

15¢ DIME  NOV. **DETECTIVE** MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

FREDERICK C. DAVIS  
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by  
**ROBERT MARTIN**

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Vol. 61

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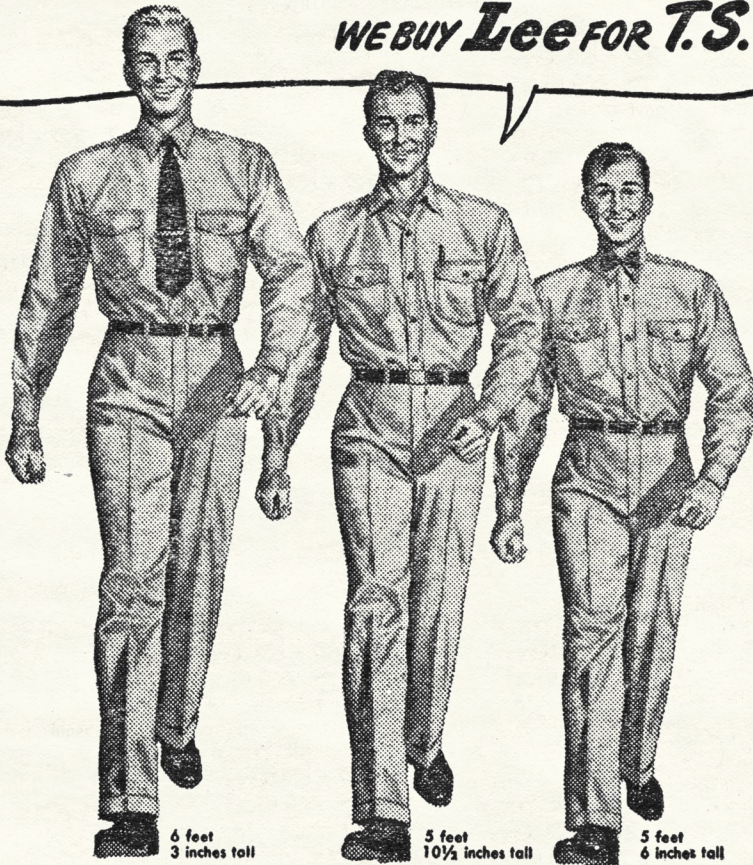
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The December issue will be out November 4th

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

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Later, at the hot spot, Jimmy turned his back—and Sis vamoosed with a lady's-man. Following them, Jimmy said that the lady wanted to go home—with his fists.



That started the corpses' carnival for Jimmy, and a "Dreamer With A Gun"—Mel Colton's thrilling novel. In the December issue, published November 4th.

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\*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



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\*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.



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\*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



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\*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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# READY FOR THE RACKETS

## A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

We all need help if we are going to protect ourselves from the potential swindlers and racketeers of all kinds who are always just around the corner, preparing a new gimmick to cheat or rob you.

These slick characters know that certain sucker schemes will never be old-hat, for there will always be somebody around to fall for the bait—unless they're wised up by hearing or reading in these pages how the ruses work. In the same way, chisellers are always working up new tricks or new variations of their older ones to try and pull on you.

But you can still keep ahead of the swindler's game—and that's by keeping up with the rackets. In this column we print each month the latest dope on the racketeers' methods of operation, so that you can be prepared. We print the letters you send us, telling of the experiences you've had, and pay \$5.00 for every letter used.

Naturally, we'll withhold your name if you wish. However, no letters can be returned, unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. You'll understand that because of the press of mail in the office, we can't enter into correspondence concerning your letters.

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

Now let's turn to the current swindles:

### It's Not Gravy, Either!

Dear Sir:

Recently, I went into a swank Cleveland, Ohio, restaurant and noticed "Mayonnaise Cake" on the menu, ordered it.

Later, finding that it was delicious, I asked the waiter if the chef would give me the recipe. He went to the kitchen, and when he returned, told me the chef would send me the recipe. I gave him my name and address.

Within a week it came—along with a bill for \$100.00, which I was forced to pay for services rendered. My lawyer explained I could not prove I had not opened the envelope and copied the recipe; therefore, I would have to pay. *I've been swindled!*

Mrs. J. H.  
Taylors, So. Carolina.

### Free Lunch, He Says

Dear Sir:

One day a man came to the place where I work and announced that on the following day he was going to give a demonstration of aluminum wear, and we were not to bring any lunch as he would provide it.

The next day he came back with a few more men. They brought boxes containing an apple, a sandwich and a piece of pie, which cost us thirty cents. He showed us about twenty-four pieces of aluminum wear, gave us a good sales talk and went around taking orders. I gave him a three-dollar deposit and got a receipt for a place that was located in Ohio.

He was to come the next day and show me how the waterless cooker worked. I waited three weeks and still he didn't show up. I wrote the company and got my letter back marked: *No forwarding address.*

H. H.  
Brooklyn, N. Y.

### A Sucker a Day

Dear Sir:

Here's a little experience I've had with a certain type of cheap racketeer—

A drives up to a small store, usually in the country or the edge of the city. He is glad to see a woman behind the counter. They bite easier. A has punch boards to sell—the cheaper kind. Very cheap! He tells the lady: "Five hundred punches at a nickel each, that's twenty-five dollars. The biggest prize comes to a quarter. There's only two of that kind. Most of the others aren't worth the nickel. The price is a giveaway, five dollars."

She buys the board. A beats it. Enter B, only a few minutes behind. He is a dusty traveler dropping in for a coke. Sees the board. Asks for his change in nickels. He's a sucker for punch boards, he tells the lady. The third punch nets him a twenty-dollar cash prize!

"But the man who sold me said there—" blurts the lady.

Sometimes it pays off, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the "dusty traveler" is satisfied with a ten spot. If the crowd in the store is big the lady might even think it poor business not to pay off. At any rate the output for A and B is very little. Two or three suckers a day come to better than wages. Few of them do much more than cuss.


S. Benedict,  
Berkeley, Calif.

That's the tally on rackets for this month, detective fans. Don't forget to write in and tell us of the schemes you've come up against.

The Editor



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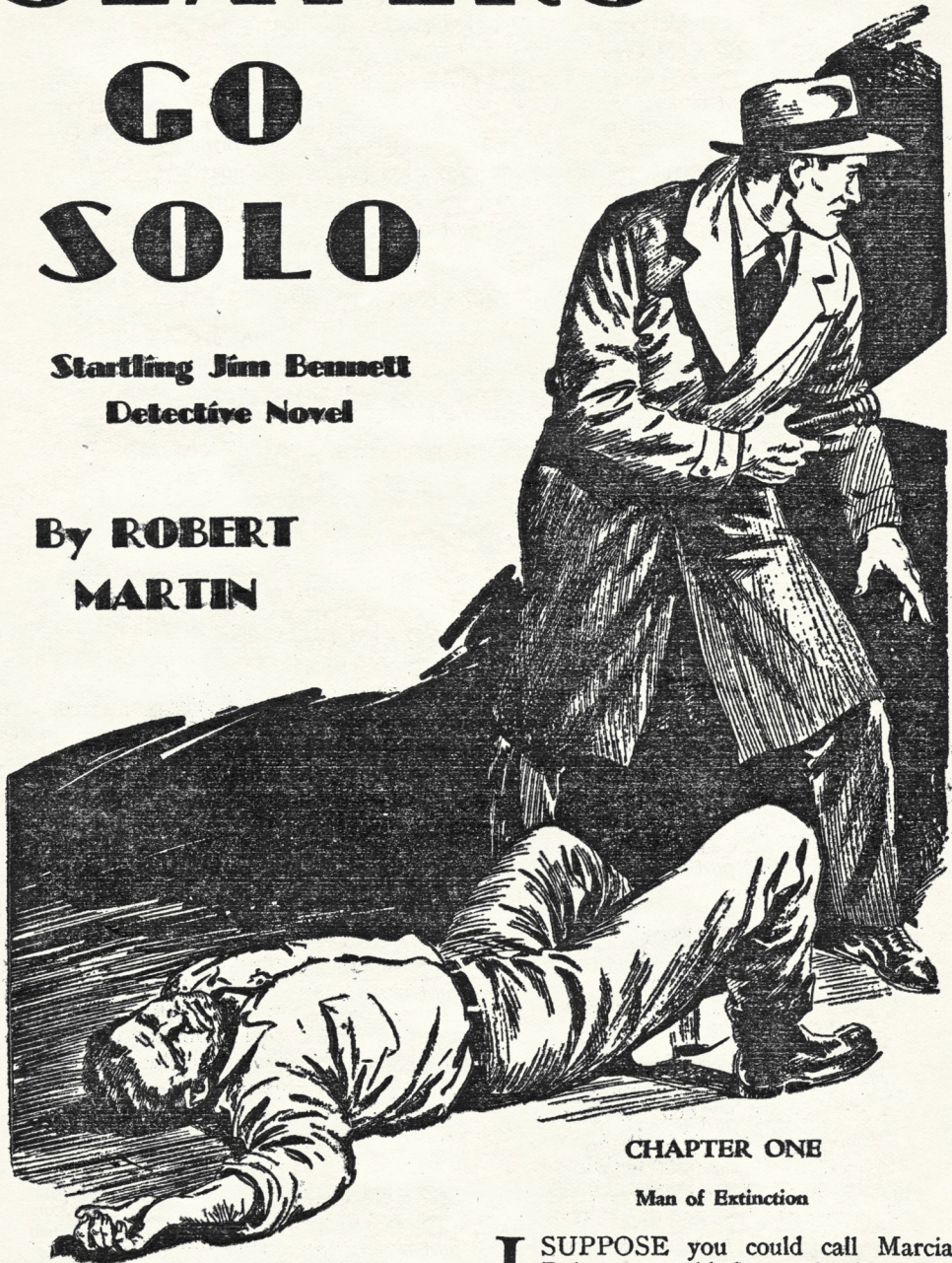
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# SLAYERS GO SOLO

Startling Jim Bennett  
Detective Novel

By **ROBERT  
MARTIN**



## CHAPTER ONE

### Man of Extinction

**I** SUPPOSE you could call Marcia Delaney an old flame of mine. She was blonde, long-legged and carefree, with a genius for wearing clothes. I didn't really blame her for marrying Rex Delaney. He had a hell of a lot more money



He raised the gun. "Good-  
by, Bennett."



*A lovely Lorelei's phone call  
got Jim Bennett on the hook but good  
—with some strange dead-fellows.*

than a private detective would ever have. To some people money is just as important as love—more important, even. You can't buy streamlined convertibles and mink jackets with love.

Anyhow, Marcia's familiar throaty voice on the telephone gave me a small tingle of excitement. It had been six months since I had seen her. Shortly after she had married Rex Delaney she had dropped out of circulation behind the high ivy-covered walls of the Delaney house in Woodlake, a fashionable village on the lake shore twenty miles east of Cleveland.

"Jim," she said, "This is Marcia. I need you. Can you come out—right away? Please, Jim."

"Sure, Marcia, but—"

"Hurry, Jim, hurry." She hung up.

I looked across my desk at Sandy Hollis. She was pretending to type, but I knew she had been listening. We were working overtime to finish some reports to the boss in New York. Outside dusk was falling over the city, and the spatter of April rain beat against the windows. I stood up, put on my raincoat and hat. I tried to act casual, but the excitement of hearing Marcia's voice again was a warm glow inside of me.

I said to Sandy, "I've got to go out. Knock off when you finish that page. We'll wind things up in the morning." I started for the door.

Sandy said, "Work?"

I nodded, but I certainly didn't classify a visit to Marcia as work.

She pointed a finger at the .38 lying on

top of my desk. "You'd better take that, then. Regulation Ten, Section C, says any operator on official business for the agency shall at all times be armed."

I picked up the gun, dropped it into my topcoat pocket, and reached for the doorknob.

Sandy said, "Where can I reach you?"

"The Delaney residence, Woodlake."

"I thought so," she said, "when I heard you say Marcia. Are you sure this is a business call?"

"Of course," I said stiffly.

She smiled. "All right, Jim. Don't get so huffy. A secretary must know those things."

"Now you know," I said, and I went out. I got one of the two agency cars from the garage in the basement and headed east on the boulevard. The rain was still pelting down, and the lights of the uptown ramp were a string of yellow beads in the wetness. After a while I left the boulevard and drove out the state highway. There wasn't much traffic.

As I approached the turn-off for Woodlake, the hands on the dash clock pointed to ten minutes after six, and I remembered that I hadn't had any dinner. But Marcia had called me. To hell with dinner.

Then I thought of Marcia's husband, a big handsome man with black brows and wavy black hair who affected draped double-breasted suits, stiff white collars and dove-gray silk neckties. Rex Delaney, a tycoon in the investment business and a man of distinction. To hell with him, too.

I saw the lights of a lake freighter as I pulled into the Delaney drive. Oh, I knew where it was, all right. For a brief period after her marriage Marcia had been indiscreet enough to include me on her guest list for various social functions. But her friends and neighbors had bored me, and Marcia herself had turned into a brittle hostess with a frozen smile on her face.

It wasn't any fun for me, and, besides, Rex Delaney had turned out to be a very jealous husband. In fact, he had called me up one day and told me nastily that I was no longer welcome at his home. That suited me: I had gone only because Marcia had insisted. After that I ignored her invitations, and she became just a very pleasant memory. After all, she had married the guy—so what the hell?

The iron gates were closed, and the gate lodge was dark. I remembered old Abner Moorehead, the night gateman, and I gave him my special tattoo on the horn. He didn't show up, and I got out and ran for the lodge in the driving rain. The door was open, and I went inside.

"Abner," I called. "Hey, Abner, open the gate."

The only answer I got was the steady drone of rain on the roof. Something heavy slammed me on the back of the head, and a blinding stab of light exploded behind my eyes. Pain thrust down my spine as I pitched forward. The last thing I remembered was the feel of the hard floor beneath my chin . . .

"JIM," a far-away voice said sharply. "Jim, wake up." I opened one eye. Light blinded me, and I closed it again. The same sharp voice said, "Get him a drink, Bruce."

I kept my eyes closed until I felt the rim of a glass on my lips. I took a cautious sip. Brandy. I took a bigger sip, and then I opened both eyes. My head hurt, and my sight was fuzzy, but I recognized Marcia Delaney leaning over me. She wore a foamy negligee, a pale raspberry in color, and it didn't leave much to the imagination.

Her tawny hair fell in shining waves over her shoulders. She gave me an uncertain smile, and pulled the negligee around her. I saw no important change in her figure, but her fine dark eyes were filled with anxiety—and something else. Fear, maybe.

"Jim," she said, "Do—do you feel all right?"

"Sure. I feel fine."

She hesitated, and then she said, "What—what were you doing out in the gate house?"

I thought that over for a minute. Then I said, "It seems that you called and asked me to rush over here."

A deep laugh rumbled from behind me. I tilted my head backward and looked into the smiling face of Bruce Atwood, Rex Delaney's business partner. He was a lean, cadaverous man with a reputation of being a shrewd operator. I had heard that he was the real brains behind the firm of Delaney and Atwood. I had met him

at Marcia's house several times in the past.

"No one called you from here, Bennett." He looked at a wristwatch. "Helena and the doctor should be here by now," he said, and he moved across the big living room and went out the front door.

My eyes swung back to Marcia Delaney. "I didn't call you—honest." She smiled, and her long lashes covered her eyes. "But I'm glad to see you again."

I relaxed on the big divan. I was content just to look at her.

She said, "It's queer, Jim. Abner found you unconscious in the gate house. He came here and told us, and he and Bruce carried you up here to the house. Helena went to get a doctor for you, and Abner wanted to go along with her."

"That's nice of them," I said. "Who's Helena? And why not phone the doctor?"

"Helena is Bruce's stepdaughter," Marcia said. "She wants to be an actress, and has been away at dramatic school in New York. She came home several months ago. We couldn't call the doctor, because there's something wrong with the phone."

I nodded and closed my eyes. The pain in my head was really pretty bad. Presently a door slammed, and footsteps sounded on the polished hardwood of the hall. I opened my eyes. A girl came through the archway at the far end of the big room. Bruce Atwood was right behind her. His face looked pale and drawn, and there was moisture on the shoulders of his coat.

The girl was young, maybe twenty-five or less, with a figure straight out of Hollywood. She wore a tight fuzzy blue sweater, smoothly tailored gray flannel slacks, and brown moccasins. A tan raincoat hung over one arm, and her reddish mass of short curls glittered with rain drops. She had wide-set blue eyes, a short nose, and a red mouth that was a little too wide for real beauty.

Her eyes met mine, and she stopped in the middle of the room. "Oh, thank goodness you're all right. We—we thought maybe you were dead." She dropped into a chair and lit a cigarette.

Bruce Atwood said gravely, "Honey, this is Mr. Bennett. He's a detective."

She gave me a slow smile, and I sat up.

I felt silly lying like a lanky corpse. Marcia Delaney said to the girl, "Where's the doctor?"

Helena's gaze swung away from mine. She turned to Marcia. "What, Marcia? Oh, the doctor? He was out. I left Abner there to wait for him, and I came back. I didn't want to miss anything." She gave me her slow smile again.

Her intent gaze made me a little uncomfortable, and I said to Atwood, "Someone *did* call me to come out here. And then I got smacked on the head." I got to my feet, a little unsteadily. "Ah, well, all in the day's work. I'll just mosey back to town."

Marcia Delaney said quietly, "Jim, I'm sorry."

I felt the bump on my head, "Never mind. Just good clean fun." I moved across the room toward the door.

"Don't go, Jim," Marcia said. "Sit down and have a drink. Rex will be here any minute."

Helena Atwood stood up suddenly and strode to the wide window. She stood staring out at the rain. Atwood looked at a wristwatch. "Rex is late," he growled. He, too, turned to stare out of the window.

Marcia came up close to me and said in a low voice, "Jim, I've missed you. Why don't you come and see us any more?"

I gave her a crooked grin, and I didn't tell her that to Rex Delaney I was like a red flag in front of a bull, or that I would just as soon not be around when he showed up. Jealous husbands are not my idea of fun. I patted Marcia's arm. "I'll see you," I told her. "Good night."

Bruce Atwood turned and said, "Bennett, maybe you'd better tell the sheriff what happened to you. There's been too much of that sort of thing around here lately."

I nodded. "Maybe I will." Helena Atwood didn't turn around, and I went out without looking at Marcia Delaney. Seeing her again had brought up a lot of memories—things that I had no business thinking about. She was married now, and to hell with it.

A blue convertible was parked in the drive before the front entrance. I guessed that it belonged to Bruce Atwood, or to his stepdaughter, and I walked on down

to the gate house to where my car was parked. On a sudden impulse I got a flashlight from the car and entered the gatekeeper's lodge. I flicked on the light and looked around.

A man lay on his back on the floor. I recognized Abner Moorehouse, the Delaney gatekeeper and handy man. His eyes were half-open, and the wound in his throat gaped up at me like a bloody mouth.

I took a deep breath, and I knelt down beside him. He was a short man, about seventy, with gray close-cropped hair. He wore a pair of blue denims, a khaki shirt, and heavy brown work shoes. Almost mechanically I went through his pockets. I found a ring of keys, a partially-filled package of chewing tobacco, forty-five cents in silver.

Reaching under him, I found a wallet in his hip pocket. It contained an Ohio driver's license made out to Abner C. Moorehouse, lodge and social security cards, a five dollar bill and three ones. I put the stuff back into his pockets, and looked him over again with the light. There was a swollen, bloody bruise just over the back of his right ear. I placed the back of my hand against his cheek. He was still warm.

I HEARD a sound behind me, and I stood up quickly and turned. The glow of my light picked up the tall, heavy figure of Rex Delaney, Marcia's husband. He was wearing about four-hundred-dollars worth of clothes—black homburg, dark overcoat, gray suit. A diamond as big as a cat's eye glittered on his dove-gray silk tie. He had a hard broad face, straight black brows, a heavy-lipped mouth and a jutting chin.

Women would call him magnetic, but Rex Delaney was everything I disliked in a man—domineering, arrogant. Still, I suppose my chief reason for disliking him was because he had married Marcia.

Our regard for each other was mutual. The hate showed in his cold gray eyes, and his heavy lips twisted in a sneer. "So it's you," he said softly, "the handsome detective." He looked without emotion at the body of the dead gatekeeper. "I'm sorry you killed Abner," he said. "He was the only one of the servants I could trust."

"Hey!" I began.

His right hand left his coat pocket, and I looked into the black muzzle of a little .32 automatic. "I came along just in time," he said. "A very unfortunate time for you."

I began to sweat. "Look, I didn't kill him. I—"

"You haven't any business here," he snapped. "I warned you to stay away. I caught you with Abner's dead body." He paused, and gave me a slow smile. "You struggled with me, and tried to escape. I shot you." He raised the gun, steadied it, and his heavy lips closed over his big strong teeth. "Good-by, Bennett."

I flicked off the light. In the darkness, I jumped to one side and leaped for Delaney. My fist struck him somewhere on the head, and I heard him grunt. There was a muffled bark of a gun, and I heard Delaney stumbling away from me. I backed against the wall and turned on the light.

Delaney lay huddled in a corner, half on his knees, his head down. A tiny spiral of smoke twisted upward from the muzzle of the gun on the floor beside him. I moved over to him. His eyes were cloudy, and I saw the bump on the side of his jaw where I had hit him. He was groggy, but I figured he would live. To hell with Rex Delaney. To hell with the whole Delaney tribe.

There was a telephone on a shelf by the door. I picked it up. The line was dead. Marcia had told the truth about the telephone being out of order. I stood a second, undecided. Rex Delaney groaned and rolled over, I saw the little splintered hole in the wall of the gate house where his wildly-fired bullet had struck. I went out to my car and drove away. A mile down the road I found a phone in an all-night gas station, and called the county sheriff's office and asked for Sheriff Ross Jenkins.

"Ross is out," a voice said. "This is Deputy Snyder speaking."

"This is Jim Bennett. Get—"

"Kind of off your beat, ain't you, Jim?" the deputy broke in.

"Way off," I said grimly. "Get hold of Ross and go out to the Delaney place. In the gate house you'll find what's left of Abner Moorehouse, Delaney's handyman."

Got that?" I added. "Rush out there."

"Yeah, Jim, but—"

"Get out there," I snapped. "I'll wait for you." I hung up.

I went out and sat behind the wheel of my car. The rain was still slanting down, making dancing blobs on the black surface of the road. I was tired, and my head hurt, and my right hand ached from punching Delaney's jaw. I wanted to go home and forget the whole mess, but I knew I'd have to talk to Jenkins sooner or later. I lit a cigarette and drove back to the Delaney place.

The gate house was still dark. I parked in the gravel at the edge of the road and carried my flashlight through the path gate beside the locked drive gates. Just inside the gate, headed out, was the blue convertible. I swung the light on it. There was nobody in it.

I opened the gate-house door, poked the light in ahead of me. Abner Moorehouse lay as I had left him. And then I stiffened. Rex Delaney was still on the floor, his back toward me. He lay very still. I moved over to him, gently turned him over. His body was limp.

The black handle of a knife was sticking from the right side of his chest. A little blood had leaked out around the blade and soaked the elegant gray cloth of Delaney's vest. Rex Delaney no longer looked arrogant. Dead men seldom do. . . .

There was a whimpering noise behind me. It was like the mewling of a hungry puppy. I swung around. A figure stood huddled in the dark corner of the lodge. I swung the light. Helena Atwood's eyes held a look of madness, and her teeth were gnawing at the back of one hand. The other hand was clutching the windowsill for support. I went over to her and grasped her by the shoulders.

"Talk fast," I said. "The law will be here any minute."

Her slender body shook beneath my hands.

"Rex—is—d—dead?" she stuttered. "And—and Abner?"

"Yes," I snapped. "Talk."

She began to shake more violently. "After—after you left," she said, low, "I—I decided to drive over to the doctor's and get Abner, and—and to report that our telephones were out of order.

When—when I got out here, I—I thought I'd check the phone in the gate house. I couldn't find the light switch, and I lit a match, and—and I—I saw them. . . . T—then I heard you drive up, and . . . and—" She swayed forward against me.

I slapped her sharply on the cheek. Her head tilted back, and I saw the fear and the horror in her eyes. I led her to the open door, and we stood there while the rain muttered on the roof and the cool damp air caressed our faces.

From beyond the hedge, toward the highway, I heard the high whine of a speeding car, and in a couple of seconds I saw the blinking red light of the first of the county patrol cars.

Helena Atwood stirred beside me and took a long, shuddering breath. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I—I'll be all right now."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Out in the Cold

THREE hours later I sat in Sheriff Ross Jenkin's little office. He was a short, thick man dressed in a faded khaki shirt, whipcord slacks and heavy shoes. He had a round tanned face, thin yellow hair, and clear blue eyes. He put his feet on the desk, pulled out a briar pipe and stuffed it with tobacco from a zippered pouch, struck a match on the heel of his shoe and looked at me gravely through a mist of blue smoke.

"Do you mind telling me all over again, Jim?"

I didn't mind. He had done a good professional job at the Delaney place; asked the right questions, searched the grounds, put the story on the state police radio, and sent deputies scurrying in all directions. The doctor had finally showed up, and the bodies of Rex Delaney and Abner Moorehouse had been hauled away.

At Marcia's request, Jenkins had left a guard at the house, and he had allowed Bruce Atwood and Helena to go home. But Jenkins had stuck pretty close to me, and kept shooting questions at me. I didn't see any point in hiding anything, and now I told him, in detail, all over again.

When I had finished, he nodded slowly.

"You sure know how to stick to a story, Jim. Now don't get in an uproar—but weren't you at one time pretty sweet on Marcia Delaney?"

"At one time," I admitted, "before she married Delaney."

He nodded again. "And—uh—and how are things between you and Marcia now?"

The sweat started dripping down my ribs, but I managed a laugh. It wasn't much of a laugh—more of a croak. I said, "Rejected suitor kills husband of ex-girl friend. . . . Want to hold me on suspicion, Ross?"

He frowned at the bowl of his pipe. "I'm just trying to find the answers, Jim," he said quietly. "It could have been a prowler, a sneak-thief. It's happened before. The death of Abner points to that. Do you have any idea as to why Marcia called you—and then denied it?"

I shook my head. "Nary an idea."

He sighed and knocked black ashes into a tray. "All right, Jim," he said wearily. He smiled at me. "This sure is a hell of a way to make a living, isn't it?" He stood up. "I'll see you later."

I took the hint, and left. I was glad to leave. During the drive back to town I thought over the whole mess, but I didn't get anyplace. It was after midnight when I climbed into bed. . . .

At a combination lunch and breakfast close to noon of the following day I read a bulldog edition of one of the afternoon papers. The story was smeared across eight columns.

*WEALTHY FINANCIER,  
EMPLOYEE SLAIN*

There were pictures of Rex Delaney, Bruce Atwood, Helena, Marcia, and a smaller cut of Abner Moorehouse, obviously taken from a faded snapshot.

The story said that Helena Atwood had found the bodies, and that one James T. Bennett, a private detective, had received a mysterious telephone call to come out to the Delaney home in fashionable Woodlake, Bennett, it seemed, was "a friend of the family." I gave Ross Jenkins credit for that slant.

There was apparently no motive for the double killing, and police were working on the theory that it'd been done by a person or persons intent upon burglary,

and that a dragnet had been put out for all suspicious characters in the area. There had been an epidemic of robberies in the neighborhood recently, etc. etc. Mrs. Delaney was prostrate with grief, the paper said. Nobody, it seemed, was prostrate over Abner Moorehouse. He was just dead—a bachelor with apparently no relatives or friends, except a few lodge cronies.

When I entered the office, Sandy Hollis looked up from her typewriter and nodded at an open edition of the same paper I had been reading. "I see the law finally caught up with you," she said.

"Not yet, my dear. Not yet."

She jerked her head toward the reception room. "You have a visitor. He's been waiting two hours." She tossed me a card. It read:

*Bruce W. Atwood, Investment Counselor.  
Delaney, Atwood and Company.*

I hung up my hat and coat and entered the reception room. Bruce Atwood stood up. He looked as lean and as cadaverous as ever, and he was smoking a long thin cigar. He wore a blue double-breasted suit, a stiff white collar, and a red-gray figured tie. A gray topcoat and a black derby lay on a chair. We shook hands formally, as if we hadn't seen each other a few hours before.

"A bad business, Bennett," he said gravely.

I agreed with him, and I said, "How's Marcia taking it?"

He gave me a thin, wolfish smile. "Marcia isn't exactly prostrated—as the papers said. Let's not kid ourselves, Bennett. Nobody's really mourning for Rex—me included." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "You neither, I take it?"

"I didn't know him very well," I said stiffly.

He chuckled softly. "No offense, Bennett. Marcia is a damned attractive woman." He lifted his spare shoulders. "Rex is dead—water over the dam. The business won't suffer. I can get along without him very well—better, really. Rex lacked judgment and investment sense. And we both carried a big life-insurance policy on each other. The usual partnership precaution, you know?" He paused, and eyed me steadily.

"I see," I said.



He mouthed the cigar between strong yellow teeth. "I won't try to fool you, Bennett. I'm not mourning for Rex Delaney. He lived his life as he wanted to live it, and be damned to anyone who got in his way. I had no particular love for Rex—but I want you to find his murderer. And fast."

I said carefully, "That's a job for the law."

He said contemptuously, "Sheriff Jenkins and his blundering louts? They're looking for a sneak-thief hit-and-run killer. But somebody deliberately murdered Rex—and I may be next."

I thought that over. "Why?"

"Because I've got a hunch it was somebody with a grudge against Rex in a business way. And I was Rex's partner. We invest our client's money as we think best. Sometimes it—well, it doesn't turn out so well. And nobody likes to lose money." He took a folded sheet of paper from an inside pocket and handed it to me.

It was a list of eight names and addresses on Delaney and Atwood stationery. I glanced quickly over it. None of the names were familiar to me. I said, "And these are the people you fleeced—I mean whose investments turned out badly?"

He nodded coldly. "They knew the risk when they invested. Nobody can predict the market. We took our risk, too. Now get busy." He put on his derby and picked up his coat.

I said, "What about Abner Moorehouse, the gate-keeper?"

"He probably just got in the way," Atwood said. "To hell with him."

I nodded, and then I said, "Under the circumstances, perhaps you'd better let me furnish you a bodyguard."

He smiled, and opened his coat. I saw the black butt of a revolver peeking out of the inside pocket. I shrugged, and said, "Our rates are fifty dollars a day, plus expenses."

"You'll get paid," he snapped. "Keep in touch with me." He went out.

I went back into the office, and I said to Sandy Hollis, "Make out a case card for Bruce W. Atwood. He's a client of ours."

"Yes, sir," she said with mock respect. "Anything else, sir?"

I picked up my hat and coat. "I'm going out. Hold the fort."

"You just got in," Sandy said. "And you're supposed to call the boss—"

"I'll be at the Delaney place," I cut in, and I went out and closed the door.

IT TOOK me forty minutes to drive out to Rex Delaney's house. A car followed me out. I figured it was one of Sheriff Jenkins' deputies on my tail. The gates were open, so I drove on up to the big house. A deputy in plain clothes was on the front door. I showed him my license, and asked if I could go in.

He shrugged. "Ross didn't say you couldn't." I went across the tile terrace and punched the bell.

Marcia Delaney let me in. She was dressed in a white silk blouse and a long black flaring skirt. Her honey-colored hair glistened in shining folds over her shoulders, and her white skin looked more milky than ever, revealing clearly the faint dusting of freckles over the bridge of her short straight nose.

"Hello, Jim," she said quietly.

"Marcia, I'm sorry."

She shrugged slightly, and stood aside for me to enter. I moved past her, and she led me across the big drawing room into the library. It was a big, airy room, with books on three walls reaching to the ceiling. The other wall was glass, broken in the center by wide French doors opening on a garden with sundials, bird baths and blooming crocuses. Marcia sat down on a big damask-covered divan, and I sat beside her.

She said, "Jim, don't look so solemn. I—I'm not really sorry about Rex. Except for the way he died. I never really loved him—I think you know that. But the money dad left me was gone, and I felt that I couldn't live without money—lots of it, and—" She paused, and stared down at her red-lacquered nails. "I learned a lot from Rex," she said bitterly. "About money and other things. I—I think I hated him very much."

Her shining hair was close to my face, and I smelled the clean fragrance of her, and I thought again of the summer we had been together. It had been a carefree happy summer, with things never getting too serious—almost, but never quite seri-

ous enough. Marcia saw to that, I thought grimly, and I knew that a private dick had no business falling in love, ever. Maybe it hadn't been exactly love between Marcia and me, but it was something I knew I would never have again.

She turned her head and stared out of the window. All I could see of her face was the smooth line of her chin and a corner of her mouth. Her mouth was quivering slightly.

"Jim," she said softly, not looking at me. "We—we had a lot, didn't we?"

When I spoke, my voice sounded harsh in my ears. "I'm working for Bruce Atwood now. He's hired me to find Rex's killer."

