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DIME
JUNE
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE
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SCOTT O'HARA
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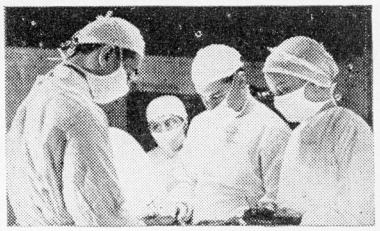
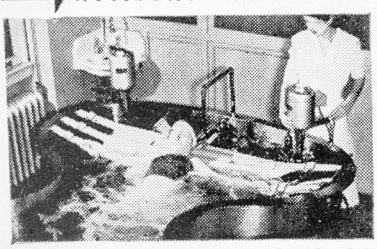


SPECIFIC SURGICAL BENEFITS

LOSS OF TIME DUE TO ACCIDENT



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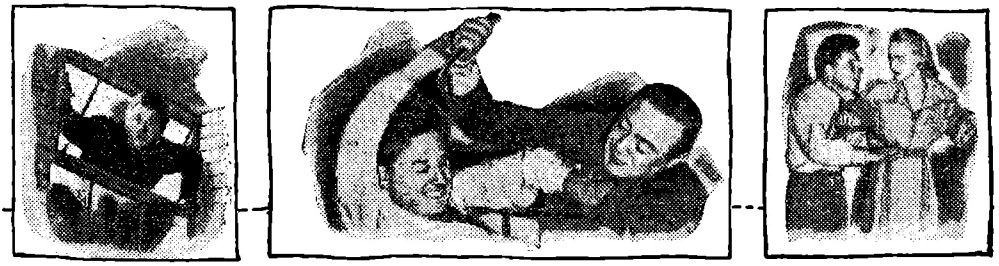

25¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

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While the cops closed in, Captain White fished for the shark who'd knocked him into the hot seat.

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The lowdown on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win $5.00 at the same time.

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PLUS

Complete Book-Length Novel—$2.50 Value

COLLEGE-CUT KILL

by John D. MacDonald 90

The July issue will be out June 2nd

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

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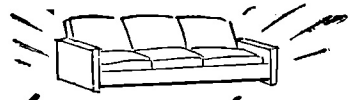
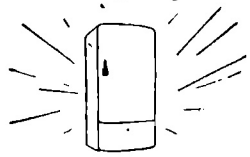
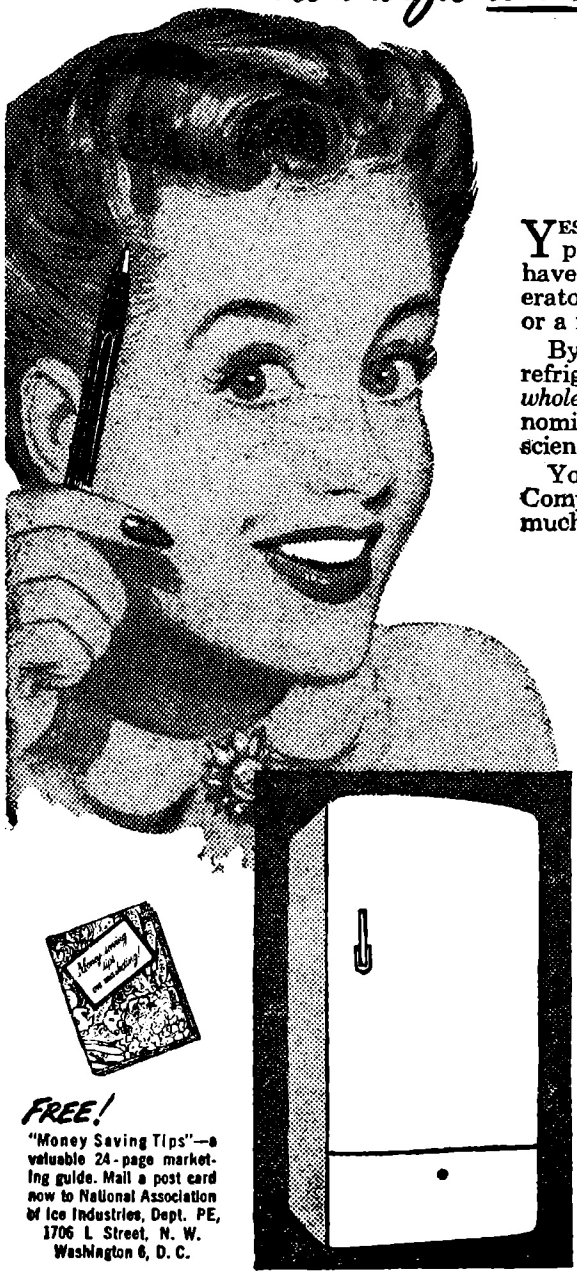


I've figured out a way to get a new sofa and a new refrigerator!





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By buying a modern air-conditioned ICE refrigerator, they saved enough to get their *whole* heart's desire. And in the beautiful, economical ICE refrigerator they got complete, scientific food protection.

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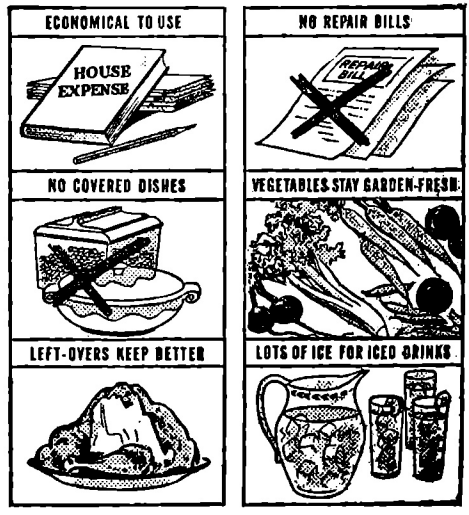

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Name.....*Age*.....
Address.....
City, Zone, State.....

Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

Just when we were beginning to think we'd heard everything, we were told about a new sort of menace—teen-aged terrors who, for the sake of their own irresponsible comfort, endanger babies' lives.

When these baby-sitting beasts are bothered by the crying of their little charges, they put him under kitchen gas to make him drowsy. These junior monsters either don't realize or don't care that the poisonous fumes not only are absorbed into food, but they can cause pneumonia or might even kill the defenseless child.

That's why we warn—be on the alert, parents. When you hire baby-sitters, don't do it blindly. Know in advance about the character of the adolescent with whom you leave your child.

And as always, don't forget that this is the column which will help keep you aware of the prevailing rackets. Every month we print here the letters you readers send us, letting us know of your own personal experience with racketeers and con men of all kinds. We not only publicize the information you give us that will benefit others—but at the same time we pay you $5.00 for every letter we use.

Naturally, we'll withhold your name if you wish. However, no letters can be returned, unless they are 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 regarding your letters.

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

Now, let's glance at the swindle-sheet:

Robbing the Grave

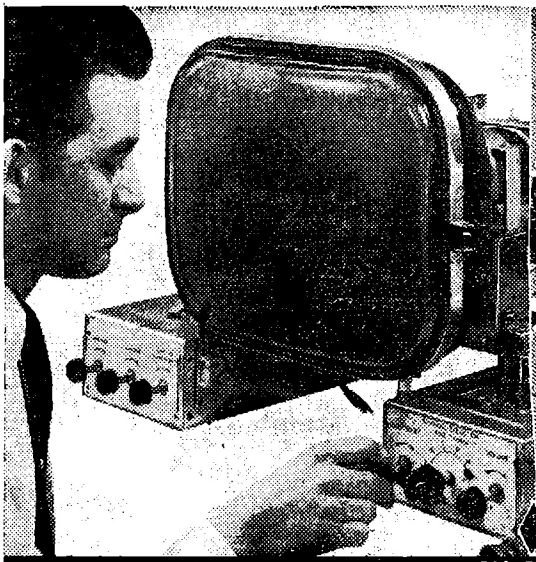
Dear Sir:

Racketeers who prey on the weak and defenseless are the lowest form of that ill-begotten breed. My mother was an unfortunate victim.

Shortly after the death of my father, a well dressed, soft-spoken gentleman came to my mother's home and inquired for dad. Father had died very suddenly and it was a great emotional shock to mother. She was "ripe for picking" in the racket this man was using.

Voicing his sympathy and listening quietly as

(Please continue on page 8)



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Offer Many Opportunities... See How You May Prepare for this Exciting, Profitable field in Your Spare Time at Home!

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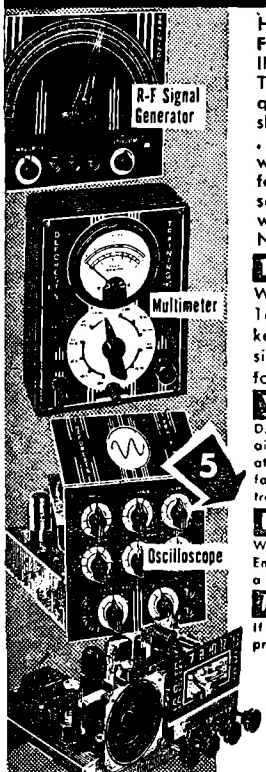

Here is everything you need to prepare you at home for FASCINATING WORK, GOOD MONEY and a THRILLING FUTURE in one of America's most promising fields. This includes the opportunity to build and keep the top-quality 16 inch rectangular picture tube television receiver shown above or a 10 or 12½ inch ROUND picture tube set . . . if you choose. No matter which tube you select, you will get bright, sharp, steady pictures. This is an optional feature—available when you complete your training described below. Get the complete facts. See how D.T.I.'s wonderfully practical "BIG 5" meets industry's needs. No previous experience needed. Mail coupon today!

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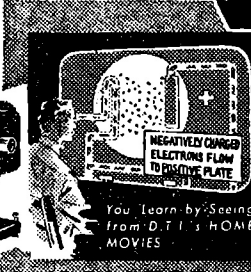

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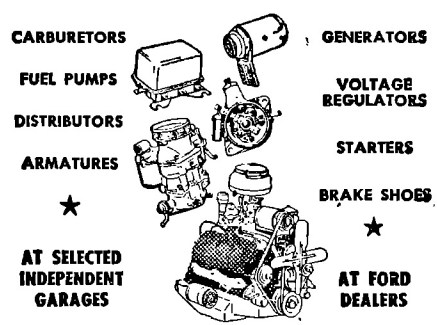


FORD Division of FORD MOTOR COMPANY

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

mother reviewed again her tragic experience, he waited patiently until she had finished. Then he told her father had contracted to buy from him a seventy-five dollar Bible on which only $2.50 had been paid down.

"I'm sure you will want this lovely book your husband planned as an Easter gift for you," said he. "You can see for yourself what a truly beautiful edition it is." He went into detail about the binding, eye-saver print, beautiful illustrations, family record pages, etc.

"But since he is dead—" and he sighed deeply, and left the remark hanging—"the only thing I can suggest is that you sign a new contract which will make you liable for the payments."

Ordinarly, mother is a wise and careful business woman but she had been approached at a time of great mental and emotional upset. She hesitated. The deep pleasing voice continued, "—his last gift for you. A truly wonderful gift, one you will treasure always. It will be a constant reminder in the days to come of his love and thoughtfulness for you."

So mother paid the balance in cash. Tenderly she took possession of dad's last gift.

Later, when she was less emotional, she remembered that a Bible was the last thing dad would ever buy. We were already the proud possessors of two family Bibles. We could do nothing about the one we bought and realized we had been the victims of a petty racketeer. Since our experience, we have heeded the advice of the Better Business Bureau.

Before you invest—investigate. Read before you sign—keep a copy of what you sign. When in doubt—find out.

Mrs. I. C. Mace
St. Louis, Mo.

All Work And No Dough

Dear Sir:

I am a housewife, and like other housewives, would like to earn some extra money. I answered an ad in the local paper, *Earn money in your spare time addressing cards, envelopes, and circulars for different firms.* Then came back an answer to send one dollar for complete details.

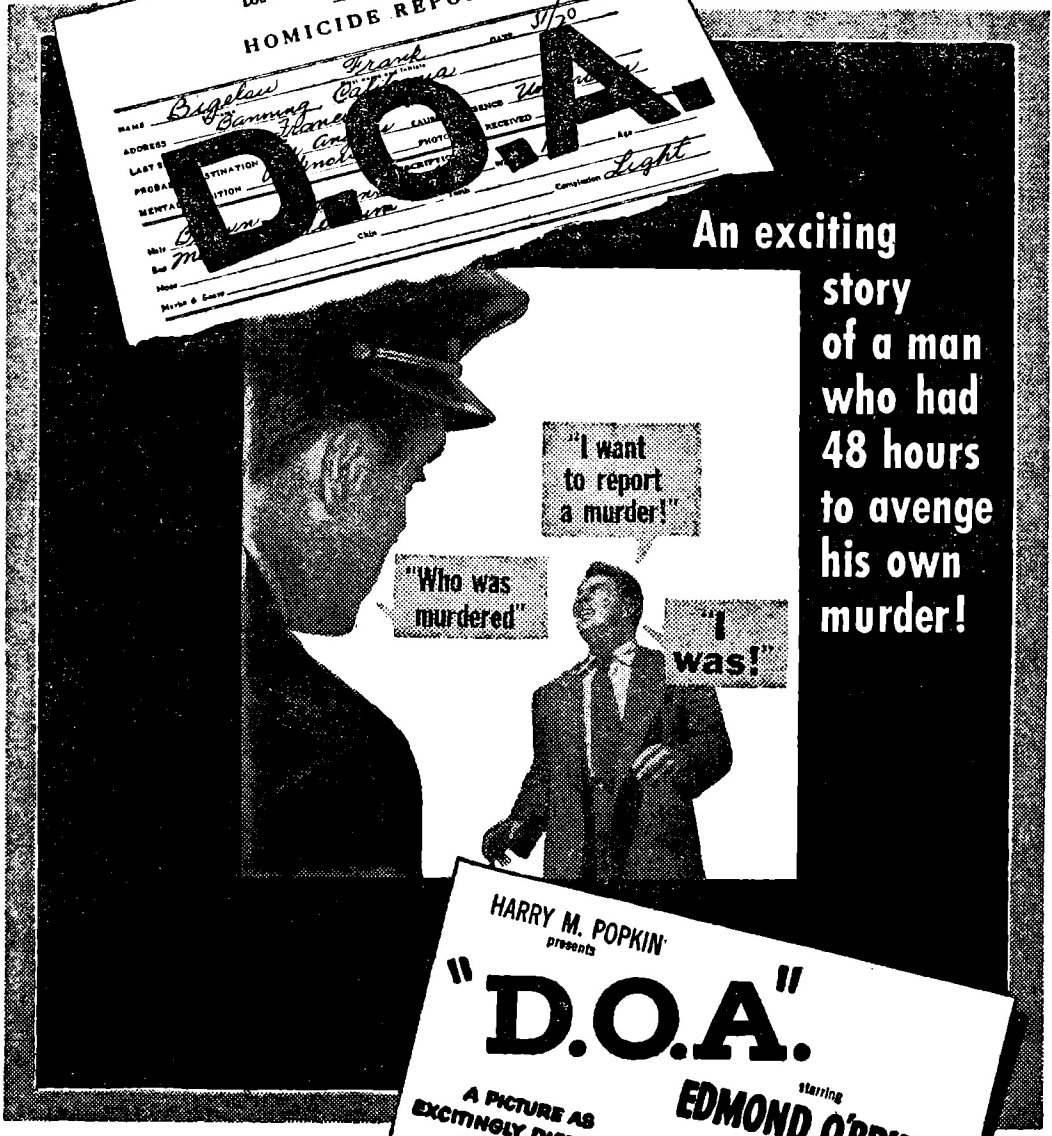
I sent the dollar. The details were to secure a lot of newspapers, especially out of town papers. Then select all of the items and articles that I thought might be of interest to the ones mentioned in them. Then write and tell them I had an article concerning them and thought they'd be interested and would send it for twenty-five cents.

Thinking I'd be working for different firms, I answered the ad—but it was a swindle.

