted up before he went out where Moss Steiner was shepherding a run of blue-green lottery tickets through the job press. Moss put up a hand, palm out, and wagged it at Gannet who waved back. Gannet glanced up a narrow stairway boxed in against the partition. There was a light in the loft, but he didn't go up. He walked back toward the job press. Moss Steiner said something he didn't catch because of the noise, and Gannet stepped to the wall where the safety switch was and pulled down on the handle. Silence moved into the room.

"Trouble?" Moss Steiner asked. He was a tall, stooped man with white hair who always managed to get some of the ink he was using on his mouth.

Gannet said, "I think so." He pointed with his cigarette at the sheets of lottery tickets piled on the table. "Ditch that stuff. You'd better figure on running off an issue of the *Gazette* tomorrow. Any issue." He raised green eyes to the ceiling. "Is Rex upstairs?"

"No." Moss Steiner looked worried. "What's wrong?"

"Where's Rex?"

"Where would you be on a night like this if you had a wife like his?"

Gannet's lips tightened on his cigarette. He started for the door. "Let's hope that's where he is," he said and immediately caught himself wondering if he was being absolutely sincere. He decided he was; he'd have to be.

THE HOUSE Rex Sanders had bought when he had married Ruby was downtown, one of the old places of greystone with polished brass handrails leading up to tall, brass-studded doors. The electric doorchime made a very phony sound. Ruby answered Gannet's ring, her long blue eyes pleasantly surprised at finding him there.

"Well, stranger," she said, and her voice reminded him of warm darkness.

"Ruby." Gannet took off his hat and crossed the sill. He stared at her vivid lips, just apart, and the rest of her face became thinly veiled, something out of a dream. "Is Rex here?"

She said, "No," deliberately. She got Gannet's hat with a pettish little jerk, and her slim brown eyebrows arched. "May I have your coat, sir?"

"How soon do you expect him?" he persisted.

"Oh, soon." Her hand went up to her smooth, light brown hair. It was a lazy stretching motion that involved more than

her arm. She had on some soft flowing thing of pale grey satin, and her body played hide-and-seek in it.

Gannet put his hands deep into the pockets of his coat, blotted his palms against the linings. There was a faint odor of cigar smoke in the air. He glanced toward the white louver doors at the end of the hall, and when he came back to Ruby's face there was a sort of triumph there he didn't intend to understand. He didn't say anything.

"Rex will think it's Old Home Week," she said, suddenly gay. "Both you and Sammy here. Sammy Hart. Didn't you play marbles together—you and Rex and Sammy?"

Gannet started to take off his coat. He laughed without smiling. "We were dirty, runny-nosed brats on Water Street, down by the canal and back of the pumping station," he said. "We used to push over garbage cans and run like hell from the cops." He didn't know why he liked his way of putting it better than hers unless it was the novelty of being honest.

Ruby gave him a quick, baffled look before she turned with his hat and coat to the closet under the stairs. They went together into the tall, nearly square room with its crystal chandelier and rose-marble mantel.

Sammy Hart—Dr. Samuel E. Hart, Dental Surgeon, according to the shingle he had hung out on Terrance Avenue after separation from some Army air base—was short and dark and sleek. He gave an impression of plumpness without actually being plump. He had a round, good-humored face, wore shiny rimless glasses, and his movements were deft, quick. He pinned up one side of his smile with a slim, tan cigar, snatched Gannet's hand. For no good reason that Gannet could think of, Sammy Hart chuckled.

"Jerking a lot of teeth lately, Doc?" Gannet asked.

"A few, Eddie." There was a pause while possibly Sammy decided not to ask Gannet how his business was. "A few," he said again. "I was just telling Mrs. Sanders—"

"Ruby."

Sammy Hart accepted the correction with a humbly grateful look at Ruby. She had opened the glass-arrayed doors of a mahogany liquor cabinet.

"I was telling Ruby that since Rex refuses to see his dentist twice a year, his dentist would just have to drop in on him once in a while."

Gannet's laugh was short, unpleasant. "If we've got to have reasons, I'm here to see Rex on business. The oil business." His hand made a flat negative gesture as Ruby asked if he'd have rye. "Nothing, thanks. I think I'm half tight now. I'll just go into the other room and sit on the back of my neck until Rex comes in."

He left them both watching his back to go through sliding doors into the adjoining room. He could feel them watching his back.

Rex called it his "mad room." Maybe that's what it was—Gannet didn't know. It was large and high with a heavy cornice of white plaster, walls covered in solid maroon paper, with two puddles of light from modern chrome-shaded lamps on a bleached mahogany desk and a pigskin-topped table. He found an ivory leather chair in a dark corner and slumped down in it. He smoked a cigarette. In the next room an electric phonograph started to play softly. His mind followed the first few bars of *These Foolish Things,* then he got onto long legs, went to Rex's desk where he stooped into the light. He opened drawers, lifted papers, searching deep and quick. His thin hands shook a little.

That was what he was doing when he heard Rex Sanders' deep voice beyond the sliding doors.

GANNET straightened. He closed a drawer with his knee and stood with fingertips touching the top of the desk, head and shoulders above and beyond the light. Rex Sanders came in. He was a couple of inches shorter than Gannet but heavier because of his big-boned frame. He wore tweed in a strong herring-bone pattern that remained distinctly black-and-white instead of blending into grey.

"Hi, Eddie," he said and showed white, crooked teeth.

"Rex." Gannet stepped back a pace. His hands went mechanically for cigarette and lighter. Rex Sanders sat down stiffly in a chair beside the pigskin-topped table.

Light fell across his close-clipped red hair, put a mask of shadow over blue eyes beneath a short brow. His irregular features maintained a pattern of studied ugliness.

"Where've you been?" Gannet asked.

Rex Sanders said, "Out." He took a cigar from his breast pocket and stripped off the cellophane.

Gannet came away from the desk to strike a flame for Rex Sanders' cigar. "Where's out?" he asked.

"Just riding around in the car. . . . Thanks, Eddie."

Gannet sneered openly. "You know what they say about people who go out just aimlessly riding in cars."

Rex looked up at him through a blue haze of smoke. "No. What?" A grin broke out all over his homely face. "I like to ride around. It's relaxing. Just like you like to read for relaxation. And then I like to come home and settle down with a cigar." His eyes picked up Gannet's expression of distaste. "You never did like this place, did you, Eddie?"

"No. Your house reminds me of an old tramp who has spent all her flesh money on having her face lifted, but she isn't fooling anybody." Gannet sat down on the arm of the ivory leather chair and crossed his ankles. "But I know why you bought it. For the same reason I have Bock and Webber make my clothes. That sort of thing gives us the feeling that we're pretty solid citizens. Decent. Civilized." Gannet shook his head. "But we're not fooling anybody except ourselves."

Rex Sanders looked bewildered and angry. "What makes you so damn sour, Eddie?"

Gannet lifted a shoulder.

"If it's the competition we've been getting from Ruick's boys, we can handle that. We've got connections—"

"*You've* got," Gannet interrupted dryly. His hand moved in a short discarding gesture. "Include me out. I don't like killing."

Rex Sanders' eyes came out of the mask of shadow. He said, "What?"

"Somebody handled John Ruick in Koenig Street near our place. He'd been shot in the chest."

Rex Sanders' big-knuckled fingers flexed, then spread out slowly on the chair-arms. He stared at his hands.

Gannet said, "I'm quitting you, Rex. This town is big, but it isn't that big. It isn't big enough, nor old enough, nor tired enough, to be indifferent about a killing. Tomorrow morning when you stand under your crystal chandelier with your newspaper you'll see 'Gang War' in three-inch type."

Sanders sat with head low, his jaw pushed forward, the big cigar jutting cold in his mouth. His breath came slow and even across his teeth. Gannet leaned forward and dropped a hand on Rex's left arm. The rough tweed was damp.

He said, "Maybe you're deaf."

"I heard what you said."

Gannet got up, swung around to the desk where he stubbed out his cigarette on a bronze ashtray. "I won't take my money out of the business now. Not until you feel you can spare it. But I want this tight and legal. Have Ziggy draw up the necessary papers dissolving partnership dated as of right now."

"Eddie, Eddie. Remember those hot nights down on Water Street when we were kids, and we used to swim in the water company canal, you and I?"

"And Sammy Hart," Gannet reminded him. He heard Rex grunt. "You don't care for that, huh?"

Rex raised his head. His expression was vaguely bewildered. "I don't know. Sammy is all right."

Gannet nodded. "Sure he is. But he makes you feel inferior. He really yanked himself out of the ooze, didn't he? You just acquired a crystal chandelier." He went to the door and paused, his eyes shiny, malicious.

"Rex, you were going to remind me of that time you hauled me out of the canal. It was a hot night on Water Street, and I must have been out of the habit of eating because I forgot it wasn't a good idea to get into the water right after a meal. I got a cramp. I guess I owe you my life." Gannet made sounds like laughter. "Well, thanks, Rex."

Rex said deep in his throat, "You'll get your dough tomorrow, you s—"

"If that's how you want it," Gannet said quietly. "I got my eye on a North Side restaurant. I might make a go of it, so many people are addicted to eating."

He turned and went out of the room.

There was a Vaughn Monroe recording on the phonograph, and Sammy Hart was dancing with Ruby, standing off from her as though he had a paunch. Gannet hadn't thought any man could hold Ruby in his arms that way. It seemed like carrying civilization too far, and he felt like laughing. He waved a hand at them, crossed to the hall, opened the door of the closet under the stairs. The rustle of satin hurried him.

"Eddie—"

He turned out of the closet with the coat hooked over his fingers. Ruby stood close to him, closer than she had stood to Sammy Hart while dancing. She tipped back her head, and even the garish light of the hall lay softly on her face. Her wide blue eyes were moist. He thought also that they held a look of fear.

He said, " 'Night, Ruby." He felt her breathe.

"You're not going?"

"Uh-huh."

"Eddie, is there anything . . . wrong? Between you and Rex?"

"Not that I know of." He noticed the coat in his hand. In his haste he had picked up Rex Sanders' trenchcoat. Rain had deepened the tan of the till except for the left front flap.

"That's Rex's coat." As Ruby took it from him to return it to the closet, Gannet let his hand drop along its folds and across the right pocket. He had noticed the weighted swing of the coat. Now he felt the shape of the gun.

He worked up a smile. "I told you I was half tight." he said.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bullet

THE MAN with the bullet in his chest said, "Marva, allow me to introduce Mr. Gannet. Gannet, my wife."

Across the hospital bed, across the shapeless mound John Ruick's fat made beneath the sheet, Gannet exchanged polite smiles with the plump, fiftyish woman in the visitor's chair. She wore her grey hair drawn flat across her brow from left to right.. Her eyes were round and brown and damp like those of a Boston terrier, but they had a whipped, meek look. Her mouth was any small rouged mouth. Maybe Marva Ruick was reluctant to accept the idea that she was not a widow, or maybe she just liked to wear black.

John Ruick turned his face in its fat to get a better view of Gannet. His immense head was cushioned in its mop of kinky grey hair that apparently hadn't been cut during the three weeks he had been in the hospital. His smile was one of patient suffering. When he spoke his voice was gentle. Gannet thought the smile and the voice were phony. The gleam in the tiny eyes was the real thing, the malice that peered through the mask.

"This, my boy, is an unexpected pleasure."

Gannet said, "It must be."

"And how are Rex Sanders and his beautiful wife? Well, I hope?" He waited for Gannet's nod. "I knew Ruby Sanders before her marriage," Ruick said. "Lovely girl. Lovely voice. She used to sing at one of my places down on the Ohio."

Gannet started to say something, but Ruick had turned to his wife. "Marva, would you mind leaving Mr. Gannet and me alone for a minute or two?" It was an order regardless of the inflection. Mrs. Ruick stood and, with a faint smile at Gannet, came around the bed and left the room. She was taller than Gannet had anticipated, and she had good slim legs for a woman of her weight and years.

Ruick indicated the chair Marva had vacated. Gannet went around to it, sat down, hung his soft grey hat on one knee. He said indifferently, "You ought to be dead."

John Ruick chuckled. "I've got the old stuff in me."

"Yeah, I can see." Gannet nodded at the paunch under the sheet. "I hear you've still got the bullet in you, too."

Ruick raised a big hand in a gentle clawing motion just over his breast where the bullet had entered. He said, "They can't remove the damned thing. Too close to my ticker. Imagine the irony of it. Exactly one week after the sheriff completes a routine ballistics check of every licensed gun in the county, I get shot. Now nobody can lay hands on the bullet for comparison."

Gannet grinned crookedly. "That makes it tough." He helped himself to a cigarette, then placed one in Ruick's thick wet lips. He hunched forward to share the flame of his lighter. "I guess you heard that Rex Sanders and I don't love each other any more. I want a job."

Ruick raised one steel-wool eyebrow. "Well, well!" He seemed pleased. "I could use a bright young man. How about my place down-state on the Ohio—the Moon River Casino. I need a new manager, and you'd have things more or less your own way, though of course I fly down there every now and then to check over the books."

Gannet apparently considered the matter for a moment. He made a face. "It sounds like work." He pointed with his cigarette at Ruick's chest. "I thought maybe you could use a bodyguard."

Ruick grunted. His tiny eyes had a baffled, dull look.

Gannet said, "It's something I'd like—just sitting on my fanny all day listening to you mutter, 'six million, seven million, eight—' "

Ruick had started to laugh—open-mouthed, bellowing laughter. "Excuse me!" he gasped when he could say anything. "But the humor of it all—" He wasn't able to go on. Hands held his quaking paunch while tears streamed into the crinkles that edged his eyes.

Then he was not laughing. He lunged forward, sat tensely erect in the bed, mouth open, staring eyes anxious. Gannet jerked out of the chair. He reached and fumbled the call button wired to the bed. He said, "John . . . John!"

Ruick had fallen back to lie motionless, his eyes loosely closed.

Gannet put out a hand toward Ruick's chest. He had not actually touched the man when Ruick wrapped pudgy fingers around Gannet's wrist. Ruick looked up out of sly eyes, and Gannet stiffened.

"Scared you white, didn't I, Gannet? Just a little trick of mine. I had to know how concerned you were about me. Yes—" he sneered— "before I hire you as a bodyguard. Imagine! Yet you don't want anything to happen to me, do you?"

"I don't give a good damn what happens to you," Gannet said.

"No? Possibly not. But the bullet I've got up here next to my heart—that's the thing. It's your bullet, isn't it? *Isn't it, Gannet?"*

Head tilted, Gannet stared down at the face on the pillow. Ruick's jaws were set. His eyes were hard little pinpoints of light sticking up out of softness.

Gannet's smile was not necessarily a smile. "Wouldn't you like to know, John?" He washed Ruick's damp, clasping fingers from his wrist and stooped to pick up his hat.

"Do you need something, John?"

It was a woman's voice, and it had no life in it. Straightening, Gannet saw Mrs. Ruick in the door with one plump diamond-splashed hand on the varnished wood trim. Her face was impassive.

"No, Marva dear." The phony gentle voice. "Mr. Gannet here is, uh—unduly worried about my condition. You might assure him that I am not going to die."

"He isn't going to die, Mr. Gannet," Marva Ruick said. Her smile was watery.

Gannet said, "That's fine." He came around to the foot of the bed. "You don't think you need a bodyguard then, John?"

Ruick rocked his head negatively. "No, no, my boy. Thanks, of course, for the offer. I'll be out of here tomorrow and well able to take care of myself. In fact—" his glance was meaningful—"In spite of the difference in our ages, there's always the chance I might outlive you."

Gannet stared at him a moment out of the ends of his eyes. Then he turned to Mrs. Ruick. They exchanged polite mutterings, and he went out.

GANNET stopped at a bar on Pennrose Avenue, and it was after midnight when his taxi stopped in front of the four-story, red-brick building in Ogel-Street where he lived. He stood on the sidewalk, paid and tipped the driver, and as the cab rolled off there was a sudden blaze of headlights close on the right where there had been only darkness. Gannet whirled and sprang, the two movements blended into one as an idling engine was whipped to full-throated power. He got to the steps that led up to the door. Light followed relentlessly, flattening his shadow in front of him. Three shots crashed one on top of another, scarcely distinguishable from a single roar of sound. Gannet

tripped, spilled forward face down on the top step, rolled to the right under the iron pipe railing to land heels above shoulders in the compact shrubs that grew in the corner between steps and wall. A fourth shot smacked the brick wall and powdered his upturned face with mortar dust.

The car spurted on down the street, its transmission screaming in second.

Gannet thrashed his way out of the shrubbery, walked up the steps again, found his hat at the top. He brushed dust off the light grey brim as he went through the door.

When he reached his flat the phone was ringing. He let it ring while he crossed the room in darkness and pulled down the front blind. He turned on a small lamp, went to the phone, picked up the handset, and listened without speaking. He could hear somebody's indrawn breath.

"Hello." It was a woman's voice. Mrs. Ruick's, he thought. "Hello . . . hello."

Gannet didn't say anything. He replaced the phone on the receiver. When it rang again less than a minute later, he didn't answer.

* * *

Gannet opened his restaurant and bar on Terrance Avenue late in July. What he had had in mind during the remodeling process was a place both small and intimate. That it turned out to be crowded and noisy didn't bother him too much when he noticed the way the total was mounting on the cash register. There were cigars for the men and red roses for the women. Up front in the neon-lit window he had installed an electric organ, and Julie, the girl who played it, had very nice legs. He could stand behind the cash register and watch Julie's legs as she nimbly toed bounce rhythm out of the bass peddles, and what and how she played did not seem important. She had a pretty child's face, and pale gold hair that wouldn't stay where she wanted it but looked all right anyway.

They were crowding the beer curfew and traffic in cash was gratifyingly heavy when Gannet looked up from the till to see a short-fingered hand with clean, close-clipped nails reaching over the counter. Attached to the hand was Sammy Hart, happily puffing his gift cigar. Sammy's office and living quarters were directly across the street.

Gannet gripped Sammy's hand, pleased. "We'll start a co-op. You fill my teeth, I'll fill your face."

Maybe Sammy couldn't hear above the energetic peddle stomping of Julie. He smiled broadly and said, "Everything is swell, Eddie." Then, as he noticed how Julie looked from his angle, he added, "In fact, wonderful."

Gannet laughed. "Stick around and I'll introduce you."

Sammy was backing into the crowd. He waved his hand negatively. "Some other night, Eddie." And then he went out.

The doors closed at one a. m., and Gannet cleared the cash into a bag, carried it to his office at the rear of the restaurant. As he opened the door he was smiling. He felt warm all over.

GANNET crossed the threshold, then stopped, one hand on the knob. His face straightened slowly. Ruby Sanders was there, sitting on one corner of his desk, her knees crossed. As though she belonged. A part of the picture. She had on a simple street-length dress of grey silk, her hat a halo of pale yellow violets with a swish of grey veil. Good for her misty kind of beauty, he thought.

He closed the door quietly.

"Hello, Eddie." Very casual, yet it did not achieve the effect of casualness. She slipped from the desk, stood tall and slim and soft. There was that elusive, haunting something in her wide blue eyes that challenged and fled. "I slipped in at the last moment. I simply had to congratulate you."

"Thanks, Ruby." He put the money bag down on a chair.

She said, "Everything is lovely. Perfectly lovely, except—" She broke off, took an abrupt turn that swirled the trailing ends of her veil like thin cigarette smoke.

"Eddie, I didn't get a rose," she said pettishly. There was a scarlet one in the slim chrome vase on his desk, and she helped herself to it. She came back to him with the rose and the pin in her hands.

"Pin it here, Eddie." She patted where.

He took the rose and the pin warily. "You were saying everything was nice here except, and you didn't finish."

"Oh, yes." Her purring little laugh. "It's soft lights and *sweet* music. Not loud music. Don't you think so?"

"I think so." His fingers were thumbs. "I'm going to have to marry Julie to break her contract."

"Grand, Eddie!" She made it sound like the real thing. "When?" She didn't wait for an answer, though. She knew that the idea of marrying Julie had just now occurred to him, something he'd tossed in defensively without a whole lot of thought. "Must you make such a face? You're pinning a rose on me, not fixing an old alarm clock or something."

He took his tongue out of his cheek. "There," he said, "you're decorated." His hands moved apart. She stood where she was, twisted from her hips a quarter turn to the right and back, a softly nestling movement that left her in his arms. He was thinking he ought to have foreseen this. Or it was something he had foreseen and had done nothing about. And then, with the warm pressure of her mouth against his, thinking did not seem important. . . .

He broke it off. He got his hands up behind him, caught hold of her wrists and broke it off. She stood with her hands at her sides, palms outward and empty. He didn't look at her face with his kiss still imprinted upon it, he looked at her hands. Suddenly hating her, hating himself more than he hated her, he opened the door of the office.

"Don't come back," he said huskily. "Don't come back ever. You hear?"

"Yes, Eddie." It had the sound of meekness, but as she walked by him and out into the restaurant there was triumph in her long legs.

THE MAN with the bullet in his chest came into Gannet's restaurant at noon on the following Thursday. Gannet found him seated alone at a table for two spooning clear soup that was thickened with crackers.

"Well, well, my boy!" John Ruick said heartily. That Gannet didn't notice Ruick's proffered hand rumpled the composure of that fat face a little. He paused.

Gannet pulled back the chair opposite and sat down. He lighted a cigarette. "You on a diet, John?"

Ruick, his mouth full of soggy crackers, shook his head. He tapped his right cheek with a forefinger. Maybe it was swollen, but with a face like that you couldn't tell.

"Toothache?" Gannet asked.

Ruick swallowed. "It did." He chuckled. "Still concerned about my health, eh, Gannet?"

Gannet didn't say anything. His eyes didn't say anything, either.

"Look here, my boy—" Ruick wagged his spoon—"the night you returned from visiting me at the hospital, an incident occurred to you—"

"You mean didn't occur," Gannet interrupted.

"Didn't, then. Mind you—" Ruick cocked a steel-wool eyebrow—"I had nothing to do with the matter, but I want you to know that I consider the whole thing highly regretable."

Gannet watched the fat man through narrow green eyes. "You mean it's regretable that it *didn't* occur."

Ruick's expression suggested confusion. "My dear boy! You're worse than a Philadelphia lawyer. Put it this way. I am delighted that you fell off your front steps when you did. Now. I want to tell you that if I have my way nothing of that sort will happen again."

Gannet said, "Nothing of the sort has happened since then, so you must be getting your way."

Ruick inclined his bushy head over his soup. "Delighted to hear it," he said soberly. "Bygones shall be bygones."

"That's fine," Gannet said. "And if you send any pool tickets around here, I'll tell you what you can do with them."

"I had no thought of such a thing," Ruick said piously. "No, no. I simply came in here for a bowl of soup and to make a—shall we say a peaceful gesture?" He patted his chest where the bullet had entered. "This isn't going to bother me much longer."

Gannet stiffened. Ash trembled from the end of his cigarette.

"The—uh—the source of friction between us shall be gone." Ruick spread his smile slyly. "I finally found a doctor who

believes he can remove the bullet without greatly endangering my precious existence. This afternoon, I shall fly down to New Albany to check over the books of my Moon River Casino. I want everything in order so that in any eventuality matters will not be too difficult for dear Marva—"

He broke off, smiling, reached across the table and put a hand on Gannet's wrist. "Why, my boy," Ruick said in his phony gentle voice, "you mustn't worry about old John." He started to chuckle.

Gannet said, "I'm worried about the soup. You've got your elbow in it." He stood up. Sammy Hart and two other men from the neighboring business district were just coming in off the glaring street. Gannet returned Sammy's wave, turned, walked back to the office, closed the door after he had entered.

He stood at the desk and thoughtfully stubbed out his cigarette in a glass tray. He picked up the phone and dialed with quick jabs of his thin yellowed forefinger. After three rings Moss Steiner in the pressroom of the *Oil Dealer's Gazette* answered.

"Eddie, Moss," Gannet said. "How's the wife?" While Moss Steiner was telling him how the wife was, Gannet fingered a cigarette out of the package in his vest pocket and put it to his lips. "That's fine," he said. "Where can I find Rex?"

Moss Steiner didn't know. Rex Sanders was out somewhere having lunch at the moment. Could Moss take a message or have Rex call back?

Gannet flipped his lighter. "I'll try it again." He started to hang up, but changed his mind. "When Rex comes in, you might tell him I called. If I do get hold of him I don't want him to die of shock." He laughed and put the phone down. It had been nearly six months since he had last talked to Rex Sanders.

He sat down slowly in the chair back of the desk, laced long fingers behind his head and, for a minute or so, blew smoke at the ceiling. That didn't seem to get him anywhere. His thoughts were hazy cluttered thoughts. He got out of the chair with a sudden flinging of arms and returned to the restaurant.

HE DIDN'T see John Ruick anywhere, and there was a waitress at the table Ruick had vacated, cleaning up cracker crumbs. Sammy Hart was one of three customers scattered along the line of stools at the bar. Sammy's Panama hat was pushed back from a line of sweat along his bulging forehead and his shoulders slumped tiredly in white linen.

Gannet hung a hip on the stool next to Sammy Hart. He said, "That's one way to lose a patient, huh, Sammy?"

Sammy's shoulders jerked. The brimming shot-glass in his stubby fingers slopped liquor onto the bar. He gave Gannet a quick dark glance. His smile was not sure of itself.

"I must have been miles from here, Eddie. Miles. Out on the fairway, I guess. What was that you said about losing a patient?"

Gannet indicated the liquor glass. "When a dentist's breath offends, who the hell does he see?"

Sammy laughed. "I close my office on Thursday afternoons and play golf. On the public links, so I have to play the tenth hole before I start." He played the tenth hole fast and, strangling a little on it, he reached for his chaser.

John Ruick came sidling out of a phone booth at the back of the room, waddled between the rows of tables. He split a smile between Gannet and Sammy Hart. "See both you boys later," he said as he passed.

"Don't feel it's compulsory," Gannet said acidly.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Ruick," Sammy called after the fat man and then turned curious eyes on Gannet. "How come?"

Gannet said, "I don't know. I just hate the damned fat swine."

Sammy played with his glass, linking wet rings on the bar. When he spoke his voice was low, uneasy. "Is it true, Eddie, that the bullet Ruick carries around in him is Rex Sanders'?"

"Ruick thinks it's mine," Gannet replied steadily.

"Yours?" Sammy swiveled on the stool to face Gannet. His dark eyes were startled.

Gannet smiled thinly. "That's what the man said." He got up and went back into the office.

This time he succeeded in reaching Rex Sanders by phone.

"Hi-ya, Eddie!" Rex's deep voice sounded like old times.

Gannet said, "How's by you?" He sat down in the chair and cocked an ankle up on a knee.

"Everything's fine," Rex told him.

"You just think so, and it sounds good over the phone," Gannet said dryly. "Can we talk just between us girls?"

Rex said, "Wait a minute." He must have muffled the transmitter. Then, "All right."

"John Ruick was in here a while ago. He told me he finally found a doc who thinks he can remove that slug." Gannet waited, heard Rex take a deep slow breath. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah, I heard."

"Can you get under cover for a while, Rex?"

Rex was silent, thinking that over. "I don't know what good that will do."

"I don't know either," Gannet said honestly. "But we can die trying. How about it?"

"Okay. I guess so."

"Keep in touch with me if you can."

"Okay," Rex said again. He hung up.

CHAPTER THREE

Living Evidence

JULIE came into the restaurant to provide dinner music at six-thirty. She had on a fresh summery dress with blue cornflowers printed against a white background, and she wore no hat. She smiled shyly at Gannet behind the cash register, then took a funny little self-conscious hop-skip to the electric organ. She arranged some music sheets on the rack, but maybe that was for show, the way she played.

Gannet watched her through the first set of numbers, and her pale gold hair kept sliding down. He came from behind the counter and over to lean against the organ. Julie raised her head, looked at him out of her lovely childlike face.

"Am—am I all right, Mr. Gannet?" she asked anxiously.

"You're wonderful," he said.

She took a long breath, leaned forward to flip over her music. She looked up again at him and flushed, the way he was staring at her.

He asked, "Will you marry me, Julie?"

"Wh—what?" She left her mouth open.

He said, "I almost never kid anybody. Some day soon."

The phone on the front counter was ringing, but he let one of the girls take it. He was watching Julie run a forefinger up and down the edge of the music rack as though that was a very important thing to do. Her cheeks were flaming and she'd drawn her lower lip back into her teeth to stop its trembling. She looked as though she might cry with embarrassment.

"I—I don't know how you can say you're not kidding." The words got over a lump in her throat. "I—why, I hardly know you, Mr. Gannet."

"Eddie," he said. "And that's why I'm asking you right now." He looked around as the waitress who had answered the phone came up.

"For you, Mr. Gannet."

He nodded, and as he straightened away from the organ he said to Julie, "You give it a good think, honey. I'll ask you again next Thursday." He turned away, stepped to the counter, and picked up the phone. The voice was a woman's and he couldn't identify it.

"Marva Ruick," the voice said. And then he remembered. He asked, "How're you, Mrs. Ruick?"

She said, "There isn't . . . much time. I'm at the airport. We just flew in from New Albany. Right now they—the pilot and some other men—are taking Mr. Ruick out of the plane."

"Taking—"

"He's dead, Mr. Gannet," she said. "Dead. I wanted you to know before—well, I wanted you to know."

Gannet's lips drew back from set teeth. "I see. And thanks."

Mrs. Ruick uttered a strange sound; it might have been laughter. "Thank *you*, Mr. Gannet."

* * *

The apartment house where John Ruick had lived was scarcely worthy of his reputed wealth, but it was no dump either.

The halls were thickly carpeted, and there was an air of refined quiet about it incongruous with a man whose gambling interests covered half the state.

The automatic elevator took Gannet to the top, the ninth. floor, and he knocked at the door of the Ruick apartment which was directly across from the shaft. A thin, middle-aged woman in a maid's cap and apron opened the door and informed him that Mrs. Ruick had flown to the southern part of the state with her husband.

Gannet said, "I know, but she's back. I just talked to her on the phone. She's expecting me, and I'll wait, if you don't mind." She wasn't expecting him, but he was going to wait anyway.

The maid, after some consideration, showed him into a spacious room with luxurious grey-blue carpet and just the right number of pieces of substantial furniture in dark mahogany and soft fabrics. Gannet tried a London lounge chair, and the effect was like that of sitting on the floor. John Ruick's chair, he decided because of the broken springs.

HE GOT up, went to the window and stood there a while, his eyes roving unseeingly over the city. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps and the murmur of voices in the foyer. Gannet turned but remained with his back to the window. Marva Ruick came through the door and stopped, her feet close together. She was wearing a grey suit that fitted her well, and her silhouette suggested an inverted Indian club with her slim legs and her swelling and undivided bosom. She stared at him with damp pop eyes.

"You! Why did you come here? Here of all places!"

Gannet only smiled.

She took a few steps toward him. She put a fluttering hand to her severely drawn grey hair. "You—you will go, won't you?" She wasn't used to giving orders.

Gannet nodded. "In a few minutes. I'd like to talk to you."

She crossed to a wing chair. Her chair, Gannet thought, and probably the only one in the room which John Ruick's weight hadn't ruined. She sat with her ankles crossed and tucked under her. She looked small with the smallness of constant oppression.

Gannet came over and stood in front of her, his hands in the pockets of his tan tropical-worsted trousers. He said, "I want to know how John died."

"Quietly." She sounded strangely resentful, but Gannet understood.

He said, "That's too bad."

"Yes. Almost slyly, as he did everything." She swallowed at the thickness in her throat. "He made me fly down to New Albany with him today. He knows —knew—how I hate flying, but he made me. On the return, I had the rear cushion to myself. John was up in front beside Joe Sablonsky, his pilot. The air was smooth, and I think John was dozing. His head kept bobbing forward. And then he coughed a little and—and spat. Like this."

She showed Gannet how. Her tongue made little *pft-pft* sound against dry lips. "As though he was trying to dislodge a crumb of tobacco," she explained, "though he hadn't been smoking. Then he went back to napping for a very few minutes. I looked away." She looked away now, distantly. "The clouds were beautiful trailing the wingtips. And then the next thing I knew Joe Sablonsky had leaned back to call my attention to John. He had reeled sideways in his seat, his hat crushed up against the plexiglas, and he was gasping for breath. I couldn't awaken him. And then—" She brought her eyes back to Gannet.

He said, "And that was that."

"Yes. I wouldn't allow the pilot to radio ahead about John, because I knew the police would get to you before I could warn you if he did. I wanted to give you time to get away. I—I felt I owed you something. Do you understand?"

"I think so. You must have hated him. Plenty."

Marva Ruick took a deep breath and sat erect. He thought she was going to shout. Her "Yes" came in a surprisingly quiet voice as though she weren't entirely sure the dead man couldn't hear her.

"Women?" Gannet asked. He sat down on the arm of a chair.

"Yes." Her eyes were alive with her hate. "He used to bring them home with

him. Any kind. The worst. And then he would laugh—" She broke off. Her smile was ghastly. "You would hardly believe it, but I used to be . . . quite attractive."

Gannet said warmly, "I'm sure you were." He looked at her through half-closed eyes. It seemed to help him see her as she had been—tall and slim and soft.

She turned in the chair and dropped a hand impulsively on his knee. "I did what I could. I told them—the police—I wouldn't consent to an autopsy, but they said my consent wasn't needed."

"It wouldn't be. Did John tell you he had found a doctor who was willing to risk removing the bullet?"

"No. I wouldn't have believed him if he had. John wouldn't have taken a chance like that. He was—" her eyes narrowed somewhat — "among other things, a contemptible coward."

Gannet stood up. "That's what he told me this noon anyway."

"Then he was lying," she said. "He was only trying to torment you because he knew you shot him and knew it could be proved if the police could get hold of the bullet. He was like that. The sly, cruel little things he would do—" Her hands parted in a limp gesture that was like the finis on the last page of a sordid book.

Gannet smiled at the woman, and she smiled back faintly. He said, "I think I outsmarted John at that, Mrs. Ruick. Funny, isn't it, that I didn't shoot him." He watched her plump face fall open. "He ought to have known that I didn't. Because if I ever felt I had to kill a man I wouldn't do the job halfway."

GANNET acquired a police tail as he left the apartment building. He wasn't the least surprised. The police would have learned from John Ruick's pilot that Mrs. Ruick had opposed calling ahead to the airport in regard to John's death in the plane. And the police had heard Mrs. Ruick's useless objection to an autopsy. They could add one and one with reasonable accuracy. Mrs. Ruick was trying to protect somebody, and since Ruick would have expressed a private

opinion to the police that Gannet was the man who had shot him, the unavoidable conclusion would be that Mrs. Ruick was trying to protect Gannet.

The cop was a very ordinary-looking man, medium height, middle-aged, wearing a brown suit and a sun-faded straw hat. He sat opposite Gannet on the Ogel Street bus, his eyes sometimes on Gannet, sometimes on his newspaper. But his mind was on his feet. He kept shifting first one foot and then the other. His toes slowly and continually wriggled for more room in his shoes. Gannet was his job, but his feet were the tools for his job, and the tools had broken down a long time ago.

Gannet got off the bus at Twenty-fifth Street, and so did the cop. Gannet started walking north in the twilight, while the other hung around the corner as though he weren't sure where he was going.

Gannet stopped to light a cigarette and looked back toward the corner. His eyes were shiny with malice.

"Hey, you. Hey, Feet!"

The man in brown looked at Gannet as though seeing him for the first time. He had a small, earnest face. "Huh?"

Gannet said, "The number is twenty-five sixteen, a roach trap called the Worthington Arms, south side, second floor, front."

The man tucked his furled newspaper under his arm and came a few steps closer. "I don't getcha." He looked a little embarrassed. "You ever hear of some folks around here name of Tyson?"

"No." Gannet laughed shortly. "Between us girls you never have, either. I don't expect to go out this evening, so if you'll come up to my place we'll open some beer."

The cop stared at him. "You must be nuts. I'm tryin' to find some people named Tyson."

Gannet shrugged. "Have it your way. Only it'll be plenty tough on feet." He went on up the street and entered the apartment building. By the time he had reached his lodgings on the second floor, Feet was pounding the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street ostensibly looking at house numbers.

Gannet crossed to the bedroom, went to the chest-of-drawers where he found a small flashlight and a .38 S-W revolver with pearl grips. The gun showed care, not because Gannet liked guns but because he was a habitually careful person. He took off his suit coat, folded it over the arm of a chair, put the gun and flashlight on the chair cushion. Then he stretched out full length on the bed to wait for the night to come down deep and black in the street.

His thoughts concerned Julie—the way she kicked hell out of the electric organ, the way her pale gold hair kept tumbling down around her childlike face. He felt as though he needed to think of Julie.

The phone rang. Gannet got up, moved through dim grey light into the other room, picked up the handset and said hello.

"Eddie—" Rex Sanders' deep voice rattled off the receiver diaphragm.

"Where are you?" Gannet asked.

Rex laughed tautly. "Maybe I'd better keep that just between me and me. Anything new?"

"Not much. Except that Ruick did it. Finally."

Rex Sanders whistled. "Have they got the bullet yet?"

"I don't think so. If they had it, there wouldn't be all this heat on me."

"Bad, is it?"

"Not too bad. I've got a tail. But as a decoy, I can't last forever. You should hop a plane for somewhere."

"No-o." Rex drew it out slowly, a man putting his thoughts in order. "I'm going to hang around."

Gannet said acidly. "You're a damned fool, Rex."

"Maybe."

Gannet thought a moment. Then, "Could you manage to get over to the old office in about an hour-and-a-half, two hours?"

"Maybe. If you've got a reason."

Gannet laughed. "I don't need a reason, as long as you don't give a damn what happens to you."

"Okay. I'll try it."

"I'll shake my tail and meet you there," Gannet said. "Where's Ruby?"

"Home—I think."

"I'll see you." Gannet started to hang up, but Rex Sanders was saying, "Wait a minute, Eddie. Listen." Gannet waited.

For a moment it was quiet.

"If anything should happen, Eddie—I mean—" Rex broke off. "Well, never mind. I'll see you."

GANNET stared into gathering dark, the phone dead in his hand. Then he blew a short derisive sound through his nostrils, let the phone clatter back onto its stand. He moved to the front window and looked out. The glow and fade of a cigarette marked the shadow within shadows that was Feet. Gannet turned, went into an alcove kitchenette, flipped on a light. He picked up a paper bag containing empty beer bottles that stood in the corner between refrigerator and wall, brought the bag out into the living room, put it down on a chair near the door. He returned to the bedroom for suitcoat, hat, gun and flashlight. When he left the apartment he was lugging the beer bottles. They made a clink that Feet could not possibly miss.

Gannet turned into the narrow side street. A block to the west a jittering neon sign advertised beer. Between the sign and the corner were several shops, all closed, and the Little Sport Cigar Store. The lower half of the window and door of the Little Sport were painted black and ornamented with a large white baseball. Across the baseball was black lettering that read: "Scores by Innings." Gannet opened the door and went in.

It was a disproportionately small front room with a counter containing three boxes of cigars and a carton of candy bars. The partition that foreshortened the room had a closed door and a small white-framed mirror with wavy glass in it which covered a peep-hole. Behind the counter stood a short man, bald and shriveled like some old and experienced organ-grinder's monkey. His name was McAlear. He looked up briefly as Gannet entered and said, "How're you, Eddie?"

"Mac." Gannet rested the bag of bottles on the counter top, nodded in the direction of partition. "Lots of players tonight?"

"Twenty. Maybe twenty-five."

"Rex should like that."

McAlear didn't say anything. He raised his eyes and moved from Gannet's face to the door and back. Gannet looked toward the door, and there was the brown back of Feet showing above black-painted glass. Gannet's move, unannounced by the beer bottles, had made Feet apprehensive and he had shortened the distance between them.

"You dragging that?" McAlear asked shrewdly.

Gannet shook his head. His green eyes lied steadily. "You are."

McAlear sucked in his withered lips. "Plainclothes, yet," he said worriedly. "Thanks for the tip, Eddie." His left hand dropped down back of the counter where there were two buttons. One buzzed a signal to the back room, the other operated an electric deadlock on the front door.

Gannet looped his arm around the sack of bottles and went through the door in the partition into the back room where a steady quiet voice was saying, "Don't throw your run-off sheets on the floor, fellahs. Keep your—Hi, Eddie—keep your stubs."

"Hi, Potty." Gannet set his bottles down on the deserted mourners' bench and fell in with the crowd of lottery players who were shuffling through the door into the alley.

Outside, everything was pretty informal. Gannet made himself a part of a group of five men who stumbled and groped their way to a small parking lot back of the beanery. He got into the front seat of a 1937 Dodge beside a man he didn't know who was going Gannet didn't know where. The man kicked the starter. He said, "Dammit, I shoulda hit tonight. I felt it was my time."

There was no response, and the car rolled out of the alley, turned into thin traffic going north. Gannet sat quietly, watching the street lights and neon signs move slowly by.

After a while, the car pulled up in front of a traffic signal, and Gannet reached for the door latch. "Well, here's where I get out," he said. "Thanks for the buggy ride."

There was a surprised "Okay," and the car roared off.

Gannet stepped up onto the curb and looked up and down the street. Feet obviously was not with him. He wondered how Feet was feeling now. Relieved,

probably. He turned into the side street to a cab station on the corner where two taxis were parked. He approached the nearest and put his head through the open window.

"How's for taking me out to the Capitol Airport?"

The driver sat up, reached over the back of the seat, and unlatched the door. He said, "They won't ever replace the old hack, will they?"

Gannet got in. "I don't know. Once there was an animal called the horse."

CHAPTER FOUR

Meet Me in the Death Chamber

THERE was a lot of sky up there, and to the north, where it was not tinted by the neon glow from the city, there was a sprinkling of pale stars. The man in the greasy coveralls lay on his back on a wood bench between the mouths of two sheet-metal hangars. He was a young man, and his mind was where it belonged, up in the clouds. Gannet, who was not that young, leaned over and prodded the dreamer.

"Cripes!" The young man sat up and got one foot onto the ground. "Mister, don't ever do that again," he said more startled than angry. He laughed somewhat foolishly. "Sorry, but we had what you might call a gruesome experience out here today."

Gannet nodded. "That's what I heard. What was the name—Ruick?"

"Yeah. Old John Ruick." The young man stood up and stretched. He was shorter than Gannet, heavier. "Old John Ruick," he repeated and yawned. "They say he made his pile in slot machines or something like that."

"Is that a fact?" Gannet looked amazed. "Well, now that's he's an angel, he won't need his plane, and—"

"Don't quote me," the young man put in hastily.

"I won't. I thought I'd look at his plane with the idea of buying it cheap."

The other grunted. "You might buy it, but not cheap, unless his widow is nuts. It's a Navion." He walked over to the mouth of the next hangar, and Gannet followed. The Capitol Airport was a small, private affair, not heavily staffed. Inside the hangar, under a bug-swirled light, two other men were either dismantling a plane or putting it back together, Gannet couldn't tell which. He trailed his guide to a corner of the building where a silvery, red-striped, low-winged plane was poised like a dragonfly. The young man with Gannet beamed.

"There she is. Built by North American, like the Mustang. A hundred and eighty-five horse at twenty-three hundred r.p.m. She'll cruise at a hundred and fifty, and with that variable prop she can climb eight hundred thirty feet per minute, and—"

Gannet cut in with a gesture. "I can't count above ten. What I want to know is can you get into it without a can opener or glass cutter?"

The man in coveralls stepped up onto the inboard section of the wing, took hold of a handle, and slid back the canopy on its grooves.

"There you are, mister."

Gannet got out his flashlight, climbed up, and looked in at the luxuriously appointed interior. He rayed his light down onto the blue upholstery fabric of the front seat cushion, then onto the heavy rubber matting on the floor.

He asked, "Has this thing been cleaned out since they removed the dead meat this afternoon?"

"Not that I know of. Why?" There was grease on the young man's face. Gannet thought there was also suspicion.

He said, "I just didn't want to step into anything in case Ruick was messy about dying." He climbed carefully in through the opening in the metal and plexiglas bubble. He crouched on the cushions, turned his light on the floor. There, between ribs of the matting, was a spec of something, faintly pink. It might have been lint except that it felt hard to the tip of Gannet's finger. He picked it up, examined it in the light. It was a little larger across than the head of a tack. It had no particular shape.

