

25¢

DIME



FEB.

DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

DEATH UNDER GLASS

by ROBERT MARTIN

NO BODIES, DARLING

by TALMAGE POWELL



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M251

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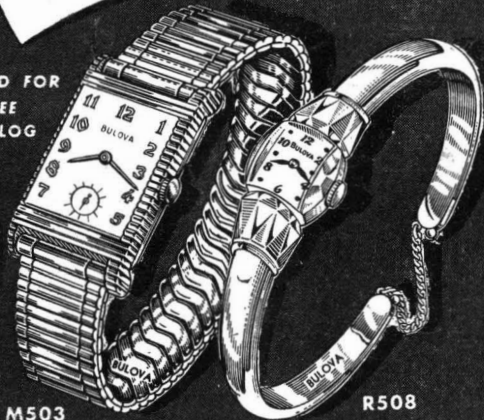


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59⁵⁰

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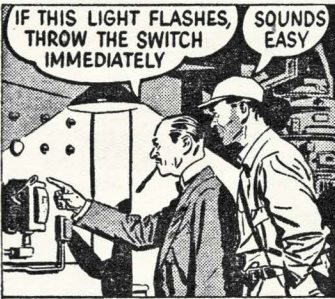
AND THEN THE GAMBLERS MET THEIR MATCH...



THE BOYS SAY YOU'RE A RIGHT GUY, JIM. LIKE A REGULAR JOB?

SURE THING, MR. DAVIS

JIM READE, MASQUERADING AS A ROUGH-LOOKING SUPPLIER OF ILLEGAL GAME TO A SWANKY SUPPER CLUB, GETS THE BREAK HE HAS BEEN WAITING FOR...



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RIGHT!

LATER THAT NIGHT



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BECAUSE HE'S SERGEANT READE OF THE GAMBLING SQUAD! THIS TIME WE'VE GOT YOU WITH THE EVIDENCE

AT LAST JIM LEARNS THE SECRET THAT HAS BAFLED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS FOR MONTHS



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OKAY, BUT LET ME GET RID OF THESE WHISKERS FIRST

AT HEADQUARTERS



LOOKING FOR BLADES? TRY THESE

THANKS



THIS IS MY FIRST SHAVE WITH A THIN GILLETTE, BUT IT WON'T BE MY LAST!

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25¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



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Copyright 1941 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Prelude to an Operation."
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The next issue out February 1st.

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person,
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Gifts that last

FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

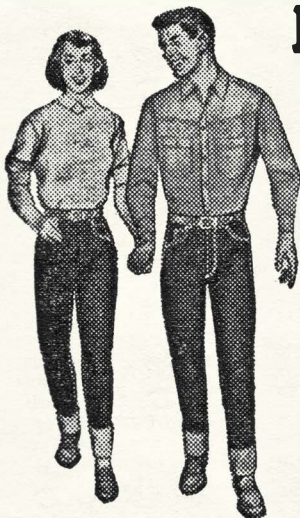
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**READY
for the
RACKETS**

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

Almost every day in the week, the newspapers carry some item about another trusting person being swindled. It's a great thing for filling a paper on a dull day, but it's a little hard on the pocketbooks of hard-working people like you and me. That's why DIME DETECTIVE is happy to reserve this space every issue to help put you on your guard against the newest wrinkles in the con business.

Each issue we print the letters you send in which tell of your own personal experience with racketeers of every description. For every letter we use, we will pay \$5.00, which should make you feel better about your disillusioning experience. We will withhold your name, if you prefer, but unfortunately we can't enter into correspondence on any racket letters because of the volume of mail in the office. Nor can we return your letter, if we can't use it, unless it is accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Be sure to address your letters to The Rackets Editor, care of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

Now for the February line-up of rackets:

Perfect Getaway

Dear Sir:
The Great Barnum once said, "There's a sucker born every minute," and his statement was proven to me in Austin, Texas, during the middle thirties, by an eleven-year-old boy.
I was enroute to my office and had just finished reading the glaring headlines about Clyde Barrow, the Texas desperado, and his cigar-smoking gun moll, Bonnie Parker, once again making good their escape from a seemingly foolproof police blockade. On alighting from the bus, I noticed a large crowd gathered near the bank. Curious, I edged into the crowd and was surprised to find it was only a youngster selling something. I started

(Continued on page 8)



BE A SUCCESS AS A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

2 FREE BOOKS SHOW HOW MAIL COUPON

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You

EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, AIR FORCE

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1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make \$5, \$10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS to show you how to do this. Tester you build with parts I send helps you service sets. All equipment is yours to keep.

2. GOOD PAY JOB

Your next step is a good job installing and servicing Radio-Television sets or becoming boss of your own Radio-Television sales and service shop or getting a good job in a Broadcasting Station. Today there are over 90,000,000 home and auto Radios. 3100 Broadcasting Stations are on the air. Aviation and Police Radio, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio are all expanding, making more and better opportunities for servicing and communication technicians and FCC licensed operators.

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

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I TRAINED THESE MEN

Shop Specializes in Television. "Have my own shop. Am authorized serviceman for 5 large manufacturers, do servicing for 7 dealers. N. R. I. enabled me to build enviable reputation." P. MILLER, Maumee, Ohio.

NRI Graduate Doubles Salary. "Am with Station WKBO as transmitter operator. More than doubled salary since starting in Radio full time. N. R. I. has been helpful to me." A. HERR, New Cumberland, Pa.

\$10 Week in Spare Time. "Before finishing course, I earned as much as \$10 a week in Radio servicing in spare time. I recommend N. R. I. to everyone who shows interest in Radio." S. J. PETRUFF, Miami, Florida.

Gets First Job Through N.R.I. "My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Eng. of Police Radio Station WQOX." T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio

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Read How You Practice Servicing or Communications with Many Kits of Parts You Get!

NOW! Advanced Television Practice

New, special TV kits furnished with flyback power supply

SCOPE . . . BE OSCILLATOR with many other units. You see complete TV set . . . many other units. You see parts, responsible, successful, practical experience locating and correcting TV faults, pictures and prices

This is just part of the equipment you will have all parts I send

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE—build valuable Electronic Multimeter for conducting tests; also practice servicing Radios or operating Transmitters—experiment with circuits common to Radio and Television. At left is just part of the equipment my students build with many kits of parts I furnish. All equipment is yours to keep. Many students make \$5, \$10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time.

Mail Coupon For 2 Books FREE

Art Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual lesson on Servicing; shows how you learn Radio-Television at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." You'll read what my graduates are doing, earning; see photos of equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal.

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The Ancients Called It COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Must man die to release his *inner consciousness*? Can we experience *momentary flights* of the soul—that is, become *one with the universe* and receive an influx of great understanding?

The shackles of the body—its earthly limitations—can be thrown off and *man's mind can be attuned* to the Infinite Wisdom for a flash of a second. During this brief interval intuitive knowledge, great inspiration, and a new vision of our life's mission are had. Some call this great experience a psychic phenomenon. But the ancients knew it and taught it as *Cosmic Consciousness*—the merging of man's mind with the Universal Intelligence.

Let This Free Book Explain

This is *not* a religious doctrine, but the application of *simple, natural laws*, which give man an insight into the great Cosmic plan. They make possible a source of great joy, strength, and a regeneration of man's personal powers. Write to the Rosicrucians, an age-old brotherhood of understanding, for a *free copy* of the book "The Mastery of Life." It will tell you how, in the privacy of your own home, you may indulge in these mysteries of life known to the ancients. Address: Scribe D. M. J.

The Rosicrucians

(AMORC)

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

to walk away, then paused as he shouted, "Get your enlarged picture of Bonnie and Clyde! Only fifty cents."

I'll never know why, but like the others, I pushed forward and handed him my half dollar and received one of the 6x8 envelopes. Placing it in my briefcase, I continued on to my office. Sometime later I decided to look and see if Bonnie was smoking her cigar when the picture was taken. I opened the envelope and out came a piece of plain cardboard on which was printed:

SORRY SUCKER! GUESS THEY GOT AWAY AGAIN!

Thomas L. Cummings
Salem, Oregon

Door-to-Door Data

Dear Sir:

I see they have introduced a bill banning door-to-door salesmen here in Michigan, and I truly hope it passes. For more years than I care to remember I've been badgered by peddlers. Sometimes up to eight or nine times a day. I've been victimized on the enlarging of pictures, a dollar down and no further communication. I've signed for one magazine, only to find that four magazines were delivered monthly, which was on the contract in small letters and I mean *small*. I've bought a beautiful linoleum at half price, only to find it was torn so badly at the rolled end I could use but half of it.

I have listened to dapper young chaps who were "working their way through college" and was sadly disillusioned by a lovely table scarf of tapestry which disintegrated the first time I washed it carefully in mild soap. I also gave twenty-five cents to a lady who came to the door pleading that her husband's car had broken down and wanting to call her brother at the next town. To prove it, yes, there was a man working on a car out in front of the house. I wonder how many quarters they got that day?

I also won a piece of land through counting dots on an elephant, and after a smooth-talking man came around and told me I was the lucky winner, I paid him ten dollars to have the deed transferred, and was to have been shown the lot the next day. By the next day I discovered the entire neighborhood had also won a lot through counting the dots correctly. The man has not been seen since. Oh, me how stupid can we get?

Mrs. Ernest Bertschinger-
Wyandotte, Michigan

A Teacher Gets Took

Dear Sir:

When I was teaching high school in a small mid-western town, reference material was scarce, and new ideas hard to come by. So when a personable young man showed up one day selling what he claimed were teacher helps in the form of new supplementary information, quizzes and lesson plans, I gladly ordered the set—one to come each month that school was in session.

(Continued on page 10)

Give yourself an even break!

I. C. S. training is a key to advancement. Here's how three men cashed in on these down-to-earth home study courses.



"After serving with the U. S. Army Air Forces in World War II, I went to work for a sign company. Decided to take an I. C. S. course in Show Card and Sign Lettering to get ahead. Soon after beginning the course I became a partner in another sign company, and after finishing my I. C. S. training, I started my own sign business in California."



"When I enrolled for my I. C. S. Aeronautical Engineer's Course, I was an Aircraft Crew Alert, Grade 10, Step 2, but now I'm an Aircraft Service Mechanic, Grade 15, Step 3, at Scott Air Force Base, Belleville, Illinois. My advancement brought an increase in salary of 45.2%. The Progress Reports sent my employer played a very important part in my promotion. Many a time, your lessons went right on the job with me!"



"I signed up for I. C. S. training while working in a plant. Right away things happened. You might say that promotions outstripped my ability to keep up with my I. C. S. lessons. Recently I was made foreman of the welding setup and Assembly Department, and now I'm in charge of training three other men for promotion. Naturally, I'm determined to finish my I. C. S. training."

You, too, will find that I. C. S. home study pays off in better pay and better jobs. Why not fill out and mail the coupon below—right now?

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Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

(Continued from page 8)

I had nearly forgotten about it when one day in the mail came a sloppy envelope of loose sheets. If the vague drawings and poorly mimeographed pages could have been used for anything, it might possibly have passed for primary work. But high school English helps? Hardly.

I was disturbed, but rather than admit I had been duped, I said nothing to anyone.

Several months later everyone in town told me that a strange man had been looking for me that afternoon. He finally found me, and served a subpoena for me to appear as a witness before a grand jury in a case of defrauding by the U.S. Mail.

The office girl of this fraudulent company had started postal inspectors on the trail when she arrived at work one morning to find everything gone, even the desk. They had located the men involved, and needed evidence to hold them.

They apparently pleaded guilty to the grand jury charges, as I was never called back as they said I would be if there was to be a trial. I hope they learned their lesson. I know I did.

Mrs. Alice Gleitsman
Redlands, Calif.

Vacuum-Cleaned!

Dear Sir:

Here is a racket that I want to warn your readers against.

I was working in the yard one morning when a man approached me.

This fellow had a nice-looking vacuum cleaner, and he said that he and his family lived around the corner and were moving East. He said the machine was in first-class condition and had cost \$80.00 or so. He didn't want to give it away, and he just didn't have room for it. He told me that if I wanted it I could have it for \$15.00.

Well, it was a dream at such a bargain, and so I took it.

I later found out that it was practically useless. It had such a small motor it wouldn't pick up anything. Also I discovered it was a T.V. Special that was selling for \$8.95 new, and that the actual worth of it was approximately \$3.00.

Yes, maybe someday I will learn that you can't get something for nothing.

Jacqueline Martina
Gardena, Calif.

Short-Stop Swindle

Dear Sir:

A few years ago I was traveling across the western part of the United States with my two-year-old son. When the train stopped at a large city and little Johnny wanted some sweet milk to drink, I left him on the train and went into a small restaurant beside the railroad to buy a quart of milk.

The clerk put the bottle of milk into a paper bag and handed it to me, after I had paid an unusually high price for the milk. Then I rushed back on the train. When I took the bottle out of the paper bag, I found only about a cupful of milk in the bottom of the bottle.

I was simply shocked at such a cheap racket—swindling passengers who had to hurry back to the train and could do nothing about it.

Mrs. H. G. Johnson
Nashville, Tenn.

Gyp With a Chuckle

Dear Sir:

When I was a young farmer living on the prairies of Kansas I was troubled with a pest called "potato bugs". They would get into the hills of potatoes and practically ruin the whole crop.

One day while glancing through a magazine I noticed an ad which read: "Sure cure for potato bug menace. Price \$1.00."

I sent my dollar and it was only a few days until I received "the cure". It consisted of two pieces of wood, one grooved and the other a small block. Neatly printed instructions said to place the potato bug in the groove and press firmly with the small block.

This is how I was swindled, but the many laughs I have had out of telling the story ever since has been well worth the price I paid for it.

E. M.
Santa Barbara, Calif.

Duped on the Dotted Line

Dear Sir:

I was more than surprised when my bank called me to tell me that my endorsement had appeared on a check that they had cashed for a gentleman several days previously and that had since been returned marked "No Funds." I had not placed my name upon any check as an endorsement, that I could remember.

However, when I went to the bank and was shown a check drawn in favor of a John Doe, I remembered the name and then saw how the trick had been consummated. My name had been signed as an endorser, all right, but it was not my signature but a clever forgery.

Several days previously, this John Doe had called at my office and explained that he was getting up a petition for presentation to the city councilmen to have our river front graded and otherwise beautified. He showed me a petition that had been signed by a number of business men, property owners and others, and of course I signed my name.

Then this John Doe went to the bank and presented a check for \$300. When the teller told him he would have to be identified, he asked if I would be acceptable. The teller said, "Why, of course. He is one of our directors, and if you have him endorse your check, we will cash it for you." The rest was easy for the clever penman, as he already had my signature on his fake petition.

J. T. R.
Ft. Myers, Fla.

We'll be back again next issue with more dope on the latest and meanest in swindles. Till then, keep out from behind that eight ball!

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THRILL DOCKET



Dolph Regan's war-blasted nerves had made him forget a lot, but he recognized his old sergeant's face in a minute. Wally Block was now big stuff in Brasher, New York—the clean-up candidate for mayor.



Georgeous Jan Holland was Wally's most enthusiastic campaign worker, and she lost no time in enlisting Dolph in the good fight. Then Dolph learned Wally was planning to clean up nothing but gravy. . . .



The noble Mr. Block, Dolph decided, could use some investigating. But he started off wrong by con ding his suspicions to a dangerous twosome—a redheaded Amazon and her hair-triggered gun!



Then Dolph overheard some interesting chatter—Wally's plans to murder him. . . . John D. MacDonald tells the complete story of "The Man From Limbo" in the next issue, out Feb. 1.

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DEATH UNDER GLASS

Spine-Tingling Murder Novelette

By ROBERT MARTIN

CHAPTER ONE

Jake's Progress

NIGHT birds cried above me, and a soft wind fanned my face. I moved forward another dozen steps. Here the ravine curved sharply, and I knew that I was close to the burial vault. It was just beyond me in the darkness, around the sharp projection. I stopped and listened once more. The night birds still cried, and the wind still rustled, but there was something else now—a metallic pounding sound.

I stepped forward and saw a dim light inside the vault. An oil lantern was on the floor, and shadows flickered and weaved in the pale yellow light. I leaned forward, peering, and saw two figures inside the vault, their black shapeless shadows weaving and jerking.

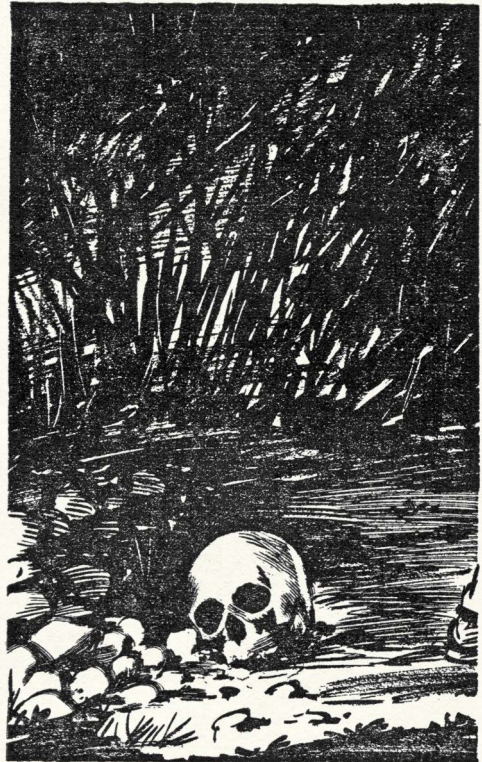
I took another step. My foot struck something soft and yielding. I stopped, frozen. A body. I leaned down, my eyes straining in the darkness, and I saw only a dark figure huddled in the weeds. I didn't dare turn on my flash.

Then the pounding inside the vault stopped, and I heard a scraping sound. I looked up. The shadows were tugging at a casket in its niche, and a shrill voice cried, "We've got it!"

I knew that voice, and I wished that I had a gun. I knew both of those shadows in the grave vault, and I suddenly realized with a deep sadness who was lying so still at my feet.

Jake Camp had been a good friend. Did they give medals to newspaper writers for risks beyond the call of duty? To those

Every second that tipsy Wilbur strayed farther from his luscious wife's arms, the five C-notes strayed farther from my hands. But I was stuck in a dark, lonely graveyard—collecting my epitaph!





I stood frozen, waiting for the blow. . . .

who gave their lives for a story—a story of love and murder? *Oh, Jake, Jake. . . .*

I crouched and reached out a hand. They had left his glasses on him, and my fingers touched the thick lenses and his short bristly hair, and I felt a damp and pulpy spot on his head. His body was still warm.

I felt a deep, surging hatred. *Why hadn't I brought a gun?*

But still I moved forward. I don't know why. If they spotted me, I was trapped like a duck in a rain barrel. I stumbled against a vine and fell forward. I reached out a hand to catch myself, and my flashlight struck a stone with a sharp ringing sound.

I tried to turn and run, but I was far too slow. One of the shadows in the vault moved swiftly, and a hand grasped my arm. I tried to struggle free, but the hand was like a steel clamp. A heavy fist slammed against the side of my head. I swung my free arm wildly in the darkness, but I didn't hit anything, and I knew with a lost, sick feeling what kind of a murder nest I'd stumbled into.

The moon came out, suddenly, from behind a black mass of clouds, and I caught a wild glimpse of the huge form before me. I saw the glint of teeth, naked in rage, and the dull gleam of steel smashing toward me. Struggling frantically, I tried to shield my head, but a hard cold object struck my temple, glancing off to my shoulder with crushing force, and my whole left arm went numb.

The coffins and the grinning skull on the floor of the vault seemed to whirl in wide looping circles, and the whole moonlit ravine danced and shivered before my eyes. My body slammed downward. I felt the weeds against my face, and from somewhere in the night a voice was screaming, *"Don't kill him! Don't kill any more! Don't, don't, don't!"*

Above me in the blackness a thick guttural voice grunted something—not a word, just an obscure sound—and then the night exploded all around me, and I didn't hear anything, or know anything.

* * *

In the morning I had driven through the cemetery with Jake Camp. The tombstones gleamed gaily in the bright sunlight, like soldiers in dress uniform, and an occasional

imposing stone urn stood like a corpulent general directing the march of an army. The wind sang pleasantly through the trees, and the waving branches cast dancing shadows over the graves, and it seemed for an instant as if the tombstones were really marching and wheeling in bone-white columns in the morning sun.

Jake Camp peered through his thick horn-rimmed glasses. "Slow down, Lee," he muttered. "It's along here someplace."

I braked my car, and Jake pointed at a huge green urn near the rise of the hillside. "That's it," he said. "My marker. Pull off the drive."

"I can't," I protested. "I'll be on top of the graves."

"The dead won't care," Jake said. "Stop."

I swung off the drive gingerly, hugging the edge, but even so, my left tires cut into the soft turf of a grave. "They buried 'em too close to the drive," I complained.

"This graveyard is crowded," Jake grunted. He picked up a flashlight from the seat beside him, got out of my car, and stood peering off over the graves, his hand shading his eyes against the sun.

"It's over there," he said, "in a deep ravine. The vault is dug into the side of the hill. Make a good story. Worth a couple of columns. Give the subscribers a shiver. Skulls on the floor, bones in the coffins. Old-time iron caskets. Plate glass over the top." He laughed. "Corpses under glass, *a la mort*." He moved over the grass between the graves. "Come on."

I followed him. Jake Camp was a young feature writer for one of the city papers. He specialized in stories dealing with the early history of the locality. The night before he had told me of stumbling onto an abandoned grave vault near the site of a cemetery in the village of Birch Forks. He intended to do a story about it for his paper, and he invited me to come along. My work was in the middle of the August doldrums, and so I had accepted his invitation.

As he walked ahead of me, Jake Camp talked steadily. "Did some research today. This vault was built by a pioneer family about a hundred and fifty years ago. All dead now, as far as I can find out. Family name of Keeting. Had money at one time, according to the county historical records. Rafe Keeting came here from Kentucky.

Cleared the land, killed Indians, raised a family of twelve—four sons, eight daughters. Started a flour mill. Made money. Kids either died or married off. Scattered to hell and gone.

“Rafe died in '59. The oldest son, Jules, was killed at Gettysburg. The records are hazy after that, but it seems that Jules' youngest son, name of Prince—ain't that a hell of a name?—lit out for the West. Never heard from. Rafe Keeting built the vault himself, after one of his daughters was killed by a bear. Five years old, the book says. Must be true. There's a kid's coffin in there—two of 'em, in fact. Eight coffins in all. Just like I told you last night. You'll see.”

The tombstones were behind us now, and ahead of me Jake stopped and peered down into the ravine. I moved up beside him. He pointed down at a mass of briar bushes and tangled vines.

“Under the hill,” he said, “around the bulge. This was Rafe Keeting's private burial vault. That's why it's been neglected and forgotten—it was never part of the cemetery. The first corpse wasn't buried in Green Acres until around 1910.” He started down the hillside.

I plunged after him, the briars tearing at my clothes. We reached the bottom of the ravine, and Jake pushed forward, his arms held high. It was hot and still, and insects buzzed about us. We rounded a curve in the ravine and came to a small grassy clearing. Jake paused and spoke in a hushed voice. “There it is.”

Through a mass of tangled vines, I saw the dark brown of rusty iron bars, and a stray beam of sunlight fell on a marble slab above the entrance to the grave vault. I saw one chiseled word: *Keeting*. The barred door was standing ajar on its hinges. Jake stepped forward through the weeds and into the black mouth of the vault, and I followed him.

We stood in semi-darkness on a stone floor covered with moss, and the dank walls dripped moisture. At my feet lay a human skull. The caskets had been laid in two rows of four each, one row above the other. Marble slabs covered the ends of the caskets, with names and dates carved on them. The dead were all immediate members of the Keeting family, with dates ranging from 1800 to 1903.

Two of the slabs in the bottom row had been pried loose and lay broken on the floor. One of the caskets thus exposed was a small one, apparently a child's, and it was made of sturdy iron with the lid bolted down. It was wedge-shaped, like caskets in the time of Poe, and it had been pulled half out of its niche in the wall. I glanced down at the cracked marble slab lying beneath it on the floor, and read:

Nancy Faith Keeting, Born November 26, 1810. Died June 10, 1815. Brutally Murdered by a Wicked Bear While Picking Berries. Avenged by Her Father, June 12, 1815.

“He killed the wicked bear,” Jake Camp said softly, and he pointed to a full-sized casket in a niche next to the wall. It, too, was made of heavy iron, rusty and green with mould. It was half out of its niche, and the end had been battered in, apparently with a crude chisel. Jake turned on his flash, and I peered through the jagged opening and saw a skeleton. There was no head, and I decided that the skull on the floor belonged to the bones in this casket.

“Somebody found this vault a long time before I did,” Jake Camp murmured. “A very long time ago. Prowlers, vandals. They tore off the marble plaque sealing the child's casket, decided that there would be nothing valuable on a kid, and tried another one. They busted in the end of another casket, took out the skull, and probably looked for rings or other jewelry. They didn't try any of the others—it was too tough a job—and apparently nobody has stumbled on this place since.”

I agreed with him. This burial vault had obviously been undisturbed for many years. I moved my feet restlessly. “Let's get out of here,” I said.

Jake laughed. “It gives me the creeps, too. But it'll make a good story.” He moved through the entrance, and I stepped out behind him.

A GIRL stood in the weeds staring at us. The sunlight made bright glints in her yellow hair. Jake stopped abruptly. “Uh—good morning, miss.”

“Good morning,” she said shortly.

Her gray eyes gazed coolly at Jake, and then shifted to me. She was small and slender, with a pale thin face and full red mouth. There were little hollows beneath

her small cheek bones and faint shadows under her eyes. She was wearing a pale blue sweater, gray flannel slacks, and thick-soled white buckskin shoes. Her figure was slim, yet subtly rounded.

"Hello," I said, and I smiled at her.

She didn't smile back. She moved a hand, and for the first time I saw that she held a slender, lacquered cane. Not a walking stick, or a riding crop, but a cane, with a curved handle. She flicked it at the weeds and said in a brittle voice, "What are you doing here?"

I nodded at Jake. "This gentleman is a newspaper writer. His name is Jacob Camp. He is going to do a story about this abandoned grave vault. My name is Fiske." I smiled at her again. "Okay?"

Her eyes narrowed a little, and she said crisply, "And who gave you permission to enter the vault?"

"No one, miss," Jake said. "It's been abandoned and forgotten for many years. Somebody, a long time ago, broke into it and opened one of the caskets. I happened to stumble onto it a few days ago, and I'm going to do a feature story about it for my paper. Local pioneer family, and all that." He grinned at her. "I hope you don't mind."

"I do mind," she said sharply.

"Now, miss," Jake said gently. "I write what I please. May I ask what *you* are doing back here in the wilderness?"

She ignored his question, and peered past us at the sagging iron door. "That's a shame, an outrage," she said. "Breaking into a grave like that. Do you know who did it?"

"No, miss," Jake said. "Are you interested in old graves?"

"Yes," she said. "In this grave. My name is Nancy Keeting."

I started at the sound of the name, and I saw Jake swallow hard. "Miss," he said. "Nancy Keeting was killed by a bear in 1815. It says so in there."

"I know," she said. "I was named after her. I have it all in a book at home."

"Could I borrow the book?" Jake asked eagerly.

"Of course not," she snapped. "It's in Fort Worth."

"You're a long ways from home," Jake murmured. "I didn't know that any of the Keeting family was still living."

"I'm the last," she said. "My father was Rafe Keeting's grandson. I came back here to arrange for the bodies to be moved to a plot in the cemetery." She gazed coldly at Jake and me and added, "Where people cannot disturb them."

"We didn't disturb them," Jake said. "We just looked."

She moved past us to the vault. She walked with a limp, and leaned heavily on the cane.

Jake said sympathetically, "Did you hurt your leg?"

She turned to him and said bitterly, "Yes, I hurt my leg. And now I'm a cripple."

Jake flushed. "I—I'm sorry," he stammered.

"So am I," she said coldly, and she turned back to the vault and peered in. She stood there silently for several minutes.

Jake looked at me and cleared his throat. "Uh—we're leaving," he said.

She turned slowly to face us. "Well?"

Jake said, "Our car's up in the cemetery. Can we give you a lift?"

"No. Thank you. I left my car on the road and walked back here."

Jake snapped his fingers, and said abruptly, "I know now! You're Prince Keeting's daughter!"

For an instant a flicker of warmth showed in her eyes, and she almost smiled. "That's right. How did you know?"

"Oh, research and stuff," Jake said. "Could I talk to you—about the family?"

The warmth died in her eyes. "I'm afraid not. My father never liked publicity. I promised him before he died that I'd come back here and see that all the Keeting family was buried properly. When that's done, I'll return to Fort Worth." She turned away and peered once more into the gloomy recess of the vault. "That's Uncle Wade Keeting's skull on the floor," she said quietly, as if talking to herself.

"Yep," Jake said. "It says so on the slab. Quite a guy, Wade. Six-foot-four, red hair and beard. Fought in the Indian wars and married a Wyandotte squaw. He formed a party to rescue Colonel Crawford, but they burned him at the stake, like they did Crawford."

She turned, and the warmth was once more in her eyes. For Jake, not for me. She smiled, and it gave a sudden beauty to her small features.

"You do know a lot about my family, don't you, Mr. Camp? Father has told me the story of Wade Keeting's life many times. When I was a little girl, he was my hero—like Daniel Boone, and David Crockett. I—" She broke off suddenly and leaned against the wall. Her face twisted in pain, and I saw tiny beads of sweat on her forehead.

I stepped forward and touched her arm. She brushed my hand away and drew a deep shuddering breath. "It—it's all right," she said in a low voice. "It's just my knee. Sometimes—the pain—" Suddenly her cane fell to the weeds, and she slumped against the wall, her head down.

I slid an arm around her slender waist and held her up. She hung limply against me, while Jake Camp stood helplessly by. She felt light in my arms, and I guessed that she didn't weigh much over a hundred pounds. Her yellow hair fell forward over her face, and I pushed the silky strands away from her forehead. Her face felt wet and cold, and her eyes were closed, and her eyelashes were like moist, bronze fringes against her pale cheeks.

"Lay her down, you dope," Jake said. "She's fainted."

He trampled a space in the weeds, and I laid the girl gently down. She stirred, her lashes fluttering, and her clear gray eyes gazed wildly up at me. "Pocket," she gasped with desperate urgency. "Bottle—"

I spotted a pocket in her sweater, and I took out a small glass vial. It was half-filled with small blue pellets, and I shook one out into my hand. She opened her mouth, like a baby bird waiting for a worm, and I dropped the pellet on her tongue. She swallowed convulsively and then closed her eyes again and lay still. Jake Camp and I stood silently, staring down at her. The sweater had pulled up from the waistband of her slacks, exposing a narrow expanse of smooth white skin.

"What'll we do?" Jake muttered.

"Hell, let's carry her up to the car."

I leaned down and picked her up in my arms. Her body twisted feebly, and she protested in a voice that was almost a whisper, "Please—I'll be all right."

BUT I carried her up the side of the ravine, Jake following with her cane. It was tough going in spots, but with Jake

behind me pushing at the steeper places I made it to the top. Panting, I carried her between the tombstones to my car and laid her on the rear seat.

Jake whispered anxiously, "Maybe we'd better get her to a doctor."

"We'll wait a couple of minutes," I said. "She said she'd be all right."

We stood by the car and smoked. The morning sun climbed higher in the hot blue sky. We talked in low tones, and presently Jake said, "I wish I had a cold beer."

I said, "Me, too," and I turned to look at the girl in the car. To my surprise, her eyes were open, and she stared at me gravely. She said with a faint smile, "I'll have a beer, too."

Jake poked his head inside the car. He grinned at her. "Feeling better?"

She nodded and pushed herself to a sitting position. Her eyes were clear once more, but the blue shadows beneath them seemed darker, and her face held a wan, waxy look.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "You two have been very kind." She gazed about her. "One of you must have carried me up. . . . That silly knee of mine! Sometimes the pain is pretty bad, and I have to take one of the pills. Then I'm okay again." She attempted a bright smile. "Now, about that beer. . . ."

Jake said, smiling, "If you really mean it, there's a tavern a little way down the road."

"What are we waiting for?" she said.

I got behind the wheel and Jake sat beside me. A short distance from the cemetery gate we passed a long blue convertible bearing Texas license plates. It was a twelve-cylinder job listing around five thousand dollars, F.O.B. Detroit. Nancy Keeting said, "There's my car."

"We'll bring you back to it," I said, and in a few minutes I parked beside the place Jake had called a tavern. It was a combination gas station, general store, and beer and wine joint. Jake opened the car door for the girl, and she got out. He handed her the cane and held her arm. She brushed his hand away and hobbled alone into the store.

We sat at a wooden table between a shelf of canned beans and a dusty glass case containing candy bars, chewing gum, shotgun shells and fishing tackle. A cheerful fat girl

served us cold beer in bottles, and Jake ordered a plate of Swiss cheese and crackers.

Nancy Keeting said, "I thought you were a couple of grave-robbers."

Jake told her again about the story he wanted to write. "Now that you're here," he said, "it'll be even better. Can't you see the headline? '*Last of Pioneer Clan Returns from West to Bury Ancestors.*'"

"No," she smiled. "I'd rather you didn't. It wouldn't serve any purpose."

"It would serve a marvelous purpose," Jake said. "It would fill at least two columns for me."

"I'm sorry," she said, and gazed thoughtfully at me. "Are you a newspaperman, too, Mr. Fiske?"

Jake said, "He's a famous detective—just like you read about. A high class private eye, a shamus, a dick, a peeper."

"How exciting," she said. "I know a private detective in Fort Worth. He carries a big blue automatic in a shoulder holster, and he's very nice."

"It's a living—some weeks," I said.

"I like guns," she said. "Father collected them—old weapons of all kinds. Flint-lock pistols, swords, even cross-bows. It was his hobby. Do you carry a gun, Mr. Fiske?"

I grinned at her. "Sometimes. Not today. Will you have another beer?"

"Sure," she said, draining her glass.

The fat girl brought three more bottles, and Jake got up and put a nickel in the juke box. The familiar themesong of a popular band floated out, and then swung into a fast tempo with plenty of drums and brass. Nancy Keeting began to snap her fingers, and lights danced in her gray eyes. Jake grinned at her, and said, "How about a dance?"

The gay light faded from her eyes, and she said in a bitter voice. "No, thank you. I can't dance. I'm a cripple, remember?"

"I'm sorry," Jake said soberly. "I—I didn't think."

Suddenly she smiled and reached out and touched his hand. "It's all right. I used to dance a lot. I loved to dance and ride and play tennis and swim. And I used to ride in the rodeos at Fort Worth. Last year a bronc rolled on me. Smashed my knee. Splintered the knee cap. The best bone surgeons in the country have tried to help

me. No go. So now I walk with a cane and take pain pills when it gets too bad. . . . A little soft music, please?"

Jake got up and jerked the plug from the juke box. The music stopped abruptly. "To hell with the music," Jake said. "Let's talk. Where are you staying? In town or over at Birch Forks?"

"At the Birch Forks Inn," she said. "But I'm lonesome for Texas. As soon as I finish this business of reburial of my relatives, I'm going back."

"Then what?" I asked her.

Her small shoulders moved beneath the sweater. "Sell the ranch, I guess, and move into an apartment in town. The place is too big for me alone. Then I'll pass my days playing bridge, going to cocktail parties, and tolerating friends trying to be nice to me." She looked away from Jake and me, and there were sudden tears in her eyes.

"Aw, now—" Jake said.

"I'm talking silly," she said briskly, and she brushed a hand over her eyes. "Pay no attention, gentlemen. I'm just feeling sorry for myself. It's a bad habit of mine." She pushed herself to her feet and picked up her cane. "I must be running along. Thanks for the beer."

Jake jumped up. "I'll drive you back to your car. Lee, here, can finish his beer."

"Sure," I said. "Go ahead."

She smiled at me, and they went out together.

Jake was gone a long time, maybe an hour. When he came back, his eyes were shining behind his thick glasses, and he was humming softly to himself. As he sat down, he said, "She's wonderful, Lee. Calls herself a cripple! I'd like a chance to show her how much fun you can have in this world without dancing or riding or swimming."

"So would I," I said.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Now, look, pal. I saw her first."

"Okay," I said. "What're you going to do—get a room at the Birch Forks Inn?"

"I might," he said. "I just might, at that. By the way, she consented to my doing the Keeting story. I've got to talk to her about that, don't I?"

"Sure," I said.

He looked at his wrist watch. "Golly, I gotta go. Deadline at two o'clock."

CHAPTER TWO

Husband Adrift

JAKE and I drove into the city and I let him out at his newspaper office. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. I had lunch and then went to my apartment. The telephone was ringing as I unlocked the door. I crossed the room and picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

A female voice said, "Mr. Fiske?"

I said, "Yes," again, and she said, "You don't know me, but my name is Emily Dewitt. Can I see you? Now?"

"Why not?"

She laughed softly. "That's fine, Mr. Fiske. I'll come right over to your office."

"I don't have an office. This is my apartment."

"Well, what's wrong with your apartment?"

"Nothing—except that I need a new living room rug."

"I never notice rugs. How do I get there?"

I told her, and she said, "Light a candle in the window," and hung up.

I emptied the piled-up ash trays, picked up newspapers, socks and a shirt from the floor, and dusted the tables. Then I washed my face, combed my hair, lit a cigarette and waited. In fifteen minutes my buzzer let loose. When I opened the door, I took one look and got dizzy.

Emily Dewitt was like a Hollywood star in Technicolor. She breezed past me into my living room before I'd had a chance to take a second look. But the first look had been plenty. She was tall and leggy, black-haired, dressed simply, and with taste, in a black linen dress with short sleeves and a low neck. No hat. She had a skin like rose petals floating in cream and a figure that had just a shade too much of everything—just a shade. Illusive perfume trailed after her as she walked gracefully to the center of my living room and turned to face me. I closed the door.

She said, "You're quite handsome, Mr. Fiske—in a rugged sort of way."

"Thank you. Cigarette? Drink?"

She smiled. She had strong white teeth and a full, red mouth. "No, thank you. After all, this isn't a social call."