She turned startled eyes toward me. "Bruce?" she said quickly. "That's odd. He and Rex had been quarreling about the business. Bruce didn't approve of Rex's policies, and he wanted to take over. But Rex owned half, and he wouldn't sell to Bruce. Anyhow Bruce couldn't buy him out because he didn't have enough money. That was why Bruce was waiting for Rex last night—to argue some more about it."

"And Rex was dead before Bruce had a chance to talk to him further?" I asked.

She nodded silently.

I said, "What happened here last night after I left?"

She took a cigarette from a silver box, and I held a match for her. She inhaled deeply, and said, "Bruce and Helena talked for a few minutes, and then Helena said that apparently the doctor wasn't coming—we didn't need him anymore, anyhow—and that she was going over to the doctor's house and bring Abner home.

"Helena left, and Bruce and I talked a few minutes, and then I went to bed. Sometime later Helena woke me and told me that Rex and Abner had been killed . . . and about the sheriff finding the bloody hammer behind the gate house." She shivered slightly.

"Hammer?" I said.

She looked at me with wide eyes. "Didn't you know? It was one from the garage, and had been used to hit poor Abner before—before he was killed."

I had a sick feeling deep inside of me. I said, "And your telephone wires had been cut?"

She nodded. "Yes, but they're fixed now."

I didn't want to know, but I had to ask. "What about the knife?"

"It was a carving knife, from the kitchen," she said. "Jim, what does it mean?"

"I don't know," I mumbled. "I don't know."

Marcia said softly, "I feel sorry for Helena. She was—was quite fond of Rex. She . . ." Marcia stopped, then went on. "Helena's father has been dead for many years, and she was devoted to her mother. Shortly after her mother married Bruce Atwood, she was drowned. Bruce once told me about it—it's the tragedy of his life.

"He had been drinking quite heavily, and he persuaded Lillian—that was Helena's mother—to swim out from shore farther than was safe. Lillian became exhausted, and Bruce didn't have the strength to save her. She knew she was going to drown, and out there in the water she asked Bruce to always look after Helena. Bruce never got over it, and he's tried to make it up to Helena in every way he could. Helena was sixteen at the time. Bruce officially adopted her, and gave her his name, and he's done everything possible to make her happy."

"And how does Helena feel about Bruce?" I asked.

Marcia shook her head slowly. "I don't know. She seems fond of him, but she's a difficult girl to understand."

A telephone in a mahogany knee-hole desk began to jangle, and Marcia got up to answer it. She said, "Yes, he's here," and beckoned to me.

It was Bruce Atwood. "Bennett, maybe you'd better come over here. Somebody just took a shot at me."

"Are you at home?"

"Yes. Two miles south on the same road as Delaney's."

"All right," I said. "I'm leaving now." I turned to Marcia. "I've got to go. Somebody just took a shot at Bruce Atwood."

Her eyes got big. "Who?"

"He thinks it's a disgruntled client—maybe some sucker who lost his life savings by letting Delaney and Atwood invest for him." I started for the door.

"Jim," she called after me.

At the door I turned and looked at

her. With the April sunlight falling on her hair, she was as pretty a picture as any man ever saw. "Be careful," she said. "Sure," I said, and I went out.

**B**RUCE ATWOOD was waiting for me at the entrance to his drive. He stood bare-headed out in the open, away from a tall hedge. I stopped and opened the car door. "Get in," I snapped. "If I ever saw a clay pigeon, you're it."

He climbed in beside me. His face seemed gray, and he was breathing whiskey fumes. I wheeled up the drive to a white colonial facing the lake and slammed to a stop.

"Get inside," I said. "Fast."

Obediently he opened the door, scooted across the stoop, and opened the front door. I followed. He crossed a big hall, and entered a small paneled study. There was a bottle of scotch on the table, and he thrust a glass into my hand. He poured for me, and for himself. His hand shook a little. Atwood took a long swallow, and then he motioned toward a wide screened window.

"I was sitting here. I heard a report, and a kind of swift buzzing sound past my ear. It took me a couple of seconds to realize that it was a shot, and then I got away from the window." He pointed a finger. "The bullet went into the paneling over there."

I looked at the hole. The bullet had been fired from a small caliber gun. I said, "I don't suppose you saw anybody?"

He shook his head.

I said, "Isn't your step-daughter at home?"

His eyes narrowed a little. "Helena? Why do you ask that?"

I shrugged. "Just wondered."

He looked down at his glass, and he said in a low voice, "Bennett, I don't mind telling you this—I know you'll keep it confidential—but Helena has been a worry to me ever since her mother died. She's been, well—a problem. A little wild, and very headstrong. Marcia doesn't know this, but Rex Delaney had been paying a lot of attention to her, too much for a married man. I didn't like it, and I told Rex so.

"That, and our business disagreements, was causing trouble between us. I was to

have it out with him last night. I threatened to tell Marcia. Helena's hard to handle, and I promised her mother . . ." He passed a hand over his face. "I don't know where Helena is now. She left this morning." He tilted his glass.

I moved to the door. "Stay in the house. Don't expose yourself any more than necessary. I'll see you later today."

He nodded silently, and took another drink.

I went out and looked over the terrain opposite Atwood's study. It was sloping ground, all green grass and shrubbery, with a million hiding places for a gunman with a bead on the study window. I got into my car. The left-hand rear view mirror on the outside was twisted out of line, as it usually was. I glanced into it as I headed down the drive. The mirror was tilted upward, and I could have sworn that I saw the reflection of Helena Atwood's face at an upstairs window. . . .

I drove into the village of Woodlake. At a drugstore phone booth I called Bruce Atwood's number. He answered right away, and I said in a high-pitched voice, "Is Helena there?"

"No," he snapped, and he hung up.

I went over to Sheriff Ross Jenkins' office. He was sitting with his feet on the desk. Pipe smoke filled the room. I said, "I thought you'd like to know I'm working for Bruce Atwood."

He nodded gravely. He didn't say anything.

I said, "Still looking for a kill-and-run bum?"

"We never were," he said calmly. "As they say in the movies, this is an inside job."

I said bitterly, "I wondered if you'd get around to telling me about the hammer, and the knife from the Delaney kitchen. Why hold out on me?"

He took his feet off the desk. "I told you before, Jim," he said wearily. "This is a hell of a way to make a living." He gave me a crooked grin. "After all, you're a Grade A suspect." He puffed on his pipe and added, "Or was."

"That's a relief," I said with what I hoped was heavy sarcasm.

It was wasted. Jenkins said calmly, "I just finished going through Rex Delaney's papers, and I found this." He took a sheet

of paper from his desk drawer and handed it to me. It was the same list of Atwood and Delaney clients which Atwood had given me.

"Looks like a special sucker list," Jenkins said. "I've contacted every one of those people. They all say the same thing—that they invested heavily, and lost." He stood up and hitched at his belt. "I think I'll have a little talk with Atwood."

I said, "Somebody just took a shot at him."

His head swung toward me. "Now who's holding out?" he snapped.

I grinned. "It plumb slipped my mind, Sheriff." I told him about Atwood calling, and about the bullet fired through the study window. When I had finished, I said, "Maybe we'd better really work on those people on Delaney's sucker list. Okay if I leave now?"

"If I want you, I'll find you," he said, and he didn't smile. I went out with a cold feeling along my spine. This business was rapidly ceasing to be funny. Or had it ever been funny? I could still see the killer look in Rex Delaney's eyes. I went across the street to a drug store, had a strawberry soda with two dips of ice cream, and then dropped a nickel in a pay phone and dialed Rex Delaney's number.

When Marcia answered, I said, "This is Jim. What's the name of the doctor Helena and Abner went to get last night?"

"Dr. Westover. Jim, I'd like to talk to you."

"Anything special?" I said carefully.

"N—no, but—"

"Later," I said. "By."

As I crossed the street to my car, I saw a beefy man in a brown leather jacket sitting behind the wheel of a blue sedan in front of a feed store. I recognized the car as the one which had followed me out from town. As I pulled away from the curb, I saw it move out and follow me slowly. After that, I didn't pay any attention to it. I was just groping in the dark, and I didn't care how many deputies Ross Jenkins put on my tail.

I found Dr. Westover's office on the second floor of the Woodlake Banking Company building. A small sign on his door read, *Closed Wednesday Afternoons*. I remembered that it was Wednesday, but I banged on the door a few times anyhow.

I didn't get any answer, and so I went back down to the drug store and looked up the doctor's home address in the telephone book. He lived the hell-and-gone on the other side of town. I drove out there.

From the size and appearance of the house, I guessed that the doctor was doing all right. I parked in a curving cement drive and punched a bell. Presently a perky little maid with big brown eyes opened the door and looked at me with just the correct expression of enquiry and aloofness.

"Hello, honey," I said, "Is doc in?"

She looked me over carefully, and apparently decided that I wasn't good for a thousand-dollar appendectomy. "I'm sorry," she said crisply, "but the doctor cannot be reached."

"Is he dead?" I asked her.

She looked a little startled. Then she said, "The doctor is not in," and she started to close the door.

I put my foot in the door in the approved brush salesman's technique. It worked, too. She couldn't close the door without smashing my foot, and she didn't look that hefty. "It's a matter of life and death," I pleaded.

Brown Eyes looked distressed. A voice from inside the house called, "What is it, Corrine?"

A woman came into view. She could have been twenty-five or forty-five, but at first glance she was really something. Hair the color of ripe corn, a thin, high cheek-boned face, a red mouth. She was wearing black silk lounging pajamas which, in the right spots, seemed to be painted on her.

"You may go, Corrine," she said in a cool brisk voice, and Brown Eyes ducked away. The door opened wider, and I stared into a pair of blue eyes as clear and as cold as ice in January.

I said, "I'm sorry to bother you. I wanted to see the doctor."

The blue eyes looked me over, and I wished I had worn my good blue suit and that my shoes were shined. She smiled faintly.

"Then it's not a matter of life and death?"

"Death, maybe," I said. "I just wanted to ask him what time Abner Moorehouse

was here to see the doctor last night." She frowned. She looked older with the furrows in her smooth white brow. "Are you from the sheriff's office, about Rex Delaney's murder? And poor Abner Moorehouse?"

I said the easiest thing. "Yes. Routine, you know."

She looked me over again. "And what is your name, please?"

"Bennett, ma'am."

"Yes, Mr. Bennett," she said briskly. "Abner was here, with Helena Atwood. Helena said someone had been hurt at the Delaney house, and that their telephone wasn't working. She wanted the doctor, but he was out on some house calls. I expected him momentarily, and I asked her to wait, but she said she would try and get Dr. Farr—he's in the next village."

"Helena and Abner left, but in a short time she came back and said that Dr. Farr was out of town, and that she was going back to the Delaney's. She asked if Abner could wait and ride back with the doctor, and I said of course, and that I'd tell the doctor to go to Delaney's as soon as

he returned." Mrs. Westover looked at me. "How long did Abner wait?" I asked her.

She puckered her lips attractively. "Oh, quite a little while. The doctor didn't return as soon as I expected, and I went to bed and read awhile. After I turned off my light, I heard a slight noise and looked out of my bedroom window. I saw Abner sitting in a chair out here, smoking. I could see the glow of his cigar, or cigarette."

I thought, *Whoever killed Abner must have picked him up here, after Helena had returned to the Delaney's, and either killed him on the way back and dumped him in the gate house—or else took him alive to the gate house, and then killed him.* It didn't make sense. I said, "Just one more question, Mrs. Westover."

She smiled. She was almost beautiful when she smiled. "The doctor is playing golf," she said. "His first game of the season. He won't be back until dinner time. If—if we're to have more questions, perhaps you'd better come inside."

Her smile was inviting, but I said reso-

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lutely, "No, thanks. Just take a minute. Were you awake when the doctor returned?"

"No, but I awoke when he came in. I told him to go over to the Delaney's. I was asleep when he returned, but again he wakened me and he told me that Rex Delaney and Abner had—had been murdered." Her slim shoulders shivered a little.

I touched my hat and backed away. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Westover."

The smile had left her lips, and she nodded coldly. With a faint pang of regret I retreated to my car. As I drove away, I decided that Dr. Westover had better give up golf and spend more time with his wife on his days off.

IT WAS almost six o'clock in the afternoon when I unlocked my apartment door. I kited my hat into a chair and took off my topcoat. The place seemed stuffy, and I moved to the big window and opened it wide. For a couple of seconds I stood looking down to the street six floors below, while the warm April air billowed the curtains. I heard a tinkling sound from my kitchen, and I turned slowly.

A voice called, "How dry do you like your martinis?"

I moved to the kitchen doorway. Helena Atwood stood at the table before an array of bottles, including what was left of my imported dry vermouth and a full bottle of gin I had been hoarding. She was gently stirring a mixture of ice cubes and an amber fluid in a tall bar glass.

A loose tweed coat was flung over a chair behind her, with a tan pigskin purse on top of the coat. She was wearing a tight white turtleneck sweater and a deep blue gabardine skirt. Her curly copper-colored hair glinted in the yellow rays of sunlight from the kitchen window as she turned to smile at me.

"Hi," she said.

She was certainly a pretty sight to come home to. I sat in a kitchen chair, tilted it back against the wall, and lit a cigarette. "The drier the better," I said. "How in hell did you get in here?"

She poured more gin into the glass, stirred briefly, and poured. She had even found the olives and the cocktail glasses.

She handed me a glass, and said, "I told the superintendent that I was your sister from East Orange. He let me in right away—after I gave him ten bucks."

"You got gyped," I told her. "He usually lets redheads in here for five."

She laughed, sat down on a stool by the sink and crossed her legs. She had nice legs, straight and strong, with slim ankles. Her small high-arched feet were clad in high-heeled blue-and-gold sandals. "How's your drink?" she asked.

I took a sip. "Could stand more gin, but not bad."

"You make the next round," she said. "I waited an hour for you before I decided to have a drink—and then I heard you come in. Isn't this cozy?"

"Very," I said, and I meant it. Suddenly I remembered something. "Were you at home this afternoon—when I was there?"

She drained her glass and looked at me with level eyes. "Yes. I was watching from an upstairs window when you left."

I tilted my chair forward carefully until all four rungs were solidly on the floor, and I said, "Your stepfather told me that you were not at home."

"I know what he told you," she said quietly. "I was listening at the top of the stairs. I—I can't understand it. Bruce told me that he was going to hire you to find the person who killed Rex. That's why I came here. I wanted you to know the truth and—and to talk to you about Bruce." She held out her empty glass.

I got up, dropped ice into the bar glass, and began to measure out gin.

"Bruce lied to you about that shot, too," she said. "He fired the bullet into the wall himself. He used a silencer, I guess you call it. I was supposed to be in my room, but I saw him." She pointed a finger at the wall and pretended to squeeze off a shot. "Just like that."

I lost count of the gin measurement, and I poured vermouth. "Then what?" I said as casually as I could, and I sprinkled in some orange bitters and began to stir.

She looked up at me with puzzled eyes. "Jim—can I call you Jim?"

"Sure," I said. I clamped on the strainer and filled her glass.

"Well, Jim," she said, "after you left I went downstairs. I wanted to ask Bruce

a few questions. But right then Sheriff Jenkins came, with a grim-looking deputy, and they took Bruce away." She took a sip of her drink. "What does it mean, Jim?"

I filled my own glass, and I said, "Drink up, and then we'll take a ride. The least I can do for a client is pay him a visit in his cell."

Her red mouth twisted a little. "To hell with Bruce. I—I hate him." Her eyes held a brooding, far-away look.

"Bruce killed my mother," she said in a low voice. "He was drunk, and she swam out too far from shore with him. She—she drowned. Bruce has tried to make it up to me, but I'll always hate him. I've tried not to show my hate, all these years, since the day I saw the dead face of my mother when they brought her in—white and wet, with her black hair across her face. . . ."

The kitchen was silent for a couple of seconds. Helena Atwood looked up at me with hot eyes. "Do you want to know something else, Jim? I hated Rex Delaney, too. Once I—I loved him. Really, I did." Her red mouth twisted bitterly.

"Isn't that funny? I thought he loved me, too, but it was Marcia all the time. Gorgeous, lovely, cold Marcia. Rex fooled me for a while, but when it came to a show-down between Marcia and me, he—he just laughed, and said he'd never leave Marcia. It seems I was his second-best girl. But the odd part is that Marcia hated Rex, too. I've seen it in her eyes."

Helena laughed suddenly, slid off the stool with a graceful movement and came up close to me. She held her empty glass under my nose and said, "More," like a kid asking for candy.

I poured her glass full. I was learning a lot, and if I had to get Helena Atwood drunk to learn more—well, I still had half a bottle of gin left. I gave her what I hoped was a fatherly, understanding smile, and I said soothingly:

"I know, honey. I didn't have any love for Rex Delaney myself. Once, Marcia and I—"

She placed a finger over my lips. "I know," she said softly. "Marcia has told me about you." She lowered her dark lashes, and one tear slid down her cheek. "Isn't it hell, Jim? You loved Marcia,

and she married Rex. I loved Rex, and he was married to Marcia. Now Rex is dead, and Marcia is free—but where does that leave me?

"That's poetry, Jim. Free and me. Now you can have Marcia, but you won't like her: She's cold, Jim, cold." She took a sip from her glass and swayed a little. I put an arm around her waist to steady her, and she moved up under my chin. "I'm not cold, Jim," she murmured. "Hold me. Hold me tight."

I held her as tightly as I could, while I balanced my drink in my free hand. She was a nice armful, but I happened to glance at the clock on the kitchen wall. Twenty minutes until seven in the evening. I tried to push her gently away from me.

"I've got work to do," I told her.

She snuggled closer. "Hell with work. Hell with everything."

I put down my glass, and grasped her shoulders. She tilted her face up to mine. Her red mouth was parted, and her eyes were veiled. Her hands crept up to the back of my head, and the slow pressure of her fingers brought my lips against hers. I liked it, very much. The clock on the kitchen wall ticked on. . . .

Presently she turned her face with a little gasp, and my lips were on her cheek. The telephone in my living room began to ring. I made an involuntary movement, and she murmured, "Let it ring."

But business was business. I pushed her gently away from me and entered the living room. Before I reached the telephone, I remembered that I had left my apartment door unlocked. I knew I had, because the door was open, and a girl stood staring at me. Her eyes were big, and her face was white.

"Jim, something terrible has happened," Marcia Delaney said.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### "To Hell with Homicide"

"COME on in," I said. "We're having a gay party. Helena is in the kitchen." I nodded at the ringing phone. "Excuse me." As I picked up the phone, Marcia entered the kitchen.

The voice on the wire belonged to Sheriff Ross Jenkins. "Jim, you've lost a client. Bruce Atwood just confessed to the murders of Rex Delaney and Abner Moorehouse. We're taking it to the grand jury."

"That's fine," I said carefully. "Just fine. Now I'm in the clear."

"Ha, ha, Jim," he said. "That's good."

"I suppose he just walked in and gave himself up?"

"Well, not exactly. I had a phone call from Marcia Delaney. She seemed quite upset, and said that something had been worrying her, and that she probably should have told me sooner, but she had been confused from the shock of Rex's death. Well, you know how women are. Anyhow, she told me that Bruce Atwood had been quarreling with Delaney about business policies, and that, also, Atwood's stepdaughter, Helena, had been carrying on with Delaney.

"She said that Atwood had warned Delaney to stay away from Helena, but that Delaney had been out with Helena the night before. Then she said that she remembered that Atwood had left the house shortly before Rex Delaney's body was found. She said she didn't know if it all meant anything, but that she thought maybe I'd want to know about it, and stuff like that." He paused.

"Go on," I said. I had one ear cocked for sounds from the kitchen.

Jenkins chuckled. "Well, it was funny. I took one of the men and went out to Atwood's. I asked him if Helena was home, and he said she wasn't. Then I asked him about her and Rex Delaney, and about the shot that had been fired at him. That did it. He said he had killed Abner Moorehouse and Rex Delaney, but that he wouldn't say any more until he had seen his lawyer. So we took him in."

I felt sweat on my temples. "Thanks, Ross. I'll see you tomorrow." I hung up. I stood quietly for maybe a minute, listening to the voices of Marcia and Helena in the kitchen. Then I took a deep breath and moved to the kitchen doorway.

Helena was stirring another batch of martinis. She didn't look around, but Marcia saw me at once and came quickly over to me. She led me back to the living room, and cast a glance at the kitchen

doorway. She was dressed all in black, and a wide-brimmed black straw hat accentuated the whiteness of her face.

"Jim," she said breathlessly, "I wanted to see you first—before I told Helena. They've arrested Bruce for the murder of Abner and Rex."

"Why?" I said coldly.

A faint puzzled frown marred the smoothness of her forehead. "I don't know why, Jim," she said quietly. "Sheriff Jenkins just called and told me. Jim, what's wrong?"

"Not a thing," I said shortly. "Not a thing. Wait here a minute."

I left her standing there, and I strode into the kitchen. In a low voice I said to Helena Atwood. "I'm going downstairs for a few minutes. Keep Marcia here until I get back."

She gazed at me steadily over her glass. Then she said, "Right-o," and she began to hum a little tune.

Back in the living room, I said to Marcia, "Be back in a minute," and I went out before she could say anything. I didn't bother with the elevator, but ran down the six flights to the lobby. I entered a phone booth, placed a handkerchief over the mouthpiece, and dialed my own number. I got four buzzes before a feminine voice said, "Yes?"

"Is Jim there?" I asked.

"Not at present, but he'll be back shortly. Do you wish to leave a message?"

I recognized Marcia's voice then, and I said, "Who is speaking?"

"Mr. Bennett will be back shortly," she said, and she hung up.

I folded my handkerchief and walked slowly back up the stairs to my apartment. Marcia had rejoined Helena in the kitchen, and she, too, now held a martini.

"Hi, stranger," Helena said, and she nodded at a full glass on the table. "You've fallen behind the pack."

I picked up the glass and look at Marcia. She was watching me with a curious puzzled expression in her eyes. Even in the somber black beneath the bright kitchen lights she was the prettiest woman I had ever known. And she had something more than beauty; an illusive look of quality, of character and breeding.

Grimly I wondered if Rex Delaney's money had given it to her, or if she had



always had it, unnoticed by me in the old days. But she had liked a lot of things I liked—a good book, sun on the beach, wind high in the trees on a fall afternoon, a drink before dinner, Ravel's *Bolero*, and the waltzes of the elder Strauss. Oh, there were a lot of things Marcia and I had enjoyed together.

She said, "Jim, while you were out someone called for you. They wouldn't leave a message."

I said, "Uh-uh," and glanced at Helena Atwood. She was sitting on the high stool, humming lightly to herself, and tapping out a beat on the linoleum with the tips of her shoes. She glanced up at me, and her eyes were friendly.

"Don't look so grim," she said. "I'm hungry. Are we going to drink our dinner—or what?"

I said, "There's eggs and bacon in the icebox. I've got to go over to Woodlake and see Bruce."

Helena raised her glass. Her eyes were bright, and she said gayly, "Here's to Bruce and to Rex. May they both burn in hell."

There was a second's shocked silence, and then Marcia said sharply, "Helena!

You don't know what you are saying."

"Stop acting, Marcia," Helena said. "I'm the actress around here. Remember? Did you catch me in *Harold's Seventh Wife* in summer stock last year? I was wife number two. Harold poisoned me with a milk-and-cyanide highball in the first act." She made a face.

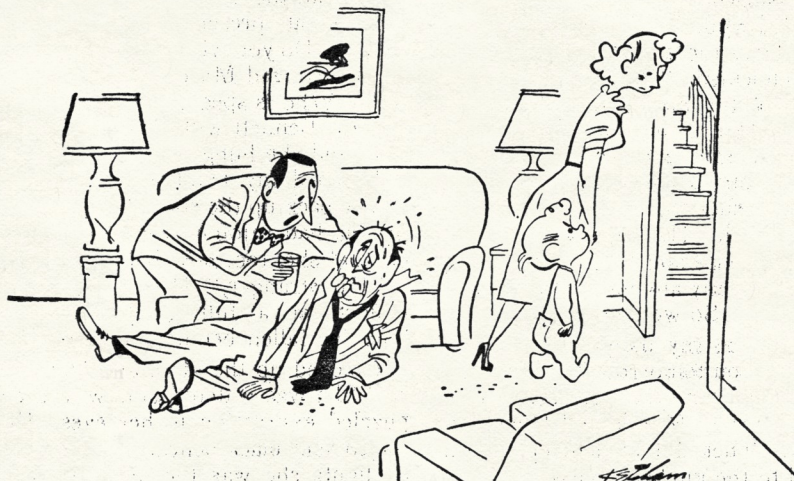
"I never drank so much milk in my life, but I died beautifully. The critics all said so. Don't look so shocked, Marcia. You know damn well you're glad Rex is dead. Wasn't he a stinker? And I'm not grieving about Bruce. You knew Bruce killed my mother, didn't you, darling?"

Marcia shot me a helpless, worried glance, and she moved to the doorway. "Jim," she said in a low voice, "I—I'd better leave."

I shook my head, and placed a hand on her arm. "No, not yet."

She tried to twist away from arm, but I held her firmly. "Jim, please," she panted. "I wouldn't have come, if I'd known Helena was here."

"Stick around, Marcia, darling," Helena said. "Anybody got a match?" She had a cigarette between her lips, and she was watching Marcia and me with a



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twisted smile. As I reached for a match, she looked directly at me, and there were tears in her eyes.

"That's the last thing Abner did for me," she said softly, "when I left him on the porch at Dr. Westover's house. He—he held a match for my cigarette, and then he lit a thick black cigar. He said to me, 'Miss Lena'—that's what he always called me—I'll just rest here and come home with Doc.' Abner was a nice old man. When I saw him again, he—he was. . . ."

HELENA brushed the tears from her eyes. "To hell with Rex, and Bruce. But I feel badly about poor Abner, that gentle old man. To think that while we were all at Marcia's, worrying about Jim's dinky bump on the head, somebody was killing Abner." She looked up at me with bright eyes. "How about that light, Jim?"

I let go of Marcia's arm, and struck a match. Helena inhaled deeply, and I said, "Mrs. Westover saw Abner smoking, after you came back to Marcia's house." I looked at Marcia, and I added, "But I don't see how it happened that he was found dead in the gate house."

Marcia moved backward to the doorway. "I really don't know, Jim," she said coldly. "I'll leave you and Helena to argue about it." She hesitated, and then she said, "Why don't you ask Mrs. Westover? She was the last person to see Abner alive, after Helena left him." She turned to leave.

"Wait," I said sharply. I wanted her to go, and yet I wanted her to stay. It was very strange. She turned a white face toward me, and there was annoyance in her eyes.

I said to Helena Atwood, "Abner Moorehouse didn't light a thick black cigar at Dr. Westover's house, or anyplace else. He didn't smoke—he was a chewer. When I went through his pockets he didn't even have any matches, just chewing tobacco. He never sat on the Westover porch, because he was already dead."

Both Helena and Marcia were watching me silently. Marcia with a cold stillness, and Helena with a look of bright expectancy. I moved slowly to the kitchen door and gently pushed Marcia against the wall. I said to Helena Atwood:

"You called me last night, pretending

to be Marcia, and asked me to come over. This afternoon you called Sheriff Jenkins, still pretending to be Marcia, and tried to pin the killing on your stepfather, Bruce Atwood. You're a good enough actress to imitate Marcia's voice.

"You fooled the sheriff, and you fooled me—until I called here a little while ago and talked to Marcia herself. I could detect the difference, when I was looking for it. You killed Abner Moorehouse, and you killed Rex Delaney. You've already told me why you hated Delaney, but why murder the poor old gatekeeper?"

Helena Atwood smiled pleasantly. "I think we all better have another drink," she said lightly. She stood up and sauntered to the kitchen doorway. "Will you make them, Marcia, darling? I've been bartender all evening."

Marcia stood frozen against the wall. She let Helena stroll past her, into the living room. I followed quickly. Helena stopped in the middle of the room and smiled at me. Her eyes were hot and bright. Marcia moved past me, and stood beside Helena.

She said in a choked voice, "Helena, you didn't?"

Helena patted Marcia's cheek. "There, there, darling," she said soothingly. "I've been waiting for this since last night. I don't mind, really. I came here to tell Jim the whole story, but we were having so much fun—and then you came. Don't look that way, Marcia. Why don't you admit that you're glad Rex is dead? It's just that I had the nerve to do it, and you didn't. You stick to Jim, there. He's a bloodhound, but a handsome, ruthless bloodhound, and worth a million Rex Delaneys, money or no money. I envy you, Marcia."

She sighed, and her eyes were brooding pools of darkness. "Life might have been fun—I don't know. But when mother drowned, I guess part of me drowned with her. Bruce tried to make it up to me, even to confessing to murder to protect me, because he had promised mother. He must have loved her very much—I'll say that for Bruce. But I couldn't stop hating him. He's a weak, gallant fool.

"You see, he came into the gate house, right after I'd killed Abner. He knew all about me, and I told him then that I was

going to kill Rex, too. I knew he wouldn't betray me—not Bruce. He went back into the house with me, and he pretended that Abner was still waiting over at Dr. Westover's. "I hated him, and I got him arrested for Rex's murder by calling Sheriff Jenkins and telling him that I was Marcia. Jim, too, thought it was Marcia when I called him last night, and he rushed right out at the bidding of his old flame, as I wanted him to.

"Then I cut the telephone wires and waited in the gate house for Jim. You see, yesterday afternoon, after I had talked to Rex at our special apartment in town, I knew I was going to kill him at the first opportunity. And when Bruce told me that he was meeting Rex at Marcia's house last night, I knew that my chance had come, Bennett. If I could get Jim there, a jealous former lover of Marcia's, it would throw suspicion on him for Rex's death." She paused, and said, "Am I boring you people?"

I didn't say anything, but Marcia whispered, "You're mad, Helena. You didn't—"

Helena laughed. "Maybe a little, darling. But, oh, I had it planned so beautifully. Poor old Abner upset my scheme. He came into the gate house right after I'd hit Jim with the hammer. I told him—forgive me, Jim—that you had, shall we say forced your attentions upon me, and that I was forced to defend myself. Abner is—pardon me, *was*—old fashioned and unsophisticated, and he believed me—I thought.

"I asked him not to say anything to the people at the house. He promised, but he insisted upon accompanying me to Dr. Westover's.

"Later, on the way, he said, 'I can't understand it, Miss Lena. Mr. Bennett was always a gentleman before. I think maybe I'd better tell Mrs. Delaney about it.'

"I knew then that I'd have to kill him, and I made my plan when Mrs. Westover told me that her husband—the doctor—was out."

She paused, and she seemed to be looking with shining eyes at something over and beyond Marcia and me. "I'm free of Rex now," she said in a hushed voice, "and mother is waiting for me. It was



easy with Abner, the poor old man. I stopped at the gate house and asked him to go in and get a purse I had left there. I had the purse beside me, of course. I followed Abner right in, and I knew exactly where I had left the hammer. I hit Abner with it, and he went down. It was easy, really.

"Then I took the knife from my purse, where I had placed it in the afternoon when I decided to kill Rex, and—well, it wasn't so bad. You see, I couldn't see Abner's face in the darkness. Bruce came in then, and I'll never forget the look on his face when he saw me kneeling over Abner.

"But Bruce was game, and he tried to protect me. Then I went back to Dr. Westover's and asked Mrs. Westover if Abner could wait there for the doctor. I waited a while, until I saw a light in Mrs.

(Please continue on page 96)

# WIDOW IN WAITING



"The next thing . . . I was sitting up, staring at him."

By **HAROLD Q.  
MASUR**

**T**HE lady's husband, it seems, was indulging in a little extra-curricular activity, though why a man should stray from the fireside with such nice homework around was more than I could figure.

The homework sat in the red leather client's chair across my desk, taking me in with turquoise eyes that moved languorously under canopied lashes. Red hair framed a regal face with a faintly amused mouth. She was wearing one of those knitted outfits that clung to her figure like a coat of paint. It was a figure that could raise a man's temperature to fever pitch.

She was Mrs. Ivy Strickland, out of Park Avenue by way of Hackensack, calm, assured, and a little careless about dumping her ashes in the tray.

"I know Claude is seeing another woman," she said in a deep contralto. "I've been aware of it for some time."

"How?" I asked politely.

"Oh—" she waved airily—"a woman can tell."

I looked at the man beside her. "You know how I feel about divorce cases, Owen."

"Sure," he said. "But everybody makes exceptions."

*Shamus Scott Jordan couldn't get the sultry redhead a divorce—  
but he offered to help . . . with her husband's burial.*

"This is a bad time for it. They're cracking down on lawyers and crooked detectives."

He smiled. "Exactly. That's why we want a lawyer with an unimpeachable reputation. Everyone knows that Scott Jordan wouldn't touch a case tainted with suspicion."

It was oil out of the can and he knew it. He knew, too, that it would be hard for me to refuse. Owen Lang was an accountant, a tax expert. We'd worked together on some rebate cases and he'd brought some good clients into the office. You have to take the bad with the good. He probably thought he was doing me a favor by bringing Mrs. Strickland in.

"Another thing," he said. "Money is a minor consideration. Mrs. Strickland won't quibble about a fee. Charge whatever you think it's worth."

