

TURN OVER BOOK FOR 2<sup>nd</sup> NOVEL

**ACE**

DOUBLE NOVEL  
BOOKS

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Manhunt in a Racket-Ridden City

# SO DEAD MY LOVE!

Harry Whittington

An ACE  
Original



*A new, trigger-tense novel of a faltering political boss and the ex-convict he brought in to save him . . .*

It's not easy for an important man to vanish in a small city like Duval, Florida, but one had. He was the partner of a political boss, and if he was not found quickly, it would be curtains for that chief's machine. But the inside story was too dangerous to entrust the search to a local detective . . . and the cops belonged to the opposition. So Jim Talbot was brought down from New York after ten years' embittered exile.

From the moment Jim stepped off the train, he knew he was in hot water. First, a sheriff's deputy threatened him. And, second, he discovered that the girl who had perverted his love and ruined his youthful career was now the wife of his client. . . .

This ACE Original is packed with action, violence, and emotional tension.

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*Turn over this book for second novel*

*There is political dynamite in Duval, Florida, and these are the characters who will set it off:*

**MIKE LAYNEBECK**—Though still senator, his long hold on the local administration was fast slipping.

**SHERIFF ROBERTS**—He interpreted the law to suit his personal advancement—and Laynebeck was now in his way.

**DAN CALVERT**—Laynebeck's lieutenant, his disappearance threatened to upset the senator's applecart.

**NITA LAYNEBECK**—Though she had married the biggest man in town, she still had a yen for certain pre-marital boy friends.

**STRICK CLEMMONS**—As sheriff's deputy, he liked his job best when it involved a little extra violence.

**LAURA DAWSON**—The sheriff thought this exotic dancer knew more than he did about a certain rival bigwig.

*and last but most of all*

**JIM TALBOT**—The private eye from New York whose arrival in his former home town was the spark that lit murder's fuse.

SO DEAD  
MY LOVE

*by Harry Whittington*

*Ace Books, Inc.*

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I, THE EXECUTIONER (FALSE BOUNTY)

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# Chapter 1

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THERE WAS this feeling of anxiety. . . .

Talbot decided it came from returning to a place he hated, a town he'd run from in terror. A hot sweaty country that had haunted him for ten years. The last place in the world he should have come back to—the town and Nita. And the memory of Nita.

He stepped off the eight P.M. train and looked about the platform. The fifty-year-old station hadn't changed. He glanced up at the paint-scabbed sign: *Duval, Florida. Population 35,000.*

Talbot picked up his leather suitcase and started across the platform, searching for Mike Laynebeck.

He'd memorized Laynebeck's letter: *I know your memories of Duval and Florida—and Florida justice—must be steeped in bitterness, Jim. I know you own a successful investigating agency and you must be busy. But if an old friend in need can prevail upon you to come back to Duval, please do come. I've hesitated to ask you. But I do need you. You're the one man for this urgent business: you're an ace investigator and you know this part of the country.* Devotedly, Mike.

When he'd gotten the letter, Jim Talbot had crushed it in his fist and sworn he'd forget it. But he'd reread it a hundred times. And finally he'd bought a ticket on a streamliner south. And from the moment the wheels started turning twenty-five hours earlier, their clicking melody had had one jarring theme: *Nita. Nita. Nita. Nita.*

Talbot glanced through the waiting-room window. A small, well-stacked girl peered back at him. Talbot looked her over as he passed. She met his gaze and her eyes widened a trifle. Talbot kept walking.

At the parking area, he stopped and set down his suitcase. Laynebeck had promised to meet him. Laynebeck had in-

sisted via long distance that he'd meet the eight o'clock train.

There was only one car parked at the curb. A black Plymouth with an aerial for two-way radio. Police car. A man was curled up under the steering wheel, watching Talbot.

Talbot heard a mewing at his heels. He turned and looked down.

A scrawny kitten spit at him, mewed again, and swiped at his cuff with a tiny claw.

Talbot smiled. "Your old lady know you're out?"

The kitten mewed again.

"Okay. Okay. I was hungry in this town once myself. I know what it's like, buddy. You don't have to sell me."

He pushed open the waiting-room door and walked to the candy concession. The girl made a production of going behind the counter. Hips, thighs and legs co-starred. Her eyes were bold prowlers. Her voice was as Southern as hominy grits for breakfast.

"What's foh yo'all, honey? . . . Uh, pahdon, Mistuh Honey."

Talbot grinned. Been a long time since he'd heard a voice like that. "Half-pint carton of milk, y'all."

"Milk? Foah yo'all? Yo'all just making a joke?"

"Saw you admiring my muscles. Where you think I got 'em?"

She handed him the carton, but she still didn't believe it. Her eyes wondered if that was all he wanted. He paid her and took the carton to the platform. The kitten was on its haunches, waiting.

Talbot tore the top off the carton. He hunkered down, setting the milk before the kitten. "Here, kid, drink this. I want you to grow up so you can get out of this town. A hell of a place to spend *nine* lives."

A pale blue Cadillac convertible skidded into the curb beyond the black Plymouth. Talbot straightened. He hefted his suitcase and started along the platform, staring at the man coming toward him from the sleek car.

Mike Laynebeck was taller even than Talbot remembered. Yard-wide shoulders in tailored gabardine. Shoulders that had looked good on long-ago football fields and made Laynebeck seem a giant in a courtroom. It gave you a hell of a

lift to know such a man was on your side when your life was at stake. Talbot knew.

Talbot watched Laynebeck hurrying toward him. Mike sure had inherited the Laynebeck look of arrogance. Head erect, tilted, always looking down, making him seem even taller than he was.

Talbot began to see the changes. Ten years had been a long time for Mike Laynebeck. They'd been hell on him. He was bald except for a few slicked-down strands and the close-cropped hair on his temples was iron gray. He looked old, haggard.

They shook hands.

"Welcome home, Jim. I can never repay you for coming. Believe me, I'd never have brought you back. But it was important. To me, at least."

"I'm glad you called on me." Talbot glanced heavenward, expecting a thunderbolt to strike him dead for lying.

They started toward Laynebeck's Cadillac. The occupant of the Plymouth had emerged and was now draped against the front fender, picking at his fingernails with a penknife. Tall as Laynebeck, he was so thin that he looked as if he were standing on stilts.

He was looking Jim over, remembering him. He spoke to Laynebeck. "Evening, Senator."

Laynebeck inclined his head. "Hello, Clemmons."

Clemmons straightened. "Nice night." Clemmons was barring their way. "Real nice night." His gaze included Talbot. "Ain't it, mistuh?"

"All right, Clemmons." Laynebeck's voice held anger. "This is my friend Jim Talbot. Mr. Talbot, Deputy Sheriff Clemmons."

Talbot felt a constriction in his belly. Here was a man he remembered. Strick Clemmons shoved out his thin hand.

Talbot hated to touch it. He shook hands, managing to smile.

"Goin' to be heah in town long, Mr. Talbot?"

"I don't know yet."

"We better push along," Laynebeck said. "I left a highball sitting at home."

Clemmons smiled again. "Remember me to the missus, Senator."

Laynebeck glanced at Talbot, nodded briefly at Clemmons. Clemmons stepped back, watching them. They got in the Cadillac. Clemmons backed his cruiser out. He went south on Main Street in a cloud of exhaust smoke.

Laynebeck laughed without mirth. "Sheriff Roberts' boy. Running to report."

"Report what?"

"That you're in town. That I met you at the train. That your name is Jim Talbot. That's enough for them to start on. They'll pick and worry at it until they get themselves in a stew."

"But why?"

Laynebeck sighed. "We're going through a political war right now, Jim. I've pretty well run the Party here in Marvel County as my old man did when he lived. But Sheriff Roberts is an ambitious man. He wants to run the county. Sometimes I think he wants to run the state. Nights I wake up in a sweat thinking what might happen if he ever did run Florida. He is just about taken over here—on a *reform* platform. It would be funny if it weren't so desperate. Things are getting rough now—so rough that Governor Reeves has threatened to move in personally at the next outburst of trouble. Roberts knows I'll make a last-ditch fight, so he has his boys report on everything I do. You've come to town. Roberts won't sleep until he knows why."

Talbot's hands clenched. "That's not why you brought me back?"

Laynebeck shook his head. "No. The job I have for you is in your line." His hand gestured expansively. "Duval has grown in ten years, Jim. We have one-way streets now."

"Doesn't matter which way the streets go in this town. Just so they all lead out of it."

Talbot watched the town slide past Senator Laynebeck's car. Narrow red brick streets. Old houses. Looking older and shabbier than ever.

"If you hate it that bad, why did you come back?"

"You sent for me."

"I told you I only hoped you'd come. I didn't really believe you would come."

"You knew I'd come." Talbot's voice was cold. "Without mentioning it, you let me know I owed my freedom to you."

"Come now. I hinted nothing. I said nothing."

"You didn't have to. You knew you didn't have to. Ten years ago I was in jail. Didn't have a chance in hell. You got me out. I owe everything I've got to you." He smiled. "It's all right. I knew you must need me all to hell, Mike, or you'd never have stooped to blackmail—even polite blackmail—to get me back to this garden spot."

"I do need you, Jim. There's no use pretending I don't."

"What's the job?"

"You remember Dan Calvert?"

"Yeah. He was in school with me."

"I took him in my law firm, Jim. Dan's smart. I made him a partner. A partner in everything. And Dan Calvert has disappeared. I don't know if he's been—murdered. I don't know anything. Only that he's gone. Almost two week and no trace of him. That's why I brought you back here, Jim. I want you to find Dan Calvert."

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## Chapter 2

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"ANY REASON to think Dan might have been murdered?"

Laynebeck said no. Not unless his being a partner of Laynebeck's was a reason. It didn't sound like a reason to Talbot. But Mike reminded him he'd been away a long time.

"What will you do with him when you find him?"

Laynebeck's foot came off the accelerator. The car slowed. He wanted to know what Jim meant by that.

"It's plain enough. If I'm going to look for Dan Calvert, I'll have to know the angles. One angle is obvious. He might have skipped out on you."

"He didn't." Laynebeck had checked their finances, those Calvert could have got his hands on. He had faith in Dan, but he'd checked all the angles. And Calvert had never suggested he was dissatisfied.

Laynebeck tooted the car off Fort Queen into a drive that curved into the Laynebeck place.

The house was a symbol of everything that Duval stood for. Old homes, old families, old hates, old wrongs.

There were lights in the sun room. Light splayed out on the columned veranda through floor-to-ceiling windows. A woman was wandering around in there with a highball glass in her hand.

Talbot smiled. He'd come a long way. He'd looked up at this old house many times. This was the first time he'd ever been invited inside.

Laynebeck parked under the east portico. He slid out from under the wheel and started toward the front door. Talbot followed, lugging his suitcase.

Laynebeck opened the front door. Talbot entered the two-storied foyer.

"Leave your suitcase there." Laynebeck motioned toward the foyer closet. Another question answered. Talbot had

been invited in. But he hadn't been invited to stay. He hadn't come that far.

Laynebeck glanced toward the sun room, frowning. He strode across the foyer and opened the library door. Talbot strolled through. Laynebeck followed, closing the door after him.

The library looked older than Laynebeck himself, though the furnishings were new. Shelves of books were ceiling high. But nothing helped. It was a tired room. Laynebeck seemed at home in it. He flopped into a leather-covered chair, waved Talbot into another. "You want a drink?"

"Sure."

Laynebeck dragged himself from the chair. *My God*, Talbot thought, *nobody is that old*.

Laynebeck poured two stiff drinks of bourbon, adding ice and water. He gave one to Jim and returned to his chair. He sagged into it with a sigh and regarded Talbot.

"I have no idea how you go about finding missing persons, Jim. I tried to get you right away so the trail—if he has disappeared and if he left a trail—wouldn't be too cold."

"It doesn't matter too much," Jim said. He finished his drink. "I've found the best thing you can do when you're tracing a missing person is to find out all you can about why he wanted to go."

"I can't help you there. I thought everything was fine. Dan was smart and I trusted him. Matter of fact, he was coming here to dinner the night he disappeared. I reminded him at noon that we were expecting him at seven. That was on a Tuesday. He said sure he'd be here. I was out of town that afternoon, selling some dairy property. Got home about five-thirty. I dressed for dinner. And Dan didn't show up."

Laynebeck had checked with Dan's friends. Unless they lied, they were astonished to learn that Dan had gone. There was no argument between them, personal or professional. Dan was a bachelor. He had plenty of women. Some of them were married. But he had stayed out of trouble. He owed nothing. He made around sixty thousand after taxes on their investments alone. Jim wanted to know if Calvert gambled. Laynebeck smiled. Sure. But not to the tune of sixty grand a year.

"Was he afraid of anybody?"

"He never told me if he was."

"Maybe he wouldn't. The hell of it is, none of us ever really knows anybody else. You can't ever know what the person before you is really thinking, really wanting. Their smiles don't mean a damned thing. I'll try to find Dan Calvert, Mike, but I'll have to ask a lot of people a lot of questions. You may not like all the answers."

"I brought you back here because I wanted him found."

"Right. You have a picture of him? A late picture. This year?"

"I'm sure we do." Laynebeck got up and went to the foyer door. He opened it. He called, "Nita."

*Nita.*

Talbot felt the breath in his lungs stop. Nita. He hadn't known how he would find her. Nita Barwell. He'd been aware that she might have moved away from Duval, married, divorced, died. And yet the simple answer hadn't occurred to him. The obvious angle. The merger of the Barwell money and the Laynebeck money.

What if there was over fifteen years' difference in their ages? Hell, now that it had happened, it was as though it had been destined to happen all along.

Nita Barwell, with all her boy friends, her crushes and summer romances. They hadn't meant a thing. All along, their families, the people who mattered, had been taking it for granted. Laynebeck had been adding to his fortune and his prestige. Nita had been growing up. Talbot felt his throat muscles tighten. What a growing up that had been!

She must have come across the foyer. Laynebeck spoke to her, his voice lowered. "Will you get the latest picture we have of Dan, my dear? The latest one."

Jim strained to hear her voice. He heard nothing. Maybe the pound of his own heart. The lazy night sounds beyond the windows. The steady throb of the clock. He set his glass on the table and looked at his hands. They were trembling.

Laynebeck returned to his chair. That odd frown was on his face again.

Talbot said, "I didn't know you'd married Nita. You should have told me when you wrote."

Laynebeck spread his hands. "I would have, Jim. It never occurred to me you didn't know."

*I didn't know*, Talbot thought. *Ten years away. I heard nothing of this town and didn't want to. If I'd known, nothing would have brought me back here.*

The door opened. Laynebeck pulled himself to his feet. Talbot stood, turning slowly. He was more aware of the throb of his heart than of anything else. He looked at Nita, wondering what he was trying to see, wondering what he was looking for in her face.

She was thirty. He knew how old she was. He knew all about her. Her full breasts swelled at the plunging line of her black evening dress. Her stomach was still flat. Her hips were fuller than he remembered and her thighs strained against the fabric of her gown. They'd always been like that.

She stood with the framed portrait of Dan Calvert in her hand. It pleased her that he was staring at her.

Talbot's gaze moved to her face. The slightly squared jaw, stubborn and arrogant—that was Nita. Stubborn, arrogant as hell. Her mouth was full and sensuous. Her nose was almost Greek classic. That was Nita, too, the goddess with the sensuous mouth. Her eyes were black and her hair was black. Then he saw the streak of gray.

It swept back from her widow's peak like a dove's soft wing. And it was the finishing touch. The gray wing in the crown of her black hair was what she had always needed. That wing of gray made her beautiful. Before, she'd been pretty and now she was beautiful.

Talbot felt the breath sigh out of him.

"He'o, Jim," Nita said.

Mike tried to laugh. "Remember the shaker of cocktails I mentioned? Now you see who drank it."

"I drank it," Nita said. She moved forward and placed her hand in Jim's. It was like ice. "Courage. Needed courage."

"Nita!" Laynebeck's voice was sharp. Nita withdrew her hand from Jim's and gave him the framed portrait.

"It's not a very good picture," she said. "He doesn't take a very good picture. He worries. Worries about how he'll look. Never take a good picture if you worry how you'll look."

"Something you never had to worry about," Jim said.

Nita looked at him. "Well, thank you. I can tell you, Jim, I've been looking forward to this moment with dread. Unaccustomed as I am to dreading old lovers. I wondered what you would say the first time we met. Funny, I never thought it would be a compliment."

"Funny," Talbot said. "Neither did I."

Her eyes widened, showing fear deep inside. She stared at him. Her lips moved, but she said nothing.

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## Chapter 3

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LAYNEBECK SAID, "If you're going to make it to your bedroom under your own power, Nita, it might be wise if you started now."

Nita heeled around. "It would have been wise if I'd started two hours ago. This is a very odd moment, Mike, and I wish you wouldn't spoil it."

"Tomorrow your perceptions will be keener, my dear. You'll appreciate the odd moment all the more."

"There never was an odder moment than this one, Mike, my love," Nita said. "I had to drink to be able to face it. I think Jim is being very fine about it. I was afraid he wouldn't be. I can tell you something else. I wouldn't have been fine about it." She turned again. "Did you ever forgive me, Jim?"

"Nita." Laynebeck's voice was chilled. "If you don't mind, Jim and I have a lot to discuss. It's getting late."

Nita stood looking at Jim. Her eyes squinted as though she were trying to find him through a haze that clouded her memory. She held out her hands, palms upward. They were trembling.

"I'm going to bed now," she said. "But one thing, Jim. When Mike said he was sending for you, I begged him not to. I made quite a scene. But he sent for you anyway. I just want you to know. Part of why I didn't want him to send for you was for you, Jim. I didn't think he had any right to bring you back to it."

She spun about on her high heels and walked from the room. They stood watching her. Talbot's gaze moved to Laynebeck's haggard face. What Mike felt for Nita was in his eyes.

"So you really love her?" Talbot said when the door was closed.

"There it is," Laynebeck agreed. "The beginning and the

end. I grew up with her and never loved her. I married her and during the ceremony I thought that maybe I was fond of her. Now it's like a disease."

Yes, Talbot thought. *It is a disease. Loving Nita is a disease.*

"I control this town, this county. If I worked at it, I could control this state, or the men who control it would be working with me, which is the same thing. But I can't work at it any more."

"Nita."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I just said her name."

"I heard you. And you're right. She's all that matters to me. And the hell of it is the more I let her see that I care, the worse she makes it for me. I can make everybody in this town dance except Nita. And she goes right on dancing if I tell her to stop."

Mike Laynebeck saw that he was talking too much. He tried to laugh, tried to make a joke of it. But he was too tired. He mixed drinks for them and returned to his chair.

"Did you ever marry, Jim?"

Talbot shook his head. "I tried to. Carrying the memory of a woman around inside you is foolish and unnnatural. I've heard a man can't do it, anyway. He'll forget her. That's what I've heard."

Laynebeck tried to smile. "I'm sorry you were hurt. Sorry she hurt you. But I'm sure that Nita loved me, Jim. When I got you out of prison, I was a knight to her. I'd rescued you."

"That's God's truth."

"I think it meant as much to Nita as it did to you."

Talbot scowled. "It meant I was out of prison. I was free. If you hadn't gotten me a new trial—complete exoneration—I'd never have got an investigator's license in New York. That's what it meant to me. What could it have meant to Nita, except that a dirty matter was ended?"

"Don't you think it was a prison sentence for Nita? If she had put you in prison, do you think she was free as long as you were penned?"

Talbot laughed coldly. He thought, *you're defending her to me. What about what she's doing to you? You say Sheriff Roberts is trying to take over political control of this county.*

*Isn't it possible only because your mind is on Nita?* He said, "Could Sheriff Roberts have bought out Dan Calvert?"

Laynebeck stood up. "Roberts is dirty. Dan isn't. Dan believes as I do in decent government. Roberts makes his on dirty little rackets."

"What kind of rackets?"

"All kinds. They were in existence in this town when my father was young, but now they're all owned by Roberts. He dares me to bring it out in the open. Everything from petty protection to gambling. The smell of it is another reason Governor Reaves has threatened to crack down here. Why, even women who dance publicly pay Roberts a tax—"

"What for?"

"To be safe. So his goons won't pick them up as common prostitutes. So they won't be put out of business. Mostly because it's another graft."

Talbot smiled. "No wonder he thinks he can take over. Are you sure Roberts isn't the answer to Calvert's disappearance?"

"Why should Dan Calvert fear Roberts?"

"Maybe things are getting too hot?"

"But if things got too hot, Dan wouldn't leave without money. He'd try to salvage something."

"Maybe. Depends on how scared he was."

"If he was that scared, Jim, some of it would have rubbed off on me. He was my partner, you know."

"But as you say, your mind was on something else." Talbot nodded toward the door through which Nita had gone. "If Dan had his eyes open, he might have seen things that scared hell out of him."

"Are you afraid already, Talbot?"

"No. But I thought this town was rotten when I ran away from it. It was a Sunday School picnic then."

"Yes. Things were simpler. They're not simple now."

"Are you afraid to look for Calvert?"

"Afraid?"

"Why else would you send for me? You control this county. Or you did. Until Roberts started taking over. You could find out all about Calvert if you wanted to dig. But you don't want to. You'd rather hire me. You're afraid to dig, Laynebeck. You're afraid of what you might find."

"That's not true. If I were afraid, I wouldn't have brought you back. You were the first man Nita ever loved. She told me. She told me when she was begging me not to bring you back to look for Dan."

"There's another kind of fear, Laynebeck. The fear of the muck you might get all over you. Maybe you're more afraid of that than of a love that's ten years dead."

Laynebeck finished off his drink. "All right, Jim, I'm going on looking for Dan. Just as I have been looking. I searched before I gave up and sent that special delivery to you. But so you won't believe I'm afraid, I promise you I'm going on looking."

Jim smiled, admiring the big man. "All right. That's good enough for me, Mike. Sorry my temper got the best of me. I'll find Dan Calvert for you."

He poured himself another drink, wondering what he was going to do about Nita. It had been clear in his mind before. He had known what he would do about her if he found her when he got back here. But now it was different. She was Mike Laynebeck's wife. Maybe the word wife didn't mean so much anymore. But it meant everything to the tired man, Mike Laynebeck. Nita was Mike's wife. Mike loved Nita more than life. Hell, life was cheap. Nita was everything.

Talbot shook his head. He had been so certain before. He was no longer sure. He didn't know what he could do about her now. . . .

Laynebeck picked up the house phone and told the chauffeur to bring the Buick coupé to the west drive. "I'm turning over one of my cars to you, Jim. If you like it and do a good job, I'll make it a bonus."

Talbot was studying the picture of Calvert. "Thanks, Mike."

Laynebeck looked over his shoulder at the picture. "About your age, Jim. His eyes are blue, though that picture shows them as brown. His hair is brown and is receding slightly, though not as alarmingly as mine, of course. As Nita pointed out, Dan looks worried. It's an habitual expression."

"He hasn't changed much. Nice looking. I didn't know him too well at school. But I'll know him when I see him."

"You think you're going to find him?"

"That's what you hired me for, isn't it?"

The chauffeur opened the library door and told Laynebeck the Buick was in the west drive. A dark-faced man, he withdrew at once, closing the door.

"I won't walk out with you, Jim. I consciously avoid doing anything I can get out of."

"Sure. I'll take Dan's picture with me. It might frighten the goblins in my hotel room."

"By the way, I reserved your rooms for you. At the Duval House. That's the best, and I told them I wanted their best for you."

"Thanks, Mike. It's good to see you again. Not the town, but you. I don't forget what I owe you and I'll find Calvert for you."

