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DOCKET



While the other movieland guests drowed in the sun, after whooping it up at a Beverly Hills mansion, Brant Cully dove to the bottom of the pool—and there he found blonde gossip-scribe Anya.

Sent by the bank to spy on its film employees, Brant wondered which one had a homicidal hangover. Maybe Hollywood-agent Parker—or even ballet-dancer Maura . . . or provocative blonde actress Timmy.



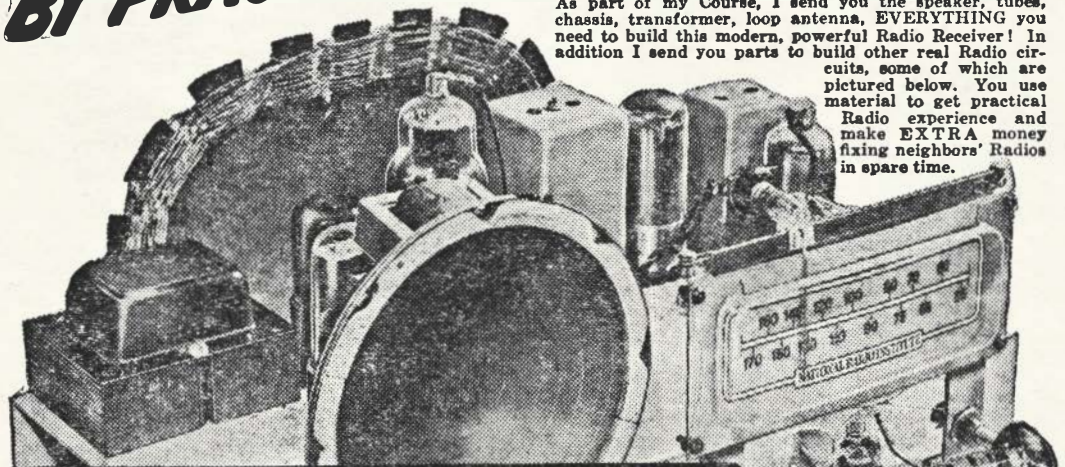
After Brant took winsome Janet Temple into his confidence, they told hunk-o'-actor Tod Russel to rendezvous with Anya that night. Then Brant kicked in Anya's door and found her blackmail list.

Back at the estate, Brant set a trap for the mid-night slayer—and baited it with Janet. . . . The complete story will be told in John D. MacDonald's novel—"I'll Drown You In My Dreams"—in the March issue . . . published February 2nd.

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Holy Oats!

Dear Sir:

"Buy my seeds of the Holy Plant of Jerusalem," wheedled a voice at the back door. The seeds were in neat little packets, twenty-five cents apiece, and the glib salesman showed me the plant itself, which he carried in a tiny flower pot . . . wrapped in cellophane.

"These seeds produce this plant," he assured me, pointing to tiny red "bleeding hearts" blooming on the evergreen ball-shaped plant. "And these heart-shaped blossoms are unique, a blessed symbol." Tears were in his eyes!

I purchased several packets because he assured me that each twenty-five cents would go to help the "cause" in the Holy Land.

Did I ever get stung! What did the seeds produce? Oats! Yessir, just plain oats. I wonder how many others got taken in likewise?

Mrs. Muriel E. Eddy
Providence, R. I.

What a Coincidence!

Dear Sir:

Lunching in a Cleveland restaurant recently, I was witness to a slick little swindle.

Two men, evidently business men on their lunch hour, were seated at a table near mine. A slim woman dressed in gray came into the restaurant and hesitated a moment at the entrance as she scanned the dining room. When her eyes fell upon the business men, they lit up in apparent recognition.

She approached their table without hesitation and greeted one of the men effusively: "Well, imagine running into you here! It's been just ages since I've seen you!"

Then, notwithstanding the somewhat puzzled look on the man's face, she did what seemed the natural thing to do—seated herself at their table and ordered her meal.

Their conversation was strained, as the man she had recognized seemed to be searching his mind for a clue to her identity.

Finally, in reply to his question, she said that she was Mabel Smith and didn't he, Mr. Alexander, remember her? The man protested that he was not Mr. Alexander, and they all laughed at what appeared to be a case of mistaken identity.

However, immediately after the waitress brought their check, a single check for all three

meals, the woman in gray made a great show of consulting her wrist watch, then exclaimed, "Oh, my goodness! My lunch hour is up!" and with that, made a hasty departure.

The man who was not Mr. Alexander fingered the check thoughtfully, a rueful look on his face. Then, to his companion he commented dryly, "She sure was hungry!"

Eliana Beam
Strongsville, Ohio.

Well, Well, Well!

Dear Sir:

My daughter Jane and I were staying at a well-known summer resort in Michigan and had taken rooms at the resort's most popular hotel. Among the guests was a fine-appearing man near my age and, as I was an attractive widow at the time, I found his companionship very agreeable.

My daughter was enjoying herself with her young friends and so the friendship between my new acquaintance and myself naturally had a chance to develop.

When Jane and I returned to our home in Chicago Mr. Stevens called upon us there. He was interested in oil and to all appearances had plenty of money which he claimed to have made in the rich oil fields of Oklahoma.

After we had been home a few weeks Mr. Stevens told us of very wonderful oil well which was certain to be a gusher. Best of all, he told us, a comparatively small amount of money would swing the deal which would give us a wonderful profit.

Well, by this time we had implicit confidence in Mr. Stevens, so one day when he called we gave him sufficient funds to invest. He, of course was greatly pleased at our confidence in his business ability and soon after receiving our money he left saying that he was going to return that evening and take both daughter and me to the theater and dinner to celebrate the occasion.

That was the last time we ever saw Mr. Stevens until I picked up the newspaper weeks later. By the picture of our Mr. Stevens I read of this swindler who had been recently captured, after fleecing many women of their money.

To add to the farce, Mr. Stevens was married and his wife aided him in his schemes.

Edith M. Holman
Oakland, Calif.

(Please continue on page 73)

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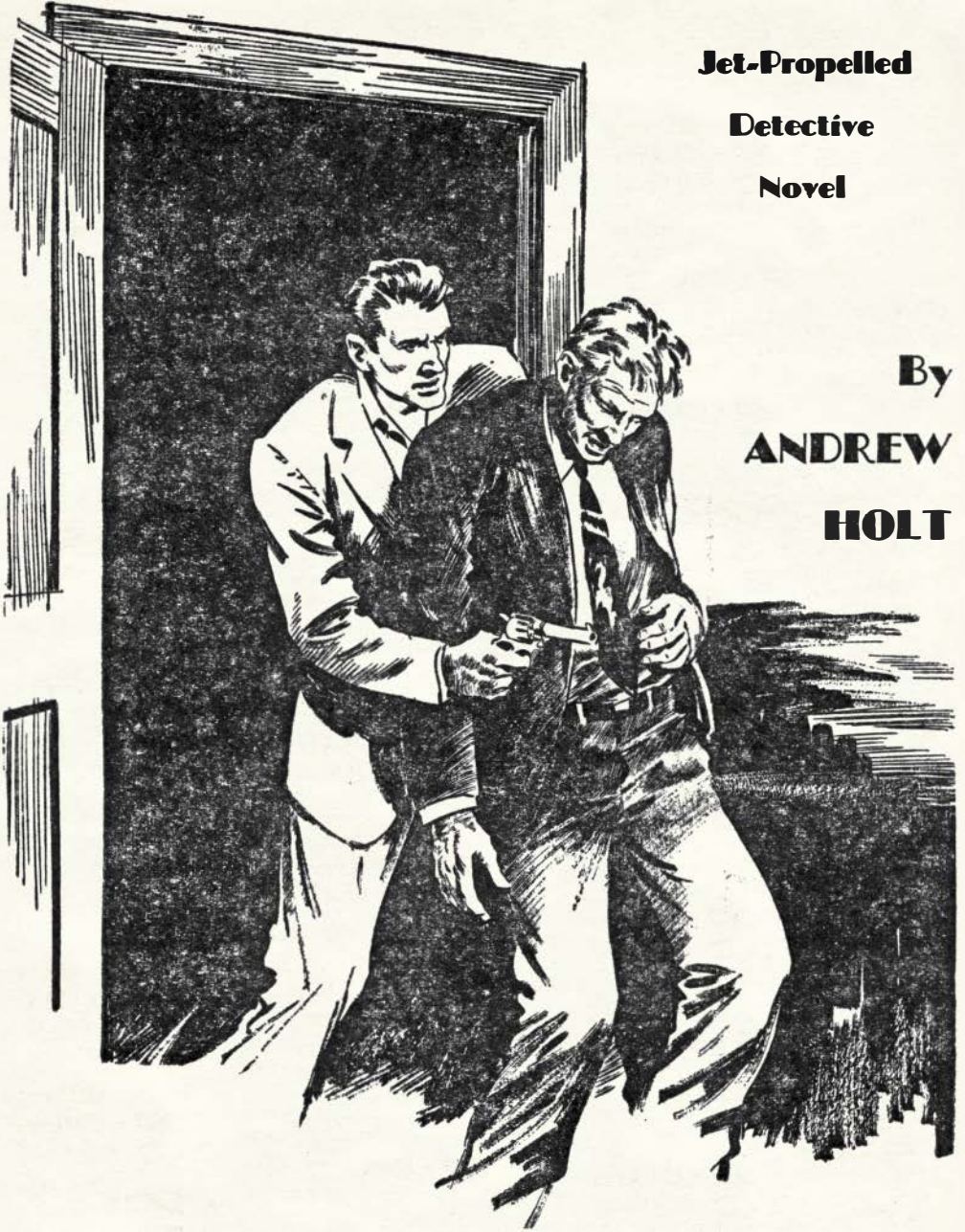
Detective

Novel

By

ANDREW

HOLT



*Because a cholera-croaking punk sneaked
back into the States, I was the patsy who had
to walk in the Black-Death corpse's footsteps.*



SOME LIKE 'EM • COLD! •



"This is a forty-five, chum," he told me.

CHAPTER ONE

Death in the Air

NOON. Springtime in the park. The traffic noises caught and dissipated in the thick screen of oaks and poplars that hold back the insurance company skyscrapers on one side of the square and the ladies-wear loft buildings on the other.

If you come into the park suddenly, you see the kind of thing the Impressionist painters saw. Old men in shiny blue serge holding crumpled paper bags full of bread-crumbs, peanuts carpeting the asphalt, pigeons playing hopscotch between the shells, small boys in frenzied chase between baby

carriages and indignant nursemaids, and girls.

Girls from the insurance companies strolling in two's, the thin stuff of their spring dresses making you turn around to look. ". . . So I said to him, Arthur, don't think I don't appreciate. . . ." "Such nice places. . . ." ". . . Just because I. . . ." "No reason for you to think you. . . ." And so forth. Girls sitting down, eating their lunches, and yacking. Girls—

It was no day to get involved in a murder. And yet it usually turned out to be murder when the Greater Urban Life Insurance Company by-passed its own detectives and called us in.

The corridor was gray-grained marble with black marble floor blocks ribboned with sunken Monel strips. Very cold. The door lettered: *A. Harper Innes, Vice President* opened into a much warmer, cherry-red carpet, bottle-green walls, good imitation Sheraton furniture, and a blonde.

"You're Mr. Reed from the Agency?"

I nodded. She wore her hair in a low bun, probably because someone had told her it made her look less aggressively feminine. It didn't.

"Mr. Innes said for you to check in at the dispensary downstairs and meet him at the City Morgue at one."

I looked at my watch and then, appraisingly, at the blonde. I really don't know what had got into me but apparently she did.

"No," she said.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "I just get this look during the spring."

She smiled sweetly. "Come back after you're back to usual. Anyway, I always eat my lunch in the office."

I shrugged and trotted down to the dispensary. A bright young medic with curly black hair and horn-rimmed glasses was waiting for me. He held a hypodermic in his right hand.

"What is it?" I asked. "A sedative? I must be wearing my heart on my sleeve."

"What?"

"Spring," I explained, "young man's fancy, that sort of thing."

"Oh." He nodded judiciously as I slipped out of my coat and rolled up my sleeve. "The reaction ought to calm you down."

"If it isn't too forward of me," I asked

as the needle went in, "just what the hell is the idea?"

He passed a cotton swab over the muscle, which felt as though it had just been hit by a baseball bat.

"I don't know. Just Mr. Innes' orders."

They even had the label removed from the serum bottle. I rolled down my sleeve and started to get into my coat.

"Maybe he's been reading the tabloids," I suggested. "Figures it's inhumane to experiment on dogs, so he's using people."

The medic had lost interest. He's waiting for you at the morgue," he said, "and don't drink any liquor for twenty-four hours."

"Oh, he *is* using people," I said and left.

THE morgue attendant was a bald little man with eyebrows that could have been combed back over his skull in a pompadour. Without looking up from his paper he motioned me to a sagging plank bench set against the tile wall. I watched his eyes pan across the funny sheets and when I got tired of that, I watched the cracked wall clock over his desk. Promptly at one, Innes came in, his aristocratically beaked nose tweaking at the formaldehyde smell.

He gave the morgue attendant a letter and, while the man read it, frowned at my sport shoes.

"I fired an executive once for wearing black and white shoes to the office," he said.

"That's why I'm a detective," I said. "You don't have to stick to those high-button jobs with the soft tops. That's what you wear, isn't it?"

He grimaced and the attendant handed back the letter and lead us down a flight of slate-colored stairs.

This was an old routine between Innes and me. He liked to pretend a detective was some kind of rum-dum and I that insurance company vice presidents were dated as mustache cups. Actually, he wanted to be a dick and I'd like nothing better than to live in Larchmont and commute on the four-forty—but we kept up the game anyway.

The attendant led us through the dented tin doors into the cold air and past a four-tiered row of lockers. Near the end of the line, he stopped and pointed to a brass numeral.

"Number twenty-seven," he said, "a John Doe."

I gave him a dollar and we waited until he'd shuffled off. Innes pulled out the drawer.

"See anything, Lynn?"

I looked. Wasted flesh on a big frame, a four-inch cut where they'd done a Post, and two blue bullet holes side by side like snake fangs in the forehead.

"Yeah," I said. "He's dead."

"Very funny. Don't you notice the blue color and the depth of the eyeballs?"

Another look. "The water cure, too?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Cholera."

I must have jumped a foot because I had to step forward again to stare down into the drawer.

Innes laughed. "Don't worry, he's been eviscerated and besides this is why we gave you that shot."

"You hire Dr. Ehrlich and his magic bullet," I said. "I'm going home."

He took my arm and shoved the door closed. "You're not afraid of a little bacteria, are you?"

"Frankly, yes. I'm a hypochondriac. You put me within two miles of cholera and I'll start to get it."

His hand tightened on my arm and his look told me the prologue was over.

"We may *all* start to get it. That's why you're here."

"I hope they're *very* little bacteria," I groaned. . . .

We were upstairs in a walnut-panelled bar across from the morgue where the lawyers from General Sessions hang out. Innes had a Rob Roy and I was having a wild time with a glass of milk as per instructions.

"It's name is Ramon Sanchez," he began, "and it was originally a New York boy."

"I thought it was a John Doe."

"That's the way the police want it."

"Does Kramer at Homicide know you've called me in?" I asked.

"No, and I don't want you to tell him."

"Oh, come on," I said, "this is a great big city and this isn't the movies. Private dicks just don't work over homicides without checking with the law."

"Your objections are noted," he said. "Can I go on now?"

I nodded.

"All right. Sanchez knew a great deal about some people in Cook County, Illinois. He got out in 1928 a day ahead of two torpedoes. France, Italy, Madagascar, and finally India. Last month, he heard the people from Cook County were all dead. They weren't. He is. That's all."

"All?"

"All, except that he happened to be in the first stage of Asiatic cholera when they bumped him. The cop who picked him up on the waterfront died of it last night and the four men he spotted tossing Ramon out of the car are incubating right now—wherever they are."

There were about two fingers of milk left in my glass. It suddenly lost interest for me and I put it down.

"How fast does it spread?"

Innes flashed an actuarial report at me. Cutting through the statistics and the medical mumbo-jumbo, it said that in 1890, in Elbe, Germany, twenty thousand people died of it in a week. That had been the last big western epidemic.

I fold the report carefully and gave it back to him.

"You figure that with eight million people crowded in this city, these mugs might infect—" I stopped. It was hard to imagine. A little shudder of fear charged up my spine. I pointed to my arm. "How about inoculation?"

He shook his head.

"If it gets going, serum will have to be shipped in—and that'll take time. Should the news get out, we won't get to the first million before the panic is on."

"Panic?"

"SURE. Mass evacuation. Hysteria. We'd lose as many lives from that as from the cholera. This whole area would be like a burning night club with only a few narrow exits."

"That could happen any way if the story gets out—even without the actual epidemic."

He shrugged. "It could. But right now only key people know, Kramer, the mayor, the commissioner, a few public health officials."

I finished the milk, swallowed some water to kill the taste and asked:

"How seriously are the police looking

for these four men who killed Ramon?"

"As seriously as they ever look for a John Doe killer—when there's been no newspaper publicity and the whole thing is a routine drag."

I nodded. "And you figure on account of the cops don't know the cholera angle, they'll resent *my* looking?"

Innes stood up and picked the check off the table. "That's about it, Lynn. You're soloing. Except you'll have one thing the police don't have."

"Goody," I said. "What?"

"Money. All you want of it. We've got to stop this thing cold."

We were threading our way through the tables now, toward the street.

"You mean microbes can be bribed like *people*?" I asked.

The corners of his mouth came down.

"Sorry," I said. "I was just vamping till ready. I just wanted to ask how come the Greater Urban Life Insurance Company is so public-spirited all of a sudden?"

We were pushing through the revolving door. He stopped revolving and looked at me pityingly.

"We have four hundred and fifty millions worth of life insurance within this city. Do you realize what cholera in epidemic proportions would do to our resources?"

I pushed the door so that it carried us out to the street.

"Innes," I said, "your foresight is admirable, correct, businesslike, and in some way that I can't explain—disgusting."

He grunted. "Spare me your philosophy. Just find those killers."

I left him, walked across the street to General Sessions and called Kramer, from a booth next to the press room. "Hullo," I said. "Department shoofies tap your phone down there?"

He sighed. "Probably. What is it this time?"

"Personal. Do me a favor, go outside and ring me from a coin phone."

He grumbled but took the number. I waited with the door open, watching people pass with that self-important look they get around courtrooms. After a few minutes, he called.

"I've seen Innes," I said. "I'm supposed to crack this cholera business."

He laughed. "And I've got a hundred

men *working* on it full time already."

"No soap?"

"No soap, Lynn. You know how these things are. Who did Sanchez pal with in 1928 in Illinois? You work forward to 1947 and it gets dull—unless you know you're solving something more than a cheap hood killing, and I suppose Innes told you I've got orders not to tell the boys anything about it."

"What about the practical side—anything interesting from the lab?"

"Nothing that leads anywhere. We don't even know how Sanchez got back into the country—except that it wasn't by stepping from a liner onto a dock. Mud samples from his shoes and some pollen narrowed it down to Ocean Shore. He must have been brought in on one of the halibut boats, bumped somewhere, and then dumped in the city. And there are two hundred boats and we couldn't find a fisherman with more than drunk and disorderly on his record."

"You've been having fun," I said. "What about quarantine?"

Kramer groaned. That was out, too. He was working with the public health service. Cholera would turn up in the bilge even during the incubation period, but a double check of every boat in port had been completely negative.

I hung up and oiled my brain with a little logic. Sanchez had come off a boat and the boat had to be some place. Clearly, someone had sneaked him off that boat and past the Port officials on another and smaller boat. If I went down to Ocean Shore and went from trawler to trawler until I got warm, someone would make trouble for me quicker than they would for a gang of city detectives.

So I would go and see. Something like the principle of getting a good seat in the orchestra by jumping off the balcony—but there didn't seem to be any other way. A cholera epidemic was nothing to look forward to, either.

The long, stone steps in front of the courthouse led to a hackstand. I walked down and told the cabby Ocean Shore.

"That's a twenty-dollar haul," he said.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," I told him. "The Greater Urban Life Insurance Company wants its hired help to go to hebben and glory in style."

CHAPTER TWO

Ruffians Don't Rat

OCEAN SHORE is one of the lucky towns the real estate people forgot when they built those little chicken-box commuter developments during the twenties. No poured concrete with fake English beams of brown cement and none of those phony little turrets and garages disguised as stables. Just bleached, clean-looking shacks, the five and dime, a drug store that sold drugs, and a street of gear stores and boatyards along the waterfront.

It was after four o'clock and the big, eight-wheel trailers had almost all rolled into the city with the day's catch on ice. The boats, mostly snouty little thirty-six and fifty-footers, were being washed down by their crews at the quarter-mile string of individual floats that took the place of a pier. As I walked parallel to them toward one of the remaining trailers, the nippy, early April breeze slapped the Long Island Sound against the rounded hulls.

The truck driver sat in his cab smoking a cigar, moodily watching a crew of booted fishermen pack their white-bellied catch in ice and roll it into his trailer.

I climbed up beside him. "Late today, eh?"

He took the cigar out of his mouth. "Draw up a chair and sit by the fire, mister," he said. "We're all just a-talkin' here."

"That's real neighborly," I said, "real neighborly. You do this run much?"

"Five times a week for two years."

He took off his long-peaked army surplus cap and adjusted one of the union buttons. I took a twenty dollar bill and dropped it into the cap. He set it back on his head without bothering to let me know he'd noticed it.

"I'm a cop," I said, "a private one. I figure I can talk to you because these halibut boys are maybe a little clannish and silent."

He raised a pair of jagged, blond eyebrows and rubbed the bristle on his chin. "Could be. What's your problem?"

I made a gesture that included all the boats. "Who in this navy would turn a couple of bucks the easy way—I mean, say like slipping a hot passenger ashore from a tramp?"

"I don't know," he said slowly, "these guys are dumb but honest. They feel . . ."

"Oh, come on," I cut in. "So they all go down to the sea in ships and their fathers before them. Who drinks, who's in hock, who chases dames? You must hear all the gossip."

"Okay," he said, "but the cops been all over these guys the last two days. I don't think nuthin' came of it."

He rattled off a half-dozen names. I thanked him, climbed out of the cab and started down the line. . . .

Only a fool would have asked the questions I asked now. But, of course, that was the idea. I put the same questions and got pretty much the same answers on each of the boats I climbed on.

I'd say: "My name is Lynn Reed; I'm a private investigator. There's a grand in it for you if you can tell me which of these boats took a guy named Ramon Sanchez off a tub out at sea about forty-eight hours ago."

I got the bum's rush twice and a lot of doubletalk the rest of the time.

"Hey, Pete," one youngish captain yelled to a hand who was mending a net. "Here's a guy who asks questions like the cops—only he's buying. Should I tell him?"

Pete shook his head. "I wouldn't. Maybe he's got a family or maybe he's studyin' to be an opera singer on the GI loan or somethin'. He oughta finish his education."

The captain turned back to me and shook his head. "You heard what Pete said."

"Us opera singers make lots of money," I told him. "For a real ocean voyage to that boat, I might even pay two grand."

He nodded toward the dock. "Go on," he said. "Goof off. You're being kidded."

"That's fine," I said. "I like it. Do me a favor and tell the boys there's a patsy sitting at the soda fountain in the five and dime. I'll be waiting up there if you know anybody with a real broad sense of humor."

I sat in the ten-cent store and had two black and white sodas. Nobody said anything funny to me. In fact, the only sense of humor in the place was the guy who described what I was drinking as an ice cream soda.

The golf-ball size ice cream tasted of corn starch and the syrup was that artificial chocolate they got away with during the war. I started to think of all the sodas I'd had in my life, and suddenly realized I wasn't thinking about it at all and I wasn't really having any fun. Somewhere on another level in my brain, like a trick optical effect in a movie, a different scene was being played.

In this scene, a man got off the subway train in a crowded station. Everyone who got off the train with him was very quiet, all looking at each other suspiciously as though each were a possible pickpocket. The crowd shuffled slowly toward the exit, the man carried along with it. Suddenly at the steps, it thinned a little and the people beside the man no longer pressed against him. Since he had been dead for some seconds, carried along upright by the crowd, he now fell forward on his face, slapping his rolling head against the stone steps. He was quite blue and his milk-glazed eyes had receded far back in their sockets. The crowd looked, screamed and ran. What they had searched each other suspiciously for had happened. Unmanned, they gave themselves to panic. At the narrow kiosk exit, they piled body on trodden body, like insects matted on a cone of sticky flypaper.

SUDDENLY I slid off the stool, needing the sea air. That crowd could happen and a thousand times worse if the cholera got going. And it would get going almost certainly—unless its four unknowing carriers were rounded up. And as for them, if they had actually brought Ramon Sanchez in on one of the halibut boats, I'd done everything but load the gun and place it against my head for them.

When a man goes to all that trouble to get himself jumped, the least you can do is feel sorry for the poor slob and jump him. I was in the position of the acrobat who darts on the stage, turning cartwheels and cracking jokes, only to find that the theatre is empty.

There was a very old cab in front of the store—the kind with the yellow and black checkerboard running around it. The cabby was a relic, too. He dropped the flag as I got in.

"Where to, son?"

I settled myself on peeling leather in the back. "I'll bet if I said the Kit Kat Club or Texas Guinan's you'd know where to go."

He smiled almost toothlessly. "Nineteen twenty-six was a great year," he said.

I leaned forward. "It's like this, Pop. Some people I would prefer to see in a crowd might want to see me alone." I took two tens from my wallet and passed them to him. "I want to stretch my luck a little."

He nodded back at me into the rear-view mirror, not in the least surprised, and I told him what I wanted him to do.

We drove out of Ocean Shore, cut across the new six-lane highway and hit the old Merrick Road. A '39 convertible rolled in behind us after a mile or so and kept its distance. We wound up to sixty and down to twenty. So did the convertible.

When we were sure, the cabby turned off onto a dirt road and gave it the gun hard on a hairpin curve. I had the door open and jumped clear as he skidded into the straightway.

Two thick oaks made good cover just at the curve. I ducked behind them, got out the .38 I carry and charged it. The convertible meshed into second to take the turn. On the narrow road, the big tail swept past at arm's length. I crouched and grabbed.

A moment later, we swung wide, nearly off the road, then rocketed to a stop almost against the side of the cab. The old boy stuck his head out and started to swear convincingly. The rear door of the convertible swung open and a second later the front door on my side. A big man in a gray suit ripped open the cab door and stuck a gun into the empty back seat.

I swung off the bumper, timing it as the convertible driver ran around the back to help his big pal. He was smaller and the flat Colt barrel caught him hard just above the ear before he saw it coming. The big man took an instant too long to decide whether to swing around inside the cab to use his gun or back out first.

Covering him, I solved the dilemma for him.

"Leave your gun inside the cab," I said. "Then come out."

He did, very flushed and hurt.

I nodded behind me. "See what this one is wearing, Pop."

The cabby shuffled around the front and I could hear him rooting around the unconscious smaller man. I stepped forward.

"Now," I said. "Which boat brought Sanchez in?"

He gave me a road company version of a man looking blank.

"Look," I said, "there isn't any money in this for me and I'm not the law, either. If you tell me, it could be your boss gets mad at you some other time. If you don't, I'll break every bone in your face—right now."

I said it quietly, very matter-of-fact, the way it scares most. He shook his head stiffly and kept his eyes on me.

They were hard little eyes grown soft with fear. He had dealt out so much of it that he could recognize it—feel the brutality to come—long before anything was done to him. I sensed his weakness and drove home. For money, or even for hate, I couldn't have nerved myself to work him over cold—but with so many lives dangling in the balance. . . .

I brought the gun down across his cheekbone. He screamed and turned to run. A quick step to the right and a simultaneous flip of the gun let me swing it, butt out. The flat steel sank across the bridge of his nose. I twisted the Colt in my hand.

He tilted sideways, clawed at the cab, and shattered the red glass of the tail-light with his hand. Then, sitting down, he stared hard at the macerated palm. He paid no attention to his nose and that was the only place he'd been really hurt. I lifted my foot to his shoulder and shoved. He tumbled over onto the road on his face. Now I straddled him and slid the end of the Colt into his open mouth. Then I smiled down at him as though I was enjoying myself.

"Which boat?"

The metal clicked hard against his teeth.

He shoved at my wrist and gasped:

"The last one you were on—that young guy's boat."

HE WAS down on the floor of the car, under my feet, and we were driving back to Ocean Shore before the cabby spoke.

"You know," he said, twisting back to look at me, "I hope you got a good reason. You did that like it ain't right to do to anybody."

"Just drive, Pop," I told him. "Just drive."

Even my voice sounded a little sick. But sick or not, I had to go on with it. What I had got from the big guy was pretty disappointing but it was the truth—he didn't have a lie left in him.

He was what was left of Sanchez' old gang. The boss had sent him a letter. Following its instructions, he'd arranged with the fishing boat to have Sanchez picked up off a tramp while she was still out at sea. And that was all. He hadn't even known that Ramon Sanchez was dead until I told him.

He had come after me because he thought Sanchez was picked up by the immigration authorities, to protect his old pal. Just plain dumb, rather touching loyalty and no help in finding the killers to me at all.

We parked in the crowded lot behind the five and ten while the cabby called Vice-President Innes for me. It took Innis forty minutes after the cabby returned to deliver what I wanted.

Meanwhile the big man sat silently on the floor holding his purpling nose and watching my gun arm as a patient watches the hypnotist. Every time I threw a question about the old days at him, he shrank away as if I had hit him. When it got to the point where I could no longer take it, I gave up—no closer to Sanchez' killers than when I started.

Finally, they came—a Public Health Service station wagon and four men. The cab horn spotted me for them and they came over.

The tall, bald man turned out to be Dr. Harlow Evans whose work on cholera prevention had made him almost a saint in India and the short stubby man was a Health Service medic named Brodtkin who had spent four years in the CBI.

Brodtkin did not seem surprised when he looked down on the floor.

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing serious."

Evans cleared his throat and made a movement toward the gungel. "Let me see that nose."

The man took his hand away but said nothing as the doctor probed.

"Chipped a little bone," Evans concluded.

"Doesn't he talk?" Brodtkin asked.

"He tells what he knows," I said, "but he doesn't know much."

The two other men were special agents of the immigration service. One of them carried an M-3 tommy with the stock slid in so that it was very little larger than a .45.

The cobby looked relieved as they prodded the gungsel out and into the station wagon.

"I guess you had a good reason," he said.

I gave him another ten of the Greater Urban Life Insurance Company's money. "No gossip about this, Pop. Not even to your wife. Nobody knows a thing."

"Nobody at all?"

I shook my head and grinned. "Not even Mayor Walker or Commissioner Mulroony or the *Evening Graphic*."

"Ah," he said as I walked away, "those were the great old days."

* * *

Pete and the young captain were still on the boat when we drew up alongside the pier. Pete stood watching us, running a finger inside the turtle neck of his black seaman's sweater. The captain chewed on a stubby cigar and pressed back against a winch with a poor attempt at casualness.

The gungsel stepped up to the string-piece and onto the gently swaying boat. I held one of his arms and the immigration men covered him ostentatiously with the tommy. The captain tried to look outraged and puzzled at the sight of it, but only succeeded in looking sick.

"I found some other fellows who knew the joke," I said; then to the gungsel: "Are these the men?"

He hesitated. "You promised me?"

I nodded, impatiently. "I told you. Sanchez was a citizen—there's no illegal entry involved. Conspiring to violate the quarantine laws is all you'll be charged with."

He looked relieved. "All right. This is the boat."

I faced the captain. "Now, suppose you

run us out to the tub you got Sanchez from."

He shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I put out my hand and Dr. Evans gave me the paper as we'd planned. The captain read it with a faint sneer, then the color faded from his face.

"This is Ramon Sanchez' death certificate," I told Pete who was watching and looking worried. "On the bottom it says that he was in an infectious stage of asiatic cholera when he died."

Pete drew in his breath sharply. I took his arm and the captain's and led them, unprotesting, away from the others.

"Tell you what's going to happen," I said conversationally. "You're going to be jugged and isolated as possible carriers. These are all Federal men. They'll see to it that somehow people forget to give you your cholera shots. You'll vomit, you'll turn blue, you'll die," I added with relish.

Pete looked pathetically at the captain. "Harry, they wouldn't dare, would they?"

I laughed. "You've been around, Harry. Tell him."

I walked back to the others. Harry told him. After a few minutes they came slowly toward us.

Harry said: "Can we have the shots now?"

Brodtkin opened the leather bag he'd brought from the car and slipped the serum out from the dry ice pack. I took it out of his hands and put it back in the ice.

"When we get to the ship, Doc."

CHAPTER THREE

Right From the Corpse's Mouth

AN HOUR'S rolling in the choppy waters brought us almost abreast of a low-riding tramp. A wispy evening fog was shaping up. The tramp hooted twice. Harry slipped in alongside the rusty hull just beneath the bridge, then turned to look at Brodtkin. He didn't say anything, he just looked, and his skin was gray even in the late red sunlight.

"Where'd you take Sanchez?" I asked.

"To Ocean Shore." He looked surprised. "To our own wharf, That was the deal."

"Anyone meet him?"

"No." He licked his lips. His eyes

plainly begged. I gave Brodkin the nod.

Then, while the three of them—Pete, Harry, and the big gungel—were getting their shots, a man with a megaphone yelled down to us from the bridge: What did we think we were doing?

Brodkin yelled back a line about the United States Government and official business. The man on the bridge thought that over for a while. Then the engines throbbed to a stop and a rope ladder snaked down over the side.

I crawled up, trying to look as if I liked it, and found the master who turned out to be a man with a red beard and an extravagant Oxford accent. We were very polite. He told me his name was Beauclyde. I told him mine. Then I went right to it.