The money helped clinch it. Some rapid rationalization helped, too. Getting a woman her freedom from a No-Good husband is really an act of benevolence, I thought.

"Okay," I said. "Let's have the facts."

His smile widened. Owen was a handsome party in a rugged, loose-jointed way. "It's the usual triangle, Scott. Claude Strickland and his secretary."

"How do you know?"

"Mrs. Strickland's been following them. They meet once a week in the Hotel Boncourt, Wednesday nights usually."

"This is Wednesday," I said.

He nodded. "Exactly."

"You mean, tonight?"

"Why not?" Mrs. Strickland asked.

"The sooner, the better."

"Are you certain he'll be there?"

"Yes. He phoned he'd be home late. *Business.*" The last word was accompanied by a contemptuous snort.

"Good enough," I said. "There'll be a raid."

"You know what he looks like?" Owen asked.

"Who doesn't?" I said.

Claude Strickland had been a big name back in the heyday of silent flickers. He'd even starred in a few talkies after the movies found its tongue. But it hadn't panned out. His voice spoiled it. He came through the amplifiers sounding like an Italian coloratura.

So he'd severed his relations with the production end of the business and entered the exhibiting end, buying a chain of houses with a man named Balado. Strickland & Balado. Two first-run palaces and a dozen neighborhood grinds.

"Will you want a retainer?" Mrs. Strickland asked.

"Yes," I said, testing her. "Five hundred dollars."

She scribbled the check without debate. "May I volunteer some information? Claude usually reserves the same room every week. Number 725."

"And he usually gets there about ten," Owen said.

All this was nice to know because it simplified the job. I accepted the check and I divided a smile between them and we all stood up and I convoyed them to the door and through the ante-room.

IT SEEMED like the architects had searched for a musty smell and then built the Boncourt around it. Or maybe the structure was just old. From its revolving door to its Philippine mahogany desk a silk-thin rug rambled across an acre of chandelier-illuminated lobby. Potted palms drooped here and there. Ancient inhabitants drowsed in faded chairs. It was all as calm and as peaceful as a game of whist with your maiden aunt.

Shortly after ten o'clock I stepped into the elevator. It was one of those open front, iron-grill cages. Max Turner was at my heels. Max was a private detective who had helped me on a number of jobs. He had an anonymous face and a card-index memory. He was one of the best leg-men in the business. A young assistant of his was trailing along as a witness.

The hallway was wide enough for a brace of elephants and Number 725 was at the end of the corridor.

I didn't bother with a skeleton key. There is a certain type of lock that generally yields to a simple trick. You turn the knob, put your shoulder tight against the door, and heave sharply. If you have the weight, if you have the knick, it springs the latch and sends the door flying.

I didn't like what I was doing. Neither does the dare-devil who hangs by his toes from an airplane at four thousand feet. But that was his job and this was mine.

I followed the formula. The trick worked fine and the door flew open. Momentum carried me halfway into the room. Sudden shock stopped me short.

The charge didn't surprise Claude Strickland. Nothing would surprise him any more. He was through with all of that.

He lay crossways on the floor, wearing glen-plaid pants and a chestful of black hair that looked like a sleeveless sweater bought in a bargain basement. One side of his classic profile was intact. The other side was something else. It was the face of a blind steer who'd charged into a brick silo.

I jumped back and blocked the door. I straight-armed Max Turner into the corridor. "Go home," I said, in an off-key voice.

"What?" He looked at me dumbly.

"It's all off," I said. "A bust. Go home."

Perplexity wrinkled his forehead. "What's the matter with you counselor?"

"Max," I said, swallowing hard, "it's better this way, believe me. Don't argue. Bail out. You didn't see anything. You didn't hear anything. You don't know anything. Get lost, Max, please."

I closed the door in his face. Why drag Max into it? He was an innocent bystander. No need for him to spend the night down at Headquarters trying to explain something he knew nothing about.

I turned and had another look at Claude Strickland.

The gun was in his right hand. It had been fired into the side of his head. Powder gas had chased the bullet into the wound, expanding and tearing out a ragged hole. Blood stained the whole side of his face.

I looked at the gun, but I didn't touch it. A .32 caliber Colt Banker's Special, short, snout-nosed, lethal. An elephant gun might have done worse damage but it couldn't have made him any deader.

It was supposed to look like suicide.

Only somebody had bungled.

It wasn't suicide. Not with the gun in his right hand and the bullet hole in his left temple. Mrs. Strickland wouldn't need any divorce now. A good thing I had cashed her check that afternoon.

I made a quick survey. The room held

three doors. Two closets and one door leading into the bathroom. It was one of those adjoining bathrooms, shared by the room on the other side, privacy being insured by a door kept locked with a hook and eyelet device.

I went back and reached a reluctant hand for the telephone. . . .

You can skip the next two hours, what with the lab boys, the medical examiner, and the D.A.'s assistant. Then I was alone with Detective-Lieutenant Nola.

Nola was a slender man, dark-skinned and dapper, with quiet brooding eyes, a quick mind, and the tough core of a beetle nut. He sat on the edge of the bed and said, "Okay, Jordan. I'm listening."

"You heard me tell it to the D.A."

"You didn't tell all of it, boy. You were holding back. Pull the plug and let it spill."

Lying to Nola would get me about as far as a wide-eyed anarchist at a banker's convention, so I opened the bag and dumped it into his lap.

He made a distasteful mouth. "A divorce raid. You! I'm surprised, Jordan." He folded a hand over his chin. "Any ideas?"

"Yes. This job was pulled by an amateur, some Nervous Nellie in a hurry to kill and clear out. Bad planning, bad execution. Witness the gun on one side and the bullet hole in the other."

"No trace of the girl when you got here?"

"None. What does the desk clerk say?"

"Strickland was alone when he checked in."

"Maybe the girl was supposed to meet him here."

"Maybe. You know her name?"

I shook my head. "The widow probably does."

"The widow is at an opera party. We can't locate her." He regarded me steadily. "What do you know about her?"

"Dynamite, Lieutenant. Thirty years younger than the deceased and really constructed."

"An old man and a young wife. That means she married him for his dough." His bottom lip bulged thoughtfully behind his tongue. "It shapes up peculiar. Why would she divorce him just because of this?" His gesture embraced the room.

"There's her pride," I said. "There's alimony. Or a cash settlement. And could be there's another boy friend."

"Okay. Okay." He turned wearily and headed for the door.

I followed him to the elevator. He was silent all the way down. When we reached the street he paused to deliver a brief but trenchant lecture on steering clear of police business, emphasizing each point with a rigid finger jabbing my breastbone.

Then he ducked into a squad car parked at the curb. The driver kicked it over and took it past a red light as if he was color blind, splitting traffic in half.

STEER clear, Nola had said. But he wasn't fooling me. I wasn't out of the woods yet—not by a long shot.

I patronized the nearest telephone booth and dialed Owen Lang. He was home. "Well, Scott, how did it go?"

I ignored the question. "Owen, I need some information."

"Shoot."

"Who's the auditor for Strickland & Balado?"

"Me."

"Is the firm solvent?"

He hesitated. "Well, Scott, it's no secret. They're on the rocks."

"Will they sink?"

"Looks that way. Unless one of them suffers a heart attack. There's partnership insurance—one hundred thousand dollars worth. Plus double indemnity except in the case of suicide."

"I see. Give me a line on Strickland's secretary."

He laughed briefly. "That, Jordan! Nice, isn't she? Name's Violet O'Hara. Lives at the Milton. But you won't get to first base, boy. I know. I tried. . . . Say, what is this? Why all the questions?"

I had pumped him dry, so I mumbled an excuse and broke the connection and vacated the booth. . . .

Louis Balado had an apartment on Central Park South. He was a man who had a finger in many pies. We knew each other casually from some corporate re-organization meetings. Recognition and surprise mingled on his face when he opened the door.

"Good evening," I said. "Business. May I come in?"

He piloted me into a wide living room and planted his feet apart on a camel's hair rug and lifted bushy eyebrows over questioning eyes. A thick man built low to the ground, with tiered chins and a forehead that reached all the way back to a horseshoe fringe of sparse hair, with a face dyed ox-blood by unrestricted scotches.

I said, "So you're in business by yourself now."

"I beg your pardon."

"The partnership, Strickland & Balado—it's finished."

A double wrinkle of puzzlement dented the bridge of his nose. "What are you talking about?"

"A corpse," I said. "A corpse with a bullet-hole in his head. I'm talking about murder. The murder of Claude Strickland."

His mouth fell open and he groped at a chair for support. A gasp caught at his throat. This, I thought, is acting in the grand tradition. Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. He worked his voice into a squeak.

"Strickland dead! How? When? Where?"

I answered categorically. "Shot. Tonight. In a hotel room."

Louis Balado sank back against a nest of pillows on the sofa. He swallowed enormously. "Who—who did it?"

"That's what I aim to find out." I towered over him. "I'm looking for motive. I think I found motive. You were his partner in an almost bankrupt business. There was insurance—a hundred thousand dollars worth. How's that for a nice fat slice of motive?"

His fingers flattened across his chest. He smiled at me like a man with the mumps. "Me? You think I killed Strickland?"

"Why not?"

He shook his head. "But there was another policy, the same amount, for his wife."

"So what? You still had a business to protect. And you probably knew where he could be found tonight."

"You're wrong, Jordan." His tongue rubbed over parched lips. "A hundred

thousand dollars wouldn't be enough. It would just about buy out the wife's interest."

"Two hundred thousand," I corrected. "Double indemnity for death by violence."

His hands shooed at invisible insects. "Only in the case of murder. Not if it was suicide. Strickland did it him—" Balado broke off, snapping his jaw shut. He looked as if he'd swallowed a baseball. He shriveled back against the sofa, frightened.

I reached down and collected a handful of velvet smoking jacket and pulled him close.

"How did you know about suicide?"

He made incoherent noises and his eyeballs floated in quick moisture. I shook him.

"Nobody said anything about suicide, Mr. Balado. Yet you know. You know because you were there."

His lips moved soundlessly.

"Talk," I growled. "How did you know?"

His mouth opened and then, suddenly, the telephone was ringing. I listened to it for a moment. I released him. "Go ahead and answer the thing."

The telephone was in the bedroom. He stumbled through a door on the right. The ringing died when he lifted the receiver. "Hello," I heard him say. "Hello, this is Balado speaking."

And that was all he said. Whoever was on the other end of the line did most of the talking, did it all, in fact. Not another syllable came out of Balado. More than a full minute passed before I got it. Then I catapulted toward the bedroom. But it was too late. He was gone. The handset dangled off the night table at the end of its cord. I yanked at doors until I found one that led through a hallway out of the apartment. The hallway was deserted.

The bonehead! How far did he think he could get?

It must have been panic that sent him flying. Or maybe he needed a little time to think.

I took the elevator down, but the doorman hadn't seen him. I sighed and flagged a cruising cab and told the driver to take me to the Milton.

VIOLET O'HARA answered my knock. She was something to see, a slender girl, with dark hair and pale face, and enormous eyes that were trying hard to look casual. They weren't succeeding. They were moist and apprehensive.

I rode her backwards into the room and closed the door, not giving her time to think. "All right, Miss O'Hara, what happened tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"At the Boncourt."

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand."

I shook my head. "That won't wash, miss. It's too late to play innocent. We know all about it, about Strickland and the divorce, about you, too. Everybody's clearing their skirts and talking. Don't get left behind."

Her lips trembled. A pair of tears glistened in her eyes. The hard core that had formed inside me began to melt.

"Did you kill him?" I asked gently.

"No. . . Oh, no, no."

"But you were with him tonight."

She took a deep breath that shivered on the way down. Her eyes searched mine and seemed to find confidence. "Yes," she nodded. "I was with him."

"Were you in love with Strickland?"

"Oh, no. It wasn't like that at all."

"Suppose you tell me how it was."

She selected her words carefully. "Mr. Strickland asked me to do him a favor. He said he was going to get a divorce and he needed help."

"You knew they were staging a raid?"

"I—I guess so."

"You weren't afraid of besmirching your reputation?"

Her eyes were wide and innocent. "He said my name would never come into it."

"Why you?"

"He didn't know anyone else."

"So you went."

"Yes. I liked Mr. Strickland. He'd been very kind to me. He loaned me money once when my mother needed medical treatment. He was unhappy and I wanted to help him. His wife was running around with another man. They had decided on a divorce and this was the least I could do."

"Go on from there. What happened?"

The recollection was painful. "I went to the Boncourt. I got there at seven o'clock. Mr. Strickland was waiting for



me. He'd been drinking from a pocket flask he always carries and he was a little drunk. He offered me some. I don't like liquor. But he was very insistent. So I had a drop." She covered her eyes with her hands.

"Things grew hazy. Something happened to me. I think I fell asleep. The next thing I remember I was sitting up, staring at him." Her voice went down to a flat, awed whisper. "He was dead. He'd been shot and the gun was in my lap. I didn't know how it got there. I was very frightened. I—I was afraid they'd blame me."

I said quietly, "So you put the gun in his hand to make it look like he had committed suicide."

She nodded, wordless.

"Now, tell me," I started, but the doorbell rang, cutting me off.

Violet O'Hara went rigid. She clutched at my sleeve, sudden fear warping her mouth. Her eyes appealed to me beseechingly.

I loosened her fingers gently. "Go see who it is."

She went to the door and opened it and two men stepped inside.

"Headquarters, miss," one of them said. "You're wanted downtown."

She turned slowly, perplexity joining the fear on her face. Her finger aimed at me. "But this man says he's a policeman, too."

The plainclothes man put a pair of hard eyes straight at me.

"She's mistaken," I said. "She drew the conclusion herself."

"You'd better come along with us too..."

Everybody was deployed around Lieutenant Nola's office. Ivy Strickland sat tear-stained on a straight-backed chair. Owen Lang was folded-armed soberness behind her. A thick-necked cop held Louis Balado vertical in front of the desk. Violet O'Hara stood there, looking pale and resigned.

"Jordan," Nola said coldly, "didn't I tell you to stay out of it?"

"How could I, Lieutenant? I was in it up to my neck. Where did you find Balado?"

"In his apartment. Why?"

"He must have sneaked back. He ran away from me."

Nola was a man driven to exasperation, but containing himself with difficulty. "So you were there, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"And maybe you solved the case," he said sarcastically.

"Yes, sir."

His jaw dropped and then his eyes narrowed skeptically. "Well, who is the killer, then?"

"A question first," I said, and looked at Balado. "How did you know about suicide?"

HE LAID his ears back like a mule and his eyes went stubborn. He wasn't talking. Nothing could make him talk.

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It was Violet O'Hara who spoke. "I told him," she said. "I phoned him when I left the Boncourt. I had to tell someone and I thought Mr. Balado ought to know." The picture focused for me when I saw how he looked at her, like she was Joan of Arc. Louis Balado, short, fat, and balding, was carrying the torch for Violet, and nobody on heaven's green footstool could make him say anything that hurt her.

"That clears the decks," I said. "Now we're stripped for action." I faced Nola. "Has Strickland been posted yet?"

"Tomorrow morning. But I don't need the Medical Examiner to tell me what killed him."

"Sure," I said. "He was killed by a bullet through the head. But if they're not careless, if they do thorough autopsy, they'll find he had a stomach full of chloral hydrate, commonly known as knockout drops. Mr. Strickland drank a Mickey Finn out of his own flask."

"How do you know?"

"Deduction. Violet O'Hara drank from the same flask and fell asleep. Precisely as contrived—which gave the killer a chance to enter the room, shut off Strickland's meter with bullet, impress Violet's fingerprints on the gun, and then fade. It almost worked, too. Except for one uncalculated hitch.

"Violet hates liquor. So she took only a small sip from the flask and woke up too soon. She recognized the picture and tried to rearrange it. But she was walking on eggs, panicky, and she planted the gun in the wrong hand."

Nola's palms pressed flat to the desk. "Whittle it down. Who?"

"Owen Lang," I said.

Ivy Strickland gasped. Her fingers were a bowknot of distress at her throat, and she stared at the accountant, appalled.

Lang stood rigid, trying to smile, if you can call the horrible distortion of his lips a smile.

"Untangle it, Jordan," Nola said.

"It figures. Balado wouldn't do it. He's crazy about Violet. He'd never frame her. Mrs. Strickland didn't do it. She was at an opera party. I didn't do it. So who's left. Only Lang."

"The motive?" Nola asked tightly.

I crossed two fingers. "Lang and Mrs.

Strickland. Like that. She had a boy friend. He's it. She was getting her divorce to marry him. But it's just as easy to marry a woman with money than one who's broke. She wouldn't get any settlement from her husband. He was strapped. But she did stand to collect plenty if he died. And twice as much if he died the hard way. Only it would have to be done soon because after the divorce he would probably change his beneficiary."

Owen Lang laughed once, hoarsely. "The man's crazy."

"Am I? Who suggested that I reach the Boncourt at ten? You did, friend. But Violet got there at seven. You needed that interval to complete your operations. You knew exactly when she'd be there because you mounted and staged the whole production. And I was sucked into the deal, thinking it was on the level."

"Words," he croaked. "Only words. You have no proof."

He was clutching at straws. He was fighting a losing battle. He knew it and I knew it.

"We can get what proof we need," I said. "We'll check the person who registered for the adjoining room at the Boncourt. I'll bet the handwriting is yours, even if the name isn't. You were in that room, waiting for the moment. You stuck a card between the door and the jamb and lifted the hook out of its eyelet. That's why you selected the Boncourt. You knew the setup and how easy it would be. Then you went in and did what you had to do.

"And there's the flask, too. It's missing. You didn't want the police to find it. You took it away and I'll bet its still hidden somewhere in your apartment. If that doesn't wrap it up, Nola can locate your source of chloral hydrate. You're sewed up tight, friend. You're hooked and you'll never wriggle off."

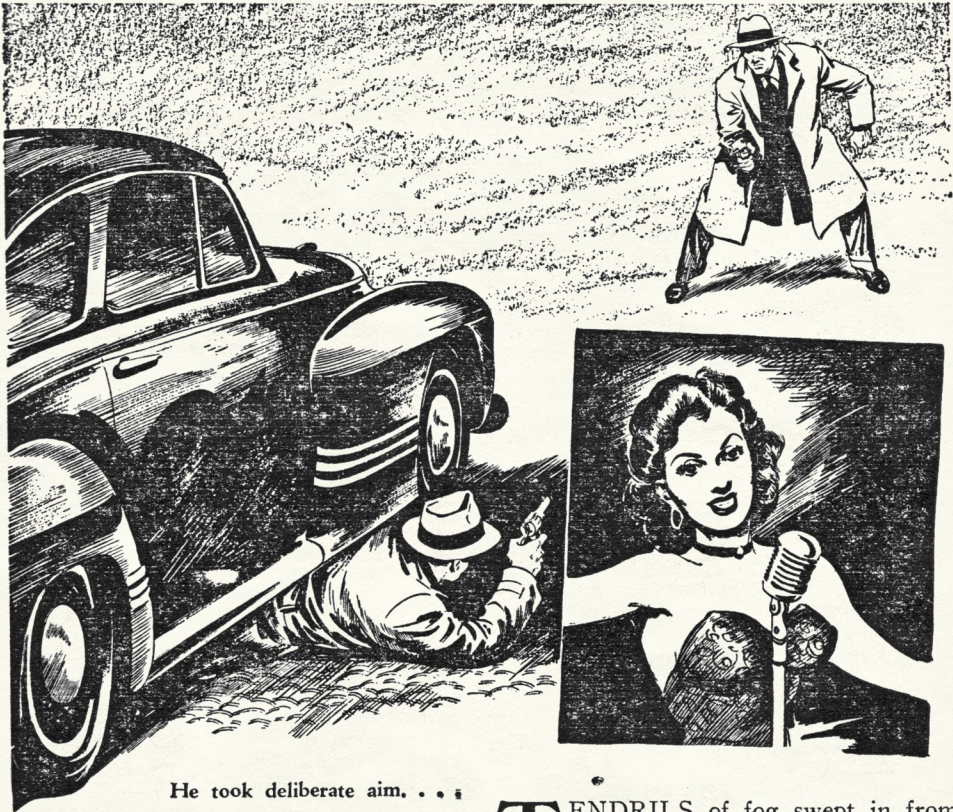
I guess he believed me. His head bowed down and he put his face in his fingers and began to tremble.

I turned around and went over to Balado, whose arm was over Violet O'Hara's shoulder. "It's all right," I said. "I'll take her home. She's got a lot to forget."

I figured I could help more than he could.

# REACH FOR YOUR COFFIN

*Out of the fog stole Johnny  
toward the black-hearted singer  
who'd signed his buddy's death warrant—  
and the dope-runner . . . who'd executed it.*



He took deliberate aim. . . .

●  
●  
**By RICHARD E.  
GLENDINNING**

**T**ENDRILS of fog swept in from the dark bay and swirled in the sickly yellow gleam of the widely spaced gas lights along Water Street. A cold drizzle came in with the fog and settled in big puddles on the cobblestones of the deserted street. Somewhere far off, a drunken sailor sang a maudlin ballad, and then his song was swallowed up by the mournful bleating of a foghorn out on the bay.

Johnny Sylvester stood a moment

longer in the pitch-black alley, cupping a cigarette against the rain. He was a big man with broad shoulders and tremendous hands, but size was no protection against a raw and lonely night. It seemed to him that he had been standing in this alley, his back pressed against the wall, forever, waiting . . . always waiting for something to happen.

"The hell with it," he muttered. He flipped away his cigarette, pulled the collar of his black raincoat high about his neck and moved out of the alley. He crossed Water Street diagonally, skirting the dirty puddles, and made for pier six which jutted into the bay like a ghostly finger.

The pier was a fire hazard. Its timbers were rotting and its gloomy warehouse was sway-backed. But the city refused to condemn it on the grounds that it would cost too much to replace it. All right, Johnny thought, but just one carelessly dropped match—just one—and pier six would go up in flames, taking all the nearby piers with it.

The city administration thought it could forestall disaster by keeping a watchman on duty night and day on the old pier. But what would Sid Rawler, who spent most of his time in his shanty, be able to do if a fire *did* break out?

Johnny grinned at the thought of old Sid. One good thing about the watchman—he made fine coffee.

Keeping to the deep shadows of the warehouse, Johnny approached the rear of the shanty and peered in the window. Sid was leaning back in a straight chair, his feet on the rough table. He was reading a magazine, lips moving slowly, and a mug of steaming coffee was within easy reach of his right hand.

Johnny moved around the shanty to the door. He kicked the door open and stepped in quickly. "Stick 'em up!" he snapped.

Sid jumped out of the chair, knocking over the mug, and fumbled at the waistband of his khaki trousers, where he kept his Colt.

"Hold it, Sid," Johnny laughed. He sat down on the table and shook his head. "You'll have to do better than that."

The old watchman grinned sheepishly. "I guess I had my mind on the detective

story I was reading, Johnny. You sure had me going."

"How's the coffee?"

"Strong and black." Sid took a clean mug from the shelf over the single-burner stove and poured coffee for Johnny. "What brings you down here?"

"Smuggling."

"I thought you was on the narcotics detail."

"I am. The junk's coming in from Cuba. Maybe it isn't coming in through this port but—" Johnny's big jaw stiffened—"Red Carter's back in town."

"Carter? I thought you ran him out about two years ago."

"Right after Bill Kendall got shot," Johnny said. Johnny and Bill had been buddies since high school. They had joined the force at the same time, had shared the same laughs and had even dated the same girls—until Bill met Ginger Vaughan, a singer at the Golden Apple. Johnny wouldn't have touched her with a ten-foot pole, but Bill had fallen in love with her.

Bill and Ginger had set the date, Johnny to be best man, but the wedding had never come off. Bill had been shot down two days before the marriage was to have taken place.

"You figger Carter shot Bill?" Sid asked, tugging his scraggly beard.

"I could never prove it," Johnny said. "Ginger used to be Red's girl. Red doesn't like people who take things away from him. He knew I'd make it rough for him if he stayed in town—so he got. Dope was one of his rackets and now he's back in town. Put two and two together."

"I make it four," Sid muttered. "Well, it's a helluva night for a man to be standing around. Here." He reached under the blanket on his cot and came up with a bottle of good burbon. "Spike your coffee."

"No thanks, Sid. I just came in to get warm."

"Suit yourself." The watchman laced his own coffee with a generous slug. "If there's anything I can do to help. Of course, an old man doesn't get out and around where he can hear things . . . but—"

"You can help, all right, Sid," Johnny said, standing up. "If dope is coming

in through here, you might hear about it. And if you ever see anything or hear anything suspicious on the bay, call me right away. Okay?"

"Count on me, Johnny."

"I will." Johnny smiled at the old man. "And keep that gun where you can get at it in a hurry." Johnny stepped out into the night and turned toward Water Street.

The chances were about one in a million of anything's happening while he stood around waiting for it, but he was willing to take that chance. If he had to patrol this lonely beat for the next hundred years, it would be worth it, provided that he found evidence to convict Red Carter at the end of that time.

**H**E REACHED the street and stepped down from the curb just as a black sedan sped around the corner, skidding and lurching on the wet pavement, and shot past him, a wave of water rising from its wheels.

"Hey!" Johnny shouted, momentarily blinded by the shower of water. His raincoat had protected his clothes somewhat, but the cuffs of his gray suit were spotted with dirty water.

The sedan slammed to a stop, backed up. A tall, baby-faced man got out of the passenger's side of the front seat. He stood in front of Johnny and glowered at him. "You want something?" he asked, rubbing the knuckles of his gloved right hand.

"An apology would help."

The tall man, a stranger to Johnny, turned toward the car. "Did you hear that? He wants an apology. Think I should give it to him?"

"Sure, a nice sweet one," the driver said, leaning across the seat. His heavy face was an evil yellow in the light of the gas lamps.

Johnny tried to see into the rear of the car, but its occupants sat in shadow. "You're real tough, aren't you?" Johnny said, edging toward the car.

"Is that any kind of a way to talk to a man who's going to apologize?" Baby-face simpered. He snatched Johnny's shoulder and jerked him around. "Here it comes—"

"You asked for it," Johnny said. He stepped in and drove a short left into Baby-face. When the tall man double-

over, he brought a right-hand punch up from the cobblestones that slammed Baby-face down into the puddled gutter. Johnny went to the car and yanked open the rear door. "Get out of—"

"Hi, Johnny! What do you know?" The overhead light was snapped on and Red Carter leaned forward to pat Johnny's shoulder. "You haven't forgotten how to use that right, have you?"

For a moment, Johnny was too surprised to speak. Finally, he said, "I've heard you were back. I thought I warned you to keep clear of Harbor City."

"Did you, Johnny?" Red said blandly. "It must have slipped my mind." He settled back in his seat and, for the first time, Johnny got a look at the other passenger. Smiling, Red said, "You remember Ginger Vaughan, of course."

Johnny nodded curtly. Ginger was a strikingly beautiful woman. Her hair was like black velvet, each hair in place, and her black eyebrows formed perfect arches over her coal-black eyes. Her dress and cape were black too. Only her dead-white skin and bright red lips provided any contrast of color.

"I remember her, all right," Johnny said. "I doubt if she remembers me, though. She seems to have forgotten other things pretty quickly."

"The same old Johnny," Ginger said, her scarlet mouth twisting into a bitter smile. "As sentimental as ever."

"That depends," Johnny replied. "I remember Bill, if that's what you mean. I'd like to forget you."

"You've got my permission," she said. "What's stopping you?"

"The company you keep."

"Don't be so infantile." She turned to Red Carter and put her long cool fingers on his hairy wrist. "Can't we go, Red? Johnny always did bore me."

"Sure, honey," Red said affably. "Too bad you can't come with us, Johnny, but you haven't got class enough for the Golden Apple. I guess you know Ginger's back there singing again."

"That's what I heard. People in the next county are complaining about the stink."

Ginger's mouth compressed to a thin line and her eyes snapped angrily. "You're no good, Johnny. You never were—and

Bill was the spitting image of you. He was a bum, strictly a bum."

"I admit he hung around with a lot of tramps," Johnny said. He stepped back from the car and watched it drive off.

He had never hit a woman in his life; until this moment, he had never felt the urge. But now his fingers itched to punish Ginger Vaughan, to leave that pale white skin a patchwork of mottled black and blue marks.

In the days when Bill Kendall was alive, Ginger had seemed to reform. She had broken away from her cabaret friends and had even given up her singing. But now, it was a different story.

Bill Kendall, dead, was no good to her, but Red Carter could give her all the things she wanted. It was then that Johnny wondered why Ginger had ever played around with Bill—an honest cop, scraping by on an honest cop's income—in the first place.

As he crossed Water Street to the alley where he had parked his coupe, Johnny thought he had the answer. Two years ago, just before Bill had been ambushed and killed, he and Johnny had been trying to find the evidence which would definitely prove Red Carter to be the key man in the local dope ring. It was about then that Ginger had thrown Red over for Bill. The way Johnny looked at it now, Ginger had simply been playing Bill for a sucker, pumping him for information to pass along to Red Carter.

Perhaps Bill had uncovered the evidence and, trusting in his bride-to-be, had told Ginger what he knew. He had died because he had trusted a woman who was strictly no good.

"The rotten little tramp!" Johnny muttered, getting into his car. "She put the finger on him." Someday, he would square that account for Bill. He wished he could do it now but that was impossible. His first job was to break up this newest dope ring, provided of course, that the shipments were coming in through Harbor City. Red Carter's being back in town was reason enough to believe that Harbor City was the funnel's mouth.

Johnny swung out of the alley and drove through the waterfront district toward noisy midtown where the Golden Apple was located.

THAT glittery nightclub—a smoky box of dim lights, high prices, watered drinks and raucous music—had been a basement speakeasy in the old days. It had been a favorite hangout for Harbor City's hoodlums. Though the décor had changed since then, the Golden Apple's best customers were still the town's mobsters.

Johnny stepped into the lush foyer and gave his dripping hat and raincoat to Betty, the hatcheck girl. As he walked toward the bar, Mike Ganzio, the burly bouncer, came to meet him.

"Hi, Johnny," he said, a toothy smile failing to conceal a case of jitters. "Business or pleasure?"

Johnny stared at him for a moment, enjoying Mike's nervousness. "Pleasure. I just dropped in to catch Ginger Vaughan's act." His eyes slid over Mike's shoulder and searched the crowded room for Red Carter.

"Now, look, Johnny, don't start nothing," Mike begged. "Ginger's doing all right. She—"

"Sure. Ginger's the kind who will always do all right." He saw Carter at a table near the orchestra. Baby-face and the driver of Red's car were sitting with him but Ginger wasn't there. "Where is she?"

"In her dressing room. She comes on in a couple of minutes." Mike gripped Johnny's arm and led him toward the bar. "How about a drink on the house?"

"I never took a drink on Red before," Johnny said. "I'm not starting now."

"Who said anything about Red?"

Johnny grinned stiffly. "Red had a piece of the Golden Apple before he left town. He never got rid of it. Why should he? He needs a legitimate front."

Mike let go of Johnny's arm. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Some things ain't smart to say, Johnny. You're right about Red's owning a chunk, but the rest of it—that ain't smart of you, Johnny. You should know better than that."

"My mother claimed I was the dumbest of all her kids. . . . Okay, beat it, Mike. I can find the bar by myself."

Nodding, Mike walked away. Johnny watched him as he threaded his way between the close-packed tables. At Carter's table, Mike stopped and leaned down to

mutter in Red's ear. Johnny's mouth tightened.

He sat up at the bar and ordered a drink. Just as it came, the house lights dimmed and Ginger Vaughan, dressed in filmy black, stepped out in front of the orchestra to sing. She was good, Johnny admitted grudgingly. She had to be good to silence the noisy room as she did. The number was a torchy lovesong, filled with the bitterness of unrequited love, and she sang it as if she really meant it.

But Johnny saw the ghost of Bill Kendall at her shoulder and he cursed her under his breath. She looked like an angel, under the spotlight. She *was* an angel, a black angel, the devil's helper, and Johnny hated her with all his heart. The hatred swelled within him until he could stand it no longer.

His right arm swept out and knocked his drink from the bar. The glass crashed noisily on the duckboards behind the bar and the attention of the customers swung from Ginger to him. The illusion she was spinning with her haunting, poignant song was suddenly gone and the room became noisy again. Ginger stumbled through the remainder of the song. When she finished, there was only a smattering of polite applause.

She stood rigid for a moment, staring toward the bar. Then she turned angrily on her high heels and went through the door to her dressing room. Johnny laughed harshly and called for another drink.

He had taken no more than a sip of it when Mike Ganzio tapped him on the shoulder. "Ginger wants to see you. She's mad enough to—"

"How sad," Johnny murmured. He drained his drink deliberately, stood up and walked unhurriedly through the Golden Apple to the dressing rooms. He knocked on Ginger's door.

She jerked it open. "You!" she said sharply. "Come in here. I want to talk to you. You ruined my number."

Johnny went in and closed the door behind him. He straddled the chair in front of her dressing table. "It was a pleasure," he said.

