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DETECTIVE
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JAN.



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AND
SLAY**

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**MIGHTY LIKE
A ROGUE**

by **DAY KEENE**

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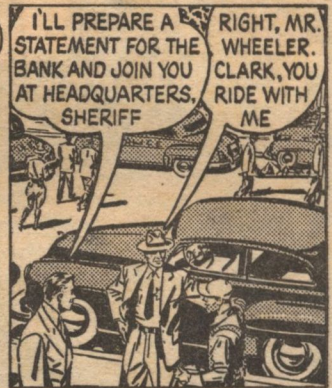
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Vol. 62

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The February issue will be out January 4th

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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

If all of us followed a few simple rules, one of the easiest ways to be taken for a sucker's ride would be avoided. For one of the most common rackets of all is that operated by the dishonest door-to-door salesman. Most people who come knocking at your door, of course, are honest—which is what makes you gullible enough to be taken in when the pretty chiseler comes along.

The surest way to guard against him is by knowing with whom you're dealing. And if you don't—then prevent yourself from being swindled by looking carefully at the small print in contracts before you sign anything, by getting real guarantees and receipts. You can make sure they're real by checking up before you hand over your hard-earned money. In any case, it's generally unwise to shell out the cash before you get what you're paying for.

If you readers follow just these few simple rules, chances are the door-to-door swindles will be cut in half.

Then, you can keep on protecting yourself in advance merely by continuing to read this column.

Besides, send us your letters relating your own personal experiences with racketeers and chiselers of all kinds. If we can use your letter, we'll pay you \$5.00—helping both you and your fellow-readers at the same time. If you wish, of course, we'll withhold your name for print.

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.

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Now, let's learn how to avoid being duped:

Keep Informed

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(Please continue on page 97)

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MIGHTY LIKE A ROGUE

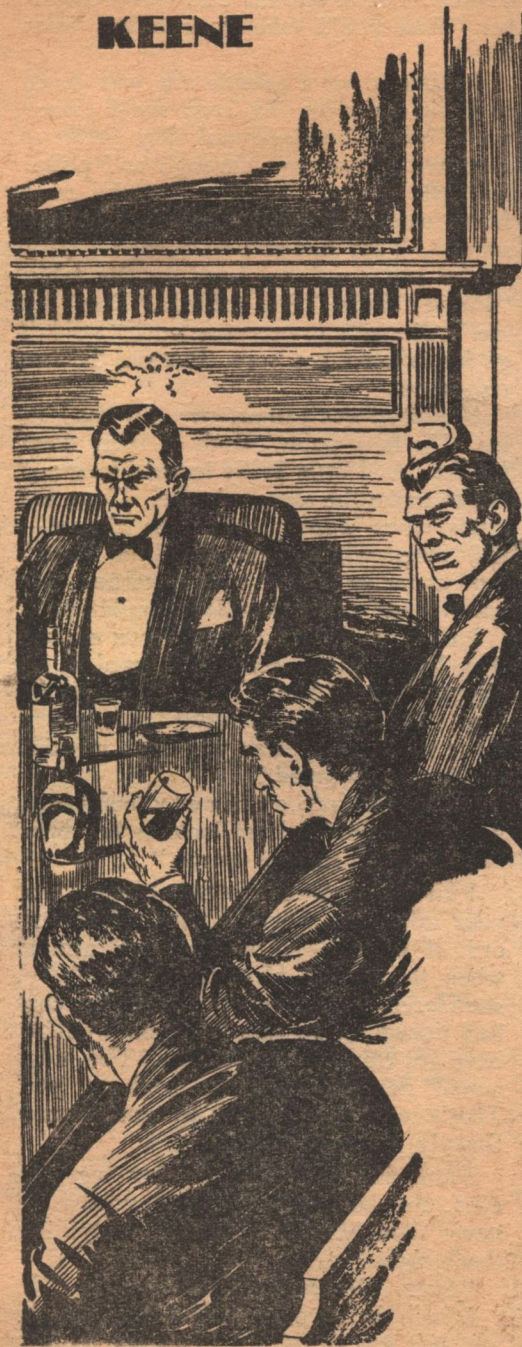
*Just as soon as Dumb-and-Delicious blew the whistle on the D.A.—
I was gonna comb that guy
right out of my hair.*



"You name the time. I'll do the job."

Novel of a Real-Smart Heel

By DAY
KEENE



CHAPTER ONE

To the Last Ditch

CONNIE looked good to me. Six months in the House of Correction hadn't punctured any of her curves. Her tummy was still flat. She still bulged and bobbed intriguingly when glimpsed from the rear of her facade. She still had two nifty pins and the same big blue eyes and baby stare. Her bleached hair had grown out a light brown. I liked it.

When she'd been pinched, she'd been wearing a blackless, strapless, evening gown torn down to here. When they released her, they gave her a plain cotton dress that made her look almost like the dewy-eyed, simple little country chump she had been when Sir Galahad had ridden into her life in a hot, white convertible. Even without much make-up, what I

mean, the kid was really good-looking.

As she walked across the room to where I was feeding some hair to the dog that had bitten me the night before, I couldn't help but think, "*If only she had brains.*"

I was glad to see her for two reasons. One, I stood to win over two hundred dollars. Various of the boys had bet me, what with me letting her take the rap on the Schaeffer mugging and not paying much attention to her while she was scrubbing out her time, she wouldn't show back at the apartment. I knew better. I'd picked her out of the hills down in the you-all country.

Down there when a girl promises to love, honor, and obey, until death do us two part, she means it. Once she gets that paper, her man can do no wrong. It's like a religion with the billies.

Then, too, I was tired of Rosita. *Enchiladas* and *tamales* are fine once in a while. But after stuffing on it for two months, a man gets tired of chile powder.

Connie's opening words were typical. "You ran out on me, Willy."

I'd expected a somewhat similar opening gambit, but the words were slightly out of focus. Then I realized why. Six months before she would have said, "You run out on me, Willy."

"You've been going to school," I accused.

She bobbed her head. "Four hours every day. I was up to the story about Black Beauty in the fifth reader when my time was up. And I'm going to keep on learning. I like it. And I'm not going to do any bad things any more. Both the matron and Mr. Phillips told me that a girl with my looks and my—" she stumbled over the word—"inherent decency didn't belong in a house of correction and—"

The time to put out a fire is when it starts. I got out of my chair and slapped her, hard. Phillips was the young D.A. who was giving us all a headache. A young punk with a good war record, he'd ridden in on a reform wave. Which was all right with us. You have to expect ups and downs in any business. But the young fool really meant what he'd said. He couldn't be bought.

I slapped her again for good measure. "Don't get too big for your two-way

stretch. You're still my dear wife, remember. And you'll take your orders from me."

I thought for a minute she was going to brain me with the lamp she'd picked up. Then a hundred and fifty years of inherited genes came through and pulled for little Willy. Down where she came from, women are used to being pushed around. They like it.

She put the lamp back on the table. "Please, Willy." She sniffed. "Don't hit me." The billy in her came out. "I didn't go for to make you sore. But you did run out on me."

Napoleon was a smart guy. So was Hitler. Up to a point. Both of them went too far. And little Willy learned long ago not to make the same mistake. There are times when women should be clipped—and times when they should be kissed. And as far as Connie was concerned, that was my cue for an osculatory build-up.

I took her in my arms. "I can explain that, honey." I kissed her as hard as I'd slapped her. "And I didn't mean to hit you. But you're so beautiful. And it made me mad to hear you even mention another guy's name."

Connie wasn't entirely convinced. There was still a hurt look in her eyes. "But you did run out on me."

I kissed the hollow in her throat. "For your sake only, honey. You had no record. I have. And if I'd stuck around when the chump blew the whistle—" I shuddered to think of it. "Once the cops had linked me to the deal, you wouldn't have got off with six months. The judge would have thrown the book at you. That's why I ran out on you, honey. Strictly for your sake."

Fluttering the lashes of her big blue eyes, she bought the bill of goods. "I never thought of it that way, Willy. But that's right."

"Sure. Of course it is, honey."

I built her a good stiff drink, but she said if it was all right with me she thought she would just take ginger ale as, while she was in the House of Correction a temperance lady had given a lecture on what alcohol did to the brain, and she didn't want to become stupid.

Coming from her that was a howl, but I added the hair to the pelt I was grow-

ing on the dog and let it go at that. There ought, I thought, to be a law. It's positively criminal the things they learn the stupes in jail.

She was glad to be back in the apartment, like any good wife should. She fingered this and looked at that and remembered such and such, as pleased as a kid. She should have been. I'd bought her her first pair of silk stockings.

Down in the hills where she'd come from running water means the nearest branch and the only vitreous china they ever come in contact with is when they handle the souvenir cake plate that great grandfather Zeke stole when Quantrell's guerrillas raided Podunk because Sherman had burned Atlanta.

The next thing she did was take a bath. "*To get the smell off of me.*"

I knew just what she meant. I hadn't been kidding about my record. On account of two stupid lawyers and one jury box filled with morons, I'd lost the toss three times. Once more, and they'd etch my number on my hide.

ARTURO called while she was in the tub. I told him that Connie was out and home again. He said to bring her over to his place that night to celebrate, and we would combine business with pleasure as he had a little deal he wanted to cut me in on. He also said that an old friend of mine, he wouldn't tell me who, was going to be there. He said I would be pleased to see the guy, however, as we were fellow alumni.

I mixed another drink and told Connie the good news. She was standing in front of the mirror, looking at the expensive lucite brush I'd swiped for her one night.

"The big shot just called," I told her. "Put on something snazzy and we'll drop by there after we eat."

She continued to look at the brush. It made me kinda sore. Any other doll in the city would have been palpitating over the invitation. Arturo wasn't only a big shot. He was the biggest shot since Al Capone lost the fall to Uncle Sam. But Connie had never cottoned to him.

For one thing, he had a habit of liking to wrestle with pretty dolls without stopping to look at the third finger on their left hand. Then, too, she'd gotten plenty

sore at him the night he had made all of us, but her, laugh by soaking a stray kitten she'd picked up with lighter fluid and then touched off its fur to make a self-propelled cigarette lighter.

I said she didn't seem too pleased, and she turned to face me.

"You don't seem overly pleased to see me, Willy," she countered. Like the dumbest of women will sometimes, she hit the nail on the head. "There hasn't been any other woman while I've been away, has there, Willy?"

I started to say, "Positively not." I laughed. "Why—no," I said finally. "No one I was interested in, if that's what you mean. Why? Why do you ask me, honey?"

I tried to take her in my arms, but she wasn't having any at the moment.

"Skip it," she said. "I just wondered," and walked on into the bedroom.

And that was all right with me. Feeling as I did, I didn't care if I saw any woman, even a little honey like Connie, for a month. I had more important things to think of. I went back into the living room and finished re-pelting the dog.

Things were working out nicely. Arturo was calling me now. That meant I was in. From here on I would move strictly in big time. There would be no more petty capers like the gone-sour badger game.

There would be no more lone-hand filling station and liquor store hold-ups. No more selling hot cars for a fraction of their value because I didn't have an in. I had proven my value to Arturo on the half-dozen little tasks he had entrusted to me. And now I was no longer a wall-flower. I was one of the gang. Arturo was calling me.

"*I have a little deal I want to cut you in on, Willy.*"

It made me feel like a new man. I bought the new man a drink and sipped it, listening to the radio. With Rosita gone, it was quiet and peaceful in the apartment. There was no more banging of drawers or streams of liquid Spanish curses because Rosita couldn't find something that she wanted among Connie's things. It was just like the old times before Connie had been tagged.

I sat thinking about the three hundred-

buck suits I would buy and the block-long convertible I'd drive. I would buy one just like Arturo's. And it would be nice, for a change, to drive a car that every cop in forty-eight states didn't have down on his hot-car pad.

It got so dark I had to switch on the light. The drinks had given me an appetite. I hoisted the six-foot-two of me that had nicknamed me Little Willy to my feet and walked on into the bedroom to see if Connie wasn't about ready to go out and tie on the feed bag.

Dames. Sometimes even a smart guy can't understand them. Here with her time behind her, back home with her loving man, a gold-plated invitation to a penthouse, and the future opening wide for both of us, you'd think she would be jumping with joy. Instead, she was sitting in the dark, on the stool in front of her dressing table, looking out of the window.

I asked her what was the big idea of taking so long, and she told me:

"I've been thinking."

So help me. I damn near burst my sides. Think of it. She'd been *thinking*.

CHAPTER TWO

Willing Little Willy

ON THE drive was Arturo's penthouse, so high up that on a clear night you could see the lights of Michigan City from the set-back terrace. Believe me. He was one of the boys who had made a chump out of the first party-waist who cracked that crime didn't pay. It had paid him plenty. He'd made more money out of more rackets than any five big athletes put together. What I mean, he had more pies than he had fingers to put in them.

The doorman fell all over his feet giving us service. I didn't blame him. He knew he was opening doors for quality. It takes a man six feet tall, weighing two hundred pounds or better, to really set off a dinner jacket.

Being fair about it, though, Connie gave us some class, too. The long white organdy evening gown she was wearing was built for curves and shoulders like hers, and her round baby face and straw-

colored hair didn't exactly make her look like a hag. But it was her eyes that got men mostly. Most of the time they were just soft and appealing like a kitten's.

But I'll never know how she managed to store up so many watts in nineteen years. When she wanted to turn on the power, she could make an Eskimo melt his igloo just by touching it with his finger. For a dumb little hillbilly kid, she wasn't too bad at all.

Being a big shot as he was, and owning the building besides, Arturo had his own private elevator. Jack Keagle, a punk I'd done time with, was running the cage. He had a grin all over his face.

"Well, it looks like we're moving into the big time, eh, Willy?" he greeted me.

"Yeah. Kinda looks like." I agreed. In the last year, since Phillips had been elected, Arturo had been having a lot of bad luck with his boys. The law had snagged some. Some had gotten cold feet when the new D.A. turned the heat on. Some had opened their mouths too wide. It had been doing a free-lance job on one of them for Arturo that had given me my first in. But Keagle was even newer than I was. He had come into the fold since Connie had been put away.

"Meet the wife," I told him. "Connie, this is Jack. Jack, this is Connie."

Keagle said, "Pleased to meetcha."

"Likewise," Connie said. Then she remembered one of the Emily Posts she'd leaned against in the House of Correction. "I am indeed very pleased to make your acquaintance."

From her, it didn't sound bad.

Arturo's penthouse was really something. The living room was sunken just enough to make it unhandy for a man with one drink too many, and long enough to be a shooting gallery. At the far end of where you came in, French doors led out onto a landscaped set-back, complete with a portable bar and fish pool.

"Now this," I told Connie, "is the kind of a joint that I would like to live in."

I'd expected it to be jumping. It wasn't. Only a half dozen of the boys and their dolls were there. But I was glad I had worn my tux. The boys who were there were creme-de-creme. Gorgo, Chink, Elmo, Farley Gray, Boots Hannon, Tod Wyatt, Petey. I felt even bet-

ter than before to know Arturo had cut me in on such a gathering.

A butler was passing drinks on a tray, cocktails for the ladies and double-shots for the boys, but I didn't see Arturo. When I asked about him, the butler told me:

"Mr. Arturo is currently speaking on the phone, Mr. Mason. But he requests you and the other gentlemen to join him in the library as soon as he is finished."

I drank a double and took one to hold. Then I saw The Preacher. It was all I could do to keep from giving with a whoop. I hadn't seen the guy in two years, not since we'd knocked over the bank in Mayfield together and had to hole up in the town in which I'd made Connie's acquaintance until the heat had blown off.

The guy was like a brother to me. We'd pushed over our first pushcart together and he'd had the top bunk in Atlanta when we both had been doing two years. Not that rough stuff was much in his line. What he really shone at was con work. He could pose as a doctor, lawyer, preacher, and make the guy he was conning think he was one.

Why, even while we were lying low, I saw him talk a small-town banker into putting up two grand to finance an expedition to Mozambique to dig monobenzl ether of hydroquinone to sell at one hundred dollars a pint to, as estimated in the 1940 census, eleven million, four hundred and nineteen thousand, one hundred and thirty-eight potential customers.

What I mean, The Preacher was good. But with all of his education and all of the dough he'd grifted, he wasn't above doing a fast favor for a friend. I took a quick look at Connie to see if she recognized him. It could be embarrassing if she did. I couldn't tell, but I doubted if she made him. They'd only met the one time, and then it had been kinda dark in the front room of the farmhouse where he'd been staying.

I patted her and told her to go join the dolls clustered in one corner making snide remarks about each others' dresses. Then I shook hands with The Preacher. "You old so and so," I told him. "When did you get in town and what are you doing here?"

He was as glad to see me as I was to see him. "I've been in town almost a week," he said. "Arturo flew me in here from the coast as a trouble-shooter. According to what he tells me, this new D.A. has been putting you boys over the hurdle."

I said it was worse than that and started to tell him the whole sad story, but just then the butler opened a big pair of doors and said that Mr. Arturo would now be pleased to see all of the gentlemen in his library.

IT LOOKED more like a board of directors' room to me. There was a big polished table in it with chairs along both sides and a bottle of each guy's favorite tiple and a deck of the cigarettes he smoked just to the right of a gold ash tray.

A little rat in his early fifties who looked more like a beat-up second story man than the big shot he was, Arturo was already sitting in a big armchair at the head of the table.

"I guess you boys can find your places," he said, and waved us into our chairs.

I sat between Chink Elmo and Farley Gray, on account of that was where the brand I drank was on the table. Chink asked me if I knew what it was all about. I said I didn't.

Gray poured himself a drink, rinsed it around in his mouth, then, because he was humoring his ulcers, spit it into a gold cuspidor. "Two bits to a dime," he said, "it has something to do with Phillips. We've either got to comb that guy out of our hair or go out of business."

Coming from him, I considered it straight out of the horse's mouth. If anyone knew, he should. He'd been with Arturo for years. I was in the big time and no kidding.

Arturo added another red vein to his nose. Then he told the butler to close the doors, including himself out, and opened the polished table discussion by rapping on it with a gavel just like in a director's meeting in the movies.

"You guys," he began, "are probably wondering why I called you all here tonight. I can tell you in one word—Phillips."

Gray lifted on eyebrow at me as if to

say, "Well, what did I tell you, chum?"

Arturo continued, "This has been going on now for a year. And it still has three more years to go unless we do something about it. I mean to."

I slapped the table and said, "Here."

Arturo continued, "We've tried to frighten the guy off. We've tried to buy him. We've tried to find out something nasty about him. But he won't be frightened. He won't take dough. And two firms of private detectives have informed me the worst thing he ever did in his life was tip over a cup of coffee at a Methodist church supper. But the fact remains, he *has* to go."

I said, "If I may be so bold as to remark, when I was a kid in school, they taught me the straightest distance between two points is a straight line. How about me shooting the guy?"

"I've thought of that, Willy," Arturo nodded. "And if it does come to that, that will be in your department."

Me, Willy Mason. I was the head of a department. Chink Elmo looked at me with new respect, but The Preacher got to his feet. Pushing the bottle by his place aside, he began to talk.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Not out of any humanitarian precepts on my part. But the murder of a high official, city, county, or state, is always a messy affair. And with the reform party in this town as strong as it is, I am afraid that an outright killing would only add to your troubles."

Gorgo wanted to know who the hell he was.

The Preacher told him. "An expert, punk, on any line of so-called criminal endeavor. And I'm not speaking without official standing. I came here for a fee at Mr. Arturo's request to see if I can't untangle this old man of the sea the voters in the last election have straddled on your necks." He looked at Arturo for confirmation. "Is that correct?"

Arturo said it was. "But one way or another, Phillips has to go. The guy is costing me thousands of dollars every day."

"We'll cure that," The Preacher said. "Now, confirm my own deductions." He looked at Chink. "How old would you say your new district attorney is?"

Chink said, "Twenty-eight, maybe twenty-nine."

"And he's young, husky, human? He likes the girls, would you say?"

Chink colored slightly. "So far as I know. But we ain't never been able to get nothing on the guy. Take it from me, he's cagey."

The Preacher nodded. "In his position, he'd have to be. A reform district attorney, as with Caesar's wife, must be above the suspicion of the vulgate." He lighted one of the strong Turkish cigarettes he smoked.

"But there are means to every end. I've been in town a week looking over the situation, trying to formulate a plan, none too successfully I'll admit." He looked at me, "But when Willy and his little blonde doll walked in tonight, I think, mind you I say I *think*, I caught the glimmering of a solution."

I slipped my rod out of my shoulder holster and laid it on the wood. "You name the time. I'll do the job."

Arturo was impressed. "You're okay, Willy," he told me. "You're okay. I like you fine."

I didn't need a drink I felt that good. From here on it was in the bag. I was already wearing three-hundred-dollar suits and driving the convertible. A nod from a big shot like Arturo is like being knighted by the king and hitting the quiz jackpot all at the same time you are collecting five percent on a new aircraft carrier.

"Laudable willingness, Willy." The Preacher praised me. "But not quite so fast. As I said before, an out-and-out shooting might bring our house of cards and capers tumbling about our heads, and Arturo might find himself in an even worse financial position than he is now."

Arturo patted his forehead with his handkerchief. "Heaven forbid. Put your gun away, Willy. Go on, Preacher."

The Preacher snuffed out his cigarette and looked around the table. "'Frailty,'" he said, "'thy name is woman.' Likewise no pair of handcuffs ever forged or no cement kimono was ever half so strong as one fair hair from a woman's head." He added, "Bill Shakespeare didn't say that last, though he might well have."

Chink confided to me, "I used to know

Shakespeare well. Bill was a sergeant at East Chicago. And the precinct station in Logan Square was named after his grandfather."

The Preacher leaned both palms on the table. "Now here is the solution I propose." He looked at Arturo. "But first, let me ask you a hypothetical question. If a young, personable man, currently a district attorney with a bright political future ahead of him, were to fall in love with a little blonde who had done time in the House of Correction, and he had reason to believe she reciprocated his affection, what do you think he would do?"

Arturo thought a moment. "Put on the ball and chains?"

"No, no." The Preacher was patient with him. "He can't afford to marry her. He can't even afford to know the girl. Being a gentleman, he has one of two choices. He can give up the girl. That would be the sensible thing for him to do. Two. He can be a good sport and give you a break by putting a forty-five to his head and blowing out his brains."

Arturo was dubious. "But what if he doesn't want to be a good sport?"

"Right there," The Preacher said softly, "is where willing Little Willy comes in."

CHAPTER THREE

Gold-Plated Future

WE WAITED for him to explain. The Preacher continued: "Let's say some night while he is calling on the doll, perhaps the night he drops in to tell her farewell for ever, Little Willy is waiting in the closet. And if the

job is done at close range with the young D.A.'s own gun, and the girl is broken-hearted all over the place—who is to know that Little Willy and not a tragic love is responsible for the deed? *Especially if the death gun is found in the D.A.'s hand and the doll swears on her love for her dead mother that she saw him clap it to his head and pull the trigger.*"

I got the set-up. It wasn't bad. "Kinda of a high-class badger game, eh, with a homicidal finish?"

He said, "Exactly."

Gray said, "It sounds to me. But what if he doesn't fall in love with the dame?"

The Preacher grinned. "That is the beauty of it. He doesn't have to. All he has to do is be nice to her where people will see it and the public draw its own conclusion."

Chink Elmo echoed Gray. "That sounds to me. But where can we find a doll that we can trust?"

"We can trust Connie," I told him. "And that reminds me, boys. All of you except the boss owe me a little money." They tossed their bets over the table. "She came straight home from the can this afternoon like the little homing pigeon that she is. The kid is nuts about me. What's more, she knows if she doesn't do just what I tell her, I'll slap her black and blue."

Arturo licked his lips. "Heaven knows she is pretty enough. I could go for the doll myself." He looked at The Preacher. "But how are you going to get Connie and the D.A. together?"

"They already been together," I said. "Just this afternoon when she came home after doing her time. Connie told me that



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both the matron and Mr. Phillips had told her that a girl with her looks and inherent decency shouldn't be in a house of correction."

The Preacher dry-washed his hands. "Fine. Fine."

Arturo wasn't so certain. "Okay. So they were together alone, with four hundred girls and thirty matrons. How are you going to get them together now?"

"Why not," The Preacher suggested, "get Connie a job in that restaurant across from the City Hall? Can do?"

"Can do," Arturo said.

"Then there you are. Phillips eats in there every noon. I know. I've spent a week checking his habits. We see that Connie waits on his table. He is surprised to see her. She tells him she is trying to go straight. I'll map out a campaign for her. Maybe she asks his advice about going to night school so she can hold down a better job than hashing. What would you do if you were a young man?" He drew a graphic picture.

"She is standing close to you. She is young and beautiful—and helpless. She's seen the error of her way. She wants to lead a good, clean life. She's standing to close you can smell her perfume. It inflames your senses. So what are you going to do? Are you going to kick the poor kid in the face?"

"Not me," Gorgo said. "Willy is bigger than I am."

The Preacher ignored him. "Of course not. You're going to be noble about it. You're going to give her a helping hand. And maybe get into the habit of dropping up to her room every other night or so—just to see how she is getting along in the secretarial course you suggested.

"The guys in your office, the people on the street, maybe even the kid's landlady, begin to talk. But you are so clean-minded that you don't realize that. Then one night, Willy is there. And when the doll blows the whistle, they find you stiff on the floor with your own gun in your hand and the little blonde doll weeps all over the front pages, '*It just wasn't meant to be.*'"

Concluding, the preacher sat down. "And there you are—rid of Phillips."

All of us slapped the table, saying we would buy it. It was a peach of a scheme,

a lulu. The Preacher had come through again. With Connie's looks and the D.A.'s well-known Sir Galahad complex, it couldn't miss. It was a sure-fire pitch.

When we had quieted, Arturo said, "There is just one more thing. Are you *sure* that you can trust her? Can you answer for Connie, Willie?"

I told him, "With my life. Connie is a hill girl from down in the you-all country where women are used to taking orders from their men and a woman's man can do no wrong. It is a religion with them."

"Fine," Arturo said. "Fine. The Preacher can coach Connie later." He got to his feet with dignity. "Well, gentlemen. Shall we join the dames?"

AFTER that, the night got slightly fuzzy. All I remember about it is that we had a barrel of fun. One of the dames got higher than a kite and insisted on doing the routine she used to do on a chorus runway. Another of the dames got a complex she was a gold fish, and we were all of the time having to fish her out of the pool on the terrace, all of us laughing like mad.

Then someone tossed out a pair of dice. After we'd all agreed no passers or miss-outs could be rung in, we rolled them on top of the grand piano with the music rack for a back stop. I built up my roll quite a bit on account of the dice were mine and I had both passers and missouts to match the square dice in my pocket.

We had one hell of a time, and whooped and hollered and wrestled and cut the fool until four o'clock in the morning. That is, all of us but Connie and The Preacher.

They sat most of the night on the sofa while he explained point by point, as to the child she was, just what was expected of her.

Things were pretty hazy along about then, but I remember The Preacher telling me, "She'll do. She'll do, Little Willy. She'll do. If those big blue eyes of hers and that baby stare don't pin a crepe on Phillip's door, I hope I never clip another sucker."

I told him not to be sacreligious and he added:

"Early tomorrow morning I'm going to get Connie a room in a private house.

Something very respectable where the only male caller she could possibly have would be a district attorney. So kiss her good-bye for a few weeks, Little Willy. We have to play this thing cagey and we don't dare to rush it."

For a moment I was sad, thinking of all an ambitious man has to give up for a career. Then I took another drink and thought, *What the hell? There is always Rosita.*

It was getting light by the time we got back to the apartment. I was so boiled that Connie had to prop up one side and the cab driver another, to get me up the stairs. But I'd never felt better in my life. I wanted to wake up everyone in the building and tell them I was in.

"You're okay, Willy," Arturo had told me. "You're okay. I like you fine."

Then the cab driver tried to get tough with me just because I didn't want to pay the fare. I was going to shoot his ears off, but Connie persuaded me to give him a ten of my dice winnings and he slunk off down the stairs.

Even then there were two doors where there should have been one, and I tried to walk through the wrong one the first time and had to clip Connie good because she hadn't steered me right. But she finally got me in.

"Now you get some sleep," she told me.

I said, "To hell with that."

I'd never seen her so pretty. I was going to miss her like sin. I grabbed her and pulled her to me. "Did I ever tell you that you were a pretty little doll?"

She nodded like she was frightened of me. "Why, y-yes. You've told me several times, Willy."

"And I'm saying it now," I told her. The frightened look was still in her eyes. "Come on. Tell me, honey. What is eating you now?"

Her eyes filling with tears, she got what was worrying her off her chest. "About, Mr. Phillips. You aren't really going to hurt him, are you, Willy? All you are going to do is hit him, like you hit Mr. Schaeffer."

"Sure. That's all," I lied.

"And I don't have to be bad, do I, Willy?"

I kissed her eyes and her lips and her throat. "That's just the point, honey," I

told her. "If you were to do anything bad, you would queer the whole deal. Like The Preacher explained, you don't have to do a thing but be good and want to get ahead in the world. You leave everything else to Little Willy. You'll queer the whole pitch if you as much as wink one of those pretty blue eyes at Mr. Phillips."

"I'm glad," she told me. "Because like I told you this afternoon, both the matron and Mr. Phillips told me—"

I'd heard the record before. "Sure. I know," I said. "A girl with your looks and inherent decency doesn't belong in a house of correction. Okay. Now take off my shoes. It's damn near morning."

She took off my shoes and untied my tie like a dutiful hill wife should, but she seemed to be having trouble with the zipper of her dress. "You—still awake, Willy?" she asked me.

I said I was.

"He—he's nice, in a way," she said. "I mean The Preacher. And even if he is working for Arturo now, he is a real preacher, isn't he, Willy?"

Drunk as I was, I'd never heard anything so funny. I had to hang on to the bed to keep from falling out.

"Hell, no," I told the little stupe. "We just call him that on account of he looks like a Holy Joe. The closest The Preacher ever came to a church was once when he pinched the poor box to buy a quart of rum. He's the cleverest con man in the business."

"Oh," she said. "I see."

I tried to kiss her again, but she got up and got the quart I'd left on the dresser.

"Let's have a big drink," she suggested. "A great big drink—to celebrate." She handed me the bottle. "Here you take the first drink, Willy."

I was glad to see her in her right mind and forgetting that foolish temperance business about alcohol making you stupid. I tilted the butt of the bottle to the ceiling and let the stuff in it drain down. And it was the one over twenty.

The next thing I knew, it was two o'clock in the afternoon. On Connie's pillow there was pinned a note that read in her misspelled childish scrawl:

Mr. Preacher has cum for me to take me to the room he has rented. I start work at

the restrant tomorrow morning at ten an work the shift thru until four. Goodbye, Willy.

Connie

I was almost sorry I'd gotten so drunk. Even if she was dumb, Connie was a good kid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fair-Haired Boy

ONE week, two weeks, almost three weeks passed. Arturo was biting his nails up to here, but The Preacher told him the same thing he'd told me—we didn't dare to rush the deal. We had to play it cagey.

Meanwhile, the town was going to pot. Cobwebs were forming on the bar stools where the B girls had once made merry chatter to the chumps. Flying squads of picked men from the D.A.'s office knocked over one after another of Arturo's horse-and-poker parlors. Chink Elmo, who handled the hot car-export drop, was tagged by a strong-arm squad and thrown in the clink for three days before Arturo could locate him and get him out on ten-grand bail.

The stick-up boys and muscle men were starving. An inspector, two captains, a lieutenant, and a short ton of sergeants, were suspended pending charges. It was getting so bad a fellow couldn't even have an over-time parking ticket fixed, let alone square a fast caper.

The first thing I'd done after the party was spend most of my dice game winnings on two three-hundred-dollar suits of clothes. But unless the town opened up pretty soon, I was going to look very silly wearing glad rags like that with holes in both of my shoes.

The only bright spot in the picture was Connie. She'd been a hasher when I met her and a good one. She took to the job in the joint across from the City Hall like benedictine to brandy.

What was more important—from what reports I'd had and what I'd seen with my one eyes, Phillips had fallen for her like a ton of Irish confetti. He used to eat at one, and spend fifteen minutes in the joint. Now he came in for a cup of coffee when Connie came on shift and ate his way through the rest of the day.

What I mean, the guy was on the ropes.

And Connie was playing it smart. From time to time I dropped in for a cup of coffee and a sinker, and saw it with my own eyes. As soon as the chump would walk in the door, she'd flutter those big blue peepers of hers at him like he was the most important thing in her life and she was just as crazy about him, in an innocent way, as he was about her.

Even if he'd just been in five minutes before, she'd say, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Phillips," like her heart was standing still.

And he'd just sit there mooning at her like she was pennies from heaven and keep on ordering coffee and pie for an excuse to look a little longer. Honest. One day I saw the guy eat six bowls of deep dish apple and drink eight cups of coffee.

I didn't blame him for looking. Like the guy said in the book, you never miss the violets until they're gone. And Connie was something to look at in the white nylon uniform. With her straw-colored hair wound in big braids around her head, she reminded a guy of summer and flowers and the sweet smell of hay and the tinkle of a brook and green, living, growing things sprouting up out of rich black earth. The kid only weighed a hundred pounds, but what I mean she was lush.