Gannet straightened up onto his knees. His hands shook a little as he took an old envelope out of his pocket.

"Just what are you doing?" the man standing on the wing root asked. "What've you got in your hand?"

Gannet dropped the hard little particle into the corner of the envelope, folded the paper tightly about it. He looked up soberly at the greasy face in the opening. "That's the rarest thing in the world, son. A gallstone from a Gremlin." He climbed out of the plane and walked over to the waiting cab.

GANNET paid off the driver in front of the square grey face of Rex Sanders' house, climbed up the steps from the sidewalk, his hand on the brass railing. There was sweat on his palm, and the metal felt cool. He listened to the phony *bing-bong* of the electric door chime, thought queerly that he couldn't remember pushing the button. Then there were footsteps. Ruby's. Even with the thick, studded door between them, he could see the way she walked. The lithe nakedness of her walk. She opened the door, stood tall and slim, short-skirted in grey again. Grey for the soft mist. Her eyes shone through the mist.

"Eddie!" she breathed.

He walked in, took off his hat and hung it on the newel post at the foot of the stairs.

"Eddie, where's Rex?"

"I don't know." He looked at her with bleak green eyes. He said, "John Ruick died."

Startled, her hand moved up to her throat. Her lips parted, but she didn't say anything. Then she turned slowly, uprooting herself with an effort, and walked toward the white louver doors. He followed her into the next room. It was cool in there under high ceilings. Ruby sank down on the Lawson, her hands listlessly in her lap, her eyes dull. Gannet sat down beside her, one ankle cocked on a knee. He tipped back his head and looked at the crystal chandelier.

"America, land of opportunity. And opportunists," he said softly.

"Eddie, what will they do to Rex? When they catch him."

He felt the nearness of her. "I don't know."

"Will it be the chair?"

"I don't think so. They'll put him away for a long time."

"Why did Rex shoot John Ruick."

"He didn't," Gannet said quietly. "Rex was out in the rain the night Ruick was shot. His suit was damp. So was his trenchcoat. You can't add that up. Rex wouldn't have a trenchcoat that leaked. He hated anything that wouldn't stand up and deliver."

"He—he went out twice," Ruby said faintly. "The first time he wore his trenchcoat."

Gannet didn't say anything, and she moved over to him, picked up his hand in hers. The pressure of her fingers was warm and strong. "Twice, Eddie."

"I heard what you said. A trenchcoat is double-breasted. A man buttons the left-hand flap over the right. In a rain, the right-hand flap remains dry. A woman's coat buttons exactly opposite. That night, when I picked up Rex's coat by mistake, the left-hand flap was dry. You wore Rex's coat, and you used Rex's gun. Used it on Ruick. You thought one bullet was enough — a mistake Rex wouldn't have made."

He looked at her face. Color had drained from her cheeks, leaving her rouge stranded high. Her eyes were hot and bright.

There was a sound in the house. Somewhere. Wood on wood, as a drawer or a window opening or closing. Then the silence, and Gannet's one word dropped into it.

"Why?"

She drew her lower lips into her teeth. Her eyes looked down at her two hands. She straightened his forefinger and matched the tip of hers aaginst the tip of his.

"I—I had to," she whispered. "I used to sing at John Ruick's casino—you never heard me sing, did you, Eddie?—and he used to make passes at me, promising me anything I wanted. . . ." Her hand caressed Gannet's gently. "Even after I married Rex, he kept after me. And there was another thing: I knew that if John Ruick was shot, the police would tie it on Rex and—"

"Sometimes," he said through his teeth, "I'd like to smash that face of yours."

Her laugh was low and strange. She turned on the cushions. She put her left arm across his chest, her fingers burrowing under his right armpit. "Would you, Eddie?" Her face was a blur close to

his, and her arm tightened around him.

He watched her lips saying, "You're so awfully smart, Eddie. It was just as you said. I wore Rex's coat and took Rex's gun. I went out for a long walk in the rain. I telephoned John Ruick from a drugstore, told him I was stranded, asked him to pick me up in the car. He was—" she laughed quietly—"delighted. I made him take me to Koenig Street, and he got out to help me to the curb. Very gallant. He never even knew it was me."

"But, why?" he asked. "Why?"

"Because of you, Eddie. Because I've loved you since the first day I saw you, there at the wedding. Loved and wanted you. I did it for us. Because we belong to each other, and there was Rex in between us."

It was as though something he'd kept in the dark of his mind for a long time had come up into the light.

"Well," he said slowly as his arms went around her, "he's not in the way now."

Finally he said, "We'll have to go somewhere. Until after the trial." His mouth felt shapeless and numb from her kisses.

"Yes. Mexico, Eddie. Or Canada."

"Anywhere. All places are alike." He stood up. She stood up, too, and her mouth looked like his felt. He glanced at his watch. The hands stood exactly at ten. "Tonight," he said. "How soon can you pack?"

"Thirty minutes. We'll take my car."

He nodded. They went out into the hall, to the foot of the stairs. He said, "You stop for me. I'll be in Koenig Street at the old office. There's something I've got to pick up." He took his hat off the newel post, and she turned into the crook of his arm, face flushed and eyes misty.

"A quick one," she whispered.

He kissed her, not too quickly. She started up the steps. He stood, head cocked as though listening, watching her legs on the stairs with an oddly impersonal interest that was almost remote. When she was gone he put on his hat, turned to the door. He was deliberate about opening it. His fingers hooked around the edge of the door so that when he stepped over the sill he could give the door a yank, let it go, and it would slam. He moved very fast. The door slammed as he turned and plunged to the left, his left shoulder smashing into the somebody who waited there. His right hand struck at a gleam of gun metal that showed somewhat below a white strip of shirt cuff. His hand closed over a fist, rammed the somebody's arm out straight and then down like a pump-handle. The somebody's wrist struck the brass hand-rail with bone-shattering force.

"Drop it, Sammy," he panted. "Drop it, you damned fool."

He heard the gun drop. He heard Sammy Hart's indrawn breath like a sob. He let go of Sammy's hand, eased back.

"I—I couldn't, Eddie. I wanted to kill you and couldn't."

"Is that how it was?" Gannet said dryly. "I thought you didn't just because I'm quicker than you." He took a long breath. "Cigarette?"

Sammy said, "I wanted to kill you. I wanted to kill you, Eddie."

Gannet fumbled out a cigarette, got it up to his lips. He stared at Sammy in the flame from his lighter. Sammy's eyes were black and dull, his round face faintly green.

"Where were you?" Gannet asked. "Rex's mad room?"

"Yes," Sammy murmured, looking away. "When you rang the bell, Ruby told me to go out the back way. She said it might be Rex. But I went into the mad room instead and I—I heard what she said. I wanted to kill you."

"You said that before."

"I knew Rex had a gun in his desk. I got it, slipped out the window—"

Gannet closed his lighter with a snap. He let Sammy draw the darkness around him. "What are you going to do, Sammy?" he asked.

"I—I don't know." His lips made slavering sounds. "What can I do?"

"I was just asking," Gannet said quietly. "I thought maybe you had it figured out." He stood there and watched Sammy's crushed shadow take slow, stumbling steps down the street.

IT WAS exactly the same. The same cans of the same brand of oil pyramided in the window and layered with dust.

Gannet still had his key. He opened the

door, went in, went back through the gate in the rail of the dummy office, unlocked the door at the back. The press room was silent, deserted. Gannet creaked up the treads of the stair that led up to the loft, pushed back a door. There was ovenlike heat and the smell of dead air.

"Rex?"

"Yeah."

"I made it," Gannet said.

"It looks like you did." Gannet's fingers were lost in the great raw-knuckled hand. Gannet's smile was limp. He looked away from Rex's face and at the closed windows with the tightly drawn opaque green blinds. He said it was hot.

"Yeah," Rex said. "I don't know why the hell I bothered to be so secret about it. I won't get through the night."

Gannet said, "So that's it? You're going to play Galahad. You're even getting a kick out of it."

Rex tilted his head on one side. "How's that?"

"You're going to be a hero and throw yourself to the wolves. You're going to let the cops pick you up. If you want it in English, you're going to make a damned fool of yourself."

"Well, have you got a better idea?"

"Uh-huh." Gannet flattened his hand on the desk, putting weight on his stiffened arm. "I got a better idea. You won't like it, but it makes sense."

"What?"

"Let her paddle her own canoe. She got herself into this; now let her get out."

Rex's face slowly spread itself out. "How long have you known this, Eddie?"

"Since the night she shot him. You don't think I'd have gone to the trouble of making a damned decoy of myself if I thought you really shot Ruick, do you?"

"Yeah, but—" Rex moistened his lips. "You don't know the circumstances. Ruby had gone for a walk. She got caught in the rain, and Ruick happened along in his car. She accepted his offer of a lift. He made a pass at her—"

Gannet was sneering. "And she just happened to be packing your gun—the same gun that the sheriff had recently pulled in for a ballistics check. He made a pass at her, did he, and in the struggle she shot him? Well, I'll let you have it straight. She got John Ruick because I wouldn't make a pass at her. She did it to get rid of you. She knew if she got a divorce I wouldn't look at her, but as the widow of a man who died in the chair for murder—"

Rex straightened to his feet, the force of his movement sending his chair all the way back to the wall. His long reaching left hook caught Gannet across the mouth. Gannett stumbled backward.

He said steadily, "You'd better listen to what I've got to say before you put my mouth out of business. Maybe the cops don't know it yet, but the most they can give you is twenty years. You think the bullet finally got John Ruick. The cops probably think so too. But my guess is that Ruby doesn't think so, and I know damned well Sammy Hart doesn't think so. Because Sammy Hart poisoned Ruick."

REX SANDERS' jaw dropped. He stood there with his mouth open for a moment. Then, "What makes you so damned sure?"

"Several things," Gannet said. "The sudden way in which Ruick died, for one thing. For another, both John Ruick and Sammy Hart were in my restaurant this noon. Ruick had had an aching tooth treated. He told me so. After Ruick had left, I went up to the bar where Sammy was drinking and said, 'That's one way to lose a patient.' What I meant was that a dentist couldn't risk liquor on his breath, but Sammy just about jumped out of his skin. He must have been thinking of John Ruick, the patient he'd just poisoned."

Rex said, "That I don't get."

"You'll get it. Sammy was a dentist assigned to the Air Corps during the war, wasn't he? Do you know that before they send a man into combat flight training he has to go through the dental clinic where they make absolutely sure that the fillings in his teeth are tight? They do that because if there's the smallest bubble of air under a filling, that air expands at high altitude and shoves the filling right out of the tooth.

"Sammy knew John Ruick was flying down-state that afternoon. Suppose he put some cyanide in the cavity in Ruick's aching tooth, then capped it lightly with gutta-percha. It takes damned little cy-

anide, and the way Sammy would know how to fix the gutta-percha seal, it would take damned little altitude. He made sure that the seal didn't come out before Ruick got into the air by ordering Ruick to eat nothing but soup for lunch. When Ruick came down dead at the airport, the cops were hounds after that bullet. They didn't even look the plane over. They didn't have any reason to. But I did, and I've got the piece of gutta-percha."

Rex rested his fists on the desk top. He took a long breath. His expression was one of utter bewilderment. "But, why, Eddie? Why in hell would Sammy do a thing like that."

Gannet snorted. "I keep telling you, fat head. To make the bullet available to the cops. To get you out of the way. The cops won't look for poison. They've got what they want—the bullet. Why would Sammy do that? Ask Ruby why. Ask Ruby how she got poor little decent Sammy to pull a trick like that. Or maybe you'd like to ask Sammy why he wanted to kill me tonight when I came out of your house with Ruby's kisses all over my mouth."

Rex moved away from the desk and around. He hit Gannet in the belly, a hard-driving blow that sent Gannet reeling back to the wall. Rex followed, striding. He said, "You dirty, double-crossing rat!" and chopped at Gannet's face with his left, then a right to the body.

Gannet went down slowly. His sweating palms left dark streaks on the plaster. He kept talking, his lips numb, his voice shaky.

"Now you're kidding yourself, Rex. You know what she is. She's . . . muck."

Downstairs, the front door opened. Footsteps *tack-tacked* across the front office. Gannet raised his head with an effort, looked up at the man towering above him. Rex Sanders was listening, a puzzled expression on his face. The door of the press room at the back opened. Rex took a step backward, stopped, clenched fists at his sides.

"Eddie."

Ruby's voice from the foot of the stairs. Gannet looked at Rex and smiled a slight, twisted smile. He walked past Rex to the head of the stairs. He could scarcely see her down there in the light that reached from the lamp in the loft room.

"I'll be down in a minute, Ruby," Gannet said. "Where's your car."

"Right out in front, darling."

"Go on back and wait in it. I'll be right down."

He watched her turn and go. He stood listening to her footsteps, to the opening and closing of doors. Then he moved to the front of the room where Rex sat at the desk, massive shoulders hunched, head down, his back to the light, hands loosely clasped between his knees.

Gannet went to the window, peeled up the edge of the heavy blind. Ruby was in her yellow convertible parked at the curb. She was preening herself in the vanity mirror by the light from the street lamp. The back of the car was piled high with her bags.

"She's going away," Gannet said to Rex. "She thinks I'm going with her. I had to do it this way to kick the truth through your thick skull."

Rex uttered a sound deep in his throat. Gannet looked around. Rex had come to his feet. His shadow reeled grotesquely on the floor. As he started for the head of the stairs his footsteps shuffled a little.

"What are you going to do, Rex?"

Rex didn't say anything. He kept walking, now without shuffling. He got onto the stairs, went clumping heavily down.

Gannet went back to the window, lifted the edge of the blind. Rex had just stepped out of the front door. Ruby, behind the wheel of the car, turned eagerly, smiling.

Her face straightened out as Rex stalked to the door of the car and reached for the latch. What she saw in his face as he got in beside her brought her mouth open, silently screaming.

Gannet let go of the blind. He turned, stood with his back to the wall. He listened to the grind of the starter, the racing throb of the engine, the snarl of the gears. He followed the sound of her leaving him until there was nothing but silence. Then he moved on shaky legs to the chair and sat down. Tiny pinpoints of sweat stood out on his brow, and the blood in his mouth tasted of bitterness.

THE END

TOO MANY DAMES!

By JOHN BENDER

Even if George is rubbernecking the hot numbers in the beauty contest while Manny Holtz is prodding him with his own Police Positive, how can Chief Strohmeier know it is not just a ruse, because George is just dumb enough—sometimes—to have good sense, whether it's a matter of gams or guns. . . .

NOW, THE WAY it all happens is George's fault, some might say. Strohmeier says so, in large gold-braided words, bouncing them off the walls at Headquarters. But I know George Feeney ten, twelve years, and I know he can't be as dumb as Strohmeier makes out. Sure, George is kind of forgetful at times, but answer me this: ain't we all?

And as far as that blonde bathing-suit girl is concerned—well, no matter what Chief Strohmeier thinks, George is hu-

Suddenly, Manny Holtz is not in a hurry any more. George, neither. And how can you blame them?

man, too. Human and very forgetful.

The whole thing started on a Friday afternoon, late, toward the end of the eight-to-four shift. I was at the radio panel when the boys brought George into headquarters, and I could see that he had been roughed up some. In about two seconds flat we all learn that Manny Holtz has busted the coop.

Now, it is not the most important break we ever have, but to hear the chief carry on you'd think that Dillinger himself was on the loose, and he stomps around like a wounded bull, his red face getting redder by the minute. He has me put out an alert to all cars—and in between orders he's bellowing what a dope George Feeney is. George is parked in a chair over near the desk, wiping his accident with a wet, cold cloth and weaving his big shaggy head from side to side. I guess Manny Holtz gives him a pretty good belt on the noggin, at that.

I FEEL awfully sorry for George. Sure, he's a mite more forgetful than the rest of us, but he's always been a good cop, and he's one good joe, let me tell you. Why, when I come back from the Army, two years ago, he's the one sits up nights going over the questions I got to answer to make the cops, and what he knows about the department would make Strohmeier look like an amateur. George Feeney is a detective first grade and Strohmeier should not send him out with Manny Holtz in the first place. But no, the chief busts up our card game and has George do it, even though it is no assignment for a first grader. A patrolman could've taken Manny down to the district attorney's office for questioning.

Anyway, George takes him, and on the way back—well, as a matter of fact, it happens right here in headquarters building—Manny pulls a piece of pipe out of his pocket and *whammo!* he lets George have it on the side of the head. Then he gets George's keys, unlocks the cuffs and takes off right down the front steps. Some of the boys find George in the corridor and bring him inside, and that's the way it is.

The chief almost blows his top, as I say. He tears out a couple fistfuls of hair, I bet, while calling George all kinds of a dope.

"You know Holtz is right-handed," Strohmeier roars, "yet you leave his right hand free! Don't you remember one of the first things you learn is not to leave a prisoner's working arm free!"

"I guess I forgot," says George.

"And how come you forget to frisk him, too?" The chief throws his hands up in the air. "How come he had that pipe?"

Now, I ask you, who in hell would figure Manny had a piece of pipe? The guy'd been in the cooler for four weeks!

When George just sits there without saying anything, the chief shakes his head. "You're just lucky he didn't grab your gun and shoot you!"

He thinks about that, looking at George. "Maybe he should have!"

Going into his office he slams the door so hard the glass almost shatters.

A couple cars call in, but they don't have anything to report on Manny. This Holtz bird is a two-bit crook with a record like a telephone directory, and even though he's being held on a second-degree manslaughter charge I don't think he's gonna borrow more trouble by asking for the chair. But I can be wrong; this bust-out is not gonna help him any.

I check my board again. Things outside headquarters are deader than a Sunday afternoon in Philly. So I go over to George.

He still looks a little peaked, but I can see he'll be all right. He got a lump on his head like a golf ball, but it takes more than a bump or two to keep George down. He's one of the biggest, strongest guys I ever see. And, no matter what the chief says, one of the nicest gees I ever run into. He's always helping somebody out, just a big, good-natured slob without a mean bone in him. I could tell the chief a lot about George Feeney. About the way he lends Murphy, in Traffic, enough dough for his wife's operation. And the way he makes sure I pass my exams. No, sir, you don't meet many like George.

"You got any ideas about Manny?" I ask him. "You think he's blown town?"

"No," says George. "He'll hole up till tonight, anyhow. He's much too hot to run." He plays with his pushed-in fighter's nose. "I'll get him. I don't know why the chief is so worked up. It's just a question of time. Manny's trial ain't for a

week yet." He is still rubbing his nose.

Maybe so. "Strohmeier ain't gonna like what the papers say about this. They've been boiling the department lately."

I can see George forgets that. "That's right. So they have."

"Strohmeier's record ain't exactly the best. He's plenty touchy about it, and this'll top it off good."

If George has anything to say, I don't hear it. The desk sergeant's phone rings and he almost falls off his chair when he answer it.

"Chief!" he hollers. "Chief Strohmeier!"

Out of his office comes Strohmeier, still mad enough to chew nails.

Sergeant McGarron gives him the pad and the chief brightens to a better-looking pink. "Well," he says. "Well, well!"

That's right, you guess it. Manny.

One of the beat boys spots this character who looks like Manny Holtz going into a theater, so he reports in. The chief studies what's written on the pad, calls me over, tears off the sheet, and says to get it out on the radio fast. Then he hollers for George.

George moves slow at times, but this ain't one of them. He is up and ready. "I'll bring him back, Chief," he says, like he was going out there to win a high-school letter. "I'll have him back here in no time!"

He is running for the door when the chief stops him.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Feeney?"

George rubs his hand on the back of his head. "Why, no. . . ." He pats his pockets. "My handcuffs!"

He gets them from the desk sergeant and heads for the door again.

"George," Strohmeier calls wearily.

"Oh, yes!" George snaps his big fingers like knocking blocks of wood together. "The name of the theater!"

IT IS the Tivoli, a nice little neighborhood theater, a couple blocks away. George goes down there, while I put out a call for Cars 8 and 10 to go over to the Tivoli, meet Detective Feeney and take further orders from him.

Well, anyway, George goes to this

theater. He meets Gallagher and O'Mara, the patrol car boys, and he sends Gallagher around to the stage door and takes O'Mara into the lobby, where he parks him. "In case I flush him inside," George explains, "you be ready to grab him."

Then he checks with the manager.

The manager is Irving Case. George finds him in the office—a little, sharp-clothes guy who takes one look at George and gets very distressed in the face. But George gives it to him quick and gets Irving to calm down.

"It's Manny Holtz," George says. "We think he's killing time in your theater, Irving. All I want to do is look around."

Well, that is something else, as far as Irv is concerned. Trouble with the constabulary he doesn't want; but to look around, of course, is okay. He can make George a gift of the place.

"You want it, I can turn the house lights up—right after the picture," Irving offers.

George nixes that. No sense giving Manny the tipoff that they're looking the joint over. "I'll just prowl around first. He may be holed up backstage. If I don't have any luck, I'll look the place over from the wings."

Irving says he won't interfere with the show, will he, please? Especially tonight. They're running the semi-finals of the bathing beauty contest. . . . George will keep it quiet. . . ?

Of course, George says.

Irving says good luck and George heads on. It is a detective picture me and George see three times, so he pays no attention to the movie as he goes down the aisle. He hustles through the curtained doorway to the stairs leading up into the wings and the dressing room section.

A couple characters look him over but they don't say anything, so George just mosies around, trying the doors. He gives them all the look-see without knocking, of course, and the fifth one he pushes in produces results.

Oh, it's not Manny.

It is a roomful of young ladies, and George can't get the door closed again before they all start yelping. One of them yanks the door open and sticks her blonde head out.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demands. "Who do you think you are, anyway?"

She comes out into the corridor after him. George sees that she's got more on than most of the ladies inside, though she's not overdressed by any means. She's wearing a bathing suit—a pair of tight blue and white striped trunks and a blue and white piece upstairs. "Well . . . ?"

So George tries a grin for size and shows her his calling card by flipping back his coat lapel. "Police Department," he says. "I'm sorry if I frighten you, miss."

"A raid!" the blonde girl squeals

"Oh, no," George assures her, smiling. She is the kind of young lady to smile at, all right. She's built—well, something like seven hundred dollars on a Saturday night, if you know what I mean. "I'm not clamping the joint. I'm just looking for someone," he explains. "'Course, I wouldn't mind making a pinch right here—if you get what I mean."

"I know what you mean," the blonde says. But she grins, too.

Well, it is not too deadly and they have a laugh or two, and she warms up somewhat, looking George over. Do I mention before that George is not such a bad guy to look over? Sure, he is no collar-ad boy. But some folks like Saint Bernards, don't they? I guess this blonde gal does. It's not long before George begins to figure this is one of the best assignments he ever runs into.

He gets real chummy and tells her all about it. How he got a tip that Manny Holtz is hiding out in this theater. The blonde listens and gradually her big blue eyes tell him that she thinks he is a hero, and I guess George's mind kind of wanders off the case. Then she tells him her name is Garnett Gaye and that she is in the beauty contest, and George says he hopes that she will win, and really he can't see any reason why she won't. He is surprised to see what a nice, big girl she is. He don't find many girls who come up to his vest buttons, but this gal's bright gold head comes right up to his eyes.

"If there's trouble, you won't let anything happen to poor little me?" she asks. "Will you, Mr. Feeney?"

"Don't you worry," George tells her. "Don't you worry a bit."

"Well, I hope you find your man." She smiles and starts back inside. "And I hope you'll be here when we go on for the judging. Maybe you will clap real loud for me. . . ."

George says he'll break his hands. He is thinking that it would be nice to catch this contest, but right now he's got to concentrate on catching Manny Holtz. He tries a couple more doors. He busts in on some more rooms full of gals, but he's getting used to it now, and besides, Miss Garnett Gaye is enough woman for George at the moment.

He begins to figure that Manny ain't around here because with all these ladies it's hardly safe. Then he comes to the one door that he don't even put the glimpse on; it is plainly marked LADIES, and he's had enough hollering for one day.

HE IS standing outside the ladies room door, thinking about Garnett Gaye, when the door opens behind him. Maybe he don't hear it right away, since the band out in front is blaring introduction music; or maybe George is in one of his forgetful moods, since he has so much on his mind. I think it's the band, myself. But no matter. Before George can say a word something slaps him in the rear, and the next thing he knows he's minus his gun.

The gun doesn't go far, just the distance from George's back pocket to the middle of his spine. He feels the barrel pressing into him, and he hears Manny Holtz's voice saying:

"Take it easy now, copper. Don't get no foolish ideas."

If it's one thing George ain't getting then it's foolish ideas. He starts to raise his hands but Manny says no.

"Keep 'em at your sides. We don't want anyone horning in on our secret, do we?"

He pushes with the Police Positive. "Start walking—slow, Feeney! Just make like we're real close pals."

"You're making a mistake, Manny," George tells him. "You can't get out of here. There's a flock of blues outside."

Which ain't exactly the truth, but George thinks it might make Manny stop and figure. It doesn't. Manny only laughs at him.

"Coppers don't like to shoot their buddies, Feeney. And we're gonna be closer than Siamese twins all the way. Move!"

They move.

The stage door is on the other side of the theater and they have to go deep backstage to get there. George is hoping that somebody will stop them to ask what time it is or something, but the few guys hustling around backstage don't pay any attention to them at all.

When they get to the far wings something happens that almost gives George the break he is looking for. It is Miss

Chief Strohmeier

Garnett Gaye. She and the rest of the girls come parading out of the dressing room. She smiles at George, and he sick-smiles at her, and Manny whistles low, in his teeth.

"Wow!" from Manny.

And they are something to *wow* about, all right. Maybe twenty, twenty-five nice-formed young ladies in tight bathing suits, heading for the wings that lead out to the brightly-lit stage. Suddenly Manny Holtz ain't in any particular hurry. George, neither. And can you blame them? It's only human.

Well, the band blares, while Manny and George watch the girls walk out there, from the dark backstage to the bright stage. And while they're watching these cuties, George suddenly remembers something, because they remind him about the night before. With a grin spreading across his face he looks at Manny and Manny don't know what's

come over him. George looks down at the gun and shakes his head, almost sad-like.

"Whassamatter, copper?" Manny scowls.

"Nothing," George says. "Everything is just fine!"

Manny backs away. I guess he can tell George ain't afraid of that gun any more. And before he can squeeze the trigger, George lets go with that big right hand of his, grinning all the time. The sock connects. Manny's eyes go glassy, and he goes right into the act, like they say. Yessir, he sails right onto the stage, scattering the frightened girls like bowling pins.

The customers don't know what gives, of course, and there's some laughs when George comes through the air and lands like a bomb on Manny's chest. The girls all scream like the devil, and George keeps putting his fist in Manny's face, and it's probably Irving Case, the manager, who tells the curtain man to ring down the asbestos on the show before the customers die with laughing.

George puts the cuffs on Manny—on both hands behind him, this time. He drags him, unconscious, off the stage. It is quite a rumpus, let me tell you.

Everybody is running around trying to make some sense out of the whole thing, shouting questions at George and Irving Case and the girls. Miss Garnett Gaye is somewhat put out that all this has to happen during the semi-finals she figures on winning, but when George tells her that this is Manny Holtz he got trussed up, and that if it ain't for her and the girls he might never take this mug, Miss Gaye is a little less disturbed.

Well, that is how it is. Gallagher comes running in from his post outside the stage door to see if George is all right. Gallagher's driver has radioed headquarters and Chief Strohmeier goes out of headquarters like he's ducking an unpaid bill. He gets down to the Tivoli just about the time George is working his points with Miss Gaye, thanking her for helping him out.

"Why, when you lead these here girls by me and Manny," George tells her, "it reminds me where I was last night—"

Strohmeier snorts, "What the hell are you talking about!"

"Why the silhouettes of course," George says.

The chief just shakes his head, a puzzled look on his face.

"Well, just look at these here girls. Don't they make you think of targets, Chief?"

Strohmeier looks at the frightened beauties. "Targets? Damn it, no! Feeney, get to the point!"

"The point is this," George says. "When all these girls walk out to the bright lights, I see their shapes—their silhouettes—and that reminds me of the targets we got down at headquarters. You know, the ones down in the pistol range. Well, last night I'm down there, firing for record. I remember how I break down my gun after, to clean it—but I don't remember to load it again!" He grins. "So it's simple—the gun Manny lifts ain't loaded."

Right then the chief gives up. "I should have known," he groans. "I should have known."

But really, he's not feeling so bad now that Manny is back in the fold.

George holds up the gun, grinning. "See," he says, and gives a yank at the trigger.

Do I have to tell you it goes off—*whoom!*—making more noise than any .38 ever makes before?

Master MANHUNTERS

by Ben Nelson & Stookie Allen

FAHY'S FIASCO

WM. J. FAHY, ACE POST OFFICE SLEUTH, WAS FACED WITH A MOST SURPRISING MAIL ROBBERY WHEN 6 BANDITS WEARING GAS MASKS AND CARRYING SAWED-OFF SHOTGUNS HELD UP CHICAGO, MILWAUKEE AND ST. PAUL'S TRAIN 57 THE NIGHT OF JUNE 12, 1924.

WITH SMOOTH PRECISION THEY TOSSED SMOTHERING BOMBS INTO THE MAIL CAR AND SELECTED BAGS CONTAINING $2,000,000 IN CASH AND SECURITIES. IN THE CONFUSION THEY SHOT ONE OF THEIR OWN MEN BUT GOT HIM INTO A WAITING CAR AND ROARED AWAY.

INSPECTOR FAHY, SPOTTING IT AS AN INSIDE JOB, WENT AFTER THE MASTERMIND.

CHICAGO POLICE LOCATED THE WOUNDED BANDIT, W. NEWTON, AND THROUGH HIM BRENT GLASSCOCK, HERBERT HOLLIDAY AND NEWTON'S 3 BROTHERS. FROM UNDERWORLD TIPS AND HINTS DROPPED BY THE BANDITS, POSTAL DETECTIVES CLOSED IN ON THE MASTERMIND AND ARRESTED WM. J. FAHY!

THE BANDITS TESTIFIED FAHY HAD ORGANIZED AND TRAINED THEM, AND TIPPED THEM OFF TO THE RICH SHIPMENT ON TRAIN 57. THE MANHUNTER TURNED BADMAN WAS SENTENCED TO 25 YEARS.

"Ben was behind the bunkhouse when we found him. Somebody'd used a pick on him."

Six Tickets to Las Vegas

For his partner, Ben, nothing was too good—the finest coffin, a soloist to sing Lead Kindly Light, *flowers, everything. And as the final touch, Ben's killer would help—working as pallbearer. . . .*

By DAVE SANDS

THE SUN was baking the Mojave desert town in a relentless, shimmering heat as Pete Blade stopped his battered truck in front of the railroad station and went inside.

The station agent gave Pete a listless nod. Pete walked to the counter and took out a wallet. He laid a small sheaf of banknotes on the counter.

"Six tickets to Las Vegas, and one for

the corpse," he said. "He's going along."

The station agent showed little surprise. He gave Pete tickets and correct change.

"Clammer was in about Ben Moren's body," the agent said. "He made arrangements. You'll be the official custodian."

Pete nodded solemnly and the station agent added, "Clammer is sort of mad you don't let him have the funeral here. He says you ought to patronize the local undertaker."

Pete shook his head. "I figure we got to give Ben a first-class funeral, with all the trimmings. Hell, who'd want to be buried in the cemetery they got here? And what's Clammer sore about? He got the embalming job and all the business about the autopsy."

"Well, it's none of my business. The sheriff got anything yet?"

Pete's dried, wrinkled face took on a frown and he hunched his narrow shoulders in disgust.

"That sheriff! In all my fifty-two years I never seen a man with less ambition. All he knows is Ben was murdered."

The station agent rubbed his jaw reflectively. "Just what did happen out there, Pete? I never got the straight of it."

Pete lit a hand-made cigarette and pushed back his weathered hat. His eyes narrowed in contemplation.

"Not much to it. We found Ben dead in back of the bunkhouse. Someone used a pick on him."

"Fight, huh?"

"Well . . . maybe. Ben's diamond is gone."

"Diamond?"

"Ben had a diamond the size of the end of your finger. He had a lot of money sunk in that piece of rock. None of us ever knew exactly how much because Ben kept saying different amounts. It was plenty, though."

"And the diamond is gone?"

"Yep. He had it set in a ring and kept the ring in a little chamois bag tied to a string around his neck, except when he wore it on state occasions."

The station agent thought about it, and suddenly he looked a little startled.

"If he kept it out of sight most of the time, it must have been someone out there! The sheriff has been saying it was some guy going through the country that did it. But a stranger wouldn't know about that ring."

"Maybe," Pete Blade said laconically. He took off his hat and ran a gnarled hand over his bald head. His eyes glinted. "But you better be careful what you say about it. Only seven of us been working that hole, including Ben. You're practically saying one of us did it."

The station agent looked fussed. "Nothing personal, Pete. Everyone knows you were Ben's best friend."

Pete nodded decisively. "And I'm going to see that he gets a decent burial. We're all going to Las Vegas and be pallbearers."

STILL SCOWLING, Pete clamped on his hat and went out into the bright heat. In his truck he thought about it as he drove out of town toward the mine.

He remembered how the sheriff had gone down the list.

"Not you, Pete," the sheriff said. "You own the mine. You have more money than you need, anyhow. Besides, you were Ben's best friend. Then there's Big Bill Fleming. That Irishman wouldn't murder anyone for a diamond. Little Manuel Gomez has a good reputation around here. Tom Howard and Sam Hoskins I don't know. How about them?"

"Tom's worked for me three years. Don't know much about him, but he's a good hard-rock man. Stubborn and minds his business."

"Hoskins?"

"He's a good man with a drill. Talks a lot, but doesn't say much. He's been here about a year. Howard and Hoskins are both from Butte. All right, I guess."

"And this Colly Lyman?"

Pete shrugged. "I got nothing against him, either. He's out here for his health. Pretty well educated. Used to be a white-collar man somewhere in the East."

The sheriff spread his hands expressively. "See, Pete? It doesn't look like an inside job. All those men are middle-aged, respectable hombres. Someone came by here and Ben was alone, and whoever it was bumped him off, found the ring, and got away. Ben might even have shown him the ring. He was proud of it."

"Not that proud around strangers," Pete objected.

"Well, I'll have the boys search the bunkhouse and everyone's belongings. It won't do any good, though."

"Waste of time," Pete agreed. "No one would hide it around here where it'd be found."

They were right. The search had been fruitless and although the men could have resented it, they seemed anxious to cooperate.

"We'll check the country over," the sheriff promised. "Maybe we'll get a line on someone who was out around here."

"Hmph," said Pete.

Hopelessly, he reviewed all the circumstances of the case. All that they knew was that they hadn't worked that day because the hoist was down awaiting parts for repair. Except for two hours, no one knew exactly what anyone else had done during most of the day, and no one missed Ben until chow time when Manuel, who doubled as cook, went out to get wood from the pile behind the bunkhouse. He'd found Ben's body then.

On the other hand, it was quite possible that a stranger had come by and fled after murdering Ben, because for two hours in the afternoon everyone but Ben had climbed down to the first level in the mine, where it was cool, for a session of poker. That was the only two hours when everyone had an alibi.

Pete's mouth set in a straight line as he drove the truck over the dusty mine road.

"No matter who killed him," he thought, "he's going to get a decent burial. Good as I can buy, including pallbearers."

THEY ARRIVED in Las Vegas in the morning, and Pete immediately made his arrangements with the mortician, the florist, and for an obituary in the news. He visited the police station and asked for suggestions in finding Ben's murderer, outlining his own theories. By the time he returned to the hotel, where they had taken a room for the day, he felt that he had left no stone unturned for Ben. There would even be a soloist at the funeral to sing *Lead Kindly Light.*

It seemed unfortunate, while they played poker in the air-conditioned room and waited for the hour to go to the mortuary, that Pete started the argument about the diamond.

It came from a theory he had developed that the diamond was not as valuable as Ben had claimed, and he presented good cause for his belief.

"Ben never had enough money at one time to pay much for a rock like that. He was broke from payday to payday."

"He said he won it in a game at Tucson," Howard insisted with a stubbornness that matched his short, stocky body.

"Not worth the thousands he said it was worth," Pete maintained. "The more I think about it, the more I think it was a phony. They make them good these days."

"'Twas a good ring," Bill Fleming announced heavily and drew three cards to his poker hand. "Ben was no man to be lying."

"That's right," Sam Hoskins nodded. "Ben, he had his good points. I don't think as how he'd be lying about it."

Colly Lyman looked up in quiet approval of Hoskins' statement. "Hoskins is right. Ben was no liar."

"Give me two cards," Pete said sourly. "I still think the ring was a phony. And remember, I knew him a long time."

Manuel Gomez dealt the cards and his voice fell as gently as the cards that fluttered to the blanketed table. "*Por Dios*! The man is dead. He was a good man, regardless."

"You think the ring was a phony?" Lyman asked him.

Gomez shrugged eloquently. "Who cares? Now it is gone."

Howard nodded in agreement and inspected his cards.

"Two-bits," he said and tossed in a coin.

"Up four-bits," Pete said. "Manuel's right. Poor Ben is gone now. We got to respect the dead. Even if the ring was a fake, old Ben wasn't."

* * *

It was a fine funeral. The organ played softly, the preacher eulogized fittingly, and the soprano sang *Lead Kindly Light* in a way that would have delighted Ben. Manuel wept openly and Pete had to blow his nose several times.

When they returned from the cemetery,

Pete bought drinks and then looked at the clock over the bar.

"You men may as well do the town a bit," he said. "Just be at the hotel before train time."

He left them in the bar and found a movie. It was a Western and he sat through it twice. When he came out, he had a solitary drink, ate, and went to the police station.

The police lieutenant with whom he had talked in the morning greeted him with a wry smile.

"You were right," he said briefly. "We picked him up twenty minutes later and he's already confessed. We've been trying to get you at the hotel, but you were out."

"Who was it?"

The lieutenant told him.

Pete nodded a little wearily and said, "I thought so. He was too damn sure and stubborn. He'd have to prove to himself that he was right."

THEY WERE somber as they prepared to leave the hotel. It was still an hour to train time.

Colly Lyman played solitaire at the table. Big Bill Fleming sat on the bed, gazing absently at Sam Hoskins, who looked discouraged.

Hoskins said, "I don't understand it. I've known him a long time. I remember he had some trouble in Butte, but I never thought he'd do a thing like that."

Pete stood by a window, looking down into the street. Now that it was over, he felt very tired.

"I figured it out at the mine. If whoever had that ring got to worrying whether it was any good, he'd want to get it appraised quick. He couldn't do that at home, though. He'd be afraid old man Myers, our only jeweler, would know the ring. But he could get it appraised here in safety."

"That's why you had the funeral here?" Colly asked. "And then started the argument about the diamond?"

"That, and to give Ben a nice funeral," Pete nodded. "This morning I talked with the cops and they passed out the word to jewelers to call them if anyone came in to get a diamond ring appraised."

"And Tom Howard did after the funeral," Lyman said flatly.

"Ben would have liked that funeral," Pete said. "It was nice."

The room was very quiet. Finally Pete turned and brought out his wallet. He counted out money and handed it to Manuel.

"You go down to the station and get our tickets," he said, in his tired voice. "Five tickets home."

With This Axe, I Thee . . .

By JAMES G. MacCORMACK

FROM the beginning of January to March, no tenant had been found for the little house in Andrew Street, Windsor, a little suburb on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia. Prospective tenants viewed it, but went away without taking it. Eventually their objection was explained when one of them complained that the house was malodorous. The landlord investigated the smell—with a result so definite that he practically ran for the police.

Source of the odor was traced without difficulty to the bedroom. The trouble—or odor—seemed to emanate from the fireplace. The police pried up the marble slab and, in a grave of cement, discovered the nude body of a young, dark-haired girl. Her throat was slashed and the back of her head had been caved in by a blunt instrument.

In that house of murder on that March day in 1893, the only clue the police could find was a Bible whose owner appeared to be a Mrs. Mather of Rainhill, England.

The Melbourne police immediately got in touch with the Rainhill constabulary, and that was how Mrs. Mather, a little widow who ran a paper shop near the Rainhill Hotel, found out that her daughter Emily had been murdered. When the police told her of the Bible being found and gave her a description of the young woman found murdered, Mrs. Mather gave the police a lead on her daughter's murderer that would soon put a hangman's nose about the neck of Frederick Bailey Deeming, England's most notorious thief, confidence trickster, bank robber, bigamist and multiple muderer.

* * *

About the year 1883, Deeming, a man of some thirty years of age, describing himself as a plumber and gas-fitter, left his recently married bride at Birkenhead, England, until such time as he could afford to have her join him, and hired on as steward on an Australian liner bound for Sydney.

Work in the gas-fitting line was plentiful in the Australian port; so, indeed, were gas-fittings. And the newly arrived immigrant took the short cut to affluence by stealing instead of repairing the fittings he was called on to deal with.

Deeming's career from this point on is a long and repetitious tale of larceny, swindle, bigamy and, finally, murder.

"The louder you talk the more money you get," he is reported to have said. And when all accounts were in shortly before justice collected its due, it was a statement which he seemed completely justified in making.

Moving constantly under assumed names, Deeming moved from Sydney, to Port Adelaid, to St. Helena, to Cape town, back to England, then to Montivideo, Uruguay. This Cook's tour was financed by his slick tongue, his ability to worm his way into people's confidences and wangle money from them. Marriage was also another manner in which he obtained funds for his nefarious schemes and high scale of living.

Apprehended in Montivideo by English police, Deeming was brought back to England to do a stretch in the Hull Assizes for his swindling of a woman in Beverely, England. After a term of nine months, Frederick Bailey Deeming moved to Rainhill, and reopened shop as fraud and swindler. His victim this time—the year was now 1890—was Emily Mather, daughter of the widow who kept the little paper store next the hotel in Rainhill.

Not all the cement Frederick Bailey Deeming poured over his beautiful dead wives, could keep them from coming back to tie a rope around his throat. . .

Always a gallant, Deeming, now calling himself Williams, and using the phony title of Inspector of the Queen's Regiments, soon married Emily.

He accounted for his presence in Rainhill by saying that he had been asked to find a house for a Colonel Brooks, who was about to retire. He chose Dinham Villa, a small house outside Rainhill. Included in the lease he signed was the clause that the kitchen and scullery should be covered with cement—and that he, Deeming, would be allowed to perform the labor!

It seems that Deeming's real family, his wife and three children, were living at Birkenhead, a mere stone-throw from Rainhill. But with his new attachment to Emily, Deeming knew his family would be in the way.

Deeming stifled enquiries about the woman and three children who were seen living at Dinham Villa, the place rented for Colonel Brooks, by saying they were his sister and her children who would soon leave for Canada. Then he ordered furniture and cement simultaneously. For a few days nothing was seen of Deeming. He was very busy.

When he married Miss Mather on September 22, 1891, he took her on a honeymoon to New Brighton. On their return from the sea resort, Deeming stopped in at Dinham Villa to show his bride the place he had rented. In rare and exuberant spirits he danced a little clog on the new cement floor of the kitchen.

Deeming took his wife to Australia, changed his name to Droven when he rented a little house in Andrew Street, Windsor, and then ordered cement and a supply of tools. Christmas Eve, 1892, was the last Emily was seen alive.

WHEN the murder of Emily Mather was traced back to Rainhill, the police of that town, on a hunch, went out to Dinham Villa. Here again an odor brought the officers to the scene, for neighbors had been complaining about the terrible stench coming from Dinham Villa. The police wasted little time. They began digging where the new cement in the kitchen was. A few minutes work brought to light the nude bodies of a woman and three children. All four had had their throats cut.

It wasn't long afterward that this English Bluebeard was brought to justice. He was tried in Melbourne, and his crimes in total were given to the public. He had murdered five people—it was even hinted that he was Jack the Ripper, but this was never proven—and he had swindled over $3,000,000 in the course of his 10 years of operation. Besides that, he had taken the marriage vows with at least nine women! After a stormy trial, Frederick Bailey Deeming, one of England's most notorious criminals of the nineteenth century, was hanged on May 23, 1892. But the untidily brilliant criminal cheated his jailors, if not the audience of several thousand who gathered to see him swing. It was his last act of fraud, and how he must have delighted in it!