"You had a passenger named Sanchez."

He chose to misunderstand me. "We're not carrying passengers—just cargo."

"I said *had*. He slipped you a grand or so to get off before the immigration authorities could stop him. Later, the welcome-home committee shot him full of holes."

Somehow, by the merest quiver of his beard, he let me know that I was not interesting him. I went right on:

"That part of it isn't important at the moment. Because he'd have been dead by now anyway—cholera."

It sh ok him. But he recovered quickly, set his teeth like it says in books the British do, pointed the beard at me, and spoke softly:

"Get off my ship."

I can lower my voice, too. "Sanchez is dead," I told him. "Could be some of your crew are very sick boys right now without knowing it. Could be *you* are."

He smiled, then remembering how bad his teeth were, clamped his lips down over them.

"My dear fellow, someone has thrown a big one. I've not dropped a passenger—I wasn't carrying one. And if there *was* cholera on my ship, your inspectors, don't you know, would find it and quarantine me."

I shook my head. "Pipe all hands on deck or whatever the hell it is you do. But get them up here."

Beauclyde shook *his* head. "We'll be berthed by midnight. The tugs are already on their way to meet us. I can't delay."

I walked back toward the rope ladder. He walked with me, like the lord of the manor speeding the weekend guest.

Below, from the deck of the fishing boat, Brodkin, Evans and the boy with the tommy started up. I decided to give it another try. After all, it was a British ship and I am a great respecter of international laws, even if I'm not sure exactly what they are. I turned back to him.

"Look, Captain Bligh—" I began.

He glanced over at the mate. Two outsize seamen detached themselves from the rail and moved toward me. I aimed for the beard and let go. He fell back. The seamen kept on coming.

Then, behind me, the boy with the tommy gun rose into view and peace broke out suddenly.

After Evans had given them a short talk on the disease and its horrors, we didn't even need the gun. They lined up for the needle like orphans on the ice cream line at a Tammany picnic. Even Beauclyde came to and around, in that order.

It turned out that there was enough cholera bacillus in the bilge to make the Hudson look like the Rockies. So, all in all, it was a good afternoon's work. Except that Sanchez' killers were still loose and until I found them, I was just shadow boxing.

The crew didn't have much to tell me. It had been a red-letter day when Sanchez said good morning and good night. Only two of them could remember anything more than that—two conversations, one about pigeons, the other about Mama Lucia's *pizza*.

Maybe it doesn't sound like much but with the kind of luck I knew I'd have to pray for, it might be enough.

Sanchez had been sentimental about pigeon racing. Pigeons are bred and raced in New York on the roofs of tenements in the Delancy-Forsythe street area. There are individual fanciers in Queens and Harlem, but the only place where the sport is taken seriously on a large scale is the lower East Side.

To the other seaman, Sanchez had remarked that, in his opinion, Italian-Italian cooking did not compare with American-Italian cooking. The first thing he was going to latch onto was one of Mama Lucia's

pizzas . . . if she was still around cooking.

She was, and I knew where. At the same old stand, right in the heart of the pigeon belt.

That was all and nobody had to remind me that a guy who remembers pigeons doesn't necessarily intend to live with them, or that he can live uptown and take a taxi downtown for dinner. But it was all I had and I was going to try it—hard.

When Brodtkin, Evans and I—leaving the immigration men to make certain that the ship stayed where she was—climbed down the fishing boat again, the mate was telling the crew about the time he had seen cholera on the rampage in China.

It was rough going back and the little boat moved slowly and heavily through the oily black water. It took us two hours. I could hear the mate talking all the way, inside my head, and I knew it was two hours I didn't have to spare.

BACK in Ocean Shore, I thought of calling Innes, decided he could go chase himself, and called Kramer again.

He sounded sick.

"Nu?" I asked. "What's new?"

Kramer said "nothing" cautiously.

"Look, friend, I found out where he knelt and kissed the dry land, get me?"

"Yeah."

"And I think he was bound for the lower East Side—somewhere near Little Italy."

"Thanks." He was still unenthusiastic. "You sure?"

"No. But it's the best I can do. You'll work on it?"

"Sure."

"And I'm sending a couple of presents—the friend who made the arrangements, the crew of the fishing boat that met the tramp. Maybe you'll have more luck, but for me they didn't know anything about the reception committee."

There was a little pause. I hated to have to ask him because Kramer is not the kind to give too much to a shamus who needs it, even on a case like this.

"Well, I've shown you mine," I said at last.

He laughed miserably. I liked him better than I had ever liked him before.

"I've got plenty of nothing."

"Not even someone with memories?"

He sighed. "Just one guy who'd be likely to give him what he got—Big Jim Hogan."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh. And you know where he was when it happened? In Florida opening a new supper club with roulette wheels."

"Well, that's where he would be, isn't it—if he'd set the hired hands to work?"

"That's what I told the commissioner. He knows it, I know it, you know it—but what do we do about it?"

There was no answer to that. Big Jim was just too big. I hung up, thinking about it. Hogan was rich and almost respectable now, but he had begun with running beer. So had Sanchez. If Hogan had a grudge left over from a highjacking or a tomahawking twenty years old, he would hire a couple of killers and go far away while the dirty was being done. And he was big and smart enough, too, to get the news to Ramon Sanchez that it was safe to come home.

Then, abruptly, I decided to forget it. It was a strange feeling but for the first time in my life, I was willing to let the big shot who had given the orders go if I could get my hands on the trigger men. . . .

The lower East Side goes to bed late and even then never really goes to sleep. Underneath the quiet, there is always a big city hum that never stops, and in the old-law tenements the restless and the sleepless let their lights burn until morning.

I know, because I walked the streets all night. There was no point to it but the other things I had done—waving Innes' money at stoolies who didn't know a thing, walking into the *pizza* joint Sanchez had mentioned, prowling the mob hangouts—had been pointless, too.

Being down there, sensing, seeing, smelling the dense mass of humanity, the tired women, the old men, the kids three in a bed in the dingy rooms on airshafts, the punks on the street corners, the girls walking in pairs, I couldn't go home. I couldn't go to bed and leave them to the danger they didn't know about, the disease that might even now be hidden inside some of them.

If I was right, if Sanchez' killers had found him here, in one of the dark houses, on one of the shabby streets—if I was

right in my hunch, what good did it do?

How could I find them? I stopped in front of a fifty-cent hotel, staring, as if I could force my eyes to see through stone, as if I could tear the brick fronts of the houses off with my hands and look into room after room, find a man or men who might be lying now in alternate fever and deathly chill.

Then I passed a corner store, cleaner than most of them, with uncluttered windows, with desks inside instead of merchandise, and a small sign lettered over the door. My brain read it, held onto it, and told it to me, over and over again before I listened. Suddenly, I knew what I was going to do and it was very simple.

Innes saw it, too, sleepy as he was.

"Good boy!"

"The Avenue A office," I told him. "I'm a reporter who wants to see how the other half lives."

"Will do."

I left the phone booth feeling a little better. I remembered that I was hungry. An old man in an all-night delicatessen fixed me two corned beef sandwiches and

talked me into celery tonic for my digestion. Then I found a place where they would give me bourbon for the celery tonic and what with one thing and another, it was five o'clock and the dawn was gray over the river.

I cabbed home, bathed, shaved, changed my shirt and made myself a pot of coffee. It was eight when Innes phoned.

"All set. You'll go out with one of the nurses on her rounds and you'll see the records of the other ones whenever you want to. You're from the *Express* and you're doing a series of articles on how much good the various charities do. Better hurry on down because the girls get to work early."

IT WAS nine-thirty when I had finished with the supervisor—one of those pleasant spinsters who have forgotten all about wanting to get married because what they are doing is so much more important—and was all set with Miss Margaret Martin.

Even in my depressed state, I thought of her as Peggy. We walked to her first call.

Country Doctor

Good-natured...
mild-mannered!

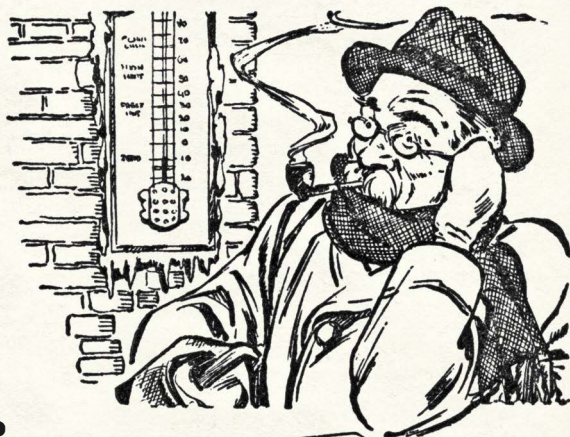
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I found out quickly that visiting nurses walk . . . more than cops . . . which is why they wear those social worker shoes.

The reason for the gray cotton stockings, the gray cotton uniforms, and the social worker hats was more obscure, unless it was to make sure the patients didn't make passes. Although, in Peggy's case, I thought maybe they did anyway.

Not that she was wasting any charm on me. She didn't speak and when she threw me a glance now and then, there was a bitterness. I thought at first it was just the natural bitterness that any woman would feel if she had legs like that and had to wear stockings like that. But then I concluded there was more to it and we'd better get it out in the open if we were going to spend the day together.

"Don't you like reporters?"

"I don't know. You're the first one I ever met."

"And so far, no good?"

She smiled and blushed a little.

"It's not you. It's just that I work with these people. I know them. I've seen the kind of articles men like you write, as if they were a different species, as if they weren't entitled to any privacy."

It seemed a little silly to argue about it. "I don't use names," I told her.

"They know," she said.

That was all there was to it, and she was right. We turned onto the steps of a low stoop and there was no need to go on with it. She led me through a dark, evil-smelling hall and into a room with dirty walls the color of green mold and air that had been breathed in and out over a period of a hundred years by thousands of people with halitosis.

Peggy changed dressings, bathed babies, gave medicines, took temperatures and made beds. I found out what it was to be sick, to be old, to be poor. I asked questions. I looked into back bedrooms, rooms on airshafts, rooms without any windows at all. I saw people who were dying and people who had just been born, who were already wishing that they hadn't been. I saw pathetic cleanliness and dirt, roaches, rats and puppies. But I didn't see any gunsels with cholera.

Peggy and I had lunch. She still didn't like me and I had nothing left in me that wanted to bother to change that.

There was a man with a broken leg, a feeble-minded child, a woman with anemia. But nothing for me. Nothing at all. By three o'clock, I was wondering how I dared to be wandering around looking for a needle in a haystack, one man where there should be thousands.

I was ready to call the papers, the radio stations, to let them scream panic, to let them all run as far as they could get. I even thought of running myself.

Then I heard it. I looked over at Peggy. She straightened up, stiffened and listened. The sound came again—from the back room, through a heavy door, and it was pain-ridden animal.

With a roll of gauze dangling from her hand, Peggy moved toward the door.

"Who's in there, Mrs. Sandowsky?" she asked.

Behind her, the boy whose arm she had been dressing got to his feet. Fear moved in his dark eyes, on his pinched face. He looked at his mother, wordlessly commanding her. With an agility unbelievable in one of her bulk, the woman slid between Peggy and the door.

"The—the roomer," she stammered. Then rapidly: "He's asleep. He works nights, sleeps days. Maybe he's dreaming."

The lie was obvious. So was the terror that quickened her breathing, wrung her fat hands together. Peggy, hesitated, then tried the door. It was locked.

"He's sick," Peggy said.

The woman went white, gulped in her anxiety to get the words out.

"Maybe he came home drunk last night. Lots of times he comes home drunk."

The man behind the door moaned again. I saw the woman flinch and the boy's eyes sicken but there was no pity in me for their problem—because an impossibility had been achieved. A miracle had happened.

I reached into my jacket and sprung my automatic out of its holster.

"Open that door."

CHAPTER FOUR

Up Again—And Out!

MRS. SANDOWSKY had seen guns before; so had her son. But Peggy was something else again. Without the benefit of their experience,

she was not afraid of it—or me. She was furious.

“Are you crazy?” she blazed. “Put that thing away and behave yourself!”

She began to walk toward me. I rasped at her.

“Stand still!”

I waved the gun at the kid. He didn't have to be told. He scuttled over beside his mother. Peggy watched him and something about the way he moved convinced her. She backed up slowly. When the three of them were in a little knot facing me I thought it over.

It couldn't be smooth, I had no room, no time. I had to get all of them, the sick man, his three companions, the mother, the boy, anybody they knew of who had been in the back room, every single human being they had seen in the last few days, and for that I would need help.

“How do you feel about cops?” I asked Peggy.

I heard the sharp hiss of the boy's breath. If I had wanted anything more, that would have been it.

Peggy was angry again. “You mean you're not a reporter? You mean you're a—”

My nod stopped her.

“Listen. There's a man in there. Mrs. Sandowsky's son, or her brother, or somebody she cares about. He's very sick. In fact, he's dying. Maybe Mrs. Sandowsky's been praying it isn't so. But she does know that he's delirious, that if he's taken to a hospital he'll talk—and if he lives, it will be to die in the chair. She hasn't dared to take that chance—or maybe somebody won't let her.”

Peggy looked at the woman at the boy's thin white face working under the control that kept his mouth shut. I saw belief dawn in her eyes.

“Open the door,” I repeated.

Mrs. Sandowsky took a key from her apron pocket, turned it in the lock.

Even before the door swung open, the sickening, fetid odor came out to us.

“Don't go in,” I told Peggy. “Just look.”

We moved into the doorway. We saw the blue skin, the stains on the bedclothes, the eyes that were already dead. I put my hand on Peggy's shoulder.

“Do you know what that is?”

She nodded mutely.

“You understand what it can mean—down here—with all these people?”

Peggy was trembling but she found her voice and she made it sound almost calm. “I'll call the hospital.”

I shook my head. “No. This can't get out. It would cause a panic. And we have to find everybody who's been exposed right away.” I handed her Innes' card. “Call him. Tell him who you are, say that you're calling for Lynn Reed. Tell him not to fool around—that I want Kramer and every cop he's got.”

She was good in the clinches. She took it all in the first time and was out the door and down the stairs.

Mrs. Sandowsky was crying now, in a quiet way, as if she had done a lot of it in her lifetime. I made her sit down and I shut the bedroom door. There was nothing to do for him and it would be easier for the three of us, waiting.

The boy looked toward the bedroom. The moaning had started again.

“What's he got?”

“He's very sick.” And, then, because I felt sorry for them: “Don't blame yourselves. A doctor probably couldn't have helped him anyway.”

There was nothing more to say. I stood there for a while, feeling ill at ease with the gun in my hand. There were footsteps outside in the hall and a knock. Peggy would not knock in the circumstances. I slid back against the wall next to the door and waved the gun at the kid again.

“Come in,” the boy said obediently.

The door opened. I knew what he was the moment I saw his clothes and the way he carried himself, tight and controlled. He was well into the room before he caught what was on their faces and whirled at me, clawing for his inside pocket.

The hood looked competent and I gave him my full attention.

“Drop it,” I said.

It was only a moment, while his hand hesitated and then came away from his coat pocket, empty. But it was enough. The kid was out the open window and onto the fire escape.

There was an instant as he threw himself toward the iron ladder when I had a full view of him and a point-blank shot. Then he was gone and there was nothing

to do about it any more. I had the hood to watch—and I had learned something new about myself.

Even with the life of an entire city at stake, I couldn't bring myself to shoot a fourteen-year old kid with a game arm.

I saw the curl of the hood's lip as he sneered at me, and it consoled me a little.

"All right, you *could*," I told him, "but don't let it give you ideas. *You're* old enough."

So there it was, and I had nothing to be proud of except maybe the elementary good sense that had kept me from mentioning the cholera. At least, the kid could not tell the world about that. What else he could do, I didn't know. I could only wait and see.

It seemed a long time before Peggy came back.

She took in the hood and missed the kid in the same instant.

"What hap—" she started.

"Skip it," I told her. "I'm sensitive. What took you so long?"

"Mr. Innes asked a lot of questions."

"The executive type," I murmured. "Never trusts anybody."

Peggy ignored me. "I told him everything I could. They'll send an ambulance. We're all to go to the hospital. The police can get the statements, start rounding up people. Then they'll get as much out of him—" she nodded toward the bedroom—"as possible while he's still . . . while there's still time."

The gungel flinched. That was something. That meant I only had two to go.

It was a bare five minutes before there was a siren wail. Peggy, looking out the window, announced the ambulance.

"Can you shoot?" I asked her.

"Well enough," she said coolly. She was definitely a girl who would grow on me. I gave her the gun.

"Watch it," I told her. "We can't afford to lose another one. Mrs. Sandowsky will go first. This gentleman and I will carry him. I don't want you to get any closer to him than you have to. Come up behind with the artillery."

It worked fine. The interne opened the back of the ambulance for us. I'd half expected a crack about not waiting for the stretcher but when he didn't make it, I realized it was just four flights of stairs he

hadn't had to exert himself climbing.

We all crowded into the cab and a certain complacency began to steal over me. I hadn't got very far, but I was on my way.

That's what I told myself and if I'd held out my hand to Peggy for the gun instead of using it to pat myself on the back, it might have been true.

As it was, there was a loud crash somewhere inside my brain. My ears popped as if I'd come straight down from six thousand to zero. In the flash of man-made lightning that illumined the ambulance, I saw Peggy struggling with the interne.

I reached forward to help her and kept on going, flat on my face, down into a deep black well of despair.

I WOKE up hating myself. I could think of what Innes and Kramer were saying and I didn't like it. But I'd have taken all of that and a lot more besides, if it helped.

But I was through and I knew it and it was my own fault. Thousands . . . maybe hundreds of thousands of people would die because I was a bumbling, conceited, fat-headed, incompetent, would-be cop without the humility to know when a job was too big for me.

My head hurt. I sat up sharply and made it hurt worse. It was concrete I was sitting on and there were oil stains on it. I was in a garage. I told myself bitterly that that was the most brilliant deduction I had made that day. Then I saw Peggy. She was doubled up and the ropes that tied her bit deeply into her wrists and ankles and the gag held her mouth awry in a grimace of pain.

Maybe that doesn't sound like a sight to be thankful for, but it was. Because it made me throw away the luxury of feeling sorry for myself and try to think like a man again.

The first thing I told myself was that I wasn't going to do anything brave and glorious and foolhardy. I wasn't going to make another mistake. I'd think it out first, every half inch of the way and when I did it—if somehow I got another chance—it would be good.

Then I looked around, pushing my brain the way I usually don't because I'm too busy making with the guns and the fists instead.

They hadn't gagged me. They had just tied my hands and feet. That could mean they thought I'd stay out—or it could mean that we were some place where yelling wouldn't matter.

Then, why had they gagged Peggy? I looked at the vicious way her mouth was taped and knew the answer. They'd had to stop what she was saying to them, that was all.

Her eyes were open now and they were very blue. She was looking at me. She tried to smile and winked instead. In the spot I'd put us in, she'd have had me bawling like a baby if she'd done it again. I wanted to tell her how badly I needed to get that gag out of her mouth.

"Did you tell them about the cholera?" I asked instead.

She nodded, tried frantically to explain it to me with her eyes.

"Don't. Just let me ask until I hit the right questions. It had no effect on them?"

Peggy shook her head.

"They didn't believe you?"

She nodded. There was something rather ironical about that. Their skepticism might kill them—but it might kill us, too, and a lot of other people as well. I moved my mind away quickly.

It was a three-car garage but the only thing that was in it, besides us, was the ambulance. Outside one of the windows, the only one I could see, there was a tree branch and the unreality of green leaves and bright sunlight. We were in the country, at someone's home, a big one because little houses don't have three car garages.

"Do you know where we are?"

She did. I couldn't have been out long; it had to be some place comparatively close.

"Long Island?"

I was doing swell. Right on the nose. Except that it's a big island and what would it mean if I knew the name of the town?

"Did you see the house?"

She saw the house but she didn't know who it belonged to. It took us about five minutes to get that far, if you could call it that. I also found out that they had taken Mrs. Sandowsky, the sick boy, and themselves upstairs, over the garage to what looked like servants' quarters. And that they had said nothing of any significance.

My brain had not been very helpful. I tried my muscles next—against the ropes that tied me—with the same howling success. Four of them, the sick boy, the driver of the ambulance, the fake interne, the hood, all upstairs, and me downstairs trussed up like a rolled roast ready for the oven and nothing to do, nothing at all to do.

A tiny sound came from Peggy and a rustling of starched uniform. She was wriggling, inching toward me.

"Don't honey," I told her. "You can't loosen them. The way they've got you tied, the more you struggle the more you'll tighten them."

She bit on the gag. Her eyes blazed. I think she was swearing. A swell girl but a trifle too impatient with stupidity.

"You're trying to tell me something?"

Violent nodding. More nodding.

"All right. Take it easy. I'll get around to the question."

Peggy'd have brained me if she could have. It dawned on me finally that she was pointing with her chin, not nodding, pointing to the pocket of her uniform.

"You want me to get something out of your pocket?"

Her relief was clear.

SLOWLY, painfully, we crawled together. There was a white handkerchief in the pocket. I caught hold of the protruding corner with my teeth and pulled it out. Then a thermometer in a black case and a fountain pen. They were obviously not what I was after.

I don't know if anyone else has ever tried to get something that was wedged far down in a starched pocket with their teeth but I'm here to tell the world that it isn't easy.

Peggy lay still, to help me, while I fumbled and, even as I fumbled, the irrational male in me took note of all the clean, homelike things of which she smelled. Not perfume—there would be no place for perfume on a job like hers. But starch, and clean linen, and good soap.

Then something sliced an inch or so out of my lower lip and I knew I'd made contact.

When I got it out, finally, inadvertently dropping it to the floor where I could see it—it was a double-edged razor blade, with

a kind of improvised holder made out of the bottom of a paper match book. A very handy little gadget indeed to have around at the moment.

I got it back into my mouth somehow and, after ten or twelve tries and another gouge to match on my upper lip, cut the ropes on Peggy's wrist.

I made her take the gag out first. After that, it was easy. In no time at all we were standing gingerly on our pins-and-needles feet. There was no key in the ambulance and no wires to cross under the dashboard, of course, so that was out. I took a heavy lug wrench from the tool rack on the wall and we made straight for the door—before it occurred to me that now was the time to do some of that heavy thinking I'd promised myself.

Was this the thing to do—make a dash for freedom and a telephone? And shouldn't Peggy and I go separately? I'd be able to move faster without her and, also, that way we'd have two chances instead of one.

It was the kid on the fire escape all over again. If I got away and they caught Peggy. . . . But I wasn't the only one who was thinking.

"Maybe you should go alone," she said.

"Shut up," I told her.

How long would it take help to get here? Suppose they got away in the meantime? Things like that chased themselves around inside my brain. But what else could I do? There were three of them to fight with at least two guns, mine and the hood's. There was just one of me and a lug wrench.

I was scared. I was scared as hell. This was the last, the extra chance. It would have been a pleasure to solve everything by letting somebody shoot me.

I opened the door quietly, slid out, slithered along the side of the garage, and cased the layout. A gateway straight ahead, a hundred yards away. Lawn to run quietly on, but no cover except a privet hedge about a foot high and a pair of elms too far to one side to be any good. No sound from upstairs at all. Nobody about. Nothing to worry me but windows all around the second floor for them to see us from, to shoot from.

I slid back.

"We run on the grass, as fast and as

quietly as we can," I told her, "straight ahead toward the gate. If we're spotted and there's any shooting, you throw yourself flat on the ground behind the hedge and don't move."

Then I kissed her, not to encourage her but to encourage me, which it did. We went out the door. We didn't have a chance in a thousand. Peggy knew it, too, but she gave me a quick grin and ran like a deer.

The gates were just close enough to make it seem that luck was on our side at last—when it happened. I was looking back over my shoulder with the genius I had developed for doing the wrong thing at the wrong time, oblivious to the fact that the lawn was used for croquet. The wicket caught me a little above the ankle and I sprawled. At the same moment, someone yelled and I heard a gun.

I got onto my feet again, waiting for the impact of the bullet with every inch of my spine. It didn't come and a second later I saw that Peggy was still running.

"Stop, Peggy!" I yelled.

She didn't. I was on my feet again and after her. There was another shot, from a different gun by the sound of it and from a different direction. I saw him and I understood what had happened.

He was on the path between us and the gate, the beer bottle he had gone into the house for in his hand and a gun in the other. Behind me, the others pounded toward us, alerted by the first bullet and shooting as they came. The man on the path raised his gun carefully and got a bead on Peggy.

I couldn't have missed, even without the quick prayer I said. The lug wrench landed just above the solar plexus, sank with a soft thick thud into his sagging diaphragm. His shot went wild. Then two of them came up behind me and I got one punch in, to someone's jaw, before the gun butt landed on my skull.

CHAPTER FIVE

Welcome-Back Committee

IT KNOCKED me down. One of them trained his gun on me while the other went and caught Peggy. Then they marched us back to the garage and up the flight of stairs.

They had Mrs. Sandowsky in a chair.

I didn't want to look at her and I couldn't look at Peggy. I just sat where they shoved me on an old day bed beside her.

The man I had hit with the wrench opened his shirt and showed them the mark it had made on the fat white bloat of him. He was in favor of tying us up again, elaborately. The others were too openly contemptuous of us now to bother, but they were good boys at their trade and they remembered to watch us.

The sick one was in the other room. He brought it all back to me—everything I had been hired to do, everything I hadn't done. It was not good to sit there, realizing that I was the only one who was really safe, with the shots inside me, knowing that even now Peggy might be . . . that even now the disease might be working.

I took her hand. She let me hold it. The one I had caught at the Sandowskys'—the boys had been calling him Frank—saw us and sneered at us mildly. He was about twenty-five, twelve years younger than me. I could see he thought of me as a rather silly, harmless old cluck, nobody to worry about. If I made a break for it, he would just tap me on the head in a lazy, almost gentle way and let it go at that.

The fat one was Poly and the tall blond one was Dave. They all wore guns that could shoot bullets to fit the holes in Sanchez. From the way they talked, I could see that they didn't know exactly what they were going to do with us.

That made it worse, somehow. Three little gunsels spreading death, killing Mrs. Sandowsky and Peggy, because they were rather stupid kids who hadn't been well educated enough to know what cholera meant. And killing themselves the same way.

I was sitting there, keening to myself like that, when Peggy spoke.

"Tell me about it," she said.

I could think of gayer ways to spend our last moments together. But maybe she was the kind that have to have a reason to die. Then I saw something in her expression and I got it.

"Well," I began, "there was once upon a time a big-shot racketeer named Ramon Sanchez. He got very unpopular late in the twenties and lit out of the States to beat the machine guns. He was in Asia when he got homesick enough to kid himself it was safe to come home. So he slipped back into the country. Someone—probably another ex-hood named Jim Hogan, paid these smart boys here to bump him and they did. Only it was a waste of Hogan's money because Sanchez was dying already . . . from cholera."

Poly was watching me. Peggy saw him, too, and cued me again.

"They did him a favor," she said judiciously. "Anything that would save you those last few hours. . . . You know, in China they're so terrified of it and it's so catching, they burn down the houses where people have died of it."

"Yeah," I said. "You can get it anywhere within a week after you've been exposed to it."

I wasn't sure about that but I wasn't taking any chances on Poly deciding he'd passed the danger period. I watched him take that in and continued:

"You get dysentery and spasms of retching and your skin turns blue and your eyes sink in and in about two days you die."

I hadn't forgotten about Mrs. Sandowsky. She reacted just the way I thought

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she would. It was a hell of a thing to be depending on, but it was what I had to do.

She began to cry as if she had never really stopped. Between her sobs, broken words came out as if they were being torn from her.

"Stash," she said. That's a kind of Polish nickname for Stanley and the way she said it, it could have meant dearly beloved. "Stash, it was that way with him. He's dying. It's two days already."

She stood up and faced them. Poly had forgotten the sore place on his belly now.

"Why did I listen to you?" she demanded fiercely. "My Stash is dying because I listened to you. You should die, too, all of you! You should die!"

She had put the hook into them deeper than I could have. There had been no sound from the back room, ever since we came in. I reached up quietly and gave the hook a twist.

"Stash is dead now," I said softly, to no one in particular.

Mrs. Sandowsky screamed. Peggy put her arms around her.

"Go and see," I told Poly. "Get yourself a preview of how *you'll* be looking, tomorrow or the next day."

He half rose from his chair. There was still the same sneer on Frank's face—maybe it was permanent. Under Dave's left eye a little nerve quivered. He was, however, very superior, very tough.

"Sit down," he told Poly contemptuously. "This guy is working to soften you up. Don't you know when you're being conned?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm making the whole thing up. But all the same, I don't seem to hear your little pal in there laughing and scratching."

THIS time Poly got out of the chair and went across the room. But he didn't get into the bedroom. The something that had been Stanley Sandowsky stopped him. He stood stock still in the doorway. When he turned back to us his face was yellow. The little pillows of fat along his cheek bones dropped, hung loose and quivering.

"He is dead." His voice was toneless. "He looks terrible. He's . . . he's like this guy said."

"Sit down." It was Dave. Under the

hardness of his voice there was only the faintest hint of hesitation. "Sit down and keep your flabby mouth shut. You know we gotta wait here."

We sat still again. Peggy held onto Mrs. Sandowsky but the older woman was too exhausted, too dulled, to cause her any trouble. Time passed slowly. Somewhere, far away, a dog barked. Once a bird sped past the window with a sudden, rushing sound of wings. From the bedroom the smell of death crept out to us.

Poly sat in his chair, his bulk deflated slightly, like a rubber toy without enough air. The little nerve in Dave's cheek continued to twitch. Frank's face was sneerless, expressionless. I decided that I had given it long enough.

I got up slowly, almost casually, and I spoke conversationally.

"I want to show you something."

Frank's hand snaked for his gun.

"Forget it," I told him. "I know when I'm licked." I rolled up my sleeve. "But if you'll notice, I take it pretty calmly. I can afford to. I can sit here all afternoon and all tonight and all tomorrow, if I have to, and the worst that can happen to me is maybe I get hungry or one of you guys throws a little lead into me. Because I have this."

I pointed to the bruise on the outside of my arm. Then I looked straight at Peggy and told a barefaced lie.

"She has one, too. She got hers this morning at the hospital. I got mine yesterday from an insurance company doctor. Take a look."

I held out the arm. It was black and blue and in the center of the bruise there was a tiny, scarlet mark.

"That's the place where they jabbed the hypodermic in. You've been around enough to tell a hophead when you see one. You know I didn't do that to myself for fun. I'll tell you *exactly* how it felt—like they hit me with a baseball bat. But also it felt wonderful. Because the stuff they shot me full of means I can sit around here watching everybody else die off like flies."

I moved back toward the day bed, but I didn't sit down.

"Take a look at yourself in a mirror, Poly," I suggested. "I think you're getting a little blue around the edges."

He moved so quickly I almost didn't have time to be surprised that it was Dave instead of Poly and he made straight toward the stairs.

Frank was just as good as I had thought him. The gun flashed into his hand.

"Don't do it, Dave."

The man in the doorway turned and there was a gun in his hand, too.

"*You* be a good boy and sit here with *that*." He jerked his head toward the bedroom. "Wait for your telephone call. *I'm* going to find a doctor and some of those shots, just in case."

It was a fairly long speech and he made it to Frank. I took a deep breath and got myself set right. I made it in one leap, and I hit him so hard that the wind went out of him. Then I got hold of his gun arm before he could bring it around to use on me.

Out of the corner of my eye, as I twisted away from his knee jab, I caught a glimpse of Poly, just sitting there, and Frank as cold as ice, waiting for a chance to get in a shot. Even without Dave's thumb on my eyeball, it wouldn't have been easy to figure which of us he would shoot, but I was past the point where a consideration like that could stop me.

I put on the squeeze, crushing the fragile wrist bones between my hands. He screamed and tried to pull away from me. Then his hand loosened on the gun and I caught it as it fell.

I stepped back and let him collapse against the door jamb. Then, without excitement, when it was no longer necessary, Frank shot him.

I didn't waste any time thinking about how right I had been about Frankie. My arm was around Dave almost before he started to slide down to the floor, and his body was a shield behind which I faced Frank, gun in hand.

He was sneering again, as if we had not been fighting on the same side, for the same thing, three seconds before.

"This is a forty-five, chum," he told me. "I can go right through him and you too."

I was talking to Poly, not to him, although he didn't know it and although I didn't have much confidence in that fat boy by now.

"I'm pretty good, too," I said, "so you shoot me through the heart and I shoot you through the heart and where does it

get us? No place. Which is pretty dumb considering we can make a deal."

"Like what?"

"Like I tell the cops you are just friends of Stash, guys who accidentally got exposed when you came to see him. They see you get your shots and nobody remembers there ever was a guy named Sanchez."

The sneer was getting monotonous.

"Are you kidding? You get us downtown and you forget you ever said that."

He raised his gun. I raised mine. We were going to shoot it out like he was Billy the Kid and I was Jesse James in the last reel of a western. Poly was still slumped in his chair.

"Actually, we ought to do it at ten paces."

He knew about me all right. He knew I had to make the last jest before the firing squad. I had the first word out, barely, when he squeezed the trigger.

IF POLY had been completely what he looked like, I suppose I'd be Swiss cheese now. But his fat arm came up, miraculously, just enough, in the last possible fraction of a second, and the bullet slid through Dave's arm and out the door. My first shot was the last for Frankie.

There was just Poly left to tie up. He didn't mind, even if the inoculation would just keep him alive for the chair. Mrs. Sandowsky had never wanted to fight anybody anyway, so she was all right with Peggy while I called Kramer.

