

OCT. 1950



DIME DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE



25¢

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OCT.

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINATION LYNCH'S DETECTIVE FICTION

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by MEL COLTON



THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN
by TALMAGE POWELL

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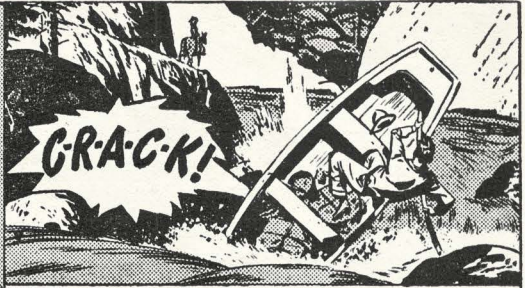
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LUCK WAS WITH TOM WHEN...



ON VACATION, TOM MAHONEY IS SHOOTING THE LAST AND MOST DANGEROUS RAPIDS IN HIS LONG TRIP THROUGH MAD CANYON WHEN . . .



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25¢ **DIME**
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Vol. 64

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The November issue will be out October 4th

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans,

Some of the oldest dodges in the world seem to keep finding new victims—which means that we always have to be alert and aware of the tricks that sly swindlers may try to pull.

That's why we try to keep you ahead of the swindlers' game—by printing information about the currently popular ruses, the new and the old in the racketeers' bundle of tricks.

Reading this column will regularly help you to keep ahead of the chiselers, for then you'll know what to expect. And besides—you can earn some extra money. For every letter you send in telling of the experiences you have had with con men of all kinds, and which we print as a warning to other readers—we'll send you \$5.00.

Of course, you'll understand that we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters because of the press of mail in the office. Neither can we return any letters unless they are accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes.

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

And now, let's see what's popular in chicanery:

No Fair Fare!

Dear Sir:

I'm employed as a taxi cab driver, have twenty years experience in this line. We get quite a few long hauls out of town. Most of these trips come after midnight. We are always on the lookout for these trips—especially when business in the city is slow. We work on commission and must pay the fares ourselves when we get beat out of them.

On these long trips, you should collect the fare in advance. But a lot of customers get insulted because you ask for the money before you go, and a good many times they will walk over to another driver and let him take them. This

either results in losing a good commission or taking a chance of a big loss.

Other drivers have told me about losing such fares, and I have just laughed about it. I have always taken pride in my judgment of my passengers and have never lost any big fares, and I have had plenty of long hauls.

One night I was parked in front of a terminal. A man walked up to me and asked the price of a trip to a distant point in West Virginia. I gave him a price. He told me he thought it was a little too high for him. He told me he could make connections with a bus, but he had to lay over about five hours and he didn't want to wait that long. He told me he would wait over for the bus.

After that, I made two short hauls in town and finally got back to the bus station. I was just parked there, when finally the same man came to me and said he would make the trip in my cab, but he had to make a couple of stops along the way.

Now that I was getting the trip, I didn't like to ask for the money in advance and possibly insult the man, so I forgot about it, as he looked all right to me. We started out. After about 50 miles he asked me if I would like to stop for coffee and some eats. I agreed, but I kept watching so that he couldn't slip off.

We resumed the trip and made forty or fifty miles more. Then he wanted to stop and see a relative of his. We stopped, but I still kept watch on him. We started again, this time covered about 30 miles before another stop. Here I watched him go up to this house, knock on the front door, wait a minute, and then go around the back.

I waited about half an hour, then decided to go up and check. I went up, banged on the door for about five minutes. Finally a woman came to the door and asked me what I wanted. I told her—and she acted like I was crazy.

"You are right," she said. "He knocked on the front door, went around the back and kept right on going." I inquired around, but couldn't find out anything about him. The trip cost me \$35.00 and time. It did convince me that there is a first time for everything.

P.S. I get money in advance now.

Orville K. Merrbough

Dog Gone It

Dear Sir:

I would like to tell you about a man picked up recently by the police. His racket was an old one and probably known to a lot of victims.

The idea of his game was simple. He would get in his car and drive out to a pretty well-to-do section of town. He would cruise around out there until he would spot a couple of dogs. When he did, he would stop the car and get out, first making sure no one was watching

(Please continue on page 8)

\$100⁰⁰ A WEEK in CASH
PAID DIRECT TO YOU

FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

**Policy Pays for a Day, a Week,
 a Month, a Year—just as long as
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The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. It is the kind of protection that will stand by you when emergency comes. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your \$1.00 a month!

TWO SPECIAL FEATURES

MATERNITY

Benefits At Small Extra Cost
 Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays \$50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

POLIO

Benefits At No Extra Cost
 In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
 For Hospital Bills, \$500.00
 For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to \$500.00
 For Orthopedic Appliances, up to \$500.00
TOTAL OF \$1,500.00



3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY

for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS \$100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of \$50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What \$100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

PAYS CASH BENEFITS REGARDLESS OF ANY OTHER HOSPITAL INSURANCE YOU NOW HAVE!

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and licensed in other states. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON

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The Service Life Insurance Company
 Hospital Department K-11 Omaha 2, Nebraska

Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name.....
 Address.....
 City or Town.....State.....

SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

Hospital Department K-11, Omaha 2, Nebraska



"They showed me,"

says Mike
(From Missouri)

"How to give my faithful
Ford a new future!"



WHEN I VISITED ONE OF THE AUTHORIZED
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THE JOB'S DONE TO EXACT FACTORY
STANDARDS BY AUTHORIZED
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THAT OUGHT TO
MEAN SAVINGS
ON GAS, OIL
AND UPKEEP

* CRANKSHAFTS, CAMSHAFT, BUSHINGS, VALVE GUIDES,
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VALVES, GASKETS, STUDS, NUTS... ALL COMPLETELY
RECONDITIONED OR REPLACED WITH...



IT CERTAINLY DOES.
AND HERE YOU SEE THE
ENGINES TESTED TO MAKE
SURE IT CHECKS AS GOOD
AS NEW

THEN THIS EMBLEM
MEANS THE
FORD ENGINE I
BUY HAS BEEN
RECONDITIONED
RIGHT BY THE
RIGHT PEOPLE

GENUINE
FORD
PARTS



YOU BET IT DOES, MIKE.
SO BE SURE THIS AUTHORIZED
RECONDITIONER'S EMBLEM IS
ON THE RECONDITIONED
FORD ENGINES OR
ENGINE ACCESSORIES
YOU BUY



I WILL BECAUSE IT
MEANS REAL MONEY-
SAVING PERFORMANCE
FOR THOUSANDS
OF EXTRA MILES!

**RECONDITIONER'S
GUARANTEE**

90 DAYS
OR
4,000
MILES

Costs only a few
dollars per week

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RECONDITIONED
FORD ENGINES
AND ENGINE ACCESSORIES**

GIVE "LIKE NEW" PEP AND POWER...
SAVE ON GAS, OIL AND REPAIRS

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

him. He would then go over to the dog with something tempting and coax him to the car.

When he had himself one or two dogs he would go home and wait, as he figured the next day or so he would read the descriptions of one or both dogs in the paper and a reward for their return. He would then hurry to the address and explain how he found the dog wandering through the streets and being a lover of dogs, took him in and fed him. The owners would be so taken in by his line that they would offer him the reward. He would refuse at first, saying he just couldn't, but would accept it finally "to pay for the food he gave the dog."

Each night he would try a different section. If no reward appeared for the dogs in four days, he would let them go.

After he was picked up, it was learned that he would average a hundred dollars a week on these rewards. His one mistake was trying the same section of town too many times.

Mrs. M. Clark,
Cleveland, Ohio

The Polio Cure

Dear Sir:

Beware of the polio-water-tester—especially so if polio has recently struck down a victim in your county!

The professional-looking man stops his fine car at your home, tells you of the dangers of polio and inquires if you have your own water system. He carries a medical kit.

"Yes," you answer, "we have a well and electric pump."

"Just the place for breeding polio," he says soberly. "Have you had your water tested?"

"No . . . we haven't," you admit anxiously. "Could our children get polio from our well?"

"Goodness, yes!" he exclaims. "If the water is infected with polio virus, your children are in grave danger—and so are you!"

It's alarming to even think of such things and you naturally want to do something about it.

"What will it cost to have the well tested?" you ask.

"Just \$10."

"And suppose you find polio germs? Can you do anything to kill them, without ruining the water?"

"Yes, we can, now," he says. "Our new chemical treatment will kill every germ without hurting the water. But first we'd better give it a test."

"Sure," you agree. "Go ahead."

He carefully fills a test tube with water from the pump, then seals it, labels it with your name and address, and puts it into the medical bag with all your neighbors' well samples. You pay him the ten dollars.

"I'll send these samples to our laboratory for a complete analysis," he explains. "The official reports will be ready in two or three days. I'll see you then."

You watch him drive away and you feel hap-

(Please continue on page 10)

A TRUE I. C. S. STORY taken from an actual letter



I was a World War II pilot ...



A prisoner of war in Germany ...



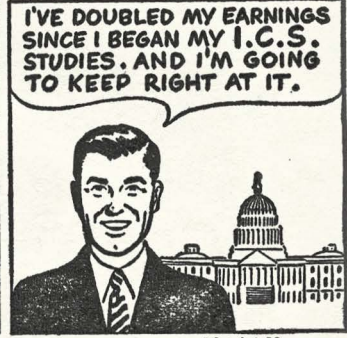
Back home, I was hired by National ...



Studied with I. C. S. in my spare time ...



I. C. S. sent reports to my employer ...



I am now Washington District Manager.

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<input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry, Industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> Radio, General	<input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Contracting and Building	<input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Engines	<input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Engineer	<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial Art
<input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Gas Engines	<input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Fireman	<input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accounting
<input type="checkbox"/> Lumber Dealer	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Courses	<input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Machinist	<input type="checkbox"/> Federal Tax
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading Structural Blueprints	<input type="checkbox"/> Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.	<input type="checkbox"/> Railroad Section Foreman	<input type="checkbox"/> Fortmanship
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<input type="checkbox"/> Structural Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Flight Engineer	<input type="checkbox"/> Stationary Eng'g's Courses	<input type="checkbox"/> Higher Mathematics
	<input type="checkbox"/> Foundry Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaking	<input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Supervision
	<input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment of Metals	<input type="checkbox"/> Combustion Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Motor Traffic
	<input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Engine Running	<input type="checkbox"/> Postal Civil Service
	<input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Instrumentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Retailing
		<input type="checkbox"/> Power Plant Eng'g	<input type="checkbox"/> Retail Bus. Management
			<input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engr.
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(Continued from page 8)

py, because you know he is trying to safeguard the health of your loved ones.

Four days later he returns with good news.

"Your well hasn't enough virus in it yet to be dangerous, but within a year it will be polluted. You are certainly lucky that you had it analyzed in time." He's very friendly, and seems to have your problem at heart.

"Do you have the chemicals to treat the well today?"

"Yes, I got a new supply this morning," he says. "A couple of gallons will make the well safe for at least two years."

"Good," you reply, "and what will it cost?"

"Only \$12 a gallon."

You pay the \$24 and he empties two jugs of pale bluish fluid into your well. It smells a little like antifreeze.

"Your well-water will have a slight taste for about twenty-four hours, but it certainly won't have any germs in it," he explains as he puts the jugs back into the car. "Your family will be safe from polio now, unless they drink from some well that hasn't been tested or treated."

"I'll see that they don't do that!" You smile with real relief and thank him sincerely. He thanks you again and bids you a pleasant good day.

Unless he gets caught by the law, you'll probably never know that you were gypped out of thirty-four dollars. If he is caught you'll read in the papers that none of the water-samples were ever tested . . . and that the "chemical" fluid was nothing but very diluted antifreeze. Beware of the polio well-tester and treator!

James D. Callahan,
P. O. Box 271,
Lincoln 1, Nebraska

The Double Switch

Dear Sir:

While employed as teller in a neighborhood bank, a friend of mine cashed a worthless check for \$5,000. After some investigation by the bonding company, the bank requested his resignation. He had explained his version of the incident to apparently deaf ears.

His version was as follows. It later proved to be the true story of what had actually happened, since the swindler was apprehended years later and confessed it as being only one of the many frauds he had perpetrated.

It is necessary that one know the layout of this bank in order to get a clear picture of just how the swindler pulled his hoax. Lining the walls were the usual tall, heavy wire screens in back of which sat the various clerks, stenographers, bookkeepers, etc. Each teller, however, had his own separate wire cage.

Directly in the center of this huge bank floor was a marble enclosure about four feet in height which acted as sort of a fence encircling the minor executives. It was like an "island" in the center of the bank floor. In fact, it was called that by the employees.

On the particular day in question, a well dressed, important-looking man stepped up to

my friend's cage and presented a check to be cashed i. e. the amount of \$5,000. The man did not have an account at the bank and was a complete stranger to my friend. Having no authority to cash checks under these circumstances, he requested the man have one of the officials on the "island" okay it for him.

My friend watched the man approach one of the cashiers and did not divert his attention until another customer demanded his services. At the time, he attached no significance to the man's quite normal action of putting one hand in his coat pocket as he strolled over to the "island."

When the distinguished-looking man returned with an okayed check for \$5,000, my friend cashed it without hesitation and immediately dismissed the matter from his mind.

However, the repercussions which followed were terrific, to say the least. I mentioned them in brief at the start of this account. We, as his friends, knew he was innocent of any wrongdoing but to this day I can hear him telling about the lifted eyebrows and the frigid behaviour of many of his co-workers. It bit in rather deep.

Here's how the deception was executed. The man had walked into the bank with *three* checks in his pockets—follow this closely: One was for \$5,000 *without* an okay on it. One was for \$5,000 *with* a forged okay on it, and another was for \$1.00 *without* an okay on it.

This suave crook had presented the \$5,000 check *without* the okay on it to my friend. Then, in the process of walking over to the "island," he had switched to the \$1.00 check which he presented to the cashier and had okayed without difficulty. Almost any banker will quality a \$1.00 check for any person of good appearance. Then, while walking back to my friend's cage, he made another switch by bringing forth the *forged* \$5,000 check which was presented and cashed.

In his confession, this swindler told how he had been in the bank several months prior to this time and had a legitimate but small check okayed by the same cashier. He had used that signature for his model when forging the \$5,000 check, prior to entering the bank this second time. He also stated that he never tried this particular method of fraud again as he could not find another bank with that specific type of physical layout.

The whole thing, fortunately for my friend, had a happy finish to it since he secured a position later with one of the large newspapers here in the city and now holds a responsible job in a field he had wanted to be associated with in the first place!

A. M.
Chicago, Ill.

That's the line-up on rackets for this month, detective fans. Keep writing us about your own experiences.

The Editor

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Order any book right from your own home. You'll get it promptly, direct from New York (book center of the world). Postage and insurance are free. Here's the smart money-saving way to build a library your friends will marvel at. And it's just as perfect for selecting gift books, too. Here are just a few of the latest selections worth owning. Use the convenient coupon below . . .

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CHAPTER ONE

Scarlet Spotlight

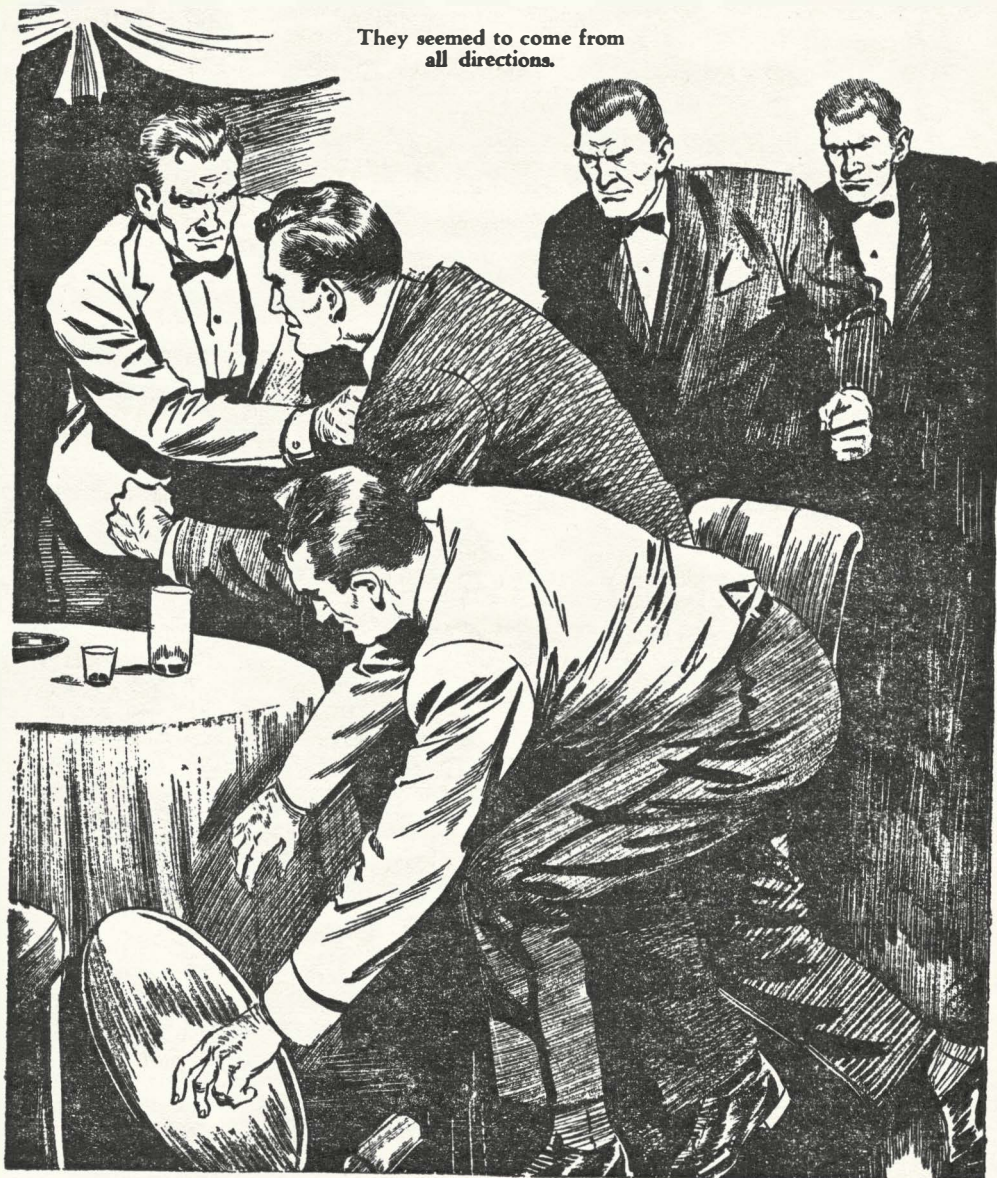
THE note read: "Dan, please see me at the Flower-Hat. Signed: Lois."

When Lois La Monte starts to sing at the Flower-Hat, a classy Sunset Strip bistro, the velvet curtains do an

inverted V, the lights go off and an orange spot picks her up in front of a mike.

"Picking her up" is a weak description. She is a bundle of wrapped-up curves, well rounded and soft, accepted by a

They seemed to come from all directions.



black gown that has more twists than a mountain road. Lois sings low and lazy with just enough sadness to make you want to climb up on the stage with her.

She scorches a few numbers, lets them smoulder around the edges. Then the curtains close and the lights go on and you are left hanging. No encores and no repeats. No extra helpings. That's it, brother. And the men hang limp and the women bite into their lips.

And this invitation to paradise wanted to see me—which meant she was in a jam of some sort. That was all right with me as I was the boy to see on jams, buttered or smeared. Besides, doing a public favor for Lois was bonus, plus.

Two years ago or so, when I was assigned to the Bunco Squad, I had done a little favor for Lois. When she came in from New York a couple of boulevard hoodlums had tried to force a fast contract on her, and since then I had received gaudy Christmas cards from her just to keep us friendly. Now, as Detective-Sergeant Dan Winters of Central Homicide, I was sitting at a table and applauding her like the rest of the suckers.

As the lights went on, I discovered a cigarette girl had put her cigarette container and small candid-camera on the table and had sat down during the performance.

She smiled at me. I mean it was a special kind of a smile that makes your heart pull a sneak rabbit-punch. Her hair was reddish-brown with curly dips clinging about a just-right oval face. Her eyes were of marine-blue, deep-pitched as depthless water. A small, pert nose shadowed knife-thin nostrils over all-purpose lips.

You could tell she was a tall girl, curved and well formed because her saffron, ballet-type costume allowed your eyes that privilege and her long, slim legs showed a lot of black nylon display.

I reached for a buck and put it in the

cigarette container and plucked out a nickel cigar and smiled back. She was about to say something real nice when she suddenly stiffened to a curt, "Thank you, sir," and walked off.

I had another guest.

Small, active, bushy-haired Lee Gates, night-club columnist pulled up, horned-rim glasses and all, and leaned his elbows on the table. He ran a column with a question-mark ending; the type that reads: What loco banker has been paying too much interest to a glamorous account and if his wife finds out look for a quick withdrawal? Stuff like that.

He said: "How're things going, Sergeant?"

I shrugged with a so-and-so movement.

"Business in the police department must be picking up," he mentioned, "seeing you operating in this gyp joint. Or are you casing a high-class bindlestiff?"

"I'm off-duty, Lee. I'm human and curious. They say Lois La Monte is tops among the singers right now. Now that I've heard and seen Lois, I agree."

He laughed. "If you'd like to meet her, I can arrange. Power of the press reaches farther than law and order, Danny-boy."

"You hounds know the dolls real well."

He winked. "Real good. Want to meet her?"

I shook my head. "Not just now. I'll drink a round first for stability."

Lee got up and patted my shoulder. "Any time, Danny, any time." He got lost among the crowded tables.

An hour and thirty bucks later, Lois came on again and went off after a few numbers. Same system and more hanging tongues.

I ordered another drink and wrote on a napkin: *Lois—Dan Winters*, and gave it to the waiter with an extra five spot.

He said: "I'll try."

Thirty minutes later the waiter returned with a "so-sorry" look. Lois had finished her singing and had left the house.

He smiled sourly, pathetically, and moved off with my five bucks for effort.

I pushed the table away, got up and walked toward the blaring orchestra and to a small backstage door. A couple of goons in tuxes barred my way.

"Lois is expecting me," I told them.

"He's real cute," one goon told the other.

A quick shadow broke into view and set the goons back with his hand. He was tall, well-built with flat-black hair and deep eyes coming out alert and quick from a smooth, handsome face.

He was Bert De Lorenzo, the manager and a tough boy when he had to be. He turned and faced me, smiled, cautious host-style.

"I think I know you. What's the beef?"

He asked me.

"Lois La Monte. She wanted to see me. My name's Winters."

He pushed a tongue around his teeth and squinted. "Winters. Not Dan Winters that used to be with Bunco."

"Same."

He shook his head. "Sorry, Sergeant, Miss La Monte has gone." He made a motion with his hand. "You can check if you want."

I hesitated, then said: "Okay. Nothing wrong—just old friends."

Bert drew in a long breath noisily, then let it escape slowly and with feeling as he watched me walk to the lobby. I got my hat and then my car out of the parking lot, then drove slowly down Sunset. The early morning wind—it was close to one in the morning—was down to a low, coughing growl.

I remembered that Lois had lived in a modern, green-stucco apartment building off Beverly and Palmas. The building was still squatting on half the block. Big, fake green shutters still bordered French-type windows. A small lantern-lamp hung over the main entrance and lighted the mail-bank.

PARKING, I went up to the mail-bank and read the names. Lois La Monte still had 212. I pressed the button under that number but no response. I tried the entrance door, but it was locked. I went down to the walk, around the corner and the side that 212 would be on. Orange slices of light slipped through Venetian blinds and patterned the middle of the street into slats.

I got a small, sulky, sleepy manager out of bed, showed him my police badge and told him I wanted to check room 212. He put on a bathrobe and slippers, fumbled with keys and muttered to himself up the carpeted stairs and all the way to a bronze 212 over a door.

He pushed a bony finger into a bell and we heard chimes. We waited but nobody cared to answer. He set a key in the door. We entered. The lights were on and nobody was living in the parlor.

In the next room we got a different story. We got a corpse. We got Lois La Monte sprawled on a nice, fresh, fancy-ruffled bedspread, her glassy-blue eyes looking without seeing. Her brick-red lips were open, tulip-fashion, revealing a white glimpse of small teeth.

You had the cause in a red stain that had squirmed from a hole in her right temple, through a network of blonde curls and to a reddish pool on the spread. Her right hand held a .22. She was dressed in the same black dress she had been wearing at the Flower-Hat.

This room had been designed for lazy evenings, absinthe and moonbeams seeping through the slanted Venetian blinds. It was a typical hotsy-totsy, perfume-stench Hollywood gaga room. One wall was mirrored with a cut-out door-line for a closet, three walls a plaid-green and the rug was a deep lemon. The fluffy curtains were languid with soft breezes puffing up the ends.

The scene was tricky. A couple of brocaded chairs were overturned, the wall

mirror was splashed with perfume. The broken perfume bottle itself was on the rug; the telephone was solid on a stand but the receiver was off and dangling by its cord. The floors were bright with new wax.

I walked back to the living room where the manager was having trouble with a mouth full of phlegm. His hands were shaking. I ordered him to call homicide from his downstairs phone. He gulped and set sail fast.

I went back to the other room and tried to figure out just what was wrong with the set-up.

I stood and I looked and I thought. I got murder and I got suicide. I thought of Lois and the mysterious trouble that made her want to see me and it pops up murder. Then the type of fast life she had been living turned up suicide. I had it sideways, longways, upside-down.

I still had Lois with a hole in her pretty head, a receiver off the hook and a lot of unnecessary perfume.

But I really didn't get it at all. I went back to the living room, which was nice and expensive and feminine. A clay-beige rug swept wall to wall; leaves and painted ferns sprung up from the baseboards; fancy doodads and wiggly-shaped cocktail tables with small ebony figures, a television set in the corner, and plum-colored walls.

Apparently luscious Lois had done real well with a few lyrics pitched at lush customers over an orange-spotted mike.

About an hour later the parade began: the flashlight boys, the scribblers, the coroner's assistant and the finger-print and lab monkeys started yawning and gave the how-come to Lois La Monte, now out of this world for keeps. I told Lieutenant Leeds what had happened and he took over. Then I drove on home.

I had a one room, with roll-a-way bed, kitchenette deal. It was my home, my den, my base. It was usually gloomy and

dank when I got home. Only the electric light and a medium-done steak, bachelor style in bacon, turned on the warm and homey feelings. The bed was still down—no maid service—my pajamas were on the chair and the sink had the breakfast dishes.

But I wasn't hungry for steak. I changed to pajamas and heated up the breakfast coffee. It tasted like the inside of a motorman's glove. I saw the dishes in the sink and the crumbs on the table cloth and my socks under the pull-down bed.

I saw an orange spotlight and a black dress and a red stain through blonde curls; and I saw a cute cigarette girl with no-nonsense lips and a smile—and the room got cold and dank and a little lonesome. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Sparring Partner

IN THE morning I was assigned the La Monte case. Back in her apartment, the monkeys had long gone to their respective occupational holes. There were two uniformed guards and some reporters. Lee Gates was one of them. He came up and said: "You're making it murder, Danny?"

"You'd like that better than suicide?"

"Certainly. Look, pal, Lois La Monte, Hollywood's play-girl, night-club warbler and so forth commits suicide. So what? Good for two issues, no more.

"But make it murder in a roughhouse brawl. Look for the missing murderer with scratches on his mug—and we get front page for three weeks." He leaned forward. "Make it murder, Danny, and you get a lead."

"From you—"

He nodded. "This is old home grounds for me. Lois and I used to be chummy."

"Tighten it up a little," I snapped.

Lee grinned. "Lois had plenty of ad-

mirers and she didn't care who she hurt or why—just so she got what she wanted. She got a big fish. Calvin Johns!"

That woke me up quick. "The reformer?"

Lee clicked his teeth. "Same. The civic reformer. The clean, healthy-living physical cultural example of decency." Lee slapped me on the shoulder. "Hang a sign on that, Danny." Then, as if in sudden thought, Lee glanced at his watch and whistled. "Got a hot tip on a nag back east. See you later, Danny."

The case was starting to spread out like spilt ink on a blotter. Lois was at the morgue and whether it was suicide or murder, Calvin Johns became suspect number one.

"Sergeant." A uniformed cop had his hand firmly on the arm of an open-eyed, puzzled girl. "Lady keeps wanting to see Lois La Monte."

The girl stepped from the cop's grasp, walked in and faced me. The cigarette girl at the Flower-Hat. I got hammers in the stomach again. She was dressed in one of those peasant affairs that showed a blouse bordering smooth, cool shoulders; a skirt that bellowed over golden sandals. She was lighting a cigarette and kindling a small flame in her eyes as she stared at me.

"There's something fishy here," she snapped.

I got that funny feeling that a cop should never have while on duty. "Sit down," I managed.

She didn't sit down. She wasn't the type to just sit down—just like that. "Just who are you?"

"Police. Dan Winters, Homicide."

She sat down, slowly, speaking as she hit the cushion, "Homicide? . . . Then Lois is dead."

I nodded. "You expected it, Miss—?"

She closed her eyes, held them tight, then gradually opened them. She got to her feet, quickly. "What happened?"

"You better sit down."

"Look, copper," she suddenly flared. "I'm not the fainting type. I've seen plenty, heard plenty and met plenty, good, bad and neutral. What happened?"

"Suicide. Shot herself."

She put her cigarette into her mouth and blew a few resolute puffs. She let the smoke clear before she looked at me. "You believe that—suicide?"

I tried a grin. I sat down on the edge of a chair arm and looked up at her. "Suppose you let me ask the questions, Miss—?"

"Jenny Lake. Age twenty-two, single and beautiful," she said quickly. "I work at the Flower-Hat on the Strip as a cigarette girl. You ought to know, you were there last night."

I said: "You were coming up to see Lois. Why?"

"Why?" She was about to spread a lot of conversation but suddenly caught herself. She straightened and said defiantly: "None of your business."

SHE was pretty, vibrant and sharp and it was getting tough, believe me, because ever since I could snap a marble or shimmy-up a tree I had an ideal girl—and this was it!

She broke into my thoughts. "I suppose we go down to headquarters?"

"I was about to ask you to join me in the lounge across the street for a drink."

Surprise with a glint of uncertainty lay in her expression. "And then what?"

I grinned. "You'll join me?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "What else?"

The cocktail lounge had cool, scented shadows, soft and friendly. We were at a booth, shadows within shadows, and we talked this and that. I forgot for the moment I was a homicide cop and she a cigarette girl at the Flower-Hat; we found that we liked to talk, twiddling our glasses now and then.

Then I said abruptly: "Break it down, kid. You hammed it all the way when you came in the apartment. You knew Lois was dead."

Jenny held her glass tight, looked at it and kept her eyes to the contents, wiggling the glass, as a frown played her forehead. "Smart, you. I knew something was wrong. Last night I came to the house but I saw the police cars and all the lights on."

"You suspected foul play?"

"Yes, in a way. Lois was stretching her luck too much. She played all her men that way. Lee Gates, Bert De Lorenzo and—" She hesitated.

I helped her out. "Calvin Johns."

She lifted her eyes. "You knew about that?" A swath of clean air swept our corner. Some ten booths away someone broke out into a raucous laugh and glass broke. Jenny kept looking at her glass, pushing it in small circles and watching the ice jump and waddle. Finally: "That's all, copper."

"Scared a little," I offered.

She lifted her head slowly. "Maybe." "Who's pinching you?"

Her face flushed. "Look, fellow, you're doing a good job of tearing me apart." She tried a laugh. It was unsuccessful. It was forced and unsure. "Is this the modern police approach? Soft lights . . . cool breezes . . . drinks?"

"What did you want with Lois early this morning?" I asked abruptly.

"Leave her alone," came sharp from the front of the booth, and I was looking up to Bert De Lorenzo. His mouth was tight, his eyes small in that smooth face.

He opened his small eyes a little wider and said slowly: "That's a fair warning, law or no law."

"There happens to be a murder," I said casually.

He closed one eye at me. "I know that. And it still goes. She had nothing to do with it. Leave her alone, flatfoot."

Flatfoot with distaste, flatfoot with sarcasm and flatfoot for a definite reason. I was supposed to get mad and get up and take a swing at him. He stood looking down at me and he was playing it showy. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, took one, put it in his mouth and waited.

I said easily: "You give me motive, Bert, like going up to Lois' apartment and finding out why she threw you over for an older man—"

His face squeezed and his lips curled. He took the cigarette from his mouth with dramatic affect. "Don't put frills on it," he warned. "And maybe we'll talk over your theory sometime, flatfoot." A faint smile greased his face. "In an alley," he added.

Then he looked at Jenny and his face softened. "Look, kid, I need a singer for tonight. You got the looks and you can sing. Want to give it a try?"

Her eyes lit up and she tried a broad smile. She looked at me and I knew the pitch, but I said: "Go ahead, take a crack at it." I shrugged. "I'm not holding you just yet."

She got up. "I know—" she grinned. "Stay in town and don't run away." She reached over and pinched my cheek. "I like you, fellow. You're a human cop. And don't get too drunk—Danny."

CHAPTER THREE

Boomeranging Blackmail

THE Johns' residence lay back from the road like a haughty patriarch aged in red brick and green vines. A wide pavement circled the grounds coming to its apex at the entrance. It was the last of the stone aristocrats of the West Adams' district in Los Angeles before the modern sweep to the west and Beverly Hills to the ocean. A fading landmark of Angelos culture and tradition.

There was a lazy smell to the flowers and the air hung with a heavy, sleepy indifference. A whirling water spout sent flying sprays, touched into rainbows by the sun. The calmness was suddenly ruptured by a bus screeching to a fast stop at the corner.

At the large oak door I was met by a butler with shoulders like a swinging bridge and a face that had caught many a blow. But he bowed stiffly, took my name and told me to wait. When he came back, he bowed again, and led me into a cool, dark hall, through an arcade effect and to another door at right angles to the passageway. He knocked lightly, then opened the door, allowing me to enter.

I was in a large library-study affair, with redwood paneling up to the ceiling. On the far wall, books lined to the top and on the other wall a huge fireplace had large leather chairs circling about it. From one of the leather chairs, a head turned. It had a perplexed look on a handsome face.

Calvin Johns got up from the chair. He was a large, well-proportioned man about fifty with an outdoor chest and ruddy cheeks. His eyes were deep brown and clear, but there were worry lines begging around his lips.

He said: "Yes, Sergeant?"

The butler closed the door and stood in the room, his back to the door, his eyes on me.

I said: "It might be better if we were alone, Mr. Johns."

"That's all right," he replied. "Jud can stay." Jud twisted his lip in a snicker and stayed, folding his arms across his chest, guard fashion. "Now," Johns continued, "what is it you want?"

I took a deep breath. "Mr. Johns, I'm fully aware of your position in this city and what you have been attempting to do. That is the reason I am here without my superiors knowing this move." Johns' eyes sharpened up. "You may not be

aware of the fact that a Miss Lois La Monte is dead."

I got no response from him, but Jud shuffled his feet some. I added: "I understand you knew Miss La Monte."

"Let me see your credentials, Sergeant," Johns snapped suddenly. I took out my wallet and showed him all he needed to see. Then he seemed to loosen up. His face clouded and he waved me to a leather chair by the fireplace. We both sat down.

A few minutes passed with silence. I could hear the water sprinkler whirling faintly outside. Then he said: "With an opening like that, Sergeant, without the proper credentials, I would have had to let Jud take care of you."

I didn't interrupt. He was beginning to work it up himself in slow spasms, getting it out of his system, touchy and sensitive. You could see it in his fingers tapping the leather arm.

He said: "I appreciate your discretion, Sergeant, but just how much do you know?"

"Not much," I admitted. "Just a lead."

Irritable frowns played his forehead and his mouth pressed. He nodded but seemed unconvinced that I was telling everything I knew. And that was the way I wanted it.

He looked curiously at me, brushed a knuckle against his chin and said: "My relationship with Miss La Monte was a great deal like any other relationship between a man being blackmailed by a woman."

I said softly: "Care to tell me about it?"

Calvin Johns got up from the chair, went to the other side of the room and looked at a vacant space on the wall. He stood, hands in pockets, thinking. Then he came back and stood in front of me. When he spoke, it came deep from his chest.

"I'm forty-nine and a bachelor. There's

no law saying I can't fall in love. There's nothing psychologically wrong in that. Lois had spirit, looks and ability and I fell in love with her the day that I met her at a swimming party." He said hoarsely:

"As I see it now, the party was a plant. I was pushing against gambling on the Strip and I didn't realize she worked for Bert De Lorenzo."

I just sat and drew in a long breath and let it slide out, waiting for the reformer to continue.

"I've come up the hard way," he added, showing me a pair of well kept hands but with memories of hard calluses within the palms. He had the large knuckles and stubby fingers of a hard-working construction man.

"You say you didn't realize she worked for Bert," I pushed in, "but you knew she sang at his spot."

HIS face hardened and he put a hand into his coat pocket and brought out a photograph of the commercial size and flipped it into my lap. I picked it up, turned it over and saw a sweet little swimming-cove scene between Calvin Johns and Lois.

"We both liked swimming," Johns explained quickly, "and we thought it great sport to swim at midnight when the waters cool and clean and it's quiet." He made a little gesture with his hand. "A bit romantic at my age, perhaps," he admitted, "and I never gave it a thought after our date."

I kept staring at the photo. "This was the little trick to tell you to lay off on your reforming the Strip."

He nodded. "Except for one thing. That photo was taken months ago when we first met. I just got it by mail yesterday."

Johns turned his back on me and walked the room again. When he returned, he bent forward a little and

slapped one fist into the palm of his other hand. "But, damn it, man, it doesn't make sense. We were to be married next week!"

I said: "Maybe it goes this way. When you were rushing the boys a bit too hard, they sic lovely Lois on you. And she knows the game. But maybe she falls in love with you after all, and maybe she forgets about the photo plant until the boys remind her about it. Then maybe she goes all to pieces and commits suicide."

His face was empty of expression and he winced at the thought of suicide. He leaned forward again and shook his head from side to side, earnestly, and with an amount of patience. "Then where does the fifty thousand come in?"

"That's nice," I snapped, "just where does it?" This fifty thousand was a brand new job to me, but it started to turn over the motor. Maybe I was finally getting a little spark.

"For fifty thousand dollars—" Johns pointed a finger at the photo—"I get the negative."

Now it was beginning to take shape. I leaned back in the chair, crossed my legs, took out a pipe and pouch and set the pipe bowl in the pouch and dug out tobacco. Johns was watching me closely as I punched the few extra shreds of tobacco into a neat packing. Without looking up from the pipe, I said:

"Bert De Lorenze didn't send you that photo."

He stared at me with bright, interested eyes. "What makes you so sure?"

I shook my head, knowingly. "You're worth more to De Lorenzo's gambling interest on the leash, Johns. No, this fifty grand is a little sideline job."

Johns' shrewd brown eyes studied my face, then he said irritably: "Just what are you driving at, Sergeant?"

I saw Jud moved and squirm from his spot by the door as if waiting for a signal from Johns to really go to work on me.

"I just think there's something else," I put in mildly. "For instance, you said you received the photo and demand of fifty grand yesterday. Lois was still alive. You must have made some effort to get in touch with her and ask for an explanation."

"I did," came quickly. Then he straightened up and said carefully, "I tried to get in touch with Lois—but no success."

"Do you have a key to her apartment?" I asked.

The corners of his mouth tightened. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded indignantly.

I stuck the pipe in my mouth and got up and did a little room walking myself. Then I turned quickly to Johns. "I mean just this. You didn't get in touch with her during the day. Because of your local standing and rep, you didn't get in touch with her at the Flower-Hat—so that leaves after the show. Did you visit her late last night?"

His face paled and his lower lip tightened. Moisture set on his forehead. For a full second he stared at me, then he threw up his hands. "I visited her last night, late. She was dead . . . on the bed . . . I saw her . . . she committed suicide . . ."

I jumped at that. "How do you know it was suicide?"

He shrugged and turned away.

I said: "Okay, that does it. Thanks for the cooperation, Mr. Johns, and I'll do what I can to keep it confidential." I lifted a hand in a three-fingered salute, passed Jud who just moved enough to let me slide out of the room. I opened the oak door myself and was out in the warm air. I scratched the back of my neck and stood watching the whirling water sprinkler. Then I walked slowly back to the car and drove to headquarters.

I finally decided that I should light my pipe.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunning for the Sergeant

LEE GATES, very natty in a two-hundred buck blue serge suit, was slouched in my chair. He pushed his hat back from his eyes, swung around and straightened up. "What's the bloodhound uncovered?"

"Everyone has a key," I admitted.

"Me, too." He grinned.

The lab reports were on my desk but were still incomplete due to the number of different prints. I said casually: "How'd you make out?"

Lee cocked his head, dog-fashion, for more detail.

"On the nag back east."

He made a wry face and short motion with his right hand, thumb down, "Two C-notes down the drain."

I looked out the window. The sky was getting a lazy bronze coloring and the traffic was beginning to pick up office workers starting the trek back homeward. I turned to Lee.

"The phone off the hook in Lois' apartment denotes what?"

Lee took out a pack of cigarettes and punched a cigarette an inch from the pack. He lifted the pack, caught the cigarette with his lips, then slowly slipped the pack back into his pocket. He lit the cigarette and kept his eyes on me.

"Like I suggested—murder. Big fight and she managed to grab for the phone in a last desperate effort."