H. H. M.
Hopeville, Georgia

That's the windup on crooked rackets for this month, detective fans. Don't forget to keep us informed of the chicanery you've come up against, so we'll all be prepared. The Editor

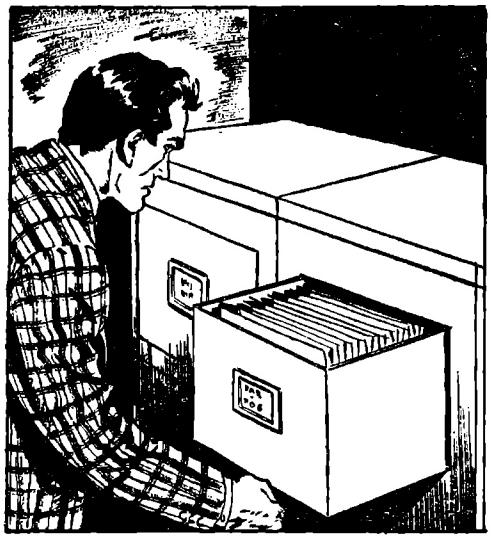
THE STRANGEST ENTRY EVER MADE ON A POLICE BLOTTER!



with
LUTHER ADLER · Beverly Campbell · Neville Brand
Lynn Baggett · William Ching · Henry Hart · Laurette Luez

Produced by Leo C. Popkin · Directed by Rudy Mate · Story and Screenplay by Russell Rouse and Clarence Greene
Music Written and Directed by Dimitri Tiomkin · A Harry M. Popkin Production · Released thru United Artists

THRILL DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION DOCKET



Preston arrived during Headliner Files graveyard watch . . . to find Thackeray Hackett slugged, the files searched—and Lieutenant Blackley phoning.

The dick wanted Pres to hunt through his files for the lassie who'd left behind a murdered man—and her clothing stitched Bonny.

Courtiere Paul Dayn gave Pres and ex shamus Hackett a lead to stripper Sally Florell. But when they found her, she was hanging from a curtain rod . . . dead.

Hackett's cane started swinging . . . in Frederick C. Davis' slashing novelette—"If The Noose Fits. . . ."—in the July issue, published June 2nd.

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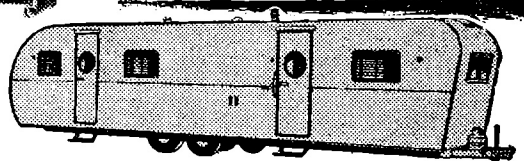

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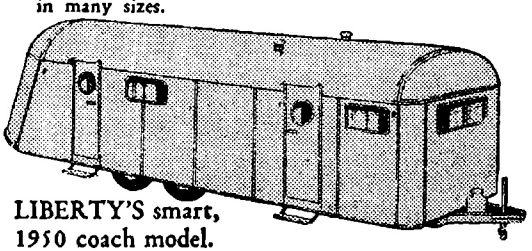
See the 3 complete lines of Liberty trailers at your dealer's today, or fill in coupon below for full information without obligation. Act Now!



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CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

By DAY KEENE

Chill-Packed Murder Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Out of the Jug

MORNING was slow in coming. I'd waited for it a long time. Three years the man said. And three years I had done without any nonsense about parole or executive clemency.

I was washed and dressed and waiting when the rising siren blew. As McKenny, the screw on our tier, clomped down the steel catwalk to pull the master switch, he paused in front of my cell and grinned:

"This is the day, eh, Charlie?"

The lump in my throat was so big all I could do was nod.

THE BLOODY TIDE

The big shark who'd baited boatman Charlie White
with a luscious dame and quick mazuma . . .
was treating him to a fast trip—
back to the hot squat.

After three years in a cell, it was like kissing a jet plane.

Breakfast wasn't much better. The pock marks in the plaster of the mess hall bothered me. I knew them for what they were. If it hadn't been for Swede, I could be dead instead of going out this morning. I could be with Mickey and Saltz. I could be down in solitary with the other ringleaders of the riot. I could even be with Swede.

The thought cost me my appetite. When we finally filed out of the mess hall a front-of-the-prison guard asked if my name was Charlie White. When I said it was, he led the way to a small room in the administration building. The clothes I'd signed for the day before were hanging on a wire hanger.

"When you're dressed," he said, "turn the things you're wearing now over to the supply clerk. Then go straight down the hall to the warden's office." He laughed. "That is, unless you want to keep your denim as a souvenir."

I said, "No, thank you. I don't want any souvenirs. All I want of this is a faint recollection."

"Then stay out of trouble," he told me.

The warden had my dossier on his desk. He looked from it to me and said, "I'd planned to talk to you, White. You're several cuts above the average man we get here and I don't want to see you back. But right now you're so filled with self-pity and feeling so pushed around that nothing I could say would do a bit of good."

He laid a typed receipt, a sealed envelope, a small sheaf of bills, and some silver on the corner of his desk. "So if you'll sign a receipt for the one hundred and twenty-six dollars and fifty cents that is credited to your account, I'll keep my mouth shut and let someone else do the talking."

That would probably be Father Reilly. The priest had given me the only news I'd had of Beth. I knew she was clerking in a store in Palmetto City. I knew she knew about Zo. But if Beth had filed suit for divorce, I hadn't been served with the papers.

"Good-by and good luck, White," the warden concluded the interview.

I started to crack, "Thanks for nothing," but something stopped me. Perhaps it was the fact I had plenty for which to thank him. The warden had leaned over backwards to see that the attempted break hadn't earned me any bad time.

The same guard took me in tow again. But we weren't headed for the chaplain's office. It was the first time I had been in a death house. I didn't like it.

SWEDE was sitting on the edge of a desk in a small windowless conference room. He looked much the same as he always had except his tan was gone, the lines in his face were deeper, and his eyes seemed even bluer.

The guard said I had ten minutes, and closed and locked the door. The lump in my throat grew still larger. Ten minutes wasn't long enough to even start thanking the old man for what he'd done for me. I'd have been in the attempted break up to my eyes if Swede hadn't landed a hard right on my jaw that had belted me back on my cot unconscious.

When I'd come to again, Mickey and Saltz were dead, and Swede had picked up the big tab for caving in a guard's head.

"Stay out of this, kid," he'd warned me. *"You only got six months to go. I got life and ninety-nine years."*

Swede sucked hard at his cigarette as if with time running out on him he wanted to enjoy every puff to the maximum. "Ten minutes," he said, "isn't long. So let me do the talking, kid. Would you say I was a Holy Joe?"

The lump in my throat let go and I laughed nervously.

"Then keep that in mind," Swede said. "You and me are a lot alike, Charlie. We both like the water. We've both made a good living on and out of it. But were we content with that? No." He gestured with his cigarette.

"That's why I asked the warden if I could talk to you. A man does a lot of thinking when he gets in one of these quick-fry joints. And it all boils down to this: A man hauls in the fish he baits for and at the depth at which he fishes."

He lighted a cigarette from the butt of the one he was smoking. "In the old days it was different. A man had to depend on himself and there was a lot of wide open space for him to do it in. But times have changed. After years of sailing by guess, society has set out certain buoys and

markers." He asked if I had a silver dollar. There was one in the silver the warden had given me. Swede traced the lettering on the head side with a finger. "*E Pluribus Unum.* Know what that means, Charlie?"

I said, "Something about one for all or all for one."

Swede shook his head. "No. It means *one out of many.* And that's you and me, Charlie. And the screw who brought you here. And the warden. And the guy who's going to fry me tonight. We're all just one out of many. And you've got to swim with the school and keep its rules or—Well, look what's happened to me. Look what happened to you when you tried to sail on your own.

"As rackets go, you had a good one. But let's add up the score. On the debit side it cost you your wife, your boat, and got you three years in the can. On the profit side you had a dozen roaring good drunks in *Habana,* a fancy dame, and the false knowledge that you were smarter than your fellow fishing-boat captains. There were no lulls in your business. You brought in a good load every time. Okay. How much dough have you got?"

I told him. "One hundred and twenty-six dollars and fifty cents."

Swede hooted. "For three years of your time. There are guys netting mullet out of Naples, and Palmetto City for that matter, who are making that much in one night. But netting mullet is hard work. So is fishing the grouper banks. And you and me had to be wise guys. You hear from your wife yet?"

I said I had not.

"Well," Swede admitted, "I don't know why you should. A man can starve a dame. He can cuss her. He can beat her every night and twice on Sunday and she'll still think he's her personal Marshall plan in a silver champagne bucket. But only if she knows she's the only woman in his life."

He went on before I could speak.

"But are you willing to admit you made a mistake and cut bait or fish? No. You're so rotten filled with self-pity and hate, it's a shame." He snuffed out his cigarette. "I know how you feel, Charlie. I've got a temper, too. That's one of the reasons I'm here." He read my mind. "But don't do it. Killing your former partner because he ran out on you when the law stepped in, will only bring you back here. And I mean *here.*"

Swede lighted a third cigarette. "Look. When you came back from that mess over there in '45 or '46 you'd been living in a bloody tide for four years. Life meant nothing. A thousand lives meant nothing. We had a similar red tide in the Gulf while you were gone. Fish died by the tens of millions. The shores and tide flats were heaped so high with dead fish they stunk. Everyone swore things would never be the same again.

"But they are. The water gradually cleared and the fish began to spawn again. Nature is building back. And that's what you've got to do, Charlie. Forget this. You're in clean water again. If you're smart, you'll stay there. Get a job fishing on shares. Swab out a charter boat if you have to. Then when you get something to offer her, find your wife. Get down on your knees if you have to and beg her to forgive you and come home."

I said that sounded like good advice.

Swede looked at me a long minute, then snuffed out his cigarette. "But you aren't going to take a damn word of it. Okay, kid. It's your funeral."

The guard opened the door. "That's it."

"I've been wasting my time," Swede told him. He walked out of the room without offering to shake hands. "I won't bother to say good-by. It's just *auf Wiedersehen,* Charlie. I'll try to save a quart and a blonde for you down there."

I WALKED back through the yard with the guard and out the front door of the prison. It was the same sun on the outside of the wall but it was brighter somehow. It almost blinded me. I stood on the steps a moment looking at the cars in the parking lot and flipping a mental coin.

If Beth was waiting for me, I'd follow Swede's advice. If she wasn't, I was off to the races. I'd identify, locate, and kill *Señor Peso* if I had to call for the quart and the blonde that Swede had promised to save.

Señor Peso was obviously a *nom de plume* and a cover. It sounded like a gag. The prosecutor had made much of that

fact at my trial. But it was the only name I had.

Swede lost. Beth wasn't waiting—but Zo was. I walked over to the yellow jeepster she was driving and her voice reached out and caressed me.

"Hello, honey. Am I glad to see you." Zo lifted her lips to be kissed. "I've been waiting out here since daybreak."

Her lips were clinging. Her fingers dug into my back. After three years in a cell, it was like kissing a jet plane. I said:

"You shouldn't kiss strange men like that. You won't go to heaven."

She wrinkled her nose at me. "Who wants to go to heaven? And since when are you a stranger?" She slid over on the seat. "Get in, honey. You drive."

I said, "What? Without a driver's license? You want me to break the law?"

She thought that was very funny. "Okay. I'll drive." When I still didn't get into the jeepster, she fished in her purse for the Havana bank pass book that had been in her possession when the law had swooped down on me. "And don't jump to false conclusions. No one let you down. The big shot couldn't show up at your trial. It would have jeopardized the whole set-up." She handed me the pass book.

I had lied to Swede. I wasn't broke. I was filthy. And I was still important to the gang. Every month I had spent in a cell, someone, *Señor Peso* presumably, had deposited one thousand dollars to my account. The last figure showed $36,-124.00.

Zo asked, "Feel better?"

The Devil came up behind me and pushed. *To hell with Beth. To hell with everything,* I thought. *To hell with trying to kill Señor Peso. In his way the guy had played square with me. Why should I try to goose into his grave an egg who laid so many golden pesos?*

I got into the jeepster and Zo pulled out of the parking lot and headed south on Florida 16 into Starke. I asked her where we were headed. She said:

"Over to the West Coast. I've engaged a double cabin on a little cove just above Dead Man's Bay. But we won't be there long. One of the boys will put in with a converted Tarpon Springs sponge boat in the next few days and take us on to Havana and Shrimp Cay. That all right with you?"

Her head was bare. She was wearing a strapless sun dress that made her shoulders look like they were made of rich cream. Heat and palm trees, the slap of blue waves, and Zo. It sounded good to me.

"Yeah. Sure. That's fine," I told her.

She pulled to the side of the road and handed me an opened bottle of rum. Then, the same devil who was pushing me lighting twin candles in her eyes, she kissed me, hard. "Okay. Until then. You drink and dream, I'll drive. . . ."

It was afternoon when we reached the cabin. We'd stopped twice to eat. Once in Gainesville and once in Cross City. I'd also picked up another bottle of rum. After being away from it so long, it hit me almost as hard as Zo's kisses.

The cabin, when we reached it, was a pleasant blur in a stand of slash pine on an isolated section of the shore. A rutted sand road led back to it. As nearly as I could tell, the nearest house was a mile away. The gulf looked the same as it always had, blue and endless and inviting.

It gave me an idea. If I wanted to stay with the party, I had to get some coffee in and some water on me. I told Zo, "I'm going to dunk the body. Put some coffee on, will you, babe?"

She laughed. "You're out of training, honey. But go ahead. You do just that. I figured you might want a swim and you'll find some trunks in the bedroom closet."

She got busy at the stove and I staggered on into the bedroom. Zo had told me we'd be alone, but as I closed the bedroom door I could have sworn I heard someone say:

"You got him, eh?"

I opened the door and asked her, "Who was that?"

Zo smiled at me from the stove. "You must be hearing things, honey. Go ahead and have your swim. The coffee will be ready when you get back."

At the time it didn't seem important. I closed the door again and tried to hang up my coat but I was so high I hung it upside down and an envelope fell out and skittered across the floor. I recognized

it as the envelope the warden had given me along with my discharge papers and what money I had coming. Sitting on the bed I tore it open, and two tens and a five dollar bill fell out. Forcing my eyes to focus, I read:

Sweetheart,

I'd be there when you get out if I could possibly manage it but I have to hang on to my job. So, as a substitute, in case you are broke, I am enclosing my last week's salary for train fare. I love you and I'm waiting. We'll start all over.

Beth

It was the type of letter Beth would write. Beth loved me and she was waiting. And here I was all mixed up with Zo again. I was still so long that Zo called:

"What's the matter? You aren't sick, are you, honey?"

I told her the truth. "Yeah. Plenty." I got a grip on the rum and tried to do some straight thinking. With Beth out of my life forever, nothing would ever be right again. The money and excitement and Zo were just poor substitutes for what I really wanted. Beth was my wife. She was my life. I loved her.

I fished my coat from the door and staggered back into the living room. "So I'm a heel," I told Zo. "I'm sorry. But you and I are washed up as of now. I'm going back to Palmetto City and my wife."

She wanted to know if I was kidding. I said I was never more serious.

She wasn't so pretty now. Her black eyes narrowing to slits, she spat, "You're either drunk or crazy. How much can you make commercial fishing or running a charter boat?"

I said, "Even so. I'm going back to Palmetto City and Beth and get a job and open the old house and raise five or six red-headed kids and be disgustingly honest."

Her eyes opening wide, she screamed, "No. Don't!"

I thought she was screaming at me. She wasn't. The blow came from one side and behind me. I turned in time to see a blur of white face through the fog of pain that was reaching up to engulf me. Then the leaded butt of a gaff hook used as a club landed a second time, and I floated out into space on a red tide.

Just as I passed the last buoy marking the channel of consciousness I thought I heard the flat slap of a pistol. Then a black roller swept me under.

CHAPTER TWO

Sprouting Wings

THE tarpon was huge, two hundred pounds or more, the largest I'd ever hooked. He broke water a dozen times while I was playing him. I was bathed in sweat. My arms and shoulders felt like they had been pounded with a mallet by the time I got him within ten feet of the boat. Then he really went crazy.

