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**ALL-STORY**



JUNE

# DETECTIVE



**DEATH  
DOUBLES  
IN  
BRASS**

by

**ROBERT  
TURNER**

—ALSO—

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CARLTON**

AND MANY  
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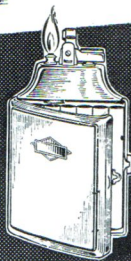
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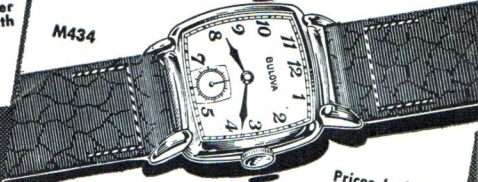
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THAT'S THAT, WELL, YOU FOLKS HAVE YOUR DINNER. I'LL BE BACK ABOUT NIGHTFALL

WHY NOT STAY AND HAVE A SNACK WITH US?

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CERTAINLY. HERE'S A RAZOR



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**DETECTIVE**

Volume 1

June, 1949

Number 3

**ONE BOOK-LENGTH DETECTIVE NOVEL**

||| **MALICE IN MOVIELAND**..... Robert Carlton 52  
 The movie mogul's blonde gave me a corpse at my feet.

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Next Issue Published—June 24

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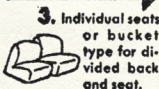
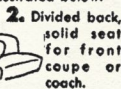
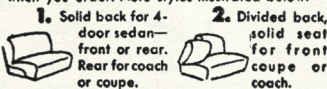
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# MURDER PORTRAIT

We want to hand you a chill-filled invitation to match wits with the best detectives and the toughest gunman of the fiction world in the August issue of **ALL-STORY DETECTIVE**.

In order to give you a sample preliminary chill, here's a suspenseful key-hole view of "Brush Babe's Poison Pallet."

\* \* \*

She was slim and neat as T.N.T. Her eyes were lovely brown pools of arsenic and old French wine. She wore her blonde hair in a feathery fluff.

The blonde held a brush in her right hand, and a loaded .22 Woodsman Colt in her left. She had the paint-smearred brush aimed at the large canvas on the easel, the Colt aimed at Sands' guts.

"Hold damned still," she said to Sands. "I want this to look just like you. I'd hate for them to get the wrong guy."

Sands opened his mouth to growl a reply, but the pain stabbed through him like quick-lime. He groaned and leaned back wearily. His hands were shackled to the chair back and his feet were tied tightly to the legs.

Slowly his vision cleared and he turned his aching eyes to the canvas. The sweat that had been waiting inside him beaded out on his forehead. She was the one, this lovely, rose-lipped girl. The canvas portrait she was using to paint his own face over, was the smiling, dark-eyed masterpiece of Jennie Ramirez.

And Jennie was dead. Dead as Sands would be in twenty-four hours.

\* \* \*

You'll learn the blonde gunsel's racket in Bruce Cassidy's novelette, "Brush Babe's Poison Pallet," in the August issue, published June 24th.

THE EDITOR

You know the value of training.  
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# POPULAR FILMS

## Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

### Palmer Picks:

**For Murder Drama:** "Too Late for Tears" with Lizabeth Scott, Dan Duryea and Don de Fore (United Artists).



Mysteriously, Jane Palmer (Lizabeth Scott) and her husband acquire a leather bag containing a fortune in cash.

Although she is determined to keep it, her husband thinks differently and checks it at Union Station. With the help of a black-mailing crook (Dan Duryea), Jane drowns her husband, but they fail to find the claim check for the money. The husband's sister and a stranger (Don de Fore), who arrive on the scene, locate the check. Jane takes it at gun's point, sheds herself of the blackmailer with a well-administered dose of poison and flees to Mexico.

The sister and stranger follow her, unravel the plot and bring Jane to a just end.

*Suspensefully played, the picture makes for some spine-tingling moments.*

**For Adventure:** "Canadian Pacific" with Randolph Scott and Jane Wyatt. (20th Century-Fox). Cinecolor.



Building this famous Canadian railroad was more than just ties and trestles—at least according to this version where it takes six-guns and two-fisted action by Tom Andrews (Randolph Scott) to overcome bad whites and renegade Indians.

Although Andrews has a temporary love affair with a female doctor (Jane Wyatt) in the railroad camp, it is his own true love, a French-Indian girl, who warns him of the Indians' plan to attack the camp. Andrews goes on a private sortie to prevent the signal for the attack from being given and gets the ringleaders—but too late. Returning to camp he joins the fight which the Indians abandon after they hear the whistle from a relief train.

*The railroad background gives a different flavor to this outdoor action picture. Plenty of bang-bang and dust-biting keep it fast paced.*



**For A Western:** "The Red Pony" with Myrna Loy, Robert Mitchum, Louis Calhern, Sheppard Strudwick, Peter Miles (Republic). Technicolor.



Not in a sense a true Western, but a picture laid against a ranch and a boy's dream about a pony come true, which even the most calloused Western picture-goer will find moving. As the story unfolds you can see the boy (Peter Miles) growing apart from his father (Sheppard Strudwick) through his love for his pony and the hero-worship of a ranch hand (Robert Mitchum) who helps him raise the animal. Myrna Loy, as the mother, understands the boy and helps him out.

*A simple story, well-told and rich in human values and colorful backgrounds.*



**For Sports:** "Take Me Out To The Ball Game" with Frank Sinatra, Esther Williams, Gene Kelly (MGM). Technicolor.



Imagine Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly, as vaudevillians turned baseball players, fielding "hot ones" for a baseball team owned by Esther Williams. Silly, but nonetheless fun. When a gambler (Edward Arnold), who is betting against the team, inveigles Kelly to direct the chorus at a night club, Kelly begins to slip from the loss of sleep and is benched. Eventually, wised up by a little gal who is sweet on Sinatra, he gets back in the line-up.

*The picture—and the baseball—are played for the laughs.*

*by Ted Palmer*



# "I WAS ASHAMED OF MY FACE

until Viderm helped make my skin clearer in one short week"

(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

**If your face is broken-out, if bad skin is making you miserable, here is how to stop worrying about pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.**

**JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS**



**I**T DOESN'T PAY to put up with a broken-out face. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. Nobody likes to look at a face that is blemished by blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, HEALTHY-LOOKING SKIN.** Business executives don't choose men whose complexions are against them. And it's just plain foolish to take chances with your happiness and success in life when the Viderm formula can do so much to give you the clearer, blemish-free face you want.

## Good-looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same handsome complexion, free from externally caused skin troubles, simply by giving your face the special care that screen stars give theirs. *Because, remember!—a good-looking, handsome appearance usually begins with the condition of your skin.* There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly purges the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—something that ordinary cleansing seldom does.* In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as faulty cleansing that leaves oily grime clogging up your pores. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser. This penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. Specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly loosened. They dissolve and disap-

pear, leaving your skin entirely free of the dirt particles that otherwise remain as pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

Squeezing pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Doing so may also be injurious and leave your face with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to get it smoother and clearer and to keep it that way. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated medicated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

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Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident of a smoother and clearer complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment. Then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smoother, clearer skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. G-1, New York City 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and mailed in a plain wrapper. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. *If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing.* After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



### DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm Treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clearer, blemish-free complexion.



# DEATH DOUBLES

*Dramatic Crime-Adventure Novelette*

She started angrily towards Sis Mario.



# IN BRASS. . .

when a crooning cutie and a hot-horn jazz boy take a powder on the maestro who played for murder.

By **ROBERT TURNER**

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Million-Dollar Dame*



**H**E WAS dreaming and they say that dreams are often secret wish fulfillments. Maybe so. Because deep inside of him Mike Collier had secretly held and nurtured one hellish, frustrated desire, and in this dream he was getting rid of it; it was coming true.

He was standing out front of a band, taking a turn all by his lonesome. He did not even know what band it was, it wasn't important—but he was finally hitting a trumpet note higher than any horn man had ever reached before. He was holding it longer than anybody had ever held any note. And he was driving the people in this place—the good people, the silly, damn customers—crazy with the ear-piercing sound of it.

It finally took full effect and a woman stood up and started to scream. Then another and another. Only you couldn't hear the sound of the screaming over the splitting shriek of his horn. You could only see their mouths open and the veins standing out in their necks and their eyes wild.

The strain of holding the note was telling on him, but he was going to hold it longer, if it killed him. He would hold it until the screaming stopped or they fainted or ran out of breath or something. Because

he didn't want to hear that awful sound.

He couldn't stand the sound of a woman screaming. It reminded him of the night terror he had known as a kid, when the old man came home roaring drunk and started in on the old lady and he'd have to bury his head under the pillow so he wouldn't hear what went on. But the pillow had never muffled the noise completely.

And then in this dream, something else happened. Somebody knocked the trumpet away from his lips and its sound died abruptly. He heard the woman screaming then, and it made his a little crazy. He turned and Lonny Floyd, the band leader, was standing there, saying: "Stop that! What the hell do you think you're doing, driving people into hysterics with that horn? Stop that, I say!"

So he turned and deliberately hit Lonny over the head with his trumpet, smiling, and watched the peculiar, surprised look come over Lonny's asininely handsome features and watched Lonny crumple. And that was strange, too, because it was another thing he'd always wanted to do.

Then the dream got a little fuzzy around the edges and his head was suddenly filled with ringing bells. . . .

Awakening, he reached for the alarm clock, but stopped his arm halfway because it wasn't the alarm clock that was ringing. He saw that it was a quarter to six and he knew that it was night not morning because it had been broad daylight when he had gone to sleep. He looked across the big, cluttered studio room, toward the door and winced. He reached under the studio couch and picked up a shoe and hurled it toward the door with all his might. He yelled: "Cut it out!" The ringing of the doorbell stopped.

He rubbed sleep-fog from his eyes and got up and looked at himself in the mirror over the couch. He was not a prepossessing sight even to himself. A medium height man in a sport shirt and slacks

rumpled from sleeping in them. A man with a lean, hard build that gave the impression of a tempered steel blade, flexible and sharp and strong out of all proportion to its weight. It didn't go with his face. The face was thin almost to the point of emaciation. Hollows under the high cheekbones. Dark patches under the deep-set eyes.

It was Mike Collier's eyes that set off his face, though, that kept him from being out-and-out ugly. They were widely set and a smoky, smouldering gray under sooty lashes long as a girl's. They held a bored and cynical, yet somehow bold and challenging expression that seemed to say that they had seen everything there was to see, but hoped that maybe something new would come along any time, now.

But now he didn't like what he saw in the mirror, and he pushed a hand quickly through short-cropped, sleep-touseled black hair, made a grimace at himself and stuck out his tongue, leaning close to the mirror. He pulled the tongue back in quickly, shaking his head sadly and turned toward the door.

He hoped it wasn't the landlady, that old bag, going to give him a hard time just because he was two and a half months behind in his rent. He liked this lousy little one-room studio flat and he'd hate to move. But he wouldn't take any of her lip. It wasn't the landlady, though.

**M**YRNA SHERIDAN was almost an inch taller than he and with that regal grace of stature that tall girls have. She had thick, glossy, cinnamon-red hair that hung full around her shoulders in a straight bob that was rolled inward from the side and cut in bangs across the forehead. Her eyes were long and elipsed and a startling jade green. They held a sleepy, cat-like look that was lovely but disconcerting. Her mouth was richly carmined. The lips always slightly parted so that you could see a slight

sheen of white teeth in between them.

"Michael, darling!" she said. "How are you?" Her lips pulled back and showed all of her teeth, white and strong and moist looking. But you wouldn't call it a smile. It was just an expression. There was nothing behind it.

He looked at her. The afternoon dress she wore was beautifully cut and in simple, good taste in a three-hundred dollar sort of way. She wore a triple strand of jade about her curving white throat and a matching bunch on one slender, aristocratic wrist. She was beautiful, but she was high-priced showcase beauty and Mike Collier looked at her the way he'd look at a \$10,000 dollar custom-built convertible, and let it go at that. He didn't let her bother him.

He had to smile, though, at the greeting. Real chummy. And he knew why. He said: "Don't give me that. You're wasting your time. Let's get it over with fast, and the answer is no."

She looked surprised and color mounted quickly into her translucent white skin. Her eyes veiled threateningly for a moment, but then she laughed. "Really, Michael," she said. "Don't be such a bear. Impolite, too. Aren't you going to ask me in?"

He sighed and stepped aside. She moved past him and he shut the door and watched her move into the room.

"Look," he said, as she turned to face him, "Before we start. I know you're rich and beautiful, a spoiled and pampered society darling, used to having your own way in everything. But not this time. I know that you're the real boss of Lonny Floyd's band, because you put up the big sugar it takes to launch a new name outfit. But that doesn't mean anything to me. I'm not with the band, anymore. I quit, as of yesterday. And I'm not coming back under any terms."

She kept smiling. She seemed not to have heard him. She glided close to him

and put her hands on his shoulders. He could smell her cleverly insinuating perfume and it was not dime store stuff by several hundred dollars an ounce.

"You look so tired, Michael," she said. The silky tip of an index finger touched him under the eyes, traced the lines about his mouth. "You don't get enough sleep. You work too hard. Where did you go after we closed last night?"

"It's none of your dam' business," he told her. "But I'll tell you, because I think you won't like it. I went up to a cellar dive in Harlem and played some real music, with some real musicians. Free-for-nothing, I gave them better stuff than I ever gave Lonny Floyd for your three hundred bucks a week." He took hold of her hands and gently but firmly put them back down at her sides.

Hot lights of anger flecked through her green eyes for a moment and he watched her fight for control and make it. But the smile was more forced on her red mouth now.

"I can see why the women get so delirious over you, Michael. You're refreshing. You were a very valuable property to the band. We can't lose you, Michael. And when you said you wouldn't come back under any terms, I hardly think you knew what I have in mind."

His eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "Sometimes I'm willing to listen to the jingle of heavy silver," he said.

"That's what I thought, Michael. I want you to *lead* the band from now on. It'll be your band. How does that strike you?"

He turned away from her and went to a table, picked up a cigarette and lit it. "How about Lonny Floyd?" He swung around toward her again, smoke curling past his eyes.

For a moment her glance shifted around the room, then she stared at him steadily. "As you would put it, Michael—to hell with Lonny. It was his fault that you left

the band, and you were its one big attraction. You—”

“Me and Sis Marlo,” he said modestly. “You forget our coy little canary.”

Myrna Sheridan’s green eyes seemed to flash flame. Her lips curled against her teeth. “That sneaking, hypocritical little—”

“You mean that you don’t go for that sweetness and light business that little Sis puts out?” he interrupted.

**S**HE tossed her head. “Forget about her,” she said. “You’re the one I’m interested in right now. As I was saying, Michael, the band’s been losing money under Lonny’s leadership. I think you could give it the shot in the arm that it needs.”

“Name bands always lose dough in a run at a big New York glitter club. You know that. It’s the road run with the big town build up behind it that tinkles the cash register. You have no gripe against Lonny for losing dough at this Café Patee engagement.”

She said, impatiently: “We’re behind out of all proportion. Anyhow, I’m giving Lonny his notice tonight. What do you say, Michael? Say the word and we’ll get together with my attorneys tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll have to think it over,” he told her. “I’ll let you know tonight.”

She moved very close to him again. This time he felt the tips of her fingers digging into his shoulders. He looked down at her and the heavy, long-lashed lids of her eyes were half closed.

“Think it over carefully, Michael,” she said, slowly, softly.

He reached up and cupped her chin tightly with one hand, the thumb and forefinger digging into her cheeks a little, puckering her mouth. “Look,” he said, gruffly. “You want me to kiss you, don’t you? Let’s not fence around.”

“What do *you* think, Michael?”

He deliberately put the cigarette to his mouth, dragged deep and then blew the smoke full into her face. “Some other time, Cleopatra,” he told her.

She jerked away from him as though she’d been slapped. Her lovely features grew white and tight with fury. “You despicable, conceited little oaf!” she snarled. She swung at him, not with the flat of her hands but with her small, balled fist.

He caught her wrist before the blow was half started. “I’m not Lonny Floyd,” he told her. “Keep that in mind. I’d hate to have to mess up that pretty face of yours.”

The anger flowed out of her and fear came in its place. She backed away from him. “I’m—I’m sorry,” she said. The smile flickered again momentarily. “I’ll go now. And the offer is still open. You think about it, will you? And if Lonny tries to make any trouble over that fight you two had, let me know. I can handle him.”

“So can I,” he said. “It wasn’t any fight. When I told him I was quitting the band he got a little too fast with the mouth and I shut it up for him. There won’t be any more trouble. I’m going over there in a little while and pick up my check.”

She nodded and opened the door and went out. For a moment, Mike Collier stood in the center of the room, his nostrils flaring slightly from the faint scent of Myrna’s perfume that still lingered. Then he shook himself all over and went in to shower.

Lonny Floyd, the band leader, lived in a small, quiet and dignified looking old apartment building on West End Avenue. There was a canopy over the sidewalk and the small lobby was quietly and tastefully furnished. There was no doorman, no switchboard and the elevator was self-operated.

Mike wondered about Lonny’s success as a lady-killer. He had nothing on the

ball as far as Mike could see. He was suavely handsome in a waxed-mustached, greasy haired, insipid sort of way. He knew how to wear clothes. He had a fake Oxford accent. He was a complete phoney through and through and was known to have been mixed up in more than one smelly deal.

He had flopped twice before in an attempt to crash the name-band racket, but still he'd been able to dig up a backer for a third attempt. Mike Collier couldn't figure guys like that. Yet he knew there were a lot of them around town. And they always made out.

He chuckled going up on the elevator. Lonny Floyd didn't know it yet, but once again the merry-go-round ride was over for him. It was going to give Mike great pleasure to be the first to tell him. He was also going to get a bang out of telling Lonny that Myrna had offered him the chance to take Lonny's place. Mike had already decided to turn down the offer, but it wouldn't hurt to let Lonny think otherwise.

It would make him stew some. Mike Collier frowned, remembering the row he and Lonny had had two nights ago. Half the people in the Club had seen the fight. It had made a couple of the gossip columns. Mike now regretted it somewhat, because his rep was bad enough as it was. It was the first time he'd ever gone so far as to wallop the willies out of a leader, even though he'd often toyed with the idea.

The elevator stopped at the fifth floor and he got out and walked along the carpeted hallway to apartment 5-D. His finger reached for the bell, then stopped as he saw the door ajar and with light cracking out the side of it. He put the tips of his fingers against the door and pushed it in and open. He said loudly: "Hey, Lonny, you've got company!"

There was no answer. He called again and then went on down the short hallway

toward the light coming from the living room. He heard the door shut behind him, staying ajar again, not shutting completely. He hoped that Lonny Floyd was sleeping. It would give him great pleasure to awaken him as abruptly and rudely as possible.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Murder, Maestro, Please*

**L**ONNY FLOYD was sleeping, all right. He was stretched out on one side, with his head pillowed on one upthrust arm. He was wearing a red and black satin-labeled smoking jacket and bedroom slippers. Mike Collier stopped in the doorway and stared at him. He saw now that he was not going to awaken Lonny. Nobody was going to do that. Not ever. Because the sleep Lonny Floyd was enjoying now was the long one, the big one—from which there is no awakening.

His skull at the temple and over the left ear was smashed like an eggshell. The collar of his shirt was soaked with crimson and there was a big blot of it on the deep-napped, slate colored rug. His thin, sharp-featured, handsome face was twisted a little crookedly and his small, mean eyes were open wide. Somehow, the waxed, pointed tips of Lonny's famous mustache had not been disturbed. That would have pleased Lonny if he had known. It didn't please Mike Collier. That incongruous touch somehow made the sight of the corpse more ghastly.

A few feet away from Lonny's outstretched, manicured dead fingers, a gold-plated clarinet rested on the rug. Mike Collier had been up here once before, when he'd first signed up with the band, and he recognized the instrument. It was a fancied-up souvenir of Lonny's first professional job. It had been hung in a conspicuous spot over the mantel as a not too subtle reminder that though Lonny

Floyd no longer played any instrument, that one time he had been able to do so. That he had worked himself up from the bottom, so to speak.

Now, the clarinet was smashed and twisted. Blood and tufts of Lonny's black hair glistened stickily in the dim light from a lamp. Several valves from the instrument had been knocked loose and were lying separately on the floor.

In a flashing moment of horror, Mike Collier remembered his dream in which he had smashed Lonny over the head with a trumpet. He shuddered and felt his throat getting thick. Apparently somebody else had the same idea. Only they'd gone through with it. They hadn't kept it in their dreams.

His glance swept around the rest of the room and he saw that no furniture had been overturned. There was no sign of a struggle. Lonny had gotten it quickly, suddenly. He probably never even knew what had hit him.

There were heavy crimson velvet drapes at the two windows and the room smelled close and stuffy as though it hadn't been aired in weeks. Mike Collier's nostrils caught the scent of cognac and his eyes flicked to a cocktail table. There was a half-emptied bottle of expensive cognac and two brandy ponies. He walked toward the table and saw that one of the tiny glasses held faint lipstick imprints. An ash tray nearby was full of butts and some of those, too were rosy-tipped with lipstick.

Mike turned toward a nearby desk that held a telephone. He put his hand on the instrument and then stopped. If he called the police he'd be neck-deep in the whole mess. In view of his recent trouble with Lonny he might even become a suspect. Memory of Myrna Sheridan's recent proposition lanced through his mind and he yanked his hand quickly away from the telephone. That would go against him, too.

The cops might think that somehow Lonny had heard that Mike had been offered the leadership of the band. It might look as though they had quarrelled about that and in a fit of rage he had killed Lonny. It wasn't good. Of course, they'd have a tough job proving anything, but even the thought of a mess like that chilled him.

The police would check on him and find out that he'd served time when he was a kid on an assault and battery charge that had just missed being changed to murder by a miracle. The guy had hovered between life and death for weeks from the beating Mike had given him. But he'd finally recovered. The police liked things of that sort to toss at a murder suspect.

He remembered that nobody had seen him come in here, or even enter the building as far as he knew. With a little luck he could get out the same way. It would be the same as if he'd never come.

And then he saw the small ledger book lying on the desk. It was opened to a page on which was written in Lonny's affected phoney script a list of names and rows of figures. The heading at the top of the page said *Payroll Deductions*. It was dated today, the band's regular semi-monthly payday. Mike Collier recognized the names of members of Lonny's band crew. They were all there except two—his own and Sis Marlo's. After each name, there were three columns of figures. The first column was listed *Payroll*. The amounts following each name were the same. They were exactly one hundred dollars over the scale wage set by the Union for a Class A nightclub such as the Café Patee. The next column was listed: *Deduction*. The amounts in that column were all the same—one hundred dollars even.

**I**T WAS very simple. It wasn't even new. The old kickback racket. And apparently still good—good for a thousand bucks a



month gravy for Lonny Floyd, figuring ten men in the band beside Mike and Sis Marlo, the vocalist.

A wry grin twisted Mike Collier's long mouth. Lonny knew better than to try and pull a stunt like that on him. Lonny liked the shape of his own face too much. And Mike knew why Sis Marlo wasn't being forced to kickback part of her salary in order to hold the job. Even a heel like Lonny Floyd would hardly put the bleed on a girl he was crazy about.

Mike wondered how the police were going to like the little story that book would tell them. It was going to give them a rough time. Any one of the bandsmen might have finally rebelled against the salary kickback, might have come up here to have it out with Lonny, and then gone haywire.

Mike Collier took a deep breath, whisked his handkerchief from his back pocket and carefully wiped off the part of the phone that he had touched and portions of the desk. Fingerprints were a bad business. He retreated through the apartment, wiping off door-frames and giving particular attention to the front door and the bell button outside.

At the end of the hall he found a stairway and used that to go down, instead of the elevator. He got through the lobby and was pushing through the revolving door before he ran into anybody. And then it happened. A round-faced teenager, with wide bright eyes and her blonde hair wrapped in a babushka, wearing a sweater and skirt, bobby socks and saddle shoes, pushed into the revolving door from the outside at the same instant that he hit it from the inside.

The girl stared at him through the glass and Mike Collier felt his throat go tight. He could have sworn that the kid's eyebrows raised and her lips parted in a little gasp, seeing him. Somehow, he kept his eyes away from her and kept going. Out on the street he fought the temptation

to look back and turned toward the corner.

He swore softly and dabbed perspiration from his upper lip. It would be just his luck that the kid was a jive hound, that she'd recognized him from pictures she'd seen in the entertainment sections of newspapers. If she lived in the building she probably knew that Lonny Floyd had a flat there, too. That would clinch it in her mind. She'd be sure that it was Mike Collier she'd seen coming out of the building.

He forced the thought from his mind, hoping that he was wrong, telling himself that it was too late to do anything about it now.

He subways down to Times Square. He started walking uptown toward the Fifties, his mind clicking automatically, precisely. There would be a big stink about this. The tabloids would go for it. He could almost see the headlines: *Band Leader Slain*, He could see the picture of the cocktail table with brandy ponies, one of them lipstick-marked. The caption would probably read: *Who was Lonny Floyd's mysterious woman companion just before he was murdered?* Mike Collier thought that he could tell them that.

They might even feature a picture of him as the man Lonny had fought with a few nights before. There would be newspapermen all over the place, prying, snooping. A lot of his own past that was better off buried might be dug up. He was suddenly sick of the whole thing. He thought about heading for the airport or a railway station, and hitting out of this big, phoney burg before the police lightning started cracking around him. He might be able to still make it. He knew places to hole up.

**MIKE** pushed through the crowds. The neon lights of the roof display ads flashed on and off. The air was clogged with the honking of horns and traffic sounds. A movie theatre doorman shouted

to the crowd queuing up at the box office that there was immediate seating on all floors. A trampy looking kid with inch-thick lipstick on her mouth and sick hollows under her cheekbones bumped into him and apologized pointedly.

He moved on, hands jammed into sport coat pockets. And he got sicker of the whole thing. Not just the murder, but the works, the music business and Broadway and everything connected with it. He had been here too long. There were other towns. There was Chi and Saint Looey, N'Orleans, Memphis, Salt Lake, 'Frisco. He didn't have to stay here. To hell with them.

But he kept walking, the cacophony of sound that was the Big Drag of the Big Town beating against his eardrums like a throbbing pulse. And he knew that he wasn't going to leave. Not in the middle of this thing anyway. Somehow, he was in it, whether he liked it or not. Myrna's offer, his fight with Lonny, the visit to Lonny's apartment and finding him dead there. It had pulled him into it.

He turned into Forty-Ninth Street, just off Seventh Avenue and found a small, hole-in-the-wall gin mill. He went inside and it was quiet; no juke box blaring, no television screen flashing. There was nobody at the small, dimly lit bar.

One person was sitting at a back booth. She was the girl Mike Collier had thought would be here. He squeezed into the booth next to her. He stared at the brandy pony she held between long, slender, crimson-nailed fingers.

"Ah, cognac!" he said. "Where have I smelled that before? Who is it I know that likes cognac?"

He looked up at the girl then. She was small and dark and cute. She wore her hair like a school girl, hanging in shiny black waves about her slender shoulders and curling at the ends. She wore only a touch of lipstick and rouge, but that was all she needed. She had a delicate snub

of nose and a full-lipped, innocent looking mouth.

Her brown eyes were so thick-lashed you could hardly see them. Her black brows were unplucked, but had a naturally graceful arch to them. She wore a navy blue suit and a silk blouse under it, open at the throat. There was a sort of breathless freshness about her, the way she wore her hair and her clothes, the way she held her head.

This was Sis Marlo, the newest singing sensation in the name-band business. This was Sis Marlo, whom a Broadway columnist had once described as *the gal all the guys would like to have for a sister—and then would wish that she wasn't*.

But that wasn't the real Sis Marlo and Mike Collier had seen through all that surface softness the first time he'd met her. When he hadn't fallen all over her, hadn't stared at her moon-eyed the way all other men did, she couldn't keep away from him. The first time he'd taken her out and she'd told him that she didn't drink, he'd said: "Don't give me that, baby. Drop the act. If you were really what you pretend to be I wouldn't be out with you. Now, what do you want to drink?"

And she'd admitted that, sometimes, once in awhile, she liked a little cognac. And later he saw what cognac did to her. She didn't get drunk, at least not so that it would show. It hit her in other ways and she told him: "That's why I drink it, Collier. I get the kicks without getting sloppy, without making a public spectacle of myself. You won't tell anyone? I'd be ruined!"

He'd laughed at that. The idea was enchanting. He wondered what all of Sis Marlo's fans would think if they knew what their schoolgirl sweetheart type was really like. But they would never know from him. He liked the kid. She was a phoney too, but at least she was a clever and different one.

Later she told him her name was really Rhoda Marlowicz, that she came from the Pennsylvania coal belt. She'd had a rugged time of it as a kid. Her father had been killed in a mine shaft explosion and her mother had cut her own wrists three days later. A hatchet-faced, vicious aunt had brought her up, and she'd run away when she was fifteen.

And maybe that was one reason Mike Collier liked her. She'd come to New York when she was seventeen and somehow, through all her trouble, she hadn't been touched on the surface. She maintained her dewey-eyed, high-school look. She had adopted the name Sis, because all the booking agents where she applied for work called her that. One of them had gotten smart and figured that she was something new and they could capitalize on it.

"Hell," he'd said. "Sophisticated, sleek glamor-pusses standing in front of bands with their polished, stylized delivery are a dime a dozen. Let's make somethin' new. You're goin' to be just you, little Miss Muffet, The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi type. You're just goin' to stand there and sing natural, and make 'em think of the first girl they ever fell in love with back in the eighth grade. Maybe it'll stink. Maybe you'll be sensational. What've we got to lose?"

Two months later she was the hit of the business. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### A Glass of Cognac

**N**OW, sitting across the table from Mike Collier, Sis Marlo lit a match to a cigarette and stared at him across the flame. He saw the slightest pinpointing of the pupils of her eyes and a smouldering look to them, and he knew that she'd had a lot of the cognac. He knew the signs.

"What's this about the cognac, Collier?" she said.

"Nothing," he said flatly. "A fine drink, that's all. You know the history of it? Named after a town in southwestern France. It's a picturesque-as-hell place; built on a hill, topped by an old castle, where Francis the First was born two or three centuries ago. It's on the River Charente. I—"

"All right," she said. "Throw away the encyclopedia. What are you driving at?"

He laughed. This was what he liked about Sis when she was acting herself. Direct, no frim-frams. He was sorry that he was going to have to do what he had to do. He said: "Encyclopedia, hell! I lived there once for six months. There was a little girl called Collette, who liked horn music. She—"

She cut him off. "The cognac, remember?"

He reached over and took the cigarette from between her lips. He examined the lipstick-stained unlit end. He said: "Looks like the same shade. Police laboratory tests will probably tell."

She snatched the cigarette back from him, set it on an ash tray. She reached across the table and took his hand in both of her own. "Collier," she said. "Mr. Heel. You'd probably crucify your own grandmother if you knew who she was. You know I'm crazy about you, don't you, Collier? Let's not kid ourselves. I could get any guy in New York, and what do I do? I pick on a no-good tramp trumpet player who doesn't give a damn about anybody but himself. Maybe I'm slightly psycho."

"Who isn't?"

"Okay," she said. "I've been making a play for Lonny Floyd. I won't try to kid you, Collier. You probably know anyhow. But it's only been for what I could get out of it. He was a stinker and when I'd gotten tired of spending his money I was going to give him the brush."

"You're speaking in the past tense, Sis."

She put the cigarette to her mouth and drew on it so hard the coal threw a pale, ruddy glow over her pretty features. She said through the smoke: "You were up there. You saw the cognac and the empty glasses. What else did you see?"

He nodded his head very slowly. "Why did you kill him, Sis? Not that I care, but the cops get sort of nosey about things like that."

"Don't be silly," she said. "I didn't do it. I—well—I underestimated friend Lonny. Somewhere he must've found out about—well—the cognac and I. Things got a little rough. Then he had another visitor and I took advantage of the break to get out of there."

"And he was still alive, then?" He snorted. "You can do better than that, Sis. How did you know he was killed?"

"I went back there later. I'd left my purse up there. I went back for it. The door was ajar. I went in and he was—you know—he was—"

Her voice started to rise and there was a sudden twitching at one corner of her mouth. Mike Collier reached over and flicked his hand against her cheek several times. She shook her head. She said: "Thanks, Collier. I'm all right now. For a moment, remembering, it got me. He—he was such a mess."

"I know," he said.

She leaned across the table toward him. "You believe me, don't you?"

He looked her full in the eye, long and hard. He got up from the booth. He said: "Sis, frankly no!" He turned and left her and went out of the dim-lit, deserted little side-street gin mill. He stood out on the street for long moments and smoked a cigarette and wondered what he should do. He felt certain it was Sis Marlo who had killed Lonny Floyd. It hurt him to think that she would stoop so low as to make a play for him.

Finally he shrugged and turned toward Broadway. It was no skin off of his shoulder blade. He was getting soft. Sis Marlo was just a dame. She'd amused him for awhile, that was all. He didn't care what she did or what she had done. To hell with her along with the rest of the world. He headed for the Café Parea. He didn't know why.

It was the usual tourist trap. Only the trimmings were different. This one was small and intimate. It was decorated to look like the tourist's idea of a sinful Montmartre basement café. There were imitation stone archways. There were simulated pine-knot torches sticking from the artificial brick walls, only instead of flames, they had orange electric bulbs shaped like torch flares. The waiters were dressed like dance-team Apaches. The cigarette and novelty salesgirls and the hat check chick were dressed like musical comedy French maids. Brief black skirts with a tiny lace apron in front. Long black silk stockings sleek around their shapely legs. Square cut, extremely décolleté bodices and a bit of lace fluff capped atop their expensive coiffures completed the uniforms.

It was early when Mike Collier got there and the crowds hadn't started to arrive yet. A couple of the boys from the band had gotten there early. They came over and kidded Mike about socking their leader. They admired him for his stand and his guts and said that Lonny Floyd had had it coming to him. He wondered what they would say if he told them where Lonny was now and in what condition. He wondered if the murder had been discovered yet.

He sat at a corner of the bar drinking gin-and-sodas, in a sort of forced mental vacuum that he had cultivated to use when things were on his mind that he didn't want there. He sat at the bar several hours, but it only seemed like minutes to him.

HE WAS tossing the pair of small green dice he always carried for luck when the hand touched his shoulder. He turned around and a man was standing there. Mike didn't know him from Adam's uncle. He didn't want to. He looked like a plump, tired lingerie salesman from the Midwest out on the town. Mike turned away from him, tossed the little green cubes again. They came up seven.

"You've got a nice touch with the dice," a soft voice said. "I've been watching you. You can make whatever number you want come up. You must stack 'em or something. That's nice. I'd like to be able to work that trick. How do you do it?"

Mike Collier said: "Like you do everything else well. You practise. Once I had to make my living with these things. Maybe I'll have to again."

"You've got a nice touch with a horn too," the voice said. It sounded tired. "Too bad you're not with the band anymore. It's going to be just another bunch of noise-makers, now."

Mike turned around again and this time he let his cold gray gaze go over the man he was talking to. He saw a man taller than he first looked, because of his corpulence. He was bald on top, with a fringe of iron gray hair around the ears. He was plump-cheeked and middle-aged. There was a humorous quirk to his mouth and his brown eyes looked like they'd once had a lot of laughter in them, but it was almost gone now. The closer you looked the more you saw that here was not actually the jolly, tired business man out for a good time that you first suspected. You sensed a sort of sheathed hardness and grimness.

"You don't know me, Mike," the man said. "Name's Wallach. Steve Wallach. Lieutenant of Detectives. New York City Homicide." He reached in front of Mike and gathered up the little dice in a pudgy fist. He rattled them once and tossed out an eleven. "Maybe it isn't so hard to do,

at that." Wallach did it three more times.

Mike Collier said: "Okay. Very clever. Now what do you want?"

"You know what I want, Mike?" Wallach said. "You like to discuss it here or run downtown with me?"

"Since I've got a choice it must not be so bad." Mike picked up the green dice and put them into his pocket. "Let's get to the point."

Wallach sighed and he suddenly looked very tired, very unhappy. "Mike," he said. "Don't get me wrong. I don't like my job. But I work hard at it. I got only three more years to go till retirement. That place in Jersey is goin' to look real nice in my old age. But I'm a grumpy old guy. I got no time for games. Don't clam up on me, Mike Collier. I'll give you a break if I can, but not if we got to cross swords. Lonny Floyd is dead—murdered, and you know it. I want to hear your story. All of it and straight. You can start now."

For a long moment, Mike didn't answer. He sucked three deep drags from his cigarette and then jammed it out in the tray. Through a lungful of smoke, he said: "The little bobby-sox kid?"

"Yeah," Wallach said. "We went through the house checking to see if anybody noticed any strangers entering or leaving the building. The kid told us about you. She's a fan of yours—or at least of that hot horn of yours. When we found out you were there it tied in."

"You mean you think I did it?" Mike felt his temples and his wrist pulses begin to drum. He got a little scared.

"We don't think," Wallach told him. "We find out things. For instance, we've already found out that in private life you're a very hard customer. As a musician, you're a difficult guy to work with. You've got your own ideas about working a horn. When leaders don't agree with you, you quit them. They all hate you for that. You've played with every big

name outfit in the country and if you'll go with them, they have to take you because you're so damned good. Even though they know you'll only stay a little while. Maybe we've all got a little of that restless, seething unhappiness in us, and when we hear it come out through a trumpet, it helps us out and we like it. So—"

"**O**H FINE," Mike cut in. "A philosophical cop. All right, you know all about me. That doesn't make me a murderer. It only makes me a bum of a musician with itching feet."

Wallach smiled. "We found out some other things. First, you tore up your contract in Lonny Floyd's face after a row right in front of the whole band. Contracts mean nothing to you. Lonny got nasty-mouthed and you slugged him. Okay. We found out that this afternoon Myrna Sheridan, who backs the band, offered you the job of leading it. She was going to can Lonny. We also found out that you were up there this afternoon. You could have killed him, Mike. I shouldn't even be sitting here discussing it with you. I'm way out on a limb and its creaking. But I like you. I'm nuts about your music. And I got some kind of a crazy hunch that you're innocent. But I've got to face facts. I've got to find out for sure. And even if innocent, I think you know something about it."

Mike said: "Okay. Thanks. I'll tell you everything," He told what had actually happened, said: "That's all I know."

"I see." Wallach nodded his bald head. "I got a hunch it was a woman. You know any woman who might want to kill Lonny Floyd?"

Mike turned his eyes away. He shrugged. "He was a stinkpot. Anybody might have killed him."

"You're worried about Sis Marlo aren't you, Mike?" Wallach turned toward the main room of the club. Sis Marlo was up there in a blue spot. She was wearing

the kind of evening gown a teen-age kid might wear to her first formal. She was doing a cute, sentimental novelty number in her own natural way and there was no talk in the club, no laughter, no sound. They were eating it up, as usual.

"I'm worried about her too," Wallach went on. "The lipstick on the glasses, on the butts were hers. She was up there all right, but before he was killed." He made an impatient gesture with his hand. "We'll have a hell of a time pinning it on her. She has a set alibi. She was in a gin mill on Forty-Ninth Street at the approximate time established for Floyd's death. It was about four o'clock this afternoon. The bartender and a couple of regular afternoon customers, who come in to listen to race results, were there and will testify for her along with the bartender. That stops us."

"It stops you with me, too," Mike said. "I was home asleep at four o'clock."

"Sure. Only you don't have any witnesses. You could have gotten up, gone over there, done the job and come home to crawl back in bed and be there later at six when Myrna Sheridan came to see you. I won't kid you, Mike. You're in a bad spot. If you're innocent I still think you know something about it, can help us out. You'd better do that."

Mike made an exasperated sound. "I've told you all I know."

"Did you know about the kickback racket Lonny had been working with the boys in the band? Did you know that he'd been going around a lot with Sis Marlo? Did you know that she isn't quite the sweet young thing she's been built up to be? She's a gambling nut. Lonny's been spending a young fortune backing her bets at the horse parks and in a couple of shimmy parlors in Jersey. If you know any of those things, Mike what are you waiting for? Why haven't you told me. That kind of holding out's going to shake my hunch on you."

"Some of them I knew, some I didn't," Mike admitted. "I didn't know about the gambling. I didn't think the other was important."

"Important?" Wallach raised his wiry brows way up. "Mike, Mike! That kick-back racket makes every boy in the band a suspect. It could have been rebellion. It could have even been blackmail against Lonny for pulling such a stunt. Do you know what's going to happen? This is a tight case. We don't have much to work on, but if we have to we'll pry and dig and push into the private life of everybody connected with it. Some of those guys in the band are nice guys with wives and families. But every man has got some little thing he wouldn't want turned up, that he wouldn't like made public, that might ruin him. If you don't give a darn about yourself, Mike, at least give them a break. Help us out."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Swing and Slay

**M**IKE COLLIER thought about it. He finished off his gin and soda. From what Wallach had said Sis Marlo's story to him was true. But she hadn't said who the visitor was that had interrupted her afternoon tête-a-tête with Lonny. It could have been the killer. Maybe Sis Marlo knew that. She was protecting him. But even if he told Wallach that he thought Sis knew who the murderer was they'd never get it out of her. He knew that. He thought that maybe he could.