"Too many movies you see." I laughed.

"So I get dramatic, but it certainly knocks your suicide theory."

"It smells," I offered as I picked up the lab report. "It smells to high heaven because the house is loaded with every Tom, Dick and Harry's prints but no prints on the dangling receiver."

Lee did a stock-stop, took his cigarette from his mouth and funneled out smoke.

"No fingerprints?" Lee concentrated on a spot on the floor, then lifted his head. "Like I said. Big fight and the phone is accidentally knocked off—"

"The base would be on the floor as well. No, Lee, that receiver was placed off the hook, not knocked off."

Lee got up. "Strictly assumption, Danny. Strictly convenient police thinking. Well, see you later, but don't get mad if I write it up as I see it—confused police department."

I tried a sour grin as Lee left the room.

I stood and thought of Jenny Lake—which was not doing your best for the city when a murder was involved, for I was thinking of that small stucco dream-house with a short red-brick wall, with acres of grass and a view of the Pacific—on a sergeant's salary?—and I was coming home to the little woman—Jenny Lake Winters—and she was in shorts and halter and cutting roses in the garden.

All of which was not very practical thinking because Jenny was involved in the La Monte case clear up to her pretty neck. With such thoughts, I was just begging to get caught off first base. A sergeant in love just wasn't worth a tinker's damn.

Then Captain Charles, a tall, thin, gray-haired veteran of Homicide came in. He batted around a few La Monte case ideas which ended up being long foul balls.

After the captain left, I loped back to the La Monte apartment, which still had a guard, and sat down in a chair in the living room and tried to pull out some inspiration. No soap. Ideas began to float into my mind like Saturday refuge down a rain-drain, rocking, colliding, burping, but strictly refuge as ideas go.

I got Calvin Johns and Bert De Lorenzo and Lee Gates and Jenny Lake and I got panicky with doubt. I got up and went into the other room and switched on the lights. Everything was the same except Lois was not present, but I pic-

tured her on the bed, gun in hand and those sightless eyes.

The bed was set so half the legs were on the rug and half on waxed floors. I got down on my hands and knees and examined the waxed floors. There were no scratches and no streaks where the legs stood.

I got up and opened the closet which was a part of the mirrored wall. Clothes were lined up neatly, but the shoe rack had been tipped and Lois' dozens of pairs of shoes were piled up in a semi-circle.

I looked down at the floor, whistled, then closed the closet, switched off the light, said good night to the guard and went downstairs and on home to my one-roomer.

I took off my clothes, letting them fall where they may and took a shower. I rubbed down, I shaved and I dressed in the best suit in the house. I ended up with a gray suit, a white shirt and hand-painted tie, black silk socks and black shoes.

My hair was groomed as the ads say it has to be, and I slapped a dab of men's woody cologne behind the ears just to cinch it.

I was definitely not myself—I had murder on my mind and a cigarette girl in my heart. I was calling at the Flower-Hat to see that cigarette girl—now a singer, perhaps—and hoping I hadn't fallen in love with a murderess.

Then the phone rang. Lee Gates with his silky know-it-all voice said: "Danny, here's a lead I just discovered. Listen: Jenny Lake and Lois were sisters. Lois was a Lake, and I think they had a sweet little racket all by themselves. Take it for what it's worth."

I said: "Thanks, Lee. I was going to see the little chick. She's taking Lois' place on the stand."

Lee said: "No kidding? The little gal's stepping right up."

AFTER we hung up, I drove over to Hollywood Boulevard and had a steak and French fries. When I finished it was seven o'clock, daylight saving time, and old Sol was getting time and a half for overtime. There was a warmish feeling in the air, the palm trees were hulu dancing to a high-top breeze and a slight tang of jasmine was mixing with the steamish atmosphere.

Cuties were beginning their Hollywood stroll, eyes crawling with side glances hoping you might be the producer looking for them. Then came the berets, the goatees, the dark glasses and the big parade.

It was early for the Flower-Hat to operate, so I took in a movie and fell asleep right where the high-class boys in Uncle Sam's income tax division were closing in on a lispng, saucer-eyed blonde. I woke up to a loud rabbit gnawing on corn in a cartoon. It was ninthirty, and time to see Jenny Lake—or hear her.

The Flower-Hat on the Strip had a canopy, a doorman and glass doors. It had a lush foyer and I didn't think the Maitre D' recognized me, but there were plenty of tables as it was still early. I sat down just as the lights went down and the spotlight came on and Jenny Lake strolled through the invetded *V* of the curtains.

I got that feeling again as she took hold of the mike and started to sing. She was dressed in a white gown which flowed to the floor with yards of soft material to spare. It was split on the side up to the knee to give the proper nylon display.

Brother, you never missed Lois. Jennie had it in voice, in display, in personality. She gave you that smile and wink and another song. I ordered a couple of drinks and lined them up to fortify myself.

When the lights went on, I tried another napkin message. This time I got

Jennie quick and happy-eyed at my table.

"I'm glad you made it, Danny," she said excitedly. "How'd I do?"

I grinned. "Great. Better than your sister anytime."

The happiness snapped off in her eyes like a blown fuse. She sat down slowly, her face flushed and her eyes a little dull. "So you know," she murmured quietly.

I said: "Fifty thousand, sweetheart."

Her eyes became wide and curious. "Fifty thousand? What are you talking about?"

"The sister act," I said. "Lois poses with rich playboys, little sister snaps candid-camera shots. Nice and pay-offish. How about a midnight swim and a negative, infra-red and all that technical stuff, darling? Bang-bang stuff. Ten years."

A waiter came over to give her a message but she waved him away. She dropped her lashes and she clasped her hands and kept looking at them.

I pointed a finger at her. "That's the reason you were visiting Lois in the early morning hours. After each night's performance, you scooted over with the camera so you could pick out the possible suckers."

Her lower lip pushed in and her teeth came out and pressed against it. Her voice was hushed. "Danny, Lois was my sister and I did take the camera up to her apartment every morning, but believe me I wasn't part of it—that is, intentionally."

When a guy gets the brass-knuckle treatment in the heart, it hurts. "Set that to music," I snapped. "Your lyrics are swell."

She placed a hand on my sleeve. "Danny, please. The first time I did it, a rich old goat came across plenty. I was trapped. Lois said that if it was discovered I took the picture, then I was as much to blame according to law. After that—" Jenny moved her shoulders slightly—"it was just another routine for greedy Lois."

"What about the Calvin Johns' deal?"

I never got the answer for that. A waiter coming around the table conveniently dumped his drinks on my suit. I moved to get up when another waiter came by and pushed me into the waiter trying to pick up the glassware.

Then they seemed to come from all directions.

I was being lifted roughly and dragged. I wiggled and I caught a free-lunch punch. I doubled and shifted getting rid of one escort. Another fist caught my cheek and scarred it. I swung and caught a jaw and it fell away.

There was shuffling of feet and screams. I was being given the bum's rush into the lobby. By the time we straightened out, I was being firmly held by two house mugs and Bert De Lorenzo was talking rapidly to two uniformed sheriff deputies standing in the lobby.

Jenny was nowhere among the little intimate group.

"Drunk," I heard Bert report to the deputies. "A drunken officer getting fresh with our new singer. Just because he's a sergeant he thinks—" Bert stopped and sneered at me.

A nice plant. It was staring me in the face and yelling "Stupid". The older deputy cocked his head and looked me over and shook his head disgustedly. Guests had come into the lobby to rubber and some wise john flashed a photo. I was getting it, but good.

In the sheriff's squad car we kept a respectable silence. At the sub-station I ran into some luck. I knew the lieutenant.

He sat back in his desk chair and bit at a cigar. "You're entitled to a sobriety test, Danny." He grinned.

"I had a couple of drinks," I admitted, "but not this," and I pushed a hand down my liquor-flushed suit.

The lieutenant looked amused. "What's De Lorenzo got against you, Danny?"

"A murder. His girl friend, or one of

them, is at the morgue with a bullet in her temple."

"So you're on the La Monte case, eh?" His eyes steadied to mine. "I should say, you were. You know what this'll mean. You're off the case." He leaned over hopefully. "You got something on De Lorenzo?"

"Not yet."

"Okay, Danny, nice seeing you. I'm sorry as hell about having to make out a report on this. How tough is Captain Charles on his sergeants disturbing the peace and bothering singers?"

"Rough. It'll be suspension until the board meets."

The lieutenant shook his head sympathetically, and I was free without booking. The sheriff's office, a county function, can be nice to a city cop if they want to be.

CHAPTER FIVE

Power of the Press

THE cool night air, chasing away the sickly warmth of the day, revived me somewhat. I was on my own now, with suspension facing me in the morning and possible demotion or elimination from the force, depending on how hard the whip struck.

I had approximately twelve hours before that report went through channels and laid itself on the captain's desk for the necessary action.

I had one hope. Jenny knew I hadn't been drunk or tried to bother her. But then again, whose side was she on?

I drove out on Sunset clear to the ocean and then rolled up toward Malibu in an effort to get myself together. I thought I had the answer three times—only to discover loopholes. On the fourth try I turned the car back and headed for the house. I might need a gun for what I had in mind.

I opened my door to discover Lee Gates

sitting comfortably in my one club chair. He had pushed my pajamas on the floor.

"You must have had it bad, Danny," he grinned, "leaving your door open."

I remembered dressing up and dabbing cologne and feeling like a dapper-dan. I had probably forgotten a lot of things, my gun, for one. I crossed in front of Lee and went behind the bed where the closet was and took my shoulder holster and .38 off the wall hook and put it on.

Lee watched me with interest. "Looks like the infantry's got its orders." I said nothing. "Danny, heard things about the Flower-Hat a couple hours ago. What happened?"

I told him. He said: "Tsk, tsk." He stretched his legs out. "And the one hope you got, Danny, is Jenny Lake." I nodded. He nodded right back, mockingly. "And who do you suppose might have taken that flash picture with you all tied up with the house?"

That stopped me.

"And that means," Lee said, "that at the board your word is as good as De Lorenzo's, but an actual photo?"

He was rubbing it in good and he knew it. But he was right. And he was still loaded. "But you won't have to worry about De Lorenzo, Danny. He's dead." He made a quick cutting motion with his hand.

It was coming too fast for me. I just stared at him. "Shot an hour ago and

found in the alley behind the Flower-Hat." Lee got up and wiggled in his suit and pressed it down with the palms. "Like you said, Danny, it's getting smelly."

Lee started for the door, turned, hesitated, then said: "You wouldn't by any chance have—" His hand was on the knob when the phone rang.

I answered it, and it was Jenny. Her voice was sharp, clear, quick. "Danny, Bert's been shot." She waited for a reply that never came. "I've been trying to get in touch with you. I tried the sheriff's office and they said you left hours ago—"

"Checking up," I snapped. I shook with inward fury. This dame was doing a complete job of putting a noose around my neck for Bert's murder.

Her voice was hurried now. "No, no, Danny. Listen. I took flash pictures of your fight at the club. I can prove you were framed!"

Something heavy inside of me suddenly dissolved and the old ticker started pounding against my ribs. I said quickly: "Jenny, go on home and I'll meet you there. What's your address?"

She said: "144 South Camino Drive."

I repeated: "144 South Camino Drive. Okay. Now listen. I want those candid-camera shots of my trouble and those you just took of De Lorenzo when he was alive."

Jenny said: "What?"

"The ones you have just before he was

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shot, and the alley shot pictures—”

Jenny exclaimed: “What are you talking about?”

I said: “Okay, honey,” and hung up.

The one room had filled up. Lee Gates had left, but Captain Charles and the lieutenant from the sheriff’s sub-station stood in the doorway. They wore frowns that meant trouble.

Captain Charles said: “Winters, let me have your gun.”

I TOOK the gun from the holster and handed it to the captain. Then he broke it, looked it over carefully, and smelled it. He handed it to the lieutenant, who did the same. I stood like a bad boy who has been caught making spitballs.

Captain Charles looked down at the carpet, then with a deep breath straightened up. His eyes were hard. “Danny Winters, this gun of yours killed Bert De Lorenzo.”

I snapped back angrily: “That’s impossible. I just came for that gun. It was in its holster in the closet.”

Captain Charles said: “One shot fired. You were thrown out of De Lorenzo’s club for drunk and disorderly conduct and you knew you were facing suspension. I understand you and De Lorenzo have been feuding over a girl. Is that right, Sergeant?”

I said nothing. I was wasting time, time that every second was piling up in value.

The captain looked at me steadily. “I don’t like to believe this, Sergeant, but I have to.”

“If you’ll give me an hour—” I asked.

He shook his head. “You’re coming down to headquarters.” The lieutenant from the sheriff’s station just stood looking at his fingernails. I had nothing to lose. I started for the door and the captain fell behind me.

At the door I turned and shoved Captain Charles back. He backed into the

lieutenant and they both peddled backwards into the room, the captain trying to grab him to keep from going down. Slamming the door, I ran down the hall. I hit the first floor rear entrance in record time, cut to the side street and then down to the main drag. I flagged a taxi, pushed my police badge in the cabbie’s face and gave him Jenny’s address. He didn’t spare the horses.

At the entrance, I stuck a bill at the driver and dashed out. “Any time I can help th’ law—” he grinned—“sure t’ing.”

The door to 6 C opened. Jenny hesitated when she saw me. She was in a hostess gown of burgundy red with puffed sleeves and a high neck. Her reddish-brown hair jumped with highlights, her lips trembled and she looked undecided. She didn’t say anything; she just stood, her face drawn and pale.

I pushed into the room, taking her with me and snapped:

“Where is he?”

“Looking for me, Danny?” Lee came out from a room and walked over and sat down on a couch. I went over and grabbed his lapels, picked him up, then slammed him back onto the couch and his head hit the back of the couch and it wobbled.

His eyes glared. “Be careful, chum. You’re in bad enough shape so that you could use a little of my help.”

“For instance?”

“For instance, I came over here immediately when I saw the cops in your place. I thought maybe Jenny had photos on Bert’s killing and we could save you.” He smiled. “But she didn’t know what you were talking about over the phone.”

“You came running over here,” I growled, “because you thought maybe Jenny did have photos of the Lorenzo kill and you wanted those pictures because you took my gun and killed him.”

Jenny backed up a few steps and Lee’s eyes dulled behind his glasses, but his

smile was still frozen on his lips. "You'll have to prove that, chum. In the meantime, I think I'll have the cops hear this."

He got up and went for the phone. I batted it out of his hands. "Not yet," I ordered, and I threw some more story at him.

"You were anxious to make it murder, Lee. Why? Because it was fixed for murder. Because you and Lois had a sweet racket. She'd get the picture poses and you'd follow with a question item in your column and the guy that got stuck knew the game was rough, so he came across quick. You caught Johns the same way, only De Lorenzo paid you for that because it tied Johns up on his gambling crusade."

I took time out for a deep breath. "But Lois goes feminine on you and falls in love with Johns and she wants out of the racket. You can't see it, because you need the dough. Your gambling runs high and your suits run high and you are use to living higher than the mere hundred bucks the column gets you."

LEE was listening and Jenny was listening. I had to make it good. "Lois, in love, threatens to expose you if you don't release her. But you mail the photo to Johns anyway, hoping to break it up. Then Lois calls on me because I helped her once and for a cop I can keep my mouth shut.

"But you spot me at the club. What's a cop doing in a ritzy night-club? So you get Lois home before she can talk to me."

It was getting windy, but Lee just sat and crossed his legs and folded his arms and seemed perfectly at ease. I hoped I had him tagged right.

"Go on, Sherlock," he urged. "It's great."

"In the apartment, you probably tell her you'll quit. But you get her gun, get close enough and shoot her. You put her gun in her hand and you make it look like

suicide. But what happens? Calvin Johns comes in, trying to find out about the photo deal. He sees her dead and leaves but fast.

"And, brother, you think fast. You now want it to be murder. You got Johns where you want him, so you overturn chairs and smash perfume. Because now that fifty grand is just peanuts. You got a murder rap over his head."

Lee began to squirm and he put his hand in his pocket. It wasn't that cold in the room. He had a gun and I knew it. Jenny knew it for she stifled a small scream.

"Go on," Lee urged. "Amuse me."

I amused him some more. "Johns admitted to me he was up in the room and it looked like suicide. Because when he saw Lois, nothing was disturbed. But when I discovered her body, I get a roughhouse brawl appearance. Now, why would the murderer leave the phone off the hook? Simple. You wanted the body to be discovered as quickly as possible after Johns had left—and an open circuit is a good method.

"But you didn't want your fingerprints on the phone. You knew you couldn't wipe all fingerprints from the room, so you made it a point to account for your fingerprints in the room by telling me how chummy you were with Lois."

Lee said: "Shall we call the police now, Sergeant?"

"Not yet. You hid in the closet, Lee. I know, because the shoes were upset as though someone jumped in quickly and knocked the rack over. But you overlooked two things, smart-boy. The waxed floor showed no signs of the bed moving yet the phone and the chairs were overturned, and number two: Footprints on the waxed floor in the closet and they'll lab-test to your shoes. Okay, now use the phone."

I started for the phone when Lee jumped to his feet and came out with a

gun. His face was pasty, a yellowish-white, and his eyes looked like big black marbles behind his glasses. His hand shook.

"So you figured it out," he said jerkily. "Smart, but what good is it going to do you dead?"

His finger tightened on the trigger and his knuckles were white. I lunged forward as a reddish flash blinded me and I felt a sharp, knife-thrust sting my shoulder. Another shot.

On the floor I looked up to see Lee turn slowly, his mouth twisting and his small face tight with agony. His glasses fell as he tumbled to the floor a foot from me. I saw more. I saw big Jud with a smoking gun and Calvin Johns following him into the room.

Jenny was on the floor holding my head. It was my shoulder that had taken the shot but it was nice as it was. Jud and Johns had been following me ever

since I left their house and they made good witnesses. Especially Johns, who knew them all from the governor on down.

Captain Charles forgave me since he had to, but Jenny wasn't so easy to fool.

"I get everything," she admitted, "even as to why Lee had to kill Bert. Bert was getting to know too much about his activities. But how can a lab test a man's shoeprints? Aren't most shoe-lasts of standard sizes?"

I grinned. I was happy, so what the hell. I said: "Honey, a lab man would laugh at me if I asked him to test a shoeprint. But when a guy with a guilty conscience gets all nice and built up, and then you spring a clincher on him, logical or not, he jumps to protect himself. It adds up too quickly for him. It is known as snowballing evidence."

She smiled, and then frowned. "I hope when we're married," she cooed, "you're not so tricky with words."

THE END

SCREWBALL ACCIDENTS

A citizen of Wisconsin scored the neatest trick of the year—he was shot by a cigarette. This is how he did it: he placed a lighted butt on the edge of an ashtray, and sprawled comfortably into the nearby chair to scan a newspaper. The heat of the cigarette exploded a rifle cartridge left in the ashtray—and the lead slug tore through his arm. Can any other cigarette make that statement?

* * *

All burned up was a young cricket player. A hard-hit ball struck a box of matches in his pocket. Pants burning, the man of fire bravely finished the play and rushed from the game in a blaze of glory. Need we add, he was also char-grined.

* * *

Here's the sad case of a man from St. Louis, who was hurried to the hospital with a sharp puncture wound. The patient's gripe was that he had been awakened from sleep by a stabbing pain. A bed-spring had snapped loose, pierced the mattress, *ping-g-ed* the dis-comfited sufferer in the middle of his nap.

by Lil Mehlman

EXCLUSIVE SUCKER

By **WALTER
SNOW**



Seizing the muzzle, I waited
... for the flashlight beam.

*For five C notes
Reporter Ogden covered a story
about a shotgunned blonde—
with himself . . . on the spot.*

THE first murder was the kind to get drunk about as you never have been drunk before. It was the doom of our pasts, a blight on our futures. Most of the others had phoned home hours ago to helpmates who understood why the boys wanted to be out for the last time.

I hadn't: my long-stemmed Rose was different from newspaper wives. Probably she had already heard about it. Ever since 10 a. m. it had lead all the news-

casts on the hour and had screamed in the headlines.

Now the dusky twilight had changed to a black, stormy night. With savage sleet slashing down outside, the stragglers were tottering out of Benny's Waterfront Bar. Long since the truckers and pressmen had departed. The printers and city room crew lingered until 7 p. m., then remembered grimly that no skeleton night shifts would be coming on ever again.

Between 2 p. m., when I emptied my desk after the Night Edition went to bed, and 8 p. m., one can get thoroughly plastered. Benny himself was a vague blur at the far end of the deserted bar weariedly mopping up puddles.

Being a barkeeper, he seldom drank. But when the bulldog Home Edition came out, he had to have a couple with the boys. The mass exodus from the Globe Building occurred when the Night Edition hit the streets.

For all of us on *The New York Evening Globe* there was only one story today.

The lone stranger—his face was a blur, a narrow hatchet-like blur with the bready little eyes of a wharf rat—picked up the damp, limp paper, read it aloud: "THE GLOBE IS SOLD!" The banner verb should have been "SOLD OUT."

"It used to be a great paper," he said, sidling up to my elbow. "Got kind of stuffy except for its smashing campaign against waterfront rackets. S'pose it was television. I'll buy you a drink to damn TV. My name's Costello."

He didn't look like a real Costello, but wharf rats generally take over good honest names. His voice grated on my nerves like the grind of gears, but I was alone and in a whiskey haze.

"I'm Harry Ogden, ex-crusader against waterfront rackets," I announced recklessly. "I can still buy my own drinks. I'll match you for the next."

"Tails," said the self-described Costello, flipping a half dollar. It clinked on

the moist mahogany, showing heads. Absent-mindedly I fingered the coin out of a beer puddle. Maybe I was binge-blind, but it seemed to have two heads. In my misty aroma Rat-Face seemed vaguely familiar, but I had done too much cursing about soulless publishing corporations to place this particular variety of rodent.

"S'pose you got a big hunk of severance pay," said Rat-Face Costello.

I growled, "I was on the *Globe* only a year so I rated only two weeks severance pay."

"That's not much for a cold winter," said Costello, sympathetically.

"It's chicken feed to the blonde extravagance I married six months ago. It won't pay for the rent on our Central Park West apartment and the next installment on her mink coat. The bank account is a cancelled book."

"Why not shift to the merged *Press-Courier and The Globe*?"

"My friend," said the slurred voice of too many bourdons and too much self-pity, "*The Press-Courier* has bought out so many dailies that by this time it only had room to take 13 guys, just columnists and top brass. All the rest are out on the street—like me. I was just another working stiff."

"Then you'd like to make a few hundred quick bucks, eh?"

"I'm not ready for murder—yet."

"Always the kidder, eh, Harry?" said my new pal, flipping the coin again and paying for another round before I could call out "Tails." He merely moistened his lips as if sampling his drink. "I'm serious. I mean five centuries on the line and a hot tip on a great story. Tomorrow's headlines."

The way Costello spoke, those magic words banished spectres of endless job-hunting and hungry toil in a Grub Street hack's garret. He conjured up visions of new bylines on a metropolitan daily. It need not be the old rat race once more.

The five C's bonus would just pay off the balance on Rose's mink.

Maybe we'd have a chance again—if my statuesque blonde didn't get too big ideas. It really wasn't her fault. As cloak-room gal in the High Hat Club, she'd seen too much of the glitter of expense-account society. Since I had fallen for a would-be glamour gal, dropping little Sally Lenson, the half-pint reference clerk in the P-C Morgue, I should be willing to pay the piper.

"Spill the works, pal. I'm a reporter for hire."

"I'll have to take you there," said Costello, lowering his hard, metallic voice.

Somehow I reeled towards a yellow cab with my hot news tipster, settled back on the cold leather cushion. Vaguely I remembered the glint of a silver flask, the fiery bite of good bonded bourbon, and then a peculiar acrid aftertaste.

The taxis bumped monotonously along the waterfront cobblestones of West Street. The steady jolting made me so drowsy that I lost all interest in my strange companion and unknown destination.

A FLY-SPECKED buglight flickered on the ceiling through the jagged shell of a broken globe. It faintly illuminated plaster zig-zagged with cracks. In one corner a triangular chunk had fallen down, exposing hairy brown slats. From damp walls dangled curling snakes of faded, flowery paper.

At first my head was a balloon about to float away from my shoulders. Then it seemed that my skull was fractured and trip-hammers were splitting it again. I hunched to one elbow, upsetting a pinch bottle of scotch. Then I discovered that I was lying on a tangled rag rug, which reeked like a brewery. I was a distillery myself.

Wearily I sank down again, resting one cheek in a puddle of scotch. What did a

hatchet-faced man like the self-described Costello matter? It had been a grand farewell binge. Now I could sleep it off. It would do Rose good to worry about me for a change. She had kept me pacing the floor many a time.

Besides, I didn't have to face any city editor tomorrow. Closing eyes that smarted, I started to yawn, then began to shiver. Hard pellets were pounding my head, sharp needles were scratching my face.

The sole window, two feet away, had a jagged hole through which the sleet came pelting in. It was the shakes, the wet blanket of ice, that had awakened me. Foghorns hooted from the nearby Hudson River. I sat up with a start.

The dismal hall bedroom, a ten-by-eight foot cubbyhole, was furnished only with a rickety bureau, one ramshackle straight chair and a sagging cot. My smarting eyes popped with horror.

Dangling down from the cot was a nylon-sheathed leg. A blue satin gown had gotten twisted on the narrow bed, exposing the shapely leg. That cheesecake had done its last high kicking. The lumpy bedding was drenched with clotted blood.

The head had been blasted with buck-shot from a sawed-off double-barreled gun that lay beside the charred remains of peroxide-blonde hair.

This anonymous dirge in blue and blood had no handbag. Around two long, tapering fingers were red circles where identifying rings had been yanked off. Once she had been a Junoesque creature, a show-girl type like my long-stemmed Rose, but larger, at least ten years older.

How could an unidentifiable woman possibly be tomorrow's headlines? An electric shudder shot up my spine. The screaming type would be concerned with a crusading crime reporter in a murder trap. But for the hail pelting on my face, I would be still slumbering from my own quota of hootch and the doped stuff.

Fingering into a pocket for a handkerchief to wipe off fingerprints, I came up with a wad of bills. There were ten of them, all bearing engravings of General U. S. Grant. The five hundred promised by the mysterious Costello. I shoved them back into the pocket, hurried to the broken window.

Gaunt, red steel girders were towering out of a half block hole next door. It was still night, only 9 p. m. by my strap-watch. The riveters had quit at 5. Their clanger apparently had muffled the shotgun blast. So the strange blonde had been dead for at least four hours—leaving me without a time alibi.

I noticed a bulge under the heavy weave of the stocking top. I pulled out a thick wad, mainly centuries, a few fifties. It must have counted to several thousand. If Costello had planted five C's on me as a murder frame, would he have left this fortune? Had the killer banged my limp body against the shapely leg, unknowingly pulling up the blue skirt and so failed to notice the ex-showgirl's First National Bank?

I started to put it back when footsteps creaked up the stairs. There was no fire-escape outside the third-floor window. It was a suicidal drop of five stories into the excavation. There was no weapon except the shotgun, which had been fired.

Seizing the cold muzzle, I stood by the hinges just as the door swung inward with a flashlight beam. Was the killer returning? The mahogany stock descended like a club on a sleet-coated fedora. A big man doubled up, plunged headlong on his left side. His torch, still blazing, rolled across the floor.

Illuminated the face of First-Grade Detective Moe Marcus, Manhattan-West Homicide. An old acquaintance but a tough man, who had been demoted from Acting Captain in a departmental shakeup due to newspaper razzing.

Prowl-car boys always travel in pairs.

Already the partner was thumping up the steps.

"What's up, Moe?" called a warned voice. "Hurt yourself?"

A quick yank pulled the heavy body inside, dragged it against the wall. The fallen flash still cast its telltale shaft across the floor. The second plainclothesman, a short-winded portly chap, spotted the betraying light, pulled out his Police Positive.

I clouted before he could raise the weapon. The shot went low, burned into my right thigh. He went down and I almost followed suit. He stirred groggily. I had struck only a glancing blow.

I didn't have the heart to clout again, but forced myself to tap him. I limped over the threshold, clumped down the rickety stairs.

The old rooming house was still as a morgue. Doors gaped open, showing windows with slats instead of glass. The remnants of furniture were so dilapidated they had been abandoned.

Just as I reached the brownstone steps, a police whistle shrilled. I had been too afraid of cracking the second detective's skull.

The next house was boarded up, condemned. This was the warehouse district of the waterfront edge of Greenwich Village. No one was aboard on the sleety, silent streets.

HOBBLING along on my gimpy leg, I turned a corner, took the shortest route to the 14th Street station of the Eighth Avenue subway. Luckily, an uptown local was just pulling in. Blood was trickling down the inside of my trousers, staining the kneecap. I buttoned my long topcoat to cover the wound, stood in the vestibule against the metal wall.

Getting off at 50th, I entered the wash-room, pulled off my undershirt and bound it around the wound. The .38 bullet had missed the bones, just drilled through the

flesh. My dirty-fingered dressing was an invitation to gangrene.

Riding to Columbus Circle, I realized that identification of fingerprints in the murder dump wouldn't take more than a few hours: I was ex-Infantry. I hobbled upstairs to a drugstore, dialed my Central Park West number.

"Hello, hon," said Rose, with unusual warmth in her throaty contralto. "I was worried about you, big boy. Will you hurry home to your gal friend?"

"Are you alone?"

"Er, of course. Take a cab, darling. You will come right away, hon?"

"Take me half an hour."

Rose was chirping kisses into the mouthpiece as my receiver clicked off. I could picture a green-and-white radio car parked around the corner. Another tip from the frame-up specialist.

I bought iodine, cotton and adhesive, took the IRT to 72d Street and in a bar washroom applied slightly more sanitary bandaging. I phoned Benny's Waterfront Bar. Because he owed his existence largely to the Globe Building, he'd called it a night. At this hour, my old city-room pals would be in no shape to help.

How does one trace down money, possibly hot money? After two shots of bourbon, I called another number. Just twenty minutes later half-pint Sally Lenson came tripping up to the rear booth.

Once I had told her that little girls

should never wear bulky furcoats. She had stormed at me then; now she had discarded the racoon, which made her look like Miss Four-by-Four. She was sheathed in a tight-fitting blue serge suit and a form-fitting cloth topcoat. With black bangs protruding under a crazy saucer of a hat, she was a nifty little number. There was panic in her hazel eyes.

"It's on the radio," she gasped.

"I didn't hear. There's a tenth-rate fight on TV in the front of this bar."

"A dragnet is out for Harry Ogden. Your reporter's police card, which should have been surrendered to the *Globe* city editor and returned to headquarters, was found under a slain girl's body."

The tiny reference clerk wrinkled a freckled nose like a bunny. "I know you didn't do it. But who is she?"

"Didn't the newscast say?"

"Her face was blasted away. It's a mystery how she ever was lured to the condemned building. It used to be a rooming house for longshoremen."

"She carried bills stuffed in the top of her stocking."

"Whew! She might have rolled a millionaire. Or maybe she owned a classy clip joint. How about that sucker-trap where your Rosebud hung out?"

Half-pint Sally, as a once-jilted woman, couldn't resist the temptation to go catty. I patted the freckles on one cheek.

"The High Hat is owned by the syn-



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dicate. Let's see. Longshoremen and big dough. You give me an idea, little one."

Since I couldn't venture into that known hangout, I outlined a few questions for Sally to ask, told her to phone Mr. Daily—me—at this bar. She vetoed the latter part, packed me off in a taxi with the key to her own apartment.

The three modest rooms for \$50 a month looked more homey than Rose's \$150 place. I had a shower, more first aid and then tried to keep myself awake with black coffee. Nodding groggily, I decided to close my eyes for just forty winks. . . .

The western sun was blinding my eyes when I awoke. The alarm clock said 2 p. m. I had been dead to the world for fourteen hours. If I had slumbered through Sally's phone calls, why hadn't the tiny reference clerk showed up?

The coffee pot held just a half cup, as I had left it. There was no trace that she had been in the apartment. Certainly she would have picked my fedora off the floor.

A call to the *Press-Courier* Morgue—I mean *Press-Courier and The Globe*—brought a cold and impersonal Sally.

"Yes, Mr. Daily. The story you want was Page One last July 15th. A waterfront case, remember?"

The date of nearly six-months-old news drew a blank. My expose of waterfront rackets covered all kinds of angles—I couldn't hazard a guess now.

"Why the chill? What happened last night?"

"That place was a hot spot all right. I didn't cool off until I got to the Girls' Y."

"Why didn't you phone?"

"Good-by, Mr. D."

Scrambling brunch, I suddenly realized that the cops were monitoring all newspaper switchboards. If Sally had been tailed and had taken a room at the Y to keep them off my trail, it didn't spell plainclothesmen. The police could have

easily, quickly located her apartment.

Not being willing to wait twenty minutes for the next newscast, I walked down one floor, took the elevator to the basement, sneaked out through the service entrance to the next building.

Only a few Night Editions of the afternoon sheets were left on the nearest stand. All front-paged good photos of myself. They made me pull down my fedora brim.

At the Newspaper Division of the Public Library on West 25th Street, the *Globe* for July 15th exposed waterfront loan sharks. Heading a list of persons expected to be questioned by the Grand Jury was Mrs. Dora White, former showgirl and peroxide blonde.

THE name suddenly rang two bells. For my Rose had furnished that tip, picked up at the High Hat Club. I staggered out of the library in a daze. The corner kiosk already displayed stacks of Wall Street Closings. The stories hadn't changed. The dragnet was still closing on the wounded crime-crusading reporter.

All doctors were warned to report the appearance of a tall man seeking treatment. The killer apparently used his sensational waterfront exposes for shake-downs on the side. The theory was that the still unidentified blonde had threatened blackmail.

Not until hailing a new cab and climbing inside did I notice too late that the *Evening Bulletin* lay opened beside the driver. Above a photo of myself shrieked the head:

CRAZED REPORTER IS HUNTED IN BLAST MURDER OF BLONDE

I hunched in a corner to be out of range of the rear-vision mirror, gave a waterfront address five blocks north of the murder scene. It was a two-story taxpayer, a sawdust saloon on the sidewalk floor,

upstairs the office of *D. White's Check Cashing Service*.

Giving a buck for the forty-cent ride and telling the cabbie to keep the change, I bumped my head getting out, tilted up my fedora brim. Awkwardly I had shoved my gimpy leg out first; it was stiff, beginning to fester despite first aid. The top-coat parted, revealed clotted blood on the trousers.

A startled flicker in the cabbie's eyes told me he had recognized the photo, noticed the telltale stain. I pulled out one of the U. S. Grants.

"Will you wait for me, Bud? If I don't come down in ten minutes, call the cops."

The fifty-note was a mistake. The cabbie jammed down the accelerator, shot away from the curb like a rocket-ship.

Upstairs a light was burning behind the one frosted glass door I wanted. The door was locked. It was 3:30 on a Saturday afternoon. The check-cashing hours were over. I rattled the knob. For several minutes there was no answer. Then I was staring into the muzzle of a blue-steel automatic and behind it a ratty hatchet-face.

"Precaution pays," said Costello. "I could shoot you down, have the cops on my side for life."

"But you'd never know what happened to Dora's five gees."

"C'mon in, punk."

Ordered to stand against the fumed oak walls, arms raised, I was conscious that another person stepped on the soundless carpet leading from the inner office. The subtle, intriguing aroma, the moist, languid fragrance of heliotrope, was more of a shock than the rough frisking of hard knuckles.

"I don't get it, my beloved," I said, ironically assuming a bantering tone to fight off a sudden dizziness. "Won't my five grand GI insurance be just chicken feed to you?"

"I'd forgotten you carried it, hon. I

can always use a neat round sum like that."

"But what's your big percentage, Rose?" I asked, turning around slowly. "What's your tie-in with Dora White? You tipped me off once that she was a loan shark. All it got her was an I-don't-remember session before the Grand Jury."

"She had to make a bigger income tax payment."

My long-stemmed Rose was leaning her five-feet-eleven of blonde showgirl back in a swivel chair, puffing on a long ivory cigarette holder. There was a hard, enameled look to her doctored features. Grim lines around the plucked eyebrows and bobbed nose suggested she hadn't slept last night. What had I ever seen in her? Only a stunner to attract attention in the cabarets.

"Why did you kill Dora White?" I asked.

"I didn't. Haven't seen her in months. She went to that dump to corner a supposed loan welcher, had an accident."

"But why were you an accessory to murder?"

"Didn't your freckled Sally tell you? She was quizzing everybody at the High Hat, cigarette gals, hatcheck, chorines, even waiters, about whether I had anything to do with a female loan shark? Knuckles here—he's Knuckles Rogan, not Costello—hurried to the High Hat when he heard you slugged those two dicks.

"Pretending he was a cop taking your Sally to the station for questioning, he tried to use brass knucks outside on the street. Your alleycat kicked him in the shins, ducked into the Y. W. This morning the little twerp called two *Press-Courier* truck drivers to pick her up."

"Listen, I figured the set-up out by myself. The blonde had five grand in her stocking top, a habit from the old days. Oh, you don't have to search me. It's stashed away."

"I wondered how you tumbled to Dora

White. She was supposed to go to the morgue as a nameless stranger. The only reason I married you was because Dora dropped me from her payroll. She was my stingy half-sister, but she even cut me out of her will with a single dirty dollar. But I burned that up—so I'll get all." Rose smirked at my surprise. I had never guessed that she and Dora White were related.

"If she was buried in Potter's Field as an unidentified pauper, how could you collect?"

"I'd have to wait seven years—because otherwise I might be suspected. Too many people knew there was bad blood between us. But now, with Knuckles' help, I've already taken over the loan business. And better still, you're tagged as the fall guy. You and your half-pint cheap mink coat."

"So I'm supposed to have killed Dora for money on the day I lost my job, eh?" I asked her.

"*The Bulletin* calls you a crazed reporter. You're even trying the hold up this office. When Knuckles shoots, I can identify my dear half-sister, collect my inheritance in six months," said my darling wife.

"Couldn't you let me escape to South America?" I pleaded. "If you'll let me run for it, I'll give you Dora White's five grand."

Knuckles' beady eyes reflected a shot in the back. The blue steel gun was ready for a signal.

"So you've got the money on you!" exclaimed Rose, springing up greedily. She halted on the verge of getting between the muzzle and myself, her eyes with excitement.

Reaching into jacket pockets with two hands, I pulled out fistfuls of U. S. Grants and centuries. For a split-second they were magnets to avaricious eyes. Quickly I tossed them fluttering into Knuckles'

face. Then I dove with a flying football tackle for his knees.

The gun roared inches above my shoulders. We crashed into a tangled heap on the hardwood floor, thrashed around, battled for the gun. Suddenly glass shattered.

A big hairy hand reached through a hole in the frosted pane, flung open the door.

It was Moe Marcus, Manhattan-West Homicide, wearing criss-crossed adhesive over a swelled bump on his forehead. He was followed by his bandaged partner and my cabbie who had called them on the double-quick.

Rose shrieked that I was attempting a holdup, that Knuckles just wrestled away my gun.

Moe Marcus pulled me off the floor, stood me on rubbery lags. He doubled his ham of a hairy fist, landed an uppercut that sent me sprawling into a corner. My head cracked against the fumed oak paneling.

Momentarily I discovered some new constellations.

The husky brute, the former acting captain of detectives, stepped to the phone, dialed a number.

"You all right?" he asked, capping the receiver to one ear, turning around to look at us.

Rose patted her blonde tresses, smiled sweetly, but Moe Marcus turned away, grinned at me squatting on the floor. "I mean you, Harry. That frame smelled but you had the clout coming. A scoop should get you back on the *P-C and G*. Gimme the city desk."

He held up the receiver.

"No, no, Moe," I said. "I've got a half hour to make the last deadline with a four-hour exclusive. So the city desk can wait.

"I want to call the Morgue first—for a very alive gal named Sally."

MOURNER'S BENCH

**First-Prize Winner in the 1949
Writer's Digest Contest**

Louie jerked and gave a short
grunt. . . .



**By W. P.
BROTHERS**



“SURE, I trust you, honey,” Myrtle said sweetly. “It’s just that you shouldn’t carry the stuff around. Suppose a copper gets nose-y. He finds it on you. Then where are we?” She spoke in her most persua-

*Meet Myrtle—
scavenger in the ruins
of a back-firing double-cross.*

sive tones, but her voice was still a whine.

Louie stubbed out his cigarette on the edge of the table and let the butt drop to the floor. At the bar a lone man nursed a beer. The bartender chewed on a ham sandwich and let a mask of boredom slip over his face.

"The cops ain't touched me in weeks," Louie said, a thin smile spreading over his face.

"But that don't mean they ain't gonna," Myrtle said quickly. "You leave the stuff with me, Louie, and go on down to the boat and get George. I'll be here when the both of you get back. You know me. I wouldn't run out on my Louie." She smiled.

Louie grinned back. Let her beg for it, he thought. If he was too easy, she'd get suspicious. The "stuff," a small package in his breast pocket, was almost pure heroin. He and George had run it in, past the harbor police, past the Treasury agents, past everyone. A hundred thousand bucks worth of it! And Myrtle thought she was going to get cut in.

He and George would have a good laugh over that. Only he'd like to see Myrtle's face when she opened the substitute package he would give her after she'd beg a little more.

The man at the bar walked back to the juke box and dropped a nickel in the slot. He waited until the music started, then went back to his place. Louie watched him until he picked up his beer and started to drink. Then he said to Myrtle:

"No, honey. The coppers won't touch me. I go down to the wharf where George is waiting, and the two of us come back. Then we all go up-town and get rid of this stuff. We'll split the money at the same time."