With a series of high-powered jolts like the current they were going to shoot into Swede, he lashed into a flurry of frenzy that almost tore the rod out of my hands. I eased the star drag too late. He didn't want any part of where he was and streaked off into the blue, snapping the wire leader as if it had been string.

I looked over the edge of the cruiser to see what had frightened him. A twenty-foot shark looked back. I was still trying to figure out who had tied the shark under my boat, when he tried to climb into the cockpit with me and I beat at him frantically with my fists.

It was the sharpness of the pain that knife the fog away. With the first of returning consciousness I lay, gasping, looking up into the dark, thinking what a screwy dream it had been.

The tied shark was an old gag. All of the guides on the waterfront had used it at one time or another to give their charter passengers a thrill. A six-foot shark tied under a cruiser could make a two-pound trout fight like a fifty-pound blue marlin.

Then, one by one the shattered pieces of reality began to fall into place like the curlicues of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle.

I was lying on the floor of the cabin on the shore of Dead Man's Bay. I'd just read the letter from Beth and told Zo I was going back to my wife when an unidentified party, presumably male, had popped out of nowhere and beaten me half to death with the loaded butt of a gaff hook.

It didn't make sense to me. I had no illusions about Zo. She'd never sprout any wings. I hadn't asked her how she'd lived during the three years I'd been in prison. It hadn't mattered. A jealous boy friend was the obvious answer. But why in the name of time should he pop up and try to beat in my brains when I'd just announced I was going back to my wife?

Then I thought of the voice I'd heard when I'd gone into the bedroom.

"You got him, eh?"

Zo had denied there was a voice. But there obviously had been. In the light of what had happened, it began to look like she had contracted to deliver me to the cabin on Dead Man's Bay like so much beef.

On the other hand she had screamed, *"No. Don't!"* just prior to the first blow.

I gave up trying to think and got to my feet. The interior of the cabin was as black as a fish wholesaler's heart. I tried to find the light switch and, failing, struck a match instead.

According to the alarm clock on the mantel I had been out for hours. It only lacked a few minutes of midnight. The rum bottle was standing on the table. I rinsed my mouth with a drink. Then, striking another match, I walked on into the bedroom—and wished I hadn't.

Zo was lying on the bed, her eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling. But they weren't seeing anything. I struck another match and looked closer. She was cold. The flat slap of a pistol I had heard had been meant for her. She had been dead as long as I had been unconscious.

I lighted a third match and looked around the room. The sense of unreality persisted. A chair had been tipped just so. A shattered rum bottle lay by the side of the bed. Another had drained out its contents on the rug.

Catching sight of a dark object in her hand, I bent over the bed and looked at it. It was the leaded gaff hook with which I had been slugged.

I walked out in the other room and found my coat. The pistol with which she had been killed was in my right-hand coat pocket.

I could see the scene as described by the papers. A recently released con and his moll had rented the cabin to celebrate his release. A drunken brawl had ensued and during it I had killed her.

There was a metallic 'pong' as the alarm clock on the mantel passed the hour. A hundred and some odd miles away, in Raiford, Swede was taking the big jump. He knew all the answers now.

"Here. And I mean right here," he had told me.

SWEDE had been right about a lot of things. If only I'd listened to him. If only I'd opened the letter from Beth before I had met Zo.

The match burned down and burned my fingers. I didn't feel it. This was murder and I was tagged. I walked out the door and stood on the screened-in porch. The night was black but filled with stars. The tide was out and the sweet-sour smell of the tide flats filled the air. I'd never wanted so much to live or felt I had so much to live for. I thought of what I'd told Zo.

"Even so. I'm going back to Palmetto City and Beth and get a job and open the old house and raise five or six red-headed kids and be disgustingly honest."

That was a laugh. The only place I was going was back to Raiford. A half-dozen guards had seen me get into the jeepster. The waitresses at both Gainesville and Cross City would testify that they had seen us together and I had been drinking heavily.

The jeepster was still in front of the cabin. The smart thing for me to do would be to drive to the nearest phone and call the state patrol and get it over. No one would believe my story. I couldn't describe the guy I'd seen. He was as vague as my testimony concerning *Señor Peso.*

The big veins in my temple began to pound. *Señor Peso.* The guy was beginning to haunt me. If it hadn't been for him, I'd still be operating the *Beth II* out of Bill's Boat Basin as a deep-sea charter cruiser. It had been his voice on the phone the time I'd been behind in my payments that had started off all of the fireworks.

"This is Señor Peso, Captain White. How would you like to make a quick five thousand dollars?"

How would I like to drop a mullet net

around ten ton of pompano? All I had to do for the money was meet the *Andros Ancropolis,* a converted sponge boat, eighty miles out in the gulf and bring in a few small waterproof packages that fit easily in my bait well. I didn't know what was in them. I was afraid to ask. I needed that five thousand bad.

That had been the beginning. A trip to Veracruz had followed. Then one to Pinar del Rio. Then one to Havana where I'd met Zo. After that I was in so deep it hadn't mattered. I met who I was ordered to meet, took what I was ordered to get, and brought it back to various points ranging from drops in the Ten Thousand Islands as far north at Palmetto City with a few trips up the bay to Tampa.

I only made one restriction. I refused to run wet-backs. I hadn't spent three years of my life in the navy fighting for the so-called American way of life only to turn around and smuggle in for pay the very guys who were trying to destroy it.

After the one proposition along that line, *Señor Peso* hadn't mentioned the subject again. All of the Coast Guard boys knew me. The older officers had known my father. I never had any trouble getting clearance papers. No one ever stopped me. Until that last time.

Then only my good service record, a purple heart, all the cash I had in the bank, the confiscation of my new boat, and me pleading guilty to assault with a deadly weapon during the fracas that followed the boarding, had saved me from a long Federal rap. That trip, my bait well had been filthy with forty grand worth of Swiss watches and French perfumes on which no duty had been paid.

But I still hadn't ever met *Señor Peso.* All my instructions had come by phone. My money came in the mail, in cash. And once the law had laid its arm on me, he had run out on me cold. When the prosecution had asked me for whom I was running the stuff, all I could offer was a mythical *Señor Peso.* It was a wonder I hadn't gotten life.

Not that it mattered now. Zo was dead and I was tagged. And if he hadn't come forward before, I couldn't expect *Señor Peso* to come out in the open now. Staring up at the stars, I remembered the dead girl's words at the prison.

"And don't jump to false conclusions. No one let you down. The big shot couldn't show up at your trial. It would have jeopardized the whole set-up."

It sounded logical. He'd made good to the tune of $36,000.000. Zo with her talk of Havana and a converted sponger putting in had obviously been under instructions that—if they had been carried out—would have proven profitable to me. No. I couldn't blame *Señor Peso* for this. This was a personal affair between the dead girl and myself and the man who had killed her.

THE night was cool. I put on my coat and lighted a cigarette just as a pair of headlights turned off the highway a quarter of a mile away and bounced down the rutted sand road toward the cabin. I kicked the screen door open and walked out and stood with my hand on the butt of the gun in my pocket, in the shadow of a big slash pine fifty feet from the wooden porch.

The car was blue and white, a state patrol car, with two uniformed troopers in it. They skirted the yellow jeepster and parked in front of the porch.

Getting out, one of them said, "It looks quiet enough to me. Probably a false alarm."

"Probably," his partner agreed. He flicked the car's searchlight around among the trees, missing me by inches. Then he pointed it at the shoreline. "Lonely sort of place, though." He was a bit impatient with his partner. "Well, go ahead. Bang on the door. Wake 'em up and ask 'em if anyone screamed."

His partner banged the screen door. "State Police."

When no one answered, he opened the screen and walked in, sweeping a path before him with his flashlight. A moment later I heard him whistle. Then the lights in the bedroom came on and he shouted to his partner:

"Hey. Come in here, Jim. That fisherman who called the barracks wasn't whoofing. Some dame was screaming all right. But she isn't screaming now. She's dead."

So much was clear. The man who had killed Zo had waited as long as he could hoping her body would be discovered.

When it wasn't, he'd called the State Patrol. He really wanted to pin this thing on me and he didn't want me to get too far away before the law stepped in.

I hoped the trooper would leave his keys in the car. He didn't. Sliding out from behind the wheel, he clipped his keys on his belt before drawing his gun and striding into the cabin.

I inched over toward the jeepster. A few minutes before I'd been considering calling the State Patrol and turning myself in. Now I was damned if I would. I didn't want to go back to Raiford. I didn't want to die. At least not without seeing Beth and telling her I was sorry.

The ignition key was still in the jeep. Keeping it between me and the cabin, I walked the length of the patrol car, raised the hood as quietly as I could and yanked out a handful of wires. Then I walked back and climbed in the jeepster, crossed my fingers and kicked it over. Over the roar of the motor, I heard one of the troopers say:

"What the hell?"

Then I'd spun the jeepster in a sharp U turn that threw up a screen of sand and was bouncing down the rutted road with both troopers shouting after me and spraying the back of the car and the windshield with lead.

I made the highway without being hit and into a little on the north bank of a river. I had, at the most, a five or ten minute start. I'd put the patrol car temporarily out of action but their two-way radio was still working. It would only be a matter of minutes before road blocks would be set up and every law-enforcement officer in Dixie, Bronson, Alachua, Marion and Citrus counties would be alterted for a killer driving a new yellow jeepster.

A tired-looking tourist driving a mud-splattered '48 with Iowa license plates was just pulling out of the town's only filling station as I passed it. I drove on to the edge of town and the bridge across the river. There was a small gap between the black-and-white guard rail and the bridge.

Pointing the jeepster at the gap, I rammed down the gas and hopped out. It hit the gap dead center and disappeared with a splintering of wood and a screech of metal. A moment later there was a great splash. The '48 behind me braked to a stop and the tourist stuck his head out the window.

"Holy smoke," he said. "What happened, fellow? Did your car go out of control?"

"No," I told him. "I did." I opened the door on the far side, climbed in beside him, and rammed the nose of the gun that had killed Zo in his ribs. "Look," I said, "I have a date with a road block where this road joins U. S. 19. That is, unless I get there first. How fast will this crate go?"

He looked at the gun in his ribs and swallowed hard. "Well," he admitted, "I've had it up to ninety. And my foot wasn't all the way to the floor."

I said, "Then put it there. As of now."

CHAPTER THREE

Close Call

IT COULD be the law would figure out I was in Palmetto City. If it did, it wasn't my fault. I'd left a trail only a snake with Saint Vitus dance could follow. I hadn't doubled back once but I'd done a lot of twisting and changing of means of transportation. I'd kissed the Iowa tourist good-by at Inglis after giving him the impression I had a boat waiting for me in Withlacoochee Bay. From there I'd picked up a ride on a fruit truck as far as Dunnellon and U. S. 41. I'd taken a bus from there to Tampa and spent most of the day buying new clothes piecemeal.

When I'd finished buying slacks and a sport coat and a loud gabardine shirt and washing the blood from the back of my head, I looked a lot more like a northern tourist than I did a local boy who'd spent most of his life on the water.

The Tampa papers were filled with the thing. The headline on the evening paper read:

EX-CONVICT MURDERS SWEETHEART

The story was about as I expected. The way the law figured it, Zo and I had staged a drunken party to celebrate my release. During it, we had quarreled and I killed her. I was, variously reported,

seen north near Tallahassee, boarding a forty-foot sloop in Withlacoochee Bay, and hopping a south-bound freight at Dunnellon.

But the law was merely confused, not stupid. Once they sifted out the false reports, the net would begin to tighten. And Beth was in Palmetto City. The chances were there was a stake-out right now on the house in which she was living.

I'd taken a plane from Tampa to Palmetto City. But I didn't dare take a cab from the airport to the return address she had given on her letter. I had been born in the town. I'd lived there most of my life. I knew all the cab drivers. All of them knew me. I also knew the law. Ken Gilly, a kid with whom I had gone to school, was now a lieutenant in charge of the detective bureau.

Getting out of the airport as fast as I could without attracting attention, I strolled past the dark ball park and out to the mole in the bay where, night or day, there were always a dozen or so northern tourists fishing. It was dark on the mole and as good a place to kill time as any.

My plans were all tentative. I wanted to talk to Beth. I wanted to tell her I was sorry things turned as they had for us. Then I wanted to talk to one or two of the boys who still berthed their fishing cruisers at Bill's Boat Basin. One of them, Matt Heely, owed me plenty. And I was willing to call it square for a free trip to Shrimp Cay.

It was too late for me to turn honest now. Once there I'd attempt to contact *Señor Peso* through channels and see what he had in mind when he had sent Zo to re-establish contact with me. If he decided I was too hot to be of any use to him, there was still the thirty-six grand in my Havana bank account. And a man had to be pretty stupid if he couldn't have one hell of a time drinking himself to death on thirty-six thousand dollars anywhere south of the Tropic of Cancer.

The tide was in. The moon was right. You could have caught fish with doughballs and a bent pin. At one o'clock I interrupted the excited shoe clerk from Chicago who was pulling in pig-fish, about the size of the ones I usually used as bait

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for snook, and who was teaching me how to fish, telling him that while it all was very interesting I thought I would turn in.

The return address on Beth's letter was less than a mile from the mole. It proved to be a small white frame garage apartment on a palm tree and bougainvillea-tangled alley on the south-east side of town, not far from the store in which she was clerking. It was a hell of a place for the wife of a man who'd made the money I'd made to live in. Shame heated the collar of my sport shirt. Swede had been right about the bloody tide, too. I must have been out of my mind to treat Beth the way I had.

Of course she could be living in the big old house on the island across the deep water channel from the mainland. But she couldn't live there and work in town. The only way it could be reached was by boat. Unless she had rented the old place to bring in a little additional income, the chances were that nothing but snakes and raccoons and rabbits and field mice had lived on the island for three years.

There was no police car in front or in the alley. Keeping close to the wall, I climbed the stairs and rapped lightly on the door. Either Beth wasn't asleep or she was sleeping lightly. Almost immediately she asked, "Yes? Who is it?"

I took a deep breath and told her. "Charlie."

A MOMENT of silence followed. Then slippered feet scuffed across the floor and only a screen door separated us. A single beam of moonlight, flooding in through a hole in the vine that almost covered the porch, spotlighted her white face. I'd forgotten she was so pretty. Even with her cheeks stained with tears and dark lines under her eyes, she was beautiful. And one time she had loved me and I had thrown her away for a mess of Zo.

Pressing her nose against the screen she said, "You shouldn't have come here, Charlie. The police were here not two hours ago and I promised Ken Gilly I'd call him if you did contact me."

I said, "Then you know?"

She brushed a lock of red hair away from her forehead. "Yes. I know. It was in the papers."

I got it off my chest with a rush. "I didn't do it, Beth. I didn't kill her. And I didn't open your letter, I didn't realize what it was, until after I'd reached the cabin. When I did read it, I told Zo I was coming back to Palmetto and you. And that was when it happened. Someone slugged me and shot Zo."

She said, "And you expect me to believe that?"

I asked, "Have I ever lied to you, Beth?"

She thought a moment. "No. That's one thing you've never done." She unhooked the screen. "Come in. Come in before one of the neighbors sees you."

Inside the room I tried to take her in my arms but she pushed me away.

"No. I want time to think. This may change things for both of us. What do you intend to do now, Charlie?"

I told her.

Beth said, "In other words, if you can evade the law and get out of the country, you're going right back in the same old racket. You're going to work for this *Señor Peso* again."

I asked here what else I could do.

She told me. "Be a man. If you didn't kill that girl there must be someway we can prove it."

I asked her, "How?"

She shook her head. She was standing so close to me that one of her curls brushed my face. It was all I could do to keep from digging both of my hands in her hair and pulling her to me. "I don't know," she admitted. Then, woman-like, she persisted, "But there must be some way. Perhaps Mr. Clifton could help us."

He was the guy she worked for. I'd never liked him. Few of the local people did, even if they did trade in his store. A cocky little Yankee, he'd come to Palmetto City twenty years before and built an idea into the biggest business in town. He wouldn't be undersold. If a fellow merchant ran a loss leader costing him two cents, Clifton would lose five to get the business. And he had.

