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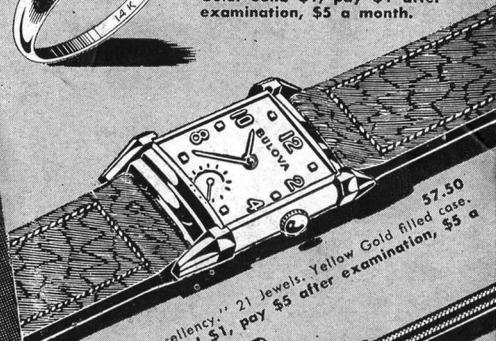
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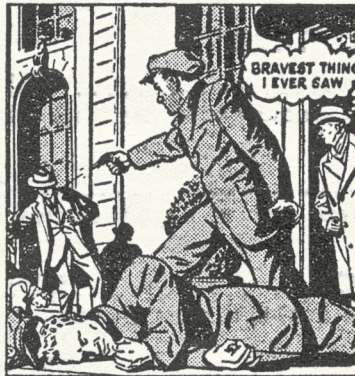
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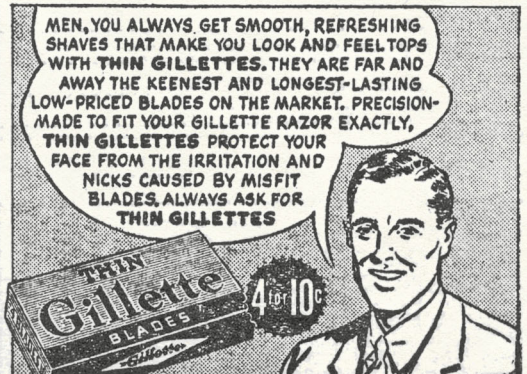
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Vol. 57

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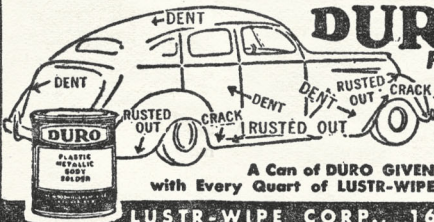
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For Thee I Swing

Action-Packed
Novel of
Suspense

By **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**

CHAPTER ONE

Wake Up to Murder

HE LISTENED to the footsteps climbing toward the door. Stiff with alarm, he heard them coming closer, step by step, as he stood there, motionless, bent over the dead girl on the bed.

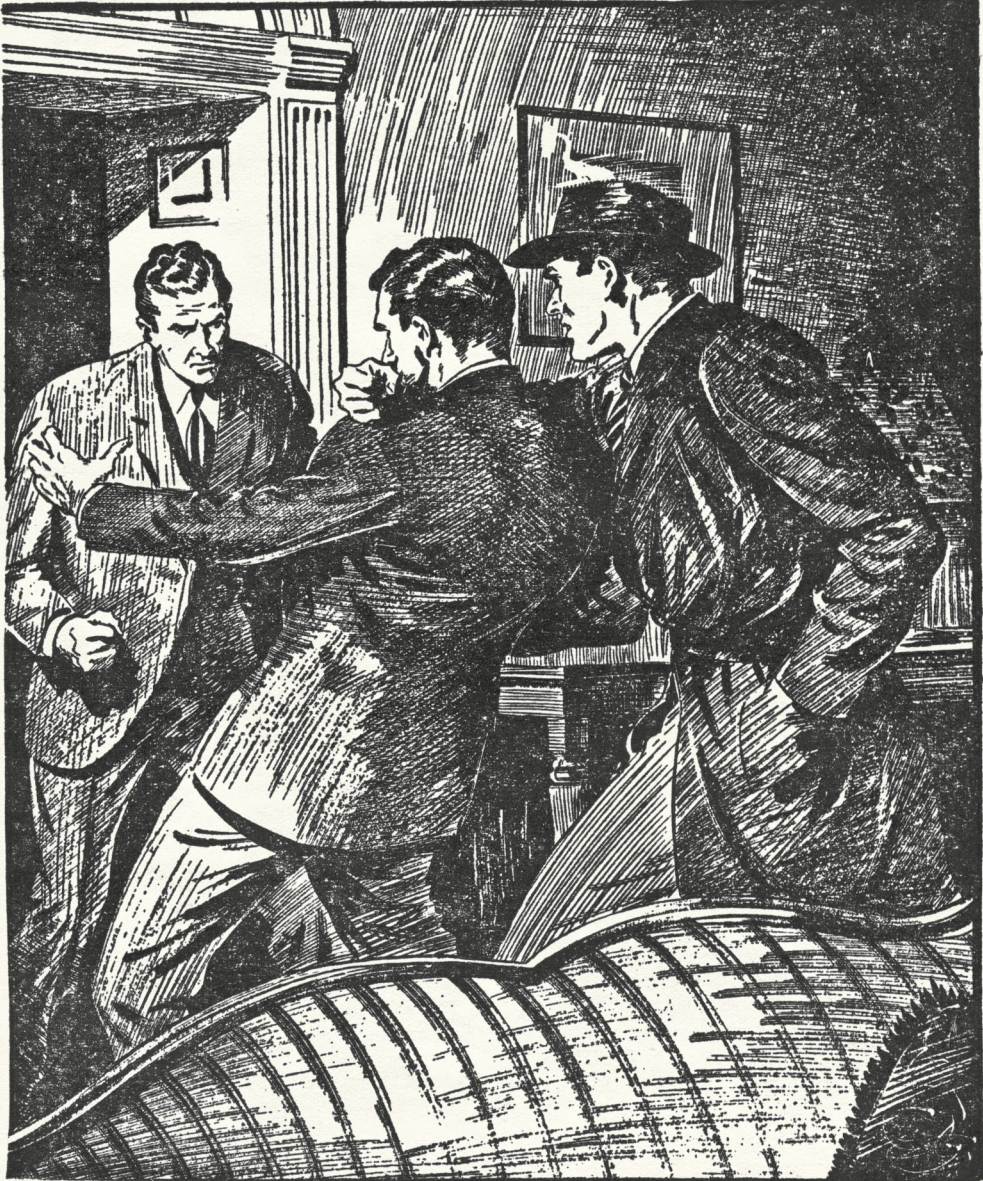
A moment ago he had heard them begin on the ground floor, directly below. The street entrance had been thrust open and heavy feet had thumped in. They had moved straight to the base of the stairs, solidly shod, as deliberate as destiny, and now they were coming up, coming up toward the door—*thud, thud, thud*—the frightening beat of threatened discovery.

Inside the room, stooping over the dead girl on the bed, he felt panic, realizing in an icy flash what discovery would mean. Twisting away from her, he swung his left shoulder to the inside of the hallway



When the law came rapping, tapping on his chamber door, it trapped Luke Kelsey with a doped-drink hang-over—and the brutally murdered corpse of a luscious girl.

Kelsey hooked him under the chin. . . .



door. He had a husky fullback's shoulder; stunned as he was, he could put plenty of stubborn pressure behind it. He bore against the door in a straining effort to be silent, and eased the bolt into its socket.

By that time the fateful footfalls had reached the landing of the stairs. They came on—*thud, thud*—straight toward him.

He drew back, his pulse feeling like the rattle of a snare drum, watching that door. As the footsteps stopped directly outside it, he saw the knob slowly turn—full around, then back. After that—nothing.

The presence remained just outside the bolted door, a living silence. He drew farther back, turning to her again—to the lifeless girl.

She'd laughed so gaily, bringing him in here only a short time ago this evening; but now she had laughed her last. Her cheap, sleazy robe had become wrapped around her body in the struggle. Under it she wore panties and bra, both of bargain basement quality. Her small feet—patrician feet, oddly—were bare; her fine hair loose.

Her face could be remembered as a strained, pale one with too-bright lips; it could be remembered but no longer seen. It was a red mass, inhumanly misshapen by repeated brutal blows of a sharp-cornered weapon. Her faceless head hung over the edge of the bed—she'd been dragged half off it—and under her head was a wet blot, dark red, stretching out along a crack between the floor-boards.

He bent over her with loathing, twisting his mouth, and said acridly under his breath, "All right, now, baby. Now give me back my dough."

He pulled the robe loose from her flaccid body—and froze again.

A knocking sound jarred the hallway door. He peered at it with his breath turned to oil in his lungs as a voice spoke through the panels.

"Come on, open up. This is the law, buddy."

He remained in an agony of stillness for a moment, then slowly went through the pockets of the dead girl's robe. They were empty. There was no other place she might be hiding the money on her person. The money had made a sizable wad.

He straightened, gazing searchingly around the room. There was another rapping at the door and the law's voice said, "Come on, buddy, be reasonable now. Let's not do it the hard way." He ignored it. His mind and his eyes were too busy ransacking the room for the money she'd stolen from him.

He was none too steady yet—the doped drinks she had fed him were still making him feel dog-weary, numb-headed. He moved to her chiffonier, then to her dresses hanging behind a curtain in one corner—there was no closet in this sordid little rat's nest—but even as he hunted, taking desperate pains to make no noise, he knew he wouldn't find his all-important money.

The knocking on the door was hard this time, the voice inflexibly demanding. "Open it up! I know you're in there with a bad job of trouble. Otherwise there wouldn't be so much blood, buddy."

So much blood? He stared at the one little puddle, no bigger than a murderer's hand, on the bare floor under her dangling head.

"When blood begins dripping through the ceiling, it means something's not so good in the apartment upstairs, see, buddy? The couple below happened to notice the ceiling was bleeding, so they hustled outside to tell me about it. I'm just the cop on the beat, buddy, and I figure we might handle this thing nice and quiet—unless you want me to get the chief to throw the riot squad around you."

But the cop didn't go tramping off toward a phone. The cop stayed at that door, right outside it—a tough barrier to pass.

HURRIEDLY he searched all through his own pockets again. Of course the money wasn't anywhere on him—he'd already made certain of that. His billfold was stripped of the twenty-odd bucks he'd had in it for gas and oil, drinking and eating. The money-belt he'd worn under his singlet had vanished entirely. His raincoat— He picked it up, patted its empty pockets, then slipped into it, not noticing he was putting it on wrong side out, with the black-and-white checkered lining showing.

He couldn't understand what had hap-

pened to his money. The girl had rolled him for it—but now she was dead and the money wasn't anywhere in the room. His three thousand bucks had literally vanished.

Money not really his to lose. Three thousand borrowed dollars which eventually he must pay back—unless excused by the hangman's rope.

The cop was getting impatient. "I'm comin' in there and get you, buddy!"

The whole door jarred as he drove his shoulder against it. It sounded as if it might split open any second—the next time surely.

The man inside stooped, reaching for the only weapon at hand, a mechanical contrivance lying on the floor beside the bed. Its cunning arrangement of cogs and sharp blades was smeared with her blood.

On it were the carefully hand-lettered words, *Kelsey Kutter*. He'd made it himself; it was a working model of his own patented invention. Found here, it would be more damning than a calling-card. There was only one of these contrivances in existence, and its inventor's identity was a matter of record in the U. S. Patent Office.

He peered around the room dazedly, wondering how he had ever come to this. He'd never seen this girl before tonight. He didn't even know her name, except—was it Jewel? Jewel Somebody, or Something Jewel? He couldn't remember. Their pre-homicidal acquaintance had been so free-and-easy—so short.

The voice growled, panting, "Next time does it, buddy!"

He shifted quickly to the single window in the rear of the room. A thin rain was slanting against its panes. He slid it open and tossed the Kelsey Kutter into the open darkness. He heard it land on a hard surface somewhere below.

Putting his aching head out, he saw that there was no fire-escape—just one risky possibility, the rain-pipe.

He swung over the window-sill, gripping the drain-pipe with one hand, then shifting his whole weight over. He felt ridiculously like a toy monkey on a stick, and he could hear the rust-weakened pipe groaning. He let himself slide downward rapidly—and at the same instant heard the last splintering of the door crashing open.

Still sliding down the pipe, the rough bricks rasping at his knuckles and knees and shoes, he looked up, the rain pelting in his face, and saw the cop's head and shoulders in the window. He saw the glitter of the cop's service revolver. Then, swiftly, before he could drop free, came a shot.

He spilled down then, clenching his teeth. His feet smacked the alleyway pavement and he rolled backward. He felt sudden numbness in his lower left arm and warm blood gushing to his wrist. He leaped up, flattening against the dark wall—and not an instant too soon. A second report blasted from the window overhead as he faded. The bullet splattered near his toes.

He couldn't see the Kelsey Kutter anywhere in the wet darkness—couldn't risk searching for it now, not with that gun looking for him like a hawk's eye. He had only one possible move—to abandon it, to get out of here fast.

Through the driving rain, he skirted along the base of the dark wall toward the mouth of the alleyway, his right hand clenching his left arm where the bullet had burned in. . . .

PATROLMAN GEORGE MEEDER
I pulled his head and his gun back into the room. With hardly a wag of his hard red head for the murdered girl, he plodded down the stairs to the pay-phone in the lower hallway. Ignoring the other tenants who listened cautiously from their doorways, he made his hard-breathing report to Headquarters—twisting it just a little, so as to avoid a reprimand for not having called for help sooner.

"Got only one quick glimpse of him in the light of a window as he lit out of the alley. Can't tell you one damn thing about him except he's wearin' a black-and-white checkered raincoat—no hat. Puttin' it on the radio? Good. With that checkered raincoat lead, we ought to have him hooked pretty fast.

"One other thing, Sergeant. Judging from the way he battered up that poor babe upstairs, better warn the boys to be careful—this guy don't fool. He's got his heart in his murderin', you might say."

"We'll give 'em Signal Thirty-Four," the phone answered. "Shoot at the first

show of resistance.'” The phone clicked. for an announcement. Kelsey heard:

* * *

This was another alley, just as dark as the other, but a much better one socially. Instead of sooty flats, there were neat little homes in this block. Forsythia growing along the fences gave him bushy shelter.

His arm had begun to throb and pain. Pulling up his blood-soaked shirt-sleeve, he found the blue-black spot where the bullet had pierced completely through, neatly between the two bones. A little blood still seeped from it. He wrapped his handkerchief twice around and pulled it tight, helping with his teeth.

It didn't stop hurting. It wasn't going to stop. But it was a wound which he might manage to keep concealed—with luck.

Folding his cuff upward so the blood-stains wouldn't show, he slid his numb hand into the pocket. He'd had time to get his breath back. His pulse wasn't drumming so badly any more. The effect of those mickeyed drinks was working off, thanks to the exercise and extra oxygen he'd just had.

He'd been enough of a chump for one night, he decided; he wasn't going to try the chump's trick of fleeing blindly. The time had come to use his feet less and his head more—to get that damning Kelsey Kutter back before the police found it.

Besides, the cops would be looking for their man to hightail it, so the smart move was to stay reasonably close—close enough to seem unafraid and innocent.

He went quietly out of the alley, turned and strolled along a street. A nice one. He was a stranger here but he liked what he'd seen of this town in the few hours since his arrival from Kansas City. This was a neat little residential section, wholly asleep except for a lighted window here and there.

He paused to listen. The rain came down on him steadily but lightly as he gazed toward a glow shining from someone's bedroom. A high school kid cramming for an exam, maybe, or just someone with insomnia. In any case a radio was speaking, quietly audible through the open window. It had faded out its music

“We bring you a special bulletin from the WWID newsroom. Police have signaled a city-wide search for the perpetrator of a murder committed only about an hour ago at 124 South Street. The victim is a woman, about twenty-six years old, known as Jewel Flammine. She was found beaten to death in the apartment where she is said to have lived the past three months. Glen Cheney, a friend of the victim, will be questioned. Witnesses saw another man, a stranger, entering the woman's apartment with her several hours before her lifeless body was discovered. The entire police force is being alerted to look out for the man. When seen escaping from the death room he was without a hat, but wearing a black-and-white checkered trench-coat. Police say”

He moved into the shadow of a maple, wondering how long it would be before they ran down the dope on the Kelsey Kutter. It would inevitably give them his name—Lucas Kelsey—and a much better description. But even as it was, they had him too closely tabbed with that item about the black-and-white checks.

He slid the coat off, gritting his teeth with the pain his left arm gave him, and turned it right side out. Putting it on, he buttoned it and drew the belt snug. Then he strode on, and to anyone who might happen to notice him he wasn't a murderer fleeing; he was just a guy on his way home.

That was the idea: go where the cops would never expect to find him—and where he could pick up his blood-stained gadget if he got a chance. He turned back into South Street.

He stopped short beside a car parked at the curb. It was just an ordinary sedan left there for the night—but it was a small miracle of luck.

A man's hat lay on the front seat. A cheap gray little number, soiled, but still a hat. He felt the Goddess of Chance smiling at him as he reached for it.

To complete the wonder of it, the hat fitted him fairly well. With a wry smile he strode on. He'd needed a break like that one. But he would need several more of them, equally fortunate, in order to get clear of a dead babe named Jewel.

Three police cars sat in front of 124 South Street, one an ambulance for carrying Jewel Flammine to the morgue. It

was surprising how few neighbors had been attracted by murder. Here and there a curious head was poked out a window, but nobody else had come as far as the sidewalk. That was why Luke Kelsey chose to stop and watch—it wasn't the thing which a man wanted for murder might reasonably do.

But in a moment his pulse was quickening with new alarm and he was cursing his rashness. A cop posted on the opposite side of the street was eyeing him—a big superman of a cop with glints in his gaze, glints that might be suspicion.

He started to cross the street. Because it would have been even more rash to take to his heels now, Luke Kelsey had to stand still and let him come.

CHAPTER TWO

Hired—and Fired

THE cop stopped on the curb beside Kelsey. He said nothing, but gazed at the building in which Jewel Flammine had violently died, as if trying to discover the nature of Kelsey's interest in it. His very silence held Kelsey chained there.

Kelsey ventured to explain, sounding as casual as he could. "Heard about her on the radio. Too bad. Happened to meet her at a party a couple of months ago. That's the only time I ever saw her, though. Just thought I'd see what's going on. Don't mind, do you?"

The cop eyed him dourly and said nothing. Kelsey could feel him trying to decide whether his chief should have a look at this rain-coated loiterer. After all, a description picked up in a fast emergency was likely to be none too reliable.

Kelsey's temperature slid toward freezing and he swore at himself for a reckless fool. His stifled anger choked him—he felt himself so close to getting collared at any second that he didn't notice the girl coming to his side.

"Mr. Lyle?" she said.

He gazed down at her—a pale face under the dark wet cowl of a raincape. Her hair was raven-black, her eyes an even deeper black, like burnished night. She was anxious and annoyed and beautiful enough to stop Luke Kelsey's breath.

"You seem to be Tav Lyle, all right,"

she said with silken smoothness—and a sting. "You sounded a little insolent over the phone, and it's most insolent of you to keep me waiting in the rain."

"I'm so sorry," Luke Kelsey said, sounding insolent for her benefit. "I was delayed."

"By a client who needs you more than I do, Mr. Lyle?" She lifted a fine black eyebrow at him. "You've had your look at this place, so we might as well go now. I'm all clammy with this disgusting rain. Why are these policemen swarming about? Has a crime been committed in the neighborhood?"

Kelsey gazed at the wordless cop, elated at this heaven-sent opportunity to slide from under, and said, "More probably the news got around in official circles that a fruit vendor had put out a fresh box of apples."

The girl lowered her expressive eyebrows to a straight line, looking past him to the cop. "Funny, funny man, isn't he?"

"I'm crackin' a rib over him, Miss Wilmont," the patrolman said. "You are Miss Wilmont, aren't you—Miss Helene Wilmont who collects traffic tickets faster'n anybody else in this city? And that's your car right up there, isn't it, Miss Wilmont, parked right smack in front of a fire-plug?"

Helene Wilmont peered through her lashes. "If you're going to hand me another ticket, officer, hurry up with it. Otherwise Mr. Lyle is going to take me to his office and mix me a nice warming drink."

Even before the cop had wagged a cynical dismissal, Helene Wilmont had turned on one spike heel and was skipping across puddles toward her illegally parked convertible. Luke Kelsey followed her with more than gratitude. Her car was a custom-built job, a post-war dream on wheels. He eased into the seat beside her. He'd thought he'd brought his blood pressure under control, but it was soaring again.

She veered from the curb swiftly, without a backward glance. He admired her ankles as she plied clutch and gas, with heavy emphasis on the gas. Her delicately carved, impertinent profile gave him a feeling like a freshly uncapped bottle of club soda—doubly so, somehow, because the delicacy of her features didn't match her

bold, direct manner. Here, he decided, was a problem child, the problem being to find something that would stop her once she'd got started. And she was evidently started on something now.

Watching her, he wondered how long this delectable moment would last. Obviously Helene Wilmont had made an unusual sort of appointment with a man named Jay Lyle, whom she had never seen before, to meet her at that corner; she had assumed him to be Lyle simply because he'd been there at the moment. Now she was whisking him off somewhere—and he was perfectly happy to go with her, wherever it might be.

Abruptly she braked the car, having darted to the curb without a hand signal. "This is it, isn't it?"

He gazed at a row of neat buildings, brownstone houses converted mostly to doctor's offices.

"After you," he said politely.

He opened the car door for her, took her delicate arm—feeling the wiry strength in it—and hustled her to a stoop numbered 430. As she ran up it, he saw another cop, an ominous-looking figure in glistening black rubber coat and helmet, trudging toward them. They pushed through the street entrance into a short hallway. Looking back, Kelsey saw the cop mounting the steps after them. His breath slowed.

The patrolman wasn't following them in, however; he had paused on the top step to get out of the rain. He seemed to have planted himself there immovably, his broad black back turned, blocking the way out.

"Well?" Helen Wilmont said impatiently. "What are we waiting for?"

She had paused at the door of one of the offices. There was no light behind the pebbled-glass pane on which a legend was lettered: *Jay Lyle—Private Investigator.*

LUKE KELSEY gazed into the lovely face of Helene Wilmont with a wry twist of his lips—a man losing forever a moment of beauty. This had to be the end of it, of course. She was waiting for Jay Lyle, private detective, to open the door of his office for her—and not having Jay Lyle's key, he couldn't do it. He'd have to say, "I'm sorry, Miss Wilmont, but

you see, there's been a slight mistake in identity." Then he'd have to turn from her and hustle on his furtive way—except that a cop had the street doorway blocked.

Almost as a gesture to prove his despair, he reached to the doorknob. He gulped back a gasp of disbelief as it turned. Dizzily he pushed the door wide open, reached inside to the spot where the light switches always were, and clicked them.

The Goddess of Chance was still on his side, prodigal witch that she was when she wished to be. Smiling as he imagined Jay Lyle, private investigator, might smile on a very special client, he said, "Step right in, Miss Wilmont."

She went directly to Jay Lyle's desk, sat in the chair beside it, crossed her lovely legs and threw off her cowl. She was too vivid, too vital for this commonplace setting. Jay Lyle should have slicked up his office, Luke Kelsey felt, to receive a classy client like this one.

Kelsey gave the office a quick scanning as he closed the entrance and crossed to Lyle's desk. Very ordinary, all of it. Two desks, one evidently for a secretary; three chairs and a hat-tree—all of mission oak and probably second-hand. Walls newly painted a standard ivory, but bare. No diplomas. Two inside doors leading to closets, or possibly one of them to a lavatory. A window looking out rearward, probably on a court. It might have been the office of a not particularly prosperous lawyer or insurance agent. The unlocked door, whether an oversight or intentional, hadn't been much of a hazard; nothing here was worth stealing. Except Miss Helene Wilmont.

The flat light from the bulbs on the ceiling gave her a breath-stopping clarity of line and revealed a petulant pucker of her lips. Spoiled, Luke Kelsey felt. At times, no doubt, a brat. A few stinging spankings would do her no harm. The job of training her to the halter might get rough, but he'd like to take it on. He'd like it very much.

He was sinking uneasily into Jay Lyle's chair, when she said, "Remember, Mr. Lyle? A drink."

He rose with lips quirked. "Will scotch do?"

"And soda," she added. "With plenty of ice."

Kelsey moved his punctured arm, and felt a sharp stab of pain. He wondered if the cop still had the street door blocked. Was Jay Lyle due back this evening? And if a detective, private or otherwise, should happen to walk in right now, how would things shape up for Lucas Kelsey, a fugitive wanted for murder?

Helene Wilmont, he decided, was prison-bait. He should thank her for unwittingly getting him loose from the cop on South Street and bid her a hasty goodbye. Instead, he was about to whip up a scotch and soda for her, with plenty of ice.

But from where? The lone file cabinet in the office might contain something of the sort. He looked in four drawers and found a few letters and much empty space.

"Mmm," he said. "Nothing left in the S section. Mice maybe. Thirsty ones."

He tried one of the doors in the rear. Sure enough, the first one gave into a lavatory. A medicine cabinet hanging on one wall contained the sort of medicine he was looking for. When Luke Kelsey returned, he vindicated Jay Lyle's hospitality with two glasses of whiskey. Miss Wilmont tasted hers with a wrinkling of her high-bred nose. It was rye plus a little tepid tap water and no ice.

She put it aside and said, "When I phoned you, Mr. Lyle, I asked you to meet me there on South Street so I could point out the building where she lives. Now that you've seen it, get busy. Twenty dollars a day and expenses, you said. How many twenty-dollar days will it take you to find out all about her? Am I expected to pay you a retainer now?"

"Not you, Miss Wilmont," Kelsey said. "I'll see you again. I'll collect." As she arched her fine black eyebrows a little, he added, "Have you told me who 'she' is?"

"No, because I don't know her name. But I do know she's there somewhere in Frank's life. I caught him talking to her on the phone several times. I'm referring to Dr. Frank Kerrick, my fiancé."

KELSEY swallowed unhappily. After all, even a goddess had to slip up once in a while. He said, "Your fiancé?"

"How am I to take that funny look on your face?" she asked. "You aren't really amazed to learn I'm capable of acquiring a fiancé, are you?"

"I would be amazed to learn there's something you're incapable of, Miss Wilmont," Kelsey said. "But this fiancé of yours amazes me even more. It's hard to believe he can be engaged to you and have any interest left for some other woman."

Helene Wilmont narrowed her eyes. "I must confess it puzzles me, too. As a woman I'd felt well equipped. I'd like to see what Frank's back-street girl's got, so I can check myself over. Frank seems to like to keep her hidden. Each of the three different times when I walked in on him talking to her on the phone, he hung up fast, looking flustered about it."

She had fished into the pockets of her cape and brought up a bent cigarette. Kelsey discovered Jay Lyle's desk lighter, flipped it, held the little torch for her, watched the smoke curling over her parted lips. She went on discussing her fiancé's suspicious actions with unaffected candor and more than a touch of fine-pointed feminine spite.

"It interested me, so I did a little detecting on my own and followed Frank to that place twice—124 South Street. My amateur efforts didn't get me too far, though, so I've come to you for a professional job of pinning it on him."

"Something I'd hardly expect of you, Miss Wilmont," Kelsey said, "is a lack of results."

She smiled faintly, her long lashes shadowing her eyes. "I didn't do too badly even so. By skirting around into the alley one night, I figured it out that Frank's interest lay in the third-floor apartment in the rear. But as to— Yes, Mr. Lyle?"

Luke Kelsey sat still. The third floor apartment, rear, was Jewel Flammine's.

"I thought you were about to say something." Helene Wilmont stood. "You see, Mr. Lyle, to me marriage is not a trivial matter. I'd like one of the sort which we've never had in our family, one that will last. Frank is a nice boy, even if he is a little too impressed by money and social position. On the other hand, he may have an idea that he can be married to me and keep on playing around. I don't agree. Whomever I marry, I'm going to be married to him good."

"So I want the facts about Dr. Kerrick, ugly though they may turn out to be. And

I want them now, before the wedding, which is two weeks from tonight. That's all, Mr. Lyle. There's your assignment. Good night." She turned and walked toward the door.

"Just a minute." Luke Kelsey went around the desk after her. "I work fast, Miss Wilmont. Frank's other girl's name is Jewel Flammine—" He paused to see if the name registered, but it didn't. "Already," he went on, "I can guarantee your fiancé won't be seeing his South Street girl-friend any more."

Helene Wilmont puckered her pretty eyebrows at him. "Not at all?" she asked, frowning.

"Not at all."

Her eyes searched him and the dark pucker above them became a frown. "How can you be so sure?"

"She's dead, Miss Wilmont."

Her eyes grew round—with fear, Luke Kelsey wondered? Afraid? This girl? It would take something really frightening to scare her, to crack her poise. Something like—

"Murder, Miss Wilmont," he added.

She didn't flinch. Was it self-control—or was it, somehow, not news? She might reasonably have taken it for granted that the sudden death of a woman of Jewel Flammine's sort would be murder; or she might have had foreknowledge. In any case he had shaken her. His news had made an impression.

"She won't be getting in your way any more, Miss Wilmont."

"How did you—" she was suddenly short of breath—"find that out, Mr. Lyle, so fast?"

"I'm a quick guy," he said, staring at her calmly.

"Too quick." She lifted her chin. "That's that, then."

"You mean now you can go right ahead and marry Frank?"

For a moment she was silent, her dark eyes holding him.

"That's no longer your business, Mr. Lyle. I'll take care of the rest of this my own way. Send me your bill. Good night, Mr. Lyle."

Then she was outside the door, and he was listening to footsteps again—quick high heels this time, tap-tapping rapidly away.

CHAPTER THREE

Little Babe With Big Eyes

WHEN the sounds of her footsteps were gone, the office of Jay Lyle became full of a strange loneliness for Luke Kelsey. He felt a desperate sense of being at loose ends—of not belonging anywhere. Certainly not here in this office where Helene's presence lingered too vividly, where someone's sudden appearance might send a new alarm flashing to the police.

He was playing a losing game anyway, he told himself miserably; his working model of the Kelsey Kutter would tell the cops all they would ever need to know about him. It was only a question of time until they bagged him.

He looked out along the hallway to the street entrance and saw with relief that the black-coated patrolman was no longer stationed there. He was about to click off the lights of Jay Lyle's office and step out when he heard the street door opened quickly.

Footsteps again—brisk, hurried by an emergency. Luke Kelsey hoped they would turn to another office; but they came straight to Jay Lyle's door.

It opened, forcing Kelsey to step back. A young man stepped in and stopped, startled to see Luke Kelsey standing there. Kelsey thought, *This is it, brother; now it blows up. He knows I've no business here.*

Still, it was worth a try. Eying his visitor with the bilious eye of a proprietor who had been about to close up shop, he said, "Yes?"

The young man said, "You're Lyle. Helene's been talking to you. We've got to get this thing straightened out."

Kelsey shook his head. "Confidential," he said. He reached for the knob.

The young man gripped Kelsey's arm—his left arm, stopping him stock still with pain he dared not show.

"You don't get it, Mr. Lyle. I'm Dr. Kerrick. Helene and I are going to be married in two weeks and I don't want anything to go wrong. I know Helene's been seeing you about me, with—with the wrong idea."

Slowly, his teeth clenched, Kelsey loosened Dr. Kerrick's grasp, freed him-

self of the secret torture. He began to breathe again and kept his voice steady as he asked, "And how did you find out she was hiring a detective?"

"I—I overheard her phoning you this evening—arranging to meet you somewhere. I didn't quite get that part of it, so I looked up your address in the phone book and watched for her to show up here. I saw her leaving just now. . . . We've got to talk this over before it goes any farther, Mr. Lyle."

A fine pair, this engaged couple, eavesdropping on each other. Luke Kelsey wanted no part of it. He shook his head, moving closer to the door. "I can't do a thing for you, Dr. Kerrick. Good night now."

That determined hand again, clamped on Kelsey's swollen, pulsing wound! A paralysis of agony held him on the spot for a moment that seemed never-ending. Even after he had slipped Dr. Kerrick's fingers free again, the pain went on pounding. A red mist thinned before his eyes. Dimly, he heard the young doctor asking, "What's the matter? You sick?"

"I'm fine." Kelsey sighed thinly. "Never finer. By the way, are you actually a practising physician?"

"I've got my medical degree, yes, but I'm doing research in rheumatic fever at Polyclinic. Listen now, Mr. Lyle. The reason I've been seeing Jewel isn't the reason Helene thinks it is; not at all. Here, look at this."

Kelsey watched him closely as he fished inside his coat and brought up a letter. Possibly he was a little older than Helene in years, but that nice gray stuff she had upstairs was higher quality. And she definitely surpassed him in audacious ability to look out for herself. His hand, extending the letter, trembled like a frightened kid's.

Kelsey read it rapidly, feeling it might provide him with a brisker brush-off for this youthful medico. It bore the imprint of the Police Department of New York City—a brief report from the Missing Persons Bureau, signed by the acting captain in charge.

. . . Definitely established that your sister, Victoria Kerrick, arrived at Grand Central Station at 4:32 p. m., aboard the train you mentioned, on April 21, fourteen weeks ago. Also definitely established that

she took up her reservation at the Riviera Hotel less than half an hour thereafter; that she remained at the Riviera Hotel just two weeks, then checked out. We must confess our inability so far to trace your sister's movements beyond that point. However, we are holding the case open and continuing our endeavors. . . .

DR. FRANK KERRICK was saying earnestly, "See, Vickie was a Wac. I mean she and Jewel were both in the army during the war and that's how they got to know each other. Two entirely different natures—Vickie thoroughly sweet but Jewel sort of rough and ready and cynical—one of those unusual tie-ups that happen when war makes pals out of people who'd never look at each other ordinarily.

"So recently, when Vickie melted into thin air in New York, I naturally kept hoping she might drop a word to her old pal Jewel. That's why I kept calling Jewel and going over to see her when I couldn't happen to get her on the phone. I was looking for news from Vickie—but none ever came. Hell, there's no other reason I'd play around with a tramp like Jewel. I've got better taste."

"I've noticed," Kelsey said shortly. "You would have saved yourself and Helene a few headaches by telling her all this."

"I will, now," Dr. Kerrick answered. "I just felt I couldn't have Helen knowing Vickie was friendly with such a low character as Jewel. Jewel's really disreputable, you know, and Helene's top-drawer.

"It's queer about Vickie—she's so sweet and quiet, but with a wild streak showing sometimes. That's why I've kept mum about Vickie's disappearing—I didn't want to noise it around. It might hurt her rep with lots of nasty gossip after she comes back. Lord, who knows, she might have gone off the deep end for a flashy racketeer or something! I mean, Helene won't like this a bit, but now I've got to clear it up for her regardless. So for your part, you can just drop the whole affair."

"If that's the way it shapes up, okay." Watching Frank Kerrick sharply, Kelsey added, "Since you're hoping word from your missing sister might come through Jewel, you wouldn't be likely to cut that line of communication, would you?"

Young Dr. Kerrick blinked. "I don't get that."

"Skip it, doc," Kelsey said quietly. "Better hustle now and fix yourself up with Helene. And after this, stay away from Jewel. If she happens to hear any word from Vickie, I'm sure she'll let you know."

"Well—I guess that's true." Dr. Kerrick forced a strained grin, backing away. "Say, you're a pretty good guy. Thanks very much."

He hustled along the hallway to the street door and away.

Dizzily relieved to be rid of him, Luke Kelsey drew a deep breath. Now was the time to get out—now, before this trap of a room snapped its teeth into him. He clicked out the lights, put his hand on the knob—and stiffened there, his breath gone.