He was down there, in the Avenue A station, with the precinct captain and he stopped blowing his top as soon as I told him what I had. For the first time since I have known him, he listened to what I wanted and promised to send a doctor who'd meet us driving in the ambulance, with shots for Peggy, Mrs. Sandowsky and Poly.

"Where are you?" he asked.

I asked Peggy.

"Evans Center," I told Kramer.

We could use the highway. They would have to catch the Sandowsky kid and take care of all the people in the neighborhood who had been exposed and send out for Stash, and Dave, and Frank.

After that, we took Poly down and locked him with Mrs. Sandowsky in the back of the ambulance. I had left Peggy

in the driver's seat and gone upstairs to get the ignition key from Dave or Frank when the telephone rang, high and thin. I thought it was Kramer with an extra question. But it wasn't that phone. It was another one, on the wall—a house phone. I was on my horse at last and I wasn't letting any opportunities pass me by. I answered it.

Someone said "Dave" cautiously.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Is everything under control? I thought I heard shoot—"

He stopped. Maybe Dave was too cultured to say "yeah."

"Put Frank on." This very suspiciously.

"Just a minute."

I let the receiver dangle and I raced down the stairs, told Peggy to hold everything as I galloped past, and made it up the long path to the house in something better than sixty seconds flat.

There was a car around in back, a big flashy pale blue convertible with darker blue gabardine upholstery. There was a man getting into it in a hurry.

"Mr. Hogan?" I said, with my hand on my gun in my pocket.

He made a small movement that told me there was something in his pocket, too, then turned to face me impatiently. I moved right on up to where I was leaning on the car door.

"I think you'll have to come with me."

"Who are you?"

"Lynn Reed." With my free hand, I held my card out where he could see it. He was big enough to be amused.

"And why should I come with you, Mr. Reed?"

"Because even with your lawyers, it's going to be rather difficult to explain what Sanchez' killers, hiding out, kidnapping possible witnesses, were doing on your estate."

"I don't know anything about Sanchez' killers." His tone put quotation marks around the words. "But if you mean the three boys who have been living in the garage, they asked me if they could stay there while the place was closed up. And," he added benevolently, "I think you're making a mistake about them."

"Have you seen them?"

"One of them—an hour or so ago. Why?"

He turned the key in the ignition to show me I didn't have much more of his valuable time to waste and stepped on the starter.

"Because he was carrying cholera. Maybe I have no way to prove you hired them to kill Sanchez and maybe I can't hold you for that. But I have every right, morally and legally, to stop you from running around killing innocent people with the germs that may be in you right now."

He sniffed. He put his foot down on the accelerator. The motor stopped humming and roared.

"If I have to shoot to stop you, I will," I told him.

He didn't seem to believe me. The car shot forward. Then the bullet I had been half hoping he would throw my way first split the air beside my left ear. The tires screamed around the curve in the driveway.

He had time to shoot once more before I got him. The bullet went through the back of his head. The convertible swerved off into a clump of blossomless laurel and he fell out. I didn't feel badly about it at all.

* * *

They were all pleased with me. Brodtkin, Evans, all the public health people, even Kramer and Peggy. All very pleased and very hysterical after the strain they had been under.

They had the Sandowsky neighborhood roped off and the medics were having the kind of roman holiday with their hypos that they hadn't had since the war. They'd found the kid and the real ambulance driver and interne. It didn't even matter any more if the papers got it. It was all over and it would be played that way.

I was brushing off reporters like one to the manner born when Innes arrived.

"You irresponsible idiot," he said. "Do you know what kind of a policy we had written on Hogan? A million dollar double indemnity! That bullet of yours will cost us exactly two million dollars!"

"Well," I told him judiciously, "you can't have everything."

Then I secured Peggy's arm and we left together.

THE END

SINNER'S HAVEN

By
**MICHAEL
O'HILLARD**



"A thirty-eight scares
off lots of things," she
said.

*Murderer-branded Detective Thorne
tried horning in on a waterfront den
—and escorting a beautiful damsel...
into distress.*

PICKETT STREET is the place you don't go at night. It's the last mile on the waterfront and marks the end of the long wharf. It's a cluttered kind of place. The old houses lean over the street, closing in on you, pressing you down toward the docks. At this time of

year the fog swirls through the street between the houses, and the foghorns make the loneliest sound in the world.

I parked my car up on the hill and walked down toward the wharfs. I didn't like it at all. I didn't like the time of the year, the neighborhood, but most of all I didn't like the address that was scribbled on the little piece of paper in my pocket—the dirty little piece of paper with the bloodstain on one corner and the blurred writing that said “No. 17, Picket Street” and obliterated the rest by three weeks of soaking in the dirty water of the bay. That little piece of paper was all I had to go by. It was the only thing I'd found on a man's body and I had to know more about the man.

I turned into Pickett Street and stopped. I could smell the rank odor of stale garbage. My stomach did a couple of flips and I wanted a drink. But I started walking, counting houses from the number three. My heels clicked on the sidewalk as if I were the only person left in the world. Three—five—seven—I knew that other people must be around. Occasionally I thought I saw a blurred shape slide from one doorway to another. And I knew that I was being watched.

Nine—eleven—thirteen—I cursed myself for wearing good clothes. The whole street must be alive with the news I was there. Behind the dirty windows . . . up, somewhere in the houses, immersed in the gloom, people were waiting for me. Thirteen—fifteen—and seventeen— Number seventeen Pickett Street.

I could barely make it out. I had gotten off too far from the lightbulb at the upper end of the street. At the other end, the harbor lights glowed dully. In between were the faint lights of a bar . . . or maybe something worse. I started to climb up the stone steps of number seventeen. I stumbled, but somehow I got to the top. I stopped and listened.

Silence on Pickett Street. Silence complete and profound.

You know that knocking doesn't do any good at that kind of house. The place was dark and quiet. But people were there—people who didn't like you.

I stepped into a damp hallway. There was some kind of light burning up around the bend in the stairs above me. To the

other side of the stairs a little hallway plunged back into the darkness. I felt sick again, but this was no time to go back. I leaned against the door and my heart beat. I listened.

Somewhere a man breathing heavily. Asleep.

The fog horn in the bay mourning at weary intervals.

The man breathing.

A faucet dripping.

Someone walking . . . quietly . . . firmly . . . coming up the dark little hallway to the right of the stairs.

Pause.

There was a tall shape spraddling the narrow hallway. It was a man in a white shirt. The light from the stairs cut across his neckline so I couldn't see his face. But I knew where he was looking.

“What you want, buddy?” The voice was deep and grating.

“Who owns this joint?”

“I asked you what you want. Come on.” The man was moving out of the shadow. The light moved up and slithered across his face. A dirty, narrow face. A face like a ferret, black little eyes, hooked jaw and thin hair over a high forehead. As he moved toward me, one of his hands was reaching for the inevitable gun, knife or blackout bar. This was Pickett Street. “Maybe you got the wrong house, buddy.”

I stepped away from the door. “Maybe,” I said, “but I'd like to find out for sure.” Now it was open warfare.

Suddenly the man did a quick turn. Something whistled over my head and smashed into the wall. Blackjack. I spun on one heel and drove my left fist hard. I felt ribs crunch. The man caved over me and sunk onto the floor with his head against the wall. Too easy. I squatted down and looked into his eyes. I've been around enough to know when they're doped up. I straightened up and listened again.

Man still breathing.

Faucet dripping.

The foghorn mourning for a dead man found in the bay.

Pause.

And then— as if it happened very slowly—a blinding flash and I dissolved into the obscurity of Pickett Street.

THE first thing that I was conscious of was pain. Great burning streaks of it tearing through my arms and legs. Then I felt wind with salt in it . . . cold . . . pain again.

I opened my eyes and saw stars over the bay. As I turned my head I saw a night lamp burning blue, hanging on a post with the water out beyond it. I raised my hand to my head and felt fingers close around my wrist. "You'd better let it alone for a while," said a voice. "They nearly chopped your head off. Here, see if this feels better." Something cold over my forehead.

Looking up, I saw a human being hanging over me. It seemed to be sitting on a crate. It held out a burning cigarette. Slowly, I reached for it and began to sit up. I was looking into the face of the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Blonde, dark eyes, good head, and a certain sparkle to the face. Her mouth looked like it had smiled and laughed a lot. She was tall, built easily and gracefully.

The mouth smiled and the eyes looked friendly. "You're Rufus Thorne, aren't you?" Then, without waiting for an answer, "I followed you down here and it's damned lucky for you that I did."

"Wait a minute," I said, "I'm a sick man. Who are you?"

"Brandy," said the girl. "Tell me, did you really kill Lars Kellaway? I'll bet you didn't!"

"I think we'd better start at the beginning. Suppose you tell me what happened to me, how you figure in it and where I am now." I crushed out the cigarette and fumbled for another one. She struck a match. I could get a better

look at her in the flickering light. She was really beautiful. Too beautiful for Pickett Street or the waterfront.

"When you slugged Jason you had your back to the door. Someone opened the door and hit you. Didn't you hear it? They started to pull you into the house again and I scared them off."

"How in the hell would you scare them off?" I asked incredulously, looking at her hundred and fifteen pounds. I rubbed the back of my head. "It feels like a couple of orang-utangs wouldn't scare off the guy who slugged me."

"A thirty-eight scares off lots of things," she grinned, pulling one from her raincoat pocket and waving it in my face. I grabbed it.

"Give me that before someone gets hurt. Do you really know what it's for?"

"Just try me sometime," she grinned. She put the gun back in her coat pocket.

I stood up and shook myself. Nothing broken. My hat missing, my nerves a little more shaggy, but nothing really damaged. "Now you'd better explain how you know me and what you know about Lars Kellaway," I said. "And while you're at it, you'd better tell me who you are."

"Right," she said brightly. "I'm Brandy Thornton."

"Don't tell me," I murmured, "You aren't—"

"Correct on the first guess," she said, settling herself on the crate. "The daughter of the guy who hired you."

I sat down again. "Go on."

"It's simple, darling. My old man hired you four weeks ago to trail Lars Kellaway. You lost him and he turned

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up dead in the bay. Now they think you did it. At least father does and he's convinced the police that he's right." She looked at me sympathetically. "You're in a jam, aren't you, baby?"

She was right . . . too right. I had tailed Kellaway plenty until he got away from me. I worked like a beaver trying to find him again. Then came the anonymous phone call from a woman with a rasping voice—the call that said I might find something I wanted beneath pier nineteen.

I got there fifteen minutes ahead of the cops. They found me with the soggy mass wrapped in a blue denim. It had been Lars Kellaway once . . . but it wasn't any more. I was slippery enough to get myself into the bay and do some fancy swimming. After that the cat-and-mouse stuff began. It had been going on for six days. The broke private dick roaming around the city trying to get himself out of a jam while every smart apple on the municipal police force is trying to get him in one.

I looked at the girl. "Okay," I said, bitterly, "I might as well have one more laugh. What's your old man going to give you for finding me? And how far do you think you'll get me? With or without that thirty-eight of yours. I could take that gun and—"

"Now wait a minute, darling," she said soothingly, "You don't know which side I'm on yet, do you?" She leaned back, clasped her hands around her knees and sighed. "What's it going to take to prove to you that I'm on your side and not theirs?"

"Three good reasons—and you haven't got 'em. I'm leaving. If you want to shoot me you'll have to do it in the back. Thanks for pulling me out of the jam on Pickett Street." I turned and started off. For the first time I noticed that I was on a dock. My feet thudded hollow on the boards. I walked away from the girl sitting on the box. I could feel the hackles on my neck rise, waiting for that gun to go off.

"All right, chowderhead." Her voice snapped through the darkness. "I'll give you one more chance."

I stopped. Clutch at that straw, O drowning man.

"If you buy me a drink, I'll tell you who Lars Kellaway was and why my old man wanted him tailed." I heard her stand up.

I turned and went back to her. Now the blue light was behind me and I couldn't see her any more. "You win," I said. "What do you drink?"

BY THE time she'd finished off the third whiskey sour and the sweep-hand on the clock had hit two-thirty a. m., I had a lot of confidence in her.

"So," I asked, "you roam Pickett Street at night trailing men you've never met?"

"Sure," she grinned, "I'm curious. I'd like to know the answers to a couple of somethings."

"What kind of somethings?"

"Why, for instance, my old man fired a chauffeur ten years ago. And why the chauffeur kept hanging around just the same. I used to come home late at night and see him leaving the house by the servant's entrance. I asked my old man about it once and he got me an apartment on Avenue L and told me to mind my own business."

"And the chauffeur—"

She nodded. "Lars Kellaway."

Pause. Something coming up.

"What does your old man do? How did he make his dough?"

"Importing hemp. And that's all. Made a fortune at it. He also imported cheap oriental labor to work in the rope business. All of which leads us to the second something I'm curious about. Namely, how did my beloved daddy make so much money during the war when there wasn't any importing going on?"

"Reserve stocks, maybe?" I asked.

She shook her head. "He doesn't even own a warehouse. No, something's fishy."

I stretched back and mashed out a cigarette. "Look," I said, "I've met all kinds of people. But this is the first time I've ever met a daughter who was just itching to get her old man in trouble. How do I know you're on the level? And what're you driving at?"

"Well," she shrugged, "to answer the first question, you could check into the records and see if I'm on the level. And

the second—what do you care, as long as I can help you out?”

“When you’re in this kind of a jam, you don’t trust anybody,” I muttered, “and yet you want to trust everybody. I don’t know. Why didn’t you do something about all this years ago?”

She laughed that good, easy laugh. “I have an apartment, a car and a steady income, darling. Why cut my own throat? If daddy loses, Brandy loses. But Kellaway got hurt—permanently, and you got hurt temporarily. I should have done something before all of this. Now, maybe I’ve got a guilty conscience.”

“Okay,” I said wearily, “where do we go from here?”

“I suggest that we go back to Pickett Street. To number seventeen. You’re looking for Rose Ackerman. Don’t ask me how I know, but you’re looking for her. There’s a skylight in the roof of that building. Go in that way—you’ll live longer.”

“Might as well trust you,” I said, standing up. “There isn’t anything else I can do.”

I slipped down between the rows of booths in the little bar and out onto the street. It was a big avenue. Naked and empty now at three a. m. I took a quick look and hailed a cab that was idling beside the curb. As I settled back on the seat I slipped the palm of my hand across the safety of my gun.

“Where to, buddy?” asked the driver.

“The top of Pickett Street,” I said, slowly.

The driver shifted his gears, moved the cab away from the curb and chuckled.

“What’re you laughing at?” I snapped.

“I take more guys to Pickett Street at this hour,” he said. “It’s just funny—that’s all.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, “funny as hell.”

* * *

I suppose I was a little nuts. I’d met a wacky girl and I was putting everything I had into trusting her. I was crawling across a rotted roof-top with the fog making wet slime on my face and my fingers growing stiff with early morning cold—headed back into a house where some guy had nearly torn my head off.

Sure enough, I found the skylight towards the front of the house. There was a latch on the outside—a funny kind of place to have a latch—and I pried it open. Good it was rusty. Hadn’t been used for a long time. Still, the latch on the outside meant that someone had been using this place for something that required secret outside entrance. One more riddle about the house on Pickett Street.

Slowly I pried open the skylight. It squeaked a couple of times and each time I stopped for a thousand years. Finally there was enough space to get my body in. I peered down. Pitch black. I straightened myself up and looked out across the rooftops. Out there I could see the red haze of the harbor lights. In the other direction I saw the dull glow of the city. Rufus Thorne in between them, wishing he was some place else. I listened into the house. No sound.

Rose Ackerman plus number seventeen, plus a dame’s story, plus the hemp business and a dead man in the bay equals what? Now is the hour.

First my legs slid down the hatch, then the middle of me. Now my head was in and my fingers were clutching the rotten rim of the skylight bordering. I was hanging inside. Deep darkness below and treacherous night above. I let go with one hand. The rotten wood gave way under my other hand.

For a split second I seemed to hang in space. Then I plummeted down and crashed onto the floor. I must have dropped fifteen feet. It felt like fifteen hundred. Darkness, engulfing and complete.

Getting up painfully, I felt for the wall. I began to feel my way along. Ten feet down the wall—still alone, still feeling the enemy in the darkness. Fifteen feet—then the abrupt stop. A door.

I fumbled around for a knob. There was one—there would be—I was afraid I’d find it because that would mean I’d have to go in and see what was there. I opened the door and it gave without a sound. I took a sideways step and closed it again. Now I was in.

I waited.

Silence. Darkness. Time passing.

Silence.

I fumbled for matches and found my

gun. I took that out and brought the matches along. The safety was off the gun. I tucked it underneath my arm and struck a match.

The light flared up and died to a near-blackout. Then it climbed up again . . . a tired, reluctant light. I took a step forward and peered around the room. I saw the old brown walls . . . the greasespots flickered on them in the faint orange light. I saw a busted rocking chair. I saw a mussed bed.

I saw Rose Ackerman sprawled out with her mouth open and her fingers twisted in her hair. One leg was crooked up through the torn house robe. Her head was twisted at an odd angle and that open mouth was towards me. The open, silent mouth. With her last words unspoken within her.

Two deaths in six days. Not a good average for a man in trouble.

But I'm smart. I know lots of things. For instance I knew that someone was framing up the murder of Lars Kellaway against me. Now this Ackerman dame had been polished off and it was a cinch that they were going to pin that one on me too. Think fast, Rufus.

So I lit up another match and took a good look at Rose Ackerman. Brunette, about five feet ten, pretty when her neck isn't broken . . . nice tall girl that ran round with the wrong people. I went over the room quickly. The usual stuff. Nice and neat, all laid out in the bureau drawers. I sniffed the perfume. Good stuff. Fifteen bucks an ounce. I looked at the clothes. Cheap, but well picked. A dame with cheap clothes and expensive perfume. Question mark. One more riddle. My head was clogged with them.

I took one more look at the body. The match flickered and died in my fingers. I stood in the darkness for a moment feeling for another one.

Then I lit another match. Looked at the pretty girl and pulled the sheet over her face. Sorry Rose, you lost—but I'll win for both of us.

I snuffed out the last light and went out into the hall. No one was in the house now—not with a stiff on the second floor. Almost cheerfully I went down the steps, clumping my feet along. In the front hallway I stepped over something

soft and limp. I must have hit him hard for he was still there. I crouched and put one hand on him. He was warm and alive—alive enough to be sorry for trying to hit me. . . . He'd be sorry for maybe fifteen years if the law liked my case enough.

A ray of dim light broke through a crack in the front door. Maybe that was a symbol. I opened the door and stepped out onto the street. The air of Pickett Street smelled good . . . wonderful after the stinking house.

I had a couple of questions to ask my gal friend. And then I was going to have breakfast with a murderer.

SHE was sitting in a sleek, black convertible just beyond the light of a street lamp. Smart baby, she knew enough to be inconspicuous. I slipped into the car seat beside her and caught my breath.

She looked at me eagerly. "Find her?" she said.

I shook my head. "The whole batch have flown the coop. No one there. Just the jasper I slugged on the first floor. But I found out plenty. Got to fit some pieces together. Let me ask you a couple of questions."

She started.

I said: "Your father smuggles dope, doesn't he? And Lars Kellaway was the errand boy. Right?"

Her lips tightened. "Right, baby. I've been hoping you'd find out." She was silent for a moment. "Then I guess I half hoped you wouldn't find out. He's a rat and so forth, but he is my father. This isn't easy."

I thought she was going to cry. Let her, damn it.

"The guy I slugged was dopey. When I went back to that house the place reeked of dope. Easy to put it all together. Your pappy runs this dump. A cab driver told me he takes a lot of people down to Pickett Street late at night. What for? To smoke opium.

"Kellaway knew too much so they had me trail him and then bumped him off and fixed it so the cops thought I did it. Easy way of getting rid of a guy with no consequences. Am I right so far?"

She nodded. "You must be. Sounds right to me."

"Okay. Now I've got a couple more things to figure out. What time is it?"

She peered at her watch. "Three fifteen."

"Okay," I said, "let's git."

And another piece fell into place.

Al Forrest works late at night and he drinks. He plays poker worse than I do. But he'll do me a favor whenever I want it and I wanted one now. I was taking a big chance going into the offices of the Evening Star, but I knew that three-thirty in the morning was the best time.

He was sitting with his feet up on a desk and his six feet and five inches spread around the city room. He was half crooked, I guess and half asleep. He nearly woke up when he saw me. I came up behind him so he couldn't yell.

"Rufus," he gasped. "You oughta be—"

"I know," I grinned, "either in Mexico or Alcatraz. Listen Al, I'm in a jam. I want to use the morgue files of your newspaper. Gotta look someone up."

"I'll say you're in a jam," he snorted, "and you'll damned well have me in one if anyone recognizes you here. C'mon, let's get down there."

We went out of the city room, shutting off the noise of the teletypes. We walked down the dark corridor and turned in at a little door marked "*Reference Library*"—the morgue. Every story for ten years is on file in there, under the headings of people and subject matters.

Al shoved on the door. "They lock it," he grinned, "but that doesn't keep anybody out."

The door gave and we went in. I switched on a small overhead light that cast a dim glow over the file cabinet marked "T." Al leaned against a desk and lit a cigarette. "Tell me, Rufus," he asked quietly, "did you do it?"

"So help me heaven, Al," I said, looking him the eye, "I didn't."

"Frameup?"

"A great big one."

"You look like you've had a hard time." I glanced at myself in the mirror on the wall. I hadn't thought of that. No shave for a week, rumpled suit, dried blood over one ear. I looked like a man who's been running over his life in a maze. I looked like death warmed over.

But this wasn't any time to be worrying about appearances. I slid my fingers along the files and found a letter. Then I yanked open a drawer and found a name. There were clippings in the envelope and a picture. A picture of a girl who might have been anyone—if you hadn't seen her before. But I'd seen her before and everything checked—checked too damned well.

I straightened up and looked at Al. He was peering over my shoulder in an absent sort of way. "Well?" he said softly. "Find the key to the Kingdom of Heaven?"

"Something like that," I grinned, "or maybe it's more like memorizing the last line in a play. My friend, the curtain is about to go up . . ."

Smuggling that girl into my apartment was no easy job. But it had to be done. Part of the plan. I wanted her to wait there and yet I was afraid that the cops were still watching the place. So I turned her big car into an alleyway behind the building and slithered it up close to the fire escape.

"Okay, baby," I grinned, "clamber up there and slide yourself in. Second floor window."

"But what if there are cops in there?"

"There aren't," I said, firmly. "Cops never wait inside an apartment. They wait outside for you and then they trap you in there."

She shrugged. "I guess you know what you're talking about. But, Ruf, doll, whatever you're going to do—be careful, won't you?"

I nodded and she disappeared above me into the darkness. I heard the window slide open and shut again. She was in. I swung the big car out of the alley and hit for the main artery leading out of town.

I swung the car up over a ridge and the highway dipped down below me. In the gray dawn I saw a side road. That was for me. I slowed the car down and swung it off the road, up into some shrubbery. It bounced to a stop. I made sure it couldn't be seen, then I got out, locked it and unscrewed the license plates. I threw them in the bushes and started to walk.

Stumbling and slithering through the wet foliage, I finally came out into the edge of the lawn. Ahead of me a great

pile of a house was stacked in the gray light. On the top floor—the fourth—the east windows were flashing faint suggestions of the pink sunrise . . . but down at my level it was still dark and forbidding. I stopped and crouched on the ground, getting my plan set and looking over the land. Plot for the last mile.

I shivered. Cold . . . cold as death . . . death that held hands with an ex-chauffeur and a girl with a broken neck. A small dawn breeze scudded across the lawn.

Silence.

Then a shadowy figure flitted across Grant Thornton's front lawn. It slipped into the shadows of the house, flickered away again and then disappeared into the well of darkness around a basement door.

That was Rufus Thorne playing tag with destiny.

I STOOD looking down at old Thornton as he lay drugged with sleep on his great four-poster bed. His white hair was tousled and his jowls sagged on his chest and his flabby mouth grunted out snores. Nobody is cute when they're asleep except babies and girls on the beach . . . but I've never seen anyone look so forbidding. Grant Thornton's black eyebrows were coursed down over his forehead in a perpetual scowl—the scowl that had made a million dollars—the scowl that wanted to send me to the electric chair for something I didn't do.

I glanced around the room quickly. The tall windows were letting in streaks of dawn grayness. The white starched curtains rose eerily in the breeze and settled again. I could make out shapes of great pieces of furniture and one door. Probably led to a bathroom, but maybe somewhere else. Chance, always chance.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and clamped my hand over the open mouth. Pause. He still slept. I probed his ribs with my gun butt.

His eyes flew open with a sudden shock and he tried to snort. I'll say one thing for him. He never registered fear.

"Okay," I said quietly, "I'll make you a bargain. Keep your voice low, don't try to call for help, and I'll let you up." I waved the gun in front of his face. "Gun. It shoots."

The scowling brows jugged down over his eyes. Then he nodded. I lifted my hand off his mouth and moved away.

He sat up, brushed his hand across his mouth, then glared at me.

"I'll admit one thing, young man, you have nerve. How'd you get in this house, eh?"

I grinned. "Give you some advice for nothing, Mr. Thornton. Never leave basement doors open."

He snorted. "I'll fire that gardener, so help me I will. Well—what are you after? Money?"

"Not at all. Just conversation. You recognize me, of course?"

"Anybody in the county would. I'm not so far gone as you think, Thorne. I'm only eighty-one." He swung his spindly legs out of bed and slid his feet into a pair of slippers. "Be so kind as to hand me my bathrobe." I reached for a soft purple robe that lay on a chair and he lit a cigar.

"You say you're after conversation, do you? Well let me tell you one thing—if you came here to prove that someone else killed Lars Kellaway, you can't do it. I'm convinced."

"Right, if you want," I said. "We'll skip Kellaway for a couple of minutes. First, why did you hire me to trail him? I should have asked that in the first place."

"Lars Kellaway was a thief. I was missing some things from this house and I knew that Kellaway was responsible."

"How'd you know that?"

"Fired him ten years ago. He always said he'd given even. Besides, he knew the plan of the house perfectly. Waited around until my daughter and I went to New York, then came up here, broke in and took the things."

"Why not some other servant?"

The old man pulled on his cigar and frowned. "Two reasons. One, all my other servants have been with me for years. Two, none of them knew the combination to the wall safe. Stuff was stolen from there. Kellaway knew the combination."

"I see. Well, I think I can tell you where the stuff is."

The eyebrows shot up. "Eh? Where?"

"In a house on Pickett Street."

"Hmm."

There was a pause. We looked at each other. My heart was beating fast because the time was getting tighter.

"Well," I said, "Why didn't you call the police about it?"

The old man took his cigar out of his mouth and scowled. "Don't be an ass, Mr. Thorne. If I had called the police, Kellaway would know instantly that I was after him. I called you in the hope that he would lead you to where the valuables were hidden."

"Why didn't you tell me that you were looking for stolen goods? I might have found them." I sighed, stretched my legs out and lit another cigarette. "Mr. Thornton, I'm afraid you were the one that played the fool. You've lost heavily on this."

"What do you mean?" The old eyes, couched in wrinkles, sparked for a moment. He didn't like being called a fool.

"Tell me," I said, "did you ever know that you were being used as a front for a dope-smuggling business?"

"I!" He didn't question it—he caught on immediately. He just straightened himself up and glared at me hard. "Young man, you'd better explain yourself, and quickly."

I got up and went to the window. This wasn't going to be easy to tell. Outside, the lawn was streaked with pure morning sunlight and some birds were beginning to test their chirpings in the lush trees and bushes that glittered with a myriad of dew-sparkles.

"There is a smart girl mixed up with a smart outfit. The girl's name is Rose Ackerman and her business is importing dope. They get it into the country through your

hemp shipments. But the port authorities began to have a couple of vague suspicions. So you got framed."

I looked at the old man. He was staring at me with his mouth set hard and the eyebrows pierced down on his forehead. He didn't know what to think now. Maybe it was much too early in the morning.

"Well, go on."

"So," I said, "they decided to frame you. And they fixed it so cleverly that you actually framed yourself."

"It worked this way: Lars Kellaway got fired about ten years ago. He knew a lot about your business. After you booted him out he drifted around the waterfronts for a while. He got hooked up with some narcotics peddlers and bought his way into the trade. He bought in with information about the Thornton hemp business. They contacted some of your people overseas and made a deal. And for ten years you've been carrying dope into the country via bales of raw hemp. Simple.

"Then things began to get tough. The city administration changed and the new D.A. was a little too nose. So they decided to close up operations. But it wasn't that easy. City Hall and the Federal Narcotics authorities knew something was up. Somebody had to be expendable. Lars Kellaway was chosen—although he didn't know it."

The old man shifted in his chair and grunted. "You seem to know a great deal, Mr. Thorne. I assume your information is carefully gleaned?"

"Not at all," I grinned, "it's pure conjecture up to now, and will be for a little while." He frowned but didn't stop me.

"Then," I continued, "they heard about

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the wall safe. They got the combination from Kellaway and cracked it open. The stuff was stolen and taken to Pickett Street. That put the finger on Kellaway because they knew you were smart enough to suspect him. They expected you to call the cops. The cops would find out that Kellaway was in the dope-smuggling racket and they would connect you to him.

"Remember, it was your importing business that got the stuff into this country. That was the end, supposedly. The one thing they didn't figure was that you would call in a private detective—which is where I come into the picture. So I had to be framed too. That was easy.

"Only I got nose. I found the address of the house on Pickett Street and went there. I was slugged and saved by a dame who claimed to be—your daughter."

He glanced up at me. "Yes?"

"Your daughter—" I said slowly—"is she dark, tall with fair skin, or is she blonde, glib and jittery?"

He blanched. "Why do you ask?"

"Because there are two girls that have to be identified. One of them is Rose Ackerman; the other is Brandy Thornton, your daughter. One if them is dead on Pickett Street and the other is in my apartment."

Silence. A clock ticking.

"I went to the files of a daily newspaper. I found a picture of the girl that is dead. Here it is." I pulled out the rumpled clipping.

I handed him the picture. He stared at it a long time.

And we both knew that Brandy Thornton hadn't been seen with me that night. We knew that she was dead.

ROSE ACKERMAN tossed her beautiful blonde hair and smiled at the booking sergeant. She spelled her name slowly for him, then lit a cigarette. "Baby," she said to me, "you did all right."

"I know it," I said, "and you played a dirty trick on a lot of people."

"Come now," she grinned, "you aren't going to rub it in, are you? Remember, I saved your life."

"Sure," I answered grimly, "so you could kill me for better reasons later on.

Tell me, why did you have to kill Brandy Thornton?"

The lovely blonde smiled. "I had to get out, baby, and the best way for me to get out was to die. So the poor little girl died and if you hadn't nosed around so much we would have burned the house and you would have known that Rose Ackerman was in it and everything would have been perfectly ducky." She sighed.

A cop took her arm and led her out of the room. She paused at the door and grinned at me. "See you, baby," she said. Then the iron door swung shut and all that was left of her was the dying click of her heels as she started down the long road.

I turned away and sat down. Suddenly everything hit me. Weariness, fear, despair. I ran my hand over my jaw. It was rough with dirt, beard and dried blood. My clothes were rumpled and torn and somehow I knew that I was much older. I had gained in one night what you would live in ten years.

The score didn't tally right. A dead guy, a dead girl and an old man with a broken heart. All because Rose Ackerman wanted something . . . she probably never knew what.

I lit a cigarette and got up. "You guys want me any more?"

"We'll call you for the inquest," said a young man who was poring through some papers. "Sure you're all right?"

"Fine," I said wearily. I went out the door. The bright sunlight slammed into my eyes. I blinked. Daylight for the first time.

I got into my car and slid the gears into place. Slowly I moved away from the curb and rolled down the boulevard. I turned into Avenue L.

To my left was a large apartment house. Brandy Thornton had lived in there, but she didn't any more. Suddenly I wished I'd known her, because forever I'd think of her as someone else. As Rose Ackerman, the dame who gambled with stakes that didn't belong to her—and lost.

I tipped my hat as I passed the apartment building. Despite the bright, warm morning I felt a little chill pass over me. That would be Brandy Thornton smiling from the other side of eternity. And I knew that both of us would never forget.

ONE LESSON in LARCENY



Blackie said: "The cigar box with the money. . . ."

By **WILLIAM P.
MCGIVERN**

●
To keep the cops from putting the finger on him, Blackie had to ditch his luscious armful of trouble.
●

WHEN the bartender announced to the few stragglers in his dingy bar that it was about time to close, Blackie Ward nodded pleasantly and drained his glass of beer. Blackie's nod was not wholly a gesture of acquiescence with the bartender's order. Chiefly, it was an expression of satisfaction with his own timetable. It was just a few seconds before two o'clock, which was just right.

The last few customers were on their

feet now calling good nights to the bartender. Blackie lifted his glass for a last drop.

He had discovered after two weeks of patient investigation that the laborers from the nearby docks were in the habit of running a tab at this bar, and settling it on Thursday evening after they had been paid. The bartender placed his money, which ran to a considerable amount, in a cigar box beside the cash register and at two o'clock, when the beat cop stopped by, the two men walked to a neighborhood bank, which had an all-night deposit service, with the funds.

Now Blackie noticed the last customer was going through the door. Normally, Clancy, the cop, would be walking in any second.

This night the cop wasn't going to arrive on time. No indeed!

It was little strokes of planning such as this that had made Blackie Ward a successful criminal, specializing in various types of armed robbery and living pleasantly on the proceeds. Blackie looked more like an underpaid bookkeeper than a criminal, with his neat body and inconspicuous clothes, and his thinning black hair and nondescript but alert features.