"Aw, heck," I said.

She gazed at me curiously. "Are you really a detective? A private one?"

"Yes, ma'am. There are at least six of us in town. How did you happen to call me?"

She sat down and crossed her long, nylon-clad legs. She crossed them carelessly, not bothering to pull down her skirt. She knew she had nice legs, and she knew I was watching them. It was impossible not to. She said, "I think I'll have a cigarette after all."

I jumped to supply her with one and struck a match. She inhaled deeply and gazed at me thoughtfully through the swirling smoke. "I asked a policeman on the street who was the best private detective in town," she said, "and he told me you were."

"My regards to the department," I said.

Her dark eyes clouded. "I want you to find my husband," she said.

So she was married—but she wasn't wearing any rings. I waited for her to go on.

"You find missing persons, don't you?" she said coolly.

"Sometimes. How long has your husband been missing?"

"Two days. He left the night before last to attend a board meeting, and he didn't come home."

"Board meeting? Of what?"

"Wilbur's on a lot of boards and committees," she said. "He just loves to attend meetings. This meeting was with the trustees of the Green Acres Cemetery Association."

I said carefully, "Out at Birch Forks?"

"Yes. The meeting was held at the inn there. Wilbur left for Birch Forks right after dinner. I spent the evening with friends and came home around midnight. I went to bed without looking in his room to see if he had come home. I didn't know that he hadn't returned home until late yesterday afternoon, when one of the men from the bank called to ask if he were ill. I rarely see Wilbur during the day—he leaves for the bank before I get up—and I was surprised.

"But I didn't want to admit that I didn't know where my husband was, and so I said that he had been called out of town. Then I went to his room. It was the maid's day off, and I knew that she hadn't been there to make his bed. He hadn't slept in

it, and the blue pin-striped suit he'd worn the night before was missing. And he didn't come home last night, either. So today I called you."

"Does anyone else know that he's missing?"

She shook her head. "I called the bank and told them that Wilbur had gone out of town for a few days, and I told the same thing to the maid and the cook. And I didn't notify the police."

"You'd better," I said.

She shook her head again, and her glossy black hair moved smoothly over her linen-clad shoulders. "Not yet. It'd make too much of an uproar. I thought, maybe, that you—" She hesitated, and for the first time I saw anxiety, and maybe fear, in her eyes.

"Tell me all of it," I said gently.

She crushed out her cigarette and avoided my gaze. "That's all," she said.

"Did you and your husband—get along?"

She nodded. "As well as any couple, I guess. Wilbur devotes most of his time to business, but he's been very good to me."

"How long have you been married?"

"Two years. I was his secretary before that."

I grinned. "Married the boss, huh?"

She smiled faintly. "Yes."

"Good for you. Do you have a picture of him?"

She reached into a black purse, brought out a small glossy photo and handed it to me. "That was taken a few months ago, for reproduction in the annual stockholder's report. Wilbur is president of The Federal State Bank."

WILBUR DEWITT was not a young man—at least twice the age of his wife, I guessed, looking at the photo. Thin gray hair, thin face, stern and lined. His mouth was small and thin-lipped, and his eyes behind rimless glasses held a cold banker's look. He didn't look like a man who drank heavily or chased women—especially with a luscious wife like Emily. But you can never tell.

I said, "Do you have any idea where he could have gone?"

"No. He has no close relatives, and he's always worked too hard to have many friends."

"I assume he was driving a car?"

"Yes. A new maroon coupe, with white sidewall tires."

"All right," I said. "I'll give it a quick check. But if he doesn't show up by tomorrow, we'd better tell the police."

She sighed. "I suppose we should." She stood up and opened her purse. "Now, about your fee—"

"You can pay me after I do a little investigating."

"Discreet investigating, I hope?"

"Very discreet."

She moved to the door. "Call me. My number's in the book."

I nodded.

Suddenly she smiled. "You know, Mr. Fiske, just talking to you has made me feel better."

"I'm glad of that."

She opened the door and went out. I was left alone with her perfume, but I didn't linger to enjoy its fragrance. I ran through my apartment to the kitchen and took the back stairs down to the street. I emerged from an alley in time to see her drive past in a low black sedan.

At the corner she stopped, and a man crossed the sidewalk and got in beside her. I was a little far away for details, but he was a young man, tall, with dark hair. He kissed Emily Dewitt lightly on the cheek, and the sedan moved swiftly away, and I lost sight of it in the traffic. . . .

I returned to my apartment and sat by the telephone and stared at the photo of Wilbur Dewitt. There was something vaguely familiar about his lean, cold face, and his name rang faint bells in my memory. *Dewitt, Dewitt*. I stared at the ceiling. Nothing clicked. I picked up the phone and called a lieutenant I knew in the detective division. I caught him at his desk and asked him what he knew about Wilbur Dewitt.

"The banker?"

"Yeah."

Phil laughed. "He hasn't got a record. You working for him?"

"For his wife. Wilbur hasn't shown up at the home corral for two days."

"You reporting it to us? You want me to tell Missing Persons?"

"Hell, no. I'm not reporting anything. Keep quiet about it. I thought maybe you might have some ideas."

"I don't know Wilbur Dewitt, but I've seen his wife. When a man runs away from a dish like that, he's either crazy—or drunk. If I had the job, I'd check every bar and gin mill in town, and then I'd start on the hotels and work down to the tourist cabins and flop houses."

"That's the hard way," I said. "I'd like a quick picture of Wilbur's habits, background and taste in neckties."

"Give me ten minutes. Maybe I can dig up something."

"Thanks, pal." I hung up.

I smoked another cigarette. In exactly twelve minutes Phil called me.

"This probably won't help much," he said, "but it's all I could find. Wilbur Dewitt has worked for The Federal State Bank for thirty years. Started as messenger boy and worked up to third assistant teller or something like that. Then he married bank-president Gus Shane's spinster daughter, Maude, and got promoted right away to vice-president. That was about ten years ago. Then old man Shane died, and Wilbur's wife inherited the whole damn bank, including a controlling interest in the stock. You can figure out the rest. Wilbur was made president right away and was in the driver's seat. Pretty nice for Wilbur—rags to riches, via the boss's daughter."

"Then the present Mrs. Dewitt is Wilbur's second wife?"

"That's right," Phil said. "About three years ago on a Sunday afternoon, Wilbur and Maude were trolling for pickerel out near the reefs. Just the two of them. A storm came up, and Maude was swept overboard. Wilbur managed to get the boat to one of the islands. The Coast Guard combed the area, but they never found Maude's body."

"Then what?"

"Nothing. The papers carried the story, and then it was dropped. Over a year later Wilbur married his secretary, Emily McCoy."

"Hmmm," I said.

"I know what you're thinking, Lee. You're a cop, like me. But Wilbur didn't drown his wife for her money. Why should he? He had it anyhow."

"That's right," I agreed. "Well, it looks like the hard way. I owe you a couple of drinks."

Phil laughed. "Don't forget."

I decided to start at the place where Wilbur Dewitt was supposed to have gone first and work backwards, and so fifteen minutes later I was driving out of the city, heading for Birch Forks. The village was built around a square, and the Birch Forks Inn was set back from the square in the middle of a wide, sunny lawn and surrounded by carefully trimmed shrubbery. I entered the lobby and walked up to an old man in a black string tie and a neat white linen suit. He was standing behind the desk, and a small plaque on the desk said, *Adam Hess, Clerk on Duty*.

He smiled at me. "Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon. Can you tell me if the trustees of the Green Acres Cemetery Association held a meeting here the night before last?"

He nodded gravely. "That is correct, sir."

"Do you recall if Mr. Wilbur Dewitt was present at the meeting?"

He nodded again. "Yes. A very fine gentleman." For an instant his old eyes shifted away from mine.

I said, "Do you know where Mr. Dewitt went from here?"

He looked a little puzzled and ran a finger over his neat, white mustache. Then he said, "After the meeting, he stopped to chat with me a moment, and he mentioned that he was going to stop and see Sam Tew—he's the cemetery caretaker."

"Thank you," I said, smiling. "Do you mind if I ask one more question?"

"I don't mind, sir," he said courteously, "but I am a little puzzled. Are you a friend of Mr. Dewitt's? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I said smoothly. "Where will I find Mr. Tew?"

His eyes shifted again, and for an instant there was a glint in them, a something, and then he said, "He lives in a house directly across the road from the main cemetery entrance." He looked away from me and began to fiddle with an old-fashioned steel pen in an inkwell.

"Thank you," I said again and went out.

SAM TEW'S house was a small bungalow on a sloping rise of ground. His name was on a white mail box, and a stone walk led up to the front porch. A television aerial about the size of a schooner's main

mast towered above the roof, and, as I went up the walk, I spotted a shiny new car in a shed. Inside the house I could hear a baseball announcer describing a two-base hit in strident tones. I pounded on the screen door, and a man's voice yelled, "Come in!"

I opened the screen, and stepped inside. I stood facing a mammoth radio-console-television outfit which filled most of the far wall. A baseball game was in progress on the big screen. On my right a big man in a blue shirt and overalls sat on a divan watching the game. He glanced at me, said, "Sit down, brother. Game's about over. Indians are ahead, six to two, last of the eighth."

I sat down in a deep leather chair and looked at Sam Tew. He was big and heavy, with close-cropped iron-gray hair and bright little blue eyes in a thick-jowled red face. He was smoking a fat brown cigar, and on a low table before him was a bottle of scotch whisky and a pitcher of water. The bottle was half full, and he held a full glass in his hand. He emptied the glass in three swallows, poured more whisky, and grunted at me, "Drink, brother?"

"No, thanks. You're Mr. Tew?"

"That's me. Sam Tew. But I got plenty of grass seed."

"I'm not selling grass seed. Did Mr. Wilbur Dewitt come to see you the evening before last?"

He got up, lumbered across the room and turned off the ball game. He was an enormous man, well over six feet, and he weighed close to two-fifty. He turned to face me in the suddenly quiet room. "Didn't hear what you said, brother."

"Did Wilbur Dewitt see you the night before last?"

He eyed me silently. Then he grunted, "Why?"

"Never mind why," I snapped. "Did he?"

He grinned, showing yellow broken teeth. "Don't get riled. I'm just curious. Sure, Wilbur was here. Known him for years. He was born and raised here. Folks buried in the cemetery. He wanted to see me about cementing a crack in the big vase over his mother's grave."

I grinned at him. "Thanks, Sam. I'm not riled. Just in kind of a hurry. Did he say where he was going when he left here?"

"He didn't say. We talked our business, and I gave him a couple of drinks, and he left." He squinted down at me, and again he asked, "Why?"

I ignored his question, and I stood up. "Thanks, Sam," I said. He stood inside the screen door and watched me as I got into my car and headed back toward Birch Forks.

I parked on the square and entered a drug store. There was a pay phone in the back, and I called the sheriff's office. A nasal voice twanged in my ear, "Sheriff Duffy speaking."

I talked fast. "Sheriff, my name is Jones. I'm from over at Big Creek, and I'm on the township cemetery committee. Our caretaker has been pestering us for more money, and I'm checking some of the surrounding communities to see what they are paying. You know what's going on in this county—what do they pay the caretaker at Green Acres?"

"Well, sir," he said, "you contacted the right party. I happen to be one of the trustees here. We pay Sam Tew seven hundred and fifty dollars a year, and he gets his house rent-free. And that's plenty. It ain't a full-time job, and he's free to go out and get other work. Not that Sam does, but he could if he wasn't so dang lazy. Plenty of farm work to be had around here. As I was saying the other—"

"Thanks, Sheriff," I broke in, and hung up.

I left the drug store, crossed the square and walked around to the rear of the Birch Forks Inn. There was a long garage there, and I peeked in. A new maroon coupe was parked in a far corner.

I crossed the drive and went up a dark back stairway to the second floor of the inn. I was in a dim hallway with a row of doors on each side. I moved along the doors, listening briefly at each one. I tried four doors before I heard muffled voices. One voice was just a mumble, incoherent. Another voice was soft, persuasive—the voice of Adam Hess, the old gaffer from the desk downstairs. I twisted the knob. The door was unlocked. I pushed it open quickly and stepped inside.

Adam Hess turned to face me. There was a man lying on the bed, and I said to him, "Come on, Wilbur. We're going home to Mamma."

Adam Hess looked at me with sad old eyes and lifted his spare shoulders. "I lied to you, sir," he said gravely. "I was trying to protect Wilbur. I've known him since he was a boy—knew his father before him. Please let him stay here until he's—able to go home." He sighed and added, "I was afraid you'd be back."

"Don't wanna go home," Wilbur Dewitt mumbled. "Wanna stay here. Wanna drink." He looked exactly like his photo, except that now his lean cheeks were covered with a gray stubble, and his thin white hair was rumpled. His shoes were on the floor beside the bed, and his pin-striped blue coat was hanging over a chair.

Adam Hess moved over to me and spoke in a low voice. "Please let him stay. I'll take good care of him, and he'll be all right in the morning. Just last month he loaned me the money for my wife's operation. Not bank money—his. This is the least I can do for him."

"How long has he been here?" I wanted to know.

"He staggered in early this morning. He wanted me to get him a bottle from the bar,

and I gathered that he'd been just driving around and drinking steadily since he left here after the meeting. No one was around, and so I put him in this room and locked him in. I—I was pretty shocked. I've never known Wilbur to drink. I suppose you're from the city police? Mrs. Dewitt sent you to find him?"

I nodded and moved over to the bed. Wilbur Dewitt was really drunk. He stared at the ceiling with hot, glazed eyes, and he mumbled thickly. "Get me drink, Adam. One lil' drink. Gotta have drink. . . ."

Adam Hess stood by my side, and he said sadly, "Must you take him home—in this condition?"

"Yes," I said. I had found Wilbur Dewitt, and I wasn't taking any chances on losing him. "Get his shoes on him and his coat. I'll bring my car around to the rear."

The old man sighed. "Very well, sir." He leaned down and placed a hand on Dewitt's forehead. "This gentleman will take you home, Wilbur," he said gently.

"Don't wanna go home," Dewitt muttered. "Wanna drink—"

I left them and went quickly down to the



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street. When I returned to the room, Dewitt was fully dressed and Adam Hess was supporting him in a sitting position on the bed. The old man helped me get him down the back stairs and onto the rear seat of my car. Dewitt flopped on his side, and I let him stay that way. As I drove away, I waved to Adam Hess, and he lifted a limp hand in a sad farewell.

I circled the inn's drive, and, just before I turned out to the square, I saw Nancy Keeting and Jake Camp standing on the edge of the verandah. They were close together and talking earnestly. I tooted the horn at them, but they didn't notice me, and I smiled to myself. Jake Camp was wasting no time. I didn't blame him. Nancy Keeting was an appealing and attractive girl, crippled knee and all.

FIVE miles down the highway, I stopped for a traffic light at an intersection. In the seat behind me, Wilbur Dewitt began to mumble again. I listened absently, wondering what the lovely Emily would say when I carried him in.

"You stole my wife," Dewitt said thickly. "My Emily, my sweetheart—"

I turned quickly in the seat and looked at him. He was still lying on his side, facing me, his knees drawn up. His eyes were dull and vacant.

"Who?" I said.

He stared at me dumbly, as if seeing me for the first time, and for an instant his eyes were clear and sane, and he said distinctly, "Reed Balfour." Then he squeezed his eyes shut. Tears ran down his thin cheeks and mingled with the gray stubble.

I turned in my seat. The light was green, and I moved the car forward. I drove slowly, thinking of the dark young man I'd seen getting into Emily Dewitt's car. But it wasn't any of my business. Emily Dewitt had hired me to find her husband. Well, I had found him, and I was delivering him. That was all I was being paid to do. To hell with it.

I stopped once at a pay phone to look up Wilbur Dewitt's address, and fifteen minutes later I stopped in the drive before a big red-brick house in a fancy suburb. There was a lot of landscaped lawn, and a tennis court behind a three-car garage. An elderly maid answered the bell, and I asked for Mrs. Dewitt.

She invited me to step inside, but I declined. I wanted to stay where I could keep an eye on Wilbur Dewitt. The maid went away, and in a minute I heard Emily Dewitt's rich voice in the hallway. "Mr. Fiske! Come in."

I peered at her through the screen. She had changed to a thin, bare-shouldered sun dress, and it clung to her full figure.

"I can't," I said. "Your husband's on the back seat of my car, and I've got to watch him. I found him in a room at the Birch Forks Inn. He was drunk—still is. Where do you want him?"

Her eyes widened. "Wilbur? *Drunk?*" She opened the screen door, stepped outside and looked at my car. "I don't believe it," she snapped. "He was never drunk in his life. He doesn't drink."

I shrugged. "He's drunk now." I cocked an eyebrow at her, and added, "Maybe he had a reason."

She glanced at me quickly. She was startled and trying not to show it. "What do you mean by that?" she asked quietly.

I decided to let her worry a little. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I've always felt that marriage means a person should put his chasing days behind him. But then, I'm not married, and I could be wrong. But still I said, "He seems to be worrying about somebody named Reed Balfour." I gazed at her with what I hoped was an innocent expression.

A faint flush touched her rose-petal cheeks, and her eyes wavered for an instant. Then she said coldly, "Reed Balfour is a young man who works in my husband's bank."

I shrugged. "All right. Where do you want your husband?"

"Can you get him up to his room?"

"Sure."

She followed me out to the car and gasped at her husband's appearance. "Oh, the poor darling," she breathed.

I got him out of the car, and we each took an arm. Dewitt didn't protest or seem to notice either of us. As we started up the wide stairway with him, the maid came into the hall and stood staring at us. Emily Dewitt snapped, "Back to the kitchen, Louise," and the maid did a fadeout.

After we had Wilbur stretched out on a bed upstairs, Emily Dewitt said coolly, "Thank you so much, Mr. Fiske. How

much do I owe you for all your trouble?"

"Fifty dollars," I said. "I used a little gasoline and a nickel for a phone call, but I'll throw that in."

She left the room and came back and handed me five crisp twenties. "I want you to accept a little bonus," she said, and gave me a slow smile. "I am very grateful to you." She paused and regarded me thoughtfully. "You promised to be discreet. Have you?"

"Very."

She laughed softly, deep in her throat. "Good," she said.

I moved to the door. "You'd better send someone for your husband's car. It's in the Birch Forks Inn garage."

"I will. You know, Mr. Fiske, I think I like you. Perhaps we shall meet again."

My pet peeve is a teasing babe who has no intention of following through. "Perhaps," I said. "How about tomorrow night?"

I had called her bluff, and she didn't like it. "I think not," she said coldly.

I laughed at her and went out.

A half hour later my telephone was again ringing madly as I unlocked my apartment door. It was Emily Dewitt, and she was sobbing. "Wilbur's gone again! Oh, please find him!"

"Why in hell didn't you watch him?" I snarled.

"I did! He seemed to be sleeping, and I went downstairs to make some coffee. When I came back up, he was gone. He must have sneaked down the back stairs. And my car is gone, too. He'll get hurt. He's in no condition to drive. Please find him!"

"Find him yourself," I snapped, and I cradled the phone.

It began to ring again immediately. I ignored it. On the tenth ring I picked it up.

"Don't hang up," Emily Dewitt pleaded. "I'll pay you two-hundred dollars to find my husband and bring him home."

It wasn't the mention of the money that interested me. After all, a private detective owes a moral obligation to his clients. It's like ethics in the medical profession, a matter of honor. Or something. Had she really offered me two-hundred bucks?

"Mr. Fiske," she said anxiously. "Are you there?"

"Yeah."

"Say you will find him and bring him back. I—I'll watch him this time, I promise."

I decided to drag it out into the open. "Are you worried about your husband—or Reed Balfour?"

The wire was dead for a second, and then she said quietly, "I'll be frank with you, Mr. Fiske. Because of a silly misunderstanding, my husband thinks that I've been—well, friendly—with Reed Balfour. He's new at the bank, but I think he has a lot of ability. I've been trying to persuade my husband to promote Reed, because he really deserves it. But unfortunately my husband has the twisted notion that my interest in Reed is personal, and before he left for the meeting in Birch Forks he flew into a rage and threatened to kill Reed. I tried to calm him, but he wouldn't listen, and he left in a furious temper. Naturally, I warned Reed, and he left town for a few days—until Wilbur gets over this ridiculous jealousy."

"He was in town this afternoon," I said. "I saw him get into your car. And he kissed you, I believe."

After about two seconds of shocked silence, she said in a hard voice. "Shall we stop sparring, Mr. Fiske? All I want you to do is find my husband. I'll raise my offer to three-hundred dollars."

Blackmail is a nasty racket, and I already had three-hundred dollars in my hot little hand—if I found Wilbur Dewitt. But I said smoothly, "Perhaps you'd better call the police. After all, if your husband threatened a man's life—" I let it hang there.

She got it. "Five-hundred," she said in a strained voice.

"All right. Where does Reed Balfour live?"

She gave me the name of a downtown apartment building. "But he isn't there," she added. "I tried to call him as soon as I knew that Wilbur had left again."

"We're not worried about Reed Balfour," I said. "We're worried about your husband, remember? Balfour's place is merely a likely spot for me to start looking for your husband."

"Start looking, then," she snapped. It was her turn to bang down the phone.

I stood up and stretched. Seven o'clock on a summer evening and no dinner yet. Once more my telephone began to jangle.

I eyed it wearily, and then I picked it up.

It was Jake Camp. "Lee, come on out here!" he cried excitedly. "I've found something terrific. A wonderful story! I need your help. I can't tell you any more now. I'm calling from the caretaker's house right across from the cemetery. I'll wait for you here. Hurry!" He hung up, and I stood holding a dead phone.

CHAPTER THREE

Home of the Grave

THE apartment building where Reed Balfour lived was only a block off the route I took across town to the Birch Forks road. I parked across the street, checked Balfour's apartment number in the lobby, and went up and pounded on his door. No response. I pounded some more and rattled the knob. A skinny woman in metal hair-curlers poked her head out of the door across the hall and said acidly, "Don't break the door down. He went out a half hour ago."

"Thank you, madam," I said, and went back down to the street.

I scanned the immediate vicinity, but I didn't see Wilbur Dewitt. Anyhow, I figured that as long as Balfour had skipped, he was temporarily safe from the drunken wrath of a wronged husband. And I also figured that maybe Dewitt had scooted back to his nest at the Birch Forks Inn, like a homing pigeon. It was as good a place as any to look for him, and it gave me an excuse to see what Jake Camp wanted. And so, for the third time that day, I drove to the village of Birch Forks.

It was almost black dark when I pulled off the road in front of Sam Tew's house. He had his television set going again, but he heard my step on the porch and came to the door.

"Hello," he said, peering at me through the screen. Then he added, "Oh, it's you again. Come on in."

"No, thanks. A friend of mine telephoned me from here a while ago. Said he'd meet me here."

"Oh, you the feller he called? He left. Said he'd meet you at the bar at the inn."

"Thanks," I said, and I turned to go.

"Better come in and sit a spell. Good shows on tonight. Dancing girls. Or bring

your friend back. Gets kind of lonesome here." He looked at me hopefully. "I got a case of scotch in the kitchen."

I grinned at him. "No, thanks. Maybe some other time." I went back out to my car. Just before I opened the door, I spotted something in the glow of my headlights at the edge of the road. I leaned down and picked it up. It was a small red-leather notebook which I'd seen Jake Camp carry. I dropped it into my pocket and drove into the village and parked on the square before the Birch Forks Inn. I went inside.

Adam Hess was still on the desk. He gave me a grave smile, and I said, "Don't you ever sleep?"

"This is my long day," he said. "But I'm off tomorrow." He hesitated and then added in a low voice. "Did you get Wilbur home all right?"

"Yeah," I sighed, "but his wife let him skip out again. Has he shown up here?"

He looked worried and shook his head. "That's bad. Poor Wilbur. No, I haven't seen him." He added with a wry smile, "Really."

I grinned at him. "I believe you."

I moved across the lobby and through an archway labeled *Bar*. I didn't see Jake Camp, but Nancy Keeting was sitting alone at a table drinking a dry martini. She glanced up, gave me a big smile. It made her small features warmly radiant. I went over to her, and she removed her cane from a chair and said, "Welcome. I'm going quietly nutty all by myself."

I sat down. She had changed her sweater and slacks for a soft pale-blue dress, and her yellow hair was combed smoothly and parted on the side. She didn't look like a little girl any more, but like a young and beautiful woman. In the soft light her face held delicate contours and shadows, and her mouth seemed softer and fuller. I said, "I was to meet Jake Camp here. Have you seen him?"

She laughed softly. "Not for the last two hours. He borrowed a car and came back out here this afternoon, after he was finished at the paper. He—he's nice. I think I like this little town. I hate to think of leaving."

"When will that be?"

"In a few days, I guess. I bought a plot in the cemetery today and arranged for its perpetual care. And I talked to a Mr. Tew

—he's the cemetery caretaker—and he's going to start digging the graves tomorrow. He explained to me that the original vault was outside the cemetery limits, and that's why it's been neglected all these years. And I also contracted with a local undertaker to remove the old caskets from the vault and to place the bodies in new bronze caskets. He'll also arrange for new headstones and for the re-burial." She shivered a little. "It's a little gruesome, but it's what Father wanted."

I smiled at her. "You've done a lot today."

"Jake helped me." She finished her martini. "Will you have a drink with me? I'm trying to get in the mood for dinner."

"Jake will probably show up," I said. "I'd enjoy a drink."

"Good," she said, and I signaled to the bartender.

The time passed quickly and pleasantly with Nancy Keeting. I was on my second martini when I reached into my coat pocket for a package of cigarettes. My fingers touched Jake's notebook, and I took it out and leafed through it absently. It was filled with jottings for newspaper stories. There were a few pages of addresses, mostly female. In the back of the book were inscriptions he had copied from the stones in the Keeting vault, and then came a final page filled with sort of a crude map. It represented the Keeting vault entrance, and a few feet to the right he had drawn a pile of stones. Beneath the stones he had made a black X and marked it. *Bones here.*

Nancy Keeting said in an amused voice, "What's that? Your diary?"

I returned the notebook to my pocket. "It's Jake's. He dropped it by the road in front of Sam Tew's house. He telephoned me from there."

I hesitated, trying to decide what to do. I was supposed to be looking for Wilbur Dewitt, and Jake Camp had been in a rush to see me, and here I was, frittering away the time. I wasn't too concerned about Wilbur Dewitt—except that I wanted to earn the five-hundred dollars I'd gouged out of Emily Dewitt—and it wasn't my fault that I hadn't met Jake. And yet, I was uneasy and felt that I should be doing something.

I said to the girl, "I'll have to leave. I want to find Jake." I stood up.

She gazed at me with big eyes. "You're worried about Jake," she said quietly. "When he left me this afternoon, he said he was going out to the vault again to get more data. We were going to a drive-in movie this evening. Can I go with you to help find him?"

"You'd better stay here."

"Please," she pleaded.

I tried to smile at her. "I'll be back—with Jake."

"Is—is he in trouble?"

"I don't know," I said. "I hope not." I left her and moved swiftly out to my car. I gunned it around the square and headed out the dark road toward Sam Tew's house.

HIS place was dark. I pounded on the front door and walked around and pounded on the back door. All locked, all dark. But the shiny new car was still in the shed. I began to sweat. I gazed across the road at the cemetery. The moon was not up yet, and all I could see were the dark clumps of trees and the occasional ghostly glow of a tombstone in the clearings.

I got into my car and drove slowly down the road past the cemetery, to the beginning of the deep ravine leading back to the Keeting vault. I took a flashlight from the dash compartment and started down the ravine. When I had waded about a hundred yards through the weeds and thick underbrush, I stopped and placed a handkerchief over the lens of the flash. Then I proceeded cautiously, until I thought I was near the vault. I turned off the light and stood still, listening.

Night birds cried above me, and a soft wind fanned my face. I moved forward another dozen steps—and that's when I saw the two men working in the vault by the yellow lantern light, when I found the body of Jake Camp, and when the huge animal bulk of Sam Tew smashed me into unconsciousness. . . .

* * *

The weeds scratched my face, and I smelled the damp earth. I opened my eyes slowly, and the bright moonlight was all around me. With a kind of wonder I realized that I was still alive. I was lying on my side, facing the grave vault, and through

the tangled weeds I could see the lantern on the floor beside the skull, and the two men working. They had pulled out one of the ancient iron caskets, and they had the lid off and the glass covering beneath, and they stood peering down at what was inside.

I heard Sam Tew grunt, "I'll get them other bones. You get her out of there."

Wilbur Dewitt moaned, "I can't, I can't!"

Sam Tew laughed. "You killed her, didn't you, Wilbur? She's three years dead. She can't hurt you now."

Wilbur Dewitt began to shake, and he pressed back against the wall. He was making a sound like a puppy whimpering. Sam Tew grunted in contempt and picked up a shovel.

"Bring in the box," he said. "I'll shovel her out."

Dewitt stumbled to the door of the vault, leaned down, and pulled a big wooden box from the weeds. Tew placed the shovel inside the casket, and I heard a thudding sound as he began to dump something into the wooden box. Wilbur Dewitt turned away, his hands over his face, and the whimpering began again. The big man shoveled methodically, and presently he stopped.

"There," he said cheerfully. "Now we'll just get them other bones that dumb writer feller told me he'd found, put 'em in this here coffin, seal it all up ship-shape, and nobody'll know the difference. Then we'll plant your missus down the ravine a piece. I don't know what you'd do without me, Wilbur."

Dewitt said in a strangled voice, "But those other two—out there. What about them?"

"I'll take care of them," Sam Tew said. "But this'll cost you plenty, Wilbur. I got my eye on a dandy new television set—thirty-inch screen."

"All right, Sam," Dewitt moaned. "But hurry, hurry!"

Carrying the shovel, Sam Tew stepped out of the vault and began to dig beneath a pile of stones a few feet from the vault. I suddenly remembered Jake Camp's map in his note book, and the cross labeled, *Bones here*, and I knew why he had called me.

When he had returned to the vault, he'd stumbled on the bones buried outside the

vault and had guessed that they'd been removed from one of the ancient caskets to make room for another body. But he'd made the mistake of telling Sam Tew about it and of calling me in Sam's presence. What Jake hadn't known was that the ancient bones had been removed to make a hiding place—in a sealed and long-interred casket—for the body of the first Mrs. Wilbur Dewitt, who was supposed to have been drowned and lost in the lake three years ago.

I knew now what had happened, all of it, and I wasn't going to lie there in the weeds and wait for Sam Tew to bash me in the head with a shovel. It was too late to do anything for Jake Camp—poor trusting Jake, who had innocently stumbled on a murder deal—but there was still time to do something for myself—maybe.

I groped over the ground, and my fingers closed over a stone. It wasn't a very big stone, about the size of a baseball, but I didn't have time to be choosy. I pushed myself slowly to my knees. My left shoulder pained, and my head throbbed, and for an instant the moonlight blotted out. Then my brain cleared a little, and I took a deep breath.

Wilbur Dewitt stood huddled inside the vault. I wasn't worried about him. I was worried about the hulking Sam Tew. His back was toward me while he dug under the stones. A small pile of stones lay beside him, and I saw a skull. I pushed myself slowly upright, gripping the stone. If I could only make it the few feet to Sam Tew . . .

I must have made a noise. Wilbur Dewitt saw me, and he cried in a voice shrill with fear, "*Sam! Behind you!*"

Tew whirled and raised the shovel. I heaved the stone at him. It was all I could do. But I missed him, and he laughed and took a step forward, holding the shovel like a ball bat. I wanted to run, but I couldn't move. It was all I could do to stay on my feet.

Tew swung back the shovel, and once more I saw the gleam of his teeth and heard him laugh wildly. I stood frozen, waiting for the blow.

Behind me a voice said sharply, "Drop it!"

Tew stopped his swing and peered past me. His eyes small and mean in the moon-

light. I felt cold sweat on my face as I sank to one knee. I couldn't help it. And then suddenly my head cleared and the earth stopped swaying, and I stood up straight once more.

Nancy Keeting moved up beside me. She leaned on her cane, and her face was white. But her mouth was firm, and there was a cold gleam of fury in her eyes. She said to Sam Tew, "Drop that shovel, you lout!" and her voice was brittle with contempt.

Tew took a slow step toward her, making thick guttural noises in his throat.

From inside the vault Wilbur Dewitt made a howling sound, and his thin scream cut the night. *Oh, Sam, don't, don't, don't!*

And then I heard a small clicking sound, and Nancy Keeting swung her cane. I saw the bright sharp gleam of steel in the moonlight, and I saw the sudden black spurt of blood from Sam Tew's face. He screamed and swung away, dropping the shovel. His hands were clasped over his face, and blood dripped through his fingers. I leaped for him, and Nancy Keeting snapped, "I can handle him."

"To hell with that," I grunted. "I've earned this."

I GRABBED Sam Tew's shoulder and swung him around. For an instant his hands left his face, and I saw his wild eyes, and the blood, and the gaping slash across his cheek. I hit him on the chin with all the force I could summon, and I felt the blood spatter away from my knuckles. His big body staggered drunkenly. I hit him again, and he sighed and went down. His legs moved once, and he lay still. My arm hurt clear to my shoulder, but I didn't care.

I looked at Wilbur Dewitt. He was crouched in a corner of the vault, gibbering like an idiot. I turned to Nancy Keeting and grinned idiotically at the cane in her hand. "That's a handy gadget."

She lifted it, and I saw the thin bright blade protruding from the tip. There was a clicking sound, and the blade disappeared into the cane. "Sword cane," she said. "From Father's collection. Eighteenth century. I've carried it since my accident, but this is the first time I've used it as a weapon." She laughed a little shakily.

I said, "Why did you follow me?"

"You seemed worried about Jake. I lost you outside the village, but I saw your car parked at the end of the ravine. So I came back here, and I saw what was happening—" She shivered a little.

I said gently, "Did you see Jake?"

She looked at me quickly. "Jake? Is he here?"

I nodded toward his dark form out in the weeds. "Over there. He stumbled onto a murder deal between Sam Tew and that man in the vault. Tew got suspicious of Jake, bashed him on the head and carried him back here. Then he returned to his house to send me on a wild goose chase for Jake at the Birch Forks Inn. Then—oh, I'll explain it all to you later."

She gazed solemnly up at me. "But Jake—he's—?"

I nodded silently.

She turned away and began to sob quietly.

I sighed and moved through the weeds and knelt down beside the still form of Jake Camp. I could see him very plainly in the moonlight. A thin stream of blood had dried on his cheek. He lay as if sleeping, his face serene and composed. I placed a hand gently beneath his ear, on his throat—and felt a slow warm beat of life.

I shouted to Nancy Keeting. "He's still alive! Get a doctor—and call the sheriff!"

She limped through the weeds, her eyes shining. She didn't stop to waste foolish moments in joy, but moved straight past me, with only a glad sidelong look at Jake as she hurried down the ravine toward the road. I watched her for a second, a small figure limping rapidly along in the moonlight, and then I gently straightened Jake's legs and placed my folded coat beneath his head.

I stood up, moved over to the form of Sam Tew, and picked up the heavy shovel. He was breathing hard, and blood bubbled from his thick lips and mingled with the blood from the deep gash on his cheek. I walked to the vault entrance and peered down into the wooden box sitting there. I saw the skeleton of Maude Shane Dewitt. There was a neat hole in the temple of the skull, where the bullet had smashed out her life.

I turned to Dewitt. He sat huddled in a corner beside the ancient skull of Wade Keeting, Indian fighter, and he stared up

at me with mad glittering eyes. I felt a little sorry for Wilbur Dewitt, and yet I wanted to smash him with the shovel, the way I would smash a snake.

I said, "You're done, Wilbur. All done. Three years ago you fell in love with your secretary, Emily McCoy. But you couldn't marry her because you were already married to Maude Shane, whose inherited money had made you president of the bank. But money wasn't enough—you wanted Emily McCoy, too.

"As a trustee of the Green Acres Cemetery, you knew about this abandoned vault—a perfect place to conceal a body. So you shot your wife, brought her body here, took the bones from one of the caskets, and buried them under the stones outside. Even if those bones were found, you figured that nobody would worry about them. They were over a hundred years old and near this old family grave. Then you placed your wife in the empty casket, replaced the glass top and the iron lid, slid the casket back into its niche in the wall and replaced the marble headstone.

"After that, you pretended to go on a fishing trip with your wife, and you faked the drowning story. Nobody could prove that your wife didn't drown, and you mourned for a while, and then married Emily. And you were happy—until Emily began cutting up with a handsome young clerk in your bank named Reed Balfour. And on top of that, Nancy Keeting showed up from nowhere to claim the bodies in the vault. That was really a blow. You knew that you had to remove your wife's body from the casket before it was opened for the re-burial and she was identified—with a bullet in her head."

I paused and said curiously, "How did Sam Tew get into it? Did he catch you putting your wife's body in the vault?"

He nodded dumbly.

"So Sam caught you," I said, "and you had to pay to keep him quiet. And you had to keep on paying. That's how Sam can have fancy luxuries on seven-hundred and fifty dollars a year. Sam tipped you off about Nancy Keeting wanting to move the caskets. That and the strain of discovering that you had a cheating wife set you off on a drunk. But you weren't too drunk to know that you had to move your wife's

body out of here. So you skipped out after I'd taken you home and came straight back here and got Sam Tew to help you with your moving. And then Jake Camp stuck his nose in and—oh, to hell with it. Do you have anything to say?"

He stared beyond me, out into the bright moonlight, and the tears streamed down his thin, gray-stubbled cheeks.

"I killed for Emily," he said in a quavering voice. "I killed Maude, my dear wife. And Emily—Emily repaid me by consorting with another man, a young man . . . I should have killed Emily, too. She is the embodiment of sin, and she deserves to die. I had Maude, my gentle Maude, and she gave me everything—the bank, everything—and I killed her because of Emily. . . ."

I turned away from him, feeling sick.

He began to whimper again. "I want to die," he sobbed. "I want to atone for my sins. But promise me that you'll bury me with Maude. Promise, promise, promise. . . ."

I stepped out into the moonlight. When the doctor and the sheriff and his deputies arrived, Wilbur Dewitt was still huddled inside the vault, singing a hymn in a cracked, crazy voice. . . .