She was doing good with her homework, too. None of us dared to see her at the restaurant or show at the high-class rooming house where she was living. But like she had arranged with The Preacher, she sent in regular reports. Phillips—she called him Don in her reports—had suggested she take a secretarial course. Even in the short time she had been going to school, it showed in both her spelling and her writing.

He, Don, Connie wrote, said there was no reason in the world why with a little coaching she shouldn't over-come her humble beginning and take her rightful place in society. To that end, he was calling for her almost every night now, escorting her to school, waiting while she learned, then escorting her back to her room and going over her lessons with her.

Even The Preacher was impressed by the way she was following his instructions, and began planning big things for her once Phillips was out of the way.

THEN the fly got stuck in the ointment. Arturo, it would seem, just happened to be coming out of a certain office in City Hall, where he had dropped in to try to arrange a fix in the Chink Elmo matter, when he bumped smack into the young D.A.

I wasn't there. All I know is what I read in the papers and what I was told. Maybe Arturo snarled at the kid. I wouldn't know. I don't blame him if he did. But Phillips wasn't having any.

He named Arturo in so many words and told him that now he had him on the run, he was going to run him right back into the hole he'd crawled out of. Then Arturo came back with a couple of hot retorts about Sunday school towns and teaching his grandmother to suck eggs. And the first thing the guys in the hall know, the two are mixing it with their fists.

It takes Gorgo and Farley Gray, an elevator operator, and two Park Board Policemen to pry them apart, before they can make like the gingham dog and the calico cat, while two press photographers who just happened to be passing snapped themselves a twenty-buck raise.

The afternoon papers came out with screamers:

ARTURO AND D.A. BATTLE WITH
FISTS IN CITY HALL CORRIDOR!

CRIME MUST GO, SAYS D.A.
NUTS, SAYS ARTURO!

It was all very sordid and degrading, but I will say for Phillips that he kept his head. He could have jugged Arturo and had him put under a peace bond. But he knew he couldn't keep him in the jug. He also knew all he'd made was talk. He could never get rid of Arturo. Not by any legal means.

Arturo knew where too many lost weekends had been spent. Where too many bodies were fertilizing the daisys. He had too many high officials on his secret payroll. Too many aldermen were driving cars and living in houses their smear of the gravy had bought.

So, being a smart lad, Phillips let the affair wind up with a final statement to the press in which he said:

In a younger, more direct, more virile
America, what would have been done, what

should be done to vermin of Arturo's stripe, is exterminate him. He should be shot down like the mad dog he is.

Arturo blew higher than his penthouse when he read it. "Now the guy is going to shoot me. To hell with this stalling around. Get Phillips out of my hair. Have him rubbed out tonight."

"Okay," The Preacher agreed. "Tonight is as good a night as any. You ready to go to work, Little Willy?"

I told him, "Any time."

He gave me explicit directions in just what part of the house it was and also a key he'd had made for Connie's room and one for the downstairs front door.

"We'll pull it tonight," he said, "when Phillips brings her home from school. You be in Connie's closet and waiting by ten-thirty. When I leave here, I'll stop by the restaurant and tip her off that tonight is the payoff. You remember your instructions?"

I said I did, but The Preacher made me repeat them—how I was to wrap both arms around Phillips and get his gun out of his pocket without marking him in any way that might make the homicide boys suspicious.

"And remember, Phillips is left-handed," he reminded. "Be sure you put the gun in his left hand."

I said I would remember, and he went into more details about how he and two of the other boys would touch off a house a few doors down the block to shill Connie's landlady and her fellow roomers out of the joint, so that no one would see me enter.

Now the pay-off was coming up, Arturo was pleased as a kid. He bought both of us a drink of the good stuff he drank himself, and then slipped me a fifty as an evidence of good faith and affection.

"Eat a big steak. Eat two big steaks. Be good and strong, Little Willy," he told me. "And pull that trigger hard."

I promised him I would and rode downstairs. It being then only about two o'clock, and the caper eight and a half hours away. I went back to the apartment to have a few more nips and a nap. . . .

It was almost six o'clock when the special-delivery boy banged on the door and poked the letter at me. I tipped him the back of my hand, then ripped open the

letter and read it. It was from Connie.

On top of her six months training in the House of Correction, three weeks of secretarial school had certainly done wonders for Connie. There wasn't one misspelled word and, instead of a childish scrawl, her writing had character. It could have been written by a governor or even a senator's wife. What I mean, it had class. Some bills fell out in my hand as I opened it. The letter read:

Dear Willy:

Please meet me in Grant Park by the Buckingham Fountain at exactly seven-thirty tonight. I have something very important to discuss with you. Something vital to both of our futures. If you would like to get rich, if you would like to have as much money as Arturo, don't fail to meet me. And don't tell any one about this.

Yours very truly,

Connie

P. S. Am inclosing my two-weeks pay.

It was nice of the kid. It was also an intriguing letter. I couldn't help but wonder what she was on the trail of. Even the dumbest of dames bump into gold mines sometimes, and Connie had had an inside track into the D.A.'s office for three weeks. I burned the letter and put the money in my wallet.

The caper wasn't set for until after she'd come back from school. The Preacher had tipped her by now that tonight was the big night. But I still would have plenty of time to meet her by the fountain and find out what was in her little mind. . . .

SINCE the colored lights hadn't been turned on yet, it was dark in the park by the fountain. But I hit it on the head, and Connie was waiting for me. I took her in my arms and kissed her but something big was eating her and she was too excited to respond.

"Not now, Little Willy," she told me. "We haven't time." She led the way to a bench and sat down. "Do you remember what you told me that last night, when we went up to Arturo's penthouse?"

I asked her, "What?"

"You said, 'This is the kind of a joint I would like to live in.'"

I was pleased that she remembered. "Yeah. Sure. I did say that."

She took a deep breath. "Well, you can. Listen, Little Willy. I've been thinking."

"No. Not again?" I cracked.

But Connie was in no mood for levity. She had business on her mind. "You've read the afternoon papers?"

"Of course."

"All about where Mr. Phillips said that Arturo should be shot down like a mad dog?"

I laughed. "Sure. And did the little grease-ball hit the ceiling! That's why he said that Phillips had to be—" I remembered her delicate sensibilities just in time—"er—intimidated and disgraced tonight." I wasn't too worried about her reaction after the thing was over.

Once I had cut the caper, she would have to string along or find herself tagged as an accessory to murder. And even Connie had brains enough to know what that could mean. "The Preacher contacted you?"

She nodded. "Yes. And that's why I sent you the note." She gave with the brain business again. "And here is what I have been thinking, Little Willy." She patted my sleeve. "You're big and you're strong and you're brave and you're a good shot with a gun."

I was modest. "Oh, I get by. Come to the point, honey."

She said, "I don't like Arturo. And I don't trust him. He burned my kitten. I'd like to see him dead." Then she pulled the snapper and it hit me like a punch in the belly. "So what would happen, Little Willy, if Mr. Phillips tried to keep his threat and he and Arturo did shoot it out—and both of them were killed?"

I said, "It would be a mess." Then I saw what she was driving at and the small veins in my temple began to pound. It all just went to show what happened when you bought a pair of shoes for a hill kid and combed the dogwood out of her hair. She got ambitious for her man. I was bigger and tougher than any of the other boys in the mob, The Preacher and Farley Gray included. And with Arturo dead and the snotty young D.A. making the grass greener, there was no reason in the world why I shouldn't take over Arturo's mob and his rackets.

The picture made me nervous, I slapped her. "You've said too much or not enough. Keep talking."

Sniffing a little because I hurt her, Con-

nie explained the plan she'd thought up. It would have to go like clock-work. The Preacher and the rest of the boys would be expecting her to lead young Phillips back to her rooming house for the pay-off and would be busy touching off the house down the block and making certain the road was clear for me to get into her closet. Just on the off-chance that anything should go wrong, Arturo, rat that he was, was certain to be in his own penthouse, perfectly alibied.

Almost breathless now, Connie continued, "So what if exactly at ten-thirty—instead of leading Don back to my rooming house—I suggest he make a personal call on Arturo and have it out with him once and for all? And you are waiting at Arturo's instead of the rooming house? *And when the shooting is over, both of them are dead, the D.A. by Arturo's gun and Arturo dead by his?*"

Once she had made the plunge, Connie was a bloody-minded little wench. It made my skin crawl to hear the calm way she explained it. She concluded:

"Then both of them would be out of your hair, Little Willy. And you could live in Arturo's penthouse and wear three-hundred-dollar suits and drive a big convertible."

It was a pretty picture. "But how do you know you can get the D.A. to go to Arturo's penthouse?"

She made a gesture with her hand. "Oh, that. I can wind Don around my little finger. He thinks the sun rises and sets in me and he'll do anything that I ask him."

I thought it over for a few more minutes. The more I thought, the better it sounded. Arturo *was* a rat and a cheap skate. What had he given me? A few pats on the back, a few drinks, and fifty dollars.

Connie continued to stroke the sleeve of my coat. "I don't have to tell you. You're smart. But you'll have to time it close. So why don't you get to Arturo's at, say ten twenty-five and, well, get the first part of the business over with. Then when I come in with Mr. Phillips—" She left it there.

"It's a sale," I told her. "I'll buy it." I tried to hug her to me, but she pulled away.

"Please. I'm wearing a brand-new suit and you're getting it all mussed."

The lights in the fountain came on then and I could see her. Feeling as good as I did about what was going to happen and me taking over the whole shebang, I said she looked pretty snazzy. Connie explained it was what they called a going-away suit, whatever that means, and she had bought it with her tips.

"You do like the idea, then?"

There were still a few minor points I would have to work out, like what to do with the butler if he was there, and whether to run the cage myself or trust Jack Keagle. But I'd cut a lot of *ad-lib* capers and I was confident I could bridge any gaps in the mechanics as I came to them.

"Ten-thirty at Arturo's," I sealed it. "And you can quit your job in the morning, Connie. You won't have to hash any more."

"Thank you, Little Willy," she told me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pure and Simple

PART of my problem solved itself when I remembered that Thursday was Arturo's butler's night out. After leaving Connie in the park, I took a cab back to the drive and was smoking a butt under the marquee of a joint a few doors up the street, when I saw the butler come out. He was dolled-up to start off on some tom-cattling expedition of his own. Working where he did, the guy must have gotten a lot of telephone numbers.

How to get in and out of the joint without being seen was another problem. Then I happened to think that in a swell joint like that they wouldn't bring the garbage down in the front cage. They didn't. Walking around in back of the building I could see a narrow line of lights spotting a freight elevator that ran all the way up to the penthouse.

The entrance, I imagined, was through the boiler room. A quick investigation proved I was right. And Arturo for all his dough was no smarter than the average householder. He had a two hundred dollar a week guard on his front door but he entrusted the back to a two-dollar lock any dime store skeleton key would open.

Satisfied I could get in and out, I walked

on down the street and lost myself in a crowded bar for the next two hours. At ten, I called Arturo from a pay station.

"This is you-know-who, boss," I told him. "I'm just calling to have you wish me luck and tell you to be sure to be covered just in case something should go wrong."

It seemed to please him.

"Thanks, I-know-who," he said softly. "Good luck." He chortled. "And don't worry about me. I'm sick on the couch with a doctor's prescription. Besides, I've left word for the mayor to call me at exactly ten-thirty, at which time I intend to lodge a protest against keeping in office a certain highly placed official who keeps the low company he does. The nerve of the guy cracking wise like he did about a respectable business man." Then he said, "Thanks for calling again," and hung up.

I smoked a cigarette in the booth. If Arturo was using a sick dodge it was unlikely he had a doll in the penthouse. Besides, once the fat was in the fire, reports from this guy and that would come pouring in over his private unlisted wire and he wouldn't want any doll tuned in.

Some mug opened the door of the booth and wanted to know if I'd rented it for the night.

"If I had time," I told him, "I'd push your teeth down your throat on account of I don't like the tone of that crack. But as it so happens, I'm busy. So, if you will excuse me, chum, I am on my way to earn a million dollars."

He looked after me like I was nuts, as I walked out of the bar. The Indian still having charge of the summer, it was warm. I enjoyed the walk back to the drive. I've thought of it many a time. The thing was a cinch, a push-over. It all just went to show a guy. You went along stealing peanuts for years. Then you picked up a blonde—and whammo, you hit the jackpot.

I walked by in the dark, on the other side of the street, to give it a last quick once-over. Jack Keagle was out on the walk smoking a cigarette with the doorman. When the time for it came, both of them would swear that no one but Connie and District Attorney Don Phillips had asked to be taken up to Arturo's penthouse. I walked on around to the

back of the building, in through the open baggage room door, and opened the lock on the freight elevator with my skeleton key.

Closing the door, I pushed the handle forward and started up at exactly the time I should have been sneaking into Connie's rooming house and making like a mouse in her closet.

The cage opened into a service hall with a little better lock on the door leading into the penthouse. I had to use both my pick-lock and my pen knife on it. It must have taken me almost two minutes before I got it open and walked on into the unlighted kitchen.

I touched the deep freeze as I passed. The thing was big and must have cost two thousand bucks. And it was filled with expensive viands like aged steaks that thick, and quail and frog's legs and quick-frozen pompano. And it all was going to belong to me. All for the price of two slugs. It was the best bargain I'd ever picked up.

Arturo was in the living room, alone. He was propped up on a zebra-striped sofa reading a racing form and nursing a bottle—which must have been the doctor's prescription he'd mentioned.

When he saw me, he squeaked, "Little Willy. What are you doing here?"

I gave him the classic answer like they always do in the films. "Why, me? I'm taking over, chump." I glanced at his wrist watch. It was ten twenty-eight. It was time. "Good-by, Arturo," I told him—and pulled the trigger of the gun in my hand.

For all of his dough and his rackets, he went out like a switched-off light. I made certain I'd done a good job. Then I lighted a cigarette and sat down to wait for Connie to show up with the D.A.

I'D NEVER known minutes could be so long. It crawled to ten twenty-nine, then dragged on to ten-thirty, and the phone began to ring like mad. That was the mayor. I let it ring. It served him right for a man in his position to stoop to call a rat like Arturo.

From then on time really went slow. It got to be ten thirty-five, and I was beginning to sweat. I could have left any time. The back door was wide open. But

I'd only completed half the job. The way it stood now it was murder. Connie *had* to show up with Phillips.

At ten-forty, I unloosened my tie and opened my shirt. I was getting hot—but the stiff was getting colder every minute. If it got much colder even when Connie did show up with Phillips, the boys who make with the thermometers and test tubes were going to be damn suspicious.

My whole body was drenched with sweat. The phone continued to ring on and off. At ten forty-seven I couldn't stand it any longer and picked it up, hoping that it was Connie calling to say they'd been delayed, but she'd be up with the chump in a minute.

It wasn't Connie. It was The Preacher. And he sounded more hysterical than I'd ever heard him before. He thought I was Arturo.

"Both Little Willy and Connie have run out on us," he stormed. "And there's been a tip-off somewhere. Four cops picked me up just as I was about to torch off the house down the block to create a diversion and what I mean—they got me with the goods. But it can't go on the blotter—"

I dropped the phone back in the cradle. To hell with The Preacher. I had troubles of my own. I gave Connie two more minutes, thinking dark thoughts about her, like maybe she'd never meant to show. Then the front door bell pealed. I was never so glad to hear any bell in my life. I'd done the kid an injustice.

Holding the gun in my right hand, I opened the front door. "Come in, Mr. Phillips," I invited. "By all means, come right in."

Captain Miles of the Homicide Squad looked at me like I was nuts. So did the five members of his squad with him.

"Well, Little Willy," Captain Miles greeted me. "Imagine meeting you here. Tell me something, chum. Some dame just called me from Valpariso. You know, that Indiana marriage mill, just over the state line and down aways. And she told me the screwiest story. She said if we'd chop-chop right over to Arturo's penthouse, we might have the pleasure of making a murder investigation."

That was a long time ago. Nine months to be exact. In the elapsed time, the State

has given birth to two murder trials, both of them revolving around me. The first jury was smart. They disagreed. But the second box was filled with morons. They made it 'first degree' with no recommendation for mercy—which means I have to hit the coal chute in a place and at a time as designated by the law. The place is here. The time is two nights from now.

So help me, I didn't have a plea. That guy Phillips is one smart D.A. After him calling Arturo all the things he had, to hear him talk to the jury you would have thought that the little rat was one of the greatest benefactors of mankind. What's more, in both of my trials he got the judge to admit what evidence he wanted on record and to discard all the rest as irrelevant and immaterial and tending to harm and degrade innocent parties involved.

And once he got a look at the pins of the young D.A.'s new wife, even the lawyer appointed by the court to defend me was working for the other side. It was criminal. So help me.

They wouldn't allow him to testify, but they did let me see The Preacher, once. That was just after they'd brought him here to start doing the long haul without any hope of parole. And outside of trying to kick in my teeth, he wasn't too sore about having to take the fall. We both agreed it had been a good idea and I'd only made one mistake.

Those hill kids are funny women. Once they get that paper, they'll stick by their man to the last ditch. They'll work and fight and lie and steal and even kill for him. But they want that paper to be legal. And I'd made a bad mistake by using a phony license I'd just happened to have handy and asking The Preacher to pose as something he wasn't and do something that he had never been ordained to do.

And that winds it up, I guess. It was murder, pure and simple. Like the guy says in the gag, Connie was pure and I was simple. But I'll see her again. I know. And not too long from now.

The warden doesn't like me either. And he got a big charge out of showing me the invitation to my execution that he sent to Mr. and Mrs. District Attorney Donald Phillips.

PLEASE OMIT FLOWERS



*Pinning a crepe on the gambling czar's gal
would've been a pushover—
if newshawk Blair hadn't fallen for Angel Face.*

*She smiled and her finger
tightened.*

I EYED the tall willowy blonde in the white suit as she passed my table. Except for the bartender, she and I were alone in the place but there was always the chance that she was expecting her date any minute. She vanished behind the green curtain where the management kept its illegal slot machine.

Wheels chugged as the one-armed bandit swallowed her quarters. There was no

**By RICHARD E.
GLENDINNING**

payoff. She came back, her full lower lip pouting, and I decided to make my pitch by the direct approach.

She reached my table, and I said, "Are you alone?"

She studied me appraisingly. "Not now." She sat down.

I called the bartender, ordered two highballs, then nodded at the green curtain. "Any luck?"

"I never have any luck."

"Maybe you don't live right."

"Could be." The drinks came and she made rings on the table with the bottom of her glass. "I haven't seen you in here before."

"I just got in town this morning."

"And made straight for this dump."

The bar wasn't that bad. It was about par for a town the size of Rumson. "The drinks are honest," I said. "It's got a slot-machine and I haven't seen one since the old days in New Orleans."

"Are you from there?"

"My territory was in that section."

"Oh. A traveling salesman."

"In brushes. I'm working out of Baltimore now."

A startled expression moved swiftly across her face and then was gone, leaving her smoky-blue eyes expressionless. "Is that so?"

"What about you?" I asked. "Do you live around here?"

"All my life."

"Strange. When I mentioned Baltimore, I thought you— What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Libby Rawler."

"I'm Marty Blair."

She tugged on dark blue gloves and picked up her matching purse. "Thanks for the drink, Mr. Blair."

"You haven't touched it."

"Haven't I?" She stood up and walked to the door, her high heels clicking coldly on the tile floor. She had a gorgeous figure and dressed it to its best advantage. She had too much class for Rumson, population 19,000.

But she was just right for Baltimore, where I was sure she had been known by the stagey name of April Day, not Libby Rawler. I had only a blurred and faded snapshot to go on—a picture taken aboard Little Joe Anton's cabin cruiser—but

nothing could hide the girl's statuesque beauty.

I took out the snapshot and looked at it. Little Joe and the girl were standing at the bow. He, a swarthy, froglike man, had his arm around her waist; she, a good three inches taller than Little Joe, was staring over his head. The photographer—one of Little Joe's boys, more expert in aiming a tommy-gun than a box camera—had jittered, blurring the faces, but April Day was still Libby Rawler.

I had to be sure. I put the picture in my wallet, tucking it under my press card, and went to the bar to talk to the bartender.

"Has that blonde been around long?" I asked.

He glowered suspiciously. "You a dick or something?"

"A traveling salesman with time to kill."

"She comes in ever' day and has maybe two drinks. Never more. She's been coming around about two weeks now."

Check. Little Joe Anton had been dead two weeks. I smiled stiffly. "Do you know where she lives?"

"This is a bar, not a date bureau." He turned his back to me.

I walked across the square to the courthouse. The girl hadn't been in town long enough to be listed in the phone book or city directory but I thought someone might know her. I asked a clerk in the tax assessor's office.

"Sure." He rolled his eyes. "A nice dish. She came back about two weeks ago. Been away almost four years."

Double check. April Day's unspectacular stage career had started about four years ago.

"She left town right after her mother died," the clerk said.

"Where's she living now?"

"The same place, 413 Maple Street. That fooled everyone in town. We all figured her father'd leave the house to that woman—" he winked suggestively—"but he didn't. He left it to Libby."

"When did he die?"

"Two years ago, it was. There was another funny thing. Libby didn't come back for the funeral. Didn't even send flowers."

She hadn't sent flowers to Little Joe's funeral, either. She hadn't even been in town when they planted the stubby gambling czar. She had vanished the day of his murder; but the police, convinced that the shooting was a gang killing, hadn't concerned themselves with a missing woman.

I left the courthouse, got into my car and drove east to Maple Street which, though no longer in the best residential district, was a pleasant, quiet street of houses built in the gingerbread era. Libby Rawler's house was in the middle of the block on a maple-shaded lawn.

I parked a few doors down and got out, lugging my sample case with me. I had turned in strange expense accounts to my paper, the *Baltimore Call*, but the next promised to be the strangest: one dozen assorted brushes, one black cardboard suitcase. I had picked up all the items at a dime store, having had the bright idea that a brush salesman could go where angels and police reporters feared to trend.

ON THE chance that Libby Rawler was watching through a window, I went to the house next to hers. A hard-eyed brunette came to the door and I made like a salesman. She didn't want anything. At least, she didn't want any brushes.

She looked up at my red hair. "Ummm, and freckles to match. Are you working your way through college?" She opened the door.

Her patter was just too, too cute. And as for working my way through college, football had taken care of that a good ten years ago. Since then, I had been a fiddlefooted reporter with no strings attached. I wandered the country, working for papers where the sun was shining brightest and the tracks were fast. But Baltimore finally roped me down and I had been pounding a police beat for the *Call* for almost a year.

"Well," the brunette said, holding open the door. "The flies are coming in."

I took a piece of paper from my pocket. "If you'll give me your name, I may be back."

"Miss Lillian Parsons," she said, bearing down on the *Miss*. She was about

thirty but a full life was reflected in her glistening eyes.

"I'll be back." She wasn't hard to look at and her figure was fine, but I had murder on my mind. I left her and cut across the lawn to Libby Rawler's house, the sample case banging against my knee.

I went up on the big porch and rapped at the door. Peering through the screen, I saw the girl coming down the long hall.

She looked out at me. "Well?"

"Why—hello!" I exclaimed.

Her face stiffened. "I don't want any brushes."

"Let me show you this." I opened the case and whipped out a long thin brush on a wire handle. "Isn't that a beauty?"

"What is it?"

I tried to remember my mother's brushes. "A vegetable brush. The Scrubba-tater model."

She looked at the brush, then unhooked the screen door. "Come in." She led the way back to the kitchen. "How much is that brush?"

"Fifty cents." It had cost me twenty.

"I'll get my purse." She was gone only a minute. When she returned, she stopped about fifteen feet in front of me, her right hand hidden behind her purse. "Who are you?"

"I don't get you?"

Her right hand came out. It held a gun. "You're no salesman."

Why argue with a .38? I sighed wearily. "How did you know?"

"If you don't know a bottle brush from a vegetable brush—"

"All right," I said, rubbing my brow. "All right."

"What do you want?" Her voice was cold and pitched low.

"You're April Day."

The gun jerked. "Who are you? A cop? One of Little Joe's—"

"Neither. I'm Marty Blair, a reporter for the *Baltimore Call*."

"What do you want?"

"I got tired of trailing the law around and finding nothing. I started to wonder about Little Joe's girl."

"I was never his girl!"

I tugged my chin and said nothing.

"I wasn't!" She was working herself into a storm. Guns in the hands of excited people can go off. She took a step

toward me, waving it wildly before me.

"Put it away," I said, my eyes on the gun. "Let's talk."

"How do I know you're a reporter?"

She was terrified. Until now, she had done a good job of hiding her fear behind a hard mask, but it was beginning to leak through. Raw terror. "Show me anything to prove— Not so fast! Move that hand slowly or I'll shoot."

I was sure she knew how. Little Joe had been shot by a gun about the size of hers. I drew my hand slowly from the inner pocket and tossed my wallet to her. She caught it with her left hand and dropped it on the kitchen table. She fumbled it open and pulled out my press card. The snapshot came with it.

"Where did you get that?" she whispered tensely.

"I was at headquarters when word came that Little Joe had been found dead in his car. I got there as soon as the police did, but while they were looking for footprints on a cement road, I searched the glove compartment of the car." I nodded at the snap. "That was there, under a lot of junk."

"But it was taken at least three years ago! I didn't know he had a print of—"

"People seldom clean out glove compartments."

She checked the photo on my press card against my face, then slowly lowered the gun, but she held it ready for action.

"Satisfied?" I said.

"You still haven't told me what you want."

My knees were like jello. I sat down to rest them. "You knew him pretty well, didn't you?"

"Hardly at all."

"You were singing in a New Orleans joint when you met him."

"You're crazy! I—"

"All reporters are a little crazy but we check our facts. You've admitted that that's you in the picture on Little Joe's boat. He didn't have that boat in Baltimore. It dates back to New Orleans." I smiled at her over steeped fingertips. "When he moved his interests north, you came along."

"I modeled clothes for a department store."

"And had a North Charles Street apart-

ment. Not very bad on a model's pay."

She drew herself proudly erect. "I was a good model."

I believed her, but if she had been the best model in the world, she couldn't have made enough in Baltimore to meet her monthly rent. Little Joe had taken care of that.

I was sure of my facts. I had talked to all of the gambler's mob. To a man, they agreed his girl had been April Day, but they knew her only by name, for few people had ever seen her with Little Joe. That was a strange twist. Usually, Little Joe had flaunted his tall beauties—always tall, perhaps because of his Napoleonic complex—and had been seen with them everywhere.

But April Day had been something else again. He saw to it that her name and face were kept out of the papers. He rarely appeared in public with her. Once to Pimlico, once to a refined restaurant, and that was about all. April Day lived an almost anonymous life.

If the police new about her at all, what they knew was so inconsequential that they didn't connect her with Little Joe's sudden demise.

I had a different theory. There had been powder burns on his natty sport coat; he was not the sort to let an enemy get close enough to singe his clothes. He had been killed with a single shot to the heart, but the professional killer isn't such an optimist; he pumps lead until he is sure that the victim is a real gone guy.

The killing didn't add up to gang friction. It looked more like a personal matter between Little Joe and someone very close to him. Someone like April Day—or Libby Rawler.

WATCHING the gun from the corner of my eye, I stood up and paced the floor. She twisted her supple body to follow my movements. There would come the moment when she would tire of acrobatics, and then—

"Can't you stand still?" she snapped, her angelic face turned toward me. "What did you come here for?"

"A story."

Her eyes clouded, and for a few seconds, her mind was distracted. I reached her in two bounds and wrenched the gun

from her hand before she could resist.

"All right," I said. "Now let's talk."

She gasped for breath and her body was rigid as she stared fixedly at the gun in my hand. "Don't," she moaned. "Don't."

"I'm not going to kill you," I said. I put the gun in my pocket and she relaxed a little. "You still say you weren't his girl?"

"Never."

"Just good friends." I laughed scornfully. "He was like a father to you. Listen, he never gave away anything in his life."

"I can't help it. That's how it was."

I laughed again, then broke off suddenly and said, "You killed him."

She stared at me in horror. "No, no, no!"

"You were with him when he—"

"I hadn't seen him for over a week."

"You were seen with him," I said, keeping a straight face. "The elevator boy saw you get into his car."

"He couldn't have. Little Joe always picked me up at the corner. That day, we met at—" She stopped abruptly.

"Okay," I said, smiling grimly. I shook her shoulders, hammering at her as a fighter does when his opponent is on the ropes. "You killed him."

"No."

"Get your coat. I'm taking you back to Baltimore."

"I won't go."

"You'll go if I have to carry you."

"They'll kill me."

"Who're they?"

"The ones who killed Little Joe."

She must have thought I was a chump. Smirking at her, I said, "If you're innocent, I'll give you all the protection you need."

She looked at me beseechingly. Then, at last realizing that nothing would stop me from taking her to Baltimore, she stood up slowly. "I'll get my things."

She went down the hall and up the stairs, her feet dragging heavily. A moment later, I heard noises in the room directly overhead. Then there was silence—too much silence. I felt uneasy, thinking she might have crawled out a window.

"Damn her," I muttered and I raced up the stairs. The door to the room over

the kitchen was closed and locked. I moved back six feet and threw my one hundred eighty-five pounds at the door. It gave suddenly and I sprawled into the bedroom.

She was standing in the middle of the room. There was a gun in her hand but it wasn't pointed at me. The muzzle was aimed at her face and she was staring in fascination at the round black hole, her thumb on the trigger.

I scrambled to my feet. "Libby!"

She smiled and her finger tightened.

I jumped her just as the gun went off and I slammed her to the floor. I was afraid to look at her, afraid of what had happened to that angel face, but I had to look.

She was all right. Only the wind was knocked out of her. A bit of plaster fell from the ceiling and I looked up at the hole the bullet had made.

"You're crazy," I said, jerking her to her feet. She was trembling violently and wanted to cry but she couldn't. I slapped her hard and she cried against my chest.

"That was stupid," I said angrily. "There's a chance you can beat the rap, and so long as there's a chance—"

"You still think I killed him." She pulled away from me.

I was willing to stake a month's pay on her guilt, but in some unfathomable way, she had reached me and I felt—well, two hours ago, I would have bet a year's pay, not a month's.

"We'll talk about it in the car," I said bluntly.

She threw clothes into a weekend bag, took her coat from the closet and we left the house. As we were walking to the car, the brunette next door came out on her porch.

"Hey!" she called. She had changed to something more clinging. "I thought you were going to— Oh!" Her keen eyes spotted the bag and she smiled with a blend of jealousy and maliciousness.

Libby ignored her and got into my car, her head high. I waved to the Parsons woman and said, "I'll send you a dozen brushes."

"Nasty woman," Libby muttered as we drove away.

Libby lapsed into a brooding silence which persisted until we were a good ten

miles out of Rumson. "She was the woman my father ran around with. Everyone in town knew it. It killed my mother. She didn't want to live any longer. When she died, I just couldn't stay. I ran away. Then when my father died—"

"How?"

"Suicide," she said flatly. "I hated him so much I didn't even come to his funeral."

"He left you the house."

"Right next door to her," she said bitterly. "Everyone thought he would leave it to her, but he changed his will."

I was getting a different slant on Libby. I had thought she was a girl who had been out for thrills, or perhaps had left home because of a starry-eyed vision of a movie career, but she was a girl on the run. Still, that didn't explain away Little Joe's death.

"Lillian Parsons must be quite a woman," I said.

"She tried to break his will. She spent more than the house was worth trying to find me, but I'd changed my name and I'd never stayed in one place very long. Not until I hit Baltimore."

"Like me," I said.

"When her lawyers and detectives finally found me, they dropped the case. They knew they couldn't get to first base."

"That burned her," I said, whistling softly.

LIBBY smiled for the first time. "I have Little Joe to thank. He handled it for me. I didn't ask him what he said to the lawyers and Lillian Parsons. Maybe he made a muscle." She stared out the window. "You wanted a story."

"Yeah," I said, but it wasn't the story

I had already written in my mind. Words like cold and ruthless, brazen and treacherous, no longer fit. I had to force myself to remember that Little Joe had paid her rent, but when I had it firmly in mind, she was no longer so innocent.

"How do you figure Anton's fatherly interest?" I asked.

"Don't be crude. I don't understand it any better than you do, but there was one spark of decency in him somewhere."

"Nuts."

"I won't pretend he didn't try to move in at first, but I held him off. That was a new experience for him and he got mad. Later, he thought it was a good joke. We talked a lot. Did you know he read poetry? He was ashamed of it and made me promise never to tell. One night, I told him about myself and why I left Rumson. I told him about my father and Lillian and what it had done to my mother."

"So he shed real tears," I said sarcastically.

"Go ahead and laugh, but from then on, he never made another pass at me and—" she glared at me defiantly— "I paid my own rent in New Orleans."

"Get to Baltimore."

"He said I was too good to be singing for luses. He wanted me to come north so he could talk to someone decent." She snickered as if even she knew how corny that sounded. "Don't get me wrong. Little Joe didn't reform. He didn't sacrifice anything. He had a parade of women. He used to wish I'd meet some nice guy and fall in love and get married."

"Are we still talking about Little Joe Anton?"

"We are."