He was as careful as a bookkeeper in his planning too, for he never took short cuts or extra chances. As a result, he prospered as would any business man who took the same precautions. Method and order were his twin passions.

The fat bartender glanced at the wall clock and said, "Well, Clancy's a little late tonight."

"Yes," Blackie said politely.

He glanced casually out the front window of the bar and saw that the street was deserted. It wasn't likely that anyone would drift by in the next few minutes, for this was the waterfront area of Philadelphia, a section that was deserted soon after the bars closed.

Blackie got to his feet.

The bartender nodded a good-by to him and yawned.

Blackie took the gun from his outside pocket and put the barrel on the bar so that it pointed at the bartender's stomach.

"The cigar box with the money. . . ." Blackie said.

"Now, here," the bartender said, going

all red and then white. "You can't—"

"The money," Blackie said in the same voice. "And fast."

Stuttering an incoherent protest, the bartender put the cigar box on the bar before Blackie. His eyes flicked hopefully to the wall clock.

"Clancy won't be along for a while," Blackie said. "Relax."

He opened the cigar box and transferred the bills to his outside coat pocket. "Now turn around."

With a last hopeful glance at the clock, the bartender turned around reluctantly. Blackie raised his arm and struck him below the right ear with the barrel of his gun. The blow was an expert one, hard and sure, and it hit exactly the right spot. The bartender went down without a sound.

Blackie tossed the empty cigar box behind the bar, straightened his coat and walked unhurriedly out of the bar. Stopping at the curb he glanced up the dark, empty street. According to schedule, Toni would be along any second now. . . .

Toni, he thought with a touch of sadness. He had liked her—but now it was time to travel. Blackie had learned that he travels fastest who travels alone. And Blackie had also learned that there would always be a Toni. Or a Belle, or a Marie, or a Trixie.

Dumb kids who never had a break, who were ready to fall for a fast line, a little flash of money—but who hadn't the judgment to realize that smart guys would soon give them the fast brush.

But he was going to miss Toni. She had helped him out when he'd arrived in Philadelphia, broke and needing a place to hole up. He had used her small salary while he planned this job. Blackie wasn't grateful in any normal sense, for he considered gratitude a phony emotion that had nothing to do with the practical problems of living.

Still, he was going to miss her slender blonde loveliness. Toni was tall, with long shapely legs and a waist that he could almost circle with his two hands. And somewhere in her short nineteen years she had become sophisticated, too.

HE SAW the lights of a car coming along the street, drawing over toward the curb. The door swung open as the car

slowed to a stop and he saw Toni's blonde head. She was grinning. It was all right.

He stepped in, slammed the door and the car picked up speed immediately.

"Any trouble?" he asked her, taking his last cigarette out and lighting it.

"Not a bit," she said, in her husky voice. "I started about ten of two just like you told me and I pulled up alongside the cop, Clancy, about five minutes of two. That was six blocks from here."

Blackie nodded, feeling a satisfaction at hearing her account of his plan in operation. They had tailed Clancy for three nights and made a careful timetable of his route.

"Well, I asked him how to get to Jenkintown, like you told me," Toni went on. "You should have seen the service I got." She laughed in her high, cheerful voice. "He put his foot on the running board and practically described every lamp post on the way. I kept interrupting him, like you told me, and finally pretended I was all mixed up and made him go over it again. I could have kept him for an hour."

"Five minutes was enough," Blackie said.

"It worked then?"

"As planned," he chuckled.

"You're really smart, Blackie," she said admiringly.

"Sure I am," he said. "Now let's get to the apartment."

She concentrated on driving and he turned sideways to watch her. Yes, he'd miss her all right. The white silk dress she wore clung to her slim body like a second layer of skin. She was quite a dish.

But this was so long, good-by. Tonight he pulled out. He had his ticket to Miami in his wallet. One ticket, one way. It was time to go, and where Blackie went so did the money. . . .

Her apartment was in the downtown section of Philadelphia in a cheap neighborhood. Entering the dingy, three-room

rat trap Blackie felt a sense of relief that he wouldn't be spending another night in the place.

"Fix us a drink while I count the loot," he told her.

He spread the money on the coffee table, counting it with nimble fingers. Eighteen hundred and fifty dollars. Not bad. Toni brought him a highball and looked hungrily at the money.

"Pretty," she said, and ran her fingers through it like a child playing in sand.

"Stick with me and you'll see lots of pretty sights," he said.

She leaned across and kissed him on the mouth. "We'll stick together, won't we, Blackie? I mean, you're really taking me to California with you?"

"Sure thing, baby. You're my lucky piece."

He took a page of the newspaper and wrapped the money in a tight flat bundle. This had been part of his first plan. He had told her he was going out to put the money in the trunk of the car, explaining that it was safer there than in his wallet. But she would know that this could be done the next morning when, as she believed, they would start for the coast.

Blackie had therefore another little scheme, one which would give him the opportunity to leave the apartment that night—and with the money—in time to catch the three a.m. for Miami.

Of course, he knew that his caution was probably not necessary, for Toni trusted him completely.

He stood up and took off his coat and tie and tossed them over the back of a chair. Unbuttoning his collar, he sat down with a sigh of contentment and fumbled through his pocket for a cigarette. He didn't find any naturally—for he had carefully gotten rid of everyone in his possession and everyone in the apartment that same day. And Toni didn't smoke.

"Fresh out," he said, with an annoyed

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shake of his head. He tried the pockets in his suit coat then, and looked into the cigarette boxes. "There's gotta be one around somewhere," he muttered and walked into the bedroom and rummaged around in there for a while.

When he came back to the living room, Toni said, "Seems like you'd be a little more careful, seeing the way you smoke."

"Well, it just means I take a little walk to the drug store," he said. "Maybe that will make me remember in the future."

He liked the nice homey touch in this part of his plan. What was more natural than that a guy should run out of cigarettes and be forced to take a walk in the middle of the night to get some?

"Well, hurry back," she said.

"Sure." He started for the door, turned back. "I might as well drop off the cash in the car on the way. No sense leaving it around here. There's a chance, a slim one, of course, but somebody might nose in here on us."

He picked up the newspaper-wrapped flat bundle from the coffee table and put it in his hip pocket. If she was smart enough to have any suspicions, the fact that he was going out without a coat or tie would be enough to allay them.

But Toni wasn't the suspicious type. She was the animal type and he had known how to make her purr.

SHE had stretched out on the couch now with her arms above her head, and in that position the lamp light touched her long blonde hair with a soft sheen. Her wonderful, satin-textured legs were crossed. Blackie hated to say good-by—but his plans called for it.

So he waved to her and opened the door.

She said, "Please hurry," and snuggled down deeper into the couch.

"I'll run all the way," he grinned, and left.

Outside Blackie walked the block and a half to his car—Toni's car really—with unhurried steps. He opened the rear door and took a coat from the floor and slipped it on, and then hopped into the front seat and pulled a tie from his pocket. He adjusted it carefully and with the help of the rear-vision mirror tied a perfect Windsor knot.

Then he opened the glove compartment and took out a pack of cigarettes. He broke them open, stuck one in his mouth and lighted it from the dashboard lighter. Inhaling gratefully, he started the car and drove away. He felt very pleased and quite relaxed. The cigarette tasted very good, and the coat he was wearing was a camel's hair jacket that fitted him neatly. Already his regret at leaving Toni was fading. Miami was the mecca of beautiful women, he thought cheerfully, and he had an eighteen hundred dollar bankroll.

Blackie drove ten or twelve blocks to get out of the immediate neighborhood, before pulling over to the curb and stopping the car. He took his wallet from his pocket and prepared to open the newspaper-wrapped bundle of money. He was smiling as he tore open the paper and began stuffing the bills into his wallet.

He stopped smiling and began to curse. He was holding a packet of dollar-sized strips of newspaper in his hand.

For a moment he was too stunned to do anything but stare at them with helpless confusion. But that moment passed quickly. With an oath, he started the car, spun the wheel recklessly and drove back the way he had come at breakneck speed.

"The dirty double-crossing doll," he raged. He jammed the accelerator to the floor and his anger was so all-consuming that he forgot about the risk he was taking of being picked up for speeding.

His luck held. He wasn't stopped and when he brought the car to grinding halt before Toni's apartment, he was out and half way up the steps before the motor had stopped turning over.

When he opened the door, he saw that the lamp by the sofa was still burning. But Toni was gone.

Nevertheless he dashed into the bedroom and jerked open the closet door and even got down on his knees to look under the bed. After that, he barged into the kitchen and the bathroom with the same furious energy.

But she was gone.

When he returned to the living room, his steps were lagging and on his face was a dazed, unbelieving expression.

"After all I did for her," he mumbled to himself. He felt hurt, bewildered and dazed for a moment. His anger returned

and in a healthy fury, he kicked over the coffee table.

It was then he saw the note. It had been on the coffee table, weighted down by a compact he had given her one night in a burst of generosity. With trembling fingers he picked the note from the floor. It was in Toni's sprawling, affected handwriting, and it read:

No guy as careful and sharp as you would run out of cigarettes, Blackie. I know you, baby, and when you forget anything it's for a reason. I had the dummy package fixed up ahead of time just in case you pulled anything funny. You did, and ain't it a riot? Love and kisses.

Toni.

Blackie groaned and sat down on the couch. The scheming, two-faced little ingrate. It showed you couldn't trust anybody.

Suddenly, he started to his feet and looked at his watch. Twenty of three. He had to catch that train, even though he was broke. It would be hot for him now in this town, with that bartender waiting to put the finger on him.

He hurried to the door and started down the steps. It was dark and for a second he didn't see the two men who were standing by the car. When he did it was too late for him to turn around and try to get away.

One of them caught his arm. The other flashed a star.

"City police," the first man said quietly. "We want to talk to you about a robbery in town tonight. Mind coming along?"

Blackie wet his lips. "Officer," he said, "I've got to catch a three o'clock train. It's very important."

"So is this," the cop said patiently. "We got a phone tip a while ago that you were mixed up in that deal. If you're not, we'll let you go in time to catch the morning train. We want a certain bartender to take a good look at you, that's all."

"Oh," Blackie said. His voice sounded rather shrill. "Was this phone tip you got from a babe?"

He knew even before the cop said, "Yes" that it was Toni. And he knew the bartender would put the finger on him. Shrugging sadly, Blackie allowed the detective to lead him down to their car.

But this would never happen to him again, he swore fiercely. He took the cigarettes from his pocket and hurled them into the street. He'd quit smoking, that's what he'd do. He'd never get caught that way again.

That was the secret of his success. Detail. He felt a little better then. But not much.



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HERE'S LEAD

By **RUSSELL BENDER**

When a tough and tipsy actress collided with a Hollywood producer's bullet, Law-shark Jimmie Kerr had to outfox a cute cookie—or take his client's punishment.



CHAPTER ONE

Change of Heart

KERR came into the El Gofo Lounge with Nan McCourt on his arm. The El Gofo was a theatrical hangout—not for the Hollywood celebrities, but for a few radio performers, jazz musicians, chorus girls, and actors and producers from the town's various legitimate stage enterprises.

At the bar, Dorothy Luft spotted Kerr. She was flanked this Thursday evening by two escorts, thin, sunburned, blond young men with carefully-set curly hair.

Dorothy Luft said in a shrill angry voice, "I never liked crooked shysters, and even if I did like 'em, I wouldn't like one named Kerr." She spoke loud enough for everyone in the bar to hear. Her two young escorts looked startled. "He murdered my brother," she added.

Kerr stopped just inside the door, his dark eyes brooding on Dorothy Luft.

Nan McCourt plucked at his sleeve. "What's this?" she whispered. "Your past catching up with you?"

One of the bartenders moved down the bar to Dorothy Luft, his whole face tightening with disapproval. "Cut it, Dottie," he said. "Cut it."



**Dramatic Crime-
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IN YOUR TEETH

"You're a liar," she said softly.



Dorothy Luft stood up from the bar stool. She was a thin girl, barely over twenty, with a slight puffiness from whiskey already in her face. Her tight-fitting black taffeta dress was cut very low in the front. A tufted bustle swayed in the back. "I won't stay in a joint that lets that crummy shyster in the door." She leered at her young escorts. "If you want me to stay, throw the crumb out." She walked off in drunken majesty toward the door marked *Ladies*.

The two escorts looked uncertainly at Kerr. One wore a tan sports coat with chocolate-brown sleeves and no lapels. The other wore a chocolate-brown sports coat with tan sleeves and no lapels.

One of the waiters came quickly up to Kerr. "Table for two, Mr. Kerr?"

Kerr's face was flushed slightly. He glanced past the waiter over the tables in the long dim room. "Mr. Munger's table," he said.

"He left about an hour ago, sir."

Kerr looked at the two young men at the bar. They were still watching him. He shrugged irritably. "Well, if he comes in, tell him I'm looking for him. It's urgent." He touched Nan's arm. "Let's dust out of this trap."

Nan said, "Let's not." She smiled up at him. She had brown eyes and her hair was a lighter brown, cut short, with bangs. She had a husky voice, almost the timbre of a man's, except that it was soft and sometimes had a caress in it. It caressed Kerr now. "We'll fight them together."

Joe Luft had killed himself—by the simple expedient of pushing a pistol barrel into his mouth and pulling the trigger—because he was wiped out financially backing a show produced by Arthur Munger, who was Kerr's client. It was Dorothy Luft's belief that her brother had been tricked by some underhanded legal shenanigans on Kerr's part. This was not common gossip in Hollywood, because up until now she hadn't accused Kerr publicly. Up until now, she hadn't been drunk in public.

"We'll stay if you like," Kerr said. He looked at his wristwatch and frowned. It was a few minutes of nine. "Munger usually drops in three or four times a night, anyway."

"Don't pout," Nan McCourt said. They

followed the waiter to a table near the end of the bar.

The chocolate-brown coat with tan sleeves pushed himself away from the bar and came up to their table. He said to Kerr, "You heard the lady." He didn't sound too sure of himself, but he jerked a thumb toward the door with much bravado. "Blow."

Kerr stood up negligently from the table and hit the young man under the right eye. The young man swayed, but didn't go down. His partner squealed like a frightened animal, jumped off his bar stool, and ran for the door.

A waiter blocked his way. "Have you paid your tab?" he asked politely.

The young man in front of Kerr felt his right eye very gingerly. It was already beginning to swell. He ran to the bar and peered into the back-bar mirror. "Heavens!" he screamed in horror. "And I have a test at Excelsior Films tomorrow!" He too ran for the door.

The waiter was still blocking the door off. "What's the tab, Hymie?" he called to the bartender.

The bartender named a sum.

JIMMIE KERR just sat down and looked at his knuckles. They were unbruised. He flushed and said, "I feel like I'd just hit somebody's mother." He felt very little pride in Lawyer James Kerr. His waiter still hovered nearby, so he ordered drinks.

Nan put her hand on his arm. "You had to do something, Jimmie," she said softly. She hesitated. "Could you tell me what it's all about?"

Kerr explained about Joe Luft killing himself. "His life-savings were twenty-seven thousand dollars. He lost that. He also had an ice-cream store on Sunset Boulevard. It was worth about the same amount. He lost that. He claimed I tricked him."

"How?" Nan asked.

Kerr looked at her gloomily. "In backing a show, there are two kinds of partnerships—limited and unlimited. In a limited partnership, you're only responsible for the amount of dough that you put up. In other words, if you put up a thousand dollars, all you can lose is a thousand dollars."

Nan said in a hushed voice, "Look, Jimmie. The boys're adding up their pennies, trying to pay the bill."

"Are you listening to me?" Kerr asked irritably.

"Certainly. Go on."

"Well, in an unlimited partnership, you're responsible to the full extent of your assets. If you invest a thousand dollars, and the show loses thirty thousand, you have to pay the extra twenty-nine thousand—if you have it. In return for this kindly privilege—" Kerr's lips twisted ironically—"you have a say in the management of the show. Get it?"

"Vaguely," Nan said.

Kerr shrugged. "Joe Luft invested five thousand dollars. There were a dozen investors altogether, with investments totalling forty grand. All signed limited partnership papers—except Joe Luft and a woman named Janice Morley. The show flopped. Janice Morley was supposed to be from a rich Texas oil family, but that turned out to be a hoax. So Joe Luft lost everything." He paused again. "He said he thought he was signing a limited partnership." Kerr's face darkened.

Nan said, "Did you fool him?"

Kerr looked shocked. "What?"

The door marked *Ladies* opened and Dorothy Luft came out. She hadn't bothered to comb her dyed dark-red hair. At sight of her, her two young escorts, their bill finally paid, fled. She swayed to the bar and stood looking uncertainly at the two empty stools. Then she spotted Kerr.

Nan wasn't paying any attention to her. "You haven't answered my question, Jimmie," she said. Worry shadowed her soft delicately-shaped face. "Did you trick him?"

Kerr paled. "For gosh sake, Nan—"

Dorothy Luft picked up the drink of the man nearest to her at the bar. She said, "Scuse me." She swayed over to Kerr, who was looking at Nan McCourt, and poured the drink over his head.

Kerr pushed his chair back and stood up, sputtering. He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his head. His waiter seized one of Dorothy Luft's arms.

She said, "Leggo me," and kicked him in the shins. The waiter howled and jumped back, and nobody else tried to touch her. She swayed off toward the

door, waving a hand angrily at Kerr. "Wait till tomorrow, shyster!" she called bitterly. "I'll fix your li'l red wagon! A cell for you, shyster—a li'l cell for you!" She opened the door and staggered out.

Nan McCourt was looking at Kerr coolly. "You still haven't answered my question, Jimmie," she said.

Kerr wadded his sodden handkerchief into a ball. His eyes brooded on the door that Dorothy Luft had just quitted. "Do I have to now?" he snapped. His voice quivered with anger.

Nan said, "You don't ever have to, Jimmie." She stood up quickly and walked out of the lounge.

CHAPTER TWO

Planting His Coffin

KERR stood motionless. The man at the next table doubled over with laughter, but straightened up when Kerr looked savagely at him. Kerr wheeled and went into the men's room. The shoulders and lapels of his jacket were wet with whiskey and water. He brushed off his jacket, adjusted the collar of his soft white shirt, and returned to his table. Two drinks were waiting for him. He drank both of them standing. Nobody else laughed at him. He paid his bill and left the lounge.

In front of the lounge, Kerr crossed the street gloomily and climbed into his green convertible. He felt sure that the moment the door had closed behind him, laughter had surged again over the tables. Something else bothered him more. The thought of losing Nan McCourt was like a hard blow in the pit of his stomach.

He rolled the convertible down a slight grade and turned into Hollywood Boulevard. Something else occurred to him. He had seen Dorothy Luft several times since her brother's suicide, and while she had looked at him like a snake she would have liked to smash underfoot, she hadn't said a word to him. He wondered if her threat was just alcohol induced—or if she was going to spring something on him tomorrow.

Kerr had gone to the lounge to see Arthur Munger because of a phone call from an attorney named Pat Vico who

said that unless Kerr and Arthur Munger saw Vico promptly they would find themselves in very dire straits.

Pat Vico was the lawyer handling Joe Luft's estate. Or rather, Kerr thought dryly, what was left of Joe Luft's estate. Pulling the convertible abruptly to the curb, Kerr got an address book out of the glove compartment, and looked up Dorothy Luft's address. She lived in the hills north of Hollywood in a house she had formerly shared with her brother, Joe.

He did a U-turn in the center of the block and headed east. At Western Avenue, Kerr turned north in the direction of Griffith Park, and in ten minutes reached a small development built on a narrow road that wound upgrade.

Four small stucco houses were at the top of the hill, fronting on the dead-end shank of the road. This was Sereno Court. At the rear, garages were built into the hill beneath the houses. From the street below, steep concrete steps ran up beside the garages to the small back yards. Kerr parked his convertible in front of the third of the four houses, No. 32.

The houses were set back picturesquely from the road, about thirty feet. Each had its own small square grass plot, and flower beds blooming with oleander and geraniums. A bright California moon washed them clearly as day. Nos. 28, 30, and 34 were very dark and very quiet. Hell was breaking loose in No. 32.

There were drawn Venetian blinds in the front windows. A woman's shrill angry voice rose behind them—too slurred to be intelligible. Then there were a couple of crashes, like the explosive pop and clatter of shattering glass. Two shots—and silence.

Kerr's lips were suddenly dry. A door slammed in the rear of the house. Hard heels beat heavily on concrete. Kerr ran around to the back of the house. He reached the top of the steep concrete stairs that led down to the street below in time to see a man running away at the bottom.

In the bright moonlight, Kerr saw the man clearly. A sleek blond head and a pair of broad square shoulders in a light sports coat. The head and shoulders ducked quickly into the big dark sedan that already had its headlights on. Kerr cupped his hands to his mouth to yell.

The motor of the big sedan purred softly. The sedan shot away down the winding grade.

"What the hell?" Kerr said. He turned and looked at the rear of the house. A light burned dimly inside. Somewhere nearby a door closed softly.

No lights showed in Nos. 30 and 34. Kerr reasoned that if he were a neighbor, he wouldn't show lights either, and tried the back door of No. 32. It was unlocked. He pushed through a kitchen into a small square living room.

Near the doorway to the kitchen, the white wall was wet in two places. Beneath the wet spots, shattered bits of red and blue pottery were scattered on the thick green rug. Red roses and hibiscus blooms were strewn among the shattered bits. On the floor near some window boxes, Dorothy Luft lay. Her eyes were open, glazed.

Kerr didn't touch her. He felt a slight sinking sensation in his stomach, and wished he hadn't come inside. The two holes in Dorothy Luft's dress were so small that Kerr had difficulty spotting them. They were no larger than cigarette burns.

Kerr stood motionless for a few moments, fighting a mounting panic that urged him to flee. He found himself making up reasons to justify that urge. He finally discovered one that seemed perfectly good common sense. He reviewed it and found nothing wrong with it. He opened the front door and plunged out, sucking gratefully at the clear California air.

A TALL man in a wide-brimmed Western hat was copying down the license number of his green convertible. Kerr stopped as if he'd been hit by a truck. The tall man calmly folded a piece of paper, slipped it in his pocket, and stuck his stub of a pencil through the narrow band of his hat—all without taking his hat off.

He said, "Nice car you got here, son." He shoved both hands deep in his pants pockets and stared at Kerr blandly.

Kerr didn't recognize his own voice. "You wrote down my license number?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

The tall man said, "Heard a couple of

shots. Live next door." He waved a long thin arm toward the last house in the row—No. 34. "People don't shoot in their houses without no reason. Used to be a deputy sheriff once back in Amarillo, Texas." He leaned down and scratched his right leg. "Glad there's no mosquitos in California."

Kerr took a deep breath. He was sorry there were Texans in California. He said levelly, "Somebody was killed in there."

The Texan leaned down and scratched his left leg. "I ain't surprised," he said. "Man blew out his brains in there just about a month ago." He paused. "If he had any brains. Never knowed a Texan to blow his own brains out."

Kerr said, "Dorothy Luft was killed in there. She was murdered."

"I ain't surprised." He nodded.

"I didn't murder her," Kerr said.

The tall man took his right hand out of his pocket and studied his long bony middle finger. He said, "Reckon that's something the po-leece'll have to decide."

"A man ran out of the house right after the shots. He ran down the back steps. He even had a car waiting for him. You saw *him*, didn't you?"

"Nup," the Texan said.

"But you heard him?"

"Nup," the tall man said again. He bent and scratched both legs at once. "Shots woke me up, kind of. Sleep on the other side of the house. Cooler there. More breeze." He scratched more vigorously. "Damned new drawers for my birthday," he said. He looked at Kerr without straightening up. "Nup. You're the only man I seen around here. Called the po-leece yet?"

Kerr measured the bent figure hastily, deciding whether to try to knock hell out of this man—obviously in his middle fifties. But the Texan would be able to describe him and the green convertible, and he might even remember the license number. Kerr abandoned the idea of filching the paper that contained the license number. He sighed heavily. "I was just going to," he said.

The tall man straightened up and looked at the convertible. He chuckled. "Didn't know they was even putting phones in these things." He jerked his chin toward his house. "I got one in there if you'd like to use it."

Half way up the walk, the Texan asked Kerr, "You recognize the man you seen, son?"

He stopped in his tracks and looked quizzically at him. He felt that his was a very ironical question. If he hadn't recognized the man he had seen, he wouldn't have tried foolishly to run away. Kerr scowled and, glaring at the man, reached down and scratched his right leg.

"Yup," he said, and went on into the house. . . .

The following morning, the nine o'clock final of the Los Angeles Times carried a banner:

LAWYER ACCUSES OWN CLIENT OF MURDER.

Kerr spread out the paper on the steering wheel of his convertible and scowled at the headlines. Then he tossed the paper on the seat, and climbed out near the stage door of the Martinez Theater. A slim dark man in navy-blue chauffeur's whipcord was leaning against the wall by the

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door in the sun, studying a racing form. He looked up as Kerr approached, moving nothing but a pair of soft liquid eyes.

"You better blow," he said.

Kerr stopped. "You frighten me, Lou."

Lou folded his racing form carefully and thrust it in the top of one of his shiny black leggings. Under the brim of his chauffeur's cap, his soft eyes showed no animosity. "Nobody's putting the scare on you, counselor. I'm just telling you for your own good. Artie's sore."

Kerr said, "I'm going in."

Lou shrugged. "Who's stopping you?" His eyes, which never seemed to change expression, looked at the armpits of Kerr's suit. Apparently satisfied that there was no gun there, he opened the door and pushed his head inside. "The counselor's coming in," he called. Then he leaned against the wall again.

Kerr entered the theatre. The stage was bare of scenery, its rear brick wall bleak and somber in the dimness. Overheard, a few lights burned faintly. A girl in slacks and a tall blond actor in a Hawaiian-print sports shirt were rehearsing a scene. Others lounged around an upright piano in the orchestra pit. This was the cast of *The Bride's Room*, Arthur Munger's latest production, due to open in Hollywood in three weeks. Arthur Munger himself was not in sight. Nan McCourt, the second lead, wasn't around.

Kerr felt a stab of disappointment. He crossed the stage and, climbing a narrow metal companionway, entered an office one flight up.

FROM behind a blue kneehole desk, Arthur Munger looked up in surprise. Munger had a sleek blond head and broad square shoulders. Unlike a lot of people connected with show business in Hollywood, his face was untouched by the sun. His skin was pale to the point of grayness. Otherwise, he made the usual Hollywood concessions—light blue flannel sports shirt buttoned at the throat, fawn-colored slacks, Western belt, multi-colored argyles, and loafers. His eyes were the same pale gray as his face.

Kerr always suspected that Munger's blond hair was tinted. For the first time, he wondered if the rumors about Munger having been a member of the old Purple

Gang in Detroit were true. Certainly, Lou, the chauffeur downstairs, had a record as long as a showgirl's leg. "I dropped in to make something clear," he told Munger.

Munger said, "That's nice of you. Accuse me of murder and then drop by casually. I like that touch. I'm laughing myself to death over it. Let's go out and have lunch together and let everybody in Hollywood laugh."

Kerr hesitated. The last thing he had expected from Munger was irony. He said, "Listen, Artie," and paled slightly. It was very difficult to explain to a man why you had accused him of murder. Then he plunged. "You know how I feel about the law," he began.

He wet his lips. "I saw you run away from that house yesterday. I found Dottie Luft dead a few minutes later. Evidence like that is pretty serious stuff—the kind they put you in the gas chamber for." He frowned. "I even tried to get away from that house because the only evidence I could give might send you to the gas chamber. I like to see people get the breaks the law gives them. I don't suppose you'd care to believe that."

"Would it make any difference," Munger asked indifferently, "if I did believe it?"

Kerr flushed. He was trying to explain something that looked like the betrayal of a client. Angrily he said, "I risked disbarment last night for you, like a fool." His flush deepened. "Not because I like you, Artie, because I don't and never will, but because it's the way I happen to feel about the law."

Amusement glinted for an instant in the pale gray eyes. "I know," he said gravely. "You're a very noble character."

Kerr whirled savagely. He said, "All right! Why are you out of jail right now and—and not even out on bail?"

"You tell me, noble character," Munger said.

"You had an alibi, and the law, by Jupiter, recognizes alibis!" He crossed the room and put both fists on the blue desk.

"Your chauffeur and five other guys swear you were playing cards all night—miles away from Dottie Luft's. The law happens to think the words of six people are better than the words of one." He

didn't add that, on this particular day, especially than the words of Lawyer James Kerr.

Munger looked indifferent.

Kerr added, "With me, luckily the law demands evidence. Dottie Luft was shot with a gun. I didn't have a gun. The police searched the place for four hours last night and couldn't find a gun. So they *had* to accept my story whether they believed it or not." Kerr was very sure that they hadn't believed it. He added, "Lawyers know how to sue for false arrest, you know."

"Is that all they know?" Munger asked.

Kerr decided to ignore this. He said, "Listen, Artie. If I hadn't tried to run away, I wouldn't be facing a possible investigation for disbarment. After my ruckus with Dottie Luft, the cops think that's my motive for killing her." Kerr thrust his chin out slightly. "Since this publicity may ruin your new show—ruin you forever in show business—I think that's *your* motive for killing her."

Munger stood up slowly behind the desk. His pale face was still indifferent. He leaned over and picked up an *Examiner* from a blue leather chair. He studied the front page for a moment. "Seen this?" he asked.

Kerr said, "I saw the *Times*."

"Oh." Munger thumped the paper thoughtfully with a finger. "What publicity would ruin me? It might be interesting to know that, counselor."

Kerr said quickly, "I've been trying to contact Vico all morning. The last word I could get on him was that he ran into you at a pub last night about nine o'clock—an hour before Dottie Luft was killed. I have an idea that when I find out why Vico was threatening us, I'll find out why you killed Dottie Luft." He added, "Incidentally, I haven't told the police this."

Munger was vastly unperturbed. "What would you advise me to do, counselor?" he asked. "According to you, I'm in a pretty tough spot."

Kerr said, "You might cop a plea. If you plead guilty to manslaughter, for instance, you'd save the state the expense of a first degree trial. Or maybe even a second degree trial." He watched Munger closely. "That way you might even

get off with a suspended sentence or maybe just a couple of years."

Once more Munger glanced at his newspaper. "Is that advice free?" Then he looked up and his eyes were like pale gray rocks as he put the paper down carefully on the desk in front of Kerr. "I don't suppose *this* could have been the reason?"

Kerr gazed at the paper briefly. In the box on the right where small headlines:

JEALOUSY OVER ACTRESS NAN McCOURT HINTED AS REASON FOR MURDER ACCUSATION

Kerr looked up savagely.

Munger just smiled.

Kerr said, "Did you give this to the papers?"

Munger lifted a square shoulder and dropped it. "Somebody did," he said.

Kerr's face flushed darkly. He said, "Nan wouldn't look at you twice!" He didn't hear the door open behind him. "Nobody would except a cheap Hollywood climber," he yelled.

Behind him, Nan McCourt said, "Thank you, Jimmie." She walked around the desk and placed her hand gently on Munger's arm. She wore an aqua wool-gabardine dress gathered gently at the waist with a narrow pigskin buckle. Her slender legs were bare and softly tanned. Her gold sandals were heelless. She looked as young and fresh as a schoolgirl, without a schoolgirl's fragile immaturity. Kerr's throat ached, just watching her. "Sorry I'm late for rehearsal, Art," she said. "All of the reporters in town have been hounding me today."

The ache in Kerr's throat went away. After a moment, he looked fiercely at Nan McCourt, saying, "Maybe in Artie's next show, you'll get the lead." He wheeled quickly and walked out.

Across the street in a drugstore, he used a telephone to call his office. His hand shook as he dialed the number.

When he had identified himself, his secretary, Miss Conroy, said, "Mr. Vico called you." Her usually prim voice seethed with suppressed excitement. "He wants you to come see him right away." She gave an address on Wilshire Boulevard. "Mr. Kerr, there's something else,

too—something that's *very* important.”

“Well?” Kerr asked. His hand was still shaking.

Miss Conroy said, “I was over to the Hall of Justice about—well, ten, fifteen minutes ago—you know—to file your change of plea on that wife-beating case.” She was breathing very heavily. “The place is buzzing—like—like a bomb exploded over there.”

Kerr gripped the phone almost tight enough to crack it. “Over what?”

“Well—” Miss Conroy paused. “You know those flower-beds out at Dorothy Luft's house? They've been searched about half-a-dozen times. Anyway, a tip was phoned in about an hour ago—an anonymous tip. The police searched again. They found a gun.”

CHAPTER THREE

Scarlet Double-Cross

THE address on Wilshire turned out to be a white stucco apartment house, a little down-at-the-heel. Paint was peeling from the open door to the lobby, and the row of mailboxes near the automatic elevator was tarnished. Kerr used the elevator to go up to the third floor. He knocked on the door of the rear apartment, 3C. Pat Vico opened the door. However, he didn't open it very far. He saw Kerr and his dark-skinned face turned the color of a lemon. He didn't say a word—just slammed the door in Kerr's face.

Kerr lunged fiercely at the closing door. His shoulder caught it before the lock clicked, and bounced the door back at Vico. Kerr went in.

There was no foyer, and Vico was driven back into the living room. Behind him, a tall statuesque blonde stood up from a divan with a gun in her hand. The blonde wore soft pearl-gray flannel slacks and scarlet Roman sandals. Her toenails were painted scarlet. She also wore a soft scarlet cashmere sweater. In movies, the sweater would never have passed the Johnson office.

At the moment, Kerr was more concerned with the gun. It was a flat black automatic of a small caliber—probably a .32. The girl held it carelessly down at her side, making no move to point it at Kerr.

She asked Vico: “What's this?”