The street door had squeaked open again, and more footfalls were coming straight down the hall.

Like the footsteps of the cop outside the dead girl's room on South Street, these stopped directly at the door. At the same instant an added noise startled Kelsey—a tinkle of keys. In the flash-bulb burst of revelation, Kelsey knew it was Jay Lyle, himself.

Kelsey wheeled about, took long swift steps toward the second of the two inner doors. He pulled it open and eased through, hearing the man grunt at discovering the unfastened lock. The closet door was shut in front of Kelsey when the hallway door opened and closed. The light-switch snapped, the man crossed straight to the desk and Kelsey heard the spinning of a telephone dial.

"Skid? Jay." Lyle in person this time, all right. "Dammit, Skid, I'm soaked. I'll get a lousy cold out of this if nothing else. I've waited all this while for Miss Wilmont and she didn't show. Look, you were here, you heard me take her message. She said Blount Street, didn't she?"

Kelsey listened through the closet door, trying not to breathe so noisily, as the phone buzzed an answer.

"Oh, South Street, not Blount? Dammit! My mistake, Skid. Fine way to impress a new client—most important one I've had so far. I'll have to call her and apologize—find out what's on her mind. Okay, Skid, be seeing you."

Kelsey heard the phone cradled, Lyle muttering profanity at himself, then footfalls crossing to the lavatory. He ventured to crack the closet door a fraction of an inch and peer out. The lavatory door was shut. It would stay shut a few moments if the Goddess of Chance still liked him a little. He sidled out, watching it as he moved toward the hallway.

A heady intuition that a wild chance might pay off caused Kelsey to pause. Coming in, Lyle had stripped off his dripping raincoat and flung it across the nearest chair. Unlike Kelsey's it was black, with a silky finish. Kelsey picked it up. Also he quickly substituted his hat—the cheap gray felt he'd found in the parked car—for the soft black snap-brim that Lyle had tossed onto the hat-tree.

With a sense of exhilaration, Kelsey was tempted into pushing his luck even further. Jay Lyle, all wet and annoyed, had in addition left his suit coat hanging on his desk chair after emptying its pockets. A billfold, a cigarette lighter, his keys and a fancy handkerchief lay scattered on the blotter. The billfold had flopped open, exposing a celluloid pocket containing Jay Lyle's license as a private investigator.

Luke Kelsey slipped the license out, turned quickly to the hallway door and eased through—all without Lyle's having suspected his presence. The goddess wasn't merely smiling at Kelsey this time; she was grinning all over her shining face. He could feel her watching him, fascinated at her own artfulness, as he moved to the window in the rear of the hall, quietly opened it and pushed his own raincoat over the sill. Then, being careful of his arm—it felt swollen to twice its normal size now—he put on Lyle's silky black coat and tilted Lyle's snap-brim to a jaunty angle. He turned then to hurry out—and halted.

He had felt someone watching him, all right, but it wasn't a mythical goddess—it was a real flesh-and-blood girl gazing at him intently from the front end of the hallway.

SHE stood there, a tiny blonde package in a raincoat of fire-alarm red, arrested in the act of closing an umbrella of matching brilliance. She wore no galbshes over her little black pumps; they were oozing

wet and her stockings were spotted above her slender ankles.

Kelsey couldn't guess how long she'd been standing there like an unblinking doll. She infuriated him. He had already been balked too many times in his efforts to get out of this tricky place, and he was damned if he'd let this oversized midget of a girl get in his way now.

He resorted to a direct challenge again—strode straight toward her. She just kept her rounded eyes on him like a three-year-old entranced by a giraffe. Opening the street door, he gave her an amused smile, as if to say, "Aren't you an odd little tidbit!" and stepped out.

Not a sound came from her, not a flicker of motion except her magnetic turning. She simply watched him go and he went—down the stoop without a backward glance at her, and along the puddled sidewalk in the rain, leaving her behind, never to see her again.

He was leaving a great deal more than an unknown girl behind him, and he felt vastly safer for it. He had even shaken off his identity. No longer was he Lucas Kelsey, a fugitive being sought by the police for murder. Instead, he was one Jay Lyle, private detective, and he had a valid license to prove it. . . .

The street, leading into the downtown retail section, was too dark. A glance over his shoulder informed Luke Kelsey of nothing. He couldn't see anybody following him in such a sticky, terrifying manner; he couldn't lose those faint, quick footsteps either. They kept coming up behind him like a ghost on the prow.

He turned toward the haven of light. It shone not far ahead, an all-night restaurant. Kelsey tried not to break into a run for it. He strode along, glancing back again and catching nothing except a passing reflection of himself in dark shop windows.

He turned quickly and entered the restaurant. The three customers on stools at the counter, two men in tuxedos and a girl in long white tulle, were topping off a late party with hamburgers. There was a row of booths made to order for Kelsey's purposes. He vanished deep and quickly into the nearest.

His breather lasted less than thirty seconds. Before he realized it, a girl was

sitting on the bench squarely opposite him—the diminutive blonde in red.

Luke Kelsey gazed at her poker-faced, his nerves screaming, and she gazed back at him, smiling like a little girl who knew she was being naughty.

"Hello," she said.

Eyebrows leveled at her, Luke Kelsey retorted, "You must have picked up a whiff of my perfume, honey. It gets 'em like magic."

The little blonde answered, "No, I didn't smell anything funny. I just liked your looks."

"In case you often get to liking the looks of strange men at this odd hour of the morning, this is a good time to quit it."

Her smile was meant to tease him. "I bet you're a movie actor. Or maybe one of those dashing transport pilots from the cigarette ads. Or maybe even an adventurous private detective. Anyway, gee, may I have your autograph?"

"However did you guess I'm a private detective, honey? Could it be you saw me coming out of my office?"

"You are Jay Lyle, aren't you?"

Luke Kelsey grinned, conscious of his credentials. "I am."

"Gee, I've heard so much about you, I can hardly believe it, Mr. Lyle."

"I'll prove it to you, then, little one."

He produced Jay Lyle's private-detecting license, saw her gasp, then tucked it into his own wallet.

"Gee, you're wonderful," the little blonde sighed. "I mean you're wearing a marvelous disguise. Even though I'm your secretary, Mr. Lyle, I can hardly recognize you."

His smile became a congealed grimace. "You're my secretary?"

"Why, I've been your one and only secretary ever since you hung out your shingle six months ago, Mr. Lyle. Don't you remember? My name's Myrtilla Skidmore and if anybody ever makes the mistake of calling me Myrtilla, I slug 'em. Remember now, Mr. Lyle?"

He wondered wretchedly what she meant to do.

"I recognize your classy coat, Mr. Lyle. And your hat. But I don't seem to place the special face you're wearing right now. It's much handsomer than your every-day

face, but I can't quite get used to it, Mr. Lyle. If you'll glance at the photo on the back of your license, you'll see you don't look at all like yourself." She stopped and smiled at him.

"Some men age fast," Luke Kelsey told her.

"May I ask you a question, Mr. Lyle? Was it foolish of me to do this? I mean, have you got a big gun in your pocket or something?"

He was watching her sharply. "No gun, Skid."

"Would you excuse me for a minute, then," she said, sliding toward the open end of the bench, "while I call the police?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Smile, Goddess, Smile

KELSEY'S right hand clamped over hers, stopping her. She looked like a big-eyed doll again, little lips parted as if to wail "Ma-a-ma!" But she really wasn't kiddish at all; she was fully her age, smart as a whip, and practised in the deft handling of all sorts of hard-to-handle guys.

"Don't call them just yet, please, Skid," he said. "There's no rush about it. I'm not going to hurt you. And in case your boss is more than just a boss to you, I didn't hurt him either."

"I know you didn't." She let him keep her hand in his. "I checked on that, of course—went to the office door and heard him muttering curses in normal health. You'd given me quite a buzz, you know. I live just around the corner. When Jay phoned me about missing his appointment with Miss Wilmont, I hustled over to smooth his ruffled temper, and there I saw you just about leaving the office in Jay's clothes."

"So you hustled after me to find out what cooked and maybe to get yourself killed."

"I did think of that angle," Myrtila Skidmore said softly. "I mean I've had my radio tuned to WWID all evening, and I noticed the checkered lining in that coat you ditched out the window. But I guess every girl dreams of getting killed by a murderer as handsome as you are."

He stared at her miserably. "Settle back a little, Skid. I want you to listen to

me for just a few minutes. Please."

She leaned tentatively against the arm of the booth, her tiny hand still clasped in his usable one. "Sure, go right ahead. But would you let me know a little in advance when it comes time to strangle me, so I can close my eyes and really enjoy it?"

He liked her spirit but he couldn't smile. "Name, Lucas Kelsey. Occupation prior to hostilities, odd jobs. During the war in the OSS."

She broke in, "Why, so was Jay! The other Jay, I mean. Small war, wasn't it?"

"Not small enough. I never met Jay Lyle in the service. Anyway, after discharge, restlessness. Finally a promising little venture into inventing. My device will revolutionize lawn-mowing. It's a gadget with blades to attach to the ordinary mower. It gets the tall weeds which reel-type mowers always miss otherwise. I thought I might really make a million on it, or maybe a few thousand—until tonight gummed up the works."

"Murder does seem to make a difference," Miss Skidmore observed.

"For me it's wrecked a deal I'd made with a man named Graham, here in town, who's got a metal-working plant. He said he and I could go into partnership manufacturing my cutter if I would back us up with capital to the modest amount of three thousand dollars. The money was a loan from my home-town bank, given to me with many slaps on the shoulder and wishes for my success."

She was listening.

"I had a date to meet Mr. Graham yesterday afternoon, but he'd had to go to St. Louis on business and was held up. That gave me an evening to fill. I filled it the wrong way, especially considering I had the three thousand on me in folding money. Well—" He felt himself looking shame-faced. "There in that bar near South Street—Jewel did a slick job on me. It didn't seem to be an ordinary cheap pick-up, but I can see now it was. The rest is routine sucker-rolling, I guess. Doped drinks, then getting led up to Jewel's room where I could pass out and get robbed good."

Skid said softly, "Made you pretty sore when you woke up to it, huh?"

"Damn right," he said. "But not

enough to murder her. I didn't have to. It had already been done."

"Oh, sure," Skid said. "While you slept like a baby, never noticing a thing."

"That's the absolute truth—except I guess it was the violence of the beating she got that brought me to. By that time, the killer was gone—down the stairs so quietly that nobody noticed. But I was still in there, looking for my money and fighting to stay on my feet, until the cop came banging on the door." He squeezed her hand. "Tell me, Skid. How's chances for me?"

"Like charity in our D.A.'s heart when he sees a front-page setup like this one," she answered. "Non-existent. Look, let's be practical about this. So long as you're about to get nailed for murder anyhow, it won't harm Jay's reputation to get him credit for it."

"PLEASE, Skid." He pressed her hand so tightly it made her wince. "The minute the police pick me up, I'll be a dead duck. Until then I'll have some slight chance, if only my luck holds out—and it's been pretty good so far. If it's possible to prove I'm not the one who killed Jewel, I want a crack at it. I want that, and my three thousand bucks back, and some time for manufacturing the Kelsey Kutter. It isn't too much to ask, is it? It won't cost you anything."

"I don't owe you anything, either," she said shortly. "I'm working for Jay."

"Skid, honey, listen. I figure the person who killed Jewel is the one who took my dough. I've got a good idea what he looks like and where to find him. He's my only chance and I haven't had an opening to get to him until now. Come and help me hunt him. If I succeed in running him down, you and Jay will be saved from starting the wrong guy through the wringer. It would be better for Jay's reputation not to pull a king-size boner by tagging an innocent man for the murder, wouldn't it, Skid?"

She said, "I'm just an impressionable young girl when it comes to handsome men, but excuse me anyway. I've got a call to make."

He let go of her hand. "All right. Go ahead, honey. But before you can get an answer. I'm moving through that door

and on my way. So so long, Skid. It was nice knowing you."

Without hesitating, she slid from the bench and hurried to the rear of the restaurant to the pay phone. Luke Kelsey sat still, heavy-hearted, watching her as she slotted a nickel and spun off a number. When the dial whirred to rest, she held the receiver tightly, gazing back, big-eyed, at the man she was turning in.

Kelsey rose from the booth, turning his back on her. If a kid as good as Skid couldn't believe in him, he reflected bitterly, nobody could. He would save a lot of wear and tear on himself by giving himself up. But that would be too easy.

With Skid talking excitedly into the mouthpiece, he pushed out the door and hurried deeper into the night. . . .

Blocks away, he paused in a dark doorway to gaze at a coupe parked midway along the block. It was his own car. He'd left it there before entering the tap room where Jewel Flammine had later picked him up. After escaping from her room, he hadn't dared go back to it. Someone might have told the police it belonged to the stranger who had left the barroom with Jewel.

Now, feeling the threat of arrest closing in on him, he wanted to make sure whether it would be actually dangerous to use. He stood obscured in shadow, out of the shine of the bar-and-grill signs, watching to see if the cops had it spotted.

Suddenly he heard footsteps. He stiffened, standing as far back in the doorway as its shallow depth permitted, and heard them coming closer. The rain was stopping its spattering; he could hear them distinctly, coming at a run. A girl's.

He looked for her in the neon-tinted gloom, guessing from the quick lightness of the sound that it was the tiny blonde. The next moment she hustled into sight. She stopped on the sidewalk only a few yards away, breathless. Then she saw him and stopped breathing altogether.

"Hello," he said acridly. "What is this irresistible attraction I have for you honey? Is it a reward? Have they offered one for me?"

"Haven't heard—but I hope so," she said, getting her breath back. "Look. I can understand why you want to go places in a rush, but why here?"

"To do a little job of still-hunting on my own. I'd hardly got started and you've probably spoiled it. Come on over and join me while I check. This doorway hides two comfortably—and as I mentioned, I won't bite you. At least not in the street."

UNEASY but still self-confident, Skid smiled and came to the doorway. She looked along the deserted street in both directions, then curiously up at him.

"I could kick you for killing that girl," Skid said. "It would have been much nicer having you around a while."

"I won't be around long, the way you use telephones," he reminded her tersely. "Who did you call? The cops?"

"No. Jay. I told him I'd spotted the man who'd murdered Jewel Flammine—I was doing a little job of tailing for him and I'd call him back first chance I got." She added plaintively, "Sure you haven't got a gun? You're through murdering girls for tonight?"

"You're okay, Skid—in a better spot than I am, really. Listen. When this thing started—when I went into that bar down the block, Tim's Tavern—I think Jewel was with a man, a man she knew well. I don't know whether this guy sort of drifted off to give her a free hand with me, or whether she'd cold-shouldered him. He could have followed us to her room. If he wasn't in the deal with her, he might have killed her in a fit of drunken jealousy. Either way, I figure my dough left that room on him."

Skid was watching Kelsey. "There's something funny about you. You give me a queer feeling you're on the level."

"Thanks, Skid. Maybe you can help me about that guy. He's about thirty-five, dark wavy hair, good-looking in a Latin way. Impressed me as a one-time classy dresser gone shabby."

Skid shook her cornsilk head. "I don't associate with such characters unless they're my boss's clients."

"He couldn't be Glen Cheney by any chance?"

"Oh-oh," Skid said. "Come to think of it, that description does fit Cheney. One of our more notorious young crooks, that boy. He was running a chi-chi gambling casino uptown until too many

church-goers squawked and forced the D.A. to put him out of business. A paid whipping boy is taking the rap for him, I understand. Glen just lost his silk shirt. When pressed, as he undoubtedly is these days, he could become a really low-down type of crook, I suspect."

For the first time Skid looked anxious. "If you're thinking of taking on Mr. Cheney, I have news for you. He's touchy. He says little but gets mad fast and hits hard."

Luke Kelsey thought of Jewel Flammine's beaten, faceless head; he shuddered at the recollection, but said, "For my money Glen's worth trying out—for my money."

He hooked his right arm through Skid's left and hustled her along. A firm grip on her, he knew, was necessary in order to keep her off the nearest phone with information for Jay Lyle.

Leaving his car where it was momentarily, he steered Skid to the door of Tim's Tavern. She hustled alongside him on her tiny wet pumps; and the instant they stepped inside the tavern she spotted the phone booths in the rear.

"Not yet, honey," Kelsey said softly.

Ten or twelve customers were still quenching their thirst, half of them at the bar, the others at tables. Kelsey made sure Glen Cheney was not among them. He kept an unshakable but painless grip on Skid's arm, and swung her to the bar.

Only a few hours ago he had been standing at almost this same spot, thinking about another beer, when Jewel Flammine had brushed his elbow and insinuated herself into his speculations. The same barman was on duty. He looked at Luke Kelsey drowsy-eyed, without recognition, fooled by Jay Lyle's black coat and hat.

"Glen been in?" Kelsey asked quietly.

"Sure he was in. In all evening. Never stepped out once, until a little while ago. That what you wanted to know, mister?"

"No."

The barman's answer was, anyhow, a lie. Possibly he felt it would be smart to play along with Cheney and give him an alibi. If Cheney had been inside this saloon all evening without having stepped out even once, of course he couldn't have murdered Jewel and stolen her victim's

money. He guessed he could play along.

"I've got a message for Glen, wherever he is now," Kelsey said.

"Who knows, maybe he's gone beddy-bye," the barman retorted, poker-faced.

Kelsey executed a small but difficult maneuver. He crowded Skid against the bar to keep her from hustling off—and at the same time, flipped open his billfold to show Jay Lyle's license.

"So?" the barman said, entirely unimpressed. "So I still can't say where Glen's sleeping tonight." He turned away.

POCKETING his wallet with a numb feeling of frustration, Kelsey heard Skid saying softly, "Look what's coming in the door."

Kelsey, still keeping her crowded against the bar, looked at the man who had just entered. Short, fat-jowled, sly-eyed, he bore no resemblance at all to Glen Cheney.

"Leon Marvin," Skid whispered. "One of the city's smellier shysters and Glen's favorite lawyer."

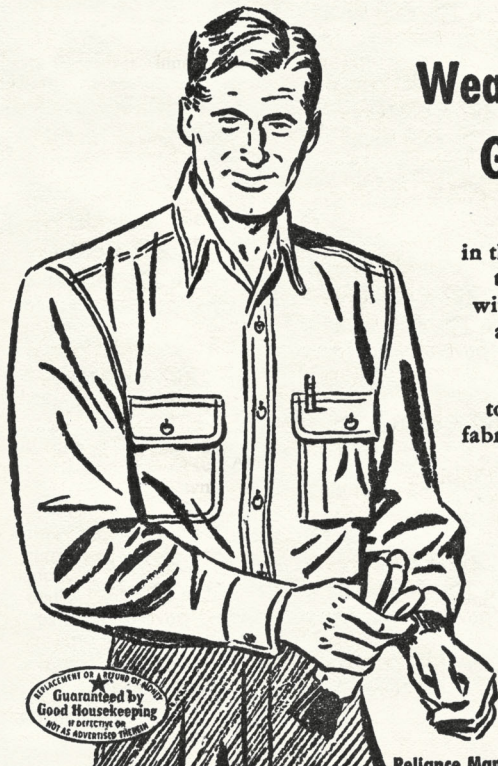
Marvin had paused, flashy in a broad

herringbone suit. Rolling a gold-banded cigar in his thick lips, he waited to be noticed so that he might make a dramatic entrance. When the buzz of conversation quieted, he came forward, beaming and wagging look-who's-here gestures at the young man following him in.

The dark, curly-haired young man wore a smug grin. At once he was showered with loud welcomes and thick-tongued congratulations. Customers left the bar and the tables to crowd around him, to shake his hand and slap his back. Meanwhile Marvin stood by, glowing like a proud uncle.

The barman was speaking to Kelsey. "You wanted to see Glen Cheney? That's him. Go right over and say hello, he won't mind."

Skid looked up at Kelsey. "Know what this means? The cops collected Glen for questioning and Marvin just now got him clear. So that's that. Glen seems to have that murder off his mind for good. Quite an occasion, isn't it? In a nice spot like his, you'd feel like celebrating, too, wouldn't you?"



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Glen Cheney waved an all-encompassing gesture to the barman, signaling drinks for everybody. He slipped away from his admirers, leaving them to Marvin, and went to the telephones in the rear.

Luke Kelsey watched him making earnest talk behind the tightly closed door of the booth. When Cheney came back, after only a few moments, his smile was even more smug, his manner that of a man assured of his ability to polish off a slick deal which he had just set up for himself.

Kelsey took a hold on Skid's arm again, this time steering her out. The car in which Cheney and Marvin had made their triumphant return was parked directly in front of the tavern—an expensive job monogrammed *GC* in gold, evidently left over from Cheney's prosperous casino nights. Kelsey moved to its side, still keeping a hold on Skid, and gazed through its bullet-proof windows.

"Glen's a little nervous these days," Skid said. "The D.A. has publicly promised to jump on his neck the minute he thinks of opening up a new gambling den, and at the same time he's said to be badly in need of dough. Like I told you, he's sort of tetchy. I mean, in case you've decided not to interview him after all, I can hardly blame you."

Kelsey shook his head. "Mr. Cheney's having a busy night. I think he hasn't quite wound up his operations yet."

He opened the door of Cheney's car and pushed Skid into it, then climbed in himself. He fished into the seat pockets, then probed under the cushions and into the cracks all around them. Still empty-handed, he flipped open the glove compartment. He pulled from its depths a crumpled length of olive-drab cloth.

"Careless of him not to've dropped this into a sewer somewhere. But then, maybe he's been too busy proving his innocence," Kelsey said. "It's my money-belt. I was carrying three grand in it. Empty now, of course."

He tucked it into his coat pocket—or rather into the pocket of Jay Lyle's coat—opened the door of Glen Cheney's car again and pulled Skid back to the sidewalk with him. He hurried her down the block to his own car. Again he looked

up and down the street, wary that a cop might be lurking nearby; but his move was flushing none from cover.

"If you'll solemnly promise to stay away from telephones, Skid," Kelsey said, "I'll let you go now. Because from here on out it might get rough."

"No."

"I didn't think you would go. Inside with you, then, shrimp."

She resisted hardly at all. He had her sit on his right in the front seat, so he could grab her the instant she made an offside move. She watched him in frankly anxious uncertainty as he adjusted the mirror for a rearward view of Cheney's car.

"We wait," he said.

Their wait was shorter than he'd expected it to be. Within five minutes by the dash-clock, Glen Cheney appeared outside the door of Tim's Tavern. Leaving Marvin inside, he crossed directly to his car. He sent it flashing past Kelsey's car with a deep hum of power; and as it veered from sight at the next corner Kelsey stepped on his starter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Homicidal Heel

KELSEY rolled slowly past the white stone house, U-turned, then drove back. The mansion resembled a sub-Treasury in a landscaped setting. Two formidable wrought-iron gates gave entrance to a gravel driveway.

Kelsey swung through one, coasted past lighted windows and swung again into a parking space that flanked a four-car garage behind the house. Sitting there was the car Kelsey had trailed.

Skid said, "So he came here. I thought you'd lost him. You know, you do all right." She looked up at the mass of architecture looming against the night sky. "Know who lives in this ruin?"

"I'm a stranger here myself." Kelsey ducked from his car. "If I had to guess I'd say the Wilmonts."

"That would score a bull's eye." Skid kept watching him in wonder. "One of our fair city's show places, where I think the likes of Glen Cheney doesn't get invited socially."

"But he and Helene Wilmont found

a certain common interest. Murder."

Kelsey moved quietly to the rear of the house. He tried the back entrance and found it unfastened—possibly left open after Helene had admitted Cheney. He signaled Skid inside, followed her closely, shut the door behind them.

"A private detective's license doesn't make it okay to sneak into people's houses like this," Skid whispered. "That's still illegal."

"I'm wanted for killing a girl, remember?" he murmured back. "Lesser crimes don't bother me any more."

He cocked his head to listen. Voices could be heard as if from far away—strained voices. They funneled down a long hallway from the forward regions of the house. Kelsey moved cautiously toward them.

Halfway there he halted, gazing back. A sudden suspicion had hit him, and it wasn't wrong. Skid had vanished. She had ducked off through one of the dark doors he had passed. Kelsey knew exactly what she was doing—hunting a phone to call Jay Lyle. Or the police. Or both.

He hung on the edge of his nerves for a moment, feeling impelled to prowl after her, to try to stop her. But perhaps she was already putting the call through. At any rate it would cost him time, and time, to him, had become precious.

His mouth set, he went farther along the hallway. The thick carpeting silenced his approach, and the voices grew louder as he neared the living room. Unnoticed, he paused in the archway, gazing across its baronial vastness at Helene Wilmont.

Tensely agitated as a thoroughbred at post time, she was moving back and forth in front of the fireplace, seeming surprisingly shorter now because she had kicked off her shoes. Her jet-black hair was disarrayed by her fine raking fingers. Cheeks flushed, dark flame flickering in her eyes—she was hotly incensed.

"You can't let a girl get married quietly and conventionally," she said, a sting in her voice. "No; you've got to mix murder into it. You've got to come around talking blackmail. A fine pair of rats you gentlemen turned out to be."

Dr. Frank Kerrick stood watching her, looking heartsick and weary to the point of nauseous collapse. Evidently he had been here ever since leaving Lyle's office,

exhausting himself in an effort to convince his bride-to-be that his interest in Jewel Flammine had been purely platonic.

At one side, slouched in a morocco easy chair, Glen Cheney watched them with smug gratification lingering on his mouth like canary feathers on a cat's. For a moment the two of them were silent, watching Helene as she padded back and forth in her stocking feet, boiling with a highly refined fury. They seemed to be awaiting a decision from her.

As for Helene's family and the servants, Luke Kelsey surmised they were soundly sleeping upstairs.

"All right," Helene said, stopping abruptly. "I'll pay. That's the simplest way out. But don't expect me to love you for it. You mustn't mind if I hate you both."

Kelsey said quietly from the doorway, "Blackmail, you said, Miss Wilmont?"

Glen Cheney's eyes flicked toward him and Dr. Kerrick turned with a gasp—but Helene in her anger hadn't heard.

"As for you, my cute little fiancé—" she pointed a scarlet nail at him—"you can go jump off a church steeple. The wedding's off. It's stinking enough, letting you mess me up this way, but I'm damned if I have to marry you, too."

"Of course not, Miss Wilmont," Kelsey said, moving into the living room slowly. "In blackmail it isn't the original cost that counts; it's the upkeep."

SHE looked across one shoulder, lovely and startled, her dark eyes depthless, her red lips parted. She didn't retreat as he came closer, but stood firm in her nylon feet, ready to take him on.

Dr. Kerrick stammered, "Wh-what are you doing here? How did you get in, Mr. Lyle?"

Before Kelsey could speak, Helene snapped a scornful answer. "He's not Lyle. After I left that office tonight, the real Lyle phoned me. This is a phony who passed himself off on me—and a cute job it was, too." She put her fists on her slender hips. "I told you before, that's all for you, brother. Now it goes double."

Frank Kerrick stammered, "Th-then who is he?"

Glen Cheney pulled himself to his feet. "I'll tell you who he is. I remember him—the guy Jewel took in hand tonight. This

is the boy the cops want for murdering her."

They were silent again, all watching him, until a slight noise behind him attracted their attention. It was Skid. The little half-pint blonde had strolled right in, just as if she were a weekend guest.

"Well—" she sounded a little apologetic—"I phoned Jay."

"Just Jay?" Kelsey asked. "Not the police, too?"

"The police don't need me to look out for 'em," Skid said. "I told you it would be nice for Jay to get the credit for nailing you. I wish I hadn't had to do it, honest, but then you oughtn't to go around knocking off girls the way you did tonight."

Helene Wilmont said, "However you may feel about the police, Miss Whoever-You-Are, I'm getting them in here fast."

They all watched unmoving as she got Headquarters on the phone.

Helene Wilmont said laconically into the phone, "Thank you so much," and hung up. To Kelsey she added, "For whatever the information may be worth to you, they'll be here in a matter of minutes."

"Now that they're on their way," Luke Kelsey said, leaden with weariness, "may I say I didn't kill her?"

"Of course you didn't," Helene said. "You wouldn't run true to type as a murderer if you didn't deny murdering her."

"But the person who really did kill her," Kelsey added, "is here in this chummy little gathering."

He saw the quick paleness in Helene's face. Cheney retained a gambler's inscrutability. Dr. Frank Kerrick watched Kelsey almost slack-jawed.

"I'm not referring to your new-found associate in crime, Cheney, of course," Kelsey added. "If he were guilty of the murder himself, he'd hardly have come here to sell his silence. That means he knows who actually is guilty. And you just now agreed to pay him the money he demands, Miss Wilmont."

"You mean I first killed Jewel Flammine and then saw a private detective about her as a sort of cover-up?"

Kelsey was nodding. "You were prepared to shell out for blackmail simply because your young medico can't afford it himself. He killed Jewel."

DR. FRANK KERRICK stood there swallowing inarticulately. Helene and Cheney moved closer, as if to close Kelsey in. He was conscious of movement behind him. Myrtila Skidmore was moving rapidly to a door. She opened it and a man stepped in. He had a rugged face lined with character, not handsome. He wore neither topcoat nor hat. Jay Lyle, of course, here in response to Skid's hurry-up call. He stood back at her signal, playing it smart, listening.

Helene stared at Lyle a moment, then said to Kelsey, "Are you fairly sure of what you're saying—about Frank?"

"You know I am, and so does Cheney," Kelsey answered. "Cheney came into Jewel's room after I'd passed out on her drugged drinks, and she gave him my money. That was her purpose in rolling me—to get dough for her hard-up guy."

"But about your errant fiancé, Miss Wilmont: Cheney had left when Dr. Kerrick went in and finished Jewel off in a proper rage."

Frank Kerrick said, "You—you must be crazy. You said yourself that I couldn't be the one who killed Jewel, because I was hoping to get news of my missing sister Victoria through her."

"Jewel was your missing sister Victoria," Luke Kelsey said.

He moved closer to Frank Kerrick and felt Jay Lyle coming up behind him.

"You told me all about it," Kelsey went on quietly. "Vickie was a sweet and quiet sort, but with a wild streak showing sometimes. Who knows, you said, she might have gone off the deep end for a flashy racketeer—which was exactly what she'd done . . . for Glen Cheney. You tried to cure her of him, sent her to New York to get her away from him; but she sneaked back to him. You sent the Missing Persons Bureau on that wild goose chase to cover up for her, knowing all the while just where she was."

"You were so scandalized by Vickie's actions that you made her use a false name and stay away from her old haunts. You kept phoning her, seeing her, trying to get her away from Glen and back home before she got tangled up in his troubles with the law. That would mean a terrible scandal—it would touch you with pitch, probably spoil your big chance to marry

into Helene's money and social station.

"Tonight, when you found her with a drugged sucker in her room, you recognized what a really devastating grade of dynamite she was. You had to stop her in the only sure way left to you—by killing her. As you did it you thought to destroy her face. That started me wondering right there—why did Jewel get her face beaten off? It was to keep Jewel from being recognized as Victoria Kerrick."

Helene Wilmont was not too sophisticated to shudder.

"But you murdered her in vain," Kelsey added. "Glen knew the truth about her, of course. Helene has learned it, too. And within hours now everybody will know it."

Frank Kerrick was surrounded by them—by Glen and Helene at his shoulders, by Kelsey facing him.

Helene said, with surprising softness, "I'm really sorry, Frank, but I can't buy you out of this now. You're such a nice boy in other ways. I wish I hadn't come to mean so much to you."

Kerrick blurted, "B-but they can't prove anything. Her face—"

"They won't need her face," Kelsey said. "She was in the Army. Her fingerprints are on file."

They all lifted their heads. A sound came on the night—the wail of a police siren.

Glen Cheney, alarmed, was moving toward the main entrance.

Kelsey said, "Stop him!"

Skid flew at him first, swinging her handbag. Her furious miniature attack signaled Jay Lyle into action. As Lyle sprang to block Cheney's path, Kelsey closed in from behind with one-armed awkwardness. A sharp smack sounded. Cheney stopped, then pitched backward. Kelsey hooked him under the chin and dropped him to the rug. Kelsey planted a knee on Cheney's chest as Lyle sucked at his skinned knuckles. Then, working side by side, they began fishing new hundred-dollar banknotes out of Cheney's pockets.

"Mine, all mine," Kelsey said happily. "You can have the killer—I'll take my dough back."

He looked up and saw Helene Wilmont. She was biting one of her luscious red lips, bright excitement in her eyes. "That reminds me," he said. "Now that you can't mean so much to the doc any more, Helene, would you mind meaning a lot to me?"

"You're a quick guy, all right," Helene said breathlessly. "Take it a little slower, please. To begin with, what's your real name?"

* * *

Finally it was dawn. It had been a long time coming. There had been many questions by the police, many cups of coffee gulped, and statements signed; and finally, chiefly because of Helene's insistence, they had sent Luke Kelsey on his way, but without the Kelsey Kutter, that being a weapon of murder. The police surgeon had dressed his arm. He and Jay and Skid, in Jay's office, had just decided it might be a good idea to buy some breakfast soon. Jay had stepped from the office for a moment, but Skid was there, watching him with her doll eyes.

"Look now, Luke, don't hold it against me for wanting to turn you in," Skid said earnestly. "After all, I was breaking my own heart when I did it. I like it much better, having you still in circulation."

"Me too, honey." He grinned at her. "Go right ahead trying to get yourself into my good graces. I don't mind that."

The door opened and Jay Lyle returned briskly. He had a tan raincoat with a checkered black-and-white lining.

"There's yours. I'm taking mine back now. And my hat. And my license. Listen, Luke, keep on thinking over my proposition, will you? I'm new in this racket, but things are looking up now. We'll get a million dollars' worth of publicity out of this. So don't waste yourself—a couple of hours a day on your lawn-mower attachment is all it needs. The rest of the time you can help here as my partner, making our clients happy. Lyle and Kelsey, Private Investigators. Doesn't it sound good?"

Luke Kelsey gave a shake of his head, still feeling a little dizzy.

"Sounds good," he agreed. He thought of Helene and smiled at Skid. "I'll like it fine. Much better than mechanics."

THE END



... All because of a beautiful girl's vanity. . . .

By **HOPE**
CAMPBELL

*When the shiv-artist got Larry, I
tossed gallantry overboard and
muscled in on the kitten — who
was ready for another kill.*

THEY were ahead of me, riding up the escalator at Penn Station. I was just getting in from out of town, where people are not quite as intellectual and refined as reputation has it, though they pay nice fat fees to preserve that illusion. Automatically I kept an arm against the roll in my pocket while I studied them.

Small town New Englanders, I guessed. The older one had a prim neatness about her that was more auntish than old maidish. The girl was a honey, petite too,

A SHIV FOR CHIVALRY

with an ingenuous golden-brown dutch bob and a colt-like awkwardness that had more appeal in it than most chorus lines.

As I stepped off the escalator, they faced me.

"Could you tell us the way to Number One?" Auntie asked.

"One what?"

"The place called Number One."

"There are a lot of Number Ones in this town." I didn't want to sound impatient but it had been a hard three days, particularly when that jerk Bertrand tried to blow his brains out. "Every street east and west has one and so does every avenue."

Auntie twisted her blue cotton gloves. "But that's all he ever wrote. That he was dropping in at Number One for the evening."