Wallach said: "Look, Mike, maybe it'll be your last chance to play—and mine to listen. Maybe if you get some of that music out of you it'll help you decide to do the right thing. Get up there and sit in with the band and play a little tune for me, Mike. For an old fan. After that we'll talk some more."

He looked at Wallach and the old guy wasn't kidding. He was stark serious. He grinned, said: "Not only a philosopher but a true jazz bug. Okay, you win."

He left the bar, pushed through the crowd, between tables toward the band dais. Halfway there, he stopped at one of the tables. Myrna Sheridan was sitting there alone smoking and sipping a champagne cocktail. The jade was gone from around her throat and her wrists, but you didn't miss it. Not with the black, strapless velvet evening gown she was wearing. The contrast with her milky white redhead's skin, was startling enough. She looked up at him and her lovely features were hard. She didn't smile.

"Hello, siren," he said grinning. "Proposition still open? You really need a new leader, now. Or haven't you heard about poor, dear Lonny?"

"I've heard," she said through her teeth. "And I'm glad. He was strictly from reptile. Whoever did it ought to get a medal—even if it was you."

He laughed. "I've been thinking about your offer. I'll take the job—for ten grand a week." He figured that would infuriate her, but he was wrong.

She shrugged her bare, lovely white shoulders, said coolly: "I've been thinking it over, too. I've changed my mind. I don't want you. I've already picked a new leader."

Mike Collier formed an "O" with his mouth. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"It's not a guy. It's a girl. It's going to be Sis Marlo's band from now on."

"What!" Mike gasped. "Are you crazy? No gal leader has ever brought an outfit right to the very top of the trade."

"Why don't you try a little trick called minding your own business," she suggested.

"Sure," he said, grimly. "As a little, shall we say, dirge for poor Lonny, I'm going to blow out a number with the band. Do you mind?"

"I don't care what you do," she said. She looked away from him.

He went on up onto the bandstand. He cracked a few gags with the gang and borrowed a trumpet. He told Doxie the piano player, who was leading tonight, to have the bunch back him up softly on *Saint James Infirmary*, that this was for a friend. He looked toward Sis Marlo and the hair at the back of his neck curled at the expression in her eyes. Even though he'd practically called her a liar and a murderess the look in her eyes now told him that she didn't care, she still felt the same way about him. It made him suddenly seem to smell the sweetish scent of cognac again as he kissed her the first night he took her home from the club. He winked at her and moved up to take his stand in front of the band.

He looked around and Doxie went into the number with a feather touch. Solly the drummer picked up the beat with a brush. The whole outfit came in, softly, slowly, hauntingly. He put the horn to his lips and slid in with them. The sad and wailing blues of the song came out through the shiny bell of the horn, and it seemed to come up from the soles of his socks and go all through him, before it found its way out. Vaguely he saw that they'd stopped dancing out there in front. They were crowding around the dais, swaying like a group of cobras in front of an Indian fakir tootling on his reed pipe.

And then they got lost to him. They faded. Everything faded except the music he was making and he let it all out without any stops. He was shaken and soaked with sweat when he stopped. He was like a man coming out of an anaesthetic. Suddenly the waving roar of the applause broke in his ears. He turned and set down the trumpet. He suddenly knew what he had to do. He got down off of the dais, started back toward the bar, then hidden in the press of the crowd, he scrounged around and twisted in the direction of the

men's lounge. He ignored the back-clapping and the pleas for another number. "Later," he told them.

AND then he was in the white-tiled, hospital-like cleanliness of the wash room. He wiped his perspiring face with a towel. Behind him Chico, the attendant said: "That was fine, Mike. I heard it. That *Saint James* job, I haven't heard a horn treatment like that since Bix."

He turned to Chico, a small, stooped, leathery-skinned old man with all the sorrows of the world in his soft brown eyes and in the lines of his face. Once Chico had been a great trombone man. But an accident had smashed nerves in his lip and cheek and paralyzed one hand. He'd had to leave the music business. He had a family to support, a big one, and one of the kids was crippled from the same accident. In desperation Chico had become a pickpocket. He had been caught, given a suspended sentence. He'd gone straight and taken a wash room attendant's job. He made good money at it too, but never enough. There was always some new specialist, some new operation coming up that might straighten out his kid. So Mike Collier and Chico had a little weekly ritual. It was almost a game. He said: "Feel like playing a little dice, Chico?"

The little old man shrugged and grinned. He was no longer embarrassed over this. He knew that it was something Mike Collier enjoyed doing. "It's up to you, Mike," he said.

Mike Collier fished the green dice from his pocket, handed them to Chico. "You roll first."

They retreated to a corner of the wash-room. Chico put down a ten dollar bill and Mike faded him. Chico rolled and came up with a nine point. He rolled three times and crapped out. Mike took the dice. He left the twenty dollars lie there. He rolled. The dice twirled and came up a one and a two. Mike cursed.



"Leave ten," he said, and pulled a bill from his pocket while Chico picked up one of the two extra tens on the floor.

Mike rolled again and this time the dice spun and came up two ones. "Crap again!" Mike griped. He pulled out his empty left trouser pocket, showed it to Chico. "That's all," he said, grinning. "You cleaned me. I'll catch you next week."

Chico glowed. He knew what Mike Collier could do with a pair of dice. He said, gently: "You're a good loser, Mr. Collier. And a fine man. People don't really know you."

Mike put up a hand. "Now, now, Chico. Listen, do me a favor." Chico nodded. "I need pencil and paper."

Chico fished inside his white jacket pocket, came out with a folded square of notebook paper and a silver mechanical pencil. Mike took them and tore the paper into little squares. On each one of


them he wrote the same thing: *Sis knows who did it.* That was all. He folded each of the squares once and handed them to the curious, frowning Chico. "Another favor, Chico. A big one."

"For you, Mike, anything," the attendant told him.

Mike nodded. "Listen carefully. Some time tonight every member of the band will come in here. When you brush them off, Chico, I want you to slip one of these pieces of paper into the pocket of each one of them. I think you can do it without them noticing. Right, Chico?"

He wet his lips. "All right," he said finally. "For you, even that. Even though I swore I'd never put my hand into another man's pocket again."

When Mike Collier left the wash room, he didn't go back to the bar. He cut through a curtained doorway that led to the kitchen. He kidded with the kitchen help a few moments and then slipped out



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the rear door of the club. He went straight to Sis Marlo's apartment. It was in a small, modern and expensive East Side building. He used the key she had given him to let himself inside.

He didn't know whether this was going to work or not, but he thought it was worth a try. If the killer was one of the guys in the band the message on that slip of paper might scare him into coming up here and trying to shut Sis Marlo up. But even if he was on the right track the murderer might figure it for a bluff or a trap and not take the bait. All he could do was wait and see.

He curled up on the heavily cushioned divan in the living room with only one tinted lamp glowing softly, and went to sleep.

**W**ARM breath blowing into his ear and soft lips tickling the lobe awakened him. He sat up and Sis Marlo straightened and backed away from him laughing. He yawned and stretched languorously and reached toward her. She backed completely out of reach. She shook her index finger at him.

"Bad boy Collier!" she said. Under the smile she was wearing her face looked drawn and tight. "I wish you hadn't come here tonight. Why are you always so damned contrary, Collier? Other nights I've wished and wished for you to come and you never did. Tonight I'm fagged out and on edge and not fit company for anybody—and here you are."

She made a gesture with her hand. "Up Collier. I'll have one drink with you and then you'll have to go. It's been a rugged day." She drew her hand across her forehead, squinching her eyes shut.

He got up from the divan, walked over to a small liquor cabinet, opened it and pulled out a half-full fifth of cognac and two glasses. He brought it over to the cocktail table and poured drinks for both of them. He took a sip and rolled the

brandy against the back of his tongue before swallowing it.

"Sis," he said. "You never did tell me. Who was it came up to Lonny's flat this afternoon?"

Something filmed across her dark eyes for a moment and then was gone. She tossed her head. "It wasn't important. It was just Lonny's landlord. He wanted to talk about redecorating the apartment."

"Uh-huh." Mike held the drink up to the light, admired the fine, delicate coloring. "You had me curious. For awhile I figured that it could have been the murderer. And I was wondering why you were holding back the name."

"Now you know," she said. "It had nothing to do with it."

He shrugged. He said quietly: "We'll soon know who the killer is, anyhow."

She swung around toward him so suddenly the drink sloshed over the edge of her glass and stained the front of her gown. "What did you say?" Her voice was suddenly tight with tension, shrill. "What do you mean?"

He told her then, what he had done, about the trap he had set for the killer. When he had finished she was white around the lips. Her eyes looked wild, the pupils distended. "Mike, are you crazy!" she cried. "Suppose the trick works and the murderer does come here. He—he'll kill me. He'll maybe kill both of us. Mike, we've got to get out of here!"

He went over to her and took tight hold of her arms. "Cut it out!" he ordered. "I'll see that you don't get hurt. I'll handle whoever it is. And the chances are nobody'll even come. We'll sit up and wait for them a couple of hours. Then, if nobody shows, I'll curl back up out here on the divan and you go to your own room. There's a lock on your bedroom door, isn't there?"

"A couple of hours!" she almost screamed at him. She stamped her foot and her fists were balled tightly against

her thighs. A vein stood out angrily against the soft white flesh of her throat. "Mike, you're out of your head. You're getting out of here and you're going to the police and tell them what you've done. They can send a man around here to stand guard outside. I—Mike—I wouldn't sleep a wink all night."

"You've lost sleep before," he said. "This is important. This killer has got to be caught. Otherwise I might have to take the rap for it. We're going through with this."

She stood there, staring at him, breathing loudly, her eyes shifting wildly, like a frightened, trapped animal's. Suddenly she broke away from him, raced toward a desk. He didn't try to stop her. He watched her yank open a drawer and snatch a .32 revolver. She held it quaveringly pointed toward him.

"Get out of here, Collier, out of this apartment. I've heard people say you were mad. Maybe you are. Maybe you did kill Lonny. I—I'm afraid of you now, Collier. Get out of here. I'll call the police myself. I—"

She cut off abruptly as he started across the room toward her. A flat, cynical grin spread across his wedge-shaped face. He moved deliberately toward her, his hand stretched out in front of him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Contract for Death

"GIVE me that gun, Sis," he said quietly. "You're not going to pull the trigger. You haven't got the guts. It takes nerve to shoot a man when you're looking into his eyes."

Her lower lip started to tremble. Her chin puckered. She backed away from him until she bumped against the wall. "Don't come any closer, Mike!" she screamed. "I—I don't want to shoot you!"

"I know you don't," he said. And then

he was close enough. He reached out suddenly and closed his fingers around her wrist and twisted. The revolver fell to the rug. He bent and scooped it up. And then the doorbell rang. They both froze, heads cocked, listening to the sound of the ringing. Their eyes met and locked.

"Don't answer it," Sis whispered. "Please, Mike. Maybe they'll go away again."

"The hell with that," he said. His gray eyes grew very bright. A triumphant grin flirted across his tough features. "It worked," he said. He stuck the .32 into his jacket pocket. He said: "You stay here, Sis. I'm going to let them in."

She cried: "No, no! Please, Mike!" But he kept going. He went down the short hallway and flung open the door, keeping his free hand in his pocket on the gun.

He and Myrna Sheridan stared at each other, wide-eyed, gape-jawed. In Mike Collier's brain all his ideas, all the things he'd planned to say and do at this moment collided and smashed to smithereens. This, he hadn't figured on. Myrna Sheridan hadn't gotten one of those slips. She hadn't come here as a killer, walking into a trap. He was suddenly furious at her:

"What the hell do you want?" he snapped.

It took her a moment longer to recover. And then her words were jumpy, hesitant. "I—well—you see—I wanted to discuss a contract with Sis Marlo. This is her place, isn't it?"

Mike looked at his wrist watch. "At four-thirty in the morning you come around to discuss business?" Suddenly, his eyes darkened. A shadow seemed to cross his face. "Oh hell, come on in."

He pulled the door all the way back and stepped aside. He let her precede him along the hall. He followed her into the living room. She stood there and she and Sis Marlo looked at each other and neither of them spoke. He couldn't tell which one

of them looked the more confused and frightened. He leaned back against the wall. He watched Myrna Sheridan closely. She had tossed an evening wrap around her shoulders and she carried a small, jeweled handbag, but otherwise she was dressed the same as she had been at the Café Patee.

"All right, Myrna," he said. "Start discussing contracts."

Myrna Sheridan looked from him to Sis Marlo. Her pointed tongue came out and moistened her lips. She said: "It's between Sis and I. Haven't you the decency to leave when two people want to discuss their business affairs in private?" She tried to put the usual fire into it, but it didn't quite come off. Something was lacking. Mike even seemed to detect a touch of fear, of desperation in her tone.

"Why?" he drawled. "Have you got something to hide, Myrna?"

"Hide?" she said. "What—what are you talking about?"

He took the revolver from his pocket and Myrna's jade-green eyes stared at it in horrified fascination. Then they lifted to Mike Collier's face as he said: "You can skip the trick talk, baby. Sis has changed her mind. She's told me all about it. She's not going to cover for you anymore. She doesn't think it's worth it. She—"

Sis Marlo's high pitched voice cut him off. She cried: "He's lying, Myrna! I didn't! I didn't. I—" She broke off, realizing that she'd given the whole thing away.

The redhead wheeled toward her. "You blabbermouthed little witch! You just let him trick you. He didn't know anything. I should have killed you too! Now you've got him in on it."

She started angrily toward Sis Marlo, her long-nailed fingers clawed at her sides. Mike Collier stopped her. "Hold it!" he said sharply.

Myrna caught herself and turned back

to him. He watched her beautifully featured face working. He saw some of the selfishness and cruelty in this woman start to show around the lines of her mouth and in the hard, cold glittering of her green eyes. She said: "All right, Mike Collier, what's it going to cost me to buy your mouth? Name your price."

"You got away pretty cheaply with Sis, here, just giving her the leadership of the band. Or was there a little hunk of cash for a bonus as well?"

Myrna Sheridan shook her long red hair impatiently. "She's getting plenty. What I'm interested in right now is your price."

He let his eyes go slowly over her with a calm disdain. Then he shook his head. "I'm sorry, kid. It would take more than money to make me buy in on a smelly deal like murder. And you haven't got what it takes."

ALL the color drained from her face, leaving red flag-spots of rouge on her high cheekbones. A small tic started to jump at one corner of her long, elipsed eyes. For a moment Mike though she was going to leap at him, gun or no gun. But then she seemed to wilt all over.

He said: "You found out that Lonny was two-timing you with Sis, didn't you and it was too much for you to take. Or was it the kickback business that you learned about? Or both?"

Her features sagged. She was looking straight at Mike Collier only he got the eerie impression that she was looking right through him. She didn't even seem to see him. His voice came out in a flat, monotone. "It was both," she said. "One of the boys in the band squealed to me about the kickback. I went up to Lonny's place to have it out with him about that. I was—well—I was crazy at the idea of him practically stealing a thousand dollars a month off of me like that."

"And you found Sis there."

"Yes." She almost hissed the word. "She was sitting on his lap when I walked in. They had their arms around each other and they didn't even know I'd entered until I spoke."

Some expression came back into her face for a moment and she turned her head slowly, almost mechanically, toward Sis Marlo. Sis was leaning against the wall and she had her face in her hands and she was sobbing heavily and rocking back and forth.

"Sis!" Myrna said the name with poisonous sarcasm. "What a nickname for her. If—"

Mike Collier stopped her. "Get back to the other. Was Sis there when you killed Lonny?"

The frozen look drifted back over her exotic features. For a moment she didn't answer, then numbly, she went on: "No! She left. When I started to tell them both off she slipped into her jacket and ran out. And then Lonny and I really had it out. Everything would have been all right. It would have been just a fight, but—but when I asked him how he could double-cross me for a phoney little bit of fluff like Sis Marlo he said—he said—" Her voice caught and faded and she couldn't seem to go on.

"Go ahead, Myrna," Mike said softly. "Get it out of your system. Go ahead and talk. It'll do you good."

"Yes," she said. "Yes. Maybe you're right— Well, he told me that Sis Marlo had more—more life and fire in her little finger than I— Then he laughed at me. He said I was nothing, that he had known a hundred women like me, but never one like Sis Marlo. I—well—I went into a sort of red fog then. I don't remember exactly—but when I came out of it, Lonny—he was sprawled there on the floor. And that gold clarinet was in my hand and there was blood—there was blood. Mike, there was so much blood—"

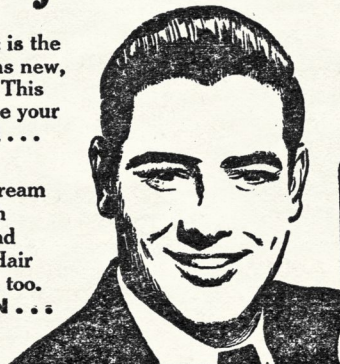
Toward the end her voice started to climb and then it broke. She spun around once. She pushed her splayed fingers deep into her red hair at both temples. The motion pushed her cat-like eyes up at the outer corners. Her mouth was all twisted. Her lovely face was suddenly a wild-staring, hideous mask. She screamed and started toward the window. She flung herself headlong through the glass—

Mike Collier stood there, his fingers frozen around the gun. Slowly they uncurled and he let it fall to the rug. He looked toward Sis Marlo and she was a crumpled heap on the floor. And then he

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heard the sound of the window rising. He turned toward it horrified, and he saw Myrna Sheridan coming back into the room, through the now opened window. She was coming in backward and for a moment he thought he was seeing things, that he was going crazy too. And then he saw the arms holding her and Wallach, the Homicide detective, stepped into the room carrying Myrna's unconscious figure. He walked over and tossed Myrna onto the divan. He wheeled toward Mike Collier, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping blood from his hands.

"She got cut up a little going through the glass, but otherwise she's all right. She conked out when she hit the fire escape outside. There is one, you know, in case you wondered how it happened."

"Yes, I know," Mike said. "I'd forgotten. Maybe it would have been better if there hadn't been one."

Wallach shrugged his plump, round shoulders and moved toward the telephone. "Maybe you're right. Who knows. That's just the way it goes."

**I**T WAS late the next afternoon before they let Mike go from Headquarters downtown. He went right to his own apartment. He slept for several hours, had a couple of drinks, made himself a sandwich and started to pack. When he was finished he left a note for the landlady and left the building carrying all that he owned in a suitcase.

Half a block from the building he was stopped by a small, hurrying feminine figure. There were dark shadows under

Sis Marlo's eyes and she looked more appealingly youthful and innocent than ever. She grabbed his arm.

"Collier," she said. "I was just coming up to see you." She glanced down at his bag. "Where—where are you going, Collier?"

"Away," he said. "I've got a belly full of this town. Get out of my way, Sis. I've got to catch a train." He removed her hand from his arm and started to walk away, not looking at her.

"But where are you going, Mike?" She hurried along beside him. She tried to link her arm with his, but he shook it off. "Let me go with you, Mike, please, please!" There were tears in her voice. "I need you now more than ever, Mike, you big, wonderful heel! Please, Mike, take me—"

"No," he said. "There's a little jive-joint roadhouse just outside of K. C. They like my music there. But I don't think they'd go for your style of stuff, Sis. The guy that owns the place has a daughter about your age. She, especially wouldn't care for you. It's been a long time since I've seen her. I'm looking forward to a pleasant couple of weeks."

He kept walking and in a few moments, he noticed that she was no longer beside him. He glanced back quickly and saw her standing there in the middle of the sidewalk stock still, watching him go. He shrugged his shoulders uneasily. "To hell with her," he told himself. "There are a lot of guys in this town that like cognac. She won't be lonesome long—and neither will I."

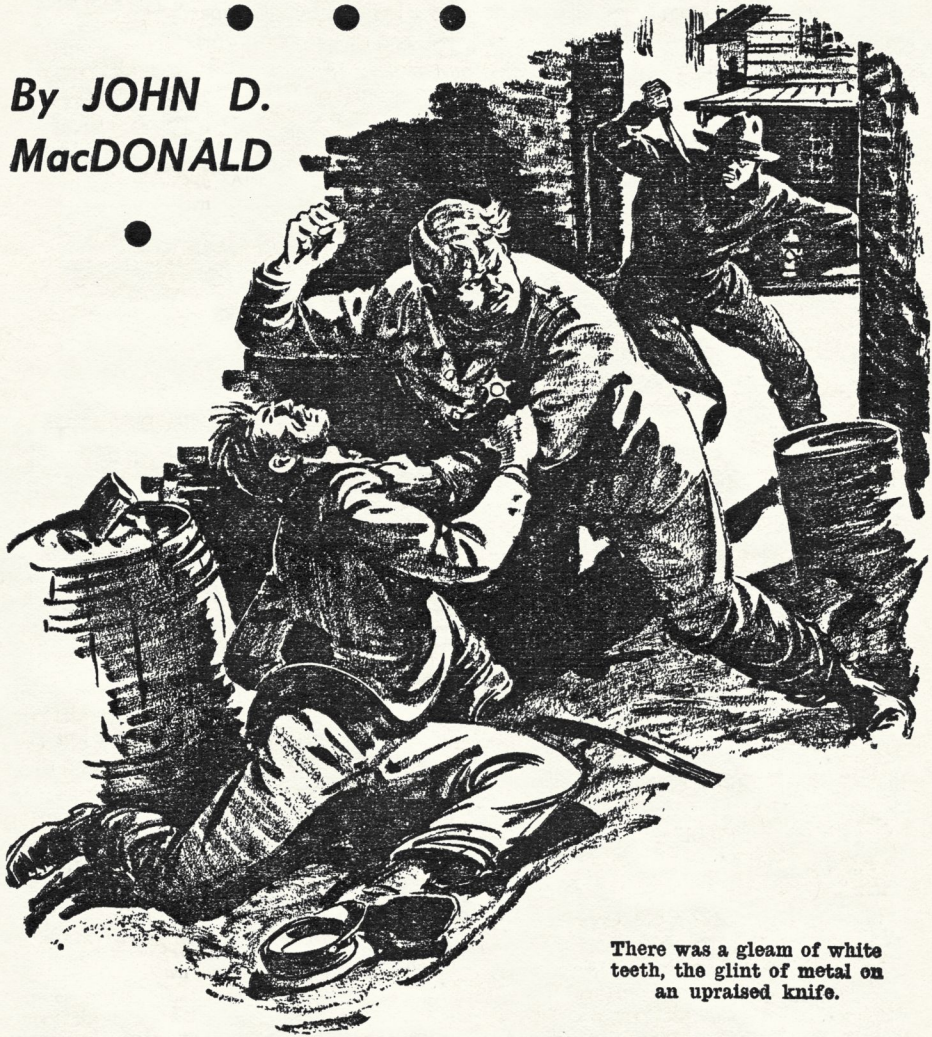
THE END

## HIGH COST OF LIVING

Arrested for driving through a red light, a Washington, D. C., housewife explained that she had just had to pay 72 cents for a bunch of asparagus and was so disgusted and aggravated she didn't know what she was doing.

# THREE STRIKES— YOU'RE DEAD!

By JOHN D.  
MacDONALD



There was a gleam of white teeth, the glint of metal on an upraised knife.

Vengeance drove Big Tom Gordon to the crime-ridden alleys of Angel Village—and into the arms of his brother's luscious sweetheart.

**B**IG TOM GORDON turned off the road that slanted down the shoulder of the mountain. Gravel made a popcorn sound under the wheels of his coupe. The white drive-in was flood-lighted, but the other four cars were

parked off in the shadows of some trees.

Down in the valley he saw the lights of Haggins, and knew that it matched his expectations. Gordon edged out from behind the wheel and stood by the white-washed rocks that marked the drop off. Behind him a ripe and fruity trumpet blared from the bubbled neon on the juke, and in one of the parked cars a woman laughed. A mist half wreathed the valley, glowing pink-red with the Saturday night lights of the town below. Big Tom, a vast, slow, gray monolith of a man, stood rock-still and looked into the valley. There was a sleepy brutality about his face.

"Something, mister?" a young voice at his elbow asked.

Gordon turned slowly. She was young, too thin. In the shadows her eyes were too big, sunken too far into her fragile head.

She hugged herself, elbows cupped in her palms.

"It's pretty cold for that skimpy uniform, girl," he said.

"Yeah, I know. Don't keep me out in it. What can I get you?"

"I'll come inside."

She sniffed and hurried back to the shelter of the white frame building. Tom Gordon followed her more slowly. Inside was a steamy smell of old grease. A pallid, blond young man behind the counter was pinching absent-mindedly at a pimpled chin. The girl sat on one of the counter stools. Outside a horn bleated with a demanding note. She hurried out.

Tom Gordon sat at the counter and said, "Coffee, black."

With three lazy motions the young man produced the coffee, set it down in front of Tom, pushed the sugar within reach. The juke had stopped and the only sound was a thin spitting of grease on the edge of the hot plate.

The girl came back in with a tray.

"Know where I can stay in Haggins?" Gordon asked.

"Jack Steele's Hotel, if it isn't full up. But don't eat there," the girl said.

"Pretty rough town, isn't it?" Gordon asked.

For a moment she dropped her mask of indifference. "Rough! Brother, there's nothing like it. Lumberjacks out of the hills. Indians off the reservation down the road. Guys from the steel plant. We got 'em all." Suddenly she frowned. "Why? You figure on staying around?"

"For a little while."

She smiled without humor. "You look like you could get along all right. But don't figure on police protection. And stay home on Friday and Saturday nights. Friday is payday. The money's gone by Sunday."

"No police protection?" he asked, raising his eyebrows, regarding her steadily.

The boy behind the counter laughed dryly. The girl turned on him. "It was a joke, Nick? Something to laugh about, maybe?"

Nick explained. "Her boy friend, a cop named Billy Gordon, got himself killed in a dive five weeks ago. He was the only cop who handled a beat by himself in that part of town they call Angel Village."

The girl turned and walked away from the two of them. Her legs were thin under the uniform shorts, her shoulders held too square.

Big Tom Gordon said, "Too hot in here. Miss, would you mind bringing some more coffee out to my car?"

As she turned, she wiped under her eye with the back of her hand, a quick pitiful gesture.

Gordon got behind the wheel just as she left the building carrying the tray with the coffee on it. When she hooked it onto the car door, he reached out and took her wrist in his big hand.

"Say!" she said angrily, "What do you think you're—"

"Not so loud, Bonny," he said in a low voice.



She grew very still. "How do you know my name?"

"I used to get one letter a year from my kid brother, Billy. He mentioned you in the last one. I want to talk to you."

She lowered her voice. "Bill used to brag about you. Did you come all the way from . . ."

"All the way from Shanghai."

"He said you were the toughest cop on the toughest force in the world."

"When do you get off?"

"In twenty minutes or so."

"Can you come for a ride and talk to me?"

"Please. You saw me in there. You heard Nick. You can't go around with grief on your sleeve where every monkey like Nick can stick pins in you. I'm not like you think, Mr. Gordon. I—"

"For heaven's sake, shut up, girl! I saw through your act. I'll be here when you're ready to go."

She pulled herself together. "Okay, Mr. Gordon," she whispered.

"We'll make it Bonny and Tom."

HE WAITED in the cool night, tapping his fingernails against the horn button, looking down into the valley. A tough town. Too tough for Billy. He had carried his anger with him, nursing it across fifteen thousand miles of ocean, a cold hard anger.

Maybe part of it was in having no other

family. Billy had been the only one. There was no humor in his smile as he remembered the way he had evaded Bill's demands to get him a spot on the Shanghai force. He hadn't wanted Bill, that big, clean-cut smiling kid, to find dirty and miserable death waiting for him in the filth of a Shanghai alley. No, he had wanted Bill back in the States. Safe. When he got word of Bill's death, word that the crime was unsolved, he had requested and received ninety day's leave.

Bonny would help. He saw her courage, clear and shining in her eyes. He remembered the sentences from Bill's letter.

*Tom, boy it looks like this isn't going to be a family of bachelors after all. For the first time I have a big yen to get married. Her name is Bonny Gaylord and she insists on working at a drive-in on the hill above town until the date is set. She says we need a bank roll. Anyway, I know it's no use asking you if you can attend, but the date is tentatively set for next June tenth. I wish you could make it. We'll send pictures, anyway.*

Yesterday had been June 10th. Big Tom Gordon knew very well how Bonny felt. He knew how she was putting a layer of superficial hardness over the pain.

When the floodlights clicked out, the valley city became more distinct. The other cars were gone. When he heard her quick steps, he opened the car door. She had a cheap cloth coat wrapped around her.

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"Where's a good place?"

"Go back up the hill. They park at the top."

He turned off where she pointed and cut the lights. The match flame as he lit her cigarette showed him a fragile face from which all hardness had fled. She looked very young and very alone.

"I've got to know more about it than you were able to put in the letter you sent me along with the clipping, Bonny. And if I ask questions at other places, word might get around. Naturally I wouldn't like that."

"You need the background, Tom. Two years ago it used to be a favorite sport in Angel Village to beat up the police. They used to do it the same way a naughty boy would put a rock through the school window. Defiance. You know.

"But Bill put a stop to that along three streets of Angel Village. When he went in there he made it a point to lick the three roughest men in the district. Angus Murty, who manages the Rite Spot, corner of North and Main; Ed Tour, boss lumberjack from the Henderson outfit near town; and Sullivan Bendrick, a tough young buck from the Indian reservation. He licked them good and they didn't bother him any more. He did it with his fists. No guns or clubs.

"On the night of the third of May Bill was coming off his beat. He passed an alley near Border Street. They found later that the two streetlights there had been broken earlier in the evening. Anyway, they dragged him into the alley and—"

"And they killed him. How bad was he marked up?"

She shuddered. "His face was smashed badly and his knuckles were bleeding so you could see that he put up a fight. What killed him was a blow over the ear with a tire iron. They found the weapon beside him."

"What have the police done?"

"They thought that it was one of the three men he had licked so badly. They grabbed the three of them, Murty, La-Tour and Bendrick. They were all marked up. But a lot of fighting goes on on Saturday night. Every one of them was able to produce witnesses to some other scrap they had had. I guess the police may have worked them over a little, because Bill was well-liked. But they couldn't prove a case on any one of them. They had to let them go."

"Could the three of them have ganged up on Bill?"

"I—I don't think so. They all hated Bill, but they hate each other, too."

Tom Gordon slouched behind the wheel. "I see," he said softly. "How about other enemies?"

"I guess every policeman has enemies. Probably Bill had fewer than most. He never ran a man in unless it was the last resort. He used to tell me that he saved the city money that way."

Tom laughed. "I used to tell him that. I used to tell him that a cop didn't have a dogcatcher's job. Run your beat right and there won't be trouble on it."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Do? Whoever did it got away with it, didn't they? They feel free and clear, don't they? I'm registered as Thomas Logan. I'm going to hire out on Bill's beat. I'm going to clean up the three people he did. And then I'm going to wait and see what happens. If it worked once, they'll think it'll work twice."

She turned and touched his arm "Please be careful, Tom. Please."

"You want the score evened up, don't you?"

"It—it won't bring Bill—"

She couldn't finish. She was sobbing against his chest. He felt her frailness under his heavy arm. He patted her shoulder awkwardly and murmured soothing sounds.

In a few minutes she was under control

again. She sat up. "Sorry, Tom," she said crisply. "That doesn't happen too often."

He took her home and went to his room.

**C**HIEF AUGUST MILLER was a lean, bitter, nervous and sincere man. He drummed on his desk top and said, "I have no precedent for appointing you."

"You want to get whoever killed Bill, don't you?"

"But is this the way to go about it?"

"Have you thought of a better way? Give them the same target again."

Chief Miller looked Big Tom Gordon over. "And if they kill you too?"

Tom Gordon's smile was thin. "I don't think they will."

"On the other hand, if you find the man or men, I want him or them hauled in here alive. Do you understand that?"

Below the desk level Tom Gordon crossed thick fingers. "I understand."

"All right, then. As of now, you're Officer Logan. I'll swear you in. The false name ought to go over. You don't look like your brother. You're big, but you look slow and soft. What happens if one of the three licks you?"

Tom Gordon said, "I don't want to be childish, but on the other hand I don't want you worrying about me." He stood up, went to the end of the desk and knelt on the floor. He put a big hand around each of the two end desks legs, the edges of his hands tight against the dusty floor. Without a change in facial expression, he lifted all four desk legs off the floor, so steadily that nothing tipped or fell on the desk top.

The chief gasped and then began to grin. He said, "Bill told me about that. I told him it couldn't be done."

Tom Gordon stood up and dusted off his knees. "Did he tell you about this?" He walked close to the chief who had gotten to his feet. "Hit me in the face. Don't pull your punch."

The chief licked his lips and swung. Tom Gordon didn't seem to move. And yet the blow spatted harmlessly into a thick palm. The chief tried again—with the same result. "This," he said at last, "is going to be very interesting."

It took Tom Gordon, dressed in a uniform too tight across his shoulders and around his middle, ten minutes of his first shift to get to the Rite Spot and locate Angus Murty. Murty was a raw-boned man with faded blue eyes and rusty hair. He wore scars of many battles and carried himself like a fighting cock.

His place, the Rite Spot, was dingy and scarred. Three customers lounged against the bar. The tables were empty. The juke box was unplugged. Angus loafed at one end of the bar, picking his teeth with a match.

He raised one eyebrow as he saw Tom Gordon. "Ah, so it's a new one we have! An old fat one, too. What will it be for you, Dad?"

Tom Gordon politely asked for a small beer. He moved his beer along until he was in front of Angus Murty. He said softly, "I don't care for personal comments about my size, Murty."

Murty's eyes blazed with the joyous light of battle. He grinned widely and said, "Well now, Fatty, isn't that a damn shame!"

Tom Gordon took a mouthful of beer and sprayed it with precision directly into the face of Angus Murty. "Here's your beer back," he said.

The three loungers scurried away from the bar. Murty ripped off his apron and came around the end of the bar, stumbling in his eagerness.

Tom Gordon waited.

Angus led with a bar fighter's Sunday punch. Tom Gordon stepped outside it, caught the sinewy wrist in both hands, pivoted, got his shoulder into Angus' armpit and levered down on the long arm, thrusting with his shoulders when he felt

Angus' weight lift off the floor. Angus lit flat on his own bar and, like a skipped stone, continued on into the backbar. He fell to the floor behind the bar with a stupefying crash of shattered mirror, bottles, glasses.

For one moment Tom Gordon hoped that the man would stay there. But with a bull-roar of rage, Angus came back over his own bar, crouching for a moment on top of it and then launched himself like an ungainly bird directly at Gordon. Gordon stepped into him, driving his shoulder against Angus Murty's middle. Murty clutched him and clubbed Gordon over the ear with a heavy right fist. Gordon got both hands on Murty's shoulders, yanked him in, at the same time lowering his head. He felt the bone and flesh give under the thrust of his head. Murty sagged. With one effortless heave Gordon flung Murty back across the bar.

Angus Murty layed where he had fallen. Tom Gordon went back and picked up the rest of his beer. He finished it, looked speculatively at the man behind the bar, and left.

The rest of his shift was uneventful. Word of the disaster that had befallen Angus Murty traveled fast. Tom walked his beat and heard the buzzing whispers behind him. It would be a long time before Murty felt belligerent again. Yet he doubted that Murty had been the one who had dragged Bill into the alley. It seemed out of character. Murty seemed to be one of those who would stay licked.

His shift ended at four in the morning. He went back to the station house, showered, dressed and went back to his room.

On Tuesday night he did not get to the Rite Spot until eleven. He knew from the hush that fell over the place as he stepped inside the door that one of the other two local champions was inside. Angus Murty was behind the bar, helping the bartender. Both eyes were black and his broken nose had been taped.

"Got anything to say about me tonight, Murty?" Tom asked.

"You haven't heard me open my mouth."

"Is that the guy, Angus?" a heavy bass voice roared.

Angus nodded. Tom Gordon turned, his back against the bar, and looked at the man who got up from a table and swaggered up to him. He saw it was the Indian; it was Bendrick. Tom sensed that this would be more difficult. The man was young, with so much breadth of shoulder that he looked top-heavy. Yet he moved with quick nervousness, his dark face impassive.

He stopped ten feet from Tom. "I hear you're a tough cop."

Tom shrugged.

"You got a gun with you to show how tough you are, man?"

"No gun," Tom said.

"And when I lick you you go get your boys and come back and pick me up and whip my skull a little, hey?"

"If you want to try to lick me, Bendrick, go right ahead. If you lick me, I forget it. If I lick you, we forget it. But if any of your friends try to help, everybody gets taken in. Understand?"

The man turned, grinning widely. "Guys, listen to him! Just listen to old Fatty!"

White scars were livid on the Indian's knuckles. He turned back, walked closer, his thumbs tucked in his belt. Tom Gordon waited.

**W**ITH amazing speed the man shot a left at Tom's head, followed it up with a right that was very low. Tom caught the left in his palm, turned sideways so that the right bounced off his hip. Even so it nearly numbed his leg.

The Indian grunted and tried for Gordon's head with the right. Tom Gordon caught the right fist in his left hand. His fingers closed tightly over the two fists,

one fist in each hand. Gordon looked up.

He saw bewilderment on the man's face as he tried to pull his hands free. Tom Gordon grinned and closed down with the pressure.

The two men stood motionless, facing each other.

"What the hell they doing?" somebody muttered.

The Indian tried to twist away, But Tom Gordon held the hands steady. Slowly he increased the pressure. The Indian turned white and his mouth twisted. His eyes rolled up and Tom let go. The man dropped to his knees and hugged his hands. He moaned softly. Tom reached down, grabbed the thick hair, tilted the man's head back and slapped him heavily across the mouth. The slap raised a red mist of blood. All fight was gone. The man slumped back onto his haunches and dropped his head between his knees.

"Take him out of here," Tom Gordon demanded. The men that Bendrick had been sitting with came forward silently, helped him to his feet and walked him out.

Tom Gordon turned and looked at Angus Murty. The wonder faded from Murty's face and he looked away quickly.

"Murty, when you see LaTour, tell him that he gets the same deal you got and the same deal Bendrick got."

"He'll be here tomorrow night at this time," Murty said.

Ed LaTour was there, alone. He was a big man wearing a brilliant flannel shirt. His teeth were very white and his wrists were the size of a normal man's ankle. He wore the caulks of the lumberjack.

Tom Gordon walked in and turned towards him when LaTour said, "You wanted to see me, sir?" The voice was soft, with just the tiniest edge of a French-Canadian accent.

"Not particularly, LaTour. I just thought I'd have trouble with you sooner or later and I want to get it over with so I can relax."

"Maybe you relax more than you think."

"Maybe."

"Come closer, sir. Why you think you have trouble with LaTour?"

Tom Gordon went close to his table. "I understand you got a local reputation as a guy who can beat up a cop and get away with it."

"They hire you from outside, no? You lick Murty and you lick Bendrick. I can lick Murty and Bendrick too. Now I see if I can lick you."

With the last word, LaTour got his hands under the edge of the heavy table and flipped it up into Tom Gordon's face. Gordon fended it off with his forearms, and as it fell away he saw the legs of the metal chair whistling down toward his head. He rolled to one side and the chair hit him a sodden blow on one shoulder,

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catching him hard, numbing his left arm.

LaTour followed it up with a rush, jumping high, slamming both feet against Gordon's chest. The caulks bit through fabric, tearing his flesh. He went down, heavily, rolling to get free. Tom caught a glimpse of a foot descending toward his face. He took it on his arm, got his right arm crooked around the man's ankle and threw his weight to one side. LaTour fell across him. Feeling was beginning to return to Tom's left arm.

A thick fist thundered between his eyes, misting the room. Unable to see clearly, Tom managed to get his feet under him, stagger away from LaTour. Standing, he blinked the tears out of his eyes, let his mouth hang slack, let his arms dangle at his sides.

LaTour yelled, "This the way we show tough cops!"

He measured Tom with a gentle left, brought the booming right up through the middle, a right that would have torn Tom's head off.

Tom moved the necessary two inches backwards, feeling the wind of the punch on his face. As LaTour, off balance, lurched toward him, he stepped in and pawed at LaTour's middle with a big gray fist. LaTour gasped as it hit. It was a pawing punch, an apparently effortless punch. With a weaving, rolling, motion, throwing lefts and rights at LaTour's middle, Tom Gordon worked him back toward the bar. LaTour's middle was like a rock. But he was ready to fall as he backed against the bar. Tom Gordon stood at the bar and drove in left and right, left and right until he was thoroughly arm-weary, until LaTour's long arms were dangling like the arms of a rag doll, his eyes glazed, his big mouth open.

The big room was silent except for the wet, heavy impact of those punches. At last Tom Gordon stepped back and let LaTour fall. He fell as ponderously as one of the trees in his forest.