"Why don't you leave me alone?"

"You invited me back here, remember? Believe me, honey, I'd never come of my own accord."

"You hate me. You've always hated me."

"Not always," Johnny said. There had been a time when he had almost loved her. "Once, I thought— Oh, the hell with what I thought." When she had given up her old friends and her singing to devote all her time to Bill, she had seemed almost decent. Johnny remembered the night that she had made Bill bring him along to a spaghetti dinner she cooked in her tiny apartment. It had been a good dinner, a fine evening.

"Johnny," she said now. "I haven't forgotten him."

"Put that to music," he said, standing up.

She caught his arm and held him. "I—I loved him, Johnny."

"And to prove it, you're the girl of the guy who probably killed him." Johnny jerked away from her. "You're no good. You put the finger on Bill."

With sudden fury, her fingers curled like talons and she raised her hands as

## Message from Garcia

Texas Artist Tells Why It's  
Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"



if to rake his face. But her hands dropped limply to her sides. "You believe that? You *really* believe that?"

Johnny nodded his head grimly.

"You're wrong, Johnny." She crossed the room swiftly and opened the door. She looked up and down the hall, closed the door and came back to Johnny. Her voice low and tense, she said:

"I haven't forgotten, Johnny. Maybe you think I like this dive. Maybe you think I like to have Carter hanging around me! No, Johnny. I'm doing it for Bill. Someday, Red's going to make a mistake. He's going to talk too much. It might be tonight or next week or next year. All right, I'll wait. And when he talks . . ." She squeezed her soft hands together as if cracking a walnut between them. "Johnny, I need you."

He laughed at her. "What kind of a chump do you take me for?" Maybe she told Bill she needed him, too. Then, when he fell for it, she had him where she wanted him, spilling everything he knew.

"You're trying to pin something on Red now, aren't you?" she asked.

Now Johnny knew he was right. Red had told Ginger to go to work on him. Well, it wouldn't work. Johnny looked at her innocently. "Of course not. Why should I try to pin something on Red?"

"All right," she said. "Then I won't be interfering with anything if I tie him up with Bill's murder."

Johnny thought fast. If she were telling the truth, she could mess up everything by scaring Red out of town again before Johnny could smash the dope ring. If she were lying, and Johnny fell for it, he would soon be joining Bill in hell.

He had to gamble. "No," he said softly, "you wouldn't be messing up anything."

"Johnny, I wish I could prove to you that I—"

A heavy rap on the door interrupted her. The door opened and Red Carter, backed up by his two goons, came in. He looked at Johnny sharply, then turned to Ginger.

"Is Sylvester bothering you, honey?" Red asked.

"That's his hobby," she replied. She had lost her softness of a moment ago. Now, she was as cold as ice. "Make him leave me alone."

"You heard the lady," Red said to Johnny. "Stay away from her. While you're at it, stay away from me."

"I like your club," Johnny said.

"You're pushing me," Red grated. "I don't like to be pushed."

"What brings you back to town?" Johnny said, ignoring the thinly veiled threat.

"I like the climate. Get out, Sylvester, or I'll have the boys throw you out."

"Baby-face tried to rough me up before," Johnny said. "Maybe he'd like to try it again."

The tall, baby-faced hood crowded forward. "Let me take him, boss. I owe him a—"

"Get back, Breur," Red snapped. "I don't want any trouble in the club. You and Moe get back out front where you belong." The two gunsels left the room. When they were gone, Red said, "Sylvester, I'm legit. Leave me alone. I'm not saying I didn't handle the junk a couple of years back—but you'd have to prove that, and now I'm running an honest club."

"Pure as snow, hey?" Johnny murmured.

"That's right. I don't want any trouble with the law. Hell, Johnny, you know I'd be the first to let you know if I should hear of any shipments coming in through Harbor City. That's how straight I am."

"We'll pin a medal on you." He looked disdainfully at Red and Ginger. "A couple of nice, clean-living kids." He left the dressing room and went up front to pick up his hat and coat.

**B**Y THE time he reached the street, the rain had stopped. He stood on the curb for a moment, gulping in the fresh air, then crossed the street to his car. He was unlocking the door when he heard footsteps behind him and he turned to see Breur and Moe walking toward him.

"We want to talk to you, hard boy," Breur said. "In the alley."

Johnny backed up against his coupe. "Some other time. I'm tired."

"We'll help you sleep," Moe grunted. He reached out for Johnny but Johnny slapped his hand away. "Don't be like that," Moe said.

"It might make us mad," Breur laughed. He lunged suddenly and grabbed



Johnny's arm as Moe came in from the other side. They slammed Johnny against the car and he felt the door handle jam hard against his spine, paralyzing him momentarily.

"You won't get away with it," Johnny muttered, struggling weakly.

They held his arms and Moe walked him into the dark alley. A heavy fist struck him behind the ear, sending him to his knees. Another blow slammed him all the way down, his cheek in a muddy puddle.

"Maybe you don't get the idea," Breur rasped. "We don't want you around." He kicked Johnny in the ribs. "Pull him up, Moe." Moe grabbed Johnny under the armpits and pulled him to his feet, holding his arms while Breur smashed viciously at Johnny's face.

Moe let go suddenly and Johnny fell. His last conscious thought was of Ginger's torchy song—and then the world went crazy, spinning around and around over his head like a gigantic flame-colored top. . . .

He was still unconscious. He *had* to be unconscious. How else to explain that voice he now heard? It was a throaty, melancholy voice and it was singing a sad, sad song. A dirge. Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps he—

The song ended. The voice spoke. "Johnny," it murmured.

He opened his eyes painfully, slowly, and, through a haze, he saw Ginger standing over him. She was holding a wet cloth. She leaned down and put the cloth on his head. It felt good. He closed his eyes, then opened them. Ginger was still there. The powder on her cheeks was streaked with tears, tears for him, and that didn't make sense.

"What am I—" he began.

"Sh-h," she said softly. "Rest. Let me do the talking. I came out of the club and saw your car. Then I found you in the alley. I drove you here—to my place. I had a time with you. You're heavy." She tried to smile.

He pushed himself up to a sitting position, groaning as he felt the sharp pain over his ribs. "They kicked me until —"

"It's my fault," Ginger said bitterly. "You were right, I'm no good. I'm trouble for everyone. First Bill—now you."

"No," he said. "I didn't get this beating because of you. I got it because I—" He stopped short. Suppose this was all part of the act? Red's hoods beat him to a pulp, then Ginger comes along like a good Samaritan to nurse him and to win his trust. That would be smart.

"You still don't believe me, do you?" she said.

"I don't know. I—I just don't know! If there were only some way you could—"

"Prove it? All right, you're a poor liar, Johnny. So was Bill. You claim you're not after Red. I know you are. You want to tie him up with dope. He told me that much tonight—and he told me enough to know he knocked off Bill for taking me away from him."

"Not for finding out about the dope ring?" Johnny asked, surprised.

"No. Red's jealous. When I used to sing at the Golden Apple, he got the idea I was his private property. He wanted things that weren't in my contract."

"How did he make out?" Johnny said bluntly.

"He didn't." She sat down on the edge of the sofa and lighted a cigarette. She passed it to Johnny. "When I quit, Red went crazy. A little later, Bill was dead. I loved Bill, I was happy with him. He was kind to me and he was decent. I had my wedding dress and . . ." Her eyes softened and she stared dreamily at the floor.

After a moment, she turned to Johnny again. "Anyway, I was sure that Red had killed him. Now I know. I'll get him for it, Johnny. I'll get him just the way he got Bill."

"Take it easy," Johnny said and, despite himself, he put his hand on hers and squeezed it. Suddenly, he knew he would have to trust her. "I need Red alive, Ginger. If you do anything foolish—"

"Thanks, Johnny," she murmured.

"Thanks for what?"

"For telling me that. It makes me feel better to know you trust me a little."

"A little," he said, "but that's all. It wouldn't take much to swing the pendulum the other way."

"What's the next step?"

"I don't know. But first, I've got to report to headquarters. I should have

done that an hour ago." He stood up and went to the hall to the phone.

Murphy, who had the night duty, belatedly, "Where the hell have you been? I've been trying all over—"

"A couple of mugs gave me a going over."

"Well, listen. Sid Rawler, down on pier six, has been trying to get you for the last hour. He says he's got something hot but he won't tell anyone but you. Of course, if you're banged up and can't go we'll send—"

"I'm on my way." Johnny hung up and went back to the living room. "I've got to go."

"Where, Johnny?" Ginger's fists were clenched at her sides. She made no effort to conceal her alarm.

"Pier six. I just got a tip that—"

"You're not in any shape to look for trouble."

"I'm not looking for trouble. I asked old Sid to keep his eyes open. I'm not overlooking any leads."

"Take care of yourself," Ginger said. She followed him into the hall and helped him into his coat.

"I'll do that. Thanks for the nursing." He left her apartment and heard a faint click after the door was closed. The inside bolt lock, he thought. He went downstairs and got in his car, his mind still on Ginger. Maybe she was all right, after all. She'd certainly seemed concerned enough. . . .

He parked his car in the same alley off Water Street which had sheltered him earlier in the evening. How many years ago had that been? He had been through the mill since then. He crossed the street and, keeping in the shadows of the warehouse, went out on the pier to Sid's shanty.

There was no time for games this time. He slipped into the shack without knocking and looked directly into the barrel of Sid's old Colt.

"Oh, it's you, Johnny," the watchman said, breathing raggedly. "I heard something out there and I thought—" He pushed the revolver into his waistband.

"I phoned headquarters. What's up?"

"I don't know. About an hour ago, I heard a boat about a hundred yards off the pier. The motor was just idling and

that didn't seem right. I went outside to look and I guess whoever it was saw me framed by the light behind me. Anyway, the motor kicks over and the boat gets away like the devil's chasing it."

"Uh-huh," Johnny said. "Anything else?"

"No, nothing else. But you told me to let you know if—"

"You did the right thing, Sid." He saw the bottle of bourbon on the table and said, "You hadn't been nipping when you heard the boat?"

"Maybe I'd had a couple, Johnny, but booze never made me hear boat engines before."

"All right, Sid," Johnny said, going to the door. "Keep up the good work. I'll go put in a call to the harbor patrol." He stepped out into the darkness and felt his way toward Water Street.

WHEN he reached the curb, he hesitated and looked to left and right. The poorly lighted street was deserted.

He stepped down from the curb and had taken a half dozen long strides to the dead center of the street when he heard the sharp crack of a gun. Simultaneously, a slug chipped into the cobblestones at his feet and ricocheted, whining. Johnny crouched low and, weaving like a frightened rabbit, raced for the alley.

The gun cracked again. This time, there was no ricochet. Johnny felt a hot, streaking pain in his left leg and he stumbled to his knees. Gasping, he crawled forward into the dark alley and rolled under his car, his gun out. He lay as still as death and waited.

Time stood still with him.

He heard a faint, scraping sound . . . shoe leather moving slowly and cautiously on pavement. Straining his eyes, he thought he could make out a black patch which was darker than the night around it. Holding his gun far out to the side, he squeezed off a shot and grinned mirthlessly as the black patch fired back.

He took deliberate aim at the patch. He fired, heard a startled cry, then a groan. A gun clattered noisily to the pavement. Johnny rolled out from under his coupe and crept forward on hands and knees. He touched a shoulder, a chest and felt the oozing blood. That was that. He struck

a match and looked down at Red Carter's face. Red would never have to worry about being pushed again.

"That was for Bill Kendall," Johnny muttered.

But, Johnny wondered, how had Red known he was coming? Suddenly he remembered the faint click he had heard in Ginger's apartment after he had left it. A telephone call—a receiver coming off the hook? A call to Red with a simple message? *Pier six, right away.*

Johnny struggled to his feet, supporting himself against the brick wall. He stumbled out of the alley and into Water Street.

"Johnny!" a sharp voice shouted, and at the same time, Johnny heard the far-off wail of a police siren. "Johnny!" old Sid said again. "I heard the shots and I—"

"Stay where you are, Sid," Johnny mumbled. He braced himself in the middle of the street and tried to bring Sid's narrow face into focus. The watchman was standing near the warehouse twenty feet away. "Stand still, Sid, or I'll let you have it."

"What happened, boy?"

"I was ambushed," Johnny said grimly. "Red Carter."

"That girl!" Sid cried.

"Get back, Sid. Ginger didn't do it. You did. You called headquarters to get me to come down here. You had the trap all— Keep your hands up where I can see them!"

"You're nuts, Johnny," Sid protested.

"The mob needed a pier to use. Pier six, your pier. Who'd ever suspect a potty watchman like you? All the time

Red Carter was out of town, the junk kept coming in. You were Red's boss. You ran the—"

Sid's clawlike right hand dipped swiftly toward his gun. There was no clownlike, inept fumbling this time. Sid was playing for keeps. The Colt was free and rising.

"Thanks," Johnny muttered. His first shot chewed into Sid's shoulder, spinning the watchman. The second shot ripped open his stomach. Sid went down in a heap.

"You should have known better," Johnny said coldly. The squad car screamed around the corner and slammed to a stop. Johnny went to meet it. He nodded at Sid. "He's dead."

Murphy wiped his perspiring red face with a big handkerchief. "I was afraid we'd be too late. That girl phoned and—*whew!* How'd you figure Sid?"

"I saw him earlier tonight and told him what I was working on. A little later, I saw Red Carter and he told me what I had told Sid. That struck me funny but I didn't think much of it until later, not until I thought about Sid's bourbon.

"Come again?" Murphy asked blankly.

"The bourbon. Sid offered me a drink of good stuff. Since when does a watchman's pay buy decent liquor at today's prices?" He tottered toward his car.

"Hey!" Murphy shouted. "You need to be fixed up. I'll take you to the doc for—"

"I've got a nurse," Johnny said, grinning. "And she can cook a mean plate of spaghetti."

"I'd like to meet something like that."

"The hell you say. But maybe she's got a friend."

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By **FREDERICK C.  
DAVIS**



He fired twice, blindly. . . .

**Novelette of  
a Trouble-Hunting Dame**

# YOU KILL ME, HONEY!

*Private-op Halliday had to pick up the bodies strewn about minked Iris—  
without getting Iris in Dutch . . . or himself in jail.*



## CHAPTER ONE

### Pink-Tea Assignment

*Kellerton Detective Agency MEMO  
J. J. Kellerton, Director.  
From: J. J. Kellerton.  
To: Mr. Val Halliday  
Re: Miss Iris Kent.  
Remarks: This is urgent.*

It is now 10:36 p.m. I have been waiting in my office for further word from you since the last time you called in, at 7:27. For more than three critical hours you have failed to keep me posted on developments.

I believe you are deliberately keeping out of my reach in order to avoid explaining why your very simple assignment to follow the Kent girl should suddenly get this agency mixed up in a scandalous homicide. It would not surprise me to learn that you are keeping yourself out of the hands of the police also.

Very well. Having given up attempting to reach you somewhere by phone, I am now going home to bed. Do not under any circumstances disturb me there. I want a report from you, but I want it here, and in writing.

I will leave this memo on your desk where you will find it when you finally come in. No matter at what hour that may be, I expect you to have waiting for me, first thing in the morning, a complete, detailed, written account of all developments up to then. Upon your report will depend your future with this agency—if any.

Good night.

J. J. K.

\* \* \*

*Kellerton Detective Agency DAILY REPORT*

*From: Val Halliday.*

*To: Mr. J. J. Kellerton.*

*Re: Miss Iris Kent and murder, maybe.*

*Remarks:*

It is now exactly 12:42 p.m. I have had a very tough day. I would like to go home and to bed myself, but "being a conscientious employee, I will dutifully follow your instructions to report the evening's developments in detail—including one sudden death already, with maybe another corpse coming up any minute now, as soon as somebody stumbles across it.

As you can see already, Mr. Kellerton, this is going to take a little telling.

Trouble began coming to a simmer for us at seven o'clock last night, with Miss Iris Kent hustling herself along Lexington Avenue, northward bound.

I could see she was anxious about something. Having watched Miss Kent every day, ten hours a day, seven days a week, for the past four weeks, I had become well acquainted with her moods. During this same period, of course, she had been totally unaware of me.

I had often regretted that my job kept me at a distance from Miss Kent, but I am not complaining, Mr. Kellerton, because trailing Iris Kent is, as you say, an easy assignment and also a very pleasant one.

Hustling anxiously along Lex, Miss Kent turned her trim little sling-backs into the Hotel Roulin. I came in close behind her. As she paused for a quick glance around the lobby, a young man bounced out of one of the chairs. He had been waiting for her.

I had seen this lad before, at a couple of night-club parties that Iris had gone to. His name is Ned Rodney. He's a younger brother of Donna Rodney Carling, the ex-wife of Spencer Carling, the prominent play producer, whom Donna recently divorced.

Ned Rodney has blond, wavy hair, eyes bluer than a baby's and the look of a wolf. He could be just the kind of smooth operator that an unworldly girl like Iris Kent might mistakenly go for.

It was now my turn to get worried. Besides, this meeting could be something that our client, Newton Kent, would not want us to miss.

AS YOU see, Mr. Kellerton, I hadn't forgotten for a moment that Iris's father, Newton Kent, the well-known fancier of thoroughbreds and owner of one of the choicest chunks of suburban Connecticut, was paying the Kellerton Detective Agency a princely fee to keep his only daughter safe while she pursued her ambition to "make good in the big city."

Mr. Kent had explained when hiring us that Iris had insisted on being "strictly on her own," so we had been careful not to let her know we had two shifts watching her day and night. Even over and beyond the call of duty, I was holding myself ready to steer Iris clear of all kinds of trouble, including, of course, the wrong kind of handsome, blond companion.

It came as a big relief to me to see that,

after all, Iris's date to meet Ned Rodney here was for reasons other than romance. They talked together earnestly, with no show of affection on Iris's part.

Rodney's gestures caused Iris to look anxiously and curiously at a poster standing near the door of the Coral Room. The poster presented a colorful view of a dancer known professionally as Yolette. Yolette's dances featured two hoops covered with rainbow-hued cellophane.

Having been sneaked into this exclusive nightery on one occasion by my friend Sid, the house dick, I can testify as an eye-witness that Yolette and her hoops combined into some fetching silhouette effects. Although she was getting only a newcomer's minor billing, Yolette obviously had a really lovely future.

In their conversation, Ned Rodney appeared to be giving Iris a briefing on this honey with the hoops. Presently Iris was nodding and Rodney was giving her shoulder a reassuring pat. They said good-by and Rodney left the hotel, while Iris moved on to the hotel desk.

"Yola Ryan's room?" Iris asked, this name being, as I learned later, Yolette's real one. "Seven forty-two, isn't it?"

At the clerk's nod, Irish swallowed twice. Instead of turning to the elevators she detoured into the Egret Bar. When she disappeared into a dark booth it became necessary for me, in the line of duty, to follow her into the bar. While she fortified herself with a very dry Gibson, I was obliged to have a scotch. (Expense account attached.) Then, feeling more reassured, Iris breezed out again.

The elevators were busy. The one I chose took off only ten seconds after

Iris'. When I left it at the seventh floor, Iris was already deep down the hallway, heading toward the rear room which was given Yolette as part of her pay.

Iris was still a few feet from 742 when the boom of a muffled report echoed from the depths of the hallway.

She paused, wondering what it was. I faded back, watching her, not wondering. It had sounded to me very much like a noise made by a gun.

This was literally the opening gun in a series of puzzling and startling incidents. I would like to take this opportunity, Mr. Kellerton, to point out that none of these dangerous complications would have developed if only Iris Kent had turned around then and headed the hell out of there.

She did no such thing. Instead, she went straight on toward the door of Room 742, moving even faster.

I couldn't stop her. This would have violated the instructions of our client, Mr. Newton Kent, to the effect that Iris must not know her father was having her shadowed. Instead, I watched from a remote angle of the hallway while Iris opened the door of 742 and went in.

Immediately I heard Iris's stifled yipe of fear and horror.

Nothing else happened for three minutes by the clock. They were calmer than any three minutes I have known since.

Suddenly the door of 742 snapped open again. It opened six inches and stopped there as Iris froze. She stood stiffened with consternation, her lovely face clearly visible through the opening, because at that precise moment another door just



## "Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to *Calvert*. I did. Elementary!"

down the hall—736—had also opened and a hotel guest had stepped out.

For a few seconds this guest, a brokerish-looking man of sixty, gazed across the hall at the pretty face of Iris Kent. Recovering herself, Iris faded back into the room. The man simply came on to the elevators, where I was pretending to be waiting, and caught one downward bound. He couldn't know, of course, that he would very soon become entangled in an important police case, with the cops holding onto him as a material witness.

Peeking from the door of 742, Iris made sure the man from 736 was gone, then slipped out into the hall. I dodged aside, making way for her to head for the elevators. Again, however, she surprised me by taking a detour—grabbed open another door marked *Service Stairs* and disappeared.

I let her go, moved up on 742 and eased in.

The reason for Iris's cry of fright upon entering this room was easy to find. It was sitting loosely at a desk beside the bed.

**YOLA RYAN** had slumped forward with her head resting on a portable typewriter. Her face, white as soap, was twisted toward the door with her lips sagging and her eyes fixed in a round blank stare. The bullet hole in her right temple was powder-burned and blood made a maroon streak across her cheek and chin, matching her slinky red robe. She had evidently been getting herself costumed for the early show down in the Coral Room, but it was a sad fact that Yolette would never again roll her hoops.

There was no letter or any other kind of message left in the typewriter. There was no gun on the floor, or in Yolette's dead hand, or anywhere else in the room.

There was nobody here but me and the corpse in a room having only one window looking out on empty space seven floors up. This might raise an interesting question—who but Iris Kent could have killed Yolette?

I could testify that the shot was fired before Iris entered Yolette's room. On the other hand, it was also true that I had seen no murderer fleeing from 742. There was no murderer here now, yet none had left.

Nobody at all had come out except Iris—and the male guest from 736 could honestly swear he had seen her in the act of dodging out in a guilty manner close on the heels of that gunshot.

Nor were there any signs of suicide here. The only promising item was an envelope. Yolette's handbag lay open on the bed as if she had pawed into it for her lipstick or something and this envelope appeared to have spilled out. It was just an empty envelope, not imprinted, but postmarked a few days ago, which may have contained a routine ad. A short list was scribbled on its back:

*Butter, rye bread, bologna, coffee,  
scotch, bourbon, club soda.*

It was addressed to Yola Ryan at East 55th Street.

Why should Yola receive mail at East 55th Street when she'd been living right here at the Hotel Roulon?

While puzzling over this, I must have slipped the envelope into my pocket, maybe thinking in the back of my mind that it might be important for me to get there ahead of the cops—for Iris's sake. And our client's sake. And ours.

I blew out of there fast.

Something important was missing from this picture. The time looked ripe for putting our cards on the table all around. However, I couldn't approach Iris without first checking with you, Mr. Kellerton, so I headed for the nearest public phone.

Back in the lobby, I couldn't find a sign of Iris. I figured I could pick her up later, maybe at her apartment. The most urgent thing was to flash this break to you, Mr. Kellerton, and get your valued advice.

It was just 7:10 by my strap-watch—I knew you would be working late, as usual—when I started dialing your special office number. When I was only halfway through it, the door of my booth was opened and Iris Kent looked in.

"Let Mr. Kellerton wait a while, Mr. Halliday," she said. "How about buying me a drink?"

I was too stunned to believe it for a minute, but that is exactly what the girl said—this babe who wasn't supposed to know she was being trailed!



Mr. Kellerton, it is now 1:53 P.M. On top of a very tough day and an even tougher night. I have conscientiously labored long overtime pounding out this report for you. I hope you won't mind too much if I take a few minutes off for a cup of coffee at the hamburger emporium around the corner.

It might be a good idea for me to slip out the side way just in case the cops already have this office cased. Also, about that other corpse I mentioned at the beginning—I'd better check on whether or not it has bobbed up yet.

Be right back, Mr. Kellerton—unless a squad of police dicks nails me first.

Val Halliday

## CHAPTER TWO

### Cards on the Table

*Kellerton Detective Agency DAILY REPORT No. 2*

*From: Val Halliday.*

*To: J. J. Kellerton.*

*Re: The Surprising Crimes of Iris Kent.*

*Remarks:*

Before continuing with this report—having buzzed right back after three mugs of java and an elapsed time of only eighteen minutes—I have two news items to offer, both of them indefinite.

Item One: After quietly taking a gander along the street below I cannot say absolutely whether the cops *are* casing the office. Time will tell.

Item Two: That other corpse I mentioned is still missing somewhere. I'm not certain what its name was. As to where it may turn up, I can't be sure of that, either. But there is good reason to expect a dead guy to show very soon now, and when he does—this case is going to take a sudden turn for the worse.

You will understand a little better, Mr. Kellerton, when I explain what followed after Iris Kent handed me that neat stunner in the phone booth in the Roulon lobby.

Too dazed to move, I simply stared. This was actually my first good full-faced look at Iris. At close range she lost none of her loveliness. By comparison, any year's Miss America would look slightly frowzy.

She reached in, curled one of her arms around one of mine and tugged me from the booth. I offered no resistance.

When she had steered me halfway across the lobby, I spotted a big bruiser of a guy noticing us. Sid, the house dick, my old pal, had his eye trained on Iris. He noted her mink jacket, her Parisian hat, her trim custom-shod feet. In passing he gave me a private wink and a wise smile of congratulation.

My answering smile was strained. I wanted Iris to be seen by few people today. First the gent in 736, and now Sid—they were already adding up to too many.

Iris steered me back into the Egret Bar. We slipped into the same secluded booth which she had occupied alone before. She ordered another very dry Gibson and I ordered another scotch. (See expense account attached.) Gazing across at her with only a little table between us, where before I'd usually been a block away, filled me with a titillating tingle. But thinking of the hoop-dancer's corpse upstairs turned it into a frosty chill.

"How long have you known I've been trailing you around?" I asked.

"More than two weeks." Trying to make me feel better about it, she added, "I began noticing that you seemed to be waiting around outside every powder room in town. Then I realized I was the reason. Once, when you were phoning Mr. Kellerton, I slipped into the next booth and overheard you reporting every move I'd made all day. It got to be sort of a game with me, listening in on your reports to Mr. Kellerton. He sounds like a crusty old grouch."

"On the contrary, Mr. Kellerton has a dandy disposition," I said quickly. "But I'm afraid he's not going to like this, and neither will your father."

Her smile turned teasing. "Daddy worries too much about me. He just won't believe I'm perfectly able to make my own way and take care of myself. But your reports have shown him I've been a perfectly good girl—haven't they?"

"Until now. Our next report to Mr. Kent might cause him to snatch you back to Connecticut fast." I asked her point-blank. "Why did you go up to Yolette's room?"

Iris gazed at me calculatingly, through

lowered lashes. "I was looking for a job as an assistant hooper."

"Honey, I know you much too well to believe that. One of the first jobs you applied for was an airlines traffic department. They offered you a job as a hostess instead, but you turned it down. Same thing when you tried to get into movie publicity and promotion. They urged you to take a screen test instead, and you turned up your pretty nose at the notion of becoming a screen starlet."

"You *are* pretty well acquainted with me," Iris said quietly. "Pretty well."

"Again when you went looking for an editorial berth, they offered you all the work you would handle as a fashion model, but you said no, thanks, that stuff's for show-offs. Next you wanted to learn about play production from Spencer Carling, the ex-husband of your good friend Donna Carling. He did his best to persuade you to let him make you a front-rank show-girl. Most girls would give their eyeteeth for such chances, but each time you shook your pretty head and went your pretty way."

"In other words," Iris answered with rare good sense, "I refused to capitalize on my looks, or on my father's influence either, because both of them came to me through no effort of my own. I want a job calling for talent and brains."

"So you definitely were not approaching Yolette for a chance as an apprentice dancer," I reminded her. "Actually you were doing Ned Rodney an important favor. Okay, what was it?"

"Not Ned, really," she said quickly. "It was for Donna."

**S**HE got a good grip on herself while our drinks were served. I was busy trying to sense whether or not a dead body had been found so far, up there on the seventh floor. It did not calm me any to see Sid drifting around the bar with that same wise smirk on his well-scrubbed puss.

Iris took a quick sip of her cocktail and explained. "Donna's my very dearest friend. She's still deeply in love with Spencer, even though she did divorce him some weeks ago. He's still mad about her too—and I didn't want anything to keep them from marrying again."

"Marrying *each other* again?"

Iris nodded earnestly, pressed closer across the table and spoke in confidential whispers.

"It was just a silly quarrel to begin with. Donna was an actress. After marrying Spencer she wanted him to put her into his new plays. He loved her devotedly but simply didn't feel she was star material. Their marriage blew up over it. Spencer settled a big chunk of money on her and moved into a lonely bachelor apartment while Donna went to Reno in tears."

"But then everything turned hunky again?"

"Except for Yolette." Iris narrowed her lovely violet eyes. "I didn't know about Yolette until Ned told me just a few days ago. He said Yolette was about to wreck everything."

Her pretty mouth tightened, Iris nodded soberly and went on. "The way I understand it, Yolette met Spencer soon after Donna left, and she fell for him hard. When Donna got back from Reno, she agreed with Spencer that their divorce should just never have happened. Yolette went melodramatic and threatened to kill somebody, maybe herself, if Spencer went back to Donna."

"But Spencer's too used to histrionics. Yola's didn't stop him."

Iris lifted her pretty chin. "Certainly not. It's Donna he really loves. The date for the remarriage is set for next week. When Yolette heard of that, the fireworks really started—and she really scared Spence by stealing his gun."

I sat up. "When? Where from? What kind of gun?"

"A revolver, from his office at the theatre. Afterward Yolette phoned him and screeched that she intended to use it to kill herself, and maybe him too. Spencer didn't dare risk going near her, so he asked Ned to help him. You see, Donna didn't know about Yolette—and still doesn't."

"Ah," I said. "And if Donna should suddenly find out about Yolette?"

"She'd be so hurt that she would never marry Spencer again. Never." Iris said this emphatically. "So it became highly important to shut up Yolette before she wrecked everything. Ned told me that

when he tried talking to her she flew into a fury and kicked him out. He thought maybe she'd turn allergic to men, so he asked me to try next, for Donna's sake. But—"

"But?"

"I arrived just a second too late. She'd already killed herself."

Looking levelly at Iris Kent, I said, "I hope she killed herself. I really hope that's the way it was. But in that event what became of the gun? Did she shoot herself with it, then maybe swallow it?"

Suddenly pale, Iris gulped the rest of her cocktail. At the same time she took a tighter grip on her handbag. That bag seemed unusually bulky—so I reached for it.

A struggle ensued, brief and polite but earnest. When it ended I had a blue .38 revolver in my hands. In hers, Iris had a crumpled piece of paper. This had also come from inside her purse and now she hastily stuffed it back in. Then she hugged the bag in both arms, stiffened back into the corner of the booth and filled her beautiful violet eyes with defiant glints.

"It's Spencer's gun," she said breathlessly. "It could be traced back to him. I just *couldn't* leave it there!"

"Not only the gun, honey," I said. "You carried away not only the suicide gun, but also the suicide note that Yolette left in the typewriter. Let's have it."

"No," Iris said.

"Listen, honey."

"No," Iris said.

I frowned at her, realizing, as her daddy must have realized years ago, that this chick was hard to handle. "Listen, honey," I insisted. "Let's disregard the fact that you have removed two pieces of evidence from the scene of a homicide, which is a crime by the books. There's another angle that's more important right now. By doing this you changed the appearance of the scene from that of a suicide to that of a murder."

**I**RIS looked around quickly, as if in search of something desperately needed . . . for example, another Gibson.

"If you had only let it alone, it would have been obviously a suicide and the cops would have been glad to let it go at that. But no. You took away the weap-

on the suicide had used on herself. You took away also the note she'd left explaining why she'd knocked herself off. You made work for those homicide dicks. Now they'll begin turning this town upside down looking for the non-existent guy who supposedly murdered her."

"But I couldn't leave 'em there," Iris wailed softly. "All that scandal would wreck Donna and Spencer all over again—for keeps this time!"

"Nice of you to wreck yourself with a murder rap rather than your friends with a little gossip," I said sourly. "When the dicks come up with the killer in this case, it could be you. It could be you far easier than anybody else this side of Christmas."

She stared at me round-eyed.

"The cops can argue that you took Spencer Carling's gun into Yolette's room to use as a persuader. They can say it turned into a fight, fatally for Yolette. Remember the man from across the hall who saw you ducking out of there? And if the cops start grilling me, I'll have to lie myself purple in the face because the truth about you is just too damned deadly." I added in wry tones, "Daddy may not be able to buy you out of a murder rap, either."

Iris swallowed three times before managing to ask, "What—what can we do?"

"First, give me that suicide note."

She shook her lovely head, hugged her handbag even closer and said it again.

"No."

"All right." I had no time to waste arguing. "Sometimes suicides don't leave notes. This could be one of those. But this gun is a different matter. I've got to do something about it, and now. Wait here for me. Understand, honey? Wait right here."

