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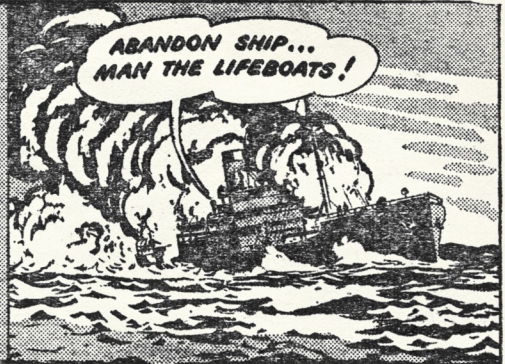
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Vol. 60

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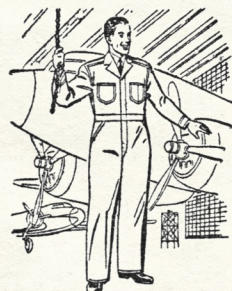
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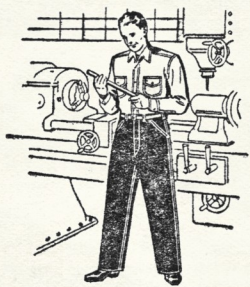
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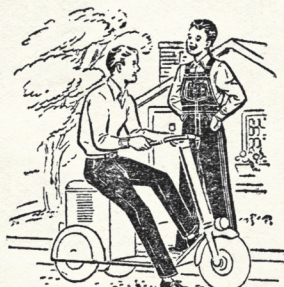
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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans
 Ted Palmer Picks:

For Comedy-Romance: "The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend" with Betty Grable, Cesar Romero, Rudy Vallee and Olga San Juan (20th Century-Fox). Technicolor.



Beautiful, blonde, gun-happy Freddie Jones (Betty Grable) gets out of town fast after accidentally shooting the Honorable Judge Alfalfa O'Toole in the seat of his pants. Fleeing on a train, she is mistaken by the conductor for "little Hilda Swandumper from Bashful Bend" on her way to teach at Snake City. This is good enough for Freddie—only she knows nothing about school teaching. Charlie Hingelman (Rudy Vallee), under her charms, gives her a few lessons in teaching at night. Freddie's past, however, in the form of Blackie (Cesar Romero), catches up with her. Through a succession of hilarious events, the town is set afeudin', and Freddie gets taken back for trial. She almost goes free when Blackie offers to marry her, but Freddie finishes that by shooting at the judge again. Where and when? Why, in the end, of course. *Good spoofing with lots of broad laughs.*

For Adventure—"Illegal Entry" with Howard Duff, Marta Toren and George Brent (Universal). To assist Immigration Inspector Dan Collins (George Brent) break up a gang that smuggles aliens across the Mexican border by plane, Burt Powers (Howard Duff) gets hired by the gang as a pilot. Lucky for him that Anna Duvak (Marta Toren)—an unwilling gang member—tips him off on a trap to test his loyalty. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to break the gang up and get the girl. *A semi-documentary with good, fast action.*



For Murder Mystery—"Manhandled" with Dorothy Lamour, Sterling Hayden, and Dan Duryea (Paramount).



A hard-pressed author, worried about a recurrent nightmare in which he kills his wife for her jewelry, visits a psychiatrist to get things off his chest. The psychiatrist's secretary, Merl Kramer (Dorothy Lamour), mentions this dream to Karl Benson (Dan Duryea), a private investigator, and a chain of events are set off which lead to murder of the wife, theft of the jewels and some of the dirtiest double-dealing you've seen in some time. Sterling Hayden is the insurance investigator who works on the case. *A film, well-played for suspense, with a neat, ironical wind-up.*

For Sports—"The Stratton Story" with James Stewart and June Allyson (MGM).



One of the pluckiest stories in sports is retold in this film version of the life of Monty Stratton—brilliant young Chicago White Sox pitcher who lost his leg in a hunting accident after the 1938 major league season. Overcoming this handicap, Stratton learned to use an artificial leg, and in 1946 pitching in the East Texas League, he won 18 games. Although Hollywood over-sentimentalizes the story, this remains a good baseball picture. Jimmy Stewart plays Stratton, June Allyson, his wife, while Gene Bearden, Jimmy Dykes, Bill Dickey and Mervyn Shea lend authenticity to baseball sequences. *It makes a pleasant evening.*

For A Western—"The Younger Brothers" with Wayne Morris and Janis Page (Warners). Technicolor.



The four Younger brothers, who were once the "Dead End" kids of the West, along with Jesse James and his gang, find it's tough to go straight herein. A vindictive police officer, leading a misguided posse, and a beautiful, female outlaw leader both try to get the boys in trouble. Some good straight-shooting, hard riding and quick thinking save the day. *It has all you want in a Western.*

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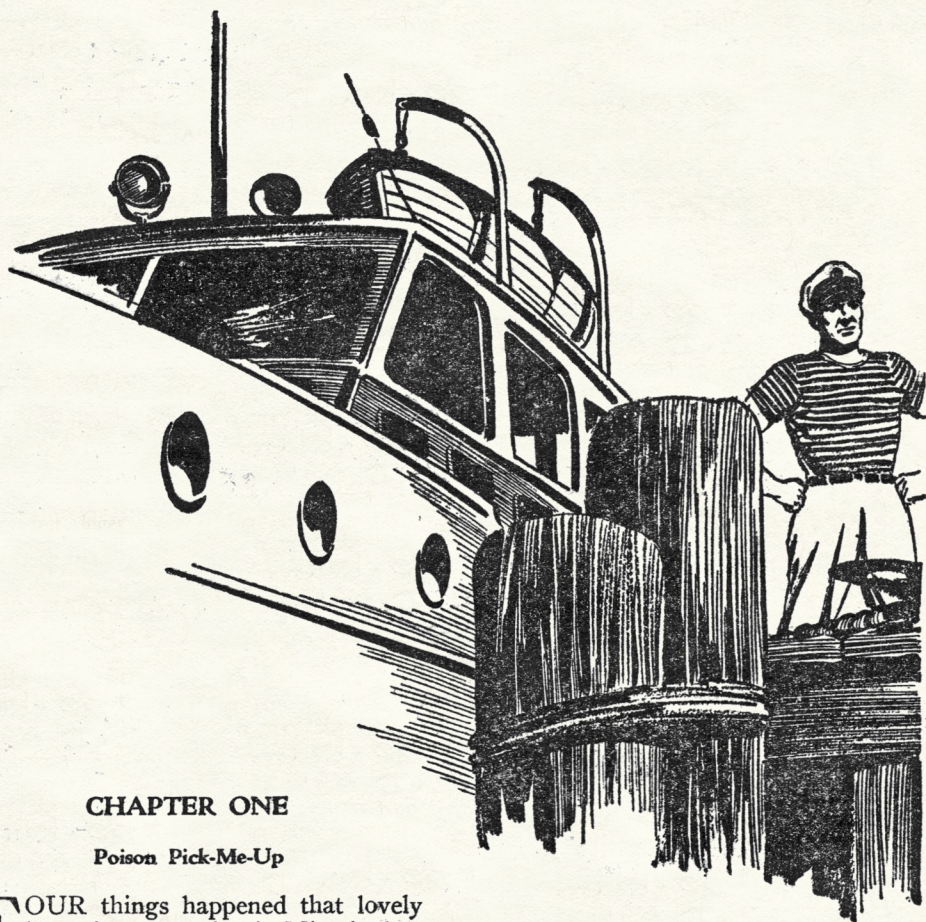
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MR. MADDOX TIPS A HOMICIDE

Trigger-Charged Track Novel



CHAPTER ONE

Poison Pick-Me-Up

FOUR things happened that lovely late-winter morning in Miami when Mr. Maddox was accused of murder. None of the four things seemed important at the time. Tens of thousands of winter visitors in the Miami sunshine belt were smugly happy at news of a blizzard swirling through frigid New York streets—happy that they were in Miami. The fact that the frosty gale was painfully biting the narrow acquisitive nose of Duke Hannigan interested no one in Miami.

Hannigan halted on the Eighth Avenue corner across from Madison Square Garden to let a lumbering truck crawl by. He rubbed the back of a tan pigskin glove over the half-frozen end of his sharp nose. "The hell with it!" Hannigan said, and wheeled back toward his hotel.

Nothing important about that.

In Havana, Cuba, *Señor* Ricardo Muñoz left his all but palacial residence on

*The sugar-daddy Cuban and smart-money big shot
raced their love triangle into a murder marathon—
with Mr. Maddox leading the dead-heat finish.*

A gun was in his back as he stepped aboard. . . .



**By T. T.
FLYNN**

the broad prado, north of the Parque Central. A liveried chauffeur opened the door of an orchid-colored, custom-made coupe.

Muñez smiled. "Damn nice day for flying, Mike."

"Ain't it," Mike Brady agreed with an answering grin.

Miami would not have been interested.

And out at beautiful Hialeah Park, the Cuban wonder horse, Si Magnifico, left two quarts of his carefully mixed feed ration uneaten.

But who cared about oats, barley, cracked corn and bran, when the surf was rolling lazily on the dazzling Miami Beach sands, when speed boats were tearing furrows in the crystal blue of Biscaye Bay, and sleek yachts and stubby charter boats were nuzzling the whitecaps offshore.

At the huge Miami Beach-Caslon hotel, one could swim in the tiled outdoor pool, or have a cabaña facing the beach and the surf. Mr. Maddox chose the pool this morning.

One could look out over the beach from the pool. There were palms, gay-painted tables, lazy chairs. Newsreels often caught champion swimmers and cheesecake beauties in this pool.

Mr. Maddox was not a champion swimmer or cheesecake. Swathed in a vast expanse of blue terry-cloth robe, thick black cigar in the corner of his mouth, Mr. Maddox stepped on the low diving board with dignity.

Oscar, his wizened, shrewd assistant, spoke acidly behind him. "You gonna dive with that cigar in your face?"

Mr. Maddox draped the robe over Oscar's left arm. He placed the cigar in Oscar's right hand. Vast and beefy, rather than fat, Mr. Maddox ran lightly to the end of the diving board—and his foot slipped. His huge bulk crashed flat on the water and went under.

Moments later Mr. Maddox's head broke surface at the north side of the pool. He blew and puffed and hauled himself out with a grunt. Oscar was waiting.

Mr. Maddox put the cigar back in the corner of his mouth. He donned the terry-cloth robe in silence. He took the tall glass of scotch and soda Oscar handed him.

"Pay the lady fifty copper cents—and I hope she strangles the next time she dives," Mr. Maddox said with vast dignity.

The lady was Fritzie Larkin, in the small group at the table a few feet away. Fritzi's mirth broke into a shout of laughter. Fritzie was that kind of full-blooded girl, which was why she was not just another singer on the Broadway and Hollywood-radio circuit. Her hearty vitality pumped into everything she did.

"I thought," Fritzie gasped, "the hotel had fallen into the pool."

"A sucker bet—and I fell for it," said Mr. Maddox. The chuckle starting to spread on his broad, wet face suddenly wiped away. "Skunk behind you," warned Mr. Maddox coldly.

The thin raspy voice which spoke behind Fritzie had a jab of sly amusement.

"The only girl who could make Duke Hennigan charter a special plane from New York to Miami this morning. Is it a clinch and kisses?"

Fritzie's glass of orange juice shattered on the flagstones. Mr. Maddox saw a flash of naked fright on Fritzie's tanned face—but only ferret-like satisfaction lay on the thin face of Al Armstrong, Broadway tattler for print and radio. Two stooge bodyguards—Armstrong needed them—stood close, grinning.

Mr. Maddox stepped over and gave Fritzie his drink, certain she could use it. Fritzie took it and turned in her chair. She was smiling.

"We're in Miami, and you're telling me Hannigan has just chartered a plane in New York?"

Al Armstrong managed to strut without moving. White pants, tan coat, sun glasses and silk sport shirt open at the neck gave him a youthful look, despite gray hairs at his temples.

"No matter where I tell it, it's always right, honey. And if I know that, guess how much more I know?"

Annie Ryan, Fritzie's companion and closest friend, sat with a strained look on her face. The others in the group were watching curiously.

At that moment, a bell hop came out of the hotel, paging Mr. Maddox. A waiter hurried up to clear away the broken glass at Fritzie's feet. Fritzie, smiling

and pouting a little, said to Armstrong: "Here, have a drink. Sit down and tell me."

Mr. Maddox saw his drink passed to Al Armstrong, and stalked away to take the long distance call he had been expecting. He was disgusted with Fritzie Larkin. It wasn't like Fritzie to pat a skunk or stroke a snake.

A LITTLE later, in his suite and dressed, Mr. Maddox answered a knock on the door. Annie Ryan stepped in. "Are we alone?"

"We are."

Annie still had the same tense look. "We're leaving town at once. Will you meet the next Pan-American flight from Havana for Fritzie?"

"Meet who?" Mr. Maddox countered. "Señor Ricardo Muñoz."

Instantly interested, Mr. Maddox asked: "The Muñoz who owns Si Magnifico, the Cuban horse?"

"He owns some horses," said Annie vaguely. "But that isn't his business. He grows sugar."

There were times when Mr. Maddox wondered if Annie were as naive as she seemed.

"The horse is a champion," Mr. Maddox said. "And his owner is one of the biggest sugar men on the island. Friend of Fritzie's, eh?"

"Slightly," said Annie, still vague about it. "If Fritzie meets him as she planned, it will probably be reported. And if she doesn't, Muñoz will be asking why; he has reservations here at the hotel." Annie swallowed. "So has Hannigan. Fritzie doesn't want to see either of them before she leaves."

"She wants me to meet one of the richest men in Cuba for her," said Mr. Maddox. "I'm to tell him his lady friend can't see him. Furthermore, she's leaving, if not gone, and he shouldn't ask questions. Fritzie," said Mr. Maddox, "has a hell of a nerve."

"Al Armstrong can make any friendship look different. Fritzie doesn't want to give him anything to talk about," said Annie nervously.

"I'll meet the plane," decided Mr. Maddox. "Because Al Armstrong is making trouble. I don't like him."

"Who does?" said Annie wanly, but relieved now . . .

It seemed simple, until Mr. Maddox left the elevator bank and was halfway across the ornate Moorish-style lobby. Oscar caught him there.

"Keep walking, Joe," Oscar blurted from the corner of his mouth. "Cops are here!"

Mr. Maddox halted. "Do we cheer about it?"

"Murder," Oscar gulped. "One of Al Armstrong's bodyguards!"

Mr. Maddox started walking again, faster. "Don't tell me someone tried to knock off the big-nose himself, and got one of the bodyguards instead!"

"The man was standing at the edge of the pool when he doubled up, like it was cramps," said Oscar. "He yelled, 'Poison' and fell into the water."

"Too much Al Armstrong," decided Mr. Maddox callously. "It would poison a horse."

"He dropped his glass there by the pool, Joe."

"He couldn't drink after he fell in," said Mr. Maddox.

Oscar had a pallid look when they emerged into the sunlight flooding the palm-fringed parking space. By the moment Oscar was getting more jumpy, jittery, apprehensive.

"It was your scotch drink," said Oscar. "Fritzie Larkin handed it to Armstrong. He slipped it to his man. The guy wandered over to the edge of the pool to watch some cuties in the water. Wham! Poison! And in he goes!"

Mr. Maddox snapped: "What was Al Armstrong doing?"

"Talking to Miss Larkin."

"Why didn't I hear about it sooner?"

"Joe, it looked like a gag! Everyone laughed when he dunked under. Then when he didn't come up, the dames started squealing. It took time for the lifeguards to get him up. Then they tried to pump water outa him. They thought for awhile he was gonna breath and come outa it. A mob had come running to the pool by then."

"Was Fritzie Larkin's maid there?" Mr. Maddox demanded sharply.

"Miss Larkin had sent her away." Oscar was growing jumpier. "A doctor

came running. They sent for an ambulance."

"Where is Fritzie Larkin?"

"Still there, I guess," said Oscar unhappily. "The hotel cop is there. It's trouble, Joe! Al Armstrong started to remind everyone that the fellow said he was poisoned. So it must have been the drink. And the drink had been Al Armstrong's drink! So Armstrong hollered it was an attempt to poison him! He looked almost green, Joe. He was scared! He was telling it to everyone around him . . . Who handed the drink to him? Who didn't like his guts? Who was afraid of him?"

"Most people hated him—and a few thousand were afraid of him," Mr. Maddox growled. "But the skunk tossed murder straight at Fritzie with that kind of talk."

"It wasn't her drink, Joe. It was your drink! When I figured that far, I started in to find you."

They had reached Mr. Maddox's big, blue convertible. Mr. Maddox took a fat black cigar from the breast pocket of his coat and bit off the end. After a moment, he chuckled slightly.

"You gave me the drink," he reminded.

"You ordered it," said Oscar unhappily. "All I done was take it off the tray, which was sitting there on the table."

"Did the glass break when it was dropped?"

"Yes."

Mr. Maddox slipped in behind the steering wheel. "I'm busy right now," he said. "If anyone wants me, they can wait."

"Joe! If I'm pinched, I ain't got bail money!"

"If it's murder, bail won't spring you," said Mr. Maddox as he pushed the starter button.

CHAPTER TWO

Meet the Press

THE great Pan-American base was south on the bay shore. The big flying boats came in from Central and South America and the Indies, low over the whitecaps, like birds homing from the ends of the earth. Always an air of romance, of thrills, even when it was a short ninety-minute hop from Havana.

Mr. Maddox had *Señor* Muñoz paged when the Havana passengers left the plane. The short, alert, almost dapper little man who came toward him had pale skin and thin features. Muñoz was clean-shaven, hair black, white linen suit a trifle rumpled. Fortyish, Mr. Maddox guessed. The man was mildly curious when Mr. Maddox stepped to meet him.

"*Señor* Muñoz?"

"Sí."

"Miss Larkin asked me to meet you. I'm Mr. Maddox."

Muñoz laughed, and the laughter sparkled in his keen eyes and cut lines of pleasure on his face.

"A pleasure to know any friend of Miss Larkin's," said Muñoz. "Nothing wrong, I hope. Over the telephone last night this was, well, a promised meeting."

"I'll explain when your luggage is out," said Mr. Maddox blandly. "My car is here."

He liked this Ricardo Muñoz; he made a guess Muñoz liked him. Not that it mattered.

The man had one modest bag, which he carried himself and put on the back seat. As they drove off, Muñoz rolled a cigarette from sack tobacco as expertly as any Hollywood cowboy.

He noticed Mr. Maddox's look.

"Had to spend my Cal-Tech vacations working in the Colorado sugar beet fields, and live on my pay, which meant rolling my own," he explained, and shrugged cheerfully. "Young habits stick."

Then Mr. Maddox knew he was all right.

"There's a bit of trouble," Mr. Maddox explained. "Fritzie thinks it just as well you don't communicate with her."

"If Fritzie thinks so, she must be right," said Muñoz calmly. It was a level-headed tribute to Fritzie Larkin, from an apparently level-headed man. "What is the trouble?"

Murder made explaining easier. Murder elbowed aside the personal angle. Mr. Maddox explained briefly.

"Did Fritzie try to kill the man?" asked Muñoz coolly.

"I gave her the glass," reminded Mr. Maddox. "Must have been meant for me. Can't prove it though."

"Why you?"

"Why anyone?"

Ricardo Muñoz remained calm. "We shall see," he suggested. "Meanwhile, if you see Fritzie first, assure her that Ricardo Muñoz is at her service." It sounded old-fashioned, with a touch of colorful Latin gallantry. But it would, Mr. Maddox guessed, be backed to the hilt.

Muñoz walked in alone from the Casion parking lot, carrying his modest bag. It was Mr. Maddox' suggestion.

Some minutes later Mr. Maddox strolled in through the main entrance. He was apparently enjoying his cigar, his peace of mind, and the climate, in the best Miami Beach manner. He stopped, without changing his expression, as two men boxed him in, right and left.

The big blocky man on the right, with a squarish face and a flat rasping voice, asked, "Going somewhere?"

"Cassidy," Mr. Maddox said. He took the cigar from his mouth. "It was a nice day until now."

"Meet Collins, from Homicide," said Cassidy.

Collins looked like a young chamber-of-commerce man. A pink-faced, smiling booster.

"Heard about the dead man?" Collins inquired as he shook hands.

"Yes," said Mr. Maddox. "If you mean Armstrong's bodyguard. And Armstrong's talk of murder."

Cassidy looked crestfallen. Collins blinked and seemed to want to think the reply over for a moment. Both men had evidently expected a denial.

Cassidy's remark was close to a sneer. "Murder happens—and you duck out."

"From what?" asked Mr. Maddox blandly. "I wasn't there when it happened. None of my business. Some people, Cassidy, do mind their own business. Or would you know?"

Collins asked a mild question. "Where did you go?"

"Pan-American base."

"Why?" demanded Cassidy suspiciously. "Getting the way greased to hop to South America?"

"I should let you guess," said Mr. Maddox. "Or are you and the Masterton Agency in charge here?"

"Okay, Joe. Collins is running this."

"I wondered," mused Mr. Maddox, "who would be idiot enough to put you in charge of anything."

Cassidy's face was coloring with temper when Collins cut in smoothly again. "No doubt you had a good reason for driving to the base."

"I met the Havana plane," said Mr. Maddox cheerfully. "To be exact, I met a gentleman named Ricardo Muñoz. He owns the Cuban horse, Si Magnifico. I drove the gentleman here to the hotel, where he has reservations."

Cassidy's red-faced anger seemed to tighten into intentness at the mention of Muñoz. Mr. Maddox took note; Cassidy's manner might have meaning. Cassidy was one of the crack men of the Masterton Agency racetrack detail, with owners, jockies and horses under his scrutiny.

Collins said, "Si Magnifico won at Tropical Park with a sawbuck of mine on his nose . . . And, I understand, Mr. Maddox, you had a small bet with Miss Larkin at the swimming pool."

"Fifty cents—that I couldn't dive off the board as gracefully as I used to in the kid days we were talking about." Mr. Maddox looked ruefully down at his distinguished mid-section.

Cassidy commented, "A tub of lard, if I ever seen one!"

Collins said politely, "You had ordered a drink before you dived into the pool."

"Flopped like a fat walrus is the way I heard it," said Cassidy.

"I could have been more graceful," Mr. Maddox admitted. "Yes, I ordered a scotch and soda."

Collins continued his polite probing. "You handed the drink to Miss Larkin?"

"Armstrong came up behind Miss Larkin and startled her. She dropped her glass. I gave her mine."

Collins studied him. Mr. Maddox looked blandly back.

"The drinks were served while I was on the diving board," Mr. Maddox recalled for them. "I came out of the pool dripping. Only held the glass a minute. No one there had any idea Armstrong and his bodyguards would pass the pool at that time. No one asked him to stop. He wasn't welcome. No one knew I intended to hand my drink to Fritzie Larkin

—and I didn't myself, until she dropped her glass. And she dropped it when Armstrong startled her—which couldn't have been predicted."

Mr. Maddox savored his cigar with relish. "Handicap all that," he invited blandly.

Collins asked, "Did the waiter ever bet with you?"

"Never saw him before."

"Anyone in the party ever lose money with you?"

"No." Mr. Maddox chuckled. "I lost to Fritzie. Fifty cents."

Cassidy said, "I keep wondering what would have happened if Joe Maddox had downed that drink." Cassidy looked pleased at the thought.

Collins said, "Thank you, Mr. Maddox." He shook hands politely. "Probably nothing to it," he said. "Heart attack, stroke, something of the sort."

They walked away. No questions about Richardo Muñoz. Or Duke Hannigan. Everything pleasant, soothing . . .

MR. MADDOX watched them walk out the main entrance. He strolled back to the bank of telephone booths at the rear of the lobby and called the city desk of the Miami *Globe*.

"Ben? . . . Joe Maddox."

"How are you, Joe? How's tricks?"

"Dead man over here at the Casion. Al Armstrong is screaming murder. The dead man was drinking a scotch I'd ordered when he passed on."

Ben Egan, a high-pressure city editor, had cubbed in San Francisco, written sports in Los Angeles, made the crime beat in Chicago, and arrived in Miami by way of New York and Baltimore papers.

Experience had not changed Ben's opinion that a ten dollar show bet was a better risk than a two dollar win bet. He had been a friend of Joe Maddox since his Frisco days.

"I know all that," Ben said briskly. "Can't keep you out of it, Joe. Sorry."

"Can you keep me in it?" Mr. Maddox countered. "Five hundred for my investigation of this case, Ben. Plus a press card. Going, going—"

"Bought," said Ben Egan without hesitation. "I hear Duke Hannigan's flying to Miami in a chartered plane. I wouldn't

guess how much you know about other people's business. Some of it might be risky to use. Hate to have anything happen to you, Joe."

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Lay you three-to-one you're risking five hundred on the chance I'll be the next body and a good headline."

"Give you an A-1 obituary if it's needed, Joe."

"Big-hearted Ben. I talked with a homicide man named Collins. Is he as good as I think?"

"Better," said Egan promptly. "Sam Collins is ex-FBI. Don't let that soft grin fool you." Ben Egan was silent for a moment. "Joe, I'm guessing this business is loaded. What do you know about it now?"

"That," said Mr. Maddox, "is what I'm trying to find out—for five hundred."

The telephone booth was hot. Mr. Maddox paused outside and wiped his broad damp face with a purple-bordered handkerchief.

"Mr. Maddox!"

The door of the adjoining booth was open. The girl in there, pretending to use the telephone, was Madge, the lively brunette from the switchboard.

Cautiously Madge said: "A party named Armstrong handed out fifties on the switchboard. He wasn't saying we should listen in, y'understand. That wouldn't be ethical, he says. But if the girls should know anything interesting about you and Miss Fritzie Larkin, he ain't interested in where we heard it."

"Get his money?"

"We hadda keep him feeling good," said Madge virtuously. "But when Ruthena says you was using booth eight, we thought you oughta know."

"Never give a skunk an even break," said Mr. Maddox, chuckling. "I'll let you know later what to tell him." From a thick pigskin billfold, Mr. Maddox passed a crisp five-hundred-dollar note into the booth. "I'll keep topping any offer you girls get to talk about my business."

"Gee!" Madge swallowed hard. "You didn't hafta do *this!*" Madge looked at the money again. She glowed. "Certain other parties might put taps on certain room phones in this jernt, I hear. I'd stick to outside phones, if it was me."

"That," said Mr. Maddox, "is a thought."

He was big and smiling as he walked away. And the clammy feel of danger was close and real. It wasn't the dead man. Or the thought of what might have happened if Joe Maddox had downed that scotch and soda.

It was the sheer fright on Fritzie Larkin's face at hearing Duke Hannigan was coming on a chartered plane . . . the pale strain of Annie Ryan's look . . . the malicious satisfaction in Al Armstrong's boast, "If I know Hannigan is coming—guess how much more I know."

Mr. Maddox wished he knew. Fritzie Larkin was a healthy, well-balanced girl. A celebrity in her own right. Three thousand a week minimum. A girl like Fritzie didn't frighten easily.

In the elevator, going up, Mr. Maddox considered Duke Hannigan. You couldn't prove, for instance, that a man had died far from New York, because Duke Hannigan had dropped a brief comment in New York.

Try and prove that a New Orleans politician, say, or a San Francisco business man, or a Chicago ward heeler or law official, had too much cash tucked away in safety deposit boxes, because the man obeyed the tugs of a thread which led into the web of Duke Hannigan's interests.

Better men than Joe Maddox had failed to prove it. Mr. Whiskers' men, tax men and FBI, had tried to prove it. Everything about Hannigan was legal, Broadway ticket agency, interests in sports promoting, his occasional angeling of shows. And always, of course, was the solid background of Hannigan's real estate, insurance and brewery interests. He had lawyers who were wizards; bank accounts which could stand any audit.

Try to prove that the biggest lay-off money in the country ended up bucking Duke Hannigan's bankroll. Prove that slot machines, bribed officials were tied to obscure lines of influence controlled by Hannigan.

Try to prove it. See what happened. A truck ran over you. A sudden heart attack dropped you. Your name appeared on the Missing Persons list. People got amnesia, didn't they?

A girl like Fritzie Larkin could hardly have known any of that when Duke Hannigan's big boxes of costly flowers began to arrive, when Duke Hannigan went all-out for Fritzie in a way that probably astonished himself.

The man had never gone for women, never let his guard down. But Fritzie and Hannigan had seemed to click. Mr. Maddox had never heard what had happened. No one else had apparently; but it was all over.

Or was it?

Oscar let Mr. Maddox into the suite. The wizened little man was jumpy. "Thought you were the cops again, Joe. Cassidy came up here with them."

"I talked with him. Any word from Fritzie?"

"No," said Oscar. "And we ain't pinched yet, because they ain't sure it's murder. After the autopsy, they'll get down to business. That Masterton flat-foot is after us, Joe. What have we done?"

"Not what we've done—what we may do." Mr. Maddox stepped to a wall table and poured three fingers of scotch in a tall glass.

Oscar warned nervously: "That scotch may be loaded to the cork with rat poison."

"There's a dry floor to fall on," said Mr. Maddox. He drank the scotch and put the glass down thoughtfully. Oscar watched him with fascinated apprehension.

"You look," said Mr. Maddox, "like a ghoul waiting to catch the body." He scooped a handful of cigars from a humidor and thrust them into his pocket. "A press card will be delivered. I'm investigating this case for the *Globe*."

"You ain't no reporter, Joe," Oscar said with rising alarm.

"Don't argue if I telephone you," said Mr. Maddox blandly. "No matter what I say, don't even act surprised."

"What'll you say?"

Mr. Maddox was on his way out. "How do I know?" he said, and kept going.

CHAPTER THREE

Tough Guy's Threat

HIALEAH track sprawled in lush beauty under the sub-tropic sky. Scarlet flamingos waded in the lovely infield lake. Stately royal palms

lifted straight and high. Flame-vine, poinciana and hibiscus were lushly colorful.

Ten would take your two that the elite of the northern underworlds would appear during the forty-day meet, heeled with folding money, charged with larceny, and lacking scruples.

Mr. Maddox ate lunch in the clubhouse and tried to fit Duke Hannigan's trip south into all that had happened. It wouldn't quite fit; he had a nagging feeling the real answer was there, just barely edging him.

Some of the facts were tantalizing. Big time crooks fished for big-time money.

Ricardo Munez had parlayed war-time sugar into fantastic millions, topping the fortune he already had. That was well known, due to the publicity given on Si Magnifico's owner.

Muniez was now in Miami. He was linked to Fritzie Larkin. Fritzie connected with Duke Hannigan. Also with the dead man. And the dead man linked up with the law. But Cassidy, of the Masterton Agency, was working with the Miami Beach law for no good reason that Mr. Maddox could guess. However, Cassidy linked back to horses . . .

Mr. Maddox signaled for the check. Carl, his regular waiter, took the five dollar tip, and as usual said quietly, "Thank you, Mr. Maddox."

They understood one another. Carl was a familiar sight in race-track clubhouses in Florida, California and New York. Now he listened intently as Mr. Maddox spoke thoughtfully.

"Carl, has anything struck you as unusual about this Cuban horse, Si Magnifico?"

"In what way, sir?"

"Any way."

"It strikes me the horse is unusual, sir," Carl said slowly. "I say he has become part of the pride Cubans feel in Cuba herself, sir."

"That's a thought," said Mr. Maddox. "Go on, Carl."

"I meant to say, sir, the horse sparks the reckless proud side of the Cubans. In my opinion, sir, when Si Magnifico runs these days, Cuba runs—if I make myself clear."

Mr. Maddox was leaning forward in-

tently. "Sounds like a poet talking, Carl. But you're making hard sense, I think. Go on."

Carl's smile was faint. "I understand Spanish, Mr. Maddox. I hear them talking. You'd be surprised at the wealthy Cubans making the season here just to see the horse run." Carl shrugged. "Yesterday I served a party of six gentlemen from Cuba. I'll wager every one was a multi-millionaire—and here to bet the shirts off their backs on that horse. For the glory of Cuba, as I heard one of the gentlemen say."

Mr. Maddox sat motionless for several moments; then he added a twenty to the tip. "Another hundred waiting for more details," he said, getting up.

"I understand, sir," said Carl calmly. "I'll have the Cubans seated at my tables."

Carl probably thought Joe Maddox was looking for big money to lay against. Not that it mattered to Carl. Mr. Maddox was willing to let it stand that way . . .

Pop Harvey, who trained the Maddox stable of four horses, was all but dozing on an upturned box in front of Kopper King's stall. The horse, looking out over the door strap, saw Mr. Maddox coming. His welcome whinny exploded close behind Pop's ear.

Pop Harvey came off the box in a frantic leap.

"Dang it!" Pop caught his balance, saw Mr. Maddox, and hastily adjusted the steel-rimmed spectacles askew on his nose. "Like to blew off my ear," Pop-snarled. "An, dang it, if he ain't gettin' sugar for it!"

Kopper King was greedily nuzzling sugar cubes from Mr. Maddox' hand.

"Shows what a loud mouth will get you," Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Pop, I'm interested in that Cuban horse, Si Magnifico."

"You ain't the only one," Pop, retorted.

Pop Harvey was a gaunt, wrinkled man with sparse gray hair and canny blue eyes behind the steel-rimmed spectacles, which always sat askew on his nose. An old-timer around the tracks, Pop was an expert an shed-row lore and gossip. He knew swipes, guineas, trainers, jockeys, and owners.

Now Pop gave Kopper King a sour look and gnawed off a large chew of dry

Kentucky twist. Then he spat noisily.

"Doby Tyler," Pop said, "has got hosses in the same shed row as that Havana hoss. Doby says its like bein' at the Havana track. Cuban men an' wimmen-folks traipsin' around all hours, admirin' the hoss. Bill Cameron, the trainer, had a stall screen put up to hold 'em back."

"That all you know?"

"I keep busy trainin' my own hosses' fat off, what with them gittin' stuffed with sugar all the time," said Pop darkly. He sighted a wandering beetle, and knocked it end over surprised end with a deadly stream of tobacco juice.

"Si Magnifico races Saturday; tomorrow."

Pop nodded. "Hispañola Handicap. Twenty thousand dollars added."

"Will he win?"

POP shifted his tobacco to the other wrinkled cheek. "Ain't a man around the stable'll bet ary other hoss—unless it's trainer Bill Cameron."

"Has Cameron suggested his horse won't win?"

"He ain't a fool," said Pop.

"Give!" ordered Mr. Maddox. "You're holding out."

"It ain't nothin'," said Pop. "Just a hunch somethin's wrong, Joe. Doby Tyler says Bill Cameron ain't been sleepin' much. Cameron has been pacin' back and forth along the shed row the last couple nights. Stops now an' then an' looks at the Cuba hoss like it was on his mind."

Mr. Maddox stood big and intent, weighing that. "Something's wrong with Bill Cameron, at least."

