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HARD**

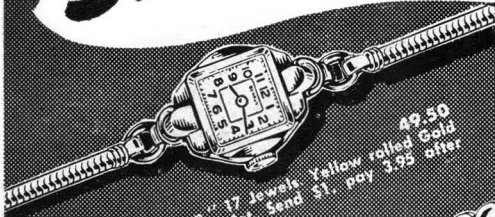
by **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**

**THAT'S
MURDER
FOR YOU**

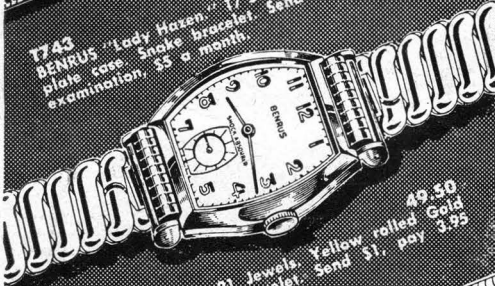
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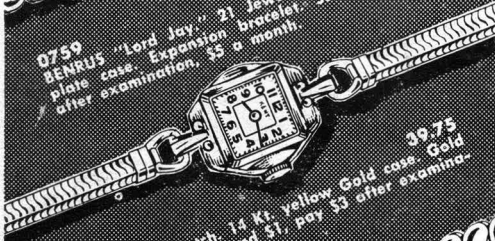
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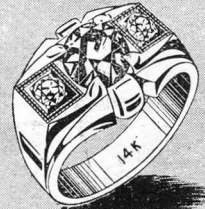
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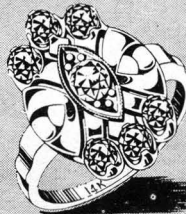
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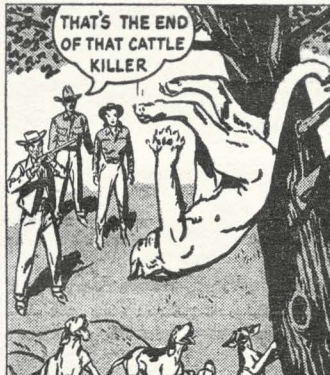


SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN ...

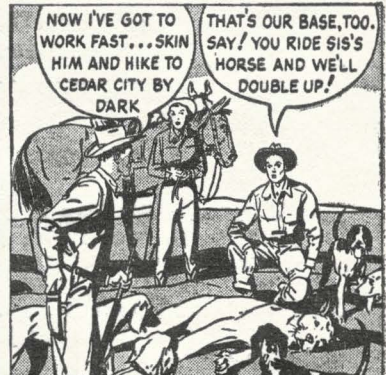


THE DOGS HAVE TREED HIM! COME ALONG AND WATCH US GET HIM

YIP! YIP! YIP!

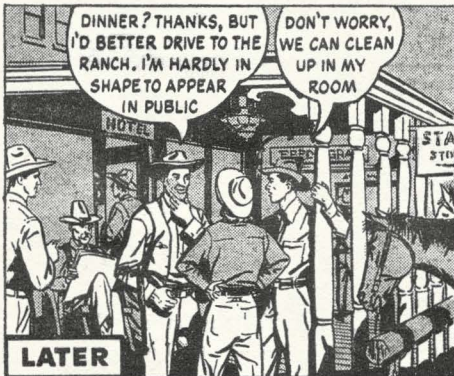


THAT'S THE END OF THAT CATTLE KILLER



NOW I'VE GOT TO WORK FAST... SKIN HIM AND HIKE TO CEDAR CITY BY DARK

THAT'S OUR BASE, TOO. SAY! YOU RIDE SIS'S HORSE AND WE'LL DOUBLE UP!



DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC

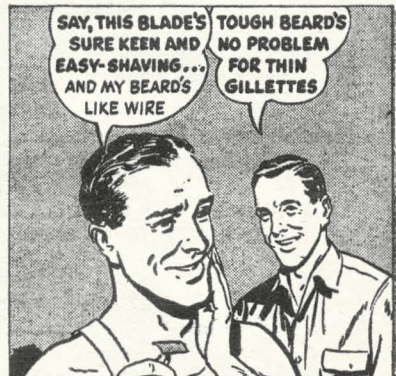
DON'T WORRY, WE CAN CLEAN UP IN MY ROOM

LATER



RAZOR? SURE THING!

SHE'S A BEAUTIFUL GIRL



SAY, THIS BLADE'S SURE KEEN AND EASY-SHAVING...

AND MY BEARD'S LIKE WIRE

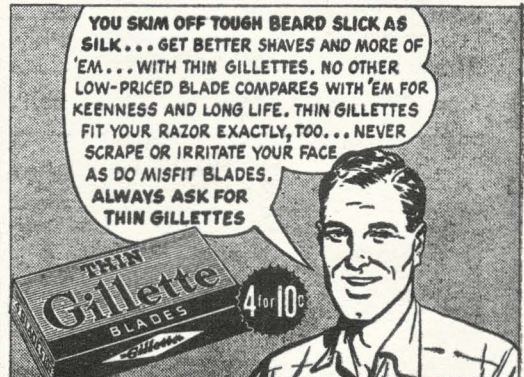
TOUGH BEARD'S NO PROBLEM FOR THIN GILLETTES



I SURE WISH YOU'D ACCEPT. THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE RANCH AND...

WE STILL HAVE A WEEK, SIS. HOW ABOUT IT?

I'D LOVE IT HE'S SO HANDSOME!



YOU SKIM OFF TOUGH BEARD SLICK AS SILK... GET BETTER SHAVES AND MORE OF 'EM... WITH THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE COMPARES WITH 'EM FOR KEENNESS AND LONG LIFE. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR RAZOR EXACTLY, TOO... NEVER SCRAPER OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE AS DO MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES



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EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 57

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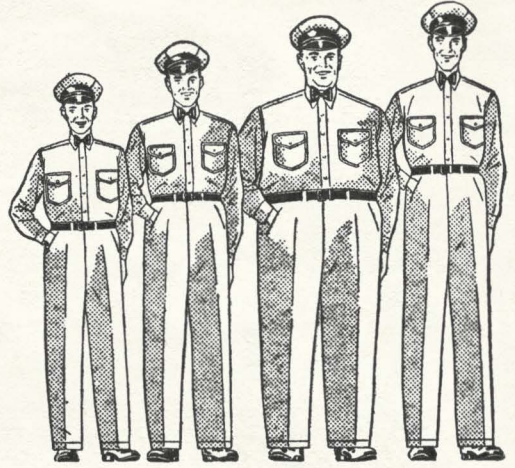
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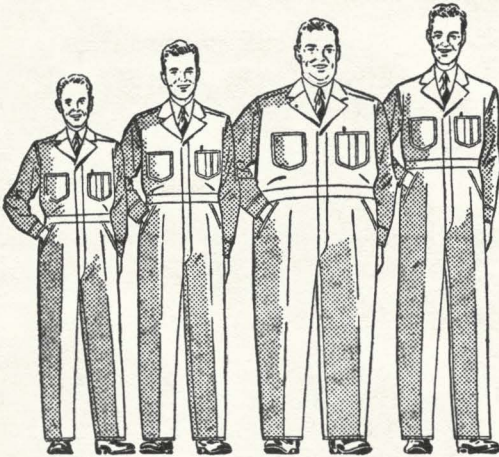


Lee Overalls

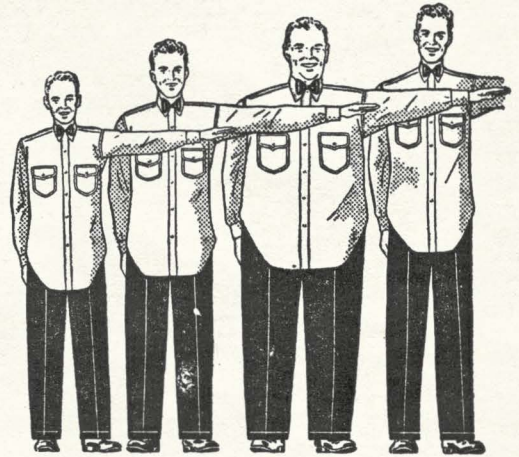


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DOCKET



Lieutenant Marquis of the Broadway Squad once again ruled the Main Stem with his flying crew of tough dicks. . . . Lovely Doris Connally, Peacock Alley songstress, pleaded with the Marquis to beat the D. A. to her fugitive kid brother—wanted for murder.



\$1000 for three minutes of his time—that was offered to the Marquis by a stranger named Purvis, who said: "Three minutes. You'll wait here that long!" It was a booby-trap that blew up in the face of the dapper Broadway cop.



Doris' kid brother, swathed in ropes, pitched through the abandoned warehouse doorway. One of the cops gasped: "He's alive—but shot to hell." If the kid died, the Marquis' bitter enemy, the D. A.'s office, would blast the Broadway Squad.



The Marquis' murder hunt met a barrier in the tipsy babe with the one-track mind. . . . The complete story of Lieutenant Marquis will be told by John Lawrence in his novel—"A Frame for the Marquis"—in June DIME DETECTIVE . . . out May 5th.

WHERE A MAN IS STILL IMPORTANT!



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DICKS DIE HARD

By **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**



CHAPTER ONE

Murder Makes a Widow

HE TOPPLED slowly against the wall, stiffened with pain, gripping the phone, the bullet burning deep in his back. The gun behind him was lifted, he knew—poised to fire again. He

Her husband's violent exit labeled sultry Paula Vale as red-hot TNT—but who was that handsome lady-killer, Detective-Sergeant Hibbard, to believe in signs?

Dramatic Detective-Mystery Novel



He was aware of Paula's white face
—as he swung the bottle.

couldn't see it, or the two faces turned to him—couldn't twist his shock-numbered body.

That deadly pair had him cornered from the rear. They were hunters waiting for their prey to fall—killers waiting with hot breath held, to see whether he needed another bullet.

If only they had left him the strength to speak again he could have told them no—no, one was enough. That first bullet was doing the job. For him, this was all there was ever going to be.

He was through now. He wouldn't be playing around any more. He'd never take another fragrant, cool drink. He'd

seen his last cuddly babe, and now he was very close to drawing his last breath. Here with his face against the cold wall and the heavy phone clenched in his hands, he was about to die. . . .

Rex Hibbard, detective sergeant on the homicide detail, pulled his car into the garage of police headquarters at seven-twenty that morning, having taken his own sweet time about responding to a hurry-up call from his new chief.

On the way he'd decided what the hell, he'd stop for another cup of coffee; one with a shot of rum in it. He not only needed it—he'd only had three so far—he also had to think of the principle of the thing.

Quite a lad for principle, this Rex Hibbard. "Look out for yourself, kid, because nobody else will do it for you." That was it, the big payoff principle you acted on unless you were a chump, which he wasn't. Not any more he wasn't. As of right now he had stopped being anybody's chump. From now on, brother. . . .

He left his six-year-old, waxed-up coupe in its usual stall just as six-thousand dollars' worth of silver-plated limousine rolled in from the street, bearing the remains of the late Lewis Vale.

This big black car with the important corpse in it was the reason behind the tension in headquarters this morning, and behind that urgent call from Hibbard's new chief. It was the city's highest-class killing in ten years; and Hibbard was teased by an angle of it having nothing to do with evidence, routine investigation or justice. His special personal slant, as he watched the big black car with a shadowy smile, was the enticing thought that, thanks to the little job of murdering that had been done during the night, Paula Vale's life and apartment were no longer cluttered up with a husband.

Hibbard had seen the luscious Paula more than once, and had admired her in passing—but only in passing, which was as close as a smart lad should ever get to a fireball babe like Paula Vale. This Paula was no doll for an amateur to fool with; she needed to be handled by an expert, as say, an electrician handled wires charged with high voltage. Maybe that was what was wrong with Lewis Vale this morning; maybe he'd lost his touch and Paula had

suddenly turned into a deadly dose of woman.

Ah, yes, a rich subject for speculation, this murder victim's new-made widow—but Hibbard felt fed up with babes this morning. When was he going to learn never to trust these cute little chicks? Deceitful, heartless little she-devils! Like the one last night who had been Hibbard's special date for the past couple of weeks. He'd caught her two-timing him. With her own husband, at that! The hell with such fickle frills. He was off 'em for keeps, the little witches.

As the Vale car rolled to a stop with its dead cargo, Hibbard moved toward it—a natty lad with a cocky manner calculated to stimulate the babes' curiosity.

The slight habitual smile of a ready wisecracker which he usually wore was not with him this morning. He had turned sour for a change, doubly so, and not merely over last night's babe either, but for a second reason also, which was right here right now. He had put on a poker face to conceal his rankling resentment as he guided his shiny new bluchers past the oil-drips on the cement floor with no haste to report to the man at the wheel of the Vale death car.

THAT was Lieutenant Danwood, brand new head of the homicide detail, a big bear of a guy with grayed temples, thoughtful deep-set eyes and an air of careful deliberation. "Hiya, Hib," he said amiably, ducking out.

"Good morning, sir," Hibbard answered, with all due formality.

For that Danwood gave him a look. "Where do you get that 'sir' stuff? My promotion definitely doesn't call for that, Hib. We've been working together on the same squad for years, haven't we? Well, we still are, pretty much the same as before." He smiled with fraternal good humor. "You'll have to watch yourself on this case, Hib. There are a couple of classy skirts mixed up in it, including the hottest glamour girl in town, Paula Vale."

"She's also the hottest poison in town, that Vale babe," Hibbard said shortly. "Any guy would be asking for plenty of grief if he got himself mixed up with her—especially after this morning."

Eying the car with the dead man in it,

Danwood said, "Yeah, I see what you mean. Just between you and me, Hib, it scares me, the way this big-shot case has hit us my very first morning on my new job."

Hibbard said stiffly, a subtly derisive edge on his voice, "And orders, sir?"

Danwood's smile faded slowly. A peace-loving guy, Danwood. The slippers-and-pipe type. Slow to anger on the job. Slow on his feet, and also, Hibbard reflected, slow in the head. Had to mull things over, like a cow masticating a cud, before he could decide where he was. So late on the uptake, he wasn't sure when he was being needled, as Hibbard was needling him now, slyly and bitterly.

"Who killed him, chief?"

"It's a little early yet for that question, Hib," Danwood went on quietly. "All we know so far is that Vale got it while he was sitting in his car near his apartment on Prince Street around two or three this morning. The case is wide open for us to suspect practically everybody who knew Vale. Ned's going to check his connections and finances. You'll look into the family angle."

His lips twisting a little, Hibbard said, "Sure, chief, I'll look into that."

He opened the black door of the death car, turning his back on Danwood. Danwood let it pass again, but with a glitter in his eyes, making a note of it for future reference.

"Frisk him," he said evenly, watching Hibbard. "We'll shift him into the morgue after you've finished."

Hibbard paused inside the tonneau with his head ducked down for a close look at the husband whom Paula Vale would presently bury with appropriate tears.

Since the scene of Lewis Vale's murder happened to be a movable one—the car, that is—he had been brought here inside it as a convenience. In all other ways he had been left untouched.

He wore shiny brown boots, custom-tailored breeches and a green hound's-tooth jacket, plus an ascot—and it didn't belong on him, alive or dead. He'd had dough and a mysterious sort of power in his flashy circles, but no breeding.

The trick clothes and the small hour of his death indicated a late party among the horsey set. Earlier in the day the elegant

Lew Vale, ex-bartender, had no doubt been riding to hounds and at present the hounds of hell were no doubt riding him. The face he had once had wasn't there any more—he'd taken a savage beating all over his head with something that had left smashed-in hollows.

"Probably his own riding crop," a voice said at Hibbard's shoulder. "Weapon's missing."

Hibbard ignored the voice, having slipped a hand smoothly inside the corpse's technicolor coat. Shielding himself with his bent back from the dick in the front seat, and from Danwood as well, Hibbard brought out Lew Vale's wallet. Hand-tooled morocco it was. A billfold fat with upper-bracket folding money, and a portable picture-frame combined. Opening it, Hibbard saw the photograph he had hoped to find. Paula Vale looked up at him.

Huddled over beside her lifeless husband, Hibbard sought to plumb the cryptic depths of the woman's dark eyes. Dark yet luminous, like a moonlit night—a world of their own inviting secret adventures, veiled with hints of daring and danger. Dark portals through which to glimpse darker temptations that stirred an electrical tingling through Hibbard's whole body.

THE voice from the front seat was repeating, "Weapon's missing, Hib. Probably his own riding crop. If so, it was grabbed away and the hard end turned on him so fast he never had a chance to hit back. A murder of passion, brother, this one, and they do say, as to Mrs. Vale— Well, we're still looking for his missing crop and hoping to find a clear print or two on it."

This was Ned Larkin speaking. The youngest member of the squad, just up from the uniformed ranks earlier this year, he looked and acted more like a typical college grind than a dick. He had a lean and hungry look, stooped shoulders, owl-like glasses on a poetic face—and a notebook. Always a notebook. Always jotting down everything observed in that eternal notebook of his, burying a few pertinent facts under a profusion of useless detail. Flipping through his notebook pages now, he frowned over his shoulder at Hibbard.

"You listening to this, Hib?"

Hibbard answered, "Sure, oh sure, I'm fascinated," as his eyes played over the face of Paula Vale. This was a color photo of his wife that Lew Vale had carried with him everywhere, even to the brink of death, and the color made alluringly soft and real the coral red of her mouth. Lips touched with highlights, curved slightly with a glimmer of a smile, parted a little as if on a whispered word—a secret word murmured for no one in the world but the man to whom her dark eyes were giving themselves.

"Fascinated," Hibbard repeated softly, and Ned Larkin, not knowing what he really meant, went on:

"Nobody's been questioned yet. He wasn't found until about an hour ago—although the news is buzzing all around, of course. Lots of nice people in town, and some others not so nice, are waiting right now for a dick to come knocking on their door and hoping he won't. First on your list, Hib, is Mrs. Lydia Kingsland. The late Mr. Vale and wife spent last evening, or most of it, at Mrs. Kingsland place, so that's where Mrs. Vale's alibi is, if anywhere."

"Not quite the first on my list," Hibbard said, mostly to himself. "Not quite the first on *my* list."

He had slipped the likeness of Paula Vale from its morocco pocket; and now, unseen by Larkin, he eased it snugly from sight inside his coat. After all, it wasn't evidence. Backing from the car then, he turned to Lieutenant Danwood, who had stood there wordless all the while, and he proffered the wallet, without that provocative picture. He also gave him a matching leather case containing several costly custom-built cigars, and an unsurprising assortment of keys, change and other oddments.

"Nothing important in his pockets, sir," he reported to Danwood. "I understand I'm to check Mrs. Vale's alibi, sir?"

Big Lieutenant Danwood's jaw tightened a little. "Look, Hib, things shouldn't be so different between us now. The fact that I've been picked to head homicide means I'm going to rely on you as my Number One man. So let's forget that yes-chief formality and get going on this case as a pair of cops and old friends should.

You know I mean it, so shall we, Hib?"

Hibbard eyed him for a moment with a face acridly set. So he was supposed to go right on being palsy-walsy with this guy who had crowded him out. He had every reason to hate this big ape's guts, but no, he was supposed to slap his shoulder and drool with good will.

Hell, every man on the force knew why Danwood had been named top man of homicide instead of Hibbard. It was because Danwood was married to the commissioner's niece. There was plenty of griping about it in the locker room. "Never mind building up a good record, boys. The way to get places on this man's police force is to marry into the commissioner's family. But unfortunately for us good old Danny has cut us out—the commissioner has no daughters and no more nieces, either."

Sure, every fair-minded guy in headquarters knew Danwood was too plodding and uninspired for his new job; they all knew Rex Hibbard had the stuff for it. Danwood's appointment had been posted on the bulletin board only last evening. Along with the others, Hibbard had gripped Danwood's hand and offered congrats on his splendid promotion and all that sort of guff—and the taste on his tongue had been brassy indeed.

The very first thing that had to happen, of course, was a top-flight homicide dropped into Danwood's lap so he could strut his stuff and pull that corny we're-all-one-big-happy-family line. "Let's forget the trifling matter of my superior rank and boosted salary, dear old chum of mine." Damned generous of him! Down-right magnanimous!

"Oh, sure, chief, let's forget it," Hibbard answered with the same unyielding respectfulness, smooth and straight-faced and defiantly mocking.

A FROWN settled over Danwood's deep-set eyes. "All right, Hib. You don't need orders from me to know what to do, but since you seem to expect them — Check with Mrs. Kingsland on Mrs. Vale's whereabouts for all of last night, especially after midnight—and keep an ear cocked, of course, for any kind of a boyfriend. While Ned's taking the dead husband from every angle, in other words,

you can do the same with the widow.”

“Take her?” Hibbard said, beginning to grin. “*Those* aren’t orders, I hope, sir. I’m no dope; and besides, I value my health.” He swung away with his cocky stride, his grin growing. . . .

Hibbard breezed past the cops stationed at the Prince Street corner on orders of Commissioner Munro. They were keeping the murder scene clear of curious neighbors and tough-talking kids from the bottom of the avenue. Two more members of the detail, Ronney and Hauser, having outlined the position of the death car with chalk lines on the pavement, were working now with tapeline and camera—as if such stuff mattered.

Hibbard thought it was more interesting to notice that at the moment of Vale’s death, his big car had been parked more than half a block east of his apartment, in a nice, unfrequented spot where a clandestine date might be kept after midnight—a sweet but short one, but worth the while.

Letting his confreres go on working, earnest and uninterrupted with their chalk and lens, Hibbard parked his coupe and strolled toward the apartment where Lew Vale wouldn’t be coming home any more. As Hibbard knew, having been inside it on several occasions on official business, it was the largest in this elegant white stone building—a duplex affair of twelve rooms and eight baths occupying half the two lowest floors.

Signaling his way past another cop posted at an iron gate, Hibbard went along an arbored passageway leading into the elaborately landscaped private court in the rear. A fountain’s streams caressed frisky cupids and gay awnings and umbrellas shaded the lounging chairs and shrub-bordered nooks. And in his first few moments there, Lady Luck tipped her hand to Hibbard—he made two discoveries at almost the same time, both offering a special promise.

The first was a bright golden glitter in the morning sunlight. Other dicks searching before Hibbard had missed it, perhaps because the sun’s angle wasn’t right for them. The gleaming reflection guided him to a low window overlooking the court. He reached up and into a flower-box affixed to the sill just above eye level

and took the golden glitter into his fingers. As he brought it down it became the late Lew Vale’s riding crop.

The blackened crusts on its leather-bound handle verified the theory that Danwood had expressed to Larkin. It was the weapon of murder. Heavy, Hibbard noted, helfting it by its fine leather loop. Unusually heavy. It was weighted with a solid lead core, actually a blackjack in fancy disguise. Hidden quickly—pushed under the leaves and loose soil of the flower-box immediately following the murder by a killer desperate to get rid of it and get gone.

Then, lifting his gaze farther, Hibbard made his second discovery—this one more electrifying than the first—Paula Vale’s dark eyes. He found them staring out at him. The oval of her face was dim in the shadow behind the glass; her lips were open, as if on a silent gasp. Startled to find him there, dismayed to see the crop in his possession—but not afraid. She was motionless as she watched him, her eyes dark yet bright with their cryptic shine, but without fear.

He held the bloodied crop in his fingers as he gazed up at her. He began to swing the weapon of murder lightly back and forth, speculating and watching the pale face of the victim’s widow, and smiling a little.

CHAPTER TWO

So Fair in Black

HE LEANED stiffly against the hard cold wall, the nails of his right hand scratching the plaster in his effort to hold himself on his feet, the phone clenched in his left, the bullet a lump of flame embedded in his back.

It had come so swiftly, only a few seconds ago, and it had come true, so that that one solitary bullet would be enough. It had come dead-center to the killers’ target, shattering his life with its impact. There wasn’t much left for him now. He was already half way through the process of dying and the rest of it shouldn’t take long. Just a few more seconds—a few more.

Nothing was left for him except the final words he wanted to speak—if only he;

could get up the strength to push them past his pain-pinched lips. He wanted to speak them into the phone, but the phone was so heavy. It was slowly pulling his left hand lower and lower; he could hardly hold onto it any longer.

He felt somehow that if only he could manage to speak those words, someone on the other end of the line might hear him. Even now he thought vaguely that there was a voice reaching toward him from the receiver—"Hello? . . . Hello?" But he couldn't lift the phone, couldn't force the words out of his mouth and over the line.

And those two were still standing behind him—that murderous pair. They were still watching him, waiting for him to pitch lifeless to the floor. The gun that had already driven one deadly bullet into his body remained poised to sink another into his back in case they decided he wasn't dying quite fast enough. . . .

Hibbard gazed up at the woman behind the glass, smiling as he lightly held the weapon of murder that had been used to beat the life out of her husband.

Still smiling slightly, he moved aside then, as if heading for her door. But he had no intention of going in. Not just yet. He figured he'd have nothing to lose by keeping her guessing. Tease 'em—that was the way babes should be handled. Not a startlingly original technique, of course, but effective—especially, Hibbard thought, when mixed with fresh murder.

Paula Vale had seen him with the lead-loaded crop in his hands and at this moment she was listening for him—waiting, tense with dreadful expectations, for him to knock at her door. And he wasn't coming. Not just yet. He had something else to do first.

He slid back into his coupe and when he eased it off, the smile lingering on his lips, the weapon was tucked under the floormat. He had only six blocks to drive.

He braked at a small English provincial house in a high-bracket neighborhood favored by those who had to rake in fifty or sixty grand a year in order to break even on expenses. This one was just the Kingsland's city place, just an occasional convenience; they lived on a two-hundred-acre suburban estate complete with stables and grooms. Unlike the Vales, the Kingslands had been born to it; anything

less would have seemed unnatural to them.

Hibbard's badge induced the manservant to conduct him into the music room where two maids were still straightening the mess left by last night's festivities. Loking like part of it waiting to be swept up, James Kingsland, a dissipated thirty who looked forty, had propped himself against the Steinway grand while his wife, still in jodhpurs and sweater, grabbed handfuls of rando chords off the keys. She eyed Hibbard warily and stopped, full of candid anxiety and confusion.

"We don't know anything," she began without preliminary. "You could've knocked me flat with an olive pit when I heard it. But don't expect me to tell you who polished him off, because I just wouldn't know."

"But Lewis Vale got it while your party was still on, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard reminded her, noticing that her husband seemed willing to let her do the talking. "Didn't you notice he'd strayed off somewhere?"

"We missed him, certainly," Mrs. Kingsland answered, toying with an empty whiskey-sour glass. "I noticed his car was gone, too, but Paula couldn't say where he'd gone or why. She phoned their apartment but couldn't raise an answer. I drew blanks in all directions, nothing but blanks. We asked Paula to stay here all night, and she did, and still Lew didn't turn up.

"Then, hours later, the elevator boy in their building phoned. Alden, the kid's name is. Said he was on his way to work when he saw the Vale car sitting in this unusual spot, so he looked in. That gave me the nice little duty of telling Paula that Lew had finally been found, pretty damn dead."

"In a case of this sort we automatically check on the wife first, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard said. "Regrettable, but strictly routine, even when she's obviously in the clear. If you can assure me that Mrs. Vale didn't leave your party at any time during her husband's absence. . . .

"I can't assure you of anything about it," Mrs. Kingsland put in flatly. "Twenty guests milling around, getting themselves oiled, sneaking off into dark corners—my Lord, who can say who was where

and when during yesterday evening?"

Did this observation include James Kingsland, Hibbard wondered? Had the host himself been a little elusive and hard to account for at moments? Hibbard gazed poker-faced at him and saw Kingsland's sensitive nostrils twitch in alarm.

A smooth lad, this Kingsland—a fine specimen of degenerate nobility, in his way. A guy having nothing to do with his life except play—and play around. In case the babe's husband happened to be a friend of his, he wouldn't let that fact occasion him too much hesitancy either.

HIBBARD figured this angle wouldn't be news to Lydia Kingsland; so he listened carefully as the sophisticated Lydia went on, wondering just how far her sophistication could take it.

"For example, I've no way of knowing how long Lew had been gone before we began missing him. It seems to me now there was a period in there, pretty late in the proceedings, when I don't remember Paula's being around. But then, that goes for everybody else as well."

This was it, Hibbard recognized—a crucial point. It would make a terrific difference to Paula Vale.

It went back to the fact that Lew Vale had been slugged lifeless in the rear seat of his car. Why the rear seat instead of the front?

Hibbard didn't think it was Vale who had driven his car from Kingsland's town house over to that dark spot on Prince Street, there to keep a brief rendezvous with some other person, and shift from the steering wheel to the rear seat. Hibbard couldn't see that—not on the part of a man of Vale's resources, who would never have been at a loss to arrange a secret meeting more comfortably than that.

Paula might have had a little trouble with such an arrangement, though. To Hibbard's mind, knowing women and their secret ways as well as he did, it seemed more likely that it was Paula Vale who had slipped away from the party, Paula who had been surprised there in the car by a suspicious husband. Very possibly Lew Vale had overheard a whisper of his wife's at the party, or had eavesdropped on a phone message. If he had trailed her last night, he had caught

her with the goods—"the goods" being some guy she liked too much.

There must have been one other explosive element in the picture, an element which Hibbard couldn't even guess at just now—something that had caused it to burst out in murder.

At this critical moment the thing depended entirely on Mrs. Kingsland's statement. Let Mrs. Kingsland say, "Oh, yes, now I remember—Paula *was* gone from here for a while," and it could mean Paula's trial and possibly her conviction for her husband's murder. Once a single seed of fact was planted in this blood-wet soil of murder—the fact called "opportunity"—this theory would sprout and wind its coils around her and perhaps pull her down to her doom.

Mrs. Kingsland, eyeing Hibbard uneasily, herself recognized the decisive importance of her position. She was a frank young woman, one of inbred independence, conscious of the forces of friendship, but hardly willing to use her own neck to cover a murderer—except possibly her husband.

"You'll be asked to come down to headquarters a little later to sign a written statement, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard informed her. He added, "You too, Mr. Kingsland," which caused the princely young man to wince. "Meanwhile you'll probably get it cleared up in your mind. As you say, you can't possibly swear that everybody was here all the while last night. But on the other hand, can you swear that any one person was definitely gone off the place, except Mr. Vale himself?"

"Why, no, I can't," Mrs. Kingsland said. "Why, I wouldn't dream of saying that Paula *did* slip out, because I've no way in the world of being sure about it either way."

"Naturally, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard pointed out to her, "we want to nail the killer without making any unnecessary trouble for innocent people. As far as you can say, then, Mrs. Vale acted just the same as any one else last night. Everybody was here playing around and drinking, having a fine time with never a hint—"

"Not the slightest hint," Mrs. Kingsland broke in, sounding relieved. "The

news about Lew came as a terrible shock. It's being horrible for Paula, poor kid. She's really *such* a lovely girl."

"Makes it tough, mighty tough sometimes, when such nice people get mixed up in such an ugly business through no fault of their own. A jury might let itself be influenced by a beautiful face, but we cops—" Hibbard flashed a friendly smile—"we've got to be hard-hearted. Well, now, lacking any definite knowledge to the contrary, are you prepared to state that Mrs. Vale did not leave your party at any time during last evening?"

"Yes, I am," Mrs. Kingsland added decisively. "I certainly am ready to say that to the best of my knowledge as hostess, Paula was here all the time. You've helped *so* much to clear up the situation, and I'd like to say also that you're being just as nice about it as any detective possibly could. There, that settles that. I do feel a hell of a lot better than I did when you came in."

James Kingsland felt relieved also, Hibbard noted—in fact, he seemed almost dizzy, now that the tension was suddenly off.

"Jimmy, darling, make me another whisky sour," Lydia Kingsland said, holding her empty glass toward him. So sure of her favorable position now, thanks to Hibbard's subtle cueing, she had forgotten how honestly uncertain she had been only a few moments ago. "How about joining us in a wee spot, Sergeant?"

"Thanks a lot," Hibbard said with his most captivating grin. "You'll ask me again, I hope. You see, I'm on duty now. . . ."

THE doorman at the Eden Apartments on Prince Street, mummylike in his loose-fitting uniform, recognized Hibbard as a detective at sight. He turned immediately to the house switchboard and was in the act of sinking a plug into Paula Vale's extension when Hibbard's sharp "No!" froze him. He shrugged resignedly and Hibbard strolled closer, idly swinging the late Lew Vale's riding crop by its loop.

"Never mind announcing me, Pop," Hibbard said pleasantly. "I'll tell her I'm coming when I get there. Maybe she'll be more surprised that way."

Hibbard strolled on toward the elevator.

A mousy woman had stepped into the car a second ago, opening a letter just received.

"Oh, bother," the woman said petulantly, reading a scrawled page. "Clarence said he can't get back home until the end of next week. Oh, dear, Alden, I'm so disappointed; it's being so lonely for me."

Her scratchy voice and eager glance at the elevator attendant earned a lifted eyebrow from Hibbard. She had doused herself so liberally with heliotrope perfume that the very air reeled, costly as the stuff was.

The operator, Alden, Hibbard decided, was doomed to have many such problems with such scarecrows. This lad, who had reported Vale's death, was so handsome it hurt Hibbard to look at him—golden blond hair lovely waved by Mother Nature, a profile that would have given Apollo an inferiority complex and a physique that made him a dream walking to females of all ages.

Wasting himself here, Hibbard felt—he should have been, if not a star on the screens of the nation's movie temples, at least the captain of ushers in one of them. But he seemed able to size up his customers with a keen eye. He stopped the car at the second floor without having asked where Hibbard was bound.

The elevator continued upward with the heliotrope-drenched crone and its beautiful pilot, leaving Hibbard in the vestibule of the Vale apartment. Its door was closed. Hibbard heard a voice through it—Paula Vale's normally husky voice unnaturally raised in a rage.

"Operator, I've had enough of these calls! The damn bell hasn't stopped ringing all morning. If you can't cut the connection there, then the damn phone is going out of order right here—and *don't* send a man around to fix it!"

Smiling, Hibbard heard the taut tearing sound of the cord being yanked from its moorings and the clatter as Paula Vale flung the instrument to the floor. He had quietly pushed the door open and now, stepping in, he caught her giving the phone a furious kick. She ran her long-nailed hands distractingly into her loose russet hair—and then she saw Hibbard.

She lowered her hands slowly across her white face, her dark eyes fixed on him

steadily. "How'd you get in here?" she said hoarsely. "I left orders downstairs. Everybody's supposed to be kept out."

"I'm different," Hibbard said, his voice quiet. "I'm a dick. I get places where ordinary guys can only hope to get."

Her eyes dropped to the crop in his hands. They recoiled from it, yet they were held in shaking cold fascination. Her chin quivered, and after a moment she forced her eyes to lift from the weapon back to Hibbard's.

"You don't remember me, Mrs. Vale," he said, taunting overtones in his voice. "I was the detective who guarded your room full of wedding gifts the day you married Lew Vale. Then there was another time you received a few threatening letters from a crank, when I was ordered to—" his grin slowly grew—"be your bodyguard." "Of—of course I remember you," she said, short of breath.

Hibbard shook his head. "No, you don't, Mrs. Vale—you really don't remember me any more than you remember the clerk that sold you your last dozen pair of nylons. But maybe I'll make a little stronger impression on you this time."

The color was returning to Paula Vale's cheeks; she was finding a new grip on herself. "I don't like being walked in on, the way you just did. You gave me a scare."

"No need to be scared of me, Mrs. Vale," Hibbard said smoothly, moving forward. "It's true the reason I'm back this time is a little more serious, considering the fact that your husband's been murdered—but you didn't do it, did you?"

Her dark eyes still fixed on his, she said hoarsely, "No!"

"But you know who did."

"I don't know anything about it. How could I? I was at the Kingsland's every minute of the night."

"Sure," Hibbard said, his grin growing a little. "Sure you were. Every little minute. I wouldn't have it any other way, either. . . . Besides, you look so beautiful in black."

He swung the crop by its loop and strolled past her. It was like passing a transfixed bolt of lightning. He felt her eyes on him, heard her small feet pacing after him, step for step, as he moved through a living room where it seemed a

Hollywood set-designer must have outdone himself.