From a two-by-four dry-goods store he'd branched out into a block square four story high merchandise carnival, handling everything from apples to zithers. If you couldn't buy it at Clifton's, it wasn't for sale.

I asked, "Why should he help us?"

Beth was frank about it. "Mr. Clifton's in love with me. He's asked me to marry him. He even offered to buy the old house out on the island so I'd have some money and wouldn't have to work while I made up my mind whether or not to divorce you."

I said, "Oh yeah?"

Beth put me back in my place. "*You* should get sore."

The strain was beginning to get me. I sat down on the edge of the bed and buried my head in my hands. "Okay, honey," I admitted. "I'm sorry. I haven't got a beef. Not with the way I've loused up our lives."

She sat down on the bed beside me. "Kiss me, Charlie."

I said that after the way I'd treated her I shouldn't think she'd want me to. Her lips inches from mine, she repeated, "I asked you to kiss me, Charlie."

I took her face in my hands and kissed her. But it wasn't the way I kissed Zo. It was more like I'd kissed her in front of the altar after the Reverend Paul had finished marrying us and the world was going to be our oyster. She was something sweet and beautiful and fragile. She was good. She was something that had been missing out of my life for a long time.

When I lifted my face, her eyes were shining in the dark and patting my cheek with one hand she kissed me back of her own accord. "It's going to be all right, honey," she told me. "I don't know how we'll do it. But we'll *make* it right."

A car purred to a stop in the alley. Heavy feet began to climb the stairs. A moment later there was a light knock on the door.

Standing up in front of me, Beth asked, "Yes?"

"It's Ken again, Beth," Gilly told her. "I'm sorry to disturb you but I thought you ought to know. Charlie's been traced to a men's store in Tampa where he bought a complete new outfit. We're setting up roadblocks on the causeway and all roads leading into Palmetto City."

"Oh," Beth said. "Oh."

Ken sounded tired. "I wish the guy hadn't headed back this way. Heaven knows I don't want to make the pinch. Charlie's my friend. But what can I do?"

Beth suggested. "Maybe he didn't do it, Ken. Maybe he didn't kill that girl."

Lieutenant Gilly was skeptical. "Yeah. Maybe. And maybe someday filet of grunt will sell for as much as snapper fingers. Well, Tampa only being sixty miles away, I thought I'd let you know. You want me to post a guard in the alley?"

Beth's fingers tightened on mine. "No. I don't think that will be necessary, Ken. Even if Charlie should come here I don't think he'd hurt me."

"No," Gilly agreed. "Well, it's just as well. I can use every man I have on the road blocks. But if he should slip through and come here, you let me know now, Beth."

He clumped on back down the stairs. A moment later the police cruiser purred off into the night. I could feel the cold sweat start on my cheeks. The boys were beginning to haul in the net—and I was in it. It wouldn't be long now.

BETH sat back on the bed, all business. "No one ever comes in here but me, and I was going to suggest you stay here until after I'd talked to Mr. Clifton. Now that's out. When you don't show up at the blocks, they're going to know you got through and someone is bound to suggest the police search this apartment. There's only one logical place for you to stay."

I asked her where that was.

She said, "Out at the house. You know it and the island better than anyone else. An army couldn't find you there if you didn't want them to. Now, tell me the whole thing from the minute you were released from prison yesterday morning."

I gave her a play by play description. But I still didn't like the Clifton angle and said so. "You say the guy loves you. You say he's asked you to divorce me and marry him. Well, what's his reaction going to be when you tell him I'm in town? He's going to reach for his phone and call the cops. The guy is a bargain hunter. And it's a lot cheaper for him to turn me in to be burned than it is for him to pay for a divorce."

Beth said I wasn't doing Mr. Clifton justice. He was really a very fine and a very honorable man. She shook her curls in my face. "Besides I'm not going to tell

him you're in town. You have to admit he is smart?"

I said I did.

Beth continued. "All I am going to tell him is that I don't think you killed that girl and ask his advice on how to go about hiring a private detective to prove it."

It didn't sound too bad. The guy was smart. And Beth was right about the island. I could hide out on it indefinitely. "Well, okay," I agreed. "But how are you going to contact me?"

She said she would find some way to do so without making Ken Gilly suspicious. "After all, it's our house. I have a right to go out there anytime I want to. Maybe I want to put it in shape to be sold."

I asked her when she'd been out there last.

She said, "Not since shortly after your trial. For a long time I didn't care what happened to it. Now, if we can straighten out this mess you're in, we're going back there to live."

I got up to go while the going was good and Beth walked to the door with me. "I love you, Charlie."

I said that went double. I felt some better. I felt a lot better. But we still had a long row to hoe. I didn't see how anyone could possibly prove I hadn't killed Zo.

I wanted to stay. I knew Beth wanted me to. But Ken Gilly was nobody's fool. When I didn't show at the road blocks, he'd know I had slipped into town before they had been established and would put a stake-out on Beth's apartment without telling her anything about it.

Beth kissed me at the screen door. "I'll be out—soon. With good news to report."

Keeping close to the wall and out of the moonlight, I tiptoed sideways down the stairs to the alley and made my way towards the nearest street. I'd gone perhaps twenty yards from the foot of the stairs, when the big guy stepped out from behind the bole of a pineapple palm.

"You there," he stopped me. "What's your name? And what are you doing prowling an alley at two o'clock in the morning?"

My first thought was, *Ken left a stake-out after all.*

I thought fast: I didn't know the man. He was obviously new to the force, at least since I'd been sent to Raiford. If he took me in, I was dead. I still had the murder gun in my pocket. They'd burn me like they'd burned Swede. My only chance was to bluff and run.

"Why, my name is Olson," I lied. I tried to feint him off guard by making him look where I was pointing. "I live in that house back there, officer. And I'm on my way downtown to try to locate an all-night drug store."

"Oh," he said. "I see."

There was a glint of silver in the moonlight. I thought at first he was throwing a gun on me. Then his arm reversed itself and started up in a familiar arc and I knew what he had in his hand. Backing a step, I let it rip air where my belly had been.

Then, stepping in before he could recover his balance, I smashed a hard right to his jaw that smacked him off his feet and his head into an empty garbage can with sufficient force to make it ring like a bell-buoy.

He was out, cold. Striking a match I leaned over him. I still didn't know him. But whoever he was I doubted if he was an officer of the law. If he was, he was the first cop I'd ever seen who carried a six-inch fish knife.

Then the light in the window of the apartment just over my head came on and some old dame asked nervously:

"What was that? Who's that out there in the alley?"

I said, "Me-arrh."

"Oh," she said. "Bad kitty."

Then I tiptoed out of there fast before she stopped to think that kitty cats didn't strike matches.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Man's Bay

THE water was warm but the air was cold. The tide had changed and was going out. The pull of it was terrific. It had been three years since I'd done any swimming. I thought when I reached mid-channel that the tide was going to sweep me out into the gulf. As it was, I lost one of my shoes off the length of plank on which I had piled my clothes and which I was pushing ahead of me.

It would have been much easier to steal

a boat. But I knew how most bait-camp men were. They hated to lose a boat almost as badly as a wife. A good boat cost two hundred dollars. You could get married for five. And I didn't want to direct any attention to the island.

The knife man worried me. Who was he? How had he known I would be coming down that alley? Why had he tried to kill me? He wasn't the man who had killed Zo. That much I knew. It hadn't been his voice that had said, *"You got him,* eh?" Nor was he the man who had slugged me with the butt of the gaff hook. He was a much larger man whose muscles strained the shoulders of his coat. If he had swung the gaff, it would have caved in my head.

As the low-lying trees grew to their proper place in the night sky, I felt for bottom and found it. The storms of the last three years hadn't changed the coast line of the island, not on the lee side at least. The deep water extended to within a few feet of the shore. I waded up on to the sand and slapped and tramped myself dry and warm before I put on my clothes.

Now I was really home. My rotting nets, unused since before I had gone into the Service, still hung on their long drying racks. A half-dozen hulks and stove-in rowboats lay half buried in the sand, including the bare ribs of the fifty-foot bottom that had been my father's boat. I was glad the old man was dead. I was the first of our family to do time and the disgrace would have broken his heart.

Dressed, I turned for a last look at the mainland. It was a good mile and a half across the channel. I couldn't see the running lights of any boats. My passage, so far as I knew, had been unobserved.

I padded, barefoot, up the weed-overgrown path toward the house, hoping I didn't step on a snake. The path was a jungle of vines. I wriggled my way through them, being careful not to disturb them any more than I had to. I didn't know how long I would have to stay on the island. And when both his road blocks and stake-out failed, Gil would undoubtedly make a perfunctory search of the home place.

Then I thought of something both Beth

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and I had forgotten—food. Unless there were some canned goods in the pantry, food was going to be a problem. But I'd face that when I came to it. As long as I knew I was going to live, I could live on fish and rabbits if I had to.

The house itself set well back from the shore in a clearing that we had farmed from time to time. Now the ground was sour and overrun with saw palmetto. Even in the waning moonlight I could see the fifteen-foot wide porch across the front was sagging badly in spots, supported only by the thick-trunked red and purple bougainvillea and flame vine that had been old before I was born.

I picked an orange from a tree and tried to suck it but the grove was as sour as the garden. I wondered why Clifton had offered to buy the place from Beth. Probably out of pity or in the hope of buttering her up so she would say yes to his proposal. The old place was out of the world. I mean that literally.

No one but a typical cracker fishing family or a pair of kids as much in love as Beth and I had been would want to live in such a place. And the rest of the island was as bad. It was still as wild as it had been when the wreckers had been a power in Key West and Billy Bowlegs had terrorized gulf shipping.

I walked up the stairs to the porch. Coiled in a pool of moonlight, a ten-button rattle snake watched me from the shredded canvas of a once-expensive chaise longue I had given Beth when we'd first been married.

I opened the door and went in. The big front room smelled old and musty. By striking a match I found a lamp with some oil in it and lit it. Even as old and decrepit as it was, after three years in a six by eight cell, the house looked good to me. At least here I could breathe. There were some canned goods in the pantry but not much, enough perhaps for three or four meals.

The more I thought about Beth asking Mr. Clifton to suggest a good private detective to prove I hadn't killed Zo, the screwier it sounded. If the guy was really in love with her, he wasn't going to cut off his prospects by sweeping the legal sand spurs out of her husband's path to her side.

When she contacted me, I'd suggest she try to arrange passage for us both and meet me somewhere down in the Caribbean. I was pretty certain that Matt Heely would run us down, for a fresh piece of change, if not for the money he owed me. Matt was as bad as I'd been. He made good money but he threw it away with both fists and was always in financial hot water when it came time to pay his insurance or the installments on his boat.

Crossing the kitchen floor, I plowed up a pine splinter with my big toe that made me see stars for a minute. The quarter-inch callouses on my feet were gone. I'd have to have shoes of some kind. Then I thought of the old pair of sneakers I'd discarded just before making my final trip down to Shrimp Cay for the load with which I'd been caught. They should be up in the attic somewhere. Beth was as bad as a magpie. She never threw anything away on the theory that some time she might find a use for it. And this was one of the times.

HOLDING the lamp in one hand, I padded up the back stairs to the second floor and stopped in front of the door of the bedroom that Beth and I had used. I hadn't had it on the first floor but here I had an eerie feeling that I was being watched. I opened the door and held the lamp high.

It was the same with the three other bedrooms on the floor. They were all as Beth had left them when she'd left the island, stripped to the bare mattress with the bedding folded neatly and piled at the foot of each bed. It was my nerves, nothing more. I started to light a cigarette as I climbed the stairs to the attic, then decided to conserve my supply. Cigarettes were another thing that Beth and I had forgotten.

The old house had been built by my grandfather when both labor and lumber were cheap. Rumpus rooms hadn't been thought of, but he'd finished the attic as a ballroom so he and his friends could dance when a party of boats had come out from the mainland or a rare passenger vessel, New Orleans or Havana bound, had dropped anchor in the deep channel.

The finished section was thirty by forty feet, paneled in rare woods, with two large

dormer windows on each side and two more windows at each end. But it had been a long time since it had been used as a ballroom. The windows had been boarded up and covered with cobwebs for years. Even when I had been a small boy, the attic had become a family catch-all.

I pushed open the heavy door and walked in and a sudden gust of wind blew out the flame of my lamp. Cursing the wind, I walked a few more feet. Then setting the lamp on the bare floor I lifted the hot glass chimney, struck a match and applied it to the wick.

I wasn't alone in the attic. Sitting in built-in bunks against the wall were perhaps a dozen men, their eyes as flat and expressionless as those of the coiled rattlesnake I had seen on the chaise longue. I'd seen their faces before.

At least I'd seen similar faces in the stews of Marseille, Port Said, Sevastopol, Hamburg, and two dozen other war-torn ports. They were the faces of wanted men. Men wanted in their own countries for treason and murder and fabulous thefts. Men willing to pay a stiff price to escape the noose, the guillotine, the firing squad, and the garrote.

I straightened. "What the hell?"

A thin-faced man with a heavy accent said, "Someone make out that light."

It was the only word spoken. Another man snatched the lamp from me and extinguished it. I reached for the gun that had killed Zo and remembered it was in the pocket of my coat. And I'd left my coat in the kitchen.

Then the first of a dozen fists found me and beat me to my knees with the deadly precision of men who have nothing left to lose. I fought back to my feet and the ring of fists hemming me in gave way for a moment as I tried to pound my way to the door. Then a foot thudded into me. As I went screaming to the floor, still other feet found my head, my chin.

The huge tarpon was back on my line. Only this time, like a fool, I'd allowed the line to become entangled with my ankles and he'd pulled me over the side of the cruiser and was heading, seemingly, for the bottom of the gulf out in fifty fathoms.

I was cold. I was wet. I was strangling. I was sinking through endless fathoms of black water, towed by the huge fish. It was strange what a man would dream.

Then an alarm bell rang in my head. I wasn't dreaming. I was drowning. It wasn't a fish pulling me down. It was a weight. I fumbled at the cord. Then I managed to open my knife and cut it.

The swift descent ended abruptly and I shot surfaceward. Just as my lungs were about to burst I broke water. I gasped a mouthful of air and sunk again, but just under the surface this time.

When my head broke water again, I turned on my back and floated. Perhaps five hundred feet away the running lights of a boat were circling and I could hear the faint throb of an underwater exhaust. I lay with my cheek to the water watching the lights. As they came toward me again I turned on my belly, ready to dive.

Then from the wheel of the boat, Matt Heely said, "Like a stone. Poor Charlie." He sounded sad.

The boat passed to port. Its stern lights grew small, then disappeared, and I was alone in the night. I tried to raise myself in the water and was partially successful. There were no shore lights in sight. That meant I was a long way out in the gulf.

I turned on my back again and floated until my breathing was normal. Then I tried to find shore again and had better luck this time. Almost parallel with the water I could see a faint pin prick of light that didn't look like a waning star. I swam toward it slowly, floating frequently to rest, hoping it was the light on Quarantine Key.

I HAD to reach shore. I meant to. I had the whole set-up now. I knew who had killed Zo. I knew why she had been sent to meet me. I knew why thirty-six thousand dollars had been credited to my account. I not only knew who had killed her, but why. More, I knew what the men were doing in the attic of the old home place and how they had gotten there.

The sky grew blacker, then faded into a dead gray. All of the stars disappeared. A light on-shore wind sprung up and whipped up a froth of white caps. I swam on doggedly. The gray turned to a dirty mauve and then to a bright crimson before breaking into day. I found a drifting

mossy, old plank and used it to rest on.

It had been Quarantine Light I had seen. I passed to starboard of it on an incoming tide, unobserved. The same thing happened with the Coast Guard plane making its routine morning flight. I was just another speck in an endless carpet of water.

Then the water turned a pale green and I knew I was on the outer bar. I waded a few hundred yards, then sat neck-deep on the edge of blue water for perhaps half an hour before striking out again to cover the last half mile.

I came ashore a few hundred yards above the former luxury hotel on the beach that the government had bought and turned first into a rehabilitation center and then into a veteran's hospital. An early-rising former G.I. hunting for shells along the beach looked at me curiously, then decided I was a fellow patient.