**Fast HELP for
HEADACHE**

**UPSET
STOMACH
JUMPY
NERVES**



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"I'll be damned." It wasn't the sort of thing I could put in a story. No one would have believed it, not of Little-Joe Anton, as hard and cold a gambler as ever rolled a pair of loaded dice.

"Do you still think I killed him?"

"I don't know," I said, pounding the steering wheel. I pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. I turned toward her and looked into her eyes. "Did you?"

"No," she said steadily.

"I believe you. But what are you afraid of?"

"I might be next."

I looked at her puzzledly. "Did you witness—"

"No, but I'd been in his car only ten minutes before. Suppose his killers think that I saw— Or suppose the police get the idea that—I don't have an alibi."

"You'll be all right. I'll take care of you." I took her into my arms. "Stop shaking. Stop it!"

"I c-can't help it. I—I've got the feeling they're waiting for me to show myself, to make a slip."

"I'll take you to my apartment. You'll be safe there."

"Oh, Marty!" She clung to me fiercely.

I kissed her then and started the car and drove on to Baltimore. I didn't have any plan in mind but I knew one thing . . . I would have gone to hell for Libby Rawler. . . .

"Well?" said Jimmy Daniels, my managing editor, glowering at me. "Did you find your mystery woman?"

"No," I replied, looking him straight in the eye.

"I told you it would be a wild-goose chase. The only mystery woman in the life of a skunk like Little Joe Anton—"

"He wasn't so bad."

"—are the ones at the bottom of the bay. Not so bad! Are you crazy? There were hundreds of women in his life and none lasted more than a month. You expect me to believe he stuck to one girl for four years?"

"No, I don't expect you to believe it." I hadn't myself. I had always heard that Anton's castoffs were scattered from coast to coast. "Keep me on this story, Jimmy."

"He's been dead two weeks. You can't

pound out the same tripe day after—" He looked up at me. "Okay, three more days."

I thanked him and went to central headquarters. Vic Chambers, who was handling the case for homicide, groaned when I came in, and before I could open my mouth, said, "No, nothing new."

"Are you still looking for out-of-town mobsters?"

"I'd settle for a local outfit if we had one—which we don't."

"Anton had one."

"Meaning one of his own boys rubbed him out?" Chambers shook his head. "We thought of that and got no place."

"What about his private life? Did any of his women—"

Chambers' heavy fist crashed down on the desk and his eyes glittered angrily through shaggy brows. "Who told you? By Jove, I'll—"

"No one told me," I said, forcing a smile.

He sighed. "Little Joe had a tomato named April Day."

My heart in my throat, I said, "Have you located her?"

"She left town the day of the killing and didn't leave a trace. Every scrap of paper which might have led us to her was gone. But if I get my hands on her— And it won't be long now, Marty. One of Little Joe's boys thought she used to sing in New Orleans. We wired the police down there."

"Any luck?"

"Sure. The place she sang at had her in the files."

"April Day is a phony name. You'll never find her."

Chambers, his vanity stung, took the bait. "She came from a town called Rumson—ever hear of it? And I've got a man up there right now. Somebody'll recognize her description. She's got the kind of an angel face that's hard to forget."

I moved to the door. "Thanks for the dope."

"Keep it quiet, Marty. I don't want this babe to slip away."

"I'm the soul of honor." I left the office quickly. I had whisked Libby out of Rumson none too soon, but if Chambers ever learned I was harboring her, he'd throw the book at me.

I went to a cigar store on East Baltimore Street. The store was a front for a wire-room where a man could always lay a bet on a likely horse. Anton's boys spent most of their idle hours in the back room.

The clerk nodded when I came in. "How's with you, Marty?"

"Swell. Is Tony Lutz around?"

"In back, sulking."

I WENT to the rear of the store. When the clerk pressed the button under the counter, I pushed open the sound-proof door and stepped into the back room. Tony was reading a magazine in the middle of the room. He was alone because Anton's death had brought a temporary halt to betting action.

He looked up. "Like a morgue in here, ain't it?"

I sat down, facing him, and spread my hands on the table. "I guess you're missing Little Joe."

"He had his faults and him and me used to scrap, but he kept the boys busy. Sure we miss him."

"I hear Chambers asked you some questions."

Tony scowled darkly. "The boys set him straight. Little Joe had the brains. He put us in the money. Only suckers kill the gilded goose."

"Golden goose, golden eggs. Tony, I've got the idea this wasn't any gang job. It looks like something personal."

"Keep talking, scribbler. You're getting warm."

"What about April Day?"

"Now you're red hot." A muscle quivered in Tony's jaw. "If I get my hands on that jill, she'll never—"

"You think she did it?"

"Who else?" Tony leaned forward and tapped my chest. "She had Little Joe so he didn't know if he was coming or going."

I nodded encouragement. "I'll bet she took him for plenty."

"Search me. But the things he used to do for her! Like that time he made like a lawyer. Yeah, a lawyer—but sucker I call it. Somebody's trying to take a house away from this wren, see, so Anton throws law at the mouthpieces, gets me and the boys to put some scare in the

woman who hired them, and the first thing you know, nobody's trying to take April Day's house any more."

"The police went to Rumson to pick her up."

"They won't get her."

"How come?" I asked, startled.

"I'll get her first." He meant it. He'd take pleasure in shooting her before she ever got to trial.

The law and Tony Lutz were closing in on her. If I didn't do something fast, she'd be a goner. It came to me suddenly that Tony's urge to kill Libby Rawler might not be so much to avenge Little Joe's death as it was to protect himself. Tony was ambitious. He could have come close enough to his boss to leave powder burns.

I stood up and walked to the door. "If she didn't kill Anton," I said, "she might know who did. Maybe she witnessed it."

Tony came to his feet slowly. "Who else would have done it?"

"You never know," I said lightly. "Maybe you."

"If that's a joke, it ain't funny. I wouldn't repeat a joke like that, Marty. You could laugh yourself to death. A suicide like April Day's old man."

I stiffened against the door. "What about his suicide?"

"He changes his will, leaves everything to her and dies the same day. Ain't that a sketch? But we was talking about something else, Marty. You ever open your peeper again about me knocking off—"

"What about the suicide?" Libby couldn't have killed her father, no matter how much she had hated him. She couldn't have! She was too decent.

"Little Joe sent me up there to smell around. It smelled, all right. The guy was holding the gun and he was dead, so it's suicide as far as the yokels are concerned. They take powder burns for proof and don't even bother with a nitrate test on his hand."

"She couldn't have done it? She hadn't been in Rumson for a couple of years. Hell, she didn't even go up to the funeral."

Tony grinned malevolently. "She was in Rumson the day her father died. Real coincidental, that is."

Tony was lying, I told myself. He was building a case against Libby, but I wouldn't let him get away with it. I'd phone her at my apartment. She'd tell me that she hadn't been within a hundred miles of Rumson that day. She wouldn't lie to me.

I got out of the wire-room in a hurry and ran across the street to a phone booth in a drugstore. I called my apartment, using the signal I had fixed up with Libby. The phone rang six times. I hung up and dialed the number again.

She answered on the first ring. "Marty?" she said.

"Were you in Rumson the day your father—Tell me the truth."

"Y-yes, Marty."

The ground dropped out from under my feet. "But why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I didn't think it was important."

But, I thought, it had been important enough for her to tell me she hadn't been there for years. The implication had been plain.

"How did you know, Marty?"

"Someone saw you."

"Lillian Parsons," she whispered. "That snoop never misses a thing."

"Why did you go up there?"

There was a long pause. "I used to think that things were either black or white. When I found out there was gray, too— My father and I had been feuding long enough."

"So you kissed and made up?" Kiss of death. And she hadn't attended the funeral.

"Not quite. I saw him and it seemed to me he was as infatuated as ever with that woman. After his will was probated, I knew better but it was much too late by then."

It all sounded so simple the way she told it. "The police have trailed you to Rumson," I said.

"But I'm safe, aren't I, Marty? You promised to protect me."

I hung up without replying and stared at the wall. Wise old Marty Blair had been suckered by an angel-face's kiss. I had even believed that a mobster paid her rent just to have a place to discuss poetry.

"Chump!" I muttered. I punched the wall until my fists bled.

BACK at the city room, I stared blindly at my typewriter, putting off writing the story I had to write.

Jimmy Daniels ran over to me and snapped his fingers under my nose. "Wake up, dreamer. I just talked to Vic Chambers on the phone. Homicide trailed your mystery woman to Rumson but she'd skipped. He wants to see you and he's boiling mad. Get on it."

I nodded glumly. I had to surrender the girl to Chambers. I couldn't shelter her now, knowing what I knew. But—and heaven knows why a man's mind works as it does—I felt she was entitled to know my promise was canceled.

I phoned my apartment, let it ring six times, hung up, dialed again. The phone kept ringing. No answer. No answer. No answer. Either Libby had taken a powder before I could send the police after her, or someone had come to take her. Who knew she was there? Then I remembered telling Tony Lutz some things which I could not have possibly known if I had not seen Libby recently. It wouldn't take Tony long to figure out that I was hiding her.

My stomach in knots, I went to face Vic Chambers. There was nothing I could tell him to lessen my guilt. Citizens have no business messing in police affairs. I was prepared to kneel in front of him if necessary.

"Real smart, aren't you?" he said, smiling frigidly. "So amazed when I told you about April Day. Real smart."

He knew I had harbored his fugitive. I was through in Baltimore.

"Jimmy Daniels told me all about your trip on the phone," he went on. "But you missed her, too."

I stared at him stupidly. He didn't know! I kept my mouth shut.

"Half an hour ago," he said, leaning forward, "I could have murdered you. Now things are different. I'm going to show you what good police work is, scribbler. We've got her!"

"Swell," I said tensely. He couldn't have picked her up at my place or his attitude toward me would be different. "Where is she?"

"Come on." I followed him down to the garage. We got into a squad car and roared out to one of the outlying precinct

stations. "I've been holding her here until we were ready downtown," Vic said as we climbed the steps. "I'm not taking any chances. You're the only outsider in on it."

"That so?" I asked guilelessly, wondering if I should tell him he had a leak in his office—because we had passed Tony Lutz parked in a black coupe a half-block down the street. "When do you move her?"

"Any time now."

And when they did, Tony would be waiting.

A turnkey led us down the hall to Libby's cell.

"There's angel face," Chambers said, pointing.

I took my cue from her eyes. She stared at me blankly. From her point of view, that was smart. Perhaps she figured I was still under the spell of her lips and wouldn't testify against her.

"Uh-huh," I muttered. "Where did you pick her up?"

"Police work," said Chambers. "We figured she'd back-track so—"

"Liar," Libby said scornfully. "They picked me up on the steps of the police station. I was turning myself in."

Chambers reddened. "That's her story."

"Has she confessed?"

"No," Libby snapped. "I'm innocent."

"Then why did you surrender?"

She looked at me coldly. "For protection."

It was my turn to redden. There were questions I wanted to ask her but I couldn't with Chambers standing by. I got a break. A stooge from the mayor's office came in and took Chambers aside to get the latest developments.

I moved close to Libby. "Quick," I said. "Why did you leave?"

"Your voice on the phone. I knew you didn't believe me. Then later, when I found the note under the door—"

"What note? I didn't send you a note."

"I know you didn't. Someone tipped me off you were going to turn me over to the police. You were, weren't you?"

I couldn't deny it. I nodded dumbly.

"Giving myself up was better than that."

"Do you still have that—"

"All right," Chambers said, returning. "Let's go downtown."

"No, Vic," I said, a lump in my throat. "Leave her here."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I saw Tony Lutz."

"So what? He's in the clear."

"Don't take her outside, Vic. Tony will gun her down."

"You've been seeing too many movies," he sneered. He grabbed Libby roughly by the arm. "Come on, angel face."

She jerked loose and walked down the corridor by herself, head held high. But her knees were trembling, her face was white.

"Vic," I said, "you're making a mistake."

"Let me do my job and you do yours."

We went out of the station house and stood for a moment on the top step, only Vic and I to protect Libby. And Vic was no help because he saw no danger. I looked down the street and saw the black coupe moving slowly toward us.

"Come on," Vic ordered. We went down the steps toward the squad car at the curb.

Tony was almost within accurate shooting range now. I saw him hunched over the wheel, then the car came almost to a dead stop and light flashed on gun metal.

"Down!" I shouted. I knocked Libby off her feet and fell across her just as Tony's silenced gun coughed flatly. The bullet chipped concrete near my head.

GEARS clashed and the coupe gathered speed, but Chambers, prone on the sidewalk, had his gun out and, taking careful aim, fired into the rear right tire. The coupe swerved, leaped the curb and smashed into a steel lamp post. Tony jumped out of the car and ran for an alley. But Chambers fired again and Tony went down, a bullet in his leg. Men from the station house were on him before he could crawl an inch.

I helped Libby to her feet and she rested against me. "All right," I said gruffly, "all right."

Chambers was puffing and blowing like a whale and his confidence was considerably shaken. He looked wonderingly at the trembling Libby. "Why in hell do you suppose Tony wanted. . . . Well, let's go."

We got in the squad car and Chambers poked his head out to shout, "Bring Lutz down to Central."

In his office again, he said, "Hadn't you better be writing your story, Marty?"

"What story? You don't have evidence enough to hold her."

"Sure I have."

"Think it over, Vic. Did Tony shoot her to silence her or to avenge Little Joe? Did she surrender because she's guilty or because she really did need protection?"

Reluctantly, he said, "I'll go part-way on the protection after what happened, but that still doesn't mean—"

"Tony Lutz," Libby began falteringly. "He sent me that note to get me out in the open. I know that now."

"What note?" Chambers bellowed.

I sighed. Vic would find out sooner or later that I had hidden Libby. Better he learned from me. I told him.

He blew like a bomb and the walls almost shook from the explosiveness of his wrath. He thundered at me for five minutes without repeating a threat or an expletive, and when his vocabulary was exhausted, he fell back in his chair, still furious.

"I was going to turn her in," I said, knowing it was too late for explanations. "I was sure she was guilty. But I don't think so now."

"Marty!" she exclaimed, taking a step toward me.

"Get back," Chambers growled. "Did she leave Rumson willingly?"

I hadn't told him I had held a gun. I hadn't mentioned her attempted suicide. "Of course, and she begged me to let her surrender immediately to clear herself," I lied. "I wouldn't let her. I had a terrific story and I wanted to keep it exclusive for a while."

"Can you prove she returned to Baltimore voluntarily?"

Libby and I exchanged glances, remembering that Lillian Parsons, who never missed a trick, had seen us leave. So contented had we looked that Miss Parsons thought we were off for a wild weekend. But Lillian Parsons and Libby hated each other. Would the Parsons woman overlook her hatred long enough to testify in Libby's behalf?

I had to take the chance. "The woman next door—Lillian Parsons—saw us leave. She'll tell you."

Smirking, Chambers said, "No good. The man I sent to Rumson brought the Parsons dame back. The things she's got to say won't help you."

That tore it. The one witness was using the opportunity to stick a knife in Libby's back.

Suddenly an idea hit me and I appealed to Vic's vanity again. "You're a good judge of human nature. Bring Parsons in and see if she dares deny that Libby left Rumson voluntarily. You'll know if she's lying." I dropped my voice to a confidential tone. "After that Lutz affair, you owe this girl that much."

"All right." Chambers sent a man to get Lillian Parsons.

We waited. From time to time, Vic looked up at Libby and me. "I don't get it, I just don't get it," he muttered over and over again. "Lutz taking a chance like that. . . ."

The door opened and Lillian Parsons came in. She saw Libby immediately. "So there you are," she gloated. "I knew you were a bad one."

Libby would have clawed her eyes out but I held her back. This was no time to antagonize an already prejudiced witness. I pushed Libby back in her chair and beamed at Lillian Parsons as if we were old friends.

"Miss Parsons," I began.

"Shut up," said Vic, and he took over. "Miss Parsons, did this girl seem willing to leave her house?"

Lillian laughed harshly. "She fought like a horrid alley cat every inch of the way."

"That's that," Chambers said. He wasn't especially happy. Prejudiced witnesses make poor impressions in a courtroom.

"Why didn't you try to stop me from taking her?" I asked Lillian.

"I thought you were just a reporter who—"

"How did you know I was a reporter?" I asked quickly.

"I knew you weren't a brush salesman," she snapped. "You didn't have an order book. And your face was familiar. I got to thinking and remembered seeing

your picture once in the *Baltimore Call*."

She was right.

"Vic—she knew me, saw me leave with Libby, but when your man came, she told him nothing about it. I had to tell you."

Chambers frowned. "Yeah. . . ."

"Another thing," I said. "A note to Libby was slipped under my apartment door. Parsons was the only one with any inkling where she was. Lutz might—"

"And Lutz sent the note," Vic declared. "He wanted to get the girl out where he could shoot her."

"He didn't send it," I said. "If he had, he would have shot her the moment she stepped out the door. He didn't know where she was until he learned she had given herself up."

Chambers scratched his head. "Maybe, but—"

"DON'T be so damped stubborn. Lock Lillian Parsons up for killing Anton—and charge her with the murder of Libby's father. It's all part of the same thing."

Libby gasped, Lillian cried out protestingly, and Chambers simply stared.

I said, "She didn't tell you Libby had left with me because she wanted to make Libby look like a girl on the run. Flight is a sign of guilt. She sent Libby the note for the same reason, never figuring that Libby would surrender but sure that you would catch her sooner or later."

"But why this Parsons babe?" asked Chambers. "I mean—"

"Two years ago," I explained, "Libby's father changed his will, leaving Lillian out, so she killed him, rigging it to look like suicide, then tried to break the will. But Little Joe got into the act and sent a couple of his boys to snoop around in Rumson. They found enough to convince the boss that Libby's father had been murdered."

"Little Joe had a lot of faith in Libby and he was sure she hadn't killed her father. That left only one other person with sufficient motive—Lillian Parsons. He told her to drop her case or he'd call a cop. Tony Lutz has already told me that Parsons had a scare thrown into her."

Chambers stared stonily at Parsons. She sneered at him. "Prove it to a

jury. You can't tie me up with any of this."

I turned to Libby and asked her the question I had begun in her cell. "Do you still have the note that came under the door?"

"Yes," she said and she gave it to me.

I let Lillian Parsons look at it. "Is that your writing?"

She couldn't very well deny it. Any hand-writing expert would make a liar of her. She nodded jerkily and buried her face in her hands, breaking.

Chambers moved swiftly to the door and called in a stenographer. He went back to Lillian. "Spill it."

She did.

She arranged a meeting with Anton and he, sure that he had her under his thumb, never suspected that he had an appointment with death, and that in time, the one decent woman in his life—the one he wanted to protect—would be suspected of murdering him. Libby hadn't helped matters by skipping town to escape the mobsters she thought had killed Little Joe.

It was the perfect setup for Lillian. She could kill two birds with one stone, but then Libby had to spoil it by surrendering for a crime she had not committed.

A matron came in and led the hysterical Lillian Parsons away. When she was gone, Chambers said, "Where does Tony fit in this?"

"He thought Libby had knocked off his meal ticket. It was Tony's version of a vendetta."

"Okay," Chambers said, beaming at Libby. "Beat it, angel face."

She and I left Central together, and figured restlessly at the bottom of the steps. I walked away determinedly, then turned. "Well, I'll see you around." She hadn't moved. "Oh, hell," I said and I ran back to her and kissed her. "Dinner tonight?"

She nodded eagerly. "What time?"

"Six o'clock." I ran all the way back to the office.

"My lord!" Jimmy Daniels shouted across the city room. "The redheaded monster is cracking a smile!"

"Love has come," I said. I didn't care who knew it. I began to pound out my story.

NOT BY BLOOD ALONE

*Scatter-brained Sue was no killer,
her detective-husband swore—
while he put the finger on her . . . for murder.*



"I didn't know you were busy," she said. . . .

By RIC HASSE

BILL BRENN drove with mechanical precision, but his mind wasn't on his driving. His mind wasn't on anything. He was deliberately keeping his mind blank, and the effort of holding down the unpleasant thoughts twisted the muscles of his face and made his skin feel cold and numb.

He turned off Tenth Street into Irvington and, a half-block down, swung the coupe into the concrete driveway that

separated his house from the edge of his property line. He parked beside the house and went in by the side door.

"That you, sweet?" Sue's always-cheerful voice sang from the kitchen.

Just as if she'd been there at home all day waiting for him, Brenn thought.

"Depends on who you call sweet." He tried to keep his voice light and normal as he passed the arch of the little dinette separating the side door from the kitchen. He walked on past the bathroom and pushed open the door of their bedroom. He didn't enter; he just stood there looking in.

On the chenille-covered bed was a tiny heap of yellow cashmere wool and a crumpled green skirt. Draped across the back of a chair was Sue's red-and-green plaid coat.

"I wasn't expecting you, sweet," Sue called to him. "You phoned that you were going to be tied up on a job most of the evening."

When he didn't answer, she came out of the kitchen looking for him, wiping her hands on a little white, ruffled apron. She had wide, round, guileless eyes and looked no more than two years over the legal age of consent.

"What's the matter? Client back out on you?" She held out her arms to him and demanded, "Don't I even get a kiss?"

"Sure." He put his arms around her small waist, lifted her until her straw-blond head was level with his, and kissed her red, smiling lips.

"A very pretty picture," someone said. Brenn released his wife and looked over her shoulder. Nora, Sue's older sister, was leaning against the dinette arch, with a taunting smile on her plain, heavy features.

Nora was as competent and level-headed a woman as Sue was scatter-brained. But Sue was beautiful, even getting out of bed on a sleepy-eyed morning, while no amount of beauty preparations could make much improvement on Nora's thick, rough-skinned face or her bony, angular body. Facts their late father probably had in mind when he had made out his will, leaving his prosperous little drug-store to Nora.

"How many years is it going to take," Nora asked, "for you two to stop acting

like newlyweds?" But she didn't smile.

Brenn didn't answer, but took her elbow in his hand and guided her to the door. A sensible-looking hat and a canary-colored sport coat was lying on a chair just inside, and he handed them to her.

"I haven't time to explain or to be polite, Nora," Brenn told her. "I'm in a jam and I have to talk something over with Sue. Alone. Look, if I send Sue over to your place later, can you take care of her for a while?"

"Of course, Bill," his sister-in-law assured him. "But I'm leaving on a vacation trip in a couple of days. Eddie's been running up bills again, and I want to get him out of town for a while. He just don't seem to—"

"Thanks, Nora," Bill said, shoving her gently outside. He closed the door after her. Once Nora was allowed to start talking about the failings of her handsome, no-good husband, there would be no stopping her.

Sue was still standing in the bedroom door when he returned. Her frown made the dimple in her left cheek look deeper than ever.

"Bill, that was awfully rude."

"Sue," he said, ignoring her complaint. "Why the clothes on the bed?"

She leaned around him to look. "Oh, those. I was just trying them on to see if I could still wear them again. Why?"

"You're an awfully poor liar, darling," Brenn looked down into eyes like soft brown velvet. "You need a memory to lie convincingly and you have a memory like a broken mirror. You always said you'd never wear that yellow sweater again, because it was too tight for a decently married woman, and that the only reason you kept it was because it had such an interesting history."

"Did I say that?"

"Yes, you said that. Now, look, Sue, this is serious. Why did you wear those clothes? Why those particular clothes?"

"This is what I get for marrying a detective," Sue said in a plaintive voice, and screwed up her face in an expression of deep study. "Maybe I wore the sweater to relive a little of the past?" she said, not very convincingly, around the knuckle she bit.

Brenn pressed his lips tightly against

his teeth and looked at her, pondering.

"Look," he said, spacing his words carefully and slowly, "Maybe this will convince you that I'm serious. Three hours ago I was parked on the corner of Sixteenth Street and Central."

He watched the blood slide out of her face.

HE HAD been parked there, sitting beside his client, and trying to squirm his big, awkward-looking bulk into a more comfortable position on the worn seat of his nine-year-old coupe.

The small bleak man beside him didn't move, as he hadn't moved in the past hour. The man kept his eyes fixed on a doorway across the street, squeezed between a radio-repair shop and a small fruit market. It was the entrance to the upstairs apartments over a line of small neighborhood shops.

"You just want me to follow her and report, Mr. Jacoby?" Brenn asked once more. "Nothing else."

His client's eyes were peculiar, with heavy lids that cut them in two, making them seem but half-eyes. Black half-pupils in an arch of dead white.

"Just follow her and report, Mr. Brenn." His voice was as flat and expressionless as his gray face. "Nothing else. Especially nothing else."

Brenn sighed and squirmed again. The kind of work this Jacoby guy wanted wasn't unusual. Jacoby wanted to check on his wife, or maybe his son's wife or prospective wife. But he didn't want to admit it, so he hired a private detective, fingered the woman for him, and said, "Just follow her and report."

Jacoby's bony hand touched Brenn's arm. His head nodded at the doorway he'd been watching.

"That's her," he said. "Don't lose her, and call me tonight at the number I gave you."

Brenn wasn't even aware of Jacoby when the gray, expressionless man left the coupe and walked swiftly to the big, new sedan parked just ahead. Brenn was too stunned to notice.

The girl stepping through the doorway was just as Jacoby had described her.

She was small, not over five-three. Her hair was blonde, as blonde as a new straw

broom, and her eyes were brown. A red-and-green plaid coat hung open to reveal an excitingly tight yellow cashmere sweater and a green skirt a little too short to be in fashion. There was a dimple in the left cheek of the young, otherwise symmetrical face. And her name was Sue.

Brenn sat there and watched his wife walk to the corner and stand there on the curb. A few minutes later he saw her climb aboard the Central trolley.

For a quarter hour longer he sat there motionless. When Jacoby had first given the description, a germ of remembrance had entered Brenn's head. Now it was gnawing at his brain and he knew he had to check on it before he talked to Sue.

Ten minutes later he parked his decrepit coupe in a zone restricted for police car use and climbed the worn stone steps of Police Headquarters. He found Lieutenant Haehl in his office, little more than a desk with plasterboard walls around it, struggling with a fistful of reports.

"What's new, Jock?" Brenn asked casually. He slid a hip onto a corner of the battered desk and fingered the inevitable stack of police readers, lists of names and descriptions of wanted persons and of stolen cars, mimeographed for the use of the radio patrol cars. "Anything interesting in these?"

Jock Haehl was a tired and overworked man. He had charge of investigating all armed robberies, in addition to the few homicides committed in the city. His face, his body, and his hair had grown thin prematurely, and he looked as though someone should make him eat more.

"The only thing I'm interested in," he said disgustedly, "is in finding a few missing payrolls. And the answer isn't here." He threw down the reports and leaned back in his squeaking swivel chair with a tired stretching gesture.

"I thought those payroll bandits were out-of-town hoods." Brenn tried to sound interested. "That's the way the newspapers tell it."

"That's the way I told it to the newspapers," Haehl told him. "I wish it were true. None but locals could pull a string of hold-ups as smoothly as these have been. But it's not any of the outfits we know. This is a new bunch of thugs, and we can't get a lead to them."

"Maybe there's a lead in these." Brenn brought attention to the mimeographed readers. He selected one a week old and tried to sound disinterested as he read the item he had remembered; the item that had brought him here.

"Who is this? 'Woman. Name unknown. Twenty years. Blonde. Wears red plaid coat, green skirt, yellow —'."

Haehl's tired eyes didn't leave Brenn's face as his fingers reached out and plucked the paper from Brenn's hand. A trace of a smile flickered around the corners of his mouth.

"You're a picture of innocence, Brenn," he criticized. "But I've known you too long, and you're hamming it up. You've seen this reader at your own office, and now you want to pump me about it."

"Oh?" Brenn still pretended.

"Why don't you just ask? Why all the acting? What do you know about her?"

"Her? Who?"

Jock Haehl recited patiently, "Blonde. Red plaid coat. Yellow sweater."

Brenn gave up.

"Okay, Jock," he admitted with a weak grin. "I was hired to tail her. Nothing more. My client fingered her for me, but then I lost her. I thought I remembered seeing the description and checked to see if you could give me a lead, so I could pick her up again."

Lieutenant Haehl leaned an elbow on the edge of his desk and propped his chin.

"Your client give you anything on her?"

"Nothing."

"Well, when you see him again, tell him to give us a visit. Convince him that we protect blackmail victims down here."

"Blackmail!"

"Yeah, blackmail," Haehl repeated. "We don't have anything definite on her. You know how it is with these blackmail cases. The victims won't testify, even when they're willing to give us information. We've had several tips on this woman. We'll pick her up eventually, and question her. Once we have her identity, we'll either pin something on her or scare her out of the business."

"These tips you got," Brenn said. "Did they all give the same description?"

"Exactly the same," Haehl nodded. "And I know what you're going to say. No woman would wear that same costume all the time unless she wanted to be identified by it. When we find her, we'll probably learn that she ordinarily never wears sweaters, and wouldn't be seen dead in a plaid coat."

"Or," suggested Brenn, "all your tips might be phony and there isn't any such woman in such a costume at all." He sighed and slid off the desk top.

The lieutenant said he was sorry he couldn't help, then added, "How's Sue? My wife was asking about you two just the other evening. Said she bet Sue would forget all about our wedding anniversary party next week."

Brenn laughed and said he'd have Sue phone Mrs. Haehl and reassure her. He paused at the door and asked, as if by afterthought, "You know anyone named Jacoby?"

Haehl looked up, startled.

"Little guy," he asked quickly. "Pale? Funny eyes?"

"You know him?" Brenn looked interested.

"Yeah, and if that's your client, our



EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill.—
 "I mean it when I ask for Calvert," says Max Adelman, insurance broker of this city. "I switched to Calvert long ago, because I like its better taste. And with me it's the taste that counts."

little blonde blackmailer has bitten herself off a tough mouthful."

"Why?"

"Jacoby is the right hand of Alex Ambuhl, the big gambler and sports promoter, and Ambuhl isn't the kind of guy you blackmail, unless you know how to breath at the bottom of White River."

The lieutenant's phone rang, and he paused to lift the receiver to his ear. His thin face tensed as he listened to the words bubbling at him over the wire. He reached over to flip a key on an inter-office communications box; snapped: "Have the squad car downstairs," into it; then back to the telephone again: "Get the crew moving. What was that address again?"

He repeated the address aloud and jotted it down on a scrap of paper. Brenn's spine tensed. He recognized the address. It was an apartment house, with the upstairs entrance between a radio repair shop and a little fruit market, on Sixteenth Street, just off Central.

"What's up?" he asked, as the lieutenant grabbed his hat.

"Homicide."

"Mind if I come along?"

Haehl didn't say anything, just jerked his head in permission as he went through the door.

THE man's name was Howard Hudson, and he was an artist, or had been, before someone planted three .32-calibre slugs through the front of his zebra-striped sport shirt.

Lieutenant Haehl and his squad were busy doing their jobs. Sprinkling powder, measuring the floors and the walls, making lists of everything in the combination studio and apartment, putting cigarette stubs and other pertinent items into little tagged envelopes, snapping pictures.

Brenn sat quietly in a corner, out of the way. He wasn't interested in this routine work. There was only one thing in the room that interested him. He had spotted it the minute he'd stepped in the door, and he knew that Haehl caught it, too. He couldn't have helped it.

It was a large unfinished canvas on an easel near the front windows, an oil painting of a woman, laughing, with her blonde head thrown back and her arms flung full-

length above her. It was done in almost photographic detail, down to the folds in the plaid coat, the furry quality of the yellow sweater and the weave of the green skirt.

Only one thing about it saved Brenn's nerves from cracking. The face wasn't done. It was blocked in, and he could recognize the lines of the features, but he didn't think anyone else could, even Haehl, who knew Sue well.

Hudson had evidently just finished some work on it and had been cleaning his brushes when he died. The oily-looking, sleek-haired man had fallen against his paint stand and knocked it over. Brushes, some with paint still in their bristles, and others damp with turpentine, were scattered around his slender body. The odor of turpentine and banana oil was overpoweringly strong in the room, even with the windows open.

Lieutenant Haehl gave final instructions to a couple of his men and walked over to Brenn's corner. He moved a hassock with his foot and sat on it, facing Brenn.

He didn't say anything until he had given Brenn a cigarette, taken one himself, and had a match lighted. Then, over the flame he said quietly:

"All right, pal. Let's have what you know."

Brenn said, "I don't know anything about this, Jock. That's on the level. Sure, I recognize the painting, but I don't know who she is, or anything about her, except what you told me. I never saw Hudson before in my life."

"Jacoby was your client. Right?"

Brenn nodded.

Haehl said, patiently, "You told me at headquarters that he fingered the girl for you. Right?"

Brenn knew the police system. They would check every little fact and detail. He would have to stick as closely to the truth as possible. He nodded again.

"Okay," Haehl continued. "Where did he locate her?"

Brenn sighed and rubbed his knuckles across his temple.

"In front of the building here. She came out, and Jacoby got into his own car and drove off. She couldn't have killed him. She wasn't excited and she wasn't in a

hurry. She walked to the corner and caught a Central Avenue trolley."

"Never mind the guessing," Haehl said. "Just the facts. You followed the trolley?"

Brenn decided it was time to veer from the truth.

"Not right away," he said. "The traffic on Central kept me from turning there for a few minutes. I didn't catch up with the trolley until a couple of blocks after it made the bend at Fort Wayne Avenue. She wasn't on the car then. I drove around a few of the side streets looking for her, then went to headquarters to see you. That's it."