He turned along a hallway, glancing into the rooms as he passed them—all lushly decorated, all empty. His pulse was in high; he was scarcely aware of anything except Paula Vale's palpitant presence as she followed him.

They went down curving stairs into a game room that somehow missed the artificiality of the others and became real. It might have been lifted bodily out of an eighteenth-century inn. Worn wooden stools were lined up at the ancient walnut-railed bar. Paula Vale went behind it. Her white hands moved quickly. Ice tinkled in thin crystal, soda fizzed and she proffered to Hibbard an expertly mixed drink—smiling.

Not touching it, he watched her until at last, a vein beating fast in her throat, she lowered it to the bar, her smile gone again. Hibbard's tour of the apartment had told him that Paula was alone here, entirely alone. He liked that part of it, too. It could be arranged again. As a cop he could fix that easily. This babe was poison, sure—but the right kind of poison for him, the kind he could take and like.

As she gazed at the black-cruled crop in his hands—the weapon of her husband's murder which he had kept gently swinging, swinging, swinging—he drew out his handkerchief and slowly wiped it over the leather handle, obliterating any fingerprints that might have been left on it.

Her red lips parted on a silent gasp and her eyes flew to his, feverishly shining.

He said softly, "Now let's talk things over—shall we?"

CHAPTER THREE

Dark Watch

THE bullet, hot and deep in his back, was sucking all his strength into itself. Devouring even his power to stand on his feet, it was letting him slide lower and lower against the slippery wall. And the phone in his left hand had become an almost insupportable weight.

He heard it twanging at him, "Hello? That you, Hib? Hello, Hib?"

He had had the phone at his ear when the bullet stabbed in, close to his spine.

He had finished dialing headquarters' number and had said crisply to the switchboard operator, "Hibbard calling Danwood—and snap it up."

Danwood hadn't yet answered when the unsuspected gun behind Hibbard had cracked out. The shock of it jumbled his senses; he couldn't be sure whose voice it was in the receiver, rasping at him now. But no matter who it might be, he had news to give—the answer to this murder case.

He knew the two killers were crowding closer behind him, cornering him, watching as he tried to pull the phone upward toward his mouth. He knew his attempt was inviting a second bullet from the gun that was poised at his back; but he tried. The one more thing he wanted to accomplish, the one last thing before he died, was to nail his own murderers.

His lips were drawn tight across his teeth and his fist was clenched white on the phone. He dragged it slowly upward while the deadly gun watched with a black, forbidding stare. . . .

Hibbard wore an ironical grin when he proffered the murder weapon, hung from one finger by its loop, to Danwood.

"Found it in the street, right there where it had already been looked for," Hibbard said, lips curling as he watched Danwood's troubled face. "In a crack in the cement in the gutter, wedged down probably by one of our own cars in passing."

Frowning, Danwood poked a pencil through the leather loop and lowered the crop gingerly to his desk.

"Hardly any use putting it through the lab, though," Hibbard added, subtly ridiculing Danwood's carefulness. "There probably isn't a usable print on it. Chances are a thousand to one against pulling a clear print off leather like that."

"I know," Danwood agreed.

"As for Mrs. Vale's abibi, sir," Hibbard continued, his tone still distant, "it's plenty solid. Mr. and Mrs. James Kingsland will sign a statement saying positively that Mrs. Vale never left their place all night—and can we argue with their mountain of dough?"

Danwood said, "Okay, Hib, sit down," and swiveled his chair to include Ned Larkin in the report.

Poring over his eternal notebook like a Phi Beta cramming for an exam, Larkin sat beside his chief's desk. The tension drawn up by the Vale murder could be felt throughout headquarters, but most sharply here in the drab-walled homicide bureau.

"Ned's been checking Vale's connections, as you know, Hib," Danwood said. "He picked up a little information about Mrs. Vale along the way. He tells me—"

Hibbard interrupted resentfully. "What's the idea, Ned, cutting in on my angle? What are you trying to do, work yourself up to a better job on merit? If so, it's high time you put yourself wise to the way they handle promotions on this force, chump."

Danwood flushed and Larkin turned pale. For a moment both of them simply stared at Hibbard, startled by his swift, heated two-way thrust.

Danwood said then, evenly, "Ned wasn't trying to crowd you over, Hib. When he was talking to Vale's friends, he found a few logical openings to ask about Mrs. Vale, too, that's all. Naturally he couldn't pass them up. What I'd started to tell you was that the information Ned picked up won't do Mrs. Vale any harm."

Hibbard listened with well-concealed relief as Larkin explained, in his thin voice, "That's right, Hib. Talking with various men about Vale's business connections, from the mayor down to a handful of stoolies, I just mentioned that maybe they'd seen Mrs. Vale stepping out now and then when her husband was too busy otherwise. Well, it surprised me no end to hear every one of 'em say that the only man anybody ever saw her giving her time to was Vale himself."

HIDING his own surprise, Hibbard said, "So she's a dame who looks super-charged but happens to be on the level, is that it? Just a little homebody after all! Maybe she's too smart to let any talk get around for her husband's friends to smack their lips over. Maybe she's been hiding a guy right along, a sweetiepie that nobody else ever tumbled to—except maybe Vale himself last night.

"Personally I wouldn't know, but I wouldn't trust her one damn inch if it weren't for the fact that her alibi is leak-

proof. So if anybody has it in mind to ask me, I think she's scratched off our list of suspects and the whole thing boils down to the obvious setup."

Danwood said—not seeming aware that Hibbard was glibly showing him up—"Obvious, Hib?"

"Yes, sir, if I may venture an opinion, sir," Hibbard said, a faint derisive curl on his lips. "The key question is—where did Vale get his dough? Nobody's even been able to find out exactly, and I doubt that we'll ever uncover more of the story now. In a general way, though, we know he was tied up with slot machines, the numbers racket, and a few fancy dens around town, and we believe, but can't prove, he was head man for all the bookies in the city.

"In a setup like that, as soon as a hot-shot gets too big for his striped pants, or as soon as another guy with ambition decides to move up on him, then murder's inevitable. That's elementary, of course, sir, and I believe that's the answer, in a general way." Hibbard's smile grew subtly more derisive. "How soon do you think we'll pin it on some specific guy, chief?"

Danwood said in pained tones, "Look, Hib. Please drop that 'chief' stuff now. And leave out the sirs. For years, until yesterday, I was always Danny to you. Don't hold anything against me that I can't help."

Hibbard kept the taunting smile fixed on his face and said nothing. An expression of sadness, of heart-sickness, settled like a shadow on Danwood's face; and after a moment Ned Larkin broke the embarrassed silence by clearing his throat.

"What you said, Hib, about the question of where Vale's money came from—that's important, all right. But even more important, I think, is the question of where it went. He pulled in plenty and paid out plenty, but that still leaves plenty more unaccounted for."

Danwood took it up, watching Hibbard's face go poker-blank. "He lived high, as everyone knows, and spent it almost as fast as it came in, but he must have cached a good sockful away somewhere.

"The puzzle is where. All his bank accounts stayed at a conservative level. He

had only one safe deposit box, joint with his wife, and we've found nothing in it but a respectable man's papers—no cash. He *must* have left a trunkful of coin tucked away in some odd corner—and it may mean something in this case."

Hibbard almost horselaughed out loud at that big dimwit of a Danwood. Mean something? It was the most vital segment of the puzzle; it was the added extra quality in the murder of Lew Vale—the dynamite that Hibbard had been looking for. Suppose Vale had kept his cache of dough a secret even from his luscious little home-girl of a wife—and then suppose Vale had overheard Paula scheming with some sharp guy ways and means of uncovering it and skipping together with it.

Once Paula had made the mistake of unwittingly tipping her mitt to her husband about it, he would boot the witch out in sheer self defense, and her only chance of getting her lovely little mitts on the swag would be to kill him. . . .

"I doubt that Vale would let anybody in on his private sugar-bowl," Danwood added thoughtfully, "so maybe he had a built-in safe hidden in some odd corner in his apartment. I'm going over there right now with a search warrant. Meanwhile Ned will look deeper into Vale's connections—and Hib, I want you to keep a close eye on Mrs. Vale."

"A pleasure, sir, of a certain kind—like watching the cobras in the zoo," Hibbard said.

Damned little hot-head, Paula Vale, for tearing out her phone! Without it Hibbard couldn't get through to her in a hurry. He might have slipped a tip to her ahead of Danwood, but as it was, she'd have to run her chances. Not that she was afraid to run them. Risks were her meat. She didn't know the meaning of fear, that audacious little—

"Watching yourself, Hib?" Danwood asked, rising, clumsily trying to make it sound like a pal's joshing. "Not letting yourself fall for Paula, are you?"

"Not me," Hibbard said shortly, touching him with a sharp glance. "I'm through playing myself for a sucker over babes. With Paula Vale I'd be the worst sort of chump. She's way up out of my class, that doll. Besides, she's either an angel—or she's murder—and who knows which?"

Sure, chief. He wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole, chief. Not any faster than he could get there by running. . . .

"THE funeral," the *Herald* had said, "will be private." The chapel was mobbed by the invited and the uninvited. Mayor Hasman sat up front with his family, hog-fat, looking as greasily grief-stricken as if he'd lost a brother. Twenty-odd officials of lesser rank, some of them in honest sorrow, were also present. The classier grade of bookie was represented, as was the better-dressed type of muscleman who had loyally cracked skulls for Vale when business policy called for it.

The city's riff-raff, who had paid Vale their dimes and pennies in the hope of winning it back some day, stood massed and bare-headed on the steps and the sidewalks. And the focal point of this reverent ritual was not only the man lying dead on the dais, but also the woman garbed so beautifully in black who sat dry-eyed facing the closed casket.

Lewis Vale could not be seen by his admirers today, his murderers having done too thorough a job of beating his face in.

Standing at the side of the chapel while the organ sang its lament, Rex Hibbard dutifully watched the widow and scanned the faces of the mourners. Among them were minds buzzing with conjecture, of course: *Did she kill him? Did she really do it?*

The ghost of a smile on Hibbard's mouth, not quite appropriate to the occasion, was his own answer to that question. Who the hell cared who'd knocked the guy off? Not Hibbard. Let Danwood the plodder and Larkin the note-scribbler worry about that.

Now the service was ended and the pallbearers, including the sweating mayor, were lugging the casket up the aisle. Floral offerings were being piled high in the cars behind the hearse when Hibbard went to an official car at the end of the procession. He ducked inside it to find Danwood there, looking baffled, and Ned Larkin with his inseparable notebook.

"Just dropped over from Vale's apartment, Hib," Danwood explained heavily. "Thought I'd have a little freer hand with my search warrant if I poked around while

Paula was out burying her husband."

"Sweet setup there, if a little odd," Larkin put in admiringly. "An apartment just like a movie set in a building where the doorman's a living skeleton and the elevator boy smells of heliotrope."

"The elevator boy—?" Hibbard paused to add thoughtfully, "Hmmm."

Danwood went on, "But if Vale left a hoard of dough tucked into any odd corner of that apartment, I didn't get a smell of it."

Hibbard felt his pulse accelerating as Larkin added, "Might be outside somewhere. Maybe under the base of one of those statues in the fountains, or buried in the garden somewhere. Look, Danny. We're not sure yet whether there *is* any coin cached away; or if there is, we're not sure whether it ties in with the murder; so maybe our best play is to sit tight and keep an eye cocked for somebody else to start trying to sniff it out."

Hibbard swore silently at Larkin, the bright lad with the notebook; but Danwood nodded.

"I've had that in mind. That's one reason, Hib, why I won't want you to let Paula Vale slip out of your sight. When she turns in tonight, knock off; then we'll start tailing her again tomorrow. With the funeral off her mind then, something may begin to cook."

"Don't give it another thought, chief," Hibbard said. "She won't get away from me if I can help it. If something begins cooking, I'll be around."

The funeral procession had started. Danwood and Larkin slipped out of the police car, leaving it to Hibbard. He rolled along toward Vale's last resting place, bored with the gaudy process of disposing of him. But Hibbard could be patient. A moment would come, he promised himself, which would not be boring. . . .

At the mausoleum, when Vale's casket was slid at last into a bronze-doored niche, the funeral party began to scatter. Half a dozen of the cars still followed Paula Vale's. Hibbard's was one of them. He trailed them to the apartment building on Prince Street. He sat in his car below the Vale windows, and watched and waited.

It grew dark while Mrs. Vale's friends remained inside, consoling her in her

bereavement with the help of her velvet-smooth scotch. The Kingslands were the first to leave. The convivial evening moved on, crawling for Hibbard, with a car rolling away now and again; and Hibbard waited, keeping an eye on Mrs. Vale as ordered by his superior officer.

Finally—a little past midnight now—the last of Paula Vale's fellow sorrowers drove off. As the car disappeared at the corner, Hibbard slid out. He watched the apartment again and saw the lights in the living room upstairs blink out. Windows darkening in groups, one after another, marked Paula's movements from room to room as she left darkness behind her. No lights remained on now except those in Paula's bedroom and those in the game room downstairs. She was alone there again, probably lingering over a drink—entirely alone once more.

Hibbard crossed the street, quietly opened the iron gate and followed the dark passage into the court. Through another lighted window he could see Paula now. She was standing beside the bar, slender fingers curled around a tall drink, her face lifted and pale as her dark eyes peered all around, searching.

Hibbard gently tapped the pane. Paula stiffened at the sound, lips parted. For a tight moment she gazed out at him. He smiled at her and moved aside to the door that connected directly with the game room. There he waited again with the patience of a man who knew what he was waiting for.

The latch clicked. When Paula Vale opened the door she was a slender silhouette against the light, her dark hair a smoky cloud. He stepped in, closer,

shutting the door behind him. Her breath was fast; and suddenly his arms were binding her to him, and her lips were hot and clinging. . . .

Tapping out his report next morning, with fingers not quite sure of the keyboard, Hibbard wrote, "When her last guests left at 12:20 A.M., Mrs. Vale retired to her bedroom. Before going off duty, however, I made reasonably sure there would be no later callers."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Happy Trio

HE COULD see, through a haze of pain as he bent his head down, the shining drops falling to the floor near his feet. There were only a few of them in a red cluster, but each one was precious, each marked off a brief interval in the advancing process of his death. There would not be many more.

The phone—the voice calling from a distant star. . . . In a moment of clarity the voice reached him again. "Hib? . . . Hib, this is Danny. Are you okay, Hib?"

No, he wasn't okay; not entirely. He was dying. He was spending his last living moments on his feet, trying his utmost to stay there while he dragged at the phone. His breath had quickened with a surge of elation. He had managed to lift the phone as far as his chest.

Its enormous weight was trying to pull his hand down again, but he couldn't let it. Not when he was this close. His all-consuming objective now was to lift it a few inches farther—to speak a few words through it to the cop listening at the wire's

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far end waiting for the murderers' names.

Behind his bullet-pierced back his murderers watched him; and the deadly hand holding the gun lifted it a little, making ready to fire again. . . .

Danwood scarcely glanced at the report when Hibbard handed it to him. He tossed it to his paper-piled desk and resumed his pacing with his big shoulders hunched and his fists thrust deep into his pockets. Hibbard knew the reason for Danwood's agitation this morning, of course. The papers were loudly reporting no progress in the Vale homicide. The commissioner was pressuring Danwood for results—and Danwood in his dull way didn't know where to find them.

"Running into a few snags, chief?" Hibbard asked him tauntingly. "Didn't the lab find any fingerprints on the riding crop? With Mrs. Vale out of the murder picture, are you finding first-class suspects a little scarce?"

Danwood paused to frown at him—not an unfriendly frown, but earnest. "No prints. Hot suspects are scarcer'n hell, and the other possibilities are too plentiful to mean much. I can't put on an act, Hib, and pretend I'm not worried. My very first case is the town's biggest in ten or twelve years, and so far it's headed straight for the unsolved file."

Hibbard asked with a fine edge on his voice, "You don't feel your men have laid down on you, do you, chief?"

Danwood shook his head. "No, no, Hib. You and Ned and the others are clicking right along. Trouble, this is a tough case. All we can do is keep on slugging at it." He lifted his square chin. "I've got a new idea, Hib. A smooth worker like you might be able to run it for a touchdown."

"You're the chief, sir," Hib reminded him.

"Maybe if you got better acquainted with Paula Vale, sort of personally. . . ." Danwood fumbled with the suggestion and Hibbard struggled to keep his face straight. "Sort of work into her good graces, Hib—fix it so she'll take her hair down. Handling her that way, maybe you'd get somewhere."

"Yeah," Hibbard drawled. "I might get somewhere, at that."

"It's not the way I like to work a case, Hib," Danwood said soberly, "but this

one calls for pretty special measures."

"Sure," Hibbard agreed. "It's pretty special, all right."

Maybe even a little more special than Danwood suspected. . . .

Hibbard took a sniggering sort of smile along with him on his new assignment. He checked over the angles as he toiled his old coupe toward Prince Street.

A cheap and worn-out piece of junk, this heap he was pushing around. He'd like a new one, say one of the new convertibles that put an extra shine in a moonlit night. With a dreamboat like that, and his lousy job chucked, and the babe he'd been looking for all his life. . . . Sure, why not? In a special case like this anything was possible—if you knew how to shoot the angles Hibbard's way.

He left his waxed-up jalopy around the corner and walked into Prince Street. Murder had faded quickly from the scene; nothing here showed it now, not even a curious passer-by. Hibbard strolled along close to the building, to avoid a chance glance from the Vale windows; then quietly turned into the lobby.

THE skeletal doorman was somewhere else at the moment, but the blond, painfully pretty elevator boy was sneaking a cig behind the switchboard. Caught with it, he didn't grind it out, but held it arrogantly, eyeing Hibbard with his beautiful face a shade haughty—and Hibbard caught a whiff of heliotrope off his perfectly waved golden hair.

"Busy lad, aren't you, Alden?" Hibbard said wryly. "You'll probably feel relieved when Thursday comes. But after all, a young guy's got to get along."

"I get along all right," Alden said cynically. "Second floor for you?"

"Any visitors up there?"

"No visitors."

"I never call on slick young widows without a chaperone, Alden," Hibbard said, poker-faced. "You savvy how to get along with cops, too? It's easy. Just stay clammed up about 'em."

"Thanks for the tip," Alden said through a cloud of sneaked smoke. "But I get along."

Hibbard nodded and strolled out, clearing the heliotrope from his nostrils and

permitting Alden to believe he had merely made a routine check on Mrs. Vale. Unseen, he turned again into the passageway leading to the deserted court. The morning sunshine streamed over the rippling fountains and the splashy umbrellas. Nice, Hibbard thought, but there were choicer spots and he was the guy to find them. He turned to the game room door, tried the knob, found that the forgotten latch had been left open, and he quietly stepped in.

The game room was deserted; but Hibbard heard noises from upstairs. Scraping sounds, like furniture being shifted. Bumping, clattering noises indicating an exasperated search in progress. He listened with an oblique smile—until high heels began ticking rapidly down the stairs. Then he dodged aside.

He sidled through a door into a large closet where case goods were stacked ceiling-high—the late Lew Vale's "cellar." As he stood there in the dark he saw, through a crack, Paula moving in with her smoky hair disarrayed and her red mouth set hard.

She paused, peering across the room, her eyes prowling as Hibbard had seen then prowling last night—but this time they glittered with an avid determination. Paula was on the hunt, in the mood to kick obstacles out of her way, to smash through a jungle of possibilities until she found it. Her eyes were like fingers feeling in crevices, poking into dark crannies, then darting on to pry again.

Hibbard watched her as she systematically attacked the corner behind the bar. She opened cupboard doors and banged them shut, still baffled; she cleared shelves; she peered under the counter. Then Hibbard saw her stiffen with the first glimpse of a discovery.

She came off her nylon knees to peer into the stainless steel sink. Then prying her long nails under its beaded edge, she lifted it. As it rose from the cavity that had been built for it, it trailed a drain hose of black rubber. She peered into the depths she had uncovered and gasped.

Then guile seized her—wily caution. Playing for big stakes, she thought fast, and quietly lowered the steel shell into its cleverly contrived bed. Hibbard, watching her, felt the same stepped-up sense of hunger for all her discovery meant. His

pulse fast, he pushed open the door that had concealed him—and it gave off a slight creak.

The tiny sound cried danger to Paula Vale. Instantly she closed the hidden cavity and snatched up an empty glass, as if she had been about to mix herself a drink. Hibbard in the same swift moment had stepped forward to the mouth of the hallway, as if he had just come out of it. Her dark eyes shone across her shoulder and she smiled.

"Oh, hello! Didn't hear you come in, darling, but I left the upstairs door unlocked for you."

He went behind the bar, smiling, with a sharp wonder how it could ever be possible to trust this woman.

She kissed him and put her head against his chin and said, "You've been gone so long, darling. I can't seem to do anything while you're gone, except wait for you to come back. Drink with me, darling?"

"I'll take Guatemala," he said.

She lifted her night-dark eyes and gave a puzzled little laugh. "What, darling?"

"Or Honduras," he said. "Any of those Central American dream-spots where money goes far and the U. S. law doesn't go at all. You'd like it, too. You're made for a paradise like that."

Her cheeks had lost color. "Would we dare?"

"We'd be chumps to play it any other way. Once we're across the border we'll be safe. The trick is to get across without being stopped along the way. As a cop I've learned what mistakes are made by crooks on the lam. I know how to avoid them. Would you like to hear how?"

"Of course, darling!"

"We drive. That's all. We just get in a car and roll—but in a smart way. Maybe we switch plates. Anyhow we don't follow the main highways or even the secondary roads. We wind through the backroads, on dirt lanes that are never patrolled. We avoid big cities and small towns and pass through nothing but crossroads hamlets where the hicks hardly know the world stretches beyond the next county. We'll sleep and eat at farmhouses along the way. We'll be a nice young couple on our honeymoon and everyone will smile on us and hope we'll be very happy together."

Her dark eyes large and round, Paula said, "But in case someone stops us, darling—a s k s questions—gets suspicious of . . ."

"Then I flash my badge. I've just picked you up on orders, see, and I'm taking you back in your own car, as my prisoner. I've got extradition papers to prove it, all filled out and signed and sealed. In a case like ours a small-town constable doesn't talk back to a big-town dick. He speeds us through."

"Why, that's wonderfully clever, darling!"

"It's simple. I'll pick up the official blanks down at the bureau and fill them out tonight. As a forger I'm good enough. We'll leave tomorrow, baby. By the time my dumb ox of a chief wakes up, we'll be practically halfway to heaven."

"But darling," she said softly. "Lew's estate will be tied up for six months and the insurance is being delayed for some reason. I haven't much else. What will we use for money?"

"Simple," he repeated. "I'll fix that in a flash."

HE STEPPED past her, lifted the sink from its bed and watched her face. He saw no dismay in it and no phony astonishment. She instantly accepted the fact that he had outsmarted her on this turn—and the game was to go on from there.

Eager to play along with that, he pushed the shell aside, plunged both hands into the hollow of the false bottom and brought up two handfuls of snugly banded thousand-dollar bills.

"Darling," Paula said in a husky whisper. "Let's go. As soon as you can get those papers ready. The sooner the better, darling."

"Don't worry, baby. We're practically on our way right now—heeled to the extent of at least a quarter million."

He turned quickly, ran along the hallway and up the stairs. When he raced back down again with one of the late Lew Vale's briefcases in his hand, Paula still stood where he had left her behind the bar, gazing with a consuming fascination at the money. He brushed past her, caught up the packets of banknotes, began stuffing them into the case.

She asked quickly, "Why are you doing that, darling? Why don't you leave it there?"

"I want to know where they are—and where *you* are—when I come back, darling." Hibbard's smile was crafty. "Just a slight precaution, you see, to—"

She had gasped. He froze, looking up at her, alarmed by her sudden paleness. She was staring at something at the far end of the bar, behind him. He twisted quickly, peering at the window there, and saw a face.

Ned Larkin.

Larkin looking in, finding him in the act of cramming Lew Vale's hoard into the case.

Hibbard straightened swiftly. He couldn't guess what had brought Larkin here, except, of course, more of his characteristic glory-grabbing.

Cursing him behind clenched teeth, Hibbard forced himself to wag a fraternal greeting to Larkin. Delighted to see him! Just in time! Another signal from Hibbard urged Larkin to come to the door. Larkin nodded eagerly and began to move. The instant he was out of sight, Hibbard grasped a bottle by its neck. He warned Paula tersely, "I'll take care of this."

He held the bottle in his right hand, concealing it behind his thigh, as he opened the door for Larkin with his left.

"Hustle in, Ned. Take a slant at what I just found. Man, our fine new chief will be glad to see *that*."

Larkin was a step past him now, heading for the bar. Hibbard was keenly aware of Paula—aware of her tight stillness and white, unreadable face—as he swung the bottle. He delivered it with cleaving power behind Larkin's left ear. The single whizzing blow was followed at once by a rattling thump as Larkin limply hit the floor.

Hibbard stood over him, breath rushing. "He won't be getting up again."

Paula backed away, holding her red-nailed hands to her face, staring at Hibbard.

"Damn it!" he burst out. "I had to do it. I couldn't let this flukey snooper cost us the works. I had to do it for us both. Well? Get busy, baby. Bolt that door. Cover up those windows. Order those flunkeys in the lobby to let nobody in here—and that means nobody. The rest I'll

handle myself so we can hustle out of here quickly, with no more trouble."

While he bent behind the bar, pushing the last packet of Lew Vale's money into the briefcase, he heard the bolt click and the venetian blinds clatter down. He pulled the straps tight as Paula hurried back.

"But you can't take the money, darling," she said hoarsely. "It's mine."

"It's ours and I'm taking it," he said flatly. "You don't think I'd cross you up, do you, baby? I'll bring it back tonight. As early as I can make it. We'll have to leave as soon as I've finished taking care of this guy who got a little too nose-y. When we're ready to light out we'll all three be together again, a happy little trio. For keeps. You, me and the dough."

He strode quickly to the door, the case-handle tight in one fist. She unfastened the lock for him, and he kissed her. Then he eased out, and he heard her bolting the door again behind him. He left her there with the man he had killed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Play Lady Luck Along

THIS was the one and only try he would ever get. He had to make it this time or never.

The voice in the phone had been still for a short moment. Danwood, at the far end of the wire, seemed to sense the deadly importance of this silence. He said, with soft terseness, "Let's have it, Hib. Give it to me, boy."

He sounded so close now. Hibbard had brought him near through unlimited space. When Hibbard answered now, Danwood would be able to hear.

Then another voice spoke—another man's—behind Hibbard. It warned, "Drop that phone. I said drop it, or—"

Hibbard swore he wouldn't drop it. Not as long as he lived. He had dragged it up, far up from the very bottom of the universe. He had achieved the stupendous feat of bringing it near his mouth, and if only he could find the breath he needed now he could speak. It was all he had to do—to speak the two names of his killers.

The man's voice behind Hibbard snarled, "Drop that phone!"

Hibbard whispered into it, "Listen . . . listen . . ."

Hibbard was driving. The car was his old coupe, and this, the way he figured it, was just about the last time he'd ever push another weary mile out of it. Next trip, beginning any time now, he'd have a nice, soft spot behind the wheel of one of the Vale custom-built jobs, with Paula close beside him, her hand curled on his arm.

Hibbard sent his old heap along the boulevard at its top limit, forty-five, with Danwood sitting tensely beside him in the front seat. They had by-passed the central section of the city. This was a main highway ribboning through a recently developed middle-class suburb. The headlamps shone on newly built cottages and others still bare-sided. A quiet, respectable neighborhood, not too risky for a quick job of dumping.

Danwood said in a dazed manner, "I can't believe it. Snezeck must be wrong. It's got to be somebody else."

Hibbard had been back at headquarters, in the bureau, hands washed and breath recovered, when the call had come in to Danwood. Patrolman Snezeck, of the North Side branch station, was reporting. "These kids playing on this stack of cinder blocks, see, they happened to find him. Larkin. Sergeant Larkin, yes, sir. I'm keepin' the kids off and stayin' right here with him till you take over."

"Can't believe it," Danwood insisted woodenly. "Ned Larkin. Such a quiet, sweet guy, it hurt his feelings when he had to arrest somebody. What was he doing way out here in this corner of town anyway? I—I just don't get it."

Hibbard kept pushing his shining wreck-on-wheels at its limit—driven by a sharp, panicky awareness that he had overlooked something important. An oversight on Hibbard's part that could make a life-or-death difference—Larkin's notebook!

Working in furtive haste, under a constant strain, fearing discovery at any moment, Hibbard had forgotten about that damn notebook of Larkin's. After being agonizingly careful of everything else! He had waited for darkness so that he could finally get Larkin out of Paula's apartment safely; he had skillfully removed every possible trace from the game

room floor. No one would ever know.

Sneaking the body out to this far-removed section of town, he had gotten all the breaks. He'd pulled off a slick job of it, all right, except for the one detail of Larkin's everlasting notebook. He'd remembered it too late, just as Danwood was getting Snezeck's call. But he recalled all too clearly Larkin's habit of jotting down everything, even a time-table of his own movements.

Hibbard couldn't guess how closely Larkin's scribbles had followed his course to his own death; but that notebook was still on him. And it could wreck the works for Hibbard with a disastrous crash.

Hibbard was chasing it now, as fast as he could roll his ancient crate, goaded by the necessity of getting his hands on it first, before Danwood, before anyone else at all—

"Right there," Danwood said suddenly, pointing. "Stop 'er, Hib."

Hibbard's hard thrust on the brake pedal pulled them down to a shuddering glide. He was hopping out of the car almost before it had entirely stopped. Striding faster than the lumbering Danwood, he crossed the clay-heaped yard of a bungalow under construction—knowing exactly what he would find lying there in the darkness behind the stack of concrete blocks, where the sober-faced patrolman was standing guard.

Hibbard paused just long enough to ask, breathlessly, "Did you frisk him, Snezeck?"

"No, sir, Sergeant. Never touched him."

Hibbard stooped quietly while Danwood came closer across the muddy yard. His fingers slipping into Larkin's vest pocket pinched on the little black notebook at once. Still bent, he slipped it into his own coat pocket; and when he straightened, to turn to Danwood, it was like walking safely from a nightmare.

"It's Ned, all right."

DANWOOD stood still, gazing down, his face sadly set. "I'll wait here with him, Hib," he said. "The meat wagon will be along any second now. I'll go back with him. You find a phone and notify the commissioner."

Hibbard turned away, glad of a chance

to go. He had taken only two steps when Danwood said, "Hib." He waited, not breathing, as Danwood came closer.

"Larkin's notebook, Hib."

"What about Larkin's notebook?"

"Turn it in when we get back to the office."

Hibbard answered with a snap. "What the hell do you mean? What would I be doing with Larkin's notebook? Isn't it on him?"

"No." And Danwood said again, quietly, "Turn it in when you get back to the office, Hib."

Hibbard stared into the reaches of the night and walked to his car. Danwood stood back there near the stacks of blocks, near the cop and Larkin's corpse, as he started away. He drove while his mind came to a rolling boil of conjectures. He couldn't guess how far he could bluff this one along.

When he was well out of Danwood's sight, he braked under a street lamp. He fished up Larkin's notebook and flipped through it to the last scribbled page. Larkin had noted, with his typical meticulous attention to detail:

11 A.M. Watching Vale apartment.

11:20. Hib entered V. apt, using private door in rear.

11:25. Have decided, while Hib's keeping Mrs. V. busy, good chance for me to give gardens quick once-over.

That was the last entry. Hibbard expelled a breath of deep relief. This notebook in Danwood's hands—Lord, it would have documented the whole story! Now, of course, Hib had to get rid of it, at least that last page. But that would be easy.

No need to stew over such minor details now. Hibbard had other things to do. For instance, a new life of his own to begin. In paradise. With Paula. And he had to get going on it tonight, now, without making any more mistakes.

He sat for a while under the street light, his mind buzzing over every possible mischance, checking every step in his plan of flight. He'd be a chump to rush off in a panic. The smart way was to take it slow, to feel it along from one moment to the next. Play Lady Luck along just like a new babe, with the Hibbard technique that had always produced such gratifying

results. Take it easy—no rush—just keep on playing it smart . . .

Danwood might be expecting him back where Larkin lay dead, but Hibbard wasn't going back. He drove instead in the opposite direction—to fatal Prince Street.

He stopped his car around the corner—to leave it there forever—and from under the seat cushion he pulled the late Lew Vale's briefcase. He had kept it buried there all the while. It was the reason he had insisted on using his own car tonight. But now he was done with it, done and leaving it behind forever, and he was opening the door of a dream.

He went with a brisk stride and a cocky smile into the lobby of the Eden Apartments. The wizened doorman permitted him to pass without a word. Alden, the Apollo of the elevator, kept his beautiful face blank and said nothing as he piloted Hibbard to the Vale vestibule. As he left the cage Paula opened her door for him—ready to travel, in a smart black suit, her dark eyes shining, her lovely smile eager.

She closed the door behind him quickly and her willing lips came to his for a long moment. When she drew back her cheeks were fiery, her eyes full of a quick fever. She asked Hibbard quickly, "All set, darling?"

"All set. You see, I really did bring

the money back," he said. "Every buck of it. I'd never cross you up, honey."

"Did you bring the papers too, darling—the ones you said we might need?"

"Sure, here," and he tapped the pocket over his heart. He gazed at the bags she had packed. Just two small ones, waiting. Ready to go, yes—ready to walk out on all this opulence with a guy named Hibbard, to leave it all behind as casually as he was leaving his rust-eaten heap in the street.

She meant it. She was primed for action, really leaving for far parts. A babe who didn't know how to be afraid. He could go places with her, all right. From this beginning, right now, he could keep going at top speed with her until the end of his days.

"All set," he said, smiling. "All we have left to do is get in your favorite chariot and tool off. Tomorrow will be another day in another world, baby. . . . But just one thing first. I've a phone call to make."

He turned to the table in the corner where the phone sat. At his urging she had had it put back in working order. He placed the briefcase casually on a chair, took up the phone and dialed a number which he had called many times before but would never call again.

A rookie in the telegraph bureau answered, "Police headquarters."



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"Give me Commissioner Munro," Hibbard said. "Official."

"The commissioner's right now making a speech at a Kiwanis Club dinner."

DANWOOD was probably back by now. Hibbard felt tempted to leave an artfully misleading message with him. Perhaps "I'm coming right in," or even better, "Maybe I'd better keep an eye on the place where Larkin was dumped and try to turn up his notebook." Either message would keep Danwood waiting indefinitely.

Grinning to himself, he said into the phone, "Okay, then. Hibbard calling Danwood—and snap it up."

Then, hearing a step behind him, he glanced over his shoulder.

Startled cold, he saw a hand curling around the handle of the briefcase—a man's hand, its nails gleaming. His eyes snapped next to a face he knew—Alden's. Then another lightning-like flick took his gaze to Paula's face and he saw her standing still, dark eyes narrowed, as inscrutably fearless as he remembered her at the moment when he had suddenly killed Ned Larkin.

He swung swiftly into two savage moves at the same instant. He slashed down at Alden's hand with the phone while grabbing inside his coat for his shoulder-slung police positive. They were on him like leaping dogs—both of them together, grasping his arms. They crowded him back into the corner with grim and greedy teamwork. Paula's fine sharp teeth flashed to Hibbard's raised wrist and the pain numbed him. His gun was torn out of his fingers, then swiftly whipped back on him as a club.

The crack of the butt against his head knocked him twisted against the wall. Dazed, he hung there, helpless a moment. Then the single sharp sound barked out and the bullet pierced hot and deep in his back.

They waited, the deadly two behind him, Alden with the gun in his hand, Paula tense at his side, watching to see whether Hibbard would need another bullet.

No. No—he knew one was enough.

That first bullet was doing the job. But he couldn't tell them that. And he couldn't tell them how clear everything had become to him at his first glimpse of Alden's handsomely manicured fingers stealing around the briefcase handle.

Alden was so perfectly all that Paula wanted. Of course none of her husband's friends had seen her stepping out—because Alden had been always at her door. It must have been that very convenient proximity which had aroused Lew Vale's suspicions to the extent that, seeing Paula slipping away from the Kingsland's party, he had followed her. Paula and Alden had already schemed to cheat him of his money too, if only they could uncover the hoard.