"Out for an early morning swim, eh?"

I said that was right and asked him if he had a cigarette. He had and gave me one. I sucked the smoke into my lungs gratefully. Nothing had ever tasted quite so good except the cigarette I had smoked after I'd finished my part of the demolition work on Saipan.

It was perhaps six o'clock. There was no one but myself and the former G.I. on the beach. That much was fortunate. The law was still looking for me. And all I had on was a pair of shorts. I'd kicked off my pants and ripped off my shirt perhaps five miles out.

My new friend looked at my battered face and grinned, and I knew what he was thinking. As soon as they get a little dough together, a lot of the boys out at the hospital swarm into town and raise hell in an attempt to forget that they will never be the men that they once were. I touched my face. It was tender to the touch but the long immersion in salt water had cauterized the cuts. And if it looked like the rest of my body, it was a sight in technicolor.

His grin widened. "Kinda pitched one, eh?"

I said, "That's right. And am I going to get hell. You don't know where I can borrow some clothes, do you, buddy, just long enough to sneak by the desk?"

That was right up his alley. He'd held up a few bars himself. "Why not cop a suit from the old ward-room?" he asked. He nodded at an open ground-floor door. "You know. In where the orderlies hang up their civies when they change into whites."

I patted him on the back. "Thanks. That's an idea, fellow."

There was a clatter of dishes in the kitchen as the help brought up breakfast, but I was alone in the locker-room. I picked out a white sport shirt and a gray gabardine suit and a pair of two-toned sport shoes that didn't fit too badly. A broad-brimmed panama hat that I could pull down over my eyes and so hide most of my face completed the ensemble. The name of the guy who owned the clothes was Phillips. His hospital pass was in a glassine case in the outer breast pocket of the coat. Making a mental note to reimburse him for the loan if I lived through the fireworks I intended to touch off, I walked down a long corridor and out the front door of the hospital.

A sleepy guard barely glanced at the pass. "A long night, eh, fellow?" he yawned.

I agreed it had been a long night.

CHAPTER FIVE

Señor Peso

CLIFTON'S was always crowded, from eight o'clock in the morning until midnight. It was around ten when I got there. According to the headlines of the paper on the news rack next to the cigarette counter, I was still driving the cops nuts.

I hadn't attempted to crash the road blocks set up on either side of Tampa. I hadn't been seen in Palmetto City. The general public had been alerted to watch for me. I was known to be armed and dangerous. I was described as pale, six feet tall, weighing in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds and wearing blue slacks, a checked sport coat, and white shoes. I was probably bare-headed as I was never known to wear a hat.

I turned the pages of the paper. Swede was on page four, in a one-column two-inch box. All it said about him was that Swen (Swede) Olson, former fishing

guide and convicted murderer, had been executed at midnight for killing a prison guard during an abortive attempted break. Swede's troubles were over. I thought of what he'd told me in the death house.

"A man hauls in the fish he baits for and at the level at which he fishes."

If that wasn't good logic, I'd eat it.

The snip back of the cigarette counter asked if I wanted to buy the paper or rent it. I laid twenty-seven cents of Phillips' change on the counter.

"Tut tut. What if Mr. Clifton should hear you? Remember the customer is always right. But just to show you my heart is in the right place I'll take the paper and a deck of cigs."

She slammed the cigarettes on the counter. My picture was on the front page of the paper next to a picture of Beth. She'd looked straight into my face but hadn't recognized me.

I cracked the cellophane wrapper, then tapped the picture of Beth. "Now could I have some information. Where can I find this girl? I was told she worked at the cigarette counter."

The snip snapped, "She did. But right now you'll probably find her in Mr. Clifton's office." She patted her blonde hair. "Not that I can see what he sees in her."

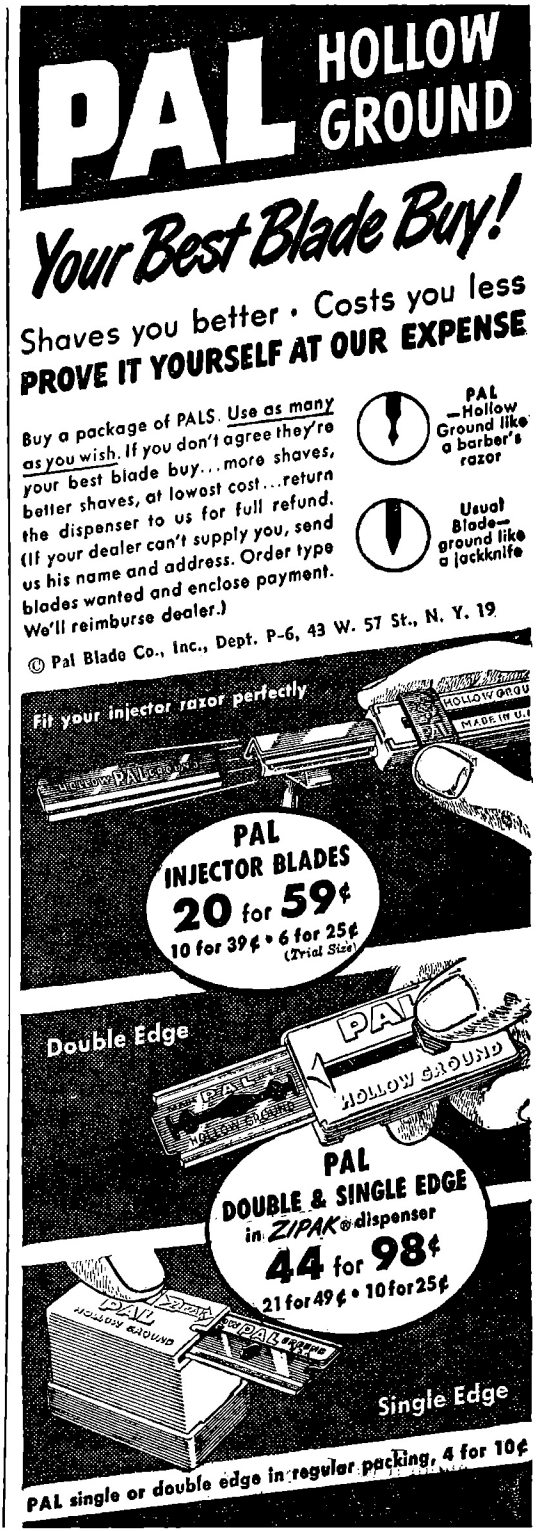
I walked back through an aisle lined with tables cluttered with merchandise to the elevator and asked to be taken to the fourth floor. No one, including the elevator operator, gave me a second look.

The office was large and modern. Behind a half-glass partition I could hear a man, presumably Clifton, saying, "But, my dear girl. I'd like to help you. You know that. But I can't see what good hiring a private detective would do. I've been talking to Lieutenant Gilly since you first mentioned the matter this morning and he says there isn't a doubt but what White killed that girl in the cabin on Dead Man's Bay."

Beth stuck to her guns. "I don't believe it."

I opened the door and walked in.

A dapper little man, perhaps five feet four, with wide-spread intelligent eyes, a high forehead and hair so black it looked like it had been dyed, Clifton waved me out of the office. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "But whatever it is, I'm too busy to see



you right now. Please come back later."

I closed the door and leaned against it.

Beth recognized me and dug a fist into her mouth to keep from screaming. "Charlie," she said finally. "What are you doing here?"

I drew a chair up to the desk and sat down. "Well, it got a little hot out on the island. In fact, quite a few things have happened since I saw you last night. And as you said maybe Mr. Clifton would help us, I thought I'd come in and see what he could do."

The little guy looked at me like I was something obnoxious. "Nothing. I can do absolutely nothing," he said. "As I was just telling Beth—" he corrected himself—"Mrs. White, Lieutenant Gilly says there is no doubt about your guilt and I can't afford to be involved in such a sordid matter."

Beth said, "What do you mean, 'things got a little hot out on the island'?"

I lighted a cigarette and told the story just as it had happened. When I had finished, Clifton said:

"But that's preposterous. Who were these men in your attic?"

I said I imagined they were wet-backs that *Señor Peso* had paid Matt Heely or one of the other boys working for him to smuggle in from Cuba or Mexico.

"The old house," I pointed out, "is ideally situated. A boat can bring them in. A boat can distribute them along the coast in the guise of tourists and the law never be the wiser unless one of them should be picked up accidentally. Even then, I imagine by the time they leave the house they're well equipped with fake papers. As I see it, they're just another item of profit with *Señor Peso.*"

Clifton made a gesture of distaste. "That name." He lighted a cigarette and smoked it in short, quick, puffs. "And you say at the end of the attack that this Matt Heely took you out into the gulf in his fishing cruiser, weighted your ankles and dropped you in?"

I said that was correct.

NOW he was openly skeptical. "I don't believe it. Even if you had managed to cut the cord you couldn't have swam that far."

Beth said, "That wasn't far for Charlie. He was on a water demolition team during the war. You know. One of the boys with goggles and rubber flippers who swam in the night before the first assault wave hit a beach and blew up all the obstacles they could."

Clifton eyed me with fresh respect. "I don't know what to think or what to say," he said finally. "Just what is it you want of me, White?"

I said, "You have a cruiser down at the yacht basin. I want you and Beth to come out to the island with me and check my story. In other words I want a friend in court before I turn myself in. A responsible business man who can back at least a portion of my story."

He thought a moment. "You think this Matt Heely could be *Señor Peso?*"

I said, "Matt could be. He's smart enough." I snuffed out my cigarette. "If I'm right, it was *Señor Peso* who killed Zo and pinned her death onto me. It was *Señor Peso* who hired a knife man to wait outside Beth's apartment last night. It was *Señor Peso* who ordered me dropped in the gulf."

He protested, "But why?"

I said that would probably come out when we found out who he was. He sat silent a long moment drumming with his fingers on his desk. Then Beth turned her smile on him and said:

"Please."

She really had the guy wrapped around her little finger. He was so nuts about her it oozed out all of his pores.

"Well, all right," he said finally. "But let's have an understanding, White. If we do go out to the island and find nothing in the old house to substantiate your fantastic story, you will turn yourself in to Lieutenant Gilly as soon as we return to the mainland and allow the law to take its course. Is that understood?"

I said it was.

He said, "Then you go ahead to the yacht basin. Mrs. White and I will follow."

I passed a half-a-dozen cops on my way down to the basin. One or two of them glanced at me casually but none of them attempted to stop me.

His boat was a thirty-eight footer, double cabin, with a flying bridge. He knew how to handle it, too. If he hadn't

been a successful merchandiser, he'd have made a good fishing boat captain. What's more he knew the bottom of the channel like the lines in his well-kept hand. Easing the nose of the cruiser in between the rotting pilings of what once had been a pier, he made it possible for Beth to step ashore without even getting her feet wet. I helped him tie up to a piling, then followed him ashore.

Seen in broad daylight the old house looked better than it had in the moonlight. There was nothing wrong with it or the path or the clearing that a few dollars and elbow grease wouldn't make right again.

The first place I went was the kitchen. But the coat I'd left on a chair was gone, and with it the gun that had killed Zo.

Clifton was impatient. "Well, let's get on with it," he said. "Let's see this fabulous attic."

As I led the way up the stairs, he asked if I was armed. When I said I wasn't he said:

"Then it's a good thing that I brought a gun with me." He was openly skeptical. "Heaven knows I wouldn't want to face an attic filled with wet-back desperadoes without a gun."

I paused on the second floor for a deep breath then walked up the attic stairs and threw the heavy door open. The floor was thick with dust. There were no built-in bunks against the wall. The walls were lined solidly with the antique furniture that various Whites had discarded over a period of a hundred years.

Beth began to cry.

Clifton was silent a moment. Then, drawing his gun, he motioned me back down stairs to the second floor. "I was afraid it would be like this," he admitted. "But what in the name of time did you hope to gain by telling us such a fantastic story?"

I asked him why the gun.

"You're not mentally right," he said. "You can't be."

I lighted a cigarette and leaned against the jamb of one of the closed bedroom doors. "That can be," I admitted. "Heaven knows I've made a mess of my life. But tell me this, *Señor Peso*. Did you ever see a Florida attic that had been closed up for three years that wasn't covered with cobwebs?"

His voice shrill, he asked, "What was that you just called me?"

I SAID, "Answer my question. No. You never did. You could get the men who were in here last night out of the attic and onto the mainland. You could rip out the bunks and move the old furniture back. You could cover the floor with dust. But you couldn't replace the cobwebs. That's something only a spider can do."

He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "You're crazy. You're out of your mind."

I said, "We'll leave that up to the law. And while the law is at it, I want them to check your whereabouts at the time that Zo was killed. I doubt you have an alibi. You can't have. Because you were the guy who shot her and dusted me with a gaff hook."

His voice grew even shriller. "And just why should I do such a thing? What was my motive?"

I nodded at Beth. "My wife. She was the one thing you couldn't get at a bargain. You couldn't buy her. But you could buy me. That's why you sent Zo to meet me. That's why you deposited the thirty-six grand to my account. That's why you had Zo steam me up about heading straight for Cuba and Shrimp Cay. That's why you were at the cabin, to make certain she had me in tow.

"And everything went just fine until I read Beth's letter and told Zo it was no dice, that I was heading back to Palmetto City and Beth. It was you to whom Zo cried out just before you shot her. Shot her because you saw another way to accomplish your purpose. With me back in a cell at Raiford waiting to be burned for murder, I couldn't very well return to Beth. And, in time, you knew you'd get what you wanted."

He laughed. "A jury would howl at that story."

I said, "Okay. Let's test it. Let's go back to the mainland. I'll tell my story and you tell yours."

He shook his head. "No. I'm afraid we can't do that. I'm a prominent man in Palmetto City and my business enemies would be certain to try to make capital of this."

I said, "You mean you're afraid that the Feds might look at your invoices and begin to wonder where you're getting some of your goods that you're able to sell for less than your fellow merchants pay for it wholesale. Hell. It's been right in front of my nose all the time. No one but you could be *Señor Peso.*"

The little man sighed. Then looking at Beth he said, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" she asked him.

He said, "That I can't allow such a scurrilous story as this to be bruited about. I'm very sorry, my dear. I'd hoped to make you very happy. But now—" He thumbed the safety off his gun.

I said, "It won't wash, Clifton. One dame on a gun is enough. Besides, just how do you intend to explain our bodies?"

His eyes overly-bright, he said, "That's simple. I'll tell the police the fantastic story you told me. Then I'll tell them when I called you a liar, you saw that you were trapped and shot your wife and committed suicide."

It was still as death in the old second-floor hallway. A chorus of dust particles were dancing in the sunlight streaming in the front window. Clifton lifted the gun in his hand and the door of the bedroom behind me opened and Ken Gilly stepped out in the hall saying:

"I wouldn't, Mr. Clifton. With all your dough, you've got a much better chance hiring a high-priced lawyer." Ken cocked the big gun in his own hand. "Of course if you insist."

Around us the doors of the other bedrooms opened. There was an officer in each one, one of them a police stenographer who was still scrawling curlicues on his pad.

Clifton wasn't a fool. He dropped his gun. "You win," he said looking at me. "You're smarter than I gave you credit for being." He looked at Ken. "Well, let's get back to the mainland so I can contact my lawyers." His smile was thin. "But you haven't a damn thing on me but some foolish conversation."

Putting his gun away, Ken rubbed thoughtfully at the knuckles he had bruised beating at least a portion of the truth out of Matt Heely after I had gone to him with my story, directly from the hospital.

"Oh, I don't know," he said slowly. "A little of this, a little of that. A guy talks here. A guy talks there. And the first thing you know, it builds into a conviction." He waved his hand at the stairs. "Take Mr. Clifton away, boys. We're going to give him a bargain, board and lodging free for nothing."

When they had gone, Ken turned to me, offered me his hand.

"Welcome, Charlie." He brushed my nose with the tip of one finger. "But keep that clean now, fellow. Hear me?"

I said I did and intended to.