They shook hands. Talbot got his suitcase, went through the front door and let it close behind him.

For a moment he stood on the veranda. The front porch light was snapped off. Somebody had allowed him just time to walk to the Buick in the west drive. The wind was rising. It dried the sweat across his forehead. He'd drunk too much in there. He'd been hired to find Dan Calvert, but that wasn't what made him keep refilling his drink. It was finding Nita. Finding her married to Mike Laynebeck. And wondering what he was going to be able to do about Nita now.

He strode across the veranda to the coupé, opened the door. A shadowy figure was slumped down on the far side of the seat. Nita laughed throatily. "Get in," she said. "Come on, Jimmy Talbot. Get in and tell me you're glad to see me."

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## Chapter 4

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TALBOT looked at her. She'd tossed a sheer green wrap about her bare shoulders. Its hood was draped over her dark hair so only the wing of gray winked at him in the dark.

He put his suitcase behind the seat, got in and sat with his hands on the steering wheel. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I don't know. Where are you going to take me?"

"Mike sent you to bed."

"Mike would always send me to bed. He's afraid I might see someone to think about besides Mike Laynebeck."

"Just the same, I'm working for him. You're his wife. This isn't starting things off on a fine plane."

"To hell with a fine plane. Start the car."

He started it. They moved along the drive, swung east on Fort Queen.

"I'm more than Mike Laynebeck's wife. I'm also the girl who let you go to prison. I played a rotten trick on you. Because you loved me, and I knew you loved me, I let you pay for something I did and didn't have the guts to face."

The light from the dash glowed on their faces. Talbot could feel Nita's eyes on him. The scent of her assailed him. The feel of her shoulder against his shoulder was fire.

"Faster, Jim. Drive faster." He pressed harder on the accelerator. The car lunged forward, its bright lights illuminating the road. He heard her whispered approval.

Forks in the road loomed ahead. Left was a huge sign: *Golden Springs—Nature's Underwater Fairyland*. To the right, the road was narrow and dark. Talbot swung the Buick right.

Memories swarmed in upon him on the whistling wind. They'd been on this road the first time he had her. He wondered if she would remember, and told himself she wouldn't.

His voice was bitter. "We had a fine love, Nita. I was a

poor kid who rode the county bus to high school. You had your own car and more spending money than my family had for a week's groceries. But that didn't matter. You told me you loved me and if I liked, you wouldn't even speak to any one else but me, just to prove it."

Nita's voice was soft. "I meant it too. And I hated you in a way. I wanted to be able to laugh at you. The way my friends did—"

"You don't have to tell me."

"But I couldn't laugh. I found out I couldn't stay away from you. We'd fight and I'd make you beg me to come back, and all the time I knew I'd die if I didn't have you."

"Sure. You put me through hell."

"You were a fool to let me, Jim."

"No." His sardonic voice broke across hers. "I loved you. Nothing else mattered."

"You have the bitterest voice in the world."

"I'm the bitterest guy in the world."

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I got mixed up in a robbery for thrills. I was drinking. When I sobered up, I was with this boy, and the police were after us. All I could think was I had to get to you. If I could get to you, I'd be safe."

I remember, Talbot thought. Nita had broken a date. Another one. He'd been too miserable to sleep. At about eleven-thirty, he got out of bed, dressed and slipped from the house. He was sitting near the dark road when Nita's car came tearing along it. He still remembered how wonderful it had been to see her.

But it hadn't been wonderful. She'd told him all about it. She and a boy robbing a filling station just for the hell of it. Only the boy hadn't been drunk enough. He'd lost his nerves. Dressed as a man, Nita had done the thrill robbery alone. The station lights were already out. The operator's face was to the wall. She said she was sure he never saw her clearly.

The police were tracing her car. Nita begged him to help her. Sure, her family was rich enough to get her out of it, but she'd die before she'd let them find out. Jim was the only one who could help. She was hysterical. He told the cops he'd borrowed her car, gone alone, robbed alone. It wasn't until later that he learned that Nita had been armed.

It was too late then. The police believed every word of his first confession. He was poor, he'd borrowed Nita's car, he'd robbed in order to get money to date her. His family remembered he'd dressed, left the house. They couldn't say at what hour he left, and he hadn't returned that night.

A nightmare of jail and waiting. Nita didn't come near him. At the trial she attended only as a spectator. She stood by, hearing the Florida law read: *Armed Robbery. At the discretion of the court, a term of years equal to the natural life of the convicted.*

He'd believed until after the trial that Nita was going to come forward and tell the truth. Afterwards, he broke down and told the truth because he was scared and hopeless. And nobody believed him. . . .

He slowed the car abruptly and whipped it off the highway into a shell-paved road that ended on a bluff overlooking Cypress River. Headlights illumined oak and sweet bay matting the far bank of the black stream. This had been their bluff once.

He cut off the engine and sat watching the soft glow of light across her face, and the old emptiness hit him, hard.

"You know where you are?" His mouth twisted when he asked her.

She sat up and looked around. She shrugged.

She fumbled in her purse and found a cigarette. White fingers unsteady, she placed it between her lips. She dug again and came up with a gaudy book of matches.

He read the red letters on the yellow cover. *Bonny Williams' Golden Club. On the Golden Springs Road.*"

"No gold engraved cigarette lighter?" Talbot taunted.

She lighted her cigarette and tossed the dead match through the window.

"Can't keep 'em. I bet I've had three dozen and I've lost 'em all. Mike says he won't let me have any more." She laughed. "He says it's embarrassing where some of 'em are found. Once he told some friends that one had been found in the Y.M.C.A. men's room."

"Still careless. You haven't changed much."

She dragged a long nervous breath of smoke. The cigarette glowed cherry red. "Oh, I've changed. Don't think I haven't."

She slapped down on the door handle. The door swung open. Nita slid her legs around and stepped out of the car. Talbot watched her for a moment. His gaze moved to the seat. Her handkerchief was there, fragile and scented. He opened his mouth to taunt her that she'd dropped her handkerchief. But he said nothing.

He picked up the handkerchief, shoved it in his coat pocket. He got out of the car then and followed her to the edge of the bluff.

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## Chapter 5

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SHE FACED HIM in the darkness. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets. The rising wind billowed the diaphonous wrap about her head.

"Cigarette lighters aren't the only things I lose, Jim. I lose everything. I'm hexed. Jinxed. I always lose everything I want."

"Maybe you just don't know what you want."

"You know me better than that. I know exactly what I want."

"Sure you do. And every day it's something different."

"I haven't been happy, Jim."

He couldn't see why not, he said, She had everything. Money. Position. Marriage to Laynebeck. More money. Anyway, he hadn't talked to Laynebeck very long before he'd found out she wasn't spending a hell of a lot of effort to keep Mike happy.

She was silent a long time. Finally she whispered, her voice tense, "I can't help it, Jim! I'm in love with someone else."

He could see the outline of her face. Hazy, the way the memory had been through the years. Indistinct, and yet he could never lose it, no matter how hard he tried.

"That's why I had to see you, Jim. It's about Dan."

"Your husband's missing partner." His voice hardened. "You're in love with Dan Calvert? How long?"

"What does it matter how long? I've known him all my life. We were kids together. Maybe I always loved him."

"Nice to tell yourself that anyway. If you change men the way you do your pants, you begin to see yourself for what you are. But if you can remember you *always* loved the newest one, it changes it."

She flicked her cigarette out into the dark. "I thought I could talk to you."

"You can. In fact, I think you better. Anything you can tell me about Calvert might help me to find him."

She swore she could add nothing to that. She told him the same story Mike had, except she added that she and Calvert had laughed, planning to put sleeping pills in Mike's coffee so they could be alone all evening. But Calvert never showed up.

He asked her the same question he'd asked Mike. What would she do about Calvert if he found him? She didn't know. She'd tried to make Mike divorce her, but he'd refused. Very definitely.

She asked for a cigarette. He lit one for her and stuck it in her mouth with a short jabbing motion. He suggested that maybe Calvert was scared, and didn't want to come back. The kids had called Calvert the gutless wonder even in high school.

"I've only been here a few hours, but I already know plenty of reasons why Calvert might have run. Partners with a man losing his grip. In love with that man's wife. In the middle of a political scrap that he can't win. Nothing but trouble ahead. . . ."

"Dan loves me."

"Mike is sure Dan is still his loyal partner, too. Looks like both of you have faith in a man who might be fooling both of you."

"He might be deceiving Mike. I know he wants me." There was a chilled edge to Nita's voice.

He shrugged. "Shall we start back?"

She followed him, walking very slowly. When she reached the car, she flipped the cigarette away and slid inside. He slammed the door, went around and got in under the wheel.

She asked him not to hate her. It was ten years. He told her to forget it. On the highway, he shoved his foot to the floorboard and held it there. He heard Nita sigh, felt her relax against the seat. She broke the silence to ask if he disapproved of her because of his idol, dear Mike. His answer was short. Mike was the only person who'd given him a thought while he was in hell. She laughed and said nothing more. A block from her home on Fort Queen, she nodded

toward a dark curb. He pulled into the curb, opened the door. She sat looking at him.

"We could have been happy. Only it took me ten years to get sense enough to know it. I'm sorry, Jim. Sorry as hell."

He said nothing. She slid out of the car, then reached back in for her purse. Their eyes met. She smiled ruefully. She stepped back on the curb. He moved away, looking for her in the rear-view mirror. She was already lost in the darkness.

He parked the Buick across the street from the Duval House. Carrying his suitcase, he started toward the hotel entrance.

Almost at the curb, he noticed the black Plymouth. The police car with the two-way radio. The door opened. He watched Strick Clemmons get out.

Clemmons said, "Hey, fellow. You."

Talbot stopped at the doorway. He could feel his heart race. Anxiety. He'd been a scared kid in this town. No matter what he'd become, he still had the habit of fear, here.

He said, "All right. What you want?"

"How about coming along with me."

"You crazy? I'm going to bed. Maybe tomorrow."

"Look, mister. Don't make trouble. I ain't asking you. I'm telling you."

"And I just told you. Forget it." He hefted the suitcase and started walking again.

Clemmons took three steps on his pole-like legs. He caught Talbot's shoulder, trying to stop him and turn him at the same time.

Talbot dropped the suitcase. He turned on the balls of his feet. With a quick movement he drove his left wrist deep into the thin man's belly.

Clemmons jackknifed forward. Talbot gave him credit. The deputy sheriff recovered quickly. He didn't hit the walk face first. He went backwards, striking on the sharp knobs of his tail bones.

Talbot watched the police positive appear in the bony hands. Clemmons sat on the walk, the gun fixed on Talbot's belt buckle.

With his left hand, Clemmons wiped his long chin. His eyes

were slits. "All right now, fellow. We're through playin'. You want to get in my car, or you want me to shoot you?"

"I want you to shoot me," Talbot said. His voice was cold. "First, I'd like you to tell me why you're doing it just this way."

"Resistin' an officer," Clemmons said.

"An officer!" Talbot's voice mocked. The thin man stood up. "I remember you, Clemmons. The time you took Crazy Perkins ten miles out on the Lake Ware road and made him walk home barefoot. The time you rolled the drunk after a football game. When they caught you, you swore he was a queer that had got fresh with you."

Clemmons stared. "Talbot! Now I remember. Used to live out on the Addison farm. Got you for armed robbery, didn't they?"

"Yeah. Only I didn't do it. So now we've covered old times. Put up that cannon and let me alone."

The gun didn't waver. "You might as well make up your mind, Talbot. You ain't walkin' back in here and takin' a poke at me."

"All right. I'll make a deal with you. Don't you ever grab me, Clemmons. And I'll never hit you."

"Still a wise guy, ain't you? Well, wise guy, Sheriff Roberts wants to see you. He's waitin' in his office for you. Get in my car. And get in it now."

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## Chapter 6

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CLEMMONS PARKED the Plymouth in an "Official Cars" parking space on the courthouse square.

Talbot stepped out, looking around. Most of the stores were dark at this hour. Only a few cars lined the square.

Clemmons prodded Talbot in the side and they started across the courtyard. There was a huge sign perched atop a building across the street. An arrow pointing east: *See Golden Springs. Six Miles. Nature's Underwater Fairyland.*

They walked together up the wide steps of the courthouse. They turned left in a musty, dim-lit corridor. Talbot listened to the echo of their heels. At the end of the corridor there was a lighted door with gold-leaf lettering: *Sheriff's Office. Marvel County, Florida.*

Clemmons pushed the door open, motioning Talbot in ahead of him. The room was large, sparsely furnished. It was divided in the middle by a wood railing. A man in his shirt sleeves sat at a blond-wood desk behind the railing. He wore a shoulder holster. It was empty. He looked up.

"What you got, Strick?"

"The guy Roberts wanted to talk to."

The deputy looked up at Talbot. His name was Ballard. A big man, broad-shouldered and thick-chested. His blue eyes were set like pig-eyes in sweaty sockets of fat. And yet Talbot saw that the eyes were the same as those in Clemmons' thin horse face. It was the hate that made them the same. He was a stranger and they mistrusted him. Though they were totally unlike, they saw him with the same suspicious eyes.

Ballard pressed a button on his desk.

The door marked *Sheriff L.F.M. Roberts, Private*, opened.

The Sheriff came through it. Take a man six-feet tall and stuff him tallow fat, give him more money than he can spend and more power than he has intelligence to wield, re-elect him

to an office he should never have had in the first place, shake well and add high blood pressure, sloth and ambition. That was L.F.M. Roberts. Even his black wavy hair was oily. He was wearing an expensively tailored gray suit and hand-tooled brown leather boots. He was carrying a ten-gallon gray Stetson.

"Well now," he said in a thick drawl, "what's this?"

Ballard swiveled around. "The guy you wanted to talk to, Sheriff. Talbot."

The Sheriff plodded across to the railing and peered at Talbot.

"Youah face is familiar, suh. You live around here?"

"I used to."

"Jim Talbot," Clemmons said. "He used to live out on the Addison farm."

"That's right. You were a deputy then, Sheriff." Talbot said.

"He did time," Clemmons said. "Two years. Armed robbery."

Roberts frowned. "Armed robbery is good for a life term in this state."

"Sure. And that's what this guy's sentence was, too. Don't you remember, Sheriff? Laynebeck got him a new trial and sprung him."

Roberts' mouth tightened. "Laynebeck. . . . Yeah. Now I remember." He faced Talbot. "And now you've come back to town and Laynebeck meets you at the station, eh? Still good friends with him?"

"Which criminal statute does that violate, Sheriff?"

"I'm asking you a question," Roberts said. "It won't avail you a lot to make an enemy of me in this town, Talbot."

Talbot tried to keep his temper, knowing all the time he wasn't going to. His voice was cold. "Stop shoving, Sheriff. I came back here on business. I don't want trouble. But I don't want to be pushed around, either."

The Sheriff leaned forward across the railing. His eyes glistened in their sockets of fat.

"Listen to me, Talbot. You been away a long time. So I'll explain to you. I been sheriff in this county eight years. Don't make trouble with me. Don't think being Mike Laynebeck's

boy will save you. Not this time. I want to know why you're here. You'll be smart to play along with me. There's something about Laynebeck you better know. He's got troubles. He's running down. His grip on this county is going and mine is tightening. Get it?"

"Go on."

"That's it. If you came back here thinking that maybe you were going to last as Mike Laynebeck's muscleman—you better forget that right now. In fact if you came here to help Laynebeck at all, you'd be wise to get out of town. Tonight. Laynebeck can't help you. Like I said, he's got his own troubles."

Talbot studied the sweating man. "I'm in this town to do a job, Sheriff. I'm going to do it."

"Then you're a damned fool."

"I don't think so. I came back here to work for Mike Laynebeck. It doesn't have anything to do with you—or your politics. I thought I'd forgotten all about you. But I know now I haven't. When I was a kid you came out with a furniture company truck to the Addison farm where we lived. Deputy Sheriff Roberts! You helped them repossess some furniture my mother had been paying for on instalments. We owed only twenty dollars more but you took it all back. Beds, chairs, everything."

A flush crawled across Roberts' beefy face. "That's the law, Talbot. You miss an instalment, the whole bill comes due."

"Even the furniture company was willing to let Mom keep part of it. I'll never forget the look on her face. You took everything she'd worked so hard for. When the driver wanted to leave part of the furniture because he couldn't stand the hurt look in her eyes, you wouldn't let him."

Roberts' jaw was thrust out. "Why did you come back here, Talbot?"

"I told you. Mike Laynebeck hired me to do a job for him."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"If I was you, I wouldn't take that job."

"I've already taken it."

"Why?"

"For money."

"Maybe you didn't know what you'd run up against trying to buck me in this town, Talbot. So I'm telling you. I don't know what job you're supposed to do for Laynebeck, but you're going to find out you got plenty of opposition. I'm a big man in this town. Stay here, Talbot, and you'll find just how big a puddle I do make."

Talbot walked across the square, carrying his suitcase. Panic and anger were stirring up his insides. He entered the Duval House and went through the silent lobby.

He had to wait at the desk. A woman was there ahead of him. She'd evidently just arrived in town. She was tired and washed-out looking. Looking at her, Talbot remembered that not even the nights were cool here in summer. This near to hell, he thought, how could it be cool?

"I'd like a room, please," the woman said to the clerk. Talbot yawned, waiting.

"Yes, m'am. Single or double?" The clerk rang for a bellhop while the woman signed a registration card. The bellhop took her bags and the tired woman followed him toward the elevator.

Talbot took her place at the desk.

"I'm James Talbot," he said. "I think you have a room reservation for me."

"Yes, Mr. Talbot."

The clerk turned to the files. Jim watched the man's face pale. He came back to the desk, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid there's a mistake. There was a reservation. But it's been canceled."

"What is this? I know—"

He stopped. He knew, all right. Roberts hadn't been kidding! In the few minutes it had taken Talbot to cross the square and walk one block north, Roberts had started making things tough for him. Sure, Roberts would know this was the hotel Talbot had intended staying in. Clemmons had picked him up outside it earlier.

The clerk looked miserable. He was shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, sir. There isn't a thing available. Not tonight."

Talbot stared at him. The man remained pale but adamant. Talbot nodded, his laugh was short. The clerk said again that he was sorry. Talbot hefted his suitcase. It seemed heavier than ever. He couldn't remember having ever been so tired.

He crossed the street, got in the Buick and drove up the street to the Marvel Hotel. His hopes were not very high. He parked in the loading zone and went across the deserted lobby.

The clerk was smiling and pushed a registration card across the desk to him. Talbot scrawled his name. The clerk turned the card around. The smile on his face froze.

"I'm dreadfully sorry, sir. But I let you sign without checking my files. There isn't a thing available tonight." And as Talbot started to protest, he said again, "Nothing."

Talbot returned to the street. There were other hotels here in town. But he was sure that Roberts had sent out the word. This was the beginning. Sheriff Roberts was showing his muscle pretty fast.

Talbot yawned as he crossed the walk and flung himself into the Buick. He knew it was useless to try the other hotels. He decided to drive out of town somewhere, park the Buick and sleep in it. He had slept in a hell of a lot less comfortable places. Tomorrow he'd find a room. Tomorrow the magic name of Laynebeck would go to work. Meanwhile, the only important thing was sleep.

He drove slowly, more asleep than awake.

He was aware first of the blurred sound of movement on his right.

A car sped past him on the wrong side. Talbot swung his car left, slamming on his brakes.

The other car was a few feet ahead of him. Something blossomed red in its window. The sound of the pistol was like a cannon in the silent street.

The right-hand side of the windshield shattered, streaking out from the bullet hole.

In the second that Talbot stared at the shattered windshield, the other car roared ahead, whipped around the corner, tires squealing. There were no lights on it. There was a blink of

red as the driver went chicken at the last minute and touched the brake pedal to keep from skidding into the curb of the narrow side street.

Talbot whipped the Buick around the corner. He drove with one hand, gripped his .32 automatic in the other.

The other car made another turn in the darkness. An alley or a drive. Talbot went three blocks before he admitted the sour truth. He had lost it.

He pulled in to a curb and stopped the car. He looked at the gun. His hand was shaking. Then he noticed he had snagged something else when he grabbed at the .32 in his pocket. There was Nita's fragile-scented handkerchief crushed in his fingers.

At Barnett's All-Night Drug Store on the west side of the Square, Talbot entered a telephone pay booth. He looked for a dial. There was none. When a woman's sleepy voice finally questioned him, he gave her Laynebeck's home telephone number. He could hear the telephone ringing across the lines a long time before Mike answered.

"Mike. Jim Talbot. I thought I better tell you. Somebody just took a shot at me."

"A hell of an hour to be out. I didn't expect you to start work tonight. Why don't you get some sleep?"

"It seems I can't get a hotel room. But the hell with that. Either Roberts has gone completely nuts ordering me shot at, or somebody was shooting at *your* car. I just want to make sure before I do anything."

"Why would they shoot at you?"

"Not more than three people knew I had that Buick tonight—until I got down to Roberts' office. You. Nita. And your chauffeur."

"Yes. I trust Fisher. Nita is in bed."

"Just maybe they weren't shooting at me. Do you use the Buick very often?"

"No. Very infrequently."

"Does Nita use it?"

"Sometimes."

"Anyone else?"

"Yes. Dan Calvert used it often, Jim."

Talbot breathed heavily. His hands were still shaking. He'd have to check with Roberts' office. But maybe Dan Calvert was the answer to the gunshot. If it was the answer, that meant somebody in that town was pretty sure Dan Calvert was still alive.

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## Chapter 7

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TALBOT LEFT the brightly lighted all-night drug store. He looked at the bullet-shattered windshield, glanced up at the lights burning in the windows of the Sheriff's suite of offices in the courthouse.

He crossed the deserted street. Street sweepers were grooming the curbs with large brooms. He went up the short walk and entered the courthouse. There was an eerie silence in the dim corridors.

Ballard was dozing in his swivel chair with his big feet crossed on the blond-wood desk. Talbot entered the office, went through the swinging gate at the railing and shoved Ballard's feet off the desk.

The fat deputy sat up, blinking.

For a moment, neither spoke. Ballard relaxed, straightened up in his chair. "The tough guy," he said.

Talbot looked around the bare room. "Where is Clemmons?" he said. "Out doing more errands for the boss?"

Ballard shrugged. "He might be."

Talbot looked at him. "Some day you're going to talk yourself to death. . . . Is Roberts still here?"

"Maybe. You want to see him?"

"I want to talk to him."

"What about?"

"I'd like to report a shooting."

Ballard's pig-eyes narrowed. "All right," he said. "Just a minute."

He got up and knocked on the Sheriff's door. Talbot heard Roberts' thick drawl. "All right, Ballard. What is it?"

Ballard opened the door and spoke through the opening. "Jim Talbot is back. Says he wants to talk to you."

"Come to say good-bye, eh?" Roberts' voice boomed. He

appeared in the doorway. "Well, suh," he said, "You want to come in my office, Mistuh Talbot?"

Talbot nodded and entered the private office. He heard Roberts closing the door behind him. He looked about. There were expensive furnishings in this room, a sleek new desk, steel filing cabinets, leather-covered chairs and couches. There was a Silex coffee-maker behind Roberts' desk, with coffee brewing. On all the desks and cabinets and tables were enlarged photos of Roberts and his large family. All daughters. In every picture Roberts was beaming in the center of them, his arms about as many of them as he could encompass.

Roberts went around and slopped down behind his desk. He nodded toward a chair facing him. Talbot sat down.

"Well, suh, what can I do for you?"

"I don't know. I can't get a room in any hotel in town. I suppose you wouldn't know anything about that. But I came here because I was shot at tonight. I thought I'd report it to you."