Tom Gordon stepped over him, retrieved his hat, brushed it off on his sleeve and left. He heard the excited roar of voices as the door closed behind him.

The stage was set. LaTour, Bendrick or Murty. Any one of the three. If one of them had felt it necessary to avenge a beating by the younger Gordon, they would think the same way after having been beaten a second time.

The only thing to do was to wait.

Maybe LaTour would bring in some of his men from the woods. Maybe Bendrick would bring some lads off the reservation. Maybe Murty had a few toughs in the background he could use. Tom was certain that it had taken more than one man to kill his brother. He had thought Bill too much to expect that one man could have killed him, with or without a tire iron.

**T**HURSDAY night was calm and peaceful. Gordon rearranged his beat so that he passed the alley often. The repaired street lights glowed dimly. As he walked he thought of days long ago. He was fourteen years older than Bill. Tom knew that his brother would not sleep quietly until the murder had been avenged.

To go armed would mean that the opportunity would not come. They would not risk tackling an armed man. Bill had set the precedent out of a spirit of bravado. His avenger had to maintain the same standard.

Tom had debated carrying a flat small automatic, had decided against it. A gun small enough to conceal carefully would be difficult to get at in case of need.

He knew that he would kill or be killed.

On Friday night Gordon was busy breaking up bloody fights, answering frantic calls. Yet he managed to walk by the alley at least once every hour. The lights still gleamed.

Saturday was almost as bad as Friday. But the fights were easy to quell because of the reputation he had acquired. He met

respect on every side. Respect and fear and awe. He walked solidly, planting his feet firmly, his big fists, half clenched, swinging at his side.

Sunday the crowds were slim. A few places, such at the Rita Spot, had plenty of customers. Many closed early. The alley had become almost a habit. And yet not so much of a habit that he was able to walk by without a tightening of his throat, an intensification of every sense.

At midnight it began to rain, a light misty rain. At one o'clock Angel Village began to quiet down. Even the throng in the Rite Spot began to clear out. At two o'clock Angel Village was silent—and dead.

Tom Gordon's footsteps echoed in the shallow canyons of the streets, and he walked with thoughts of long ago, thoughts of what might have been.

It was ten after three when he rounded the corner and saw the alley entrance ahead. It didn't look right. He glanced at the street lights. The same two were broken again. He took a deep shuddering breath and kept walking at the same speed. He was expected.

The mouth of the alley was like the jaws of a stone beast that waited, lidless eyes cold on him.

He thought, I could call and get help. A dragnet. Maybe we could—

He discarded the thought. The first way was best. He had come thousands of miles to do it just this way. The fear filled his throat. Fear of dying. No man wishes to die. No man who has seen much death wishes to die.

Tom walked on with steady, unhurried pace. The alley mouth was twelve feet away, ten, eight, six, three, one.

The wet canvas tarp slammed down over his head, and he was yanked into the alley mouth, into the blackness. Gordon stumbled and gasped as he fell heavily, cursing himself for not thinking of such a possibility.

It was useless to attempt to fight. He curled his arms around his head to protect himself and rolled, writhing his big body, rolled with all his strength, rolled like a great seal deep in the water.

He broke clear of the canvas, his cheek scraping against the wet stones of the alley floor, and he heard the grunt of surprise. Gordon moved quickly under the half-seen ghost of a blow, and metal clanged off the stones near his head. He rolled against legs, toppled a man down on top of him, found a wrist, held it tightly in both hands and spun his body with one quick, hard motion, completely around, hearing the bone snap like a parched stick.

A yell of pain was quickly muffled and a heavy boot thudded into his stomach. He still had hold of the broken arm. Tom plunged back, getting his feet under him, squinting into the darkness. He pulled the protesting stranger along the stones, swung him around and, gaining momentum, smashing him against the alley wall.

The mouth of the alley was a paler darkness. A man stood, then turned to run. Tom threw himself forward, his hand closing on an ankle. The figure fell heavily and once again metal clanged.

The man scrambled up, but Tom Gordon was close to him, backing him against the wall. There was a gleam of white teeth, the glint of metal on a small, up-raised blade. The knife flashed down and there was no time to avoid it. It chunked solidly into the right side of Tom Gordon's chest, grating against the bone, filling his chest with fire, with the warm thick feeling of internal bleeding.

He grunted in satisfaction and locked his hands at the small of the man's back. The pressure against the knife hilt forced it against him, but there was an almost sensuous pleasure in the pain. He slowly began to pull the man in toward him, forcing him back. Pressure in that spot would eventually result in a faint splintering noise and the man would drop.

The man clubbed Gordon behind the ear with feeble blows, there being no way for him to get leverage.

"Just like you killed Bill," Tom grunted.

The man didn't answer. He pulled down harder, and the man groaned and his ribs crackled under the pressure.

One more pound of pressure. One more second.

Revenge. Absolute and complete. And suddenly he couldn't do it. He released the man quickly, stepped back and knocked him out with a blow that jolted his arm up to the shoulder, sent out waves of pain from the knife wound.

Only then did Gordon find his matches, stoop and briefly illuminate the two faces. He smiled tightly, braceleted them together, walked to the call box on the corner and put in a call for a car and for an ambulance.

He fainted as the ambulance turned in the hospital gate, the knife still protruding from him.

**O**N THE third day Tom Gordon was permitted to have visitors.

Bonny was the first visitor. She came in, pale and subdued. She sat beside the bed and took his hand, held it tightly.

She gave him a crooked smile and said, "A pretty strange way to solve a case, copper."

"You mean I should have gone around on my knees with a magnifying glass? No, I like my way better. Murderers are stupid. If you can't crack a case one way, set up the same circumstances all over again and see what happens. They'll usually try twice." He smiled. "That's called the Tom Gordon Clay Pigeon System."

"Do you know why Nick murdered Bill?"

"The nurse read me the papers. It would have helped, Bonny, if you'd told

me about that Nick making a play for you at the drive-in all the time. He would have cracked sooner than Bendrick if they'd hauled him in immediately after Bill got it."

Bonny frowned. "It's hard to understand. I can't imagine Nick working on Bendrick's pride to get him to help lay for Bill in an alley like that."

Tom shrugged. "He wanted you. He was using the beaten Bendrick as a fall guy, egging him on, promising help. Nick just wanted Bill out of the way so the field would be clear. I began to think it was Bendrick. The other two men didn't quit until they were out cold. Bendrick quit when I broke a bone in his hand. It takes a little yellow streak in a man to make him capable of that sort of ambush, you know."

"And then, Tom, when you beat up Bendrick, he wanted to get you. He put the pressure on Nick to help him by saying that if he didn't, he might talk about the other killing. Nick had to help him the second time."

Suddenly she leaned over, put her cheek against the back of Tom's hand. "Oh, Tom, when you go take me with you. I can't stand it here any longer. I can't." There was the sound of desperation in her voice.

"Why, you're just a kid!" he said in astonishment.

But as Tom saw the yellow sheen of her hair, the half-hidden curve of cheek, he began to wonder.

"You wouldn't like it at all in Shanghai," he said. "Being married to a—"

Her cheek was warm against his heavy knuckles. Tom Gordon licked his lips and swallowed hard.

"You hear me?" he said. "You wouldn't like it at all!"

"Just give me time to pack," Bonny said.



Ex-marine Meckling faced a last-chance gamble with the Death House—when a gentleman gunman hung a murder rap on him.



Mr. Giacomo tried to pick up the little pistol. . . .

By **TEDD  
THOMEY**

# KILLER TAKE ALL

**A**LL around him lay the dark shadows of San Francisco, silent except for the screeching of an occasional trolley. Bill Meckling lay silent, too.

His eyelids slowly strained open. He saw only thick, fuzzy blackness. A cold and gritty surface was flattening his nose and pressing against his knees.

He smelled something sharp and stinging.

Bill Meckling's head was a swollen boulder, too heavy to lift. He tried, and long-nailed fingers of pain prodded through his brain, knocking away the fragments of memory which could have told him what had happened. . . .

It was much later before he felt strong enough to move again. His head hurt just above his right temple. Lord, how it vibrated. And he was sick. That damned smell was making him sick.

He had to get home. He had to get back to the little apartment and let Jeannie touch his head with her understanding fingers.

The pain rocked his brain, but he forced himself up and crawled a short distance across the cold surface. The effort sucked the last drop of vitality from his body. He fell on his side and lay without moving.

In the flats nearby somebody touched a switch and light spilled from a bathroom window. It shone yellowly across the lean face and black curly hair of the figure on the street. It was an ordinary young face with a good jaw line and thick eyebrows which met over a short straight nose. But it was drawn and white now, lines of pain pinching the mouth.

The light winked off without Meckling being aware that it was ever on. He pushed himself to his hands and knees. And then he recognized the odor which was all around him. Whiskey. It touched off a flood of recollection.

*Mr. Giacomo had been murdered!*

And he, Bill Meckling, had seen it happen, had seen the man with the angry blue eyes pull the trigger three times.

He had to tell the police!

Memory brought a bit of strength to the boiled asparagus stalks which were his legs. He stood up and started off uncertainly. Six steps later something whipped across his stomach. He fell forward and swung on a rope-like thing. Then his forehead seemed to split, thunder came and went and he was bobbing comfortably,

a chip on a faraway rolling sea. . . .

When Bill opened his eyes again the sky was gray and the first pink of sun was streaking the east. The damp night air had chilled his blood, but he felt better. His head still hurt, but his brain was clearer.

He glanced around. His right hand was stuck in a net. A tennis net. So that was what had caught him across the stomach. His weight must have pulled it down. He was lying smack in the middle of the courts at Nineteenth and Valencia, only two blocks from home.

He swore when he saw how the blood and whiskey had stained the shoulders of his new gray suit. Gently he put his fingers to his temple. The hair was stiff and matted. His left eyebrow was riding on a small lemon. That was probably from his fall on the net.

There was no time to feel sorry for himself. He had to get to a phone. He had to tell the police what he knew. And what about Jeannie? She'd be worried sick.

On stiff legs he crossed the courts. The heavy latch on the wire gate defied his trembling fingers. But he got through finally and walked down the narrow concrete roadway which led to Valencia Street. As he walked his mind was jammed with a dozen helter-skelter thoughts, each demanding immediate attention.

What a day yesterday had been. All he'd had time for at lunch was a milk shake and a sandwich. And no supper. No wonder he felt so weak. With a glow of pride he remembered parking his truck in front of the plant at six last night. He'd changed his uniform and been told the boss wanted to see him. A promotion! No more lugging ice all day and getting cold water down his neck. The boss had said: "Bill, I don't care if you are only twenty-seven. You're a good man. Ought to make a damned fine supervisor."

He'd stayed at the plant till nearly midnight studying the six routes he was to start supervising today. Brother, wouldn't

Jeannie be surprised when he told her. Five bucks a week more. He'd phoned that he wouldn't be home for supper, but he hadn't said why. He'd just told her: "Forget about the budget, honey. We're going to be in the dough!"

AROUND midnight he got off the Number 14 car on Mission Street and walked half a block to Mr. Giacomo's pocket-sized delicatessen on Eighteenth. He and the gray-headed old storekeeper had chatted briefly about business and he bought four bottles of beer and a big chunk of cheddar. About a block from the store he realized he'd forgotten rye bread and went back for a loaf.

He felt sick again when he remembered what he had seen.

A man was holding a gun on Mr. Giacomo. Bill would never forget that man. He wasn't tall, but he was wide-shouldered and wore a neat blue business suit, pink plastic-rimmed glasses and a dignified, school-teacher expression. He just wasn't the kind of person you'd expect to go around robbing people.

The gun was a black forty-five, the same kind Bill had packed along with his flame thrower in the Marines.

Bill was told to stand near Mr. Giacomo. Then, when the man was busy taking bills from the old varnished cash register, Mr. Giacomo had snapped open a

drawer and tried to pick up the little pistol hidden there.

But he never touched it.

Everything happened at once, running together like a badly-spliced movie. The man swore and veins stood out in his forehead. He fired three times before the gun jammed.

Three black dots appeared in Mr. Giacomo's white jacket and there was a look of absolute disbelief in his eyes. As he toppled, he dropped his yellow pencil and knocked over a pyramid of grapefruit. When he hit the floor the three dots were red.

He lay near the drawers marked *split peas, lima beans and lentils*, and slowly his fingers stopped their flexing.

Bill was dumbfounded. This couldn't be happening to Mr. Giacomo, who was everybody's friend, Mr. Giacomo, who gave weiners to kids and dogs and a shy smile to old ladies.

The sound of the shots had brought two men running from opposite directions across the street. The killer kept swearing and snapping the trigger, but the gun would not fire again. He saw there was no rear door and that he would be seen or perhaps captured by the two passers-by.

That was the last clear thing Bill remembered. He saw the man snatch up the bottle of whiskey from the counter display, but still stunned by the suddenness of Mr. Giacomo's death he didn't

women prefer men who prefer



It grooms hair - relieves dryness - removes loose dandruff!



realize what was going to happen until too late. The bottle caught him across the temple and as he pitched forward he felt the liquid and bits of glass cover his coat.

He didn't know how much later it was when somebody helped him to his feet and headed him for home. He'd been holding something, but he'd lost it. The beer and cheese? Probably. And then he woke up on the tennis court. . . .

Bill stepped off the curb and crossed Valencia, walking as fast as he could. The street lights still glowed dimly, although the sun was nearly up. He looked at his wrist watch. It had stopped at one-fifteen. He judged it was probably five-thirty or so and wondered where he could find a phone.

He'd need a nickel. He put his hand in his front trouser pocket to see if he had one. Instead of a coin he drew out a lump of green bills.

Bill closed his eyes. But when he opened them again the bills were still parked in his hand. He knew they weren't his.

A streetcar motorman walked by looking at Bill curiously. The young man's head was streaked with dried blood and his gray eyes regarded his right hand as if it held a green snake.

**B**ILL jammed the money back into his pocket and walked down the east side of Valencia past several dark taverns and a photography shop. Just as he discovered that his black morocco wallet was missing, he heard the newsboy shouting a block away on Mission Street. "Shop Owner Murdered and Robbed."

He wanted to go down and buy a paper, but he knew he had to find a phone first and call the police. He decided to use Mrs. Frankington's. She was his landlady and she was always up early. Besides there'd probably be papers for sale in the metal rack in front of the barber shop at Twentieth.

There were. Bill picked up a *Chronicle*,

started to read it and walked off in a daze without dropping a nickel into the red tobacco can. It couldn't be! It just couldn't. But there it was in black and white.

#### ICEMAN HUNTED AS MURDERER

A San Francisco delicatessen owner was murdered and robbed last night and police were searching for a young iceman whom witnesses said was the killer.

Patric Giacomo, 59, owner of a shop at 3499 Eighteenth Street, was shot down around midnight. Approximately \$225 was taken from the till.

Police said fingerprints on the butt of the .45 caliber pistol found at the scene matched fingerprints checked in the apartment of William B. Meckling, 27, at 3270 Twenty-first Street.

Bill's eyes whipped through the paragraphs again. His fingers clutched the paper so hard it nearly ripped. They couldn't mean him! This couldn't be happening to him! The reporter must have got the names mixed.

Meckling was traced by a wallet dropped in the store. He was described by witnesses as being dark-haired, with regular features, straight shoulders, and wearing a gray business suit and brown shoes.

He was cut about the head when one of the witnesses, George R. Rankin, 38, auto accessories salesman, struck him with a liquor bottle. Meckling fell to the floor while the other two witnesses ran to find a policeman on Mission street. In a moment he came to, overpowered Rankin and escaped.

The sickness had swept back in Bill's stomach. He couldn't think the thing out. His mind refused to accept these bold, marching facts. The reporter hadn't made a mistake. They actually thought he had killed Mr. Giacomo. His fingerprints were on the gun. The real killer had lied his way out of the mess and framed him.

After talking with Meckling's wife, Jean, 25, police said there was good evidence he had planned the robbery well in advance. He had told her earlier that night that he was coming into "some more money."

Police are checking to determine whether Meckling is the same lone gunman who has

held up half a dozen local drug stores and gas stations in the last two months.

Blankly, Bill stuffed the newspaper into his coat pocket. He stood at the curb and his lean face was pale and bewildered. His mouth hung open and he breathed through it thickly. There were lines around his harried gray eyes which had never been there before. Something inside him kept repeating: *You're Bill Meckling all right, but this can't be happening to you. You've never been in trouble before in your life. Why, in three years in the Marines you weren't AWOL even once. You're Bill Meckling, all right.*

The thing that hurt was Jeannie. Even what she'd said had gotten him in deeper. She couldn't have seen how her words would be twisted around.

He didn't know how long he stood there before it became clear what he had to do.

He couldn't go to the police—not yet, anyway.

He would have to fight it out by himself. And, brother, what he wanted to do to that guy, what was his name? He looked at the newspaper. Rankin. The filthy liar. The filthy cold-blooded killer.

Now that he'd decided on a course of action Bill found his mind was beginning to operate. He realized he wasn't the kind of a guy who could work things out in seconds. What he needed was time to think. Lots of time. And what was the matter with him? What was he doing standing here in the street only two blocks from Giacomo's place? The neighborhood must be lousy with police—all looking for him!

He couldn't go home. They'd be waiting for him there. A place to hide for a few hours that's what he wanted. He recrossed Valencia, and walked west along Twentieth. He set his watch from a red neon-rimmed clock in a grocery window. It was five-forty.

Luckily the streets were deserted. If it

were an hour and a half later the neighborhood would be bustling with people off to work, people who had glanced at their morning papers, people who were interested in a murder which had occurred only two or three blocks away. They would be looking for a young man in a whiskey-stained gray suit.

Bill crossed Guerrero. Another block to go and he'd be in the big park along Dolores Street. If he could just make it without being spotted. He was walking faster now despite every effort to the contrary. Tall, dark apartment houses lined both sides of the street and suddenly he was panic-stricken. What if a prowler car came along now? Where could he run? What could he do? What if a big, blue-uniformed cop suddenly opened that front door over there and yelled: "Stop or I'll shoot!"

THE park, finally. He almost broke into a trot. The grass dampened his shoes. Down the green slope he slid, his eyes on thick bushes which lay fifty yards north of the kids' swings and sand pit.

He fell to his hands and knees, brushed against the jagged trunk of a palm tree and forced his way through the foliage of some red-berried bushes. He sat on the wet ground, branches all around him, and covered his face with his hands. Great shudders, from both fear and morning chill, racked his shoulders, bringing dew spilling down on him from the leaves above.

The bad moments passed. He brushed the water off his hands and looked out. This was a pretty good place. In order to discover him someone would practically have to walk into the bushes. There wasn't much chance of that happening—he hoped.

He read the paper again. How did his prints get on that gun? Damn that smart, lying Rankin! The guy must have pressed the gun into his hands while he was unconscious. Probably while those other two

guys were looking for the cop. And Rankin stuck the money in his pocket. Bill drew the bills out and counted them. Ones, fives and tens—a total of two hundred and twenty dollars, just what the paper said was missing. Rankin probably helped him from the store, too. Anybody who saw him with all that whiskey soaked into his coat probably thought he was just another Mission Street drunk.

The fingerprints, the fact that he'd fled, the money, what more proof did the police need that he was the killer? He snorted. What a bitter laugh this was. He'd seen the shooting, knew who the real killer was. And here he sat, like a dumb, scared rabbit, while Rankin helped the police look for *him*.

The more Bill thought of Rankin the madder he got. But maybe this was good. It made him plan. He wanted to expose that smart, lying murderer. He wanted to see the look on Rankin's face when the tables were turned, when the evidence was against him. Then Rankin would feel sick like this. Rankin's face would be pale and he'd be knocking himself out trying to think of the answers.

Evidence. What he needed was a couple of buckets full. He rubbed his forehead and thought. He twisted leaves and thought.

The sun slid up over the roofs of buildings across the city. Traffic increased on the Dolores Street hill. Pretty young girls waited for the bus down at the corner. And Bill Meckling sat there and racked every corner, every niche of his brain.

Around nine o'clock when mothers brought their broods to the playground, he started getting desperate. Hours of thinking had developed not one reasonable method of finding some evidence. Now it was time he arrived at the plant. This was supposed to be his first day as supervisor. Five bucks a week more—and he wasn't even going to show up. The boss was a good guy, but he'd blow his top.

Things were going from bad to worse. The mothers were sitting on the green iron benches smoking and soaking up the sun and their kids were wandering all over the place. What if one stumbled over here and its Mom came after it?

He squeezed his brain dry and watched the mothers. He wondered if he'd feel better if he had taken up smoking. At least he'd have something to do beside roll these leaves up into sweaty little balls. Ten o'clock came. Eleven. Eleven-thirty. He was getting another idea. Maybe this one wasn't so fantastic. Somewhere a whistle blew—noon. And he wasn't hungry, although he hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours. He was too keyed-up to be hungry. But he was thirsty.

The lima bean drawer idea seemed best. But would Rankin fall for it? Such a smart guy, he was—look how he'd figured out that slick set-up last night. In seconds. Was the drawer deal logical enough, that was the question. Well, there was only one way to find out.

Bill wriggled out of his coat and left it on the ground. Maybe he wouldn't be so easy to spot now. Luckily it wasn't another cold foggy day. He could walk around in shirtsleeves without looking like he had holes in his head. That reminded him. People would wonder about all that dried blood on his neck and hair. By concentrating hard, he squeezed out enough saliva to wet a corner of his handkerchief. He scrubbed his temple, and ran his pocket comb through his short, black hair.

He crawled out and brushed the leaves off his shirt. There was a different look on his face now. His eyes were steady and hard and his jaw stuck out. He was thinking about Rankin.

Along palm-lined Dolores Street he went, walking fairly rapidly. Bill hoped he looked like just another guy going after a quart of milk and a pound of hamburger. There were quite a few people on the sidewalks, but no one looked at him with more

than passing interest. He got a big drink of water at a gas station fountain, and after a while turned left and headed back toward the Mission Street business district, which is San Francisco's second largest. He was now at least a dozen blocks south of Mr. Giacomo's shop.

Tufford's Drug Store looked like a good place to phone from. It was small with a six-stool counter and just a few displays.

Bill went into the phone booth, sat down and got Rankin's number from the directory. He checked his change. With his wallet missing, eighty-five cents in dimes and nickels was all he had—not counting the two hundred and twenty dollars, of course.

**T**HE nickel clanked into the phone's belly. Bill sat forward tensely, his knuckles white against the black of the receiver. Questions jumped in and out of his head. Could he put it over convincingly? Would Rankin go for it? Was it too amateurish? What was the matter with his lungs? He was panting like a Saint Bernard on an August afternoon.

"Hello?" It was a woman.

"Is Mr. Rankin there?" Bill's voice was low and deep and its steadiness surprised him.

"No. He's down at the office. Want the number?"

Bill certainly did and he repeated it until he had it memorized. Atwater 2-

9243. California Auto Supplies. He pushed down the hook with his thumb, got the dial tone again and dropped in his last nickel. California Auto Supplies transferred him from department to department. The longer he waited, the more it felt like three or four mice were loose in his stomach. And then a strong voice announced: "Rankin speaking."

Sweat dribbled down the inside of Bill's shirt and for a fraction of a second he didn't know what to say. But he got a grip on himself.

"This is Bill Meekling," he said.

"Who?"

*Don't try to kid me*, Bill thought, *you know damn well who I am*. He added levelly: "The fellow you hit at the store last night."

"What do you want?"

Bill marveled at Rankin's calmness. This guy was a smooth one all right, with a voice more buttery than a radio announcer's.

"I want to make a little deal," Bill said.

"Yes?"

"Give me ten thousand dollars and I'll get out of town. I won't tell the police what I saw."

Rankin laughed. A nasty laugh. "Who're you trying to bluff? What could you tell the police? You took the money, you ran out. You're the one they want, not me. There's no evidence against me."

*Well, here goes*, thought Bill. He said:

READY...  
FOR A GOOD SHOT..  
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OF THAT CLEAR.. CLEAN TASTING  
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"Oh yes there is. Evidence that'll send you to the gas chamber—" He hesitated. "You were pretty busy last night, putting my prints on the gun, sticking the money in my pocket. You didn't see that Mr. Giacomo had time to do some thing before he died . . . Something that—"

"You lie!" Rankin made the accusation quietly. "The old man died right away."

"He didn't," said Bill, stubbornly. "He had time to leave positive evidence you were his killer. It's still in the store, but the police won't find it unless I tell them." He let his voice get confidential. "Lugging ice gets a guy nowhere. The wife and I have been wanting to take a little vacation. Give me the ten thousand dollars and I'll tell you how to find the evidence."

For a long interval, Rankin didn't say anything. Then, bluntly: "Give me a chance to think it over. Call me back in an hour." He hung up.

Bill stepped out of the booth and wiped the water off his face. He didn't know how to judge Rankin's reaction. The hour's delay could mean one of two things. Either Rankin would call the police so they could trace the next call Bill made. Or Rankin was going over to Mr. Giacomo's store to try and find that evidence himself.

Bill walked to the counter. He picked up a cellophane-wrapped liverwurst sandwich and gave the blonde two dimes and a penny tax. Even now he wasn't hungry, but he thought the sandwich might steady his stomach. He glanced at his watch while he walked down the sidewalk. Well, in another hour he'd know whether the lima bean idea was logical.

**H**E SPENT the hour walking thoughtfully through all six floors of the big, crowded Randolph department store. Occasionally he stopped and examined a piece of merchandise. He hoped the studied look on his face would cause any store detective to think he was just

another guy trying to find an anniversary present for the Missus. To make it look like he really was on a shopping expedition he spent thirty cents for a whisk broom.

At two o'clock he stepped into a booth on the store's main floor and dialed Rankin. Rankin got right to the point.

"I've been thinking it over," he said. "Where do I meet you?"

"You know where that big red and white gas station is where Valencia runs into Mission Street?" Rankin indicated that he did. "Okay then. Meet me there in half an hour. In the men's room. And have the money in a paper sack."

"All I can raise is four thousand dollars," Rankin said.

A thrill scooted up Bill's spine. The guy was taking the hook. Or was he? "It's got to be ten," Bill declared. "You can mail me the rest."

They hung up.

As he left the store, Bill's face was set in deep lines. He was baffled. Rankin had been so agreeable, it worried him. Was he working with the police? Would the gas station be hip-deep in officers? No. Rankin was too smart to take the chance. No matter how wild that story about the evidence sounded, Rankin couldn't risk it. Rankin had to cover every angle. If he brought along the police, and Bill produced the evidence, he'd be cooked.

The sidewalks were thronged with afternoon shoppers. Bill walked a block south and stopped when the crowd was held up at an intersection by a thick-chested traffic cop. It was a funny feeling. Bill kept his eyes glued on the fur collar of the woman in front of him. When the whistle blew and the crowd moved forward again, he passed within six feet of the cop—without being recognized.

Bill turned down a side street. This next maneuver, this business of getting a witness, would be tricky. He needed someone who knew him slightly, but who didn't



know his name. And Mr. Cartwright, who owned a small shoe repair shop filled the order. Bill always left his and Jeannie's shoes at Cartwright's and occasionally chatted with the talkative proprietor. Cartwright didn't take down his customer's names. He used a number and card system.

When Bill entered, Cartwright was tacking a leather heel onto a tiny green slipper. He was a big-stomached man, but perfectly groomed in a gray gabardine shirt and matching slacks. He stepped over to the plastic-topped counter.

"Hello. Do something for you?"

Bill gave out a friendly smile. "I was wondering if you could do me a little favor. It's sort of unusual, but—"

Something was wrong. Cartwright's eyes had lost their welcome. He snatched up the afternoon paper, looked at page one, looked back at Bill and his mouth hinged open.

Bill glimpsed the big picture under the headlines. It was *his* picture. The one taken in the Marines when he had a butch haircut. By the time Cartwright found his voice, Bill was at the door.

"You're the one!" yelled Cartwright. "Stop!"

**I**T WOULD have taken more than that to stop Bill. He ran down the sidewalk, dodging nimbly in and out of traffic. Cartwright was lumbering somewhere behind, shouting for the police, shouting for help from anybody.

Bill's blue tie was flying and his eyes were wide and scared. He didn't know where he got the strength to run like that. He ran half a block down the side street, but was forced to walk when he got back to the throngs on Mission Street. Any moment he expected to feel strong hands grab his shoulders.

Where could he go? What could he do? Cartwright was yelling like a plucked eagle. Soon he'd have help from the

police and a thousand eager bystanders.

It was the two noisy streetcars which gave Bill a desperate idea. San Francisco's trolley's, rain or shine, are open-air at both ends and can be boarded on the run. These two cars, a number 14 and a number 22, were at the intersection and had just started up in opposite directions. Bill dashed toward the rear loading platform of the No. 14, but instead of boarding it, he passed around and behind it. For a second or so he sprinted between the two cars. Then the rear of the number 22 approached. It was going pretty fast. He grabbed the hand pole and was yanked aboard. He felt pretty good about the maneuver. Cartwright couldn't have seen him board this car because the number 14 had shielded him. Besides, maybe Cartwright thought he was on the number 14—or hadn't taken either car.

Bill dropped a dime into the glass box. The car was crowded and he stood with a dozen others in the rear. He swore at himself. He should have known that sooner or later the papers would run his picture. Well, he'd gotten away.

Or had he?

Panic knifed into Bill's stomach again. New streams of sweat sprang out on his body. What had he gotten himself into now? A few feet away a man was reading that same newspaper—and there was William B. Meckling on page one. Further along in the car other people were also reading that paper.

A strange feeling ran through Bill. He wanted to tear the paper from the hands of the nearest man and yell that he was innocent, that he had committed no crime. He wanted to announce it to the whole city! He couldn't, of course, but he could get off the car.

Or could he?

More panic poured through him. The car was practically back in his own neighborhood! In three more blocks, it would pass only a peanut's throw from Mr. Gia-

como's delicatessen. And here the streets swarmed with police looking for him. What a fool he had been. He should have jumped on the other car. Besides, it would have taken him closer to the gas station where he was to meet Rankin. And now here he was getting farther and farther away all the time. He'd miss Rankin.

The rest of the ride was a dragged-out nightmare. The streetcar stopped at every intersection. And each time Bill expected to see blue-uniformed policemen jump aboard. He waited for the moment when one of the other passengers would start comparing him with the picture in the paper. Fortunately the picture was nearly four years old. And that butch haircut made him look lots different. He hoped.

He stayed on the car until he could no longer stand the suspense. When it stopped at Tenth Street, he got out. He walked a block to Market Street. The first cab ignored his whistle, but a second one stopped. He knew the driver might recognize him—but he decided to risk it.

The driver didn't. He dropped Bill off six blocks from the gas station where Bill had arranged to meet Rankin.

There was some chance Rankin was still waiting at the station, but that wouldn't fit Bill's plan. If it was to work, Bill had to be there first. And he needed that witness.

Bill spent the next half hour seated quietly in the crowded spectator's section at a large bowling alley. Then he went into one of the phone booths near the alley's chromium and red leather bar. He called California Auto Supplies again and was told Rankin was out. Ten minutes later, he called again with the same result. The third time, however, Rankin was there.

Rankin's voice was still calm. He didn't seem suspicious or even annoyed because Bill had failed to arrive. Bill explained what had happened and Rankin agreed to bring the money to the station by thirty.

Bill wanted to phone Jeannie and tell

her he was all right. But he was almost certain the apartment phone would be tapped by police and they'd trace the call. So he left the bowling alley and walked the few blocks to the station. His plan called for this particular station because he bought his gas there and had a chatting acquaintance with Eddy, one of the attendants. He was quite sure none of the attendants knew his name.

The station consisted of three white buildings with red and blue trim. There was a box-like office out front beside the six red pumps. On one side of the asphalt lot was the lubrication and wash racks. At the lot's rear was a small metal building housing the men's and women's rest rooms.

THE office was untended at the moment and Bill, pretending to be casual, walked in and out and assured himself that no copy of the afternoon paper was lying around. Then he went over to the lubrication rack where Eddy and another attendant were placing soothing lotions on the aching joints of a beat-up Model A.

Eddy, wearing clean white overalls, was about twenty-one. Of medium height, he had large hands and a somewhat large nose. His grin always seemed less artificial than the average attendant's. He was an ex-marine also and once or twice he and Bill had spent a few minutes exchanging stories of boot camp.

"Hello, leatherneck," greeted Eddy. "What d' you know for sure?"

"Nothing much," said Bill, feeling more at ease. Eddy and the other guy apparently hadn't seen that damn picture. He stood around for a while and watched them operate the grease guns. Then he said: "Can I speak to you a minute, Eddy?"

Eddy put down his gun and he and Bill walked a few steps away from the rack. "I'm going to need your help," said Bill. "I'm in sort of a jam and I want you to overhear something."

"Sure," said Eddy.

Bill looked at his watch. "In about twenty minutes, I'm going to meet a guy in the men's room." He gave Eddy a description of Rankin. "Whether or not we're going to have a lot to say to one another, I don't know. But I want you to listen in."

"Sure. You want me in there with you?"

"No. The women's room is right next to the men's and the wall's just thin metal. You stand in the women's and you can hear us. Okay?"

"Okay," said Eddy.

"Thanks," Bill gripped Eddy's arm. "I'm in a bad spot, but believe me, I've done nothing crooked."

Eddy smiled reassuringly and returned to the lubrication rack. Bill got a drink of water, stood around for an interval and then went into the men's room. It was twenty-five after three.

Just before three-thirty, Bill heard footsteps approaching the door.

The door opened and in came Rankin. This time he was wearing a well-cut, brown tweed suit and a brown hat. He was carrying a paper bag. His square, dignified features looked more school teacherish than before.

He looked straight into Bill's eyes. "I've brought the money and I hope your information is worth it."

"It—" Bill's throat was so dry he could

hardly talk. "It is. Maybe you noticed those drawers near Mr. Giacomo's cash register marked split peas and lima beans."

"And after he fell you saw his pencil roll around?" Rankin indicated that he had. "Well, while you were busy sending those two guys after the cop and putting my prints on your gun—" Bill hesitated again. "You stuck the money in my pocket too, didn't you?"

"Yes. Yes." Rankin was impatient.

The mice were running around inside Bill's stomach again.

"He got hold of the pencil," Bill said. "He pulled open the lima bean drawer and he wrote something on its bottom. I didn't see what he wrote, naturally, but I'll bet he wrote that you killed him."

Rankin's eyes narrowed to slashes. "Impossible. I put three bullets into him—he died right away."

"You better get a look at that drawer," said Bill. He held out his hand. "The bag?"

**R**RANKIN handed it over. Bill's fingers were so wet with sweat he nearly dropped it. He looked in, almost sure it would be empty. But there was a fat packet of bills bound with a rubber band. He was unprepared for this development. Mr. Giacomo hadn't written anything. Was it possible Rankin was falling for

(Please continue on page 129)



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# MALICE IN

*Fast-Shooting*

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# MOVIELAND



The movie mogul's blonde gave me a corpse  
at my feet and a pair of kill-crazy hopheads  
on my hands.



By **ROBERT CARLTON**

## CHAPTER ONE

Wanted—One Blonde

Mac started to rise from the floor, a murderous expression on his sullen face.

**S**ATURDAYS in Hollywood annoy me. Outlanders from the San Fernando valley and Greater Los Angeles crowd the sidewalks, through the



shops, and otherwise obscure the town's colorful denizens. I viewed the scene sadly from my office window above Hollywood Boulevard and Vine. The merchants were coining money, the Chamber of Commerce was deliriously happy—but this influx, this stampede of shoppers was ruining our fair city. It was almost vulgar.

I had another drink, and put my feet on the desk. Every time I put my feet on the desk, Helen, my red-headed secretary gets busy. Sometimes I think she has a television camera concealed in the wall.

She opened the outer door, stepped into my office, bowed low, and announced in a loud voice: "Mr. John Spaulding Brown. Mr. Kent will see you now, Mr. Brown."

I took my feet off the desk. She didn't have to say it so loud. A whisper would have sufficed. I have standing instructions that all million-dollar-a-year people are to be admitted to my office instantly, if not sooner. I gave Helen a baleful glare.

The man who marched through the door was stout for his height. He wore a plaid sport coat over a white turtle-neck sweater, and jodphurs encased his muscular legs. He carried a riding crop and looked like a movie producer. He was a movie producer. John Spaulding Brown had taken an Oscar for the year's best picture. I swept my bottle of Old Mellow Mountain into a drawer and reached for my necktie.

"Never mind," he said. "I'm not casting any private detectives. I'm here on business."

"Business?" I tried to keep the glee out of my voice. "I was just thinking about business, Mr. Brown. What can I do for you?"

He pulled a fat wallet from his coat, and started peeling bills onto my desk. One, two, three—I stopped counting after the fourth hundred dollar bill and just looked at the man. He had a round pink-

cheeked face, but the pouches under his brown eyes gave him a sophisticated air not uncommon in Hollywood.

He dug a passport-size photo from another pocket and laid it atop the pile of bills. He shoved the business across my desk.

"One thousand dollars," he said. "Find this girl and you get another thousand."

Just like that. No haggling over price. I like people who do things in a big way, but I also like my liberty. I folded my hands in my lap and craned my neck at the picture. The girl was a blonde, maybe twenty-three. She had a straight nose above a glamour mouth, lips painted big with a down twist. Not a world-shaking beauty.

"Who did she kill?" I asked.

"She hasn't killed anyone," Brown said. "I want her for a picture. She's the type for the part I have in mind. She worked for me a couple of years ago, but we dropped her, and I lost track of her whereabouts. Think you can locate her?"

"Maybe," I said cautiously. Some people are awful liars, but you can't say so to their faces. She was a type Brown could pick up by the dozen along the boulevard. "What's her name?"

I thought a shadow darkened his eyes. "Lita Carroll. Last I heard of her she lived in a little theatrical hotel over on Whitley Street. The Madden Arms, I think. You might start there. Possibly they can give you a lead."

I picked the money up, counted it. Hollywood has its secrets—the man was hiring me to find a girl, nothing more.

"You've just retained a detective," I informed him. "In addition to the C.O.D. thousand, there will be certain items of expense, statement attached at completion of the job. Okay?"

"Agreed." He stared out the window at the news ribbon, flashing in electric lights across the boulevard. "Of course, Mr. — ah — Kent, I know I can trust

you to be discreet. You come to me highly recommended, and — well — I wouldn't want it hawked around I'm looking for Lita Carroll."

"Why?" I asked.

He tapped the riding crop against his boot. "Picture-making is a cut-throat business. If certain parties knew I wanted Lita, they'd hold me up for her services."

"I see," I said dryly. "She must be a very valuable personality. You can trust me—with legal limitations."

"Certainly." Some of the strain left his voice as he stood up. "I'll expect to hear from you, then. Come up to my place in Coldwater Canyon anytime. Anytime at all."

He walked briskly to the door, which opened magically, propelled no doubt by Helen's hand. Sometimes I suspect my secretary listens on the inter-com to my conversations, especially when I throw the switch under my desk. She winked and closed the door. I got Old Mellow Mountain out of the drawer and had a drink.

**T**HE frowsy dame who collected rent at the Madden Arms was positive about it. "She's in jail. She left here six months ago. I read it in the paper. She was eating hop or something, and they threw her in the can."

I chewed my lower lip as I drove downtown. Lita Carroll a hophead? I didn't

like it a bit. And she'd checked out of the Madden only six months before. Something wasn't right, something smelled in Denmark. I found Tom Blane in the narcotic's squad's office at Central. I showed him Lita's photo, and his heavy brows drew together.

"Sure," he growled. "I know her. We picked her up in the Lowell hotel. She was smoking marijuana. She did ninety days upstairs with the other weedheads. What's it to you?"

"Nothing," I said vaguely. "She owes a couple of bills."

A sneer crossed his beefy face. "Chasing deadbeats for a living, huh? I thought you fancy private cops only got mixed up in big murder cases."

I shrugged. Ordinarily I don't speak to Blane. I don't like cops who beat up suspects and behave like morons. "Only hearsay," I told him. "I haven't seen a stiff for a week, except you. Where did she work?"

If possible, his face got uglier. "Do your own leg work, tin cop. This ain't no information bureau. Now take a walk."

"Thanks," I said. "I hear they found marijuana growing in the City Hall flower garden last week. Did you plant it there?"

The narco bull lifted himself out of his chair, doubled his big fists. He glowered a moment, then motioned to the door. "Wise guy," he rasped. "Be careful crossing streets, Kent."



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I tried the Lowell hotel. The management was glad Lita had checked out. They didn't allow marijuana smoking in the rooms. "She worked at Subway Slim's," the clerk told me. "That's a cheap bar on Hill Street and Third, right near Angel's Flight."

I legged it over to Subway Slim's and gave the day bartender a double sawbuck. "She worked here awhile," he admitted. "Come in around midnight and see Kitty. Kitty is here every night after the last show at the Parisian Burlesque. I think she knew Lita."