"He's disappeared," the girl whispered.

She had that kind of a voice, sweet and low but with just enough throatiness in it so you wanted to hear it again. Her blue eyes were full of misery and humiliation. I had to remind myself that the pair of them didn't look like money.

"Try the Bureau of Missing Persons," I suggested briskly.

"But if we register at a hotel like the Larchmont and start making telephone calls like that, what will people think?" Auntie gave those gloves another knot.

"Lady," I said, "in this town, nobody has time to listen in at switchboards, let alone think. They're too busy talking to themselves."

I ditched them cold, didn't even see them to a taxi. My disposition hasn't been the same since Larry's death, and being away hadn't improved my opinion of the human race. Besides, I hadn't seen my mail in three days.

That dope of a secretary of mine had made her usual mess of the telephone memos and put the only important letter among the bills. Then I didn't want to go to the apartment. Without Larry, it was just a place to sleep and change clothes.

I got to thinking about New England and Number One, and worked up an attack of conscience. Anyhow the room clerk at the Larchmont was a pal of mine and half an hour later I was knocking at 1731.

I held out my card and the gardenias

I'd picked up downstairs, and decided right there that it wasn't conscience. It was the misty blue-eyed look I had caught at the station. "Just to apologize for being rude."

"Why, Mr. Fall," the girl said.

I felt as if I'd stepped out of a hot shower and smack into a cake of ice. My name isn't Fall—never will be. It's Dan Spring. I'd been called Fall by just one person and once in print. Suddenly that kitten mistiness wasn't a magnet any more. This babe was blind as a bat. She was myopic, not romantic. She couldn't have read that card unless she'd stuck it right under her nose. But she hadn't dreamed up that Fall. She'd got it from just one source.

This was an angle I had to act on fast. "Private detective with an evening to waste," I grinned, changing my line as I spoke. "I think you're in trouble and I can help you. How about you and your girl friend," I nodded toward Auntie in the far corner of the room, "having dinner with me? Suppose I wait in the lobby while you change?"

I didn't worry about them ditching me or standing me up; they wanted to see me worse than I wanted them. I sat in that lobby and put twos together until I had a total that made me forget I had ever thought of kissing Kitten Eyes.

The Drury case was a dirty one from the minute it came into the office. Dirty but not dangerous, I had thought. That was the reason I'd put Larry on it. Maybe I never should have taken the kid brother into the firm. But a guy's got to do something for a kid he loves, even if he is too good looking and too dumb.

There are hundreds of rich gals like this Cynthia Drury, drink too much and like the men too well. But Cynthia had a talent, painting. That dumb dame liked to keep a diary and she drew it. Everyone admitted that for graphic sketching, hers couldn't be touched. Then she lost it, she didn't know when or where, and whoever found it would have a potential blackmailing fortune. So we were supposed to find it or, if necessary, buy it back cheap.

Cynthia gave me a sultry look and I got out fast, turned the case over to Larry. He was safe. He liked the windblown type.

Larry started backtracking on Cynthia's dates, in and out of town, and that gal really covered the east coast on her excursions. At twenty a day, plus expenses, I told him to take a year. But after two months he was found in a Manhattan alley with a knife hole in his back.

Then that dizzy Drury dame did something that nearly got her a personal slapping around from me. Except she wasn't worth it. She gushed an interview to one of those sleazy society mags about the twelve most glamorous men she had ever met, with pictures drawn by Cynthia. I came in a bad eighth, because my name wasn't in the Register and she remembered it as Fall, and drew my Irish mug with too much chin and curly hair.

HOW did New England tie in? They'd been waiting for me at Penn Station. That was first-grader stuff. My dopey secretary probably had broadcast to the world that I was expected in this afternoon. They deliberately told me where they were registered. They'd got their dope about me from that Drury article, including the name. Interesting. Very interesting. Because the Drury case was Larry's first and last.

Kitten Eyes was very neatly packaged in brown velveteen when she walked out of the elevator.

"How about the dining room here?" I asked. "It's quiet and we want to talk."

I've always had a theory that if you let people string enough words together, eventually they'll hang themselves. But these two were pathetic.

By the time I ordered brandies and coffee, I had a lot of negatives at least. The head waiter knew them, so they had been staying at the hotel for several days. Their name might or might not be Maitland. But if Auntie wanted to pass herself off as Mama Maitland, she should have remembered to buy a ten-cent-store wedding ring.

They shouldn't have tried to say they were from Chicago either. I placed that vowel twang closer to Portland. And Patty's missing brother, who had come to New York for an art career and plunged into a life of dissipation at Number One and then disappeared, sounded as if Auntie had read a confession story in her

youth and remembered it very vaguely.

"I'll speak to some people in the morning," I promised finally. "Meanwhile, what would you like to do? I know a couple of clubs that might fit that Number One clue of yours."

"I would like to see New York," Patty said. "But night clubs, I don't know. I'd rather see how people really live here."

Did they think I was that dumb? I had to count ten before I could speak and then I threw it at them. "I had thought I might call a friend of mine this evening. Cynthia Drury. Want me to give her a ring and see if it's convenient to bring you along?"

They looked as happy as a couple of Sunday School kids who had just palmed a quarter off the collection plate. I didn't expect to find Cynthia at home but she was, her voice a little thick.

"This is the eighth most glamorous man in your life," I said. "Why have you been neglecting me?"

It worked. Cynthia's family was away as usual, and she and her gang felt less inhibited with a whole house to romp in than out in public. I got invited right up to join the brawl, along with my country cousins, as I put it. Auntie and Patty were perfectly congenial about being country cousins and I didn't bother to sully their minds by telling them this wasn't exactly a quilting bee we were joining.

Cynthia wore black silk to match her hair and she was swaying. "I'm about to fall for Mr. Fall," she giggled.

Ever try to watch three faces at once? "Not Fall," I corrected. "Spring. You got it wrong in the article, too."

Auntie and Patty looked as if an elevator had fallen out from under them.

Cynthia giggled again. "I knew it was something to do with the weather. Wonder I didn't call you Winter, the freeze you gave me."

Auntie and Patty never got a chance to recover, once we joined the party, but I couldn't waste time watching their faces. I don't enjoy that kind of thing myself, a lot of luses roaming all over that awful museum piece of a house that Grandpa Drury had built. Me, I'll do my drinking in a bar, the one place left where conversation is still an art.

I had work to do, after I picked the hotel key out of Auntie's purse, and it

wasn't hard to disappear in that setup. I clocked eight minutes back to the hotel. The room was made up for the night. First, I picked up my card from the dresser, just to give them a few bad moments. Any points I'd given them for brains disappeared in the next three minutes. They'd left three snapshots of Larry, ones I'd never seen before taken against a rocky New England shore, and a torn-out page of that famous pictorial diary, there in an unlocked suitcase. I took the drawing.

I was back at the party and had the key in Auntie's purse in twenty-six minutes and no one had missed me. Then I took a couple of fast slugs but I couldn't get that red haze out of my mind. I hurt. I hurt inside me again, the way I had the day Larry was found. I wanted to hurt back, with my fists, even if they were women.

I knew it was stupid but I went ahead because I had to have action. I'd waited six months and I couldn't wait any longer.

Cynthia was willing to be alone but I surprised her. I talked. "Am I still on the diary case?"

She blinked foggily and then she snapped out of it, fast. "What have you found?"

"What will you pay?"

I've seen them sober quicker but never nastier. "Not a cent."

Those big slugs hadn't helped my reflexes. I did a double take. "How come? That wasn't the story before."

Then she went sullen. "Why pay now? It's been gone eight or nine months. I think it's been accidentally destroyed."

I flashed the single sheet out of my pocket and watched her go white. For a minute I thought I was going to have to hold her head.

"How much?" I repeated, because I never doubted that was the Maitlands' game and I wanted to have my answers ready when they began fishing. "For the diary, plus a receipt for funds paid, incriminating enough so they'll never dare spring any photostats on you?"

"The country cousins?" Cynthia snapped.

"Never mind. I'm asking the questions."

Cynthia stalled. "Sound them out. Get

an idea of the price and then see me before you do anything."

I didn't go straight back to find the Maitlands. I had to talk business to them, nice and polite, and my fists didn't feel polite. They felt like taking a neck in each hand and then not thinking about what happened after that.

THAT was another mistake. Because Cynthia got to them first. For once I didn't care about losing a fee, but this case was my own private fight—no outsiders allowed in. I walked over to the corner where the three of them had their heads together. I never saw three women hating each other worse. Their eyes did it and Patty was trembling with anger. Just as I joined them, Kitten Eyes spat out something, words nice little girls shouldn't know.

Cynthia had a glass in her hand and she let fly. I shoulder-blocked Patty out of the way and it hit the wall. I broke that meeting up without any Emily Post gestures.

In the taxi, Auntie started to say something to Patty.

Patty turned on her. Kitten Eyes had claws all right. "Shut up, you stupid fool. You've spoiled everything. Shut up before I shut you up."

That clicked like a key in a lock. Not kitten eyes. Leopardess. Murderess. She had that kind of fire in her.

I did too, but killers are dopes. I try not to be a dope. I had to get away. I jumped out of the cab at the first red light and gave the driver a bill and started walking.

I walked most of the night, until the dawn was blue. By then I had control. I could talk to them now, bargain for the diary if they wanted it that way, and let them weave that rope of words to hang themselves and finally turn them over to the cops.

Still, I put a safety valve on myself. The idea was that I would keep control if I knew I'd lay a line straight to myself if I let my hands go around their throats. That would stop me. I saw a guy burn once, smelled it rather. So I called Joe Mahoney, the lieutenant who stuck with me longest on Larry's care, and I told him I was spending the morning with some

dames named Maitland at the Larchmont. "Maitland?" Joe said. "Maitland? You do get around."

I didn't like his tone. I'd never crossed the guy. What was wrong with him? I asked, "You got something on Larry's case you haven't told me?"

"I've got something—but I didn't realize until now it was Larry's case." That Joe has a habit of dropping his voice when he gets excited. He was whispering. "Better tell me where you are and stay right there. I'll pick you up."

What could I do? While I waited on the corner, I kept wondering if I'd missed something he said. It didn't make sense. Unless. . . Cynthia had been lushed last night and mean mad. Could she have called the cops and sicked them on the Maitlands?

But I think I half guessed the truth the instant I saw Joe's expression. Joe doesn't like murder. It always gives his face that mottled red-marble look.

I wasn't too surprised when the car swung down one of the dead-end streets on the East River, in the packing house district. They were getting ready to take Auntie away. She had a knife hole in her back.

That was as far as they had got, a hole in the back; like Larry's, now that they were connecting the cases. Her purse wasn't much help: just the Larchmont key, some cards engraved "Miss Alice Maitland," twelve bills and some silver, and a linen handkerchief wrapped around a powder puff.

"You never did tell me exactly what Larry was working on, except that your client was Cynthia Drury," Joe said.

"Lost but not found. Some valuables."

"Like letters maybe?" Joe whispered. "Blackmail?"

"Ask her," I advised as we went up there.

Cynthia gave him the regal treatment. A dozen people could testify she had never left the house last night. That checked. She had passed out on a couch soon after we left but she pulled herself together enough to engineer the breakup of the party. Then her maid put her to bed.

The maid covered that. She came in, with that black silk dress in her hand, mending a rip in the hem, and said she had

kept an eye on Cynthia all night. Sometimes, as she tactfully put it, Miss Drury slept badly after a party.

Joe got a look at the dress without making a point of it. It needed pressing and mending but it was clean. Knives are messy, close work.

We left and started downtown.

"You said Maitland dames. Want to give me the dope on the others before we see them?" Joe asked.

"Her," I corrected. "You'll do better on your own unless you want a collection of second-hand lies that weren't convincing first-hand."

Joe's fast and he wasn't pulling punches for me. "Why were you going up to see the Maitlands? Why did you want us to know you were there? How do they tie up with the Drury case? They do. You took them there last night. How does it all tie in with Larry?"

This is the only business I know and I want to stay in it. I gave him the story, including Kitten Eyes' fight with Auntie. Except that I didn't mention my informal visit last night and finding the snaps and the leaf from the diary. After all, nothing had been said, so it was only my opinion that the Maitlands had brought that to prove possession while they made a deal with Cynthia, and the thieves had fallen out. So let Joe dig up his own motive.

Patty was in the hotel room and she was playing it sweet and stricken. And dumb. She gave Joe the brother story she and Auntie had handed me. According to her version, they just happened to speak to me at the station and I forced my company on them and took them to a brawl. Not a word about Mr. Fall or the diary—though she must know by now that her leaf was missing—or the quarrel with Auntie.

She never lost her head for one minute. I had to admire the babe, even while I hated her. Of course, she couldn't know I had handed Joe the whole story, so that hers began to look plenty bad.

Whenever Joe asked too many questions, she turned on the tears. Either Joe had urgent business elsewhere or he's a sucker for the water works.

I'm not.

He was willing to let it go at that for the moment but as we walked out, I said

to her, "I'll be seeing you. Properly chaperoned."

I guess it registered. I don't know how she could have missed that cop down the hall.

I went back to my office. I could have handed Joe the case tied up with a pink ribbon, but I wasn't playing it that way. Kitten Eyes wasn't going to get away with a hung jury or reasonable doubt or even a manslaughter verdict. I wanted Joe to dig up enough facts, facts the officials could get a lot better than a private operator, to make it in the first degree. If I could keep the diary angle reasonably quiet, that was all gravy and I was glad to do it for a client, but I didn't really care.

Joe was digging. He called me about five to say the Chicago address had turned out to be a phony. I shut up the office and went over to the Grindstone Bar and Grill, and cut myself in on a short beer and a long discussion. Then I began cussing inside. When an Irish hunch starts nagging you, you might as well throw in your hand. It's worse than a wife, much worse.

The beer went flat. Still I couldn't pin that hunch down. Just nag-nag.

Joe walked in. He'd learned my habits when we were working on Larry's case. I never heard his voice so low. I almost had to lip-read.

"We've got the knife. Taxi driver brought it in. Left in his cab. Forgotten. Dames! They stick someone in the back and are smart enough to get the evidence off the scene but they get to lipsticking the puss or something and never get the shiv home."

He slid it across the bar toward me and I covered it with my arm. I barely glanced at it because I had to watch Joe's face.

"Driver's no help though. We've had him on one drunken charge and he won't admit about last night but I think he was fogged up. Only knows the passenger was a dame, maybe young, picked up near the river and later dropped off on Fifth Avenue. Must have switched cabs there. The next passenger found the knife. And that's all, brother. No fingerprints. Nothing."

I got a quick look at it and something almost rang a bell, except that Joe was

still talking, and I wanted to hear it.

HE WAS pounding a fist on the bar. "Tracing that knife's hopeless. Manufactured twenty years ago and sold to professionals by the hundreds. But there has to be blood on the clothes. There has to be. And there isn't."

"Patty Maitland?"

Joe went a slow angry red as he shook his head and now I could hear his voice. "That Maitland babe. I'll be back pounding a beat yet. But I'd like to know how she did it. I let her go downstairs to lunch, with two guys covering her, so I could get a look at her clothes. She gave them both the slip."

I jerked my arm away and cut my hand and didn't even feel it. Because now I knew that knife. And I had that nag-nag settled. It had to fit. Those holes in the back. Clothes clean. This kind of a knife. Kitten Eyes. Cynthia's heaving that glass.

Now I didn't know from nothing about motives. I only knew there was going to be a third murder if we didn't get there fast. I could only hope I knew where, not a private conference in some hideout.

"Come on," I said. "Don't ask questions. We need action, not conversation, or you won't even have a beat to pound."

We threw the book of traffic rules away, getting up to Cynthia's house. I don't know what I expected as we stormed into the drawing room. Maybe the two babes slugging it out, toe to toe. Maybe knives flashing. Certainly not the tea party we walked into, smooth and formal as a drawing room comedy stage set.

"You featherbrained dope," I snapped at Patty.

Joe concentrated on looking official and as if we knew what the score was, but he was throwing me distress signals. I shook my head. No time now to explain. I had to call them as I saw them. But careful.

Cynthia put down the silver sugar tongs and stood up. Her gold jersey dress matched the metallic threads in the brocade drapes.

"We'd like to see that maid again," I said.

Cynthia was playing the great lady, displeased but courteous. She used the inter-house phone.

When the maid came in, I said, "We can get a warrant and search this house. But you can save everybody the trouble by answering one question. Is Miss Drury keeping her picture diary again?"

Cynthia stepped between us. "Tell him nothing."

I never knew triumph could taste as bitter as poison. I had to lick my lips before I could go on. "Meaning you are. She must see you working on it."

Cynthia's sleek head turned. "What if I am? I like to paint."

"Sure. You like to paint. Only with you, it's a fatal weakness. The scare you got when you lost that diary didn't teach you anything. You're still doing it."

"I won't lose this," Cynthia said sullenly.

"Won't you? I think you have a habit of losing things. Especially when you're drinking."

"So what?"

Let her worry about that crack awhile. Let it ride. That was what got them, not knowing what you knew. I shifted position. "So nothing, if it were another diary. But it isn't. It's the same one, the one for which you're so suddenly not interested in paying any reward. I haven't seen it but I'd bet my grandmother's back teeth on that. The same diary."

Joe's fast. He didn't know how this tied in but he knew it tied. "Want that warrant? I can get it here in half an hour."

"Won't need it." I couldn't keep my eyes off Cynthia. I wanted to see her break. I wanted her to bust wide open. "We'll get it without a warrant."

Cynthia was still fighting. "What if it is the same diary?"

"What if it is?" My eyes felt hot. "Just this. Larry found that diary. He returned it to you."

"I found it myself," Cynthia claimed.

I shook my head, very slowly. "Oh, no."

"She didn't," Patty put in. "Larry gave me that page to prove he found it. As evidence. He had an idea she might try to renege on the reward or something."

I didn't have time to follow that line up. "Which ties you in with Larry," I told Cynthia and went overboard on the jackpot gamble. "We can prove the time element fits. Why did you kill him?"

"You're crazy," Cynthia said flatly, but a nerve was twitching in her cheek.

Joe stepped forward and showed her the knife. I'd hate to play poker with that guy. I'll bet he'd raise with a pair of treys if he figured the other guy bluffed easy.

"We've got the weapon and we've got the taxi driver," he said. "Want to come down to the station and dictate that confession now?"

"What confession?"

She was beginning to break up. Her face was white and her nostrils flared, fighting for breath.

"Might as well do it the easy way," I told her. "Your alibi for last night isn't worth a dime. That party was all over the house and you wouldn't have been missed for a half hour. I wasn't myself, when I left to search the Maitlands' room."

That shook her. I kept on pitching. "It has to be you. You throw things when you get mad. That's a throwing knife." I looked at Joe. "Get it? A near-sighted gal couldn't see to use a throwing knife. Even wearing glasses, it wouldn't be her game. Myopics don't coordinate too well. But Cynthia has excellent eyes and peculiar hobbies. Don't waste time going over her clothes. She threw from a safe distance and was careful getting the knife out. You won't find a thing."

Cynthia took a step forward. "Get out of this house."

"Not just yet. Not without you." Mentally I was searching for her soft spot, to hit her where she couldn't take it. Then I almost snapped my fingers. Never overlook the obvious. A beautiful woman's vanity. I knew right then where Larry had hit her and why she had killed him.

I laughed in her face, the sort of laugh no woman can take. "If you won't tell it, I will. You went for Larry. He was a handsome guy. After he returned the diary, you had a few drinks. Right? When he told you he wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole, you blew your top and killed him. Larry and I had the same tastes. Notice I didn't rise to the bait, when you named me in that article, trying to intrigue me into calling you and dating you?"

SHE busted. Her lips drew back from her teeth and her eyes disappeared. She came at me with the silver teapot in her hand. I hit her. I wanted to slug her again as she went down. But I guess I was brought up wrong, too soft. She was a woman and I couldn't hit her twice.

"See you later, Joe," I said thickly and made for the washroom across the hall.

Murders always affect me that way. They raise Joe's blood pressure but they literally make me sick at my stomach. I lost that beer and everything else I'd eaten in two days.

I could hear part of what was happening but I didn't want to see it. I stayed in the washroom until the house quieted down. When I let myself out, I headed straight for the Grindstone. I needed a lot of straight ones.

But I couldn't get them down fast enough to wipe out the pictures of what must have happened. I threw down another double.

"Joe said you'd be here."

I didn't turn my head. "Tell Joe I'll see him tomorrow."

"I need a double, too," Patty said meekly but firmly.

Right there, I tabbed her. A whim of stone.

"Two more doubles," I said.

"I told Joe my part of it," Patty said. "I met Larry when he was down searching the Drury summer place. I lived at Alice's boarding house. She was sort of a tenth cousin of mine."

"I know," I said, but it didn't stop her.

"He said his name was Larry Waters."

"Oh." So the kid had been playing big detective, fake names and all. Gosh, but I had loved that dumb guy. "So?"

"We dated quite a bit. He showed me a picture of you. But he never told me that you were brothers or your last name. That's the reason I made the mistake about Mr. Fall."

I began to get interested.

"The last time Larry was down, he found the diary in the launch where Cynthia had lost it and he gave me that leaf to keep. I think he had a hunch."

"Irish nag-nag."

(Please continue on page 97)

TOM CLICKS ON VACATIONS-NOW!

THANKS FOR THE LIFT, JOAN, SEE YOU TONIGHT!

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Fay threw herself at
him. . . .

By **DWIGHT
V. SWAIN**

• • •
When Reynolds gave shrewish Kathryn and sultry Beryl the run-around . . . and sparked fiery Fay—he almost outsmarted himself.

IT CAME as a queer, self-conscious prickling between Carl Reynolds' shoulder blades first, a vague uneasiness that made him pause and turn. When he saw nothing, he frowned, not quite knowing what to make of it. But he didn't worry. He was still elated over that little bag of stones in his pocket.

That the stones were stolen, dyed red as their own fierce ruby fire with the blood of a murdered guard, didn't bother him. Nor that in buying them he'd passed the thin-drawn line between legitimate gem dealer and fence—nor even the fury of Nolan, his partner, who had refused to allow the stones to stay the night in their safe.

No. To Reynolds it was enough that he had a fortune in his grasp, a pyramiding pile of loot all his own, subject not even to Nolan's rapacity.

Then the feeling came again—the prickling, the uneasiness. Once more he halted.

Only this time it wasn't fruitless. This time he saw the shadow, the man drawing back into the doorway.

A sudden chill slithered up and down Carl Reynolds' spine. He spun, hurried on along the dark street. Unconsciously he caught himself thinking again of the killer, Donnagan, with the sullen slit-mouth, the beady basilisk eyes. Donnagan had murdered once for these blood-red stones already. . . .

But Donnagan stood tall and slender, a study in sartorial elegance, while this shadow was stocky, wore rumpled gray. Besides, Donnagan couldn't know Reynolds was still carrying the stones.

The pursuer came out in the open now—moving faster, closing the gap. Panic gripped Reynolds. He upped his own pace to a point just short of running, searched desperately for a taxi, an open store.

But it was late, after six already. The dark of winter night hung shroud-like. The business district stood bleak, deserted.

If not Donnagan, then who was tailing him? The law?

No. Reynolds had seen detectives work. They'd either have maintained a steady, unobtrusive tail, or else arrested him on the spot.

A lone cab barreled around the corner. The flag was up. Reynolds broke into a wild run. His shout echoed shrill even in his own ears.

The cab veered, pulled to a halt. Panting, he scrambled in. "Get rolling!"

The driver shot him a curious glance, but stepped on the gas. Reynolds peered out the rear window.

The man in gray had disappeared.

Now that he felt safe once more, Carl Reynolds could consider the problem of the shadow more calmly. He gave the driver his home address, then leaned back in the seat to think the matter through.

Outside of Donnagan, the only person who knew he had the stones was Nolan, his partner. Could Nolan be behind the shadow? Perhaps his worry about the stolen rubies had been put on. Maybe, greedy as always, he'd coveted them—

Only that didn't ring true, either. If Nolan were out to rob him, no accomplices—such as the shadow—would be cut in to share the spoils. That was one thing about Nolan; you could count on him to handle any job the stingy way.

Then who?

The answer struck him a hammer blow: Kathryn, or Beryl.

As his wife, Kathryn had the best motive. Possibly she'd decided, at long last, that a smart shyster could wring enough of a settlement from him to make it worth her while to divorce him. Result: a private detective on his trail to dig up evidence.

Langorous Beryl could be counted on to shoot angles, too, sooner or later. With her, he'd gone to a lot of trouble to keep his right name a secret. Now maybe she'd made up her mind to try blackmail. Again, a private detective would be the answer.

Except that in either case—Beryl or Kathryn—the private detective would have no motive for trying to catch up with him the way the man in the gray suit had.

Carl Reynolds frowned.

The hackie said: "In case you don't know it, mister, you got a tail."

Reynolds went rigid. He pasted his face to the rear window, peered back through the gathering gloom.

Two headlights—one bright, one dim—leered at him.

"I spotted those cocked lights a dozen blocks back," the driver said. "I zig-zagged a couple of times to try him out, but he's stickin' with you like a plaster."

Reynolds' breath came fast and shallow. "Ditch him. Run for it."

"Uh-huh." The driver shook his head emphatically. "I like my health, mister. I'm givin' you enough break by tippin' you off."

Wordless, Carl Reynolds nodded. His lips were dry, his throat too small. Of a

sudden it had come—the other reason why a man might follow him.

Fay Norris was her name. A waitress at Zamboula's, a redhead. When he grabbed her arm, she slapped his face.

However, Reynolds knew Zamboula, and the thought of taming her somehow appealed. He'd had Zamboula fire her, then amused himself by plaguing her over the phone.

Once, she said: "My brother gets out of State Prison next week. He'll know how to take care of you." But her voice trembled with fear, and Reynolds laughed—the more so because, with a brother in prison, she'd never go to the police.

Last night, a little high, he'd rung her again. He'd spoken, and the phone had clicked dead in his ear without a word. Somehow, now that he thought of it, it seemed it had had an ominous sound.

Today—this shadow.

Of a sudden Reynolds' hands felt damp despite the cold. He had to force himself to think.

He said: "Here's five. Go on to Gunter Street instead of mine. Swing west. Drop me off fourth house from the corner, right hand side."

Deftly, the driver snared the bill. "Behind your place, huh? You figger to run through between the houses?"

Reynolds nodded. He didn't dare speak. The cab raced past the street on which he lived; then, at the next one, whipped round the corner on two wheels. The ill-matched lights behind fell back.

Reynolds leaped even before his own cab stopped. Heart in mouth, he sprinted between the buildings, back towards the place where he lived. He had a gun in his apartment. If he could only reach it. Half sobbing, he clawed up the steep rear outside stairs, jammed his key into the lock.

The click of the bolt did more for his nerves than brandy. He was here, home. He'd outwitted the shadow. Not that it mattered, really. The man in the rumpled gray suit probably was some bumbling incompetent sent out by a private detective agency to check for Kathryn or Beryl. The other, the nonsense about Fay Norris and her ex-con brother—he almost laughed out loud, it was that absurd.

Chuckling, he pushed open the door, stepped inside, heeled it shut again and

bolted it. The darkness closed in about him. When it dawned on him that he was still trembling, he chuckled again: reflex action, pure and simple.

It was then he heard the sound, the faint, harsh scuff of shoe on floor.

He froze, scalp prickling. The panic swirled over him once more.

"Kathryn!" he choked, and even as he spoke knew it wasn't Kathryn, that she was long gone.

Out there in the blackness, someone laughed. The room exploded sound and flame. . . .

SHE was at least a pretty girl. The auburn ringlets that swirled to her shoulders made her striking, and her figure backed up the impression, and her face was not too badly put together. She knew these things, as every woman knows them. Rather desperately, she counted on them now.

"My name's Fay Norris" she said. "You're holding my brother Tom."

"Dunno," the man with his feet on the desk began. Only then he saw her—really saw her, that is—and the indifference that had hung about him like part of the eddying blue cigar smoke thinned. He said: "Yeah, I remember now. The Reynolds mess. See Hammaty, in Homicide."

"Thank you." She gave him a smile, the same smile she gave them all as insurance against some future need, even though she hated them for what they were trying to do to Tom. She could feel this one's eyes upon her as she doubled away. The click of her high heels on the floor came like an echo to the way she knew he was smacking his lips behind her.

More elevators, more miles of corridor. Then a door with a pebbled glass panel lettered *Homicide Bureau* and, finally, the man called Hammaty.

Her heart went cold when she saw him. Because she knew, instinctively, how he would be. Not kindly and genial, like the old ones with daughters at home. Not acutely conscious of her womanhood, the way the young bucks were. Not even smug and smart and cynical, and so the more easily played.

No. Not this one, this Hammaty. He was cold, and that word alone summed him up. His youth, his brain, his very be-

ing—all were subordinate to that all-pervading chill.

"Yes, Miss Norris?" he clipped, and the words might just as well have been so many shattering icicles.

"My brother Tom—"

"Your brother killed a man, a Carl Reynolds. He's being held on a murder charge."

The way he said it, the cold brutality, set her back. For an instant she lost control.

"He didn't!" she flared. "You know he didn't! All you care about is convictions, not justice—"

Hammaty's face was a chill blank mask.

"I doubt that, Miss Norris. Reynolds had been annoying you. Old Zamboula even admitted he fired you at Reynolds' request. Your brother learned about it. When he was released from prison he went hunting Reynolds in a rage. He admits that—"

"No!"

"He does. He's told us that he followed Reynolds to a place on Gunter Street, then chased him between the buildings, back towards the apartment house where Reynolds lived. The cab drivers who drove him and Reynolds confirm it."

"But he didn't kill him!"

"Reynolds was shot to death just inside the kitchen of his own apartment."

"But Tom didn't—"

The look he threw her turned her last hopes to pain. No mercy, no relenting. It made it worse, she thought, that he was as young as he was, almost good-looking save for the hardness of eyes and mouth and jaw.

"Miss Norris, your brother is a former felon, convicted on a charge of assault with intent to kill. He admits he was close behind Reynolds, and that he fully intended to beat Reynolds within an inch of his life the instant he caught him."

"But he doesn't say he killed Reynolds, does he?" Desperately, she tried to fight the tremor from her voice. "He hasn't confessed?"

Slowly, the man called Hammaty shook his head. His eyes stayed hard. The thin, harsh lip-line didn't relax.

"No, Miss Norris. No confession. He continues to claim he became confused in the dark, that the shots that killed Reynolds were fired before he could reorient himself."

"Then?"

"In spite of his story about beating Reynolds up, your brother was carrying a gun, a .38 he bought in a pawnshop in direct violation of his parole. Reynolds was shot with a .38. Your brother threw his in the river, he says. That way, Ballistics can't check it against the slugs from Reynolds' body."

Fay Norris stood silent, shaken.

STOP, OR
I'LL SCREAM!

NOT NECESSARY,
DEAR. I USE NEW
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"Don't think we haven't checked the angles, either." Hammaty's voice was a hammer of sound, driving home his points.

"Reynolds was scum, but careful scum. The enemies he made weren't the kind who'd kill him. He was cheating on his wife, but she was out of town for the week, with a alibi that's iron-clad. His girl friend knew him for the kind of small-time trash he was, and was playing him that way. His partner, too—Reynolds' wife will make him liquidate the firm's assets, pay her off—"

On and on the harsh voice drove, but Fay Norris was past hearing. Her eyes filled in spite of her, and she knew only that she had failed.

She said, babbling: "You can't do it, you can't! Tom isn't guilty. You're just trying to cover up, putting it on him because he's been in trouble before, because that's easier than finding the murderer—"

"Sure. The boy's always being framed; the law's always wrong. We get it from every jailbird's girl."

Fay's world was blurring. She could feel her self-control go.

"You—you animal!"

She slapped him across the mouth.

THEY must have made a fitting pair, Reynolds and this woman who had been his wife. Her eyes were small and shrewish, her figure sloppy, her hair streaked in spite of the blonde rinse.

She wept too copiously. "Poor Carl, he loved me so."

A tiny needle of nausea jabbed at Fay Norris' stomach. She forced herself to go on in spite of it.

"But he had enemies, Mrs. Reynolds? Surely, a man in business—"

"No. No enemies. Everyone loved him." Again, the tears.

Fay thinned her lips. "Including a Miss Beryl Chambers, Mrs. Reynolds?"

The tears stopped. The shrew eyes glittered balefully. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you know, Miss Reynolds? Miss Chambers was your husband's sweetie."

"Shut up!" The saccharine voice went shrill, violent. "Shut up, I tell you, you red-headed fool! That little tramp wouldn't leave him alone."

"Then you did know, Mrs. Reynolds?"

"Know? Of course I knew. I knew everything about him. He wasn't pulling the wool over my eyes—"

"Then you had a motive, too?"

"A motive?"

"For murder, Mrs. Reynolds. You were jealous of your husband's other women." A pause. "Perhaps you were jealous enough to kill him."

A veil fell over the shrewish eyes. The shrillness, the violence, went out of her voice, replaced by a low, quaking fury.

"Get out of my house, you— Get out!"

Pause.

"I was a hundred and fifty miles from here when he was killed, sitting in my sister's living room with her and her husband and their three children. Neighbors dropped in twice during the evening." Silence, echoing, while the seconds ticked by.

"Since you're asking questions, you might ask that Chambers dame where *she* was about that time—especially since Carl was making passes at you as well as at her, and a tramp can be jealous as well as a wife!"

* * *

Beryl Chambers. Tall and dark and statuesque, with full lips, deep curves, a slow, meaningful glance that to men spelled invitation.

She dropped back on the ornate period bed. Stretched, cat-like, till the long, lithe muscles rippled under the yellow silk of her lounging pajamas.

Her voice was as slow as her glance. "Yes?"

"Carl Reynolds is dead," Fay said.

Beryl Chambers nodded. The full lips twisted into the caricature of a smile.

"I'd heard." The smile twisted even more. "I was supposed to think of him as Carl Rogers, you know. To the end, I believe he was convinced I didn't know his name."

"But you did?"

"Of course. So long as he paid the bills, I didn't give a damn," she said, as the yellow silk rippled with a tiny shudder. "You were lucky you didn't have anything to do with him."

Fay caught her breath, felt her cheeks go hot. "Then you knew?"

The silken shoulders shrugged ever so slightly. "Of course." The smile again. "You'll never know how much you hurt his dirty little soul. He'd hold it down till he got drunk. Then he'd come here and curse you by the hour because he couldn't get to you. He couldn't stand the thought of a woman living who repulsed him." She paused. "You'll never know how much pleasure it gave me, either."

"They're holding my brother for killing him," Fay said dully. She didn't even know why she said it; only that, somehow, she felt strangely close to this woman in spite of everything.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't know who did it? You don't have any idea?"

"No."

"He was in prison, my brother, I mean. For assault with intent to kill, because he attacked his partner—they had a little garage—with a spanner when he found their place was being used as a hideout for stolen cars. Only the police thought he was in on it, that it was just a quarrel between them."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sure—there's nothing?"

The jet hair rippled. "No."