The Sheriff's face darkened. He sat forward.

"When did it happen?"

"Less than thirty minutes ago."

"Did you get a look at the man who did it?"

"No. A car pulled up on the wrong side of me. I slammed on my brakes. Whoever was driving took a shot at me. It shattered the windshield on Laynebeck's new blue Buick."

Roberts made a sound of sympathy. "And you didn't get a look at the man?"

"Like I said, it all happened in a hurry. They took off like a bat out of hell. I tried to catch them and I couldn't. They had no lights burning, and I didn't have a chance to see the license."

Roberts took a deep breath. "That's why I hate to see men like you coming back to town, Talbot. Bad guys. With reps. It always means trouble. And I hate trouble in my county."

"I didn't ask for trouble. Looks like the only trouble I've had so far has been with you and your boys."

"Are you intimatin'—"

"That you warned the hotels not to take me? Yes. As to the shots. I didn't see Strick Clemmons when I came in the office. The driver of that car could have been alone—"

"You really want trouble, don't you?" The Sheriff's voice was hoarse. "Comin' back heah. Makin' accusations . . ."

"Strick Clemmons may be in a beer parlor for all I know. I came here to report an attempt on my life. Are you going to do anything about it, or not?"

Roberts spread his fat hands. "What can I do? Like you said, it was dark, the car got away, you got no chance to see who shot at you. What do you want me to do?"

Talbot brought a smashed-nosed bullet slug from his pocket. He held it out in the palm of his hand.

"Where'd you get that?" Roberts said.

"It's the slug that was shot at me," Talbot replied. "I picked it up off the floor of the car. I want a ballistics report on it."

"What good will that do? You got a gun for comparison?"

Talbot smiled. "I might find one. Later. I want a complete report. Model gun, calibre. Grooves, bullet markings. Everything. Your office can handle a thing like this?"

Roberts' florid face paled. He stared at Talbot for a silent moment. He got up and poured himself a half cup of coffee. He drank it black.

He nodded. "We can make the tests," he said. "I'll have the report for you tomorrow. If you're still in town."

"I'll be here," Talbot said. He tossed over the slug.

The Sheriff caught it and placed it on a pad of white paper at the edge of his desk. "Now maybe you'll answer a question for me?"

"Why not?"

"Why are you here?"

"I told you. Mike Laynebeck hired me."

"We've found out about you, Talbot. You run a successful private investigating agency in New York City. Why would Laynebeck brink you back here? To spy on me? I want to know! Why would you give up good paying accounts to come back here?"

"Sheriff, Laynebeck saved me from hell. I'll do whatever I can for him. I came here without even knowing exactly what he wanted. Now I know. And I'm willing to tell you. Maybe it'll pull you off my neck for a little while. He hired me to find his partner, Dan Calvert."

"Oh, for God's sake! That! I've tried to tell Laynebeck that

Calvert probably just took off on some business of his own. He's a queer duck. Don't like to be told nothing. Don't like to have to explain. He just wanted to go. He went."

"Maybe. Maybe not. That might hold up for a week-end, or even a week. He's been gone three weeks now."

"And you're going to find him?"

"I'm going to try. In spite of you. How about it, Sheriff? Maybe you can help me on that? Did Calvert have enemies here? Weren't things getting pretty hot for Laynebeck and him? Maybe Calvert got scared."

"I wouldn't know."

"Would you know that Calvert often drove Laynebeck's blue Buick? The one I was driving tonight when somebody took a shot at me? Maybe they weren't shooting at me. Maybe they thought Dan Calvert was back in town."

"That's an interesting theory. But I'm afraid I wouldn't know anything about it either way."

"Wouldn't you? What have you found out about Calvert's disappearance, Sheriff? He couldn't disappear and your office do nothing about it, could he?"

"I've assigned a deputy to the case, Mr. Talbot. When the time comes to make a report, I'm sure he'll have one."

"Calvert's a big man in this town. Yet you're not very upset about his disappearance, are you?"

"No, suh, I'm not. I'm surprised that Mike Laynebeck is takin' it seriously enough to bring you all the way here from New York to look for him." He leaned over the desk. His voice was hard. "As a matter of fact, I'm beginning to think maybe your lookin' for Calvert is just a cover-up for your real reason for being here."

Talbot met his eyes evenly. "That's why Laynebeck hired me."

"Is it? Or did he hire you to see what I'm doing? Maybe to keep some of his boys in line? Boys that are losing their faith in him and would like to break off—"

Talbot laughed. "If you investigated me, Sheriff, you know I'm no muscle and rod man."

"Like you said, you owe your freedom to Laynebeck—"

A scream broke across the Sheriff's words. A scream that

cut across Talbot's raw nerves, sending a tingle along his spine.

For a moment the two men stared at each other. The Sheriff looked slightly ill. The door behind Talbot burst open. Ballard bolted into the room, his eyes still red-rimmed with sleep.

"Get out of here." The Sheriff's low voice was hard.

It stopped Ballard like a blow in the chest. "Yes, sir." He stood looking foolishly from one to the other. He backed out, closing the door after him.

The Sheriff tried to pick up the unraveled ends of the conversation. "Now, like I was saying—"

"Who's your company, Sheriff?" Talbot was standing up. "Who's the woman in that room?"

"That's none of your business. We have our prisoners. We have our way of handling them. Now, if you got no more to discuss with me—"

"I have, though." Talbot went around the desk. Roberts sprang to his feet. Talbot brushed past him.

"Don't open that door." Roberts' voice was a tense whisper. "Workin' for Laynebeck don't give you the right to interfere—"

Talbot was looking over his shoulder. His mouth twisted. "A scream like that gives any human being the right to interfere."

He turned the knob. The door was locked but the key was in it. He unlocked the door and swung it open.

A jail matron stood just inside the door. She had a short leather belt in her fat hand. Her graying hair was awry and her face perspiring. She stared at Talbot a moment and then her gaze moved on to Sheriff Roberts just behind him.

Strick Clemmons was standing over the blonde girl who was tied in a straight chair. Talbot's mouth formed a dry smile. Another question answered. Clemmons hadn't been the man who took a shot at him from the darkened car on Fort Queen. Strick had been busy with other matters.

Talbot stepped into the small, hot room. The air was heavy with the odor of sweat.

The blonde girl was sprawled half out of the chair. Her arms were handcuffed together behind the chair back and they were twisted, pulled so tightly that her full breasts

strained against the torn bodice of her white shirtwaist. Her head sagged on her shoulder. Her thick creamy-colored hair hung down loose. She had screamed only once. She appeared to be unconscious.

"What's the matter with her?"

Strick Clemmons turned slowly and stared at Talbot. He wiped a mist of spittle from his twisted mouth. His shoulders moved in an effeminate gesture of disgust.

"Why, she's drunk," Clemmons said.

The girl moaned, her eyelids flickered, and slowly she straightened her head. Talbot saw the livid marks of Clemmons' hand across her bloodless cheeks. A thin thread of blood ran from her nostrils across her teeth-marked lips and chin. Spots of blood were on her torn shirt and her exposed body.

Talbot spoke to the matron. "Take off those handcuffs."

The matron glanced at Roberts. He nodded. She shrugged and removed the metal links. The girl almost fell from the chair.

"What are the charges, Sheriff?" Talbot said. He saw the girl was alert now, watching him closely.

The Sheriff was silent a moment. At last he said, "Common prostitute."

Talbot couldn't say why, but he knew this was a lie, that there was another reason why they'd beaten this girl in this back room. But it would do no good arguing with the Sheriff.

"Is there a fine?"

"Fifty dollars."

"And she couldn't pay it?"

"She wouldn't."

"It's a lie," the girl whispered.

"Shut up," the matron said. "If you know what's good for you, shut up."

"He brought me here," the girl jerked her head toward Clemmons. "He hit me. He—"

"It's all right," Talbot said. "The Sheriff will let me pay your fine. You're going to be all right."

"I'm willing to let her go," the Sheriff said. There was a short static pause. "If she gets out of town."

The girl stood up, staring at the Sheriff. She wiped the blood from under her nose with the back of her hand. Her

bright mouth twisted. She staggered a little and caught herself against the back of the straight chair.

The matron brought a lightweight gray coat. She handed it to Talbot. The girl didn't look at him as he draped it over her shoulders. She couldn't seem to see Roberts well enough to please her. Her pale eyes were clouded with her hatred.

"I want to get out of here," she whispered. She began to tremble suddenly. She looked up at Talbot. "Will you take me out of here?"

"Sure." Talbot took out his wallet. He fished out a pair of twenty-dollar bills and two fives. He offered them to the Sheriff.

Roberts' face was cold. "Pay Ballard. Outside," he said. "He'll give you a Sheriff's Office receipt."

Talbot's lips pulled thin over his teeth. "I'll be pleased to have it, I'm sure."

He took the girl's arm and led her through the door and out into the Sheriff's private office. Her steps faltered and he led her to a chair and poured her a cup of coffee from the Sheriff's private container. Roberts, the matron and Clemmons followed them into the room. They stood silent, watching the girl sip the steaming liquid. Roberts seemed scarcely breathing. He didn't take his eyes from Talbot's face.

The girl finished the cup, and her whisper thanked Talbot for the coffee.

Talbot took her arm and led her from the office. Outside, Ballard wrote out a receipt for fifty dollars.

Talbot read it. "Don't you put down what the fine was paid for?"

Ballard just looked at him. "You make jokes," he said.

Talbot felt the girl leaning heavily against him as they left the office. He put his arm about her as they went along the darkened corridor. He heard her breath catch once in a stifled sob. She made no other sound. They went down the steps to the sidewalk.

He glanced at her in the street light. Why had they beat her? And why released her to him like this? Why had Roberts said casually that she'd been picked up as a common prostitute when obviously they'd been putting her through some kind of third degree?

He shook his head. He knew what the law in the wrong hands could do.

He took two twenty-dollar bills from his pocket, closed the girl's trembling hand over them. She tried to draw away, protesting.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "There's only one thing for you to do. Get out of town."

She looked at him. Finally she nodded. "All right. I'll leave tomorrow."

"Look. If you're smart you'll leave right now. There's the bus station, right across the street. That's the lovely thing about this town. You can get out of the place as soon as you've seen what it's like."

"I can't run off like this—without my clothes."

"If Roberts gets his hands on you again, your clothes won't seem important. You live here in town? Your folks live here?"

"No."

"Then show Roberts you're smarter than he is. Get out of town before he can get hold of you again."

"They've got to let me alone. They can't run me out!"

He shrugged. "All right. Go back up there and play some more games with Strick Clemmons."

"Thanks for what you've done. But—"

"Look, baby. Get smart. Either tell them what they want to know, or get out of town fast—"

He started away. She caught his arm. Her mouth was a taut line. "How do you know—they were asking me anything?"

She was looking up at him. Her eyes were filled with fright. Here was one scared girl, he knew. Afraid to trust anyone. Had it been ten years since he'd run in terror from this hot land of injustice? He doubted it. He shook his head, his teeth gritting hard together. Above her head he could see the bright neon sign, the red, green and yellow arrow: *See Golden Springs—Six Miles—Nature's Underwater Fairyland.*

He shivered.

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## Chapter 8

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"WHAT THE devil's the matter with you?" Talbot demanded. "Why can't you get out of this town? Don't you know when you've had enough?"

She held out her hand with his money in it. "Take your money back," she said. "I'll be all right. I've got a job, mister. And maybe they'll leave me alone."

"Sure they will. When you get smart enough to tell them what they want to know."

"Whether I like it or not, mister, I can't go. I've got to stay here."

He took her arm and started along the walk. She looked up at him. "Where are we going?"

"Since we're going to be in this lousy town together, we may as well be friends."

He steered her across the street into an all-night café. They sat in a booth at the rear of the brightly lighted restaurant. A drunk was sitting alone, his head bowed over a bowl of soup, at the counter that ran the length of the room. Two taxi drivers argued sleepily at a table up in front.

"What's your name?" Talbot said. She sat across the table from him, took powder and rouge from her pocketbook and began to repair the damage to her face.

He caught his breath, looking at her. She had the kind of beauty that hit you with the impact of a fist in the belly. She wasn't over twenty, that was certain. He watched her trace a lipstick over her full lips, watching her reflection in a hand mirror. Her intent eyes were the impossible blue of the sky on a sultry day. He let his eyes move over her. There was a sheen to her pathless skin. Her tinted flesh was flawless. It made you sad for her.

She wasn't ever going to be so perfect again. And she was

wasting her beauty on this town. She was young and lovely tonight, even frightened and worked over as she was. He smiled appreciatively at her perfection, her shoulder-length blonde hair, and skin that was like hot liquid platinum.

She hesitated, watching herself in the tiny mirror for a moment, then she said, "My name is Dawson. Laura Dawson. I'm a dancer. When I dance I use a very gaudy name. But that's what they want. Luri Dusan. Isn't that a swell name?"

It would be swell, if he could overlook the hysteria under her voice.

"It didn't keep you from being picked up by the law."

She bit her lip. "It didn't have anything to do with my dancing."

He was watching her. "You want to tell me about it?"

She shook her head, breathing heavily.

The waitress came. Talbot ordered a two-inch steak with french fries, salad and coffee. He looked at Laura. She nodded. "That sounds good to me," she said. "I'll have the same."

Talbot smiled. "Well, at least you've got sense enough to eat. Why haven't you got sense enough to run?"

She shrugged. "I want to stay here," she said. "What I want is here."

He smiled. "A man," he said. "So you're in love with some jerk. Then why did he let the police get you tonight?"

Her face was pale. She opened her mouth to answer him and then closed it. She just met his eyes evenly.

Now he grinned. "Okay. So now we know you won't leave town because you're in love with some guy. Let an old man tell you something, baby. Love can make you do some damn fool things. Staying in this town is one of them."

"Whether there's anyone I love or not, I'm not going to let them run me out of town. I'm going to stay. I've got a job. I dance at Bonny Williams' Golden Club."

Talbot frowned, trying to remember where he'd heard that name. He remembered. He'd seen the red letters on the golden cover of the book matches that Nita had been carrying in her purse.

"What sort of place is it?" Jim said.

"The Golden Club? As good as there is in this town, I guess.

But nothing to sing about. I've danced in a lot better places. But no little town has any decent night spots."

"Why did you come here? A pretty girl like you who can also dance rates a hell of a lot better place than this."

She looked at him sharply but said nothing.

Talbot laughed wryly. "She was dancing in a decent town. *He* comes along. Next thing she knows, she's dancing in a hell-hole just so she can be near him. Boy, would I like to meet a guy that can do that to a pretty kid like you!"

She smiled. "You guess things pretty good."

"Hell, baby. I'm not guessing. I was in love once myself."

"Anyway, here I am. And here I'm going to stay."

"Why couldn't Bonny Williams keep the Sheriff off you?"

"He tried. But—well, he's scared of Roberts. There wasn't anybody who could help me."

"Not even the great lover?"

She bit her lip. "There's wasn't anything he could do." Her eyes flashed appreciation. "I guess nobody could have stopped them but you. I—I'm glad you came along. Maybe I can repay you."

"Don't worry about it."

The waitress brought their meal. Talbot began to eat, realizing for the first time how hungry he really was. The girl was watching him.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Jim Talbot. I just got in town at eight o'clock tonight. From New York." He said it all hurriedly, a chunk of steaming steak waiting on his fork.

"And you walked into Sheriff Roberts' office and got me out of there? Are you magic?"

He chewed his steak. "Not quite. I've been hired by a man Roberts is afraid of, that's all. Don't worry, Roberts is having his innings. I've tried all night to get a hotel room. I can't get one. Roberts has given out the order. So they won't take me in. He's making it tough for me to stay in town."

"I have a hotel room. I'll share it with you—for what you've done for me—if you'll be smart enough to know that's all I'm offering."

He nodded. "I'd never take advantage of a girl who loves another guy enough to stay in this hell-hole."

She didn't smile. "All right, so I do love him. I just never heard of a thing like that stopping a man when he thought there was a chance."

Talbot's voice was cold. "Maybe I don't want the chance."

Her head snapped up, color crept up her cheeks. "I didn't think I was that bad."

"I'd like a room, baby. But that's all I want."

She frowned, then looked down at her coat, caught tightly across her torn dress. "What's the matter with me?"

"Nothing, baby. There's something the matter with me."

Her eyes widened, shocked. "I don't know if I like you, after all."

"Does it matter whether you like me or not?"

She nodded. "It does to me. I had a chance to repay you. I could offer you a place to sleep. But I'm afraid of people I don't understand. I was beginning to like you. I guess every woman likes a man who is strong enough to protect her. You're good looking. But you—don't talk very nice."

"Okay. So why don't you grab a bus out of this town and let that wonderful guy you're so crazy about come to find you. He will, if he really wants you."

"Maybe I want him too much to care whether he'd follow me or not. Maybe he didn't do anything when the Sheriff sent that Clemmons for me—but at least he's really a man."

Talbot laughed. "You sound like you're begging me to rape you."

"I'm not! But I saw one man like—like that Clemmons tonight. It gets me all sick."

He grinned. "Look, honey. I'm thirty. You're twenty. You're in love with some guy. I'm in love with nobody. That's the way I want it. I don't want to get tangled up with any dame. Isn't that clear enough? I'd like to sleep, but you don't have to share your room with me."

She pulled her plate toward her and began to eat again. "Well, all right," she said. "If you're sure that's all it is. I guess I can see it now. You've hated somebody for a long time, haven't you? It's all in your eyes. Hated her and loved her at the same time." She shook her head. Her blonde curls trembled over her shoulders. "I know what that is, all right."

"I'm not in love with anybody." His voice was cold. He sat back, rammed his hand into his coat pocket. His fingers closed over the fragile handkerchief. It was almost as if he could smell her in the room.

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## Chapter 9

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LAURA'S ROOM in the Broadway Hotel was shabby. Cheap but clean. The twin beds looked like paradise to Talbot. He yawned just looking at their inviting softness.

Laura gestured toward the bathroom. "You can undress in there," she said. "I'll wait."

Talbot agreed and took his suitcase into the bathroom. He turned to close the door. He saw Laura flop across one of the beds. She was lying on her back. Her eyes were fixed on the ceiling.

He closed the door and looked at his watch. It was two-thirty A.M. What a wonderful homecoming! Picked up by the Sheriff's office. Shot at on a dark street. And now sharing a bedroom with a blonde he had never heard of before. And against it all, the elusive scent of Nita. Her voice. Telling him that it was Dan Calvert she loved. He was her love. Her latest love.

He undressed, showered, brushed his teeth and shook out a pair of pajamas. He brought his suitcase with him from the bathroom. Laura was where he had left her, on her back across the bed.

"It's all yours," he said.

She pulled herself up on her elbows. "What?"

"The bathroom. It's all yours."

"Oh. Thanks."

He frowned. "What's on your mind?" He carried his suitcase to the closet, shoved it inside and stepped over to his bed. He sat on the edge, yawning. He could feel Laura's eyes fixed on him as he lay down. "What's troubling you?"

"Nothing." She was standing now. "All right, it was silly. Very. I was wishing you were—him. I was wishing he and I were together like this—I could hear you in the shower, and I was wishing it was him I was waiting for."

He lifted his head. "You've got it bad."

She came around the bed and sat on it facing him. "What was she like?"

"Who?"

"The girl you loved. The one that hurt you so bad."

"I'm sleepy. Go brush your teeth and hit the sack."

"I guess you and I just—aren't lucky." She shrugged, got up and trailed into the bathroom.

It grew silent in the room. Talbot closed his eyes. They burned. The light on the table between the beds was too bright. He wished Laura would hurry and turn it off. He lay with his eyes closed, waiting.

It was no good. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't get her out of his mind. The guy wasn't human who could be hit with that much beauty and then go to sleep. How long since a girl had affected him like that? Wouldn't it be wonderful if he could look at Laura—and get *her* completely out of his mind? God help him, that was all he needed.

His mouth tightened. But this kid had her own love, and it was all cluttered with heartbreak. A hell of a way to repay her kindness! Well, he was going to lie right here and go to sleep if it killed him. His heart began to pound heavily. The blonde hair about her shoulders. Her breasts, young and firm and high. The eyes so pale. What the hell was keeping her? Why the devil didn't she turn off that light and go to sleep?

He turned over and opened his eyes. She was standing there watching him.

She smiled somberly. He decided he was asleep and dreaming. Her tawny, lustrous hair was free about her shoulders as he had imagined it would be. It shimmered in the light. Her eyes were clear, the color of fresh water. Her sooty lashes were at half-mast over them.

Talbot looked at her, scarcely breathing.

There had never been a lovelier girl. She lifted her face, and Talbot watched the light moving on her translucent skin. Flawless milky flesh shining in the brightness.

"Why don't you go to bed?" he said.

She smiled. "I was just looking at you."

"Cut it out. Let's get some sleep."

"Do you really want to?"

He stared at her. "I thought you were in love with some noble character."

She was still smiling. "I am," she said. "But I also dance. The kind of dancing that ends up with everything off. I see men wanting me in the middle of a crowded room." She unzipped her skirt and stepped out of it. "And yet you sleep while I undress."

That was the first time he felt the chilling premonition of wrong. Maybe he'd been too tired. Maybe he had wanted a room so badly that he had been willing to believe she'd be ready to share hers because he had gotten her out of the Sheriff's back room and away from the Sheriff's goons. But there was something else.

*This babe wanted something.*

As he watched, Laura slid both her hands upwards from her hips moving them slowly over the roundness of her breasts to unbutton her white shirtwaist.

She was watching him for effect! She was trying to see in his face the effect of her young beauty on his senses.

He sat up. "Who are you, Laura? What do you want from me?"

He saw her eyes flicker, and then she was smiling again.

"I don't want anything. I'm trying to be nice to you."

"You're lying."

She came around the bed toward him. "Do you think I'm pretty?" she said.

"I think you're pretty, baby. But all of a sudden I don't care."

Her eyes narrowed. "What's the matter?"

"You were a girl so in love with a guy you couldn't leave town. Even if it meant trouble. Now all of a sudden, I'm the only guy in your mind. That doesn't add up, baby. Maybe you'd like to explain."

She started to draw back. He caught her wrist suddenly. He twisted, pulling her towards him. She fell heavily. He held her across him, her arm bent behind her back. Her face was inches from his.

"All right, baby, start talking. Is this business your own idea, or somebody else's?"

She said nothing. He twisted her arm. She gasped.

"Mine," she said. "My own idea."

"Why?"

"You—you said you'd been hired by a man that Sheriff Roberts is afraid of. There's just one man that he is even a little bit afraid of . . ."

"Go on."

"Senator Laynebeck."

He stared at her. "Laynebeck? What has he got to do with you?"

Her eyes were defiant. "I don't know. Maybe nothing."

"But that's what you're trying to find out."

"Yes. You're working for him, aren't you?"

"That's no secret. Sure, I'm working for Laynebeck. How does that tie in with you?"

The fear was deeper than ever in her eyes. She tried to smile, but failed.

"Please let me go," she said.

"Oh, no. You were trying to get close to me. Now you are close, baby. I like it like this. Besides, you've got a lot more to tell me. What is it to you if I work for Laynebeck or not?"

"It's nothing to me."

He twisted her arm. "Don't lie to me. Not any more."

"All I want to know is—why are you working for him?"

"What difference does it make to you?"

"Are you a detective?"

"Yes."

"You—" She watched his face, tensely silent for a long time. "You find missing people?"

"If I can."

All the life seemed to go out of her. He stared at her. His eyes widened. "Dan Calvert!" he whispered abruptly. "So that's the guy you're in love with. The missing Dan Calvert!"