And now that it was found, they had allowed a police dick named Hibbard, the chump, to provide them with a slick plan of escape and forged papers to speed their flight. . . . So clear—how clever they were—what a sucker he was. So clear now. . . .

Danwood's voice in the phone was saying, "Let's have it, Hib. Give it to me, boy."

"Listen," he whispered. "Listen—"

Alden's voice snarled behind him, "Drop that phone!"

"Listen, Danny." He hadn't called Danwood that in a long while, but it seemed right now. "They did it together, Danny. Paula Vale and Alden—"

The gun blasted a second time. The second bullet smashed Hibbard between the shoulder-blades, jarring him harder against the wall. But he didn't drop the phone. He clenched it as tenaciously as he kept his grip on the last few seconds of his life. . . .

And it wasn't so bad. Not so bad any more. Dying was like—like the soft enclosing warmth of a woman's arms.

"They're hitting out tonight, Danny—Paula and Alden—heading south for the border with fake papers. You can stop 'em before they can even get started. Get 'em, Danny—get 'em—"

A third time the gun blasted, deafening loud in the room but only a murmur in Hibbard's ears.

Then he fell—for the dark, haunting face of Death.

DOC PIERCE'S CORNNY CAPER



I slap Watermelon-Head
in the face. . . .



By **RICHARD
DERMODY**



When the Doc says Iowa is ripe for a quick-money harvest, little do I know Pony Boy's entered to run double with a corn-fed Amazon.

IT IS coming on corn-planting time and the Doc and me are peeking around the state of Iowa for a quick harvest. Of course we are not really interested in corn. What we have in mind is a crop of fresh, tender lettuce. Legal-tender lettuce.

We pull into Hambone Center late in the day, and I turn the heap down the main drag. The Doc pokes me with his elbow.

"Hold it, Pony Boy," he tells me. "This

appears to be the lair of a savage. I detect a delicious fragrance."

I slow down and take a look. I can see why the Doc smells money. It is a brand-new brick building and a sign on the front says:

HAMBONE COUNTY SEED &
FERTILIZER CO.
Ferdinand Klanck, Prop.

I stop at the curb. The Doc buttons his haybelly into his white vest and gets out. He dusts off his swayback coat, combs his thatch of gray hair, sets his black skimmer firmly on his skull, runs his fingers down the press in his best striped pants and is all ready to go to work. I shake myself down, get this package out of the back seat and follow him into the lair of the savage.

At the front is a big room with bins of corn, barley, oats and other merchandise along the sides. A young dame is parked at a desk in the corner. She is a few years younger than me, maybe twenty-four, and I can see she is built for heavy going. She has a square chin and bright black eyes, and I also notice that she looks me over carefully.

I have seen this same hungry look on a dozen of these husky fillies in my time and it makes me nervous. The Doc never misses a trick. He gives me a quick grin and then arranges a smile on his big red face.

"Good afternoon, my dear," he says. "I am Doctor Pierce, formerly Dean of the College of Agriculture at Bushweed University. I wish to speak to Mr. Ferdinand Klanck on a matter of business."

The filly smiles back at him and then slides part of this smile around at me. She points at a door behind her.

"Daddy is in his private office, Doctor. He is not busy. You can go right in."

The Doc's smile widens until it nearly splits his face. He bows at the filly and shoots another quick look at me, then leads the way to the private office. I am very nervous now.

Mr. Ferdinand Klanck is parked behind a big mahogany desk. He is a skinny party with a bald head and little button eyes. I feel better when I take a good look at him. Ferdinand is prime stock, sharp and shrewd and convinced that he is smarter than the next party.

In my book, a smart savage like this will show a streak of that old larceny if you give him a chance. The Doc and me make a good living for many years offering such opportunities to smart savages.

The Doc slips Ferdinand a warm mitt and puts me away as Professor Allan, his brilliant young laboratory assistant. I place the package on the desk, park in the corner and make like a brilliant young assistant. I am pleased to think this work in the laboratory is finished. The Doc sits down and starts the pitch:

"We have been informed that you are a man of outstanding business sagacity and sterling integrity, Mr. Klanck," he says. He lets this sink in for a minute and then goes on: "Professor Allan and I have decided to entrust the results of our long and arduous research to your hands."

He stops again and peeks around the room, then lowers his voice: "The demonstration you are about to witness must be held in absolute confidence. Not a living soul must know of this until I give you permission to speak."

Ferdinand is interested. "You can trust me," he says in a whisper. "I won't say a word."

"Good." The Doc takes another peek around the room and hitches his chair closer to the desk. He takes the string off the package, unwraps the paper and leans back. Ferdinand sits up in his chair and stares at the two big ears of corn.

"What's this? A new kind of seed?"

The Doc shakes his head. "No. These specimens were grown from inferior stock, deliberately selected for the experiment."

Ferdinand thinks it over. "I give up. What's the secret?"

THE Doc chuckles. "Secret," he says. "I am glad you used that word, Mr. Klanck. It is a secret. A miracle of modern science." He picks up one of the big ears and holds it in the air over the desk.

Ferdinand is on the hook. He is breathing heavy and he is watching this ear of corn like he expects it to sprout hundred-dollar bills. The Doc lets him hang for a minute and then taps the cob lightly on the desk. The kernels fall off in a pattering shower on the paper.

Ferdinand lets out his breath. "By golly," he says. "I saw it. That corn

shelled right off the cob." He picks up a couple of kernels and studies them carefully. He blinks at the Doc and shakes his head. "I don't understand it."

Well, I am not going to mention it to Ferdinand, but this demonstration is the result of all my laboratory work. The Doc and me spend a whole day picking out all these big kernels from a bushel of the best hybrid corn we can buy. Then I glue them on the cobs so they will fall off easy.

The Doc claims his fingers are too big for this laboratory work. He also claims his eyes are not too sharp, although I notice he can spot an appleknocker with a fresh bankroll a mile away on a cloudy day.

The Doc nods at me, so I take a small jug out of my pocket and place it on the desk. Ferdinand pulls the cork and takes a sniff.

"Smells pretty good," he says. "Kind of sharp and spicy."

I nearly snicker when he says this. The Doc learns how to mix all kinds of merchandise when he peddles snake-oil around the carnivals in his younger days, but this stuff in the jug is plain whiskey with a few drops of wintergreen and peppermint oil. At that, it is the best merchandise we ever offer to a savage. It is good bourbon. The Doc gives me a stern look and nods at the customer.

"This is a historic moment, Mr. Klanck," he says. "You are gazing upon the only existing supply of a new element. We have named it *Ipsobourbonariumate*."

Ferdinand goggles his little button eyes and his mouth is opening and closing without a sound. Ferdinand is now laying about five lengths back and losing ground every minute. The Doc moves in fast:

"*Ipsobourbonariumate* is a powerful energizing agent," he says. "To date we have found it potent only with corn. A tiny pin-point of the pure element will energize a barrel of solution. When the solution is sprayed on seed corn, the kernels grow to enormous size and cling to the cob while fresh. After drying, the kernels fall off at a slight tap."

Ferdinand nods his head. "I was going to ask you about that," he says. "This stuff can be used for table corn and feed corn, too. Is that right?"

"Correct," the Doc tells him. "The solution also destroys harmful parasites

and bacteria, thus ensuring a healthy crop."

Well, I have to admit this is one of the best spiels I ever hear the Doc produce. Ferdinand chews on the bait for a while and then looks up.

"How much does it cost?"

"The manufacturing expense is small," the Doc tells him. "We estimate a net of about fifty cents per pint. One pint will energize two bushels of seed corn."

Ferdinand gets out a pencil and scratches on a piece of paper for a few minutes. His skinny face cracks in a smile.

"There's a fortune in it, Doctor," he says. "We can get three, maybe four dollars a pint for this Ipso-what-you-call-it."

The Doc shrugs. "We are but simple scientists. We know nothing of the marts of trade. We hope that you will agree to take over the merchandising problem. That is why we came to you."

Ferdinand nods. "What's your proposition?"

The Doc gets out his notebook and his cheaters with the black ribbon. He places the cheaters on his nose and riffles the notebook. I sit up and pay close attention. The Doc speaks slowly.

"We will need a small amount, say five thousand dollars, for the production of the first twenty barrels. We will then require an additional ten thousand upon delivery of this quantity. That sum will launch a suitable production program. From that point on I suggest that all net profits be divided equally among us. One part to each of us. That will give you one-third of the net."

Ferdinand does a little more scratching with the pencil. He shakes his head.

"That sounds fair, but I haven't got that much cash right now. My money is tied up in stock at this time of year."

The Doc gets to his feet, crosses to the desk and starts to wrap up the package of corn. He gives Ferdinand a little bow.

"We will say good day, sir. I regret that we have wasted your valuable time."

FERDINAND makes a quick grab at the package. "Just a minute," he says. "I can arrange for the money, but I will have to bring in another partner."

The Doc sits down again and scowls. "A partner?"

"Yes." Ferdinand is eager now. "A fine young man who is almost a member of my family. Mr. Dilworth Niffle, vice-president of the bank across the street. Mr. Niffle is engaged to my daughter Muriel, the young lady you met when you came in."

The Doc scowls for a while and then nods his head.

"Very well. If you can vouch for this young man."

"Yes indeed," Ferdinand says. "I will vouch for him. I will have him here tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

He unwraps the package and picks up the second ear of corn. Before I realize what he is going to do, he taps it on the desk and the kernels fall off. I don't care for this performance. I can see a long evening of laboratory work ahead of me. I get up and go over to the desk and start gathering up the cobs and loose corn.

I am working around where I can stomp on Ferdinand's toe or maybe slip him a quick kick in the shins when I notice the Doc is watching me. He gives me a stern look and shakes his head.

"Very well," he says. "We will agree to meet Mr. Niffle at ten in the morning. But I must insist that we do not procrastinate. Mr. Niffle must bring the initial payment of five thousand in cash."

Ferdinand scowls. "Cash?"

"Correct." The Doc gets up and puts the eye on Ferdinand. "I told you that every detail must be held in strict confidence. I will explain fully to you and Mr. Niffle in the morning. But I insist on cash. If the cash is not available we will take our enterprise elsewhere."

"Yes, yes," Ferdinand says. "The cash will be here. I will tell Mr. Niffle it is necessary."

We move out of the office and Ferdinand puts us away with his daughter. Muriel gives me another load of the cow-eye. I am not pleased to see the Doc watches her closely. He has a grin on his face when we leave the building. I don't like it.

I like it even less later on in the evening. While I am busy with the laboratory work, the Doc sits around the hotel room dosing himself with bourbon and chuckling every once in a while. I can tell he has a little plan in mind. A plan that in-

cludes me and this husky filly, Muriel. . .

We walk into Ferdinand's office again a few minutes before ten the next morning. Ferdinand and Dilworth Niffle are present, and the minute I lay eyes on Dilworth I can see why this Muriel is so hungry.

Dilworth is maybe thirty but he looks like he spends most of his time in a damp safe deposit vault. He is neat and stringy, with a pale face and a long nose with little pink marks at the top where his cheaters pinch him.

I can see a flat bulge in Dilworth's pocket and I can tell the Doc notices it also. The Doc is jovial and hearty, the way he always is in the presence of fresh money. We shake mitts around and then the Doc opens the package and shows the results of my laboratory work.

Dilworth is trying to be calm, but I notice his fingers are shaking when he picks up one of the big ears of corn. He gives it a tap on the desk and lets out a squeak.

"My goodness," he said. "It is true. This is self-shelling corn."

The Doc smiles and relaxes in his chair. The Doc never yanks at the hook when the savage has a firm hold.

There is a short silence and then Ferdinand and Dilworth nod at each other. Dilworth reaches in his coat and produces this long envelope.

"I have the five thousand in cash," he says. "But I must confess I do not understand why this business cannot be handled through regular banking channels."

The Doc's fingers are curling at the ends but he keeps his voice calm.

"Secrecy in every detail is essential to our success," he says slowly. "Professor Allan and myself are the only two persons in the world who know the secret of *Ipsobourbonariumate*. That is our only protection. As you probably know, we cannot patent a formula."

Dilworth frowns. "But surely no one else can discover this secret."

THE Doc looks solemn and lowers his voice. "That is true, with one exception. If the massive brain of Wimbledon J. Weems is applied to this problem, he could solve the secret formula. He is the only scientist in the world with the

necessary skill. No doubt you know of his wicked reputation."

Ferdinand and Dilworth stare at each other and shake their heads. The Doc waits a moment and then goes on:

Weems was a member of my staff at Bushweed University," he says. "I was forced to expel him when I discovered that he had purloined the results of another man's research. He went to the city of Chicago and opened a commercial laboratory. I understand he is quite prosperous and I can well believe it. Wimbleton J. Weems will stoop to any knavery for a few thousand dollars."

I am paying close attention as this is the most important part of the pitch. Of course I do not know exactly what the Doc has in mind, as he never lets me in on the details of a caper until it is ready for the payoff. But I can see that he is leading up to a nice cool-out for Ferdinand and Dilworth when the time comes.

Dilworth is thinking hard. All of a sudden he takes a quick sideways look at Ferdinand and then leans forward.

"I can see your point, Doctor," he says. "We must get our product well established on the market before this man Weems hears of it."

The Doc nods. "Yes. And our connection with the product must be concealed. If Weems knew it was our formula, he would soon be on the trail."

Dilworth smiles and takes another look at Ferdinand. His voice is smooth.

"One little point, Doctor," he says. "Mr. Klanck tells me that you propose to divide the profits three ways. I suggest that we revise that condition and divide four ways. One quarter to each of us."

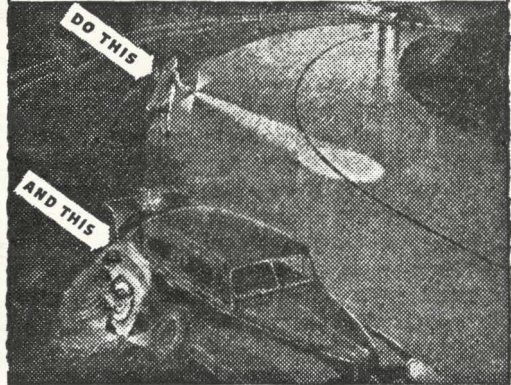
The Doc's big red face hardens and he shakes his head.

"Absolutely not," he says. "We will not consider such a proposition for one moment. You gentlemen must make your own arrangement between yourselves."

Dilworth lets out a sigh and shrugs his shoulders. "Very well," he said. He thinks for a minute. "One more point. The secret is held by you and Professor Allan. Suppose that you are injured or killed in an accident. What protection would we have?"

I let out a small sigh myself when Dilworth says this. He is responding per-

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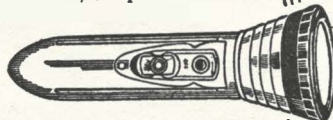
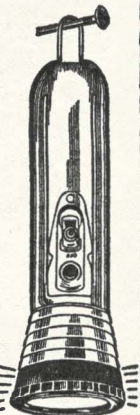
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factly to the Doc's guiding hand. I take a look at Ferdinand and I can see I have nothing to worry about. He is leaning forward over the desk and he is running head-and-head with Dilworth. He smiles at me.

"Do you have that sample of the solution, Professor?"

The Doc nods at me and I hand the jug over. Ferdinand pats the jug and his smile gets wider.

"Just as a matter of safety, Doctor," he says. "I think you should leave this sample here with us. If anything happens to Professor Allan and yourself, we can then call in this man you spoke of and have him analyze it for us. Kind of insurance, you might say."

The Doc frowns for a minute and then nods. "I suppose you are right," he says. "Although I hate to think of this rascal Weems profiting by our labors."

Dilworth is happy now. Everything is working out dandy.

"We are not anticipating your untimely demise," he says. "But just how would we get in touch with this man Weems?"

"He is in the Chicago directory, I believe," the Doc says. He gets to his feet and gives Ferdinand and Dilworth a long look. "If you gentleman are satisfied, I think we will take our leave. We must return to our secret laboratory and start production of the first shipment of the solution. We will return in exactly four days and we will expect the second payment of ten thousand dollars at that time, also in cash."

Dilworth hesitates for a moment, and then slides this long envelope across the table. It is a pretty sight when the Doc riffles that fresh lettuce through his fingers. Ferdinand and Dilworth look like they might break out in a snicker any minute.

Of course this Wimbledon J. Weems is nobody but the old medicine-pitch man, Watermelon-Head Weems. It is true that Watermelon-Head runs a laboratory in Chicago but his customers are people like Soapy Ginsberg and other operators which play the appleknocker circuit.

WE ALL get up and handshake around. Everybody is smiling and it is a jolly scene. Muriel is in the front

office when we go out and the Doc stops and speaks to her about her bright eyes and the roses in her cheeks. He tries to drag me into this conversation but I am suddenly nervous. I am beginning to suspect what the Doc has in mind.

It turns out I have pegged it exactly. We are hardly in the heap before the Doc gets brisk and full of business.

"We will drive to the next town and register under false names at the hotel," he says. "I must put in a call for Weems at once and give him detailed instructions. Those two savages are sure to get on the telephone within a few hours. Everything will depend on exact timing." He chuckles and shoots a quick look at me. "I know that your timing will be perfect, Pony Boy."

This is what I have been waiting for. "Okay," I tell him. "Give me the bad news. Where do I fit in?"

The Doc chuckles again. "You might almost call it two-timing, Pony Boy. Your part of the play will be simple. Just a pleasant evening with a lovely young lady, Miss Muriel Klanck."

"Listen," I tell him. "You will have to shift your plan. Miss Muriel Klanck outweighs me by twenty pounds. I refuse to run second in that kind of corn-fed company."

The Doc shakes his head. "This is absurd," he said. "I am merely suggesting an evening of innocent fun with a slight romantic interlude at the front door of her home about ten-thirty, three days from now."

Well, I argue for three days but finally I pick up the phone and call the Hambone County Seed & Fertilizer Company. Muriel is surprised but she agrees to meet me at seven o'clock around the corner from the Hambone Center movie palace. She also agrees to tell her old man she is going to the show.

We pull into Hambone Center about quarter of seven and I unload the Doc at the hotel. I wait while he checks up on the message Watermelon-Head Weems leaves at the desk for us. In a minute the Doc flags me through the window and I know we are right on schedule.

Muriel is waiting and she is raring for action. I drive out to a joint a few miles down the road, and on the way I manage

to poke my elbow in her eye a couple of times so we arrive in good shape. It is a dine-and-dance trap and I get a table right under the lights so the waiter can protect me in case Muriel tries to climb in my chair.

I have been in rough company in my time, but after a couple of dances with this Muriel I realize I am up against the toughest opposition of my career. She has a grip like a deputy sheriff and she is determined to drag me into the dark corners of the room. I step on her toes and kick her in the shins but this does not discourage Muriel.

It is a tough evening all around. By the time I stop the heap in front of the Klanck homestead I am all tuckered out. I haul her out of the car and straight-arm her up the walk and onto the front porch. The house is dark except for a light behind a drawn curtain in one room.

I can see the Doc's big hulk under a tree across the street so I figure I am safe now. I relax, put the arm on Muriel and treat her to a little light mugging. Muriel is in favor of this and is just settling down to work when the Doc comes across the street and moves quietly toward the house.

I break away from Muriel and tell her people are looking and she must get out her key. It takes a little time for this to sink in but finally she opens her handbag. The Doc and me are inside the hall with her before she realizes what is happening.

The Doc closes the door behind him. Muriel opens her mouth about a foot and lets out a squall. A door opens and the lights in the hall go on. Ferdinand Klanck is standing there goggling at us. Before he can move, the Doc butts him with his haybelly, and we shove on past into the room.

Muriel is right with us. She stops and lets out a squeal.

"Why, Dilworth," she says. "What is going on?"

I MOVE around behind her and close the door. It is quite a scene, at that. Dilworth Niffle is standing in front of the fireplace in his shirt sleeves. A kettle of water is steaming on the fire and a bunch of test tubes and little boxes of powder are scattered around a long table.

Watermelon-Head Weems is standing beside this table. He is wearing a white gown and a pair of horn-rimmed cheaters, and I must admit he looks very scientific indeed. He takes out a handkerchief and mops his big bald skull, and there is a mean and nasty look on his fat face.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" he asks the Doc. He turns and gives me the dog-eye. "Take this senile old dotard out of here before I lose my temper," he says. "Your discovery is no longer a secret. I will have the key to the formula in a very few moments." He waves his mitt at the test tubes on the table.

Watermelon-Head is doing fine. I step to one side and settle down to enjoy the payoff. The Doc shakes his head and lets out a big sigh. He looks at Ferdinand and Dilworth and his voice is sad.

"You are making a grave error, Wimbledon," he tells Watermelon-Head. "Can't you realize that these men have no scruples? They will use you and then cast you aside, accord you the same treatment they have tried to mete out to Professor Allan and myself. We are fellow scientists, Wimbledon. We must stand together."

Watermelon-Head gives the Doc another nasty look and lets out a sniff. "I will take care of my own interests," he says.

Ferdinand has got his breath by this time. He moves in front of Watermelon-Head and points a skinny finger at Muriel.

"What are you doing with these men? How did they get in here?"

Muriel steps over and grips me by the wing. She is smiling.

"I have bad news for you, Daddy," she says. She looks across the room at Dilworth Niffle. "And for you, too. I am not going to marry you, Dilworth. I love another. Professor Allan and I have plighted our troth."

Well, I am not going to hold still for this. I give Muriel the elbow and break away. "Listen," I tell her. "You're losing your buttons."

The Doc breaks in; his voice is loud and stern.

"Be quiet, Pony Boy," he says. He takes a step toward Ferdinand. "We are simple scientists, Mr. Klanck, but we did not trust you fully. We retained a detec-

tive to report on your actions after we left town. When the detective informed us that Wimbledon J. Weems had checked in at the local hotel, we knew that our suspicions were justified."

Ferdinand and Dilworth Niffle look at each other and they are not feeling well. The Doc stares at them for a moment and turns to Watermelon-Head.

"I trust you are being well paid for your dastardly act."

Watermelon-Head gives a nasty smile. He pats his chest.

"Yes," he says. "I have received ten thousand dollars."

The Doc shakes his head. "Only ten thousand? You are a fool as well as a rascal. This formula is worth millions. Mr. Klanck and Mr. Niffle were to receive only one-third of the net profits. They were to pay us ten thousand on receipt of the first shipment." The Doc slaps his own chest. "We have already been paid five thousand on account."

Watermelon-Head thinks it over. He looks at Ferdinand.

"So you intended to take all the profits for yourself?" He turns to the Doc. "Perhaps you are right, Pierce. Perhaps we should stand together in this matter." He picks the little jug with the sample solution off the table and shoves it in his pocket. "At least we will discuss terms before I proceed with my work."

Ferdinand opens his mouth and starts to let out a bellow. The Doc's voice snaps: "Get going, Pony Boy!"

I jump across the room and slap Watermelon-Head in the face with one hand and rip this white gown down the middle with the other. Watermelon-Head struggles enough to make it good. I get this long envelope out of his inside coat pocket. Then I spin him around and dip him for the little jug as he goes by.

Watermelon-Head slams into Ferdinand and then billiards over to Dilworth Niffle. They all go down in a heap. By the time they get sorted out and on their feet, the Doc and me are standing together at the door. The Doc shakes his head.

"I abhor violence," he says. "I trust this little affair will be a lesson to you all. He pats his chest. "I feel that we are entitled to retain the five thousand initial payment. We are also retaining the ten

thousand Professor Allan just took from Wimbledon J. Weems. We are also taking the only existing sample of *Ipsobourbonariumate* with us."

Ferdinand lets out a holler. "Thieves," he says. "I will call the police!"

The Doc smiles. "I doubt it," he says in a soft voice.

Ferdinand and Dilworth look at each other and I can see they are going to cool out nicely. Watermelon-Head is sliding toward the door. It is time to go. I turn to the Doc. Just then Muriel rushes forward and grabs him by the lapels of his swayback coat. "You must take me with you," she says.

Well, the Doc is handy for a big party, but he had no luck in trying to get rid of Muriel. I have to step in and put a strong arm on her before she turns loose. The Doc hustles down the hall after Watermelon-Head, and I am almost to the front door before I realize that Muriel is still with us.

She comes alongside as I am trotting across the lawn. I miss with the first straight-arm and she has me by the neck.

"I must go with you, darling," she tells me. "I cannot remain in Hambone Center another moment. Daddy and that old Dilworth Niffle are just a pair of cheats. I never want to see either of them again. You are the one to share my life."

There is only one thing I can do. I relax for a second and then get a foot behind Muriel. She hits the lawn with a thump. I am in the heap and rolling down the street before she makes it to her feet again. The Doc looks back and then lets out a chuckle.

"The young lady has gone back into the house," he says. He laughs again. "That was a touching farwell, Pony Boy. For a moment I thought we would have to rescue you." He turns and looks at Watermelon-Head in the back seat. "I must congratulate you on a fine performance. You were most convincing."

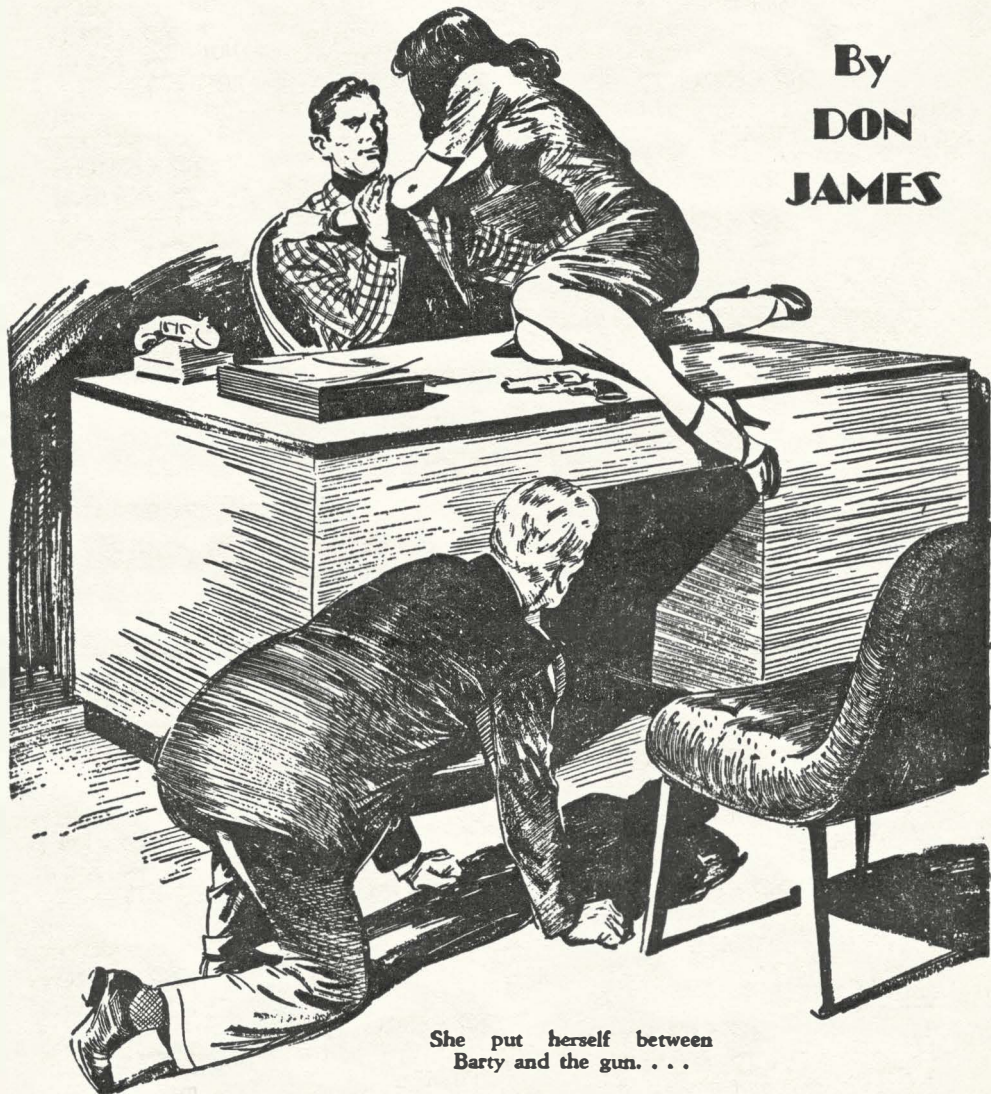
Watermelon-Head laughs. "It was a neat operation," he says. "A fifteen-thousand-dollar score and a pair of savages who will never utter a peep. A tidy job."

The Doc nods. "I agree. This has been a pleasant and profitable experience." He

(Please continue on page 98)

HEARSE FOR A HUSBAND

By
DON
JAMES



She put herself between
Barty and the gun. . . .

Jack's winsome widow had personality plus—but I couldn't forget Jack lying in that cold steel drawer.

THEY were hard, bitter words; the kind I never thought I'd use with Margaret. She stood motionless, her sultry eyes hot with anger, her beautiful body tense.

Finally I wrapped it up.

"He was the greatest guy I ever knew," I said. "The best friend I ever had. Jack

Hollister. When you married him, it was fine with me. You and I had lots of fun, but it was never meant for anything else. Jack was in love with you. There's a difference. Then you married him—and you know what you gave him. Shall I tell you what you gave him?"

I felt blood pound in my ears and the muscles twinge along my back. I'd never hated anyone so intensely in my 36 years.

She didn't speak. She just stood there motionless. So I told her.

"You gave him a steel drawer in the city morgue. He's there now—with bullets in his dead body and a bloody smear where his friendly grin used to be."

I ran out of words. I had to get out of there. Quick. The sudden silence wasn't helping any. The tenseness was becoming too dangerous. There was one more thing.

Softly I said it, "You didn't fire the shots, Margaret, but you put him there. *You put him there!*"

I turned and walked out of their expensive apartment. Maybe the door was still open when I stepped into the elevator. I don't know. I didn't look back.

The night was filled with rain. I hurried across the wet sidewalk to my coupe and sat there for a few moments thinking about Margaret and her black hair, her beauty, her voice, and the way she used her smile when she sang her songs at Con Barty's nightclub. I thought how much I'd like to wrap my fingers around her smooth neck and squeeze until she was a limp weight in my hands.

Then I remembered the things I had to do and started the car.

The neon sign of a drugstore dyed the wet pavement red. I parked, went in, and found a telephone booth. In the classified section I found *Morticians*. It said, *See Funeral Directors*. I saw *Funeral Directors* and remembered that I knew Carson of Morley, Carson and O'Shea. I called him.

"This is Harry Birch of the *News-Press*," I told him. "You knew Jack Hollister—"

"How are you, Harry! Hollister? The public relations man?"

"Yes. Someone shot him a couple of hours ago. He's in the morgue. I want you to get him out of there."

"I'm sorry to hear about Hollister. Good friend of yours, wasn't he, Harry?"

"Yes. Look, Carson—will you take care of it? You can send me the bill."

"Well . . . there'll have to be a release from the police and—he was married, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then the widow will have to make arrangements with us."

"Take care of it," I said impatiently. She could even shove him around when he was dead, I thought. "Just get him out of that damned morgue."

"I'll attend to it personally, Harry."

I thanked him and hung up.

There was a lunch counter in the place. I ordered black coffee. There were things to do, but I had to take a break and think it through.

In a few moments I'd have to call the city desk and talk with Perkins. He had taken over when Moriarty, our man on police, had called in about Jack Hollister and I had rushed to the morgue, through rain and traffic, hoping that it was a mistake, that it was someone else. Then the cold quiet of the morgue, the drawer sliding out, the one awful look at Jack's bloody face.

I assigned Moriarty to the story and found a bar in the neighborhood and had three quick drinks. I didn't feel them. I was remembering the times that Jack and I had stood at bars and had our drinks, our talks, our dreams. The times that started on our first assignments, before Jack had worked into public relations, before I had worked into the city editor's desk.

I recalled the war years when Jack had returned to news reporting as a correspondent in the Pacific, and I had gone over for the *News-Press*. We'd met once on a war-battered island, and again in San Francisco when it was over.

That was a time. There was liquor to drink and things to talk about; Jack's long, lean body ambling beside my shorter, stockier one from bar to bar. Jack's ready grin and the excitement in his voice when he talked about Margaret and going home.

The three quick drinks didn't dull the memories, but the anger began to rise. Jack was dead. All the background I

knew so well fell into place. The things Jack had told me; the things I knew because a city editor hears the rumors, the facts, and the stories behind the stories.

ANGER became greater than the grief, or perhaps it was born of grief. That was when I left the bar and went to face Margaret. There were things to tell her. . . .

The coffee was hot. It burned my lips and the pain brought my thoughts into focus. I had seen Margaret and I had told her. That had been the one extravagance in emotions. The rest was deliberate thinking and planning.

Back in the telephone booth I called Perkins.

"Take over for a while," I told him. I have some things to clean up. I'll be back when I finish. It may be tonight—it may be next week."

"Don't worry about the desk, Harry."

"What has Moriarty turned in?"

"The cops haven't anything yet. They found Jack in that alley behind the Morton building. That's it."

"Who's on it for the cops?"

"Korzler."

"Thanks. I'll keep in touch with you."

I hung up and dialed again, put my call through the police switchboard and heard a heavy, worried voice say, "Lieutenant Korzler speaking."

"Harry Birch. I want to see you, Korzler—about Jack Hollister. Will you be there a while?"

"Yes."

Korzler saw me alone in his office. He looked like a tired, overweight business man. Hair that once had been black had become gray and thin. He puffed at a battered pipe and leveled shrewd eyes on me as he motioned me to a chair.

"You and Hollister were close friends," he said. "Maybe you can help."

I shrugged out of my raincoat and sat in the chair.

"Moriarty reports that you haven't much," I said.

"It happened shortly after eight o'clock. A news kid on the corner heard it, but thought it was a car backfiring. We've checked back.

"Hollister worked late in his office in

the Morton building, came down in the elevator just before eight, walked out into the street. It was dark by then. What happened from there on, we don't know. Looks like someone met him on the sidewalk, herded him into the alley, and let him have it. Five bullets. One of the Morton janitors went out into the alley about 8:20 and found the body. He called in."

"Know his wife?" I asked.

"I know who she is. Sings under the name of Margaret Delano in Con Barty's club."

"Who notified her?"

"Sergeant Noonan."

"How'd she take it?"

"No hysterics, he says. Got white and froze up. Thanked him and closed the door in his face." Korzler's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

I took a deep breath. Now was the moment. I could keep my mouth shut, or I could talk. If I talked, some dirty linen was going to be aired. Some of Jack Hollister's heart and soul was going to be laid bare. But Jack would want it cleaned up. Jack hated loose ends. Besides, there was how I felt about it. I had to live with myself.

"I'll make it brief," I said. "Margaret and I dated around for a while before she met Jack. He fell in love with her and married her. That was just before the war. He went overseas as a correspondent. While he was gone, Margaret kept her job with Con Barty." I lit a cigarette. Korzler puffed silently at his pipe, watching me. "She kept more than her job with Con Barty," I said. "If you get what I mean."

Korzler looked thoughtful.

"Did Hollister find out?" he asked.

I nodded.

"What did he do about it?"

"He was in love with her. He found excuses for her and gave her another chance. But he made one condition. She had to quit her job."

"She didn't?"

I shook my head. "She gave him a line about her right to a career. It didn't wash too well, but he was crazy about her. He wanted to keep her at all costs. Maybe he had ideas about making it work out

eventually. Then he made a big mistake."

Korzler watched me and waited.

"He went to see Con Barty," I said. "He told Barty to leave her alone and fire her from the job, or else—"

"Or else what?"

"He'd make it so tough for Barty that Barty would have to get out of the picture or get out of town."

KORZLER frowned. "That's a big order. We can't get enough on Barty to run him out. How did Hollister plan to do it?"

Slowly I smashed out my cigarette in a tray and looked up into Korzler's eyes.