"It ain't safe, Louie, I tell ya," Myrtle said, her voice rising. "We worked too hard to risk things with some stupid copper. It ain't safe."

She's some little worker, Louie thought

to himself. If he hadn't overheard a scrap of her conversation on the phone a couple of days before they'd gone out to get the stuff, he'd be falling for that line right now. Myrtle was playing a sweet little game—a double-cross game. Only he was wise. That was why he had a second little package in his coat pocket.

He and George could split it two ways instead of three. Anyway, he was getting tired of Myrtle, tired of her cheap painted face and her whining and nagging. He and George would have a good laugh over it. He trusted George and George trusted him. Hadn't George waited at the boat while he took the package up here to meet Myrtle? George was all right. And a two-way split was easier to figure.

He didn't know who Myrtle had her deal cooked up with. But it didn't matter. Only, he'd like to see her face when she opened her little package.

Louie scratched the back of his head and then rubbed his hand over his thin face. He waited. "Maybe you're right, Myrtle," he conceded with reluctance. "Maybe I had oughta leave it with you. You never can tell what ideas a stray flatfoot might get. But don't you be getting any ideas."

"Louie! You know me better than that. We been together a long time. I wouldn't do nothing like that."

Louie summoned up all the seriousness he could muster. "You know I'd get you if you tried to skip. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure, I know it. Louie. Give me the stuff and you do down and get George. He'll be waiting. I'll be right here when you get back."

Louie paused a moment for effect, then he pulled a brown string-tied parcel from his coat. He passed it to her under the table. She quickly slipped it into her handbag.

"I'll be sitting right here when you and George get back," she said flatly.

Louie slid out of his seat. "I won't be more'n a half hour," he said softly.

Outside the bar, a soft, warm rain had started to fall. As Louie hurried away through the drizzle to meet George, a little parcel still tucked neatly in his breast pocket, he could hardly keep from laughing.

OUTSIDE the telephone booth at the base of the wharf, George waited and cursed Myrtle for not calling. The faint slap of the water below him and the falling rain were the only sounds he could hear. The dim light from the phone booth cut a yellow square in the blackness.

He wondered if Myrtle could have double-crossed him. After all, she'd been Louie's girl a long time. Maybe she squealed to Louie. He was about to light another cigarette when the phone inside rang shrilly.

He was through the door in an instant, receiver in hand. "Yeah, Myrtle," he half whispered. "He's on his way? All right. Leave it to me."

When he came out of the booth again, George's nerves were quieter. Everything was going according to plan.

All he had to think about now was killing Louie.

After Louie was taken care of, he and Myrtle could get the stuff sold and head for other parts. It was easy to figure. A hundred grand split easier two ways than three. And Louie was in the way where Myrtle was concerned. George's heart beat quicker. She was too cute a doll for a dope like Louie.

And she had brains, too. It had been her idea to give Louie the heave-ho. A few days before they'd made the run out to pick up the stuff, she'd sounded George out. Louie hadn't suspected a thing. George had even let him take the stuff when he went to meet Myrtle. That was Myrtle's idea, too. Let Louie get full of

trust and confidence. Myrtle was a smart kid.

George walked halfway out the deserted pier and stopped beside three posts that stuck up. From their base, he groped until he found the gun with the sacking wrapped around it.

He heard Louie when the other first stepped on the pier. George fingered the gun and waited as the footsteps clicked over the heavy boards.

He called softly, "Louie."

Louie turned. "Oh, it's you, George. Let me tell you something funny. About Myrtle. She—"

The blasts from George's gun were muffled in the sacking he had thoughtfully provided. Louie jerked and gave a short heavy grunt and went down. George went closer. He fired twice more.

It took him several minutes to find the parcel in Louie's pocket.

That was when he saw the police car pull up. Their spotlight swept the pier and fingered him out of the darkness. He heard their cries of "Halt!"

George lost his nerve then. He was trapped. The little package and the dead Louie—he gripped the gun and started advancing toward the police car. He had to get away. He saw the shadowy figure of a policeman. He fired. For a second there was no sound. Then the whole world before him seemed to explode.

George was dead before he hit the pier, the small brown parcel clutched tightly in one hand, the gun in the other. . . .

Back at the bar, Myrtle paid the bartender and left. She would have liked to have gone down to the wharf—just to make sure. But she knew it wasn't necessary. She had given the police the exact location over the phone.

Clutching her handbag tightly, she hurried up the street. She smiled with satisfaction as her fingers felt the bulge of a little brown package tucked inside.

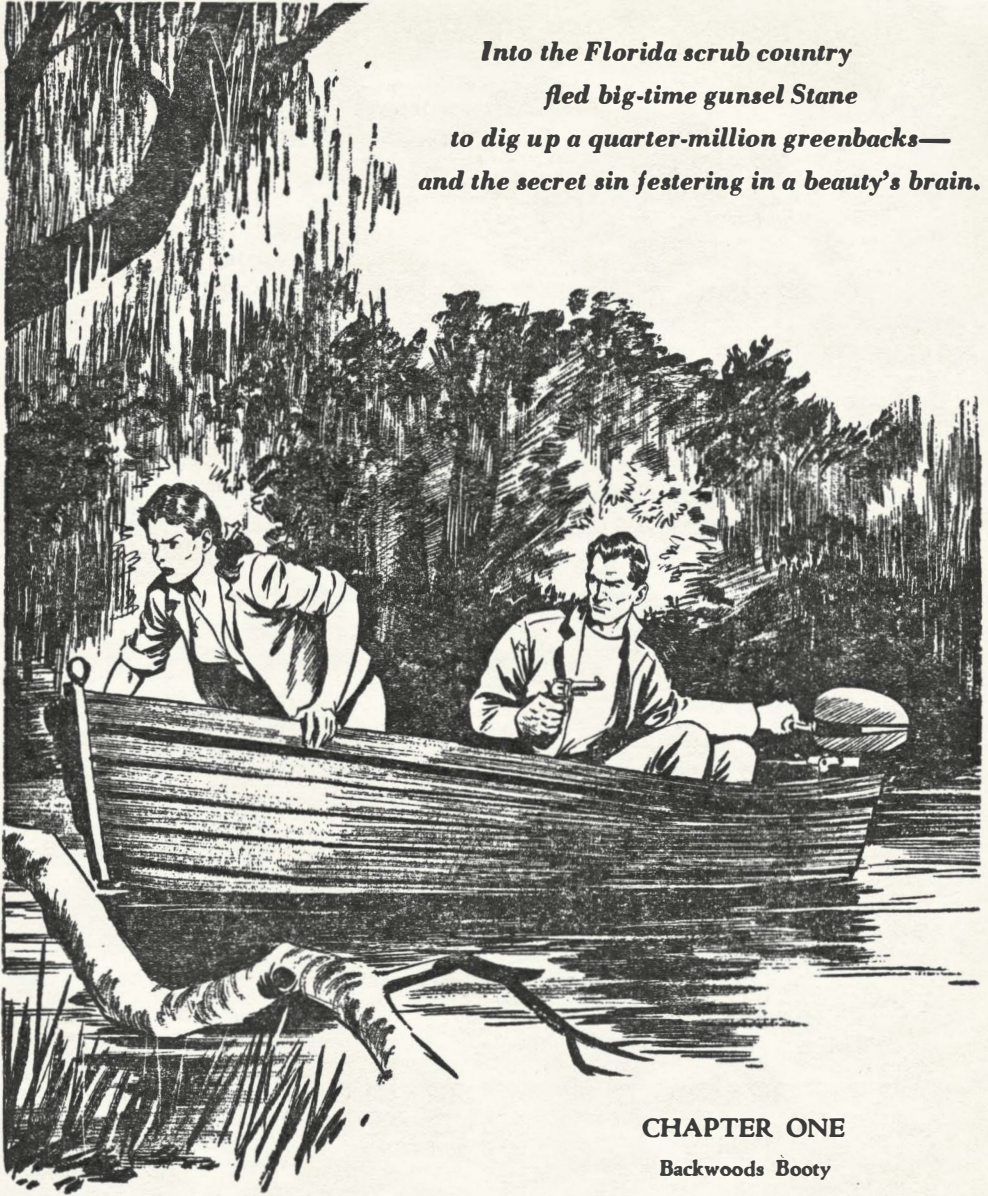
• • • • •
Mystery Novelette
of a
Strange Sell-Out

By
TALMAGE
POWELL



THERE WAS A

*Into the Florida scrub country
fled big-time gunsel Stane
to dig up a quarter-million greenbacks—
and the secret sin festering in a beauty's brain.*



Janie and I were trapped in the middle of the river in an open boat.

CHAPTER ONE

Backwoods Booty

I STOOD in the clearing and waited for Janie in the thickening dusk. I'd been here at the Oklawaha House for a week now. I had delayed longer than I should, longer than was safe or smart, because of Janie. What would Karl Razzo,

CROOKED MAN

or any of the boys, say if they heard that smart cookie Sam Stane had fallen all the way for a nineteen-year-old waitress in a backwoods hideaway glamor hotel?

I lighted a cigarette from the red-glowing butt in my fingers. I had seen Janie the first day I arrived, and I had been telling myself all week that it was going to be all right. The world was going to belong to Janie and me. I tried to tell myself I was through with loneliness and the fast, empty life I'd begun to loathe.

Was I just kidding myself that I alone was smart enough to cross Karl Razzo, beat him out of a quarter of a million dollars—and get away with it?

I clenched my fist to stop the trembling of my hand. From where I stood in the clearing, I could see the Oklawaha House coming alive with golden lights down on the sweeping curve of the narrow, cypress-black river that cut its treacherous way through the scrub country of central Florida.

Save for the Oklawaha House, civilization was a thousand light years removed from the raw, brutal life of this backwoods from which I had run, a tattered scrawny kid who longed for bright lights, race tracks, free-flowing money, and beautiful, good-smelling dames.

And Sam Stane had had all that, until I was fed up with the stink of the life I'd made for myself in the wildernesses of Broadway and Harlem and Chicago and Reno—wherever the vast, crooked enterprises of Karl Razzo stretched their slimy tentacles.

All around me were the hard, dry jack oaks of the big scrub, spreading out over the gray, lifeless sand into eternity. Out there, in the slash pine and palmetto lived the people I'd been born among. Ironic. I thought. I went away to find my fortune, but I had to come back here for the big chance, the quarter-million payoff!

I walked back and forth in the clearing

like a caged animal. I searched the crowding, oppressive dusk for Janie, listening for her footsteps in the raked-out paths.

We're going to make that break, Janie, I told myself. Sam Stane, the only man in the world Karl Razzo trusts, is going to cross his boss. A quick flight to South America. And paradise with Janie.

The thought of what I was going to attempt hit me hard. Standing there, I could see huge, heavy-jowled Karl Razzo as he had been the day he returned to his apartment from a visit with Joe Kruger at the New York Sanitarium. Razzo was sweating that day; he waddled and breathed through his fat lips when he walked. But his small, pig eyes had been lighted up that day in their folds of gross lard.

"Sammy," Razzo had heaved, slumping down into the wide, custom-made easy chair and spilling over the arms of it like warm tallow. "I've been a patient man. Haven't I, Sammy?"

He was the most patient, the most deadly man I knew; Razzo could wait forever, like a bloated spider in a web of his own spinning. I nodded, knowing he would tell me about Joe Kruger.

I had guessed most of it. Kruger had been one of the three hoods who'd knocked over a plush Miami gambling spot, collected enough lead poisoning to kill ordinary men. In fact, two of them had died, after a long, bloody run up Florida from Miami with the sheriff's posse breathing more of that inexhaustible lead down their necks every step of the way.

The cops had taken them, too, up in the central Florida scrub country. Two of them had died in the prison hospital at Raiford. But Joe Kruger hadn't died. He was an old-time pal of Karl Razzo, and Razzo gave him every legal and medical aid.

Kruger beat the rap in Florida, and for two years, had been dying, babbling in

the New York Sanitarium for mental patients. But I happened to know Joe Kruger was broke, and that patient Karl Razzo was paying all the bills. Looking at Razzo, I knew Kruger was dead or dying, at last, and I knew that Razzo's bloated, watchful patience was going to pay off again.

"A quarter million dollars!" Razzo sighed. "Nobody knew where it was, Sammy, but poor Joe Kruger. Poor little Joe. He died less than an hour ago, rest his soul. But now I know, Sammy, where I can pick up the easiest dough I ever made in my misspent life."

Sure, I thought. You'll grow bigger and fatter and more evil, spreading yourself and your web to entangle more, helpless souls like Joe Kruger, and all the other poor devils who got their blood sucked out by patient, bloated Karl Razzo. I didn't say any of that. I had gotten to be Razzo's right hand by playing it smart, keeping my mouth shut and my eyes open.

"You're going to get that money for me, Sammy," Razzo had heaved. "I'm going to tell you where it is, where it's stayed untouched for two years—and you're going down there and get it."

THINKING all that for the millionth time since I'd gotten down here and met Janie, I crushed the cigarette under my heel.

I heard Janie coming up the gravel path then. It began again, as it had the first minute I saw her, that stirring inside me. This Janie was different. All through my life women had just been dames as far as I was concerned. But Janie was sweet and simple, and good and clean. All my life there had been something lacking, something I was seeking, and here she was, coming toward me in the clearing.

Looking at her, I was aware of the way my heart pounded, I was aware of the muted music up from the Oklawaha house, the chill sting of the February night. Janie was still wearing the white waitress smock from the restaurant down there.

She loved being a waitress; she served the tables of the bored and the sated with a gleam of fresh loveliness and excitement in her face and in her dark eyes. It thrilled her to be among these people, to smell their rich perfumes, to gaze awed upon their gowns and their jewels. I had seen the pleasure in her face, I recognized the poor little hunger the first time I saw her.

She saw me then, and a half smile tugged across her lips. I saw the frown that the smile couldn't touch. I took her icy fingers and drew her to me.

She struggled, enough to send a chill of apprehension along my spine.

"Janie," I said softly, "what's the matter?"

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)
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She opened her mouth to speak. And her head tilted and I saw the glitter of tears filling her eyes. Her mouth was soft and I wanted to kiss it, the way I had yesterday and last night.

"Sam, wait," she begged. "I want to kiss you, too. I've been thinking about you all day. I've never known anyone like you before, Sam." Her fingers trailed upward and caressed my cheek.

"I'd never ridden in a convertible until I met you. But you must listen to me, Sam. I don't know how to tell you. Seeing all these people all the time who have everything, all the money in the world, with servants to wait on them, lovely clothes and fine cars. All the things I love, Sam—"

"You're going to have them, honey," I vowed huskily. "All of them."

"Wait, Sam. That's it. Maybe I don't really want them. Maybe I've got what I want. See, Sam, I went a little wild when I met you. You were the sort of man I'd dreamed about. Power, money, strength. You can take care of yourself, Sam. And you could take care of the woman you loved. You were everything I dreamed. . . . I know I've led you on, Sam. I'm as much to blame as you. But—I can't see you again. Sam, I'm married."

I had her shoulders in my fists before I knew what I was doing. My jaw was tight, and aching with the tightness.

"What is this, Janie?" I said.

"I'm sorry, Sam. I wouldn't have done it, but for a little I let myself dream."

I laughed. A hard, rasping, bitter laugh. That was great. For the sweet and simple little Janie Hickens, Sam Stane was going to gamble his life, double-cross Karl Razzo, and run for South America and a new, decent life!

I released her. I was holding her up so tightly, she slumped back, staring at me. Her mouth worked, and tears spilled down over her face. Looking at her, I

thought crazily, *What does a husband matter? What does anything matter, Janie, but you and me?*

"Go on," I said, my mouth twisting over the bitter taste of the words. "Get out of here."

She started to speak again, stood for a moment searching my face. Then she was gone, across the clearing into the dry void of darkness. Crickets, bull frogs and frantic night birds made the night eerie and loud. Loneliness swept all through me with the chill of the rising wind.

Janie's scream broke across my thoughts. I was pounding toward her before the scream died out and the second one began. Screams of terror and pain. They went through me, and I ran without thinking what I was running into.

The first thing I saw was Janie. She was on her knees in the dirt, and this tall, lean backwoodsman had her hair twisted in his left hand. With his free hand, he was beating her back and forth across the face, and snarling that no wife of his could go sneaking off into the arms of a city punk.

As I plowed toward him, I saw this other thing. And even running, I got the creepy feeling you get when you come upon something evil and unwholesome in the darkness. It was another backwoodsman, tall, rawboned and thin as the man beating Janie.

But this man watching, his pale eyes glittering, and with spittle flecked on his pale mouth, had sandy hair and almost colorless brows. His pale face danced, and he missed nothing, jumping with excitement and crowing a jumble of meaningless jargon as he nodded, urging his companion on. "Beat her, Hobe. That's it!"

And Hobe replied, "I'll beat her, Ab, I'll take care of her."

Hobe saw me coming in time to release his grip on Janie's hair. In time to

catch my left full in his handsome, narrow face. I felt his nose give, and his eyes flew wide as he reeled out backward, beyond my reach.

I kept on going after him. He scrambled around on the ground, getting a footing and lunged against my legs. We went out backwards, and he shot his knee into me. I felt the agony in one horrible jolt at the base of my neck. I hit him and hit him again, feeling his face tear and his head rock back. But when he wrenched free, my legs weren't quite ready to stand on. Before I could roll over, he had kicked me in the side with his heavy brogan.

The breath exploded out of me. I heard Janie scream as I rolled with his kick. In the flash of that instant, I saw Ab jumping up and down, his vacant eyes round with excitement.

I came up on my knees in time to catch Hobe's boot in my fists as he kicked again. I twisted hard. I heard Hobe's growl of agony as he lunged away. I was up on my feet and ready for him when he sprang again.

His weight carried me over the exposed root of a jack oak. We went down hard, my head hit, the breath sobbed out of me.

I tried to get up, but I got only as far as Hobe's boot in my face. I tried to buckle down under it, and got another in the back of my neck.

Then I stopped feeling his blows clearly because the lights were going out. But from far away, I heard Janie's sob, and the crazy, pale Ab's frenzied whimpering, "Stomp 'im, Hobie. Stomp 'im, dead, Hobie!"

I tried to shake it off, but I couldn't. Ab's whining, frantic voice screamed through my head as darkness took over. But the last thing I thought was, *I'm down here with a lot on my mind, Hobe. But you asked for it, and no matter what else happens, I'm going to take care of you, Hobe. . . .*

CHAPTER TWO

Redheaded Gal's Warning

I STRUGGLED back to the clearing, across it, down to the hotel. I stumbled my painful way along the gravel drive where the big, slick cars were parked to my cottage on the bank of the Oklawaha. There was a light on in my front room, but it was only a blur through the blood in my eyes. I dragged myself to my front door and leaned against it for a long time while the world wheeled and whirled, spinning and exploding before my clouded eyes.

I heard the swirl and suck of the black river below me, the sigh of the chill wind in the slash pines across it. I could feel the darkness of this place crowding in upon me. I had been away since I was a kid, and this dark land was alien. I got the shakes, and for a moment I couldn't stop. I felt a tearing need for Janie's soft, cool touch.

I pushed open the door. The living room light struck across my eyes, and I heard a woman's sharp gasp.

"Sammy boy! Tell me, what kind of concrete mixer you been playin' with?"

I dragged the back of my hand across my eyes. When I looked again, I could see the gray form standing by the reading lamp. I knew it was Chris Collins. I knew that voice. In a moment, my eyes would clear and I would see her red hair and her green eyes and the knowing smile on her carmine lips.

Looking at her, I compared her to Janie. It didn't help any to contrast Janie's sweet and simple goodness against the aggressive, worldly, grim hardness of Chris Collins.

"Hello, Chris."

Chris grinned. "Hello, Chris. Look at you! You look like a little boy who's been playin' in the next block with a bunch of tough guys."

"I'm all right," I said. "Just let me alone."

She laughed. "Let you alone? I've got to take care of my boy. I came down here, Sammy, to give you hell. But that'll have to wait."

Her voice got almost gentle. At least as soft as I'd ever heard it. She led me to a chair. I was cursing myself as she forced me to lay back in it.

"I'm all right," I said again, my voice as hard as the line of my jaw.

But Chris wasn't listening. She went to work on me as efficiently as a doctor. Under her sure, swift hands, the blood was washed away and some of the pain.

Chris brought me a straight bourbon in a shot glass. I tossed the liquor down while I watched her close the Venetian blinds at the windows. When she turned to face me, her mouth was straight and her eyes undecieved and hard.

"Now, Sammy, suppose you tell me. Just what gives? What are you up to?"

"Nothing," I said. "I'm down here on business for Karl Razzo."

Her red lips twisted a little. "Did you have to run out on me, Sammy? Couldn't you even say good-by?"

"How did you know I was here?"

She looked at me levelly. "The girl on the switchboard heard the telegram you dictated for a reservation here. She came high, Sammy. It cost me all of fifty bucks to find out where you were." Her eyes glinted.

"It isn't hard for me to add two and two. I know Razzo paid Joe Kruger's keep and that Kruger was one of the boys who cached that little fortune down here. You're after that money, Sam—and you're planning to cross Razzo. If you were playing it down the alley, you wouldn't have run out on me that way."

My face was inches from hers, but her gaze didn't waver. Abruptly she turned away, her voice hard and bitter.

"Stop it, Sammy. Do you think you

can fool me, after all this time we've been together? I'll lay it on the line with you—because I love you until I'm all sick inside with it. But you've got to play careful. Razzo was outsmarting other men when you were a ragged kid in these backwoods."

"You're jittery, Chris," I said. I forced myself to smile. "Come here, Chris. All you need is a little lovin'. You've missed me, and it's made you suspicious."

She shook her head. "Kisses won't do it this time, Sammy. Not when there's a quarter million dollars out there in that scrub. Now do you want me to pick up that telephone and call Karl Razzo?"

"Don't be a fool, Chris. What do you want?"

A faint smile etched itself fleetingly in her eyes. "That's better," she said. "So much better." She moved toward me then, tantalizingly. "All I want, Sammy, is half that money. That's not very much. Is it? I want half the money, and I want to go where you go, everywhere you go, all the rest of your life, Sammy."

I shivered, sensing the steel-hardness of her.

Chris was a hungry, redhead from the streets. The lean years of the chorus. She loved me. I knew that. I knew the way she kissed me, in the practised, knowing way that set fire to you in spite of yourself.

But I knew I had to get rid of her. She meant to keep her talons in me until she had half that money, until we were running together, to spend the rest of our lives that way. And I knew if I even let her think I meant to deal her out of it, she'd call Razzo without thinking twice about it.

As I kissed her, I made up my mind to get rid of her. And in the middle of the kiss, I almost laughed aloud. Bitter laughter. The girl I wanted was married to a snake-mean backwoodsman. And hard, glittering Chris Collins had her

arms locked about my neck, with the threat to expose me to Razzo like a sharp-pointed knife at my heart. . . .

THE next morning before eight o'clock I went to Chris' cabana to wake her. The previous evening I had spent trying to make her trust me again. The rest of the night I had been turning plans over in my mind, thinking and discarding. Hobe's beating and the problem of Chris left me with a dark brown taste in my mouth and a pain in my head. But I had a plan simmering in my mind that made me feel better.

In her cabana, she smiled at me, and stretched out her arms languidly. I kept my voice the way she wanted to hear it.

"I'm going down to talk to a guide, Chris. At Dozier's Landing. I won't be gone an hour."

"I'll be waiting, Sammy. Think of it, all the rest of our lives together like this. I'll take care of you. You'll see."

At that, I felt a crawling at the nape of my neck. But Sammy went on smiling. . . .

Lon Willerston's fishing camp was a ring of brown, single room shanties, with wooden drop-windows, bright tin chewing tobacco signs nailed on sides and roof, a rickety wooden pier built along the muddy bank of the black water. Fifteen-foot flat bottom boats slapped about at the end of frayed ropes, and nets and

fish-lines were strung drying in the sun.

Beyond the clearing, cypress, sweet-bay and water oak hung out over the creeping river, nodding at their dark shadows. The place was oppressively silent, with bottle flies humming over fish heads along the wooden planks of the dock.

When I came into Lon Willerston's shack, the old man was sitting with a gnarled, scarred hand clutching at his shirt front over his heart.

"Got a stinkin' ticker," he gasped out. "Be all right in a minute. Get me a drink of that corn whiskey there, will you?"

I poured some into a tin cup, kept pouring until he nodded when with his long, weathered head.

I watched him drink it off. He sighed expansively and wiped his hands down his blue overalls.

"Wanta go fishin', eh, mister?" he said.

"I want to go up the river. I don't know just how far. A few miles. I don't want a fishing party. You understand? Just you and me alone."

"Yeah."

I laid a fifty dollar bill on the table. "Will you take me?"

"Yeah."

"We'll need some gear. We might have to sleep overnight. Food. Will you get it?"

I put another bill on the first one. His



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whiskery face slowly moved into a smile.

"Yeah."

"I want to be ready to go by noon today," I said. "Will you be ready?"

His witch fingers closed over the money. "Yeah," he said, nodding. Then his voice jerked me to a stop at the door.

"Just fish, mister?"

"What else?"

"This back country is fulla talk of buried money. You know? Lotsa folks around hunt that money when they got the time."

"Not me," I said. "Just fish."

"Yeah." It came out of him okay. His suspicion of anyone going up-country was probably routine. He sounded convinced.

By the time I got back to my cottage, I was feeling better. There were a few things to take care of. Chris. Hobe Pickens. And I hadn't given up hope of taking Janie with me when I hit for Brazil. But I was going to get my hands on that money, now.

Chris had ordered breakfast served in my cottage, and she clung to me a little when she kissed me. "You look happy, Sammy," she said. "For the first time in so long."

"It's settled," I said. "We get the money in the morning, Chris. You and I and a guide—tomorrow morning at seven."

I had to make that lie stick by making Chris think I was glad she was down here. It was almost eleven when I left her to take her nap. I strolled out to the convertible parked in the gravel drive behind the main building of the swank retreat.

Taking my keys out of my pocket, I slipped them into the ignition. Then I stood, looking around. Lighted a cigarette. Strolled casually out to the sunlit veranda that looked down on the river. I could feel the excitement rising in me, but I kept my face clear.

Keeping my movements as casual as

possible, I sat for a while in a deck chair, watched a game of tennis out on the courts.

But at five minutes to twelve, I stood up, yawned, stretched in the dazzling sun, walked slowly through the hotel lobby, out on the walk, beyond my convertible, to the vine tangled undergrowth at the end of the clearing.

Once inside that brush, I stopped any pretense, and slumped over low to the ground, I broke my way through the palmettoes and brittle growth toward Lon Willerston's fishing camp.

Who'd suspect until too late, I thought exultantly. Keys in the car, I had purposely planted there for Chris to seek for reassurance.

Quickly I pressed through the scrub oaks ringing Lon Willerston's camp by the river.

The first thing I saw was an outboard motor boat, all rigged out for our trip up river. A little trip that was going to net me a quarter million dollars.

The place was quieter than ever at high noon. There was not even the insistent hum of the bottle flies.

I ran across the clearing and bounded into Lon Willerston's shack. The place was wrecked. Tables were overturned, the coal oil stove was upset. Stretched out in the middle of it, that gnarled hand clutching at his shirt front, was Lon Willerston.

He looked like he'd been kicked and beaten. He croaked, eyes rolling, "That dirty Hobe Hickens done it. Questioned where you was going. Been watching you. Water. . . ."

I spun to a bucket with a dipper handle sticking out of it. But that ticker of his gave out and Lon Willerston died without ever tasting the water.

I hunkered over him. Hobe Hickens. Why?

Because Hobe Hickens was after that money that lay hidden in the scrub.

CHAPTER THREE

Pale Man's Bullets

I SAT there on my haunches staring at the murdered guide. My hands were shaking. It was all getting clearer to me. I felt I even knew why Janie worked as a waitress in the restaurant while her husband rambled around the scrub country with his pale-eyed friend Ab.

Hobe Hickens had that money fever, the same as I did, as Chris did, and as Karl Razzo had always had it back in New York. Death and murder had come out of it so far. That money had made killers and double-crossers. In my mind, I could see Janie's clear young face, and I thought: *Only she is clean. I'll get that money and I'll keep Janie just the way she is. . . .*

I heard movement behind me. Shoving my hand inside my coat to the .38 holstered under my left armpit, I wheeled about, coming up to my feet.

Chris stood there. She was wearing the latest creation in summery slacks and sheer shirt, her red hair was loose about her shoulders. But my gaze sped to her hard, green eyes and stayed there.

I felt sick at what I saw. For a moment, neither of us spoke. I could hear the gentle slapping of the water against the sides of the river boats. I could feel the dry, breathless midday heat. In that violently wrecked shack, that heat seemed to stifle me.

"So you tried it again?" Chris said huskily. "You were going to run out on me again, weren't you, Sammy?"

I stood there, slack shouldered, facing her. No kisses would quiet her now, no tender-sounding lies were going to keep her from calling Karl Razzo.

"Why did you do it, Sammy? Did you think that casual disappearance of yours from the hotel would fool an old hand

like me?" She looked disgusted. "I'm disappointed, Sammy. There's only one thing for me to do. I'm going to call Karl."

A snarl broke from my throat as I leaped at her. My fingers dug into the tender white flesh of her shoulders and I shook her. I drove the back of my hand hard across her face.

"You leave Razzo out of this," I snarled. "You're not calling anybody. Get that straight. I made a deal with you last night—I dealt you in this thing, and I mean to keep it that way if I have to beat you to keep you in line."

Her fine brows went up in astonishment. I knew I couldn't have gotten away with a tender line, but now she had forgotten I had struck her across the face. She was staring at me, believing me, and yet afraid to believe.

Her hand went up and touched the red marks on her cheeks. She came against me. Talked against my mouth. "We're alike. Don't you see that, Sammy? We're the same kind of mugs. We know what we want. And we know how to get it."

I laughed bitterly and shoved her away roughly. "Sure. Every time I step out of your sight, I'm taking a powder. You're not very smart, honey. You've got to be a hell of a lot smarter than that if you're going to take Karl Razzo for 250 grand that don't mean no more to him than his life blood."

She wouldn't release me. "All right, I'm afraid, Sam. There's so much at stake. Why are you here? What happened?"

I told her as many lies as fast as I could think of them. I'd come down to check the gear, someone had attacked our guide, and that was going to delay us. I'd try to find another guide before night-fall, and we'd still try to hit the river by morning—if she'd behave herself, and trust me.

She looked about at the shambles of

Lon Willerston's fishing shack. "Yes, Sam. I'll go back to the hotel now, because somehow, I think you've got to count me in. You need me—because you're going to get hurt down here."

Chris returned to the hotel. I gave her a lot of phony errands, things to do that would keep her busy, and I started out across the dry, ankle deep sand to Hobe Hickens' shack.

I knew where it was. I had stopped near there plenty of times in the last week, letting Janie slip out of the convertible.

Almost I wished I could give up the whole thing for her. That way Janie would never even be touched by this desire for money. I wanted to keep her just the way she was. But I knew that I had run too long and too far to stop now. My life had been a rat race until I found Janie. I couldn't go back to the emptiness and the loneliness, any more than I could stand the thought of going back to work for fat, gross, greasy Karl Razzo.

AS I came to the edge of the clearing at Hobe Hickens' shack, Janie came out of the door and across the flat, bare yard to meet me.

She was in a cheap cotton frock that accentuated the loveliness of her, and made her seem younger and sweeter than ever. Behind her, at the corner of the shack, two hounds whined, their bodies shaking, tails between their cringing legs.

"Sam!" she cried. Her hands were tense on my arms. "Get out of here. You've got to get out of here. Stay away from me, Sam." Her voice broke. "I'm poison for you!"

"Where is Hobe?" I said.

She was trembling. She didn't answer me. "Please go, Sam, and don't ever come back. Hobe has sworn to kill you."

I held her shoulders tightly in my hands, forced her head back so her eyes had to meet mine.

"Where is Hobe, Janie? I know a way to get rid of Hobe—"

Her mouth parted, and terror spilled into her eyes. She shook her head, her black curls bobbling against her shoulders. The change in her scared me, but for a moment as she drew away, I didn't realize what she thought I meant by getting rid of Hobe.

When I realized she had misunderstood, I was able to force a smile. I shook my head. "I don't mean that, Janie. I won't touch Hobe—except to deliver him to the sheriff. Hobe killed a man today, Janie. Tell me, where is he?"

"He—and Ab—" She hesitated. "They've gone in the scrub."

"Looking for money," I prompted sardonically.

She looked at me wonderingly. At last she nodded. "Yes," she whispered. "Everybody in the scrub country talks about the money those men hid up here, but nobody the way Hobe does. It's all he thinks about, all he talks about. It drives him crazy to think somebody might get it before he does."

"Listen, Janie," I said. "That money is there. But he'll never find it. Nobody will ever find it but me. I know where it is. I'm going to get it. But we want to get rid of Hobe and Ab first. Get them off our trail. Get them out of our way. Tell me, Janie, where is he?"

Terror swirled in the darkness of her black eyes. She shook her head.

"No. Hobe would kill me."

"Hobe's never going to touch you again, Janie. I'll show you the sights of the world. Paris. Rio. People waiting on you. Going where you want to go. Doing what you want to do. It's me or Hobe, Janie. You've got to choose. I'll give you the world—"

I felt her tremble. I saw the way her eyes lit up, the fires smoldering behind them. I felt her quickened breathing across her lips. I knew I'd won. I held

her close and spoke into her fragrant hair.

"Help me, Janie, help me get my hands on Hobe—and you'll have everything you ever wanted."

Her hands were trembling and she licked the tip of her tongue across her dry lips. She nodded slowly. "All right," she whispered. "I'll go with you, Sam. I know where Hobe is. He's in the scrub. But you'd never find him. You'd only get lost."

I tried to kiss her, but her mind was on something else. Her smoldering, smoky eyes were fixed, fascinated, on nothingness out beyond me.

"Get ready," I told her, "there's a boat at Willerston's landing. We'll go up river now."

She moved like a dream-walker, nodding without looking at me, hearing me without being aware of me. When she'd donned cord pants and boots and pulled on an old jacket, I took her arm and hurried her through the brush to Willerston's camp. And with Janie sitting in the bow of the boat, we started against the current, up the narrow, black river. . . .

Hours passed that way. Janie wouldn't talk. She wouldn't look at me. I knew she was being tortured by her guilt. No matter how low and mean Hobe Hickens was, he was her husband, and I was making her sell him out. No wonder she wouldn't even look at me yet. I felt rotten inside, myself.

All I could think was how clean Janie was, and what I was doing to her. I told myself that I was dragging Janie down into this mess just once. When this is settled, I promised myself, no dirt will ever touch her again.

We worked upstream in silence. As the day wore on, I began watching the banks of the changing stream. I knew what I was looking for; it had been drilled

into me by Karl Razzo, and I knew I was making no mistake.

As we rounded a bend, the spang of a rifle bullet split through the silence. I heard Janie's whimper of fright. I looked up into a clump of jack oaks on the small bluff to my right. Somebody with a squirrel rifle was hidden in those trees, and Janie and I were trapped in the middle of the river in an open boat.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sweet and Deadly

IT ALL happened fast, but minutes seemed to stretch into eternity as bullets slapped into the water all around us. I had the .38 in my hand, but there was no target, and anyway it was out of range.

There in the middle of the river, the gun was useless as a toy. I pulled over hard, driving the boat straight in for the shelter of the same bluff from which the shooting was coming.

"Get down," I told Janie. "Down in the bottom of the boat."

She toppled off the thwart, and huddled there as the boat struck the bank so sharply every timber in it shuddered.

I leaped out into the shallow water as a bullet struck the top of the motor with a singing spang. I ran into the tangled thicket at the water's edge.

With the .38 at my side, I crouched low and moved upward toward the crest of the small bluff.

I was on even ground with him now. Hugging against an oak, I spotted his pale hair. At that instant, Ab's round, vacant eyes found me. He threw up the rifle and fired twice. The explosion was loud in the silent scrub country. Bark leaped from the tree beside me.

Then it was silent. I inched my head out. I saw why. Ab was feverishly reloading his smoking rifle. I stepped out

from behind the tree. "Ab," I said calmly.

He looked up, his pale brows moving in horror, his vacant eyes wild, his mouth working in agony. I lifted the .38. The bullet punched into his skull.

He took two crazy, long-legged steps before he fell. He stumbled. I stood there watching him hit on his knees and bound up a little so that he sprawled out hard on his face.

I didn't move for a moment. Ab was very still, and I knew he was dead. I was glad Janie didn't have to see it. . . .

When we started up river again, the silence between us was deeper than ever. Before Janie had been silent. Now she was withdrawn from me. She had looked at me when I got back to the boat, then looked away, as if she'd read the answer to the shooting in my face.

I remembered the way it had been between us when I'd first known her, when I'd first kissed her soft, cool lips. Something was dying between us.

I still had my gun in my hand, and I kept my eyes looking for Hobe Hickens, and that other thing—the place along the river that I sought. But I couldn't think about Hobe, or about the money, either. All I could think was, hurry, I've got to hurry before it's all gone and dead between us.

In a clearing ahead there was a sheer bluff, topped with sand-smooth boulders rearing against the afternoon sky. I looked at Janie. But she wouldn't lift her eyes to the excitement in mine.

I cut off the motor, drifted into the shore, directly under the high bluff. I moored the boat, with Janie still sitting silently in the bow. *It's going to be over soon, I told her in my mind, I'll get you out of it, Janie, and I'll make it up to you.*

I stepped out on shore, roped myself to a stunted pine twisting out of the side of the bluff. With Janie's eyes pinned on me, I took a sighting on the apex boulder

above me. I waded out into the water and began surface diving. On the third dive, my fingers touched the heavy strong box.

When I surfaced, Janie must have seen the triumph in my eyes. Her lips parted, and her dark eyes grew bright and dry as she watched me haul the heavy box over the side of the boat. It was a heavy thing—it had to be to lie buried in the mud and withstand the downward pull of the current.

Holding my .38 at arm's length, I shot off the thick lock. Inside was the money. Money that had lain wrapped in oilskin for two long years.

Her eyes fixed on the piles of greenbacks, Janie pulled herself over the thwarts that separated us. I wanted to yell, I wanted to let it out of me, and yet I couldn't speak. I just grinned, flushed with victory, and watched Janie gaze hungrily at the money bared in its oilskin wrapper.

AND I didn't really hear the snap of Hobe's rifle. I only felt the bite of its slug low in my chest. Suddenly, my eyes clouded, and my side was afire with agony, and I felt the blood loosed and flowing, not out, but inside me, filling my lungs and choking the life out of me. I tried to go on standing up, but I just couldn't do it. I sank to my knees in the water, and clung with all the strength in my fingers to the oar lock of the boat.

I stayed there like that, my head slumped over. I listened to the slow footsteps as Hobe came along the embankment toward the boat. He must have thought I was dead; I had every reason to be, but I guess he moved cautiously, his eyes on that money, his rifle slung in the crook of his arm.

I felt him, across the boat from me. But I couldn't do anything about it.

"Dirty, rotten little double-crosser," he snarled at Janie. "So you sold me out!"

I heard the crack of his hand across

her face. I heard Janie's agonized scream.

I lifted my head then. He was just a fiery blur to my eyes, but he was there, and he didn't even bother to look at me until I started the .38 upward in my agonized fingers. I laughed, choking, and feeling the blood in my throat. By the time Hobe saw me, it was too late.

It took everything I had to press that hair-trigger, but I heard the blast, and I heard the thud of the bullet. The fiery blur folded, but not far enough, and I kept pulling the trigger until the blur stumbled out and fell face down in the swift current of the river.

Knowing that Hobe Hickens was dead must have given me a will to live. I pulled myself over into the boat, my eyes seeking Janie's face. I had to see that sweet, fresh young face if I was going to cling to life.

But when I saw her face, all the triumph in me turned to horror.

Janie was looking, not at me, but the money. She was playing in it, running her fingers through it, touching it, feeling it against her skin. I felt the creeping feeling of sickness worming through my veins.

She sat there, her hands buried in the money. She looked up at me, with a faint, distant smile. Her face was transfigured. "More money than I've ever dreamed of," she breathed. "Now I can have all the things I've always wanted. I can live in fine hotels with people to wait on me. I can own fine cars with young chauffeurs to drive for me. I can own a big house. And beautiful clothes. I can see the world. I can have all the things I want. Can't I, Sam? All this lovely money. It's all mine. Isn't it, Sam?"

I shivered. I knew that Janie had sold her soul for that money, but I knew that it was all my doing. She'd longed for things before, dreamed of them without hoping to get them. I was the cookie who'd laid Babylon at her feet.

To get away with it, she had to have a fall guy. She was smart enough to see that. And she killed her love for me, just as she would go on killing things inside herself from now on. She picked Babylon—not me.

She let me stay, huddled and sick in the bottom of the boat as we went downstream.

She brought me back to the sheriff and I lay there, with a doctor over me, hearing Janie swear me into the electric chair.

In a way it was funny, bitterly funny, the way Janie told it, her eyes wide.

It was funny the way they believed her, too, the sheriff shaking his head over her and pitying her. The way Janie told it, I had been making a play for her. Hobe was wild with jealousy—naturally. Today I forced her to accompany me on a trip up river. Hobe had followed us, and in the fight that ensued, I had killed him.