"There's a man, Hammaty, a detective. He's out to get Tom. He isn't even trying to find the murderer. He's got a man with a record to pin it to; that's all he cares about." Fay's shoulders shook. She couldn't stop them. "Tom, I'd told him about Reynolds. Then he answered the phone one night when Reynolds called. He didn't even tell me about it till I saw him down at the jail this morning—"

"I'm sorry," Beryl Chambers repeated. She stretched again, slid from the bed. "I wish I could help, but . . . there's a man, Donnagan is his name. Carl introduced me to him. We've been going out once in a while, when Carl wasn't around. We're having dinner together tonight, and I've got to dress. You know how men hate waiting. Besides, now that Carl's dead, I'll have to find somebody new, and this fellow seems to have money. I like him, too. . . ."

SHE'D gone nearly a block when Beryl Chambers' words struck her: *'There's a man, Donnagan is his name. . . . We've*

been going out once in a while, when Carl wasn't around.'

And Kathryn Reynolds': *'A tramp can be jealous as well as a wife.'*

A man named Donnagan. And maybe he was jealous too.

Fay pivoted. Her heels clicked faster, faster, like a drumbeat of alarm in her own ears. She still didn't know what she'd do when she found Donnagan. Paste his face into her brain, perhaps; follow him to where he lived. Then throw the facts into the cold-eyed Hammaty's face.

Only it didn't work that way. Not quite.

First, Donnagan came, a tall, slim young man, with a brooding, too-handsome face. From a vantage-point in a fire escape doorway down the hall, Fay watched him enter Beryl Chambers' apartment.

Minutes dragged by. She took it for granted they'd be a while coming out, considering Beryl's plans; and when they came of course they'd be together.

Instead, the door clicked open again almost before she'd realized it. Not more than five minutes, at most. Donnagan strode out, fists momentarily clenched, face set in a way that made a little chill run up and down her spine.

For an instant she hesitated. Then, as quickly, she made up her mind.

Swiftly, she spun, darted down the fire stairs. She was waiting across the street when Donnagan came out the front door.

He pushed into the first cab. It wheeled away. She caught the second in line.

They raced downtown. Through the theater district, the nightclubs, the shopping center with its big stores. Then right, off among the narrow canyons flanked by great office buildings, the business and financial center of the city.

Donnagan's cab swerved to the curb.

New chills touched Fay. She knew the address. She'd looked it up this morning, after she'd seen Hammaty.

The lone night operator drowsed by the banked elevators. Donnagan jerked him awake. The car sped upwards.

Fay waited till it was out of view, then ran for the stairs. The sixth floor, that would be it.

It was. The corridor was dim, deserted, but a light still gleamed behind 612's glass door. The black letters said: *Reynolds & Nolan, Dealers in Precious Stones.*

A faint blur of voices reached her. She tiptoed closer, strained her ears.

"I won't have it!" a belligerent voice—she took it to be Nolan's—rumbled. "Tough mug or not, I'll be damned if I'll let you charge in here—"

"Shut up!" Donnagan, low and deadly. "I want my cut, that's all, Nolan. I'm dealing myself in."

"You—you hoodlum!"

"Sure. But I don't knock off my partner for a bunch of hot rocks like you did Reynolds."

A queer, queasy panic crept into Nolan's voice. "You're crazy, Donnagan. You can't prove a thing."

"Can't I?" A laugh that made Fay shudder even through the door. "Let's put it this way. Yesterday I sold Reynolds the DiGorci rubies. They were hotter than the Fourth of July, but he figured that at the price I was willing to sell 'em for, he could afford to chance fencing 'em."

"You're just talking, Donnagan." Nolan sounded bolder now.

"Am I? Reynolds got the money out of that safe behind you. He put the stones in it. There was an old gun there, too—a .38, like he was shot with. He mentioned it wasn't registered. If that gun and those stones are still in that safe, Nolan, I'll go away without even asking whether or not you've got an alibi!"

FAY could hear the breath go out of Nolan. He said something she didn't catch, even though she pressed her ear against the door.

Donnagan went on:

"The way I've got it, Nolan, you played sanctimonious and let Reynolds buy those rocks out of his own pocket, instead of partnership funds. Then, last night, knowing his wife was away, you hid out at his apartment and knocked him off with that gun from your safe. After that you lifted the rubies, and now you're all set to stage a crying jag over how you're losing money breaking up the partnership. That stir-bug Norris getting mixed up in the deal was just a lucky break for you."

Nolan's voice came wearily. "How much?"

It was confession.

Fay Norris sucked in air. Her heart pounded.

The door jerked open. Before she could move Donnagan caught her, dragged her in. The sullen, too-handsome face was a pattern of glowering menace now.

"That's the thing about frosted glass doors. You can see shadows on 'em." He turned to Nolan. "I sort of expected this skirt along. She's Norris's sister. She was putting the bee on the Chambers doll. That's what brought me up here. I hadn't even known Reynolds was dead till I saw Beryl."

Nolan's face was pasty gray. His voice came hoarse. "What can we do with her?"

"She's been listening, hasn't she?" Donnagan sneered. "For my money, that don't leave any choice. We take her for a little ride along some nice, quiet country road. . . ."

Fay Norris stood very still. She almost thought she could hear her own heart beating. Her mind kept flashing back to Tom. Poor Tom. He'd never know. He'd die for a murder he'd had no part of. The man called Hammaty would have his way.

Donnagan's voice came harsh and flat.

"All right, baby. Let's go!"

Then, of a sudden, the door was opening, a new voice speaking.

"Reach, Donnagan!" Hammaty said.

Donnagan reached—for a shoulder-holstered gun.

Without quite knowing why, Fay threw herself at him, wrapped her arms around him. He wrenched free, struck at her. Her head rang stars and blazing pain.

Guns roared. The office went acrid with powder smoke. A meaty *thwack* of metal on bone reached her dully. Donnagan went limp, fell.

Hummaty had her, then, was lifting her bodily into a chair.

He said: "You gorgeous, damn-fool redhead! All day I follow you, on the off chance you'll turn up something, and for fear you'll get into trouble. Then, when you hit the jack-pot, a stalled taxi almost makes me miss the boat!"

Very slowly, she opened her eyes, stared up at him. The chill edge was gone from his voice. . . .

On the far side of the room, Nolan sagged in his chair, clutching a shoulder. Donnagan still sprawled a moaning heap. A red welt marked the spot where Ham-

(Please continue on page 98)

THRILL

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

DOCKET



After a friendly tiff with a tough mugg named Jake Haggerty, Private-Eye Race Williams found Haggerty and a friend waiting in his apartment—with a deadly surprise Race violently prevented them from delivering. . . . A bigger surprise was teetering outside on a ledge—a luscious babe who strikingly resembled Haggerty's date. . . .



Race accepted ladylike Alyce's bid to protect not-so-ladylike Martha—against the wishes of racketeer Ward Anderson, Alyce's fiancé . . . and Martha's bitter enemy. Then Race found out from Psychiatrist Johnson that Alyce and Martha were one girl with two personalities! Race was getting too hot—and had to shoot off a killer.



On the trail of the truth about the split-personality queens, Race visited Alyce's politician uncle—who stoutly denied pressuring Alyce into marrying Anderson. . . . Race walked out badly confused—but not too confused to slug a hired torpedo . . . and sneak up behind Anderson with another dose of the same.



Things promptly reached a kill-or-be-killed pact between Race and Anderson. The meeting came sooner than Race expected—when he blundered into Anderson's booby trap. . . . The complete story will be told by Carroll John Daly in—"Race Williams' Double Date"—in the August issue . . . out July 2nd.

DOLLS OF DEATH



To put the legal screws on cuddlesome Evelyn's errant hubby, Jim Bennett found himself playing with life-like dolls—and toying with a heel's slab-happy pastime.



By **ROBERT**

MARTIN

Thrilling

Jim Bennett

Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

Too Close for Bennett

IT WAS after two o'clock in the morning when I left the poker game. I cashed in twenty-six dollars worth of chips and thanked Johnny Blaze for his scotch and for a pleasant evening. The

rest of the boys began to play showdown for odd chips. I shouted good night to them, but no one besides Johnny heard me. He smiled and winked at me as I went out.

Twenty minutes later I unlocked the door of my apartment, stepped inside, and felt for the light switch. As the lights came on, a voice said: "Hello, Mr. Bennett."

I smacked him with the gun. . . .



I jumped a little, and turned. A girl was sitting in my leather chair by the bookshelves. There was a bottle of my best bourbon on the table beside her and a glass in her hand. She looked small in the big chair, and the light glinted down over her copper-colored hair. She had a full red mouth, a short nose and wide brown eyes. Her crossed legs were long and well-shaped, and through the sheer black of her stockings I could see the red lacquer on her toe-nails. A pair of black, stubby high-heeled shoes were lying on the floor beside the chair. She smiled at me in a friendly fashion and rattled the ice in her glass.

I closed the door behind me and nodded at her shoes. "Do your feet hurt?" I asked her.

Her black lashes lowered as she glanced down at her toes. Then she laughed softly. It was a sound like champagne bubbling from a fountain. "I always buy my shoes a size too small," she said. "And it's been an awfully long wait. . . . Would you like a drink?"

She appeared to be alone, and I relaxed a little. "Do I know you?" I asked her.

She knew she had a nice laugh, because she turned it on again. "Not until you walked through that door. My name is Evelyn Sand. The girl on the switchboard downstairs told me you were out, and I decided to wait. The elevator boy unlocked your door for me—for five dollars."

"He's my pal," I said. "He's got a standing order to always unlock my door for redheads." I walked over to the table and picked up the bottle. It was a little over half full.

The girl nodded at the bottle. "I hope you don't mind. It was lonesome sitting here in the dark waiting for you. I found it in the kitchen. You've got scotch there, too, but I took the bourbon."

"Thanks," I said dryly. I lifted the bottle to my lips and took a small swallow. After Johnny Blaze's scotch, it tasted a little raw. I put the bottle down and decided that what I needed was coffee. "Look, honey, I'm tired, and I've got a hard day tomorrow."

She stretched like a kitten and looked at her toes. "Must we get down to business so abruptly?" she murmured. "I was

just beginning to enjoy your whisky, and your apartment is so warm and cozy. . . ." Her voice faded out, and she almost seemed to purr.

I began to have an uneasy feeling.

"Miss Sand?" I said.

Her lashes flicked up at me, and she shook her head slowly. Now that I was close to her I saw that she had the clear white skin of most red-heads, with a faint dusting of freckles over her small nose. Her black gabardine suit was smoothly tailored, and the open jacket revealed a crisp white blouse buttoned close to her firm little throat. A leopard-trimmed beaver coat lay over the arm of the chair.

"Missus," she said.

She didn't say any more, and that irritated me. At two-thirty in the morning I irritate easily. Even with a cute little red-head parked in my favorite chair. Maybe it was the *Missus*.

"All right," I said wearily. "What's the play?"

She gave me an innocent wide-eyed look and handed me a card.

I read: *The American Detective Agency, Private Investigations, James T. Bennett, District Agent*. This was followed by my office address and telephone number. I tossed the card to the table and took another swallow of the bourbon. I didn't want it, but she was watching me and I had to do something.

"I got it from your secretary," she said. "You were out when I called, and she gave me your home address. I want to engage your services."

I perked up. This was different. This was money in the bank, and not just a new approach. The *Mrs.* part should have tipped me off, but I'm not very bright after slaving over a hot poker table half the night.

"What can I do for you?" I asked her.

She stuck out her plump little lower lip in an exaggerated pout. On most women that kind of coy expression turned my stomach, but on her it was cute. Very cute. With her short nose, square little face and wide eyes, it gave her a sort of pixie look. She looked at the glass in her hand.

"Money," she said. "All you care about is money."

I grinned down at her. "Not all," I

said. "But almost." I stared at her.

She kept her eyes lowered and rattled the ice in her glass. I poured some more bourbon into it. She held it steady while I poured. I said: "Water or soda?"

"Neither," she said, and she tilted the glass to her lips. She wasn't kidding. She swallowed it without a shudder. I looked at her in admiration.

SUDDENLY her mood seemed to change. She leaned her head against the back of the chair and looked directly at me.

"I've got a job for you, and it's important that you do it tonight—right now. That's why I waited for you. He's with her now—this minute—and I need a witness. Not just a friend, but a neutral, disinterested person whose word will stand up in court. She's leaving for New York tomorrow, and I've got to do it tonight. Otherwise it'll drag on for months and months." She looked at me with hard, dry eyes. Her mouth quivered a little.

"Who's with who?" I asked her.

"My husband," she said evenly. "With Arlene Donovan."

She didn't have to tell who Arlene Donovan was—me, or anybody else who could read, see or hear. Arlene Donovan's hollow-cheeked, full-lipped face was as familiar to America as chicken on Sunday and beer on Saturday night. She was the top glamour star of the movies, and the darling of the cigarette and soft drink advertisements.

I knew that she had been making a personal appearance at the town's biggest theater for the past several days, and the papers had just carried the story of her divorce from her third husband, an Argentine bull breeder.

"That's pretty fast company," I said. "How do you know your husband is chasing around with her?"

"Does that matter?" she said. "But if you must know, I found a note from her, and he's been out to Los Angeles three times in the last few months on so-called business trips. And besides that, he even told me himself. Bragged about it—when he was drunk. I—I can't—I won't—stand for it any more." She took a swallow of her drink. "Well, how about it?"

"It's not my kind of a job," I said.

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"What does your husband do—how does he make his money?"

"Softie True-Skin Babes," she said in a mocking, sing-song voice. "He invented them. Miniature flesh-tinted Burlesque Dancers with Rubberized Bodies—Just Like Human Skin. Complete With Three Daring Costumes Designed to Tantalize and Delight. Mail Your Order Today."

Her lips curled a little. "I know his ads by heart." She took another swallow of her drink and stared at her toes with brooding eyes.

"Does he sell any of them?" I asked her.

She laughed shortly. "Sell them? Millions. And the kids aren't his best customers, either."

I had another drink from the bottle. I felt that I needed it. Almost three o'clock in the morning, a perky copper-haired girl with a husband who was playing around with a movie queen, and flesh-like dolls complete with strip-tease costumes. I began to wonder about the quality of Johnny Blaze's scotch.

The girl stood up abruptly and started across the room. I turned toward her, but she waved a hand and said over her shoulder: "Don't bother, Mr. Bennett. I know where it is."

I watched her move down the short hall and enter the bathroom. I sat down with the bottle and thought things over.

It wasn't until I heard the click of the door latch behind me that I remembered that I hadn't locked the door. I turned in my chair to look straight into the face of a man in a brown hat and a gray tweed topcoat. He stood just inside the door with his hands in his pockets and a mean look on his thick smooth face.

"Hello," I said. "Just come right on in."

He ignored me, and his cloudy pale eyes took in my apartment. They looked at the leopard-trimmed coat on the arm of the chair just vacated by Evelyn Sand, and at the small black shoes lying on the floor. Then the eyes swung slowly to me.

"Where is she?" He had a hoarse, unpleasant voice. A whiskey voice, I decided.

"Who?" I asked lightly.

"Don't stall, you damned cheap wife stealer."

I sat up straight and put the bottle of

bourbon carefully on the table. *Jim Bennett*, I thought dismally, *the smart operator, the wise guy, the tough dick*. I laughed hollowly.

The big man jerked a blue steel .45 automatic from his coat pocket and stood with his stocky legs apart. "Trot her out, brother," he said, "before I start blasting."

I wasn't carrying a gun. It was hanging in its clip over a hook in my bedroom closet. I don't carry a rod to a friendly poker party, but I decided that maybe I would from here on out. The .45 in the big man's hand was pointed straight at the knot of my necktie, and he held it very steady, as if he knew how to squeeze the trigger without too much barrel jump. And then I heard the bathroom door open.

The big man heard it too, and his gaze darted across the room.

I said to him: "How much are you charging this season for catching your wife with another man?"

He didn't answer me. He was looking beyond me, and I saw his eyes widen and a slow flush come over his heavy face. He lowered the gun a little, and his jaw sagged. I followed his gaze to the bathroom door.

Evelyn Sand was standing there in an attitude of innocent surprise. Her eyes were wide, and her small red mouth was formed into a cute "O." Her arms were clasped over her chest, one knee was bent prettily, and she was wearing a lacy slip. She made an attractive picture.

The man with the gun let out a roar like a prodded lion, and he wheeled toward me. But I was out of the chair and halfway to him before he took his startled eyes from the girl. I smacked him hard behind the ear, and he stumbled forward. I hit him again, wrenched the gun from his grasp and brought it down on the back of his head. He hit the carpet with a slithering thud.

Evelyn Sand let out a small scream and scurried back into the bathroom. I went in after her.

SHE tried to lock the door on me, but I squeezed my way inside. She squealed and jumped to the corner between the tub and washbowl. She held the skirt and jacket of her black gabardine suit up in front of her and stared at me like a cor-

nered innocent. It was no longer funny.

I wasn't in a mood for dilly-dallying. "Get your clothes on," I snapped at her.

"What—what are you going to do?"

I jerked my head toward the living room. "Is that your husband out there?"

She nodded silently, watching me with big eyes.

"You knew he was coming here?"

She shook her head violently from side to side and huddled against the wall. "Please go," she pleaded.

I went out.

The big man on the floor was making feeble motions with his hands. I reached out a foot and rolled him over on his back. There was a little blood oozing through the short hair behind his left ear where I had hit him with the gun. His eyelids began to flutter.

I kept his gun in my hand and sat down in a chair by the telephone. I had just about decided to call the precinct station and have the cops come and haul the two of them away when the bathroom door opened and Evelyn Sands stepped out.

She was fully dressed now, except for her shoes, and she crossed to the chair where her coat lay. She leaned down, not looking at me, and slipped on her shoes and buckled the ankle straps. She took a long time doing it, and I watched her silently.

The telephone jangled beside me, and I jumped a little. The sudden noise seemed to arouse the man on the floor and he opened his eyes and looked at me blankly. I kept an eye on him as I picked up the receiver.

It was Johnny Blaze. "In bed yet, Jim?"

"I should be," I said. "Don't tell me they're still dealing showdown?"

"No, the boys have all gone home. I just wanted to tip you off. A big boy with a mean look in his eye was here asking for you. Name of Gilbert Sand. Know him?"

"I think so," I said. "He's lying on my rug."

Johnny hesitated. "Maybe I should have called you sooner."

"It would have helped," I told him.

"Want me to come over? Everything under control?"

"Yeah, Johnny. Thanks." I hung up.

Johnny Blaze had inherited the pile of dough his father had made in ore boats between Cleveland and Duluth, and Johnny knew how to spend it. He didn't do much of anything but play golf and poker and squire the prettier debutantes around town.

Out of boredom, he once asked me for a job. I used him on some blackmail leg-work in Detroit, and he had done all right. Since then I had called him whenever I needed an extra helper—leg work, mostly; looking up records, watching airports and stations, things like that.

The girl was watching me silently, and the man on the floor had pushed himself to a sitting position. He dabbed at his head with a handkerchief, looked at the blood on it, and got slowly to his feet. He leaned down, picked up his hat, and said to the girl in a flat voice: "Are you ready to go home, Evelyn?"

"You aren't going anywhere," I said.

He swung his head slowly toward me. "Keep out of this," he said heavily. He took a step in the girl's direction.

I wagged the barrel of the .45 at him. "Stand still," I said.

He stopped and looked at me dully. I couldn't figure out whether he was groggy from the blow on his head, or just drunk. Probably a little of both.

"You're in an old, old racket," I told him. "Maybe you can still make it work—with a wife like that. But not with me. I'm calling the police."

The girl spoke suddenly. "No!" I saw that she was trembling.

"Yes," I said, and I reached for the phone.

She ran toward me. "No, no. Don't you see? He's been with her, but somehow he found out where I was, and he came to stop me—"

The big man reached out and grasped her by a wrist. He twisted her in close to him, and I saw her lips curl in pain. He held her in front of him and moved for the door. His eyes looked dangerous, and he moved swiftly for a man of his size. The girl stared at me helplessly, and there was a desperate pleading look in her eyes.

I stood up and leveled the gun at the two of them. But I knew that I didn't dare shoot. With a swift writhing motion, the

girl wrenched herself free. She stumbled across the room, fell to the floor. He lunged after her. I jumped forward, and for the second time that night I smacked him with the gun.

He side-stepped, like a boxer, and the gun glanced down over his ear. I went off balance, and his foot came up and caught me in the stomach. I felt my lungs collapse as the air whooshed out of them. I doubled up, gasping, and I felt his big hand close over the gun and jerk it from my grasp. I snatched for it, but I was far too slow. He leaped backward, his teeth bared, and the muzzle of the big gun leveled on my face.

From behind me I heard the girl say in a dry whisper: "No, Gilbert. No!"

I lunged forward, and I flung myself sideways at his knees, like I used to do in college, before they outlawed clipping. But he side-stepped me easily, and I heard him laugh. I hit the rug on my face, and my lungs seemed to be bursting. I managed to get to my hands and knees. I raised my head and looked straight into the black wicked muzzle of the .45. The big man's thick finger curled tightly around the trigger, and I began to roll across the rug. He laughed again.

I heard a faint whisper of swift feet on the rug, and a sudden, soft thudding sound. I turned my head, and I saw the big man looming over me, falling, his arms limp and his knees bent. His heavy body fell across me, and I wiggled and tried to get loose. I couldn't see the girl, but I heard her gasp: "John—"

The .45 lay in front of my nose. I picked it up, twisted around and looked toward the door. It was open, but I still couldn't see the girl. I squirmed out from under the big man's body and got to my feet.

I saw Johnny Blaze then. He was grinning crookedly, and he held a silver-plated .32 carelessly in his hand.

"Hi," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Flamingo's Farewell

MY CHEST ached, and I couldn't talk yet. I just looked at him and tried to suck some air into my bursting lungs.

He dropped the .32 into a pocket of his silky gray gabardine topcoat and moved his deep-set black eyes to the girl huddled along the far wall. He looked at her, but he spoke to me. "You sounded funny on the phone—thought I'd better have a look. Couldn't sleep, anyhow." He smiled at the girl. "Hello," he said to her slowly.

She just stared silently. Her eyes looked big and dark in her white face.

I was beginning to breathe a little easier. I said to Johnny: "The old badger game, believe it or not."

The big man lay quietly on the floor. There was more blood above his left ear. Johnny had gun-whipped him in about the same spot as I had. He would have a very sore head.

The girl said quietly: "I wanted to engage the services of Mr. Bennett. I—I didn't know my husband was coming here." She paused, and pressed her palms against the wall.

"Yes?" Johnny said politely.

She lowered her eyes. "My husband is, well—unfaithful. I wanted Mr. Bennett to go with me—to secure evidence. I want to divorce him."

I said to Johnny: "So she tries to get her husband sore at me."

Johnny Blaze said: "Hmmm."

Evelyn Sand's eyes were desperate, pleading. "I heard his voice, and I knew it was Gilbert. Honest I don't know how he knew I was here. But suddenly I wanted to hurt him . . . the way he has hurt me . . . make him jealous. . . ." Her eyes filled with tears. "Mr. Bennett, I'm sorry if I—I didn't think—"

I decided to call her bluff. I winked at Johnny, and turned to face her. "All right," I said. "Let's go see this Arlene Donovan."

For a second she hesitated, her eyes straying to the still form of the man on the floor. Then she looked at me, and her small round chin tilted upward. "Thank you Mr. Bennett," she said quietly. "You are very kind." She picked up her coat.

I wasn't expecting that, and I thought fast. "Look," I said. "You wanted to catch him with her—wasn't that it? Why see her alone?"

She threw her coat around her shoulders. "That would have been better," she

admitted, "but I think it would help if I talked to her."

Johnny Blaze grinned at me. "Sure, Jim. You know? Woman to woman?"

I stalled a little. "By the way, I said to Johnny, 'Mr. Sand manufactures Softie True-Skin Babes. Flesh-tinted and life-like, with appropriate costumes. Isn't that interesting?'"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Very. Tell me more."

I said to Evelyn Sand: "Here's a potential customer."

But she had moved to the door and stood waiting for me.

The man on the floor grunted, and rolled over on his back.

Johnny Blaze wasn't much help. Still grinning, he said to me. "Go ahead. I'll take care of True-Skin."

I gave him a mean look, but he didn't seem to notice. Evelyn Sand stepped out into the hall. There wasn't anything else for me to do but pick up my hat and coat and follow her. As we waited for the elevator, I said: "I hope you'll pardon this cold commercial note, but my rate for professional services is fifty dollars a day, plus expenses."

"All right," she said. "That is satisfactory."

I sighed, and entered the elevator with her.

As we stepped out to the sidewalk, the cool damp April air felt good on my face. Evelyn Sand stood beside me and looked up at the misty sky above the lights of the city. The nostrils of her small nose flared a little. She pulled her coat around her and put a hand on my arm. "The air smells so good," she said. "Let's walk a little."

I would have rather had a drink, but we walked. It seemed that we walked for blocks along the city's partially deserted streets.

Abruptly I stopped walking. Evelyn Sand looked up at me with a question in her wide brown eyes.

"Look," I said. "Do you want to see Arlene Donovan, or don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But—"

"But what?"

"I—I lied to you. I can't pay you. Not now. But I will. I'll get a job." She reached up and fingered the top button of

my topcoat. "I'm sorry. But I need help, and I can't go back to Gilbert any more. I won't."

I have a one track mind. "A job?" I said sternly. "Where?"

"In a beauty shop. I worked in one before I married Gilbert. That's how I met him. He came in for manicures, and he was so friendly—always kidding—and he tipped well. He asked me to go out with him, and I went, and then one night he asked me to marry him, and I said I would, and I never went back to the shop. But I was so tired of working twelve hours a day over crabby women's dirty, scraggly hair for ten cent tips. . . ."

"We were married on Saturday night in Covington. I didn't know then that he chased around with movie actresses, or that he would slap me, or about those nasty True-Skin dolls." She looked down at her toes. The top of her head was at least six inches below my chin.

"Folks?" I asked her.

She shook her head slowly. "My mother married a druggist in Seattle. He's got five children. I don't know where my father is. The last I heard he was with a snake oil show in South Carolina." She tilted her face up to me. "Please help me. I knew about you before I went to your apartment tonight. And I saw you once at a hockey game—a friend pointed you out to me. I liked the way you looked, so big and dark, and after I found out about Gilbert—"

She moved a half inch closer to me and began to pluck at the button again. I looked around for a taxi, and I spotted one stalking us two doors away. I lifted a hand, and it pulled swiftly up beside us. I had suddenly decided to string along with Evelyn Sand, for a while, anyhow. Maybe it was Johnny Blaze's scotch still working on me, and maybe it was the way she had looked at me when I had had her cornered in my bathroom. And anyhow, the night was already shot, no matter how I spent it from here on out.

"Oh, hell," I said. "Maybe your husband is playing around with Arlene Donovan, and maybe he isn't. Shall we go up and ask her for her autograph?"

She grasped my arm with both her small hands and tilted her face up to mine. "Do you really mean it—you'll help me?"

I shrugged. "A job's a job. Shall we go?"

She pulled me into the waiting taxi. "Yes, yes."

THE Erie Shore Hotel overlooked the lake from a high bluff on the west side of town. The taxi swung in off the boulevard and climbed a long winding drive flanked by thick hedges just beginning to show the pale green of spring. Evelyn Sand and I stepped out to a long tiled veranda fronted with white pillars reaching to the second story of the big rambling building.

A doorman in a turban opened the door for us and we padded over a thick rug across a rose-and-yellow lobby a little smaller than the Yankee Stadium. I didn't bother with a kinky-haired blond clerk in a black cutaway, but headed straight for the bank of elevators. Evelyn Sand tripped along behind me like a kid in a toy shop with her daddy.

At the elevators we ran into trouble. A big man in a tight tuxedo appeared from somewhere and stood in front of us. He had little blue eyes and a flat nose. His mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't.

"Whom did you wish to see?" he asked.

Evelyn Sand chirped up before I could stop her. "Miss Donovan," she said happily.

The man in the tuxedo still smiled, but he shook his head from side to side. "I'm sorry," he said, and he looked at his wrist watch significantly. "Miss Donovan left instructions that she was not to be disturbed."

I looked over my shoulder at the blond clerk in the cutaway. He was watching us with a faint sneer on his face. I turned my back to him, took out my wallet and showed my police permit card to the man in the tuxedo.

He read it carefully, his lips moving silently. Then he said in a guarded voice: "Bennett? No kidding?"

I nodded, and slipped a ten dollar bill from my wallet.

The man in the tuxedo moved closer to me so that the clerk couldn't see his hands. He took the ten, stepped back and smiled for the clerk's benefit. He said in a low voice: "All right. I used to be on the Force. Go around to the south entrance

and meet me at the service elevator." He backed away another foot, and said loudly: "I'm sorry."

I winked at him, took Evelyn Sand by the arm, and marched back across the lobby. The clerk smirked at us as we went past. I smiled politely at him, and we moved out past the Rajah and around the cement drive to the south side of the hotel.

We had to walk about two blocks, but we found it all right, and the man in the tuxedo was waiting inside. He led us quickly to the elevator, and as we shot upward he said: "I don't mind doing a favor for a brother dick, but I gotta be careful. This is a cushy job and Parsons, the pretty boy downstairs, is a stooge. Make it quick, will you?"

I said: "Is she in?"

He gave me a hurt look. "Would I take the ten if she wasn't?"

"Sure," I said. "Do we come out the same way?"

"Hell, yes," he said. "I'll wait. I'm supposed to be in the kitchen grabbing some coffee. I even have to ask Parsons if I can go to the wash-up."

I grinned at him. "What do you mean—cushy job?"

He shrugged and slid open the elevator door. "It's better than pounding the cement. Hey, I forgot. You'll have to get past her ex-husband."

"Now you tell me," I said. "You mean her Passion from the Pampas?"

He nodded. "Big man, too. He came in about an hour ago. Parson handled that deal himself—and not for ten bucks, either."

"Remind me to deal with you," I said. "Anybody else been up to see her—tonight, I mean?"

"You want a lot for your dough, don't you? Yeah, there was another guy here, but he left. But he's been here every night since she checked in. She gave the desk an okay on him. Name of Brown."

"Big man—fat face?"

He nodded. "That's him."

I looked at Evelyn Sand, but she avoided my glance and stepped out to the carpeted hallway.

"What number?" I asked the man in the tuxedo.

"Don't you even know that? Ten-twenty-eight."

The wide hall was lined with mirrors and gilt silk-covered furniture. Suite 1028 was at the end, in a corner, and I tried the knob without knocking. The door opened and I got a glimpse of a big room filled with fat ivory-tinted chairs and divans the size of box cars. I waited a second, and then I stepped inside, Evelyn Sand at my heels. She closed the door quietly, and the two of us stood silently looking around.

There was a wide window overlooking the lake, prints of famous paintings on the walls, two closed doors apparently leading to other rooms, and a soft light filtering down through a frosted glass disc flush with the ceiling. Somewhere, a radio was emitting soft dance music from a night owl station.

Something stirred in a shadowed corner, and I took six silent steps over the thick carpeting. A man was reclining in a deep chair. He was snoring gently and his mouth was open. Even in repose the man looked powerful.

He had a chest like a beer barrel, thick shoulders and short heavy legs. The legs were encased in tight, gray-striped pants, and they were stretched out before him. He was wearing gray spats and black patent leather shoes which looked too tight for him. A gray striped coat lay over an adjoining chair.

A diamond pin the size of a pea glittered on his purple silk tie, and a double-breasted yellow vest was unbuttoned over his swelling stomach. He had a heavy, dark, smooth-shaven face and thick black hair, long over his ears. On a table beside him was a partly-filled bottle of Irish whiskey, two empty quart bottles of soda water, two glasses—both empty—and a small silver pail containing half-melted ice cubes.

I glanced at Evelyn Sand. She was watching the man in the chair, and she seemed to be holding her breath. I took a couple of steps nearer the chair.

"Hey," I said.

His snoring missed a beat, and he turned his face away from me.

I tried again. "Hey, *Señor!*"

The snoring stopped on a treble note, and he turned his face slowly toward me. He opened his eyes. They were small, bright and black.

"*Adios,*" he said. "Go away." He had a voice like black velvet.

"Pardon," I said. "We wish to see *Señorita* Donovan."

HE SAW Evelyn Sand then, and he sat up straight. He gave her a white-toothed smile and got to his feet. The top of his head was on a level with my eyes, but his body was almost twice as wide as mine. He buttoned his vest and put on his coat. "Please excuse the undress," he said to her. "I take the nap." He picked up the bottle of Irish whiskey. "Drink?" He looked at Evelyn Sand with bright eyes.

"Sure," I said.

He turned his eyes on me. "I ask the lady."

Evelyn Sand said: "We—we'd like to see Miss Donovan."

He made a little bow and clicked his heels. It was an unexpectedly graceful gesture for a man of his bulk and stature. "I am so sorry," he said in his velvet voice. "*Señorita* Donovan is—ah—indisposed."

I decided to dispense with finesse and come to the point. I took out my wallet and flashed my agency card on him. "I am from the police. We have come to ask her about a man."

His sharp eyes glinted at me. "The police? About a man—an *hombre?* Would his name be Sand—like on the beach?"

I nodded. "It would."

He gestured with the bottle and ran a forefinger across his throat. "If I catch him here again, I keel him—quick. He was here when I arrive. I chase him away."

I cleared my throat. "Look—uh—*Señor.* Aren't you and Miss Donovan divorced?"

"Dee-voiced? Bah! American legal trickery. It means nothing. She is my wife—forever. The lawful wife of Luis La Plata. I come to take her back to Buenos Aires."

I glanced at Evelyn Sand, but her face was expressionless. She was watching La Plata.

"And Miss Donovan?" I asked. "She is willing to go?"

La Plata smiled a little ruefully. "I have been unable to speak to her. This American, this Sand, he get her a leetle drunk before I arrive. She is like a child, a trust-

ing child. She needs Luis La Plata to look after her. Tonight she sleeps. Tomorrow we shall leave for Buenos Aires."

I said politely: "Perhaps she is awake now?"

He gave me a quick smile. "Si, that may be true. She does not know that her Luis is here. Come, we shall enter gently." He bowed to Evelyn Sand. "You, too, *Señorita*."

We followed him across the room. He walked with a rolling bow-legged stride, like a cowboy. At one of the doors leading off the main room he turned to face us, as if he had just thought of something. His heavy black brows came together in a small frown. "The police, you say? Is my little flamingo in trouble? Has she done anything wrong?"

I shook my head. "A routine matter. This lady wishes to apply for divorce. She needs Miss Donovan's testimony to secure it. She is Mrs. Sand."

For a split second La Plata's bright black eyes narrowed. Then he laughed softly. "I understand. All sorts of men are attracted to my wife. It is natural. An annoyance to her, but necessary for her career." He sighed, and made his little bow to Evelyn Sand. "My sympathy, *Señorita*. Many men are in love with my wife. I am sorry that your husband is one." He turned and opened the door.

Except for the light shining through the open door, the big bedroom was in darkness. Luis La Plata tip-toed over the rug and turned on a shaded lamp in a corner. Its light fell across a big double bed with the foot and head covered with white leather.

In the middle of the bed was a woman. She was wearing a black silk nightgown which was twisted around her slender body. Her face was turned away from us, and one bare arm was flung out gracefully on the silken sheet.