"It's a help," Haehl said gratefully. "At least we know the neighborhood where she left the trolley. She might live around there. Will you do me a favor, Brenn?"

"If I can."

"Contact your client, Jacoby. Don't tell him any of this; just tell him you lost the girl and see if he can locate her for you again. Okay?"

"It's as good as done, Jock."

"There's more to this than you think, Brenn," Haehl's voice lowered confidentially. "You know this string of pay-roll robberies I've been working on? Well, all that money is hot. We've got the serial numbers of all of it."

"What's that to do with this?" Brenn said. His brain was a jumble, trying to take in Haehl's words, the studio scene, and his wife's situation all at once.

Haehl stopped to signal an okay to a pair of bored-looking men in white coats. They picked up the canvas-covered stretcher and carried it out.

"We just found a little of that hot money on Hudson's body. He's been under suspicion for blackmail, but we've never had evidence enough to hold him. Small, nuisance value stuff mostly. Drawing figures whose faces could be recognized, and selling them to husbands and fathers. That kind of thing."

"And now the money connects him with something big, eh," Brenn said. "It's a mess."

"Murder's always a mess," Haehl agreed. He stood up and walked toward the door with Brenn. One of the plainclothes men came in before they reached

it. A little black automatic pistol dangled by its trigger guard from a pencil held in the cop's hands.

"Found it out back, Lieutenant," he reported. "Dropped on the way out through the yard, or tossed out through the back window."

"Give it to Joe," Haehl directed. "Tell him to test it for prints before it goes to ballistics." The lieutenant's face was gray and bleak. Then he gave Brenn a tight-lipped smile and said, "Keep in touch with me now, pal. And don't forget to remind Sue about the party next week."

Brenn went down the stairs with his mind numb. The little black automatic was an Italian Beretta. Brenn had a Beretta, a war souvenir, at home in the bottom bureau drawer. He wouldn't bet that it was in the bureau drawer right now.

He drove home with mechanical precision, trying to remember that he must remind Sue that she mustn't forget the Haehl's anniversary party next week, and trying to forget everything else. He parked the car and went in the side door, and Sue called, "That you, sweet?" just as though nothing were wrong.

BRENN got rid of his sister-in-law, Nora, and went back to talk to his wife. He gripped Sue's arms just above the elbows and squeezed hard.

"Now, will you tell me why you wore that outfit this afternoon? And why did you wear it the other times? And what were you doing in Howard Hudson's apartment?"

"I was working," Sue said in a tremulous little voice, "I was modelling for a painting. I wanted some extra money, so I could buy you a present. A surprise for our wedding anniversary next week."

Brenn said, "Our wedding anniversary is four months off."

She threw her head back and stared at him with accusing eyes.

"It is not! It's next week. You've forgotten!"

Brenn started shaking his head, and she pushed past him into the bedroom. She snatched up a little daily calender from her dressing table and thumbed pages until she reached the date she wanted.

"There now, see?" She thrust the calender under his nose. In her sprawling

handwriting was scribbled the words, "*Wedding anniversary.*"

Brenn shook his head hopelessly.

"Darling," he explained carefully. "That is the wedding anniversary of Jock and Mary Haehl."

Sue's mouth dropped open. She covered it with the palm of a hand and giggled.

"You're right," she admitted. "I wrote that down so I wouldn't forget Mary's party."

"Sue," he demanded. "How did you meet Hudson? How did you get mixed up in all this?"

"He saw me in a department store," Sue said. "He said I had just the face he was looking for and asked me to pose. That's all."

"Did he know who you were? Before he asked you to pose, I mean."

"No." Sue pursed her lips thoughtfully. "No, he couldn't have."

"When was this?"

"About two weeks ago." Sue smiled brightly. "It was the day I bought your new pajamas. Remember? I forgot your size and stopped in at your office to find out."

Brenn nodded thoughtfully. "You went directly from the office and bought the pajamas, didn't you?"

Sue nodded.

"And you charged them, didn't you? You told the clerk your name and address so he could check the account?"

Sue nodded again, then saw what he was getting at. "Of course! He was right there. He could have heard my name then."

"Hudson probably followed you from my office," Brenn said. "Did you ever do anything for him beside posing?"

Hot, angry color quickly stained Sue's cheeks.

"Now, see here, Bill Brenn! If you're insinuating that there was anything between me and—"

Brenn smiled at that, and put an arm around his wife's waist.

"I know you too well for that, darling," he told her, and the smile dropped from his face. "Howard Hudson is dead. He's been murdered, and you're going to be involved unless I can do something to prevent it."

Sue said, "Oh," and gripped his hand with both of hers.

"Did you ever do anything else for him?" Brenn repeated. "Deliver messages, errands, or anything like that?"

She leaned back and looked admiringly into his face.

"How did you know?" she said. "I picked up little packages for him several times. It was kind of funny."

"How do you mean, funny?"

"Well, he said I would save him some time if I would pick up some stuff for him on my way home. Snapshots and instructions he needed for some of his other paintings, he said. He'd tell me a street intersection and I would wait there a few minutes. A man would drive up, or sometimes a woman, get out and hand me a package or an envelope. They would never say a word; just drive off again."

"And you would take it to Hudson the next time you went to pose," Brenn surmised. "Always wearing the same clothes."

"Bill," she said plaintively. "What's this all about?"

"I'm not sure, myself," he said. "But I'm beginning to get the general picture. And I think I know who framed it." He strode across the bedroom to the bureau, pulled out a drawer and fumbled under a pile of shirts.

"It's gone," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"What's gone?"

"The little Italian gun I had here. Someone's stolen it."

"Oh." Sue gasped. "I hope they didn't get Mr. Hudson's package."

Brenn whirled around to her. "What package!"

"The big one Hudson wanted me to keep for him," Sue said. She went to the closet, dug into a dark corner and came back with a brown paper-wrapped package about the size of a shoe box. "A man with funny-looking eyes gave me this one two days ago. Mr. Hudson asked me to keep it until he wanted it."

Brenn opened his pocket knife and cut a little corner from the package. A corner was enough. It was packed solid with currency.

He went outside the bedroom to the little alcove where the telephone was kept.

He thumbed through the directory until he found Jacoby's name. The number wasn't the one Jacoby had given him this afternoon.

He looked for Alex Ambuhl, Jacoby's boss, and found an office number and a home number. The office listing was the one Jacoby had given him.

Brenn sat there a moment longer, staring at his hands and the streak of yellow paint across the palm of the left one. He wondered what he'd touched in Hudson's paint-smear studio to produce the stain. He couldn't remember.

HE KISSED Sue and told her not to worry, that he would take care of everything, and took the package of currency out to the car. His other gun was locked in his office desk, and he thought he would probably need it, so he drove there first.

It was a frame, all right. Brenn knew that. But it was tight enough that, had it involved anyone but Sue, Brenn might have believed it himself. He knew, too, that he'd never be able to convince anyone else of the truth of Sue's actions.

If he couldn't figure a way out, and quick, he and Sue would have to run. When he parked the coupe near his office, he was still trying to think of a course to take.

The building that housed his office was on the cheap lower edge of the amusement district. His single room shared the third floor with a pair of mail-order businesses who used the rest of the space for storage.

A bowling alley took up the floor below, while the ground floor was occupied by a shooting gallery and a third-rate bar. The rumbling bowling balls, the clatter of maple ten-pins, the staccato crack of .22 rifles, and the blaring juke box blended continually in a jumble of sound that made the ordinary street noises seem far away and made the stillness of Brenn's office seem more profound than that of a graveyard.

Brenn took a stubby thirty-eight calibre revolver from his desk drawer, checked its load, and slipped the weapon into the waistband of his trousers.

He tried to calculate how much fast cash he could raise if he had to do it.

Following the thought through, he picked up his phone and dialed the number of a realtor who had sold him his house. The property agent was a family friend, who could always make a quick and confidential cash deal.

Brenn was saying thanks and good-by into the phone when he noticed the figure in the doorway. He hadn't even heard the door open.

The man looked out of place in this cheap building. He was so finely groomed that Brenn felt like a boy with chewing gum in his hair. The expensive sharkskin suit had the drape of fine tailoring, even on the huge round figure. The surface of the round face was saved from looking fat or soft by expert care and massage, and even the heavy black .45 Colt automatic in his fist couldn't keep his thick fingers from appearing manicured and sensitive.

Brenn replaced the phone in its cradle with a slow careful motion and placed both his palms on the desk top.

The big man in the doorway nodded his approval and moved into the room with the smooth grace of one who weighed a hundred pounds less.

"I am Alex Ambuhl," he announced evenly. "I've come here for a quiet chat with you."

"And that—" Brenn nodded at Ambuhl's gun—"is to insure that it will be quiet?"

"Precisely, Mr. Brenn." A quick smile flashed on and off the smooth round face.

"The visit was really not necessary, Mr. Ambuhl," Brenn said. "I would have phoned my report to you."

"Report?" A slightly puzzled expression appeared fleetingly on Ambuhl's face.

"Yes," Brenn said. "Your man, Jacoby, hired me. He told me to phone my report to your office tonight. At least, that's the number he gave me."

"I am never at my office at night," Ambuhl said. His brows lifted quizzically, and his eyes didn't leave Brenn's face. He called in a sharp, commanding tone, "Jacoby!"

Jacoby's bleak figure appeared in the doorway, his peculiar, cut-in-two eyes alert and wary.

"Brenn tells me," Ambuhl said, "that you hired him. Is that correct?"

"That's right, boss. I was working on

this thing in my own way, but you had to get impatient." Jacoby's voice was irritable.

"Your way wasn't showing results, Jacoby. What did you hire Brenn to do?"

Jacoby's face showed the anxiety with which he was thinking of an answer. His flat, heavy-lidded eyes became desperate.

"He hired me," Brenn supplied for him, "to frame myself or my wife for the murder of Howard Hudson."

"Hudson?" Ambuhl puzzled. "I know no one by that name. This is becoming confusing to me, Brenn. Suppose we start at the beginning."

"That's a good place to begin," Brenn agreed. "You start."

"Someone thought they could blackmail me, Brenn," Ambuhl began. "They were mistaken, of course, for I never leave myself open for such threats. I gave Jacoby the job of discovering who these persons were. The threats were repeated and, since Jacoby was showing no results, I investigated for myself."

"How did you connect me?" Brenn asked.

"Through friends who were also paying blackmail, though in such small amounts that they would rather pay than cause trouble about it. I discovered that your wife, Brenn, was doing the collecting. Naturally, that led to you, who, as a private detective, have an affinity for blackmail."

"People always think that," Brenn complained thoughtfully. "That's why they think it's an easy task to frame a private detective."

"I'm listening with both ears, Brenn," the big man said.

"You have a big promotional organization, don't you, Ambuhl? You have a lot of men working for you? Some of them with, shall we say, questionable reputations and doubtful honesty?"

Ambuhl nodded.

"Jacoby gives the orders to them?"

"Sometimes."

"That's the answer," Brenn smiled grimly. "If you've read the papers recently, you know there's been a series of well-planned payroll robberies. They were well-organized jobs, but not done by any known gang."

"Howard Hudson was an artist. He

found out the organization that was pulling those holdups. Hudson was also a blackmailer, so he thought he had a good set-up to collect from the head of that organization.

"But you, Mr. Ambuhl, have a reputation for being a dangerous enemy, so Hudson arranged to have his collections picked up by my wife, without her knowing what it was all about. At best, my wife seldom knows what she's doing. Do you follow me?"

"I follow you," Ambuhl said tautly.

"The blackmail was paid," Brenn continued. "You didn't pay it, and only one other person knew you were being threatened. Jacoby."

Brenn reached into his desk drawer and pulled out the paper parcel, tore open the top. Ambuhl's eyes glittered at the display of currency.

"Don't look too hard," Brenn advised. "The police have the numbers of these bills. It's part of the payroll loot. Jacoby used your organization to plot and carry out those holdups. He paid off Hudson to keep him quiet until he could figure a way out."

"He probably thought the money of less importance than my remaining in ignorance of all this," Ambuhl said in a soft voice that carried a deadly note in it. He had swung the muzzle of his gun to the direct center of Jacoby's vest.

Jacoby's face was pasty, and fear added glitter to his half-circle eyes. He tried to speak but his throat choked off his words.

"Hudson was demanding more money and Jacoby was getting desperate," Brenn went on quickly. "He stole a gun from my home, hired me to trail an unknown woman from Hudson's apartment today, and took me there. When he fingered the woman, my wife, Jacoby drove around back and went up the back stairs to Hudson's apartment. He left my gun there to frame me or my wife."

"I didn't kill him!" Jacoby bleated. "I took your gun and went up there, yes. But Hudson was already dead!"

"It doesn't matter," Ambuhl said in his deadly tone. He slid his gun into his coat pocket, but its outline still aimed at Jacoby.

"The only thing that ties this to me," he said, "is Jacoby. I will remove that

connection, and I will dispose of that money."

He picked up the brown parcel and motioned Jacoby toward the door. The bleak little man moved as though in a trance. Brenn slipped his hand off the edge of the desk and touched the grip of his stubby revolver. Then he, Jacoby and Ambuhl all froze in position. The door of the office was swinging open.

BRENN'S sister-in-law, Nora, stood hesitantly in the doorway, her hands thrust into the pockets of her canary-colored sportcoat. Her shrewd eyes took in the scene; Brenn's tenseness, the fright on Jacoby's face, the package under Ambuhl's arm, but the coarse, heavy features of her face showed no expression of understanding.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I didn't know you were busy," she said, and started to back into the hall.

"Wait." Brenn stopped her shortly. "My friends are just leaving anyway."

"I'm in a hurry, Bill," she said, as if anxious to leave. "I just stopped to tell you that Eddie and I have moved up our vacation plans. We're leaving tonight, so I won't be able to take care of Sue for you. I've already seen her. Good-by, Bill."

"It's no good, Nora." Brenn stopped her again. "I know all about it anyway. Besides, this is Alex Ambuhl, and I doubt if you could get that package away from him, even if you ambush him on those dark stairs, as you're planning to do."

Nora turned slowly back to the room, and her hand came out of her coat pocket. A little flat .32 automatic came out with it.

"Just what do you know, Bill?"

"I know that there is just one person that connects all the angles of this case," Brenn said. "My wife, Sue. She doesn't know what any of it's about, but no one else could learn what it's all about without talking to her. I found out from her, but you found out long before I did."

"What did I find out, Bill?" Nora's voice was steady.

"You found out that Hudson was using Sue to collect his blackmail, and you went to Hudson and made him cut you in. When you found out that Hudson was

blackmailing Ambuhl, you made him demand a big percentage of the payroll loot, a big-enough chunk that, after it was paid, would force Ambuhl to get rid of the blackmailer."

Alex Ambuhl was listening intently to Brenn, but his alert little eyes were fixed on Nora, and he was easing the gun in his pocket around toward her.

"But you thought that if anyone got hurt, it would be Hudson, or me, or Sue. You didn't care. You had to have the money to hold onto that no-good husband of yours. Just before Ambuhl came in here just now, I made a phone call, Nora, to a real estate agent. I learned that you'd sold the drugstore that your father left you."

He extended his left hand toward her slowly, palm out.

"This is what gave you away, Nora. I didn't touch a thing in Hudson's studio, yet after I got home, I had this streak of yellow oil paint on my hand. The only place I could have gotten it without noticing, was when I handed you that canary-yellow coat you're wearing. You got yellow paint on your coat when you went to Hudson to get the big payoff. When he refused you, you killed him. You saw Sue after I left and found out she'd had the money parcel and then had given it to me."

"Yes, Sue told me," Nora said. She was staring fixedly at Brenn's yellow-stained hand. That was a mistake. Ambuhl had finally gotten his coat pocket twisted around. He fired through the cloth, and Nora's body jerked and doubled up.

She clutched at her stomach with one hand and emptied her pistol with the other. Ambuhl was too big to miss. They both hit the floor at almost the same instant.

Jacoby stared for a second, then darted for the door. Brenn pulled the snub-nosed revolver from his waistband and shot the bleak, scared little man through the back of the knee.

"I hate to treat a client like this, Mr. Jacoby," he said with sarcasm, "but a friend of mine will want to talk to you."

He put his hand on the phone and dialled police headquarters.

To nab a deadbeat medico,
skip-tracer Carter locked horns with a frost-bitten redhead—
and the whistle-stop terrorists.

"Drop it," the agent
repeated.



CHAPTER ONE

Sour Gripes

THE lettering on the door said, *Emmett B. Mayberry, M. D.*, and beneath it was the word, *Enter*. I didn't need medical attention, but I turned the knob and saw a girl with red hair sitting behind the receptionist's desk. I had always thought it would be red; even in a newspaper cut it had looked that color, but the newsprint hadn't done justice to the cameo complexion and green eyes.

"Hello," she said. "The doctor isn't in right now, but you can wait." It was a nice voice, warm and without the usual professional crispness. She nodded at a chair beside her desk. "Sit here. I'll save time

Dramatic Detective
Novelette

By R. M. F.
JOSES



**FILL YOUR
OWN SHROUD**

by getting a history card started before he comes back."

She smiled at me while she hunted for a blank card in her desk. I enjoyed the smile while it lasted. It would probably be the last one I'd get.

"You're a stranger in Novato, aren't you?"

"Yeah. From L.A."

That didn't mean anything to her; Los Angeles is a big city. "You're a long way from home. Name, please."

"Carter. Mack Carter."

I looked around the office while she wrote it on the card. It was a crummy reception room. The furniture wouldn't bring over fifty dollars in a forced sale. Cracked oak chairs. A black leather couch with a brass spittoon beside it and a deerhorn hat rack in the corner. The only thing in the place that hadn't been old at the turn of the century was the bowl of yellow roses on the girl's desk. I wondered how much of the twenty thousand Mayberry had left.

The girl was speaking to me again. "What's the nature of your complaint, Mr. Carter?"

"Deadbeats," I said. "All kinds. Big one and little ones. And in particular, one Dr. Emmett B. Mayberry."

The pen slipped out of her fingers and rattled off the desk. I bent to pick it up, and the green eyes were wide and frightened when I straightened.

"Hello, Carol Mayberry," I said. "Three years is a long time, isn't it? It's a hell of a long way from Beverly Hills, California, to Novato, Arizona. You must have figured you were in the clear by now."

Her hand moved out to take the pen from me and the lacquer-tipped fingers were shaking a little. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"The Carter Collection Agency," I told her. "And I want eleven thousand, nine hundred and seventy-four bucks, to be exact. Just for convenience, let's call it twelve grand."

She was breathing quickly under the white silk blouse. "He can't pay you. Why don't you leave him alone? He's not well. Ever since my mother died—"

I cut it short. They can always string one out that makes Uncle Tom's Cabin

seem like a musical comedy. "He had twenty thousand when he ducked out of L.A."

The green eyes threw sparks. "What kind of a man are you? Hounding people for their last dime."

I didn't think that twenty thousand added up to a last dime, but I didn't argue the point. "There's a guy named Jones in L.A.," I said. "Just one of the Jones boys. Your old man got into him for three grand, more or less. Jones was starting a new market and he was hungry for business. Now he needs the money to keep out of bankruptcy. It's enough to put him over the hump. There's another named Abbott. His widow and a couple of kids could use their two thousand in the worst way. There are a dozen or so more, and they all could use it. That's the kind of a guy I am. Now, where's your old man?"

"Stop calling him my old man!"

"All right. Where's the doctor?"

"He's out on an emergency call."

I stood up and borrowed a bud from the bowl of roses for my buttonhole. It brightened up last year's Palm Beach suit. "Emergency call where?"

For a moment I thought I was going to lose the bud and the lapel with it. Her face was flushed and hot and angry. Then she said, "The Ellis place. Out on Deer Creek Road."

At the door I stopped and said, "Thanks for the flower."

She watched me with her lips tightly set. I closed the door and hoped the red hair came from her mother. If Mayberry was responsible for it, he was going to be harder to handle than I had counted on.

NOVATO was one street and five minutes walk long. They had paved it, but that didn't keep the wind from settling a thick layer of dust on the buildings. Not that it mattered. Most of them were frame false-front numbers left over from the wild and wooly days. The only one in town over two stories was the stone Cattleman's Hotel where I had a room and a washbasin with a dripping faucet. I drove the coupe into a service station, dodging the tumbleweeds blowing down the street, and got directions to the Ellis place.

Deer Creek Road turned off the high-

way a mile beyond Novato. It was one lane of powdered dust twisting through the low brown hills, a memorial to the warped sense of humor of some community planner. If there was a creek anywhere in the ash-dry gulleys, it ran only during the rainy season—if it ever rained in Novato.

Dust billowed out behind the coupe and drifted in the window. The sun beat through the windshield like an acetylene torch and a layer of top soil deep enough for a truck garden had settled on me in the first mile. This was a hell of a way to make a living. I wondered how Dr. Mayberry liked Novato after the green shaded drives of Beverly Hills.

The coupe ground up from a gully and around a bend. The Ellis place lay ahead in a pocket between two hills the shade of overdone biscuits. It was strictly back-broken. The fence line along the road wavered crazily, with half the strands of rusted barbed wire broken and a windmill with three blades teetered at an impossible angle. Two white-faced steers were trying to find shade under the der-rick, their ribs sticking through their hides, and over the near hill a vulture glided in lazy circles, a distant speck in the cloudless sky.

"Hello, brother," I said.

The house was in a clump of cottonwoods. It had been painted last when Grover Cleveland made his inaugural speech. Half of the shingles were missing from the roof. Behind the house, a barn and a couple of small outbuildings sagged in a state of arrested collapse.

I left the coupe in the road and dodged through a maze of rusted tin cans in the front yard. There were four cars in the yard to complicate matters. Three of them had been disemboweled, and wheels, axles, gears and what-not were scattered around the yard. The fourth was a small gray sedan with twisted serpents and a staff depicted on the M.D.'s caduceus emblem, fastened to the license plate.

The house had a screen porch across the front with the screen rusted out. I let the door slam behind me and knocked on the inner door. The sound came back as if the house were empty and had been for a long time. A horned toad retreated to a corner of the porch in unhurried hops.

I knocked again. Harder this time.

Then a third time.

Someone crossed the floor inside, and the door opened six inches. A man in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up squeezed through the gap and closed the door behind him.

After a year of trying, I was looking at Dr. Mayberry.

Wavy white hair and a moustache to match it. A small nervous mouth and puffy-lidded eyes that jumped over me like neurotic fleas.

"Hello, Doc," I said. "Let's have a little talk."

He didn't wait for introductions. "I can't see you now." His glance skittered back to the house. "I've got an emergency case inside. You'll have to wait for me at my office."

"Like hell I will." I stuck a thumb in the direction of the telephone line running from the house down the road. "By now your daughter's got everything packed and you're all set to go again. We'll talk now."

He tried to look professionally indignant, but there was mostly fright in his face. "See here, young man. There's a very sick man inside. He could die while I am standing out here talking to you."

"And you could take off out the back door while I wait out in front for you." I shook my head. "Nothing doing, Doc. A year is a long time. I'm not starting all over again."

His face twitched as if a pin had been jabbed in it. "I promise you I won't. If you'll only go back to my office and wait, I promise you I'll be there inside of two hours."

I gave him my laugh reserved for dead-beats' promises. "Stop trying, Doc. You'll work up a sweat for nothing. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

A lizard ran up the siding beside the door with a rustling sound, and Mayberry jumped six inches. His eyes rolled at the door, then back to me. "You can't come inside. I'm doing an emergency operation. Now for heaven's sake, leave here!"

I shoved him to one side and reached for the door. "Let's see this emergency case."

Mayberry hung onto my arm with both hands. His face was the dirty gray of the

dirty weathered siding on the house.

"Don't!" He almost screamed the word.

I stopped. I always stop when a gunshot blasts within twenty feet of me.

It was inside the house. A single crash that drove through the clapboard walls and sent echos chasing each other around the porch. Mayberry let his hands drop from my arm and a whimper slipped through his teeth. His jaw sagged and the side of his face twitched horribly.

For maybe four seconds there was dead silence. The lizard beside Mayberry bobbed on its forelegs and its pointed head turned inquisitively. Then heavy, running steps inside the house jarred the weak flooring.

Mayberry's voice was a croak. "Run! Quick! I tried to warn you."

I didn't have time to move. It happened so fast I had only a blurred impression of the door being wrenched open, of the man who lurched through the opening, his face a dirt-streaked mask of frenzy.

His shirt was open at the neck and a stubble of beard spread up from his throat, giving his face the appearance of an animal, but even without the beard, his open mouth and bared teeth made him look as if he belonged down on all fours.

I saw the gun stuck in the waistband of his trousers. I saw his hand swoop down to it. I tried to duck but Mayberry was in the way. The hand with the gun swung in a short arc and the side of the barrel landed against my temple.

I was falling then, falling into a blackness filled with my own private display of pyrotechnics. The floor was rough and splintered against my face and I tried to drag myself off it, but there was nothing left to drag with. A weak push-up was the best I could do and the last thing I thought was . . . *I must look like that damn lizard.* Then something smashed against my skull and even the push-up was too much. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Cop-Killer's Reward

MINUTES passed. Maybe hours, or even days. The door was still open and I was on the floor with my mouth pressed against it, trying to take

a bite out of planking that hundreds of farmer's boots had crossed straight from the barn. I hauled a badly misused body up the doorframe and clung there, letting the cold sweat dribble down my back like the run-off from a glacier.

It was quiet in the house, much more than when I first came. Nothing moved in or out of it during the five minutes I hung on the door. By then I was able to investigate what the animal man had done to me. The bump on the back of my head was bloody and much bigger than the one on the temple. He must have used the butt of the pistol for that, and it had more sharp corners than the side of the barrel. But what the one on the temple lacked in size, it made up in painfulness.

I should have crawled out to my car and quietly driven away. But I didn't. I went into the house.

The front room was patterned after the cluttered yard outside. Wallpaper was stripping from the walls and brown watermarks stained the ceiling plaster. Yellowed newspapers lay scattered around a potbellied stove and stuffing spilled out of a couch. Beyond, a kitchen with greasy plates and a sink heaped with blackened pots.

Half a bottle of whiskey was on the kitchen table, and I washed a glass at the pump on the sink. It wasn't good liquor but it wasn't bad enough to stop at one shot. Not the way I felt.

Across the kitchen, another door opened into the other side of the house. I nudged it ajar and peered around the edge. For a moment it seemed to be just another rat's nest in the farmhouse. Then I saw what was on the bed.

I went back to the bottle in the kitchen and had two more drinks. By then I was feeling a little drunk and I wanted to. I wanted to feel very drunk before I went back into the other room. Through the window of the kitchen I could see my coupe still standing in the road, waiting for me to get in and drive away, but it seemed too late to do it now. Mayberry's car was still there, too.

This time I took the bottle with me. There wasn't much left in it but every little bit would help.

He was on the rumped brass bed, lying on his back with his mouth open. A big

man with heavy shoulders that wouldn't mean much to anyone now except the undertaker who tried to fit him in a pine box. The features on the still face were proportioned like a concrete mixer; flattened broad nose, a forehead that made a narrow path between bushy eyebrows and hair like shredded carrot.

On the floor a blood-stained shirt lay in a wadded ball and the seat of a chair held an assortment of bandages and cotton and shining instruments. They might have done some good for the small red hole in the man's right chest, but I couldn't see how they could have fixed the gunshot wound in the side of his head.

Sweat started dribbling down my back again and I went outside and tried to keep the whiskey down by pouring more on top of it. The vulture was still circling in the sky and he seemed to be getting closer to the house. Off in the dry weeds a grasshopper buzzed, but there wasn't a sound beside that; not a thing moved anywhere in the low, baked hills.

Somewhere in the back of my mind a small machine added up telephone poles and wires and told me to let the outside world know what had happened at the Ellis place out on Deer Creek Road. There hadn't been a phone in any of the three rooms I had seen, so I went around the back of the house and climbed the steps to the rear porch. Opening the door, I almost fell over the second body.

I cackled. They didn't mean anything to me anymore. Stack them up around the place like cordwood and Carter could take them in his stride.

This one was a man, too, a younger man fully dressed in khaki and flattened on his stomach. He didn't look as if there was even a twitch left in him, but I rolled him over and felt for a heartbeat. There wasn't any, but pinned to his shirt on the flap of the pocket was a small gold deputy's shield and his right hand still clutched a revolver.

It had been a fair demonstration of shooting if you went in for that kind. Only one bullet used on this one and that right between the shoulder blades. My deputy friend hadn't known what hit him. With two dead men in the house, I wondered how it happened I was still alive.

The telephone was on a wall of the porch. It took a lot of effort to turn the

crank, almost more strength than I had. While I waited for the operator to answer I started shivering. The sun was still blazing outside but it seemed cold in the house.

THE county offices were in a squat stone building half a block down the street from my hotel in Novato. We went along a musty corridor, through a frosted glass door marked *Sheriff* and the deputy named Kyle jerked his head at a chair in the ante-room.

"Sit down."

I watched his back disappear through another door marked *Private* and tried the chair. It was hard. Everything in the room looked hard, except the little fluffy blonde pecking at a typewriter behind a dirty oak railing. But I wasn't up to appreciating her.

The door opened and Kyle said, "Carter In here."

The blonde stopped pecking and Kyle grinned at her. A grin on his face was as native to his expression as rain to Novato. His features were as hard as a granite tombstone and his pale eyes were twice as cold. I moved past him through the doorway, and his thin lips snapped off the grin. The pale eyes fixed on the back of my neck like the points of two icicles.

Sheriff Bemis was something left over from the hog exhibit at the last county fair. All three hundred pounds of him swelled out of a wrinkled linen suit and overflowed his chair in a flabby mass of pallid, sweating flesh. He was tucking something away in a drawer of his roll top desk as I came in. The smell of whiskey was rank in the room, even with as much as I had had.

"This is the man who called in from the Ellis place, Sheriff," Kyle said. His voice was edged with a kind of sneering servility. "He calls himself Mack Carter. Says he's a skip tracer from L.A. looking for Dr. Mayberry."

Bemis scratched the naked calf of one leg and looked at me unhappily. "What have you got to say for yourself, young man?" His voice was a peevish whine.

"What am I supposed to say for myself?" I asked. "I went out to that dump looking for Mayberry. Some hood hit me over the head with a gun and when I came out of it, I was alone in the house with two

dead men." I hesitated, shut up then.

The sheriff and Kyle exchanged a look. The deputy let his thumbs hook loosely in the embossed gunbelt around his hips and Bemis rolled a whitish tongue over lips like tire casings.

"You ain't goin' make it easier for yourself by talkin' tough," Bemis whined. "I ain't in the habit of havin' my deputies killed without doin' something about it."

I put my hands on the table between us and leaned forward. "Look, Sheriff," I began. "I—"

"Shut up!" Kyle said.

I looked back at him over my shoulder. One of his hands had slipped from the belt back to the grip of the revolver in his holster. I let my breath ease out and straightened. Enough guns had been in use for one day.

"The man on the bed was Red Dillon," Kyle said to Bemis. "We've been getting readers on him for a year. Yesterday he pulled a bank job in Kansas and we got it on the teletype. The cashier pulled a hero act with a .22 and put one into Dillon before Red and his partner shot him in half. It was a two-man job in the bank, and they think maybe there was another man in the car."

Both Kyle and Bemis looked at me when the deputy finished speaking. I began to realize that all was not well with the world. Something seemed to be expected of me, so I began again.

"About three years ago, Mayberry went to pot. His wife died and he started drinking. Maybe people around here don't hand out twelve thousand dollars worth of credit, but that's how much Mayberry got. He was a big-time M. D. in Beverly Hills then with fancy offices and a corps of technicians and everybody thought he was good for it. He always had been."

I paused. Neither Bemis nor the deputy said anything. I had the feeling I was getting as much attention as a shoe clerk trying to get a table at a country club. I struggled on anyway.

"When his practice went to hell and the bottom started falling out, Mayberry unloaded his house on the quiet and blew town with twenty thousand clear. He dropped out of sight for better than two years. About a year ago, I got an assignment of all claims and went to work on it.

"Mayberry was my number-one project. I had newspaper clippings on him, I talked to people who knew him. By the time I was finished, I knew how much sugar he used in his coffee and what kind of perfume Miss Mayberry used. I figured sooner or later, he'd start practicing again. It was the only work he knew and he was too old to tackle something else. Last May I heard he was here, and wrote a letter to your office to check on it. I never heard from you, but you must have it in your files."

Both the sheriff and Kyle looked blankly at me and the deputy shook his head. "Never saw it and I'd remember if I had."

"It wasn't returned," I said. "Maybe someone else—"

Bemis mopped his neck with a wadded handkerchief. "Ain't nobody else. Just me and my two deputies."

His glance shifted to Kyle and my letter was dropped in the discard like a pair of deuces looking at a full house.

"What about old man Ellis?"

"He was tied up in a cow stall. Says somebody slugged him when he came around the barn about ten this morning. He didn't see who it was. Just after the shooting, he heard Doc Mayberry get ordered into a car and the car driving away. According to the teletype, the other bank artist was identified as a life term named Karns who crashed out of Ohio State a month ago. Carter's description of the guy he claims slugged him fits Karns."