And the moaning and the yelling about

REACH
for
Alka-Seltzer

When You Want
Prompt Pleasant Relief for
**ACID INDIGESTION
HEADACHES
COLD DISCOMFORTS
MUSCULAR PAIN**

All drugstores U. S. and Canada

a quarter million dollars? What quarter million dollars? Janie's eyes were wide. She didn't know what I was talking about. The doctor said it was fever and delusions. And later in a courtroom, a judge said, death in the electric chair. . . .

* * *

And that's what I'm waiting for now. It won't be long, but it seems eternal, waiting for it and knowing it's coming, and seeing the lights dim every time some other poor devil gets it.

But today, my wait was lightened. I had visitors, the only company I've had since I've been in here.

When I came into the visitor's room, I saw Karl Razzo standing there waiting for me. There wasn't even as much compassion in his face as I had expected. He looked fatter than ever, sleeker, and his jowls seemed to hang lower, like waxen lavaliers.

I looked at Chris standing beside Karl, with her hand lightly on his arm. The fur she wore was mink, and the beanie was mink, and she let me catch a glimpse of

the rich frock she wore beneath that tailored coat.

Her eyes raked across mine, almost impersonally. I knew then that what she had said was true, we were alike, she had been right for me.

Her voice was level, and slightly amused. "You should have stayed with me, Sammy."

Razzo's voice heaved out in short-breathed sighs. "Don't worry, Sammy. I'm not going to let you die in the electric chair. My lawyers are working for you already. I'm not going to let the state cheat me out of my pleasure. I personally am going to kick you out of the country."

I knew then that time and space had swallowed Janie. Razzo hadn't been able to find her after she'd disappeared. Maybe his mind was too complicated to anticipate Janie.

I watched Chris leave. She looked so trim and so lively beside Razzo's gross form. And then I thought about Janie, and I wondered. Of the two women I had loved, which was the deadlier—diamond-smooth Chris, or sweet and innocent little Janie?

THE END

BLIND JUSTICE

We all have days now and then when things just seem to be going round and round. In Dunn, N. C., J. K. Stewart was hauled before the bar of justice on a charge of dribbling a bum check. It may have been a sunny day, with the flies buzzing and the fish biting—anyway, when Stewart proffered another check to cover his fine, the judge took it on without batting an eye.

It bounced two days later.

♠ ♠ ♠

In Chicago another judge, faced with a rather similar opportunity of exercising judicial benevolence and trust said, to all intents and purposes, to hell with it. It had just been brought out, in due legal process, that a certain prisoner had obtained \$39 through illegal means. Wishing to temper justice with mercy, the judge offered to release the prisoner, provided the latter handed the money back. The prisoner said he would—if the judge lent him the sum.

"I judge the world," Hizzoner said, "but I don't take it on my shoulders."

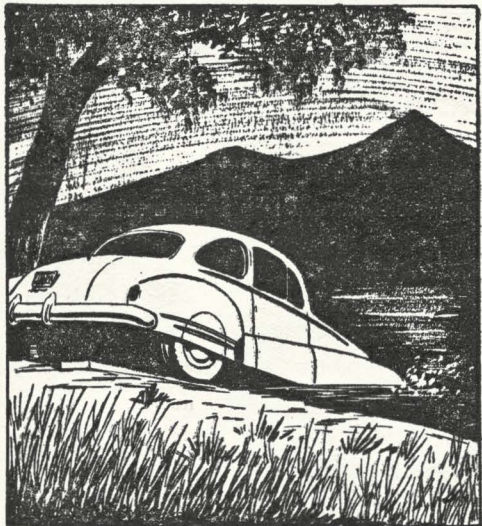
E. Jakobson



Big Al was the first to go. The newspapers called it the Alarm Clock Murder—not knowing Sonny had shot him down to prove he wouldn't be crossed.



Johnny Doyle was laughing inside, but still he got one of his headaches . . . and that's when Sonny's girl, canary Mandy, got soft on the revenge-mad Johnny.



Skipper was next to go. With Mandy's help—and Sonny's temper—it was easy to manage. Only . . . the one cop who couldn't be bought had the scent.



Johnny had to get him out of the way—and exit with his TRI-KILL CUTIE, in the new John D. MacDonald novel . . . in the Nov. issue, published Oct. 4th.

THE FATAL FOOTLIGHTS

By
CORNELL WOOLRICH

*Match wits with Police-Dick Benson
as he tries to trap the brazen murderer
who killed golden Gilda before his eyes—
on a burlesque runway.*

• • •
Baffling Detective-Action Novelette

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"Don't be jittery," she began scornfully.

CHAPTER ONE

Curtains for the Cutie

HE SAW Vilma first. She was the blonde one. Then he saw Gilda. She was the golden one. Naturally strawberry dark, but gilded. He didn't see the man at all, that first night. He didn't know any of their names. He didn't want to. He'd just gone to a show on his night off.

He had an aisle seat, alongside the runway. He'd told the ticket seller he wanted

to see more than just their baby-blue eyes. The ticket seller had said: "You will." He'd been right, it turned out.

At the moment Benson took his seat, there wasn't anything going on that a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl couldn't have watched with perfect propriety. A yellow-haired singer in a flowing, full-length dress was rendering a sentimental tune. And she was good, too. Benson noticed several onlookers, who certainly hadn't

come in to be reminded of mother, fur- tively sticking thumbs into the corners of their eyes.

But this was his night off and he felt kind of cheated. "Did I walk in on a funeral?" he asked himself. He shouldn't have asked that, maybe. The mocking little gods of circumstances were only too willing to arrange it for him.

The singer walked off, the orchestra gave out with an introductory flourish, and the proceedings snapped back into character. The curtains parted to reveal a living statue group—five or six statuesque chorines presided over by a central "statue" poised on a pedestal in their midst. This was Gilda, the main attraction.

Gilda stood up there, head thrown back, seemingly in the act of nibbling at a dangling cluster of grapes. Whether she was as innocent of vesture as she seemed was beside the point; her body was coated with a thick layer of scintillating golden paint which was certainly far more protective than any ordinary pair of tights would have been. But that didn't dampen the general enthusiasm any. She got a tremendous hand without doing a thing, just for art's sake.

The curtains coyly came together again, veiling the tableau. There was a teasing pause, maintained just long enough to whet the audience's appetite for more, then they parted once more and the "statuary" had assumed a different position. Gilda was now shading her eyes with one hand, one leg poised behind her, and staring yearningly toward the horizon—or, more strictly speaking, a fire door at the side of the auditorium.

Benson caught the spirit of the thing along with everyone else and whacked his hands. The curtains met, parted once more, and again the tableau had altered. This time Gilda was up on tiptoes on her pedestal, her body arched over as though she was looking at her own reflection in

a pool. Again she held the graceful pose.

JUST before the curtains obliterated her, Benson thought he saw her waver a little, as if having difficulty maintaining her balance. Or maybe it was simply faulty timing. She had prepared to change positions a little too soon, before the curtains entirely concealed her from view.

That slight flaw didn't discourage the applause any. It had reached the pitch of a bombardment. The audience wasn't a critical one; it didn't care about complete muscular control as long as it got illusions through gold-plating.

The pause was a little longer this time, as though there had been a slight hitch. Benson wondered where the dancing came in. They had billed her out front as "The Golden Dancer," he remembered, and he wanted his money's worth. He didn't have long to wait.

The footlights along the runway, unused until now, gushed up, the curtains parted, and Gilda was down on the stage floor now, and in motion. The audience forgot it had homes and families.

She was coming out on the runway to dance over their heads, wearing a mantle of gauzy black. She wasn't any great shakes of a dancer; nobody expected her to be, nobody cared. It was mostly a matter of waving her arms, turning this way and that, and flourishing the mantle around her, a little bit like a bullfighter does his cape, managing to keep it all around her at all times, in a sort of black haze, like smoke.

But indifferent as her dancing ability was to begin with, a noticeable hesitation began to creep into its posturing after she had been on the runway a moment or two. She seemed to keep forgetting what to do next.

"They hardly have time to rehearse at all," Benson thought leniently.

Her motions had slowed down like a clock that needs winding. He saw her cast

a look over her shoulders at the innocu-
pied main stage she had just come from,
as if in search of help. The lesser chorines
hadn't come out with her this last time,
were probably doing a quick change for the
next number.

For a moment she stood up there per-
fectly still, no longer moving a muscle.
The swirling black gauze deflated about
her, fell limp. Benson's grin of approval
dimmed and died while he craned his neck
up at her. Suddenly she started to go off-
balance.

He had only had time to throw up his
arms instinctively, half to ward her off,
half to catch her and break her fall. Her
looming body blurred the runway lights
for an instant, and then she had landed
across him, one foot still up there on the
runway behind her.

The black stuff of her mantle came
down after her, like a parachute, and
half-smothered him. He had to claw at it
to free his head, get rid of it. . . .

Those in the rows further back, who
hadn't been close enough to notice the
break in her performance that had come
just before the fall, started to applaud
and even laugh, like fools. They seemed to
think it was still part of her routine, or
else that she had actually missed her foot-
ing and tumbled down on him, and either
way it struck them as the funniest thing
they had ever seen.

Benton already knew better, by the
inert way her head and shoulders lay
across his knees. "Take it easy. I've got
you," he whispered reassuringly, trying
to hold her as she started to slide to the
floor between the rows of seats.

Her eyes rolled unseeingly up at him,
showing all whites, but some memory of
where she was and what she had been do-
ing still lingered in the darkness rolling
over her.

"I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you, mister?"
she breathed. The performer's courtesy
to the spectator, so seldom returned!

"Guess I've spoiled the show—" It ended
with a long-drawn sigh—and she was
still.

THE laughter and handclapping was dy-
ing down, because her head didn't bob
up again at the place where she had disap-
peared from view, and they were catching
on that something was wrong.

A hairy-armed man in rolled blue shirt-
sleeves popped partly out of the wings,
not caring if he was seen or not, and wig-
wagged frantically to the bandleader, then
jumped back again where he'd come from.
The droopy music they'd been playing for
her broke off short and a rickety rumba
took its place.

A long line of chorus girls came spilling
out on the stage, most of them out of step
and desperately working to get their
shoulder straps adjusted.

Benson was already struggling up the
aisle with his inert golden burden by that
time. A couple of ushers came hustling
down to help him, but he elbowed them
aside. "You quiet the house down. I can
get her back there by myself."

A man with a cigar sticking flat out of
his mouth like a tusk, met him at the
back, threw open a door marked *Man-
ager*. "Bring her in here to my office,
until I can send out for a doctor." Before
closing it after the three of them, he
stopped to scan the subsiding ripples of
excitement in the audience.

"How they taking it? All right, keep'em
down in their seats, usher. No refunds,
understand?" He closed the door and
came in.

Benson had to put her in the man-
ager's swivel chair; there wasn't even a
couch or sofa in the place. Even with the
shaded desk light on, the place stayed
dim and shadowy. Her body gleamed
weirdly in the gloom, like a shiny golden
girl.

"Thanks a lot, bud," the manager said
to him crisply. "You don't have to wait;

the doctor'll be here in a minute, mister."

"The tin says stick around." Benson reburied the badge in his pocket.

The manager widened his eyes. "That's a hot one. You're probably the only headquarters man out there tonight, and she keels over into your lap."

"That's the kind of luck I always have," Benson let him know, bending over the girl. "I can't even see a show once a year, without my job horning in."

The manager took another squint outside the door to see how his house was getting along. "Forgotten all about it already," he reported contentedly. He turned back. "How's she coming?"

"She's dead," Benson said.

The manager gave a sharp intake of breath, but his reaction was a purely professional one. "Gee, who'll I get to fill in for her on such short notice? What the hell happened to her? She was all right at the matinee!"

"What'd you expect her to do," Benson said, short-tempered. "Come and inform you she was going to die in the middle of her act tonight, so you'd have time to get a substitute?" He lifted one of the golden eyelids to try for optical reflex; there wasn't any.

The hastily summoned doctor had paused outside the door, trying to take in as much of the show free as he could before he had to attend to business. He came in still looking fascinatedly behind him.

"You're too late," the manager scowled. "This headquarters man says she's dead already."

Benson was on the desk phone by now with his back to the two of them. A big belly-laugh rolled in from outside before they could get the door closed, and drowned out what he was saying. He covered the mouthpiece until he could go ahead.

"Okay." He hung up. "The examiner's office is sending a man over. We'll hear

what he says in a couple of minutes."

The doctor smiled. "Well, he can't say any more than I can. She's dead and that's that."

"He can say why," Benson countered, dipping four fingers of each hand into his coat pockets and wiggling his thumbs.

The private doctor closed the door after him.

"Now he's going to stand and chisel the rest of the show free, just because he was called in," the manager predicted sourly.

"He can have my seat," Benson remarked. "I won't be using it any more tonight."

HE BRUSHED a fleck of gold paint off the front of his coat, then another off the cuff of his coatsleeve. "Let's get the arithmetic down." He took out a black notebook, poised a worn-down pencil stub over the topmost ruled line of a blank page.

Those that had gone before—and many had gone before—were all closely scrawled over with names, addresses and other data. Then, one by one, wavy downward lines were scored through them. That meant; case closed.

He hadn't bothered to tear them out and throw them away. When the entire booklet itself was used up, he would probably throw that away, intact. But what a light it could have thrown on the vicissitudes of human existence in a large city, what a tale of theft, violence, accident, misfortune, crime!

The manager opened a drawer in his desk, took out a ledger, sought a pertinent page, traced a sausage-like thumb down a list of payroll names. "Here she is. Real name, Annie Willis. 'Gilda' was just her—"

Benson jotted. "I know."

He gave the address on West 135th. "There's a phone number to go with it, too."

Benson jotted. He looked up, said, "Oh, hello, Jacobson," as the man from the examiner's office came in, went back to his note-taking again.

Outside, three-hundred-odd people sat watching a line-up of girls dance. Inside, the business of documenting a human death went on, with low-voiced diligence.

Benson repeated: "Nearest of kin, Frank Willis, husband—"

The examining assistant groused softly to himself: "I can't get anything out of it at all, especially through all this guilt. It mighta been a heart attack; it mighta been acute indigestion. All I can give you for sure, until we get downtown, is she's dead, good and dead."

The manager was getting peevish at this protracted invasion of his privacy. "That makes three times she's been dead, already. I'm willing to believe it, if no one else is."

Benson murmured, "This is the part I hate worst," and began to dial with his pencil stub.

An usher sidled in, asked: "What'll we do about the marquee, boss? She's still up on it, and it's gotta be changed now for tomorrow's matinee."

"Just take down the 'G' from 'Gilda', see? Then stick in an 'H' instead, make it 'Hilda'. That saves the trouble of changing the whole—"

"But who's Hilda, boss?"

"I don't know myself! If the customers don't see anyone called Hilda, that'll teach them not to believe in signs!"

Benson was saying quietly: "Is this Frank Willis? Are you the husband of Annie Willis, working at the New Rotterdam Theater? . . . All right, now take it easy. She died during the performance this evening. . . . Yeah, on stage about half an hour ago. . . ."

"No, you won't find her here by the time you get down. You'll be notified when the body's released by the medical examiner's office. They want to perform

an autopsy. . . . Now don't get frightened, that's just a matter of form, they always do that. It just means an examination. . . . You can claim her at the city morgue when they're through with her."

He hung up, murmured under his breath: "Funny how a strange word they don't understand, like 'autopsy,' always throws a scare into them when they first hear it." He eyed the manager's swivel chair. It was empty now, except for a swath of gold-paint flecks down the middle of the back, like a sunset reflection.

Benson grimaced discontentedly. "I shoulda stayed home tonight altogether. Then somebody else would have had to handle the blamed thing! Never saw it to fail yet. Every time I try to see a show—"

CHAPTER TWO

Vanishing Bottle

NEXT day at eleven a cop handed Benson a typewritten autopsy report. Benson didn't place the name for a minute. Then:

"Oh yeah, that girl in the show last night—Gilda." He glanced down at his own form with rueful recollection. "It's going to cost me two bucks to have the front of that other suit dry-cleaned. Okay, thanks. I'll take it into the lieutenant."

He scanned it hastily himself first, before doing so. Then he stopped short, frowned, went back and read one or two of the passages more carefully.

" . . . Death caused by sealing of the pores over nearly the entire body surface for a protracted period. This substance is deleterious when kept on for longer than an hour or two at the most. It is composed of infinitesimal particles of gold leaf which adhere to the pores, blocking them. This produces a form of bodily suffocation, as fatal in the end, if less immediate, than stoppage of the breathing passage would be.

"The symptoms are delayed, then strike with cumulative suddenness, resulting in weakness, dizziness, collapse and finally

death. Otherwise the subject was perfectly sound organically in every way. There can be no doubt that this application of theatrical pigment and failure to remove it in time was the sole cause of mortality—

He tapped a couple of nails on the desk undecidedly a minute or two. Finally he picked up the phone and got the manager of the New Rotterdam Theater. He hadn't come in yet, but they switched the call to his home.

"This is Benson, headquarters man that was in your office last night. How long had this Gilda—Annie Willis, you know—been doing this gilt act?"

"Oh, quite some time—five or six months now."

"Then she wasn't green at it; she wasn't just breaking it in."

"No, no, she was on old hand at it."

He hung up, tapped his nails some more. "Funny she didn't know enough by this time to take it off before it had a chance to catch up with her," he murmured half under his breath.

The report should have gone to his lieutenant, and that should have ended it. Accidental death due to carelessness, that was all. She'd been too lazy or too rushed to remove the harmful substance between shows, and had paid the penalty.

But a good detective is five-sixths hard work and one-sixth blind, spontaneous "hunches." Benson wasn't a bad detective. And his one-sixth had come uppermost just then. He folded the examiner's report, put it in his pocket, and didn't take it in to his lieutenant. He went back to the New Rotterdam Theater, instead.

It was open even this early, although the stage show didn't go on yet. A handful of sidewalk beachcombers were drifting in, to get in out of the sun.

The manager had evidently thought better of his marquee short-change of the night before. The canopy still misleadingly proclaimed "*Hilda, the Golden Dancer*," but below it there was now affixed a small

placard, so tiny it was invisible unless you got up on a ladder to scan it: "*Next Week*."

THE manager acted anything but glad to see him back so soon. "I knew that wasn't the end of it! With you fellows, these things go on forever. Listen, she keeled over in front of everybody in the theater. People are dropping dead on the streets like that every minute of the day, here, there, everywhere. What's there to find out about? Something gave out inside. It was her time to go, and there you are."

Benson wasn't an argumentative sort of person. "Sure," he agreed, unruffled. "And now it's my time to come nosing around about it—and there *you* are. Who shared her dressing-room with her—or did she have one to herself?"

The manager shrugged disdainfully. "These aren't big stars playing this house. She split it with Vilma Lyons. That's the show's ballad-singer, you know—the only full-dressed girl in the company—and June McKee, who leads the chorus in a couple of numbers."

"Are her belongings still in it?"

"They must be. Nobody's called for them yet, as far as I know."

"Let's go back there," Benson suggested.

"Listen, the show's cooking to go on—"

"I won't get in its way," Benson assured him.

They came out of the office, went down a side aisle skirting the orchestra, with scattered spectators already lounging here and there. A fifteen-year-old motion picture, with Morse Code dots and dashes running up it all the time, was clouding the screen at the moment.

Climbing onto the stage at the side, they went in behind the screen, through the wings, and down a short, damp, feebly lighted passage, humming with feminine voices coming from behind doors that kept

opening and closing as girls came in from the alley at the other end of the passage, in twos and threes.

The manager thumbed one of the doors, turned the knob and opened it with one and the same gesture—and a perfect indifference to the consequences. “Kids, there’s a detective coming in.”

The manager stood aside to let Benson pass, went back along the passageway toward his office with the warning: “Don’t gum them up now. This show hits fast once it gets going.”

There were two girls in there, working away at opposite ends of a three-paneled mirror. The middle space and chair were vacant. Benson’s map appeared in all three of the mirrors at once, as he came in and closed the door after him.

One girl clutched at a wrapper, flung it around her shoulders. The other calmly went ahead applying make-up.

“You two have been sharing the same dressing-room with Annie Willis,” he said. “Did she usually leave on this shiny junk between shows, or take it off each time?”

The chorus leader, the one the manager had called June McKee, answered, in high-pitched derogation at such denseness. “Whadd’ye think, she could go out and eat between shows with her face all gold like that? She woulda had a crowd following her along the street! Sure she took it off.”

SUDDENLY they looked at one another with a flash of enlightened curiosity. The McKee girl, a dark-haired honey, turned around toward him on the make-up bench. “Sa-ay, is that what killed her, that gold stuff?” she asked in an awe-stricken, husky whisper.

Benson over-rode that. “Did she take it off yesterday or did she leave it on?”

“She left it on.” She turned to her bench mate, the platinum-blond singer, for corroboration. “Didn’t she, Vilma?

Remember? I do—it was only yesterday.”

“Where is this gold stuff? I’d like to see it.”

“It must be here with the rest of her stuff.” The McKee girl reached over, pulled out the middle of the three table drawers, left it open for him to help himself. “Look in there.”

It was in pulverized form, in a long jar. It had a greenish tinge to it that way. He read the label. It was put up by a reputable cosmetic manufacturing company.

There were directions for application and removal, and then an explicit warning: “Do not allow to remain on any longer than necessary after each performance.” She must have read that a dozen times in the course of using the substance. She couldn’t have failed to see it.

“You say she left it on yesterday. Why? Have you any idea?”

Again it was the McKee girl who answered, spading her palms at him. “Because she mislaid the cleanser, the stuff that came with it to remove it. They both come together. You can’t buy one without the other. It’s a special preparation that sort of curls it up and *peels* it off clean and even.

“Nothing else works as well or as quick. You can’t use cold cream, and even alcohol isn’t much good. You can scrub your head off and it just makes a mess of your skin, gets it all red and fiery—”

“And yesterday it disappeared?”

“Right after the finale, she started to holler: ‘Who took my paint remover? Anybody seen the paint remover?’ Well, between the three of us, we turned the room inside out, and no sign of it. She emptied her whole drawer out. Everything else was there but that.

“She even went into a couple of the other dressing-rooms to find out if anybody had it in there. I told her nobody else would want it. She was the only one in the company who used that gilt junk.

It wouldn't have been any good to anyone else. It never turned up."

"Finish telling me."

"Finally Vilma and me had to go out and eat. Time was getting short. Other nights, the three of us always ate together. We told her if she found it in time to hurry up after us. We'd keep a place for her at our table. She never showed up. When we got back for the night show, sure enough, she was still in her electro-plating. She told us she'd had to send Jimmy, that's the handyman, out for something and had eaten right in the dressing-room."

Benson cocked his head slightly, as when one looks downward into a narrow space. "Are you sure this bottle of remover couldn't have been in the drawer and she missed seeing it?"

"That was the first place we cased. We had everything out—even two cockroaches that lived in a crack on the side. I remember holding it up in my hand empty and thumping the bottom of it just for luck!"

His wrist shot out of his cuff, hitched back into it again, like some sort of a hydraulic brake. "Then what's it doing in there now?" He was holding a smaller bottle, with liquid contents and a small sponge attached to its neck.

It got quiet in the dressing room, deathly quiet. So quiet you could even hear the sound track from the screen out front.

They both had such frightened looks on their faces, the superstitious fright of two giddy, thoughtless creatures who have suddenly come face to face with nameless evil.

The McKee girl's lower lip was trembling with awe. "It was put back—*after!* Somebody *wanted* her to die like that! With us right here in the same room with her!" She took a deep breath, threw open her own drawer, and with a defiant look at Benson, as if to say, "*Try and stop me,*" tilted a small, flat gin bottle to her mouth.

•The ballet singer, Vilma Lyons, sud-

denly dropped her head into her folded arms on the littered dressing table and began to sob.

The stage manager bopped a fist on the door and called in: "The customers are waiting. If that dick ain't through questioning you in there, tell him to follow you out on the runway!"

CHAPTER THREE

Brazen Killer

"**Y**ES, sir, I'm Jimmy, the handyman." He put down his bucket, followed Benson out into the alley, where they wouldn't be in the way of the girls hustling in and out on quick changes. "Yes, sir, Miss Gilda done send me out last night between shows to try to get her another bottle of that there stuff, which took off the gold paint."

"Why didn't you get it?"

"I couldn't! I went to the big theat'cal drugstore on Eighth where she tole me. It's the only place around here where you can get it. Even there they don't keep much on hand, never get much call for it. The drugstore man tole me somebody else just beat me to it. He tole me he just got through selling the last bottle he had in stock, before I got there."

"Keep on," Benson said curtly.

"That's about all. The drugstore man promise to order another bottle for her right away from his company's warehouse or the wholesaler what puts it up, see that it's in by the first thing in the morning. So I go back and tell her. Then she send me across the street to bring her in a sandwich.

"When I come back the second time, she already sitting there acting kind of low, holding her haid. She said she was sorry she ordered that bite, after all. She didn't feel well. Gee, she said she hopes nothing happened to her from leaving this stuff on too long."

Benson told him: "You come along and point out that druggist to me."

* * *

"Come in, Benson."

"Lieutenant, I've got a problem. I've got a report here from Jacobson that I haven't turned in to you yet. I've been keeping it until I know what to do about it."

"What's the hitch?"

"Lieutenant, is there such a thing as a *negative* murder? By that I mean, when not a finger is lifted against the victim, not a hair of her head is actually touched. But the murder is accomplished by *withholding* something, so that death is caused by its absence or lack."

The lieutenant was quick on the trigger. "Certainly! If a man locks another man up in a room, and withholds food from him until the guy has starved to death, you'd call that murder, wouldn't you? Even though the guy that caused his death never touched him with a ten-foot pole, never stepped in past the locked door at all."

Benson plucked doubtfully at the cord of skin between his throat and chin. "But what do you do when you have no proof of *intention*? I mean, when you've got evidence that the act of withholding or removal was committed, but no proof that the intention was murderous. And how you gonna get proof of intention, anyway? It's something inside the mind, isn't it?"

The lieutenant glowered, said: "What do you do? I'll tell you what you do? You work on your bird until you get the intention *out* of his mind and down in typewriting! That's what you do!"

THE man was alone when he started down the three flights of stairs in the shoddy walk-up apartment on West 135th. He was still alone when he got down to the bottom of them.

And then, somehow, between the foot of the stairs and the street door, he wasn't alone any more. Benson was walking along beside him, as soundlessly as though his own shadow had crept forward and overtaken the mourning man along the poorly lit passage.

He shied sideways and came to a dead stop against the wall, the apparition was so unexpected. He was gaping.

Benson said quietly: "Come on, what're you stopping for? You were leaving the house, weren't you, Willis? Well, you're still leaving the house, what's the difference?"

They walked on as far as the street entrance. Benson just kept on fingertip touching the other's elbow, in a sort of mockery of guidance. Willis said: "What am I pinched for?"

"Who said you were pinched? Do *you* know of anything you should be pinched for?"

"No, I don't."

"Then you're not pinched. Simple enough, isn't it?"

Willis didn't say another word after that. Benson only said two things more himself, one to his charge, the other to a cab driver. He remarked: "Come on, we'll ride it. I'm no piker."

And when a cab had sidled up to his signal, he named a precinct police station. They rode the whole way in stony silence from then on. Willis staring straight ahead in morbid reverie; Benson with his eyes toward the cab window—but on the shadowy reflection of Willis' face given back by the glass, not on the quiet street outside.

They got out. Benson took him in and left him waiting in a room at the back for a few minutes, while he went off to attend to something else. This wasn't accidental; it was the psychological buildup—or rather, breakdown—preceding the grill. It had been known to work wonders.

It didn't this time.

"All right, you can take him out now," he said to the subordinate who had been helping.

Willis went out on his own feet, waveringly, leaning lopsided against his escort, but on his own feet. A sense of innocence can sometimes lend one moral support. But so can a sense of having outwitted justice.

"The guy must be innocent," the other dick remarked when he had come back.

"He knows we can't get him. There's nothing further in his actions to be uncovered, don't you see? We've got everything there is to get on him, and it isn't enough. And we can't get at his intentions. They got to come out through his own mouth. All he has to do is hold out. It's easy to keep a single, simple idea like that in your mind, no matter what happens.

"What breaks down most of them is the uncertainty of something they did wrong, something they didn't cover up right, cropping up and tripping them—an exploded alibi, a surprise identification by a material witness. He had none of that uncertainty to buck. All he had to do was sit tight inside his own skin."

BENSON said to his lieutenant the next day, "I'm certain he killed her. What are the three things that count in every crime? Motive, opportunity and method. He rings the bell on each count. Motive? Well, the oldest one in the world between men and women. He was sick of her; he'd lost his head about some one else, and didn't know how else to get rid of her.

"She was in the way in more than just the one sense. She was a deterrent, because of the other woman's sense of loyalty, as long as she remained alive. It wouldn't have done any good if he walked out on her or divorced her; the other woman wouldn't have had him at her friend's expense and he knew it.

"It happens that the other woman was

a lifelong friend of the wife; the kind of friendship that is more often met with between men than women, a real thick-and-thin partnership. She even lived near them, up at the 135th Street place, for awhile after they were first married. Then she got out, maybe 'cause she realized three's a crowd and a set-up like that was only asking for trouble."

"Have you found out who this other woman is?"

"Certainly. Vilma Lyons, the ballad singer in the same show with the wife. I went up to the theater yesterday afternoon. I questioned the two girls who shared Annie Willis' dressing-room with her. One of them talked a blue streak. The other one didn't open her mouth; I don't recall her making a single remark during the entire interview.

"She was too busy *thinking back*. She knew; her intuition must have already told her who had done it. At the end, she suddenly buried her face in her arms and cried. I let her take her own time. I let her think it over. I knew she'd come to me of her own accord sooner or later.

"And she did, after curtain time last evening, down here at the station house. Weren't we going to *get* the person that had done that to her friend, she wanted to know? Wasn't he going to be punished for it? Was he going to get away with it scot-free?"

"Did she accuse him?"

"She had nothing to accuse him on. He hadn't said anything to her. He hadn't even shown her by the look on his face. And then little by little I caught on, by reading between the lines of what she said, that he'd liked her a little too well."

He shrugged. "She can't help us, she admitted it herself. Because he started giving her these long, haunting looks when he thought she wasn't noticing, and falling into reveries, and acting discontented and restless, that isn't evidence he killed his wife.

"But she *knows*, in her own mind, just as I *know* in mine, who hid that remover from Annie Willis, and with what object, and why. She hates him like poison now. I could read it on her face. He's taken her friend from her. They'd chummed together since they were both in pigtails, at the same orphanage."

"All right. What about Opportunity, your second factor?"

"He rings the bell there, too. And again it doesn't do us any good. Sure, he admits he was sitting out front at the matinee day before yesterday. But so was he a dozen times before. Sure, he admits he went backstage to her dressing room, after she'd gone back to it alone and while the other two were still onstage. But so had he a dozen times before."

"He claims it was already missing then. She told him so, and asked him to go out and get her another bottle. But who's to prove that? She's not alive, and neither of the two other girls had come off the stage yet."

"Well, what happened to the second bottle that would have saved her life?"

"**H**E PAID for it. The clerk wrapped it for him. He started out holding it in his hand the way one does any circular package. And at the drugstore entrance, he collided with some one coming in. It was jarred out of his grasp, and it shattered on the floor!"

And as if he could sense what the lieutenant was going to say, he hurriedly added:

"There were witnesses galore to the incident; the clerk himself, the soda jerk, the cashier. I questioned every one of them. Not one could say for sure that it wasn't a genuine accident. Not one could swear that he'd seen Willis actually relax his hand and let it fall, or deliberately get in this other party's way."

"Then why didn't he go back and tell her? Why did he leave her there like that

with this stuff insidiously injuring her system, so that she had to send this Jimmy out to see if he could get hold of any for her?"

"We can't get anything on him for that, either. He did the natural thing; he went scouting around for it in other places—the way a man would, who was ashamed to come back empty-handed and tell her he'd just smashed the one bottle they had left in stock, afraid she'd bawl him out maybe."

Through thinned lips Benson added acidly: "Everything he did was so natural. That's why we can't get him!"

The lieutenant said: "There's an important little point lurking in that smashed-bottle angle. Did he know it was the last bottle on hand *before* he dropped it, or did he only find out after he stepped back to the counter and tried to get another?"

Benson nodded. "I bore down heavy on that with the drug clerk. Unless Willis was deaf, dumb and blind, he knew that that was the last bottle in the store before he started away from the counter with it. The clerk not only had a hard time finding it, but when he finally located it, he remarked that it was the last one they had."

"Then that accident was no accident."

"Can you prove it?" was all Benson said.

The lieutenant answered that by discarding it. "Go ahead," he said sourly.

"I checked with every one of the other places he told me he'd been to after leaving there, and he *had* asked for it in each one. They corroborated him on that. He wasn't in much danger of coming across it anywhere else and he knew it! The drug clerk had not only forewarned him that he didn't think he'd find it anywhere else, but his wife must have told him the same thing before she sent him out."

Screwing his mouth up, Benson said: "But it looked good for the record, and it kept him away from the theater—while

she was dying by inches from cellular asphyxiation, without knowing it!"

"Didn't he go back at all? Did he stay out from then on?"

"No one saw him come back, not a soul. I made sure of that before I put it up to him." Benson smiled bleakly. "I know what you're thinking there, and I thought of that, too. If he didn't go back at all, then he wasn't responsible for making the remover disappear in the first place. Because it was back in the drawer before the next matinee—I found it there myself. Now get the point involved.

"WILLIS had a choice between the natural thing and the completely exonerating thing. But an exonerating thing that would have meant behaving a little oddly. The natural thing for a man sent out on an errand by his wife is to return eventually, even if it's an hour later, even if it's only to report that he was unsuccessful.

"The exonerating thing, in this case, was for him to stay out for good. All he had to do was claim he never went back, and he was absolutely in the clear, absolutely eliminated."

"Well?" The lieutenant could hardly wait for the answer.

"He played it straight all the way through. He admitted, of his own accord and without having been seen by anybody, that he stopped back for a minute to tell her he hadn't been able to get it, after chasing all over the Forties for the stuff. And that, of course, is when the mysteriously missing bottle got back into the drawer."

The lieutenant was almost goggle-eyed. "Well! She was still alive, the murder hadn't even been completed yet, and he was already removing the traces of it by replacing the bottle from where he'd taken it."

"The timing of her act guaranteed that she was already as good as dead, even

with the bottle back within her reach. She couldn't take the guilt off now for another three hours. Using it continuously had already lowered her resistance. That brief breathing spell she would have had between shows spelled the difference between life and death.

"In other words, Lieutenant, he left her alive, with fifty people around her who talked to her, rubbed shoulders with her in the wings, after he'd gone. And later she even danced onstage before a couple hundred more. But he'd already murdered her."

"But you say he didn't have to admit he stopped back at the theater, and yet he did."

"Sure, but to me that doesn't prove his innocence, that only proves his guilt and infernal cleverness. By avoiding the slightest lie, the slightest deviation in his account of his actual movements, he's much safer than by grasping at a chance of automatic, complete vindication. Somebody just *might* have seen him come back, he couldn't be sure." Benson paused, thinking it through again.

He took a deep breath. "There it all is, Lieutenant: motive, opportunity and method. And it don't do us much good, does it? There isn't any more evidence to be had. There never will be. There's nothing more to uncover—because it all is uncovered already. We couldn't get him on a disorderly-conduct charge on all of it put together, much less for murder. What do I do with him now?"

The lieutenant took time answering, as though he hated to have to. Finally he did. "We'll have to turn him loose; we can't hold him indefinitely. There just aren't any loopholes here."

"Gee, I hate to see him walk out of here free," Benson said.

"There's no use busting your brains about it. It's a freak that only happens maybe once in a thousand times—but it happened this time."

CHAPTER FOUR

An Eye for an Eye

LATER that same morning Benson walked out to the entrance of the precinct house with Willis, after the formalities of release had been gone through. Willis had a lot of court-plaster here and there, but he was free again. That was what mattered. Court-plaster wears off after awhile; several thousand volts of electricity does not.

"Well, I guess you think you're pretty smart," Benson said taciturnly.

Willis said: "That's the word for people that have held out something, gotten away with it. I got a beating for something I didn't do. Unlucky is the word for me, not smart."

Benson stopped short at the top of the entrance steps, marking the end of his authority. He smiled. "Well, if we couldn't get anything out of you in there last night, I didn't expect to get anything out of you out here right now." His mouth thinned. "Here's the street. Beat it."

Willis went down the steps, walked on a short distance alone and unhindered. Then he decided to cross over to the opposite side of the street. When he had reached it, he stopped a minute and looked back.

Benson was still standing there on the police station steps, looking after him. Their stares met. Benson couldn't read his look, whether it conveyed mockery or relief or just casual indifference.

But for that matter, Willis couldn't read Benson's either; whether it conveyed regret or philosophic acceptance of defeat or held a vague promise that things between them weren't over yet. . . .

There was a brittle quality of long-smoldering rancor about her, even when she first opened the door, even before she'd had time to see who was standing there. She must have just got home from the show. She still had her coat on.

But she was already holding a little jigger glass of colorless liquid between two of her fingers, as if trying to cauterize inner resentment that was continually gnawing at her. Her eyes traveled over him from head to foot and back again.

"Been letting any more killers go since I saw you last?" she said.

"You've taken that pretty much to heart, haven't you?" Benson answered levelly.

"Why wouldn't I? Her ghost powders its nose on the bench next to me twice a day! A couple performances ago I caught myself turning around and saying: 'Did you get paid this week, An—' before I stopped to think."

She emptied the jigger. "And do you know what keeps the soreness from healing? Because the person that did it is still around, untouched, unpunished. Because he got away with it. You know who I mean or do I have to break out with a name?"

"You can't prove it, any more than we could, so why bring up a name?" Benson asked her.

"Prove it! *Prove* it! You make me sick." She went back and refilled the jigger. Her face was livid. "You're the police! Why weren't you able to get him?"

"You talk like a fool," he said patiently. "You talk like we let him go purposely. 'D'you think I enjoyed watching him walk out scot-free under my nose? And that isn't all. I've been passed over on the promotion list, on account of it. They didn't *say* it was that; they didn't say it was anything. They didn't have to. I can figure it out for myself. It's the first blank I've drawn in six years. It's eating at my insides, too, like yours."

SHE relented at the signs of nursed bitterness that matched her own. "Misery likes company, I guess. Come on in, as long as you're here, detective-by-courtesy.

Have a stab," she said grudgingly, and pushed the gin slightly toward him.

They sat in brooding silence for several minutes, two frustrated people. Finally she spoke again, a cruller of white hate outlining her mouth. "He had the nerve to put *his* flowers on her grave! Imagine, flowers from the killer to the one he killed!

"I found them there when I went up myself, before the matinee today, to leave some roses of my own. The caretaker told me whose they were. I tore them in a thousand pieces when he wasn't looking."

"I know," he said vindictively. "He goes up twice a week, leaves fresh flowers each time. I've been casing him night and day. The hypocritical rat. All the way through from the beginning, he's done the natural thing. He does it whether he thinks anyone's watching or not, and that's the safe way to do it."

He refilled his own jigger without asking her permission. He laughed harshly. "But just the same, he's not pining away. I cased his flat while he was out of it today, and I found enough evidence to show there's some brunette has been hanging around to console him.

"Hairpins on the kitchen floor, a double set of dirty dishes in the sink. He's probably just waiting for the temperature to go down enough, before he marries up with her."

She lidded her eyes, touched a hand to her own platinum-blond hair. "I'm not surprised," she said huskily. "That would be about his speed." She got up suddenly. "These jiggers are too small." She came back with a tumbler, a third full. "Maybe you can still get something on him through her," she suggested balefully.

He shook his head. "He can go around with ten brunettes if he feels like it. He's within his rights. We can't hold him just for that alone—"

"What's the matter with the law these days?" she said almost savagely. "Here we are, you and I, sitting here in this

room. We both know he killed Annie Willis. You're drawing pay from the police department, and he's moving around immune and fancy-free only a few blocks away from us at this very minute!"

He nodded as though he agreed with her. "They fail you every once in awhile," he admitted gloomily, "the statutes as they are written down on the books. They slip a cog and let someone fall through."

Then he went on: "But there's an older law than the statutes we work under. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' It's short and sweet, got no amendments, dodges or habeas corpuses to clutter it up. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'"

"I like the way that sounds," she said.

"You're getting a little lit. I shouldn't be talking like this."

"I'm not getting lit. I understand every word you say. But more important still, *I hear the words you're not saying.*"

He just looked at her, and she looked at him. They were like two fencers, warily circling around each other to find an opening. She got up, moved over to the window, stared grimly out toward the traffic intersection at the corner ahead.

"Green light," she reported. Then she turned toward him with a bitter, puckered smile. "Green light. That means go ahead—doesn't it?"

"GREEN light," he murmured. "That means go ahead—if you care to." The gin was making him talk a little more freely, although that was the only sign of it he showed. "The man that throws the switch in the deathhouse at Sing Sing, what makes him a legal executioner and not a murderer? The modern statutes. The ancient code can have its legal executioners, too, who are not just murderers."

She had come over close to him again.

"But never," he went on, looking straight at her, "repay the gun with the knife, or the knife with the club. Then

that's murder, not the ancient code any more. In the same way, if the State executioner shot the condemned man on his way to the chair, or poisoned him in his cell, then he wouldn't be a legal executioner any more, he'd be just a murderer himself."

He repeated it again for her slowly. "‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’ Annie Willis met her death by having something withheld from her that her safety required. No weapon was used on Annie Willis, remember."