Then he was gone and Beth and I were alone and she was in my arms.

"I love you, love you so, Charlie," she whispered.

Swede had been right about a lot of things. He'd told me:

"A man can starve a dame. He can cuss her. He can beat her every night and twice on Sunday and she'll still think he's her personal Marshall plan in a silver champagne bucket. But only if she knows she's the only woman in his life."

I hadn't known how really big a lump in the throat could be. All I could say was her name. But that was all right with Beth. She understood. The bloody tide was over for both of us. There was nothing ahead but clear sailing in clean water.

She lifted her face to mine. "Hey, you, Mister Man. Remember me? How's about a kiss?"

And that was all right with me, too.

THE END

WHO SNITCHED?

Prison pets are an old story. Something new was added, however, when, some time ago authorities in Amarillo, Texas, reported they had been forced to discontinue the solitary confinement of two ingenious inmates—who were playing hob with prison morale. They had trained a large, handsome cockroach to smuggle them cigarettes from other prisoners. *E. J.*

The Widow Wouldn't Mourn

If sleuth Sid had his way . . .
Delores was going to cry
over her millionaire husband's spilt blood.

He hit the floor with me on top. . . .

By RUSSELL BRANCH

LEE still hadn't called by the time I finished breakfast in the little hotel coffee shop, and I had just about decided the hell with the whole business. His wife could kill him, for all I cared. I had to get back to L. A.

But as someone once remarked, it's a small world. On my way out I ran into

a swinging door. The guy who had swung it was an over-sized mug with curly blond hair, well-upholstered with lard. He looked like he might have been All-American about 1939.

He wore a big gold star on his chest and a big cannon on his hip—but none of these was what stopped me from taking a poke at him. What did stop me were his words to the girl behind the counter as he pushed past me and dumped his tonnage into a stool.

"Cuppa coffee, Irma, and I'm in a hurry. One of our local citizens killed himself last night."

Irma's mouth fell open, which made two of us.

"Hallenbeck," the sheriff went on. "Just gotta call from up there at his ranch."

I didn't wait to hear any more. I was already on my way . . . and not back to Los Angeles.

* * *

Someone—probably the same guy who said it was a small world—once observed that war makes strange buddies. Lee Hallenbeck and I really hadn't had many interests in common . . . aside from life, liberty and the pursuit of women.

He came from a ranch, I gathered, and knew horses and cattle. My acquaintance with them was limited to the Racing Form and rare New York cuts, but for some reason Lee and I had hit it off out there on Guadal where there was neither.

It wasn't until afterwards I learned he was *that* Hallenbeck—the steamship line—and that the old family homestead covered a few thousand acres of the more expensive real estate north of San Diego.

So after the war what we mostly didn't have in common was a million bucks or so, and Delores. Delores had been mine to begin with. All mine, I thought, until the night she and Lee eloped to Las Vegas. It wasn't so much a matter of his taking my girl, as of her taking both of us. But at any rate, I hadn't seen him again until yesterday.

When I did see him, he looked like he'd been worked over with a meat cleaver and then pasted together again in a white hospital bed. The bed itself had been a hell of a note in that sprawling, luxurious ranch room, but Lee himself had been worse. He just moved his eyes when I came in, nothing else.

"All right," I said finally. "It's tough. But you're still a lucky son."

"Lucky?" His eyes flickered down across the covers.

"You're alive, aren't you? After seeing that car—"

"Sure, Sid. Outside of a crushed spinal column and a missing leg, I'm fine."

"So you shouldn't try to fly a convertible. Now you know."

No grin, no nothing. Just thick silence. I tried to clear the air, make it casual.

"How's Delores?"

"Del's fine." His eyes brightened in spite of himself. "She came out of it with hardly a scratch, thank heaven."

I stared at him. "She was in that smash-up—and came out of it too?"

He nodded.

"But jeepers—"

"Tossed clear on the first bounce," he explained. "If it weren't for that . . . well, I tell you, Sid, she's all that keeps me going. And sometimes I wonder . . ." He ended it with a hopeless shrug.

"Bull," I said briskly. "Look, pal, maybe I better be going. The nurse was dubious about my bedside manner, she told me—"

"The hell with the nurse! The hell with you too. I didn't get you all the way down here to cry on your shoulder, so sit down and listen, damn you."

That was better, that was more like the old Hallenbeck. I sat down again and grinned at him. I kept right on grinning at him when he told me:

"Sid, somebody's trying to get me."

"You mean that was no accident, that was your wife?"

"I'm serious, Sid. Somebody tried to kill me. You know that joint down in the village, the Corral? Anyway, it's strictly for tourists, that sort of a place. They even have a hillbilly dance band during the season, and the night this happened, Delores was kind of restless. You know how she is."

I knew, probably better than Lee himself. I knew the only reason she put up with any of this horse opera stuff was because she saw a dollar sign on everything that wore the Hallenbeck brand.

But I just said, "Uh-huh," and hoped it wouldn't show on my face.

Lee explained that they had driven down there that night, just for a couple of drinks. On the way back, just as they started up through the Pass, he had begun to feel sort of dopey, and—

"How many drinks?" I interrupted.

"Two."

"In round numbers, that is?"

He swore and muttered something about just because *I* used to be a bad influence—

"Go on, Angel-child," I grinned at him.

This had been different, anyway, he said. More than just the drinks . . . he'd gotten sick and dizzy and weak. And the last he remembered, until he woke up in the hospital, was slowing down and thinking maybe he'd better pull off to the side of the road for a moment.

"So you picked the wrong side?"

He frowned uncertainly. Even that much movement of his butchered face looked painful. He wasn't sure. Delores had been half-asleep herself, and she didn't remember either. But that wasn't the point anyway. Not exactly *how* it had happened, but why he had been—

"Not so fast," I interrupted again. "The way I get it, you went all the way down with the car, but Delores managed to get in the clear somehow?"

He nodded. "Thrown out, or maybe she jumped instinctively. She managed to get back up on the road, anyway, and when Rick found her, she was—"

"Who?"

"Rick Skinner, my manager here. He had been doing the town that night too; he came along a while later and spotted Del. She was stumbling along the road, completely dazed, suffering from shock, out on her feet. As for me . . . well, they saved the pieces, as you can see."

That look I didn't like was back on his mangled puss again. "Quit moaning and get to the point," I told him. "You really think somebody doped your drinks down there?"

"I'm sure of it," he told me flatly. "I want you to find out who, and why."

MAYBE he *had* sort of shoved me out of the way to get at Delores. So he had also once shoved me out of the way of a sniper's slug, and from where I was sitting, they were both looking like favors.

I had lit cigarettes for both of us and had gone into my professional act. I hadn't learned much from Lee himself—just enough to get myself kicked out for my trouble.

No, he had told me, he hadn't had any local beefs. The other people down at the Corral that night had been strangers to him. Just tourists, dudes, nobody he'd even recognized. Well, yes—Rick Skinner had stopped by their table, with some babe from one of the nearby guest ranches, but only long enough to say hello. Nobody had bought anybody any drinks; Rick and his babe had moved on to the bar.

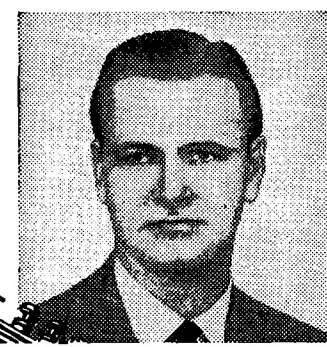
"In other words, just you and Delores?"

He nodded. "We nursed our drinks, watched the crowd, danced a couple of times—" He broke off in bitter silence.

"Otherwise you didn't leave your table? Not even to—"

"Say!" His eyes widened. "Now that

BAND LEADER SWITCHES TO BLEND LEADER



AMARILLO, Texas—Billy F. Briggs, Amarillo band leader, has switched to Calvert Reserve. "Lighter, smoother, milder," he says. "Calvert is tops for moderate drinking."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N. Y. C.

I think about it, I did! And when I came back there was this character standing there talking to Del. Funny little guy, bald head and hornrimmed glasses, loud polo shirt—but sharp. Hollywood all over. Del gave me the wink and said something about him telling her she should be in the movies."

"So you took a poke at him?" I suggested.

"Of course not," Lee answered. "He wasn't drunk or obnoxious or anything, he seemed to be on the level. We get a lot of the Hollywood crowd down here about that time of year, anyway."

Love, I reflected brightly, was not only blind but dumb. I pursued the subject further. Lee didn't remember the guy's name, in fact he didn't think it was mentioned. The character had handed a card to Delores, in case she "changed her mind", and that had been the end of it.

The card . . . well, Del might have dropped it on the floor or put it in her purse. He had gathered the little guy was some sort of agent or director, but that was all he could remember. In fact, he had forgotten the whole episode until just now.

"In other words," I said. "You haven't talked this over with Delores?"

He hadn't—as I could plainly see by the sudden flush of color in his white face. In fact, he hadn't even told her I was coming. No need to worry her any more; I might say I had just happened along, dropped in for a visit.

I could see Delores swallowing that. I shook my head anyway. "I'll have to put it up to her, too, old man. That is, if you still want me to dig into this."

"Of course. But you're not thinking—"

"I'm not thinking anything yet," I said, and took time out to inspect the end of my cigarette. "Who gets the jackpot, chum?"

"Huh?"

"The loot, kid. The Hallenbeck millions."

"Oh." He looked embarrassed at the very mention, which was one of the things I had always liked about him. "Why, Del, of course. I don't quite see what—"

"Let's get back to the details," I said hastily. "You left the place soon after this character talked to Delores? Or was that guy around early in the evening?"

Almost immediately afterward, from what he could remember. Del had said she was tired, they had a quick one for the road, and—

"Which made three, at least?"

"All right, three! But I tell you, Sid, I wasn't drunk. Not even a little tight. The drinks they serve down there—"

"Was your top up or down?"

He looked blank again.

"Your top—the roof of your convertible. Shut, or folded back?"

"Folded back, probably. In fact, I'm sure it was. That was during the warmest weather."

I wagged my head at him. "It was closed, pal. At least it was when you landed."

He stared at me, and I explained: "I told you I looked the car over on my way up here. For all the good it did you—the top, I mean. By the way, aren't you going to haul that heap out of there, or have you got too many convertibles as it is?"

"The insurance company can worry about that," he said shortly. "Sid, what the hell are you driving at?"

"Nothing. Just thinking how lucky Delores was. Damn lucky."

Lee and I hadn't spent the worst years of our lives together for nothing. He looked at me, and the gash across his cheek tightened. "I don't like your inference, Sid."

I shrugged again. "Just thinking out loud, that's all. If you don't like my thinking, you'd better hire yourself another investigator. Or forget the whole thing."

He said grimly, "Maybe I'd better. I know you're still sore about Del, but that's stretching it pretty thin. To accuse her of—"

"I'm not accusing anybody of anything—yet. All I'm doing is looking objectively at the few facts you've given me so far. Opportunity, motive, results—the only things I have to go on."

His head went back against the pillow, his eyes closed. For a minute he didn't say anything. Then, quietly: "Get out, Sid."

I chuckled reprovingly. "Look, guy, I didn't drive all the way down here just

to see you make a damn fool of yourself. If you want me to—"

"Get out of here!"

I rose slowly, reminding myself it was a pretty sick lad who was treating me like this. "Look, old man."

"Go on! Get out, damn you!" He was screaming at me now.

The door opened and a worried-looking nurse stuck her head in. Hallenbeck's face was dead white now, he was trembling with emotion. The nurse pushed past me, with a dirty look.

I turned toward the door, and found myself facing more of the same. This was a wiry, compact gent about my own age, with a face as sharp as a tack and the rest of him as hard as nails. The name Lee had mentioned, Rick Skinner, would fit him just as well as did his levis.

He didn't tell me to get out, not the smooth Mr. Skinner. He just stepped aside and waited politely. He didn't have a pair of forty-fives draped around his hips, either; he just casually slapped a long-barreled target pistol against his leg.

ALL right, so I may have been a poor psychologist. But I did know one thing. You don't get a guy mad, ordinarily, by suggesting that any given dame would like to get rid of *him*. You just earn yourself a horse laugh—despite the fact that Reno is filled with women and the graveyards with surprised husbands.

Unless, of course, the poor jerk is already convinced but won't admit it even to himself. *Then* he gets sore.

I had headed back down the narrow, twisting road with that thought to console me. Lee was sore, but he'd think it over. He could reach me at the village inn, where I'd told him I'd be staying. It was too late, anyway, to tackle the long drive back to L. A.—and as long as I was here, I was going to see it through.

As for Delores, well, I admit I didn't even give her the benefit of a reasonable doubt. The fact that she had tried for the whole works, instead of settling for a divorce and half a million, fit in too well with what I already knew about her. Delores, I reflected bitterly, was one gal who had everything . . . everything except morals, scruples, decency, and common sense.

But it was still a question of finding proof and then convincing the poor guy it would be good riddance at any price—neither of which I kidded myself was going to be easy.

When I reached the spot where the car had gone over the edge, I had stopped again. The convertible was still lying down there on its back, a five-thousand dollar pile of junk in the shadows and boulders at the bottom of the ravine. The hillside there was worse than steep; it was a sheer rockslide formed when they had cut the road through.

But I still wanted to take a close look, to make sure about that top and see what else I could find. So I walked back up the road a bit and then started down, skirting the edges of the rockslide, which looked like it would turn into an avalanche with little encouragement.

I was right about the top. Also about the danger of a landslide. I was flat on my belly, under the edge where they had obviously dug out Lee's bloody remains, when I heard the first sound.

It was the sound of a car on the road above. When I suddenly didn't hear it any more, I decided it must have stopped. I started to squirm back out to take a look. Then I heard something else. It was just a loose pebble which rattled harmlessly down past my legs. But there was another right behind it, and then another. Then something that sounded like ten dump trucks acting in sudden unison.

I reversed direction like a rat diving back into its hole. I got back under that car just as fast and far as I could. Rocks bounced off it like hail against a tin roof, a couple of big boulders crashed into it hard enough to jar my molars. But the car stayed put, and I likewise. Finally it was all over except for the dust and the job of digging myself out again.

When I got back on the road again, almost an hour later, there was nothing to be seen but my own car and the tracks where another car had squeezed out around it. The other car had been forced over dangerously close to the outside shoulder, and that in itself *might* have been enough to start things rolling.

But I didn't think so. I thought it was more personal than that. Besides . . .

whoever had tried to bury me alive might be getting curious about the outcome.

So I ducked around the bend and waited. I waited until I was cold and stiff; I waited until I heard a car grinding up from below, and then I waited until it stopped.

It was a light gray pickup truck with the big red H on its side—and the driver was my case-hardened friend in the blue jeans, the one I had tabbed as Lee's ranch foreman. He was standing at the edge, looking down with no expression that I could catch in the shadowed dusk.

"Looking for someone, Skinner?"

He didn't even jump. "Oh, there you are."

"And where'd you think I was?"

He eyed the gun in my hand, raised his sun-bleached eyebrows. "I didn't know. Saw your car here on my way down, thought I'd better take a look when it was still here. That slide's dangerous, you know."

"I know," I said pointedly. "I found that out when you passed a while ago, not to mention what happened to Hallenbeck."

He nodded. "That's what I mean. And since this is a private road, I wouldn't want you getting hurt too." He grinned at me and turned toward his truck.

"Just a minute, friend."

He went right on climbing into his car, keeping his back turned until he had the door closed. Then he leaned out the window, still grinning. "Those things are dangerous too," he informed me, indicating my gun. "You know, you shouldn't point one at anything you don't intend to shoot."

Unfortunately, he had a point there. The truck pulled away and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it, except drive on down to the village, check in at the hotel, and then wait for Lee's phone call and apology to make it official.

I WAITED, all right. And while I waited, I did the only thing I could think of to do at the moment, even though it didn't seem very promising. I put in a long distance call to a colleague of mine in Hollywood, who was quite profane and very uncomplimentary about the assignment I gave him.