I tried to talk the sheriff into letting me take Wilbur Dewitt home to his wife long enough for me to collect the five-hundred bucks, but he wouldn't let me. I tried to console myself by thinking that Emily Dewitt would have been unable to pay me off anyhow—because Wilbur had changed his will, cutting her out of everything. Sam Tew confessed to his blackmailing part in helping Wilbur conceal his wife's body, and Wilbur died in prison of a heart attack while waiting trial for murder. Emily contested the will, but she didn't get anything, and she left town. Young Balfour disappeared, too.

Jake Camp recovered from a fractured skull in the Birch Forks hospital. Nancy Keeting went to see him every day. She re-buried her ancestors in fancy new coffins, but she didn't go back to Texas. She married Jake and set him up with a newspaper of his own in Birch Forks. He's made it pay, too. They've got three kids now, and I sometimes go out for Sunday dinners.

THE END

PRELUDE TO A WAKE

From Hongkong to Hoboken, Foyle had never met anyone nicer than beautiful Nora—to keep him company at his own wake.



Under cover of opening the bottle, Foyle said, "Can you get me a gun?"

By **LARRY
HOLDEN**

FOYLE stared at the spread of IOU's that lay on the table soaking up the spilled drinks—twenty-two thousand dollars' worth of them, all signed by George Bascule. He hadn't seen George in years, not since that South American business, but he knew George's signature. A careless slash of ink, typical of George.

Foyle raised his eyes to the man sitting opposite him, reflecting that they were all alike, these men, from Hongkong to

Hoboken, the big and the little. In the little ones, the panhandlers on the street, the predatory gleam was pretty dim, but in the big ones, like this fellow, it burned hot and fierce with the refusal to be denied.

This one's name was Routt, a round-headed blond with popping blue eyes and a thin, sucked-in mouth. He had brought a girl with him, and now she sat in the corner of the booth, smoking a cigarette and sullenly indifferent to both of them.

She was a brunette and worth every dollar, Foyle thought, that Routt had spent on her. But she was another predatory character. They seemed to run in pairs, on this level—men like Routt and their women.

Foyle reached out and picked up his glass of lime and rum, taking a sip before answering the question that had been put to him.

"What makes you think," he asked indifferently, "that I'm responsible for George Bascule's gambling debts?"

Routt shrugged and reached into a pocket, as if he had been expecting this question, and slid a newspaper clipping across the table. Foyle picked it up between his second and third fingers. His bony face was wooden as he read it.

It was datelined Tampa, Florida, and it said that the bullet-riddled body of a man, identified as Matthew Lund, had been found floating in Old Tampa Bay at the eastern foot of Gandy Bridge. There was a brief description of Lund, and according to a Sheriff Sublette, the old man had been the victim of a gang killing and was suspected of smuggling aliens from Cuba into Tampa, posing them as seamen from the shipping lines. That part of it sounded like the old man. He had been a former resident of Newark, New Jersey, and the clipping was from the Newark *Evening News*.

A muscle bulged in Foyle's jaw, but otherwise his face was unchanged as he dropped the clipping in the middle of the table between them.

"What about it?" he asked.

"You've got twenty thousand dollars belonging to Lund."

"I have?"

"There were five of you," said Routt, writing the figure 5 on the wet top of the table with his forefinger. "Soldiers of fortune, you called yourselves. . . ."

"What gave you that damn fool notion?" interrupted Foyle drily. "We didn't call ourselves anything." Then he laughed. "Oh, Bascule. Yes, George might have said a thing like that."

"May I continue?" asked Routt coldly.

Now that Foyle had laughed, it stayed close to the surface of his gray-green eyes. "Have you finished?" he grinned.

"No."

"Then," he made a lordly, derisive gesture with his hand, "you may continue."

"This isn't a joke, Foyle."

"Oh, I don't know. I thought you wanted to continue."

The girl laughed suddenly and sharply, and her eyes gleamed sidewise at Routt, enjoying the pinch of anger that showed white at the flange of his nostrils. She leaned toward Foyle.

"Watch yourself," she said. "Routt doesn't have a sense of humor."

Routt looked at her. "That's your last crack," he said.

HE TURNED back to Foyle. "There were five of you," he said, as if nothing had happened since the first time he made that statement. "You hired out to the government of Palmagua, in South America, to fight the guerillas under Montoya. There were ten of you, actually, who went out on reconnaissance patrol in the hills where the guerillas hid, but only five of you lived after your attack on the paymaster's mule train.* You got a hundred thousand dollars out of that raid, and you were the one who carried it in the retreat. Matthew Lund was wounded, and he made you leave him behind, or all five of you would have been captured. Your retreat," Routt's voice became momentarily ironical and he traced two x's on the wet wood of the table with his finger, "carried you all the way to the seaport of Jurua, where you took the first banana boat to New York. Not forgetting the hundred thousand dollars, of course."

Foyle forked his fingers through his harsh red hair and laughed. "It was a tough trip," he confided. "We had the guerillas *and* the federal troops after us every jump of the way. But go on. I got a feeling you're just coming to the interesting part of the story."

The girl laughed softly, but this time Routt ignored her.

"Yes," he said. "The interesting part was your division of the money. You held out a full share for Lund, saying it was his by rights, if he came out alive, but that it would be divided if he didn't."

Foyle murmured, "You can't help liking George Bascule, even if he does talk his head off. But you must have gotten him

drunk, or was he already drunk and babbling when you picked him up? I think that must have been it." Foyle nodded and flicked the IOU's with his finger. "Otherwise you wouldn't have let him get this deep into you. Did he also tell you that the money is banked in the Newark and Essex Trust? He must have. George always told everything when he was drunk. But go ahead and finish, now that you've come to the really interesting part."

"Lund is dead," said Routh flatly. "Two others of the five are dead, too. You and Bascule are the only ones still alive, so you've got ten thousand dollars belonging to Bascule. I want it. He owes it to me, and I want it."

"Naturally. If a man owed me money, I'd want it, too." Foyle drained his glass. He set it down very carefully in the same wet ring from which he had lifted it. "You want it pretty badly, I suppose?"

"You have it. I want it."

"Suppose I said the hell with you?"

"You won't. If you were honest enough to hold Lund's share all this time—three years, isn't it?" Routh's first smile was a mocking pursing of his lips. "You'll be honest enough to give Bascule what's coming to him."

"If I gave George what's coming to him," said Foyle with sudden violence, "he'd be in the hospital for a month. For blabbing to you. What kind of a damn fool do you take me for, anyway? You show me a scrap of paper torn out of a newspaper, and expect me to hand you ten thousand dollars. Well, I'm not going to, bucko!"

"Lund is dead."

"Is he? Did you have him embalmed and bring him along with you? I don't know that Lund is dead, and until I do, neither you nor George Bascule, nor anybody else, is going to get a smell of that money."

The girl had stopped smoking and was leaning forward, watching Foyle with interest.

"Would you take the word of the Tampa police?" asked Routh.

"Maybe."

Routh's temper cracked again. "Believe me, Foyle," he snapped, "the Tampa police are not in my employ. Are you willing to take *anybody's* word for his death?"

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Foyle flushed. "I'll confirm it my own way," he said.

"And in your own time, Foyle? The way you've waited three years to give Lund his share of the money?"

"I didn't wait three years. I was offered a job in India and I took it."

"You could have banked the money in Lund's name so he could draw on it. But you didn't, did you? You banked it in your own name. You didn't touch it, I know. But no one else could, either. Are you going to wait another three years, Foyle?"

Foyle half rose from his chair, his face clotting. Routt's right hand darted under his left lapel and he leaned back.

Foyle said harshly, "Pull that gun, Routt, and I'll slap you silly with it!"

Routt's hand came slowly out from under his coat.

"Well?" he said challengingly.

Foyle dropped back in his seat and put both fists on the edge of the table before him. They were big, bony fists, white across the knuckles.

"We'll settle it tonight," he said heavily. "My way. Give me a piece of paper. I'll send a telegram to a friend of mine in Tampa."

"Why not call him on the phone?"

"He's in the Tampa Hospital for Paraplegics," said Foyle shortly. "But he has contacts. Do you have a piece of paper or don't you?"

SILENTLY, Routt handed him a small leatherbound notebook and a pen. Foyle scribbled out the telegram, hesitating at the end.

"What's the address of this gin mill?" he asked.

"Seven-six-three River Street, Hoboken. It's called Ed and Shorty's."

"I know what it's called. Here, you send it." Contemptuously, he tossed the notebook across the table at Routt. It struck the man's chest and slid into his lap.

Routt's nostrils whitened, but he took the notebook and slid out of the booth. As he stood, Foyle looked up at him and asked softly:

"Tell me, Routt, was it you who had Lund killed?"

"Talk sense," said Routt and started to-

ward the phone booth. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. He tapped the notebook. "And this had better be answered tonight before closing."

"If you're worried," drawled Foyle, "add 'urgent' to it."

Routt walked away without another word.

The girl started, "If you want me to leave . . ."

Foyle held up his hand, stopping her. "Just a minute," he murmured.

He stood and leaned over the partition between his booth and the booth behind him. Two men were sitting there—one bald and squat, very broad across the shoulders; the other young, with wavy black hair, a self-satisfied expression and an obviously expensive chalk-striped blue suit.

Foyle looked down at them and said, "Beat it."

They sat stock still for a moment, surprised, and then the young one began angrily. "Who the hell do you—"

The squat man backhanded him casually across the mouth and said, "Shut up, punk." He looked up at Foyle with eyes as brown as melted chocolate. "Beat it why?" he asked mildly.

Foyle grinned at him with appreciation. He knew this kind of man. In a sense, Foyle was the same kind.

"Because," he said, "all we do now for awhile is wait. Your boss is phoning a telegram. He won't be coming back here. He won't like my company. You two better join him at the bar. I want some privacy."

The squat man considered this thoughtfully. "Or else?" he asked.

"Or else," Foyle agreed cheerfully.

The man sighed, "Oh hell," and slid out of the booth. "Come on, punk."

The boy said hotly, not taking his eyes from Foyle, "You can go if you want to, but me, I'm staying."

"Suit yourself, but if he takes that gun away from you, the boss'll crucify you."

Chuckling, the squat man walked toward the bar. The boy sat undecided for a moment, then scrambled angrily out of the booth. He faced Foyle and for a minute it looked as if he might spit straight at him, but his eyes wavered and he spat on the floor in front of Foyle's booth instead.

"Tough boy," he jeered. "Real tough."

Having vindicated himself, he swaggered across the room to the bar. The two regulars, who had been drinking beer at the far end of the bar, quietly put down their glasses and just as quietly turned and walked out. The bartender hurriedly walked down, took their glasses, mopped the bar and looked anxiously out into the darkness of River Street. There was nothing across the street but the high fence that surrounded the docks and warehouses of the steamship lines. Routt's two henchmen were now the only ones at the bar.

Foyle turned and slipped back into his seat, grinning at the girl. "Hell, no," he said, as if just answering her question, "I don't want you to leave. It's not very often that I get the chance of buying cheap drinks for something as expensive as you. What's your name?"

Her chin lifted. "I'm not Routt's woman and never was," she said defiantly.

"And never will be, I guess. He just gave you the kiss-off, and with a guy like him I'd say it's permanent. Why'd you feel you had to needle him all the time?"

"I wasn't his woman. You don't believe me, but I wasn't. I just went around with him. Things happen where he goes. I thought I'd like that."

Foyle rubbed his chin and gave her a searching glance. Apparently satisfied, he nodded. "Yes," he said, "I've done some things I wasn't proud of, too, just because I wanted to be where something was happening. Is that why you needled him—because you'd gotten in, couldn't see a way out, and weren't very proud of yourself? Is that it?"

"There's more to it than that," she said wearily. "It's not that simple. All right, I was his woman, but I didn't have the guts to walk out on him. I needled him so he'd kick me out. Does that satisfy you?"

"Satisfy me?" Foyle looked surprised. "What have I got to do with it? The point is, does it satisfy you?" Then he laughed. "There's an old song," he said, "about a bear. It went over the mountain, but there was always another mountain, and the bear always kept going over the next one, just to see the other side. It sounds pretty pointless, until you consider that he must have seen a helluva lot of mountains and become a pretty well-traveled bear after

awhile. . . . Now, can I buy you a drink?"

"But you don't understand," she said with a bleak kind of earnestness. "Everybody knew I was Routt's woman. Nora Logan, Routt's girl, me. And yes, I can use a drink."

Foyle called the bartender with a careless wave of his arm and said, "There's something you can tell me. I got back in New York a week ago from India, where I spent some of the best years of my life teaching Mr. Nehru's soldier boys to shoulder arms. I got a room up in Myer's Hotel here in Hoboken, but I don't like the bar there because it's always full of tourists from East Orange. I like this gin mill. Until their ship sailed, it was full of Dutch sailors who like to sing Dutch songs. So. Tonight you and Routt walked in on me, and this is what I want to know—who the hell is this Routt?"

HER mouth fell open at the unexpectedness of the question, and when she realized the implication, she said wryly, "Nice try, Foyle. Very nice try but you can ask about Routt, and they'll tell you, in Miami and in San Francisco and in Chicago and in New York. . . ."

"Yeah, but I'm asking in Hoboken. Who is he?"

"He's a gambler."

"That much I guessed. A big shot?"

"A *very* big shot."

"But right now he's broke, eh?"

Nora Logan's eyes sprang wide, then narrowed suspiciously. "I thought you didn't know him."

"I don't, but a big shot wouldn't be making such a college try for ten thousand bucks if he weren't broke. He'd send somebody to collect it. And he wouldn't have fooled around with somebody like George Bascule, in the first place. So he's broke."

"He won't be for long," said Nora bitterly. "He never is. He just needs a stake."

The bartender came to the table and nervously asked what it would be. Foyle told him to bring a bottle of Royal George scotch. Tonelessly, the bartender said the best they had was Vat 69 and it was eight bucks, would that do or wouldn't it? Foyle cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Why not make it ten bucks while you're at it?" he asked.

"Okay. Ten bucks." His eyes were passively hostile.

"Bring it. And for the same ten bucks you can bring us a bucket of ice and two or three bottles of plain soda. Roger?"

"Roger," said the barkeep with disgust. He walked away.

"He doesn't like us," whispered Nora.

"Can you blame him? We cleaned out his bar for him. And Routt'll keep it clean till this is settled. He doesn't like a mess any more than—" Foyle grinned wryly "—most people."

Nora looked at him and her young face was suddenly tired. "You can include me," she said. "I'm tired of messes, too."

"Too?"

"How old are you, Foyle?"

Foyle winced and unconsciously his fingers touched his temple where the gray had begun to seep into the angry red of his hair.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Maybe you're right."

"If I'm not, then all the happy tourists from East Orange all over the country are wrong."

Foyle, suddenly harsh, said, "Hold your hats, kids, here we go again."

Routt had come out of the phone booth and was standing at the bar beside the squat man, and the two of them were looking expressionlessly toward the booth while the boy in the two-hundred-dollar chalk-stripe suit slowly crossed the intervening space with reluctant feet. His cockiness was gone. The squat man had obviously and sadistically told him a few things about Foyle.

Foyle felt the impulse to slide out of the booth just to see the boy jump, but he grimly checked it. He waited until the boy came up to the table and said to Nora, with a jerk of his head toward the bar:

"He wants to see you."

Before Nora could answer, Foyle grabbed the front of the boy's double-breasted jacket, jerked him against the table, fanning him quickly for a gun. There wasn't any gun. The squat man at the bar laughed, but it was a laugh of respect and satisfaction, as if he had learned something he had wanted to find out and now had things well in hand.

Foyle shoved the boy back roughly, swearing to himself. They had wanted to

find out if he was carrying a gun, and now they knew he wasn't, or else he wouldn't have fanned the boy.

But he was totally unprepared for what happened.

The boy staggered back three hard-heeled paces, his face veal white, gave his right arm the peculiar straight-arm jerk of a knife fighter with a knife up his sleeve, and lunged at Foyle with the knife-blade gleaming between his thumb and forefinger.

Foyle swore and kicked up the table with his knees, deflecting the boy's arm, and he saw the wickedly gleaming blade go past his eyes and heard the thunk as the point stabbed into the high wooden back of the booth. He grabbed the boy's wrist, and if Nora had not been sitting there, her mouth rounded in horror, he would have wrenched down, breaking the boy's arm across the edge of the table. Instead, he bounced the boy's elbow twice against the table edge, then released his grip and pulled the knife out of the wood over his left shoulder. It was a beautiful, balanced knife with an ivory handle—the kind you either make for yourself or have made to order for fifty dollars.

Foyle hefted it familiarly and said, "Tell *Mr.* Routt that *Mrs.* Routt does not care to join him at the moment." He said it gravely, without any hint of a smile.

The boy stood white-faced, holding his elbow, then turned and walked back to the bar. The squat man patted him patronizingly on the shoulder, and Routt said something to him. With a look of hatred toward Foyle, the boy walked out of the bar, not holding his elbow but squeezing his arm against his side so he wouldn't have to swing it as he walked.

FOYLE muttered, "I'm getting old. I should have known you can't play around with a young buck. I shouldn't have fanned him. I should have smacked him. If you hadn't been here, it would have been different. You can't shame that kind in front of a woman. I thought I'd have to kill him at the end."

A little hysterically, Nora cried, "Getting old!" Then, "How did you know Routt and I were married?"

"How did *Mr.* Bessemer know what made steel?" Foyle asked sourly. His

hand flicked and the knife flew across the table, pinning the collar of Nora's sport coat to the wood of the high seat behind her. "Good knife." Before she could even gasp, he reached out, wrenched the knife loose and bounced it appreciatively in his hand. "Good knife."

The bartender came to their table with the scotch, ice and soda. He was not hostile any longer. He was scared and there was no room for anything else. He knew now that the bar was divided into two camps, and that he was the innocent bystander who always got it in the neck, and that there was no hope for him unless a policeman dropped in, which was unlikely. The police went down River Street in prowling cars.

Foyle took the scotch bottle and under the cover of opening it, he said, "Can you get me a gun?"

The bartender had already made up his mind against Routt. He nodded. "In the till," he whispered back.

"Can you get it to me in a tray of sandwiches?"

"I can try, buddy. Any particular kind of sandwiches?"

Nora laughed hysterically. "Ham," she cried. "Ham and swiss on rye with mustard!"

"With mustard," muttered the barkeep. "And, brother, I hope you know what you're doing!"

He walked quickly away, twitching his towel against his leg. He did not have to go into a back room to make the sandwiches. All the makings were at the end of the bar next the hamburger grill and coffee urn.

Nora grasped the edge of the table, leaned over it and said a little wildly, "You're not going to do it, are you? You're not going to do it."

"Do what?"

"Give Routt that ten thousand dollars. You're not going to do it no matter what happens. Isn't that right?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what? The answering telegram from Tampa? I don't believe that."

Foyle drew his mouth together and glanced sideways at Routt's back. The man was leaning over the bar, talking to his henchman.

"There won't be any answering tele-

gram from Tampa," he said. He grinned a reckless, liting grin. "I don't know if Tampa has a hospital for paraplegics, but if it does, I don't have any friends in it."

Aghast, Nora said, "What!" Her fingers clawed on the tabletop, and she stared at him incredulously.

He shoveled ice into the two clean glasses the bartender had brought, measured the pour of scotch with his eye, then added soda for a strong drink. He handed her one of the glasses.

"Well," he said, "let's try the dive from the twenty-foot board. I think your husband killed the wrong man, Mrs. Routt."

"Don't call me that!"

"All right. I apologize."

"I mean it," she said fiercely. "He may kill me before this is over tonight, but you've got to know how I feel!"

Impulsively, he took her out-stretched hand, looked down at it, then, with a rueful grin, kissed the palm of it.

"Yes, Nora," he said gently.

She jerked her hand away from him. "Don't pity me!" she cried tearfully. "I don't want pity. I wasn't the under-privileged child, I wasn't a slum kid. I went in with my eyes wide open. My father was a school teacher in White Plains, New York. I was wild, you understand. I was just plain no good. . . ."

"Maybe that makes two of us. My old man was a mechanical engineer. Worked in a furnace factory. The only thing I can say for myself is that I've never fought against my country, though I've fought under every flag except my own. Call us two of a kind."

NORA'S hands, both of them now, closed convulsively around his. "I want to know something," she asked feverishly. "I want to ask you something. About that twenty thousand dollars. I know you've never touched it—but did you ever intend to give it to Matthew Lund?"

He said very carefully, "That's a funny question."

"Three years you waited. Three years! You could have found him before. You knew he escaped. You must have known, but you waited three years. Why? Why did you wait? You didn't want to turn it over to him, did you? You wanted to keep it!"

"I was in India. If Lund is dead, I'll divide it with George Bascule."

"You *will* divide with Bascule?"

"If Lund is dead. I don't think he's dead."

She said, "Oh," and her shoulders seemed to slump a little. "You don't think Lund is dead, but instead of trying to verify the report of his death, you sent a telegram to a fictitious man in a fictitious hospital. You're never going to give that money up, are you, Foyle? To Bascule, Routt, or anybody. Why did you send that telegram?"

His gray-green eyes snapped and he said angrily, "What is all this anyway? Why all the questions? Have I applied for a job, or something?"

"I just thought you were somebody. that's all," she said dully. "I just thought I had finally met somebody who wasn't like Routt and the rest of them."

He stared at her and slowly a lopsided grin dug into his right cheek. "Think of that," he murmured. "After all this, you still think there's an honest man."

She picked up her bag from the table and started to slide out of the booth. "Oh, let me out of here," she said. "At least Routt never pretended."

Foyle put out his long arm and stopped her. "Stick around," he said. "Maybe you were right the first time. That wasn't Matty Lund they found in Tampa Bay. Matty Lund had only one arm, and when they described that guy in the newspaper story, they didn't say anything about only one arm. They wouldn't have missed that in a description, would they?"

"Then who—who did they find?"

"Ask Routt. He had it done so he could show me proof that Matty Lund was dead. I sent that phony telegram because I need time. I sent Matty a telegram five days ago, telling him to meet me here tonight. I'm waiting for him."

Her face showed only horror. "You fool!" she said. "You fool! Do you think that's going to stop Routt now? Do you think he's going to let you get away with that money? He needs more than a stake. He's in the hole, and if he doesn't pay up, he knows what they'll do to him. He won't be the first gambler they took for a ride because he didn't pay up. Foyle. Listen to me, Foyle."

She clutched his hand in both of hers. "Give him the ten thousand dollars. This is his last chance to get the money, and he's desperate. You haven't looked outside since we came in, have you? Well, I'll tell you what's out there for Routt. There's death out there unless he gets the money, or the definite assurance of it—*tonight!* Maxon and Tony aren't his men. They're here to see that he gets the money or—the other thing."

"Maxon and Tony?"

"Maxon's the one standing at the bar with Routt. Tony's the young one who went out. Their car is waiting outside, and there's another man in it. They'll help Routt get the money from you, if they have to. They'll hurt you, Foyle. They'll hurt you dreadfully, and in the end you'll give them the money, anyway. Give it to them now, before anything happens. Give it to them now!"

She saw Foyle's head jerk around and his eyes become very intent. She turned and saw that a uniformed policeman had just walked in, thrusting back his cap and wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. Routt and the squat man, Maxon, stood frozen as the bartender walked quickly down the bar toward the cop. Foyle grasped Nora's arm and whispered harshly:

"You keep your mouth shut, understand?"

She tried to free her arm. "You're hurting me."

"You keep out of this. Let me handle it."

"All right, but let me go, please. You're hurting me."

He muttered, "Sorry," and released her arm, watching the policeman stroll toward their booth.

THE policeman stopped at the table and looked down at Foyle. He was a big man, middle-aged and gone to fat. His blue coat strained at the buttons across his middle.

"What's the trouble, buddy?" he said to Foyle. "The barkeep says those two guys at the bar have you behind the eight ball."

Foyle looked surprised. "Trouble? There's no trouble now. I had a little trouble a while ago with a wise kid, but he's gone."

"Now wait a minute, buddy. The barkeep said you wanted a gun."

"A gun!" Foyle blinked, then roared with laughter. "What would I do with a gun? I'd probably shoot myself in the foot, or something. If you ask me, the barkeep's been sampling his inventory."

The policeman's face turned fiery red. "And it wouldn't be the first time," he said angrily. "Sorry to have bothered you, buddy."

He turned and, glowering at the barkeep, walked out of the bar. The barkeep stared at Foyle, then walked back to the sandwich counter and deliberately threw the two ham-and-swiss sandwiches into the waste can.

Nora breathed, "And you could have walked out of here . . ."

Foyle shook his head. "How far do you think they'd have let me go? And how much good do you think that fat cop would have done? His badge wouldn't save him from a clout over the head, and we'd be out of here and in that car you told me was waiting outside."

"But you can't just sit here!"

Foyle glanced toward the door. "It's beginning to rain," he murmured.

As if to verify his observation, a peal of thunder reverberated across the night, and out on the river, a wallowing tugboat hooted twice. Foyle gently patted the girl's hand.

"Will they let you walk out of here?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not now. Not any more."

"Try going to the john. There may be a window or a door back there. The going may get rough, and I don't want you to get hurt."

"They won't let me, Foyle."

"Try it."

Obediently, she slid out of the booth and walked steadily across the floor toward the door marked *Ladies*. Under the sign, some prankster had penciled, *Ha-Ha*. Routt did not stop her. He followed her and when she went into the room, he quickly stopped the door with his foot before she could close and lock it. She jerked it open, her face red.

His lips puckered in his palsy smile and he said, "Don't mind me, darling. After all . . ."

She slapped him furiously, thrust past him and strode back to the booth. Maxon followed the movement of her hips with his chocolatey eyes and put his tongue in his cheek.

Foyle stood as Nora came back to the booth; then he sat and tipped the scotch bottle over her glass. He smiled at her.

"I'll bet that did you good," he said, "that slap."

"I wish I'd had a club!" Her hands were shaking.

He glanced up at the wall, at the clock that advertised Four Roses. It was ten-thirty.

"Three and a half hours till closing," he murmured. "Am I going to see you again, after this is all over?"

She raised her eyes to his face and silently began to cry. Foyle patted her hand, then looked up quickly as the street door opened again. There were three men, obviously members of the engine-room crew of a docked freighter. All three wore black caps and grease-stained dungarees and skivvies. They rapped noisily on the bar and called for beer.

Maxon stopped the bartender and spoke a few words to him. The bartender wet his lips and rolled his eyes toward the three men clamoring for beer, and when he walked toward them, he looked scared.

"Sorry, fellas," he said, "no tap beer. The keg run out."

"Okay, give us some bottles."

"All I got's the imported. That's seventy-five cents a bottle."

They swore at him, telling him what to do with his bottles of imported Holland beer at seventy-five cents a bottle, and stamped out, slamming the door. The bartender just stood there, staring after them, not looking back at Maxon, who was watching him with a small smile on his round face.

Maxon's the man to watch, thought Foyle, Maxon's the tough one. Routt's desperate, but Maxon'll be the one to swing the ax.

But aside from keeping the bar clear of transient customers, Maxon seemed to be keeping himself aloof, his attitude saying very plainly that until the deadline, it was Routt's party. Once or twice he glanced curiously at Foyle, as if the big, red-headed man had him puzzled. He had been like

that since Foyle had gotten rid of the policeman. Maxon and Routt hardly spoke, and when they did, it was always Routt who initiated the conversation, and Maxon answered him only in monosyllables. At twelve-thirty he was yawning and seemed to be getting drowsy, but Foyle knew better. Maxon was just coasting, taking it easy, waiting.

NORA had not said anything for an hour. She sat hunched in the back corner of the booth, watching Foyle with tragic eyes. Foyle was watching the door. His eyes sharpened when the door opened at one o'clock and a gray-haired Salvation Army man walked in with a black, shiny raincoat thrown over his shoulders like a cape. The man took off his red-banded cap, set it down on the bar and wiped the rain from his face, his glance wandering from Foyle to Routt and Maxon and then to the bartender. Foyle sighed and sat back in his chair.

The Salvation Army man tried to order a cup of coffee, but the bartender, with a sidelong glance at Maxon, shook his head.

"Sorry," he said gruffly, "all outa coffee."

"Then give me a cup of that brown stuff that's bubbling away in there." The Salvation Army man pointed at the coffee urn. A finger of steam was coming from the top of it, and the coffee could plainly be seen on the tubular glass gauge at the side.

Maxon growled, "Give him a cup of coffee and shut up. Here, pal, put this in your hat." He spun a half dollar down the bar.

The Salvation Army man picked it up and put it in his pocket. "Thank you and God bless you," he said gravely.

Maxon said sure, and laughed, as if he found it very funny.

The phone rang and Routt jumped for it. He came out of the booth and crooked his finger at Foyle.

"For you," he said. "Western Union."

Foyle muttered to Nora, "Here we go. Stay here."

Nora's eyes became enormous as she watched him cross the room to the phone booth. Routt stepped in front of him. His face was shiny with perspiration.

"I want to hear this, too," he said tightly. "Have them repeat it to me."

Foyle shrugged and picked up the receiver. He felt his stomach tighten just a little, the way it always did before an action. He knew what Western Union was going to say to him—*sorry, but we could not deliver your telegram. There is no Tampa Hospital for Paraplegics.*

"Yes?" he said into the mouthpiece.

The voice began to talk and his harsh, red eyebrows lifted. Then he grinned. Western Union was giving him an *answer* to his telegram. "Body positively identified as Matthew Lund. Anything else you want to know, pal? Why don't you drop in and see a guy once in a while?" It was signed with the fictitious name to which Foyle had sent the original telegram, and it had come from Tampa.

Foyle said solemnly, "Would you mind repeating that, please?" and handed the receiver to Routt.

Routt, the man who thought of everything, the man who had acquaintances all over the country, including Tampa, would have an acquaintance who would, as a favor, answer one fictitious telegram with another.

Routt hung up and faced Foyle. "Well," he said with satisfaction, "are you convinced now?"

Foyle felt a tingling in his legs. Maxon was standing away from the bar now, watching them. Foyle gave his head a short nod.

"If I can't trust that guy," he said, tilting his chin at the phone, "I can't trust anybody. But you're still not getting the money, Routt. It goes to Bascule and nobody else."

Routt's mouth pursed and he walked to the front door. He opened it and waved his arm. He stood there until the young hoodlum, Tony, walked in, pushing a staggering, unshaven man before him.

Foyle's heart turned over at the sight of this drunken derelict. It was three years since he had seen George Bascule, and at that time George had been a laughing, good-natured braggart. Whatever had happened in those three years, it had left Bascule a bleary-eyed wreck.

Foyle cried poignantly, "George!"

Bascule raised his head and looked dimly around. Spying Foyle, he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and grinned loosely.

"Hiya, Foyle," he said thickly. "Heard you was back. How's about buying a drink for an ol' friend?" He lurched to the bar and stood there blinking and grinning foolishly at Foyle.

Routt said sharply, "Here's a check, Foyle. Give him his money."

Foyle looked down at the check Routt was offering. It was a Newark and Essex Trust counter check. Foyle raised his eyebrows and took it. Routt did think of everything: He laid it on the bar and bent over it with the pen Routt had thrust at him. He looked up at Bascule.

"Do you want me to make this out to you, George?" he asked softly. "Or shall I make it out directly to Routt, here?"

Bascule clung to the bar with both hands and his mouth fell open.

"Ten thousand dollars, George," said Foyle. "Half of old man Lund's share."

BASCULE swallowed. He stammered, "Foyle, I swear I didn't mean to get you mixed up in this, but I'm always a damn fool when it comes to likker. I . . ." His hands clawed on the edge of the bar and he cried, "Don't give it to him, Foyle. He gyped me. He got me soused, and when I woke up he said I owed him. I don't even remember playing poker with him. Don't give it to him!"

He shoved himself away from the bar and fled clumsily toward the door.

Tony took two lithe strides and chopped him savagely across the back of the neck with his clubbed fist. Bascule went down on his face, twitching. Tony raised his foot to kick him in the side and, with a roar, Foyle flung Maxon out of his way and lunged. He caught Tony by the arm, twisted him around and hit him in the stomach as hard as he could. Gagging, Tony doubled up, and Foyle hit him in the face, driving him back against the bar, chopping again and again at the gagging face, refusing to let Tony fall.

The bartender cried, "Oh, God," and Maxon flung himself at Foyle, locking his arms behind him at the elbows. Tony slid to the floor and lay still.

Maxon grunted, "Take it easy, pal, or I'll let you have it, so help me."

Foyle took a breath. "You can let me go."

Maxon released him and stepped back

warily. Routt had not moved from his place at the bar.

"Are you going to finish making out the check or not?" he asked sharply.

Foyle balanced on the balls of his feet. He looked over his shoulder. Maxon was behind him, his head cocked to one side as if he were still very, very curious about Foyle.

Foyle laughed and thrust out his finger at Routt.

"I'll make you a deal," he cried liltily. "If Lund is dead, there's twenty thousand dollars floating around loose. I'll cut cards with you. Twenty thousand or nothing. What do you say, Routt?"

Routt's eyes seemed to bulge and his glance flickered at Maxon. His pale tongue darted out across his lips. He showed his teeth.

"That's a deal," he said hoarsely. "But we'll use his cards." He jerked his head toward the barkeep.

The bartender said shakily, "All I got's a pair of dice." He reached under the bar and put a leather dice cup on the bar. "Here you are."

Foyle shook it out and picked up one of the dice, grinning into Routt's sweating face.

"One roll," he said. "Want me to go first?"

Routt swallowed. "You."

Foyle flipped his dice. It bounced down the bar, caromed off Routt's glass, spun for a moment and turned up a six.

Routt cried, "No dice! It wasn't a free roll. It hit the glass."

"I never heard that rule before. Just make it up? I suppose if I had turned up a six without hitting the glass, you'd have accused me of using educated dice. I think George was right. I think you did clip him."

Routt swung his arm, sweeping the dice and glass from the top of the bar. "The hell with this!" he said hoarsely. "Give me my ten thousand."

Foyle smiled into Routt's convulsed face, then turned his head just a little and said over his shoulder, "Tell them who you are, bucko!"

"Why," said the Salvation Army man, "the name's Lund. Matty Lund, old man Lund himself, in person." He whirled and dived straight at Maxon, and his raincoat

falling off showed his left sleeve pinned empty to his shoulder.

Routt cried out and scrambled back, his hand darting under his coat for his gun. Foyle's open-handed swing caught him across the face and sent him staggering and flailing across the floor. Foyle bounded after him and slapped again, then again and again, driving Routt across the room. Routt crushed against the wall and Foyle finished him off with a short, hard hook to the jaw.

Foyle bent over him and swiftly flipped out the gun from under his left arm. He whirled. Maxon was sitting on the floor, dizzily shaking his head, and old man Lund was standing over him.

"Butted him right in the kisser," the old man cried gleefully. "I always did have the hardest damn head. Here's his cannon, you crazy mick."

He swept Maxon's gun down the room to Foyle with a flip of his foot. Foyle picked it up, grinning.

"Old man," he said, "I've just had a sweet time saving your twenty thousand dollars for you."

THE old man walked over to the bar, picking up his raincoat on the way. He put on the red-banded cap of the Salvation Army. He gave the visor a little tug, setting it jauntily on his head. He looked at himself in the mirror.

"Now I got the strength to tell you what I came all the way up from Tampa for," he said. "I don't want the money, Irish. I'm a reformed character, but if I got my hands on that much money, I'd go right back to being unreformed. I think I like it better being reformed. I could say give it to the Salvation Army, but I ain't gonna, because it'd always be an awful temptation for me to tell somebody the money came from me, and I'd start getting a big head, and there's nothing like a big head to start you on the way to getting unreformed again. Now I want to get out of here. You're a bad influence, Irish. For two years I've been decent and God-fearing and now, after only a half hour around you, I've been fighting and rolling around on barroom floors and swearing."

"You're kidding!" gasped Foyle.

"No sir, I'm not kidding. All I want is to go back to Tampa and get back to doing good, and I hope the good Lord will forgive me for lifting my hand against a fellow man even if that fellow man was as sinful and ugly as a moth-eaten gorilla. My advice to you is to keep that money. You always were unreformed and you always will be unreformed, so it can't do you any harm. And in case you do decide to get reformed, maybe the money'll help you stay that way, because you ain't like me, content just to do good. As I remember, you've never been content unless you had that big hairy fist of yours in somebody's kisser. So long, Irish. And so long, ma'am," he said to Nora. "I seen you looking at him like he was something special. Well, he is."

He turned and walked quickly out of the bar, his raincoat flapping behind him.

The bartender had been standing, gaping, behind the bar. Now he vaulted over it and ran for the phone booth, muttering, "This time I'm calling the cops." He stopped at the booth and glowered back at Foyle. "Don't you understand, stupid?" he shouted angrily. "I'm calling the cops. Get that dame outta here before she gets mixed up in this, too."

Nora came running from the booth. Foyle put his arm around her and hurried her out of the bar. As they stepped out on the sidewalk and started up the street, they heard a car door slam and saw a man come sprinting from it toward them. Foyle waved the gun he had taken from Routt and the man sheered off sharply, darting now for the door of the bar.

Foyle lengthened his stride and carried Nora along with him. They turned the corner and started up toward Hudson Street, hearing the sound of the police siren. Foyle looked back, and as he did, a car roared north on River Street and he caught a glimpse of Routt's white face in the rear window as the car flashed under the street light. There was a flat crack, like the bark of a gun; the door of the car opened and something tumbled out, flapping limply like a scarecrow. Nora gave a cry, but Foyle tightened his arm around her and hurried her forward.

"No, honey," he said, "don't go back." Then, "Don't ever go back."

G-STRING KILL

By **DON
JAMES**



Laura Lemaine was strangled in a cheap Fourth Street hotel. . .

With every two-bit question, Sam's two-bit case got hotter—until suddenly he was staring at his own obituary, starkly written in the eyes of the blonde stripper's killer!



SO THERE I sat, in a hole-in-the-wall office in a rundown building with my name on the directory—Sam Margin, Private Detective—flat broke and without a client.