"Yes," she said with flaming dreaminess. "And I know where there's a trunk that belongs to me, down in a basement storage room, seldom entered, seldom used. One of these big, thick theatrical trunks, roomy enough to carry around the props for a whole act. I left it behind when I moved out. I was going to send for it but—" She didn't finish it.

She looked down at his empty jigger, as if he was listening intently to her, but without looking at her.

"And if I came to you, for instance, and said: ‘What's been bothering you and me both has been taken care of,’ how would you receive me—as a criminal under the modern law or a legal executioner under the old one?"

He looked straight up at her with piercing directness. "The modern law failed you and me, didn't it? Then what right would I have to judge you by it?"

She murmured half audibly, as if endeavoring to try him out: "Then why not you? Why me?"

"The injury was done to you, not me. A friend is a personal belonging, a professional disappointment isn't. Nothing was done to me personally. Under the ancient law, a frustrated job can only be repaid by another frustrated job, by making the person who injured you suffer a like disappointment in *his* work."

She laughed dangerously. "I can do better than that," she said softly.

She kept shaking her head, looking at him from time to time as if she still found the situation almost past belief.

"The strangest things never get down on the record books! They wouldn't be believed if they did! Here you are, sitting in my room, a man drawing pay from the police department, with a shield in your pocket at this very minute—" She didn't finish it.

"I'm a little bit tight on your gin," he said, getting up, "and we haven't been talking."

She held the door open for him. "No," she smiled, "we haven't been talking. You weren't here tonight, and nothing was said. But perfect understanding doesn't need words. I'll probably see you again to let you know how—what we haven't been talking about is coming along."

The door closed and First-Grade Detective Benson went down the stairs with an impassive face.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Lady Says "Die!"

WHAT followed this event was even more incredible yet. A cop came in to him, down at the precinct house three nights later, said: "There's a lady out there asking for you, Benson. Won't state her business."

Benson said: "I think I know who you mean. Look, Corrigan, you know that little end room on the left, at the back of the hall? Is there anyone in there right now?"

The cop said: "Naw, there's never anyone in there."

"Take her back there, will you? I'll be back there."

He got there first. She stood outlined in the open doorway first, watching the cop return along the hall to where he'd come from, before she'd come in.

Benson acted slightly frightened. He

kept pacing nervously back and forth, waiting for her to come in.

When she finally turned away from seeing the cop off, she came in and closed the door after her. He said: "Couldn't you have waited until I dropped over to see you?"

"How did I know when you'd be around again? I felt like I couldn't wait another half hour to get it off my chest." There was something almost gloating in the way she looked around her. "Is it safe to talk here?"

"Sure, if you keep your voice down." He went over to the door, opened it, looked along the passageway outside, closed it again. "It's all right."

She said, half-mockingly, with that intimacy of one conspirator for another: "No dictaphones around?"

He was too on edge to share her bantering mood. "Don't be stupid," he snapped. "How did I know you were going to pull a raw stunt like this? This is the last place I ever expected you to—"

She lit a cigarette, preened herself. "You think you're looking at a cheap ballad singer on a burlesque circuit, don't you?"

"What am I looking at, then?"

"You're looking at a legal executioner, under the ancient code. I have a case of justice to report. I had a friend I valued very highly, and she was caused to die by having the skin of her body deprived of air. Now the man who did that to her is going to die sometime during the night, if he hasn't already, by having the skin of *his* body—and his lungs and his heart—deprived of air in the same way."

He lit a cigarette to match hers. His hands were so steady—too steady, rigid almost—that you could tell they weren't really. He was forcing them to be that way. His color was paler than it had been when he first came in.

"What have you got to say to that?" She clasped her own sides in a parody of

macabre delight, gloated with pleasure.

"It'll tell you in a minute." He went over to the door, opened it and looked out again, as if to make sure there was no one out there to overhear. He'd dropped his cigarette on the way over to it.

She misunderstood. "Don't be jittery—" she began scornfully.

He'd raised his voice suddenly, before she knew what to expect. It went booming down the desolate hallway. "Corrigan! C'mere a minute!"

A blue-suited figure had joined his in the opening before she knew what was happening. He pointed toward her.

"**A**RRREST this woman for murder! Hold her here in this room until I get back! I'm making you personally responsible for her!"

A bleat of smothered fury ripped from her. "Why, you dirty, double-crossing—The guy isn't even dead yet."

"I'm not arresting you for the murder of Frank Willis. I'm arresting you for the murder of his wife, Annie Willis, over a month and a half ago at the New Rotterdam Theater!"

The greater part of it came winging back from the far end of the hallway, along which he was moving fast on his way to try to save a man's life. . . .

They came trooping down single file, fast, into the gloom. White poker chips of light glanced off the damp, cemented brick walls from their torches. The janitor was in the lead. He poked at a switch by his sense of memory alone, and a feeble parody of electricity illuminated part of the ceiling and the floor immediately under it, nothing else.

"I ain't seen him since yesterday at noon," he told them in a frightened voice. "I seen him going out then. That was the last I seen of him. Here it is over here, gents. This door."

They fanned out around it in a half-circle. All the separate poker chips of

torchlight came to a head, focused on one big door, which was fireproof; nailstudded iron, rusty but stout. But it was fastened simply by a padlock clasping two thick staples.

"I remember now, my wife said something about his asking her for the key to here, earlier in the evening while I was out," the janitor said. "So he was still all right then."

"Yes, he was still all right *then*," Benson agreed shortly. "Get that thing. Hurry up!" A crowbar was inserted behind the padlock chain; two of the men with him got on one end of it and started to pry. Something snapped. The unopened lock bounced up, and they swung the storage-space door out with a grating sound.

The torchbeams converged inside and lit it up. It was small and cramped. The air was already musty and unfit to breathe—even the unconfined air at large between its four sides—and it was lifeless. All the discarded paraphernalia of forgotten tenants over the years choked it.

Cartons, empty packing cases, a dismantled iron bed frame, even a kid's sled with one runner missing. But there was a clear space left between the entrance and the one large trunk that loomed up in it, like a towering headstone on a tomb.

It stood there silent, inscrutable. On the floor before it lay, in eloquent meaning, a single large lump of coal brought from the outside part of the basement and discarded after it had served its purpose. Two smaller fragments had chipped off it, lay close by.

"A blow on the head with that would daze anyone long enough to—" Benson scuffed it out of the way with his foot. "Hurry up, fellows. She'd only left here when she looked me up. It's not a full hour yet. The seams may be warped with age, there's still a slim chance—"

They pushed the scared, white-lipped janitor back out of their way. Axe blades began to slash around the rusted snap-

lock. "Not too deep," Benson warned. "Give it flat strokes from the side, or you're liable to cut in and— Got that pulmotor ready?"

The axes held off at his signal and he pulled the dangling lock off the splintered seams with his bare hands. They all jumped in, began pulling in opposite directions. The trunk split open vertically.

A face stared sightlessly into the focused torchbeams, a contorted mask of strangulation and unconsciousness that had been pressed despairingly up against the seam as close as it could go, to drink in the last precious molecule or two of air.

WILLIS' body, looking shrunken, tumbled out into their arms. They carried him out into the more open part of the basement, one hand that ended in mangled nails trailing inertly after him. An oxyden tank was hooked up, and a silent, grim struggle for life began in the eerie light of the shadowy basement.

Twice they wanted to quit, but Benson wouldn't let them. "If he goes, that makes a murderer out of me! And I won't let myself be a murderer! We're going to bring him back, if we stay here until tomorrow night!"

And then, in the middle of the interminable silence, a simple, quiet announcement from the man in charge of the squad: "He's back, Benson. He's going again!"

Somebody let out a long, whistling breath of relief. It was a detective who had just escaped being made into a murderer.

At the hospital later, in the early hours of the morning, when he was able to talk again, Willis told him the little there was to tell.

"She showed up and said she wanted to get something out of that trunk she'd left behind here in our care, when she'd moved away. I got the key to the storage room from the janitor's wife. I should

have tumbled she had something up her sleeve when she asked me not to mention who it was for, let them think I wanted it for myself.

"Then she got me to go down there with her by pretending there were some things of Annie's in the trunk, from their days in show business together, that she wanted to give back to me.

"I didn't open my mouth to her, didn't say a word. I was afraid to trust myself, afraid if I came out with what was on my mind, I'd beat her half-senseless and only get in more trouble with you police guys. I couldn't wait to get rid of her, to see the last of her—

"I even helped her to open the trunk, because it was pretty heavy to handle. Then she asked me to bend down and see if I could reach something that was all the way down at the bottom of one of the two halves, and I stepped between them like a fool.

"Something that felt like a big rock hit the back of my head, and before my senses had a chance to clear, the two sides had swung closed on me like a—" He shuddered. "Like a coffin when you're still alive." He swung one finger-banded paw in front of his eyes to shut out the recollection. "The rest was pretty awful. . . ."

The lieutenant came in, holding the confession in his hands. Benson followed.

"She put away?"

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant went ahead, reading the confession. Benson waited in silence until he'd finished. The lieutenant looked up finally. "This'll do. It's strong enough to hold her on, anyway. You got results, but I don't get the technique. What was this business of her coming here and confiding in you that she'd made an attempt on Willis' life tonight, and how does that tie in with the murder of Annie Willis? You hit the nail on the head. This confession proves that, but I don't follow

your line of reasoning. I miss the connecting links."

Benson said: "Here was the original equation. A wife in the middle, a man and a woman on the ends. She was in the way, but of which one of them? Vilma Lyons claimed it was Willis who loved her. Willis didn't claim anything; the man as a rule won't.

"I WATCHED them to see which would approach the other. Neither one did. The innocent party, because he had never cared in the first place; the guilty, because he or she had a guilty conscience, was not only afraid that he was being watched by us, but also that the other might catch on in some way, connect the wife's death with him or her, if he made a move too soon after.

"But still I couldn't tell which was which—although my money was still on Willis, up to the very end.

"Here was the technique. When I saw neither of them was going to tip a hand, I tipped it, instead. There's nothing like a shot of good, scalding jealousy in the arm for tipping the hand. I went to *both* of them alike, gave them the same buildup treatment. I was bitter and sore, because I'd muffed the job.

"In Willis' case, because we'd already held him for it once. I had to vary it a little, make him think I'd changed my mind, now thought it was Vilma, but couldn't get her for it.

"In other words, I gave them both the same unofficial all-clear to go ahead and exact retribution personally. And I lit the same spark to both their fuses. I told Willis that Vilma had taken up with some other guy; I told her he had taken up with some other girl.

"One fuse fizzled out. The other flared and exploded. One of them didn't give a damn, because he never had. The other, having already committed murder to gain

(Please continue on page 127)

SPOILER FOR A WISE GUY



"Freeze!" the little man warned in a hoarse voice.

With the pert waitress seconding him, ex-boxer Danny fought the bout of his life—to keep from taking a shiv-artist's count.

MAD enough to kill, that's how Danny Carson felt. Outside the cool restaurant, with the humid night air choking off the pleasant after-taste of his supper, the old hatred swept over him.

Walking toward his cab, he stared moodily up Eighth Avenue, shoddy, old—

By
**HARVEY
WEINSTEIN**

a Broadway without make-up—and let his eyes linger for a sour moment on the unlit bulk of the Garden.

This made five nights in a row he'd eaten in Marta's place, just to get the feel of the fight game once more. That had been his first smart move in months, swallowing his pride and coming back to swap a word with the boys and, best of all, seeing Pert Miller again.

He wished he'd asked the cute little waitress if he could drive her home when she knocked off at ten o'clock, in another hour. Funny, wasn't it, that when he'd been on the uptake, he hadn't got to first base with Pert. But now that he was down on his luck and couldn't buy a friend, she made him feel as if he could be number one on her hit parade.

He slid on to the seat of his cab and ground the starter. Before he could drive away, two men had the passenger door open and were climbing inside. The short one, wiry and about thirty-five, took the right-hand seat. He wore a loud sport jacket and was vaguely familiar, with darting eyes that looked Danny over and then framed a smile. But there was no failing to recognize the second man, stout and plucky in blue gabardine, who sat down as if he owned the hack.

The stout man put out a fat hand. "Heard we could meet you here, Danny," he said in a hearty voice.

Shock still, Danny struggled against his swift rise of temper. How do you act at a moment like this? You're twenty-seven years old, a hot shot for the 160-pound title, and you're barred for a fight your manager rigged for you to win without you knowing it.

You mope at home for three months, till you're punchy with hate and self-pity. You get so you forget how to think clearly. When you're forced to go to work pushing a hack because you've got no skilled trade, you have to learn all over again how to mix with people. Then you

come face to face with the man who put you in the hole.

"What's on your mind, Fisher?" Danny said, his voice hoarse with hate. He was dying to take a poke out of his ex-manager, but he didn't dare get in a jam that might cost him his hack license.

"Take it easy, kid," Fisher said. "We just want a ride up Columbus Avenue."

Danny threw the meter and headed up Eighth. Behind him, his riders were whispering. He warned himself to watch out for a cute angle. A fellow would be smart to keep his own trap shut and get rid of them by driving them where they wanted to go.

"Listen for a moment, Danny boy," Fisher said. "You won't be sorry."

Danny gritted his teeth and kept driving ahead. He hadn't been sorry, either, that night in March, when he'd gone to sleep singing with joy over his quick kayo of Lefty Boyle, but he'd awakened to learn from the papers that the fight had been in the tank.

And then he'd been suspended and his purse forfeited. Instead of a match with the Champ, he was busted. All his savings had gone into the big house in Flushing for his folks. A big-shot act that had been, making his father quit his job and take it easy. Good thing the old man had got work again. He couldn't hope to meet the payments himself with the crumbs he earned on the hack.

Fisher went on: "You don't have to push this hack after tonight. I've arranged a fix for you. Right here is the guy who's gonna handle you for me."

The news staggered Danny. He should have known they couldn't keep Fisher down. Funny, though, that the fat man should reach some politician now when he couldn't save his own hide at the hearing before the Commission.

"It's costing me three G's, but it's worth it," Fisher added. "Well, aren't you glad?"

Unable to keep quiet any longer, Danny yelled back: "I'm crying with joy. You know what you can do with your damn fix."

BEHIND him, the whispers commenced again as if they hadn't figured he would turn them down. The wiry little man especially sounded angry and his voice rose loud enough for Danny to hear that he was demanding money. Evidently this deal had been planned to pay off some past obligation of Fisher's.

"Hey, what's this?" the little man called out as the cab waited at a red light on Columbus. "Danny, look what I found wedged in back of the cushion!" He reached forward and handed over a large knife, haft first. "Who'd leave a shiv like this in your hack?"

"Beats me." Danny took the knife, recognizing it by the swastika on the hilt as a Brown-Shirt ceremonial dagger. He'd seen many like it after his outfit had crossed the Rhine. Some of the boys had prized them as souvenirs.

He ran his finger over the sharp edge and placed the blade on the box next to his seat. "I'll turn it in," he said, and got under way with the green light.

Fisher raised his voice over the noise of second gear. "Now, Danny," he said in the patient tone one uses to a child, "what happened is bygones. I had a lot of dough bet on the Boyle scrap and I wanted insurance. Lefty had been around a long time. He was a spoiler, smart as they come. The wise money figured him to take you."

Danny grated at that. "You thought your own man was a bum, didn't you?" It rubbed him to hear the same old chatter when it had all been said over and over.

"Boyle's copping a dive wasn't going to hurt you," Fisher added. "The win was good for you. Would have moved you up to a crack at the Champ."

Danny began to sizzle. "Once and for all, knock it off!" he yelled.

"Aw, don't be a boy scout all your life."

Burning mad, Danny squealed his heap to the curb. He jumped out, threw open the passenger door and yanked Fisher by the collar. The fat man's head was clearing the doorway when the other man caught Fisher back.

"Don't let him throw you, Danny old boy," the short fellow warned in a friendly voice.

Slowly, Danny unclenched his fist. The little guy was right. Why bust his knuckles and get in a second jam that might ruin his name for all time?

He let go of the fat man and stepped clear. For a long moment he leaned on the open door and let the breeze from the park cool his sweaty back. Then he turned to take his own seat.

"I'll see that he doesn't bother you again, Danny," the little man said, obviously doing his best to warm up to him. "And say, while you're out there, how about getting us a pack of butts in that ginmill down the street?" He pulled out a buck.

Danny took the bill and walked to the saloon. Inside, he had to fumble with the cigarette machine, but he didn't mind the delay. He was glad for the chance to collect his wits.

Back on the sidewalk, he felt his head clear of the burning pressure. He gazed at the cigarettes in his hand and flung them into the gutter. He wondered if hacking had so quickly made a public servant out of him that he could run an errand for the likes of his two riders. Hack license or no hack license, a man had pride. He'd toss them out on their respective ears.

He crossed over to his cab—and saw to his horror that he'd do no tossing of anyone. All that remained on the leather cushion was a gabardined body that had

once been Fisher, his manager. There was a bloody bruise on the temple, and on the reddening shirt front stood an inch of blade and the hilt of the Brown-Shirt dagger. The wiry little man had fled into the blackness of the night.

Danny steadied himself against the cab door, unable to tear his eyes away from the bloody sight. A few minutes before he had hated Fisher enough to think he'd enjoy seeing him dead. The reality of his ex-manager's body was something else again.

He forced himself to walk back to the ginnill, to phone the police. . . .

COPS were milling about the cab, shunting away the crowd which had quickly formed out of nowhere. Inside the hack, the medical examiner was bending over the body. Calmer now, Danny sat on the fender, answering the questions of a plainclothes man.

Another cop came over. "Ready, Spinelli?" he said to the first detective.

"What does the doc say?" Spinelli asked.

"There's just one clean wound, as if the killer took careful aim and hammered the knife into an unconscious man. That checks with a bruise on the temple which shows that Fisher was slugged before he was killed. I've got the knife."

Spinelli ran expert fingers over Danny's clothes and then led him to a squad car. "We ain't pinching you. Just want you to sign a statement at the nearest precinct house."

He started throwing more questions during the ride. Mostly they were routine, but he seemed to be trying to twist Danny's description of the little killer, as if he didn't believe there had been another rider with Fisher. Finally he said: "How about the dough?"

"What dough?"

"Now you know better than anyone else that Fisher always carried thousands.

Maybe you didn't kill him, but you could have gone through him."

Danny steamed at that, but kept his temper. The dick was just fishing.

The car pulled up at the police station and they went in through a side door, leading to a stairway with an arrow sign, *Detectives*. Spinelli was saying: "We're not out to get anything on you, Danny. We'll just write you up and print you, and then you can probably go home."

Danny wanted to say that nothing would suit him better, but the dick's use of the word *probably* started him thinking: *Spinelli means maybe I can go home, and maybe not. I can probably go into the back room and sweat it out under the lights for the rest of the night. He'd like nothing better than to prove himself a smart apple by hanging a murder rap on me.*

Then the full meaning of being fingerprinted smacked him like a wet glove. The prints on the knife were sure to be his own. How cleverly the little guy had framed him by pretending to find the Brown-Shirt dagger and then passing it over for him to handle.

Once upstairs, he'd be alone, without a friend, with no one to believe there had been another rider. The cops wouldn't try to find the little guy. Not when they had a ready-made suspect with a grade-A motive and his prints on the death weapon.

The other dick had gone ahead. Spinelli was a half step above, acting as if Danny didn't have to be guarded closely so as to make him feel among friends—which would make him talk more freely.

Danny spoke out in a voice that was as calm as he could make it through the bursting tension in his veins, "Here, I want to show you this."

Spinelli eagerly stepped down and closer. Danny showed the detective, showed him all the dynamite in his right hand. He caught the dick's dead weight

and eased him to a sitting position on the stairs.

"Sorry, old man," he muttered, "but I don't care to hang around here and assist in my own frame-up." He thought of a gruesome joke as he strode out the side door. His ex-manager had double-crossed him again. When alive, Fisher had framed him out of the ring. Now, by getting killed, the dead man had given him a head start toward the hot seat. Very funny!

Down the block, a hack was dropping a passenger. Danny broke into a run, caught up as the hack was pulling away, and jumped aboard.

He directed the hackie to drive downtown and leaned back in a corner. Unable to relax, he drummed his feet on the mat, trying to figure how to go about locating the killer. What he needed was a friend who'd level with him—a pal. One person kept coming to mind.

Ten to ten, by his watch. He wouldn't have more than one brief chance before he would have to hunt cover. His description was surely at this very moment sounding in every police radio in town. He boiled at the thought of the little guy probably gloating in safety, while he himself was on the dodge.

Across from the restaurant where Pert worked, Danny paid off the hack and took a stand in a darkened store entrance. He watched the perspiring hackies jockeying their empty rigs in an endless stream as they hunted in vain for eighteen feet of curb space in which to park till show break, and envied them that they had no greater problem than making a living. Around him the loose ends of humanity lazed in the stifling heat and he was relieved that his plain shirt and unpressed slacks made him blend into the crowd.

AS THE hands of the Paramount clock pointed to ten, he began to use body English to make Pert come out of the

restaurant. He was bait for the cops, hanging around Eighth Avenue.

Suddenly he realized that he was sweating with anxiety, afraid she might come out with some other guy. A babe like Pert didn't have to play drop-the-handkerchief to get a date. On the other hand, she could rate better than the two-room flat uptown that she shared with her mother—if she wanted to go with the spenders.

Danny thought back over the two years he'd known the pretty waitress. He'd swaggered into Marta's place the day after he'd fought his first semi in the Garden and dropped Sailor Neil in two—and he'd got his cheek reddened to teach him that some waitresses didn't date easy. Pert had hung him out on a limb thereafter. He'd kept coming back whenever he'd been in town, determined to make her and break her.

He was the one who'd been broken—thanks to Fisher. His first night back in Marta's, he'd been self-conscious as a recruit on his first three-day pass, and his new modesty had scored high with Pert.

At last the girl came out—alone. For a moment he thrilled to her quick figure, trim in white blouse and plaid-colored skirt. Then he dodged through traffic to cut her off.

Pert's face lit up when he caught her arm. "Add sights I'd never thought I'd see," she said laughing. "Danny Carson running after a girl on Eighth Avenue. You used to think you did a girl a favor just by looking at her."

"No time to kid," he said, his nervousness making him almost rude. Abruptly he steered her toward the doorway of an old tenement house.

"Wolf, check your teeth at the door," Pert said, playfully pretending to resist but allowing him to lead her into the dark vestibule.

Pressed for time, Danny skipped further preliminaries and hastily sketched the

events of the past hour. Pert's interest mounted as he went along and soon she was punctuating his story with gasps of surprise. Her excitement gave him hope that she'd go to bat for him all the way.

The girl's mouth was wide open with shock when he finished. It was a mouth the old Danney would have kissed—if he could have got this close—but this Danny didn't even dare bury his cheek in her dark hair and tell her how much better he felt just talking to her.

"You going to stick by me?" he blurted out.

"What do you want me to do?" she said in a low voice.

"I figured you'd contact a mouthpiece for me, someone who'd go to work and dig out the real killer. Then I got to hole up somewhere."

He waited for Pert to say yes, but the girl merely stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. His pulse ticked off the seconds till she said: "Danny, I have to tell you something your best friend wouldn't. Don't get sore, but you're acting screwy as a stumblebum. That lay-off of yours has gotten you all twisted."

He reeled back in amazement. *Don't get sore*, she had said. With his life at stake, she was turning against him.

"Look at yourself, Danny," the girl said earnestly. "You're jumpy and nervous—as if you had killed Fisher. You've got nothing to worry about. If the cops pick you up, all you have to do is tell the truth. It isn't as if you had to lie to save yourself."

"That's the baloney," he said coldly. "I told the Boxing Commission the truth, didn't I, and look where it got me."

"There was so much smell in the papers they had to knock off the principals. In fact, the only one they didn't blacklist was Lefty Boyle's trainer. You know, the man the fellows call the Whippet."

In the dead silence that followed, Danny leaned back against the clammy wall, see-

ing the whites of Pert's eyes as if through a fog. The pleasure he felt that the girl had followed his case so closely faded before the overwhelming revelation that she had named Fisher's killer.

No wonder the lanky little guy had looked familiar. He'd been tied in with the crooked fight but had somehow managed to get himself cleared.

Danny clenched his hands as he pictured himself choking a confession out of the Whippet.

Pert shook his arm. "Danny! What's the matter?"

"The Whippet is the man we want," he said slowly. "I'm dead sure."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's tell the police."

"I'M GOING after him myself." His words sounded great in his own ear. He repeated them to himself, rolling the sentence around his palate and relishing its confident taste. He'd show her who was punchy.

Pert fell back a step as if alarmed by his sudden change of mood.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I know what I'm about now. You've given me the key. Now to find the Whippet."

"If you think that's the wisest thing to do. . . ." The girl hesitated. Then, decisively: "Wait here. I'll ask Marta. She's got the name and address of everyone who ever hung her up for a meal—and that covers everyone who ever got within five feet of the Garden ring." She squeezed his hand and hurried out the door.

"Don't tell her why," Danny called after her.

The minutes dragged with agonizing slowness. Danny felt that he was more conspicuous standing by himself in the dim vestibule than if he had been strolling down the avenue. He'd be lost if the cops pulled him in.

Bad enough that he faced a going over

for slugging a cop; that he could take. Much worse for the long haul, it was a cinch that the Whippet had an alibi for himself. The little guy had planned this too shrewdly, maneuvering Fisher to look for his cab outside Marta's, to have overlooked any detail. He had to sew the Whippet up by himself.

The rattle of the doorknob startled him. Pert glided inside, her face bright with good news. "His name is Harry Gregg and he lives on West 89th." She handed over a slip of paper with the written information.

"You're a doll. That's all I want to know." Danny hustled outside and made for the head-out cab at the corner, trying hard to walk nonchalantly and not to glance around to see if cops were about.

"Uptown, Johnny," he told the driver as he opened the door. "On the loop!"

Pert was climbing inside.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" he asked.

"With you," she said simply. When he tried gently but firmly to pull her out, she added, "I'll just keep this hack and ride on home after you get out."

"Okay." Then, despite his self-control, Danny glanced up the street. He didn't see any cops, but he caught a glimpse of a familiar-looking man in a loud sport jacket. The Whippet?

He took a few strides in the man's direction, but the fellow scurried away and dived down the subway steps.

In the cab, he didn't mention that he thought he had seen the Whippet, but lay back in a corner, with the ticking of the taximeter playing a tireless accompaniment to his tortured thoughts. Had that man been the Whippet?

Assuming that it was, that the Whippet had trailed him from the scene of the murder, why hadn't the little guy let the police know that he could be picked up in the tenement hallway? The Whippet seemed to want to keep him on the lam,

yet know where he was. This could mean that the little shiv-expert wasn't sure his own hide was safe.

Absent-mindedly he glanced at Pert and got a reassuring smile in return. "Bet I know what you're thinking about," she said.

"You've got a bet."

"You're wondering how Fisher was going to fix it for you to be reinstated when he couldn't get an okay for himself."

Danny smiled inwardly. Just like a woman, he thought, sure she could read a man's mind. But she did have a good point at that.

"You hit it on the head," he told the girl. "What do I owe you, or would you rather just tell me Fisher's angle?"

"Just the angle, or rather that there's no angle. I've got a hunch that Fisher was playing it straight. You would be reinstated legit, but he'd claim credit for a fix that never was."

There's the woman of it again, was Danny's reaction. Mind-reading, hunches—gals thrived on them.

"That can keep," he said. "First let's hang this murder rap on the Whippet."

The hackie rapped on the partition glass, letting them know that they had pulled up at a dingy apartment building. Pert tried to climb out with Danny.

"No good," he said, barring her exit. He handed a deuce to the driver and told him to take the girl uptown.

"Danny," she called in a low voice. "Good luck." She was leaning forward, her face upturned.

"Later," he said curtly. "I'll phone you." He slammed the door and strode off. No use lingering on the good-by and letting the worry in the girl's eyes shake his confidence. He'd claim that kiss later.

ONCE inside the foyer, he pressed hard on the bell marked Gregg. He had reason to believe that the Whippet was out, but there could be a Mrs. Gregg.

Not getting a reply, he climbed one flight and knocked on the Whippet's door. His nerves drummed as if he were squatting on his stool in the ring, waiting for the opening gong, and he wondered what he'd do if the short man opened up and greeted him with a roscoe. He began to wish he had kissed Pert. Suppose there was no *later*.

After a few seconds wait, he ran downstairs and rang the janitor's bell. A bald man in undershirt and shabby pants came out and looked him over with annoyed eyes.

"I want to get into Harry Gregg's place," Danny said abruptly. "He isn't in."

The janitor shrugged. "Stick around. He usually comes home."

"I've got to get inside and I'm not taking no for an answer," Danny said. He pulled out all his money, mostly singles, about thirty dollars, and pressed it into the man's hand. "Don't be a chump. No one has to know but you and me. I'm his pal."

The janitor eyed Danny's determined face and sloping shoulders, and pocketed the dough. Without further word, he got a key from his own flat and led the way to the Whippet's place. After Danny had gone in, the man watched from the corridor for a moment, as if wondering whether to hang around and protect Gregg's interests; then he let the door spring shut behind Danny.

The two-room apartment was dense with heat, but Danny had no time to waste opening windows. Swiftly he scouted the small kitchen and large sitting room on the chance that Gregg might be lying low, found a moment to admire a Japanese samurai sword that hung on a wall, then got to work. Judging by the closets, dresser and high chest of drawers, he had plenty to search.

He made an instant score on top of the dresser. There it was, a letter that made him upgrade his opinion of wom-

en's hunches, an amazing letter from the Boxing Commission, addressed to himself, Mr. Danny Carson, c/o Mr. Harry Gregg.

With excitement tempered by admiration for Gregg's gall, he read:

Dear Mr. Carson:

We have received your request for reconsideration of your suspension. In view of the new evidence you have submitted, as well as your distinguished record in the service of our country, you will be given another hearing next Tuesday at two p.m. . . .

Danny skimmed through the rest of the letter, the words a blur to his excited eyes. He'd been acting punchy all right, moping at home instead of fighting to clear his name. But Fisher and Gregg hadn't been idle. So this was his ex-manager's so-called fix. *New* evidence that Fisher probably could have presented at the first hearing!

He shook himself alert. No use wasting time cursing the dead, especially since Fisher had done him some good. More important to hustle about the immediate business of searching the Whippet's place, so he could live to celebrate with Pert *later*.

Still, he couldn't help but picture Gregg, maneuvering to get him reinstated. Being turned down as manager must have belted the little guy where it hurt.

He drew a blank in the dresser drawers and tried a heavy trunk that he dragged from under the couch. With a hammer he found in a closet, he broke the lock and lifted the lid. Before his amazed eyes was a jumble of war souvenirs, German and American hand grenades, a variety of trench knives and gas masks, even a disassembled Garand rifle.

A German, Teller anti-tank mine lay at the bottom. The firing device had been removed and the red spot on the screw head was on "safe" position. He wondered how the Whippet had managed to

get hold of the mine and who had had the savvy to disarm it.

A blue hand grenade brought back memories of his early days in the Army and a forty-five made him wish for some ammo to fit the huge weapon. He might have use for it if he hung around the Whippet's place too long. It was time to call the cops and invite them to look at Gregg's hoard of weapons.

He was cuddling the blue grenade in his palm when he heard a faint click behind him. Instinctively, he pulled the pin from the grenade as he whirled to look down the muzzle of a .25 caliber, Belgian automatic that the Whippet was aiming his way from the half-opened apartment door.

"Freeze!" the little man warned in a hoarse voice. His face was a clay mask but the nervous flicker of his eyelids showed that he was charged like a dynamo.

Danny couldn't have moved if he dared. His limbs petrified as the Whippet moved warily into the room, but his heart whirred like a mainspring uncoiling because Gregg's left hand was gripping a wrist that belonged to a girl with big, frightened eyes. Pert!

The Whippet swung Pert past himself and waved her to stand near the dresser. The girl rubbed her bruised wrist and her eyes haunted Danny, begging forgiveness because she hadn't gone home in the cab but had waited outside.

"Don't eat your heart, honey," Danny said with forced calmness. "He's only bluffing. He needs me alive to take the rap for Fisher's murder."

"That's where you're wrong," Gregg said. "Both of you are so clever that you outsmarted yourselves."

TOO late, Danny understood what the little man meant. In the hands of the police he spelled possible danger for Gregg who didn't know that he couldn't

recall the little man's identity and couldn't set the cops directly on his trail.

Gregg had been trailing him to see if he would hole up long enough to give the little man time to get rid of the incriminating, war-souvenir trunk—the loophole in his crafty scheme. Trapping Pert and him this way was the best that could have happened for Gregg.

The Whippet's voice rose nervously. "Look at the out you've given me. The crooked fighter returns to the place where he stole the shiv he used on Fisher. He and his girl gang up on his old buddy, Harry Gregg, who defends himself. I'm gonna be a hero, see—" a pulse began to throb next to his Adam's apple—"after I kill both of you."

Danny edged up on the balls of his feet. Fifteen feet was a long way to rush against a man with a gun. The automatic was small but it could punch hard at close range. Years before, in cleaning out a Ruhr village, he'd looked down a gun like this in the hand of an SS officer and it had dealt him an awful wallop in the shoulder before his momentum had buried his bayonet in the German's belly.

As if trying to blame Danny for Fisher's murder, the Whippet said: "This needn't have happened if you'd agreed to let me manage you. I would have made you middle champ. But now—" His face lit up with a glow of self-righteousness like a fanatic on a soap box.

Danny squeezed the grenade, slippery with sweat, and wondered if he dared gamble on throwing it at the Whippet's head. This was the pay-off. Working up nerve to murder two decent people had been harder for Gregg than deciding to kill a rat like Fisher.

But now the little guy had transferred the guilt. Danny was at fault for not signing Gregg as manager and therefore causing the Whippet to kill Fisher, was the way the little guy must be reasoning.

(Please continue on page 128)

MURDER ON

PLUS

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

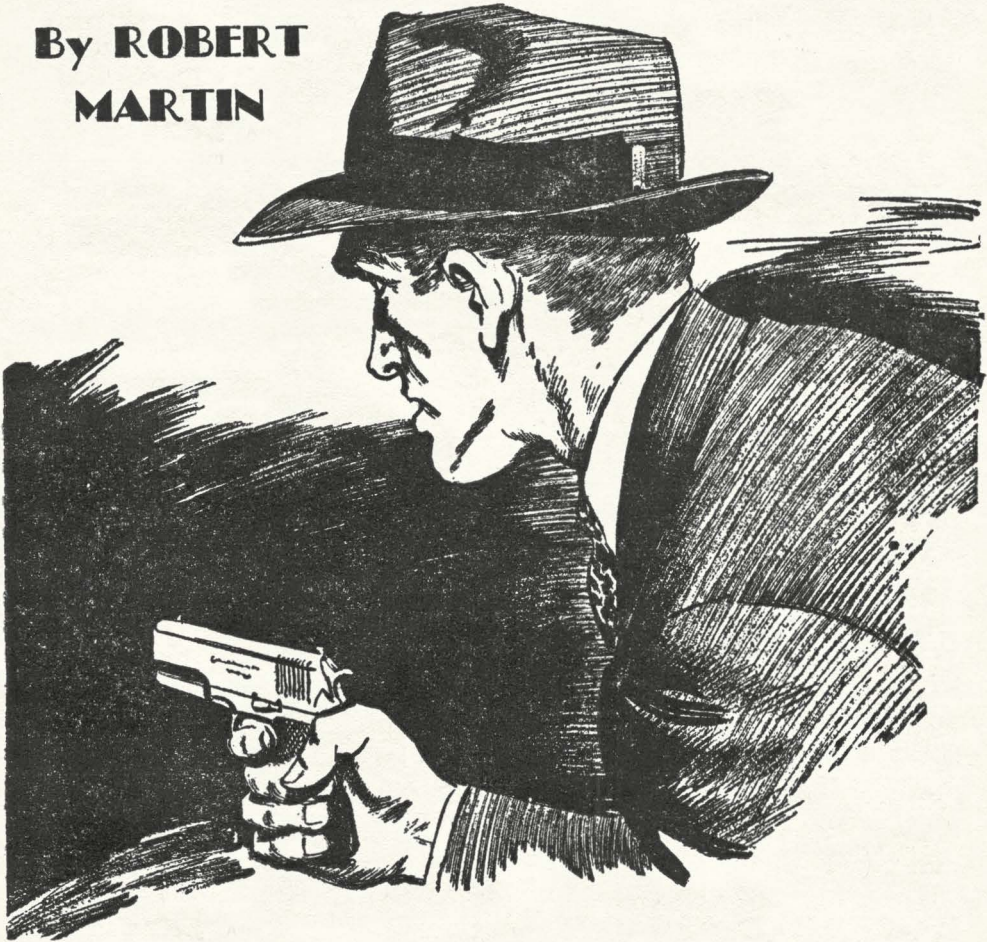
Blake King whirled to face him, his handsome face contorted in rage. . . .



THE MAKE

*He'd do anything for a million bucks,
soldier-of-fortune Ramsey thought—
until he got a corpse in his arms . . .
and a gun in his back.*

By **ROBERT
MARTIN**



CHAPTER ONE

The Heiress Was Impatient

RAMSEY got out of the taxi in the drive before the wind-swept terrace. There was a dim light shining behind the French windows, and through the glass he saw a slim, slowly

moving figure. Ramsey's heart pounded a little harder. Even her shadow brought back a flood of memories.

"Want me to wait?" the taxi driver asked.

"No," Ramsey said, and he stood until the taxi had circled the drive to the highway. Then he ran lightly through the rain across the terrace, and rapped softly on the glass. The door opened immediately. Ramsey stepped quickly inside, and kicked the door shut with his heel.

She looks marvelous, Ramsey thought. Slim and straight, her glossy black hair falling softly over her shoulders, her red lips parted slightly, her large dark eyes searching his face. She was wearing a pale blue silk robe, long and soft and clinging. In one hand she held a drink in a tall thin glass. The ice in the glass tinkled gently, and Ramsey saw that she was trembling a little.

He glanced quickly around the room. It looked the same—a blood-red rug, an enormous low glass table, the soft light falling on a high shelf of books. On his right a wide archway led into the big darkened living room where he had once sat and gazed out over the moonlit gulf. Except for the light in the room where he now stood, the big house was dark. Dark and hushed. The only sound was the rain beating on the glass doors behind him.

The girl took a step toward him. "Rack, oh, Rack. . . ."

Ramsey forgot that she was married to Jefferson Carr now. He forgot the Guatemalan jungle, and the marvelous forest of mahogany, and Nevil Simpson, and the sight of the fer-de-lance clinging with its fangs to Pete Davos' wrist. He forgot Phil Wheeler, and Sara Brand, and the rest, and all he remembered was Marcia.

She stepped into his arms with a little cry. He heard her glass thud to the thick rug. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. He grasped her roughly, kissed her. Her lips were clinging.

To hell with Jefferson Carr, Ramsey thought wildly.

She moved her lips against his cheek.

"Rack," she whispered, "it's been so long."

Suddenly the jungle filled his mind. He couldn't forget it—ever. The heat, the sweat, the mud. Six months, and she had promised to wait for him. Six months of dreaming about her, and all the while she had been married to a cold-eyed lawyer named Jefferson Carr.

He pushed her away from him. She stared wonderingly, and her red mouth trembled. Then she reached for him, her fingers beckoning. "I love *you*, Rack," she whispered. "Really, I do."

"You wrote me a letter," he said harshly. "Remember?" He jerked an envelope from his pocket and waved it in her face. "You said you weren't the waiting kind. Remember, my love?"

She made a kind of a moaning sound. "I didn't mean it, Rack. I was so lonesome for you. But Jeff, he—"

He cut her off. "Skip it," he snapped. "You're married to Jeff now. Why did you ask me to come here? What do you want of me now? Tell me, so that I can get the hell out."

She gazed at him with sad brooding eyes. "You—you're different, Rack. You. . . ." She paused, and made a slight hopeless gesture. She turned away from him. "I remember—"

"Stop it," he almost shouted. But even then he knew that he wanted to hold her again, to kiss her, to tell her that he didn't care about Jeff Carr. Nothing mattered very much any more but Marcia, a gorgeous creature with more than enough beauty for any man—plus the Stockton oil millions.

He looked at her straight, slender figure, at the smooth arch of her back beneath the sheer silk, and at the way her black hair fell softly over the curve of her cheek.

She took a cigarette from a silver box on the low glass table. Ramsey stepped forward, picked up a booklet of matches

from the table, and struck a light for her. As she inhaled, he glanced at the cover of the booklet. The printed words jumped up at him: *The Starlight Club. . . Sand Road. . . Phil Wheeler. . .*

He looked at Marcia. She was watching him with grave eyes.

"So you know Phil Wheeler," he said.

She shrugged slightly. "Yes. He was here tonight. That's why I couldn't see you earlier."

"Friend of yours?"

"Not especially. He was here on—on business."

"Of course," Ramsey sneered. "He didn't know that your husband was out of town."

She turned abruptly away from him. "Why do you talk that way, Rack? Phil Wheeler means nothing to me. He's just a—a gambler. He called me this afternoon, said he wanted to see me about—Jeff. I've warned Jeff about his gambling debts, and—other things. He owes Phil Wheeler twenty thousand dollars, and Wheeler wants to know what I'm going to do about it. I told him I wasn't going to do anything about it. I'm finished doing things about Jeff. I'm going to divorce him, Rack." She turned to face him. "Do you hear?"