"This mornin'," said Pop, "Doby Tyler stopped by fer a tin cup or so of tonic outa my bottle—"

"Tin cups of that Kentucky corn poison?" Mr. Maddox demanded. "Half-pint tin cups full of it?"

"Three cups full afore he stopped," admitted Pop sadly.

"He was lying after the second cup full," said Mr. Maddox flatly. "After the third cup, he was out of his head. If he'd been drinking scotch, I might have believed whatever he said. But not after that double-distilled mountain dynamite."

"Scotch," said Pop, and shuddered "Ain't even good mouthwash." Pop sniff-

fed. "Corn-squeezin' mellers a man like Doby. When he says Bill Cameron's son-in-law come around nigh midnight last night, arguin' with Cameron to forget it an' get some sleep, I ain't one to disbelieve it. Cameron cussed the young feller out. Said it was a sorry day his daughter married him. An' that young Larkin feller—"

Mr. Maddox's big hand shot out and gripped Pop's arm. "Larkin, Pop? You said *Larkin*?"

"Dang it, I'll get the jumps, bein' grabbed like that!" said Pop testily. "The young feller's name is Steve Larkin."

"What else happened?" Mr. Maddox demanded.

"Nothin'. The young feller said he wouldn't argue. Wasn't for the baby they had, he'd take the next train outa town. Then he walked away."

Mr. Maddox' broad face had hardened. "What did Bill Cameron do?"

"Follered him."

"I want to know anything you can learn about Cameron and the Cuban horse. Anything that happens tonight or tomorrow, Pop." Mr. Maddox was emphatic.

Pop peered over his lopsided spectacles and champed on his tobacco for a moment. "Yep," said Pop.

That was good enough. Pop was canny at getting information. Mr. Maddox walked away in hard thought . . .

These bright and sunny afternoons, most people one would want to see could be found at Hiialeah. The third race was coming up when Al Armstrong turned from a fifty-dollar window in the clubhouse, two tickets in his hand, and almost walked into the impressive bulk of Mr. Maddox.

"How's Steve?" Mr. Maddox asked blandly.

The result was startling. Al Armstrong might have been punched suddenly in the stomach. He froze in mid-stride. His mouth sagged a little. His stare had a bulgy look. The right eye twitched hard in the tanned thin face.

"So it was *you* tried to get me with that drink!" Armstrong's raspy voice blurted.

Mr. Maddox chuckled. His bland scrutiny was almost friendly. "Going to tell about it in your broadcast tonight?" he inquired.

Al Armstrong backed away a step. It

was an instinctive movement, as if the genial bulk confronting him were suddenly dangerous. His head swiveled to the right as the remaining bodyguard moved in quickly beside him, shoulders square and hard inside a closely tailored coat.

"Hasn't Armstrong handed you the mortician's mickey yet?" Mr. Maddox inquired genially.

"Al, what's he want—trouble?" The fellow was strictly muscle. But he had been eating well in a soft job and was getting saggy under the jaws. Not too keen above the ears at any time, Mr. Maddox guessed.

Al Armstrong said, "Trouble?" He looked at Mr. Maddox. "No, hell no," he said. He started to pass.

"Is this the way to treat the press?" said Mr. Maddox.

"Hah?"

"I'm a trained seal for Ben Egan's *Miami Globe*. Hired to write up this case."

"You're nuts!"

"Check with Egan, on the city desk. I'll want an interview with you."

"Your drink knocked over my man—and you want an interview with *me*? The hell with you, Maddox!"

"Good! That'll go fine in print."

The bodyguard asked, "Al, you wanna shut him up?"

"Yes—no! How do I know what I want?" Al Armstrong ducked past Mr. Maddox and kept going. The hired muscle glowered and followed.

ALL that from a simple, genial question about one Steve Larkin, whom Mr. Maddox had never seen. Mr. Maddox lighted another cigar and strolled through the clubhouse crowd.

Trainer Bill Cameron had been a ruddy, smiling, talkative man the few times Mr. Maddox had spoken with him at various tracks around the country. The third race was pounding through the stretch, the crowd crying the leaders to the wire, when Mr. Maddox found Cameron morosely nursing a bottle of beer at the clubhouse bar.

"Steve still waiting it out?" Mr. Maddox mildly inquired behind Cameron's shoulder.

The man spun around, his narrowed look blazing. "You, Maddox! I might have known." Cameron had the sudden

look of a dangerous man. "A few more dead ones around here would help the climate," he gritted under his breath.

"You must have heard about the corpse at the Casion," Mr. Maddox guessed.

"I have."

"Climate hasn't been helped," said Mr. Maddox dryly. "It's a thought though, I'm reporting the case for the *Miami Globe*. Climate is always news around here. I'd like to quote you on how to improve the weather." Mr. Maddox chuckled. "One corpse—clear weather. Two corpses—more sunshine. Three—"

"Just one more corpse would help!" said Cameron thickly. "You fat, crooked—"

"Careful," warned Mr. Maddox coldly. "Call me a crook if it's backed with proof—or don't." Mr. Maddox waited a moment, asked, "How is Si Magnifico?"

Bill Cameron's ruddy face had a drained, sallow look. "Damn you," he said thickly under his breath. He left his beer bottle on the bar and strode away.

No one had heard them. The third race was under the wire, the bar was almost deserted. "Scotch," Mr. Maddox said to the bartender who came to him.

It was good twelve-year scotch, but Mr. Maddox might as well have been drinking water as he sipped it. He had the feeling of standing on a powder barrel, fuse spluttering. When a man like Bill Cameron talked killing, anything could happen.

Ricardo Muñoz and his Cuban friends, six or seven were in the party, came toward the bar as Mr. Maddox was leaving. Muñoz stepped over, his smile quizzical. "Is Miss Larkin here this afternoon?"

"Haven't seen her. How's Steve?"

"Excellent, I hope," said Muñoz readily. "And no doubt wishing he could join his sister here."

"Your horse going to win the *Hispañola* tomorrow?"

"We think so," Muñoz answered, smiling. "I have been informed you book bets, Mr. Maddox. Would some large sums on the *Hispañola* interest you?"

"How much?"

"A hundred thousand or so." The man said it as other men might speak of fifty or a hundred.

"Your money?" Mr. Maddox inquired.

"In part," said Muñoz. "But I speak

for friends also, who will be betting." He lifted a reassuring hand. "My friend, it is not your money I wish to win. But if you could place our money safely . . ."

Mr. Maddox thought it over. "I'll let you know," he said. He studied Muñoz blandly. "If there's a chance your horse won't win, I'd like to know."

"When Cuba runs," said Muñoz, "there is never a chance she won't win." He said it smiling. But he meant it. Also, he was a hard-headed business man. "If we bet," he added, "we do not expect to lose."

They parted on that note. Mr. Maddox went to the parking lot, striding hastily, and drove the long, blue convertible fast to the airport, where plane traffic from the north would be landing.

No chartered plane from New York had arrived. Mr. Maddox wedged his bulk into another hot booth and telephoned the Casion. Fritzie Larkin's room phone did not answer.

Mr. Maddox tried his suite. Oscar was there.

"No news, Joe."

"I've been busy," Mr. Maddox said calmly. "Al Armstrong is ready for another killing, I think."

"What, Joe?" Oscar's voice had a strangled note. "What's that, Joe?"

"None of our business, any more than the other," said Mr. Maddox briskly. "But the rat will get into trouble if he tries much more of it. *Good-by!*"

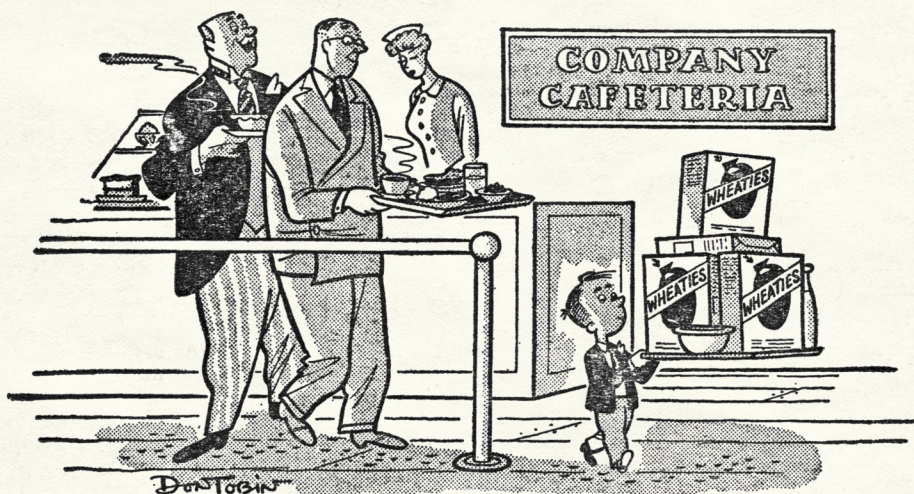
Mr. Maddox stepped out of the booth, chuckling. If taps were on their telephones, someone would make an urgent report about Al Armstrong.

A folded tenner to an airlines clerk spurred that obliging young man into calling the control tower. It was information well bought. Mr. Maddox was on the apron, in front of Tropic-South hangar, when the big twin-engined plane wheeled in and the props stopped. Steps folded down out of the plane.

Duke Hannigan stepped down, overcoat over his arm, hat in hand. He looked at the sky, and stretched, elbows akimbo, in the blaze of afternoon sunshine, like a man soaking it up in every muscle. He said something with a jocular air to the co-pilot who had stepped down after him.

Then, gray-suited and compact in build, as sedate looking a business man as ever came to Miami, Hannigan walked toward the airport building. Mr. Maddox veered over and fell into step with him.

"Welcome," greeted Mr. Maddox blandly. "Any statement for the press about your surprise visit here?"



"There's a man who's going places in this company."

ANOTHER up-and-coming young man is Boston Braves' Al Dark. Wheaties eater for over 10 years, he was voted "Rookie of the Year" in '48! Famous training dish—

these 100% whole wheat flakes, milk and fruit. Real "he-man" nourishment plus second-helping flavor. Had your Wheaties today? "Breakfast of Champions"!

"Nothing to say." Duke Hannigan's first glance was careless. Then his head jerked around. He halted. "Press?" Hannigan repeated on a rising note. "You're Joe Maddox, aren't you?" Hannigan's nod was positive. "You are! What's the idea?"

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "It's still the press, Hannigan. The *Globe* has hired me to write about the murder of Al Armstrong's bodyguard, beside the Miami Beach-Casino pool this morning."

It was obviously news to Hannigan. He said: "Al Armstrong's man, eh?" His face remained expressionless. "Too bad it wasn't Armstrong himself," he added. Hannigan held a lighter to a cigarette. His hand was steady.

"How's Steve Larkin?" Mr. Maddox asked.

Hannigan's expression showed exactly nothing as he slowly pocketed the lighter.

"We're talking about me," Hannigan said. "I just got here. The sunshine is great. Maybe I'll stay a day; maybe a month. When I get a newspaper, I'll know what's happening around town. That's all." Hannigan started on.

Mr. Maddox said: "Fritzie Larkin has been questioned about the murder. She was there."

Mr. Maddox had not moved. Hannigan had to halt. It was more like a man freezing in mid-stride. Hannigan had to turn clear around. He stood for a long moment, cigarette in hand, his look cold.

"Maddox," Hannigan said, "I'll find out about you."

He walked on, leaving a blank chill in the sunshine. Mr. Maddox' broad face was sober as he turned back to the blue convertible. From Hannigan he had learned exactly nothing. And Hannigan was the most important one. Mr. Maddox had no proof; but he had a hunch now.

CHAPTER FOUR

Quarry in the Swamp

MR. MADDUX dined in solitude in his hotel suite, on a tall glass of buttermilk, a scant saucer of toasted cheese crackers, and a peeled orange.

Oscar, stuffed with steak and French

fries, salad and pie, watched the spectacle with a kind of morose horror.

"You sure you ain't sick, Joe?"

"I'm thinking," Mr. Maddox said. His collar was open, shirt sleeves rolled up, big black cigar curling lazy smoke from a glass ash tray on the service table. "Turn on that radio," Mr. Maddox directed. "It's about time for Armstrong to blather his Friday night scuttle of dirt. But first, try Fritzie Larkin's room again."

Oscar tried, and turned from the phone with a shrug. "Still out."

Fritzie hadn't met Duke Hannigan's plane. Hadn't been at the racetrack with Ricardo Muñoz. She seemed to have vanished with Annie Ryan. Hannigan hadn't checked in at the hotel here either.

Twice a week Al Armstrong's *Behind the Headlines* had a fifteen-minute spot. He must be good, in his way, Mr. Maddox was willing to concede. Certainly Armstrong was ruthless, raucous and glib. He had a nose for scandal; if the dirt was libel-proof, look out. Al Armstrong would dish it in his sly razor-edged delivery, making it worse with inflection and innuendo.

Mr. Maddox was on his feet, pacing slowly, cigar in the corner of his mouth, when Al Armstrong's voice began to hammer from the leather-covered portable radio.

Then it came:

"Scoop, my friends! A cold-blooded attempt was made this morning to murder your hard-working radio reporter! Yes! In these United States such things do happen! A drink was put into your reporter's hand! Unsuspecting, he passed it to a companion! And death struck the wrong man! The dying man cried, 'Poison!' So fate can take a life and save a life! Arrests will be made! Reputations will be ruined! Guilt will be placed where guilt belongs! And if your hard-working reporter, who calls the truth as he sees the truth, has not been murdered before the next broadcast, he will fearlessly lay before you—"

Mr. Maddox' big hand cut off the radio. "He dogged it," Mr. Maddox said coldly. "Not a name."

"Poison is still murder," Oscar muttered.

"I'll believe it when I see the toxicologist's report after the autopsy," said Mr. Maddox.

Knuckles rapped urgently on the door. "Answer it," said Mr. Maddox.

Annie Ryan came in, with the stark look of a girl running. She ignored Oscar. Her eyes had a wide, frightened look.

"Are you Fritzie's friend?" she asked Mr. Maddox.

Cigar clenched hard in mouth corner, Mr. Maddox was already rolling down his sleeves. "I am," he said, and closed the collar of his shirt and reached for his coat. "Where is Fritzie?"

"She went out," Annie answered. It was close to a whimper.

"Been trying to get her on the phone and no answer," Mr. Maddox told her.

"We were out."

"Where?"

"Driving with Ricardo Muñoz."

"Where?"

"Just around," said Annie vaguely. "He had hired a big car. We had sandwiches at a drive-in for dinner."

"What was said?"

"They sat in the front seat; I was in the back and didn't listen."

"Is Fritzie in love with Muñoz?" Mr. Maddox demanded brusquely.

Annie shrugged. "Fritzie doesn't tell me everything. She likes him."

"How about Duke Hannigan? She still go for him?"

"Oh, my lord!" said Annie. "No!"

"What happened between them?"

"I don't know," said Annie, "and that's the truth. Fritzie is proud. Some things she won't talk about, even to me." Annie gestured helplessly. "Whatever it was, it hit her hard. But she wouldn't tell me anything—just that it was finished. Now Hannigan's in town and—" Annie swallowed hard—"I'm afraid for Fritzie. When we came in a few minutes ago, Fritzie made a telephone call. Her face frightened me when she hung up."

Annie swallowed hard again. "Fritzie put her gun in her purse and went out. She wouldn't let me go with her. She wouldn't tell me anything. She said she'd be back in an hour or so." Annie's voice was wobbling on the verge of tears. "It's trouble. Terrible trouble! I know it is!"

"Who did she call?"

"I don't know," said Annie. "But I think it was her brother. I—I stood it as long as I could, and then I came down here."

"Always Joe Maddox and trouble,"

said Oscar resentfully. "Why didn't you go to that Cuban money-bags? If he gives the dame a ride, he can give her a hand."

"There's something about Mr. Maddox," said Annie uncertainly.

"A big wide streak of sucker," said Oscar. "He can't mind his own business. Now it's a dame on the loose with a rod!"

Mr. Maddox asked Annie Ryan, "Do you know where Fritzie's brother lives?"

"New York."

"I mean here in Miami—where's he staying?" Mr. Maddox glanced at the amount of money in his wallet. He caught Annie's nod and said, "Let's go."

"Joe! Use brains!" Oscar pleaded.

"I'm trying to," said Mr. Maddox as he took Annie's arm and hurried her out of the room. He gave a last order from the doorway. "Only Fritzie Larkin is to know where we've gone . . ."

ANNIE RYAN wasn't much help. She knew that Steve Larkin's young wife and baby were in a furnished cottage for the full season. Bill Cameron had been staying with his daughter. It had been Cameron's idea, sunshine good for the baby and mother, and Cameron would be with them through the winter.

"Cameron worships his daughter," Annie said.

"Jealous of his son-in-law?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"Oh, no! That is, it's been a happy marriage. Fritzie just about worships Steve, and likes Steve's wife and Mr. Cameron."

"One sweet happy family," Mr. Maddox commented. His sarcasm was not audible. Annie agreed.

They came off the causeway and swung north in the Biscayne Boulevard traffic. Annie Ryan said Steve Larkin had appeared in Miami about a week ago, on an unexpected vacation. He had been working too hard. He looked almost haggard and Fritzie had been concerned about him. Steve worked for one of the smaller stock and bond firms in New York.

They passed seventy-ninth street, far out in north Miami. "I'll have to guide you; it's hard to find," Annie said. She was peering out intently. "To the right," Annie finally said. "It's over by the bay and wild like." Annie added a few mo-

ments later, "Left at the end of this street."

There were more turns until the convertible turned in between weathered, wooden gate posts. The last houses were well behind them; the car was rolling in shallow, sandy ruts.

The headlights picked out palms, low palmetto, taller pines, and a thick tangle of bushes, grasses and scrub growth.

"Wild?" Mr. Maddox muttered. "It's jungle. Worse than back in the Glades."

Annie said: "Ricardo Muñoz got the property in some sort of business deal. He's let it stay as it was. Mr. Cameron has the use of—" Annie gasped and caught Mr. Maddox' arm. "What's that?"

The last of three fast gunshots slammed through the night. Mr. Maddox' fast stamp on the brakes slid tires in the sandy soil. A bullet *bonged* against the car hood and keened viciously off into the growth.

"Down on the seat," Mr. Maddox ordered. He cut off lights and ignition and stepped out.

Ahead of them, the ruts had been curving sharply to the right. Blank silence had fallen. Then, running steps came toward the car. Mr. Maddox reached back and switched on the headlights.

The man was hatless, his coat flapping open. He was running in a kind of a frenzy. He veered off into the growth when the lights struck him. A man following him plunged into the scrub tangle, also.

Their crashing progress, circling the car, was easy to follow. It also covered the quick dart of Mr. Maddox' bulk off into the growth. Neither man could have seen Mr. Maddox anyway, in the shadows behind the blinding headlight glare.

The second man came crashing through the scrub, square into the vast waiting bulk of Mr. Maddox. His frightened squall demanded: "Teddy! This you, Teddy?"

"*Boo!*" Mr. Maddox said loudly. One big hand slapped to the back of the man's neck; the other hand caught an arm.

"Oh, my heaven! *Teddy! Teddy!* I'm being killed!"

"Brother," said Mr. Maddox, "it would be a pleasure!" Mr. Maddox released the arm. He had just enough glow from the headlights to make the target visible.

One short uppercut, and he heaved the sagging limp figure to his shoulder and tramped back to the car. The first man kept going.

Annie was starting ahead on foot. She was in an agony of fear. "They may have killed Fritzie."

"Run ahead and see," said Mr. Maddox.

Annie ran. Mr. Maddox followed.

The jungle-like growth ended. Hidden from the world ashore, was a small shingled bungalow and smooth green lawn running to the edge of Biscayne Bay.

The bungalow lights were on. A long, screened porch across the front was lighted. Fritzie Larkin stood at the foot of the porch steps with Annie Ryan. Fritzie held a small automatic. Her famous, tremendous vitality needed tight restraint as Mr. Maddox stretched his burden on the shell walk at their feet.

"So that," said Fritzie, "is one of the sneaking rats I shot at? Did I kill him?"

"Unfortunately," said Mr. Maddox dryly, "no."

Fritzie sat down on the porch step as if her knees were suddenly weak. They looked at Al Armstrong stretched limply on the ground. They heard a rough voice out in the night say:

"Step fast or I'll clout you!"

FRITZIE stood up. Mr. Maddox wheeled around. "It would have to happen! Cassidy!" Cassidy had the other man—Al Armstrong's bodyguard—by a twister on his wrist.

"I mighta known you'd be in on this, Joe," Cassidy snarled as he jerked his prisoner up to them. "Shooting; guys running . . ." Cassidy's voice trailed off as he saw the body on the ground. Cassidy exploded. "The same gang that was around the pool! So you finally got him?"

Mr. Maddox chuckled.

"Murder ain't any laugh, Joe," Cassidy warned darkly.

"They were sneaking around outside," said Fritzie, "and I shot over their heads."

"Have it your way," said Cassidy. "I ain't the jury. You didn't get him this morning, so you got him tonight."

"Lovely sight, isn't he?" Mr. Maddox said admiringly. "Who were you snooping after, Cassidy—Miss Larkin or me?"

"You,"" said Cassidy. "I had a hunch —" Cassidy stopped as Al Armstrong stirred, groaned, put a hand to his jaw and sat up, looking wildly around. "Where you shot?" Cassidy demanded.

Al Armstrong staggered to his feet. His thin raspy voice was shrill. "It was Maddox punched me! I recognized your voice, Maddox!"

Cassidy's squarish face was red as he freed the prisoner.

"So you run when I need you," Al Armstrong growled at his man. "You're fired! Shut up!" Armstrong whirled to Cassidy. "There's a body around here! You're that Masterton detective who was with the police this morning! Find that body quick!"

"Body?" said Cassidy blankly. "Where?"

"In the house, you dope. Where else?"

Cassidy plunged past Fritzie into the house.

Al Armstrong running in fright had been almost funny. This was real. Annie Ryan showed her fear. Mr. Maddox looked reproachfully at Fritzie Larkin as he fol-

lowed in Cassidy's angry, quick steps.

"I tried to get here in time, sister," Mr. Maddox said regretfully.

Cassidy was storming through the bungalow, snapping on room lights. Mr. Maddox stopped in the living room. There had been a struggle here. Chairs were knocked out of place. A glass pitcher of ice water had shattered against a wall, the ice cubes melting on the floor.

"Where's the body?" Cassidy yelled from the back of the house. He came pounding back, flushed, angry, as the others came in.

Fritzie still held her automatic. She was cool. Not a hair out of place. But Fritzie was pale as she asked: "What body?"

"We heard her!" Al Armstrong said excitedly. "She said, 'You fool, you've killed him!'"

Mr. Maddox lighted one of the fat black cigars. He looked at Fritzie. Fritzie shrugged. Cassidy was glowering.

"There ain't no body here," Cassidy said flatly. "There ain't anyone here she could have been talking to!"

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Did you think

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Al Armstrong was ever right? First he sneaks up and frightens a young woman. Playing copper, and doing worse at it than a Masterton detective," said Mr. Maddox with relish. "Then he runs like a rabbit. Now he tries an alibi out of a B-grade radio mystery. And when the *Globe* prints it, and the wire services pick it up, a few million people will be laughing at our fearless radio reporter."

Al Armstrong was almost weeping with rage. "Whoever was here, carried the body outside!" He yelled at Cassidy, "Haven't you any brains?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Mr. Maddox regretfully.

"Joe, I'll remember that!" Cassidy promised. He took a flashlight from his coat pocket, spotted the flash beam on Al Armstrong. "You know so much, mister! Let's find this body you're talking about!"

"He won't get lost in that jungle out there," Mr. Maddox guessed. "Too much rabbit in him."

Al Armstrong's look was venomous. "Teddy, come on!"

Mr. Maddox listened to them go out back. "Well, Fritzie?" he said.

Fritzie took a white leather purse from a chair beside her and slipped the automatic inside. Her hands were shaking. Suddenly Fritzie was shaking all over, as if in a chill.

"Th-they won't find anything," she stuttered under her breath. "He w-wasn't dead anyway. Steve only knocked him cold. I w-was excited."

"Knocked who cold?"

"S-Steve's boss—Art Cullan."

"Where are they?"

"Steve carried him to the b-boat. There's a channel at the edge of the p-property. You c-can't see it from the house. B-bushes." Fritzie's chin was trembling. Her eyes were wet. "I c-can't stop it! S-slap me!"

Mr. Maddox stepped to her. His slap knocked Fritzie half around. Mr. Maddox took the cigar from his mouth and somberly eyed the scarlet cheek. Fritzie shook her head, and opened the purse and dried her eyes with a handkerchief. Her twisted smile was steady now.

"Thanks, Joe."

The three men were audibly searching

out in the night. "Where's Bill Cameron?" Mr. Maddox questioned.

"He took Steve's wife and the baby to a movie."

"Fritzie, you've played this alone too long," Mr. Maddox said. "That fellow died this morning, you know. Steve's in bad trouble, isn't he? What's he done?"

"Took a chance and gambled with a customer's account," said Fritzie under her breath. "Steve says it was authorized verbally. Like a fool he didn't get it in writing. He'd done it before and no kickback. Now they've got him. Over twelve thousand!"

"You can pay that much back for him."

"Art Cullan won't have it that way."

"So the boss comes down here to talk it over and get punched." Mr. Maddox shook his head. "Has to be more to it than that, Fritzie."

"I can't tell you," said Fritzie. Her mouth was tight.

"What does Al Armstrong know?"

"I'm afraid to think," said Fritzie bitterly. "He gets tips from everywhere."

"Plenty to make him try a sneak like this tonight, personally," guessed Mr. Maddox, frowning. He studied the girl. "I'm your friend, Fritzie. This is bad, to make you rush here with a gun tonight. Bad, if it tears Bill Cameron to pieces. He's a steady sort."

"When you love a brother or a daughter, seeing their lives wrecked is worse than taking it yourself," said Fritzie wretchedly.

"Hogwash," said Mr. Maddox rudely. "You're covering up! Duke Hannigan's name blew this open by the swimming pool. What's with you and Hannigan?"

Fritzie's flash of indignation went off in a shrug. "Nothing. It was big while it lasted."

"What blew it?"

"It percolated finally," said Fritzie. "Hannigan is cold-blooded and all wrong inside. Nothing solid for a girl to build on." Fritzie's twisted smile mirrored some of the great hurt she must have gone through. "You would say the Duke wasn't a good bet for a trusting gal."

"How did Hannigan take it?"

"He didn't," Fritzie said. "He promised to get the first man I fell for. I could marry him or nothing."

"And you fell for Muñoz—and got

panicky when you heard that Hannigan and Muñoz were landing at the hotel almost together?"

Fritzie said, "Ricardo is a nice little man. Too nice to have something like Hannigan after him."

"Armstrong know all that?"

"Who knows what the rat knows?" said Fritzie. "I threw him out of my apartment when he was prying about the Duke and me. He's had a knife for me since."

"Makes you a perfect suspect for that death this morning," Mr. Maddox muttered.

"I know," said Fritzie. "But I'm clean there; they can worry about that."

Fritzie's head turned quickly toward the open door. Out on the bay, close inshore, the muffled murmur of a powerful underwater exhaust broke through the night quiet.

"Hey! Listen to that!" Cassidy's harsh voice called out at the edge of the growth.

CHAPTER FIVE

High-Rollers From Cuba

MR. MADDUX walked outside and heard Cassidy running, saw Cassidy's flashlight bobbing toward the waterfront. Fritzie came off the porch and stood beside Mr. Maddox. They heard the rising drone as the speedboat took full throttle, quartering out across the bay.

Mr. Maddox gripped Fritzie's arm. "Your honest word, Fritzie, there's no body on that boat! Steve isn't running out to sea to ditch a dead man?"

"They're ducking all this," said Fritzie. "Steve must have poled the boat out beyond the seawall before he started the motor."

"You're holding out, Fritzie. It's not good," Mr. Maddox warned soberly. "There's something big, dangerous, here."

Fritzie was looking out toward the bay, as if her thoughts were in the speeding boat. "Not murder," she said under her breath. "I'll see to that, if—if I have to—" Fritzie gave Mr. Maddox a startled look and closed her mouth tightly. "I won't talk about it any more." Her hand went out to Mr. Maddox's arm. "Not even to you, my friend. And you are my friend."

Mr. Maddox tossed the remains of his cigar to the damp grass. "You've had all the breaks, kid. You're young, and you've never learned that the breaks don't last, but a friend does. If it gets too tough, I'll still be around."

"Thanks," said Fritzie, and her voice was unsteady.

Cassidy had cut over through bushes and found the small channel at the edge of the property where the boat had been moored. He came back now, striding fast, trailed by the two men.

"Lady, who was in that boat?"

"What boat?"

"You heard it?"

"I'm not a seal," said Fritzie. "What happens in the bay is not my business."

Al Armstrong was bitterly positive. "Her brother's carrying the body away! Do something! Have that boat stopped! Call the harbor police!"

"Ah, shut up!" said Cassidy harshly. "If a body's being dumped, it'll be overboard before any other boat gets alongside. An' if it's dumped, it'll float in a day or so."

"Not out at sea, you dope!"

Cassidy was a big man, muscular, powerful. The grab he made for Al Armstrong hauled the smaller man roughly close. "I don't like you, mister!" Cassidy shook him. "I got a notion to pinch you! I ain't the local law, but I can drag you in! You been talkin' loose since this morning! You and that bodyguard—that guy wasn't poisoned."

"Wh-what? What do you know about it?"

"They got a preliminary report from a toxicologist," said Cassidy. "No trace of poison so far. They're deciding the guy had a heart attack."

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Our fearless radio reporter. The newspapers will cook him with this."

Al Armstrong had stepped back from Cassidy. His reaction came in a spitting rush. "No one makes a clown out of Al Armstrong. Come on, Teddy!"

No one stopped them. Cassidy plucked a cigar from Mr. Maddox' coat pocket. "I want to talk to you, Joe. You leaving?"

Fritzie said: "I'll stay here. Everything's all right now."

Mr. Maddox had the feeling Fritzie

was relieved to see him go, yet hated to be alone with her troubles. But when Cassidy was dour and dogged like this, he was worth attention.

They walked in silence to Mr. Maddox' car. The headlights were still on. Cassidy stood in the glare, chewing the unlighted cigar. His solid face was hard.

"Joe, there've been times I thought you were a square shooter."

"My pal."

Cassidy shrugged that comment aside. "I saw you meet Hannigan's plane. That's good enough for me. You're working with Hannigan." Cassidy tapped Mr. Maddox' broad chest forcefully. "First an' last warning, Joe. Drop it fast! I been onto you since you met that Muñez. I had an eye on you before that!"

Mr. Maddox had never looked more blandly innocent. "Why should I be working with Duke Hannigan?"

Cassidy snorted. "I might have wondered yesterday, Joe, even if the Masterton Agency hasn't had a hunch smart high-rollers down from the Main Stem would try to grab off bundles of Cuban dough, over from Havana to back that Muñez horse!"

"Cassidy," said Mr. Maddox admiringly, "you do think."

"I ain't dumb. Big horse betting means Joe Maddox. And what happens today?"

"Tell me," urged Mr. Maddox.

"Joe Maddox' name pops up in a police report. An' the same report says Duke Hannigan, who means big lay-off dough, is flying in," said Cassidy. "Then Joe Maddox personally meets Ricardo Muñez at the airport. And when Hannigan gets off *his* plane—there's Joe Maddox having a quick huddle with him."

"All for the press, Cassidy. Want to see my credentials from the *Globe*?"

"If you got their printing press in your hip pocket, I don't want to see it," said Cassidy. "While Homicide is thinking about murder today, I'm thinking about horse betting. And what do I find?"

"A horse," suggested Mr. Maddox helpfully.

"Better than that," said Cassidy with heavy satisfaction. "I find a horse trainer! He's got a son-in-law. That guy has got a sister. That sister, Al Armstrong tells us, is Duke Hannigan's girl friend. And

would you believe it—she's thick as thieves with Joe Maddox, and running around with Ricardo Muñez!"

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "One big happy circle of friends."

"With rooms tore up and bodies being sneaked away," said Cassidy coldly. He lit the cigar he had been chewing. He spat. "Joe, it ain't a happy circle to me. It's a set-up for a big clean-up. And it looks to me like the gang is fighting before they get these lousy-rich Cubans framed and cleaned with that pride-of-Cuba horse, *Si Magnifico*!"

"So now we have a real murder," said Mr. Maddox.

"That'll get cleared up," Cassidy promised. "But The Masterton Agency ain't going to have a big clean-up on these rich Cubans with a crooked race! Joe, I'll give you this chance to come clean with me and get out of it."

Mr. Maddox sighed. He was big and troubled. "Can you protect me from Hannigan's friends?"

"Sure, Joe. I knew you were smart enough to see the light."

"What I tell you won't get outside The Masterton Agency?"

"Not a leak, Joe. We're friends, ain't we? Old friends?" said Cassidy sentimentally.

"Pals," said Mr. Maddox warmly.

"Pals is right," Cassidy agreed. He dropped a hand on Mr. Maddox' shoulder. He gripped Mr. Maddox' other hand reassuringly. He looked Mr. Maddox in the eye. "Joe, you can trust me all the way."

Mr. Maddox shook the hand. Mr. Maddox clapped Cassidy on the shoulder. Mr. Maddox' voice was deep and rich and bland with sentiment.

"Tomorrow morning, beside the Casion swimming pool."

"Hah?"

"That's where we keep the bodies," confessed Mr. Maddox. "Take half a dozen home with you. Compliments of Joe Maddox."

Cassidy was past speech as Mr. Maddox slid in behind the steering wheel and started the motor. Cassidy stepped to the door.

"Joe, I'll have handcuffs on you for this!"

Mr. Maddox' long, low convertible surged ahead. Rear wheels spun sand back at Cassidy. Mr. Maddox made a sharp turn on the green lawn and picked up speed in gear back toward the gate.

Cassidy had to leap into the tangled bushes as the car rushed past him with derisive blare of horns. Cassidy's loud oaths dropped behind, and Cassidy was too late to reach his own car outside the property and follow.

Mr. Maddox drove fast to downtown Miami. He was grim now, under the impact of facts which Cassidy sensed but did not understand. And time was short.

IN A downtown hotel in Miami, Mr. Maddox wedged his bulk into another warm telephone booth. He had a handful of change. No one was checking this telephone for calls Joe Maddox might make.

Person-to-person, the call went through to Big Dan Hennessy, in New York, one of the squarest Inspectors of Police who ever came up by sheer ability from a suburban beat.

It took a little time before Dan Hennessy's rumbling voice said: "Joe Maddox—in Miami? The nerve of you, Maddox, calling from sunshine an' bathing girls, and me over here in Queens at a wake, and half-frozen getting here!"