La Plata gently pulled the sheet over the woman's semi-nakedness. He put a finger to his lips. "She is still sleeping," he whispered. "My little flamingo was very drunk."

I leaned over the woman and looked at her averted face. I got a shock. Her eyes were wide open and staring—the famous blue eyes of a thousand billboard posters. Her lips looked bloodless, and they were

parted a little. I touched the smooth curve of her throat with a forefinger. Her skin was cool, and I couldn't feel a trace of heart-beat.

"Dronk, hell," I said. "She's dead."

CHAPTER THREE

Quick Exit

FOR maybe thirty seconds the room was as silent as a night club at ten o'clock in the morning. Then Evelyn Sand let out a long shuddering sigh, and I glanced quickly at her. She was standing beside the bed with her eyes squeezed shut, as if to blot out the picture of Arlene Donovan's dead body.

Luis La Plata made a deep growling sound in his throat, like an animal, and he moved cat-like around the bed with his peculiar bow-legged stride. He leaned over the dead woman and his big hairy hands went frantically over the still body. He lifted it by the shoulders and shook it violently. Arlene Donovan's head hung limply, and her long yellow hair cascaded over the pillow.

Suddenly La Plata picked her up in his short thick arms and began to carry her around the room. He started to howl, like a hound dog in the full of the moon. It was a sound to make your skin crawl.

I led Evelyn Sand out of the room. She seemed to be walking in her sleep. I closed the bedroom door to shut out the sound of La Plata's howling, but it came through, like something heard in a nightmare.

The outer door opened, and a man stepped inside. He was a tall gray man in a maroon silk robe and red-and-white striped silk pajamas, brown leather slippers. He had a thin, sunken-cheeked face, a high broad forehead and thin gray hair. His skin was clear and smooth, and his eyes were a slate gray. He looked older than his age, which I guessed was not much over forty.

"What's going on?" he asked sharply. "I'm Howard Wittman, Miss Donovan's secretary. What's that strange noise?"

"Never mind," I told him. "Call a doctor, quick. Miss Donovan passed out—and I don't think she's going to wake up."

He jumped for the telephone like a grayhound, and his crisp voice crackled

into the receiver. Evelyn Sand was still acting dopey, and I pushed her into a chair. I crossed the room and helped myself to La Plata's Irish whiskey. The gray man cradled the phone and moved to the bedroom door. He opened it a little and peered inside.

I could see Luis La Plata sitting on the bed with the body of Arlene Donovan hugged across his chest. La Plata's howl had died to a whimper.

Wittman closed the door softly and turned to me. "My Lord," he said. "He sounds like a dog. What happened?"

I ignored his question and jerked my head at the bedroom door. "Is that La Plata, her last husband?"

He nodded and pulled a thin hand down over his face. He lowered his lanky body into a chair. "He's been writing to her ever since she divorced him, and calling her from Buenos Aires, trying to persuade her to go back to him. And then this evening he showed up here. . . . Who are you?"

I told him my name and business, and I nodded at Evelyn Sand. "This is Mrs. Sand. I'm working for her. She claims her husband has been having an affair with Miss Donovan, and she wants a divorce. We came here to talk to Miss Donovan about it."

Wittman's thin lips curled a little. "I see," he said. "Blackmail."

¶ I had a notion to reach out and slap the sneer off his face, but I didn't. "No," I said. "My client just wants a divorce from Sand."

He was still sneering. "That lout? Miss Donovan was kind to him in Los Angeles, and he's been pestering her ever since. She

is too nice to too many people for her own good. But why come here at this hour in the morning?"

I said: "It looks like we should have come sooner."

Somebody knocked on the door. Wittman got up to open it. A little beagle-faced man in a baggy brown suit came in carrying a small black bag. Wittman gestured toward the bedroom door. "Miss Donovan is ill again. You know where to go."

The little man nodded and looked up at Wittman. "The same?"

Wittman said grimly: "I'm afraid so, Doctor."

The doctor made a clucking sound with his tongue. "That's bad. I told her yesterday about drinking. Her heart—" He broke off and hurried to the bedroom, opened the door, and went inside.

I said to Wittman, "Did Miss Donovan drink a lot?"

"Too much, I'm afraid. But don't we all?" He laughed bitterly, and began to pace slowly around the room.

Evelyn Sand sat quietly in her chair looking at her folded hands. She looked small and scared. I lit a cigarette. We could no longer hear La Plata's moaning, and the minutes ticked by.

The bedroom door opened and La Plata came out. His big body seemed to sag, and he stumbled a little as he crossed the room to a chair and sat down. He leaned forward, his head in his hands. His big shoulders twitched, but no sound came out of him. The room was very quiet.

The little doctor came out of the bedroom and softly closed the door behind him. He spoke to Wittman. "She's been

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dead for at least an hour. I warned her yesterday about her drinking. Her heart just couldn't stand it."

Wittman's face was expressionless. "I understand," he said quietly. "Thank you, Doctor."

The doctor moved to the door. "The cause of death is very evident. However, I secured a blood sample to make certain. I see no reason to notify the coroner." He paused. "I'll need some witnesses to sign the death certificate, but we can attend to that later." He nodded politely at Evelyn Sand and me and went out.

Wittman began to pace the floor again. "A hell of a thing," he said. "A hell of a thing."

Luis La Plata got to his feet and stood staring at the three of us. "Go," he said in a dead voice. "All of you. I stay with her—alone."

Wittman swung toward him. "Now, look here—"

La Plata took a slow step toward him and his bright little eyes glittered. "Go," he said.

I nodded at Wittman and jerked my head toward the door. He hesitated. Then he turned abruptly and went out. I motioned to Evelyn Sand. She got up and followed him. I turned to La Plata.

"I'm leaving, too, in a minute," I told him, and I put a hand on his shoulder. "I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry."

HIS eyes softened a little. "Thank you, Señor," he said quietly. "You are the first to say so. The rest—" He made a wide sweeping motion with his hand which seemed to include the world—"they do not care—except for the money she made for them. They used her, all of them, like a prize bull for exhibition purposes.

"All but me, Luis La Plata. I am rich. I did not care for her money. I only wanted her love, to take care of her. The others forced her to dee-voce me—while I was in Argentina. I came here to take her home with me, and now—" His voice broke, and tears glittered in his eyes.

"Sure," I said gently. "I understand." I nodded toward the bedroom door. "Do you mind if I—?"

He lifted his big shoulders. "Why not?" I went into the bedroom.

The doctor had laid the body of Arlene

Donovan on the bed and covered it with a sheet. I lifted the sheet and looked down at the pale face. She had been a beautiful woman—still was, even in death, with her full pale lips parted and her yellow hair making a halo on the pillow beneath her head. She had not been a very good actress, but her spectacular beauty had kept her at the top for years.

Born Lavina Donner in a mill town in Georgia, she had won a beauty contest in Atlanta and had gone to Hollywood. She had been smart enough to be nice to the right producers, and in a year she was a star. Now she was dead, and her studio bosses would be wailing in anguish at the thought of her fabulous popularity with the people who bought movie tickets.

I covered her gently with the sheet, and looked around the room. On a table near the bed were two empty gin bottles and an ash tray heaped with cigarette stubs. Something protruded from beneath the bed, and I leaned down to pick it up.

It was a doll, I suppose, but not the kind of a doll that little girls would want to play with. It was about eight inches high, a girl doll, flesh-tinted and dressed in a brief dance set, made of a soft resilient material which yielded to the touch. Long wavy hair, silky and yellow, was glued to the head, and the face was big-eyed, with a saucy red mouth. It was molded perfectly in the image of a full-grown woman, a young woman with an abundance of everything a young woman should have.

As I turned it over in my hand I felt a faint sense of revulsion. In tiny letters on the sole of one little foot were the words, *True-Skin Doll Company*, with the address. I wrapped the doll in a handkerchief, dropped it in my coat pocket, and turned toward the door.

Luis La Plata stood just inside the room watching me with brooding eyes. I took him by the arm and led him out of the room. I closed the door and looked at him. He stood kind of huddled up, like a man who was cold, and suddenly I felt sorry for him.

"Look, Señor," I said, "how about coming home with me for some coffee and some shut-eye? I've got room."

He shook his head slowly. "You are very kind, but I stay here."

I nodded silently and left the room. Out

in the hall Evelyn Sand stood talking to Wittman.

Wittman took a pen and an envelope from a pocket of his robe. "I'd better have your names and addresses," he said, "in case the doctor wants you."

We gave them to him, and he wrote carefully on the back of the envelope. Then he nodded at us and opened a door numbered 1030 next to Arlene Donovan's suite. The door closed behind him.

I said to Evelyn Sand: "Where do we go from here?"

She looked pale and tired. "I don't know. I can't go home—now."

I took her arm. "Come on. We'll go to my place."

She didn't protest as I pressed the *down* button beside the service elevator. We could have gone out through the main lobby, but I didn't want to double-cross the house dick. In a couple of seconds he opened the door for us, and we stepped inside.

He was muttering under his breath. "I told you to make it quick," he said in a hurt voice.

I just grinned at him, and in a couple of minutes Evelyn Sand and I were outside walking down the curving drive to the boulevard. The sky out over Lake Erie was beginning to turn a dull gray, and birds chirped in the hedges beside us. I looked back at the Erie Shore Hotel. It loomed above us, massive and dark, with an occasional light showing from the cliff of windows.

* * *

It was almost five o'clock in the morning when we reached my apartment. There was a note from Johnny Blaze propped against the bourbon bottle.

Jim: I escorted True-Skin to a taxi. He was a little groggy, and he mumbled something about "Arlene." Mrs. True-Skin is real cute. If you need me any more, I'll be delighted to help. Or is this a private deal? Call me.

Evelyn Sand stood just inside the door. I grinned at her. "Come right on in." She smiled a little uncertainly. She looked about sixteen years old. I moved over to her, slipped her coat from her

shoulders and laid it over a chair. "I'll make some coffee," I said, and I turned toward the kitchen.

"Wait," she said in a small voice.

I turned.

She lowered her eyes and fumbled with her fingers. "I—I don't want you to think—" she began.

I laughed, and put my hands on her shoulders. I didn't feel like laughing. I was tired and sleepy, and it had been a very unprofitable evening. But I made my voice sound as fatherly as I could. "Look, honey. I'm old enough to be your dad. You get some sleep, and we'll talk about it later."

She raised her head, and her lips trembled a little. "You're very kind. I thought detectives were tough, and hard. I'm sorry to have caused you this trouble. I should never have married Gilbert, and I'm not going back to him. Tomorrow I'll find a room, and I'll get a job." She lowered her eyes.

I patted her cheek. "Sure. How about some coffee?"

She smiled up at me. "I'll make it."

We walked into the kitchen together.

We had some coffee, and some toast, and she scrambled some eggs. As we ate, she told me about her life with Gilbert Sand. It wasn't pretty.

All the time I kept thinking about how tired I was, and after a while I showed her my bedroom and I stood at the door with her, tired as I was. Suddenly she stood on her toes and kissed me, quickly, shyly, and I wasn't tired any more.

"Just talking to you has made me feel better," she said, and she smiled up at me like a high school freshman on her first date.

"Okay," I said. "That's fine. Just fine." I pushed her gently into the room and firmly closed the door.

I took off my shoes and stretched out on the davenport in my living room. In two minutes I was asleep. I dreamed about Arlene Donovan, and Evelyn Sand, and about Luis La Plata with the dull pain in his little black eyes, and I saw Johnny Blaze's lean crooked smile, and I heard the cold voice of Howard Wittman saying over and over, "A hell of a thing, a hell of a thing," and I saw again Gilbert Sand's thick face and his eyes clouded with rage,

and the little doll danced before me, swaying its hips. . . .

WHEN I awoke the sun was shining through my east window, and the apartment looked cluttered and messed up. I swung my feet to the floor and looked at my wrist watch. Ten-thirty of a bright Tuesday morning in April. I thought of Evelyn Sand, and I looked at my closed bedroom door. I got up, crossed the room, and silently opened the door.

The bed was neatly made, and a cool morning breeze blew through the half-opened windows. There was a penciled note pinned to a pillow. I crossed the room and leaned over the bed.

I haven't any words to thank you. I'm not going home—ever. As soon as I find a room, I'll call you. Gratefully, E. Sand.

I made some coffee and had three cups, hot and black. Then I shaved, took a hot shower, got into fresh clothes. It was going on to twelve o'clock when I walked into the office.

Sandy Hollis, my red-headed secretary, uncrossed her long legs, stood up from her typewriter and gave me a mocking little bow. "Good afternoon, Mr. Bennett," she said.

I began to look over the mail on my desk. "I had a tough night," I said.

"I know. She just called for you."

"Who?"

"A Mrs. Sand. She had a nice voice. She wants you to call her. And the boss is at a hotel in Boston. You're to call him, too. Both numbers are on your desk." She went back to her typewriter, amusement flickering in her brown eyes.

I called the boss first. He was a peppery old guy with gray hair and a limp black bow tie. He was the head of The American Detective Agency, and I had been with him for a long time. Two years ago he had placed me in charge of the Cleveland branch, but sometimes he called me out of my territory on special jobs. I hoped that I didn't have to go to Boston.

I didn't. He was on an embezzlement job, and he wanted me to check on a certain loan officer in a Cleveland bank. I said I'd send him a report, and then I called Evelyn Sand.

She sounded as though she had been

crying. "Please come at once. Hurry."

"Where?"

She gave me an address on the west side.

"What's the trouble?"

She began to sob. "I—I can't tell you now. Oh, please hurry."

I said I'd hurry, and I hung up.

Sandy Hollis said: "It's been a short day. Would you mind signing these reports before you shove off?"

I sat down, with my hat and coat on, and signed the reports. Then I took a Smith and Wesson .38 from my desk drawer, checked the cylinder, and dropped the gun into my coat pocket.

Sandy was watching me. "That kind of a deal, huh?"

"No," I told her. "I'm going to shoot crows on my way over to the west side."

Her eyes lost their gay light. "Be careful, Jim."

"Sure." I went out.

I got one of the two agency cars from the garage on the corner and drove across town to the address Evelyn Sand had given me. It was a small bungalow in a newly developed section, and the houses were far apart. The bungalow looked new, and the ground around it was bare and lumpy, waiting for the spring grass to come up. I parked the agency coupe on the street in front and went up a cement walk to the small front porch.

Evelyn Sand opened the door for me.

She was wearing the same dress she had worn the night before, and her small face looked white and drawn in spite of freshly applied lip rouge and powder. Her eyes were red and swollen. I could see that she was trying hard for control, but her little body was jerking slightly and her hand trembled as she motioned me to a door leading off the conventionally furnished living room.

I grasped her by the shoulders, and she started to speak, but no words came out. I shook her a little, and her eyes rolled toward the door across the room. "In there," she whispered. "I came home a little while ago—to get some clothes. I thought he would be gone—but he wasn't."

I pushed her away from me, crossed the room, and opened the door she had indicated. It was a bedroom, with twin beds, Venetian blinds closed against the after-

noon sun. Gilbert Sand lay on one of the beds, the one nearest the door. He was on his back, fully clothed. His mouth was open, and his eyes were open. The pupils were a little off center, and they looked glazed, like candied fruit.

The room smelled of stale cigarette smoke and alcohol. Two empty whiskey bottles were on the floor beside the bed. I squinted at the labels. Scotch. Also on the floor was an empty glass, an ash tray containing a pile of cigarette stubs, and a half-filled pitcher of water. The cover on the adjoining bed was wrinkled, as though someone had slept there and hastily thrown the cover over it. I moved around to the bed and lifted the cover. The pillow underneath was wrinkled, with a round depression the size of a man's head in its center.

I turned back to Gilbert Sand and placed my hand on his throat, just beneath his chin. He was cold, but not stiff. I guessed that he had been dead for two or three hours.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Man's Doll

I WENT out and closed the bedroom door softly behind me. Evelyn Sand was sitting in a chair by a window. She looked at me silently with big eyes.

I said: "Is that the way you found him?"

She nodded.

"Was he a heavy drinker?"

She nodded again, and lowered her eyes. "Yes. Gilbert drank a lot."

"He's dead," I said.

"I know." She stood up and looked at me steadily. She seemed to be in better control of herself. "There's no use in pretending I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I hated him, I guess. But finding him like that—"

I moved to the window and looked out over the bare ground in front of the bright, little new house. Evelyn Sand's dream of love in a cottage with a kind, adoring husband had been blasted by a beefy, whiskey drinking, woman chaser who manufactured grown-up dolls for the half-wit trade. I sighed, and wondered for the umpteenth time why so many pretty nice girls got teamed up with heels like Gilbert Sand.

"Mr. Bennett," she said.

I turned.

"Did he . . . just die?"

"He just died—looks like. The same as Arlene Donovan."

I didn't like the spot. A husband who apparently had drank himself to death, and a young, attractive non-grieving widow. I decided to play it as safe as possible.

"Now, look," I told her. "I'll take care of things. But you can't stay here. Isn't there any place you can go?"

She shook her head.

I moved to a telephone on a stand in a corner. "A friend of mine will look after you, until the preliminaries are over. O.K.?"

She nodded silently. She was beginning to look scared again.

I called Johnny Blaze. There was a little delay while his housekeeper went to call him. When he answered his voice sounded sleepy.

"This is Jim, Johnny. Feel like working today?"

"No."

"That's fine. I want you to look after a client of mine for a little while. A Mrs. Sand."

"Who?"

"Evelyn Sand. The girl you met in my apartment last night."

"Oh, yes. Where are you?"

Pretty soon Johnny Blaze's cream-colored convertible stopped in front of the house. He came in, tall and dark and hatless, with a soft camel's hair coat belted carelessly around his slim waist.

I said: "Johnny, you remember Mrs. Sand?"

He smiled politely. "Of course. How are you?" He was waiting for me to give him the play.

Evelyn Sand nodded at him, not smiling.

"Johnny," I said, "Mrs. Sand's husband is in the next room."

He looked at me quickly, his eyes narrowing.

I held up a hand. "Don't get excited. He's dead."

His tanned cheeks turned a faint pink. Then he said quietly: "Maybe you'd better tell me more about this, Jim."

"All right, but this comes first. How come you didn't tell me that you already

knew Mrs. Sand—before you came to my apartment last night?”

He gave me an embarrassed smile, and glanced at Evelyn Sand. She sat quietly looking at the two of us.

I said: “She started to call you ‘Johnny’ last night—and then you acted like a couple of strangers. Why?”

He looked at the girl, and he seemed to be waiting for her to speak. There was a moment of silence. She hesitated, and then she looked up at him with appealing eyes. “It doesn’t make any difference now, does it, Johnny?”

He smiled wryly. “I guess not.”

Evelyn Sand turned to me. “Johnny and I want to get married,” she said simply. “But we hadn’t meant to tell anyone until after my divorce.”

Johnny Blaze said: “It’s on the level, Jim. I sent Evelyn to you. Since I couldn’t come into the picture or openly help her until after her divorce.

“But Gilbert Sand left Arlene Donovan early last night—maybe she was too drunk to even talk to him—and he went home and found his wife gone. Then he saw where she had written your name and address on the telephone pad. He got suspicious, probably because he had a guilty conscience. He found out from the switchboard girl that you were at my house, and he came over looking for you with blood in his eye.

“Sand told me part of this last night. I got worried and called you. Then I decided to go over to your place and see what was going on. You can understand why I would be interested?”

“Sure,” I said. “If Gilbert Sand got wise that you were in love with his wife, he could start a counter-suit. And with your money it could be tough—if the case got aired in court.”

He smiled grimly. “That’s about it—no mention that I still want to marry Evelyn.”

I ran a hand over my face. Then I said: “And when Arlene Donovan died you lost Exhibit A for the divorce charges. Her death blew your dream of love sky high?”

Johnny said harshly: “Dammit, Jim.” He swung toward the door to the bedroom. “Where is he? How did he die?”

I grabbed his arm. “Take it easy. He won’t get any deader. All I want you to

do is to get Evelyn Sand out of here. Take her home with you and keep her there until I call you. Gilbert Sand died in a drunken stupor—the same as Arlene Donovan. Isn’t that poetic, or something?”

He gave me a crooked smile. Then he turned to Evelyn Sand and helped her on with her coat. Side by side they moved across the room. At the door, she said to me: “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You’ll get a bill,” I told her.

Johnny Blaze laughed shortly, and they went out.

I WATCHED them drive away, and then I went into the bedroom where Gilbert Sand lay.

His glazed eyes seemed to watch every move I made. I looked around the room. Something on the dressing table, nestled among the bottles, combs, brushes and lotions, attracted my attention. It was a small, like-life doll, the twin of the one I had found in Arlene Donovan’s room, except that this one had black hair instead of blonde. I didn’t touch it, but moved back out to the living room.

For maybe a full minute I stood by the telephone trying to decide what to do. There was at least three places that I wanted to be at the same time. I made up my mind and called Sandy Hollis at the office, told her where I was and waited while she wrote down the address. Then I said: “Try and get hold of Clem Burkart. Tell him to go to my apartment and get a doll with yellow hair from the top of the bookcase, and bring it to me here right away. Tell him to wrap it up and to handle it carefully.”

“Fingerprints, Boss?”

“Maybe. Call me here as soon as you locate Clem.”

“Yes, sir,” Sandy said with mock formality. “Right away, sir. I presume you’ll arrange for Clem to get into your apartment?”

“Tell him to get a key from Doris, on the switchboard. I’ll call her.”

I called Doris, and smoked two cigarettes before Sandy called back.

“Clem’s on his way. Does that do it?”

“For now. Thanks,” I said, and hung up.

Clem Burkart was a good investigator. He had three kids still in grade school and

a plump, black-haired wife who thought that Clem was the answer to every maiden's dream.

Maybe he was, at that. He didn't drink or smoke, and his one night out a week was devoted to a meeting of The Ohio Indian Relic Society where he beamed over his prehistoric arrow head collection and talked learnedly of the Flint Ridge mound builders. Nevertheless, he was a fast man with a gun, when necessary.

Then I called Homicide and asked for Detective Sergeant Dennis Rockingham. When his irritable voice said, "Yeah?", I said: "Rock, this is Jim. A guy named Gilbert Sand passed out last night after drinking a couple of fifths of scotch. He didn't come out of it. In fact, he's dead. Do you want to give it a look-see, or should I call the family sawbones?"

"Why are you mixed up in it, Jim?" Rockingham's voice had a hard edge to it.

"Just a friend of the family. You know."

"Yeah, I know," he said bitterly. "I'll bring Doc Haven with me. Where are you?"

I told him, and hung up. Doc Haven was the coroner, a big, red-faced man with an enormous appetite for bonded bourbon whiskey. I sat and waited for Clem Burkart, and I hoped that he would arrive with the doll before Rockingham showed up. He didn't. Rockingham got there first, and I began to wonder what was delaying Clem.

Rockingham's tall lanky frame moved into the living room as if he owned the place. The massive bulk of Doc Haven was right behind him. Rockingham gave me a sharp look and ran a finger over his narrow red mustache. "Let's see it, Sherlock," he said.

I led them into the bedroom. Doc Haven leaned over Gilbert Sand's body and lifted one of the dead man's eyelids with a thumb and forefinger. Rockingham's bright blue eyes flicked over the room.

Doc Haven said: "A lush, if I ever saw one." He had a deep rumbling voice. He nodded at the two empty bottles. "Even scotch will kill a man—if he drinks a lot of it fast enough." He looked at Rockingham. "Do you want a P.M. on this stiff?"

Rockingham sounded irritated. "Hell, you're the coroner."

Doc Haven spread his big fat hands. "No bullet holes, no slit throat, no abrasions, no brains hanging out of his skull. Let's call it acute alcoholism."

"Let's," Rockingham snapped. He said to me. "Who was this guy?"

I told him all I knew about Gilbert Sand, including my connection with Sand's wife. I didn't skip anything. I had learned from past experience that it didn't pay to forget details with Rockingham.

He patted his mustache and looked thoughtfully at the body. "It could be suicide," he said. "Poison."

Doc Haven laughed derisively. "My Lord, Rock. Sure it's poison. Whiskey poisoning. Don't tell me you want an autopsy?"

Rockingham's eyes were blue slits in his lean face. "I want an autopsy," he said stubbornly.

Doc Haven looked at the ceiling. "My Lord."

"You'll get your fee from the city," Rockingham said.

"Hell, I get more for catching a baby."

Gilbert Sand's dead eyes looked at us. It seemed to me that he was sneering.

Rockingham's voice was still stubborn. "I want him opened up. I want to know what's in his stomach. I'll call the wagon." He went out to the living room.

Doc Haven glared at me. "Cops and robbers," he said. "Nuts."

I waited until the wagon came and hauled Gilbert Sand away to the morgue. I told Rockingham to let me know the outcome of the autopsy, and then I locked up the house and drove across town to my apartment.

Doris, the switchboard girl, said: "I gave your friend a key. He's still up there."

WHEN I reached my floor I walked fast down the hall. As soon as I put my key in the lock of my apartment door I knew that something was wrong. The lock was broken, and my key turned loosely. I stepped away from the door and got my hand on the .38 in my pocket. I reached out a foot and kicked the door gently.

It swung inward about a foot and stopped. I waited maybe a minute. Then I took a deep breath, kicked the door all

the way open, and stepped quickly inside, my gun in front of me.

A man lay on his face in the middle of the room. He was a big man, and his dark overcoat was bunched around his waist. The sole of one shoe was worn through to the second layer of leather, and I knew who it was without seeing his face. I moved slowly around him. I peered into my bathroom and kitchen, and I opened closet doors. Back in the living room I looked on top of my bookshelves. The doll I had found in Arlene Donovan's hotel room was gone.

I knelt by the man on the floor and gently turned him over. His dead eyes seemed to look at me reproachfully. On his white shirt front there were two bloody patches where the slugs had caught him. I let the body fall back into the position I had found it, and I stood up.

I thought about Clem Burkart, and his three kids, and his gentle wife, and about his Indian relic collection. A slow red haze of rage began to burn deep inside of me, and my gun felt sweet and lovely in my hand. I wasn't working for Evelyn Sand anymore—or for anybody.

I was working for myself, for Jim Bennett, a wise dick who sent nice harmless guys like Clem Burkart to get a damned, human-like doll made for screw-balls. In my mind I pictured Clem ambling down the hall with his leisurely gait and unlocking my door, probably whistling contentedly under his breath, the way I had seen him do. I saw him enter my apartment, and I could hear the sudden blast of the waiting gun. . . .

My telephone began to ring.

Luis La Plata's deep rich voice said: "Señor Bennett?"

"Yeah."

"A-ah! I find you at last. I leave for Buenos Aires tomorrow, but tonight I would like you to join me in a leetle dinner—at the hotel. You weel come?"

"Who'll be there?" I asked cautiously.

"Señor Wittman and yourself, only. You have both been so very kind. May I expect you?"

Suddenly I had an idea. A crazy fantastic idea, but I wanted to try it out. "Thank you," I said. "I'll be glad to come if—Could I bring a couple of friends?"

"But certainly. If they are friends of

yours, they are always most welcome."

"Thank you. What time?"

"Around six. In the rooms at the hotel."

I hung up. I sat by the phone for a couple of minutes, thinking, and trying to keep my eyes from straying to the still form of Clem Burkart. After a while I called Sergeant Rockingham. He wasn't at headquarters, but they told me I might reach him at the city morgue.

I did. "Rock," I said, "did Haven do that autopsy yet?"

"Yeah. Just finished. He wanted to get it over with."

"Find anything?"

"Just whiskey. His blood must have been about ninety proof."

"All right," I said wearily. "You'd better come over to my place. Somebody shot Clem Burkart dead on my living room rug. I just found him."

Rockingham began to curse, and I waited until he had run down. Then I told him the story and said I would wait for him.

For the next two hours I had the police department in my hair—Rockingham, Doc Haven, three uniformed cops and the flash bulb boys. It was almost five o'clock in the afternoon when I finally broke away.

I called Johnny Blaze from a little bar on the corner close to my apartment. "Everything under control?" I asked him.

He laughed. "Why not? This is the nicest job you ever gave me."

"All right. Bring her over to the Erie Shore Hotel at six. Luis La Plata is throwing a party. I'll meet you there."

"I kind of liked him," Johnny said. "Donovan should have stuck to him. But why a party?"

"He probably considers it a wake for his dead ex-wife. You just don't understand the Latin mind."

"Maybe not," Johnny said, "but we'll be there."

I had three drinks in the bar before I started for the Erie Shore Hotel in the agency coupe. This time the snooty blond clerk in the cutaway showed his teeth in a rat-like smile and said, certainly, Mr. La Plata was expecting Mr. Bennett.

I sneered at him and walked over to the elevator. And I didn't see anything of the house dick, either.

It was five minutes of six when I entered the luxurious suite of Arlene Donovan. Apparently, Luis La Plata had taken it over. He greeted me effusively and motioned me to a table laden with almost every known ingredient of drinking—whiskey, brandy, vermouth, bitters, gin, ice, soda, bottles of champagne in silver ice buckets. Another table was covered with trays of canapes—fish, meat, olives, cherries, cheese.

La Plata hovered at my elbow. He said sadly: "I arrange thees for my little flamingo. It ees really in her honor. Then I go."

I selected a tall highball glass, dropped a couple of ice cubes into it, and stirred myself a triple martini. La Plata expertly popped the cork from a champagne bottle and filled a glass for himself. Then he clicked his heels, made a little bow. "To *Señorita* Donovan," he said solemnly.

We drank.

From somewhere a bell chimed melodiously. La Plata crossed to the door and opened it. Johnny Blaze and Evelyn Sand came in. They both looked happy. La Plata took their coats into the bedroom.

Johnny nodded at the glass in my hand: "What's that?"

"Martini," I said. "No use fooling around with those thimble-sized cocktail glasses."

He shuddered. "I like to get drunk slow and easy. Is there any scotch?"

I motioned to the table. "Everything. Help yourself."

The bell chimed again, and I admitted Howard Wittman. He smiled coldly and looked around the room almost as though he owned it.

LUI S LA PLATA came out of the bedroom and waved an arm. "Ah, *Señor* Wittman! Now the party can begin." He put an arm about Wittman's shoulders and led him to the liquor supply. Wittman accepted a glass of champagne, and I saw Johnny Blaze stirring a manhattan for Evelyn Sand. When we all had drinks in our hands, La Plata went through his heel-clicking routine again, and everyone acted very grave.

La Plata laughed. "But she would not want us to be sad. Let us be gay—in her memory. It ees better that way." He moved across the room to a huge phonograph console, pressed a button, and the soft strains of a tango filled the room.

I carried my glass to the liquor table, and with my back to the room I emptied my martini into the shaved ice packed around a champagne bottle. I winced at wasting all that good gin, but there was no help for it. Then I made a pretense of draining the empty glass, tilting my head far back. After that I stirred another martini in the highball glass, a more generous one than the first.

When I turned, I saw that Johnny Blaze was watching me. "Another?" he laughed. "You believe in doing it fast, don't you?"

I took a big swallow of the martini, but not too big. "Sure," I said. "I call this the pass-out special. You should try one."

He shook his head, grinning. "No, thanks. I'll stick to scotch."

Howard Wittman was talking in low tones to Luis La Plata. He nodded his head from time to time, and La Plata seemed to be agreeing with him. Evelyn Sand was looking through the record cabinet, and when the tango was finished I



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saw her change the record. The lilting strains of *Tales from the Vienna Woods* floated out over the room. She stood close to the console, her cocktail in her hand, and her small hips swaying gracefully to the music.

Johnny Blaze smiled at her and strolled over to my side. "She's nuts about Strauss," he said.

She turned, and came over to us. She looked at Johnny, and her eyes seemed to melt. He took her hand, and smiled down at her. They made a pretty couple—very pretty. Johnny's dark good looks contrasted nicely with her copper-and-white beauty.

She pointed a small red-tipped finger at my drink. "More?" she said. "How do you do it? It must be good. May I have a sip?"

I gave her a drink from my glass, and she wrinkled her short nose. "It's bitter—and strong. I'll take a manhattan, the way Johnny makes them."

I shrugged, and took another big swallow of my martini. Johnny Blaze watched me with a quizzical look in his dark eyes. I gave him a broad wink. "Drink up, Johnny, my lad," I said, and I made my voice sound a little thick.

He drained his glass and I reached for it. I grabbed twice before I got it in my hand. "Make you another," I said. "Can't fly on one wing, Johnny, old boy." I moved to the liquor supply, and I remembered to stagger just a little.

With my back to the rest I again emptied my drink into the champagne bucket, and once more tilted the empty glass to my lips. Then I made a fresh martini, high-ball size, and filled Johnny's glass with scotch and soda. As I turned to hand it to him, I managed to spill a little on the rug.

"Hey," Johnny said. "That's good scotch. Don't waste it."

I winked at him again, and began a tour of the room, humming off key to the music from the console. I knew they all were watching me, and I felt silly as hell, and I hoped I wasn't over-doing it.

It was easier to maintain the act after the hotel waiters had set the table and we all sat down to dinner. I decided to be morose, and I did not join in the general conversation. I pointedly ignored the food

on my plate, and from time to time I got up and went through my act with the champagne bucket. I must have poured a quart of good Holland gin into that bucket before I hit upon the idea of filling my glass with plain pale ginger ale. It looked like martini, and I could gulp it down much more convincingly.

But I listened carefully to the conversation of the rest. One thing struck me as odd—but maybe it wasn't so odd, either. Neither Evelyn Sand nor Johnny Blaze mentioned the death of Gilbert Sand.

By the time dessert was served, my nose was practically rubbing the table cloth. They were all trying hard to politely ignore me, and once La Plata got up, came around the table, and placed a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Please, *Señor* Bennett," he said gently. "Perhaps you eat now—yes?"

I brushed his hand away. "Don' wanna eat. Wanna drink."

This got a strained laugh, and La Plata went back and sat down, shrugging his big shoulders.

They were drinking coffee when I lifted my head and looked intently at the four of them. "I know something," I said darkly. "Something bad."

There was a sudden silence.

Howard Wittman spoke first. "So do I," he said coldly. "You're stinking drunk."

I waggled a finger at him. "Never mind. There's worse things than getting drunk. Lots worse."

There was another silence, and then Johnny Blaze said quietly. "Like what, Jim?"

They were all watching me, and the expression on each face was interesting to see. I looked at each of them in turn. Then I screwed my face into an exaggerated wink and nodded my head slowly up and down. "Murder," I muttered. "That's worse."

CHAPTER FIVE

Down-Under Doublecross

I THREW it at them, and then I hung my head over the table again. Luis La Plata laughed, but there wasn't much humor in it. "I forgot. *Señor* Ben-

nett is a dee-ctive. He deals in such things."

I raised my head. La Plata was smiling, but his little black eyes had a hard glitter to them. Howard Wittman just stared at me coldly and continued to sip his coffee. Evelyn Sand's face was pale, and the freckles over her short little nose looked as big as pennies.

Johnny Blaze's face had a stony look to it. Suddenly he got up and moved around the table to me. He grasped my arm. "Come on, Jim. You'd better lie down." His voice had a hard edge to it.

I let him tug at me a little before I allowed myself to be pulled from the chair. He had to almost drag me to the bedroom door. The three people at the table watched us silently. I waved a hand at them and snickered in what I hoped was a drunken manner.