Vico regained his balance. His dark-skinned face still holding its yellowish tinge, he told the girl in a choked voice, “Kerr, Munger's lawyer.” He had the look of a badly trapped man, cowering slightly before the girl's level gaze. “I . . . I didn't know he was coming, Janice. Honestly, I didn't.”

Kerr said, “Janice?”

“That's right,” the girl said. She spoke as casually as if she had known Kerr all his life in a deep booming voice. “Add Morley to that.” She was watching Vico. “You're a liar,” she said softly.

Fascinated by Janice Morley, Kerr remembered now that she had appeared briefly at his office with Munger and signed some papers—but she certainly hadn't been wearing a scarlet sweater. This was the girl who had claimed to come from a rich Texas oil family and had turned out to be a phony, whose masquerade had caused Joe Luft to lose every penny he owned.

According to Munger, who was usually sound on financial matters, the girl had been worth plenty. Kerr was forced to admit that was just how she looked—rich, brassy brawling Texas oil. No, he didn't blame Munger for being bedazzled.

Now Vico was cringing in front of the girl. “For Pete's sake, Janice,” he almost screamed. He spun toward Kerr. With his back to the girl, he winked at Kerr desperately. “Tell her!” he cried. “Tell her! Did I know you were coming, Kerr?”

Kerr wasn't sure which way to jump. Apparently, Janice Morley had arrived at the apartment after Vico had left his message for Kerr with Miss Conroy.

“Vico's lying in his teeth,” Kerr said.

The girl said, “You didn't need to tell me.” She sat down on the divan again and rested the automatic on her knee. “He's just full of tricks, you know.”

Vico cried, “Jan!”

The girl lighted a gold-tipped cigarette with one hand. She kept the gun balanced on her knee. She said to Kerr, “About a month ago, he started crawling around me, begging for a date. I finally went out with him.”

She waved the gun casually at Vico. “Now it turns out that all the time the heel

was just investigating me." She looked directly at Vico. "Go on, heel. Tell the lawyer what you found out."

It was cool and pleasant in the apartment but Vico had begun to sweat. He pulled out a silk monogrammed handkerchief and mopped his forehead. He said, "For Pete's sake, Jan! You've got me all wrong!"

"You've always been wrong, heel."

"No, no!" Vico cried. He held his hands out pleadingly to Kerr. "Look. I made a mistake. I don't want to see you, Kerr." He waved his arms. "Now, get out of here! Scram! Dangle!"

Kerr just looked at Vico. Then he walked over to the divan and sat down beside the girl, saying, "Don't let the heel kid you." He was highly gratified to find his voice had achieved just the right note of carelessness. He patted his jacket pockets. "Got a cigarette?"

"Sure," Janice Morley said. She used the barrel of the automatic to push a pack of her gold-tips toward him on the coffee table. When she finished, the gun was pointing almost at Kerr's middle.

HE SAID, "Thanks." He was disappointed to find that his voice tightened somewhat. "Haven't had a smoke for hours," he added. The girl was to his left. His right hand, reaching ostensibly for the cigarettes, passed close to the gun and drew the girl's gaze.

Meanwhile, his left hand seized the girl's gun-wrist. He pinned the wrist down on the divan, and then with his right hand, pried the gun from her fingers. The girl's free hand tried to stop him. Her long scarlet nails left scratches on his wrist.

"You're full of tricks, too," she panted.

Kerr examined the gun. It was a .32, all right, and had the same action as a standard Army .45. The safety was off, but there was no cartridge in the firing chamber. Kerr snicked the safety on and pocketed the gun.

"You couldn't have fired it if you'd wanted to," he told the girl chidingly. He paused. "Were you holding it on Vico, or did you just pull it for me?"

The girl leaned back on the cushion of the divan. Kerr had to admire the swiftness with which she recovered her poise. She said coolly, "Wouldn't you like to

know?" and shrugged her shoulders.

Kerr looked at Vico. "Well?"

Vico was dumbfounded. He just stared at Kerr.

"I asked you a question," Kerr said irritably.

Vico nodded. "Wh—when you knocked, she didn't want me to let anybody in. She took the gun out of her handbag and threatened me if I did."

"Why?" Kerr asked. He studied Vico a moment. As a lawyer, Vico's reputation stank all the way from Malibu to Las Vegas. However, he was handsome enough to get some business anyway. Kerr added, "If you lie to me, I'll give the gun back to her. I don't care what happens to you, Vico, you know."

Vico didn't look as though he believed that Kerr would give the gun back to the girl. He said, "Listen, Kerr," seeming much less frightened. "I've—I've been investigating Jan. She told you that. I was working for Dottie Luft. Dottie always thought that something smelled about the way Joe lost his money." He shook his dark head. "She was wrong. It didn't." He glanced fleetingly at Janice Morley. "Jan thought I really sailed for her. She's just sore because she thinks I tricked her."

"Not that sore," Kerr said savagely.

"What?"

"You heard me," Kerr said. He got up from the divan and went over to Vico. His face was hard and tight. "She wouldn't be sore enough over a thing like that to pull a gun on you—not just to keep you from letting somebody into the apartment. It might have been the iceman." He seized the lapels of Vico's jacket with both hands. "Why did you leave a message for me to come over here?"

Vico looked physically sick. "I—I just wanted to see you."

Kerr hurled him away violently. Vico's legs struck a hassock in front of a lounging chair, tripping him. He plunked heavily on the floor on his backside, looking like the most surprised man in the world. Kerr bent over him darkly.

"In case you don't know it, Vico, I'm being framed for Dottie Luft's murder. For all I know, you're doing the framing. You and Munger. You saw Munger in Ciro's last night. What did you tell him?"

Vico looked fearfully at Janice Morley. "N-nothing," he said.

Kerr leaned down and back-handed Vico heavily across the mouth. He didn't like lawyers with reputations that stank, anyway. A trickle of blood appeared at the corner of Vico's mouth.

"What did you tell him?" Kerr repeated.

This time Vico didn't look at Janice Morley. His mouth quivered. "A-about Jan."

"What about her?"

Vico hesitated. Kerr lifted his arm to back-hand him again, and Vico lifted his hands, palms out. "Wait a minute!" He licked at the blood on his lips. "The f-five thousand dollars Jan put up originally—wasn't her money. I found that out. That was Munger's own money that he put up in her name."

Janice Morley said, "Artie thought I was as dumb as the rest of the girls he knew."

Kerr wheeled, goggled at the girl.

She just shrugged. "We were—well, pretty chummy for a while, you know." Kerr hadn't known.

"That is," the girl went on, "until he found out I didn't own all the oil in Texas. He thought he was fleecing me." She laughed softly. "Artie's such a generous soul. He said he'd give me a five thousand dollar interest in the show—if I'd get him an angel. I got him one—Joe Luft. And Artie got me to sign unlimited partnership papers. He's *so* clever."

HER eyes were sparkling. "He still thought I was a big wheel in Texas oil, and that I'd have to be responsible for any dough that the show lost. Imagine his amazement when the show floundered and I didn't have a quarter! It even cost Artie an extra two thousand of his own precious dough, so that the whole deal wouldn't look too phony. Somehow Artie and I were never too chummy again after that."

Kerr frowned. He didn't know whether Janice Morley was talking to divert him from Vico, or whether she just couldn't resist the temptation to gloat. He whirled on Vico.

"Is that what you told Munger in Ciro's?"

"Yes," Vico whispered. He was on his

feet again, slowly approaching Kerr.

Kerr's frown deepened. "Did you tell him Dottie Luft was going to file suit through you?"

Vico didn't speak this time. He looked too frightened. He just nodded.

"In other words," Kerr said savagely, "you're the lawyer handling Joe Luft's estate. Dottie Luft was his sole remaining heir. You could sue for half of the money Joe Luft lost on Munger's show—by accusing Munger of fraud." He paused, tight lipped. "Right?"

Now Vico looked terrified. He nodded again.

"You're a liar," Kerr said, and hit him in the face.

Vico stumbled backward, covering his face with his hands. Kerr followed. "You're a lousy lawyer, but not that lousy." He seized Vico's lapels again. "There isn't enough evidence for a case." He shook Vico like he was a rhumba gourd. "What else did you tell Munger at Ciro's?"

Vico's face was wet with sweat. He found his voice. "I didn't tell him anything!"

Kerr shook him again. "You told him enough to make him kill Dottie Luft. What you just told me isn't enough." Vico's teeth were rattling. "What did you tell him?"

Off to his right, Kerr caught a flash of movement. He looked that way quickly, not releasing Vico. Janice Morley was sauntering to the rear window of the apartment. She reached the window and extended an arm toward the shade.

Kerr let go of Vico. "What the hell?"

Janice Morley didn't answer him. She pulled the shade down about a foot, jiggled it, and let it up again.

Kerr strode toward her. "Hey!"

Behind him, Vico suddenly ran for the door. He was out of the apartment before Kerr could get close to him. Kerr then went to the window and looked down. The rear court of the apartment house was empty. Janice Morley was watching him coolly. "Who did you signal?" Kerr asked. When she didn't answer, he gripped her arms. Then an idea occurred to him. He pivoted and sprinted for the door.

The third floor corridor was empty.

Kerr ran down to the automatic elevator. The red bulb over the push-button was burning—the elevator was in operation. He swore savagely and headed toward the stairs. He was half way down to the second floor when two shots boomed below. Just two. They had much the same sound that he had heard at Dottie Luft's.

Kerr got all the way to the second floor before he realized he had a gun in his own pocket. He pulled it out, snicked off the safety and pumped a cartridge into the firing chamber. From the front of the apartment house, he heard the starter of an automobile grind, the motor catch. The car rolled off into the distance as Kerr's feet hit the first floor.

He ran through the lobby and out into the street. A car was disappearing, too far away to be distinguished clearly. He wheeled and came back into the lobby. Pat Vico lay in front of the elevator, a foot or so from its open door. He lay on his side and doubled over.

A door opened in the first floor corridor and a gray-headed woman, hair done up in fancy curlers, put her head out timidly. She started to speak, spotted Vico. Then she saw the gun Kerr still held in his hand. Her face turned ashen. She fled into her apartment and shut the door.

Kerr swore for a few moments under his breath. Then he slipped Janice Morley's gun into his pocket, went out of the apartment house, and walked around the corner to his car. He hadn't driven half-a-dozen blocks before he heard the police sirens.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kerr Takes the Count

DECIDING he'd better avoid his usual haunts, Kerr put his convertible in a parking lot in North Hollywood where he was unknown, and took a cab to downtown L. A. There he bought a suitcase in one of the numerous luggage shops on Main Street, and filled it with underwear, socks, and a cotton slack suit from a couple of haberdasheries. He registered under the name of Harry Lurner at a good-sized hotel on Spring Street, had a big lunch sent up to his room. He spent most of the afternoon reading the

accounts in the Los Angeles papers.

The late editions were full of Lawyer James Kerr. There was a six-year-old picture of him, snapped after a now obscure court triumph, and in which, Kerr felt, he looked very young and callow. Beside this, there was a picture of the Texan who lived at 34 Sereno Court.

The Texan also looked younger, but certainly not callow. His name was George H. Hawkins and he *had* been a former deputy sheriff in Amarillo, Texas, now owning the Western Theatrical Supply Co., which furnished necessary Western props to the movies. There was also a picture of Pat Vico—but no mention of Janice Morley.

The papers made much of the fact that Vico was dead, and that the man standing over him with a gun had been identified as Kerr. There was a photo of the woman who had identified Kerr's picture. One of the papers labeled Kerr as a mad dog. However, Kerr was cheered by this, feeling he had beautiful grounds for a libel suit when—and if—he could clear himself.

Kerr left the hotel a few minutes of nine, as soon as it was conveniently dark. Both the papers and the radios had described him perfectly so he wore his new cotton slack suit, which was a light inconspicuous tan, and left the blue gabardine locked in his suitcase in the room. The square tail of the shirt hung outside his trousers to hide the butt of the automatic pushed into the waistband. Not used to carrying a gun, Kerr found he was taut as a banjo string.

At Sixth and Spring, he flagged a cab and rode out to Munger's house in Beverly Hills. The house was dark. Kerr rode down to Hollywood and Vine and dismissed the cab. In a drugstore, he made several telephone calls to Munger's usual hangouts, carefully disguising his voice. Nobody could tell him where Munger was.

He caught another cab on Vine Street and rode over to Nan McCourt's apartment house on Oxford, off Wilshire. He paid off his cab at the corner of Oxford and Fifth, reasoning that the police might be having Nan's home watched. Although he didn't see anything that looked like policemen, there was a big dark sedan parked in front of the apartment house

with a man in a chauffeur's cap lounging behind the wheel, smoking.

The chauffeur's back was to Kerr. Kerr took an automatic out of the waistband of his trousers and walked around behind the sedan to the side away from the curb. He jerked open the rear door, jumped in, and pointed the gun at Lou. "Do anything silly and I'll blow your head off," he said.

Lou didn't even seem surprised. He sucked at his cigarette, and meticulously knocked off the ashes in a pull-out tray on the dashboard. He said, "You're nuts," as casually as if he were telling Kerr about the weather. "There's a couple of coppers up in Nan's apartment right now."

Kerr kept the gun level. He wondered if he were a snob because he wished Lou wouldn't call Nan by her first name. "Looking for me?" Kerr asked.

"Who else? They been watching the place all afternoon. They just went up with Artie. They ain't trusting him, either."

"Do you?" Kerr asked quickly. When Lou didn't answer, he said, "You're an accessory, you know." He glanced at the still-empty entrance to the apartment house.

"You gave Artie an alibi, which means you'll go along to the gas chamber with him. Maybe if you ask, they'll let you take it together." Kerr put the gun six inches from Lou's face. "Did you plant that gun in the flowerbed?"

Lou looked briefly at the gun. Nothing about his face changed at all. "I didn't plant no guns any place," he said.

"Who did?" Kerr asked.

"I wouldn't know, counselor."

Kerr said, "Doesn't Artie take you into his confidence?"

Even in the face of the gun, Lou shrugged. "You know better than that. Artie don't take nobody into his confidence."

Kerr said, "You drove the car for him last night when he killed Dottie Luft. You even had the car all set for a getaway. Wouldn't you call that being taken into Artie's confidence?"

Lou looked again at the gun. "O.K." he said. "No witnesses here." He sucked at his cigarette very slowly. "Sure, I drove the car. I don't figure it's a knock-off

job, though. Artie said he has a conference with Dottie Luft and don't want nobody to know.

"He also tells me he didn't kill her. And me? I'm funny, I believe him. In the first place, he's too smart to do his own killing, and in the second place, he wasn't wearing no gun, like you. Of course, maybe it was the girl's gun—but that's just maybe. Maybe buys you nothing."

Trying to read Lou's face, Kerr felt gloomily was like trying to read Chinese upside down in a dark room, and he was glad he had never played poker with Lou. Then he glanced again at the entrance to the apartment house. A slim dark young man in plain dark clothes came out to the sidewalk. He had plainclothesman written all over him. He even wore black shoes, a dead giveaway. Kerr crouched down on the floor behind Lou.

"Do you think I killed Vico?" Kerr asked softly.

Lou also saw the slim dark man. An almost imperceptible hoarseness got into his voice. "I wouldn't know, counselor."

"All right," Kerr said. "The cop does, though. Give me away and I'll blast you first."

Footsteps sounded across the pavement. A young cheerful voice asked, "You know where I can buy some cards?" Kerr felt like snakes were writhing around in his stomach. The young policeman was at the front door of the sedan. Light from the street lamp at the curb threw his shadow over the back seat.

"Cards?" Lou said. His voice was strange.

The gun in Kerr's hand felt slippery.

"Yeah," the young cheerful voice said. "The sarge thinks he'll be kind of lonesome upstairs, and wants to play some solitaire. He's going to stay up there in case Kerr slips into the apartment house without us seeing him. Miss McCourt doesn't mind. She's going out. In fact, she's fixing the sarge some coffee." There was a pause. "Brother," the voice went on reverently, "if he can leave town without seeing *that*, then he's not the man I think he is."

There was another pause. Kerr wondered if his hair were getting gray. Then there was a sound of a match sizzling, and Kerr realized the young man was lighting

a cigarette. "Is there a drugstore on Wilshire?"

"Yeah," Lou said. Another pause. "Artie coming down?"

"Mr. Munger? I think he's on his way." Smoke from the young man's cigarette floated into the back seat. "See you later, fella." Footsteps faded away down the sidewalk.

Kerr felt like he hadn't breathed for twenty years. He sat up on the seat and stretched his long legs. He said, "You're pretty good, Lou." He was so accustomed to silence that he spoke almost in a whisper. "I didn't really kill Vico, you know."

Lou rubbed his nose. "Who cares? Me, I just don't like being in the middle if two guys start blasting each other. Stray slugs don't have no conscience."

KERR still held the gun in his hand. He pointed it again at Lou and twisted his head so he could see out of the rear window. He kept glancing back at Lou from time to time. The young policeman was crossing the street at Fifth. Kerr waited until he disappeared around the corner at Wilshire. Then he swung around and reached for the door of the sedan. As he did so, Nan McCourt came out of the apartment house with Arthur Munger at her side.

They walked toward the sedan. Kerr thought he had never seen Nan look so beautiful. She wore a short white flannel jacket with gold sequins at the cuffs. Her evening gown was a shimmering gold lamé. The soft round bangs on her forehead and her short hair made her look like a medieval pageboy. Munger wore a black dinner jacket and black tie. Lou, being the casual type of chauffeur, made no move to get out and open the door for them.

Munger opened the door of the sedan himself. He held it open for Nan to climb in, and she was half way inside before she saw Kerr. She gave a small smothered cry and jumped back. Kerr bounced out after her, pointing the gun at Munger.

He said, "Don't get complicated on me, Artie."

Nan McCourt looked at Kerr in sheer amazement. She said, "Jimmie!" in a hurt, wounded sort of way, turned and ran into the apartment house.

This was too much for Kerr to stand. It was one thing to be angry at Nan; it was quite another to hurt her without explanation. He wouldn't have cared if the lobby of the apartment house contained a whole squadron of policemen. He ran in after her. As he entered the lobby, he heard Munger's sharp voice asking Lou where the young policeman was. Then he heard the motor of the car start. Kerr realized he didn't have much time.

In the lobby, Nan was at the row of mailboxes, ringing the bell of her apartment furiously.

Kerr still held the gun. He caught her wrist with his left hand. "Nan!" His voice was hoarse.

She fought him furiously. "Let—go of me!"

"For heaven's sake, Nan! Listen to me!"

"Let go!"

Kerr released her wrist, and slapped her face—hard. His fingers left white prints. Nan stopped struggling, and stared at him, shocked rigid.

He reached out and touched her face gently. "That was the last thing I wanted to do," he said. "Nan, you've got to listen to me."

"I'm . . . listening." She seemed dazed.

"You've got to," he said. Nan rubbed her cheek where he'd struck her, and Kerr winced. "You've got to believe me. I haven't killed anybody. I'm being framed. I'm being framed by Munger so he can get you. Can't you see that?"

Nan said, "No, I can't, Jimmie." She lifted her chin a little. "Not after what I heard."

"What?" Kerr asked. He gripped her arm.

"You're hurting me!" she cried. He released her again, quickly. "I saw Dottie Luft outside the El Gofo," Nan said, very pale. "She was drunk and I . . . I talked to her. I helped her get a cab. I felt sorry for her, and I wanted to find out some things. About you, I mean. Well, she said you had really tricked her brother. She said you knew all along that Janice Morley was a phony. She said you knew her real name. She—"

"Her *real* name?" Kerr cut in. He heard the rattle of the automatic elevator descending, but didn't pay any attention

to it. "What is that doll's real name?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"My Lord," Kerr said. "Munger handled all the business with her. I've only seen the girl twice in my life." He heard the elevator stop on the first floor and still didn't pay any attention. "What is it?"

"She wouldn't tell me," Nan said. "All she would say was that she and her lawyer were going to tell you in court."

The door to the automatic elevator swung open. A large thick-set man in rumpled dark clothes burst excitedly into the corridor. He saw Nan and swung to a stop.

"Did you ring your bell, Miss McCourt? I thought maybe Kerr was—" His gaze swung to Kerr and he broke off. It was obvious that the man had no difficulty recognizing him. In addition, Kerr's gun was in plain sight. The man in rumpled dark clothes reached for his gun. Kerr pointed the automatic at him. "Don't try it, sarge." His voice was almost pleading.

The sarge didn't try it. He didn't put his hands up, either. He just stopped his right arm with his hand crooked over his gun.

Kerr jerked his chin at the automatic elevator. "In there, sarge."

The sarge hesitated.

Nan McCourt cried, "Please, sergeant!"

The sarge moved into the elevator. Kerr pressed the top button, the one to the fifth floor, stepped back and closed the elevator door. The elevator rattled and started up. Kerr hoped it would take a minute or so for the sarge to find the necessary buttons to start it down again. He pushed his automatic back into a pocket. "These damned guns get you in trouble," he said.

Nan McCourt was pale as paper. "Oh, Jimmie," she cried. She ran into Kerr's arms and sobbed gently against his shoulder. He could feel her body trembling.

He tilted her chin and kissed her. "You smell good," he said. He walked around her reluctantly and went out to the sidewalk. Munger's car hadn't come back from Wilshire. Kerr walked rapidly up to Sixth Street, and then ran down to Western. He flagged a cab going north. Half-a-dozen blocks up Western, he found a drugstore with a phone, and looked up

Janice Morley's home address in the book.

AT A small restaurant on Sunset, Kerr tried to align his facts. Obviously, Janice Morley was the key to everything. Both Dottie Luft and Vico had known her real name; they were planning to spring it on him in court. Now both Dottie and Vico were dead. It seemed logical to assume that they died because they knew Janice Morley's real name.

Kerr was glad Nan McCourt didn't know. He believed Munger capable of anything. However, since he was also inclined to believe Lou, Kerr decided he must be a pretty stupid lawyer to have such an indecisive mind.

Then he looked at a clock on the wall. He discovered he had whiled away an hour; it was a few minutes after ten. He went quickly out to Sunset and hailed another cab.

Janice Morley lived on the second floor of a two-story apartment house on Santa Monica Boulevard. Kerr rang the bell under her name on a mailbox. He picked up an earphone hanging from a hook on the wall, but her booming voice shot down the stairs. "Who is it? A man, I hope." She leaned over a white concrete balustrade and peered down. Kerr went up the stairs.

"Oh," she said. "The tricky man." She held open the apartment door. She had taken off the scarlet sweater, and substituted scarlet satin lounging pajamas with the upper part a kind of half jacket. About six inches of bare smooth midriff showed. Kerr realized he might have difficulty keeping his mind on the business at hand.

"Well, don't just stand there," Janice Morley said. Kerr went on into the apartment.

Arthur Munger looked up at him from a divan. He still wore his dinner jacket and black tie. His knees were crossed very casually, and one hand was draped along the top of the divan. He smiled faintly.

On Kerr's left, Lou stepped out from against the wall. He pointed a snub-nosed revolver at Kerr. "I wouldn't reach for nothing, counselor," he said.

Janice Morley shut the door and locked it. Then she swayed over to a coffee table, got one of her gold-tipped cigarettes from

a Chinese box, and lit up. "Surprise," she said to Kerr.

Kerr felt as though someone had kicked him in the stomach. He tried valiantly to conceal this. He asked Munger, "Are you psychic? How'd you know I'd come here?" Despite his efforts at control, his voice was hoarse. "Where's Nan?"

"In her apartment," Munger said indifferently. "It seems you told her that I knew considerably more about Janice than you did." He smiled faintly again. "Nan was pretty sore about that. In fact, she decided she wouldn't go out with me this evening." He shrugged. "I figured you'd probably come here." He looked at the Morley girl. "Get his gun, Janice."

"You mean *my* gun." She came over to Kerr, patted his pockets, and pulled the gun out. "Hey," she said. "This is fun." She swayed back to Munger and handed him the gun.

Munger held the gun in his lap. "Like to get out of your jam, Jim?"

"What jam?" Kerr was relieved to find that his voice was less hoarse.

Again Munger shrugged. "I fixed it so Hawkins, the Texan, will change his story. He'll say he *did* see a man run out of Dottie Luft's, and go away in a car. But he won't give my description. It'll be close, but not mine. You can change your story to fit his. I've got an alibi, anyway, so they can't pin anything on me. It'll also clear you. Dottie Luft will have been killed by an unknown third party, whose description is close to mine. Like it?"

Kerr frowned. "What about the gun in the flower-bed?"

Munger said, "There're no fingerprints on it. The cops are fairly sure it's a plant, anyway."

"How do you know there are no fingerprints on it?" Kerr asked swiftly.

Munger just smiled. "Coppers told me. What difference does it make?" He uncrossed his legs. "Vico was shot with a .38. Now, don't ask me how I know—coppers again." He inclined his head toward the girl. "Her gun is a .32. That'll be the gun you'll have on you when you give yourself up." He held up the gun from his lap.

"This one. The woman who saw you standing over Vico has already described

the gun—a small black automatic. So that will put you in the clear on Vico. You see? The whole business is a locked-tight cinch." Kerr noticed that Lou still held the revolver leveled.

Kerr said, "What price do I pay for this cinch?"

Munger stood up, making this a gesture of finality, just like a high-powered peddler closing a sale. "You keep Janice out of everything. You didn't see her at Vico's, and you haven't been here."

Kerr hesitated. He remembered that there had been no mention of Janice Morley in the papers. "You got away from Vico's?" he asked the girl.

She shrugged. "I just walked out. Nobody saw me go in there."

Again Kerr hesitated. He decided it just wasn't his night for reaching decisions quickly. After a few moments, he looked at Munger. "How do I know Hawkins will change his story?"

"You'll just have to take my word for it, Jim."

Kerr made a decision. "Not tonight," he said.

Munger sighed. "That's what I hate about dealing with lawyers. What do you want—a notarized statement?" He wheeled toward the swinging-door to the kitchen. "Come on out, Hawkins!"

The tall Texan, still wearing the wide-brimmed western hat, sauntered into the room. He scratched his right leg earnestly as he walked. "Howdy, son," he said to Kerr.

Munger said, "Tell him, Hawkins. Are you going to change your story?"

Hawkins nodded. "Yup," he said. "Seen a man run away from Luft's house, after all." He pointed a bony finger at Munger. "Looked lots like Mr. Munger, but plain as day it wasn't him." He looked at Kerr and grinned. "Been paid plenty, son, to say that, too."

Munger spread his hands. "Satisfied, Jim?"

Kerr made another decision. He said, "Give me the gun."

Munger laughed. "Sure." He slipped the clip out of the automatic and spilled the bullets into his hand. Then he tossed the clip to Kerr. After a moment's hesitation, he shucked the gun open and peered into the firing chamber. "Well,"

he said. He shook another cartridge into his hand. "It'll look better for you if the gun isn't loaded."

He laughed again and smelled the gun's muzzle. "Hasn't been fired. That's good." He tossed the gun at Kerr. "Satisfied now, Jim?"

Kerr felt ill. He made no move to catch the gun. He had remembered shoving a cartridge into the firing chamber after Vico was shot, but an empty gun certainly wasn't going to help him. The automatic thudded on the thick rug.

Kerr made his third decision. "No," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nobody's Pal

MUNGER'S face darkened savagely. All of a sudden, Kerr felt a great glow of satisfaction. He had finally gotten under Munger's skin. Munger said sharply, "Why not?"

"I'm a very noble character," Kerr said.

Angry breath hissed through Munger's teeth. He took one long implacable step toward Kerr. His pale face thickened. The muscles in his neck grew corded.

"It told you it wouldn't work," Janice Morley said.

Munger spun, venting some of his anger on her. "Shut up, weisenheimer! Anything I hate is a fresh chiseling doll!" He wheeled suddenly back to Kerr. "You've played out your last chip, Jim!" He stamped to a telephone that sat on a stand in the corner. He dialed furiously, keeping his eyes on Kerr.

"Police headquarters?" This formality was obviously for Kerr's benefit. "Give me Lt. Brennan. Homicide . . . Munger. Arthur Munger. Hello—Terry? Sure, it's Artie. I'm out on Santa Monica Boulevard." He gave Janice Morley's address with a kind of fiendish glee. "What? . . . No. It's the apartment of a friend of Vico's. . . . I just didn't think to mention it, that's all. . . . No, Terry. Look. We just saw a man skulking around outside, and I have an idea it may be Kerr."

Munger's eyes never left Kerr's face. "The girl here is sure it's Kerr. Suppose you throw a cordon around the place and

then phone me?" Munger shifted the phone to his left hand. "You better shoot on sight, too. I'll try to keep an eye on the prowler, and then I can let you know exactly where he is." He gave Janice Morley's phone number.

"Okay, Terry. Hell, I know you'll make it quick. . . . Always glad to do anything I can." He banged up the phone. His pale gray eyes were alive with malice. "We'll keep you here until Brennan calls," he told Kerr. "Then we'll shove you outside and watch you run."

Kerr was pale. "How far do you think I'll get?"

Munger said savagely, "Two steps will be enough for me." He walked across the thick rug and picked up the automatic. The cartridges were in his pocket and he fished them out again. "Let's have the clip," he told Kerr.

Kerr glanced down at the clip. He realized it would look considerably better for the police if a loaded gun were found near his riddled body. Then, at least, it wouldn't look like he had just been mowed down in cold blood. In the general confusion after the shooting, Munger could easily drop the gun beside him. Kerr turned the clip over, stalling.

A small strip of paper—about an inch long—was pasted on the clip by a piece of transparent scotch tape, which covered it. The piece of paper was stamped in small black letters—Western Theatrical Supply Co.

Then the doorbell rang.

Kerr could almost feel the tension in the room mount. Munger wheeled on Janice Morley. "See who it is. If it's one of your boy friends, get rid of him."

The girl hesitated. Then she swayed over to the wall telephone near the door and lifted the earphone from the hook. "Yes?" she said carefully, and listened. Her hand clapped quickly over the mouthpiece. "Believe it or not, it's a woman," she said. She looked curiously at Arthur Munger. Nobody else in the room moved. "It's Nan McCourt."

Munger frowned. "Go outside on the steps and stall her. Get her away from here."

The girl said, "I thought Nan McCourt was your department." Then she shrugged. "Well, I don't like it. I don't like any of

this." She unlocked the door and started out.

A large thick-set man in rumpled dark clothes bowed her back into the room. Kerr recognized the police sergeant from Nan McCourt's apartment house. He held a .38 Police Special in his hand. Behind him was the slim young policeman who had gone down to Wilshire Boulevard for cards. He too held a Police Special in his hand. Both men pointed their guns at Lou, who caught off-guard, was half facing Kerr. Lou dopped the snub-nosed revolver very quickly. He promptly shoved both hands in the air.

Munger still held the empty automatic. He also shoved his hands in the air, but he didn't drop the gun. He waved it frantically above his head. "This is Kerr's," he yelled. "We just took it away from him! It's empty!" He turned the gun so they could see the clip wasn't in. "See?"

The sergeant said, "All right. Drop it."

Munger quickly dropped the gun. His usual grayish paleness was turning sallow. The slim young policeman picked the gun up, and then went along the thick rug and picked up Lou's. He stopped in front of Hawkins. "Who're you?"

Hawkins just scratched at his hip. "Name of Hawkins," he said. "Used to be a deputy sheriff once, back in Amarillo, Texas." He cocked his chin toward Kerr. "I'm the man caught him coming out of Miss Luft's house last night. After he up and shot her to death." He wagged his head gravely. "Bad business."

Kerr said, "Bad business is right." He looked at the sergeant. "Hawkins is right, though, except for one thing." He paused a long time, just for emphasis. "He's the one who shot her."

The sergeant looked scornfully at Kerr. "That's great." He didn't sound as though he meant it. He wheeled toward the young policeman. "Tell Miss McCourt it's okay for her to come up now. And you better wait outside for the wagon and the rest of the boys. They ought to be along any minute. We only had a few minutes start." He swung back to Kerr. "Miss McCourt turned you in."

"What?"

"She told us she thought you'd be coming here."

"That's right," Kerr said bitterly. "Pour salt in my wounds." He had never felt so bad in his life. It was tough enough to know who had murdered Dorothy Luft, and not be able to prove it. It was especially tough to realize that, if he didn't prove it, he would undoubtedly be saddled with the murder himself. To top this off, Nan McCourt had turned him in. Kerr knew several moments of very deep despair.

THEN Janice Morley caught his eye. She was lighting one of her gold-tipped cigarettes. Kerr made a bee-line across the room. "You're a smart cookie," he said. He was breathing heavily. "Why don't you be smart enough to get yourself out of an accessory rap?"

The girl looked at him in surprise. Then she lounged elegantly back on the divan, and turned her gaze briefly on Munger. "How?" she asked coolly. She blew smoke down over her bar midriff.

The sergeant said, "Save it, Kerr. You can do that in court."

Kerr jiggled the clip in his hands. This was his last chance, and nobody was going to stop him. "Both Dottie Luft and Vico were killed because they knew your real name," he told the girl. He spoke rapidly. "Now that we know that you *have* another name, we can easily find it out. In exchange for doing some talking, you can get out of your accessory rap."

The sergeant strode toward Kerr. "I told you to shut up!"

Kerr said, "You told me to save it for court." He turned his back deliberately on the sergeant. Again he addressed the girl. "What is your real name?"

"First," Janice Morley said, "tell me why you want to know."

When the girl spoke, the sergeant was reaching out to collar Kerr. He stopped and wheeled toward the girl. He looked amazed.

Kerr hastily pushed the clip into his hands. "Look at it, Sarge. There's a tab that says Western Theatrical Supply Co." He pointed. "Hawkins owns the Western Theatrical Supply. I saw it in the afternoon papers. And I took that gun away from the girl up in Pat Vico's apartment. She's from Texas, and Hawkins is from Texas." He swung savagely toward the

girl. "What is your real name—something that ends in Hawkins?"