"Dan, I need information, by tomorrow noon. Big trouble, Dan. I'm guessing Duke Hannigan's in the background."

"Hannigan!" said Hennessy. It sound-

ed like an oath, which was Hennessy's opinion of men like Hannigan. "Let's have it, Joe."

Mr. Maddox talked earnestly and answered questions. He had gone to grade school with Dan Hennessy. Bloody noses and black eyes had cemented their life-long friendship.

Dan Hennessy decided: "I'll go to my office now and start checking. It'll be unofficial, Joe, between you and me. If your telephone may be tapped, I'll send you telegrams fast as I find out anything."

"Thanks, Dan."

There was more telephoning; first to the suite of Ricardo Muñoz, at the Cason. A party seemed to be in progress. Mr. Maddox was all business.

"I'd like to hold all money possible which anyone from Cuba bets on your horse tomorrow."

"That will be done if I suggest it," Muñoz agreed readily. He warned, "It will be a large sum. Better than two hundred thousand, at a guess."

"I'll take it. Give me the names and amounts tomorrow."

Mr. Maddox hung up on that call soberly. He had obligated himself to pay out more money than he possessed or could borrow. Joe Maddox—who always paid off at track odds. Let Si Magnifico win the Hispaniola tomorrow at good odds, and it would take a fortune to pay the wildly happy Cubans off.

Information gave Mr. Maddox the

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number of Bill Cameron's telephone at the isolated cottage. Fritzie Larkin was still there.

"Fritzie, Duke Hannigan didn't check in at the Casion. Where is he?"

"Why should I know?"

"Don't you?"

Fritzie hesitated. "Hannigan left a message in my box at the Casion. If I wanted to see him, he was staying with Jake Fleming, on Flower Island." Fritzie was suspicious. "Joe Maddox, what business do you have with Hannigan?"

"Strictly personal. . . ."

Mr. Maddox was blandly self-assured when he got through to the Fleming residence and Hannigan. "Joe Maddox, Hannigan. Business this time. Can you handle two hundred thousand, more or less, on that Cuban horse tomorrow?"

It was big, even for Hannigan. "You don't deal in money like that, Maddox."

"I said this is business, Hannigan. Are you big enough to take it yourself? If not, there's time to place it around the country."

"On Si Magnifico?"

"To win."

Hannigan did not hesitate. "I'll take up to two hundred and fifty thousand." He was not all ice. Mr. Maddox knew that. A man who blew his top over Fritzie Larkin was fire inside. Hannigan's sneer came out of that inner heat. "I'll take as much more, if you can raise it, Maddox."

"I'll have it," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "All the Cuban friends of Ricardo Muñoz are laying with me, through Munez."

"So?" Hannigan said, and it could have meant anything.

One more call—to the redheaded operator on the Casion switchboard, at her rooming house in Miami.

"Madge, here's one for Al Armstrong. Miss Fritzie Larkin and Ricardo Muñoz, the Cuban sugar king, are talking about eloping tomorrow evening. Tell Armstrong in the morning."

"Gee! Sure, Mr. Maddox! Ain't she lucky?"

"Perhaps," said Mr. Maddox dryly. He left the booth, perspiring, and drove back to the Casion.

Pop Harvey had telephoned a rumor from one of the Muñoz stable hands that Si Magnifico was off his feed today.

"Tomorrow we'll know," Mr. Maddox said, getting out of his shirt, on the way to bed. "We're laying-off about two hundred grand on that horse tomorrow. Duke Hannigan is taking it!"

"Oh, my Lord!" said Oscar, blanching. "And Hannigan, too! Joe, do you know what you're doing?"

"I'd sleep better if I did," confessed Mr. Maddox.

He slept nervously, and awoke with doubt and uneasiness. Today would bring the answers.

TWO telegrams arrived from Dan Hennessy, in New York. A telephone call to Pop Harvey, at Hialeah, was not productive. "Cameron came to the early work-outs," said Pop. "He looked like he was up all night on a drunk. That there Cuban hoss wasn't blown out; jes' galloped easy. But they mean to run him."

Mr. Maddox went down to the coffee shop for a scant breakfast; then to the barber shop, and killed time with a shave, haircut and massage. He was waiting for more word from New York.

Finally, he telephoned the suite of Ricardo Muñoz, and went up. Muñoz, in slacks, sport shirt and rope-soled sandals, was smoking one of his hand-rolled cigarettes and smiling when he let Mr. Maddox in.

He gave Mr. Maddox a sheet of hotel stationery with an ink-written list of names and amounts. "Enough?" he inquired amiably.

"Two hundred and nine thousand," Mr. Maddox read the total at the bottom. "That's money in any language."

"Si Magnifico," said Muñoz, is a great horse in any language." He said it smiling, lightly, and his own great pride in the horse shone through as he turned to answer the ringing telephone.

Mr. Maddox was suddenly all attention as he heard Muñoz, obviously startled and puzzled, repeat: "Did I say we were going to elope?"

The other voice was crackling in angry indignation. Ricardo Muñoz protested, half-smiling:

"My dear Fritzie, I said no such thing to anyone. Who said so? . . . A man named Hannigan? I don't know the gentleman. Ah, but Fritzie, I'd like to shake

his hand. It's a great idea. Why don't we? . . . Love you? Of course! Let's make it the truth!"

Ricardo Muñez listened. His smile grew strained. "Anything you say, Fritzie," he said, and hung up. He snuffed his cigarette in a glass tray beside the telephone and started to roll another. "You heard," he said to Mr. Maddox. "Amazing. Wonderful—even if I was refused."

Muñez twisted the cigarette end and lit it. "I am in love, Señor Maddox. Yes! I propose. The lady refuses. She admits she loves me too, but she won't marry me. She is crying. She warns me to hire bodyguards quickly. My life is in danger. Now is that sense?" Ricardo pinched his arm hard, winced. Then for a moment he stood staring into space. A slow pleased smile came back on his face.

"Love . . . and danger," he said. "The two exquisite sensations. I am fortunate, señor."

"That," said Mr. Maddox blandly, "is one way of looking at it. Meanwhile, better get the bodyguards." There was a knock. "Let me answer it," said Mr. Maddox quickly. "Just in case."

He opened the door. Oscar stood there with another telegram. Mr. Maddox ripped it open, read it, and his broad face did not change.

"Seen Cassidy?" Mr. Maddox inquired, and when Oscar's head shook a negative, Mr. Maddox said, "I'll see you at the Hialeah clubhouse. Oh, and stop by Miss Larkin's door and tell her Joe Maddox said to stop worrying. And congratulations on the happy news."

"What news?" countered Oscar suspiciously.

"Love," said Mr. Maddox, and closed the door.

Ricardo Muñez was eyeing him intently. "You said to stop worrying, Señor Maddox." Strain and suppressed excitement were making him more Cuban.

"I didn't say for you to stop worrying," warned Mr. Maddox bluntly. "Have you heard from Cameron, your trainer, this morning?"

"A short talk over the telephone. He had a word of caution about being too certain of winning."

Mr. Maddox' face clouded. He glanced

at his wristwatch. "I'll be at the track," he said rather shortly, and departed, leaving Muñez puzzled at his abruptness. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Unwanted Vacation

FLOWER Island, one of the man-made islands out in Biscayne Bay, reached by a causeway, was lush and expensive with villas and palms, shrubs and flowers. Jake Fleming was kingpin of the slot-machine concessions south of Jacksonville, and wealthy enough from that, no matter what his other sub-rosa interests.

His dazzling white, Mediterranean style house was almost invisible behind a property wall and the riot of painting. But it was the edge of the island, with its own private speedboat dock, Mr. Maddox was interested in.

Mr. Maddox walked from the convertible and rapped with the wrought-iron door knocker.

A man-servant opened the door. He looked like an ex-wrestler. He said, "Hannigan? Who said he was here?"

"I said he was staying here," said Mr. Maddox coldly. "If he's in, tell him Joe Maddox is here."

"He's out back of the house. If you're smart, you won't bother him. He's sore about something."

"Never mind telling him. I'll walk around the house."

Duke Hannigan was pacing back and forth in the dapple of sunshine through palm fronds. Hands gripped behind his back. Black fury, if a face ever showed it. He saw Mr. Maddox and stopped short.

"What the devil! I don't want to see anyone!"

"For two hundred and twenty-nine thousand of lay-off money, you'd better see me," said Mr. Maddox, joining him. "I've got the list here."

"Give it to me and get out, Maddox! I'm busy!"

The man's icy calm was cracking. He was raging inside. A thought struck him. "You must have come from that damned Muñez!"

"I did."

"Was Fritzie Larkin there?"

"None of your business," said Mr. Maddox calmly. "Here's the list." Hannigan snatched it, shoved it inside his coat without a glance at the names and amounts. "You accept it?" Mr. Maddox persisted.

"Hell, yes! Stop talking!"

"I added twenty thousand of my own," said Mr. Maddox blandly. "Just for luck, Hannigan. Now I'll tell you a fairy story, which may be printed in the *Globe* and picked up by the wire services."

Mr. Maddox lit one of the fat black cigars. Duke Hannigan was watching him with smoldering intentness, as if sensing trouble.

"An ex-salesman of bum oil stocks, alias Eddy Winters in those days, real name Art Cullen, was backed in a brokerage business by a smart man named Hannigan, who covered up his forty per cent interest in the firm. You'd have to dig in the legal records and know what you were looking for, to prove it."

"You've been digging," said Hannigan in flat harshness.

Mr. Maddox blew a reflective smoke ring. "With pick and shovel, Hannigan. So it was easy for you to get Fritzie Larkin's brother, Steve, a nice job with Cullen and Carnes, who handled some of your investments. I'll lay odds Fritzie was grateful. She thought Hannigan was tops at that time."

"Go on," said Hannigan in the same flat harsh voice.

"Maybe it was a gesture," said Mr. Maddox. "You were overboard for Fritzie. When Fritzie got wise and quit you, the larceny came out. You couldn't handle Fritzie. But you had a string on Steve Larkin. And Steve had a string on his sister's heart—and Steve's wife had a string on her father's heart."

"And Bill Cameron trained horses for Ricardo Muñoz, who had more money than he knew what to do with. A girl like Fritzie, who could toss Duke Hannigan over, you didn't quite understand. But horses and millionaire owners and their friends, you did understand. Am I calling it right?"

Duke Hannigan had not moved a muscle. "I'm listening."

"Al Armstrong was nosing around in

all that," said Mr. Maddox. "Hard to tell how much he found out about Cullen and Carnes, and Fritzie's brother working there. I'm guessing he had a tipster around the office who kept him posted. Anything about the Duke Hannigan—Fritzie Larkin romance, was meat to that jackal after Fritzie brushed him off."

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "By the way, thank Armstrong for tipping you off about Fritzie and Ricardo Muñoz. I thought he would, and I wanted to see how you'd take it."

Duke Hannigan said nothing. His eyes were murderous. Mr. Maddox considered him.

"You're big, Hannigan, and you're clever. And you're greedy. It was easy for two smooth ones like Cullen and you to work a trusting young fellow like Steve Larkin into an angle, where you had him cold for ostensibly embezzling from a customer's account. The one weak spot was the customer to tell Steve verbally to trade for him, and deny it later. He had to be safe.

"And," said Mr. Maddox blandly, "he was safe until Inspector Dan Hennessy bluffed his name out of your bookkeeper this morning and looked him up. Guess what Hennessy found?"

"I've stopped guessing, Maddox!"

"I'll surprise you," said Mr. Maddox, unruffled. "Mr. A. L. Greenwood, the trusting customer, was Boiler-Room Louie Green, a two-time loser for peddling fake oil stocks. Doesn't surprise you?" Mr. Maddox chuckled. "The surprise is what you evidently didn't know about Louie Green. He violated his last parole by skipping to Texas, from California, and pulling a fake oil lease deal on a wealthy widow, who didn't forgive and forget. Dan Hennessy remembered the circular on it."

Mr. Maddox took the last telegram from his pocket, and gave it to Hannigan, who snatched it.

"Dan Hennessy is persuasive," said Mr. Maddox. "Louie Green admitted Steve Larkin was framed. He didn't know why. None of his business. But I'll tell you why," said Mr. Maddox. His broad face was now hard.

"Steve was a decent young fellow. A stretch in the pen would smash his life,

wreck his marriage, break his wife's heart—and crucify Steve's sister and his wife's father. That's what you'd do," said Mr. Maddox, "to a girl you loved as much as you'll ever love anyone! Do you feel like a rat, Hannigan?"

HANNIGAN crumpled the telegram and threw it on the grass. "There's more than one way to bring a dame to her senses." Hannigan's face was white with fury. "Art Cullen had handled all this! I never saw this man Green!"

"Cullen was fronting for you, Hannigan. Maybe it started as a squeeze play, for Fritzie to beg you to help Steve, when Steve was in great trouble. But Fritzie evidently had you pat; she didn't beg. And the money angle was too sweet to pass up. Why not squeeze Bill Cameron too, in the one way he could be reached? Love for his daughter.

"Just let this Cuban horse lose his race—and everyone would be happy. No trouble for Steve. Who would know about it? Just one race, not quite as good as the Cuban horse could run it. All up to Bill Cameron, a fine man and a loving father. Make him forget he's a sportsman. Strangers will lose the money! And if Bill Cameron does it—and hates himself forever afterward, he's just another sucker who could be handled!"

Mr. Maddox threw his cigar to the grass.

"Hannigan," he said. "Rats like you deserve what they get! If you'd stayed out of Miami, it might have worked. Al Armstrong wouldn't have meddled. I'd never have known. Now the hook is in you. Two hundred and twenty-nine thousand—and you'll pay out if the horse wins.

Because if you don't, I'll put you in headlines! And the horse will win if he's got a chance—because I'll tell Bill Cameron before paddock time that Steve's in no danger, now or any time!"

A great sudden stab of warning went through Mr. Maddox. Perhaps it was the murderous satisfaction flashing on Duke Hannigan's face. Or Mr. Maddox' instant realization his own anger had made him say too much.

He'd shown Hannigan that Dan Hennesy's telegrams were in his coat. . . . *And he'd let Hannigan know that Bill Cameron hadn't yet been warned.*

Duke Hannigan's soft white hand was slipping inside his coat even as he shouted: "Help here!"

Mr. Maddox lunged forward fast—but Hannigan was leaping back. Mr. Maddox' smashing fist only grazed Hannigan's cheekbone. The force of it drove Hannigan reeling aside.

Off-balance by the blow, Mr. Maddox dived after Hannigan. He saw the blued gun-metal of a short automatic whipping out in Hannigan's hand. His grip reached Hannigan's shoulder and halted the man. His wild grab settled behind the gun wrist. Men were running from the house. Hannigan, not trying to beat him off, was snatching for the gun with the other hand.

Mr. Maddox knocked the hand up. His elbow drove Hannigan's head over; but the man was twisting, pulling away with a kind of berserk fury which made him hard to handle quickly.

And it had to be quick. Almost too late now. This back garden plot was not large. The pounding steps were close. Mr. Maddox crowded in, whipped his

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other hand over the gun, and with a great wrench tore it from Hannigan's convulsive grip.

The slug of a gun barrel from behind knocked Mr. Maddox stumbling to his knees, sunlight fading, Duke Hannigan's figure whirling. Hands grabbed Mr. Maddox' arms. This green and cozy little garden behind the house was high-walled, very private, Mr. Maddox remembered foggily.

They hoisted him to his feet. The manservant who looked like an ex-wrestler had Mr. Maddox' right arm in a grip which could break bone with pressure. The man hanging to the left arm was tall and lean; he had a black eye. Art Cullen, Mr. Maddox guessed he was. Steve Larkin had blacked his eye last night when Cullen brought final pressure about the race today. Steve had brought him here in the speedboat, avoiding the strangers Fritzie had fired at.

Hannigan frisked Mr. Maddox fast. He took only Dan Hennessy's telegrams.

"Want him in the house, Duke?"

Blood was in Mr. Maddox' mouth from a split lip. His head ached terrifically. But he was thinking clear enough now. Joe Maddox had botched it at the last minute. And Duke Hannigan had clamped glacial calm over the wild fury.

"I've got the betting list, Maddox. If the race is lost, I'll collect the bets. But if something goes wrong and it's won, they can collect from you! If they can find you. Take him down in the cruiser cabin," said Duke Hannigan. "He likes to fish out in the Gulf Stream, and this is the morning to take him."

Like that. A truck ran over you in St. Louis . . . you got amnesia . . . you went fishing in the Gulf Stream—if you crossed Duke Hannigan's web of plans.

Mr. Maddox tried to break free. He was slugged again, into foggy helplessness. Thoughts raced in great pounding throbs inside his head. . . . Steve Larkin was safe. Dan Hennessy would see to that. But Bill Cameron would not know it by race time. Cameron would have to look into his soul and heart and make his decision about the race.

They hustled him through the gate to the boat landing. A gun was in his back as he stepped aboard the smart little cabin

cruiser tied there. Any eyes looking across sun-glistening Biscayne Bay would have envied the lucky passenger with a boat like this at his disposal.

Mr. Maddox was seated in the cabin. The flat-faced man-servant took a post in the doorway. Hannigan and Cullen left. Time passed. Mr. Maddox wiped the blood from his lip and lighted a cigar.

"What's the wait?" he finally asked.

"The guy who runs the boat went over to Miami."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mr. Maddox' Hole-card

MORE time passed. The cabin was hot. The guard was restless. Now and then he muttered to himself and looked toward the house. It was noon when he snapped alert. Men were coming aboard. The man who stepped in first was Cassidy—with a gun at his back, his cheek split and blood trickling from his nose.

"Welcome, pal," Mr. Maddox greeted.

Cassidy glared. "So you *are* tied in with this, Joe?"

"Square in the middle."

"Joe," said Cassidy, "this finishes you."

Mr. Maddox nodded. Lines were being cast off. A powerful young man in white ducks and yachting cap went to the wheel. A big engine pulsed into life.

"Where we going?" Cassidy demanded.

"Fishing in the Gulf Stream. Shark fishing," Mr. Maddox guessed. His chuckle was wry. "We're the bait. I'll lay you ten to one you make your shark sick. Have a cigar."

"*We?*" said Cassidy. He stepped closer, peering at Mr. Maddox' split lip. He took the cigar and sat in another chair heavily. "I came to the door asking for you, Joe—and got asked in and slugged."

"This," said Mr. Maddox, "should cure you of being a dumb cop."

Two other men, strangers, were with the guard outside the cabin door. The boat had picked up speed.

"I went to Ricardo Muñoz, to warn him we were suspicious of any big betting the Cubans would do on his horse," said Cassidy. "He said the betting had been done,

and it was heavy, and it might be a good idea to talk to you and Hannigan."

"So you left Muñoz thinking I was crooked," said Mr. Maddox with a trace of bitterness.

"We knew where Hannigan was staying. I came looking for you both," said Cassidy. "Joe, what gives?"

Mr. Maddox told him, coldly, curtly. Cassidy's face darkened. "The betting was away from the track, Joe. That ain't my business. But that trainer is set for a crooked race! Right under our noses! He'd have reported it, if he wasn't!"

"You won't be there to worry about it," Mr. Maddox comforted.

It was beginning to really dawn on Cassidy. "Joe—they meant to kill us."

Mr. Maddox nodded. The powerful marine engine was droning at top speed. The bow was up, spray sheeting, as the cruiser raced through Government Cut, at the south end of Miami Beach, toward the open sea.

"I've been waiting for someone to get careless," said Mr. Maddox. "Got an idea. Beats being shark's canapé at tea-time in the Gulf Stream."

"Anything goes, Joe! Anything!" Cassidy was perspiring.

"Don't look," said Mr. Maddox. "But if you dive along the floor when I say so, and slam that door and hold those three goons out there in the cockpit for a few minutes, we might change the odds." Mr. Maddox added, "If you could last a minute, while they were getting wise and shooting through the door at you."

Cassidy swallowed. "Joe, I'll last a minute, if they don't get me in the head."

"I believe you will," said Mr. Maddox. His faint smile was genuine. "Good luck at it, pal."

Cassidy nodded. He said huskily, "If there's anything I ought to take back, I do."

"Now!" Mr. Maddox suddenly snapped under his breath.

Cassidy dived out of his chair like a football tackler. His hand slammed the door shut, slapped the catch over, and Cassidy, hunched on the floor, got all his weight against the door to hold it.

Mr. Maddox was moving even faster in the same second. His huge bulk, deceptively fast, with more muscle than fat,

plunged forward, and up two steps to the glass-enclosed bridge where the cruiser was steered.

The first ocean swells into Government Cut were tossing the boat some; motor noise and wave noise drowned minor movements. But danger in the air, or vibration of Mr. Maddox' steps, brought the man's head around. He had an automatic thrust down inside his belt buckle. He was grabbing for it when Mr. Maddox' big fist, backed with all the charging bulk, smashed just behind his ear.

The men fell against the wheel and rolled away. Now Mr. Maddox could see clearly what he had been glimpsing and waiting for. . . .

A big white steel yacht was coming majestically into the Cut, following the channel to the Yacht Basin over on the Miami shore. The cruiser, still running all out, heeled sharply as Mr. Maddox spun the steering wheel.

Shouts, kicks, lunges against the door, were coming from the cockpit aft. Then the loud report of gunshots broke out. Glass shattered behind Mr. Maddox' head. He ducked down and over to one side, straddling the limp figure on the floor.

They were shooting at Cassidy too. The yacht's whistle began to kee frantically. The white hull seemed to leap close, grow monstrously in size. A man at the yacht's rail was waving frantically.

Mr. Maddox braced himself, held a crooked arm before his face and eyes. The crashing impact at full speed into the yacht's steel hull was a nightmare of rending hull, shattering glass, furniture hurled about.

They ground in along the yacht's side, motor still running, as Mr. Maddox lurched up. The cruiser almost overturned. Its bow was smashed far back. It hammered and banged and ground along the yacht's hull as Mr. Maddox whirled the steering wheel and kept in against the yacht's side.

A look back showed Cassidy, chairs and cushions, in a mass at the front of the cabin. The shooting had stopped. One man was overboard. The other two were hanging on. The yacht had reversed engines and was slowing. Mr. Maddox slowed his own engine and waved at shouting, gesturing crew members and passen-

gers now rushing to the yacht's rail. . .

IT WAS almost three o'clock when a police launch put them ashore at the Miami docks. The sleek, shiny cruiser was a waterlogged wreck, beached off the side of the causeway. Prisoners were handcuffed. It had taken ship-to-shore messages back and forth over the police radiotelephone, with the Masterton Agency interceding and Collins, of Miami Beach Homicide, adding his knowledge, to let both Cassidy and Mr. Maddox step ashore free, details to be settled later.

Cassidy's face had bruises and scratches. There was a bullet furrow through his shoulder which had been given first-aid on the police boat. But Cassidy could move fast enough, keeping with Mr. Maddox, as they reached the street and hailed a taxi.

"Hialeah," Mr. Maddox snapped to the driver. "Fast as you can get there."

He looked at his watch as he sat heavily on the seat. "The Hispaniola goes to the post at three-thirty," Mr. Maddox commented dubiously. "Lucky if we can make it."

They sat for the most part in silence during that fast ride out northwest through the city to Hialeah track.

It was Saturday afternoon; parking lots were jammed with cars, grandstand, clubhouse and standing space was packed. Cassidy snapped to the gatekeeper as they ran in:

"Has the sixth race started?"

"At the post now."

"Damn! I hoped we'd get them in the paddock, at least," Cassidy fumed.

"Ricardo Muñez will be in a clubhouse box," Mr. Maddox suggested. "It's his horse. You'd better see him before you go to the stewards."

Cassidy led the way hurriedly. The horses were in the starting gate. A taut quiet had settled down on the great crowd. Pushing through, they reached the box of Ricardo Muñez.

Fritzie Larkin was seated in the box beside Muñez. The other occupants of the box were Cubans. The horses bolted from the starting gate in front of the grandstand as Cassidy stepped into the box and touched Ricardo Muñez' shoulder. The crowd was roaring and the horses sweep-

ing past into the turn, while Muñez came quickly to his feet, his face stern.

They talked at the back of the box. Fritzie saw them and joined them. Fritzie was pale. She looked unhappy, but she would always look stunning.

"Joe Maddox," said Cassidy, "is okay." Cassidy had to lift his voice above the crowd noise and first blare of the loud speaker horns. "But there's a chance, mister, your horse ain't running his right race!"

Muñez stared at them. A faint smile touched his mouth. He reached for Fritzie Larkin's hand, and held it. "I think so, gentlemen," he said. "The trainer came to me at noon, with certain facts, including his belief that our great horse is possibly a bit stale."

Mr. Maddox mopped his forehead. "So Bill Cameron came through."

Fritzie was not happy. "It was against my advice," Fritzie said. "No horse race is worth what we'll have to pay for this."

Ricardo Muñez smiled broadly and patted Fritzie's hand. "That is a woman," he said, and there was Latin proudness in his tone. "A woman who knows how to love—a woman who would do anything for the men she loves." Muñez winked at them. "But this is a matter for men to decide. We will do what we can later, in matters which are making Fritzie unhappy. Meanwhile, Si Magnifico will run his race."

The horses were in the far backstretch. The loudspeakers were blaring: "It's Si Magnifico still, by a length. . . ."

Mr. Maddox suddenly remembered that Duke Hannigan was out of the picture. A win by the Cuban horse would cost Joe Maddox more money than he could raise. But he'd been trying to make it possible. Someone was a fool there, when you pondered it.

"You're running your horse on the chance he's not stale?" Mr. Maddox said. "And betting on him? All your friends, too?" Mr. Maddox made one last gesture. "Muñez, you can call off the betting!"

"Ah, no!" Muñez refused. "I have explained to my friends. Everything is as it was. We are sportsmen. We are racing and betting for the glory of Cuba." Muñez shrug was pure Latin. "If we lose, we lose."

The loudspeakers cried: "Si Magnifico

by a head." Si Magnifico was leading in the Hispaniola. . .

"Fritzie," Mr. Maddox said, "stop worrying. Steve is all right. Tell you later. It was a frame-up by Hannigan. He's probably under arrest by now."

Fritzie stared unbelievably. Then she kissed Mr. Maddox. She was crying. "Oh, Joe, I'm so happy. Really happy now that this is over."

"I'm glad," said Mr. Maddox with an effort at cheerfulness. "Someone should be happy around here. Looks like your horse is winning." He glanced again at the track.

Ricardo Muñoz was a man of great perception. "Señor Maddox! I have changed my mind. About many things. I wish to withdraw the betting."

"Not now," Mr. Maddox refused. "But thanks, Muñoz. Everything stands as it was."

There they came sweeping into the stretch—and there went Joe Maddox' bankroll, Joe Maddox' credit—and possibly Joe Maddox' reputation for paying off to the last penny at once.

Si Magnifico had his head lead, and had the rail, and he was beginning to run through the stretch like the great horse he was. Everyone was cheering, shouting madly.

Mr. Maddox reached for a cigar. They were all gone. He stood there, big and expressionless, watching ruin sweep through the stretch.

Then suddenly speeding out of the furiously whipping pack at the leader's heels came one horse, fast, faster. The crowd was howling.

The group of Cubans in the box were on their feet in frantic excitement. No one could hear the horns now. But you could see the race. See clearly the desperate efforts of Si Magnifico's jockey—and his great horse, which kept running, but lacked the snap to meet the challenge that came and moved on ahead by inches under the wire. Si Magnifico had lost the race.

Mr. Maddox suddenly relaxed and mopped his face again. He had stopped breathing. He drew a great breath. The Cubans were disconsolate. Ricardo Muñoz shrugged his slender shoulders, wryly smiling.

"Señor Maddox," he said, "we will settle tonight." He turned to his quiet-voiced sad friends.

"So you win a hatful, Joe," Cassidy said. "If that ain't the luck of a fat bookie. Dough for you—and a face like pounded steak for me."

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "You got a dumb cop's reward, Cassidy. All I did was help out our good-neighbor friends—for the glory of Cuba."

Ricardo Muñoz soberly nodded his head at that.

"How much did you win, Joe?" the Masterton detective asked.

"The price of glory," said Mr. Maddox blandly, "comes high. Add five hundred to that for my newspaper work. And Cassidy, you're in on this with me."

"For dough?" Cassidy asked suspiciously.

"Honorable mention," said Mr. Maddox. "The cop whose brain wouldn't work—but whose face could take it."

THE END

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She slipped up when
no one was watching.



*Private-eye Clark didn't believe
the Bohemian painter had kicked the bucket
without help—from a shapely gun-artist.*

By **JOHN
KAVANAUGH
POLITO**

THIRD STREET south of Wash-
ington was a dim tunnel, with a
chill wind off the Mississippi rub-
bing grimy flurries of snow against the
sick yellow of the street lights.

Ahead of me, at the end of the block, a
green splash of color barely survived the
cold shadows. Two dark shapes near the
curb crept away as I approached the Green

Lantern Cafe. One, long and black, blinked a red eye suddenly and cried with the low, hoarse moan of a siren into the cold wind. This, a police ambulance, was followed by a patrol car.

Probably just another skid-row bum starved and frozen out of an unfriendly world, I thought, and shuddered.

I entered the narrow door under the green lantern, and the desolation of waterfront St. Louis was shut out. Here was vivid color, warm light, the sharp tang of liquor, the yeasty perfume of beer.

Diogenes Kyrios was behind the bar, and while I had unconsciously noticed that the Green Lantern was rather empty for ten o'clock, his gloomy face and mournful eyes made me suddenly and sharply aware that the clattering voices, usually inescapable, were strangely absent.

I gave "Doge" a small smile. "Cold out there tonight. I'll take a mostika."

With dignity he turned to the shelf, reached the bottle of clear liquid, and turned back to pour my drink. I swallowed half the sharp, sweet liqueur. As I set the glass on the bar, I glanced around the dim cavern of the cafe. The silence was understandable now.

In a back corner, a huge oval dining-room table was vacant, the eight or nine chairs pushed back in orderly fashion, the thick candles cold and lifeless in the necks of old wine bottles.

I turned back to the decorous Greek. "What gives with our Bohemian friends tonight? Too cold for art?"

Doge crossed his thick arms on his barrel chest and shook his head solemnly. He leaned across and half-whispered:

"Tragedy. One of the boys is dead. Killed himself." He cocked a forefinger at his head and triggered his thumb.

I shook my head in bewilderment. I had spent many a loud and interesting evening among these writers, sculptors, painters. To imagine that any of these roistering characters would kill himself—

"Who was it?"

"Joe. Joe Calvin. The only painter we have, and now—he is gone."

Joe was one of the few in the group who had become something of an individual to me, more than a loud, wrangling voice in the heavy air of the cafe. Joe and Ruth Corio, his girl.

I said: "Well, where is everybody, then? Where is Ruth? How is she taking it? What happened?"

Doge shrugged his shoulders. He drew a beer and slid it along the bar to a customer.

"They all go to headquarters to answer questions. Ruth—well, first she break down, but she is controlled when she go. The others—the same—arguments, arguments, even in the face of death."

I sipped my drink and looked around the cafe. It didn't seem warm and friendly any longer. I glanced idly at some of the work on the walls, turning over in my mind the feeling I had that Joe Calvin was not a likely boy for a suicide.

One of his paintings hung back of the bar. It was a study in oils, about four feet square, with a quality of harsh cold light that actually hurt your eyes.

The scene was a barren bedroom, seen through a gaping door, with light flowing coldly from an uncurtained window. Across a bed a girl lay curled, asleep. Her hose were rolled below the knees, and she wore high platform shoes. Realism, stark and denuded of illusion. It was good, somewhere between Van Gogh and Gauguin, perhaps, but still unmistakably Calvin.

I gulped another mostika. I said:

"You think they'll be back down tonight?"

Doge answered with a grave smile: "Oh, yes. Where else do they have to go?"

I agreed. When they weren't working or sleeping the Green Lantern was their home. Surely they would come back after the business at headquarters.

SUDDENLY I wanted to be near Ruth and to help her—and I fought a little battle with myself over that. She was color and warmth, soft olive tones and deep red and the dancing ebony of soft hair and she belonged to Joe Calvin. A private dick could exist by sufferance in her world, but belong? I didn't kid myself.

Sure, admit it. I spent those evenings in the Green Lantern not because I liked the flame of the little candles or the good talk or the rude good spirits of the little artists' group—no, the flame I came to

watch was Ruth Corio. Calvin's girl.

"Another mostika, Diogenes." When he brought the drink I asked, "How did it happen?"

"I am not sure. They all talk at once. So. Tonight they have a little party at the rooms of the thin, quiet girl, you know? Ah, ah, Martha."

"Yes, Martha Ganz."

"She is have her place on second floor the old fur warehouse next door. Joe is have his studio upstairs, third floor."

I knew the lay-out. Joe originally had rented the whole third floor of the old loft building for a workroom, and later, with plywood and paint and imagination, turned it into comfortable living quarters.

Martha Ganz, a fragile intense girl who wrote obscure stuff—experimental literature—had moved in on the floor below somewhat later. No plywood for Martha, though. Loire out on Washington Boulevard had done the decorating and most of the furniture came from Lammerts. Out of the whole group, Martha was the only deal dilettante. Some of the others were phony, certainly, but they were harmless, merely playing at being artists. Martha came from Ladue Village.

". . . oh, is good party. This girl, the thin one, she have me order champagne, cognac, scotch." He nodded in tribute. "Plenty money."

I agreed. He continued:

"Joe is not at the party. He is working to finish painting for exhibition in south somewhere, New—something—"

"New Orleans. First show they've ever had open to artists from all over the country."

"Yes. The party is going very good. I bring another case champagne. Everybody, she want Joe to come down before liquor is all gone, so Martha, she go upstairs to bring him. Then is a shot. She scream, and everybody she go upstairs. Joe is dead. He have gun in hand. His head is fall against easel. Martha, she's a faint on the floor."

"Did he leave a note or say anything beforehand?"

"Nothing. He's a shoot himself, is finish."

The street door swung open then, and with the blast of cold air the group entered the cafe.

There was Martha Ganz, frail, delicate, with gray eyes that hid a flickering light. She entered first and walked daintily past me to the table at the rear. Then a couple of men whose names I didn't know. One of them, I remembered, played around with wires and pieces of metal, called it mobile sculpture. The other, big, red-faced and blond, carved distorted balloon-like figures out of wood. Ruth came next, on the arm of Anson Doyle, who worked in ceramics.

Ruth gave me a tremulous smile as she passed me. Her eyes were swollen and the shadows under them deep violet. I wanted to put out a hand to her, and caught myself in time.

After they settled around the table and Diogenes had brought them drinks, I walked back to the table.

"Ruth, fellows, I'm awfully sorry. Doge told me. If there's anything, anything at all . . ."

Ruth took my hand and her soft lips framed her thanks silently. There were murmurs around the table and nods of sympathy. One of the men moved a chair forward and motioned with his hand. I sat down and sipped my drink. I asked:

"What do the police have to say?"