"I wish I knew," I said softly. "Jack didn't tell me, but he called me this afternoon and asked if the paper would back him if he broke something hot on Barty. I told him we would, and asked what it was. He said he'd see me tonight and explain. I think he was on his way to the *News-Press* when he was murdered."

"That's as much as you know?"

I shrugged. "I can only guess. Jack's last big assignment with the sheet before he went into public relations was Bitsy Liner's murder. You remember that Barty was mixed up in that, but you had to give him a clean ticket."

"Then you think Hollister may have dug up something to tie Barty into Liner's murder?"

"Jack was one of the best newshounds I've ever known. He always maintained that Barty was guilty. He felt there was something you and he and everyone else had missed. Some angle, or evidence, or something. It used to bother him."

Korzler took his pipe from his mouth and studied the bowl. "You're saying that you think he found it, that he was ready to nail Barty and make good his threat?"

"What do you think?"

He didn't answer at once. Outside the storm lashed rain against the windows. People passed in the hallway.

"What can I do with it?" he finally asked.

"Bring Barty in."

"I'll do that, for what it's worth. But you know what it's worth, Harry. All you've given me is a theory, and we can't

convict on theory. We can't even put on pressure without something tangible. Barty has too many connections. He's the big guy on the other side of the fence from us. Rackets and all. You know what we're bucking."

"I know," I told him. "But you'll bring him in?"

"For questioning. Barty was playing around with Hollister's wife. That gives me an excuse. He'll bring his lawyer with him and he'll evade questions. He'll have an alibi—if he did kill Hollister. He has a dozen men working for him who could have done it. They'll be alibied, too. If you're right, it will take an act of God to break it. One thing makes it add straight."

"What?"

"We gave Hollister's office a look. Someone had been there before us. The place was a shambles. If you're right, and if Hollister had anything in the way of evidence, it's gone. And there was nothing in his pockets."

I stood and put on my coat.

"He wouldn't have it at their apartment," I said. "Margaret was still playing with Barty and Jack knew it. He wouldn't leave anything like that around."

At the door I said, "I'll call back in a couple of hours. You'll have had a chance at Barty by then?"

"An hour and a half or so."

As I opened the door, he stopped me. "Harry," he said thoughtfully. "It couldn't be his wife?"

"Not as long as he was making the dough he did and was crazy enough about her to want to keep her," I said. "She didn't like them dead, but she liked men—as many as she could get and in bunches."

"Yeah?"

"She was playing up to me again within a month after she married Jack," I said.

Korzler was reaching for a telephone when I walked out.

It was a long hour and a half. I tried to eat, but finally pushed the food away untouched. I drank coffee and read an early edition.

Moriarty had phoned in a good story and rewrite had followed through. The boys knew and liked Jack. Anger about the murder smouldered between lines.

Automatically I glanced over the remainder of the edition. Perkins had things under control.

The hands on the clock on the wall behind the cashier edged slowly around. I gave Korzler an extra five minutes and called.

"Anything?" I asked tersely.

"Alibis. He had his lawyer. We had to turn him loose."

"Are you checking his men?"

"As well as we can. We probably won't get anything."

"But you'll stay on it?"

"Until we're at dead-ends and the pressure pulls us off. We might get a break before then, but I doubt it."

"You don't sound hopeful."

"I'm not, Harry."

"Any other leads?"

"Not a thing. It's going to be rough. We'll get pressure from the D.A., too, the other way—an unsolved case. And the chief is afraid you newspaper boys may get tough about it."

"That comes from higher up, Korzler. We just do our jobs."

"I know."

It was no more than I expected. No less. I thanked him and hung up.

Rain still sliced through the night and slithered across the highway as I drove out to Con Barty's nightclub.

IT WAS close to midnight. The parking lot at the club was filled despite the storm. I parked and went into the low, white, stucco building. I checked my hat and coat and stepped to the entrance of the main room.

It was not difficult to spot Barty. He was making his rounds, nodding his well-groomed dark head, flashing his white smile, pausing by a table, drifting on to another. He had a nice technique. It was as suave as the music of his small band.

Near the entrance he saw me and hesitated, looking poised in a smart English drape suit, his smile fading, eyes narrowing.

I waited for him. He walked over casually.

"Looking for someone, Birch?" he asked.

"You."

"That's good. I want to talk with you. My office is across the foyer."

As we crossed, a man who looked too smoothly tailored in his dinner jacket detached himself from a group near the door and silently walked with us. I wondered how he concealed a gun beneath the tailored jacket, but I knew it was there.

Barty opened the office door and stood back for me to walk in. He said a single word to our companion. I didn't hear it, but when the door closed, Barty and I were alone. I had a feeling that the man was leaning against the door outside.

Barty sat behind his desk and waved me to a chair. We sat and stared at one another for a few seconds.

"First you call on Margaret," he said, talking tough. "Then Korzler pulls me in, asking questions. You get around."

"That's right."

"I don't like people suggesting to the cops that I've been bumping other people."

"The truth hurts?"

His suaveness was gone now. His dark

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eyes were menacing. His words came out as if he were biting them off with those white teeth.

"I didn't kill Hollister."

"One of your boys?" I asked softly. "The mugg leaning against the door outside?"

He shook his head slowly. "You're too smart to come out here to ask questions. You know the answers before you ask them. Why are you here?"

I knew why I was there. I knew exactly why I was there. I wanted to know one thing and I had to bluff to learn it. I had to rely on observation, and what I knew about people, and a hunch, to get the answer.

There was a man outside. I had to take care of that first. I lit a cigarette, held the match a few seconds and then got up and crossed to an ashtray across the room, wrinkling my forehead as if in thought. I had to put on an act.

I shot a quick glance toward the door and my luck was good.

Barty watched me, suddenly alert. I shook my head and began to pace the floor as if searching for the right words. I circled near the door in the silence.

"Barty," I said, "Jack Hollister was my best friend."

I let it hang there and I was by the door. Casually I leaned back against it, my hands clasped behind me. My fingers found the small bolt lever and turned it.

"There are some things about this that I don't understand," I bluffed. I started to pace again and stopped at the desk, looking across at him. I saw his body become tense. I shook my head as if I were puzzled. He relaxed a little, but his eyes were careful and one hand strayed near a desk drawer.

I leaned on the desk, hands flat, and looked into his face.

"Jack got to me before you killed him," I lied. "I've got the dope on the Liner killing. He mailed it last night. I'll have it tomorrow. I'm going to use it. I came out here first to settle something personally with you while I still have a chance—before the cops get you."

Now was the moment. If I knew anything about men and reactions, I needed all that knowledge now.

His mouth gave him away. It tightened and the upper lip twitched. Suddenly his hand jerked toward the drawer.

I grabbed his wrist. He twisted out of the chair and upwards. His free fist jolted against my head. He snapped out a name loudly: "Tonelli!"

Behind me I heard noise at the door and then a body hit it.

"It's locked, Barty," I said.

I had my answer. My hunch had been right. Barty's actions confirmed it. Jack had found something on the Liner murder to tab Barty. What Jack had found, I could find. It was just a question of time. If Barty didn't die for Jack's murder, he would die for Liner's if it took the rest of my life to nail him.

In the meantime, I remembered Jack's body in the morgue. I had a personal score to settle for Jack and myself.

I threw all of my 180 pounds into the fist that smashed into Barty's white teeth.

HE COULD fight and he was desperate. It was savage, as primitive as two animals fighting for their lives. Thumbs gouged, fists thudded, fingers gripped and tore. Blood smeared torn clothing. Hard breathing filled the room.

The desk went over. I dodged a chair and hit him low with my shoulder. We were down. Fingers clawed at my face and I used my knees.

Barty grunted in pain. I pounded fists into his face until blood from his nose and mouth were slimy. His jaw sagged.

A window crashed. Someone was on my back. I tried to release my hands from Barty's throat and get up. A man's voice growled, "Here! Use this!"

Something cracked against the back of my head and the world exploded in my face. . . .

It was Margaret's voice. I'd know it anywhere. Even with my eyes shut and pain throbbing through my head. Even when she was sobbing and almost hysterical.

"What do you expect of me, Con? Haven't I had enough today—Jack and—"

"Shut up!" Barty's voice sounded thick. That would come from what I had done to his mouth.

Margaret managed to quiet the sobs. "But how *could* he know?" she asked. "Jack and I quarreled over the phone a little after seven. He lost his temper and said he'd take care of you. That he was washed up. That he was through with me and that you'd killed a man named Liner and he could prove it. That's when I called you and—"

"Will you shut up?" Barty demanded angrily.

I opened my eyes a slit. I was on a couch. Barty was at his desk again. The man who had been stationed outside, Tonelli, stood near the door.

Margaret was sitting in the chair I had used. Now she stood and I saw anger tighten her lips.

"You can't talk to me that way, Con! I don't have to take it, and I won't!"

Barty's face was a mess. He was holding a handkerchief to his mouth. He had exchanged his torn, bloody clothing for a clean sports outfit.

He looked up at her with emotionless eyes.

"You're a Jonah," he snapped. "A Jonah to any man. It's brought you a dead husband and put me in a spot. Now I've got to do something about Birch. You're not worth it."

He might as well have slapped her. The mouth that could be exciting in a smile, or a kiss, became ugly with vicious anger.

"No, Con. You don't shove me around. I'm in this as much as you."

"I'm in it *because* of you!" Barty said through puffed lips. "And you're in deeper than you think. It's time for me to get out. I'm not taking you with me."

She stared at him and the words began to make sense to her. The anger disappeared in visible fear.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, baby—you know I had your husband bumped and you know I was mixed up in the Liner deal. This guy, Birch, *knows* about the Liner deal. Hollister must have mailed him copies of the stuff we found in his office. Birch suspects the truth. Do you think I'm going to let the cops start throwing questions at you? You think I'm that crazy? You think I'm going to let this mugg go to the cops with what he knows about the Liner killing?"

"Con! I wouldn't—"

"You won't get the chance," Barty interrupted. He glanced at Tonelli.

"You know the way to Slim's cabin," he said. "There's a side road that crosses railroad tracks about a mile this side of it. It's a blind crossing and the track curves into it. A freight goes through there about three a. m."

Tonelli nodded.

"Get a couple of the boys," Barty continued. "One of you drive Birch's car. Take care of them first. No guns. Stall his car on that crossing just before the freight goes through—with them in it." He stopped to wipe his bleeding lips. "We'll let the cops and the newspapers guess how they happened to be riding together in that neck of the woods when they got hit."

Margaret's eyes became large and she clenched one fist against her mouth. Abruptly she screamed.

"Shut her up!" Barty snapped.

Tonelli stepped toward her. She shrank back from him and tried to scream again. Tonelli's fist clipped her on the jaw. Her knees folded and she went down in a huddle of silk and nylon and legs.

Tonelli looked back at Barty.

"We better get going," he said.

Barty nodded. "Take a look at Birch. See if he's still out."

I shut my eyes. The man came to my side. He prodded me with a fist. I remained limp.

"Okay." Barty's voice expressed satisfaction. "Get things lined up."

Tonelli walked out and I heard the door close. Carefully I opened my eyes to a slit again. Barty was nursing his mouth with the handkerchief. He had a gun on the desk before him. Margaret still was on the floor, unconscious.

I stared at her through narrowed eyelids and tried to think. If I could get her out of there and to Korzler, I knew she'd talk. I had the case buttoned up, but two dead bodies from a wrecked coupe couldn't tell Korzler a thing.

SUDDENLY I realized that Margaret was not unconscious. Her eyes were opened narrowly, as mine were, and she was looking at me.

Barty opened a drawer and there was the sound of glass and liquid as he poured a drink. Margaret's eyes opened a little wider, as if she were trying to tell me something.

When a man and a woman have been together as much as Margaret and I had once been, there can be an understanding between them, a knowing of one another so that words sometimes aren't really necessary.

Now she veiled her eyes with long lashes in a look that could mean nothing but a warning.

She moaned and moved a little. Carefully I squinted at Barty. He put his drink down and watched her without expression.

She pushed herself to a sitting position and shook her head. After a few seconds she stood with a brief display of long, nylon-clad legs.

She steadied herself with a hand on the back of a chair and looked at Con Barty.

"Con . . ." she whispered. "You've got to listen to me, Con."

"I'm listening," he said curtly.

"You can't do this to me, Con—not after how it's been between us!"

She walked toward him, using all her allure. She looked frightened and lovely and pleading. She was playing a part.

Barty shook his head. "It's no use, baby."

She was at the desk. She sat on the edge of it and leaned across with her arms supporting her so that she looked directly into his face.

"Not to me, Con," she whispered again. "Not *me* . . . remember?"

She did it neatly and swiftly. Abruptly her mouth covered his. She pushed herself against him, half lying across the desk. Her hands crept over his shoulders. She had put herself between Con Barty and the gun.

She squirmed sideways and the long line of her thigh, half resting on the desk, touched the gun. She moved and the revolver slid to the edge of the desk. I saw the deliberate movement as she pushed it off.

I was halfway across the room before Barty knew what was happening. He shoved her away so that she fell to the floor. Desperately he reached for the spot

where the gun had been. It wasn't there, and at that second I lunged for it and felt its coldness nestle in my hand.

He came over the desk at me. I brought the muzzle of the gun down on his head. He groaned and went limp.

Holding the gun pointed at the door, I made the telephone call to Korzler. He said he'd be there in minutes.

Margaret was on the floor, sobbing violently.

"Margaret!" I said sharply. She raised her tear-stained face. "You've got to tell the cops all you know about this. Everything. If Barty gets out of it, he'll kill you."

"Yes, Harry . . . I'll tell. I'll have to tell now. Tonelli killed Jack. Barty told me. He said he wanted to make sure I'd remember—that the secret would tie me to him for life. . . ."

"They won't hold you," I told her. "It was Barty's idea and planning. You're responsible, but you didn't do it. They'll let you out. But you have to talk."

"I will, Harry. I will. . . ."

The door opened and Tonelli came in. He saw me and the gun in my hand. He reached toward his shoulder holster.

I pulled the gun trigger. Tonelli staggered back and grasped at his shoulder in a reflex movement. Then he just stood there, sagging back against the door, blood dripping from his coat sleeve, glaring at me. He still was there when Korzler arrived.

* * *

It was Barty who finally confessed. He wanted a deal. Tonelli had done the killing. He had told Tonelli not to kill Jack. He was to frighten him, work him over. Tonelli had lost his head and killed him.

They told that to Tonelli and insane anger made his eyes bright. He called Barty lashing names and he talked. He talked about Liner and rackets and Barty's orders to rub out Jack. He told names and places and things. He gave Korzler a field day and the D. A. began to think of running for governor. Wasn't he smashing the biggest racket organization in the state?

I made sure our men covered every de-

tail and I managed exclusives on most of it.

It was shortly after six in the morning when Margaret and I left headquarters. Our part was over for the time being.

She looked exhausted.

"Harry, will you drive me home?"

She had done her part. It was the least I could do. The drive was made in silence. At the apartment building she turned.

"If you'll come up with me— It's just that I don't want to walk into the apartment alone . . . I—" She left it there.

I could do that, too. We went up without speaking and I opened the door with her key. We stepped inside and she closed the door.

"A drink?" she asked.

"No. You're home now. I'm going."

"Wait, Harry . . ." She came close to me. "Do this for me, Harry. Just kiss me. Just hold me for a moment."

I stared into her face and saw the strange excitement in her eyes, and there was the shadow of something unclean and abnormal and abandoned there.

"No." I stepped back from her.

"Harry . . . you owe me something for saving our lives. Maybe we were meant for each other. Maybe this is it. . . ."

"Maybe," I said and my voice sounded dead.

The telephone was across the room. I went to it. I found his home number and dialed. He didn't like being pulled out of bed, but he listened.

"Carson, you have Jack Hollister's body?" I asked.

"Yes, Harry. I called Mrs. Hollister and—"

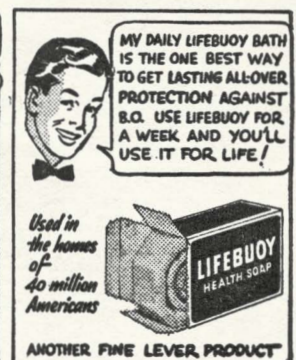
"Never mind. Just listen." I looked over the telephone at her and said to Carson, "Tomorrow I'll send you a check for the funeral expenses. Make out a receipt to Mrs. Hollister and mail it to her. On the receipt write, 'Paid in full.'"

I put down the telephone and went to the door. There I turned and looked at her again.

"Now I don't owe you a damned thing," I said. "And neither does Jack."

I walked out.

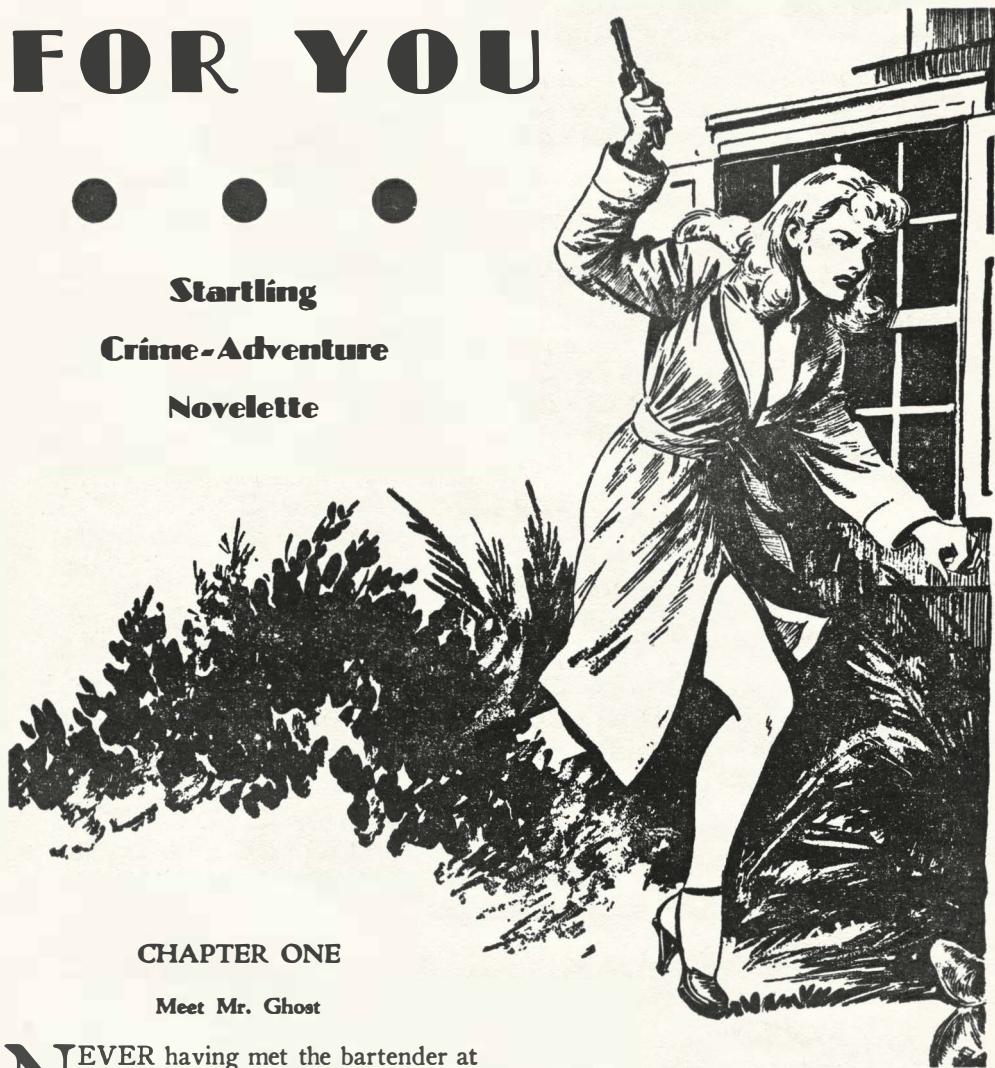
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CHAPTER ONE

Meet Mr. Ghost

NEVER having met the bartender at the Brickbat Club, Mack Spain wasn't particularly concerned about him. But, he thought, the barman's family, if any, ought to be worried about his health. Spain had never seen anyone with so florid a face turn so pale in such a hurry.

Spain had walked into the Brickbat Club only a moment before for the first time in his life. Now he was leaning against the bar, one heel hooked to the brass rail.

The barkeep had been polishing a brandy sniffer with his back to Spain.

Why did Private Op Mack Spain's fatal charm to women make him the target of mauling bruisers, a gun-swinging beauty—and all the trigger-happy coppers on Pittston's vice squad?

When the barkeep had the right degree of sparkle on the glass, he started to place it on the shelf at the back of the bar. It was then that his eyes met those of Spain in the mirror.

The color had drained out of the barkeep's face like port wine out of a cracked bottle. His chin dropped until it rested on his neat black bow. He closed his eyes slowly and then snapped them open to stare again at the reflection of Spain's face. He looked as if he had seen a ghost.

The barman dropped the brandy sniffer from nerveless fingers and it tinkled into shards on the floor behind the bar. He put one hand to his heart, walked slowly down the length of the bar as though his knee joints were out of control and vanished through a small door at the rear of the room.

Spain didn't like the performance. He

Spain figured he had
Bum just where he
wanted him.



By H. H.
STINSON

knew, of course, that the barman had mistaken him for a guy named Al Mason. That wasn't particularly odd, inasmuch as he looked a h elf of a lot like a guy named Al Mason.

What bothered him was the thought that had jumped to his mind in response to the barman's stricken look. That, on top of the wire he'd had from Al Mason, was what Spain didn't like.

The wire, which was the first communication Spain had had from Al Mason in six months, had read: "Got a tough one by the tail stop come arunning and bring that fatal charm to women." It had given a hotel address in Pittston. "If neither me nor message there check Brickbat Club with your ears hanging out."

Inasmuch as Al Mason wasn't the kind of guy who'd yell for help unless he really needed it, Spain had locked up his one-man agency office in Chicago, hopped into his jalopy and come arunning. At the hotel he had learned that Mason hadn't picked up his mail for twenty-four hours. And now, at the Brickbat Club, a barman had nearly keeled over at the sight of someone he thought was Al Mason.

It could all add up, Spain thought, to something very sour.

He'd figured on ordering a beer. He still wanted it. He craned over the bar, located the cooler, hauled a dripping bottle out and got it uncapped. He located a glass and poured carefully, getting a nice, medium collar. After a couple of swallows, he lit a cigarette and surveyed what he could see of the Brickbat Club in the bar mirror.

The mirror showed him a large, square room, done in black-and-red plastics and imitation leather. A row of booths down the opposite side. Tables crowded around a tiny dance floor. A small bandstand angled into one rear corner. At five-thirty in the evening, the place wasn't too crowded. He was alone at the bar. A couple of the booths were occupied by cocktailing couples; a lone drinker moped over a highball at a table.

The mirror also reflected Spain's face back at him. Eyebrows were straight and black under a down-pulled hatbrim and over gray, cool eyes. The planes of his face were hard, bony, relieved only by a certain curt humor about his mouth.

Spain was refilling his glass when the Brickbat Club acquired three new customers, two of them very large men and the third a young woman who looked small between them. They had paused at the archway between foyer and bar. Spain, examining them idly by way of the bar mirror, thought the men would have been more at home in a saloon down by the freight yards or the vinegar works. They were young; they had muscles that bulged blue workshirts. One had a single cauliflower ear. The other sported a pair plus a face so scarred that its owner must have forgotten to duck a thousand times.

The girl belonged. She was neat, compact, copper-haired. She had hot blue eyes and a good jaw. She wore expensive clothes, including a platinum fox jacket. Spain thought she resembled an orchid looking for a fight.

The man with two gnarled ears said: "Leave enough of him for me, Danny."

"Nuts to you, Ernie," said Danny. "I won the toss for him, didn't I?"

"Dopes," said the girl. "Quit arguing." She had a nice voice, a little husky, and a clipped way of talking. "There he is—take him!"

She gestured at Spain. Spain saw Danny weave his shoulders and start for him. Spain swore briefly, wondering if he was going to have to receipt for a slugging in Al Mason's name. Not, he thought, if he could help it. He swivelled from the bar just as Danny ended three long strides and towered over him.

Danny gathered Spain's lapels in a ham-like left hand. He snarled: "Bum, I give you one first for the old man. Then some for me personal and then a lot for nothin' at all." His right hand, balled into a fist, pulled back past his shoulder.

Danny shouldn't have taken time out for dialogue. Spain could practically have recited the Bill of Rights and the new income-tax regulations and climbed Pike's Peak in the time it took the guy to speak his mind and get the fist started.

"Have some beer, pal," said Spain. He threw the beer, glass and all, into Danny's face.

DANNY'S left hand released Spain's coat but, blinded though he was by the beer, his right fist kept coming. Spain

slid away from it and sank his own right four inches into tough muscles above Danny's belt. Danny jackknifed a little. Spain straightened him with a left and then put all his hundred-and-eighty pounds into a right that landed nicely on Danny's beer-drenched jaw. Danny fell over backward, taking two tables and eight chairs with him.

A blonde in one of the booths began to scream.

The second big man, Ernie, swore loudly and headed for Spain, his right cocked. A toppled chair hemmed Spain in on one side, the bar was rigid at his back. He didn't like that, he liked elbow room when he brawled.

Spain put a hand on the bar, flexed his knees and went upward like a man vaulting a fence. Ernie had aimed a long right and the impetus of his rush piled him against the bar, while Spain scrambled from knees to feet atop the polished wood. Getting up, he brought his beer bottle with him.

Ernie bounced away from the bar and then came surging in again with his hands hooked to grab Spain's ankles. Spain tapped the guy expertly on the skull with the beer bottle, watched him collapse joint by joint and end up knocking down one more table.

Spain hopped off the bar. Danny was trying to get up. Spain banged his beer bottle on Danny's chin. Danny lay down again.

After that Spain looked around for the copper-haired girl. She was just where she had been before; she hadn't moved, hadn't spoken, hadn't screamed. On her face there was a look of frustrated fury. Spain crossed to her and took her arm under the expensive platinum fox.

He grinned at her and said: "Let's find a nice, quiet place where we can talk and have some beer. Mine got spilled."

The girl wrenched her arm free. She sputtered: "You heel, if they can't do it, I can."

She looped a right fist that smacked Spain on the ear and knocked his hat off. He stooped, retrieved the hat and stood up again to see that her eyes were fixed on a jagged white scar that zig-zagged across one temple and into the wiriness of his hair. Her fury was swiftly

changing to something else, puzzlement perhaps.

Spain thought in that moment that he could talk to her now and get answers, instead of uppercuts. But he knew, too, that he wasn't going to have a chance here for the kind of talk he wanted. Danny was getting up again with ferocious sounds. The scuffling of hurried feet sounded on a staircase somewhere. Spain stepped past the girl and went on into the foyer.

He had his hand on the knob of the outer door when a man, tall, wiry, silver-haired, popped into sight at the turn of a stairway that led down into the foyer. The man had a long, handsome face and lidless-looking dark eyes and thin, pale lips. The dark eyes bent down at Spain and the man froze. The pale lips parted a little and then the man shook his head as though he were trying to rid himself of blurred vision or merely denying to himself that Spain was there.

Spain put that performance down in his mental notebook, too, and opened the door and went out.

Half a block to the south the main drag of Pittston—Pitt Avenue—hummed with the traffic of home-going crowds spilling from office buildings and stores. Neon signs cut patterns of vari-colored light into the crisp fall dusk, automobiles moved in noisy fits and starts. At the corner newsboys yelled headlines that had something to do with someone having been murdered. Pittston was any vigorous American city at the close of the business day.

Spain jaywalked across the side street, stood in the darkened doorway of a shoe-store across from the Brickbat Club. He still wanted to talk to the copper-haired girl; find out why she classed Al Mason as a heel and wanted him slapped around.

No more than two minutes later the girl and Danny and Ernie came out of the Brickbat Club. In the glow of the neons above the door the girl could be seen speaking crisply to the two big men. Danny and Ernie hung their heads sheepishly. Spain grinned a little. Either of the men could probably have whipped him in the ring. But he hadn't learned his fighting in a ring.

Danny and Ernie walked north along

the sidestreet. The girl turned toward the main drag. Spain kept pace with her along the opposite side of the street. He saw her buy a paper and scan the headlines for a minute.

Then she crossed the intersection toward Spain, and Spain could tell by the way she angled toward the sidewalk that she meant to head back along the sidestreet. He went on ahead of her quickly, glancing back now and then over his shoulder. He saw her stop beside a long, shiny convertible parked in the middle of the block, saw her get in.

AFTER that he made fast time to the corner of the next street where his own coupe was parked. It was a street that was quiet now; a street lined with warehouses, wholesale establishments, parking lots. He hurried, anxious to get under way and catch the convertible before it vanished, and he paid no attention to a man who lounged against the base of an arc lamp. He passed the guy, didn't notice him stiffen.

The man let him get three steps along and then barked: "Hold it!" He came away from the lamp post so fast that he had to skid to a stop just behind Spain. Something hard and round jabbed Spain's back.

The man cursed him luridly, said: "Make a move, you lousy, stinkin' punk, and I'll blow your guts out. By dam', Mason, I got a mind to do it anyway."

Spain said mildly: "Wrong number, pal. My name isn't Mason."

"You think I don't know you, Mason?"

"Take a good look at my face," Spain said.

He turned his head to the left, centering the man's attention on that movement. He pivoted his body, too, but more slowly so that it wasn't obvious. When he felt his elbow contacting the man's gun, he spun the rest of the way, knocking the gun down and aside. His right hand, palm and fingers rigid, chopped at the base of the man's neck.

The man grunted chokingly and fell forward against Spain, slid off Spain's chest sidewise and flopped to the sidewalk on his back. The gun made a sharp metallic noise on the cement and bounced out of sight into the gutter.

Spain leaned over the man. He was a burly man, partly bald, who wore shiny blue serge and large, comfortable shoes. His coat had flipped back from his chest, showing a badge pinned inside the lapel. Leaning over, Spain could make out: "Detective Sergeant, Pittston Police."

Straightening, Spain swore. Nobody, including the cops, seemed to be on Al Mason's side. Spain didn't linger.

He was unlocking the door of his coupe when he saw another man, another burly and large-footed man, appear at the corner. He saw the man stop, peer toward the prone figure of the detective sergeant under the street light. The man suddenly sliced a hand toward his armpit and Spain knew there wouldn't be time for him to get the car started and get out of there on wheels before the show opened. He was right.

The man at the corner brought his hand out from under his coat and began waking echoes in the quiet street with the blast of gunfire. He didn't fire warning shots over anyone's head first, either; slug number one did a billiard off a fender of Spain's coupe and whined nastily off into the night. A second slug missed Spain only because he was already moving, cutting between cars to the street.

He angled across toward a half-emptied parking lot. Another shot banged out behind him. There was some yelling. A parking lot attendant got out of his way in a hurry.

The lot extended through to the next street; this one also lined with darkened warehouses and loft buildings. Spain swerved out onto the sidewalk, headed for an intersection a hundred yards away. He was beginning to be pretty sore at this town of Pittston.

Behind him a car swung into the street and bore down at him, slowing as it came closer. It cut over to the wrong side and its lights centered on Spain. He swore somewhat bitterly and halted, pivoting to face the new menace. The car stopped abruptly just abreast of him but he was still too dazzled by its lights to make out who or how many were in it.

His ears were still good, though. He heard a voice he identified instantly as that of the copper-haired girl. It said, not loudly but sharply: "Climb in!"

CHAPTER TWO

Redheaded Rescue

THE HURRIED beat of big shoes sounded from the parking lot, and Spain went around the car fast to the right-hand door. The headlamps flicked off as he did so. He didn't know what new kind of a jam this promised to be but he was certain it couldn't be any worse than sticking around to absorb police lead.

The door was open for him and Spain slid inside and was thumped back against the seat as the car took off in a hard-gunned second. A shot sounded behind them and whanged off some metal part of the convertible.

The girl skidded into a turn at the first corner, straightened out for a block. She made another turn and, snapping the lights on again, dropped to an easier pace.

Spain said: "Thanks." He shoved his hat back and patted sweat from his forehead. He looked at the girl in the faint, greenish light of the instrument panel. Even by green light, she looked good. He said: "But I don't quite get it, Miss—"

The girl said in her husky voice: "The name is Mary Quinlan." She glanced at Spain as though she expected the name to mean something to him.

It didn't. He said: "I don't get it, Miss Quinlan. Fifteen minutes ago you were trying to have me slugged. Now you risk a slug through the noggin to jerk me out of range of a lead-throwing cop. At least, I figure he was a cop. What's the answer?"

"Curiosity," the girl said. "The fact that someone who is almost a double for a man named Al Mason—minus that scar on your temple and ten pounds, you'd be his image—should show up in Pittston right now couldn't be just a coincidence. When I got over my surprise at the Brickbat, I decided I had to learn what it meant. I was trying to think of a way to find you or find out about you when I drove past that intersection and saw someone begin shooting at you. I watched you cut through that parking lot so I just drove on around the block and picked you up. Now it's my turn to ask questions."

Spain grinned. He was beginning to like this girl, not merely because she was extremely easy on the eyes; she had a cocki-

ness, a hard sparkle that appealed to him. He said: "It'd be nice if you cleared up a few minor points first. What have you got against this guy, Al Mason?"

The girl laughed derisively. "It's a nice act, Mister—"

"Spain is the name. Mack Spain."

"I'd have said you were Al Mason's twin and, being that, you'd know his business and why I hate him."

Spain said patiently: "Look, angel, this double talk has to end sometime. I'll tell you about Al and me and then we can start making sounds that are coherent. Al and I are first cousins. We're both private dicks and that, in my opinion, is more of a coincidence than our looking alike. Al's been working out of Cleveland, I've been operating in Chicago. Once in a while we handle a job together but I hadn't heard from him in six months until yesterday when I got a wire that he needed help here. It didn't say what he was working on. I haven't located him yet and all I've found out is that he's in trouble up to his eyebrows. What's your beef with him?"

"He's a rat, that's what. My father, Tim Quinlan, hired Mason to do a job and he sold out on us to the other side. Even that I could stand. But last night he had Dad beaten up and almost killed. Dad will be in the hospital for weeks."

"And what was this job?"

"Cleaning up Pittston. For the last eight years the town has smelled to high heaven. Name any vice or racket you can think of and you'll find it running wide open here. Every crook in the country runs for here to cool off. Dad and a lot of other businessmen got tired of it and formed a Citizens' Committee. It was no use expecting cooperation from the police or the district attorney. John Brick has the key men on his payroll and—"

"This guy Brick," said Spain. "Would he have any connection with the Brickbat Club?"

"He owns it. And he's a slimy, white-haired snake. You know it the minute you see him."

"I think I've seen him," Spain said. "Go on about Al Mason."

"Well, Dad brought him here to dig up the kind of evidence against Brick that could be taken to the State attorney-general so he could move in and force ac-

tion. For a while he came to the house a couple of nights a week to report. He said he didn't have anything yet but he was working into Brick's organization. Then we didn't see him for a few weeks and after that word got to us that Brick had a new man—Al Mason—running the bookie syndicate for him.

"We still thought he was working from the inside. But then we found out he'd introduced something new in the bookie racket, lining up ice-wagon and bakery and grocery drivers to take bets from housewives along their routes. Yesterday Dad learned three of our drivers—the Quinlan Ice Company—were working it. Dad fired them on the spot. And last night Mason and three hoodlums waylaid Dad near the house and beat him almost to death. I knew it wasn't any use going to the police, so this afternoon I got two of our drivers and went looking for Al Mason. And I still hope I can get him before the cops do." She scowled at Spain fiercely.

SPAIN said: "I gathered the cops don't like him, too. What's that angle?"

She brought a folded newspaper up from the seat between them. "I only found out about it a few minutes ago."

Spain unfolded the paper and saw that it was the Pittston *Courier* and that its banner, in red type, said: *Racketeer Accused In Cop Killing*. He said: "Can you drop anchor near a street light?"

Mary Quinlan stopped just beyond a lamp standard. Spain read the story under the banner. In blunt, dramatic phrases it said that Police Captain Mose Brackett, vice squad head, had been shot and killed in the garage of his home at three that afternoon. A gas company meter reader and two home-going schoolgirls had heard the shots and had seen a man run from the garage to a parked car and drive off. The meter reader had been a smart lad; he'd noted the license of the car and given the information to police three minutes later over a drugstore phone.