I sat at my scarred desk, leaned back in my creaking swivel chair, looked at my empty client's chair, and tried to ignore the unopened bills that had just come in the mail.

"At this place in the story," I told myself, "the door always opens and a beautiful dame walks in. First, second, or third paragraph. Maybe I should stop reading the

damned things and take a course in plumbing. My door *never* opens."

But the door did open and a dame walked in. She was not the beautiful dame of the stories. She was as plain looking as an eatery coffee cup. She wore a suit that was in style four years ago. Her black hair was a little stringy beneath a hat that was a little soiled. Her black eyes blinked behind thick glasses. She might have been thirty or thirty-five. It was hard to guess.

"Mr. Margin?" she asked.

I decided to stand. She might be a client. I stood and said I was Mr. Margin and would she be seated? She took the client's chair and carefully pulled her skirt over her knees, as if I could possibly care. Her knees were bony, her figure was awful, and her nose was too long in a pointed way.

"You're a private detective?" she asked.

I nodded.

She hesitated and thought it over. "Do you charge much?"

"It depends upon the job. Generally speaking, I'm quite reasonable."

"I only have twenty-five dollars to spend."

"It depends upon what you want," I pointed out again.

"I'm Clara Crundle. I'm a waitress in a sort of boarding house at Pasco, but we also serve meals to anyone who wants to come in. It's pretty busy. The Hanford project, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"I finally came down to Portland to find out for myself and went to some other detective places but they weren't interested. I found your name in the telephone directory under 'Detective Agencies' and they said your phone was disconnected, so I came."

I nodded again and thought about my telephone bill.

She watched me nervously and said again, "I only have twenty-five dollars to spend."

"It depends upon what you want, Miss Crundle. It is 'Miss'?"

"Divorced. My husband drank. He wasn't much good."

"Some men aren't," I said.

"But I suppose twenty-five dollars isn't enough."

It was getting to be a routine. I smiled pleasantly and said, "To do what?"

"To find out who killed my sister Eloise."

FOR maybe fifteen seconds I was surprised and then I had a lively debate with my conscience and my conscience won.

"You mean she was murdered?"

"Yes." She got out a handkerchief to blot a couple of tears.

"The police know about it?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. They were awfully nice to me and explained that they're still looking, but they simply haven't found out anything."

"Well, I don't know the circumstances, Miss Crundle, but I'll be honest with you. I could take your money, but I wouldn't get any results. There isn't once in a blue moon that a private detective outshines the police when they're after the same thing. The police have a great many facilities and a large personnel. Their methods are effective. They're trained and competent—regardless of what you may have heard. They're doing everything they can, and there isn't a thing more that I can do. You'd be throwing away money."

She nodded as if she was in perfect agreement with me, and then she said, "Only I'd feel better about it. How long would you work for twenty-five dollars, Mr. Margin?"

I shrugged. "One day—maybe two."

"Would you work the rest of today and tomorrow until quitting time? I suppose that's five o'clock, isn't it?"

"I could, but I don't want to take your money when I know I won't do anything for you. Why don't you just forget it?"

"I'd feel much better about the whole thing if you would, Mr. Margin. I'd feel then as if I'd done everything possible for poor Eloise. Not that we were ever very close. But she was my sister—step-sister, that is. We were raised together on the ranch and it just seems right that I do what I can as a sort of final—final something or other."

"Final gesture?"

"Maybe. Anyhow, you can see what I mean."

She looked at me through watery eyes, and then she opened a handbag and took out twenty-five dollars in worn bills and laid the money on the desk.

"If you would, Mr. Margin, then I could go home day after tomorrow feeling that

I'd done my duty. I'd feel I'd done all I could."

"It's worth that much to you?"

"Yes."

My conscience and I had another talk and I decided that the aspect of the case had changed. If she felt that way about it, maybe it made sense.

I put the money in my wallet.

"You'd better tell me about her," I said.

"I keep forgetting that she didn't use 'Eloise' on the stage. She used 'Laura Lemaïne.' She wasn't a very good actress, I guess. She usually played in those burlesque places and—"

I stared very hard at her.

"Laura Lemaïne was *your* sister?"

"Step-sister."

"Look, Miss Crundle, you'd better take your money back. Laura Lemaïne was strangled in a cheap Fourth Street hotel. She made a big news splash because there were plenty of leggy pictures for the newspapers. The cops had half of skid row on the pan for that murder. Every guy she'd been out with. All the suspicious characters hanging around burlesque joints. Every angle was carefully investigated. There isn't a single thing I can do."

"I told the police about Howard, but they weren't very interested."

"Howard?"

"Howard Swanley. He was her boyfriend up at Wolf Point, Montana. We were raised near there on a wheat ranch. Then our folks sold out in the war and worked in the shipyards here and after the war they went back, but Eloise—Laura—and I didn't."

"And what about Howard?"

"He was 4-F and worked in the yards, too. He's still here in Portland."

"What's he got to do with Laura's death?"

"That's what I don't know. I called him and he said there wasn't anything to talk about—not after the way Eloise had turned out and then getting murdered in that awful hotel."

I lit a cigarette. "The cops weren't interested?"

"No. They don't think he had anything to do with it. They sort of checked and found out he's married and settled down and has a good reputation. And no one ever heard anything about Eloise—Laura—

ever mentioning him. But I wish you'd talk to him."

"Would that earn the twenty-five dollars for you?"

"Oh, yes!"



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"All right. I'll talk with Howard. I'll give you a report tomorrow right after five. Okay?"

She nodded.

I said, "Where will I find you?"

"At the YWCA."

I smiled and she stood. I went to the elevator with her. Four old lawyers with no practice, but old age pensions, were in the cage. The building was full of characters, including a bankrupt detective with a welcome bonanza of twenty-five bucks in his pocket.

IT WAS a beautiful spring evening. Up on the Heights the houses looked large and pleasant against their background of heavy foliage. To the east, Mt. Hood was a tremendous, magnificent, snow-capped monument to nature. The air was balmy as a rose petal. It was that kind of a spring evening and I had fun with phrases.

With five gallons of gas in my 1940 Chev I headed out Burnside, switched onto Sandy and cut northeast across town to the outskirts. I found the cross street beyond the eighties and bumped over scarred blacktop until I came to the address I wanted. The house's blinds were drawn and there was no sign of life about the place. The lawn needed cutting.

I pushed the doorbell. No one came to the door. I went around to the back door. No one answered. I looked in the garage at a Ford.

I walked around the other side of the house. A woman was in the yard of the next house working around some rose bushes. The houses were similar; in the low price bracket, built since the war, small and compact.

The woman saw me and stopped working. She was young and blonde. She wore slacks and a plaid cotton shirt.

"I don't think he's home," she said.

There was no fence and I walked across her lawn and looked at the rose bushes.

"Nice bushes," I said. "I'm looking for Howard Swanley."

She smiled. "That's what I thought. I don't think he's home."

"Nor Mrs. Swanley?"

"Alice has been in California for about three or four months. Someone in her family is sick and she left suddenly. Howard's alone."

"His car is here. I thought he might be around."

"Sometimes he rides with another man who works where he does."

"Where's that? Maybe I can find him there."

"He drives a truck for Columbia Gorge Trucking. It's over on the West Side."

"Well, maybe that's my best bet."

She looked at me curiously. "Say, is Howard in some kind of trouble?"

"Something makes you think he is?"

"Well, maybe I shouldn't be so inquisitive, but Alice and I are pretty friendly. Not close friends, you understand. I didn't even know she had relatives in California, for instance. But you know how it is—next door neighbors and everything. So I've been wondering."

"It's nothing serious. Someone else was out here?"

"Yes, and I thought it was—" Suddenly she giggled. "Listen to me! You're probably a detective, too. I bet you think I'm just an inquisitive woman!"

I laughed with her. "You mean someone from the police department was here?"

"Day before yesterday. He asked a lot of questions about Howard, but I guess it wasn't too important because he seemed satisfied with what I told him. Howard's a nice, hard-working man and my husband and I like him."

"Well, it isn't too important," I said. "I'll try where he works."

The dispatcher at the Columbia Gorge Trucking Co. said, "Swanley is due from Spokane now, but there's a wind up the gorge. It slow 'em down sometimes."

I thanked him and went to my parked car where I could watch the trucks come in. Down on 19th traffic streamed toward the ball park and I remembered it was the first at-home week for the Beavers. I thought a ball game might be a good idea after I talked with Swanley.

Ten minutes later I was talking with him.

Howard Swanley probably was around thirty. He matched my six feet of height, and had a rugged face, yellow hair, blue eyes and big, capable hands. He wasn't the friendly type.

"What's this all about?" he said. "First Clara calls me with some screwy questions about Eloise. Now you."

"Clara thinks you might give us a lead on who killed Eloise—Laura."

"Eloise," he said. "I always called her that. But I can't tell you anything about her. I hadn't seen her for a year before she was killed."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Look, mister, I don't think it's any of your damned business. What you tryin' to do? Cause trouble?"

"Aren't you interested in seeing that the murderer is caught?"

"Why should I be?"

"Clara says you were her boyfriend up in Montana."

"So what? After they moved here and she worked in the yards she changed. Workin' in that burlesque. Showin' herself off without enough clothes. She wasn't decent."

"A kid trying to make the stage sometimes takes any job she can get behind footlights. That doesn't mean she's no good."

"No? Then why did she live in that dump of a hotel?"

"It's a dump, huh?"

"Look, mister, go in there once and you'll know what kind of a place it is. Don't kid yourself about Eloise."

"No idea who killed her?"

"No. And she probably had it coming. A girl playin' around with half a dozen guys leads with her chin. Drinkin' like she did. And don't kid yourself that she didn't keep some reefer in her dresser drawer. She was on the skids. But plenty."

I shrugged. This was buying me nothing, and Clara less. A small return for twenty-five bucks.

"I told Clara I'd see you," I said. "Anything you want me to tell her?"

"Nothing that I didn't say over the phone." He looked at another driver walking by. "Hey, Pete—goin' my way?"

"Want a lift?"

"Yeah. I got to get some sleep. Takin' the short run to Astoria tomorrow." Swanley looked back at me. "I'd like to help you, but I can't. Tell Clara I'm sorry. I don't know why she's so interested, anyhow. After the way Eloise treated her. But I guess Clara is just that way. Sure as hell isn't much for looks, but she's okay. Used to worry a lot about Eloise. An' Eloise was only a step-sister, too. Dames are

funny." He shrugged, looking bored and anxious to be off.

"Well, thanks," I said.

"Sure. Sorry I couldn't help."

I lit a cigarette and gazed after him and wondered about a few things. I glanced at my wrist watch. It was after eight. I'd put in more than my half day for Clara and out on Vaughan street the baseball crowd was roaring.

I went to the ball game. The Beavers lost to Hollywood, 4 to 2.

AFTER the game I started toward my small apartment on N. W. 23rd, and when I came to the four-way stop at Lovejoy it occurred to me that it might be the best time to check the hotel.

I turned down Lovejoy, crossed the Lovejoy ramp, turned right on Broadway, then left to Fourth. The hotel was on the wrong side of Burnside.

A middle-aged clerk with little hair wasn't too impressed with me.

"No rooms," he said.

"Not interested in a room," I said.

He looked me over.

"Laura Lemaine," I said.

"Cop?"

I nodded.

He said, "When you going to let it die?"

"That depends. Just a couple of questions."

He sighed. "Okay. I thought all the questions had been asked."

"She was murdered four months ago—in January. How long had she been living here?"

"Exactly?"

"Exactly."

He sighed again and thumbed through the register. Finally he pointed a blunt finger at her name. "She registered October seventh. About four months before she got killed." He thumbed the register again. "Checked out January seventeenth." He smiled. "Checked out permanently, huh?"

"Know her well?"

"As well as any of them."

"Quite a few boyfriends?"

"Look, all these questions have been asked. I can't tell you any more."

"Ever see her with a big guy about my height, a little heavier, yellow hair, blue eyes?"

He squinted thoughtfully. "Seems I did."

I had expected him to say he hadn't. Maybe he was just talking.

"Often?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Just once or twice—if I remember right. There's a side door. We don't see 'em all."

"Remember anything else about him?"

"No. It's kind of hazy."

"Maybe you can help me later. Okay?"

He shrugged.

"Who do I ask for?" I said.

"Horatio Clanivan."

I thanked him and drove over to the Jolly Joan for coffee and apple pie and went home.

I should have been asleep by one o'clock. At two I still was tossing around. It was beginning to look as if Clara might get something for her money.

THE beautiful spring evening had become a beautiful spring morning and it was hot by ten o'clock. I parked at the small house again. The blinds still were down, but the Ford was not in the garage. The young lady was not looking at her rose bushes, either, so I went to her front door. She wore shorts and a halter.

"Oh, it's you again!" she smiled.

"Yep. I saw Howard last night, but forgot to ask one question and I want to send a wire to his wife, so it's sort of important. Do you have her address? Howard is on a run and I can't reach him."

"Why, no, I don't," she frowned. "I asked Howard once, and he said he'd leave it in our mailbox the next morning, but I guess he forgot. Then last week I asked the mailman if he'd let me get the return address from one of her letters." She frowned again. "And that's kind of funny."

"It is?"

"The mailman said he hadn't delivered any letters from her. I've been wondering and I almost asked you before, but—well, it's none of my business."

"Ask me what?"

She took her womanly inquisitiveness firmly in hand and put it to work.

"Do you think there's been trouble between them? That Alice has left him?"

"Do you?"

"Well, they had some quarrels. I mean, I guess all couples do. Michael and I do sometimes. He's got such an Irish temper. But it's never very important. Not like the

one I heard between Alice and Howard. About a woman."

"Oh? Well, maybe we're getting somewhere, Mrs.—?"

"O'Ryan. Sally. My husband is a meat cutter at Joe's Super Market."

"This woman business. Did you hear the other woman's name?"

"No, but Alice *did* say something about 'that strip-teaser.' Do you suppose Howard was mixed up with a strip-teaser?"

"Sounds interesting," I admitted.

"I'd certainly like to hear from her and learn just what happened. She never mentioned any relatives in California. In fact—say! That's funny, too!"

"Something else?"

"Why, Alice told me once that she didn't have a single living relative. Now how could she be visiting relatives if she—?" She let it stand in midair.

"You don't know exactly when she left, do you?"

She bit a full lower lip and thought about it. She was young and desirable in her shorts and halter and Michael O'Ryan was lucky.

"Yes," she said. "It was the day after the second Wednesday in the month when our bridge club meets. Alice said she'd meet me there and then she didn't and the next day she wasn't home, but when Howard came home I asked him if Alice was sick or something and he told me."

I got out my wallet calendar and checked. A small chill did a tap dance along my spine. January 17.

Sally O'Ryan stared at me with wide eyes.

"Isn't that strange?" she said. "That she hasn't written?"

"Is there someone else who might have her address?"

She shook her head. "Alice isn't one to talk much about herself. Sometimes I think she might be hiding something, something in her past, but I guess not. I guess she's just sort of shy. She's really awfully sweet."

"But there's no one who could tell us where she is?"

"Say! Maybe there is! We were talking about insurance policies one day and she told me she has one in Cosmopolitan Life that her folks took out for her before they died. She's kept it up and can collect two

thousand dollars on it next year. I'll bet they'd know where to find her. She wouldn't let that policy lapse. She told me she wouldn't for anything in the world. She pays on it every month. And if she's left Howard—well, wouldn't she give them her new address?"

"Do you have a telephone?"

She took me into a house as shining as a new kitchen stove. There's an adjustor I know. I called him and asked him to make the Cosmopolitan contact for me. They'd be reticent about giving me information, but he had stature with them.

He said he'd call back, and did within five minutes.

"I've got news for you, Sam. That policy lapsed. The last payment was made January 3rd."

I THANKED him and hung up. Sally O'Ryan watched me almost breathlessly. I told her and she frowned some more.

"It's certainly strange," she said. "That isn't like Alice at all."

"It looks odd," I said, thinking far beyond Sally's thoughts and getting more small chills along my spine.

"She's so careful," Sally said. "Like about her teeth. She's had so much work done in spite of the way she takes care of them. But she always visits her dentist when she should, and she's so punctual about everything else. I don't understand how she ever let that policy lapse."

"Did Howard say how she went to California?"

She nodded. "I asked him because she'd have to take either the morning Shasta, or the Cascade later. In the morning I'd have seen her leave, and I was talking to her after the Cascade had left. I asked Howard about that and said I knew she didn't go by bus because she hated buses. So I asked if she went by air and he said she did."

I used the telephone again and checked the airlines. I had friends in both offices. When I hung up Sally O'Ryan saw my scowl and looked a little alarmed.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a small voice.

"She had no reservations out of Portland. In fact, no one did. Weather."

"Oh, I remember. It was terrible! But I don't understand."

*Listen, Mrs. O'Ryan, will you keep all

this to yourself for a day or so? Promise?"

"Why, yes. Only I don't understand—"

"I'll tell you all about it later."

She went to the door with me.

"Thanks for the help," I said.

"I still don't understand," she said.

I wasn't so certain that I fully understood, either, but I had a good idea. I nursed it as I drove toward town.

On Sandy I stopped at a drug store and called the truck dispatcher and asked when Howard was due from Astoria.

"About four."

Back in my car I watched Sandy traffic and discarded ideas one by one until a sound truck went by and I got the idea I thought might work.

"You ought to take this to the cops," I warned myself. "But it's only an idea. They'd probably think you're nuts."

I drove back across Broadway Bridge and parked at Sol Enze's radio shop. Sol and I had worked a few deals together calling for sound recorders.

He grinned up at me from his backroom bench. He looked like a genius out of a fantasy movie. He had small, dark features; a slim, small body; a king-size mind in radio and electronics.

I told him what I wanted.

He nodded. "Maybe a D.C. motor, extra battery, wiring, switches. Sure. Take me about an hour."

"Go to work," I said. "When's the next newscast on?"

He shrugged. "Check the radio page in the *Oregonian*." I did and caught a newscast ten minutes later.

It was too fast for me so I borrowed Sol's car and drove over to Glisan and 21st and picked up a *Journal* and took it back to Sol's place. He was squirming around in the trunk compartment of my Chev.

I sat at his battered typewriter and copied lead paragraphs from the newspaper. Finally I carefully wrote a paragraph that wasn't in the newspaper.

Then I used the tape recorder on his bench. I tried four times before it sounded right.

An hour later Sol finished his job. It was almost three. We got in the car and tried it out. It worked.

"Ten bucks," Sol said.

"I'm getting twenty-five for the job. I can't afford ten."

Sol grinned. "Okay. I'll write it off. Give me some credit in publicity if it works out."

"It's a deal."

HOWARD SWANLEY looked disgusted. I shook my head as if I was ashamed to bother him again. "Just a few moments," I assured him. "Let's sit in my car. I want you to listen to an idea."

"To hell with your ideas."

"I just want your advice. You knew Eloise. Maybe you can tip me if I'm wrong."

He hesitated and then sighed. "Okay."

We sat in the car and I talked, practically off the cuff, about the hotel clerk who looked as if he'd be the kind who might bump a pretty girl if he couldn't get her.

Swanley listened to my screwy talk and when I finished he shook his head.

"Hell, I don't know anything about police work. Sure. Maybe you're right. But like I told you, I'm not interested."

"You think I might be right, though?"

"Yeah. If you think you're right, maybe you are."

I smiled sheepishly. "Well, maybe it's a screwball idea. I'll buy you a drink for listening, though."

I reached for the glove compartment and got out a pint bottle. He hesitated a second and then took a deep drink.

"Say, I want to get the news," I said. "The Korea business. I almost forgot."

The radio warmed up and I listened to my own voice making like an announcer with the lead paragraphs from the Journal. It sounded as if I'd broken into the middle of the broadcast. The tape recorder played back very smoothly from the trunk compartment through my radio.

I took a small drink and gave him the bottle again. He drank and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand.

Through the radio my voice said, "The body of a woman was discovered today by Portland police following an anonymous telephone call. Police state that the woman had been murdered. They did not disclose where the body had been found, but said that recent dental work in her mouth would probably lead to identification of the body as soon as Portland dentists have been checked. Police believe she was murdered in January. Identification can possibly lead

to an early arrest in the case. In The Dalles, four women were responsible for a traffic jam that—"

I turned off my tape recording.

"That Korean situation is really tough," I said.

Swanley stared at the radio dial. He wet his lips. "Yeah. It's tough. Well, thanks for the drinks. I got to get home."

"Sure. And thanks for the help."

He got out of the car and walked down the sidewalk toward his Ford. I waited until he had turned into 19th before I started after him. . . .

It was an hour's wait. The Chev was parked out of sight and I stood in a cluster of trees and watched across a vacant lot.

He came out with two suitcases and dumped them into the back of the Ford. He went back into the house and returned with an overcoat and a couple of hats. They went on the back seat. He went in the house and when he came out a few moments later I was leaning against the Ford waiting for him.

He stopped dead still. He wet his lips and put his right hand in a coat pocket. Then I was scared. Plain scared. Even his big hand wouldn't fill the pocket that way unless he held something in the hand. Something like a gun.

I shook my head. "Don't," I said. "It's no good."

"What do you want?" He sounded as if he had laryngitis.

"You didn't think you'd get away with it, did you? The dentist identified Alice's work at once."

In back of him Sally O'Ryan came out her back door and stopped when she saw us.

I rocked forward on my toes and estimated the distance to Swanley. It was five feet. His hand was very large in the pocket. Around a gun handle it was even larger, and the mouth to a pocket is only so large.

"The way it figures," I said softly, "is that Alice followed you that night you killed Eloise, saw you go in the hotel, saw you come out. You were probably home when she got here, but she lit into you and accused you of seeing Eloise. And that's when you lost your head. As soon as Alice learned about the murder, she'd know who did it. She was sore at you, anyhow, and she'd probably go to the police."

He didn't move, but his eyes were getting narrow.

I said, "So you killed her the way you did Eloise and then hid her body. No wonder there was no mail from California and her insurance policy lapsed. When did you plan to skip? Waiting a while to make it look good?"

He still didn't speak.

"You slipped when you told me about the hotel. You sounded as if you'd been there, but you said you hadn't seen Eloise for a year—yet she'd only been in the hotel four months when you killed her. Why'd you kill her? Jealous? Getting a run around? Still crazy about her? Or were you helping her smoke that marihuana you seemed to know all about?"

He was getting too tense. So was I.

I said, "But you heard over my radio that Alice had been found. That called for a quick lam. But know something, Howard? You're not getting away! You're tagged!"

He started to pull the gun, but his hand and the gun were too large for the mouth of the pocket. Too large by about two seconds. That was enough.

I put 180 pounds into my fist. Sally O'Ryan screamed. Her husband ran out. Other kitchen doors opened, and after a while there was some order and a police siren screamed out Sandy.

Big as he was, Howard Swanley blub-

bered like a kid when he confessed. I'd been right all along the line. He was just a guy who got the wrong woman in his blood and couldn't take it.

The next morning Sol got credit for his part in the morning papers. I got praise. The cops didn't like some of it, but softened when I admitted I was just lucky.

Before that—at 8:10 p.m. that same evening—I met Clara Crundle at the YWCA. She listened to my report, and nodded as if she had known all along that I'd do something about her problem. When I finished she looked at her watch.

"You were paid until five o'clock," she said. "I must owe you some overtime. I'm awfully sorry, but I haven't much money. Could maybe I mail it to you? Would it be about five dollars?"

"Never mind," I smiled. "I got to work late this morning. It evens up."

She thanked me and I thanked her.

So here I sit in my office, with a few bucks in my pocket. It's better than it was day before yesterday. I have a client.

One of those old lawyers in the building said I'd done such a good job on this case that he wants me to do some shadowing in a divorce case. He said it would be worth \$50 to his client. He even had the \$50. I know, because it's in my wallet right now and in another half hour I'm going up to pay my telephone bill.



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"Pick your spot," Packy said, "and start digging."



*"Let him run," said the cops.
"He won't get far. That was
Packy Vogel's dame he
chilled!"*



CHAPTER ONE

A Dead Babe's Brooch

ONE minute everything was smooth as an eel swimming in oil, and the next moment all hell broke loose. Forcing the window had been a snap. An ordinary pair of scissors for the screen; a silken pillow jammed tightly against the glass to muffle the noise; a sharp rap with my fist—and I was in the darkened house. A very neat, professional job, up to a point.

And then, as I say, all hell broke loose.



By
HANK SEARLS

TOMORROW WE DIE



Exciting Crime-Adventure Novelette

I'd pussy-footed to the bedroom, crossed to the dressing table, and was easing out the top left-hand drawer. Then the damned dog yapped.

There hadn't been a dog when I'd cased the place. Larry hadn't told me of any. But there *was*, apparently, a dog, and he yapped.

I froze, my pulse pounding. Carefully, reluctantly, I sneaked a glance at the blonde on the bed.

She was still. I breathed again, and felt swiftly for the jewel box. The dog stopped yapping and began to howl. Cold sweat

dampened my forehead; my hands were clammy. And I couldn't find the box. I straightened up, and the dog wailed louder.

"Here, boy," I whispered, peering into the dark. "Here, fellah!"

No soap. The dog whimpered and howled again.

A window squealed next door. "Shut that fleahound up!"

Brother, I thought, wouldn't I like to!

I looked at the blonde again. She was quiet. Sleeping off a drunk, maybe—or petrified with fear. I groped helplessly through the drawer and cursed softly. The

dog howled again from somewhere in the front of the house, and through the bedroom window I could see lights flashing on up the street. I moved to the bed.

The blonde was a pale, still shape, lying half out of the sheets, one arm draped over the side of the bed. A light snapped on in the house next door and a faint beam fell on the girl. The whites of her eyes glinted. Awake, but frightened silly. . . .

"Sister," I growled. "Tell me where the brooch is, and you'll be okay."

No answer.

I leaned over the bed. I began to shiver.

The pale, lovely features were twisted into a mask of disbelief. The eyes stared up at me, blank and unseeing. And protruding from the smooth, silvery skin above her nightgown was the ugly handle of an icepick.

My fingers tingled and a wave of nausea swept over me. More than anything in the world I wanted to be away from the spot. The dog howled again, and I lurched across the bedroom and through the house. I stopped at the front door and listened. Someone next door was talking:

"The dog next door starts barkin' and nobody shuts him up, so my wife, she says call the cops."

"Okay, mister," answered a weary voice. "I'll see if there's anybody home."

A police car was parked in front, motor running, hiding Larry's car across the street from my view. A dark shape detached itself from the house next door, cut across the lawn and sidled through a hole in the hedge. I tiptoed silently to the kitchen and unlatched the screen. The cop rapped at the front door. I eased myself into the back yard.

"Anybody home?" yelled the cop. The dog yowled louder. I heard a muttered curse and then the sound of the policeman making his way to the back. I started around the corner and heard him call to his partner: "Come on, Pete, there's somethin' wrong!"

A car door slammed and footsteps started across the lawn. I plastered myself into the chimney alcove and waited as a squat figure in uniform passed by. I saw him open the kitchen door, squinting suspiciously inside. I braced my shaking knees and tensed. Then I was sprinting across the lawn, past the police car, heading

for Larry's car as fast as I could run.

I heard a surprised shout. Behind me heavy feet rumbled on the soft earth. I dodged around the police car and stared wildly across the street. The car wasn't there. Larry had gone!

My heart sank. I had a quick flash of iron bars, gas chambers, the third degree. Then I was in the empty squad car, grinding into low, barreling up the street in a hail of lead. . . .

A dozen blocks from the blonde's house I left the squad car in an alley and flagged a cab.

"The Moonglow Club," I told the cabbie shakily. "And take it easy. I'm a nervous man."

"Okay, Mac. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride, as it says in the advertisement."

I sat back but I didn't relax and I didn't enjoy the ride. Sirens wailed in the distance, like hounds from hell, and I remembered the blonde's agonized face on the pillow. I needed a drink, and I needed time to think, and I needed the soothing voice of a certain girl.

"Here ya are, buddy," said the driver. "And be sure ya catch the redhead's act." He pursed his lips. "Out of this world."

"I know," I said. "I know."

I COULD tell when I walked through the door that it was time for her song. The well-dressed wheels from uptown were silent, hushing each other; the waiters were standing in the rear, watching the little stage; Tiny, alone in the glare of the single spotlight, was turning to the microphone hanging from his piano. I nodded to Pietro, found my usual table in back, ordered a Moscow Mule and lit a cigarette.

Tiny spoke reverently into the microphone.

"And now, good people, here's the gal who'll take your mind off our lousy chow and green liquor; the home-town girl who turned down Broadway to sing for *you*; the gal with the voice you never forget. Our own *Chris Malone!*"

There was a sharp burst of applause as Chris stepped from the wings. A breathless quiet fell over the club, and she began to sing in her low, haunting voice, moving to the piano. Her sleek evening gown rippled in the harsh glare of the spot; her copper hair came alive and shimmered when she

moved. And the great, wide, seagreen eyes smiled dreamily.

I sat back and let the cool, soothing voice wash over me. It was languid native music by a tropic lagoon; it was a full-rigged schooner beating to sea at eventide; it was the boom of surf on some exotic beach. It was Chris Malone.

Chris ended her song on a haunting note; then she was moving across the floor to my table. She sat down and looked into my eyes.

"You're late, Pete. How did it come off?"

I jolted down to earth.

"The job? Sister, if you *only* knew!" I ordered her a drink and took her hand. "How'd you like to marry me and go live on a desert island?"

She smiled. "Was it that bad?"

"Worse." I swirled my drink in my glass. "She was dead."

Her eyes widened. "Dead?"

I nodded. "Murdered."

Her face went dead white. "Oh, Pete!" "She was murdered, and her dog raised hell, and the cops came. Larry got scared and shoved off without me, and I had to steal a squad car to get away."

"And the brooch?"

"Whoever murdered her must have stolen it. It wasn't in the drawer."

"What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "I'm okay. Nobody saw me, except from the rear. I ditched the squad car. I wore gloves, so they won't find fingerprints. I don't know who killed her, but I'm clear. If," I added, "Larry keeps his mouth shut."

"What's going to happen to him?"

"I couldn't care less."

"If Anne finds out Larry gave Corene her brooch, she'll divorce him."

"And he'll have to work for a living. You're breaking my heart."

"What about Anne?"

I gazed into my copper tankard. Anne Lewis—Anne Tipton, now. I remembered her in college, proud, beautiful, untamed—and spoiled. I remembered the sleepless nights I'd spent longing for her, the dull ache when she'd told me she was marrying a man who even then showed the weaknesses that were destroying him. Because Larry Tipton was a crumb—a drunk, a gambler, a parasite living on Anne's

money. And tonight I'd found him a coward.

"Anne," I said, "will find out that Larry-boy gave her seventy-thousand-dollar brooch to a gangster's moll, and that'll be the end of Larry and Anne."

The long lashes swept down over the green eyes. "And then I suppose you'll take up where you left off with her?"

"Lord, Chris!" I flared. "I took on this job for free, to keep them together. I nearly got caught breaking into the house of a murdered woman; I set myself up for a homicide charge; I almost got shot trying to get away. You're not suggesting I *planned* it this way, are you?"

"No," she said faintly. "But I know how you felt about her."

"Forget it," I said. "That was finished a long time ago. I'm a big boy now. I'm through with Anne and Larry, and I'm finished with their lousy brooch, and I'm going to get plastered."

"I'll get plastered with you," said Chris. "And I'll even live on your desert island, and never sing another song, except to you and the coconuts. . . ." Her breath caught. "Oh-oh!"

She was gazing past my shoulder. I turned nervously.

ACROSS the room swept Anne Tipton, golden hair flowing, chin high, a proud lift to her shoulders. Again I felt the familiar thrill. My face must have showed it.

"I'm finished with her," quoted Chris acidly. "I'm a big boy now."

"Hell," I said. "She doesn't mean a thing any more."

"Who's that with her?"

I turned and watched her heavy-set, tanned escort seat her at a table. He was young, with a careless twist to his lip and a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"Ace Barlow," I said thoughtfully. "Now, I wonder."

Chris raised her eyebrows. "Wonder what?"

"Why she'd come here with him."

Chris gazed at Ace's broad shoulders. "Mum," she said appreciatively. "Not bad."

I shook my head. "He's not the type for Anne. No, it's business."

"Business? What does he do for a living, burn down orphanages?"

"I think he would, if there were enough money in it. No, he's a private eye, like me. Unethical as hell, though. Almost lost his license last year."

Chris laughed. "Unethical? You mean he doesn't pull burglaries?"

I flinched. "Okay, sister. That's the last I want to hear about that."

Chris ignored me. She spoke quietly, not moving her lips. "Don't look now, but there's somebody in here casing the place."

The bottom dropped out of my stomach; with an effort, I kept myself from turning. "Does he look like the law?"

She nodded. "If ever I saw a cop trying to act like a customer, it's the guy at the door."

I turned slightly, lighting a cigarette and hiding behind my hand. It was a cop, all right, and the meanest cop in town—Lobo Ricco. I turned back. Maybe he was checking the liquor license. Maybe he was looking for an alimony jumper. Maybe he'd dropped in for a drink. And maybe Larry had shot off his mouth. . . .

"Oh-oh," breathed Chris. "He's spotted you. He's coming this way."

I glanced up, looking for a back door that I knew wasn't there. I'd have to play it cool.

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder.

"Hello, Pete," muttered a hoarse voice. I looked up, trying to seem surprised. And trying to seem pleased.

"Lobo!" I said. "Sit down and have a drink."

"Thanks," he said. "But instead of that, whatta ya think of comin' along with me? There's a water fountain at the station, we can drink all we want."

My heart stopped. "What are you talking about?"

Lobo dropped into a chair across the table. "Listen," he said wearily. "You ain't gonna make it tough on us, are you? You ain't gonna make us get rough?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lobo sighed. "Where were you an hour ago?"

"Out for a walk in the park."

Lobo got up impatiently. "All right, Pete. Your pal Tipton drove direct from the blonde's house to the station. Told

us he'd hired you to recover a diamond brooch. Told us he was scared when he saw the squad car drive up—afraid you'd mix him up in a burglarly charge. So he turned himself in. When we told him you'd murdered the blonde, he fainted." He shook his head. "Too bad you didn't pick a better partner. Come along."

I got up, my knees weak and my thoughts jumbled. "All right," I mumbled. "I'll come."

Chris stood up, her eyes swimming in tears. "He didn't kill her! She was dead when he got there!"

Lobo ignored her. "And on the way to the station," he said sweetly, "you can tell us where you ditched the squad car."

I SAT in the back of the prowl car, Lobo Ricco crowding me, a pink-faced rookie driving. "Unwrap your siren and move this crate, son," growled Lobo. "My wife wants me home early."

The rookie pulled away from the curb in a screech of rubber. The siren howled and traffic disintegrated in front of us.

"Tell him how to get to the squad car you swiped," muttered Lobo. "We might as well spot that now."

Sure, I thought. I show him where the squad car is and that sews up his case. A free ticket to the gas chamber. But they had me anyway.

"All right," I agreed. "Straight ahead to Castro Street. Take a left there."

I turned to Lobo. "Listen," I said. "I broke into the blonde's house. I was going through her dressing table. I was after the brooch, trying to get it back for the owner. But I didn't kill the blonde!"

Lobo chuckled. "What gets me," he said, "is how you expected to get away with it. Now, *we* mighta slipped up; you mighta beat the law. But what about Packy Vogel? Think he'd let you get away with killing his dream girl? Think he wouldn't have tracked you down? Hell, if you'd got away we'da found you in the bay, all nice and warm in a cement overcoat." He shook his head. "I dunno. Sometimes I wonder."

I sat back. Anger at Larry Tipton swept through me like fire. I'd wanted to do him a favor, tried to help him keep Anne, and what had it got me?

I remembered Larry's strained, anxi-

ous face this morning in my office. "Pete," he'd whined. "You've got to help me. You've got to."

I'd turned him down at first. "It's about time you grew up. You've got a girl everybody in town was after, and you still fool around with every chicken that clucks at you. And Packy Vogel's girl—whew! If he finds out, you'll be so full of lead they'll sell you for scrap."

"He won't find out, Pete. He won't find out because I'll never see her again. If you'll just help me get the brooch before Anne misses it—"

So I'd agreed. A big wheel. A very noble character. " 'Tis a better thing that I do now than I have ever done before." Sticking my neck out for the guy who'd stolen my girl. And now I was going to die for it.

I began to think about making a break. They had me on a murder charge; I couldn't be any worse off. If I could get out of the country—Mexico, maybe—it was worth a try. And I had some unfinished business with Larry Tipton.

I sat forward in the seat and began to pay attention. The car was a coupe, and I noticed that the front seat folded. I watched the speeding street signs carefully. It would take timing, and it would take nerve, and I'd have to pick the right street or I'd end up full of slugs in the gutter. . . .

The rookie slid in and out of traffic, siren screaming. At the corner of Broad and Fitchett, the busiest intersection in town, I yelled suddenly: "This is it. Turn left!"

The rookie shot me a quick glance in the rear view mirror. "Dammit, you said Castro." He yanked at the wheel and the car swerved, tires squealing. I was tossed to the right, crowding Lobo. The detective cursed and pushed me away. Half way through the turn I stiffened. Now was the time.

I drove my feet at the back of the rookie's seat, bracing against my own. I arched my body, jamming the apple-cheeked kid against the wheel. He yelped and tried to free himself, wrestling with the steering gear. Next to me, Lobo went for the gun in his shoulder holster. At the last moment I dove for the floor. There was a grinding crash and the tinkle of glass, and I was tossed across the car onto Lobo's lap.

For a brief moment after the crash there was silence. I felt Lobo stir faintly, clipped him on the chin to make sure, and relieved him of his police positive. Then I was over the front seat and fighting to open the right-hand door. It was jammed. I glanced quickly at the driver. He was slumped over the wheel, muttering groggily. I reached across his lap, opened his door, and spilled him onto the sidewalk. I followed him, my heart beating wildly. A police whistle sounded from the intersection.

The car was over the curb, its crumpled hood snuggled against a department store front. A window dummy was sprawled grotesquely against the steaming radiator. A circle of onlookers gathered, gawking stupidly. I glimpsed a man in uniform shouldering his way past the citizens. I melted into the mob, sidling out of sight in the welcome press of bodies. A hand fell on my arm and I looked into an anxious face.