She relaxed against him. He could feel the warmth of her body against his chest. He released her arm. She didn't move away.

"Why do you want to find him?" she whispered.

"So you *are* in love with him?"

"Is that so terrible?"

"I don't know. I don't know him. It's just that you're the

second one tonight who has told me she loves Dan Calvert. He must be one hell of a guy."

"That's not true! There's nobody else." She sat up, her body suddenly taut, her eyes searched his.

Talbot shrugged. "Okay. Sure, if you say so."

She grabbed his arms, shaking him. "Tell me!" she cried. "It isn't true!"

He smiled. "Baby, I wish I were as young as you are. All right, it isn't true. But tell me one thing. Do you want me to find Dan Calvert?"

She was silent a long time. At last she shook her head. "Why don't you go away?" she said. "There's so much trouble here now. You'll only make more."

He caught her chin in his hand, turning her face to his. "That's why Roberts had you in that back room. You know something about Dan Calvert, don't you, baby? And Roberts was trying to beat it out of you?"

"No." Her breath came fast. "That isn't true."

"It's true, all right. Do you know where he is? Do you know what's happened to him?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't know!"

He smiled. "Well, I could hardly hope you'd tell me when Clemmons couldn't torture the facts out of you. . . . Okay, baby, let's call it a night and get some sleep."

She shook her head. "No. Listen to me, Jim. Tonight. Now. I'll give you anything you want. Do anything. Then tomorrow you'll tell Mr. Laynebeck that you can't take the job—you'll go back to New York."

"You're pretty wonderful, honey. It sounds very lovely. But I've got a job to do."

"Please, Jim. You won't be sorry."

"Look, baby. You get me in a sweat. Okay. I admit that. You're one beautiful little doll. And young. God, you're young. You're everything a guy could want. But it so happens I've promised to find Dan Calvert and—"

"You mustn't!" And before he could move, Laura had planted her mouth over his. He could feel the heat of her lips burning its way into him. "Anything," she whispered against his mouth. "Anything you want."

He tried to shove her away and found out he couldn't.

Sweat broke out across his forehead. His hands began to move over her. She was like fire under his fingers. Her breath was hot against his face.

He pushed her away. Not too far. He could still feel the beat of her heart, the warmth of her body against his.

"I'd be lying to you, baby," he said. "No matter what I told you. No matter what we did. I'm still going to find Dan Calvert."

She moved away, got to her feet. She stood tall, her face flushed, looking down at him. He could see she was puzzled. She couldn't make him out. Every man she'd probably met made a big play for her. Nobody had ever resisted Laura Dawson before. That was clear enough in her troubled gaze. It was as though he had hit her. She, whose body exerted a lure that made men do handsprings—now when she was offering it for something she desperately wanted, it was no sale.

She backed away from him.

He sat looking at her, pitying this new look of defeat in her baffled eyes, and still wanting her, still feeling his heart racing.

He started to speak. He heard somebody at the door. The unmistakable sound of movement in the corridor. She stared at him, her eyes widening.

He got up cautiously. Laura sat there, watching him. He moved across the room toward the door.

As he touched the doorknob, he heard someone catch his breath on the other side of the panels.

Whoever it was leaped away from the door and began running down the corridor. Talbot fought the key in the lock and flung the door open. He stepped out in the hallway. It was silent and dimly lit. And deserted. The runner had disappeared, down the stairs, into some other room, or out the fire escape.

Talbot expelled his breath slowly. He stepped back inside the room and locked the door after him.

Laura had forgotten now that she had tried to seduce him and failed. The look he had first seen in her face was back now. Fear.

She was deathly afraid.

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## Chapter 10

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TALBOT TURNED OFF the lights and lay down, sure he'd not sleep this night. He could hear the soft dry sobs from Laura's bed. Then the silence closed heavily on his eyelids and he fell asleep. Soundly.

When he awoke, sunlight was streaming in through the open windows. The mornings were hot early down here. For a moment he lay there, still groggy with sleep, and tried to remember where he was. A girl named Laura. A prowler. A cheap room in the Broadway Hotel. He turned over. She was not in her bed. He opened both eyes. She was applying lipstick at her mirror.

She was watching his reflection. She turned, looking at him over her shoulder.

"Hello," she said. "You were just too late for the morning performance."

His eyebrows rose. "You seem pretty gay this morning."

"I am. I did a lot of thinking last night after you went to sleep. You haven't found Dan. Maybe you won't."

"Don't bet on it."

"Well, anyway, I won't help you. The Sheriff won't help you. Looks like you won't get much help in this town."

He sat up in bed. "Look, kid," he said. "Don't waste your time. It doesn't make sense. A good-looking kid like you hanging around a town like this because of a guy like Calvert."

She turned from the mirror, her eyes mocking him. "Love doesn't make sense. If it did, you wouldn't still love that girl who hurt you so bad, would you?"

Maybe she had something there, he thought. "Where are you going?" he said.

"It's almost noon. I've got to get breakfast and report for rehearsal at one."

"Rehearsal? Where?"

"At the Golden Club. Luri Dusan. That's me. Remember? Very special."

"What about Clemmons and Roberts?"

"I can take care of myself."

"I hope so."

"If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't have dared stay here."

She gave him a mock salute and crossed the room. She unlocked the door, opened it. And as suddenly leaped back with a startled gasp.

Talbot grabbed his .32 automatic from under his pillow. He jumped off the bed and ran across the room. Laura was shaking her head at him. Warningly.

At the door was Sheriff Roberts.

Talbot's gaze moved from the obese lawman to the blonde Laura.

"Whatever your charge," he said coldly, "it's my doing, Sheriff. I came here. I couldn't get a room—as you damned well know. She had nothing to do with it."

Roberts moved into the room, his face blank. "I don't know what you're talking about." He turned to Laura and gave her one of his false, quick smiles. "You were going out, miss. Why don't you just go ahead?"

"Yes, Laura. Go." Talbot said. There was panic in his voice. He hated himself for it. It was a hell of a thing to allow this hick sheriff to see that he was afraid of him. But he half-shoved Laura from the room and locked the door after her.

The Sheriff was looking around the room. What he saw pleased him immensely. He shoved an undergarment off a chair and sat down. Talbot returned to the bed and sat on the side of it.

"I guess there's no use trying to hurry you, Sheriff, but I'd like to know what's on your mind."

The Sheriff smiled. There was no falseness about this smile. It was genuine. It meant trouble for someone else. That was the only real smile Roberts owned.

"I've got enough right here," he said affably. "If I wanted *anything*, this is it. This is all I need."

Talbot licked his tongue across dry lips. "Leave her alone. I

couldn't get a room and you know why. That's the only reason I stayed here. Leave her out of it!"

"I may be able to. . . . If you're reasonable."

The breath sighed out of Talbot. "All right. What do you want?"

"I don't rightfully know—yet. Let's say right now I'll just take a promise from you that if I do want anything, you'll help me out?" His eyes went over the disarrayed room slowly, meaningfully.

"Like what?"

"Well, you say that Laynebeck hired you to find Dan Calvert. So if maybe you find there is some other reason Laynebeck hired you, or something else he wants, or you find out something about Calvert, you'll let me know what it is."

"In other words, you want to keep up with Laynebeck."

"That's right, suh. I do. With everything he does."

"And I'm to be another one of your stool pigeons?"

"You're calling yourself names, suh." Roberts looked around the room again. "What you call yourself, that's up to you. What happens to you and the little blonde lady—that's up to you, too."

Talbot stood up. "All right," he said. "You know where I am."

"You understand, Talbot. I don't like trouble in my county. Way to keep trouble down, suh, is to stay ahead of it."

"You want to get out of here now, and let me get dressed?"

"Well, if you want me to." The big man stood up, wiping a soiled handkerchief about the sweatband of his ten-gallon hat. "As long as we understand each other. And everything friendly."

"Isn't that a little too much, Sheriff?" Talbot said. "You and me. Friendly. When I know you for what you are, and you know I do?"

"A man in my positon has to be friends with all kinds, suh. Now, frankly, I'm a church-going man. My whole family is. We go every Sunday. I don't particularly relish being friendly with a man who lives immorally like this." And his gaze went over Laura's rumpled bed. "But I'm willing to close my eyes to some things—just so I can be friendly."

Talbot's laugh was short. "My friend, the Sheriff."

They looked at each other.

Talbot said, "Tell me, friend, what sort of man is this Bonny Williams who owns the Golden Club?"

Roberts chewed that over for a moment. "All right, my friend," he said. "I believe I can tell you about him. Bonny Williams is trying to please everybody. Tries to please Senator Laynebeck and his friends on the one hand. Tries to please me and my friends on the other. It makes life pretty tough for him. You can't be friends with too many people with opposing ideas. That way you're trying hard to please everybody, but you ain't really pleasing nobody. You see?"

When the Sheriff was gone, Talbot showered and dressed. He drove the blue car down to the Buick agency garage and ordered a new windshield installed while he was at lunch.

He called Mike Laynebeck from the pay telephone booth in the Country Style Restaurant.

"I had a visit from the Sheriff this morning, Mike," Talbot reported. "He wants me to tell him everything you do while I'm working for you."

Laynebeck's laugh was sour. "You have my permission to report to him anything you see."

"I just wanted you to know what he said."

"I appreciate it, Jim. Did you find out anything about the attempt on your life?"

"Not yet. But I couldn't get a hotel room, either. Looks like nobody but you wants me in town. Somebody had canceled my reservation at the Duval House. I spent the night in a blonde's room. Roberts plans to hold it over my head to make me spy on you."

"Tell him what he wants to hear. I'll talk to those damned people at the Duval House. My God, I own a controlling interest in the place!"

"That's about all I have to report. Where did Dan Calvert live?"

"He has a suite at the Duval House. But we've looked through it."

"You don't mind if I have a look?"

"No. I want you to. By the time you get there, I'll have

read the book to the bastards that work in the place. They'll treat you with respect."

Talbot laughed. "That's what I want."

"Don't worry. That's what you'll get."

Talbot hung up. He went to a table near the front window. He watched the people walk past on the sidewalk. There were no familiar faces among them. He didn't find the other thing he was seeking, either: there was no sign of anyone loitering out there, waiting.

If there was a spy on him from the Sheriff's office, the guy was playing it smart. Jim Talbot was unable to spot him yet.

He ordered orange juice and coffee and followed it with a lunch of roast beef, mashed potatoes and squash. When he had eaten, he walked back down to the garage, got the Buick and drove over to the Duval House.

The manager himself rode up with Talbot in the elevator and opened the door to Dan Calvert's suite.

Talbot thanked the manager and closed the door in his face. He stood there a moment with the key in his hand. He dropped it into his coat pocket. He remembered the fragile handkerchief that was in there. Nita's handkerchief. His smile was grim.

He wandered among the impersonal furnishings of the hotel living room. It was small and had been furnished for the transient. He wondered how many years Calvert had lived here without giving the place a lived-in look.

Talbot flopped on the divan, fixed a pillow under his head, crossed his feet on the divan arm and stared at the ceiling.

Reclining on the couch, he let his eyes move over each piece of furniture and picture and mirror that he could see without moving anything but his head.

Finally he got up and pulled open the drawer of the imitation mahogany secretary. There was a jumble of personal letters inside. He sat down in the straight chair and at his leisure read them all. There were a few bills: from the haberdashery, the laundry, the garage, the hotel. All were current, none overdue.

He looked again at the letters. All were boring, from stupid

people with nothing to say and all the time in the world to say it.

Among the letters were several packages of book matches. All had gaudy yellow covers with red letterings: *Bonny Williams' Golden Club—On the Golden Springs Road.* Now he saw that there was a bare dancer on the face of the folder. She was done in pink. She had a blue flower in her teeth.

He dropped a couple of the book matches in his pocket. This started his mind on a new train of thought. He moved every pillow in all the chairs and divans. This netted him a quarter and three bobby pins. He pocketed the quarter and decided that he had no more use for the bobby pins than Dan Calvert had.

He spent an hour in the room. When he was through, he had gone over it thoroughly. Almost no part remained untouched.

Then he went into the bedroom. He found whiskey in there and poured himself a drink. He had another drink while he was going through the drawers of the dresser. Dan Calvert loved clothes. He had dozens of pairs of underwear, one whole drawer of white handkerchiefs.

Talbot touched each shirt in every stack. He moved slowly, picking up every shirt, moving it and letting it fall back in place.

When he had gone through the clothes, the closets where Calvert kept his suits and shoes, Talbot pulled the sheets off the bed and wadded them in the middle of the mattress. Then he turned the mattress, dropping the sheets on the floor.

Behind the bed he found one of her cigarette lighters.

It was an ornate thing, with her initials in scroll upon its silver face. N.L. He looked at it and then dropped it into his left coat pocket.

"Very careless." That was all he said.

He went through the bathroom next, reading even the prescription labels on the bottles in the medicine chest. When he came out there was no place else to go in the small apartment.

He had another drink, went out the front door, locked it after him.

He rang for the elevator. He had spent almost three hours in that apartment.

The elevator man smiled at Talbot. Talbot could see the poor guy had his orders. Be nice to Mr. Talbot. Laynebeck must have stirred the place up with a nettled stick.

"Seen Mr. Calvert lately?" Talbot said.

"Oh, no, sir. Not in the last three weeks."

Talbot looked at him, nodding. He crossed the lobby. The manager was at the desk.

"Everything satisfactory, Mr. Talbot?" His voice was pleading.

"Fine. How long since Mr. Calvert was in that room?"

The manager swallowed hard. "It's been three weeks, sir. The whole town is upset about him. He's a great gentleman."

"I'm sure he is."

"I want to tell you again how sorry we are about the mistake in your reservations last night. If there is anything we can do. We find this morning that we have a suite—almost identical with Mr. Calvert's. With—with a better view. If you'd like it, it's available now."

"I'll sure keep you in mind," Talbot said.

"Please do." The manager wrung his hands. For a minute Talbot thought the fellow was going to cry.

The man at the haberdashery was sorry, but if he had heard a word on Mr. Calvert he would have notified the police immediately.

"You rendered him a bill, dated last month. Has that been taken care of?" Jim asked.

The clothier shook his head. "But we're not worrying about it. It'll be taken care of. We know that Mr. Calvert is good for any amount."

"And if something has happened to him?"

The man shook his head. "I hope nothing has. But if so, I'm sure his estate will take care of his debts."

The laundry was closed when Talbot got there. He sat outside it, smoking contentedly. He told himself he felt like a man who had accomplished a good day's work and was now ready to accomplish his night work.

He drove up the one-way street to the Duval House. He had supper in the Duval House restaurant. Afterwards he

bought a Jacksonville paper at the cigar counter and sat in the Duval House lobby and read the news. When he had gone all the way through the newspaper, he folded it deliberately and looked over all the people in the room. None looked familiar. Not one of them had he seen before at all that day.

He got up, frowning. It was a hell of a thing. It irked him to think the Sheriff might be smarter than he was. Then he smiled, shrugging away that idea.

It was dark when he crossed the street and got into the Buick.

He drove west out of town, turned north at the deserted Fair Grounds. He crossed the Atlantic Coast Line railroad tracks and turned east on a shell-paved road. He followed this to the highway.

He turned north on the highway, drove for about a mile to Cypress Road. A neon arrow pointed east: *See Golden Springs*. With a wry smile, he followed the arrows, driving less than twenty-five miles an hour.

It was just nine o'clock when he drove into the dim-lit parking lot behind the Golden Club. There were plenty of other cars on the lot. It was still early. That meant the Golden Club was enjoying popularity. It was the spot at the moment.

Talbot killed the engine, slid down in the seat. He lit a cigarette and sat there puffing at it contentedly. About three minutes after he arrived, an old Plymouth pulled into the lot and parked near him. He sat up, tense, watching.

Two youngsters piled out, a boy laughing with his arm around his girl. Talbot sighed and relaxed. He sank down in the seat again.

He let his gaze rove over the big two-storied building. It was in good repair. Bonny Williams was making money. He was spending it, too, keeping the joint looking neat. Lights glowed in upstairs windows beyond drawn shades. Streaks of yellow showed where shades fit against sills.

A small door opened in the side of the building.

Talbot sat up, watching.

A woman came out of the door, closing it hurriedly behind her. She looked all around, then ran hurriedly toward a car parked in the shadows at the end of the club building.

It looked like Nita.

She was too far away for him to be sure. Maybe he just thought it was she. Anyhow, she was getting into her car before he could be positive.

Something flashed along her side as she stepped into the car. Talbot smiled. The woman had dropped something. He was pretty sure now that it was Nita.

She slammed the door, unaware that she had dropped anything.

The car backed a few feet out of the shadows. It was a gray Dodge. Late model. The woman didn't turn on her lights. She whipped the car around the side of the Golden Club and out onto the Golden Springs Road. She was headed into town before she cut on her lights.

Talbot stepped out, flipped the cigarette away and walked over to where the woman had parked her car. He took out one of the books of Golden Club matches. He struck one and from its fire, ignited all the matches in the book.

The flare made a nice torch. In the glare of the matchlight he saw a gold lipstick on the ground. It was what the woman had dropped. He had seen it flash when the light caught it as it fell.

Talbot picked it up. He sighed heavily and dropped the small cylinder in his coat pocket. It might not be Nita's. It might not have been Nita who came running out of the club. He shrugged. On the other hand, it might.

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## Chapter 11

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THE CROWD went wild. They loved her. The dance space darkened. The band began a rhythmic pattern. The spotlight blossomed out in the middle of the floor. And there she was. In the center of it.

It was the first show of the evening. The place was packed. Talbot had come through the ornate entrance of the Golden Club and he'd seen the displays of her. *Luri Dusan. Dances Extraordinary*. A headwaiter found him a small table near the wall. The Golden Club had one thing in common with every night spot. It hated singles anywhere except at the bar. He ordered bourbon and sat down to wait for Luri Dusan. Last night she had been Laura Dawson and she had undressed for him alone. Now he was going to see the crowd in this room when she mixed her undressing with her dancing. He knew she wasn't going to fail here tonight. She'd have these yokels standing on their heads.

The m.c. was balding and his jokes were poor. But he had been coached in the proper adjectives to use to describe Bonny Williams' big attraction, Luri Dusan.

Talbot was mildly surprised to see that Laura's dancing was a matter of veils and was nothing more than an excuse for disrobing.

The lights were down about the crowded room. Smoke swirled in gray wisps above the heads of the spectators and hung like gossamer clouds in the brilliance of the spotlight. It was a good effect. The light moved with Laura, but the tenuous gray clouds were stationary and were always above her no matter where she danced on the oval floor.

Talbot smiled to himself. He was probably the only person in the place watching Laura's hands. But they were graceful and effective.

She kept them moving over her body. The effect was almost hypnotic.

The music reached a first crescendo, and Laura lost her first veil.

A long sigh went across the room.

You could almost feel the sweat on the foreheads of the men who were watching. You could see the intent expressions in the faces of the women.

Talbot saw that he was alone. Only the people who had ringside tables kept their seats during the floor show here at the Golden Club. Everybody crowded in around that first ring of tables.

Another loud "Ah" signalled the fact that Laura had discarded another veil. Talbot got up and moved in with the standees around the ringside tables. Laura's expressive hands were teasing the catch on the veil insecurely caught over the curvature of her right hip.

He grinned to himself. There was the devil himself in Laura's face now. She was teasing them. They were all one man and she was tantalizing them. Her eyes asked them if she dared let the veil fall away. Her expression taunted them because they weren't daring enough to say so. They were holding their breath.

Somebody a few inches away from Talbot spoke. Talbot looked down. Strick Clemmons was sitting alone at a ringside table. His drunken voice was loud: "Take it off, baby. Take it off!"

Laura seemed unaware of him. But her hands fluttered away from the veil and she danced again, making them wait, making them pant. Her body flashed on the floor, the remaining veil shimmered, and she bent low. Clemmons yelled at her again. She was only a few inches away from him. Her face didn't alter. Her whispered, "Drop dead," was absolutely devastating. It left Clemmons speechless, and almost no one else in the place heard it.

Before Clemmons could move, Laura was in the center of the floor again. And they were clapping, begging her to loosen that last veil. Their breaths were held, even the sweat showed clearly on their foreheads.

Talbot turned away. There was no need to worry about

Laura any more. She was young, and there was a clean young innocence about Laura Dawson. But that other self, the dancing Luri Dusan was something else. Laura had not lied. Luri Dusan had been around. She knew how to take care of herself.

The applause and the cries were deafening as Talbot walked out of the room into the bar. It was deserted except for the bartender.

The bartender grinned at him. "What's the matter, mister? You don't like *that*?"

Talbot shrugged. "Why look at something like that, when you can't touch it?"

The bartender nodded. "You got something there. Only I can tell you, mister, there ain't a sweating guy in that room who hasn't been to bed with Luri Dusan in his mind already. It's her eyes. Mister, that girl is a devil. Her eyes make every man in the place think he's in there alone with her."

"I'll still take a double bourbon and water."

The bartender grinned again, shoving the drink across the bar. "Just hope I never get that old, that's all."

"Is Bonny Williams in there watching?" Talbot asked after he'd finished his drink.

"He may be, but he'll be back in his office as soon as Luri goes off. He gets a real charge out of that girl. You can't drag him out to see anything else that goes on in this place."

"Where's his office?"

"Across the room and down that corridor," the bartender said.

"Think he'd mind if I wait for him in his office?"

"I doubt it. Takes a lot to make Bonny mad. But why don't you just sit here until he goes back in his office? I'll give you the nod."

"Okay. Another bourbon. That the idea?"

"That's the idea."

"Have one with me before the crowd comes back."

"Never drink while I'm working, mister. I'm a guy that gets plastered on the smell of the stuff. If you feel friendly, drop the price on the bar. I'm saving for a new mink coat."

Talbot laughed and dropped a couple of bills on the bar. "Saving up for Luri Dusan, eh?"

The bartender nodded. "That and a rainy day, mister."

Talbot toasted him with his glass. "Hope it's a deluge that day."

The bartender nodded toward the corridor. "Dusan is off, mister. Bonny Williams just went back into his office."

Bonny Williams looked up when Talbot entered his office. Bonny Williams was a scared-looking fat man. He wore expensive clothes. His club was a success. But Bonny was pale and scared. He was sick in his gut with it. That was the first thing Talbot noticed about him. Next was his dark, balding head, the heavy brows and the clipped moustache over his full, nervous mouth.

Bonny Williams was an unhappy man.

It just never occurred to him that Talbot's presence in his office meant anything except more trouble. He nodded at a chair that Talbot was to sit in. His voice was heavy as he said, "What do you want?"

"I want to ask you some questions."

"My God. What now? Who you from, Internal Revenue, the Treasury, or are you another salesman with something I don't want?"

"I'm looking for Dan Calvert."

Bonny Williams seemed to melt like tallow in his chair behind his sleek desk.

"Oh." It was a whisper. A prayer. It was final defeat.

"Do you know him?"

"Yes. But I don't know you, mister."

"My name is James Talbot. I'm working for Mike Laynebeck. Maybe you'd like to call him and verify that?"

Bonny Williams licked his lips. "I think so."

He picked up the telephone and gave Laynebeck's house telephone number without even looking it up. He watched Talbot as he waited, sweating.

"Mr. Laynebeck, please," he said. And then, "Hello, Mr. Laynebeck. How are you, Senator? This is Bonny Williams. I run the Golden Club. You know? That's fine. Thank you, Senator. There's a—James Talbot here. He says he has been hired by you to look for Mr. Calvert. He is? Good. Oh, yes, I'll be more than happy to cooperate with Mr. Talbot."