"What could they say?" This was mobile sculptor.

Ruth began to cry and got up and left the table. I looked across at Martha expectantly, but she shook her head and said shortly:

"No. She's better off alone. She'll get over it."

I noticed a couple of glances, unfriendly glances. The blond fellow said:

"Yeah, it's no worse than a bad cold. Only Ruth isn't a cold cookie like you."

Fire flickered in Martha's eyes as she answered: "What would you know about cold or fire, you carpenter?"

"Carpenter, huh? Well, at least you can see what I'm trying to do. Why can't you write a simple understandable sentence, just once?"

The fire died out of Martha's eyes as she replied indifferently: "Little Bo Peep is just about your level. By all means, stay with it, you and your wooden night-mares."

I broke in: "Listen, let's cut out the quarreling for tonight. I know we can't

help Joe, but maybe there's something we can do for Ruth. How is she fixed for money?"

There was a little babble at that, with the general sense that she was okay, and besides, everyone would do their best to help her.

"How about the funeral? Does Joe have any family?"

There were several I-don't-knows, and then Martha spoke up.

"No. But still the police won't release his body, not for a couple of days. I don't understand it." Her last words were angry, annoyed.

I answered: "Well, they'll have to perform an—"

A warning word told me Ruth was returning. I caught an odd look of dread in Martha's eyes at my words, and I wondered what I would have seen if I had finished my sentence. Ruth stopped at my shoulder and said:

"If you don't mind, I think I'll turn in. I don't—I can't—"

I jumped up and helped her with her coat, turning her shoulders so she faced away from the table. I asked:

"Can I take you home, Ruth? I was just ready to leave."

She nodded, tears again in her eyes. With a few polite murmurs, we walked to the door. Before we were outside one of the voices began:

". . . that garbage they call prize winners in the Missouri Exhibition . . ."

Several voices leaped in, and I knew that Joe Calvin might be lying on a cold slab in the little building on Twelfth Street, but his art would be the only memory of him in the little cafe. . . .

THE street was cold, and if possible lonelier than when I had come in a couple of hours before. Ruth shivered.

"Clark, do you think Joe, do you think he could have?"

"It doesn't seem likely, but—well, I don't know any of you people well, not your private lives. Maybe he had a reason."

"No. I knew Joe well. I knew him as well as I know myself, better maybe, and Joe was happy and contented and his work was going well. He couldn't have—he just couldn't have."

I slipped my hand through her arm and pulled her closer to me. I tried to think of words that would help her, healing words for a wound that couldn't be reached. There aren't any.

We reached the fur warehouse entrance and Ruth paused tentatively:

"Will you come up to the studio with me, Clark? I want to straighten some things. The police—"

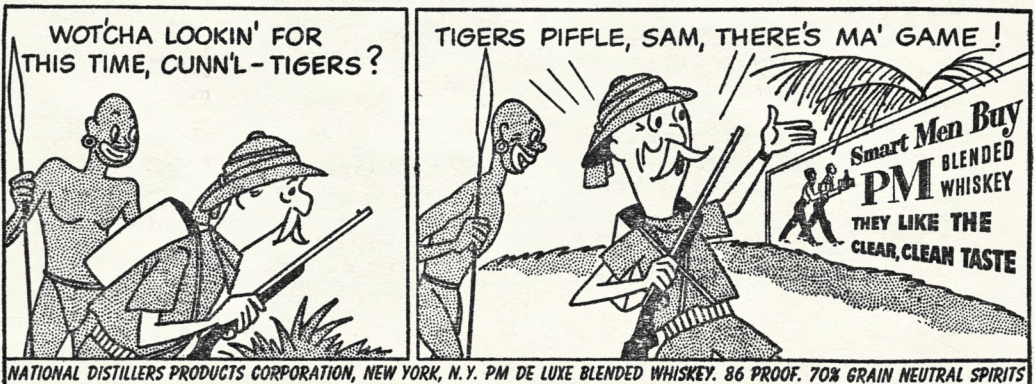
"Do you think you'd better?"

"I'll be all right. I promise. You're being awfully patient with me, Clark. You did like Joe, didn't you?"

"Sure." I gulped. "He was a great guy. Okay, let's go up."

The old building was a jungle of dim shapes in the shadows cast by a tiny light. We mounted broad wooden steps that groaned and rasped with every pressure. At the first landing I glanced at the blond wood door that closed Martha's apartment from the rest of the building.

On the next floor Ruth stood for a moment, silently, in front of the scarred studio door. Then, holding her head erect, she opened it, stepped inside, and flicked



a switch that Calvin had installed.

Several wall lamps flooded the long, wide room with a golden glow. The near side of the room was arranged like a living room, with two low divans, a couple of leather-covered easy chairs and small low tables with books, photographs and magazines spilling from them.

The bath was to the left, forming a cubicle within the square of the room. At the far end was the workroom. A pedestal-type easel was set up, and held a large square of masonite, scored side up. A chest-high table stood at one side of the easel, its top littered with brushes, tubes and bottles. A metal wastebasket held cloths, stained with paint and slightly stiff. A dark, scoured patch on the floor drew my eyes, and then I noticed more darkly stained rags in the can.

Ruth looked at the partly finished painting on the easel.

"This new one is the way he's been painting lately. I—I don't quite understand it." Her voice became dull. Then she finished firmly: "But it was good and it was coming along fine. I can always tell."

"He was pretty happy?"

"Oh, yes. If it was going badly he'd be upset and blue—"

She turned away and walked back to a divan. On the rack at the easel's base were two white bristle brushes, one a three-quarter inch and the other a one-inch. I knew they were white bristle because that's what Joe always used, but they were clotted with paint now.

I looked at the work table. He had been working with greens and yellows when he had suddenly—quit. There were uncapped tubes of flake white and cadmium yellow and terre-verte green. On the palette were little blobs of color, glossing over now with a dull sheen. The soft feeling that had held me ever since Ruth walked in began to give way to something else.

Okay, Sherlock, I sneered to myself, so you smell a trail. This isn't any job for a p.i. Still, it wasn't the first time I had worked without a fee and besides, maybe I was working for the biggest fee I'd ever had in sight.

I walked back to Ruth and asked:

"Was it possible for anyone to enter

the studio while the party was going on downstairs?"

"No, the door was open, Martha's door that is, and someone would have seen anybody on the stairs. And besides, I was—well, I was anxious to see Joe and I had an eye on the door and the stairs practically all evening."

The idea began to grow that there was something wrong with the suicide picture. Facing Ruth I had also faced the book shelves Joe had made from paving bricks and oak planks. They formed an orderly row of vari-colored backs, and I could read some of the titles—neatly arranged alphabetically and by subject matter. My mind flickered back to the work table at the other end of the room, with its tubes and bottles and brushes.

"Ruth, there *is* something wrong with this situation, but I'm not sure and I don't want you to hope for much of anything."

"Clark—oh, if only I could be sure he didn't want to go away from me . . . if only I knew."

I patted her on the shoulder, and said to myself: *Okay, smart guy, you're in it now and you can't win. Give her back the picture she wants of her sweetheart and you're finished. Make it murder and you're a hero—or are you?*

I walked from the bookshelves to the easel, and the reconstruction began to build. Then a burst of sound blew up the windy stairs, voices, the clatter of footsteps, a slammed door.

I turned to Ruth and she answered my mute question: "Probably Martha brought them back for a nightcap."

I liked that. I said: "Can you get them all up here—that is, if they're all the same people who were at the party?"

RUTH looked for a moment as though I had asked her to dance on Joe Calvin's grave. I started to explain, but understanding cleared her face of the little doubt and she smiled faintly. She opened her purse, ran a comb through her hair. There was a dull gleam from her handbag, which I couldn't be sure was her compact.

Then she stood up and walked out. I could hear faintly the rise and fall of voices. There was one protesting, high and angry; another, heavy and constant—and the dry whisper and beat of the whole

blended to make a Greek chorus. There was a hush, broken by three sharp words and the dull rhythm of movement.

They came clattering up the stairs then; Anson Doyle lumbering, the wire-and-metal fellow stepping along precisely, then Ruth, and following her, Martha.

As they entered I tried to read some confirmation of my ideas, without too much success. One thing I noted. As Martha came through the doorway, I noticed the clear, unbroken lines of her body, from her throat to her feet. The sculpture of her small but perfect body was startling. I was surprised in a way, and yet it was something that I might have expected, if I'd given the matter any thought.

They found seats, Ruth near Anson Doyle, with Martha and the sculptor each taking an easy chair. The carpenter draped himself on a hassock. I walked back and forth, trying to arrange words to offer these people. Finally I began:

"Just about now a fellow in a white coat is drawing a sharp, crescent-shaped knife along the cold body of Joe Calvin."

I checked reactions. Doyle looked interested. Ruth's eyes opened in shock and pain, but she quickly composed her features at what I hoped was a reassuring nod. The sculptor twisted his hands nervously and avoided the faces of the others. The carpenter continued gazing studiously at the rug. Martha sucked in her breath sharply. Then there was a faint flick of movement around her mouth which died almost instantly.

I went on: "Even though they know his death was caused by a gun-shot wound, they are doing that anyway. It's a long process and an ugly one. They assume they are performing a routine PM on the body of a suicide. I know differently."

I threw it fast and loud. Martha froze. Ruth looked at her hands. Doyle jumped up.

"If he was murdered, what's the idea of telling us? Man, you ought to have the police here by now—"

I broke in: "I know that one of you killed Joe. I'm not quite sure just why. I'll be more certain in a few minutes. Now look."

I walked up to the easel and beckoned for them to follow. Martha was the last

to rise and I looked at her steadily as she got up from the chair. She didn't fail me. She held my eyes as she moved across the room to the work space, and the message in her thin, burning face was unmistakable. I had seen it before. It was a good bid, and I don't think even she knew how good it was. Certainly her clear eyes had missed none of the interchange between Ruth and me. Certainly she had made some kind of guess about my situation.

Her offer of a second best was out in the open and we both knew what it meant, and there were only minutes between me and—nothing. Nothing but the cold pavement of Third Street. In the seconds it took my mind to register and evaluate these things, the group had stopped motionless around the canvas. I picked up a brush and held it by the ferrule.

"This is a tool. A good workman always takes care of his tools. Not sometimes, not even most of the time. All of the time. I want each of you to take a good look at it."

I handed it directly to Martha. The question was still there in her eyes, but I wasn't ready to answer. She glanced at the brush and handed it to Doyle. When it had gone the rounds, I set it down apart from the rest of the materials. I said:

"You noted the brush was clogged with pigment. Here is another brush Joe was working with. It, too, is full of paint." I pointed to the palette.

"There are drying clots of paint there, but that doesn't mean anything because any painter might squeeze out more pigment than he needed. But—" I pointed to the tubes of color—"no painter interrupts his work and leaves his brushes and palette knives dirty. If Joe was going to kill himself he might have stopped in the middle of a painting. I don't think he would, but he might. But if any of you were smart observers, you'd know that he would never leave his colors uncapped or his brushes dirty."

Before the reaction hit, I went on: "Okay. The police might not see a thing like that. You people should have. Because one of you killed him."

I WALKED away from the easel, drawing the group with me, all except Martha. She was staring at the palette

knives and the two brushes as though they were covered with blood. I had only seconds now for the answer, and her head came up and she held her body proudly as she watched me. I halted a little way down the room and continued:

"That establishes his death as murder. By now you should be able to guess the only person who could have killed him. One of you was more than interested in Joe Calvin. Ruth seemed to rate first with him. Martha is the only other woman present at the party tonight and she also could have been secretly in love with him."

I looked back at Martha and she read the answer in my face, but she waited, waited, wondering, I guess, if I might in the last infinitesimal second change. I resumed:

"While Ruth was downstairs asking you to come up here, I coated the brush you all handled with blue of bromophenol. Under certain conditions, the hands of a person who shot a gun or was exposed to the nitrates of burning powder, will turn blue. Sweat will do it, and certain other acids."

I stopped and waited on the chance that someone would look at his hands. No one moved. I went on:

"Now I didn't need that to be sure who killed Joe. Because I can give you the name now, and I think I'll have the necessary proof the police will need."

I stopped and turned my back on the little group. A cold chill hit my back as I faced Martha. There was a small smile on her face, and a dare, a preverse touch that, like all of the other things, didn't surprise me.

There was a flurry of movement in back of me, but I ignored it. I kept walking toward Martha. About three feet away from her I said, without looking back:

"Okay, Ruth, this is your chance."

On the "Ruth" I dived hard at Martha and hit her knees, just as two closely spaced shots barked in back of me. We went down in a clutter of tubes, bottles and brushes. I twisted quickly, grabbing at my own gun, but a third shot, muffled, boomed in the room, and I relaxed.

Ruth was standing in the door leaning against the frame. She hadn't begun to fall yet. She was poised just before the

instant of death, hate firing her black eyes, distorting the lovely mask that I knew so well. The gun had dropped from her fingers and a dark stain was wetting the bodice of her dress. I walked to her and helped her to a divan. I whispered so that none of the others could hear:

"So long, baby. You knew it had to be this way."

Maybe she forgave me. Maybe there was a little smile in her eyes as she went away. I couldn't be sure. After a minute, I got up and joined the group now huddled around Martha, talking in low voices.

Doyle spoke up: "How in the world did you get it figured out?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I felt tired and beaten up. I tried to explain:

"Little things. First, Ruth, who knew I was a private dick, never gave me a nod before tonight, though she had guessed I was a little interested. Then she asked me back to the studio. If she was as crazy about Joe as she seemed, this studio would be nothing but a horror for her. At the table in the cafe when she seemed to break down, it was just an act to lay the way for asking me to leave with her.

"She figured me as a threat, possibly the only one, since everyone else seemed to leave it at suicide—but she knew it is just my nature to start poking around.

"But even after I got to the studio, I still wasn't sure. Martha gave me part of it in the cafe when she seemed to be hard-boiled about going to the ladies' room with Ruth. Martha may be a cold number, but I've rarely seen a woman refuse to go to the aid of another in distress, and I couldn't believe it was just callousness."

I stopped a moment, and walked to a chair. The fatigue was really beating on me now. I went on:

"Remember, this was all flashback for me. I didn't *know* Joe was murdered until I saw the mess his painting things were in. Another thing—men get mad over material things, and frequently over ideas. Women seldom do. Usually it's emotional. So only one thing could account for the cold feeling between Ruth and Martha—Joe.

"I was still balancing one thing against the other when I asked Ruth to bring all

of you up here. I felt it had to be one of the two women. But it still could have been Martha. However, when Ruth opened her purse to fix her face before going downstairs, there was a little glint of metal and it looked very much like gun-metal to me. There again, no proof. The police have the gun Joe was killed with. But people with easy minds don't lug firearms around.

"While Ruth was gone, something old Diogenes said to me repeated itself. When he was talking about the discovery of Joe's body, he finished saying: *'His head is fall against easel. Martha, she's a faint.'*"

Doyle nodded. "Yeah, right after she screamed, I heard a bang on the floor."

I went on: "There was hardly time for her to shoot him, fake a faint, then remember about the gun, get up and wipe it off and put it into his hand, and get back down on the floor before you all burst in. Did any of you notice just when Ruth joined you?"

The carpenter said: "Why I think she came up the stairs right behind us. I know she was just behind me when we got to the—ah—to where Joe was lying."

"That's about the way I figure it. After a few drinks, no one notices much whether anyone is in a given spot at a given moment. Ruth probably slipped up when no one was watching. Maybe she wanted to kill Joe and maybe not. Probably she was quarreling with Joe about leaving her stranded alone at the party.

"Hearing Martha coming up the steps may have pushed her over the edge emotionally. She shot him, placed the gun in his hands, and probably slipped into the

bathroom, the cubicle in the corner. "Then Martha came in, fainted, fortunately for Ruth, and as soon as the rest of you came rushing in Ruth fell in behind you. In the excitement you wouldn't notice that."

Doyle said, "We will get the police." They all left, except Martha.

After a few minutes of silence, Martha said: "What would Joe be doing with that blue of whatever you called it?"

I grinned. "There wasn't any. If there was, I don't even know if it would work. I read it in a book one time. Next?"

"You just established the idea that we both liked Joe Calvin. How did you decide that I was winning and that Ruth knew it?"

She smiled then, and the offer was out in the open. The feeling of tiredness began to leave me.

"You were sure of yourself. Ruth was unsure, uneasy about the crime."

I hesitated, and then added: "But I guess it was mostly a hunch that in any contest you would usually get your man—if you wanted to badly enough."

She said slowly. "Just usually? Get this straight—I liked Joe and admired his work. I came up here now and then to talk. Ruth was jealous, but entirely without reason. She was losing Joe, all right, but not to me. As an artist, he had simply outgrown her, and she knew it. But she had to make her jealousy material, so she picked me as her competitor."

"That clears up everything, for me." She smiled. "Just what do you mean?"

I spent the time before the police came explaining.

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By **HIAWATHA JONES**



*Picking up Emerald Eyes
was good clean fun for Steve—
until she started him
pushing up the daisies.*

44

I CROUCHED in the narrow space between the filing case and the wall. The butt of the gun in my fist felt warm from being gripped so long. A square of moonlight made the office floor pale and through the window I could see a dark night sky. There was a picture on

the wall, across from the filing case behind which I was squeezed. Behind that picture was a safe.

I was hoping that I wouldn't have to use the gun. The whole set-up was cock-eyed. I had started out the evening looking for a good time. Murder wasn't in my schedule. Yet here I was now, crouched out of sight, my arms close to my body, waiting for a guy I didn't want to kill. I kept remembering why I was there. I kept remembering that red dress and those emerald eyes, her smile and the way she walked.

It had all started about three hours before. I had been sitting at a little table in a dim corner of the Hi-Tie Club, which is a swanky bar with a three-piece band in one of those hotels just west of Broadway. I'm an engineer, strictly a salary man. The Hi-Tie Club is usually off my beat, but that night I felt like getting spiffed in style.

The band was beating out a lazy blues number at one end of the low-ceilinged, smoke-filled room. An over-expressive thrush with swivel hips stood gesturing in a cone of light, trying to make herself heard. I sat at my table bolting martinis and taking in the atmosphere.

She was sitting on a high stool next to the bar. About a hundred-and-ten pounds of temptation in a red dress that fit like fingernail polish. Her blonde hair was cut short around the back of her neck and she wore black elbow-length gloves. Class!

A short guy with slicked-down hair was talking to her, but I continued staring and she must have felt it. She turned her head slightly toward me, still listening to the little guy she was with, and gave me one of those long slow looks that slips from your ankles to your ears, flipping your stomach over both ways past.

I was just deciding to wander over and break things up, when she patted this little guy on the elbow and slowly started across the floor, still carrying her drink. *Just what I like*, I thought. *The shy type*. That red dress was a strapless, ankle-length affair. A neatly arched little foot moved out in front of her at each slow step. I looked down at my drink and when I looked up again she was sitting beside me.

She was tapping a cigarette against a thin case, and she held it to her lips for me

to light. She really worked slowly. "Hello," she said. Her voice was low, soft.

I lighted her cigarette. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am," I said, mocking respectability.

She leaned back and blew out a line of smoke. "You seemed to find the view from here interesting, cutie. I was curious to find the big attraction."

"Don't even try," I said. "You'd need a mirror."

She took a long sip out of her drink, looking at me over the rim of her glass. Her eyebrows were arched. Her eyes were the color of emeralds. Then she put the glass down on the table. "What's your name, honey?"

"Steve. Steve Clayton."

"Let's dance, Steve."

I nodded. She hadn't told me her name but I didn't ask. Like I said, she was probably the shy type. After we had been dancing a few minutes, she leaned away from my arms, looking up into my face. She had a small, pretty face that might have been almost child-like except for those arched brown and large green eyes.

"Why so quiet?" she asked.

"It's nicer this way."

"Aren't you going to ask me my name?"

"No."

"Or what I do?"

"No."

A couple dancing near us, collided. It was the greasy little guy who had been talking to her at the bar. He gave me a twisted grin and mumbled an apology. I nodded my head.

"He stepped on my toe," she said. "Now my shoes hurt."

I made an abrupt motion, as if to go after him, but she lifted her lips close to my ear. "Don't," she murmured. I could smell the wild, sweet scent of her perfume. Instead, she suggested we go back to our seats.

We walked through the crowded dancers, back to our table. She stood in front of me, not giving me a chance to sit down.

"I live in the hotel, Steve. Room 319. I want to go up and change into something more comfortable. These damned pumps pinch." She opened the small sequined

purse she carried and took out a key. "Maybe we can continue our drinks up there."

She smiled and tilted her head to one side, raising one eyebrow slightly. She looked at me that way for a moment, without speaking.

"In twenty minutes," she said finally. I took the key.

I watched her leave the bar and walk into the lobby of the hotel. That red dress going through the crowd had a nice swing to it. A quick look backward and she was gone.

Steve, I thought, you fast worker, you! I looked at my watch and quickly slid out from behind the table. In the men's wash-room I straightened my tie and grinned into the mirror over the sink. *Not bad for a banged-up engineer,* I thought, passing my hand over my chin. Emerald eyes called me cutie, which is just a line, a routine, not to be taken seriously, but still. . . . The colored guy in the washroom scratched the shoulder of my jacket with a long whisk broom, and I folded a bill into his hand as I left the room. *Steve, I kept saying to myself. You fast worker, you.*

AT THE end of exactly twenty minutes I was putting my key into the door of 319. I walked from the hall into dimly lit front room. There was one lamp lit on a table next to the sofa. She was sitting there, looking up at me as I walked in. To hell with formality, I thought. I sat down next to her, put my arms on the back of the sofa and kissed her.

She pushed her hand against the front of my shirt and shoved me away. I noticed she hadn't removed her shoes.

"Nothing more comfortable?" I asked.

"They stopped pinching when I got upstairs.

"Maybe it will start again," I suggested.

She laughed quietly without looking at me. Somehow she sounded very . . . tired. It was almost a sad laugh.

"Do you have anything to drink?" I asked.

"Look in that room," she said, but not as though answering my question. She pointed to a door by the side of the fireplace.

I got up and started toward the room. "Just where is it?"

She didn't answer and I turned around. She shook her head. "Look in there," she repeated. I opened the door.

He was dead, slumped against the bed footboard. His face grimaced horribly and the open staring eyes cut straight through me as I opened the door. When I got my breath back, I glanced back at the girl. She had turned her face around to the back of the sofa and was crying softly, her shoulders shaking convulsively. I closed the bedroom door not able, even in that flash of a second, to escape the dead guy's staring eyes.

I put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her around to me.

"Who is it?" I asked.

She was still crying. My fingers buried into her bare shoulder and I shook her.

"Who?"

"My . . . my husband. I found him there when I came up. I—I wanted to stop you from coming. I wanted to call the police." She started crying again. I just stood there in front of where she was sitting.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked.

She reached into her pocketbook and dried her eyes with a small handkerchief. "You've got to go downstairs," she said, still not looking at me. "I can't involve you in this. I'll call the police in five minutes. I'll pretend that I just then found the—" She buried her nose in her small handkerchief and I saw her short blonde hair bob against the back of her neck as she cried. I sat down beside her.

"What was his name," I asked, wanting to soothe her but still curious, still puzzled.

"John Kingsley." She turned around to face me, drying the corner of her eyes with that small hanky. She seemed so different, so changed from the brazen little blonde I picked up down in the bar. I couldn't help feeling sorry for her.

"You'd better leave," she continued. "You can't get mixed up in this. It'll make things look worse for both of us."

I got up, took the key out of my pocket and gave it to her. "I'm sorry it had to turn out like this," I said.

Out in the hall again, I leaned against the elevator button for a second. It was going to be rough on her. I remembered

how helpless she looked, how scared. But there was nothing I could do; I'd only mess things up by interfering probably. I didn't want to interfere. There was my job to think of. I could just see the headlines . . . the boss' face.

No, I had to circulate around the bar, meet as many people as possible. Hell! Here I was building an alibi. All I wanted was a high evening, and here I was.

We were down at the lobby and I walked straight into the hotel entrance to the Hi-Tie Club. I headed for the bar, asked the guy there for a straight scotch and lit a cigarette. He pushed the glass toward me. I drank it without turning around. Then I lit another cigarette, paid him and walked across the room to where I had been sitting before. The table I had been sitting at was taken. Before I could look around for another, I felt a hand on my arm.

I jerked my head around. It was the greasy, smooth-haired little guy I had seen earlier in the evening. He was smiling that same twisted smile at me. My heart was pounding too damn fast.

"Excuse me," he said. "I was wondering if you've seen Sandy around. I noticed you dancing with her before and I thought—"

Something inside me tightened. I've got to play it straight, I thought to myself. If I once start bluffing.

"You mean Mrs. Kingsley?" I asked.

He looked at me quizzically for a moment, and then he started to laugh. He had small black eyes in a round face, and it was a hyena's laugh. "Mrs. Kingsley! Yes, that's good!"

He started to laugh again. He slapped my arm, and it splashed my drink over my fist. I could feel my mouth tighten.

He looked at my wet hand. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, still almost laughing. "That's good, though. Mrs. Kingsley! Have you seen her though?" He stopped suddenly. I saw his round eyes widen and his flabby lower lip dropped, then twisted into a grin. He was staring past me, looking at something.

I swung around. Everything inside me suddenly knotted hard.

She was standing there at the entrance to the bar. She was smiling! She didn't look at me, just at him. Then she winked

at him, smiled even more and started across the room. One foot neatly in front of the other. That same sway. He met her on the other side of the dance floor, and they both stood there for a while talking with their heads close together. Then she tossed back her head, laughing, and they both looked at me and started through the crowd to where I was standing.

I was too confused to feel anything. I just waited until they were with me.

"So you've been making jokes about me," she said in mock anger. I searched her eyes to find some meaning. Some sense. But it was almost as though that business upstairs, the dead guy—it was almost as though it hadn't happened.

"Don't be harsh with him," greasy one butted in. "After all, every columnist in town has been saying the same thing. *What famous model has her hooks out for what famous business-magnate?* Darling you're just famous, that's all."

She laughed. I was struggling inside to keep myself from bashing that boy's teeth in. I didn't like this monkey business.

"Be a dear," she said, turning to him. "Bring me something to drink."

"Anything for you?" he asked before leaving. I shook my head.

SHE watched him walk toward the bar, and when he was out of hearing turned toward me.

"What the hell goes on?" My voice was too loud.

"Please," she said. She put her hand on my arm. "Don't think anything until you've heard what I have to say."

The band was still playing and there were people passing us on the way to the dance floor. I spotted an empty table and we started over toward it.

"My name is Sandy Waters. I'm a model."

"So I gather. From him." I jerked my head in the direction he had gone.

"That's Larry Treven. He's a partner in Kingsley's business. I know this sounds mixed-up, but if you'll listen, you'll understand. I've got to tell you this before Treven gets back."

"O.K.," I agreed. "Only it better be good. I won't play sucker the second time."

She spoke quietly now, looking straight

at me. "That is John Kingsley upstairs. We were going to be married. I had the key to the apartment. Just before I met you down here, I had gone up and found him there, dead. I had gone up in the first place to apologize; we had a fight last night. I was wrong. I wanted to make up. Then I found him. If I called police, everything would point to myself. I'm a model. The papers would just grab up the scandal. It would ruin my career. I'd be blackballed from every decent magazine in the country."

"So how'd I get mixed up in all this," I interrupted angrily. "You knew he was dead even before you invited me up. What's the punch-line, *cutie?*"

"Please, Steve, listen." Her voice almost broke. I didn't want her to cry again. "I know it was cheap and rotten. But I had to get you to come up. I didn't murder John. I know who did. Can't you see, Steve, I had to get someone to help me. I had to implicate someone else."

And then it hit me. All at once. I had been feeling so sorry for her upstairs, the more obvious truth never reached me. I *was* implicated. Even if the elevator guy didn't remember taking me up, there were still my fingerprints. The apartment was probably covered with them! The realization was like a blow to the guts; it knocked the wind out of me.

"Why not a friend! Why me?" My anger forced itself into my words. "Why not Treven?" I asked bitterly.

"He's the one," she said hurriedly. "He's the only person who might possibly have wanted to murder John." She turned her head quickly and when I looked around, the greasy one was coming our way with two drinks in his pudgy fists. She smiled when she saw him and turned to me as if to finish a funny story.

"Please, Steve," she whispered. "Please, please!"

"A drink for Mrs. Kingsley," giggled fat boy as he reached our table. He handed her the glass.

"Larry," she said, turning away from me. "Steve has to be leaving and I made him promise me one more dance." He grinned and we edged our way through the close tables to the dance floor. The band was playing something slow.

"I know what you must think," she

said as we danced. "But I had to do this. I need your help Steve."

"What makes you think it's Treven?" I asked finally.

"They had been fighting about some money Larry thinks John cheated him out of." I wanted to stop dancing to sit down and talk with her, but I knew as soon as I did fat boy would barge in.

"They'll find John tomorrow," she continued. "That's why Larry's tagging me now. He doesn't want me to go upstairs and find him. John kept some personal cash in the company safe. If Larry takes it out tonight, it will never be missed. That's why he murdered John."

"Why can't he wait?" I asked. "Won't he get John's share of the company after things are found out?"

"No. It all goes to John's family out West. All that Larry can possibly put his hands on is that personal cash. It's not accounted for—and it's a lot of money. Nearly forty thousand dollars, I think."

I realized we couldn't let the police on this just now. We were bigger suspects than Treven. With the police on the trail, that would surely scare him away. It would stop him from getting the money, but it would also ruin our only chance of proving that Treven was guilty. I looked down at Sandy.

"Then he'll head for the office tonight," I said.

She nodded. "Yes, Steve. As soon as he takes me home. That's all the way on the other side of town."

"In other words, as soon as I leave this place—right after we finish dancing—I'll head for their office. I'll wait there till he comes. If I can catch him breaking into the company safe, and then call the police, we shouldn't have too much trouble proving the rest of our case. How about the office, though? How will I manage to get into it?"

"I've got a key," she said.

I looked down at her. "Lady, is there anything you don't have a key to?"

She didn't smile. "I found it in the apartment." Then she gave me the address of the building. It was a top floor office with a private elevator. Ritzy. The address of the building and the keys to the elevator and office were in her pocket-book.

"And . . . there's a gun too," she announced quietly. I looked down at her.

"It was John's," she said. "I knew where he kept it in his apartment." She looked up and her eyes searched my face. She looked so beautiful, so helpless. "Take the gun," she said, "along with the keys and address, while I'm dancing with Larry. I'll leave my bag on the bar."

I looked down at her for a long moment before I said anything. "Don't worry, honey," I said. "It'll work out O.K. We're both in this together, but I'm big enough to get us both out alone. From here on in, I'll take over."

She smiled, and I thought I could see her eyes watering. We finished out the rest of the dance not saying anything, just listening to the music and dancing very close.

AND so here I was now. Crouched and stiff, waiting for Treven, hoping I wouldn't have to use my gun. It was a long office. In the moonlight I could make out that the carpet was green and the desk and filing cases were lime oak. There were two or three chairs placed around and they might have been red or maroon, though it was hard to tell on account of the darkness. At one end of the office, the outline of the elevator door showed through as a dim square.

I was hoping that I hadn't missed Treven, that he hadn't gotten here before I arrived. Our plans, the arrangement Sandy and I had made, were for me to come here directly from the Hi-Tie Bar. It hadn't worked out that way though. I had first gone to my apartment in order to. . . .

Suddenly, through the stillness, I heard the heavy lifting of elevator cables. My heart began to pound fast. When I had come up I had pressed two buttons on the elevator, one for the floor and the other for the ground floor from where I took the elevator. Otherwise the elevator would have stayed open at the office level. That would have aroused Treven's suspicion immediately.

But now I could hear the elevator re-ascending. I gripped my gun even tighter. My forehead was cold with sweat. The cable sound became louder. Then I heard the click that meant the elevator had stopped at my floor. *I hope I don't have to*

kill that greasy little guy, I thought. I hope I don't have to use the gun. But if I do. . . .

The elevator door slid open. A long shaft of light was thrown across the dark floor, and Treven walked into the office. His bulky overcoat made him look even fatter than he actually was. He walked across the floor.

I watched him walk toward the picture on the wall and my heart began to beat more slowly. Somehow Treven seemed calm. Almost too calm. He walked to the safe without looking to the right or left. It was as though he was in a daze, or going through an act. His pudgy gloved fingers were fumbling with the safe knob now; the picture was titled at a crazy angle on the wall.

I watched him and measured my breath so as not to make a sound. Suddenly Treven stood back a little and swung the small door of the safe open, uncovering a round dark hole in the wall. The fat guy just stood there a moment, staring into the safe. One hand was in his pocket and the other hung at his side. It seemed rather ridiculous, him standing there with his hat and coat on, just looking, almost waiting for something.

I slid from behind the filing case. My gun made a scraping noise against the back of the safe. Treven turned around quickly. His eyes opened wide, but he just stood where he was. Except for turning, he didn't move at all.

I gripped my gun tight, pointing it at the center button on Larry's coat. "Just stand still, Treven."

But he made no effort to move. "Hello, Steve." He didn't look down at the gun, but he must have known it was there. I watched his fat mouth curve into that damned twisted smile of his. "Playing cops and robbers?" he smirked.

His calmness unnerved me. The whole thing seemed ridiculous, unreal. He should have been scared. I had thought he would whimper.

He is scared, I thought. I know he is. He must be.

"I know what you're here for," I said. I stood beside the filing case. The open elevator spotlighted one side of Treven, leaving the other side in darkness.

"I'm going to call the police," I con-

tinued. "Don't try to make any trouble. I don't want to hurt you."

"So you don't want to hurt me." His voice was mocking. "You don't want to . . . shoot me." He laughed that high, hyena laugh of his, and looked down at the gun in my fist. Then he stopped. He stared at the gun. Even in the half light of that darkened office, I saw his face go pale; the color drained out of his fat lips. "That—that—*isn't*—"

Suddenly he lifted the elbow of the hand in his pocket. A red flash spitted at me from where he stood. Without thinking twice, I squeezed my trigger and kept squeezing. When my hand had stopped shaking, I wiped my brow with the back of my sleeve and looked down at the bundled form on the rug. *I didn't want to kill him*, I thought. *He shouldn't have used his gun. He shouldn't have.*

I walked over to the slouched figure and bent down over it. His knees must have buckled first. He had fallen on his face. I turned him over. He wasn't dead.

Treven was still breathing thinly. I quickly put my gun on the low desk and started to unbutton Treven's overcoat. A hip wound. A nick in the arm. He'd live.

I started to get up to my feet, but I felt Treven's hand pull at my sleeve. The fat man's eyes nearly completely closed but he turned them to find me. The side of his face was away from the elevator, in the darkness as the rest of the unlighted room. His lips quivered as though he were trying to say something. I bent my head down to listen.