"Say, officer, you have an accident?"

"No," I said. "We always stop that way."

CHAPTER TWO

Old College Pals

ANNE and Larry Tipton lived in Cold Spring Valley, in a house big enough to quarter an army division. I had the cabbie drop me off on the highway and walked down the winding drive alone. It was dark, but the lower floor was lighted. I trudged past the house and headed for the garages in the rear.

I heard a deep-throated growl in the darkness ahead and I stopped short.

"Easy, Cassidy," I said soothingly. "Good boy. Come here."

The growl turned to a squeal of delight, and a massive gray shape streaked across the drive. Suddenly I was knocked sprawling, and the huge dog was standing over me, licking my face with a tongue like a wet mop.

"Cassidy," I whispered. "Lemme up!"

Cassidy backed off and dropped his head playfully. I scrambled to my feet and brushed myself off.

"Holy smoke," I told him. "I leave you here with Anne so you'll have a

place to run, and I can't get within a mile of the house without you trying to drown me."

Cassidy looked sad.

"Now, shut up," I told him. "I've got to check on your friend Larry Tipton."

I may have been wrong, but I swear that the hackles rose on Cassidy's neck. I moved over and scratched his ear. "Don't like him, do you, boy? Come on, let's see if he's back."

I walked to the garage and peered in. Larry's sleek yellow convertible stood between a station wagon and a Rolls-Royce. Anne's car was missing; she was still out with Ace Barlow. I felt the car radiators. The sleek convertible was warm; Larry had just got back from the police station. I wondered how he'd posted bail without borrowing money from his wife.

Larry was the one I wanted to see. I crunched across the gravel to a side door. Cassidy followed me.

"Speak, Cassidy," I said. "Speak, boy!"

Cassidy answered with a bark that shook the eaves. I heard Larry's voice inside: "Shut up, you mongrel!"

"A fine way," I told Cassidy, "to talk about my five-hundred-dollar dog. Speak again!"

Cassidy woofed again and my ears rang. I heard a curse from inside and the door opened.

"Listen, you moth-eaten horse—" Larry Tipton saw me, and his voice trailed off.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" I said.

Larry yanked at the door knob, trying to pull the door closed, but I jammed my foot in it.

"Why, Larry," I said. "If you're going to live like a gentleman, you have to act like a gentleman. You have to learn to be more hospitable. You mustn't slam the door in your friends' faces."

I shouldered my way into the house. Larry backed up nervously.

"I didn't recognize you in the dark," he said weakly. "I didn't expect you."

"Oh?" I said, dropping into a chair in the study. "And why didn't you expect me?"

"I saw the cops pull up—I thought they'd get you—"

"So you remembered you had an appointment somewhere else."

Larry looked at me closely. He seemed to gain confidence.

"Sure," he said. "I shoved off. Wouldn't you have left if I'd been in the house and you'd been in the car?"

"Sure, Larry. Sure I would have."

Larry's face broke into a relieved smile. "Sure you would have. Hell, I figured the jig was up. Even if they didn't catch you, I'd only be in the way. But say, I'm glad you got away. Did you get the brooch?"

"No."

His face fell. "Oh." He rubbed the back of his neck. "What'll I do now?"

"Since we're all buddy-buddy again," I suggested amicably, "how about offering me a drink?"

"Of course," said Larry absently. He moved to a bar at the end of the study and began to mix me a Moscow Mule. "What'll we do now, Pete?"

I let him bring me the drink.

"Thanks," I said. "What'll we do now? We'll have a little talk." I sipped the fiery brew.

Larry looked at me in concern.

"You're not sore about my leaving, are you?"

I shook my head. "No. I didn't expect you to stay if there was trouble. It wouldn't do for Larry Tipton, of the Cold Spring Valley Tiptons, to get in trouble with the cops, would it? And of course I got away without anybody spotting me, so I'm in the clear."

Larry nodded vigorously. "Sure, Pete. No harm done. We'll take another crack at that brooch sometime else." He looked at his watch. "Say, it's time for me to turn in, fellah. Got a golf date in the morning."

I ignored him. "So long as the cops don't know who was in the house, we're fine, aren't we?"

Larry smiled weakly. "They'll never find out from me, Pete. You know that."

"That's right," I said. "They couldn't drag it out of you with white-hot pokers, could they?"

He looked at me nervously. "What are you getting at?"

I whipped the police revolver from my pocket.

"It just so happens," I said, "that the cops picked me up tonight. On a murder rap. But you wouldn't know about that, would you?"

THE color drained slowly from his face. "What did they tell you?" he whispered hoarsely.

"They told me you drove straight from the blonde's house to the station. They told me you turned yourself in, and turned me in. That's all."

"It's a lie!"

"Like hell it's a lie. It's the truth. You figured they'd pick me up and I'd tell them you were an accessory to a robbery. You figured it'd go easier with you if you turned yourself in and went State's witness. But it backfired on you, didn't it? They told you the blonde was dead. Murdered. And that made you an accessory to murder instead of housebreaking. They tell me you fainted down there. Well, get ready to faint again. Because if they catch me again, I'm really going to give them a story. I'm telling them you hired me to *kill* the girl, not to get the brooch. I'll get the chamber for it, but you'll be right along with me. You wouldn't want your old college buddy to die alone, would you?"

"They'll never believe you!"

"The hell they won't. You gave Corene Rivers Anne's brooch. You also gave her enough material to blackmail you the rest of your life. Why wouldn't you want her dead?"

Larry sat down suddenly and buried his head in his hands. "It isn't true," he moaned. "I wanted the brooch back. I didn't want her killed!"

"That's right. You didn't want her killed. But they don't believe me, and they won't believe you. And brother, if I'm caught, you're in this as deep as I am."

He looked up wildly. "Don't get caught! Get out of town—leave the country—"

"Sure," I said. "Ten years it took me to build up a detective agency in this town, and now, because I'm stupid enough to try to help a guy who doesn't have the brains to keep his big mouth shut, I gotta get out of the country. I gotta spend the rest of my life in some stinking hole in Mexico, and what happens to you? You sit around and play country squire. All because I tried to help you square things with Anne."

"I'm sorry, Pete."

"He's sorry, Cassidy," I told the dog.

"He's sorry! All right, Tipton. This job was going to be for free. But leaving town is going to run into money, so it's no longer for free. It'll take dough for me to get to Mexico. It'll take dough for me to live down there. Plenty of dough. Five thousand clams."

His eyes narrowed. "What is this, blackmail?"

I felt the anger seething inside me. I got up and stood over his chair. I flicked him across the mouth with the back of my hand. His eyes widened fearfully.

"That'll be all of that blackmail talk," I gritted. "It's not blackmail. It's my special fee for burglary. A special fee for guys who hire me for a job and then sing to the cops. Five grand."

"Where can I raise five thousand?"

"That's your worry. And the longer you take, the longer I'll be in town—and the more chance I have of being picked up and you of going up for the Big Rap."

Cassidy got up and stretched, his sleek muscles moving under his gray coat. He lay down again by the fireplace, his massive head cradled in his paws, watching us lazily. Larry looked at the dog speculatively, and flicked his eyes to me.

"Cassidy," he yelled suddenly. "Kill!"

In spite of myself I tensed. Cassidy looked at me and wagged his tail playfully.

I laughed at the look on Larry's face, and then a wave of disgust swept over me. "You no-good, sneaking rattlesnake," I spat. "I taught him that trick. I oughta plug you!"

Larry cringed, his eyes shifting desperately. "No—no. I was kidding. I knew he wouldn't."

"No," I said softly, "Cassidy wouldn't jump me. But would you like to see if he'll jump you?"

"No, Pete! Don't do it! I'll get the money for you. I'll get it somewhere."

"I think," I said, "it'd be wise if you did. With me out of the country, all you'll have to worry about is the housebreaking charge, which some of your political playmates can fix, and the brooch. And, of course, Packy Vogel."

Larry stiffened in his chair. "What about Packy Vogel?"

I shook my head in pity. "Don't you think he'll find out you hired me to break

into her house? Listen, buddy, when he finds out she's dead—when he decides that you hired me to murder her—" I shrugged. "Well, if I were you I'd get out of the country, but I wouldn't stop at Mexico. I'd go all the way to the South Pole."

I started for the study door. Cassidy rose with a grunt and lumbered over, pressing against my leg. I scratched his ear and turned.

"Another thing," I said, "If I had any choice, I wouldn't in a million years leave a dog like Cassidy with a crumb like you. I haven't got any choice, he's too big to travel with me. But if I ever hear you've mistreated him, I'll get you if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The study door opened and I turned. Anne Tipton stood in the doorway, her golden hair shining in the dim light. Behind her stood Ace Barlow. She looked at me curiously, coolly.

"Hello, Pete," she said. "Who's mistreating who?"

"The dog," I said. "Don't ever forget he's in your charge, Anne. See that Larry keeps his filthy hands off him. I like that dog."

"You sound," she said curiously, "as if you're going on a trip or dying of cancer or something. The dog will be all right. Have you two been fighting about anything?"

"Boys will be boys," said Ace Barlow. "Hello, Pete. How's business in the snoop department?"

"Okay," I grunted. "This town's big enough to support *one* honest private eye, anyway."

Anne Tipton laughed. "You *are* bitter this evening, Pete. Are you leaving? Ace can drive you to town."

"I'll call a cab," I said briefly. "You meet a nicer class of people."

Anne shrugged. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I'm off to bed. 'Night, Ace; 'night, Pete." She paused in the door and turned to Larry. "Good night, husband dear," she said acidly. "Incidentally, the brooch you took downtown last week to deposit in the bank, as you put it—I'm wearing it to the club tomorrow. Be a darling and get it in the morning." She smiled nastily. "If it's still there. Sleep tight, darling."

CHAPTER THREE

Mobster in Mourning

I STOOD by the gatehouse and waited for my taxi, wondering what Anne knew about the brooch. Ace Barlow's taillights disappeared down the road, and Cassidy rubbed his warm flank against my thigh. I stroked his back thoughtfully.

"I wish I could take you with me, boy. But take good care of Anne, and maybe some day things'll cool off and I'll see you again."

Cassidy whimpered softly.

A pair of headlights swept down the highway. My cab.

I whacked Cassidy's kettledrum ribs. "Okay, boy. Home!"

Cassidy slurped my hand and was gone, galloping up the drive. The headlights grew brighter, and the car slid to a stop in front of me.

It wasn't the cab.

It was long, and low, and sleek, and black. Its motor purred with quiet power. It was as inconspicuous as a powerful car can ever be, but I knew it as soon as I saw it.

It was Packy Vogel's car. I had a quick urge to dash for the woods, but there wasn't time. The door swung open and a tall, slim character unfolded, his hand in his pocket. It was Snag O'Shea, a loose-jointed, freckled hood with no chin and a cruel mouth full of teeth. He made a thousand a month doing dirty work for Packy, but he would have done it free. He was a congenital thug, a guy whose idea of a big time was kicking the tin cup out of a blind beggar's hand.

He slipped his gun out as he peered at my face in the darkness.

"Well," he said, "It ain't Tipton, boss. It's the other guy—Butler. The guy that killed her."

The beam from a powerful flashlight caught me full in the face. O'Shea wiped his hands over me and took the police positive. I was half-blinded, but I could see the back door opening. Two men got out.

Beyond the glare of the flashlight I spotted Packy Vogel, his head too big for his frail body, his lips thin and taut. Lumpy Larson, his chubby bodyguard, eyed me grimly.

Packy Vogel stepped close to me, his deep-set eyes hot with anger, his tiny body tense.

"Well," he smiled, "isn't that nice. Pete Butler. I thought you'd be half way to Timbuktu by now, Butler. I thought it would cost me a lot of dough to track you down. But I find you right here. Isn't that fine?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. It seemed I was asking everybody that tonight.

Packy Vogel ignored me. "What the hell were you thinking about, Butler? Did you think I'd let you knock off Corene and get away with it? Did you think I wouldn't follow you to the last place on earth? Did you think you could disappear? Or were you tired of living?"

The trees about me seemed to be pressing closer. I wished I had a drink. I tried to keep my voice steady.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I'm waiting for a cab."

"You won't need a cab, Butler. What're you doing here, anyway—collecting the pay-off? You figure Tipton paid you enough for what's going to happen to you?"

"Listen," I said, the words tumbling out. "I didn't kill Corene. She was dead when I got there."

Packy laughed. "You killed her, all right. You killed her, and I'm going to kill you!" His voice broke. "Maybe you figured nobody cared what happened to an ex-showgirl. Maybe you thought I would not get my hands dirty by killing you. . . . Well, you figured wrong. Tipton figured wrong. She was my girl, even if she was playing around with that two-bit Casanova!" He laughed again, a high-pitched, crazy laugh that chilled my blood.

He turned back to the car.

"Get the artillery, Lumpy," he barked. "And the shovel." Lumpy Larson waddled to the rear of the car. "Snag," said Packy. "Go get Tipton. We'll make this a double ceremony. Get him and meet us a half a mile up the road. You," he said to me, "get in the front seat."

I climbed into the front seat. Lumpy Larson dumped a load of hardware in the back and slid behind the wheel. Packy Vogel sat in the rear seat, leaning forward, the cold, hard muzzle of his gun against

the back of my neck. Sweat began to break out all over me.

IT WAS a long half mile. When a gun cuddles the base of your neck, you think faster than you have ever thought before. Your head aches with the strain, and your nerves jump at the slightest noise, and your muscles tense at every bump in the road. It was a long half mile, but not long enough.

"Pull over," snapped Packy. "This will do."

No, I wanted to say. This isn't good at all. Look, it's too close to town. Somebody's liable to see you. The terrain is bad. People pass here every day—and every night. Let's ride around some more.

I kept quiet.

"We'll wait," said Packy Vogel, "for your buddy and Snag. We'll wait, but while we wait I want you to think things over. I don't like killing. That's Snag's racket—and Lumpy's. That's why I keep them around. Ordinarily I don't even wait to watch them operate. But I'll watch tonight. I'll watch, and I'll enjoy every second of it!"

"Here they come, Boss," Lumpy broke in.

"Get out," Packy told me, rapping my head with the barrel. I got out, my knees weak.

Packy handed me the shovel. "Take this along. You're going to need it."

A body hurtled across the road and slammed against the car. It was Larry Tipton. He lay on the macadam road, moaning softly.

"I got him, Boss," said Snag O'Shea. "I hadda practically carry him here. He didn't seem to wanta come."

"Get up," said Packy tightly. "Get up, hero."

Tipton managed to pull himself to his feet. He cowered in the headlights, his mouth working weakly.

"We're still on your property, aren't we, Tipton?"

Larry nodded weakly.

"Good. Where's the best place for a couple of graves?"

"Listen—" began Larry.

"Shaddup," growled Snag O'Shea, backhanding him across the mouth. "Answer the Boss!"

Larry shot me a pitiful look. I shrugged. Larry pointed vaguely to the forest.

"Okay," said Packy. "Let's go."

We followed Packy Vogel down a trail into the woods. I dragged my feet, looking for a way out, the shovel bouncing on my shoulder.

Behind me Packy Vogel spoke softly, reading my mind. "I wouldn't, Butler. I wouldn't."

Lumpy stopped in a little clearing, surrounded by towering pines. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled, and shivers raced up my legs.

"This," Packy said, "looks like a nice quiet place for you boys to spend the next thousand years. Pick your spot and start digging."

"The hell with that," I said tightly. "Why should I dig my own grave? You're going to kill me anyway!"

Packy nodded to Snag O'Shea. The gangling redhead whipped out a knife. Lumpy Larson tossed his strong, pudgy arms around my neck and squeezed. The knife shimmered in the starlight, and I felt a searing pain as O'Shea drew the blade lightly across my cheek.

"See?" said Packy. "Just like a surgeon. Now—you want him to start carving, or you want to dig?"

"Dig," I gurgled. The pressure on my neck eased, and I wiped the warm, sticky blood from my face. I jammed the shovel into the soft dirt and began to work.

"And hurry," said Packy. "We haven't got all night."

There was a deep silence, broken only by the sound of the shovel as I sank it into the earth and the splatter of the dirt as I tossed it to one side.

"Dig it nice and deep for him," said Packy. "And be careful what you do with the dirt, because you're going to have to fill it up."

I'D DUG a lot in the Pacific—some of the best foxholes on Guadalcanal were Pete Butler jobs, and some of them had ended up with bodies in them, but this was the first I'd ever dug that I knew was going to be used as a grave. I shoveled and sweated and shook. After a while my brain went dead, and I dug automatically. Finally Packy said:

"That's a nice neat job, Butler. Now

give the shovel to your buddy, so he can do the same for you."

I thrust the shovel into Larry's shivering hands. He began to dig, sobs racking his body. I looked around at the trees—the last trees I'd see. I listened to the crickets singing in the forest—the last crickets I'd hear. I breathed the moist night air—the last air I'd breathe. And I wished I'd never heard of Larry Tipton or Anne or Corene Rivers or the damn diamond brooch. I watched Larry digging my grave, and wondered how it would be with the cold, moist earth around me for the long, long sleep. . . .

"Okay, Tipton," said Packy. "Now just step over to that other hole and smile at the birdy."

"No," Tipton muttered. "No!"

"G'wan," growled Snag O'Shea. "Don't make us carve up that pretty face!"

Larry staggered to the grave.

"Watch, Butler," gritted Packy Vogel. "Because this is what's going to happen to you."

I tried to tear my eyes away from Larry's horror-stricken face. But it was no use. I stared, fascinated, as he threw back his head and screamed:

"No! No—no!"

Snag O'Shea moved forward, a smirk on his face, a sub-machine gun in his hands. He shot from the hip, squirting the lead lazily, in three short, sharp bursts. Larry's screams turned into a gurgle and his look of horror became a pop-eyed, unbelieving grimace. Slowly he sat down, clasping his belly. Deliberately, quietly, he toppled backward into the hole. Snag motioned to Lumpy Larson. Lumpy stepped to the grave and looked down. He pointed his gun carefully, shot once, and there was silence.

Somewhere in the distance the dog howled again, a longdrawn, forlorn wail of loneliness. I shuddered in the darkness.

"All right," said Packy Vogel. "Fill up the grave."

I looked up. "Me?"

"Who else?" He looked nervously over his shoulder. "Snap it up!"

It was horrible, it was barbarous, it was sickening. But I began to shovel, trying not to look at the body in the grave. And, of course, doing my damndest to stall for time.

"That'll do," said Packy Vogel finally. "Go stand by the other hole. It's your turn now."

This was it. This was the end of the line, the great, gray fear to end all fears. . . . I stepped to the hole and tried to steady myself, waiting for the hot slugs to tear into my guts.

Snag O'Shea moved toward me, the same silly grin on his face. My stomach tensed. He fumbled with the gun, looked down into the chamber. . . .

And then, somewhere in the underbrush, my taut, straining ears heard the noise. A rustle of leaves, a thumping along the trail, something like a whimper of delight. Cassidy? I waited, my hand tightening on the shovel, to see what would appear.

Suddenly I saw him, a great gray shape bounding across the clearing, galloping toward me, squealing in joy. Snag O'Shea whirled, swinging his tommy-gun toward the dog.

"Kill, Cassidy!" I screamed at the hurtling animal. "Kill!"

Cassidy hesitated for a fraction of a second, wavered in his course, and headed for O'Shea. A short burst of automatic fire shattered the night. Then Cassidy sprang in a graceful arc and the triggerman went down under a snarling, murderous terror. I scooped up a shovelful of dirt and slammed it into Packy's face. Lumpy Larson's gun cracked and a slug sang past my cheek. I swung the shovel in a wide circle and let it fly. Larson folded with a gasp as the shovel slammed into his belly.

There was a terrified scream from Snag O'Shea and a yelp of delight from Cassidy. I'd have loved to let the dog finish the job, but across the clearing Packy Vogel was staggering blindly, his automatic gripped in his hand.

"Heel, Cassidy!" I called, cutting for the trees. The big dog gave Snag O'Shea's body one last brutal shake and caught up with me, his heaving flank touching my leg. Then we were crashing through the underbrush. We weaved through the trees on the Tipton estate, and cut across the rolling lawns. Headlights shone up the drive. A car was turning in, backing onto the gravel. It was my taxi.

I was free.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fugitive's Girl

CHRIS lived in an apartment built into a brownstone house. The section had once been considered the cream of the city's real estate. Now it was shoddy, a neighborhood in need of a shave and a haircut. But the rent was cheap, and the entrance was private, and Chris had made the inside into an interior decorator's dream. I drummed my fingers lightly on the door.

Chris wore a light green robe that matched her eyes. She had a book in her hand; when she saw me she dropped it.

"Oh, Pete," she murmured. Then she was in my arms, and her cheek was wet against mine. "Oh, Pete!"

"With half the bulls and mobsters in town looking for me," I remarked finally, "this is no place for a screen test. Can I come in?"

She drew me inside and latched the door. "Pete, I've been half crazy. What happened to your face?"

I'd forgotten Snag O'Shea's little reminder. "Nothing a drink won't cure."

She poured me a glass of whiskey and I gulped it. I handed her the glass and she filled it again. I sipped it slowly.

She sat on the couch, her slim long legs drawn under her. "The police—?"

I told her what had happened. She blanched when I mentioned Larry and the two graves. When I finished, I downed my drink and tried to relax.

"What are you going to do now?"

What was I going to do now? With Larry dead, the idea of going to Mexico was dead too. No cash, and a fugitive needs cash. Besides, I had a feeling that an international border wasn't going to stop Packy Vogel, even if it stopped Lobo Ricco and the cops. No, I was stuck. If the murder weren't solved, I might as well turn myself over to the police. I'd be safer that way.

I filled my glass again and lay back on the couch, my head on Chris' lap. "I'm going to stay in town. What else can I do?"

"I have a little money, Pete. I can help you."

I patted her knee. "Not enough, honey.

If I just knew who wanted to kill the blonde . . .”

Who would have wanted to kill her? Larry Tipton, maybe, just as Packy had said. But Larry didn't have the guts. Besides, he'd been with me all evening, planning the robbery. Somehow Packy Vogel had found out that Larry had been running around with his girl, maybe that would have made him want to kill her. But Packy had acted as if he were half-mad with grief. Of course, it might have been an act. . . .

Who else would want her dead? Anne Tipton? Maybe, if she'd found out about Larry and the blonde.

I tried to clear my brain with another shot of whiskey. My head ached, my eyes were hot and tired, my nerves were jumpy. Chris stroked my forehead.

“Don't worry about it, Pete. Catch a little sleep and think about it tomorrow.”

Don't worry about it. But when your life hangs in the balance, you do worry. Quick, disconnected pictures flashed before my eyes. A dark bedroom with a blonde staring blankly at the ceiling. Larry Tipton sagging into his grave. The look on Snag O'Shea's face as he fumbled with his gun. . . .

I awakened with a ray of golden sunlight peeking through the Venetian blind and shimmering in my eyes. There was a pungent smell of frying bacon, and a quiet, cool voice was singing in the kitchen. I swung my feet over the side of the sofa and stood up. Every bone in my body cried in protest. The room dipped suddenly and whirled about me, and my mouth felt as if I'd been drinking rubbing alcohol with an iodine chaser. I groped for the bottle on the coffee table.

“Hold it,” said Chris. She wore a sweater and skirt combination that made her look as fresh and young as a coed. “Gentlemen don't drink before breakfast. I made some coffee for you.”

“I'm a boor,” I agreed, taking a long swallow from the bottle, “but I haven't got time for breakfast.”

“I cooked it,” said Chris dangerously, “and you'll eat it if I have to cram it down your throat.”

I decided to eat. I staggered to the kitchen and sat down. “Chris,” I said finally, flicking a spot of egg from my tie,

“I'd like to borrow your car for a while, if I may.”

“Sure, Pete.” She got the keys and tossed them on the breakfast table. “What are you going to do?”

“The dog,” I said, sipping my coffee. “The blonde's little dog. I want to find out something about it.”

“Where are you going to find out anything about a dead girl's dog?”

“The next-door neighbors,” I said. “Corene was a wild sort of character. Those neighbors probably knew more about her than she did herself.”

Chris stared at me. “You mean you're going next door to her house? You must be batty!”

I shrugged. “The cops are probably through by now. Anyway, it's a chance I'll have to take.”

Chris stood up. “I'm going, too.”

“That's where you're wrong.” I reached for the car keys. She snatched them away and dropped them down the top of her sweater, her eyes blazing.

“Okay, you win,” I said. “Let's hit the road.”

I MADE Chris park a block away from the blonde's house. I walked nonchalantly down the street, casing the place.

I'd been wrong about the cops. There was a squad car in the middle of the block, and two policemen were squatting under the broken window, taking plaster impressions of a footprint. One of them looked up and stared at me. My blood pressure went up thirty points. I turned quickly up the walk next to the blonde's. I rapped on the door.

A fat, unshaven citizen in a brightly colored bathrobe opened the door a crack.

“Look,” he said. “You guys kept me up all night. I told you everything I know. Now lemme go back to sleep.”

“Just a few more questions,” I said smoothly, “and we'll be all through.” I sidled through the door and closed it behind me. I sat down and whipped out a piece of paper and a pencil.

“Like I said,” the fat man began wearily, “about eleven o'clock last night I hear this dog yapping next door. I holler for the Rivers dame to make him shut up, and nothing happens. So my old lady has me call the cops. That's all I know.”

"This dog," I prodded. "How long had Miss Rivers had it?"

A small, skinny dame with a nose like a parrot and her hair in curlers hurried into the room.

"Well," she shrilled, "she got the dog about a week ago. I said when she got it that it'd be more trouble than it was worth. But she said her boy friend gave it to her and she had to keep it."

"Her boy friend? Who was that?"

The parrot-beaked woman smiled tightly.

"Huh! How should I know? I'm not one to speak ill of the dead, but frankly, mister, Corene Rivers was no better than she should be. Men around there all the time—parties every night—a body could not sleep half the time. I don't know which one gave her the dog."

"Can you describe some of the men who were around?"

"Well, there were three here real often. One was a little man with a big head and a sort of crazy look in his eyes. I think that was her real boy friend. Then there were two more, friends of the little man, I think. One was a tall redheaded fellow, and the other was short and kind of dumpy. They both looked like gangsters."

I clucked in disgust. "Terrible."

She nodded primly. "I always said she'd come to no good end, the kind of people she ran around with. Didn't I, Casper?"

Casper nodded patiently. "Yes, dear."

"And there was one other—but he had class, like. He came in a convertible. Only he wasn't around much."

Larry Tipton.

I asked, "Did you ever hear the dog bark when any of these people came to visit her?"

"No, not after the first time. When he got used to you, he wouldn't bark."

That was what I'd come to find out, but I had one more question.

"You say you heard the dog barking late last night. Are you sure he wasn't barking earlier in the evening?"

"He only started yapping once," said the woman definitely. "And he barked until the police came."

"Thanks," I said. I got up and started for the door. I had my hand on the knob when I heard the knock. My heart thumped. The fat man sighed and looked out the window.

"More cops," he grunted. "Why can't you guys let us alone? I'm a taxpayer, and I don't have to—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I think I'll go out your back door. I want to look for footprints."

I walked swiftly across the living room and into the kitchen. The front door opened and the fat man said:

"What is this, a police convention? One of you guys just went out the back, and I told him all I knew. What do you want?"

Lobo Ricco's voice pinned me to the spot.

"Wasn't no cop," he growled, and my blood froze. "Probably a reporter. Now, about this Rivers dame . . ."

I stepped into the back yard.

CHRIS pulled away from the curb. "Where to now, Sherlock?" she asked. "Drive downtown," I said absently. I leaned back and closed my eyes and tried to get my tired brain into gear.

When I'd broken into the house, the dog had barked. So whoever it was, the dog had seen before. As far as I knew, the dog was familiar with four people: Packy Vogel and his two thugs, and Larry Tipton. Of course, there might have been others—probably were.

All right. Whoever had killed the blonde had done it either because he didn't like her, or because he was after the brooch. And the brooch was gone by the time I got there. Larry had said that he gave the blonde the brooch in a little downtown bar, and that when he went home with her that night she had put it in a jewel box in her dressing table. The brooch wasn't there, so somebody had taken it. If it had been a cat-burglar, he'd never have killed—most of them were scared silly from the time they entered a house until they were safe home in bed. Apparently the blonde had awakened and recognized the thief, and he'd killed her.

Anybody who came to steal the brooch would have had to know that the blonde had it in the first place. According to Larry, she'd never worn it in public. Therefore, whoever knew she had it must have known that Larry gave it to her. And who knew that?

Anne Tipton's remark came back to me: *Get it in the morning—if it's still there.*

Anne knew. And somebody else knew.

I sat up with a start.

"Take me to the Lippencott Building, Chris, and leave me there. I'll get hold of you later."

Chris pushed out her lower lip.

"I want to go, too."

"No," I said. "I'm going to be tailing a guy. A guy who ought to be wise to all the tricks of the game. I don't want you hanging onto my coat tails."

"Go to hell," said Chris politely. She dropped me in front of the Lippencott Building. "I'll be at home, waiting for you to call." She raised her soft, warm lips and kissed me.

I stepped into the stream of pedestrians. "Don't wait up for me, honey. I might be late."

I stood studying the directory in the lobby of the Lippencott Building, trying to look like a guy who'd just dropped in to have a tooth pulled. I managed to drag that out to ten minutes, carefully watching the crowd spilling out of the elevators into the lobby. Then I had a shoeshine, hiding my face behind the morning paper and reading about how I'd murdered a beautiful showgirl, but still covering the lobby like a sheriff waiting to serve a summons. I made the shoeshine boy repeat the job, and the operation took an hour. I wasted the next fifteen minutes glancing through the pocket books at the newsstand, until the gum-chewing blonde behind the counter made a nasty crack about where I could find the public library. I looked at my watch. My man wasn't, apparently, planning on leaving his office this morning. Well, maybe I could flush him out, and maybe I could make him lead me where I wanted to go.

I stepped into a pay booth and dialed his number. He caught it at the first ring.

"Hello?" he said guardedly.

"Meet me," I said, "at my place. Right away. We're in trouble."

"Who is this?"

"You know damn well who it is. Now, get over here. Quick!"

I pulled down the hook and disconnected myself. I waited in the booth, the receiver to my ear, watching the elevator and talking into a dead phone. I didn't wait long.

Ace Barlow stepped out of the elevator and lit a cigarette, his eyes sweeping the

lobby. I shielded my face with my hand. Very carefully Barlow studied everyone in sight. Then, deciding that he wasn't being picked up, he moved swiftly for the revolving doors.

I ducked out of the booth and waited until he was outside. I started to follow him; then, on a hunch, walked quickly to the side door into an alley and back to the main street. It had been a good hunch. Ace was leaning on a car at the curb, languidly watching the front entrance. Finally he tossed his cigarette aside and walked up the street.

I stayed half a block behind him, trying to keep his yellow sport jacket in sight as I squirmed through the pedestrians. At a corner newsstand he turned, peered into the crowd behind him, and suddenly flagged a cab. Then he was inside and gone. I ran a couple of steps after him and stopped.

I'd been, as they say, shook. I'd been shook by an expert. And when he got where he was going and found that the call was faked, he'd be twice as cautious. But there was one chance.

I went to the corner newsstand and looked at the newsdealer. My heart sank. He was blind.

Well, it was worth a question and a couple of bucks.

The dealer stared past me with sightless eyes. "Yes, sir?" he asked. "What would you like?"

I passed him a bill. "A guy just flagged a cab here at your corner."

The dealer nodded. "I heard him."

"What address did he give?"

He pulled at his ear.

"Let's see. The River Drive Apartments. Yes, that was it. The River Drive Apartments." He tilted his head curiously. "Are you with the police?"

"Not exactly," I told him. "They'd like to have me, though."

CHAPTER FIVE

Death's Little Tea Party

THE River Drive Apartments filled an entire city block, and the names of the occupants stretched along the whole side of the entrance-way. I searched the names for a familiar one, and hoped

that I'd recognize the man Ace Barlow had come to see. I went through the names carefully, wearing out my thumb holding my place.

Then I found it, and it was not one name but two. *O'Shea—Larson, Apartment 409*. Packy Vogel's two hoods, then, lived together, and Ace had come on the run to see one of them, or both of them, when he'd had a message that there was trouble ahead.

All right, but what did I do now?

I found a pay phone in the back of a bar and looked up Packy's number. If I kept up mimicking voices, I could get a job on any soap opera in the country.

"Vogel speaking," said a voice on the other end of the line.

"Packy? Snag O'Shea. Look, Boss, I want yuh to get over to my place right away. It's important." I added confidentially, "It's about the Tipton deal. And I can't get down to see yuh."

There was a long silence, then Packy's worried voice: "Okay, I'll come over. But if you're calling me down there for nothing—"

"Honest, Boss, it's real important!"

I finished my drink and called Chris. Then I waited until Packy's sleek sedan drew up in front of the apartment house. Packy Vogel slid out of the front seat, his hand inside his coat. He took a quick look up and down the street. Then he disappeared into the entrance.

I waited outside, gave him time to ring the apartment, heard him say into the house phone, "It's Packy, Snag," and then heard the buzzer sound and the door open. I stepped inside and caught the door before it closed, waiting for Packy to cross the lobby to the elevator. The gate clanged behind him and the car began to move with a whine. I leaped across the marble floor and up the steps.

I beat the elevator to the fourth floor, and waited until Packy stepped out of the car. I followed him down the hall, moving silently on the thick carpeting. He stopped at apartment 409 and pressed the doorbell. The door opened immediately. Snag O'Shea stood framed in the doorway.

"Well, Boss, it's great to see you up here. Come on in. Place is all messed up, but I got plenty whiskey."

Packy's head tilted curiously. "Skip the

hospitality, Snag. Why'd you want me here?"

Snag's face broke into a ludicrous grin. "Want you here? Gee, Boss, I—" He caught sight of me in the gloom of the hallway and his hand moved suddenly for his gun. With a quick motion he shoved Packy aside and out of the line of fire. I jammed my hands up in the air, my heart pounding.

"I see," said Snag. "I think I see what happened."

Packy Vogel had turned and was staring at me. "I see, too. Get in there, Butler. Quick!"

Snag O'Shea grabbed my arm and yanked me into the apartment. Packy slammed the door after us. Snag gave me a shove and I hurtled into a chair.

"Okay, Butler," said Packy. "Now tell us why you made that call!"

"Halloween joke," I said. "Anything for a laugh."

Snag O'Shea's hand lashed out at me. I took a stinging blow across the mouth.

"Who came here with you?" asked Packy.

"Nobody."

"He wouldn't come here alone, Boss," said Snag, walking swiftly to the window and looking down. "He ain't that stupid."

Packy Vogel looked puzzled.

"He was stupid enough to kill my girl. He might do anything." His hands moved over me swiftly. "No gun on him, either. Why'd you come here, Butler? Why'd you call me?"

"I thought," I said, "we could have a party."

THE madness began to glow in Packy's eyes. Madness, and uncertainty. Well, that was what I wanted.

"All right," he said suddenly. "Maybe you got something up your sleeve. Maybe you haven't. But it's not going to do you any good." Deliberately he took a snub-nosed .32 automatic out of his pocket. "It's not going to do you any good, because I'm going to kill you, if they hang me for it. I'm going to kill you myself, right now."

His hand tensed on his gun. Snag grinned in the background, I tried to get my breath, tell my story. . . .

A buzzer sounded and Packy jumped.

"What's that?"

"Downstairs," muttered Snag.

Packy's gun wavered. "Get it."

Snag O'Shea stepped to a house phone by the door. "Yeah?"

The voice was a faint, garbled one, but I heard it. "Anne Tipton. Ace Barlow sent for me."

Snag O'Shea hesitated. "He ain't here."

Packy Vogel frowned thoughtfully. "Let her come up."

"Hell, Boss, we don't want no dame up here. Barlow ain't here."

"Snag," said Packy slowly, "I don't like the way you keep trying to think. I think; you do what I tell you. Send her up."

Snag pressed a button reluctantly. I looked into Packy's eyes.

"Listen, Packy, your boy Snag has been double-crossing you. He said Ace Barlow wasn't here, but Ace is."

Snag O'Shea swung his pistol butt. It cracked against my head and I reeled to the floor. Slowly I climbed to my feet, my temple throbbing.

Packy Vogel swung his gun between me and Snag. "What's all this?" he growled.

"Nothing," I said. "Except Ace Barlow's here. Look in the bedroom—look in the bathroom. He's here, because I sent him here with another fake call."

Packy Vogel's face went hard. "All right, Barlow," he said. "Come out of there!"

Ace Barlow came out of the bedroom, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Hello, Packy. I was just mixing us all a drink."

"Thanks," said Packy. He said softly to Snag, "Why didn't you tell me he was in there, Snag? You know I like to hear about those things."

There was a ring at the door. Packy opened it.

Anne's eyes were red with lack of sleep. Her face was drawn and haggard, her hair scraggly, but she carried herself proudly. When she saw me, she drew herself up.

"Where's Larry?"

"Ask Vogel."

"No," she said. "You had a fight with him last night, and he was gone this morning. Where is he?"

"He's dead," I said simply. "And it's your fault."

"No," she whispered. "No!"

I nodded. "You killed him, and I think you know it. You had him tailed—you hired Ace Barlow to shadow him. Ace found out that he was running around with Corene Rivers. So you told Ace to let Packy Vogel know about it, right?"

Her eyes were suddenly swimming with tears. "I thought he'd scare him off . . ."

I shook my head. "He'd have scared him off, all right. Now he doesn't have to. Corene's dead, and Larry's dead too."

"I didn't want him to kill Larry!" Her voice broke and suddenly she was sobbing.

I smiled grimly. "Your boy Ace told Packy Vogel that Corene was seeing Larry. What he didn't tell Packy was that Larry gave Corene your brooch. He didn't tell Packy, but he told Snag O'Shea."

Packy was tense. I could see the wheels spinning in his brain. I helped him a little.