He said he would be happy to cooperate. His voice sounded happy enough. But when Bonny Williams hung up, he looked sicker and paler than ever.

"You need more sun," Talbot said.

Bonny Williams' head jerked up. "Yeah." He tried to laugh. "I could stand a vacation, all right."

"What about Dan Calvert?"

"What about him?"

"Why don't *you* tell me? Dan Calvert needed help from somebody if he disappeared."

"I don't know anything about it."

"If he didn't disappear, somebody helped him."

"Why pick on me, mister?"

Talbot shrugged. "I've got to start somewhere. There are a lot of reasons for starting with you. First, you run the most successful night spot in the county—"

"Not if this trouble keeps up."

"Second, Dan Calvert was out here a lot."

"How do you know that?"

"You practically kept him supplied with book matches. You know the pink nude on the yellow cover? He was out here a lot. Third, you're mixed up with Roberts and Laynebeck. That's two distinct crowds."

"I'm just trying to get along."

"Maybe. Anyhow, you're in a position to know a hell of a lot more than almost any other man in this county. Now, is that enough reasons?"

"Even if I knew a lot," Williams said, "how long would I last if I told anything I knew?"

Talbot just looked at him. "You talked to Laynebeck. How long do you think you'll last with him when he finds out that you held out on me?"

"Mister, for God's sake. I don't know you. You don't know me. You couldn't have any reason for wanting to ruin me. Yet that's surer than hell what you're doing—"

"I don't want anything except to find Dan Calvert."

"I don't know a thing about it, mister. I swear it."

"You look mighty sick."

"I am sick. The whole business scares hell out of me."

"Why? If you don't know anything about it, why?"

"My God, mister. Who believes me? Do you?"

Talbot stood up. "Sorry. I don't. I'm not going to say anything to Laynebeck for a while. I'm going to give you a chance to think it over. Maybe you'll want to get in touch with me—say, before tomorrow night?"

Williams seemed not to be breathing. He just licked his lips again and nodded. He sat, melted-down blubber behind his desk. Talbot got to the door with his hand on the knob.

"I won't say anything about seeing Nita Laynebeck sneaking out of here by a side door about an hour and a half ago, either."

For a minute Williams looked like he might faint.

Laura was waiting for Talbot at the entrance of the bar. She was wearing a white terrycloth wrap-around. Her face was freshly scrubbed and clean. It looked as clear and honest as her sun-bleached blue eyes. She had looked like a she-devil out on that floor. She looked twenty now.

"Hi," she said. Her eyes were studying him. "I saw you watching me dance."

"You're terrific."

She managed to smile through the fear in her eyes. "Was I really good?"

"You're wasted in a place like this."

She tried to go on smiling. "You didn't think I was so wonderful—last night."

"I don't like to be bought."

"It would have made things a lot easier."

"It would make it a lot easier if you'd tell me why you don't want me to find Dan Calvert."

"Maybe he had a reason for going away. Did you ever think of that?"

"Sure. I know he had a reason. Before I'm through I'll know the reason. Before I'm through, I'll have Dan Calvert."

"Please—don't meddle in something that—that you don't know anything about."

"Stop worrying. It wrinkles that pretty brow. Smile now and I'll see you later, baby. At home. Our own little room."

There was envy in the bartender's eyes as Talbot walked past him and out of the club to the parking lot.

When he stepped out in the darkness, he moved quickly into the deep shadows of a recess in the facade of the building. He pressed close against the wall, waiting.

After a moment a stocky man in a dark suit came out of the club. He stood for a moment on the steps looking around. He frowned when there was no sign of Talbot anywhere on the lot. He threw down his cigarette and broke into a run across the macadam toward the parked cars.

Talbot came out of the shadows and slid quietly around the side of the building. He walked swiftly past the kitchen entrance, ran across the lighted drive to the thick line of cars. With his gun in his hand, he moved in the darkness, keeping close to the automobiles.

Ahead of him he saw the man. He was standing there looking around, puzzled. Talbot went between the cars and walked up behind the man. With his left hand he reached out and tapped him on the shoulder.

As the man turned, Talbot brought the butt of his gun down across the side of his skull. There was the sharp sound of metal against bone. The man grunted once and crumpled to his knees. Talbot stepped back and let him fall. He bent over, rolled him on his back. He went through his identification, finding nothing that linked the fellow either to the Sheriff or to anyone else.

He ran for his car, and got out of there as fast as he could.

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## Chapter 12

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TALBOT PARKED the Buick in the east drive beside the big Laynebeck house. He was still breathing as though he had run all the way from the Golden Club and the man he'd left lying unconscious in the darkened parking lot.

He crossed the veranda, glancing in the open windows of the sun room as he went. Nita was in there, alone. He paused, involuntarily.

She was drinking. He hesitated outside, looking in from the darkness with that old feeling creeping over him.

There she was. The girl who belonged in the big house on Fort Queen. The goddess he had loved so hopelessly and so helplessly. She was really beautiful now. The years had given her a breathtaking kind of beauty.

Talbot clenched his fists inside his coat pockets. He stalked beyond the windows to the front door and rammed hard on the doorbell. He could hear it from within the house. Hear it echoing in the bottomless pit of his belly.

The butler opened the door.

"Talbot. I want to see Senator Laynebeck."

"Come in, Mr. Talbot. Senator Laynebeck is expecting you."

He crossed the foyer in the wake of the butler. He couldn't keep his eyes from the door of the sun room. Nita was standing there. After you saw how beautiful she was, you saw her eyes, you saw how drunk she was.

"Talbot," she said.

Jim and the butler stopped. She came out into the foyer, glanced at the butler. "That'll be all, Meffert."

She looked up at Talbot. He couldn't say what it was about

her, but she had changed since last night. Now she seemed very pleased with herself.

"Have you found him yet?" she said.

"No."

"Do you think you will?"

"Nobody wants to cooperate. But I think I will."

She smiled. But behind her smile, Jim was sure she was laughing at him.

He tightened his sweaty fist over her handkerchief in his pocket.

"We better not keep our lord and master waiting," Nita said. She nodded toward the closed library door.

Jim stared at her for a moment longer. He heeled about and knocked on the library door.

"Come in," Laynebeck said.

He opened the door and stood aside. Nita preceded him into the room.

Laynebeck got up from behind his old desk and came around it. He tried to smile, but plainly he felt that none of it was worth the effort.

"Welcome, Jim," he said. He glanced at Nita. "You mind, my dear, Jim wants to make a report to me."

"I'm a big girl," Nita said. "I won't be shocked if your private operative announces he entered a whorehouse in this fair city—"

"Nita!" Laynebeck's voice was harsh.

"Sorry, master."

But her voice wasn't sorry. She was laughing at the tall man. She didn't even try to hide her laughter from Talbot.

Laynebeck sank against his desk. He was defeated.

"She may as well stay," Talbot said, trying to preserve the older man's feelings. "I'm afraid I haven't a lot to report. I looked over his apartment. Found out who his friends were, and what his habits were." He glanced at Nita. "For instance, Calvert has a half-dozen toothbrushes in his apartment but not one tube of toothpaste."

Laynebeck's smile was gray and preoccupied. But at least he smiled. At least he was listening.

"I made some progress. For instance, I think that Calvert hasn't run away at all."

Laynebeck's head jerked up. He stared at Talbot, his jaw taut.

"What are you talking about?"

"That he might be right in this town. Alive."

"Impossible. How could he get away with it?"

"By being careful. By trusting only people who liked him, feared him, or wanted him to help them."

"Fantastic!"

"Is it? That's why I came here tonight. I want to know if you want me to go on with it."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I told you last night. You might not like the answers."

Laynebeck dragged in a deep breath. "You believe that Calvert is crossing me?"

Talbot glanced at Nita before he answered. "Well, if you want to put it mildly and conservatively, yes, that's what I think."

"I've been in the same office with Calvert for years and I don't believe it. You came back to town last night, and you're positive he's crossing me. What do you base this belief on?"

Again Talbot glanced at Nita. His voice was flat. "Maybe people tell me things they wouldn't dare tell you."

Nita's face became suddenly stony.

"Maybe they do," Laynebeck said. "Who—who have you talked to?"

Talbot heard Nita's sharp intake of breath.

Talbot's lips twisted. "Do you know a dancer at Bonny Williams' Golden Club?"

Laynebeck was looking at him. "No. I've never been out there. Haven't had the time. Do you know her, Nita?"

Nita's voice was a whisper. "I've seen her."

Talbot spoke to Laynebeck, but he was watching Nita. "Her name is Luri Dusan. Her real name is Laura Dawson. She does a strip dance. She's Calvert's girl friend. His latest."

There was almost no change in Nita's face. Just a little color fading, just the slightest widening of her eyes. But Talbot knew. He'd hit her hard. She hadn't known about Dan's little love, either.

Her voice was carefully casual. "This is all very boring,

Mike. I think I'll go back to the sun room. I left a drink there, unfinished. Unbelievable as that sounds."

She went slowly across the room. It seemed to Talbot that the room got chilled as she went out of it. The scent of her was gone, and the warmth. He remembered those two years in the chain gang. That had been the worst. The need for her then.

When the door closed behind her, Talbot turned to look at Laynebeck. The big man was still watching the door. He exhaled heavily and met Talbot's eyes.

"It's a hell of a thing you're telling me," Laynebeck said. "Maybe I've been stupid, not to suspect. But you want to believe in somebody—in something."

"Maybe I'm wrong. For your sake I hope so. But just now it looks like you put your money on the wrong horse." Talbot's mouth twisted, and to himself he added, *on a couple of wrong horses.*

"Do you think that Calvert is selling out to the Sheriff and his gang?"

"What would he have to offer them?"

"Oh, I suppose Dan could swing a lot of weight if he decided to. And of course he knows some explosive secrets. If you handle a stable of politicians for very long you find a hundred wrongs that you have to conceal. For the good of the Party—for the sake of votes. And sometimes even when a man is bad—he's better for his job than his opponent. It's a tough racket."

"All right. It may be that. I would think so except that the Sheriff had Calvert's girl friend, this Dusan babe, down at his office. They were beating hell out of her. She knows something the Sheriff wants to know—and he's not afraid of Dan when he mistreats her . . ."

Laynebeck's eyes were narrowed. "Or maybe—maybe Roberts is trying to get Dan to sell out. Maybe Dan's agreed. I don't know. I'm just guessing, of course. But if the Sheriff didn't trust Dan, he could try to check on him through the girl—and if Dan is selling me out, Dan's got nobody to holler to except the Sheriff." The big man's wide shoulders slumped. "That would leave Calvert in one hell of a spot all right. The Sheriff won't trust him until he delivers at election time."

"And then again, Dan might want out. Maybe he's trying to work out something on his own."

"But would he disappear? That focuses a lot of attention on him. He must have known I'd try to find him. Everybody is talking about him—"

Talbot slapped his fist into the palm of his hand. "That's it! Calvert has taken out life insurance by disappearing. Attention is on him. No matter what kind of switch he is plotting, he's safe as long as everybody is talking about him, thinking about him, looking for him."

Laynebeck nodded slowly.

Talbot strode over and poured himself a drink.

"There you are," Talbot said. "A pretty dirty picture. Do you want me to drop it?"

Laynebeck shook his head. "No. I want you to find Calvert. I've got to talk with him, anyway. There's a chance I might save the Party—and Calvert, if I can make him listen to reason."

Talbot shrugged. "Seems to me Calvert made up his mind to ditch you, Mike, a long time ago. Maybe one reason he decided to step out for a while was because he could no longer pretend that he was your loyal partner."

Laynebeck's head sank on his chest. His hands clenched at his sides.

"Anyway," he said. "Find him for me."

Talbot was almost at the front door before Nita stopped him.

She was standing in the sun-room doorway again. She smiled at him. "Come have a drink, Talbot. One for the road."

He looked at her, started to refuse. He shrugged and went past her into the sun room. She closed the door.

She poured drinks and then turned up the volume of the console radio. "Sit down," she said. She sat on the divan and looked at him. He went on standing, looking at her over the rim of his glass.

"I haven't been able to get you out of my mind," she said. Her voice was petulant. "I thought you were never going to get through talking in there."

"Your husband is pretty upset," he said, "about the man who

is double-crossing him. A man he trusted. And he doesn't even know part of it."

She looked at him, her eyes slumbrous. "Are you going to tell him?"

"Maybe."

She leaned forward. "Why? Because I need someone to love me? Maybe you don't know what it is like to *need* to be loved."

His mouth twisted. "No. I wouldn't know anything about that."

Now she smiled. The tigress claws were hidden, sheathed beneath the silk and nylon that rustled when she moved on the divan. "Sit down, Jim. Talk to me. I'm lonely."

"Yes. Is that why you were at the Golden Club at nine o'clock tonight?"

He caught her unaware. Her lips parted, and her face colored a little. "Were you there?" she said at last. Her voice was casual now. "I didn't see you."

He sat down beside her. Waited.

"I went to see Bonny Williams," she said. "I thought maybe he'd heard something about Dan. . . . But I don't have to explain myself to you."

"That's right, you don't."

Her hand trailed across the short distance between them on the divan. "Let's not fight. I want you for my friend."

"Friend? Good lord!" He began to laugh.

"Stop laughing. I hate it. I won't have you laughing at me."

"Oh, I'm not laughing at you. It's that gag. Friendship. The two people I could never be friends with have offered me friendship today."

"Please, Jim. No matter what I've become—oh, I know what you think of me for falling in love with Dan, I know what you think when you watch me drink too much—but it's because I need someone. Maybe I wouldn't have been like this, Jim, if I'd had you."

Her trailing fingers had reached his hand. He brushed them away and stood up.

She jumped up too and closed the gap between them. "All right, I know. It was my fault. My fault you went to jail. My fault we weren't together—the way we should have been.

My fault I'm like I am now. But I can't help it, Jim. I need help and you've got to help me."

She looked around nervously, picked up a cigarette from a pack on an end table. She searched helplessly then for a match. He took his cigarette lighter from his pocket, snapped it and held the flame out to her.

Her icy fingers closed over his. When she had lighted the cigarette, she inhaled deeply and blew a cloud of gray smoke at the ceiling. She took his lighter from his fingers.

She examined it. "Very nice," she said. "I'm glad you're able at last to afford nice things."

"And thanks to Mike Laynebeck," he told her. "I'm sorry, Nita. That kind of puts me on his side in this business."

"You can't desert me." There was no panic in her voice. She was an indulged child asserting a fact. People didn't turn their backs on Nita Laynebeck. Not when she needed them.

"I've got a job."

"I must talk to you. Not now. But later. Out by Cypress River. You know where you drove me last night. Please meet me. After Mike has gone to sleep. Be there at midnight. I'll be there as soon as I can."

He smiled and shook his head. "No."

"Jim. You won't be sorry. I've been mixed up. But I'm not mixed up now. Don't tease me. Don't make me beg. I'll make it up to you, Jim. I never forgot you, Jim. I wanted to. I tried to."

He inhaled deeply. "All right, Nita. This one time. I can't argue with you here. I'll be there. This time. No more. I'm not helping you keep a Dan Calvert. As far as I'm concerned you belong to Mike Laynebeck. As far as I'm concerned, you should have been mine."

"I should have been," she said. It was a whisper. But he heeled around and started across the room.

Her voice stopped him.

"Jim, your lighter."

At the door, he stopped. With his hand on the knob, he turned and looked at her over his shoulder. She was holding his lighter out in the palm of her hand. He looked at it, remembering the one in his coat pocket. Remembering where

he had found it. The Duval House. Dan Calvert's apartment. Behind his bed.

His voice was hollow. "Keep it," he said. "I've got another one."

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## Chapter 13

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PETE MOSTELLA owned the newsstand next door to the entrance of the Duval Professional building. Mostella didn't have a lot of space and sold only newspapers, magazines and pocket books. But he took his business seriously, met everybody with a grin and was a successful merchant.

He was just closing up for the night when Talbot pulled his car up in front of his stand. The whole town was almost dark. Only a few lights burned in the windows of the courthouse on the square. Even the department store display windows were dimly lit.

Talbot came around the car and crossed the walk. Mostella stopped pushing news racks into the narrow room and looked up grinning. He was a dark-eyed little man with thick black hair.

"Yes, sir, friend. What can I get for you?"

Talbot bought a pocket book. A detective story with a lovely girl on the yellow cover. There was a green knife in her back. He also bought a Jacksonville newspaper. He started out of the tiny shop as though he intended leaving, although he had no intention of doing that.

"You do a lot of business with the people in the office buildings?"

Mostella grinned. "Why don't you ask me, mister? You're a detective. I heard all about it today. Mike Laynebeck hired you to find his partner Mr. Calvert."

Talbot laughed. "That's right. You should take up detection in case the news business falls off."

"Mister, the news business can't fall off. There ain't no place for it to fall to. Besides, I just keep my big ears open."

Talbot leaned against the bare wall of the building. "All right," he said. "I'd like to know. Calvert disappeared on a

Tuesday, between noon and five o'clock. Did you see him that day at all?"

Mostella shoved the last news rack inside and pulled an iron grate across the front. He fixed a lock and snapped it. Then he reached inside and snapped off the lights. He loosened a canvas then. It slid down behind the grate and he secured it along the flooring. Then he straightened up, dusting off his hands.

He nodded at Talbot. "Sure, I seen him. I seen him every day. He bought magazines and papers from me. And I seen him that day. He left the office about four o'clock. Last time I seen him."

"How did he leave? Did someone meet him? Did he walk? Was he alone?"

"His car was parked at the curb. He must not have been in his office an hour because there are parking meters and hour limit parking. But I know I saw him get in his car and drive away. Yes sir, drove right off the face of the earth."

"Not quite," Talbot said. "He could drive a long way from Duval without doing that."

Talbot didn't leave the car on the street tonight. He drove around the rear of the Duval House and went down the ramp into the hotel garage.

The attendant was a tow-headed man of about forty. He was wearing tan coveralls. His hands and clothes were smeared with grease. He had the look of a busy man, except for his eyes. They were red-rimmed, as though he'd been sitting in the warm garage office fast asleep.

"Yes, sir. Park your car for you, sir?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I may be going in the hotel to bed. That might depend on you."

The man looked puzzled.

"Dan Calvert lives in this hotel, doesn't he?"

Now, the attendant was worried.

"Well, yes sir. He did. That is, he did until he disappeared a few weeks ago."

"Three weeks," Jim said. "Did he leave his car in here nights?"

"Yes, sir. It's here now."

Talbot nodded, feeling the old pounding of his heart. He was moving along now.

"Let's look at it," he said.

Before the attendant could open his mouth to protest, Talbot showed him his badge and credentials.

"I'm trying to find Calvert," he said. "I was told he drove off in his car the day he disappeared."

"Well, he couldn't have done that. There it is, right over there." The attendant pointed to a blue Cadillac hard-top convertible.

Talbot strode across the drive. The attendant followed.

"How long has this car been in here?"

"It was here the night Mr. Calvert disappeared."

"Did you see him bring it in?"

"No, sir. It came in during the afternoon. I come to work at ten at night. It was here when I came to work that night. It's been here ever since."

Talbot got in under the wheel. The keys were in the ignition. He turned them, started the engine. It purred into life at once. He looked questioningly at the attendant.

"Oh, we keep it in condition," the attendant said. "We run it, check the tires. It's ready for use any time."

"Who told you to do that?"

The attendant shrugged. "I don't know. The hotel, I guess. Anyhow it's an order over in the office. And that's all I do, mister. Follow orders."

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## Chapter 14

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TALBOT DROVE out of the Duval House garage. He looked at the timepiece on the dashboard. It was almost twelve o'clock.

He drove up to Cypress Road, turned east under the neon arrow. *See Golden Springs*. He shook his head. People came from all over the country to this hot hell-hole just to see that attraction. Well, if he got out ~~this~~ time, nothing would ever bring him back. Not even neon arrows.

He let the car purr along at forty. The streets were deserted. At intervals he watched the rear-view mirror. He wasn't taking chances on being shot at again.

Whoever that had been had wanted to kill him or scare him out of town. And whoever it was, Talbot was ready for him if he came again.

He knew he should hurry. Perversely he let the car slow down. If Nita got there first, let her wait. It would be the first time she ever waited for anyone in her life.

He had a lot to think about. There was only one way to find out why Dan Calvert had pretended to leave town. That was to find Dan Calvert. Duval wasn't a big town, but there were places in it where a man could hide.

He had made up his mind to move his clothes from Laura's room in the Broadway Hotel to the Duval House. He could get a room now. There was no longer any need to stay there.

He smiled grimly. But would Laura know that? Why couldn't he go on trading on the fact that he couldn't get another place to sleep? One thing he knew for sure. Laura knew a lot about Dan Calvert. Even better than Nita, Laura could lead him to Calvert. If he worked it right, if he was careful, he could find out from Laura what she knew about Calvert.

One thing was a fact. It would be a mistake to leave Laura as long as she knew something about Dan Calvert that he didn't. The Broadway Hotel didn't care who shared her room.

And Sheriff Roberts didn't care, not as long as he thought it provided him with a weapon against Talbot.

He grinned, satisfied with himself.

It was twelve-thirty when he pulled the Buick into the narrow gravel road that ended on the bluff overlooking the Cypress River. As he turned the car out into the open space, the headlights raked holes across the darkness. There was no other car on the bluff.

He was not surprised. He had not expected Nita would get there ahead of him. Wait. How many hours had he spent waiting for her in that past when he had been her latest love? How sick he had been, wanting her and afraid she wasn't coming. Needing her, and being sure that she had found something "more amusing" to do. The emptiness in his belly that he couldn't will away. And then, how suddenly he was all right when she came at last.

He pulled the big car almost to the edge of the precipice and killed the engine.

When the car was silent, the night outside became raucous. The bullfrogs were wailing in the mud flats at the foot of the bluff. There were birds out there that never slept, that didn't know spring from winter, midnight from noon. Occasionally a bull alligator would croak somewhere down the black stream, or land with a splash in the water from a log.

After a few moments you became accustomed to the sounds and you could almost fool yourself into believing there was silence in this hideaway place. The silence beat at him, and he waited, listening for the sound of her car.

He got out of the Buick and walked to the edge of the sheer bluff. He stood there, looking out into the blackness, hearing the slap of the swift current, the caterwauling of the frogs.

He got a cigarette and reached for his cigarette lighter. He remembered he had traded it to Nita, in a perverse kind of swap for hers.

He took out her lighter and tried it. It would not ignite. He dropped it back into his pocket. He had quite a collection there now. Lipstick, lighter and a handkerchief.

He found a folder of matches from Bonny Williams' Golden Club and lighted up.

The folder reminded him of the liquid-platinum skin of

Laura Dawson. In love with Dan Calvert. He shook his head. One thing he had done, he had spoiled one of Dan Calvert's games already. Laura hadn't known that Dan was having an affair with the wife of Senator Laynebeck.

He remembered the way Nita had looked when she heard that Dan was in love with Bonny Williams' little dancer.

It was a dirty trick he had played on both Nita and Laura. But it was good strategy. The best thing he could do to flush Dan Calvert out of hiding was to set the two women who loved him against each other!

The one he pitied in the whole business was Mike Laynebeck. What good could come to that poor devil? Probably no man in Florida had been as much a force for good in the past fifteen years. They were paying him back beautifully, all right. His partner, double-crossing him. His wife, faithless. The Sheriff plotting to take over after a smear campaign that would cover the Laynebeck name with mud that could never be scraped off.

He struck another match and looked at his wrist watch. It was one o'clock.