The license number, the story said, was registered to the car of one Al Mason, a character who had arrived in Pittston a few months before and was known to be associated with the local underworld. Shown a picture of Mason that had been

snapped at a local nightspot not long before, the meter reader and the two schoolgirls had identified it as the likeness of the man they had seen fleeing from the garage.

The hunt was on for Al Mason, with every cop in the city itching to shoot.

Mary Quinlan had watched Spain as he read. When he folded the paper, she said: "Now what do you think of Al Mason?"

"The same as before," said Spain. "When a guy is related to you he has to be twice as regular as a stranger before you can like him. Al is that regular. For my money, if he blasted the cop, it was forced on him. And maybe your old man needed a beating."

"Why, you—you—" The girl tried to twist around at the wheel and bang him on the chin.

Spain grinned and caught her fist in his hand. "Easy now. I only said 'maybe'. As a matter of fact, the whole thing smells to me like a frame, knowing Al the way I do."

"How could anyone frame a man into beating and killing people?"

"I don't know yet but I'm going to find out."

"How?"

"I haven't any idea—yet." Spain thought he did have an idea, a pretty good idea. But he wondered if he hadn't already talked too much. He opened the door, put a leg out and then paused. "In case I find myself brawling on your side, Miss Quinlan, where can I reach you?"

The girl gave him a phone number, a street address, and Spain noted them down mentally.

Then she said: "Mr. Spain—"

"Yeah?"

"I—hope you're right about Al Mason. I liked him at first. I thought he was really sort of a wonderful guy."

"That's still a good notion, angel."

AT TWENTY minutes of ten the barman stepped out of a passageway at the side of the Brickbat Club. Spain, standing in a darkened doorway across the street, watched him dig the stub of a cigar out of a pocket and pause to light it. Bereft of his neat white jacket, the barman was just a fat, elderly man in a

shabby topcoat who plodded off down the sidewalk on flat-arched feet. He didn't look like the type who'd have gang secrets on his conscience.

But, Spain remembered, he was a man who had almost fainted when he thought he was looking at Al Mason, a man who had something very much on his mind about Al Mason.

The barman went toward Pitt Avenue and turned west on that brightly-lighted thoroughfare. When Spain reached the corner, his man was halfway along the block, ambling steadily down the sidewalk through the thin foot-traffic of late evening. Spain had hoped that his quarry would turn toward the gloomy and less populous section north of the main drag.

Spain slanted his hatbrim well down and drifted along in the barman's wake. None of the passing pedestrians gave him a glance. The barman went three blocks west on Pitt, crossed and vanished in a side street. Spain quickened his pace. When he reached the intersection, the barman was only a hundred feet beyond the corner. Spain crossed Pitt Avenue, lengthened his stride. He and the barman were the only pedestrians in the block.

When he was three steps behind his man, Spain said: "Wait a minute, doc." He didn't think he'd be going wrong on that; Al Mason called everyone 'doc' from newsboys up to bank presidents and police commissioners. And the timbre of his voice wasn't too far off from Mason's.

The barman whipped a startled glance over his shoulder and instantly broke into a stumbling run. He went a few strides and tripped over his own feet, went down to hands and knees. He groveled there, making no attempt to get up, so Spain put a hand under his arm, lifted.

The barman's face was terrified. He put his left hand to his heart, held his right to fend off an expected blow. He backed against the wall of a building and made gasping sounds through his big nose.

Spain said mildly: "Worried about something, doc?"

The barman found his voice but it was hardly more than a babble. "L-look, Mister Mason, I been your friend. . . . You know old Gus always liked you. . . . What could a little guy like me— Hell, Mister Mason, I couldn't do nothin' about

it when Morton and Bum walked you outa the Club yesterday. I figured if I hadda even cracked wise, Mister Brick woulda had me cooled off, too. Please, Mister Mason, don't take it out on me!"

Spain chuckled. "You didn't expect to see me walk in there this evening, did you?"

"For a minute I think I am lookin' at a ghost. That Bum and that Morton are tough cookies and cold blooded like snakes. After Bum cracks how they are going to let the Quinlans cool you off for them, I never expect to see you walkin' no place again. I don't know how you done it."

Spain's brows bent but he kept his voice casual. "Knowing their set-up with the Quinlans and where they were taking me, you can figure out how I did it, can't you?"

"I don't know nothin' about those things, Mister Mason."

Spain cursed silently, savagely. He had something. He had it that Al Mason had been walked out of the Brickbat Club the day before by a couple of characters named Bum and Morton. He had the interesting but cryptic information that the Quinlans were to be allowed to cool Al Mason off. But he didn't have the important things—where the gunsels named Bum and Morton had taken Al Mason and how the Quinlans were involved.

He kept the frustration out of his voice. "You knew that cop's number was up—and the setup on the shooting today, didn't you?"

The barman was less frightened now. He said: "Not me, Mister Mason. Nobody ever tells me nothin'. I know Brackett is a louse—once he shook me down for ten bucks and I catch hell from the old lady on account of my envelope is short. There is probably lotsa guys would like to slough him if he wasn't Mister Brick's man." He paused and squinted up at Spain. "I am wonderin' why you bother to look me up when you know I wouldn't know nothin'."

Spain said: "Sometimes little guys like you, Gus, know a lot more than people think. But the reason I tailed you was that I'm too hot to contact Brick and I wanted to know what cooks between Brick and the cops on the shooting."

"Well, Inspector Stark and a couple

homicide dicks talk to Mister Brick and Bum and Morton at the Club for a while. But even a tough, honest cop like Stark don't push Mister Brick around. Afterward Mister Brick goes out to the River Farmhouse like always." The barman was getting fidgety. He said: "Look, Mister Mason, I gotta be goin'. If I am fifteen minutes late, the old lady right away suspects I am playin' around with some blonde at the club."

"Scoot along," Spain said. "Just keep your trap shut about seeing me."

"Sure, Mister Mason. Sure."

Presently Spain was scouting the block where his coupe had been parked. The car was still there. He could detect no sign of a police stake-out; apparently the cops hadn't connected a travel-stained, out-of-state automobile with the affair of Al Mason. He slid behind the wheel, dragging thoughtfully at a cigarette as he started the car.

CHAPTER THREE

Pistol-Hackin' Mama

THE NUMBER Mary Quinlan had given Spain was on Devon Road and Devon Road turned out to be a broad, dignified street that ran along the heights above Pittston. Stately elms arched over the street, filtering the gleam of widely-spaced street lights. Large and comfortable homes set in spacious lawns flanked the street.

Spain located the right block but house numbers were not visible. He parked his car, decided that a white-pillared colonial ought to correspond to the number he had and made for it on soft turf beside a gravelled driveway. The lower floor of the house was darkened, light gleamed at a single, curtained window above.

As he walked, Spain freed the gun in his shoulder rig just as insurance. Nearing the house, he could see two cars in the drive near a side entrance and there was enough light from the street so that he could tell that the leading car was the shiny convertible Mary Quinlan had been driving that evening.

At least, she hadn't given him a bum address. And the presence of the car promised that she was at home.

Spain halted twenty feet away from the cars and chewed over the next move. He was still trying to figure out ways and means when lights sprang on behind the door at the side entrance.

The door came open at the same instant and Spain saw a young man, smooth-faced and bare-headed, step into sight. He saw the man turn a look over his shoulder, heard him say:

"Step on it, honey. We don't want to keep Mister Brick waiting, do we? . . . And you, Bum—quit stuffing your gut and come on."

Mary Quinlan, her hair bright as a new penny and her figure trim in a belted camels hair coat, came out on the heels of the smooth-faced man. They stood together on the steps for a moment.

Spain slid the gun out of his shoulder holster and advanced in the darkness until he was crouching by a bunched shrub near the convertible.

The door opened wider and a short, bulky man appeared. He wore a brown turtle-neck sweater and baggy pants and no hat. His close-cropped bullet head thrust out of the folds of the sweater neck exactly like that of a turtle. He was stuffing the last of a banana between thick lips and he tossed the peel away with one hand, closed the door behind him with the other.

Mary Quinlan said: "How about taking my car?"

"We take our car," said the youngish man. "Everybody in town knows that chariot of yours."

Spain watched the three come down the steps. He let them get three steps past his shrub and then he straightened, moved fast and jammed his gun against the youngish-man's spine.

He snapped: "Everybody freeze!"

The three halted as though they were all on a single leash. The youngish man after a moment swiveled his head enough for a look at Spain. Spain could feel through his gun the startled tremor that ran through the man.

The youngish man swore, muttered: "The guy himself!"

Bum spoke in a slow hoarse voice. "Huh, Morton, huh?"

"The mystery guy!"

Bum apparently had an uncomplicated and one-track mind. He rumbled excited-

ly: "The guy we're lookin' for, huh? Right in our hands, huh? Jeeze, Morton, leave us take him!" Bum started to turn and Spain ramed his gun harder against Morton's spine.

Morton said hurriedly: "Cut it, Bum! You dummy, he's got a rod in my back!"

"Oh," said Bum. He stopped halfway in his pivot and let the idea sink in. "A rod, huh? Whatta we do now, Morton?"

Spain said: "Just keep quiet, Bum."

His left hand slid up under Morton's snugly-tailored jacket and found a flat automatic under Morton's armpit. Spain took it out, tossed it away into the darkness. He patted Morton's belt line, his pockets, his sleeves and found no other gun. He said into Morton's ear: "Tell your bright little pal to shed his hardware."

"Bum," said Morton, "get your gun out—slow and careful—and drop it on the ground."

Bum made a protesting noise. "Mister Brick ain't gonna like us bein' taken this way."

"Mister Brick hasn't got a rod in his backbone. Drop your gun just like I say."

Spain saw Bum get a big gun out of a shoulder rig. It dropped to the lawn. Then Bum's hands went in front of him again and, after a moment, a second gun, brightly-nickeled and with the barrel sawed to a stub, fell to the ground beside the first one.

Morton cursed. He said furiously: "You dope, I said your gun—one gun! The guy wouldn't have known you had a hold-out."

"But, Morton, he said my hardware, didn't he?"

"Shut up, you brainless wonder!"

DURING all this the copper-haired girl had stood motionless, silent, hadn't even turned her head. Now she said suddenly:

"Thanks, Spain," and, whirling half-way around, brought her right fist up and in the general direction of Bum's face. It went low and smacked Bum on the Adam's apple. He whooshed and gagged indignantly and, probably purely by reflex action, brought a big, open hand against the girl's face. It sent her staggering back-

ward three steps and at the third step she slammed into Morton, careening him against Spain.

Morton wasn't stupid, or yellow. Like lightning, he slid downward and away from Spain's gun and tried bringing an elbow up and backward into Spain's stomach.

Spain grunted and brought the barrel of his gun down at Morton's ducking skull. The gun raked Morton above one ear, slid off his head and down against the angle of his neck and shoulder. He fell away from Spain, rolling into the darkness of the shrubbery, groaning loudly.

The next moment Spain was busy with Bum. He had a fleeting impression of thick, snarling lips, a dark and animal-like face, shoulders as wide as truck fenders; and then Bum was all over him. Bum's brain may have been slow but his body was as quick and sure and hard as an automatic machine. He drove Spain a yard backward with a jab that Spain shed off his shoulder. The shoulder went numb and Spain's fingers went numb, too, and his gun dropped, disappeared in the darkness.

Spain decided fast that he didn't want to stand and slug it out with this guy. He fell away from a long lightning-like left, went to his knees and then dived forward very low as Bum danced near him. He hit the guy's knees with the bad shoulder, jerked at an ankle. Bum went down but he rolled over fast, grappled Spain so that they were locked chest to chest.

That was fine with Spain. He could never have outboxed Bum but no-holds-barred was right up his alley. He got a forearm across Bum's throat and the spread fingers of his other hand jabbed for Bum's eyes. Bum began working a knee at Spain's stomach. Spain turned a thigh against that and kept on jabbing. He connected and Bum moaned, butted his head against Spain's nose. Spain forced Bum's head up again, jabbed some more, connected again.

They rolled over and over. Bum was beginning to whimper. Another thirty seconds without interference from Morton or the girl, Spain figured, and he'd have Bum just where he wanted him.

Just then something heavy and solid smacked him on the back of the head.

He fell away from Bum and lay helpless on his back, watching the stars jump around the sky and waiting for Bum to swarm all over him.

Bum didn't. Spain was conscious of a whirl of movement near him, a thudding sound, a curse in Bum's hoarse voice and then the diminishing beat of feet on the gravel of the driveway.

The stars began to dance to a slower rhythm and then stayed put. Spain sat up. There was a blur of movement in the shrubbery and then the movement materialized into Mary Quinlan. She came toward him, passing through a bar of light from the side door, and stopped beside him. He could see his gun swinging from one small hand.

She said: "Spain, are you all right?" "Lots of times," Spain muttered, "I've felt better."

"I'm sorry. I was trying to hit that thug with the gun and you rolled over just then and I connected with you. But I got him on the next try."

Spain got to his feet unsteadily. "Swell," he said. "For a dame, I guess, fifty percent accuracy is swell. Where are the guys?"

"I couldn't find the one you hit, the one called Morton. I was looking for him just now. The other one must have a very hard head. I hit him twice but he got up and ran when he saw me point the gun at him. Incidentally, if I seem to have forgotten to say thanks, this is it."

"Thanks for what?" said Spain.

The girl's voice seemed a little astonished. "For what? Well, when a lady gets rescued from a couple of thugs, she's usually grateful."

"Oh," said Spain. "I get it. They were supposed to be snatching you."

Mary Quinlan was silent for a moment, staring at Spain. Then she said: "Just what did that crack mean?"

Spain let that go for the moment. "Who's in the house?"

"Nobody."

"No servants?"

"There's only Dad and myself to look after so we just have a housekeeper who goes home nights. What's that got to do with the crack you made?"

"Let's go inside and talk it over."

"That pair might come back."

"I wish Lady Luck would be that good to me," Spain said bleakly. He went to the second car, a small sedan, and was busy for a few moments unscrewing valve cores on both front tires. "If they do come back, they won't ride away."

"Or they might tip off the police where you are."

"Not those guys. They'll want to know where I fit in before they'll feel safe having the cops know." Spain lifted his gun from the girl's hand and put it back in his shoulder rig. After that he prowled around for a little, looking for the rest of the arsenal that had been dumped. When he had collected Morton's gun and Bum's pair, he scooped a hole in the earth under a shrub and buried them. "Could be a ballistics guy'll be interested in them later," he said. "Let's go."

They wound up in a big, well-furnished living room. There Mary Quinlan thrust her hands into the pockets of her belted coat and scowled at Spain. "Now will you explain that crack?"

"You won't like it," Spain said. "Those two hoods you came waltzing out with—"

The girl interrupted angrily: "You think I was going with them willingly?"

"You weren't putting up much opposition. I heard one guy call you 'honey' and I heard you suggest they use your car. Also I recall that you clunked me on the noggin when I was winning the final round and that you let Bum get away when you had a gun in your hand."

"What could I do against two armed thugs? And I couldn't help it if a hoodlum called me 'honey'. I suggested using my car because it's conspicuous and would have been a lead if anything had happened to me. I told you I hit you by accident. And as far as shooting that hoodlum to keep him from getting away, I couldn't. I couldn't shoot anyone, no matter who he was or what he'd done." When Spain continued to look skeptical, she cried: "If you still think I was going out because I wanted to, look at this!"

SHE unbelted the coat swiftly, whipped it open for a fleeting split-second. So fast were her movements that Spain had more of an impression rather than an actual glimpse of bra and briefs. Then she was belting the coat again.

Her face was pink but still furious. "Does a girl dress like that to go out? And look at this!" She pulled up the right sleeve of the coat. Between wrist and elbow her arm showed angry bruises.

"I was undressing when they walked into my bedroom. The dumb one grabbed my arm and they began asking questions about the man who looked like Mason. One of Brick's men had seen you get away in my car when the shooting began—"

Spain interrupted: "How did they know I was a double for Mason, not Mason?"

"They didn't say anything that would give me a clue to that. Anyway, I wouldn't tell them anything, so they threw a coat at me and said I'd better come along and talk to Brick. Well, are you convinced now that I was practically being kidnapped?"

Spain grinned a little. "You showed some wonderful evidence."

The girl blushed. "You don't have to be a heel about it."

Spain's voice was edged with impatience: "There's more to it, angel. Yesterday afternoon those two same guys—Morton and Bum—put the walkaway on Al Mason. And when they did it, they cracked that they were going to let the Quinlans cool him off."

"They said—*what?*?" Mary Quinlan's mouth jarred open, stayed like that for about three seconds. Then it snapped tight again. "Who told you a thing like that?"

"Never mind, angel," said Spain. "But I know the guy was leveling. So whip up a good answer for that one."

The girl frowned. She wasn't angry any longer but, by all outward indications, she was intensely puzzled. She repeated in a low, thoughtful voice: "Let the Quinlans cool him off?" She said it again. Presently she shook her head. "I don't get it, Spain. What's it supposed to mean?"

"If you don't know, how would I?"

"Well, I don't know. All I can do is give you my word that if anything has happened to Al Mason, the Quinlans had nothing to do with it." Presently she added: "I still don't see why what took place yesterday afternoon would have anything

to do with something happening to him. He was alive at three this afternoon."

"I've thought of that, too. But I figured if you knew what that crack about the Quinlans cooling him off meant, it'd be a clue to the whole business." The look he bent down at her was hard. "And to the whereabouts of Al Mason which, as far as I'm concerned, is right now the most important thing."

The girl said: "Spain, I wish I could help you find him." She sounded as though she meant it.

Spain stared down at her for a moment. Then he tramped up and down the softness of the rug a couple of times, his eyes bright with thought and the fingers of one hand worrying his blunt chin. He swung suddenly and came back to Mary Quinlan.

"Maybe you have helped me," he said. "And maybe you can help me more."

"How?"

"I'll draw you a blueprint later. Right now let's get into action. Is there any Pittston paper that's battling Brick?"

She nodded. "The *Morning Globe*."

"Know anyone on the staff?"

"I've met a reporter named Kenny. He interviewed Dad when the Citizens' Committee was formed."

"Fine. Phone Kenny. Tell him you've got an important statement from your father that you want to give him and insist that he come out here for it." Spain jerked his thumb at a phone that sat in a niche down the room. "And we'd better snap into it before the *Globe* runs out of deadlines."

Mary Quinlan didn't move. "First, I'd like to know just what you plan."

Spain hit his thigh impatiently with one big hand. "When I was leaving the Brickbat Club this afternoon, Brick got one quick glimpse of me and, the way he acted, I know he mistook me for Al Mason. But tonight he sends a couple of hoods out to look for a mystery guy who resembles Mason. He couldn't know there was a double for Mason in Pittston unless he was able to make a fast check on Mason's whereabouts at five-thirty—and knows where he is now. Which, for my money, means he's holding Al somewhere. So I'm going to build a fire under Mister Brick."

"I still don't understand."

"You get that newshawk out here and I'll confess—as Al Mason—that I killed the cop and that I was paid to do it by John Brick. When the public reads my confession, Brick is going to have to make some sort of a move—particularly if this cop on the case, Inspector Stark, is as tough and honest as I hear."

"What do you think Brick will do?"

"If he has Al tucked away, he'll have to produce him to prove the confession's a fake."

"You mean throw Al to the police?"

"I'd rather have Al in a cell with a good lawyer than in Brick's hands."

Mary Quinlan said: "The way the police feel, they might shoot first."

"Once this confession gets to the public, the cops won't dare blast him. It'd smell like they were covering Brick."

Mary Quinlan frowned thoughtfully. "There's one thing I can't figure out. Why would Brick be holding Al Mason?"

Spain shrugged. "I'll be honest. I haven't got that doped out, myself."

"I can understand why he might hide Mason—if Mason really did kill the policeman for him. In that case, won't your fake confession kick back? Won't Brick be apt to have him killed to keep him from making a real confession?"

"You think of the damndest things, angel. I know Al Mason. If he killed that cop, he didn't do it for some jerk of a small-town racket boss. So make that call and then get dressed. We'll wait for the reporter outside where I'll have elbow room."

CHAPTER FOUR

Slaughter Scoop

FROM Spain's coupe, he and Mary Quinlan watched a shiny little sedan park just ahead of them. A small, round man bounced out and headed for the Quinlan house.

"The reporter," said the girl. She called: "Mr. Kenny."

The small man pivoted. "That you, Miss Quinlan?"

Kenny came back to the coupe, when the girl said, "Yes." He peered at her.

"What's the idea of waiting out here, Miss Quinlan? Anything wrong in the house?"

From beside the girl, Spain said dryly: "This was my idea, doc. When a guy is as hot as I am, he doesn't like to be fenced in."

"Hot?" said the reporter. He peered and his voice upped a little as he repeated: "Hot? Listen, you're—"

"Al Mason," said Spain. He flicked on the dome light very briefly and saw that the reporter had a blank pink moon of a face, on which recognition succeeded surprise. The light went off and Spain said: "How'd you like an exclusive yarn from me?"

"Ha!" said the small man. "If you think I wouldn't like it, you're crazy. In fact, I'd say you were a little crazy, hanging around a burg where every copper is set to blow holes through you."

"I haven't found an exit yet that wasn't covered," said Spain. "Maybe I'll make it tonight, maybe I won't. The reason I forced Miss Quinlan to phone you and get you here is in case I don't make it. You need a light to make notes?"

"A good reporter doesn't have to make notes. I'm a good reporter. Shoot."

"We'll start back a ways," Spain said. "Several months ago Tim Quinlan hired me to come to Pittston and get enough evidence against John Brick to oust the organization and clean up the town."

The reporter chuckled.

"Something comic?" said Spain.

"I didn't mean to interrupt. Go ahead."

Spain said: "I like to work from the inside. I angled my way into Brick's setup, came through with a couple of smart ideas for him, was sitting pretty. I was sitting so pretty, doc, that I came up with what I thought was a good idea for myself. Why should I sweat it out for Quinlan and his reform group for a lousy twenty-five bucks a day when I could cut in for real dough with Brick?"

"So you sold out on Quinlan?"

"My version," said Spain, "is I just quit working for him. But it didn't pan out. Somehow Brick learned I'd been brought to town by Quinlan. That let me out with the organization. I was already out with Quinlan. And I was flat broke. So, when Brick offered me five grand for one little job before I blew, I said yes."

The reporter breathed sharply: "Are you trying to say that Brick hired you to kill Captain Mose Brackett?"

"I'm not trying, I'm saying. I got two grand in advance and the promise of three grand and a greased getaway after the job. So I take care of my end and then run into a beautiful double-cross. The getaway is not set. There's no three grand waiting for me. I can't get in touch with Brick. The cops have somehow been wised and they're planted as thick as grass seed around the Brickbat when I show there."

"Wow!" said Kenny. "If this is just a reporter's dream, don't wake me up. I suppose, Mason, that you have proof Brick hired you for the murder?"

"Sure. I'm a guy that's had experience, doc. What the proof is and where I've got it, I'm not saying now."

"Naturally. This is wonderful, Mason. Let's go where we can get it down in writing and you can sign it."

"Don't be a hog. If my story and Miss Quinlan as a witness to it isn't good enough, to hell with you."

"Oh, sure. Sure. Now some of the details, Mason. Why did Brick want Cap Brackett of the vice squad dead? Brackett was the organization's key man in the department. And just what happened in Brackett's garage? Were you waiting there for him? What'd he say? Did he suspect his number was up?"

Spain hesitated. He could dream up answers to the reporter's questions. But they might be the wrong answers. He made his voice rough. "Don't try to suck me dry. You got enough. On your way."

Kenny didn't move. He said: "Why were you dope enough to use your own car on the killing, Mason? That angle's been bothering me."

Spain knew that one had to be answered. This newshawk, Kenny, was nobody's dummy. Spain said: "That was part of the double-cross. They slipped my license plates on the car they gave me to use."

"What do you think was Brick's idea in giving you the double-cross?"

"I figure he had the cops set to mow me down. But his plan slipped."

"Just a couple more now," the reporter said it soothingly like a dentist saying he'd only be a moment longer with the

drill. "What's your reason for confessing this killing to me?"

THAT one, Spain had been expecting. He said grimly: "Insurance. If the cops had grabbed me before I could tell my story, how much chance do you think I'd have had of telling it where it could do me any good? Brick would have had it fixed so I couldn't talk. I'd have been shot trying to escape or died of a skull fracture I got falling out of the bunk in my cell. Damn it to hell—Brick isn't going to get away with this double-cross. If they get me—he goes down with me."

"Pretty smart, Mason, pretty smart. Now where does Miss Quinlan fit into this?"

"Nowhere," Spain said. "I had to find out what newshawk it'd be best to talk to, so I walked into her place and asked her and then made her phone you."

"Well," said Kenny, "I just wondered. You see, what I got a laugh out of a while ago was the idea of Tim Quinlan hiring somebody to come in and clean up the town. Tim Quinlan was this town's boss until eight years ago when Brick moved in and got his men elected and took over. Ever since this Citizens' Committee was formed, I've been wondering whether reform was reform or just Tim Quinlan's way of coming back."

Mary Quinlan said hotly: "My dad was in politics—he wasn't a racketeer like Brick!"

"You could be right, Miss Quinlan," Kenny said politely. "I wasn't around eight years ago." He held his wrist up, looked at the glow of his watch. "Good-by, folks. I am now about to phone in a yarn that'll rock this burg."

Spain said: "You're not taking this to the cops first?"

"Hell, no. Too many chances of a leak to the opposition."

"When will it hit the street?"

"The twelve-thirty edition. But it'll hit the air on the *Globe* newscast at midnight. Well, thanks for the break, Mason."

"It's okay, doc."

"I hope you don't mind my adding," said Kenny, "that I think you're a dirty louse, Mason."

"To hell with what you think."

The reporter went down to his car.

Mary Quinlan said: "He ate it up, Spain."

"I hope so," said Spain, "But he's a smart little fat boy. I'm going to tail him and see if he hits a phone like he said."

"And after that?"

"A stake on Mister Brick."

"Us? Or just you?"

"Us, angel. Even after the crack the newshawk made about your Pop, I'm going to trust you." He didn't add that, under the circumstances, he had to take her along. He didn't think now that she was playing along with Brick but he couldn't take a chance that his thinking was wrong.

Her voice got mad again. "The way Kenny said that, it wasn't true. Dad was in politics—he was chairman of the City Central Committee—but he wasn't a crook or a grafter."

"Quit worrying about it."

The reporter's shiny sedan spurted away from the curb. Spain got his motor turning over. At a distance and with his lights off, he followed the sedan through a couple of right turns and then to a well-lighted and well-traveled boulevard where the reporter turned toward downtown. Spain switched on his lights and eased into traffic.

The sedan passed up a couple of lighted drug stores, an open filling station, another drug store.

Spain didn't like that. He muttered: "If he's hot to make an edition, why didn't he pick that first drug store?"

The sedan finally slowed and angled to the curb abreast of a cigar-store Indian who wore a neon warbonnet and brandished a neon tomahawk. When Spain drove past the cigar store, he could see the reporter propped in a glass-fronted phone booth inside.

"That's better," he said. He looked down at Mary Quinlan. "You know anything about a place called River Farmhouse?"

"That's where Brick lives. The place was built as a country home years ago by Pittston's first millionaire."

"Is it run as a night spot?"

"Not like the Brickbat Club, which is the clip-joint for the small fry. At River Farmhouse Brick puts on small, high-stake games for the Pittston elite. Is that where we're going?"

"Yep."

"Do you think Brick would have Al Mason there?"

"That would be too close to him. Ever been inside the place?"

"Never. Are you going to try to crash it?"

"In a very inconspicuous fashion," said Spain. "My information is that Brick is there now. I'd like to be behind a door or under a rug close by when—and if—he listens to the *Globe's* midnight newscast. He'll react. He'll phone somebody. Or he'll start places. Or maybe our pals, Bum and Morton, will be with him and he'll tell them what to do. And, out of it all, maybe I'll get something that'll lead us to Al Mason first. Does that make sense?"

"It sounds all right," Mary Quinlan agreed. After a moment she said: "But one thing still bothers me. I keep thinking that if Al Mason isn't everything you think and if he did that job for Brick, your confession stunt will put him on a bad spot."

"Quit worrying. How do we get there and how far is it?"

"River Drive cuts off from this boulevard. I'll show you where. It's about five miles out there."

Spain looked at his watch. It was twenty-five minutes to twelve. He tramped harder on the gas.

Presently the girl said: "Take the next left."

River Drive was a clutter of sandwich stands, motels, used-car lots, scrubby little stores. All that fell behind and they were in the country. A new-risen moon showed a checkerboard of plowed fields to either side. From a rise now and then they could see a curving line of silver that was the river. The road curved toward the river and began to climb.

"We're close," said the girl. "The place is on a bluff above the river."

In another minute the headlamps picked up a high wall of heavy white stone to the right of the road. The wall continued a hundred yards, was broken by an arched gateway, and then extended another hundred yards. The open gateway gave them a glimpse of a massive house of stone to match the wall. The house showed only three lighted windows at a lower corner.

Spain drove a thousand feet and parked, headlamps out, under a clump of trees. Five minutes later he was testing a section of wall in the shadow of massed evergreens. Unlike some estate walls, it was not topped with imbedded bits of grass. In another two minutes he and the girl stood beneath the evergreens inside the wall.

Spain looked at his watch. "I'll have to work fast. The newscast is on in ten minutes."

THE lawn was dappled with a clear, pale light from the moon which was now well above the horizon. They followed a circuitous route that kept them in the shadow of trees and shrubs. When they got closer to the house, they could see that the lighted windows were masked only by down-pulled shades. Once the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders moved across the yellowness of one window.

They were within fifty feet of the building when another light, that of a match, blossomed suddenly in the night. It came from inside a parked car and after a moment it moved higher, was held against the tip of a cigarette. The face back of the cigarette was that of Bum, thick-lipped and dark. A bandage was looped around his head, covering one eye. The match went out, leaving only the glow of the cigarette tip.

"Bum being outside," Spain muttered, "probably means that Morton is inside with Brick."

"That'll make it trickier."

"I still want to be where I can eavesdrop when that newscast comes over. You stick here and watch Bum."

He was twenty feet away from the girl when he began to wonder if it was smart to turn Mary Quinlan loose on her own. One yip from her and they'd all be on his neck. But the chance was already taken and when he reached the side of the house near the lighted windows, there hadn't been any yip.

There was one lighted window at the corner and he eased to it, brought his eyes level with the glass. A half-inch gap between window sash and shade gave him a fair look at the room beyond. It was small, furnished as an office with an elab-

orately-carved desk and leather-covered chairs and divan.

The gray-haired John Brick sat behind the desk, his bony frame wrapped in the red silk of a dressing gown and his lidless-looking dark eyes bent sourly on Morton, who perched on the edge of a chair. Morton was talking and making apologetic movements with his hands. There was a wide strip of tape on his temple and an unhappy look on his face. Spain saw John Brick speak but no sound, not even a faint rumble of words, came to Spain's ears.

Spain glanced at his watch. It showed six minutes of twelve. He swore silently. Six minutes didn't give him much time to find a safe entrance to the River Farmhouse.

He began to work his way toward the rear of the building, feeling for basement windows. He found two but both were securely bolted, and he couldn't chance the sound of breaking glass.

At the rear of the house a glassed-in porch seemed to extend the width of the building and the doors, the windows, were locked. Spain backed away and only then saw slanting cellar doors at the far corner. He went to them quickly. His watch showed exactly midnight but it was possible that there would be a minute or so of an announcement at the beginning of the newscast, that the newscaster would take a little time getting into the story, that Brick and Morton for a moment would be transfixed by the news of the confession.

But he was still working at the cheap padlock on the cellar doors when a motor sprang suddenly to angry life at the front of the house. He heard gears clash, heard the car spin wheels on gravel and then get away fast. He headed around the house, made half the distance, and halted when a dark figure stepped from the shrubbery.

Mary Quinlan whispered: "Spain?"

"Yeah. Who left in the car?"

"Bum and Morton. Brick came out with Morton and said something but all I got was that they were to hurry."

Spain had already turned her, was starting her for the front of the house. They reached the corner and Spain looked toward the road. The high wall blocked his gaze.

He said: "Which way did they turn? Toward town?"

"No. Away from town."

"Hit for the car."

They ran across the soft turf toward the gateway and spurred through the gateway to the road. Spain lengthened his stride, reached the coupe fifty feet ahead of Mary Quinlan and had the motor turning over when she slipped in beside him and relaxed, panting, against the cushions.

Ahead, the road dipped and curved through the rolling farmlands. Once, during his sprint to the car, Spain had thought he saw a red spark of taillight far ahead in the ash-blue expanse of the night. Now there was nothing.

He got the coupe rolling fast, saying: "Damn it, angel, with that start they can give us the slip a dozen ways and never lead us to Al Mason. Maybe I'd better go back and work on Brick."

"THERE'S only one road they could turn onto and that just curves back to town the long way."

"How come there's only one road?"

"Right beyond that road, River Drive begins to run between the river and what used to be the channel. Now it's a sort of a slough with little lakes here and there. About five miles from here River Drive peters out in a swamp. There're a few sideroads here and there but they only lead a few hundred feet down to the slough and we can check them as we come to them."

"Ah," said Spain, sounding pleased. The coupe leaped forward, the night air began to scream past the windows. "I'm glad I found me a gal that knows the country."

"I ought to. Dad's first ice-house is out this way. He got his start cutting ice in the winter and peddling it in town in the summer."

Spain yelled: "An ice-house! Quinlan's ice!" In his amazement, he unconsciously relaxed the pressure of his foot and the coupe dropped to sixty, to fifty. "Angel, is that place kept full of ice?"

"Yes. The company keeps it as a standby in case anything goes wrong with our ice-making plant. What of it?"

"Think hard and you'll get it."

The sedan gained speed again.

"You mean they might have Al Mason there?"

"That crack about letting the Quinlans

cool Mason off for them, the direction they headed—it couldn't add up to anything else. How far ahead is it?"

"A mile or so. I'll tell you."

Stunted roadside trees flashed past. The mouth of a dirt track came in sight and Spain slowed.

"The next one," said Mary Quinlan.

Thirty seconds later Spain saw a narrow paved road angling off to the left. Down the road there was the glint of moonlight on still water. Spain switched off his lights, bore down on his brakes and stopped the car across the mouth of the road, blocking it. He dug a flashlight from the glove compartment and climbed out.

"They've probably seen our lights so keep your head up." He got his gun free. "Or maybe you'd better wait here until I look things over."

"I'll stick with you."

They went along the narrow road, keeping their footfalls noiseless. Emerging from the stand of fall-stripped trees, they were in a clearing where the bulk of an ancient ice-house reared itself on the edge of a small lake. One side of the structure was in deep darkness. The weatherbeaten boards of the other side showed silver-gray in the moonlight. At the land end Spain could see a conveyor angling on gaunt timbers from a loading platform up to a door under the eaves.

There was stillness everywhere; no car was in sight.

Spain hefted his gun and began a circuit of the building, going down along the dark side, climbing over the stringers of another conveyor at the lake end and returning by way of the moonlit side. Mary Quinlan tagged along behind him silently.

When they got back to where they had started, Spain muttered: "This has to add up. How do you get into the place?"

"We'll have to go up that conveyor to the door."

Spain began to climb the narrow runway at the edge of the conveyor. The girl came silently on behind him. He reached the top and tried the door, which had looked small from the ground but, close up, was big and heavy. He shoved hard and got it rolling. The rollers groaned, making a loud and mournful sound in the night.

Beyond was a black void, from which chill, damp air flowed. Spain aimed the flashlight through the opening, clicked the button. The flashlight gave forth only a wan and ghostly glow that made a tiny hole in the blackness.

Spain said: "Damn it, maybe sometime I'll be smart enough to believe those ads about fresh batteries."

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Merry-Go-Round

THE glow was enough to show him a wet, dark-brown surface of sawdust three feet below the level of the floor. He let himself down to the ice and the chill of it seeped through his soles. Mary Quinlan climbed down beside him.