"Ace Barlow didn't have the knowhow or the guts to pull a robbery. But Snag did. Corene's dog knew Snag; the dog didn't bark when he got in the house. The trouble was that Corene knew Snag too. She woke up and recognized him."

A key turned in the door and Lumpy Larson walked in. He stopped in surprise and stood near the door, watching. Nobody paid any attention to him.

"Corene woke up and recognized Snag," I continued, "so Snag killed her. He got the brooch. It was gone when I tried to get it."

Snag laughed nervously. "He's nuts, Boss. You want me to take care of him?"

"I'm not nuts," I said. "Ace Barlow and Anne were the only ones that knew Corene had the brooch. So I faked a call this morning. I called Ace and said he was in trouble, made out that I was his partner on the brooch deal. Maybe Ace thought his partner was having trouble fencing the brooch. Maybe he was worried about his cut. Anyway, he could have led me anywhere. He led me here."

Snag O'Shea grunted and swung his gun toward me.

"No, Snag," said Packy. "Wait!"

SNAG shook his head and growled. I dove for the deck, pulling Anne down with me. Snag's gun roared and a slug buried itself above me in a chair.

Packy knocked the gun from his hand. "No!" he said. "He's right. You broke

into her home for the brooch. She saw you, and you killed her." He leveled his gun. "And I'm going to kill you!"

Snag O'Shea's face worked irrationally. "No, Boss," he whined, backing away. "No, I wouldn't kill her. You know I wouldn't." Suddenly he bent and his long arm darted down at his gun. There was a shattering blast and Packy Vogel staggered, twisted, and sagged to the floor.

A startled gasp came from Lumpy Larson. His automatic was in his hand. "You shot the Boss," he said plaintively. "You shouldn't have done that."

Slowly, impassively he raised the gun. Snag O'Shea whirled, and the two blasts sounded together. Snag clutched at his throat and dropped to his knees. He gurgled and fired once, blindly. Lumpy Larson took a heavy step forward and toppled to the floor.

I got up brushing myself off, my stomach fluttering. I yanked Anne to her feet.

"Oh, Pete," she murmured. "Oh . . ."

"Take it easy, sister." I moved away from her, scooping up the three guns. Packy Vogel and Snag O'Shea were dead; there wasn't the whisper of a breath in either one. But Lumpy Larson groaned, deep down in his throat.

"Call the cops," I told Anne. "And an ambulance."

"Never mind, sonny boy," said a voice from the hall. "What happened here?"

I turned swiftly. Lobo Ricco stood in the door, with Chris, white-faced and shaken, behind him. Police crowded into the room, covering me.

"An epidemic," I said. "Good for cutting down the population. How the hell did you get here?"

Lobo jerked his head at Chris. "Your girl friend was afraid you'd hurt yourself playin' with the boys. It looks as if you cleaned house. Who said you could go around shootin' up citizens?"

"I shot nobody," I said. I prodded the body of Snag O'Shea with my foot. "Here's the guy that killed Corene Rivers and Larry Tipton. He also killed Packy Vogel, but I guess he gets ten points for that."

"Any of 'em still alive?" Lobo asked coldly.

I pointed to Lumpy Larson.

"Ambulance," said Lobo, and a cop moved to the phone.

"Now suppose you tell us, Butler, in your own sweet words, just what happened."

I told him. He asked Anne a few questions. Finally he turned sceptically to me. "When you doped this out, why didn't you call us?"

I shrugged. "I kind of figured they'd work it out among themselves."

A rookie cop straightened over Snag O'Shea. "Say, Lobo, look at this!"

I caught a glimpse of a diamond brooch, alive with every color of the rainbow. I caught my breath.

Lobo looked at Anne. "Yours?"

Anne nodded. She turned to me.

"I should have asked you to shadow Larry, instead of him." She looked at Ace Barlow, sitting innocently in a chair.

Lobo Ricco raised a finger. "Oh, yeah," he said. "I forgot about him. I guess we can make an arrest after all. Accessory to robbery. Accessory before the act for the murder of Corene Rivers. Come on, you phony."

Anne walked across the room. "Thanks, Pete, for trying to keep Larry and me together. But it never would have worked, even if things had been different." She shrugged. "Now Larry's dead . . ."

I looked into the cool gray eyes of the girl I'd once worshiped. Now Larry's dead, she meant, Pete Butler was the fair-haired boy. Life as a country squire. Horses. New cars. All the dough in the world. And for a wife a beautiful blonde goddess. . . .

A blonde goddess who'd betrayed her first husband to a gangster.

I turned to Chris and smiled into the emerald eyes. "Chris, do you like dogs?"

She nodded wonderingly. "I love them, Pete. You know that."

"Great Danes?"

"Especially Great Danes."

"I happen to own a Great Dane named Cassidy. Could you keep him in your apartment? He's too big for my hotel."

She smiled thoughtfully. "I'd have to have help—you know, bathing him, and taking him for walks, and things like that."

"Help," I said happily, "is exactly what you're going to have!"

By
**TALMAGE
POWELL**



**Tense Novelette
of Suspense**

CHAPTER ONE

The Blonde in 3-C

MILDRED CONTINA was in the club chair drawn up near the double windows when she first noticed the blonde in the apartment across the grass-grown courtyard.

It was five-twenty-three of a dying winter afternoon. Mildred was alone, and the apartment about her wasn't exactly snug. Too large for that, and expensive, with big, deep living-room furniture reflecting the precise tastes of Robert, her

sister's husband, who was an architect.

The blonde was behaving oddly, Mildred thought. The apartment house, of cream-colored brick, was built so you looked into apartments in the other wing. In the late afternoon, the lighting was poor and the blonde's apartment almost in darkness. But a few sun rays, slanting across the building, lighted the window in Mildred's gaze. She could see the glint of sunlight on the girl's blonde hair. Just

NO BODIES, DARLING

She opened her mouth, forming a scream, trying to get it out. . . .



*Mildred was the sole witness to a brutal murder—but only the
killer would believe her.*

a flash of light caught and held for a moment on flowing tresses. The girl over there must be incredibly blonde—platinum. Standing with her back against the window, plams pressed flat on the panes behind her. Wearing a fur neckpiece. Evidently talking tensely to someone deeper in the room, someone out of line with the window.

Watching the blonde idly, Mildred was thinking of her own problems—of leaving here, picking up the pieces of her life, getting over the shock of Nick's death. She thought about Nick, remembering his laughter as he pulled her down on his lap and nuzzled her neck. "Mind if we sit home tonight, baby? Just us?"

Nick had a lively, bubbling way of talking, as if he owned the world, would readily give it to you. She always wanted to remember Nick that way—tender, alive, laughing—not the way they'd showed him to her that day in the morgue. A cop shot down on duty. . . .

It wasn't real to her yet, though her sister Jean and Jean's husband Robert had brought her here months ago. There was no one else, no other relatives, nothing left in Philly for her. But she hadn't minded, because she knew in a moment she'd waken from this nightmare.

She hadn't wakened from it, of course. Many weeks passed and she stayed on in Jean's apartment, slowly accepting the fact that she must forget Nick. She must begin her life all over. A life going in a different direction. A life devoid of Nick—and all she had left of him was a memory of his tenderness. . . .

Mildred Contina stood up without knowing she did it. Body rigid, breath exploding in her lungs. The blonde had moved, and then suddenly she'd gone down, out of sight below the window sill!

The window across the courtyard was a big, vacant eye now. Yet for a moment things had happened up close to the window. Mildred hadn't gotten a glimpse of the man at all, only his arms shooting out from behind the sill. Like adders—coldly, decisively. In one hand something gleamed. The hand moved like a flash of light, so quickly the blonde girl hadn't even had time to scream. The thing in his hand struck the blonde hard, slamming the blonde out of Mildred's view with that

one killing blow. Then there was only a faint shifting of shadow deep in the room.

Mildred waited, wanting something else to happen behind that vacant window over there. But nothing did. Nothing moved in the courtyard. A lowering winter night. Lights peppering the apartment building. People eating, reading, living. But beyond the blonde's window—nothing.

Mildred moved around the club chair to the telephone. She hesitated. But you were supposed to call the police when you witnessed something like that, weren't you? When you'd seen a girl struck so hard she must be dead?

SHE heard the foyer door open; Robert and Jean were coming in. Robert was tall, very lean, with a square, chiseled face beneath his Homburg. Jean was smaller than Mildred.

"Hello, hello, hello," Jean bubbled, shrugging back her mink. "How are you, darling?"

"She's ill," Robert said, looking at Mildred's face as if he were reading a slide-rule.

Mildred's gaze flashed past to him. Very likely, Mildred felt, Robert would calculate the exact number of breaths left to him when he lay on his deathbed!

Jean placed her hand on Mildred's. "Darling, you really do look ill. Can I get you something? Don't you want to lie down? After all this length of time—"

"I'm not brooding about Nick's death, if that's what you mean." Mildred felt suddenly smothered by her younger sister. "I just saw a girl murdered. Over there—in that apartment directly across the court."

Jean drew in a breath. Robert's eyes narrowed.

"I saw it, I tell you! She was blonde—standing with her back to the window. He struck her down!"

"Who?" Robert said.

"I don't know. I didn't get a good look at him. But we're wasting time. We should call the police. While we stand here, he can put blocks of city streets behind him!"

"But, darling—" Jean's laugh was meant to be reassuring. "Are you sure? I mean, perhaps a husband and wife were just spating and you—"

Mildred knotted her fists. "And I, being without a husband, thought I saw things that didn't really happen at all?"

Jean shrank from her glare. "But right here in our own building, a murder? People just don't do those things, not our kind of people! People who do murder are—are—" She hunted a word, shrugged. "They're different."

Mildred picked up the phone, held it close to her in a gesture of defiance. "I'm going to call them," she said.

"I'd rather we didn't get mixed in this." Robert ran his fingertip across his lower lip. "Jean and I are going to dinner tonight—with the Old Man, the high-and-mighty boss. I've got my eye on a new spot in the firm. I don't think old J. D. Breen would be pleased if I got my name in the paper."

Mildred thought, *Nothing matters to him but the threat of scandal.* She thought, too, of the way sunlight had caught in the blonde girl's hair, the savage blow that had struck her down. The blonde girl was over there in the growing darkness. Alone. Helpless. Dead, or dying. The thought brought a hammering to the hollow of Mildred's throat.

"I won't discuss it! The girl may not be dead. We may save her life. I'm going to call them!"

Robert's voice was sharp with impatience. "I can't afford to be involved in any way in anything at all sensational, I told you!"

"And I can't afford to waste any time!"

For a second they stood glaring, Mildred and Robert. Jean always managed her little victories from Robert by being soft. Mildred didn't know how to be that way, even if she'd ever tried to learn.

"Dears," Jean begged from the background, "listen. These are soundproof apartments and it's possible—just possible that something *might* have happened over there and no one heard or saw it except Mildred. Why not call the super, Robert? Let old man Pickens take a look in the apartment. If there's a murder, let *him* find it!" She finished with a little rush of breath, smiling, eyes beaming. She'd solved everything. Let Joe do it.

"I'll get the super," Robert assented quickly.

Uncomfortable minutes dragged while

they waited for Pickens to answer Robert's buzz. Mildred stood stiffly beside a table, feeling her brows pinch together. Robert and Jean were good, charitable people, she knew, but they were afraid of dirtying their hands.

There was a light knock. Jean rushed to answer it, and returned ushering in old man Pickens. The super was a big, raw-boned man with a hawkish face and steel-cold eyes. Opinionated, from what Mildred had seen of him. He brooked no insolence or undue bother from his tenants.

"Mr. Pickens," Jean said, "my sister thinks she saw something in an apartment across the court."

"Is that so?" He looked at Mildred, as if to say, *I know all about you. You're the one that was married to Nick Contina; you almost went crazy when he was killed, didn't you?* "Which apartment, lady?"

"Here." Mildred stood at the window. "That one over there, directly across."

Pickens coughed softly. "That would be apartment 3-C." He was standing beside her, big-framed in overalls. He turned his iron-gray head and looked at her. Almost queerly, Mildred thought. Almost in a way to put a shiver down her spine. "What was it you saw over there, lady?"

"I saw a blonde girl struck down with enough force to kill her," Mildred said steadily. "I didn't get a look at the man."

"You sure it was that window? That apartment?"

His tone brought spots of color to Mildred's cheeks. "What must I do to get somebody to be a little humane about this? Yes, I *am* positive it was that window. And if you say that window is one in 3-C, then I'm equally positive a girl is lying in 3-C at this moment, dead or dying."

She raked them all with her gaze, flung herself toward the telephone. "I'm sick of listening to all of you!" For a second time she picked up the telephone. Now it was Judd Pickens' voice that stopped her.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, lady. I have to tell you that apartment 3-C has nobody in it. It's been vacant a week."

MILDRED turned slowly from the phone. They were all looking at her queerly. She felt her face drain of color. A little twitch started at the left side of

her mouth, and she tried to control it. "If 3-C has been vacant a week," Robert said stonily, "it's quite obvious you dozed in the chair and dreamed, waking so quickly you didn't know you'd been asleep."

"Oh, darling, yes!" Jean said. "Of course, that's it. It was just a nightmare."

"You think I'd dream a thing like that and not know it was a dream?" Mildred felt ghastly, not through doubt of herself—that would come later—but rather because she realized what they thought of her.

They stared at her through another silent moment and she stared back. What strangers they seemed! How smugly concerned for her!

"I didn't dream it. Mr. Pickens, I want you to open that apartment."

Judd Pickens shrugged, as much as to say it takes all kinds to make a world. He smiled slyly at Jean and Robert, the kind of smile that said, *Let's be indulgent, let's humor her; then put her to bed and go about our business.*

With Pickens leading, they went around two right-angled bends in the corridor and reached the door of 3-C. Pickens fished out a ring of keys, chose one, fitted it, and pushed the door open.

The apartment was almost totally dark, filled with gloom like a cave, and chilly because the heat was off. Mildred, crowding in behind Pickens, felt Jean close to her. Jean shivered, even under the mink which she was still wearing. Jean fumbled for her hand, and Mildred took it. Robert, stolidly silent, brought up the rear.

Apartment 3-C had the cold, alien feeling of an empty apartment. Pickens flashed on the lights, and bare walls leaped starkly into being. The space under the window yawned vacantly.

"Well," said Robert, "here it is. Bare walls, bare floors, bare ceiling."

"He—moved her," Mildred said. "Into another room." Behind her, she sensed they exchanged glances.

She didn't wait for them. She crossed the large, vacant room, her heels erratic, harsh on the naked floor. She opened a door, switched on the lights. Nothing. And beyond, another big, hollow room. All the rooms were empty. Big, hollow caves giving back echoes to mock her.

She returned to the first room they entered. She could feel the rising pound of blood against her temples. She knew that Pickens and Robert were indulging her, but growing impatient.

"I know what I saw!" Mildred cried, as if replying to a verbal challenge.

She stood in the center of the room, facing them. Jean had a worried, helpless light in her eyes. Robert's lips were a thin line. Pickens was laughing without moving his mouth.

"In this room," Mildred said, "a girl was murdered, I tell you!"

Still they didn't speak, only looked at her. Too kindly. Too ready to agree with her. *Of course, darling, a murder. Now, come along and jump in bed, and we'll call a doctor for you.*

Mildred whirled toward the window, stood close to it. There were half a dozen tiny gnats like specks on the pane, clustered on a fine, greasy-looking smear on the glass. Mildred brushed her hand through the air near them. The gnats took flight, hovered, dropped again on the small smear that would have been invisible had it not caught and reflected some of the glaring artificial light. Mildred looked closely, but it was not blood, only a very faint film of grease. And on the floor—nothing.

Robert said, "No blood, no body, no weapon. A vacant apartment. I think we should sign off. Jean and I are going to be late to the dinner party."

"We may be late getting home, darling," Jean said, patting Mildred's arm. "We'll get someone to sit with you. Let's go back to the apartment now, shall we?"

Like syrup, flowing over her, pulling her along, her sister's voice. *What else is there to do?* Mildred thought. "You needn't have anyone come in. I'll be all right. I'll make myself a snack of supper, read a while, and turn in."

She returned to apartment 3-J without looking at them again. Arriving, she noticed the tingling of her lip. She touched it with her fingers. She had chewed her lipstick off. . . .

NOW the night was much older, and very dark. The apartment was still. Mildred sat in the living room. She dropped the magazine she'd been reading

and turned the lamp down low beside her. She closed her eyes a moment to rest them.

What time was it? She looked at her little wrist watch Nick had given her. Ten-thirteen. They must be having a good time at the party, with Robert favorably impressing the boss.

Mildred looked out in the darkness of the courtyard, her gaze drawn toward that window over there, that dark window where today she'd seen something that hadn't happened. Better not think about it. Better accept Robert's explanation. She'd dozed a few seconds; she'd seen the blonde girl in a dream.

Robert and Jean had wanted to leave someone with her, but that would have been intolerable—the rattle of conversation, the sly glances of pity. If only Nick were alive! But Nick was gone. No use thinking of Nick. . . .

Mildred sat bolt upright in her chair.

A flash of light over there—in that same apartment. In 3-C! Just a momentary flicker, then it was gone. As if someone were prowling with a shaded flashlight. *He's hunting something—something that will show the blonde girl was there—something that was overlooked!*

She knew she should be frightened, but she wasn't. She felt a sweeping relief—the blonde had been real! Because this was real. *I'm not asleep now, she thought, and dark as the place is at this moment, I know I did see a flick of light!*

She was moving. Out of the apartment, around the ells in the dimly lit corridor. She paused at the door of 3-C. A pulse hammered faintly in her throat. The whole building seemed unnaturally quiet. She put her ear against the door, listened. Nothing. She turned the doorknob, gently. The door was locked. But that brought him to his toes. That scared him! Because she heard the scuff of a foot, ever so faint, in there in the vacant apartment.

Her throat constricted. The man in there had killed once; he would kill again. She hadn't thought of that, only of proving she'd been right about 3-C! Now, frightened and breathless, she wheeled, running along the corridor, back to 3-J. Inside its familiar door, she paused a moment to catch her breath.

She picked up the telephone. But the

phone was no good. Over the phone how could she explain? What could she say?

I saw a girl murdered, but her body disappeared. A moment ago I saw a flick of light in the same apartment—the man hunting something—but by the time you get here, he'll be gone too. Over the phone it'd sound silly to a matter-of-fact policeman.

Hat. Coat. Gloves. She slipped into them. Then she was leaving the apartment.

She'd not been outside much these last weeks. Days had passed without her leaving the apartment. She walked down the sidewalk, passing people, passing shadows, looking for a taxi. One passed, ignored her hail. Then another. Then one stopped. She got in. "The nearest precinct station," she said. The cab shot into the traffic.

CHAPTER TWO

Second Call to the Morgue

HIS name was Paul Kileen. He was a big man, and she sensed he'd be soft spoken. There was kindness in his brown eyes, and Mildred knew that he would move quickly, strike hard. He had a shaggy appearance. Maybe the tweed suit, maybe the coarse, unruly hair. He stood behind his desk and said, "Sit down, won't you, Miss—"

"Mrs.—Mrs. Mildred Contina." When she was seated, he sank in the chair behind his desk.

She looked about the shabby office. She'd had trouble with the desk sergeant. He'd looked as if he wanted to smell her breath, or ask where she bought her snow. But Paul Kileen had invited her here.

He looked at her across the desk. "I heard most of what you were trying to say out there. Why don't you back up, start over?"

She told him everything that had happened. His eyes led her on, drawing the story out.

She looked at the picture on the little corner shelf. He must have put the shelf there himself, sometime. The picture was of a boy about ten. The boy looked very much like Paul Kileen. She wondered what his home life was like. He must be

a good father; the picture there on the shelf was almost like a shrine. She might have been speaking to the picture when she finished. "Do you believe me?"

"I don't know," Paul Kileen said.

She looked at him, the big model of the same cast the boy in the picture had been molded in. Standing, he got his coat and hat. "The name of the apartment house is the Artleigh, you say? They'll have to know where I'm going."

Now she was in 3-C again. She didn't really think of it as apartment 3-C, the Artleigh. She couldn't think of it any way except as where the blonde girl had been killed.

It was as barren, as chilly, as it had been at five-thirty this afternoon. But there was a difference now. Paul Kileen's presence was here. He'd driven her up from the precinct station in a black sedan that smelled of old cigar smoke. He'd gone to old Pickens' cubbyhole apartment in the basement and got a key. Now he gave her a smile, reassurance that at least he was neutral. If he didn't believe her story, he didn't disbelieve. He began a methodical inspection of the place.

She watched him wander into the next room. She followed, heels tapping across the floor. He didn't look at her, but he didn't tell her to wait in the outer room, either.

He might have been a prospective tenant, looking the place over. He worked his way to the kitchen. Gleaming white stove, cabinets, refrigerator standing with its door slightly open, unplugged. But somewhere here in the kitchen was a faint pungence.

He began opening cabinets. Opening the one beneath the sink, he sniffed, reached in and pulled out a paper bag that was wet on one side. He grinned. "The price of fruit being what it is, you'd think they'd have taken this, wouldn't you?"

"Fruit?"

"A sack of rotten oranges and bananas," he said. "Pushed 'em back in there and forgot 'em, the way tenants will. Housemaid carelessly overlooked them when she came in to clean after the tenants were gone. The way housemaids will these days. Pshew! This bag is about to burst. Look at the horde of gnats it's collected!" He dropped the bag in the garbage con-

tainer, wiped his hands on his handkerchief.

"I suppose that's where those other gnats came from," Mildred said. "I remember wondering a little at the time. Gnats in a building like this."

"Which others?" he said.

"It's nothing. Just some gnats on the window pane in the other room. It couldn't mean anything."

He didn't say that it could. He said, "Show me which room."

She led the way back to the first room they'd entered—the living room.

"This window?" he said.

"Yes."

He looked out the window, across the court. "This the window the girl was standing against when he hit her?"

"Yes. Then when we came over, I saw the smudges on the pane. I thought they might be blood—six or seven gnats were gathered on the smudges. But it wasn't blood. More like fine grease. Almost invisible. I brushed the gnats away from the smudges but they came back to it."

His eyes had suddenly changed; they were glittering. "She had her back to this window, her palms against it?"

"Yes."

"At a moment like that, her palms were pouring perspiration. Could it have been perspiration smudges you saw?"

"Why, yes! Come to think of it, that must be what it was! Do you think—fingerprints?"

He was stooping, looking at the window pane from several different angles. "If they were there, they're gone now. The window has been wiped shiny as a new dollar."

"Oh—his second visit. He was making doubly sure, wiping away every single trace of her and himself from the apartment."

"If he didn't, he was a damn fool," Kileen said.

They stood looking at each other for a moment. She thought, *He believes me now! At least this proves her existence. It proves she left smudges on the pane, and someone returned to wipe them away.*

SHE said, "How will you go about finding who killed her, even who she was? You have nothing at all to go on."

"I have one or two things," he said. He thrust his hands in his overcoat pockets. "Scared? You're in this now, you know. You're in it good. We'll try to look after you. But it's sure-fire tabloid material. You're going to be in the papers."

"Robert will hate me!"

"Perhaps he'll understand."

"You don't know Robert. At this moment, he's slyly suggesting to J. D. Breen that he could do a job better than Joe Doakes is doing it. Joe's a nice fellow, but—"

"I've seen the type," Kileen said.

"I guess I'd better move downtown, to a hotel. If I stay here, those tabloids are sure to label me as sister-in-law of a young architect with the well-known firm of J. D. Breen. Old J. D. would have apoplexy, and Robert would die something more than a thousand deaths. I couldn't do that to Robert and Jean. If I'm living downtown, there'll be no reason to mention Robert's name. It'll be bad enough as it is!"

Kileen was regarding her, one brow quirked. "You haven't mentioned yourself, your own feelings, at all."

"Haven't I? I saw the blonde girl. I couldn't ignore what I saw. Anyway," she laughed harshly, "after Nick, I've grown a thick skin. They couldn't say anything to hurt me now."

Kileen was still looking at her. He touched her arm. For a moment his fingers were there—firm, strong, a hard pressure against her flesh that was somehow welcome. They didn't speak.

In the corridor, as he locked the door, she said, "I'll leave Jean and Robert a note. I'll let you know where I register, of course."

"Nix," he said. "I'll wait while you throw things in a bag. Then I'll drive you downtown."

As she walked toward Jean's apartment, it dawned on her that this was the first positive action she had done on her own initiative in weeks. . . .

The room should have had the impartial aloofness of any hotel room; but it didn't. It marked a beginning; for tonight at least, it was her own. Mildred lay on her back and stared in the darkness. Faint light filtered up from the street, and small, muffled sounds of traffic. She was remem-

bering Paul Kileen's square face, his way of moving. He'd find the blonde.

She lay there thinking how incredibly important the blonde had become to her. What if there hadn't been a Paul Kileen to listen to her? What if Robert and Jean had been right? That brooding over Jean's death had done something to her. . . .

Mildred turned over on her side. She hoped Jean wouldn't worry, but she hadn't wanted to stay and face Robert's dismay when he learned she'd dragged the police in. She'd left a note saying she'd call Jean tomorrow.

The phone rang. Puzzled, Mildred turned, sat up in bed. The bell jangled again as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. She padded barefoot across the carpet, picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

The line hummed alive in her ear, but no voice came to her.

"Hello. Mildred Contina speaking."

She fancied she could hear soft breathing at the other end of the line. But still her caller didn't speak.

Frowning in the darkness she said, "Hello? Hello!"

A click. Silence. The phone was dead. She lowered it slowly from her ear; it felt slick in her hand. She cradled it, went over and sat on the edge of the bed.

She was trembling a little, trying to think. Trying to imagine the workings of his mind, the man who had killed the blonde. Mildred thought, *He's scared of me, he's scared of death that some little something, something I might have seen, would identify him. Only one witness, and no matter how thorough he'd been, he can't be completely sure.*

She went to the door. It was bolted. She pushed the chest of drawers over against it. At the window, she saw there was no fire escape, no way into the room now. She lay back on the bed. The city grew still as the hours passed, and faint gray light was touching the fog over the East river when Mildred dropped into a light sleep.

ROBERT and Jean came to the room at noon. Mildred had just breakfasted and was at the vanity doing her nails when Robert knocked. She opened the door. Her eyes widened as Robert, stiff-faced,

brushed into the room. Jean entered, her eyes more serious than usual.

"We had enough trouble finding you." Robert didn't remove his hat, but stood in the middle of the room as if he expected to leave in an instant. "We finally got hold of a policeman named Kileen. With some persuasion he told us where you were."

"Darling, it's our lunch hour," Jean said. "We only have a moment. We—you tell her, Robert."

"We think you should come back to our place."

"But I was so certain you'd be angry because I went to the police."

"I'm not exactly pleased! But I'm tired of listening to Jean worrying. She's afraid for you. She thinks you'd be safer in our place."

"Oh, darling," Jean said, a catch in her breath, "why did you go mixing in this thing?"

"What else could I do?"

Robert said, "I've got to run. I'll send a boy for your bag." He guided Jean out and the door closed behind them.

Mildred looked at it a moment. Robert, she reflected, definitely had that in-law look in his eyes. She sighed and turned to pack her bag. Only for a day or two, she thought, to quiet Jean's fears. And perhaps he wouldn't spot her leaving the hotel. Perhaps he wouldn't know where she had gone. He wouldn't expect her to return to the apartment. Maybe she could elude, for a while anyway, the shadow of the blonde's murderer.

Paul Kileen's voice had a soft, firm quality over the phone. He said, "I'm glad you called."

"I just got back to my sister's apartment," Mildred said. "I just this minute walked in. I wanted you to know where I was."

"I might need you this afternoon," he said.

"I'm not busy."

"It won't be pleasant. We found a body."

Her hands tightened on the phone. She felt funny in the knees. "I'm still not busy."

His laugh was brusque. "Good girl! I'll pick you up in twenty minutes."

He was driving the same black sedan with its stale cigar smoke. He helped her in, got under the wheel, pulled the car

away from the curb. "You look very nice." He handled the car deftly. "You think you could tell the blonde if you saw her again?"

"I only saw her back."

"I know, but sometimes that helps. When you haven't much to go on, a little thing can be a big one. You said the blonde you saw in the apartment was wearing a neckpiece?"

"Yes. It might have been fox. I remember the contrast between it and her platinum hair."

"There was a neckpiece beside this girl's dead body. She was found in an alley. But there was no sign of her being killed there. It looked more like she was killed someplace else and carried there. She was platinum blonde, and the medical examiner says she was killed about five-thirty yesterday afternoon. The killer took everything from her that would identify her. It could be the girl."

Inside the car it felt close now. The roar of the city was a din in her ears. "You ever been in a morgue?" he said.

"Yes," she said, her voice dim. "Once. In Philadelphia. When they showed me my husband's body."

She saw white lines about his lips. "I'm a blundering fool!" he said. "Please forgive me. I buried my own wife over six years ago."

"The boy's picture in your office—his mother?"

"Yes. He's ten and a half now. I drive up to his school every weekend I can get away. He likes it up there." Kileen's eyes crinkled. "Uniforms, deep blue with lots of gold braid. Y'know—snappy."

MILDRED involuntarily held back as Kileen guided her down a short corridor and through glazed glass doors at the corridor's end. She looked about in the large room with overhead skylights, a big heavy table in its center. A long bank of large drawers filled one wall, brass handles gleaming, name tabs below the handles.

She felt a terrible chill inside her, here in this way-station for the dead. And the smell of formaldehyde was nauseous.

She heard the doors swing behind her. A young man came in, looking like a young interne with his white smock and the fingers of rubber gloves hanging over the lip of the pocket. He smiled at her, nodded

to Kileen, and Kileen said, "We want to look at that blonde one. You know the one."

The young man nodded again. Mildred watched him in horrified fascination as he paused at one of the drawers, slid it open with a smooth slithering of rollers. A human-shaped mound under a white sheet lay on the slab.

She felt Paul Kileen gripping her arm. She looked up in his face and smiled weakly.

"Okay?"

"Okay," she said.

"Okay," the young man at the drawer echoed. Mildred looked at him. He had thrown back the sheet.

"Turn her over," Kileen directed. "We want a back view." And then to Mildred, "Can you tell?"

She shook her head. She was glad Kileen's fingers were so strong on her arm. She felt dizzy and ill, looking at the long, platinum hair, matted now, a little dirty from the alley where they'd found her. There was an ugly sunken place the hair didn't quite conceal.

Kileen turned her abruptly, led her back to the corridor.

"I'm sorry I put you through this. You couldn't tell at all?"

"It could have been her—but I'm not sure."

"Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

They went to a restaurant. The mid-day rush was over. A few people were in the place, a sprinkling of elderly ladies, out-of-towners. At a table near their own, a wizened young man studied a tabloid and sipped coffee without looking at his cup.

Mildred laid her menu aside. "There's something—maybe it's nothing—or maybe I should have told you before. Last night at the hotel I had a phone call."

He looked up, with a jerk of his head.

"It was a strange call. Just the ringing of my phone. I answered it. But the person on the other end never spoke. I could hear his breathing. Then he hung up. Paul—could he have followed me?"

Kileen traced the pattern in the tablecloth with his gaze. "I'm afraid so."

"Then he could be watching me—every minute." She locked her hands on the table before her. "He could be anyone, couldn't he? That old gentleman drinking water

over there, the young man reading the paper. He could be anyone of a million, and I wouldn't know, would I, Paul?"

Kileen's eyes were steady. His teeth flashed behind his smile. "You wouldn't need to know. I had a man watching the corridor, the door to your room, all night."

She let out a long, slow breath. "Thanks, Paul. Thanks for your sense of duty."

"Maybe it was a little more than duty in this case."

"You shouldn't say that!"

"Why not?"

Their eyes met. She was thinking of Nick Contina. She heard Paul's voice: "You'll have to get back to normal living sometime. You've been cheating on yourself—on life—these last months."

She smiled. "I like the plain way you put things."

"I'm a cop. You learn to put things that way." His voice roughened at the edges, as if hiding the sudden tenderness. "I know what's good for you, Milly."

She smiled and didn't look up, feeling the warmth and the nearness of him. While she sipped her coffee, trying to make this moment last, he excused himself, saying he'd better call his station.

He came back to the table with his lips flattened against his teeth. "They've identified the blonde girl," Kileen said.

CHAPTER THREE

Terror in the Night

THREE of them were in Paul Kileen's office in the old precinct house—Mildred, Paul and Roger Kingsbury. Paul stood behind his desk. Mildred sat in the shadows of a corner, looking at Kingsbury. He was heavy set, with a narrow, unprepossessing face and sandy hair. Kingsbury looked decidedly English, like an Englishman crawling from a shelter during a blitz. Numbed, staggering, not knowing for the moment where he was. Shell-shocked and stunned.

Looking at him with the horrible, blank grief in his eyes, Mildred thought, *Not yet; it's too new for you to realize, to know that that thing they showed you in the morgue is really your wife. Like having a leg cut off and feeling the toes ache. Then it'll sink in, and God help you then, Mr.*

Kingsbury, with your agony and the spectre of your pain and grief. . . .

"If you'll just tell us a few things," Kileen prompted.

Kingsbury's eyes looked glazed, as if he'd been hypnotized.

"I'm sorry to bother you at a time like this," Kileen said. "But there are several things we have to know. You're sure it was your wife?"

"Yes." Kingsbury's chin trembled. "Yes. It was Helene."

Helene, Mildred thought. Helene Kingsbury. A nice name, warm and alive. A lovely woman, waking in the morning, laughing, reading the paper, walking in the park. . . .

"She left our apartment sometime yesterday afternoon," Kingsbury said. "She didn't come home to dinner. That was unusual. I called all our friends. None had seen her. I waited. She didn't come home all night. I searched every place today I could think of. She hadn't been—anywhere. Finally after I'd called all the hospitals, I went to police headquarters. There they called the morgue. A—blonde woman had been found. I went to the morgue with a policeman, knowing it couldn't be her. But it was—it was Helene."

"Is there anyone who might have had a motive for doing such a thing to her?"

"Not that I know of. But I knew little of Helene's past. I knew the past was an unhappy thing to her. Her mother had married two or three times, she mentioned once. I gathered that her mother had been rather selfish, one of those women who try to stay perpetually young, who never stop hunting thrills. I suppose Helene's youth was a bitter period. She struck out on her own. She was working in an office when I met her, studying music two or three evenings a week. She had a fine voice. We met at a concert. Helene is—was—" Mildred saw Kingsbury's face blanche as the use of the past tense drove the truth a little deeper into him. Kingsbury choked, said, "Helene was a sensitive woman. I respected her wishes and let the past remain a closed book."

Kileen moved some papers around on his desk. "I understand you're a diamond importer, Mr. Kingsbury?"

"Yes, my brother owns the mines in South Africa. I came to this country a

little over ten years ago to set up an office here."

"Then you're a British citizen?"

"No, I took out my papers as quickly as possible. I intended to stay in this country the rest of my life."

"You're a very wealthy man, Mr. Kingsbury?"

"More than moderately so, I suppose."

Kileen moved papers across his desk. "One more thing, and it might sound a little strange to you. Was your wife diabetic?"

Kingsbury jerked his gaze to Kileen. "Why—yes. How did you know?"

"I didn't. But now that I do know, I think a half dozen or so gnats would have brought me to you finally, Mr. Kingsbury."

"Gnats, Mr. Kileen?"

"It's pretty common knowledge," Kileen stated, "that a diabetic person's perspiration is a lot different from a normal person's. A diabetic person's perspiration often contains heavy quantities of glucose and allied compounds. Yesterday afternoon, a woman was murdered in the Artleigh apartments. She left heavy perspiration smudges on the window panes—and these smudges drew a whole horde of gnats because they were attracted by the intensely sweetish compounds in the perspiration smudges. So it's a pretty safe bet that the woman killed in the Artleigh was diabetic. We also knew that she was platinum blonde and wore a fur neckpiece. We know, too, that she was killed about five-thirty in the afternoon, this woman in the Artleigh, and killed quite probably by a blow on the head.

"Now consider Helene Kingsbury—it's likely she wasn't killed in the alley where she was found. She was diabetic. She was platinum blonde and wore a fur neckpiece. She was killed about five-thirty—by a blow on the head.

"It's all too closely correlated to be coincidence. And the odds against another woman's turning up to fit the exact set of circumstances are beyond calculation. It's a cinch that Helene Kingsbury was the woman killed in the Artleigh yesterday afternoon."

"All that can't matter to me," Kingsbury protested.

"It'll matter to you later. Later you'll start to hate. You'll want us to find the man who did it to her."

"And that will help you?" Kingsbury said in a tired voice.

"It cuts down the area, weeds out people. Now all my legwork will be centered on Helene Kingsbury—calling on her employer—the firm she worked for before she was married. Finding the names of the last tenants of Apartment 3-C, the Artleigh, and finding out if they're still in town, and if they were ever connected with Helene Kingsbury. We're starting right now."

SHE had been asleep. She had been very tired, not having slept very much in the hotel room last night. She had had dinner. Jean had phoned. An important official was in town from Washington, Jean had said. Old J. D. Breen had chosen Robert to entertain the official tonight.

"It might lead to a contract to build some post-offices, darling!" Jean had squealed over the phone. "It'll be a bright blue feather in Robert's cap if we get it. But we'll probably be terribly late getting in, darling. The Washington official likes nightclubs. You're sure you'll be okay?"

"Of course," Mildred had said. "I'm all done in, anyway. I'll read a good book and drop right off to sleep."

She had read thirty or forty minutes, until she was so sleepy she had to fumble for the bed-lamp to turn it off.

But now she was awake.

In the silent apartment, the night was like thick, black syrup. She had wakened with a start. She could feel the smothering hammering of her heart.

What awakened me?

She strained her eyes in the blackness. She could see nothing, but someone was here, in her room. . . . She tried to breathe. It was hard. She smelled faint mustiness from the hateful incense Jean burned in her little golden Buddha on the bed table.

She slithered slowly to the edge of the bed, still staring in the darkness. The silence set up a terrible roaring in her ears. She felt clammy; she couldn't swallow past her dry throat. And still nothing moved in the darkness. . . .