Then I was in the dark bedroom. Johnny closed the door. I staggered to the big double bed and flopped over on my back.

Johnny Blaze leaned over me. "What the hell, Jim?" he said in a tense whisper. "Why the act?"

I answered him with a deep snore.

He shook me roughly by the shoulder. "You don't have to fake with me. I know you—you never get like this. What's the play?"

I kept on snoring.

Suddenly his hand struck me sharply across the face. My cheek stung. "Snap out of it," he said harshly. "If you're playing some kind of a game, let me in on it. I want to help."

I made a feeble motion with my hand, rolled on my side and snored louder. He didn't slap me again, and I was glad of that. But I knew he was standing silently above me. After what seemed like a long time I heard the bedroom door close softly.

I lay in the darkness with my eyes open. The sounds of the party came faintly in to me—indistinct words, occasional laughter, the clink of glass. I could feel the weight of my .38 in my inside coat pocket, and I reached in and transferred the gun to my right armpit, with the butt turned outward. After a while the bedroom door opened, and a shaft of light fell across the bed. I closed my eyes, and began to snore again.

The four of them must have been gathered around the door peering in at me.

Howard Wittman's cold, clipped voice said: "He's out cold. Leave him alone."

"Poor *Señor* Bennett," Luis La Plata said in his velvet voice. "He is very drunk. Shall we leave him to his dreams? I have reservations for the table downstairs, and we can still observe the first performance of the show floor."

I heard Johnny Blaze laugh. "Floor show," he said. "Let's go. Jim'll be all right—but what a head he'll have in the morning."

The door closed again, and I lay in the darkness. There was silence for a while, and then I heard the waiters clearing the table. Their talk came faintly to me through the closed door. It seemed to take them a long time, but finally they left, and the suite was silent.

I wanted to smoke, but I didn't. I just lay there on the bed, where Arlene Donovan had died, staring up into the darkness and waiting. From somewhere out on the lake an ore boat hooted dismally, and far below me I heard the occasional far-away blare of a car horn on the Boulevard.

I lay there for an hour, maybe two. Maybe I dozed a little, but I don't think so. I was too keyed up, too tense. The black minutes ticked by, and it began to be a nightmare, a nightmare of dark waiting for I didn't know what.

I didn't have any warning, I didn't hear any sound. But suddenly I was aware of a narrow crack of light shining over the bed. The crack widened, and I heard a soft whispering sound, like footsteps on the thick rug. I closed my eyes to slits, and I remembered to snore gently.

A dark shadow approached the bed—I could see it looming over me. There was a soft sibilant breathing sound as the shadow leaned over me. Through my almost closed lids I saw an arm reach across, and a grasping hand picked up the extra pillow beside me. I made myself lay still, but my nerves were screaming.

The shadow straightened, and the sound of the breathing grew hoarse. Something white was poised over my face, and I knew it was the pillow. But still I made my body be quiet.

Suddenly the shadow and the white blur

of the pillow were blotted out, everything was blotted out. My eyes, nose and mouth were smothered in a suffocating softness held tightly against my face with a terrifying rigidity. For a wild second I knew the fear of death, and then I bolted upright and the smooth butt of my .38 was in my hand.

The pillow fell away from my face, and there was a frantic, whistling breathing above me, and the scrambling of clawing hands reaching for the pillow again, and once more the soft smothering softness was clamped over my face.

I kicked out with my feet, and rolled violently away and off the bed. I heard a swift scurrying sound of feet on the rug, and I got to my knees and leveled my gun across the rumpled cover of the bed. A fast-moving shadow, crouched low, was suddenly black against the light in the doorway. I aimed carefully, and squeezed the trigger.

The room rocked with the explosion, and the shadow pitched forward, stumbled drunkenly out of sight beyond the door. I ran around the bed and out of the bedroom. A man was crawling on his hands and knees for the door. I made a long dive for him, and I heard his sobbing breath as he collapsed beneath me. I got him by the hair, and I twisted his face around.

Howard Wittman's cold gray eyes glittered up at me.

HE JUST stared at me silently, his eyes cold and contemptuous. I got to my feet. "Where did I get you?" I asked him.

"In the back," he said calmly. "Low down. Why didn't you shoot straighter?"

He let me turn him over, and I saw a hole in his coat, just above his left hip. I lifted the coat. There wasn't much blood.

"Clever," he said. "Very clever. I could have sworn that you were drunk as hell."

"Thanks," I said. "I fell for Arlene Donovan's death. I almost fell for the Gilbert Sand deal too—until I noticed that the pillow on the adjoining bed was messed up. But why did you have to kill poor Clem Burkart—think it was me coming into my apartment?"

"That's right," he said tonelessly.

"Maybe I was a little trigger-happy, but I guessed that you were on trail. I was parked down the street in a taxi when you showed up at Gilbert Sand's house. I waited, and I saw the police arrive. That's when I decided to go after you.

"I went to your apartment, broke the lock with a chisel, and waited for you to show up. I wanted that damned doll too—the one you took from Arlene's room last night. My fingerprints were on it. The door opened, and I shot—too quickly—" He paused, and his face twisted in pain. "Do I have to go through all this now?"

"You'll have to sometime. You may as well tell me."

"To hell with it," he said, and he turned his face to the rug.

I moved to the telephone, called the desk, and told them to send a doctor up. Then I called Detective Sergeant Rockingham.

"You again," he said bitterly.

"I've got Clem Burkart's killer. And Gilbert Sand's, and Arlene Donovan's, if you're interested."

"Donovan? Sand? Were they bumped off?"

"Yeah. Smothered to death, while they were passed out."

"Well, well," Rockingham said. "How'd you catch him. Sprinkle salt on his tail?"

"Better than that. I was the cheese in the trap. Cheese Bennett. Rats cry for him."

"Who was it, and why did he do it—or is that too personal a question?"

"His name is Howard Wittman, Donovan's secretary," I said. "Damned if I know why he did it. He won't talk." I glanced at the man on the floor. He was watching me with the still cold eyes of a rattlesnake.

"Where are you?" Rockingham asked.

I told him, and then I hung up. I went to the liquor table, poured myself half a glass of scotch, added a dribble of soda. That was one drink that didn't go into the ice bucket.

Wittman said: "I know you don't give a damn, but my back hurts to beat hell."

"The doctor's on his way up," I told him. "You went to a lot of trouble to kill three people. Why?"

I didn't expect him to answer me, but he did. Suddenly he seemed to want to

talk. When Wittman wanted to, he sure could talk plenty.

"I got started," he began in a tired voice, "and I couldn't stop. I handled all of Arlene's affairs, including her money. I had a hot tip on a horse at Santa Anita. I gambled with her money, a lot of it—and I lost. I lost a lot more trying to get it back.

"Just before we started this Eastern trip, she got suspicious. By the time we arrived here she was threatening to call in the police. Last night we had an awful row, and she got drunk. Then this jerk, Sand, came up and the two of them began to drink together. I heard her telling Sand about me. She finally passed out, and Sand left, leaving behind in her bedroom one of those damned dolls he's always carrying around with him everywhere he goes.

"But before he got out, La Plata showed up. La Plata threw a jealous rage and chased Sand out. I calmed La Plata down, and blamed his ex-wife's drunken condition on Sand. La Plata tried to talk to her, but she was out cold. Then La Plata asked me to stay with her while he went downstairs to get something to eat. That's what he said, but I think he wanted to finish what he had started with Sand. Anyhow, I was alone with Arlene. It was easy. I saw it done in a movie once—one of *her* movies, by the way." He paused, and smiled grimly.

"Did La Plata come back?" I asked him.

"Yes. He peeked in at Arlene, decided that she was still sleeping, and told me I could go. I got some whiskey, went over to Sand's house and waited for him. When he finally showed up, he was already more than half drunk. We talked, and I learned that Arlene had told him plenty about me. By that time he was mumbling, and I kept feeding him liquor. He finally fell out of his chair, and I carried him in to one of the beds. I got a pillow from the other bed and—"

Wittman paused and I saw him shiver a little. Then he added: "But after all, I couldn't allow him to go around telling people about me, could I? Then I came back here and went to bed—just before you came and found Arlene. I guess that's about it."

I said: "And all the money went on the horses?"

"Of course not," he sneered. "There's a little matter of a blonde and an apartment in Santa Monica."

"The man you killed instead of me—he had a nice wife and three kids."

"You're breaking my heart," he said harshly. "I've got a wife and two kids in Los Angeles. So what?" He closed his eyes. There was sweat on his face. He looked almost done.

The little doctor came in then, and right behind him was Rockingham and his crew. I kept working on the scotch, and by the time Luis La Plata, Evelyn Sand and Johnny Blaze showed up I was well on my way to staging a drunk act without faking. But I stayed on my feet, and answered a lot of questions. They seemed unending.

I remember seeing tears in Luis La Plata's eyes as he shoved something into the breast pocket of my coat. After what seemed like a long time I was driving home with the windows rolled down and the April air damp and cool and clean on my face.

In the morning I found a five-hundred dollar bill in my coat pocket. I gave it to Clem Burkart's widow. I felt as though it belonged to her.

* * *

It took Johnny Blaze a couple of days to get over being sore at me for classing him as a murder suspect, even though I tried to explain to him that in my business you couldn't afford to trust anybody.

A week later I met him in the bar of the Statler. He introduced me to a leggy blonde in a black dress and a big black hat, and I climbed onto a stool beside them.

Johnny rattled the ice in his glass and seemed to speak to the top of the polished bar. "I guess you were right, Jim," he said.

The blonde winked at me and shook her head silently.

Johnny didn't say any more, and it wasn't until later that I found out that Evelyn Sand had gone back to Buenos Aires with Luis La Plata.

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 206 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

Two in One

Dear Sir:

My father has just been the victim of a racket. He bought a ticket to the Army-Navy football game, but when he got there his seat was taken. Naturally, he called the person in charge of the seats.

The man occupying his seat said there was some mistake (and there was—on my father's part). He had bought a duplicate ticket. They could not tell which ticket was the real one or which was the fake.

At this particular game, my father was the only person this happened to. But at other games, large numbers of people are cheated in this manner. Please, if you want to see a game, buy your ticket at the proper place.

C. H.

Richmond Hill, N. Y.

When Cash Isn't Good

Dear Sir:

I was taken to the hospital recently for a minor operation. In my mind I was financially at ease, as we had hospitalization insurance.

After I returned home, we had the necessary papers filled out and returned to the insurance company. After six weeks, our claim came back with a notice attached to it, saying our policy had been canceled due to non-payment. We wrote the company telling them we knew there was a mistake, but they stuck to their story.

Even though we knew we were right, we didn't have any proof as the money had always been sent by cash. It taught us a lesson: Never send money in the mail in the form of cash—and always demand a receipt.

Mrs. William W. Taylor
Indianapolis, Ind.

A Tenant Turns the Tables

Dear Sir:

When the Army shipped my husband north, we rented our house to a lady for \$65 a month. After three months my real estate agent informed me of rent difficulties and asked my permission to evict the tenant. I immediately returned to see for myself. This is what I found:

The lady I had rented to had sub-rented to another family for a twenty dollar a month profit. This family was instructed to deposit the rent in the bank. The lady receiving the rent could not be found.

I paid well for the lesson I learned.

Mrs. Johnnie Lee Collier
Kemp, Texas

Eager for Evidence

Dear Sir:

A racket on out-of-town service stations has been worked by a driver in league with two men following in a second car.

The man in the first car stops at the filling station, orders gas and pays with a twenty-dollar bill.

About ten minutes after the first car has pulled out, the two men drive up in the second car. They give a description of the other car and man, and want to know if the service station attendant has seen the man. The attendant says he bought some gas there. The two men ask if he paid for it with a large bill, and the attendant says he did. Then the men explain that they have chased the man all the way from the state line for passing phony bills, and request the twenty-dollar bill to use as evidence. The attendant gives them the bill, thinking they are the law, and the trio is not seen again.

G. T. Ray
Mineola, Texas

What Price Beauty?

Dear Sir:

One afternoon last summer I was sitting on my porch when a young man came up the walk.

He said they were opening a new beauty shop in a nearby town, and to get customers and advertise their shop, were offering a \$15 permanent wave for \$5. He said the beauty shop would be open in a week and named a street where he said the shop would be located.

I gave him \$5, and he gave me a coupon that stated I was entitled to a permanent wave.

Needless to say, when I went to the city a week later, there was no such beauty shop.

Mrs. Clara Reed
New Boston, Ohio

Not So Nutty

Dear Sir:

What some people will do for a dollar is beyond me.

A wild-eyed stranger began telling me in a cafeteria one evening about being hounded by a man falsely claiming a five-dollar debt. The easiest way to get rid of him, the stranger explained, was to pretend to be broke.

A newcomer entered.

"That's him," the stranger said. To my astonishment he quickly emptied his wallet of four one-dollar bills and placed them on the table, saying, "Keep those for me till I get back."

Then the stranger went over to talk to the newcomer, pulling out a wallet and showing it empty. Shaking his head angrily, the newcomer left.

Back at the table, the stranger said, "Hey, there's a dollar missing. You took it."

Impossible, I argued. I never touched the bills, nor did anyone else.

He became indignant and threatened to call the manager. Convinced now that he was a nut but not wishing to become involved in anything, I handed him a dollar and walked out. It didn't occur to me at the time that I'd been the victim of petty swindlers.

Mentioning the episode to a policeman friend three days later, however, I was told several cafeteria managers had complained to the police about the pair. Even so, I never heard of them being apprehended.

Keith S. C. Allen
Remsenberg, L. I., N. Y.

Pedigreed Profiteering

Dear Sir:

I answered an ad offering fine-strain pedigreed pups for sale—fox terriers, these were. I made a date to see them and found them perfect black and white babies. I paid for one, got my receipt, and went home to wait till my pup was old enough to leave his mother.

When I went to get him at the end of the stated time, there was a nice little black and white terrier-type pup, but *not* the pup of the litter I'd seen. My receipt read: one terrier puppy, aged. . . . The racket apparently consisted in breeding two dogs at the same time, one finely pedigreed, one mongrel.

If you love dogs as I do, you'll take the little fellow waiting for you, because you've paid your \$40.00 and apparently there is no way to get it back. Still and all, it is a racket. The good dogs are sold twice, delivered once, and the mongrel dogs sold once for the same price. Or perhaps the pedigreed dogs are sold and sold, and *never* delivered to anyone.

Mrs. J. Templar
Oakland, Cal.

No Niagara

Dear Sir:

We were newlyweds on our first trip to no other place than—Niagara Falls!

We registered at the hotel and then decided to go out and see the sights. As we emerged from the lobby, we were besieged by cab drivers urging us to let them take us "to see the beauty of the Falls." We got in one of these cabs and were driven around for about five minutes. Then the driver let us out, pointed out a spot to us and said: "The Falls are just over there. One dollar, please."

We stood a moment after getting out of the cab to get our bearings, and found we were *exactly one block* from the spot where we got in. The experience had cost us a dollar.

I guess that cab driver saw us coming!

Mrs. A. R. King
Flint, Mich.

Swindle Switch

Dear Sir:

There just isn't time to listen to your intuition when you're employed as clerk for the duration of a department store sale. After a short briefing, I had been allocated to the linen department, and found myself regretting on that first, furious morning that I had neither the leisure nor cash to invest in some of the bargains.

I *was* staggered, however, when a customer brought me a fine tablecloth and a five-dollar bill. But the price tag was right, so I gritted my teeth and muttered farewell to another good buy.

During my lunch hour I rushed to purchase one for myself—only to find that the price was \$25. The five-dollar ones were at the other end of the same table. The customer had switched tickets, probably realizing a new clerk would be unfamiliar with the merchandise.

I've wondered since just how many tickets she switched that day, and how much loot she accumulated with the unwitting cooperation of green clerks!

Indignantly yours,
Cynthia Leigh

Wrong Course

Dear Sir:

One day a gentleman knocked at our door. He was attempting to interest people in a civil service preparation course. The tuition was only \$70.00 with a money back guarantee *if*, after taking and passing an examination at any first-class post office, no job was assigned.

My husband took this course and, when the company indicated, he went to a first-class post office and asked to be given the examination. The post office superintendent had no knowledge of said company. "Furthermore," he said, "we do not recognize these correspondence civil service courses, and they do not prepare anyone for civil service examinations."

Why, I asked, does the government allow such advertising, when in reality it is genuine fake? The companies word their guarantees in such a way everything appears legal. The company is safe, but we, the trusting public, are the losers.

Ruth O. Fricke
Ames, Iowa

Pegleg Plot

Dear Sir:

The morning local had just pulled away from the station when a man who walked with a scarcely perceptible limp came to our baggage and parcel check-room window and presented a claim check for a pair of crutches which had been checked the night before. He disappeared into the men's room across the hall and in a few minutes reappeared and checked, of all things, an artificial limb loosely wrapped in newspaper. Then he hobbled off as best he could with the aid of the crutches, saying, "Going up town on business."

In the afternoon about 4:30 p.m. he returned, checked the crutches, took the artificial limb and, after another quick change, left town on the afternoon local.

I soon noticed that this was a daily occurrence. Sensing something peculiar, I said to my fellow checkman, "Mac, what kind of business is that fellow in?"

His reply was that if I really wanted to find out, I should take a walk up town on my lunch hour and take a look around. This I did, and I now tell this for the benefit of those who might be disposed to drop something into every tin cup along our streets.

Walter C. Missimer
Wilmington, Del.

Soft Soap

Dear Sir:

An entirely new racket, and a most contemptible way of using trusting men and women for suckers, had its beginning on the streets of New York in December.

Many of us, young and old, wear eyeglasses. Its no secret that glasses need constant wiping in order not to becloud the vision. Legitimate liquid preparations on the market, used to clean glasses, retail from 15¢ to 50¢ per bottle.

Now along comes the petty, conniving racketeer with this one: A large, white, floating cake of soap is cut into hundreds of small bits. The tiny bits are then wrapped in gold-colored paper with a blue ring around it. The color effect of the gold and blue sells this fake in large quantities.

The price asked for the tiny bits of soap on the east side is 5 cents. In other localities these gyps get 10 cents per bit. Needless to say, they keep moving about from street to street, and avenue to avenue, with eyes ever on the alert for police cars. Another reason for darting from place to place is to avoid meeting anyone who may have peeped inside the gold paper.

On reaching home you decide to clean your glasses. To your chagrin you discover you've been sold a tiny bit of soap for 5 or 10 cents—and you may have, as this writer has, several large cakes of the identical soap in your medicine chest.

of soap—anywhere from \$2.50 to \$5.00. Nice

The racketeer's profit from one 10-cent cake racket, eh?

P. J. Lewis
New York, N. Y.

He Got There First

Dear Sir:

The small-time shyster soliciting his crooked schemes from door to door can put a damper on an honest person who may wish to represent a legal proposition.

Some while back I joined a contest sponsored by a book club. All participants were supposed to obtain a few members to the club to be sent in with a completed series of puzzles. Each new member increased the amount of the top-winner's prize. So I thought I would call on a few people in my town and ask them to join. Since membership certificates were furnished by the club and no deposit had to be collected, I felt confident my friends and neighbors would be only too glad to help me in the contest.

I am very lame and have to be assisted in and out of my car. The first woman I visited knew me well and invited me and my assistant inside. We chatted cheerfully for a spell before I explained the nature of my errand. An odd expression came over her face.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'd rather not join your club as much as I'd like to help you. Three months ago a man came to my door with a similar proposition. He said he was helping a crippled friend to obtain new book club members in order to be eligible for cash awards.

"To confirm this statement, he nodded toward a car parked in my driveway. A youth sat in the front seat. The door was swung open so I could see that he wore braces and that a pair of crutches rested on the seat beside him. I felt sympathetic to the lad, so I asked the man in.

"He showed me credentials and order blanks and explained that for only \$2.00 deposit the club would send me the first month's selection for the small balance of \$1.00, plus c.o.d. charges. I didn't recognize the name of the club, but the man's terms seemed to coincide with the contract agreement. I paid him the deposit, accepted a duplicate of the order as my receipt, and the man left.

"Two months passed and I thought it odd that my book selection didn't come. I wrote a reminder to the address printed on the order blank. It was returned to me unopened and marked 'Unclaimed; no such address.' Right off I knew that the man had duped me.

"I didn't mind losing the \$2.00 so much, but it made me mad to realize that perhaps that evil man was taking that crippled boy around in his car with him purposely to win the sympathy of unsuspecting victims. I doubt if the boy even knew the nature of the man's crooked business. Or perhaps the man paid him to ride around with him and open the car door to reveal his handicap. Whichever way he worked it, it certainly was a contemptible trick!"

It was fortunate for me the culprit hadn't dared make too many calls in such a small area. I made up my necessary quota of new members without meeting any others who had been swindled by him.

G. H. M.
Hyannis Port, Mass.

VACATION FROM VIOLENCE

By **JOHN
POLITO**

I was just a big-city dick away off my beat—but I got sore when the lovely lady was rushed into a shroud.



She was sitting at the vanity table. . . .

THE long, white building might have been a night club or a chain store. The big green neon sign said simply, *Mortuary*.

The air was cool as Marshal Bondy and I went inside. Down a flight of stairs, the soft lighting and sober furniture was left

behind. This was working quarters. Concrete and chrome and sharp, clean steel. Along one wall a series of drawers.

It seemed my fate to be always looking at the tools of a morgue. Of course this wasn't a real morgue—just the cold room of a prosperous undertaker. Like most small towns, the undertaker was coroner, and stored the local stiffies until claimed or buried.

With a word to a sorrowful-looking little man, we walked over to one of the drawers. Will Bondy pulled it out and I sucked in my breath quickly. No matter how many I see, the sight of a lovely woman stretched out, cold and lonely and dead, gets me. I knew this one had been lovely because I've had a little practice visualizing what people looked like before. . . .

Something had battered her up, in spades. The side of her head and one shoulder, an arm. That was enough for me. There was more, but I wasn't having any. Something about one of her hands looked odd to me and I picked it up and looked carefully, without being able to catch it. It was cold though, cold and hard. I dropped it quickly.

Bondy just stood there looking at me, with no humor in his eyes, but a little curiosity. I shoved the drawer back, mopped a few drops of perspiration from the corners of my eyes, and coughed.

I nodded to the cold case. "I give up, Will. I've seen worse but—"

"I took advantage of you a little, Jimmy." He smiled wryly. "I've got a couple of items to clean up in connection with this mess. If you want to come along I can tell you about it on the way."

Vacation or not, I had to know about it. You know, that old one about fire horses. . . .

I felt my vacation hadn't really begun until I left Socorro on US 85 in the New Mexico desert. There, you begin the slow climb through the low ranges that flank the Rio Grande Valley. There's space and sky-flung rock in violent, primitive colors and tortured, blasted crags. After a couple of hours of this terrific desert-scape, US 85 runs along a ridge, and suddenly and startlingly a flicker of blue sparkles across the reds and yellows and lengthens into Elephant Butte Lake. It is great and colorful and clean. Above everything else, it's clean.

Deyner, I told myself, you don't belong here. A private dick like you will only dirty up the atmosphere. It certainly was a far cry from Sixth and Market in St. Louis, from the dark alleys and haunted streets, the shuffling men and red-eyed old women of my usual beat.

Before I went overseas I had spent

some time in camps in New Mexico. Once on a pass in Hot Springs I had met the town marshal, and we had struck up a quick friendship, the way those things happen during war. When a couple of tough cases and some St. Louis heat made me think of fresh, clean air, I wired the marshal. In two hours I had his quick and western-warm invitation.

After I checked in at the Golden Spike Tourist Court, I strolled down to the small adobe building that housed the Hot Springs official body—mayor, marshal and the lesser dignitaries. Bondy's door wore his name in small black letters, a couple of which had peeled in the dry, warm air. I rapped sharply and walked in.

Willard Bondy sat staring blankly at a piece of unpolished agate on his desk top. His white felt hat was pushed forward to his feathery, light eyebrows. The fine, saddle-leather complexion was wrinkled into sharp lines at his eyes and mouth. He looked up, pushing his hat back, then got around the desk in two strides.

"Jimmy Deyner, I'm glad to see you." He pushed me into a chair alongside his desk. "You're looking good, boy. When did you get in?"

We spent the next fifteen minutes with the usual "remember when?" and "what ever happened?" kind of conversation.

Bondy is tall, tough and good looking—blond hair, a rangy build and the soft voice and manner of the Southwest. He was a gentleman. Not the kind who would lift an eyebrow if you picked the wrong fork at dinner, but the kind who would roll you into the hay after a big night and never remind you afterward what a sap you had made of yourself. I noticed that politeness when we had run out of the catching-up phase of our talk and got current. He was apologizing.

"Jimmy, I'm awfully sorry, on your first night here, but I can't ask you to have dinner with me. I have a little business, but perhaps later— Can I call you?"

I laughed. "Will, any time is okay with me, you know it. By what kind of desperate doings could happen here that would keep you overtime?"

HE FROWNED then, recalling our only big difference of opinion. "Jimmy, you always talk about big cities like

they have some kind of option on crime. I've argued before that we get our share. Well, I've got one here now that's a real mess, just as ugly as anything you could pick up in St. Louis."

I told myself to leave it alone, now. This is a vacation, I said firmly. My big mouth said:

"In a quiet little town like this? I don't believe it."

Will looked at his strap watch, squinted out the window at the sun and said quietly:

"Dinner time won't be for an hour yet. You come along with me."

He wouldn't tell me anything more about his case as we went out to his station wagon and pulled away from the little yellow building. In five minutes, we had pulled up at the long, white building with the green neon *Mortuary*. . . .

After we left the morgue, we rolled out of town in the station wagon. Sunset was splashing crimson and purple and gold along the peaks just out of town. Blue shadows lay quietly beside the stones in the fields, and murder was a foreign and ugly thing in all this beauty.

As we left the flat land along the Rio Grande we passed through a rusty-hinged gate suspended from cyclone wire fencing. Will nodded toward it.

"During the war, this was all part of the big dam up there, and closely guarded. It's open to anyone now that the war is over." His last words held a hint of bitterness. I knew what he meant.

The road began to climb. Almost straight up the side of a mountain. No guard rail. Nothing between us and the increasingly distant valley floor but judgment and good muscles.

I didn't care for it. It felt a little like riding a bicycle up an outside fire escape on the Railway Exchange Building in St. Louis, with the rail knocked off. I breathed carefully. I didn't want anything to disturb what I felt must be a very delicate balance.

After a few years we reached the top of the climb and swung sharply onto the concrete road that crossed the dam in back of us. Only then I dared to take a cautious look.

The scene was frightening. The rim of the dam swung in a wide clean curve, and

the sweep of concrete dropped in a sheer straight fall to the floor of the valley hundreds of feet below. The path we had climbed looked more like a goat's runway than a road. With a sudden gasp I realized that we would have to come down this road again—in the dark.

We jolted on along the rough, twisting and tilting way. Elephant Butte Lake was off to the left. The huge rock or island out in the center that gave the lake its name cast a long jagged shadow as the sky slowly darkened.

Up to the right a small house huddled against the shoulder of the hill, a narrow graveled drive crawling up to the side of it. The drive seemed a continuation of the main road, but as we turned in I could see the road, fainter and narrower, continuing on into the hills.

"Lonesome road," pointed out Will unnecessarily. "Not many people use it. Only a couple of families live past this point." That I could believe. A rough road and that awful descent alongside the dam. Maybe city streets are for me after all.

A couple of cacti flanked the wooden porch, dusty and forlorn in the dim light. Two petals stood valiantly at the top of one of them.

Will flipped on the light as we entered the house. Apparently no one was home. I looked around and sniffed, and I was back in the mean economy and the patchwork gentility of the run-down cities. I don't know what I expected, but it was not this hall bedroom atmosphere. In one corner stood an old console radio with a broken knob. A flop-eared magazine lay on the seat of a pink upholstered chair. The back was lumpy and had a dark stain near the top.

"The Gregory Daggess' lived here," said Marshal Bondy. "That was Mrs. Daggess you saw down town."

He walked out of the living room and I followed. A narrow hall opened to a kitchen at the rear, a bathroom on one side, bedroom on the other. They all had the look of having been left abruptly. A sudden break in motion, things left here and there that should have been picked up. Like a faint trace of suds near the drain in the bath tub. A woman's stocking trailing from the clothes hamper. The medicine chest door half open.

WE WENT into the bedroom and Will sat on the bed, removing his hat with a tired gesture. I leaned against the wall and looked around as he talked.

"Dagges was a peculiar sort of fellow for a small town. A beauty expert, hair-dresser, all that." He waved a hand vaguely.

"In a small town like Hot Springs? I don't get it."

"Tourist business. The big hotels get a lot of easterners, and some west-coasters, too. He had a good business developed in the hotels. Seems kind of funny he'd leave it."

"Oh. Killed his wife and scrambled?"

"Yes, kind of looks like it, and yet—well, there's a good-looking girl missing, too. Married. Lived in Newburn, about fifteen miles from town. Husband's all busted up."

I walked over to the large vanity table. A couple of bottles of lotion or something were unstoppered. Spilled powder. Bobby pins. A bottle of nail polish on its side, the contents a gelid, smooth-topped clot on the table top. Will went on, the uneasy look making his tanned face old and tired:

"Nothing in the house has been touched. Looks kind of like it happened this way: Dagges had his gal waiting outside for him in a car. He knocked out his wife just as she was finished with her bath, probably while she was sitting there at the vanity getting ready for bed. Then the two of them, Dagges and the black-haired gal, carried her body out to his car. He drove his car, the girl drove the other car.

"About a quarter of the way down the road beside the dam, Dagges stopped, got out, pulled his wife over to the driver's side and let the car slide over the edge of the road. Anyway, some people down below heard the crash and phoned to town. We came out and looked, and there was the car down at the bottom of the hill, smashed to a heap of junk, and Mrs. Dagges in it. Dead."

"Well, that seems pretty simple to me," I said. Then I added, "But I wonder why they went to the trouble of making it look like an accident if they were going to run away afterward?"

Will smiled, a very small smile. "That is what I don't get. I got circulars out on Dagges and the black-haired girl, and it

was on all police teletypes yesterday. I ought to let it go at that." He brushed back his hair absently. "But it just doesn't seem sensible."

"Something else, Will. Whose car did they leave in if it was Dagges' car that went over the road?"

"Yeah. I expected the guy from Newburn to report that his car as well as his wife was gone. But it isn't. Right in the garage the next morning when we checked with him."

I looked up at that and asked: "How did you happen to connect the girl and Dagges?"

"Well, it's a funny thing, but everybody in town knew they were running around together. Didn't make any bones about it."

I noticed a chest with one drawer pulled out. Women's clothing was mused around and a slip hung over the edge. The closet seemed regular enough. I asked Will:

"You said she must have just finished her bath. Was her body nude when you found it?"

"No. Fully dressed, right down to the last detail."

I didn't get it. I walked back to the vanity and touched the clotted mass of nail polish. The surface was hard but yielded, and a thick blob of scarlet broke through the surface. Some of it ran onto my finger and I pulled out a handkerchief to wipe it off. An idea flickered around in my mind and vanished before I could tie it down. I thought about the marshal's words and then, without knowing just why, asked:

"You say Mrs. Dagges was dressed completely. Was she wearing gloves?"

I guess it was a silly question, but I felt annoyed at Will's humorous smile as he answered.

"Trying some city-slicker Sherlocking, Jimmy?"

I started to answer, but he broke in.

"I don't remember—we can go look. Guess there's nothing more to pick up here anyway."

We left the little house on the lonesome hill, and the tattered cactus flower. About five hundred yards down the road on the way to the dam I noticed that another road curved off sharply toward the lake.

It was quite dark by then, but I could make out the outlines of cabins, and at least one large building. In answer to my question, Will explained:

"Government-operated resort camp. Nice 'dobe cabins, boats. Nice set-up."

I BEGAN to hold my breath as we approached the dam and turn-off down the hillside. It was dark enough so that I didn't have to see the bottom of the sheer drop unless I tried. I tried. I had that sinking feeling that you get when an elevator drops too suddenly. Will handled the station-wagon as casually as though he was driving along a city street. Down the hill a few hundred yards he pulled out nearer the edge of the road and stopped, pointing.

"This is about where the car left the road. Some drop, eh?"

"Yeah," I answered shakily.

I was afraid to lean out the door for fear of unbalancing the car. Will must have noticed it, because he started up abruptly, sand and gravel rattling from under the rear wheels. He glanced at me and laughed. I said several impolite things to him, which made him laugh harder. "City slicker," he snorted.

Back in town we stopped outside the adobe Municipal Building. In the marshal's office, he picked up a phone, and in a few minutes a young fellow came in carrying a large cardboard box.

Will up-ended it on his big desk and I poked around in the scattered clothing that had been Mrs. Gregory Dagg's last costume on this earth. Stockings and a garter belt, somewhat torn. Pants and slip and blouse. A wool skirt with some dark stains that had left the material stiff and hard. In a white box a wedding ring, a solitaire diamond, small, and a gold chain with a tiny cross. I remembered a pair of garnet earrings on the vanity table.

I picked up a pair of white gloves, turned them over, not knowing what I expected. They were dirty and one of them had a spot of black grease on it. I absently felt one fingertip and then a tingle crept along my back. I knew now what I had been looking for, but I needed a couple more items to make it fit. I turned to Will, playing it very cool, and said:

"Will, I think I might be able to tell you something about this case if I can use your phone for a minute."

"What's the idea, Jimmy?" His big, honest face wrinkled.

"City-slicker stuff, Will."

"Okay, kid, I reckon you-all have got yourself a clue."

He slapped his thigh in imitation of Hollywood westerners, and guffawed. There was just enough derision in it to make me want to bust this thing right in his face.

The operator put me through to the resort manager up at the lake. His voice yawned in my ear:

"Martinez—who is it?"

"I'm James F. Deyner, Mr. Martinez, down here at Hot Springs—"

"Sorry," he broke in. "All filled up tonight. Maybe in a couple of—"

"I don't want a cabin. I just wanted—" I stopped and thought for a second. A direct question usually gets a cagey answer, at least in my business. I rephrased my question: "Looks like a nice night, so I thought I'd like to—well, I got a girl with me, and it would be nice to go for a little boat-ride in the moonlight."

There was a sputter, then a wheezing cough, and then he roared: "Them boats is a quarter-mile from my shack and I ain't to walk down there and unlock them for nobody."

I cut in: "You keep them locked?"

"Yeah. And even that won't keep lunatics offa the lake at night."

"What do you mean?"

"People are always smashing the locks. Why just the night before last somebody stole a boat and brought it back half fulla water." He stopped his rambling for a second, then finished. "No sir, no boats tonight. *Good-by.*"

I hung up. I was ready for the next act. I shoved Mrs. Dagg's gloves in my pocket and walked to the door.

"Let's go over to that mortuary place, Will. I want to show you something."

HE HAD a lot of questions now, but I wasn't answering any of them. We entered the long, white building, splashed now with the green glow from the neon sign. Inside the door another idea occurred to me.

"There's just one thing. Can you put your finger on this black-haired girl's husband if you want him?"

"Sure, but why bother with him? He's got no call to go anywhere."

I tried to give out with a sinister laugh, without too much success. Will just shrugged his shoulders.

We entered the workrooms in the basement and walked to the rear. We pulled out the drawer that held the body of Mrs. Daggles. I took the pair of white gloves from my pocket.