I eased from the booth with the death gun tucked under my belt. Sid, the big house dick, still drifting about, had noticed the strain developing between Iris and me. He frowned as I hustled across the lobby to the elevators.

"Seven," I told the operator.

When the car stopped at the seventh floor I stepped out, then promptly stepped back again.

"Wrong floor," I said quickly. "Seventeen. Didn't you hear me right?"

Down the hall, in front of 742, I had

spotted a precinct dick named Hooker standing guard. Also, Captain Pader of the homicide detail, having just now arrived via a service elevator, was at that same moment entering the death room.

I rode on up to the seventeenth floor with the gun putting chills in my stomach. Without it, the suicide that looked like a murder was certain to go right on looking that way.

Halliday.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Field Day for Danger

*Kellerton Detective Agency DAILY  
REPORT No. 3*

*From: Halliday again.*

*To: J. J. Kellerton.*

*Remarks:*

There has been another brief interruption.

At 2:48 a.m., I decided another skirmish was in order, so I took a quick scout along Broadway and the cross-street. Although I spotted no dicks lurking in any dark doorways, I brought back the feeling that something is getting set to pounce on me.

As to the corpse we're expecting, it's still delayed, but I'm looking for it to turn up somewhere any minute now.

Meanwhile, the radio in the back room has been spouting bulletins all evening about the violent end of Yolette. Just as I warned Iris, the cops are tagging it a murder. They have the description of a girl who asked the desk clerk at the Roulon for the number of Yolette's room just before the shooting. It is good, detailed description which is verified by a Mr. Martin Emmett, a banker from Wilmington occupying Room 736 across the hall, who saw the same girl ducking out of Yolette's room immediately following a banging noise which must have been the fatal gunshot.

Please bear in mind, Mr. Kellerton, that this same girl was also seen a few minutes later in the Roulon lobby accompanied by a private detective named Halliday. It seems fairly likely that Sid, the house dick, has already offered this bit of information to the cops. If so, they aren't tipping their mitts just yet; but we're sure to hear soon.

The cops at any rate are now hard at work finding out this girl's identity. When they do learn it, we can expect to be swept down by a loud, outraged thunderstorm from Connecticut named Newton Kent.

When he descends on us, I would like to ask him if he has any way of figuring what his luscious daughter may do next. I doubt it.

Because when I came down from the seventeenth floor of the Roulon and went back into the Egret Bar, I found that Iris wasn't there any more. She knew she needed expert help and she knew I was trying my damndest to squeeze her safely out of a very bad jam. I had asked her most earnestly to wait for me right here. But now she was the little girl who wasn't there.

With the death gun feeling heavier under my belt every minute, I headed again for a phone booth. That, Mr. Kellerton, was when I finally connected with you at the office.

Rapidly and factually, I told you what had happened.

You blew up.

You said in what might be fairly called a roar, "Great grief, Halliday, Mr. Kent hired us to keep Iris out of trouble! Yet you let her stumble smack into the middle of a homicide—just the kind of homicide that will give the papers a field day. My Lord, Halliday, this incompetent bungling of yours could cost me the fattest fee of the year. It can even wreck us."

Without giving me any opportunity to explain that none of this was my fault, you went on loudly, "Wreck us, I said, and that's no exaggeration! Newton Kent is a hot-shot who's pals with scores of top-drawer officials, including the governor and the secretary of this state. My license as a private detective can get revoked plenty fast if Newton Kent should want it that way. Damned if I could blame him, either, Halliday. Why, we don't dare even let him get wind of this!"

I said, "Yolette is not going to come back to life, Mr. Kellerton, and it may not be so easy to get the cops to overlook it."

"Halliday, you dimwit," you howled at me, "of course we're helpless to stop them now, but we must keep Iris Kent's part

in it covered up. She must be kept entirely clear. Understand that, Halliday? Your assignment is to keep her clear at all costs."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Is that all, sir?"

"I'm counting on you, Halliday. If you fail me now—" The silence that followed seemed an ominous one, Mr. Kellerton. You added, "See me here at the office at the soonest possible moment, Halliday—and remember, *keep that girl absolutely in the clear!*"

You then hung up violently.

I started out at once to find Iris Kent. Although your instructions seemed slightly unreasonable, they were plain enough. Whatever might come of the Yolette case, my job was to extricate Iris from it, to prevent her having any further contact with it and to keep her part in it forever hushed up, especially from Newton Kent.

After slipping out of the Egret Bar, Iris did not go to her own apartment. I watched it for a while, hoping she would show soon, but she didn't. In searching further for her, I was forced to cover a great deal of ground and use up a lot of time.

Evidently she had gone off to meet Ned Rodney somewhere by previous arrangement, and evidently they had talked there a while, because I finally spotted them getting out of a taxi together in front of the Carling town house on East Seventy-Sixth Street.

Both of them looked harassed and scared. Rodney used his key at the front door. It seems that Rodney, who will become a Great Writer any day now, is living in his sister Donna's home, but only temporarily, until he hits the best-seller

lists, which of course will be as soon as he finishes his Book. Losing not a minute, I hustled quickly up the stoop to join them.

Rodney greeted me with a sullenly puzzled frown and Iris's lovely eyes grew alarmed.

"You can't come in!" she protested in a stage whisper. "Donna's here and she'll wonder who you are."

"You can pass me off as a continental diplomat, can't you?" I said sourly. "However, I'm willing to do business right here. Just hand over that note."

"What note?" Iris said.

"You know damned well what note. The one you stole from Yolette's typewriter. Let's have it."

Staring at her in dismay, Rodney blurted, "Did you do that?"

To Rodney, Iris said, "You shut up," and to me she said, "No, and that's final." She pushed into the house to get away from me, with Rodney pushing close behind her and me pushing close behind Rodney.

I figured I would have to get that note away from Iris now and no more fooling. In the first place she shouldn't be carrying such evidence around with her. In the second place she might show it to the wrong person and in that way get herself into an even worse jam.

Third, it might contain information that I ought to know, maybe something I could use to keep a jump or two ahead of the cops.

Besides, this babe was a challenge I couldn't let pass. I gave them no chance to slam the door on me, but jounced Rodney to one side and squeezed in.

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IRIS narrowed her eyes at me, clutched her handbag more tightly, then poked her head into the living room to see whether Donna was there. Donna wasn't. As long as Donna stayed elsewhere, we had a chance to discuss the subject of a recently deceased hoop dancer.

"Where's Spencer?" I said. "He should be tipped off to sit tight come what may."

"I've been trying to reach Spencer by phone ever since I found—found *her*—but I couldn't." Iris added, "You just made things tougher for him by putting that gun back."

"I didn't put it back. The place was crawling with cops. They are cops who will never in this world believe Yolette did that to herself. Not now they won't."

"I don't care," Iris said. "The most important thing is that this mustn't cause Spencer and Donna to bust up all over again."

"I'll let you worry about them while I worry about you."

Rodney spoke up. "You have my sympathy. She's gone and fouled things up so badly that you don't stand a chance of fixing them."

"Is that so!" Iris said hotly. "I think I'm doing all right. Except for me, every paper in town would be licking its chops over Spencer and Yolette. As it is, nobody knows—including Donna."

"That's fine, my sweet," I said acridly. "That's really lovely, except that the dicks are scouting around right now for a murderess answering your description. Please take yourself out of circulation. Stay here, or in your own apartment—but please avoid public places until the heat's off. Give me a chance to at least try to find an out for you. Because, honey, you need one."

"Brother, you can count on me to help you with that," Rodney said fervently. "What Spence and I wanted from her was a little help, but what we got was a load of snafu. Next move she tries to make, I'll nail her down."

They glared at each other again. At the same time came sound of an approach in the hallway. Rodney quickly put on a phony smile. Iris, in a little flurry of anxiety, began shedding her coat and hat in order to cover up her agitation. The woman who came into the room was dark,

willowy, finely bred and very beautiful. "D-Donna, dearest," Iris said. "Mrs. Carling, may I present Mr. Halliday—an old friend of daddy's from Connecticut."

Donna Carling greeted me with warm graciousness and suggested a drink. A drink was one thing which I could use nicely indeed, but I had work to do. Also, I had my eye on an opening which I could not let get past me. In trying hard to appear her usual casual self to Donna, Iris had momentarily forgotten her big handbag. It lay right there within reach now, on the grand piano.

After bidding them all a good evening I turned to go, and in going I brushed past the grand. No one saw me grab the purse except Rodney, who was escorting me out and didn't appear to disapprove. In the hallway I left the bag on a chair while Rodney and I gave Yolette's suicide note a quick pass. It read:

*To Anybody Who Might Care—  
Now that I have killed the man I love  
I have nothing left to live for. Here I come,  
Death. Good-by, you horrible world.*

Under this was a swooping pencil mark which might have been a Y.

Rodney and I stared at each other. He swallowed twice. I groaned once. Then I took my growing headache out of there.

You see how this is shaping up, Mr. Kellerton? I was getting no help from any direction, including the dead woman's. Yolette's note didn't say who she killed or where. Chances were she meant Spencer Carling, but we couldn't be sure until the dead guy himself turned up. At that time there hadn't been any word from him, and at this writing there's still none.

Well, Mr. Kellerton, this brings us up practically to the minute.

After leaving the Carling home I camped outside it for a while to make sure that Iris would stay put. She was still there when I went to a nice place to think things out. They happened to serve beverages there. I really did a lot of heavy thinking, Mr. Kellerton. Then I remembered to buy myself a long overdue dinner. (See attached expense account.) Finally I went down to the office to report to you, but found that you had gone home to bed and had left on my desk a

memo demanding a detailed report, which I have now dutifully produced exactly as—

Just a minute.

A few seconds ago I heard the street door open. Now I hear somebody coming up the steps. The footfalls are quietly and steadily approaching our office door. Whoever it is, they've got me cornered here. I happen to have Carling's gun still in my possession—the one Yolette used on herself—and no way of getting rid of it fast.

The footfalls just stopped outside the door. I hear the knob turning. The door is about to open. Now—

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Greased Getaway

*Kellerton Detective Agency DAILY REPORT No. 4.*

*From: Halliday still.*

*To: J. J. Kellerton.*

*Remarks: Relax.*

It was Iris.

For half a second there, when that door began to open, I could picture myself taking a long trip up the river. Maybe it would have been better if my easy-footed caller *had* been a beefy-faced dick with a fistful-of gat. With him at least I would have known where I stood and where I was going next.

Even at that unholy hour of the morning, 3:38 a.m., Iris looked luscious and lovely—and too much like a headache on spike heels.

Before going on, Mr. Kellerton, I would like to insert a note to the effect that it is now exactly 5:52 a.m. During the past two hours, since Iris prowled in, certain important developments have occurred.

Bad news, Mr. Kellerton. By the time you read this, Iris may have been invited into the clink and all hell may be busting loose under Newton Kent's personal direction.

It was quiet enough here, however, when Iris Kent slipped in with that hard-to-handle gleam in her eye. I went back to breathing again and she came straight to my desk in an anxious, resolute way that meant she needed help desperately and had made up her mind just where she

was going to get it. Meaning me, of course.

"I warned you to keep yourself under wraps," I said, getting in the first shot. "How did you manage to slip away from Rodney?"

"Ned's doing his best to keep Donna calmed down about Spencer," Iris said quickly. "Spencer's still missing. There hasn't been a word from him and none of us can find him anywhere. It's ghastly."

"You know what Yolette's suicide note said," I reminded her. "Didn't that mention of murder refer to Spencer?"

"I couldn't let myself think that," Iris said, sounding really scared. "After all, Spencer couldn't have been the only man in Yolette's life."

"True," I admitted, "and given half a chance I could have been one of them. What've you been telling Donna?"

"That Spencer's in conference with a big writer somewhere and doesn't realize how late it is but he'll be home any minute. I really kept hoping he *would* come, but now. . . . I'm horribly afraid that note—" Irish added earnestly, "We've got to do something—find him!"

"What you've really got to do, instead, is keep your pretty little mitts off this dynamite and sit tight. I have orders to—"

"Donna has already started phoning hotels and hospitals." Iris leaned over the desk with her lovely violet eyes growing more frightened. "She may phone police headquarters next. What then?"

"Get up there with her," I said quickly, "and stop her."

Iris shook her head. "Only one thing will stop Donna—finding Spencer. Finding him dead or alive." She shuddered. "And it better be soon before something pops."

This little angel-face looked even harder to stop than Donna might be. I asked her bluntly, "Got any ideas where to look?"

"Yes. When I was in Yolette's room I saw an envelope lying on the bed. I didn't touch it but I did notice an address on it—something East 55th Street, I think."

Up until that point, Mr. Kellerton, I had been kept so busy writing reports for you that I had no chance to think about that East 55th Street angle. Also, following your orders to keep clear, I had decided to let it alone. The envelope was in

my coat pocket at that very minute, but I realized at once that that place on East 55th was one which Irish should by all means avoid.

"Wherever it was, the cops must have been there hours ago," I said. "Don't forget they have a fine description of you. If they should happen to find you turning up over there, your daddy would have to begin hiring squads of lawyers fast."

"If Spence is there, the police haven't found him yet," Iris said with conviction. "If they *had* found him, the news would be all over everywhere by now. So it's an opening for us and we've got to get there in a hurry, before they do get around to it."

"And suppose you do find Spencer Carling there dead?" I inquired. "What then?"

Paling, Iris said, "I'll decide about that when we find out just how dead he is. Don't try to stall me, Halliday. Come on, we're going."

"But *where* on East 55th Street?" I said, hoping the question would leave her stymied. "Just where?"

"We'll find out," Iris said without hesitation. "Somebody who worked with Yvette might know. We'll go over to the Roulon and ask."

**T**HE idea put a chill into me, as you can well understand, Mr. Kellerton. She would have done it, too. There can be no doubt at all that for the sake of relieving Donna Carling's anxiety this chick would actually have gone over to the hotel where the homicide dicks were certainly still sniffing about, and started shooting questions at the "murdered" dancer's friends.

Naturally, Mr. Kellerton, I had to prevent that at all costs, Iris seemed too willing to play risky gambles with too little concern for the danger to herself. She needed watching all the time, for her own sake, just as her daddy had known all along.

Rising at last from this typewriter, I said, "It's your round. Let's move."

Down in the street, Iris headed for the nearest hack stand. We should have walked, in order to make ourselves as inconspicuous as possible, but eye-witnesses don't seem to bother Iris very much.

The taxi stopped in a region of ou-

lent spires rearing above old stone houses, all dark and slumberous. Iris ordered the cabby to wait. It had once been a fashionable home. Now remodeled into small apartments, it seemed slightly shabby in an otherwise snooty Sutton Place scene.

One of the mail boxes in the vestibule bore the name of Ryan and the designation 1-A. That was it—Yvette's other apartment, apparently on the ground-floor front.

Irish discovered immediately that apartment 1-A had a separate entrance opening directly from the vestibule, ideal for perfect privacy. Her hand reached the knob before mine. The knob turned and she caught her breath. It was highly unusual, I thought for that door to be left unlatched.

Iris slowly pushed the door open—onto darkness. I eased a hand in to a switch. Soft lights shone and a gasp broke from Iris. Suddenly she was pushing in.

"Spence, Spence!"

Spencer Carling lay heavily on a couch, one leg dangling. The blood on his topcoat and pants was dry and black. The fancy rayon couch-cover was stained with it. More of it made big spots on the floor. There were two black-green bruises on his forehead and his expensive Homburg lay crushed on the floor. When not subject to such wear and tear, he would be a smoothly handsome man of distinction. Right now he appeared to be a distinguished-looking corpse—but Iris thought different.

"Spence!" She had dropped to her knees and was shaking him. To me she said breathlessly, "Thank heaven, he's not dead, Halliday. *Do something!*"

Sure enough. Yvette's suicide note had exaggerated a little. She seemed to have overestimated her talents as a murderess. Apparently she hadn't checked closely enough after the shooting and had hurried away under the mistaken assumption that she had blasted the guy down for keeps. He certainly looked utterly inert, but Iris was right again. His pulse was ticking faintly.

"Needs a doc bad," I said. "We better—"

"Not here!" Iris squeaked. "We can't let Donna know we found him like this!"



Carling had been that way for hours and would hang on longer with no more harm done. In fact, he began showing more signs of life. He stirred a little and groaned. Giving him a quick checking over, I found a bullet hole penetrating completely his left leg and a gash in his side where another bullet had bounced off a rib, leaving it shattered. Those bullets had been fired from Carling's own gun, which Iris had stolen from Yolette's room and which I was still carrying stuffed under my vest.

I scouted into the pantry and came back with an old household remedy labelled *bourbon*. A little of this trickled between Carling's waxy lips, caused him to cough. While he continued to show signs of increasing recovery, I left the medicine with Iris and gave the apartment a quick once-over.

Its frilly touches showed Yolette's chorus-girl taste. A man's frequent presence was shown by such items as a pipe, and jar of tobacco.

The signs were hinted it was a place not used for full-time living.

Whispers from the couch called me back. Carling had opened his eyes slightly and was blinking blearily at Iris. He seemed to mistake her for the first host of angels.

He had been lying here a long time, which was probably all to the good. He had lost some blood, but the effects of shock had passed. Thanks either to that hole in his leg, or to his good sense, he had stayed flopped right where he'd fallen and had apparently had the benefit of a coma-like sleep. In fact he had doubtless spent a better night than I had.

In a hoarse breath he asked, "Who shot me?"

CONSIDERING the setup here, and the story as Iris had relayed it, this seemed to be something he should already know fairly well; but of course he was confused and suffering. I answered him: "Yolette."

He said, "Who?"

"Yolette, of course."

He asked with an effort, "Who's she?"

"It will all come back to you, Mr. Carling," I assured him. "Don't worry about it now."

"I don't know any Yolette," he insisted in his weak voice. "I never saw this place before. I came here to meet Donna."

I decided he must be delirious. He closed his eyes and sank back into a deep fog. Iris tugged at my arm in alarm.

"We've got to get him out of here, Halliday, get him back home before the police find him here."

"He'll still have those punctures in him," I reminded her. "Doctors are required by law to report all gunshot wounds. The cops will be coming around soon, anyway."

Iris's violet eyes flashed. "Spencer's doctor won't report these. Not after I've done a little work on him."

I could believe that. "But how are you going to explain those bullet-holes to Donna? You can't tell her it was moths."

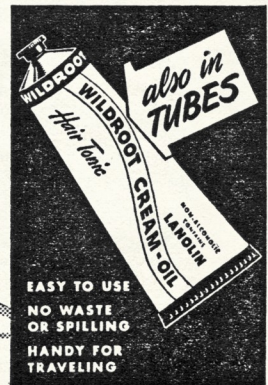
"Leave her to me, Halliday," Iris said. "Daddy's paying you to keep me out of trouble, isn't he? Well, then, quit quibbling and give me a hand before the cops move in."

This play, also being illegal, would jam



3 good reasons why men prefer

**WILDROOT  
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EASY TO USE  
NO WASTE  
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HANDY FOR  
TRAVELING

us up even worse if we were caught making it, Mr. Kellerton—but I knew of no way of persuading Iris not to make it.

So I buttoned up Carling's coat to hide the bloodstains, stuck his battered Hamburg back on his head. Then, with Iris's help I pulled him to his feet. He dragged between us while we jockeyed him out the door and across the sidewalk to the waiting taxi.

"This is a guy who never calls it a night until he falls on his face," I explained to the driver. "Too much liquor is the curse of mankind—they say."

The cabby, a typical member of his profession, helped Iris and me hoist Carling aboard. After tooling us over to East Seventy-Sixth, he helped us to unload our passenger in front of the Carling home. As a consequence of pressing a ten-spot on him (see attached expense account). I hope he has become a man with a short memory.

As we jockeyed Carling inside, Donna came hustling over, cool and efficient in the emergency. She was too intently concerned about her shot-up husband to notice that I was there. She and Iris maneuvered Carling to the couch in his study on that same floor. Donna immediately got busy with the phone, routing their family doctor out of bed.

As I have pointed out, that move could blow the whole case wide open. It was everybody's funeral now—unless Iris could somehow arrange it otherwise, slightly illegally.

Nde, Rodney looked as bushed as if he had had a night as tough as mine, from having to cope with Donna's anxieties.

"I don't know how Iris will try to explain all this to Donna," I said to Rodney, easing him aside. "but that's up to her. Here, take this—but keep it out of sight."

Rodney winced and stared as I put Carling's revolver into his hands. "What should I do with it?"

"Put it back where Yolette stole it from—and pray that the cops will never match it up with the slug she sank in herself." I moved back from the door. "Damn funny about that gun, Rodney. Carling knew Yolette had stolen it. She was screeching threats and he told you he was afraid to go near her. Yet the next thing

he did was to walk right into her Fifty-Fifth Street parlor. So he promptly got shot up. Is he usually that absent-minded?"

Rodney said with a puzzled frown, "Maybe she lured him in by pretending to forgive him. One last drink together for old times' sake, darling—that sort of thing."

I wagged my head. "Their friendship must have flared up like a skyrocket. Yolette knocking herself off just because one guy had gone sour on her when there must've been dozens of other guys drooling around after her. It's pretty hard to believe."

"But who can say what a woman in love will do?"

"Yeah, or any other kind, for that matter. Well, let me hear from you, Rodney, when the bulls start swarming in. Good night now."

From the Carling home I came back here to add this report to the night's bad news, Mr. Kellerton. As to keeping Iris Kent absolutely in the clear when the crash comes—got any suggestions, Mr. Kellerton?

If so, please put them in the form of a memo and leave them here on my desk where I'll find them when I come back—if I ever do.

Halliday.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Snaful*

*Kellerton Detective Agency MEMO*

*From: J. J. Kellerton.*

*To: All operatives.*

*Remarks: Urgent!*

Find Halliday.

I have had absolutely no word from Halliday all day. I am unable to locate him anywhere by phone.

All operatives are hereby ordered to drop all previous assignments and concentrate on finding Halliday.

I am unable to offer any suggestions as to where to look, but *find him*.

Report to me immediately any information that might indicate his whereabouts.

J.J.K.

\* \* \*

*Kellerton Detective Agency MEMO*

*From: J. J. Kellerton*

*To: All office employees.*

*Remarks: Urgent!*

Any employee receiving word from Val Halliday in any manner is ordered to report it to me at once.

It is highly necessary for me to see Halliday as soon as possible. The continued existence of this agency may depend on it. Time is of the essence.

All my operatives are now concentrating on the objective of finding Halliday, but so far without result.

I repeat, any employee who may hear from Halliday must inform me instantly. Any employee failing to do this will be summarily fired.

J.J.K.

\* \* \*

*Kellerton Detective Agency MEMO*

*From: J. J. Kellerton*

*To: Val Halliday*

*Remarks: This is urgent and for the record.*

It is now 6:45 p.m. All my operatives have been searching for you all day. You have not reported so much as one word to anyone else in my office.

This lack of cooperation on your part in a time of crisis is unforgiveable. Unless you can give an acceptable explanation for it immediately, your connection with this agency will be abruptly and permanently ended.

All New York newspapers today have been printing hints that certain sensational developments in the Yolette homicide case are about to break. Headquarters has not yet released any information as to what these sensational developments may be. Lacking further reports from you, I have not been able to learn how disastrously and criminally this agency may be involved in them.

However, two developments right here in this office have cast a most ominous shadow over our situation.

The first of these was a visit from Captain Pader, chief of the homicide squad, bright and early this morning.

Captain Pader's call was ostensibly a casual one. Actually he was feeling us out and giving us more rope. He inquired for

you in a friendly way. He asked me if I am acquainted with the lovely girl with whom you had been seen recently—meaning last evening in the Roulon Hotel. I evaded all his questions as best I could, at the same time feeling that Captain Pader already knew more of the answers than I do, even yet.

How could he know so much?

I have an unnerving suspicion, Halliday, that this was not Pader's first visit to this office today. I believe he was here at a very early hour of the morning, after you had left the office empty. If so, he had free access to the reports you had left on my desk. Captain Pader must have found them very enlightening. To him, in fact, they were not so much reports as a damning confession of guilt.

Immediately following Captain Pader's departure, which left me feeling already trapped, I received a long distance call from Mr. Newton Kent.

Mr. Kent asked me why our regular written report to him, about his daughter, due today, had not shown up this time.

What could I tell him, Halliday?

Having been retained by Mr. Kent to keep Iris safe from danger, I did not dare inform him that we had allowed her to become criminally entangled in scandalous front-page crimes.

I answered Mr. Kent to the effect that my operative on the case had been a little remiss due to ill health, but the report would follow immediately. Meanwhile I said as convincingly as I could that there was no cause for him to worry about Iris.

This statement of mine may be disproved cataclysmically by events at any moment, in which case I will be a gone duck.

It is up to you, Halliday, to make my word good—and you'd better make it good fast.

I intend to wait here indefinitely on the off chance that I may hear from you. Meanwhile, a copy of this memo will be put on your desk as a matter of routine and another copy will be left under your apartment door in case my men continue to miss you.

Let me repeat, Halliday, this is most critical and *most urgent*.

One other thing, Halliday. Lay off your profligate use of your expense account.

If you attempt to charge one more thing to me, you'll wind up paying for it yourself.

J.J.K.

\* \* \*

Mr. J. J. Kellerton,  
Kellerton Detective Agency,  
Broadway, New York City.  
Dear Mr. Kellerton.

Please excuse the orchid stationery.

As you may have noticed from the post-mark on this letter, I am writing from a safe distance outside New York City. Following the last of my reports, certain new developments came up which made it seem wiser to get out of town and stay undercover until the heat's off.

While I have been sitting here, waiting from hour to hour for the Yolette case to break wide open, you have possibly been waiting also for me to get in touch with you. I did not phone because of the strong possibility of tapped wires. An ordinary letter, like this one, although slower, seemed safer. By the time it reaches your desk we may all be ensconced in the clink, but at this writing it's still anybody's guess because the cops are giving out no news as to which way the case may break.

As I noted in the last of my reports, it was dawn when I was finally able to call it a night.

Just as I opened the door to leave for home, quick footfalls came up the stairs.

It was Iris again, this time with Ned Rodney at her elbow. He tried to hold her back, his face flushed with anger, but she came right on with her eyes again full of those hard-to-handle glints.

"She's impossible," Rodney complained. "She won't hold still. Can't make her let bad enough alone."

Iris said to him biting, "I don't see why you're following me around. After all, Halliday's an expert at that. I wish you'd get out and stay out."

"I will," Rodney answered stiffly. "I'll do that very thing right now. You can have the entire blame for wrecking the works, and welcome."

He turned around, stomped back down the stairs and went stalking along the street. Iris seemed relieved to be rid of him. Her smile was daisy-fresh and eager.

I answered it with a frown.

"He's right. You should have stayed with Spencer and Donna."

"But everything's okay there. Spencer's doctor is being sweet about it. And Donna doesn't suspect anything about Yolette—not so far, anyway."

I stared at Iris. "How does Spencer explain those bullet holes in himself?"

"Spencer can't seem to understand it himself. He says that while he was out of his office late in the afternoon a phone message was left for him, supposedly from Donna. Donna says she left no such message, but of course Spencer had no reason to question it at the time. The message asked Spencer to meet Donna at East Fifty-Fifth Street. It was the first time he was ever there in his life, he says."

"What happened?"

"He says he rang and a voice called 'Come in.' He opened the door. As he stepped in, the lights inside the apartment were switched off. At the same time a gun was shot at him twice. In falling, he hit his head. That's all he remembers until he recovered consciousness all alone in that dark room. He tried to get up but couldn't make it any farther than the couch where we found him."

"Didn't he see Yolette doing the shooting?"

"I found a chance to ask him about that when Donna wasn't around. Spencer didn't see anybody. He says he knows no woman named Yolette, and nobody had been threatening to kill him. He didn't even seem to know his gun had been stolen from his office."

"In other words, he denies everything—except that somebody shot him. A total stranger did that to him, maybe. It was just innocent target practice. Do you believe him?"

"Yes. I do, Halliday," Iris said. "For lots of reasons. I'll tell you some of them on the way over. I think another look at that place might turn up something to show that Spencer's telling the truth."

"We can't go back there," I said. "The cops could be waiting for you by now. You'd be walking right into a trap."

"Are you walking into it with me, Halliday?" Iris said evenly, "or will I have to go over there and walk into it alone?"

She started down the stairs in a way that told me nothing would stop her until she reached East 55th Street.

Well, Mr. Kellerton, my strict orders from you were to keep her clear and safe. This left me with no choice but to head out with her to what might be our certain doom.

**A**GAIN Iris grabbed a cab. A few more taxies were in circulation now that the dawn of a new day was at hand. As we got under way, I felt a cold twinge of warning that we were heading into the payoff, but no such misgivings troubled Iris.

"In the very first place, Spencer's a man of very discriminating tastes," Iris resumed. "He would never go for a second-string night-club dancer. Not when he knows all the most beautiful and attractive women in the theatre."

"Next you'll mention Spencer's top-coat and hat," I said. "When we found him he was still wearing his coat and his hat lay on the floor, and this seems to bear out his story that he was shot as soon as he stepped through the door."

"That's right," Iris said. "None of this is really what it seemed to be. I don't know yet what it really is, except that it must mean Spencer wasn't actually two-timing Donna after all."

After we arrived and sent the taxi on, I held Iris back a moment and took a good look up and down the street. There was no sign of any cops casing the joint, but this was no guarantee that we weren't about to stick our necks into a noose.

Iris tugged me on to the private door in the vestibule. It was unlocked, just the

way we had left it when lugging Carling out. We eased into deep gloom amounting almost to darkness—the venetian blinds were closed, with heavy drapes drawn halfway over them—and snapped on the lights again.

The room was the same as we had left it, which indicated that no dicks had dropped in so far. That meant they were overdue.

I went directly to the coffee table. An expensive English-made pipe lay beside a humidor half full of a tobacco having a delicate, costly fragrance.

"Your theory is that Carling was framed, but how about these items?" I asked Iris. "They're Carling's, aren't they?"

Iris puckered her pretty eyebrows over them while I continued giving the place a once-over. Next I pointed out to her pajamas monogrammed with the initials SC. A spare rainy-day Homburg, also in the closet, had the same initials stencilled in its band. The scotch in the kitchenette was a rare brand which Iris admitted Carling always insisted upon for his cellar at home. However, none of this proof convinced her.

"I still can't believe Spencer would go so hard for a gaudy gal like Yolette," Iris said. "It must have been somebody else with Yolette, not Spencer."

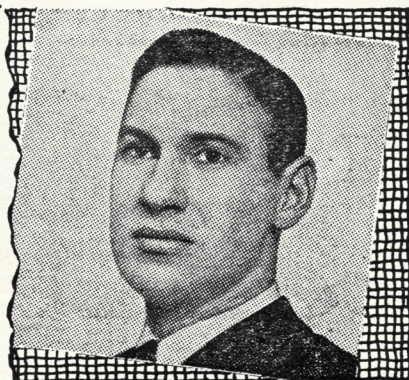
If you've got to theorize about it, let's do it some other place," I said. "The dicks might drop in here any minute."

"Suppose it was some other man. He wanted to shake Yolette—but she was making it plenty tough. So in his desperation to tear loose from her this man killed Yolette and made it seem that some other

## REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.



man—Spence—” Iris hesitated, thinking that one over.

“But a man didn’t kill Yolette,” I reminded Iris. “Yolette shot herself, remember?”

“Did she?” Iris said.

“Didn’t she? You ought to know. You heard the bang. You went right in and found her dead. There was the gun and a suicide note. But you didn’t notice any murderer in there, did you?”

Iris shook her head, no.

“There was no place for a murderer to hide in that small room. Neither was there any way a murderer could have slipped out unseen, path both of us. So there wasn’t any murderer. So it was Yolette who shot Yolette.”

“But I didn’t smell any gunsmoke when I went in, Halliday,” this amazing babe informed me. “The air seemed to have had time to clear. The blood on Yolette’s cheek seemed to have dried a little, too. Don’t you think she should have looked a little  *fresher*  dead than she did?”

This chick was impressing me as one who knew how to use her eyes and her head. She was not only a luscious lass but plenty hep too. I must confess, Mr. Kellerton, that Iris was figuring this angle a little way ahead of me—although I was catching up with her fast.

“You’re saying that Yolette was not a suicide, but a victim of murder, and the killing happened earlier than it seemed. If you’re right, that bang we heard just before you went in wasn’t the death shot after all. So what was it, then?”

Answering my own question, I reached for the phone. This was a long-shot inspiration and I was making this call in a risky direction. I dialed the number of

the Hotel Roulon and asked for Sid, the house dick.

The line stayed dead for minutes while they hunted him up. Finally his response came in the shape of a noncommittal grunt. I said effusively, “Hiya, Sid. This is Val, your old pal Val Halliday. How the hell are ya, kid?”

**I** COULD feel Sid suddenly tighten up. That means he knew the cops were really taking an interest in me. Sid had to play ball with the dicks, of course, while at the same time protecting his hotel’s good name by keeping the homicide as quiet as possible. This meant he had to play it cagey in all directions, including mine.