He might as well go back. Nita wasn't coming. Maybe she couldn't get away. Maybe she had a more interesting date. Anyway, she wasn't here and he wasn't going to wait any more.

Well, the day had had a lousy beginning. Sheriff Roberts walking in, smirking and leering at Laura's underthings strewn about the hotel bedroom. And now it had a lousy ending.

Jim Talbot was right back where he had started more than ten years ago. Waiting for Nita—who never showed up. A lousy ending for a lousy night.

A stinking lousy night.

He drove slowly back to town. He didn't pass more than half a dozen cars all the way to the Broadway Hotel. But he looked each one over carefully.

He admitted it. He was still looking for Nita. Just like he used to, in the long-ago.

His mouth pulled into an angry sneer. Oh, brother, but he had had it bad. What a fool! He had thought that was the way God meant for two people to love each other. But he had

found out all right. Love was for laughs. It wasn't important. It was a foolish thing.

Well, it had put him through hell all right. There had been plenty of women after Nita. He hadn't lied to her about that. But what he hadn't told Nita about was the laughter. The laughter that roiled up inside him whenever he tried to tell some woman that he loved her.

Sometimes they even knew he was laughing. Bitter, rotten laughter. All of it inside. And not a damned bit funny. . . .

He walked up the stairs to Laura's room on the third floor of the Broadway Hotel. She had given him a key last night and he was fumbling in his pocket looking for it as he went along the musty corridor.

He heard her crying as he fitted the key in the lock.

He thrust the door open. He stepped inside and slammed it shut after him.

Laura was sprawled across a twin bed in her slip. She was hugging her face into a pillow, and she was still crying deep inside her when she propped herself on an elbow and turned looking at him. Her face was streaked with tears and her lips were trembling.

She pushed her platinum blonde hair back from her face.

"What the devil is the matter?" Jim demanded. He went across the room and sat down on the bed beside her.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came back!" she whispered. Her voice held a touch of fright.

"Sure I'm here." He put his arm around her and held her head against his shoulder. "Now tell me, what's the matter? What are you crying about?"

"What difference does it make why I'm crying?" she whispered. "I'm crying, that's all. But you've got to make me stop. Make me stop crying."

She began to quiver. He pulled her closer, feeling her hot tears against his face, feeling her swollen mouth damp against his neck.

"Tell me about it," he said.

But she wouldn't talk about it. He felt a sob rack her full body. Her arms went about him, misery making her strong. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as she pulled herself

closer against him. She spoke against his face, "Make me stop crying. Make me stop crying." He could feel the tear-hotness of her breath, the resilient pressure of her breasts. He knew what she wanted, but it made him sad. Sad that she found out what he had learned long ago. That because you love with abandon, it doesn't mean your love is always returned that way.

She didn't have to tell him why she wept. He knew. Dan Calvert had broken her heart. She had found out the truth about Dan and Nita Laynebeck. And now there was only one way to stop her crying. The old gag. Pain to counteract pain.

*God help you, baby, he thought. We both loved in this town—with all our sucker hearts. And we got it good, baby, you and I. The way suckers get it everywhere.*

He pushed her back, covering the warmth of her mouth with his. He was trying to make her forget that Dan Calvert had broken her heart. And all the time he was trying to forget, too.

Nita had broken another date.

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## Chapter 15

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HE WAS dressed and out of the room the next morning before Laura woke up.

There were four good reasons why he wanted to get out of there without talking to her after last night.

First, he awoke needing violence. There was nothing else that was going to satisfy him now. He had to move and keep moving. He wanted to break things. Smash them. Watch them smash.

Second, he meant to put in at least twenty hours looking for Dan Calvert. He was positive Calvert had never left Duval. At least not for any length of time that mattered. Calvert was in town. He was in the mood to find him.

Third, he felt that the kid was going to want to be alone when she woke up. Sure, he'd made her stop crying. And she had gone to sleep in his arms. He had lain there for hours staring at the swirling patterns of darkness on the chipped ceiling of the cheap hotel room. She didn't wake up again that night.

The fourth reason he didn't like to think about. Not only had he made her stop crying last night. It had hit him where he lived, loving her. There was no cynical laughter boiling around inside him as he'd held her and loved her.

The hellish truth was that he had run away from Duval to escape one love. A love that had thrown him in a Florida prison and abandoned him. And now he had come back and found a new one.

He knew. With Laura he could go the rest of the distance. He'd be really civilized. No more bitterness, no more wormwood insides laughing at anything decent. A respectable citizen. She'd made him feel clean and young and worthwhile. Hell, with Laura he'd be thinking about a home, a business, washing machines, clotheslines, mortgages. The works.

And what chance did he have? She was twenty. Just twenty. The fact that he was thirty was minor. He was a thousand, he stunk with age and bitterness. He was what loving Nita Laynebeck had made of him. Laura needed a decent young guy.

He shook his head. He'd been laughed at for the last time. He wasn't going to stick his neck out. She was a kid. He wasn't right for her. What a laugh it would hand her when he told her he loved her. Only he wasn't going to tell her.

He got the framed photograph of Dan Calvert and left the room. He was almost running as he went along the corridor. His hand gripped the picture so tightly that he heard the glass smash under his palm. He didn't even look down at it.

There was a woman on duty at the bus station. Talbot went up to the window. He shoved the picture of Calvert across the desk. For the first time he saw that a sliver of glass had been pushed into his hand. He pulled it out, wrapped his handkerchief around his palm.

All the time the woman was staring at him instead of at the picture.

"Look at it," he told her. "You know that man?"

She looked at the picture. "I know him," she said. "I've seen his picture in the *Duval Sun*, and I've seen him around town. That stuck-up rich so-and-so disappeared."

"Did he buy a bus ticket?"

"That guy? That rich snob ride on a bus? Mister, you're making jokes early in the morning. Before breakfast."

The same full-bloomed little doll was at work in the news concession at the depot. She smiled as Talbot entered the place. She had the kitten up on the glass counter. She was stroking its back. Talbot shook his head. Two days. It seemed more like a month since he'd been in this train station.

Talbot poked a finger at the kitten. He looked at the girl. "What kind of hours do you have around this place anyhow?"

She smiled. "Oh, ah couldn't date you'all anyhow, mistuh. Ah'm mayried. Mah little ol' husben is just about the most jealous crittuh you evuh saw."

Talbot smiled. "Well, honey, I don't blame him for that.

It's just that you're here day and night—when are you home with him?"

"Why, honey, I'm only heah before trains leave and before they arrive. We close up except for an hour before every train time. That's why I'm here everytime they's anything doin' around heah."

He laid the picture of Calvert on the counter beside the kitten. The kitten spit at it.

"Maybe you saw him when he got on a train about three weeks ago? Can you remember?"

Talbot fished out a five-dollar bill and laid it across Calvert's eyes, thinking Calvert looked much better that way.

"I could have remembered without the money, honey, but —" Her little hand covered the bill. "Thank you'all so much."

"All right. All right. How about this guy?"

"Honey, that's Mistuh Dan Calvert. I went out with him one night. Was mah little ol' husben mad! Mad? Why, he was fit to be tied. Even when I told him what an impohtant man Mistuh Calvert was. He just didn't seem to care—"

"All right. All right. When did he leave town? What train did he take? Did he tell you where he was going?"

"Honey, take it easy. You'all will work up a real sweat heah so early in the mohnin'. Mistuh Calvert ain't left town, honey. Least not on any train he didn't . . ."

The young fellow in the gray uniform at the ticket office at the Duval Airport looked bored. Talbot smiled. The airlines catered to the sophisticated who could afford air travel so they evidently hired blasé clerks to create acceptable atmosphere.

He showed Calvert's picture.

"No. He hasn't been on any of our flights. Not recently. Not in the last six months. I would remember. He flies frequently to Tallahassee and Washington with Senator Laynebeck. But not lately at all. No. There's no other place in town where he could buy plane tickets, and no other airport. No. Mr. Calvert didn't leave Duval by plane."

Talbot was almost out of the air travel office when he remembered something. He stopped and looked around for the public pay telephone booths.

Inside one of the booths, he thumbed through the telephone directory to the yellow classified section.

Calvert definitely had not left town in his own car, or by bus, plane or train. He either left town walking or in transportation furnished privately. Talbot didn't believe Calvert had done any of these.

He turned the pages of the yellow section. If Calvert was still in Duval, where could he hole in and arouse least notice?

He found the classification "Motels."

The listing was not long, Talbot glanced over his shoulder and then tore the listing from the directory. What the hell, no one as blasé as that air clerk over there was going to need a motel. If the clerk didn't, the patrons wouldn't. Anyway, he needed that list worse than they did.

John Spexter came out on the small front stoop of the office-cabin at the Park-Here Motel. He was a thin man in white trousers and white undershirt. A spray of white hairs showed above the line of the undershirt. He was barefooted.

"The heat," he told Talbot. "A man has to be comfortable. Reason I went in the motel business. Most relaxed business in the world next to a trailer park. In a trailer park you're right down to bare living. A motel is a cut better, but still relaxed. Community bathrooms, showers, washtubs. People relax. That's what I like. Especially in this heat."

Talbot shoved the picture at him. "You know this fellow?"

The motel owner looked disappointed. "Say, I thought you wanted to rent a cabin. Is this all you want? Checking up on some poor guy might have stayed here. How do I know? People come, late at night, stay a few hours. How do I know who stays here?"

Talbot's voice was sharp. "Well, look at the picture anyway."

John Spexter looked at him petulantly. But he took the picture, holding it carefully so he didn't touch the broken place. He adjusted his spectacles and then looked over the top of them at the worried countenance of Dan Calvert.

"Well, all right. I believe I've seen him."

"When?"

Spexter thought. "One night, say a week and a half, two weeks ago."

Talbot grinned. "Wonderful. Did he rent a motel?"

"Yes. That's when I seen him. It was him all right."

"Has he still got the cabin?"

"No. Oh, no. He just hired it for the one night."

"Oh."

Spexter smiled. "Now if you had another picture. Of the lady, I might be able to tell you if it was her that was here with him."

"There was a woman with him?"

"Well, not when he hired the cabin. But about an hour after he'd taken it, a car parked half a block down the road. I was sittin' out here on the stoop, all the lights out that hour and all the cabins taken. Too hot to sleep. I see the lady walk back down the road and come in here. She walked right past my porch, almost close as you are to me. She never seen me at all.

"Well, she walks right along the roadway. Then this feller in the picture there, he comes out of a cabin. They sort of run together and hug tight, right out there in the drive. Then they went in his cabin."

"What did you do?"

"Why, I went on sittin' here. Maybe I ruminated a bit 'bout people and people's ideas about life."

"About them using your cabin?"

"What the devil? They paid for it, didn't they?"

"And so they left the next morning? In her car?"

"No. She left sometime during the night. I was settin' out here, seen her leave. She stopped down by the road there and lighted a cigarette. I looked at her. She looked tired."

"And the man?"

"When I went to clean the cabin the next morning he was gone. They were mighty neat folks, I'll say that. Hardly messed the place up at all. I changed the sheets, swept up, and that ended the matter, far as I was concerned. Nice, quiet, refined folk. Wish I could get rentals like that all the time."

"You didn't see him leave?"

"No, sir. I didn't. Didn't look for him. Cabin was paid for

in advance. Ended the matter right there, far as I was concerned."

Talbot drove back slowly into Duval. He had found Calvert and lost him just like that. If the woman at the motel were Nita, that would mean that Calvert had pretended to be out of town, and had arranged to meet her there for one night.

If it had been Laura who had run out there to stay with Calvert, that would make a different picture. In that case, Calvert was playing it safe. He was having his fun with Laura. But he was holding on to Nita. The rich woman. The one who would do his career the most good—when Laynebeck was out of the way. . . .

He parked outside the courthouse and went up the wide sidewalk. Old men were sitting on benches in the sun. He remembered when he had been a kid here. There had been a bandstand, and concerts at night, with the crowds standing around on the wide sidewalks and spilling out into the quiet streets.

Ballard was sitting at the blond-wood desk.

"You still in town?" he said.

"You didn't expect me to run just because the fat man in there said boo, did you? How about running in there and telling him that Talbot is back here to see him again."

Ballard got up and went to the door of Roberts' private office. He knocked.

"All right," Roberts said. "What is it?"

"Talbot is back to see you."

"Send him in here."

Ballard jerked his head at Talbot. Jim crossed the room. Ballard held the door open for him.

Roberts pushed back in his swivel chair. He regarded Talbot across the top of a steaming coffee cup.

"Morning, friend. You been shot at again?"

"Not since the first night. The high cost of ammunition and all."

Roberts put down the coffee cup. He picked up a sheaf of papers. Yellow, blue and white sheets stapled together.

"Here's the ballistics report," he said. "I think you'll find it pretty complete."

Talbot took it. "Thank you, friend," he said. "This is mighty neighborly of you."

Roberts peered up at him. "Not at all," he said, his smile as false as G.I. teeth. "You scratch my back. I'll scratch yours."

Talbot grinned. "Yeah. But your back is so much bigger than mine."

"Well . . . that's the way it goes in life," Roberts motioned toward a chair.

*Now it's my turn*, Talbot thought. He remembered what Laynebeck had said. The Sheriff would take a sliver of fact and chew at it, until he'd gotten all the juice out of it. That's the way they had worked when Talbot hit town. Clemmons went running to Roberts with the news. They haggled over it, ripped at it until they worked themselves in a frenzy—and sent Clemmons out to bring Talbot in. A friend of Laynebeck. A dangerous man.

And that was why they had brought Laura in. She knew Calvert and—and. . . .

Suddenly the whole thing was as clear to Talbot as though it were a series of photographs laid out on the Sheriff's desk before him.

Certainly, Calvert had never left town.

Where was he staying?

It was laughably simple. He was staying at two places. And suddenly Talbot knew exactly where to find Dan Calvert this morning.

All this time the Sheriff had been talking, worrying at each subject about which Talbot might remotely be informed! Laynebeck's latest plans; anyone who had been to see Laynebeck; any phone calls.

Talbot could think only one thing. He had to get out of this office. And yet he knew he couldn't hurry the Sheriff. If the Sheriff suspected Talbot was anxious to get out, he'd fret about that until he found out why. Maybe if he'd give Roberts some harmless lie to mull over and shake to pieces, he'd get a chance to ease out.

"There is one thing," Talbot said, "that I didn't tell you. While I was out at Laynebeck's place last night, he did have one phone call. Some guy named—let me see, Laynebeck called him Erskine—"

"Erskine? Great lord! Erskine Reeves. Governor Reeves! Telephone? He called Laynebeck? On the phone? Uh, look, Talbot, my boy, you've done me a great service. And I won't forget it. You'll see that I appreciate neighborly acts. I'm a man situated so he can repay a favor. But will you excuse me now? I'm pretty busy at the moment. I'll tell you what. Come back. Drop back in here to see me any time."

*And so, Talbot told himself, here I am, outside his office, still friendly.*

He tossed Ballard a salute and sauntered out into the corridor. Out there, with the door to the Sheriff's offices closed, Talbot moved faster.

He went out in the street and started toward his car. But before he reached it, he realized he could move faster on foot. The one-way streets of this swollen hick town would delay him.

He crossed Main Street and started along it, forcing himself to remember not to run.

Where was Calvert? He was at the Broadway Hotel.

Why else would Laura Dawson stay in such a dingy dump?

Why would Calvert stay there?

Because nobody would think to look for the rich snob in such a trap. Because the people who worked there were so poor or else so deep in trouble that Calvert could buy their loyalty.

Didn't that explain the prowler the first night Talbot had stayed in Laura's room?

The prowler had been Calvert, calling on Laura. Or checking. He had run, disappearing probably in some other room on the same floor. Maybe he'd seen Talbot come in with her.

Didn't that explain the look of fear on Laura's face? She'd been afraid Talbot would tumble to Calvert's little hideaway. Afraid he would catch Calvert in the hall. And that explained why Laura was in better spirits the next morning. By then she had warned Calvert. . . .

So that was one of the places Calvert had been using as a hide-out.

Talbot was almost running as he went through the double doors into the dusty lobby of the Broadway Hotel.

The clerk was a thin man with black hair, a prominent Adam's apple and a sharp, hooked nose. Talbot walked to the desk, pushed the cracked photograph of Calvert across it. He saw the clerk go pale, staring at the picture as though he couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Which room?" Talbot said.

The clerk looked up at him, his jaws sagging. He managed to squeak, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Talbot kept his voice low. "Look, Calvert's in this hotel. Either you tell me which room he's in, or I'll tear down every door in this dump until I find the right one."

"Please, mister! I don't want any trouble."

"Then let's don't have any. Give me a key to his room."

"I couldn't do that."

"That's up to you. I'm going in to see him. With a key or without it. Trouble or no trouble. That's up to you, fellow."

The clerk moaned low in his throat. "He'll kill me," he whimpered. "He's going to just kill me." But he fumbled under the desk and handed Talbot a key across the top of it. "He's in room 206, mister. And for God's sake don't tell him I told you."

Talbot took two steps at a time to the second floor. He didn't want the clerk to have time to call Calvert's room. Few rooms in this place were equipped with telephones. There were just pay phones in the corridors on each floor. But Calvert would very likely have had a telephone installed.

He came out of the stairwell on the second floor. The room across was 208. He decided the numbers would start at the elevator and he turned left. There it was. 206.

He shoved the key into the Yale inside lock, thinking he had been wrong in one thing. Calvert hadn't had a room on the same floor with Laura. Calvert was always the one to do a thing the safe way.

He turned the key and shoved the door open. He moved in fast then.

He could have saved the effort of hurry. There was a man in the room all right. He was sprawled out in the middle of the floor. There was a pool of blood under his head.

Talbot closed the door, leaning against it. He stared at the body on the floor.

Without touching him, Talbot knew the man was dead. He had been dead for several hours.

Talbot could feel the sickness boiling up in him. The man on the floor was dead. But it wasn't Calvert. Talbot hadn't yet found Dan Calvert.

The dead man was Mike Laynebeck!

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## Chapter 16

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TALBOT WALKED WOODENLY to the body on the floor. He knelt beside it, touching Laynebeck's cheek with the back of his hand. It was cold. The cold of death.

He lifted Laynebeck slightly. Just enough to see where the bullet had gone in. High in his left chest. The pool of blood had formed from the hole.

Talbot swallowed back the wad of tears that choked his throat. If there was one good man in Duval, one decent politician in the state of Florida, one swell guy in the world, this was he. Mike Laynebeck. Dead on the unswept floor of a dingy room in a cheap hotel.

Talbot clenched his fists until his fingernails dug into the palms of his hand. "My God, Mike," he whispered. "Why didn't you let me handle it? Why, Mike? Why?"

He could feel the sting of tears. He blinked them away angrily. He felt horrible. He had accused Mike of being afraid. Afraid of the questions. Afraid of the answers. Afraid of the muck.

Well, that showed how wrong you could be about a decent guy. Mike had been sincerely worried about that rotten bastard Calvert. He had been afraid Calvert was in trouble and needed him. That was why he had brought Jim Talbot back to a town he knew Talbot hated. He wanted the best talent he could buy to help him find Calvert. Find him so he could aid him, if Calvert needed it.

Laynebeck hadn't been afraid of anything. He had promised Talbot he was going on seeking Calvert. And he had. Sometime last night he must have gotten the answer. This morning he had come to see Calvert. And this was what he had gotten. A bullet in his chest.

*Laynebeck, Talbot thought, he could have been the biggest*

*man this state ever had, the kind it needed all to hell. Except for one thing. He had loved Nita.*

*Loving Nita is a disease.*

He was still hunkered over Laynebeck's body when he heard them in the hall. He was thinking that but for Laynebeck, he would be in a Florida road gang when he heard Roberts' voice: "Room 206, Clemmons. That's where they said."

Someone had called to report a shooting. But the shooting had occurred hours ago. And the call had gone in since Talbot left his office thirty minutes ago!

Talbot stared at the door. He was thinking, Laynebeck got me out of the chain gang. His body could send me back there. Especially if Roberts came in and found him.

He sprang up, ran to the window. There was no fire escape outside. It was a long two-story drop to the alley. He stuck his head through the curtains, looked both ways. The building was brick. There were no ledges, nothing to hold to.

It wouldn't do him any good to drop from the window. The fall to the littered alley would probably break his leg. He'd never get away then.

He looked up. The building across the narrow court had a flat roof. It was a long jump from this window. It was a desperate chance. It was his only chance.

He was already climbing through the window. He heard Roberts' voice from the corridor: "All right, all right. Open that door. Or would you like me to break it down?"

Talbot jumped. His hands caught on the inside of the ledge. His knees cracked hard against the bricks of the wall. He didn't have time for pain. He chinned himself up to the ledge, caught with his arm and pulled himself over.

He scrambled away from the ledge. It was in plain sight from the window of room 206. By now, the clerk was going to be staring speechlessly. He'd sent a man up to 206, and that man was gone!

Talbot ran across the hot tar roof. There was a rusty fire escape on the other side of the building that led down to another refuse-cluttered alley.

Talbot swung his legs over the ledge and clambered down

the fire escape. There was a six-foot drop into the alley. Talbot made it, landing on his feet.

He straightened up, brushing the dust from his aching knees. A woman crossed the alley on Main Street. She stared in at him. He bowed, smiling.

"Good morning, ma'am."

She tilted her head and strode on. Another drunk in an alley.

Talbot stepped out on Main Street. He walked with what he hoped was jauntiness toward the courthouse square. But he couldn't be sure. His knees hurt so much that it was agony to take one step after the other.

He longed to look over his shoulder toward the Broadway Hotel. He managed to resist. He had to resist. Even though he felt he was wearing the latest thing in pistol targets—right in the middle of his back.

At the square, he waited for the traffic signal to change, crossed the street and managed to get to the Buick before his knees made him yell with agony.

He was still waiting for the shrilling of police whistles. He started the car, backed out, drove around the square to Cypress Road. There was one place for him to go. He didn't know when he had decided it, but there was no doubt in his mind.

The big arrow above the bus station pointed east. And Talbot headed east, keeping barely within the speed limit. He didn't want to be picked up for speeding. But he wanted to get where he was going before the call went out for him.

There were only two cars baking in the sun of the huge macadam parking lot that surrounded the white building with its huge unlighted sign: *Bonny Williams' Golden Club. Dancing Nightly. Floor Show.*

Talbot parked in the rear of the Club. He banged on the front door. This was padded and he didn't even hear himself. He walked back around the building in the sun.

There were half a dozen garbage cans outside the kitchen door. He brushed past them, walking unsteadily and entered the kitchen. Three men were laughing and talking over by the stoves. They stopped talking and stared at him.

He nodded, trying to look as though he owned the joint. "Bonny up front?" he said. He didn't wait for their answer. He wondered how much longer his knees were going to support him. Long enough, he determined grimly, till he got to the right door.

Bonny Williams looked up when Talbot pushed open the door to his private office.

"Hi, Bonny."

The Club owner looked ill. "What you want this time?"

"You didn't decide to tell me where Calvert was?"

Bonny licked his tongue across his lips. He shook his head.

"No." It was just a whisper. But there was fear in it.

"You don't need to tell me any more," Talbot said. "Now I know. I figured it all out. All by myself, Bonny. Isn't that nice?"

"Yes. Swell." Bonny was sweating now.

"If I told Mike Laynebeck that you'd been hiding Dan Calvert out, you wouldn't last long, would you, Bonny?"

"My lord, mister! Please!"

"I can't tell him, Bonny. Laynebeck's dead."