Treven was trying hard to suck in breath in order to form his words. "I'd . . . It . . . wasn't . . . the . . . same," he breathed out weakly. "Wasn't . . . the . . . sss . . . same." His head plopped over to one side, his cheek against the rug. I reached to feel his heart. He was still breathing. The heart was still beating lightly.

I GOT to my feet and looked around for the phone, then dialed the last hole. Treven had been scared, I thought. But only after seeing the gun. He must have known I had one, but just looking at it . . .

"Operator? I want the police . . . and an ambulance." I gave her the address,

then looked at the mound on the floor. As I was looking at Treven's form on the rug, the elevator doors paneled closed. Once again the room was locked in darkness.

It can't be the police I thought. Unless it's a cop who was passing by. Or maybe a night watchman. Anyway, I had nothing to worry about. Treven would live to be convicted. I leaned against the filing case and waited for the elevator to begin its ascent. The cables made a creaking, groaning noise in the silent office.

Whoever it was, I wasn't afraid. Sandy and I would be clear. Sandy, I thought. She'll be nice to know when things are quiet, when this is all over. For the first time since Treven came up I thought of her. I remembered her eyes and the shape of her face and the way it felt dancing with her.

If it's a cop, I'll make him wait for the ambulance, I thought. If it's a watchman . . .

The elevator door slid open. All my mind could take in first was a red dress and short blond hair. The light from the elevator sent its shaft of light into the dark office again.

Sandy stepped out of the elevator, seeing neither me nor the body on the rug. For a moment I was too surprised to say anything.

"Larry," she whispered. "Larry!"

I stepped from beside the filing case into the light from the elevator.

She looked at me and her eyes grew wide and one hand jerked up to the lapel of the fur jacket she wore over her dress. For a moment she looked as though she was going to run. She composed herself quickly. "Steve." She didn't address the name to me; she said it as though it was the answer to a question.

I walked over to meet her. "Darling," she said, "you're not hur—" Then her eyes caught sight of the form on the rug. "Larry!"

She seemed to freeze with fright. I walked in front of her, between her and the body. "But how?" she said finally. She passed one gloved hand over her eyes. "I—I didn't expect this. I hoped you wouldn't use the gun."

"I didn't want to," I said. "And I *couldn't* have used the one you gave me." She looked at me quizzically.

"It wasn't loaded," I said.
 "Then how—"

"I stopped up at my place before coming here," I said. "I picked up my old army revolver. I have a permit." I nodded my head toward the gun on the desk. She looked at it for a long moment, almost as though she didn't believe it. It was the same kind of expression Treven had had when he first looked at it. They had both been surprised. They . . . Suddenly I got that tight feeling inside.

I grabbed Sandy by the shoulders of her fur cape and turned her toward me quickly.

"Did you know it wasn't loaded?"

She looked at me and her eyes blazed like shattered glass.

"How could I?" she said. She pulled herself out of my grip. "I didn't want you to kill him, but I didn't know about the gun."

"I didn't kill him," I said slowly.

Her eyes blazed again, this time in disbelief and anger.

"He's not dead. I've called the police. They'll be here soon."

She looked away from me to Treven's body on the rug. Suddenly, before I could stop her, she rushed to the desk, grabbed the revolver and pointing it at the figure on the rug with both hands, squeezed the trigger several times. The empty gun only made a hard-sprung, clicking sound. She looked down at the gun in her hand with a wild horror in her hand.

It was all clear to me now. The empty gun, Treven's calmness, my implication in Kingsley's murder. My being here.

I dug my fingers into her shoulders,

turning her toward me. "You wanted him to kill me!" I said. "You knew the gun was empty. He'd tell the police I had come to rob the safe. I'd be blamed for Kingsley." The anger inside me was almost uncontrollable. I couldn't form the words I wanted to say to her.

She was crying, sobbing. "It wasn't my fault. Steve, darling, darling, I didn't want to hurt you. He made me . . . I—"

The elevator door slid closed slowly. She looked to it startled. The office was dark again.

"It's the police," I said calmly.

I still held her by the shoulders. "Steve!" she cried. "Please darling, please. He'll think I fr—"

I could only see the dark shadow of her in the unlighted office, but I could feel her closeness, and hear her almost hysterical sobbing. I wanted to slap her, to feel the sting of her cheek against my hand. And all at the same time, I felt sorry for her.

"He made me," she sobbed. I felt her shoulders twist between my hands. Her voice was high and hysterical. Her head jerked and her loose hair slapped softly against my face. "Steve, please. I love you. Kill him, Steve."

In the darkness, her lips met my jaw. I could feel her tears on my face. "Steve!" she cried. "Darling. Please. He'll think I've framed him. He'll confess. They'll kill me. Please darling, please! Kill him! Don't let him confess. We'll make up something! We'll blame him! We'll. . ."

She was still crying in my arms when the elevator with the police reached the office floor.

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KILLER ON

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CHAPTER ONE

Cut to the Quick

IT BEGINS, I guess, with Ludkin. No, it goes back a few hours farther. It starts in a beer joint, in a dive on the south side of Chicago. It starts with a gal who slapped me in the face. Meaning I was happy. Meaning I was looking for a time, looking for a brawl—or let's put it this way: looking for a celebration. Reason, discharge, after six years in the

● ●
**By CYRIL
PLUNKETT**

THE TOWN

*Ex-gob Pete was a natural for the slay chair,
copper Ludkin figured—
so why bother finding the real shiv-artist!*



*I shot even before completely
turning....*

Navy. I got on the band wagon pronto.

I remember a big guy with sideburns. He was about forty-five, and his son was in Japan yet, in the Army. I remember that we threw a cabbie from his hack and drove all over town. And somewhere we picked up two men, grads of Joliet who carried rods. I remember that we saw a cop we fancied looked like a European dictator.

Sideburns stopped the car. We stayed in the car. The two hoods tripped the cop, gave him a beating. I remember that we ditched the car; and then a smelly room came into being. Sideburns was still with me, and still drinking. But now it wasn't quite so friendly. There was sweat smell in the air, and smoke and beer and steel and whiskey. Puddlers, cranemen, heaters jammed the bar, and a juke box began moaning.

Oh no. Now it wasn't friendly. Sideburns began slugging with both fists. I was slugging with both fists. The brawl began with fists, and then someone threw a bottle. . . .

I woke up to meet Ludkin. Now we're back to Ludkin. Of course I didn't know his name was Ludkin, then yet, but I knew he was a cop. Two bulls pulled me from a cell and shoved me up a hall and into a brown room. The sky was just breaking red. My face was battered, red. The screws didn't have to worry about bruises.

"I hate sailors," said this copper, Ludkin. He used brown words, like the room. He was about forty, swart, blocky, and his voice was twangy tight. He used every foul word in the book. He had a short piece of hose and used it too then. Slammed me.

Some guy had been shivved, he said. A Finn. *Chicago, Chicago—wonderful town.* Only this wasn't Chicago. This was in the suburbs. How did I get here? That I couldn't remember. I had tried to kiss a girl. I had got into a cab with three men; we'd found the dictator. I'd shoved nickels in a juke box in a smelly room. . . .

"Come on, sailor. We want a confession."

It seemed the coppers hadn't picked up Sideburns. All they had was a Finn, and the Finn had been shivved, and all they needed now to wrap the case up was a confession.

No confession? Ludkin began snarling. "What happened to your papers? Hold his head up. Grab him by the hair. That's better. Now then, sailor, what's your name?"

Bull Halsey.

"Hit him. The guy thinks he's cute. Pull his head up. . . . All right, sailor, what's your name?"

Bull Halsey!

"Hit him. He was in a brawl, so who will be the wiser? Come on, sailor. Keep your glimmers on this knife. Spring blade. You remember the knife. It's your own, kid."

You're crazy.

"Crazy, are we? Here—look the shiv over. Look it over good."

Never saw that knife before. You're crazy.

"Crazy, are we? Pull his prints off the blade. That's it. Now we got him."

"Lieutenant?" said a voice from the doorway.

I couldn't even look around. My neck was stiff. My eyes were almost closed. I licked blood from my lips, just sat there, aching, panting.

"Having a party, Lieutenant?"

Ludkin said, "What the hell are you doing down here, Brask?"

"Thought I'd drop around. Friend of mine, the Finn. I might even know who took advantage of a brawl and pulled the knife on him, Ludkin. Incidentally you should move into Chicago. They need men in the stockyards. By the way, whose blood are you letting?"

"Discharged gob—he says," said Ludkin. "I still think he shivved the Finn."

"Did you do it, sailor?"

NOW I could see him without turning. He faded for me at first, out, in again—white coat and blue pants. Panama, black mustache. White teeth, diamonds on his finger. Class. His voice was very sure and silky.

"No, sir."

Ludkin said, "Better stay out of this, Brask."

"Why? Maybe I can use this boy. Put his hat on him, Lieutenant."

They looked at each other, and Ludkin's face became a dirty red. Ludkin looked at me, then said, "Halsey, eh?"

We'll see. I'll remember you, sailor." Ludkin walked from the room.

Brask stood frowning, looking me over.

"Can you navigate?"

"Yes, sir. I—I think so."

"Then let's get going, sailor."

"You mean I—I'm free?"

"Free to walk out with me. On the level, the discharge, kid?"

"Yes, sir, on the level."

"Enjoy fighting, sailor?"

I grinned. The grin hurt, but I didn't care now. "If I don't end up like this, in the clink."

"You're hired."

"Hired? Doing what, sir?"

"Don't spoil it, sailor." Brask's black eyes were flinty. "Don't spoil it, sailor."

Brask. . . . The trouble was, a guy can't help *thinking* questions. I shelved them for awhile, slept the clock around, in a big high room, very near the lake. When I woke up the evening sun was like gold upon the lake. The high French window opened on a tiled red terrace. Red flowers on a ramp, red awnings, and in one corner chrome chairs, a chrome table.

Brask was sitting on the terrace, at the table. I tried another door, showered in a blue tub screened by yellow glass. Etched in the glass were two figures pouring water from tall vases. Then I taped Ludkin's presents, the gashes, and powdered the bruises. My clothes were gone, but in their place were brown shoes and a brown shirt and brown slacks. Brand new and expensive. I dressed and went out to see Brask.

"You look pretty good."

"I feel one hell of a lot better, sir."

"Y'know, I rather like that 'sir' you stick on the end." He smiled. "Sit down, Pete."

"Pete?" I shot a frown at him. "I thought I'd lost my papers?"

"You underestimate me, Mister Henning." Still Brask smiled. "Pete Henning, born Omaha, 1920. No family. Two years at Northwestern; then you joined the Navy. Coffee or a pickup?"

"Coffee. I don't drink, sir."

His fine black brows went up a small notch. "After last night?"

"Last night," I grinned, "I buried the body."

A Filipino brought us coffee on a silver

tray. I had toast, fried eggs and bacon. Golden brown, the toast, the bacon.

"Tomorrow," Brask said, "we'll complete your wardrobe. That includes a holster and a gun."

I gave him a direct look. "No law against *thinking* questions, is there?"

He lit a cigarette, tossed me the pack. I took one. "Pete, the Finn was an okay guy until it came to brains. He'd grab a lion by the tail—make sense, kid? What I mean, no forethought, no knowledge of finesse or psychology. Now I asked you to *carry* a gun; I didn't say anything about using it. Ever study psychology, Pete?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Yes, sir, what?"

I drew keep on the cigarette. Monogrammed. King-size. Turkish. "Psychology, sir."

"Oh, you see the point? Then you'll wear the gun."

So I wore the gun, a stubby revolver. Ate well, went to bed at dawn. Slept well and met people. The first day of September we had one visitor I knew, my old friend of the rubber hose, Lieutenant Ludkin. It was very warm that day, and Brask was on the terrace, in the sun, wearing only shorts. He was slitting open the mail with a long, gold-handled knife, and he paused to put on a blue silk robe as the little man from far Manila announced Ludkin.

Ludkin stopped one step on the terrace. Ludkin's black eyes glittered. "I see you're still around, sailor."

"With a view like this?" I waved my hand. "What happened to the Finn?"

Ludkin looked from me to Brask, looked grim. "What is this, a gag? What am I, a Sennett cop or something? He knows damn well what happened to the Finn. He died." Then he inclined his head toward me again, but still looked at Brask. "You ought to fumigate this place—now."

Brask, laughing, just lay back in his deep chair, the knife glinting in his hands. "Okay. Take a powder. Scram, Pete."

I saw Ludkin again on October first—but now I'm ahead of my story. By October first I knew I didn't want to work for Brask. Mister Brask lived by his wits—and other people's failings. The other

people provided money for the blue silk robes, the red and chrome terrace, the yellow glass with the etched figures. And for Pete Henning. The psychology body, the lad with the muscles and the gun. Psychology? Brask simply used his own peculiar kind of rubber hose to get what he wanted. He was no different from Lieutenant Ludkin.

Okay, I was checking out on Brask. October first. But let's pick it up at nine o'clock the last night of September....

A CLIENT was due. Who? I was never introduced to Brask's "clients". The meek ones just slipped in and out, or were met at a bar; and with them it was very, very casual. The tough ones? Sometimes Brask would suggest that I sit—"There, Pete. In that chair. Now let your coat hang open. I want the gun to show. I want *you* to look completely sure of yourself, bored." So the tough ones would glance first at me, and then at the gun, and then at Brask. And Brask would light a cigarette, say softly, "Out, Pete."

Ludkin? I gathered Brask owned Ludkin.

But apparently, tonight, a client was due. The Filipino went out fast. At nine o'clock, Brask put in a call to the airport.

"A plane arrives from Lakeview, nine-fifteen. Will it be on time?... Thank you." He put down the receiver.

"Something on your mind, Pete?"

"Yes, sir. I think I'm leaving."

His eyes changed. It was gone then, the glitter. "How'd you like Miami for the winter?"

"I've seen Miami, sir."

"That may be the point. You've traveled, Pete." He examined his nails. "I mean the things you've seen."

"Don't worry, sir."

"I?" He laughed. The sound was there; no change in his eyes though. "I never worry. I never make mistakes. Better think it over, Pete. I like you. *You* wouldn't want to make a—mistake?"

The phone rang at that moment, and he grinned at me and reached for it.

"Oh, hello!" he said. "I've been waiting for your call. Just get in? How was the trip?" His free hand made the familiar motion: *Out, Pete.*

"Jackie? One moment, till I light a

cigarette." Then he covered the mouthpiece. "Catch a show, Pete. Get drunk, go to Milwaukee. I don't care what you do, but don't come back before midnight."

He freed the mouthpiece again. "Now then—am I alone?" He laughed. "I assure you, utterly alone. How long will it take you to get out here?"

I closed the door softly. He had a private lift. You stepped in above and out below, on a private entrance and a private drive. A small coupe Brask kept for my use was parked in the drive. I got in and drove around then. No show. I had to think, make a decision. A mistake?

The Finn was a mistake—he'd died. "Lieutenant," Brask could say, "I've changed my mind. Let's solve that stabbing case, the Finn. How would you like another crack at Henning?"

Mistake? Ludkin would love it.

So I drove along the silver lake and stopped for a bite to eat about eleven, at a highway stand. I ate dogs, drank coffee. I sat talking to two kids down from Great Lakes. *Who the hell was scared of Brask? Or Ludkin?* I bought beer for the sailors. It was twelve o'clock now. . . .

The lift was down. I went up, the door was unlocked, open—and I stopped there. Premonition, if you like; I got cold all over.

"Brask?" I called, after the next step, after I had stepped inside.

He was lying on the terrace, just beneath the ramp. The gold-handled knife stuck out of his back. Suddenly it was very still and lonely on the terrace. His blood looked black on the tile.

CHAPTER TWO

Dangerous Nemesis

REMEMBER how the Finn had died? Nice now, the comparison. Everybody loves a comparison. Knife once—knife twice. You remember Ludkin? Nice, huh? Ludkin and his ugly one-track mind. "*Well, this time, sailor, we've got you! We'll fry you!*"

So far, less than a minute had passed. Just enough time for every nerve inside of me to quiver into knots. Just enough time to realize events had pushed me off

the deep end—and no bottom to this pool. Just enough time to take a frightened glance at the darkness all around, the hushed terrace, the stars above alone with me, aware, but bewildered, blinking.

Then a cool breeze swung in from the lake, and whispered, *Get out while you can, Pete, fast.* I just stood there. The sweat began to run down from my armpits.

But for heaven's sake, Ludkin, can't you see Brask's blood has dried! Check up on the time he died. Ten o'clock? Eleven? I wasn't here then. I was talking to two sailors from Great Lakes.

But I didn't know their names. Two kids down on furlough. Their last furlough they'd said. Who knew where they'd be tomorrow? Who would even try to find them tomorrow? Not Ludkin. Not if the Finn case was a sample. Not when he'd have what he wanted—me—and this time a conviction.

My mind stopped whirling. It was like coming out of ether, groping for the first high rung. Now I could see that rung. *Jackie.* Someone named "Jackie" had come in tonight from Lakeview, by plane, to see Brask.

So maybe a full minute passed before I knelt beside Brask and went through his pockets. Nothing of interest, no little black book. No prints on the knife either, very likely. Brask dealt in skeletons—the kind some people had in their closets. Tonight, someone had wanted their skeleton back, and he'd come prepared to kill to get it. Apparently he'd got it. *Jackie.* It was that simple.

I ran to Brask's room. Somewhere there must be records, a locked drawer. Somewhere there must be proof that Brask dealt in blackmail. No locked drawer? I was sweating suddenly again. I could feel my heart pounding suddenly again. Minutes were ticking away now, building up a barrier reef as sharp and deadly as coral. Brask never went to the bank. Smart money never went to a bank. So the record had to be here—

I stopped searching. Faintly, from somewhere beyond, I'd heard sound, a hum. The elevator made that hum, and it was going down. It was going down, so someone below could step in the cage and come up.

Everything changed in the space of seconds. Every nerve in my body was again, instantly, aquiver. *Hold it now, Pete.* The hum . . . Still going down? It stopped. I let my breath out slowly, tried to swallow, couldn't. The swallow hurt, stuck there in my throat. My throat was dry and aching.

Now they'd step inside the cage. The hum . . . The elevator was rising again, and I hadn't called the cops or a lawyer. I hadn't proved a man named Jackie guilty. I hadn't proved anything.

I reached for my shoulder holster, the gun.

The gong rang softly. Once. In my mind it clanged, reverberated. Twice? I stopped breathing, closed my eyes. *Now,* I thought. Then my eyes opened again, and I could see the door from Brask's room, through a wall-length mirror. It was as I'd found—and left it. Open. I could see the man who stool there. Ludkin.

He called in a harsh voice: "Brask?"

Then he stepped in, just as I had. He looked straight across the big room, at the open terrace, just as I had.

"Brask," he called again, sharply.

I could hear his breathing. I could see his forehead wrinkle—no doubt just as mine had. His eyes got very bright then, wary, as he walked across the room toward the terrace. Still I stood there, not breathing at all now, waiting.

Go out on the terrace, Ludkin. Just as I did. The rug's thick between me and the door. Once you're out there I might make the door. I might make the lift, and the car downstairs and that's all that's left now.

But he didn't go out on the terrace. He stopped inside the French door. He sucked in his breath, and whipped around.

HE SAW me in the mirror. He saw me coming at him from Brask's room, and he cursed and tried for his gun. He didn't get the gun. I hit him. His hands flew straight out as he crashed the mirror, and then he yelled.

I cut the yell off as it barely begun, slammed him in the neck, below the chin. He clawed me on the way down, on his knees, half dazed, moaning. I slammed him on the head and finally he toppled

over. Then I stood one moment, panting.

He'd tried to yell. He'd known someone might hear him. Squad car, below, in Brask's private drive? Meaning that if Ludkin didn't come down—soon—the copper in the car would come up.

I went out. Down the short hall, as though it were paved with eggs. Down the elevator with my stomach fluttering and empty. Bronze door below you shoved open. Who would be there when I shoved it open?

No copper. Soft light, no commotion—but a black car in the drive outside. A red eye in the front seat, moving. Bobbing, and the faintest smell of smoke. Copper with a cigarette between his lips.

He called, "Hi."

Careful now, Pete. Keep it smooth now.

"Your car up ahead?" he said.

"I could drive around you."

"Hell, no!" Red-eye started his motor, backed out of the drive for me.

I gave him two small toots of the horn as I drove past, and he waved. He drove back in the driveway. *What the hell, Lieutenant, are you going to stay all night?* He might wait another fifteen minutes. Then he'd blow his horn—if Lieutenant Ludkin didn't regain consciousness long before that. Fifteen minutes, then Red-eye would begin to grumble, would get out and go up—if Ludkin didn't regain consciousness before that.

All right. I had maybe fifteen minutes.

I filled the gas tank first. Lost—five minutes. I made the corporation limits fast—eight minutes. That left me at the most two minutes. I swung off the road then, at the airport.

Friend, don't argue. There's a gun beneath my coat. I don't want to use it. All I want is information.

"Friend" was the first guy I saw in the administration building.

"I need information," I said. A plane, apparently was due. Three people sat dozing on a bench, behind me. "I must have a copy of a passenger list, the nine-fifteen from Lakeview."

He smiled. "Sorry."

You don't understand, friend. This may mean my life. I laid a ten on the counter ledge.

"Friend" just yawned, repeated, "Sor-

ry." But he didn't look very sorry. "Then I'll make it twenty."

He said, "What's the angle?"

My heart slid into high and started racing. I put a third ten on the ledge.

For forty I got it. Everything is relative. Forty bucks to this guy might look like a whole week's wages or a million. Forty bought *me* one small scrap of paper with twelve names scribbled on it. Forty bucks put me back in the running. Dirt cheap. No time to look now, though.

Ludkin would be cursing his head; Red-eye cursing the guy he'd let out of the driveway. Ludkin would try phoning my description. How long before the teletypes were clicking?

I drove southeast, Indianapolis, Cincinnati. I had five hours until dawn, upward to three hundred miles if I got the breaks. I ditched the coupe at dawn, its tank empty. Then I caught a bus northward. Now all I had to do was doze, my hat pulled over my face. All I had to do in Lakeview was find "Jackie".

That evening I was in the Lakeview papers. Front page, but not much. Lakeview had its own news, its own murders. I got three paragraphs, way down at the bottom.

Dead: A man named Brask. Motive: Money. *You're a smart boy, nicked the wallet, eh, Ludkin?* Wanted: The police knew me only as "Pete" and "The Sailor". I drew a deep breath, then released it. If Brask had discovered my name in one day, why couldn't Ludkin? I waited for the next day. Still wanted, "The Sailor". I took a small room, in a small hotel.

Twelve names on the airline list, passengers from Lakeview. But no Jackie.

Twelve names in the phone book. "Hello," I'd say. "Is this the—the Basil Morgan residence? Or the Thomas Gregory residence? or the Amos Fortneys? Hello," I'd say, "I wish to speak to Jackie."

"To whom?" Three butlers and five maids; four gentlemen who didn't seem at all scared, but just puzzled.

"Jackie," I would say. "I must speak to Jackie."

Funny. No Jackie. And no voice that betrayed the slightest apprehension.

* * *

Okay. Then there must be some other

way. Only I had to eat. I had to have money. I got a job and around Christmas I met a girl. I blew ten bucks on her one Sunday. I had dinner with her on Monday. And she was in my dreams every night that week.

She had brown hair with a wave in it, and brown eyes, shiny bright, alive. Her nose turned up a little, just a little. She was tall, five-five. She was all alone too, working here, in Lakeview. Well, the past was water underneath the bridge, over the dam.

Okay. I hadn't stabbed the Finn. I hadn't killed Brask. I was Pete Henning, Omaha, Northwestern, the Navy. Why shouldn't I fall in love and marry Janie?

One day we looked at a house. It wasn't much of a house, four small rooms. It was all we thought we could afford though. So we talked about it until midnight, and the next day we went to the bank.

Funny how the breaks come, how the black clouds roll away, and then the sun shines every day. We saw a guy in the bank. He looked at me and gasped.

"Pete Henning!" he said, and the grin that came was real. *Well I'm a so-and-so, this can't be true.* The grin was like that, hearty. He came around his polished desk, reaching for me with both hands.

We shook hands. His name was Taylor, Herb Taylor, and he'd been a shipmate, back in '42. I introduced him to Janie.

"Married," he said. "Just this week? Well, I'll be damned."

"And shopping for a house now, Mr. Taylor."

"Look, Pete. She says *Mister Taylor*. Is that nice? Young lady, I'm *Herb*. Your husband and I are old *friends*."

We sat down, smoked cigarettes, talked about old times. We talked about the house we wanted, and now Herb was scowling.

"No place for you kids. I know the place for you, near my home, Oakland Drive."

"But that's expensive property," Janie cut in quickly.

He was grinning again. He jotted something on a pad and gave the sheet to Janie. "Run out and look this place over. We own it—the bank that is. You can have it. You just let me worry about

all the angles." So we had a look at it.

Five rooms, and brand new. Colonial, with a brick front, a red roof. Sweet as it could be, with trees. In the summer it would nestle in a big yard, shady. We looked at the house, and Janie whispered, "Pete—oh, Pete," and her hand found mine and I gripped it.

Okay, anything for you, hon.

"But darling, can we afford it?"

"Herb says that we can."

"Pete, maybe if we just close our eyes and—"

—Pray. We weren't in the house two months when I saw Ludkin.

CHAPTER THREE

The Grinning Reaper

I'D LUNCHEd that noon with Herb Taylor. He was stubby, his blond hair was beginning to thin; he was always ready with a wisecrack and a grin. Friendly as—as sin. I'd wonder sometimes why he was so friendly. I mean ten months together on a bucket in the Pacific didn't seem to put me in his class. It was class, all right.

He wasn't just a guy in the bank; his wife owned it. It seemed she'd worked for a millionaire, a gentleman named Warren. Then Warren's wife had died, and she'd married the old buzzard, and gone to live in California. Then *he* died. I guess Herbie happened along and picked up the pieces. Uh-huh, pretty nice pieces. Her name was Elaine. And she was blonde too, but not stubby. Anything but stubby. She was slender as new flame. Lashes like black fringe, mink on four-inch heels—she was absolutely gorgeous.

"She doesn't very much like us," Janie would say, frowning. "Pete, she doesn't want Herb running over here. She's bored with us and the house."

The Taylors had dropped in two or three times while we were getting settled. Herb even helped me move the davenport. Peeled his coat off; then drank a beer with me in the kitchen, out of the bottle. He inspected the whole house, inside, outside. What we needed, he thought, was a breezeway, from the back door to the garage.

What we needed, I said, was dough, and a car to put *in* the garage. We looked in the garage. Then I pulled the door down. What we needed, I said, was a new lock *on* the garage. Look, I said. The lock was jimmied, broken.

Elaine, of course, remained in the house. Blonde ice, as Janie called her. Elaine would smile a little at our problems, then very sweetly, "We'll run along now, Herb. Appointment, remember?"

We began to wonder what to do about the Taylors, and Herb's invitations. We began to wonder how long she would let Herb extend invitations. We were in the house about six weeks, when I had lunch down town with Herb one noon, looked out on the street, saw Ludkin.

We were at the cashier's desk. We'd tossed a coin to see who'd pay. Herb punched me in the ribs, pointed to the floor said, "Pete, you dropped a dollar."

He picked up the dollar. "What's the matter? You got these things to throw away?" he said.

"Herb, I—I've got a call to make."

"Okay." He shrugged and grinned. "Okay."

"I—I'll see you tonight." We were going to play bridge that night, at the Taylors'.

"Okay. But Pete—" he handed me the dollar bill now, gravely—"don't you think you'd better start saving these things?"

Herb went out the side door, to his car. My knees were shaking. I slipped into the phone booth, crouched there, looked out. I could see straight out to the street. *Ludkin. Brown room. Hit him, pally.* He'd stopped to light a cigarette, then to wait for the light to change. Now he started over.

My temples throbbed, my throat was tight, I began to ache all over. I lost him for a moment, the angle from the window, and he reached this corner. He came back into view though. Like looking at him through strong glasses. Way off and now nearer. Nearer. He passed, glanced through the window.

The spell broke. Now my first shock became panic. I stumbled from the stool, bumped into people. Everything fluttered around me, my voice now mumbling apologies, my stomach. I stumbled out and

turned the other way, stumbled away. My teeth were doing a clog dance.

"Just drive," I said, in a cab, and closed my eyes and tried to think it out.

It was warm. Spring here, in the air. Janie in the air, everywhere I looked now. Janie. What would happen if he found me? Happen to Janie? And yet how did I know I had brought him to Lakeview? Months had passed, a long, long time. Why now, after all this time, should I have brought Ludkin to Lakeview?

I kept my eyes closed for awhile, and a lot of thoughts went through my head. Janie and the home, the things we'd planned and wanted. Next year we would finish the upstairs, maybe the nursery. My thoughts got into a sing-song rut, the tires, maybe, whining on hot asphalt. Round and round they went. *Ludkin—Ludkin.*

JANIE saw my tension that evening in five minutes. Her brown hair was piled high on her head; she'd been getting dinner. She'd rolled the sleeves of her white blouse; now she put her arms around my neck and hugged me.

"It's going to be a lovely spring, isn't it, darling!"

I looked around the kitchen. Everything seemed cold and black now.

"Pete, you're not ill?"

Oh no. Hearty as could be. Get twenty years in prison? I might live them out. Twenty years, *if* it wasn't the big bolt, the hot seat.

"Pete, are you worried about money?"

She knew I worried about money. We'd gone way out on a limb. Loan on house and furniture. We'd even made a small down payment on a car-spring delivery.

"Tell Janie, darling, why you're worried?"

Sure, tell her. About Ludkin and the brown room, and Brask and the gun. I still had the gun. Everyone should keep a gun, especially when the cops might close in someday. Yes everyone should have a gun; that's what I'd told Janie. Keep it by the bed. Keep it where, if something happened in the night, you could reach out, grab it. Handy. Look Janie, if the time should come, it shoots like this, bang, bang. So don't be afraid

to be prepared, keep the gun around.

What would happen if Lieutenant Ludkin came up to the door now?

I looked at the gun. That was one way. Grab it. Handy. You get a lot of queer thoughts when you're backed into a corner. I picked up the gun; the thing was loaded. No good if the thing wasn't loaded. Remember, Janie. Shoot first in a pinch. Protect the home. Always keep the gun loaded, and handy.

I put the gun down again then. That wasn't the way. I shoved the drawer shut, turned around, sighing. I got ready for bridge with the Taylors, but Ludkin sat on the foot of the bed all the while, watching. Wherever I looked, even on my eyelids, I would see him.

The shock, probably, would kill Janie. "Pete?" she whispered abruptly.

I jerked. I caught my breath. I turned around. She was in the bedroom doorway. I could see the halo of her hair. I fumbled for a cigarette, lit one. "Yes, hon?"

"What happened today, Pete?"

"Today?"

"You're different."

"I am?"

She made a movement, faint irritation. "You're deliberately stalling, Pete, aren't you?"

"Problem. I'll tell you when I work it out. Let's go, hon. . . ."

I couldn't remember a card. Herbie was a card though. A clown. They had television, wrestling. Herbie put on act one, grunt-and-groan man. Even blonde ice, Elaine, had tears in her blue eyes from laughing. But a car would stop outside, and once the phone rang; then I'd stopped breathing.

"For me, dear?" called Elaine.

But Herb was coming from the next room, from the phone. Herb still red and rumpled from his "wrestling." Herb said, "I need a beer."

Elaine said, "I told the housekeeper to see that we had beer."

"You mean we're out of beer?" Herb said.

He went, growling, to the kitchen; reappeared at once in anger. "Elaine, fire that woman tomorrow morning!"

"You aren't going out, Herb?"

"There's no beer!"

"But Herb—!" Elaine shrugged then as Herb slammed the kitchen door. She calmed right down, saying sweetly, "We've such a problem with the servants."

She had a problem! I began to wonder what I'd do tomorrow, how I'd dare go out tomorrow, at what minute I might see again, or be seen, by Lieutenant Ludkin. Elaine tuned in the news, animated for a change, commenting on the news with Janie. Music came in on the air, and Herb returned abruptly, yelled from the kitchen:

"Be with you in a minute with more beer!"

He came in, beaming, with cold bottles and clean glasses. I looked at Janie and her eyes were round and worried.

Baby, I can't take this. Baby, let's go home. I won't sleep, but I've got to think, kid.

Janie said, "Really, Pete, you've got to get up early in the morning."

So we went home. They called good nights and we walked up the street. A clock somewhere was just tolling midnight. We went in the front way and I fell into the first chair, sat there as Janie went on to our bedroom.

Suddenly she called from the bedroom, "Pete, the garage doors are open."

I stiffened. Looked straight ahead, and it seemed my heart stopped beating. We never opened the big doors; no car, we didn't need to. I hadn't even been in the garage this evening.

"Pete?"

"Yes, I heard you."

I walked through the house. We sat on the corner, and thus the driveway entered from the side street, was lighted from the street light almost up to the garage door. The doorway yawned black from the house door—open.

I stopped. Janie couldn't see it from the window, but I could see it from here. A car. In our garage—a car. For a moment I was tempted to go back for the gun.

I didn't. I walked forward again on tip-toe. In the car was a man. I reached for the wall, something to hold onto. In the man was a knife. I almost fainted. The match I'd struck fell from my trembling fingers. The dead man was Lieutenant Ludkin.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Corpse in Every Garage

I HADN'T even known the Finn. And Brask's body lay on Brask's own terrace. But now, sheer fright leaped through me. I recall clearly the subjective symptoms, nausea, a cold wave, hammer heart beats, severe tremor.

Then, suddenly, upon this fright came a quick hot flash, something new and strange—elation. *Ludkin was dead.* My mind zigzagged from fear, to sing and dance around those three words for a moment. Dead, he could not hurt me! I hadn't needed the gun!

Probably within the same few seconds stone-hard reality hit me.

This time I couldn't escape, not by simply turning my back, walking or running away. This time the body and the crime were mine to explain, in my garage.

My crime to explain! I put both hands to my ears. My body to dispose of. I began to moan, to pound the car door in frustration, without reason.

"Pete?" Someone was calling. Janie.

The bedroom was lighted. I swung around, in one instant stone. I could see her at the open window.

"Yes," I said. "I'm here."

"Oh—I thought I didn't hear you close the doors, darling."

Overhead doors. I pulled them. And the second that they squealed and clattered down I knew I'd made a mistake. Now I'd have to raise the doors again, to get him out, to get the car out. And I couldn't raise the doors again tonight without Janie hearing.

The bed was by the window. It was warm, and she'd left the window open. It was less than twenty feet from the window to the garage, the driveway.