Looking down, Spain saw that the smooth surface of the sawdust had been disturbed across a trail of what had been footprints until someone had carefully scuffed out the impressions.

"This is no bust," he said in a low voice. He raised his voice, called: "Al! Al Mason!" There was no sound except for their breathing. A chill knifed Spain's backbone and it had nothing to do with the dank air that rose from the surface of the ice. If someone had taken the trouble to obliterate footprints, it meant that the business they'd been on at the ice-house was done.

Focussing the weak beam on the trail of scuffed sawdust, Spain followed it fifty feet across the surface of the ice-blocks. The light began to pick up something darker against the dark-brown of the sawdust. Spain took half a dozen quick strides and was looking down at a face that might have been his own except for its marble-like stillness, its closed lids. There was even torn flesh at the temple, blood-crusted, mocking the scar that Spain carried. The body nestled in a little cradle of ice it had melted for itself.

Spain pocketed his gun and knelt beside Al Mason. He got a hand on Mason's wrist. The flesh was cold, lifeless.

Spain stood up. He said: "Okay, fellow, I'll take care of it for you." His voice was bleak, toneless.

Mary Quinlan moved close to him. She was crying, almost soundlessly. She said:

"I know how you feel, Spain. Because I—feel the same way. Because I was—well, sort of crazy about Al Mason . . . at first. Now I wish I had shot that thug when I had the chance."

Spain said nothing for a little. In the pale reflected light of the flash, his face was stern, filled with a congested malignance. His eyes stared down at Al Mason.

After a little he said in a low voice: "Funny."

"Funny! You can look at him and say it's funny?"

Spain didn't answer. He knelt again and worked his hand carefully between the ice and Mason's body. He got up again after a moment and grunted enigmatically.

A faint sound, the muted creaking of a board somewhere, turned him toward the doorway. A body suddenly was silhouetted there. The cone of brilliance fastened on Spain and Mary Quinlan.

A voice, one that was new to Spain, said: "Get your mitts up, Mason!" The voice had a crisp ring of authority. Spain knew a cop's voice when he heard one. His hands went up slowly.

Someone climbed in and down to the ice but the flashlight stayed where it was. After a moment a tall man, bony of frame and hard-faced, appeared in the light. He came swiftly to Spain's side, patted Spain's pocket and said: "Just try these for size, Mason."

Spain didn't lower his wrists. "You're Inspector Stark?"

"I'm Inspector Stark."

"In that case, my name is Mack Spain.

"What're you giving me?"

"Look down on the ice just beyond me."

The beam of the flashlight slanted a little, not enough to shift from Spain and Mary Quinlan. But it was enough to show the sprawled body of Al Mason.

There was no more than a breath of silence.

Out of it Stark exploded: "What the hell goes on? Who's that?"

"Al Mason."

"Who're you?"

"I told you my name is Spain."

"That means nothing. This guy and you twins or something?"

"Not that close," said Spain. "First cousins. I'm a private op from Chicago. I got in town this evening in answer to a wire from Mason, asking help."

"You got in this evening, did you?" The detective's stare flicked to the body, back to Spain. "But if you'd gotten in earlier, maybe you could have been the guy—where were you at three this afternoon?"

"Luckily I was having a tire repaired at a filling station forty miles out of Pittston. I can prove it. Anyway, I got in town. I started looking for Mason. I found him ten minutes ago."

"Who killed him?"

"I wouldn't know for sure but I was figuring on getting the answer out of John Brick."

"Brick, eh? Brother, you'll have your chance right now." Stark raised his voice. "Mahoney—Kaufman! Bring everyone in here. And plug the first guy that hesitates."

There was confused movement at the doorway and then John Brick, still in the red silk dressing gown, came into the light. His face was suffused with anger and the lidless-looking eyes fastened on Stark venomously. He said: "For tonight's performance, Stark, you'll be looking for a job as night watchman."

Stark said harshly: "Maybe—but tonight I'm still a cop."

More figures appeared. There was Bum. There was Morton. A couple of plainclothes men, one of them holding the flashlight. Kenny, the *Globe* reporter, came into the light accompanied by a fox-faced man.

Kenny grinned at Spain. "Whoever you are, pal, you're keeping me busy as a little honey-bee tonight."

"How'd you get here?"

"Easy. That sedan of mine is equipped with a two-way radio phone, the *Globe* being fustest with the newest. I phoned my story in while you were tailing me in your car and arranged for my pal here to be parked near that cigar store. When you went past the store, he picked up the tail and followed you out to Brick's. He had no radio-phone so he turned back to a filling station and called the office, told me where you'd gone, and hurried back to watch you.

"I picked up Stark and a couple of his bloodhounds, and we came out to call on Brick. My man reported your car had vanished when he got back which meant you must have driven up River Drive. So we collared Mister Brick and followed, picking up a couple of his boys en route and checking sideroads as we went until we found your car. Simple, huh?"

Inspector Stark began to fume. "Damn smart, Kenny—you're smart. We admit it. Let's get on with this." He tramped up and down the ice, three steps each way. He stopped in front of Mary Quinlan, said disapprovingly: "Nice company you're keeping these days, Miss Quinlan." He resumed his tramp, apparently revolving things in his mind. He swung around at Spain. "That confession of yours—was it a complete fake?"

"Complete."

STARK said, still hopefully: "But you said you figured Brick had the answer to this killing. Couldn't that mean he had the answer to Captain Brackett's murder, too?"

John Brick cried venomously: "Stark, you're trying to put words in his mouth! You're trying to smear me!"

"I'd love to smear you. Shut up. . . . How about it, Spain?"

"I'm not interested in Brackett, I'm interested in Mason."

"Okay. All we have to do is hang one murder on Brick. Speak your piece."

"First," said Spain, "I've got a witness who saw Brick's stooges, Bum and Morton, walk Al Mason out of the Brickbat Club to knock him off."

Bum cursed suddenly. "Morton, that guy woulda had to be Gus, the damn dumb barkeep. He was the only guy was around to hear—"

Morton snarled: "Shut up, you dummy!"

Brick sighed and said: "Oh, hell, Stark, I might as well tell you the whole story."

"Am I dreaming a sweet dream?" said Stark. "Brick, are you confessing?"

"Don't be a fool. I've got nothing to worry about. Neither have the boys. I've just kept quiet because I don't like to get involved in things. Mason was brought here by Quinlan to get something on me. He crossed Quinlan and began to work

with me. I thought he was just a good boy so I gave him things to do. Several days ago Brackett came to me with the dope on Mason. I didn't want a double-crosser working for me so I told him to blow town. Bum and Morton got an idea. They called Quinlan and asked him if he'd be interested in having the heel worked over. He offered them a hundred bucks to turn Mason over to him. That's what they did last night and they heard later that, after they'd left Mason with Quinlan, the guy beat the tar out of Quinlan and—"

Mary Quinlan yelled: "That's a rotten lie!"

"Quiet," said Stark.

"Well," Brick went on, "this afternoon around three-thirty, Bum and Morton saw Mason driving hell-bent out Pitt Avenue toward the transcontinental highway. They hadn't heard about Brackett's murder then. They cornered the guy and Morton called Miss Quinlan and asked if she wanted Mason and what it would be worth. Another hundred bucks. So they delivered Mason to her here at the ice-house and went their way after she put a gun on the guy—"

"You're a liar!" sputtered Mary Quinlan.

John Brick ignored her, continuing: "Tonight that fake confession came over the radio. Knowing it was phony, since it involved me in the Brackett murder, I sent the two boys out this way to see if, as I suspected, the Quinlan girl had killed Mason and tricked the *Globe* into accepting a fake confession that would smear me. The boys saw the headlights behind them and, not knowing who it might be, ducked into a sideroad until the lights passed them. Then, Stark, you caught up with them later."

Mary Quinlan doubled her fists, started at Brick.

Spain grabbed her. "Ease up, angel."

"But he's accusing me of murder!"

Stark said lugubriously: "It sounds like a pretty tight story, at that. Her leading you out here ahead of everybody, Spain."

"Nuts," said Spain. "He's not accusing her of murder. He's accusing Bum and Morton."

"I don't get you."

"Al Mason's body has been right where

it is now for at least twenty-four hours. Brick says that Bum and Morton told him they not only saw Mason but grabbed him this afternoon. So Bum and Morton are lying."

Stark rubbed his hands, pleased. "How do you figure the body's been here twenty-four hours, Spain?"

"Take a look at it for yourself."

STARK took three steps, knelt. He felt the flesh of Mason's face. "He's cold, if that's what you mean. But in court, it wouldn't mean a thing. The lawyers would bring up that, laid out on ice the way he is, the body would cool fast."

"I don't mean that. Look how the body has melted a place for itself. It's sunk four, maybe five, inches into the ice. That couldn't happen in just a few hours."

"Yeah," said Stark. "Yeah. And it wouldn't be hard to prove one way or another. We'll get a side of beef about the same weight and experiment."

Spain nodded. "But I think you'll get quicker results by taking Morton and Bum downtown and working on them. I'd pick Bum first. I don't think it'd take much shellacking to crack him."

Bum said: "Huh? Listen, you can't bounce me around. I got head injuries from boxin', see? Mister Brick ain't gonna let you shellack me."

"Oh, yeah?" said Stark. His voice had a ferocious note.

Bum wet his thick lips. He glanced at Brick. "Mister Brick, you ain't gonna let 'em shellack me, are you?"

Brick said very carefully: "Stark, I still believe the boys' story. Anything they might say under third-degree, I'm not responsible for."

"Look now, Mister Brick," Bum said plaintively. "I ain't gonna stand and take no shellackin' for —"

"Keep quiet. You have nothing to worry about."

"Mister Brick, you know I can't take no shellackin'. . . . I got head injuries. . . . I ain't gonna take no shellackin'—"

Bum's hand made an aimless gesture in front of him.

Brick had his hands in the pockets of the red dressing gown. One of the pockets tilted upward and there was a spurt of flame, the sharp crack of a gun. Bum

cried out wildly, and fell down beside Mason's body and thrashed there on the ice.

Brick jerked the gun from his pocket. He shouted: "He tried to pull a gun on me! You saw him go for a gun!" His own gun banged twice in the direction of Bum, still squirming on the ice.

The plainclothes man with the flashlight began pivoting uncertainly, bring the light around to bear directly on Brick. Brick instinctively swung the gun in the plainclothes man's direction.

The other plainclothes man's gun began booming solemnly—once, twice, a third time. Brick coughed, jackknifed, straightened and then fell down backward, rigidly. He thumped on the ice and then lay still, with dark red beginning to stain the lighter red of his robe under his heart.

Out of the immense stillness that followed, Stark, still on his knees beside Al Mason's body, barked: "Nice work, Mahoney! That was swell wo—" His voice died in midflight. Then he said on a note of astonishment: "Hey, this guy ain't dead!"

Somebody said: "What ain't dead?"

"This guy Mason. One of those slugs clipped his chin and blood is oozing. Dead men don't bleed!"

Spain snapped: "What the hell are we debating about? How do you get an ambulance and a doctor out here?"

Dawn hung like gray smoke in the streets when Spain parked his coupe in front of the three-story yellow brick building that was the Pittston Emergency Hospital. He went through a bare reception room, climbed to the second floor and said, "Mason," to a nurse.

The nurse gestured at a door and Spain shoved the door out of his way. An interne leaned on the foot of a hospital bed and ogled Mary Quinlan. The copper-haired girl didn't see that because she was looking at Al Mason and holding Al Mason's hand.

Al Mason, in a turban of gauze, looked up at Spain from the bed and said drowsily: "Hi, Mack. Been having any fun lately?"

"A little here and there, Al," said Spain.

Al Mason closed his eyes and went to sleep contentedly. Spain gestured at the

interne and at Mary Quinlan. They followed him outside.

Spain said: "How's he doing?"

"Pretty good, considering," said the interne. "He's got a bad concussion and he may develop pneumonia from exposure. But rest and sulfa ought to fix him."

"How come," said Spain, "that a guy could look and feel as dead as a frozen mackerel a couple of hours ago and come out of it as good as Mason has now?"

The interne chuckled. "Well, in the first place, a concussion like he got from having his skull creased by a bullet is marked by such symptoms as a cold skin and a weak pulse. And then the would-be killers unknowingly used a new therapy that a lot of doctors aren't familiar with yet—the freezing therapy that's used on limb infections and sometimes over the whole body. It slows the circulation and makes the breathing very shallow. Put a man with concussion on ice the way Mason was—and the average layman could easily mistake him for dead."

"Thank's doc," said Spain. He took Mary Quinlan's arm.

"Is Al cleared?" Mary Quinlan said.

"As clear as that beautiful Oklahoma morning they sing about. Bum wasn't hit by Brick's slugs, just scared. And he's been talking like a Chatauqua lecturer. Al Mason had nosed around and come up with evidence of revenue-stamp violations on Brick. Brick got tipped on it somehow. Bum doesn't know how. Then Brick had Bum and Morton pick Al up.

"Brick certainly had some fancy-dan stuff figured out. He wanted to smear you Quinlans. He wanted to get rid of the vice-squad copper, Brackett, who was getting too big for his pants. His scheme was a dilly. Bum and Morton and a hood named Gary took Al Mason with them when they waylaid your Dad and slugged him. With a gun in his ribs, Al had to stand by, apparently approving the beating. That was supposed to supply a motive for you Quinlans' killing Al. Then they took Al to the old ice-house and thought they'd bumped him off."

Mary Quinlan nodded slowly, then asked: "But the killing of the policeman and the identification?"

"Morton killed Captain Brackett, us-

(Please continue on page 95)

THE RELUCTANT CORPSE

By WYATT BLASSINGAME



Natcha said: "Vot is wrong vith
him?"

We were hurricane-trapped bottle comrades—but the ardor of Natcha and the presence of a recently dead corpse . . . gave me an acute case of claustrophobia.

USUALLY people living on the Florida Keys go to the mainland when there is a hurricane coming, but on Sanctity Key they remain at home, putting their faith in the Lord and liquor. Consequently on this day, just before the hurricane hit, Montgomery N. Jones and I were driving to The Anchorage to replenish our supply of faith, and we saw the mail truck parked in some bushes beside the road. I stopped, meaning to ask Lloyd Billet, who drove the truck, if there was any mail for me. Only there was no

sign of Lloyd anywhere around the truck. "Probably," Monty said, "he has stopped to visit with his Russian lady friend."

"Who?" I said. "Not Natcha!"

"He has taken a great yearning for her," Monty said. "And gossip has it that she responds."

I couldn't believe it. Lloyd Billet was a thin, quiet old gentleman and the lady called Natcha Valentine was something else altogether. Besides, as I pointed out to Monty, the mail truck was parked in front of the house belonging to old Mrs. Greenshawl. Natcha's house was a hundred yards down the road.

"Just camouflage," Monty said. He pointed to Mrs. Greenshawl's mailbox, buried deep in bushes. "He wasn't delivering mail here. Mrs. Greenshawl is a bird fancier and last year when a pair of titmice nested in her mailbox she had her address changed to the Sanctity Key post office so they wouldn't be disturbed."

We sat and discussed the matter. The wind was blowing harder now, bending the palms. The rain was still thin but it came sideways. And now down the wind, from the direction of her house, came Natcha Valentine, her yellow hair blowing before her.

She stood a good six feet one in her heelless slippers and she weighed two hundred pounds. She wore a pair of very brief shorts and a halter which did not quite halt her in time. Such things, of course, did not bother Natcha who always said that in Ruusha one thought about the spirit, not the body. Although this did not explain why there are so many Ruusians, it satisfied Natcha.

We got out of the car to meet her. "Vere is Lloyd?" she asked. "He is bringing to me a present."

"He isn't at your place?"

The wind came harder, bending the bushes. And out of these bushes, from near the old mailbox, there came a sound such as I never heard the wind make, low, and moaning. "Soo. . . ." Natcha said. "Lloyd is playing games again," and she leaned over and pushed aside some of the bushes.

Lloyd Billet lay there on his back, a little, bald, old man with his eyes shut. With the bushes pulled aside the rain beat

down into his face and spattered on his bald head.

Then his eyes flickered and he made that long moaning noise again and sat up. When he did, we could see the huge lump on the back of his head, the broken skin, and the smeared blood. "They tried to kill me!" he yelled—and keeled over again.

With much excitement we drove him to Natcha's house and stretched him out on the sofa in the living room. It was late twilight and dark in the house because the windows had been boarded up and the electric lights were out. The lights always go out on Sanctity Key when the wind blows. Natcha lighted candles.

Monty found a bottle and gave Lloyd a nip, after which we all had one, helping him to revive. With more help he recovered enough to tell us there had been a letter for Mrs. Greenshawl, addressed to her mailbox. "So I got out and put it in the box," he said. "Then it happened."

"What happened?"

He sat huddled up, holding his head. "I can't think," he moaned. "It hurts." "Didn't you see anything?"

He tried to think, with all of us encouraging him and pressing the liquor bottle upon him. But it didn't help much. "I ought to remember something," he said. "I know I do. Trouble is, I can't remember what it is."

It was Monty who remembered what all of us should have remembered. "Weren't you bringing some jewels for Natcha?"

Natcha stared at him, then howled. She flung herself on her knees beside Lloyd, imploring him not to say the jewels were missing. "They were on the front seat," Lloyd said weakly. "Right beside me on the front seat!"

I opened the door to go out and look. When I did the wind whooped in and blew out the candles. The wind and rain were both hard now, the darkness so thick that when I reached the truck I had to feel rather than look for the package. I felt around a long time and made sure. There wasn't any package.

Naturally I now began to wonder who had known that Lloyd Billet was bringing Natcha's jewels out from town—and I decided that everybody on Sanctity Key

knew it. Natcha often spoke of her family jewels, referring to them in a casual manner that gave you the impression they were only a few trinkets worth several million dollars each.

They had come by insured express from New York, and the night before, in the local jook, Natcha had given Lloyd a note authorizing him to sign for them and bring them out. After all, he was the United States mail, and you don't expect anything to happen to that.

WHEN I went back to the house the wind blew out the candles Monty had just finished lighting. He relighted them while I informed Natcha the jewels were gone. "I knew!" she screamed. "I knew! I coot feel it!" She whirled on Lloyd, grabbing up the poker from beside the fireplace and swinging at him.

It took several drinks to calm her but finally she quieted down to a kind of volcanic murmuring. She said she was sorry she had spoken harshly to Lloyd; she knew he had defended her jewels with his life. "They tried to kill me," he said, holding his head. "And I can't remember."

With peace restored I tried to phone the sheriff. It was only a gesture; on Sanctity Key any strong breeze will do away with phone and lights. But it served to remind Natcha that her jewels were probably getting farther and farther away all the time. She began to yell that the law had to be notified, and she picked on me to do it. "You musta go to him, Johnny! Right away!"

"Me? In this storm?"

"You are the deputy out here," Monty said.

"A purely honorary job," I said. "Non paid. Listen at that wind."

It was blowing all right by now. It howled like a lovelorn cat. Great gusts would take hold of the house and shake it. Rain was beginning to beat in under the window sills. "You better hurry," Monty said. "The bridge is likely to go out any time now. It might go out with you on it."

"I was thinking of that." I said.

Lloyd raised his head. "Done it in a storm 'bout eight years ago while old man Parboy was trying to get across. But he

washed up on Longboat Key all right, three days later."

"That was nice," I said.

"His wife was with him at the time. Never did find her." He put his head in his hands again. "You better hurry," he said.

"I don't want to." I remembered what Monty had said when I picked him up on my way to The Anchorage just before we found Lloyd. He wanted to paint a picture of a hurricane, he'd told me. Because Montgomery Noland Jones was an artist. Not a commercial artist, as he often assured us. He did not prostitute his art, preferring to live off his wife's money. I told him this was just the chance he needed to view the full force of the storm and get his inspiration.

"I would like to go," Monty said. "But it will be more official if you do it. I'll take the candles into the next room so they won't blow out when you open the door."

"Maybe my car won't start," I said hopefully. I went out and wind jumped on me. It banged me against a palm tree. It smashed a ton of water over me. Something big, like the limb of a tree or the top of a house, came sailing past, just missing my head.

But I made it to the car, and the damn motor started. I decided instantly to get rid of an automobile that would do such a thing. "After the good care I've taken of you," I told it.

I made it out of Natcha's drive and into the road. The car skidded and slipped. "If you are going into a ditch, do it now," I said. But the thing clung to the road. It would probably stay on the road all the way to the bridge. I didn't like to think of the bridge. . . .

My headlights didn't show much in that rain, but I saw the reflection of Lloyd's mailtruck. That reminded me it was parked in front of old Mrs. Greenshaw's house, and this reminded me that Mrs. Greenshaw's phone was on a different line from Natcha's. "Maybe it's not out," I said, not arguing with myself about the probability of such a thing.

When I got close I could see a light through the boarded windows. I knocked and pushed on the door; the door opened and I blew in headfirst.

"Hello," Mrs. Greenshaw said. She

had all the furniture pulled into the middle of the room, because the walls were leaking, and she sat in the midst of the pile. A lantern swung from the ceiling and it whipped back and forth but didn't go out. I got the door closed and Mrs. Greenshawl, blinking, said, "Oh, it's you, Johnny."

"Yes'm," I said.

She was a little woman who bore a distinct resemblance to the birds she was always feeding. Her eyes were small and round and very bright and she had a way of hopping about instead of walking. There was a liquor bottle on the table beside her and it was this she had grabbed when the door opened. "My!" she said. "It almost blew over."

She was a little lady, but the drinks she poured were not. "If you want water," she said, "just hold the glass out the door."

I told her what had happened to Lloyd Billet and she listened, making little bird cries of excitement and hopping about. In her excitement she had another drink without seeming to notice it. "And now," she asked, "you are out looking for the man who slugged him?"

"I thought maybe your phone was still working. I want to get word to the sheriff."

"Not tonight you won't. The phones are out and the bridge too."

"The bridge!" I said. "That's too bad." I didn't ask how she knew; I was too much of a gentleman to doubt the lady's word. And besides, she might have turned out to be wrong. "Well," I said, "we will just have to do without solving the mystery—unless Lloyd can remember something about it."

She blinked at me. "Remember? What's he going to remember?"

"I don't know. There seems to be something troubling him."

"Besides that yellowheaded Amazon next door?" She hopped up and took a firm grip on the neck of her liquor bottle. "I think I will go over there with you. This is the most excitement we've had on Sanctity Key since they found a still in the church tower."

So it was back into the storm again. This time, naturally, my car wouldn't start and we had to walk. It was upwind

and hard going. Mrs. Greenshawl clung to me and every now and then she would blow out behind me like the tail of a kite. But she held on, to me and the bottle, and eventually we made it.

"Monty will get to light his candles again," I yelled at Mrs. Greenshawl and pushed open the door, and we blew in.

THE candles went out. A table flew into the wall. There was a crash of glass—a small black pandemonium until I pushed the door shut. "Light the candles, Monty."

"Why?" he asked. "It's so futile."

His lighter flickered on. The flame wavered and big shadows jumped over the room making the whole thing seem to sway and I thought maybe I'd had one drink too many. Mrs. Greenshawl said, "Hello, everybody. Hello, Lloyd. Johnny tells me you got cracked on the head."

"Who's that?" Lloyd said. His voice sounded strange.

"Annie Greenshawl."

Monty had touched his light to a couple of candles and the room was beginning to take shape. I saw Lloyd Billet sitting on the sofa, his bald head raised and shining in the candlelight like a baby's bottom. He was staring toward Mrs. Greenshawl and his mouth was working like the handle on a dry pump, with nothing coming out. Then the yell came.

"That's it!" he shouted. He stabbed a scrawny arm toward Mrs. Greenshawl. "I remember now! I know who robbed me! I'd seen—"

I hadn't got the door pushed tight. Now it blew open again.

It was the same thing all over again: no light and shades banging and chairs blowing and doors slamming all over the place. I pushed the door tight this time and latched it. In the dark I heard Monty saying, "I won't do it. I won't!"

"Just once more," I said. "The door won't come open again."

"My thumb is getting blisters on it," Monty said. But he flicked the lighter and touched it to the candles.

"You ought to have a lantern," Mrs. Greenshawl said. She uncorked her bottle, saw that the glasses which had been on the table had blown off, and put the bottle up to her lips. I was admiring her

capacity when, looking past her, I saw Lloyd. He was kneeling on the sofa, his head hung over the sofa's back. As I watched he began to slide, quite gently, his head coming gradually upward.

"Vot is wrong vith him?" Natcha asked.

Nobody answered her. Nobody needed to. Lloyd had slipped sideways until just his chin was hung over the sofa back, his head in full view. There had been a knot on his head before. Now there was a dent, a Grand Canyon. It looked as though his skull had experienced a landslide. On the floor beyond him was the iron poker from the fireplace.

For awhile we just stood and looked at him. Then we were all looking at one another and somehow we had got spaced around that room with the greatest possible distance between each of us, and none of us crowding the sofa.

"It's time I went home," Monty said. "My wife will be wondering what happened to me." He started eagerly for the door.

All of us must have had the same idea at the same time: whoever opened that door first was going to be outside and the rest of us inside, and the candles blown out. We were going to be together in the dark, with a corpse—and one of us a murderer.

We got jammed together at the door, each trying to be first. "Now wait!" I said. "I'm the deputy. I have to go notify the police." I felt now that I could swim the bay if necessary.

Natcha was wailing, "You can't all leaf me!" Unfortunately I was the closest to her and she clasped me to her. "You can't leaf me!" she wailed.

I couldn't: not with the grip she had on me. But Monty and Mrs. Greenshaw could, and did. The door banged open, the candles blew out, and I was left struggling in the dark.

The struggle was useless. Natcha got the door shut, and the candles lighted. I tottered over to the liquor bottle. In this hour of need it seemed to be my only friend.

Natcha made herself a drink also. "I am glad you vonted to stay vith me, Johnny."

"Thank you," I said, looking wistfully

at the door. I knew I didn't have a chance of making it.

Lloyd lay on the sofa. His eyes were open and he seemed to gaze accusingly toward us. I didn't like to look at him, and I couldn't keep from it. Whichever way I tried to look I wound up looking at him. For one man he sure crowded a room.

"You vorry about him," Natcha said. "He is gone now. In Ruusha we understand those things. But—" she gathered the candles; I gathered the liquor bottles—"we will go into the next room."

It was a bedroom with one of these low, headless beds, big enough for two people Natcha's size, which was some bed indeed. There was a dressing table with jars and bottles on it, a writing table on which lay piles of pale blue, square envelopes and blue writing paper—and the only chair in the room was the one in front of the writing table.

Natcha sat on the bed and patted the place beside her. "Sit down, Johnny. You will be more comfortable here."

"I'll stand up," I said. "I haven't had much exercise today. I'll just sort of walk back and forth awhile."

"Bring me a drink."

I refilled her glass. She said, "You remind me of my first husband, Johnny. He was my favorite."

"How many husbands have you had?"

"Four." She looked sorrowfully down at her ample self. "The flesh," she said, "is veak."

"Yes," I said, and my hand trembled as I made a drink.

"It is the spirit vot matters, Johnny. Sentiment." Her eyes had a liquor-melted look. "That is why I hate to lose the jewels. The value is insured, but how can one insure sentiment?"

"I don't know," I said.

"My first husband gave them to me. He was the only one left me anything. Now they are all gone."

"Who do you think stole them?"

"How vill I know?" She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. "I am sleepy, Johnny. I think I am a little drunk. But I am safe—vith you?"

"Completely."

She sighed. "Americans do not like Ruussians any more. It is sad. . . ."

I SAT in the chair before the dressing table. Outside the wind howled. The rain beat at the house. Inside the candles burned down little by little. Inside me alcohol did the same. I thought about old Lloyd Billet and Natcha, about Monty and Mrs. Greenshawl. And it was thinking of Mrs. Greenshawl, half asleep, that I thought of something very obvious.

Lloyd had told us he brought a letter addressed to Mrs. Greenshawl at her rural mailbox. Now very little mail came to that mailbox; it was all grown about with bushes; it was a fine place to slug and rob the postman.

And whoever had done it, had known Lloyd was going to stop there! How else could they have been present? So whoever had done it had written the letter to Mrs. Greenshawl!

Natcha lay with her eyes shut and her mouth open; so I got up and tipped carefully out of the room, closing that door behind me so the wind would not blow out the candles when I opened the front door.

I didn't need a light. I could find the mailbox in the dark and the way that wind was blowing the letter would either be inside the box or the other side of Tampa Bay—unless the killer had taken it with him. But there was a chance. . . .

The letter was in the box.

I crumpled it in my fist, holding it that way to try to keep it from getting too wet. I went back to Natcha's house, across the dark living room to the bedroom. She was still stretched out, snoring just a little. I took one of the candles and went back into the living room.

I put the candle on the table and the light of it reflected on Lloyd's baldhead and in his eyes which stared up at me. I wished they wouldn't. I don't believe in ghosts, of course, but it did occur to me that old Lloyd might not know who killed him. If he was still hanging around in spirit form and saw me with that letter he might be mistaken.

I smoothed out the envelope. It was pale blue; Mrs. Greenshawl's name and rural box number were carefully printed on it. Inside was a square sheet of perfectly blank paper.

But there was no need for anything to be written on it. The paper was Natcha's. It was the same as that in her bedroom.

"Johnny," Natcha said. She was standing in the door and she had a pistol.

"I—er—thought you were asleep."

"I pretend to be asleep, so you will go to sleep. I want to get the letter."

"You can have it," I said generously. I don't want it. I—"

"I should have taken it ven I got the jewels. But I forgot. I vas excited. It is not until ve are talking in the bedroom I remember the letter. Then you vont go to sleep so I can get it."

"It's yours. Blank anyway. I don't—"

The words stopped. Natcha was raising the gun. It was such a gun it took a big person to raise it. The muzzle looked big enough to jump down.

"No!" I wailed. "Look at Lloyd. You don't want me like that!"

"Death is not too bad, Johnny. If you were Ruusian you vould understand."

"But I aint Russian! I don't—"

On the sofa Lloyd Billet moved. His feet slid over the side. His body bent in the middle so that he sat half erect. And he made a noise, the damndest noise ever heard by man on this or any other planet. Later the coroner told me it was rigor mortis and such movement and sound are not uncommon—but although this served me well I want no part of any more.

When Lloyd moved, Natcha moved. In Russia they may understand death, but evidently they expect the dead ones to keep still, just as we do. Just where, or how far, Natcha moved I cannot say, however, as I had gone out of a boarded window, taking the boards with me. I didn't worry about not having my car. It was no fit means of transportation in such an emergency.

"Feet!" I cried. "Help the body!"

* * *

Later, Monty and I were having a few beers at The Anchorage. A goodly crowd was there, and I held them spellbound with a modest recital of how, single handed, I had solved the murder.

"Only her first husband left her any money, and it was all spent. She told me that herself. But the jewels were insured for a neat round sum and she wanted that insurance—and the jewels."

I ordered another beer. "Her idea of swiping the jewels from Lloyd before they ever reached her house was a good idea,"

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READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

Ring Around the Grocery

Dear Sir:

I had a job in a grocery store in the downtown section of Brooklyn. The boss was a good-natured fellow with an eye for the ladies. One day a very fancily dressed, bejeweled and good-looking lady came in. She began shopping around, picking up, examining and ordering various items. The boss waited on her personally, beaming with smiles as he did so.

All of a sudden she let out a shriek. "I've lost it—I've lost it!"

"What'd you lose, lady?" asked the boss.

"My thousand-dollar engagement ring," she moaned. "I think I dropped it in those potatoes."

Well, we looked and rummaged around for about two hours but found no ring. The lady, semi-hysterical, left her address and promised the boss \$100 reward if he found and returned the ring to her. She then left, sobbing.

About an hour later, a husky, well dressed guy came in and ordered some onions and potatoes. "And no rotten ones like you sold my wife the last time," he said. "Say, what's this!" And he picked up a diamond ring from the floor.

The boss flew to his side. "Give me that ring!" said the boss. "I know who lost it."

"Nothing doing," said the guy. "I'm turning this in to the police."

The boss argued with him and finally made a deal. The boss obtained possession of the ring by paying the husky guy \$25.

The boss later visited the lady's address to collect his \$100 reward. No one at the address knew of her!

An appraisal of the ring by a local jeweler indicated that it was worth about 35c.

The man and woman evidently were working together in this racket which hooked the boss for 25 bucks.

Arthur A. Knippler
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Perennial Swindle

Dear Sir:

Each year I plan in my budget a small expenditure for perennial plants and trees for my garden. This year I decided the peony bed would be more attractive if it had a greater variety in coloring. Hence, I visited one of our well known chain stores known to every town.

There I found ten-inch metal containers each packed with a peony plant in peat moss. I chose three for different colors according to the descriptive pictures on the containers.

A few days later when my flower beds were prepared for planting, I proceeded to open the peony containers and, lo and behold, much to my amazement I had exactly three containers full of peat moss. There was absolutely no sign of a peony plant, or any other kind of plant, in any one of the three containers.

Hereafter, when I buy packaged plants from chain stores, I open them before I leave the store. I may be perennially swindled, but never again on perennials.

Mrs. N. E. Lord
Wethersfield, Conn.

Con Men's Cabinets

Dear Sir:

There were two of them. One was weasel-faced and constantly carried a small valise. The other had a gorgeous white mustache and a goatee and looked like a Kentucky colonel, hat and all. He was suave and did the talking; the other took the money.

They were selling a newfangled kitchen cabinet, something the housewife would just love to have as soon as she saw it. They came to our town and sold a hundred cabinets right off the bat at \$16 each—or so they said.

Then commenced the dirty work. Riffing the hundred sales slips, they talked county rights. "Take any county you want where there are lots of people—pay us \$1.00 each on account for the cabinets you are going to sell in the portion of one cabinet for each one hundred families. A perfect cinch for you to make a cleaning. . . ."

Selling at \$16.00 to the consumer, \$6.50 was to be paid to the manufacturer when a cabinet was sold. This with the \$1.00 paid to the kind promoters totalled \$7.50 leaving a net profit of \$8.50 on each cabinet—think of it!

Did we fight to get rights to certain counties? I'll say we did. My privilege cost me \$4000. I went to another state, worked like a slave for three months and never sold a cabinet—finally returning home a poorer and wiser man.

Later it came out that not a single cabinet placed in our town had been sold for cash. Most of them were given away or traded for

whatever the promoters could get. And the "take" in our town was \$48,000.

John Lee Clarke
Cos Cob, Conn.

Masterpieces

Dear Sir:

When is a racket not a racket. It seems to this interested observer that a great many businesses these days are operating within a very narrow margin of the law, and while it doesn't take a very sharp eye to see that they are pulling fast ones, legally they are inside the baseline.

One I specifically had in mind as an example is a mail order item currently being advertised. The advertisement offers "Genuine steel engravings of great presidents" for only \$1. "George Washington, and other illustrious statesmen, in beautifully executed engravings sent prepaid," the ad goes on.

The pitch is, of course, very obvious, once you've fallen for the bait. The "genuine engravings" of George Washington and other statesmen are the ones done by the very expert engraving department of the United States government—on a postage stamp!

Is that sort of thing legit business?

Sincerely,

B. H. Hosey
New York, N. Y.

All Mapped Out

Dear Sir:

A man just fresh from our city was apprehended by the police of a neighboring city, and described as one of the most thorough swindlers ever to be brought before their attention. He carried business cards for six aliases, three social security cards and bankbooks showing balances in at least thirteen cities.

When captured he was making the rounds of hospitals soliciting orders for nurses' uniforms. A nurse became suspicious of him when he refused to take a check for her order and called the authorities. This resulted in his arrest.

The whole story came to light when the authorities found a large road map of the U. S. which told the swindler not only what city he was in but who he was supposed to be and what business he was supposed to be in. In various cities the super crook "sold" different lines, including magazines and novelties. The map looked like a secret agent's map but was simple enough after close observation.

His previous successes lay in the fact that he never sold the same product in one area under the same name twice.