Deeming took poison smuggled him by a woman won by his charm during his trial. He was dead when he was hanged! The prison officals, who had been under strong criticism by the press during the trial and were afraid of further blasting, hanged the dead man anyway. They let out the story that the limpness of Deeming's figure, as he was "helped" up the scaffold, was due to the complete breakdown of his nerve!

DIE,

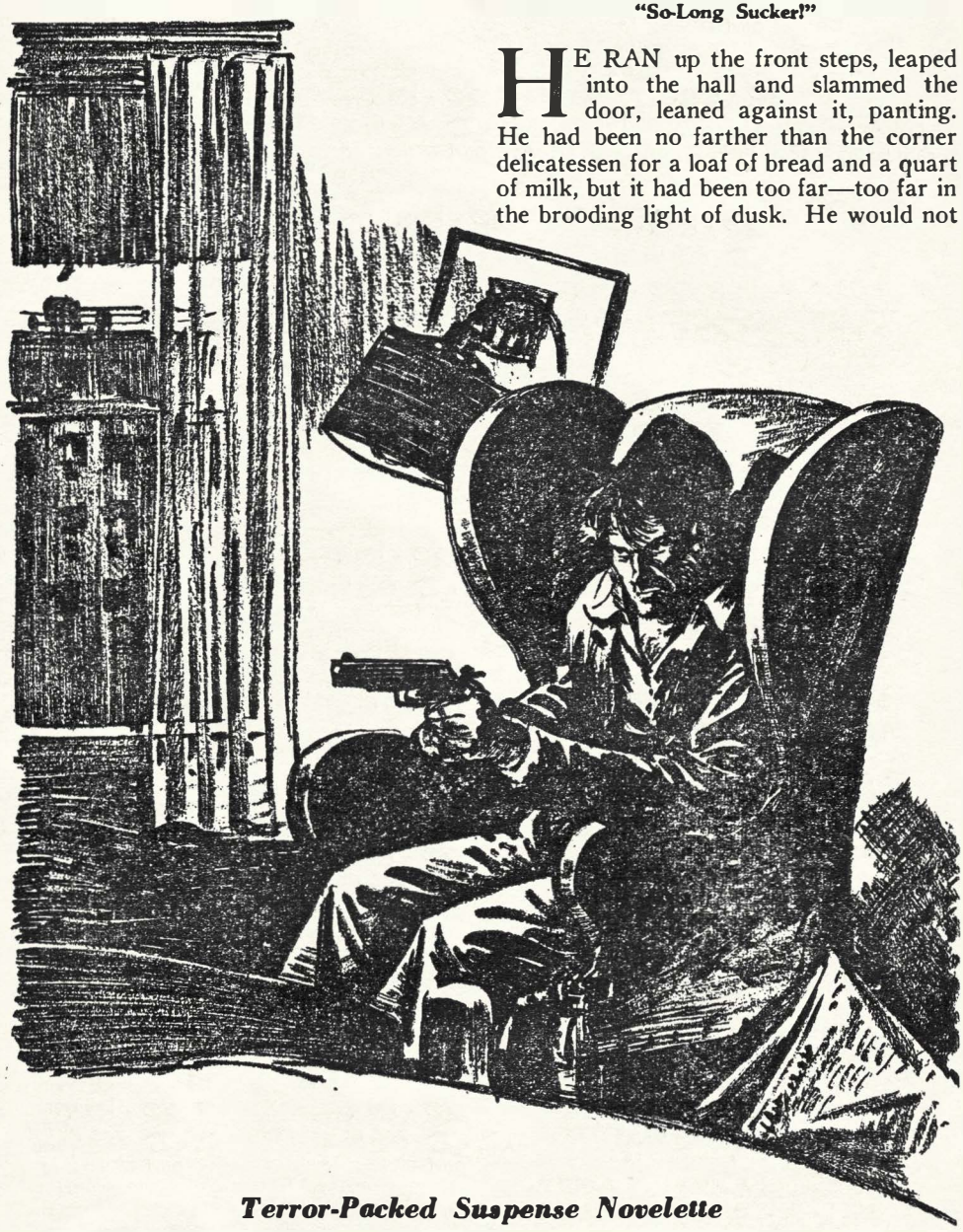
"Out there some place, in some alley, in some doorway, waiting for you, is a little man with a gun," the D. A. told Morgan. "You'll be walking down the street and there'll be a sharp crack, and it'll probably be the last sound you'll ever hear. . . . And, Morgan—I'm not going to lift a finger to stop it!"

BABY, DIE!

CHAPTER ONE

"So-Long Sucker!"

HE RAN up the front steps, leaped into the hall and slammed the door, leaned against it, panting. He had been no farther than the corner delicatessen for a loaf of bread and a quart of milk, but it had been too far—too far in the brooding light of dusk. He would not



Terror-Packed Suspense Novelette

By LARRY HOLDEN

have gone but he had been driven by hunger, and the street had looked so empty. But that emptiness had been only a delusion, a lure to trap him in the open, for there was lurking life in even the emptiest of city streets. With a pencil—for he did not want his hand to be seen—he pushed the curtain aside quarter of an inch and peered out into the street, straining until his eyes hurt, to see as far as he could in either direction.

A black sedan rolled slowly by, and his stare intensified. His eyes followed it until it was lost beyond the blocking frame of the window, then picked up a delivery truck coming from the other direction. It was a green Bond truck and he relaxed a little as he recognized the driver. A woman came out of the apartment house opposite, paused at the door to paw into her bag, then continued down the street. Everything seemed innocently usual—but you never knew, you had to make sure.

He gave one last searching look, then turned and plodded up the stairs to his room on the second floor. His fingers trembled slightly as he fitted the key, and his heart lurched when he found the door unlocked. He stood for a full minute, torn between the desire to run and his urgent need for the familiar safety of his room with the door locked behind him. With his ear against the panel, he rattled the knob and waited for the whisper of footsteps within. There was none, and cautiously he opened the door and stepped inside. The room was empty. It should have been empty. No one knew his address. Even the newspapers had not printed that, and the place where he worked had only his old address in Jersey City.

He spun around at the soft knock on the door, and his eye leaped to the bolt. He stood still and silent. The knock was repeated and a small, feminine voice called:

"Mr. Morgan? Mr. Morgan?"

It was the voice of Jessie Rogers, who helped her mother run the boarding house. That is, it sounded like the voice of Jessie Rogers, but that could be a trick. You couldn't tell. You had to be sure.

He said, "Who is it?"

"Jessie. Are you all right, Mr. Morgan? Mama was worried."

"I'm all right."

"You hadn't gone to work for three days, and Mama thought you might be sick. Then when you came back from the store just now you looked so awful, she sent me right up."

"I'm all right. I'm—" He paused, fumbling for a plausible excuse.

"I've got some stew for you, Mr. Morgan," the girl said. "And some coffee and hot biscuits I made."

Reluctantly he opened the door and she came in, smiling, carrying a small tray covered with a clean towel. She looked around for a place to put it. Shamefaced, he cleared the empty bean and soup cans from the table beside the wing chair, mumbling something about eating in. It didn't make much sense. She set down the tray and looked critically at him.

"You don't look well, Mr. Morgan," she said. "Maybe you don't feel sick right now, but you look as if you're going to."

She was a pretty girl with a sturdy, slim figure, square hands, and firm, well-shaped legs. Her eyes were friendly and pansy-brown. She smiled.

"You know what *I* think?" she said. "I think you need some good, hot food. Now sit down and eat this. I have to wait for the coffee pot because it's the only little one we have."

With dismay, he saw she was going to stay. He sat in the wing chair and took up the fork. He didn't want the food. He didn't want to talk to her. He wanted just to be alone. She sat on the edge of the bed, facing him, and watched him put forkful after forkful into his mouth and chew them with laggard teeth.

She liked to watch him, even now when it was very clear to her that he did not want her there. She liked the flat planes of his lean, hard face and his tawny hair, streaked with sun-bleached strands like the hair of children at the seashore. He stood over six feet and had a lazy Arizona way of talking. That's where he had come from. Arizona. Some little town with a poetic Spanish name outside of Phoenix. She liked his slow, easy grin. She wished he didn't look so drawn now. She was a practical girl. She wanted to get him a doctor.

She shook her head. "You're not en-

joying that food one bit," she said, disapproving.

He grinned wanly. "Not hungry, I guess."

She stood and put her hand firmly against his forehead. Her fingers were electric, the spark that touched off his yearning for the friendly human contact that he had repulsed. He grabbed her roughly, pulled her down into his lap and dipped his face over her's, fumbling for her lips. She strained back, then her hand crept to the back of his head and she leaned into his kiss. His violence was a quick fire, soon burned out, and he dropped his head into the soft hollow between her cheek and her shoulder.

She whispered soothingly, "What's the matter, Dave?"

THE MATTER? It was an awful little word for a big thing like murder, a murder he'd had nothing to do with. No one thought he had; it was the rest of it that they didn't believe—and after the skepticism of the hostile police, he desperately wanted some one to believe him.

He had been the bartender in the Eureka Bar & Grill, one of a chain owned by a little Greek called Nick Papa. His name wasn't either Nick or Papa, but something so fantastically unpronounceable that he had become unanimously Nick Papa, the equivalent of John Doe. He was a fussy little man, always popping into his bars and grills, dusting off the tables, tasting the Bar-B-Q beef that hung on a spit in the window, giving his bartenders bits of sage, commercial advice.

Dave had gone to him for a job and had told him frankly that all he wanted was a little more experience before he went back to Arizona and opened a place of his own.

Papa smiled and spread his hands. "Arizona. That's a long way. Arizona is not competition to me in Newark. Draw me a glass of beer. I want to see."

Dave expertly drew a beer with a half-inch head. Papa nodded. "Throw it away. I don't drink." He corrected one or two of Dave's cocktail recipes and gave him the job at fifty dollars a week. "I like you," he said. "You have an honest personality. Sure we sell beer at the bar, but mostly we sell the bartender. Beer you can get any place, but people come back where they like the barkeep."

That much of it had been fine. Dave was saving money and learning the business. His particular Eureka Bar & Grill was on Market Street, beyond the Pennsylvania Station, a tough neighborhood, but Dave was big enough to handle a fighting drunk and he had no trouble.

Until that night.

Joe Mangin and another man, who turned out to be a hophead named Leo Speiss, had come in a half-hour before the wrestling was scheduled to start on the television set. They had sat, arguing about baseball, at the end of the bar near the door. Then the wrestling came on. In the middle of the first bout the shot rang out, and everybody turned to see Mangin leap from his stool. Speiss and the gun hit the floor together. Somebody yelled and Mangin dived through the doorway. In one minute the rest of the customers were fighting to get through the same doorway. Not to chase Mangin. Oh, no! They just wanted to be some place else

when the cops arrived. It was that kind of neighborhood. When the cops did arrive, there was no one in the bar but the dead man, Dave, and the chef whom everybody called Rastus, but who was actually Eugene Owen Knibbs. For all practical purposes, Eugene Owen Knibbs was not there, either, for during the shooting he had been down in the cellar getting ice cubes for the bar from the big refrigerator. Dave was the only witness the police had.

DAVE looked up into Jessie's face and said earnestly, "That was just the way it was. They were arguing for a half-hour, but I didn't pay any attention. It was something about baseball. Lots of people argued at the bar, and I never listened because I didn't want to take sides. And another thing, I had other customers to take care of. I didn't hear anything that led up to the shooting."

Jessie nodded. It was very logical. She had been in bars, and she had seen how the bartenders were always going to and fro from the beer taps, never spending more than a minute or two with any customer.

But the district attorney had not believed Dave. He had not believed it probable that an argument about baseball had led to the shooting.

"I argue about baseball myself," he snapped, "but I don't go shooting anybody. Come on, Morgan, what's the rest of it? What were they really arguing about?"

Dave looked unhappily across the desk and helplessly tossed his hands. This had been going on for two days, the same questions, the same pounding. "They were arguing about baseball," he repeated for the tenth—or was it the twentieth?—time. "That's all I heard."

"How often had Speiss been in the bar before that night?"

"I never saw him before."

"He was coked to the eyes, probably spoiling for trouble. What were he and Mangin fighting about?"

"Baseball."

"Dam it, if I hear baseball once more I'll beat you over the head with a bat. Did Mangin come in very often?"

"He came in two or three times a day."

"What business was he in?"

"I don't know. I never asked him."

"Maybe he made book on the horses."

"He talked to a lot of people, but I never heard horses."

"But he was a bookie, wasn't he?"

This had been gone over before, and Dave said wearily, "I don't know."

"Let me put it a little differently. Was he engaged in any form of gambling activity whatever?"

That, of course, was the meat of the whole interrogation. The district attorney was a worried man. The elections were at his throat, and an investigation was looming in the state capital. His city was one of the plague spots mentioned in the press releases given out by the opposition's crusaders. Hell, he knew there was gambling around—penny-ante stuff, two-buck bookies, two-bit numbers. They were like ants. You stepped on a batch here, and behind you another batch was running out of another crack. A full-scale gambling crusade, in the mind of the party's front office, would have been very unpopular. They had been wrong. It was turning out to be very popular indeed, and the wrong rider was on the white horse. The district attorney felt harassed and abused.

"Well," he said impatiently. "was Mangin a gambler or not?"

Dave repeated, "I don't know."

"For a barkeep, you sure kept your ears and eyes open? Let's take Speiss for moment. You claim you didn't know him. You don't know, for instance, that he had a record as long as his arm do you?" Dave dumbly shook his head. "I didn't expect so," the D. A. said dryly. "Well, let's go down the list. How many of your other customers made book or peddled the numbers?"

Dave said truthfully, "I never saw them do it in my bar. The only gambling I ever saw was when they shook the dice for beers, or stood a round of rye on a shuffleboard game."

The district attorney ominously tapped his pencil on the desk. "Give me the names of the men who came in regularly every day," he ordered.

Again Dave fumbled. All he could say was—Frank, Al, Joe, Nick, Stretch, Clocker. . . .

"C l o c k e r?" The district attorney

pounced on that. "That would be Clocker Mornay, the bookie. How often did he come in?"

Hurley, his chief investigator, leaned over the back of his chair and whispered into his ear. Dave couldn't hear what was being said, but Hurley was telling his superior that Clocker Mornay had been in a Maryland jail for the past nine months.

The district attorney said irritably, "Maybe this is another one. Well, I'm waiting, Morgan."

"He came in every day, usually around five-thirty. He had two beers, then went home. He brought his wife on Sundays and watched the television."

"Oh, God, a family man! How long were you working at that bar, Morgan?"

"Eight months."

"And during that time you never once learned anybody's last name? Not once?"

Dave lost his temper for the first time. "They didn't introduce themselves to me," he said hotly. "They didn't come in and say, 'I'm John Jones. I want to buy a glass of beer.' If you think they were crooks, why don't you ask the cop on the beat. He saw them come and go. He'd know more about them than I would. Why don't you ask him?"

The district attorney rocked back in his chair, tented his fingers and looked at Dave over the peak. "As I understand it," he said, "you were down there keeping bar for eight months in one of the toughest districts in Newark, and all you saw were a lot of family men having a glass of beer after work before they went home to the wife and kiddies. That's what you want me to believe, isn't it?"

Dave said sullenly, "I didn't say that."

"No? You'll pardon my poor, feeble intellect, but that's the impression I got. Just what *did* you say, Morgan?"

"I said—" just what had he said?—"I said I didn't see anything that was against the law."

"That, of course, includes arguments about baseball, doesn't it?" Before Dave could answer, the district attorney turned to Hurley, the chief investigator, and said, "Throw the little rat out. He's no good to us."

He lunged forward in his chair and pointed the pencil at Dave like a gun. His voice was mean and hard. "I'm letting you go, Morgan. But out there some place, in some doorway, waiting for you, is a little man with a gun. His name is Mangin. You've got the only voice that can talk him into the electric chair, and he's going to keep you quiet if he can. You'll be walking down the street and there'll be a clap, like that!" He slapped his hand on the desk. "That's what a gun sounds like, and it'll probably be the last sound you'll hear in this world. I could protect you, but I'm not going to. The life of anyone on the other side of the fence doesn't mean this much to me!" He snapped his fingers. "And as far as I'm concerned, you're on the other side of the fence. Baseball! So-long, sucker."

CHAPTER TWO

The Beginning of Terror

JESSIE said, "You mean he deliberately let you go so that man could shoot you?"

"It wasn't quite as bad as that," Dave confessed. "I hadn't gone four blocks when I saw Hurley behind me. I might never have noticed him, but I was standing in the doorway of one of those modern store fronts lighting a cigarette, and I happened to see him in the mirror. The district attorney was just doing his job. He thought that by having detectives follow me I might lead them to Mangin."

Jessie conceded the fairness of that, but, "A detective fifty feet behind you would never be able to stop that!" she said in horror.

Dave found himself pleading the district attorney's case, for that was the one he wanted to believe. "He didn't actually think I'd be shot," he said. "He thought I was in on something and that I was protecting Mangin. Maybe he *was* counting on me to lead them to him."

* * *

But he hadn't. In the first place, all he knew about Mangin was that the man came into the bar and drank beer and seemed friendly with strangers. He didn't know where he lived, whether he was married or not, if he children—none of those things.

The first thing Dave had done was go back to the Eureka Bar & Grill on Market

Street. He still had his living to make.

Only it wasn't the Eureka Bar & Grill any more. In two days, the front had been changed, and when he walked up a crew of workmen had just finished hoisting a tall neon sign that said: THE TAP ROOM.

There was a strange barkeep behind the mahogany and in the window, tending the Bar-B-Q, was a swarthy man with pointed mustaches and a tall chef's hat—Eugene Owen Knibbs' old station.

"What's going on?" Dave asked. "Nick changing the name for luck?"

"Under new management," the new barkeep told him.

He said, "Oh," and after a pause, "I guess I don't work here any more then. Who owns it now?"

"Entertainment Enterprises Incorporated," the barkeep rolled out. "Which is owned by Max Niepert. You were the barkeep here, weren't you? I thought you looked familiar. I saw your picture in the papers."

Dave hadn't known the papers had used his picture, and for some reason he felt a little stab of apprehension. Click—like that—and click, it was gone. But not forgotten.

"Max Niepert," he said, chiefly to have something to say. "He's the gangster, isn't he?"

The barkeep took a towel from under the bar and slowly swabbed the deck. "Brother," he said in a flat voice, "all I know is that Max Neipert is Entertainment Enterprises Incorporated and that his wife gets her picture in the rotogravure. If there's anything else on your mind, you talk to Max. He's the boy to ask. But why don't you go over and see Nick Papa? He's a square joe. If he likes you, he'll find a spot for you in one of his other grog shops. He's got eight or nine of them."

Dave said, "That's an idea," and walked out.

But the name Nax Niepert nagged at him—and then he recalled that somewhere in the district attorney's interrogation it had been dropped that Leo Speiss had been one of Niepert's boys back in the Prohibition twenties. That was all. No more than that. And now Niepert had bought the Market Street Eureka. He had been after it for quite a while, so that part of it didn't surprise Dave. Actually, he didn't know what bothered him about the coincidence—except the fact that it was a coincidence. There was nothing you could put a finger on and look at.

HURLEY shadowed him from the bar to the Commercial Building where Nick Papa had his office. Nick almost fell out of his chair when Dave walked in.

"Go away," he bleated. "Go away, Davie!"

Dave stammered, "I—I just want to ask about my job, Mr. Papa."

"There is no job. I sold the place. Please do me the favor and go away. I owe you some money. Here." He took out a plump wallet and threw three fifties on the desk. "One for a week's pay," he said, "and the rest instead of two weeks' notice. You're satisfied. It's fair? Now take it and go away, please, I ask of you."

Dave still didn't understand it. Nick Papa had always liked him and had spent a lot of time in the Eureka, giving him pointers, teaching him the business, showing him the corners you had to cut to make the difference between a profit and a loss. Now Nick looked actually frightened of him.

Bewildered, he said, "But. . .I didn't do anything, Mr. Papa. The police let me go. What did I do?"

Nick sank back in his chair, patting his face with a huge, snowy handkerchief. "Please," he said. "I know you did not do anything. But the police have not caught Mangin, and here you are walking the streets. Is that safe? It isn't safe for me to be seen talking to you. People like this Mangin think all kinds of things. He might think you're telling me something I shouldn't hear. Then tonight Nick walks out of the office and *bang, bang* Nick falls on the ground. No thank you, please. Why do you think I sold the Market Street Eureka? Because Mangin might see me walking in and out and remember that he saw me talking to you. I'm superstitious. I don't believe in crossing a black cat before I come to it. I don't like things like that. How do you know Mangin hasn't followed you here? Have you eyes in the back of your head? Neither has anyone else. Please, on bended knees I implore of you, go away!"

Dave blurted, "You don't have to be afraid of that, Mr. Papa. There's a detective following me this minute. He's probably downstairs. He knows what Mangin looks like. I pointed out his picture. He was arrested once."

"Detectives!" Nick groaned. "Believe me, no one has had such detectives as I have had since that fatal killing. Detectives in blue suits with brass buttons, detectives with cigars, detectives with no cigars so they smoke mine, and all of them with questions. Is Davie a good boy? How long has Davie been a good boy? Has he been a good boy since he was out of jail. Yes, Davie is a good boy. His till is always all correct and he don't drink. I don't know he was in jail. When was this, what did he do? They don't tell me. When were you in jail, Davie?"

"But I've never been in jail, Mr. Papa."

"You see? That's detectives for you! Please, no more detectives. I am a busy man, and their questions distress me very much. Do me the favor—go home and don't get yourself shot at, or there will be more detectives and more questions even *they* don't know what mean, like you being a jailbird and never was."

Perspiring, he hustled Dave to the door, looked quickly up and down the corridor, then ducked back into the office and closed the door. Dave heard the key rattle in the lock.

* * *

"I feel sorry for him," Jessie said.

Dave grimaced. *He* knew what fear was.

* * *

It hadn't been there the first day, that fear. He knew Hurley was behind him all the time, and he led him a merry chase. Never trying to lose him, of course. Never that! But Dave was feeling a little peeved at the district attorney and he took it out on Hurley. He took a bus to Upper Montclair and spent a few energetic hours climbing the hills of Great Notch. When he returned to town, he had dinner in the most expensive restaurant he could find—not thinking that the money to pay for Hurley's wouldn't come out of Hurley's pocket. Then he went by train to New York and took the long ferry to Staten Island. Not that he particularly wanted to go to Staten Island. He didn't but riding that ferry had been one of the things he had intended doing before he went back to Arizona. If the Statue of Liberty had been open, he would have gone there, too.

That was the first day.

The second day was a little different. The second day there was no Hurley. By this time he knew Hurley very well—the way he wore his hat, the color of his necktie, how he moved his jaws crookedly as he chewed his everlasting gum. He could not have missed Hurley. There simply was no Hurley behind him.

And that was when he felt the first small twinge of panic. He spent hours trying to spot the detective he knew had to be behind him. He rode up and down in elevators; he changed from bus to street car; he walked across the broad, open lawns of Branch Brook Park—he did everything he could think of to get the detective to reveal himself. There was absolutely and paralyzingly no one there.

HE DID not realize until then what a feeling of safety Hurley had given him. With Hurley behind him, the threat of a murderous Mangin had seemed remote, a tale told to frighten him—but now he felt suddenly and nakedly defenseless. And it was his own fault. He had too obviously led Hurley a wild goose chase the day before, and Hurley had caught on. Now they were giving him a taste of fear to soften him up. That was one thought.

The other thought was that Mangin had been captured, and his spirits went soaring. He bought a paper and eagerly sat on a fire hydrant to read it. The story wasn't on the first page; it wasn't on the second page, either. In fact, it wasn't on any of the pages. His hands shaking a little, he started on the front page again, going over each headline very carefully. It was so easy to miss something with a paper full of headlines. So easy—especially when it wasn't there.

And it wasn't there.

He sat dumbfounded. It had to be there. The district attorney had been playing a game until Mangin was caught; he hadn't deliberately turned Dave loose to be shot down in cold blood on the open streets. That would have been too cynical.

Then he had a third thought. He was having thoughts all over the place now, one after the other. Mangin had been caught too late for the early edition. He rushed into a drugstore and called the district attorney's office on the phone.

Trying to keep his voice calm, he asked, "Was Mangin caught?"

A voice said suspiciously, "Who?"

"Mangin. The man who shot Leo Speiss."

"Just a minute."

There was a pause, a number of mysterious clicks and bumps, and the district attorney's voice came through the receiver. "Who is this?" he demanded.

"This is Morgan—Dave Morgan. I just wanted to know if you'd caught Mangin yet."

"What's the matter, Morgan? Getting the jitters?"

"No. But I noticed your detective wasn't following me, and I thought—"

"That's fine. Keep right on thinking. The more you think, the better I'll like it."

Dave faltered, "You mean . . .he hasn't been captured?"

"That's right. He's still out there. Did you look under your bed? You never know when or where he'll turn up. You gotta be careful, Morgan."

Dave shouted, "You think it's funny, don't you! You think it's a big joke! You aren't fit to hold public office. If the people knew what you were like . . . ." He didn't realize he was yelling until the manager of the drugstore tapped angrily on the glass of the door and shook his head.

The district attorney said softly, "Why don't you take a run down to the office, Morgan—if you have something to tell us."

Dave hung up.

At first he was afraid to leave the phone booth, then he was afraid to stay there. It was a trap, a death trap. Those were the terms in which he was thinking now. Anybody could walk up to the door and shoot him, and there wasn't a thing he'd be able to do about it. He escaped from the booth and fled into the street. And that was worse, much worse. Now he could be seen from all directions. Panic really gripped him He jumped on the first bus that came along and rode as far as Washington Street, crouched in a rear corner, when he realized it was taking him into the heart of the city, and he did not want that. He was afraid of crowds and what might be hiding in them. He got off hurriedly and walked down the street toward the public library, looking back over his shoulder at every few steps. He saw danger everywhere now.

And how Mangin had multiplied!

He was everywhere. The world was suddenly full of little men with wise, rodent faces, bright black eyes, narrow, slouched shoulders and a jerky, perky way of walking. They rode by in cabs; they came out of stores carrying packages; they leaned against telephone poles reading racing forms; they greeted him selling newspapers.

That was the beginning of the terror that drove him to his room and into abject hiding.

CHAPTER THREE

Cry-Baby

JESSIE said sensibly, "You shut yourself away for three days, Dave. How do you know they haven't caught Mangin by this time?"

"I don't know." He shook his head miserably. "I was too scared to go out for a paper, and I don't have a radio."

"You could have come downstairs. We have both."

He shook his head and avoided her eyes. How could he tell her that he no longer trusted anyone? How could he say that to her face? But that was the way it was. First it had been the district attorney who had betrayed him. Before that episode, he had an ingenuous faith in the good will of public officials toward the innocent. The district attorney had shattered that. His naive idea of friendship was the next to go. He had thought rather artlessly that a friend was a friend—as simple as that. And surely he'd had plenty of reason to believe Nick Papa his friend. Nick had spent hours and hours with him, teaching him the business, and had even said once that Dave reminded him of his son.

And Nick had let him down. Completely. He hadn't asked anything of

Nick, and yet Nick had kicked him out.

People, he had learned bitterly, always looked out for themselves when the cards were down. He was afraid to extend his trust again.

"I'll tell you what, Dave—" the girl kissed his cheek for solace and pushed herself from his lap—"I'll go downstairs and get the papers and we can go over them together. If Mangin is in jail there's no reason for you to stay cooped up here, is there?"

He mumbled, "I suppose not." He had no faith in the capture of Mangin.

She paused at the door, smiled and said, "Don't run away now," meaning it as a joke, a small note of whimsy.

But when she returned with the papers, he was gone.

He had fled, cursing himself for telling her the story. He no longer felt safe in the house. Not that she would do anything deliberately, but a careless word over the counter while shopping and the damage was done. He had purged himself in confessing his fear—only to find he had saddled himself with a new one. He had rushed down the back stairs and out through the rear hall. He crossed the yard, leaped the low fence and walked through to the street beyond. He stood behind the rough bole of an oak, watching for five minutes before he could be sure that no one had followed.

Then suddenly he felt a new sense of freedom. It had been so easy! While they're watching the front, slip out the back. Nothing to it. For the first time in three days he felt sure that no one knew exactly where he was.

And he could *think* again! He had rushed out of the house overwhelmed by the blind desire to escape. Now he knew he had to plan. First he needed advice; that was essential. Left to himself, he'd run in circles and soon be back in the squirrel cage of fear. What he needed was a wise, cool, level head to tell him just what to do—and that he knew just where to find this wise, cool, level head gave him a fresh surge of confidence. Jake Webster. Good old Jake Webster.

Jake had been on the *News* for a while, running a column of bright harmless tavern chatter called "Booze News," and after that he had gone to New York to edit a trade journal for the liquor industries. He lived in Arlington, just across the Passaic River. They were friends of a sort. Dave wrote him an occasional letter, and just as occasionally Jake answered them. Jake was the man to see.

Dave skulked crosstown through dark streets, frequently scanning the long stretches of sidewalk behind him, until at last it became clear even to him that no one was following. His caution swung wide in the other direction. He didn't care who saw him now—because he was sure no one would. He walked into a tavern, stepped boldly up to the bar and ordered a glass of beer. When the barkeep set it before him, he said loudly:

"You know, this is like old times. I used to be in the saloon business myself."

The barkeep looked at him, at his hot, flushed face set with those too-brilliant eyes, at the high, reckles carriage of his head, and decided he was drunk. "That so?" he said disinterestedly and walked back to the beer taps.

Dave drank off his beer and strolled out into the street with a swagger. He had a plan. He knew just how to get to Arlington—the smart way.

He chuckled. If he hadn't lost his head originally, he'd have been out of this mess long ago. You had to be crafty, you had to be sly, like a mink. No one in the world could catch an intelligent man, because the odds were all with him. He could double on his tracks; he could lead the hunters up blind alleys; he could scatter a false scent—and time was always working in his favor as he worked farther and farther away from the hot core of the hunt.

He climbed to the platform of the North Newark Erie Railroad Station, looked carefully around from his high point of vantage, then trotted briskly eastward along the track toward Arlington. From North Newark the tracks bridged the Passaic River and anyone following him would be silhouetted against a sky flushed with city lights.

He was fifty feet out on the tracks when someone yelled, "Hey you!" and his heart lurched. He gave a wild backward glance and broke into a frantic run across the bridge. The train came with a roar, it's headlamp lighting him mercilessly. He flung himself face down on the board foot-

walk, and a scant three feet to his left the train thundered by with a sucking rush. Shaking, he rose and stumbled the rest of the way across the bridge. But the headlamp had shown him one thing—there was no one behind him.

Jake Webster, in slippers and an old blanket bathrobe, opened the door of his carelessly shabby bungalow in answer to Dave's clamoring ring.

He grinned, extended his hand and cried, "Well, blow me down if it isn't Saddle-Sore Morgan himself, the big beer-keep from Arizona. Come in, Dave. Who let you loose on a Friday night? Or did they close the bar for selling adulterated ginger ale?"

In the hall he gave Dave a shrewd glance and asked casually, "What's the matter, Dave—woman trouble?"

That was close enough for the moment, and Dave nodded. Jake took him into the living room, explaining the mess by saying that his wife had been visiting her sister for the past three days, and would Dave have a drink? Dave would. They sat in facing chairs at either side of the fireplace.

Jake grinned again. "Brother," he said, "her old man must be after you with a shotgun. You've been watching that window like a dog at a meat counter. Relax. The windows," he winked, "are bullet-proof and there's a time lock on the door."

"Watching the window?" Dave laughed hollowly. "I wasn't watching the window. I was—I was looking at the picture."

Jake turned his head. "Oh, yes. Very interesting. A dead fish on a cracked plate. My wife is very fond of it, but she's crazy in other ways, too." Then gently, "In trouble, Dave?"

Dave felt a rush of gratitude, and he nodded dumbly.

Jake's eyebrows arched. "Something to do with the shooting in the gin mill where you work?"

Dave looked down into his drink and nodded again.

Jake slid comfortably down in his chair. "You want to tell me about it? All right, boy. Go ahead. Get it off your chest."

STUMBLING at first, then blurting, Dave told him—of the shooting, of the district attorney, Nick Papa, of Leo Speiss having been one of Max Niepert's boys, Max buying the Market Street Eureka Bar & Grill, of his seeing Mangin everywhere, of Jessie Rogers.

When he stopped, Jake did not answer at once. He held his glass to the light and squinted at the bobbing ice cube.

"Max Niepert used to be a pretty bad boy," he said almost absently. "That was back in the twenties. But from what I hear recently he's become more respectable than a Sunday school teacher. Still, you can't tell." Then he sighed and pushed out his underlip. "Damn it, Dave, I know you want me to say you've been pretty cute ducking out of your boarding house. But I don't think so. Look." He leaned toward Dave and spread his forearms across his knees. "Your district attorney is a stinker. I know that. He's a vote merchant—but he knows his job, he's not a damn fool. Give the police a break, Dave. You're the star witness against Mangin and they know it. They're not throwing you to the wolves. They had their eye on you, until you decided to cut up and give them the slip. You've put yourself in a spot, Dave. This man Mangin is dangerous. He proved that, didn't he?

"You know, you need someone to talk to you like a Dutch uncle. Ever since this thing began you've been looking around for someone to take care of you. First it was the district attorney, and he wouldn't. Nick Papa threw you out. It wasn't nice, but I can see his point. Nobody *likes* to be shot at, even by mistake. Then that girl—Jessie Rogers—you grabbed at her for sympathy. And now you've come to me. What can I do, Dave? Hide you out? For how long? This is something you have to sweat out yourself, boy. You're welcome to stay here, but you're just running away again, and it's not going to help."

Dave's face burned. Very carefully he set down his glass on the hearth and stood. "Sorry I bothered you," he said stiffly. "I'll breeze along before I get you in trouble."

"Sit down! You can't go out there tonight. What do you want to do—give Mangin the opportunity to walk up to you and put a bullet in your belly? I'm not sore, Dave. I mean, I'm not worried about

any trouble you can get me into. But I *am* bothered because you've been behaving like a scared schoolgirl. You have more sense than that."

He stood, smiling slightly to take the sting out of his words, and put his hand on Dave's shoulder. "Sit down, fella. Finish your drink. Get cockeyed. You're going to stay over tonight. Forget about Mangin for a while. You'll be safe here tonight."

Dave sank reluctantly back into the chair—but he didn't get drunk. The liquor did not seem to touch him, and he was miserably sober when he went to bed.

It was two in the morning when the doorbell rang loud and urgently. Tying his bathrobe around him, Jake stumbled sleepily to the door. Dave crouched in the shadows of the stairway, watching. It was Jessie, clutching a brown manila envelope, her mouth tremulous, and behind her Hurley and another detective. Hurley pushed Jessie ahead of him into the room. He glanced at the stairway and spotted Dave's white face. He crooked his finger at him.

"Come on, we're going home. Sorry to disturb you at this hour, mister," he said to Jake, "but we got a little worried when we didn't see a light in Bright Eye's room, and we sorta figured he'd gone visiting. Come on, Morgan, pin up your diapers. It's getting late."

Jake grinned at Hurley and said, 'I'm glad you came. It simplifies things."

Dave gave him a bitter glance and went back to his room for his clothes.

He rode in the back seat of Hurley's car with Jessie.

"It's my fault," she said contritely. "I led them to you. It was this envelope. It came by Western Union."

She showed him the envelope. It was addressed to him, and it was stamped boldly in purple ink—PERSONAL: IMPORTANT! There was nothing in the envelope, nothing.

"We thought the little lady might know where you were holed up," Hurley said blandly. "We pulled that little trick out of the hat so she'd lead up to you." He turned, satisfied, back to his cigar.

Jessie said anxiously, "You're mad at me, Dave?"

He made a small gesture of resignation and muttered, "I'm not mad." Then, "How'd you know where to find me?"

"Well, I thought the envelope might be something you should see right away and I went to your room. There was a letter from Mr. Webster on your bureau and it had his return address on it. I remembered that the only other mail you got was from Arizona, so I thought you might have gone to see Mr. Webster. Dave," she said timidly, "why are you running away from the police?"

"I don't trust them. I don't trust anybody."

She ignored the thrust. "A phone call came for you," she said. "A man. He didn't give his name but he wants you to call him back at this number." She burrowed in her bag. "Mitchell 4-8800." She gave him the slip of paper.

Hurley walked to the front door with them.

"Pleasant dreams, sucker," he said, "and don't get any more ideas. The boys might get sore and cuff you around if they have to chase over the Hohokus in the

middle of the night again. We want you right here where Mangin won't have any trouble finding you."

JESSIE slammed the door indignantly. "He hasn't any right to talk to you like that!" she said hotly.

Dave asked wearily, "Can I use the phone?"

He called Mitchell 4-8800 and waited. He didn't expect a quick answer at this late hour, but the wait seemed interminable before the drowsy voice mumbled:

"Yes, sir?"

"You called me tonight. This is Dave Morgan. What do you want?"

"Mr. Morgan? Just a minute sir."

Dave heard footsteps retreat down an echoing hall, then within a minute or two, the phone clicked in his ear and a heavy, authoritative voice said, "Morgan?"

"Yes. You called me? Who am I talking to, anyway?"

There was a momentary pause. "I'm Max Niepert. I want you to come over and see me."

Dave's breath seemed to catch and tear on a thorn in his throat. He stammered, "No. I can't come to see you."

"See here, Morgan, I'll make it worth your while. You won't be wasting your time. I want to have a little talk with you."

"I can't come."

"How does a hundred dollars sound to you?"

"No."

"I won't keep you more than a quarter of an hour," Niepert said. "Two hundred dollars."

"I don't want your money. I can't come."

"Then I'll come over to see you, damn it!"

"You can't come here." Then Dave added craftily, "The police are watching the house."

Niepert swore, but his voice had turned wary. "I suppose they got this line tapped, too," he said angrily. "Why didn't you tell me this in the beginning?"

Dave said truculently, " I don't have to take your swearing. If you have something to ask me, go ahead. I want to go to bed."

"Well." Niepert paused and Dave could almost see him lick his lips. "Well, I hear my name is being mentioned in connection with Leo Speiss. I haven't had a thing to do with Leo Speiss for the past fifteen years. I want to know what that argument was between him and Mangin that night."

There it was again, the same question. Dave said, "Baseball."

"What's that? What's that?"

"I said, baseball. That's what they were arguing about."

"Don't give me that, Morgan. I *know* there's more to it. I hear you brought up my name, and I'm warning you right now, you cut it out or I'll have a stop put to it. Do you understand?"

"I didn't—"

"And don't give me that, either. I have it from a reliable source. You're heading for trouble. I'm warning you!"

Dave said, "You go to hell," and hung up.

The phone rang before he was ten feet away, and Jessie looked inquiringly from the living room doorway. He shook his head.

"Don't answer it," he said. "I know who it it. I don't want to talk to him."

"But it'll wake the whole house."

He went back, took the receiver from the hook, then plodded up the stairs to his room. He closed the door, annoyed at finding it unlocked again, and turned on the light.

Immediately, he knew there was something wrong. The shades on all the windows were drawn to the sills, and they had been up when he left. He knew that. They were always up until he turned on the light, and he had not turned on the light. He was expecting the voice even before it came from the wing chair.

"Lock the door, Morgan."

CHAPTER FOUR

Man With a Gun

DAVE turned toward the voice feeling sick and dizzy. Mangin sat huddued against one wing in the big chair, an enormous black gun in his right hand. His left was hidden under his topcoat. His grimacing monkey face was carved with gaunt shadows and his mouth was

tight at the corners. He was staring.

Dave felt dully surprised at how different Mangin looked—not at all the way he remembered him. He had brown eyes, not grey, and they weren't set close together in a feral squint. His nose wasn't sharp and hawk-like; it was flat. And his thin mouth did not leer;—it just looked twisted with suffering. He looked small, shriveled, and old.

But the gun did not waver in his hand. He repeated shrilly, "Lock that lousy door!"

Mechanically, Dave reached behind him and turned the key, not taking his eyes from the cold black muzzle of the gun. He was beyond speech. If he opened his mouth, he would have gibbered. Something crawled down his face and he knew it was sweat.

"Sit down so I don't have to twist around." Mangin waved the gun at the bed.

Davet staggered across the room. He practically fell on the bed and lay staring, open-mouthed, at Mangin, waiting for the flash and the bullet.

Mangin said, "I didn't shoot Speiss." His voice was weak.

The words made no impression on Dave. They were merely incoherent sounds.

"Why didn't you tell the truth?" Mangin gasped. "You ain't gained a thing playing it this way. Are you trying to be a Boy Scout for somebody? Have you made a deal? Why'd you throw *me* to the cops? What did I ever do to you? You fixed me pretty, you did!"

It had come to Dave that Mangin wasn't going to shoot him, that he was talking too much. But still . . . there was a gun in Mangin's hand. He said, "I didn't do anything to you, Mangin. I didn't do a thing to you. I only. . . ."

Mangin gave him a bitter glance and took his left hand from under his topcoat. He was holding a balled handkerchief, but it didn't look like that now. It was red and wet, sodden.

"You didn't pull the trigger," he said feebly, "but if you hadn't put the finger on me, I wouldn't have two bullets in my chest."

Dave gasped. "The police?"

"Police? They don't want me dead. It was the boys who sent Leo Speiss to your gin mill."

"You—you should see a doctor."

Mangin laughed thinly. "That would be smart. That would be very smart. With every cop in the city after me, I should go to a doctor and get turned in. I ain't seeing no doctor until we get this settled between us." A menacing roughness had crept into his wan voice.

"Wha-what's there to settle?"

Mangin stared at him, uneasiness creeping into his glittering eyes. "You don't know that Leo Speiss tried to put a bullet into you that night?"

Dave started to say, "I didn't see a—" and stopped. The room went white before him. The figure of Mangin receded at an alarming rate, became tiny, disappeared, and inside his head a small, clacking voice repeated and repeated like a cracked record— "Leo Speiss tried to put a bullet Leo Speiss tried to put a bullet Leo Speiss tried to . . ." He held on tight but something was screaming inside him. Terror had piled on terror.

Mangin was talking through the milky mist and his words gradually made sense to Dave's ears.

". . . during the television. Everybody was watching the rassling. We'd been having a little argument about baseball and all of a sudden he pulls this gun and says to me 'This is on you, Cokie,' and levels off at you. I grab his arm and twist it and *bang*! it goes off and the next thing I know he's falling on the floor and everybody is looking at me. I got out of there, but fast!"

Speechless, Dave kept shaking his head. He stammered. "B-but . . . why me?"

Mangin said, "That's what I gotta find out. That's the little thing that'll take the heat off me. Leo was hopped that night. Hopped to the eyes. I know because he mooched a bindle from me before we went in." A spasm of pain twitched across his face. He put the gun in his lap. "You stay put, Morgan," he gasped. "I can grab it up fastern' you can run."

He reached into an inside pocket and took out a small white envelope. As he emptied the contents into his mouth, a few white crystals fell to his lapel and he picked them off carefully, one by one, and put them on the tip of his tongue. He

caught Dave watching him fearfully.

"I ain't a cokie. I won't go off my nut," Mangin said irritably. "It kills the pain, that's all."

"Why don't you let me get you a doctor—"

Mangin snatched up the gun and snarled, "Move off that bed and I'll put a couple bullets in you! I don't want any cops till this thing is settled, so start thinking. Why did somebody send Leo Speiss against you that night?"

"I don't know. I tell you I didn't—"

"Nuts! Come on, give!"

"How—how did you happen to be there with him that night?"

Mangin grinned wolfishly. "He picked me up. He knew I hung out there. I was to be the fall guy. He was going to bump you and drop the gun in my lap. That's why he said, 'This's on you, Cokie.' He was high enough for a crazy caper like that. I peddle hop. I know how they act."

DAVE cast desperately for something to say, something to stall with. "The district attorney thinks you're a bookie."

Mangin said quickly, "He had his eye on me?"

"Before the shooting? No. Why?"

Mangin gave him a puzzled glance. "You don't know?"

"Is there something else I should know?" Despairingly.

"You damn fool, I used your gin mill for a drop station! I hung around and the cokies came to me for their bindles. You weren't in on it?"