I stared straight into the darkness, at nothing. Then yet my thoughts were revolving, around nothing. Ludkin was dead. Here was his body, presumably his car. I'd certainly had motive to kill him, once Ludkin's death was tied back to Brask's. Back to the Finn's. Three murders, all stabbings. Consistent. Juries liked things consistent. Three murders to explain, a body to explain. Whirling thoughts, whirling around nothing.

"Pete?"

I stifled a groan. She'd come to the back door. She wore a wide-belted robe, slippers with high heels, her hair down, falling gently, satin brown, smooth, to her shoulders.

"Pete, what on earth are you doing out there?"

I had to stumble out, shut the side door. I had to convince her that the night was sane, that I was sane, that nothing had happened.

"Just—just looking," I said.

"In the dark?"

"I—I'm not sleepy."

"Aren't you coming in?"

"I'll be in, hon."

"Pete, there's nothing missing?"

Missing!

Wonderful, Pete, how you can stand here, ten feet from her, ten feet from the body, talking! Wonderful. I marveled at myself, this display of control. I stood shaking though, inside, my teeth chattering. After midnight. Not even five black hours left, until dawn. You couldn't drive off with a dead man after dawn. Five small hours, somehow, to do it. Then the wave hit me.

It was like stone too long under water, slimy. *Who had put Ludkin in the garage?* I took a deep breath, and my skin began to crawl. Who had murdered Ludkin? Jackie. Who had murdered Brask? Jackie. Why had I first come to Lakeview? To find Jackie. Funny. To find Jackie. Actually it appeared Jackie had found me.

I walked into the house, had to get out of the darkness, had to be where there was sanity and light. I had to see that Janie went to sleep. I had to dispose of the body.

"Pete? Pete, when were you in the garage?"

I stopped breathing.

"I mean," she said, "it's very odd. The doors were closed when we went to the Taylors. I'm sure I remember."

"Oh, no." I tried to swallow, had to choke it down. "I was out there just after I got home from work." *Committed. She'll remember that statement. Be it true or not, if the rest goes wrong, you're committed.*

"Oh," she said. She looked at me as

I came in the bedroom. Then she added queerly, "I just wondered."

"Good night, hon."

She waited a long moment. Then she answered, "Good night, darling."

Less than five hours to dispose of the body. . . .

FIVE small hours until dawn—and Janie couldn't sleep. Too warm? She would sigh and toss, and once she rose and drew still farther back the draperies. I didn't dare so much as move now, or she'd know I was awake. Each quarter hour I could hear the tower clock, its soft, insistent chiming.

She dropped off to sleep finally. The eerie light, the silver street light, watched her with infinite patience, through the wide north window.

I got outside all right, every step on tip-toe, cautious. Old shoes, old trousers, a sweat shirt. I got the door, the side door open. The smell inside was somehow faintly sweet, like old perfume.

No—nonsense. Just my nerves. Death was never sweet. Gasoline and oil, the smell, just car smell. I could see him slumped beyond the wheel, a darker shape, a blot. I closed my eyes a moment, had to lean there on the car door, fight the shaking.

I touched him. First, he had to be searched. But there was no wallet in his pockets, no papers. I even felt behind the seat. No papers, nothing. Easy, therefore, this first step. And easy, I could see, would be the third one, because the driveway inclined toward the street. Then the street inclined slightly into Oakland Drive.

Now I was going to push the car out, turn the wheel, try to keep momentum all the way to Oakland. Then I would jump in quickly. Then it didn't matter if Janie did hear the car start. Then I would be away. Coming back I could invent a story. Any story, once I was rid of the body.

I was going to park the car blocks distant. Simply pull up, get out, walk away. Stall for time that way. Easy, first and third steps.

The step in between was going to be the big one. To get the overhead doors open. To do this without any noise. with-

out waking Janie. I took another deep breath, walked back to the door. Everything okay? No sound from the bedroom window; I closed my eyes a moment—opened them on light.

"Pete Henning," Janie called from the house door, "what are you doing out there? Pete, where did you get that car?"

She was coming down the steps, her belted robe on again, coming toward me. She got almost to the garage door. "Pete, I was so afraid—" She stopped. I'd slammed the door behind me, reached her. I grabbed her apparently, spun her around.

"Pete—there's someone *in* the car!"

"Don't talk."

"But, Pete!"

"Not here. In the house, kid, please."

"Pete, there was—"

We were in the house now, as she faced me. As she paused now, tense and panting, clutching both my arms and shaking.

I nodded. "I guess you've got to know. No other way, I guess. You're right. In the car, hon. A dead man. . . ."

One o'clock. One-thirty. Two. It wasn't so hard though, to tell her. The secrets, started, just spilled out. It was good to get them out. The pain was hearing her choked cry, and seeing that she swayed, and knowing that her heart was tight in the sudden fear, and aching.

"Pete," she breathed once, "what you planned to do, dispose of him like that, was madness!"

Was it? Madness to want love, a home, respect, and life? We sat in the dinette, beneath one small side light, but it wasn't the dinette to me tonight. It was the law's brown room.

I started with the Finn, broken words, throat aching. I told her all about the brawl and Ludkin. I told her about Brask, and Jackie; and then the weeks so good since we'd met that I'd almost forgotten the danger. She was deathly white at first, then crying. No sobs, understand; just tears that ran unnoticed by her down her cheeks. I told her how I'd looked up just this noon, and seen Ludkin.

"Janie, believe me. I don't know what happened tonight. I mean how it happened. Janie, believe me. I didn't kill

Brask, nor the Finn, not even Ludkin."

She reached out for my hands, across the table. Still the tears came as she whispered, "Pete, I love you. I *know* you." She raised my hands to her lips and kissed them. *Not killer's hands! No Pete, you must believe that.* I heard her deep breath, and a sigh, out slowly. "I was with you all evening. You couldn't have killed Ludkin."

"But would that hold—from you, my wife—in court?"

"Wait, Pete, let me think. Ludkin was crooked. He knew Brask's game. Somehow he picked up the same trail you did. He didn't care about you. He was going to follow Brask's game, blackmail. The same trail, to Lakeview."

"To Jackie."

"Yes, apparently to Jackie."

"Then Jackie knew I'd worked for Brask."

"Yes, Pete, it would seem so."

"And Jackie knew Ludkin's body, found in my garage, would tie me back to Brask's murder."

"It—it would seem so."

"But I've gone over and over that list—the plane's passengers—and there wasn't one small lead, hon."

"Wait, Pete, I'm thinking. You said the Finn had worked for Brask?"

"That's what Brask said. He said—"

"Then suppose Jackie killed the Finn too, Pete?"

"What?"

"Suppose—" Two small red spots appeared in Janie's cheeks, heightened. "Suppose we go *all* the way back, Pete? The Finn had something on Jackie. Suppose that's where it really started? Pete, Brask just wasn't big hearted. He didn't save you from Ludkin because he believed in justice.

"Ludkin could have 'solved' the Finn's murder, by framing you for it. But Brask didn't *want* it solved. He wanted that murder open, as a lever. Didn't he always want a lever? Isn't that plain? Pete, suppose Brask knew who'd killed the Finn, then backtracked from the Finn and so discovered all the Finn knew about Jackie?"

"Then suppose Jackie had seen *you* the night of the Finn's murder. And saw *you*, afterward, working for Brask. And

finally, saw *you* here, in Lakeview. Wouldn't he be frightened? Wouldn't he, Pete?"

"It must have been clear that I knew where to look, but not which guy to look for."

"That's right. But wouldn't he fear you *might* discover his identity? And when Ludkin appeared, an immediate threat, wouldn't he try to dispose of both Ludkin and you, through Ludkin's murder?"

"But, Janie," I groaned, "we're right back where we started!"

"Oh, no." The tears had stopped, her lips were tight, chin firm. "I've changed my mind, Pete. Now we've got to dispose of the body. We've got to discover who the Finn was. Where he'd worked. Who he knew in Lakeview. We've got to—"

She stopped suddenly. She looked at me and bright spots faded from her cheeks as I got up, as I leaned across the table.

"Pete," she whispered.

"Hon, you've got half of it," I said. "The half we may need. Will the body, found anywhere else, point back to me? Hon, we've got it! We've got a lion by the tail!"

"The killer can't call the cops—too obvious. But he can stick around—to see that we don't move the body. We can cut right through to the core, hon, and then we'll find—"

There was a small sound behind us. We both spun. Herb Taylor stood there, grinning. The gun in his right hand was black and big and very, very real.

I stared at it, fascinated.

HE WAVED the gun, said softly, "Hi, kids." Then he added: "It's Ludkin's rod, Pete. It won't be traced to me, so don't get any funny ideas and think I can't use it."

We both whispered, "Jackie!"

"No." The grin widened, changed then. He wet his lips, repeated in a flat voice:

"No. Elaine was 'Jackie'. Nickname before she became involved with the Warrens, before she married Warren—and a million. But sit down, kids.

(Please continue on page 96)

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to cheat or rob you. We all know well enough that as long as there's a would-be smart guy around to prey on honest people's gullibility, we'll be needing a column like "Ready For The Rackets" to keep you readers up-to-date on the slick schemes these dishonest characters cook up to cheat you out of your hard-earned cash.

For you can read in these pages all the ways of operating the racketeers have. By keeping up with the news, reading this column every month to learn of the tricks that might possibly be tried on you, you can safeguard and protect yourself against being caught in the net of the swindler.

More than that, this column can help you—by you helping us. Send us letters telling of your own personal experiences with chiselers and racketeers of all kinds. We'll publicize the information you give us—and at the same time pay you \$5.00 for every letter used.

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

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

Now, let's see what the current swindles are:

Ah, Vanity!

Dear Sir:

There is a racket which preys upon the unwary would-be poet. I have on my shelf a poetry anthology. In it are several hundred poems, representing the hopes of hundreds of struggling writers.

I was approached through the mail by a cadjoling letter. A poem of mine had been printed in the local newspaper. The editor of the prespective anthology noticed the merit in my poetry—so ran the message. Would I be

gracious enough to grant permission for reprint in the coming book? Overjoyed at such recognition, I rushed my affirmative reply.

In turn, overjoyed at such a lack of resistance, the book publisher contacted me immediately. A share of fame was mine—for a price! Due to the high cost of printing and distribution, I was asked to order and pay for in advance several copies of the book, at the publisher's swollen prices.

I bit, and sent my money order along. This wasn't enough. The publisher wrote glowingly of a picture supplement which was proposed as part of the anthology. For only \$16.00 I could have my photograph included in the collection. I didn't nibble at this vanity bait.

The book reached me some months later. It didn't reach the general public, nor the book stands. It was cheaply printed, and poorly bound. The much-heralded picture supplement was a paper-covered pamphlet, looking like an afterthought, glued messily in the back of the book.

My lesson in Vanity Publishing costs me \$25.00—money I could ill afford to spend. But the lesson was worth the financial loss. That sad-sack-book on my shelf is a constant reminder to me to stay always on the look-out against the fast-talking minor racketeers who await an opportunity to prey on the general public.

D. Winter
Geneva, Ohio

Dirt Cheap

Dear Sir:

It was a wonderful buy, or so my wife and I thought.

The man at our door showed us a sample display of name-brand cans of food in a cardboard carton. He offered the lot at one-third the cost at a supermarket.

Of course each can was dented or scratched or else the label ripped, but those superficial blemishes in no way affected the quality of the contents. But grocers, our man explained, dislike carrying disfigured stock because customers subconsciously offer sales resistance to it. Thus, wholesalers rid themselves at giveaway prices of cans of food that are marred in the handling processes.

Willingly my wife and I paid four dollars for what we estimated to be twelve dollars' worth of stock. We didn't receive the sample carton he'd unpacked before our eyes but a sealed case he was carrying in the back of his car.

Imagine our indignation on unpacking the sealed cardboard carton our self-styled jobber sold us to discover we'd bought a box of dirt!

Keith S. C. Allen
Remsenburg, New York.

All Wrapped Up

Dear Sir:

The two rackets pulled in our town were unconsciously aided by the unsuspecting clerks. Several days after Christmas, a young man walked up to the clerk in a large crowded store and pushed a toaster across the counter.

"We got this toaster for Christmas," he explained to the clerk, "but there is something wrong with it. It doesn't work." The clerk tried the toaster and found there was nothing wrong with it.

"That's funny," the young man said. "It wouldn't work at home."

"Something must be wrong with your wall plug," the clerk said and handed him the toaster back. The young man apologized for the trouble and asked politely if she would wrap it up for him so that it wouldn't look as if he was 'shop-lifting'.

It was several hours later that the clerk found a toaster missing from the showcase. Of course, it was the one she so obligingly wrapped up for him.

The second one ran on the same order, probably pulled by the same man. He had a table-model radio under his arm and explained to the clerk that he brought the radio to be fixed and left the house in a hurry, and would she please wrap it up for him or give him a paper bag before the floor-walker starts asking embarrassing questions?

Yes—the radio was also found missing from the showcase.

S. T. W.
Saginaw, Michigan

All Burned Up

Dear Sir:

Police are beginning to think that perhaps they have some kind of a new racket on their hands. It apparently takes the form of an oil burner "inspector" who professes to be a member of the Police Department.

A few weeks ago a woman in Rochester, N. Y. called the Detective Bureau out of curiosity to find out why a policeman should want to inspect her oil burner. He had not only inspected the burner, but insisted on being taken on an inspection tour by her through the entire house.

This is what aroused the housewife's curiosity and suspicion.

The police had an excellent description of the "inspector"—but could not find any policeman who was detailed to such duty. This morning another woman called the police to report that a "policeman" had called to inspect her oil burner as was now "required by the new police regulations."

This one went a little further than the other inspector. He calmly announced that there was a \$2.00 fee connected with the inspection. Luckily, it wasn't paid. This racket is liable to spread unless checked or it will lead to more home robberies.

Mrs. G. W. Beikirch
Rochester, N. Y.

As Bad as His Word

Dear Sir:

Some other cowhands and I were sitting in the Adams Bar having a quiet evening when this well-dressed fellow came in. He ordered a couple of drinks and got to talking a little with his neighbors. First thing you know he bought a couple of rounds for the house. Then everybody got to listening to a big deal he'd just made.

Seems he'd just bought a rundown dude ranch for a song, and he had contacts in New York that were really backing him. According to him, his fortune was made.

The only thing he needed was some good cowhands to work on the place with him. He wanted real cow punchers to make the place authentic.

About that time Joe steps up and says, "Say, pard, you've got a crew right here!" He pointed to the rest of our crew. We had just been paid off after the fall roundup, and were all dreading hunting some other kind of work to tide us over until time for the spring roundup.

After a little more talk this fellow says, "Boys, you're just what I need. Be out in front at nine tomorrow morning with your duffle, and I'll take you all out to the place in my station wagon." Then he collected a ten buck deposit from each of us to make sure we'd not forget to show up, and had us sign a contract.

Us boys would like to nail his hide on the wall. We felt a little foolish after waiting in front of the Adams for an hour with nothing to do but wish we each had our ten bucks apiece back!

J. G.
Gilbert, Arizona

She Sees the Light

Dear Sir:

A few years ago I leased a rest home in San Jose, California. The day I moved in, a well-dressed, middle-aged man carrying a brief case rang my bell. Stating that he represented the Gas and Electric Company, he asked if I had signed up at the office for service. I replied that I had.

"That is why I am calling on you," he said. "It seems that the office failed to tell you about a ruling which entitles you, being in business, to a fifty-percent cut on your monthly statements. All that you do is pay \$64.00 in advance. This entitles you to one year's rates."

Doing a little mental figuring, I decided that this plan would result in worthwhile saving. Consequently I handed the "representative" the \$64.00 in exchange for a receipt that he had me sign. But I realized much later that he had signed nothing.

The following month my utility bill came in. It was not cut in half. At the Gas and Electric Company's office I was informed that they had no such representative. I left that office with a red face, but a wiser head.

Doris Clement
Galt, Calif.

(Please continue on page 98)

MY MISTAKE— YOUR FUNERAL



He grabbed wildly for the Colt,
swung it on me.

By

**RUSSELL
BRANCH**

I CUT the ignition and the old sedan died with a death rattle. Then silence closed in; silence and dusk and a thin fog swirling in the feeble headlights. I switched them off too, and waited.

A coyote back in the hills lifted my scalp with a demented howl, and a shadow disengaged itself from other shadows on the edge of the grove. A two-legged coyote this one, with a low furtive call that barely reached my ears . . .

“Knowles?”

I shoved the door lever down, slowly edged out of the car that belonged to Anson Knowles. Knowles’ hat was too small, but I wore it tilted low over my

*It took not-so-innocent Bobby-socks
to get Detective Rocky Rhodes
neck-deep in murder.*

face. His coat was also too small, but the pocket hid my right hand. I kept my side turned and remembered to move stiffly, with a slight stoop to my shoulders.

Then something blasted ugly orange holes in the dusk, and I forgot all about being Anson Knowles. I was Rocky Rhodes again, hugging the dirt for dear life with my Special pounding in my hand.

I squeezed out four shots, maybe five, before reason caught up with my trigger finger. The other gun had quit, and I was shooting blindly at a shadow which had merged again with other shadows.

I rolled over behind the rear wheel and waited. There was a faint stirring somewhere deep in the bushes, and then silence so deep I could hear myself shivering. I got to my knees and ducked around the car. Then I moved carefully away, skirting the dark fringes of the parking area with ears strained to a pin-drop.

My feet found him. I stumbled against him right where I had first spotted him, at the edge of the path leading back into the picnic ground. He had a hole in his face and his eyes stared blankly past the match trembling in my hand. A thin young fellow with long blond hair; Hollywood tie, tight gabardine topcoat, suede gloves. A sharpie, a lady-killer, and—I reminded myself—a would-be man-killer.

I lit more matches, wondering with vague irritation whether Knowles kept a flashlight in his car. There was a briefcase near his head, but the gun was harder to find. I located it finally in the dirt beyond his feet. Apparently my slug had shook it loose as it spun him around. I reached for the gun—and then a faint sound brought my head up.

It was just a whisper. A breeze stirring in the tree tops, maybe; or a car rolling silently away down the road. Then I heard the unmistakable cough of a motor catching in gear. I shoved the dead man's gun in Knowles' other pocket, groped for the briefcase, and ran.

The sedan was a nice, reliable old bus. It started at the first touch of the starter, and it had power. But it wasn't quite what I'd pick for a chase down a winding mountain road. I fought the stiff wheel, wished for my own beatup job, and prayed that Knowles' tires were as well preserved as the paint job.

I knew it was hopeless even as I slewed precariously around the first bend, but I kept on anyway. My dead pal would wait; and there was always a chance the guy ahead would miss a turn before I did.

He didn't. Fifteen minutes later I came out on Eagle Park Boulevard without even catching a glimpse of his tail light. The boulevard was heavy with traffic; with late home-comers and early movie-goers: I pulled into the curb and began cursing myself for a trigger-happy chump.

TWO hours ago I'd been planning on a quiet dinner and an early movie for myself. In fact, I'd just been locking my files, when Anson Knowles walked in. He was a tall, quiet-spoken gent in gray tweed—one of your nice, average middle-class and middle-aged citizens. Except that he had blackmail on his mind.

I'd recognized him from his newspaper pictures, and I remembered now what I'd told him about blackmail.

"You haven't got much choice, Mr. Knowles. You can go to the police."

He'd vetoed that with a quick shake of his head, and I'd gone on: "You can pay—and pay and pay—if you can afford it."

Another worried shake of his head.

"You can do it the simple way, with a bullet."

I paused and grinned at the horrified expression on his face. "Or you can go the blackmailer one better. I mean, get something on him, put the fear of hell or the police in him, and tell him to go fry. A guy who messes with blackmail usually has something to hide himself."

Anson Knowles had liked that last suggestion—providing I'd handle it for him. I knew all about such unsavory matters, I could take care of myself, I had a reputation for honesty and discretion as well as . . . er, courage. If five hundred dollars—

For five hundred dollars, I assured him, I was his boy, complete with honesty, discretion, and courage. And what was it all about?

Early this morning, he told me, he had received an anonymous phone call advising him, if he valued his reputation and position, to meet the caller at seven

o'clock in the Eagle Park picnic grove, the one on the reservoir road about a mile below the dam. He would also kindly bring five thousand dollars with him in small negotiable chunks.

"You agreed?" I asked in surprise.

Knowles shook his head with a wry smile. "I told him to go fry, as you put it. But in the afternoon mail I received a certain photograph, and then about an hour ago another phone call from the same man." He shrugged helplessly. "I haven't any choice, Mr. Rhodes, not in my position. Nor do I have five thousand dollars to spare. That's why I've come to you."

"This photograph?" I asked delicately.

Knowles blushed to the roots of his graying hair. "It—well, it involves another person and unless you think it absolutely essential, I'd rather—"

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter," I assured him, "neither the picture itself nor the subject matter. There will always be more prints and more prints, no matter how much you pay. Any idea who your friend is?"

Knowles had a very definite idea. A young punk—he used the word "cad"—by name of Saunders Cotrell who ran a portrait studio out in Westview. Knowles had had some previous, er, experience with this Cotrell, and he would seem to tie in with the photography angle too.

I'd agreed to that, and also to Knowles' suggestion that we exchange cars and apparel. I was the same general build, allowing thirty pounds which the topcoat would help hide, and the disguise would help me get close enough, in the dark, to get my hands on the blackmailer. My client was out of his depth, maybe, but not exactly stupid, I decided. . . .

No, if anyone had been stupid it was I—sitting here now in Knowles' sedan on the edge of Eagle Park, and taking a long sour look at the mess I'd made of the whole thing.

Not to mention the mess I'd made of a face belonging to a man who unmistakably matched Knowles' description of Saunders Cotrell. A dead blackmailer, sure, and I'd shot in self-defense, sure—but it would still be enough to wreck Knowles' career.

All I had to show for his faith in me

was an empty briefcase and an automatic; and somewhere loose in this traffic was an accomplice of Cotrell's who had seen the whole business. There were several things that bothered me about it. Why, for instance, the fireworks had started so suddenly and unexpectedly. But my main worry now was what to do about it at the moment.

I worried it all through and arrived at the only sensible solution. I'd return Knowles' car and clothes, warn him to keep clear, and then come back to claim my victim. Maybe, with luck, I could find a story that would satisfy the police and still keep Knowles out of it.

But even while I hesitated, it was too late. A police car bored a red hole down the boulevard towards me, turned the corner with shrieking rubber and screaming siren, and roared on up the narrow Eagle Park road that led to only one place.

It was too late now to save my neck, but the least I could do was try to salvage what was left of my professional pride and Knowles' reputation. I found a drugstore with a classified directory, I found the number I wanted, and then I found myself pushing an ancient sedan faster than it had ever been driven before.

I still thought there might be a chance in a million of saving my client from the wolves.

SAUNDERS COTRELL'S Studio of Photography was a walk-up trap in a block of cheap stores on Westview Avenue, the kind with a glass showcase by the entrance. The display cabinet was lit with a dim bulb and displayed a sick-looking wedding couple and a toothy damsel wearing a piano scarf. The rickety stairs were unlit, but I followed my nose.

My last match showed me a frosted glass panel with the proper label. It also showed me something else: the splintered door jamb where somebody had made short work of a flimsy lock. I stepped on the match and gave the door a tentative shove.

It swung inward silently, then stopped short and took a deep breath. It was the first time I'd ever heard a door take a deep breath and I was interested. I gave it a real hard shove, and this time I got

a grunt out of it. That was enough for me.

I said, "Okay, come out slow. This is a gun in my hand and it's hot."

He came out, but not slow. He came out swinging like a wild man. I side-stepped and let him have it—but with the flat of my revolver this time. I'd done enough shooting for that night. Then I found the light switch and flicked it on . . . and found myself looking at Anson Knowles!

He was on his knees, shaking his head groggily. A flashlight lay next to him—my flashlight, with its lens broken. He stared up at me fearfully and then incredulously.

"Rhodes!"

"I told you to go home and stay there!" I snapped. "What's the idea?"

He rose, shaking his head weakly. "I . . . well, I did. But then I thought while you were meeting Cotrell would be an excellent time to search for the pictures here."

"And a nice job you did," I said, casting an unhappy eye about the ransacked joint. "You must have left a million finger-prints."

Knowles reached for a large manilla envelope and held it up triumphantly. "What difference does that make? I found the pictures. Prints, negatives, everything. Mr. Cotrell, if you'll pardon the expression, can go plumb to hell."

"He's already gone," I said, and explained briefly.

Knowles listened gravely, admitted it was an "unfortunate" situation, but didn't seem too worried. His attitude was that since he had recovered his pictures, the least I could do now was to find some way out of my own mess without involving him. That was what he had paid me for in the first place, wasn't it?

I told him nastily that five hundred bucks wasn't worth a trip to the gas chamber, even to me, but short of that I'd do my best. I also suggested that we'd do well to scam before the cops came poking into the business affairs of the late proprietor.

When we reached the sidewalk, Knowles did ask me a bit apologetically whether there was anything he could do to help—without sticking his own neck out, of course.

"You can burn that folder and contents to a crisp," I said, "and flush the ashes down the drain. You might also pray, if you think it'll do any good. Where's my car?"

He showed me, and I gave him back his hat and coat, and we left each other without another word. I didn't get much sleep that night, but I did get one thing figured out. At a pack a day, five hundred bucks would only buy me cigarettes for about nine years in jail. . . .

The next morning was sunny, warm, and a lot more cheerful. In fact, I would have been inclined to write the whole thing off as a bad dream—except for the souvenirs on my desk, namely one cheap briefcase and one .38 Colt automatic with three shells missing from a full clip.

What really got me was the fact that neither of the morning papers had one word about a shooting in Eagle Park!

Anson Knowles, however, had made the front page and more enemies with another speech on his favorite theme.

"If it be true that juvenile delinquency breeds crime," he had told the Grand Jury yesterday morning, "then the reverse is doubly true. We can appoint endless committees, we can blame the housing situation and the divorce rate and a dozen contributing factors—but we will never clean up our schools unless the law-enforcement agencies of this city first clean out the dope and vice rackets and the known criminals who foul our nest and betray our young."

He had a point, of course, even if it didn't sound so good coming from a gent who had let himself wide open to blackmail, burglary, and accessory after the fact of man-slaughter.

I read on, and I had reached the point in his talk where he'd begun to mention names, when my door opened and one of the names walked in.

IT WAS, as I told my visitor, "just like in a story." John Devore's dark face scowled back at me suspiciously.

I pointed to the open newspaper, which very neatly concealed the mementoes on my desk. "I was just reading what Superintendent of Schools Knowles said about you to the Grand Jury."

"Superintendent of Schools Knowles is

going to talk himself into a casket," John answered grimly.

"I'll remember that," I said. "What d'ya want?"

John gave me his greasy grin. "Let's talk some more about Knowles, wise guy."

"For a nickel you can find out as much as I know," I said. "There's a newsboy at the next corner."

John settled his lard into my best chair. As I said, it was a warm Indian-summer day, but John had already gone into hibernation in his winter overcoat. His face looked sweaty, but then it always does, and his hands remained in his coat pockets.

"Knowles came to see you late yesterday," he informed me. "I don't know what he wanted or how much he offered, but I'll make it double."

"That wouldn't be half enough, John. Half the money in the world wouldn't be half enough—for you."

I'd forgotten: you can't insult a skunk by telling him he stinks. John just grinned amiably and leaned back and worked a cigar out of the breast pocket under his overcoat. He chewed the end off, spit it on my floor, and helped himself to my desk lighter. He did all this awkwardly, with his left hand. His right remained in his coat pocket.

"Last night a pal of mine had an appointment with the Knowles in Eagle Park. He never came back from Eagle Park. I want to find out what happened to him, and it's worth dough to me."

"Eagle Park?" I raised my eyebrows. "What kind of an appointment was that?"

John answered smoothly, "Don't be stupid, Rocky. This was a business matter. Every man has his price, you know."

I shook my head. "You haven't got mine, John."

"He was a young fellow by name of Saunders Cotrell," John went on imperceptibly. "Has a little photography business way out on Westview Avenue." He hunched himself up and fished out his wallet, still with his left hand. "We'll make it a C-note to start with, and a grand when you—"

I shoved it back, and that finally convinced him.

"What's the matter with my dough?"

I told him what was wrong with his

dough and what he should use it for.

"You shouldn't talk like that, Rocky," he said petulantly. "I don't like smart punks who talk like that."

"Not being liked by you is a compliment," I said. "Now get out of here, you fat fluff."

His face went blank as a hunk of baker's dough. His right arm stiffened in his coat pocket. I ignored him. I reached for the corners of the newspaper on my desk and began very deliberately to fold it. By the time it was folded, I had a .38 automatic in my hand where John could see it.

He looked at the automatic and began to chuckle. He was still chuckling as he waddled out. When the door closed, I looked down and got the point of the joke.

The clip to the .38 was lying in plain sight on my desk—and any fool knows that you can't fire a Colt automatic with the magazine out.

* * *

In my business you don't meet too many nice people; you meet too many of them like John Devore. Ab Cox counted in the first category. He knew his job, which was captain of the homicide detail. He kept his big nose clean, too—a remarkable feat for anyone working at the city hall—and he expected private detectives like me to do likewise.

His voice, as usual, sounded like a bad telephone connection. "Well . . . Rocky, my friend. What's the good word?"

"They tell me the striped bass are running off Vallejo," I said. "How's the murder and mayhem department these days?"

"Dead, pal, dead. I thought you went up there last weekend?"

"It was only a rumor," I answered. "I got three smelt and a sunburn. You working on that business out in Eagle Park?"

"Eagle Park? What about Eagle Park?"

Ab was obviously puzzled, and my noble resolution went out the door which had closed behind John Devore. "Yeah, didn't you hear? They found an honest politician up there with a knife in his back, and the D.A. swears it's suicide."

Ab didn't think it was very funny, and neither did I, for that matter. It was just the best I could do on the spur of the moment. "Look, Ab, I'm asking a little unofficial favor. I've got hold of a stray gun I'd like to tag if possible. A Colt Super .38, serial number—"

"You sure it wasn't a .38 slug in that honest politician you were talking about?" Ab interrupted suspiciously.

"Don't be silly. That was just a gag. What would an honest politician be doing in this town?"

Ab snorted dubiously, but promised me he'd let me know if the serial number I gave him showed up in their files.

Frankly, I didn't think there was a chance in a carload that it would, but what could I lose now? I shoved the gun into my pocket and went on out to Eagle Park for the same reason.

EAGLE PARK, in case you've been wondering, is a "park" only by courtesy of the city council and a real estate deal which must have made some councilman a pretty penny. Actually it's nothing but a few thousand acres of scrub oak and chaparral, and it's one of the reasons why people make jokes about our so-called "city limits."

The picnic grove was still there, and there didn't seem to be anyone picnicking this morning, but I drove on past anyway and then walked back in order not to mess up any tracks which might show up in the little parking area.

I found a small caked puddle right where I expected, at the mouth of the path into the grove. But something new had been added: a wide trail in the dust which might have been made by somebody dragging a sack of potatoes. The trail ended ten feet out into the parking space, and anything beyond that it would have taken somebody with Indian blood to read.

I skirted back along the path into the grove to see what else I could find, and that was when I first became aware of the car grinding up the hill from below.

It arrived, slowed tentatively, then turned around and stopped. It was one of those things that give motorcycle cops gray hairs: a cut-down, hopped-up Model A with a junk yard pickup body in back and a thousand dollars' worth of chrome

and soup under its hood. In other words, a hot rod.

I've always wondered about those pick-up rears—whether they're supposed to fool the police, or to carry ballast for traction during time trials. This one had a boy and a girl sitting very close together.

The girl got out, looking scared but determined, while the boy idled the motor with a nervous foot. She moved quickly towards where I was hidden, her eyes searching the ground.

She wore a sweater two sizes too big, a plaid skirt of the same dimensions and bobby socks—but her droopy costume didn't fool me a bit. Her body moved as if it knew what it was all about, and her face was about as innocent as mine, if a lot prettier.

At the edge of the path she hesitated, bit her bright red lips uncertainly, and then deliberately scuffed dirt over the spot marked X. I held my peace. In fact, I waited until she was well into the grove before I stepped out behind her.

"Lose something, honey?"

The fluff of taffy hair jerked around, her brown eyes widened at me in one startled instant, and then she scooted for it like a flabbergasted rabbit. I guess my reflexes aren't what they used to be, because I missed completely.

She yelped as she ran, the motor gunned, and I arrived at the scene of the departure around the bend in a whine of rubber, and if there was a license plate on its tail anywhere, I was a monkey's uncle.

I was already something close to that anyway, so instead of wasting more breath in running for my car, I turned back into the picnic grounds and went on looking for whatever it was I was looking for.

I found the three empty shells, finally, and I found something else too. There were struggle trails leading from each of the two barbecue pits, and these looked as if someone had dragged a very heavy and wide rake through the dead leaves. My brilliant powers of observation supplied the answer, after ten minutes more of concentrated effort. Somebody had toted away the iron grills from both fireplaces! But the pits themselves were empty.

On the way back down, I tried to add it up. One missing stiff, and two barbecue grills. I knew there were still a few coyotes and deer in Eagle Park—but cannibals? Not to mention a bobby-soxer, a gangster, and three wandering .38 shells.

My day was complete when I got back to my office and found it full of law.

ACTUALLY it was only Ab Cox. But Ab seems to take up a lot of room when he's wearing a hat and a frown.

"Here we go again," I sighed. "Whose throat have I cut now?"

"I wouldn't know," Cox grunted insultingly. "Who're you working for?"

I let that go with a silly grin. "What's on your mind, Captain?"

"Right after you called this morning, I heard two more gags about Eagle Park. Interesting coincidence, don't you think?"

"Fascinating. Do go on."

"Number one: John Devore showed up bright and early at headquarters and turned in a missing-person squawk on a lad named Cotrell. Cotrell, he said, had last been seen last night on his way to a mysterious appointment in Eagle Park, and he suspected foul play."

"That's one for the books," I admitted. "John Devore asking the police department for help. What'd they tell him?"

Cox shrugged. "The usual—no official action until forty-eight hours had elapsed. Item number two, and this will slay you; at seven-twenty-five last night the desk logged an anonymous phone call reporting an alleged shooting fracas in the Eagle Park picnic grove. Patrol Car 32 investigated."

"And found?"

"That's just it. It was as phony as your little joke and Devore's visit to headquarters."

"Don't look at me like that," I said. "You mean they didn't find anything?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. At least, nothing Schultz bothered to write up. You know—Schultz. I called him in, when I learned about Devore's interest, and he admitted they did find a couple of high school kids up by the reservoir, but they hadn't heard anything. He sent 'em home to bed."

"He didn't even take names and li-

cense number, on a call like that?" I yapped incredulously.

Ab shrugged sadly. "We all have our shortcomings, Rocky. What's this all about?"

I grinned at him unconvincingly. "Idle curiosity or an official question?"