“This may help us get Yolette off the front pages faster than otherwise. Sid. Take a look in the register. Find out who, if anybody, was occupying a room right next door to Yolette’s, or directly across the hall. I don’t mean the witness in 736. I mean some other guy who was even closer than that to 742.”

I waited, trying to hear what Sid was mumbling to the desk clerk in the background. Presently he relayed the dope to me.

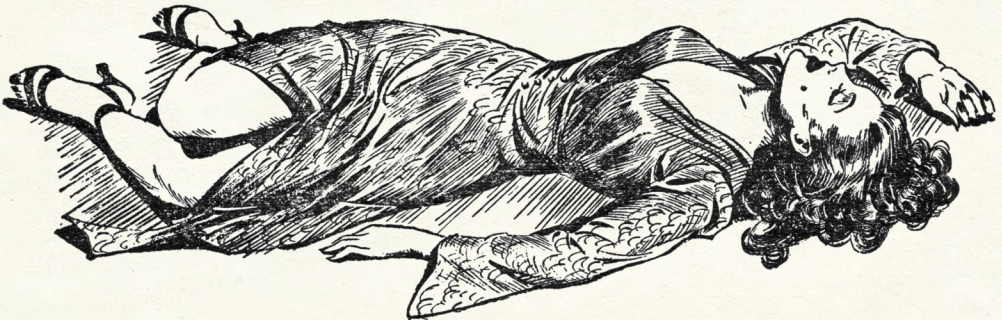
“Man named George Ross in 741.”

The name meant nothing.

“He asked for that room,” Sid added. “No paying guest ever asked for that lousy location before, but this one said he likes quiet. He’s checked out now. Cops weren’t interested. Saw no connection.”

No connection? “George Ross” could fire a gun in that room, or make any loud banging, gunlike noise, and a listener in that long, carpet-muffled hallway couldn’t tell whether it had come from

Yolette



742 or 741 or any other nearby door. That noise and that noise alone had seemed to fix the time of Yolette's "suicide"—but of course it could have been easily faked.

"How about a description, Sid?" I asked quickly, with Iris listening at my elbow. "Would he be a handsome blond, with baby-blue eyes, the artistic, wolfish type—"

I never did hear Sid's answer.

At that instant the room lights went out.

A sudden darkness swamped us. Iris gasped and grabbed my arm. I put the phone down fast, twisting to stare over my shoulder.

The door connecting with the vestibule was open several inches. A hand had reached in to the wall-switch. It was still visible, now grasping the edge of the door and pushing. The door flashed open and shut all the way and then there was somebody standing backed to it inside the room.

The faintest light of dawn coming through the closed venetian blinds made it possible to see him faintly outlined. One of his fists was lifted in the direction of Iris and me. It was full of gun.

Holding my arm tightly, Iris whispered: "Is it—" and stopped.

"Who else?" I said. "What gripes me is that I actually handed him that gun he's aiming at us."

The killer with the gun said nothing.

Iris whispered, "But how? Why?"

If Spencer wasn't Yolette's boy-friend, then this one is the only other answer. Who else had a better chance to steal Spencer's pipe and scotch and pajamas and plant them here—who but somebody living in Spencer's own home?"

Iris caught her breath. Ned Rodney's mouth stayed tightly shut and his gun stayed pointed straight at us.

"Why, now I see it, Halliday," Iris said. "I had no first-hand knowledge of my own about Spencer and Yolette. Everything I thought I knew about them was second-hand, told me by Ned. I believed it—but every word was a lie."

"He used you to help build up a phony picture. His plan was to serve up the juiciest sort of scandal, with Yolette seeming to have killed herself for love of

Spencer. Fortunately for Spencer, it wasn't important whether or not he got bumped off too. If he lived, he could deny it sixty ways from breakfast and still never convince the papers or Donna," I pointed out.

I added, "What makes this guy sore is that after he'd faked Yolette's suicide so neatly, you started working like a little beaver turning it right back into a murder!"



Staring at Ned Rodney's shadow on the door, Iris said breathlessly.

"But why?"

"That's clear enough too, once you think of the legal angle. When Donna divorced Spencer he paid her a lot of dough. Since then Ned's been living very nicely off his sister. Also! he's first in line to come into Donna's money in case *she* should suddenly turn up a suicide over blighted love. But if Donna remarries Spencer, then Spencer become's the number-one man in the Carling financial setup, with full control of it. This fine lad's plan was simply to prevent that remarriage."

Iris said directly to the dark figure against the door: "It was a perfectly foul trick, Ned. What are you going to do now—murder us, too?"

"He's nuts if he tries it," I said. "He'll never be able to fake a picture to account for me being found dead with you, honey."

A click came sharply from the gun in Rodney's hand. He seemed to have decided that I had moved far enough. I had been edging away from Iris, dividing his target and bringing myself closer to the coffee table. I had no gun on me. My only hope was to fall back on a trick as old as Pocahontas.

With one hand I suddenly whipped off my hat and flung it at Rodney's face. His answering shot came with hair-trigger

swiftness. The bullet thudded into something between Iris and me.

She yipped and dove behind a chair, as my hand grabbed up Carling's jar of tobacco. The second bullet was due in another split second—when a hail of stinging tobacco flakes flew into Rodney's eyes. It worked as well this time as it did three hundred years ago.

Rodney fired twice, blindly and wildly, as I jumped on him. I grabbed the gun, twisted it back on him and let him shoot himself in the left shoulder. Then with the gun in my own hand, I clipped him across the face with it twice. This left him lying inert in the center of the room. I dropped the gun beside him.

"Come on, honey," I said to Iris, grabbing her hand. "We're blowing."

I pulled her out of that hideaway, hustled her along the side street and veered her into the avenue. She was breathless and dizzy when I stopped momentarily, on a hunch, to peer back past the corner. A car was stopping just then in front of Yolette's apartment. It was a police limousine and Captain Pader got out of it, having apparently just gotten around to tracing Yolette's hideaway.

Iris and I hustled on. Using her convertible, next, we kept on riding until we arrived at the Kent estate.

We have been here ever since, watching the papers, listening constantly to the radio and waiting for the cops to announce the big break in the Yolette homicide case. Having captured Rodney, they are exploring all the angles before calling in the reporters. At this writing they are still staying clammed—and all we can do is to keep on praying.

I would like to add, Mr. Kellerton, that Newton Kent is a really swell guy so long as Iris seems to remain unharmed by the wickedness of the city, anyway. He has invited me to spend the weekend here as his daughter's guest. It didn't take me as long as a fiftieth of a second to accept.

Sincerely, your faithful servant,  
Van Halliday.

\* \* \*

*I. J. Kellerton Detective Agency MEMO*

THE END

*From: J. J. Kellerton.*

*To: Mr. Val Halliday.*

*Remarks: Congratulations, my boy.*

You will find this memo on your desk when you return from your well-earned weekend at the magnificent Kent estate, which I hope to see myself some day.

By this time you will have read all the newspaper accounts. I may say that my earnest conversations with Captain Pader (aided by your confidential reports and letter) helped to shape the news as it was finally given out.

Although Ned Rodney has not talked at all, Captain Pader has accused him of killing Yolette, then attempting to kill himself, using a gun stolen from a friend's office. Iris Kent is not mentioned in any of the news accounts and neither are Mr. and Mrs. Carling, except incidentally, as innocent relatives of the prisoner.

Come right in at any time, my boy, and allow me to felicitate you personally on the satisfactory outcome of a difficult case.

\* \* \*

*Val Halliday Detective Agency MEMO*  
*Val Halliday, Director.*

*From: Val Halliday.*

*To: J. J. Kellerton.*

*Remarks: This is not particularly urgent.*

I'm sorry I never did back to your office, Mr. Kellerton, but how about dropping over to have lunch with me some day soon?

I have been pretty busy, you see, setting up my own private detective agency on Park Avenue, with the backing of Mr. Newton Kent. After Iris had talked it over with him several times, he finally agreed that I was a good business risk, particularly with Iris in charge of the office.

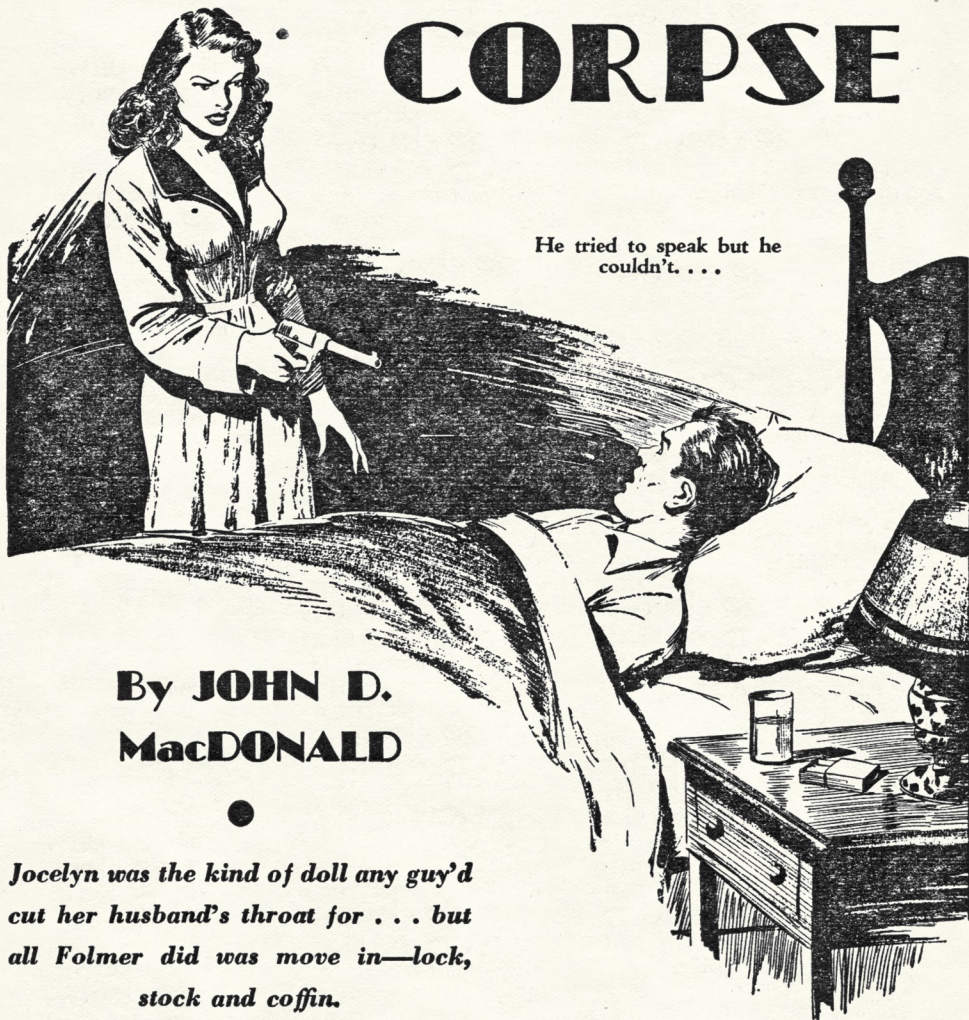
He is a hard man to convince sometimes, but Iris's talents as persuader seem to be equal to her natural abilities as a detective—so much so that she expects daddy soon to okay her plan for becoming Mrs. Val Halliday in the very near future.

But more about this at lunch, J. J. Hope you can make it soon. Of course, it will go on this agency's expense account.

V. H.



# THE DURABLE CORPSE



He tried to speak but he  
couldn't. . . .

By **JOHN D.  
MacDONALD**

*Jocelyn was the kind of doll any guy'd  
cut her husband's throat for . . . but  
all Folmer did was move in—lock,  
stock and coffin.*

"I'M CALLING from the hospital," she was saying to Folmer. Her voice was thin and horse with terror. "Go right home. I'll meet you there."

"Now look, Jocelyn," he said, placatingly. "I can't just pick up and run out of here in the middle of the afternoon. What in the world is it that—"

"It's Steve," she said. "He's come back."

He waited long minutes and then said, "No! No, it isn't . . . it can't be. I—"

"You're on the phone, you fool. Come home immediately!"

The line went dead. Harrison Folmer hung up the phone. His hand shook so that it rattled against the cradle. He took a white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead and his upper lip.

It couldn't be true! . . .

He remembered the night that Steve had taken him home after finding him on the street. Steve with his big, plain, almost ugly face, his slow warm smile. Steve had said, "I met her in London during the war."

Harrison Folmer had expected one of those heavy little London girls with a creamy expression and flat twangy voice. And so in the warmth and the subdued lighting of the big apartment, Folmer had been completely unprepared for the girl who came to the doorway to meet them. Tall and delicately rounded with a firm body and slow grace. Shoulder-length hair, as light-absorbent as soot, tilted eyes of an odd greeny-gray, mouth like crushed fruit, and a voice so gentle as to be but the echo of a voice.

Steve said, "Jocelyn, you've heard me talk about Harry Folmer, my tail gunner? I found him ten minutes ago."

He remembered the way she had taken one slow step toward him, the feel of her cool hand in his, the undertone of caress in her voice as she said, "I am so happy to meet you, Mr. Folmer."

Later, after dinner, they had brandy by the fire. After Jocelyn had gone to bed, Harrison Folmer had found the courage to make the confession—that his clothes had been impounded by a landlady whose patience had finally worn out, that he had lost four jobs in a row, that he was down to a last seventy cents.

Steve had said, "This is a big place. This is your home for as long as you care to stay, Harry. Maybe I can work you in down at my place."

Steve Haegan. Always soft-hearted. Harrison Folmer looked around the office that had once been Haegan's. He had hung Steve's picture on the wall. A nice touch, he thought.

He took his hat and topcoat from the outer office, told Miss Grannady that he wouldn't be back until the next morning. Going down in the elevator, he thought of those first days in Steve's apartment. Only once had Steve mentioned the war, saying, "I never blamed you, Harry, for asking to be taken off flying duty after the twenty-ninth strike. Your replacement got it, you know, the thirtieth time out."

Folmer had wanted to make a pointed

comment about people who had no nerves and no imagination. Instead he contained himself and said calmly, "Thanks, Steve."

He had been run-down and Steve had insisted that he "take it easy" for a few days.

The few days had become two weeks. With the money Steve had loaned him, Folmer had gotten his clothes, bought a few new things.

Being of a certain delicacy, he had made it his business to be up every morning, dressed in his robe, to have breakfast with Steve and Jocelyn. Jocelyn, with her dark hair piled high, with the house coat that buttoned around her slender throat, was particularly lovely in the morning.

Breakfasts were gay, but the moment Steve left the house, the constraint was upon them. Innuendoes, unbidden, crept into polite conversation. Each morning the cleaning woman arrived at eleven. Steve left the house at eight-thirty.

The tension between them grew. On the fifth morning, over the last cup of coffee, Harrison Folmer said, "Steve tries to think that I was a legitimate member of his brave and noble crew. As a tail gunner I was a washout." He looked at her steadily, making his meaning clear, saying, "As a matter of fact, Jocelyn, I'm a man completely lacking in moral stature."

She did not blush or look away. She said, "I was dancing in a club not far from Picadilly. He tries as hard to pretend I'm a lady as he does to pretend that you were a hero."

"Living up to a preconceived standard becomes a bit tiring, doesn't it?"

"Almost too tiring, Harry," she whispered.

Her lips were flame. She was vortex, slowly spinning, dragging him under the surface of black water in which he drowned.

Days later, lying in his arms, she said, "This is about the end of it, Harry. I don't want to put you off, but he's growing impatient for you to go to work. He's saving a place for you in the office."

"There will be other chances. There has to be."

"Too dangerous, Harry. This hasn't been dangerous, as you have a reason for

being here. But after this, you won't. I've had to claw my way up the ladder, Harry. I'm not going to throw it over easily. There's a better way."

Those words had become as oppressive as a canker. He thought he knew what she meant, but the very idea of it gave him the horrors.

The evenings when Steve invited him to the apartment were worse. He wanted to refuse and yet he could not.

Once, when he had a moment alone with her, he said, "I'm going to do it. You know what I mean." She had nodded.

Early winter night two years before. Snow flurries. Collars turned high against the wind. He had said, "Steve, I've got problems. Come for a walk with me."

Steve had said, "Sure thing, Harry. And I want to talk to you. Your work here hasn't been . . . exactly adequate."

Harry had picked the path. It lead down near the path by the riverfront.

It had been very simple, really. "Is that a light out there, Steve?"

Turn him toward the railing and point. The other hand slips out the length of pipe. Chunk of lead against bone half lost in the sound of the wind and water. Shoulder him over the railing, fling the length of pipe out into midstream, walk quickly away, back to the lonely room and get into bed and wait for the police. . . .

**H**E SUDDENLY found himself outside the apartment door, reaching for the key, not knowing how he had arrived there. Jocelyn sat on the couch, pale.

He sat down heavily beside her, without taking off his coat or hat. He lit a cigarette and passed it to her, lit another

for himself, forgot to put it in his mouth. "I don't understand it!" he said softly. "He couldn't have lived. Are you certain it isn't an imposter?"

"Do I look a fool?"

"What did he say?"

"He wasn't well enough to talk. He smiled at me and said, 'Hello, Jocelyn'."

"Wasn't it funny that . . ."

"He smiled? Why not. I'm his wife. He's got nothing against me. I didn't try to kill him."

"You're my wife, Jocelyn."

"Not quite—not with a prior marriage on the books. Why can't you ever do anything right?"

"I didn't want to do it. You made me do it."

"Now you're going all hysterical, my brave Harry. You would have done it with or without a suggestion. If he gets around to accusing you, you'll have the devil of a time trying to prove that I had anything at all to do with it. I didn't, you know."

"Why is he in the hospital?"

"The police came and got me. They call it an amnesia case. From his papers, he's been a common seaman for the past two years. A taxi hit him. When he came to in the hospital he gave them his right name and address. Reporters have been pestering me. A human interest case.

Harrison Folmer stood up and began to pace back and forth. "Oh, great! Victim of amnesia returns to find wife married to other man. The business belongs to him. His memory will come back, Jocelyn. All of it. And he'll remember what I did and he'll put two and two together and throw both of us out onto the street. What

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are we going to do? What *can* we do?"

"Be still. I'm trying to think. . . ."

Steve was propped up in the bed in the guest room. Jocelyn stood, slim and lovely, at the foot of the bed. Harrison Folmer sat in the flowered armchair by the window.

Steve was sun-darkened, somehow younger-looking than when he had left.

He said, "The papers have given us a bad time over this. It is going to be up to the three of us to settle it like adults and give them nothing to discuss in the future."

"How much can you remember, darling?" Jocelyn asked softly, throwing a quick glance toward Harry.

Steve smiled ruefully. "Not very much. I can't even remember leaving the office the night I disappeared. Then there is a gap and I can remember being aboard a tugboat. They had taken my wet clothes and put other clothes on me. My head hurt. For some reason I was afraid. I crept off the tugboat. Then, later, I had to pick a name. I got a deck-hand job on a banana boat."

"What do you mean, settle it like adults?" Harrison Folmer asked.

Steve smiled at him. "Naturally, Harry, I'll have to take my business back. I built it up myself. And I don't want to separate you two. Jocelyn and I will get a quiet divorce and then you two can have a legal marriage. That's the only fair way."

Folmer jumped up. "Fair? Fair, you call it! Even the furniture in this place is yours. I won't have a dime. We've spent it as fast as the business made it, and —"

"Please be quiet, Harry," Jocelyn said. She smiled at Steve. "We are both very grateful, Steve. Believe me. You're being very fair. I know how hard all this must be. The police found your hat near the river. You were assumed to be dead. We were married eleven months later."

Steve's smile held its familiar warmth. He said, "I've become quite an inconvenience, haven't I, Jocelyn?"

"Of course not, Steve. Try to rest." She went around the bed, patted his hand, tucked the blankets around him, beckoned to Harrison Folmer.

In the kitchen, Folmer, his voice a

harsh whisper, said, "What are you trying to do?"

"You fool, Harry. That little speech of yours didn't help. We don't want him suspicious. You are to agree to his plan—completely."

"I don't understand."

"Look, silly. What is more natural than for a man in his position to commit suicide?"

There was a long silence. He said, "It would look bad unless we had a note of some sort. Remember how they were suspicious when he disappeared?"

"I've been thinking about that, Harry. In London he wrote me a lot of letters. I thought he was just another American lying about his bankroll. So I wanted nothing to do with him. But a friend checked for me, found out that he was well off. Some of the letters he wrote me when I was ignoring him might have passages that would fit. I'll read them carefully. I saved them."

Harry said stubbornly, "I can't do it again. I can't."

"But you will, Harry," she said sweetly.

"Let's not talk about it now," he said. He held her tight, his cheek against her soot-black hair. She pushed him away.

She said, "Not with him in the house, Harry. Never again until he is dead—this time for good."

**F**OLMER let himself into the apartment. She met him at the door, kissed him lightly, held her finger to her lips, handed him a small slip of paper.

He read it quickly:

*This is an impossible situation, my darling, and there seems to be so little that I can do about it. Please forgive me. All my love.*

Steve.

His hand trembled as he held the paper. She whispered:

"I cut it from the bottom of an old letter. He was apologizing for making a fuss in the club where I danced."

"It's perfect," he said. "Absolutely and completely perfect. You are a genius, Jocelyn."

"Hadn't you noticed?" she said softly.

His voice thickened. He said, "I have been thinking. I have decided I won't do

it. I did it the last time. It gave you a hold over me. This is something we have to share. You'll do it this time."

"No, Harry."

"You'll do it or it won't be done."

Her eyes were fury for long seconds. Her mouth had an ugly twist. "Spineless little man! Dishclout of a man! The stubbornness of the very weak coming to the fore. All right, little man. I'll do it. He's resting now. I'll do it tomorrow night and I'll do it with his target pistol and I'll do it right. But you are going to be here when it happens. Is that clear?"

"Of course I'll be here."

She turned quickly, glanced toward the closed door to the hallway that led to the bath and the bedrooms. She said, "Did you hear something?"

Harry went quickly to the door and pulled it open. The hallway was empty. He smiled a bit uncertainly and said, softly, "We mustn't let imagination get out of control." He closed the door.

Jocelyn said, "I have it planned. We can take the risk of a post mortem. He takes a sleeping pill every night. He takes it with hot tea. I can dissolve several of them in the tea. That will make him . . . easy to handle. . . ."

Folmer, in pajamas and robe, paced back and forth behind the dressing table where Jocelyn sat carefully applying a deep burgundy polish to her nails.

"When are you going to do it?" he asked.

"Be patient, my dear. In a little while." The blue-black pistol was incongruous on the dressing table beside the dainty bottles and jars. It weighed down the note, ironed by Jocelyn into freshness. She said, looking at him in the mirror, "Be a good lad. Run in and take a look at sleeping beauty. Turn on the light a few times and see if it disturbs him."

Folmer went quietly down the hall to the guest room. He found the switch and turned on the bedside lamp. Steve didn't move. He clicked the switch a few times, left the light on, went over to the bed, stood beside it, said softly and experimentally, "Steve! Steve!"

The man didn't stir. Folmer moved a step closer to the bed. A hard brown hand snaked out, grabbed the front of his robe and yanked him down as the other hand,

clapping over his mouth, stifled the startled cry.

Steve rolled over onto him and Folmer looked up into the man's eyes. All warmth was gone from them. The hand slipped from Folmer's mouth to his throat, squeezing tight before Folmer could cry out. The room spun into blackness.

He came slowly up into consciousness, swallowing against the liquid that filled his mouth.

"You've had a nice drink of cold tea, friend," Steve said. "You didn't hit hard enough. I came to in the water and dragged myself out. I took a cheap room under another name and I watched the two of you for a month. I wanted to kill you both, but I was still in love with Jocelyn. So I went away. When love for her was gone, I came back. I wanted to walk in on the two of you. But a taxi hit me. Then I found that this was the better way. I exaggerated my weakness and I've been listening to the two of you. You're a pretty pair."

Folmer felt the thick languidness, the furry-tongued helplessness. He tried to push Steve away, but he could hardly lift his arms. He sagged like a helpless doll, making fuzzy noises in his throat as Steve sat him up, yanked off the robe.

Consciousness was like a light slowly receding into darkness. He felt the covers being tucked around him. Then the room was in darkness and he was alone.

He could hear his own heavy breathing and knew that his mouth sagged open. He tried to move but could only roll his head from side to side. Moonlight, silver-pale, shone across the bottom of the bed.

Her tall pale figure appeared silently in the doorway. By a great effort, Folmer managed to hold his eyelids up far enough so that he could watch her. A great elation filled him as he saw her hand reach for the light switch. The click came from an incalculable distance, and the room remained dark.

He heard her make a sound of annoyance. "Harry," she said softly. "Harry, where are you?" He tried to speak but he couldn't alter even the cadence of his drugged breathing.

"So he ran out on me," she said, venom clear in her tone.

*(Please continue on page 96)*

# BIRTH OF A KILLER

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA



"We could make a trade,"  
he said.

**T**HE cop didn't have much of a hold on Joe Bradley's shoulder. He was jabbing away at the elevator button, looking up at the arrow that showed the cage had stopped at the eleventh floor. The arrow continued up, stopped at the thirteenth floor, the top floor, the city-hall jail.

The cop grunted. "Bringing one of the

*Salesman Joe Bradley had to talk fast to sell his double-crosser on a trip to the sizzle-seat.*

boys downstairs, most likely. That's the way it goes. We get a customer, we lose a customer."

Like tin cans under a press, Joe's insides crumpled. He didn't comment. He was watching the arrow move again, going down. It was five o'clock, quitting time in city hall, and the corridor was filled with people leaving the building. A few looked curiously at Joe in passing. They didn't look at the cop.

The arrow continued down. It pointed at seven, hovered there. Joe wet his lips. He thought of the trouble he was in, and how he wasn't prepared to handle trouble. He was an ordinary guy with blond hair and pleasant, regular features. He was twenty-six, and had, up to that morning, been assistant manager of the Gibbons department store.

"You the fellow that lifted that dough from Gibbons, ain't you?" the cop asked.

"I didn't do it," Joe said. "I—" And then he stopped. He had told his story over and over to Detective Glanz. It hadn't made any difference. Everything pointed against him.

"I heard different," the cop said. "They found the dough in your apartment. Fifteen hundred, wasn't it?"

Joe said nothing. The arrow was moving again, down to the third floor. He thought of the evidence against him. He thought about the trial coming up next week, and how he would be convicted and sent to the penitentiary. Suddenly he knew he couldn't go up in that elevator, that once up there he could never prove his innocence.

The cage stopped; the doors slid back. The cop shifted his hold to Joe's arm as another cop and a prisoner stepped out. Joe wrenched his arm free and shoved his weight against the cop.

A dry sob went through him—and then he was running down the corridor. He ran as fast as he could go, ducking and sliding between the people crowding toward the entrance. The cop shouted behind him. A woman screamed.

There was a jam at the door, and he went through it like a fullback smashing the line. Someone grabbed his sleeve. He made another lunge and heard cloth rip. They were shouting back there for someone to stop him. Then he was through

the entrance and down the steps. There was a lot of confusion behind him as he tore along the sidewalk. There was a picture in his mind of a red-faced cop showing through the crowd, tugging at the revolver in his holster.

The corner came toward him. He turned the corner and continued running. He cut through an alley and stopped when he reached the next street, breathing hard. He was very frightened, and he told himself to cut it out. The sound of a siren floated through the alley.

He walked rapidly along the sidewalk. A bus stopped at the corner and two women climbed down. Joe ducked through the door before it folded shut. He had some change in his pocket. They hadn't booked him; they had been going to do that on the thirteenth floor. He dropped a nickel in the slot.

The driver looked at his torn sleeve, looked at his face. "Trouble?"

"No trouble."

He ducked into a rear seat just as the patrol went by, sirens open.

It was getting dark out there. It looked like rain. The bus rolled two blocks and stopped at the corner. A half-dozen people climbed aboard. Clerks, bookkeepers, a handful of the thousands of white-collar workers in the city. Like Joe Bradley. Like Paul Paine who had lied about not being locked in the store last night. Paine was in charge of shoes, and had been with Gibbons about a year.

Joe had told Detective Glanz everything he knew. Mr. Brice, the manager, had left three days before to attend a retailer's convention. He had left Joe in charge of the store.

Last night, Joe had checked the day's cash with the office girl and sealed the bills in an envelope. Gibbons, like many of the big chain outfits, didn't believe in keeping their money in a safe, and Joe had deposited the envelope in the usual hiding place, after carefully checking that everyone had gone. Then he had locked up and taken the bus home.

The phone was ringing when he reached his small apartment. It was Paine. Paine told him he had been cleaning shelves at the rear of his shoe department and hadn't known it was quitting time. It made Joe sore. It was a mark against him. He'd

been sure the place was empty before he locked up. But he'd gone back and let Paine out the back door, because Paine always parked his car in the alley.

This morning he had arrived at the store early. Mr. Brice was due back, and Joe wanted everything in shape. He'd worked hard to get where he was, starting with Gibbons when he was sixteen as a part-time stock clerk. Brice was ready to retire, and everyone in the store knew that Joe would take his place.

It meant a large salary and a cut of the profits at the end of the year. It meant marriage to Jane Willis, who clerked in ladies ready-to-wear, a home and the kids he'd always wanted.

WHEN he went to look for the money, it was gone. He checked through the store before calling the police, trying to remain calm. When they arrived, Joe told his story. Detective Glanz questioned the clerks, then pulled Joe and Paine aside. Paine denied having been locked in. He denied having called Joe. There were a dozen clerks who swore that Paine had left the store right after closing time.

Then the beat cop mentioned seeing Joe unlock the store, come out alone. Glanz sent a couple of men to search his apartment. An hour later they were back with the envelope intact, saying they had found it in a dresser drawer.

Joe argued. He said that Paine, whose job it was to bolt the back door, could have left it unlocked, gone out the front and cut through the alley to re-enter the unlocked back door. He said there were a hundred places a man could hide in a department store, especially if he knew the set-up.

He called Paine a liar, but none of it did any good. The evidence was against him, and Glanz took him to headquarters.

The bus was rolling through the residential district. It turned left at the corner, turned left again and headed back toward the city. Joe was the only one left in the bus. The driver was watching him in the rear-view mirror. He pulled to a stop at the next corner.

A cop climbed in, said "Hi, Sam," to the driver. The driver spoke to him as he shifted gears, and the cop's eyes found Joe. He made as if to come down the

aisle, then dropped in a seat behind the driver.

*Going on night duty*, Joe thought. It was time for him to get out of here.

He pulled the bell cord and stepped to the rear door, holding his arm against his side so the rip wouldn't show. The bus stopped. The driver worked the release that opened the door, then tried to close it again as the cop yelled:

"Hold it!"

Joe managed to squeeze through. He was running when he hit the pavement. A streetlight showed him a row of frame houses, and he cut between the nearest two. There was a back yard with a lot of shrubbery, and beyond it a fence. He grasped the top of the fence and pulled himself across as a flash beam cut a path through the dark. It washed his face before he dropped to the alley and continued running.

Three blocks away he stopped running. By this time, either the driver or the cop were using a phone, telling headquarters that a suspicious character was in the vicinity. In a very few minutes they would know that the man with the torn coat sleeve was Joe Bradley, and they would be combing the area.

He kept moving. He couldn't seem to think straight. Hunger pawed at his stomach and his breathing was dry. He walked across a lawn to a curled hose and followed it to the connection. The water was warm and tasted of rubber, but it helped. He hurried on, cutting back toward the city, wondering if Mr. Brice had returned, wondering why Paine had framed him.

Then he knew he didn't have to wonder about that. Paine was ambitious. Paine also knew merchandising. With Joe out of the way, he had a good chance of taking over Brice's job. It was as easy as that. Paine was a handsome thirty-five, and eight thousand a year plus a bonus looked good to him.

There was a red neon glow over the city. The residential district gave way to the first scattered business establishments. There was a drugstore up ahead. Joe went through the door and walked rapidly to the phone booth in back.

If Mr. Brice was back by now, he would have checked with the office girl.



Her name was Vivian Blake. She was small and blonde and inclined to giggle, although she was efficient in her work. Joe had gone with her before Jane came to ask for a job, six months ago. Jane was dark, the sultry type. From the very beginning Joe had gone overboard. It hadn't been easy.

She had dated most of the fellows who worked in the store before settling for Joe. She was temperamental, moody, soft and clinging one minute and cold and reserved the next. Joe liked that in her. It was a pleasant change from Vivian who was at times too easy to get along with. But Jane liked expensive things, the reason Joe had held back on popping the question until he was a full manager.

He dialed Vivian's number. After two rings she said hello.

"It's Joe," he said, and heard her gasp. "Vivian," he said.

"All right, Joe." Her voice was steady. "What can I do to help, Joe?"

"Has Mr. Brice called you? Is he back?"

"His train came in around six. The police met him at the station. He called me right afterwards and checked on what they had told him. He doesn't believe you did it, Joe."

"Where is he now? I didn't want to call his house unless I knew for sure."

"He's probably at the store, checking up. He told me he was going there after he'd had dinner. He mentioned something about calling Paul Paine."