Dave gaped at him. "A dope peddler!"

Mangin said uneasily, "If *I* didn't peddle it, somebody else would. It ain't a crime. I mean, those poor suckers *have* to have their hop. I didn't start them on it. I just helped them out."

Dave repeated with horror, "A dope peddler!"

Mangin jerked up his gun. "Come on, we're wasting time," he said. "This ain't getting me nowhere. What did Leo have against you?" You *know*, damnit! Even a cokie don't gun you down for no reason. You knew him, all right. He knew you. Did you have a run-in with him? What did he have against you? Spit it out or—" his grin fell back from his teeth—do I have to soften you up a little?" He waved the gun.

"I—I don't know anything."

"Think then, damn you! You're gonna sit there till you think of it, a week if we have to. I'm not gonna fry for this one, not for a rat like Leo Speiss."

They sat facing each other, not four feet apart. Dawn found Dave red-eyed from lack of sleep and dread, and Mangin seemed to have sunk a little more deeply into the big chair. His face was yellow and waxy, and every now and again a little groan forced itself through his teeth. He hadn't said anything for hours, but his feverish eyes never left Dave's lips.

But he was alert. He was the first to jerk erect, groaning, when the footsteps mounted the stairs. He threw Dave a sharp, warning glance when the knock came on the door.

Jessie called urgently, "Dave! Dave!"

Mangin nodded and Dave said, "What is it?"

"Let me in. I have to talk to you."

"I can't. I—"

"Let her in," Mangin ordered. He tucked the gun under his leg. And remember, I've still got this."

Dave opened the door slightly and she came in then. She gave a startled look at Mangin and turned to Dave, her eyes wide. "Who—"

Mangin said, "What did you want to tell him?"

She looked helplessly at Dave. "Go ahead," Dave said.

"All right, listen," she said. "There are two men in the lobby of the apartment house across the street. They're watching this house."

"They're detectives."

"They're *not* detectives. The detectives are in a police car up the street. Dave, I—"

"There's nothing you can do."

"There *is* somthing I can do! I'm going to call the police!" She nodded toward Mangin. "Who's he?" Mangin had the gun out again.

"A friend. . . . Look, Jessie, don't—"

But she was out the door. He would have run after her, tried to stop her, had not the gun apppeared again in Mangin's hand. Dave leaned toward the little man, his hands twitching, so obviously on the

verge of violence that Mangin crouched back in the chair and said quickly:

"I'll let you have it, Morgan. So help me, I'll put one into you!"

Dave ran to the window and pulling out one side of the shade, looked down into the street. Mangin pushed himself painfully out of the chair and stood at Dave's side, clutching his chest.

They saw Jessie run down the front steps, pause for a moment as she gave the apartment house a belligerent glare, then stride toward the parked police car. Her purpose was so obvious that Dave gasped. She had not bothered to disguise what she was doing.

The apartment house door opened and two men erupted into the street, heading Jessie off. The burly one's arm rose and fell and Jessie staggered blindy, toppled and clutched at the fire hydrant. The men fled toward the corner. The police car leaped to life and, siren screaming, roared after them.

Mangin ground the gun into Dave's back. "Stay put, Morgan," he warned. "Don't make any breaks." He backed cautiously to the chair.

Jessie picked herself up. Her nose was bleeding and she tried to stem the flow with a wisp of a handkerchief. She lurched back toward the house.

Dave whirled, his face furious. "I don't give—" He stopped.

Mangin was rigid in the chair, his arms and legs twitching. His face was tortured, his eyes closed.

Dave cried, "Mangin!" and ran to the chair. Spasms shook Mangin's whole frail body. He was trying to talk.

"Got it," he whispered hoarsely. "Got it . . . Speiss . . . got it. . . ." He gestured painfully at the small white envelope on the floor. His head strained back, then he slumped sideways and his head hung crookedly as he fell half over the arm of the chair. He looked dead.

Dave faltered, "Mangin . . ." and felt for the heartbeat. His hand encountered the wet, bloody handkerchief and he hastily withdrew his fingers.

He stooped and mechanically picked up the empty white envelope toward which the dying man had pointed. What he had been trying to say had something to do with the envelope. "Got it," he had said. Got what? Dave turned the envelope in his hands. It was blank, inside and out. Two little glittering crystals had lodged in one of the corners—two little crystals, it came to him slowly. Those two little crystals. They were the symbol—the symbol of slow death and the symbol of quick, violent death.

HIS FIRST impulse was to call the police. That would settle the Mangin end of the business—but once that was settled, where would *he* be? And it would settle nothing. The police would leave the case, leave him. Mangin was dead, but it had not been Mangin who'd been gunning for him. Would the police believe that? Where was his proof?

He needed help. He had to have help. Not the district attorney, not JakeWebster—he still thought bitterly of Jake—not Jessie. He had seen what had happened to Jessie. He stopped his restless prowling and clenched his fists.

All right, he'd stop being a cry-baby! He had two feet and he could stand on them, Jake Webster. He gingerly picked up Mangin's gun and dropped it into his pocket, then went downstairs to the phone and called Nick Papa. Nick was not glad to hear from him.

"Davie," he pleaded, "I would appreciate it if you did not call me any more. Please, I beg of you. You know how the police do with telephones, listening in—"

Dave interrupted shortly, "Listen, Nick. I've got Mangin upstairs in my room. He's been shot. I need help."

"Davie, look— I'm on bended knees. I'm too old."

"I want you to come right over, Nick."

He paused, then said, "Mangin was a dope peddler. There were two men in the apartment house lobby across the street, but the police chased them. I think they were the ones who shot Mangin. When you come, Nick, come in the back way. I'll go out and pull the police away. Wait in the hall for me. You know where I live?"

Nick said unhappily, "Yes, I know, Davie. It was in the papers yesterday. I said to myself, is that fair, is that justice? Telling Mangin exactly where to find that poor Davie. My heart went out to you. To the district attornev I sent a let-

ter expressing my patriotic indignation." He sighed "All right, Davie. I am an old man and I do not think I will be much help, but I will come. I will be there in about a half-hour, I think."

Dave spent the next twenty-five minutes chewing his finger ends and trying to spot the detectives through the curtain of the back door. As the clock struck in the living room, he slipped out into the yard, climbed the fence and walked rapidly to the street behind. A half-block away, a black sedan moved and prowled after him. He turned the corner, not looking back, slowly walked the length of the block, turned right on the next corner and continued to his own front door. His heart was thumping. He hoped he had timed it right. They wouldn't be fooled a second time. He slipped into the vestibule and strode to the rear hall.

He whispered, "Nick."

A hand touched his arm. "This is Nick. We go upstairs, please."

As he walked into the room after Nick, Dave saw to his horror that Mangin had moved. He was sitting upright in the chair, his head resting against the back.

Nick grunted and stepped softly to the chair. He took his hand from his topcoat pocket and there was a gun in it. He held it out and fired two shots into Mangin's head. Dave saw the head bounce against the chair as the bullets struck it. The gun had a knobby silencer screwed to the barrel. Nick whirled, turning his gun on Dave, and frantically Dave fired from his pocket. Nick jerked and bent forward from the waist, staring incredulously at the spreading spot of crimson on his shirt.

He said harshly, "I hope you take a long time dying, Nick—longer than Mangin, longer than those people you sold dope to. I've been dying for almost a week, Nick. I hope you take longer than that." He stepped closer to the bed to see the man's perspiring face. "How can you have a man murdered, Nick, after you smile at him and pat him on the back, the way you did me? I used to think you were in the Market Street Eureka so much because you liked me. You were there for business, all right. You were there to keep your eye on your rotten cocaine business. Mangin told me he used that bar as a drop station where he handed out your poison. He told me that."

Nick's liquid eyes pleaded. He whispered, "Get me to a hospital, Davie. I will die here. Money. All the money you want, Davie. . . ."

"Not yet, Nick. You're going to tell me all about it first, even if you bleed to death. Mangin worked for you, didn't he? He may not have know you were the boss, but he was one of your boys, right?"

"Davie, the hospital, I beseech—"

"You were the boss, weren't you, Nick?"

"Yes, yes, Davie, but please, please, *please*. . . ."

"Tell me the rest of it, Nick, and I'll call the police. They'll be very anxious to get you to a hospital. Why did you suddenly decide to have me killed, Nick?"

Nick wept openly as he watched the blood seep between his fingers. He raised his tear-lined face to Dave. "Believe me, Davie, I did not want to do it, but it was necessary. It was the state gambling investigation. They might turn up things, not gambling, like my business. I think you know more than you should, like Mangin too. So I have Leo Speiss to shoot you and make it look like Mangin does it. Very easy, Davie. People believe what they see. They see you shot, they see Mangin with a gun in his lap, right away they jump to conclusions. Please, Davie, that is everything. I had to protect myself. I did not want you killed. Mangin was no good. He talked to too many people. He was no good. Please, Davie, I beg of you, call the hospital. I beg, I beg, I beg. . . ."

Dave turned toward the door and said, "All right, Jessie."

She stepped into the room, looking at Nick with loathing.

Dave gestured toward the window. He said in a small, exhausted voice, "Go down and call the police, Jessie. I'll stay here and see that he doesn't get up enough guts to shoot himself through the head."

Nick whispered frantically, "Money, Davie, money. . . ."

Dave turned his back on him. He went to the door with Jessie. "Afterward," he said. "I'll make it up to you afterward."

THE END

"Stop making so much noise," Hap Ferris said. "We ain't killed him . . . yet."

Danny and the Big-Time

By DAY KEENE

For two bits, you could have bought Danny—lock, stock and peg-bottom pants. But that was before he met Bess O'Connel. After that, not all the hot ice Nails Bruno could offer, nor all the threats Hap Ferris could make, nor all the beatings Candy Phillips could administer, could buy one bloody inch of ground from Danny O'Brien.

THE HEAT WAVE had persisted for days and the still air of Randolph Street, where he stood, was heavy with the smell of Chinese cooking, spent gasoline and cheap perfume. Danny inhaled deeply. This was life. This was his way of living. He liked the color and movement. He liked to see pretty girls. He liked to smile and be smiled at. There was no doubt about it. A man got out of life what he put into it. And any way of making a living was preferable to fixing pipes in other folks' gloomy basements.

"Hi-ya, Mabel," he greeted a chorus girl tripping past. "How's for a nice, tall, cold one?"

A month before, she would have slapped his face. Now she stopped to squeeze his arm. "I'd love to, Danny, honest. But I'm late for a rehearsal now. Lemme take a rain check, will ya?"

Danny grinned after her trim little figure. The Loop was beginning to know him. He had come a long way in a year.

He intended to go a lot further.

A big youth in his middle twenties with oversized, prominent ears on either side of an earnest, freckled face, he looked slightly stupid. He wasn't. The police could give witness to that. They had picked him up a dozen times on various charges but always had been forced to release him for lack of evidence. He toiled not, neither did he spin—still he managed to dress well and eat in the better restaurants.

Sergeant Green of the Loop Detail, seeing him propping up one corner of the Sherman Hotel, gave him the business from force of habit. "And just what are you scheming up now, Danny?"

Danny was clean and he knew it. His fingerprints would never be found on a job while gloves were still manufactured. He never carried a gun, except during business hours. His tone implied deep hurt. "Why don't you drop dead?" he inquired. "You know as well as I do, Sergeant, that I am a respectable journeyman plumber with a paid-up card."

He would have extracted the card from his wallet but Green told him not to bother. "I know you have it, Danny. I also know you haven't worked at your trade for a year. And one of these days we're going to send you away, Danny."

Danny was amused. Sergeant Green shrugged and walked on. He felt bad about Danny. He came from the old neighborhood. Green knew the elder O'Brien well. He had lifted many a stein with him. A capable master plumber with a small shop of his own, O'Brien senior was broken hearted over the tangent that Danny was traveling. It didn't make sense to Green. He wished *he* was a plumber. What with things as they were in the building line, a capable journeyman plumber could make as much in five days as a police sergeant made in thirty. There could only be one end. Crime was never minor. It was akin to atomic reaction. All crooks wound up the same way—a number, a date with the chair, or with a spitting gun in their hands and only a slab in the morgue for a target.

Resplendent in a white linen suit, a red carnation in his buttonhole, Hap Ferris passed and in passing nodded to Danny. "Hi-ya, pal. How's tricks?"

Danny beamed after him. Hap Ferris was a big-shot. He was one of Nails Bruno's boys. And Hap had called him pal. His name and face were getting around.

A FEW MINUTES later it rained, gently at first, and Danny moved leisurely under the protection of the hotel marquee. In a few minutes the dry spot was crowded with laughing men and women amused by the sudden turn in the weather. Danny laughed with the rest. This was life. He liked it.

The pelt of the rain increased. It became a savage downpour. There was less laughter now. A girl holding a ruined hat cried. Two well-dressed men came to amateurish blows over possession of one of the suddenly rare taxis that until a moment before had been cruising the Loop in droves.

Still more sodden men and women joined the group under the marquee and the first comers were forced to move back. Cursing softly to himself, a tall, distinguished-looking man standing directly in front of Danny stepped back abruptly to avoid contact with a dripping newcomer. In so doing he stepped heavily on the toe of one of Danny's new two-tone sport shoes.

Danny waited for him to apologize. He didn't. He merely glowered over his shoulder. It was then Danny felt the wallet. Picking pockets wasn't his trade. He had never picked one before. But due to their sardine-like relationship the wallet in the right-hand hip pocket of the distinguished looking man was practically popping into his hand. More, it felt well-filled and a fast dollar was a fast dollar.

Using the forefinger of his left hand as a razzle-dazzle, Danny tapped the man on left shoulder. "I believe that you stepped on my toe, chum."

The grey-haired man turned his head. "So what? What do you want me to do, cry about it? Why don't you keep your feet out of the way?"

Danny was tempted to hit him. But with the wallet in his possession he couldn't afford that luxury. He backwatered instead. "Okay. Okay. If that's the way you feel about it."

The man out of the whiskey ads resumed his sullen survey of the weather.

Keeping a sharp outlook for Sergeant Green who might have doubled back, Danny elbowed his way through the crowd into the lobby. A flight of tile stairs led down to the washroom. Whistling nonchalantly, Danny invested a nickel in privacy.

In his debut as a pickpocket he made an almost perfect score. The wallet bulged with twenty, fifty, and one-hundred-dollar bills. A quick count proved the total to be thirty-eight hundred dollars.

The man's name was J. Austin Towers. He was, according to his business cards, a lawyer with offices on South LaSalle Street.

The name sounded familar. Then Danny remembered where he had seen it. Only the Sunday before it had been in all of the papers. J. Austin Towers was the losing attorney in the case of James O'Connel vs. the State of Illinois. And O'Connel had been the punk who had thoughtlessly planted a slug between the eyes of an elderly jeweler during a two-hundred stick-up. Small wonder Towers was in a nasty mood. Losing clients to the chair was bad for a lawyer's reputation. Small wonder he carried this kind of money. J. Austin Towers was big time.

Danny knew better. The first thing a smart pickpocket does is strip a wallet and get it out of his possession. But Danny's curiosity was aroused. He was curious to know how the upper crust lived, what they carried beside money in their wallets. There were the usual identity and club cards, a driver's license, a dog-eared snapshot of one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen, and, stuffed well back in a glassine case, two small-folded pieces of paper that looked like notes.

Danny unfolded them. One, written on the top half of a piece of Hotel Valdmir stationery, and signed Bess O'Connel, accused Attorney Towers of having sold 'my Jimmy' down the river in the interest of one Nails Bruno.

The second note read:

> Friend T:
> Nice going and a nice verdict. Sorry to have missed you last night but please accept the agreed upon 10 Gs from bearer and destroy this upon receipt.
>
> Cordially
> N.M.B.

His eyes bugging, Danny studied the initialed signature. N. M. B. could stand for No More Bananas. Or it could stand for Nails Marcus Bruno. He was inclined toward the latter theory. Instead of destroying the note, which would seem to substantiate the one written by Bess O'Connel, Towers had kept it as life insurance, or possibly a source of future easy touches.

Danny considered the information. He didn't know exactly what he had, but he had something big. There had to be *some* way he could make the information pay off. True, it was dynamite, But a man didn't get anywhere in any line if he was afraid to take chances.

Outside the cubicle, an impatient would-be customer rattled the locked door but Danny refused to be hurried. Slipping the thick wad of bills in his pants pockets he regarded the two notes. After mature consideration he put them in the cuff of his trousers under the tacking on the inside of the leg. The stolen wallet presented a problem. He solved it by stuffing it into

the flush bowl after wiping it clean of fingerprints.

The waiting man wanted to know if he had been writing a letter to Stalin. "Also one to Vishinsky," Danny assured him soberly.

He left the hotel by another door to avoid any possible contact with Towers down the street. There was still a crowd under the marquee but the rain was slacking off. He couldn't see the lawyer. The first thing to do, he decided, was to case the O'Connel dame, make certain her allegation was the real McCoy. If it was, Danny had a hunch he had stumbled into a gold mine.

THE HOTEL VALDMIR was across the river, and almost smart. An ornate lobby filled with potted palms and out-of-work radio actors and actresses from nearby N. B. C. and C. B. S. led back to a bored desk clerk. The name O'Connel was sour in his mouth.

"Oh, yes. Bess O'Connel," he said. "You'll find her in Apartment 4C."

Danny wondered what the clerk had against the girl. He couldn't see anything wrong with her. She was even prettier in real life than she had been in the snapshot. A tiny brunette with an oval face, mostly eyes, she peered out at him warily from the cracked-open door of her suite.

Both her voice and her eyes were hard. "Now what?" she wanted to know. "Who sent you—Towers or Bruno? And what dirty rotten thing have you thought up to do to me?"

Danny was aghast. "Nothing, Mrs. O'Connel. Believe me. I want to be your friend."

"I don't believe it," she hooted. "Just because I stood up for Jimmy, because I've spent every dime that I had to pay that crooked lawyer of his to double-cross us, I'm being hounded out of town. Oh, but gently. Nothing I can prove. But my clothes don't come back from the cleaners. The cabs I take to the studio get me there just late enough to get me fired from my programs. Someone writes nasty letters to the agency and the sponsors. A man I never saw before is discovered in my room." She began to weep softly. "But you can't run me out of town, understand? I'm going to stay right here and fight for Jimmy. You won't stop *me*."

"Nix," Danny tried to stem the tears. "You have me all wrong, sister. All I want from you is a little concrete information on this double-cross you claim that Attorney Towers pulled."

"You're a reporter?" she asked hopefully.

Danny lied glibly. "No. I'm a private eye by the name of O'Brien." He had a flash inspiration. "I'm working for the insurance company, the one that insured the diamonds."

She opened the door. "Come in."

Her story, as she told it, was simple. O'Connel was a capable radio actor, but he was given to strong drink and a weakness for the company of hoodlums. On the night he had allegedly killed the jeweler, he had gotten drunk in a little bar on the near north side with a couple of Nails Bruno's boys. During the course of the evening he passed out cold. The next thing he knew, he was in a car not far from the scene of the crime, with a revolver on the seat beside him, a few of the jewels in his pocket, and two radio car men slapping him around and wanting to know why he had killed the jeweler and what he had done with the rest of the diamonds.

Danny asked if she knew the name of the two hoods with whom he had been drinking. She said, "Of course I do. They were Candy Phillips and Hap Ferris. They were the ones who really did the job."

Neither name had been mentioned in any account of the trial that Danny had read. He wanted to know why.

She told him, "Because of me. They told Jimmy if he dared to mention any names they would wrap me in a concrete blanket and roll me into the river."

The short hairs on the back of his neck tingling, Danny stood up and reached for his hat. Perhaps he was being hasty in butting in on another man's racket. He had, after all, picked up a quick thirty-eight hundred dollars. And there was no sense in a man being greedy.

"That scares you, doesn't it?" the girl jeered. "It scares everyone I've tried to tell my story to. That's why no one will help me. You're all afraid of Bruno."

Danny denied the truth.

Indignantly, she pulled him back on the daybed beside her. "Then *please* help

me, Mr. O'Brien. Pretty please. You wouldn't want an innocent man to die, would you?"

DANNY wished she weren't so lovely —and so married. He also wished she wouldn't sit so close. It was difficult for him to keep his mind on what she was saying. He had never felt quite this way about any girl before, at least on such short acquaintance. She was too lovely to be so worried. He wanted to take her in his arms and assure her that everything was going to be all right. But if everything was all right for her and O'Connel it wouldn't be right for him. Even Mom would approve of this girl, except for the fact she was married. In an attempt to recover his composure he stripped the paper from a stick of gum and offered her half of it.

"No, thank you," she said. She was clinging to his lapels now, her lips only inches from his as she said earnestly, "Besides, there is the reward for the diamonds. And I *know* Nails Bruno has them. He was juggling a handful of them the day I walked into the office and overheard him talking to Towers."

Danny considered the statement. The diamonds were another angle. Only a few thousand dollars worth had been found in O'Connel's possession. If he could get his hands on the diamonds he would be set for life. The whole setup was a natural. But how to cash in without assisting the Portland Cement people to declare a dividened? That was the problem.

Then he thought he had it. A smart man played both ends against the middle. Nothing succeeded like boldness—and insurance. Picking up the phone he gave the switchboard girl the number of Central Bureau, then asked for Sergeant Green's extension.

"This is Danny O'Brien, Sergeant," he told him. "If I should turn up missing some morning, where would you look?"

"In the morning line-up?" Green asked hopefully.

Danny was scornful. "Naw, I mean it. I am working on something big, you might say hand-in-hand with the law. And if you shouldn't see me around the Loop it might earn you a boost up the ladder to ask Attorney J. Austin Towers and Mr. Nails Marcus Bruno a few questions about when they last seen me."

Sergeant Green was still spluttering questions when he cradled the phone again. Bess O'Connel's eyes were shining. "I think you're wonderful. You *are* going to help me, Mr. O'Brien!"

Before Danny could defend himself, she kissed him.

It might have lasted longer than it did except for the discreet rap on the door. "Telegram. Telegram for Bess O'Connel."

The girl opened the door, smiling, and Hap Ferris followed by Candy Phillips pushed her back into the room, then closed the door and leaned against it.

"Imagine finding you here," Hap told Danny.

Bess screamed, "Get out! Get out of my room, you dirty killer! It was you who killed that jeweler. And you're letting my Jimmy go to the chair."

"Shut up," Candy told her.

Danny got to his feet, his mouth suddenly dry, his eyes flicking from the two men's faces to the exposed wrists of the hands plunged in their coat pockets. "How did you know I was here?"

"That," Ferris said, "was elemental. Thank God that dumb mouthpiece had sense enough to phone the boss and admit he hadn't followed orders."

" 'I think,' he tells the boss," Candy grinned, " 'that my pocket was picked by a big, gawky-looking, freckled-faced punk with oversized landing flaps in front of the Sherman Hotel.' "

Ferris took up the story. "Who could that be but you? In fact, I'd seen you there myself not fifteen minutes before. So I said to myself as soon as I am told the story, if I was a cheap little chiseling punk like Danny O'Brien and I was to get ahold of such a piece of information, what would be the first thing I would do? I would check on it, was the reply. I would talk to the girl. And here we are."

Candy held out his left hand. "Let's have the two notes, Danny. Also the thirty-eight hundred. And it may be we can forget this."

"What two notes?" Bess demanded.

Danny said, "That one that you wrote Towers accusing him of selling out to Bruno. And a note from Bruno to Towers admitting that he did."

She said, "Don't give them up,"

"I don't intend to," Danny said. He didn't. At least, not without a fight. He had made a bad mistake. He knew that now. And the continued existence of Bruno's brief note to Towers was the only life insurance he had.

Candy looked at Ferris.

"No," Ferris shook his head. "Some nosy tenant will hear the shots and yip for the house detective. Slug both him and the dame and we'll walk them out like they were drunk."

Bess O'Connel opened her mouth to scream and Ferris clamped his palm over her mouth. "Go ahead," he told Candy, ignoring the kicking, squirming, girl he had pulled back against his own body. "I'll take care of the girl. You take care of Danny."

IT WAS easier said than done. Taking his gun from his pocket, Candy made a vicious swipe at Danny's head with the barrel of the gun. Danny avoided it easily, but in backing out of range he backed into the daybed and, his knees collapsing, fell across it heavily.

Candy was on him in an instant, slugging at his thrashing head with short-armed blows that failed to knock him out. Then Danny doubled his knees to his chest and kicked out with both feet. Candy sailed across the room but landed on his feet and returned to the attack.

"Not so much noise," Ferris warned him. "Take your time, Candy. We have all the time in the world."

Danny wondered why he didn't yell for help and Ferris read his mind. "I wouldn't if I were you, Danny."

Between ducking blows of the gun barrel, Danny could see that the girl was standing very still now. There was a reason. The muzzle of Ferris' gun was pressed to one of her temples.

He got in a hard right to Candy's body and a short left to his jaw but took a stunning blow on the head in exchange.

Candy was panting now. "For God's sake," he wanted to know, "what do you have to hit this guy with to knock him out, a crowbar?"

"Reverse your gun," Ferris told him. "Use the butt on him."

Candy attempted to do as he was told and Danny tackled him from his feet. Both men hit the floor with a crash, the gun spinning from Candy's hand, unfortunately close to Ferris' right foot. He promptly kicked Danny in the face as Danny attempted to claw the gun from the rug.

"Now," he told Candy. "Now! Knock him out while he's groggy! Use a chair on him!"

Candy attempted to follow instructions, but Danny was no longer groggy. He was too burned up to feel pain. A cheap, chiseling, little punk, was he? He'd show them. He wrested the chair from Candy's hands and attempted to throw it through the window. Candy blocked the attempt with his body. Then they were on the floor again, first Danny riding Candy, then Candy riding Danny, bucking-bronco fashion, from one wall to the other, fists, elbows and knees all flying.

It couldn't last much longer. It didn't. Walking Bess ahead of him, one palm still clamped over her mouth and the other pressing a pistol to her temple, Hap Ferris crossed the room to the struggling men and, waiting until Danny's head showed on top, kicked him on the point of the jaw.

Danny rose to his feet with the blow, then, a great roaring in his ears, promptly sat down again. Somewhere Bess was whimpering:

"You've killed him."

His voice as distant and as cold as ice, Hap Ferris said, "Eventually. Why not now?"

Breathing heavily, Candy recovered his pistol and slugged Danny twice. He heard both blows as they landed. It sounded like someone rapping on a door. Then the door opened and he tumbled through it into silence. . . .

HIS MOUTH was dry. His head ached worse than the time the Stillson wrench had slipped on the Armitage Avenue job. With it all, he was hungry. He lay wondering what Mom had for supper. Then as full consciousness returned he remembered what had happened. Somewhere in the dark a girl was crying, probably Mrs. O'Connel. Danny's thoughts were bitter. He had certainly made a mess of his first bid for the big time. The thing for him to have done was to have gone

directly to Nails Bruno with the wallet. Nails would have been grateful. He might even have found a place in his own organization for him. But all that was back of him now. Bruno knew why he had kept the note, why he had attempted to check on it.

He seemed to be lying on a cot or day bed in what smelled like a basement. He sat up and the girl's voice, only inches away in the darkness, was small.

"I'm sorry, Mr. O'Brien. I'm sorry you got into this mess just because you tried to help me."

She still thought he was leveling. His cheeks suddenly hot, Danny swung his feet to the floor. "Forget it. How long have we been in this joint? Where are we? And how did we get here?"

She said, "We're in Nails Bruno's playroom. We've been here almost three hours. And after talking to Mr. Bruno on my phone they changed their minds about pretending we were drunk and sneaked us down the back stairs of the hotel into a small panel truck."

Danny got to his feet. They might be in a playroom, but it still smelled like a basement to him. He searched for water, thinking what a sucker he had been to think that phoning Sergeant Green would give him any insurance. Questions didn't do a man at the bottom of the Chicago River any good.

The girl asked what he thought Bruno intended to do with them. "I haven't," Danny lied, "the least idea."

By striking a match he found the water taps under a removable knotty-pine drainboard used to conceal two metal sanitary tubs. The cold water felt good on his face. He used it liberally then dried on a clean bar towel, subconsciously listening to the gurgling of the water as it left the tub. Whoever had plumbed the tubs hadn't known his business. Either his angles were wrong or he had put in too small a trap for the volume of water it had to handle.

"Did they search me?" he asked the girl.

She told him they had.

He felt in the cuff of his trousers. The notes were still there. He chewed his gum thoughtfully a moment, then, taking it from his mouth, used it to fasten the two notes to the under side of the drainboard. Replacing the drainboard carefully, he walked back through the darkness to the daybed and sat down beside the girl.

"We're in a mess, kid. Even if you can't prove anything with you knowing as much as you do, it's a wonder to me that Bruno hasn't picked you up before."

She clung to him feverishly. It might only be gratitude but Danny liked it. He said as much. "You're a nice kid."

"I like you, too," she whispered.

He could feel her heart fluttering as her body pressed even closer to his chest. Then an overhead light came on. A key snicked in a lock and Nails Bruno said, "How touching."

A fat man who walked as if his feet hurt him, he lumbered into the playroom and leaned against the drainboard of the sanitary tubs. Attorney Towers followed him into the room with Hap and Candy at his heels. Danny had to look twice to make certain Hap was holding a gun to the small of the lawyer's back.

"Hi-ya, Danny," Ferris said.

"This," Towers said, "is an outrage." He didn't look so distinguished. One eye was closing fast and blood trickled out of one nostril. "An outrage," he repeated, addressing himself to Bruno. "I phoned you as soon as I discovered that my pocket had been picked."

"That's right," Bruno agreed. "And putting the blame where it belongs, I was a fool to write that note, but you were a bigger fool to keep it." Bruno returned his attention to the boy and girl on the daybed. "How's for giving it to me, Danny?"

Danny told the truth. "Sorry. I haven't it on me. I mailed it to my lawyer with instructions to pass it on to Sergeant Green and the States Attorney's office if I should happen to drop out of sight."

Hap Ferris shook his head. "You've been seeing too many movies, chum. In the first place you haven't a lawyer. In the second place you didn't have time to mail anything. You beat it right over to the Valdmir."

He turned to Bruno. "What do we do now, Boss? Beat it out of Danny? I don't know about you but I'm not going to sleep well nights until we get that note back."

Bruno glowered at Towers. "I ought to beat your brains in. I intend to."

"You wouldn't dare."

"No?" Bruno pointed out. "It's six of one to a half-dozen of the other, Counselor. In the state of Illinois, a man who plots a job is just as guilty as the lad who pulls the trigger. Neither Hap nor Candy nor I have any desire to step into O'Connel's shoes. And if you kept the note, you *might* talk. I'm sorry as hell, believe me. But I just can't afford to take chances."

HE PAUSED to mix and sip a drink. "As I see the picture, it is something like this. Bess O'Connel is sore at you because you refused to give her a cut of the loot O'Connel sneezed in the jewelry heist. So she enlists Danny's help in beating some of the diamonds out of you. You and Danny have it out with guns and during the melee a stray slug gets her, too. The three of you are found in your apartment with a few more of the diamonds scattered around to mentally needle the police into the proper deduction."

Towers buried his face in his hands, "Oh, God!"

Candy pointed out, "But we still don't have the note."

"How true," Bruno sighed. He extracted a handful of kitchen matches from his pocket and handed them to Ferris. "You'd better start with the girl, Hap."

Ferris used his pocket knife on a half-dozen of the matches and walked slowly toward the girl.

"No," Danny stopped him, He was being a fool. He knew it. What little hold he had left on life was dependent on the note not being found.

"No, what?" Ferris wanted to know.

"Don't bother," Danny told him. "You'll find both notes stuck to the inside of that drainboard with gum."

Towers gasped, "You fool. You've killed the three of us."

Bess said, "Danny," softly. A small hand snuggled into his.

Wiping a fine film of perspiration from his forehead, Bruno lifted the drainboard and recovered the notes. "Is this a relief!" he said. He touched a match to them, then washed the ashes down the drain. The resulting gurgle still bothered Danny.

Hap Ferris picked his teeth with one of the unused match splinters. "Well, that's that. We might as well get the rest of it over with, I suppose."

It might be he would have to, but Danny didn't want to die. Hurling himself across the room, he attempted to wrest the gun from Bruno's hand.

Bruno clubbed at him, bleating, "You fool! You crazy young fool! Hit him, one of you guys!"

Both Candy and Hap Ferris obliged. Towers seized on the distraction to yank open the door of the playroom and run blindly up the stairs. His footsteps pounded halfway up, then backed down much more slowly.

Two district men behind him, Sergeant Green followed the lawyer back into the playroom and studied the scene with interest. "Look. What gives here?" he wanted to know. "On account of Danny phoning me some hours ago and making a rather interesting statement I drop by to ask you a few questions, Bruno. And what do I find?"

As agile mentally as he was clumsy physically, Bruno, panting heavily, told him, "An attempted robbery and possible murder. And am I glad to see you, Sergeant! Attorney Towers, whom I believe you know, dropped in a few minutes ago to discuss a certain legal matter in which I wished him to represent me. We were having a friendly drink," he pointed at Danny, "when that punk there broke in with a gun in his hand and he and, Miss O'Connel, I believe she said her name was, attempted to make Attorney Towers turn over to them some diamonds they insisted that O'Connel had paid Towers as a fee."

As mentally agile as Bruno, and no longer afraid of death, Towers took up the story. "The accusation was, of course, entirely erroneus. Even on the day he was convicted, O'Connel refused to state what he had done with the diamonds. But there was no reasoning with either of them. They blackened my eye. They bloodied my nose. Then, while Mr. Ferris and Mr. Bruno grappled with them, I was hastening to summon the police when you three gentlemen so happily appeared."

Still on his knees on the floor, his head cradled in Bess' arms, Danny was thinking that it wasn't a bad story. Green might or might not buy it, but there was no way he could disprove it. Towers couldn't admit he'd accepted a fee from Bruno to throw O'Connel's trial. And now Bruno

wouldn't dare to kill him. The tangible evidence was the note. And it had gone up in flame and down the drain. It was his and Bess' word against theirs.

"He's lying," Bess said hotly. "Both of them are lying." She told Sergeant Green the true story of what had happened in the playroom and the events leading up to it. "They were going to torture me," she concluded.

Green looked at her and sighed. Her story was no stranger to him. It had been kicked around the bureau both before and during O'Connel's trial. But there had been nothing to substantiate it. Even O'Connel had denied it. Green thought he knew why now. "Your contention is, then that Bruno planned the job, that Hap and Candy pulled the stickup, and Bruno has the diamonds."

She said, "It is."

Bruno laughed until his double chin bobbed in unison with his belly. "Believe me, I've heard a lot of tall ones in my day. But that's the best fast cover that I ever heard." He waved a plump palm at the stairwell. "It would seem reasonable to assume, however, that if I had the diamonds, two hundred thousand dollars worth, that I would keep them where I could protect them. To that end, Sergeant, and to put the matter on record, I wonder if you and your assistants would be so kind as to search my home without the benefit of warrant."

Green didn't like Bruno. He never had. "I think we'll do just that."

The two plainclothes men walked back up the stairs. Feeling more like a fool every minute under the amused eyes of Bruno, Candy and Hap Ferris, Sergeant Green thumped the paneled walls of the playroom, looked in the tubs and liquor cabinet and even fine-combed the crannies of the adjoining furnace room.

Bess' hand snuggled in his, Danny sat watching Bruno. Bruno wasn't as confident as he was trying to appear. There was a faint film of perspiration on his cheeks and upper lip. This was proof of murder that the law was seeking. But when Green called off the search an hour later, Bruno was still the perfect host.

"No matter. A drink before you go." He rinsed the glass he had been using—and Danny suddenly knew where the diamonds were. More, Bruno catching his eye, knew he knew.

THE FAT MAN'S eyes were eloquent. They pleaded:

Keep your mouth shut, Danny. This is your chance to chisel in on the big time. I'll cut you in on them, Danny. I'll give you half of them. You can be a big-shot. You can write your own ticket, Danny. You can have dames and money and guys patting you on the back and telling you what a smart guy you are. I won't touch you, Danny. Believe me. I won't dare to. We'll be partners.

Danny was tempted. Then Bess' fingers closed on his and he knew that he couldn't do it.

"I think I can find the diamonds for you," he told Sergeant Green. "All I need is a Stillson wrench." A wrench found in the furnace room, he dismantled the trap under the sanitary tubs, pried a wire screen from the outlet, then, wrenching the bend lose, he poured a double handful of diamonds on the drainboard. "The gurgle wasn't right," he explained.

Sergeant Green broke the long silence that followed. "Thanks, Danny," he said softly, his voice rubbing mental palms together. "And now if you other four gentlemen will accept a ride in a common old squad car I believe both the State's Attorney and the young lady's brother, currently incarcerated for and convicted of a crime of which—"

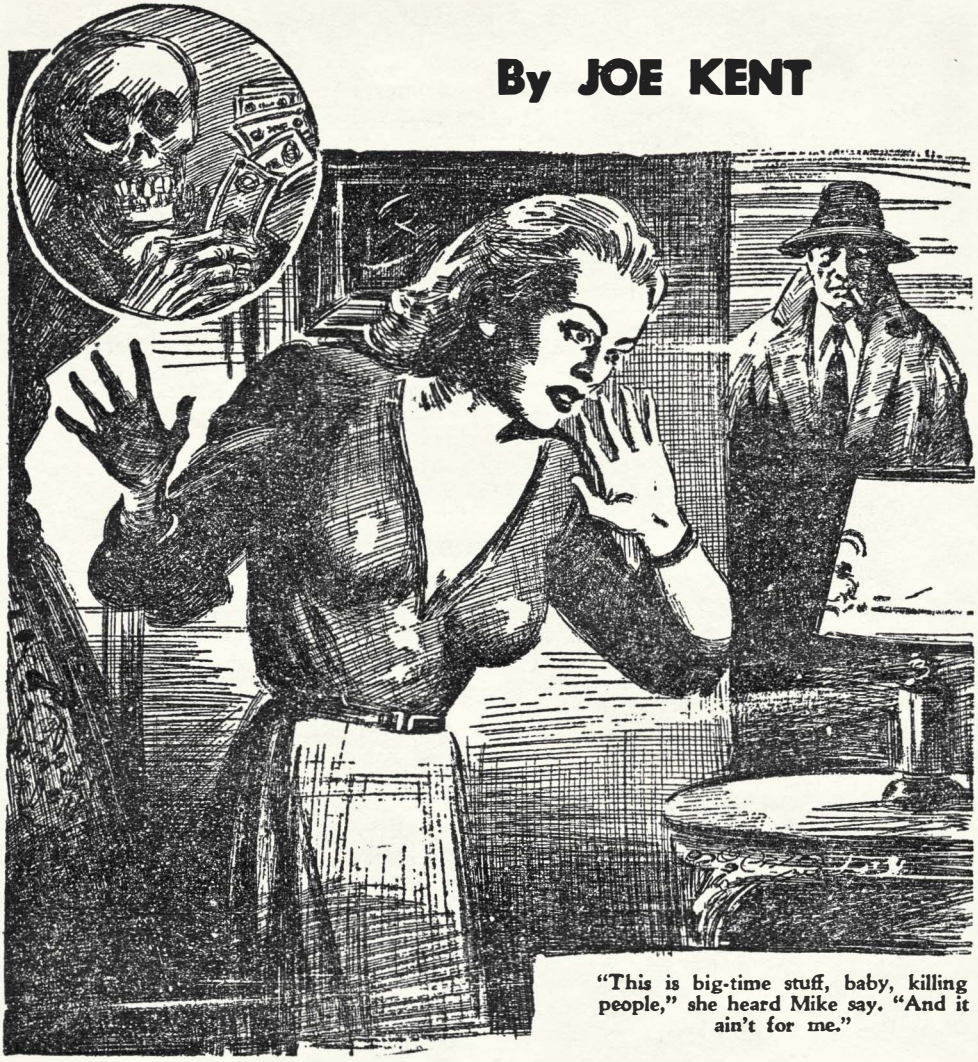
"*Brother?*" Danny gasped.

"Why—yes," Bess gasped in turn. Her eyes grew round. "Oh, Danny. You didn't think that— You did! I remember now! You called me *Mrs.* O'Connel!"

Danny disentangled his hand from hers and, taking his wallet from his pocket, attempted to extract a card with fingers that shook so badly he could hardly hold his wallet.

"Never mind, Danny," Green stopped him. "I know you have it. And I know what you want to say. Send me an invite, will you?" His voice turned cold and rasping. "All right. The rest of you guys stop gawking and make tracks up them steps. Didn't you ever see a plumber kiss his girl before?"

By JOE KENT



"This is big-time stuff, baby, killing people," she heard Mike say. "And it ain't for me."

THE DEADLIEST GAL IN TOWN!

Kerry Marlow, the prettiest girl in Williamsburg, they called her . . . until Kerry built a better mantrap—and found that murder had beaten a path to her door!

●

FROM THE DAY she was sixteen, Kerry was the prettiest girl in Williamsburg. It wasn't much of a place. Ugly and crowded and near the East River, it was just above the Manhattan Bridge on the Brooklyn side. They tore it down last year to make room for a housing project. But Kerry was the girl. Her hair was pale gold and it just touched her shoulders. She was slender and almost hard, and her eyes were clear and grey. And she was so wise, so in-

credibly wise. Even when she was sixteen.

That was when Big Mike first saw her. He was a guy. Built like a truck, but with a gentle voice and the strongest hands you ever saw. A great stony-rock of a face, even when he was twenty-four. He was a truck driver and he was honest then. Before he first saw Kerry.

He would smile at her and walk a while with her, but she just gave him a long glance, and she never went places at night. But once, one afternoon when the sun was going down, she said to him:

"Look over there." She was looking across the East River. "See that building? The tall, grey one that looks purple in the sun, the one with the penthouse. I'm going to be there some day, Mike. I'm not staying here. God, look at what's around you! What've you got if you stay?"

After a little while he rubbed his hard hands against his pants. "Yeah. I'd like to be something, too. I'd like to get over there."

It wasn't that year. It was when Kerry was almost nineteen. Mike had never kissed her. He wasn't like the other pushers. He drank, but quietly. He sat alone and there was a look in his eyes as though he were looking across a river toward a penthouse in the sunlight. . . . Nobody had ever seen him with another girl. Just Mike walking home, talking a little with Kerry. Then one night it happened. He came to her house, where she lived upstairs with her dad. Her mother was baby-sitting and her dad was sick.

"I've got something to tell you. Something to show you, Kerry."

Kerry looked at him a long moment. She was smart. She put on her coat and they walked over toward the river, and they sat there. As always, Mike couldn't talk much when he was around her. Finally he said, "You remember that thing you said, about being something some day?"

She had known. Some sixth sense that she was given had told her.

"Yes. I remember. And so?"

He pulled it from his pocket. It was money. Some in tens and twenties, and a few hundred-dollar bills. "I got it. I had to get it. I got to thinking and thinking," he said. "Let's get somewhere, Kerry. Let's me and you be something, Kerry."

She looked at the money in the moonlight, and then she looked at him. "How much is it, Mike?" she asked quietly.

"Almost five grand."

She smiled at him gently. "What's five grand, Mike? Look." She took the money and counted off a thousand. "One grand, see?" She put it in her pocket and then, in the April moonlight, she leaned back and she was as beautiful as anything he had ever seen. She was young and hard and fresh. "Kiss me, Mike," she whispered. "You've wanted to so damned long."

The sound he made was like a sob. He kissed her and he did not touch her. His fists were balled. She kissed him in return, and it was over. Her clear eyes shone in the moonlight.

"You can kid yourself if you want, Mike, but you just got Kerry's first kiss. For a grand, I hope you got a bargain." She stood up. Mike couldn't say anything. He got up, too, and he looked hungry and big and clumsy, and there was a terrible devotion on his face. "I'll be away, I don't know how long," she said. "But remember this: When I can pay you back, you can always get it by telling me. Good-bye, Mike."

That next morning Kerry Marlow left Williamsburg for good. She left five hundred of the grand with her mother. She took the rest. As she rode the subway, she read where the Kirstin Freight Company had been held up and robbed of five thousand dollars the previous day. Big Mike had worked out of the Kirstin for a while. She folded the paper slowly and dropped it on the floor.