Bonny Williams' mouth fell open. Talbot could almost read the man's thoughts. Bonny had been willing to cross Laynebeck. But Laynebeck had stood between this gross, sweating man and ruinous protection pay-offs to Roberts and his thugs. Bonny didn't mind seeing Laynebeck cheated, robbed and double-crossed. But he hadn't looked ahead to the time when he was going to have to try to stay in business in Marvel County, Florida, when Laynebeck was dead.

"I need a room, Bonny," Talbot said.

"I got nothing."

"I think you have. Upstairs. Or maybe you'd like me to go to the Sheriff and tell him you've been playing along with Dan Calvert, hoping he could save you from Roberts even when Calvert pulled his double-cross and Laynebeck was dumped?"

"Maybe I got one room. It ain't nothing extra. You may not like it."

"It'll have to do. Let's go up and see it."

As they came off the stairway to the second floor, Talbot could hear the music from a phonograph or radio. The volume was turned up loud. It came from a room directly across the hall from the stairs.

Talbot looked questioningly at Bonny. Williams pretended he didn't even hear it.

Talbot strode across the corridor. He put his hand on the doorknob. The door was locked.

Williams' voice was almost a sob. "Not that room. That ain't the room I got for you!"

"It's good enough," Talbot said. "It's the room I want."

"Oh, lord, mister!" Bonny was wringing his hands. "Please come away from that door!"

Talbot grabbed Williams' shirt front. "Unlock that door or I'll tear it down—and I'll use your greasy head for a battering ram."

He could feel Bonny Williams' shivering. The Sheriff had the man's number, all right. Bonny was shaking so badly he could hardly work the key into the Yale lock. He turned the key and tried to knock warningly as the door swung open.

Talbot caught Bonny's balled hand and thrust him into the room ahead of him.

The radio console blared louder than ever in this richly furnished room with the Venetian blinds drawn tight against the sunlight and heat of the outside world. This room with air-conditioning, with a table set for a banquet. With divans to lounge on, and mirrors to check your beauty from every angle.

Calvert was standing with a cocktail glass in his hand. He was wearing an expensive dressing gown, a wine-colored thing with woven pictures through it. His brown hair receded from his high forehead. His eyes were blue, his nose straight. For all his worried expression, you could see that here was a man who felt himself an exceptionally handsome dog. A man of consequence. A man who was going places. The man Talbot had come to find.

Dan Calvert. . . .

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## Chapter 17

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CALVERT LOOKED DOWN his patrician nose.

"Jim Talbot, I presume?"

"It's not Dr. Livingstone, anyhow," Talbot said. He looked around the room. Calvert had been living in elegance here.

Calvert smiled. "Like it?" he inquired.

Talbot matched his smile. "Sure. I think the Romans lived something like this just before the bottom fell out."

Calvert walked over to an occasional table and poured himself a liqueur. He stood up, sipping it, inhaling it, absorbing it.

"I suppose you're here to tell me the bottom has fallen out."

Bonny Williams' trembling voice broke across Calvert's. "Mike Laynebeck is dead," he quavered.

"Or is that a surprise to you?" Talbot inquired.

Either Calvert was a hell of an actor, or the news did hit him like a sharp jab under the belt. He set the dainty glass down on the table and then stood up. He straightened his shoulders as though pain constricted his chest. His face was rigid and white.

"I didn't know," he whispered. "When did it happen? Where?"

Bonny looked at Talbot questioningly. Talbot went on staring at the foppish Calvert.

"Room 206, the Broadway Hotel," Talbot said. "It happened either last night or early this morning."

"And you found the body?"

"That's right. But Laynebeck went there looking for you. He found out last night after I left him that you were hiding out here in town, that you had not really disappeared at all. Some of your friends aren't as loyal as you seemed to believe."

His face still pale and rigid, Calvert was staring across

Talbot's shoulder at Bonny Williams. The stout man shook his head negatively.

"I didn't, Dan," he protested. "I didn't say anything to nobody."

Calvert waved his hand, dismissing him. "All right, Bonny. We'll see. Meanwhile, why don't you get back downstairs?"

Bonny nodded, his face flooding with relief. He almost ran from the room.

Talbot waited until the door was closed behind the owner of the Golden Club. He faced Calvert across the table.

"I've no doubt you have the neatest set of alibis for last night and this morning?"

Calvert nodded. "Naturally. However, I don't have to answer to you. And besides, I'm quite upset at the news of Mike's death. We were very close—"

"Not too close that you couldn't double-cross him."

"I'm too upset to talk with you. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me—"

"That's where you're wrong, Calvert. I came here to talk to you. Your grief doesn't interest me. I know what you did to Laynebeck before he died—and you weren't fit for him to spit on."

"A matter of opinion. Naturally you'd think Laynebeck a great man. He got you out of prison, didn't he?"

"He sure as hell did. When everybody else in this state had forgotten me, he was working for me. That's the kind of guy he was."

"Oh, I know all about your loyalty. It's quite touching. I even heard that you left a lucrative business up North to come running the first time he called you. Mike must have loved that. He loved to have people jump when he spoke."

"He earned loyalty, brother. He didn't buy it."

"Highly commendable, I'm sure. But your loyalty is no longer required. You are no longer needed here—if you ever were. As you have said, Laynebeck is dead. He hired you to find me, isn't that true? Well, since he's dead, there's no longer anyone to employ you. There's nothing more for you here in Duval."

"That's what you think. There's no fee in this for me from now on, Calvert. But this one is on me. There's one more thing

here in Duval for me—the guy who killed Mike Laynebeck. I'm going to find him. And then God help him!”

Calvert's small mouth tightened into a hard line. “Don't be a fool! You should never have come back here in the first place. Oh, I know why you came. Loyalty to Mike Laynebeck—and the tender memory of Laynebeck's wife. Well, I can tell you this. Laynebeck's wife never loved you. You can forget that part of it now. Do you know who was with Nita the night she robbed the filling station?”

Talbot stared. Calvert's mouth twisted. He hadn't known. But he might have if he'd thought about it. A gutless wonder who hadn't had nerve enough to go through with it at the last minute.

His whisper was hoarse. “You. You were with her.”

“That's right. I was with her. And we started off that evening laughing about you. No seat in your pants and mooning around after Nita Barwell! What a fool you looked. And we've been laughing at you ever since!”

Talbot made a pretense of shrugging it off. His heart was pounding like a kettledrum, but Calvert didn't have to know that.

“No more than I've laughed at myself,” he said. “After I found out the score. Love is a matter of economics. You fall for a man who can support you, or a woman who can do your career some good, isn't that true?”

“If you're smart.”

“Oh, well, I'm smart now, Calvert. You never met a smarter guy than I am now. So that's why if you know anything about Mike's murder you'd better talk.”

“If you were smart you'd have left town that first night.”

Talbot shook his head. “Just because you hired some thug to take a shot at me? Just because somebody shooting at you would have scared *you* out of town, Calvert, that doesn't mean that it would run me out. Oh, it scared me. I'm smart enough to be scared of guns when they're owned by men like you. But I don't run every time I'm scared.”

“Maybe you'll wish you'd run, before we're through here.”

“Or maybe you'll wish you had talked.” Talbot took a step forward. Calvert straightened his immaculate dressing gown on his shoulders. “Maybe you'll wish you'd talked about what

happened in room 206 at the Broadway Hotel last night. Or was it this morning?

"Somebody talked to Laynebeck, didn't they? After I saw him and convinced him that you were double-crossing him, he got on the telephone and started using some of that force that you rats forgot he possessed. Force that he could have been using all the time—"

Calvert smiled his contempt. "Forget it. Mike was a tired old man. Why do you think I was quitting him?"

"Because he needed you. That's why. That's when rats desert any ship, Calvert. When it's sinking."

"Laynebeck was on his way out, Talbot. He had gone soft. He was ruined. All he could think about was Nita. She spent too much money and ran too wild. He was too busy for politics. He wouldn't have had a handful of votes left in the next election—"

"So you got out from under? You hid out while you sold out to the Sheriff and his gang? What was it, Calvert—some scandal that Laynebeck had covered up for some of your politicians? You were going to smear him, weren't you? Oh, not you. The Sheriff and his boys would do that. All you would do was furnish the ammunition."

"All right. That's a good enough guess. Roberts' men are going in on a reform platform in the next election. They needed plenty of facts against the opposition. And there were plenty of facts. I haven't done anything dishonest. There's a certain judge. Laynebeck backed him for years. This judge is in graft up to his ears. Well, he's going out. And a Congressman, padding his payroll, taking a kickback—"

Talbot snarled. "Sure. They weren't perfect. Laynebeck said that. They were just the best possible men that could be rounded up for their jobs with things the way they are. That was why Laynebeck backed them. If anything ever blinded him, it was friendship. Loyalty to rats like you. And love—"

Calvert's smile was ugly. "Is it my fault I'm the one Nita loves?"

"And Nita you'll get when Laynebeck is gone. Nita. The Barwell money. The Laynebeck fortune. Social position. Prestige. And what did the Sheriff offer you? You'd be the next Senator?"

"I would have accepted, if it were offered me."

"Sure. And it would have been."

Calvert shook his head. "You're wrong Talbot. It will be. Laynebeck's death doesn't change that. I'm an important man in this state."

"I don't think you're as big as you think. You got evidence against the Sheriff as well as that judge to protect yourself until you were sure you'd get what you wanted. That was why Roberts was beating Laura, wasn't it? He'd found out you were maybe crossing him too. So he dragged in Laura to try to smoke you out. And when Mike Laynebeck found out where you were and what you were doing, he came to your room in the Broadway Hotel—and you had to kill him."

He lunged at Calvert, almost upsetting the table. Calvert staggered back with a cry of terror. Calvert's only possible response when actually threatened. The gutless wonder. The guy who let Nita rob for him when he lost his nerve even on a lark. The guy who didn't move to help Laura when the Sheriff got her, knowing the Sheriff was trying to smoke him out. He cringed. Afraid of pain. Afraid he might be hurt.

"No! I wasn't there. I wasn't there. Listen to me, Talbot, for God's sake!"

"I came here to listen." He gathered up the front of Calvert's lounging robe. "I've nothing on you but the fact that murder was committed in your hideout room. You killed the last decent guy I know. And I'd as soon kill you as take the time to prove you guilty. Start talking."

"All right. I only kept that room so I could—could see Laura Dawson. The blonde girl. You know her. She fell for me. Thought I was a big shot. She came here to dance. I was afraid Nita would find out. You don't know what Nita can be like when she hates—"

"So you took a cheap hotel room where you could shack up with Laura so Nita would never find out."

"So I got tired of Dawson. She's a nice kid. But right now, I'm going places—"

"Sure. Laura clutters it up. Nita is pretty important to a man who wants to be Senator—"

"Okay. If you know all about it, why ask me? Last night Laura begged me to come in to the hotel. I went in. I told her

we were through, washed up. She better get out of town before Roberts got her again. I wouldn't lift my hand to help her. *But I didn't stay in that hotel.* I left there. I came back here. That's God's truth. You can prove that by asking Bonny Williams."

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## Chapter 18

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TALBOT GAVE Calvert a shove, releasing him. Calvert went backward and landed hard on the pastel-tinted covers of the divan.

"I'll ask him," Talbot said. His voice was hard.

He turned around and strode across the room. He watched Calvert in one of the mirrored walls. Calvert remained on the divan where he had landed, his pale face twisted.

Talbot slammed the door of the apartment behind him. He was glad to get out. The closed-in odors of the Golden Club were clean after Calvert's plush, air-conditioned boudoir.

As he came off the lower step, Talbot heard the music of the band from the dining room. The band and the voice of a singer. His heart did a nip-up. Laura was in there. Rehearsal. But he didn't look in. He turned toward Bonny's office.

"Jim!"

Her voice struck at him. He hunched his shoulders against the sound of it and kept walking.

He could hear her running after him, the sharp sound of her breath, her heels on the corridor floor. She caught his arm, her hand barely touching him. Not pulling him around at all. Just begging him to turn. And look at her.

"Jim."

He kept his green eyes narrowed and cold. It was difficult. Her beauty was like white hot radium, and like radium burned through his defenses.

"You left this morning without saying good-bye."

He kept his voice cold. "What was there to say?"

"You were nice to me last night—you were good to me—you—"

"All right. Forget it." He forced himself to laugh. "Any time at all."

"Please, Jim. Don't be like this. I'm trying to tell you. It—"

"I don't want to hear it, baby. See? If I did, I'd have hung around this morning, wouldn't I?"

She took his hand, opened the door of a private dining room, drew him inside. She closed the door and leaned against it.

"I've been waiting all day to talk to you. I've been looking for you. I wanted to see you."

He shook his head. "Look, baby. You're a big girl now. You can't run after a guy."

From somewhere she pulled up a smile. "You mean Dan, don't you?"

"Sure. He's upstairs, honey. The great Calvert. He's the one you want, remember? I'm still the guy I always was. I'm not getting tangled up with anybody—"

"She really hurt you, didn't she?"

"She really did."

"But you can't go on letting her ruin your life!"

"Okay. And here's my tip to you, baby. You're a nice kid. Made to love. God knows I know that—"

"Jim—"

"No. Listen to me. Find some kid your own age. To hell with guys like Calvert. And guys like me—"

"And what's wrong with you?"

"I'm old. You'll never know how old."

"Don't treat me like this. Look, I admit it. I was in love with Dan Calvert. Or I thought I was. Maybe I'd never met anyone like him before. Politics. Money. Society. He asked me to come here, and I did. All right—I was—his girl. I was—I was what he wanted. And he kicked me out. I—I'm not going to lie to you about it. I'm not going to try to lie. Because I think maybe I've been lucky. Last night when you came in my room I was ready to die. I wanted to die. And today I don't want to. I want to forget Dan Calvert. I want to forget he ever lived—"

"Okay. That's swell. That's a good idea."

She was staring at him. The color was draining from her cheeks. Her mouth was stiff. She looked as though she'd been struck.

"I get it." Her voice was a whisper. "Forget Dan Calvert. But you—you don't want me—"

Talbot felt the rapid thudding of his heart over his empty belly. Want her? Mortgages. Washing machines. Kids' clothes hanging on the lines. The works.

"Because Dan had me, you don't want me." There was horror in her voice.

"Don't be a fool."

It was as though she didn't even hear him. She walked past him, sank down on one of the straight chairs. Her arms hung limp at her sides.

"I—I was honest about it. I thought that was what mattered. I was—in love. I didn't try to hide it. He made me keep it a secret. I didn't want to. I wanted to tell everybody. Now I know why. Because I wasn't good enough for him. I was just one—one of those girls that—he went to at night. The only difference was he didn't leave ten dollars on the table in the morning!"

She began to giggle. "Why should he? I was for free. I loved him."

"Cut it out, kid."

He touched her shoulder. She shrugged his hand away. "Let me alone! I'm not good enough for you. I'm a rotten cheap little slut. No wonder you don't want me. I wasn't good enough for Dan Calvert."

"Oh, the things I did for him. 'Entertain the Congressman, Laura. Be nice to Mr. Jones. He's rich. He can do me a lot of good.' Sure. So Laura entertained the Congressman. She was nice to Mr. Jones. And all the time she was in love with Dan Calvert. All the time she was doing everything for him. Only he didn't see it that way, did he? Oh, no. I was a tramp. Only he didn't pay me. Only he *forgot* to pay me."

She began to laugh. She let the sound pour out rackingly, sobs and laughter all mixed together.

Talbot reached for her. She stared up at him, her eyes distended with tears. She hit him. She struck with both fists full in his face.

She hit with all her strength. For a second, he stood immobilized. Laura shoved him and ran from the room. The door slammed behind her.

Talbot leaned against the table. *Go after her*, his mind said. *Go after her.*

He sat there, without moving.

Sure, he could talk her out of it. He could find her and he could keep talking, and keep kissing her until she forgot all about Dan Calvert.

He shook his head. She would forget the hell Calvert had put her through. He knew how Calvert must have used her. He really must have been riding high. *Entertain the Congressman, Laura.*

Talbot's fists tightened. He could fill in the other part. He could see Calvert smirking and whispering in the Congressman's ear. Telling him what a charmer the Dusan wench was. "She jumps when I tell her to," Calvert would leer. He could hear Calvert's suave voice inside his head. "We'll have to be careful, Laura. We won't tell anybody. Not for a while."

And so he had his luscious little blonde. All he had to do was keep Nita Laynebeck from finding out the truth.

But now it was too dangerous to play around with Laura. Calvert's smooth voice again. "It's all over, Laura. It's been swell. But you must have known it was all just for fun. It's been fine."

Calvert had put her through it all right. Talbot knew. He had been in love once. The terrible, star-moving kind that most people never know about. The lucky people. Laura loved hard. The way Talbot had loved—once.

He stood up, started for the door. But it wasn't too late with Laura. Hell, he could talk her out of it. Wasn't that what he had wanted this morning? A cottage, a mortgage, a job. The works.

He shook his head again. It wasn't too late for Laura, but for him . . . ten years too late.

Talbot stepped out of the kitchen door and started toward the Buick parked at the end of the building. He saw Clemmons. He started, heeling around. It was too late.

Clemmon's drawling voice stopped him. "I got my gun fixed on youah back, Talbot. I don't mind pulling the trigger. But if'n you're real smart, you'll stop. Right there where you are."

Talbot stood perfectly still.

"Your hands," Clemmons said. "Lift 'em up. High."

Talbot raised his hands.

Clemmons chuckled, coming up to him. "The great Talbot. That private eye from New York. Boy, you shore don't look very tough to me. You come off back down heah and got yourself in a passel of trouble, ain't you?"

Talbot's face was stony. "You always were trouble, Clemmons. A queer without sense enough to know he's queer. A fag without intelligence enough to know why he likes to beat women. You should have been a prison guard, Clemmons. You'd have made yourself a fortune."

"Shut up! Shut up talking to me like that."

Talbot turned around slowly. He kept his hands up. "Do I get you all nervous, Strick?"

"You like a bullet in your belly?"

"Where we going this time, Clemmons?"

"You ain't going far, tough guy. Raiford. The hot squat. Talk tough now. Cause you're really fixed this time. Suppose you just climb in that Buick and let's drive in to the Sheriff's office. Real slow-like. I don't like you, Talbot. I never have. I'll put a bullet in your gut."

"You'd like to do that, wouldn't you, Strick? You'd get a real charge?"

Clemmons' eyes wavered; he dampened his lips and swallowed.

"Try to escape, Talbot. You'll see."

"Escape? I don't want to. I want to ride in town with you and find out what you came out here to arrest me for."

"You don't have to ride that far to find that out, Talbot. I can tell you. You're gonna burn. For murder. For the murder of Mike Laynebeck."

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## Chapter 19

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CLEMMONS PUSHED OPEN the door of the Sheriff's office. "All right, tough guy," he said. "Let's go in."

Talbot went ahead of him into the office. The place was bedlam. There were newspaper men from all over the state. Nobody in Duval had realized that Laynebeck was their great man until he was dead.

Pushed against the wall across the room, Sheriff Roberts was sweating. He was facing the reporters and attempting to answer a barrage of questions. His face was a caricature of grief.

"Yes, gentlemen. Yes. This town, this nation has suffered a great loss. I promise you the Sheriff's office of Marvel County won't sleep until the murderer of that stalwart leader, Mike Laynebeck is behind bars."

"How soon will you make an arrest, Sheriff?"

"Do you have any leads, Sheriff?"

"Yes. Indeed we do. We promise a speedy arrest."

"Is it true, Sheriff, that Governor Erskine Reaves may conduct a personal investigation into Laynebeck's death?"

"Why, no. I'm shore that's just a rumor. Why, I know Governor Reaves has every faith in me. He'll allow me to conduct this investigation. He knows that his will is mine. His wish to arrest and convict the murderer of our good friend is my wish. I'm sure the Governor will let me handle this matter."

Roberts saw Clemmons and Talbot then. He jerked his head toward his inner office. Talbot felt the stout Ballard press close behind him and the three of them wedged their way through the crowd to the private office.

Clemmons closed the door against the shouting of the reporters and the hoarse bull voice of the Sheriff.

He nodded toward a chair. "All right, Talbot. Sit down."

The door opened and the sweating Sheriff squeezed through it. He locked it and leaned against it a moment to catch his breath.

He stared at Ballard. "Sit right here, Ballard. Don't let nobody in this door."

Ballard nodded.

"Here he is, Sheriff," Clemmons said. "Shall we get started on him?" Clemmons' eyes were glittering.

"Not in here, you fool!" Roberts snorted. He looked at Talbot. "All right, Talbot, in that room back there. It's quieter."

Talbot got up. "You want to be mighty careful, Sheriff. You're in a tough spot. You better not start kicking me around. I'll start out right now admitting I was in that hotel room. I saw Laynebeck's body. But I didn't kill him."

Roberts smiled. "You'll wish you had before we're through with you, Talbot. You ain't got the high and mighty Laynebeck to save you now. Laynebeck is dead."

"That's right and I didn't kill him."

Talbot was amazed that Roberts could move so fast. The Sheriff was catlike on his feet. He didn't telegraph his punch.

Talbot saw it coming just in time to jerk his jaw aside. He got the blow on his shoulder. It sent him hard against Roberts' desk.

He came off the desk on the rebound. He drove his left at Roberts' face. It never landed. There was a blur of movement behind him. Clemmons brought the gun butt down across his skull. Roberts' face danced, skidded and whirled out in front of Talbot's eyes. Then it caught fire and exploded. It burned like a million Roman candles. And when the fire was gone, the whole world was dark.

He could hear their voices a long time before he could see their faces. He came out of it slowly. It was a long time before he realized where he was.

His hands were cuffed behind him. He was sitting in a straight chair. The back room. The same back room where he'd found Laura Dawson that first night in Duval. Hell, the same chair.

What a sucker he had been. Roberts had hit at him for

just one reason. To make him hit back, to jockey him around so that he'd be set up for Clemmons. Clemmons and the gun butt. Well, they'd suckered him in. Big town guy and he'd fallen for it like the dumbest rube.

"We know you killed him," Roberts said.

"You're crazy! I worshipped the guy. He was the only decent guy I knew! Why would I kill him?"

Clemmons' hand came hard across his face. "You better tell us, killer!"

Talbot spat at him. He turned to Roberts. "You won't make it stick. You can't."

Clemmons hit him again. "This ain't no frame, Talbot. You killed him."

Roberts' voice was soft. "Wait a minute, Strick. Maybe we can make it easier for Mr. Talbot." He drew something from his pocket, held it out in the palm of his hand.

"An initialed cigarette lighter. Pretty expensive. The initials are J.T. James Talbot? Or am I wrong?? You know where we found that, Talbot? Right where you dropped it—beside Laynebeck's body!"

Talbot felt the world wheel out from under him. He stared at the cigarette lighter. Sure it was his. It was the one Nita had kept.

And it had been found in room 206, Broadway Hotel. So Nita had been there. She was so careless, wasn't she? Always losing things? Or had she lost it?

He shook his head. This was the jackpot. They were going to hold him. They wanted a man to convict. Whether he was guilty or not wasn't important. He could be made to look guilty. They could prove that James Talbot had been in that room. They could show that he had lost his cigarette lighter there. Why would he kill his benefactor?

There would be plenty of time before the trial came up. They'd think of something. Hell, they'd invent something.

And this time there would be no Mike Laynebeck to save him.

Wasn't that a hell of a twist? Mike Laynebeck had saved him from prison once. Now, Mike Laynebeck's body was going to send him back there—one way!

He stirred in the chair. He wanted out of there. He had to get out of there.