"Why did you marry him?"

She inhaled deeply on her cigarette. "I didn't want to. We had been to a party, and I'd had a lot to drink." She turned away, and stared at the rain-spattered windows.

"It was just one of those things—all part of a merry evening. We took a plane to Mexico, a whole party of us, and Jeff and I were married. Afterwards I was sorry, of course, but there wasn't much I could do about it. Jeff is a lawyer, you know, and he played it smart. And I didn't know if you'd ever come back from that silly hunt for mahogany. So I drifted. But I can't stand it any longer. I'm going to divorce Jeff, no mat-

ter what it costs me. I'm determined."

SHE turned slowly to face him. "How do you feel about me now, Rack?" she asked softly. "Do I mean anything to you any more? You said you loved me once. How is it with you now?"

The soft light made shadows on her cheeks and beneath her eyes, and glinted with a moist redness on her full lips. Ramsey wanted to hold her again, to forget all that had happened since he'd last seen her. She was too beautiful, and she had too much money—a girl alone in the world with ten million dollars.

She had lived fast, according to her whims, with never a thought of the morning after. But he knew that he still wanted to marry her, in spite of Jeff Carr, in spite of everything. It showed in his eyes, and she saw it. She smiled, and took a slow step toward him.

Then she paused, and her smile was a slow sad one. It was a smile Ramsey would never forget. It was a sober, compassionate smile, and it changed all her features and gave them a sad, inscrutable quality, older than the pyramids.

He moved to meet her.

The room rocked with a hammering explosion. For a blinding instant, the windows gleamed with a flash of flame. Marcia Carr's head jerked back, like the head of a puppet on a string, and an ugly black hole appeared on her cheek. She stood frozen, her body trembling, and a final bright gleam of life flared in her eyes.

Then her face seemed to crumple, and her body too. Her eyes went dull and dead. She collapsed limply to the floor.

Ramsey stared stupidly, his voice trapped in his throat. He took a slow step toward her. There was a swift scurrying sound behind him, and something slammed against the back of his head, jarring him to his heels. He swayed drunkenly, and wild lights danced in his brain.

He fought to stay on his feet, but his

knees buckled, and he couldn't focus his eyes. The floor slanted upward, and through a shimmering haze he saw the limp twisted body of Marcia on the floor, with the sheer folds of the robe spread like a silken fan beneath her. . . .

* * *

Ramsey had met Pete Davos beside a bombed-out church in Normandy. Davos was short and thick, with heavy dark features and curly black hair. Ramsey was tall and broad and blond. Neither of them had any family, except for Davos' sister in Saginaw.

After the war, the two of them drifted around the country, following the sun. Mostly they worked on construction jobs—when they needed money. In the autumn of 1948 they went to the Texas oil fields, and Ramsey became an expert well rigger.

One night, in a gulf city night club called the Jungle Tavern, Ramsey met a dancer named Sara Brand. She was small and dark, with a creamy skin and brown eyes that tilted slightly at the outer corners. She had been born in Mexico City. Her father had been an American mining engineer, her mother Mexican.

When Sara was fourteen, her parents had been killed in an auto accident near Taxco. An aunt in Acapulco had taken her in, and had taught her Mexican dances. For the past two years she had been dancing in night clubs from Miami to Detroit. She hoped to eventually work her way to Hollywood. At the time Ramsey met her, she had been at the Jungle Tavern for almost six weeks. She was nineteen years old.

Sara Brand fell in love with Ramsey and his brawny good looks, and she made no secret of it. Ramsey was pleased, but a little embarrassed, because girls were where you found them, and he and Pete Davos had been talking about heading north to Oregon to the lumber camps.

Then one night, in a waterfront bar, Ramsey and Pete Davos met a drunken geologist named Nevil Simpson who had just come up from Guatemala. He told them about a fabulous stand of virgin mahogany a hundred-odd miles south of the Motagua River, and said he needed a couple of partners to help him finance a survey.

"My friends," Simpson mumbled, "the main thing is to find a way to get it out to the river. Awfully rough country down there. Rougher'n hell. But if we can lick the transportation problem, we'll be fixed for life."

Pete Davos and Ramsey winked at each other, bought Simpson another drink, and presently left. But the next evening, Simpson looked them up at the Gulf Hotel. He was sober, and he repeated his story. Pete and Ramsey listened. Soon they had mahogany in their blood.

Between the three of them, they scraped up seventeen hundred dollars. Simpson insisted upon drawing up a partnership agreement. They picked an attorney out of the phone book. That is how Ramsey first met Jefferson Carr.

When the three of them walked into his office the following morning, Carr was standing by the door with a brief case in his hand, talking to a red-headed secretary with sea-green eyes. He gazed at the trio coldly from behind rimless eye glasses. He wore a stiff white collar, a dark plainly cut suit, and his gray felt hat sat squarely on his head. His mouth was small and thin-lipped.

Simpson said politely, "Mr. Carr?"

"Yes, but I'm just leaving. I've got to catch a plane for Austin."

"Very well," Simpson said quietly. "We will take our patronage elsewhere." He turned to go.

"Wait," Carr said. "Uh—perhaps I can spare you a few minutes. What did you want?"

"A partnership agreement," Simpson

said. "To consist of the three of us."

Carr glanced at a clock on the wall. "I have a little time," he said shortly. "Come inside."

It took Jefferson Carr twenty-five minutes to draw up an agreement to Simpson's satisfaction. "That will be twenty-five dollars," Carr said.

Pete Davos whistled softly. "A buck a minute," he murmured.

"I am not charging you for my time," Carr said coldly. "I am charging you for knowing how to draw up a partnership agreement."

"Very well, sir," Simpson said, and he paid him. "Please keep the agreement for us. We will return in about six months."

They had signed the agreement and started to leave, when a girl came in. She was tall and dark, and she walked with a long-legged arrogant stride. Her black hair was combed back over her ears, and she was wearing a dove-gray silky suit which clung softly to her slender form. A red silk scarf was knotted at her throat, accentuating her rather large red mouth and her white skin.

She went straight to Jefferson Carr, and kissed him. "I came to say good-by, darling," she said. "Have a nice trip."

Carr looked faintly embarrassed. "Thank you, Marcia," he said stiffly. "I'll be back in a week." He moved to the outer office.

THE girl gazed curiously at Simpson, Davos and Ramsey. When her black eyes met Ramsey's, he thought he detected a sudden glint of interest. Ramsey watched for things like that. He smiled at her, and her eyes never wavered. Something like a shiver went up Ramsey's spine.

From the outer office, Jefferson Carr said impatiently, "I really must go, Marcia. My plane. . . ."

She blew him a kiss on slender white

fingers. "Of course, darling. Run along."

Carr hesitated, a doubtful expression on his thin face. Then he turned abruptly and went out.

Simpson and Davos moved past the red-headed secretary to the outer door. Simpson said gently, "Coming, Rackwell?"

Ramsey glanced at the girl, and he saw that her eyes were faintly mocking. He said to Simpson, "I'll see you at the hotel." As he spoke, a sudden flame of excitement flared in the girl's eyes, and Ramsey grinned to himself.

Simpson and Pete Davos left, but before the door closed, Pete gave Ramsey a broad wink.

Ramsey gazed at the girl. She smiled. "Rackwell," she said softly. "That's an odd name."

"The name of my maternal grandfather. My friends call me Rack."

"I'm always glad to meet Jeff's clients," she said. "I'm Marcia Stockton."

Ramsey started. In this part of Texas the name of Stockton meant money. Oil money. He knew that old Clint Stockton had died leaving ten million dollars, more or less, to his daughter, Marcia. And this was Marcia, gazing at him coolly with her mocking dark eyes. Then he saw the big diamond on her left hand, third finger.

She caught his glance. "Jeff and I are to be married next month," she said.

"That's nice." Ramsey moved toward the door. She was way out of his league.

In the outer office the redhead began to peck at a typewriter. Marcia Stockton stepped quickly to the door and closed it. The muffled sound of the typewriter stopped for a second, and then began again. Marcia Stockton stood about a foot away from Ramsey with her back to the door. He stood stiffly.

"What's the matter, Mr. Rackwell Ramsey," she said softly. "What are you scared of?"

"I'm not scared." Ramsey's voice was

a little unsteady, despite his efforts.

Her black lashes lowered. "Show me," she murmured.

Ramsey put his hands on her shoulders, and he pulled her gently to him. Her arms went around him. When he kissed her the floor seemed to tilt and all the world went crazy. Her lips were like fire, and she clung to him fiercely. Presently he pushed her gently away, and he took an unsteady breath.

She laughed softly. "Did you like that—Rack?"

Silently he reached for her again, but she placed her hands gently on his chest. "No, not now," she whispered. She moved her head toward the sound of the typing. "Little Miss Snoopy out there."

"To hell with her," Ramsey said, and he kissed her again.

Minutes later they stood apart.

"What did you like about me—when you first saw me?" she asked.

"Everything."

She laughed happily. "It was that way with me, too. Why should we pretend? Life is too short."

"Do you always get what you want?"

"Usually—one way or another. . . . How did you get that scar on your cheek?"

"A sniper's bullet in Germany."

"Oh, the war. . . . Are you married, Rack?"

"Not yet."

She placed a cigarette between her red lips, and Ramsey struck a match for her. She inhaled deeply, and gazed at him thoughtfully through the smoke. "Now what?" she said.

Ramsey glanced at his wrist watch. Twenty minutes after five in the afternoon. "It's drink time," he said.

She gave him a slow smile. "Shall we go to my place—or to a bar somewhere?"

"Your place, if it's okay."

"Good." She smoothed her red scarf and opened the door. The redhead looked

up from her typing, her eyes narrowed.

Marcia Stockton said lightly to Ramsey, "Mr. Carr will be glad to take the case for you, Mr. Ramsey."

"Fine," Ramsey said.

Marcia winked at him, turned to the redhead, and said pleasantly, "Good night, Miss Whitney."

"Good night," the redhead said sullenly.

Marcia and Ramsey went down to the street. She had a yellow twelve-cylinder convertible at the curb. "You drive," she said. He got behind the wheel, and they swung out into the late afternoon traffic on velvet wings.

CHAPTER TWO

Jumping Through Homicidal Hoops

MARCIA STOCKTON lived in a big white ranch house overlooking the gulf. There was a swimming pool, and a tennis court. Ramsey parked the convertible in a curving drive, and they walked up to a windy terrace. The gulf stretched blue-green below them. Marcia said, "Excuse me, Rack," and the high heels of her snake-skin sandals clicked over the tile. She disappeared through a pair of French doors.

Ramsey sat down in a deep chrome-and-leather chair and gazed out over the gulf. He lit a cigarette, and stretched out his long legs. He thought of an old army expression, *You never had it so good*, and he smiled to himself.

Marcia Stockton came out, followed by a little Mexican maid carrying a tray of bottles, glasses and ice. The maid placed the tray on a low table, and Marcia said, "Thank you, Theresa." The maid smiled and left the terrace.

Marcia said to Ramsey, "How's your touch on martinis?"

"Perfect," he said. "I once tended bar in Havana."

"You've been around a lot, haven't you?"

"A little," he admitted. Swiftly and expertly he stirred the cocktails in a tall glass and poured them.

Marcia sipped. "Wonderful."

Ramsey sat beside her, a glass in his hand. "Theresa forgot the olives," he said, "but who cares?"

They laughed together, and Ramsey said, "How did you ever get mixed up with a cold-blooded character like Jefferson Carr?"

She looked at him over the rim of her glass. "Jeff? Oh, he's all right. He handles the legal end of the business for the Stockton Oil Company. Dad always liked him. Before he died, I promised him that I'd marry Jeff, but—oh, hell, I've been stalling him for two years. He finally pinned me down to a wedding date next month. After all, it's what dad wanted."

"What do you want?"

She shrugged, and for an instant her full lips twisted bitterly. Then she laughed, and held out her empty glass. "Another drink, right now."

As Ramsey filled her glass, she said quietly, "I've known you less than an hour, Rack, but I feel that it's been forever. Do you feel that way, too?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a girl, Rack? I mean—*one special girl?*"

Ramsey thought of Sara Brand, and for an instant his gray eyes clouded. "Yes," he said soberly.

She frowned. "Who?"

Ramsey grinned at her. "You."

She touched his arm. "It's crazy, isn't it? When I saw you in Jeff's office, my knees went weak. But it happens, doesn't it?"

"Sure." Ramsey raised his glass. "But time's a-wasting. I'm leaving for Guatemala in three days."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, no, Rack. No."

He nodded slowly, told her about the mahogany deal with Pete Davos and Nevil Simpson. When he had finished, she said, "But that's silly, Rack. You don't have to go—now. Stay here with me."

"And wait for a lawyer named Jeff Carr to come back from Austin?"

"Who's Jeff Carr?" she said. "I never heard of him."

The sun had gone down, and the terrace was in the shadow of dusk. The wind whipped a strand of dark hair across Marcia Stockton's face, and she shivered.

"Are you cold?" Ramsey asked.

She shook her head silently, and her eyes searched his face. He looked away, and gazed out over the gulf. He thought about Pete Davos and Simpson waiting for him at the hotel. This was a hell of a time for him to meet a girl like Marcia Stockton.

She stood up and gazed down at him. Her fingers touched his cheek, and she said softly, "Stay here with me. We'll have fun, Rack—more fun than you ever dreamed. Tomorrow we could drive west across the desert. I've got a place high on a hill at Malibu. In November we could shoot pheasant in Dakota. Stay, Rack. You won't be sorry—I promise. Don't go away. I've got plenty of money."

He grinned up at her. "You trying to buy me?"

"*Can I buy you, Rack? To keep? You don't have any silly ideas about the Stockton money, do you?*"

Ramsey thought: *I've got ideas, honey, but they're not silly. Not by any means. A gorgeous creature like you, plus ten million dollars. Silly?* Then he thought of Sara Brand. No ties there, really. But Pete and Simpson—they were different. They were his pals, his partners, and he had promised. He looked up at the girl, and he shook his head slowly.

"You don't have to buy me," he said.

"You can have me for free. But I made a deal with Pete and Simpson, and I've got to go through with it."

"You're a fool."

"Maybe."

She began to cry, like a little girl, and she turned away from him. Ramsey stood up and gently grasped her shoulders. "I'll be back in six months. That isn't so long."

She turned to face him. Her face was wet with tears. "I—I'll be married to Jeff then. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"You don't have to marry him."

"I will, I will—if you don't stay."

"No, you won't."

"Hold me, Rack. Hold me tight."

SHE told him to drive the convertible back to town—and to come back the next day. When he entered the hotel room, he found Pete Davos and Simpson playing two-handed gin. They gazed at him silently.

Ramsey took off his coat and necktie. "Hi, boys."

Pete Davos said, "You got lipstick on your kisser."

Ramsey dabbed at his chin with a handkerchief.

Pete said, "That babe looked like dough. You still going after that mahogany with us?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Sara called for you a little while ago," Pete said. "Said you had a date with her."

"I forgot," Ramsey said.

"Forgot, hell. Sara's a nice girl, Rack. I told her you'd see her tomorrow."

"I'll make my own dates," Ramsey said.

"All right," Pete said. "But remember we got a date in three days with a boat."

Nevil Simpson peered over his gold-rimmed glasses. "Now, Pete," he said

mildly, "don't talk like that to Rackwell. He's given his word. We are partners now." Simpson was a thin man with a red mustache.

Pete's heavy face was sullen. "You don't know him like I do. I remember, one time in Las Vegas. . . ."

Ramsey went into the other room and closed the door. . . .

It was the third night, and a soft wind blew off the gulf. Ramsey sat on the terrace beside Marcia Stockton. Both of them were silent, and the ice tinkled softly in their glasses. Ramsey thought fleetingly of Sara Brand. He hadn't seen her since two nights before he'd met Marcia Stockton. She had called the hotel several times, but he hadn't called back.

Sara was fine, he thought, but he'd never meet another girl like Marcia. Not another girl with her looks and her money down through the years of his life. He thought of all the jobs he'd had, the places he'd slept in, the meals he'd missed. For the first time since the war he wanted to stop moving around. To hell with Simpson's mahogany.

He felt Marcia's hand on his arm. "Don't go, Rack. Please stay here with me."

"I've got to go," he said to Marcia miserably.

There was a silence, and the wind blew. Her fingers tightened on his arm. "All right, Rack. You win. If you want to marry me, I—I'll wait for you."

Ramsey turned his head. Her face was a pale oval in the darkness. He slid out of the chair and knelt beside her. Her fingers caressed his face. "I'll wait, Rack," she whispered.

"What about Jeff Carr?"

"I'll tell him—as soon as he returns. You don't have to worry about Jeff. Or anybody."

"I'll be back," he said, and he kissed her. It was a long kiss, because it had to last for six months. . . .

Six weeks later Ramsey, Pete Davos and Nevil Simpson stood in a clearing south of the Motagua River and gazed at their mahogany. Acres of it in the middle of the tangled jungle. Strong, thick-trunked trees, some of them seventy-five feet high. Ramsey and Pete shouted and waved their arms, but Simpson just smiled and lit his pipe, a faint proud smile on his lips.

"Enough wood for all the bars on Third Avenue," Pete breathed.

"And then some," Ramsey said.

Simpson took out his thick leather note book and frowned at the rough map he'd drawn of the trip in. "If we can find a way to get it out," he said softly. "If we can only find a way."

"Hell," Ramsey said, "strip out an airfield, and fly it out."

Simpson nodded slowly, and puffed on his pipe. "Maybe that's the only way, Rackwell." He paused, and sighed. "But it's the expensive way. A road to the river would be best—but we'll see."

Pete Davos moved away from them. "I wanna feel them beautiful trees." He waded through the high grass toward the mahogany.

Suddenly Pete screamed, and leaped backward. Simpson and Ramsey caught a glimpse of a long writhing body, and they saw the dusty coils as Pete tried frantically to shake the snake's fangs from his wrist. Simpson cursed and ran forward, drawing his revolver. Ramsey plunged after him. Simpson fired, and the flat report echoed through the forest of mahogany. And then Simpson had an arm around Pete Davos, and was dragging him away. Behind them Ramsey saw the writhing coils of the snake, and he emptied his gun in a surge of rage and hate. Then he turned and ran to where Simpson had laid Pete on the grass.

Pete's eyes were bright and glassy with shock, and his lips were trembling. With a tourniquet from the first aid kit,

Simpson worked like a mad man. Then he slashed at Pete's wrist with a knife and bent over to suck at the two bluish punctures. "Serum," he snapped at Ramsey. "Hypo."

Ramsey filled the needle, and handed it over. Simpson used it with a steady hand. But Ramsey, watching the stiffening body of Pete, silently cursed the mahogany. The two men worked feverishly. Even when the stricken man began to scream in delirium, they didn't give up. But Pete Davos died at sundown.

The mosquitoes began to sing, and Ramsey built a fire, while Simpson gently wrapped Pete's body in a blanket. Simpson said, "Fer-de-lance. Snakes don't come much deadlier. Pete didn't have a chance. One of the fangs punctured a vein." He left the body, and came over to squat by the fire beside Ramsey.

Ramsey said, "It's a high price to pay for mahogany."

Simpson nodded silently. The firelight made hollow shadows in his lean, sad face.

In the morning they buried Pete, and piled stones over the grave. Then they started the slow trip back to the coast. Three weeks later they struck the road leading to Puerto Barrios, and they made their way up the coast to Livingston. There was a letter waiting for Ramsey. A dainty pearl-gray envelope smelling of sandalwood. He opened it with a feeling of pleasure and anticipation.

Dearest Rack: Please try and forgive me. I am married to Jeff Carr. It was a nice dream we had, but I guess I'm not the waiting kind. You shouldn't have left me—if you really wanted to marry me. Forget me, darling, and be happy. Marcia.

Ramsey left Simpson in Guatemala. Simpson said he wanted to stay and find a way to get the mahogany out, maybe make a deal with a lumber company. He had made several contacts, but the answer had been same—the transportation was too costly. Simpson got a job with a min-

ing company, and said that he was going to keep trying.

But mahogany no longer interested Ramsey. He was restless, and he wanted to get away. They divided the money they had left, and sent Pete Davos' share to his sister in Saginaw, along with a letter telling how Pete had died. Then Ramsey and Simpson had a last drink together.

There were tears in Simpson's pale blue eyes, and he brushed a finger across his red mustache. "Take care of yourself, Rackwell, and let me know where I can reach you—in case I make a deal about the mahogany."

"To hell with the mahogany," Ramsey said. "Forget it. But you write to me in care of the hotel. I'll leave a forwarding address."

"We are still partners," Simpson said gravely. "Maybe you'd better see that lawyer—what's his name?"

"Carr," Ramsey said, and his voice was harsher than he had intended.

"Tell him about Pete," Simpson said, "and have him change the agreement. You can mail it to me here for my signature."

"Okay," Ramsey said. He shook hands with Simpson, and went out.

DURING the voyage up the gulf Ramsey got into a poker game, and when he walked off the dock in Texas there were eighty-four dollars left in his pocket. But he didn't worry about it. A good derrick rigger could always find a job in oil country. At the Gulf Hotel he shaved, showered, changed his clothes, and walked to the office of Jefferson Carr. It was three o'clock in the afternoon.

Jefferson Carr, wearing a tight dark suit and a high stiff collar, was sitting behind his big desk. He didn't get up. Looking at him, Ramsey thought of Marcia, and he felt a sudden surge of jealousy. He said, "Remember me?"

"Yes," Carr said. "A partnership

agreement. Simpson, Ramsey and Davos. You're Ramsey." He paused, and gazed at his fingernails. "Did you want to see me about the agreement?"

"What else would I want to see you about?" Ramsey asked, and he saw Carr's eyes shift for an instant. "I want a new agreement drawn up. Davos is dead."

Carr looked directly at him. "Dead?"

"A snake bit him. It's just Simpson and me now."

"Is Simpson here?"

"No. He stayed in Guatemala."

"But you came back here—to this city? Why?"

Ramsey grinned to himself. So Carr knew about him and Marcia, and he was jealous. He said easily, "I like this town—and I wanted to change the agreement."

"That could have been arranged by mail," Carr said coldly. "And Simpson will have to sign it to make it legal."

"I'll mail it to Simpson. Send the new agreement to me at the Gulf Hotel. How much do I owe you?"

"Ten dollars."

Ramsey tossed two fives on the desk, and turned to go.

"Ramsey," Carr said harshly.

Ramsey turned.

"I know about that foolish conversation you had with Marcia," Carr said. "She's my wife now, you know."

"Yes. I know."

"Are you going to be in town long?"

"Maybe. It depends."

"I wouldn't think there is anything here to interest you."

Ramsey grinned. He felt mean. "There might be," he said.

Carr compressed his thin lips. There was hate in his eyes. Ramsey wanted to laugh. Then he thought of Marcia. Mrs. Jefferson Carr. Ten million dollars. He no longer wanted to laugh.

Carr said, "You know what I mean, Ramsey."

"Do I?" Ramsey asked softly. He

moved to the door. "Just get that agreement over to me." He went out quickly, slamming the door.

He spent what was left of the afternoon walking the streets of the city. At six o'clock he went to the bar of the Gulf Hotel. He was on his second martini when a bellboy came in and peered about.

"Mr. Ramsey?" he called.

"Here," Ramsey said.

The boy came over and handed him a slip of paper. It was from the hotel desk, and the penciled words read:

*Mr. R. Ramsey, Room 421, 4:10 P.M.:
Mrs. J. Carr telephoned while you were out.
She asks that you call her as soon as you
return.*

He read it twice. Then he said, "Thanks," to the waiting boy and handed him a quarter. He ordered another drink. To hell with Marcia. He finished the drink hurriedly, went out to the lobby and sat down. Two minutes later he was in a phone booth calling her number. The little Mexican maid answered.

"Mrs. Carr, please." He felt the sweat on his forehead. "Mr. Ramsey calling."
"One moment."

Then Marcia's voice. Soft, throaty, exciting. Once more he was back on the wind-swept terrace, and her lips were against his cheek.

"Rack," she breathed. "How nice! When did you get back?"

"Today," he said. "I got your letter."

"Rack, I'm sorry, but—"

"Never mind," he broke in. "Water over the dam. Why did you call me?"

"Call you?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Rack, you sound different. Really, I didn't call you."

"All right," he said wearily. "You didn't call me. Tell me what you want anyhow."

"Rack, I've missed you. I—I should have waited. Her voice broke.

"What's the matter?"

"Everything, Rack. It—it's all wrong. Listen, I want to talk to you, but I can't now."

"Jeff listening?" He couldn't keep the faint sneer from his voice.

"No, no. Jeff's out of town. He left for Austin." She lowered her voice. "But there's someone else here. . . . Can I see you later?"

Ramsey hesitated for only a second. Then he said in a tight voice, "When? What time?"

"This is Theresa's night out. She'll be leaving after dinner. Can you come out about ten?"

"All right."

"I—I'll be waiting, Rack."

"How did you know I was in town?"

"I've got to hang up now. Good-by."

The receiver clicked in his ear.

CHAPTER THREE

Like Old Times

RAMSEY had a lonely dinner at the hotel, and afterwards he strolled slowly up the street, killing time. He came to a corner, and he saw a familiar sign. The Jungle Tavern. He thought of Sara Brand, and he had a fleeting moment of sadness. Sara had been all right, and if it hadn't been for Marcia. . . .

He wondered where Sara was now, if she had achieved her dream of finding work in Hollywood. He stared at the entrance to the night club, and at a big painted sign.

Jungle Tavern, Good Food and Drinks, Entertainment, Four Shows Nightly, Featuring the Exotic Dancing Sensation, SARA BRAND

Her photo was there, almost life-size, glossy, beautiful, eye-catching. Her slender body was clad in a scanty arrangement

of colored beads, and her long black hair hung in two thick braids over her shoulders. Ramsey stared at the photo, remembering. So she was still here.

Abruptly he pushed open the glass door, and stood inside. The sight, and the sound, and the smell of the place was familiar to him. A small string orchestra was strumming a South Sea melody, and a few couples were dancing. About half the tables in the big room were filled with customers.

Ramsey entered the bar and ordered a brandy and soda. The bartender was a thin, gray-haired man whom Ramsey didn't remember. He asked the bartender, "What time is the next show?"

"Eight o'clock, sir."

Ramsey gazed beyond the bar to the door which he knew led down a hallway to Sara Brand's dressing room. She would be there now. He finished his drink, crossed to the door, and strode down the dimly-lit hall.

Her muffled voice answered his knock. "Come in." He stepped inside.

She was sitting before a dressing table applying lipstick. He closed the door softly and leaned against it. Her gaze met his in the mirror, and her eyes widened. She turned slowly, pulling a black silk robe close over her shoulders. She looked the same, Ramsey thought. The same fresh creamy skin, the same brown eyes, the same soft red mouth. He smiled at her.

"Hello, Sara."

The first surprise of seeing him was gone. She said quietly, "Hello, Rack. I—I thought it was Blake."

"Who's Blake?"

"Blake King, my boss. You're awfully tanned, Rack. How are Pete, and what's-his-name—Simpson?"

"Why don't you ask me how I am?"

"You look fine, Rack. You always did. Did you find the mahogany?"

"Yes, we found it." Then he told her

quickly about Pete Davos. "Simpson stayed, but I'm just an oil bum. The mahogany deal was a long shot anyway."

"I'm sorry about Pete," she said quietly. "I always liked him." She turned back to the mirror. "I've got to go on in a few minutes. Will you excuse me?"

"Sure—as soon as you say when I can see you."

"Why?" She avoided his eyes in the mirror.

"For old time's sake. We used to have a lot of fun."

"Before you met Marcia Stockton." There was a trace of bitterness in her voice.

He stepped up behind her, and placed his hands on her shoulders. "All right," he said gently. "I'm a heel. Go ahead and say it."

"No you aren't, Rack."

"Can I see you later?"

"Maybe."

He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I'll be out front with the cheering section. How about a drink after your number?"

"Ginger ale. Remember?"

"Champagne," he said. He went out.

He secured a table near the small dance floor, and ordered another drink. He remembered that he had to watch the time, and he looked at his wrist watch. Two hours yet before his date with Marcia. Plenty of time. The lights dimmed, and a blue spot came on. Sara Brand glided out onto the floor to the savage beating of drums.

She wore a brilliant feathered head-dress, and the scanty covering of bright beads. She did a slow, writhing dance that probably had its origin with the Aztecs. When the dance was over, the patrons applauded wildly, and she ran lightly from the floor.

Ramsey waited. The orchestra began a rumba, and the dance floor filled with couples. Presently he saw Sara Brand

moving through the crowd toward his table, and he stood up.

She had changed to a white evening gown with long tight sleeves and a low-cut neckline. Her black hair was coiled in thick braids around her small head. He sat beside her, and offered her a cigarette. She shook her head.

"You were marvelous," he said. "I thought you'd be in Hollywood by now."

Her eyes clouded. "So did I. But it—it didn't work out that way."

"Why not?"

"It's a long story, Rack. Maybe I'll tell you—sometime." She smiled mockingly at him. "I understand your old gal friend up and got married while you were away."

"So I hear," he said carelessly.

"I've seen her several times. She's very attractive. Rich, too."

He stirred restlessly. "How about that drink?"

She laughed softly. "Rack, you dog, you done me wrong. But I forgive you. Stop looking so glum."

He grinned. "I guess I had to learn the hard way. I'm just a dumb rigger with more muscle than brains. Now, about that drink."

She shook her head. "No, thanks. I've got to start getting dressed for the next show." She stood up. "Going to be in town long—or what?"

He shrugged. "I'll be around a while, I guess. I don't know." He walked beside her to the hall leading to her dressing room.

A MAN came out of the door, and stood before them. He was handsome in a heavy, rugged way. His yellow hair was combed neatly, and parted on the side. He was wearing a midnight blue tuxedo with carefully tailored shoulders. He smiled at Sara Brand, showing strong white teeth.

"Evening, Sara," he said easily.

"Hello, Blake. You're back early."

"Caught a plane from San Antonio." He glanced at Ramsey, and said to the girl, "Am I back too early, darling?"

She said lightly, "Blake, this is a—a friend of mine. Mr. Ramsey, Mr. King."

King nodded. "Always glad to meet the customers." He turned to the girl. "Isn't it about time for your next number?"

"I was just going back to change." She smiled at Ramsey. "See you later, Rack." She moved gracefully down the hall.

Ramsey said to Blake King, "You've got a nice place here."

"Thanks. We try to run it right. Are you with a party, Mr. Ramsey?"

"I'm all alone."

For an instant King's eyes narrowed. "I see." He touched Ramsey's arm and smiled. "If you don't mind, Ramsey, we'd rather our patrons did not associate with the entertainment talent."

"But I do mind," Ramsey said pleasantly. "Miss Brand is an old friend."

King's thick blond brows came together in a faint frown. "I'm sorry, but we prefer that our performers conduct their social affairs elsewhere. I hope you will cooperate."

Smiling, Ramsey said, "To hell with you."

A flame flared and died in King's eyes. Then he smiled thinly, and moved away.

Ramsey turned toward the bar. As he did so, a tall gray-haired man in a blue flannel suit and silk maroon necktie swung around with a drink in his hand. The drink splashed over Ramsey's coat.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" the gray-haired man said. He whipped out a handkerchief and began to dab at Ramsey's suit. "Very clumsy of me."

"Forget it," Ramsey said. "It's all right."

"Let me buy you a drink," the gray-haired man said. He glanced ruefully at his glass. "And I seem to need a re-fill"

He smiled. He had a smooth ruddy face, black brows, and friendly blue eyes. "I'm Phil Wheeler."

They sat together at the bar, and ordered drinks. "Ramsey's the name," Ramsey said.

"Stranger in town?"

Ramsey grinned. "How can you tell?"

Wheeler laughed. "You don't talk like Texas. You talk like Ohio, or Indiana."

"I was born in Toledo," Ramsey said, "but I haven't been back for a long time. I just came up from Guatemala."

Wheeler cocked an eyebrow at him. "Oil?"

"Mahogany. One of my partners died, and I pulled out. I lost my shirt."

Wheeler sighed, and twirled the ice in his glass. "Everything's a gamble. What're you going to do now?"

Ramsey shrugged. "I don't know. Probably get a job in the fields. I used to be a rigger."

Wheeler gazed into his glass, and said carefully, "I hope you won't take offense, but I couldn't help hearing your conversation with Blake King just now. I gathered that Miss Brand—a charming girl, by the way—is an old friend of yours."

"Sort of," Ramsey said. "I knew her before I went south."

Wheeler took a sip of his drink. "I gathered from your comments," he said, "that you are a little out of touch with present conditions at the Jungle Tavern. It is generally understood in these parts that Miss Brand is—ah—Blake King's girl."

Ramsey glanced at Wheeler, but there was nothing but friendly interest in his eyes. "She didn't say so," Ramsey said. "I'll take my chances."

Wheeler smiled. "Good for you. I like that. How about another drink?"

Ramsey shook his head. "No, thanks." He wanted to get back to his table before Sara Brand came on again. He slid off

the stool, started to leave the bar.

Wheeler touched his arm. "Wait." From a thin leather wallet he extracted a card and handed it to Ramsey. The card read: *The Starlight Club. Fine Food and Liquors. Private Parties by Appointment. Sand Road. Phil Wheeler, Owner.* "That's my place," Wheeler said. "If you'd like some action with the cards or dice, we'll accomodate you."

"Thanks. Maybe I could build up my shrinking bank roll," Ramsey said.

"Perhaps," Wheeler said gravely. "You'll get a fair play for your money." He took the card and wrote on it with a fountain pen. *O.K.—P. Wheeler.* "That'll get you into the gaming rooms," Wheeler said. "We have to be a little careful right now. There's a new reform sheriff in the county, and we haven't yet come to an agreement on his—ah—financial arrangement." He laughed. "How about paying us a visit tonight?"

"Why tonight? Any special reason?"

"Frankly, yes. I think maybe I have something which might interest you. A job, sort of."

"Tell me about it?"

Wheeler shook his head. "Not here. Not in Blake King's place. Say, in an hour?"

"All right," Ramsey said.

Wheeler smiled. "Good. I'll expect you."

Ramsey went back to his table. Sara Brand danced again, this time in an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse and a swirling skirt. She avoided meeting Ramsey's gaze, and when the dance was over she did not come to his table. Puzzled, Ramsey was about to go back to her dressing room, when he realized that it was time for him to keep his appointment with Phil Wheeler.

He went to the check room, and wrote on the back of an envelope: *Can I take you home? I'll be back. Rack.* He gave the check-room girl a dollar, and asked

her to see that Sara Brand got the note. Then he went out to the street.

It had started to rain. A taxi pulled up, and Ramsey got in. "Starlight Club," he said to the driver.

The place was three miles out of town, a low rambling structure with a discreet neon sign and surrounded by a wide parking area. Inside, there were only a sprinkling of people at the bar, and in the big dining room. Ramsey laid Phil Wheeler's card on the bar, and the bartender nodded gravely. "This way, sir."

Ramsey followed him down a passageway to a closed door. The bartender pressed a button. A slot in the door opened, and a pair of eyes peered out. It reminded Ramsey of the old speakeasy days. The bartender held up Wheeler's card. The slot closed, and the door opened.

A fat man in a brown tweed suit smiled at Ramsey, and led him through another door and into a big brightly-lighted room, to where customers were. There were three crap tables, a roulette wheel, and walls were banked solid with slot machines. Four poker games were in progress.

It was all very quiet and orderly. Almost the only sounds were the click of chips, the whir of the wheel, and the low, monotonous voices of the house men at the dice tables.

Phil Wheeler detached himself from a group around the wheel and came toward Ramsey. As he approached, the fat man said, "Okay, boss?"

Wheeler smiled and nodded. The fat man moved away.

PHIL WHEELER didn't look like a gambler, Ramsey thought. He looked more like a banker, or a corporation lawyer. "We'll go to my office," Wheeler said. He led Ramsey to a door at the far end of the big room and into an oak-paneled office containing a big desk, deep leather chairs, and a modern steel safe.

A pearl-handled .38 revolver lay on top of the desk. Wheeler motioned Ramsey to a chair, and sat down behind the desk. As he moved the revolver aside, he caught Ramsey's glance. "Paper weight," he said, grinning.

Ramsey saw the glint of brass in the gun's cylinder, said, "With slugs in it."

"You have sharp eyes," Wheeler said, still smiling. "But after all, we don't operate a frosted malt and hot dog stand here." He cleared his throat. "We'll get down to business. I suppose you, like all of us, are interested in making some money?"

Ramsey jerked his head toward the door. "Sure—but not out there."

"Something a little more certain, perhaps?"

"Preferably," Ramsey said. "However, I'm not too choosy."

"Good," Wheeler said, and he gazed thoughtfully at Ramsey. "Can I trust you? I mean, can I trust you—for a cut out of maybe a hundred thousand dollars?"

Ramsey kept his face composed. "How much of a cut?"

Wheeler's lips tightened. "You said you weren't choosy. I'm talking about a ten per cent cut."

"Go on."

"I told you that I overheard your conversation with Blake King tonight. Obviously, he didn't scare you. I liked that. And now, I must ask a rather personal question—are you in love with Miss Brand?"

Ramsey was a little startled, but he said carefully, "She's a nice girl, although I guess I never thought about being in love with her."

"Is she in love with you?"

"What is this?" Ramsey asked curiously. "Advice to the lovelorn?"

"Never mind. I know she likes you. I watched quite carefully as she talked with you tonight." He smiled. "She

could be in love with you, I think. Your clothes are good. You talk all right, and your appearance, while rugged, is not exactly repulsive. You're the man I need. A local boy could never do the job I have in mind. When it's over, you can pull out—with ten thousand dollars."

Wheeler paused, and gazed at Ramsey with level eyes. "Before I go any further, I want to make sure of one thing. I'm about to offer you a job. If you take it, fine. If you don't, can I have your word that you'll keep quiet about my offer? And about what I tell you?"

Ramsey nodded silently.

"All right," Wheeler said gravely. "First, there's this: Blake King's Jungle Tavern is a flossy front for King's chief activity—narcotics. Are you shocked?"

Ramsey wasn't shocked, but he was surprised. "Nothing shocks me any more."

Wheeler smiled faintly. "Good. The Jungle Tavern is a clearing house for the stuff from across the border. Big business. Well organized. A lot of us around town know about it, but so far King's steered clear of the law. I suspect that he's greasing a few palms where it'll do the most good. Anyhow, if he can get away with it, it's no skin off my nose. None of us wear halos."

He paused, and sighed deeply. "I'm a corrupt man, Ramsey. Life has corrupted and warped me. When I see a chance for a killing, I began to figure the percentages. Oh, I take chances, but the dice have to be talking before I do. They're talking now—through you. We can't miss, if we play it right. All you have to do is make Miss Sara Brand love you."

Ramsey thought a minute. Then he said, "So I make Sara Brand fall in love with me, and I get ten thousand dollars?"

"Attractive deal, don't you think? I envy you, Ramsey."

"And how many guys do I have to machine gun?"

Wheeler grimaced in distaste. "Don't be crude. Nothing like that. Those days are over. Now, listen. You're young. Your life is before you. One girl, more or less, won't mean a thing." He smiled crookedly. "I'd like the job myself—except that I'm a little old for Miss Brand, and I want to stay in business here. Everyone thinks that she is Blake King's exclusive property. I don't know how she feels about him, but I know that he trusts her. He trusts her a hell of a lot.

"Last year the income tax boys, and the F.B.I., gave him a scare, and now he keeps his cash in a safe deposit box in a bank up town. He's got at least a hundred grand salted away, probably more. We have ways of learning those things. But here's the pay-off—the safe deposit box is registered in Sara Brand's name. She's covering for him, so that the money can't be traced to him. When he needs cash, she gets it for him—no check books for *that* account. Do you follow me?"

Ramsey did, and he didn't like it. "Go on," he said.

"I've made a thorough study of the situation. Blake King keeps close watch on Sara Brand. And I've watched her. She's lonesome, and a little scared of King. He sees that no men get chummy with her at the Tavern, and he keeps tabs on her after hours. But it's obvious that she likes you. You could cultivate her friendship, and—"

Ramsey said, "And she gets the money for me out of the safe deposit box."

Wheeler smiled. "That's the general idea. It shouldn't be too difficult. Just gain her sympathy. You're broke. The mahogany deal cleaned you out. You'll take her away with you, that sort of thing. I'll leave the details to you. Don't you like the idea?"

"No," Ramsey said. "I'm not that hungry yet."

Wheeler frowned. "I didn't think you'd be squeamish, Ramsey. I picked you for a



"Why did you kill her?" he asked reproachfully. "Such a pretty girl."

man of the world. It's dog eat dog in this rat race we call life. I know. I thought you knew, too. If you don't get that money through Miss Brand, somebody else will. It's there, waiting for the right man. And you're that man."

Ramsey stood up. "Thanks for nothing."

Wheeler's eyes held a cold light. "You're a fool, Ramsey." His voice was flat and hard. "I took a big chance in telling you this. I won't take any more. I think you'd better leave town—tonight."

Ramsey laughed, and moved to the door.

"Get out," Wheeler said bitterly. "Get the hell out."

Ramsey stepped to the passageway, and slammed the door. The fat man in the brown tweed suit was leaning against the opposite wall smoking a pipe. "How do you get out of this rat trap?" Ramsey snarled.