"Why?"

"He didn't tell me, but he sounded angry. Joe, are you all right?"

"I'm all right," Joe said. "Thanks, Vivian."

**H**E HUNG up and walked outside. Then he turned and went back in the store and purchased a couple of candy bars. He pulled change out of his pocket. The store keys came with the change. He'd forgotten about them. It meant he could get into the store whether Mr. Brice was there or not. His raincoat was up there in the closet next to the office, and it was already beginning to sprinkle.

His wrist watch said eight o'clock. He thought about calling Jane, then decided to put it off. There was no use worrying

her. She would be going through enough torment without becoming upset about the chance he was taking.

He walked carefully along the street, keeping close to the buildings and looking quickly to right and left before crossing a street. He ate the candy and some of the emptiness went out of his stomach. When he was a block away from the store, he again looked at his wrist watch. It was ten to nine and, turning the corner, he saw lights in the office above the store windows.

There was not much traffic now, but he waited until the street was clear and crossed quickly to the black pocket of the entrance. His key made little noise in the lock. He stepped through the door, closed it behind him and moved to the stairs.

He mounted the stairs. There was a short hallway with the closet on one side and the office door directly ahead. He went through the door and he said, "Mr. Brice." Then his face fell apart.

Mr. Brice was on the floor with a knife in his back.

He was lying beside his desk. There was very little blood. Stepping closer, Joe saw that it was not a knife; it was a copper letter opener, the one Mr. Brice's son had sent him from Africa. Joe knelt beside the body for a long moment. He did not know much about these things, but there was no doubt in his mind that Mr. Brice was dead.

A sudden panic went through him. If he was found here, it would no longer be a matter of simple robbery. It would be murder. He cursed himself for having phoned Vivian. That alone was enough to convict him.

He climbed to his feet, shaking, and backed to the door. Then he thought about Mr. Brice lying there. He thought about this old man who had hired him, ten years ago. How he had worked patiently to teach him the business, believing in him, trusting him. He knew suddenly that he had to find the man who had committed the murder. Running away now wouldn't solve anything.

He went past the body to the desk to dial Jane's number. Someone had to know about Mr. Brice. It wasn't decent to keep the old man here all night. There was a ring.

Jane was answering the phone, "Yes?"  
"It's Joe," he said.

"Where are you, Joe?"

"Hold tight, honey. I'm at the store."

"How did you get in?"

"I can't explain now. Listen, Jane, I found Mr. Brice here. He's been murdered."

He heard her breathing. When she spoke, her voice was unsteady. "Joe, you've got to get out of there. You can't stay in that office with him. You've got to—"

"Jane," he said sharply. "Get hold of yourself. If I run now, they'll blame me. Listen. I want you to wait fifteen minutes and call the police. Tell them what I told you."

"What are you going to do, Joe?"

"I'm going to visit Paine," Joe said grimly. "I'm—"

There was a knock on the front door. Joe's insides tightened, expanded, tightened again. He whispered, "See you later, honey," and carefully cradled the receiver.

He went down the stairs, silently. The knocking was insistent now. A small door opened to the display windows. He opened the door a crack and looked past a display of men's suits, looked at the cop pounding on the door. It was the beat cop, the same one who had spotted Joe leaving the night before.

The cop looked uncertain. He stepped back to the sidewalk and looked up at the lighted office window, then back to the door. He continued pounding.

*After a while he'll go away, Joe thought. He'll go to the corner box and make a call. Then he'll come back and wait for the patrol car. I can go out the back door, but that's a bolt job and I won't be able to lock it after me. That way the store'll be open to anyone who decides to walk in. Kids, maybe, or some drunken bum.*

The cop turned slowly, walked to the opposite corner. Joe beat it to the door. He went through the door and locked it behind him. The cop was at the call box. Joe slipped along the tile entrance to the sidewalk, thinking he'd forgotten the raincoat. It was coming down steady now.

A car turned the corner. The beamed headlights bounced from the wet street and pinned Joe against the side of the

building. The cop was coming away from the call box, yelling.

Joe broke into a run. There was a shot. The bullet made a high screaming sound as it deflected from the building and disappeared into the night. The sidewalk moved beneath Joe's feet. He turned the corner, his mouth wide open, his throat lined with cotton.

Into the alley he turned. The cop was right behind him. Maybe he shouldn't have turned here. That cop would have a clean crack at him when he reached the next street. He'd be outlined for target practise, all right. He wondered what he would do if the cop caught him. He wouldn't have a chance. They'd have him tied up for sure. He wondered what he could do if he got away. Maybe better to leave the city, the state, the country. He tried to think of what that would mean.

Then he reached the end of the alley and heard the boom of the pistol. A stage hot poker burned his side. As he staggered around the corner, thoughts were wild in his head. They'd always be looking for him. No matter where, they'd look for him.

There was another corner and then another. There were no more shots, and he realized that he was moving very fast. There was no pain from the wound, but his undershirt felt warm and sticky against his side. The bullet had probably creased him.

When he could scarcely draw air into his lungs, he stopped running and walked fast, moving through the streets toward the hotel where Paine stayed. He wondered why Mr. Brice had wanted to call Paine, if it had something to do with Mr. Brice being murdered. He wondered who had put the money in his dresser drawer.

It couldn't have been Paine. After I let him out of the store, I went straight to the apartment. And he couldn't have done it the next morning because the cleaning woman came in just as I left.

He wondered who was in this with Paine.

**I**T WAS a frame hotel, four stories high, and Paine had a room on the third floor. *I can't go in through the front because the clerk will insist on calling,* Joe thought. He had a moment of panic, of

wanting to turn and run as far away as he could get. Paine was a big man. If Paine overpowered him, it would add nothing to his side for Paine would call the police. He wondered who had helped Paine.

There was a wooden staircase at the rear of the hotel. There was a fire escape of sorts, but the bottom rung was out of his reach. He waited for a second, shivered. His clothes were soggy wet. His side was beginning to pain, and the light at the end of the alley swayed curiously. He closed his eyes, tight, opened them again and steadied himself against the building. Then he went through the door and up the stairs.

There was a dim yellow light burning in the narrow corridor on the third floor. Joe walked toward in. He knew Paine's room. He had been up here one evening right after Paine had gone to work for Gibbons. They'd gone out, more to get acquainted than anything else, Joe wanting to see a play, Paine wanting to pub crawl.

Joe hadn't like the idea, but he'd gone along with Paine. They'd moved from one place to another, Paine restless, drinking more than was good for him. He'd been in the retail business all his life, he'd told Joe. Worked for a half a dozen outfits, chain outfits included. The Gibbons set-up looked pretty good to him, and he figured he was through roaming.

Paine had said a man had to settle down, make a place in the community. He'd tried to make time with every girl they saw in the bars, and Joe had left him before the evening was well started. He had better uses for his money than to toss it across a bar, and he'd never gone with Paine again.

A bar of light showed below the painted transom. Joe knocked on the door. There was the sound of footsteps. When the door opened, Paine stood there. He looked at Joe, and the cigarette between his lips fell to the floor. Joe shoved past him, turned as Paine closed the door with his back.

"What are you doing here?" Paine asked.

"I've got questions," Joe said, "and I want answers."

Paine moved his lips, but nothing came out. Then he said, "I'll give you five min-

utes—then I'm going to call the cops."

"Did Mr. Brice call you?"

Paine didn't answer. He moved to the phone. Joe stepped in front of him. Paine was a head taller.

"Who helped you?" Joe asked.

Paine put a hand against Joe's chest and shoved. He reached for the phone just as Joe hit him. It wasn't much of a punch. He was still off balance from the shove, and all it did was to turn Paine.

But he forgot about the phone and came after Joe. He hit Joe three quick blows in the face. Joe went backwards, tripping over a wooden chair. Blood oozed in his mouth. He scrambled to his feet and lunged toward Paine. His insides were liquid. He threw a few punches that Paine dodged with expert ease. There was a contemptuous grin on the man's face. He swung his left to Joe's ribs and brought over the right. A blade of pain shot through Joe's side. His head rang like a giant bell.

He was on the floor, and Paine was looking at him, turning his back, moving to pick up the phone. Joe twisted and grabbed the leg of the chair. He got to his knees, lifted the chair high. His toes found purchase, and he staggered up, bringing the edge of the seat down on Paine's head. The phone hit the floor as Paine sagged.

Joe lurched over and replaced the receiver, looking at the blood coming from a cut in Paine's scalp. He wondered dazedly if he had improved matters by coming up here. He should have known he would get nothing from Paine. He felt his eyes suddenly go wet.

There was nothing to do now but to get far away. To get going and keep going. Looking at Paine lying on the floor, a wave of revulsion went through him. He felt his body coming apart inside, come together again. Something going out of him that didn't want to leave. Something that had to leave because he suddenly knew who had helped Paine.

Paine was moving there on the floor. He was groaning and trying to push up with his hands, turning his head and looking at Joe. He made it to his knees, turned over and sat with his back against the table. He felt of the back of his head.

Joe moved to the door. He went

through the door. Then he was down the stairs and racing down the alley and looking for a place where he could use a phone. There was a service station in the next block. He stopped and wet a handkerchief in the gutter. He wiped the blood from his face, holding the wet handkerchief against his lips until the bleeding ceased.

The phone booth was outside the station, against the side. The attendant was busy at the pumps. Joe slipped inside the booth, called headquarters, asked for Detective Glanz. Glanz, they told him, was off duty. Joe asked for his home phone, and the next second he had the dial working.

"Shoot," Glanz said.

"This is Joe Bradley."

Silence, then the cautious words, "Where you calling from, Bradley?"

"Never mind," Joe said. "I know who planted that money in my apartment. I know something else."

He heard Glanz whisper to someone. It didn't matter. They couldn't trace the call. Then Glanz said, "It's out of my hands. It's murder now, Bradley. They found Brice. Homicide is handling it."

"I know about Mr. Brice," Joe said. "I know who did it. I think I can help you catch the man if you'll play along." Joe stopped. Hot splinters dug in his side. "If it doesn't work, I'll give myself up."

"Shoot," Glanz said again.

Joe began by asking a few questions.

"Hold it," Glanz said. "All they did was call and tell me Brice had been murdered."

Breath fought in Joes' throat. Finally he said, "I'm trusting you, Glanz. Suppose you phone headquarters and find out." He gave the number of the pay phone. "Call me here as soon as you find out."

He hung up. A faintness swept through him. If Glanz decided he was pulling a fast one, it was finished. All of it. They'd pick him up, and . . .

A patrol car pulled into the station, stopped beside the pumps. A plump cop climbed out, spoke to the attendant, then walked to the coke box. It was ice water against hot steel inside Joe. His hand found the door handle, pulled at the folding doors.

The phone rang.

"Here it is," Glanz said. "They've removed the body. They didn't have to break down the door because they dragged a lock expert out of bed. Now what."

Joe talked fast.

"Got you," Glanz said. "It better be good."

The phone went dead.

JOE sat there a while longer. Finally, the patrol car went away. Joe sat there, looking at his watch, waiting for twenty minutes to go by. Then he dialed again.

Jane answered.

"You've got to help me," Joe said, and the words hurt him. "I found proof that Paine murdered Mr. Brice."

"Joe," she gasped. "Have you told the police? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, all right, but I haven't told the police. Listen, Jane, I want you to come down to the store. Meet me there. I think Paine is looking for me, and I want to get this proof to you in case something happens."

"What is it? What is the proof?"

"It's not something I can explain over the phone, the reason I'm afraid to call the police. Come as quickly as you can, around the alley. I'll have the back door open. You have to trust me, Jane."

"Give me twenty minutes," she said, and hung up.

He hurried to the store and let himself in the front door. There was no sound in the building. He moved quickly between tables stacked high with merchandise, unbolted the back door and waited.

It seemed forever before heel taps sounded in the alley. There was the click of a turning lock from out front. Then he pushed open the door. Jane walked in and looked at him. Her eyes were enormous and she was breathing as if she had been running a race.

"What is it, Joe?" she gasped.

He cautioned silence, closed the door and led her to the shoe department. He motioned her to a chair, looked down at her. He said, "What ever made you go into this thing with Paine?"

Her back stiffened against the seat. Her eyes said she was moving, taking herself

away from this place—but she wasn't moving. She was looking past him. Her eyes lit up and gleamed with a wild light.

A voice said, "Because she happens to be in love with me." Joe turned and looked at Paine.

Paine had a tire iron in his hand. He stepped close and prodded Joe into a seat. "All right, master-mind. Where did I slip up?"

"We could make a trade," he said.

"What kind of a trade?"

"Why you killed Mr. Brice."

Paine shrugged. "What have I got to lose? They gave me the sack in a store back East a couple of years ago for knocking down ten bucks. Brice found out about it at the convention. That was the reason he asked me down for a talk."

"Not much of a reason for murder."

"Maybe not—but look at it my way. I made one mistake. It caught up with me. Brice and I had an argument. He told me I was fired and that I'd never hold another job as long as he knew anything about it. He said he'd get to the bottom of this, and he would have, too. It was my future or his life.

"Merchandising is all I know, and I feel I'm too old to learn a new racket. I'm not the criminal type, Bradley, but I had to be a heel for once to get what I wanted. I like this town. This is the spot I've been looking for. It isn't something I want to give up."

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"You're getting what Brice got. I don't like it, but that's the way it is. I can't turn back now, Bradley." He paused. "Okay, what is this proof you've been telling Jane about?"

Jane leaned forward. Joe looked at her and felt a moment of pity.

"She told me," he said.

Paine scowled and turned on Jane. "What do you mean she told you?"

"In the first place, I knew it was you who killed Mr. Brice. Vivian said he was intending to call you. You killed him and took his keys and locked the front door when you left. Then I entered. I called Jane. She said I shouldn't stay in the office with him, that I should get out.

"I hadn't told her he was in the office. He might have been anywhere. On the

main floor or in the basement or up in ready-to-wear. But it didn't hit me until I saw you at the hotel. Then I knew the answer to everything. You went out the front door last night and then around the alley through the back door which you had left unlocked. After I left, you took the money and handed it to Jane who was waiting out back. Then you called me.

"While I was gone, Jane entered my apartment and hid the money. I let her have the key a couple of weeks ago because she wanted to clean the place up. She said the woman wasn't doing a good job. I didn't think anything of it, but that's probably the time you had a duplicate made. How about it, Jane?"

She stood up, her lips stretched tight.

Joe looked at Paine. "After you killed Mr. Brice, you went to Jane's place and told her. That's how she knew he was in the office."

"One leads to another and you can't back out," Paine said.

He lifted the tire iron.

"You can drop that," a voice said. A uniformed cop stepped from behind a table. Another came from behind one of the shoe sections. Detective Glanz was there, and one other detective.

"Dickson," Glanz said. "Homicide. He'll take care of this boy. Nice work, Bradley." He grinned. "Cops all over the place. Even a couple in the office. Paine had Brice's keys, all right. Just like you figured. The little lady here phoned him right after you phoned her. A couple of the boys followed him from his hotel and watched him go through the front while she came through the alley."

Joe leaned back and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Jane and Paine had been taken away.

"Here's the extra keys," Glanz said. "Hey! What's the matter?"

"One of your cops was almost a good enough shot." Joe swayed. . . .

Someone was sitting at the bedside. Vivian. "Hello," he said.

"Joe!" She tried to smile. "You're all right, Joe. You'll be out of here before you know it. Mr. Gibbons flew down. I talked to him. You have the job, Joe."

He sat up and reached for her. "So have you, honey. A lifetime job."

# A DISH OF HOMICIDE

By **HANK  
SEARLS**

Sugar yelled: "Mike!"





## Hard-Boiled Crime-Adventure Novelette



*Tagging after a two-timing starlet  
started out to be a gag  
for gumshoe Mike Blair.*



### CHAPTER ONE

#### Deadly Copperhead

I WAS sitting at my desk, wondering about the office rent, when the door opened and in walked the most beautiful assemblage of female parts that had ever shrugged into a mink coat. She had hair the color of burnished copper and dead white skin and her eyes were as green and as hard as emeralds.

Suavely, as in a movie, I stood up, knocking over my chair. She's come to the wrong office, I thought. The theatrical producer is three doors down.

"Good morning," I said. It was three p.m.

She laughed. "Relax, buster. Are you Mike Blair?"

"Unless you're from the finance company."

She eased into one of the finance company's chairs. "I've heard of you," she said. Her voice was low and husky. It was a voice that had been around. "You worked for a friend of mine . . . a former friend . . . when she was getting a divorce. Sugar Lynn."

I remembered Sugar, and it hadn't been strictly what you'd call work, but I nodded. "Oh, yeah. Sugar. The little singer. She divorced her husband to marry Howard Morrison, the cowboy star. I wonder if she did?"

"No."

I shook my head. "Too bad. Are you in the show business too?"

"Off and on. Right now, off. When I found that I needed some—well, con-

fidential work done, I remembered that Sugar had come to you."

"I have always considered Sugar among my most satisfied clients."

She lit a long cigarette and looked at me lazily, taking a slow drag.

"I'll bet," she said finally. "Well, this is a different kind of work."

I went to my office safe. I opened it and took out the bottle of scotch that I must have been saving for the first beautiful redhead that came to visit me in a mink coat. I poured Beautiful a drink.

"Is your name confidential, too?" I asked, handing her the glass.

"Dawn Sherril."

"Very pretty. Miss or Mrs.?"

"Mrs, right now."

"Oh," I said. I sat down at my typewriter. "My secretary has the day off," I lied, "so if you'll just give me your husband's address and the address of the other woman, I'll start tailing them tomorrow. The price will be twenty-five dollars a day, and expenses, but you can tack that on the divorce—"

"I don't want him tailed."

I swung away from the typewriter.

"You want him shot? You want his girl friend murdered? Name it. Special on murders this week."

She gazed at me coolly, lying back in the chair, her cigarette held carelessly.

You know," she said slowly. "For a guy who's supposed to know how to keep his mouth shut, you sure do a lot of talking."

"I'm sorry. Go ahead."

She reached into a handbag that must have cost a hundred dollars and pulled out a newspaper clipping. She tossed it on the desk.

It was from the column of an Eastern newspaperman.

*Dawn Sherril, the former New York night-club warbler, is singing the blues to a certain guy in the West, and may earn a lifetime contract.*

"Well," I said, "What's wrong with that? Who's the lucky guy?"

She hesitated. "I don't think you have to know."

"Look, when I work on a case, I know everything my client knows, or no go."

She thought for a while. "Howard Morrison."

"Howard Morrison? The same guy Sugar—"

"That's right. Any objections?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "He must like married women," I said.

"Maybe he figures there are less complications."

"Maybe he's nuts, too. Every kid in the country pays a dime a Saturday to watch him shoot up the screen. One piece of bad publicity and he's all through."

"There won't be any bad publicity. That's what you're going to prevent."

"Go on. you interest me."

"My husband saw the clipping and he's flying out from New York."

"I see. And what do you want me to do? Shoot down the plane?"

Her eyes flashed green flame and I shut up.

"No, comedian. I want you to pass as the guy I'm going around with, while my husband's here. At my expense, of course. And I think I can afford the twenty-five a day, besides."

"Dawn, daughter, you just hired yourself a private escort. Would it be too much to ask why you need to hire somebody?"

Her eyes dropped.

"My husband is a bum. He's done time for blackmail, and he has a lot on me. I worked with him once. I was just a kid, and in love." Her eyes melted into tears. It was very effective. Then I remembered acting was her racket and that she was probably just rehearsing. "I finally left him because he wouldn't go straight. But he'd never give me a divorce, probably because he was waiting for me to snag somebody with money so he could blackmail me."

I looked at the mink coat.

"And you finally snagged somebody, as you put it?"

She nodded.

"Nice going," I said. "But where do I come in?"

"I want you to convince him that you're the man the column mentioned, that you haven't any money, and that you don't care about my past. If he thinks there's nothing in it for him, if he thinks we'll



get married sooner or later anyway, he may let me have a divorce for a couple of hundred. If he knew who I actually was going to marry, he'd be after him for thousands. Besides," she added, "I'm not too sure Howard would marry me if he knew I'd been tied up with a black-mailer."

I looked at her in admiration.

"I'll be damned. Who would have thought a girl as beautiful as you could have figured all that out? Of course, Mr. Sherril will find you've tricked him after you marry Morrison, and he'll be on you like a leech."

She smiled sweetly. "After I marry Morrison, Morrison will be too busy to care."

I looked her over and nodded. "I guess he will," I said thoughtfully. "I guess he will."

**WE** STOOD on the ramp at the airport and Dawn shivered in the cold. The mink coat was back in my office, with a diamond ring the size of a pea, but she still looked like a million dollars.

The huge airliner taxied up under the lights, swung in a circle, and stopped. Its engines coughed and died. A few passengers got out and one headed our way. I began to feel uncomfortable.

You can tell them a mile away—the born crooks and the crumbs. You can spot them by their eyes. Their eyes are cold and blank, and their faces are deadpan. This one was big and had blond, wavy hair, and I could see that he was the kind of a guy a girl might turn crooked for, if she hadn't been around. He walked up and nodded coolly.

"Well, Dawn, we meet again. The California climate agreeing with you?"

Dawn shrugged.

"And who is this joker?" asked Sherril.

"Mike Blair, the man I'm going to marry."

Sherril looked me over critically. I was glad, for our purposes, that my overcoat was four years old and I was wearing a five o'clock shadow.

"This is the guy you want to marry?" Sherril asked sullenly. There was disappointment all over his face.

Dawn nodded. "And what's wrong with him?"

I began to feel like a used car.

Sherril shook his head. "Let's go get a drink. If Joe Blow can afford one."

I was disliking Mr. Sherril more every minute.

"The name is Blair," I said, "Mike Blair." I flagged a taxi and told the driver to take us to the Hi Hat Club. . . .

The place was crowded, but the headwaiter stared at Dawn and then gave us a table next to the dance floor. We ordered a round of drinks. Then Sherril sat back and cased the place.

"What do you do for a living, Blair?" he asked finally, still looking around.

"I'm in the oil business," I said, just to get him excited.

His face lit up and he glanced at me with new interest.

"Is that so? That's a good racket."

"Things are slow right now. My boss has a nice station, right on Route 40, but people aren't traveling much any more."

His face fell and he looked at me suspiciously. I stared back blankly.

"And you want to marry my wife?"

"Yes, Mr. Sherril, I do."

"How the hell do you expect to support her working in a gas station?"

"Dawn is willing to struggle along until I get started."

Sherril regarded her closely. "What's the angle? You don't want to marry this guy for his looks. What's he gonna do, inherit a million clams?"

Dawn went into her act. I had to admire the way she did it. Her eyes turned starry and her face softened.

"You wouldn't understand, Pete. I didn't understand about love before, either. When it hits you, things like money don't matter any more. I love him, Pete, and I'm going to marry him."

It was pure ham, and she was playing to a tough house, but she got it across. Sherril looked thoughtful.

"I don't know about that. I don't know. There's the little matter of getting a divorce, for one thing. And there's something else. . . ."

"Dawn told me she worked with you in a confidence game," I said. "And I don't care. I still want to marry her."

Sherril looked at me and shook his head sadly.

"That's your worry, Mac. As a wife,

she makes a good singer. I don't suppose she told you that she gave the cops enough to send me up for three years?"

There was a long silence. Then the lights dimmed and the band began to play softly.

Sherril went on, his voice low across the table, "Just the same, I don't want a divorce."

"Why?" I asked.

"I think I'll just let her sweat it out. I spent three years in the jug on account of her . . . she can spend the rest of her life married to a jailbird."

A SPOTLIGHT shone on the dance floor and I started suddenly as a slender figure floated out from the wings. She was dressed in a flimsy strapless gown that made you hold your breath for her, and she was singing in a low, haunting voice that sent shivers up and down your back.

It was Sugar Lynn, her soft raven hair shimmering in the glow of the spotlight. I hadn't been to the Hi Hat since the recession hit the detective business—it had been over a year—but she was just as provokingly beautiful as ever.

She glided over to our table, looked coldy at Dawn and myself, and moved away, putting everything she had into her quiet, throaty voice. I heard Sherril draw in his breath.

"Who's that?" he asked. Neither of us answered him.

Sugar got a big hand when her song was over, and disappeared into the wings. In a moment she was out, standing at our table. Dawn looked up at her. When their eyes met, the temperature in the room dropped ten degrees.

"Sugar," said Dawn. "It's so nice to see you. You know Mike, of course."

"Of course," Sugar said coldly. "I see him all the time. Every couple of years."

I looked at my fingers and tried to think of something brilliant to say. I decided to skip it.

"I just thought I'd tell you that Howard has a reservation here tonight, Dawn, dear." Sugar's voice was dripping honey. In case you wanted to unload any of your surplus cargo."

Dawn's green eyes never wavered. "Thank you, Sugar," she said. "It won't

be necessary. Don't you have to mingle with the other guests?"

For a moment Sugar's face was naked with hate, and then she smiled and drifted off.

"Who's Howard?" asked Sherril.

"A mutual acquaintance," said Dawn absently.

Sherril looked at her doubtfully and then turned back to me. "As I was saying, I don't want a divorce."

"How much don't you want a divorce?" asked Dawn.

Sherril swished his drink absently around in the glass. "Oh, I'd say about three thousand dollars worth."

"Mike hasn't got that kind of money." She gathered up her handbag and turned to me. "Let's go, darling. We're wasting our time with him."

I nodded and got up, saw that Sherril was hesitating.

"Wait a minute," said Sherril. "Isn't there somewhere we can go to talk this over?"

"Not to talk three thousand dollars over, there isn't," said Dawn.

"Well, maybe the price is a little high for a grease monkey. Maybe we can work out a deal."

"We'll go out to my place," said Dawn sweetly.

I paid the check and the three of us started for the door. As we walked across the dance floor, I saw a commotion by the hat-check counter. Somebody had just come in, somebody important, and the headwaiter and the hatcheck girl were breaking their necks to take care of him.

He looked up and I recognized a face I'd seen on the billboards of neighborhood movies all over the country. He saw Dawn and started toward us, nodding hellos along the way.

"Dawn," the cowboy said. "Where have you—"

"Hello, Howard," said Dawn coldly. "We're just leaving. Sugar is here. Have a good time."

As we stepped outside, I saw that Sherril's face now was wearing a very puzzled frown.

"Where have I seen that face before? What's that guy's racket?"

Dawn shook her head. "Just somebody I met at a party once."

## CHAPTER TWO

## Cooling Off—Fast

WE TOOK a cab out to the suburbs and stopped at a little house that looked like all the other little houses on the block. But it was modern and clean and new, and cost a lot of rent. We walked in and sat down.

"This is a nice set-up you have here," said Sherril. "You got a job, Dawn?"

She nodded. "I have a job. Eighty a week; most of it goes into the rent."

"Aren't you two lovebirds saving anything for getting married? Seems like I would, if I were you."

"Mike's got a little saved. A few hundred. That's all."

Sherril thought it over. "All right," he said. "I need money. I'll agree to a divorce for five hundred dollars."

I looked at Dawn and she nodded slightly.

"Two hundred now and three hundred when the divorce is final?" I asked.

"Okay. Let's have a drink on it."

Dawn went to the kitchen and a moment later her voice floated out. "Mike," she called. "Help me with the ice."

I went in and closed the door behind me.

She reached up behind a shelf and pulled down a package of bills. She counted out two hundred and added another fifty.

"Give him the two hundred," she said. "And get rid of him. I want to get back to the Hi Hat before that woman cuts my throat with Howard."

I brought the money out and handed it to Sherril. He counted it carefully and put it away.

"Okay, brother," he said. "I guess you'll marry her when the divorce is over. Don't say I didn't warn you."

I gave him his drink and waited until he'd finished it. "Now get out," I said. "You'll get the other three hundred when the divorce is through."

"Don't rush me, Sonny," he said. "Don't forget, she's still my wife. Maybe I don't feel like leaving her here with you."

I grabbed him by the lapel and lifted him out of the chair. "You heard me. I

said get out and, brother, I really meant that!"

"Okay," he said. He started for the door and I relaxed. Suddenly he swung around and his fist lashed out at me. I started to duck. Then my head exploded in a symphony of light. . . .

I struggled up from the depths of oblivion. A buzzer was ringing impatiently in my ear. For a long while I stared at the unfamiliar furniture, trying to remember where I was. When I remembered, I grabbed the couch and lifted myself painfully. Sherril was gone. The buzzer kept droning. Then it stopped and sounded angrily three times.

I lurched to my feet and headed for the front door. I could hear footsteps retreating down the walk toward the street. There was a taxi in front of the house and someone was climbing into the front seat.

"Hey," I yelled. "Were you ringin'?"

The figure turned and started up the walk. "Yeah. Your cab's here."

"What cab?"

"The cab you phoned for, pal. It's here."

I stuck my head back into the room. "Dawn," I yelled. "Dawn."

There was no answer.

"I don't know who called you, but there's nobody home now. Did you see a big blond guy come out of here?" I rubbed my jaw.

"No, Mac. No big blond guy. And the next time your wife calls two cab companies and takes the first cab that shows up, paddle her for me, will you?" He spat in disgust and started down the walk. He jammed his cab into gear and was gone in an angry burst of noise.

I discovered suddenly that I was thirsty. I weaved through the living room to the kitchen door, my head still spinning. I opened the door and felt my heart turn over.

Dawn was crumpled in front of the refrigerator. An ice tray was clutched in her hand, and a bright red pool was spreading over the colored linoleum. I staggered over and squatted beside her. I lifted her head and looked at her eyes. Then I felt her pulse.

She was dead.

MY HEAD began to throb in waves and I felt sick. I sprinted through the house and out the front door, reaching for the gun in my shoulder holster. On the tiny front porch I stopped short.

The holster was empty. I groaned aloud and walked back into the house. On the way in I looked at the address. I picked up the phone in the living room and dialed the police.

A gruff, sleepy voice answered:  
"Parkview Police."

"There's been a murder at 307 Melbourne. You better get out here."

The voice was suddenly wide-awake.  
"Who is this?"

I started to tell him and then changed my mind. "I'll be here when you get out," I said. "Probably."

I hung up and walked back into the kitchen, looking for my gun. I looked all over the kitchen and couldn't find it. I decided that Sherril had taken it with him. Then I saw the open kitchen window and the thought hit me that he might have thrown it out. I peered out and saw a tangled mass of shrubbery. There was no use even trying to find it at night.

And being found with a redhead who'd just been murdered was bad enough, but if she'd been murdered with my gun . . . it didn't seem that cops would exactly see the picture my way. At any rate, sticking around seemed to be a good start toward spending the rest of the night in jail, while Sherril blew town for parts unknown.

If I was going, it was time to go. I stood for a moment undecided. Then I heard the wail of a siren far away in the night. It made up my mind. A moment later I was walking down the darkened street. I turned toward the lights of a neighborhood shopping district and ten minutes later I was on a bus toward town.

I didn't go to my apartment. I registered under a phony name for a room in a cheap hotel and got on the phone. When you make your living tailing husbands and tracing down runaway wives, you develop contacts at the airports and the train stations. I phoned my contacts and gave them descriptions of Sherril. Then I flopped down on the bed and lit a cigarette.

There didn't, at the moment, seem to

be much more that I could do. I'd obviously been used as a fall guy by Sherril. He must have planned to murder his wife all the time, and just waiting until he could cash in on the marriage ties.

The motive? She'd sent him up for three years. That was the motive, and I'd been handy to frame. Whether he'd succeed would depend on whether the cops found my gun and whether I found Sherril. Until one or the other happened, there was nothing to do but wait.

It had been a hard night. My head throbbed and my bones ached and I felt a stubble on my chin and my nerves were tied up in knots. I ground out my cigarette and closed my eyes.

I opened them with a start.

*The mink coat and the diamond ring!*

I sat up suddenly. The coat and the ring were in my office, where they wouldn't hurt Dawn's act. "Tonight I'm poor but proud," she'd said, peeling off the coat and jerking off the ring. If the cops traced the gun, that's where the cops would be, right in my office. And a cop who doesn't believe that a private eye would murder a client for a diamond ring and a mink coat is a pretty rare cop indeed. . . .

I grabbed a taxi and headed for the financial district. On the way down I smoked three cigarettes. In front of the building, we stopped and I got out. I paid the driver and walked through the deserted lobby to the service elevator.

I rode myself up and walked down the dark hallway to my office. With relief I noticed that the light inside was out, and unlocked the door. I wouldn't have been surprised to find the whole homicide squad waiting for me. There was no one there. The mink coat was draped over a chair. I went to the safe and fumbled with the dial. I took out the ring and slipped it into my pocket and picked up the coat. Then I started for the door—and froze.

Far down the hall I heard the whine of the service elevator. It stopped and I heard voices. My heart sank miserably. I dodged back into the office and locked the door. I looked wildly around for a place to ditch the coat and ring. The office had never looked more barren. I thought of tossing them out the window and then

decided that if they found them on the street, it would be worse.

Finally, I compromised by jamming the coat under my desk. I flipped on the desk light and spread papers around. I put an old report into my typewriter and began to pound the keys.