Then she heard the rasp of his breathing—the scuff of his sole on the carpet. . . . She had slid across the bed toward him.

She opened her mouth, forming the scream, trying to get it out. She saw his

heavy shadow looming over her, sweeping down upon her. She gagged as something closed over her mouth. Something hot and slick with sweat—his hand, searing where his grinding fingertips touched her cheek.

She could hear his breathing plainly now. It was pounding—pounding—like some kind of heavy engine gone berserk.

She got a whimper past his hand. She was writhing, struggling, beating at his arms, scratching at his face. But he was crazy with panic and fear. Crazy with all the elapsed time since Helene Kingsbury's murder. Crazy with the thought that only one person had seen the blonde die. Crazy with the thought that perhaps that person had caught a glimpse of his face showing over the light as he prowled the vacant apartment last night. He knew that the one person who had seen him might somehow, under the proper circumstances, identify him. The one person who had seen him must die before he could wipe the insanity away and know that he was forever completely safe. . . .

The insanity gave him the strength of a demon. She could feel herself blacking out, and she knew that when he had killed her, he would take her body away, and she might never be found.

Her heart was flooding her brain with blood now. Blood had swept away the first moment, almost causing her to faint. Now it was returning with a rush. Her flailing arms struck the bedside table. Her fingers grappled—grabbed the little golden Buddha.

She struck. She heard the little idol hit bone. He grunted, cursed. She knew who he was now, if only she could get away. If only she could live to tell—

She struck again with the idol. He staggered. His slick hand slipped. She screamed—long and hard and piercing. A scream that shook the walls.

Then the scream was choked off as his hands clamped on her throat. He was snarling, like some kind of animal. He wasn't grabbing for her wrist now, trying to control her arms. He was letting her strike. Because he had decided that he could choke her to death before she could do him any real damage.

The pressure on her throat was unbearable. His fingers were bruising leaders and veins. Her flailing weakened. Her thrash-

ing slowed. She felt herself sliding into a blackness that was shot through with pinwheeling lights. Her ears were ringing. And then it was ceasing. A great silence was settling over her. Her lungs burned, swelling and swelling. In just a moment, they would burst and she would be dead, and she wouldn't feel this pain. . . .

MILDRED floated slowly up out of the deep, black pool.

She tried to swallow. Her throat was so sore that the effort of swallowing brought a whimper out of her. She opened her eyes. The bedroom was blazing with light. And hovering over her was Paul Kileen's face—worried and smiling and tender.

"Paul—oh, Paul!"

His palm was brushing the damp hair back from her forehead. He crooned little nothings to her as her trembling ceased.

"Where is he, Paul?"

"On his way to the hospital."

"Hospital. Paul?"

"I think he's dying. Larkins, the man I assigned to you, shot him three times. You didn't know Larkins was there. Neither did the killer—or he might not have tried to kill you. Larkins was in a snug corner out in the foyer. I got a key from your sister this afternoon so that Larkins could get in without being seen. He's sorry, darling, that you came so close to—so close—Larkins didn't think about anyone slipping in the back way. He had checked that door, saw that it was locked. He didn't know anyone was in your bedroom until you screamed.

"Tell Larkins I love him, Paul!" She shivered. "It was Pickens, wasn't it? Old Judd Pickens, the super I've seen every day I've been in this building—and didn't really see at all."

"Yes, it was Pickens. He talked. He was the third husband of Helene Kingsbury's mother. Helene was his step-daughter, and Pickens played a lot on that tie. Helene was that kind of woman, sensitive and good. Pickens was a murderer on the run—he killed a man several months ago. He took the alias of Judd Pickens and this job to hide. But he couldn't stand the cramped existence. He had been tapping Helene Kingsbury for money all along. He decided to make a haul, get away, go

to South America perhaps, and live the way he wanted.

"Helene, understandably, had told her husband nothing about Pickens. Pickens phoned her, told her to come here. He considered a vacant apartment ideal for a meeting place. He said he was going to make a final caper in diamonds, that she was going to supply him with the information about Kingsbury Diamond Importers for him to do so. He threatened to reveal to Kingsbury the kind of family she had come from—and, if that weren't enough, Pickens had a lot of dirt, however untrue, he would tell Kingsbury about her.

"But she wouldn't give in to the threat. He had finally pushed her too far. She'd let her marriage go on the rocks, even, before she'd let Pickens prey on her husband. And there in the vacant apartment, she made a threat of her own: If Pickens didn't get out of her life and stay out for good, she'd tell the police about him. That scared him. He pulled a gun to throw a fright into her, but he had mis-measured that step-daughter of his. He realized then that if she left that apartment alive, she'd talk.

"He struck at her to stun her. He hadn't meant to kill her in 3-C, but he did. He knew he was in a jam, and that made him rational for a moment. He dropped her body down the laundry chute, to the basement, left the apartment without being seen. He went to the basement, but before he could move her, Robert buzzed for him. He covered Helene's body with dirty laundry, came up here, discovered you had seen the action across the court. He went with you. Robert and Jean across to 3-C, left you, went back downstairs, and, as soon as it was dark, moved her body. You know the rest.

"We've got a doctor on the way over to look after you. Everything seems—damn it, you haven't heard a word I've been saying for the last thirty seconds!"

"I know, Paul." Her voice was husky. Perhaps it was her bruised throat. "Paul, a few minutes ago, you called me darling."

"Did I?"

"I wonder what it would sound like if you said it again?"

"You'll find out. I'll be saying it often enough from now on," Paul Kileen said.

Two short years had turned Roger Tenney, surgeon, into Roger Tenney, bum—without even enough lousy luck to steal his Christmas dinner.

By **JOHN
BENDER**

TWICE he tried to slip into an empty boxcar, and twice he was turned back. On the third attempt, the railroad cop used a club, and delivered a short and pointed warning: "If I catch you around again, I'll break this nightstick over your head! Now beat it!"

Quite unnecessarily, he added, "Merry Christmas, bum!"

Tenney retrieved his battered hat and au-



Then the cry came:
"Police! Police!"

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tion."

IN JAIL BY CHRISTMAS

tomatically brushed away the growth of snow it had acquired during the short scuffle. He stood for a long moment breathing heavily, his legs firmly planted in the loose drifts that were too much for his thin shoes, his slender body rigid against the biting wind that whipped in across the great lake-front.

"Merry Christmas," he replied bitterly.

He turned and made his way out of the freight yards, pushing hard against the bitter wind and snow. Before him lay the city proper, its lights strung out like decorations on a Christmas tree. *Christmas! Noel! Peace on earth, good will to men!* Tenney cursed softly.

It can be cold in Chicago. Christmas Eve or not, the city can be the coldest, open ice-box in the world when you have no place to sleep.

He had thought, for a few deluded minutes earlier in the night, that he could find shelter in an empty boxcar. It was not, perhaps, the best night's lodging, but a man in his position could not complain.

His position. The words leapt to the front of his mind, dragging memories with them. The eminent Roger Tenney, the man whose hands worked miracles. They had called him that—they had called him that and more. For ten long and happy years he had known nothing but respect and admiration from his patients and associates. And then he had begun to look for bigger fields and fatter fees.

Through his mind passed the rapid procession of things as they had been; the new house that was much too big for just himself and his twelve-year-old daughter Nora; the new car that ran like a dream, but was far too expensive to operate; the sudden acquisition of a host of "friends," whose compiled names and interests became too big a job for him to recite offhand.

Roger Tenney shivered, but not from the wind or the snow. It was the chilling memory of the night, two years ago, when a patient had died beneath his knife.

He recalled the curious, unbelieving stares from the assisting doctors and nurses. Soon after that, though, stares had not been unbelieving, or touched with even faint surprise. Ugly rumors had circulated and reached his ears; rumors that Dr. Roger Tenney had traded his skill and scalpel for high fees and highball glasses. It was ru-

mored, without justification, that he had been drunk the night his patient had died.

That sort of thing can ruin any doctor quickly. It robbed Roger Tenney of his patients and his friends. And, as time went on, the thought that he might have had one cocktail too many that night became a terrifying thing to live with.

He found solace for a while in a bottle. Little Nora went to live with his sister-in-law in Boston. As for himself, he decided that to disappear was the best and only solution. He sold his practice and wired the money to his sister-in-law, hoping that it would be enough to take care of the child for a few years. The sum was much less than he had imagined it would be. Doctors, he found, are not expensive men.

THROUGH the night the long screech of a train whistle pounded against his ears. He turned, glad for something that took his thoughts from the bitter past. He was conscious then that he stood on a small bridge overlooking great stretches of steel tracks.

His eyes squinted against the driving snow and the glaring headlamp of the approaching train as he paused to look down. The train was almost beneath him now.

His ears grew normal again; he found they were able to pick out the separate *another turn . . . another turn* noise of the wheels. And then he was aware of another message beating its way through his brain. *Destroy yourself . . . destroy yourself . . . what can you lose? . . . What can you lose?*

The very acknowledgment of the temptation within himself was like a match to dry tinder. It flamed suddenly, almost wiping out the final vestiges of self-pride to which he still clung. He thought abruptly of the small package of surgical instruments he carried in his pocket, which his pride had refused to let him sell, and somehow the idea of suicide faded.

But the moment was a bad one, and he grew weaker too. When the train rumbled beneath him, his knees were shaking and a film of perspiration was on his face.

He did not know how long he waited on the bridge. For a long while, it seemed, but he did not greatly care. Gradually, however, the fever in his mind was extinguished entirely, so that his body once again felt the bitter cold.

He walked on, began to pass the first fringes of the city. Houses grew closer together as he made his way through the soft snow.

Then there were people, alone or in joyous groups, with faces damply radiant and voices that rang with the Christmas cheer.

Merry Christmas! He pulled his thin coat more tightly about his body and trudged on.

He turned at the first block where the buildings were close enough to combat some of the wind. The street was long and brightly lighted with neon signs and glaring store fronts. People hurried up and down, weighted down with boxes and bundles. Last minute shoppers, he decided vaguely.

He watched them for a while, from the doorway of a darkened tailor shop where he stopped to rest.

A policeman went by, and Tenney received the benefit of a baleful glance. He knew that it would not be a good thing for the cop to find him there on his return trip, so Tenney wrapped himself tighter in his worn coat and wearily stepped out of the doorway.

As he did so, a cab came to a quick, sliding stop at the curb. A tall man, none too certain of his footing, alighted. The snow underfoot and the liquor within him gave him considerable trouble. He tried to keep his balance while he fished in a wallet for a bill to pay the cabbie.

Tenney could see it was a difficult task. Twice the man dropped his well-filled wallet, and twice he bent to pick it up, his mind and body growing less cooperative with each attempt.

He finally extracted a bill and gave it to the driver. "*Merry Christmas!*" he said, and the hackman told him the same, then drove away.

For a moment the man teetered on his uncertain legs, trying to wave. The movement threw him off balance, and he slid backward, landing in an undignified lump at Tenney's feet. The wallet was flung from his hand.

Tenney looked at the wallet and wet his suddenly dry lips. It looked very big lying there—as big as the food and heat and the shelter it could buy. He glanced quickly up and down the street and saw, to his surprise, that no one was paying the slight-

est attention to him and the drunk in the snow. Hurriedly he reached down, and with one hand scooped up the wallet and shoved it in his pocket; with the other he assisted the man who was struggling to rise.

He heard a mumbled, "Thanks," and "*Merry Christmas.*" And then he was moving away, down the street.

He had gone twenty or thirty feet when the cry came. "Police! Police!"

He glanced back and saw the man waving frantically in his direction, yelling for him to stop. Tenney started to run then, unmindful of the people, conscious only that he couldn't afford to be caught.

He had made a mistake, and a big one. If his name were to appear in the papers as a thief, it would cause more than a mild sensation in the medical circles he had broken away from. He thought of what it would do to Nora.

"Police!"

The man was close behind him now, running more quickly than he thought a drunk could run. Tenney's breath came short; he seemed to be getting nowhere on the carpet of snow.

And then the cop, who had passed before, came around the corner.

For an agonizing second, Tenney saw himself in the police station being booked. What would he say when he had to give his name? Smith would do. But what about the surgical case he carried? Perhaps they would think that he had stolen that too. But it was just as likely that some police reporter in search of copy would dramatize the case, investigate him and reveal his true identity.

Desperately he looked about him. Both the cop and the man whose wallet he had taken were coming closer. Quickly Tenney swerved and raced through an alley between some stores. There was a small fence at one end, but he managed it easily enough, to his own surprise and his pursuers' dismay.

Beyond that, a long, flat yard offered itself to his rapidly moving feet. There was another fence, and another, before his footsteps imprinted themselves in snow upon a sidewalk.

Two more policemen had now joined the chase, and were not far enough away to be disregarded. Tenney looked for the

darkest portion of the street he was on, and plunged into its protective shadows. The blast of police whistles followed him as he worked his way closer to the railroads.

He noticed that the houses were thinning out again and realized the chase could not last forever. The police were too close for him to attempt to outrun them over any flat, open space. He had only one chance. He had to get into a house and remain hidden for a while.

He turned a corner and deliberately slowed his pace. The people he encountered on the block paid no attention to him. He chose the second house from the corner because it was dark, mounted its few steps and boldly turned the knob. The door opened and he disappeared behind its temporary safety.

He was looking into a small, dimly lighted room. At one end of it, set in the corner, a small Christmas tree struggled to create a festive atmosphere. From the other corner a woman approached.

SHE was small and dark, and her face was lined with worry. Tenney got the impression that she worked harder than was good for her. Her dress, like the furnishings of the room, was cheap and plain. She asked, "Are you the doctor?"

"Yes," he told her, "I'm the doctor."

She regarded him queerly, undoubtedly puzzled because his hands were empty.

"We thought you'd get here sooner. The office said that you were busy, but that you'd be here early tonight."

He noticed that her voice was on the breaking point.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"My husband," the woman said. "A pain in his side. I'm worried."

She turned and led him into the bedroom beyond. Tenney saw a man of about thirty-five lying on a cheap metal bed. Beside the bed a girl was sitting.

The sight of her brought him to a halt. In age and appearance she was very much like his own child. He thought of Nora and found himself filled with nostalgia.

The sick man tried to smile, but pain made it lopsided.

Tenney looked at the woman. "How long has he had the pain?"

"Since this morning," she said. "He

couldn't go to work with it. And he's only been working again since the day before yesterday."

"What does he do?"

"Machinist."

Tenney nodded thoughtfully. It was improbable that the man had ruptured himself lifting anything—and even more improbable that he was suffering from just a plain bellyache. He turned to the woman.

He didn't have to say anything. She motioned for the child to come with her, and they left the room. Tenney removed his coat and laid it across the back of a chair. His examination was rapid but his diagnosis, he believed, was correct.

"Acute appendicitis," he told the woman, when he emerged from the bedroom again. "He should be operated on right away."

A small sob escaped her. "Oh, my God!" Tears traced a shiny path down the strained whiteness of her face.

A puzzled frown formed on the girl's face as she watched her mother cry.

There was a quick, hard knock on the door, and the suddenness of the sound caused the three of them to jump.

A policeman entered. His eyes took in the scene quickly, rested on Tenney, then came back to the woman. It was not the same policeman with whom he had come face to face a short time ago, but Tenney's tension did not ease.

"We're looking for a thief," the policeman said. "He came into one of these houses. I wonder if—"

From the bedroom came a short, muffled groan. The policeman grew respectfully silent. Tenney rushed back to the man in the bed, scarcely thinking of the action. He was out again in a few seconds, shaking his head. "He should be operated on immediately," he said again. "Every minute is precious."

"Can you operate here?" The woman had stopped crying now, and was waiting for Tenney's answer.

IT WAS a moment he had hardly prepared for. He had thought that he could continue this mistaken identity long enough to insure safety when he again took to the street. If the man's condition were serious, an ambulance could always be summoned. Now, however, with the po-

liceman in the room, he had to be careful. Yet he couldn't tell the woman he'd operate, just to get rid of the cop. It wouldn't be fair—and besides, the man might take a turn for the worse.

Tenney knew a nervous, brain-jangling moment. He had no license to operate in the state of Illinois. But that wasn't what really bothered him. He hadn't touched a scalpel for six months. . . .

"What are you going to do, Doctor?"

He looked from the woman to the child. The pleading in both their faces could not be ignored. Still, there was one final attempt he could make to get out of the mess, and in all consideration of the patient he had to make it.

"How soon can you get an ambulance?" he asked the cop.

"About twenty minutes, normally. But in weather like this, traffic is bound to be snarled up. I'd figure about twenty-five or thirty."

Tenney nodded and turned to the woman. "I'll need hot water, and clean sheets torn into strips. We can't wait for an ambulance. We've got to act now."

He peeled off the jacket of his shabby suit, speaking to the officer as he did so: "I'll have to have some things," he said. "Anesthetic, bandages, alcohol. Is there a drug store near here?"

"A couple of blocks away."

"Good." Tenney asked for a pad and pencil, wrote a note. "Get these things and get them fast. I'll have to wait till you get back before I can do anything."

The policeman took the list, but hesitated. Tenney grunted and went to his coat. He pulled a bill from the wallet and handed it over. "Better call for an ambulance while you're waiting for that stuff," he added.

In less than ten minutes the policeman was back. "The hospital said they'd get an ambulance over here as soon as possible."

Tenney nodded as he took the medical supplies. He could hear the water boiling in the kitchen. He unrolled his case of instruments and placed them in one of the larger pans. It was the crudest form of sterilizing, but that couldn't be helped. He handed the woman some of the bandage rolls, instructed her how to make swabs.

He went back to the bedroom and looked

at the patient. Damn it, he didn't like the situation at all. The odds were far too heavy in his disfavor. But—

The policeman had removed his cap and slicker. "Anything I can do?" he asked.

"Yes," Tenney told him. "We'll have to bring the kitchen table in here. I can't operate on the bed."

They carried the table into the bedroom, set it beside the bed. "Careful how you move him," Tenney instructed, as they prepared to lift the stricken man. He waited until the other had taken a firm grip on the patient's shoulders before he reached beneath the man's, thighs and ankles.

Tenney breathed easier when the man was on the table. The glance he extended to the cop was one of respectful appreciation. Quickly, he continued his preparations, interrupting his movements only to ask the woman for more bandage.

When everything was ready, Tenney looked at the policeman. "Do you know anything about administering an anesthetic?"

The man shook his head. "No, Doc. But I can learn."

Unconsciously, both of them smiled. Tenney was no longer bothered; instead he felt strangely buoyed by the policeman's presence.

The little girl had been watching them anxiously. When she saw them smile, her face lost its worried expression. "Daddy'll be all right, won't he?" Her eyes grew bright. "He said he was going to be better by Christmas morning. He will, won't he?"

Across the room, the woman's sudden sobbing was a piteous thing. Tenney went to her, placed a comforting arm about her narrow shoulders. "You can't break down now," he told her softly. "Not with the little girl looking to you for support."

She struggled desperately to respond to his urging. Tenney smiled. "That's better," he said.

The little girl was still watching him. "Will my daddy be all right?" she asked again.

"Yes," Tenney whispered. "Yes."

THE look in the child's eyes was the richest fee Tenney had ever received in all his life. He turned to the policeman. "We ought to introduce ourselves, officer. I'm Roger Tenney."

"Mike Malone," the cop said. They shook hands, as if they had just met for the first time. Tenney started to explain about the anesthetic as they went into the bedroom together. A minute later, his nodding head above the table was the signal for its application. Mike Malone kept his eyes fastened to the doctor's, dipping the cone of ether to the bobbing of Tenney's head.

Roger Tenney looked at his hands. They had once held the infinite skill which set them apart. To them had been entrusted work of such utter delicacy that sometimes caused their owner to be amazed at their uncanny genius. He needed that skill now, more than ever.

Silently he cursed, though his features bore no trace of the internal struggle.

He made the incision.

Under his scalpel lay the tortured tissue, repugnant, virulent. The inflamed, highly poisonous matter that threatened the life of the patient and the happiness of the people in the other room, was not a pleasant thing to see. Mike Malone, for all his hardness, shuddered audibly.

Tenney grunted, set his jaws to clamp the nervousness that threatened to escape from the tightened muscles of his throat. With the back of his upper arm he wiped his forehead clean of perspiration and continued his work.

Genius did not enter that little room in the small, dark house near the railroad, nor did any major miracle take place. But twenty minutes later when the ambulance arrived and the interne looked in upon the scene, he found a competent surgical workman at a task he had once sworn a sacred oath to perform to the best of his ability. In the swearing of that oath, there had been no mention made of human faults, of duties unremembered, of uncontrollable circumstance, of running away from responsibilities.

Tenney knew that now. He had found his own level again, as, they say, water finds its level. . . .

The interne made no move to take part in the drama. He and the ambulance policeman assisted in trivial things; but courteously and professionally they refrained from an attempt to insert themselves into Doctor Tenney's case. . . .

Later, when their work was finished,

Tenney and Mike Malone sat in the kitchen, drinking the coffee which the woman had prepared. Her husband, Tenney had assured her, would live, and the interne had reassured her that that was so, just before he and his driver had gone back to the hospital. His respect for Tenney was in his eyes, and he said that there was no reason for taking the patient to the hospital. He would send a nurse to stay for as long as she was needed.

The little girl had been put to bed, and the woman sat in the bedroom beside her husband whose breathing made a soft, regular sound. Throughout the house, a peaceful silence reigned.

Tenney stamped out one of Mike's cigarettes in a saucer. "I guess I'll be going, Mike. The nurse will be here soon."

At the sound of his voice, the woman came into the room. She placed her hand on his arm, while her eyes filled with tears. "I can't ever hope to tell you how much you've done for us. You've made this the happiest Christmas we've ever had, Doctor. I wish there was something I could do, something I could give you. A Christmas present."

Tenney smiled. "Believe it or not, you've given me the greatest Christmas gift of my life."

At the door, he turned. "Give my regards to the little girl," he said. "Merry Christmas!"

Outside, with Mike trudging through the snow beside him, he realized that their business was still unfinished. He reached into his pocket and drew out the wallet.

The policeman took it, looked at his wristwatch—and put the wallet back in Tenney's pocket. "Look, Doc," he said. "the time is two-twenty. This is Christmas morning. I went off duty last night at twelve."

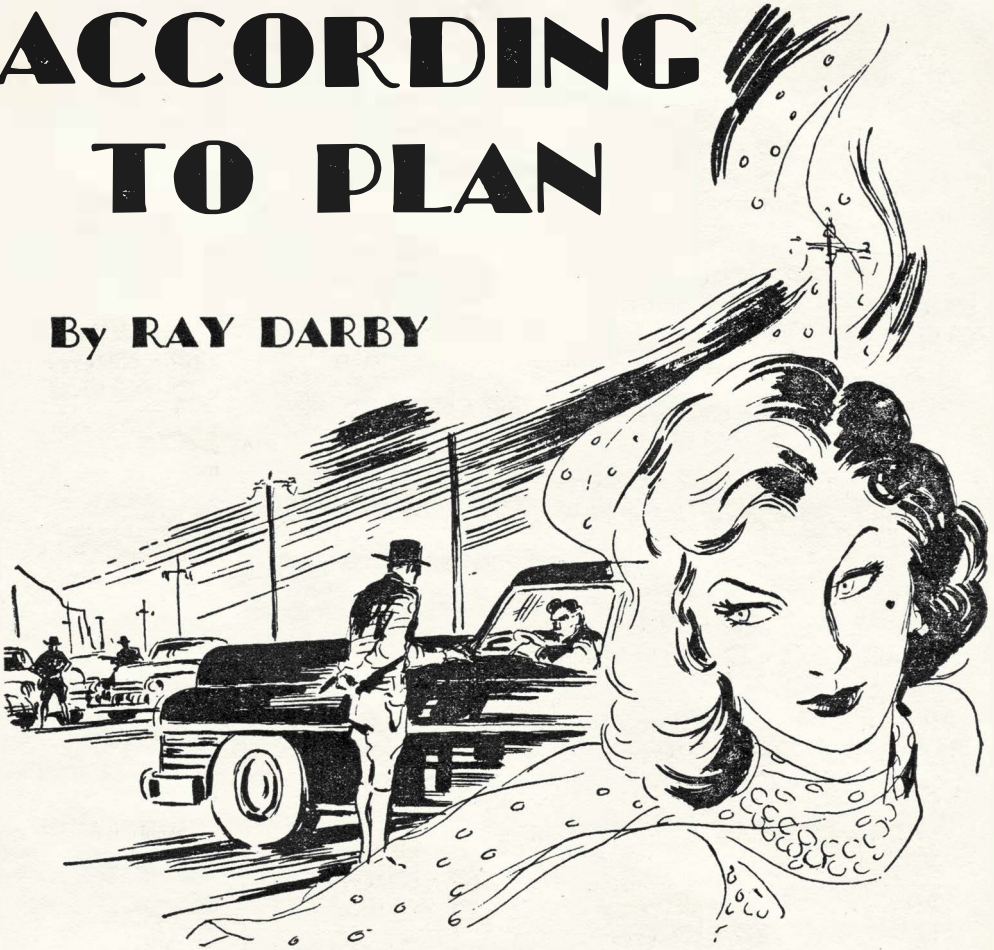
"But—"

"Never mind," Mike told him firmly. "The guy who lost this dough has plenty more." He shrugged. "If you like, you can mail the money back to him sometime, when you get back on your feet again."

For a long time, they walked along in silence, conspirators in crime. Tenney thought about Nora, and about Boston. And he thought it might be nice if he went back. . . .

ACCORDING TO PLAN

By RAY DARBY



"Looking for someone, officer?" he asked the trooper.

Men might die for the love of that red-lipped deceiver—but Ben Wayne preferred to kill for it.

IT WAS after nine o'clock when Ben Wayne's taxi drew up at the corner, half a block from Doctor Ridgeway's white house in suburban Lynwood. Ben paid the driver, being careful to keep his face averted and the hat pulled low over his eyes. He mentally cursed that hat. It was quite a trick to keep it on his head at all, because it was at least two sizes too small.

As the taxi pulled away, Ben straightened his tie and smoothed the jacket of the double-breasted suit he had taken off the man in the jail corridor. The suit fitted

him better than the hat, although Ben hated gray. He had always been a smart dresser, preferring browns or the darker tweeds. He hoped the guy in the corridor was still unconscious. If he came to and worked the gag off, he could raise a holler, and Ben's whole plan depended on getting at least a two-hour start.

It was a good plan. Ben had figured it all out after he'd got his brains unscrambled back there in Los Angeles County Jail. This had taken time, because when they brought Ben in he was raving. A man could go all to pieces over a woman.

It was a good plan, and yet, as he hurried down the street towards Doctor Ridgeway's house, Ben couldn't help thinking about all the things that could go wrong. The guy whose clothes he had taken might wake up and raise the alarm. The doctor might have changed his schedule. This would be fatal. It would leave Ben away out on the end of a limb, ruining his revenge and leaving him only the slim hope of hiding out somewhere in the city.

But luck was with him. The doctor's big black sedan was parked out in front of the house, and it was still only twenty minutes past nine. Ben made sure he was unobserved, and then he opened the back door of the car and squeezed in, doubling up his big body so that he was out of sight on the floor. It was cramped in there. The floor of the car was gritty against his hands and his cheek, but now that Ben was so close to success, minor discomforts didn't really bother him.

After five minutes of this his back and shoulder ached like fury. He thought about Doctor Ridgeway, to get his mind off it. He wondered if the wound had left a scar on Doctor Ridgeway's face. The thought that he might have marred that handsome face permanently was pleasing to Ben. It was the next best thing to putting a bullet clean through his head, which Ben would have done if he hadn't had too many drinks in him at the time.

A door slammed up at the house. Ben froze. Hurrying footsteps approached the car. In spite of the tightness in his throat, Ben had a momentary feeling of satisfaction. Everything was working according to plan. The doctor was supposed to be at the hospital by ten o'clock, and he was right on schedule.

THE front door of the car opened and he heard Ridgeway get in. The doctor was breathing heavily. He jammed his foot on the starter, slammed the car into gear and roared away from the curb with a spurt that ground Ben's cheek against the gritty floor.

Ben counted to twenty, slowly, before he got up. Then he raised himself just high enough to see the back of the doctor's head. Ridgeway was hatless. In the shifting light, Ben took note of the well-shaped head, the hair curling at the temples and beginning

to gray. The doctor was handsome. There was no use denying it. A guy could hardly blame a girl like Louise for falling for him.

Ben was not handsome. He was just a big, ordinary guy, but Louise had loved him as no girl ever had—until she caught pneumonia and Doctor Ridgeway entered the picture. That was where they had both been wrong. Louise may have been everything they said she was at the preliminary hearing. Even a she-devil with the face of an angel. But she had belonged to Ben.

Ben reached into his pocket and took out the revolver. He pressed it gently against the back of Ridgeway's neck. "Don't turn around," he said softly. "Keep right on driving. Turn right when you get to Lakewood Boulevard."

The doctor's body went rigid. The car lurched, then straightened out again.

"Ben!"

"That's right, Doc. Ben. I told you I'd bust out."

"What do you want with me?"

"Plenty. You're going to help me get to Mexico."

"Help you?" The doctor's voice was scornful. "I wouldn't help you across the street!"

Ben pressed the gun harder against the back of his neck. "Sure you will," he said. "I've come this far, and I'm going the rest of the way. They'll never put me in San Quentin."

You had to hand it to the doctor. He had guts. His neck muscles relaxed, and Ben knew that his quick brain was working. He felt a little uneasy. He would have felt really uneasy if he hadn't planned this thing so thoroughly.

"If they get you now," Ridgeway said reasonably, "they'll give you double the sentence. Look, Ben . . . let me out. Take my car and make a run for it. You've already tried to kill me once—"

"Shut up!" Ben snapped. "Turn here!"

The car swung into the heavier traffic of Lakewood Boulevard, heading south.

"One false move," Ben said, "and I'll let you have it."

"How do I know you won't anyway?"

"You don't. That's the gamble you're taking."

For a few minutes the car droned steadily on. Then the doctor tried a new approach. "Ben, if you're still sore about

Louise, get over it. You would have lost her anyway." His voice grew bitter. "I lost her, too. She's fascinating—maddening. She drove you wild, and I don't blame you. But, Ben, she's as cold and calculating as a machine. Forget her, Ben."

"You can lay off the fancy talk," Ben said. "It's no use."

Just past Lakewood Village, near the airport, Ben said, "Turn here. To the right."

Doctor Ridgeway slowed the car. The road that branched off to the right was little more than a dark trail.

"Ben," the doctor said, and for the first time there was a note of fear in his voice. "You're not rational. Let me turn around. Let me talk to you. You're making a big mistake, Ben."

"The talking's all over with," Ben said. "Keep going."

"But you don't understand! Why risk your neck over Louise? She's not worth it! Listen to me, Ben—"

Ben swung the muzzle of his gun and cracked it smartly against the side of Doctor Ridgeway's head. "Keep going!"

The big sedan entered the shadowy canyon of the trees and was swallowed up.

AT SIGNAL HILL, Ben turned into Highway 101. The big car purred. The road lay ahead of him, all the way down to San Diego, and from there across the border into Mexico.

He felt the reassuring bulge in the pocket of the gray suit, where he had put Ridgeway's billfold with all his identification papers. He glanced at the automobile registration card that was clipped to the steering post of the car. There it was. Doctor Ridgeway. Ben smiled a tight smile and tried to feel as he ought to feel, being a doctor. He remembered, with a little flush of pleasure, that there *had* been a scar on Ridgeway's face from his first bullet. This time his gun had made more than a scar.

There were two State Police cars blocking the highway just after he cleared Long Beach. Ben took a deep breath and slowed down. He had been expecting this.

"Looking for someone, officer?" he asked the trooper who came over.

"That's right."

It was hard for Ben not to laugh out loud. He knew whom they were looking for. He knew they'd be looking twice as hard after they found Ridgeway's body, but by that time he would be lost in the wastes of Mexico.

"Your name?" the trooper asked him.

"Ridgeway," Ben answered calmly. "Doctor Emory Ridgeway. My card?"

The trooper took the proffered card and turned it over in his hand. Ben took out the doctor's driver's license and his insurance identification card, playing it to the hilt. The trooper glanced at these, too.

"Good enough?" Ben enquired.

The trooper nodded. "Fine, Doctor."

"Anything I can do to help?" Ben asked. "There hasn't been an accident, has there?"

"No," the trooper said. "Not yet."

Suddenly Ben found himself staring down the barrel of a big service revolver. He turned quickly, but another trooper was leaning in the opposite window of the car.

"What's the meaning of this?" Ben spluttered.

"End of the line, Doctor," the first trooper said grimly. "We figured you'd try to make a run for it. Get out of the car, with your hands up."

Ben's jaw hung slack with bewilderment. All this was away over his head.

The first trooper said, "We found the body of Louise Hilton at your house, just after you lit out. One of the neighbors heard her scream. That woman was no good, Doctor, but you shouldn't have killed her. Now come on out with your hands up."

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Dime Detective Magazine, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, 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; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the 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. Signed: Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1951. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County. My Commission expires March 30, 1952 (Seal) —Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.



He lifted the bottle to smash me over the head.

FURLOUGH

Lightning-Paced Detective Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Our Numbers Are Up

THE second blow knocked all the fight out of him. He melted down to the shabby carpet, the neck of the bottle slipping out of his loose hand; and stayed there, unconscious.

I kicked the bottle out the open door, having no weapon except my knuckles, and kept a wary eye slanted on him as I took the phone. After a moment the operator said, "Who do you want, Ed?"

"This isn't Ed," I answered. "This is Dan Bond speaking, Alma."

"Dan?" Alma Loomis, at the central switchboard, sounded surprised. "Didn't

know you ever dropped in over there at Ed Finch's place."

"This is a special occasion—though not exactly a social visit." I watched the hulking, surly-faced man sprawled motionless on the floor. "Connect me with Mark Reece's office in the court house, will you, Alma?"

"All righty." I heard her plugging in. "Mr. Reece called in a few minutes ago to ask the time, so I guess he's still there."

Brandbury was the county seat, a town of about three thousand surrounded by farms and a dozen crossroads villages, and



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FOR MURDER

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

the local telephone company was privately owned. Antiquated and sometimes maddeningly inefficient, it was also pleasantly informal. Nobody ever bothered to ask for anybody else's number. You called for your party by name. The three exchange operators were thoroughly familiar with every subscriber by sight and by voice. Alma Loomis was the one who worked the four-to-midnight shift, and it was almost midnight now. Her personal way of handling my phone call was typical.

Mark Reece answered in a weary tone, "Selective Service office." Being secre-

◆ ◆
Tonight, my buddy was merely wanted for murder, with a small-town cop after him. Tomorrow, he'd be a deserter as well—with the U.S. Army on his trail!

◆ ◆

tary of the board, he had a right to sound weary; he was swamped with duties demanding every ounce of judgment, patience and energy he possessed.

"Dan calling, Mark," I said. "I'm at Ed Finch's place. Please hop right over here. I've found something."

Mark didn't sound so weary this time. "Something that'll help Barry?"

"Something that'll clear Barry. Come and see for yourself. I'll tell you the rest when you get here."

"Coming!" Mark blurted.

I turned from the phone quickly because Ed Finch was beginning to stir. He was tough and fifty pounds heavier than I, so I looked around for something to help keep him pasted down.

From his bedroom I brought two of his loud neckties. The house was a mess, though Ed himself was a gorilla-size dandy. I used one of his dazzling ties to bind his thick ankles, the other to lash his hairy wrists together behind his back, and left him squirming there.

Next I searched the place. Ed Finch lived alone in this run-down cottage on the outskirts of Brandbury, without a housekeeper. The bed hadn't been made for a week, dirty dishes were piled in the kitchen sink and dust-mice crouched in every corner. My object was a revolver. If Ed had it hidden somewhere close at hand, that fact would clinch the case against him. I hunted rapidly and methodically and in five minutes I was finished.

The gun wasn't there.

Hearing a car approach and thinking it must be Mark Reece, I went out into the dark and listened again; but now the sound of the car was gone. Waiting. I stood beside the well—the well in which the truth had been submerged beneath six feet of brackish water these two weeks—realizing again that this case meant far more to me than any other I'd ever tackled.

Necessarily it was also the last case I'd handle for a long while. Day after tomorrow, at 7:10 a.m., I was due to appear at the railroad station to leave for Camp Moffett along with twenty other Army privates. Technically I was no longer a lawyer and a civilian. I'd already been sworn into the Army and my two-week furlough, granted immediately upon my induction, was almost up. Though time was very short now,

I was doing my damndest to make it possible for Barry Kirk to enter active service with me.

But tonight Barry Kirk was still a fugitive from justice, wanted for murder. Not only that, but on the morning of the day after tomorrow he would also become, automatically, a deserter. That was even worse, the way Kay looked at it—and the way Kay looked at it was vitally important to me. But a deserter Barry would become, unless I could bring him out of hiding, clear his name and get him aboard that train thirty-one hours from now.

The hum of a car came out of the night again, and this time a pair of headlights glared. The sedan swung into the driveway and braked. Mark Reece hastened toward me, and the slender shadow at his side was Kay.

"I stopped for Kay," Mark explained. He was fifty-odd, a retired attorney, and Kay Reece was his niece. "She's so anxious about Barry, I couldn't keep her in the dark. Do you think you've really got something?"

"What is it, Dan?" Kay asked. "Can you prove Barry had nothing to do with it?"

"The evidence is right here," I said. "I haven't found the gun so far, but I've got Ed Finch inside, and I'm going to make him talk."

Mark asked, "Have you called Chief Dugley?"

"Not yet. I'll do it as soon as you've seen this setup. Dugley is prejudiced. He'd try to brush me off, but once you're satisfied that this is the answer he'll have to listen. First—"

"Dan!" Kay said in a little gasp. "What's that?"

A muttering voice, a strange thick-lipped babble of protests was audible inside the house.

"Ed Finch," I answered. "He's recovered consciousness and he knows he's in one hell of a jam. Come on in and—"

Without warning, a gunshot blasted. For a moment it shocked us to a standstill.