"Mayberry's car still there?" Bemis asked.

Kyle jerked his head in a nod. "Mayberry's was there. And—" he stuck his chin at me and the motion made him look like a baracuda. One with very sharp teeth—"this Carter's. We found Akins' patrol car on the other side of the ridge across on the Mexican side. He came up on the back of the place and got as far as the porch before he was shot." Kyle hesitated, and his lips drew back over his teeth. "Shot in the back," he said thinly.

The sheriff made a noise that could have been a whimper and swabbed frantically at the rolls of fat on the back of his neck. "Anybody tell Mrs. Akins about it yet?" He didn't wait for an answer. "You take care of it, Kyle. I'd do it myself but I got to see a man. Late already."

Somewhere out of the bulges of the linen suit, he pawed a gold watch and clucked over the time. Kyle watched him waddle across the room, with a nasty grin. At the door the sheriff turned to me.

"Lookee here, young man. You better make a clean breast of this whole thing. We ain't goin' to have much patience with one of our peace officers killed and the town's doctor kidnapped. Cop-killers don't rate very high around these parts."

The massive sheriff passed through the door like a four-masted schooner in full sail, and Kyle said,

"Let's go talk, Carter."

On the way out, he pinched the little blonde's arm and got a simper out of her. She didn't even look at me.

WE TALKED. We talked until I didn't know what time it was and the whiskey in my stomach was long gone and had left only a bad taste in my mouth. We talked until my chin was on my chest and I would have traded the chance of collecting from Mayberry for a cigarette or a drink of water or a few feet of floor to lie on.

Still they came, working in shifts. Short men, tall men, fat ones and lean. Or maybe there were only one or two besides Kyle. I didn't know any longer. Some stuck their noses in my face and roared, yanking my head up by a handful of hair. Others murmured persuasively, telling me just how I had stood in the corner of the porch and squeezed a trigger on Akins' back as he crossed the porch.

They all told me I'd get off with a couple of years at the most if I talked and I'd frv if I didn't.

Eventually, I didn't even hear the voices. They were just sounds beating against my eardrums and my answers were grunts out of a half-conscious daze.

Kyle came back at three in the morning. The first I knew of it was when something cold and wet splashed against my face and I coughed water out of my throat and nostrils. A hand cracked against my face and I dragged my head up. The bare kalso-mined room in the basement whirled crazily until I focused burning eyes.

He was standing before me with an empty glass in his hand and his bony face set in stiff lines. I looked down at the water spreading through my clothes and saw the yellow rose in the coat lapel. It had been a hell of a long time ago when I put it there. It was wilted, but not half as much as I was.

I'd said it a hundred times before. Maybe a thousand. But I began again like a bad phonograph record.

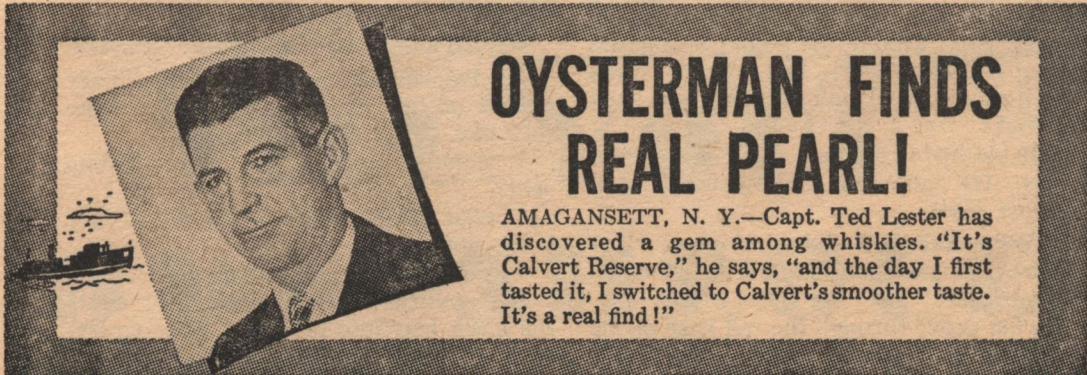
"I didn't shoot Akins. I don't know anything about it. My name's Carter. I—"

Kyle's hand slapped against my face again, hard enough to jar my head and send a stab of pain through it.

"Snap out of it, Carter!"

We were alone. The rest of the persuasion crew must have been somewhere else, getting a little rest before beginning the next round. I couldn't keep my eyes off the gun on Kyle's belt. He wore it low on his leg in an embossed black holster and it was close enough to grab—if I could move fast enough and if he looked away for a moment. I didn't have any ideas what I'd do next but that didn't seem important at the moment.

The deputy half-turned to put the glass



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on a table and the butt of the pistol moved to within two feet of my hand

I started out of the chair.

Kyle was as fast as a cat with Rin-Tin-Tin after it. His hand flicked down to the gun before I was halfway there and it swung up in his fingers.

His knuckles whitened over the grip and above the muzzle his eyes were narrowed and his mouth hard. In less than a second a slug would spurt out of the muzzle in a blast of orange flame and that would be the end of a lot of ideas and plans one Mack Carter had.

If Kyle's reflexes hadn't been good, it would have been. The door to the room opened and the sheriff waddled in like a moving van with a flat tire. He was drunk, so much so that he didn't notice the gun in Kyle's hand. The deputy slid it back into his holster and the harshness in his face broke.

"You almost saved the county the cost of a trial, Carter," he said softly enough for only the two of us to hear.

Bemis waved a sheet of teletype message. The rolls of fat on his face were shot with distended bloodvessels and a drink had been spilled down the front of his linen suit.

"Got the coroner's report on Red Dillon," he wheezed. "This boy plays rough. That hole in Dillon's head was put there while he was aliyin' on the bed. Guess Mr. Carter didn't want no buddy of his around to put the finger on him."

He held the message under my nose and rattled it, wavered back and forth. He smelled like something embalmed in alcohol and dragged up from the bottom of a lake.

"Got a teletype from the L.A. cops, too. They say you got desk space in some office. Been around for a couple of years doing collection work, but nobody knows much about you. Don't mean a thing. Just a blind!"

He bleched in my face and I shoved him away. He squawked and lumbered back against Kyle.

"What the hell did you expect?" I yelled. "A six-room suite with a blonde receptionist?"

A fist drove through the red haze of the room and I went over with the chair. My head hit the concrete on the spot where it

had been clipped in the morning, but even then the floor felt good. I lay there with blood salty in my mouth and heard Bemis say, "Put that foot down, Kyle. Don't want no marks on any of my prisoners. Lock him up. Ain't nobody can talk to me thataway."

CHAPTER THREE

Stick Around, Sucker

SUNLIGHT coming through a barred window woke me. I rolled over and every square inch of my body shrieked with pain. I ached in places I hadn't even thought a man could, but most of all in the head. It felt like a rotten watermelon and twice as big.

The blanket on the steel bunk would have been as thin as my wallet if it hadn't had the stiffening of dirt. I kicked it off my legs and sat on the edge of the bunk, holding my head in my hands. At the far end of the cell something scuffed, and I squinted through my fingers. A Mexican was crouched against the wall, trying to blend into the concrete.

"Hey," I croaked. "Come here."

He shook his head and huddled closer to the wall.

"Come here. I want to talk to you."

Black eyes rolled in a creamy olive face. He came the way a puppy comes for a licking after chewing a slipper.

"Speak English?" I asked.

He swallowed hard and tried an unhappy grin. "Si. A leetle."

"What time is it?"

"Nine hours. Mebbe ten."

I stood and unwound a few of the knots in my body. The Mexican kid shrank back and started shaking.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked.

He twisted his hands together. "They tell me no talk to you. Very bad hombre they say. Muy malo."

I stopped rubbing my eyes. "Who said?"

"Señor Kyle. He tell me when they bring you in."

"You do what Kyle says, huh?"

He nodded violently enough to shake the black hair into his eyes. "Si. Everybody do what Señor Kyle say."

"What happens if you don't?"

He shrugged, pantomined a fast draw and made a *boom* with his forefinger extended and thumb cocked. "He is the policia."

"Pretty tough guy, huh?"

He nodded again. My head ached just watching him. "Si. Very tough."

"Someday I'll catch the crumb off home base and without a gun," I said. "We'll see how tough he is then. Why'd they lock you up?"

The Mexican flashed his white teeth in a grin. "I keel a man. He steal my girl. Now, no more talk. Mebbe they come."

He went back to his corner of the cell and I rested my elbows on the window sill and peered through the bars. If I was so bad I could corrupt killers, they should have given me a private cell, but at least you could see something from this one.

It was on the second and top floor of the building, facing the main street. Below, the citizens were starting another day in the picturesque little white hell called Novato, dragging themselves along the street from one patch of shade to the next.

While I watched, Carol Mayberry came down the street. Anyone breathing the air of the great out-of-doors looked good, but she looked especially so. I liked the white sharkskin dress and the way it hugged her legs with each step, I liked the soft red hair and the way she held her shoulders.

A man was with her, a small character in a blue suit and gold-rimmed glasses that sparkled in the sunlight. Probably her local boy friend, I thought, lending a strong male shoulder in a moment of need. The two then passed beneath the window and turned up the steps of the courthouse, passing the assemblage of whittlers sitting there, spraying the sidewalk with tobacco juice.

Behind me the cell door rattled, swung open and Kyle was standing in the corridor. The Mexican kid became very interested in the texture of the concrete wall.

Kyle and I stood without speaking, watching each other. I noticed how the heavy bones of his face sloped down to a point in his jaw and wondered how it would feel to break a few knuckles against it. I decided it would be very fine.

He broke the silence first. "Let's go, Carter."

"No handcuffs?" I asked.

His thumb gouged into my back and hurt. "Start moving."

He followed me along the corridor, down a back flight of stairs and into a room. Bemis was there, wearing the same dirty white suit and a sweaty hangover. A woman was with him, a faded, worn housewife type in a washdress, who studied me with clouded eyes, then shook her head.

"Don't know him, Mr. Bemis. Ain't never seen him around. Anyhow, Jack wouldn'ta had no truck with his kind." Her head ducked onto her chest and she sniffled into a handkerchief held in rough fingers with cracked nails.

"There, there, Mrs. Akins," Bemis puffed. "Hate to put you to this, but Jack was a fine officer and we aim to find his killer."

Mrs. Akins let out a stifled wail. The sheriff glared at me out of bloodshot eyes. "Young man, in case it means anything to you, you're alookin' at the widow of Jack Akins and the mother of his fatherless children."

I shook Kyle's hand off my arm. "What's the matter, Bemis?" I snarled. "Been a long time between lynchings around Novato?"

Kyle got his fingers around my arm again and shoved me out into the hall. His face was bloodless and his lips were like two pieces of white string.

"Get out of here! And don't leave town until we tell you." His grip tightened on my arm. "And if you're figuring on ever leaving, watch the way you shoot off your mouth."

"Sure," I said. "And you watch that gun of yours. Don't walk around town at night without it."

I DIDN'T go back to the hotel right away. Instead, I found a bar down the street and had a breakfast of cold sandwiches and beer. Nobody spoke to me and the drinkers left five feet on either side for my elbow room. After a while they got tired of whispering and peeking at me, and I ordered another beer.

I wondered if Dr. Mayberry had turned up yet. If he had been found, he probably hadn't been alive, judging by the way Bemis and Kyle were acting. And if he wasn't alive, where did that leave me with my twelve-thousand-dollar assignment?

Half of what I could collect was mine and I wanted it bad. But no matter how much I wanted it, the chances were if he had died, my claim died along with him. I finished my beer and started walking.

Mayberry's place was a little frame cottage on a dirt road a block from the main street. Someone had struggled with a flower garden around the house and a few daisies and rose bushes were making a half-hearted stand in the baked earth, but it was a far cry from the ten-room show-place he'd had in Bel Air. This spot resembled the other place in the same way a mud puddle looks like Lake Tahoe.

Carol Mayberry had beaten me there. At home she dressed for comfort. The white dress had been traded for linen shorts and a striped T-shirt, and rope sandals were on her feet. There were a number of reasons for wearing the outfit and the second best were the slim tanned legs.

She was sitting in a garden swing on the shady side of the house. The bank-clerk type who had been with her at the courthouse was perched on the edge of a hammock, still wearing the neat blue suit and gold-rimmed glasses.

"Hello," I said. With a day's growth of beard and a suit that had been slept in, I felt like something that had dropped off the back of a garbage truck.

Carol Mayberry didn't move from the couch. The green eyes raked me up and down. "You might as well sit down," she said. "Mr Hendricks wants to talk to you."

There were other chairs but I took the corner of the couch, and the redhead shifted to the extreme end. Hendricks leaned forward and shook hands. For a bank clerk his grip was surprisingly hard.

"We went down to the courthouse, but Sheriff Bemis told me they had released you," he said briskly. "Our office has jurisdiction in this case. The bank Dillon and Karns knocked over was a national bank."

"What office?" I asked.

"The FBI."

"Oh," I said. The eyes behind the glasses suddenly looked keen and alert. Everytime I turned around I was facing another cop. I wondered what line the FBI used in its questioning. They'd have

to go some to beat that Kyle's methods.

"I have a personal interest in the case," Hendricks said. "I knew Akins. A damn fine officer. One of the best, but he shouldn't have tackled Dillon and Karns alone."

I rubbed the back of my head. The bump had reduced to the size of a great American eagle's egg. "Neither should I. But I didn't know I was."

"Maybe Akins didn't either. We think he noticed something out of the ordinary around the Ellis place while he was patrolling, like a car that didn't belong there. He couldn't contact Deputy Kyle because he was out somewhere on patrol, too. Dillon and Karns obviously had forced Ellis to call Dr. Mayberry and get him there on some pretext.

"When Akins appeared on the scene, and you, too, Karns went to pieces and started shooting. It isn't exactly clear to me why he killed Akins but not you, and why he kidnapped Mayberry and left Ellis behind. It isn't important, though. The point is, Akins saw something there that made him suspicious. He was born and raised around here and he knew everyone in the county."

"Don't hold it against him," I said. "He couldn't help it."

"You don't think much of Novato?"

"It stinks," I said. "And that goes for the local law, too."

Hendricks shrugged. "Cop-killing gets any police force on edge. The boys start looking over their life insurance policies. You can find a lot worse sheriffs than Bemis. At least he's honest and doesn't turn his jail into a cheap graft on the prisoners. He's just getting old—and too fond of having a drink with the boys. Ought to step out for a younger man."

"Like Kyle?" I suggested. "There's one in a thousand for you. Too bad it isn't one in ten thousand."

Hendricks cleared his throat and gave me a poker-faced stare. "What are these debts you're trying to collect from Dr. Mayberry?"

I glanced at the girl and the green eyes flicked sideways at me. She drew up the long legs and hugged them against her chest. Maybe the leg show was supposed to make me forget the twelve thousand. It almost did, but I began the story I had

already told both Bemis and Kyle before.

HALFWAY through, the redhead interrupted. "Dad always intended to pay the bills. It was just—"

"Sure," I cut in. "That's why he sold his house on the quiet and blew town with the twenty grand he got out of it. Everybody intends to pay his bills—it's just easier to keep putting them off."

She let her legs drop and jerked upright on the swing. Those legs were giving me a bad time. "He did!" she cried. "He—"

"Don't get upset, Miss Mayberry," Hendricks soothed. "I'm just trying to get a little information."

I finished the story. Hendricks pinched his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger.

"It's not much help," he said. "You'll be staying around for a few days, won't you?"

It really wasn't a question. It was just a way of telling me not to leave town. Everybody told me that.

"Sure," I said. "They love me in Novato. I wouldn't think of leaving."

Hendricks smiled happily. "That's fine. My room at the hotel is right across the hall from yours. If you happen to think of anything, just drop in and let me know."

"Yeah," I said. "If I do, I'll talk to myself. You can pick it up on your dictograph. Let me know if you get a line on Mayberry. I want to talk business with him."

The redhead's voice followed me through the hard-pressed garden. "I always thought vultures found their prey by instinct."

I closed the gate behind me and treated myself to another look at the legs. "By eyesight. Mine's getting bad."

Then I started back to the hotel.

It was only a block and a half of dirt road from Mayberry's to the Cattleman's Hotel, but halfway there I had a following. A dust-streaked green car with a buggy-whip aerial trailed along a hundred feet behind and speeded up when I reached the main drag. As I turned into the hotel, it passed. Kyle was behind the wheel, watching me coldly.

I waved and went up to my room. After a bath and a shave, I stretched out on the

bed and watched the flies crawl over the high white-washed ceiling. A fan hung there, turning lazily, as slowly as my thoughts. I was about whipped.

My chances of collecting from Mayberry seemed thin. And if I didn't, I was washed up. Already I was five hundred dollars in the hole, and Mayberry had been the longshot with everything on his tail. Maybe I should have concentrated on the small accounts and established myself the hard way, but he had looked like a short cut.

Every collection man in town had had a crack at him, and I could have turned business away if I had nailed him. There was always the credit department of Grosbeak's Great Stores again, I thought, with old man Grosbeak's nephew growling down my neck from nine to six.

Outside the room someone walked down the corridor and went into the opposite room. Hendricks wouldn't need to bother with a dictograph in this hotel. The doors were louvered like the shutters on the windows, and I could almost hear his breathing from across the hall.

I got up and crossed to the window. My room was on the front of the building and a shallow balcony ran along outside it, mainly to shade the windows below as the one above shaded mine. The green sedan was parked across the street and a khaki-clad arm hung out of the window.

While I was standing there, a diesel rumbled through town, loaded with hay. Two Mexicans sitting on the curb watched the tail of it disappear as if it was the most interesting thing that had or would happen all day. It probably was and I went back to the bed and fell asleep.

I don't know how long I slept. When I woke, the room was still light but the sun had swung away from the windows. It was still hot in the room, though, and the bed felt lumped and sticky. Beds probably always felt that way in Novato, winter and summer.

Wakefulness had come with an abrupt jolt. Part of my mind was still floundering in sleep but the rest was alive with sudden realization. Little things began to fall into place, meaningless in themselves, but taken together, they made a pattern. While I was asleep, the old subconscious must have been working overtime.

My heart started beating faster, hammering thinly at the base of my throat, and the dust in the street wasn't nearly as dry as my mouth. A thought passed through my mind like the letters in a scare headline—*You'll never get out of this room alive. . . .*

CHAPTER FOUR

Ready for the Cleaners

I GOT off the bed and looked at my watch on the dresser. Four-thirty. Still too early for him, but not by much. He'd wait until it was dark, but when did the sun set? Time was running out and the whitewashed walls of the room seemed to be pressing in like a trap. A death trap.

I crossed to the window to see if Kyle had gone. He hadn't, and Bemis was lumbering down the street, mopping his face. A couple of feet of Colt Peacemaker was strapped around his paunch. The citizens could-relax now; the sheriff's personal attention was being given to Novato's crime wave. He stopped to speak to Kyle. Both of them looked up at the window where I was. Then Bemis heaved himself into a bar down the street and Kyle lit a cigarette.

Except for the patrol car, the street was empty. The two Mexicans had disappeared and the stretch of road in front of the hotel had a strange air of desertion. No one was on the sidewalks and there was a feeling of a house that had been suddenly emptied; as if the people were still there but hiding somewhere out of sight.

I left the window, picked up the house phone and called Bemis' office. A peevish voice that could have belonged only to the fuzzy blonde told me he wasn't in and wouldn't be back.

"This is Carter," I said. "Mack Carter. I've got to get in touch with Bemis as soon as I can. It's very important. I want to talk to him personally."

The phone clicked dead in my ear and I went back to the window and waited. There might have been better ways of doing this, but I couldn't think of them. In less than five minutes, the blonde from Bemis' office walked quickly down the

street. She veered toward the bar where the sheriff had gone, then caught sight of Kyle and cut back to him. They talked together briefly and the girl left, heading back in the direction she had come.

I left the window and ate a cigarette, sitting on the bed. It was quiet enough in the building to hear the steps from the time they reached the landing until they were outside my door. The knob turned and then he was in the room, his glance jumping until it located me on the bed.

"Come in," I said. "Don't bother to knock."

"What's the important news?"

"Sheriff Bemis," I began.

He kicked the door shut with his heel. "Never mind Bemis. If you've got anything to say, you can tell to to me."

I dragged on my cigarette and hoped he wouldn't notice the way my hands were jumping. "It might bore you. The sheriff struck me as a better listener."

He was standing in front of me now and the muscles along his jaws were tight. "Forget Bemis. I'm the law around here. Crack wise once more and I'll prove it to you."

I got off the bed and stuck my face in his. I wasn't gambling anything; all my chips were in. "You couldn't prove it to me if you talked through next week, Kyle. And I know you're tough. You're so tough you frighten yourself. But I'll tell you what I had to say to Bemis. It goes back to last May when a letter came into Bemis' office from me, asking about Mayberry."

"Bemis never got the letter."

"I can believe that. You got it first and made sure he didn't see it."

"Get to the point," he said thinly.

"The letter's part of it," I said. "Little things like what happened to it? And why is there a telephone at a broken-down ranch like old man Ellis'? Add them up with a few more items and they get pretty big."

Kyle spread his legs and hooked his thumbs in the cartridge belt. "Keep going."

"Let's take Mayberry," I said. "He was trying to duck twelve thousand dollars of bad bills and doing it by hiding out in Novato, right in your lap. It wouldn't have been too hard to sell him some in-

surance against a bright boy running him down. Say, you guarantee protection in return for him treating a few patients on the side and no questions asked. After all, he was over a barrel."

Kyle's eyes narrowed. "What kind of patients?"

"The kind that would pay. Boys with the kind of disorder they wouldn't take to the nearest hospital for fixing. People with the kind of trouble that Red Dillon had. Bullet holes and the law breathing down their necks, on the lam and no place to go. They'd pay plenty for a place to hole out and a doctor to take care of them."

He laughed flatly, but his eyes didn't move from my face. "So I was running a boarding house for fugitives from justice."

"It's been done before in bigger towns than this dump. Novato is a perfect setup for it, with the border only a couple of miles away. You've got your thumbscrews on half the people around here. They're afraid to even blink at you, but I wonder how long old man Ellis will hold out when the right people get to him."

His hand cut through the air with an impatient jerk. "How much more of this do you expect me to listen to?"

"You'll listen, Kyle," I said. "Last night you were ready to lay me out if I sneezed—but you're holding off now because you want to hear the rest of it. If I went to Bemis with this story, he'd throw me out of the office. You're his fair-haired boy. He hasn't waked up to it yet, but you've elected yourself sheriff. There are strangers in town, though, and they'll listen."

"What strangers?"

"The F.B.I." I said. "You tried to make it tough for them by running me out of jail this morning before Hendricks could talk to me. Maybe you thought I'd beat town. I didn't and I've got one thing to tell them that isn't guesswork."

"What?" The word was like a fist driven against a tabletop.

"That scene at the Ellis place when I was knocked out," I said. "There was a shot and then Joe Karns ran out on the porch and hit me with the butt of his gun. There was one thing wrong with that. Karns had his gun stuck in the waistband

of his pants. He had to pull it to use it on me. That was all wrong. He wouldn't have stuck it there if he'd just shot Akins."

KYLE'S hand snaked to his holster and came up with the revolver in it. I stopped breathing.

"Like this?" he asked. The gun moved under his belt and I nodded. There wasn't enough breath in my lungs to speak.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "Nobody would have done it. That means there was someone else in the Ellis place who shot Akins."

The room seemed smaller and hotter and the fan on the ceiling measured the seconds. "You were out on the back porch, Kyle," I said. "You waited until Akins stepped through the door. Then you put a bullet into his back and another through Dillon's head so he wouldn't be left behind in talking condition."

Kyle nodded absently. "Someone was, all right," he said softly. "Put on your coat. Bemis ought to hear about this."

"Great," I said. "Get him up here. He's in a bar across the street."

"No," Kyle said, even more quietly this time. "We'll go find him."

I shook my head and the sweat on my face splattered off onto my chest. "You mean he'll find me—beside the road somewhere with a hole in my head like Dillon. I'm not moving out of this room, Kyle."

The gun slipped free of his belt and he held it beside his leg. "It's either here or somewhere else, Carter. I don't care."

I tried to swallow, but somehow my tongue was filling my whole mouth and had overflowed into my throat. "You can't pull that trigger and just walk out of here. Your luck won't stretch that far," I said loudly and tried my damndest to sound convincing.

The muzzle of the gun rose and yawned at me. Kyle looked like a man weighing a heavy problem, but one that wasn't too important. "I'll think of something. I'll figure a way out."

The voice from the window startled both of us.

"Drop it, Kyle!"

Both of us jerked in the direction of the sound. Hendricks was on the balcony outside the window, drawing a bead on Kyle

with a heavy, snub-barreled revolver.

"Drop it," the agent repeated.

For a moment it looked as if Kyle was going to. The gun lowered slowly, dangling from his fingers, and his face was the shade of dirty dough.

Hendricks stepped off the balcony and came into the room. "I heard the whole thing. If you'd talked any louder, Carter, they would have caught it down at the courthouse."

Kyle licked his lips and looked from me to the agent. The pistol still hadn't left his hand. "Nice, boys," he said. Then he ducked and dodged in back of me. His forearm locked under my chin and the muzzle of the revolver ground into me.

"I'm going out of here," he said. "If anybody tries to stop me, Carter gets it through the back. Leave me alone and I'll let him go when I get across the border."

Hendricks hesitated. No matter how good a shot he was, he couldn't curve one around me into the deputy, and he knew Kyle meant it. Another killing wouldn't make the chair any hotter. I knew it, too, and I knew what shape I would be in when Kyle let me out. That vulture around the Ellis place would have something to work on.

"The gun," Kyle ordered. "Toss it on the bed."

Hendricks still didn't move. Then he sighed, and his revolver curved in an arc to bounce on the bed. We edged crabwise towards it and Kyle's arm left my neck to pick it up.

"Turn around, college boy," Kyle said to the agent. Hendricks turned, and Kyle reached him in a single step. The pistol in the deputy's hand swung up and down against the man's skull with a sound like an axe cutting into wet wood. Hendricks sagged to the floor without a sound and lay motionless.

The deputy shoved me towards the door. My feet started carrying me along the hall, down the stairs and across the lobby. There was no one there except the desk clerk, and he was busy racking mail. It didn't matter. He wouldn't have been any help; the Texas Rangers probably wouldn't have been.

The sun outside hit my face like a magnesium flare and I stumbled over the bottom step, half-blinded by the light. Kyle's

grip on my arm tightened and the gun dug into my back.

"Keep walking," he said in a harsh, low voice, as tight as dried rawhide. "Over to the car."

We started across the hot pavement when the batwing doors of the bar down the street swung open. Bemis' white-suited bulk filled the opening. Kyle swore and pushed against me.

"Faster. Move, damn you!"

Bemis shifted his gun awkwardly as if the weight bothered him. Then he raised his head and saw us. He didn't have as far to go and he reached the car first, waddling up to the driver's side with the curiosity of a hog rooting in a feed trough, chins stuck out, peering anxiously.

"Something happening?" he asked in his peevish whine.

The muzzle in my back almost broke skin as Kyle dug it deeper. His head jerked back over his shoulder as he looked up at the windows of my room, as if he expected the FBI man to show in them.

"Everything's all right, Sheriff. Just taking Carter for a little trip."

He tried to reach the door handle, but Bemis was blocking it. The sheriff squinted at the gun against my back and I could almost hear his brain cells ponderously digesting the fact and wondering why it was there. Ever since I had come to Novato, Bemis had somehow blundered in at the time he shouldn't have, and here at the last he was doing it again.

I STARTED laughing. There wasn't anything to laugh about, but I couldn't stop and the sound went rolling down the street as crazily as the tumbleweeds.

"Nothing's happening, Sheriff," I cackled. "Nothing important. Take your time, Sheriff. No hurry. Drop around next week and get someone to explain to you that your pet deputy is the man you're looking for. They'll tell you how he killed Akins and Dillon and how I was the third on his list. They'll give you a fill-in on how he was harboring crooks under your nose—"

"He's off his nut," Kyle cut in savagely, and reached for the door handle again. He made it this time, but Bemis was still blocking the door and a faint doubt was beginning to flicker in the back of his eyes.

The sheriff leaned back against the panel. Three hundred pounds of flesh pulled the handle out of Kyle's hand and closed the door. "Just a minute, Kyle. I reckon I got a right to know what's goin' on here."

"Go ask Hendricks," I yelled. "He'll tell you if he's talking yet."

Kyle's lips stretched back over his teeth until they were ready to split. His self-control did. "Get out of my way before I put a slug into that blubber."

He swung his gun at Bemis and I grabbed the opportunity. My left hand caught the revolver around the breech, locking the chamber, and I led with my right, contrary to all the best opinions on the subject. Kyle rocked back on his heels and the gun twisted out of both our grasps, skidding on the pavement a few feet away.

He reached it first, scrambling around on his hands and knees until he faced Bemis and the pistol came up in his fingers. The dive I had started got nowhere, and I hung halfway into it.

Bemis hauled the Colt off his hip, moving wearily as if the gun was too heavy to handle, his legs spread and his belly hanging out over them like the ten ring on a target. When Kyle shot, he was still trying, a short fat man, who looked as if he hadn't slept well the night before and was worried about his heart.

The little eyes blinked and fat on his face shook when the bullet hit him. Then the .45 Colt roared and bucked, and Kyle went back on the pavement as if a battering ram had hit him. When he stopped, he was flat on his back, arm outstretched, and not even a twitch was left in him.

By the time the last echo had lost itself, Bemis was down against the side of the car, his belly cradled on his legs. A smear of red showed through the side of his linen suit just above the line of his belt, but his eyes were open.

"Guess I owe you an apology, young feller," he said. His whine had faded to a faint bleat and his head rocked forward. "Owe a lot of people around here one for lettin' things get so far out of hand. Just a trustin', fat old fool."

He coughed once and tried to push himself up. "Got one thing to recommend me, though. Can't kill a man as fat as me with

one shot." Then he fell back on the floor.

* * *

He was right, but it took a surgeon two hours to locate the bullet. A citizen's committee put up a plaque commemorating his courage and there was a celebration afterwards, but it was spoiled by Bemis. While he was in the hospital, his wife had worked on him until he signed the pledge.

Mayberry and Joe Karns came out of the desert two days after Kyle was killed. With him gone, there was no one to keep up the supply of water and food. The deserted mine below the border, where Karns was holding Mayberry, had neither. Old man Ellis disappeared like a snowfall in the Mojave, and Karns went back to Kansas with enough iron on him to anchor the Queen Mary.

Before he left, he cleared the doctor Kyle had tried Mayberry out for the first time on Dillon, being sure he'd be afraid to back out, but the doctor had turned him down cold when he found out who the patient actually was.

Karns and Dillon weren't the boys to argue professional ethics with, though, and Mayberry had treated the bank artist with a gun at his head. After Akins was killed, Karns took Mayberry along, figuring he made a better live hostage than a dead doctor.

I went out to see him before I left and we had a long talk. He told me he was coming back to Beverly Hills to try a clean start and I heard myself saying that if he'd let me have half on account, I'd string along with him for the rest.

That had an unfamiliar sound to it, but Carol Mayberry was with us while we talked, and she was wearing the sun-worshiper's outfit again. She came out to the car with me and we spent a little time together, long enough to find out her green eyes could look almost hazel at times.

I made a date with her for an evening at Malibu two weeks later. The place I had in mind was probably going to run into money but I had the doctor's certified check for six thousand when I left town. It seemed only fair to plow back some of the profit and I couldn't think of a happier way to do it.

ONE SUNDAY MOURNING



By **ROBERT
TURNER**

Now that the waterfront dowager was knifed, pianist Slim aimed to turn the heat—on her spoiled blonde heiress.

AFTER he had the trap all set and ready to close, Slim Leonard, the piano player at Momma Riley's waterfront *Rendezvous*, came down from the living quarters up over the saloon. He stood in the doorway a moment, tall, stoop-shouldered and angular in his blue corduroy shirt and faded gray slacks. His bony face, with the harsh mouth-line and tragic, deeply sunken eyes, was more ashen than usual. His long, sensitive fingers worked angrily at his sides.

Slim had never seen the *Rendezvous*

empty like this, in the harsh light of morning. Chairs were stacked on tables. The long bar was empty. This was a strange place, a place he'd never seen before, nothing like the bright, lively joint he'd worked in for the past five years. It was as though the saloon had a personality and knew what had happened. As though it knew that wonderful old Momma Riley would hold court here no more. As though it knew the old woman was sprawled up there on her bed with a knife in her chest.

For a moment Slim saw the *Rendezvous* as it had been last night. In the dusty sunbeams pouring through the window it seemed for an instant as though the bar was crowded with ghostly figures lined up, laughing and talking loud. There was Eric Hummert, the barkeep, white-haired, handsome, as he hustled back and forth serving customers.

Momma Riley, herself, on her usual high stool down at the end of the bar, was joshing a huge, bearded seaman. A fat, blowzy woman in gaudy peasant blouse, with string upon string of cheap bright beads about her powdered, wrinkled throat, she looked coarse and ugly on the surface.