"Will," I said carelessly, "have you got a pocket knife on you?"

He pulled one out and handed it to me with a worried look.

Half-turned from Will, I quickly slit the fingers of the gloves to the tips. A quick look verified what I had felt in them earlier. Holding the slit fingers so they wouldn't show, I picked up one of Mrs. Daggles' hands and held it close to Will.

"Look at her fingers. Do you see anything odd about them?"

Will looked for a moment and shook his head. I held them still closer and said:

"Okay, here's where a city slicker gets in a few licks. Look at her nails, Will. Nail polish smeared all over. Isn't that odd?"

Will still didn't get it. I laid her hand gently down.

"Reconstructing the scene in her house, we decided that she was sitting at the vanity table when someone knocked her out. It was obvious that she was putting on nail polish. From her fingers it is obvious that it hadn't dried. Now—" I held up the slit fingers of the gloves.

"In each finger tip is a little dried nail polish, see?"

I handed them to Will. He looked at them closely, verifying my description.

"What does that mean to you now, Will?"

He looked at me, at the body, and back at the gloves.

"Nothing, except that her nail polish was still wet when her husband put the gloves on her."

"Will, you told me that Daggles was a beautician, or whatever they call a male beauty operator. Undoubtedly he gave manicures. Can you imagine him smearing up a fresh coat of nail polish?"

"There was polish remover on that table, and cleansing tissues. Every instinct of his profession would have demanded that he let the polish dry, or wipe it off with some of that remover."

"But Jimmy, the guy was committing a murder. Killers do a lot of things they wouldn't normally do."

"That was no crime of passion. That was a very carefully handled, properly planned murder. There was no hurry or panic, you have to admit that. Now, if Daggles didn't put those gloves on, Daggles didn't commit the murder. Someone else did. And *there* might be the reason you haven't been able to pick up a clue as to the whereabouts of Daggles and his girl.

"Now, one more question, Will. If you wanted to hide a body around here, where would you hide it?"

"Why, I suppose I'd just drive out in the desert, dig a hole, and throw it in."

I shook my head. "No, Will. If you did that you'd leave tracks, either foot marks or tire marks, and if you tried to conceal them you'd leave even more of a trail. But nothing leaves a trail in water."

He was beginning to see it then, and I hurried on:

"Back there in your office I called the resort up at the lake. They told me they have the boats chained and locked after dark. But on the night Mrs. Daggles was killed, someone smashed a lock, used a boat and then brought it back.

"Will, I think the reason you couldn't find traces of a car that Daggles and his girl could have used to run away is because there was no such car. And they didn't run away. I think you'll find their bodies at the bottom of Elephant Butte Lake. And if you bring in the husband of the missing black-haired girl, I'll bet you a steak he can tell you where to look."

As Will started for the stairs and a phone, I called after him: "Don't forget about that steak, Will."

Later, Will joined me in the Imperial Hotel dining room just as I finished up a choice eastern steak. He paid the check.

Just one other thing bothered me—I never did get a look at that black-haired gal. She must have been some baby, but I didn't look at her when they brought her down from the lake. One dead woman is enough on a vacation.

Jackpot Jitters

She taunted, "You insipid, spineless little coward!"

By **JOSEPH
W. QUINN**



*Paul Hanson would have to
take his reward . . . strapped
down.*

“YOU’D just love to kill me!” Her voice, taunting, derisive, was even more knife-like now, after an hour of quarreling.

Paul Hanson didn’t speak. But his mind said: *Yes, I’d like to kill you. I’ve wanted to for a long, long time.*

Obliquely, he glimpsed his face in the mirror that rose from the back of the bedroom dresser. A middle-aged face, still attractively angular, but now white and drawn, pulled into tense, tight lines.

He didn’t turn his eyes, but let them linger on the slender column of her throat.

“You’re not fooling me!” Her voice rode out on high pitch. “I know it! I’ve seen it in your eyes! I see it now! But

you wouldn't dare. No, my *darling* husband! You wouldn't dare! Because you're a coward!"

Her figure blurred before his eyes. He was conscious suddenly of his hands at his sides, of the strange way they'd begun to tingle. He flexed them, once.

She taunted: "You insipid, spineless little coward!"

It was as though something other than himself took him across the room. Three steps. Three long fluid effortless steps. She didn't have time to scream. His arms became rigid poles.

Finally, she lay quiet.

He straightened. It was done now. He'd thought about this many times. Riding the subway. On long walks. In the midst of these fierce, devastating quarrels. Even in school, while teaching his classes in mathematics, the thought had intruded.

But always he had put it aside. Not for its distaste. No. For surely the idea of killing Agnes had grown more appealing as his hatred for her had grown more intense. Fear, perhaps. Fear that warned that no matter how ingenious his plan he'd probably not get away with it.

But it was done now. And, oddly, he felt no panic, but a calm detachment, a cold awareness that he must go on from here, work this thing out, step by step, like a simple problem in algebra—with x the perfect crime.

He let his gaze swing around the room. The leather-framed photograph propped on the dresser arrested his attention.

Elaine! Whatever plan he evolved, whatever story he invented, he had to take Elaine into account. A lot like her mother, Elaine. The same insolently gleaming eyes, the same full-curved mouth, the same pert nose.

But, also, that same ruthless dominant will. If there was anything of himself in his daughter, he'd never found it.

He pulled his eyes away from the photograph. She'd been gone how long now? A year? Two years. There'd been a final clash of wills—mother's versus daughter's. Elaine had gone to Hollywood, where she'd managed to land a job making up the actresses. She was an artist at make-up. She rarely wrote.

He crossed to the portable typewriter that sat on the desk between the windows.

It had been Agnes' machine. Mostly she'd used it for the advertising contests. She'd been at it for years, but had never won a thing.

Never won. Memory jolted him. She'd handed him a letter only this morning, told him that he'd have to appear that evening at some radio station's studio.

He pulled the envelope out of an inner coat pocket. It was addressed to Mr. Paul Hanson. But that was easily understood. As usual, she'd submitted two entries: one in his name and one in her own.

Quickly, he scanned the letter. Gleam Toothpaste. Their big Wishing Well Contest. His letter, "I like Gleam Toothpaste because . . ." had made him eligible for one of the five prizes. Announcement and presentation would take place at WEJF's studio. Eight o'clock. Gleam's famous *Take the Consequences* show

He'd go, of course.

He ran a piece of note paper into the typewriter. His fingers pecked at the keys.

"Paul," he wrote, "*I'm through. You'll never see or hear from me again. It's best this way. Please don't look for me. Agnes.*"

He considered forging her name. But, no. Too risky. He'd leave it in the typewriter, unsigned by hand. A wife running off with another man would be excited, in haste. She'd do it that way. It wasn't unreasonable. Good. Step one.

He crossed to the closet, pulled out two large valises. He wouldn't pack all her clothes. It wouldn't be like her to take them all. Just the ones she'd liked most.

He went through the closets, the dresser drawers. Finally her bags were packed. Step two.

Step three, the final step between here and x , was going to take some doing. How did you go about getting rid of a body and two valises—forever—beyond all chance of detection?

For the first time nervousness took hold of him. He fought it down. He lighted a cigarette. The natural thing to do with a body was bury it. But where?"

He crossed the room, pulled down the window shades. Not that the precaution was a necessary one. This was a sparsely developed suburban section. The bungalow was the only building for a quarter mile either way. It was lonely out here,

but it wouldn't be that way for long. New homes were going up all around.

New homes. Step three became clear. The O'Brien Associates development down the road. A large tract had been cleared for home sites; the pond had been drained. Daily, trucks backed up to that pond hole, dumped in dirt, rock and cinders.

It would be a simple matter to bury Agnes' body and valises there, twenty feet or more below grade. In a few days the job of filling would be finished. In a few months somebody's new home would be a monument for Agnes' grave.

Perfect!

But he'll have to wait till late in the night. When he got back from the radio show. . .

THEY sat him toward the rear of the stage, along with another man and three women. The five prize winners.

The theatre-like studio was crowded. On the stage stood three mikes, chairs, tables, paraphernalia. Technicians moved about busily.

And then the big jolly man who was announcer and master-of-ceremonies got Gleam's Take the Consequences show under way. Victims were picked at random from the audience, given senseless questions that couldn't bring anything but senseless answers. Laughter-provoking consequences followed.

Paul Hanson sat quietly, a cold detached observer. His smiles were mechanical. He couldn't stop thinking of the locked and darkened bungalow, of Agnes' body under a blanket on the bed, of the pond hole at the O'Brien Associates de-

velopment, and of the coal shovel standing near the furnace in the cellar.

Finally, the announcer was talking about Gleam's stupendous Wishing Well Contest. The five major prize winners were here tonight. Twenty thousand dollars in prizes. And for each winner a wish fulfilled.

Paul Hanson found himself wondering what Agnes' wish had been.

The first winner was called, one of the three women. She was handed a check for one-thousand dollars. A singer, she'd wished for a chance to appear on one of the big radio shows. An audition had been arranged for the following day.

The two remaining women were called. And then the man. Sudden realization stiffened Paul Hanson in his chair. He was alone! The last to be called. Agnes' letter had won the grand prize—ten thousand dollars!

He fought to slow the wild thumping of his heart in his chest. Why, he was not only free of Agnes, but she'd made it possible for him to enjoy his freedom to its utmost!

He crossed to the microphones. Applause, whistles, screams thundered in his ears. He kept his smile going. He fumbled with the check. Was he happy? Of course. Very happy. Very, very happy.

"And now, Mr. Hanson," the announcer's voice boomed, "it was your wish to have your daughter, Elaine, home for a visit. Well, sir, we've rounded her up in Hollywood, whisked her here by air for a whole week's visit. She's home right now, listening to this program, *waiting for you!*"

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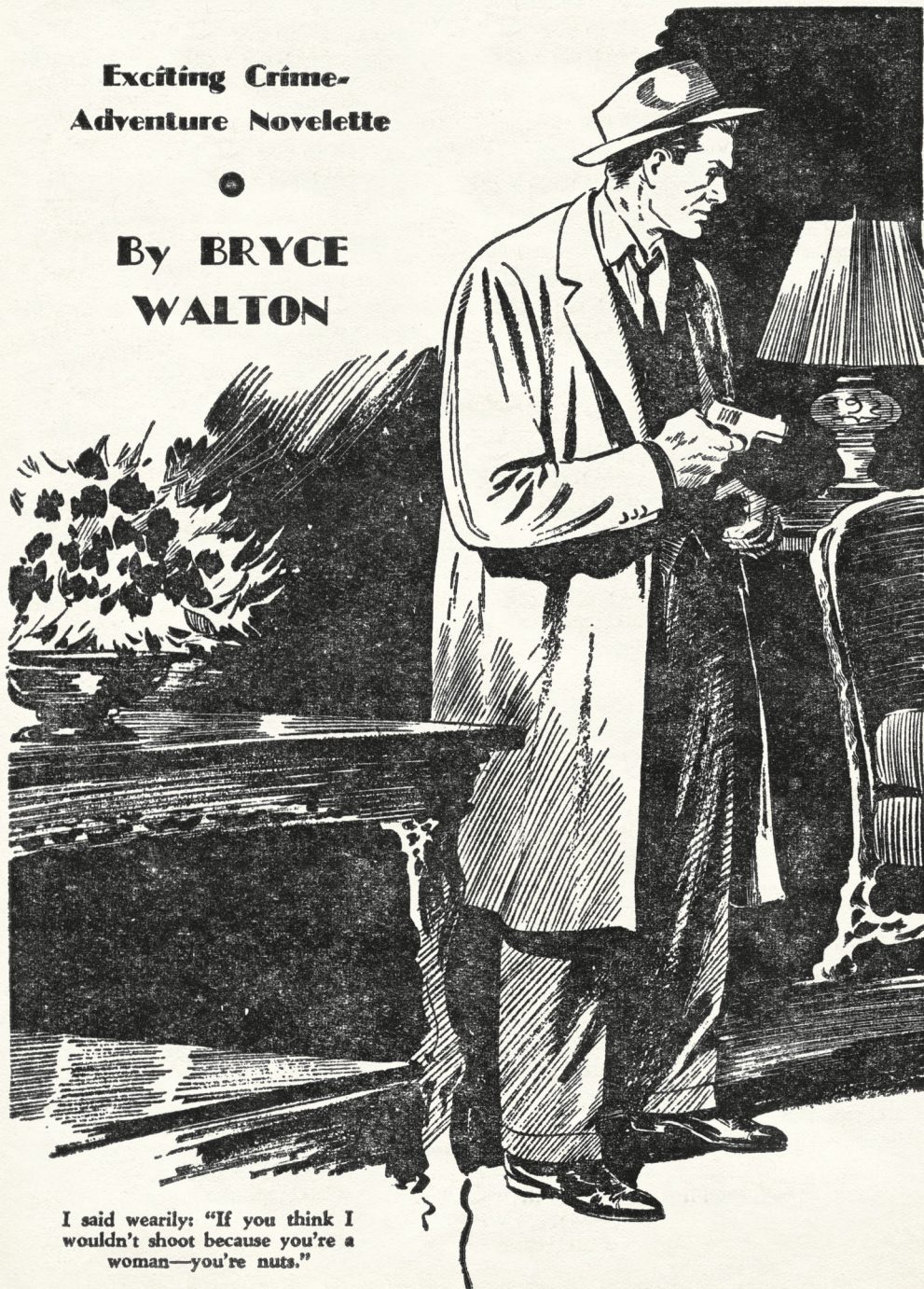
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WHISTLE-STOP

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**By BRYCE
WALTON**



I said wearily: "If you think I wouldn't shoot because you're a woman—you're nuts."

MAYHEM

CHAPTER ONE

City Boy's Welcome

I DROPPED off my white steed and looked through the smog for my lady in distress. The white steed, disguised as a bus, lumbered off into the wet night. And the lady in distress seemed to be nowhere around to explain the details of her plight.

I lighted up a cigarette and stepped back into more secure shadows to wait. I was standing before a small dimly-lighted bus



*I was eager to tilt windmills for blue-blooded Sylvia—
before the local yokels voted me Number One Boy in
the hearse parade.*

station marked *Silverston*. Inside, an old man hunched over a battered checkerboard, alone. Above the street, yellow fog lights made the damp pavement give off an unpleasant glow as I looked up and down. I had already cased the town briefly by telephone. A small town once supported by mining, but now surviving as an orange and grape center.

I hate whistle-stops and usually avoid them like a plague. In a big town you've got room to operate. In a one-horse burg you're trapped by provincial clannishness, stupidity and hate.

To my nostrils came the sickening smell of orange blossoms. To my ears came the much more sickening sound of a shot—followed by a jagged scream that was definitely on the feminine side. It cut into my ears and chopped the cigarette out of my fingers.

I found myself loping down the wide sidewalk and right on into trouble, where I guess I belong.

I stopped in a yawning gray vacancy just beyond a night-lighted hardware store. The sounds had come from here, a large and silent expanse of a vacant lot. I started in there when the sound of running footsteps stopped me, turned me around.

I touched the butt of my .38 riding comfortably under my arm as the man came puffing up to me. He peered first at me then into that area where something unpleasant had happened but from which no more sounds had come. He started to comment.

"Yes, I heard it, too," I said. "It sounded like hell, didn't it?"

"Sounded like a woman," he said. He didn't seem anxious to investigate.

It was about nine o'clock. The only spot left alive in the town that I could see was a saloon about two blocks down; figures were spilling from it into the street. The man who had turned up so fast by the vacant lot showed me his features with the air of the night-light from a store window. A strong, elderly face, lean and dry, with a touch of gray in the hair. He wore a heavy, Eastern-style topcoat that you seldom see in Southern California. He wore no hat and his hair was mussed—a condition, I decided, which was rare for him.

I started past him into the vacant lot, but he objected. He clamped a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't take the chance. You'd be helpless in there," he said.

"Maybe I'm naïve," I said. "But when a woman gets shot, I get chivalrous." I started to the rescue again. This time I was stopped by a quaint little figure in a blue checked lumber-jacket and cowboy boots. He came clacking up and flashed a tin badge that seemed too large for good taste on such a little fellow. Other figures were approaching further down.

"What in blue tarnation's going on here?" he said in a nasal, clipped manner that irritated me. He squinted up at me, and his eyes gleamed like black penny marbles in his hatchet face.

"That is what I've been trying to find out," I said.

He turned to the other man and almost salaamed. "Ah, Mr. Whitehall! It's a pleasure seein' you here, but what—"

"I don't know, Sheriff," said Mr. Whitehall coolly. "I was just walking down the street from the saloon to my car. I heard a shot and someone cried out. I met this gentleman and—"

"All of which," I injected, "is rather beside the point when one considers the possibility that a woman may be dying nearby. Wouldn't it be a good idea to check on it?"

As far as the sheriff was concerned, it wasn't a good idea. He was stalling. He was scared silly.

But a frightened sheriff wasn't as interesting as the identity of the man in the Eastern topcoat. Mr. Whitehall. Sylvia Whitehall was the lady in distress. She had sent a retainer fee of a hundred bucks by money order to me in L.A. and had summoned me from my Hill Street sanctum to Silverston.

She had written: *My brother, Richard Whitehall, is in a dangerous nervous condition that sometimes seems stark fear. He came back here from the East two months ago. A woman named Joan Lane and some other suspicious people have moved into the old Foreman house next to ours. These people seem to exercise some evil influence over Richard. . . .*

It occurred to me that my client, Sylvia Whitehall, might have voiced that scream

of terror. So again I started into the vacant lot. I felt hands clawing at my coat, and I heard Whitehall yell frantically, "Don't be a fool, man! Don't risk it!" I wondered why he should be so concerned about my welfare. According to Sylvia's letter, he knew nothing about her having retained the services of Marc Stamford, private investigator. I ran into the darkness about five hundred feet.

My shoes slipped on something wet and soft. I saw a figure some distance away as it bounced up against the skyline. I took a pot-shot at the leaping figure for luck. Then I turned my pencil flash down.

Two bodies sprawled out there on the wet grass about five feet apart. The nearer one groaned and moved a little. The other, I saw at a glance at the oozing hole above his eye, was dead.

THE ONE who was still alive was a young man, big and blond; but his rather handsome face had been sapped until it wasn't handsome any more. A section of scalp hung over his left eye, and his face was bloody.

He sensed me above him when I knelt down. His one eye opened, stared unblinkingly into the pencil beam of my flash. "Plates," he mumbled faintly. "In the Second Chance . . . I saw . . . plates. . ."

He tried to say more but it was too much for him. He went on out. He wouldn't have said that if he'd known what he was saying.

I frisked the other man's corpse quickly. His outside pockets contained no identification at all, but pinned inside his belt was a badge. I barely managed to pocket it before the sheriff, Whitehall, and a small murmuring mob surrounded the two bodies and me.

The sheriff had unlimbered a torch big enough to spot a stratosphere rocket. In its light I caught brief glimpses of three men. One was tall and thin with white hair, gold-rimmed glasses on a small nose. The other was short and slimly dapper with coal black hair that was so slick it resembled a skull-cap. The third was distinctive in its complete lack of any kind of character. Just an utterly plain face with mousy hair and stolid, unemotional eyes. You wouldn't remember it ordinarily. I remembered it.

The sheriff was going overboard trying to act like a sleuth, although he was so scared I could hear his false teeth clacking. No one was saying anything while he scurried around with his monstrous torch. When he had examined the bodies, he mumbled: "This dead gent is that Mr. Compton who's been hanging out in Alph's Saloon the past couple of weeks."

"Who is he?" I said.

The sheriff stopped running around and looked at me hard. "Who are you?" he snapped.

I decided to break the ice right there, so I confessed. "I'm Marc Stamford, a private detective. Just got in from L.A."

The sheriff leered. Someone coughed behind me. I suddenly realized that the night was very cold, very quiet.

The sheriff said, "Compton's a stranger in town. Been hanging out a lot at the saloon. Don't know what his business was. But now this young fella—" He moved over toward the blond boy.

"Young Hal Wright. What in the devil's happened to him now?"

"Sapped," I said. "But he's alive. He was making noises to that effect when I came up."

The sheriff's voice quavered higher. "Couple of you tote young Wright over to Doc Myers. Keep him there till I show up later. Maybe tonight; maybe fust thing in the morning."

The sheriff turned to Whitehall, who was absently fondling a stag-handled Bowie knife which looked out of character. "Better tell your sister about this right now, Mr. Whitehall. Maybe Wright's hurt bad."

"Yes," agreed Whitehall. He was in a bad state, but he concealed it well. Two of the men who had gathered around lifted up Wright and carted him away. I heard Whitehall say something to them but I didn't catch it.

I wondered where Sylvia was.

Whitehall came back and joined the rest of us then. As the sheriff's torch swung around, I got a good sharp highlight of Whitehall's face again. I decided that Sylvia had been right. Whitehall was nervous. Maybe the fear wasn't stark, but it was near enough. His face was gray, though not as gray as Compton's.

"Now we police the area," quoted the

gun-totin' sheriff. He proceeded to do something like that, sniffing around in the grass like an under-fed hound. He didn't find anything. He sent someone after the coroner, then he whipped around and threw the torch squarely in my face. I stood there, blinded. I felt the tenseness growing about me, the deadly and sullen animosity.

From behind the blazing disc, I heard the sheriff whine, "So you're a big-shot detective from the big city, eh?"

"I'm a detective," I admitted modestly.

"Son," the sheriff cracked, "that's your story. What was you doin' here before the rest of us got here? How come you pulled into town just in time for a killin'?"

"Coincidence," I said. "The newspapers are full of it."

I felt the hard breathing shadows closing in. I should have made a break then when I was smart and able.

BEFORE I knew what was happening, I felt my arms pinned behind me, a knee rammed into my back. The sheriff's small, darting hands scurried under my coat like brown mice, and lifted my gun.

He jammed it into his belt. "Hmmm. .38 caliber. I'd say that was about the size slug that finished Compton."

I felt my muscles bunching instinctively. A hot dry suffocation rose up in my throat. I could feel the frame going up around me like a prefabricated house over a homeless vet.

"Listen, pardner," I said. "You saw me run in here and fire that shot at the real killer who was trying to get away. Everyone here heard two shots didn't they?"

No one said anything.

"Maybe the first shot missed," said the sheriff. "Maybe your shot plugged Compton."

The pack around me growled hungrily. I didn't have a chance. These small-town vigilantes would try to frame any stranger rather than put the finger on one of their own clan. My arms bent back a little more. My vertebrae cracked around the guy's knee.

"You all are my deputies," said the sheriff. "Take this tough city boy to the jail house. And if he gets rambunctious, tidy him up some."

I decided that if I was ever going to get

rambunctious, I'd better start right then. I was in no mood to plan a break out of the local squirrel cage.

I threw all my weight forward. My two hundred pounds plunged the man behind over my head and smashed him into the sheriff's hatchet face. I heard a dull ooomph. The flashlight pitched aside, and the two crashed backward into the dark.

About a thousand and some odd pounds of panting, drooling shadow rolled over me before I could get traction in the wet grass. And then knees, elbows, thumbs and fists started jolting me into unconsciousness.

The back of my head was jammed into the ground, and the slugging was rough. The last thing I remembered hearing was the sheriff yelling:

"As long as I'm re-elected sheriff, no city gangster'll disturb the peace and quiet of our law-abiding village of Silverston. . . ."

* * *

Someone was industriously slapping life back into my face with a slimy cloth. I opened one of my eyes. The other was glued shut. I had difficulty getting my teeth together; it felt like someone had jammed a steel bar in my mouth. Sharp pain dug into my skull. I'd really been roughed up.

The small room was lighted with a dim yellow bulb on the ceiling. There was an ancient roll-top desk cluttered with junk, piles of yellowed magazines and newspapers, and even a dirty spittoon on a rugless board floor. I was sitting at a greasy table. Over by the door and spread out along the faded wallpaper were some of the sheriff's 'deputies.'

I shifted my aching head. Sheriff Simpson stood there with a fear-quivering face about the color of old talcum powder. His beady eyes were bulging.

He held out a shaking hand. In it was the badge I had lifted from the murdered man, Compton. His voice trembled and whined. "Why—why didn't you tell us you was a G-man?"

I wanted to laugh, but by the time I had decided it would be too painful, I had changed my mind, and had decided to get the hell out of Silverston and never come back. They thought that FBI label I had lifted from Compton was mine. Whoever

had bumped Compton because he had learned too much, was now on the market for me. As an FBI man my life expectancy in Silverston or anywhere else was like a moth's.

I took the badge. He shoved my gun toward me across the greasy table, and I took that, too, and holstered it. There was blood all over the front of my topcoat. It got all over my hands.

I didn't say anything. I sat there and watched that rube crawl and crawl until I thought he was going to bark. He'd made himself a big joker in Silverston. He might get re-elected now if no one else wanted the job. He began mopping at his hatchet face with a dirty bandanna.

"Mr. Stamford," he moaned. "I'm sure enough sorry for the way we acted. But in our anxiety to see justice done we—"

I said, "Herd these jaybirds out of here. I want to see you alone."

The sheriff motioned jerkily. I heard footsteps move slowly then merge into a concerted rush. The door slammed. The office was still except for the sheriff's painful breathing and the croak of crickets and tree toads.

"Sit down, Bat Masterson," I said.

Wearily, the sheriff raked up a straight-backed chair and propped himself up in it. He looked like he was hanging on a hook.

He fumbled in his vest pocket for the makings. "Forget the smoking," I said. "Tobacco bothers me." He dropped the stuff on the table as if it were hot.

I had the temporary authority of a Federal Agent. I could pull a lot of wires with it. And I could pull myself right into the morgue. I had to find out the score fast and get out. I had to find out about the Whitehalls.

For a starter, I asked him about Mr. Richard Whitehall.

CHAPTER TWO

The Fragile Frill

"THE Whitehalls," said the sheriff, eager to please, "are an old aristocratic family hereabouts. To the best of my knowledge, Sylvia and her brother, Richard, are the only Whitehalls left. Neither of them have

ever married. Their ancestors settled this place back in the days of the covered wagon. They fought Indians, and old James Whitehall was one of the biggest figures in Western history. Why—"

"Who's Richard Whitehall?" I asked. "Forget the history."

The sheriff sulked. "He's been away from Silverston for about three years. They have a big house out a mile from town. He just got back here from the East a couple of months ago."

"What for?"

"He's going to start the old Second Chance Mines to operatin' again. Now ain't that a funny thing?"

I mulled that over. "Is it, Sheriff?"

"Sure is, Mr. Stamford. That old mine just hasn't nothing in it worth minin'. The Whitehalls own a lot of property round here. They own the Second Chance Mines, too."

"What about Sylvia Whitehall?" I asked.

The sheriff squirmed uncomfortably. "A very pretty woman. Little strange though, I guess you'd say. She lives with a servant in the big Whitehall house a mile out of town. The family has plenty of money, I reckon. Mr. Whitehall's come back to carry on the old family traditions and—"

"And," I finished, "you wanted to stay in good with him because he swings most of the weight around here. That's why you put on that little show out there using me as a prop."

The lobes of his ears reddened but the rest of him remained colorless. "They're a proud old family. Their reputation is spotless. They demand the respect of the community and they get it."

"So do G-men," I said. The sheriff didn't like to be reminded of that. Neither did I.

"Who is this guy, Wright?" I asked next.

"An up-and-coming young fella," said the sheriff doggedly. "He's got a big orange orchard bordering the Whitehall estate. I understand him and Sylvia's been engaged since he got out of the Air Corps. But things ain't been so well between 'em for the last month or so."

"Why?"

"Well—it's this young widow woman

who moved into the old Foreman place a couple of months ago. I don't think it's young Wright's fault mainly. But this widow, Joan Lane, is pretty all right. She likes men, you can see that. I guess she's interested in Mr. Whitehall, too—for all the good it'll do her. Her kind don't cut any ice with big men like Mr. Whitehall."

"Go on," I encouraged.

"Durin' the last couple of days I been seein' her runnin' around some with this Compton fella that got killed. Nothin' serious though. I seen them have a couple of drinks in Alph's Saloon a few times. She really gets around all right, an' that's a fact, Mr. Stamford."

I could talk with the sheriff the rest of the night without finding out what I wanted to know. The only one to see now was Sylvia. That was a date that was past due.

"You seem to have quite a few strangers around here now," I said.

"An' that's a fact," swore the sheriff. "I don't know what's going to become of California! I understand that over a million cars came just into L.A. alone last year."

"It's tough everywhere," I observed, as I somehow managed to get onto my feet. Sweat jumped out all over my face and I could feel it running down over my ribs. My back and sides were like boils.

"You got a car?" I asked him. When he said he did, I told him to unharness it, that we were going for a ride. I looked at my watch. It was only nine-thirty.

I picked up a small map of Silverston from the desk and had the sheriff mark the important spots on it. The Whitehall place. The Foreman place. The Second Chance Mines.

The sheriff lived in back of his office. Outside was a garage, from which he backed a sedan that looked like an extra-special teen-ager's hot iron. It was gadgeted with three spot lights, fog lights, radios, cut-outs, and squirrel tails. There was a siren, too, which he would have used if I hadn't stopped him.

We dropped by a little neat frame house in which we found Doc Myers, a big gruff man with a red beard. Wright was still unconscious, but Doc said he would be all right. Wright was suffering from a mild concussion and shock.

WE WALKED back out on the porch.¹²
High up between a couple of tall trees the moon was trying to shine. Clouds were giving it a bad time.

I asked the sheriff if there was anyone he could really trust in this town. He looked blank.

"Then stay here and keep an eye on Hal Wright for a while," I said. "I think there's a good possibility of him getting knocked off, too. He probably saw whoever murdered Compton do the job. Maybe they tried to get Wright then, and he put up a fight. We probably came along and broke up the business before it was finished.

"Anyway, stick around here and watch him. Don't let anyone see him unless you know it's safe, and don't let him out of your sight. Stay here until I get back. I'm running out to see Miss Whitehall."

I left him standing there, still looking blankly at me.

I jumped inside the sheriff's hopped-up car and headed east toward the Whitehall place. The road was winding and foggy. I had my speedometer under surveillance, so I would know when to stop. The interim gave me time to think—after a fashion.

The general set-up was pretty well figured out. The words, "plates . . . in the Second Chance Mines," mixed up with a dead FBI man made a group of suspicious characters pour out into an understandable stew.

Other ingredients I couldn't figure. I wanted to find out who was on which side, and fast, before it was too late for me to figure anything. There were some tough eggs in this burg for whom homicide was a way of life. They were after me, and after Wright. None of the others meant anything to me, yet.

Any of them could be on either side of the fence, including the sheriff, Richard Whitehall, Hal Wright, Sylvia, and even Joan Lane—who could simply be a predatory pidgeon after Whitehall's inherited jack.

Richard Whitehall hadn't wanted me to go into the vacant lot where the girl had screamed and Compton had died. He had a reason for that. Maybe he'd known the danger and hadn't wanted me to get hurt, just like he said. Maybe. He hadn't

seemed surprised to see Wright knocked out, or Compton dead. I wondered why.

I was still wondering when I doused my lights at a safe distance from the Whitehall place, and coasted the sheriff's wagon into pitch darkness between a couple of poinciana bushes beside the road. I do that often. If anyone's after you, they sometimes get confused as to where your car is. You can get out of jams that way. That is, if you're the type who gets into jams.

I walked the rest of the way, found a winding drive, and walked up to a huge sprawling mansion made out of gingerbread and old Southern-style columns. There was a light burning on the first floor, and a bright porch light was on.

I transferred my gun to my overcoat pocket as I moved up onto the porch. A man shifted from the shadows at the other end of the porch and came to meet me. His attitude was not friendly. He shuffled slowly toward me, his hands remaining in his storm-coat pockets. His thin, dark face had a funny grin on it. It was the man with the slick greasy hair that looked like a skull-cap—the one I had seen earlier in the evening.

I was tired of wasting words. He started to say something. One of the most pleasant sounds I ever remember hearing was the crunching noise my fist made on his face. He backed away from me slowly, leaning at an odd angle. He kept on backing completely over the railing of the porch and fell sprawled out by the steps. I rang the bell.

Whitehall answered it. I didn't get the expression on his face. It flickered on and off as he looked past me and saw Skull-Cap stretched out there by the steps sleeping.

"He jumped me," I said. "I took care of him."

Behind Whitehall I heard a woman let out a light, bird-like cry of fear.

"I'll take care of him later," said Whitehall. "There have been some troublesome characters molesting this house for some time now. Oh, pardon me. Won't you come in?"

I went past him and inside.

"This has certainly been an eventful evening so far, hasn't it, Mr. Stamford?"

"It certainly has," I said, but my mind

wasn't on it. I kept my coat on and walked on down a long warm hall like something out of East Lynn, and a woman backed away in front of me. She walked austere, a slim white body sheathed up tightly in an organdy gown. An evening gown of some sort I wasn't familiar with. She was a woman of a kind I'm not familiar with either.

She led me into a large dim room piled with old-fashioned furniture and oil paintings of the Whitehall line. The men all looked like Richard. The women all resembled Sylvia. A big fireplace smoldered in a far wall.

Whitehall introduced us. Sylvia, his sister. And Mr. Stamford, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. She gave a little startled stare at that, but otherwise controlled herself well.

I was motioned into a chair and offered a drink. I accepted both.

I COULDN'T shake my eyes away from Sylvia Whitehall. I just wasn't used to her type. Her face and neck were delicate, pure white, and lightly veined with blue. She wore no makeup. Her eyes were too large for her face. They were slightly oblique; big and dark and frightened like a deer's. She was long and incredibly slim, yet there were curves and a softness about her, too. She was too delicate and dainty and frail like aged porcelain. Her family blood flowed too far back. She needed some mongrelization, but it was too late for that now.

She was pure blue blood. And that isn't good. They're too neurotic. Their survival value is limited. In a crisis, they go to pieces, dig up a big neurosis and use it. They're too inbred, too dependent for a world in which, for my money, the jungle law still prevails.

I wondered if she had any idea what kind of stinking reality she had gotten involved in, decided that she had no idea at all about reality, stinking or otherwise. Something was threatening her secure, but meaningless existence, and she wanted the clouds rolled away. She had sent me a money-order for a hundred bucks, sight unseen, to roll back those clouds. I had another twenty-five bucks coming for this day's work. I had another twenty-five due for the next day, if the case lasted that

long. She was forking out a lot of dough.

I would do all I could for her, if I lasted as long as the case. That badge of Compton's had put me on a spot. It had gotten me out of one jam and into a damned sight worse one. Every time I took a step I felt like a bull in a slaughterhouse chute.

We had all been just sitting there studying each other. Sylvia had been saying meaningless general things to be polite. Her slim, swan throat pulsed violently. That throat vein was the strongest thing about her. She said softly:

"Richard's been telling me what happened in town tonight. About poor Hal and that Mr. Compton. And about the awful things they did to you, Mr. Stamford, before they found out you were. . . ." She trailed off, moved her hands nervously. She didn't know where to go from there. She was trying to figure out how you could send to L.A. for a private detective and get a G-man by return mail.

"My opinion is," said Whitehall, "that it was some out-of-town person who trailed Mr. Compton here for some unknown reason. Mr. Compton's been here only a short time. I'm sure no one here knows him—ah—real well, that is." His face flushed slightly. He was thinking of Joan Lane, in whom rumor said he also had an interest.