IT WAS just about five o'clock and a week later when she walked into Nick Carley's Rondo Club on East Fifty-first Street. All except nineteen dollars of the five hundred were gone, but on Kerry it looked like a lot more. She was by herself. She didn't look toward the bar. She looked at the murals. She had read about these murals in George Bennet's "Broadway Bit's" column. They had cost nearly fifty thousand dollars. Kerry had read about them, mainly, because Nick Carley

had come from Williamsburg ten years ago. Kerry knew his old man, who lived upstairs over Lerke's Bar. The old man still talked about how Nick was coming back some day, bringing a car, to buy them a place. Place with land where a man could grow trees, it was going to be. Nick was a good boy, very busy, but he was coming back. Kerry knew Nick would never go back, and there'd never be a place with land and trees. She knew, for she knew how much alike she and Nick must be.

She saw him standing there, tall and dark-looking, with a pin-striped suit and a gardenia. Then she frowned at the murals. She knew, in a while, that he was watching her. She knew he would keep watching, and she kept frowning, and finally he came over.

"May I help you?" he asked very politely.

She gave him a straight look. "No, I'm leaving here. I can take d.t. murals just so long."

"Oh. You don't care for them?" He was cool but still looking, this time at her legs, which was a very beautiful place to look.

"No." She smiled. "They make me think of a guy who might have come from Williamsburg."

That made him look in her eyes. "You know the place?"

"Know it?" She laughed. "I'm still washing it out of my ears!"

He took one more look at her clothes; then he laughed loudly. "Great joke, beautiful." And because she was smiling, he touched her elbow. "A drink? I'm Nick Carley."

"I'm Kerry, and thanks, but I don't want a drink. I'm saving my money."

"But I was—"

"You've got me wrong, Mr. Carley." She smiled and started out.

"Wait." He looked at her again. She had won and she saw it in his eyes: the same hungry adoration she had seen in Big Mike's. "There's something about you," Nick said slowly. "When do people see you? Where?"

After a long moment she said, "You're starting something that will cost you much and get you nothing, you know. Nothing at all."

IN HIS WAY, Nick was a nice guy. He was cold where he didn't care, and usually he didn't care. With Kerry it was something else. The thing to remember, always, is how beautiful she was. It was the kind of beauty that you wanted, and made you hungry. It was so far away.

But Nick Carley never so much as kissed her. He used to sit there when he should have been at his club. He'd sit there in the living room of her new place with a drink in his hand and his eyes watching her. His face was thin and he drank too much now.

One night she said, "Nick, quit staring at me. I don't like it."

He stood up and his muscles were working in his face. "No. And you don't like me. You never have. Not since the day I saw you. I—"

"Nick," she said softly. "Don't." She got up and picked up his gloves and handed them to him. "'Bye, Nick. I told you, don't forget. I said it would cost you, and get you nothing. You asked for it. But good-bye. Call me if you're ever in a jam." It was the same thing she had told Mike. Nick slapped her and then he tried to say he was sorry. The next morning they found him in bed, where he'd tried to kill himself with sleeping pills. He didn't die.

She sold the bracelet he'd given her. It brought sixty-five hundred dollars. She kept the coat. She met Kirk. He had horses and he took her out on Long Island to meet his family and he told her he worshiped her. She told him good-bye. He was too nice and too dumb. The ring pulled four grand when she sold it, and that autumn her dad died.

It was after that when her mother came over and they went on the shopping trip. "No, not *one* dress," Kerry kept arguing. "Seven. One for every day in the week." They ate at that Automat on Broadway. Mrs. Marlow remembered when, years before, they used to come here and eat. It had always been a kind of a thrill, sitting and watching all the people. It was a big day, coming into town like that. Sometimes going to a picture show, but always eating here, no matter how hard times were.

Kerry sat there quietly, watching her mother's tired face and thinking how it

must have been when you called a meal in an Automat a wonderful holiday. It made her forget the hate in Nick's eyes.

After they'd eaten, she took her mother to the two-room place she'd rented for her on Seventy-sixth. "This is it, from now on. From here you can walk to the park. You can go to the show, or you can tell the doorman to go to hell on a broom. Don't let 'em push you."

"Kerry. . . ." Mrs Marlow's voice was slow and soft. "I don't . . . I worry. I. . . Kerry, is everything all right with you?"

"Everything will always be all right with Kerry." She grinned. "You'll be seeing me, almost every day."

It was that Christmas when she met Paul Kane. He was not like the others. First, he was far richer. He was older and wiser. He looked at Kerry and understood her; and she knew it. It made her uneasy. But still he liked her. He took her everywhere, and he never tried to touch her.

"I like to watch you," he told her once. "You're a perfect animal, Kerry. You are almost very smart. Not quite. And you don't worry me. You know, I'm dying." She'd never heard. "My heart. Oh, I've got months or years, but when you're sure, little things don't drive you crazy. And you're little, Kerry. Basically, you're just an honest tramp, with too damned much beauty."

She was afraid of Paul at first, and then another feeling came. She realized that, for the first time, she had met someone infinitely colder and wiser than she, and even more honest. And last, he was quality. He was class, and Kerry knew, deep down, she *was* a tramp.

Paul was the only one who met Kerry's mother. The only one besides Mike, of course. Kerry watched him and studied him and learned. And it became a game with Paul—the amused game of a wise and dying man, teaching a tramp to be a lady.

It was the following spring when Paul said to her one night, "I've decided about you. About what makes you tick. You aren't tough or cold or smart. You're so afraid you have to cover up."

"Afraid?" Kerry laughed at him. "Of what?"

"You. Of feeling what you want to feel. Of being what you've got to be."

"What have I got to be?" she demanded.

He smiled. "Just what you are. A beautiful tramp." He leaned forward. "I'll bet you've never even been kissed."

She stared at him. "No, I have. Once. Four years ago in Brooklyn."

"What ever happened to him?"

"I don't know. I—I've wondered," she said faintly.

THAT WAS the night when Kerry got the call that took her to Mike again. He'd probably found her name in the telephone book, and he'd left his address.

He was in this fifth-rate hotel, in a fish-scented room that looked into an airshaft. It was near the Hudson River. He was different from the Mike she remembered. His bigness was only in his bones now. He was like a skeleton, and his face was old. There was a look of wariness in his brown eyes, and there was a clumsy bandage about his shoulder. He let her in and closed the door. For nearly a minute he stood there looking at her. Starvation and hate and worship were mingled in his eyes. He rubbed his hands across his lips.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said.

"You called me. What is it, Mike?" she asked. "You're in trouble. How much and what?"

"How much do you care?" he asked. "Or maybe you don't care at all."

"Don't talk like a movie lug. What are you into?"

His shoulders sank wearily. He took the last cigarette from his pack and lit it. His fingers trembled. He didn't look at her. "I want to know if you can lend me some money, Kerry," he said. "It'll be a loan. I swear that." He looked up finally. "It's a lot and I need it quick."

"How much is a lot?"

"Twenty thousand dollars," he said.

"Twenty!" Kerry stared at him. "If you'd said ten, I could have made it by hocking. Listen, what's the twenty grand for?"

He stared at his fingers again. They were rigid, like claws. He was ashamed, and Kerry hated the look of shame. "I

owe it," he said. "I lost when I should have been winning," he said with a crooked grin. "The guy I owe doesn't believe in credit. His friends don't either."

Kerry stared at his bandage. "That would be my guess, on looking." She walked around the room nervously. "It doesn't do any good to ask why you did it, I suppose."

The hate came darkly into his eyes and he stared at her. "You wouldn't remember, maybe, once when you told me about leaving Williamsburg? About how you were going to be something? You wouldn't remember the time when five grand wasn't even an ante for the game you wanted. You wouldn't—"

"Shut up," she said coldly. "You've made your point: I gave you ideas, and now they've got you in trouble. Very clear and simple." She put her hands on her hips. "Only I didn't tell you to be dumb, Mike."

"No." He swallowed. "You didn't tell me something else, either." He walked toward her slowly. She started to back away. He held her shoulder roughly. "You didn't tell me I wouldn't forget you," he said. Then he kissed her. All the fury, the hate, the starvation and the worship was in that kiss. Then he pushed her away. She stumbled against the wall. Suddenly Kerry was frightened. Not at Mike. She was afraid of herself. It was precisely what Paul had told her: She was cold and wise on the surface because, inside, she was a fool.

Mike stared at her, then rubbed his hand across his face. "Sorry. I didn't plan on that."

"Why in hell are *you* sorry?" she asked.

"I don't know why I called you, even," he rambled. "I knew you wouldn't have twenty grand. If you had, you wouldn't lend it. If I took it, I couldn't pay it. And I wouldn't take it, anyway. I don't know why I did. I guess I wanted to see you. Sometimes I guess I even wanted to hurt you. I think about you and I hate you, and I wish I'd never seen you. But I don't hate you, either. I don't know, Kerry."

"Oh, quit trying to think," she said angrily. "You can't, anyway." She began to walk around the room again. "Who do you owe all this money to? What's the best that can happen if you don't pay?"

"The guy is Ben Kelton at a place called Ben's Blueroom. The best that can happen? I could take a trip, I guess, and stay a long time."

"You might even learn farming, in fifty million easy lessons," Kerry said. "Why are you so *damned* dumb?"

Something in his eyes stopped her. "Why are you so damned beautiful?" he whispered.

"We won't kick that around tonight. Let me go home and think. You will stay here, I suppose?" she asked. He shrugged. "Well, I'm telling you," she said bluntly. "Stay here and I'll come back. Twenty grand is impossible, but there are two ways to do everything."

Before she had walked a block, Kerry knew she was a fool. The whole thing was like a crazy dream, she kept thinking. That big lug she hadn't seen in three, maybe four, years. And twenty thousand dollars. He was crazy, but she was double-crazy to even think about it.

SHE WAS so crazy she didn't go to sleep that night. She had about six thousand dollars in the bank, and she had the diamond Paul had given her. The mink coat was too old. When dawn came, she got up and made coffee and walked around. Finally she got so angry she kicked a foot-stool. The apartment began to feel like a cage that was constantly getting smaller; she had to get out. She dressed and walked. She caught herself almost running, though she was going nowhere in particular.

She was trying to run away from decision, she knew. She was trying to flee from the memory of Mike's kiss. She didn't want to see him again; she wanted nothing to do with him. She was afraid of him because he was a mirror—a mirror of the shabby, crooked, stupid past, and in the mirror she saw herself. Beauty was her only disguise. And then she made herself admit what she feared most: She loved him.

She sat down on a park bench for a while to quiet her nerves, and then she took a cab and went to the bank. From the bank, she went to the place on Fifth

Avenue where she had sold Nick's bracelet. She sold the diamond. There was seventy-three hundred dollars in her purse when she climbed the stairs toward Mike's room in the dingy hotel.

He had been sleeping. He needed a shave and his hair was tangled. She didn't want to look at him. She took out the money. "There it is. Seven thousand," she said. He looked at it, then at her.

"Why did you do it?" he asked slowly.

"Because I had to." She moved her shoulders impatiently. "Everything will be all right now, I suppose. You'll pay the guy and everybody's honor is back where it started. That's the way it works?"

"It works that way," he said. "I hope." He kept staring at her.

"Pick up the damned money and kiss me. I want to get out of here," Kerry said. Slowly his fingers closed on her shoulders and his lips came down on hers savagely. She clung to him. She stopped thinking. Then Mike said, "Oh," very flatly and pushed her away.

"Sorry," a voice said. "You said you were hungry."

Kerry turned. In the doorway stood a thin girl with dark hair and dark, brooding eyes. Her dress was cheap and her shoes were worn. She was pretty in a worn and tired way. She put down the grocery sack and pushed wearily at her hair.

"I'm Lena. You don't remember me," she said almost tonelessly. "I lived around the corner from you in Williamsburg."

"Oh." Kerry had a feeling that something terrible was about to happen. It did. The girl said, "I'm Mike's wife. You don't have to say anything to me. I know all about it. He loves you more than he loves me. But he hates you, and at least he doesn't hate me. I know he asked for money. I couldn't help it. I don't care. I couldn't get him any more. I don't know what song-and-dance he gave you, and I still don't care. There was a time, once, when Mike made forty-four a week driving a truck. It would be nice if he still drove a truck. It would be nice if he loved me a little more. It would be nice if I didn't love him so much. We could put it that way." She shrugged. "I'm too tired to talk about it. You and Mike and the sliced ham can stay here, and where you're gone, there'll still be Mike and the ham. And me. He'll always come back to me." She closed the door quietly and was gone.

Kerry thought she was going to scream. Or cry. She could scarcely breathe. She turned on Mike and her eyes were burning.

"You weren't in debt! You didn't owe the money! You just wanted it, and you wanted to make a sucker fo me! You didn't say you were married! You didn't tell about—"

"Married?" He was smiling. "That's something people do, and spend their life forgetting. Like I've tried to forget you, and wondered if you'd forgotten. You . . . listen, Kerry, there are a lot of places and a lot of days ahead. I know about you. I've read about you in Benny Wickley's column. You know the boys that have got it. You—"

"Shut up!" she screamed.

"But you don't give a damn about

them. But we—you and me and the dough it would take—we could lift ourselves around and see—"

"Shut up! Shut up! damn you!" Kerry jerked the door open and ran.

"Think about it a couple of hours," he called after her. "What are you running from?" She could hear him laughing, all the way to the street.

"What are you running from?"

Over and over it circled her head. And she knew: She was running from Mike, but only because it was a way of running from herself. For she and Mike were the same: they came from the same place; they thought the same way; they were the same bit of trash and the same scrap of love. And she knew so well, at last, that she could not run so far, nor so fast, that she would ever lose the poison of him.

WHEN at last she got home, Paul was stretched out on her couch.

"I got the superintendent to let me in. I feel like hell. Sit down, Kerry, and talk to me." His face was pale, but his cheeks were crimson. She could hear his swift, light breathing, and his eyes were very bright. "I want to say something to you. Light us a cigarette, Kerry," he said. She did. His fingers trembled as he took a drag.

"Something's wrong. I can tell," he said softly. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's nothing, Paul, I swear."

"You're not a good liar. It doesn't matter. What I wanted to say is this: I'm going away. To Florida. I don't think I've got very long, and I may as well stay warm. But I want you to promise me something."

"What is it?"

He gestured, then his fingers collapsed. "Funny. . . . I was going to say something about running. . . . I—I can't think well. I . . . Kerry, look over there. In my coat pocket. . . . There's a box of pills in there. Let me . . . hurry, Kerry. . . ."

She got up quickly and searched through the pockets. First she found the money—a great deal of money. Maybe it was what he planned to take to Florida. Maybe it—

Then her thoughts tangled with an image of Mike, and then with money. Mike was money. Without money there was no Mike. Money and Mike were the same. She stared at her hand, at the money. . . .

"Hurry, Kerry," Paul said breathlessly.

She found the pills and took them to him. "Water," he whispered. She went for it. As she started back, she realized the money was still in her hand. She stopped in the doorway. Paul's eyes were glassy. He seemed almost unconscious. Suddenly she thrust the money down into the bronze vase that held the roses.

"Here it is. Here's the water, Paul."

He drank and lay back, breathing heavily. At last the glassy haze left his eyes and he looked at her steadily. "Give it back, Kerry. Don't ever be a cheat and a thief."

She blinked. "Give . . . what back?" she stammered.

"The money, Kerry. You're not that kind."

"I don't know what you mean. I don't, Paul! What—"

"In the vase, Kerry. Bring me the vase off the mantle."

"But I—" She rose awkwardly. "But there's nothing in the vase. I'm looking, Paul. Nothing in the—"

"Bring it here, Kerry. I'm sorry, but I hate a cheat."

His eyes were angry. Slowly she walked toward him. He reached out. He reached into the vase and took out the money. Slowly he shook his head. "Only six thousand dollars, Kerry; I had planned to leave you so much more than that in my will. Why did you have to spoil it?"

"But I—I didn't. . . ." She couldn't speak. She saw him there, thin and angry, with the money in his hand. She thought of Mike—Mike was money, and Paul had taken the money away. *He had taken Mike away!*

It happened. Without thought, without premeditation, Kerry lifted the heavy bronze vase. Paul's eyes widened. His hands moved helplessly, and then Kerry drove the vase down on the man who had taken Mike away. Paul did not moan. He made no sigh. He simply lay there and the money spilled to the floor.

Kerry dropped the vase. She bent forward. "Paul?" she whispered. "Paul? Paul? Listen to me! I didn't mean it. I swear I didn't, Paul! I wasn't trying to hurt or steal, Paul! Paul!" He did not answer.

"I don't think he's teasing, baby," a low voice said. Kerry twisted around, and there stood Mike. "I think Paul's dead. I think little Kerry killed him. That's big-time stuff, baby, killing people." He shook his head. "And for that dough down there? . . . You could have done it a lot easier. Four . . . five . . . six grand. Not much, but something" And then, as Kerry stared and could not speak, he put the money in his pocket and backed toward the door "Think up a good one, baby, before anybody walks in. This isn't for me. So-long and—"

"Mike! Mike!" she screamed. "You can't leave me like—"

"Honey, I'm not leaving anybody else. You're playing it too big and too fast for be. 'Bye, baby." The door closed.

The clock ticked. Kerry stared at Paul's quiet face. She touched his cheeks. She laid her head against his. "I didn't mean to. I didn't want to. I don't know why I did, Paul. I swear I don't know why."

The clock ticked. The telephone rang. It was Paul's butler. "I was worried about Mr. Kane. He didn't feel too well, and it's almost time to leave to catch the plane. May I speak with him, please?"

"He . . . can't talk," Kerry said brokenly. "He's dead."

"I . . . oh, God, ma'am!" the butler cried. "Is he there?"

"Yes. You . . . can bring the police." She hung up. The clock ticked on. Kerry touched his hand and leaned her head against the pillow beside his and closed her eyes and waited.

WAGES OF SIN

FOR John Esposito, known along the Brooklyn waterfront as Johnny Lefty, the wages of sin were very small—$15 per week which his boss, saloon man and small-time gangster leader, Leo Lauritano, paid him to take care of little odd jobs. These "odd jobs" during the hectic prohibitions days of the twenties ran the gamut from small intimidations, like breaking a mans leg, to murder.

That Johnny Lefty wasn't overpaid in his chosen profession of killer may be judged by the efficiency with which he undertook the rubbing-out of one Joe DiMarco, a contender for the leadership of Gangland's Number 1 murder syndicate, the Unione Siciliane.

At the time, the Unione Siciliane was being run by a Manhattan gangster named Ciro Terranova, and when DiMarco challenged his leadership, Terranova gave the word to Leo Lauritano that DiMarco had to go. Lauritano, never a man to pay out $15 a week without getting his full money's worth, passed the job on to Johnny Lefty.

Johnny wasn't too happy about it. Not that he objected to killing, he explained to his boss when accused of going soft. "It's just that I ain't never seen DiMarco. What if I rub out the wrong gee?"

Which was just what happened. Accompanied by another hired hood, Mike Fetto, who had been assigned to do the job before and had failed, Johnny Lefty broke into DiMarco's gambling joint and shot somebody he thought looked like DiMarco, but was actually a man named Charles Lombardi.

This was a bad mistake, Johnny Lefty testified later on the witness stand where he, Lauritano and Fetto were tried for murder—and, incidentally, freed on a legal technicality.

No, he didn't feel so bad just because he had killed the wrong man. But the murdered man had been a good friend of Lauritano, and Lauritano had avenged his friend's death by reducing Johnny Lefty's salary from $15 to $10 a week!

—Budd Howard

THEY DON'T COME DEADER!

By

RUSSELL BRANCH

CHAPTER ONE

Too Many Corpses

IT WAS a lousy night for a trip to the morgue. It was a lousy night for anything, except staying home and nursing your holiday hangover.

I took Scotch for mine and read the paper and wondered what the hell we'd been celebrating. Europe still starving. The U.N. boys still batting the atom bomb around. Another sex murder in Los Angeles, blizzards in the Midwest. Here at home seventeen citizens had got themselves mangled in traffic, and the Board of Supervisors was still playing politics with the Freeway proposition.

Outside my apartment, the happy little New Year, just two days old, bawled its eyes out in a cold, steady drizzle. I turned to the sports page and the Rose Bowl rehash. When the phone rang I hoped it wasn't Susie. I'd had enough of Susie to last me for a while.

It wasn't. It was Ben Tombs. That's his real name and he's the county coroner. You'll just have to take my word for it—mine and Ripley's.

"Rocky, I've got trouble on my hands and I need your help."

"Sure, Ben. What's her name?"

It was a stupid crack. Ben's a nice guy with a nice wife and two kids.

"It's a male. Can you make it down here right away? My office, I mean?"

Outside, the rain was beating hard against the window. "What d'ya mean, it's a male?"

"The body."

"In your office?"

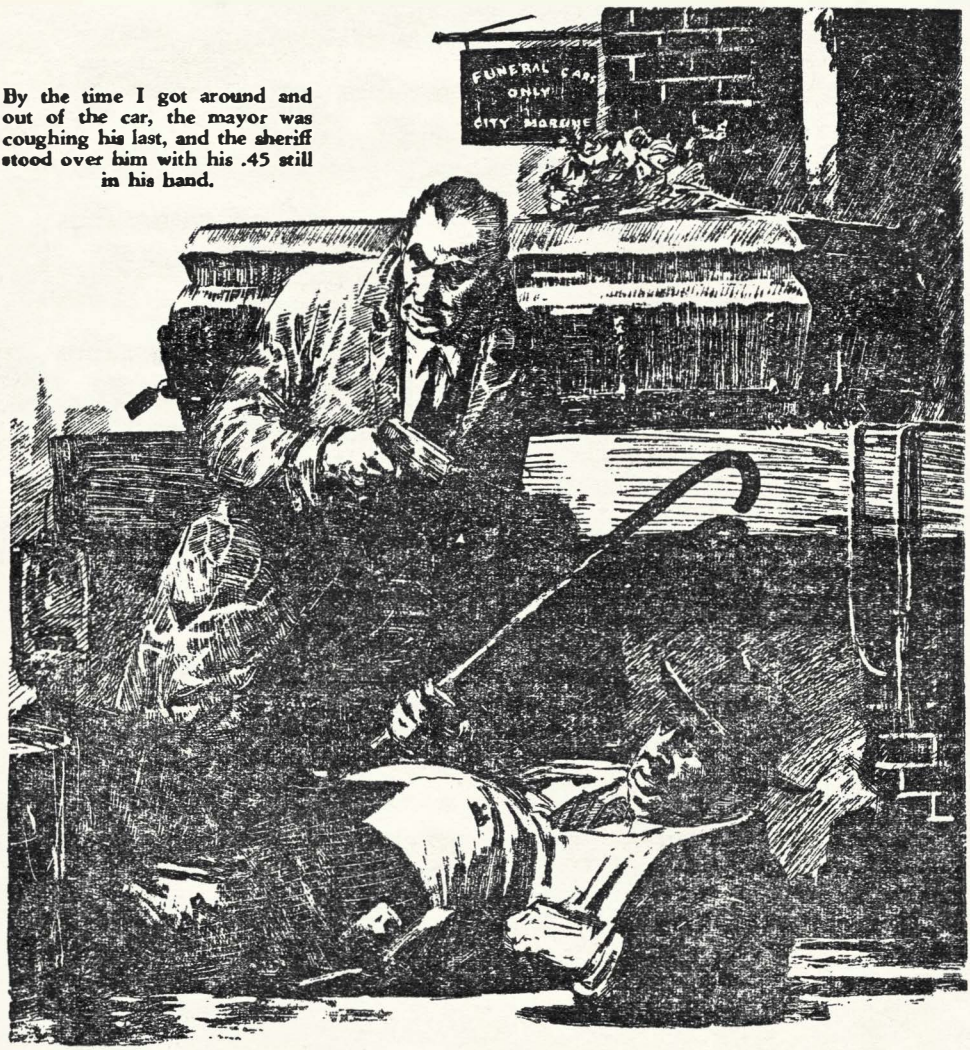
"In the morgue," he said impatiently.

Smashing Crime-Mystery Novelette

●

One corpse too many on the coroner's hands, one bullet too many whizzing by his head, and one political deal that smelled too much, took private eye Rocky Rhodes on the strangest, wild-noose chase ever to cause a slab-happy sleuth to check in as a permanent guest at that dormitory for the dead—the city morgue!

●



By the time I got around and out of the car, the mayor was coughing his last, and the sheriff stood over him with his .45 still in his hand.

"I can't think of a better place for it."

"Not this one," he said earnestly. "It —well, it just doesn't belong here. We can't account for it."

I looked out at the solid sheet of water sluicing down the window pane. "Won't it keep?"

"It'll keep, all right. But it's playing hell with our bookkeeping."

I knew Ben well enough to know he wasn't trying to be funny, and I knew the setup down there well enough to know that any irregularity would really put him on the spot. I also knew that he'd done me a dozen favors in the past, and this was the first time he'd asked me for anything more than a light.

"Be there, fella. Sit tight and give me twenty minutes."

"Take thirty," he said gloomily, "or they'll be bringing you in here in a basket, too."

I COMPROMISED and made it in twenty-five, but even so. Niagara Falls in a barrel has nothing on the traffic problem in our fair city. The rain helped like banana oil on a bowling alley.

I got there all of a piece, but I made the morgue by the delivery entrance because it was closest to the parking lot. It's in the rear basement of the county building, with a gate and a guard's shack outside and an "Absolutely No Admittance" sign on the locked door leading from the unloading platform.

The guard let me through on my police card and a mention of Ben's name. The locked door was unlocked, as usual, and the morgue was the same homey place it always is.

In the shabby receiving room Pop was fixing himself a peanut and jelly sandwich, and a young fellow I didn't know was weighing a long, sheet-wrapped bundle on the floor scales.

"Keeping you busy, Pop?"

Pop grinned back at me with all of his round, ruddy face and I wondered: how cheerful can you get? I mean a guy whose job it is, eight hours every night, to do nothing but pick up the pieces.

Steve in the next room gave me the same big hello and tried to stop me for a chat. But the lights were awfully bright in that room and Steve was doing something to something on the long white table with the gutters . . . and I didn't want to see what it was if I could help it.

"Later, kid. When you're not so busy."

He chuckled and waved me on with a wet, rubber-gloved hand. A nice boy, Steve, with red hair and clean blue eyes. Started out to be a doctor, but his dough gave out and now he was going to undertaking school days and practising embalming by night, on the county payroll. "The perfect setup," he called it. "And there's more money in it than medicine, anyway."

The air in Ben's office was stale with cigarette smoke. Ben sat staring glumly at a stack of forms on his desk, a worried guy with a nice wife and two kids and a job to keep. He looked like any other guy and his office looked like any other office —except for the stray murder weapons and pieces of pickled anatomy which had long since been crowded out of the inadequate laboratory.

"Happy New Year, Coroner."

He gave me a wry smile while I shook a miniature lake out of my hat and hung it over the handle of an axe that somebody, long ago, had used for chopping something else besides wood.

"Thanks, Rocky. Thanks for the card, too. Edith got a big kick out of it, and I meant to call you. . . ." He finished with a weary shrug.

"Your busy season," I said.

"Seventeen traffic deaths since Christmas eve."

"A new speedway system would help," I said. "Too many accidents lately. Now, what about this spare stiff of yours?"

Ben got up and I followed him into the morgue.

It's a long, windowless room with concrete walls and floor. The bulb that Ben switched on didn't shed much light or warmth, and the air was too much for even the conditioning system.

They were lined up solid down either side, on their hard cold tables under their thin short sheets. Not complaining, just waiting for something. Maybe for the rest of us. I wouldn't know.

Ben stopped short of the iceboxes, for which I was grateful. He pulled a sheet back and frowned down at the joker who was fouling up his records.

I saw a guy about my build and age,

say thirty-five. He'd knocked around a bit, taken his fun where he could find it, and wasn't particularly sorry it was over. As a matter of fact, he looked now as if he belonged in a wax museum along with the rest.

"Embalmed," said Ben. "A good professional job, too."

"How long?"

Ben shrugged. "They don't come any deader. This is just the way we found him."

"What did it?"

Ben shrugged his thin shoulders again and pointed. There was a gash on the top of the skull that had been neatly basted up.

"Concussion probably. A fall, auto accident, murder . . . you can't prove it by me."

"Fingerprints?"

"Already checked. No luck."

"How about that thread or suture or whatever it is? Can't you check that with some surgical supply outfit, for a beginning?"

Ben permitted himself a thin smile. "Dime store to you, Rocky. We use the same thing here. Embalming fluid's standard, too."

I FISHED out my cigarettes and wondered where the hell we went from here. "Maybe you better give it to me from the beginning, Ben. Who found him, and when?"

Ben blew the match out as if he'd already smoked too many that day. "I did. This afternoon, say three-thirty or so. I came in here to see how we were making out for space."

"Counting toes, eh?"

"Not quite. I just happened to notice this one didn't have a tag. We checked our records and found we had one too many. But the rest match up okay. I've gone through the files a dozen times."

"How about your staff?"

"I've checked with everybody. But like Steve says, there's nothing more anonymous than death. After the first hundred, they all look alike. That's why we put tags on 'em."

I looked at the one behind me. It was attached around a bunion and the bunion was attached to a foot and the foot belonged to *John Doe No. 23, No Address.*

"Ben," I said, "how anonymous can you get?"

He looked puzzled.

"I mean, why not just make this one John Doe Number twenty-four or sixty-four and let it go at that? It won't make any difference to *him.*"

Ben just shook his head, because that's the kind of a guy he is.

I grinned skeptically. "All right, so it isn't just a slip-up in your paper work. Somebody decided the morgue would be a good place to plant a stiff and smuggled him in here."

"Nuts," said Ben indignantly. "There're only two ways in here. The back way and through my office. This door's kept locked permanently, as is my office when I'm not in it. Not to mention the guard in the lobby and another one out back."

"Nuts yourself. The rear door was unlocked tonight. And the guard let me through the gate on a police card that's not worth the paper it's printed on."

"Your pass and *my* phone call," Ben corrected me. "Besides, there's always at least two of my staff on duty here, twenty-four hours a day. And a state law—we don't allow unauthorized visitors, dead or alive."

"Much," I said. "There was something in the paper just today. Council Conclaves with Cadavers, or some such."

"The County Board," Ben admitted sheepishly. "But there was a good reason there, Rocky. Several good reasons. Porter Maynard thought if they could see with their own eyes what the traffic mess looks like from this end on a holiday, they'd hurry up with the Freeway appropriation. It gave me a good chance to get in some licks for a bigger budget, too, and the publicity didn't hurt the taxpayers."

"Not to mention the Honorable Porter Maynard," I said. "But that still doesn't help poor John here. Why not dump him in the sheriff's office and let them worry about it?"

"And why do you think I asked you for some help?" Ben said reproachfully.

I knew why, and I guess I wasn't being very generous about it. Sheriff Sid Slade is a character, a fixture, and an institution in our neck of the woods. Not to mention a pain in the neck.

He wears hand-tooled cowboy boots and

a fifty-dollar Stetson—in a city where horses have become even scarcer than parking spaces. He rides herd on all the luncheon clubs, plays poker with the right businessmen, and bunks with the mayor, Porter Maynard, and the rest of the local politicoes.

But there was one burr under his saddle and its name was Ben Tombs. The coroner's office has absolute jurisdiction in all cases involing homicide, and Ben had the pleasure of telling the sheriff what to do with his fifty-dollar Stetson on several occasions when he had tried to horn in on the wrong side of the fence.

One hint of anything amiss in Ben's office, though, and Slade would have his hide for sure.

"The sheriff—" I began, until Ben held up his hand in warning.

Across the hallway, in Ben's office, someone had called his name. There was another hail in an affected drawl we both recognized, and then the unmistakable clatter of sharp heels on concrete.

"Speak of the Devil," I muttered.

Ben told me to shut up and hurried for the doorway. "Duck!" he added over his shoulder.

A good idea, no doubt. But there was only one doorway out, and the icebox doors at the other end didn't appeal to me. I hastily borrowed a sheet from John Doe No. 23 and slid my carcass onto the nearest vacant slab.

They must have made it in a dead heat. I heard the sheriff's voice plainly and could picture his sharp little ferret face peering suspiciously into the room.

"Busy, pardner? I thought I heard—"

"Not at all, Sid," Ben interrupted smoothly. "What can I do for you?"

The light flicked off and their voices faded down the hallway, and there was nobody here but us corpses.

The sheet across my face was reminiscent of John Doe No. 23 and all his predecessors. I pushed it back and tried to relax, because it was too dark to see and I couldn't feature groping my way to the light switch. I could almost hear my pals around me sneering in the dark.

Then one of them got up at the other end and started tiptoeing toward me. At least that's the way it sounded to me.

A flashlight flicked briefly a few feet away and showed me a pair of shoes. I sat up and started to swing my feet to the floor. "Ben?"

There was a startled grunt and the flashlight caught me full in the face, blinding me. Then it swung away and up in an arc that meant only one thing. I tried to move in to meet it, but my borrowed shroud wrapped itself around my ankles and I stumbled.

John Doe No. 23 kicked me in the face on the way down and somebody else dropped a tombstone on the back of my head, and then the bottom fell out of everything.

CHAPTER TWO

The Oversized Hat

THEY DRAGGED me to the gallows and dropped a cold, clammy hood over my face and started to pull the noose tight around my neck. I fought and pushed them away and they pushed back and then the hood fell off and the light came into focus.

"Take it easy, Rocky."

It was Steve. He had a dripping wet cloth in one hand and was pulling my collar and tie loose with the other. I pushed his hand away again and sat up and tried to put my head back on my shoulders where it belonged.

"No you don't, pal," I said. "I'm not ready for you yet."

I was on the white enamel table with the gutters and the rest of them were standing there looking self-conscious, like spectators around a traffic accident victim.

"You all right?" Ben asked anxiously.

"Fine," I said, and proved it by standing on a pair of legs that promptly buckled under me.

They helped me into the old Morris chair in the outer office and Pop, with a defiant look at his boss, produced a bottle of something that tasted like ninety percent formaldehyde.

Then Sheriff Slade cleared his throat and took the floor while I was making my peace with Pop's embalming fluid.

"What's this all about, Rhodes?"

Behind him, Ben shook his head at me worriedly.

"Wal, it were thisaway, Sheriff. There

were nine of 'em, and they went thataway."

Steve snickered and the sheriff changed color like a neon sign.

"Rhodes phoned me earlier," Ben intervened anxiously. "He said he wanted to drop in on me for a chat."

I nodded. "Ben wasn't in his office, and somebody slugged me in the hallway just outside. I didn't see him."

"We found you," Slade snapped, "in the inside room. The room where the bodies are kept."

"Maybe my friend thought I was dead," I suggested helpfully.

"What did you want to see the coroner about?"

"That," I said, "is between me and the coroner."

The sheriff didn't like it, but there wasn't much he could do about it. I tried my legs again and found them in working order. Pop's preservative had already reached my knees.

The rest of them tagged along as I headed toward the storage room. In the hallway I remembered to pause and look puzzled.

"You found me in *there?*"

Steve stepped up. "I found you, Rocky. Over there, at the other end. I came in here to—well, to put something away, and you were on the floor."

"Anybody in the hall?"

Steve shook his head and I walked on down the row between the tables. Everything was in order, except that John Doe No. 23 was indecently exposed and his sheet still on the floor. Ben reached down to pick it up and we both saw it at the same time. A hat under the next table, an ordinary grey felt hat that looked as if somebody had sat on it.

I picked it up and straightened the crown and Ben asked, "Yours, Rocky?"

I shook my head. "I left mine in your office. Maybe this one's—"

Sheriff Slade interrupted me by reaching past and taking it out of my hand. "It's mine. Must've dropped it in the excitement."

I looked at him. He was bareheaded at the moment, and I realized I'd never seen him that way before. Ben said what I was thinking.

"Thought you always wore one of those big-brimmed, ten-gallon affairs, Sid?"

Slade shook his head. "Not in weather like this, pardner. They're too expensive. This here's my rain hat." He gave us a crooked, nicotine grin and went on out, still holding the felt in his hand.

I watched him go and there wasn't anything I could do about it. You don't call the sheriff a liar to his face. Not and keep your license, in this town.

Steve and Pop went back to work and Ben and I went back to his office.

"What really happened out there?" he demanded as soon as the door was closed.

I slumped down in a chair and closed my aching eyes. When I thought it was safe to open my mouth again, I answered him. "You tell me, Ben. What'd the sheriff want?"

Ben shrugged. "Just an opinion on a hit-run case. Nothing to do with this. We went up to his office on the first floor and I guess you had your trouble while we were up there. He came back with me to go out to the parking lot the back way. Just about the time Steve found you and called us in there."

"You were with him all the time?"

Ben nodded. "About twenty minutes, the old windbag. What was that business about the hat?"

I shook my throbbing skull and an idea fell into it just like that. "Say, Ben. What happens to the clothes of those fellows in there? The stiffs, I mean. You burn 'em or something?"

Ben's eyebrows went up. "And get sued by the relatives? One of the most important responsibilities of the coroner's office is to protect the property of the deceased until proper legal claim is established."

"Yeah," I said. "Now tell me in English what you do with the stuff."

"Why, we tag it and lock it up. The valuables are—"

"A hat," I interrupted. "An ordinary grey felt hat, for instance?"

"The clothing, we keep down here," Ben said. Then he got up suddenly like a man with a bug, and I wasn't far behind.

WE WENT back into that room where my disappointed friends were still waiting for me. Ben opened some cupboard doors down near the iceboxes and

there was a row of shelves with bundles of clothing neatly tied and tagged.

He glanced over them quickly, counted them out loud, and shook his head. "All here, Rocky. I can't see a thing out of place."

"And you checked 'em when you first discovered your extra customer?" I suggested.

Ben reddened sheepishly. "I was so damn busy all afternoon, Rocky. The files took so long, and—"

"And you didn't think of it," I finished for him. "Well, whatever my friend with the flashlight was after, it's probably gone now. Including a hat."

"But the sheriff—"

"If the sheriff wears an eight and three-quarters, I'll eat it. And J.E.E. doesn't spell Sid Slade in any language."

"You think it belonged to the guy who hit you?"

"I don't think, Ben, not with this headache. All I know is, that hat was bone dry and it's been pouring all day. It had a Benheim label in it, and those little metal initials you clip on the sweat band. J.E.E."

Ben looked dubious. "I don't know any J.E.E. and I don't like Slade but . . hell, Rocky, it just doesn't add up to anything"

"Except one stiff too many," I reminded him, and headed for the door.

* * *

It was still pouring in the morning, and the clerk in the hat department at Benheim's looked surprised at seeing a customer on a day like this.

"Something in a cravanetted felt, sir? Or we have some waterproof garbardines, the latest—"

"I already have a hat," I pointed out.

The clerk looked dubiously at the piece of flotsam on my head and said nothing—out loud. The look was enough; it was supposed to make me reach for my wallet.

I did, and gave him a very brief glimpse of an expired Coast Guard pass. "Lieutenant Rhodes," I said, and that much of it matched the pass. "The sheriff's department is trying to trace a hat with your label."

"We sell a lot of hats, Lieutenant," said the clerk, his eyes wandering irresistibly back to what perched on my head.

"This one had initials in it."

"Most of them do. There's no charge for the service. Do you have the hat with you?"

"The sheriff," I said reprovingly, "has it in personal custody. The initials are J.E.E."

"Ah, yes. A very good customer of ours."

And me who never hit a jackpot, I thought. "Who is it?"

"Oh, I meant Sheriff Slade." He frowned. "Offhand, I can't place those initials. We sell a lot of hats, you know."

"Don't you keep records?"

"Only of our charge sales. I suppose I could check."

"Suppose you do that," I said.

The clerk went off and I waited. He must have had to work his way up from the department head to the business manager, but finally he came back with a slip of paper that read: "Joseph E. Edwards, 1365 Arcade Drive."

The name looked familiar to me, but the clerk still couldn't give. He reminded me for the third time that they sold a lot of hats.

"I'm sure you do," I said approvingly, and headed for the phone booth near the front entrance.

My pal on the Evening *Herald* had Joseph E. Edward right on the tip of his tongue, and he seemed surprised at my ignorance.

"Board of Supervisors, Rocky. Fifth district. You remember . . . G.I. Joe Edwards."

I remembered now. A young fellow who'd come back from the wars with young ideas. *Good government with G. I. Joe.* . . . I think he'd actually been a captain in the Air Force, but anyway he'd been elected. That had been in the days when people still thought their G.I. Joes had won a war. . . .

"What d'ya know about him?"

"Nothing, personally. He started out fine, stirred things up, made a lot of enemies. But somebody must've got to him. . . ." My friend sighed cynically. "They always do."

"For instance?"

"Cripes, Rocky, don't you read anything but the funny papers? Edwards is

even bucking the Freeway these days, for no better reason apparently than the fact that Porter Maynard and his gang are for it. . . . What's up, anyway?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just wanted to return a hat."

IT WAS ten-thirty by the time I reached G. I. Joe's office, but apparently his secretary was just getting in. She was standard issue too—a tall, faded blonde with better legs than her face deserved, and she was standing leafing through the mail with her coat still on. She seemed surprised to see me; in fact she jumped.

"Mr. Edwards here, honey?"

"He's . . ." She hesitated, glancing uncertainly toward the closed door beyound her desk. "I'm afraid he's not in right now. Perhaps if you'll come back a little later. . . ."

There was the unmistakable sound of a file drawer slamming in the next room.

I grinned at the blonde and parked myself comfortably. "I'll wait. Just tell Mr. Edwards it's a confidential matter—when he comes in, of course."

She glared at me, bit her lip, and finally slipped through the door, closing it discreetly behind her. I heard her voice, a man's voice, and then I didn't hear anything more. I waited three minutes without hearing anything more. Then I got up and opened the door.

Edward's office was a mess. It was also empty. No blonde secretary, no supervisor, no nothing but dumped drawers and scattered papers and a cigar butt still smoking soggily on an ash tray.

* * * *

Supervisor Joe Edwards' home was a nice modest walkup about the size of mine. His wife was a nice, modest brunette who looked as if she could bake a real apple pie. She also looked as if she had been crying.

She told me that her husband wasn't home, and I told her I'd like to talk to her anyway, and she asked me in because she was too well-bred to shut the door in my face.

I sat down on a maple rocker and looked at a little Christmas tree which looked the way all little Christmas trees look a week after Christmas, and wondered what I was going to say to Mrs. Edwards.

She said it first, her red-rimmed eyes never leaving my face. "You say you're a detective, Mr. Rhodes?"

I hadn't said so exactly, but maybe she was psychic. Or maybe she was expecting a detective.

"We're very anxious to locate your husband."

"He—he's out of town."

"That covers a lot of territory," I said. "Where can we reach him?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I—well, Joe's on a fishing trip. In the mountains. I don't know where, exactly."

"Fishing—in January?"

She looked at me and the dam broke, just as I was afraid it would. I looked away, into the next room, the bedroom. There was a photograph there on the dresser, a picture of a clean-cut lad in an Army pilot's cap.

Mrs. Edwards had pulled herself together and was drying her tears on her apron. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rhodes. Please forgive me." She smoothed the apron across her lap again apologetically.

"I quite understand," I said. "And I'm sorry to bother you. I've already seen Mr. Edwards' secretary, but she wasn't much help."

"Agnes?" Mrs. Edwards looked at me in genuine surprise. "Why, I *know* she's not in town."

"Fishing?" I asked. "With Mr. Edwards?"

"She's my sister," Mrs. Edwards said coldly. "She's back home for the holidays. In Ohio."

"And she wouldn't be a blonde, about thirty-six?"

"She wouldn't," Mr. Edwards said firmly. "What in the world makes you think—"

"It must have been two other people," I said. "When did your husband leave town?"

She thought that one over. "Two days ago."

"New Year's day?"

"New Year's day. We had New Year's dinner early, I remember, because he had to go to some sort of special board meeting that afternoon."

"And from there he went fishing?"

He mouth started to quiver again.

"You're just making it hard for both of us," I said. "Do you know what that meeting was about?"

She shook her head. "Joe wouldn't tell me. He was—well, he just said it might upset me. But I know that's where he went that afternoon."

"For sure?"

"I talked to Mr. Maynard. Porter Maynard, the chairman."

"And you don't know where Mr. Edwards is now, and you won't help us?"