J. F. M.
Savannah, Ga.

Blue-White and Imperfect

Dear Sir:

Last year while in a Texas city, a friend and myself were staying in a small hotel. One night a well dressed young man walked into the lobby and began to make conversation.

He stated that he was under the weather financially and asked if either of us would like to buy a diamond ring of his wife's. My friend, who was about to get married, sensed an opportunity to pick up a bargain and asked to see the stone.

The stranger took the ring from a small box in his pocket and showed it. It looked good. Asked the price, he said he didn't know and that the best way would be to go to some jeweler. We walked down to a small jewelry shop and the jeweler appraised the diamond at three hundred dollars. The stranger said he would take a hundred and fifty. My friend paid the money and felt that he had made a good bargain.

A few days later my friend returned to the same jeweler in order to purchase a new setting. The jeweler happened to look at the diamond and stated that the diamond must be a different one.

At first it looked like a gyp between the jeweler and the stranger, but it was not. What happened, we learned, was this:

The stranger had probably taken this diamond, which was worth about thirty-five dollars, and had dipped it in wood alcohol with a few shavings from an indelible pencil. Maybe the solution had been applied with an eye-dropper. Anyway, the solution had given the small diamond a blue effect that lasted about an hour. Such treatment done by an expert will often fool the best of jewelers.

Live and learn.

W. B. Sayers
Daytona Beach, Florida

Sitting Pretty

Dear Sir:

An ad asking for baby sitters appeared in a local paper recently. Naturally, with the cost of living so high, I welcomed an opportunity to make some extra money.

Upon reporting for my appointment, I was greeted by a young man who explained that there was a slight fee of \$2.50 to take the psychological test which they required. Mentally I figured: baby sitting at 40-60c an hour—why I would get my money back in the first sitting. I exchanged my \$2.50 for a series of tests designed to test my reactions to various situation and so on.

After computing my scores, the young man gravely told me that I was maladjusted and so could not be trusted with young children. Fortunately his concern sponsored social activities which, for a fee, I would be allowed to participate in and so become a normal person.

It was then that I learned that the baby sitters ad was only a blind for a concern which specializes in aptitude tests and personality problems. Naturally few people take such tests for the fun of it, but when practically guaranteed a job, that is a different matter.

I declined the social activities course and chalked my \$2.50 up to experience. On my way out I couldn't resist remarking that it was odd that my maladjustment hadn't shown up during my four years at college nor during the four and a half years in which I taught school.

At the nearest booth I phoned Better Business. They too had seen the ad and had already instructed the man to revise his advertising to represent the true facts.

V. H.
Kansas City, Mo.

On the Carpet

Dear Sir:

My husband and I learned an expensive lesson about salesmen, and that is never to do business after business hours.

When we moved into our new home, a rug salesman telephoned and asked if he might stop by at ten o'clock that night, when he would be in our neighborhood, to show us some rug patterns. We consented.

First, he displayed several not-too-attractive carpet patterns and then casually mentioned that he had two genuine Oriental rugs in his automobile that he could sell to us, if we were interested, at a bargain figure since they were not part of his regular stock.

It seemed strange to my husband and me that he insisted we pay for the Oriental rugs that night, but as he explained it, the price was so reasonable that they would surely be sold by the time we could make up our minds. We gave him \$50.00 in cash and wrote a check for the balance. He gave us his business card before leaving and said that if we decided within the next few days the rugs didn't suit us, we could telephone him and he would refund our money.

The next day I called in a neighbor, who happened to be a rug salesman with a local department store, and asked him to evaluate our "genuine Oriental rugs." Imagine my consternation to learn that they were imitations! And two minutes later I'd ascertained that there was no such telephone number as the one given on the salesman's business card. When my husband drove to the address printed below the name, he discovered that it was a vacant lot. We lost our \$50 but were fortunate in being able to stop payment on our check before it had been cashed.

And so, experience has taught us to investigate before buying if our salesman calls on us after six p.m.

E. H.
Cleveland, Ohio

Forty Were Fooled

Dear Sir:

Two months ago, a well dressed young man came to the door with wash cloths and towels which he offered at an attractively low price. Looking over his selection, I invited him in. During the course of the conversation as he pointed out the excellence of his merchandise, he sprinkled in the name of many of my neighbors.

He mentioned, seemingly as an afterthought, that he and his partner in a store on the lower east side were contemplating a route to sell sheets and pillow cases on weekly installment payments.

Was I interested? Of course. My stock has needed replenishing but I have been prevented from doing so by high prices.

"Good," he said. "Now, we're prepared to make deliveries in a week or two at the most. How many would you like?"

"A half dozen." I answered. "More, if they're good quality."

"Fine. That would mean two dollars down and fifty cents a week. If you could give me the down payment now I could deliver the merchandise to you on my next visit."

I paid him; he carefully made out a receipt. Then he asked me if there was anyone I could recommend. I gave him several names.

He went on his way. Two weeks passed. My friends and I compared notes. Over forty of us in the neighborhood had been taken for amounts ranging from two to ten dollars. No place in existence as given on the receipt. We were too eager to be cautious.

Mrs. Gertrude Maher
New York, 25, N. Y.

Vanishing Vacuum

Dear Sir:

A neighbor of mine had a pretty slick trick pulled on her last winter. She had bought a brand new vacuum cleaner from a store in Canton. Several months later a couple of men stopped at her door, claiming they were vacuum cleaner inspectors from the store.

As this store promises servicing at the time of purchase, my friend did not hesitate to let them see the cleaner. The men claimed it needed some adjusting that could be done only at the store. They promised to return it the next day, gave her a receipt and departed with the cleaner.

They did not return the next day nor the next. My neighbor was more angry than worried when she called the store to ask why her vacuum cleaner had not been returned. The store said they had not sent any inspectors from house to house. They had not heard of the two men when given their names and descriptions. The local police and county sheriff were called in, but they never succeeded in locating the men with the cleaner.

Mrs. Hugh Patterson,
Minerva, Ohio

He's Got Your Number!

Dear Sir:

There's a new racket in Wilkes-Barre. Some morning you wake up and find your house number neatly stenciled in white on a black background on the two visible sides of the curb in front of your home.

Later in the day a representative will call for payment for this service. He may ask for as high as \$3 or as low as \$1. The work is done in the early hours of the morning when no one ever sees it being done.

E. Venit,
Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

NO HAVEN FOR

Ellen loyally tried to help her handsome boss — when his back-alley romance with a luscious starlet backfired . . . into murder.

CHAPTER ONE

Hold the Fort

I SUPPOSE a man should be telling this, because it's really a man's story. But I was in the middle of it, and I'll tell it just the way it happened. It's all over now, but I want to put it down the way it really was, while it's still fresh in my memory. Some of it I wish I could forget, and some of it I want to remember forever.

My name is Ellen Garry, and I'm twenty-four years old. I'm five foot four inches tall, and I weigh a hundred and ten in a bathing suit. My eyes are brown, and my hair is neither blonde nor brunette, but a kind of a neutral color in between. I'm a secretary, and I work for The United Appliance Company. They make electric irons, toasters, ovens—things like that. My boss is Walter Cochran, editorial director of United's industrial publications.

Walter is thirty years old, six foot tall, with a crew hair-cut and black eyes. He wears plastic-rimmed glasses, soft-collared shirts and gray flannel suits. At first glance you might think that he has a lean plain face, but if you take a second look at him you see that he is really handsome. He is big, and kind, and cheerful— But I'd better get on with the story.

It began on a busy afternoon in February. Walter was reading proof for the March issue of "The United Employee's News," and I was typing copy for the sport page. The telephone on my desk jingled. I stopped typing to answer it.

"Mr. Cochran's office," I said.

Susan Kovac, on the main switchboard, said: "Hi, Ellen. Cleveland is on the wire. A Miss Howard to speak with Walter."



"I heard them laughing—
about me!"

HOMICIDE

Gripping Suspense
Novelette

By **ROBERT MARTIN**



The United Appliance Company has three thousand employees, and most of them called my boss by his first name. He was that kind of a guy.

"Hold it," I told Susan, and instead of pressing the button on my desk which transferred the call to Walter's phone I got up and poked my head into his office door. He had his coat off, there was a pencil over his ear, and his desk was covered with yellow proof sheets. He looked up at me, and the light glinted on his glasses. He grinned at me, as he always did.

"Do you want to talk to a Miss Howard—from Cleveland?" I asked him.

He had a cigarette in his mouth, and a lighted match halfway to the cigarette. The grin left his face, and the match burned his fingers. He dropped the match into an ashtray, carefully struck another. As he applied the flame to his cigarette, he said: "Sure, Ellen. Put her on."

I went back to my desk, leaving the door open. It was standard practice for that door to be open, and we shouted back and forth to each other through it. But this time Walter got up and closed the door behind me. I looked at the closed door, and I felt a small flicker of resentment.

But Walter was my boss, and I decided that if he wanted to talk to somebody named Miss Howard, from Cleveland, without my listening in, it was his business. Only it was kind of silly, because by keeping my receiver down I could listen to the conversation. But I didn't. I switched the call to Walter, replaced my phone on its cradle, and continued with my typing. Maybe I hit the keys a little harder than necessary.

Five minutes later Walter opened his door and came out. He had his coat on, and was carrying his topcoat and hat. "Hold the fort, Ellen," he said. "I won't be back today."

"All right," I said, "but the printer has been yelling for that corrected proof."

He grinned at me, but it wasn't his usual grin. "You do it," he said, and he went out.

That was at three o'clock in the afternoon. At five o'clock I locked up the office and went home. I had a dinner date

with a new young engineer who had been pestering me ever since he had spotted me when the Director of Research had brought him into the office to meet Walter. We had dinner, and then we went to a movie, but I couldn't watch the movie because the young engineer kept trying to kiss me.

After the movie we had a sandwich and a couple bottles of beer, and then he took me home. When I finally got into the house I looked like the last survivor of a bargain counter raid.

There was a note under my door, and I recognized my landlady's handwriting. *Ellen: Call Operator Ten at Cleveland as soon as you get home.* I went back down to the phone in the hall.

When I got the connection, Walter Cochran's voice answered immediately. "Ellen, I'm tied up here for a couple of days. Business. Will you tell Birdie in the morning? And get that copy to the printer, and check the first press proof? Okay?"

"Sure," I said, "But—"

"I've got to go," he broke in. "See you in a couple of days." He hung up.

"Birdie" was Birdwell J. Timmons, a third vice-president at United, and Walter's immediate superior. I went back up to my room and got undressed. I washed some stockings and underwear in the bathroom, and I tried to read before going to sleep. I couldn't keep my mind on the book, and after I turned out the light I couldn't go to sleep.

When I finally did doze off it seemed that my alarm clock began to buzz almost immediately, and as soon as I was awake I remembered instantly what Walter had told me. It must be something pretty important, I thought, for him to trust the final checking of his precious "United News" to me.

I had breakfast in my usual restaurant, bought a morning paper, and caught a bus for the plant. The bus was crowded and I didn't open the paper until I was sitting behind my desk in the office. It was still ten minutes until time to start to work, and I lit a cigarette and looked over the paper. I read the headlines and the weather report, turned two or three pages, saw a sketch of a spring coat I liked, and then my gaze fell on a photo-

graph of a girl in a brief black bathing suit.

SHE was reclining on white sand, with a surf breaking behind her. One knee was bent gracefully, and her arms were stretched out behind her, supporting her body. She had long black hair and an over-painted mouth, but she was pretty, and her figure looked good in the picture.

Over the photo were the words: **KILLER SOUGHT.** Beneath it was a block of black-face eight-point type topped by the words, *Continued from Page One.* My eyes flicked across the page to another fashion ad, but they moved back to the picture again. A name had jumped out of the type at me.

Holly Howard, Hollywood starlet. . . .

I turned back to page one, and I saw the headline which had escaped me. It was a one-column story, halfway down the right side of the page. My cigarette burned itself out in the ash tray as I read.

KILLER OF ACTRESS SOUGHT

State and city police tonight are searching for the killer of glamorous Holly Howard, young model, nightclub singer and Hollywood actress, who was found dead in her room at the Hotel Madrid in downtown Cleveland last night by Julian Laval, Miss Howard's agent and business manager, shortly after midnight. The body was fully clothed and lying on the bed, with two bullet holes in her chest. When found, she had been dead between two and three hours.

Police are at a loss for a motive. Miss Howard had not been robbed, and there is no evidence that she had been attacked. She went to Hollywood, California, a year ago, following a number of years in New York as a model and night club singer. She has had several small parts in recent pictures, and she came to Cleveland to open a singing engagement at the Club Flamingo, owned by Samuel Benedict. Hotel attendants have testified that Mr. Benedict's wife visited Miss Howard early in the evening and that she had dinner with a tall dark-haired man in a gray flannel suit. No arrests have been made. . . .

I put the paper in a desk drawer, pulled out my typewriter and tried to work. People came in and out, the phone rang at intervals, and I went through the motions of doing my job. At nine o'clock I called Mr. Timmons and told him that

Walter would not be in for a couple of days. He was very pleasant, and even joked with me a little.

"Is Walter getting married, Miss Garry?" he asked.

I tried to laugh gaily, but I wasn't very good at it. I mumbled something, and hastily hung up. Things were in kind of a muddle after that, but I finished correcting proof and sent it to the printer.

At eleven o'clock the phone rang again, and Susan Kovac said: "Cleveland, Ellen, for you. Isn't Walter here today?"

"No," I said, and my voice sounded faint in my ears. "Put Cleveland on."

Walter Cochran's voice sounded queer and far away. "Ellen, this is a hell of a thing to ask, but I don't know what else to do. I'm going to be stuck up here longer than I thought, and I need some clothes. Tell Birdie that you've got a headache or something, and go to my apartment—there's a key in the second right hand drawer of my desk—and get a brown suit and a blue suit hanging in the closet.

"Put them in the big pigskin bag and bring them up here. You better throw in some shirts and socks, too. I'm at the Erie Hotel, room two-twelve. And bring some money—all you can scrape up. I'll give you a check for it—can't get one cashed up here. Don't tell anyone I called you. This sounds pretty silly, I know, but I'll explain to you when I see you. There's a bus leaving at noon which should get you up here around three o'clock. Will you do it?"

My heart was pounding more than ever, but I made my voice sound steady. "All right, Walter. I'll be there."

Birdie—I mean Mr. Timmons—was very considerate about my headache, and said that it was all right for me to go home. But he couldn't resist a mildly insinuating remark about Walter and me being absent on the same day. I laughed gaily, and told him that I was sure I would feel well enough to return to work in the morning.

I took a taxi to Walter's apartment, and I tried not to think as I unlocked the door with his key. I found a brown tweed and a blue flannel suit, and some shirts and socks. I threw in a stack of handkerchiefs, and in the bathroom I

found a razor and a tooth brush. I put it all into the big pigskin bag, and stood looking around the apartment. It was the kind of an apartment I had always imagined Walter would have—big and roomy, with a lot of books.

On top of his high dresser there was a picture of a girl in a gilt frame. I moved closer. It was the same girl whose picture I had seen in the morning paper—the murdered girl, Holly Howard. There was a hand-written inscription in the lower right hand corner. *Walter, I'll love you always. Holly.* On a sudden impulse I picked up the picture and put it in the pigskin bag. Then I went out, locked the door, and walked down the stairs to my waiting taxi.

I told the driver to take me to the Haynesville National Bank. I drew my three hundred dollars out. Ten minutes later I was on the Cleveland bus with Walter's bag beneath my seat. For the first time, as the bus rolled northward, I began to be afraid, afraid for Walter, and for myself.

But it was too late to back out, and Walter was depending on me. Walter, my boss, a big pleasant man who probably never gave me a thought outside of office hours. . . . I began to feel a little sorry for myself. Why was I doing this?

Business, he had said, and I thought uneasily: *What kind of business?* Then I tried to stop thinking, and at five minutes after three the bus pulled into the terminal at Cleveland.

A taxi took me to the Erie Hotel. It was on a side street, close to the lake. Respectable looking, but small, and not the kind of a hotel I knew Walter usually picked. I went in, took a tiny elevator up to the second floor, and rapped on the door of two-twelve.

THE door didn't open, and I rapped again, a little louder. Then a muffled voice said: "Who is it?"

"Ellen."

The door opened then, and Walter took my arm and led me inside. Then he closed and locked the door. He was coatless, and his shirt was open at the neck. He needed a shave, and there was a sunken tired look around his eyes.

"Thanks, Ellen," he said. "I guess I

shouldn't have pulled you into this. I wish now that I hadn't." He opened the pigskin bag and began to take out his shirts. Then he saw the picture, and he picked it up slowly and looked at me.

I stood still, watching him.

He said quietly: "You know—about her?" He nodded his head at the picture.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

His eyes never left my face. "And you still came—knowing?"

"I—I saw it in the morning paper."

My voice sounded faint, and I took a deep breath. "I knew that a Miss Howard had called you yesterday afternoon, and then you left. I—I thought maybe I'd better get her picture out of your apartment."

He began to pace slowly around the room. "I should never have called you," he said. "I had no right—" He swung toward me. "You've got to get out of here—fast. Go back to the office. You don't know anything. Maybe you can stay out of it."

I opened my purse and took out the three hundred dollars and handed it to him. "It's all I had."

He thrust the money into his trouser pocket and moved toward his gray flannel coat hanging over a chair. "I'll give you a check," he said.

"Don't bother," I said. "I—I couldn't cash it . . . now."

He turned. "That's right, I guess. But I'll pay you later."

"What—what are you going to do?" I asked him.

He was looking at me, a grim smile on his lips. "Do you think I killed her?"

I shook my head slowly. "If I did—I—I wouldn't be here now." I knew that I ought to get out of there, and get away, far away, as quickly as possible, and a small voice inside of me said: *Well, why don't you, you dumb bunny? What's keeping you?*

Suddenly Walter laughed. It was a short bitter laugh. He ran a hand through his black hair. "Oh, hell," he said. "What a mess. How do you know I didn't kill her?"

I sank to the edge of a chair and held my purse on my knees. I didn't say anything, and I fumbled for a cigarette. He crossed over to me and held out a package.

I took a cigarette, and he lit it for me. "I'd better tell you about it," he said quietly. "You have a right to know. And then you've got to leave." He lit a cigarette for himself, and his hand was steady. He sat down on the bed, facing me, and he began to talk.

"I met Holly Howard in college ten years ago, at Ohio State," he began. "Her name then was Hazel Howard. She was majoring in music and dramatics, and I was in the journalism school. I was crazy about her. I wanted to get married, right after graduation, but she had this career idea.

"She kept stalling, and right about that time I learned that she was sneaking out with a shady character from up town—a small-time gambler and playboy named Julian Laval. He was married, but he wasn't working at it. Holly and I quarreled about him, and she promised not to see him any more. We got along okay after that, but she still wouldn't marry me.

"I took a job with a Columbus paper, and she went to New York. She got a job with a model agency and did pretty well at it. I went to New York to see her as often as I could afford it, and occasionally she visited me in Columbus. I knew she was lying to me—about a lot of things. But I kept thinking that if we could just get married, everything would be all right. One week-end I went to New York to surprise her. I surprised her all right. I found this Julian Laval in her apartment.

"That ended it for me. We shouted at each other, and I socked Laval, and I slammed out of there. I got drunk, and then I went back to Columbus. Two days later she showed up wanting to patch things up. Even offered to marry me if I would forgive her."

Walter paused, and drew deeply on his cigarette. I felt like crying when I saw the look in his eyes. Then he smiled bitterly and said: "I took her back—of course. I couldn't help it. She was in my blood—still is." He got up abruptly, crossed the room and crushed out his cigarette in an ash tray on the dresser.

I sat still, and I didn't say anything.

He turned toward me. "That was three years ago," he said. "We decided

to get married right away. It was what I wanted, and I pushed Laval and New York into the back part of my mind, and I was happy. But we didn't get married. She skipped out, leaving me a note asking me to forgive her.

"She had a sudden offer to go to Hollywood, she said, and she couldn't turn it down. Shortly after that I left Columbus and went to work for United—and I met you." For the first time he smiled a little.

I realized that my fingernails were digging into my purse. "And then what?" I said.

He shrugged his big shoulders. "That's about all—until yesterday. She didn't do so well in Hollywood, small parts in a couple of B pictures. I saw some publicity pictures of her, one of them with this Julian Laval. They called him her 'agent.'

"She seemed to want to keep in touch with me. A week ago I had a letter from her telling me that she was quitting Hollywood to take a job singing in a night-club in Cleveland. She said this Sam Benedict was giving her a nice contract, and that she wanted to settle down. She asked me to meet her in Cleveland last night. Then she called me yesterday afternoon—you know about that. I met her in the bar of the Hotel Madrid.

"We had a few cocktails, dinner. She told me that she had ditched Laval in Hollywood—she just used him because of his connections in New York and Hollywood. After dinner we went to her room and talked some more. She seemed changed, sort of quiet. It was a lot like old times. She told me that she had been ill, and that she needed money. I gave her all I had—a couple of hundred dollars—and I arranged to meet her tonight. Can you understand that?"

"Yes," I said.

He lit another cigarette, and gave me a faint smile. "Thanks, Ellen. I guess a guy never learns. . . . When I got into my car I discovered that I had left my wallet in her room. It wasn't important, but I went back to get it—maybe I just wanted to see her again. Her door was not locked, and when I went in I found her, on the bed, just like the papers said. Shot twice—dead."

His voice cracked a little, and he began to pace around the room again. When he spoke, his voice was steady.

"My wallet was gone. I had left it lying on the coffee table. I knew I was in for it then, and I went back down to my car. I didn't know what to do. I drove around a while, and then the report came through on the radio—my description, all that. I put the car in a garage, and I came here. Then I called you."

The room was silent for maybe half a minute. Then I said: "Your wallet—who—?"

Somebody knocked gently on the door.

Walter looked silently at me, and then he crossed to the door and said in a tense voice: "Yes?"

Nobody answered him, but a white envelope suddenly appeared under the door. Walter unlocked the door, jerked it open, and peered up and down the hall. Then he closed the door, locked it, and picked up the envelope. He tore it open, and silently read the single sheet of paper inside. He handed the paper to me, his face expressionless.

I read the penciled words:

If you want to keep your wallet from the police leave two thousand dollars in tens and twenties on top of the big rock below the bath house on Paradise Beach at eight o'clock tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

Game Bunny

I LOOKED at Walter, and there was such a stony expression of defeat on his lean face that I wanted to take him in my arms and tell him not to worry. But I remembered that he was my boss, and I handed the paper silently back to him.

"That's swell," he said. "If the police get that wallet—"

"Why not go to them," I said, "and tell them the truth?"

He laughed bitterly. "I'm not that much of a sucker. I can't prove I didn't kill her, and they'll say I had a motive—jealousy. I saw in the papers that Julian Laval was still with her, in spite of what she told me."

"Your wallet—" I began.

"Pins it on me," he broke in. "It contained my driver's license, Social Security card, everything."

"Would it be worth while to try and get your wallet back?" I asked.

He laughed shortly. "Where would I get two thousand dollars? And the chances are that I wouldn't get the wallet anyway. The best thing for me to do is to hole up here for a day or two, and then make a break for it. Go far away, keep under cover—"

"No," I said. "No, Walter, you can't do that."

He came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. I sat still, looking up at him. It was the first time in the three years that I had known him that Walter Cochran had ever touched me. He put a hand under my chin, tilted my head upwards, leaned down and kissed me. I let him kiss me, and I liked it. I knew that I had been wanting him to do it for a long time, and I returned his kiss with my lips.

Suddenly he stood up. "I'm sorry, Ellen," he said. "But you're such a swell gal."

I smiled up at him. I didn't care whether I ever got back to my job at the United Appliance Company. I didn't care about Mr. Timmons, or anything. Walter needed me. "Don't be sorry," I said to him. "Can I stay—and help?"

He shook his head slowly, and the light glinted on his glasses. He took me gently by the arm and led me to the door. He opened the door and pushed me out into the hall.

"Thanks, for everything," he said. "But I can't let you get mixed up in this mess. Just forget about it and go on back to Haynesville. Maybe I'll see you . . . sometime."

"No," I said. "I want to help—"

He shook his head again, and his lips were tight together. He closed the door, and I heard the lock click.

I walked along the hall and down the stairs. I didn't wait for the elevator. There was a drug store on a corner near the Erie Hotel, with a telephone booth. I entered the booth and leafed through the thick directory. In the yellow pages in the back I found *Detective Agencies*, and my eye stopped at a name. *Daniel Morris*,

Private Investigations. All Work Strictly Confidential. There was an address and a telephone number. I went out and flagged a taxi.

The office of Daniel Morris was on the fifth floor of a tall building close to the Square. I got off the elevator and my heels clicked down a long corridor past rows of lettered doorways until I came to the one I wanted. I opened the door and stepped inside.

A woman was reclining in a swivel chair with her feet on the corner of a battered walnut desk. She had gray hair pulled back from her face into a wispy knot behind her head. I saw a lined, lean face, a thin nose, a sharp chin, bright blue eyes. She was wearing gold-rimmed glasses pinched to her nose with a black ribbon dangling down to a small gold watch pinned to the starched white blouse. Below the blouse was a long gray tweed skirt and an expanse of black cotton stockings. The feet on the desk were clad in scuffed brown-and-white saddle oxfords. A thin freckled hand held a cigarette in a long black holder.

"Howdy, honey," she said. She had a deep, pleasant voice.

I said: "I'm looking for Mr. Daniel Morris."

"I'm Daniel Morris," she said, waving her cigarette holder. "In everything but name. Dan just does the leg work." She swung her feet to the floor and hunched her thin shoulders over the desk. Her small black eyes looked at me with bright interest. "What kind of trouble have you got?"

"It's about a—a friend," I said. "You see— If you don't mind, I'd rather speak to Mr. Morris."

"Dammit, honey," the woman said. "I told you I was the boss here. And don't give me that 'friend' hogwash. What kind of a mess are *you* in?"

I could feel my face reddening, and the hair at the back of my neck felt damp. I clutched my purse tightly, and I suddenly wished that I was back in my room in Haynesville, Ohio. And then I thought of Walter Cochran hiding in a hotel room with a murder charge hanging over his head.

I said to the woman: "It's really very confidential. If you don't mind—"

She sighed, took off her glasses, and rubbed the sharp bridge of her nose. "All right, honey," she said wearily. "I suppose you've heard that Dan's got red hair and is six-foot-two in his bare feet." She turned her head and shouted at a door behind her desk: "Dan!"

A deep voice from beyond the door said: "Yes?"

The thin woman carefully laid her cigarette over an ash tray, cupped two freckled hands to her mouth, and yelled: "Get the hell in her, you rat. There's a dame to see you." She winked at me and pinched her glasses back on her nose.

The door opened, and a man entered the office. His hair was more of a bronze color than red, and his eyes were blue, with heavy reddish brows above them. His face was broad, bony, and his short nose was a little crooked. He grinned at the thin woman, and I saw that his white teeth were a little crooked, too. A thin white scar ran from a corner of his mouth across his firm chin. He was not wearing a coat, and a green knited tie was knotted loosely beneath his unbuttoned shirt collar.

Still smiling, he said to me: "Don't mind Grace, Miss. She thinks she's a gun moll. Did you want to see me?"

I nodded silently, and for the first time I saw that he had a big blue-steel revolver in his hand. In the other hand he held a small can of oil. He saw my eyes on the gun, and he placed it on the desk with the can of oil beside it.

"Here, Grace," he said. "Make yourself useful."

She picked up the gun, clicked open the cylinder, saw that it was not loaded, snapped it shut. Then she pointed the weapon at the wall, squinted one eye, and clicked the trigger rapidly.

"Bang, bang," the big man said. "Feed the rats lead."

The woman laughed, and said to me: "You know, honey, I've been in the detective business for two years now—ever since Dan got out of the Marines—and I ain't shot a man yet. All he lets me do is run down missing girls and talk drunken wives into going home to their husbands and kids. No excitement, no glamour, no nothing. I may as well be back on the farm in Michigan."

Dan Morris smiled down at her. "The

next man I have to kill—I'll let you do it." He nodded at me and held the door open to the inner office. I stood up and walked through it. I sat down on a straight wooden chair, and he leaned on a desk.

"We really don't need two rooms," he said, "but they go with the lease, and so we use them. What can I do for you?"

I told him as quickly as I could all that had happened since the afternoon before when Holly Howard's call had come to my desk. I didn't leave anything out.

WHEN I had finished, he nodded slowly. "I know about this, of course. It's in the papers, and on the radio. A description of your friend—Cochran?—has been broadcast all over the state." He hesitated, and looked at his fingernails. Then he said: "You say this Cochran is just your boss. Murder is bad stuff—why get yourself mixed up on it?"

"I wanted to help him," I said. "I know that he couldn't do a thing like that—killing that girl. And after I got up her, and talked to him— Well, I couldn't run out on him. He made me leave, and he thinks that I'm on my way back to Haynesville, but if I can help him."

He said abruptly: "Are you in love with him?"

I felt my face flush, and I looked down at my hands. "I don't think so. No, of course not. It's just that I admire him, and respect him. When you work with a man for several years you get to know pretty well what kind of a person he is. He—"

Morris held up a hand. "All right. I just asked. But whether he's innocent or not, the police want him, and it's my duty to notify them."

Sudden fear plucked at my heart, and I stood up. You wouldn't!"

He gave me a slow, crooked smile. "You certainly are a trusting gal—coming to me, a stranger, with a story like that."

"I never met a—a private detective before," I said. "And your ad in the directory said, 'Strictly Confidential' "

He smiled a little grimly. "Sure. But withholding information about a murder suspect—" He sighed. "I won't go to the police—at least, not until I check into it a little. I think you're telling this

straight. I suppose you want me to go to Paradise Beach tonight, try to find out who wrote that note, see what I can dig up to clear Cochran? Is that it?"

My knees felt weak, and I sank down to the chair again. I nodded, and opened my purse. "Your fee," I said. "How much?" And then I remembered that Walter had all my money.

He shook his head. "There isn't enough money in Cleveland to pay for this kind of a job. But I'll talk to Cochran. My regular rate is twenty-five dollars a day, and expenses. You don't have to pay me now."

"You'll help, then?" I asked him.

"Sure," he said carelessly. "I'll give it a whirl."

It was what I had wanted him to say ever since I'd met him. And yet, when he finally said it, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was nice to know that I wasn't alone any more. I started to say something, I don't know what, and then I stopped and fumbled with my purse.

Dan Morris put a gentle hand on my arm. "You've had a tough time—would you like a drink?"

I shook my head, not daring to speak. It was like one time when I was a little girl lost in a ripe wheat field, and everywhere I turned there was a solid wall of wheat, over my head, and I cried and wandered aimlessly, trying to find my way out of the jungle of wheat.

Then I looked up and I saw my father, looming over me, his arms out-stretched. He carried me out of the wheat, holding me tight across his big chest, and I cried harder than ever because I was too happy to laugh. I felt a little like that now, and I swallowed hard and looked up into Dan Morris's face.

"Where did you get that hat?" he asked, smiling. "It's cute—like a bicycle wheel without the spokes." He turned away. "Wait here," he said, and entered the outer office.

I heard him talking on the telephone. "George, this is Dan. . . . Yeah. . . . Anything break on that Howard kill?" There was a brief silence, and then I heard his voice again. "Okay. Thanks, George. . . . What? . . . Sure, I owe you a beer." He laughed, and I heard the click of the receiver.

He came back into the inner office, his big hard-looking hand tightening the knot of his tie. "All right, Miss. Here we go." He took a tan camel's hair jacket from a rack, put it on, and picked up a gray gabardine topcoat. He didn't wear a hat. I followed him to the outer office.

The thin woman handed him the blue revolver. "Your rod is full of slugs, chum," she said flashing him a dark look. "Give 'em hell."

He dropped the gun into his jacket pocket, and patted her cheek. "Thanks, Grace. I'll call in around seven. Will you be here?"

She nodded, and Morris moved to the door, held it open for me. I stepped out into the hall. Just before he closed the door, I heard the thin woman say softly: "Dan."

"Yeah?"

"Be careful, boy."

His rugged profile was toward me, and I saw him wink at her. Then he closed the door, and we walked down the hall together. As we stepped into the elevator, he said: "I can't keep Grace from worrying. My folks are dead, and she raised me since I was a kid. She's a sister of my mother's."

"So your Aunt Grace is your secretary?" I said.

"Secretary, hell. She owns half the business. Before the war I worked for a big national detective agency. When I got out of the Marines, I wanted to go into business for myself. She sold her farm in Michigan, and went in with me. She's swell."

We got out on the street floor, and he led me down a long corridor and out a door at the bottom of a short flight of steps. We were in a rear courtyard filled with parked cars. He held open the door of a black convertible, and I got in. He climbed in beside me, started the motor, and backed the car expertly out of the court. We headed south, away from the lake.

"Where are we going?" I asked him.

"Will Cochran keep a while?" he said.

"I mean—he won't skip out?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. He said he was going to stay in hiding for a day or two."

"We'll take a chance," Morris said.

"First, we're going to see a lady named Mrs. Sam Benedict. You may recall that her husband is the nightclub owner who brought Holly Howard from California to Cleveland. You also may recall that Mrs. Benedict visited Miss Howard shortly before she was killed.

"The police found that out from the Hotel Madrid's desk clerk. They've questioned Mrs. Benedict, but she is not under arrest. A pal of mine on the force told me that much." He took a package of cigarettes from the glove compartment and shook one out for me. I took one, and he lighted it for me, and one for himself.

"Furthermore," he went on, "this Julian Laval, Miss Howard's—uh—agent, accompanied her to Cleveland and is at present occupying the room adjoining hers—the room where she was killed. Laval claims that he was not in the hotel at the time of shooting, but was at Sam Benedict's nightclub discussing the terms of Miss Howard's contract. Laval's alibi holds water—Benedict has verified his statement."

"Oh," I said.

He gave me a quick glance. "Cheer up," he said, and I thought there was faint hard edge to his voice. "The most they can do to your friend is send him to the chair."

I looked at him blankly, and he slammed on the brakes and stopped the convertible a foot behind a car waiting for a traffic light. "I'm sorry," he said, not looking at me. "It's just that a girl like you shouldn't have to be mixed up in a mess like this."

"I want to help Walter," I said. "It's the least—"

"Oh, sure," he said, and he jerked the car into gear.

He didn't talk after that, and neither did I, and pretty soon we turned off the traffic-clogged street and headed up a winding drive past far-spaced houses with lots of lawn. Morris stopped the convertible in front of a sprawling white house with wide windows and evergreens around the front door. He got out, opened the door for me, and went up a curving flagstone walk. He pressed a bell button. Almost immediately a woman opened the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Double-Cross in Paradise

SHE was wearing black silk pajamas, low in front and tight across the hips. There was a cocktail glass in her hand and a cigarette in her mouth. She could have been thirty or fifty—she was that kind of a woman. Her hair was carbon paper black, clear to the roots, and it hung in loose folds over her shoulders, framing a narrow smooth face, expertly made up in a mask of beauty. She had bright black eyes shadowed by long lashes—the kind you paste on—and a thin, slightly curved nose.

She looked at the two of us, and said insolently: "Well?"

"Mrs. Benedict?" Dan Morris asked politely.

She narrowed her eyes, and her lower lip protruded a little. "You police?"

"Kind of," Dan said. "Do you know Miss Holly Howard?"

The woman laughed harshly, threw back her head and drank the contents of the glass in her hand. Then she flung the glass violently away from her, and I heard it crash on the walk behind us. "Don't kid me," she said. "Please don't kid me, darlings. Holly Howard is dead. I hope her soul burns in hell."

Dan Morris said: "Madam, is that nice?"

She stretched out a thin hand and supported herself against the doorway. She fixed Dan with a steady glare. "Listen, Police-Kind-Of," she said. "Was it nice for her to make a play for Sam? Did he have to go clear to Hollywood to get her to sing at his lousy joint—when he can get a hundred better warblers than her right here in town? Did he have to stay in her hotel room until five o'clock yesterday morning to discuss a contract?"

She threw back her head, and the harsh laugh rang out again. "What kind of a contract do you call that?" She lurched toward me and pointed a red-tipped finger. "You're a woman—what would you do with a husband like that? I ask you, woman. Tell me."