Then we broke the tension of our muscles and ran, the three of us, to the door. There we stopped again, struck with horror, staring in at the ugly red splash on the face of the man I'd left lying, bound hand and foot, on the floor. . . . *

JOHN TILLSON'S garage stood three blocks from Brandbury's main corner. An enterprising man, Tillson did a brisk, varied business. He carried a big line of spare parts for cars and tractors, sold accessories and batteries, and was the county distributor for a popular make of tire. A mechanic stayed on duty all night to handle emergency calls. On an evening just two weeks ago, however, the wife of the night mechanic, Bill Church, had phoned John Tillson to say that Bill had gone to bed with a touch of the flu.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when John himself went over to the garage to see if everything was all right. John was worried about the hundreds of tires stored in the stockroom. He went in alone and unarmed, not really suspecting anything was up, but just to make sure.

Chief Dugley was dozing in the police station above the five-and-dime, almost directly across the street, and heard the shots. The three quick, muffled reports were followed by the sound of a truck engine starting up, snorting and grinding off. It disappeared while Dugley hustled over to the garage. He found John Tillson lying on the greasy cement floor with three bullets in his chest, dead.

The crime created a major sensation in Brandbury. Indignation ran high. The murder victim was our best-liked business man. He left three grand kids. His widow, a charming woman, was prostrated. It seemed impossible that we'd never again see John breezing down State Street with genial hellos for everybody, or rolling up his sleeves to replace a broken duckfoot sweep on somebody's cultivator.

A quick check of the stock showed that John had surprised the thieves when they were just getting started on the job. Only four tires were missing—four new, heavy-duty 6.00 by 16's. The serial numbers of the entire stock were on record. The whole town looked for those four stolen tires, a sort of mass, amateur investigation. They weren't found—not at first.

Early on the morning of the second day following the murder, Barry and I, with twenty-eight other men, left for Camp Moffett to be inducted. Most of us returned that same day with a final two-week furlough, so the train brought us back to Brandbury late in the afternoon. The same

crowd that had seen us off welcomed us back—but among them was Chief Dugley. And something had happened to Kay. She looked pale, fearful. I glanced at Barry and wondered what was up.

Dugley grabbed Barry's arm the minute he stepped out of the coach. There was a hard glint in the chief's eyes.

"Where were you, Barry," he asked bluntly, "at two o'clock in the morning, two nights ago?"

"Why, I was in bed, asleep, of course," Barry answered. He lived in a small room that he'd fixed up in his greenhouse. "Where else?"

"Well, that's no good," the chief said. "You're under arrest for the murder of John Tillson." His hand tightened firmly on Barry's arm.

Barry tried to laugh. "What kind of joke is this, Chief?"

But it wasn't a joke. Dugley's grimness, his few pointed words and the ominous quietness of the crowd soon made it very clear that this was deadly serious. Chief Dugley had found the four stolen tires that day, all four of them on the same car—Barry Kirk's.

WHILE the chief grilled Barry inside a locked cell in the county jail, Kay came with me to my office. She sat stiffly in the chair beside my desk, her blue eyes stunned, her lovely face pinched.

"It isn't possible, Dan!"

Of course it wasn't possible. I'd known Barry Kirk all my life. I loved the guy. An awkward, fumbling sort, redheaded and impetuous, he had a broad, boyish grin that came easily. In his little greenhouse he'd grown roses that were blue-ribbon beauties, though he'd never in this world earn more than a bare living at it. He could make mistakes like anybody else, and he'd gotten into his share of scrapes, but certainly he had no talent for thievery and no capacity for murder.

"You'll do your best to get him out of it, Dan, won't you?" Kay said earnestly.

I gazed at her soberly, thinking how cockeyed and tough it was. You can love a girl to the point of pain and all the while she loves some other guy just as hard, and the other guy is the one you like best among the whole human race. I had to do my damndest to exonerate Barry Kirk

so that some day the girl I loved could marry him.

Kay and I talked it over. It looked bad, but I promised her I'd do everything possible. I went out, asked questions of everyone I could buttonhole, then hurried over to the jail to find Chief Dugley just striding in. A brusque, hard-minded man, the chief looked particularly sour. I followed him to the iron-barred door of the cell where Barry was moving in restless circles, utterly bewildered.

"In the very first place, Chief," I said, "this was not a one-man job."

He gave me a quick, searching look, then scowled at Barry.

"You told me you kept your revolver in the desk in your office, over at the greenhouse," Dugley said in his flat, rasping tone. "But it ain't there, Barry. It's gone. Where'd you hide it?"

Dazedly, Barry could only repeat, "Gone?"

"Barry hasn't hidden his gun anywhere, Chief," I said. "If it was the one used in the robbery, it was stolen and not brought back afterward. As for those tires, plainly enough they were planted on Barry. No sane man would ride around on four pieces of evidence that everybody was looking for—evidence that would incriminate him in a murder the instant they were recognized."

"Be that as it may, Dan," Chief Dugley said, "I got my duty and I'm doin' it."

"The man who actually stole those tires knew they were plenty hot," I persisted. "He didn't dare use them himself, or try to sell them. It was risky even to keep them hidden somewhere. The safest thing was to get rid of them somehow, and at the same time stop the investigation, if possible. That's exactly what he accomplished by putting them on Barry's car."

"You ain't provin' a thing, Dan," Chief Dugley retorted obdurately. "Just sayin' somebody else did it don't prove Barry didn't do it."

"Barry's car always sat outdoors, alongside his office. Somebody sneaked up during the night, jacked it up and substituted the stolen tires for Barry's set. Barry's were the same size and even the same make. He'd bought them from Tillson some time ago. The stolen tires were muddied up a bit, so Barry wouldn't notice the difference.

Now he's been caught with them, which was exactly what the real crooks intended."

"Don't you argue with me about it!" Dugley snapped. "You save your talk for the jury. I've seen Judge Bodlen and District Attorney Keyes, and I'm takin' Barry Kirk right now over to a special session of court to get him charged with murder."

Dugley unlocked the iron-barred door and grasped Barry's arm. Barry walked down the corridor with him, looking like a man trapped inside the incredible realms of a waking nightmare. They went as far as the jail steps together, and there Barry cut loose.

Suddenly, Chief Dugley went sprawling, bellowing at the top of his lungs, his jaw marked red where Barry's fist had hit. Just as suddenly, Barry was gone from sight. Running to the steps while Dugley jumped up and dragged his old service revolver out of his hip pocket, I glimpsed Barry skirting to the rear of the jail. I shouted to him to stop, but he raced on—kept going as fast as his long, loose-swinging legs could carry him.

It was getting dark. Chief Dugley's attempt to give chase in a car got him nowhere. Barry had avoided the roads. With natural sagacity, he'd dodged through the woods, waded creeks and skirted along the fence-rows. The posse that went out later that same night couldn't find a hair of him. The bloodhounds that dragged Chief Dugley across country until dawn wound up by treeing a cat. They might just as well have tried to trail a phantom.

CHAPTER TWO

Hooked Evidence

IN THE *Brandbury Standard* the next day Kay publicly appealed to Barry to come back. I added a statement of my unshakable belief in his innocence and promised to leave nothing undone in my efforts to prove it. No answer came from Barry. He stayed gone.

It was evening again—with Barry still hiding—when Mark Reece called me over to his office, a courtroom converted to the needs of the Selective Service Board. His face was pinched with worry. Kay looked pale and inexpressibly tired.

"Like you, Dan," Mark said quietly,

"Barry is now in the Army. He's an Army private on furlough, subject to Army regulations and orders. Like you, when you were sworn in, he was ordered to present himself at the Brandbury railroad station when his present furlough expires, at 7:10 a.m. a week from Wednesday."

"But if he doesn't come back, Mark?"

"If he doesn't come back he'll automatically be listed as absent without official leave."

"And then—if he stays away?"

"He'll be listed as a deserter."

"It's a sweet choice he faces," I said wryly. "Either come back to face trial for a murder he didn't commit, with the evidence heavy against him, or else stay away with charges of both murder and desertion hanging over his head."

"The murder charge will remain at issue," Mark said. "Perhaps it is improbable that Barry will be acquitted, but at least it's not impossible. But eventually there'll be no question at all concerning his status as a deserter."

"Chief Dugley and the State Police may find him—" I said—"but I doubt it."

"Then we've got to bring him back, Dan!" Kay said.

"We'll keep on appealing to him through the papers and by radio, but I know that guy." I shook my head. "As he looks at it, he doesn't belong in all this trouble, doesn't deserve to be locked in a cell, denounced in a courtroom and pointed out as a killer. He feels it's an injustice for him to be hunted like a criminal, but everything waiting for him back here is even more of an injustice. So, he asks himself, why should he choose the greater of two evils? You see, he's handling it in his own proud way. With matters as they stand, we may never see him again—unless he's caught and dragged back to jail."

"But, Dan," Kay said again, "we've got to bring him back!"

"There's only one way to do it," I said. "That's to clear his name. He'll come back then, but not before. And that, God help me, is the job I've taken on."

IT WAS a crazy way to work at it. I might be seen prowling through people's yards at night, and then Brandbury's favorite young lawyer would have some embarrassing explaining to do. It was also risky.

I might be mistaken for a chicken thief and get myself thoroughly peppered with buckshot. But it was the only way, and I stuck to it. And here, finally, during the hushed hour before midnight, I stood beside Ed Finch's well, uncoiling a long rope with an iron hook knotted to one end.

Night after night for more than a week I'd been sneaking about, persistently searching, accomplishing nothing, but at least there was method in my madness.

I was logically sure of the truth, even though I had no way at all, so far, of proving it. Two men had planned to steal a truckload of John Tillson's tires. They lived in Brandbury. Not being professional crooks and not owning a gun, they'd taken Barry's—he never locked his greenhouse doors. John Tillson had surprised them when they'd only started the job. Panic-stricken, they'd shot him and fled. Next, they'd planted the stolen tires on Barry's car in order to protect themselves. In all this there were only two leads.

First, Barry's gun. It was still missing. There were so many possible places of concealment for an object the size of a revolver, however, that it seemed impossible to find in time. This first lead, then, was no good. But the second held more promise.

Barry's tires—his set of four tires which the crooks had removed from his car in order to substitute the stolen ones. Four big, heavy tires were not easy to hide. The question buzzed in my mind—where were they now?

I was certain they weren't in use. To use them would be too dangerous. The crooks would fear that Barry might have noted down their serial numbers. Actually, he hadn't, but Kay had told me he'd had a bit of tire-trouble, and she'd described them. One had been vulcanized; another had a patch inside; each of the other two had shallow cuts in their sidewalls. Barry would have recognized them easily. I could recognize them also. No, his tires were not in use, nor had they been sold. They must be hidden somewhere.

How could a thief dispose of four great big tires?

He might store them in his cellar or his attic. Neither of these would be a smart place, but even so, I couldn't get a warrant to search every cellar and attic in Brand-

bury and in all the surrounding villages.

He might bury them, but there were so many possible burial places, in all the yards and all the fields and gardens, that a search would be hopeless.

He might throw them into a creek or pond; and again, if he'd done this, it would be futile for me to try to drag every pool and every stream for miles around.

Where else? I could think of only one other practical possibility: they might have been tossed into a well. A well close at hand, particularly an unused one, would offer a quick, reasonably secure means of getting rid of them. But how many open wells were there in Brandbury and vicinity? Perhaps hundreds! Yet it was the only plan I could possibly adopt.

During the day I scouted about, spotting wells wherever I found them. Late at night, when houses and stores were dark, and the streets of Brandbury deserted, I prowled. I carried a long rope to the end of which I'd attached an iron hook. I lowered the hook into one well after another, swinging and twisting it about in an effort to snag whatever might lie in the black depths. I shifted from yard to yard, from street to street, night after night.

In this place, a dog would bark, warning me off. In another, chicken or ducks would squawk an alarm. I encountered barbed wire fences. I tripped over vines. I stumbled into junk-heaps and bog-holes. My hook brought up old buckets, old lanterns, old chains, and once an old baby buggy. Turning from a well, my back and my arms aching, I invariably felt that perhaps the tires were really there but somehow I'd failed to hook them. Soon, having exhausted almost every possibility in Brandbury, I faced the even more disheartening prospect of scouting out to the surrounding villages. Now my furlough was almost spent—and Barry's, too.

Then, at last, I reached Ed Finch's place. I approached it from the rear, with a hunch that here was a better bet than any of the others. Ed was frequently out of a job, due to his hard drinking. He liked money and paid fancy prices for his fancy clothes. Sly and mean-minded, he would consider it very smart to steal a truckload of tires, bootleg them and get from two to five times their pre-war value. Actually he wasn't clever enough to engineer such a job on

his own, but he'd be quick to fall in with a plan like this if it were master-minded by someone else.

Lights burned in Ed Finch's cottage as I crept up to his well. As I'd already done thirty or forty times elsewhere, I snaked my rope down into depths. I'd become an expert, able to feel the contour of the shaft bottom, to twist the hook so as to catch a submerged object with very few misses. My pulse began to pound; I hooked something heavy that bumped the stones as I pulled it up. Yes—a tire!

My flashlight showed me exactly the proof I'd labored to find these many nights: a tire of the same make and size as Barry's—and this one had been vulcanized!

I left it lying in the weeds, and the other three still resting on the bottom of the well to wait for someone in authority to haul them up. Ed Finch was one of the guilty men, and at this moment he was inside the house.

Quietly I went to the door and thrust it open without knocking. Ed Finch was pouring the last of a bottle of rye into a glass. He looked up with a start as I moved in on him.

"All right, Ed. It's caught up with you. You helped to kill John Tillson. Frank Gates, that slick pal of yours, was in it with you, wasn't he?"

Finch sprang up, dropping the glass, hitting out with his clubbed left hand. It grazed my ear. My first blow slid off his cheekbone. Then he had the neck of the bottle clenched in his other fist, had it lifted to smash me over the head. My second punch connected squarely with his jaw. He melted down to the shabby carpet, the neck of the bottle slipping out of his loose fingers, and stayed there. I'd knocked him unconscious.

I'd lost no time about making the most of this break; I'd phoned Mark Reece at once. He had come in a hurry, with Kay, and I'd promised them that this would clear Barry.

Then, without any warning, we'd heard the shot—the single gun-blast that sent us running to the door of the house.

Ed Finch lay there in the center of the room, still bound hand and foot with his gaudy neckties, an ugly red splash on his face. He was dead—and effectively silenced forever.

CHAPTER THREE

Perfect Alibi

WHILE Kay and Mark stood there in the doorway, stunned and uncomprehending, I skirted around the house. Another road passed not far to the north. Someone using a car—I recalled having heard it—had stopped nearby, had come quietly across the adjoining field and had fired through the screen of an open window. Just as I found the bullet hole in the screen, I heard the car again—the sound of a motor fading away.

To give chase would be hopeless. The car would be back in Brandbury, even before I could get a message through to Chief Dugley by phone.

I went to the phone anyway. A different operator was on duty now; her name was Jean Knowles. Responding to the urgency in my voice, Jean connected me at once with Dugley's office.

"Please hop over to Ed Finch's," I said. "He's been shot—killed. Before you come get your hands on Frank Gates."

"Frank Gates?" the chief blurted. "What for?"

"I'll explain the whole thing when you get here."

I disconnected before the chief could ask any more questions and found Mark gazing at me curiously.

"Frank Gates?" he echoed too. "What makes you think Frank did this, Dan?"

"Ed was Frank's closest pal for years. Ed was a big dumb lug who hero-worshipped Frank because Frank's so much smarter. Ed helped with the Tillson job, so common sense says he was in it with Frank. Frank was the brains. He's exactly the type—a man who loves to pull off slick ones and cash in."

Kay asked quickly, "But can you prove that, Dan? Remember, Frank is also a close personal friend of Chief Dugley."

"I know, but I can prove Ed's complicity beyond a shadow of a doubt, and Frank will have to do plenty of convincing talking to get himself out of this. I don't believe he'll succeed. Somewhere there's got to be concrete evidence to clinch this case against him."

"You've so little time now, Dan," Kay said.

"I've so damned little time. But I'm going to use every minute of it to make it possible for Barry to catch that camp train."

A car hummed down the road. It stopped behind Mark's. Chief Dugley had hustled.

The other man was Frank Gates.

Eyeing me narrowly, the chief asked, "Well, Dan?"

Watching Gates, I said, "Ed was one of the two men who robbed the garage and killed John Tillson. Look at that tire leaning against the well out there. It's one of the four they took off Barry's car in order to substitute the stolen set. The other three are still under water. I had to knock Ed down and tie him like that. While I was outside, somebody fired through the window and killed him."

"Somebody?" Chief Dugley's eyes were still narrowed. "Using the same gun that killed John?"

"Probably. A test will show that. The rest is even more probable. Ed was murdered by his partner in crime."

"Did you see this so-called partner?"

"No," I was forced to admit. "But obviously Ed was killed in order to shut him up. The partner happened along just after I'd cornered Ed. He couldn't trust Ed to keep quiet. Using a gun, he made sure Ed wouldn't name him."

"And just who do you figure this partner of Ed's was, Dan?"

"You know as well as I do, Chief. Everybody in Brandbury knows who's been Ed's buddy for years."

"You mean Frank, here."

Gates stood silent at the chief's side, handsome, forty-odd and smart. No one was quite sure how he made his money. He talked wisely about the stock market, real estate deals, card playing and horse racing. He always looked perfectly pressed and fastidious. His too-smooth face shone, and his hands were scrubbed as thoroughly as those of a surgeon about to operate. He made no answer to my indirect accusation. Instead, he smiled faintly.

"You're goin' off half-cocked, Dan," Chief Dugley reproved me. "Frank couldn't have done this. He's been with me all evenin'."

"With you!" I was jolted. "Are you sure of that?"



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Frederick C. Davis

Chief Dugley nodded. "That's why I was so surprised when you told me over the phone I better pick him up. He was in my office with men when you called."

"But had he been with you every minute?" I doubted my ears. "Was he with you a few minutes past midnight?"

"Every single minute since early evenin' Frank's been with me as close as you see him right now," Chief Dugley stated flatly. "He ain't been out of my sight."

My fine theory had exploded in my face. I'd been too sure of it. It seemed that my last chance to exonerate Barry was gone.

"I'm takin' charge here," Chief Dugley announced. "Better clear out, all of you."

He crowded us to the door, including Frank Gates. Mark was silent, and Kay was so heartsick I decided grimly that I couldn't let it go at that. Turning back, I again buttonholed the chief.

"Whoever may be guilty, you've got to admit now that it's not Barry Kirk. Those tires in the well prove he was framed."

Eyeing me, Chief Dugley said, "Maybe it's Ed who was framed." Then he went on shrewdly, "Barry's still missin'. So is Barry's gun. He could've pulled off the robbery with Ed. He could've thrown those old tires of his into Ed's well, and then killed Ed, as a slick way of makin' hisself appear innocent."

"But, good Lord, Chief—"

"Or, if Barry didn't do that, then you might have done it, Dan. You're tryin' your almighty dammedest to clear Barry. You ain't stopping at nothin' to save him. If you thought this was the only possible way—" The chief's eyes were shrewd, shining slits. "There's absolutely nothin' so far to prove Barry's innocent. Matter of fact, this makes it look worse for him—and plenty bad for you too, Dan. You'd better keep quiet!"

Frank Gates, my prize suspect, was already driving off. Going back to the car, I found Kay and Mark both bitterly silent. I knew what they were thinking. I was thinking it myself. *Only thirty hours until the camp train leaves.*

THE HOURS slipped past. The rest of that night was a period of empty frustration. The morning brought no new de-
(Continued on page 104)

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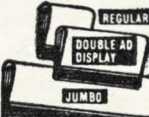
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Frederick C. Davis

(Continued from page 102)

velopments, and after almost a full afternoon of accomplishing nothing I sat alone in my office, keenly feeling the relentless pressure of time.

Only fifteen hours left.

Still there was no word from Barry. The tension in Kay, I knew, was mounting minute by minute while the search for him went on without result. Tonight would be torture for her, and when 7:10 tomorrow morning came, with Barry still gone, something in her would die.

Brandbury seemed unusually quiet. It was a cloudy, oppressively dark day, this last day of my furlough, and of Barry's. It was just before four o'clock, and Alma Loomis was hurrying into the telephone office directly across the street, just as she'd done every day for year after year. A rather homely girl in her thirties, she carried her big handbag and moved with a certain earnestness. She disappeared into the street door, then reappeared in the office on the second floor to relieve Martha Gates, who was just finishing her eight-hour spell at the switchboard. It all seemed so good and well-established, and in a moment, I knew, Martha would hurry down and across to Hannock's Market, to get meat and vegetables for dinner.

Martha, however, broke her routine. Instead of turning to the market, she came straight across the street, ran up the stairs and thrust into my office.

"Dan, I can't stand it any longer. I've got to get a divorce!"

It had been a long time coming. Martha had held on as long as she could, and it wouldn't be news to the town that at last she'd had enough. Her husband was Frank Gates—Frank Gates of the unbreakable alibi.

"He doesn't care about me any more. I'd rather be entirely alone than feel he's cheating on me behind my back."

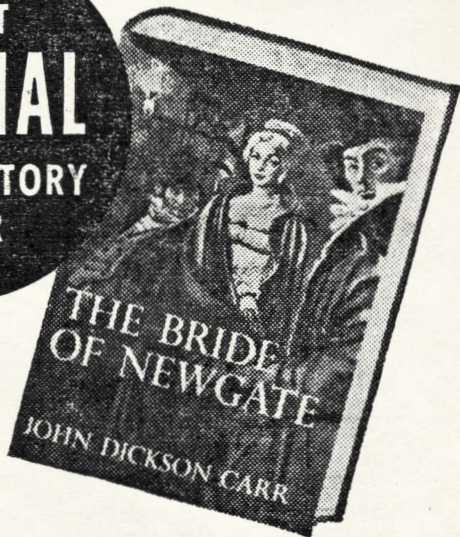
"Are you sure there's another woman?"

"No, I'm not really sure, Dan. That is, I've never seen them together, and neither has anyone else, as far as I know. I just feel there must be—some woman he's been meeting secretly, and often, too. I know the signs. He's kept it from me so he could keep on getting money from me."

(Continued on page 106)



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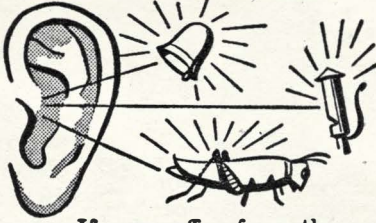
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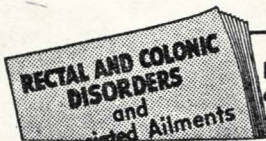
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Frederick C. Davis

(Continued from page 104)

"I'm afraid I can't help you, Martha. There isn't time for me to handle your case, you see. I'm leaving for camp tomorrow morning. Just go down to Jim Leatherman's office, around the corner, and talk to him about it."

"If I was sure, you can just bet I'd name that woman!" Martha said, her eyes flashing. "She'd never be able to live in this town afterward." Then Martha rose. "Thanks, Dan, just the same—and lots of good luck in the Army."

I was still sitting there, trying to think where to turn next to help Barry, when Kay came in, looking ill.

"Nothing, Dan?" she murmured.

"Absolutely nothing, Kay. Martha Gates was just in, wanting me to file a divorce action against Frank. She thinks there is another woman, but she hasn't any evidence of it."

"There is another woman," Kay said. "Frank's been so mean to Martha, I'm willing to help her prove it."

"How can you do that?"

"I don't know who the other woman is, but I've seen Frank with her. Two or three times I've passed his car, parked beside a back road, and a woman was with him. Once I was taking a walk when a thunderstorm came up, so I took cover in the barn of an abandoned farm. I saw Frank and a woman running out the back. I haven't told anyone until now."

"Who could that woman be?"

"Any young woman in town."

Taking up the telephone, I asked Alma Loomis to connect me with Jim Leatherman's office. Jim said Martha was there now, so I told him what Kay had seen.

"You'll probably need stronger testimony than that, though," I said. "I'd hire a good private detective to watch Frank. Sooner or later you'll catch him with the other woman and then you'll be all set."

Jim said he'd do it and also that he wanted to talk with Kay soon and hung up. I took Kay to the door.

As I opened it we saw Frank Gates. He scowled at Kay, his sly mouth twisted.

"You let Martha mind her own business," he said levelly. "You keep your mouth shut. If you drag another woman into this thing, you'll regret it. Get that?"

Furlough for Murder

Keep your hands off, or you'll get hurt!"

He turned about, hurried down the stairs and disappeared into the street. Kay was frightened. I started after Frank Gates, but abruptly I turned back, a feeling of elation surging through me.

"It's all right, Kay," I said. "I think everything will be all right now. At least I see a chance—a long-shot chance—of getting Barry into the clear."

CHAPTER FOUR

Death on the Line

KAY didn't understand. Neither did I, exactly. It was just a spark kindling in my mind and I didn't dare put it into words for fear it would mean another disappointment for her.

"I'm taking you home, Kay," I said. "Please wait there. I'll let you know the minute I've got something."

She went on with me, bewildered and anxious. Leaving her at her door, I looked around. Darkness was already settling. The Gates place sat several doors away, and the lights were on inside. Martha was still at Jim Leatherman's office, probably, so Frank must be back home alone. My own place was just around the corner. Walking back, I saw lights also in the police office above the dime store and in the courthouse across the square. I hurried into Mark Reece's office.

"I've got a plan, Mark," I said. "I need your help. I can't be sure what'll come of it, but maybe it'll give us some proof."

He listened, eager to try anything.

"In half a minute I'm going to leave here and go over to Chief Dugley's office. I'll send him over. Then I'll go home. From there I'll give you a ring. Whatever I may say, pay no attention. I won't really mean it. Regardless of what you hear, hurry out of here the minute I hang up. Take the chief with you to Frank Gates' place and watch it."

Mark nodded.

"Frank may come out. He may even look like he's about to skip town. If so, he's to get grabbed then and there. I'll be along next to handle the rest of it. It may not work, but it's our only chance."

"I don't see what you're driving at,



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Dan," Mark said, "but you can count on me."

"Good. Wait here for my call, and remember—no matter what I say, ignore it and get going."

Mark remained at his desk, puzzled. I circled around to the police office. Dugley looked up at me.

"Mark needs you, Chief, right away."

"What for?"

"He has to make an arrest, but he wants it kept quiet. It's important, Chief."

"All right," Dugley said, slapping his newspaper down, "but why didn't Mark tell me himself? If you're up to some new trick, Dan, you'd better be careful."

Saying nothing, I followed him down the stairs. I felt the suspicion in him. He was sternly jealous of his official power. One false move, I thought, and he'd nail me. When I left him, he trudged into the courthouse.

Quickly covering the next three blocks, I passed Kay's home, then paused in front of the Gates place to make sure Frank was still there, and finally I went into my own bungalow. I was ready for my next move, the most crucial one, but just inside the door I stopped still, listening.

My ears caught a sound, a furtive noise coming from the kitchen.

Not turning on any lights, I went quietly to the connecting door. The kitchen was empty, but I sensed someone there.

Then I said, "I'm alone, Barry."

The pantry door slowly opened. Barry Kirk appeared, a lanky, silently moving shadow. In one hand he had a chunk of cheese which he'd taken from the refrigerator. I snapped on the dining-room light, and a dim glow reached him. He was emaciated; his clothes were filthy; thick red-brown stubble bristled on his gaunt cheeks. He looked exactly like what he was—a starving, hunted animal. I snapped the light off, and he stood in the darkness gnawing on the cheese.

"I'm glad you've come back, Barry. Are you giving yourself up?"

"No," he said. "I had to see you just once before you leave for camp, and I've got to see Kay. Then I'm—" He made a tired, sweeping gesture toward the outlying fields—"I'm skipping out again."

"I can't let you do that, Barrv!"

Furlough for Murder

"I'm going to do it. Nobody's going to stop me—not you or anybody else."

He meant that. He'd decided on his own way and nothing could shake him from it: not his friendship with me, not even his love for Kay.

"You've come back at the wrong time, Barry. It upsets a plan I've made. You know what I've got to do, and how much I hate having to do it—but I'm forced to turn you over to Chief Dugley."

HE LET me get as far as the telephone. Then he strode after me, clamped his big hand over mine and kept the instrument pushed down against the table.

"Don't try it, Dan. It's wrong, because I'm innocent. Once they put me in a cell, I'd never in this world get out again."

A tough man to handle, Barry Kirk. By failing to notify the police he was here I'd make myself guilty of criminal conspiracy. I could even be disbarred. *Gold help us both*, I thought, *if Chief Dugley should walk in here now!*

"I've just come to say so long, Dan."

His simple, sincere way of saying it got me by the throat.

"All right," I said finally. "Only don't be too quick about saying good-bye to Kay."

"Thanks, Dan." He gripped my hand.

He drifted out the kitchen door. By crossing the back yards he'd be able to reach Kay's home unseen.

I took up the telephone. Alma Loomis asked, "Who do you want, Dan?"

"Mark Reece," I asked. "At his office."

Alma plugged in, and Mark answered.

"Dan calling, Mark," I said, speaking rapidly. "Listen—this is important. I've got the evidence we need—strong material evidence that Frank Gates and Ed Finch pulled off the garage robbery. It's going to send Frank to the chair for killing John Tillson. I'm coming right over."

Without giving Mark a chance to answer, I hung up.

Leaving the house, I rounded the corner. I waited, keeping out of sight. It was very quiet. The windows of the Gates place were lighted. A shadow moved across the curtains of the bedroom.

Presently a car came up the street and

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stopped, and its lights blinked out. The two men who got out of it were Mark Reece and Chief Dugley.

Suddenly the front door of the Gates place opened. Frank Gates hurried out, carrying a suitcase. He hustled to his sedan, which was parked at the curb. When he was ducking into it, Mark and Chief Dugley closed in on him from one side while I advanced from the other.

"Just a minute, Frank," I said.

He straightened. "Stay out of my way, Dan. I've got to go to the city to see about a big real estate deal."

"There's a bigger deal on right here in Brandbury," I answered. "It won't take long. You won't even have to answer any questions. I just want you around for a few minutes, that's all."

"Frank," Chief Dugley said, "you better do it. I ain't so sure about Dan Bond, but Mark Reece is a man I respect. If he's still got suspicions of you, I want 'em cleared up quick."

"Why, sure," Gates said uneasily, anxious to remain in the chief's good graces. "Nobody's got anything on me."

"This way, then," I said.

AS WE walked into the center of town, a repair truck drew to the curb in front of the telephone office. Two men, having done a late job of trouble shooting somewhere, lugged their tool-boxes and several coils of wire up the stairs. To Mark's surprise, and Chief Dugley's, I followed them. They dumped their stuff on the landing at the top of the flight and went into a room on the right. We went into the room on the left, where Alma Loomis was on duty at the switchboard.

"I'm after information, Alma," I said. The board wasn't busy at the moment, so she eased the spring-held receiver off her ear. "This afternoon I phoned Jim Leatherman's office. Remember that call?"

"I remember it," Alma said.

"A minute or two later somebody else phoned Frank Gates. Remember?"

"No, I don't. That's the busiest part of the day, Dan."

"Again tonight, a few minutes ago, another call was made to Frank Gates' home. You should be able to remember where that one came from, Alma."

Furlough for Murder

"From a pay station," Alma said.

Frank Gates was scowling, and Chief Dugley asked with sharp impatience, "Where's this leadin'? What's important about those calls to Frank? Everybody gets phone calls, don't they?"

"Not like those two," I said. "They mean plenty. Take the first one. You see, I'd first phoned Jim Leatherman. Martha was there, having just decided to divorce Frank, and the conversation between Jim and me concerned that. It was confidential. Only four persons were supposed to know about it—Martha herself, Jim, Kay and me. Yet someone else did know about it. Within a few minutes Frank received a phone call warning him that his relations with an unknown woman were about to be investigated."

"Well?" Chief Dugley growled.

"Frank was given the same sort of tip-off again tonight. I phoned Mark to say that I'd found evidence strong enough to convict Frank in the Tillson murder. Again the information was confidential between Mark and me. Yet within two minutes Frank knew it and was getting ready to skip town. Someone had immediately warned him."

"I don't see how anybody could do that!" the chief snorted.

I stepped behind the railing and suggested, "Let me sit at that switchboard, Alma."

Puzzled, she shifted to another chair, taking her big handbag along. She found a compact in it and powdered her nose while I plugged into Kay's number.

"Dan calling. Are you alone, Kay?"

She murmured, "No."

Barry was still with her.

"Keep listening," I said.

Holding the line open and keeping the transmitter near my mouth, I turned to speak to Chief Dugley.

"Check back from the beginning, Chief, and the whole thing will be perfectly clear. Two weeks ago Bill Church, the night mechanic over at Tillson's garage, took sick. His wife phoned John Tillson to say Bill couldn't come to work. The tire thieves chose that night for their job. It was the first night in months when nobody was to be on duty at the garage, yet the crooks knew their way would be clear. How?

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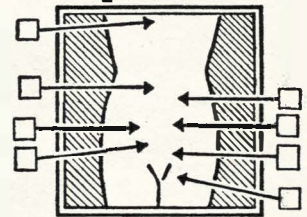
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"Last night, again," I went on. "I phoned Mark from Ed Finch's place. I told him I believed I'd found one of the two men really guilty of the robbery, that I felt confident of clearing Barry. Within a few minutes Ed Finch was dead, silenced to keep him from talking."

The chief blinked.

"Take a good look at Alma," I said. "Alma herself wouldn't claim to be highly attractive to men. She's going on forty, perilously close to becoming an old maid. You'd hate that, wouldn't you, Alma? More than anything else in the world you've wanted a husband and a home—and the bitter part of it is that you've been in love with a handsome, clever man who is already married."

Alma's face went white. She sat very still.

"The man is Frank Gates. You're the 'other woman' who has wrecked Martha's marriage. You've been so desperate to get Frank and keep him that you've played along with him in his shady schemes—even the Tillson garage robbery. You made yourself a secretly daring sort, Alma, more his type than Martha could be. Your all-important plan was to help Frank cash in on the stolen tires, then run off with him."

"You out of your mind, Dan?" Chief Dugley snapped.

I SMILED. "There's no other answer, Chief. Everybody knows the operators here listen in on phone calls whenever they feel like it. On the night of the robbery, Alma learned in that way that the garage wouldn't be guarded, so she tipped Frank off. Frank and Ed had the job already planned and were waiting for an opening. They killed John Tillson. Frank didn't kill Ed last night, though. Alma herself did that."

"Alma killed—!"

"No one else could have done it. She listened in on my call to Mark's office, because I was calling from Ed's place. It meant that Frank's and Ed's little game was up. Because Frank was at your office, Chief, she couldn't warn him—didn't dare speak of it in your presence. She was forced to act herself. She was just then going off duty and she knew where Barry's stolen gun was hidden. At all costs she

Furlough for Murder

had to save her man. There you have it—the inescapable answer.”

In the receiver Kay's voice cried, “Dan, Dan, is it true?” I scarcely heard. Alma was rising stiffly to her feet. Her right hand was lighting from her big purse. She was gripping a revolver—Barry's gun.

“Don't say anything, Alma!” Frank Gates blurted. “Don't talk!”

Alma said tightly, “I'm not ashamed of it. I'd do it again. You mean that much to me, Frank. Come on. We can get away together. My car's right outside.”

“Shut up, Alma!” he howled.

She was at the door, hesitating, every fiber drawn tight. “Aren't you coming, darling?”

Mark Reece's hand swept down in a sudden arc. It struck the revolver in Alma's hand. The gun spun from her fingers, clattered across the floor. Chief Dugley pressed a big foot on it. For an instant Alma stood poised. Then a thin wail squeezed out of her throat. She spun about, flinging herself out the door.

The next sound was a quick thumping on the stairs—a series of hard thuds going down.

When we reached Alma, she was lying inert at the foot of the stairs. A long wire trailed down them, its lower end curled around one of her ankles. She'd stumbled into the coil left by the repairmen at the top of the flight.

Chief Dugley had Barry's gun leveled at Frank now. Mark looked dazed with relief. First I called an ambulance, and then I saw Kay's light flashing on the board.

“Dan, is it true?” she cried again. “Is it all right? Barry needn't hide any more?”

“Hide?” I said. “Not any more, Kay. Not ever again!”

Barry's voice boomed over the wire. “Thanks, Dan! Boy, am I happy! I'll be seeing you, pal—at the railroad station, seven-ten tomorrow morning!”

As I withdrew that plug, another light flashed on. Cutting in, I heard Martha Gates' voice.

“Connect me with Kay Reece's home, please.”

“Sorry, Martha, she's busy,” I said, though her line wasn't connected at all now. “She's very busy.”

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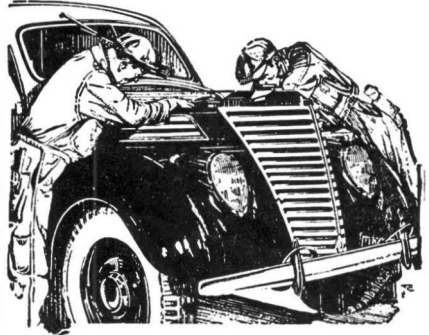


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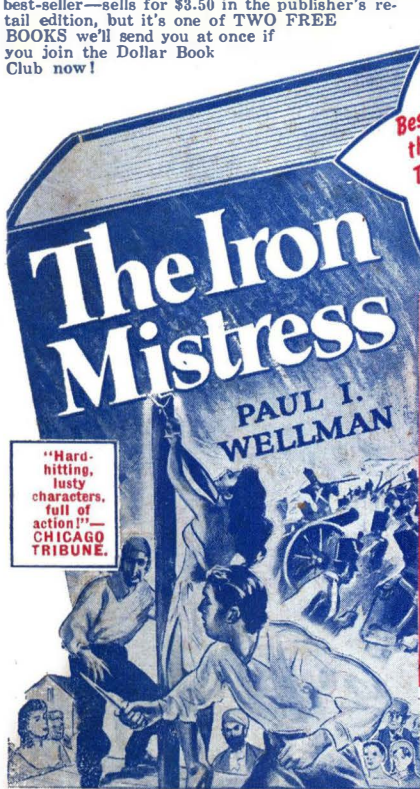
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