The tears came again. "I *can't*. I just can't!"

At the door I paused and made one last stab. "Tell me, Mrs. Edwards, what brand of cigars does your husband smoke?"

"Cigars!" She stared up at me in shocked surprise. "Joe doesn't smoke cigars. I hate the smell of the nasty things."

I grinned at her in spite of myself and closed the door behind me. The next stop would be Porter Maynard's office.

CHAPTER THREE

A Visit to the Undertaker

SHE WAS sitting at the reception desk, a tall, faded blonde with a face that wasn't up to the rest of her. She had her coat off now, and she looked much more at home as Porter Maynard's secretary than she had as Joe Edwards'.

Until she looked up from her typewriter and saw me.

"You change jobs fast," I said.

She got her legs unscrambled and bolted for the inner door. But this time I was way ahead of her. The gent at the desk didn't have a chance to avoid me.

He was big and stout, the chairman of the Board of Supervisors, with a couple of chins and a barber-fresh pinkness that made him look jolly. But his eyes were as cold as the inside of a frozen filet and his mouth would have been too small for a face half the size.

The mouth opened and shut a couple of times and finally said indignantly, "What's the meaning of this intrusion?"

"My name is Rhodes, Mr. Maynard. I'd like to talk to you. If you don't mind."

"Was it necessary for you to break in here like a—like a hoodlum?"

Behind my back the blonde was making with the frantic gestures. I grinned at her and said, "I've had some previous experience with your secretary, Mr. Maynard. Can we talk in private?"

He gave her a nod and the door slammed behind me. Nobody offered me a seat, but I took one anway.

"I'm a private investigator. I'm trying to locate Joe Edwards and I thought you might be able to help me."

The cold-fish eyes bored into me. "May I ask what your interest in Joe Edwards is?"

I said, "I'm afraid I can't give you the name of my client, Mr. Maynard. However—" I paused tentatively—"Mrs. Edwards tells me her husband disappeared on Thursday, New Year's day."

"You aren't working for Mrs. Edwards," Maynard stated flatly. "She just called me, and I might add that your visit accomplished nothing but upsetting her further, poor woman."

I said nothing. Porter Maynard's eyes dropped to his fancy desk set.

"Just how interested are you in finding Edwards?" he said. "I mean, how much would it take to pay you for your work so far and—well, shall we say, forget the whole thing?"

I examined the desk set, too. It was one of those double-barreled affairs. I've always wondered how one person could use two pens at once.

Maynard's face went a bit redder. He got up from his desk and started pacing the floor.

"Mr. Rhodes, there are times when we must all sacrifice our own interests to the interests of the community."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"To be frank with you," he went on, "I don't know where Supervisor Edwards is, but I do know what lies behind his mysterious disappearance. And even though Edwards and I have always been, shall we say, at cross-purposes politically, I have refrained from taking personal advantage of this knowledge. I trust I can count on you for the same discretion. For the good of the community."

"I'm listening," I said.

"To put it bluntly," he continued, "Joe Edwards tried to use his office for personal gain. To put it even more bluntly, he solicited a bribe. I confronted him with evidence of his dishonesty, and apparently he chose to disappear rather than face the music."

"What bribe?" I asked. "What evidence?"

"Undoubtedly you know, Mr. Rhodes, that one of the most important considerations before the County Board at present is the matter of appropriating funds for a super-highway system—the Freeway—connecting the outlying suburbs of our city. Our traffic problem—"

"I know," I interrupted. "It stinks. What about Edwards?"

But Maynard wasn't to be sidetracked from his prepared text. Apparently he thought I voted, or something.

"I am proud to say, Mr. Rhodes, that I have put all my efforts into pushing the Freeway which our community needs so badly. However, Edwards has opposed me at every turn and at the same time he has declined to present any valid objections to the measure. I have been at a loss to understand his motives—until this damning piece of evidence was brought to my attention."

He picked up a letter from his desk and waved it indignantly. "This communication indicates that Edwards attempted to blackmail at least one property owner into buying his vote for the Freeway measure."

I reached for the letter but Maynard casually moved it away.

"This person does not wish to be involved, and I have promised him my confidence. Sufficient to say that he owns a large piece of property on the west side, which lies in the path of the proposed speedway."

"I don't get it," I confessed.

MAYNARD seemed surprised at my naivete. "There are certain slum areas on the west edge of the city, Mr. Rhodes, which have depreciated greatly in property values since the war. Many buildings there have been condemned by the health and building departments, also the Fire Department. They can no longer be rented as dwellings, and yet present high costs of wrecking and construction make their replacement unprofitable in a generally undesirable neighborhood.

"The owner I am speaking of, like many others, would profit greatly if the city purchases his property on the proposed basis of assessed value."

"And Joe Edwards," I said, "approached this character and offered to change his vote—for a consideration?"

Porter Maynard sat down in his chair again and beamed at me. "Exactly."

"Mrs. Edwards knows all this?"

He nodded. "Poor woman. She asked me for help in locating her missing husband, and I was forced to tell her."

I looked at the letter under Maynard's puffy paw. "You've turned it over to the D.A.?"

Maynard shook his pompous head. "We need that Freeway, Rhodes. An investigation would accomplish nothing. In fact, it would simply delay matters. It would make the taxpayers suspicious of the whole deal and undoubtedly hold up the state funds which have already been appropriated."

"Except," I pointed out, "that it makes Edwards a crook who ought to be nailed."

"I've taken the liberty," Maynard said slowly, "of having Edwards' files searched, and I'm satisfied this was his first transgression. Of course, if he dares to show his face again, I'll force his resignation—but otherwise I can see no earthly good in prosecuting him. This is one case, in my opinion, where the public welfare outweighs personal vengeance or justice in the narrow legal sense."

"Un-huh," I said. "When did you spring this on Edwards?"

"On New Year's day. As perhaps you've read, I took the board on a trip through the morgue, thinking that the dreadful spectacle of our holiday traffic fatalities might remove some of the opposition which Edwards had aroused.

"But Edwards was still adamant; in fact he became personally abusive in private conversation with me and I told him off, even though I intended to wait until a more suitable time. He left in the middle of our tour, and that was the last I saw of him. Mrs. Edwards called me when he didn't come home that night, and I advised her it was our public duty to keep it quiet, poor woman."

I nodded thoughtfully and pulled out my cigarettes and helped myself. Then I said, in sudden embarrassment, "Pardon me," and shoved the package across the desk.

"I don't smoke," Maynard said, but the package had already skidded off the edge and he automatically bent for it. When his head came up again, I was on my feet and the letter was in my pocket.

I thanked him for his help and started out. He stopped me at the door and I thought for a moment he had noticed his loss. But it was only another speech.

"One thing more, Mr. Rhodes. I think you see things my way, but I might remind you that I have, shall we say, a certain influence in the city hall. And it is my understanding that private detectives are required to be licensed. Er . . . do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly." I smiled and slammed the door behind me.

The blonde watched me uncertainly while I paused in the outer office for a quick look at the letter I had snitched. It was on Joe Edwards' official letterhead, and signed by him. It was addressed to one Terrence Gibney of the Westside Investment Co., and it said simply:

> Despite your refusal to cooperate when I talked to you the other day, I hope that further consideration has convinced you of the wisdom of making a deal in regard to the Freeway matter.
>
> If I do not hear from you immediately, I shall proceed as I warned you I would.

From the door behind me came the unmistakable sounds of an angry search. I took another look at the address on the letter and handed it hastily to the blonde.

"Here, honey, your boss may be looking for this."

There were only two things still puzzling me as I hit the street. Why a public official smart enough for graft would be dumb enough to put it in writing on his offiical stationery . . . and why I was being tailed.

HE WAS right behind me as I went through the elevator lobby and he was still behind me when I reached the corner. Just to give him the benefit of the doubt I turned into the drugstore there and went to a phone.

Ben Tombs wanted to know how my head was and if I was getting anywhere.

"Yeah," I said. "Nowhere, fast. Ben, have you checked on all the stiffs that went out of your boarding house in the past three days?"

"What d'ya mean, checked?"

"Do they add up right?"

"Of course they add up," Ben said. "Our only trouble is, we've got one too many."

"I'd still like to see a complete list of the ones you've released since New Years. Can you give it to me?"

"Sure. Right here on my desk. But I still don't see what that—"

"Neither do I, yet. Let's have it."

Ben read them off quickly until I interrupted.

"Hold it. What's that John Doe-Richard Smith routine? A gag?"

"John Doe Number twenty-four. Identified as Richard Smith by brother, Allen Smith. Released for private burial, Montel Mortuary, January second."

"Who released him?" I asked.

"Why, I did. At least I signed the release papers."

"And you talked to this brother, Allen Smith?"

Ben said slowly. "No . . . not exactly. The sheriff's office called us on that one. In fact, it was Slade himself, I think. Smith had gone to the police for help in locating his brother, and they turned him up in their copy of our file."

"And you let him go down there and take his choice?"

"Of course not," Ben said indignantly. "Smith came over here and I sent one of my deputies to the viewing room with him. We never let any outsider into the morgue itself."

"I know," I said. "There's a state law."

"But it was straight routine," Ben said defensively. "This case was an accident victim, a drunk who got in front of an auto. The inquest had been held, everything was in order. And it just saves the county money when some relative turns up and takes a John Doe off our hands."

"You remember what this Allen Smith looked like?"

"I only saw him a minute or two," Ben said. "I've got his address here, though, if you want it."

"Probably a phony, like his name," I said. "Was he a young, clean-cut chap?"

"No . . ." Ben said thoughtfully. "Seems to me he was a big fellow. Heavy-set, I think. Swarthy."

I looked out of the phone booth and tried to fit the picture to someone familiar. My shadow had finally gotten impatient, I saw. He had left the tobacco counter and was over at the magazine rack, and he didn't look like the sort of guy who would be interested in the *Ladies Home Companion,* although that was what he was leafing through at the moment.

I interrupted Ben's efforts to recall Allen Smith. "About 190 pounds, five-feet-eleven," I said. "Black hair, heavy beard and a broken nose. Wears a dark blue topcoat with one button missing and shiny at the elbows. Chews cigars and looks like they don't agree with him."

My literary friend turned suddenly, as if he knew somebody was talking behind his back. I looked away, but not fast enough and our eyes met. Then he moved out of range.

Ben was still agreeing with my description and wondering how I did it. I cut him off.

"Look, Ben. I've got a theory. Get that deputy who showed the body to Smith, take him over to that mortuary. . . . Which one was it?"

"Montel. It's out on Farnsworth Avenue with all the rest. Corner of Mills, I think."

"Okay, I'll meet you there in an hour. Maybe sooner."

"But—"

"See you there," I said and hung up hurriedly.

But I was too late. My cigar-chewing friend had taken a powder.

I FOUND him again ten minutes later, and I couldn't say which of us was more surprised.

He was sitting behind a ramshackle desk in a little rat-trap office, and he hung up the phone just as suddenly as I had opened the door.

The door indicated that this was the Westside Investment Company, but I couldn't see an investment in sight. Certainly it wasn't in office equipment. There was only the phone, the desk, and a couple of beat-up chairs. If the mug who occupied one of them was a businessman, I was J. P. Morgan. And if the desk held anything more than a couple of racing tabs and an empty bottle, the joke was on me.

The joke *was* on me. The desk also held an automatic. The only thing good about it was the fact that the safety was still on.

I heaved the spare chair into his face and followed it across the desk. The gun went off in the shuffle, but it must have missed. It went off again as we smashed into the wall. Then he tried to chop down with it, but I got a knee up first and a twist on his arm that shook the gun loose.

Even without his rod, Terrence Gibney or Allen Smith or whatever his name was, gave me a lot of trouble. We went at it as if we were being paid for it, until finally I moved him with a lucky left and dumped him with a right that had everything in it but the kitchen sink.

It took me ten minutes more hard work to get him in a mood for polite conversation. I tried everything in the book and a couple of tricks that weren't in the book before he talked, and by that time a patrol car was screaming down the block.

I bade Mr. Gibney farewell with the butt end of his own gun and went out after bigger game.

* * *

The blonde was still out to lunch, or something.

But Porter Maynard was in his office and Sheriff Slade was there too. They had their heads together when I opened the door, and they looked like two kids caught in the act of telling dirty stories to each other.

"Gentlemen," I said, lying in my teeth.

Maynard had something nasty to say about my manners, and the sheriff got up as if he intended to do something about them.

"You were talking about Joe Edwards?" I asked casually.

The sheriff stopped and looked at Maynard. Maynard looked at the sheriff.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I thought it wise to report the matter to the authorities, just for the record. Fortunately, Sheriff Slade agrees with me that it would

be far better to let things rest as they are."

The sheriff nodded. "I say leave sleeping dogs lay, Rhodes. You can't hang a man till you catch him. and they ain't no sense of wastin' the taxpayers' money."

"Seems to me that's for the D.A. to decide," I said. "Anyway, I've found Joe Edwards for you."

The applause was deafening. "Thanks," I said in the dead silence that followed my announcement. "Since you're both interested in the case, I thought—"

"Where is he?" Slade demanded.

"He'll keep. Of course, if you gentlemen aren't interested—"

"What the hell are you drivin' at?" asked the sheriff angrily.

I shrugged. "Some people call it justice. The law says a man should be punished for his crimes."

Porter Maynard stared unhappily at his desk. The sheriff stared at me.

"There's always the D.A.," I suggested.

Slade put his Stetson on his head, his face grim. "Come on, Maynard. Now that you've got me in this thing, I'm gonna see it through."

WE TOOK his car. It was a big, cream-colored sedan, with an emblem on the side and a siren in front, and it didn't take us long, even with the roundabout way I directed the sheriff. I don't think either of them knew where we were heading until I told the sheriff to pull up to the curb on a side street.

They got it then, when they saw the building and the service drive which said "Funeral Cars Only." They balked then, as I expected they would. Porter Maynard just sat there in the back seat, a deflated windbag trembling in every fold.

The sheriff took his hands from the wheel. "What the hell's this, Rhodes? You said—"

"I said I knew where Joe Edwards was. He's in there. The man who killed him is right here."

Maynard muttered something unintelligible, but I was watching the sheriff. His hand was resting on the fancy Colt he wore under his fancy jacket. "You're wrong, Rhodes, plumb wrong. There're a lot of things say you're wrong."

"There're a lot of things say I'm right," I said. "A mug named Terrence Gibney, for one. He's already trying to explain things to the cops, but he explained a lot of things to me first.

"Maynard killed Joe Edwards because Edwards was digging into a rotten real estate deal that would have blown Maynard's political career wide open and put him in jail besides. Joe Edwards didn't have enough evidence to expose Maynard publicly, but he was getting there and he was delaying the Freeway measure until he did."

Behind us, Maynard stammered something. The sheriff told him to shut up without taking his eyes off me. "That's a lot of talkin' without anything to back it up, Rhodes."

"I told you I had Terrence Gibney," I said. "Gibney fronted for somebody in buying up a lot of worthless property long before the Freeway proposition came up, although it had been talked about for years. Then our honorable board chairman started promoting the Freeway, which would take in that property and pay him a handsome profit under condemnation proceedings.

"It was a hard thing to trace and a harder thing to nail down, but Joe Edwards had enough evidence to make Maynard lose his head when he confronted him with it, three days ago in the county morgue. Maynard killed Edwards, probably with one of those little souvenirs in the coroner's office, removed his identification, and stuck a tag on his body from one of the other stiffs.

"Probably he only hoped to cover up the murder long enough to get out of there, but somehow in the rush at the morgue that day Edwards got processed with a dozen other accident victims.

"It was a lucky break, but it was only good until somebody recognized Edward's body or discovered the discrepancy in the morgue records. So Maynard took another desperate chance and had Gibney claim Edwards' body as the John Doe whose tag he had borrowed."

The sheriff was shaking his head. "Too many loose ends, Rhodes. I know how they work it down there, and—"

"There was the clothing," I said, "and the fact that the real John Doe was still

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IT SLAYS TO ADVERTISE!

"Knifing and killing neatly done," M. Louis advertised . . . and half of Paris beat a red path to his door. . . .

By JIMMY NICHOLS

THE PARIS underworld of the early nineteen hundreds was full of colorful and endearing characters—men who would cheerfully sell you the souls of their maternal grandmothers for the price of a few francs, and still others who needed even less encouragement to do far worse.

Among them, however, none was quite so outsanding and so long-remembered as Louis Goujon, a handsome Apache who flourished there from 1905 until his career ended abruptly on the guillotine in 1911. There was nothing so unusual about his calling—he was a professional cut-throat—but he was greatly admired for his businesslike methods.

A good twenty years ahead of his time, Louis knew the commercial value of advertising and that intangible asset called good will. Neatly printed handbills stating his specialty fluttered down discreetly from Montmartre rooftops.

"Knifing and killing neatly done," runs one translation of their incredible message, "and your secret is safe with M. Louis."

If there had been a radio at the time, there is little doubt that Louis would have been on the air three times a day with a tuneful jingle. As it was, word got around very nicely indeed to the effect that Louis Goujon was not only efficient, but trustworthy and honorable. It was the custom, at the time, for those in the same line to demand payment in advance, inasmuch as it was frequently necessary to skip down-river for a time after the deed was done. Many of Louis' rivals had been known to pocket the fee and then skip out, leaving the corpse in question still walking around on his or her own two feet. But if anyone paid Louis his price, the deed was as good as done.

Curiously, it was this very reputation for honesty that prevented the Paris police from bothering him. They were long ago resigned to the fact that every Apache was a murderer, or a potential one, but an honest Apache? Nonsense, they said wisely. This Louis Goujon must be a myth, invented by the other villains to throw them off the trail.

Yet the killings attributed to him amounted, by 1911, to an impressive toll. "It's maddening!" snapped M. Jacques Martin, the black-mustachioed Prefect of Police. "Every time a new dead body floats down the Seine, word comes back from our underworld sources that 'Louis did it!' "

"And you don't believe there is such a person?" queried his good wife, hiding a smile behind her cup of breakfast chocolate.

"Certainly not! An Apache who keeps his word? Ridiculous! It's all a blind!" answered her husband, and strode angrily off to his desk in the Prefecture.

His wife, Berthe, remained at the breakfast table a little longer, nibbling at the crumbs of an extremely tasty croissant. Then, at a sign from her servant, she rose and strolled into her drawing room.

A tall, broad-shouldered, handsomely dark man rose politely to greet her. "Madame Martin," he murmured over her hand.

Meanwhile, the Prefect of Police was also receiving a visitor. An extremely embarrassing one, for although she was very lovely and beautifully dressed, she really had no business calling at the Prefecture, and Jacques Martin told her so.

"How will it look?" he asked.

"What do I care?" she screamed after the unreasonable manner of some women. "You've been putting me off with promises, promises, promises for five years! Now you get rid of that fat wife of yours

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THE USED-CORPSE MARKET

"This is a gun, Thompson," Fielzer said. "I'll use it if I have to."

By DON JAMES

*"One thing," Kranz said, "just be sure he's breathing when he goes in. Out—but breathing. That makes it drowning. Suicide." . . . And no matter how I parsed that sentence, it came out the same way: Subject—*me! *Object*—me! *And corpse*—me!

AFTER I paid the doctor and the hospital for Joan's operation I was down to around $2,000, but we still had the apartment. At least, we were that lucky. I knew plenty who were living in one room and glad to get it.

I took Joan home on a Monday. The previous Saturday the doctor had told me that she needed fresh air and a change from the apartment because it would be six months or more before she could get around much. I figured I had a way to arrange that.

I gave her the surprise when I took her

home. She expected a taxi and when I took her to the new convertible coupe she almost went to pieces.

"Oh, Hal . . . you shouldn't have done it. You shouldn't have!"

Then she began to worry about the money it had cost and I assured her that it was all right. It had taken the $2,000, but I still had my job and the new car could be converted to cash any day.

I told her how I'd put my name in at a number of dealers months before, when we had no idea she'd ever see the inside of a hospital. I'd been lucky to get the car in the tight market.

All the way to the apartment we planned Sunday trips to the beach, the mountains—picnics in the long summer evenings. We were still talking about it when we went to sleep.

Shortly after midnight Joan's terrible headache started. Frantically I dialed the doctor, envisioning embolisms and a dozen other things too vague in their medical meaning for me to understand, but all too realistic as I heard Joan's deep moans.

The doctor arrived and did something for the pain, but the worry in his expression struck fear through me.

He took her to the hospital. The next morning there were consultations and specialists and my own attempt to work at my desk while every telephone call tightened my nerves.

My call came through and I knew that my face was pale as I answered it. The doctor's voice was reassuring but grave.

"Brain tumor," he told me. "It means another operation, but it's not too dangerous. I've talked with Dr. Chester—he's the top specialist in town."

"Anything to make her well!" I blurted. "Anything, Doctor!"

"Don't worry, Thompson. She'll be well again." He hesitated a few seconds and then said, "I'd better warn you that Chester is expensive. Don't worry about my bill, but it's going to take quite a bit for him."

"How much?"

"You'll need at least two thousand at once. And, of course, you'll have the hospital for a while."

"I'll get it," I told him. "Just see that everything is done for her."

"Fine. Chester would like to operate in the morning."

"I'll have a check for him when he finishes," I promised.

THE BOSS let me have the day off. He'd raised a family and knew what was going through my mind. Or maybe he knew that I wouldn't be much good at the office.

I drove the new convertible to the hospital that morning and saw Joan for a few moments before they took her to surgery.

She had more nerve than I did. Her smile was better and braver than mine. She kept a towel over her head because they had cut away the deep auburn waves, and her eyes were gentle as she looked up at me.

"Don't worry, Hal," she whispered. "Please don't. It'll be all right. We'll have our good times yet."

"Sure, Joan. You bet! Just like we've planned!" I kissed her gently.

In the hallway the doctor told me that I might as well go out for a while. Brain surgery is a long, tedious job. It would be hours before they'd know anything about the results.

I left the hospital and drove to the nearest cafe and drank coffee. It was tasteless. I kept seeing Joan's eyes and feeling her cool lips.

A waitress handed me a slip for ten cents and I remembered that I had to get $2,000. I had it. Out there at the curb. Our new, shining convertible.

In a telephone booth I called Bill Laity. I'd bought the car from him and had known him for years.

Rapidly I explained the situation.

"You're in a tough spot," he sympathized. "Normally, I wouldn't suggest this, Hal, but you need all the dough you can get. There's a man named Tony Fielzer who's operating a so-called used car lot over on Park. It's a racket and he's handling nothing but new cars on a black-market setup. Take your car to him. You'll get more than we can give you. We're trying to give the public a break and keep things in line."

I thanked him and drove over to the car lot. A short, heavy-set man wearing slacks and sport shirt strolled over and leaned on the car door.

"Something, bud?" he asked.

"I'm looking for a man named Fielzer."

"I'm Fielzer. Want to sell this crate?"

I nodded.

He quoted me a figure below the list price.

I shook my head. "I need dough. My wife's in the hospital." I glanced at a sign on a new car that priced it $600 above list price and said, "I want a deal."

He grinned. "You can't blame a guy for trying, bud. The less I give you, the more I get. Wife in the hospital, huh?"

"Yes."

"Then you really need the dough. Them hospitals are high. I'll give you our going price." He quoted several hundred above what I had paid for the car. "Is it a deal?"

"Can I have the money at once?"

"Soon as we take care of the papers. Half an hour or so."

It took a few moments longer than the half-hour. Fielzer walked to the lot entrance with me.

"How'd you get that crate?" he asked. "Some dealer finally work down to you on his list?"

"That's it."

He was thoughtful. "You on any other dealers' lists?"

"On almost all of them in town—the ones handling cars at about that price."

"And you need dough bad?"

I thought about the hospital. I had telephoned before I left the shack he used as an office. Joan still was in surgery.

"All I can get," I admitted.

"I'll make a deal. You're on all those lists? You haven't canceled yet?"

"I haven't had time."

"Don't. I'll stake you to dough to buy those cars as they come up and you can bring them to me. I'll cut you in on the profits when I sell 'em. I'll even furnish some cash so you can prod some of those dealers a little to boost you on the list—or to get someone in the office to do it. We know all the angles."

The idea was distasteful and maybe I'd have walked away any other time. It smelled too much of rackets and black markets and everything the little guy, like I am, has to fight.

But I remembered Joan's eyes and that kiss in the hospital and the things we had planned together. This was our first year of marriage and so far it had been nothing but rough for her. After waiting through the war, the months when I was overseas, the fears and anxieties, this was turning into a nightmare relieved only by our love and our faith in the future.

Most of all I remembered the hospital and how the wards were crowded and hot and how Joan was cheerful about it. She should have a private room. Any person should! Special nurses. The best.

My weekly salary wouldn't buy a week in a ward bed.

"That's a deal," I said. "You've made a deal."

Fielzer motioned to a man standing by a new sedan. The man came over, his small, thin body moving in a jerking walk. His face had the wizened hardness of a sidewalk pitchman and he talked with a sharp, staccato voice.

"This is my partner, Sam Moxie," Fielzer told me. "Sam, this is Hal Thompson. He's listed at most dealers in town. He's going to do some business with us."

Moxie nodded briskly and we shook hands.

"Sam knows the angles around the dealers," Fielzer continued to me. "You tell him where you got your name listed and he'll tell you how to get yourself to the top on a list, if it's possible."

Moxie explained, "Usually there's someone in most places I can reach. Maybe twenty-five or fifty bucks does it. Some places, no dice. Where you listed?"

I told him. He listened attentively and when I finished he nodded. "You got early orders in and ought to get crates quick—quicker if we put a few bucks in the right place. Here's what you do. . . ."

He went into a careful explanation of dealers and names and methods.

We returned to the shack office and he made a few telephone calls. Within half an hour I departed with some of their money in my pocket and an hour later returned with a new coupe.

I was in business with Tony Fielzer and Sam Moxie.

JOAN had her private room and special nurse. I'd made arrangements by the time they brought her down from surgery,

using my newly acquired money. I also had a date to go to the lot immediately after work the next day.

Joan was too ill to know or care about my good fortune. As far as that went, I didn't care if she did know. It was enough just to have her in that private room with a special nurse and all the care she needed.

A few days later when she was well enough to wonder about the expense, I had managed to get another car for the lot and more money for us. I grinned at her hesitant question about expenses.

"I had to sell the coupe, darling. It brought more than I expected. We'll get another later on, and in the meantime, we don't have to worry about you!"

Her lips trembled. "It was such a beautiful car, Hal!"

"Stop worrying. We'll have another. You're the only important thing right now. I just want you well again!"

I changed the subject. Somehow I didn't want to tell her about Fielzer and Moxie.

We had worked out an arrangement. My office closed at five and visiting hours at the hospital were between seven-thirty and eight-thirty. That meant that I had some free time. The lot stayed open until nine-thirty or later.

I reported to the lot at six and worked with them in one way or another for an hour or so. If I had a line on a car that was in my list, I'd go to the dealer immediately after work. Usually I grabbed a quick dinner at a counter somewhere.

Sometimes I watched the lot while Fielzer and Moxie ate dinner, and occasionally I would stop there after I left the hospital.

In less than a week, with Moxie's instructions and help, I had managed to get to the top of lists and buy three more new cars for them. I thanked my enthusiasm that had driven me to place so many orders months before. Others had done the same thing, taking the first car that came and canceling the remainder of the orders. I had been lucky in not canceling. Now it was getting badly needed money for us.

On the ninth day after Joan's brain surgery, I stopped at the lot on the way home from the hospital. Fielzer was alone. He greeted me with his lopsided grin.

"Do me a favor, Hal?"

"Sure."

"Moxie called. He just bought a new crate from some guy that owns a parking lot on Seventh. We can make a quick deal for it out of town and can afford to jack the price a little to the lot guy. Moxie's there now and there's another car the lot guy thinks we might get, so Moxie is waiting until the owner shows up.

"I want the lot guy's car now so I can get some kid to drive it to Riverton tonight. I got to have it there to sell in the morning. Go over and pick it up for me, will you?"

I nodded.

Fielzer continued, "You'll see Moxie with the guy, or if you don't, here's the license number. They may be talking to this other guy in the shack. You better not bust in on them. Just get in the car and drive it here. It's okay."

The lot was about a four-block walk. I looked around for Moxie, but couldn't see him and the attendant wasn't in sight. Evidently they were in the shack and I remembered Fielzer's warning not to disturb them.

The car was parked in a front row. I checked the license number, took another look around, and drove the car to Fielzer's lot. He told me to park it at the back.

"Moxie thinks he can jack you up on another list tomorrow," he said as we walked to the sidewalk. "He's made a new contact with some sales manager."

"I hope so," I told him. "The doctor told me tonight that my wife will have to stay in the hospital longer than we expected."

"You're having tough luck," Fielzer sympathized.

We said good-night and I walked home. In the apartment I made coffee and drank it in the kitchen, hating the lonesomeness of the place with Joan gone, the dead smell of the air, the dust that had accumulated because I didn't have time to do the cleaning.

I went to bed and couldn't sleep. Worry about Joan nagged at me until I was more wide awake that when I had crawled between the sheets.

I got up and turned on the radio as I had done a dozen nights before. There

were some platter programs that weren't too good. Restlessly I switched to short wave. The local police station came in. I kept it tuned. At least it might be interesting.

There wasn't much doing and when the announcer started to read his routine list of stolen cars I got up to turn it off. My hand froze. The first car on the list was a tan sedan of popular make. The license number sounded familiar. The announcer repeated the number.

An icy chill went over me. The number was too familiar. I remembered that I thrown away the slip that Fielzer had given me. I couldn't be sure unless I checked.

Hastily I scribbled the number I had heard over the radio on the back of an envelope. I dressed and left the apartment. It was just a little after ten o'clock.

A LIGHT still burned in the office shack on the lot and I could see Fielzer and Moxie talking to a man I didn't know.

I crossed the lot at the far side and went to the sedan. The license number checked with the one the police had given.

The asphalt on the lot silenced their footsteps. I didn't hear them until Fielzer spoke.

"Want something, Thompson?"

I whirled. There were three of them: Fielzer, Moxie and the man I didn't know. The stranger had a set of license plates in one hand and a screwdriver in the other.

"This is a stolen car!" I blurted. "You had me—"

"Shut up!" Fielzer snapped. "Take it easy. Don't blow your top."

Suddenly the whole thing was clear. They had talked me into stealing a new car from the place while Moxie had absorbed the attendant's attention in the parking lot shack. Once they had it out of town, they were in the clear.

If I had been caught, they could have denied knowledge about it. It would have been their word against mine—two against one. The deals I'd made, my desperate need of money, were all against me. And Moxie probably had made sure that his conversation with the attendant was legitimate.

As suddenly as I realized what had happened, anger flared in me. I'd been taken for a sucker.

"Okay," Sam Moxie said in his hard voice. "So you're wise. You aren't going to do anything about it. Remember, pal, you're the guy who drove the car off that lot."

"With Fielzer's instructions," I barked. "You can go to hell. You're not getting away with it. I'm going to the cops and tell them the truth."

"Nuts," Moxie sneered. "We'll deny it. They'll think you're crazy."

"I don't think so, Moxie. I've a good record in this town. I've never associated with dirt like you before. I think they'll believe me."

"You're going nowhere," Fielzer growled. He made a fast movement to his pocket with his right hand and suddenly the gleam of metal was in it. "This is a gun, Thompson," he said. "Don't get any ideas."

"You wouldn't dare use it."

"I'll use it if I have to use it," he said softly. He turned to Moxie. "You go and call Pete. Tell him what's happened. We got to do something. If this dummy goes to the cops it could queer the whole organization."

Moxie jerked a nod and went toward the shack. Fielzer told the stranger to go ahead with his task of changing the license plates. The gun remained trained on me.

Moxie returned soon. He said, "Pete wants us to bring him over. He sounded like he was sore."

Fielzer motioned me to a nearby car. He got in the back seat with me while Moxie took the wheel.

As we wheeled out of the lot, Moxie spoke over his shoulder to Fielzer: "Pete says he doesn't want this guy to know where he's going. Douse him."

Fielzer grunted and jabbed the gun into my ribs. "Down on the floor, Thompson."

I got down on hands and knees. He forced my neck down with a heavy hand and jerked my coat over my head. It completely blinded me.

The car picked up speed and began to take corners. If I had any idea of remembering turns, I abandoned it. Moxie was

doing a first-rate job of confusing me.

FINALLY, the car slowed, turned, went up an incline and stopped, the motor running. There was the sound of a door opening. The car went forward again. It climbed a series of ramps and stopped. Fielzer prodded me with the gun.

"Out," he snapped.

I straightened and half tumbled from the car and looked around. We were in a large garage, obviously on the top floor. In one corner was a built-in office that was lighted.

They took me to the office. A cadaverous looking man sat at a desk. A hat was pulled low over dark eyes. His cheeks were leathery and sunken.

He looked me over slowly, without expression. Then he turned to Fielzer.

"Moxie gave me the whole story over the phone," he said in a dead-sounding voice.

"Listen, Kranz," Fielzer said nervously. "It was a setup. Moxie spotted this car and this guy was a made-to-order patsy. We couldn't miss and—"

"Shut up!" Pete Kranz snapped. "You were told to lay off that stuff. We've got men who handle hot crates. You figured some easy side dough."

"I didn't, Pete! I was going to tell you about it!" Fielzer's voice was frightened. From the corner of my eye I saw Moxie bite at his lips.

"You know what happens if this sucker goes to the cops?" Kranz asked softly. "He spills what he knows and the cops move in all the way from Canada to the border. They get one pry into the deal and they'll get the whole organization."

Fielzer wet his thick lips and turned to me, his heavy shoulders hunched forward in a menacing gesture.

"You go near the cops, Thompson, and I'll work you over until that wife you got in the hospital won't know you! I'll change your face so that—"

Pete Kranz interrupted him curtly, "Fielzer!"

The stocky man stopped talking and looked back at Kranz.

Kranz said, "That's what the boys will want to do to you and Moxie when they hear about this. You're in a spot. Tough talk to this bozo won't help you any. It's too late for that now—much too late."

Moxie spoke, "We pulled a bad one. We know it, Pete. You tell us what to do."

Fielzer wet his lips again. "Anything you say, Pete."

I stood perfectly still, watching, listening, and fear was like ice through me. I watched Kranz's eyes and saw them flick from Moxie to me and then to Fielzer.

"Use your head," he said softly to Fielzer. "You want this punk to get the cops interested in a setup with a million-buck take? The black market and the hot car tie-in? You want a couple hundred of our guys looking for you and Moxie?"

Fielzer's lips took a greyish cast and he swallowed hard. Moxie tried to light a cigarette with trembling fingers. The two were as frightened as I was.

"Yeah . . ." Moxie muttered. "Yeah, Pete. We see what you mean."

"Do you?"

Fielzer nodded. "We'll take care of it. Maybe you got some ideas? We don't want to do anything else wrong. . . ."

Kranz shrugged. "Well, there's the river."

"Sure, sure!" Fielzer nodded hurriedly. "We get it."

"One thing," Kranz said. "Just be sure he's breathing when he goes in. Out—but breathing. If they find him, he's got to have his lungs full of water. That makes it drowning. Suicide. Anything they want to call it."

"Out—but breathing," agreed Fielzer.

Then it hit me. Until that second it was like a dream. Now I realized that they meant to kill me. They were talking about *me*. This wasn't a movie I was watching, or a book I was reading. This was the real thing.

"No!" My voice sounded strange in my ears. "Listen to me! I won't go to the cops. Just let me out of here. I'll never mention any of it to anyone. I swear it."

Kranz slowly shook his head.

"Kranz!" I pleaded. "I've a sick wife in the hospital. I've got to take care of her. You can't do this to us. Do you hear? You're wrong. You don't have to worry about me. I'll never—"

"Get him out of here," Kranz said.

Fielzer reached for my arm with his

thick hand. He had lowered the hand with the gun as he reached for me. I chopped down on it hard with my left and jolted my right into his face. He staggered back.

Moxie sprang at me. I ducked and whirled through the door and sprinted across the darkened garage.

Behind me I heard Kranz's voice become strident: "Get him! Use your guns!"

I DODGED between cars and sprinted for the far wall. They had the ramp cut off from me. A shot cracked. Concrete spattered near my feet. I swerved.

Another shot echoed and I felt the sharp blow of lead tear into the fleshy part of my thigh.

I had to find shelter. I couldn't run much longer.

A door was dark to my left. I flung myself through it and slammed the door. There was a bolt. I fumbled as I shot it into place.

A bullet thudded into the door and I jerked back. There had been a metallic sound as the bullet hit. The door was constructed of metal common to concrete, fireproof buildings. It opened outwards. It would be almost impossible for them to ram it in.

Something dug into my back from the wall. I felt behind me and found a light switch. I flipped it and looked around in the sudden glare of overhead lights.

I was in a storeroom. The place was lined with shelves laden with car accessories: bumpers, lights, horns, radios, bumper guards, batteries.

At one side was a window with wire glass and a steel frame. I crawled across to it. My leg was numb and blood was beginning to trail behind me. I raised the window and looked down four floors into an alley and across at the blank stare of a warehouse. I could yell my head off for hours and no one would hear me if I was in the warehouse district.

Sitting down, I got out a pocket knife and slit my trousers to examine the wound. It wasn't bad and I fashioned a compress with a handkerchief and bandaged it with my necktie.

On the other side of the door Kranz was angrily berating Fielzer and Moxie with hard words and even harder threats.

Finally there was a brief silence and then I heard Kranz's voice again: "Moxie, call Blackie. Get him out of bed and over here. He can use the cutting torch. It's the only way we'll get through that door."

"Right away!" Moxie stuttered, and I heard him run toward the office.

"Should I send some more slugs in there?" Fielzer asked nervously.

"No! He's got sense enough to stay out of range. We'll have to go after him. We'll wait for Blackie."

Desperately I examined the room. It was filled with everything a man might want for a car, but nothing to defend himself.

I remembered a movie where a trapped man got help by setting fire to the place, but this was a fireproof building and a fire would only serve to smoke me out.

Maybe there was a telephone! There wasn't.

"My voice wouldn't carry from that window," I thought. "I'd need a fire siren or—"

I stared at the batteries and accessories. It was all there. I could stage a first-class Hollywood premiere!

I WORKED frantically. Somewhere in the city a man named Blackie was dressing and going out to his car to drive to the garage. There was an acetylene torch waiting for him and a door to be opened and a man to be dragged out. That man was me.

As I shoved batteries into place and fought with wire from electrical equipment, I thought of Joan in the hospital, of the way she smiled when I walked into the room, and the plans we had made. We had a life to live together and I had to fight for it.

Finally I was ready. The wires were hooked to the batteries. Eight auto horns were fastened to the open window with clamps I'd found. Spotlights were clamped to the sill, pointed skyward. All that I had to do was touch two sets of bare wires together.

Outside I heard a car grind up the long, winding ramp. Blackie was arriving.

I touched the bare wires together.

Inside the room it sounded like the trumpets of Judgment Day as the horns burst into raucous sound. Outside, the spotlights sent beams far upwards into the night like white searchlight fingers from a battleship.

I kept the wires pressed together in the tumult and waited.

I assumed there was shouting and noise on the other side of the door. I couldn't hear it. All I could hear was the shriek of eight horns.

I stood by the window and looked out. Suddenly a car swept into the alley and jerked to a stop. Two uniformed men sprang out and flashlights swept up the building to me.

The wires came apart and the silence was almost painful.

"I'm shot," I yelled. "I need help. Be careful—there are four of them with guns!"

One of the cops yelled, "What goes on up there . . . ?"

There was no time for explanations. "Stickup!" I cried. "I'm the watchman. Hurry!"

It was enough. One of them darted to the car. I saw the long, two-way radio antennas and knew that the alarm was being radioed to headquarters. Within a couple of minutes the shriek of converging sirens wailed in the night.

A police doctor was finishing with the bandage on my thigh and I had finished my story to the police lieutenant who sat in the chair Kranz had occupied.

Kranz, Fielzer, Moxie and the man named Blackie were downstairs awaiting a patrol wagon.

A uniformed cop came into the office and spoke to the lieutenant.

"We've checked, sir. The place is full of hot cars. Over half the ones we have on our lists. Out-of-state cars, too. This looks big."

The lieutenant nodded and gave rapid instructions. He looked back at me.

I said, "About the one I took from the lot, Lieutenant, I didn't know I was stealing it and—"

"Forget it," he grinned. "This is the kind of break a cop dreams about. The mayor will probably send you a letter of thanks!"

The doctor told me to stand up and find out if I could walk. I stood up hesitantly. I could.

"I still think I ought to take you to the hospital," he said.

I started for the door and shook my head. "No, thanks, Doc. I've already got a date at the hospital."

I took another experimental step and then, in sincere reverence, I added, "Thank God!"

BARRACUDA!

By TALMAGE POWELL

●

Everything was ready for Nero Bristline's fishing trip in that barracuda-infested sea: for trolling —tackle . . . for warmth—liquor . . . for companionship—the lovely Madeline . . . and for bait—me!

●

I LIKED my office. Other people wouldn't have, but I did. You couldn't see anything much from it, except a scabby brick wall, because the office opened on an airshaft. That's unusual in Miami. Most Miami offices are built to catch the sun and balmy wind, and from them you can see the deep, blue, tropic sky.

And it was to this office, this one dark hole in the sunny city, this place that contained a desk, two chairs, and a bank of filing cabinets—it was to this place that Nero Bristline came.

I sat behind the desk when the door opened, looking at him a moment. He was a big creature, so fat he was gross; he was sweating, and on his huge, flabby face it

"You haven't got the guts to shoot, Bristline," I said.

looked like oil. He was puffing a little from his climb up the creaking stairs. But he was wearing a tropical suit and Panama hat and built-up shoes that looked like money, and plenty of it. I decided he was welcome.

His small gaze had paused on the filing cabinets. The rest of the office furniture was scabrous and old, but the cabinets were solid steel and new, as if they contained something very important, worth a fortune.

"It's not a very nice office, is it?" I said.

"No."

"But you came here. I like that. I like everything about my office. In the first place, it brought me luck. I believe in luck. In the second place, I enjoy knowing that all about me is the airy, glittering city. In the third place, now that I can afford something better, I enjoy having people like you come to this office. I know you wouldn't come here unless you absolutely had to, unless this was your last straw, and I know that in coming here you are completely dependent on me."

He flushed. "That sounds almost sadistic, Mr. Kane."

"I like to have everything clear from the outset. Come in, please, and close the door. You are Mr. . . .?"

"Bristline. Nero Bristline." He came forward with the stride of a man who is accustomed to beating boards of directors into submission. But as he neared the desk, his step faltered, and as he sat down in the other chair—across the desk—I noticed that he placed his body on the edge of the seat.

"I spent a great deal of time and money getting your name, Mr. Kane."

"It's in the phone book," I said.

He was sweating harder now. His voice dropped. "I know, but just any name wouldn't do. I had to find a name first, then the man. You see? I had to know all about the name."

"I see."

He licked his lips, and his gaze was shying away now. I wanted to laugh in his face. I had seen it so many times before. I had seen so many of them come here, wearing their cloaks of respectability, to ask me to do something for which they didn't have the courage.

"After much expenditure of energy and effort, Mr. Kane, I was finally directed to a Mr. Conover. He said he would call you."

"He did. He said he thought you were okay. Just what is it you want done, Mr. Bristline?"

He dropped his eyes. I could barely hear his hoarse voice: "I want you to murder a man."

I sat looking at him for a moment. I said, "The name on the door says Sam Kane, private detective, not Sam Kane, murderer."

"It amounts to the same thing in your case, doesn't it? I mean . . ." He got fumble-tongued.

"It's all right," I said, "You didn't hurt my feelings."

He wiped his jowls with a silk handkerchief. "Then you'll do it?"

"Murder a man?"

He flinched.

"I never worry about anything," I said. "Any favor I do for a client puts us both in the same light, in the eyes of the law. Who is it?"

"Must I tell you that right now? I wanted to talk, to learn how you'd go about it. I—I'll have to know when it happens."

"I haven't said I would do anything like that yet. I've never done anything like it." I looked him straight in the eye, steadily. "I've never done a dishonest thing in my life. I'm legitimate. I should report you to the police for making a request like this to a legitimate private detective."

He flinched again.