Janice Morley hesitated. She glanced at Hawkins, whose face was immobile as a cigar-store Indian's. There was something cool and canny about her. Kerr felt she was weighing her chances, almost as if she had a scale. "Why?" she asked.

Kerr wished he were a little more certain of his facts. He said, "When Munger's show flopped a couple of months ago, you had an unlimited partnership in it with one other person—Joe Luft. That meant that you and Joe Luft were responsible for all the dough the show lost. But you claimed you didn't have a quarter. Yet you have a nice apartment here and some very fine clothes—both good enough to convince Munger that you had plenty of Texas oil. I can only see one answer. You have a nice *private* income—one that nobody knew anything about—maybe from Western Theatrical Supply."

"You interest me," Janice Morley said promptly. Again she glanced at Hawkins. His face was still immobile. "And if I did have that private income?"

"It gives Hawkins a motive," Kerr said quickly. "A motive for killing Dottie Luft." The backs of Kerr's hands felt wet. He rubbed them on the thighs of his trousers.

He added, "Vico could recover half of the money that Joe Luft lost, if he could prove that you have that much money. And if you own Western Theatrical Supply, you *do* have that much. Hawkins might be the dummy owner, running the business for you, and sharing in the profits. If so, that's his livelihood. Take it away and, like Joe Luft, he's ruined. And people threatened with ruin often kill." Kerr paused again and found that his face was sweating. "Do you follow me?"

Janice Morley was sitting erect. She didn't even hesitate this time. She just looked contemptuously at George Hawkins. "Perfectly," she said.

Kerr felt better. The backs of his hands were still wet, though. He dried them again on his trousers. He said, "Well, Vico investigated and found out your real name and that you owned Western Theatrical Supply. Vico also found out that Munger had put up five thousand dollars—in your name.

"On the surface, that looks like fraud. It isn't. Any lawyer knows it's nothing but a gift. But Vico knew that he could collect from you *legally* in court. This also meant that Munger would be subpoenaed as a witness in court." Kerr stopped, breathing heavily. "Do you still follow me?"

"Certainly," Janice Morley said.

"Vico was a shyster, and he saw his chance to make some extra dough. He figured Munger couldn't stand any unfavorable publicity—especially with a new show due to open, and the new backers possibly needed. So Vico first tried to scare both Munger and me with telephone calls. Then he told Munger at Ciro's that you owned Western Theatrical Supply and that Munger would have to appear as a witness at the suit." Kerr pointed at Lou. "Lou can prove this."

Kerr took a deep breath. "Munger told Lou that he was going to Dottie Luft's for a conference. He called Hawkins over from next door. It was to be a nice friendly cash settlement out of court—without lawyers, without publicity. But Dottie Luft was drunk, and she wanted vengeance, not money.

"She lost her head and threw some flower-pots. Hawkins saw his livelihood flying out the window, and ruin staring him smack in the face—something which at his age is *very* tough—so he shot her. Munger ran out the back door."

Kerr whirled scornfully on Hawkins. "You said you were asleep when you heard the shots, yet you were *fully dressed* and out to my car less than five minutes later. You had your hat on. You even had on your new underwear that you got for your birthday. It itched you."

KERR wheeled on the sergeant. "Also there were no lights in Hawkins' house from the time I drove up until I went into the house with him. Not only that, but I heard a door close after I saw Munger run away. At the time, I thought it was one of the neighbors peeking out. Now, I know it was the front door of Dottie Luft's house. Hawkins just went out to the car and waited for me."

Turning, he looked the tall man squarely in the eye. "Very clever." He pivoted

to face the girl. "Later, Hawkins found out the cops let me go because no gun had been found—so he planted one in the flower-bed. All he had to do was wait until the police guard turned his back. As for Munger, he didn't mind having the murder pinned on me, either. It was a good chance for him to get Nan McCourt. He even gave a phony story to the newspapers about my jealousy." Kerr looked wearily at Janice Morley.

"Maybe," Janice Morley said. She hesitated. She didn't even glance at Hawkins. "Well, I'll buy, Kerr. My name's Betty Sue Hawkins—can you tie that?"

She laughed softly. "Anyway, my phony oil story made me plenty of contacts, so I hit on the idea of Western Theatrical Supply. I got old George to come out here and run it. You were right, too—I own it, and he shares in the profits." She shrugged. "But I liked people thinking I owned oil instead, so I kept my relations to the business in the dark." She looked at Hawkins. "He's my uncle."

Kerr said, "Was it Hawkins you signaled today from Vico's apartment?"

Janice Morley nodded. "Sure. You see, Munger couldn't stand the publicity, so we didn't need to worry about him knowing our secret. That little deal we tried to make with you a few minutes ago—that was his idea.

"Incidentally, Uncle George phoned me before the conference with Dottie Luft last night. When I saw I was stuck, I told him to settle for as little as possible. But the Luft girl died instead. Vico was the only one besides Munger who knew my real name and that I owned Western Theatrical Supply. I *tried* to buy Vico off."

She looked chidingly at Kerr. "Uncle George was waiting outside in case Vico didn't act right. So, when Vico looked like he was going to talk to you, I signaled him." She inhaled languidly on her cigarette. "Killing Vico was his own idea."

George Hawkins moved deliberately. He took off his wide-brimmed Western hat and lifted a .38 revolver out of the crown. He said, "You get more like your mother every day, Betty Sue." Then he fired twice at the girl, missing.

However, the sergeant shot Hawkins

three times in the body, killing him.

The girl turned away and headed toward the kitchen. Half way there, she stopped. Her booming voice was very husky. "Is it all right for me to get a drink, Sarge?"

The sergeant said, "No," and wouldn't let her go. The girl just stood off to one side of the room, her eyes brooding darkly on Kerr. He turned away from the body, feeling slightly weak in the stomach. Then he spotted Nan McCourt in the doorway.

She was very pale. "I—I was here most of the time. It was awful."

Kerr said, "So was your turning me in."

Nan looked up at him in amazement. "Oh," she said. Then she smiled. She still wore the gold lame evening gown with the white flannel jacket. "It was just that I believed you, Jimmie—about not knowing Janice Morley's real name, I mean. And it seemed silly to me that, being innocent, you should take such horrible chances. You almost got killed in my apartment house. I—I made a deal with the sergeant."

"Deal?" Kerr asked.

"I agreed to tell him where I thought you were in exchange for a promise not to shoot at you first. I knew you wouldn't shoot at *him*."

Kerr grinned. He realized it was the first time he'd been able to grin for quite a while. He reached out and touched Nan's cheek.

She said, "What'll happen to Artie?"

Kerr shrugged. "He and Lou will both draw a criminal conspiracy rap. They'll never be able to prove that they were accessories, now that Hawkins is dead. You can't convict dead men of crimes, you know."

He bent over to kiss Nan. "Janice Morley's too smart. If they can nail her on anything—which I doubt—she'll talk and get off with a suspended sentence."

Just before Kerr's lips touched Nan's, Janice Morley tapped his shoulder.

"There's one thing I'd like to ask you," she said. "Uncle George was getting along in years and I took out a forty thousand dollar insurance policy on him. What I want to know is—can I collect?"

DON'T TALK, CHUMP!

By **FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**



... She had never seen his face.

Sultry Sylvia's cold-blooded killer, her husband Mace knew, was now pulling the shroud over his eyes.

THEY came together to the police commissioner's door, all of them tense and uneasy except the one man who had more reason than any of the others to be fearful.

The one man about whom this critical

moment centered was Spencer Mace, publisher of the *Clarion*, the youngest newspaper publisher in the midwest—and a man to whom murder had come very close.

The others watched him, both in anxiety and admiration, as he paused, gripping the knob. A young man of exceptional moral courage, this Spencer Mace. A dynamic, hard-driving young man also, but one already showing signs of wearing down under the pace he set for himself. Today his mouth was puckered with sharper strain than usual—a pinch put there by murder only hours old.

The man on Mace's right, keeping an alert eye on him, was his closest friend and the city editor of the *Clarion*, Robert Talbot. Shaky after the ordeal of the past day and night, Talbot asked, during this moment's pause at the commissioner's door, "Are you sure you want to go through with this, Spence? Haven't you already taken enough of a beating?"

The man directly behind Mace was Victor Seaver, slow moving and quietly efficient, the detective captain in charge of the investigation of the Mace murder case.

"You can call it off right now if you want to, Mr. Mace," he drawled, taking up Bert Talbot's suggestion. "You're here entirely by choice, you know. You're not under arrest or even under suspicion. If you want to change your mind, all you have to do is turn around and walk away, because nobody's forcing you to do this."

The girl on Mace's left was dark and willowy but studious-looking in her horn-rim glasses, and plainly dressed in black. She was Antonia Vinci, Mace's secretary. She smiled at him with a woman's faint, knowing smile and quietly reminded the two men, "Nobody's forcing him—except himself. He insists on it."

"That's right," Mace responded, his lips softening in appreciation of Tony's understanding. "I want to prove to everybody that I'm absolutely in the clear."

Besides—although he didn't put the thought into words—this would make a bang-up story for the *Clarion*.

He thrust the door open and stepped through.

The men in the commissioner's office immediately crowded toward Mace. Foremost was Commissioner Wharton himself,

beefy faced and big pawed. District Attorney Marks, the worrying type, wrapped a clammy hand around Mace's firm one. George Wade, the *Clarion's* police reporter, was there with Maybelle Moore, the mousy feature writer who would handle the woman's angle. "Flash" Fulton, the paper's ace photog, was getting set to shoot a scene made doubly newsworthy because his boss was the star of it.

All of them treated Spencer Mace with cordial deference—except one. The one man who made no move at all toward Mace was lean, wizened Professor Fabian, head of the department of psychology at City College. He was a self-effacing little man who had a way of habitually stroking his gray-brown goatee as if gleefully enjoying some private joke.

The office quieted as Mace turned to gaze at the device sitting on the table at Professor Fabian's side—a complex assembly of dials, recording drums, rubber tubes and wires.

"So this is the machine that makes guilty men tremble in their shoes, is it, Fabe?" Mace asked in a manner of natural, long-standing familiarity. "A lie detector."

"More properly called a Keeler polygraph, young man," Professor Fabian answered, caressing his goatee. His fingers trembled with excitement. He had never before been called into a case so important as this. It was doubly fascinating to him as a student of the human mind because he had been a close friend of Spencer Mace's father and had known this forceful young man since babyhood. Not that this friendship would influence his findings, of course. No; the machine's records would be traced on graphs for any trained eye to see, and as a scientist he must above all respect the facts.

"The Keeler polygraph, the invention of a famous criminologist," he added in his best classroom manner. "When handled by a capable operator—which I unquestionably I am, gentlemen—it is a reliable detector of conscious falsehoods. If the subject knows he is lying, this instrument will reliably record the fact. You're willing to submit to it, are you, Spence?"

"That's exactly why I'm here," Mace said briskly. "I've asked to have my statements checked by this instrument, so of

course I'll be bound to honor its verdict. Let's get going with it, Fabe."

"As you say, Spence, my boy," the professor responded, a glitter in his eye. "Just sit there."

It was a strange sensation, sitting there in the chair with the tentacles of that machine attached to him in multiple places. The office was tensely quiet as the little motor in the polygraph began humming, the drums revolving and the styli scratching on the graph paper to register his blood pressure, his pulse rate and the rhythm of his respiration.

Three flash bulbs glared at Mace during the preliminary adjustments. Then Professor Fabian hovered intently over the instrument, concentrating on interpreting its signals, while District Attorney Marks took over.

"You're making an entirely voluntary statement here, Spence," Marks said fretfully. "I've already questioned you to my entire satisfaction, so this time I suggest you simply give a straight account of your part in the case."

DESPITE himself, he felt fear of the machine which was steadily recording the incontrollable reactions of the sensitive organism named Spencer Mace.

Fear—of what? He had nothing to hold back, nothing to conceal. None of these men doubted him now, and when he finished giving his account of the incidents of the murder night, their belief in him would certainly be strengthened. Why, then, did he feel this dread of what the machine might discover and reveal?

He half realized then that he was making an effort to keep his eyes from turning—from turning to Antonia Vinci. His secretary was seated at the side of the office, notebook and pencil ready. He could feel her dark eyes watching him.

His wife was dead, murdered only thirty-six hours ago and not yet buried—yet at this moment, in his condition of dulled shock and emotional overstrain, he feared her effect on him.

The district attorney was saying, "You may begin now, Spence."

He thrust from his mind every thought except the vivid recollection of Sylvia lying lifeless on the flagstone walk, and began!

"It was simply night," Spencer Mace said, "until I awakened to discover that Sylvia wasn't in bed."

He felt again that she had never looked lovelier than that last evening. She had worn a new gown of misty blue, cut enchantingly low. Her red-blond hair had sparkled and she had had a glow in her eyes. He remembered thinking that this was one of those rare moments when Sylvia saw herself as a fortunate and happy young woman.

"Sylvia and I watched the television set a while, and had some drinks. I'm afraid I had quite a few, to help me relax. Sylvia's mood seemed gayer than usual, perhaps because it was the first evening in weeks that I hadn't had to work late at the *Clarion* plant. It was a little past midnight when we turned off the light.

"I think Sylvia was still awake when I dozed off. At any rate, she was either still awake or had been awakened just before two a. m. That was when I woke. I have the faintest sort of recollection of rapid footfalls running past the side of the house and down the street, but I was drugged with badly needed sleep and this may have been the remnant of a dream.

"I turned on the light and saw that her robe and mules were on the floor—but Sylvia herself had disappeared.

"She wasn't downstairs either. When I found the side door standing ajar, I took a flashlight and hustled out, calling Sylvia's name as I went. I was sure now that something serious had happened, although naturally I couldn't know what or why."

The polygraph was humming steadily and the styli were scratching out their record of Spencer Mace's emotional reactions as he relived this moment of shocking discovery.

"There is a flagstone walk between the house and the guest cottage in the rear of the grounds. Apparently something had drawn Sylvia out of the house and along the walk. She hadn't gotten as far as the cottage, however. I found her lying on her back on the walk—dead."

Vividly Mace visualized her neck blackened with the brutal bruises of strangulation.

"I went back into the house, so stunned I hardly knew what I was doing. I called

Bob Talbot first. As you all know, Bob's my closest friend and most valuable business associate. Then I phoned our family doctor, although I knew he could do nothing, and next the police. I could hardly talk—and I can explain the murder of my wife no better now than I could then."

In fact, it was Captain Vic Seaver who had done the explaining to Mace—how the position of Sylvia's body and the marks on the walk showed that the killer had sprung on her from behind and dragged her lifeless body backward along the walk, as if reluctant to loosen his murderous hands from her throat. Probably his leap had caught her by surprise and she had never seen his face.

"Well, gentlemen," Mace said. "That, I'm afraid, is my statement. What does your scientific machine make of it, Fabe?"

Professor Fabian stroked his goatee. "Allowing for certain emotional disturbances which are quite natural under such circumstances," he answered, "I have no hesitation in declaring that your statement is flawlessly truthful—so far as you know."

As far as he knew? Those qualifying words of the Professor's caused Mace to frown in anxious puzzlement but he had no opportunity to question the old man. Another flash-bulb glared, the D.A. pressed forward to clasp his hand and the other officials crowded up to slap his back. He saw Bob Talbot wearing a strained grin and there was a quiet smile on Antonia's lips.

Suddenly he found himself wondering whom he had wished the most to impress by clearing himself of suspicion in Sylvia's death. Not these men who had already believed in his innocence. The public, then? Or—Antonia?

THE *Clarion's* presses had finished their day's run hours ago, but in the publisher's office lights were burning late.

Working at his desk, collar open and shirt sleeves rolled up, Spencer Mace was finding it hard to concentrate. He felt weighed down by a great weariness, a massive fatigue that seemed to have been building up for years until now, with the shock of Sylvia's death added, it seemed almost overpowering.

He stirred himself and tried to force himself to go on with the editorial he was

trying to write, but his mind kept straying to other subjects. To Professor Fabian, for example, whose cryptic remark had gone unexplained. And to Antonia.

She had worked late with him and had left only a few minutes ago. He liked to remember the way she had, when her work was finished, of plucking off her glasses and shaking her dark hair loose—simple yet almost magical in the way it transformed her from a scholarly type into a lusciously attractive woman. He actually looked forward to that delicious moment every day—and tonight, now that she had gone, her absence seemed to make him more aware of his dragging fatigue.

He heard footfalls, nervously quick, coming up the stairs. When the outer office door opened several inches, the birdlike face of professor Fabian peered in.

"Thought I'd find you here, Spence," he said. "Hardly anything's enough to make you stop work—not even a death in the family."

"Come on in, Fabe. You're just the man I want to see."

"Something bothering your mind, my boy?"

"That remark you made in the commissioner's office to the effect that my statement was true 'as far as I know.' Just what did you mean by that?"

"Simply that telling the truth is not necessarily the same thing as stating a fact, my boy. It's quite possible to tell the truth *as you know it* and still be in error factually. If you believe implicitly that a certain thing is true, the polygraph will register it as such although it may actually be untrue. In other words, it catches deliberate lies unfailingly—but, of course, it cannot detect unconscious misstatements."

Mace frowned at him. "So?"

"Our subconscious mind registers a great deal more than our conscious mind gives us credit for, young man. Start thinking about it hard and you may remember details which you didn't know you knew." He was stroking his goatee nervously. "Whoever knows what actually happened, it's certainly not coming out. Your paper isn't reporting much progress in the investigation. Fool police won't tell me anything either. Aren't they getting anywhere with the case? That's what

I came here to ask. Haven't they even a theory?"

"They're working on a definite theory, Fabe, but they want to keep it quiet," Mace explained. "As you know, I've used the *Clarion* for years to fight vice conditions here. In the course of cleaning up this town, I've made enemies of crooks big and little. The police think Sylvia's death may tie in somehow."

"One of our local hoodlums killed Sylvia as a means of hitting back at you?" Professor Fabian shook his head vigorously. "Ridiculous! That doesn't explain what Sylvia was doing out there in the yard at that hour."

Captain Vic Seaver had surmised that Sylvia had heard a noise near the guest house and, not wanting to disturb her over-tired husband's sleep, had gone out herself to investigate.

Frowning, Mace asked bluntly instead, "Just what are you driving at, Fabe?"

"It may be one of the things you're not entirely conscious of, my boy," the professor said testily. "I mean the fact that your wife was an extremely attractive woman."

"Of course I was fully aware of it, Fabe!"

"Extremely attractive—and lonely. Neglected night after night by a husband more wedded to his work than to her."

"Look here, Fabe!" Mace spoke in a sudden surge of resentment. "I don't like your implication."

"You asked me what I'm driving at and that's my answer, young man," Professor Fabian snapped. "Of course you don't like it—but you'll think it over just the same. In fact, you may begin remembering some of those things you didn't know you knew. If you really want the truth, you will, young man."

He turned then and hustled out, leaving a smouldering anger in Spencer Mace. But it was silly, Mace told himself, to be angry at that prying, twitter-pated busybody. He had actually intimated that Sylvia had had a secret sweetheart! Impossible! Why, not the remotest notion of it had ever crossed Mace's mind. Utterly impossible!

But as he sat there, alone in the quiet, with his conscious mind dulled with heavy fatigue, Mace thought back, seeking re-

membrances of things scarcely noticed and forgotten.

AT THREE a. m., unable to sleep in spite of the fact that he felt almost narcotically drugged with fatigue, Mace was still fighting those profoundly disturbing suspicions of Sylvia.

Impossible, of course! Preposterous to imagine such a thing. Yet—

Now that he thought back, he could recall a period when Sylvia had been inclined to let herself get a little dowdy. Also, she had complained endlessly about his working nights, his neglect of her. Then she had changed, had blossomed with a new vivacity, a new cheeriness. He had noticed it at the time and had complimented her, but he hadn't dreamed it could be the glow a woman wears when she feels herself loved.

Spencer Mace paced back and forth across his bedroom, warning himself to stop this self-torture—to think of something else, of anything else—to get himself some very badly needed rest.

But that night—that last night of Sylvia's life. How buoyant she had seemed! Was it because she had secretly arranged a rendezvous and was waiting even then to go to it? Was that why she had stayed awake while he fell so heavily asleep . . . why she had slipped out of the house? To go hurrying in her bare feet along the walk to the guest cottage, there to meet—

He stopped himself again. Even if this impossible thing was true, what had happened then to cause Sylvia's death even before she reached the cottage?

And the man—

This blind conjecturing was agony to Mace. But—the man? It would be a man Mace knew, of course. Someone who had no doubt been here at the house often, as Mace's guest. Which so-called friend could it be, then? Could Mace recall that any one of them had begun showing signs of apprehension or unnatural tension when around him?

Mace stopped short, as still as if struck a blow squarely in the face. He was staring at a silver-framed photograph standing on his dresser. A portrait of Bob Talbot. An extremely handsome young man-about-town—Bob. And he fitted per-

fectly the traditional picture of the scheming bachelor, being Mace's best friend.

Of course it could not be true. Not Bob Talbot, of all men.

Yet Mace could recall now how for a time Bob had seemed strained and uncomfortable in his presence. That would be when the secret affair began. Then Bob had seemed easier in his mind again—after seeing that the poor blind husband didn't suspect a thing.

And more. . . . Mace remembered now little glances like caresses passing between Bob and Sylvia. Smiles—smiles which, remembered now, seemed secretly knowing. Now that Mace was groping into the dark crevices of his memory he seemed able to recall many things hardly noticed then but significant now.

No! He was imagining all this. They simply weren't capable of such treachery toward him—not Sylvia and Bob. He was overtired. His mind was playing tricks on him, making him recall things that hadn't really happened. He wasn't going to think about it any more.

He dropped into bed. No, he wouldn't think about it any more. But when dawn came gray at the windows he was tossing restlessly and still probing into the darkest crannies of his memory. \.

Back at his office, Spencer Mace told himself repeatedly that he must shut those damned suspicions entirely out of his mind. After all, it was over now, over for ever. Sylvia had kept her final rendezvous. Mace had resolved never to mention the matter to Bob, not to show a hint of it to anyone. Let it be buried once and for all with Sylvia. Think of other things, pleasanter things.

Yes, think pleasantly now—think of Antonia. Think of the dark depths of her eyes, of the soft curve of her lips. Yes, it was much, much better now to wrap all his dreams around Antonia. . . .

He had stepped from his office for a moment and now, returning, he was hit by a new and totally unexpected shock.

His quick opening of the door caught Antonia and Bob Talbot stepping apart. They had moved a little reluctantly, had separated not quite quickly enough. Antonia dropped into her chair, her face hotly flushed, and fumbled with papers. Bob turned his back for a moment, pretending to be blowing his nose—actually wiping lip rouge off his mouth. A trace of it was left when he turned, too elaborately casual, to say, "It's about time to leave, Spence."

FOR Sylvia's funeral, he meant. His one sweetheart was not yet buried before he was stealing another from Mace.

"Something's going to happen," Mace said.


"What?" Bob frowned at him. "How do you mean?"

"I have a peculiar feeling that something's going to happen to me," Spence emphasized. "Something disastrous."

"One thing that's certainly going to happen to you if you don't ease up, Spence—you're going to cave in."

"Maybe, but I mean something else," Spencer Mace said. "Perhaps the same thing Sylvia got. I have this sudden feeling that something's about to crack."

Antonia and Bob both gazed at him with sincere concern. Mace sat still, an expression of apprehension deepening on his face, while Bob took up the desk phone.



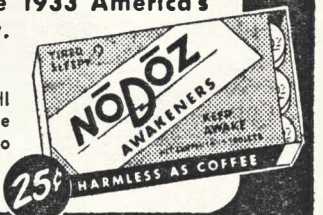
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When he finished talking, Bob had decisive news for Mace.

"As soon as the funeral's over I'm taking you home, Spence. You're going to have some stiff drinks, enough to make you really sleep. Then you're going to bed, to stay there until you're slept out."

Antonia asked quickly, "That was Captain Vic Seaver you were talking to just now, wasn't it?"

"It was. I told him, Spence, that you're worried that something might happen to you. He said I'm to stick with you at home and he'll keep watch outside. That means you'll be protected both inside and out. You can rely on us, relax and really rest. Okay, Spence?"

Mace answered quietly, "Okay, Bob"—scarcely hearing himself, aware of nothing except the trace of Antonia's lip rouge left on Bob's mouth.

* * *

In the living room of his home, Spencer Mace sat facing Bob Talbot with a well-loaded drink in his hand. It was his fourth and he could feel them. He and Bob had come here together immediately following the funeral services.

He drained his glass, pushed himself up from his chair and said, "It's silly of me to feel afraid like this—just jumpy nerves, I guess. But are all the outside doors locked, Bob?"

"Let's double-check right now," Bob Talbot said, also rising. "Then you can sleep with a perfectly easy mind."

They went together to the front door first, then to the rear and finally to the terrace door—the one Mace had found ajar the night of Sylvia's fatal rendezvous. It reminded him too vividly of that moment of ghastly discovery. He wanted to forget it and every evil thing it meant. He turned and stumbled up the stairs with Bob Talbot coming after him.

He pulled down the shade, shutting out the afternoon sunlight. Then he went eagerly to the bed, shrugged off his robe, eased off his slippers and dropped his head gratefully on the pillow.

Bob said, "Remember, Spence, Vic Seaver's watching outside and I'll be right here in the house with you the whole while, so rest easy, pal."

Rest easy, pal. . . . Pal. . . . Even as

he heard the word echoing dully through his mind Spencer Mace was sliding swiftly down a roller-coaster into a lake of nothingness. . . .

A bell was ringing. A bell very far away at first and coming slowly closer.

It rang so insistently that Mace fought his way back to consciousness. He emerged through a jungle of sleep to open his eyes in darkness. It was night now and the house was still except for the trilling of the bell. Mace rolled half over, reached for the phone with one hand and turned on the bedside lamp.

"This is Seaver, Spence—Vic Seaver phoning from the place next door. My Lord, I've had myself a time getting a rise out of you. Were you asleep?"

"Asleep," Mace said thickly. "Certainly asleep."

"My Lord," Seaver said again, short of breath. "I damn near knocked the door down before I came over to this phone. You mean you didn't even hear anything?"

"Hear what?" Mace was gradually waking now. "Know what?"

"Bob Talbot. He yelled, to begin with. I heard it out at your guest cottage. I was watching the house from there. By the time I got going, it was all over."

"All over?" Mace sat up in bed. "What the devil are you talking about, Vic?"

"About Bob," Seaver said rapidly. "He's there on the living room floor. Dead, Spence. Head all smashed in with a poker from the fireplace."

"Bob? Dead?" Mace echoed it in numb dismay as he swung his legs out of bed.

"I could see him through the terrace window, Spence," Seaver rushed on. "But I can't get in. You understand this, Spence? I can't get in because every window's latched and every door is bolted."

Spencer Mace slid his feet into his slippers—and suddenly his every muscle was rigid. His slippers were warm. His last remembered moment was many hours old now, but his slippers were still warm from the feet that had worn them only a few minutes ago—the feet of a sleepwalking killer.

"I'm coming right down," Spencer Mace said, starkly awake now. "Coming right down to let you in and give myself up."

(Continued from page 8)

Uncalled-for Expense

Costly Import

Dear Sir:

Were the perpetrators of the Spanish Bunco Game ever apprehended and punished in any way?

Although this very unpleasant experience occurred in my family many years ago, I still marvel at the method they used to present to us the facts of our family life, relatives and the like.

My father, to whom they first wrote, had been dead over ten years but the letter from Barcelona, Spain, was forwarded to us in another city where we were then living.

In this case the party needing help and a home was supposedly a girl, my father's niece, the daughter of a sister of his whom he had last seen in England thirty years before. The picture of the girl which was inclosed was enough like my sister and myself to have been another sister.

After sending the required amount of funds to the supposed prison chaplain, who was so kindly accompanying the poor orphan to America to see her safely delivered to her loving kin, we anxiously waited for the promised cable telling of their safe departure and arrival.

We watched the ship's arrival reports. My sister and I meanwhile shed many a tear for the poor orphan and, incidentally, not spending a cent of our very limited allowance so we could buy something nice to try and help her forget her terrible experiences.

Of course, we were to benefit considerably for giving her a home and allowing her poor father (in prison in Spain) to die in peace in the knowledge that his dear child was at last safe.

Oh well, live and learn. The ship landed but no word from our dear cousin.

After due inquiries and considerable cost, we were informed by the council of the swindle that was being put over on some Americans.

We tried to be thankful that it was not any worse as we told our twelve hundred dollars good-by. My kindhearted stepfather tuned more pianos and paid back every cent which we had borrowed.

We lived on. A little sadder but a lot wiser.

Kathleen A. Daly
Orange, Texas.

Dear Sir:

A letter from a distant city signed by an attorney at law informed that a distant cousin had willed me a hundred dollars but the money couldn't be mailed out until certain expenses in clearing up the estate were settled. He said my proportion of said expenses amounted to \$9.83.

A technicality prevented them from simply deducting the amount from my hundred dollar check, but that on arrival of my expense money the legacy would reach me by return mail.

I sent the \$9.83 but no money came to me. A letter I wrote three weeks later to the so-called attorney came back marked "Uncalled For."

Mrs. Doris L. Pinsebok
Pitkin, Louisiana.

On the House

Dear Sir:

Hollywood movie studios frequently come to this part of Arizona to film portions of movies, so it wasn't too much of a surprise when a station wagon pulled up and a smooth-talking fellow got out.

Naturally we're always on the look-out for a little extra business so we made an arrangement whereby we would gas up his trucks and provide food and lodgings for his movie crew at a reduced rate.

He showed us his credentials, which purported to explain that he was the advance agent for Hollywood Service Shows and produced an official expense account book whereby we could keep track of what they owed us. Naturally we were rather elated, so when he asked us to fill his tank we did so. When he ate in the Café he came back to the station and told us that when his unit came in that night he would settle with us for the gas and the meal.

He left, and we immediately ordered a thousand gallons of gas and quite a bit of food for the Café. Needless to say, he never came back and we were out the price of a meal and a tank of gas, plus all the food that went to waste.

From now on it's cash on the line for me, and I intend to think twice before believing in credentials.

J. L.
Phoenix, Ariz.

(Please continue on page 74)

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of Dime Detective Magazine combined with Flynn's Detective Fiction, published monthly at Chicago, Ill., for October 1, 1948. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of Dime Detective Magazine combined with Flynn's Detective Fiction, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, none. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known, bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Publisher, Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of October, 1948. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 116, Register's No. 368-W-0. (My commission expires March 30, 1950.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Rev. 7-46.

*(Continued from page 73)***Cancel the Order**

Dear Sir:

I was a victim of the used postage stamp racket.

It happened when a middle-aged man wearing an eye patch and carrying his arm in a sling approached me in my office and after telling me a hard-luck story asked me to buy an unused sheet of 100 three-cent stamps for \$3.25.

Since stamps are always needed and my sympathies were touched, I didn't object to buying the stamps and paying the extra quarter.

Two weeks later a government investigating agent carrying a handful of our office envelopes visited me. He said the envelopes had been seized by postal authorities for bearing cancelled stamps. He showed me where the original cancellation marks had been so cleverly removed that only a very experienced post office worker could detect the difference.

Inquiry revealed that the only stamps not bought directly from the post office were the ones I had bought from the man with the eye patch and arm sling. And it turned out that this same man had pulled the same trick before.

Newspapers carried a story warning people not to buy stamps from a stranger, but so far as I know the man was never apprehended. However, I am confident that government agents will eventually track him down.

Keith S. C. Allen
Rensenburg, New York.

No Lights, No Nothing

Dear Sir:

My husband and I were very happy when the first day of March came, for that was the day we were to move into our new home.

It had taken every dollar of our savings to make the down payment, with the exception of one twenty dollar bill, with which we planned to pay the moving man, and make the usual deposit to have our lights turned on.

Our furniture had just been unloaded and the man paid ten dollars when a well-dressed man came to the door and told us he was from the telephone company, and that he only had one more available phone for that line, but we would have to decide right then, for there were others eager to get a phone.

He informed us he would have to collect a ten dollar fee, but that we could go to the telephone office next day, fill out the proper papers and get a refund.

We talked it over and decided to grab at the chance, and do without lights temporarily. When the morning paper came, we read of many others all over town being swindled that day, just like we were.

S. Evans
Nashville, Tenn.

Guaranteed for Never

Dear Sir:

When ballpoint pens had their first big fad, I

bought one produced by one of the largest ballpen manufacturers. After two weeks' service, the ball came out of the pen, spilling a fifteen year supply of ink on a brand new suit.

I sent the pen to the factory for its guaranteed replacement or repair and complained of the spoiled clothes. Months later I received several forms to fill out in order to have the garment cleaned by their own cleaners. But no mention was made of the pen.

Two years and several dozen letters later, I am still minus a suit of clothes and the price of an unconditionally guaranteed ball-point pen.

I haven't heard another word from the manufacturer since the first red tape, and I don't suppose I ever will.

Larry Fredricks
Dover, N. J.

Blonde Bait

Dear Sir:

I've been swindled pretty often. Usually I laugh it off as good experience. But the ugliest racket that ever took me in used a pretty girl.

I was a kid, a private in the army. In three weeks I was slated to go overseas. But at the time I had a fifteen-day delay enroute, and a ticket to the West coast in my pocket. I was standing in front of the St. Louis railroad depot with a couple of hours to kill.

There were six girls, each about twenty or younger, each very pretty, spaced about a hundred feet apart in front of the station. I sort of wandered toward the prettiest blonde—I walked into it.