A woman in her sixties shouldn't bleach her hair and use layers of powder, rouge and lipstick, you'd say. She shouldn't chain-smoke cigarettes, loudly swap lurid man-jokes with roughneck customers. But what could be expected of a woman who ran a waterfront dive like the *Rendezvous*, you'd say.

After awhile, though, you saw something in Momma Riley's still-bright brown eyes—a deep-hearted kindness there, a love for life and people. You saw that here was a woman whose tolerance was real, not affected. A waterfront bum, no matter his color or country, never went hungry when the *Rendezvous* was open. If he needed a drink badly enough, he got that, too. He could come back and pay for it sometime when he had the money. They always came back.

There would be much mourning along the waterfront when they all found out that Momma Riley was gone. There would be hell to pay, too, if they ever got hold of the one who killed her. But they wouldn't, Slim knew.

In this ghost-picture that Slim saw in the sunny, dancing, dust-mote-filled half light that flooded the saloon, old Momma Riley, half turned toward him and waved. Echoing in a queer way, he seemed to hear her husky, bold voice call out to him: "*Play something, Slim, kid. Play something for Momma!*"

His mouth opened and he started to answer her, but then the picture was gone. There was nothing but the empty saloon. It wasn't Saturday night but Sunday morning, the morning after, and he was a little hung over and up too early and his eyeballs ached. And Momma Riley was up there in her room, dead.

Slim walked unsteadily behind the bar, poured himself a shot of cheap whiskey. He turned toward the end of the bar where Momma Riley always sat. He raised the glass toward that place, brought it shakingly toward his mouth. He winced as the raw liquor burned his gullet.

Music started to flow into Slim, then. He got it in his head first and then through the tips of his fingers, so that they tingled and itched. He pushed through a cluster of tables to the big piano at the back. There were still three empty shot glasses on top of it. He let his fingers trill over the keys.

He hammered out an introduction and then went into a lowdown blues that he'd heard once in a New Orleans levee dive. He'd never played it before. But now it came to him out of nowhere and he gave it sound, sitting there, rocking, thinking about murdered Momma Riley and what he was going to do about it.

He finished the number and was aware of an insistent, ill-tempered banging on the glass of the front door of the saloon. A young woman was standing there. Sun was bright on her short, fashionably bobbed yellow hair. It glinted on a diamond-banded wrist watch.

Slim lazily moved toward the door, unhooked the night latch and swung the door open. The girl pushed past him. The clean, delicately sweet scent of her swirled around Slim in strong contrast to the stale, smoky, beery smell of the saloon.

ON THE surface, the girl was class. Tall, with a waist Slim could close his big hands around; yet she was curved

where it counted. She carried herself erect, sure, graceful. An expensive black jersey dress didn't flaunt her lithe figure but made you aware of it and that was enough.

Her hair was bobbed and shingled without looking extreme, as though she was straining to be stylish. It suited her. She had a high-arching, aristocratic nose. Her mouth was full and sullen, the red moist lips looking as though they were waiting to be kissed—or just had been.

Slim let his deep and moody eyes go over her. Class showed all over her. But it was bought polish, purchased from the best girls' finishing schools, from the finest Fifth Avenue shops, from big-time hair-dressers and beauticians, from private tutors and dancing masters and elocution experts. Class bought and paid for by Momma Riley's money. . . . from the till of a waterfront dive.

Her voice, dulcet, cultured, but with an alive, husky throb, said: "What's the matter, Slim? Why isn't the place open, yet? Where's Eric, the bartender? Momma will have his scalp for being this late." She looked up at him, half mockingly, from almost too-widely spaced eyes.

There was the give-away—the eyes. They told you that all the polish and glitter and finish were fake. It was merely lacquered thickly over the rottenness underneath. You spotted that if you were wise, and Slim was wise. He knew that if you dug deeply enough under the smooth, rich finish of this girl, what you would find. He didn't say anything to her.

She walked past him, her aristocratic nose wrinkling against the stale smell of the place. The door closed behind her. Slim followed her and she stopped suddenly, swirling around. He almost ran into her. He brought himself up short, almost touching her. She laughed.

"Slim," she said, "don't be such a bear. What's the matter with me? Am I poison or something to you? Why do you hate me?"

He said: "Did you fall out of bed this morning? What are you doing up while the sun's out?"

She giggled. "I—I couldn't sleep. I—why, I was thinking about you, Slim and I couldn't sleep." She reached up and curled her soft, warm arms around his

neck, pulling his face down toward hers. She went up onto tiptoe. He looked into her eyes and couldn't see anything.

They were beautiful, though, like the bright, shiny and pretty aggies he'd played with as a kid. Shining and perfectly formed. But underneath they were cold; there was no warmth to their beauty. Her mouth wasn't cold, though, as he looked down on its fullness; its breath was warm on his lips.

He let his senses react for a moment and then wished he hadn't. He should have held on tightly like he'd always done with her. Now he couldn't get his breath. A foolish trembling took him. She felt that, and her arms curled tighter around his neck. The lids and the thick, tangled lashes of her eyes half closed, sleepily.

"I don't know what to make of you, Slim," she said. "Why do you drive me so crazy, Slim?"

He said through his teeth, still not breathing: "Get away from me!"

"Slim," she whispered. "Slim!"

He removed her arms from around his neck. He stepped back away from her and without looking at her again, headed toward the piano in the back. He heard her swearing under her breath. Then she said, haughtily:

"Slim, I want a drink. I need a dam' drink. Make me a whiskey sour!"

He was sitting at the piano. He said: "You know where the bar is. It's your mother's liquor. Make it yourself."

He started to play a strangely primitive thing with a peculiar off-key Oriental touch, that he'd learned from a girl in Singapore before the war. Music poured through his agile fingers and some of the sordid excitement engendered by Rita Riley's closeness escaped with it. His thoughts grew objective again. He wondered how these things happened; how did a woman like Momma Riley get stuck with a girl like Rita?

She had adopted Rita twenty years ago when her husband died. The girl had been given the best of everything. Old Momma Riley was determined that her adopted daughter was going to be a lady, to have all the things that she had missed.

Rita, for years, was unaware of the life her mother led. She knew nothing about the saloon. Her mother owned "a shop,"

she told her teachers and schoolmates, believing it herself. On her brief visits to New York, Momma Riley rented a suite in one of the best hotels.

But at sixteen, Rita slipped away from Miss Monohan's Finishing School in Connecticut and came down to the city. She found her mother in the waterfront saloon, and raised a terrible stink. She called Momma a dirty saloon-keeper. She swore she was disgraced for life: she would leave school immediately.

Somehow, Momma Riley quieted her, explained. Rita went back to school, and as far as her own friends and school, authorities and others were concerned, the masquerade continued. Nobody in Rita's world knew who her mother really was.

But a strange change took place as the girl grew older. She began to frequent the *Rendezvous* against Momma's wishes. She began to think it was "quaint," having a mother who was a waterfront saloon-keeper. She found that with the worldly, idle young men of her set, it didn't really matter. They thought Momma and her place were colorful, exciting.

And somewhere in that time, Rita realized just how much she really meant to her mother. She learned that by wheedling, whining or having tantrums, she could get anything she wanted from Momma Riley, up to and including large sums of money.

But the night before last, some inkling of Rita Riley's real character had seeped through Momma's adoration. Her temper had exploded, and it looked as though she'd finally tamed her daughter. But Rita Riley had needed ten thousand dollars. She was going to get it one way or another, despite the fact that Momma Riley had finally balked, told Rita she wasn't going to get it, that she'd have to get out of her trouble herself.

All that poured through Slim's mind as he played, plus the fact that Rita Riley had never given him a moment's peace. He'd disliked the girl right from the beginning, instinctively. Yet her appeal was like a drug. He could hardly fight it. This inner tug-of-war of Slim's fascinated Rita. No other man had ever resisted quite so long. She was used to getting what she wanted.

Slim was suddenly aware of her hand

on his shoulder. He let his big fingers fall heavily onto the keys in a crashing discord.

"Why did you do that?" Rita said from behind him. "I liked what you were playing. I've never heard you play anything but those oh-so-rollicking honkatonk songs that you do so cleverly for the dim-witted customers here every night. It never occurred to me that you played anything but barrelhouse piano. You're really good, though, aren't you?"

"No," he said. He didn't turn around.

"Listen," she said. "Where's Momma? Did she come down yet? She's late this morning. Somebody's got to open the place up."

HE SWUNG around on the piano stool, looked up at her, his gaunt, attractively ugly features enigmatic. Plainly, gently, he said: "She's dead."

Rita Riley stared at him. Nothing showed in her face, no expression at all. She didn't even blink. But she gave a little half-giggle. "Dead to the world, you mean," she said.

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"No," he told her. "I didn't mean that."

"You're kidding, then." Her fingertips touched the nape of his neck, toyed with dark curling hair that had grown too long there. "You're always kidding. You've been kidding me since the first day I talked to you, Slim. Playing hard-to-get, pretending you're a hard guy. You're not hard, Slim. You're a soft guy. You're just afraid to let yourself like me because you know you'd never get over it. You're not kidding me, Slim!"

He stood up, his face white. He said: "Okay. You asked for this—remember that. Okay, I'm not kidding you. I don't hate you and I've been wanting to do this for a long, long time." His long, lean fingers closed over the round, resilient flesh of her upper arms. He hunched up her shoulders and looked down into her breathtakingly beautiful face. He watched her throw her head back expertly, knowing just how to best display the graceful white curve of her throat. She closed her eyes, waiting for his kiss.

He took one hand from her arm, stepped back a little and then slapped her as hard as he could, a loose-wrist, stinging blow that rocked her head. Her yellow-gold hair danced. She would have fallen from the blow if he hadn't been holding her arm with his other hand. Her eyes flew open, blank with shock. Her face drained of color. His fingermarks stood out, red against her pallor.

Before she could recover, he said: "Why did you kill her, Rita?"

She said: "I don't know what you're talk—"

He didn't let her finish. He slapped her again. His hands took hold of her shoulders and shook her until her teeth rattled. Tears wormed along her cheeks and her mouth was like a twisted wound. She sobbed and swore. He kept after her. He didn't even vary the words. He hammered them at her over and over:

"Why did you kill her?"

But it didn't work. He dragged her, then, toward the stairway in the back. Holding her arm twisted behind her, he forced her up the stairs ahead of him.

She screamed: "No, Slim, no! Don't take me up there! Slim, please!"

He got her to the long hall at the top, but she fought like a tigress, and he had to drag her along the hall an inch at a time. She grabbed at doorways, dug her feet into the worn carpet runner. But he finally got her to Momma Riley's room at the end of the hall. He shoved her inside. She stood there, just inside the doorway, rigid and staring.

Slim looked past her at Momma Riley, lying on an old-fashioned iron-rung bed in a twist of sheets and blankets. The old woman's mouth was gaped open and her eyes stared at the ceiling. Morning sunlight poured through the windows, mercilessly exposing the cracked plaster walls, the fly-specked ceiling, the dirty, splintered floor. A broken-down dresser leaned at a grotesque angle. A dingy bulb hung by a wire from the center of the ceiling. It was a squalid, miserable little room. The only decorations were pictures of Rita at various stages of growth, on the cracked wall and on the dresser.

Momma Riley, with all of her money, had lived like this. This had been her home—so that her adopted daughter could have every luxury in the world. Slim looked at the old woman lying there, dead. *This was how she was paid for it*, he thought. *This was what she got for her life of sacrifice.*

"Look at her, Rita," he said. "Last night it was dark. You couldn't see her, could you? You didn't want to put the light on because you didn't want to see her when you plunged the knife into her chest. But it's light now. Look at her!"

The girl in front of him worked her hands in and out of fists at her sides. Slowly, she turned toward him. Now he saw that he'd worn through the outer veneer. All the rottenness showed through at last. Her eyes were too wide, the pupils dilated. Her lips strained across her teeth like a jungle cat's at bay. She said, hoarsely:

"What are you trying to work, Slim? There's only one person would kill Momma. *You* killed her, Slim—not me. What makes you think you can put it onto me? You haven't got a chance. You're a waterfront bum, a tramp ginmill piano-thumper."

He smiled. He said: "There's some—"

thing you haven't noticed. Over on the floor, beside the bed, in front of that little bedside table."

She wheeled and saw it and sucked in breath with a wheezing sound. On the floor in front of a small night table, lay a broken compact. All the powder had spilled out of it onto the floor. In the middle of the pinkish mess, clearly delineated, was a footprint. The high heel and the small sole marks were perfectly formed.

"Never commit murder in the dark," Slim said. "You can't see what you're doing. Like knocking a compact from a table, spilling the powder all around your shoe so that it forms a footprint. I imagine most of the powder was worn off—or you brushed it off—when you got back to the hotel, Rita.

"But there'll be minute particles that you missed in the cracks and crevices of the leather. Police lab men will find them. That and the perfect footprint impression will make it tough for you to squeeze out of this thing. A jury, with evidence like this, will even forget to notice how young and beautiful you are. They won't be influenced by those long, lovely legs of yours."

She lurched toward the night table. Slim reached out and grabbed her arms, yanked her back. "No!" he said. "You're not destroying any evidence, honey. Without that, the police *would* jump on me, like you figured."

She struggled in his strong grip for a moment, then relaxed. She seemed to wilt all over. She turned toward him, shoulders slumped, hands twined in front of her, wretched. A complete turnabout.

"Slim," she said, tears jeweled in her eyes. "Maybe you can understand. I—I *had* to do it, Slim. I had to have ten thousand. I *asked* her for it. I *pleaded*. She wouldn't give it to me."

"What made you think Momma Riley had that kind of money after all she's spent on you?"

"Don't fool yourself," she told him, bitterly. "She had it. And more. Her husband was an insurance man. He was loaded with policies when he died. She put the money into shrewd investments. She's made a fortune out of that place downstairs, too. You know that. You

know the business she's done. She hadn't much cash, no, but she could get it. She had over fifty thousand tied up in gilt-edged securities that can be converted in a day."

"What did you need the money for?" Slim knew. Momma Riley had told him the whole thing, but he wanted to hear the girl tell it.

SHE hung her head. "I've been crazy, Slim. I got myself into trouble. It's a gambling debt. I lost the money in a joint over in Jersey. I—I don't know how it happened. I was winning. Then—then suddenly I was losing and getting in deeper and deeper. There didn't seem to be anything to do but to keep plunging, trying to square off. When I got into hock for ten thousand, they made me stop. They wouldn't give me any more credit."

"And then they put on the pressure," he said.

She shuddered. "They gave me a week to get the money. I—I didn't know where to go, where to turn. One thing Momma couldn't stand was gambling. I knew that. She hated it, always has. I was afraid to go to her at first. But night before last, two men came to my hotel room. I'd never seen them before. They were tough. They had guns, Slim.

"They told me they were bill collectors and that there was a little matter of ten grand that I owed a client of theirs. They said they'd give me three more days and if I didn't have the money, somebody'd find me floating in the river. They said I wouldn't have any eyes or look pretty any more, Slim." Her mouth began to twitch. "The crabs eat out your eyes, they said."

"So you killed the woman who raised you from a baby, who gave you everything she had in the world to make a lady out of you, to make a fine person out of you?" Slim's lips curled.

"I—I didn't know what I was doing, Slim," she said. "I swear. I went to a tea party up in Harlem, early last night. The marijuana and the liquor made me a little crazy. I began to think about all that money—all that money, Slim! I'd told Momma about the spot I was in. For the first time in her life, she cussed me

out. She told me she had no use for a gambler. She said it would be a good lesson for me to sweat it out. And the gunmen were only bluffing, she told me, that things like that didn't happen any more. But they *weren't* bluffing, Slim. I know! They *would* kill me if I didn't—"

"Stop it," he said. "Stop bleeding on me." His voice was cold. "For your information, Momma was going to give you the money to pay that debt. She just wanted to make you sweat a little, to teach you a lesson. You should've known that."

Her eyes went very wide. "You're lying! How would you know that? Momma wouldn't discuss our affairs with you!"

He shrugged. "Okay. You know everything."

She fought for control of herself, now. The twitching at her red mouth, stopped. She forced composure into her face. Softly, she said: "That doesn't make any difference now, Slim. It's done. What's done is done. Why don't you give me a break, Slim? What good will it do to pin this killing on me? I'll see to it that you don't get blamed. We—we can help each other, Slim."

"Let me tell you a story," he said. "Maybe it's my turn to bleed a little on you. There was a guy at the end of his rope, a musician, playing with a name band. He was doing fine. He had a wife and two cute kids. Life was sweet. Then one night while this musician was at work, the wife went out with another guy. She'd gotten lonesome sitting home nights by herself all the time. She decided on a little two-timing, a little stepping out. That night there was a fire in the apartment where they lived—and the two kids were alone. They died in that fire."

"Later, when the wife heard about it, she slashed her own wrists. Then the husband was alone. He wanted to kill himself, too, but he didn't have the guts. So he became a bum. Between drunks, he shipped out all over the world. But then he got so sodden he couldn't even get a job on a ship. He became a waterfront lush."

Slim's sunken eyes burned hard and bright. Rita Riley said. "You, Slim?"

He ignored her, went on: "One night this guy came into a waterfront tavern blind drunk. He kept talking about throw-

ing himself into the river—and this time he had the nerve. He was going to do it. It wasn't just talk. The woman who owned the place saw something in that guy, through the soggy drunkenness. When she closed up, she followed him. She stopped him from hurling himself into the river. She talked to him, sobered him up, sold him on the idea that suicide was no way out.

"She gave him a place to sleep, nursed him through the D. T.'s. She gave him a job playing piano in her place. . . . All for no reason, mind you, just from the goodness in her old heart. Imagine what he thought of the woman who did that for him, Rita! You know who she was. You know who the man was. The least I can do now for Momma Riley, is see that her killer is punished. You understand?"

"That's negative reasoning, Slim. You won't do her any good and you'll do me harm. Listen, you've never had much money. Do you know how much fifty thousand dollars is?"

He thought about it. His mind flashed over all the things that kind of money would bring. If he was careful how he used it, a man might never want again. He said: "It's a hell of a lot of money. But save your breath, Rita. You can't buy me. You're going to take the rap for this thing you've done."

"There's a bonus, too," she said with quiet excitement. She was now fully recovered from her former hysteria. She had her confidence back. She was playing her own game again, the old familiar game that she knew so well. "Slim," she murmured. "I go with the fifty thousand. I'll even marry you. That'll solve your conscience, too. The law says a man doesn't have to testify against his wife."

She stepped toward him. His eyes traveled over her. He thought about what it would be like to be married to a woman like this. Then he remembered Momma Riley's wild laughter and the way she talked, when he used to ask her why she'd bothered with him that dead-end night. She'd say:

"You're a good guy, Slim. I mean down deep where it counts. Basically good. That's a hell of a rare thing and I didn't want to see it destroyed." At times, Momma Riley would talk like that.

He wiped the damp flat of his hands up the sides of his rumpled slacks. He said, holding his breath: "You aren't making any headway, Rita. It's too late. I couldn't get you out of this now, if I wanted to."

HE LOOKED toward a closet door, slowly opening. A man stepped out. He was heavy set, a little older than Slim, but with prematurely white, wavy hair. He had a florid complexion and except for a weak mouth and a slight bloat around the jowls, he was strikingly handsome.

Rita Riley heard the door opening and whirled, with a bleat of surprise. Slim said:

"You know Eric Hummert, the bartender. Eric was fond of Momma, too, Rita. To make sure that you didn't get away with your murder, I asked Eric to be a witness. I knew when nobody called you, nobody got in touch with you about Momma's death, you'd come down to the *Rendezvous*. And once I got you up here, I figured you'd shoot your mouth off. . . . You heard everything all right, Eric?"

"Yeah," Eric said. "I heard." His dark eyes, strangely alight now, switched back and forth between Slim and Rita Riley. Slim saw Eric's eyes go over Rita's sleekly sheathed figure. He watched Eric's gaze finally meet hers. A rush

of color flooded Eric Hummert's face.

Slim felt uneasiness. He said, sharply: "What are we waiting for, then? Let's call the cops."

Eric Hummert turned away from them and strode toward the dresser, opened the top two drawers, then swiftly slammed them shut again. He opened the third drawer and his hand dipped into it, came out clutching a Colt .38. He said:

"Momma Riley told me about this gun some time ago when I kidded her about being afraid up here all alone, nights, after she closed up." He came toward them, with the gun pointed at Slim's stomach. But he wasn't looking at Slim. He was looking at Rita. He said:

"You made this guy a proposition, honey. The sucker turned it down. Is the offer still open?"

"You're crazy, Eric," Slim said. "After everything Momma's done for you!"

"She's dead," Eric said. "She can't do anything else for me. This kid can. She can do a lot. Fifty grand's worth." His cagey eyes appraised Rita. "And then some!"

"You're makin' a bad bet, Eric," Slim said. "Rita will double-deal you right out of the game after you've served her purpose. And there are some angles you don't know about in this—"

"Ignore him, Eric!" Rita Riley cut in. Her eyes glowed with almost drugged



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brightness. Excitement and triumph worked her features. "The deal goes with you, Eric. I—I like it even better with you." She half turned toward Slim, spat the words scornfully: "I couldn't have stood this broken-down wharf rat of a piano player, anyhow!"

Eric Hummert's eyes became fever bright and a little scared. Perspiration cobbled his forehead. He said, thickly: "This is tough, Slim, but this is a chance I've been waitin' for all my life. A big hunk of dough in one grand slam. A dame like Rita, with plenty of class. No more floozies for me, Slim. No more standing behind a stinking bar all night, takin' guff from a bunch of rumbuns. I got to do it, Slim. A chance like this comes once in a lifetime."

"Sure," Slim said. "Money. Big money. Everybody sells their souls for big money. Rita—and you, Eric. Listen, I'm giving you one chance. Put that gun down! Put it away and let's get this murderess to the police."

For a moment, Eric seemed to hesitate and then Rita Riley tipped the scale. She said: "Go ahead, Eric! Don't be a damned fool like Slim. We can frame him easy for this. Think of all that money, Eric. Don't listen to a big, dumb, altruistic rummy who never had a nickle in his life!"

Perspiration ran from the corners of Eric's brows. His hand holding the gun trembled. Huskily, his voice catching, he said: "Yeah! . . . Yeah!"

He squeezed the trigger. The gun clicked—but that was all. No spurt of flame. No ear-splitting clap of sound in the little room. No acrid smell of cordite. Nothing. Eric kept pulling the trigger, frightened, crying noises coming from deep in his throat, through his wide and twisted mouth.

Slim walked toward him, reached out and snatched the gun from his hand. From the corner of his eye, Slim saw Rita Riley move. He heard her swearing. He half turned. The steel-enforced spike heel of the shoe she'd whipped off caught him a stunning blow behind the ear. His eyes teared. His ears rang.

But he was able to swing a blind, looping backhand blow. He felt it slam into

Rita's face. He heard her crash into a straight-backed chair, knock it over as she fell. Then Eric's fist hit him, from the front.

It caught him flush on the mouth, and he felt his legs buckle. He felt the gun fall from his suddenly numbed fingers. He shook his head and got some of the cobwebs cleared out. He saw Eric start to swing again and he somehow got his left hand up, taking the punch on the palm, rolling his head out of the way.

He fainted with that same left. When Eric ducked, fearfully, he brought his right around in a short, arching hook from the waist. Eric's jaw met it part way. It was just as though somebody had kicked the barkeep's legs out from under him. He went down heavily on his face . . . and lay still.

Slim stood for a moment, getting his breath. He put his hand to his bleeding mouth, gingerly felt of a loosened tooth. Then he shook his head, bent and scooped up the .38. He took from his pocket the six bullets he had removed, earlier, anticipating that Rita might know about the gun, might go for it. He broke the gun open, placed the shells back into the cylinder.

He walked to the phone, dialed the operator. Sitting there, with the .38 on his lap, looking down at the still-unconscious figures of the man and woman on the floor, he told the operator to get him the police.

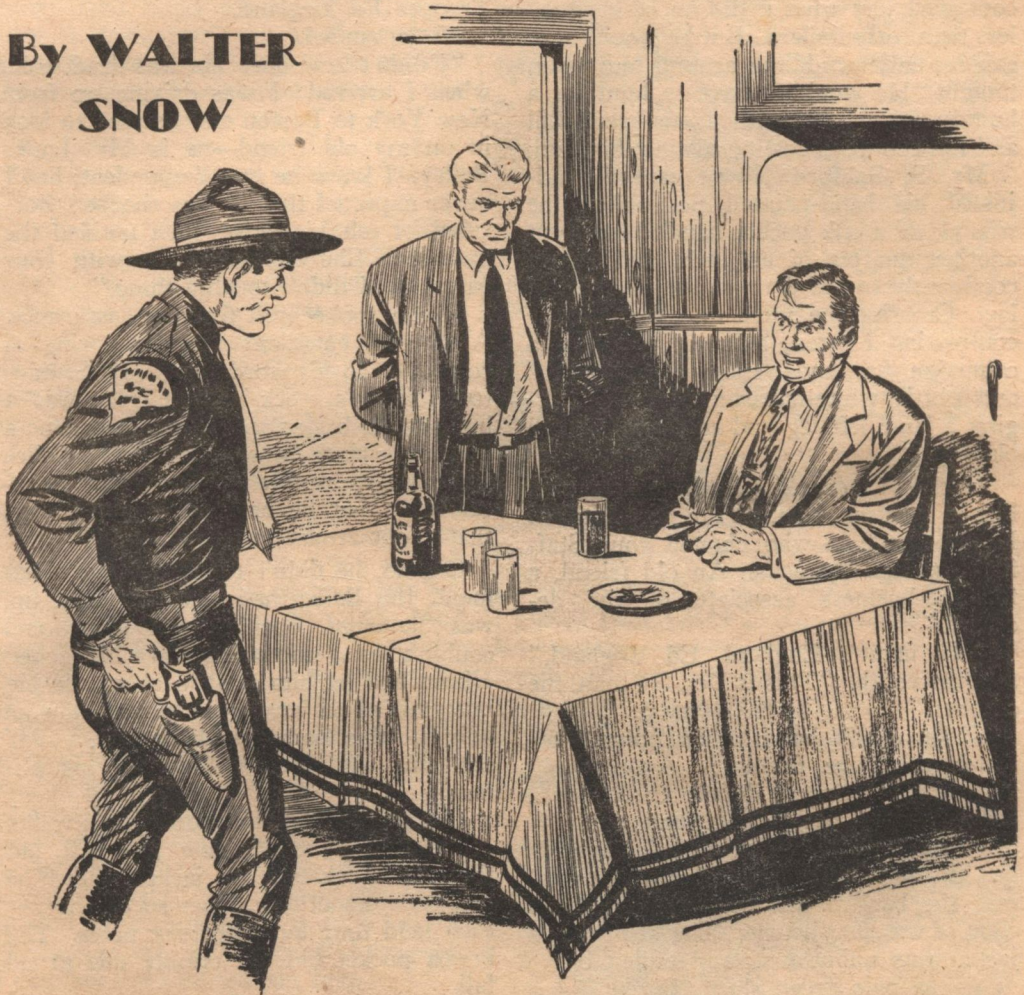
Waiting, he wondered what Rita Riley would say when she learned that Momma had changed her will the day before, when she found out about Rita's gambling. Momma had told him that no money of hers was going to disappear across gambling tables. What would Rita think when she learned that Momma had left everything to him, with the exception of the ten thousand to pay off the gambling debt?

Momma had figured Rita would marry him to get it—and be safe, then. Slim had protested, but it hadn't done any good. He couldn't talk the old woman out of it.

He wondered what Rita Riley—and Eric Hummert—would think when they learned about that, what they would say. He grinned grimly to himself at the strange ways of Justice.

NO STOCK IN GRAVES

By **WALTER
SNOW**



"Search this tub of fat down to his sticky skin."

SAM NIXON stepped back from the bay window just as the Connecticut State Police sedan turned into the driveway of Lakeside Lodge. A flabby man, he moved with surprising agility for one of his bulk. A smug smile twisted his florid face as he slipped a pudgy hand between the second and third buttons of his

*When Nixon lined his pockets
with his partner's gold—
he found it didn't pay . . .
not to be greedy.*

expensively monogramed gray silk shirt.

He fingered the crinkly paper distributed inside his sweaty undershirt. It wouldn't be noticeable under the slate-gray silk. Certainly wasn't now when he buttoned the \$200 tan gabardine, which was tailored large to give his ponderous hulk a prosperous character. His lean wallet contained just what it did an hour ago—less than forty dollars. But he would have cabaret cuties cuddling around him again tonight. He wouldn't have to hunt for a humdrum job, not with a one-grand bill and ten centuries resting against his skin.

Mr. S. Sanford Nixon carefully adjusted his hand-painted tie, pulled the triangle of a silk pocket handkerchief out another quarter of an inch, and strode confidently to the door of the big bungalow. Crossing the porch were two sharply contrasting figures; a lanky youth in a campaign hat and yellow-striped pants, and a little, white-haired gentleman, dragging a lame left leg and carrying a small black bag.

"Hello, Trooper," said the flabby man, like a perfect host. "I'm S. Sanford Nixon, the man who phoned your Stafford Springs barracks. An old friend, a former business associate of the deceased."

"My name's England, Ed England," said the youth. "This is Doc Hinman, the coroner."

Nixon shook hands, then pointed towards the huge fireplace. Another big man, almost Nixon's double except for a redder, more fleshy nose and a dyed-black moustache, was sprawled diagonally. His feet were on the heavy Oriental rug, the back of his head on the sharp edge of the hearthstone. The dead man's jacket was unbuttoned and pulled back; so was a pale green shirt. Bared like a bull's eye was a red stain on the left side of the undershirt.

Dr. Hinman limped up to the corpse, kneeled down to feel the pulse. The stiff right fingers of the dead man clutched a blued steel .38 automatic.

"Right through the heart," said the elderly coroner, still squatting. "He also cracked his head falling on the hearthstone. A very neat, even fussy man. Notice how he pulled his broad cravat to one side so it wouldn't get smeared with

blood. Say, that's a prize diamond in the stickpin!"

That ice, thought Nixon sadly, *was worth at least a grand*. Greatly had he been tempted to take it but a stickpin left holes in a cravat. Besides, it was a trademark of "Diamond Jim" Bailey.

"When did you hear the shot?" asked Trooper Ed England.

Nixon smiled.

"I didn't hear one. He was dead, cold, when I arrived. I was driving up from New York to Boston and decided to look in on my old friend—he is Mr. James Bailey. I knew he was despondent, but I never expected this. I was shocked, horrified. I felt his pulse, then notified the operator. She connected me with your barracks. I didn't touch a thing."

Nixon spoke with firmness, assurance. A smooth, confident manner, a ring of conviction to his words, was Mr. S. Sanford Nixon's stock-in-trade. He was a buff, genial back-slapper, who had gone a long ways since he was kicked off a police force out West. He was too smart to recall now that he had once been a cop; that might arouse suspicions.

Oh, no, he didn't touch a thing. Diamond Jim Bailey had seen him drive up, was flustered opening the door and couldn't resist smoothing down his jacket. Nixon had let him explain about the big bust, talk about how broke he was, how he only had this mortgaged bungalow, a 1947 car and was even behind on his alimony. . . .

It was true that Diamond Jim's wallet contained only \$220, now just \$20, but the inside pockets of his jacket—which he had been smoothing down so carefully—each held four loose century notes. The breast pocket hid the crinkly one grand bill.

"You see, Ed," Dr. Hinman was saying to the lanky State Trooper. "If it were murder, the bullet would have gone right through the coat and shirt. It's characteristic of a suicide to uncover the target-part of the body. He doesn't want anything to interfere with the slug; he's anxious to get it over quickly.

"However, a person familiar with firearms, a hunter or a soldier, knows the force of a bullet, wouldn't bother to open his coat, unbutton his shirt. But the late

Mr. Bailey was a gentleman, an insurance salesman or maybe a banker."

"He was a stock broker," said Mr. S. Sanford Nixon.

"I was close." Dr. Hinman nodded. "You see, this is Ed's first big case. I'm giving him a few pointers. Look, Ed. Bailey didn't pull up his undershirt. It was too long, might have bunched up. He held the muzzle directly against the thin undershirt, making the entrance of the wound larger than the diameter of the bullet. Note how the cotton cloth is singed. So are the hairs surrounding the hole."

A thin, bony finger was probing the reddish-brown zone as the doctor droned on, explaining.

Nixon turned away with a queasy sensation in his stomach. Usually he wasn't squeamish, but he had expected only a quick appraisal, not this lecture on forensic ballistics.

He himself hadn't wanted to touch the sweaty, flabby skin. He had known this man for years, often had gotten drunk with him, carried him home from parties. So he had tried to be quick with this last, messy job. But Ex-Policeman Nixon was no greenhorn. He tricked Diamond Jim into turning around and clouted him with a pistol butt over the back of the head.

With his victim unconscious, Nixon had put on gloves to search for hidden

money, growled on finding only \$2,000. Discovering Diamond Jim's pistol in the desk, the swindled man made a grim decision. He dragged the limp broker to the hearthstone, resting the head exactly where it was bruised. He unbuttoned the coat and shirt to dupe the hick coroner and then squeezed Diamond Jim's own finger around the trigger as the gun fired the fatal shot. Nixon then tossed his gloves and his own pistol into a marsh at the edge of the lake, watched them sink into the mud.