Silently the fat man led him to a door, and opened it. Ramsey stepped out into the dark parking area behind The Starlight Club, and the door closed behind him. It was still raining. He turned up his coat collar, and ran across the road to a gas station. It was five minutes until ten o'clock. He called a taxi from a pay booth in the station, and when it came he ran out and got in.

The driver said, "Where to, Jack?"

Ramsey gave him Marcia's address. As the taxi swung around in the road, Ramsey glanced back. He thought he saw a car pull away from The Starlight Club and follow the taxi along the rain-swept road. Then he lost sight of the headlights in the rain, and he leaned back in the seat.

"Nasty night," he said to the driver.

"Off the gulf," the driver said. "It'll last for a week."

Ramsey thought about Phil Wheeler's fantastic proposition. What had happened to Sara? Was she in cahoots with a dope-running heel? He didn't want any part of a crazy deal like that. He was going to see Marcia for one last time, and then he'd shake the dust of the gulf coast from his heels. He'd head north. To hell with Marcia, and to hell with Sara Brand.

The taxi driver said, "Along here some place?"

Ramsey looked out through the rain. He saw the curving drive leading up to Marcia's house. "Yep," he said. "Turn in."

CHAPTER FOUR

Trapped!

THE toe of a polished tan shoe kicked gently against Ramsey's chin. He stirred feebly, and the shoe kicked him again, not so gently. He opened his eyes slowly. Marcia was lying close to him. The silken robe was draped limply over her body, and her glossy black hair was spread out beneath her head. Her face was no longer beautiful. Ramsey closed his eyes quickly, remembering.

Above him an urgent voice said, "Get up. We gotta go."

Ramsey rolled over on his back and squinted upward. The fat man from Phil Wheeler's Starlight Club stood over him. "Why did you kill her?" the voice asked

reproachfully. "And such a pretty girl."

"I didn't kill her." Ramsey's voice was a croak.

"What's that in your hand?" the voice asked. "A squirt gun? Come on—get up."

Ramsey turned his head. He saw that he was holding a blue-steel revolver tightly in his right hand. One finger was crooked over the trigger. He opened his fingers quickly, and pulled his hand away. The gun lay on the rug, a wicked blue thing. Ramsey pushed himself slowly to his feet, his eyes avoiding the body of the girl.

The fat man moved swiftly. He dropped a handkerchief over the gun, and placed it in his coat pocket. Ramsey stared stupidly. The fat man said:

"You're in bad trouble, son. I followed you here to this house, and I waited outside. Then I heard a shot. You didn't come out, so I came in and found you. I called Mr. Wheeler, and he told me to bring you back to him. Ready?"

Ramsey's head pounded, and he couldn't think. The whole world seemed to be in a fog. He felt a hand on his arm, pulling him to the door, and he followed dumbly. The cold wet air hit his face, and he shivered. He felt the hands push him into a car, and he didn't protest. From somewhere in the darkness he heard the moan of a siren, and he saw a blinking red light. He felt the car move, gather speed.

"The cops," the fat man muttered. "They got tipped off fast." Ramsey saw the wide wet road ahead. The police car roared past them, and its brakes shrieked as it swung into the drive of Marcia Carr's house.

Ramsey sat limply, staring with dull eyes at the road ahead. After a while he saw the lights of The Starlight Club. His head began to clear, and he sat up straight. "What does Wheeler want?" he muttered.

"Shush," the fat man said. "You're

damn lucky to get away from back there before the cops busted in on you." He wheeled the car into the parking area and stopped behind the building. He got out, said, "Come on, son." Ramsey followed him obediently. . . .

He sat in a leather chair. His head still pounded, but he knew where he was. In Phil Wheeler's office again. The pearl-handled .38 was still on the desk. Beside the gun was something wrapped in a white handkerchief. Wheeler sat behind the desk reading a single sheet of paper.

Ramsey recognized the pearl-gray paper. Marcia's letter to him telling him that she had married Jeff Carr. He started to get out of his chair. "Hey—" he said,

Wheeler laid the letter on the desk, and looked at him with cold eyes. "A nasty business, Ramsey. No wonder you wouldn't accept my proposition. You had murder on your mind. The gun that Victor brought me will have your fingerprints on it, and this letter shows she jilts you for Carr—so jealousy is your motive.

"But you're lucky. You should be very grateful to Victor for getting you away before the police arrived. Fortunately for you, I had Victor follow you when you left here. After all, I had tipped my hand. You might have gone straight to Blake King and told him of the offer I made to you—"

"I didn't kill her," Ramsey said, "and you know it. Somebody was hiding in the adjoining room and shot her—while I was talking to her."

"Who, pray tell?" Wheeler sneered.

"Maybe your fat boy, Victor. I suppose I killed her, and then knocked myself cold?" Ramsey paused, waiting for his head to clear, trying to remember.

"You're grasping at straws," Wheeler said coldly. "All I have to do is turn over this gun and the letter to the police, and you'd be arrested for murder."

Ramsey began to sweat. "I get it now," he said bitterly. "A frame. What's next?"

"Would you like a drink?"

"No."

Wheeler sighed, and leaned forward. "Earlier this evening you and I discussed a business proposition," he said smoothly. "You refused. At this time I would like to renew my offer."

Ramsey thought fast. He thought of Sara Brand, and of the money stashed away in her name, and of Marcia Carr, dead on a blood-red rug. He thought of a lot of things, and he remembered Wheeler's phrase, *It's dog eat dog*, Ten thousand dollars would take him a long way from Texas. He said to Wheeler, "And I still get my cut?"

"Not quite," Wheeler said. "The terms have altered slightly since our first discussion. Due to the present circumstances, your share is now—ah—five thousand."

"I see," Ramsey said shortly. "But I still get the gun, and the letter?"

"Of course."

Ramsey hesitated. Then he said, "What if I just tell you to go to hell and walk out of here?"

Wheeler shrugged. "That would be very unwise. I will merely turn over the gun and the letter to the police—together with Victor as a witness."

"A complete frame job, huh?"

Wheeler looked annoyed. "Why do you keep harping on that? You killed her, didn't you?"

"No," Ramsey said, and he sighed. It didn't make any difference. "What if I can't talk Sara Brand out of the money?"

"You can try," Wheeler said. "It should be enjoyable work." He smiled faintly. "However, I am not asking the impossible. If you fail, if Miss Brand does not succumb to your charms—well, you leave town, and no harm done."

"Nothing for my time?"

"Oh, maybe a hundred bucks or so," Wheeler said carelessly. "I don't ask people to work for me for nothing."

"You're very generous."

Wheeler smiled pleasantly. "It's a tough world, Ramsey. Do you need some expense money?"

"Yes—unless you think I can do my courting on the sixty dollars I've got left."

Wheeler took a roll of bills from his pocket, and tossed two fifties on the desk. "If you need more, let me know. But remember this—if you get in a jam, don't expect any help from me. I don't know you, never saw you before. All clear?"

"Perfectly. I do a nasty job, and you collect."

"Don't be bitter, Ramsey. Perhaps you would prefer to stand trial for murder?"

Ramsey picked up the bills, and moved to the door. He felt trapped, caged, and he wanted to mash his fist into Wheeler's face. Wheeler saw the anger in Ramsey's eyes, and he couldn't resist a final goad. He quoted softly, "Romeo, Romeo."

"I'll do your damn job," Ramsey said, and he tried to keep his voice steady, "and I'll collect that five grand. But, someday, I'm coming back here." He went out and slammed the door.

BLAKE'S Jungle Tavern was fairly crowded. The string orchestra was gone, and the place was jumping with music from a brassy band. As Ramsey handed his hat to the check-room girl, he asked, "Did you give my note to Miss Brand?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Is she still here?"

"She's probably in her dressing room."

Ramsey moved through the crowd to the door beyond the bar, entered the hall, and knocked on the door of Sara Brand's dressing room. When she opened the door, he saw that she was wearing the black silk robe. Her dark hair was pinned into a thick knot on top of her head. The stage make-up had been removed, and her skin held a scrubbed shining look. All the

spotlight glitter was gone, and she looked as cute as a high school girl getting dressed for the senior prom. She stared silently at Ramsey with big eyes.

"Hello." He smiled at her. "Did you get my note?"

"Yes—but listen, Rack, please. You mustn't see me any more."

"Why not?"

"Because you mustn't. Please. . ."

"I thought maybe we could go somewhere and talk."

She shook her head quickly. "No, Rack. Please go."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

She shook her head, and started to close the door. Then her gaze shifted beyond him, and her eyes widened. Ramsey turned. Blake King stood in the hallway behind him. Big shouldered, still immaculately dressed in the midnight blue tuxedo, his neatly parted hair glinting in the light. His heavy lips were smiling, but there was no smile in his eyes. His cold gaze flicked over Ramsey, dismissing him, and he said to the girl, "Get dressed, Sara. I'll take you home."

"All right, Blake." Her eyes avoided Ramsey, and she closed the door quietly.

King said to Ramsey, "Bad night out," and he lit a cigarette.

"Yeah," Ramsey said, and he moved down the hall toward the door.

"Good by, Mr. Ramsey," King said.

Ramsey paused, and turned slowly. "Good night is better," he said. "I'll be back."

"I think not," King said. "Not if you're smart." He was still smiling, the cigarette hanging from a corner of his mouth, his blue eyes squinting against the smoke.

Without speaking, Ramsey turned and left. He didn't want any trouble with Blake King. Not before he had to.

It was still raining, and a cold wind was blowing off the gulf. Ramsey walked swiftly to his hotel a few blocks away, and got into bed. He lay awake a long time think-

ing of Marcia, of Sara Brand, and of what had happened to him in the last fourteen hours. At last he slept restlessly. . . .

He came awake with a start. A bright light was shining in his eyes. He sat up suddenly, his eyes heavy with sleep. Two men were standing at the foot of his bed. One was an over-dressed kid with a thick loop of chestnut hair falling over his pale forehead. The other was a thin, dark-faced man in a derby and tight pin-striped suit. They were both smiling at him beneath the bright ceiling light.

The thin man said, "We're sorry to disturb your slumber."

"Yeah," the kid said, grinning.

Ramsey found his voice. "That door was locked."

"Locked?" the thin man said. "Hah!" He turned to the kid again. "This is a real mean trick—busting into a man's room and disturbing his slumber, ain't it?"

"Yeah," the kid said.

"Do you suppose he's comfy?" the thin man asked.

The kid giggled, and Ramsey saw that he was drunk.

"How about getting the hell out of here?" Ramsey said. He gathered his feet beneath him, and prepared to make a leap from the bed.

The thin man said softly to the kid, "The light, Sonny. The light."

"Yeah," the kid said, and he reached a wavering hand for the switch.

Ramsey jumped then, but he was too slow. The thin man's hand swung downward and something solid struck Ramsey's head. The room went dark, and Ramsey hit the floor on his right shoulder, tangled in the bed sheets, his head filled with bursting stars. He tried to struggle out of the sheets, but his movements were slow, fumbling. From close above him he heard the kid's giggle, and the quick intake of the thin man's breath.

He knew what was coming, and he covered his head with his hands. A thick

blunt object thudded down between his spread fingers. A great flower of pain bloomed behind his eyes, and the blackness came speeding toward him. . . .

When he opened his eyes, cold water was hitting his face with stinging force. The light from the window cast a dull glow over the room, and through a watery haze he saw the kid with the chestnut hair standing unsteadily over him.

The kid held a pitcher in one hand, and a glass in the other. He made an underhanded throwing motion with the glass, and Ramsey ducked his head. Water splashed down behind his ears, and the kid giggled.

Ramsey reached one arm for the bed, and tried to pull himself up. He wanted to get at that kid. Then the thin shadow of the man in the derby crossed his vision, and a foot appeared before his face. He tried to avoid the foot, but the heel struck his chin. He went down once more, and clawed at the rug.

From the darkness above him, a voice said, "Stay away from Sara Brand, and stay away from the Jungle Tavern. That's all, brother."

Ramsey moved his legs feebly. Then he didn't move at all for a while. The blackjack thudded down once more, and he welcomed the rushing blackness. It was like a sweet anesthetic wafting him off to peaceful sleep. He heard a door slam, and brief silence merged into one big silence, and the last thing he remembered was the prickly feel of the rug beneath his cheek. . .

Ramsey shivered, and rolled over on his back. In the semi-darkness he saw the curtains billowing in from the window. The cold breeze struck his face, and it felt good, but still he shivered. His head pounded wickedly. Slowly and painfully he pushed himself to a sitting position. He was sweating, and yet he was cold.

Something moved by the window, and a soft voice said, "A bad beginning, son."

Ramsey saw him then, the black bulk

of a man. The man moved, and light from the street fell across the rough brown tweed coat. Ramsey knew that it was Victor, the fat man from Phil Wheeler's Starlight Club.

"So it's you," Ramsey said bitterly. "You were a big help."

"I'm supposed to follow you," Victor said, "and that's all. You can't expect to knock down five thousand bucks without *some* trouble."

"You know about my deal with Wheeler?"

"Sure. He told me all about it."

"You go back and tell Wheeler that he can toss his job in the gulf. I'm through."

"Now you don't mean that, son. Right now the cops are looking for the killer of Mrs. Jefferson Carr. Mr. Wheeler, I believe, has evidence identifying him."

Ramsey groaned, and held his head. "Go away," he said. "Please go the hell away."

Victor moved slowly to the door. "Mr. Wheeler told me to tell you, if I got a chance, that faint heart never won fair lady." The door closed softly.

Ramsey staggered into the bathroom and soaked his head in cold water. Then he went to the door, saw that the lock was sprung, and he propped a chair beneath the knob. The room was filled with the gray dawn before he fell asleep.

He dreamed that he was back in the army with Pete Davos, crouched beside the crumbling wall of a church in Normandy. Machine bullets were chipping the bricks above him, and red hell was breaking loose on the road beyond. Planes snarled above him, and he was happy. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Playful Knifer

IT WAS full daylight when Ramsey awoke. He lay still, closing his eyes against the pain in his head, while the remembrance of Marcia seeped through

his brain. Had it really happened last night? After a long while he crawled out of bed.

Considering the way he felt, he was surprised at his appearance. He didn't look bad at all. The bumps on his head couldn't be seen, and his chin, where he had been kicked, was only slightly discolored. After a shower and a shave he felt better, and he called down for breakfast.

While he waited, he stood by the window and smoked a cigarette. The rain still fell, like a steady mist over the city. A damp breeze was blowing, and Ramsey closed the window. What had happened last night? What kind of a creeping mixed-up mess had he gotten himself into?

A boy brought his breakfast, and he was on his second cup of coffee when the telephone rang. It was Sara Brand.

"Rack—are you all right?" Her voice sounded queer.

"Sure. Why?"

"I—I was worried about you. Oh, Rack, I—I'm frightened. Can you come and get me? I don't know what to do."

"What's the matter?" he asked the dancer sharply.

"I can't talk now," she said breathlessly. "I'll wait for you at my apartment. Please hurry."

"Where do you live?"

"The same place—the Arcadia Arms."

"Five minutes," Ramsey said. "Don't go away." He grabbed his hat and coat and went out. Down in the lobby he saw Victor, the fat man, leaning against the tobacco counter. He regarded Ramsey over the top of his newspaper. Ramsey moved past him, muttered:

"Don't you ever sleep?"

Victor followed Ramsey out to the street. A taxi pulled up, and Ramsey got in. Victor stood on the curb gazing in at him. "Come on—get in," Ramsey said impatiently. "You make me nervous following me around."

Victor shook his head silently. Ramsey

slammed the door, and told the driver to take him to the Arcadia Arms. As they drove away, Ramsey looked back. He saw Victor get into a green coupe and follow them.

The Arcadia Arms was a small four-story red brick apartment building. As Ramsey crossed the sidewalk, he saw Victor's green coupe nose into a parking space across the street. Then he saw something else. A long black sedan pulled away from the curb and headed swiftly up the street past him. Ramsey got a fleeting glimpse of three persons in the front seat, and he stood frozen to the sidewalk.

His two visitors of the night before—the brown man in the derby, and the kid with the chestnut hair—with Sara Brand huddled between them. The black sedan disappeared in the traffic.

Ramsey stood still. So Sara Brand was in trouble—because of him. So what? He was in plenty of trouble himself, and to hell with it. He walked across the street to the green coupe and leaned in the window. Victor said, "Come in out of the rain, son."

"Did you see them?" Ramsey asked him.

Victor nodded soberly. "Yes. Rafael and Sonny. Blake King's boys. Bad ones, too. They had the girl with them."

"What am I supposed to do now?" Ramsey asked harshly. "Get on a horse and chase them? Tell Wheeler I quit!"

A police car cruised slowly past them, two grim-faced officers in the front seat. One of them glanced sharply at Ramsey, and Ramsey had a sudden cold feeling at the base of his skull.

Victor said quietly, "Son, you can't quit."

As Ramsey watched the police car move slowly up the street, he knew that Victor was telling the truth. He was in too deep now, and Phil Wheeler would never let him quit.

Victor said sadly, "You seem like a

pretty good sort of guy, but we all must do what we have to do. Now, take me. I work for Wheeler. I've got a wife and two kids, and Wheeler pays me pretty good. It's better than walking a mail route, or clerking in a grocery. I do what Wheeler wants me to do, and I don't ask no questions. He plays square, in his way. I know that his tables and games are straight.

"**A**S LONG as he doesn't cheat or double-cross anybody, I'll play square with him, and I can sleep nights. Now, take this deal he made with you. You killed Mrs. Carr, but he won't squeal if you get him Blake King's dirty money. Dope money. To me, that's the same as finding it. It don't belong to nobody, except the poor devils who bought the dope. If Wheeler can get it, good for him.

"What you have to do to get it for him is none of my business. I don't know what you're gonna do now, but you'd better do something. And don't try to leave town, because—" He paused, and sighed deeply. "Well, I can't let you leave town, that's all. It would mean my job if you skipped out."

Ramsey said harshly, "What really happened at Jeff Carr's house last night?"

Victor said reproachfully, "Now, there's no sense in dragging out dead cats. I followed you, like Wheeler said, and I heard a shot, and I went in. There you were, on the floor with a gun in your hand—and Mrs. Carr dead."

Ramsey said, "How could I kill her? When I was knocked cold? That gun was planted in my hand."

Victor shook his head slowly. "I only know what I saw. I told Mr. Wheeler, and I did what he said." He paused, and added hopefully, "Maybe you fainted or something after you drilled her."

Ramsey said bitterly, "Have you got a gun?"

"Yes, son—but you can't have it."

"Maybe you'd drive me over to the

Jungle Tavern? You may as well be of some help."

"I can't do that. Blake King, or one of his boys, might see me. Mr. Wheeler wouldn't like that."

"And neither would you," Ramsey sneered.

"No," Victor said slowly, "I guess I wouldn't."

"I see," Ramsey said. "The wife and kids." He pulled his head out of the coupe's window.

"Good luck, son," Victor said to him quietly.

Ramsey walked away from him, shoulders, stiff.

"Wait," Victor called after him. "I almost forgot."

Ramsey turned, and Victor handed him a folded newspaper. Ramsey opened it. The murder of Marcia Carr was on the front page.

There were lots of pictures, including several of her in a bathing suit. Ramsey gazed at her laughing face, and her marvelous figure, and with a dull feeling of pain he remembered her as he had last seen her—dead on a blood-red rug with her dark hair falling over her face. Grimly he scanned the headlines, and skipped through the story:

OIL HEIRESS MURDERED. . . . Mrs. Jefferson Carr Found Shot to Death. . . . Police Comb City for Mystery Killer. . . . Taxi Driver Says He Can Identify Late Visitor. . . . Mysterious telephone call summons police immediately after shooting. . . . Robbery not motive. . . . Husband away on business trip to Austin told today of tragedy. . . . Victim daughter of the late Clinton Stockton, southern Texas multi-millionaire oil tycoon. . . .

Ramsey stopped reading. He had read enough.

Victor said, "Go ahead and read the box, son."

Ramsey's gaze returned to the paper. Halfway down the front page was a boxed item.

LATE FLASH: After this edition had gone to press police reported that an anonymous telephone caller had named the killer of Mrs. Carr as a man named Rackwell Ramsey, currently registered at the Gulf Hotel, of this city, who was described as an alleged former suitor of Mrs. Carr before her marriage four months ago to Mr. Carr. Ramsey was described by the unknown informer as about thirty years old, six foot tall, weighing around one hundred and eighty pounds, and having gray eyes and blond hair, cut short, and wearing, when last seen, a gray flannel suit and a dark brown hat. Police traced the call to a pay booth in a downtown drug store, but there the trail ended. However, police believe that the person who made the call was the same person who telephoned them immediately after the shooting in the Carr's fashionable gulf coast home.

Ramsey handed the paper back to Victor. "Have you got a putty nose and false mustache I could borrow?" he asked.

"You're on a spot," Victor said solemnly. "A very hot spot."

"What's Wheeler trying to do?" Ramsey asked bitterly. "Double-double frame me?"

"I just work for him," Victor said. "I told you that. Right now my job is to see that you don't leave town. That's all."

Ramsey turned and walked away. At the corner he caught a taxi and headed back across town toward the Jungle Tavern. He glanced back once, and he saw the green coupe following at a careful distance.

RAMSEY left the taxi a block beyond the Jungle Tavern, and walked back. He went down an alley and turned into a courtyard at the rear filled with stacks of empty beer cases and garbage cans. He didn't look back to see where Victor was. To hell with Victor.

The long black sedan was parked behind the Jungle Tavern. The door on the driver's side was hanging open. Ramsey

was scared, and yet a little excited. He felt a kind of anticipation, and he wished he had a gun, but he didn't worry about it.

He tried the knob of a door which he guessed opened into the kitchen. To his surprise, the door was not locked. He opened it an inch, and waited. It was very quiet. Quietly he stepped inside and moved across the kitchen to another door. He opened this door a crack, and peered through.

He could see the edge of the dance floor, an expanse of empty tables and chairs, and the bar through an alcove at the far end of the big room. The place looked as empty and as still as only a night club can look at one o'clock in the afternoon.

From somewhere beyond the bar he heard the sound of muffled voices. Then silence. He tip-toed over the dance floor to the bar. The door to the hall leading to Sara Brand's dressing room was open. He heard a thudding sound, as though a chair had been knocked over, and then a man's harsh voice, loud, but muffled.

The sounds seemed to be coming from a door beyond Sara Brand's dressing room. Ramsey moved slowly forward in the semi-darkness. He heard a new sound, and stood still to listen. A woman sobbing.

There was a soft, furtive movement behind him. He turned. The kid with the chestnut hair was standing at the end of the hall, between the door and the bar. In his right hand he held a big black automatic pistol. In his left hand was a whiskey bottle, open. His thick hair fell over his forehead, and his eyes looked hot and glazed. He stood there swaying, grinning like an idiot.

He held the gun loosely, carelessly, as if he didn't know he held it, and he stepped into the hall, moving lightly, lifting his feet high, like a cat walking on fly paper. He mumbled something, and then he giggled. He raised the automatic, pointed it at Ramsey, and held it at arm's length, like a shooter on a target range. He

squinted one eye down the wavering barrel.

Ramsey crouched, jumped for him, and came up under the gun. The kid laughed wildly, and wrestled clumsily. Ramsey grasped the kid's wrist, jerked him forward, and brought his right fist up against the kid's chin. His head snapped back, and Ramsey caught him before he hit the floor.

The whiskey bottle rolled on the floor, and settled down to a steady gurgling. Ramsey twisted the gun from the kid's limp fingers, and shot a quick dance down the hall. Both doors were still closed. The kid hung over him, motionless, and Ramsey started to lower him to the floor.

He felt a sudden hot pain in his side, just above his belt, and he flung the kid violently away from him. The kid slumped against the wall, his hair in his eyes, and Ramsey saw the bright gleam of the blade in his hand. He held the knife before him, and he made little jabbing motions toward Ramsey.

"Come on, guy," the kid whispered. "Hit Sonny again." He stuck out his chin for Ramsey to hit. "I like it. It feels good. Guns are nasty. Knives are more fun. Come on, guy. But don't let Blake and Rafael hear us. They'd spoil our fun." He danced toward Ramsey, jabbing with the knife.

Ramsey kicked the kid in the stomach as hard as he could. The kid doubled up, sucking in his breath. Ramsey stepped in, smacked him over the head with the automatic, and jumped clear. But the kid didn't go down. He stumbled toward Ramsey, his legs wobbling, thrusting the knife forward in short delicate motions.

"Aw, come on, guy," he panted. "Play fair with Sonny. It'll be so much fun. You'll see." The knife snaked out.

Ramsey jumped sideways, and brought the automatic down with thudding force behind the kid's ear. The kid dropped to his knees, and Ramsey hit him again. The

kid sighed, and fell on his face. Ramsey flattened himself against the wall, his eyes on the closed doors.

Nothing happened. Nothing but silence. He hefted the automatic in his hand. Colt .38—a lovely weapon. Slowly he edged along the wall to the door beyond Sara Brand's dressing room. He heard a soft movement from inside, and the knob turned slowly. Ramsey held his breath, and pressed against the wall. His side felt wet where the kid had jabbed him. But no pain. He didn't feel a thing.

The door opened slowly, and the thin brown man called Rafael poked his head out. Ramsey struck with the gun. Rafael pitched forward into the hall. Ramsey jumped over him into the room, the automatic out in front.

CHAPTER SIX

Loaded—and Lammin'

HE WAS in an office. Elegantly furnished. Thick tan rug, soft indirect lighting. Blake King whirled to face him, his handsome face contorted in rage and surprise. Sara Brand sat huddled in a chair. There was a thin trickle of blood on her chin, and her eyes were big with fear. When she saw Ramsey, her eyes got bigger.

Blake King's gaze flicked over the silent form of Rafael sprawled in the doorway. Then he bawled, "Sonny! Where the hell are you?"

"Shut up," Ramsey snapped. "And sit down."

There was no fear in King's eyes—just anger and contempt. He said, "I see now that I should have had the boys do a more complete job on you last night."

"Sit down," Ramsey said. "Now. Or I start shooting. I'm going out of here, and the girl goes with me."

"Like hell," King said, and he jumped for Ramsey.

Ramsey shot him in the right leg, just above the knee. King hit the floor in an attitude of prayer, his lips twisted in pain. He tried to struggle to his feet, but he couldn't make it, and he lunged for Ramsey, his hands out-stretched.

Ramsey struck him on the temple with the gun. King hit the thick rug, and lay still. Sara Brand stared dumbly. The blood was bright on her chin. She took a deep shuddering breath.

"Rack," Sara Brand said, "he slapped me. He wanted to know why you were trying to see me. He was like a crazy man. I found out today that he had the telephone in my apartment tapped. He sent Rafael and Sonny to get me, before you came. He—he said he was going to kill you. . . ."

Her voice broke, and she got slowly to her feet. "Rack," she said unsteadily, "Oh, Rack." The beginning of hysteria glinted in her eyes.

"Never mind," Ramsey said gently, and he placed an arm around her shoulders. "Come along." He led her swiftly from the office, over the still form of Rafael, and down the hall past the limp body of Sonny. He sat her on a leather bar stool. "Stay here."

He ran to the kitchen, found a ball of heavy twine, and returned to the hallway. Sara Brand watched silently as he tied Sonny's ankles to his wrists, and dragged him to the door of King's office. Then he trussed up Rafael, and pulled them both into the office. Blake King was next, and Ramsey worked feverishly.

When he finished, he yanked the telephone on the desk from its wiring, and tossed it into a corner. As he started for the door, King opened his eyes. He began to struggle violently, and the blood oozed from the wound in his leg. "Damn—you—" King choked.

Ramsey went out quickly, slammed the door, and locked it from the outside. Ten seconds later he was pushing Sara Brand

into the front seat of the black sedan parked in the rear. He got in, saw with relief that the key was in the ignition lock, and started the motor. He was panting, sweating, and his side was beginning to burn. He laid the automatic on the seat beside him, and backed out of the alley.

"Where are we going?" Sara Brand asked.

"Away from here fast," he grunted, and he swung the sedan into the southbound traffic. He glanced at the gasoline gauge. Half full. Plenty. He looked in the rear-view mirror. A green coupe was four cars behind him. Victor, the bloodhound, was still on his tan. He looked sideways at the girl. She had wiped the blood from her chin.

She laughed shakily. "Golly," she breathed.

He patted her arm. "Never mind. Relax." He watched the street ahead. Suddenly he swung right. "Listen," he said, "we've got to think fast about what we're going to do. You can't go back to work for King now."

"No, no. I—I hate him. And Rafael, and Sonny." She shivered a little. "I'll never go back there."

Ramsey gripped the wheel tighter. Now was the time. This was the time for the sweet-talk. "We had fun once, didn't we?" As he spoke, he realized suddenly that he meant it. It *had* been fun with Sara. Maybe, if he hadn't met Marcia with her ten million dollars.

"Yes, Rack," she said quietly. "We had fun—before the oil heiress came along." She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice.

He thought about the oil heiress. Marcia. Dead now, cold and dead. And the cops were looking for him. Phil Wheeler had him in a two-way squeeze, and Blake King and Sonny and Rafael were maybe at this minute on the prowl for him.

Not King, though. He wouldn't prowl

for a while—not with a .38 slug in his leg.

He said to the girl, "Forget the oil heiress. Just forget her." As he spoke he wondered suddenly, and with a shock, if she knew about Marcia's death. He waited tensely for her to speak.

But she seemed not to have heard him. "Rack," she said, "I owe you a lot—for what you did for me. When I saw you come in that door, I—I almost fainted with joy. I was scared silly. But there is something I want to tell you—to tell someone. It's worried me for a long time." She paused.

"Go on," Ramsey said gently, and he kept his eyes on the traffic.

"I came to town eight months ago," she said. "My money was gone, and I was sick—running a temperature. I tried to get work, but no one could use me. Dancing is all I know. I went to the Jungle Tavern."

Blake King gave me a job, and he got a doctor for me. It seems that I was in the early stages of pneumonia. The doctor sent me to a hospital. Blake paid for everything.

"When I was well, I went to work for him. It was the least I could do. After a while, I suggested leaving, but he wouldn't let me. He said he needed me, trusted me.

"He raised my salary, and then one day he gave me a sealed package and asked me to take it to a bank and put it in a safe deposit box in my name. I did it. After that, he sent me to the bank almost every week with a package. I knew what it was—money. Lots of money.

"One day I asked him about it. He laughed, and told me it was his gambling winnings, the race track, and dice. He said he didn't want to pay income tax on it, that cash couldn't be checked. I believed him, but I didn't like it. From time to time he'd ask me to get money out for him, but there's still a lot in the box—thousands.

"IF I leave now, he can't get it. The box is in my name, and I have to sign a register when I open it. But it's Blake's money. What shall I do? I can't go back—I don't want to see him again."

Ramsey stopped for a red light. He saw that the green coupe was still behind him. A beefy policeman stood on a corner. They were all around him, Ramsey thought, closing in on him. The law, Wheeler's watch dog, and Blake King's boys. There was no longer any time for a build-up with Sara Brand, no time for finesse. That time was long gone. He'd have to play his cards fast, and play them smart—and hope.

The light turned green, and as he prodded the heavy sedan forward, he said, "King was using you, honey. For a cover-up, so that the money couldn't be traced to him. It's profits from narcotics—dope. The Jungle Tavern is a clearing house for the stuff. He has to keep his dirty money some place, where the income tax boys can't trace it to him."

She was silent for a few seconds, and then she said quietly, "I believe you, Rack. I've seen them—those men coming into the Tavern late at night. Horrible men, and Sonny and Rafael would take the little packets. And in a few days Blake would give me some more money to take to the bank." She shivered. "What are we going to do about it, Rack?"

"We'll see," Ramsey said. He felt exultant, and yet sad. What he had to have was almost within his grasp, and if he played it right from here on out. . . .

He came to the gulf road, where the traffic was thinner, and he drove down the road for maybe a mile before he turned off into a narrow sandy lane leading down to the beach. He stopped the sedan, and looked back. Up on the highway a green coupe slowed to a stop close to the lane's entrance.

Sara Brand said, "Why do you keep looking back?"

He smiled at her. "Just jittery, I guess."

She rested her head against the back of the seat and stared out over the blue-green water of the gulf. "What are we going to do? What about the money? I can't just leave."

He looked quickly away. It was still raining, but the air was hot, muggy. There wasn't any breeze, and the water lapped sluggishly at the shore. He moved restlessly, and he said, "Money is nice. It will buy things. Things like plane tickets west—for both of us. You can't stay here any longer, and neither can I."

"Us?" she asked wonderingly.

"If you'll go with me."

She smiled faintly. "Rack, there isn't ten million dollars in that box at the bank."

"Stop talking about Marcia."

"I hate her. I've hated her for a long time. I hate her type."

Ramsey's thoughts whirled wildly. Did she know that Marcia was dead, or didn't she? Hadn't she read a paper, or heard a radio? He tried to smile at her. "She's married now. Forget her."

Sara Brand sighed. "I know. But a husband wouldn't stop her." She looked up at him. "I'll go with you, Rack, if you want. But we don't need Blake's money. I've got a little saved—over four hundred dollars. That will get us to the coast, and maybe I can find work in one of the studios."

"I was thinking of poor Simpson," Ramsey said, not looking at her, "and the mahogany. It's there, acres of it, and if we had the money to get it out."

She gazed at him thoughtfully. "You want that money, don't you, Rack? Blake's dirty money. You know I can get it, and it's eating at you. Isn't that it?"

"Do you want King to have it?" he asked harshly.

She shook her head slowly. "No one's going to get it—except the police."

A tiny thought sprouted in Ramsey's

brain. It bloomed, and he turned to grin at her.

"You're right, honey. I guess that I had kind of a brainstorm. That's the only thing to do, and then we'll be clear of this damn town. You get the money, and we'll go to the airport to see about plane reservations. "As soon as that's done, we'll take the money to the police—together. Do you suppose they need derrick riggers in California?"

"I like you when you talk like that, Rack," she said softly. "You were kind of—of mixed up, talking like that, weren't you?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "I guess I was. But I'm not any more." He put an arm around her, and he kissed her. Her lips were cool and soft, and for a long minute he forgot Marcia, and Phil Wheeler and Blake King.

Presently he released her, and she smiled into his eyes. He turned abruptly, and put both hands on the wheel. Suddenly he wanted to get it over with, this thing that he had to do. He started the motor, and swung the big sedan around in the sand.

As he left the lane and turned out on the highway, he shot a glance at Victor sitting in the green coupe. Victor looked the other way, and Ramsey gunned the sedan toward town. He didn't need to look back.

He knew that Victor would still be following him.

He said to Sara Brand, "We'll have to make it fast. King and his boys won't stay holed up too long. Are you ready to leave now?"

"I'd like some clothes," she said. "Can we drive back to my apartment for a minute?"

"Sure," he said. "Sure thing, honey." He was riding high, and he would have driven her to Hong Kong and back for a hundred thousand dollars.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Discard One Dame

RAMSEY parked at the curb in front of the Arcadia Arms, and Sara Brand ran inside. After she was gone, he had a few bad moments. What if she took it upon herself to call the police about Blake King's money? He began to sweat, and he looked nervously up and down the street. The cars passing were just cars, some of them with kids in them. No prowls cars, no sirens, no Rafael and no Sonny. He relaxed a little.

He heard a step on the sidewalk, and he swung his head. Victor leaned in the open window, and said softly, "Is she going to get it for you?"

Ramsey nodded.

"I give you credit, son. Mr. Wheeler will be pleased."

"He should be, pal, he should be. What do you hear from the outside world? Is my trail getting any hotter?"

"I don't think so," Victor said gravely. "I suppose you know that you can't go back to your hotel?"

Ramsey nodded gloomily. "I had a full bottle of bourbon in my bag, too."

"You can buy champagne now—with the money Mr. Wheeler will give you."

"If I get out of town alive," Ramsey said.

"What happened back in the Jungle Tavern?" Victor asked.

Ramsey told him quickly, and Victor sighed. "I wanted to help you, but I ain't paid for any rough stuff."

"Sure," Ramsey said.

"You going to the bank now?"

"Yes. And then to the airport—to make plane reservations to California for the two of us. Then we're supposed to turn the money over to the cops. I'll duck her while she's making the reservations."

"Do you have to do it that way?" Victor asked sadly.

"Yes," Ramsey snapped. "It's all fixed. Shut up."

Victor sighed, and withdrew his head. "I'll see you at the airport. Leave this heap there. We'll change to my car."

Ramsey didn't answer. When he looked around, Victor was gone. Where was Sara? He thought over all that had happened to him in the last twenty-four hours. A hell of a mess. And Sara would soon learn that he was really dirt. He wished he'd stayed in Guatemala with Simpson. Random thoughts filtered through his keyed-up brain.

Abruptly he sat up straight, and his fingers drummed nervously on the wheel. He got out of the sedan, and strode into the Arcadia Arms. There was a small lobby, and two telephone booths. Ramsey entered one of the booths, and called the Gulf Hotel.

A pleasant female voice answered.

"This is the police department," Ramsey said gruffly. "Please connect me with the operator who was on duty after four o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"Just a moment, sir."

Ramsey waited. Then: "That was Miss Hudson, sir. She doesn't come on duty until three."

"Can you give me her home number?"

"Miss Hudson's home number is Mesa 3901."

"Thank you." Ramsey hung up, deposited another nickel, and spun the dial. He got six long rings before a sleepy voice answered.

"Miss Hudson?"

"If you want to be formal. My name's Lucille. Is this Harry?"

"Miss Hudson, this is the police department. We're doing some routine checking. Do you remember a telephone call yesterday at the hotel switchboard shortly after four in the afternoon for a Mr. Rackwell Ramsey?"

"Police? Rackwell Ramsey? Hey—his name was in the paper. The guy who mur-

dered that rich dame! You mean that one?"

"Do you remember the call, Miss Hudson?"

"Sure I do! The name was so unusual—Rackwell. They said to have him call Mrs. Carr, and she's the dame who—"

"Was it a man or a woman who called?"

"A man. Sounded like a butler, or something. Have you—"

Ramsey hung up. He heard the click of high heels on the marble floor of the lobby, and through the glass he saw Sara Brand walking briskly toward the door. She was carrying two bags. Ramsey left the booth and called to her. She turned surprised. She had changed to a pale tan suit.

He grinned at her, and took the bags from her hands. He hefted them. "One heavy, one light," he said.

"There are clothes in one," she said. "The other is empty."

"Smart girl. Come on."

As they drove away from the Arcadia Arms, Sara Brand said, "Are we doing the right thing, Rack? About the money, I mean?"

"The cops will give you a medal."

"It—it's true? About the—the dope?"

"Sure, honey. Really. Where's the bank?"

She told him, and presently they were driving past it. Ramsey circled the block twice before he parked the sedan. "I'll wait here," he said, and he tried to keep his voice steady.

She got out quickly, took one of the bags from the rear seat, and walked swiftly toward the glittering brass and glass of the bank's front doors. With her hand on the door, she turned, and looked over her shoulder at Ramsey. He cursed under his breath.

SUDDENLY she came back across the sidewalk and leaned in the window of the sedan. "I—I'm scared, Rack. Why don't we just leave the money and call

the police later? I'll feel much safer."

"Don't you trust me?" he snapped. "There isn't much time. Sonny and Rafael are probably on our trail right now. If they catch up with us, it'll be rough. I don't want to scare you, but that's it. Blake King won't fool around any more. Now hurry."

She stared at him silently, her eyes big and scared. Then she said, "All—all right, Rack," and she turned quickly and entered the bank.

Ramsey lit a cigarette with a trembling hand. Victor appeared from nowhere, and poked his head in the window. "Take it easy," Victor said. "It's almost over."

"Go away," Ramsey snarled.

Victor sighed. "Ain't it a hell of a world? Sometimes I wish I'd stayed in the post office. Just carry a sack around to the same houses every day, and wait for your pension. That's the life."

"Why didn't you stick to the mail route?"

Victor lifted his heavy shoulders. "Oh, different reasons. My feet went bad, and then Rochelle—that's my wife—she needed an operation, and one of the kids broke his leg, and a bearing burnt out in my old clunker. It all came at once. One night, after lodge meeting, I went to The Starlight Club with a couple of the boys, and I got to talking to Mr. Wheeler, and he offered me a job. And here I am. I'm a kind of a general handy man, and he pays good."

"That's fine," Ramsey said. *Where was Sara?*

Victor pulled his head out of the car, like a turtle withdrawing his head into his shell. "See you at the airport," he said, and he shuffled away.

Sara Brand came through the bank doors carrying the bag. Ramsey got out, and took the bag from her. It felt surprisingly light. How much did a hundred thousand dollars weigh? He put the bag in the back of the car, held the door for

the girl, and got in beside her. As he started the motor, her head drew in her breath sharply.

"Rack—look!"

Two men were walking swiftly toward them through the crowd on the sidewalk. Sonny and Rafael. They spotted the black sedan, and they began to run. Ramsey wheeled the car out into the traffic. Brakes screeched behind him, and he heard a policeman's shrill whistle. He kept going. At the corner the light was red. Cars were drifting across the intersection. Ramsey picked a hole, and roared through. More screeching of brakes, and an outraged symphony of horns. But he was through.

"Where are they?" he snapped to the girl.

She was looking back. "I—I don't see them."

"Cops?"

"No—no."

He fed gas, deaving between the cars. He swung into an alley, tires protesting. A narrow alley, brick-paved. Ahead a truck started to back away from a loading platform. Ramsey laid on the horn. The sound blasted his ears in the narrow alley. The truck stopped dead, and the sedan skimmed past. Ahead, a dead end. The solid wall of a building. Ramsey cut the wheel and locked the brakes.