She was selling magazine subscriptions. She said that all the girls were competing to sell the most subscriptions. The winner of a Hollywood screen test and so forth. I thought it would be nice to have lots of magazines, if they ever caught up with me, when I got wherever I would be sent. So I bought five subscriptions ranging from one to three years and from three to seven dollars apiece. She took me for plenty. All up and down the street those girls were taking the GI's for hundreds of dollars.

It looked legitimate. My receipts were flashy. She signed them. The printed address was that of a magazine distribution agency somewhere in Chicago.

Naturally I never got those magazines. Overseas, I met two other guys who had been taken by those same girls two months before. That seemed to show that they were well organized, perhaps on a national scale, and had been in business a long time.

The Veterans' Administration tried to trace that Chicago address on my receipt. There was no such place.

Robert J. McGregor
Tempe, Arizona.

Sucker, Be Seated!

Dear Sir:

After a hot, strenuous day at Keansburg Beach, my fiancée and I caught the overcrowded, 10:30 boat back to New York, the return half of a moonlight sail.

I had given up hope of finding chairs when a polite, young man clad in a polo shirt and dungarees, like many of us, tapped me on the shoulder.

"My girl and I plan to spend the rest of the trip dancing and standing at the bar," he explained. "We'll sell you our chairs for fifty cents apiece."

It was worth a dollar to me to sit down and relax in the cool evening breeze; besides, I could demonstrate my prowess to my fiancée by getting chairs where others had failed.

"It's a bargain," I agreed. "I'll go with you."

"That won't be necessary," he said quickly. "I can get them much faster alone. Please wait right here."

I brought my fiancée to the spot where I was to wait and he immediately appeared with the chairs. He snapped them open with a practiced hand, accepted my dollar and gracefully removed himself.

The whole thing was done rapidly and in so professional a manner that I became curious. I excused myself from my fiancée and followed him.

He stopped near the railing, looked through the crowd, then walked up to a man and tapped him on the shoulder. I couldn't hear what was said, but a moment later the young man detached himself and went inside the enclosure, down the stairs and around to a companionway marked *Keep Out, Crew Only*.

A second later, he reappeared, a chair under each arm. Another sale!

Apparently, he stashed chairs away prior to sailing, and at fifty cents a chair, the supplement to his salary must have been substantial.

Of course a word to the captain might have been sufficient but he couldn't possibly have deprived more than ten or twelve people of the first-come-first-served chairs and there must have been over two hundred people standing.

I did feel grateful for the opportunity of procuring the chairs.

J. J. Rodriguez
New York, New York.

No Change At All

Dear Sir:

"The happiest day of my life," I thought as

I rode to the railroad station in the crowded truck. There I was, honorably discharged from the Navy—going home after a long fifteen months overseas.

What could be better?

We had a short wait for our trains, so, as sailors almost instinctively do, three of us headed for the nearest gin-mill to celebrate our still-unbelievable position in life.

We got acquainted with a salesman-like gentleman at the bar and I found out that he was driving right through my home town on his way to the adjacent state. That was all right with me and after a few farewell drinks with my buddies, we went out to his car and got started.

After a short drive, we came upon a woman standing beside a broken-down taxi and waving us to stop. We did, and learned that the neatly-dressed, middle-aged woman was a staff writer for a large national magazine, that she had to catch a plane to South America on an assignment, and that she was sorry to inconvenience us so. The driver assured her that it was no trouble at all because we were going to pass the airport on our way.

During the conversation she remarked that all the money she had was her expense money, a thousand dollar bill, and that she was worried about the airport being able to give her change when she bought her ticket, and "Would either of you possibly have change?"

I mentioned my six hundred dollars (five hundred back pay and one hundred mustering out pay), and the driver gave his solution to the problem, "If you've got six hundred, between the two of us we can change her thousand. Then we can stop at a bank, break the big bill, and square ourselves away." So we gave her change and later, at the airport, she departed from us like an old friend.

We started on again and the driver said as he put the "grand" bill in his wallet, "We'll stop at the first bank we come to and cash it."

That was the last I saw of my money—the driver disappeared when we stopped at a drive-inn for a "quickie."

If only I had thought, before being separated from my savings, "How did she expect to pay taxi fare with a thousand dollar bill?"

Don Barry
East Orange, N. J.

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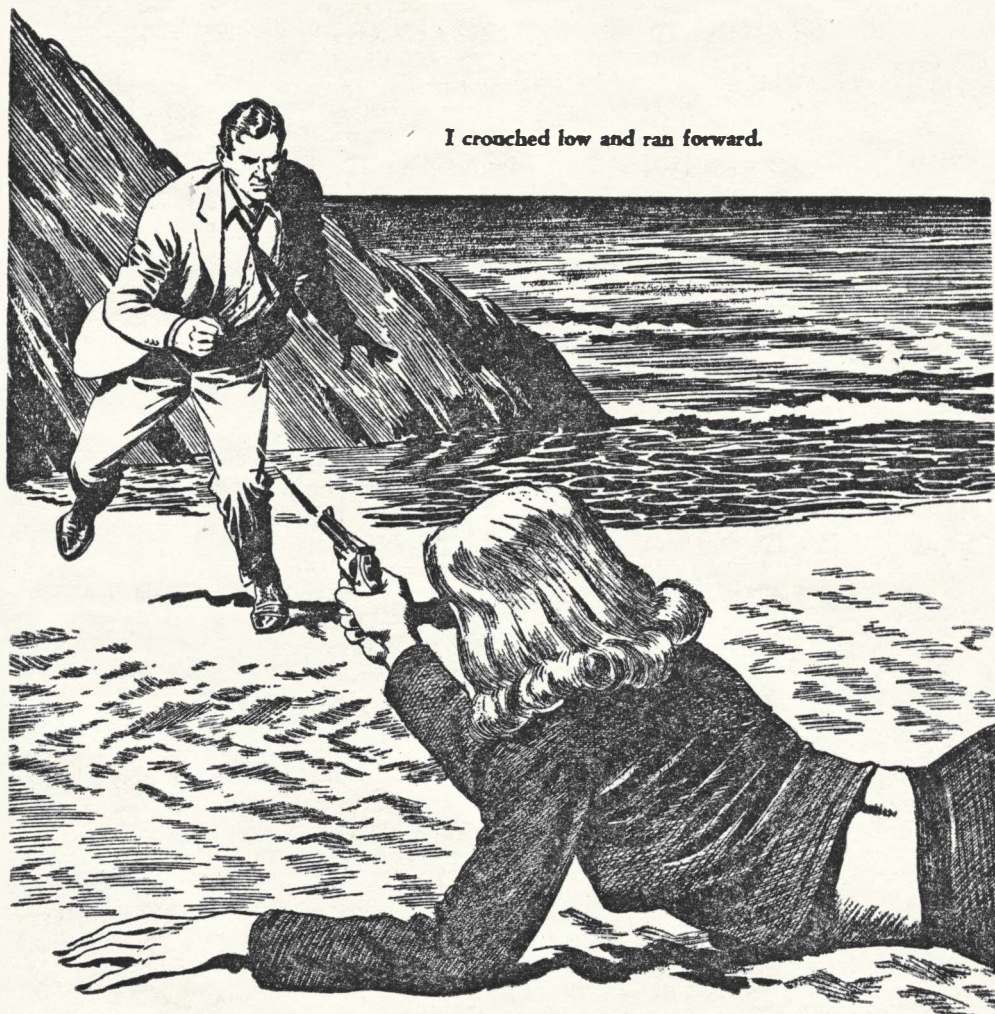


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HOMICIDAL HONEY



I crouched low and ran forward.

To learn who blasted dilettante Drake out of his worldly presence, Detective Lee Fiske played hide-and-peek with bullets—and a runaway bride.



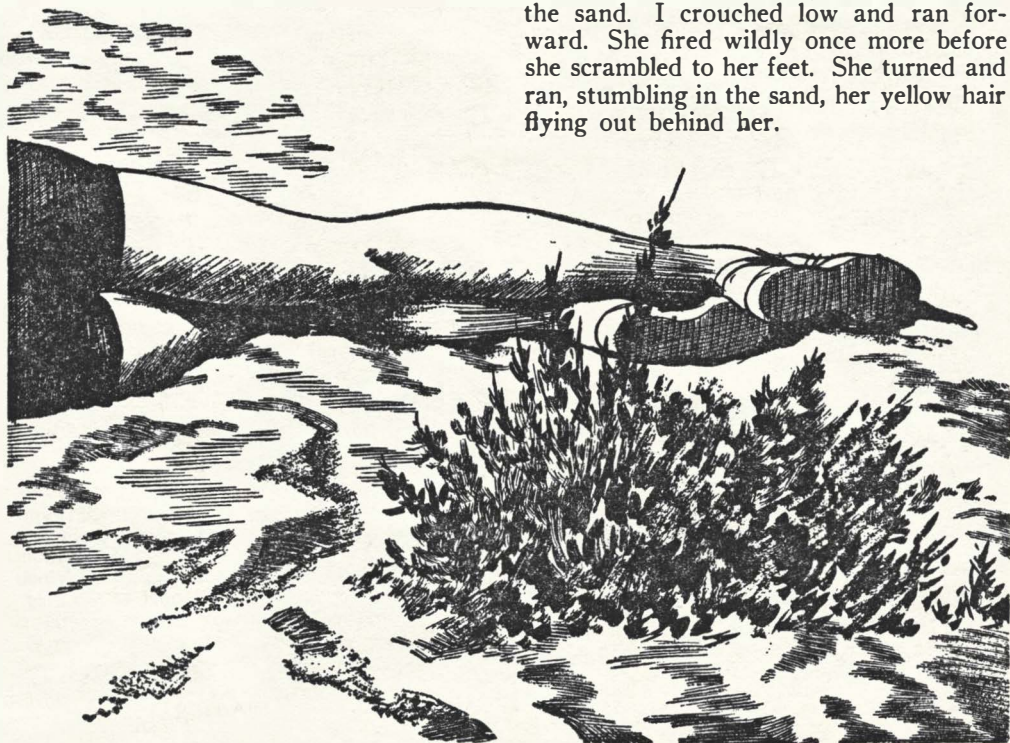
Mystery Novelette of a Blonde Bombshell

● By **ROBERT MARTIN** ●

CHAPTER ONE

Only a Blonde Stirring

I CLIMBED down the rocky hill to the beach and watched the gray waves roll up over the sand. It was October, but the sun was hot, and the wind was dry and warm. I walked along the beach in the morning sunlight wishing that I had



never heard of Leland Gifford and his wayward wife.

I didn't see the girl until I was twenty feet away from her. She was lying on the sand in the sun and the wind was blowing her yellow hair across her up-turned face. Her long legs were bare, and her arms were flung wide on the sand. She was wearing white, thick-soled sandals, brief green shorts and a short green jacket.

I stood still. The waves slapped up on the beach, and the wind rustled the leaves over the sand with a brittle whisper. I could have turned and climbed unseen to the path at the top of the hill. But I didn't. I picked up a pebble and tossed it at the form of the girl. The pebble struck one slim ankle. After that I was in trouble.

She sat up straight, and I had a glimpse of blue eyes and a red mouth, and a wicked wink of silver in her hand. Two quick reports snapped down the wind, and I saw blue smoke from her tiny gun whip over the sand. I crouched low and ran forward. She fired wildly once more before she scrambled to her feet. She turned and ran, stumbling in the sand, her yellow hair flying out behind her.

I caught her, then, and grasped her wrist. I twisted a little silver-plated .22 revolver from her grasp. She struggled silently and desperately, and when her eyes met mine they were dark with fear. Her mouth was a little too wide for real beauty, but the rest of her was straight out of Hollywood. The wind whipped a strand of hair across her mouth, and she lifted a hand to her face. On one finger was a diamond as big as a teddy bear's eye.

"Honey," I said, "you're not a very good shot."

She stared at me silently. Her eyes shifted to the gun in my hand. I clicked open the cylinder, ejected the cartridges—three of them un-fired—and handed the gun to her. She looked at me uncertainly. Then she took the gun and placed it in her jacket pocket. Slowly a pink flush spread over her face, while the sun made golden lights in her thick hair. She stood with her hands in her pockets, her long legs slightly apart. Suddenly she flung her hair back from her face and laughed. It wasn't exactly an abandoned, carefree laugh, but it was nice. "I guess I owe you a drink," she said.

I agree with her. "I guess you do."

She moved along the beach, looking over her shoulder at me. "Come on."

I followed her. She made a pretty picture with her long yellow hair, her short loose jacket, and her long shapely legs. We walked across a narrow curved beach almost completely hidden from the rest of the shoreline by rocks and trees jutting out over the lake. Thirty yards from the water's edge, against the rise of the hill, was a one-story, green-shingled cottage with a broad porch, wide windows and a red brick chimney, from which the wind whipped thin wisps of smoke. As we stepped to the wide porch, the girl turned and her eyes went over me carefully.

My gray tweed suit was wrinkled, and there was a three-cornered tear in the left knee of the trousers. I shuddered to think what my shirt looked like after my enforced ducking in the lake the night before. I needed a shave, and my upper lip felt swollen where a whiskey-drinking sheriff's deputy had slapped me. I didn't look very attractive, I thought—but still plenty good enough for a morning drink

with a girl who had just tried to kill me.

She said: "I'm sorry. I—I thought you were someone else. . . ."

I grinned at her. "Forget it. The worst you could have done was kill me."

She looked at me thoughtfully for maybe half a minute. Then she smiled faintly, turned away, took a key from her jacket pocket and unlocked the cottage door. I followed her into a long room filled with rustic furniture, a tired-looking bearskin rug, and a big oaken table and chairs. A knotty-pine portable bar sat across one end of the room. Pine logs smoldered in a big stone fireplace, filling the room with a pleasant, woody smell.

"It's really too warm for a fire this morning," the girl said, "but I like the smell of burning pine. And besides, I'll need a fire tonight, and I hate to keep building one. Is bourbon all right?"

"Fine," I said. Alabama corn liquor in a fruit jar would have suited me just as well. I still remembered the deadly zing of her bullets as they passed my ear.

SHE stepped behind the bar, selected a bottle from the shelves, poured three inches into two tall glasses, and placed the glasses on the bar. I moved over, lifted one of the glasses, and took a sip. It was bonded bourbon, smooth and hot.

"I'm sorry there's no ice," she said. "Would you like some water?"

I took another drink of the bourbon and shook my head. "That would spoil it. This is fine."

She smiled and lifted her glass. We drank together, rather solemnly. Then she came around the bar and sat on a stool facing me. "I've been so damn lonesome," she said. "You look like a nice person—a little beat up, but still nice." She smiled. "What's your name?"

"Fiske," I said. "Lee Fiske. Why did you shoot at me?"

Her eyes clouded, and she took a long swallow of her drink. Her mouth twisted a little, and she lowered her head. I knew I was at the end of the trail, and I shifted uncomfortably on the stool. From where I sat I could see the gray-blue lake undulating in the sun.

The smell of burning pine filled the room. I looked down at the lowered head of the girl. Her yellow hair was parted

in the middle of her head, and her scalp looked clean and white. One bare knee almost touched mine, and I could see the delicate curves of her legs.

She raised her eyes, and there was a hard glint in them. "I thought you were—someone else. Coming up suddenly, like that. I warned him not to bother me anymore. He knows I'm alone, and he came here last night—late. He was drunk." She turned away, and laughed shortly. "Sordid, isn't it?"

A pine bough crackled in the fireplace. I said: "You're Emily Gifford, aren't you?"

The scared look came back into her eyes, and she slid slowly off the stool. "Why did you come here?" she said in a choked voice.

"Your husband hired me to find you. Are you ready to go home?"

Her brows puckered into a frown. "I don't understand. Why should he hire you? I telephoned him last night, and I told him I was all right. He knows why I went away."

"Why did you run away?" I asked her.

"Didn't he tell you?"

"He said he didn't know."

Tears filled her eyes. She turned away from me and stared out of the window. "I went away because I thought he was tired of me," she said in low voice. "He was always so busy, and he left me alone. We—we've been married only a year, and, well . . . I thought if I went away, maybe he'd miss me, and it would give me a chance to think." She turned to face me, and she attempted a smile. "I guess it was silly of me, but I can't stand to have anything, not even his work, be more important to him than I am. Can you understand that, Mr. Fiske?"

"I guess so," I said. "But are you sure that is the only reason you ran away?"

"Of course," she said coldly. "What other reasons did you have in mind?"

I shrugged. "Forget it. How long did you figure on keeping your husband sweating?"

"Oh, just a couple of days," she murmured, and she looked down at her glass. "But after what happened last night. . . . I almost gave up and went home, but I have a silly thing called pride. And I had the gun—a birthday present from Leland

—and I swore I'd kill him, if he came back."

"Who?" I asked her. "Chuck Drake—or your husband?"

She looked at me with wide eyes, and her face went pale.

I took a long swallow of the bourbon. She didn't answer me, and I said: "So a man got rough with you last night? Here?"

She nodded silently, her eyes searching my face.

I tried again. "Drake?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"A friend of yours?"

Her mouth twisted a little. "Not any more. We went out together a few times in town—lunches, and once for dinner—when Leland was away. I told Leland about it, of course, and we had some arguments. I didn't particularly care for Chuck, but—"

"Did he follow you up here?"

She looked down at her glass. "I don't know. Yesterday afternoon I saw his boat anchored in the channel. He saw me on the beach, and he probably guessed that

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Tests by doctors show that Johnson's BACK PLASTER helps nearly 9 out of 10 sufferers. It's made by Johnson & Johnson—known for fine surgical products for 61 years. At all drug stores.

I was alone. Last night he came here, drunk." She shivered, and held out an arm for me to see. There were ugly bruise marks on the wrist. "I managed to get the gun, and I think I scared him. But he said he'd be back, and I told him I'd kill him."

I said: "And when you saw me coming up the beach, you thought it was Drake, and you started to blaze away?"

She nodded nervously. "Yes, yes. I was upset—and I couldn't imagine anyone else coming from that direction."

I placed my glass carefully on the bar and stood up. "Last night," I said, "I found the body of a man. He had been shot to death with a small caliber gun."

The glass fell from her hands. It didn't break, but the whiskey ran in an amber stream over the hardwood floor. She stared at me like a dead woman, and her lips moved. "Who?" she whispered.

But maybe I'd better start at the beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

Foul Play

IT HAD started on a rainy afternoon the day before. I was eating lunch in a restaurant called the Shoretown when I spotted Leland Gifford at the bar with a tall woman in a long black coat with the hood thrown back over her shoulders. I knew Gifford casually. Several times on crowded days we had shared the same table. He was the head of an advertising agency known as Gifford, Incorporated, and I knew that one fat account alone, Sun-Taste Cigarettes, kept him well up in the surtax bracket.

Once Gifford had introduced me to Chuck Drake, local representative for the Sun-Taste Corporation, and I got the impression that Gifford would do anything short of murder to keep the Sun-Taste account in his agency. Chuck Drake was a bright, sun-tanned young bachelor in tailored flannel who affected a clipped British accent and lived beyond his ten thousand dollar a year salary in an attempt to properly entertain his constantly changing lady friends.

Drake wore a gold chain on his left wrist to which was attached a flat little

disc engraved with the name of his current love. Locker room gossip had it that he changed the little gold discs at fairly frequent intervals and filed the old ones away—something like the notches on the butt of an early western gun-fighter's .45, I suppose.

Tired after a long fruitless night and morning searching in many bars for the tipsy daughter of a retired East Side banker—to keep her out of the police records, you know—all I had on my mind was a shower and an afternoon nap. I finished my coffee and tried to catch the eye of the waiter to get my check.

I didn't want to talk to Leland Gifford, or anyone else, but he saw me and started for my table. The tall pale woman watched him a second, and then drained a martini down to the olive and began to talk to the bartender. Her black hair, done into braids coiled around her head, gave her a regal look.

Gifford was a little drunk for so early in the day, but not sloppy. He sat down across from me. "Lo, Fiske. How's the discreet investigations racket these days?" He was a big man with fat pink cheeks and straight black hair parted neatly on the side. He affected double-breasted blue suits, starched white shirts, and rainbow-colored bow ties.

I lit a cigarette and gave him what I hoped was a friendly smile. "Same as always," I said. "Terrible. How about a job in the advertising business? Maybe I could learn an auctioneer's chant for your Sun-Taste radio spots."

He lunched his big shoulders over the table. "What are you drinking, Fiske?"

"Nothing. I'm on my way home."

"Nonsense. Gotta have a drink." He twisted in his chair and waved at the bartender. "Hey, Alvin. Two scotch."

The bartender nodded and began to pour. The tall woman in the black coat looked around at us. Then she picked up a fresh martini and came over to the table.

Gifford stood up. "Sit down, Paula. This is Lee Fiske, the man I was telling you about."

Close up, with her long black coat unbuttoned, I saw that she had a rangy long-legged body which her somber gray silk dress could not entirely conceal. And her face, which had seemed pale from a dis-

tance, now seemed vital and animated. Her eyes were a deep lustrous brown, and her lips were full and red. But there was a faint air of cold aloofness about her which I can't describe.

Standing up, I turned on a smile for her, got a small, expressionless nod in return, and we all sat down, Leland Gifford holding a chair for her.

Gifford said: "Fiske, Mrs. Vance is my attorney."

That surprised me, but I covered up by turning to the hovering waiter and handing him some money for my lunch.

"I was about to call you," Gifford continued. "Paula and I have a job for you."

Another waiter came up with two highballs and a martini. Paula Vance sipped at the martini, and her dark glittering eyes roved restlessly over the crowd. She appeared not to have heard what Gifford had said to me.

"Go on," I said to Gifford.

He leaned forward. "We can't talk here. Let's go up to my office."

Without turning her head, Paula Vance said: "I haven't had my lunch, Leland. I'm sure Mr. Fiske won't mind if you talk to him here." She fitted a cigarette into a short black holder. I struck a match for her, and her big dark eyes stared at me solemnly over the flame. Gifford drummed his fingers on the table, and there was an awkward silence. Paula Vance calmly blew smoke and stared at a point just above my head.

I said: "What kind of a job?"

Gifford looked up at me. "What?"

I was about to repeat my question, when the girl said suddenly: "Look who's here."

I twisted in my chair and followed her gaze. Chuck Drake, the advertising man for Sun-Taste cigarettes, was headed for our table. A little girl in a big black hat was with him.

I heard Gifford say, "Damn," under his breath, but in the next instant he was on his feet with a broad smile on his face and waving an arm. "Chuck," he called. "Come join us."

His invitation was unnecessary. Drake was already pulling out a chair. Paula Vance lowered her head, and her eyes were veiled as she fingered the stem of her glass. I got wearily to my feet again.

"How nice to see you, Chuck," Gifford was saying. "You know Mrs. Vance. I believe?" He nodded at me. "And Mr. Fiske?"

I smiled mechanically. Drake nodded briefly, and said to Gifford: "Greetings, old chap." He turned to Paula Vance. "Paula, my pet, you seem a bit melancholy. A difficult morning at the bar?" He had a rich baritone voice, and he clipped his words, like an actor.

Her cold stare flicked over him briefly. Then she smiled. "Sit down, Chuck. Leland is buying scotch."

THE little girl in the big hat said: "Hi, folks. My name is Susan." The rest ignored her, but I went around the table and took her by the arm. She had a pert little face with a short nose and a dimple in her chin.

"Hello, Susan," I said. "Come sit by me."

She acted like a four-year-old who had been offered an ice cream cone before breakfast. As I led her around to a chair on my side of the table, she said: "Do you suppose you can get me a bottle of beer?"

"Sure."

She smiled at me, sat down, and took off her wide-brimmed hat. Her hair was copper-colored, with gold lights in it. A waiter leaned over the table, and Gifford said: "Scotch all around, except for Mrs. Vance. A martini for her."

"And one beer," I said.

The girl beside me patted my arm. "Thanks, pal. I hate scotch. It tastes like medicine."

Chuck Drake looked across the table at her. "Susan, angel," he said, "no one drinks beer."

"I do," she said happily, and she smuggled up beside me.

Paula Vance's cold eyes were appraising the girl beside me. "Honey," she said, "I'm Paula Vance. Chuck was too rude to introduce us."

Drake said quickly, with a trace of malice in his voice: "So sorry, Paula. Meet Miss Terry."

"Just call me Susan," the little girl said.

Paula Vance nodded, smiled, and resumed her crowd-gazing. Her profile was

toward me. She had a straight nose, full sharply defined lips, and a flawless pale skin. A cold woman, I thought, who thawed only when it suited her purpose to do so.

Leland Gifford said to Drake: "Chuck, we've got the new campaign almost ready to roll. The cops came through in great shape. Ninety-seven percent smoke Sun-Taste cigarettes because they calm their nerves and make them more alert to their job of protecting the American public from crime. Ninety-seven percent—"

"I'm sold," Drake broke in. "How much will it cost us?"

Gifford shrugged and lifted a hand. "Our usual percentage—and, of course, a few cases of cigarettes which we scattered about the country."

"A few cases?" Drake said. "Don't you mean a few carloads? How many police stations are there in this fair land of ours?"

Gifford grinned. "Cases or carloads—what's the difference?"

Drake laughed and clasped his hands in front of him. I saw the gold chain on his left wrist, and I could even make out the engraved name on the attached disc. The name was, "Susan."

"I rather like the police approach, Leland," Drake said. "It has possibilities." He looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. "Let's see. While the city sleeps the stalwart guardians of law and order in the silent watches of the night . . . the police of America patrol the streets and highways, smoking Sun-Taste Cigarettes, to make democracy safe for you and yours . . ."

"Don't strain yourself, Chuck," Gifford said, grinning. "I've got good copy writers."

The waiter brought the drinks, and Susan Terry sipped at her beer. "Hmmm, good," she said.

Chuck Drake said to Gifford: "When are you going to tear yourself away from that gold mine you call a business and come to Bay Point with me for some perch fishing? I'm going down this afternoon. They say they're biting in the channel."

"Don't tempt me, Chuck," Gifford said. "I can't get away right now."

Paula Vance was gazing calmly at the

crowd, but I had the impression that she was listening to everything that was said at the table.

I said to the girl beside me: "Are you in advertising, too?"

"Kind of. I'm a model. This afternoon we're doing a style show at the North Bay Hotel. Jake Flame is showing summer wear for his customers who are going to Florida."

Jake Flame was one of the town's snottier dress designers. You could buy dresses as good as his in any bargain basement for six-ninety-eight, but Jake Flame originals started at two hundred bucks. I said: "Do you work for Jake?"

She shook her head. "No, for Sally Dollings' model agency. She gets most of Jake's business. I specialize in junior sizes. . . . Don't you think Chuck is marvelous?"

"He seems very nice," I said politely.

She looked at Drake talking to Gifford, and her eyes seemed to melt. "Nice?" she said. "He's terrific. For my money, he's the answer to any gal's dream." She tilted her small face up to me, and laughed a little uncertainly.

"So it's that way, huh?" I said.

She nodded happily, and sipped at her beer.

I stood up.

Chuck Drake said in his clipped voice: "Oh, I say, Fiske. You're not leaving?"

Leland Gifford shot a quick glance at Paula Vance, and I felt her cold eyes upon me. Gifford said: "We wanted to talk to you, Fiske."

Chuck Drake finished his highball. He stood up and said to Susan Terry: "Come on, angel. These people want to talk sordid business."

Gifford said hastily: "Don't go away, Chuck. We—"

"Tut, tut," Drake broke in. "I've been trying to persuade Susan to come along to Bay Point this afternoon, but she says she has to work. I want to work on her a little more." He made his hand into an imitation gun—forefinger extended, thumb raised—and pointed at Susan Terry. "I mean you, angel. Ready?" He moved around the table and stood behind her chair.

"But, Chuck," she protested. "I really do have to work. I—"

"Shush," he said, and winked broadly at the rest of us.

Susan Terry shrugged her small shoulders and stood up. She was smiling like a high school freshman on a date with the captain of the football team. As she and Drake moved away, Drake turned and winked at us again. "Cheerio," he said.

Suddenly I hated Chuck Drake. For no reason at all, really.

LELAND GIFFORD leaned over the table again, and said in a low, confidential voice: "Now, look, Fiske. I've heard some good reports about you, and I think you're the man I want. Paula and I have talked it over, and we want you to do something for us."

"Us?" I said.

He flushed. "Well, me. But Paula's my attorney, you know."

"What's the job?"

He looked at Paula Vance, made a helpless gesture with his hand, and leaned back in his chair.

She said in her crisp voice: "Mr. Gifford's wife is missing. She's been gone two days, and we haven't been able to locate her. Because of the publicity, we've hesitated to go to the police. We want you to find her. What is your fee?"

"Twenty-five dollars a day," I said, "and expenses."

"That will be satisfactory," she said coolly. "We want you to start immediately."

I sighed, and thought with longing of my bed. But business was business. And I figured the banker's daughter would come staggering home under her own power. They usually did. So I said: "All right. But I'll have to know a few things first."

Gifford glanced at Paula Vance. She nodded faintly, a look of cold amusement in her eyes, and Gifford began to talk swiftly in a low voice.

"The day before yesterday," he said to me, "about two o'clock in the afternoon, my wife called me at my office and said she was driving up to Detroit to visit her sister. She planned to spend the night and return yesterday morning. When I didn't find her at home last night, I telephoned her sister in Detroit. Emily—that's my wife's name—hadn't been there

at all. I got worried then, and I called all over town. Nobody had seen her, or heard anything from her. This morning I told Paula about it, and she advised me to get someone like yourself to try and find Emily. If that doesn't work—" He shrugged. "I guess I'll be forced to notify the police."

"What kind of a car was she driving?" I asked.

"A blue coupe," Gifford said, and he gave me the license number.

"What does she look like?"

Gifford stared at me blankly. "Emily? Well, she's—"

Paula Vance cut in: "Blonde, blue eyes, about five-foot-three. Thirty years old, wears sport clothes mostly. Drinks bourbon and smokes Sun-Taste cigarettes, naturally. Does that help?"

"Some," I said.

Gifford grinned at me, and jerked his head at Paula Vance. "That's my lawyer, Fiske," he said. "Never misses a trick."

Paula Vance said coolly: "Any woman can describe another woman—down to the brand of nail polish she uses. Do you think you can help us, Mr. Fiske?"

"I'll give it a try," I said. "Got any ideas about where I should start?"

Paula Vance lifted her slim shoulders. "Your guess is as good as ours."

Gifford said solemnly: "Do your best, Fiske. I . . ." He gazed at the ice in the bottom of his glass. "I've tried to be optimistic about this, but—"

"Are you skipping anything?" I asked. "I mean, about her habits? Did she drink a lot? Has she gone away like this before?"

He shook his head gloomily. "She drank, of course—like everyone else, but not to excess. And she never went away before without telling me."

"Do you have a photo of her?"

He took out a wallet, extracted a small photograph from one of the compartments, and handed it to me. It was a miniature soft-focus studio shot of a girl with light hair and a full smiling mouth. I could understand why a man would be worried about losing a wife who looked like that.

I pocketed the photo and stood up. "All right," I said. "I'll call you either tonight or tomorrow." Gifford nodded and rattled the ice in his glass. Paula Vance stared at

me impersonally through the smoke from her cigarette.

I got my hat and topcoat from the check room and went out. It was still raining. . . .

I had guessed right about the banker's daughter. When I called him from a pay phone in a drug store on the corner he told me that she was safe at home. "Just forget all about it, Mr. Fiske, sorry to have troubled you, but you know how parents are—hah, hah—but Sandra had just been—er—visiting friends in Muskegon, and if you will just send me a bill for your trouble I will forward a check. . . ."

I told the banker that I would try and remember to send him a bill. Then I called a friend of mine at police headquarters and learned that Mrs. Leland Gifford had no record whatsoever. After that I went to work the hard way. By nine o'clock in the evening I had looked into every bar, tavern, cocktail lounge, beer joint, night club and assorted dives in the city and the surrounding territory. I saw plenty of people, but none of them looked like Emily Gifford.

After I'd had two hamburgers and some coffee in a diner on the Detroit highway I called Leland Gifford's house. I didn't get an answer, so I tried his office. No luck. My third nickel went for a call to Paula Vance. When she didn't answer, I had another cup of coffee, and then I got into my six-year-old coupe and drove back into town.

CHAPTER THREE

Perchance to Dream. . . .

IT TOOK me a half hour to get to Leland Gifford's house. It was a spread-out one-story brick affair, fairly new, built on a slope of ground leading up from the boulevard on the west side of town. The windows were all dark, but a light burned in an imitation ship's lantern beside the front door. I pressed the bell long enough to make sure no one was home, and then I went around to the back. I spotted the cellar windows flush with the ground, and I struck a match.

Just ordinary windows, held with a hook on the inside. I kicked in a pane of glass, unhooked the window, and in three minutes I had climbed in over the coal and

without trouble found my way upstairs.

The flame from another match told me that the house was furnished expensively, and in good taste. The first bedroom I tried apparently belonged to Leland Gifford. Mahogany furniture, a closet full of suits and shoes, and a photo of Emily Gifford in a silver frame.

After two matches had burned my fingers, I turned on the lights as I went. I was tired enough not to worry about Leland Gifford catching me snooping through his house. The adjoining room was obviously his wife's. It was filled with a faint illusive fragrance. I hurriedly inspected the dresser drawers and the closets, but all I found was clothes—lots of them.

I went back into Gifford's room. It, too, appeared to have been recently put in order. Even the ash trays were clean. Something gleamed yellowly in a green brocaded chair. I moved over to the chair and picked up a small gold cigarette lighter which was almost buried between the cushion and the back of the chair. It was an elegant little gadget, engraved with two initials—*P.V.*

A sudden ringing sound beat against my ears. I jumped for the light switch, flicked it off, and stood frozen in the darkness. The ringing continued, loud in the quiet house. I turned on the light again, and I located the telephone on a stand by the bed. I moved slowly over to it, trying to make up my mind. Then I folded a handkerchief over the instrument's mouth piece, and lifted it to my ear.