"Yes, a simple case of suicide," proclaimed Dr. Hinman, rising slowly. "Mr. Nixon here looks a little pale, Ed. Better take him into the kitchen. You might locate a spot of something before getting the routine data."

"Oh, I'm all right. Wouldn't refuse a nip, though."

THE frigidaire in the side kitchen held scotch; a nearby cabinet revealed a full fifth and another half of bourbon. The trooper uncapped the second bottle, poured stiff shots into two glasses and paused with the third. The aged coroner was still in the death room.

"I'll take it stra— No, I'll have it with soda," said Nixon, sitting down at a white metal table, with his back to the open door of the lodge room. He dragged out his thin wallet, produced an automobile



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license and a couple of cards for identification.

"Know of any motive for the suicide?" asked the young trooper. "You mentioned he was despondent."

"Our Wall Street brokerage house went bust. Poor Jim had been speculating heavily in grains, a risky business. There was good weather, a bumper crop, and the market collapsed. Both of us were wiped out. I was taken to the cleaners for fifty thousand, but poor Jim must have dropped a hundred thousand. Jim had to close up our office, go out of business."

"What about the Federal Securities Commission?"

"Oh, there wasn't any scandal involved. We were just over-the-counter dealers, not Stock Exchange members. Besides, we lost far more of our own money than we did of customers. It happens, sometimes."

Mr. S. Sanford Nixon chuckled nastily. He mustn't show his smoldering hatred of the dead man, his enmity at being duped. He had been tricked into visiting Oklahoma to inspect some oil lands. There he had gotten a night letter on the big bust; Diamond Jim had turned ten grand over to another broker to cover customers' squawks, save himself from prosecution.

Nixon, flying back to New York, found that Diamond Jim had vanished a few hours earlier. He hadn't left a single dollar for his own partner. But shrewd Sam Nixon knew of this secret Lakeside hide-out, realized that on a Saturday, with the local banks closed, Diamond Jim wouldn't be able to stash away any loot.

Dragging footsteps approached. Old Dr. Hinman limped to the kitchen doorway, didn't cross the threshold. He stood in proudly professional manner, with both hands linked behind his back.

Nixon suddenly felt uneasy. He had hoped the coroner would have been some easy-going rural rumpot, not this little, lame doctor with an air of quiet efficiency.

"Were you in New York at the time of the bust?" asked the physician.

"No. Had gone to Oklahoma to inspect oil lands and the local cuties. I'm an old-time oil stock salesman. Wanted Jim to speculate in oils but, er, I'll admit I was strong for grains. Quick fortunes have

been made in them. Yes, I was strong on grains, too."

Mr. S. Sanford Nixon bit his lower lip. He'd almost slipped, there.

"Mr. Nixon," said Dr. Hinman. "Since you're in Wall Street, I'd like to ask your advice. I've always been strong on steels. What about Prater Steel?"

"Prater Steel is a wonderful buy. Closed yesterday at 25, up $\frac{1}{8}$."

"Then two thousand shares would be worth \$50,000?"

Why did this skinny doc, Sam Nixon thought, with no juices of life left in him, have to possess such a bonanza? Surely, the Doc couldn't mean. . . .

He, shrewd Sam Nixon, had shaken out all the books, searched every drawer, gone through each pocket, fingered the lining. There was only the \$2,000 in cash. He couldn't have overlooked such a prize stock certificate. He wouldn't have killed Diamond Jim; would have forced him to split. A half share would have meant years of wassail and women.

"Er, yeah, yes. A superb investment. I congratulate you."

"Don't congratulate me. The shrewd investor was the late Mr. Bailey."

"But he was broke."

"He told *you* he was broke," said the coroner sternly. "Tricked you into visiting Oklahoma so he could juggle investments, swindle you out of your share. No man with \$50,000 in a blue chip would commit suicide. Say, Ed, search this tub of fat down to his sticky skin."

Nixon glanced down at his own jacket—it was perfectly smooth. How could the doc suspect crinkly bills, \$2,000, inside his undershirt? If only he had hidden the money in his car, he could protest that his pal must have been killed by a robber.

"When I touched the wound," said the coroner, "I felt something crinkly around the edge. Had Ed take you to the kitchen. You should have pulled up the sweaty undershirt, pressed the muzzle right against the flabby skin. Then you would have found this."

It was an engraved stock certificate. The stiff paper had absorbed only a little circle of blood, like a pouting girl's lips. The charred bullet hole was like an executioner's mouth.



When Detective Jim Bennett ran into Don Canfield, the pilot said he'd found his wife Louette with another man, socked him—and Louette had started packing.



After Don took his daughter back to his first wife's home, Jim went to Don's apartment—found all the lights blazing . . . and Louette stabbed to death.



Don's daughter couldn't alibi him out of a murder charge. The police knew that—and picked him up . . . although his first wife claimed Don wasn't guilty.



A blonde burst in—and Jim grabbed her gun . . . Read the fast-action novel—"I'll Be Killing You"—by Robert Martin . . . in the February issue, published Jan. 4th.

SWING AND

Novelette of a Dynamite-Charged Blonde



His gun was on the way out
of the shoulder holster.

*Honeybun tried to prove to this star reporter
that somebody had given dead Sally—
a slow boost to suicide.*

SLAY

By JOHN D.
MacDONALD



CHAPTER ONE

Gallows Gal

THE city room was fairly quiet. I was sitting on Benny Brannigan's desk and he was unloading his grief over being assigned to cover the dog show. AP and UP were clacking in unison. Somebody in the darkroom was singing off key, and Steen, the slot man, was slapping copy on the spindle. Fat little Ruthie from the morgue was finding errands to take her by Benny's desk every nineteen seconds.

"Dogs," Benny was saying. "Nobody in the whole town hates dogs like I do. Every time I see a dog he takes a quick

lunch off me. As soon as I step into that dog show, I'm going to need a tourniquet and—" He broke off and stared by me toward the narrow doorway to the city room. His little dark eyes bugged out. "Yah-hah!" he said softly. "And yah-hah again."

I turned and looked. She was coming right down the aisle between the reporters' desks. Imagine, if your blood pressure is under control, five-foot-three feet and a hundred-and-two pounds of twenty-three-year-old female bearing down on you with a determined clack-clack of high heels on our tired old wood floor.

Swathe the frame in tailored slacks of pearl-gray. Insert, between slacks and yellow halter, about four inches of taut golden-brown midriff. Slacks and halter, of course, indicative of a bit more than adequacy in all those places where adequacy is a boon. Surmount this vision with a face more piquant than the pixies have yet thought up, rusty gold hair piled high to disclose little ears that make you want to keep them under your pillow. Glaze the determined mouth, the narrowed blue eyes, with a fury almost too great to be carried around.

Steen gave a yelp as, for the first time in eight years, he impaled his finger on the spindle along with the copy. Ruthie, being pretty smart as far as figuring comparisons is concerned, scuttled off to the security of the morgue.

She came right up to me. She came so close that there was no room to slide off Benny's desk. She put her hands on her hips and leaned forward so that her face was five inches from mine. Her yellow shoulder bag swung forward and clunked me on the arm.

"Are you or are you not George Morgan?" she hissed.

"Maybe you want me?" Benny said. "I'm Brannigan. Benjamin A. Brannigan. Twenty-nine teeth left and most of my hair. Unmarried. No vices you couldn't cure me of and—"

"Shut up, you wizened little nincompoop! I asked you if you're Morgan?" she demanded again.

"Yes," I said faintly.

She stepped back and cocked her head on one side. "I should have known without asking. I should have known you'd be

a big, thin, lazy thing with a weak mouth and shifty eyes."

Benny giggled. "Hi, shifty," he said.

He has the only reporter's chair on castors. I put my foot against it and moved him two desks away. I stared honeybun straight in her blue eyes and said:

"You're a very nice little gadget, but we reporters get pretty weary of the cranks who show up in city rooms. What's on your feather-weight brain today?"

I got my arm up just in time to fend off the shoulderbag. She must have been carrying rocks in it. I went numb right down to the ends of my fingers. While I was debating whether or not to bust her one with Benny's typewriter, she melted down into tears. Her face screwed up and suddenly she looked twelve years old. She sagged against me and I wrapped her up in one long arm and stared blandly over at Steen. He was sucking his punctured finger.

I made comforting sounds and led her off to Al's office. I knew Al was out. I slipped behind his desk, put on an executive look and said crisply:

"Now tell me what's on your mind."

She dabbed around with a handkerchief, sniffed a few times and then said, "You write police news, don't you?"

"Me and ten thousand other guys. Why?"

"Well, you went with Lieutenant Martin Habrick when Sally's body was found."

"Sally?" I said. "Sally?" Then I snapped my fingers. "Oh, four days ago. Sure. Sally—uh—French?"

"Sally Finch. I have been to the police department. Lieutenant Habrick absolutely refuses to open up the case. Your police here are certainly lax in their duties. Lieutenant Habrick finally said that I didn't have to take his word for it. I could go to the *Star* and find a tall reporter with black hair named George Morgan.

"He said that you'd written it up as a routine suicide and given it about two paragraphs. He said that if I could get you to get the *Star* to take some interest—maybe the case could be reopened, but he didn't see on what grounds."

"What's with you and the Finch girl? Who are you and where are you from?" I asked her.

The tears had fled and she was under control. She sat straight in the chair like a little old gal in grade six. But of course, a jobbie like that in the sixth grade would have had the school board installing fire-proof desks.

"My name is Jacoba O'Day. Oh, don't look so confused. It's very simple. Just that this man named Jacob Bloom saved daddy's life in the first war and daddy decided to name his first child after Mr. Bloom. It was me. My friends call me Jake. Sally Finch was my roommate in school. I knew she was having a hard time of it and I had a good job for her. She accepted by mail and then she didn't come. So I drove down from Denver and found . . . and found. . . ."

She dug for the handkerchief again.

"Steady, steady," I said. "How did you locate Sally? She was in a transient rooming house."

"She wrote me a letter a month ago. That gave her address. She didn't complain, but I could read between the lines. I sent her the special delivery letter about the job."

I said softly, "Look, Jake. This isn't one of the biggest cities in the country, but we have a disease here that's just the same as if it occurred in New York. The medics call it depression. Me, I call it heart-break. Your friend started in New York on this heartbreak business. Wanted to be a dancer. When her funds were gone she got a job on the burlesque circuit. I don't know why she left the show here.

"Anyway, she worked as cashier in one of our less exclusive beaneries. And then there was a shortage and she got bounced without a recommend. For some unknown reason her closet had a transom over it. Made it real handy for her. She cut a hunk of rope off the cheap venetian blinds that didn't work anyway. It was easy to kick the chair away. And then not so easy for a while, but not for very many minutes, I hope. She . . . wasn't pretty."

JAKE covered her eyes for a moment, and then she looked up quickly. "You're as stupid as Lieutenant Habrick. He wouldn't even read the letter I got from her. Maybe you'll break down and read it."

She threw it at me. I picked it off the

floor. It was dated two weeks before. I read it. A very excited and gushy letter. Full of exclamation marks and things underlined. The last paragraph was:

"And so, darling, as soon as I get just a few teeny details cleaned up here, I'll wire you and be on my way! The job sounds wonderful! I'm thrilled! I'm going to buy my ticket tomorrow with the money you enclosed and every hour on the hour I'm going to take it out and look at it!"

I slipped the letter back in the envelope and handed it across to her. A funny little ripple of excitement ran up my back.

She said, "You big intelligent men think she wrote a letter like that and then killed herself? Tell me frankly, Mr. Morgan, does this change your ideas?"

I scratched my chin. "It might. Of course, depression comes on quickly and—"

"Rot! She was my roommate. Don't you think I knew what Sally Finch was like? She was vain. She'd never kill herself in such a way that she'd look . . . ghastly. I don't think she'd ever kill herself. She had courage, Mr. Morgan."

"Call me George," I said wearily.

"There are a few things I want to know. She's been dead four days. We're wasting time. I want to know where that ticket went. Mostly, I want to know who killed her."

"The door to the room was locked on the inside," I said flatly.

"You said it was a rundown rooming house. Probably old-fashioned locks. A pair of pincers and you can turn the key from the outside."

"Marty Habrick would look for marks on the key from the jaws of the pincers."

"How bright of him! If I were doing it, I'd have it all planned and the pincers all ready with little bits of rubber glued inside the jaws. Did he ever think of that?"

"Why should he? She had eighty cents on the top of the bureau. Her clothes were shabby. It was a clumsy knot she tied—the sort of knot a woman would tie. Granted she didn't leave any note. . . ."

She fixed me with a gunbarrel stare. "It was my impression that newspaper reporters were eager to know the truth."

"Uh."

"And it is also my impression that if a

Reporter were to reopen this case on the basis of new information, it might sell one or two extra copies of the paper."

"You are the most logically illogical item that I've—"

"I'm a businesswoman, George, and I'm trained to think straight. Can you be given this case as an assignment?"

"Not a hope. Anything I do will have to be on my own time."

"For which you will be fairly recompensed, I assure you. I'll pay you your regular salary plus time and a half, and I'll pay all expenses."

I made a more detailed summary of the trimmings. No jewelry. The almost inadequate halter had a hand-tailored look. A men's suit made of the same fabric as in the slacks would have been well beyond my income.

"I have two fillings. Way back here," she said, hooking a finger in the corner of her mouth.

"Okay, okay. Does your daddy know you're throwing his money around?"

She pointed at the desk phone. "Make a collect call to Denver. O'Day Enterprises. 8-0666. Ask for Mr. Angelus and ask him what the boss looks like."

"You're the boss?"

"Of two supermarkets, a chain of three drug stores, a small hotel, an auto sales agency, and an appliance outlet. I can pull off a balance sheet and profit and loss statement, make statistical computations of future trends, reset the tabulating equipment, check perpetual inventories, make speeches to the Rotary Club and also hire and fire. Angelus is capable but unimaginative. That's why this has to be done in a hurry."

She snapped open the shoulder bag, pulled out a bill clip, peeled off two fifties and laid them on Al's blotter. "This will serve as a retainer. And it's understood that I'm hiring you only because this is your city and theoretically you should be able to save me time. Also, you'd better report this income for tax purposes, as it will appear with your name in our corporation records."

"I think I liked you better when you had the tears."

"We'll leave personalities out of this, George. Can you start right now?"

"The *Star* is a morning paper, Jake.

I'll be free from now until—let me see—call it eleven tonight."

She stood up. "Come on along, then. I have to get into something less . . . noticeable."

I walked through the city room with her. Or rather a step behind her. Benny watched her go by in a way that reminded me of a slow motion movie of a spectator at a tennis match. I winked at Steen.

As we went downstairs and by the business office bull pen, the girls therein leveled on Jake the kind of looks that should have raised welts. Jake didn't even know they were there.

Danny, on traffic detail, was standing near the thing she had parked in front of the *Star* building. The flared front fender was almost touching a hydrant and the rear end was neatly in the bright yellow place labeled "No Parking at Any Time".

Danny glared down at her. "This thing yours?"

"It is."

"I got to put the make on the ticket and I don't know what the hell it is."

"It happens to be a European job," she said. "Here, give me the ticket and I'll make it out for you."

The apoplectic glow faded from Danny's round face. "Lady, ain't you going to give me an argument?"

Her smile was like a La Jolla sunset. "Of course not, officer. We can't have people parking all over the place."

Danny glared at me. "Get her into that item and get her the hell away from me, George."

She held her small hand out. "I insist on a ticket, officer."

Danny turned and walked woodenly away, shaking his big head. She shrugged and slid under the wheel. It was right-hand drive. The thing gave a guttural roar—and I was looking up at the bright blue sky. I got my head back in place a block further along, just in time to give a startled bleat as we knifed between a moving van and a bread truck.

Jake had to sit up on the edge of the seat to see over the long hood. Every time we reached top speed, she yanked it into a higher gear. Suddenly deacceleration set in. A long swooping turn and up the drive of the Stanton-Plaza, our most deluxe hotel, complete even to birds in the

patios. It stopped somehow, as smooth as glass. I was punching the hat back in shape and there she was in the doorway, turned impatiently back toward me.

"George! Come on."

MIDWAY across the lobby, I got my knees under control again. I had to break into a lope to make the elevator, and trot to follow her down the hall. I remembered the suite. The only other time I was in it was when I had to interview a prince from Kashmir. As she disappeared into one of the rooms she said, over her shoulder:

"Call room service, George. Bonded rye with a beer chaser for me. Order what you want."

Her door shut. I was beginning to feel like I'd been sucked down into some plant machinery.

Room service knocked fourteen seconds after I'd hung up the phone. Three minutes after he'd bowed himself out, Jake reappeared. Snakeskin shoes and bag, tailored little silk gabardine suit in black, frothy white blouse, cobweb stockings, silver hoops hanging from those bug-cute ears, a silly hat that looked on the verge of sliding down over her left eye. Regal was the word for our Jake.

She marched to the tray and picked up the shot glass. Four little shot glasses, all in a row. She frowned. "I hope you're used to these, George."

"I can manage."

"Boom," she said. It went down and bounced. "Boom," she said again. Four empty little shot glasses, all in a row. Beer soothed the flames. By the time I'd taken three fond swallows, her empty beer glass was on the tray and she was heading for the door.

"Drinking," I said, "should be a leisurely and social affair. It is not a vice when undertaken casually."

"Please hurry, George."

Her blue car snuffed to a stop by Headquarters. The desk sergeant gave me a knowing grin and said that Marty Habrick was back in his office. "But I think the little lady already seen him once, Georgie."

Marty's office is a golden-oak telephone booth. He is a big man with a bald head, weary little blue eyes and a habit, when exasperated, of wiping a big hand slowly

across his face. He is a good, though somewhat unimaginative cop, tenderly guarding his chain of canaries, keeping his boys plodding on the necessary legwork, reading all the time on new lab methods.

He gave a tired sigh as he saw Jake. "Glad to see you in clothes, Miss O'Day."

"This time I've come back with George Morgan."

"I see him. Hello, Georgie. This chick will grind you down."

"Mr. Morgan," she said crisply, "believes that Miss Finch was murdered."

"Now wait a minute!" I bleated. Marty's glare was withering.

"You as much as said so. Lieutenant, you told me that you had all the things from Sally's room here in the cellar storage room. Could we have your permission to see them?"

"Those things belong to her family, lady."

"Sally was an orphan, Lieutenant."

Marty wiped his hand slowly across his face. "George, tell me. Are you riding along because this is one lush little item and you always had a leaning for blondes, or do you maybe think you know more than I do about police work?"

"That's a terrible way to ask the question, Marty. Look, have I ever crossed you up? Remember the Folmer case? And how about that feature I did on you? I love policemen, Marty. Even lieutenants. Take it this way. My little pal is a very determined little item. So I keep her out of trouble while I help her nose around. I'm doing you a favor, Marty. Soon she finds we were right all along and she goes home."

Marty wiped his face again. "Tell Pete I said it was okay you take a look at her stuff."

The cellar at Headquarters is one damp place. Half of it is the morgue. Pete works both halves, in addition to sweeping out the corridors upstairs every morning.

"What's new?" I asked him, as we followed him into the storage section.

"I ain't got no body," he sang in a cracked tremolo. "Leastways, no new ones, Georgie." He gave Jake a gap-toothed grin. "Honey, you wouldn't take up no more'n half a standard size slab."

Jake gave him a calm stare. "Am I sup-

posed to squeal and shudder at that?"

Pete muttered, "Wouldn't need no ice on you either."

He clicked on a hanging bulb and pulled the two shabby suitcases over toward the trestle table. The tags on them gave the name, date and cause of death. '*Suicide by hanging.*' Jake sniffed as she saw that.

I hoisted the first one up and opened it. The clothes were clean and they had a faint perfumed fragrance. I glanced at Jake. She stood with her eyes shut, reeling just a bit. I reached for her, but she took a deep breath, opened her eyes and said crisply:

"We'll see what she had."

It took fifteen minutes. A meagre wardrobe, practise clothes, dancing slippers. Purse with eighty cents, stub of lipstick, bus token, comb with teeth missing, cheap movie stub, battered compact, three bobby pins, a costume jewelry clip. There were papers in an old manila envelope. Diploma, birth certificate, tooth x-rays, graduation picture. Three paper-backed novels. And nothing else.

"That's the works," I said. Pete shuffled over, yawning. He went off into the darkness with the two suitcases.

Jake signed the completed form, we arranged for an undertaker.

We went back out to the car. I was braced against a broken neck but the expected acceleration didn't come off. The street lights had come on. She sat looking unexpectedly small behind the wheel.

I thought she wanted comfort. I moved closer to provide same. She said firmly, "Did you notice anything funny, George?"

"About what?"

"You *are* dense! About her belongings. Isn't it a little odd that there were no letters. Girls save letters. And, of course, no ticket. It was as though somebody went through all her things and took out the . . . the personal things. You see, if somebody killed her and wanted it to look like suicide, they'd have to take away any letters that showed that she didn't have her back against the wall."

"Maybe she cashed in the ticket and spent the money. Maybe she never bought the ticket."

"That's something we'd better find out. But first, let's go look at the room."

"Maybe it's rented."

"Two-ten Central Street. Tell me how to get there, George."

Central Street only has houses on one side. Across the street is the high wire fence that encloses the freight yards. The yards are hard-packed dirt and the standard landscape gardening includes barrel hoops, broken auto springs and empty beer cans.

Two-ten is a high narrow house that looks as though it were hunching its dirty brown shoulders to provide narrow lee-way between it and the houses on either side. Parked in front of it, the blue item looked like a star sapphire at a rummage sale. Kids galloped up. I nailed one and said, "A buck for you to keep your pals from climbing all over it." He nodded quickly, and I caught up with Jake as she climbed the sagging steps to the porch.

The stringy woman who answered the door exuded a strong fragrance of gin, laundry basket and stale bacon grease.

"I got rooms," she said thickly. "Rent in advance, folks." She pulled her arm back and peered at me. "I seen you before, mister. You're cops."

"That's right," I said. "We want another look at the room where the girl died. Is it empty?"

"Why don't you leave honest people alone? It doesn't do my business no good to have you poking around here. So what if she kills herself? I don't—"

"Key, please," Jake said firmly. The woman muttered and grumbled and walked back into the dark hall. She slapped the key into Jake's hand.

"Come on," I said. "Third floor rear." We went into the room and I found the light switch. Jake said, "It isn't very . . . attractive, is it?" It wasn't. A stale old, end-of-the-line room. A room like a funnel. You drop through it into nothingness. Sometimes somebody climbs up out of a room like it, but not often enough to count. A room that seemed bathed in the stale, dry sweat of hopelessness and futility.

SOMETHING made us keep our voices low. "That was the chair," I said. I moved it over and placed it. "It had fallen this way." I opened the door of the empty closet and laid the chair on its back. "She hung from that transom. The rope was

short. That's a high door. Her heels were a good twenty inches off the floor. One shoe had fallen off."

Jake was staring at the chair with an odd expression on her face. "George, are you certain it was just like that?"

"I may be out, but not more than an inch or two either way. It isn't an easy scene to forget. The chair was on its back."

Jake went to it and carefully turned it up onto its legs. I quickly saw what she meant. The wide back of the wooden chair almost blocked the narrow closet door.

Jake frowned. "It would be more normal to set the chair so that it didn't face into the closet, George."

"Maybe it didn't. Maybe it rolled that way when she kicked it over."

She stepped up onto the chair after turning it to the side. She reached up and locked her hands around the upper sill and kicked the chair over. It fell clank on its side and didn't roll over onto its back. Jake hung there.

"Quick, George," she said.

I got my hands on her waist and she let go. I resisted any number of the garden variety impulses and set her down on the floor.

After she had done it ten times, she seemed satisfied. I was getting a little shoulder-weary from lifting her down. On the eighth time, the chair rolled over onto its back.

"Not impossible," she said softly. "Merely a shade improbable."

She sat on the sagging double bed and I lit her cigarette and my own. The one window faced the blank wall of the frame house next door. She walked quickly over to the window and looked out. Then she fingered the cut end of the venetian blind rope. It was cleanly cut.

"Let's get out of here, George," she said. But she delayed long enough to study the key and the size of the keyhole.

I paid off the car watcher and we drove off. For once we moved at a respectable speed. "What do you think?" I asked.

"It begins to look more and more absurd," she said.

"Want to enlarge on that?"

"I can't, George. There was something in that room that was begging to be noticed, and I don't know what it was."

"Well, if you're going to get all mystic on me. . . ."

She braked the blue car, whirled it around and back we went. "Stay in the car," she said.

I saw her talking to the stringy character on the porch. I couldn't make out what they were saying. She didn't go in. When she came back out, there was a shade more confidence in her walk.

"Now," I said, "tell me that it's elementary, my dear Morgan."

"I'll give you a play-by-play. I asked that woman how often the man came to see Sally. She told me that she wasn't running a religious establishment and she didn't keep any box score. I asked her if it was the fat man who took her out sometimes. She said that the man who took her out before she lost her job wasn't fat, just sort of chunky, but the one who came to see her after she lost her job was thin and wore glasses. That's all she could remember."

She drove back to the center of town. I was beginning to recognize a certain competence in the way she tooled the long low car.

"*Cherchez le guy*," I said.

"Sally was attractive," she said smugly. "You'd think the police would have thought of that."

"They did," I said with equal smugness. "They checked the beanery. The chunky one happens to work there and his name is Harry Valler. He was upset about her, but he hadn't dated her in weeks."

"I think we'd better have our evening meal in said beanery," she said.

"Ptomaine heaven, Jake. Tile floor, marble-top tables and wire chairs. Menu on the wall over the short-order department."

"Tell me where to turn."

She put the blue item in a parking lot two blocks past the restaurant. A small hotel nearby advertised their cocktail lounge in green neon, and we headed that way. "For strength," she said.

We sat on bar stools. "Boom," she said. Once again around. I beat her to the boom. One more and I knew I could clip my underlip to my necktie.

Then Jake went off where little girls go and came back in five minutes. She sat beside me and whispered, "Put your eyes

back in the sockets, friend. It's still little old Jacoba."

The tone was sober enough, but she didn't look that way. A neat little gal had walked away from me. The one who came back had a rumpled look. The big smear of lipstick was on just the slightest bit crooked. Each lovely eyelash ended in a little round black blob, like black cherries on toothpicks.

"Too many of those depthbombs?" I suggested.

"Foof! The O'Days are immune to alcohol. This is a standard business device. I use it to creep upon unwary employees. I'll look more at home in that beanyery."

"That you will," I agreed.

I paid the check and we started to leave. In the door came Martha, my date for the following Saturday night, the lovely and poised item whom both Ted Daybree, in the D. A.'s office, and I have been feuding over. Ted was right behind her with a smug look.

Martha's eyes widened as she saw the package Jake had made of herself. "Well, George," she said in a voice direct from Fairbanks.

"Ha, ha," I said. "This is a business matter."

Martha swept Jake with a lazy glance. "Oh, obviously," she said.

I gave Jake an apprehensive glance expecting her to blow up in Martha's face. But Jake teetered on her high heels, her mouth slack, her eyes wide, dumb and baby blue.

"Always nice ta meet the boyfriend's-ex, huh?" she said in a slurred voice. She wrapped her little hands around my arm and said petulantly, "C'mon, Georgie, honey, we'll be late."

"Look," I said to Martha. "Look. . . ." But she was fifteen feet away, chatting amiably to Ted.

When I got Jake out on the sidewalk I took her shoulders and shook her until her teeth rattled. She beamed up at me. "Whatcha mad for, Georgie, huh?"

I dropped my arms in helpless futility.

"Come on," she said with her old crispness. "Work to do. I had to queer you temporarily with her to save time. I'll make it up later."

All I could do was groan.

CHAPTER TWO

Cherchez L'homme

THE beanyery is called Madden's Redtop Restaurant. I guess the Redtop part comes from the old lipstick usually found around the rims of all glasses and cups. I headed for a table, but she angled me over to the white stools at the counter. It is one of those damnable counters that my knees won't fit under. She was perfectly comfortable, a happy glow on her face, talking in a gay, drunken little voice that elicited appreciative sounds from the short-order men. The glances directed at me were of hatred and pure envy.

We ordered the beef stew. A young woman with a face like a hairless spaniel tended the cash register at Jake's left. Jake turned to her and said, "Say, kid, wasn't it awful about Sally Finch!"

Spaniel-face brightened and licked her chops. "Yeah. You know her, did you?"

"Not so good. I lived in the same dump for a while. Seemed like a nice kid."

Spaniel-face snorted. "Nice and light-fingered. Suppose I shouldn't talk about the dead, but the way they think she worked it, she'd ring a no-sale and then shove the waiter's check in her purse. They canned her and I guess maybe that's why she did it. Jobs are tough to get once you try a thing like that."

"Harry around?"

Spaniel-face glanced up at the clock. "In about ten minutes, dearie. Her knocking herself off busted Harry all up but I told him that he just was too sensitive for his own good. He kind of liked her before she crossed him by taking the money while he was on as night manager."

The stew was boiled mastodon with brown gravy made of hair tonic and used grease cups. Jake yunked it down as though it were hummingbird tongues. She kidded with the two counter men, kept up a conversation with Spaniel-face and even included me in the fun once every seven minutes.

"There's Harry now," Spaniel-face said. She called, "Oh, Mr. Valler, here's a girl wants to see you."

He came over. He was wide and thick through the shoulders with a square white

face, small steady eyes, chestnut hair piled in a neat and careful series of waves. The tan-and-maroon pocket handkerchief in the pocket of his chocolate gabardine suit looked as though it had been folded by a physicist deeply concerned with space-time convolutions. The Windsor knot in the tie was half as big as his fist.

Jake stuck her hand out. "Gosh, I'm glad to meet you, Harry. I hope I can call you Harry because Sally did and she told me about you." His eyes hardened a trifle, but she raced on: "That poor girl. Temptation and weakness, I expect. Anyway, we told each other if we got a break we'd share it with the other party, and there I am going off to Cleveland to collect this money which I thought would be peanuts because Uncle Albert lived like a pauper, an absolute pauper, and it turns out to be seventy grand.

"Well I rushed back and I was just dying, I mean dying, to tell Sally and maybe take her on a trip somewhere, and I find this horrible, horrible thing has happened so I thought the least I could do was maybe get together with somebody who used to know her and we could talk about her anyway, don't you think, Mr. Valler?"

She did everything but jump up and swing by the Windsor knot. He was shot dead before he ever opened his mouth. She clinched it by turning to me and saying, "George, honey, what's your last name so I can introduce you?"

She smiled at Harry. "I met George in the lounge at the Stanton-Plaza. Imagine me living there! Little old me!"

"The name is Morgan," I said weakly. Everybody ignored me.

She gently pushed me over so that Harry could sit between us. I had a perfect view of his broad brown back.

Finally her head appeared over his shoulder. "George," she said, "you're going to have to hurry if you have to be back to work by eight."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I stood between them. She paused in the middle of a sentence to say, "By, George. See you around."

Poor old Harry had the look of a prime steer after they've given it the first whack between the eyes.

I walked an aimless two blocks. Then

I told myself that my job was over and she could damn well contact me if she wanted to see me again. I walked two brisk blocks. Then I slowed down again. That Valler didn't look like a type to fool with. Pair of mean little eyes. Smelled like a barber shop.

From a drugstore booth I phoned the restaurant. A man answered. Valler. I disguised my voice. "What's the name of the morning manager there, bud?"

"Brill. Why?"

"Want to see him. What time's he come on?"

"When I leave. Two o'clock." The phone clicked. Harry was anxious to get back to the item before somebody else moved in on her.

Then I phoned the office. Al was in. "How," I said, "would you like a nice exclusive murder?"

"Who? Where? You calling from the station?"

"Simmer down. The cops don't believe it was a murder. This is a solo pitch. I got to work on it tonight. Can you give Joe my treadmill?"

"I hear you went out of here with a blonde, Morgan. Maybe the only murder is that she's killing you, eh?"

"Ah! Trust me!"

"It isn't dignified to sob over the phone, Morgan. I'll trust you this far. Go ahead on your own, but if it doesn't rate a four-column head when you get done, I'll put you back on the copy desk. A nice perch on the rim. Is that clear?"

He meant what he said. I swallowed hard. "A deal, Al," I said with false confidence.

I PUT some eating food down on top of the beef stew and made plans while I ate. Then it was time to saunter back to Central Street, two-ten. A switch engine chuffed in the floodlighted freight yards. I found a patch of shadow and watched two-ten, my fingers curled around the cigarette glow.

In twenty minutes one couple had come out, an old guy with a cane, and finally a girl. The light glimmered on red hair as she went down the street. I angled over and came up behind her.

"Pardon me." She didn't turn, increased her pace.

I lengthened the stride and caught up with her. "Please," I said.

"Mister, you've got the wrong number. I'm on my way to work at a nice clean factory."

A white prowler car was coming down the cross street. I put two fingers in my mouth and it swerved over, stopped in front of us. I peered in. Smith and Haggerty.

"Bill," I said, "will you tell this lady that I'm okay."