I returned to Hollywood, wondering what a guy had to do to earn a grand. I went around to Art's Newsstand on Cahuenga. As usual, Simmy the Lip was sprawled on a bench outside, reading a racing form. Simmy takes two dollar bets from our less prosperous citizens, and peddles information on the side. I shoved Lita's picture under his nose.

"Seen her around?"

Simmy looked. He stuck the racing form in his shapeless tan coat, and pulled his soiled felt hat down over watery blue eyes. The fat lips under his scraggly brown mustache barely moved.

"I don't know every tomato in town," he said. "Beat it."

He took a sack from another pocket, scattered a handful of popcorn on the sidewalk. Pigeons fluttered down from the newsstand awning, pecked at the fluffy morsels. Simmy likes pigeons, too. I walked back to my office. I felt tired. I wondered why Lita Carroll should be hard to find. I thought maybe I'd go down to the Swede's and take a hot steam bath.

It was five after twelve when I walked into Subway Slim's. I had no trouble finding Kitty. She was doing an impromptu bump-and-grind in front of the juke box. She had a pasty face, a smeared red mouth, and copper-colored hair. Her dress was cut too low, and fit too tight. She gave me a tippy smile.

"Lita? Sure, baby, I know her. She's a cute little dish, just right for a big boy like you." She laughed loudly and winked at the nearest customers. "You're not so bad yourself. You like pretty Kitty, huh?"

I pulled her into a booth. "You don't go for guys like me," I said. "I got big ears and a mole on my neck. I'm too skinny. How about a drink?"

I bought her a drink. I bought her four drinks. Kitty leaned over the table and looked at me knowingly. "We'll go over to my place, Skinny. Then I'll give you Lita's address."

I walked with her down Third, toward the cheap hotels on Main. It was late, after one, and only a few pedestrians showed on the sidewalks. An owl cab cruised by, and the cabby glanced at us inquiringly. I waved him on. The store show window lights were off, and the street lamps dim. Above the dark office buildings a white moon rode high in the night sky.

Kitty leaned on my arm, pushed me toward the alley. Too late I saw the figure lurking in the shadows. Too late I jumped away. The buildings danced crazily and the moon exploded, shattered the night with a million white fragments. I saw the sidewalk curling up, but I couldn't stop it, couldn't stop it. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Gal With a Gun*

**T**HE lopsided bed's lumpy mattress dug into my sore ribs. I rolled over and coiled the thin cotton blankets around my waist. My stomach heaved. I buried my face in the smelly pillow until the sickness passed, then pressed the swelling over my left ear.

It was the root of all my trouble—the swelling. It sent sharp pains down my neck and throbbed like an egg about to



hatch. I lifted my head, but the room was hazy and the shaded windows had fuzzy yellow edges. There was a water basin in the corner. I lurched off the bed, but sudden weakness buckled my knees and I flopped on the floor. I laid there, gathering strength, and thought how stupid I was to have been flim-flammed by a cheap burlycue cutie.

My throat ached for water, and my face felt dry, feverish. I tried again, although the basin looked miles away across the threadbare carpet. I got on my knees and crawled. I haven't crawled anywhere since I was a year old, and I was out of practice. Twice the floor slipped and the windows danced a jig. I stopped, gulped stale air, and adjusted my course. Then my hands gripped the basin and I pulled myself up.

I turned the cold water on and dunked my head in the basin. Presently I got the facts. I'd been sapped.

I fumbled a ragged towel off the rack, wrapped it around my head, and stumbled to the bureau. It wasn't a nice bureau. Previous tenants had scarred the oak top with cigarette butts, and the mirror was cracked. It split my nose and warped my face. I looked like a cockeyed Hindu in an amusement park mirror. I sneered at myself.

"You're a hell of a detective," I said. "Buy yourself a book and study how to become an idiot, you lunkhead. What do you use for brains?"

My reflection sneered back, so I staggered to the bed. I sat awhile until my ears quit buzzing and the room's haze cleared. I wasn't in the Biltmore. The lopsided bed and beatup bureau had an unelegant cousin in the three-legged chair tipped in a corner. Paint peeled from smudged walls revealing dirty gray plaster, and an old dog-eared calendar hung over a cobweb-encrusted radiator. It was a flea-trap.

I got up and raised the window shade.

Bright sunlight streamed into the room. I blinked at a panorama of gravel roofs, brick chimneys, and power-pole cross-arms. Below the window, garbage cans lined a cobblestone alley. A huge sign reared in the cloudless sky. *Jesus Saves*, it read. It gave me my bearings. I was somewhere on Skid Row, deep in the Lower Five slums.

I frisked myself. The .38 was missing from my shoulder brace, but my wallet was intact. Subtract two dollars for cab fare and five for drinks at Subway Slim's and I came out right with seventy-six. So robbery wasn't the motive. I hadn't thought so.

My wrist watch said nine a. m. I'd been out over seven hours, too long for a conk on the head. I scratched my upper left arm, because it itched, then shed my coat and rolled my shirt sleeve up. A tiny red dot in the bicep explained things. I'd been hypoed, probably with morphine.

I shrugged back into my coat and got my hat off the floor. Somebody had warned me to keep my big nose out of Lita Carroll's affairs, and that somebody played rough. I chose my weapons as I opened the hall door. A million-dollar-a-year movie producer had no valid reason looking for a junk-happy babe, and a man who makes that kind of moolah should tell the working people the truth.

The hall was one of those dark windowless holes lighted by a fly-specked bulb. I tramped downstairs to the lobby. It wasn't much of a lobby, either. A hill-billy wearing a wide-brimmed hat and greasy overalls lounged on a sagging divan near the windows, watching traffic on East Fifth. In a corner an unshaven bum in mismatched pants and coat slept in a moth-eaten chair, an empty wine bottle beside him. He exuded a dank, sour smell. I jingled the bell on the counter.

The fat man who emerged from a rear door wore a soiled shirt open at the neck and a gravy-stained wrinkled vest. Oil

glistened on blue-black jowls and a toothpick protruded from yellowed teeth. He eyed me suspiciously and grunted his displeasure.

"I'm the guy the fleas bit in two-hundred and seven last night," I said. "Who brought me here?"

"How the hell do I know?" he asked surlily. "I don't make no record of the tramps who stumble in an outa here, unless they stay."

I got a handful of vest across the desk and cocked my fist. "A civil answer costs nothing extra," I told him. "What did the guy look like?"

The toothpick disappeared inside his greasy mouth as he stared at my fist. "There was two of them," he whined, "a man and a woman. You was drunk they said. They took you up and put you to bed. You don't hafta get rough, mister. That's all I know."

"Was the woman a redhead?"

He nodded. I shoved him away, wiped my hand on the register. My eye caught the 207 opposite the name Jack Smith. It was a man's handwriting, but not mine. I tore the sheet out of the register, stuck it in my pocket.

"Not a very imaginative guy," I said. "You'd think he'd call me Multikopsky or Czywycz. Why do you suppose he picked on Smith?"

The proprietor said he didn't know.

**I** GRABBED coffee at a beanery and phoned Helen at her apartment. "Get your beautiful self down to the office right away," I told her. "Things are happening."

She was on the job in the reception room when I walked in. She eyed the calendar on her desk. "Sundays I like to sleep until noon," she said frigidly. "This will cost you double time, Sherlock."

"Always thinking about money," I said. "Always watching the clock. Where's your loyalty to the firm. Where—"

"Where did you sleep last night—in a gutter?" She looked my mussed suit up and down, and wrinkled her freckled nose. "There's a girl waiting in your office. She came in five minutes behind me. The way you look, you'll shock her out of a fee."

"Blonde or brunette?" I asked eagerly. "And my shoes are still shined. I can't look like a Rotarian all the time. I've been mingling with rough characters, honey."

"My hero," she sniffed. "She's a brunette."

I combed my hair, fixed my tie, and put on the smile I reserve for exotic brunettes. She had long dark hair drawn back from a tanned forehead and held with a jeweled gold clip. The tips of her shapely ears were pink, and the rachel powder didn't hide the color in her cheeks. I looked at her legs. Nice. Worth two looks. The green blouse under her suede jacket was inadequate, but it matched her eyes. Nothing matched the nickel-plated revolver she pulled from her purse.

I closed the door, walked gingerly around her to my desk. The revolver's muzzle followed me inexorably. I sat down, leaned my chin in my hand. "I'm not very bright on Sunday morning," I said. "What's the gun for?"

"To shoot you," she said firmly. "Unless you do as I say."

I tripped the inter-com switch with my knee. "I've already got more bullet holes in me than a Chicago gangster, but say it. Tell me why you might shoot me, baby."

"You're looking for a girl named Lita Carroll," she said. "I'll only warn you this once. Stop trying to find her or you'll force us to eliminate you."

"Us?" I lifted my eyebrows. "You're using the plural. And you have me at a disadvantage. I don't even know your name. Shouldn't you tell me your name before you eliminate me?"

"Names aren't important." She crossed her legs and the tweed skirt edged up over black nylons. I had trouble keeping my

mind on the gun. "Why are you trying to find Lita? Just what do you want with her?"

"I want to check her smallpox vaccinations." The gun annoyed me, and my head began to ache again. I wanted to ask a few questions myself. I'm not so brave, but she handled the gun like a hot potato. I reached across the desk, twisted it out of her hand, and shoved it in a drawer. "Now we'll talk," I said. "First, I don't like characters pulling canisters on me, even good-looking females. What's your interest in Lita Carroll?"

She rubbed her wrist, gave me a sullen stare. "I don't have to tell you anything. You think you're smart, because you're a man—and you hurt my wrist."

"Very touching," I said dryly. "You threaten to shoot me and complain when you get your arm twisted. Sometimes I'm not polite. Let's hear you talk."

She glowered silently. I reached for the phone. "All right, you can tell it to the cops. I'll charge you with a half-dozen things. Carrying a concealed weapon. Intent to commit murder—"

"You wouldn't dare," she flared. "I'll deny it. I'll say you forced me to come to your office. I'll say the gun isn't mine. I'll—"

"All right, all right," I said wearily. The inter-com was open and I had a witness, but it wasn't getting me anywhere. "I can't tell you a thing about Lita

Carroll. I can't give you information I don't have. Besides, I am representing a client."

She dug in her patent leather purse and held out a roll of bills. "Lita asked me to give you this three hundred dollars, and all you have to do is stop looking for her. Now, let me have my gun."

"Lita asked you?" I watched her narrowly. "Why didn't Lita come here herself?"

"She's—she's indisposed." The brunette stood up, smiled tightly. "You have the money. That settles it."

I took her gun from the drawer, broke it, and ejected the cartridges. "So I won't be eliminated immediately," I said thinly. "You'd better go home, baby, take a cold shower and cool off. And don't pack a gun again. You might hurt somebody—yourself, for instance."

She put the gun in her purse and marched to the door. She had nice gams all right. "Remember," she said. "You only have this one chance."

The door closed behind her, and I took Old Mellow Mountain out of the drawer. I had a drink, and got a fresh gun out of the file cabinet. The outer office was empty. No Helen. I smiled grimly as I locked the hall door. My exotic gun-moll had a very efficient freckled-nose shadow. I rubbed my bristly chin. I felt like going down to the Swede's for a steam bath.



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## CHAPTER THREE

## Castle of Death

IT WAS a sweet day for January, crisp and clear, but warm enough to heat the cockles of a transplanted Iowan's heart. In the eastern distances the purple Sierra Madres lifted snowy peaks to an indigo sky. I couldn't see the orange groves, but it was picture-postcard stuff, complete with red-tiled, white stucco houses nestled in the green Hollywood hills.

I drove out Beverly Boulevard under lacy palms still as a startled dowager's fan. At Coldwater Canyon Road I turned into the hills. Ten minutes from roaring Hollywood a cow grazed peacefully on a grassy hillside. I passed a white-bearded hermit, who'd maybe emerged from one of the canyon caves to search for fruits and nuts. I sighed. I needed a shave, too.

John Spaulding Brown's house crested a hill. It belonged to the silent flicker era—a massive pile of gray stone with battlements, turrets, and all the accessories of a medieval bastion except a moat and drawbridge. It cost somebody a million to build, and had a lurid history involving early movie queens and their virile consorts. It suited Brown. With his round, apple-cheeked face, the West World producer might have stepped from the Crusades carrying a scepter or strumming a lyre.

I switched the motor off in the L-shaped auto court. It was so quiet I could hear the birds twittering in the oaks. I got out of the car, walked up an ivy-covered wall to a brass-bound gate. The gate admitted me to a weedy rose garden. I trudged up flagstoned steps past a row of dwarf cedars in huge concrete urns. The place had the warmth and color of a mausoleum.

I wondered why the front door was ajar. I hung on the bell, heard it ring in hollow distance. I rang five times, then

pushed the door open. What the hell, I thought, somebody is careless.

That was a place. A high vaulted corridor led to a grand staircase along miles of red plush carpet. Early French tapestries hung from the walls, a background for the men-at-arms ranged on pedestals under mounted collections of medieval pikes, battle axes, and crossbows. I gaped in awe. I thought such things went out with Pearl White. Then I recalled Brown had done several period pieces before *Glory Road*. He probably had collected the props from those pictures to give his castle atmosphere.

The great hall off the corridor could have been Richard The Lion Hearted's throne room. A musician's gallery overlooked the vast chamber in true twelfth century style. Hand-wrought leather drapes fell over leaded windows, and copper cooking utensils hung in the smoke-blackened fireplace.

I got that far then I saw Brown.

He was seated in a carved high-backed chair under the gallery, his head slumped on his chest. He still wore the jodphurs, but he'd removed the turtle-neck sweater, and his gabardine shirt was buttoned at the throat. I walked over and stared. He looked every inch the successful producer—except for the blue hole over his left eye. I lifted one of his hands. It was rigid.

He'd been dead six or seven hours.

The gun lay near Brown's booted feet. I got down on my knees in the best approved gumshoe fashion and wished I'd brought my magnifying glass. All .38 Colt automatics look much alike, but this one had a familiar serial number. It was the gun I'd carried to Subway Slim's. It was my gun.

I got up, not feeling so good. Somebody knew I was required to register my guns under my private detective's license and have a permit to carry them. Somebody was smart and trying to frame me with

murder. I left the gun where it was. I never disturb evidence. The cops don't like private eyes who disturb evidence, besides the gun might have someone's prints other than mine, although I wasn't betting on it.

I didn't search the house. Evidently the servants had Sunday off, or the place would be swarming with cops. Anyway the house had forty-three rooms according to the fan magazines, and I was already tired.

I looked at Brown again. The bullet in his brain would become Exhibit A in a police file, and when the homicide boys got busy, I'd be item one in a manhunt. It was too bad he was dead. Now I'd have to find out who killed him—maybe.

I returned to my car, leaving the front door carefully ajar. A mile down Coldwater Canyon I pulled into a drug store and went to a phone booth. I cupped my hand around the mouthpiece and called police headquarters.

"There's a dead guy at twenty-six hundred seventeen Coldwater Canyon Road," I mumbled.

I hung up as the police operator asked my name. Then I drove down Beverly to Vermont. What I needed was a hot steam bath.

**I**T'S PECULIAR, I know, but I can really think in a Scandinavian steam bath. The heat relaxes my muscles, cooks the fluff out of my mind. I'm no ivory tower, and I only got through junior high school before my old man put me to work in his pretzel factory. Sometimes I'm glad of that pretzel experience when things get twisted, as finding Lita Carroll was getting twisted. While the sweat ran down my face, I thought of reasons why I should be framed with Brown's murder. I came up with the only conclusion. The murderer thought he had a better chance that way.

The Swede called me out to the massage

room, rubbed salt into my shoulders and pounded my back. I like the Swede. He's a big blond giant who speaks only when he's spoken to, and then in short sentences. He wrapped me in sheets, rolled me onto a cot, and I had him bring a phone. I called Helen.

"Where did our pistol-packing mama go?" I asked.

"Twelve-eleven Moonglow Lane," she said. "The names they have for streets in this town. Did you know there was an Amour apartments on Orchid Avenue? Her name is Gilda Brown."

"Brown—? Did you say Brown?"

"I didn't say Muerjanwiesky." Helen sounded irked. "I suppose you're at the Swede's, all comfy and cozy, while I'm out burning shoe leather."

"Reaching for answers gives me a lame back," I said. "Brown is dead, shot with my gun."

There was a short silence while she powdered her nose, lit a cigarette, or thought about it. "What do you make of it?"

"I don't make four," I said, "although I've got two and two. You'd better call Nason and tell him to check all the precinct stations and other places the cops might hold me, unless he hears from me by tomorrow morning."

"Check," she said. "Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," I said gloomily. "Maybe I'll go to the morgue. Better have Nason check there, too."

Moonglow Lane ended in a mountain behind Hollywood Bowl. A concrete-lined tunnel continued the walk into the hillside, to the foot of an elevator shaft. Half of the shaft stuck up toward the sky, the other half was buried in the mountain. At various levels platforms circled the steel framework, gave access to bridges that led to cottages recessed in sheer cliffs. It was a complicated place, typically Hollywood.

Twelve-eleven, third level, was a precarious perch for an eagle. I held onto the hand rail and looked giddily down as I crossed the porch. A man needed to fall down that mountain just once for his beneficiaries to collect. Chimes belled musically as I pressed the doorbell.

She only cracked the door, but I jammed my foot in. She backed away as I shoved into the living room. She'd changed. She'd put on silk sky-blue lounging pajamas that clung and clung. She'd let her hair down, and it hung in a dark mass around smooth powdered shoulders. She'd been into her makeup kit, and her mouth looked bee-stung, swollen.

I closed the door, eyed the pretty-faced guy who was getting up from the divan. Broad shoulders bulged his sport shirt, but he looked fat at the waist. I'd seen him on the screen a couple of times, and he'd played the hard-boiled sergeant in *Glory Road*, Brown's Oscar winner. McDonald Stiles, or some such name.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded belligerently. "What do you mean pushing in here?"

I glanced at the highball glasses on the cocktail table beside a cut-glass decanter. The venetian blinds were drawn and a record-player sent sweet music from a corner. Lipstick smeared the guy's mouth.

"Sorry to interrupt your little matinee," I said dryly, "but this is important business. The lady knows me. In fact, she's sort of a client of mine, aren't you, baby?"

She stared at me sullenly. "You have no right to come here. My business with you is finished."

"But I'm not done with you," I said. I pulled her three hundred dollars from my pocket and tossed it on the cocktail table. "Just to keep the record straight. I'm not working for you any longer. This time I want the answers. What's your connection with Lita Carroll?"

"I—" She turned quickly to her male

companion. "Get him out of here, Mac."

Mac charged like a commando, head down, shoulders hunched, fists balled. He swung from three feet away, too far for effective work. I ducked under the haymaker, slammed a short right into his guts. I'm not so big and my friends call me Skinny, but legging it after errant husbands gives me good leg muscles. I put my legs into it. Mac's breath whooshed out. He grabbed his stomach and fell to the floor. I towered over him, all five feet-eight inches of me.

"I don't like guys with curly blond hair," I told him, "and you're too pretty to play in my league. You'd better stick to tough-mugging before the cameras. And don't try that stunt again."

He wasn't talking, so I turned my attention to Gilda. "As for you, bright eyes, I haven't figured out what kind of chameleon you are, but I have news for you. Your father has been dead since three a. m. this morning."

"My father—" Her eyes got platter-round and her face went blank. "My father is dead?"

"I hate to repeat myself," I said. "And let's not beat our chops with a bunch of lies. I should have noticed the resemblance when you were at my office this morning. You're Gilda Brown, and your father John Spaulding Brown was shot in his fancy castle early this morning."

It was a nice faint and she executed it perfectly. Her long lashes drooped over her eyes and her arms sagged to her side. She caved at the knees, crumpled limply to the rug, and lay there breathing slowly, methodically. Mac started to rise from the floor, a murderous expression on his sullen face.

I slipped the .38 out of my shoulder brace. "Just stand still," I told him, "or I'll fix your face so they won't pick up your next option."

I felt irked as I went into the bath and drew a glass of water. I don't like Holly-

wood characters going Hollywood on me. It's much simpler if they just behave like people. I returned to the living room and tossed the water in Gilda's face.

"Get up," I told her. "You're not in a casting office."

Her eyelids fluttered. She sat up, brushed the water off her face, and blazed me a look of pure hate. I motioned to the divan. "Make yourself comfortable," I said. "And let's not have any more his-tronics."

I posted myself at the window as she crossed to the divan. The view was wonderful, a palm-lined panorama of white houses tucked in greenery with the gilded towers of filmland for a backdrop. It was a swell corner to curl up and write a book, or read one.

I studied my glamorous captives thoughtfully. "You make a fine looking couple. They might even send you to the gas chamber together. Mac, you worked in *Glory Road*. Is it a coincidence Brown produced that picture?"

His eyes got wary. "I work on any picture they assign me."

"Sure," I nodded. "It's also a coincidence you're chummy with Gilda, here. Make with the words, Gilda. This is murder, and you're involved. You can talk to me or the cops. Make it easy on yourself."

She was pale and shaken. "I didn't know he was dead. Honest, that's the truth."

"Everybody tells me the truth in murder cases," I said thinly. "Why did you come to my office with that corny dodge about eliminating me?"

"Lita phoned me about seven this morning. Somewhere she'd found out you were looking for her. She was frightened and wanted me to buy you off. The gun was my idea, in case you got stubborn."

"Very dramatic. Did you know Lita was a marijuana addict?"

"Yes. She and Uncle John haven't

lived together for several years. He didn't exactly disown her, but he wouldn't have her around after he found out she used drugs. Lita went her own way, and took another name. I think she was afraid you wanted her on a drug charge. That's why she called me."

"Don't think," I clipped. "Just talk. Where is Lita now?"

"She's living at the beach. Four-hundred-ten Oceanview, Santa Monica." Gilda lifted dark eyes, deep with passion. "But you've got one thing wrong, Mr. Kent. John Spaulding Brown was my uncle. Lita Carroll is his daughter—"

The record-player sang softly in the corner, the only sound in silence. His daughter. That made it nice. I got out with no more questions. The elevator motors ground heavily, like the mills of the gods, as I rode down the shaft to Moonglow Lane. I wondered if they ground for the dead that were, or the dead to be.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Deadly Duo

HE WAS lolling in my car, smoking a cigarette, and leering his scorn. I opened the door and climbed behind the wheel. He tipped his hat back from his low forehead, exposed coarse black hair. His pig's eyes were slitted and his voice held a nasty twang. "Hello, tin cop," he rasped. "You've had a busy morning."

I fitted the key in the ignition and wondered how long he'd been following me. "I always leave my car unlocked," I said. "Thieves wouldn't bother with this old job, and there's the chance a friend of mine will happen along and get tired of standing. Who's house have you been haunting, Blane?"

His sneer broadened. "That's what I like about you, Kent. You're thoughtful. We officers have a lot of leg work on the

narcotics squad. I was walking around in the neighborhood, my dogs were barking, and—”

“Sure,” I cut in. “I understand. Don’t draw me a picture. I saw you going up on lawns, sniffing windows to see if anybody was burning hay. Where can I drop you?”

“I don’t know yet.” He flicked ashes carefully in my lap. “It’s a nice day. I think we’d better ride around awhile.”

I eased the car out on Moonglow Lane. A block down the street we passed a black sedan with front and rear aerals, and a square-E license plate.

“I declare,” I said, “I do believe that’s a police car.”

He squinted at the sedan, laughed with heavy humor. “So it is, tin cop. Now I wonder who is working out this way?”

“Too bad about your feet,” I said.

I turned left at Highland and we rolled north over Cahuenga Pass. Blane settled back in the seat as we topped the crest, and his mouth twisted down. “Funny you asked about that girl Lita Carroll yesterday afternoon. Have you found her yet?”

“I haven’t talked to her,” I said coyly. “What’s so funny about it?”

He tossed his cigarette on the floor, crushed it under his heel. “Why are you so interested in a common weedhead? She’s a nobody, a little tramp who worked around bars and burlesque houses. How come you’re so hot on her tail?”

“How come you want to know?”

“I’ll ask the questions,” he snapped.

I kept my eyes on the road, followed the white line. “Like I told you, she owed a couple of bills. You know how it is with a private detective agency, Blane. We chase down deadbeats by the dozen.”

“That’s not the reason,” he said thickly. “You’re stalling. Maybe I better have you drive up in the hills where we can have a good talk.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve heard about your little trips with suspects. The other guy always comes back in an ambulance.

You’re a sweet man, Blane.” I sneered.

“You need it. You damned tin cops think you own the world. You’d better get smart, Kent, if you know what’s good for you. There’s a big drug ring operating in Hollywood and a promotion waiting for the narco man who breaks it. Maybe this girl Lita is mixed up with the ring.”

“You’re having pipe dreams. You just said she was small potatoes.”

“How come you showed Simmy Lee her picture?”

I glanced at him quickly. “You know everything. Where did you get your crystal ball? I want to buy one like it.”

“Simmy gives us useful information in exchange for favors.” Blane’s pockmarked face was dark, hard. “You know we can’t operate without pigeons. Why did you show him her picture?”

“He knows a lot of characters around town, why not? And maybe he doesn’t flutter just for the cops. Simmy didn’t tell me anything. For some reason, Simmy had a very tight lip.”

Blane scratched a match on the dash, lit another smoke. No, he didn’t offer me one. “Is Simmy your client?”

That one hit me where I live. The car drifted over the white line as I stared blankly ahead. A couple of things I’d heard began to jell. I got the car straightened out and picked my words carefully.

“Why Simmy? That doesn’t make sense. Why would I show him Lita’s picture if he was my client?”

“It don’t make sense otherwise,” he growled. “If Simmy’s not your client, who the hell is?”

“That,” I said, “is a leading question and would have to be referred to the Association’s Committee on Ethics for an answer. I don’t reveal my client’s name.”

**H**E TURNED on me, his face ugly. “I’m damned tired of you beating around the bush, Kent. You’re talking to a cop, remember? Another of your smart



dodges and I'll fix your clock. Suppose you unbutton your trap and tell me things."

"Suppose you go to hell," I said thinly. "I'm damned tired of your threats, too. Your kind of cop gives me a pain in the pants. The only language you understand is brute force. Kick them in the teeth, beat their heads in. Go to hell. I operate a legitimate business in my own way. I'm licensed by the state, not the narcotics squad. Make your pinch, but save your lip, Blane."

He balled his big fists, and I swung the car off the road. I was hot, smoking under the collar. It wasn't smart, it wasn't clever, but—

"There's something queer about this," I said, jamming on the brakes. "Something funny about Simmy Lee all of a sudden. He sits on a bench in front of a newsstand taking two-dollar bets on the ponies, but he had enough dough to vacation in Hawaii this summer, now that I recall it. As I get it, he spent a wad of dough in the Islands, clipped both ways from the States. Would you know anything about that, Blane?"

He froze on the seat, clenched his hands so hard the knuckles turned white. I thought he'd let me have it and got set. Then his hands relaxed and he laughed harshly.

"You're a wise guy, Kent. Too wise. You'll put your foot in the wrong door

one of these days. Turn around and drive me back to my car."

I turned around. I was thinking as hard as my junior high school brain would permit as I drove back over the Pass. If Blane had followed me up Coldwater Canyon, he knew Brown was dead. Then why wasn't he arresting me? He had a radio in his car. Why wasn't I on the squawk box? Of course, he might have picked me up after I left Brown's. I decided to chance it. I made my voice nice and friendly.

"I want to co-operate," I said. "I know you have a job to do, Blane. I found the girl. Get that writing pad out of the glove compartment and I'll give you her address."

He took a pencil out of his pocket, opened the glove compartment and balanced the pad on his knee. I gave it to him slow.

"She's living at four-thousand thirty-seven Glenwood Avenue in Bel-Air," I said, "under the name Adele Smith. You can pick her up easy."

His pencil scribbled over the pad. He tore the tab off stuck it in his pocket, and returned the pad to the glove compartment. His ugly face was impassive as he got out of the car and walked to the police car. He didn't even say thanks.

I waited until Blane drove away, then got the writing pad out of the compartment. I traced over the imprints his pencil had made. I couldn't be sure of any-

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thing, except I was in a bad jam which was rapidly getting jammier.

My apartment is on Yucca—nothing fancy, two rooms and bath with printed drapes and a kitchenette where I brew coffee. I keep money cached under the carpet for emergencies, and it looked like an emergency existed. It would take dough to dodge the cops after they found Brown's body.

I am a genius at going to the wrong place at the right time. I fitted my key in the apartment lock and the door flew open. A hand grabbed my wrist, yanked me into the apartment. A ton of bricks fell on my neck, slammed me to the floor. A gray fog boiled out of the carpet, bubbled around my head. The hand got me again, by the coat collar, dragged me to a chair. It frisked me expertly, relieved me of my artillery. Then a sharp slap stung my cheek.

I had trouble seeing him, for the fog. He had a swarthy face and high cheekbones and looked part Indian. He had a mean mouth. The fog thinned. A brown-paper cigarette dangled from his lips, and the smoke smelled bitingly rank. He was smoking weed, the hashish stuff, hell hemp, and his eyes were wide, staring—the pupils dilated. A prime grasshopper—loco-high.

"Hello, punk," he said. "You been keeping us waiting, and we don't like to wait."

I focussed on the other guy in the room, a sallow-faced youth whose coat hung to his knees in the best be-bop tradition. He held the cannister loosely, like he was used to it, and his face had a bluish color like the inside of an ice-cave. Nice company I had.

The grasshopper swung again, wiped boney knuckles across my mouth. I started to get up as the blood salted my lips. Be-Bop waggled the cannister.

"Don't do it," he smiled crookedly. "I'll let air into your guts."

"You know about a girl," the grass-

hopper said. "Name of Lita Carroll. We don't want no dumb play. We want to know where she is, punk."

"Why ask me?" I said. "Ask somebody that knows."

"You gonna be stubborn?" The tea stick bobbed as the grasshopper talked. He talked out of the side of his mouth, like he hadn't been out of Quentin long. "I don't like stubborn guys, either."

I lined him up. I jumped two feet to the left, put him between me and Be-Bop's cannister. I looped a short right at his chin. He was fast, maybe an ex-pug. He jerked back, and my fist swished empty air. He chopped down as I spun off-balance. The heel of his hand cracked my neck and sharp pain arched my back.

He whipped me around as I gasped for breath. A murderous joy contorted his dark face, shone in his wild eyes. He slipped his hand in his pocket and his knuckles came out sheathed in brass. I got suddenly sick down deep—sick with fear. I'd unleashed a killer, a crazy killer who could run amuck with dope.

He slammed the knucks into my mouth and my flesh split like a ripe tomato. The tearing metal exploded blinding light in my brain. I reeled back to the chair. He loomed over me, a leering loon with a brown-paper cigarette stuck in a ghoulish smile. The smoke licked his face and a sadistic brightness flamed his eyes. He was lost in the hell fumes, gooned.

"Stubborn," I heard his gritting whisper. "I'll send you back to Missouri and they can bury you with the mules."

His fist whipped down again, and the room tipped. No pain. Just numbness. My face was frozen in an ice pack. Something wet dribbled from my chin. I wiped my hand across my mouth, looked dumbly at my red fingers. Why were my fingers red?

"Where is she, punk?"

My mouth wouldn't work, and my jaw was unhinged. I gaped at him. I slipped

down in the chair, my arms wouldn't stop me. I saw my feet sliding out on the rug, slowly. I couldn't feel them, they didn't belong to me. The floor tilted, cushioned my body like a feather bed. A voice, wavery as a line on an electric chart, said distantly.

"Don't kill him, Joe. We'll have to take him to the boss. Wait a minute while I fix this spike."

I wanted to go to sleep, but my eyes stayed open. Light glinted on the hypo needle as Be-Bop bent over me. My arm itched suddenly. Be-Bop's face got buttery. The light ran down the walls and drained out of the room.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Corpse in the Cabin

**M**AYBE I was dreaming, but it looked like pink snow. Beyond the ice-frosted window, purple shadows lay under the pines like smoke in a valley. I twisted around in the bed. A road wound between high snowdrifts, curled the base of a hill, and disappeared into a winter wilderness. The pines stood like frozen sentinels above a lake glazed blue-white with ice. I frowned and my jaw throbbed. The setting sun explained the pink snow, but I'd been in Hollywood, the sky had been clear, and it was a warm day for January—

I stared at the ceiling. It sloped to a peak, like hands in prayer. I remembered the hands. I was in an attic room walled in knotty pine, and the frosty landscape had a familiar appearance. Probably a cabin at a snow resort in the Sierra Madre or San Bernardino mountains. Hinges creaked and a trapdoor opened in the floor. A man stuck his head and shoulders into the room. I lifted myself to my elbows and stared some more.

It was Simmy Lee, a different amazing Simmy Lee. A Simmy with well-brushed

hair, wearing an expensive wool plaid shirt and tailored ski pants. He climbed into the room, pulled a chair over to the bed and straddled it. His limpid brown eyes inspected me casually. He hadn't shaved off the scraggly mustache.

"You'll need some dental work done," he said easily. "Joey loosened your teeth up. And when you get smart, I'll take you to a doctor and have your face sewed up. The boys stuck some adhesive on your face to stop the bleeding."

"What the hell is this?" I demanded. "Where am I and why aren't you feeding the pigeons and taking bets at Art's Newsstand?"

"You're at Big Bear Lake," Simmy said. "The boys brought you up from L.A. when you got stubborn. Joey plays a little rough when he gets high on tea. I've warned him about it, but he's a good boy and I can't control him all the time. Sorry about your teeth."

"Thoughtful of you," I said dryly. "How many are missing?"

He extracted a pack of cigarettes from his plaid shirt, stuck one between my lips, and lit it. I dragged deep, leaned back on the pillow. Simmy was the soul of grace, but my face still hurt like hell. I figured the quality of his mercy was a little strained.

"I like you, Eddie," he said. "You're a clever boy—sometimes. You're wasting your talents running a detective agency. You could be useful. You could be in the money if you'd listen to a word from the wise."

"I'm listening," I said. "This sounds like the beginning of a short con, but I'm all attention."

"I'm a business man," Simmy said. "Like any business man I keep my ear to the ground, so I can hear a rumble before it gets too loud. That's why I operate a sideline at Art's. I give a little information and I get a little. With some officials we do all right, but there are

T-men walking around. They have soft feet, Eddie. They don't make much noise."

"Treasury men?" I tried a smile, but my lips were too sore. "You mean you're peddling hop, Simmy?"

"Let's say I'm supplying a demand. A lot of people work under pressure, and need to relax. You've seen them around, Eddie."

"Sure, I've seen them around. You're a great humanitarian, Simmy. I've seen them kick their life out in a gutter, like a chicken with a wrung neck. I've seen them beat their head against a wall when out of the stuff. I've—" I got sick at my stomach, as he pursed his fat lips thoughtfully.

"Let's not get sentimental, Eddie. A dollar is a dollar. I need you. I need a new headquarters in town, and you're on the legit. All kinds of people can come and go to a private detective's office without arousing suspicion. I'll stock you up. Marijuana, weed, good Turkish herion, and plenty of black stuff for the pipe fans."

The sickness crept up to my throat. "Suppose I say no?"

If anything, his eyes got more limpid. "It's a quarter-mile from this cabin to the lake, Eddie. Around here it gets down to ten below zero at night. If we cut a hole in the ice, put a man under it, the hole freezes by morning. They don't find the man until the spring thaw. By that time nobody cares.

I dragged on my cigarette, watched Simmy through narrowed eyes. His fat neck overhung his collar and his stomach bulged over his belt. He reminded me of a particularly well-fed toad, but I didn't tell him so. Apparently his muggs were toasting their feet at a fire downstairs, and I wasn't quite ready for another session with the grasshopper.

"So I'm working for you whether I want to or not?"

"Something like that, Eddie."

"All right, since I'm a member of the gang, how do you get the stuff in?"

"That's very valuable information," Simmy said. "Can I trust you?"

"Naturally. I'm the soul of discretion."

His lips loosened in a grin. "Pigeons. We got a loft on the desert below Palm Springs and one on the Mexican side outside Mexicali. A good pigeon can carry two ounces a trip. It adds up."

"Big enterprise," I said. "No wonder you can afford a two-month vacation with all the trimmings in Hawaii."

His face hardened. "Who told you that?"

I waved the cigarette. "A man—ten fingers, ten toes. He lists to port when he walks. A very dangerous character."

"Not so dangerous," Simmy said. "I think I know who you mean."

**I** WASN'T too surprised. Once in awhile my junior high school brain dovetails a fact or two. I'd been fishing through the ice, baiting him. And Simmy wasn't conning me for light or transient reasons. He was still swapping horses, trading items of interest for information he needed. I wasn't kidding myself. I was headed for the deep-freeze compartment. He couldn't let me live with the facts he'd given me. I jiggled the hook.

"This character might cause me some trouble," I said, "when we open our new store."

"Not that guy," Simmy said softly. "I carry him in my hip pocket and only take him out when I need him. Now you know it all. There's a girl we want to hear about. Her name is Lita Carroll. Why are you looking for her, Eddie?"

"I don't know it all," I said. "For instance, I don't know who killed John Spaulding Brown."

Simmy's eyes lost their limpid hue. "Who the hell is John Spaulding Brown?"

"Another guy. A very dead guy—the

last time I saw him he had a bullet hole in his head. You live in Hollywood. You mean to tell me you haven't heard of John Spaulding Brown?"

"The producer?"

"The producer," I nodded. "Was he one of our customers, Simmy?"

Simmy got up quick and almost tipped the chair over. He grabbed the chair, steadied it, and stared down at me. All the color left his pudgy face, and his skin took on a dead-fish cast. His droopy jowls quivered and liver spots stood out on his cheeks. He looked very unhealthy.

"What the hell is this?" he snarled. "What's this about a dead guy. What kind of game are you playing, Kent."

"I'm not playing games," I told him. "You and your junk-crazy torpedoes hold all the aces, except one. You tell me who killed Brown and I'll tell you why I'm hunting Lita Carroll. You said you give a little to get a little."

He kicked the chair across the room. He clenched his fists and his face mottled with rage. "You tell me or I'll beat your damned brains out," he rasped. "Until yesterday that dame was dead. Then you start looking for her. You're not ringing me in on a murder rap."

"Dead!"

I barely got the word out. Simmy clubbed his fist down, like a sledge. I threw my head sideways. His fist slammed into the pillow, shook the bed.

He teetered over me, off balance. I wrapped my arm around his neck, jerked him down across my chest.

"Sucker," I gritted into his ear. "You fall for the old gags. You let a guy get you mad and lose your head."

I twisted off the bed, tightened down on the headlock, and got my forearm under his chin. He squirmed and gagged as I dragged him to his feet. I yanked his head back.

"Listen to me," I said, "or I'll break your neck like a match-stick. I'm going out of here, but first—what do you mean, Lita Carroll is dead? Give it to me straight."

I loosened my grip so he could talk and he gurgled like a baby with the colic. He hooked his fingers under my arm, tried to wrench away. I tightened down again.

"Come on—talk!"

"All right," he gasped. "Joey took care of Lita at Palm Springs. She knew too much about our business. After she got out of jail she threatened to talk to the Treasury men, unless we paid her off. Joey gave her an overdose of morphine. She's dead, I tell you."

"You're lying," I said. "It's hard to kill an addict with an overdose of dope. Where is she? What else do you know about her?"

Feet padded across the floor downstairs, and the ladder creaked. I fanned Simmy's

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hip, felt the bulge in his pocket. I yanked the automatic out as Be-Bop stuck his head through the trapdoor. His eyes bugged as I lifted the gun. More than surprised, he looked astonished. He dropped out of sight fast as I squeezed the trigger. The shot splintered wood from the ladder, curled smoke in the attic room.

Silence—sudden, hard silence. Simmy breathed hard against my chest, his body quivering like an aspic salad. I heard tense whispering under the trapdoor, then a shot rocketed through the floor, whined through the peaked ceiling. Simmy jerked away from my arm, dived for the trapdoor.

“Don’t shoot,” he shrieked. “It’s me, Simmy—”

The gun blasted silence again. Wood geysered from the floor. Simmy grabbed his shoulder, slithered over the trapdoor edge. He reached for the ladder, moaned like a wounded rat. His fingers caught a rung, hung there. I lifted the automatic, decided not to waste the bullet.

He swayed a moment like a dynamited bridge. Then his fingers slipped and his body turned. His scream echoed through the cabin as he crashed through the opening. I heard his body thud into the floor below. It was quiet again, except for ice cracking the window panes and the sound of my breathing.

I backed toward the window. It was suicide to try the trapdoor, and death to remain in the room. Cold air fanned my face as I lifted the window. Outside snow sifted from the pines with a rustling sound like rubbed satin. It was fifteen feet to the ground. I jumped.

The snow was soft and deep. I sank to my knees. Wind sighed through the trees, a lonely primeval sound chilly to the spine. The sunset had thickened, turned the lake ice blood-red. I floundered to the dusky shadows under the cabin eaves, and waited there.