"I—I don't know," I said.

She laughed again. "Don't know," she said in a mocking voice. "Little Brown

Eyes don't know. Well, I know—knew. I went to see her last night, and I told the little husband-chaser what I thought of her. She just laughed at me. I could have killed her, if I'd had a gun. But some lovely person did it for me—some lovely darling with a husband, no doubt." She leaned toward me, the cigarette in her mouth trailing smoke across her eyes. "Do you have a husband, Little Brown Eyes?"

Dan grasped my arm and said: "Come on."

I followed him down the walk to the car. As we drove away I heard Mrs. Benedict shout at us: "Put it in the paper—I don't care!"

Dan made a U-turn and headed back down the drive. "Nice," he said. "Charming person."

"But, look," I said. "If she was in Holly Howard's room—"

He grinned sideways at me. "Don't wrinkle those pretty brows like that. The police are watching her. Look back, across the drive, opposite the Benedict house."

I looked back, and I saw a black coupe parked where Dan had indicated.

"They probably got a man in back, too," Dan said. "Now watch."

I glanced backwards again. The coupe had moved—it was right behind us. It swerved out, and the man behind the wheel motioned to Dan. Dan chuckled softly, eased the convertible to a stop and rolled his window down. The coupe stopped too, and a big man with a round fat face got out and leaned on the window of the convertible.

He said: "Hello, Dan. Are you a friend of Mrs. Benedict's?"

Dan shook his head. "Just curious. This is Miss Garry. Sergeant Dilworth."

The fat man looked at me and touched a stubby forefinger to his hat brim. Then he shot a glance back at the Benedict house and said to Dan: "She's getting drunk, ain't she?"

"Very," Dan said. "And she hopes Holly Howard burns in hell."

Sergeant Dilworth grinned a little. "Yeah—she told me too. Are you working on this?"

"Slightly—maybe."

"Who for—Benedict?" the sergeant asked. "I hear he's posted a thousand

dollar reward for the capture of the killer."

Dan laughed. "Maybe I *am* working for Benedict. Are the boys tailing this Julian Laval?"

The sergeant shrugged his fat shoulders. "Why? After all, this Howard babe was his meal ticket, and his alibi still holds up. Benedict backs him up on it. We're looking for a tall guy in a gray suit, glasses, and a short hair-cut. Some fun."

Dan raced his motor a little, and slid the convertible into gear. "Well, it's been nice seeing you, Sergeant."

The fat man stepped back and said: "If I really wanted to know why you're snooping around here, I could damn easy find out."

"Sure," Dan said. "So long." The convertible slid forward down the drive and left on a green light. Dan drove fast, his gaze fixed on the traffic around us.

I sat quietly beside him, and tried to relax a little. I suddenly felt very tired, and I thought of my comfortable room in Haynesville a hundred miles away. The hands on the clock on the dash in front of me stood at ten minutes past six o'clock, and I wondered what Walter Cochran was doing in his lonely room at the Erie Hotel. Suddenly, I wanted to go there, to see if he was all right—it seemed like such a long time since I'd left him.

And yet, it seemed strange to be worrying about Walter Cochran. He was so calm, and so competent, a man who could handle any situation with confidence and tact. I remembered how he had kissed me, and I wondered how it would be back at the office, when this nightmare was over, if it ever were to be over. I thought about a lot of things, and I tried to imagine what kind of a girl Holly Howard had been, and pretty soon the convertible slowed down and swung in to the curb.

I SAW black letters on a glass door which read: *Erie Hotel*. I looked quickly at Dan Morris, but his face was expressionless as he wheeled the car into a parking space a half block beyond the hotel. We got out to the sidewalk, and he took my arm. "I want to meet this Cochran," he said. "He must be quite a boy."

I was suddenly doubtful. After all, Walter had told me to go home. Dan saw the expression on my face, and he said: "Don't worry. I'll handle it."

We entered the small lobby. A gray-haired clerk glanced up absently at us and resumed his reading of the evening paper. We got into the elevator, and I said, "Two," to a tall, angular boy in a maroon uniform.

We reached our floor, and Dan followed me down the hall to two-twelve. I knocked softly on the door and waited. Nothing happened, and I knocked again. Nothing but silence from beyond the door. Dan looked a question at me, and then he shook the knob.

A muffled voice from within said: "Yes?"

"It's Ellen, Walter," I said.

There was silence again, and then the door opened slowly. Walter stood there, and I saw him stiffen at the sight of Dan. I stepped inside, and Dan followed me. Walter locked the door, and turned to face us, a watchful, puzzled expression on his face.

I said quickly: "Walter, this is Mr. Morris. He is going to try and help you."

Walter's gaze flicked from me to Dan, and there was a cold look in his eyes. "Yes?" he said quietly, watching Dan.

"Relax," Dan said to him. "Miss Garry has told me all about it. In kind of a spot, huh?"

"Who are you?" Walter asked in a tight voice.

"A private detective—but don't worry about it."

Walter said to me: "Ellen, I told you—"

"I couldn't go," I broke in. "I want to help you."

Walter smiled grimly and took a package of cigarettes from a pocket of his gray flannel trousers. He struck a match, and the flame made hollow shadows in his unshaven cheeks.

Dan Morris sat down on the edge of the bed. "Miss Garry gave me the high spots," he said, "but maybe you'd better go over it again. Do you mind?"

Dan lifted his wide shoulders in a weary gesture. "Why not?" he said. He sat down in a chair opposite Dan. "You two seem to have taken over." He smiled

faintly, and then he began to talk in a steady, quiet voice. He told Dan all about it, just the way he had told it to me.

When he had finished, Dan said: "It's a rough deal, but you can't hole up here forever. It looks like you're framed real pretty for the lady's murder."

Walter nodded silently.

Dan said: "I'll plant some fake money on the rock at Paradise Beach and see what turns up. If something doesn't break by morning, I'd advise you to turn yourself in—take a chance on the police by telling the truth. I'm risking my license by not tipping them off, but I promised Miss Garry—"

"I realize that," Walter broke in, "and I appreciate what you are trying to do for me. Even though I didn't ask for your help. And I suppose you're right. I—I" He paused, and ran a hand over his face. "I'll go to the police in the morning."

Dan nodded and stood up. "I think that would be best, but I'll see you later this evening." He glanced at his wrist watch, and I looked at my own. It was a quarter of seven in the evening. "It's twenty miles out to Paradise Beach," Dan went on. "I'll grab something to eat, and go on out there. By the way, may I see that note?"

Walter took a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Dan, who read it carefully and said: "Mind if I keep this?"

Walter shook his head, and lit another cigarette. Dan put the paper in his coat pocket and moved to the door. I followed him. Dan paused and looked at me. "Where are you going?"

"With you," I said.

He shook his head slowly from side to side. "I'm afraid you wouldn't enjoy it."

"I'm going," I said.

Dan looked across the room at Walter. A faint smile crossed Walter's lips as he gazed at me. "That's the kind of a girl she is, Morris," Walter said. "I've learned a lot about her in the last twenty-four hours. You can't get rid of her."

Dan said abruptly: "All right. Come on." He went out.

I turned to Walter. "I'll have them bring you some dinner."

He moved over to me and put his hands on my shoulders. "It was swell of you, Ellen," he said, "but you shouldn't have

done it. If I ever get out of this. . . ."

I smiled at him, aware that Dan Morris was waiting for me impatiently in the hall. I moved toward the door, and Walter dropped his hands. "Be careful," he said in a low voice.

I nodded silently, and went out.

DAN MORRIS and I had dinner in a little tavern off the highway east of Cleveland. He had three Manhattans, and I drank one Old Fashioned. Dan didn't talk much, and there was a faintly sullen expression on his face. We were drinking our coffee, when I happened to glance at the clock on the wall back of the bar. It was twenty minutes past seven.

"You forgot to call your aunt," I told him. "Remember?"

He snapped his fingers. "That's right. Grace'll be chewing her finger-nails." He got up and walked back to a phone booth beyond the bar.

I went back to the lady's room, washed my face and applied fresh make-up. There were bluish hollows beneath my eyes, and a thin strained look around my mouth. For the first time since Walter had called me that morning, I thought about my appearance. I combed my hair, and I inspected my stockings for runs. I decided that my clothes looked all right, but I felt as though I had been living in them for a week.

When I got back to the booth I found Dan folding a newspaper into a small bundle and tying it with a red cord, "Bait" he said. "That's supposed to be two thousand bucks. You might call it a ticket to Paradise Beach." He laughed shortly, put the newspaper in his pocket and stood up. He slung his topcoat over his arm and said to me: "How about you waiting here?"

I stood up hastily. "No."

He sighed and moved to the door. "I guess Cochran was right," he said.

I followed him, feeling like a tag-along kid sister, but I had started this thing and something inside of me kept prodding me to see it through.

Ten minutes later Dan stopped the car on a dark lane leading off the highway. As soon as he shut off the motor, I could hear the wind moaning in off the lake. The phosphorous hands of the clock on the

dash pointed to ten minutes of eight. It was very dark.

Dan Morris was a black bulk on the seat beside me. "Paradise Beach is just below us," he said in a low voice. "Now, listen. If I'm not back here by ten minutes after eight, or if you hear a commotion down there, take the car and get the hell back to the tavern and call the police."

I could feel my heart pushing upward to my throat, but I said: "I'm going with you."

"Are you nuts?" he said harshly. "What's the matter with you—all this brave girl stuff? Does he mean that much to you?"

"I—I like him," I said. "I admire him."

"Admire him? For what? For dragging you into a private love affair which back-fired on him? For getting you involved in a murder rap? Are you in love with him, or what?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. I just sat there looking out into the darkness.

There was silence in the car for maybe a minute. Then Dan stirred, and said: "Well, here's where I earn my money." I felt a cold gust of air as he opened the car door.

I looked toward him. The outline of his head was a shadowy blur. Suddenly he leaned over me, and I felt his hand on my shoulder. I didn't move. His cheek brushed mine, and his mouth was against my lips. He kissed me long and hard. And then suddenly he was gone, and I reached out a hand for him, but I couldn't touch him, and I was afraid.

"Dan," I said.

"The tavern," he said softly from somewhere in the darkness. "In fifteen minutes, or if you hear anything." I heard the click of the car door as he closed it, and I was alone in the dark. I said, "Dan," again, but I realized that I was speaking in a whisper.

I waited, and the clock on the dash ticked off the minutes. After what seemed like a long time I lit a cigarette and rolled the window down a little to let out the smoke. I could hear the wind, a lonesome moaning sound, and I shivered a little. I put out the cigarette, and rolled up the window.

And in that instant I heard it—a loud crackling sound from down on the beach. I opened the door, and the wind struck my face. I couldn't hear anything but the sound of the wind. And then, from somewhere to the right of me, I heard the faint roar of a car motor. I closed the door, and I sat very still, digging my fingernails into my palms. I remembered Dan Morris' instructions, but still I sat, straining my eyes staring into the darkness.

The door of the convertible suddenly jerked open, and Dan's voice said: "It's me, honey."

I began to breathe again, and I think I laughed a little wildly.

He sat down behind the wheel and switched on the dash light. I looked at him, and his broad rugged face was all shadows and high-lights. There was a smear of blood across his jaw. I stared at it, unable to speak.

He turned his head and saw my stare. His teeth flashed in the faint light. "Just nicked me," he said. "Why didn't you do what I told you?"

"You're hurt," I said.

He reached over and patted my hand. "You're quite a girl. Thanks for waiting for me." He pressed the starter and backed out of the lane. As we headed down the highway toward town, he said, his eyes on the road: "We're in kind of a hurry now." The car's motor rose to a high whine.

"What—what happened?" I asked.

He spoke quickly, without turning his head. "I put the package on the rock beside the bath house. Then I went back the way I had come—but I circled around and went back to the beach again, and hid behind the bath house. I saw somebody cross the beach to the rock and pick up the package. It was damn dark—he was just a moving shadow.

"I sneaked along the bath house to get a better look, and I heard a voice say: 'It's here, Julian.' I started to creep up behind the guy who spoke, but he must have heard me. The next thing I knew he was shooting at me, and a slug nicked my jaw. Knocked me goofy for a second. When I came out of it, I heard a scrambling on the rocks leading up from the beach, and I let fly with a couple of shots.

But they got to a car and cleared out.”
 “Julian?” I said.

“Yeah. Julian Laval, Holly Howard’s agent. This is a non-stop trip to the Hotel Madrid.”

I huddled down in the seat and watched the lights of the suburbs flash by. We entered the city, and after a while I saw a big red-and-white awning over the sidewalk. On the sides of the awning were the words *Hotel Madrid*. The convertible slammed to a stop, and Dan got out and spoke to a uniformed doorman. “Park it, Mac,” I heard him say. “Someplace handy.” I saw him slip a bill into the doorman’s hand.

Dan entered the revolving door of the hotel. I jumped out of the convertible and ran after him. He walked with long strides across the lobby, spoke briefly to a desk clerk, and headed for the elevators. I caught him just before the elevator door clicked shut.

He looked at me absently, and then watched the floor indicator. I leaned against the wall, feeling dizzy and a little faint. The elevator stopped, and Dan moved swiftly out and strode down a carpeted hall. I had to almost run to keep up with him. He stopped at a door, and turned to me.

“Stay here,” he snapped. “I mean it.”

He tried the door. It was unlocked, and he stood at one side and kicked it open. He waited a second, and I saw the gun in his hand. Then he moved into the room. I took a deep breath and went in after him. Immediately I wished I hadn’t.

Facing the door was a man seated in a big brocaded chair. His legs were spread wide apart and his arms hung limply to the floor. His head was turned, his cheek against the back of the chair. He was a dark, smooth-haired man with a sharp profile and a thin black mustache. A dark brown felt hat and a heavy blue overcoat lay on the floor beside the chair. The man’s gray tweed coat was flung wide, and his white shirt wasn’t white any more. It was a deep bright red from his chin to his belt buckle.

I clung to the door while Dan moved forward and reached into the man’s inside coat pocket. His hand came out with a wallet, and I saw him looking at the cards in the cellophane compartments. He

turned quickly to me and said one word: “Laval.”

I could feel my body shaking, and I clung to the door more tightly. I started to speak, but no sound came out.

Dan’s gaze flicked around the room, and suddenly he moved toward me. He picked up something from the floor at my feet, and I saw his lips tighten. I saw that he held a match folder in his hand. He handed it to me. It was black and silver. On the cover were the words: *Club Flamingo. Liquors, Cocktails, Dinners. Floor Show Nightly. Samuel Benedict, Proprietor.*

“The old double-cross,” Dan said softly. “A sweet little double-cross.” He grabbed my arm. “Come on, honey. I’m taking you back to your true love—and then I’ve got work to do.

CHAPTER FOUR

One Step From Freedom

THERE was a dim bulb burning in the tiny lobby of the Erie Hotel. The same lanky elevator boy took us up to Walter’s floor. I knocked on the door, and Walter’s voice said: “Yes?”

“It’s us,” I said.

The door opened, and Dan and I stepped quickly inside. Walter closed and locked the door behind us. He looked more haggard and weary than ever.

“This room is driving me nuts,” he said, and he crossed to a table. I saw a bottle of whiskey, a bowl of ice, soda water and glasses. “When the boy brought my dinner, I had him bring some whiskey. Drink, you two?”

Dan said: “Sure.”

“We’ll all have a drink,” Walter said, and he began to fuss with the whiskey and glasses. The lamp beside the table cast a yellow light over his lean stubbly face and glinted on the glasses. His white shirt was soiled looking, and his brown tweed trousers were wrinkled, but he still managed to appear calm and at ease.

I took off my hat and coat and sat down in a chair and watched him. I wasn’t sorry for what I had tried to do for him. But in the back of my brain I began to worry a little about what I was going to do—stay in Cleveland or catch a late bus for

Haynesville, or what. But I pushed the thoughts out of my mind and took the glass that Walter handed me.

Walter handed Dan Morris a glass, and then lifted his own drink in a kind of grave, formal gesture. "Here's to us," he said quietly. "All of us." We all sipped our drinks, rather solemnly. Walter said to Dan: "How did you make out?"

"Not too bad," Dan said. "I think maybe you can go home tomorrow."

I saw a sudden, eager light in Walter's eyes. I think it made up for all I had been through since he had called me the evening before. I took a big swallow of the whiskey-and-soda, and it made my eyes water. But I felt suddenly happy and care-free, and I looked at Dan and smiled.

But he was watching Walter, and there was a faint grim twist to his mouth. Or maybe it was just my imagination. "You're lucky," Dan said to Walter. "Lucky as hell—in a lot of ways." He rattled the ice in his glass, and looked at me. "You owe a lot to Miss Garry, here."

"You don't have to tell me," Walter said in his quiet voice.

Dan drained his glass and placed it carefully on a table. "Well," he said. "It's been nice meeting you two. You can mail my check to the office." He moved to the door.

"Wait," Walter said. "What happened? What did you find out?"

Dan jerked his head at me. "Ask her. I'm in kind of a hurry." He opened the door.

Walter took a step toward him. "But, Morris, I want to thank you."

"Don't bother," Dan said. "It was just another job. 'Anyhow—' he moved through the door and stood in the hall—"I did it for her." The door closed softly.

I ran to the door, opened it. "Dan—wait. I'm going with you." But the hall was empty, and I heard the whir of the elevator going down.

I moved slowly back into the room and closed the door behind me.

Walter was watching me, a half smile on his face. "He's quite a guy—that Dan Morris."

The room seemed very silent, and I looked down into my glass. I didn't say anything. In my mind I was following Dan down to the street, into the black

convertible, and—Where? To Sam Benedict? To the police? Back to the hotel room where Julian Laval sat stiffly in a chair with his eyes open? I remembered the wind moaning in over Paradise Beach, and I felt Dan's lips on my face once more, and his deep voice echoed in my brain: *What's the matter with you? . . . All this brave girl stuff. . . . does he mean that much to you? . . . Well, here's where I earn my money . . .*

"Isn't he?" Walter said.

"What?"

He laughed a little and turned away from me. As he refilled his glass, he said: "You've been wonderful, Ellen."

"Sure," I said. "I'm a brave girl." I held out my empty glass. "Am I an orphan?"

He took the glass and smiled down at me. "You've had a tough day," he said. "You look tired."

I moved closer to him, and it seemed already that Dan Morris was just a shadowy figure in the dim past. I hoped I could keep him that way, and I said to Walter: "A little drink will fix me up fine."

His face was suddenly serious. "Look, Ellen, there's a midnight bus back to Haynesville—"

"Tomorrow," I said. "Tomorrow, Walter." The floor of the room seemed to be moving up and down ever so slightly. It seemed like such a long time since I had left Haynesville that morning, and so much had happened. All I wanted to do was to curl up somewhere and sleep and forget.

Suddenly Walter laughed. I saw him pouring whiskey into my glass. He turned and handed me my glass. "What did Morris find out?"

"Benedict," I said. "Let's don't talk about it."

"Benedict?" His eyes were puzzled. "But—why?"

I took a long swallow of the drink. "To heck with it," I said, and I remembered that I waved my glass. "Dan will tell you all about it. You sleep on the bed. I'll take the floor. I'm an old floor-sleeper from way back."

He leaned over me and patted my cheek. "You're cute," he said. "Cute as hell. Did I ever tell you before?"

"No," I said. "And it's about time."

He smiled, and suddenly I saw that the tense look had left his eyes. I smiled up at him, holding my glass with both hands.

"If I'm having a guest," he said, "I guess I'd better shave. Help yourself to the liquor." He went into the bathroom and left the door ajar.

But I didn't help myself to any more liquor. I had plenty in the glass in my hands. I hunted a chair and sat down. I sat very still and looked around the room. My eyes didn't focus very well.

Then I saw Walter's topcoat lying across the bed. It had been there all the time, and I had known it was there, but now there was something about it that made me stare at it, blinking my eyes. There was something in the pocket, protruding a few inches. A newspaper, folded into a package, with a red cord tied around it.

I SAT very still, and suddenly it seemed that little mice with ice-cold feet were running up and down my spine. The glass fell from my hand and thudded to the carpet. It didn't break, but the ice rattled and made a loud noise in the quiet room.

Walter appeared in the doorway of the bathroom. He was naked from the waist up, and he held a towel in his hand. He looked at me, at the glass on the floor, and his gaze followed mine to the newspaper in the pocket of his coat. He stood motionless for a second, and then he moved slowly into the room.

I didn't want to speak, but the words came out anyway. "That newspaper—it's the one that Dan—"

Walter didn't speak. He moved a little to my right, took a brown tweed coat from the back of a chair and put it over his naked shoulders. Then he crossed to the bed, picked up the topcoat and slung it over his arm. The edge of the newspaper showed plainly. Then he walked carefully around me to the corner of the room where the bag I had brought him from Haynesville still lay. He picked up the bag and moved silently to the door. He turned to face me, and there was a blue-black gun in his hand.

"I'm sorry, Ellen," he said softly. "Sorry as hell. Maybe we could have made pretty music together—but I forgot

about that damn newspaper of Morris'. I intended to get rid of it, but I've been pretty busy tonight. Do you want to hear about it?"

I didn't speak. I couldn't

He smiled a sad smile. "You're a nice girl, Ellen. You've got a right to know, and it's the last chance I'll ever have to tell anybody. I really did leave my wallet in Holly's room tonight. When I went back to get it, Julian Laval was there. She had sworn that she was through with him, that he was in California.

"I listened at the door, and I heard them laughing—about me! I knocked, and she let me in. I killed her. I've known for a long time that I would have to kill her sooner or later. I wanted to kill Laval, too, but he got away, through the adjoining door to their rooms. I let him go. I found him later, a little while ago, after I had secured a match cover from Benedict's night club to plant by Laval's body to confuse the police.

"The clothes you brought me enabled me to go out and do that without being picked up. I hated to drag you into it, but there was nothing else I could do." He paused and smiled a little, watching me.

I felt as though I were someone else, some other girl, not me. I heard myself saying: "But the note about your wallet—?"

He was still smiling faintly. "I wrote it," he said quietly. "To throw suspicion off myself. I paid the elevator boy to deliver it while you were here, to convince you that I was innocent, so that you wouldn't give me away. All I wanted from you was a change of clothes and some money, and if you had left when I wanted you to—"

He sighed, and I saw his fingers tighten on the gun in his hand. "But you insisted on helping me, without my knowledge, and I couldn't stop you. Now it's too late. Far too late." He backed towards the door, and the muzzle of the gun tilted slightly upward. "Good-by, Ellen. Thanks for everything."

I said in a choked voice: "Then *you* went to Paradise Beach—after you killed Laval. You were the one who shot at Dan?"

He looked at me with bleak eyes, and

he nodded slowly. "That's right, Ellen," he said in his sad voice. "I changed my clothes right after you and Morris left tonight. I called the Hotel Madrid, learned that Laval was in his room, and I went there first. I couldn't let him live—after I had killed Holly. He got down on his knees—and I enjoyed it.

"Really I did. I shot him while he was on his knees, and then I put him in the chair so that I could see him better—dead, like that. Then I went out to Paradise Beach to wait for Morris, and I put on a little act for him, about making believe that there were two of us and that I was speaking to Laval.

"But when Morris started for me, I couldn't take the chance of having him recognize me, and so I shot at him to cover up my getaway. I'm sorry I hit him—I didn't intend to. He was to have been the chief witness in my defense—but it doesn't matter now. If only you hadn't seen that damned newspaper."

He sighed deeply, reached behind him, and switched off the lights. The room was dark, except for the light shining in from the bathroom, and he was a dark shadow against the wall by the door.

"Turn around, Ellen," he said in a tight, queer voice. "Face the wall."

I didn't move, and I could hear Walter's labored breathing. I just stood there, realizing at last what he was going to do. I had tried to help him, and in doing so I had learned too much, far too much, and once again I was a little girl lost in a wheat field, only it was worse, much worse . . .

"Quickly," Walter said desperately. "Please. Turn around."

A voice spoke from behind me. It was a harsh, familiar voice.

"Hold it, chum."

Walter turned to face the voice, and I saw flame leap from his hand, and the room jumped with the sound of gunfire. It seemed to me that the room was filled with one deafening roar, all around me, shaking the walls. I began to tremble violently. I saw Walter lunge forward, clutch at the bed and slide to the floor.

A dark figure darted across the light from the bathroom, and for a second I saw the bright red hair and rugged features of Dan Morris. I saw him kneel over the body of Walter by the bed, and

his voice snapped out of the darkness at me.

"Lights!"

I stumbled to the wall like a woman in a trance, and my fingers found the switch. I blinked in the sudden glare, and I saw Walter lying on the floor by the bed. His coat was flung open, and I saw the red stain of his skin, low down, by his belt, on his left side. Sweat glistened on his scalp beneath his short black hair.

"You were going to kill her," Dan Morris said harshly.

Walter's voice was weak. "Sure. What else could I do? Where in hell did you come from?"

"From the room next to this one," Dan said grimly. "I rented it. There's an adjoining door connecting the bathroom. I got the key from the elevator boy—the one you paid to push that fake note of yours under your door. You never lost your wallet."

"Of course not," I heard Walter say. "Would I be that dumb? Is it bad, where you got me?"

"No," Dan said. "Not too bad."

"Why couldn't you have done a better job of it?" Walter said in a plaintive voice. "How about trying again?"

Dan said something, but I didn't hear it. There was a banging on the door, and Dan stood up, crossed the room and picked up the telephone. The banging on the door got louder. Dan jerked his head at me, and his lips moved.

And then it seemed as though the room was getting dark. The walls began to tilt inward, and the floor swayed up and down. I felt myself slipping downward along the wall, and I felt the carpet against my face.

* * *

I opened my eyes, and the room was filled with confusion. Blue-uniformed men were moving about, and a hard-faced man with a cigar between his teeth was shouting orders, and blinding white lights were flashing. I knew I was lying on a bed, and I felt as though I wanted to lie there forever. I closed my eyes. After a while the shouting and the noise stopped. A door slammed, and then it was quiet.

When I opened my eyes again, a thin

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Robert Martin

woman in a starched white blouse was leaning over me. Black-ribbed glasses were pinched to her thin nose, and in her mouth was a long black cigarette holder. The smoke from the cigarette burned my eyes. "Feeling better now, honey?" the woman said in a deep voice.

I smiled up at her, and nodded my head. Then I saw Dan Morris standing at the foot of the bed. The light glinted on his bronze hair, and his crooked white teeth showed in a grin. It was nice, seeing him there, and I smiled at him. He came around and sat on the bed beside me and took one of my hands in his. His hand felt big and smooth and warm.

"You're going home with us," Dan said. "Tomorrow we'll all take the day off and go on a picnic. Grace will fry some chicken."

It seemed as though I couldn't stop smiling. And then suddenly I remembered and I began to tremble. Dan held my hand in a steady grasp.

"Take it easy," he said. "It's all over now."

"You—came back—?" I said.

He laughed. "Sure. Did you think I'd leave you here—with him? When I first saw Cochran this afternoon, he was wearing gray flannel slacks. When I came back here with you tonight, he had changed to brown tweed. I wondered about that. He wasn't supposed to go anywhere, no reason for him to change clothes. I figured he had been out, and I knew that he didn't dare be seen in the clothes described to the police—that's why he had you bring him those suits.

"And then I got to wondering about that Paradise Beach note arriving so pat. I had a little conference with the elevator boy, and for a twenty-dollar bill he told me that Cochran had paid him to slip the note under the door ten minutes after you arrived. Then I rented the room next to this one, got a key to the adjoining bathroom, came into the bathroom when Cochran went out and waited to hear what was going on.

I closed my eyes and I tried not to remember. But there were some things I wanted to remember—that moment in Dan's car at Paradise Beach, the light shining on his hair. I tried to remember

No Haven for Homicide

only the good and to shut out the bad. I must have remembered a lot of the good things, because a month later Dan Morris and I were married. Aunt Grace parked her cigarette holder long enough to be a bridesmaid, and Sergeant Dilworth was best man. We spent our honeymoon trailing a blackmailer for a Youngstown Steel tycoon who had written some indiscreet letters to a wise red-head. We caught both the red-head and her black-mailing boy friend in Cincinnati. It was wonderful.

THE END

(Continued from page 66)

ing Al's car and wearing some clothes of Al's. The meter reader was a stooge who'd been planted to supply the cops with an identification. The schoolgirls just happened by and when the meter reader identified Al's picture, they went along with it. Tomorrow the cops were to be tipped about the body in the ice-house. They'd find Mason and, because the ice had preserved the body, there'd be no check on when Al was killed.

"The cops would think they had Brackett's killing cleared and there'd be so much trouble for you Quinlans that the reform move would fold. When my confession came over the air, Brick was jolted. He wondered if the body had been hi-jacked and the Quinlans had stolen a march on him. He sent the boys out there to check. You know, angel, in some ways Brick was a very smart egg."

"Not smart enough to realize that some other smarter boy might come along."

Spain shrugged. "Well, that's murder for you. It's a very tricky business."

Mary Quinlan took one of his hands in both of hers. "Gee, Spain, I think you're swell. Do you have to go back?"

Spain looked down at the copper hair, the good jaw, the blue eyes. He thought of the Quinlan ice money. After that, he remembered how Mary Quinlan had been holding Al Mason's hand just about the same way. Then he thought that well—after all, Al Mason had seen it first. And that with two guys around that were spittin' images. . . .

He said: "Yeah, angel. Me for Chicago. Great town, Chi."

THE END

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MURDER BORN 3000 YEARS AGO

By JAMES G. MacCORMACK

BOW KUM was probably quite unaware, right up to the time she died a violent death, that she was the victim of a meeting between four old men who met 3000 years before her time. According to the legend, four men, after a tiring day beneath the broiling Cantonese sun, met at a well to drink and refresh themselves. They were total strangers when they gathered there, and their names were Low, Chu, Tching, and Quong. And as they sat and drank, they talked. They grew so fond of each other they decided never to part—and became known as the Four Brothers. It was a shadow of this fealty which hung over the dingy Mott Street room in New York's Chinatown, one sultry night in August, 1906.

But, let us not get ahead of our story. Bow Kum, being a girl, was in typical Oriental fashion deemed worthless. So, rather than spend money in raising her, her parents sold her to a slave trader in Shanghai for \$300. The trader saw in the pretty little girl a source of good income in ten years or less.

When Bow Kum was sixteen, her owner and tutor sold her to a wealthy merchant in San Francisco. The young girl understood her position—according to Oriental standards.

Her new owner was Low Hu Tong, who had paid \$3000 for Bow Kum—but hadn't reckoned with the San Francisco police. When Low's place was raided for narcotics, the police found Bow Kum. They asked her if she was his daughter. No! They asked her if she was his wife. No! But Low produced his bill of sale for Bow Kum.

There was a loud "Hmmm" and many a raised eyebrow among the good men of the San Francisco police force. Bow Kum promptly found herself in a home for wayward girls. Low attempted to get his money—or his girl—back. But the police

Murder Born 3000 Years Ago

told him to go and puff his pipe. Which the confused Oriental did.

Bow Kum was happy where she was, and soon met a nice young Chinese farmer near the home. It wasn't long before Bow Kum decided to marry Tchin Len. But Low Hu Tong was not a man to give up easily. Instead of giving his blessing, Low told Tchin to pay the \$3,000 before he married Low Kum, or return the girl—or else!

The newlyweds fled to the East and settled in New York's Chinatown.

But Low Hu Tong—remember his name is Low, and one of the four brothers who had a drink at the well 3,000 years ago was named Low—called the Four Brothers Tong in New York and explained his case to them. They understood and couldn't let a brother down, and so they approached Tchin Len and told him that Bow Kum must return to her owner. But Tchin Len was a member of the On Leongs, who were not four brothers and had never seen a well. The On Leongs warned the Four Brothers that if anything happened to Bow Kum, revenge would be three-fold.

Bow Kum kept strictly to her little apartment on Mott Street. One night, however, Tchin Len, as he climbed the stairs, saw the apartment light on, and the door ajar. He had warned Bow Kum to keep the door locked at all times. He rushed up the stairs and into the room.

Low Hu Tong hadn't collected his \$3,000, but he had paid off Tchin Len. Bow Kum lay on the floor, her throat quite neatly slit.

But vengeance was quick. The day following, a member of the Four Brothers was found quite dead in an alley near the corner of Mott and Pell. Another was found the next day and one more the day after that. Tong war had begun! Bow Kum's killing was the catalyst which brought over 100 deaths and thousands of dollars in property damage in the next four years. It took the Chinese Government and the American State Department to bring this tong war to a halt.

A meeting of four strangers 3000 years before brought death to Bow Kum, and death and destruction to hundreds more!

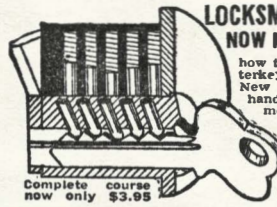
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SOLE OUT-WEARS LEATHER!

Richard Dermody

(Continued from page 36)

turns to me. "Hand over the loot, Pony Boy. We will follow our usual custom of dividing the take while it is still warm from the wallet."

I laugh and reach inside my coat. I jam on the brakes and pull over to the side of the road. I just sit there while the Doc and Watermelon-Head produce the bad language.

After a while my brain starts moving again and I step on the starter and shove the heap into a high gallop. It is fifty miles to the state line and the sooner we cross it the better. We are ten miles over the line before anyone says a word. Then Watermelon-Head leans forward and laughs.

"A tidy job," he says. "A tank-town tomato dips Pony Boy Allan for a cool ten grand. I feel sorry for this Dilworth Niffie. That dame will make short work of his bank unless he keeps all the dough in a vault."

The Doc nods. "I'm afraid Miss Muriel Klanck was a trifle too smart for us. I underestimated that young lady." He reaches into his own coat. "At least we have the initial payment of five thousand. That will cover our expenses and leave a slight profit."

I slow down the heap again. I remember suddenly that Muriel also grabs the Doc by the coat while we are on our way out of the Klanck homestead.

(Continued from page 72)

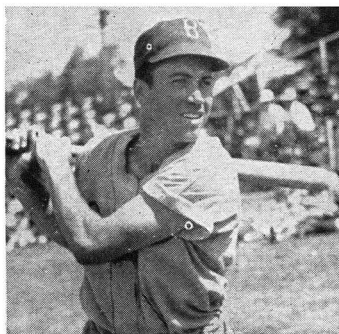
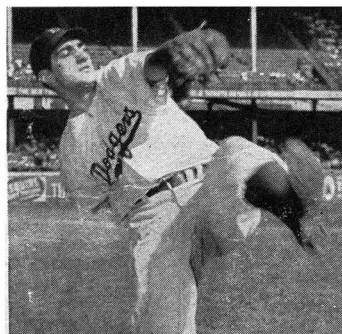
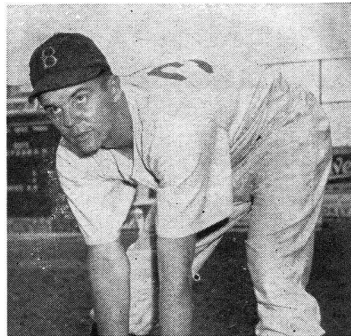
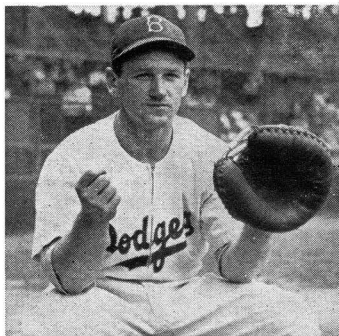
I told them. "The trouble was, she forgot the letter Lloyd had put in the mailbox."

"And Lloyd knew it was from her?"

"Maybe he recognized the envelope—you know he had been galloping around her place a bit. Maybe he didn't. That is something it is now too late to find out. Natcha can't say. She didn't know anymore what Lloyd had seen, what he was trying to remember, than we do now. But when he yelled that he knew who had robbed him she got rattled."

"I'm kind of sorry about it all," the bartender said. "We'll miss Natcha. Russia's gift to Sanctity Key. And one of my very best customers."

"Give me a small beer to cry into," I said.



TOP (L. TO R.): PETE REISER, BRUCE EDWARDS, EDDIE MIKSYS
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