Bill Haggerty guffawed. "Watch yourself, girlie," he said. "Morgan's the worst wolf in town."

"This is business," I pleaded.

Bill said, "Okay, George. Miss, this is George Morgan. He's a little weak in the head, but he works for a newspaper. He wants you to smile at him."

We were under a streetlight. She had a snub-nosed face, cute when she smiled. "Sorry, Mr. Morgan." I waved my thanks at the prowler car as they drove off.

"Do you eat before you go to work?"

"A sort of breakfast."

"Then let me have some coffee with you while I ask you some questions."

It was a delicatessen with tables in the back. She put her purse on the empty chair. "My name is Christy Ranssek."

"Hi, Christy. Did you know Sally Finch?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, so it's about that. I should have guessed. Why are you talking to me?"

"Too many young girls commit suicide every year, Christy. The *Star* is going to run a Sunday feature on Sally Finch. Sort of a profile, you know. We want to wake people up to what is going on."

She nodded. "I see what you mean, Mr. Morgan. I don't know as I can help much. She was just . . . another girl. Prettier than most, I guess. Her hours of work were as screwy as mine when she was night cashier at that restaurant. We ate here a couple of times together."

"Did she seem happy?"

"So-so, until she lost her job. She told me she was framed, but I suppose anybody would say that. She moped around and then brightened up. The last time I saw her—that was, let me see, ten days ago, maybe two weeks—she showed me a train ticket to Denver. She said she had a

swell new job all lined up. Seems funny that with a job lined up she'd . . . do that."

I shrugged. "Maybe it fell through."

"No, she said she was going to work for her best friend. She could have been lying, but I don't think so. She didn't say it in the kind of way that people say things when they're trying to impress you." She put her coffee cup down with a small clatter. "That's funny!"

"What?"

"She didn't have to tell me she was framed. She could have said that they just didn't need her any more. And when she was in the dumps she came here with me one night. She said she wasn't going to have a thing like that on her record. She already had the ticket and I asked her why she was staying around. She said she had a pretty good idea why they'd done it to her. She sounded real grim."

I concealed another small surge of excitement. "Maybe when she found out she couldn't clear herself, she . . ."

Christy sighed. "That could be it."

"Boy friends?"

"One sort of nasty type from the restaurant. And then, afterwards, a skinny one with glasses. But I don't think the second one was a boy friend. He usually carried one of those dark-red, heavy envelopes like you keep papers in."

"Well dressed?"

"Not a bum, if that's what you mean. Sort of a—a clerky looking guy. I met him once on the stairs on my day off. Unfriendly jerk. He looked at me as though he wanted to kick me for being on the same stairs with him. His eyes actually seemed to hate me."

"Going up, was he?"

"Yeah. On his way up to the third floor. I waited and heard him knock on her door. She said something and then he did and then I heard her unlock the door."

"She kept the door locked in the daytime?"

"So do I, mister. In that dump."

"If you saw the skinny one again, could you recognize him?"

"Why, sure. But you're making this sound like police work, Mister Morgan."

I gave her a long steady look. I liked what I saw. "Okay, Christy. Keep your

nice mouth shut. I think maybe it is."

She turned a bit pale and reached hastily for her coffee. "I see him again, anywhere, and I call you. The *Star*, is it?"

"Right. And thanks."

She hurriedly wiped her mouth and reached for her purse. "Got to run and punch the clock."

"On me," I said. "On the expense account."

She grinned. "First time I ever ate on one of those things."

AT TEN O'CLOCK I wandered into headquarters. I was in luck. Moe Wakis who is head of Special Detail was in. Moe looks like a horse player with his last two bucks riding on the last horse coming into the stretch. Your first impulse is to hand him a handkerchief.

"Old Georgie," he said in his thin sad voice. "Good old Georgie. Comic relief on a barren evening." He sniffed. Moe has a perpetual cold, aggravated during half the year by hay fever.

I indicated that I had business on my mind and he shuffled ahead of me into his office, a dark little man with a tired stoop. He sighed as he sat down.

"Moe," I said, "a few things are bothering me. You do the coordination here with the federal boys. F. B. I., Treasury, Narcotics, Border and so on. I am thinking about a hundred-dollar gabardine suit in chocolate brown and a platinum wrist-watch as thin as a silver dollar. How much would the night manager in a cheap beanery make? Don't answer that question. Certainly not more than fifty bucks a week."

"You feel all right?" he asked.

"I don't know yet. Moe, you are a sharpie. You own a restaurant. Outside of poisoning the customers, how illegally could you put the restaurant to work?"

"Serious?" he asked. I nodded. "Let me see. The public comes into my restaurant. So I am retail. Retail on home-made money that way could work, but it isn't good. Floating agents are better. Besides, I assume you speak of this city and we haven't had bad bill trouble lately."

"Narrow it down to a deal in which the cashier would figure."

"Hmmm. A small idea glimmers. I

assume it is a cheap restaurant. A low-grade operation. Tell me, is there opaque glass around the cashier?"

I inched forward on the chair. "You are positively psychic."

"So I have my restaurant and a cash register is a good place in which to keep small items—say little capsules. My clients come in and have a cup of coffee. When they leave, they pay their dime plus a ten bill and get a capsule. Could work, lad. Could work well. The girl would have to be trustworthy."

I started thinking out loud. "The place is open twenty-four hours a day. They get railroad station and bus terminal trade. So it makes sense to have just one gal out of the shift of three be the one in the know. The customers know what hours to come and buy. But a hop head is not exactly predictable. He comes in when the wrong gal is on. Scene. Demands his little white powder. Manager cools him off and gets him out. Girl is bright. Senses the score. Asks manager what the hell. He doesn't like curious people. No trick to make her accounts short and destroy a few waiter's checks. Safest way to handle it—unless the girl refuses to take it standing still."

"Do you go on like this often, lad?" Moe said.

"But who is the thin one with the glasses?"

"Our fair city is full of jolt-happy customers. Maybe a bit more than usual. But leads are few. I like you, Morgan. Make with facts and places."

"Not quite yet."

"It will be no trick to locate the place. With what you've told me it is narrowed down to one of three places. I can put men to work within the hour. So your cooperation can be given or withheld."

"There is such a thing as cooperation between departments, Moe. If you rush it, you may do Marty out of a nice clean murder confession."

"Does Marty know this?"

"He soon will."

"By nine o'clock in the morning, George, I will move with or without your cooperation. Clear?"

"Perfectly. . . ."

Try walking along the street at eleven o'clock imagining you're a guy in choco-

late-brown gabardine who wants to remove one troublesome dolly from the ranks of the living. You don't want to do it yourself. But you have a friend. Maybe your friend is a little psycho. You thought framing Sally was enough and that the threat of sending her to the county jail would keep her mouth shut. But you figured Sally wrong. She threatened to make trouble. To make trouble she would have to report it to somebody.

I stopped and snapped my fingers. Suppose the psycho friend could put on a front. Thin guy with glasses. "Miss Finch, we've been watching the restaurant where you worked. Your help will be appreciated. I'm from Narcotics. No, we don't want you to come to our office. I'll come here and see you and take statements."

Sure. Plenty of statements. Until one fine evening he gets the chance to come in without being seen. Final statement from dying Miss Finch. So sorry. Thank you, Miss Finch. You've been an enormous help. Then the bad time. Down the stairs. The big risk. But not too big. "No, I didn't see her. Her door was locked. I knocked. No answer."

I liked the way it fitted together. Like focusing the movie projector. Suddenly everything sharp and clear.

I went to the Stanton-Plaza. The local operator was one Steve Logan. Career house dick. College graduate, looking more like a stroke on the Princeton crew than a guy capable of hustling three drunks out of the bar on one arm.

He stared at me coldly. "I don't like it, Morgan."

"I tell you I'm working for her. This is something hot, Steve. Isn't your job, among other things, to keep nasty headlines out of the paper where it says Stanton-Plaza in large type?"

"Of course."

"Then you'd better okay me to go in there and wait for her, because it might be your only chance to sidestep that little eventuality."

"We don't care to be threatened by the press."

"So help me, it's no threat."

"If I fix it, will you keep me out of it no matter what happens—out of the responsibility of having let you in, I mean?"

I solemnly crossed my heart, rolled my eyes upward and pointed in the general direction of the roof garden.

He let me into the suite. The door locked as it closed. I went across the big sitting room in the dark, barking a shin on a coffee table, and went into her bedroom. I risked the bedside lamp to get the layout of the room. Four pigskin bags with silver fittings. In the bathroom her toothbrush was neatly laid out. Bottles from the fitted bag were aligned on the top of the dressing table. I got an unexpected look at myself in the mirror. The gaunt look of the gray-faced stranger shocked me a little. I gave myself a sweetheart smile, showing my pearly teeth.

The best place seemed to be behind the door to the sitting room. There I would be able to hear what was said, remain reasonably comfortable and be concealed if the door opened quickly.

After waiting a half hour I looked at my watch and found that five minutes had gone by. I flapped it over with the face against my wrist. No point in torturing myself.

Tired. Very tired. I leaned over to one side and braced my head against the side of a chest of drawers. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Make Like a Commando

THE SOUND awakened me and I didn't know where I was. My joints had congealed and my eyeballs were set in splintered glass. I was numb from my knees to my floating ribs.

A band of light suddenly appeared under the bedroom door and I knew where I was. I flapped the watch over. Ten after three, by the luminous dial.

As circulation began to return, painfully, I moved my left ear closer to the inside crack of the door.

Jake was still talking in that smeared voice, half teasing. "No, Harry! No!"

Harry, a shade drunk. "Honey, we got to understand each other. Now don't give me the coy stuff. I'm no stumblebum restaurant manager. You oughta know that by now, honey. We're good for each other. C'mere!"

There was the sound of a faint tussle

Swing and Slay

and genuine fright in her voice as she said, "Stop! Please, Harry!" Then her voice turned suddenly wheedling. "Look, Harry. My lovely new suit. You'll ruin it. Be a hon and be patient while I change to something comfy."

There was the quick sound of her footsteps and I moved my head out of the way. The door opened inward and then shut quickly as the lights went on. I blinked through the sudden glare and saw her headed toward the bedside phone without even noticing me.

I creaked up onto my feet. She picked up the phone and said softly, "Get me the *Star*, the newspaper, fast."

I clapped my hand across her mouth and turned her around. Her eyes were shrill with fright, and then warm as she recognized me. I let her go and she whispered into the mouthpiece. "Cancel that call, please."

She was hard against my chest, the top of her blonde head tickling me under the chin. She shuddered and whispered, "He—he's horrible, George. I thought I could handle him. I can't. He's got a gun too, George."

"Snap it up, honey! Or I'm coming in," Harry Valler yelled.

I pushed her over so that the bed hit the back of her knees and she sat down. Her eyes were wide. I stripped off my coat and tie, opened my shirt halfway down the front and rumped my hair down over my forehead.

"Cut the act," I whispered. "A long shot. Follow me out and take my lead."

She was right behind me. I strolled out into the sitting room, tightening my belt and yawning. "Hello, chump," I said, smiling peacefully at him.

Harry came up onto his feet fast, balanced on the balls of his feet. "What the hell is this?" he demanded of Jake. His voice was stone sober.

She shrugged. Her voice was back to its usual crispness. "Ask the boss."

I tucked my thumbs in my belt and smiled at him. "We don't like any of this, Harry. We don't like the way you're handling things. We don't like your big mouth. We don't like the way you slipped up on the Finch girl. We don't like the way you told my little helper that you're

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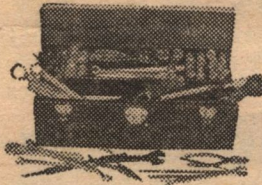
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a bigger shot than your job indicates. We don't like our men drinking. Frankly, Harry, you're not in very good shape."

His face was like stone and his little eyes flicked from my face to hers and back to mine.

"Who are you?"

"Call me a troubleshooter, pal."

"Troubleshooting what, wise guy?"

"Oh, come off it, Harry. Where do you think the stuff comes from? The birds? You're just a dirty little over-the-counter retailer. Or should I say over the cash-register? We have to protect ourselves by sealing up leaks when they seem about to break. And we think this job is too big for your collar size, Harry. I think our little blonde friend proved that."

He suddenly got a puckered look around his mouth as though he was about to cry. He sat down as though his legs had gone weak. "I've given you people satisfaction," he said.

"And too much mouth. We don't like the way the Finch girl was handled."

"The cops are off it," he said sullenly. "Isn't that good enough? Even if they weren't, they'd never track it back to me. They've got nothing on the Doc. He does clean work and he's too smart to talk."

I frowned. "Do I remember the Doc?"

"You probably heard of him. Doc Lantham. I thought I handled it smart. So what if I make a little mistake with the blonde there? No harm done, is there? It teaches me to be more careful, doesn't it?" He stared down at his shoes as he talked.

I took a deep breath. "Give me the gun, Harry. You know the rules about carrying a gun."

He looked up sharply. "Sure I know the rules. The rules say I do and I got the license according to orders. Say! Just what the hell goes on?" He stood up again.

Maybe I should have talked some more. But I didn't like his face and I didn't like the wave in his hair. I hung one on the empty air one inch from his chin as he jerked his head back. The gun was on the way out of the shoulder holster. As I fell into him and grabbed him, I felt the heavy slabs of muscle shifting in his back. This showed every sign of turning into a poor morning.

When he bucked he yanked me clean off the floor. The gun came out and I got a hand on his wrist. "Phone, quick!" I yelled to Jake.

I got my feet tangled in his and tried to fall on him. Somehow he spun me as we fell and he landed on me. All at once he was all knees, elbows and fists. And my fingers were beginning to slip off his wrist. I writhed desperately around and just as I rolled on top, the back of my head blew off and sailed out the window trailing colored lights which spelled 'Adios, amigos.'

SOMETHING wet and deliciously cold swabbed off my forehead. I kept my aching eyes shut. That went away and another item pressed down on my mouth. The perfume was fine—and identifiable. I reached up and began to make a career of the kiss.

She went away so fast that my head thumped on the floor.

I opened my eyes and looked up at her. She was blazing the same way as when I had first seen her. "Morgan," she said. "That was a dirty trick."

I moaned. "What hit me?"

She blushed. "I did. With the table lamp. I was aiming at him. I got him the second try."

I stood up, lifting my head with both hands. Good technique to keep her blushing. "Do you always kiss unconscious men, darling?"

Harry Valler was stretched out on his face. The lamp cord was knotted around his wrists.

"You should have gone for the phone."

"With him about to shoot? I phoned after I hit him." I stepped over and looked at the myriad abrasions on the back of friend Valler's head.

"How many times did you hit him?"

"Eight, I think," she said humbly. "And then I phoned the lieutenant. Some men are coming here and some are going to pick up a Doc Lantham."

I moved toward the phone. "Maybe with a replate, Al can get an extra out in time. . . ."

Doc Lantham was a scholarly looking guy. He had sandy hair and he peered in a nearsighted way through his rimless glasses. He looked like a bank clerk. Until you looked at him long enough.

Swing and Slay

Then there was an odd shifting quality about his face.

Dawn had paled the lights in Marty's office. Lantham lounged in the chair and said in a dry dusty voice, "I don't care what this Valler said. I don't even know the guy. Sure I used to go see the Finch girl. Why not?"

"So I went to see her," Lantham said with his faraway voice. "If there's a law against that, you guys had better build a bigger jail."

Deadlock. Marty looked tired. Lantham looked confident. He said, "Check on me, you guys. Sure I was in trouble when I was a kid. That was over eleven years ago. Now I sell shoes. Haven't missed a day's work yet."

Jake went to the door and beckoned to me. I followed her out. Her eyes were glowing. "I know what was wrong with that room, George. Now I know for sure. Everything in that room was packed in the bags. They had to break the door down. What wasn't there?"

"I give up."

"Think, George! What did she cut the rope with? Remember how clean the cut was? Can we use that to trap him?"

I took her wrist and we went out to the desk. The contents of Lantham's pockets had been piled on the desk. I took the jackknife from the pile and opened the blade. It was like a razor. I ran to the press room and grabbed a typewriter and rolled a sheet into it. Jake looked over my shoulder as I typed.

I yanked the sheet out of the machine and we went back to Marty's office. I stood with my back to Lantham, gave Marty a broad wink and handed him the sheet, saying, "The lab report ought to interest you, Lieutenant. The boys just finished with it."

I give it to Marty. He did it right. He read the sheet and then looked at Lantham. The satisfaction was written all over his face. Lantham shifted uneasily and said, "What's about a lab report?"

"We got you now, you strangler. We got you cold. Not quite smart enough, Lantham."

"Talk sense," Lantham said huskily.

"I'll talk sense. Ever hear about threads? Ever hear about spectroa-

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John D. MacDonald

analysis? Funny thing, Lantham, we got two threads that we can prove came off the same cord. We pulled one out of the cord that was around her neck. Know where we found the other?"

Lantham's hand slowly tightened on the chair arm. "Tell me, daddy," he said with a sneer.

"We got the other one from right where you left it. Wedged in the hinge of that toad stabber you carry around. We can prove to a jury that your knife was used to cut the venetian blind cord. How do you like that one?"

I remembered what redheaded Christy Ranssek had said about meeting this jerk on the rooming-house stairs. I spoke gently to Lantham. "You don't like women, do you?"

Lantham's eyes half shut. He said softly and dreamily, "Yak, yak, yak, every time I went there. Always somebody seeing me come in. Except the last time. Yak, yak, yak, while I went over to the window. She didn't see me cut it. I made a loop and went behind her, real casual like. I yanked it tight with a knot that wouldn't slip and moved away. She kicked some and when she fell off the bed she rolled over and looked at me. But she couldn't yak no more.

"Then I hung her up with a knot like a girl would tie. I yanked her shoe off because it would look better and tipped the chair over. I put the lock just halfway and held it there with the knife blade. When I pulled the blade out the bolt slid over and locked it good." He ran his pink-pointed tongue out of his mouth and moved it slowly over his upper lip and then his under lip.

He giggled, a high, surprising sound. "What a dumb dish! She thought I was taking evidence. Harry told me to fix her. Harry knows I like to work—when it's a woman."

The stenographer's pencil scratched busily. Marty yawned. "School's out, kids."

* * *

The blast of the phone in my eardrum woke me up at eleven the next morning after a good long four and a half hours sleep. I said into the mouthpiece, "He's sleeping."

Swing and Slay

"George Morgan!" Jake's businesslike voice said. "Get up this instant, you lazy old thing. The sun is shining and—"

"It makes me tired to listen to you. Don't you ever slow down? Don't you know that women have the leisurely role in life?"

"Please be at my suite at exactly twelve-fifteen. And don't eat first." The receiver stung my eardrum. I set the alarm for eleven-thirty and knocked off another thirty minutes. The shower almost woke me up.

The suite door was ajar. I knocked.

"Come in," she called briskly. "Be out in a minute."

I went in, shutting the door behind me. I stopped dead. Four little shot-glasses all in a row, and beads of coolness on the outside of the beer glasses. I shuddered. Two quick booms and away we'd sail, somewhere. Dashing madly around in small concentric circles until I tripped over my tongue and fell dead.

I collapsed into a chair, determined to tell her, despite her abundant charms, to find herself a new boy.

The door opened slowly. My jaw sagged. The hostess gown was in pale green and she wore a wide silver belt around her slim waist. The hair came down to her shoulders. She walked slowly. It was the first time I had ever seen her when she wasn't at a full gallop.

She moved like a gal in a dream. "Hello, Georgie," she said slowly, softly, sweetly, huskily, caressingly.

I made one small, yammering sound.

She curled herself slowly on the divan. "Bring me a drink, Georgie, like a sweet thing. Drinking, you know, should be leisurely, or it becomes a vice."

Blue eyes staring up at me. I managed to give her the shot and the beer.

With her eyes still on me, she said, "Boom." So did my heart.

Then she said, "Georgie, did you ever think about living in Denver."

"Denver," I said hoarsely, "principal city in Colorado, is located a mile above sea level and is noted for its healthful climate, its . . . its . . . its . . ."

"Sit down right here, lambie," she said softly. "You're making me nervous."

THE END



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By **JIMMY**

AT TWENTY-TWO, Wendy March had looks, charm, a warm personality, a persuasive tongue and—oh, yes—a way with clothes. Hers was not, however, the conventional way, for Wendy was one of the most talented shoplifters who has ever been apprehended. That she was caught at all was not due to any professional error, but merely to mischance. Certainly, it never would have happened if Wendy hadn't overslept one morning and given her next-door neighbor an opportunity to steal her morning paper.

Daughter of an oyster fisherman and a San Francisco native, Wendy first discovered how easy it was for her to acquire merchandise without paying for it when she timidly entered a swank clothing store in the Golden Gate City at the age of seventeen, clutching the whole of her first paycheck in her hand. It amounted to all of ten dollars and had been earned clerking in a grocery store, but it must have seemed like a young fortune to her.

Wendy enjoyed her first shopping trip and prolonged it to the best of her ability. Understandably, the saleswoman wearied after she had helped her try on nearly thirty dresses.

"Let me know when you've made up your mind!" she snapped and stalked out of the dressing room to find a commission that was easier to earn. But Wendy hardly heard her. She was admiring herself in what was later quite unimaginatively described in her trial record as "a rose-colored dress of silk fabric." It must have been something a little more than that, however, for suddenly she began walking. She walked three blocks down the street before she realized what she had done.

And then, of course, she was too frightened to go back. Instead, she wore the dress home, hung it in the back of her closet and waited, trembling, for the police. They never came. Perhaps, in order to avoid scandal, the store never reported the theft. Perhaps, among the dozens that

LOOTING! NICHOLS

Wendy tried on, the dress she stole was never missed.

Two weeks later, Wendy wore the gown to an afternoon party and had a perfectly miserable time. Every moment, she expected to feel a hand clamp down on her shoulder. Toward evening, it happened. Wendy jumped and gulped and whirled to face an expensively garbed woman about thirty years old who was eyeing the rose-colored dress enviously.

"I must have it," the woman was saying. "I simply must have it. Will you sell it to me for fifty dollars?"

Wendy March grabbed at the chance to rid herself of the stolen garment. "You can have it right now!" she said, and dodging into the ladies' retiring rooms, she slipped the dress over her head. Almost hurling it at the astonished purchaser, she wrapped her coat modestly about her partly disrobed form, hailed a cab and went home—fifty dollars to the good.

There was a gleam in her eye after that. A gleam that was translated, a few months afterwards, into a career that lasted five years and turned over a total of \$20,000 in stolen ready-to wear, size 12.

Most shoplifters are not, as is usually thought, caught in the act or stopped by detectives as they try to leave the store. Too many suits for false arrest have resulted from such risky procedure. What usually happens is that a suspect is followed to her home and, in her absence, her closets are searched to find evidence for arrest.

But Wendy never left any evidence. She simply let it be known, through the social contacts she so easily made, that she could obtain at "wholesale price" any size 12 garment on display in any store. Eventually, of course, the stores became alerted to the fact that someone was making off with top quality merchandise.

But the detectives stationed at the store entrances were so busy whistling at her trim, nicely filled figure that they never



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Jimmy Nichols

realized that the clothes that covered it were not her own.

The circumstances leading to her arrest are some of the most curious on record. On the morning of October 21, she returned home at two a.m. and slept heavily until noon. When she rose, she discovered that some early-bird neighbor in her swank apartment had made off with her milk and her morning paper. Thus she missed the front page story detailing the theft of a dozen fur coats, apparently spirited from a fashionable furrier's in daylight by an unknown man and woman.

At a cocktail party that afternoon, Wendy met an exceedingly attentive gentleman who, despite dark glances from a woman who appeared to be his spouse, persisted in paying a great deal of attention to Wendy. When she rose to leave, he held her coat for her and murmured, "A girl like you should wear mink."

The handsome stranger smiled and whispered lower, "I can get a beautiful coat for you—at wholesale price."

And that's how it happened that Wendy March found herself walking innocently down the street in a fur coat that somebody else had stolen. And there, on a Chicago street corner, at long last she felt the hand of the law fall heavily on her shoulder. The furrier promptly identified his coat. Police laughed heartily at Wendy's claim that she had bought the coat from a stranger she met at a party.

In a desperate attempt to clear herself of that charge, she made a full confession of her own crimes, but nothing could convince the court that she was not responsible for the fur theft. On December 1, she was found guilty of the one major shoplifting job she had not committed.

Wendy served five of her ten year sentence in an Illinois prison. Then, according to parole board records, she went back to San Francisco, married a wealthy Canadian land owner, and, in 1933, during a trip through Canada, was killed in a motor accident. It was not until a year after her death that the real fur thieves were caught and it was finally revealed how the slickest shoplifter who had ever plagued the police was made a victim of her very own racket.

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

he's representing a veterans' newspaper, and is selling forms for the purpose of obtaining a refund of money you paid for your government life insurance—beware.

Henry Gorrell, editor and publisher of Veterans Report, published in Washington, told the Veterans Administration two men had made fraudulent claims to represent his paper.

Charles G. Beck, V. A. deputy administrator for Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin, emphasized that any offer to sell forms for the purpose of recovering money for national service life insurance is a swindle. He said:

"When the time comes to pay dividends on the insurance next year, it will be done without expense to the veteran and any form necessary will be supplied adequately by the V.A. Furthermore, veterans need not pay anything to anyone to file any claim for benefits with the Veterans Administration."

G. W. A.
Hartford City, Ind.

The Man Pays

Dear Sir:

While visiting a large city fair, I entered a crowded restaurant and stood waiting for a table. Soon two pretty girls, who were also waiting, engaged me in conversation and invited me to sit at their table. This was often done, they said, on account of the crowds.

They were very charming and I was ready to believe that both had fallen madly in love with me. Aperitifs, wines, expensive steaks and cordials were served at our table by a most solicitous waiter who called me "Sir," I noticed, more often than was necessary.

At the end of this banquet, one girl excused herself for a moment and the other went to make a phone call. Then the bill came—one bill—for \$45.75.

I asked the waiter to make out a separate check for me, since the ladies were not my guests. He said he assumed we were all in one party. I lingered over coffee and another drink for almost one hour, but the girls never came back. The waiter advised that I should be very careful in the future, since the gentleman is always responsible for the check.

Other people waiting for tables were staring at me, wondering why I argued so much. It hurt to even look at the waiter's face. I must be a cheap skate. So I paid the whole thing, including a two-dollar tip, and left.

This would have been a perfect swindle, except that Fate, I guess, was in my favor. Exactly three hours afterwards I entered a bar at the other end of town, at least ten miles away. Whom do I see there but my two pretty dinner companions, merrily celebrating with—who do you think?—our own waiter!

Now, my first impulse was to go over and knock his block off. But then I realized my money was more important, so I walked out and explained the incident to a policeman, who said the fair had attracted many chisellers here, and came with me to face the culprits.

To my astonishment, the waiter said: "Hello,

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Ready for the Rackets

there, fellow. Glad to see you again. These ladies came back and were embarrassed that you had to pay for everything." And he handed to me \$45.75, all that I had paid.

I took the money and left without saying a word. Outside the cop said to me: "You were lucky. You see, I know that waiter. One of the girls is his wife and the other is his sister-in-law. Too bad that didn't happen in my district. . . ."

G. B. Tucson, Ariz.

Sour Grapes

Dear Sir:

Here is "the fruit racket." I could walk blocks and blocks in any four directions. At every fruit stand it is exactly the same thing.

You buy a pound of cherries even for as high as .49, or a box of strawberries, or any other fruit. The dealer will put one-third to one-half of foul, decayed stuff at the bottom of the bag and fill the good over on top. He does it so expertly that you can't follow him fast enough—it's only when you get home that you will notice the "bargain."

Is there no remedy? If you go back and show it to him, he denies it is his stuff.

R. Wyman
 New York, N.Y.

Just Bread and Butter

Dear Sir:

Some years ago when I was first married, my husband and I lived in a little village, with its one and only meat and grocery store just across the street from us.

When you dealt on credit, they gave you a small store book and they used a large one.

One day while looking through my book, I noticed some extra items added here and there, such as butter, coffee, meat.

I also noticed as they wrote down each order, they would sort of scribble it, so there would sometimes be a vacant line between some of the items. Probably when I was looking over something else in the store, they would go back in my book and fill in those lines.

One day I was sick in bed, I gave the hired girl my book to go to the store. But I had marked all vacant lines. When my book came back, sure enough they were filled in. This can also happen to people who deal where there are credit slips and do not bother to wait for their slip.

If you do get them all on the day you pay your bill, can you remember back just when you got certain things? So, beware that you are not paying a little extra every pay.

Mrs. Stella Denison,
 New York City

That's the wind-up on slick operations for this month, detective fans. Don't forget to help us all keep abreast of the rackets, by writing in about your own personal experiences.

The Editor

Let Me Set You Up For **BIG PROFITS** In '50!

**RUN THE BEST
"SHOE STORE
BUSINESS"
IN YOUR TOWN!**

Free!
**SELLING
OUTFIT!**



**You Don't Invest a Cent!
... Everything Furnished FREE!**

You have a profitable "shoe store business" right in your pocket! You have none of the expenses of rent, clerk hire, light, fixtures, etc., of the ordinary shoe store. You are independent—you have an opportunity to make **BIG MONEY** as long as you care to work in a business for which there is never-ending demand, because **EVERYONE WEARS SHOES**. You'll get repeat business from satisfied customers, and even if you start in Spare time, you soon should have an ever-growing, profitable full-time business that you own 100%.

**OVER 150 FAST
SELLING STYLES
FOR MEN AND WOMEN**

You can satisfy the needs and taste of almost every person in your territory—you sell footwear in the finest leathers, latest styles and with exclusive comfort features that cannot be found in retail stores. You offer men and women the best values on the market with a line of over 150 top quality dress, work and sport shoes. The huge demand for our line makes it possible for us to keep our prices down—even lower this year—despite rising leather costs! These savings through tremendous production are passed on, through you, to the folks in your territory.

EXTRA PROFITS SELLING CLOTHING

In addition to the generous profit you make on every pair of shoes, you have an opportunity to **ADD TO YOUR INCOME** by selling top quality Leather jackets, Wool Shirts, Raincoats for men and women.

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

Velvet-eez

AIR CUSHION CLINCHES SALES
FOR YOU!
FEATURES—features that no other shoe man can offer the folks in your territory—like this wonderful **EXCLUSIVE Velvet-Eez AIR CUSHION** that brings day-long comfort to men and women who are on their feet on hard floors and pavements from early morning to late night. The Velvet-Eez Demonstrator you'll get free in your Sales Outfit will clinch sales for you as it has for hundreds of other Mason Shoe Men all over the country!



**GOOD
HOUSEKEEPING
SEAL OPENS DOOR**

Recognized by women all over the world as the symbol of quality merchandise, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on Mason Velvet-eez shoes opens doors for you and clinches sales.



**PUT A "SHOE STORE
BUSINESS" RIGHT
IN YOUR POCKET . . .
YOU DON'T INVEST
A CENT . . . MAKE
BIGGER PROFITS . . .
NO STORE OVERHEAD...
EXCLUSIVE SALES
FEATURES BUILD YOUR
REPEAT BUSINESS**

**HUGE NATIONAL
ADVERTISING PROGRAM
BACKS YOU**

• You get the benefit of big, powerful ads in scores of magazines like Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, etc. People know Mason—are eager to get the special Personal Fitting Service we advertise for your benefit. And remember, we pay for all this advertising—it doesn't cost you a cent.



**LEO DE MATO, WHO
AVERAGES SIX SALES
PER DAY, SAYS:**

"I have accumulated over 645 customers. The Mason line with commissions up to \$3.00 a pair is really SWELL! Not only am I anxious to sell these excellent shoes because it gives me the means to a more comfortable living for my family, but also, I am my own boss with no restrictions or time to account for."

DON'T DELAY

RUSH THE COUPON NOW!

Mason Shoe Mfg. Co.
Dept. M-355, Chippewa Falls, Wis.
Set me up for **BIG PROFITS** in '50!
Rush me **FREE** Selling Outfit featuring
Water Buffalo, Zipper and Air Cushion
Shoes, Leather jackets, other fast-sellers.
Show me how National Advertising makes
more customers and profits for me. Send
everything Free and Postpaid. (My own
shoe size is)

Name
Address
Town State

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-355, Chippewa Falls, Wis

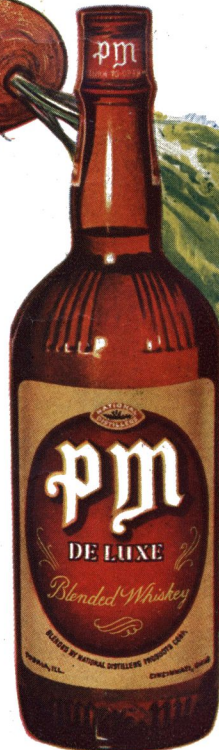
Millions of bottles are bought
by men who like that

*clear
clean
taste*



Taste is mighty tough to put into words. But take one look at the delighted gleam in Br'er Rabbit's eyes and you'll appreciate what we mean by "clear, clean taste". It's that clear, clean taste that has set millions of men calling for PM.

PM
BLENDING WHISKEY



National Distillers Products Corporation, New York, N. Y. Blended Whiskey. 86 Proof. 67½% Grain Neutral Spirits.