They’d dug a path from the porch to the road. Once on the road I might make it. It was a hundred yards to the bend around the hill, where I’d be out of sight and reasonably safe.

I edged toward the porch, gun ready. The cold ate into my fingers, numbed them. Icicles fringed the front door like gleaming crystal pendants. I bent low, stumbled into the path. The door opened as I ran for the road. I snapped a shot over my shoulder and the figure faded back out of sight. The shot shattered the icicles, and they dropped like silver slivers of doom.

Flame laced the doorway as I dived behind a drift. I felt fire on my arm—sudden, hot pain in my shoulder. I dropped flat, squirmed on my belly down the road. Blood spotted my track, a ragged red line in the snow. I ripped my coat sleeve off, got my handkerchief out. Using my teeth and my right hand, I knotted it above the wound. It stopped most of the bleeding, but my arm went numb, hung uselessly.

I kept my eyes on the house, backed down the road like a crawfish. It was slow going. The road had been plowed, but the snow lay loose and deep in places. Halfway to the bend, Be-Bop darted from the cabin. He fired as he flopped in the path. The bullet clipped a white cloud from the road and snow drifted over my face.

I lifted my head very carefully. A fringe of yellow hair showed above the path. I aimed deliberately, squeezed down on the trigger. The bullet went inches high, clipped needles from a baby pine. The yellow hair disappeared. I waited. No movement. I backed up fast. At the road’s curve I got to my feet. I ran like hell, holding my arm. My feet slipped and slid in the snow, and my teeth chattered with the cold.

I decided that I didn’t like the mountains at all.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Behind the Eight-Ball

A QUARTER-mile farther, the road dipped to the lake's edge, and a cabin nestled under the pines. A character wearing a stocking cap and a blue mackinaw over coveralls, shovelled snow from his driveway. He eyed my bandaged arm, the blood dripping from my fingers. He put the shovel down and frowned suspiciously.

"Howdy, pardner," he said. "Thought I heerd shots, and it appears you're hurt. Some deer hunters git you?"

I glanced at his car. It was of ancient vintage, but there were wheels on it. Better than walking, since the grasshopper and Be-Bop might come along any moment in a vehicle.

"Deer are out of season," I said, "but I'm not. Does that jalopy run?"

"Runs good as new," he piped proudly. "She gits me there and brings me back, that old girl."

I slipped the gun out of my shoulder brace and motioned to the car. "Let's get, then. You drive. I'm in a hurry and explanations can wait. Wind the old girl up."

He stared at the gun like a startled rabbit, then climbed behind the wheel. The jalopy jolted pain into my arm as we chugged up the snow-rutted road. I kept the gun ready, watched over my shoulder. Things grayed out. I clenched my chattering teeth, held grimly onto consciousness.

We rolled onto a highway and the going was smoother. On the outskirts of an alpine-style village the native started to turn the jalopy into a gabled two-story redwood house.

"Doc Walters will fix you up," he said. "Doc is the best sawbones in these here parts."

I waved the gun. "Straight ahead down

the highway," I ordered. "Doc can saw somebody else's bones today."

Five miles down the highway, where the road crossed the dam at the lake's end, I let the oldster out. I handed him a twenty-dollar bill. "This is for car rental," I said. "I'll leave the old girl at the P.E. station in San Berdoo. Turn around and start walking. If you mention this incident to anyone, I'll come back to the mountains and haunt you."

It was tough driving the car down the grades, wheeling it around curves with one arm. Somehow I managed. At San Bernardino I chartered a cab, changed in L.A. to confuse my back trail. It was five minutes to ten by my wrist watch as I walked wearily across the sidewalk into the Swede's Place.

The Swede was closing shop. He inspected my beat-up face and limp arm unemotionally. He locked the outside door, led me to a massage table.

"By yimminy," he said blandly. "I tank you been in a fight, Eddie."

"I think so, too," I said. "Do your stuff, Swede."

He removed my coat and his blunt fingers probed the wound tenderly. He brought antiseptics and bandages from a cabinet, handed me a bottle of whiskey. The whiskey stung my throat, brought tears to my eyes. The Swede cut my blood-soaked shirt sleeve away and bared my arm to the shoulder.

"The bullet went through," he said. "By yimminy, this maybe hurt, Eddie."

He removed the tourniquet. I flinched as the antiseptic bit into raw flesh. He worked fast, cleaned the wound, bandaged it deftly. Then he picked me up as if I were a baby and carried me into the steam room. He got pillows somewhere, tucked them behind my back, made me comfortable on the wooden bench. A nice guy, the Swede.

"Maybe you want to tank," he said. "You yust rest easy, Eddie. Pretty soon,

I'll be back with clothes." He went out.

I laid back on the pillows. After the chilly mountains the hot steam room soothed my nerves. I wanted to think all right—but the effort hurt my junior high school brain.

If Lita Carroll was dead—where did that put me? Maybe Simmy was dead too, although I doubted it. He was too sinful to die. My client was dead, and his erring daughter was the reason why he'd been killed. I shivered despite the sweat rolling down my spine.

It put me strictly behind the eight-ball, with a very busy killer on the cue.

I dozed until the Swede returned, then dressed. The shirt was too large, hung to my knees, and I had to take two steps before the Swede's suit moved. But it was no time to think of fashion. I went to the phone, called Helen's apartment. Her voice was guarded.

"There's a police car around the corner and two big men in blue suits parked in a doorway across the street," she said. "This phone line could be tapped. Careful what you say."

"Get hold of Brown's lawyer," I said, "and find out anything you can. Particularly find out who inherits his dough if the daughter is dead. Things are getting tight, honey."

"Eddie, are you all right?"

"I'm all broken up," I said. "Better phone Glenlawn Memorial Park and find out if they still have the complete sixty-seven dollar funeral, as advertised."

"Who told you not to get mixed up in murder cases? Who told you—"

"This is positively my last case," I said. "Should anything fatal happen to me, you'll find my last will and testament under the blotter on my desk. There's some unpaid bills, too. I'm leaving everything to you, baby."

"The bills?" she asked mockingly.

"Uh-huh." I briefed her on the case rapidly. "Why didn't Brown tell me his

daughter was a marijuana addict? What's your woman's reaction?"

"Maybe he didn't want bad publicity, or he was ashamed to tell you. Parents are peculiar about their children. They like to be proud of them. And a woman's reaction costs extra, Sherlock."

"There you go on money again. You're a mercenary female. You don't show me the proper respect," I said loftily. "Maybe I'll fire you if I finish this case. I've had one bad experience with redheads so far. I'll get me a blonde."

Helen made a common noise. I hung up, stared at the phone. Redhead? Maybe I wasn't seeing the forest for the trees. I checked Simmy's automatic. I had four shots left. I thought that might be enough. I borrowed fifty dollars from the Swede, and he owl-eyed me as I started for the door.

"Stick your shirt-tail in, Eddie," he said. "I thank you better go home with that sore arm."

"Home," I said bitterly, "is where the heart is, and that is far away. Good night, Swede, and thanks. If I don't see you again, I'll save you a corner lot in heaven."

I went out, stuffing the long shirt-tail into my pants. My arm felt stiff and sore, and the skin on my face was tight as a drum. A cab cruised by, and I waved him to the curb.

"Where to, buddy?"

"Four-ten Oceanview, Santa Monica," I said grimly. "I'm going to see a girl who's been dead a couple of months, but phoned a friend this morning."

The cabby twisted in the seat, stared. "Sure you don't want to go to General Hospital, psycho?"

"Later," I said, and settled back on the cushions.

**I**T WAS a low frame house built on a sand lot off the boardwalk. I walked slowly past, noted the shades were drawn.



No light showed in the windows. The place was silent, too still. At the corner I wheeled into the shadows. I waited.

Nothing moved on the boardwalk. Mist drifted in from the ocean, hooded the street lamps. Beyond the boardwalk, plumed breakers tossed spray over the dark beach, thickened the air with brine. My throat tightened as I listened to the steady pound of surf, like a giant heart-beat in the night. I was close to some answers again, but suddenly I felt alone with the night, the misty stars, and death.

My heels thumped hollowly on the boardwalk as I left the shadows. Fog, like a pasty yellow shadow, hung over the house. I mounted steps to the porch. I tried the doorknob gently. The door was locked. I listened again. My breath was quick, jerky. No sound except the sea.

My feet sank silently in loose sand as I stepped from the porch. I circled the house, climbed a picket fence enclosing a back yard. The rear door was locked, too. I tried a window near the door, worked with matches and pocket knife. I slipped the catch back. I was mighty careful about raising that window.

The kitchen was black. I left the window open, but pulled the shade before I struck the match. I made out a refrigerator and stove, the usual kitchen furnishings. I tiptoed across the linoleum floor. The match flickered out as I opened a hall door. I fumbled along a wall toward the gray oblong of a second door.

Through it, I struck another match.

An acrid odor hung over the living room—a rancid, biting smell like burned rope. It was a typical beach-house room, upholstered bamboo chairs and divan, a grass rug on the floor. It was the grass rug that got me. She lay sprawled before an unlighted fireplace, her knees drawn up to expose a length of shiny black nylon. She wore gold combs in her dark hair, and her body was twisted, so her gray suit coat was open. Blood stained

her white blouse. I stared down at her, knew she was very dead.

Maybe Lita Carroll lived close to the dangerous edge, and there were people who wanted to kill her. The match flame scorched my fingers and I dropped it. Only the girl on the floor wasn't Lita Carroll.

It was Gilda Brown.

Sometimes in this business I get so close to the truth I can't see it for my big nose. Standing in the beach-house's pulsing darkness, I tried to think from the beginning. Why should anyone want to kill Gilda Brown? It was the jackpot question and I couldn't think of reason one. Lita had phoned Gilda that morning. Lita was still the key that unlocked all the doors.

I prowled around, striking matches and searching for clues. There weren't any clues in the living room. I tried the bedrooms, found them empty except for double-deck beds and furnishings. My favorite place to look for clues is wastebaskets, but I got the cigarette butts out of the kitchen garbage can. They were brown-paper cigarette butts, smoked very short, and smeared with orange lipstick. I opened one, sniffed it. The stuff inside was green as hell—marijuana.

I carried the butts back to the living room, lit more matches and compared the lipstick with Gilda's mouth. Gilda's was dark red. So Lita Carroll had been alive lately, at least.

Sweat beaded my forehead as my sophomore brain puzzled it over. My gun had killed Brown. Whoever sapped me and took me to the Skid Row flophouse had also lifted my gun. He'd used the red-headed Kitty for a lure. He knew lots of things. He knew I was hunting Lita, but he didn't know why.

The living room got suddenly cold, clammy with sea smells, and the hackles raised on my neck. He also knew I'd investigate the beach-house. He was way

ahead of me. The cabby could testify he'd brought me down from the Swede's. Gilda had been to my office. Blane had seen me outside the dead girl's cottage on Moon-glow Lane. All he had to do was plant a motive. I thought about my car parked outside my apartment. Just suppose the cops found marijuana in my car?

He'd have me standing on the gallows with my neck in the noose. He'd only need a quick yank to hang me. My killer friend was buying insurance. He'd murdered Gilda Brown to conceal himself for keeps. He was about the business of pinning the murders on me, but good.

I walked back to the kitchen, shaky inside, shaky because I don't like violence and sudden death despite my calling. Death is a private eye's occupational hazard, I suppose, but Gilda had been a good-looking wren. I returned the cigarette butts to the garbage can, in line with my policy of not concealing evidence. Then I climbed out the window, closed and relocked it.

I had another body to report. Another killing might be around the corner. I hurried up the boardwalk. The sea smashed the beach and the surf rumbled like heavy thunder in the night. I wondered if the dead were really asleep, or only waiting out there behind the misty stars for their revenge.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Fight for Life*

**A** WHISPER under the palm stopped me, a foot rustling dry fronds—something. He stepped from the deeper shadows and the street light glinted on his gun. His lips twisted in a crooked smile and his hat was tipped back, exposing his low forehead. He frisked me, relieved me of the .38 under my left arm.

"You keep late hours, Kent. Go to bed

early and get up early—you'll be healthy, wealthy, and wise."

"Not wise," I said tightly. "Healthier, maybe. Can't you find anybody else to tail, Blane?"

The narco bull pushed me toward a car parked at the curb. Not a police car. A plain blue sedan, of which there are thousands. In his old age he was getting smart. He shoved me behind the wheel, not gently.

"You drive," he rasped. "This time you stuck your foot in the wrong door, Kent."

"Yeah," I said. "I can feel the pinch."

I eased the car into the street, headed toward Hollywood. Blane held the pistol in his lap, aimed at my stomach. He sat silently, his beefy face set in harsh lines, until we cleared Santa Monica and drove into the hills above the Riviera Polo Club. Then he laughed harshly.

"They'll give you the gas chamber, tin cop. Now you'll find out how painless it is to whiff chlorine. Smart tin cop gassed to death, that's a laugh."

"You've got a nasty sense of humor," I said thinly. "How come you're handling this pinch? I thought murder came under the jurisdiction of the homicide squad."

"This pinch is a pleasure," he said softly. "I got a call this evening early from an unknown party, telling me to watch the Santa Monica house. You been on the squawk-box all day. Seems there was some cash missing from Brown's desk. Why did you break in that beach-house, Kent?"

"Why didn't you investigate?" I asked pointedly. "You're a cop. You get three hundred a month to solve mysteries. Get your own answers."

"Wise guy," he said heavily. "Always a wise guy."

"Not too wise," I said, "but smart enough to get a few answers without beating somebody's head in."

"Always shooting your mouth off," he rasped. "And here I'm trying to give you

a break. Pull the car over, wise guy."

I braked the car to a stop on the highway shoulder. We were opposite a vacant field in a hollow of the hills. Blane sat silently a moment, staring at me, his black eyes glistening in the moonlight. Crickets sang monotonously in the weeds, and somewhere among the distant houses a dog yapped shrilly. Tightness gripped my throat. He was a cop. He had a badge, and I was wanted for murder.

Blane jerked the door open, stepped down on the gravel. "Get out, tin cop," he ordered. "I'll teach you to shoot your mouth off."

I slipped across the seat slowly. He transferred the gun to his left hand, reached into the car and grabbed my arm. He dragged me out, shoved me toward the field. The skin along my spine crawled as I stumbled over the wheat stubble. He could blast a slug between my shoulders and who would care? Fifty yards into the field, he whirled me around. His face was dark, gorged with blood. Hate slitted his eyes.

"You two-bit tin cop," he snarled. "I'll break your damned neck. After I get through with you, you won't have so much lip."

He slammed a pile-driver into my mouth and an aurora borealis completely in technicolor flashed before my eyes. I sat down in a clump of weeds, shook my head groggily. I began to get mad in my bones. I was a trifle tired of getting beat up. Blane bent over me, seized my coat lapels, and dragged me unceremoniously to my feet. He shook me as if I were a dog.

"You're too big for your pants," he said thickly. "You should stick to chasing deadbeats for a living. You cheap—"

It was the other way around. The pants were too big for me. I hit him in the guts, and he quit talking. He let loose of my lapels and backed up, a surprised look on his pockmarked pan, as if a little

guy shouldn't hit a big cop so hard. I dived for his feet as he lifted the gun and murder blazed in his eyes.

Pain razed my shoulder as he kicked my bandaged arm. I grabbed his ankles, yanked hard. The gun exploded, but the bullet sailed toward the moon. Blane's feet came out from under him, and he thudded into the dirt. I jumped him. My fingers froze on his gun wrist. He was big. He was tough. He rolled over and jammed his knees into my stomach. He put the pressure on, and I could hear his heavy breathing, feel the strength swelling his burly chest. I held on grimly, fought his hand to the ground.

He heaved up suddenly, threw me sideways. I grabbed his gun wrist again. He loomed over me, his ugly face distorted, savage. The gun muzzle swung toward my head slowly, inexorably. I tried to squirm away. Dust flurried up, choked me. A slug in the brain would end it all. And the muzzle came nearer, closer—

The gun blasted my ear, and I went limp. Blane toppled over me, dug his elbows in the wheat stubble. I gripped his arm with both hands, twisted hard. The gun slipped from his fingers and I knocked it away. He scrambled to his knees as I got to my feet. I was in no condition to play Marquis of Queensbury rules. My fist caught him in the stomach, doubled him up. He gaped and toppled into the weeds.

My mouth was bleeding again. I bent over the unconscious narco bull and retrieved the .38 from his coat pocket. He wouldn't be out long and I needed to hurry.

I wiped my mouth, stumbled back to the car. My shoulder ached plenty as I drove down the highway. One more charge for the book. Assaulting an officer and resisting arrest. What difference did it make when I was wanted for murder? I turned into a gas station outside Beverly

Hills and washed up. I was thinking a lot of things. I was thinking someone had a powerful motive for the murders. I was thinking about Lita Carroll.

I parked Blane's car and taxied back to Hollywood. The old town looked the same after midnight. Neons burned brightly along the boulevard and searchlights penciled the sky. Hollywood never sleeps, I thought. Hurry, hurry, my mind told me—there isn't much time.

I GOT a quarter's worth of nickels at a drug store cigar counter and went to the phone booths. First I phoned Tony Venetti at the *Globe*. Tony is an old pal of mine with a taste for good bonded bourbon. "Boy," he said. "Every cop in town is looking for you. You're hotter than a firecracker."

"I know. Look, Tony, what have you in the file on Gilda Brown and McDonald Stiles. Stiles played a part in Brown's Oscar winner, *Glory Road*."

"Hold on," he said. He was back in a few minutes and papers rustled over the phone. "Not much, Eddie. Here's an item, page five second section, dated October eleventh. They were married in Yuma. It didn't make big caps for Stiles is only a bit player. There's no mention that Gilda Brown was the great man's niece. Mean anything?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "I didn't know they were married, but maybe they kept it a secret for professional reasons. I'll send you a pint of Old Mellow Mountain by special messenger. What was this Gilda's racket?"

"Was?" Tony sounded startled. "You're using the past tense, pal."

"If there's a story you'll get it, news hawk. What did she do for a living?"

The papers rustled again, then Tony said: "She wrote articles for the fan magazines, blurbs about the stars and movie doings."

"Under her own name?"

"Under her own name," Tony confirmed.

"Thanks," I said. I hung up, dropped another nickel in the slot and dialed Helen's number. Her voice was still guarded, worried. "The weather is certainly warm around here," she said. "Now your description is on the radio every newscast. Eddie, I'm scared."

"So am I," I said. "I've got goose pimples all over my back. What did you find out?"

"Brown's lawyer was hard to crack, but I convinced him it was in the interests of justice. Brown's will leaves his estate to his daughter Lita Brown, the gal we know as Lita Carroll. In the event of her death the money goes to his niece Gilda Brown."

"And in the event of Gilda's death, there is no other disposition of the estate provided in the will?"

"That's right," Helen said.

"Then," I said slowly, "if Lita Brown should turn up dead, the estate would go to Gilda's husband."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Gilda Brown is dead, murdered."

"Murdered!" Helen's voice was tense. "What do you make of it, Eddie?"

"I make it five," I said quietly. "Did you have a visitor today—a guy looking for an Adele Smith, maybe?"

"Adele Smith? I don't know any Adele Smith."

"Neither do I," I said, "but in a bright moment I dreamed her up and gave her your address. Sure no one has inquired for her?"

"No one. Just what has she to do with all this?"

"Just everything," I said tightly. "Keep a pot of coffee on the stove and a light in the window. Maybe I'll be there tonight and maybe not. If not, remember my last thoughts were of you."

I hung up, lit a cigarette, and stared at

the phone dial. I thought what terrible liars people are, especially in murder cases. It was one a.m. by the clock over the fountain—a hell of an hour to be out of bed, dodging arrest, and running from a fast-moving murderer. I phoned police headquarters, got Sergeant Terry Duggan of Homicide on the wire.

“This is Eddie Kent,” I said. “I want to report a murder.”

Duggan is a little slow-witted. A good cop, a plugger who came up from the pavements, but it takes time for him to catch on. I counted three, then a roar blasted my ear.

“Did you say Kent?”

“Kent,” I repeated. “The one and only original fall guy himself. Quit bellowing in my ear. I have news for you.”

I smiled as the wire was suddenly smothered. Now Duggan had his big hand over the mouthpiece, shouting orders for the call to be traced.

“Never mind,” I said. “I’m leaving here in about five seconds. Gilda Brown is dead. You’ll find her body at four-ten Oceanview, Santa Monica. And you’ll find marijuana butts in the kitchen garbage can. She was married to a guy named McDonald Stiles, secretly. Pick him up and hold him, in case you don’t tie this one on me.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Duggan yelled. “This time you’re in the soup, Kent. This time—”

“Goodbye, Sergeant,” I said sweetly. “I have to see a man about a girl.”

I beat it out of the drug store fast, hailed a cab at the corner. My junior high school brain was clicking fast. The trees were getting out of the forest’s way.

**I** ALIGHTED from the cab at the foot of Angel’s Flight, glanced at the orange-and-yellow cable car under its ornate entrance arch. Under a string of lights, the rails climbed Hope Street hill toward the stars. I crossed Third. To my left a

tunnel bored into the hill, continued the street westward. Subway Slim’s crouched under the hill. It had booths for ladies, according to a sign in the greasy windows. I pushed through the batwings.

Flourescent lights hung from the ceiling, threw a smoky glare over the sawdust dive. A juke box blared jive in a corner. It was hard to see, harder to hear above the sounds wassail. I walked down the line of customers at the bar, scanning faces. I caught the bartender’s eye and motioned to the bar’s end. It was the same guy, wearing another stained jacket. I took a twenty from my wallet, folded it the long way.

“Remember me?” I asked. “I’m the guy who was in here last night buying drinks for the red-headed wren who works in burlesque. I don’t see her around. Where does she live? I’m lonesome.”

He eyed the twenty—and the adhesive patch on my chin. “I don’t remember you,” he growled, “and I don’t know any red-headed chorus cuties. If you want a girl, there’s plenty on the bar. Otherwise beat it.”

“Like that, huh?” I slipped the .38 out of my shoulder brace, far enough so he could see it wasn’t a cap pistol. “I’m in a hurry, pal, I don’t feel like arguing. Last night the wren said she lived in a hotel on East Sixth, but maybe she was toying with the truth. What I want is the right address. I want it quick, and no mistakes. Keep your hands on the bar!”

He slid his hands back to the mahogany. His eyes wavered. I clicked the automatic’s safety catch and he leaped like a scared deer. “All right,” he said fast. “Don’t get hasty, friend. I see a lot of guys, but I remember you now. She lives at two-hundred forty-five Hope Street, on top of the hill.”

“What’s her right name?” I demanded.

“Kitty is the only name I know her by,” he said sullenly.

I tossed him the twenty. "I'm going out. If I hear a beef from you, I'll let you have it but quick. If you call anybody at two-hundred forty-five Hope Street and tip them I'm on the way, I'll come back and make holes in your jacket where the stains are. You're twenty bucks richer. Forget you ever saw me."

I edged down the bar, angled to the batwings. None of the customers paid me any attention, I thought. I was another guy going home. I smiled grimly as I stepped into the street. Home—like in homicide.

I thought as I rode up Angel's Flight toward the hill's crest, how cute it was to be a private detective. The Los Angeles lights receded in mist as the tiered cable car climbed the steep incline. For three cents a private-eye could ride from the Twentieth Century straight back to the Gay Nineties. Angel's Flight belonged to the past, to the horse-and-buggy days when Los Angeles was young. It no longer served any useful purpose except as a tourist attraction, and to carry enterprising private-eyes to almost certain death; but in the old days it circumnavigated a long flight of stairs, and rode rich tycoons to their large, very fancy mansions up on the hill.

I left the car at the upper platform and walked rapidly toward Hope Street. The sidewalks were deserted, the streets hollow avenues of mist, and the lights wore ragged haloes. The hill belonged to the past, too. The once-ornate mansions looked down at the heel. Their gabled roofs, bay windows, and gingerbread porches sagged with age like proud heads drooped toward the ground.

Somewhere a train whistle echoed lonesomely. I stopped by a dray parked at the curb and listened. A deep muted undertone thrummed the night. It was the city—the ceaseless life never still, like the surf. I shivered. I was in another world above Angel's Flight—a world of throb-

bing silence, dust, and slow, sure decay.

My heels clicked the sidewalk, and the loud thumping in my chest was my heart. Dark nights and dangerous people depress me. I'd prefer a long drink and a warm bed. But I don't care for the slow burn either. I'd rather get mine quick and unexpected. I glanced over my shoulder as I turned into Hope Street, a purely natural reaction to the neighborhood and my frame of mind.

At first I thought it was a tree shadow, a wavering in the mist. Against the background of night it was hard to be sure. The shadow had shape without substance, like a hovering ghost, or a remembrance of things past. Then a face whirled into the sickly puddle of light under the street lamp. The lips were drawn back from a bloodless mouth in a savage grin. The eyes were wide, popped with dope, and a sap dangled from his hand. It was no shadow—it was the grasshopper.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Lights Out!

THE sap swished down viciously. I ducked away, grabbed under my coat for the .38. He followed me, chopping the blackjack like an insane butcher wielding a cleaver. The blow grazed my chest, stung plenty.

"This time I'll fix you good," he grated. "I'll beat your brains out, you stubborn punk."

The .38 hung in the holster. I tugged at it frantically as I backed into the lamp-post, felt the grooved steel bang into my shoulders. He lunged forward, arms crooked in a half-crouch. The drug hollowed his cheeks and whitened his bony forehead. His face was a devil's mask in the yellow mist and his popped eyes flamed with death lust. I yanked the gun loose, aimed. He came on. He didn't see the gun, or didn't care.

"Get back," I warned. "Get back, or I'll let you have it."

The lethal leather arced toward my head again. I sucked my breath in, sidestepped in time. The sap thudded into the lamppost with force enough to crush my skull like an eggshell. I couldn't fire the gun. The shot might rouse the occupants at 245 Hope. They'd get suspicious. They might run.

He whirled around the lamppost like a wild jack-on-a-string. His body loomed over me, blotted out the light. The rank, raw odor of marijuana clung to his fog-damp clothes, and he panted like a winded runner. His hand swooped. I threw my bad arm under the blackjack and the pain ate into my guts, sickened me to the bone. For an instant his distorted face was close to mine. His breath was fetid, sour. I shoved my hand under his jaw, pushed him back.

I wheeled, slammed the gun down with every ounce of my strength. The sharp sight raked his cheek, tore flesh to his mouth. He screamed, dropped the sap, and reached for his gashed face.

I lifted the gun again. The barrel split his forehead like a ripe plum. He folded to his knees, hung a moment like a praying mantis, then sprawled on the ground.

Quick footsteps sounded down the sidewalk. I slipped away from the lamppost, into the shadows. Be-Bop ran into the muddy light puddle, his long coat hugging his knees. He glanced at the grasshopper's body, looked wildly down the street, and reached for his hip.

"Don't do it," I said, "or I'll ruin your pretty zoot suit."

His hand froze as I walked into the light. A smile curled his thin lips—a smile that said he was the smart kid, the deadly hep-kitten, the Jackson who could dig them quick. Cold anger tightened my chest. I jammed the .38's muzzle under his chin, where the skin is soft. He lost the smile fast.

"You two-bit jerks have caused me trouble enough," I gritted. "I'm itching to blow your head off. And I will if you give me one fast answer. What the hell are you weedheads doing around here?"

He stiffened like he was getting quick rigor mortis. "Simmy sent us down from the lake. He got to figuring."

"Figuring what?"

"Figuring you might turn up at the Subway. We was in the back room and followed you out." His words were jerky, scared. "The Subway is one of our stores, and we heard you was inquiring around there, too."

I dug the muzzle deeper into his neck. "Do you know a red-headed burlesque dame named Kitty?"

"No. Let up on the gun, pal. It might go off."

I let up. I swung him around, knocked his flat-crowned hat off. I won't say it wasn't a pleasure. I cracked the gun barrel across his head. He toppled over.

A lopsided iron hitching post stuck from a block of concrete at the curb, and a wrought iron fence enclosed the weedy lawn. 245 Hope Street was another relic of the Nineties. Dormer windows opened off a patched roof, and stone dogs guarded the steps leading to the gingerbread porch. Boards creaked as I crossed under the sagging eaves to a carved door inset with colored glass. A faint light seeped through the panes, but I couldn't see inside.

I tried the doorknob, but it was locked. I debated a moment, then slipped the .38 out and rapped the door panels gently. I rapped twice, then the light behind the colored glass got brighter.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice asked.

I DIDN'T answer. I rapped again lightly. Human curiosity is a wonderful thing. A moment's doubtful silence, a key scraped in the lock. The door swung slightly ajar. I jammed my foot in the crack, put my shoulder to the panel. I

stepped inside, closed the door quickly.

She was wearing a blue chenille house-coat and pink slippers with white pom-poms. Her red hair was tied back with a silk scarf. She looked almost cute, except for the hard lines around her too-crimson mouth. She edged away from the door, her eyes widening in sudden fright. I put the gun on her.

"Hello, Kitty," I said softly. "Remember me? Don't make a sound. Don't even purr. Just get in there and make it fast."

I waved the gun toward an arch leading off the hall. The portieres parted as she backed into the room.

"What—what do you want?"

"I can't promise you a thing, Kitty," I said. "You may go to the gas chamber as an accessory to murder. You took your chances in a very dangerous game. You'd better talk."

"Murder?" She gnawed her full underlip. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the gun your boy friend took from me last night was used to kill a man, and since you were his little lure, you're in deep. Where is she?"

"Where is who?"

"Lita. Come on, Kitty—let's not stall. The show is over. I'm only the advance guard. Before long the cops will be here. You'd better get a story together."

She paled, gripped the arms of the chair hard. "I don't know anything about this—about murder. He hired me to take care of her, because I knew her and used to work with her. I didn't know he was going to sap you last night, honest. He told me—"

"Never mind what he told you. Just remember he used you. Maybe the cops will give you a break. Now where is she?"

"Down the hall, in the back room. He's with her."

I glanced around the parlor, noted the closet in the corner. I took Kitty's arm, led her to the closet and pushed her inside. "We won't take any chances. We'll

just put you on ice, as a material witness. Don't make any noise, Kitty."

I locked the closet door, dropped the key in my pocket. Let's say I was scared as I tiptoed down the hall. My breathing was ragged and my stomach was tied in knots. My neck was still in the noose, and everything depended on surprise. If he killed her before I got the drop on him, it was curtains for Eddie Kent.

An oblong of light lay across the carpet outside the rear room. I paused in the doorway, smiled tightly. My luck was good. He was bent over the blonde girl who lay on a faded red couch. I glimpsed her Hollywood mouth, lips painted big with a down twist. There was no mistaking her straight nose and pallid face. It was Lita Carroll, otherwise Lita Brown.

I glanced at the tobacco tin and brown cigarette papers on the scarred oak table. The green stuff had spilled from the tin to a newspaper—green as the hell Lita Carroll lived in. A rank smell hung in the room, an all too familiar odor. He took the cigarette from her mouth and thin smoke dribbled from her lips.

"That you, Kitty? She's knocked herself out again. We can get her out of here before morning."

I stepped inside the door. My finger tightened on the trigger. I wanted to shoot, and he needed to die, but death was probably too good. I saw his little plan then, and hate gripped my throat.

"It's me, Eddie Kent," I said grimly.

**B**LANE dropped the tea stick, spun around. His beefy face got a shade redder and he grabbed for the police revolver strapped around his thick waist. Then his pig eyes froze on my automatic. His hand dropped slowly to his side.

"That's it," I said thinly. "Don't do anything you might regret."

His lips twisted in a sneer. "It's my little playmate, the tin cop. You get around, Kent. You're becoming a nui-



sance. Hollywood is your beat, now you're prowling downtown. Maybe you don't deserve a break."

"A break?" I smiled at him, smiled because he was still cocksure, certain he had me over a barrel. "Killers are great egoists, Blane. It's too bad your plan to kill me misfired on the way in from Santa Monica."

He laughed harshly. "Who besides you says I'm a killer, tin cop?"

The laugh grated my nerves. My finger tightened on the trigger again. I glanced at Lita Carroll. She was out—in a drugged dream world.

"You had a cute scheme, Blane, but it backed up all down the line. When you found out Lita was Brown's daughter, you saw a chance to make a crooked million. If she inherited her father's money, you had an addict you could threaten and milk for a fortune. Like any addict, she'd do anything for the stuff, and you could supply her habit. That's pretty bad. I could shoot you like a sewer rat."

His sneer loosened some. "You talk like a weedhead yourself, Kent. You—"

"Shut up," I told him. "You didn't know Brown was my client. You only knew I was hunting Lita, and that endangered your plan. You saw a chance to hang his murder on me. You hung yourself."

"Brown was your client?" His pig eyes narrowed. "Why did he hire you?"

"Because he was suspicious. Because you evidently told him Lita had reformed so he wouldn't cut her out of his will. It was the only valid reason he'd have under the circumstances.

"You weren't too smart," I said softly. "You signed a name Jack Smith to the Skid Row flophouse register. I have the sheet from that register, and experts will prove it's your handwriting. I thought it was you since this morning, Blane, when you wrote the name Adele Smith on a scratch pad in my car. The imprint com-

pared with the flophouse signature. When you didn't check the address I gave you, it meant you knew Lita Carroll's whereabouts—and only the murderer could have that knowledge. The address I gave you is where my secretary lives."

His big fists knotted and his black eyes swept me with hate. "You shot Brown with my gun. The homicide boys have the gun, now. Kitty will testify you sapped me and took that gun. The flophouse proprietor will remember you and Kitty brought me to his joint. If that isn't enough you can explain why you're holding Lita Carroll in this house."

"Don't move," I said, as he hunched his shoulders. "You led Gilda Brown like a lamb to the slaughter, too. So you could frame me good. So you could pick me up outside the beach-house and kill me on the way to the police station. I found weed butts in the house. You held Lita there until you decided to use the house for Gilda's murder. You used Lita, too, when she was under the drug. You got her to call Gilda, pretend she was scared, and have Gilda come to my office. You wanted information bad. When you couldn't get it, murder was your only out."

Blane wet his lips, glanced tensely around the room. "That kind of talk won't hold up in court, Kent. And you won't shoot me. I'm an officer and you know the treatment the boys give cop-killers. They'll hunt you down if it takes years. You've still got a chance if you beat it. I'll dummy up about your part in this business. Later, let me know where you are, and I'll cut you in on the take."

My stomach crawled as he hulked over the table—over the green hell in the tobacco tin. "It will hold up," I said thickly. "I hate a crooked cop, Blane. An ordinary thief or murderer takes his chances. A crooked cop hides behind the shield decent people give him to protect

*(Please continue on page 127)*

# HOMICIDAL HYPO-MAN



By C. M.  
**KORNBLUTH**

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Drink to Death

**I**T WAS the first letter I'd ever got with a wax seal on the back. They're used by arty people and very old-fashioned ones. When I opened the note I decided it was the latter.

The handwriting was the kind that nobody does any more—big flourishes with a flexible pen based on a delicate, legible script.

The letter said that Miss Emily Rose Speyendecker would be happy to see me at her home Wednesday afternoon. The address was just off Gramercy Park and it was now Wednesday morning.

Since my hobby is eating three square meals a day, I went.

The Speyendecker house had a lot of pretty ornamental iron work, and the lace-curtained windows were shimmeringly clean. I guessed that I was the first private detective who'd ever climbed the three scrubbed steps of the brownstone stoop.

I presented the letter to a white-capped parlormaid who answered the knocker. She showed me into the parlor. There was a coal fire in a grate and a handsome set of wrought iron fire tools. The furniture was not self-consciously antique, just a bunch of nice old stuff that had been there a long time ago and stayed there ever since.

"Miss Speyendecker," said the parlormaid gently. I rose as an old, old lady came into the room like a little queen into her throne room.

"Sit down, please, Mr. Burroughs," she said in a sweet dry little voice. "Will you have tea?"

"Thank you." I studied her without staring as the maid brought a tea service of egg-shell china. She mixed teas from three lacquered Chinese boxes into the teapot and tipped a copper kettle that swung in a frame over an alcohol lamp. She inhaled delicately at the steam that rose from the pot.

She made a fragile little joke, half apology, about not being able to add the bit of India tea that would give cachet to the mixture. It couldn't be had in New York since the war.

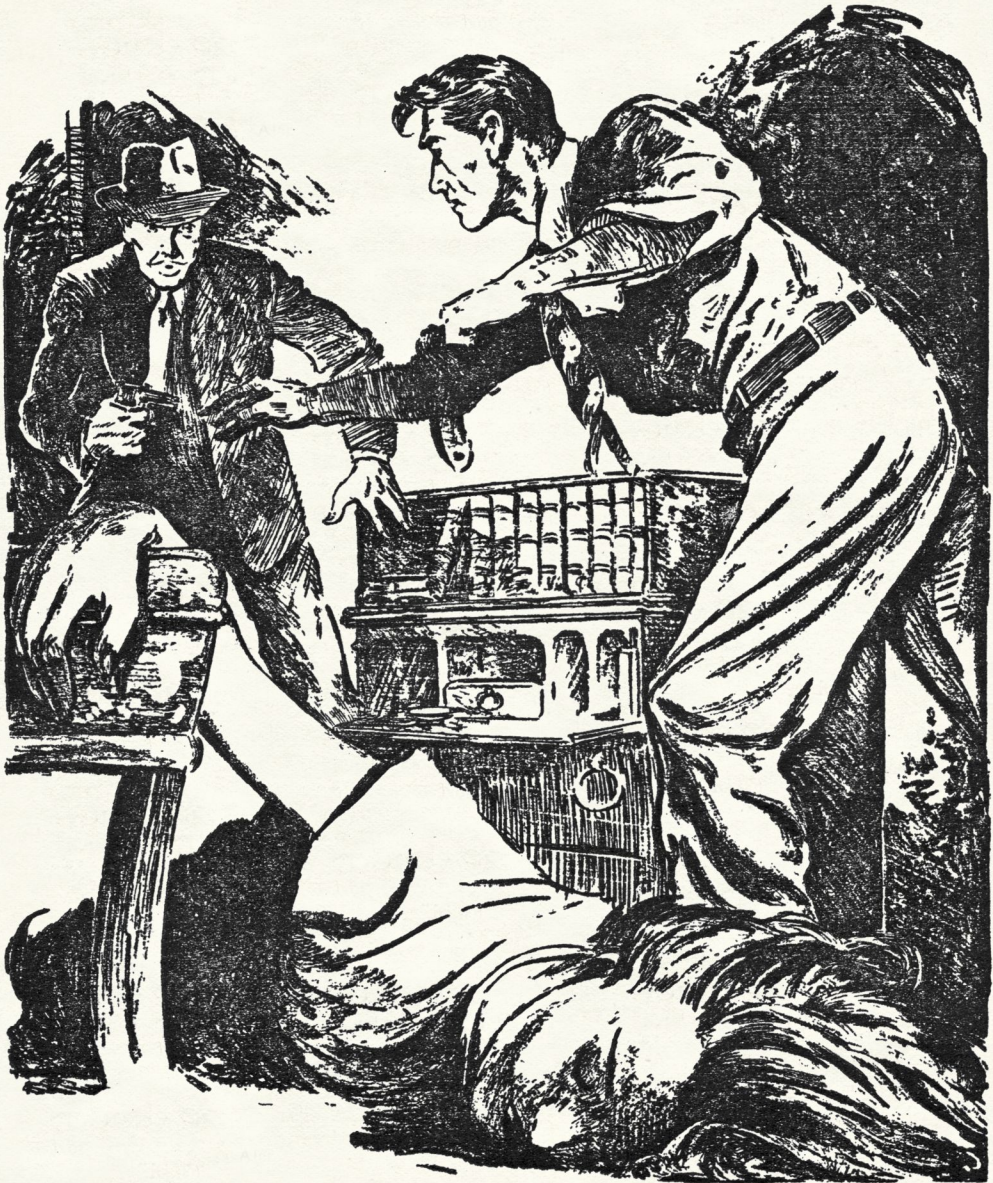
I made some kind of solemn reply and kept on sizing her up, from her waved,

*Spine-Tingling*  
*Mystery Novelette*

An invite to a million-dollar babe's mansion introduced Private-Eye Burroughs to a beautiful corpse, a curvaceous blackmailer—and two trigger-tempered slay boys.



He was coming at me as though he was walking under water.



white hair to her small, pastel-slipped feet. She wore a soft, gray gown and was just a bit plump over fine bones. Her face was clear-skinned and fair; the wrinkles she had were laughter wrinkles.

The tea was poured and sipped as we talked about the weather.

The maid carried off the service after our second cups had been drunk and we had covered the weather for the past six and the next three months.

"And now to business, Mr. Burroughs," she smiled, smoothing her skirt, and trying to look practical. "You were mentioned to me by Mr. Bisch, who retained you for a week last April, I believe?"

I nodded. That had been a blackmail case. There was a short, puckered scar over one of my ribs—a souvenir from the blackmailer. He was in Matteawan now; his lawyer had pleaded insanity and made it stick.