"But I'll give you a chance to explain yourself," I said. "Like a psychiatrist—you can talk it off your chest to me. Understand?"

"Yes." He ran his pink tongue over flabby lips. "I think our positions are clear." He rose. "Will you drop by my house this evening?"

"I'll need cab fare," I said. "About a thousand dollars cab fare—to show me you're in earnest."

We looked at each other a long time. Then he reached for his wallet and laid a thousand-dollar bill on the desk.

"I don't give receipts," I said. "I've never learned to write. District attorneys

—they know how to read. But don't worry about the cab fare. I'm dependable. If I weren't, I wouldn't last a week."

I sat and listened to the stairs creak under his weight as he went down. The stairs sounded more weary than usual today.

BRISTLINE lived on the Beach. I took the Venetian causeway over. I was driving a new eight-cylinder coupe with less than a thousand miles on it. It was much too sleek a car to be a taxi, but I had made no promises to Bristline about the sort of cab I would arrive in.

He was living in a luxurious bungalow set on a small richly landscaped estate, with its own private pool and private strip of beach. I turned in the gate, which must have been left open for me, and saw the sprawling, Spanish outlines of the house. A narrow white driveway curved around through the palms, and as I neared the house, I saw lights in the night out on the water beyond the house. That would be Bristline's private cruiser out there, bobbing at anchor. Everything nice and private; nothing to soil his hands on; everything that money can buy—even murder.

I crossed a flagstone terrace and pressed the chime-button beside the door. Bristline himself opened it.

"Hello, Kane. Come in."

The hallway was vaulted, softly lighted. A long sunken living room was off to our right. Bristline silently led me up the wide stair that rose from the hall. He turned in a door. We were in a study, furnished with mahogany desk, mahogany and leather chairs, bookcases that reached the ceiling. A case in one side of the room held a collection of yachting trophies.

He poured two drinks of brandy from a decanter.

I inhaled the aroma; it was very good brandy.

He began talking about the weather. He sat down at the desk and began fiddling with a pen from the desk set. I let him ramble on. You never know exactly how they're going to act. Some come directly to the point; some talk half the night before getting around to business. But in my business you must never bring up the point yourself; always let them do it.

Finally, Bristline said. "His name is Marcus Zoltan. Do you know him?"

"No, should I?"

"I suppose not. He's always avoided publicity. He has few friends. I doubt if very many people will come to his funeral."

"He won't be in a position to care."

Bristline laughed, down in his fat lungs. It was as insidious as silk. He leaned toward me a little, something unholy, unhealthy, glistening in his face. "Tell me, Kane, how it feels, what it does to you inside, to hire yourself out as a human instrument of death. . . ."

I let his voice trail away. My face felt stiff as stone. "How do you want it to feel?"

"Even your emotions to order?"

"Let's not go into it. I looked you up in Dun & Bradstreet this afternoon, Bristline, right after you left my office."

I didn't like that habit of his, that manner he had of locking his gaze with mine.

I said, "I want fifty thousand dollars to attend to Marcus Zoltan. I want it in small, unmarked bills, with no witnesses."

He started to speak. I said, "It'll have to be that way, for my protection. Then if you ever told anyone you hired me to take care of Zoltan, I'd laugh it out of court. Just your word against mine, and that doesn't constitute proof."

"But fifty thou—"

"Your income is high, over half a million a year. If it isn't worth a month's income to you, it isn't worth a nickel to me. Get this straight. I don't usually go in for this sort of thing. There are less risky ways of making money."

"Such as blackmail, Kane? Or acting as strongarm man when some gambler wants somebody given a beating?"

"You can draw your own conclusions, but you've heard my price. It's got to be that or nothing. If anything goes wrong, I want enough in my sock to skip to S. A. and not have to live like a peon. Get me?"

"All right, Kane."

Our eyes held again. I said, "You still haven't told me why you want Zoltan out of the way."

"Let's say he's a business obstacle."

I reached for the brandy decanter, poured a drink, cut a side glance at Bristline. "You want to get that worry out of your face, see? Don't take it to bed with you. You won't see me again when this is over. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Like politicians, see? And when it's all over, we'll be total strangers to each other. We can both feel safe. We will both know that neither can ever talk without risking his own neck, and that's the best partnership contract I can think of."

"Then I'll call you, Kane. He should arrive in town in about a week. We'll make all the arrangements then. I'll want to know exactly when it happens."

"I know. I'll give you plenty of time to be in a nice gathering of respectable people who will alibi you when it happens. I'll want the fifty grand the day we make the final arrangements."

"No, I won't do that. I'll give you twenty-five then and twenty-five immediately thereafter."

He fastened his gaze on mine again, his eyes like a dead fish's lying on a dock.

"All right," I said. "You can buy it that way."

When I was outside, in the warm night, standing on the terrace alone, I had to pause. For a moment, inside with Bristline as he had been showing me out, I hadn't been sure I could control myself until I was out of his sight. Now I let the trembling ripple over me. I fumbled for a cigarette. I was scared, but over and over I kept thinking, *fifty grand, fifty G's, fifty thousand dollars!* No more grubbing for pennies, Kane! You've hit pay dirt! I thought of all the things fifty thousand dollars could buy and I knew I had been marking time for this. I hadn't known it, but all the time I had been waiting for Nero Bristline to come along.

I walked over to the coupe, opened the door. A shadowy figure was sitting in the far side of the seat. It moved with a soft rustle of rich material. It spoke, "Hello, Sammy."

I HAD never expected to hear that voice again, warm as lazy water. It did a strange thing to me. It turned all the long period of time since I had heard the voice last into a blank. In that instant, it cut back into my life again, like a sleek blade dividing thread, and between the divisions nothing was important.

"Madeline!"

"Get in the car, Sammy. He might be watching from the house to see you drive away."

I got in the car. Over the pale glow of the dash lamp I could see her face—small, lovelier than ever, her eyes shadowed by the long lashes, her lips red and glistening faintly. I could se the dash light catching in her hair, and it was rippling, pale amber wine. She was wearing a dress of some silvery material, and it gave her the appearance of a goddess sheathed in ice.

"Turn around here, Sammy, and don't swing past the front of the house. I wouldn't want him to see me. He doesn't know I got in the car."

"He?"

"Nero. My husband."

I let a bitter little lump form in my chest. "I see. Well, you finally made the grade, didn't you, Madeline? You always said you'd make the grade."

"Only money mattered, Sammy. That's what I wanted. Now I've got it in bushel baskets. And you, Sammy? I've heard that you haven't been doing too bad since you hit Miami."

"I've got it, but in strawberry containers—not bushel baskets."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Not the same cheap punk, Sammy! Not the same gun-crazy little hoodlum!"

"Shut up," I said quietly.

"Sure, Sammy. Okay, so you're not little. You're a big six-footer, and I always did like to feel the ripple of your muscles under my fingertips."

"Then you should have stuck around!"

She laughed; it was throaty, low. "Please, Sammy, no sentiment. Never any sentiment. There's nothing soft about us, is there, Sammy?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure. Maybe there was one soft spot in me, deep down, long hidden.

I was tooling the car down the boulevard now. Traffic was heavy, and the city was blazing with lights. It was a good night, even for Miami, soft, breathless. A night like smoldering dynamite.

I felt her move over and put her head against my shoulder. My hands were slick

on the wheel. I moved away a little.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Sammy? Remember—"

"Baby, you said no sentiment."

"Sorry."

I was quiet a moment. "You sent him to me, Madeline."

"Nero? Well—he needed this business about Zoltan taken care of. I had heard your name whispered around town. I knew you were here, even if you had no idea what had become of me. I didn't exactly send him to you. I simply suggested that he look into the name of Sam Kane."

"Does he know that we ever knew each other?"

"No, Sammy."

"Do you love him?"

The material of her dress rustled softly. "I'm Mrs. Nero Bristline. The very rich Mrs. Bristline. He's good to me."

"Jealous of you?"

"Ummm. Possessive. Sam, let's go to Maxim's."

I tooled the car around the next block, and we headed for Maxim's. When I parked the car, she had turned to me. She was wearing the soft night like a veil of enchantment. I kissed her. It was headier than any drug; it flooded me with weakness.

We got out of the car and went into Maxim's.

Even while they were happening to me, the next few days were like a montage. The sound track was composed of her soft laughter, the sighing of surf on a white beach, the clink of glasses in a dim-lighted nightclub, the weeping of music in the night; the pictures were of her face with its changing moods, her hair, now upswept as she entered a club on my arm, now flowing loose about her shoulders as she made a castle in the sand on the beach, her body lithe and softly tanned against the jet-black of her bathing suit. I don't know where she told Bristline she was going; I don't know what she told him she had been doing. But she evidently handled it. We went places. We were together, but it still had an unreal, breathless quality in my mind—just like a montage.

Then Friday, just after noon, Bristline called me. "I'd like to see you," he said. "I'd like to fish a little this afternoon. We can have drinks and talk on the cruiser. I have plans—and I have twenty-five pieces of paper to give you."

WHEN I got to the Bristline place, a servant answered my ring. He told me that Mr. Bristline was on the cruiser, waiting for me. He would show me the way, but I told him to skip it. I followed a walk around the house. The walk led between flowerbeds that were flamboyant with color, between low hedges laid out in precise patterns and clipped to perfection.

Jutting out into the water was a long, low dock. At the end of it the cruiser was tied, its motor chanting idly. It was a small, sleek boat of white and mahogany and gleaming chrome. Bristline was standing on the deck in whites and a yachting cap, and should have been crisp and neat looking. But he missed that. He was too fat, too sagging. Clothes can do only a limited amount for a man. He was looking at his wristwatch. Then he looked up, saw me. I walked down the pier.

"You're late, Kane."

"Am I?"

Our gazes held for a moment. "All right," he said, "so you're independent. Please get aboard. And, Kane, we'll get around to business in due time. Business often is tiring, even obnoxious. I like to make it as pleasant as possible. Perhaps we can break the bore of business now and then with the pleasure of snagging a good fish and having a drink, eh?"

"If that's the way men with your kind of money do business, it sounds to me."

I stepped on the gently bobbing deck. Bristline started around to the wheel. I followed. Then I stopped. Madeline was sitting aft in a deck chair. She was wearing a gay snatch of playsuit, a kerchief around her hair and colored glasses.

Bristline said, "Oh—Kane, my wife, Madeline. Mr. Kane."

"A pleasure, Mr. Kane."

"Likewise," I said.

Bristline gripped the wheel, and we moved off. I sat down near her and she asked me if I liked fishing, and I said that I didn't in particular, Mrs. Bristline.

I smoked and watched the shoreline recede. The water was very blue, and the sky was so deep and soft it was like a vast

canopy of soft, blue silk above our heads.

Bristline handled the boat well, and the cruiser was seaworthy. The Miami skyline faded in the haze of distance. Madeline mixed drinks, and Bristline told stories. As I listened, as I watched him, I unaccountably began to tighten up inside. The breeze felt less warm and soft. I watched the wake of the cruiser, licked my lips, and said, "Do you always have your wife along when you talk business?"

"She'll go below later and take a nap," Bristline said.

"Yes." Madeline handed me a drink. "Sea air always makes me sleepy, Mr. Kane."

Bristline let the engine idle down. The sea was almost smooth as glass. I set my drink down. Suddenly, I didn't like it. I wished I had told Bristline that I would talk business only in his house. Around us was nothing except that vast sheet of glassy ocean. A single gull wheeled overhead and screamed. I whirled around to face Bristline. He was holding a gun on me. His face was set and ugly.

I kept the lines of my face from cracking. "I don't get it."

"We're going fishing, Kane."

"With a gun?"

"No, with bait—you."

I looked out over the water.

"It's barracuda water, Kane. You know about barracudas, don't you? The killer fish. Like you, Kane. You're a human barracuda."

I looked at Madeline. She was standing very close to the rail. She was still wearing the colored glasses, and I could see nothing of what she might be feeling.

I opened and closed my hands. My throat was dry, my forehead hot.

"I'm going to put you on the end of a line, Kane. A small, stout hawser," Bristline said. "Then you're going overboard—barracuda bait! They can slice to the bone, Kane, so neatly the flesh is laid away and the bone polished!"

I didn't ask him how he was going to do all this. He could make me turn around—he had the gun, not me—he could slug me, and when I came out of it, I'd be barracuda bait.

"Why?" I said. "Why are you doing this?"

His face set in merciless lines, he barely moved his lips to speak. "You're going to talk, Kane. You're going to tell me enough, sign papers enough for them to put you behind bars for the rest of your life. You're going to talk—or end up in the barracudas' bellies!"

I shuddered.

"You will remember her, Kane. Her name was Mrs. Lawrence Malone. You were blackmailing her. She jumped from a twelfth-story window. She was my daughter, Kane, by my first marriage. Her mother and I parted many years ago, and her mother took the child to Europe to raise. I never saw her for years and she didn't bear my name—but she was my daughter!

"I swore I'd get you, Kane. I've worked months on it. You didn't know. But you had been smart all along the line. I could get nothing definite on you, nothing that would stand up in court. But now you're going to pay, Kane!"

"But what if it wasn't me who blackmailed her!" I said. "What if you're doing this to an innocent man?"

"You're not innocent. I know it, you know it. The police know it; even a jury might know it in their hearts with the information and evidence I could show, but that same evidence isn't the kind to convict legally."

I KNEW by his eyes that nothing I could say would do any good. But I wasn't going to turn my back on him. I wouldn't go out that way. I took a slow step toward him.

"Stand back, Kane!"

"You haven't got the guts to shoot, Bristline."

But he had. He squeezed the trigger and the sound of the gun popped out over the water. I felt the bullet skin my ribs, and I staggered back. Then I saw a flash of tanned skin, the glint of sunlight on colored glasses. I heard a crash, an outcry, and Bristline, too, was reeling back. Madeline had hurled the heavy silver cocktail shaker. It had struck him in the temple. Before he could recover, I was on him. We wrestled over the gun. I got it out of his fingers. I could hear myself whimpering. I was blinded by the heat and sunlight. The thought of flashing barracudas ripped through my mind, and

cold fury seized me. I shot him. I saw his body sag down as his fat fingers clutched at his stomach.

Then the silence came back, broken only by the interminable lazy slap of water against the boat.

"You've killed him, Sammy!" I heard her cry.

I didn't look at her. I stood crouching over him, panting breath in and out, my mind cooling. I felt sick in my stomach, and I knew this was a jam. I cursed myself for that one moment of blind madness during which my finger had jerked on the trigger. But there was no backing water now. I had to get rid of him. I grasped him under the armpits, dragged him to the rail, toppled him into the water. I saw the red stain broaden a little in the water; I saw his fat face and glazed eyes through the film of water as he sank. Then I tore my gaze away. I was afraid I might see the flash of marine bodies if I kept looking.

I wrapped my fingers around the wheel, kicked the engine to life. We began moving away, back toward land, and she came over to me. She didn't have the colored glasses on now, and her arm was warm and soft as it slipped gently around my neck.

"Sam," she breathed huskily. "I didn't know. Not about his daughter. He kept that secret from even me. I didn't know what he was planning to do. But when I saw him standing there with the gun on you, I knew I couldn't let him. I knew how much I loved you, Sam. Kiss me, Sam."

I kissed her; the boat started in a broad, crazy circle. We broke apart, and I brought the cruiser back on course.

I saw her flashing smile. "Together now, Sam. Always. An accident—we had an accident out here, didn't we?—and poor Nero fell overboard!"

"Yes," I said, "it was just an accident."

A little later, with her face thrown up to the breeze, she walked toward the prow. She stood there, drinking in the sun, the wind rippling through her hair. Feeling her power. I thought, *feeling her new freedom!*

Because I knew she was lying. She would not tell them it had been an accident. She would tell them that she hadn't known the kind of business Bristline and I were going to talk over. When she had discovered it out on the water, she would say, she had tried to keep anything from happening. But I had got the gun, shot Bristline, and she had persuaded me that she wouldn't tell, until she got back to the safety of shore. Looking at her, they would believe that she could have persuaded me to do that. With her legs crossed on a witness stand she could doom me. She would tell almost the whole truth—and nothing I could do would shake her story.

It had been her all the time. She had known about Bristline's daughter. She had sent him to me. Her fine touch was there in every detail. She had been leading to one thing—the death of a fat, gross, possessive husband. She had youth. He had money. But the money was no good without her freedom, without being rid of him.

And a guy named Sam Kane had been a tool in her hand. Now the tool must be gotten out of the way, because as long as I was around and Bristline's death was between us, she still didn't have that freedom.

I looked at her up there, facing the wind. I thought of the past, and it was a dark, tortuous thing; I remembered the way her eyes changed and how sometimes she looked almost like a little girl asking for candy. I remembered the sand castle she had built on the beach. And I remembered the feeling of her soft arms around me. All that I remembered.

I knew I couldn't escape this time. I might keep out of the hands of the police for a while by running like hell when I hit shore. But I knew I couldn't escape this other thing, this hollowness inside of me like a piece of bare, rich ground that should have grown something but that had never been planted.

So there I was, raising the gun at her back—Sam Kane just doing another job, Sam Kane just making sure a witness didn't live to tell. Sam Kane, the toughest lad in the state of Florida, with his target blurred and swirling crazily through the hot, bitter tears in his eyes. . . .

HOMICIDAL HICCUP

Probably Bonny laughed and kidded a lot while she was up in the suite practising on the cork target with the little darts.

Walt Maybree had to go, Johnny Howard decreed. . . . And when bombs and bullets failed, Johnny pulled the last trick out of his sure-death grab-bag: a sweet little, deadly little, redhead. . . .

By JOHN MacDONALD

YOU SAY you've been reading the series of articles in the Baker City *Journal* about how Mayor Willison cleaned up the city?

Brother, those articles are written for the sucker trade—meaning no offense, you understand.

Oh, I'll admit that the city is clean now—but not because of Willison. Willison is a cloth-head. He doesn't even know how Baker City got cleaned up. Being a politician, he's glad to jump in and take credit, naturally.

That's right. I know exactly how it happened, and it isn't going to be printed in any newspapers, even if I am a reporter.

You spring for a few rounds of bourbon and I'll give it to you—just the way it happened.

You know about Johnny Howard. I don't pretend to understand him, or the guys like him. Maybe something happens when they're little kids, and by the time they get grown up, they have to run everything.

Nice-looking guy, in a way. Lean and dark and tall. But those grey eyes of his could look right through you and out the other side. He came into town five, six years ago. Just discharged after three months in the Army. Heart or something. Twenty-six, he was then. Nice dresser. Sam Jorio and Buddy Winski were running the town between them. Anyway, Johnny Howard went to work for Sam Jorio. Two months later I hear talk that they're having some kind of trouble and that is ten days before Sam Jorio, all alone in his car, goes off that cliff just south of town. Burned to nothing. Nobody can prove it isn't an accident, but there's lots of guessing.

With the boss gone, Buddy Winski tried to move in and take over Sam's boys. But he didn't figure on Johnny. He met Johnny at the bar of the Kit Club on Greentree Road and Johnny busted his beer bottle on the edge of the bar and turned Buddy Winski's face into hamburg. When Buddy got out of the hospital, he left town. There wasn't anything else to do. All his boys had teamed up with Johnny Howard.

Inside of a year Johnny not only had everything working smooth as glass in town, but he had things organized that Sam Jorio and Buddy Winski hadn't even thought of. Take a little thing like the treasury pools. Syndicates are always trying to move in on a town this size. Buddy and Sam used to each have their own. Not Johnny. He folded up Sam's pool and Buddy's pool and let the syndicates come in. He gave them protection in return for two cents on every two-bit ticket. He made more out of it than Winski and Jorio ever thought of.

Another thing. No flashy cars for Johnny. No, sir. A little old black sedan with special plates in the body and special glass in the windows. That was Johnny. No going into the clubs, even the two that belonged to him, with a big gang and a batch of fancy women. Johnny had all his parties in the big suite on the top floor of the Baker Hotel. All kinds of wine. Good musicians.

And, of course, Bonny was always with him. Always the same girl. Bonny Gerlacher is the right name. Bonny Powers she called herself.

Five-foot-two on tiptoe with ocean-color eyes, dark red hair and a build you wanted to tack on the wall over your bed.

Twenty-three or so and looked sixteen.

Nobody messed with Bonny. And kept on living. Not with Johnny Howard around.

WELL, things went along for a few years, and I guess Johnny was filling up safety-deposit boxes all over this part of the country with that green stuff. Johnny and Bonny. He was smart. Nobody could touch him. Estimates on his personal take went as high as a million and a half a year. He paid taxes on the net from the two clubs. Nothing else. The Feds smelled around for a long time, but they couldn't find anything.

The way he kept on top was by cracking down on anybody who stepped out of line so hard and so fast that it gave you the shivers.

Then Satch Connel got sick and the doc told him to retire and go to Florida if he wanted to live more than another half-hour.

Satch Connel ran a store next to the big high school. And he gave his regular payoff to Johnny Howard. Howard's boys kept Satch supplied with slot machines for the back room, reefers for the kids, dirty pictures and books. Stuff like that. I don't think Johnny Howard's end of the high school trade ran to more than three hundred a week. Peanuts to a guy like Johnny Howard.

So Satch sold out and a fellow named Walter Maybree bought it. This Maybree is from out of town and he has the cash in his pants and he buys it.

The same week he takes over, he tosses out the pinball machines and the punch boards and the other special items for the high school kids. You see, this Maybree has two kids in the high school. It give him a different point of view from what

Satch had. With Satch, nothing counted.

This Maybree paints the place inside and out and puts in a juke box and a lot of special sticky items at the soda bar and pretty soon it is like a recreation room you can maybe find run by a church.

Johnny Howard sends a few boys over to this Maybree, but Walt Maybree, being fairly husky, tosses them out onto the sidewalk. If that was all he did, maybe Johnny would have let the whole thing drop. But, no. Maybree writes a letter to the paper and the stupid paper lets it get printed and it says some pretty harsh things about a certain racketeer who wants him to cheat the school kids and sell them dope and filth.

Some of the wise boys around town talk to Johnny Howard and Johnny says, in that easy way of his, "Maybree'll either play along or stop breathing."

You got to understand about a statement like that. Once Johnny makes it, he has to follow through. If he doesn't, every small fry in town will figure Johnny is losing his grip and they'll try to wiggle out from under and maybe the organization will go to hell.

So, being in the line of business he's in, once Johnny Howard makes a statement like that, he has to do exactly like he says.

It would have been like pie. A shot from a car or even a ride into the country, except that a number of citizens are tired of Johnny Howard and they get to Maybree and convince him that he is in trouble. The next thing, Maybree's wife and kids leave town with no forwarding address and the talk is that when the heat's off they'll come back and not before.

Walter Maybree moves a bunk into the back of the store, so there is no chance of catching him on the street. A whole bunch of square citizens get gun licenses before Johnny can get to the cops to stop the issuing of them, and they all do guard duty with Walt Maybree.

Business goes on as usual and Maybree has a tight look around his mouth and eyes and without it being in the paper, all of Baker City knows what's going on and are pulling for Maybree. That's the trouble with ordinary citizens. They sit on the sidelines and cheer, but only once in a blue moon is one of them, like Maybree, out there in front with his guard up.

The bomb that was tossed out of a moving car didn't go over so good. The boys in the car were in a hurry, so the bomb bounced off the door frame instead of going through the plate glass window. It busted the windows when it went off, but it didn't do any other damage. At the corner, the sedan took a slug in the tire and slewed into a lamp post and killed the driver. The other guy tried to fight his way clear and took a slug between the eyes.

The next day Johnny Howard was really in trouble. His organization began to fall apart right in front of his face and everybody in the know was laughing at him because a punk running a soda shop was bluffing him to a standstill.

I can't tell you how I found out about this next part, but Johnny spends two days thinking and then he gets hold of Madge Spain who keeps the houses in line, and gives her some orders and she shows up at the Baker Hotel with three of her youngest gals.

Johnny looks them over carefully, but they won't do because they look too hard and no amount of frosting on the cake is going to make any one of them look like a high school kid. Their high school days are too far behind them.

But he knows the idea is good and he is doing a lot of brooding about it and he has the dope he wants from Doc Harrington, one of his boys, who is sort of an amateur physician. He has the method all worked out, but nobody who can do it.

Bonny is worried about him and finally she gets him talking and he tells her all about his plan and she says that the whole thing is simple. *She'll* do it.

YOU'VE got to understand that in their own funny way they love each other. It just about makes Johnny sick to think of his Bonny killing anybody, because that is not woman's work. And maybe Bonny wouldn't normally knock anybody off, but because it is her Johnny who is in this mess, she will wiggle naked over hot coals to get him out of it.

The plan isn't bad. As soon as Maybree dies, all this trouble Johnny is having dies with him. It doesn't matter much how Maybree gets it, as long as he does.

This Doc Harrington has got hold of some curare. It is a South American poison and they use it in this country in small doses to make convulsions ease up when they give people shock therapy. It paralyzes muscles. Jam a little bit in the blood stream and it will paralyze the heart action. *Poof!* Like that. Quick as a bullet.

The bodyguards that are protecting Walt Maybree during business hours are on the lookout for hard characters who look like they might rub Maybree out in a direct way. Johnny Howard figures they will not be on the lookout for high school gals.

For the next two days he has Bonny practising with a soda straw and these little wooden darts he has fixed up. They just fit in a soda straw. A needle on one end and paper things on the other to make them fly right.

Walt Maybree works behind his own soda fountain.

The idea is that Bonny goes in there as a high school girl and she has the little dart with the curare on the end in her hand. She sits at the fountain and tucks the dart in the end of the soda straw, puts it up to her lips and puffs, sticking the little dart into the back of Maybree's hand, or better yet, his throat.

When he keels over, she goes out with the crowd.

Probably Bonny laughed and kidded a lot when she was up in the suite practising on the cork target with the little darts. Probably Johnny Howard kidded back, but neither of them must have thought it was very funny. To Johnny Howard it was okay to rub out the competition with hot lead, but sending your gal out to kill somebody with a blow gun is something else indeed.

Anyway, the pressure on Johnny was getting worse every day and his boys were mumbling and it was only a question of time until somebody turned hero and blasted Johnny.

On the day that was set, Bonny went in her black dress, and her high heels and her dark red hair piled high on her head and unlocked the door to the room she had rented near the high school. The little dart with the sticky stuff on the needle end was wrapped in tissue paper and was in a little box in her purse. She had a suitcase with her.

The black dress fitted snugly on Bonny's curves. She took off the dress and the nylons and the high-heeled shoes and put on scuffed, flat moccasins and a shortish tweed skirt and a sloppy sweater. She let that wonderful dark red hair fall around her shoulders and she tied a scarf thing around her shining head.

She had school books with her. She took them out of the suitcase, held them in her arm and looked in the chipped mirror over the oak bureau. Carefully she smiled. Bonny the high school lass. But with too much makeup. She swabbed all the makeup off and put back just a little. It looked better.

Her knees were shaking and her lips felt numb. Her heart was fluttering. No woman can go out to commit murder without something taking place inside her.

One little thing had to be added. She took the big purse she was leaving behind, took out the half-pint flask that Johnny Howard had given her two years before, and tilted it up to her lips. The raw liquor burned like fire, but it steadied her down. That was what she wanted.

It had all been timed just right. She left the room, carrying the books, and walked to the high school. She went in the door, and, when she got halfway down the hall, the noon whistle went off and the doors opened and the hall filled with kids.

Bonny felt funny until she saw that she wasn't being noticed. She went right on through the building and out the other door and became part of the crew that stormed the gates of Walt Maybree's Drug Store.

Between the thumb and first finger of her right hand she held tightly the little messenger of death.

The liquor was warm in her stomach, and she made an effort not to breathe in anybody's face. She was a little late to get a seat at the counter, and so she waited, quietly and patiently, and while she waited she thought of Johnny Howard. It was only by thinking of Johnny that she could go through with the whole thing.

When there was a vacant stool, she edged in, piled her books on the counter,

made her voice higher, her eyes wider, and ordered what she had heard one of the other kids order, "A special milkshake."

She selected a straw out of the metal container near her, peeled the paper off it and waited. Maybree was down at the other end of the counter and a boy with a pimply face made her milkshake and put it in front of her. It was "special." It contained two kinds of ice cream, a handful of malt and an egg.

Bonny dipped her straw into it and sucked up the sweet, heavy mixture. She kept her eye on Maybree. He began to move up toward her. She pinched her straw so that it was useless, selected a fresh one and stripped the paper off it. With a deft, practised gesture, she slipped the little dart, point first, into the end of it.

She lifted it to her lips.

Maybree strolled down near her and stood still, his hand braced on the inside edge of the counter.

It was thus that he glanced at the very good-looking high school girl with the sea-colored eyes. He heard an odd sound, saw those sea-colored eyes glaze, and he gasped as she went over backwards, her pretty head striking the asphalt tile of the floor with a heavy thud, her dark red hair spilling out of the bandanna when the knot loosened. She was dead even as she hit the floor.

THAT'S WHY I get a bang out of the mayor claiming to have cleaned up this town. Hell, he couldn't have cleaned it up if Johnny Howard had been running things. When the mayor started his clean-up, Johnny Howard was gone, and weak sisters were trying to climb into the vacated saddle.

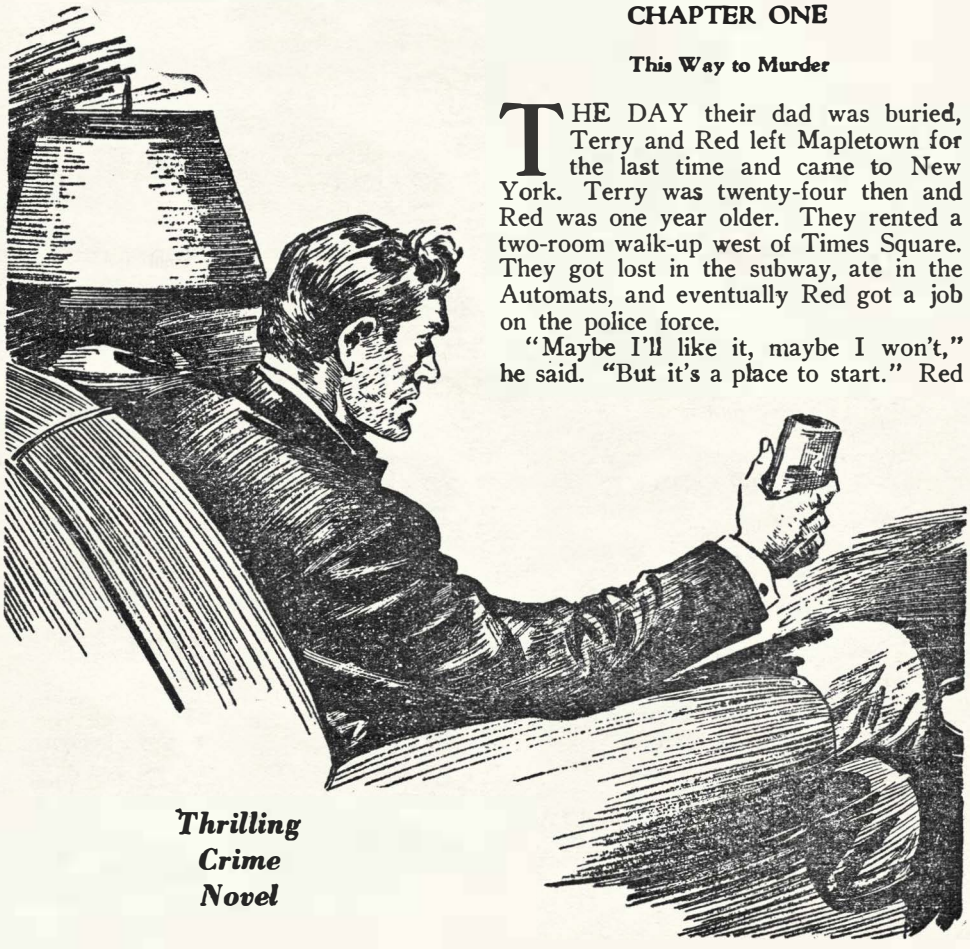
Yeah, Johnny Howard disappeared that same day that Bonny died. They didn't locate him for five days. They found him in that furnished room that still held Bonny's usual clothes. The landlady had been hearing a funny noise. She found Johnny Howard on his hands and knees going around and around the room, butting his head into the wall now and then. He told them he was looking for Bonny. They've got him out in the state sanitarium now, giving him shock treatments, but they say it'll never work with him.

That's right. Bonny made a mistake. Just one mistake. You see, she didn't realize that by taking that huge slug of bourbon and then drinking half of that sticky milkshake she'd signed her own death warrant. They found the little dart imbedded in the inside of her lower lip.

You can't mix bourbon and milkshake without getting a terrible case of hiccups.

THE CRIMSON NET

Everything he had, Terry owed to his fabulous brother, Big Red. . . . So when Big Red committed murder, it was only natural for Terry to show his gratitude by driving Big Red down the killers' road, right up to the sign that flashed in the headlights: "Dead End."



Thrilling Crime Novel

CHAPTER ONE

This Way to Murder

THE DAY their dad was buried, Terry and Red left Mapletown for the last time and came to New York. Terry was twenty-four then and Red was one year older. They rented a two-room walk-up west of Times Square. They got lost in the subway, ate in the Automats, and eventually Red got a job on the police force.

"Maybe I'll like it, maybe I won't," he said. "But it's a place to start." Red

Terry sounded like someone explaining something to a child. "Red, you can't go around just . . . killing people, and get away with it!"

By

FRANCIS K. ALLAN

was bigger than Terry by three inches and thirty pounds. His hair was red and curly, and his eyes were brown. He had a deep voice. There was something restless about him—something hard and in a hurry.

Terry took longer. But one day he came home and told Red. Red choked. "An usher in a theater! You mean, wearing a monkey suit and leading people around with a flashlight?"

Terry smiled faintly. "It's a place to start learning."

"Learning what?" Red demanded blankly.

"How to write plays."

That was the first year. Red stayed with the police force. Terry wrote a couple of things. Nothing happened, but Andresson started liking him and made him assistant stage manager. Then, late in the fall of the next year, Andresson did a switch that sent him to Hollywood for all the money in the world, and he took Terry with him. There was a party in somebody's apartment that last night, and Terry brought a girl named Carol Warren. She was a young actress and beautiful as a clear spring morning. Her hair and skin were suntan-gold and her eyes were brown with lights of gold in them. She'd been in New York only a few months and Terry had just met her.

Big Red was at this party. They were calling him Big Red now. He'd gotten two promotions. His voice was deeper. There was a shaggy leonine handsomeness about him, and he was starting to wear good clothes. People looked at him, and they remembered Big Red Bailey. And when it was time for Terry to get his train, he told Big Red to take care of her and he'd be back some day.

The day he came back, over a year later, Big Red met him. His face was craggy with laugh wrinkles. His hair was almost beautiful in its lion-mane way. They got into his car—a big grey car—and drove uptown, up the East Side. The doorman at the apartment building said he'd take care of the car. Red took Terry up to his place on the ninth floor. Terry took a long look. Grey-blue carpeting covered the floor. There was a terrace beyond the long windows, and beyond the terrace was the East River. There were oil paintings on the wall. It was, Terry thought, like movie sets he'd been seeing. Finally he looked at Red.

"The police department really takes care of its boys."

Red shook his head. "I left the force right after you went west. I opened my own agency. New York needed it. Some place where ladies could walk in without messing up their ermine, and men didn't hide their faces."

Terry looked again. "I didn't know it was such a good pitch."

"It depends, Terry. Just like everything else in life depends." He pulled a cord. A gloomy-faced butler appeared. "Let's have a drink to prove you're home. God, I'm glad to see you! A hundred times I started to write, but . . . hell, I never could sit down and write letters. But I always thought about you. A town this big, no matter how many people you've got around you, you get so damned lonely. You wish the hell—huh? Oh, give us a couple of bourbons, Harry."

Terry had a feeling of make-believe and fraud. All of this was too tricky. Something was wrong behind the mirrors. He took the drink and smiled at Red, trying to shake off the feeling. This was homecoming, he told himself. This was New York again, and he had a play in his suitcase. If he could find the money to produce it. If . . .

"There's just one more thing. I'm going to throw it now, Terry," Red said slowly. "Look at me. Remember Carol Warren?"

"Yes. I remember very— Why?" Something was wrong in Red's eyes.

"I hope this doesn't hurt. I couldn't help it. She—we're married."

After a moment Terry took a sip of his drink and time moved on again. "That's okay. That's good. Congratulations, Red. I hadn't seen her more than twice." And he remembered to make himself smile.

Red's face eased. "Thanks. It was lousy, maybe. Sometimes I'm a lousy guy. She wasn't like anybody I ever met before. I never meet people like that myself. It takes somebody like you. Somebody with class, I guess, to ease the way for me. I—oh, hell!" He put his arm around Terry's shoulder. "God, I'm glad you're home. I get so damned lonely

sometimes. I—let's get another drink."

TERRY looked at the river and he felt cold inside. The happiness of this day was gone. Then Red was talking again. "Business has been good where I've been, Terry, and somehow I always kind of think of us as partners. I'm the bricks and you're the velvet. I'll make money, but I'll never have the class. I know it. I know all about old Red. But what I started to say, I've had my hand in some deep pockets and I kept a slice for you. It's there in the bank, whenever you say."

Terry started to say something. Then he knew it was hopeless. He would only make Red sad. So he smiled and said thanks, thanks a million. Then Red finished his drink and said he had to run down to his office. Carol would be back from wherever she was soon. Terry's stuff was all put away in that green bedroom over there. And don't get any crazy ideas about moving. This was where he was going to stay. Hell, with all these rooms, he could fix up a whole suite, any way he wanted!

After Red had gone, Terry stood there alone in the magnificent and yet somehow phony room, and a strange sensation of disaster passed through him. This, all of this, he thought slowly, was a dangerous paradise. It would not crumble slowly; it would not fade gently. It was a tower that would crash in violence and tragedy.

He shook his shoulders restlessly. He wanted to get out into the warm sun. He wanted to breathe where the air was fresh. He changed suits in the green bedroom and took the elevator down. He walked and heard the roar of the subways beneath his feet. He ducked a bouncing handball on a sidestreet and the kids jeered at him. He walked west and across Times Square. He stopped in front of the Wilshire Theater, where he'd gotten his first job. It seemed such a long time ago.

He was standing there when the side door opened and a short, plump man with a cane came hurrying out. It was Carl Fredricks, the song writer. Terry waved and said hello. Fredricks paused, blinked, then smiled. He wanted to know when Terry had gotten back.

"Just this afternoon," Terry said. "I'm taking my first look. I haven't made any plans. I'm staying at my brother's place just now."

"Big Red's?" And Terry saw something happen in the depths of Fredricks' eyes. The warmth of the man's face departed. He glanced at his watch. "Well, good to see you. Let's have a drink some day." He didn't mean it, Terry knew. He stared after him, then shook his shoulders again. He walked slowly on until he found himself at Verdi's Bar on Forty-ninth. Through the window he could see the glossy pictures on the wall, and he remembered the few times when he had sat here with Carol. Always over in that corner booth near—

His thoughts halted. For there, in that same booth, Carol was sitting alone. An untouched martini was in front of her. Slowly, Terry dropped his cigarette and opened the door. He crossed the room.

"Waiting for someone?" he asked quietly. She glanced up with a start, and a flush started over her face, then faded. "Hello, Carol."

"Hello, Terry," she said in a low voice. "I . . . had a feeling you would come in here."

He sat down and ordered a burbon. She was more beautiful than he had remembered, he realized, but there was a weariness beneath her beauty. She looked as if she hadn't slept much for many weeks.

"You've seen Red?" she asked.

"I saw him." Terry struck a match and lit their cigarettes. As she bent over, the flame danced richly in her golden hair. She raised her head and looked at him steadily.

"I can't explain why I did it. I don't understand anything these days, Terry. I—I'm sorry." And in that moment before she stopped looking at him, Terry realized that she was a lonely and frightened girl. And his mind went back and thought of Red's dangerous paradise. Carol felt it, too. She had lived in it, shared it, and she was afraid.

Scarcely thinking, Terry touched her hand. "What has Red been doing? What's his game?"

"I don't know. I don't know." She ran her fingers through her hair. "He started this private detective agency.

Since then everything has been like—like a train without anyone to stop it. He's making so much money. So terribly much that it couldn't be right. And he knows people who are . . . wrong somehow. I can't explain, but you'll see. They're going to be there again tonight. And he doesn't tell me. He just smiles and kisses me and tells me never to worry, that Big Red's running this circus. The people I used to know almost never call me. When I see them, they're in a hurry to get away. I don't know. I just don't know," she repeated desperately.

Terry looked at her a long time, then finished his drink.

"I'm so glad you're back," she said. "He thinks you're the most wonderful person in the world. *You* can talk to him. He—he's like a giant baby, Terry, and he wants all the toys in the world. Then none of them are the exact answer and he goes on hunting and driving, always looking for something he'll never find. I'm only a toy to him. I know it now." She shook her head slowly. Terry looked away because it hurt him to see her eyes at that moment.

The sun was gone. It was after six. "Let's have one more drink and go," Terry said. He added after a long moment, "I think that I'll hunt an apartment tomorrow. I can't stay there."

Their eyes met and she nodded. "No." They both understood.

THE PHONE was ringing when they entered the apartment. Harry, the butler, answered and then nodded to Terry. "For you, sir."

"But who—" Terry started. It was Big Red.

"For the record, if anyone's listening, this could be a guy named Joe," Red said swiftly. "Think of a reason to take a walk, and take it to the Templar Hotel on West Seventy-second Street. Room 712. This is on the quiet side, but in a hurry. Thanks."

There was a click then, and Terry hung up. His eyes met Carol's. "Joe. Joe Williamson," he said. "He's leaving town and wants us to have one drink. I won't be long."

Carol gave him a wry look. "Sure. And tell Joe hello for me."

The Templar Hotel was massive and adorned with soot-stained nudes that supported the balconies. Red opened the door of 712. There was a metallic look in his eyes and he talked fast and softly.

"Sorry to pull this the first night you're home, but it won't take long. What I want is like this: I'm leaving my billfold here on the dresser. When I get out, call room service and order some beer. When the kid comes, stay in the bath with the shower running. Yell at him to get the money and keep the change. In twenty minutes from now, a man will knock. You're still in the bath. Just in case, keep the door locked. Tell him to sit down and have a beer. Keep the shower going loud. I'll be back in half an hour. I'll come into the bath from the other side; I've got the whole suite, and you can go out that way. Got it, now?"

"Not entirely. In fact, not at all. What's the reason—"

"Terry, time is passing. This has got to spin fast. Tomorry I'll tell you. We'll have a drink and laugh like hell about it. But do your piece for me tonight, and thanks, kid." He was gone before Terry could get in another word. Terry slammed the door and got mad, yet even in fury he called room service and ordered the beer. He went into the bath and started the shower roaring. It was 7:10. He heard the boy knock. He called to him to take the money. Fifteen minutes passed and another knock came. A man called out. Terry told him to sit down and have a beer; he'd be out in a few minutes.

He leaned against the wall and stared out at the twilight beyond the window. This was a hell of a way to spend the first night back, he thought. But Terry's first anger was gone. Now he was filled with the same restless anxiety, the same premonition of disaster that was rushing beyond control. He was afraid. Not for himself, precisely. He was afraid for Red. Red was moving too fast. Red wasn't that smart.

Silently the other door opened and Red was back. Perspiration beaded his face and his eyes were dark and hot. He was panting softly.

"Thanks. Thanks all the way, Terry. You go this way. Easy and no sound. I'll be seeing you at the apartment in a

little while." He pushed Terry out. Slowly Terry went down the stairs to a cab. With all his heart he was wishing he hadn't done this thing tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

Bound by Blood

WHEN he reached the apartment, several people were there. He remembered Carol had mentioned it, but there was suddenly nothing he wanted less than a party. A blonde was playing the piano and two men were singing. The butler was running cocktails out of the kitchen. Carol came toward him from across the room, and their eyes locked in a private understanding.

"He's all right? Nothing's wrong?" she whispered.