"I can make it official quick enough," he snapped. "I can start on the person who owns that Colt you're interested in."

I sat up eagerly, but Cox shook his head firmly. "After you, Rocky."

I took a deep breath, like a man going off on a high diving board. "You know Anson Knowles?"

Cox shook his head casually, but I caught the gleam of interest in his eyes. "Not personally. He's the new Superintendent of Schools, of course."

"What d'ya think of him?"

That fetched a grin from Cox. "Officially, no comment. As a taxpayer, I think he's got what it's going to take to clean this town up. Guts, public support, and a crusade you can't play politics with."

"He also has some enemies who play with automatic pistols," I said. "That shot somebody heard in Eagle Park last night was intended for him, if you must know. I'm trying to locate the man who tossed it."

"And what's wrong with the police department?" Cox demanded.

I laughed bitterly. "You know the answer to that as well as I do, Ab. Knowles has stepped on a lot of corns with his one-man reform campaign. The city hall boys are unfriendly, to put it mildly. The papers would just as soon crucify him as back him. Knowles knows what he's up against, that's all."

Cox shook his head. "I can't buy it, Rocky. For one thing, a guy with enemies doesn't hang around Eagle Park after dark. Not if he has any sense, not if his own hands are clean."

I could only nod. "Sure, that's one of the things I'm working on."

Cox stared at me and I stared right back at him. Then he said, "I want your word, Rocky. You haven't turned up anything yet for my department?"

"I haven't turned up the body yet, if that's what you mean," I answered, and hoped he wouldn't take me too literally.

"When I get my answer I'll let you know."

He unfolded his lanky frame hesitantly. "Well . . . hell, I got a kid in high school myself, and Knowles is going to need all the help he can get. I only hope, for your sake and his, that the answer doesn't have a .38 slug in it."

"Meaning?"

He told me what he meant and left me with the pieces of what had been a nice, neat theory.

MY TELEPHONE rang while I was still trying to pick up those pieces. It was Knowles and he was singing a slightly different tune now. He'd received another threatening phone call and this time the word "murder" had been mentioned and could I come out to his house right away?"

"Right away, hell!" I told him. "I'm practically there."

Fifteen minutes later I was all the way there, and my client himself answered the doorbell. He showed me into his study, which was just about what you'd expect of a school official, and he didn't offer me a drink or even a seat before he was off on his new troubles.

I held up a hand. "There's some old business to clear up first, Mr. Knowles. *This* business."

I opened the briefcase I had brought and shoved a Colt under his nose. "This is the gun Cotrell had with him last night. *Your* gun."

Knowles stared at it in bewilderment. "My gun?"

"The police records say so."

His perplexity gave way to alarm. "You've been to the police?"

"Only about this—so far. You admit it's yours?"

He reached out with a trembling hand and I let him have it, after I had removed the clip and shoved it in my pocket.

"I . . . well, I did buy one like this several months ago. It seemed like a good idea. Self protection, I mean. But I can't see how . . ."

He handed it back to me abruptly and left the room. From the doorway I watched him go up the stairs, and I waited there until he came back. "Mine's gone now," he admitted. "I kept it in my bureau drawer."

His eyes were pleading; I guess he saw the scepticism in my face. "Mr. Rhodes, if this is my gun—and I guess it must be—I haven't the slightest idea how or when it left this house." He concluded with a wry smile. "You can see how much good it's done me. I didn't even think of it when I went to Cotrell's office that night."

"Well, *somebody*—" I began, and then stopped. A car without a decent muffler was making a very familiar racket outside, and I was still listening to it fade away when the door to the study suddenly opened.

Knowles looked up, said crossly, "I'm busy now, Trudy," but I don't think she heard him. She was staring at me across an armload of schoolbooks, and her face had lost its knowing look. She didn't look like a wise little girl now; she just looked like a scared kid who had picked the wrong door at the wrong time.

Knowles asked in surprise, "You've met my daughter, Mr. Rhodes?"

"Not formally," I grinned. "Come on in, Trudy, and meet me."

Trudy moved a reluctant step in my direction, and Knowles said reassuringly, "Mr. Rhodes is the detective I told you about this morning, dear. He's trying to help me, and he knows . . . well, most of the whole story, anyway."

"Let's stick to the things I don't know," I suggested. "Like what Trudy was doing up in Eagle Park at nine o'clock this morning."

Knowles' mouth fell open. His daughter glanced at him and then glared at me defiantly. "I was looking for my father's gun. I knew just what happened last night and I knew dad was in a jam and I was just trying to help him out, that's all."

She took a deep breath, as if it were a relief to get the whole thing off her chest. "When dad told me about everything, after I got home from school yesterday, I took his gun and went out to see if I couldn't get the pictures back myself. But Cotrell laughed at me and got the gun away, and said he'd return it to my father personally.

"When daddy told me this morning what had happened last night, the first thing I thought of was the gun and I

went up there because I was afraid Cotrell had taken it with him and it might still be around for the police to find."

I thought that all through and found myself believing at least half of it. Knowles was staring at his daughter as if she had suddenly grown two heads, and he explained to me apologetically:

"I had to tell Trudy what was going on, Mr. Rhodes. You see, she was the one who got involved with Saunders Cotrell."

"The rat," Trudy added.

"How involved?" I asked bluntly.

Trudy sniffed. Knowles answered unhappily, "My daughter's a good girl, Mr. Rhodes, but a bit unwise at times. She needs a mother, too. This photographer lad was too old and too smooth for her. He pretended a professional interest as well as a personal one; he persuaded her to pose for some very compromising pictures."

"Art studies," Trudy corrected primly.

I exploded—in Knowles' direction. "You mean to tell me that this whole hullabaloo has been over some pictures of a silly high-school kid made by a jerk!"

Trudy pouted and her father got red in the face. "How would you like your daughter—"

"I wouldn't," I snapped. "I'd paddle her bottom good. But I wouldn't let it throw me into a tailspin, I'll tell you that. Hell and not even the press we have in this town is going to use a fifteen-year-old just to smear her father."

"Nearly seventeen," Trudy said elegantly. "I tried to make daddy see all that to begin with."

She put her books on the desk, leaned her elbows on them and looked at me with new interest, as if seeing my muscles for the first time. Knowles was still making noises like a Victorian father, but I ignored them both. I reached for the phone book on his desk, found the number I wanted, and then went to work on the phone dial while the two of them watched me uneasily. A woman answered. I asked to speak to John Devore, and that brought Knowles up out of his seat in a hurry.

Elbows still on the books, Trudy rested her pert chin in her cupped palms and watched proceedings.

I held my hand over the speaker and shoved him away. "If your story's straight, you've got nothing to lose. If it isn't, it goes to the cops anyway, so relax."

The receiver was growling impatiently and I took my hand away again. "This is Rhodes, John. Does that offer you made me this morning still go?"

Devore hesitated only a second. "What'ya got?"

"I've got a good idea what happened to Cotrell last night. If it's still worth a grand to you, meet me at Anson Knowles' house in about fifteen minutes. If not, I'll take it to the cops."

KNOWLES' face was a study of disbelief, dismay, and finally, desperation. "You—you unscrupulous—" He grabbed wildly for the Colt, swung it on me.

Trudy flashed me a quizzical look.

I told her father, "That thing won't fire with the magazine out." Then I hung up and casually took out my own gun. "Put it down and sit down, both of you. We'll just wait right here while Mr. Devore makes up his mind."

It didn't take him more than ten minutes, apparently, because no one had said anything by the time we heard a car grind into the curb outside. I nodded then to Trudy, who had been eyeing the door longingly.

"Show him in, sweetheart, and then keep going in the opposite direction. If you love your father, you'll go to the nearest drugstore and phone the police. Ask for Ab Cox, Captain Ab Cox, and tell him to get on out here. Then buy yourself a coke and sit tight until I come for you."

She looked at her father dubiously, and he sent her on her way with a resigned shrug. We waited in more silence while a door opened and finally closed. Then Devore eased into the room, looking like a fat, dirty bear in his overcoat: a bear who feared a trap.

His eyes took in the pale, strained expression on Knowles' face, the gun in my lap negligently pointed at Knowles—and then he relaxed, although his hands remained in his coat pockets.

"Let's have it, Rocky."

I carefully kept both my eyes and my gun pointed in Knowles' direction. "Our school superintendent here won't like this, but he's going to hear it anyway. Cotrell made an appointment with him last night. Place, Eagle Park. Object, a deal over some pictures Cotrell had taken of his daughter. There was some shooting and the gun which shot Cotrell is Knowles'."

Devore said, "Go on."

"Even so, the police might write it off as self-defense—except I know better. First of all, Cotrell was shot in the back of the head, as the wound will show. Secondly, the ejected shells from Knowles' gun were back in the bushes, indicating that Cotrell was ambushed without warning. Last but not least, there's Knowles' obvious motive and the fact that he didn't go to the police. What do you think?"

"I think Mr. Clean-up Knowles is all washed up himself," Devore said.

Knowles hadn't uttered a protest. He just sat there, gazing at me with haggard, betrayed eyes.

I turned back to Devore. "Then I've earned the fee you offered me?"

The answer was a smug and greasy grin. "In hard cash, Rocky. I've got it with me."

"Okay," I said, and shifted slightly in my chair. "I'll give you the rest of it for free. Cotrell wasn't shot by Knowles at all, but by somebody he let in on his blackmail scheme."

Devore's grin faded around the edges. "I like the first part a lot better, Rocky."

"Sure," I said, "because you were that somebody. You didn't give a damn about Cotrell's penny-ante game; but you saw a beautiful chance to get him out of your dirty hair for once and all. You went along with Cotrell, you had the gun he'd taken away from Knowles' own daughter, and you shot Cotrell from behind."

"You figured Knowles would run at the first shot and cook his own goose; in fact you even called the police yourself. Even if Knowles did beat a murder rap, you figured, the whole blackmail thing would come out and finish him as a school official."

"You're nuts," Devore snarled, and then his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "But

I'll still make a deal. No matter how you slice it, our righteous friend here is up to his neck."

I shook my head. "Mr. Knowles is in the clear. He wasn't anywhere near Eagle Park last night, and the fact that his gun turned up there only proves my theory. You see, Devore, I was the guy who got out of his car last night."

Devore grunted out a dirty word and made the move I'd been hoping for. His arm stiffened, his pocket flipped up . . . but my gun was already jumping. His bullet burned a hole in his pocket and another in Knowles' nice hardwood floor; mine got lost somewhere under a thick layer of cloth and hogfat.

Knowles came out of his own coma as I straightened up, counting bills. "He's . . . he's dead!"

"Yes," I said, "and you've got just one explanation for it. Devore was threatening you, trying to scare you out of your reform campaign, and you hired me for protection. Devore broke in here, and I had to shoot him to save you. Trudy knows nothing about it except that I sent her for the police. That's our story."

Incredulous relief dawned in Knowles' face. He looked like a man who had just been sprung from the death cell, or something. In fact, he surprised me by fishing out a bottle from behind some books.

I followed him past Devore's body into the kitchen. I was thinking of something he had obviously forgotten; thinking that I knew now who the high-school kids were that Schultz had chased away from the reservoir.

I knew it had been Trudy Knowles and her jittery boyfriend with the pickup jalopy; I knew my disguise had fooled them as it had Devore; and that Trudy thought her own father had shot Cotrell. I knew just about everything, I thought grimly—except what had happened to Cotrell.

Then I got it. There was only one conclusion to draw from a missing corpse plus two heavy iron picnic grills and the city reservoir . . .

I stopped Knowles just in time. "No water in mine," I told him quickly, "and you'd better take a straight shot too. You're going to need it, my friend."



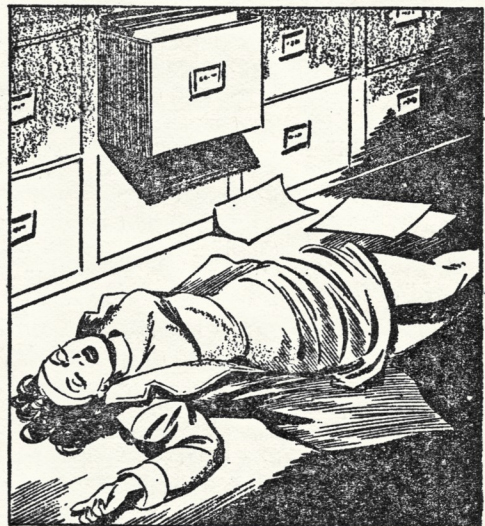
Headliner Files' manager Preston didn't like to clam up on anybody. But why was luscious Joyce Hedges interested in a great-grandmother's male chums?



Thackeray Hackett shadowed Joyce, and Preston trapped the chick who was tailing him. Both girls ducked into the same house, Hackett and Preston following.



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NEVER



Novelette of Spine-Tingling Action

CHILL A FRILL

*Ex-dick Minette began snooping
into the hotsy canary's after-dark life—
when someone pistol-shot Mama Harnish.*

CHAPTER ONE

Just Old Pals



The gun was pointed right at
my chest.

YOU make a promise to a friend who gave his life to save yours and you have to keep it. So here I was driving up the private road and catching the wink of a lighted window from the house. *What kind of help can he need?* I asked myself. He owned a newspaper and the surrounding estate spoke for his bankbook.

At the door I took a look around the moon-washed grounds before pressing the button. Then I waited. It wasn't long. The door opened and a small man in a dark blue suit stood there. Actually, I looked down at him, so the first thing I saw was a swath of white cutting through one side of an otherwise gray head.

"Mr. Harnish?"

"Yes," he said. "You're Don Minette?"

"Right."

He asked me in by clamping a small hand on my own, pulling and pumping at once. Closing the door behind me, he gestured to one side of the enormous foyer, and preceded me into a room through a wide opening in the wall. This was the living room. Off in one corner, near the windows, he pushed both ways against a double sliding door and waved me into the study. Neither of us spoke all the way in. When he slid the doors sibilantly together again I had a peculiar

● ●
By E. A.
MORRIS

feeling; like I had once long ago on Luzon—like having but one way to go and that not of your own choosing.

I dropped my hat on a chair near the door and stood there, hands in my pockets, watching his back as he poured something into a couple of shot glasses at a small bar. He turned and handed me one, stood there frowning at me. The frown curved above a small plain nose, small eyes with a hard stare and a pointed, bony chin.

He lifted his glass with a short nervous action.

"Chet?"

"To Chet." We drank.

Very erect, very short, he turned and walked with little jerky steps back to the bar. The glass didn't sound when he put it down. I held mine. He'd sent for me, so it was for him to speak first. Finally, he did.

Twisting the top half of his body toward me swiftly, he said, "Did you mean what you wrote?"

"Yes." Reassuringly.

"Do you still mean it?"

"I do!" Emphatically. I wanted him to know his son hadn't given his life for a quitter.

"Chet said in his letters you were like that. Sit down." He picked a cigar from the desk and bit off the end. His frown had deepened. He lighted the cigar, watching me and the flame of the match intermittently. It was only then, with the added light of the match on his face, that he seemed to be all of his sixty years.

He puffed a great cloud of smoke around his head and the words came fast. "I'm in trouble, Mr. Minette. It's something I can't handle myself and there's no one here I can trust to help me."

"How do you know you can trust me?"

"Chet did."

That shut me up good.

"It's nothing simple, nothing that can be treated lightly. It's the worst kind of trouble a man can have." He looked at me queerly. I guess to see if I showed any sign of reluctance.

He went on. "I can see you're wondering what it is."

He paused. Then, quietly, he said, "It's murder."

My body jerked involuntarily.

"Not," he hurried on, "that I've killed

anyone, though it could be construed that way. Still want to help?"

I owed my life to Chet and when I'd promised to help his family if ever I could, it was in all sincerity. I told him so.

"All right. Come with me." He picked a flashlight out of a desk drawer and we left the room. Walking a second time through the living room, I became more conscious of its furnishings. While the study had been for utility, a man's room, the living room was a showpiece with a lavender color throughout. There was a woman's hand in it. He hadn't mentioned her.

Out to the kitchen we went, through the foyer and dining room, and started down a flight of stairs into the cellar. There seemed to be a sort of reluctant anxiety in his silent, almost spasmodic movements. As though he hated to show it to me—whatever it was—and yet knew he had to.

WE'D arrived below and his beam splashed a white circle about a lock, on the door to a room that seemed to have been built in after the cellar. He keyed it hesitantly, opened it wide enough to permit passage of a man sidewise and handed me the flashlight. Then he stood aside.

I think I smelled it before I saw it. There was a woman's body. I'd seen death before, but my nerves and stomach still jumped when the beam flashed upon her. Her dress had been white and there was a large pattern on it; irregular, dark, caked.

With the hurried breathing of Harnish in my ears, I turned away. There was only one way to be about this, cold, unemotional. Look upon the form there as nothing more nor less than an inanimate object. Purposely, I missed her face. I didn't want to know what she looked like.

Harnish was too shaky, too frightened I guess, to lock the door. I did it for him.

"Who?" I asked.

"My wife." He whispered it, not because anyone could have heard him, but more in hushed reverence, as though we were in a tomb. We were. . . .

Upstairs again, I poured the drinks. He couldn't. At first it was all he could do to talk, but with each word he seemed

to regain strength and repose. I was in a chair, wondering just what was expected of me. He was slumped in the one behind the desk.

"Last Thursday I'd been drinking in town with a friend. About midnight I began to feel the effects of the liquor. I left him, walked around from one dark street to another, walking it off. Then I returned to my car and came home. I found her. I knew if it was reported I'd be up for murder. I became panic-stricken and put her—down there. I've been telling people she went to Nevada for awhile."

"What made you think they'd blame you for it?"

"She was killed with my gun. It was lying nearby. There was a half-smoked cigar in the ash tray. My brand. We'd recently quarreled about the divorce she wanted. Wes, my other son, heard us. There was that hour during which I'd walked. A whole hour for which there was no alibi. And now, if I go to the police I have even less chance of seeming innocent."

"You—you remember for sure that you walked all during that hour. You weren't drunk enough to—"

"Good Lord! No! I thought I'd get her out of the house some night, but I couldn't do it. It's been eating at me right along. To make it worst, I've had letters since. Here. Here's the latest."

Distraught, he fumbled a piece of paper out of his pocket. It read:

What did you do with the body? Five thousand will keep me quiet. More later.

"Have you been paying?" I asked him across the desk.

The doors sounded behind me. Harnish looked past me as though I were not there, said: "Well, what do you want? I thought you'd gone out already."

"So did I, Father. Forgot something and had to come back for it."

I could hear his feet walking up behind me as he talked. I knew just about where he was because Harnish kept his stare upon him.

"Now that I've got it I thought I'd say good night to you—Oh! Company." He was looking at me now, standing close by

the chair. I turned, and stared at him.

He stood long, with a loose frame. His eyes seemed steady and slow, his nose long and his lips thick and full. He had his father's chin. Harnish waved at him with a careless flip of the hand. "This is my son, Weston. Mr Minette here was your brother's friend. We are discussing him, so—"

"Eulogizing, no doubt." There was mockery in his voice and I clenched my fists, pressing myself into the seat to keep from jumping him. Maybe he noticed the way I took it, because he retreated almost instantly, saying, "Well, good night, folks. If I run across Sally, shall I say hello for you, Father?"

I thought he was snickering, but when I'd turned my head to see, he was already through the door. Never had I disliked anyone so much in so little time. I promised myself that if the opportunity ever came to smash his nose in, I would take it with pleasure.

"Not at all like Chet, is he?" I said.

"No, unfortunately. Hates my guts and had no love for his mother."

"Do you think he hated her enough to do that?" I glanced floorward.

"Possibly. But I think that's the wrong line of reasoning, Minette. It was someone who wanted to get to me in two ways. By taking her from me and having me take the rap for it. I don't think Wes has the courage to do that. I haven't taken the rap, so whoever it was is blackmailing me."

I said, "Have you many enemies?"

"Several, but most of them behind bars. In the past I've used my paper to put gangsters and hoodlums where they belong. I've spared nothing to see that they got what they deserved. In cleaning a dirty town, one makes many enemies."

"How about those on this side of the bars?"

"Only one left. Owns the *Gay Deuce* in town. A nightclub fronting for a gambling den. That's where Wes spends his nights, mostly. They encourage him to drink and gamble. He loses—and I have to pay off to avoid bad publicity. It's hard to fight a crook when your son is his friend and victim. I'm not trying to whitewash my son. He's no good and I know it."

I shifted uncomfortably in the most comfortable chair I'd ever been in. "You think this *Gay Deuce* fella is the man."

"Pretty sure. He knows I'm getting closer to him every day. He uses Wes, but that doesn't stop me—so perhaps he did this—other thing. That's what I want to find out. Maybe you can compare his handwriting with the writing on these notes."

He seemed content to narrow it down to just this one man, excluding anyone else. But if it didn't turn out that he was the killer, there had to be someone else.

"Who else is there? Who is this Sally?"

He gave me a hard, suspicious look. "Sally Price. She works at the *Gay Deuce*. I took her to dinner a couple of times before I knew who she worked for. That's beside the point, Minette."

Wondering if it was, I grunted. I'd learned all I could here for the night and I had another call to make in town so I wanted to put the stopper on. It was a rotten situation and it made my stomach quake when I thought of the woman down there, but that's the way he wanted it. I'd do all I could for him. I'd play detective for him. I'd promised. He gave me his lawyer's address, in case I needed any further information or had anything to report during the day. He didn't want me at his office.

He got up and came over to show me to the door. Putting a hand on my shoulder, he said, "I didn't know you knew anyone in town, Minette."

"An old friend, Mr. Harnish. Tray Tibbett."

"Who!" He stopped short, startled.

"Traynor Tibbett. Know him?" He seemed to turn pale in the cheeks.

"He's the owner of the *Gay Deuce*!"

I knew Harnish would be more wary with me from now on. "Don't worry," I said. "We weren't too friendly."

I walked away, left him standing there puzzled.

CHAPTER TWO

Open House for Gunmen

HE HAD been working for somebody else then; not really a bad guy. I was a city detective and that put us on opposite sides of the fence.

Funny how time changes things. Time and a war. Now he owned his own place and I was just another citizen.

It was a well-lighted place a couple of blocks behind the business district. There was a large, hanging neon shaped like a playing card. A *deuce*. I ignored the doorman and hat-check girl and took the two stairs to the right of the door. They led to the bar. I wanted to have a look at how well Tray Tibbett had made out.

Not bad, I thought. From the bar I looked through some lattice work into the dining room. Every table was occupied, the lights were dimmed and his patrons were watching and listening to a small strawberry blonde in front of the orchestra as she moaned something about it being a blue Monday.

I ordered a drink and listened to her.

When it was over and the brighter lights went up, I turned with applause in my ears and fingered the barman over.

"Where can I find Mr. Tibbett?" I asked him.

"Just a minute. I'll see what I can do, sir." He walked down to the other end of the bar, reached behind a line of bottle and pushed a button. A door opened a few yards from that end of the bar. A man came out and walked toward the bartender, who flung his head back at me and said something.

The man came around and moved toward me. There was a neat, a prim look about him. His tuxedo fit perfectly, his tie was straight, his mustache was slender and trim. As he approached, his small tight mouth under a sloping nose cracked across the middle. It was a smile of tolerance, at best.

His voice was clipped, but was the voice of a man who knows how to speak. A man who has known some education and culture speaks so, almost pedantically. "Good evening. May I be of some assistance? I am Victor Nadinger."

"Glad to know you, Vic. You can help a lot by telling me where Traynor is."

"Mr. Tibbett does not receive callers without my recommendation, particularly at such a late hour." He lighted a cigarette, king size. "And the name is Victor—not Vic."

He pulled his mouth tight and narrowed his eyes above the concentric half circles

hanging underneath. It was a sour look, like he'd been tasting a lemon.

"I'm sure he'll see me, Vic." I called him that again—not to antagonize him—just to let him know that nobody makes my decisions for me.

"Why? Why will he see you? Are you some celebrity or a long lost brother?" He flicked an ash from his cigarette with his index finger. He didn't seem to notice that it fell on the toe of one of my shoes. A good punch would have straightened him out once and for all, but I have some compunctions. He was old enough to be my father, so I let it ride and just ground my teeth together.

"Just tell him Don Minette is here. Now run along."

"And if I don't choose to—er—run along?"

I brushed him aside with my arm, not too gently, and pointed my feet toward the door he'd come out of. It seemed the logical place to look. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the barman stepping quickly to that end of the bar. I kept going.

Behind me, Victor's voice rapped: "Sam!"

The bartender stopped and turned back to his bottles. Drinkers at the bar seemed not to notice any of it.

Reaching the door, I closed my hand around the knob and twisted. Nothing happened. It was locked. I heard a chinking behind me and a hand came past my side, putting a key to the lock. It was Victor.

"Since you are so determined, I have no choice. But remember, such impetuosity does not go unrewarded." He preceded me into the room and I swear he lifted his nose and sniffed at me.

The walls were pale blue. There was a safe in the corner on the floor, a few chairs scattered about haphazardly and a huge couch over against the left wall. Pictures hung on all four walls. To further add to the misguided taste of the decorator, there was a massive black desk. Nubion Oak, I think it's called. The man behind it looked up slowly, saying:

"Victor, I want to talk to you about this month's receipts."

It was the same Tray. Still a little taller than me, about six feet; still a little

huskier; still—he thought—a little smarter. There was no mistaking the clefted chin, the large, sad-looking eyes. Seeing him here, like a shaggy St. Bernard, it was hard to imagine him a killer.

He looked up at me with an enormous frown. "Well?" Then he remembered me and rose. "Well! It's Don Minette! Come in, Don. Sit down."

He closed a massive, hairy paw around my hand and pumped. "Why didn't you tell me Don was here, Victor?"

"The gentleman evidently wished to announce himself."

"That's some welcoming committee you have, Tray. What is he, an ex-college professor on the lam?"

Hmph, from Victor, off to the side in a chair.

"Not exactly. But where've you been, Don? What are you doing in this burg?" He looked glad to see me, sitting on the edge of the desk, firing questions and offering me a cigarette. But was he? According to what Harnish had told me, I had to think of this as enemy territory.

"Got in tonight. Pal of mine died in the war and I went up to see his father." If I knew Tray, I knew the next question.

"Anyone I know?" I was right.

"Could be. The old gent is Philip Harnish." I watched him closely. He pushed himself off the desk, walked around behind it. This seemed to be my night for running into people behind desks.

"The crusader himself, eh? You sure that's all you went up there for? To express your sympathy?"

"That's all, though I did gather from him that you're milking his other son in the back room." There wasn't much subtlety in me. I had put my head down and charged into things ever since I could remember.

Victor exploded first. He crept swiftly over toward me, yapping: "That senile old reformist!"

"All right, Victor. Suppose you mingle with the guests and spread some good will?" It was more than a suggestion. Coming like that from Tray, it was an order.

Before he left, he gave me his own cute benediction. "Good night, Mr. Minette. I trust you find the sort of hospitality you deserve."

"Good night, Vic." He fumed out.

Tray turned back to me. "Tell me, Don. You still packing that badge?"

"No. Finally turned respectable. Run a little radio shop back home now."

"Then what's your angle in this?"

"None. I come up to pay my respects to old Harnish. Before I left I heard you were here and—well, you know—killing two birds. While I was there, Wes came in and the old gent told me about him. How about it, Tray? You working like that now?"

He took offense, groaned deep in his stomach. "You should know better, Don. I run a legit game here. I'm content to take house percentage. The patrons get good food, good entertainment and a chance for play if they want. My dealers are all honest, straight Joes."

"Then what's the score on young Harnish?"

"He thinks he's a smart player. He runs up a large debt and has to go to the old man for the cash to pay off. He drinks a lot and I can't stop him from playing without risking a rumpus. Anyway, why should I? He's just another customer."

"Okay. Makes no difference to me one way or the other. You've done pretty well for yourself since I saw you last."

"Not bad. Want to look the place over? Come on." He started for the door without waiting for my assent. He was like that.

WE WALKED past the bar and turned into a stairway beside the check room. On the second floor there were three doors; left, right and center. Those on either side were marked *Gentlemen* and *Ladies*. The center one was painted in smaller letters, *Closet*. We went through it with his key.

Inside, Victor was standing in front of the cashier's cage. There were more people here than downstairs at the tables. It was a neat set-up; a wheel, dice table, poker at four tables. Against the left wall was a small bar, busy. The wheel hummed, dice rattled, voices buzzed.

Keeping step with Tray, easing through the players, I spotted Wes Harnish at the wheel. There was a girl with him. It was the blues singer and she was using chips from his stack for her bets. This

didn't jibe with what Tray had said downstairs; it looked like they were taking him. The wheel spun and I watched them—the girl and Wes. The ball clicked and dropped. Her face took on an anguished look, but his remained passive. Losing was nothing new to him.

I hadn't realized I'd almost come to a halt, until I felt Tray's hand on my arm. "C'mon. Have a drink."

He gently elbowed his way through the players, clapping one on the shoulder, nodding to another, saying a few words to somebody else. He was a good host. In a corner near the bar, was a table against the wall. We sat at it and he held up two fingers to the bartender. The drinks came at once.

I took a good gulp and said, "I thought you ran a straight house."

He looked up quickly, defensively. "I said I did."

"What about the singer with young Harnish?"

"She plays with anyone who'll let her. If it makes them happy, why not? It's good business."

"Sings, gambles. Any other hobbies?" I put my middle fingers on my glass.

"What do you mean!" A vein bulged vertically on his neck and he leaned forward a trifle.

"Take it easy, Tray. I never knew you to get excited about a dame."

"Don, I'm going to tell you nice just once. Lay off her." He meant it, too. This was an unexpected soft spot he'd developed.

Some conventional apology came out of me and he went back to sipping his drink. Looking into my own, I ran a finger around the rim of the glass. Habit. That's why I didn't see her approach the table. She said hello to Tray and I looked up. Wes wasn't with her and for some reason I felt disappointed. Looking around quickly, I couldn't find him.

"Don," Tray was saying, "this is Sally Price. Don Minette, Sal."

I was already on my feet, blubbering, "I enjoyed your song tonight, Miss Price."

"Thank you. The name is Sally." She sat and looked at me as though she were trying to see behind my eyes and gave me a smile that I thought was too inviting

for a man she'd just met. The lips that did it were inciting and full. Her eyes were an odd brown, with little flecks in them that seemed to dance when she blinked. The rest of her was a young man's dream.

Tray sat down again, and I took my cue from that. He swallowed her hand in his and said, "Going home, Sal?"

"Yes, it's about time."

I glanced at my wristwatch. The hands formed a right angle; twelve-fifteen.

"I always go home early, Mr. Minette, except Saturdays. It keeps me fit for my work." Her voice sort of coo-ed, like it did when she sang. She was one singer who looked better close up than from a table surrounded by stale cigarette smoke. She said good night and so did we. Then, she and Tray exchanged a look. On his face it meant only one thing; it was anguished yearning. I was trying to figure hers when she walked away.

Turning to follow her with my eyes, I saw Wes out of one corner. He was at the far end of the little bar, clenching a glass with white fingers. He looked pasty, like pie dough ready for kneading. Two hard, staring eyes leveled at Tray. It wasn't a healthy look. When he noticed me watching him he turned swiftly, abruptly and strode for the exit. But he left that look behind, in my mind.

Later, when the game room was only half-filled with losers trying to break even for the night, Tray and I were winding up a talk about old times. An idea was knocking against my skull and I tried it.

"Where does a guy go for good food in this town, Tray?"

He pondered a second. "There's a place over on Maple. Treat you right if you're known."

"But I'm not. How about a recommendation?"

"Sorry I didn't think of it."

"Just a note. Probably help if you write on the back of one of your cards. You still use them, don't you?"

He slid his hands into two different pockets. One came out with a billfold, the other held a pen. He scratched a couple of sentences on a card from the billfold and signed it.

"Here, this should do it. Okay?"

"Great." It had worked.

"I'll say good night, Tray. Probably be in town for a couple of days so I'll see you again. Say, I'll be glad to drop you off if you're leaving soon."

"No, thanks. I'll use the couch in the office tonight. I often do when I have to stay late and look over the books."

I grinned at Victor on the way out.

THERE was just a washbasin in the room and the bath was down at the end of the hall, but I remembered when a bath was a luxury and privacy an impossibility. The bed was more like an iron cot. Bare maple furnishings were old, cheap and scratched. Still, there was little chance I'd be bothered in here. Though it was chilly, a small fan on the dresser blew a smell around that I was sure would have killed Victor. I pulled out the plug.

After a bath, I sat in my pajamas at the night table with only the small lamp burning. Slowly I slipped my hand into a pocket of my coat, hanging over the chair back, and brought out the card Tray had given me. If it matched, I had to put the clamp on Tray because I had made a promise.

Even in that dim light, there was no mistaking it. The writing on the notes and Tray's writing weren't alike. His definitely slanted to the right, the other was almost vertical, like a left-handed person might write. I felt a smile pulling at my face as I leaned back in the chair. I hadn't wanted it to be Tray. He was still the same, after all; just a sad-looking gambler.

Then the feeling hit me. I can't explain it but I'd had it before, on Luzon just before we were jumped. I don't know if I heard it or smelled it, or just knew it was there. Something quiet, something close. Just as I felt the draft from the door, I was reaching for the button on the lamp, knowing I'd have a better chance in the dark away from the bed. I never got to it.

The door closed behind me and he said, "Leave the light on, if you please."

He was immaculate behind the .32. He was Victor.

"How in the hell—" I got to my feet.

"That's what comes of being nice to people. Night clerks, for instance, who

have their own sets of duplicate keys."

"I didn't know Tray used gunmen."

"This call is entirely on my own initiative. Tray knows nothing of it. Sit down, please. And don't tempt me with any sudden movements. I'd regret shooting you—at this time."

"Well, what's the score? What do you want, Vic?" I sprawled on the bed, leaning on one elbow. It was more comfortable than sitting straight and I wasn't letting him think he could frighten me.

"Don't try your luck too far, Minette. What was that you were studying?"

He moved in a semicircle around me and stood against the table. The gun moved with him but the muzzle kept toward me, like the needle of a compass holding to magnetic north. He glanced down at the slip of paper and the card beside it, grunting a little. His lips thinned into a smirk and he said:

"I knew you came in tonight for more than an exchange of social amenities. What a pity," he went on, "the handwritings are so dissimilar. Now you won't be able to do right by your old friend, Tray." Again he made the arc around me and stood near the door. His face had the sour look.

"Those aren't my feelings at all." It was the truth but I didn't expect him to recognize it.

"Your feelings are of no concern to me, Minette. Who is the body mentioned in the note? Where did you get it?"

"What's the difference? It came out the way I wanted it to. I never wanted it to be him."

"Why not? Why shouldn't it be Tray?" His mustache twitched a little.

"He's not a bad guy. I like him."

"And if it had been he?"

"Too bad."

"What are you doing this for, Minette? Money?"