"Good. He was most satisfied with your disposition of his problem. I accept his recommendation and would like you to consider a matter which seems to require professional attention of the kind in which you specialize."

Burroughs can be as courtly as the next. "I shall be flattered to share your confidence," I said. "I can assure you it will not be misplaced."

She smiled as if she had seen a familiar move being made in the opening of a chess game. "My niece, Mr. Burroughs," she said, "is a willful girl. Her father is widowed, and dotes on her. He will hear no word against her. He has actually assaulted friends who had mentioned her waywardness for her own good."

"Excuse me;" I interrupted. "Do you want me to follow the girl, spying on her to collect evidence of her behavior for you to present to her father?"

"That is correct," she said. "The

Speyendeckers have never had a foolish pride of family; we come from good, Dutch peasant stock. But there is something about a name—" She mused, trying to put something into words. She gave up with a pretty shrug. "I can't stand by and do nothing, Mr. Burroughs," she said finally. "It's my duty to Charles, my brother, to Eveline, my niece, and to—"

HER eyes lifted and passed across three dusky portraits above the mantel. One was of a beaver-hatted old New Yorker who looked like her, another was of a bearded, fierce old fellow in the uniform of a brevet-brigadier general in the Union army. The third must have been her father; he wore the frock coat of the last century and the reversed collar of a minister.

"I understand," I said slowly. "I'm sorry I can't be of any assistance, Miss Speyendecker. You are justified, of course—it's your family and your name. But I don't feel that I should take any part in the affair."

I could hardly believe it was me talking. The old lady cast a spell. I was turning down a fat and certain fee because I liked to think of her pouring tea and because I didn't want to see her involved in a furious family quarrel, or to witness first hand the decay of her family. There was work enough for me to do without mixing myself up in her secret heartbreak.

"Very well," she said, her smile gone. "Will there be any fee for your call?"

"No fee," I said, and waited to be dismissed for half a minute. Then I realized that she was waiting for me to say politely that it was delightful to have seen her and I was so sorry I couldn't stay longer. I did, and her smile came again. We were back in the familiar ritual that she knew and loved, perhaps because it dulled her

to a world that had grown terrible since she was young.

She wished me good afternoon and floated from the room after giving me her delicate hand. I waited for the maid to come with my hat.

It wasn't the maid. It was a glossy Fifth Avenue brunette; tall, stagey and polished to a flawless micro-finish.

"Burroughs the detective?" she asked boredly.

I was still under the spell of the old lady, and made the mistake of answering politely. She laughed in my face and yawned: "That's for French poodles, Burroughs. You're a Saint Bernard."

"Thanks," I said. "How about my hat?"

"Sit down," she said. "I'm Eveline Speyendecker. I want to talk to you about Aunt Emily. What the hell did she want with you?"

I stayed on my feet. "Whatever she said to me," I told her, "was a privileged communication. It can't be forced from me by a subpoena. I'm certainly not going to pass on my client's affairs to any dame for the asking."

"Come off that," she snapped, two quarter-sized red spots appearing in her cheeks. She reached into a pocket of the trim, gray slacks she wore and came up with a twenty, neatly folded. She'd been ready for this.

"Now do you talk?" she asked, holding out the bill.

"Sure," I said, not reaching. "For twenty dollars I'll yelp and roll on the floor for joy. Did it ever occur to you that I've got a five-thousand dollar bond posted, and that I forfeit it and probably go to jail if I get caught divulging private information?"

She poked the bill back into her slacks. "I can't match five thousand dollars," she said coolly.

"Then where's my hat? I've got an of-

fice uptown. I work there." I answered.

The maid, who either read minds for a hobby or had been carefully briefed, came in with a pair of cocktail glasses and a shaker on a tray. I was about to be drunk under the table and artfully pried loose from whatever this dame wanted to know.

"Have a drink before you go," she said.

"Lady," I snapped, "if you want to pump me go ahead. My retainer will be that twenty in your pocket. It won't buy you anything but my company."

Eveline smiled confidently and gave me the twenty. I wrote her a receipt in retainer for services this date and she put it away and poured two cocktails.

She had toasted silently and was about to sip when I took the glass from her lips and substituted mine. She stared at it, bewildered, then as the light broke exploded into laughter.

"Oh, not really!" she gasped. "You've been reading too many comic books. Good heavens, drugged liquor!"

"Go ahead and drink it," I suggested.

She squared her shoulders and drained the glass, looking at me pityingly.

Then she collapsed on the floor, her face distorted and deathly white.

I felt for her pulse and couldn't find it because she didn't have a pulse any more. She was dead.

**W**HAT happened after that was something like a nightmare. You know how it is when you're running and running in a dream and can't get anywhere, when the air's thick and gooey and holds you back? That's how the next couple of hours were in the Speyendecker house.

I had felt her pulse and there wasn't any. I sniffed her breath and got only alcohol. I roared for the maid, who popped up and phoned the family doctor.

The doctor was shocked and grave

when he came, and went upstairs after a whispered summons from the maid. When he came down he was uncomfortable and gruff, and carried a bed-sheet which he spread over the body.

I tried to tell him about the cocktail and found that the cocktail set was gone. I tore into the kitchen and found that the maid had washed the set very thoroughly and put it in the china closet.

When I got back to the parlor the doctor was making a phone call. He was calling not the Medical Examiner, but an expensive, exclusive mortician. I babbled at him that in case of suspicious death—

He swiveled on me. "Suspicious?" he rasped.

"Damned right, doctor!"

He grunted and drew the sheet from the body. He took a printed form the size of a big index card from his black bag and began to fill it out, ignoring me. He filled in the name, Eveline Maynell Speyendecker; age, twenty-three. Hair, brown; eyes, brown; height, sixty-seven inches; weight, a hundred and twenty pounds. He filled in place of birth, name of nearest relation; Charles Speyendecker, father; mother deceased, and then he paused.

He stared at the five lines next to *Cause of Death*, tapping his front teeth with the fountain pen. He wrote down: *Cardiovascular diathesis, sev.* That means heart-failure. Heart-failure means nothing.

The mortician's men came in black coats and mournful manners. They took Eveline Maynell Speyendecker away. The doctor went upstairs with the death certificate in his hand. I waited in the parlor for my hat. The doctor came down with the certificate sticking from his jacket pocket. The maid brought him his hat and he left, without a second look at me.

The maid asked me if there was any-

thing she could bring me. She was wondering why I was hanging around.

"My hat. Please," I said.

She looked bewildered. "Did you put it down somewhere?" she asked.

"I handed it to you. Now I want it back."

"It isn't in the hall closet, sir. I looked when I got the doctor's hat. I don't remember—"

I felt myself flushing brick red. "I had a hat," I growled. "I had a hat when I came here. While I've been here I turned down a case, I've nearly been poisoned, I've seen somebody get poisoned and the poisoning hushed up. I want my hat. Go find it."

She nodded, frozen-faced. "Very well, sir. I'll look again. But I don't believe—" She left, muttering.

I heard the front door open. Somebody called in a gruff, homey voice: "Annie?"

The man came into the parlor, big, powerful-looking, a little past middle age, flawlessly dressed in a faintly old-fashioned, gray business suit.

"Hello, there," he grinned at me. "I'm Charles Speyendecker, Eveline's father. I suppose you're one of her friends?"

"Burroughs," I said. "Private detective. Called here for a consultation by Miss Emily."

"What about?" he said. His manner hardened like chilling steel.

"Your daughter, sir. Weren't you phoned about her?"

He moved up to me and took each of my lapels in a fist. He pushed his face against mine and growled. "And what about my daughter, you two-bit keyhole flatfoot?"

I broke the lapel hold and pushed him off.

"She's dead," I said.

The man went crazy before my eyes. There wasn't a second's doubt or hesitation; he simply flung himself on me.

It was a pretty tough fight. Most people don't really try to damage you. They don't know how hard it really is to paste the KO on a guy, so they keep trying for one until they're worn out. Most people know just enough about boxing form to misunderstand the fact that it's an elaborate and artificial system operating within strict rules, almost useless in a real *mêlée*.

If Charles Speyendecker knew anything about boxing form he didn't show it that afternoon. He clawed his hands, curled up his lip like a wolf and rushed. I tried to trip him as I stepped aside, but one of his flailing hands caught my jacket and took me to the floor with him. I felt his clubbed fists pounding the side of my head and his knees digging viciously into my back.

It wasn't the time for fancy-work. I rolled over and the first thing I grabbed I twisted. It happened to be his ear, and he let out an animal howl. He stopped pounding and pulled my arm away. I butted him in the mouth with all the steam I had, and he gagged and flopped onto his back. I had felt teeth splintering, and my scalp was wet with his blood and mine.

He kicked with both feet at my ribs as I was scrambling to get up. It was his bad luck that I fell on him, mainly his midsection. He was panting like a wild beast and his hands shot at my throat. I felt a short, cool flash of satisfaction. When that happens to you in a fight you've won it, if you keep your head.

The sucker thinks he's strangling you, which he isn't, both his hands are occupied and the field is yours. I measured the distance to his button, hoped he had a glass jaw, cocked my right fist and fired it.

His eyes went glassy, his hands fell from my throat and he relaxed all over. I felt his pulse before I swayed to my

feet and staggered into the big foyer.

The maid was coming down the stairs. She said indignantly: "Sir, I've looked all over and you didn't—" She saw me then and breathed, "Oh, good Lord!"

I looked at myself in the hall mirror. I was in bad shape.

"I lose more damned teeth that way," I said. "Mr. Speyendecker's in the parlor, Annie. He wants a drink of water."

I lurched through the door and stumbled down the three scrubbed brownstone steps. The subway station was two blocks away. I hoped I could make it.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Mysterious Code

I MADE it to my hotel through the thick of the homebound subway rush. The house doctor put some tape on me, found I had a broken rib on the left side and told me to stay in bed for a couple of days. The house valet said my blue serge suit was through, not worth reweaving the rips, and could he have it for rags, please. I said okay.

I was out a suit and a hat; I was in twenty bucks less a doctor's bill. You're a shrewd operator, Burroughs; they have to get up before the chickens to put one over on you, you needle-headed jerk.

I had a good night's sleep and went to the office with my side taped up. I phoned 32 Centre to ask what the chances were of making an assault charge stick on Mr. Charles Speyendecker. They just laughed at me. If I complained I'd be lucky to get off with life, they said. I didn't even try Homicide. Burroughs knows when he's licked. As far as I was concerned it was mysterious; it was nasty and it was over.

It had been over for a full hour when my phone rang.

"Annie Murdoch," said a woman's

voice guardedly. "The Speyendecker parlormaid."

"Good morning, Annie. Who gets killed today?"

"Don't kid me, Burroughs. You want a hundred bucks?"

"Lord, yes!"

"It's Thursday, maid's afternoon off. See me at Clinton's Cafeteria, Forty-Second Street, one-thirty by the coffee counter."

*It's a date*, I said to myself. To her I remarked; "If I haven't anything better to do I'll be there."

"Better than a hundred bucks?" she said sourly and hung up.

At the cafeteria that afternoon I didn't recognize her until she spoke to me. She wasn't wearing the stiff white cap or the pale-pink lipstick of the front parlor. I had an idea as I looked her over that she hadn't waited very long to inherit some of Eveline's wardrobe. She wore a cocktail dress, very blue and sporty, a Fifth Avenue hat, and smelled faintly of expensive perfume right from Miss Speyendecker's dressing table.

"Hello," I said. "The hundred bucks?"

"Take it easy. You don't get it for nothing. You work for it. Get me a cup of coffee and sit down."

I did. "The hundred bucks?" I asked.

She took a dime-store memo book, loose-leaf, side-opening, about four by six inches, out of her alligator bag.

"Can you crack codes?" she asked.

"Like other people crack peanuts. The hundred bucks?"

She hesitated and finally handed me the book. I opened it and leafed through. It was either pretty old or had been referred to a lot; the pages were dog-eared and stained. There were about twenty leaves. On one side of each was a solid mass of typed capitals, broken into the usual five-letter groups. There were vague pencil marks, some underlinings.

I looked over it at her. She was brooding and finally burst out: "If I could only trust you!"

"The—" I began.

"I know," she snarled. "The hundred bucks. Can you crack that for a hundred?"

"I can't promise," I said. "Give me fifty. That'll buy three days work on the thing. I'll know by then whether it can be cracked or not. If I do break it you can give me the rest."

She wanted to cut a hundred bill in half, holding one herself and giving me the other. I patiently explained to her that I was just a businessman with nothing to gain by dime-novel methods, that I'd give her a square deal and if she didn't like it, too bad.

She slipped me two twenties and a ten under the table, very lady-like, and I wrote her a receipt. She wouldn't let me put down anything about code work on the receipt.

"See me here tomorrow, same time?" she suggested.

I studied her. "I thought this was your afternoon off?"

"I can get away if I have to," she smiled easily.

"Yeah," I said. We shook hands, which was her idea, and I left to walk uptown to the office.

At Broadway and 46th I had to wait for a traffic light. One of those characters who takes life easily faced me and opened his newspaper for a look at the comics while waiting for the light to change. The newspaper's upper edge tickled me under the chin. Somebody bumped softly against me.

My hand snapped down and crunched on a wrist. I brought the other hand across my body and took the black memo book out of the fingers of the man who'd jostled me. The man with the newspaper suddenly melted into the crowd.



I LOOKED at what I'd grabbed. He was small, weasely, unkempt, dirty. He didn't look at me, but he said out of the corner of his mouth: "No harm done, huh? Don't turn me in. You'll be tied up for a week in court."

I held his wrist with my right hand and put the book in my inside breast pocket with my left.

I don't like dips. They're invariably chronic criminals. Arrest means nothing to them, and they care less than nothing for the sick, horrified feeling in the stomach of a decent workingman who reaches for his money and finds it isn't there.

"Don't hurt me, mister," he said hoarsely, still not looking at me.

I pushed him out of my way. There's a photo shop on Broadway and 49th Street where I have work done that takes more equipment than I own. I stopped in there and spent fifteen minutes with the manager in the back room. Then I walked the couple of blocks to my office.

Two characters were sitting in the waiting room that I keep unlocked. As soon as I saw that they weren't reading the girlie magazines left there I knew that for once my hunch had panned out. They were a Mutt and Jeff pair, both very Spanish looking. The little one looked like a tango dancer, the big one like the bouncer of an expensive Havana night club.

"We want the book," said the little one, standing. His hand was in his jacket pocket.

"So take the book," I said, holding it out to him.

He grabbed it, riffled the pages unbelievably and exchanged a relieved glance with the big one.

"*Vamonos*," he said. "*Esta OK*."

To me he bowed lightly and said: "No troubles. We thank you very much."

"*Seguramente, señores*," I said. "*De nada*."

They smiled, probably at my accent, and left. I went into the inner office, locked the door and twiddled my thumbs for twenty minutes, then phoned the photo shop.

"You want 'em already?" asked the manager.

"First make another set of prints and lock them in your safe. Tell your chuckle-headed delivery boy to ride a couple of floors past mine when he comes and walk down. Tell him not to come into my office unless the corridor's empty. Give him some kind of story."

"Right. I'll tell him it's a deck of French postcards."

Twenty minutes later the photo shop delivery boy handed me a well-sealed package and leered at me. I leered back and gave him a quarter. I locked the door after him, spread the photographs out and got to work on the code.

I COULDN'T keep my mind on it. That nice old lady kept wanting me to follow her niece, her brother's face kept appearing between me and the photographs, distorted with animal rage, Annie, the parlormaid kept whispering that she wanted to trust me. And the sullen, beautiful face of the girl who had died glowered tragically over my shoulder. The little dip, the two hard guys who'd taken the book, they were there too. Something tied them together—was it my hat? Where was my gray snap-brim felt?

I brushed them aside and worked on the code, which turned out to be not a code at all, but a triple substitution cipher. It gave way with a crash at eleven that night, and I put a client's report form in the typewriter and copied it out.

It was just a list of eighty names and addresses. The only thing I didn't understand was that after each name came a number. Most of the names were fol-

lowed by number five, which was the lowest number; one was followed by the number fifteen and the rest were scattered between the two extremes.

I typed: *Paragraph Four—Analysis of Addresses: The addresses listed have no apparent center, being distributed at a geographical random throughout Greater New York. However, cursory inspection shows that there is an economic mean presented in that no address is in a poor neighborhood and about fifteen percent in expensive neighborhoods.*

Annie Murdoch was getting her fifty bucks worth. I wound up with a flourishing signature, filed a carbon, made a neat package of the report original and the photographs of the book's pages. I locked the package in the safe and headed for the hotel and my bed.

I didn't get to my bed. I was picked off like a sitting duck on 50th Street. It was the little tango dancer again; he oozed against me and: "Es-stop, Mr. Burroughs." He was rodded up; I felt the barrel of a big gun poke me through his jacket pocket.

"Where to, Pancho?" I asked, trying to be casual.

"In the car, if you please-y," he said, pointing with his left hand. I stepped into a good-looking black sedan. The tango dancer climbed in after me. He took out his gun, letting it rest casually in his lap. It was a Luger that looked sloppy and out of drawing; I guessed it was a cheap Spanish or Balkan copy. Still, nine millimeters of caliber is much too much to argue with.

The big bouncer was in the driver's seat, and he took off without a word or a change of expression.

"Hell of a snatch car you have here," I said. "Anybody'd remember it for a year."

"Es-natch?" he asked, politely puzzled.

"Kidnapping," I explained.

"Gracias," he smiled. He shifted the gun to his left hand and took something out of his breast pocket. It was wrapped in a tube of newspaper. He held up a corner of the paper and the weight of the object unrolled it. A black cylinder fell into his lap. It was about eight inches long, an inch in diameter, tapering a bit towards the handle end. It was made of heavy, braided leather strips. The seams were turned in so as not to break the skin. There was a supple leather loop at the handle end.

With a practiced gesture he flipped the loop about his wrist and across his palm. He flicked the sap in the air once and smiled as the heavy steel spring in the joint responded, magnifying the little wrist motion he'd given it. The lead-loaded tip swung in a vicious arc three times before it trembled to rest.

I stared at him as he smiled. "Better not," I said. "Other guys have been sorry they slugged me. You'll be very damned sorry if you do."

My palms were sweating; I dug my nails into them and fought with myself to keep from jumping him. He was holding the cheap Luger copy very steady in his left hand. It could take the flick of a finger to send .775 square inches of steel mashing through my intestines, expanding as it went. I leaned back and shut my eyes, shuddering, waiting for the inevitable blow.

I heard the faint swish of the sap and then heard a roaring louder than anything I'd ever heard, louder than thunder, louder than the solid wall of cannon that the krauts had massed before Leipsig. I swung way, way out, past Mars, past Neptune. I was swinging out into the black gulf like Tarzan on a vine, and just before the vine swung back it turned to oil in my hands and they slipped from it and I fell into the darkness.

## CHAPTER THREE

## A Shot in the Arm

THERE was a heavy, groaning noise that went through my body like an organ note. I lay and felt pain fill me.

A woman's voice cut through my head like a knife: "Are you okay, Burroughs? What did they do to you?"

I tried to open my eyes. The lashes were gummed together as if I'd been on a two-week drunk. The pain of the lashes pulling was a relief, superimposed on the throbbing agony that spread from my head all over my body. My right eye pulled open and light lanced into it like a scalpel slitting a boil.

The woman's voice sounded again, hysterically: "Are you okay, Burroughs?"

"I know you," I croaked. "You're—you're—" The word wouldn't come. I saw a face pass in front of my right eye. It was a face, then a pattern of planes and colors, then a face again.

"You're—you're—" I croaked. *Where did they go? The words?* I could see them, almost, shapeless, elusive things just beyond my grasp.

I clutched at the words. "Annie," I rasped. "That's who you are."

"Yeah," said her voice relievedly. "I thought they knocked you off your trolley. Here, sit up."

I felt her arms around me, pressing my broken rib.

"Water," I croaked, feeling the blackness that closed in.

"I got some aspirin here," she said. I saw a little flat box pass in front of my eyes. I lifted my right hand and felt every joint and strand of muscle scream. I clawed the box open and pressed all the tablets into my mouth, a dozen of them. The woman helped me drink a glass of water and the tablets went down.

My other eye pulled open and focused. "Help me up," I rasped. "Walk me. Don't let me stiffen."

She tugged me to my feet and walked me, eight paces out, eight paces back. I began to see where I was, and my muscles began to work together.

"Where are we?" I asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know where this is," she said. "Two Spanish-looking guys snatched me into a car when I went out to mail a letter. They blindfolded me. I'm glad they didn't blackjack me too." She glanced at my head and shuddered.

Eight paces out, eight paces back. Eight paces out, eight paces back. The place was a store-room, full of crates. There was a sink in one corner and one strong light bulb in the center of the ceiling. There was one massive door.

"I cracked the code, Annie," I said.

She stopped walking and I found I could go on by myself, eight paces out, eight paces back. The room swayed and lurched, but I could walk.

"What was it?" she demanded eagerly. "Who did she have the dirt on?"

"The code was a list of eighty names and addresses," I said. "That's all. What did you think it was?"

"But she always had money—" said Annie, bewilderedly to herself. She turned on me. "You're holding out! You're lying. You want to keep this to yourself. I'll kill you for this!" She drew back one hand. I watched stupidly as it swung and slammed the side of my head. I crashed to the floor.

"Just eighty names," I whispered tiredly. "Eighty—"

She stared at me with horror in her eyes. She was down on the floor beside me, babbling that she hadn't meant to hit me, she was sorry, she ought to be hung for it—

She got me another glass of water and

made me drink it. She heaved me to my feet and helped me walk again.

"What's it all about?" I asked wearily.

"That lady-dog, Eveline Speyendecker. She always had cash, a roll of big bills on the first of the month. She didn't get it from her family. It had something to do with that little book, and she was always saying she knew secrets—I had it all figured out."

"Blackmail?" I asked.

"That's what I think. Thought." She glared at me suspiciously for a moment. "When she died I got that book from her dresser. I figured I could take it over and work the shake-down. It was in code, so I figured you could crack it for me."

The door opened. A man was shoved through and sprawled on the floor. The big Havana bouncer grinned from the door and slammed it.

"Dr. Gandle!" gasped Annie. "What are you doing here?"

I stared at the man. It was the doctor who'd made out the death certificate of Eveline Speyendecker. He was mussed up and madder than hell. He scrambled to his feet.

"They can't do this to a medical man," he snapped. "It's barbarous, simply barbarous. What do you know about this, you two?"

We told our stories. He looked at me closely under the eyes and delicately felt my skull.

"You'll be all right," he said. "Perhaps a very slight fracture, probably not. What the devil's all this about?"

"Somebody's rounding up witnesses of the woman's death," I said. "Somebody with South American connections and a sucker-list of some kind."

"List for what?" he demanded.

"I wouldn't know. But Eveline was in with them. She used the list. When she was killed they wanted it back. But Annie swiped it and passed it to me to de-

code. Eveline's associates tried twice to get it away from me, and succeeded. But I had copies made—"

Dr. Gandle was standing with his back to the door. There was a wide smile on his face and a small revolver in his hand.

"THANKS, Burroughs," he said.

"The delivery boy for the photo shop told the elevator man he was delivering French postcards, but we had to be sure, you know. Thanks again." His heel beat an SOS on the door; it opened and the little tango dancer came in, with the cheap Luger copy steady in his right fist.

In his other hand was my gray, snap-brim felt hat. Dr. Gandle put the little gun away and passed the hat to me. "I took this from the hall closet on my way out," he smiled. "I figured if there was any trouble with you and we had to cool you it would come in handy."

I stupidly turned the hat over in my hands. It had a new sweat-band, a little thicker and higher than the old one. I turned the sweat-band down and saw that it was actually a double fold of very thin leather, like an old-fashioned money belt. There was fine, white powder dabbed on it.

"When they find you," said the doctor, "they'll figure you just took an overdose and that'll be that. A couple of days later they'll find Annie with a bindle or two in her girdle, also dead from an overdose. No connection; it happens every day in a city this size."

"Narcotics," I said.

The tango dancer laughed and the doctor nodded, with a gleam in his eye.

"Narcotics," he said. "Eight hundred grains of cocaine a week, via the banana boats from South America. Eveline took care of the carriage trade for me, but she began to use a little too damned much herself and became very unreliable. One week she took the receipts and gave them all to

some prize-fighter she liked. That did it."

"How did you kill her?" I asked.

He chuckled. "There's an experimental drug called Gibbs 773 that they're using for early meningitis cases. It decomposes in alcohol. Decomposes, in fact, into phenol and assorted arsenates, all highly poisonous. I'd been filling her with Gibbs 773 for a week, and it finally paid off. She took a cocktail on top of a stomach-full of the stuff and it fell apart and the parts poisoned her. I knew I'd be called in, so I could cover it up."

"Neat," I said.

He nodded complacently. "Bring them into my office, Paco," he said to the tango dancer.

The tango dancer jerked his big gun at us. We went through the door into a handsome Park Avenue doctor's waiting room. The bouncer was there; he closed the door and shoved a filing case against it that blocked it completely. We went on into the office.

It was very white and sterile. There were cabinets of instruments, an X-ray machine, a diathermy set, an operating chair and an anaesthesia outfit. The doctor slipped into a white lab coat and busied himself at a table with a Bunsen burner.

I watched as he opened ten little packets of wax paper that held a pinch apiece of white powder, like corn starch or confectioner's sugar. He set a test tube of distilled water to bubbling over the flame and let the powder trickle into it. Some dissolved, the rest scummed up on top. The doctor stirred with a glass rod, turned down the flame.

Something was bothering me. "What were the numbers after those names on the list?" I asked.

"Daily dosages in grains," he said. "Interesting, too." He took a little chrome-plated box from his cabinet and began

to assemble the parts of a big 400 cc hypodermic needle. "Did you happen to notice the distribution?" he asked.

"Nope."

"A pity. According to the Theory of Least Squares you'd expect the numbers to be very different in their scattering." He sniffed at the cooling test tube and unclamped it, pouring the fifty grain solution into a small glass beaker.

"If one graphed dosage in grains against number of individuals for any given dosage you'd expect a smooth, bell-shaped curve, wouldn't you?"

"Yep," I said.

HE DIPPED the needle into the beaker with his left hand. "And yet," he said, "in a sampling of eighty you find that the curve is almost that of the exponential function. I may do a paper on it."

Delicately, with his right hand, he lifted the plunger. "The *Bulletin* of the Society of American Toxicologists, I think," he said musingly. "I've done a couple of pieces on the physiology of addiction for them. A statistical study following them should be very effective, don't you think?"

He held the loaded hypodermic needle as a fencer holds his épée in the salute, the point level with his eyes, the barrel vertical. With the other hand he pressed delicately on the plunger and a tiny thread of the solution spurted from the tip of the needle.

"No embolism to complicate the autopsy on you two," he smiled. He turned to the girl, whose face was chalky white, whose eyes were riveted on the tip of the needle, following it as a rabbit does a snake.

He nodded almost imperceptibly at the bouncer, who gripped the girl from behind, by her biceps. He forced her left arm out. She was trembling, and her eyes never left the needle.

"Yes," brooded the doctor, "narcotics are mad—quite mad." Casually he slipped the needle into the girl's arm, just above the elbow. His eyes were on the fine red lines etched in the barrel of the needle. The plunger eased down, expelling the solution into the girl's vein. It met one of the little lines halfway down the tube and the doctor twitched the needle out with a practiced, competent gesture.

The bouncer pushed the girl into the operating chair. She wasn't looking at the needle any more, but at the little blister on her arm, with the tiny speck of blood in its center. She began to twitch. Her face was a sea-sick green.

She lurched from the chair and began wordlessly to stumble towards me. The little man with the big gun stepped in her way and pushed her back into the chair. She gasped for air as the stuff reached the nerves that tell the lungs to breathe and the heart to beat. Her eyes burned and then went out.

I watched her die; I hardly felt the doctor, who was doing something to my arm. I looked and saw him roll up my left sleeve. The hypodermic had been laid on the table right by the Bunsen burner.

"I wonder sometimes," the doctor was saying, "how it all will end. As you probably know, addiction grows every year. Logically that means that—"

He slipped the needle into my arm at the very instant the bouncer grabbed me from behind in an iron grip. He pressed the plunger and I heaved forward.

"Damn you!" said the doctor.

"You est-stop that stoff," said the tango dancer silkily. "This way kill you easy. I can shoot you in gots, yes?"

The doctor was standing holding the hypodermic barrel; my move had broken it off where the needle joined it. He angrily plucked the point of the needle from my arm and went to his cabinet.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Mathematical Mayhem

WHAT HAPPENED next was new to me. The cocaine that squirted into me before the needle broke began to do things—strange things.

The clock stopped. The doctor took a million years to take one step toward the cabinet. He took a score of eternities to fit the new needle together. While he filled it with fluid from the old one I solved every riddle of the universe and set myself a trillion new ones and solved them all.

Everything was razor-sharp. I was in an eternal, unchanging instant when everything was stripped clean, was utterly itself.

I'm no mathematician, but in that instant I thought about and understood everything I'd ever tried to think about and tried to understand in mathematics.

I idly set myself a problem, a crazy problem that no human being could ever solve in his lifetime, a problem that the big differential analyzing machine at M.I. T. would take a century to answer.

The problem was: *Consider and analyze the possible paths of the bouncer, the tango dancer, the doctor, and the bullets from their guns. Calculate a path for Burroughs to follow so that he shall arrive at the little man with the big gun without being either shot or tackled.*

Maybe it was just a dope-dream that I set the problem and solved it. Maybe what happened was a combination of luck, a certain amount of training, the shot of cocaine and the crack on the head. Maybe.

So I solved the problem, or thought I did. I broke away from the bouncer and rambled across the floor. I was just out out of the way every time he tried to grab

me. Each time the tango dancer tried to shoot it just happened that the bouncer was in the way. It just happened that I reached the tango dancer from the side before he could turn and took his gun from his hand, breaking the wrist as I did so.

I shot the bouncer in the face. The doctor was slowly, slowly, drawing his gun. I aimed carefully, got a perfect sight picture of his left eye and took a hundred years to squeeze the trigger. The bullet drifted through the air and into his head.

The tango dancer was coming at me as though he was walking under water, a knife wavering in his left hand. I gently put the gun in my pocket and took him by the throat. I lifted him slowly and pushed. He floated through the air like a feather in the breeze and crumpled eerily and silently against the wall. He hung there for fifty years and began to drift down the wall to the floor. He lay there looking strangely crumpled and broken.

The eternal instant came to an end. I was just a man, a very sick one when I saw what I'd done. I managed to phone the Narcotics Squad at 32 Centre before I passed out.

They came and chopped down the door and woke me up and patted me on the back and gave me whiskey. They smashed open the store room where we'd been locked up and whistled when they opened the boxes. They called the local FBI chief, and he came, gray-haired, very business-like and polite, and he shook my hand too, when he'd heard the story.

Then somebody noticed that I was three-quarters dead and called an ambulance.

I woke up in a private room in Bellevue's Police Ward. Miss Emily Rose Speyendecker was sitting by the bedside, in mourning.

"I do hope you're feeling better, Mr. Burroughs," she said.

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm dreadfully disappointed in Dr. Gandle," she said unhappily. "And had you heard that poor Charles shot himself?"

"No," I said.

"In his office. He doted on Eveline, and then this came out. I seem to be the only one left, don't I? I suppose I'll always be the survivor." Her lip trembled for a moment; then she lifted her chin and was a little queen again.

"That's not what I came to see you about," she smiled. "You'll forgive me. I feel it's really my responsibility, since I called you, don't you think so?"

She didn't even give me a chance to answer, but rattled on: "I've taken the liberty of making this out. You'll excuse me, I'm sure. You must be dreadfully tired. I'll be going now and I do wish you a very speedy recovery, Mr. Burroughs."

An oblong of white paper rested on my blanket and she was gone.

I held the paper to my eyes and turned it over. It was a bank draft—on the oldest bank in North America—for five hundred dollars.

"That makes it all right," I said to the empty room. "Five hundred dollars makes you forget that you've seen death crouch like a panther ready to spring. You won't remember Eveline and Annie now. The doctor, the bouncer, and the tango dancer were the villains of the piece, so they had to die before the curtain fell. Charles Speyendecker loved his daughter and he died, but you'll forget it now. You'll never hear their voices in the night; you'll never see them watching from the dark with eyes that are now closed forever."

The paper oblong fluttered from my hands to the floor.

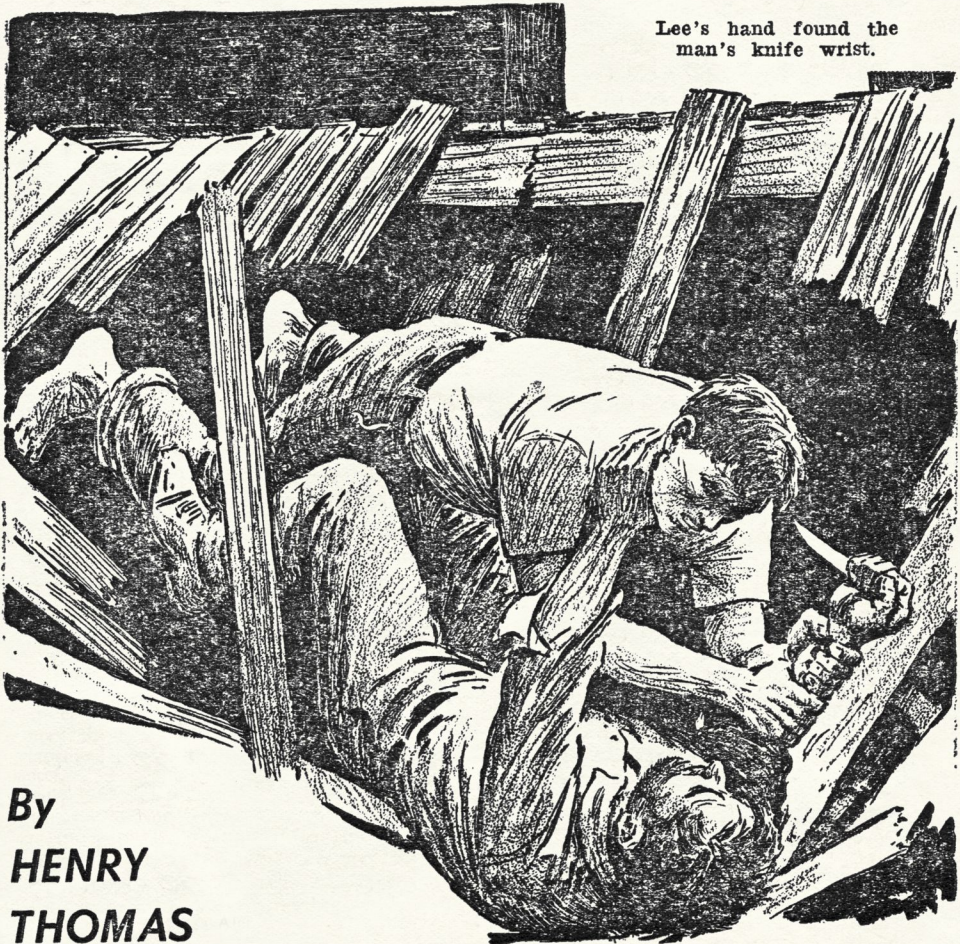
# BULLETS BEFORE BREAKFAST

A vindictive beauty and her dead boy-friend promised Lee Ford a sure spot on the hot-seat.

**L**EE FORD hopped out of bed on that bright California morning. He grinned back at the sunburned face in the mirror above the washbowl and went to the closet for a clean shirt.

Yanking aside the yellow rayon curtain, he picked the shirt off a shelf.

Lee's hand found the man's knife wrist.



By  
**HENRY  
THOMAS**



And then he blinked and his jaw felt slack as a busted football.

Because somebody was in there!

A man was sitting uncomfortably on some shoes in the corner, his face partly hidden by one of Lee's coat sleeves.

"Hey!" blurted Lee. "Get out of there!"

The shirt fell from his surprised fingers and his brain got watery as he realized that the guy wouldn't be going anywhere. Not by himself, anyway. Not when his legs were doubled under stiffly like that.

For ten, slow-ticking seconds, Lee Ford didn't breathe. He stood there in his polka-dot shorts, feeling the muscles twitch across his tanned back and his lean face furrow with shock.

Then, fingers fluttering, he bent over and lifted the sleeve from the man's face. He jerked back his hand as if it had been burned.

It was his neighbor, Irving Guthrie. The one man in Leucadia whom he hated.

Dead.

Guthrie's face was white as lard. Pain had driven his teeth into his fat lower lip. Icily, his eyes were fixed on the closet's plywood ceiling.

There was a big reddish blot across the chest of his pineapple-colored sport shirt. Lee knew that the small ragged spot above the pocket was not an extra button-hole.

Lee glanced at his watch and that slight movement started the landslide of frantic questions across his mind. It was only seven minutes to five—How in hell did Guthrie get in here, only three feet from my bed? Who shot him? Why? And why didn't I hear the shot?

He was about to kneel beside the body for a closer look when he heard a hard, urgent rapping on the front door.

Terror sprayed through him as he realized he had to answer it. In a town as small as Leucadia, the whole neighborhood knew he was always home till 7:45 a.m. when he left for the store. If he ig-

nored the knocking, they would probably think he was sick and come on in.

And of all the times for a caller this was absolutely the worst. What the blazes should he do? He jerked the yellow drapery across the closet's opening and picked his brown corduroy pants from the foot of the bed. His fumbling fingers required almost a minute, it seemed, to close the zipper.

There was more rapping on the front door. More urgent too.

"Coming!" yelled Lee.

He didn't bother with shoes or shirt. Barefoot, he strode through the short hall and out into the bare combination living and dining room. He walked across the litter of shavings, sawdust and lumber scraps and opened the door.

Two men and a girl were standing on the porch. Lee knew her. Tall and slim, she was pretty in a dark, full-lipped Latin way. Her name was Mavis Rosoff and she was a secretary at the avocado packing house. Although Lee had dated her several times, he knew little about her because she would never talk about herself.

Lee didn't realize for a moment who the two men were. And then when he did, he almost slammed the door and ran. Both were dressed in heavy khaki, had chromium stars on their chests and the words, *San Diego County* embroidered in yellow across their sleeves.

"I'm Deputy Seltzer," said the older officer, a stocky man, heavily padded front and rear. "We got some questions to ask."

"Sure," said Lee, swallowing again. Seltzer was practically inside, so he added: "Want to come in?"

The deputies entered, followed by the girl. They glanced at the pile of California redwood planks and the scattered tools.

"Sorry there's only one chair," said Lee. "I've been doing the place over."

"Yeah," said Seltzer. "What I want

to know is did you see your neighbor Guthrie last night?"

Lee shook his head. "No, I didn't."

"Weren't you supposed to meet him here at your place around eight o'clock?"

"Sure," said Lee, paling, "but—"

"But what?" The deputy folded his arms.

"We had a big inventory down at the store last night and I was stuck till nearly midnight. I tried to phone Guthrie that I couldn't make it, but he didn't answer."

"Well," said the deputy, "Guthrie's been missing since about eight last night. Miss Rosoff here—" He indicated the girl with a jerk of his elbow. "She phoned us early this morning. She was supposed to have a date last night with him. Waited for him till early this morning, but he never showed."

THINGS had been going faster than Lee could follow. He knew he had to keep calm—outwardly, at least—and not betray the excitement raging in his veins. He wondered if they could hear the way his nerves were jingling. Like telephone bells almost. Brother, in all his life he never imagined he could be in such a jam. A body in the closet and two long-nosed deputies in the front room.

"Nope, I didn't see him," Lee said for the second time. "Sorry."

Seltzer stepped closer to Lee and squinted one eye. "I hear there's been trouble between you and Guthrie—that right?"

"A little," admitted Lee warily.

"You bought this place from him?"

Lee nodded.

"I hear you don't think it's so hot now."

"It's—" Lee cleared his throat. "Well, it's got a couple of drawbacks."

Seltzer plucked a bit of tobacco off his tongue. "Young fella, is something bothering you? You'd think we were a couple of sidewinders, the way you jumped

when you opened the door. If something's on your mind now's the time to unload, believe me."

"Everything's pretty good," said Lee, grinning crookedly. Nervously, he brushed a hand across the top of his tousled brown hair. He took a tentative step toward the door, hoping the deputies would take the hint.

"Well, maybe," said Seltzer. He glanced around the room and then walked toward the hall.

Lee's heart gave a great, aching leap. *Good Lord!* he thought, *he's going into the bedroom. He knows Guthrie's in my closet!*

But Seltzer halted and inspected an unplastered section of the wall. "Nice job of lathing," he said. He turned and went to the door, followed by the other officer, and added: "We've got other checking to do. We'll see you later."

The girl started to follow them out. She paused beside Lee and her fingers were cold as they grasped his bare shoulder. Her chocolate-brown eyes were murky.

"I think you're lying!" she said, her voice dry and throaty. Then she went past him rapidly, her high heels rapping hollowly on the uncarpeted boards, the black taffeta skirt rustling around her smooth hips.