A sign loomed up. *One Way*. An arrow pointed right. The sedan was now headed left. An oncoming car swerved to the wall. The driver shouted shrilly as the sedan zoomed past. A street ahead, cars zipping along. Ramsey stood the sedan on its nose, and Sara Brand braced herself against the dash.

Ramsey shot one quick glance to his left, and swung right. A sky-blue convertible skittered away like a frightened colt, and the sedan straightened out. Two blocks, four blocks, six. The lights all green. Then a long ramp ahead, leading up to the express highway. The sedan hummed up the ramp, and merged with

the four-lane string of cars headed west.

This was more like it, Ramsey thought. No traffic lights, no intersections. He prodded the big car.

Sara Brand was looking back.

"See anything?"

"No."

"Hang on. Airport the next stop. Do you know anything about plane schedules west?"

"No. Remember the police, Rack—and the money."

"I'm not forgetting. We'll call the police from the airport as soon as we see about a plane."

"But if we went to the police now—"

"We can't," Ramsey said. "Sonny and Rafael are after us now, and the police won't protect us—not enough. They'll have to nab Sonny and Rafael first, and Blake King. We've got to get away from Texas—far away. We'd better leave the money at the airport office, and tell the police to pick it up. I don't know. Hell, we'll figure it out." He kept talking, to keep her from talking, and at last he saw the tower of the airport.

Two minutes later he swung the sedan into the huge parking area beside the landing strips. Overhead a silver plane circled into the wind for a landing, and a loudspeaker cracked with a voice announcing arrivals and departures. Ramsey stopped the car in a vacant space in a long line of cars. From his pocket he took the hundred dollars Phil Wheeler had given him, and he handed it to Sara Brand.

"Get tickets to Los Angeles. This is all I have."

"But I have my own money, Rack. I told you. I drew it out when I was in the bank."

"Take it," he said harshly.

She took the money. "Rack, are we doing right?"

"Hurry. We've been lucky so far. I'll stay with the bags."

Her eyes searched his face for an in-

stant, and then she got out of the car. "All right, Rack." There was fear in her eyes, and trust, too.

Ramsey's jaw tightened. *Good-by, honey. This is the end of the line. Now you'll know that I'm really dirt.*

She gave him a half smile, a little girl's uncertain smile, and swiftly she turned and walked away, her high heels clicking on the cement.

Ramsey watched her until she had entered the big building. Then he started the motor. Something green crossed his vision in the rear-view mirror, and he turned his head. Victor's coupe was behind him, blocking him from backing out. Ramsey smiled grimly, and waited.

VICTOR appeared beside the window. He was breathing hard, and there was sweat on his fat face. "You gave me a chase, son. Come on—let's get the hell out of here."

"Sonny and Rafael spotted me in front of the bank."

"Didn't see 'em." Victor glanced nervously over his shoulder. "Mr. Wheeler will be waiting."

Ramsey reached over the seat, picked up the bag Sara Brand had taken into the bank, and opened it. He saw the mass of green bills, and snapped the bag shut. Carrying the bag, he followed Victor to the green coupe, and got in. He felt old and tired and sick. His head still ached, and the knife wound in his side burned dully. It had stopped bleeding, felt hot and dry. As they drove away from the airport, he looked back once. He didn't see Sara Brand, and he was glad of that.

They hit the highway, and the coupe gathered speed. The bag was on Ramsey's knees. He said softly, "Look, Victor, there's a hundred thousand bucks on my lap, and here we are, just we two. Does that give you any ideas?"

Victor kept his eyes on the road. "Sure it does, son. I've thought about it—don't

think I haven't. But Mr. Wheeler has played square with me, and I won't double-cross him. And he made a deal with you. He'll stand by his word."

"A murder deal," Ramsey said bitterly. "A frame."

"Now, now, you wouldn't want Mr. Wheeler to give that—uh—evidence to the police, would you?"

"Shut up," Ramsey said wearily.

The flat plains of the gulf coast were all around them. There were few cars passing, and the wide road stretched wide and empty before them. It was still raining a little, more of a mist than a rain, and the sky was the color of lead.

Ramsey felt uneasy, restless, and he looked back through the rear window. Far down the road behind them he saw a lone black car. It grew bigger as he watched, and he knew it was coming fast.

"King's car," he snapped to Victor. "The one I drove to the airport. Behind us."

Victor shot him a quick scared look. "No kidding?" His gaze swung back to the highway. The coupe's motor sang a higher song, and the tires hummed on the wet cement.

The black car was gaining, and Ramsey saw two men in the front seat. "Sonny and Rafael," he said. "They figured I was heading for the airport, and they followed—probably in a taxi. They'd have keys to the sedan, and then spotted it. Won't this crate go any faster?"

"Doing eighty now," Victor grunted. "It ain't far to Wheeler's."

"We won't make it," Ramsey said sharply. "They're coming up on our tail." He rolled the window down, and from his inside coat pocket he took the .38 automatic he'd taken from Sonny.

Victor rolled his eyes at Ramsey. "Do you have to shoot?"

"We've got to do something," Ramsey snapped. As he spoke, the rear window and the windshield cracked with a splin-

tering sound, and damp air rushed against his face.

"Hey!" Victor yelled, and the coupe swerved dangerously.

Ramsey leaned out of the window, holding the .38 in his left hand, and he squeezed the trigger. The gun bucked in his hand, and powder smoke whipped away from the muzzle. A sound like an angry bee buzzed past his head. He fired twice more.

With shocking suddenness the front wheels of the sedan seemed to buckle, and the big car swung sideways in the highway. It straightened for an instant. The rear end whipped around, and then the car seemed to leap for the ditch. It rolled twice, and chunks of wet Texas earth shot into the sky. Then Victor wheeled the coupe around a curve, and the sedan was lost from sight.

Ramsey laughed, a harsh sound above the roaring wind. He turned around in the seat, the gun in his lap. He was trembling.

"You got 'em!" Victor yelled exultantly.

"Yeah," Ramsey breathed. "Yeah."

The Starlight Club was just ahead. Victor braked the coupe, and swung into the big parking area. He ran the coupe into a garage behind the building, got out, and closed the overhead doors. Ramsey got out stiffly, holding the bag in his right hand. From somewhere, far away, he thought he heard the lonesome wail of a siren. An ambulance, a police car, something. He didn't care.

Victor shuffled over to him. He was sweating, and there was an embarrassed look on his wide fat face. "Uh—if you don't mind, son, I'll take that gun."

Silently Ramsey handed the .38 over. Victor took it, avoiding Ramsey's eyes, and moved to a door in the far wall of the garage. "This way," he said, and he opened the door.

Carrying the bag, Ramsey stepped into

a dark passageway hesitated, stopped.

Victor touched his arm. "Don't worry, son," he said in a hoarse whisper. "You done real good, and everything will be all right."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Unlucky Murderer

PHIL WHEELER was not alone in his elegant office. Another man sat slumped in one of the deep leather chairs. A cold-eyed man wearing a dark suit and a stiff white collar. Mr. Jefferson Carr, the husband of the dead Marcia, sad and remote. When he saw Ramsey, his thin lips began to work, and he made a move to stand up.

Wheeler stopped him with an easy gesture. "Now, just take it easy, Jeff. I'll handle this."

Jefferson Carr sank back into his chair, but his cold eyes never left Ramsey's face. Ramsey stared woodenly at Wheeler, and he was aware that Victor stood silently behind him. Wheeler smiled at Ramsey, and he nodded at the bag in Ramsey's hand.

"Nice work," he said. "Let's have a look at it."

Ramsey jerked a thumb at Carr, and he said bluntly, "What's he doing here?"

"Mr. Carr is an old friend," Wheeler said smoothly. "He came here from Austin early this morning to learn of his wife's death. I might add that he is aware, of course, that you are wanted by the police in connection with the shooting."

"Who tipped off the police?" Ramsey asked. "Who gave them my name and description?"

Wheeler shrugged his tailored shoulders. "The police do not know that. How would I?"

"Who called the cops in the first place?" Ramsey said stubbornly. "They got there plenty fast last night."

Again Wheeler shrugged. "I am not good at riddles, Ramsey. What does it matter? All of us here know that you killed her. I have told Mr. Carr of my arrangement with you, and he has agreed, under the circumstances, not to interfere. Now, if you please, I will take that bag." He reached out a hand.

Ramsey shook his head. "So Carr thinks that I killed his wife, and yet he just sits there—because he's a friend of yours, and because you happen to have a private deal with me. Is that it?"

Wheeler smiled and spread his hands. "We are all civilized, intelligent people, Ramsey. I asked Mr. Carr to come here. He understands the situation. No matter how he feels about you, or how great his sorrow, it will not bring his wife back to him. The bag, please."

Ramsey felt a tightness in his throat. Wheeler wasn't even being very subtle about it. Wheeler didn't care any more. He knew that he had Ramsey trapped, and he was sure of Jeff Carr. Suddenly Ramsey remembered something that Marcia had told him, a few minutes before the bullet had struck her.

He said to Wheeler, "You saw Marcia Carr last night."

Wheeler laughed pleasantly. "Oh, did she tell you—before you killed her? Yes, I was there, early this evening. You see, Jeff owes me a sum of money, and he couldn't pay it. So I went to his wife about it. Those things happen, you know."

Jefferson Carr looked stonily at the tips of his shoes.

"And she refused to pay her husband's gambling debt," Ramsey said.

Wheeler said coldly, "That does not concern you. It was a private matter between Mrs. Carr and myself. If you will hand me the bag, please."

Ramsey said, "I think I'll go to the cops and take my chances."

"All right," Wheeler snapped. "It's your neck."

Jefferson Carr spoke for the first time. "Damn you, Phil, he can't do that. You told me he wouldn't go to the police. I—I've had enough unpleasantness." He sighed, and lowered his head. "I just want to forget the whole thing. Nothing we do now will bring Marcia back."

Ramsey gazed sullenly at Wheeler and Carr. All that had happened to him crept slowly across his brain. Abruptly he asked Carr, "Do you have a butler or a man servant?"

Carr turned to Wheeler. "Phil, I won't have it. Get this—this character out of here. I—I can't stand any more."

A quick flicker of interest showed in Wheeler's eyes. "I understand, Jeff," he said soothingly. "He'll be leaving shortly." He turned to Ramsey. "That's an odd question, and I'm curious. I'll answer for Jeff. No, he doesn't have a butler or any men servants. He has a maid and a cook. Two females. Does that answer your question?"

Ramsey was trembling a little, and he took a deep breath. "Yes," he said. He looked at Jefferson Carr. "Listen. You knew from the way I talked in your office this afternoon that if your wife encouraged me, I would probably try to see her again—even if she had married you. Maybe I'm a no-good heel—but I don't murder people.

"After I left, you had an idea. You're in debt to Wheeler, here, and you're interested in other women. Marcia found out, and threatened to divorce you. You couldn't have that—you'd lose your claim to the Stockton millions. So you went to a pay booth in a drug store, called my hotel, and left a message for me to call Marcia.

"Then you went home and told Marcia that you were going to Austin. But you didn't go. You hid yourself in the house somewhere near a phone, heard her make a date with me for ten o'clock. You stayed under cover until I showed up. You heard

her tell me that she was going to divorce you—and you shot her, from the adjoining room. Then you knocked me cold, planted the gun in my hand, and ran out someplace and phoned the cops to hurry to your house, expecting them to nab me red-handed.

"But Victor got me away before the cops arrived. Then, when I wasn't arrested, you knew that something had gone wrong. You called the police again, gave them my name and description, and where I was staying. You—"

"I was in Austin!" Carr shouted, and he jumped to his feet. "What kind of a fantastic stunt are you trying to pull? You killed my wife—"

"SHUT up, Jeff," Wheeler said quietly. "You are not on trial here." He paused, and there was a bright gleam in his eyes. "You were in Austin, of course, at the time your wife was shot. You can prove that, can't you?"

"Certainly," Carr snapped. "But—"

"How can you prove it," Wheeler asked softly. "Your hotel registration, perhaps?"

Carr stuttered, "I—I—"

"He wasn't in Austin," Ramsey said. "He never left town. He tried to rig a frame—so that I'd be nabbed for his wife's murder. At first I thought that you had framed me—so that I'd be forced to go through with the Sara Brand—Blake King deal."

Wheeler smiled. He seemed happy, and he shot an amused glance at Jefferson Carr. He said to Ramsey, "I wouldn't do a thing like that. You said just now that Jeff faked a telephone call to your hotel for you to call his wife. How do you know that?"

Ramsey said grimly, "That is why I asked if Carr had any men servants. The switchboard girl told me that it was a man who phoned the message. He killed his wife. It had to be Carr—because at the

time the call came, he was the only person who knew I was in town. Marcia told me that she hadn't phoned, but I didn't believe her—then. I do now."

Wheeler's eyes were thoughtful. "It sounds reasonable," he said, and he turned to Carr. "Well, Jeff?"

Carr's thin lips worked soundlessly, and his pale eyes bulged behind the rimless glasses. "It—it's a damn lie," he blurted. "All of it. Phil, you don't believe—"

"Now, now, Jeff," Wheeler broke in smoothly. "Don't get all upset. All you have to do is prove that you were in Austin at the time of the shooting." He paused, and when Carr didn't answer, he added softly, "You *can* prove it, can't you?"

Carr found his voice. "I don't have to prove it!" he shouted. "You told me you had enough evidence on Ramsey to hang him."

"I see," Ramsey said. "Working together, you two."

Wheeler shook his head. He was still smiling, as if he were enjoying some secret joke. "No we aren't, Ramsey. My business with Mr. Carr does not concern you at all. However, because of my promise to you, I was obliged to tell him of our arrangement, and to ask him to refrain from turning you over to the police. He agreed." He paused, glanced briefly at Carr, and then returned his gaze to Ramsey.

"You understand that I sincerely believed you guilty of the murder of Mrs. Carr. The evidence was indisputable. But now, in view of your recent statements, a slight doubt has entered my mind, and—"

"Damn you, Phil," Carr shouted. "What're you trying to pull?"

Wheeler raised his eyebrows. "Why, nothing, Jeff," he said blandly. "Let's see." He gazed at the ceiling. "Since your wife is now dead, you are worth, roughly, ten million dollars." He lowered his gaze to Carr, and added, "The sum

you owe me is twenty thousand dollars."

Again he paused, and he seemed to be smiling to himself. "I now find that an error was made. The correct sum due me is five hundred thousand dollars. Isn't that correct, Jeff?" Little hot lights danced in Wheeler's eyes.

Carr's face seemed to shrivel, and his eyes held a mad, stricken look. He sank trembling into his chair, and covered his face with his hands.

"Isn't it?" Wheeler insisted gently. "The correct sum?"

There was a brief silence in the office. And then Jefferson Carr spoke one choked, muffled word. "Yes."

Phil Wheeler drew himself erect, and there was a look of triumph, of power, on his face. Then he leaned toward Carr, and he seemed to have forgotten that Ramsey and Victor were in the room. Trembling a little in his excitement, he purred to Carr:

"Forgive me, Jeff. Again I made an error in calculation. The correct sum due me is—one million dollars. Do you agree?"

Carr sat like a man of stone. He didn't speak, or remove his hands from his face. From his post by the wall, Victor coughed slightly, and shuffled his feet restlessly.

Ramsey said to Wheeler, "You're overplaying your hand."

Wheeler ignored him. He was watching Carr intently. "Come, come, Jeff," he said softly. "Speak up. One million dollars?"

Carr cowered in the chair. He uttered a kind of a moaning sound, and again he spoke the one word at the end of a throaty sigh. "Yes."

Wheeler straightened and turned slowly. There was sweat on his temples, and his eyes held a strange light. He lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, and inhaled deeply. He stared at Ramsey through the swirling smoke, but his eyes were vacant, unseeing.

Ramsey said, "You get to be a million-



His fist slammed against the side of Wheeler's jaw. . . .

aire fast—but that's between you and Carr." He hefted the bag. "I don't suppose you'll want to bother with *this* small sum any more?"

Wheeler started, like a man awakening. "What? Oh, the bag. Put it on my desk, please."

Ramsey said, "I get my cut, and the letter and the gun?"

"Of course," Wheeler said impatiently. "That was our arrangement."

Ramsey laid the bag on Wheeler's desk. Wheeler opened it, and stared down at the mass of bills tied in neat bundles. His smooth white hands caressed the bills lovingly, and his lips moved in a silent tentative counting. At last he closed the bag, and raised his head. He glanced once at Victor standing behind Ramsey, and then he swung his gaze on Ramsey. A little smile flickered around his lips.

"I'm giving you a break, Ramsey," Wheeler said pleasantly. "I'll wait thirty minutes before I turn the gun and the letter over to the police. . . . Good-by, sucker."

CHAPTER NINE

Good-by Sucker

RAMSEY stood very still. He should have expected it, he told himself bitterly, when Wheeler had begun to suspect the truth—that Carr had killed Marcia. It was a million dollar shake-down, and he was the goat. The gun, with the fingerprints on it, and his letter from Marcia, would be clubs that Wheeler could hold over Carr's head forever—and his, too.

Wheeler knew it, and he was drunk with the power he held. Carr, in his fear

of exposure, knew it too. Wheeler would never give the evidence to the police. It was too valuable to him. And Victor, the fat man—he had known all the time that Wheeler would double-cross him.

That was why he had taken the automatic from him before they entered Wheeler's office. He, Rackwell Ramsey, was just a babe in the woods, trying to play with the big time. A fall guy, a sucker, a fool, a Grade A heel.

He thought of Marcia, a mixed-up girl with too much beauty, too much money, and too much time on her hands. He thought of her lying still and cold in a flower-banked casket in the flossiest funeral parlor in town, with her lovely face expertly puttied, painted and powdered to hide the ugly hole where the bullet had entered.

If it hadn't been for him, Marcia might at this moment be driving happily along the gulf in her yellow convertible with her hair blowing in the wind. And then he thought of Sara Brand, mixed-up a little, too, loyal in her way to a man like Blake King, and he was filled with a deep bitter sadness.

Phil Wheeler glanced at a gold wrist watch. "Twenty-nine minutes left," he said, as if talking to himself, and he gazed past Ramsey at Victor. "Get him out of here, Victor, and turn him loose." He turned away from Ramsey. He was finished with Ramsey. He picked up the bag containing the money, and moved toward the safe in the corner.

Jefferson Carr stirred in his chair, and leaned his head back. His pale eyes stared vacantly from a haggard face, and his thin mouth was slack, like an old, old man's.

Ramsey leaped for Wheeler. He knew that Victor was behind him, but he didn't care. To hell with Victor. To hell with everything. His fist slammed against the side of Wheeler's jaw, and he felt a deep surge of satisfaction. He thudded his left into Wheeler.

An agonized sigh escaped Wheeler's lips, and he lurched violently against the wall. With a horrified squeak Jefferson Carr leaped from his chair and scurried around the walls. Ramsey whirled, and started for him.

Behind him, Wheeler's voice was a gurgling bleat. "Victor!"

Ramsey kept moving for Carr. He didn't care about Victor. He wanted to feel his hands on Carr, and he rushed blindly forward. Carr crouched in a corner, his teeth showing in a rodent-like snarl, his hand fumbling inside his coat.

The hand snaked out with a stubby blue revolver, and the muzzle bore on Ramsey. Even in his rage, Ramsey knew what was coming, and he checked his charge, his eyes on the gun.

Carr laughed like a mad man, and he steadied the gun with both hands. "Give my regards to Marcia!" he screamed. "I'm sending you where I sent her!" He sucked his thin lips down over his teeth, and his finger crooked tight over the trigger.

Ramsey was poised for a leap, but he knew that he would be far too slow, and he was filled with a wild sad despair. In the last fleeting space of time left to him he thought of Sara Brand with sad regret, and he jumped for Jefferson Carr.

Wham! The single blast rocked the walls. Ramsey stopped his headlong rush, and stood trembling. He was still on his feet, he thought with solemn disbelief, and he wondered with quiet detachment where Carr's bullet had struck him.

But something was wrong with Jefferson Carr. His mouth hung open, and all expression faded from his eyes. The stubby blue gun thudded to the carpet, and he slid slowly down the wall until he sat in an awkward cross-legged position. Just beneath his stiff white collar there was a black hole, and a spreading wetness. He stirred feebly, and his breathing was a loud rasping sound in the sudden quiet.

Murder on the Make

Ramsey stared dumbly. Behind him a soft voice said, "Take it easy, son. Seems we got a couple of rats here."

Ramsey turned slowly. Victor still stood by the wall. The .38 automatic he had taken from Ramsey was in his hand. It was now pointed at Phil Wheeler, who stood frozen.

Without taking his gaze from Wheeler, Victor said, "Carr was going to plug you—for keeps. I had to shoot fast. I aimed for his gun arm, but I guess I need more target practice."

"Victor," Phil Wheeler said from between clenched teeth.

Suddenly Ramsey laughed, and his whole face seemed to crack. Then his legs went weak, and he felt sweat on his face. He stumbled forward and sat on the edge of a chair. "Victor," he said weakly, "Thanks." He took a deep breath, and nodded at Wheeler. "Is he packing a rod?"

"Naw, not him."

Wheeler stared at the two of them, and his body shook with rage and fear.

Victor said to Ramsey, "I got a strong stomach, son. One hell of a strong stomach. But that deal they tried to hand you I couldn't take. I promised you that Wheeler would keep his word to you. I told you that he was a square shooter, and I'm going to keep him honest, because I know what you went through to keep your end of the bargain. And I'm mighty glad you didn't kill that girl. You got some money coming, and a gun and a letter."

HE WAGGLED the gun at Wheeler. "I'm sorry, boss, but you shouldn't have double-crossed Mr. Ramsey. I'm sure disappointed in you, and I'm quitting my job—as soon as you settle with Mr. Ramsey, here." He moved around the desk, and prodded Wheeler with the gun. "Get," he said. "Open that safe. And then count out some money for my pal."



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Robert Martin

Wheeler, his face white, stumbled toward the safe.

Victor winked at Ramsey, and Ramsey said, "All I want is the letter and the gun. He can keep the money."

Wheeler opened the safe, and then turned to face Ramsey. He said in a ragged voice, "I'll give you your cut, Ramsey. We're in the clear on that. Blake King won't dare squawk." He looked at Victor. "I'll cut you in, too, Victor. It'll just be between the three of us."

Victor grinned at Ramsey. "He's interested in small change again."

"A three-way split," Wheeler said desperately. "A hundred thousand dollars cut three ways."

"Step aside," Victor said, and he pushed Wheeler away from the open safe. He reached in, took out the handkerchief-wrapped gun and the letter from Marcia, and handed them to Ramsey. "There you are, son. Me, I figure on getting my job back at the post office."

Ramsey grinned. "And I'm going to stick to rigging wells." He felt good, better than he'd felt in a long time. "We need the cops," he said, and he glanced at Jefferson Carr slumped along the wall. "And an ambulance," he added soberly. He picked up the telephone from Wheeler's desk, spoke briefly, and hung up. Then he asked, "Anybody outside?"

"No. The joint don't open until five o'clock."

Ramsey opened the door. "Tell the cops I'll be back."

Victor said, "Uh—look, son. If you wanted to, you could take that satchel full of Blake King's money with you and never come back. I wouldn't stop you."

"How about splitting it with me, Victor?"

The fat man shook his head. "Not me. Not that money."

"Me, neither," Ramsey said. "I'm cured. We'll let the cops worry about it."

Murder on the Make

Wheeler started to speak, but Victor silenced him with a wave of his gun, and spoke over his shoulder to Ramsey. "Go ahead. Take my coupe. I'll handle things here." His fat face broke into one big grin. "I hope you find her, son."

"Thanks, pal." Ramsey went out and closed the door.

He backed the green coupe out of the garage, and headed up the highway. As he rounded the curve beyond The Starlight Club, he saw Blake King's black sedan lying on its side in the ditch. A police cruiser was parked nearby, and the crew of a wrecking car was working around the sedan.

A state trooper stood at the side of the road waving curious motorists on. A grim smile touched Ramsey's face as he drove past. It was raining harder, and the wet air blowing through the coupe's bullet-shattered windshield felt good on his face.

He found Sara Brand sitting quietly in the big waiting room at the airport. She looked up at him, and a happy light came into her eyes.

"Hello," he said.

"Oh, Rack, I was worried. The car was gone, and—"

He patted her cheek. "Never mind. I had a little business to take care of. Everything is fine now." He pulled her to her feet, and he kissed her while the airport crowd hurried around them.

* * *

Jefferson Carr died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Before he died, he confessed to the murder of his wife, Marcia, and he scrawled his signature on a statement hastily written by a police attendant.

On Ramsey's tip, local police and federal agents raided the Jungle Tavern, found a cache of narcotics, and Blake King was arrested. Sonny and Rafael, in the

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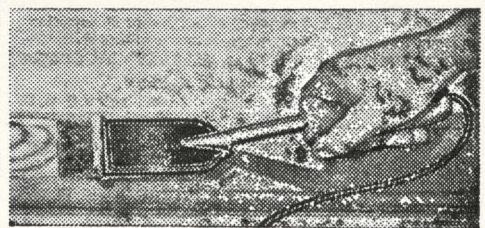
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Robert Martin

hospital with injuries received when Ramsey's bullets crashed into the motor of the sedan, causing it to overturn, were labeled accessories and placed under police guard.

The money from the safe deposit box was placed in escrow, and Treasury Department experts prepared to file charges of income tax evasion against Blake King. Victor and Ramsey were not held, but were to be witnesses at King's trial.

No immediate charges were filed against Phil Wheeler, but he, also, was scheduled as a witness. But he never appeared. One day two weeks later, The Starlight Club failed to open for business. Wheeler had disappeared. He never came back.

Two days after Blake King's arrest, Victor, Ramsey, and Sara Brand stood on the sidewalk in front of the Gulf Hotel, and Victor gravely shook hands. "Good-by, folks," he said. "Good luck."

"So long, Victor," Ramsey said. "See you at the trial."

As Victor shuffled away, he grinned at them over his shoulder. "Gonna take a long walk," he said. "Gotta get in training for that post office job." His big form disappeared in the crowd.

Ramsey picked up two bags. "Let's walk to the bus station," he said to the girl. "It's cheaper."

She laughed. "We can still afford a taxi, you dope."

"When you get to be a big movie star," he said, "will you be ashamed of a well rigger for a husband?"

"Husband?" she scoffed, but her eyes were shining. "That's news to me."

A bellboy come running out of the hotel. "Hey—Mr. Ramsey. Cablegram."

Ramsey put down the bags, handed the boy a quarter, and read the message. He looked at the girl. "Hollywood has lost a star, honey. I can support you now in the style to which you would have become accustomed. Simpson has found a buyer for our mahogany. We're sailing pronto."

The Fatal Footlights

(Continued from page 74)

the object of her affection, saw red, would have rather seen him dead than have somebody else get him.

"You see, Lieutenant, murder always comes easier the second time than the first. Given equal provocation, whichever one of those two had committed the murder the first time, I felt wouldn't hesitate to commit it a second time. The one that hadn't, probably couldn't be incited to contemplate it, no matter what the circumstances.

"Willis had loved his wife. He smoldered with hate when I told him we had evidence Vilma had killed her, but he didn't act on the hints I gave him. It never occurred to him to.

"Only one took advantage of the leeway I seemed to be giving them, and went ahead. That one was the real murderer. Having murdered once, she didn't stop at murder a second time.

"It's true," he conceded, "that that's not evidence that would have done us very much good by itself, in trying to prove the other case."

But what it finally did manage to do was make a dent in the murderer's armor. All we had to do was keep hacking away and she finally crumbled.

"Being caught in the act the second time weakened her self-confidence in her immunity for what she'd done the first time, gave us a psychological upper-hand over her, and she finally gave up and told us all."

He indicated the confession she had dictated and signed.

"Well," pondered the lieutenant, stroking his chin, "it's not a technique that I'd care to have you men make a habit of using very frequently. In fact, it's a damn dangerous one to monkey around with, but it got results this time, and that's the proof of any pudding."

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Harvey Weinstein

(Continued from page 83)

Gregg now believed that he was justified in killing the man who had put him in this jam.

Time had run out!

The Whippet's voice became shrill. "Lay that grenade down and move closer to the girl!"

Sure, Danny thought. *I do that like a good little boy and then you come in one step and let me have it close up so the powder burn will make it look like we had a scrimmage. Then Pert gets it and you scramble the furniture for stage dressing—and you're a hero. Just when you're ready to crack up because of the strain you've been under all night.*

"I can't drop this grenade," he said. "It will go off. Look!" He loosened his grip and the spring flew off. He let the grenade fall, casually so as not to cause the jittery Harry Gregg to fire at a hasty move.

The Whippet didn't wait to count out the seconds. He dove headlong through the bedroom doorway and dropped prone on the kitchen floor. Ignoring Pert, Danny plunged after him and pinned his gun hand. The grenade went off with a weak "Pop!"

Danny pocketed the automatic and hoisted the Whippet to his feet, keeping a firm grip on the short man's collar.

"The grenade?" Gregg managed to gasp out. "What happened?" He was limp in Danny's grasp, all fight driven out of him by the sudden scare.

Danny pointed to the bedroom, where a puff of smoke could be seen, and said with sarcastic friendliness:

"You're not so smart either, Harry. As a souvenir collector you're the top, but I've got you tied to the ring post when it comes to ordinance. You've just learned you can recognize a practice grenade by the color."

Still white-faced from her recent terror,

Spoiler For A Wise Guy

Pert eyed the little man curiously and said,

"He always seemed like a kind fellow when he came into Marta's."

"He did us a good turn," Danny told her. "Read that letter on the dresser. Gregg's practically fixed it for me to be reinstated legit, and that letter and this trunk of weapons are going to fix his wagon with the cops."

Hand in hand, they strolled out of the Whippet's apartment house. Danny cast a carefree eye at the police cars lining the curb.

Harry Gregg had been almost eager to confess to killing Fisher. Funny, wasn't it, the way some poker-faced characters store up so much tension inside that when they crack—pouf! They fold up for keeps.

"It was nice of Spinelli not to press charges after the way I slugged him," he told Pert.

"Nice of him?" the girl said indignantly. "He would look awful foolish when the papers come out and make a hero out of you. Wanting to arrest the next champ!"

"Champ or stumblebum?"

"Danny!"

He grinned.

At the corner, he fished through his pockets, then said sheepishly, "Got a buck on you, honey?"

She handed him a dollar and he said: "Now let's find one of those heaps with meters. It's late and your mother will be worrying."

"It's also *later*," Pert said in a low voice.

"I'll have you know," he told the girl, that when I ride cabs from now on I sit behind the meter, not alongside it. That means I don't have to keep my mitts on the steering wheel. Get the idea?"

She did—*later*.



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HAIR LOSS

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The following facts are brought to the attention of the public because of a widespread belief that nothing can be done about hair loss. This belief has no basis in medical fact. Worse, it has condemned many men and women to needless baldness by their neglect to treat certain accepted causes of hair loss.

There are six principal types of hair loss, or alopecia, as it is known in medical terms:

1. Alopecia from diseases of the scalp
2. Alopecia from other diseases or from an improper functioning of the body
3. Alopecia of the aged (senile baldness)
4. Alopecia areata (loss of hair in patches)
5. Alopecia of the young (premature baldness)
6. Alopecia at birth (congenital baldness)

Senile, premature and congenital alopecia cannot be helped by anything now known to modern science. Alopecia from improper functioning of the body requires the advice and treatment of your family physician.

BUT MANY MEDICAL AUTHORITIES NOW BELIEVE A SPECIFIC SCALP DISEASE IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF HAIR LOSS.

This disease is called **Seborrhea** and can be broadly classified into two clinical forms with the following symptoms:

1. **DRY SEBORRHEA:** The hair is dry, lifeless, and without gloss. A dry flaky dandruff is usually present with accompanying itching. Hair loss is considerable and increases with the progress of this disease.
2. **OILY SEBORRHEA:** The hair and scalp are oily and greasy. The hair is slightly sticky to the touch and has a tendency to mat together. Dandruff takes the form of head scales. Scalp is usually itchy. Hair loss is severe with baldness as the end result.

Many doctors agree that to **NEGLECT** these symptoms of **DRY and OILY SEBORRHEA** is to **INVITE BALDNESS.**

Seborrhea is believed to be caused by three germ organisms — staphylococcus albus, pityrosporum ovale, and acnes bacillus.

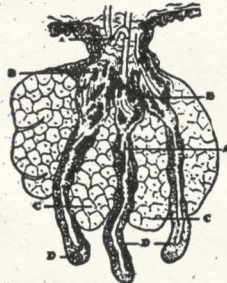
These germs attack the sebaceous gland causing an abnormal working of this fat gland. The hair follicle, completely surrounded by the enlarged diseased sebaceous gland, then begins to atrophy. The hair produced becomes smaller and smaller until the hair follicle dies. Baldness is the inevitable result. (See illustration.)

But seborrhea can be controlled, particularly in its early stages. The three germ organisms believed to cause seborrhea, can and should be eliminated before they destroy your normal hair growth.

A post-war development, Comate Medicinal Formula kills these three germ organisms on contact. Proof of Comate's germ-killing properties has been demonstrated in laboratory tests recently conducted by one of the leading testing laboratories in America. (Complete report on file and copies are available on request.)

When used as directed, Comate Medicinal Formula controls seborrhea—stimulates the flow of blood to the scalp—helps stop scalp itch and burn—improves the appearance of your hair and scalp—helps **STOP HAIR LOSS** due to seborrhea. Your hair looks more attractive and alive.

You may safely follow the example of thousands who first were skeptical, then curious, and finally decided to avail themselves of Comate Medicinal Formula.



DESTRUCTION OF HAIR FOLLICLES Caused By Seborrhea:
A - Dead hair; B - Hair, destroying bacteria; C - Hypertrophied sebaceous glands; D - Atrophic follicles.

A Few of the Many Grateful Expressions By Users of Comate Medicinal Formula

- "My hair was coming out for years and I tried everything. Nothing stopped it until I tried Comate. Now my hair has stopped coming out. It looks so much thicker. My friends have noticed my hair and they all say it looks so much better."
—Mrs. R.E.J., Stevenson, Ala.
- "Your hair formula got rid of my dandruff; my head does not itch any more. I think it is the best of all of the formulas I have used."
—E.E., Hamilton, Ohio.
- "Your formula is everything you claim it to be and the first 10 days trial freed me of a very bad case of dry seborrhea."
—J.E.M., Long Beach, Calif.
- "I do want to say that just within five days I have obtained a great improvement in my hair. I do want to thank you and the Comate Laboratories for producing such a wonderful and amazing formula."
—M.M., Johnstown, Pa.
- "I have found almost instant relief. My itching has stopped with one application."
—J.N., Stockton, Calif.
- "My hair looks thicker, not falling out like it used to. Will not be without Comate in the house."
—R.W., Lonsdale, R. I.
- "I haven't had any trouble with dandruff since I started using Comate."
—L.W.W., Galveston, Tex.
- "This formula is everything if not more than you say it is. I am very happy with what it's doing for my hair."
—T.J., Las Cruces, New Mexico
- "I find it stops the itch and retards the hair fall. I am thankful for the help it has given me in regard to the terrible itching."
—R.B.L., Philadelphia, Pa.
- "The bottle of Comate I got from you has done my hair so much good. My hair has been coming out and breaking off for about 21 years. It has improved so much."
—Mrs. J.E., Lisbon, Ga.

Today these benefits are available to you just as they were to these sincere men and women when they first read about Comate. If your hair is thinning, over-dry or over-oily—if you are troubled with dandruff with increasing hair loss—you may well be guided by the laboratory tests and the experience of thousands of grateful men and women.

Remember, if your hair loss is due to Seborrhea, Comate CAN and MUST help you. If it is due to causes beyond the reach of Comate Medicinal Formula, you have nothing to lose because our **GUARANTY POLICY** assures the return of your money unless delighted. So why delay when that delay may cause irreparable damage to your hair and scalp. Just mail the coupon below.

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Please rush my bottle (30-days supply) of Comate Hair and Scalp Formula in plain wrapper. I must be completely satisfied or you guarantee refund of my money upon return of bottle and unused portion.

- Enclosed find \$5.00, Fed. tax incl. (Check, cash, money order.) Send postpaid.
- Send C.O.D. I will pay postman \$5.00 plus postal charges.

Name.....
Address.....
City..... Zone..... State.....

APO, FPO, Canada and Foreign—No C.O.D.'s

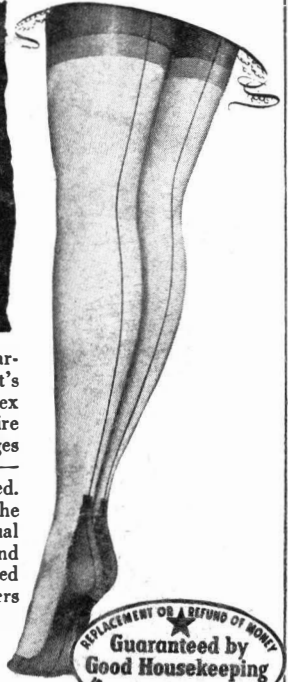
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Guaranteed Against
RUNS AND SNAGS

Regardless of Cause!



The world's ONLY complete, nationally advertised nylon-hosiery line actually guaranteed against runs, snags or excessive wear, **REGARDLESS OF CAUSE!** It's amazing, but true! No matter what the cause—hard use or deliberate abuse—Kendex nylons are replaced **FREE** if they run, snag or become unfit for wear within entire guarantee period! Every weight from sheerest 15 denier to heavy 70 denier—all gauges up to luxury 60 gauge—all sizes, lengths, popular shades, fancy heels, black seams—full fashioned and seamless. Nothing is missing to make sure every woman is pleased. In spite of the amazing guarantee, retail postage prepaid prices start at \$1.08 the pair for sheerest 15 denier 51 gauge. Should free replacement be necessary, actual cost becomes 54¢ a pair! How could any woman possibly resist saving money and solving her hosiery problems? **NOT SOLD IN STORES.** Men and women wanted **NOW**, spare or full time, to write orders and earn big money. You can get orders even if you never sold a thing in your life!

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GUARANTEED 1 YEAR**

Kendex gives you **FOUR** complete lines, including sensational men's hosiery line actually guaranteed for **ONE YEAR!** Any pair not giving satisfactory wear within 12 months is replaced **FREE** without question. All styles, patterns, colors, yarns (including nylon) at lowest prices that mean steady income for you 52 weeks a year.

**LINGERIE
HOUSECOATS — ROBES**

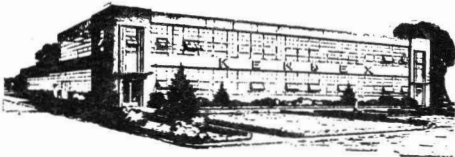
Full line of lingerie, housecoats and robes. Woven and knitted fabrics—rayon, cotton and **NYLON.** Nothing is lacking. Unbelievable prices that defy competition and make women eager to order. Imagine a beautiful all **NYLON** slip, with **NYLON** lace, at \$2.95 or a lace trimmed rayon satin slip at \$1.58! Kendex values sell themselves.

**NATIONALLY
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Kendex has advertised in Life, Look, Collier's, McCall's, Saturday Evening Post, Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, etc. Carries the Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal. Thousands of orders shipped daily. Yearly volume in millions. A dependable responsible national organization.

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Man or woman — young or old, **YOU** can easily earn steady income, spare or full time. No money or experience needed. We supply **EVERYTHING** free and set you up in business at **OUR** expense. Nothing to buy or deliver. Write orders. We deliver and collect. Big advance pay plus huge cash bonus that increases your earnings up to 40%! Your name and address on postcard will bring you sample nylon stocking; samples of lingerie, hose, robe materials; self-selling sales books with **FULL COLOR** illustrations; 36-page sales manual showing you easy steps to success; color cards, free "door openers" worth \$1 each but which you give away free; special plan to have others sell for you, etc., etc. You can start making money the minute you receive the complete **FREE** outfits!



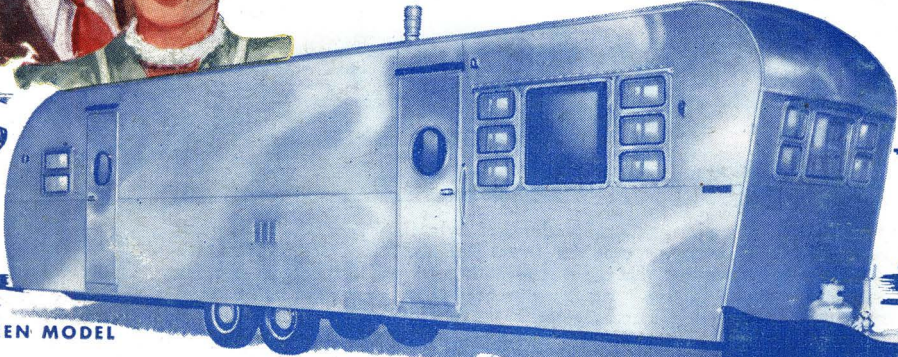
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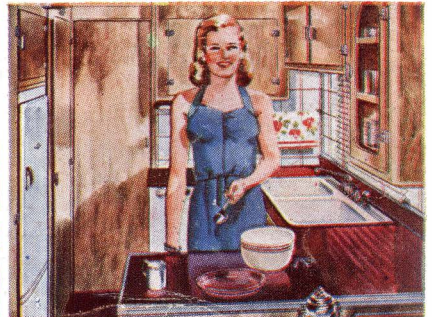
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