Clemmons brought the back of his hand across Talbot's face so hard that his head rocked back on his neck. Stars careened out before his muddled eyes.

His head sank forward on his chest. "Wait," he whispered.

Clemmons wiped the flecks of spittle away with the back of his hand. He started to hit again. Roberts stopped him.

"What is it, Talbot?"

"Unlock me. There ain't any use fightin' this any more."

Roberts nodded at Clemmons. The deputy bent down behind the chair and removed the handcuffs. Talbot sighed heavily, rubbed his wrists.

Ballard knocked on the door. "Sheriff!"

"Get the hell away from there. You know I'm busy."

"Sheriff. Please. For the Lord's sake! It's the Governor. Governor Reaves. In the outside office. He's on his way into your office right now!"

Talbot looked up at Roberts. All the blood had drained from the Sheriff's beefy face. For the moment he stood perfectly rigid. He was paralyzed. Finally, he turned and marched woodenly toward the door to his plush office.

He unlocked it. He turned, his eyes still dazed. He spoke to Clemmons over his shoulder. "Keep him quiet in here. I'll be back. Soon as I can."

Talbot sat slumped in the straight chair. From the Sheriff's private office, he could hear the voices of Governor Reaves, sharp and angry against the bull tones of Roberts.

A hell of a lot of good it was going to do him, Talbot thought. He knew all about Marvel County justice, and Marvel County mercy.

The Governor was upset. He was violently angry. It was going to take the Sheriff some time. But Talbot was sure he knew how it was going to end. Roberts would sell the Governor a bill of goods. They had a man in the back room. He could be made to look guilty. A carnival of a trial—and everything was fine again.

"The worst thing that has ever happened in my career!"

The Governor's voice was savage. "Killed. Shot in a cheap hotel room. And his killer walks out without a trace—"

"Not without a trace!" Roberts voice boomed. "Now, Governor Reaves, if you'll leave this matter to me—"

"I cannot, L.F.! They're after me. The opposition papers are ripping into me. They're saying that our group has degenerated until it is nothing more than a gang—and that the death of Senator Laynebeck is the latest gang killing—"

"Now, Governor, you know a thing like that ain't true!" Roberts' loud voice was persuasive, soothing.

"I'll tell you what I know, Roberts. The people of this state are howling about the gambling syndicate and the rackets that are going on right under my nose."

"We'll settle this matter, Governor."

"How?"

"Look, Governor. In the room back there is a man who *could* be guilty—"

Talbot heard Reaves' voice rise to a crescendo of anger and crack like a whip. "Could be guilty! And now a frame-up to cover a heinous murder! My God, Roberts! What are you trying to get away with?"

"I'm trying to settle this thing, Governor. As quietly and speedily as possible."

"I don't know how stupid you people are, but you must know how shaky our position is right now. You take an innocent man into court, they'll crucify you. I wouldn't care about that—but it'll ruin every politician in this state."

"He won't be innocent!"

The Governor's voice cracked again. "You meant there won't be a way to prove him innocent after you're through! No, Sheriff. You've got to do better than that. I'm bringing in my own investigators tonight. We're going to get the real murderer. I'm perfectly sincere when I tell you that Laynebeck was known and respected all over the country. The smell of this thing can very well ruin us all. And I'll tell you this, Roberts, I agree with the opposition. Laynebeck's death does smack of gang killing. I'm warning you. One more political death—or scandal—in Marvel County and I'll purge you. You're finished!"

Talbot went on massaging his wrists. But there was no

longer any pain in them. His mind had raced far ahead, planning, thinking, discarding, choosing.

There was a chance that Roberts would release him. There was no mercy in Governor Reaves' voice. Roberts was in a hell of a predicament. Very likely he would be afraid to hold Talbot now without some kind of conclusive evidence of his guilt.

Talbot knew he had one thing in his favor: few people didn't know how Talbot felt about Laynebeck. Against that was the cigarette lighter found in room 206 beside Laynebeck's dead body.

But he didn't want to take a chance on the Sheriff's releasing him. He wanted out of there. Now.

He slumped forward on the chair, groaning. Clemmons leaped across the room on his stilt-like legs. Talbot waited until he was close beside the chair.

He came up fast. He slapped his left hand over Clemmons' mouth, squeezing his fingers with all his strength into the deputy's lantern jaws. Clemmons was unable to utter a sound.

As he came up, Talbot drove his knee into Clemmons' groin. The deputy gasped, folding.

Talbot released him then. As Clemmons crumpled, Talbot brought the side of his hand in a short chop against the nape of his neck. Clemmons hit the floor hard and didn't stir.

The Governor was still tongue-lashing the Sheriff as Talbot stepped through the window into the breathless Florida night.

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## Chapter 20

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TALBOT WALKED across the courtyard to Main Street. There was a taxi driver napping in his cab outside the bus station. Talbot got in the rear of the car and tapped the sleeping man on the shoulder.

"The Golden Club," he said. "And step on it. I'm trying to make that first show. That blonde that dances. I don't want to miss her."

The cabbie had already put the car in motion.

"You mean the babe that dances wit' them veils?" The driver whistled. "Mister, she sends me, calls me back and spins me like a top. And me with five kids already!"

Talbot sat on the edge of the seat, alternately listening to the driver's chatter and waiting to hear the sound of sirens behind him.

The taxi was clipping along at fifty-five. Cypress Road had never seemed so long. Houses, trees, lawns seemed to inch past. It had never taken so long to get out of the city limits. It seemed twenty miles to the Golden Club. And yet Golden Springs was only six miles east of the bus station, and the Golden Club was almost three miles closer to town. Talbot felt he could have pushed the cab at a better rate of speed.

The driver whipped the car into the macadam parking lot. Brakes squealed as he skidded to a stop before the brightly-lighted entrance of the club.

Talbot tossed him a bill.

The driver looked at it and grinned. "Thanks, mister. You musta wanted to see her bad."

Talbot went through the entrance. The blaring music of the dance band struck him like a douse of cold water. But he didn't look into the dining room. He ran past the hat-

check booth and turned along the corridor toward the stairs.

He went up the steps two at a time.

The door to Calvert's apartment was closed. There was no sound from within this time. Talbot hammered on the door.

There was no answer. A waiter came from one of the rooms down the corridor. He looked worriedly at Talbot.

"Send Bonny Williams up here," Talbot snapped at him. He pounded on the door again.

Bonny Williams came puffing and sweating up the steps almost immediately.

"A key," Talbot snarled. "Open this door."

"He's not in there," Bonny Williams whimpered. "He's been gone three hours."

Talbot's shoulders sagged. He felt the defeat all over like bone-weariness. He heeled around and started slowly down the steps.

"How about Laura Dawson?" he said. "Where is her dressing room?"

Bonny Williams looked as if he were about to cry. "She didn't work tonight," he moaned. "My big night of the week and she doesn't show up. Sure. I got her veils. What will I put in them? Some cow? They'd laugh them off the floor, right off the floor."

But Talbot wasn't listening. He was already on his way to the taxi stands outside the front doors.

Talbot got out of the cab at the end of the dark block below the Broadway Hotel. He walked past its dim-lit entrance and around to the service alley.

Inside the delivery door, he ran for the stairs. He kept running, feeling his heart slugging like a hot rivet in his chest.

He went along the corridor to 314. She had to be in there. He fished the room key out of his pocket and fitted it in the lock.

He pushed the door open and there she was. Laura was sitting on a straight chair, her body lax, arms at her side.

"Laura!"

She lifted her head, turned it toward the sound of his

voice. But it seemed an eternity before her pale eyes focused on him.

"Jim," she said. "Hello, Jim."

"Laura. Snap out of it. I want you to do something for me—"

"Entertain the Congressman, Laura. Be nice to Mr. Jones." Her voice was a parrot's voice.

He grabbed her by the shoulders. Her head flopped back. She stared at him. Her face expressionless.

"Laura. You've got to find Dan Calvert for me. Do you hear? I've got to find him, Laura. I've got to have him. I haven't much time."

She shrugged his hands away and straightened up on the chair. She ran her slender hand through her tousled blonde hair. She searched his features for long moments before she spoke.

"All right, Jim. I'll find him. I'll find him for you." Her wan smile was inscrutable.

She got up and started to walk past him. She staggered and almost fell. He leaped to grab her.

She shook his hands away. "No. Don't touch me."

He let her go. She looked at him again, breathing heavily. She stumbled again and caught herself against the doorjamb of the bathroom.

"Here he is," she said. "Here's Dan Calvert."

He stared across her shoulder. Dan was sprawled on the bathroom floor. There was a knife in his throat. He was dead.

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## Chapter 21

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LAURA BEGAN to laugh, a sick sobbing sound low in her throat. "There he is, Jim. There's Dan Calvert. You asked for him and here he is."

"Laura, why'd you do it?"

She looked at him, her mouth twisting. "He killed me, didn't he? He killed me. Look what he made me. Cheap hotel. Cheap room. 'Entertain the Congressman, Laura. Be nice. Get out of town, kid.' I wanted to dance. I loved to dance. He killed me. Do *you* want me? Oh, no. You were a slut, Laura. You fell in love and so you're a slut. You're rotten. So that's why I'm rotten. Right there on the floor with a knife in his neck. That's why I'm rotten. So I killed him, too. Like he killed me. Only he won. He's dead. It's over for him. But I'm still living."

She buried her face in her hands. He put his arm about her shoulder but she shrugged it away.

"I was smart about it, Jim. You want to hear how I was smart about it? I went up to his apartment over Bonny Williams' Golden Club. His stinking sweet apartment. I never thought it stunk until you and I were together here—" She sucked in a deep breath and went on talking rapidly, breathlessly. "I went in up there. I told him I would leave town. I would never see him again. But I had to see him one more time." She snarled suddenly.

"Oh, he fell for that. The irresistible Mr. Calvert. How he loved it to have me beg him to love me—one more time. What a fool! Oh, I made it good. I danced. I never danced on any club floor like I danced for him. Then he began to want me. I drove him crazy. I had him begging.

"Only I wouldn't. Not up there I wouldn't. I told him he had to come back here. Back to my room. I wanted it here again. For the last time. Oh, how he fell for it!

"I even took a taxi back here. On my way through the Golden Club kitchen, I picked up a knife. A sharp one. They cut turkeys with it and cheap, tough meat. Oh, but it was easy. Dan wasn't cheap and tough. He was so elegant. Oh, he was elegant, wasn't he? But he cried and looked scared when he had to die."

She began to sob then as though she would never stop crying. "I didn't want to kill him," she moaned. "I didn't. I just wanted to be loved, Jim. . . . I just wanted you to love me."

He pulled her against him then. She buried her face against his shoulder. He held her for a long time without speaking. Her sobs died out, slowly, and her arms crept up his back.

He began to talk against her hair.

"Listen to me, Laura. There's a blue Buick parked in the courthouse square. The keys are in it. Clemmons made me leave them there. I want you to walk up to it—and get in. Then drive out of town. Just keep driving until morning." He looked at his watch. "You have time to get to Tampa. Or Jacksonville. By that time there may be a ticker on the car. Right now they're too busy to notice. They know I didn't take it when I ran away from the Sheriff's office. They won't think I'd come back and get it. You've got time to get away, Laura—"

"I killed him. I can't get away."

"You can. There's a good chance—a very good chance. But pay attention. When you get to Tampa—ditch the car. Just park it and walk away. Get a job, Laura, slinging hash, sweeping, cooking. Anything. Forget you ever saw this town."

She looked at him. There was a thin glimmer of hope in her tear-stained eyes. "Could I, Jim? Could I get away from here?"

"You can, Laura. You will. I did once. And you will."

"Can I come to you then—sometime? When this is over? Will you let me?" Her voice was pleading.

"You won't want to, baby. I'll remind you of Duval—and all this. You'll be happier if you don't."

Her body slumped, the hope was gone. Her voice was dead. "You don't want me."

He felt a downrush of cold through his veins. How could

he have been such a fool? She might have made the effort if he'd been smart. He forced himself to laugh.

"I want you. Believe that, Laura. You're the first girl I've wanted in ten years. That's the truth. Even if you don't believe it now, you will later when you think back. You'll know. You'll know I was different with you. But I was thinking about you. Why should a pretty kid like you want a wreck of a guy like me?"

Her voice choked. "But if I do want you?"

He nodded. "I'm in the New York phone book, Laura. Manhattan. When you get there, I'll be there. If you decide to come to me, I'll be there. Waiting."

He waited only until he was sure she was in the lobby of the hotel. The Broadway Hotel. A cheap little hotel in a hot Florida town. But for one moment in eternity, two people had had together what God intended. . . .

He went into the bathroom. The gash in Calvert's throat was no longer bleeding. Talbot got a hotel towel and wrapped it securely about the dead man's neck, without touching the knife.

He picked him up then in his arms. He crossed the room, cracked open the door and peered along the hall. It was quiet out there.

He stepped out into the corridor. He left the door standing open. Carrying Calvert in his arms he went to the stairway and started down the steps. On the second floor he stopped at the landing. Supporting Calvert's body against the railing, he fished out the key the clerk had given him to room 206.

There was no one in the hotel corridor. It was closer to 206 than 314 had been to the stairwell.

But Talbot was sweating. He had to fight a key into a lock, holding a dead man in his arms.

His hand trembled so badly that he had to stop, hold his breath and try again. As he pushed the door open another door down the corridor was opened. He leaped through the doorway, heeled around and slammed the door shut.

He carried Calvert over and dropped him on the bed. He went back to the door, opened it. A small man stood there, frowning.

"Say, did I see you carrying some man in this room?"

Talbot forced himself to grin. "My wife, partner. She had a little too much. You know?"

"Oh, yeah. Looked like a man, but there was a funny wrap around her neck—"

"Scarf—"

"Oh. Oh, sure. By the way, I wouldn't want that room. Man killed in there—"

Talbot's eyes widened. "That so?"

"Yeah. I sure wouldn't have taken that room."

"Well, I'm new in town. Didn't know anything about it. You can bet I'll raise hell with the management." He closed the door in the little man's face.

He went back across the room, pulled Calvert's body off the bed to the floor. Then he turned the bed so that Calvert's body was concealed, hidden under it.

He went out of the room then, locking it after him. Back in Laura's room, he scrubbed every trace of Calvert's blood from the tiled floor of the bathroom.

He went out in the bedroom then and went over it carefully. He picked up Calvert's hand-blocked hat, his gloves, his cane. He went to the door and looked at the room for the last time.

He crossed the corridor and went back down to room 206. Inside, he put Calvert's hat on the dresser, dropped the gloves on top of it. He tossed the cane on the bed.

He picked up the telephone. The operator said, "Number, please?"

He gave her the number of Mike Laynebeck's house.

A man answered.

"I'd like to speak to Mrs. Laynebeck, please."

"I'm sorry, sir. There has been a tragedy in the family. Mrs. Laynebeck is prostrated with grief. If you'd care to leave a message."

"This is Jim Talbot. You better ask her if she wants to talk to me."

There was a delay. Talbot stood there counting his slow, thudding heartbeats.

"Jim?"

"Hello, Nita."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in room 206, Nita, at the Broadway Hotel. Dan Calvert is here with me. I think you'd better come over."

He heard her sharp intake of breath. Finally, she said very softly, "All right, Jim. I'll be there. As soon as I can."

He sat down then in a chair beside the telephone table. It pleased him that Calvert had had a private extension installed in his room. Count on Calvert to do everything up right.

*Even, Talbot thought, he couldn't have chosen a more opportune moment to die.*

Time dragged. He smoked a dozen cigarettes. He didn't drop his ashes in the ashtray, nor did he leave the butts in there. As he finished each cigarette he carried it in to the bathroom and flushed it down the drain, ashes and all.

It was almost an hour later when he heard the elevator door open and close at the end of the corridor.

He lifted the telephone receiver. The operator said, "Number, please?"

He said nothing.

"Number, please?"

There were footsteps in the hall. A firm, sure tread; but light. A woman's foot. The steps ceased outside the door.

"Number, please!"

Talbot held the mouthpiece close against his lips.

"The Sheriff's office," he said. "Hurry."

Sheriff Roberts answered almost at once. He must have ordered an open wire during the emergency.

There was a very soft knock on the door.

"Roberts? This is Talbot."

The knock again.

"Where are you?"

"Room 206. Broadway Hotel. And you better come yourself."

The knock again. "Come in," Talbot said. "It isn't locked."

He replaced the receiver as Nita walked in the door.

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## Chapter 22

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HE WALKED past her, closed the door, locked it. There was a night latch. He secured it.

Nita was wearing a black dress, a mink jacket and a mink beanie. He shook his head. She never belonged in a place like this. She was like a flawless gem that had rolled out of its setting and fallen in a gutter somewhere.

She looked about, her face white. "Where's Dan?" she said.

He looked at her, smiled. "I want to talk to you first."

She caught her breath. "You tricked me. He's not here at all."

"He is here. See, his hat and gloves on the dresser. His cane on the bed. You'll see him. But first I want to know something, Nita. Why did you kill Mike?"

Her mouth fell open. "I? Why—why do you think I did it?"

"Because you planted a cigarette lighter in this room, baby. Still playing me for a sucker. Still letting me take your raps. An old, old habit you got into—ten years ago. Only this time it didn't work, baby."

She began to shake her head from side to side. "I didn't. Jim! I didn't!"

"Oh, yes you did. You told Mike where Dan was. You'd found out that night when I saw you at the Golden Club. I saw you running out. You made a date with me for the river bank. A date you never intended keeping. But it would put me out there at one o'clock in the morning—eight miles from the nearest alibi."

She was staring at him. She shook her head. Her eyes wallowed in the mire of terror.

"It's not true, Jim. It isn't. Listen to me. You must listen to me! I had your lighter. But Mike took it from me. He warned me not to start on you, as he called it. He told me

to leave you alone. He said I had hurt you enough, and he'd beat me to keep me from hurting you any more. He was going to give the lighter back to you. It was in his vest pocket. I saw him put it there. It must have fallen out when he was killed—"

He took a step toward her. A scream worked its way up through her throat but died on her lips.

"All right, Jim! All right! I was here. You told me about Laura Dawson and Dan. I'd never even suspected. I brought a gun. I—I paid the night clerk to let me in. I hid in the dark. I—I shot when the door opened.

"I thought it was Dan, Jim! I went crazy. I was wild to think he had been cheating! I went crazy. I wanted to kill him. I can't stand to have people hurt me, Jim. I never could. They've no right—"

"All right," he said tiredly. "What did you do?"

"When I saw it was Mike, I came to my senses. I saw him stagger into the room and fall. I tried to touch him—to see if I could help him. I—I couldn't. I ran out, I went down the back stairs. I went home."

"All right, Nita. Just so we know. Now, you wanted to see Dan." He strode past her and shoved the bed back against the wall.

He heard her gasp.

He heeled around, faced her. His face was set and cold. His voice was deadly.

"There he is, Nita. He's dead. And you killed him."

She tried to scream, but couldn't. Her hand worked at her paralyzed throat. Her eyes were bulging.

"You're insane," she whispered. "You've gone crazy."

"No, Nita. I've *been* insane. For ten years. I came back here more for revenge against you even than to help Mike. I didn't know he had married you. When I saw he had married you and loved you, it changed everything. I gave up any idea of getting even—an eye for the eye you robbed me of.

"But then I found out the truth. You were faithless. You killed Mike, and then I was free to do what I had planned to do. Make you pay for the hell I've been through.

"I was going to be a lawyer, Nita. Remember? Maybe I wouldn't have been a good one. On the other hand, I might

have been another Mike Laynebeck. We'll never know. Because of what you did to me, we'll never know."

She backed away from him, bumped the wall, slumped against it. She watched him, her gaze fixed on his cold and bitter face.

"No, you let me take the rap for an armed robbery. Dan Calvert was with you. The gutless wonder. You've been building him up ever since until he's decided he was wonderful. . . . I'd have rotted in the chain gang, Nita, except that Mike Laynebeck got me free. You killed Mike. Maybe there is no way for me to prove that. Just my word against yours. Your money and your influence. I wouldn't get very far.

"But when I'm through, nobody will doubt that you killed Dan Calvert. You're going to pay, baby. Maybe not for the right murder—but just the same you're going to pay for murder."

"Jim. How can you do this? You love me. You came back here loving me."

"Did I, baby? I came back hating you. I haven't loved you, Nita, since the day I went to the chain gang. I've never been able to love anybody else. Because all the time I hated you too terribly. I hated all women because of you."

"Jim. Please. I'll make it up to you! We can get away. I can love you as you've never been loved. We'll make up all those years. We can get away—"

"I can get away. I can get out of this room. I did it once before. I'll do it again. But you can't come with me. Anyhow, Nita, it's too late. You're not what I'd want any more. This time it's going to be a blonde—twenty—with hair like hot platinum . . ."

Her laughter stopped him. Nita came away from the wall then. She was no longer abject. Her shoulders straightened.

"The little blonde dancer, maybe? Laura Dawson? Dan's little slut? Oh, no. No matter what you do, Jim, you'll never have her!"

He grabbed her arms in his hands, squeezing.

"Where is she? What happened?"

"That was why I was so late. The State Highway patrol. They called. The blue Buick. It was registered in my name. They were reporting an accident. Some woman named Laura

Dawson was driving it. Eighty miles an hour. She missed a turn, Talbot, six miles east of Duval. She crashed into one of the big neon arrows pointing to Golden Springs. The car was demolished. There was a lot of damage done to the sign. I think the car plowed a hundred feet before it stopped. And by the way, the woman, the Dawson woman. She was dead when they found her."

Jim stood silent, looking at her. He heard the elevator door clang shut at the end of the corridor. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets. He brought out the initialed cigarette lighter he'd found under Calvert's Duval House bed, the lipstick Nita had dropped on the parking lot of the Golden Club. The handkerchief she'd left on the seat of the Buick. He looked at them. His bitter mouth was twisted.

"My things," she said. "You did love me—you saved them . . ."

"I saved them. But not because I loved you. Because I hated you. I saved them for just some sort of setup like this. I didn't know it would be murder. But that's fine.

"I'll just salt them around in here. Careless Nita. Always losing things. When you go to trial, baby, the hotel clerk down there will know you came up here. Know you paid him. But he never saw you leave. You think the people at the Duval House won't testify to the hours you spent up in Calvert's suite? I found that cigarette lighter up there. Your bobby pins. People around this town who saw you together. It'll all add up. I'll make it add up."

His whisper was hoarse. "You're too rich, too influential to burn for Calvert's murder. Maybe a miracle will save you from more than five years. If maybe Calvert can be proved to have killed Laynebeck, you might have a motive for killing Calvert that would sway a jury. But not much.

"I'm a private eye, Nita, and I'll dig up such a case against you and Calvert that there is only one lawyer who might possibly save you. Think, Nita! Think who might be able to save your hide. Mike Laynebeck. But he's not here. He's dead. The only man in God's world who could save you from prison, and he's dead—and you killed him."

There was the sound of fists against the door. Nita stared at Talbot.

Sheriff Roberts' voice boomed. "Open up in there, or I'll break down the door."

Talbot laughed at that. He could still hear Governor Erskine Reaves' voice rasping in the Sheriff's office: "One more political death—or scandal—in Marvel County, and I'll purge you."

Talbot stood there waiting. It seemed Roberts couldn't get into Room 206 fast enough. The room where the next murder and scandal awaited him. The one that was going to ruin him.

Roberts broke the lock with a kick. The door swung slowly open. Nita fainted, slumping silently to the floor beside Talbot.

But Talbot didn't even look at her. He didn't want to miss the look on the Sheriff's face when he stalked in and saw the surprise that was waiting for him in Room 206.