I heard the voices die down outside and the squeak of dry leather moving slowly up the hall. I continued to type. There was a whisper and then a knock.

"Who is it?" I asked, with what I hoped was the proper amount of surprise.

"Police," a voice answered.

I got up quickly and opened the door.

A tremendous plain clothesman with innocent blue eyes crammed himself into the office. A policeman in uniform followed. I'd never seen either of them before.

"Are you Michael Blair?" asked the giant.

"Yes, sir," I said. "What can I do for you?"

He swept the office with a glance. "Working late tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Business is good."

He walked to my typewriter and read the report I'd been typing. I hoped it made sense. It seemed to satisfy him. He turned back to me.

"How long you been working here tonight?"

"I don't know. What time is it?"

"It's one a. m."

"I've been here all night."

"Maybe," said Blue-eyes. "We think different."

**H**E BEGAN to walk around the office, lazily, but not missing anything. He moved back to the desk and I held my breath.

"Would it be too much to ask what you guys want?" I inquired, to divert his attention.

"Not at all," he said.

There was a long silence.

"What do you want?" I asked finally.

"There's been a little touch of murder going around. We seem to think you might know something about it."

"Sure," I said. "I probably murdered him. Who is it?"

"It's not a him. It's a her. And you probably did at that."

He kept moving closer to the desk, and I thought fast.

"You boys don't happen to have a search warrant, do you?"

He went on poking carelessly around in my waste-paper basket. Finally he looked up and smiled.

"As a matter of fact, we do. Want to see it?"

I shook my head. "I'm not hiding anything. Tell me what you want and I'll help you look for it."

"I don't know what we want. We're just looking. Mind?"

"No," I said. "Go right ahead." I sat down behind my desk and felt the mink coat under my feet.

He walked to the safe and kicked it. "Do you mind opening this up?"

I looked at my fingernails. "I'll open it if you'll tell me what you're trying to prove."

The baby-blue eyes grew suddenly hard.

"You'll open it anyway. Or we'll cart it down to the station and have it opened, the hard way. And then you won't have a safe any more." He paused and smiled. "Not that you'll ever need one again, probably."

I didn't like the note of confidence in his voice, but I opened the safe. He looked through the papers inside.

"Nothing here on a Dawn Sherril, is there?"

"Who's that?"

"The girl you lent your gun to. She was carrying your name and address in her handbag. She shot herself through the heart and then opened the window and threw your gun out into the shrubbery."

"What gun?"

"The gun you have licensed in your name."

I took a deep breath. "Oh, yeah. I know. That gun. As a matter of fact, I just—"

"I know, buddy. You just sold it last week. Right?"

I nodded.

Blue-eyes laughed, without much mirth.

"I've been on the force seven years. Never found a murder gun yet that somebody hadn't just sold the week before. And they never seem to change the registration. Never even able to describe

the man they say that they sold it to."

I sat down behind the desk again. The sweat was coming out on my forehead, and I wiped it with the back of my hand. I needed a drink, bad.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Blue-eyes began to speak in a flat monotone, as if he were reciting.

"A girl was shot tonight. In her home. A girl named Dawn Sherril. She was shot with a gun we found in back in the shrubbery. The gun was registered to a private dick named Michael Blair. That's you. In her handbag was a name and address. The name was Michael Blair. That's you, remember—with this address.

"A neighborhood cab driver volunteered the information that he was called to Mrs. Sherril's home to pick her up. The cab company operator remembers the call. She says it was a woman's voice. The cab driver tells us that when he got to the address, it took ten minutes to get anybody to the door. The guy that came to the door needed a shave. You need a shave.

"The guy that came to the door had on a gray flannel suit. You have on a gray flannel suit. He had gray eyes. You have gray eyes. And the guy that came to the door said there was nobody home. But there was somebody home—Dawn Sherril. Only she didn't need a cab. She needed a hearse. Search him. Muller."

The cop moved over and began to frisk me, from the top down. When he got to my coat he opened it and grunted.

"You didn't sell the shoulder holster, did you?"

I shook my head. Things were looking bad, but there was no sense in admitting anything.

Muller emptied my pockets onto the desk and whistled.

"Look at that rock, boss."

The diamond shone like a living thing. The big detective picked it up carefully and looked inside.

"D. S. from H. M." he read. "Dawn Sherril from . . . who's that cowboy joker she was supposed to be running around with? Howard Morrison."

He looked at me and smiled politely.

"You aren't too cagey, are you, Blair? I guess you got this at the hock shop?"

"Maybe."

He began to go through my desk drawers. "Let's see if you got anything else. Anybody who'd kill a dame for a diamond ring is pretty hard up."

He looked through the last drawer and started to turn away. Suddenly he wheeled and squatted, peering under the desk.

"Well, what do you know about this?" He pulled the coat out and held it at arm's length. "Yours, Blair?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's a disguise."

"Cute," said Blue-eyes. "Well, Muller, lip the cuffs on. We'll take him in and book him on suspicion of murder."

I figured the thing had finally gone far enough.

"**W**AIT a minute," I said. "I'll tell you all I know about this case. I know Dawn Sherril. She wanted me to pass as the guy she was going to marry, because her husband was due to fly in this evening—and she wanted a divorce to marry this Morrison joker. But she didn't want Morrison to know she'd been a blackmailer. Also, she didn't want Sherril to know she was in the chips, so she left her ring and coat here. The act seemed to work okay.

"Sherril wanted five hundred for giving her a divorce—but when he got it he slugged me, took my gun, and shot his wife. When I woke up, she was dead. I called the police. When I found out my gun was gone, I got scared, I guess. Also I wanted to find Sherril, and I figured you guys would slow me up. So I shoved off. I've got my contacts at the airport and train station looking for him now."

Blue-eyes smiled sweetly.

"What an imagination! The one-man police force out to trap a murderer and make the cops look silly. Just like in the detective stories. It's a great tale, Blair, but it's no soap. I don't believe you. I think things are tough in your racket, I think you knew this dame had a ring and a mink coat, I think you murdered her, got scared, tossed your gun away, called the police for an alibi in case we found the gun, and left. That's what I think."

"Look," I said. "At least check on Sherril. He came in on flight #307 from New York this afternoon—a big blond

guy, flashy dresser, red tie, green suit."

The detective picked up my phone. He dialed Municipal Airport.

"Give me the airlines dispatcher," he said. There was a long wait. "This is Peterson, of the homicide squad," he said finally. "Find out if you had a passenger named Sherril on your evening flight from New York." There was a pause. "Okay," he said. "Thank you."

He turned back to me.

"No such name on the passenger list," he said. "Surprised?"

My heart sank. "Like I said, this guy is a convicted extortionist," I told him. "Those people don't use their right names. He's probably on parole and not supposed to leave New York."

"Yes," said Blue-eyes tolerantly. "Yes, indeed. Put the cuffs on him, Muller."

A picture flashed across my mind—a picture of myself languishing in a cell while the newspapers and a D. A. hungry for convictions built up a case against me, and a guy named Sherril bought himself an airtight alibi to prove that he'd never been out of the State of New York. I didn't like the picture—I didn't like it at all.

Muller was little for a cop. Little, but stocky, built like a barrel, with nothing to grab. I let him get close to me and then threw my arms about his neck and swung him around. He cursed and tried to jerk away. Blue-eyes whipped out a gun and lunged across the office. I hung on to the cop and backed toward the door.

When I felt the knob in the small of my back, I shoved the cop hard and he reeled toward the detective. I dodged through the door and slammed it. A shot roared from inside the office and a slug ricocheted down the hallway. I was three quarters of the way down the corridor when they untangled themselves and got to the door.

Another shot sang past my head and then I was in the elevator, slamming the gate. I pushed the button marked *garage* and cursed as the elevator whined slowly into motion. I heard Blue-eyes above me. A deafening report sounded in the shaft. A slug clanged on the roof of the elevator, and I ducked instinctively. I heard the sound of feet disappearing down the hallway as the two of them raced for the stairs.

It was the longest elevator ride I had ever taken. It seemed as if two hours passed before I finally came to the garage. I yanked open the gate and walked quickly through the empty spaces. Then I was out in the night. Across the street was a squad car, with the lights on and a bulky figure slouched over the wheel. I turned south, away from the car, and forced myself to saunter instead of run. At the first corner I turned west, and at the next I turned south again. A siren began to moan in the night and grew louder and louder, and then was past, a block away. It died away in the distance, and I flagged a cab. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### Don't Tank Me

THE cabbie drove me uptown and let me off at a neighborhood bar. I went in and ordered a shot of bourbon and a bottle of beer. While I was waiting, I phoned the airport and the train station. Neither of my contacts had seen Sherril, but the man at the airport said that the place was crawling with cops, and wanted to know if they were looking for him too. I said no, they were looking for a private eye named Blair, and hung up.

I went back to the bar and downed the shot. It saved my life. My nerves began to unknot and my head began to clear. I ordered another shot and started to think.

The fact that Sherril hadn't showed at the airport or the train station didn't indicate that he was still in town. He might have taken a bus, or more likely, decided to hitch-hike to another town and take a plane to New York from there. I wondered if there were any way to get his address in New York. Dawn might have known it. Dawn might have told some friend where her husband lived. The trouble was that I only knew one friend of Dawn's—Howard Morrison—and she'd hardly have told him her husband's address.

Of course, there was Sugar. She wasn't exactly a friend of Dawn's, but they'd apparently been chummy once. The possibility that she'd know where Sherril lived in New York was a pretty slim one, but

you have to start somewhere. I finished my second shot and paid the barkeep.

The Hi Hat Club was crowded, even though it was near closing time. I asked the headwaiter for Sugar. He gave me a cold stare and told me that she was in her dressing room and it was off-limits. I slipped him a fin. He decided that it was on limits to friends of Sugar. I went back and knocked.

There was a long wait. Then the door opened and Sugar stood there in what might have passed for a negligee. She had a smile on her lips. When she saw who it was, her face fell.

"What do you want?" she asked icily.

I slid past her like a magazine salesman. "Just wanted to talk to you, Sugar."

She shrugged and pointed to a chaise longue. "Make it short. I'm tired."

"I've got news for you," I said. "Good news for you."

She sat at her dressing table and began making up her face. "Yeah? I can hardly wait. Have you decided to take me out to a movie next month?"

"Dawn's been murdered."

I watched her face in the mirror. She was dabbing lipstick on her lower lip. Her face never changed and her hand never wavered.

"Really? Lynched?"

"I'm serious. She was shot tonight, just after she left here."

Sugar swung around on her stool. "By whom?"

"According to the police, me. Actually, her husband."

"You mean you're denying it? I'd be proud." She turned back to her mirror.

I looked at the back of my hands. "I'm in a bad spot, Sugar. Her husband got away. Unless I can find him they'll hang it on me."

"You're breaking my heart. What do you want me to do?"

"I thought Dawn might have told you where he lived in New York, when you two were so chummy."

"We two were never so chummy, as you put it. I've never seen her husband, and I don't know his address."

"You saw him tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"He was the big blond guy sitting at our table."

She shot me a startled glance in the mirror. "That was her husband?"

I nodded. She started to say something and then changed her mind. "I don't know his address. Sorry."

I walked over to her and looked down at her.

"What were you going to say?"

She dropped her eyes. "Nothing."

I took a deep breath. "Look, Sugar. I'm in a hole. If you know anything about this thing, for Pete's sake, tell me about it."

"I don't know anything about it. Now I'd appreciate it if you'd get out and leave me alone."

"Something tells me, sister, that you know more than you're telling. I'm staying here until I find out what it is."

She looked up and her eyes were blazing. "I'll call the bouncer and he'll toss you out. Or else turn you over to the cops."

Something told me that she was waiting for a date and that she didn't want me around when he showed up. I decided to bluff it out.

"I don't think you'll call the bouncer. I'm staying."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "You're right, Mike. You're a stinker, but I'm not turning you in. Your boy Sherril is here now. Or he was ten minutes ago."

"What? He came back here?"

"He turned up a couple of hours ago. Tried to make a date with me. I turned him down and the last I saw of him he was sitting in the bar drowning his sorrows."

"Thanks, honey," I said. "Thanks a lot."

I WAS halfway to the door when it opened slowly. Howard Morrison stood there with a grin on his face. When he saw me, the grin faded. I brushed past him and out onto the dance floor. I walked swiftly across to the bar. The bar was a modern one, slick, chromium plated, dark in spite of the violet fluorescent lighting behind the mirrors. It was still crowded.

At one end sat Sherril, alone, staring into his drink. I walked over and stood behind him in the crowd.

"We meet again," I said.

He turned slowly. His eyes were bleary



and a shadow of fear crossed them when he saw me.

"Well," he said. "Dawn's dream man. What are you doing here? I thought you'd be busy."

"Where? In jail?"

He looked at me blankly.

"Come on," I said. "You and I are going to take a little trip to the station house."

He rose unsteadily. "You really have a taste for punishment, haven't you?" He cocked his fist and sighted at my chin, striking out blindly. I moved my head. I slapped him three times, hard, and he fell back against the bar, rubbing his jaw. I saw the bartender moving down with a dangerous look in his eyes.

"J's okay, buddy," I told him. "My friend's just a little tanked, that's all."

"You boys fight somewhere else," said the barkeep. "This is a respectable house."

"You heard what the man said," I told Sherril. I took him by the arm and shoved him to the door. "Come with me. I'll take care of you." I steered him past the doorman and pushed him into a cab.

"Drive around," I said to the driver. Then I shut the glass partition and turned to Sherril.

"Okay, Sherril," I said. "I'm taking you down to the station. First I want to talk to you."

He shook his head. "Nobody saw me slug you. You'll never prove a thing."

"I've been slugged before. But I never woke up and found my client murdered before. And I don't like the experience."

Some of the glaze left his eyes. "Murdered? What client? What are you, a lawyer? What are you talking about, anyway?"

"I'm a private detective. Your wife was my client. And after you slugged me you shot her—with my gun. Remember?"

"Dawn was shot?"

"Yeah. Surprised? You have my sympathy. It must be a terrific shock."

He was sober now, and I watched him carefully.

"Dawn shot," he repeated slowly. "Dawn shot." He shook his head. "And she still owed me three hundred dollars."

"You know," I said, "that's one of the things you're going to tell me. Why you

murdered her before you got the whole five hundred, and why you came back to the Hi Hat Club—the one place the cops would be looking for you if they'd believed me."

"I didn't shoot her."

"You don't say."

"When I left Dawn's place, I came back and tried to get a date with that singer. She wouldn't go out with me. I've been in the bar ever since."

Somehow, in spite of myself, I began to believe him. It was illogical to think that somebody else might have done the job—nobody else would have had the motive. Just the same, Sherril hadn't left town, and if he'd planned to murder Dawn, he'd have been better off to wait until she'd had her divorce.

The germ of an idea entered my head, and the rusty wheels in my brain began to turn. It seemed incredible, but. . . .

"All right. We'll say you left the place after you hit me. Did you see Dawn before you left?"

"No. She was in the kitchen."

Now for the sixty-four dollar question.

"Did you call a cab?"

"No. I just left, quiet-like. I was sick of the whole set-up. I didn't want her yelling at me for hitting her boy friend. And speaking of hitting her boy friend, I've had about enough of this Sherlock Holmes stuff, and—"

I could sense from the set of his shoulders that I was about to be slugged again. This time he was sober, and it was no place for a brotherly tap. I needed time to think his story over, and I knew that if I lost him again, he'd leave town. I let him have it with everything I had. My fist crashed into his jaw. He groaned once and slumped to the floor of the cab. I glanced at the driver. He was busy weaving through the traffic. I slid the glass aside.

"Take us back to the Hi Hat Club."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Strong, Silent Slayer

**W**E DROVE up in front of the night club. The doorman stepped up to the cab. "My friend passed out," I said. "Forgot his coat inside.

I'd like to go back inside and get it."

I went through the revolving door, glanced at a broad back in the blue uniform of the Parkview Police, and turned right around and back out into the night. Sweat broke out on my brow and I took out a handkerchief.

"Say," I told the doorman. "I don't like to go through the dining room needing a shave. My buddy left his coat in one of the dressing rooms back stage. You got a back entrance?"

The doorman peered at me suspiciously and then jerked his thumb toward an alley.

This time I was more careful and luckier. I sneaked through the side door and found myself opposite Sugar's dressing room. I crept to the door and stooped to tie my shoe, with my ear a half inch from the crack.

It was quiet inside. I stood up and began to turn the doorknob slowly. I pushed the door open with my shoulder, a fraction of an inch at a time. Then I put my head to the crack.

The lights inside were lowered. On the couch were Sugar and Howard Morrison. They seemed to be getting along well together.

I opened the door and cleared my throat. "Sorry to break this up, but I'd like a few words with you, Morrison."

Morrison jumped up and stepped toward me.

"Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?" He had, I was glad to note, a genuine Texas drawl, even in real life. Sugar got up slowly, a dangerous look in her eyes.

"You know me, Morrison. I'm the guy you just got through trying to frame for murder."

"Blair," said Sugar. "If you aren't out of here in two minutes I'm calling the police."

"I'll call the police myself. First your cowboy and myself are going to have a little talk."

Morrison shrugged. "Let him have his fun, Sugar." He sat down on the couch.

"Morrison, I'm going to tell you what you did tonight. If I'm wrong, correct me. And when we get through our talk, I'm telling it to the cops."

He laughed. "Go on, you interest me. But don't take long. I'm busy."

"I know what you mean. All good clean fun, but no strings attached. Right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. A wife in the background might hurt your box office appeal. Strong, silent type. A cowboy star. Never even kisses the heroine—or the kids up front start booing. Getting married wouldn't be good. But it would be better than a lot of bad publicity, just the same. If you get bad publicity, Momma won't let junior go to the Saturday matinee. Right?"

"Look, buddy, I haven't got all night to listen to you rave."

I stepped toward him.

"You'll listen to me rave just as long as I want you to. See? Getting married would be bad, but running around with a married woman would be worse, if there was a scandal. Just the same, the clean-cut cowboy star picked Dawn Sherril."

I paused and lit a cigarette.

"The trouble was, Dawn has been brought up wrong. When you decided you were through with her, she wouldn't go away. She'd been tied up in a black-mail racket before, so what's she do? She says: 'Marry me, or I'll spread your name over every paper in the country.' Right?"

Morrison got up suddenly. His face was blazing. "Shut up. I'm not sitting here listening to this stuff any longer."

I grabbed his coat and shoved. He sat down on the couch.

"You decided to get at the source of your trouble by killing Dawn. But you know that if she was found murdered, you'd be involved. Unless, of course, there was somebody else on the scene with a motive for murdering her. You had to work a frameup. How?"

I took a drag on the cigarette.

"You knew she was married. Her husband might be a good guy to frame. But you didn't know where he was. So what did you do? You advertised for him."

Morrison relaxed and shook his head. "Sugar," he said. "This guy's nuts. Plain nuts."

"You advertised for him," I repeated, "the best way you could have. You sent in an item to a gossip columnist. The item didn't mention you—just Dawn. It worked. Her husband showed up. When you saw us tonight, you knew one of the

## A Dish of Homicide

men with Dawn was her husband. You hadn't figured on there being a third party.

"After we left here, you asked Sugar who the men with Dawn were. She didn't know Sherril, but she knew me. She told you I was a private detective, but that didn't mean anything. You decided to go to Dawn's house and wait until I left."

I turned to Sugar. "He did ask you who we were, didn't he, Sugar?"

She shot a startled glance at Morrison. She shook her head slightly.

"And he did leave for a while, after we left, didn't he?"

SUGAR walked to her dressing table. She ran her fingers through her hair nervously. "I don't know. I don't know. Why don't you leave him alone?"

I turned back to Morrison.

"When you got to Dawn's house, you sneaked up to the window. You watched for a long while, waiting for me to go. You had a gun. I imagine you intended to make it look like a double suicide, and kill both Dawn and Sherril. But for some reason, things didn't work out right. You saw me bring Sherril a drink, and tell him to get out, and then you saw him slug me. He left after that. You stood there, thinking it over, and while you did, Dawn came out of the kitchen.

"She saw me lying there, went to the window, and looked out. She didn't call after Sherril—she didn't want him back. As far as my getting slugged, that was none of her business—that's one of the things a private eye gets paid for. She didn't want Sherril back, so she locked the door. That's important, Morrison. She locked the door, went to the phone and called a cab to take her back here.

"Dawn was afraid of leaving you with Sugar for too long, and I can see why. Then she went to put the ice tray away."

Morrison was fidgeting now, and there were beads of sweat on his upper lip.

"Meanwhile, you were watching. Suddenly it hit you. You were better off than if I'd left and Sherril had stayed. There I was, out like a light, and Dawn was out of the room. Maybe I had a gun—Sugar had said I was a private detective. You went in. You searched me. I had a gun.

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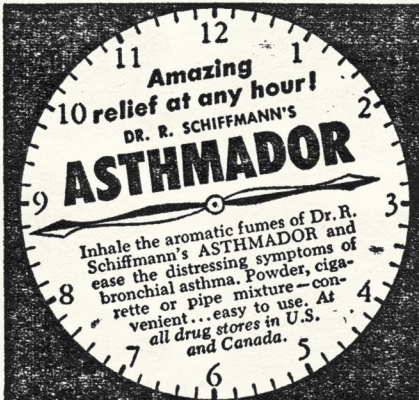
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Perfect. I was suitable for framing. So you shot Dawn and left."

Morrison laughed nervously. "Very clever. It just doesn't hold water, that's all. The only reason I left here was to go see myself in a neighborhood theatre."

"What theatre?"

He hesitated. "I don't remember. What's the difference. Your whole story's ridiculous. Now that we've—"

"Ridiculous? I don't think so. Not at all. How'd the murderer get in? Dawn would have locked the door. She didn't want her husband to come back. The murderer got in because he had a key. Who had a key? You had a key, Morrison, because you were paying the rent." I hoped my guess was right. "Guys who pay the rent always have keys."

"You're nuts." Morrison lit a cigarette. His hand trembled. Sugar looked at him curiously.

"Maybe. But there's a cop out here, probably looking for me. I'm telling him what I just told you, and we'll see if he thinks I'm nuts."

I turned my back and walked to the door. I'd made plenty of mistakes during the day, but that was the biggest. Almost before I heard Sugar's scream, I realized what I'd forgotten: Morrison must have taken a gun of his own with him when he went to Dawn's. He still had it.

Sugar yelled: "Mike!" The glow roared behind me, and a crashing blow on my left shoulder sent me rolling across the dressing room. I lay there a moment, stunned, trying to see through a red haze. Far in the distance I could hear Sugar's voice.

"You've killed him. You've killed him, and you killed Dawn!"

"Shut up! When the cops get here, you're telling them it was self defense. Understand?"

"You killed him. You killed him."

The red fog in front of my eyes lifted and I saw Morrison take Sugar by the shoulders and shake her.

"Calm down! Get hold of yourself! He attacked me and I had to shoot him. Understand?"

I disagreed, but attacking him seemed like a good idea. My left arm was beginning to feel as if it had been cut off at the

## A Dish of Homicide

shoulder, but everything else seemed as if it would work. I set myself and waited until Morrison let go of Sugar. Then I lunged across the room, aiming for his knees.

It was a beautiful tackle for a guy my age. Morrison crashed to the floor. His gun dropped and slid under the couch. I hung on to both of his legs with my good arm.

"Sugar," I grunted. "Get the cops, and hurry."

Morrison was powerful and had two arms that worked. I heard the door open and heard Sugar's high-heeled shoes tapping down the passageway. Then a smashing blow on the side of my head brought back the red mist. Dimly I remember holding on to a pair of squirming legs, and being dragged across the floor as if I was a limp old rag doll, toward the couch.

Then it seemed as if the roof fell in on left shoulder. Just before the darkness engulfed me I heard a click; the click of a revolver being cocked. . . .

\* \* \*

I looked up at the detective with the blue eyes. I was on the couch and the dressing room was crowded. I tried to sit up, and Blue-eyes put a huge hand on my chest.

"Look," I said. "Find Morrison. He's the guy you're looking for."

He smiled.

"Morrison's in the city jail. He's charged with on murder, and if it hadn't been for a cop named Shaughnessy and a girl named Sugar, we'd be charging him with two."

"Where are they?"

"Right here," said a voice with a pleasant Irish brogue. A red, beefy face looked down at me, and next to it floated a face like an angel's, a face with a pair of smoky gray eyes.

I reached into my pocket. "I don't know how to thank you, Shaughnessy, but here's a cigar, anyway."

I turned my head and looked at Sugar Lynn.

Sugar, I decided, I would thank later.

THE END

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# CAPERS IN CRIME

By HAROLD HELFER

Returning to the scene of the crime—with an appetite—proved the downfall of a Lawrence, Kans. bandit. An hour after he'd held up a restaurant proprietor, and escaped with \$728, the robber came back and ordered breakfast. The restauranter promptly notified police who promptly nabbed the breakfast eater and found most of the stolen money still on him.

\* \* \*

In Los Angeles, a wanted embezzler gave himself up after seeing a movie. "There was a detective in it that just never gave up," he told the police. "I kept thinking about him and thinking about him. I decided that you'd get me now or later, and it might just well be now."

\* \* \*

A Lexington, Va., burglar made the mistake of picking on the fraternity house of a young student. The intruder broke and ran when the student entered but the college boy brought him down with a terrific flying tackle that broke the burglar's nose and left him in a docile condition for the police. The student happened to be the star Washington and Lee half-back.

\* \* \*

In Hamburg, to catch the culprit who kept stealing from his woodpile, a man set a trap by hollowing a log and filling it with magnesium. The next day his neighbor's stove exploded.

\* \* \*

Lack of a measly dime, a thin ten-cent piece, was the undoing of a Portland, Maine, car thief. He got as far as a Hartford toll bridge and then lacked the fare to continue his flight.

\* \* \*

A man placed in the Van Nuys, Calif., jail on suspicion that he might have issued a bad check authorized his keepers to take a hundred dollar bill from his funds to buy cigarettes. That proved his downfall, sure

## Capers in Crime

enough. He was promptly hauled off to a federal pen. The bill was counterfeit.

\* \* \*

An ex-convict learned in New York that it's true what the Bible says about vanity being a downfall. During one of his prison terms, an operation on his jaw caused his cheeks to recede. This bothered him so he took to carrying a small potato in each cheek. Now, as a result, he's back in jail—a holdup victim identified him as the bandit by the false chubbiness.

\* \* \*

In Tacoma, Wash., a man, after leaving a tavern, hailed a car, climbed into the back seat and proclaimed, "Taxi, take me to Fawcett Avenue." But a slight mistake brought him into a cell on a drunk charge instead. He'd gotten into a police car.

\* \* \*

Lack of musical talent proved to be the downfall of a couple of Louisville bicyclists, each of whom carried a violin in his handlebar basket. When a suspicious cop stopped them, they declared the violins belonged to them. The cop said, "All right. Let's hear you play something on them." They couldn't and confessed they'd broken into a storehouse.

\* \* \*

On the other hand, it was a matter of repertoire that proved the undoing of a Plymouth, Mass., church organist who was arrested on an intoxication charge. Police got suspicious when they heard the bells pealing out *The St. Louis Blues*.

\* \* \*

Four small-fry Cambridge, Md., truants were captured and taken back to school. They chose a marsh for a hiding place, but the truant officer found them because they had frightened off the ducks.

\* \* \*

Fate played an ailing New York bandit a dirty trick. Real respectable-like, he'd gone to a hospital to get better. Then a few days later they brought in another sick man and put him in an adjoining bed. The new patient kept staring at him. And, before you could say Jack Robinson, there was a police guard around the bandit's bed. The new patient recognized his bed mate as the man who had robbed him of thirty dollars a few days before.

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**John D. MacDonald**

(Continued from page 69)

She drifted through the moonlight, and he heard the thin rustle as she put the note under the ash tray on the bedside stand. He smelled the fragrance of her as she moved close to the bed, bent over him and said, "Steve! Sleeping soundly?"

He was half turned on his left side. Consciousness was fading and suddenly he wanted it to fade more quickly.

Her cool fingers were on his right wrist and he felt her pressing his hand around the butt of the cold weapon. She moved his leaden arm and the muzzle jabbed his cheek, then found its way between his slack lips, grating metallicly against his teeth. He could taste the oiliness of the weapon.

Then her finger was over his, and he felt the growing pressure of his finger against the trigger. A vast and soundless scream filled every echoing corner of his mind. The eruption of white flame that filled the skies from star to star stilled the inaudible scream. . . .

Jocelyn Haegan Folmer said, in her low stirring voice, into the mouthpiece of the phone, "Please come at once. Stephen Haegan has just committed suicide. Yes. He shot himself with a target pistol. He left a note."

Steve stood ten feet behind her. He saw her hang up the phone and then, still seated on the low chair, carefully examine her burgundy nails.

(Continued from page 27)

Westover's bedroom, and then I sat on the terrace and lit a cigarette.

"I made a noise, so that Mrs. Westover would look out of her window, and I puffed on the cigarette. I knew that she would assume that it was Abner down there, smoking.

"After that, I saw her light go out, and I went back to Marcia's. I knew they wouldn't connect me with Abner's death when he was at the Westover's, smoking, at the same time I was with Marcia and Bruce."

Helena sighed, and added, "But I should have made certain that Abner



## Slayers Go Solo

smoked before I killed him. Chewing is a nasty habit, isn't it, Jim?"

"Murder is nastier," I told her. "I suppose when I left Marcia's, after I recovered from the sock you gave me on the head, you followed me out—to see if I would discover Abner's body? When Rex Delaney showed up, you heard our argument, and then saw me leave. Then you found Rex groggy, and you used the knife on him, too. Is that it?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes." Her voice was almost a whisper. "It was a perfectly marvelous opportunity—only I was sorry that it was so dark. I wanted to see Rex's face when I did it. I was tempted to light a match, afterward, and look at him, but that would have been too dangerous, and my luck had been so marvelous."

She folded her hands before her and looked up at me from under her lashes, like a high-school freshman caught smoking in the cloak room. "Was I a bad girl, Jim? Is there any way I can help you now, any questions you want to ask? I don't mind talking about it, really. It was fun."

Marcia Delaney turned away, and I saw her shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

I turned to Helena Atwood, and I said gently, "Now just sit down and take it easy." I had my eye on the telephone beyond her.

She appeared not to have heard me, and there was a look of exultation, of joy, in her eyes. Suddenly she turned away from me. "Mother!" she cried gaily. "Mother, I'm coming!"

I saw the curtains billowing in from the wide open window, and I jumped for her, but I was far too slow. She ran lightly away from me, like a fawn over the green moss of a woodland glade, and I caught a glimpse of her long slim legs as she flung them over the windowsill. Instantly she was gone, out of sight into the night.

I didn't go to the window for a couple of seconds. Marcia stared at me dumbly, her face a white mask of horror. From down in the street, six floors below, I heard the frantic-far-away tooting of horns, and then the shrill blast of a police whistle.

THE END

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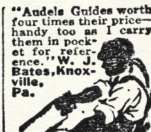


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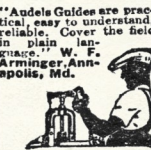


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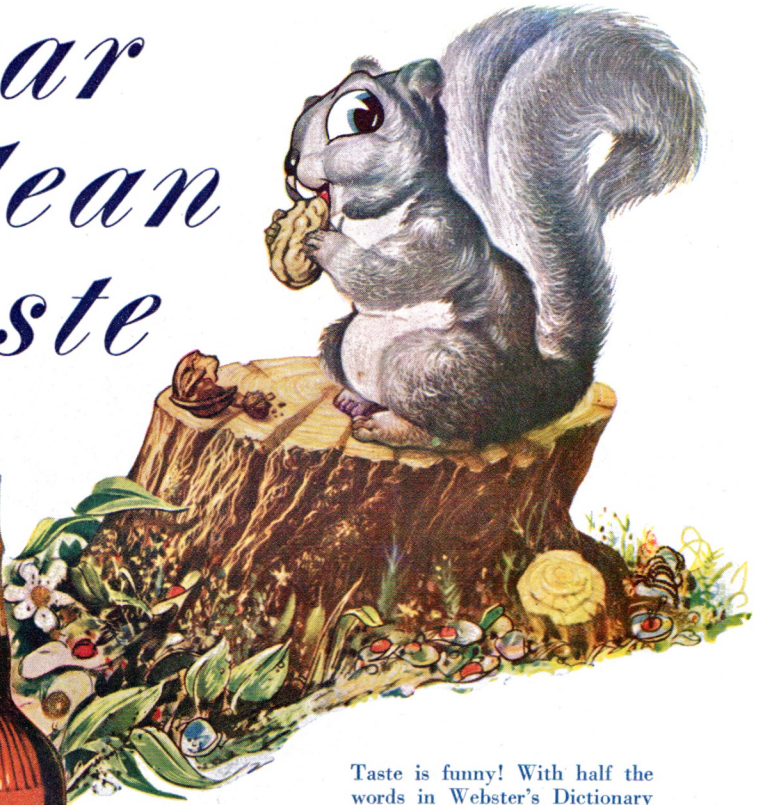
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