Before closing the door, Lee watched them go down the long flight of outside stairs which led past the untenanted flat below. Then he collapsed weakly on the pile of lumber and held his head in his hands. *Why didn't I get it over with?* he thought. *Why didn't I tell them? Now I'm worse off than before!*

For two minutes, he sat there. And just as the whips and jingles in his nerves were decreasing, there was another loud knocking on the door.

Lee jumped up from the boards as if he'd been shot. His blue eyes glared at the door as if it were the gateway to

hell. Was it the deputies returning already to search the house? Lee wiped his palm across his sunburned forehead and flung the drops of perspiration on the floor.

Prepared for the worst, he drew back the door.

The man standing on the porch this time was in his late thirties, wore blue denim trousers and a dirty khaki shirt. His jaw was rough with a four-day stand of whiskers. He was slightly stooped and his florid cheeks told the story of his close kinship with the bottle.

"Morning, Lee," said John Tressell. "Wanted to catch you 'fore you left for the store. Anything I can do today?" He kept looking over Lee's shoulder into the front room. "Plaster a little, maybe?"

"Sorry, John," said Lee. "Things are in such a mess I don't know if I'll be finishing the job. I'll let you know, though, if there's anything for you."

He closed the door and stood behind it a moment, listening to Tressell's sluggish footsteps go down the stairs. Then he turned and went over to one of the windows he had so recently enlarged.

Guthrie's big, gray house, surrounded by yellow-blooming avocado trees, was just a few hundred yards away across Orpheus Road. A black and white sedan was parked in the yard. The deputies' car, no doubt. Lee wondered how long they'd be around.

He stood by the open window a long time, wondering what to do about the thing in the closet. Hating to think how, in one short week, all his fine plans, all his great hopes had been beaten into the dust.

A year ago he'd left Chicago and come here to Leucadia. A nice, quiet California town, Leucadia. Forty miles north of the Mexican border and only ninety miles south of Los Angeles, its plushy green hills go down to meet the crashing Pacific. Twenty-eight-year old Lee brought all his savings, four thousand dollars including

the money he'd banked while overseas and the couple of thousand left him by his only close relative, Aunt Josephine. He took a job running the cash register at one of Leucadia's two grocery stores for fifty-five dollars a week and looked around for something in which to invest his money.

Mavis Rosoff traded at the store and that was how he met her. They had a few dates. Nothing serious, because the tall, quiet girl was not Lee's type. He preferred them small, taffy-haired and bouncy. Besides she seemed more interested in somebody else, Irving Guthrie. One night she introduced the two men.

Guthrie, sleek, pink and in his early forties, owned several dozen acres of avocados. Addicted to wearing ice-cream colored sport shirts, Guthrie played the gentleman-farmer role to the limit. He did very little work, leaving the maintenance of his groves to hired hands. With avocados becoming more popular all the time, the income from his groves supplied him with a new car, a new house and several adjoining properties.

He sold the old red and yellow house and its grassy lot to Lee for seven thousand dollars. To float the deal, Lee got a three thousand dollar loan from the bank at nearby Encinitas and marvelled at his good fortune. Why, in these times the property was worth at least ten thousand dollars. The house was two stories with five rooms downstairs and three upstairs, and Lee knew just what to do with it. Remodel everything, rent the lower floor for sixty dollars a month, save his money and before long maybe he could buy a few acres of avocados and start piling up the dough.

LEE borrowed another thousand from the bank. He worked eight hours at the store, spent his nights and Sundays working over the house. He decided to start at the top and work down. He put

on a new roof, built an outside stairway to the second floor, ripped out all the rotten wiring, built a tile fireplace, enlarged the windows so he'd have a finer view of the ocean. For six months he worked, lost weight, had meals on the fly, knocked the hide off his knuckles. He did almost everything by himself, helped recently by John Tressell, a Leucadia newcomer who made a precarious living doing odd jobs around the groves.

And then, last week, the bottom dropped out of everything.

Lee surveyed the downstairs rooms one night to decide what materials would be required. He stood on an old stool in the musty master bedroom and examined the ceiling.

When he jumped to the floor he and half the floor kept on going. There was a tremendous crackling of timbers and yellow wood dust flew thick and heavy.

Lee and the stool wound up lying on the ground, three feet under the house, in a pile of broken, rotten boards.

The next day, Jake Potter, the lumber dealer, took one look at the wreckage and told Lee what had happened.

Termites.

Hundreds of the pale, soft-bodied insects had hollowed out all of the timbers and flooring in the lower rooms. Potter couldn't see what kept the building standing. About all that was left of the walls were the paint and plaster.

He showed Lee how the termites, nesting underground, had built a three-foot tube of saliva and mud up to the floor. Then the blind, six-legged creatures had munched hungrily from board to board, wall to wall. In a few months, the top story would be infested too.

The blows fell hard and heavy after that. Guthrie had laughed and shouted. "Sucker!"

Lee went to a lawyer—and felt worse. According to the law, Guthrie was in the clear because Lee, before buying the

house, had failed to have it inspected for termites. Then a few days later, a health inspector turned up and said he would have to condemn the place as unsafe unless Lee immediately started replacing the timbers in the lower rooms.

He gave Lee two weeks in which to get the work started. Lee high-tailed it to the bank for another loan. And that was the two-ton straw. The bank refused to lend him a bent nickel more. So he'd have to move out and let the termites eat up his four thousand dollars in savings and the four thousand dollars in loans.

And now this. Guthrie dead in the closet.

Lee turned away from the window and walked over to the dining table. Its chair was the only one left in the large combination living and dining room because he'd stored the rest of the furniture downstairs.

Still shoeless and shirtless, he slumped into it and rested his chin on one hand, while the fingers of the other tapped nervously on the sill of the window beside him. Forgotten momentarily was the disaster of the house. His brain fought frantically now with the problem of the thing sitting silently under his coats and jackets.

Somehow, he had to get Guthrie out of the house before the deputies returned. And that might be any minute. But how? He couldn't just sling the body over his shoulder, take it down the steps and hide it in the wreckage under the house.

Lee wished he'd had the nerve to tell the deputies where Guthrie was. But he was sure they would have locked him up. The whole town knew how he hated Guthrie. After the floor caved in, Lee had told everybody about how Guthrie had gyped him.

Lee bent dejectedly over the table, resting his head on his brown arms. He felt sick. He hadn't had any breakfast, but

his stomach was full. It felt like he'd choked down a lump of cold grease.

Over and over his mind turned. Somebody in the neighborhood must have killed Guthrie. Someone who knew Guthrie had an appointment with Lee. Or maybe someone who happened to see Guthrie arrive and knew Lee wasn't home. But who? Somebody wanted to pin the murder on Lee Ford. But who?

Mavis, maybe? He shook his head. She wouldn't do a thing like that. She was quiet, hard to know, but Lee was sure she was on the square. Her friendship seemed genuine. And she always—

Lee sat up straight, feeling once more the sudden crush of fear. Somebody was knocking on the front door. *The deputies?*

**H**E DIDN'T want to go, but he did. Like a man in a stupor, he walked to the door, his belly tightly sucked in, his bare feet unaware of the sharp chips on the floor.

The doorknob was warm against his cold, wet palm. He pulled on it and then every fiber in his body was flooded with warm, electric relief.

It was only Sam Burrows, standing there with a jar of preserved apricots.

"Hello, Lee," said Sam. He smiled so broadly his upper plate slid a little. "We heard about your trouble and Martha thought these might cheer you up. They are real sweet."

Lee accepted the jar without really seeing it. "Trouble?" he said, suspiciously, feeling the tension rear up again inside.

"Termites," said Burrows. "I hear they ate out your whole lower floor."

"Oh, them." The frost in Lee's blue eyes melted a little. "They ruined the place." He started to close the door. "Tell Martha thanks a lot for the apricots."

But Burrows wasn't to be put off that easily. "Mind if I take a look at how your plastering's coming along?" He took a step toward the door.

"Sorry, Sam." Lee hated to be rude, but it was the only way. If Sam came in, he'd spend half the morning nosing around. "I'm late for work already."

Lee closed the door and Sam went grumbling down the steps.

His knees boneless and shivering, Lee stood with his back against the door. He swore. Loudly and crisply. *Dammit! Why couldn't they let him alone? Why couldn't they give him time to think?*

He stayed there a moment, angry, aching to do something. Anything—

And then he drew back the jar and flung it out into the kitchen. It landed on the tile sink-board in a crashing mess of glass and slippery fruit.

The noise made Lee feel better. He grinned a little, ashamed of himself. But suddenly he knew what he had to do. Fight. That was it. Give 'em a battle. To hell with just waiting around till they arrested him. Somewhere in the neighborhood a murderer was loose—and it was up to Lee Ford to hunt him down!

Lee had been dreading to go back into the bedroom and examine Guthrie more closely. But now he straightened his shoulders and strode to the closet with a business-like look in his eye.

Guthrie, of course, hadn't moved. He was still sitting in the corner on Lee's heavy work shoes, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Lee touched the nearest hand. It was whitish and cold like a mushroom deep in a mine shaft. He tried to lift Guthrie's arm, but it wouldn't move. Lee's forehead creased with concentration. Rigor something or other had set in, meaning Guthrie had been dead quite a while.

The bullet had gone in Guthrie's left side, roughly about ten inches under the arm and had gone up through the heart and out the left chest.

Lee was definitely not a detective, but anyone could see that Guthrie hadn't been shot while in the closet. Not unless he'd

been standing and his assailant had been lying on the floor.

Nor was it logical that someone had carried the body in during the night while Lee was asleep. No, Lee slept too lightly for anyone to get away with that.

He wished he were a professional detective. The house was probably lousy with clues which a trained snooper could read like sky-writing.

But, wait a minute. Lee remembered that he hadn't gone into the closet when he got home from the store the night before. So Guthrie could have been there all night. Lee had come in around midnight, slung his clothes over the foot of the bed and gone right to sleep.

Earlier in the day, he had asked Guthrie to come over that night around eight for a final talk about the termites. So Guthrie had probably walked right in, as he always did, and got shot while he was waiting. Maybe he hadn't died right away and had wandered into the bedroom and tumbled through the curtain into the closet.

Lee looked at his wrist watch. It was quarter to eight and he was due at the store at eight. Well, they'd be short one clerk down there this morning.

He stepped out of the closet and drew the yellow curtain shut, deciding to leave Guthrie in there for the time being. He put on a T-shirt and then, equipped with pencil and paper, he sat down at the dining table and rapidly began listing anyone in the neighborhood who might have reason to kill the orchard owner.

*Mavis Rosoff.* Guthrie had been in love with her, Lee was sure. Recently, they had been seen everywhere together and Mavis seemed to be in love with Guthrie too. But if she had any reason for killing him, she certainly kept it a secret.

*John Tressell.* The handy-man. He'd been complaining lately that Guthrie had gyped him out of twenty-five dollars. Maybe Tressell had hit the bottle again

and went out on an angry gunning spree.

*Sam Burrows.* Sam's avocado grove was on the other side of Guthrie's. During the war he had sold five acres to Guthrie for one thousand-five hundred dollars. Now those acres were worth double that and Sam and his wife, Martha went around telling folks Guthrie was a crook. And Sam had certainly wanted to come in and look around.

*Jake Potter.* Lee couldn't think of any reason why the lumber dealer might have done it. But he put him down just in case. Guthrie had made deals with everybody. There was no telling who hated him enough to kill.

Lee ran his eye up and down the sheet. Then he crumpled it and threw the ball on the floor. What a waste of time! None of them had any real reason to kill Guthrie.

And there was one name he hadn't listed. The guy who really had a pretty good motive for murder. Lee Ford. The deputies, no doubt, would agree.

**W**HERE were they now, anyway? Lee looked out through the large open window beside the table and over the tops of the orchards to Guthrie's place. The girl and the two tan-uniformed men were standing on the porch talking. Then the deputies got into their black and white sedan and drove away. Mavis stepped off the porch and walked down the driveway.

After a moment, she crossed Orpheus Road and came through Lee's white picket gate. He heard her high heels on the steps and then her knock.

"I'm so upset, Lee," she said, after he asked her in. "I'm sorry I was rude a little while ago. I need somebody to talk to."

"That's okay," said Lee.

There were purple half-circles under her dark eyes and most of her lipstick had worn off. But, tall and erect, excellently blueprinted, she was still a beautiful girl.

He watched her carefully, thinking her black leather purse looked awfully heavy, wondering why she had come. He invited her to sit at the table in his only chair.

He said, trying to be casual: "Have the deputies finished around here?"

"No." She took a cigarette from her purse and lit it. Rather clumsily, Lee thought. "They're going down and talk to Sam Burrows. Then they're coming back to see you."

Lee felt his throat muscles draw together tightly. He said: "Oh."

"They think you're trying to hide something. But I told them they're wrong."

"Thanks," said Lee.

The cigarette trembled between her long fingers. "I'm so worried. You haven't seen him, have you?"

Lee hated to lie, but he knew he couldn't tell her Guthrie was in the closet. Not yet, anyway. He shook his head.

Anxiety made her unusually talkative. "We were going to announce our engagement last night," she said. "At a party at Del Mar. I couldn't stand it if anything's happened to him. I was married once before, back in Ohio, and it turned out awful. And now—this—"

Suddenly her chin wrinkled and she started to cry. Tears always embarrassed Lee; he hated to stand there helplessly. So he went to the kitchen and took a clean glass from the cupboard. He wasn't thirsty, but he drank a little water anyway.

He set the glass down. And then he heard the noises. The first sounded like a single, sharp handclap, far away. The second was inside and it was the sound of breaking glass.

He swung around to the dining room—and felt his face break up with horror. Clogged with fear, he stared at her, his hands in hard balls at his sides, his lips stretching tightly across his teeth.

She was dead, her head hanging over the chair's back. Her life ran out redly and spread across the front of her tight, white blouse. The bullet had come in low on the left side, gone up and out through the heart.

Lee saw it all in one blurring glance. The two round holes in the screen. The upward course of the bullet. This was the way Guthrie had been killed, too.

His head swiveled sharply and he looked across the room at the china shelves. A green dinner plate was broken. And in the wall just above the pieces on the shelf were two holes. One for the bullet which had killed Guthrie last night. One for the bullet which had just killed Mavis and broken the dish. The killer had waited until each of his victims sat by the open window in the apartment's single chair.

Frantically, Lee grabbed a long board from the floor, placed it roughly across the room, almost touching the holes in the screen and those above the shelf.

He sighted along it. Out past his white picket fence. Out over the tops of Guthrie's yellow-blooming avocado trees.

And in one of them he saw movement. Through a break in the foliage he saw a patch of blue denim high among the branches.

Lee bounded out to the porch, down the steps and across the grassy yard. He high-jumped the picket fence, his bare feet slapped across the road and he darted between strands of barbed wire into Guthrie's grove. His eyes searched for the tree he'd seen from the window.

Abruptly he heard a ripping noise and someone jumped to the ground twenty-five feet ahead and started running. His shoes made crackling noises on the dried leaves blanketing the ground. His back was turned toward Lee. But Lee could tell it was the same denims he'd seen up the tree. There was a large, triangular rip under the left hip pocket which accounted for the ripping noise.

HE CHASED the pants for a dozen steps. And then they vanished. Lee stopped and listened. The grove was silent except for the buzzing of horseflies. Then he heard the leaves snapping again off to his left. He raced toward the sound, but saw nothing except thick greenness because the trees were larger over there. And he heard nothing more because his own feet in the leaves drowned out sounds the other man might be making in his flight.

Lee spent fifteen harried minutes in the grove, searching the ground, looking up into the branches. And he found no one.

Sluggishly, he walked back toward his house, realizing he'd had his one chance to catch the murderer—to save himself—and had failed.

As he started up the steps, the lower flat's front door swung in. John Tressell stood there, waving anxiously.

"Come here a second, Lee. Got something to show you."

Frowning, Lee went in. Tressell was waiting in the narrow, high-ceilinged hallway. There was a curious, expectant look in his eyes and some kind of yellow dust on his shoulders.

He tapped on the wall and said: "Lee, this is good oak. Make you an offer for it, if—"

His voice broke off and they both glanced quickly through the tattered screen-door. The black and white sedan rolled up the gravel driveway and the two tan-uniformed deputies got out.

As their boots drummed up the stairs, a whole gang of fears tumbled and leapfrogged through Lee's mind. He'd lost; he was powerless to stop them.

He heard them rap on the door. Pause. Knock again. The doorknob squeaked in its brassy way. One of the men swore. There were more bootsteps, rapid now, and four words, spoken harshly: "Ford must've done it!"

Sick with terror, Lee could almost see

them standing beside the chair, staring at the girl's slender, lifeless body. In a moment they would find Guthrie behind the yellow curtain and then all hell would crack loose. He knew he should dash outside and take to the brushy hills behind Leucadia, but his bare feet seemed welded to the floor. And then he saw the rip.

The three-cornered rip in Tressell's blue denim pants. And he knew. Suddenly he felt like cheering till his lungs split, or jumping through hoops, or turning hand-springs in the ocean.

"You!" he blurted. "The tree!"

A corner of Tressell's mouth pulled down into the black bristles on his chin, exposing two gold-capped teeth. "Yeah. That's why I called you. Had to know whether you recognized me out there."

His hand whipped inside his khaki shirt and came out with a hunting knife. Its blade was less than eight inches long. But to Lee it was the biggest, sharpest knife in the eleven western states.

"One yap and you get it!" Tressell's voice hissed the length of the hall.

Staring at the blade, his skin tingling with goose bumps, Lee could nearly feel its keenness slipping coldly into his side. Tressell raised the knife shoulder-high, his fingers gripping the handle like hooks. He took one step toward Lee.

Wondering which way to jump, every muscle dancing with tension, Lee started to back up—just as Tressell lunged.

The knife was a silver streak. Past Lee's chest it swept and down, its tip just touching his corduroy trousers, slitting them from pocket to knee. Tressell darted back and prepared for a fresh lunge.

Lee's blue eyes scraped the hallway, hoping desperately to find some sort of weapon. A board, an old lamp. Anything. But the hall was bare.

Lee stepped back again and felt the floor sag a trifle. And then, like a geyser of ice water, the wild notion hit him. His eyes on the knife, Lee jumped straight up



for a good three feet and brought his one hundred seventy pounds thumping down on the floor.

There was a sound like many mingled shots and the floor dropped open as if on hinges. Tressell made a feeble, surprised thrust with the knife and then both men were a tangle of arms and legs sliding with splintered wood to the ground under the house.

As they fell, Lee's hands found Tressell's knife wrist. He twisted hard and the blade dropped free.

Tressell landed on his shoulder blades, grunted and grabbed a piece of rotten board. In one motion he sat up and smacked Lee across the forehead with it. The board shattered and Lee, unhurt, got to his knees and swung two furious punches at Tressell's whiskers. Both connected. Tressell's head snapped back and then he stretched out as stiff as the rest of the boards.

The screen door slammed and Lee looked up to see the two deputies standing on what remained of the hall floor. Seltzer pointed a gun at Lee's shirt, while the other officer jumped into the hole and fastened nickel-plated cuffs on Lee's wrists.

"Figured we'd have to chase you all over the county," said Seltzer. "Thanks for sticking around."

"THIS the way you thank me?" demanded Lee, anger swirling up inside him. He shook his wrists. "I catch your murderer and look what I get!" He glared up at Seltzer and then turned his glance down at Tressell who was trying to sit up. "He killed them, believe me. Both of them!"

The gun was black with a brown-plastic handle. Seltzer raised its barrel a trifle and said: "Typical answer of a guilty man. Blame somebody else." His eyebrows drew together. "What'd you mean 'them'?"

Lee told Seltzer about Guthrie, adding: "Tressell shot him the same way. With a rifle up in a tree about seventy yards from my window."

"That's all very neat, fella," said Seltzer. "But you got to have proof and you got to have a motive if you want to do business with us."

Lee spun around and pointed both hands at the rip in Tressell's pants. "Look. He tore them on the tree."

"Doesn't mean a thing to us," said Seltzer. "That's what you say. For all we know maybe he tore them leaning over to pick up a bottle of milk."

Lee's brain was busier than a one-thousand-volt dynamo. He bent down and squinted at the yellow dust still clinging to the folds of Tressell's khaki shirt.

"Dammit!" he said. "There's proof! That's avocado pollen he got all over himself climbing that tree." Lee looked back at Seltzer. "Can't some of your microscope guys tell what tree that stuff came from? And won't they be able to find threads on the trunk from Tressell's pants? I'll bet his rifle's still up in the tree, too."

A look of begrudging admiration settled on Seltzer's plump face. "Okay, fella. Chalk a couple up for you. We'll get some of the lab boys out here from San Diego to look that tree over." He folded his arms, but kept the gun pointing down into the hole. "You need more though. Why? That's what I want to know. Why would Tressell want to kill them?"

"Well—" Lee felt the skin on his forehead wrinkle tightly. He knew it would sound pretty lame, but he said: "He's been bellyaching about Guthrie owing him twenty-five dollars. Maybe he got liquored up and decided to get even."

"Pretty weak," commented Seltzer. "That's not enough reason for this kind of murder. And what about the girl? Don't forget you need a motive for two."

*(Please continue on page 125)*

*Blitz-Paced*  
*Suspense*  
*Novelette*

By **WILLIAM**  
**GROPPENBACHER, Jr.**

CHAPTER ONE

Message of Murder

**H**E WAS lean and tall, so deeply sunburned I thought probably he had to shave with saddle soap, and he had a look of having knocked around some of the odd corners of the world. What he wanted wasn't unusual, and the way he explained it wasn't anything but matter-of-fact. He wanted me to find a girl for him.

He had left New York four years before, he had quarreled with this girl before he left, and hadn't heard from her since. Now he wanted to find her again; that is, he wanted me to find her for him. He wanted to know all about her before he tried to see her again—was she married, was she happy, what was she doing, all the rest of it.

There didn't seem to be anything much unusual about the girl, either. When he knew her she'd been a secretary for an importing firm, a redhead, good looking enough but no glamour girl, just one of thousands like her. To me, that is. Apparently to him she was the only girl in the world.

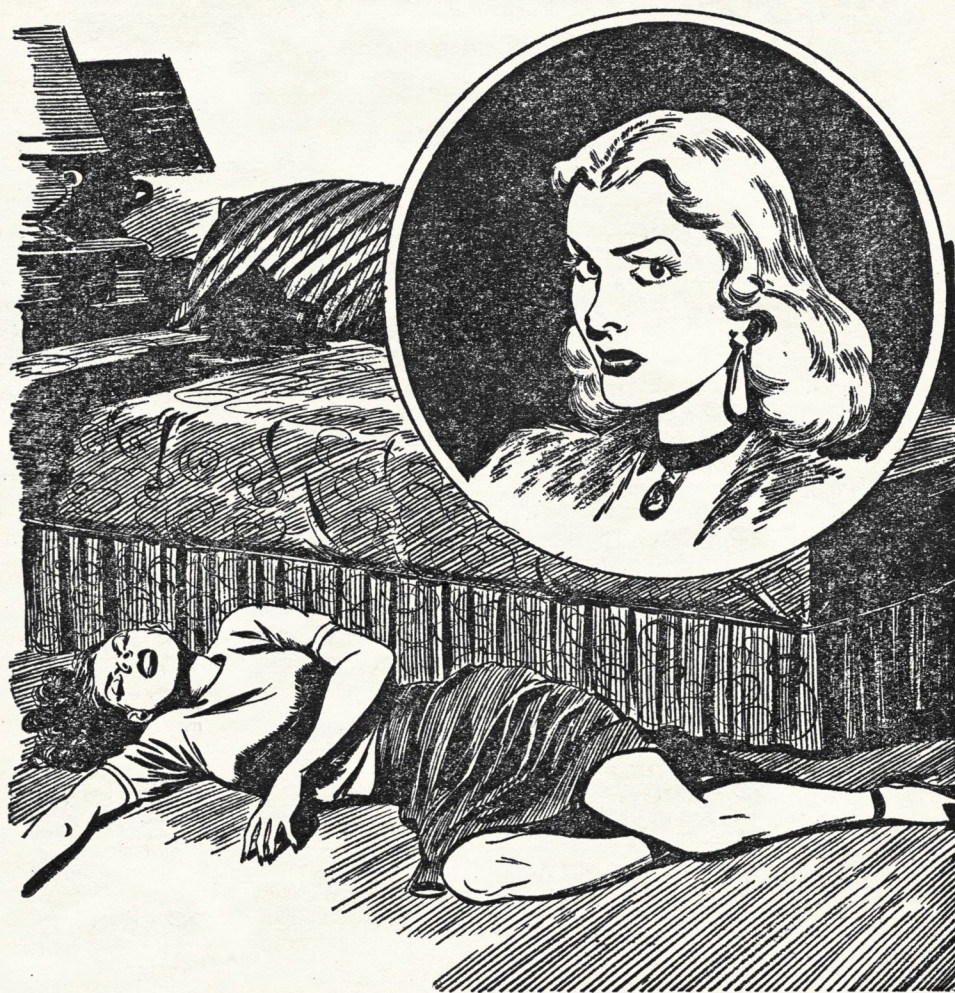
The only unusual thing about the set-up was that there didn't seem to be much point in hiring a detective to do the job for him. He gave me enough leads to make the trick about as difficult as track-



Where she had been lying there was a sheet of paper. It looked like the last page of a letter.

# CORPSE IN THE CARDS

The maharajah's jewels brought death to the redhead—and hurled a gold-digging blonde and a tricky brunette on a murderous merry-go-round.



ing down a major league baseball team. Friends, relatives, places she had lived and worked, stores where she had charge accounts, a complete list of her interests and diversions, everything you could want.

A boy scout could have done the job blindfolded, but I didn't mention that to Mr. Sandford Lane. I just told him solemnly that I would do my level best to find out all there was to know about Marjorie Hastings. He left.

My office is on the second floor, and I get a good view of the street from the window by my desk. I swiveled around and watched my new client as he crossed the street and turned over towards Lexington. I also watched a shadowy looking man detach himself from a lamp post by the bus stop and saunter along after my new client. I thought, maybe this won't be as dull as it looks. Then I got on the job of locating Marjorie Hastings.

It was ridiculously easy. I called the office where she had worked back when he had known her. The operator said yes, Miss Hastings was still with them, but she wasn't in the office today, she was ill. I asked if she still lived at that same address on Bank Street, and the gal said she did. Evidently there hadn't been any drastic changes in Marjorie Hastings' life.

I told the secretary I share with a couple of case-less lawyers that I'd keep in touch, and walked over and took a subway down to the Village. The address was a smallish building with eight apartments in it. The lobby door was open, but I punched the bell under Majorie Hastings' mailbox, and got no answer. I decided she might be sick enough not to want to bother with any visitors, but I went upstairs anyhow.

I didn't know just what I was going to tell her, but I didn't need any patter, because nothing happened when I pushed the bell. I could hear it whirring lonesomely inside, but nobody answered. After a while I idly twisted the knob, and the

door swung open. I told myself that maybe the girl really had been sick and needed some help, so I pushed on through the door, every inch the good Samaritan.

She had been sick, all right, but she didn't need any help. Not any more. She was sprawled out, half on and half off a studio couch, her glassy brown eyes staring with fixed horror at the ceiling. She was beyond any help that anybody but the coroner could give her.

I went over and looked down at the ugly bruise marks on her throat, and there wasn't any doubt that she had been strangled; expertly and violently choked to death. The job had been done neatly and deftly by somebody who knew his business, because there wasn't a sign of a struggle. I lifted up her arm, and it was as cold and almost as stiff as a marble statue. She had been there for quite a while.

When I let the lifeless arm fall back onto the couch, it spraddled out to one side and threw the whole body off balance. In a grotesque imitation of life the dead girl rolled slowly onto the floor. I jumped a foot. I don't greatly mind corpses, but I don't like having them come to life on me.

It was a good thing it happened, though, because where she had been lying on the couch there was a sheet of paper. I picked it up carefully by one corner. It looked like the last page of a letter. It was written in a strong, masculine hand on heavy gray paper, and it said:

*Don't flatter yourself that I feel either hatred or anger for you. My feeling for you is the same as my feeling for a snake. We have lots of snakes out here, you know, but I never waste any time thinking about them. When one of them crosses my path, I simply kill it.*

There was no signature. The paper was beginning to be limp

and creased, like a dollar bill that has been in circulation too long. It was the kind of thing some girls would keep reading and rereading, until it got that worn look. The first thought that flashed across my mind was that that firm handwriting would just about fit the personality of my new client, Mr. Sandford Lane. The next thought was that in most places in the world where you get sunburned to a saddle color, there are likely to be a lot of snakes. I put the paper in my pocket.

**O**F COURSE I had to call the cops, but I didn't much want to. I could never understand why the boys in Homicide should give a particular hoot about who digs up their raw material for them, but they do. And since this was the third corpse I had stumbled over in as many months, I couldn't think they were going to be any too pleased about it. You get a reputation for always being mixed up in murder, and the boys in blue are likely to be suspicious.

I went out to a cigar store and dialed the old familiar Homicide number, and I had the bad luck to latch onto Lieutenant Henry Martin. In his book I rate as a sort of licensed gunman. I gave him the story straight, just as it happened, and he did a good deal of howling. Finally he yelled, "You hang on right there, and get that client of yours down there too."

Next I called the Dunbar where Lane had said he was staying. After a little wait the operator said sweetly, "We have no Mr. Sandford Lane registered." I argued the point and eventually worked my way to up an assistant manager, who finally convinced me that nobody in the place had ever heard of any Sandford Lane. I began to wish I never had.

What I had walked into was a booby trap, but I didn't quite make all the hidden mechanisms yet. I felt a sudden and deep desire not to see Henry Martin. So I scribbled out a note telling him I

had to go find my client, stuck it under the door, and went away from there. If I admitted to Martin that my client had taken a powder, he would give me about forty-eight hours down at Centre Street to try to think where he might have gone. If he even believed I ever had a client.

I rode up to Grand Central, just to get myself out of the neighborhood, then I called the office and asked if there had been any messages. The girl said, "You've got one here now. Wearing a mink coat and Chanel Number 5. She says she can wait a few minutes longer."

"Not for me, because I can't get back. Tell her to meet me over at Tim's. I'll be wearing a double bourbon." I walked the few blocks up to Tim's, and I had just settled down behind a drink when she came in the door. It couldn't have been anybody else, because Tim doesn't go in very heavily for the mink coat trade. For that matter, neither do I.

I went over and asked if she happened to be looking for Rex Castle. She turned on a dazzling smile and said, "Oh, yes. I'm so happy to see you." We went over and sat down in a booth, and I felt like a magazine editor looking at his next cover. She had that almost too-perfect blonde beauty that you rarely see except in the pages of very slick magazines. It looked expensive, too, like the finish of a custom-built car.

After the waiter had left her Tim's version of a martini and refilled my beaker, she leaned confidentially across the table and said, "I am Sheila Rolfe," as though it should mean something to me, but it didn't. I tried to look impressed, and she went on, "I want you to find a man for me. A man named Sandford Lane."

That one almost choked me on a gulp of bourbon, but I recovered. I told her, "I'll be delighted." This was something new; being paid for a job I had to do anyhow. "What do you know about him?"

"Too much—and not enough."

I almost replied, *You can say that for me, too.* But I just said, "Better start at the beginning."

"I met him out in the Pacific, when he was in the air force. I was just another USO entertainer then. Now—well, things have been breaking better for me." That I could believe. The USO was a wonderful organization, but they didn't hand out any mink coat wages. She leaned forward in the intimate way that was just as posed as her picture on a cover, but it made me feel good all the same. She said, "I've been modelling, you know."

"So what happened on Kwajelein or Guadalcanal or wherever it was?"

"Guam. It was one of those crazy wartime romances, and I guess we were in love, or thought we were. You know how it was."

"Not me. I was an enlisted man, and I never even got close enough to any entertainers to tell what color hair they had without using binoculars. Go on."

"I came back to the States, and after the war was over he just kept going, I think he was in India for quite a while, but we lost touch. Now he's back here, and I want to find out about him."

"Uh-huh. How do you know he's back?"

"A man named Johnny Barton has been with him all this while. I saw Johnny last night, and he told me they got in yesterday afternoon on a tramp steamer from Bombay."

"Isn't there something screwy about an old air force man poking all the way back from India on some beat-up old cargo vessel?"

She gave me a level look, and her remarkable eyes became a couple of pieces of blue ice. "Unless he couldn't afford to come any other way."

"And that's one of the things you want me to find out about him?"

"I think we understand each other."

"I know we do." There's one thing about dealing with a dame like that—you know where you stand. She's out to get all she can out of anybody that comes along, so the ground rules are very simple—there aren't any. I asked, "What's your interest in this Sandford Lane?"

"I'm married to him."

"Oh." That answered a few questions, and it also set up a few more. I decided I didn't need to know those answers for a while yet. I asked, "Have you any idea where I can find your husband?"

She gave me a newly minted wistful smile. "It's odd hearing someone speak of my husband. Not many people knew we were married. By the way, you needn't mention it to anyone."

"I'm known as the boy with the open eyes and the sealed lips."

"As for finding him, all I know is that Johnny Barton said he was back. He left Johnny at the ship, said he'd get in touch with him later, but he hadn't."

"Where will I find this Barton?"

"In bed with an ice bag, I should think from the start he had when I saw him last night. He's staying at the Dunbar."

I ASKED her a few more routine questions, got her address and phone number, and told her I'd let her know when I got something. We got up to leave, and there, draped over the end of the bar, was Sam Asbury. Sam has his own agency, bigger than my one-man stand, with several cops working for him. He didn't even look at us, but as Sheila Rolfe went out the door, Sam tipped a nod to a character who was reading a paper in the end booth. The character got up and trailed along behind her.

Sam swung around on his bar stool and gave me a friendly grin. "Who was that lady I seen you with, Rex?"

"That wasn't no lady," I told him. "That was a client."

"A client, eh? That's interesting."

"Yeah, I noticed you were interested. You and your bloodhound."

"We might trade a little information, Rex, and save each other some time."

"I've got time to throw away, Sam. I don't have to save any." He just shrugged and let it go. I said, "I'll keep you in mind if I hear of anything that might interest you."

I walked on over towards the Dunbar, jigsawing all the pieces of this puzzle around in my head, and still coming up with nothing but pieces. But there was one thing I didn't like. There were too many odd coincidences floating around. Two clients drop out of nowhere. The first client is looking for a dead woman, and the second client is looking for the first one. On top of that, somebody is tailing the first client, and somebody else is tailing the second. There had to be a connection. In this racket, if you let yourself believe things just happen to happen, you can very easily wind up with a pocket full of nothing and a back full of lead.

I got Barton's room number at the desk and went on up. He was in bed, all right, but if that was an ice bag he was with, it was the first one I ever saw that wore skirts and could whisk out into the bathroom and close the door after itself. Barton was young, in his middle twenties or so, and he was sunburned to about the same shade as Sandford Lane. He would probably have been a nice looking guy if he hadn't been somewhat ravaged by a hangover, and well on the way to building another one. I told him I was a friend of Sheila Rolfe, and that seemed to make me all right with him.

There was a silver pitcher and some glasses on the bedside table. He filled up a glass and said, "Whiskey sours. It's kind of heroic, but it does the trick." He began to revive some, I asked him a few casual questions, and he was perfectly willing to talk about Sandford Lane.

"We were Twentieth Air Force. After

the war we just didn't want to come home. We got discharged out there, and there was this Indian maharajah Sandy knew—he was in the CBI first, see? So the Rajah had an army and an air force of four airplanes and he wanted some imported talent to come out and run his army for him. We did it until we just got tired of the whole show a month or so ago and headed back home again."

"Broke?"

"You mean no rupees? Hell, no. We got an elephant load of 'em."

"Being a soldier of fortune paid off, did it?"

"Soldier of fortune? I guess that's what we were, at that. Yeah, the Raj paid off. He also gave stuff away with both hands." Barton took a long pull at the whiskey sour. "Most of all, he loved to play poker, and he never did learn how. But we tried to teach him." He gave me a smug and knowing look, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he had pulled a casket of jewels out from under the bed.

I asked, "What's the matter with Lane and his wife?"

For a second I thought he was going to clam up, but he seemed to be a friendly kind of bird, and besides you can't lap up whiskey sours at that rate without having your tongue loosen up some. He shrugged. "It was just one of those fast shuffles that didn't deal out so well. I guess they found out they were going different directions. He never talked about her."

"It's odd he didn't even look her up when you got in town yesterday. What happened to him?"

"Beats me. He said he had some business of his own to look after, and I didn't ask him what it was. I thought he might have gone to see Sheila, so that's how I happened to look her up." He put on a faintly apologetic look. "I guess I was pretty tight."

"Who wouldn't be, after that stretch

in India. And I suppose that ship you came home on was no yacht, either, was it?"

"Not exactly. But there were good reasons for taking it."

I'd have given something to know those reasons, but I didn't want to push him too far. "You suppose Lane is out tying one on somewhere?"

"Not Sandy. He never drinks much."

"Could he have checked in somewhere under another name?"

"Say, that—" He caught himself suddenly and went into a very phoney fit of choking. He sputtered out an excuse and headed for the bathroom, carefully closing the door after him. I decided a touch of those whiskey sours might loosen up my thinking, so I poured myself a good one.

I didn't drink it, though. The stuff was pure orange juice. This innocent young bucko had been taking me for a good fast gallop with his lush act. I was back in my chair and trying to look naive when he came back in the room. He said, "Say, old man, I just remembered a very important appointment. I'll tell Sandy you were here, shall I?"

"Yeah. Just tell him Rex Castle is looking for him."

I went on down to the lobby, found a phone booth, and called Martin. "Henry," I said, "I've lost my client."

"If you don't get down here on the double," he bellowed, "you're gonna lose your freedom."

"But you wanted to see my client, you said."

"Yeah. And if you can't find him, eighteen thousand cops can. Get on down here." We batted that one back and forth, and finally he said he wouldn't need me for a while. Which meant that he had an angle on the killing, or thought he had. I moved over to a nice comfortable chair with a good view of the elevators, dug in behind a newspaper, and relaxed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A High-Class Emerald

I EXPECTED a couple of things to happen, and it wasn't long before one of them did. Sandford Lane came in the street entrance, picked up a key at the desk, and went to the elevators. When he stepped into the car I was right behind him. We both gave an imitation of perfect strangers. When he got off at the eleventh floor I sauntered after him, jangling some loose keys in my pocket. When he had his room door open, he took a look one way and I took a look the other way, and we were both inside. I didn't yet know what else he was, but in some ways he was a man who would do to take along.

It was just a standard hotel room, and he waved me to the easy chair and sat himself down on the edge of the bed. He said, "I've got another job for you."

I let him talk. Maybe he would drop something about a dead girl on Bank Street, or a too-beautiful blonde in mink, or a sunburned guy who got drunk on orange juice.

"I came in yesterday, on a ship from Bombay. I'm just about certain that I've been followed ever since, at least I know somebody trailed me away from the pier. That's why I checked in here under a phoney name."

He gave me a look that half apologized for leading me all around Robin Hood's barn. So I said, "Well, it wasn't phoney enough to fool me. Who would want to follow you?"

"I'd better tell you the whole thing. For the last two years I've been working, if you can call it that, for a maharajah of one of the independent Indian states. The Raj liked to play poker, and I was glad to oblige. Several times I got into him for some of the old family jewels. He didn't like losing them and he wanted them back, but he never welched or never



tried to buy them. Of course, he could have just had me disappear out there, and nobody would have known the difference.

"But that was against his code, too. It wouldn't be polite to take back a guest's gambling winnings, and it would be even more impolite to kill him. But now that I'm in my own country no holds are barred. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah," I said. "No ground rules. And the reason you don't go to the cops is the same reason you came in on that tramp steamer. You neglected to pay any duty on those rocks."

He gave me a look that made me understand why the Maharajah might have shoved some of his heirlooms across the mahogany. "Are you working for the customs department or for me?"

"For you. So far. You say you were shadowed from the time you left the boat. Is there any way that can be proved?"

"I don't follow you."

"You'd better follow me, or you're going to have more than a maharajah on your neck. You're going to have New York's finest."

He was on his feet and standing over me before I knew he'd even moved. But he was very calm. He said, "So you think you'll turn me in?"

I tried to be as calm as he was. I said, "I was thinking of it. For murder."

That stopped him. He still stood there, towering over me. He said very quietly, "How did murder get into this?"

"Sit down," I told him, and oddly enough he did go back to the bed. I said, "Remember, you hired me to find a girl named Marjorie Hastings? I found her, right in the apartment where you probably said goodbye."

All the tension washed away from him when I said that, and he forgot all the rest of his troubles. He sloughed off four years of fast living in four seconds, and he asked me, "How is she?"

Sometimes there's no use pulling a

punch, and this was one of them. I said, "She's dead." He just looked at me, and for the first time in my life I knew what they meant when they say somebody went pale beneath his tan. I went on, "She was strangled to death, sometime yesterday afternoon or evening. The cops are working on it now. They want to see you. What do I tell them?"