He called back in about an hour. "You know damn well, my friend, that half the guys in the movie industry are little bald-headed jerks with glasses. The other half are—"

"You told me that before," I said. "You 're just trying to prove how good you are. Who is he?"

"He *might* have been Manny Hekel," said my friend, and waited.

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but that was all. "You checked whether he was down in this neck of the woods about three months ago?"

"Tripex Pictures was, on location for some super horse opera. And Hekel was some sort of an assistant director on the picture."

"Well?" I demanded impatiently. "What's his phone number, where can I reach him?"

"You might try the cemetary," he said, and then exploded. "Jeepers creepers, Sid! *Manny Hekel!* Where've you been?"

It all came back to me in a flash of headlines. Manny Hekel, motion picture director. Found one morning in the vacant lot behind his own apartment house, with a slug in his head and no discernible motive the cops could discern on the local scene.

"Oh," I said. "That Manny Hekel." I sounded stupid, all right, but thoughts were popping around in my skull like jumping beans.

"Well, pal, will that hold you?"

"Wait a sec. What about the other one? Did you make that?"

"I told you I was good," my friend answered smugly. "Besides that, I happen to know a little gal down at Central Casting."

"Let's skip the admiring women. What about Rick Skinner?"

"Richard Skinner," he recited. "Rodeo stuff, trick riding, trick shooting, card tricks. A few bit parts in the B horse operas, but he dropped out of sight some six months ago—apparently he couldn't play a guitar. What're you doing down there, anyway? Looking for rustlers?"

I told him I was looking for a lost gold mine, and hung up with my bonnet full of bees. I could hardly wait for that call from Lee Hallenbeck, so that I could get going.

And now I knew I was never going to

get that phone call. Instead I had gotten smacked with a swinging door and the news that Lee Hallenbeck was dead. I felt cheated, gypped. Lee had been a good guy, sure, but he had been something more than that to me. He had been the one person I'd ever known personally in my whole life who had had everything I thought was needed to make a little happiness out of this bucket of tears.

"Killed himself," the sheriff had said.

If I knew Delores, she had made it good. And here was I, with nothing but a couple of hunches and a resolve to make her pay . . .

The big sprawling adobe ranch house looked empty in the morning sun, as if everyone were still asleep. The courtyard looked deserted, too, except for one battered, dusty coupe that wore an M. D. shield. When I opened the door and went into the wide entrance hall, the hush of death folded around my footsteps on the polished tiles.

There were two people in the big, sunken living room; a frazzled-looking middle-aged gent sitting at the desk, and Delores.

She had always been a little incredible, like one of those dames you see in the magazines but never hope to meet. Jet black hair and a cream-white skin. Full lips and vacant, sultry eyes. A figure that . . . well, in the tailored jodhpurs and the tight black jersey she was wearing now, it seemed about as flagrant as a strip-tease at a funeral.

SHE was sprawled back on an oversized sofa, monotonously tapping a cigarette and staring off into space. When she saw me, the vacant eyes flared and then went empty again.

"What are you doing here?"

I didn't answer. The doctor turned to stare at me, and got up, but Delores wasn't bothering with the social amenities this morning

"Get out," she told me, in that low flat voice of hers.

I shook my head. "Lee was my friend, Delores."

"I'm Doctor Gibson," the frazzled gent put in anxiously. "Mrs. Hallenback, I'm afraid . . . well, it's quite a shock of course, and perhaps it'd be better—"

"I saw Lee yesterday afternoon," I said, still looking at Delores. "He was all right then."

The doctor's mumbling broke into an indignant splutter, but Delores ignored him.

"Your friend Lee took an overdose of sleeping pills," she told me, her voice as emotionless as a kid reciting the multiplication table. "He had been depressed ever since the accident, and your visit with him yesterday apparently helped decide him. Now you know, and now you can get the hell out of here."

"I made him sore," I said slowly. "But a man doesn't kill himself when he's mad."

She got up abruptly and left the room. The good doctor put a grip on my arm, a surprisingly strong grip, just in case I had any notions about following her.

I yanked loose and flipped my billfold at him. "Mr. Hallenbeck engaged me yesterday to investigate his auto accident. I'm still representing him—I want to know the facts of his death."

The doctor was surprised but not impressed. "The facts are very simple. Mr. Hallenbeck took an overdose of sleeping tablets sometime during the night. I've notified the proper authorities."

"The sheriff will be along in a minute," I told him. "How can you be sure about the sleeping pills without an autopsy?"

He shrugged. "Symptoms, plus the nearly empty bottle and the glass by his bed. I know myself it had been a full bottle, because the nurse here sent one of the men down to get it from me late yesterday afternoon."

Skinner, I thought to myself. "Same bottle? Same pills?"

He drew back and stared at me as if I were a cockroach that had turned up on his operating table. "Are you suggesting that Hallenbeck was—"

"Sure," I said cheerfully. "If I were you, I'd make damn sure before I signed that death certificate, too."

That was so much malarkey. I knew the question wasn't the pills themselves, but *how* they had gotten into Lee. I was just trying to impress the doctor, and apparently I had succeeded.

He was still staring at me when the sound of a car outside announced the sheriff's arrival. The doctor went to intercept them. I stayed where I was. There was no use in having my bluff called before I had even made it.

They came back in a very few minutes: the doctor, the nurse, the sheriff and another scrawny guy who was apparently a deputy or a stooge or both. The sheriff glanced at me without recognition or interest, obviously deciding for himself that I must be a poor relation. I gave him a formal nod, which seemed to satisfy everybody, and then proceeded to make myself as small as possible while they went into their routine.

The deceased, it seemed, had been discovered as such when the nurse went on duty at eight that morning. Mrs. Hallenbeck had looked in on him about half an hour earlier, and thinking he was merely still asleep, had gone out for her customary before-breakfast horseback ride.

I couldn't quite picture Delores on a horse, but the rest of it I could. Looking in at the man she had killed, then calmly leaving him for someone else to find. . . .

"I'll ask Mrs. Hallenbeck to come in, if you'd like."

The doctor frowned, the sheriff made a pompous gesture, indicating it wasn't necessary. Apparently the widow of a million dollars could do no wrong, and between them, the doctor and the nurse could supply all the details.

Before retiring the previous evening, Mrs. Hallenbeck had taken her husband the glass of warm milk which the doctor had prescribed both as a sedative in itself and as a solution for the barbital tablets, if necessary.

The nurse had had the evening off, and had gone to the movies in the village. When she returned about eleven-thirty, she had noticed Mr. Hallenbeck's light still on and had gone to see whether he needed attention.

HIS only request had been that she mail a letter for him. A very important letter, he had said, which he wanted to get off first thing in the morning "no matter what."

"I didn't think anything about it *then,*" the nurse added. "I just thought he meant it was that important."

The sheriff jumped at this bit of information, since it seemed to explain the absence of the usual suicide note. But it turned out the nurse had given the letter to her boy-friend Joe—who apparently had hung around for a good-night kiss.

When they called Joe at the garage where he worked, they found that he had dropped the letter in the post-office slot on his way home the night before, which meant the letter was already on its way to an address which neither the nurse nor her friend had noticed.

All of which interested the sheriff, but still left me up the well-known creek without a paddle. As a matter of fact, I was beginning to worry that maybe I had missed the boat completely: that Delores was speeding on her way to Mexico by now.

She wasn't. She made her grand entrance just as I was about to throw a monkey wrench in the proceedings. For support she had Skinner, hovering at her elbow like a solicitous undertaker's assistant. For effect she had changed her

costume: a little print number which was more appropriate to the occasion but still left no doubt as to what she was.

The sheriff and his man began murmuring their solicitudes, which I interrupted very effectively by saying: "We've heard from everybody else, Delores. Now you tell us how you killed him."

That did it; at least it got me shocked silence. "You brought him his milk last night. How many of those missing pills were already crushed in that glass when you brought it to him?"

I didn't get to see her reaction because Skinner was already lunging at me. I sidestepped, stuck out a foot, and piled after Skinner. He hit the floor like a ton of bricks, with me on top, and the butt of my revolver did the rest. But before I could pick myself up again, I was wearing the sheriff's handcuffs and looking into the wrong end of the same gun.

All I could do now was talk, and talk fast. "You got smart, Delores. You did a lot better on your second try, and frankly I don't think there's a chance of proving it. But your big mistake was the first time—and that's what's going to do it."

Delores raised her eyebrows at the sheriff. "Do I have to listen to—to this crazy man—in my own house?"

The sheriff wasn't sure. He had been studying the cards in my wallet, and he wasn't sure at all.

"Two mistakes, you made," I went on, fitting my hunches together. "When you doped Lee's drink you did it in a public place. I mean the night you had your so-called accident. You got him down to the Corral because you wanted witnesses to the fact that he had been drinking.

"But Lee wouldn't drink much, and all you got actually was a witness who spotted something funny. A guy named Manny Hekel, who had known both you and Skinner in Hollywood. Hekel was shot to death shortly afterward, probably because he suspected too much and probably by your groggy boy-friend here. But that is only incidental."

Delores made another weary sigh and rolled her eyes at the sheriff, but he didn't see her. He was still looking at me with his big mouth hanging open.

I swung at Delores. "Where's your purse, honey? Where's the purse you had with you the night you doped your husband and shoved him over the bank in his car? Where is it?"

"I don't know and I don't care!" Delores shrieked at me. "If you think I'm going to stand here and—"

"Oh yes, you care," I said and turned back to the sheriff. "You've heard of the Resark test, of course? The Resark test for chloral hydrate traces?"

He hadn't, and neither had I, for that matter, but he didn't want to show his ignorance. "You got anything worth saying, Mac, you better say it quick."

Delores was thinking it over. I had her on the defensive now. I could see the wheels going around, and I could also see her friend Skinner beginning to sit up and take a wary interest in this rhubarb.

"I don't know what happened to that purse after the accident," Delores said haughtily. "It must have been lost."

"Supposing it's been found, honey! Supposing *I* found it, lying in the ditch a mile away from the spot where the car went off the road? At the spot where Lee actually stopped that night, where you shoved him over to take the wheel, where you put the top up to be sure he'd stay in the car until it hit the bottom."

DELORES bit her lip, but Skinner was doing some fast thinking, even in his condition. He climbed to his feet.

"Now I *know* you're lying! I found that purse myself in the wreck the next day! *You* remember, Mrs. Hallenbeck. White linen, with a brown flap. I gave it to your maid the next day."

It was a good try, and Delores responded quickly— a little too quickly. "Oh . . . yes, of course. I'll get it and prove it to you."

She swept from the room, trembling with indignation. I tried to follow, but the sheriff and his man hemmed me in. Skinner leaned against the wall behind us and sneered at me. He had called my bluff and had won. All Delores had to do now was show up with a white linen purse—which she undoubtedly had—and I would be on my way out with a standing invitation to never return.

So we waited. I thought hopefully,

maybe she doesn't have a white linen purse; and then I thought less hopefully, neither do I. I had only been hoping to break her down with a lot of double-talk; if it hadn't been for the sharp Mr. Skinner, I would have succeeded.

A startled exclamation from that gent suddenly turned us all around. "That stupid little double-crossing—"

He was standing by the window. As he whirled, the sheriff stupidly moved over to take a look. I tried to stop Skinner as he rushed by, but my bracelets were too much of a handicap and he bowled me over.

I climbed to my feet, as the sheriff yelled at his deputy but remained glued to the window himself. The big window framed it like a movie scene. A car slammed backward out of one of the garage stalls, engine roaring.

It swung around in a fast spin and headed down the driveway, just as Skinner came running around the corner of the patio. He had that long-barreled target pistol, and as he drew carefully down on the skidding car I remembered that trick shooting had been one of his movie qualifications.

Then the big pane of glass shattered in my face, and my ear drums did the same thing inside my head. Out there on the edge of the drive Rick Skinner half-turned, as if someone had shoved his shoulder, and then crumpled sideways. The scrawny deputy reached him and bent over him. The car was a cloud of dust disappearing through the big gates.

I turned on my friend with the smoking .45. "Damnit, you just helped her get away, that's all!"

The sheriff shook his head soberly, heading for the front hallway. "That's a mighty narrow road, and the ambulance should be on its way up. She may not make it, not the way she's speeding."

As it turned out, she didn't. She got past the ambulance, but was forced out too wide for the next turn and skidded off. She and her husband took their last ride together in that same meat wagon, and Skinner died without gaining consciousness in the sheriff's car.

I felt pretty smug about the whole thing until I got back to L. A. and found a letter waiting for me in my office:

Dear Sid,

I intend to give this to the nurse, and hope it reaches you safely. I know now you were right this afternoon, and if it gives you any satisfaction you have my apology.

She came in a little while ago, bringing me some milk. I was still worrying about what you had suggested, and not wanting to talk to her then, I pretended to be asleep. But she managed to "wake" me anyway, which made me wonder—since the purpose of the milk and the sleeping pills is to put me to sleep.

I looked at the pills after she left, and now there isn't any doubt left. Today's date is on the label, but the bottle is nearly empty, and I suspect the rest of them are already dissolved in that tall glass of milk sitting at my elbow.

It doesn't matter anyway, because as soon as this letter is in safe hands I am going to down the whole works, anyway. I won't try to justify myself, I just want to ask two favors of you.

The enclosed sheet is self-explanatory and I know I can trust you to take care of it. My other request is that you keep this information to yourself. Because I may be wrong, and in any case, guilty or not, her conscience will provide its own just reward.

So long, fellow, and please believe me this is the best for all concerned.

The note was signed "Lee" and the enclosed sheet was his holographic will, leaving me with a fat fee and the rest to the Crippled Children's Foundation.

I figure my fee will just about pay for the carving on the cornerstone of the Hallenbeck Memorial Hospital.

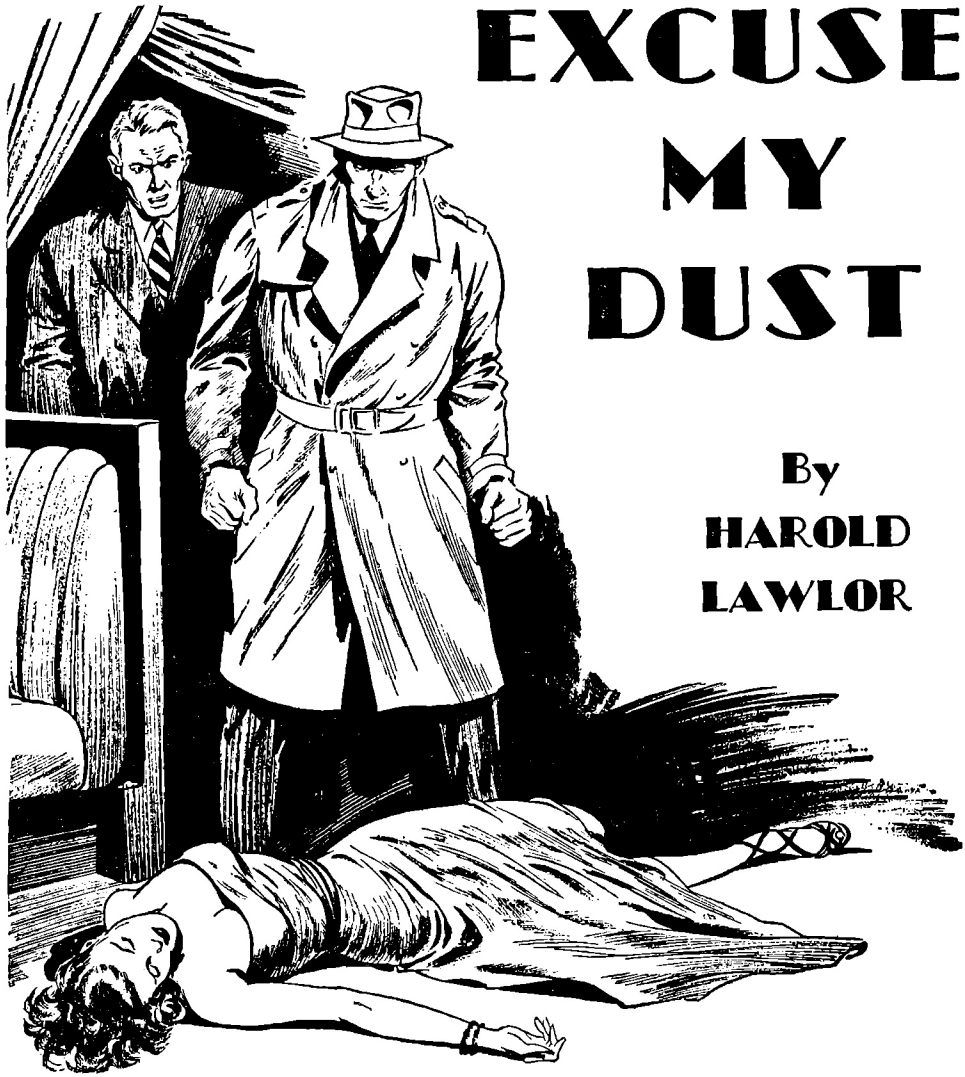
HOOSEGOW OPENER

Whatever the people on Sark Island—in the Channel—do, they don't fool around with a lot of stuff they shouldn't. Their prison has had only three occupants in the last hundred years, one of them a servant girl convicted of theft. She got pretty lonely in there all alone—so the authorities left the doors open. It made her feel a little better.