"Yes?" I said.

A woman's voice said: "Leland?"

I said, "Yes," again, and waited.

There was a silence, and then the voice said: "You sound so strange. Are you all right, Leland?"

"Of course," I said. "Where are you? I called Detroit—"

"Listen, Leland. I've got to think things out. I'm all mixed up. I—"

I began to sweat. "Where are you?" I asked sharply.

She laughed a little shrilly. "You sound worried, darling. Have you missed me?"

I tried to sound like a husband. "Emily, I want you to come home. Tell me where you are, and I'll come and get you. I want to talk to you."

She tried to laugh again, but it was more of a sob than a laugh. "I—I just wanted to tell you that I'm all right. No need to drag the river. I'll let you know what I decide. Good-by, darling." There was a click in my ear, and I stood holding the dead phone in my hand.

I cradled the phone for an instant, and lifted it to my ear again. When the operator answered, I said in what I hoped was an official sounding voice: "This is the police. A call just came through for the Leland Gifford residence on Lake Forest Road. Trace it, and call me here."

"The police, sir?"

"Yes. It's important. Hurry."

I smoked a cigarette while I waited. Presently the phone jangled, and when I answered, a cool voice said: "The call for Lake Forest 22986 was from a pay station in the Island Drug Store at Bay Point."

"Thank you," I said.

I checked Paula Vance's home address in the telephone directory, and then I turned off the light and went out of the front door, snapping the spring lock shut behind me. . . .

The apartment building in which Paula Vance lived was called Willow Court. It was a discreet-looking pile of gray stone with a small quiet lobby and a double row of mailboxes. She lived on the third floor in Apartment 3-F. I ignored the buzzer and speaking tube beside her mail box and climbed the carpeted stairway. 3-F was at the end of the hall, away from the street, and I rapped lightly. On the second rap, the door opened.

Paula Vance looked at me coldly for maybe ten seconds. Then she seemed to recognize me. "It's our Mr. Fiske," she said. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Business," I said. "Can I talk to you for a couple of minutes?"

"Of course," she said. "Come in."

I stepped in past her, and she closed the door. Her black hair was parted in the middle of her head and twisted into two long heavy braids which fell almost to her waist. She was wearing a long, draped hostess gown and gray satin mules.

"Frankly," she said, "I've been rather expecting you. Will you have a drink?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I'm in kind of a hurry."

She raised her dark eyebrows. "Really?

Have you learned anything, Mr. Fiske?"

I took a package of cigarettes from my coat pocket. "Smoke?"

She moved up close to me and her strong white fingers plucked a cigarette from the package. Her eyes were almost on a level with mine. Her face had a shiny scrubbed look, and there was a fresh clean smell about her. She slowly placed a cigarette between her red lips and waited for me to light it for her.

Taking from my pocket the little golden lighter I had found in Leland Gifford's bedroom, I flicked the lighter to flame. She leaned forward a little to ignite the end of the cigarette. Suddenly she drew back and removed the cigarette from her mouth. Her eyes were on the lighter.

I watched her, and I didn't say anything.

"That's a cheap trick," she said, and there was controlled fury in her voice. "About what I would expect. Where did you get it?"

"I found it in Leland Gifford's house," I said.

"Of course," she said coldly. "Why not? Mrs. Gifford and I are good friends. I am often at her house."

"I found it in Leland Gifford's bedroom," I said.

She stared at me silently, her face like a mask. And then she slapped me across my left cheek. It hurt.

"Get out," she said evenly. "You're being paid to find Mrs. Gifford. Why don't you find her?"

My cheek still tingled from the sharp impact of her palm. I put the lighter back into my pocket. "I *have* found her," I said.

HER eyes shifted a little, and she turned away. She said in a low voice, "Maybe we'd better have a drink," and she crossed to a cabinet in a corner. After she poured the drinks, her mouth looked softer, and the coldness had gone out of her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "Really, I am. I . . . I guess I forgot that you have a job to do. And I remember now that I left my lighter at Emily's—Mrs. Gifford's—the other evening, at bridge. Mr. Gifford was out, and we put our wraps in his bedroom. Anyhow, it doesn't

really matter." She lowered her eyes. "You don't have to explain to me," I said.

She raised her eyes. "Thank you," she said quietly. "Where . . . is Emily?"

I took a swallow of the scotch, and thought fast. Then I said: "At Bay Point. She telephoned from there a little while ago. I took the call—she thought I was her husband."

"What did she say?"

I shrugged. "Not much that made sense. Something about being mixed up and wanting to think things out and not to drag the river."

"Is that all she said?"

"Just about," I said. "What would she be doing up there? Didn't I hear the bright young executive, Chuck Drake, say today that he was going up to Bay Point?"

She said mockingly. "*You're* the detective."

"All right," I said. "Let's stop playing games. What's the connection between Mrs. Gifford and this Drake?"

Tilting her chin, she looked straight into my eyes. "You're very direct, Mr. Fiske. I think I'm beginning to like you. You asked me a question, and I'll try and answer it truthfully. Leland—Mr. Gifford—has been working pretty hard, and he hasn't been able to spend much time with his wife. And there has been some gossip about Emily and Chuck Drake."

"What about Drake's girl friend—the one with him at the Shoretown today? Susan what's-her-name?"

She laughed shortly. "Chuck Drake is not noted for being a one-woman man."

"Does this Drake have a place at Bay Point?"

"He calls it a lodge, but it's really just a small cottage. I understand he uses it the year around. Shall I get you another drink, Mr. Fiske?"

I placed my glass on a low table and moved to the door. Paula Vance had a disturbing effect upon me, and I figured I'd better go while the going was good.

She said in her mocking voice: "And so, dear reader, after wringing information from the lips of the beautiful stool pigeon, our hero, fortified with scotch, stalks out into the night to continue his relentless search for the lovely Emily."

I stood with my back against the door

and grinned at her. She made a pretty picture in the Grecian lines of her hostess gown. I said: "You're wasting your time chasing ambulances. You should write books."

She was suddenly serious. "Will I see you? I'd like to know . . ."

Paula Vance moved up close to me, and I didn't back away. After all, I'm just a guy, and Paula Vance had beauty, and a marvelous figure—and brains. She stood very still before me, her eyes shadowed by her thick black lashes, a faint, provocative smile on her full lips.

Both of us moved forward at the same instant, and she was standing close against me. I put my arms around her, her head went back, and her long thick braids fell free. I kissed her throat first, and my lips felt the strong pulsing of her blood. Her hands groped upward to cup the back of my head, and then her mouth was against mine. She wasn't ice—she was fire, and I didn't want to let her go.

Presently she pushed gently away from me, her eyes veiled by her lashes. She reached behind me, and I heard the click of the bolt as she locked the apartment door. I pulled her to me roughly, and her body seemed to melt.

The shrill jangling of the telephone sounded like the crack of doom. I held Paula Vance close. "No," I whispered against her cheek.

She stirred restlessly against me. The phone continued to ring, insistently. She said, "Damn," under her breath, twisted away from my arms with a lithe movement of her body, and crossed the room to a small writing table.

"Yes?" Her voice had a hard, impatient edge to it.

I waited by the door and tried to remember that I was being paid by a man to find his wife. Paula Vance's voice came to me from across the room. "No. No . . . not tonight. Yes . . . We'll discuss it tomorrow. . . . Tomorrow, I said. . . . Good night." She banged the phone into its cradle with a vicious movement of her hand. She turned to face me. Her eyes were smoky, and there was a strained, hard look around her mouth.

"Trouble?" I asked.

Paula Vance shook her head. "It was Leland Gifford wanting to know if I had

any news about his darling wife. Sometimes I wish I'd taken up stenography—or practical nursing."

I waited for her to come back to me. She didn't. She just stood by the table looking cold and lovely. I sighed, and lit a cigarette.

"Good night, Mr. Fiske," she said coolly.

I nodded. "Good night." I turned, unlocked the door, and went out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Perchance to Kill

I HEADED the coupe east, figuring I could be in Bay Point a little after eleven. As I crossed the high bridge over the wide mouth of the river the rain stopped and a soft south wind began to blow.

By the time I reached Bay Point, the warm wind had dried the rain off the road. I drove with a window down, and on my left I could hear the lake pounding and slapping over the stone breakwater outside the yacht basin. The summer hotels and cottages facing the lake were dark. As I turned into the main street of the town, I saw that it too had a deserted look. Only a few cars were parked on the street in front of beer joints catering to the natives. There was a light in the lobby of the Lake House, the town's only year-around hotel. I parked in front of the hotel, and went in.

A thin man with white hair looked up from a newspaper as I entered. "You want a room?" he asked abruptly.

I shook my head. "Just some information."

He sighed, put down his paper, and waited patiently.

"Where's Chuck Drake's place?" I asked him.

"Why?" he said. He had cold little blue eyes.

"Let's start over again," I said wearily. "This is a hotel, presumably catering to the public. I don't want a room right now, but it's possible that I will later. I came in here peacefully, and I asked you a civil question. Can you tell me where I'll find Chuck Drake's cottage?"

Suddenly he chuckled. "Don't mind me,

mister. After the summer people leave, I get so dang fed up sitting around here with nothing to do I guess I even hate myself." He hauled a bottle out from beneath his desk. "Drink?"

"No, thanks."

He looked disappointed, and put the bottle back beneath the desk.

"Have one yourself," I invited.

He shook his head sadly. "Never drink alone."

I said: "Now, about this Drake place?"

He sighed, and pointed a finger at the big front window. "About a mile east on the lake road you'll see a big sign advertising charter cruises to the reefs—Captain Edgar Smythe. Just beyond the sign is a road leading down to the lake. That takes you to Skeeter Paradise."

"Skeeter Paradise?"

He nodded. "That's what Drake calls his place."

"Have you seen him around today?"

"He was in the bar around two o'clock, and the fishing crews say they saw his boat anchored in the channel this afternoon. Probably doing some fall perch fishing."

"Thanks," I said, and I laid a five dollar bill on the desk. "How about forgetting that you talked to me?"

He picked up the five, folded it carefully, and tucked into a vest pocket. "Never saw you before," he said, and he gave me a sly wink. "Are you married, mister?"

I shook my head.

"No?" He seemed disappointed. "Well, anyhow, I didn't see a woman with him, this trip—if that helps."

"It doesn't," I said, "but thanks, anyhow." I went out.

I found Captain Edgar Smythe's sign without any trouble, and I turned into a narrow stone road just beyond it. The road wound down toward the lake through second-growth pine trees. Once my headlights picked up a raccoon scurrying for the underbrush. Through a break in the trees I saw a pale harvest moon coming up out of the lake. Then my lights hit a crude wooden sign tacked to a tree. The sign read:

SKEETER PARADISE
C. K. Drake

Parking my coupe beside a white frame

garage, I got out and looked around. The moon was fairly bright, and I saw a section of white beach, the dark water beyond, and a small dock to which was tied a thirty-foot boat with an outboard and a small covered cockpit. The cottage was the usual sunner affair; one story, frame, a screened porch. I looked into the garage first. Through the window I saw a low convertible and several folded beach chairs.

I moved across the sandy ground to the house, opened the screen, and tried the front door. It was locked. I went around to the back, found a door, and turned the knob. To my surprise, the door swung inward. I waited a minute, and then I stepped inside. The faint glow of moonlight enabled me to see that I was in a kitchen. I felt along the wall until I found a light switch. With my finger on the switch, I said loudly: "Hey! Anybody home?"

The only answer I got was the whisper of the wind past the windows. I waited a minute before I flicked the switch. I blinked in the sudden bright light. There was a half-filled bottle of whiskey on a table, and two glasses, both empty. I crossed the kitchen and peered into a dark room.

Something glittered at the edge of the light, and I moved forward slowly. I took four steps before I stopped, and I was suddenly sorry that I had turned on the light in the kitchen, but it was too late now. I took another step, and I leaned forward to make sure that my eyes weren't playing tricks on me.

The glittering object was a diamond ring on a man's hand. The rest of the man lay in darkness. I didn't touch him, but I moved around so that I could see his face. The bullets had entered neatly, almost daintily. There wasn't any blood—just two little red-black holes. One beneath Chuck Drake's left eye, and the other at the side of his nose.

I stood up straight and looked around in the semi-darkness. Just a plain little room, with bare floors and a stone fireplace. Then I smelled something—fresh cigarette smoke. I started for the kitchen to turn off the glaring light, but it was far too late for that.

A man moved into the kitchen doorway. He had a big blue-steel revolver in his

hand and a smoking cigarette in his mouth. The light was behind him, and I couldn't see his face—just the glitter of the gun and the red glow of the cigarette.

I stood still, and the man chuckled hoarsely. I heard a step behind me, but I didn't bother to turn around. The hard muzzle of a gun jabbed my backbone, and a voice said: "Feel him for hardware, Orvie."

The man in the doorway moved forward, still chuckling. With one hand he slapped my pockets, and lifted my coat to see if I had a shoulder holster. I didn't. I hadn't carried a gun since I had finished a blackmailing job a couple of weeks before. He chuckled again. "He ain't totting a rod, Glenn. Probably ditched it." He prodded me in the stomach with his gun. "Where'd you hide it, Sonny Boy?" He smelled like a distillery.

THE man behind me grunted something. Then the room was flooded with light. I stepped sideways a little and faced the two of them. The man called Orvie, the one who had searched me, was short and thick with a fat red face. He was wearing a tan leather jacket and a corduroy cap. The other, Glenn, was about the same height as his partner. His face was red too, but leaner and harder looking. On the flap of his heavy plaid shirt pocket was pinned a big silver star with blunt points, and in his hand was the twin of Orvie's gun.

Glenn said in a complaining voice: "I never see it to fail. You dang killers always got to come sneaking around a corpse, like a buzzard after a dead sheep." He jerked the muzzle of his gun at the kitchen door. "March, son. We got business with you."

I looked down at the body of Chuck Drake, and I thought of how little Susan Terry had looked at him across the table in the Shoretown Restaurant a scant twelve hours before, and I remembered that she had refused his invitation to accompany him to Bay Point that day.

I said to the man with the star: "Sheriff, you've made a mistake. I'm a private operator down here on a special case. I—"

"Never mind, son," he broke in. "We got your description, and it fits to a T. You was seen hanging around here this

afternoon, and we figured you'd be back. We set a trap for you, and you run smack into it. We're a-taking you in for murder."

The man called Orvie took a pint whiskey bottle from a hip pocket, unscrewed the cap, and tilted the bottle to his mouth. He swallowed twice, lowered the bottle, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and moved up close to me. He stuck out his chin. "Where's that gun, Sonny Boy?"

"Sober up," I said. "I never had a gun."

He slapped me across the mouth.

I stood still, but I suddenly knew that I wasn't going to let these two local clowns stick me in any county jail.

"Now, now, Orvie," the sheriff drawled. "None of that. We'll take him in, quiet and peaceful-like." He motioned at me with his gun. "Get moving, son. And don't try anything fancy."

"All right, Sheriff," I said earnestly, "you got me. I killed Drake because he broke up my home. My wife ran away with him, and when he was tired of her he cast her off, and she . . . she jumped in front of a train on the tracks behind our house. I've got two kiddies, and every night they cry for her . . ." I hung my head and swallowed a couple of times. "I *had* to kill him, Sheriff," I choked out. "Any man would do the same."

Orvie said, "Aw, nuts," and I heard the gurgle of his bottle.

"Them are hard lines, son," the sheriff said gruffly. "I reckon this here Drake was a heller with the wimmin. But we got to do our duty."

I looked up at him, and if there weren't any tears in my eyes it wasn't because I didn't try. "I'm ready, sir," I gulped, and I held out my hands with the wrists together.

I had figured it right. Orvie was busy with his bottle, and the sheriff stuck his gun into his hip pocket so that he could unhook the handcuffs dangling from his belt. I kicked Orvie first, quick and hard, where I thought it would do the most good. He let out a yelp like a stuck pig and went down in a writhing heap. The sheriff made a stuttering sound and dragged at his hip pocket. It wasn't any trouble to get to him and hook my leg around his.

As he went down, I grabbed his wrist and got his big .45 in my hand. I swung around, ran to the kitchen, and out into the night.

But they were smarter than I had figured. When I got behind the wheel of my coupe my groping fingers failed to find the ignition key. The whiskey-drinking Orvie had probably been hiding in the woods when I drove up, and had taken the keys out before he had followed me in through the kitchen. I jumped out of the car and ran through the pine along the lake. There was nothing else for me to do. From somewhere behind me a gun began blasting away in the night.

I ran for a long time, stumbling in the sandy earth. After a while, I stopped and tried to get my breath. From out on the highway I heard the wail of a siren, and I started to run again. But the siren kept abreast of me. I looked through the pine forest, and I saw lights blinking through the trees. I thought:

What the hell, Fiske? Let 'em get you. You can clear it up—or can you? What about that witness who claimed to have seen you this afternoon? And they caught you with Drake's body. . . .

The flickering lights grew brighter, and I could hear the shouts of men, like a pack of hounds baying on a fox trail. I turned and ran for the lake, and I felt the soft sand beneath my feet. I ran along the beach and the wind was cool on my wet face. The voices grew louder behind me, and I shot a glance over my shoulder.

Lights were on the beach behind me. Ahead loomed a steep pile of rock jutting out over the lake. I scrambled up the rough side of the rock, and I could see the water below me. The voices sounded very close, and I knew that I couldn't keep running along the beach. I rolled over on my stomach, lowered myself over the edge of the rock, and dropped into the lake. The water was so cold that for a couple of seconds I was afraid I wouldn't be able to breathe.

But I hung on to a jagged shelf just above my head and submerged myself to my chin. I crowded close to the overhang, suddenly realizing that I held the sheriff's revolver above the water.

I heard the scraping of feet on the rocks above me, and I saw the flickering beams




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Robert Martin

of light slanting out over the dark water. A voice, which I recognized as Orvie's, bawled: "Hell, Glenn, he's doubled back for the road. No place for him to hide down here. The state cops'll pick him up."

Something plunked into the water on my left, and I guessed that Orvie's whiskey bottle was now empty. I hugged the rock, and waited. The voices grew fainter, and the black surface of the water no longer reflected the beams of light.

After a while I pulled myself slowly along the rock, and stepped dripping to the beach. The wind didn't seem warm any more, and my clothes hung stiffly, like an armor of ice. I began to run clumsily along the beach, trying to get warm. I jogged along, stumbling, and all I could think of was fire, warmth, dry clothes.

I DON'T know how long I ran before I saw the cottage looming white against the edge of the pine forest. It looked dark and unoccupied, and I didn't bother with the door. With the butt of the sheriff's revolver I broke a window pane, and fumbled with numb fingers for the catch. I found it, raised the window, and climbed in. The moon made a soft light inside the cottage, and I saw the outlines of rough furniture and a fireplace.

Moving over to the fireplace, I stood shivering, until I saw a small box of matches on the mantel. They were matches, all right, dry and ready for use. I struck one, and found some newspapers stacked on the floor beside a pile of driftwood. I crumpled some papers into a ball, slanted a few pieces of wood across it, and applied a match. Flames licked up, and presently the wood was burning. I huddled over the fire, and it seemed that I couldn't get close enough. I piled on more wood.

An exploration of the cottage revealed a closet containing three woolen blankets. I took off my wet shoes, socks and shirt, hung them before the fire, and wrapped a blanket around me. I no longer worried about the sheriff or his whiskey-drinking deputy. I was warm, there was plenty of wood to last until morning, and for all I cared the person who had fired two bullets into Chuck Drake could be well on his way to Rio de Janeiro. After a while

I went into an adjoining room, crawled onto the bare mattress of a bed, and went to sleep.

The sun awoke me. I knew instantly where I was, and I crawled off the bed and moved to the fireplace. A few embers of drift wood still glowed, and my clothes were wrinkled but dry. After I had dressed, I entered a tiny kitchen, found a can of coffee and a coal oil stove. There was even a cupboard filled with canned goods—fruit, beans, meat. I made coffee.

When I inspected my cigarettes, they were still soggy, so I made another search of the cottage. I wasn't disappointed. I found a half-filled can of pipe tobacco, and I rolled myself a cigarette from a piece of newspaper. It tasted as good as any tailor-made. I sat in front of the fire and smoked and drank my coffee.

The wind was still blowing, and I could hear the sound of the waves on the beach. I sat for a while, trying to decide what to do. I couldn't hide in the cottage forever. From the way it was provisioned, it wasn't just a summer place which the owner boarded up in the fall, but a place which

he apparently used from time to time throughout the year. I got my feet and walked to the window. The lake was a bright blue in the morning sunlight, and the sand of the beach looked clean and white. A shrill jangling sound behind me made me jump.

I turned swiftly. The room looked the same, but the jangling continued. And then I spotted the telephone on the top shelf of an open cupboard built into the far wall. *All the comforts of home*, I thought, and stared at the instrument. Presently the ringing stopped, and the cottage was silent. I moved slowly over to the phone and I picked it up.

A nasal female voice said: "Hello, hello. This is the Bay Point operator, Mr. Peerson. Mrs. Peerson has been trying to reach you. Shall I put her on?"

"No, no," I said, hastily. "I mean—not right now. I just arrived. I—I'll call her a little later. Will you get me Mr. Leland Gifford, at the Columbia Building, in Toledo?"

"Right," she said. "Hold the wire."

I held the wire and sweated. I hoped

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the errant Mr. Peerson wouldn't walk into his cottage while I was using his phone.

A girl's voice said in my ear: "Good morning, Gifford, Incorporated."

My Bay Point girl said: "Mr. Gifford, please. Bay Point is calling."

I waited and sweated some more, and presently Leland Gifford's voice came on.

I talked fast. "This is Fiske. I can't talk long. I'm hiding out in a shack east of Bay Point. I—"

"What are you doing up there?" he snapped.

"Working for you—trying to find your wife. Remember? Now, listen. I found Chuck Drake murdered, and the local cops are after me. They've got my car, and I can't get away. I want you to come up here and get me—"

"Good Lord," he broke in. "Drake murdered? What is this, Fiske? I can't get myself involved in anything like that."

"You damn well can—unless you want me to tell the cops that I'm working for you."

"No, no. Don't tell them anything. Where'll I meet you?"

"Two miles east of Bay Point on the lake road. I'll be behind a big sign carrying an ad for Captain Edgar Smythe's cruises. Make it nine o'clock tonight, after it's good and dark. If I'm not there, wait for me to get in touch with you at the Lake House in Bay Point. Got it?"

"Yes, but— Fiske, have you found my wife? Wait a minute. Bay Point? Her folks used to have a cottage there. Is she—"

"Where?" I asked him. I had my ears cocked for an approaching car.

"Two or three miles east of Bay Point, on the lake. I was there once. Her folks are in California now. It's a green-shingled affair, one story—"

"Good-by," I said. "I gotta run. See you tonight."

"Yes, but—"

I hung up. I wanted to get the hell out of there. If the Bay Point operator had been listening, I would have to do some fancy dodging to keep myself out of the county clink. I placed a five dollar bill beneath the telephone to reimburse Mr. Peerson for my night's lodging, my breakfast, and the telephone call, and I left the

Homicidal Honey

cottage the way I had come in—through the window. As I walked rapidly away along the beach, I heard the faint insistent ringing of the telephone in the cottage behind me.

Twenty minutes later the beach narrowed to the water's edge, and I climbed a rocky hill and looked out over the lake. Then I descended the hill to the beach again, and I stood and watched the waves roll up over the sand. It was October, but the sun was hot, and the wind was dry and warm. I walked along the beach in the morning sunlight wishing that I had never heard of Leland Gifford and his wayward wife.

It was then that I saw the girl lying on the sand, and I tossed the pebble, and the bullet from her little gun zinged past my head.

CHAPTER FIVE

Leave Her to Heaven

THE pine logs crackled heavily in the hearth, and when Emily Gifford whispered again: "Who?" I said harshly. "Chuck Drake. I found him dead in his cottage."

She took a deep shuddering breath. "But . . . who would want to kill him?"

"You—for one," I said.

Her face flushed, and she said evenly: "Do you think I would have told you what I did—about threatening to kill him—if I really had killed him?"

"Maybe. Do you have any other ideas?"

Her eyes shifted, but she didn't answer. "What about this Susan Terry?" I said. "Drake's current girl friend?"

She looked startled. "Susan? I—I saw her yesterday afternoon, in the bar at the Lake House. It was a rather odd situation. Both of us asked the other not to mention that we had seen each other. But Susan wouldn't—"

"Kill a man? Why not?"

She made a helpless gesture with her hand, and moved over to a window. I stepped up behind her. "You'd better go home to your husband," I said.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I've finished my job. Your husband is to come after me tonight."

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She turned and stared silently at me. Then she moved over to the bedroom and closed the door. I went over to the bar and poured myself some more bourbon. In a few minutes she came out carrying a small pigskin bag. She was wearing a long blue topcoat over a gray tailored suit, and her yellow hair hung softly over her shoulders. At the door she paused. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

She gave me a small-sized smile. "For giving me an excuse to go back to Leland."

"He'll get a bill," I told her. "I'll lock up here and give him the key tonight."

She nodded, opened the door quickly, and went out. In a minute I heard the sound of a car on the drive leading up to the highway, and the diminishing purr of the motor.

The cottage seemed very quiet, and I could hear the sound of the waves on the beach. I nursed my drink and wondered gloomily how long it would be before the law got around to searching all the cottages in the area, and I hoped I could stay undiscovered until darkness. I had completed the job for which I was being paid.

Emily Gifford was presumably on her way home to her husband, full of love and repentance, sorry for her petty flare-up of jealousy. The man called Chuck Drake was dead, and I didn't care in the least about who had made him dead, or why. What I did care about was that I was the number one suspect for Drake's murder. There wasn't much I could do about that until after I'd seen Leland Gifford.

After a while I locked the door and went into the bedroom. Emily Gifford's faint fragrance still lingered there. I stretched out on the bed and pulled a blanket up over me. I fell asleep immediately. I dreamed that I was drowning. A red-faced man with a pint whiskey bottle in his hand sat in a boat above me. He chuckled as he watched me struggle in the water.

I dreamed that Paula Vance and I were dancing under the stars, on the sand of a beach, and Leland Gifford waded in out of the water with the dead body of Chuck Drake under his arm. Both of them were

Homicidal Honey

wet and covered with green moss. Gifford laughed gleefully and shouted something at Paula Vance. She ignored him, and continued to dance silently with me. Susan Terry appeared from somewhere. She was a mermaid, and she wiggled her fish-like body over the sand toward Gifford and screamed: "No! No! No!"

I awoke with a start, my face wet with sweat. Somebody was pounding on the door of the cottage. I crawled off the bed like a drunken man and peeked out of a lower corner of the bedroom window. There was a black coupe in the drive. I stumbled out of the bedroom and waited a second. Then I unlocked the front door.

Paula Vance said coolly: "May I come in?"

I rubbed my eyes, stood aside for her to enter, and closed the door behind her. She looked at me with amusement in her eyes. "Are you drunk—or just sleepy?"

"Both," I said.

She sauntered over to a chair, sat down, crossed her long handsome legs, and pulled off her gloves. "I've seen Emily and Leland," she said. "They act like newly-weds. You did a good job, Mr. Fiske."

"Thanks," I said. I was remembering the night before in her apartment, and I found it hard to concentrate.

Paula Vance looked at me coolly. "Emily told me that you were here in her parents' cottage, and Leland asked me to see you. He said you were in kind of a jam."

I glanced at my wrist watch. I had slept longer than I thought. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. I ran a hand through my hair and looked at Paula Vance. She didn't look at all like a lawyer—or is it lawyeress? She looked like one of the better stage actresses.

Shining black hair, unbraided now and falling over her shoulders; pale oval face, almost Grecian nose, a full, soft red mouth. She was wearing a dove-gray top-coat, a plain black dress which hugged her tall body, and high-heeled black shoes with narrow straps buckled snugly around her slim ankles. A black-and-silver purse lay in her lap.

"I'm flattered at this visit," I said, "but you're taking a chance. I'm a murder suspect, you know."

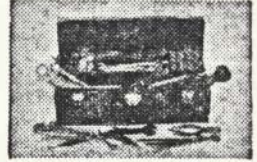
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She laughed pleasantly. "Leland told me about how you were caught with a corpse. Poor Chuck. Well, he had a short life, but a merry one."

"Poor Chuck, hell," I said. "Poor me."

She snapped her fingers. "Pooh. We can fix that up. Anyhow, they've probably caught the murderer by now. Some wandering bum who saw Chuck alone in his cottage and killed him in a robbery attempt." She stood up. "Come on," she said briskly. "Let's go to the sheriff's office and get this thing straightened out."

I shook my head slowly. "Not me. I'm as hot as a two-dollar pistol. And it wasn't robbery. Drake was still wearing a diamond ring. I saw it."

I WAS tired and hungry and beat up, and in no mood for light banter, not even with a girl who possessed the attractions of Paula Vance. "Leland Gifford got me into this mess, and he'd better show up tonight to get me out of it. I don't know who killed Chuck Drake, but I do know that somebody framed me as pretty as a Rembrandt original. Those two cops just didn't happen to be there. They—"

"My, my," she said mockingly. "Such talk." She moved gracefully to the bar.

I stepped up behind her. "Don't mind me. I get on a soap box every once in a while. What'll you have?"

She pointed a red-tipped finger at the bourbon. "That. About two inches in a highball glass—plain."

I poured for both of us. She lifted her glass. "To crime," she said. "And love." "Especially love," I said.

Her lips parted in a faint smile. "Especially love," she repeated. We drank together.

"I'm in the shadow of the gallows," I told her. "What would you do if the police walked in here right now and arrested me for the murder of Drake?"

She took a swallow of her drink before she answered. Then she said: "Get you released on bail, and take it from there. We can always think of something—if you'll cooperate."

I placed my glass on the bar. "I see," I said. "Did Leland Gifford know that his wife was seeing Drake?"

The mocking look was in her eyes

Homicidal Honey

again. "I came up here to see you because I don't want my client, Leland Gifford, involved in a murder trial. You can see the implications—missing wife, murdered playboy, and all that. If we can keep you out of it, about your being hired to find Emily Gifford, everything will work out all right."

I said grimly. "So that's it. Gifford knew about his wife's affair with Drake. He knew they were at Bay Point together, and so he came up here yesterday afternoon and killed Drake—after hiring me to find his wife. That would give him an alibi which proved that he didn't know where she was. But somewhere along the line the deal back-fired."

She looked at me with steady eyes. "As long as we've got our hair down," she said, "what about Susan Terry? Jealousy would be *her* motive. And the fact remains that Emily Gifford could have killed Drake."

"All right," I said. "You killed him."

She unhooked the clasp on her black-and-silver purse and reached inside.

She smiled. "So that's it." Her hand came out of the purse—with a gun.

I didn't like the tight way her finger was hooked around the trigger of the little .22, but I said: "You flatter me. I didn't remember until a second ago that you were the *only* person who knew that I was coming up here to Bay Point. Last night at your apartment you dropped enough hints to make sure that I would come up to Drake's place looking for Emily Gifford. At lunch you heard Drake say he was coming here, and you followed him, and you killed him.

"When I came to see you last night, you saw the perfect chance to pin the killing on me. After I left, you telephoned the sheriff at Bay Point, gave him my description, and told him that you had seen me snooping around Drake's cottage. You told him that I would probably be back, and you asked him to investigate. So the sheriff and his deputy found Drake's body, and they laid for me. . . . Why did you kill Drake? Kind of go for him yourself and couldn't stand the competition?"

She had stopped smiling, and her eyes were cold and hard. "You fool," she said. "Nothing like that. Leland Gifford is the

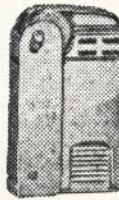
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Robert Martin

only man I ever really loved. Maybe he loves me, and maybe not—that doesn't matter. What does matter is that Chuck Drake saw us together at a hotel."

"Blackmail?" I said.

Paula Vance nodded. "I've been paying him—to protect myself and Leland. But I've paid him for the last time. You killed Chuck Drake, Mr. Fiske, and that's an end to the matter." She hesitated, and a little of the fire glinted through the coldness of her eyes. "Maybe if—if Leland hadn't called me last night—"

I remembered again the warmth of her lips against mine. I said harshly: "And you couldn't go on kissing a man you were framing for a murder—a murder you had committed—could you?"

She shook her head slowly.

With one eye on her little gun, I said: "You eliminated Drake, and from here on out it was to be a woman-to-woman affair between you and Emily Gifford. All you have to do is to shoot me and tell the sheriff that I got tough with you, and you were forced to shoot me.

"The sheriff will recognize me as the man who was snooping around Drake's corpse last night, and that will be that. That's why you came up here this afternoon—to see how much I knew. If you found I knew too much, you intended to kill me, too. Isn't that about it?"

"Yes," she said in a breathless voice.

"Yes, yes." The muzzle of her gun tilted upward a quarter of an inch, and I saw her finger curl tightly around the trigger.

I pushed violently against the portable bar, and Paula Vance fell backward off the stool. The metal edge of the bar struck the trigger guard of her gun, and I saw the muzzle tilt backward and touch her chest. In the same instant, as she fell, the gun made a little cracking noise and the bar hit the floor.

Jumping around the end of the overturned bar, I jerked the gun from Paula Vance's hand.

There was a powder burn and a little hole in her black dress over her heart, with the seeping wetness around it, where the bullet, intended for me, had entered.

But still I sat beside her. "I'm sorry," I muttered. But she didn't hear me.

THE END

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