"No, Victor. Just keeping a promise. Something you might not understand."

"I abhor honorable fools, Minette, but I admire a man who is honest. It is so difficult."

"Can't we talk without that?" I waved at the pistol.

"I admire you. That does not mean I trust you. This shouldn't impede your speech." He waved it back at me.

What could I do? Even if we couldn't be friends we might be allies. And I wasn't forgetting that it could have been him. I told him everything except the names of the persons involved. His attitude when I'd finished was almost one of paternal concern.

"And so," he said. "You chose to compare handwritings rather than check for alibis on the night of the murder."

"That would put the killer on guard."

"Oh? And just how did you propose to get a sample of my handwriting without making me suspicious? It would be impossible, believe me. You have taken the line of most resistance, Minette. A little intelligent inquiry and you would have discovered that both Tray and myself were at the club on the murder night."

That still didn't let him out.

"If you insist on doing it the hard way, my writing is open to your inspection at any time."

That did.

He said it was time he left and put his free hand behind his back to grasp the door knob. With the door opened, he said, "I can't believe you really were a detective once."

CHAPTER THREE

Putting on the Squeeze

I COULDN'T sleep for a while, knowing how I'd bungled things already. Never before had I been the clever guy. That was it. I'd tried to go about this cleverly and it wouldn't work. My usual methods had always brought results. They would this time.

The next day I saw Tray before his club opened and asked him if Wes had been in the place that Thursday night. Right off the bat he said, "No."

"How are you so sure?"

"It's so unusual for him to miss a night here that it's easy to remember what times he doesn't show up. Another thing, that's the night Sal was sick and couldn't come in. I remember it because of that, too."

He had an odd look, like a man thinking things he couldn't prove, so I beat it. Next step was the Harnish home.

When I got there, a servant told me

the old man was at his office. Fine. Wes was upstairs in his room and there was something he could tell me. The servant wanted to announce me, but I elbowed him aside and went up, touching only a third of the steps on the way.

I started opening doors. The second one was as far as I had to go. He was dressing, just had his bow tie looped once. Turning from the mirror, he let the ends hang in insolent respectability. Calmly he said: "Well, the warrior. How the hell did you get up here?"

"The stairs."

He half turned toward the dresser and picked up a cigarette case. Very much at ease, he offered me one. I didn't move and he shrugged one up to his lips, chasing it with a lighter. "What do you want, Minette? I haven't much time to waste."

"You have time enough to answer a question."

"If I want to."

There were about three steps between us. I took two of them and asked him quietly, "Where were you last Thursday night?"

"It's none of your damned business but I was at the *Gay Deuce*." He was slipping a handkerchief into a coat hanging over the back of a chair just beside us.

"You're a liar!"

"Yes. I should have known you'd have checked there first."

"Well?"

"Get out." He straightened and leaned toward me. It was what I wanted—a show of belligerence. My hands shot up and closed about each end of the tie hanging under his throat and I jerked them apart. He gagged and coughed up some smoke he had in him, but I didn't slack off. His fingers closed about my wrists helplessly.

"Where were you?"

"You filthy—" The rest of it was lost in a gargled squeak. I jerked my hands outward again and he sank to his knees. His whole pasty face was fire red and his eyeballs bulged at me.

"Where?" I let my clenched fists come together, easing off but not letting go entirely.

"I—was at—Cambreaux Arms. Sally's apartment." I tightened the noose a little. His head bobbed in a small, pleading

nod. "It's true—you can—can ask her."

I let go and backed off. I had to. If he had nerve enough to say that with the choker on him, he'd stick to it. The denial had to come from Sally, from Tray's girl.

On the way out I looked back and said, "I'll be seeing you again soon. And next time you won't get by with a little squeeze!"

He looked up from the chair he was leaning against and stopped rubbing his neck. "Next time you won't get a sneaky jump on me."

I got out of there, trying to stuff my temper back down inside of me. . . .

The stripes were green and white, arching over a strip of shade from the curb to the door. The lettering was of polished pieces of metal: *Cambreaux Arms*. The doorman was shutting a passenger into a cab.

Inside, the man at the desk was sitting behind it, holding a cigarette down between his leg. He dropped it and came up straight as a plumb line when he saw me.

"Miss Sally Price, please."

"Is she expecting you, sir?"

"No. Give her a buzz. Mr. Minette, Don Minette."

He picked up the phone very stiffly, very properly, very annoyed. In a minute he cradled it and said: "You may go up, sir. Eight-o-two. Elevators at that end of the lobby."

I pushed the eight button and fidgeted a little, impatient with the slow climb. I wanted to see her in a hurry and have her put the lie to Wes. I wanted to get back there before he had a chance to skip. I wanted to—

THE safety gate slid open with a metal-on-metal scrape. The corridors were very short, very narrow, and each had four doors breaking it. I turned left and found it, two doors down. She must have been waiting near the door because it broke from its frame almost as I put my finger on the buzzer.

"Come in," she coo-ed. She had a long, blue silk thing wrapped around her. A dressing gown, I guess.

She was saying what a nice surprise it was when I walked into the room. It was maroon and gray and expensive. Too ex-

pensive for a small-time night-club singer, even if she was the boss' girl. I sat on the edge of a low chair.

"I'm dressing," she said. "Tray send you over for something?"

"No. This is my idea."

"Social call, huh?" She poured herself a drink from a serving table and asked me with gestures if I wanted one. My chin swung from shoulder to shoulder and she sat opposite me.

"Not exactly. I'm sorry, Sally, for busting in here, but I have to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Where were you last Thursday? I mean, after the club?"

"That's easy. Right here." She spread her hands at the room.

"Alone?"

"What!" She put her glass down.

"Was Wes Harnish up here with you?"

Coming out of her chair, she whirled indignantly away from me. Speaking to a window, she said: "Really, Minette! I thought you more of a man than to do Tray's dirty work for him."

Now I was on my feet, spinning her around to face me. "Listen, if Tray wants to find out anything about you, he'll get somebody else to do the job. I'm nobody's patsy! I want to know if Wes was here Thursday night. I want to know for myself. Understand?"

"I don't know why I should tell you." It was the second time within an hour I'd been told to mind my own business. It *was* my business.

"You don't have to. He already did."

"Why that—All right, so he was up here. What of it?"

"You mean he came up for a few minutes and left?"

"I don't mean anything of the sort. We talked a long time."

"All night?"

"Yes! All night! Anything else?"

There was one other impossibility. A phone call would have beaten me up here. "What do you want to alibi him for, Sally? He called you just before I came up and told you what to say, didn't he?"

"I haven't heard from him today. Look, Minette, you're not a bad guy. I like you. Why don't you quit noseying around. You and I could be good friends if you'll

let it be that way." Her red-tipped fingers rested on my sleeve.

"Now it's my turn to mention Tray," I said, easing my arm away. It hit home.

"Get out of here! Get out before I have you thrown out!" The little flecks in her eyes jiggled wildly. I picked up my hat and slammed my way through the door. But I wasn't through. I'd still break that alibi.

Downstairs, the doorman looked big and beefy, but not bribe-proof. I walked up to him with a bill in my hand.

"Taxi, sir?"

"No. Do you know Miss Price?"

"Who are you?" He eyed the bill, licking his mental chops.

"Let's say I'm a collector of odd information."

"Yeah? Let's say I don't know anything odd."

When I matched the bill with another he put his hand down beside mine and clipped the money between two fingers. "Mister, for that much, I'm an encyclopedia of odd facts. Yeah, I know Miss Price. Eight-o-two."

"Wes Harnish?" I leaned against the building, he looked away, and we might have been discussing the ball scores.

"Know him too."

"Was he up there last Thursday night?"

His head bobbed. When I asked him how long Wes stayed up there he became cautious. "You want to know too much, mister."

"C'mon. You're paid for it."

"He was up there until I went off duty at midnight. I remember because they came in together. They don't usually do that."

"Oh?"

"Most of the time he follows her about half an hour later."

"Thanks." I clapped him on the shoulder and walked to the corner. Harnish's wife was dead at midnight when her husband got there. To anyone else it would look as though Wes was out of it. I didn't see it that way. I couldn't.

Around the corner, I dove into the service entrance of the same building. It was there, all right; the hollow square in the back where the fire escapes came to an end. The doorman couldn't have

seen him if he came out this way. No, he wasn't out of it yet—but there were still too many loose ends for me to tie him securely. I went back to my room to mull it over.

MY SHOES and tie were off and I was smoking a cigarette and trying to think. The light was off and the shade drawn. I was alone with the glowing tip of a cigarette in the dark.

I was thinking about a promise.

I was thinking about—about a little scraping sound at the door, like something metal rubbing against another piece of metal. Like a key entering a lock. More people had keys to my room! Squashing the red glow that had been in my lips against something, I quietly angled off the bed and across the floor in a crouch. Bending myself into the corner made by the dresser against the opposite wall, I waited and listened.

Almost noiselessly, the key completed its revolution in the lock. Nothing happened. I waited for the sliver of light that would mark the opening of the door and knew fear again. I began to think he'd changed his mind and crept away.

But he hadn't. A draft of air from the corridor puffed against my face as I peered out from behind the dresser. He must have loosened the bulb in the corridor before opening the door.

I couldn't see him. There was only an indefinite blob of black moving stealthily into the room. Then a vertical strip of black glided along the lighter strip that was the sheeted mattress on the bed.

I put one stockinged foot out and braced my other against the base of the wall behind me. It was almost time to move. A black arm came up over the bed, poised momentarily, then guillotined down in a thudding whack onto the mattress—where my ribs would have been.

Now that I knew about where his shoulders were, it would be easy to find his throat. I used my back as a spring and shot out from the wall, one hand on the corner of the dresser pulling me, the other outstretched toward him. Somehow I wasn't as quiet as I thought I was.

There was a swish of shadow as he whirled to meet me, his arm going up again. I tried to get down under it. Too

late. I'd committed myself to an upward lunge. His sap caught me hard on the left shoulder and toppled me off balance.

I was trying to get up. He was almost on top of me, swinging wildly in the dark. He didn't have to aim. He could crack my ribs or split my skull with that thing if he made contact again. When he was almost on me, I ducked, shot my fist into his jaw.

He bounced backwards, staggering. He was close enough for me to see what I was doing. My fingers dug into a moist palm and the fist they made smashed against the side of his head, sprawling him back into blackness toward the window sill.

I thought I had him for good, but I had to make sure. Groping beside the door I found the light switch and flicked it up. The bulb light splashed the darkness before it—and there he was. Creeping on hands and knees, a hobbling four-legged animal of a man reaching out for his weapon in the center of the room. He never got to it. I cracked his ear with the flat of my hand and lifted him to his feet before shoving him into the chair.

His eyes shone like marbles, his head teetered on its pivot and his mouth opened and closed on little groans. Now I saw he wasn't as big as he seemed in the dark. He was almost a head under me, ugly and a few years older. I brought him to the sink and splashed him in cold water until he came out of the walking coma. Then I sat him down again, standing over him. His fight was gone. Without the sap, he was useless.

Easily, I rubbed my aching left shoulder. It hurt plenty. "Okay, buster," I said, "what's the score? What'd you think you were going to get out of cracking my skull?"

He picked his head out of the cradle his hands made and, gagging, asked, "You Minette?"

"Yeah, I'm Minette, but I'm doing the asking. Spill it."

"I didn't try to kill ya. Just supposed to muss ya up good."

"How good?"

"Good enough so ya quit snooping around."

"Who told you you were big enough for the job?"

"I ain't so little."

"You're in no spot to get fresh, buster. Who put you up to this? Who wants me to get out?"

"I don't know." His hands cradled his drooping head again so I pulled him up by the chin.

"C'mon, let's have it! I'm not in the mood for any stall."

"Honest, I don't know, I tell ya." His eyes begged relief. I raised my hand and he quickened his words. "She sat with her back to me the whole time and I didn't even see her face. She gave me this note. It says what to do." He fished it out and dropped it on the table next to him.

"She? A woman?"

"Yeah. A dame put me to it, but I don't know who she is."

"Where did you meet her? Where were you supposed to go to collect the dough when you were finished?"

"Aw, have a heart, Mr. Minette. If I tell ya that my life won't be worth a sou." He was frightened. I had to see which frightened him more, the woman or me.

"What makes you think your life is worth any more if you don't tell me? I have a gun here. You were breaking in with that sap in your hand. As you came over to the bed, I let you have it—and who is to say it happened any different?"

"Aw, gimme a break!"

"You wouldn't have given me any. Talk!"

"Okay," he whined, "okay. I was to meet her same place I met her first. In her apartment. The Cambreaux Arms."

Sally Price!

"In room eight-o-two? Is that it?" I yelled at him and he shrank his head into his shoulders. Scared plenty.

"Yeah, eight-o-two. How'd ya know? I'm supposed to meet her there again tonight. Quarter to one. The dough will be on a little table behind the chair she sits in. She said to ring one short, one long before I walk in. That's all."

"And you pick up the money without seeing her and walk out again."

"Yeah."

"Beat it."

"What?"

"I said, beat it! You're lucky I'm not turning you over to the cops! And don't

get in touch with that woman anymore!"

He was quick getting over to the door. He couldn't get out fast enough. I halted him, to make sure, and told him if he showed up to collect tonight it would be the last doorbell he'd ring for a long time. He gave me a quick nod to show he understood and was gone.

I picked up his sap and whacked it against my palm a couple of times. I had an appointment. An appointment at which only I knew for sure who the other party would be. One short, one long, he'd said.

Then, it was time to go.

I put my coat and shoes on, stopped to jam the note into my pocket without reading it. All I wanted was to see her face when I waved it before her. Fingering the light switch down, I went out into the dark corridor, locked the door and made for the stairs. It was hard to keep from running.

BZZZT. BZZZZZZT. I tried the knob and it turned. Palming the door shut with a little click behind me, I walked in. The living room was almost unlighted. One lamp in a far corner splayed a feeble light toward me.

There she was, just the back of her left shoulder and a corner of that side of her head marking her presence in the chair. Not too quietly, I walked up to the table, picked up the envelope there and continued another couple of steps until I stood just behind her.

She just sat there, waiting for the click of the door to tell her the hired mugg was gone.

"You can save your money, Sally." I said it low and tossed the envelope onto her lap from behind.

She half spun in her chair and her eyes blinked up at me. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Minette! You—you're still—"

"Still in one piece? Yeah, I'm all right, but your friend doesn't look so hot. I'm surprised you underestimated me, Sally."

She watched me as I eased around to the front of her chair. "Minette—I—I'm sorry, Minette. I was sorry the minute he left here. I didn't want him to do it, not really. I was angry. I wanted to call him back, but it was too late then. You believe me, Minette, don't you?"

I'd come here prepared to hear a vehement denial, to throw the letter in her face, win a battle. I hadn't even sensed a cringing admission. This was the second time she'd disappointed me. What could I do? Hit her?

I said: "Yeah, Sally, I believe you."

She sighed relief. It was all right because she thought that meant I'd pardoned her. It didn't, though.

"You're some girl, Sal. What'd you put the bee on me for? Afraid I'll find out things I shouldn't know?"

"It's not that. It's what you've already found out. I didn't want you to get to Tray and have him find out about Wes being up here Thursday night. Not that you'd tell him intentionally, but you might let it slip." She was pouring herself a drink again, unsteadily.

"That's weak. Save it for someone else. You're no more afraid of Tray than I am. You can fool him, Sal, because of the way he feels about you. But I look at you with my eyes open—and I don't like what I see. You wanted me to get out because I was getting too close to putting my finger on a murder. You don't want him caught. Why?"

"If I knew a murderer, Minette, I'd be the first one to turn him over. I don't know what you're about."

"What are you afraid of, Sal? What hold does he have over you?"

"Who?"

"Wes."

"You're crazy. I had him up here Thursday because I wanted him up. Not for any other reason."

"And the other nights? The nights when he didn't come up with you but followed you later?"

"You've been busy, haven't you?"

"Why didn't he follow you up Thursday? Because he had to be seen going up with you! He needed you to alibi him. Whoever saw him going up would strengthen that alibi. Why do you shield that punk?"

"Wes is good to me, and if you expect me to put his head in a noose for somebody else's dirty work, forget it. I don't know about any murder and neither does Wes."

"I'll get him anyway, Sal, so you better look around for a new bankbook."

"Oh! Why are you and I at each other's throats all the time, Minette? It could be so nice if you'd only act human once in awhile. Why not have a couple of drinks with me? There'll just be the two of us, without interruptions."

She was turning it on for me. For a minute I almost forgot what she'd tried to do to me earlier. Sure, I'd been hard on her. She just wasn't the kind of girl I can be nice to. First it was Tray, then Wes, and now it would be me if I let it happen. Under it all she knew more than she was telling about the murder. Not good drinking company.

"Not this time," I refused, "I'll take a rain check on it. Good night."

I went back to my room to sleep, feeling unusually tired. Emptying my pockets onto the table, I came across her note again. I was about to flick it into the wastebasket when something made me hold up and look at it again. I had the feeling I'd seen it somewhere before tonight. Impossible. Then it hit! It wasn't the note I'd seen before—it was the handwriting!

Placing it next to the blackmail note, it took but a second to see that both were penned by the same person. Sally Price. So this was the hold he had over her. She was in it this deep, deep enough to know there was a dead body, deep enough so she had to do his bidding.

She had to write the blackmail letters because— Why? Why did she have to write them? Why, if she knew about it, didn't she turn him in? Slowly, spiraling out from the depths of my mind the answer came. It was she who had him on the spot!

The blackmail scheme couldn't have occurred to them until some time had elapsed after the murder. They had no way of knowing Harnish would hide the body. When it did happen, the opportunity to milk him presented itself. No, she wouldn't help put Wes' neck in the noose because it would be a noose for two.

Even if she could squirm out of it, murder discovered and murderer caught would mean the end of blackmail. The pieces began to fit together nicely. All but one. Motive.

Why had Wes killed his mother in the

first place? No matter how rotten a man is, he doesn't kill his mother just because he doesn't like her. Not Wes, anyway, not unless he stood to gain a great deal by it. It just didn't fit. I slept on it. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

End of the Trail

THE band at the *Gay Deuce* had just wound up a morning rehearsal and Victor was elbowed against the bar, facing the bandstand with a drink in his hand.

"Good morning, Vic. Breakfast?" I indicated his glass.

"Straight water. From your frown, I gather that your sleuthing has come up against an obstacle."

"You should have been a detective, Vic."

"Heavens, no! My parents would never forgive me. Perhaps you'd think better over coffee." The table he led me to had an electric stove heating the coffee. I looked around the place. If anything approaches the quiet of a cemetery, it's the quiet of a night club at about ten in the morning.

Victor ordered a cup for me and said, "You look like a man seeking assistance."

"You're right." I stirred the coffee.

"Unable to locate the culprit?"

"Oh, I've got him pegged. But to make a case there's one thing missing."

"And that is—"

"Motive, Vic. Motive. If you were a rich young man, why would you kill someone?"

"To become richer, of course." He grinned over his cup at me.

"Well, supposing you and your father hated each other, you'd be left out of the will, wouldn't you?" He nodded. "And you'd gain nothing by killing him."

"Really, Minette, you're being simple. If I were determined to get my hands on the family hoard, I'd eliminate whoever it was willed to until there was no one left to inherit but myself. Then I'd take care of the old man."

"Of course! And if you could do both in one stroke— See you later, Vic!" I literally ran from the place. Next stop, Harnish's lawyer.

He was cute, Wes was. Getting rid of his father would net him nothing since Harnish probably left everything to his wife. But if he got rid of her and at the same time railroaded him to the chamber. . . . All it needed was to hear the lawyer tell me the will was made out that way.

It wasn't made out that way, he said. There was no will at all. I thought men like Harnish always made out wills, I told him. He wanted to know why, the old gent wasn't going to die for a long time. Even with no will, though, it added up the same way. Now it was time to start some fireworks. It had to come from Wes' own mouth or it was no good, and someone else had to hear it to make it stick. . . .

The rest of the day I spent writing. Practicing until I could write what I wanted so it looked like she had written it. The next step was a brief talk with Victor. Then after dark, after she'd gone to the club, I slid down the ramp into the back courtyard of the Cambreaux Arms. The fire escape was easy enough, and the window was open as it had been each time I'd been there. What I was looking for was a place offering concealment for a man.

When I'd decided the only place suitable was the small closet in the foyer, a few feet from the living room itself, I looked around for other things. There just might be something she had around to cinch it. I wanted something tangible.

What I found was tangible enough but it was proof of nothing, except that Sally had her own brand of insurance and that maybe Wes had a reason other than love of money for getting rid of his father.

Love letters shouldn't be left around guarded by nothing more than a rubber band, even letters from a sixty-year-old man. The first night here he told me he took her to dinner a couple of times. Judging from the letters, the dessert must have really been something. I pocketed them and left the way I came in.

It was the second time I'd seen Tray since I hit town. He scowled up at me from behind the desk and said: "I thought you quit the detective racket?"

"I did. This is a personal matter, Tray. Wes Harnish in the game room?"

"Yeah. He looks kind of upset. What you been doing to him?"

"Not half what I'm going to do to him. But that's not why I'm here. I don't know how you'll take this, Tray. I know how you feel about Sally, but—I have to do it."

"What about Sally?" His hands came to the top of the desk and his eyes narrowed quizzically. I dropped the packet of letters near his hands and heeled around, leaving him for the bar.

It was the second drink when the door to his office opened. He looked awful, like a man looks when he's angry and hurt at one time. He pulled down a glass and a fifth of whisky. Then he was gone back into his office, back to the letters, with a bottle. His look made me want to get drunk too. But there was a job ahead of me.

I grabbed one of the waiters, slipped him a piece of paper and a buck. The paper was for Wes. I left, praying he'd bite. . . .

ONCE more it was just the darkness and I; just the two of us alone, in somebody else's room this time. At twelve, I smoked my last cigarette and drowned it in the bathroom. In a few minutes she'd be leaving the club.

I didn't have a gun and when I first thought about it it was too late to get one. I'd have to trust to her still being an opportunist when the time came. Then, there was Victor. If he didn't see that they were kept apart until she got here, I might never get another chance. And if he didn't. . . .

From somewhere beyond the gloom of the room, a door slid open. I dove for the closet and shut myself in. I'd just have to hang there with the coats until the right time. It was close and warm. I was loosening my tie and collar when the door just outside opened and closed. She was in.

It wasn't too hard to guess what she was doing. Like a blind man, I relied on sound. Footsteps receding into the living room, a clink of glass on glass, the scratch of a match. There was a sound of something being put down, then the footsteps again. She'd finished her drink and was walking toward me!

I hadn't counted on her having to

hang her coat up when she came in. Squirmying myself up stiff into a corner behind a couple of coats, I sweated. Footsteps were louder, closer. She'd face the other corner when she opened the door, but if she stepped into the closet itself for the hanger rather than reaching in for it, she'd see me. She had her hand on the knob, turning it.

Then the knob grated a little as she let it go. Simultaneously, there was a muffled knock on the door to the apartment. She waited a moment before I heard her feet patting away again. He was here. I could hear them all right. Their voices weren't hushed and they were speaking together, at the same time.

"What are you doing here?"

"You know better than to send me messages!"

Her voice spoke surprise, his hurried urgency. He said, "What's so important that you have to see me now? I told you we'd have to stay away from each other while that Minette was snooping around."

Their voices were lowering, but only because they were walking away from me, into the living room. They were still loud enough for me to get what they were saying. I'd moved from the corner and had my ear to the door jamb now.

"What message?" she was asking, "I never said I wanted to see you tonight!"

"This is your writing, isn't it?" He must have been showing her the note I'd written and given the waiter. Victor had kept them apart, or their own fear had.

"It looks like my writing, but I never wrote it. Somebody's giving us the business, Wes."

"Minette! He figures in this some way. If I could get my hands on him!" He couldn't imagine how soon he'd have that chance.

"How much have you told him? What did you say to him?"

"Nothing," she answered, "and you?"

"Don't be a fool! If he found out anything it's because you talked. If I ever find you've been blabbing to him—"

"Don't threaten me!" She sounded sore. "One word from me and you're through, Wes. Remember that!"

A sound came from his throat as he was about to speak—but the phone rang. I

heard her take a few steps and mumble into it. This was something I hadn't figured on. She gasped, loud and clear, and the phone clicked back into place. Impatience gnawed at me. They were silent, too silent.

I put my hand on the knob, gripped it firmly and twisted as easily as I could. I made no noise, put my eye to the wedge of light when I had the door open a crack.

She was just turning from the phone, her hand to her forehead. It came down and she spoke to him with bitterness on her tongue. "You didn't have to kill him, too. I told you I was through with him, Wes. There was no need for it!"

Killed who?"

"He had it coming. Tonight, after the place closed, he collared me and started rattling off about some letters my father sent you. He wanted blood, I tell you. I had to kill him!"

He had killed Tray. My fingers curled into two knots of hate. It was all I could do to stay in that little dark cell of a closet.

She was pacing furiously. He was sitting with his back to me and saying:

"He needed killing. I told you what would happen to anyone who put his eyes on you. We belong together. Understand? There's no way out for you."

"Oh, you're so smart, you are. So clever. You've been playing right into my hands all along. You've been giving me things, haven't you? And you've given me money, too, haven't you? To buy my silence, to keep my mouth shut, that's why!"

"That's not true! I've done everything I've done because I love you, because you love me as well. You said so!"

"I've yet to know the man I'd love! You're over a barrel, Wes. I've had you there right along and its about time you realized it. And don't tell me I'm there with you. There's Tray, now. I never consented to that."

Consented? She knew about the other one before it happened?

"Maybe I am under your thumb." He was up now, moving toward her. "But I won't be for long. I'll have nothing to worry about once you're gone, Sally."

His arms were bending at the elbows, hands rising with outstretched fingers. "I didn't think of it before because I thought

you loved me. I could let you live while you loved me, but you never did."

SHE was stumbling back out of his way, head shaking, mouth forming soundless words. One arm was up, trying to ward him off. The couch behind her bent her at the knees and she sagged onto it.

"You don't want to die, do you Sally?" His hands were holding her throat loosely now. "She didn't want to die, either, but she took it better than you're doing."

Her nails drew blood, digging into his face but he leaned over her, putting his weight into his hands. I smacked the door open and leaped into the room.

"Get your hands off her, Wes!"

He released his death grip and turned toward me, stepping away from her. In the same motion his hand darted into his coat. When it came out, the gun was pointed right at my chest. Sally, rubbing her throat, was inching her way to the other end of the couch. He turned his head a little in her direction and said:

"Stay where you are, you little double-crosser! I'll still get to you, but company first!"

Mouth curled, eyes squinted, he looked like a snarling animal. It was a look I'd seen on men before, just before they had killed. My feet were moving toward him, slowly. My voice was saying: "Put it down, Wes. Don't make it any worse for yourself." I was about five steps away from him.

"Give me the gun, Wes. You can shoot me, but you'll get the chamber in the end. You can't get away, Wes." I was four steps away from him. The veins on the back of his hand began to bulge under the taut skin. "Either way," he rasped, "I get the same in the end. So you'll get yours first, Minette. Then Sally. Don't come any closer. I'm warning you!"

It was only three steps now. What was wrong with her? She wasn't running true to form as I'd expected. Without looking at her, I saw her mouth open, her hands come out of her lap a couple of inches. What was she waiting for!

She stopped waiting. Her hands shot his arm toward the ceiling and my fist shot at his face. His nose squashed against my knuckles and he went back over the arm of the couch, trying to level his gun

Never Chill a Frill

arm at me again. I had it in my fists before he could, slammed it down. He squealed and the gun leaped into the center of the room.

In a second, I was after him. He'd fallen to the floor and clutched the gun again. He aimed it, not at me but at a figure rushing by toward the door. There was too much distance between us. A red, lashing tongue of flame followed the bullet and I heard a groan behind me. He was bringing the gun to bear on me again.

The shot came while I was in mid-air, but I felt nothing. That familiar searing jab never hit me. When I came down on top of him, I'd landed on a man almost dead. I rolled off him and looked toward the doorway.

He was still immaculate, even with the smoking gun in his hand. He was retribution; neat, impeccable retribution. I stepped over to Sally's huddled form.

Victor wiped his gun clean.

"Waste no time or sympathy on her, Minette. She's the cause of all this."

He put his gun in her hand and closed her fingers about it. He said, "She was Tray's wife."

I got to my feet slowly, dizzied. Yeah, Sally was a cute kid.

Victor was telling me he was going to call the police when someone began to pound on the door. I ran over and locked it. As he lifted the phone, he said:

"This won't be too difficult. We came up here to see Sally, and from the hallway heard them arguing, heard Wes admit the two murders. Your word or mine alone is insufficient. We must tell the same story—hello, get me Police Headquarters please—we both entered the room at the first shot. There was a second. They killed each other. Satisfactory?"

I nodded. When he'd reported a shooting to the police, I said, "There's someone I have to see before the cops get started with this. He'd rather hear it from me."

"Anyone I know?"

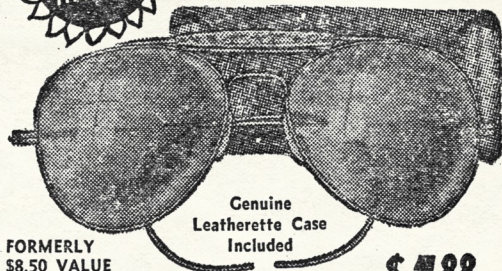
"A man who once had a son. A man with a corpse in his cellar. I'll be back." I put myself onto the fire escape.

When you make a promise to a friend who died for you, you keep it, no matter who it hurts.

THE END

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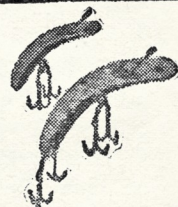


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Cyril Plunkett

(Continued from page 64)

I was afraid you'd get ideas, try to move the body. Of course, I didn't dare swipe the car keys, or jim up the ignition. I was too smart to do that.

"But sit down, kids. Wait, first you'd better pull the shades, Janie."

She did. Did it automatically, dully. She didn't even look at me, but in her throat there was a pulse pounding madly.

"So here we are, Pete," Herb was saying coolly. And now it's time for you to go—"

"Herb!"

His smile wasn't breezy, hearty now. Just a smart guy's grin.

"Come now! Don't appeal to my better nature? We mean to keep that million, pally. We've earned it. We did too much to stop now."

"Wait! So the Finn knew you and Elaine had killed the first Mrs. Warren? The Finn maybe worked for the Warrens?"

Herb just looked us over, his eyes laughing.

"The Finn knew Elaine married old man Warren, and guessed he'd been murdered too?" My voice cracked. "Herb, is that it?"

"Come on kids—" his gun arm began to tense—"you can take a last kiss if you want it."

Good-by, hon? A kiss, because he wants us close together. Bullet for you Janie—is that all I got you? Bullet for me, too, and then perhaps he's planned one blank to tattoo my hand and the wound in my body.

Janie moaned then, looked directly at me. She hesitantly reached out for my hand.

"It's the way the chips fall, pally." Taylor's voice was very hard now, and the time had come now, the last moment. Janie, with a sob had touched my hand, had pressed it just beneath her heart, down to the wide leather belt she was wearing.

Gun in the belt. Keep it by the bed. Keep it handy. If something happens in the night, just reach out, grab it. My gun. She'd had it with her. The stubby revolver.

Killer on the Town

I shoved her.

I shot Herb Taylor even before completely turning. I had one flash view of the awful shock on Taylor's face, in the split second before he pulled his trigger. I shot twice, but he'd hit me somewhere in the side.

Something—hatred, iron will—kept me from falling.

There were two sharp cries. Janie, from the floor where she'd fallen—and another from the door, behind Taylor. He was falling. He swayed against the wall, half dazed, doubling, horror on his face as though to see the floor below him rising.

He topped over—and by that time the door had opened. His wife was by his side.

Not Elaine now, gorgeous and aloof, the heiress. Not blonde ice, but dazed and kneeling by his side, and she was sobbing bitterly.

"I'm hit, hon," I said vaguely to Janie. I felt warm blood running, but no pain and no weakness.

"The phone, Janie. Get the cops, hon, and a doctor." Then I picked up Herb's gun and sat down abruptly, and just looked at the Taylors, their lovely, murderous world shattered.

Ring around the Rosie. They'd killed the Warrens. We'd find proof. The bodies could be exhumed. They'd been paying off the Finn, and Herb had killed him that night in the barroom. Herb had seen me that night, in the barroom; kept an eye out, knew I'd lined up with Brask. Brask had expected Jackie—and met Herb.

Tonight, while Jackie kept us in their home, Herb had murdered Ludkin. It went around in my mind like that, ring around the rosie.

"Pete!" Janie was pleading. She came back from the phone, was standing beside me.

Pain in the flesh, just above the hip. Damp around it, flesh wound, not much bleeding.

"Thanks, darling, for handing me the gun," I said. "Now let's get us a deep breath of fresh air and wait for the cops outside."

THE END



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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 66)

No Trouble at All

Dear Sir:

I wonder how many new rackets have sprung into existence since the advent of television. Not long ago I purchased a television set. A few weeks later two men called on me, saying that they were representatives of our new local television station and that they were checking the installation and reception for all the owners of TV sets.

After what I thought to be an unnecessarily detailed inspection of my set, the oldest man said.

"This set was installed all wrong. The reception should be better than it is. We can fix it for you today if you want. The service charge will be very small."

I had never noticed any trouble with our TV set, and so I told the men that I wanted to speak to my husband about it first. They left then, after giving me a slip of paper with just a telephone number written on it so that I could call them when I had decided.

That very same afternoon an announcement was made over the television station. Two radio repairmen had been calling on TV owners and falsely representing themselves as employees of the station so that they could gain entry to the house. No doubt with such a scheme they made themselves a pretty penny with their "small service charges" on sets which they implied were improperly installed!

Mrs. E. L. Liatti
Cleveland, Ohio

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Arthur L. Madden
Danville, Illinois

That's the lowdown on swindles for this month, detective fans. Don't forget to write in and tell us about the dishonest rackets you've come up against.

The Editor

On the eve of the gay Mardi Gras, Orson Foxworth, financial buccaneer, gave a dinner at world famous Antoine's for seven extraordinary guests. One was beautiful young Odile St. Amant, an unskissed wife, who ached with desperate longing for the embraces of Leonce, her playboy husband. And at the table sat Odile's younger sister, voluptuous Caresse, who resided with Odile and her husband in the family mansion. She drove Leonce to a maddening

desire to put an end to his wife so that he could possess her. What a setting for a story when these people and others as deeply involved with one another meet for dinner at glamorous Antoine's! Frances Parkinson Keyes' newest best-seller, **Dinner at Antoine's**, PLUS another great best-seller, **High Towers**, is yours for just a 3-cent stamp—yes, BOTH for 3c—if you join the Dollar Book Club now!

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