"He's all right." Terry felt as if he were telling a lie. More people came in. Someone broke a glass. The men were singing very loud. Another girl said she wanted to play the piano. Terry moved away and stood by the window while he studied these people, friends of Red. There was something about them that was alike in all of them. It was a hardness. A watching, wary expression about their faces. They were people who trusted no one, scarcely themselves. When they laughed, the laughter never dented the surface. They were tense. Terry disliked them wholly. He watched Carol.

She moved around, smiling a fixed smile, pausing here and there, but never for long. She hates them too, Terry realized. Now and then somebody would wonder where Big Red was.

"Oh, he's working. You know Big Red. There's always a client waiting for Big Red," a man said loudly. Terry saw an icy look of weariness cross Carol's face. The girl at the piano was getting drunk. More glasses were dropped and broken. Terry realized it was almost eleven o'clock; Red still had not appeared. The telephone rang.

"Call for Metcalfe," someone shouted. A tall, stooped man with damp lips and black hair went to answer.

"Got to run," he said when he came back. Terry saw him motion to Carol. She went with him toward the door and out into the hall. When she returned, her face was starkly white. Terry worked his way toward her.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"That was Red's lawyer. Red's in jail. Metcalfe didn't know why or wouldn't tell me. He wouldn't even say where."

Terry felt the sounds of drinking dissolve. Once more he felt as if he were back in the bathroom of the Templar Hotel, waiting for Red and knowing that disaster was on its way. Someone laughed very loud. The girl at the piano fell off the stool. Terry spun around furiously.

"How do you get rid of these people?" he asked Carol.

"You don't," she said.

"The hell you don't!" He strode over to the girl. "Get up! Get out of here! All of you, get the hell out of here before I throw you out! Get!"

Dead silence crawled through the room. The girl pulled herself up slowly. Somebody muttered. A girl giggled. Slowly they moved toward the door. All eyes were fixed on Terry, and hate was in their depths.

"Probably a mistake, kid," a big man said. They were gone. Only the broken glasses, the smoldering cigarettes remained. Carol picked up the stem of a broken glass and dropped it in the wastebasket. After that there was a long silence. Terry did not know she was crying until he saw her trembling shoulders.

He went to her. "What is it? Can I do anything?"

She shook her head and closed her eyes. "It's just that—that it's such a stinking way to live," she sobbed. "It's just like drinking rot-gut on borrowed time."

The chimes rang at the door then, and Terry answered.

"I'm Detective Kirstin," the man said. He was lean and there was a Latin darkness about his intense face. His eyes were black and he gave the impression of smiling sardonically beneath the surface of his lips.

Terry stepped back. "I'm Terry Bailey. This is my sister-in-law, Mrs. Bailey."

Kirstin nodded. He glanced about at the wreckage from the party. He looked curiously at the luxurious room and his eyes twinkled darkly. "You know, I

knew Red when he was a rookie on a beat. He used to say how he was going to hit the big time. Red's a funny guy." He ran a cigarette up and down between his fingers. "But Red's in a little trouble. Not exactly trouble," he corrected lightly, "but he has a peculiar idea about ethics in his business. He won't tell what he does, even when we need to know. I thought somebody here might help me." Abruptly his eyes locked with Carol's, then with Terry's. "Where was Red tonight at, say, 7:30?" he asked suddenly.

"I . . . don't know," Carol stammered slowly.

Kirstin's eyes darted back to Terry's. Terry spoke very carefully, "I don't know. I just got in this afternoon from California. I saw him for a few minutes; then he left." Terry hesitated, but he knew in his heart that he was going to tell a lie for Red; he was going to tell it now, and almost blindly. "He mentioned something about meeting a man at a hotel. The name, I think, was the Temple. The Templar Hotel. Something like that."

TERRY knew from the stony look that entered Kirstin's eyes that his shot in the dark had been right. He knew that Kirstin hated Red and did not want to believe that Red had been at the Templar. Yet there it was, and he kept staring at Terry. At last he smiled.

"Nice memory." His voice was hostile.

"Why are you asking? What has happened?" Carol asked.

"Why, there was a little murder at 7:30 this evening," Kirstin said. "A pretty little thing named Donna Pangborn got choked to death with a towel, up in her apartment in the Duchess Court on East Sixty-ninth. And Donna, funny thing, was a regular client of Red's. Very regular. You see, she was quite a lovely. The cocktail-and-penthouse playboys thought so, anyway. But always they break her heart; they did, that is. Or they smirched her snowy reputation, or they broke beautiful promises. But always, very fortunately, Red was around with his witnesses at those crucial moments. So he got little Donna a couple of fat little settlements—a hundred grand each, it says. Well, maybe Red just was protecting a little girl's honor. I dunno."

He smiled. Terry's fingers twitched. He was starting to hate Kirstin. Kirstin continued:

"Lately Donna's been going with Lonny Basil, the polo and yacht boy whose mother owns the Facrest Diamond, to mention only one. It looks like another hundred-grand pitch is making. But no. Donna actually falls for the yacht kid and spills her story about starting out to shake him down. So Lonny strolls out and gets his own private dick, Jerry Baxter. All this is going to be very quiet—no scandal around the sailing clubs and such. Then comes tonight and Red calls Lonny, saying he wants to meet him privately and talk things over. At the Templar, Red says. Lonny shows up. While this goes on, Donna gets murdered. Well?" He blinked at them sleepily. "Here we've got one with an alibi, don't we? But I never like alibis. Nor did I ever like Red. Lonny's not lying, but neither is Red dumb. There's a set of mirrors in this somewhere. That is strictly my hunch, just as Red is my hunch for the murderer. Red has been hot for a year."

When Kirstin had gone, Terry and Carol looked at each other. Slowly Carol shook her head. "So that . . . was the way he made all the money," she whispered. There was nothing Terry could say. It was late. At 2:30 Carol went to bed. Terry sat in the silence, amid the spoils of the party, and smoked and waited and tried to understand his brother. It came to him then that he had never understood Red. He had liked and loved him and at times felt an undefinable pity for him, but he knew that he didn't understand the workings inside Red at all. He doubted if Red did, either.

Red came home at dawn. A bronze stubble shadowed his jaws and his eyes were tired and haughty. He looked like a powerful animal that had been whipped for hours without any result.

"You didn't need to wait up, Terry," he said softly. Terry rose and followed Red into the kitchen. Red poured a glass of milk and ate great chunks of roast.

"Look at me," Terry said. "Did you kill that girl?"

Red looked up. "Oh. So somebody's been here asking things?"

"A man named Kirstin."

Red laughed with soft fury. "He hates my guts. He'd give his last ten years to pin this on me."

"I asked you a question, Red. Did you kill Donna Pangborn?"

Red looked at him deliberately. "She was a tramp, kid. She was a two-timing, man-crazy little tramp. I had to kill her. She wanted to bust me. You know why? Because I wouldn't marry her. She got sore and worked a shimmy with the playboy. I had to kill her, kid."

Terry tried to control his voice. "Red, people aren't supposed to kill other people." He sounded like someone explaining to a child.

"I had to kill her," Red said. He went on eating. Terry boiled.

"You murdered her. And you used me to make an alibi. I stood in that bathroom for you while you killed her!"

Red blinked at him uncertainly. "But look, kid, I would have done it for you."

"Oh, dear God, Red," Terry said in defeat. It was hopeless. At last it was clear to Terry. Red did not understand. He was a creature of power and love and generosity, of fury and destruction. He was a child, hunting his toys, and as a child, Red's heart had only the faintest knowledge of innocence or guilt.

Terry went to bed. He could not sleep. The sun came up and he heard Carol moving through the apartment, but he lay there trying to think. He felt trapped. They *were* trapped, he realized: he and Carol and Red, all were trapped in the net of Red's guilt. Murder could not be hidden. The thing was done, and here they were. Here they would stay—in the trap, until the inevitable end.

Terry threw back the covers and got up. He was short of breath and he was cold, then hot. He felt that he had to run; to get outside and breathe deeply. But it was no use, he knew. He would never lose the melancholy. He could never escape the fact that Red, his brother, was a killer, living inevitably on borrowed time, while he and Carol kept the wake with him.

CAROL was drinking coffee in the kitchen. Her eyes told him she had scarcely slept. "Have you talked to Red?" he asked.

She shook her head. "He's asleep in the front room." She kept hunting over his face. "He—he did it. I can tell from looking."

Terry sat down and nodded wearily. "He did it. And he says we'll all go to Florida on a party when it's over."

Carol pushed back her cup. Very slowly she put her head on her arms and began to cry in terrible silence. And there was nothing, nothing at all that Terry could do.

At noon Red was still asleep. Terry had to go. Before he had left California, he had made an appointment to have lunch with Gerard Whittle, the producer, and give Whittle his play to read. Whittle was Andresson's friend, and he was Terry's best hope for getting his play produced. Yet, even as he checked his hat and waited in the lounge of the Caravan Club for Whittle to appear, his mind kept reaching back to Red, to Carol, and to a girl he had never known, but who had been alive at this time yesterday. And God, how much Terry wished she were still alive today!

Whittle was late. He came in panting slightly. He was a tall, hatchet-faced man with rimless glasses and a black string tie. Within the last ten years he had come to be regarded as the most successful producer on Broadway. He gave Terry a swift smile.

"Terribly sorry. I got tied up at the last moment. Checked your hat? Splendid. Suppose we eat in the grillroom down here. Easier and doesn't take so much time. Fact is, I've got to duck out much earlier than I'd planned. Got a damned designer coming in."

At that moment Terry knew the whole thing was lost. They sat down and Whittle kept flashing his lean smile. "Cocktail? Martini for me. You just got in, I believe? How was Andresson? Wonderful chap, Andresson. I love him." And so it went. One cocktail and they ate.

Finally Terry interrupted Whittle. "I brought this." He put the play on the table. "Do you want to read it, or not?"

Whittle frowned momentarily. "I wanted to discuss that. I hate to do it so quickly, but the fact is—well, the fact is money is close, Bailey. You're new, un-

known. It's a gamble and I'm not s—"

"That's okay. I get the picture." Terry rose. "You better be getting back, hadn't you? I wouldn't want to make you lose another five minutes."

Whittle rose. As they were getting their hats, it came out. Whittle ran his tongue across his lips. "I was trying to think this morning, reading the paper. Aren't you Big Red Bailey's brother? I—"

"Yes. I'm Red's brother," Terry said very softly. "You were reading the paper. You could have saved my time and yours by calling me right then." He turned on his heel and walked out. He was sweating with rage.

CHAPTER THREE

The Notes

IT WAS LATE in the afternoon before Terry returned to the apartment. As he passed the florist shop next door, he noticed the man who was standing there. Their eyes met and Terry started to nod. He had seen the man somewhere, but he couldn't remember where. The man's face was round and puffy, and his brows met in a line across his nose. He was a short muscular man, and his suit was flashy and extreme. Then, just as Terry entered the lobby of the apartment building, the memory flashed to him, halting his steps.

That man had been lounging at the cigar counter in the Templar Hotel last evening!

Terry was certain. He turned slowly. The house dick, he thought with chilling certainty. He must be. He looked it in every way. Terry stepped back to the door and started to glance out. He saw the man crossing the street. Across the street he was joined by another man. That man, Terry saw, was Detective Kirstin. The sunlight glistened on his olive face and sparkled in his black hair. The puffy-faced man was nodding and speaking. Kirstin nodded and Terry saw him smile.

That was that, Terry thought as he turned toward the elevator. Now it was known that he hadn't met a friend for cocktails last evening at the murder time. Now it was known that he had lied, that he had been at the Templar.

He shook his head wearily. Carol opened the door and let him in. The apartment was silent. A solitaire layout covered a card table.

"Red went somewhere. He didn't say," Carol said. She glanced at the play as Terry tossed the manuscript on the couch. "What kind of luck?"

He pulled a finger across his throat. "Not today," he said wryly. He sat down and lit a cigarette. Carol sighed and began to deal the cards, scarcely noticing the plays. "I fired the butler. We can talk."

"Kirstin's downstairs with a guy that saw me going into the Templar last night," Terry said. "So we may have visitors with questions."

Carol stared at him mutely. The door opened and Red came in, his pockets stuffed with newspapers. "Hello, Terry. Hello, Angel." He kissed Carol on the back of the neck and tossed the papers on the couch. "Let's knock off a drink. Where's Harry? Harry!" he shouted.

"Harry doesn't work here any more. Harry," Carol said, "had ears."

"Huh? Oh." Red's face sobered. "Yeah. Well, I'll mix 'em. Listen, this place looks and acts like a sob-house. Who wants to spend his life crying? Forget what happened yesterday. This is today and today we'll just have a drink." He went into the kitchen, whistling. Carol sat very still, then slowly she touched the place where Red had kissed her. Not with resentment, nor with pleasure, but more as if she could scarcely understand how it had happened.

Red brought the drinks back and read through the papers restlessly. "Jerry Baxter," he said softly. "He's a yellow little squeal."

"Baxter?" Terry repeated.

"The private dick Lonny Basil retained to ice me over. Crooked, yellow, little cat-faced guy. Ugly inside, too." Red stared at the papers thoughtfully, then laughed. "They've had him down there sweating. He says he was taking a nap when it happened. Taking a nap, see? All alone where he lived at the Parador Hotel. He . . ." Red's words trailed away and Terry saw the processes of thought moving across the lion-like face. Red was imagining, planning, estimating something.

"Red!" Carol exclaimed sharply. "Look at me! What are you—"

He glanced at her and laughed. "Aw, Angel, you take it easy. You never need to worry." He got up and kissed her again.

"What's this thing?" He picked up Terry's play.

"Just something I wrote. Don't waste your time."

Red took it out of the envelope. "Say, a play, huh? When're you putting it on?" he asked eagerly.

"When I get a hundred grand, or find a crazy man who does."

"Is that the way it works? And you wrote all this, huh? What do you think of that, Carol? Old Terry writes a play. I told you he was smart. You know, I never read a play." He clutched the pages firmly and squinted as he read. "Looks pretty good to old Red. Say, how about getting us another drink while I just sit here and read this thing."

Terry got up slowly and carried the glasses into the kitchen. When he returned, Red waved the first pages grandly. "Say, this stuff is right on the nose, huh? This gal in here, you know what? She makes me think of Carol."

"Perhaps," Terry said quietly. Carol started to look at him, then looked away. Red kept reading. Twilight came through the windows and filled the corners. Carol turned on the lamp and said she'd fix dinner. Red looked intently at Terry.

"This thing, I don't know, but old Red likes it. And I'll tell you just what we're going to do. A hundred grand, you said? Well, there'll be a hundred grand sitting here by tomorrow noon and we—"

"No, Red," Terry interrupted. "Thanks."

"*No?* Why not?"

"Because . . . I don't want to work it that way," Terry said.

"I don't get it," Red said. "You need the dough. I've got the dough. Anything I've got is yours. So that's the story. We'll put this on and it'll blow 'em out of the tub!"

"What Terry is trying to tell you," Carol interrupted, "is that he doesn't want that kind of money."

Red frowned and tilted his head. "Is that the ticket? You don't want the dough because I made it? That's the reason?"

"That's it," Terry said. "I can't explain. It's only—"

"The dough is good enough for Carol," Red said. Carol turned away. "You mean, you're a little higher than us?"

"No. I don't mean high or low. I mean no. I'm sorry, Red."

RED GOT UP slowly and his fingers were twitching against his sides. His eyes were like embers of an angry fire. Terry thought Red was going to hit him that moment. Instead Red said loudly and very bitterly. "Does anybody think maybe it's a little cold in here?"

Terry did not answer. Carol did not answer. Red picked up his glass and threw it squarely into the big mirror over the piano. There was a raw crash, and then the final tinkling sounds as the glass particles filtered from the frame.

"If there's something I hate—I mean hate, see?" Red roared, "it is a little tinhorn saint!" He turned and stalked out. Carol cried out to him. Terry started after him. Red turned and gripped Terry's shoulder.

"Don't make me hurt you, kid," he breathed. He sent Terry staggering across the room and slammed the door.

"Terry! Terry, he can't go like that," Carol cried. "After last night, no telling what he'll do. He's never been like this!"

Terry scrambled to his feet. "Come on!" The corridor was empty. The elevator was gone. A full minute passed before it answered their ring. The operator didn't know, but he thought Mr. Bailey had gotten in a taxi. By the time they reached the street, he had vanished.

"Where do you think he went?" Terry asked.

"He'll want another drink. Several more, probably. He might go to the Peacock, or maybe to Gilly's on Third."

They took a cab and drove to the Peacock Grill on Fifty-second. No, Mr. Bailey hadn't been around for three, four days. They took another cab to Gilly's Bar on Third Avenue.

"Yeah, Big Red was in. Left just a minute ago, after two straight drinks," the bartender said. "Wasn't acting like himself tonight. He acted sore. He used the telephone and went out. Didn't say

where he was going or anything."

"The telephone?" Terry turned around. The Manhattan directory was out of its rack and open. "Did he look up a number? Do you know?"

"I think—seems like he did, maybe."

Terry looked at the open pages. They were open to the *B*'s. To Ba . . . Baxter, Terry thought. He found Jerry Baxter's listing, on West Forty-ninth Street. He had one vivid recollection of Red's face—etched with the concentration of thought and discolored by hate as he had mused over Jerry Baxter. And now . . .

"Come on," Terry said to Carol. They took a third cab, this time to Baxter's address.

It was a dirty red-brick building of six stories, west of Ninth Avenue in a crowded block. Just as their cab pulled to the curb, Carol leaned forward and touched Terry's arm.

"There! Just coming down the steps," she whispered. "That's Red."

Terry saw him. Red was moving fast, his head drawn down. His appearance in every way was that of a man who did not want to be seen. "Wait," Terry said softly, holding Carol's arm. "We better not make a scene until we know something." They let Red turn the distant corner. Then Terry paid the fare and they got out. On the wall inside the door, they found the list of occupants. Jerry Baxter was 2-B.

They climbed the stairs but the door of 2-B was closed. Terry peered at the bottom and could see no light within. What was the next step?

"We've got to knock. We've got to know," Carol whispered. So Terry knocked. There was no answer. A cold stiffness worked its way into his throat. He gripped the knob and turned. The door was locked. Perhaps Red *hadn't* gone into this room, Terry argued with himself. Perhaps nothing had happened. And yet . . .

He glanced at the window at the end of the corridor. He tiptoed to it and peered out. Here was the landing of the fire escape. It ran along the wall of the building and afforded an exit from a window farther on. And that window, Terry realized, must belong to Jerry Baxter's apartment.

He hesitated while his fingers opened and closed. Each step seemed greater folly; yet retreat meant agonizing ignorance, and he felt that he had to know what Red had done.

"Stay here," he whispered to Carol. He slipped out onto the sooty platform and moved toward the window. Just as he touched the sash, he heard a gasp from Carol. He turned. She was crawling outside.

"Terry," she breathed. "It's that detective, Kirstin! Coming up the stairs."

TERRY pulled her near him and against the wall. He could hear the deliberate footsteps as they climbed. His eyes picked out the descending steps of the escape in the night. With a pressure of his fingers, he started Carol toward the steps. He heard Kirstin knocking. They reached the midsection of the last raised section of escape. With a metallic grinding sound, the section lowered itself with their weight.

"Hurry!" Terry ordered. Carol rushed down.

"Hey! Hey, down there!" Kirstin shouted from above. Terry clutched Carol's arm and hurried her through the delivery passage to the street. Now one more piece had been added to the pattern of hopeless folly, he thought dismally.

There was nothing else to do. They returned to the apartment. Red was not there. Carol got the broom and pan and cleared the shattered mirror away. Terry smoked and walked up and down the room. He knew Kirstin would come to question him. When? Why hadn't he appeared already? What was he waiting for? Why didn't he come on, damn him! Why did he stretch it out! Why . . .

Terry caught himself and forced his tense muscles to relax. This wouldn't get him anywhere, he argued. This was too early to start getting nerves. Time for that later.

Carol fixed a supper and brought the plates into the living room. They talked little. We're afraid to talk, Terry realized. We can't admit what we know, not aloud.

She began to deal solitaire again. Terry watched the movement of light in her golden hair as she bent her head. He watched the beat of pulse in her lovely

throat, and he was seized with a yearning to take her in his arms, to kiss her as he had kissed her only once, and long ago. Perhaps she perceived. She rose and smiled at him sadly.

"I'm sorry. I am, Terry," she said gently. "I better go to bed. Wake me up if anything happens, please."

That left him alone. It was one o'clock. Then two and three and Red did not return. At four Kirstin came. He was alone. His black eyes glistened. His face was inscrutable.

"Waiting up for Red?" he asked. "Do you mind if I sit a while?"

"I don't mind," Terry said. Kirstin sat down and lit a cigarette and smiled faintly at the wall. Terry felt the silence stretch endlessly. He felt his breath grow thin and shallow. He was perspiring. His muscles ached and his ears ached from waiting for Kirstin to speak. And Kirstin simply smoked and gazed fixedly at the wall and smiled.

"All right, Kirstin," Terry finally exploded, "what do you want?"

Kirstin smiled. "To catch a murderer, of course." His voice was apologetic, and he smiled again, this time at the pattern of the rug.

"I was thinking," he murmured finally. "Lonny Basil himself says that Big Red was at that suite in the Templar when Donna was killed, and Lonny would love to hang the rap on Red. So maybe Red's innocent. Lonny wouldn't lie to save him. But *somebody* had to kill Donna."

"Obviously, since she's dead," Terry said wryly.

"I'm only thinking out loud, please understand," Kirstin murmured. "But let's keep thinking. Out loud. You came in from California yesterday. The murder day, on the nose. And lots of people have heard Red say how everything he has is yours as well. You might say that you were an unofficial partner. And, being like that, what was going to cost Red would also cost you. And," he said with a gentle smile, "this blow-off was going to cost Red clear into the pen, if it had come off with Donna singing. But of course, this is only silly thinking," he said. "You were somewhere having a drink with a pal at 7:30 last night, weren't you?"

Terry stared straight at him, thinking of the house dick from the Templar. "That," he said softly, "is what I told you. Or maybe I took Red a book of matches to the Templar first. What do you think?"

KIRSTIN studied the shape of his ears. "Me? I think the world is round, but only because the books say so. But let's keep talking to ourselves. Now here is a pretty girl named Carol. She's married to a guy who makes her a pot of coin, no questions asked. But all of a sudden the bankroll gets himself in trouble with another gal. A great big old scandal is about to pop off. So Carol, we say, does what a lot of nice wives would do when their husbands get in trouble with a gal. They drop over and settle things so—"

"Shut up, damn you," Terry whispered. "Shut up before I break your teeth in."

Kirstin smiled. There was hatred in the smile. "That would be a silly thing to do, kid." He rose and yawned. "Like I said before, I'm just hunting for a murderer. But I figured something out, years ago. If you're smart," he said softly, "you can make a murder solve itself. You just wait until their nerves start boiling. Red has nerves. Watch his hands. Watch the way he can't sit still. I can make Red break himself—on you and his wife." Kirstin's face was naked in its venom now. "I know you know about this job. You gave Red a boost with the alibi, I figure. Red trusted you to protect him. But killers start thinking twice, *afterward*. They look at people who have the answers. They wonder. They lose sleep. They get mad. They get to boiling in the nerves." He smiled and rose. "It's going to be a good feeling to hang this on Red. Right from my heart, I hate him."

Kirstin departed. At seven, Red still had not returned. Terry went to bed. When he woke, it was 11:35. The apartment was empty and silent. An empty whiskey bottle on the table told him that Red had been home and gone again.

The telephone began to ring. It was someone named Ralph Watkins. Terry had never heard of him. "I'm a friend of Si Andresson," Watkins said. "He told me you'd written a play he liked. I won-

der if I could maybe have a look at it?"

"Oh. Ralph Watkins? Sure," Terry said vacantly.

"How about bringing it by and we'll see. In the Mantrol Building, West Forty-fifth."

"Sure." Terry hung up. For a moment he was puzzled; then he forgot about Ralph Watkins. His mind returned to Red, and then to Kirstin. It was pure hunch and hate for Red that made Kirstin pick him. But the hunch and the hate would be enough.

At one o'clock Red came in. His cheeks were sunken. He was heavy-eyed and tired. He smiled at Terry uneasily. "I'm sorry about last night, kid. I didn't mean it. I was just sore. Nervous, maybe. I'm just a tramp and I don't understand fancy ideas, but I'm not sore."

"That's okay. Where is Carol?"

"I don't know. She wasn't around when I was here about ten o'clock. Didn't she tell you anything?"

Terry shook his head. "But Kirstin was here. He is going on the hate-hunch that you simply have a good alibi for the murder time; he wants it to be you, Red."

Red smiled. "He's always wanted it to be me. If a pup got poisoned in Harlem, he checked to find where I'd been. He hates me. But we're not worrying any more. The papers say that the police are working the streets, trying to find Jerry Baxter. They want Jerry for the killing, Terry. Think of that!" He roared. "Little punk Jerry!"

Terry stopped breathing. Suddenly he began to see it all too clearly. "Why do they think he did it, Red?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, something they found at his place. I wouldn't know. I—"

"Red," Terry interrupted coldly, "you framed baxter."

Red turned around. "How was that, kid?" he asked slowly.

"You framed him last night. I followed you to his place. I know."

Red breathed slowly and his eyes darkened. "Oh. Terry," he said, "sometimes I'm not sure about you. Let's say no-dice on Jerry. Let's forget about following people, too. I want a drink. I'm tired. Three hours sleep in two nights won't get it. Bring it into the bedroom, huh?" He left the room. Terry stared after him and felt a hopeless fury fighting in his chest. Red was gone. Gone, gone. It was like dealing with a ghost, Terry thought, a man on his way to the grave. He made the drink and took it inside. Red was already asleep across the foot of the bed, his shirt and socks on, his suit crumpled on the floor.

The telephone rang. Terry put down the drink and answered. It was Carol. Her voice was strained and very low. "Can you come somewhere?" she asked. "I've got to see you. Don't tell Red, if he's there."

"Okay. Where are you?"

"I'll be in the bar of the Bentley Hotel. East Forty-eighth."

Terry got there in twenty-five minutes. Carol was sitting in a booth in the knotty-pine barroom off the lobby. A martini, untouched, stood in front of her. Her face was pale. She spoke swiftly and softly:

"I had to get out of the apartment for a while. It was driving me crazy. I went walking. I went into a newsreel theater for a while. It was dark, you know, and I didn't notice things around me. But when I came out, there was an envelope stuck to my sleeve with a straight pin. It was addressed to me in pencil." She opened her purse and pushed a sheet of cheap ruled paper across the table. Terry read the crudely printed words:

If Red does not take the pressure off, somebody gets hurt.

That was all. No signature, nothing. Carol continued. "I didn't know what to do or think. I was confused and frightened. I walked up to Central Park. Lots of people were there—walking dogs and letting the children play. I paid no attention to them. I was thinking only of this note. And then . . . it seems impossible, but I found another note stuck to my sleeve. Someone had put it there as he brushed past me. I don't know who or when. It's just like that one, almost." She pushed a second sheet across the table.

I'm in a hurry. Find Red and tell him to get the pressure off. Somebody is going to get hurt.

"This frightened me even more. Somebody's following me. I don't know what to do. I don't even know what it means."

Terry knew. Jerry Baxter was fighting back. He told Carol. "Red's framed Baxter. The police are hunting him, all except Kirstin. Kirstin knows Red did it, but he knows it without any proof. And Baxter doesn't know even that much. He thinks this is the real business. And it could be, see? If Kirstin doesn't get proof against Red, there's phony proof against Baxter. But only we and Baxter know it's phony. I don't know what it is. Red is starting to look at me carefully. Nerves are going to start jangling hard and soon."

Carol looked dismally at the notes and swallowed. "Terry, we're going to have to reach a decision very soon," she said quietly. "And I don't think we've got much choice."

Terry nodded. "I know." There was nothing left to say about that. "If I could only talk to Baxter . . ." Terry said. "That sounds crazy, too, but if I could tell him to hold his fire and not make matters worse, he—" Terry paused suddenly. He glanced around the bar. There was only the bartender, the waiter, and two men with a girl.

"Carol, I'll follow you. You go back to the apartment. Walk and let yourself get into crowds. Maybe he'll make another pass with a note."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Word is "Die!"

TERRY waited until Carol had left the bar; then he rose and followed. She walked east to Lexington Avenue, then turned uptown. Terry stayed fifty feet behind her, watching intently for anyone to brush her arm. The walks were crowded. Momentarily he lost her at an intersection, after a moment spotted her again. Then suddenly he found himself watching a stout and poorly dressed woman in a flop-brimmed hat. The woman had been walking behind Carol for two blocks, now, matching her gait with Carol's. And as Terry kept looking he became more certain that this woman *was* following Carol. He moved closer. The woman's features were coarse. The hat was pulled low. The dress was loose and ill-fitting. There was muscular power in her movement.

Carol reached an intersection. Crowds converged while trucks and cabs pushed by. Terry lost sight of both Carol and the woman for several moments. Then the traffic was past and Carol moved on. There was a white scrap of paper fluttering from her jacket. Terry looked around furiously and saw the stout woman turning east into the side street. Now she was moving swiftly. An instant later she disappeared down the subway hole. Terry rushed after her and caught an uptown train just as the door closed. He hurried through the train. He found her in the last car as the train reached a stop. The woman got out. For precious moments Terry was bottled up by the in-rush of passengers. By the time he reached the street, the woman was well down the block toward Third Avenue. She turned the corner into Third. By the time Terry reached the corner, the woman had vanished.

She had disappeared. She was in this block, somewhere, in one of the shabby lodging places upstairs over the stores. She must be in one of them. She probably lived in one. If that were true, she would reappear. But when? It was after three o'clock already.

He looked again at the walk-up lodging places. They probably held their quota of people who didn't want curoius callers. If the woman actually was Jerry Baxter's contact, she wouldn't be stepping into the hall to chat. Certainly, if she got the idea anyone was watching she wouldn't lead the way to Jerry. Terry turned it over uneasily in his mind, then decided to wait. He bought a paper at the corner stand and leaned against the wall. He had a full view of both sides of the block. And in the paper he read about Jerry Baxter. Red had done a neat job.

Donna's emerald bracelet, valued at four thousand dollars, which had disappeared when she was murdered, had been discovered in Baxter's office-apartment on West Forty-ninth Street. It had been hidden in the mattress of his bed together with a key to Donna's apartment and almost two thousand dollars in cash.

Donna was known to have carried substantial sums of money, normally. The theory developed by police was that Baxter had been retained by man-about-town Lonny Basil to counter certain moves of George "Big Red" Bailey. It was now a known fact that the dead girl had been a tool for various of Bailey's money-grabbing schemes. The arrangement had gone awry in the case of Basil, when Donna refused to go through with the shakedown plans. It was into such a situation, the paper continued, that Baxter was summoned by Basil. His fee, Basil stated, was to have been one thousand dollars. It was believed that Baxter had decided to play for more, particularly in view of the fact that Big Red Bailey was a made-to-order suspect. The fly in the ointment turned up when it was admitted by Basil himself that Bailey was in a hotel suite conferring with him at the time of the murder.

There was more. Terry crumpled the newspaper and threw it away. That was it, he thought heavily. Of course Red took Donna's bracelet when he killed her. Just as he'd known he'd need an alibi for the murder time, he'd known to take extra insurance by setting up a fall guy.

If the cops caught Baxter, they would probably convict him. He would die and Red would go on his way, laughing and drinking and hunting his dangerous toys. And killing, some other day, somewhere, inevitably. . . .

And all the while, he and Carol would be damned with the secret of guilt, and the crime of letting Baxter die in innocence.

"Red or Baxter . . . Red or Baxter . . ." Terry began to say to himself. It grew hard to speak. His breath felt hot in his throat. "But Red is my brother!" he thought. "I've never *seen* this other man! What does *he* mean to me? Why—" He choked. He could not endure the torment of trying to think. And why was he standing here? What if the woman *did* reappear? What if he followed her to Baxter's hiding place? What would he do? How would he choose between Red and this man called Baxter?

He turned and left Third Avenue, almost running as he went. There was no use in waiting for the woman now. He had no decision. He did not know what to do.

When Carol opened the door at the apartment and he met her eyes, he saw fear as he had never seen it before. She breathed the words to him: "Be careful. He's cracking, Terry. Be careful, please."

RED WAS sitting on the couch. His eyes were the color of dark fire and his face was somehow thinner and harsh with lines. On the coffee table in front of him was a bottle of whiskey, almost empty, and a glass. He stared at Terry and his fingers twitched slowly.

"Where've you been?" His voice was very slow, thick, soft.

"Walking," Terry said. "Thinking."

"Walking where? Thinking what?"

"Thinking about you. About Carol and myself. And murder," Terry replied quietly.

Red filled his glass sloppily and drank, never taking his eyes off Terry's face. "Kirstin came in," he said. "He says I framed Baxter. *You* told me that, too. *You* said you followed me. *He* says you followed me; says both of you followed me." His words were deliberate. "You know I wasn't in that bathroom in the Templar. He says *he* knows it, too. He—"

"I know what you're getting at," Terry interrupted. "But I—"

"He knows *all* the things you know, kid," Red went on stonily. He drank again and coughed rawly. "Sit down, damn you," he whispered to Carol. "You look at me. Both of you stand there looking at me. Eyes like pigeons' eyes. Looking at me. Sit down, damn it!" he shouted.

They sat. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Sometimes maybe a person changes. When the pressure is on, he changes," he said slowly. "Like you. Like Carol. Maybe you're changing on me. If—"

"Red, quit it," Terry said coldly. "We're not double-crossing you. But we've got to stop snarling and talk. We've got to plan."

"What are we going to plan?" Red asked.

Terry took a slow breath. His chest

felt cold. "What to do about you and a murder you have done, and an innocent man you have framed."

Red stared and finally smiled. There was no humor or softness in the expression. "So we're going to 'do something' about it? We don't like the way it is now, huh? We don't like it with Baxter on the hook? Is that it? We want old Red where the heat is hot, huh?"

His voice was softened to a whisper. His eyes had grown almost red. Carol stirred slightly in her chair. She seemed not to breathe. Terry watched Red's face, his powerful hands, and Terry was afraid. Yet something—some force beyond his control—pushed him on.

"You can't leave it the way it is, Red. Life won't be worth living. You can't buy freedom with another man's life. If—"

"I can buy it with his a hell of a lot cheaper than I can with mine. There's nothing so damned free about being dead, kid." He finished the last of the whiskey and stood up. He was swaying, as if the room were a rolling ship. His arms had a powerful pendulum rhythm. His shoulders were thrust forward. He seemed to balance himself on the smoke-filled air. Then he came weaving his way toward Terry. Slowly Terry rose, every muscle taut. Carol made a faint cry.

Red stopped one foot from Terry, and his eyes were eyes that had lost the balance of sanity. His face was no longer a face that Terry knew or understood.

"I'm going to be okay, kid. It's going to be old Red who keeps on living and drinking and eating and seeing that sunshine and knowing there's money in the bank. Baxter's nothing. When he's dead, there's nothing but a hole in the ground with his name on top. That's how I see it. But you don't like that? You know all the answers, and you don't like it. So you can spill all the answers, and then it's Red in the ground and Baxter is drinking his scotch while—"

"Red!" Terry said in sharp warning and stepped back as Red reached for him. Red paused and seemed to measure a tractor-like course. Then he plodded toward Terry. Terry backed off. He ducked out of a corner. Red kept follow-

ing, shoulders forward, eyes burning in sullen madness. Terry swung and the blow crushed Red's lips. Blood ran down the chin. Not a trace of emotion passed over Red's face. He kept coming like a machine.

TERRY heard Carol screaming. He swung again and jarred Red's jaw around. He felt as if he were fighting a bulldozer. Then Red closed him into a corner and his great arms came down. Terry snatched a vase off the table and broke it over Red's forehead. A lacework of cuts filled with blood. Red grunted and then Terry was caught. He fought. He kicked and slammed fist after fist into the massive body, and still the arms tightened. A crumbling pain went down his arm. Red had broken something, he knew. He had no breath to shout. Then Red's fingers ground into his throat. In that moment, as Terry began to paralyze, he stared into Red's face and realized that his brother was about to kill him.

Then came the explosion of a gun. Terry felt Red's muscles shudder and start to loosen. Terry thrust with all his strength and Red stumbled backward. In the next instant Terry glimpsed Carol in the bedroom doorway, the revolver in her hand, her face stark white. Red was staring at her and a strangely wordless mixture was coming from his throat. An expression of terrible sadness filled Red's face. He shook his head like a dazed animal, unable to fathom its fate; then he turned heavily. He staggered, rather than walked. He staggered to the door, dragged it open, and stumbled into the hall. Terry heard the elevator open, then close.

Terry's paralysis of horror ended. He ran into the hall and raced down the stairway. He heard Carol behind him, calling to him. He did not stop. He ran all the way to the lobby and out onto the sidewalk. It was almost dark, but he could see Red lurching along, midway down the next block.

Terry ran across the street. Then, for the first time, he saw the stocky figure of a woman. She was hurrying diagonally across the street, as if she were intent

upon catching Red. And suddenly Terry realized: This was the same woman he had followed to Third Avenue. Then, in the dying light of evening, he saw her draw a gun from the bulky dress.

Red shook his head slowly. Then he started toward the woman. The woman backed away. The gun roared in her hand. Red halted and coughed, then started forward again. Terry leaped. He seized the woman's arm and twisted at the gun. A roar of rage came up. It was a deep sound, not a woman's voice at all. A fist cracked into Terry's temple, and a knee bored into his chest. As he writhed and grappled for the gun, he saw the wig fall from the head and he glimpsed the fury-stained face of a man. Terry knew he was looking at Jerry Baxter.

"Don't kill him, you fool," Terry panted as he struggled. "He's hurt. It's going to come out. It's all r—"

Baxter hammered a fist into Terry's mouth. Baxter held to the gun and it began to fire wildly. The street was suddenly filled with sounds. Then came a sound more horrible than any other. Red gripped Baxter's throat and sobbed in agony and ecstasy. Baxter screamed. Red forced him to his knees and then onto the sidewalk. Red fell on him, but kept his grasp. Baxter lost the gun. His face was contorted. He could not breathe. Terry crawled into the struggle and seized the gun. He lifted it. He looked down at Red's glossy mane of hair, and he remembered so many years of the past: Red, in swimming, with his hair wet; Red, before his first dance, trying to comb this hair; Red . . .

Then he closed his eyes and stopped thinking. He brought the gun down with brutal force. Again and again and a fourth time. When, this time, it missed, he knew Red was down to stay.

Red lay on his back. His eyes were open. He was staring at Terry as though he couldn't quite see him in the failing light. As if he were trying to remember where this was, and why it was, and why his head was hurting.

TERRY bent down. Carol was there. In the fringe of twilight were hurrying footsteps and shouts as people gath-

ered; and in the gutter, there was the labored moaning of Jerry Baxter.

"It's going—going to be okay," Red whispered. "You and me and Carol, see? . . . It's going to be okay. Everything."

"Yes. Sure, Red," Terry said. For the voice was Red's again, and the madness was gone. The child-like eagerness was back again.

"Head . . . back hurts. Got something in my belly. Listen." He struggled. "You're smart. You keep writing plays, see? You'll blow 'em out of the tub. You'll be the kid, Terry."

"Thanks, Red," Terry whispered. Carol leaned forward.

"Red?" she whispered urgently.

"Yes? You don't worry, Angel." And then Big Red died.

He died and that was the end. Or almost the end. There was one thing more. It came six months later. It was six months after Red died that Terry's play opened. Carol played the part Terry had written for her. It was a good play. And then Ralph Watkins, the producer, told him the truth.

"Red came to me with the money, Terry. A hundred thousand in cash, and he said he wanted the play put on. He told me to say the money came from anybody but him. He said for me never to tell you. I'm telling you now, because it's a better way to remember him."

Terry smiled slightly. "Don't worry. I remember many good things about Red. The other part, I don't remember at all. Much." And that night, after the opening, he and Carol stood at Paddy's bar. It was after midnight. They ordered two drinks, and then they both seemed to think of it at the same time. They ordered a third and put it between them. "And here we are," Terry said. They smiled at each other. Then there at the bar, Terry leaned over and kissed her.

"Screwy, it was," Paddy said when they left. "First, you could see they were in love, but this other drink—that gets me. Just leaving it there, exactly like they wanted somebody to have it. But there wasn't anybody with 'em at all. Screwy, see? . . ."

THE END

THEY DON'T COME DEADER!

(Continued from page 88)

kicking around without even a tag to his name. As for the clothing. . . ."

I paused. The sheriff wasn't even listening. He had twisted around to look at Maynard and his hand was going under his jacket.

Maynard must have read the look in his eyes at the same time I did, because he made a pathetic dive for the door and got it half open. Then the .45 slug shoved him the rest of the way out, and by the time I got around the car he was coughing his last into the muddy gutter.

The sheriff still had his gun out, but I was behind him and I had my own .38 in hand. He saw it as he straightened up.

His face went white and his mouth twitched, but he wasn't shooting it out, not today. He said, "Don't be a fool, Rhodes. Maynard's a murderer. He tried to escape, and I was forced to shoot him. That's the way it is, and that's the way it's gonna be."

I shook my head. "Not the way I see it. He had help. Help from somebody who knew the morgue setup, somebody who had access to the morgue files, somebody who helped Gibney claim the right body and got the coroner out of his office so that the clothing could be removed. . . . Somebody," I concluded, "who was in the whole deal with Maynard and had to help him to save his own skin."

Slade didn't even bother to deny it. "You can't make it stick, Rhodes. I'm still the sheriff in this town, and it takes more than a lousy, long-nosed snoop to arrest the sheriff."

I shrugged and nodded my head. Half a dozen people were pouring out the back door of the mortuary, and Ben Tombs was among them.

"There's the man who can," I said.

Slade's eyes wavered for a second and I slashed out with my gun. His Colt hit the pavement, I hit Slade, and that's all there was to it.

Except for telling Mrs. Edwards. On the way back from Oak Knoll, Ben looked at me suddenly and said, "How drunk can you get, Rocky?"

"Not drunk enough," I answered. "But we can try."

THE END

(Continued from page 89)

and make me Madame la Prefect or I'll cause a scandal that will end your career!"

"What do you want me to do? Strangle her with my bare hands?" protested the trapped man.

"No, but I know someone who will!" the lady answered.

"You do? Who?"

"Louis Goujon!"

The Prefect raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. "All right," he murmured, "bring him on!"

IF LOUIS was alarmed to find that the address to which he had been summoned on business was the police station, he did not betray it by so much as the flicker of an eyelash. In fact, he sat at the Prefect's desk quite coolly and firmly shaking his head in a determined "No!"

"But why? Why won't you do it?" asked the Prefect.

"Because I am an honorable man, Monsieur!"

"You honor!" sneered the chief, growing threatening. "An honorable killer! I tell you, if you don't take this job, I'll have you thrown into jail on suspicion of a dozen other murders!"

"Even so," maintained the Apache, "it will be impossble."

"But why? Why?"

"Because this morning I have already taken money from your wife— in payment for killing you!" and drawing his long-bladed knife, Louis made short work of the stupefied Prefect of Police.

A few seconds after the killing was accomplished, three gendarmes, hearing their commander's shrieks, burst into the office, seized the killer, and the career of the honorable Apache was ended. It is recorded, however, that at the moment of his execution, he paused on the platform of the guillotine, gazed admiringly up at the huge chopping knife poised over his head, and whispered hoarsely to the executioner, "How much are you getting for this job?"

Astonished, the man told him. Louis shook his head regretfully. "You'll never make any money staying legitimate," he commented, and laid his neck on the block.

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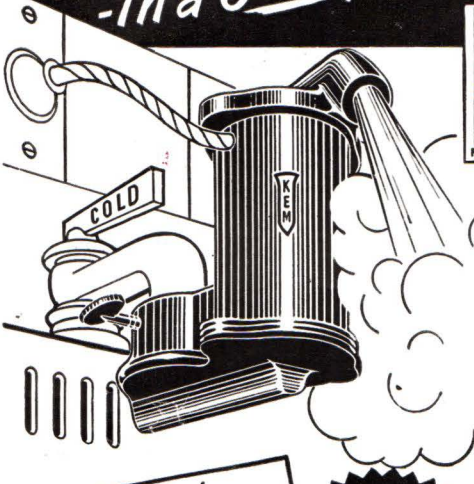


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