He looked at me, and he looked stricken. "Strangled? Yesterday?"

I told him about the dead girl, and he sat there and took it. Took it, I suppose, because there wasn't anything else he could do. When I'd told him the story, all but the part about that piece of a letter I'd found under her on the couch, I took that out of my pocket and handed it to him. "You ever see that before?"

He was a colorful guy, in a way. Underneath that tan he could not only turn white, he could blush. He said slowly, "It's my writing. It's part of a letter I started to write and never finished, and of course never mailed. Where did you get it?"

I reached over and took the paper back from him. "I found it under Marjorie Hastings' body this morning. The cops don't know about it yet, but they'll have to. If you didn't mail it, how did it get there?"

"I don't know. I wrote it out there, a year ago. I had just got that far with it when the Raj wanted to go tiger hunting, and we were gone three days. When we got back the letter was gone, and I supposed a servant had picked it up. By that time I had decided not to mail it anyway, so I didn't think any more about it."

"Are you one of those people who start off writing a letter by addressing the envelope first?"

"Sometimes I do. Why?"

"Maybe one of those Indian flunkies just bundled it up and mailed it for the sahib as part of the regular service."

He looked thoughtful, started to say

something, changed his mind, and finally said, "Could be."

I thought of asking him whether the letter hadn't been addressed to Sheila Rolfe and not Marjorie Hastings, but I decided against it. The guy was a poker player, and you don't show a poker player your hole cards until all the chips are on the table. I said, "Maybe you don't recognize a spot when you're sitting in the middle of it, but that's where you are."

"This has been a pretty bad shock. I haven't quite taken it in yet."

**"YOU** better get the intake working, then. Look. You have a fight with this girl three or four years ago. You go off to India and brood about her, and you write her some nasty letters. Then you find out you can't get along without her after all, so you come to New York and try to get her back. She reminds you of that little note about how you rate her in the same league with a hooded cobra, and she just laughs at you. So you go berserk and give her the treatment. It all fits."

"Is that what you think?"

"I'm not thinking anything, yet. But I'll bet that's what the cops will think."

"If all that were true, why would I have hired you to go looking for her?"

"Simple. That's known in the trade as an alibi. You don't even know where the girl is, because you had to hire an eye to look her up for you. So how could you have killed her?"

His mahogany brow wrinkled up into worry lines, and he took a couple of quick turns around the room. Finally he stopped, took out a wallet, and began leafing through a big sheaf of crisp new bills. He gave me a level look, and said, "Are you with me, or against me?"

"You can't hire me to dummy up, if that's what you mean. But I don't see any reason why I shouldn't go on working for you. And there are a couple of reasons

why I'd like to have some answers myself." Also, I didn't see any reason for pitching a good client to the wolves just because he might be slightly involved in a murder.

"Fair enough." He peeled off four fifties and handed them to me. "For expenses." He went back and sat on the bed again. "There doesn't have to be any connection between my coming back and Marjorie being killed."

"Nope. And there doesn't have to be any connection between the sun going down and it getting dark at night, but most people seem to think there is."

"All right, let that go for the time being. The first thing you do is find out who's trailing me. That may be your connection."

I didn't get it, but there were lots of things I didn't get about this case yet. I said, "Okay. What have you done with the Rajah's old family jewels?"

He took a big snakeskin cigar case from his breast pocket, lifted off the top, and then pulled off the top of a row of fake cigars. "They're all here," he said. "I took them out of the settings so they'd be easier to handle. They aren't very big, but they're worth a fortune."

"How big a fortune?"

"A hundred thousand, at least."

"Remind me not to play poker with you. And the first thing you'd better do is get rid of those rocks. If those brown torpedoes actually are following you, that's what they're after."

"I know a safe place to put them."

"I hope you're right, but that's not my worry. I'll go on downstairs. You give me about fifteen minutes start, then come down and take off for somewhere. I'll see whether anybody picks you up. And you'd better stay around where I can find you. Don't forget we've got a murder on our hands."

I went down to the lobby, bummed an envelope at the desk, addressed it to

myself in care of general delivery, stuffed Lane's letter into it and dropped it into a slot. Nobody needed to tell me that I was fooling with dynamite by withholding evidence, but I have an awful curiosity, and once I get started on a case, I like to play it along for a while. Besides which, it isn't every Wednesday morning of my career that a client so casually peels off two hundred fish for expenses.

I hadn't much more than settled into a chair when the elevator doors rolled open and out stepped my late drunk friend Mr. Johnny Barton. On his arm was a gorgeous little bit of fluff with very dark hair and eyes, very red lips, and skin like a gardenia. She was wearing a silver fox jacket, and she was carrying one of those hatboxes that are a model's badge. The two of them crossed the lobby and went out to the street, and I continued to wait.

Lane stepped out of the elevator in fifteen minutes on the dot and sauntered over to the street door. I didn't have much trouble spotting his tail, and after Lane had led us a block up Madison, I knew I was right. The guy was wearing a hat and topcoat that said *Made in England*, but otherwise he was nondescript. That, and the easy and aimless way he kept after his man, told me that he knew his business. I began to take more stock in Lane's yarn about being followed.

And it wasn't long before I saw he was no beginner at the game himself. His movements became more and more erratic, he was in and out of stores, he doubled back, he changed pace. And finally he just vanished, the way it looked to me, through a hole in the floor of a telephone booth. His tail ranged around the whole area, chewing on a pipe stem and looking anxious, but it didn't get him anywhere.

**F**INALLY he straightened out his course and headed up Madison. I followed him until he turned into a jewelry

store, with the air of a man who knew where he was going and had been there before. I made a note of the place for future reference, then I did something I didn't want to, but sooner or later I had to. I went down to see Lieutenant Henry Martin.

For a wonder, the lieutenant was in a jovial mood. He wasn't even mad when he said he'd give me just two more hours to produce my client. But he did a pretty good job of pumping me. I told him what I knew about Lane, or at any rate part of it. I didn't mention the jewels, and the description I gave of him wouldn't do my reputation as a reliable witness any good.

Henry gave me a benign smile that did everything but say out loud he thought he was outsmarting me. He said, "I'm surprised you didn't search the joint, Rex."

"Why, Lieutenant, naturally my one and only thought was to inform the police."

"Naturally, I'd say you were lying if we hadn't found this under that bed." He reached into the middle drawer of his desk, and when his hand came out it was holding a sparkling gem, deep green with flashes of white fire in its depths. "What do you think of that?"

"Henry," I admitted, "when it comes to jewelry, I'm strictly from the dime store. But if I had to guess, I'd say that was an emerald."

"You're damn tootin' it's an emerald, and a very high class one at that. And you know, some guys give their girls emeralds for engagement rings. That mean anything to you?"

"It means that some guys are a good deal deeper in the bucks than I am."

"Rex, you must be slipping. Can't you see the picture? Some guy that wants to marry this dame comes around to pop the question, and he brings along this emerald. He's gonna let her have it mounted however way she wants it, see? So he shows her the rock, makes his pitch, and

she puts him off—she says no dice.

“He blows his top and grabs her by the neck. She starts to scream, so he chokes harder. She gurgles and he chokes her harder. He keeps on choking harder and harder, because now he hates her. And finally she gets limp and dead, and he forgets all about the rock. All he remembers is he wanted the dame, he couldn’t get her, so he killed her.”

Henry was good. He was like something out of a Hitchcock movie. He had me on the edge of my chair. He stopped abruptly and stared at me. “Would that fit your client?”

I got a sinking feeling. Every time I tugged at a new thread it turned out to be another strand in the rope I could almost see around Sandford Lane’s neck. But I still figured the guy was levelling with me. I said, “Why no, I don’t think it would. You don’t stay away from a woman for four years and then all of a sudden turn up wanting to marry her, and end up five minutes later killing her.”

“Somebody did it that way, and finding him is just a matter of routine. I’d say your client looks pretty good on the starting odds. We’ve got a pickup out for him. You better not step into something that’s too deep for you.” He looked at me happily, as though he expected me to do just that. I left.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *Murder Merry-go-Round*

**G**OING uptown, I got an idea, so I stopped off at 50th Street, and walked on over to Sam Asbury’s office. Sam does all right, I guess. His offices are plushier than any place I ever hope to hang up my license, and right then I was wondering how long I would keep on having a license to hang up anywhere. Sam said, “Well, well. The swallows come back.”

“If by that you mean you think I’m going to sing little bird songs for you, the answer is no.”

“Maybe you want to find out something about your beautiful client?” He riffled through some scrawled memo pads on his desk. “I could tell you one or two things.”

“Nope. I want to rent one of your boys. If you’ve got a good one loose.”

“I’ve got a lot of ’em loose, but a good one you’ll have to pry loose.”

I handed him a half C note. “Will that do for a lever?”

“Has it got a brother anywhere?” I handed him another fifty. “You’ve bought the best.” He looked down at the two crisp new bills, and said, “Do these come from a large family?”

“Very large,” I told him. “With extensive connections. They would like to adopt a couple of your medium-sized boys for a couple of days.” I handed him another fifty.

Sam said, “I’m beginning to love this family. How do we all take out adoption papers?”

I told him about the jewelry shop and the nondescript shadow in the English coat and hat. “You tail him, you find out what you can about that little ice house. I want it good, complete, and fast.”

“That’s the way you’ll get it, pal.”

“And there may be another odd job or two along the way. I’ll let you know if one comes up.” As I left Sam’s office I couldn’t help thinking that for a guy whose client might not last long enough to hand over another fee, I was certainly being lavish with the expense money. So I stopped in a tavern and invested some more in lunch, with soda on the side. Then I took a cab over to Sheila Rolfe’s apartment on 49th.

Just as I had expected, it was a glittering nest, with a living room big enough for a nice game of tennis, and the kind of furniture you don’t normally associate

with the home life of a poor working girl. Sheila Rolfe had discarded the mink coat and had slipped into a black negligee.

Curled up on a big white couch at one end of the room was the little dark-haired beauty I had seen getting out of the elevator with Johnny Barton. I hadn't exactly expected her, but on the other hand I wasn't exactly surprised. Sheila Rolfe waved a negligent hand at her and said, "Miss Carruthers, Mr. Castle."

The gal gave me a lazy smile, stretched her lithe body erect with the grace of a Persian cat, and said, "I'll see you two later." She walked out a door at the end of the room.

Sheila said, "Rita lives here with me."

"Does she ever take a night off?"

Her eyes iced up for just a second, then she shrugged. "I'm not her guardian." She leaned over and took a cigarette from an ivory box on an end table. "I take it you had something to say to me?"

"Yeah. I found your husband. He's not exactly broke, by about a hundred grand or so. But he could be in a pretty bad jam."

The delicate eyebrows arched. "With a woman?"

"I'm not just exactly sure yet. I wanted to know whether you wanted me to keep on going with the investigation."

"You mentioned a hundred thousand dollars. Just what form does that take?"

"It's portable. That is, it isn't tied up in real estate or anything like that."

She looked impatient. "Really, Mr. Castle, I didn't hire you to talk in riddles."

"There's no riddle about that. I'm just telling you I've located your husband, in case you want to see him. He isn't broke, in case you're interested in that. Just how much more do you want to know?"

"I want some more exact information on the money he's got. And on the trouble he's in. I want to know whether it might be—shall we say, fatal."

"I'll get it for you. Do you want to

see him?" I asked, looking at her closely.

"Not yet. And, of course, you're leaving my name out of this entirely."

That seemed to end that interview, so I bowed myself out. I was thinking that she probably knew as much about Sandford Lane as I did, and that one very hot source of information would be that little dark-haired dolly who had apparently devoted some time to working over this Johnny Barton. I decided to try a little more of the same myself.

I found Barton back in his hotel room with the door locked, and he was very cautious about opening up when I knocked. I finally convinced him I was alone and fairly harmless, and he let me in. He had his shirt off and was wearing a towel turban-wise around his head. I couldn't resist cracking, "An old Indian custom, I presume?"

He seemed shaky on his legs as he crossed the room and eased himself into a chair. Solemnly he unwound the towel, and showed me a big purplish lump just above his left temple. He cracked right back at me, "An old American custom, I presume?"

"**I**N SOME circles, yes." He swept his hand around the room in a wide gesture, and he didn't have to say anything. Somebody had taken the place apart and turned it upside down. I asked, "What happened?"

"I thought you were supposed to be a detective."

"Where would you get that idea?"

"I heard about you a long time ago. So if you're a detective, you tell me what happened. All I know is, when I came back here somebody stepped out of the bathroom and slugged me, and when I came back to life this is what I saw."

"Anything missing?"

"No. That's the screwy part of it."

"Maybe he was just looking for something that wasn't here. Did you call the

cops or get hold of the house dick?"

"No. And what do you mean, something that wasn't here?"

"Something such as some poker winnings you've got stashed away."

For a second he looked puzzled. Then he said, "Oh. You've got me wrong, Mac. Sandy is the poker player of the firm. He has the stuff." He gave me an intent and quizzical look. "Have you found him?"

"Not yet. Have you?"

"Nope. But you may be right, at that. He's carrying some pretty valuable stuff, and it's possible somebody thought I had it." He gingerly fingered the lump on his forehead, and said, "If you'd like a job, I'll pay you your usual rates to find out who clipped me."

That was just dandy. At this rate, I'd soon be working for everybody who seemed to be involved in the case, except possibly Henry Martin. But I said, "Why don't you let the cops do it?"

He gave me a candid look, and said, "Hell, what Sandy is holding is jewels, and the fewer people who know about them, the better."

"Are they hot?"

"Not that way. But they're hot enough to interest a few types who play kind of rough." He went on to tell me about the poker-playing Rajah, and the story was the same as Lane had given it to me.

When he had finished, I said, "So you think it was one of the Rajah's boys who slugged you just now, because he was looking for the jewelry?"

"Who else? Nobody else knows."

"Not even that little dark-haired dame I saw you with this morning?"

He started to grin, and winced as the grin pulled the skin tight over the lump on his forehead. "So you tumbled to that, did you? I guess you aren't so dusty at this business after all. She tried hard enough to wheedle some information out of me, but she didn't get very far. Maybe

she thinks she did, though; she thought I was drunk."

"I wondered about that lush act."

"Now you know." He got up and started to put on a shirt. "Do you think you can locate these birds that did this?"

"It'll take some expense money."

"Such as how much?"

"Say a C note." He didn't quibble a bit, but just pulled two fifties out of a wallet that was on the dresser and handed them over. I began to think about taking a trip to India myself; these guys acted like the stuff grew wild in the jungles out there. I asked him once more, "You sure you don't know where we might find Lane?"

"Haven't the slightest idea. But he'll turn up." So I told him I'd let him know what I found out, and left. Lane's room was on the next floor above, and I thought I'd better look in on him.

There was no answer to my knock, and of course the door was locked. I sauntered down the hall until I came to a room where a maid was working. Then I took out my fountain pen, squirted ink all over my hand, and smeared it around. I put a sheepish look on my face, and knocked on the open door. The maid came out, and I said, "I had an accident. And on top of that, I left my key in my room. Will you let me in, please?"

She looked a little dubious, so I explained some more about how I started to see whether there was any ink in my pen, and the thing spilled all over me. She took another look at my hand, and where the ink was smeared up on my shirt cuff, and then she took pity. She took me on down to Lane's room and opened the door. I gave her half a buck, and left the door ajar, just to look less suspicious.

I headed for the bathroom and started washing my hands, just as though I belonged there, and the maid went away. It was pretty good ink, because it took some

scrubbing to get it off. I bent down to the job of doing it, and that's where I left the party for a while.

I didn't see anything, hear anything, or feel anything, until something approximately like a baseball bat in the hands of a Babe Ruth smashed into the back of my skull. The white tile of the wash basin exploded in a blaze of orange, and burned itself out into a deep black as I felt myself falling. That was all, for a while.

**F**OR twenty minutes, to be exact. Then I found myself hanging onto the edge of a white lifeboat that was pitching wildly in a typhoon. Little by little my head cleared, the lifeboat turned into a bathtub and the typhoon subsided and settled into the soft green walls of the bathroom. I kept on hanging on until everything was steady.

Then I pulled myself to my feet, and I wasn't too unsteady. I sidled over to the door and took a look around. The door to the hall was closed, and the room was empty. Empty, but a wreck.

I looked around, but I didn't waste much time at it. Whatever somebody had been looking for, it wasn't likely to be there any more. There was an almost full bottle of Scotch, and a couple of good jolts of that helped. I was also interested in a neat little Browning automatic lying in the middle of the dresser, and I wondered why anybody would keep a firearm lying out in the open like that. Then I patched up the damage the wrecking crew had done to me, which was considerable, and got out of there.

Downstairs in the bar, I ordered a double bourbon, and sat down to see whether I could make my head do something besides ache. I could feel a couple of ideas chasing themselves around, but my brain wasn't quite nimble enough to catch them. I kept seeing wild pictures in my mind. A dead girl with mottled

bruises on her throat sprawled on a studio couch. A tall, sunburned man with blue eyes gone suddenly cold and hard. A shadowy little brown-skinned man moving on cat's feet through the jungle of the city. A beautiful and expensive woman with a cold and calculating mind and no heart.

That kind of thing. And somewhere a thread connecting all of them, but a thread I couldn't quite reach. I took a long pull at the drink, and when I set it down, Johnny Barton was crossing the room towards me. He eased onto the stool next to me, and said, "Nice work, being a detective."

"Don't worry," I told him. "I'm on the job."

He opened the newspaper he was carrying, and said, "Do you think the guy who slugged me is still hanging around?"

"He hung around for a while, anyhow."

He spread the newspaper out on the bar in front of him, pointed to a one column story, and said, "Say, here's something." It was the story about Marjorie Hastings' body being found. We both read it through without saying anything, and I didn't learn anything I hadn't already known. Martin had naturally seen to it that I didn't get a mention; never give a private operator a break, is his theory. Barton said slowly, "That's the girl Sandy used to be in love with."

"Too bad."

He absent-mindedly ordered a Manhattan, and sat staring at the bottles on the backbar. Finally he said, "I think you'd better forget about everything else and try to locate Sandy."

"You think he's likely to take this pretty hard?"

"Well—" His voice trailed off, he took a sip of his drink, spun the stem of the glass between his thumb and forefinger, and started talking, half to himself. "To tell you the truth, I'm afraid that life out there sort of got Sandy. He took to go-

ing off by himself, he'd fly into rages for no reason at all. A couple of times he came very close to killing one of the Raj's men." He looked faintly apologetic. "Life is pretty cheap out there, and I guess he sort of took on their standards."

Oh Lord, I thought. Even his best friend is doing it. What chance has the guy got? I said, "You mean you think he might have rubbed this girl?"

"Hell," he flared, "I didn't say that. I just said he's gotten unpredictable."

"Okay," I said. "Take it easy." I asked, "Is Lane a good deal of a ladies man?"

"Not a bit. Why?"

"Nothing in particular. I just thought we might *cherchez la femme*." The reason I had asked, and I still didn't know the answer, was that Sheila Rolfe had been so quick to ask whether Lane was in trouble with a woman. I couldn't escape a feeling that she knew a whole lot more than she was telling. I told Barton, "I've got a couple of angles on him. I'll see what I can do." I slid off the stool and went out to a phone booth. First I called Sam Asbury.

When Sam answered he said, "What are you in, the carnival business?"

"How's that, Sam?"

"You've certainly got us all on a merry-go-round. I'm tailing your client, the guys you've got me tailing are tailing one of my clients. It's like a bunch of bloodhounds chasing their own tails."

"You're getting paid for it, Sam. That's all you have to get right now. What'd you find out?"

"I've only been on it a couple of hours, you know," he said wearily. "But that little jewelry shop is run by some kind of a foreigner, he might be anything from an Arabian on up or down. I'll have more on him later. That place may look like a hole in the wall, but it's a very high class joint.

"Maybe there's something else going on

there, because my boy saw a couple of characters that didn't fit going into the place, and they went right on into the back room. That bird you wanted us to watch hot-footed it out of the place and jumped into a cab, and where do you think he went, Rex?"

"I can't imagine, Sam."

"To your office. And who do you think he picked up coming out of there?"

"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

"Nuts to you. He started tailing a guy named Sandford Lane. That mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing, Sam. Where did they go?"

"How should I know where they went? Do you think my boys carry walkie-talkies?"

"For the fee you're getting, they ought to come equipped with television. How long ago did this happen?"

"Twenty minutes."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Poker for Blood

"**T**HANKS, Sam. I'll keep in touch." He started to yell something about me explaining something, but I just hung up. I called the office, and the girl told me Lane had left the address of a bar on Third Avenue, and said he would be there for an hour. I grabbed a cab.

It was just like any other Third Avenue bar, quiet at that hour of the afternoon, with just a few regulars seeing how long they could make a beer last. Lane was at the far end of the bar, by himself. I dropped onto a stool next to him, and cut my rations down to a single bourbon. I was having enough trouble with my head as it was. He said, "I see you got my message. What have you found out?"

"About what?"

"Anything."



"Does the seat of your pants feel any warmer?" He looked blank, so I went on, "It should, because that spot you're on is getting hotter by the minute. It's practically sizzling by now. You didn't know it at the time, but when you played poker with that Rajah, you were playing poker for blood. Tell me, is there an emerald in that bunch of stones?"

"Yes. It isn't especially good, but it's no piece of glass, either. Why?"

"Is it still with the rest of them?"

"I suppose it is. I didn't look."

"Suppose you do look."

"I haven't got them any more. I did as you advised and put them in a safe place."

"Where?"

"I don't see that it's any part of your job to know that."

"We'd get along better, Lane, if you'd trust me. For instance, you should have told me you'd hired Sam Asbury."

His eyes went cold and his voice had an edge of flat steel in it. "I hired you to get some information for me, not to act as a father confessor."

"You don't need a confessor, you need a nursemaid. Can't you understand that somebody's out to get you? In fact, two of 'em are out to get you. The law and somebody else."

"The law?"

"Remember Marjorie Hastings?" He went rigid all over, and for a few seconds I thought he was going to swing on me. I got set to roll with the punch, but he just went on sitting there like something out of stone. I said, "The cops are playing tag with the guy who killed her, and they think you're it."

I had relaxed, and wasn't set for this one. His fist left the bar like a bullet leaving the muzzle of a gun, and it collided with my chin with about the same velocity. I went over backwards, my head smacked the floor, and that finished it.

But not for long, this time. I was propped up on my elbows in time to see

Lane striding calmly out the door. The bartender ducked out from behind the bar and got a hand under my elbow. "Huly gee," said he, "you musta said the wrong thing." He eased me over to the bar and brought another drink.

I said, "It's his funeral."

"Guys like that is askin' for funerals."

"Brother, you don't know how right you are." Maybe it takes two good clouts on my noggin to make it work right, I don't know. But I do know that all of a sudden all of the pieces dropped into the right slots, and I had a picture. A picture that ended with somebody catching up with Lane.

I took another drink, and the picture of a dead girl on Bank Street floated back into my mind. A girl who had died for no reason except so somebody could get Sandford Lane. I felt a little sick, and it wasn't because of the raps on the head or the liquor. It suddenly struck me that Lane had a good reason—better even than he knew—for going wild at the mention of Marjorie Hastings' name.

Ten minutes later I was knocking on Lane's door and getting no answer. I prowled down the hall until I found an open door, and there was my friend the maid. I told her I'd been in such a hurry I'd forgotten my key again, and she let me in the room without any argument. It didn't take long to find out what I wanted to know. The little Browning automatic was missing.

I picked up the telephone and called Sam Asbury again. "Heard anything from the guy who's tailing the guy who's tailing Sandford Lane?"

"Yeah, that's a cute thing, indeed. Your merry-go-round gets dizzier by the minute. Where do you think they went this time?"

"Quit playing quiz contest, Sam."

"They went to that apartment building where your beautiful client Sheila Rolfe lives. What I want to know—" I didn't

wait to tell him what he wanted to know. I was on my way out of there.

Sheila Rolfe's apartment building was swank, but it wasn't big enough to have a doorman or a switchboard. I drove myself up to her floor in the elevator and walked to her door without being seen. There was nothing jerry-built about that door; you couldn't just push against it with your shoulder and break it open. But I was going in if I had to use the fire-axe hanging at the end of the corridor.

But I didn't have to. I turned the knob and pushed, and the door swung open.

I stopped in the foyer for a second or two, listening to the voices from the living room beyond, and I knew I wasn't too late. Not yet, anyhow. I stepped through the arched doorway into the living room. Sandford Lane was on the big couch at one end, and Johnny Barton was in a chair facing him. They both looked up as I came in, and they didn't look pleased. I said, "I see you found him, Barton."

His voice had lost its cheerful friendliness. "How do you fit into this?"

"Not quite where you planned to fit me."

He lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his chair, his hands in his pockets. He said, "How do you figure?"

"I figure just one jump ahead of you, Barton." I looked at Sandford Lane, sitting there tense, but not making a move. "Lane, did you ask him whether that emerald is with the rest of the stuff?"

**T**HAT did it. Barton's hand whipped out of his pocket, and it was holding a gun. It was holding the little Browning automatic I had seen on Lane's dresser. That was fine, that was just right. I had to let Barton make the first move, and he made it. Lane started to get up, and Barton waved the side of the gun at him; the muzzle he kept pointed at me. "Sit down, Sandy. I'll handle this." That

Barton was no dope. He made me face the wall and lean against it with my hands over my head.

I said, "Take a look at that pistol, Lane. If it isn't yours, tell me why it was planted in your room this afternoon when Barton slugged me there." I couldn't see what was going on in the room, but I could feel the tension. And I could tell from the sound of Barton's voice that his finger was curling around that trigger.

He rasped, "Shut up, Castle. I'll do the talking. Sandy, we both hired this guy, and that make us both damn fools. We told him about the Rajah's jewels, and he's out to get them."

He made it sound good, but I was holding the trump. I knew the one thing that would make Sandford Lane go into action. It was a little risky playing that trump, but I played it. I yelled, "Lane, you fool, he killed Marjorie Hastings!"

That got action. I dived for the floor, but his first shot got me high in the left arm. I rolled fast, palming my .38 as I rolled, and his second shot slammed into the baseboard behind me. There wasn't any third shot. Sandford Lane must have learned how to leap by watching a Bengal tiger. He chopped down on Barton's gun hand and the pistol clattered to the floor.

It knocked Barton off balance, and when he straightened he was looking down the barrel of my Banker's Special. His lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl, and his eyes flicked from Lane to me and back again. Lane's voice wasn't much louder than a whisper, but it cracked like a whip. "Who did you say killed Marjorie?"

"Your pal Barton."

Barton started to sputter a protest, but Lane shut him up. He didn't say anything; just flicked him with those hard eyes and took a half step towards him. I guessed they had had a run-in before. Lane turned to me and snapped, "Prove it."

"Remember that letter that was under

her body? Who had a better chance than Barton to take it from you?"

"Go on."

"When I told you to get rid of those stones, you turned them over to Barton, didn't you?" He nodded his head. "Make him produce the emerald."

Barton managed to bluster, "What's he talking about?"

"About an emerald you stole from Lane on the ship, and then planted in Marjorie Hastings' apartment after you had strangled her." I began to feel dizzy and light-headed, and this time that warm, wet trickle I could feel on my wrist wasn't ink.

But I wasn't getting any sympathy from those two. Barton started sputtering a reply and Lane cracked sharply, "Go on."

I hoisted myself to my feet, and said, "I'm used to working in front of a bigger audience." I backed over towards the phone, and Lane took a step towards me. I gave the .38 a little flip and said, "I'll call the plays, Lane." He stayed where he was while I dialed headquarters.

Feeling dizzy than ever, I sat down abruptly in a chair, and if the chair hadn't been there, I would have sat on the floor. Barton's voice came from a long distance away. "You don't believe any of that, do you Sandy?"

I gritted my teeth and gave my head a jerk that set something loose inside rattling from ear to ear. It cleared the fog, though, and I managed to run off a fairly straight bluff. "Barton, for a guy who rigged as pretty a deal as you did, you certainly made one beautifully dumb mistake."

Lane snapped, "What mistake?"

"After all the trouble he went to, he overlooked what any kid who ever read a comic book would know. He left his fingerprints on that emerald."

Lane swung around to face Barton, and the guy absolutely sagged. Even someone who had never seen him before could have read guilt all over him. Certainly

Sandford Lane could, because he didn't wait for anything else. His right fist lashed out, lifted Barton clear off the floor and sent him crashing backwards over an end table.

In the middle of that, like an icicle splintering down from a roof, a voice said, "Well?" Sheila Rolfe stood framed in the doorway, haughty and beautiful.

That stopped Lane long enough for me to say, "Listen, Lane, I've spent the day being knocked down and shot up, all to keep you from burning for murder. Before I sit here and watch you pull a murder, I'll shoot you myself."

He glanced at me, shrugged, and looked back at Sheila. She looked at me, and said coolly, "Sandford, you always were a fool. You let him sit there and bleed all over my rug while you and Tommy have fun breaking up the furniture. Here, let me do something about that arm."

I managed to say, "Thanks, Florence Nightingale." Then I keeled over.

**T**HERE was a blurry ten or fifteen minutes while Lane and Sheila Rolfe took off my coat and bandaged my arm, making acid cracks at each other all the time. But Lane didn't get so occupied that he failed to keep an eye, and my revolver, on Johnny Barton.

Henry Martin and his crew came storming in, breathing fire. Henry whipped out a set of cuffs and started for Lane. I said, "Whoa. Wrong number." I pointed to Barton. "There's your man."

"Who's he?"

"The killer. He admitted it."

"Oh." It took me quite a while to brief Martin on the simple fact that Johnny Barton had killed Marjorie Hastings just to frame his old pal Sandford Lane for the job. The next step was to kill Lane and make it look like suicide. The cops wouldn't have any reason to go any farther than that. The guy killed his girl and then killed himself

"Yeah," said Martin, "But why? These guys were pals."

"Barton," I told him, "not only wanted Lane's money, he wanted his wife. And he wasn't squeamish about killing to get them. Of course, his first idea would be simply to kill Lane and take over. But that was too obvious; it would leave a trail that pointed right to him. That my-old-pal, my-old-gal routine is one of the better motives. So he worked out this murder and suicide deal."

"He persuaded Lane it would be smart to hire me to get the dope on Marjorie Hastings before he tried to see her. That gave him time to kill her, plant the emerald and the letter."

"Where'd the letter come from?"

"Barton had been thinking about this little stunt for a long time. He filched the letter out in India, a year ago. Of course, Lane was really writing the letter to his wife."

"Wasn't Barton taking a chance when he dragged you in?"

"Not a bit. That was part of the plot. For one thing, somebody had to find the body before Lane did. For another—well, this was pretty deep stuff. You thought Lane was using me as an alibi, which I admit is the way a smart cop would figure it. Furthermore, Barton steered Sheila Rolfe to me. You see, there were certain points he wanted brought out, and he reasoned it would be better to have an innocent bystander do the bringing."

"Innocent bystander, my eye."

I ignored him and went on. "Barton wanted to make it clear that Lane had deserted his wife, that he was in love with another woman, that he had a fortune in jewels, and that the Rajah's torpedoes were after the jewels. Naturally, I couldn't help finding out all those things, and calling them to your attention."

"You took your time about doing it," Martin growled. "Maybe I better just

take you in for withholding evidence."

"Of course you'll let me see the reporters in my cell, won't you, Henry? They love these stories about how one man breaks a case wide open while the whole Homicide Department is baying up the wrong trail."

"Can't you take a joke? Where does this Sheila Rolfe fit in?"

"Being a member of the cat family, she was ready to light on her feet on the softest deal she could find. If Barton's little scheme had worked out, he would have been the best catch, although she wouldn't have known or cared just how it worked out. When she came to me, she was on the level. She wanted to know how much money her husband had, so she would know whether to claim him or brush him off."

"Uh-huh. And what's with all them rocks you been talkin' about?" He asked.

"The part about the Rajah's men being after them is on the level. You'll have to hand it to Barton on one thing—he had sense enough to stick pretty close to the truth all the way. Barton has them now, I don't know where, but you can club that out of him."

"He slugged me so he could say that's when the jewels were lifted. It also gave him a chance to plant that automatic, so I could identify it as Lane's when you found him shot with it. Believe me, the guy was thorough. He even went so far as to give himself that crack on the skull, just to prove that somebody was after the jewels."

That wrapped up that little package. Martin led Barton away, and before I knew it, Lane had gone, too. Sheila gave me an appraising look and one of her come-hither smiles. She said, "You know, Castle, you're a pretty smart operator. I think I'd like to get to know you."

"You will, baby," I told her, "You will."

## Bullets Before Breakfast

(Continued from page 105)

The corners of his mouth quirked up. "You going to tell me she owed Tressell twenty-five dollars, too?"

Lee didn't reply. For a long time he stood there, head bowed, eyes on the bright, pinching handcuffs.

"Well—" said Lee again. And then he remembered the things Mavis had said in that talkative streak just before the bullet struck. Something about a former marriage.

Suddenly confident, he added: "She told me she'd been unhappily married. I'll bet Tressell's her ex-husband. Maybe he didn't want to see her marry Guthrie, so he shot them both."

The other deputy had taken a black morocco wallet from Tressell's pocket.

"By golly, Seltz," he said. "I think the kid's right. Look at the identification card in there. This guy's name is John Rosoff, not Tressell."

John Tressell Rosoff was sitting up and gingerly stroking his aching jaws. He glared at the three other men.

"To hell with all of you! I did it and I'm glad I did it! Would have been nice to get away clean, but I never really thought I could. Yeah, she divorced me—thought I wasn't good enough for her. She didn't know I followed her here from Ohio and watched her."

"But why'd you try sticking it on me?" said Lee.

"I saw you take her out a couple of times," growled Tressell, averting his eyes. "You were sweet on her too, and I told myself if I couldn't have her, nobody could—"

Lee's handcuffs were transferred to Tressell's wrists. Seltzer leaned down and helped Lee out of the hole.

"Sorry we had you pegged wrong," said Seltzer. "How'd you feel now—better?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've still got termite trouble."

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"Another one thousand-five hundred dollars from Mr. Groggins down at the bank."

"Old Man Groggins? Why, me and him are just like that." Seltzer placed one finger along the barrel of his revolver. "And after the job you did for us here, I figure I owe you a favor. Groggins'll give you that loan okay, you'll see." He winked. "In fact, I'll come around and help hammer in a few boards myself. Now how do you feel, fella?"

Lee jumped into the air and clicked his bare heels together. He landed on the cracked flooring, it gave way and he wound up on the ground again in another pile of broken timbers.

"Swell!" He grinned up at Seltzer. "I feel swell!"

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## Malice in Movieland

(Continued from page 81)

them. The boys don't like it either. It's a reflection on the whole force. When they get you down to the station, they may rough you up. There aren't many like you around."

"**T**IN Cop," he grated. His hands shot out suddenly, grabbed the table's edge. He upended the table toward the door and dived for a corner, clawing his waist. I swung the automatic as the heavy centerpiece crashed into my legs. My shot went wild.

He was in the corner now, like a crouched bear. He lifted the service pistol, aimed carefully. He had police training. He was using it. He squeezed the trigger, and I slammed myself to the floor behind the table. The bullet ripped through the thick oak, whined over my head.

The pendulum clock ticked loudly as the shot's echoes died away. I edged away from the table toward the opposite corner. His gun blazed again, ripped the floor inches from my hip. I lifted myself to my elbows, snapped a shot across the room. He'd moved, too. Too late I saw him hunkered down by the couch, near Lita Carroll's head. He was using the drugged girl for protection.

"Lay off, Kent," he yelled. "Lay off, or I'll kill her. Toss your gun over here and back out of the door. I won't shoot."

I couldn't see it. I kept my head down. If I started for the door, he'd blast. It was his only out now—to kill me. To get the homicide boys in and pin the whole business on a dead man. I thought fast. If he killed Lita, I'd still be in a mess. He might be able to make it stick, for she was the key to the murders. Once out from under the weed she'd talk, add her testimony to Kitty's and the others.

"All right, Blane," I said. "You win. I'll go out the door, but I'm keeping my gun. In case you throw a slug at me, we'll

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## All-Story Detective

shoot it out and to hell with Lita, understand?"

"I understand, tin cop," he snarled across the room. "Get going."

I got going. I raised myself to my knees behind the table, glanced at the ceiling fixture. The fixture was open at the bottom and a single globe burned in the socket. I brought the automatic up and flame jumped from the muzzle. Darkness leaped into the room, darkness splattered with shattered glass. I skittered sideways as Blane's gun lanced fire toward the table. At the foot of the couch, I knelt down, waited.

His feet scraped the floor and a heavy black shadow raced across the room. For an instant the doorway limned his figure—a hulking silhouette against pale light. My gun was already on the door and I squeezed the trigger.

I edged back to the door. He lay face down, his gun loose in his big hand. I bent over him, saw he was still alive, rasping for breath. I gathered the gun up. I went to the phone in the hall. I called homicide. Then I sat wearily down on the floor as the pain from my arm bit into my brain. Things grayed out, and I fought to keep my eyes open until I heard the sirens . . .

They released me from jail at nine a.m., after quizzing Kitty, the flophouse proprietor, and patching me up at the jail hospital. Lita Carroll would be indisposed a couple of days.

I taxied back to Hollywood. Monday mornings in Hollywood annoy me. Everybody looks sour, grim, as if they'd had a bad week-end. It's discouraging, depressing. Sometimes I think luckier guys live in Kalamazoo. I took the elevator to my office. Helen was right on the job.

She eyed my baggy clothes, my patched-up face. She sniffed audibly.

"My hero," she said. "You look like you just got out of jail."

THE END



## Killer Take All

(Continued from page 51)

such a prefabricated yarn? What the devil should he do now? Automatically, he reached in for the bills.

"All right. Don't bother counting them—it's a padded stack."

Bill's eyes traveled from the bag to the gun which Rankin suddenly was pointing at his stomach.

Rankin allowed himself a wry smile. "I brought the 'money' just in case," he said.

He took the bag from Bill's fingers and placed it inside his coat.

Somehow Bill felt a little less confused. This gun business, at least, was the sort of thing he had expected Rankin to pull. Bill feigned surprise. He blurted: "What are you going to do with me?"

Rankin placed the gun in his coat pocket, keeping his hand on it. "You're a nice kid," he said, "and in a way I feel sorry about all this.

"I'll let you in on a little secret," Rankin continued. "I got behind in my accounts last month, lost a couple of hundred worth of the company's advance receipts at the race track. So I needed money quick. I figured that with my face, holding up that store would be easy—but I was wrong, wasn't I?"

"You have to be smart," Rankin said. "Maybe I didn't make any money last night, but everything will work out. I'm going to collect the reward they're offering for you." He smiled again. "The police will think you tried to kill me because I was the witness. They'll see that we struggled over the gun and you got killed when it went off. I've got a little place all picked out. Shall we take a little walk?" He gestured at the door. "Open it."

Bill's mind was roaring like a jet engine. In a split second he considered and rejected the idea of diving for Rankin's gun hand. He flipped the door's latch and they went out, Bill first. He wondered if he



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## All-Story Detective

should yell for Eddy. Could the two of them overpower Rankin?

Bill turned around to face Rankin just as the door marked *Women* opened and out came Eddy. Bill's jaw dropped almost to his blue necktie when he saw who came out after Eddy.

A young police sergeant with a determined look on his face and a blue-black gun in his hand.

He took two steps forward, jabbed his barrel into Rankin's back and said evenly: "Don't move."

Rankin didn't.

But his eyes were so full of amazement and then hatred that for a long instant Bill thought he might try shooting his way out. Finally, Rankin's shoulders slumped forward beatenly.

Bill rushed over to Eddy. "What a guy!" he yelled. "What a life saver!" He pumped Eddy's hand gleefully. "But I don't follow. How the devil did you get hold of the sergeant?"

"He was having a cup of coffee across the street," said Eddy. "I knew you were up against it, saw your picture in the paper when I had lunch. I figured you'd be needing help and I took your word for it when you said you hadn't done anything wrong."

The sergeant snapped handcuffs on Rankin's wrists. He looked at Bill and said: "I heard enough to put this guy away for keeps. But what I want to know is did the old man really write something on that lima bean drawer?"

"Not a thing," said Bill. He fished in his pocket, drew out the wad of bills and handed them to the sergeant. "Man, am I glad to get rid of those. I'd rather lug around a pocketful of lima beans any day. Boy, do I love lima beans."

He grinned at Rankin. "You like lima beans, Mr. Rankin?"

The handcuffed man did not reply.

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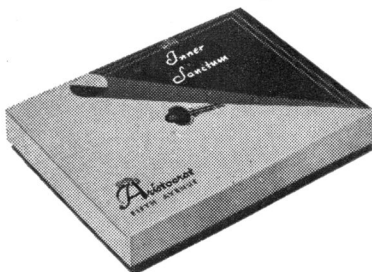
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