"Seems to me," I said, "that just about everyone I've seen tonight has been from out of town."

Whitehall nodded his austere head. "Yes. Very much of a problem here in California now. I understand that last year a million cars—"

I interrupted him; I was tired of hearing about how many cars came into L.A. last year. "Mr. Whitehall," I said, "you've only been back here a short while."

"Oh, but I've never really been away from the old place—not spiritually." His voice was gentle and nostalgic. "But business in the East forced my three years of absence. However, now I've come back and I hope to stay this time. Maybe something can be done with the Second Chance Mines. A good hobby perhaps, anyway."

I said, "Sheriff Simpson tells me that the Second Chance Mines are worthless."

"That's still to be decided," he said,

lighting up a long slim cigar. "I have an engineer, Earl Hammond, looking the place over. The mines have always had a small laboratory and other buildings out there. We've just gotten them rigged up so Hammond can utilize them for business purposes. He and his assistants have been out there working steadily for almost two months."

He glanced at his watch. "I just reminded myself," he said. "I'm supposed to be out at the mines tonight—Hammond's expecting me. Almost forgot in all the excitement. If you will excuse me, I'm sure Sylvia will love to entertain you. She so seldom sees interesting personalities."

"Thank you," I said wryly. I didn't have time to say anything else. Richard Whitehall was gone. I heard the door slam, and a few minutes later I heard a big car move along the side of the house and away down the road.

And then Sylvia Whitehall began to cry. Ordinarily that gripes me, but this crying was unique, and authentic. She stirred my heart to genuine pained sympathy.

I sat down beside her on the couch and took her hand. It was cold, very cold. I couldn't warm it up either.

"How—how's Hal?" she sobbed.

"He's getting along swell," I said. There was a silence broken only by her crying. Finally I said:

"Listen, Sylvia. I'm the private detective you sent for. I—" I became fascinated with her ear for a moment and couldn't go on. It was transparent. The delicate veins in it were like the veins in a flower leaf.

"I'm not the FBI man. That was Compton. I had his badge and that's the reason for the mistaken identity. Now I'd like to know why you weren't at that bus station to meet me. I'd like to know also if you were the lady who screamed tonight on that vacant lot where Compton was killed."

HER SOBBING subsided. Her hand remained in mine. She wasn't as cold as one might expect. There were possibilities here. . . .

She was saying in a gentle murmur like a summer wind, "I knew Richard was going into Silverston tonight. But he

wouldn't let me accompany him. I would have walked in anyway—I have often enough—but I was afraid to walk it alone."

"What were you afraid of?"

"These strange characters who came here soon after Richard returned from the East. He sees them occasionally, and I just can't understand the connection. Richard's started to—to drinking too much, and he seems—frightened."

"That," I said ruefully, "is justifiable fear. So you weren't in town tonight at all?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Then," I wondered, "could the lady who screamed so effectively have been your brother's friend, Miss Joan Lane?"

Her eyes avoided mine, either because of her delicate emotions, or because of my battered face. Finally she said, "It could have been. Miss—Lane lives in the big rented house half a mile down the road. Richard has been seeing her now and then."

Her face colored suddenly. "I know Richard hasn't gone to those mines tonight. I know he's gone to see Miss Lane. It isn't natural, Mr. Stamford. You've got to find out what kind of a hold they have over my brother!"

"You have no idea what kind of a hold?" I asked.

She didn't. But she talked. "In his letters from New York, Richard mentioned something about the business he's been engaged in. Promoting—mines and real estate, I guess. I have no business head, so I've never really known what he was doing. But he's been trying so hard, Mr. Stamford, to make our small inheritance work for us."

She flushed again, thoroughly. "Please don't tell anyone, Mr. Stamford—but we really have no money at all. All we have is our name." Her eyes wandered across the oil pictures of her ancestors. "We intend to keep that unstained, no matter what the price."

"Of course," I said, rising. "I'll leave you now. I've got business elsewhere."

I started for the hallway. She put a hand on my shoulder that was airy and soft—like a butterfly settling there. Her eyes looked deeply into mine; they were clear, light blue. I've never looked into

any woman's eyes that held such complete innocence and dependence and trust. It got me. Women aren't like that anymore. That was the way they used to be, long, long ago.

"Mr. Stamford," she said softly, "please help us. Not us personally so much, but the name of Whitehall. The name will die someday, perhaps, but I want it to die as it has lived. Unblemished and unstained. We have only that name left now." She stiffened. "These—these people will blacken that name, Mr. Stamford, unless you prevent it."

"Yes," my voice whispered in the dim light, "I know."

And in a way I did. At least I understood one thing: A tough blow to her family name, which was all she had to live for, might easily be fatal to Miss Sylvia Whitehall. It would be like turning an icy wind on a hot-house gardenia.

She accompanied me to the front door. In the very dim yellow light she looked unreal to me. Her big, soft eyes in that round, white face, the upswept hair with its gold tiara, and the thin delicate threads of gold on a brooch at her white throat. . . .

I suddenly realized that I had no idea of her age. She could have been anything from twenty-five to fifty.

I found the switch that turned off the porch light. "Don't turn it on again," I said. "No matter what happens. And stay in here until this thing is cleared up." I paused before the opened door. "I'll do the best I can," I whispered, "to preserve the family name of Whitehall."

I went out into the night.

I guess my face lighted up like a red stop sign then. Hell, I'd sounded like True Blue Harold telling the heroine not to fear, that all was not lost. It was also True Blue Harold who found himself lashed to a log, with his blond scalp moving into a buzz saw!

CHAPTER THREE

Knock-'Em-Dead Blonde

I SLAMMED the door and jumped sidewise into thick shadows behind a fluted column. The area around the porch was pitch black. I didn't see or hear anything so I moved around and down the dark steps.

The night was sickeningly sweet with the smell of night-blooming flowers and orange blossoms. I had walked about five feet when I stepped on something soft and rubbery, a habit that might get too familiar if carried out enough.

It was another body. It felt dead. I didn't think I'd punched the skull-cap kid hard enough to bring on such a permanent state. I risked my pencil flash.

I sucked in my breath, then stood there uncertainly, trying to get oxygen into my burning lungs. It was time for me to leave Silverston. Leave it fast, go to L.A., crawl in a steam bath and forget the lady in distress. To hell with the family name of Whitehall.

But I didn't go. Don't ask me why. I crouched down, turned on the pencil flash again.

The little dark man with the skull-cap hair was very much a corpse, with arms and legs flung out in helpless gesticulation. He was on his face. There was a stag-handled knife plunged to capacity into his back. I wouldn't forget that kind of knife. It was the one I had seen Richard Whitehall playing with earlier in the evening.

I stood up slowly. There might have been other reasons for someone killing the skull-cap kid—but it could have been part of that neat frame. Two witnesses, big names in the community, Richard and Sylvia Whitehall, had heard me say that I had taken care of the dead man. How I had gotten Whitehall's knife would be my worry. I wondered how much of a lawyer it would take to convince a jury that I wasn't the type who went around stabbing my enemies with stag-handled bowie knives.

"Put 'em up," snarled a too-familiar nasal voice from behind the glaring disc of a monstrous flash. "Reach for the stars, Stamford!"

Almost wearily I exclaimed, "Bat Masterson!"

The disc advanced toward me. I heard people, too. But I saw only the glare of eyes, hungry eyes, like wolves cornering a beast of prey.

"You're a pretty tricky hombre," said the sheriff of Silverston. "But you ain't pulling no more fast breaks on me. I put through a call to L.A., and you're a private detective named Marc Stamford just

like you said you was. You ain't no G-man at all! You came out here messin' up our peaceful little town with killin', but it's endin' for you right here an' now. I'm takin' you in. I knew you'd come back to look at your last victim. We been layin' here waitin' for you. We had other men guardin' the house on all sides!"

I tried to stay calm. "What about Hal Wright?"

"I went to telephone, and the young fool skipped out on me."

"He'll be next," I said. "And it's your fault, sheriff. I told you to guard him."

"I'm givin' the orders in this town," whined the sheriff. "Once I get you behind bars this town'll be safe again. All right, boys! Take him in. I don't give a tarnation's hoot in hell how damn rough you get."

But I did.

I went through all the movements of booting a pigskin seventy yards in the Rosebowl game, using the sheriff's big torch for the ball. He howled as the torch gyrated through the air and landed in the middle of a bush. The surrounding leaves almost buried its light. I felt hands and fists pawing me. I got some good licks in as I fought my way through the ring. Then I was in the open.

I started running. I ran faster, perhaps, than I'd ever managed on a gridiron. I ran faster than hell.

By the time those vigilantes got their questionable wits straightened out a little, I was long gone. I got to the highway and the sheriff's car. I wondered if the sheriff had been worried about what had happened to his jalopy.

I gunned life into the car, threshed it out onto the highway. By then, the sheriff and his deputies had gotten some jalopy of their own into action and were careening out of the Whitehall drive into the glare of my headlights. I slammed the brakes down, made a smoking U-turn that took twenty dollars worth of rubber from the sheriff's tires, and headed back toward town.

I lost them within half a mile. I doused my lights, cut the car across a shallow ditch, and bucked wildly into an irrigated orchard. Half ripened oranges spattered against windows and windshield. Metal ripped loose.

After the other jalopy roared past and headed on into town, I jammed the sheriff's battered job back onto the highway, bolted it past the Whitehall estate and on toward the residence of a lady of mystery—one Miss Joan Lane. . . .

I clocked that distance on my speedometer, too, so that I knew fairly well when to douse my lights and again slide the car into concealment in a dark row of orange trees. I jumped out and began running up the road. It didn't feel good, running. Pain shot around in my stomach and into my head. But I was in a hurry.

I slowed down just before turning into the driveway of the house that sheltered Joan Lane, her friends and no doubt other interesting things. Then I noticed another shadowy figure ahead of me. I heard a car roar down the drive, and the figure of the man dropped down to concealment. So did I. By then I had gotten close enough to recognize Hal Wright's blond hair reflecting the moonlight.

The car, a long black sedan, moved down the drive and turned, heading in the opposite direction from town. That would take them in the direction of the Second Chance Mines. Or Mexico City, for that matter, if they kept going long enough. They might, too.

I caught a glimpse of Whitehall driving, his taut, strained face bent over the wheel. I saw that other familiar slim face with the gray hair and gold-rimmed glasses. The engineer, Hammond.

Then Wright popped up out of the bushes and headed for the house.

It was a small affair compared with the Whitehall mansion—a bungalow type with Spanish influence. It had fallen into decay, but had evidently been hastily repaired, strictly for immediate convenience, as though its occupancy hadn't been intended to be very lengthy.

I let Wright get onto the small porch, and I gave him a little more time after that to get inside and get something underway for me. One thing I was sure of—Wright's life was the prime objective of this gang, and he was going right into the den.

Cautiously I stepped onto the porch, across it. I tried the handle of the door and finally edged inside and into a darkened hallway. I had my gun well in hand as I crouched in the darkness, listening.

This was the headquarters of a ruthless gang, I knew that. They had bumped off Compton and even their own man, Skull-Cap—the latter, I'd decided, for no other purpose than just to make the frame around me look better.

But I had to find out where young Wright stood. The fact that he was in danger of losing his life any minute didn't mean he wasn't one of the gang. Skull-Cap had been one of the gang, too—a fact he'd probably resented for a short time before he stopped resenting anything.

I heard a murmur of voices and padded on down the hall and listened at a door. I leaned down and peeked. For a long time at the start of my career as a private eye, I had done nothing else but peek through keyholes.

But this scenery was as eye-warming as any I'd ever seen. It was good for my psyche then, too. It planted my feet on the ground again. I began to feel at home.

JOAN LANE'S tall, rounded figure was strictly for the connoisseur as she stretched her luscious long legs and looked up at Hal Wright. He was breathing heavily and I couldn't blame him for that.

She was dubiously clothed only in a light green silky housecoat. She wore high-heeled slippers and her legs were bare. Her hair was light gold and piled on top of her head, to top off a very lovely, slightly hard face. Her eyes were green and tilted a little at the outer corners. They glittered mockingly up at Wright, and her wide red mouth helped her eyes.

She held a drink steadily in her hand. A cigarette smoked broodingly all by itself in a well-stocked ashtray. The room was sparsely furnished with makeshift furniture. Behind them, print curtains swayed suspiciously.

"I don't mind your coming here, honey," she was saying in a husky tone. "But you've got to be nice. I don't like rough talk."

"And I," said Hal Wright, "don't like to see men murdered in cold blood, either." His voice vibrated with emotion. He wasn't used to this sort of thing.

"You—you mean that poor Mr. Compton who—?"

"You know who I mean. Joan!" Wright said. "I followed you tonight. I—

maybe I was jealous, I don't know. You met him at the saloon, then you talked him into crossing that vacant lot. You said you had your car over there. Then those damned murderers—shot him! I ran to stop them, but one of them tried to brain me. You didn't care about that either, did you? *Did you?*"

She rose up slowly. She threw the glass, broke it against the wall. Her face was fevered with fury. Her mouth opened just a crack and never opened any further. The words came out in a kind of hissing way difficult to describe.

"Okay, sucker," she said. "What the hell you going to do about it?"

He stared, fell back a step. "I—I don't know."

"You're still in love with that damned phony doll, Sylvia Whitehall—so you'd better behave, Junior."

"I fell for you when Richard brought me over here to meet you that first time," whispered Wright. "I couldn't help it. But hanging around here, it didn't take me long to see that this set-up was crooked. I heard them talking about the plates and the tens and twenties. I went out to the mines one night and found the stuff."

"You little sneaking spy!" she said tightly.

"I've found out all I want to find out. I could have kept my mouth shut before. But not since the murder. You were in on that!"

She slapped him. It cracked across that room and slammed me in the face about as hard as it hit Wright. I blinked. I think I would have knocked her cross-eyed for that. Wright didn't do a thing.

"You played up to me after that," she hissed at him. "You played up to me after that just to find out more, you damned spy!"

"I found out plenty. I've found out enough that I can make a deal with your friends for the plates. I'll either make a deal and get your gang out of here away from Sylvia, or I'll tell everything I know."

Her tall sinuous body trembled. Little chills of fury ran up and down it like electricity in a wire. I shivered.

"You moron!" She glared. "You'll keep on playing along with us, or else you and little Sylvia will just never get to-

gether. You wouldn't want her hurt, would you, Junior? Richard Whitehall stands in your way, and there's nothing you can do. You don't want her to find out the truth, and you'll do anything to keep her from finding out. So shut up, Junior. Shut up, and sit down, and have a drink. We can still be friends."

I felt on familiar ground again, listening to this baby talk. This wasn't whistle-stop dialogue. And this Joan Lane was no Sunbonnet Sue. The only eggs she'd ever gathered was spelled with a 'Y' in front.

Wright's broad shoulders slumped like a shamed pugilist's. "You're right," he said hoarsely. "I can't do anything without Sylvia finding out the truth. And the truth would kill her. But what's to keep your crowd from killing me off before they pull out? They'll think I'll talk sooner or later."

"That's right, Junior," Joan Lane said, smiling. "So, honey, why don't you give me a kiss and lam out of here? Join the Merchant Marine or something and powder clear to China. No one'll care in another twenty years."

The curtains shifted. "No one except your friends, baby," said a low, tough voice. The curtains opened on up and a man came out. He was short and fat, with a wild mop of red-brown hair. He was draped in a flashy pin-stripe suit and he stood blinking in the sudden light. His face was dark except where it was blue around its lower half. Tufts of hair stuck up above the color of his sport shirt. He was one of those types who have to shave three times a day to stay out of the zoo.

The snub-nosed gun in his hand was as much a part of his costume as the hand-painted tie with the Windsor knot. It was pointed at Wright. The man's face was expressionless in a most expressive way. I've seen guys hold guns that way before. I knew what it inevitably signified. This was Wright's finish as far as the newcomer was concerned.

He made that plain with, "You know too much, kiddie. You're going to your ancestors, right now."

"Oh no!" cried Joan Lane. I was surprised. She meant it. "Not anymore killing, Shorty! Please, no! I can't stand it. We're in this thing clear up to our necks and—"

"Don't worry, baby," Shorty said. "The sheriff is set on sticking that dumb shamus from L. A. with tonight's work. We'll shove this one off onto him, too. By the time this thing's figured out, we'll be holed up somewhere in Chi."

His arm stiffened. Wright was frozen there like one of those phony statues in a cemetery.

I did the only thing I could do. I didn't have time for anything else. I kicked open the door and plugged Shorty dead center.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lethal Windmills

THE ROAR of my thirty-eight in that small room was like a thunder blast. Wright staggered over to the wall and held it up. Joan Lane shuddered violently the length of her expressive body and dropped down on the couch.

And all the time Shorty was stumbling toward me trying to squeeze his gun. He was doubling up and squinting his eyes dazedly, and seemed to be pretty helpless. But I was too scared to take any chances with him. I laid the barrel of my gun across his head once and that did the trick. He fell over a chair.

I said, "I guess you and I are on the same side, more or less, Wright. Let's cooperate. They've got a frame around me like something on a ten-thousand-dollar painting. And your life isn't worth a plugged nickel. Just stand there quietly and relax for a minute."

I turned the gun slightly toward Joan Lane. I didn't trust her either. Her face was white. The hand that tried to lift the cigarette never made the grade. It was too shaky.

"Sister," I said. "Don't even look like you'd do what you feel like doing. You were intended for better things—but I'll give you just what I just gave Shorty."

She was a tough personality, all right, but not nearly as tough as she wanted to be. She appeared to be trying to convince herself I was kidding.

My eyes turned toward Hal Wright. His face was a wild, desperate white, whiter than the bandage around his head.

"Take it easy, Hal," I said. "We'd better take off toward Sylvia's house. We'd better pick her up and get out of here."

"Not Sylvia!" Joan Lane almost screamed. "If she finds out the truth, she'll fall apart like a carnival kewpie doll!"

"Shut up, damn you!" yelled Hal Wright. "Shut up!"

And before I could do anything, Wright took a powder through the curtains. I yelled for him to stop or I'd shoot, which I wouldn't have done even if he hadn't dodged behind the curtains into the next room. I guess he knew I wouldn't.

I jerked the curtains aside just in time to see Wright go out through a big french window, taking glass and sections of window frame out with him in his frantic flight. He was desperate.

I wondered how, alone, he planned to deal with the elements who were annoying his Sylvia. I had to protect Wright then, I thought, as part of my duty to my client. I was just beginning to realize then what a responsibility women like Sylvia are, if you can find one like Sylvia. I'll never strain my eyes stalking any like that.

When I came back into the room, Joan was pulling a small revolver from beneath the cushions of the couch.

"Drop that toy," I said wearily. We stood looking at each other for a long half-minute. "If you think I wouldn't shoot because you're a woman—" I finally said—"you're nuts. You helped kill a man tonight. And a killer, for my money, is no lady. You met our friend, the Federal agent, in Silverston and started prodding him. You found out he was a G-man, I don't know how. G-men can be suckers, too. Anyway, you helped get him killed. People hang for that."

The gun sagged and she sagged with it, down to a sunken slouch. She aged ten years in as many seconds, and she started to sob a little bit. It wasn't phony, but it was unpleasant. She wasn't used to crying, in public anyway, and it came out in harsh, choking gasps.

She didn't look so tough then. She just looked like a kid who had gotten lost from her mama a long, long time ago, and had never been able to get back.

"You and Whitehall are that way about each other?" I asked.

She shook her head. "That two-faced phony?"

"You lured Compton onto that lot to

get him murdered because he knew too much."

"No!" she said sharply. "You're wrong there. You're right about my being a come-on and about his being killed because he knew too much. But I didn't know they were going to kill Compton. Shorty said they were just going to take Compton and hold him until we were finished up here, then let him go."

"And you bought that, Joan."

"I wouldn't have believed anyone else. But I believed—Shorty. I—I thought he was—" Her eyes found Shorty's body on the floor. Her face twitched.

I looked down at the dead man, too. "Don't so many men confuse you?"

"Shorty and I were going to take our cut and retire . . . that was what Shorty said." She dropped the revolver on the floor. Her voice sank down to a dull whisper. "It was Shorty who shot Compton. He shot him right in front of me. That's why I screamed."

"Who else was with you," I asked.

"Earl Hammond, the engineer," she said listlessly.

"What is Wright in the picture?"

"Just a sucker who stuck his nose in. I was supposed to lead him around and keep his eyes shut until we finished up here and could take off."

"But he found out about what you were really doing in the Second Chance Mines?"

"**YEAH,**" she said, without any emotion at all. "I guess Shorty and the others would have let him go on living if he hadn't trailed me tonight and seen Shorty bump off Compton. Besides, Whitehall thought I was really stuck on Wright. He was jealous. He didn't like that. He wanted Wright to marry Sylvia and leave me for himself—the chisler."

"Whitehall's strong for you, Joan," I said, "but he still loves his sister and wants her to be happy with Wright?"

"I don't know," said Joan Lane. "I care much less. I hate two-faced phonies."

I said, "Whitehall's two-faced because he keeps on playing the role of the aristocratic gentleman when he really isn't?"

She nodded, and her damp eyes closed up tight. "That's why Wright's been afraid to try anything, even though he

knew the score. He knew that if his dainty little Sylvia ever found out what her brother Richard really was, it would probably kill her. And if it didn't kill her, it would do something worse to her. Have you ever seen that dame? She isn't really human, is she?"

I asked her where Whitehall and the others had gone, and she told me they were at the mines. They were getting their stuff together in case they had to lam at a minute's notice.

Then I opened a closet door: "Get in there and relax," I said. "I'll be back in a little while. If I'm not, someone'll be along to let you out."

She didn't resist. She got up slowly, walked stiffly and listlessly to the closet and stood in the opened door. She looked at me oddly out of those tired green eyes; then she stepped inside and stood in that shadowed interior, her face a white tired mask with dull and hopeless dreams.

"Listen, shamus," she said as I started to shut the door. "Will you believe me? I—I never saw a man die before. Compton was the first. Please believe me, will you, shamus? Believe me and help me, because I don't want to ever see it happen again. I couldn't stand it."

I reached in and patted her arm. "Sure, I believe you," I said. "And we won't let it happen again."

I shut the door gently and locked it. I switched off the lights and ran out of there. I knew that Wright had put himself on the spot, that he had probably gone to the mines. I knew that he was desperate.

I drove until I saw a small sign with a light above it. I stopped there, relaxed for a few minutes with a cigarette, studying the map so I'd get to the mine in the shortest possible time. Then I headed the car in that direction, gunning it to capacity. It was a distance of about fifteen miles into the mountains. . .

I found the mines all right. I ended up on a road that was rocky and narrow and as winding as spaghetti. The altitude was high, and the air rare and brittle and cold. But here the smog was gone that had covered the farmer's orchards in the valley, and I could breathe.

I was beginning to feel better. The sky was icy clear. I didn't bother counting

the stars which were like flecks of shattered glass.

The mountainside was broken by a long softened line of broken shale. A small bypath wound up to it. I noticed an old rusted railing for the small cars that used to be pulled by burros. A long row of dilapidated buildings sagged rottenly on the mountain, clearly etched in the moonlight. At the end of the building I saw the pale yellow light of a gas lamp.

I was beginning to wonder if Sylvia Whitehall was really worth it. The helpless, dependent lady in an ivory tower. A delicate Lady of Astelot who remained safe in her castle while poor Wright and a poorer private detective fought windmills for her. Windmills that turned out to be a hell of a lot more realistic than Don Quixote ever ran up against.

I stopped that pointless introspection as the man sitting on the steps of the shack decided to light up a cigarette. If he hadn't, he'd probably have spotted me first. As it was I was able to sneak up within ten feet of him before he heard me. Then I rushed him.

He was lifting a gun when I cracked him across the head with my own. I left him lying there as I went on across the porch and peered through what remained of a broken window. There were four men inside. One of them was Wright and he was standing facing the other three.

THE TALL, gaunt guy with the gold-rimmed glasses was leaning against the wall smoking a pipe. The plain, expressionless man I had seen in the vacant lot earlier that evening was sitting on an old table looking like a plasterer resting during his lunch hour. Whitehall was facing Wright, talking.

"Wright, this is a bad deal for you. I don't like it either. You're going to die, and I can't do anything about it.

"You think I'm just a common lousy crook—but I've just been a victim of an unpleasant destiny. This scholarly looking gentleman here," he motioned toward Hammond, "fooled me. It was five years ago when I first went East and started in the real estate business, with some mining speculation also involved. I exhausted most of the family funds to keep the business going. I was at it about six

months before I knew that my partner, Hammond, was a crook and that our business was just a front for Hammond's less legal profession. Hammond is one of the world's few truly ingenious counterfeiters left."

Whitehall's thin, bitter face cracked in an ironic smile. He said, "From the time I found out the truth, I was helpless. I knew that if Sylvia ever found out I was a crook, the shock would kill her."

I had most of the story. The plates in the mine mentioned by Wright, and the fact that a Federal man had been put on the job was enough. It had been only the personal angles that had me puzzled.

One thing was obvious. Whitehall had been just as naïve about reality as Sylvia was. He'd been played for a first-class sucker all the way to the finish.

"We came out here," Whitehall was saying in a tired, futile monotone, "ostensibly to start the Second Chance Mines to operating again. It was just a front, however. Hammond wanted a nice place for a hideout because the FBI was getting too hot for him back East. But while they were cooling off, they planned to use my local name and prestige as a blind. This mine has been used to turn out over a million dollars in counterfeit tens and twenties."

"Why are you telling me all this?" asked Wright shakily.

Whitehall said, "Because these men will kill you and you'll never be able to tell. And because I wanted you to know, anyway, that I'm not the kind of common crook these others are. I'm telling you because I have some honor and decency in me, even yet. And I want you to know that before you die."

Somehow, Wright managed a jerky laugh. "You haven't had the guts to fight back. That isn't honor for my money," he said.

Whitehall breathed heavily. "The hold they had on me—on Sylvia—amounted to blackmail. I had to go along. I was trapped back there when Hammond told me what our business really was. I've had to keep Sylvia from finding out what's happened to the Whitehall name."

His bony face became startlingly shadowed. His face broke out in a dewy sweat. "They promised that after using these

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mines and my name for a front, that they'd clear out and leave me and Sylvia in peace. But then that FBI man showed up, and one of the men recognized him, but they sent Joan to make certain of his identity. And then when that private detective showed up, I guess that destroyed any possibility I might have had of breaking out of this thing clean."

Hammond moved away from the wall. He moved softly like a cat. His hand came out from beneath his immaculate sport coat with a gun in it.

He held it casually on Wright. "This is all so touching, but it's got to come to a conclusion some time. This is the time. Wright, you'll go down one of those mine shafts and I doubt if anyone will ever find you, even if they bother looking. Bon voyage."

I sent two doses of death smashing into Hammond through the window. As he went down, I moved in through the door.

The simple-looking little man was crouching down low in front of the table. He threw a shot at Wright, then another at me, so close together it made one long roar of sound. I saw Whitehall push Wright to one side so he could take the shot himself. Whitehall shuffled past me. I could hear the sighing in his chest as he sank down on the rough boards, coughing.

My neck burned where that other shot had creased me. The man fired again as I managed to get my big feet to carry me to one side. Then I let him have it twice, and he went down.

I listened to Hal Wright choking over in the corner. I dropped down in a chair and looked over at the stiffs. None of them, including Richard Whitehall, would ever move under their own power any more.

Whitehall's story had sounded good, so I decided not to tell Wright about Whitehall having knifed his own boy, Skull-Cap, in the back. Whitehall might have had some honor left, but he had buried the last of it along with his stag-handled knife in Skull-Cap's back.

WRIGHT turned around and stumbled toward me. His young face had grown much older. It was corpse-white

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and his chin was trembling. His eyes were bulging with sickness and horror.

"All this—" he sighed. "It'll—kill Sylvia. Poor Sylvia. The disgrace will kill her."

I studied his face. It looked good—on the outside.

"Forget it, Junior," I said. "You've been trying so hard to protect her, haven't you?"

He stared at me.

"You didn't want her to die until after you'd married her, did you, Junior?" Joan Lane had labeled him right. "You don't have to worry now. Sylvia Whitehall doesn't have the million dollars you've thought she had. She's penniless. So all this time you've been making a sucker out of yourself for nothing."

I got up, pushed him out of my way. "But Sylvia's my client," I said. "So I'll do all I can to protect her reputation and dignity in the community."

I dragged Whitehall across the floor, propped him up against the wall facing the gunman and Hammond. I went outside, got the gun from the boy who was still unconscious and fired four shots out of it, then wrapped Whitehall's dead hand around it. Right then I heard a car roaring up the winding road toward the mine.

"Bat Masterson's on his way up here, Wright," I said as the kid stared stupidly at what I'd done. "We'll lie a little bit for Sylvia's honor. When the sheriff shows up, we'll tell him we followed Whitehall up here after he said he was going to clean out these counterfeiters. We followed him to protect him. We'll say that Whitehall finally got wise that was being played for a sucker, and that he came up here to settle things with the crooks. But we got up here too late to help him. We got up here just in time to see him shoot it out with them."

"That'll be my story, Junior, and you'll back it up all the way. If you don't, I'll testify that you were a witness to counterfeiting and murder and didn't tell the authorities."

Wright said shakily, "Sure, Mr. Stamford. Whatever you say."

And to the best of my knowledge, that's the way it came out, though I wasn't much

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Bryce Walton

interested in Sylvia Whitehall or Silverston after that. The sheriff didn't argue with me when he saw all the evidence of counterfeiting in the mine—the million dollars or so in counterfeit tens and twenties, the plates, and the rest of it. He believed my fantasy about Whitehall, too. He wanted to believe it. The Whitehall name was extremely important to him, too.

I got a ride into Silverston from the mine and phoned the F.B.I. in L.A. Three of them were casing the place within three hours. The sheriff backed up my whole story with the G-men.

I called them from the bus station in Silverston, and I told them I was going back to L.A. because I was in bad shape. I told them where they could find me whenever they wanted information. By that time, the bus had stopped in front of the station and I was boarding it, heading back to the City of Angels.

She boarded it with me. She didn't say anything. She just sat there looking broodingly out the damp window of the bus into the moonlit night. But there was that same pathetic look on her face like that of a lost child who had just realized it was lost and was on the way home to mama.

I looked at my watch. It was one a.m. I could bill Sylvia for another twenty-five bucks. I'd done my duty, I guess. As far as I knew, the Whitehall name would never lose its ancient grandeur and dignity. She would think her brother died a hero, facing the enemy and fighting for the honor of the Whitehall name.

So I leaned my head on Joan Lane's nice wide shoulder. The bus was rolling somewhat roughly along, but I was too tired to care. I started off to dreamland immediately.

"Wake me up, baby," I said, "when we hit L.A."

She nodded absently. But when the bus driver woke me up in the Main Street Station, she was gone. I've never seen or heard of her since. Maybe she really did go back home to mama after all.

Stranger things have happened. Didn't I make a hero out of Whitehall when I should have worn those laurels myself?

THE END

A Chiv for Chivalry

(Continued from page 33)

"He just never came back. We—I guess we'd talked about getting married. I couldn't believe he'd just ditch me. I wrote Miss Drury and asked for his address, but she never answered."

"I hope it gave her heart failure," I said.

"When I saw that article with your picture looking like the snapshot and—"

"Why didn't you write me?"

Then I stared. Kitten Eyes was a versatile gal. She knew naughty words but she also could blush.

"I wasn't going to let it look like I was chasing Larry. I asked Alice if she'd come to New York with me. I just wanted to run into Larry casually. I didn't know what had happened."

"Joe told you just now."

She swallowed hard. She didn't say anything for a while but when she did, her voice was under control. "He told me. Joe's nice. Anyhow, picking you up at Penn Station was my idea. But you were taller than I'd thought and I almost missed you."

"So you asked me about Number One," I remembered. "Why?"

"Because of Larry. When I asked questions, he always said he was working on Number One and we'd be married after Number Six. He always had so much fun being mysterious and teasing. He—Oh, order me another one."

I did. "You were being mysterious yourself. Phony address and straying brother."

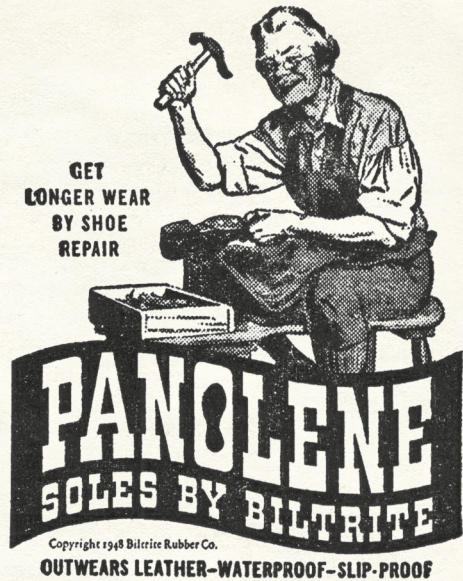
"I never chased a man yet," Patty said fiercely and then muttered, "Or if I did, I never let him know it."

What a pair of kids! What a pair they would have made, with their phony stories and little mysterious games. I gulped the last one fast. "Did Cynthia talk? Or would you rather someone else told me about your cousin Alice?"

"I can tell you," Patty said. "Alice got to worrying about spoiling things for me. I went to sleep but she slipped out of the room and called Cynthia to try to fix things up that same night. Cynthia must have figured Alice knew something. Then—"

"Never mind. You two didn't know there'd been a murder. Or that a killer

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will very likely kill again to cover a kill."

"I didn't know anything," Patty whispered.

I looked at her. A tear was rolling down her cheek. Just one. No water works. Kitten Eyes had the stuff.

"So now you're going back home?"

"Not even to pack," Patty swore.

"Someone else can do it and send the stuff to me. What's left there for me? I'm a pretty good secretary. I'll make out somewhere. Maybe Chicago. I've never been to Chicago."

I put my glass down. "Secretary?"

Patty fumbled in her purse and stuck a pair of blue rims on her nose. "Sure. Don't I look business-like?"

"Mmm," I said.

My mind was doing its totalizer stunt again. That dope of a secretary of mine. Patty was a secretary. Patty as my secretary. That picture I liked.

And something else. Larry and I always did have the same tastes. Even with glasses on, Patty had more appeal than most chorus lines. . . .

(Continued from page 40)

maty had applied his revolver barrel.

Fay said: "Tom—will he be all right? Will this clear him?"

Hammaty grinned.

"I came in late, so I didn't hear the whole story. But from that rod Nolan was sap enough to hang onto, and what I heard, and the way these two characters are going to sing songs about each other by the time I get through with 'em, I guarantee it—your brother'll be cleared."

Fay smiled. It was an effective smile; she knew that from her experiences of the morning. And coupled with the auburn ringlets and the figure and the not-too-badly-put-together face. . . .

Hammaty frowned, ran his tongue along his lips. It came to Fay that frigid air of his might very well be a shyness around pretty girls. When he eyed her tentatively, she was certain of it.

"Maybe—" he hesitated—"maybe I can see you again, Miss Norris?"

Fay smiled again, and all at once her heart was singing. "I guarantee it, Mr. Hammaty!" she said.

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