She didn't try to leave, either. *E. J.*

EXCUSE MY DUST

By HAROLD LAWLOR



I stood there, looking down at Val's body.

Even his slayer mourned Bill, until the scribe turned it into a nightmare—by showing . . . without his wooden overcoat.

● ● ●

FIVE days had given me time enough to get over my anger. Back in town, I parked the car near the Lanzi-Bar. I hoped I'd find Valerie there. There'd been no answer at her apartment.

A rainy Monday night was always slow in the Lanzi-Bar. I stood there in my wet trench coat, valise in hand, on the balcony just inside the entrance, while I looked the place over, searching for Val.

Behind the bar, on a raised platform in front of the mirrors, Harry Quist sat

cross-legged at the white grand piano. He had a cigarette stuck to his lower lip, and he was playing a blues song with a soft, slow barrel-house rhythm.

Just below him, Mac stood polishing glasses, a white apron tied about his vast paunch, his bald head turned a little to one side, his fat face absurdly wistful and dreamy as he listened to Harry's playing.

I turned left and went down three steps, started toward the bar. That's when I saw Valerie getting up out of the last booth, where she'd been hidden till now from my sight.

But she must have seen me when I first came in.

I stopped when I saw her, waited to take my cue from her. I still didn't know what the score was with Val, after our fight last Wednesday night. She'd said she never wanted to see me again.

But I think I would have stopped dead in my tracks now, anyway. There was something so damned peculiar about her manner.

Val was coming toward me slowly, her lips parted a little, her trembling right hand outstretched as if she wanted to touch me, wanted to make sure I was really there. Her eyes were wide, her face so white that her red hair seemed to flame like a lighted torch.

I had a hazy impression of a slender, gray-haired man stepping from the booth behind her, looking after her with faint surprise on his face, as if he were wondering what was the matter.

I was, too.

Val stopped before me, searched my face with haunted eyes. I'm no beauty, but she ought to be used to it by now. Despite our quarrel, that was my ring still sparkling there on her left hand where I'd put it a week ago.

I said, "Well, what's eating you? You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

She made a dreadful sound in her throat at that. Then she screamed so piercingly that the prisms on the chandelier above us tinkled audibly. Her eyes rolled up under their lids, and she collapsed to the floor in a faint.

The rhythm broke in mid-stride. I heard Harry Quist say hoarsely, "It's Bill Holdsworthy!"

There was a crash as Mac dropped the tall cocktail glass he'd been polishing.

I stood there, looking down at Val's body.

The brittle sound snapped me out of it. I stooped now, picked her up in my arms, carried her back to the booth she'd left, brushing past the slight, gray-haired man.

Another shock awaited me.

Sitting in one corner of the booth, huddled against the wall, was my ex-wife. Dark-haired, dark-eyed Gloria, the back of her hand against her mouth, as if she were repressing a scream.

I sat down next to Val, held her head in the hollow of my shoulder. Whispered to her. Shook her. Did all the crazy, futile things a guy does when he tries to bring someone he loves out of a faint.

Yet all the while wondering, with some part of my dazed mind, what was the matter. Feeling a little scared, too, with that fear of the unknown and unexplained that's a part of us still, a heritage from darker days.

I looked up. The slender, gray-haired man, who'd seemed to be with Val, slipped into the seat across from us, next to Gloria. He was staring at me, too, a funny expression on his face.

I said, "Who are you?"

He took out a wallet, held it half-open across the table for me to see.

"Ames," he said. "Homicide Detail."

I wasn't getting this at all. "Homicide?"

He nodded. He seemed as stunned as I was. "The piano player just said something. He said you were—Bill Holdsworthy."

"That's right."

"You can't be."

"Why not, for Pete's sake?"

"Because," he said, "you're dead!"

I LOOKED blankly from him to Gloria. She was still staring at me, white-faced. I looked down at Val. Her eyelids had fluttered open. She must have heard what Ames had said. Her small hand touched my shoulder, tried weakly, frantically, to push me away.

"You're dead," she whispered. "You're dead!"

Gloria shivered. Ames looked shaken. As for myself—

I didn't know what this was all about.

I was sure of only one thing. I clung to that fact desperately. Clung, in a reeling world. If anyone was dead, it was somebody else's dust—not mine.

I said idiotically, "I am like hell dead!" I wasn't trying to be funny. I was trying to snap them out of it, snap myself out of it.

Some of the stiff shock left Val's face.

"Bill!" she whispered unbelievingly. Then, *"Bill!"* She threw her arms around me, held her face against mine. She started to cry.

I tried to quiet her. "There, honey, there!"

Gloria watched us through narrowed eyes.

Harry Quist and Mac came from behind the bar, stood at our table. Harry's pale urchin face, unhealthily overlaid with cheap sophistication like some too-wise youngster's, looked disconcerted for the first time since I'd ever known him. His black eyes were usually fever-bright. They were dull now.

"They said you were dead," he muttered to me.

He shouldn't have cared if I was. I'd flattened him not so long ago for making an uncompleted pass at Val, back in the days when she was singing here in the Lanzi-Bar. I'd hung one on him again last Wednesday night, when I'd caught him with Val. I'd told her off, too, sick at heart as I was with the fear that I'd let another woman take me again.

My eyes slid past Harry to Mac. Poor Mac! I always felt a little sorry for him, remembering the pathetic torch he'd always carried for Val. His fat face was flabby now, dark-smudged, as if he'd lost too much weight too suddenly.

"Bill Holdsworthy," he muttered, as if he still couldn't believe it.

I said to Ames, "Look, it's time I knew what this was all about. But we can't talk here. Val's apartment is just around the corner." I looked at her. "Honey, may we—"

"Of course," she said, picking up her gloves and purse.

"Sure you feel well enough to leave, honey?"

She smiled into my eyes, squeezed my arm. "I do now."

Gloria was suddenly absorbed in watching the lighted tip of her cigarette. But her lips had straightened grimly.

Ames said, "You'd better come, too, Mrs. Holdsworthy."

Gloria's black hair swept forward with her nod.

I could almost feel Harry's and Mac's eyes boring into our backs as the four of us went out into the rain-swept night.

We hurried around the corner, past my parked car, heads bent against the wind and driving rain. In Val's apartment, we distributed ourselves on sofa and chairs while Val mixed highballs.

"Tell me," I said then. "What's happened?"

"Oh, Bill!" Val cried. "Someone was—"

Ames stopped her. "I'll handle this, Miss Noel, if you please." He looked at me. "Where's Paul Winship?"

Paul shares my apartment with me, and he's my friend. Ames' question made me wary. If Paul was in trouble, I wasn't going to make it worse by blurting out his whereabouts. Until I knew more about this, I had to play it cagey.

So I lied.

I said, "I don't know where he is. Isn't he at the apartment?"

"No," Ames answered. "And though news of your *murder* has been spread all over the front pages since Monday morning, he hasn't come forward."

"*My* murder?" I jerked upright.

"Saturday night—two nights ago," Ames said, "someone rang the bell of your apartment. When the door opened, this same someone hurled acid into the face of the apartment's occupant. Crazed with pain, the victim turned blindly, leaped or fell from your fourth-floor window, and was killed."

I said the first thing that came into my head. "If he fell himself, would that be murder?"

"Coupled with the acid throwing, it wouldn't be parcheesi," Ames said grimly.

"And you thought the victim was me?"

Ames nodded. "Why wouldn't we? He fell from your apartment, wearing a robe and pajamas identified as yours. He was about your build, had hair the color of yours. His face, of course, was—destroyed."

Val made a small horrified sound. Gloria looked into her highball enigmatically.

I couldn't understand it. The apartment should have been vacant. Unless Paul—

I asked, "And he died instantly, without speaking?"

Ames shook his head. "He lived a few minutes, unbelievable though it seems. The doorman of your building reached him in time to hear him mutter two words. Or rather one word, repeated. He said, 'Famine, famine,' before he died."

"'Famine,'" I repeated, bewildered. "But—it's meaningless!"

"It could be," Ames nodded. "After all, he must have been nearly insane with pain and shock." He looked down at my valise, went on, "Where have you been?"

"Down at my cottage in the dunes," I said mechanically. "I'm writing a book, and got stuck on Chapter Seventeen. I went down there last Thursday morning to be alone and try to iron out the difficulty."

"Anybody see you down there?"

"At this time of the year? The place is deserted."

I wondered if Ames thought I was the killer, now that he knew I wasn't the victim. I had to get in touch with Paul now, I knew. It must have been his key the other man had been using. Mine was right here in my pocket. Naturally, none of us thought the victim *was* Paul. He's half a head shorter than I am, and a blond, besides.

I said thoughtfully, "Acid. That sounds like a woman."

"That's what I thought," Ames agreed.

Without meaning to, I looked at Gloria. She sat up straighter, threw me a venomous glance.

"Well, what are you staring at me for?" she cried. "Just because I'm still in love with you—"

"Are you still trying to sell me that?" I asked wearily. "You blew me off two years ago, got a divorce, and you certainly never carried any torch for me until—"

"Until?" Ames was right in there pitching.

"I sold a book to the movies, several months ago," I finished.

Gloria said sullenly, "That has nothing to do with it. And, anyway, I didn't try to throw acid in your face. But what about your redheaded girl-friend there? You had a fight with her Wednesday night, didn't you?"

Val and I ignored her.

Ames said, "Miss Noel has already told me about that. Besides, there's one thing you're all forgetting. The acid may never have been intended for Mr. Holdsworthy at all. I mean, the victim may have been killed in his own identity."

I hadn't thought of that. "But he could have been mistaken for me?" I asked.

Ames nodded. "The hall light outside your apartment was out. The lights of the apartment itself would have been behind the victim as he opened the door, throwing his face into shadow. Also, it's safe to assume the acid-thrower was emotionally wrought up, that he would have hurled the acid immediately upon the opening of the door, without waiting to take a good look. If it had been meant for you, it's possible the murderer never even knew he'd made a mistake."

"But who'd want to throw acid at me?" I asked.

Ames shrugged. "I hoped you could tell me that."

"Well, I can't." I thought a minute, then shook my head. "It's preposterous. The victim must have been killed in his own identity." I've often been wrong, but I was never so wrong as I was when I said that.

AMES hadn't held the others, and he made no attempt to detain me, beyond telling me to stay within call, giving me his telephone number and asking me to get in touch with him immediately if Paul Winship should contact me.

Gloria went with Ames when he offered to drive her home.

When we were alone, Val cried, "If you only knew how happy I am! Ames suggested Gloria and I meet him at the Lanzi-Bar tonight. He wanted to question us, and I suppose he thought a friendly atmosphere would disarm us, throw us off our guard—that is, if we had anything to be guarded about. And then, when you came walking in—oh, Bill!"

She buried her head against my shoulder a moment. When she looked up again, she said, "You're not still angry because of last Wednesday night? It was just as I told you. I was waiting for the bus, and when Harry came along and offered to drive me the few blocks to my apartment, I could see no harm in it, even if I didn't like him." She smiled faintly. "I didn't know you'd be waiting in the lobby for me, though, like a—a Grim Avenger!"

I grinned. "I'm sorry I lost my head. I'm not sorry, though, that I poked Harry in the nose. He looked so damned smug when he knew I'd seen you walking in with him."

"That's the second time you hit him." Val looked thoughtful. "Bill, do you suppose—"

"I was just wondering myself," I admitted. "After all, it doesn't have to be a woman who threw the acid. Suppose Harry got hopped to the eyes on marijuana—"

"I always thought he was on that stuff." Val considered, looked terrified. "Suppose he tries again now!"

I didn't want her thinking about that. I didn't want to think about it myself. I said, "That reminds me, we're still not sure who the acid was meant for. Is it okay if I use your phone?"

She nodded. I asked for the long distance operator, and gave her a Wisconsin Dells number. At Val's look of inquiry, I said, "Paul told me before I left that he was going up Friday night to stay with his folks for a week."

Paul's a reporter, and he'd said he wasn't taking any busman's holiday. He didn't even want to see a newspaper for a week. I'd known while Ames was talking that was why Paul had missed news of the murder.

Paul answered the phone himself. I told him as quickly as I could what had happened, cut through his worried, astonished exclamations.

"Did you lend the apartment to anybody for the weekend?"

There was a minute's dead silence. He said slowly, "Yes. To one of the new lads at work. Tom Downey, his name was. He's just a drifter, I guess, and wasn't settled yet. He's a god joe, has a girl who lives in a rooming house. I knew we wouldn't be using the apartment, so I gave him the key."

"Paul," I said, "I'm afraid—"

"Yeah." I could imagine his sick face at the other end of the wire. I knew he was blaming himself, though it wasn't his fault. "What a thing to happen. No one could have known he was there but the girl. Look, I'll come back to town tomorrow. It'll be noon, I suppose, before I get there. You'd better tell Ames you've talked to me."

"Okay."

I hung up. From what Paul had said, it sounded as though the victim had been meant to be me. I reached for my trench coat, put it on.

Val looked worried. She said, "Where are you going?"

"Back to the Lanzi-Bar. I want to talk to Harry Quist."

Her eyes went to the clock, looked relief. "It's nearly one. They'll probably be closed up."

"I'll hurry."

She said, "Bill, please be careful."

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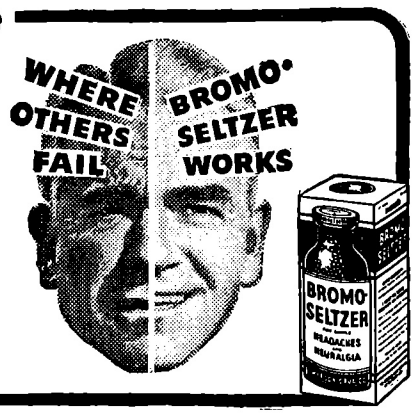

I tried to kid her out of it. "Don't worry, honey. I couldn't be killed with an ax."

She smiled at that, but her heart wasn't in it. . . .

As I went down the stairs from Val's apartment, I realized suddenly how tired I was. Reaction, I supposed. And then, too, I was tired of the questions chasing around in my mind like waltzing mice, questions that seemed to have no answers.

Did Harry Quist hate me enough to have tried to throw acid in my face? Did anybody hate me that much? It seemed unbelievable, but then I suppose I'd think so, anyway. And what did Tom Downey mean by muttering, "Famine, famine?" Or had he meant anything?

I shook my head wearily, and went out again into the rain.

When I reached the Lanzi-Bar again, Mac was alone, going around switching off the little lights in the booths. He'd already removed the apron from around his big waist, was shrugging into his coat.

"Where's Harry?" I asked.

Mac shrugged. "Home, maybe. He left right after you did."

But when he'd given me the phone number and I rang Harry's apartment, there was no answer.

Mac said then, "You might find him in a back room over on Rush Street." He told me where it was. "Some of the musicians meet there after work every once in a while for a jam session. I went there with him once. Boy, after those guys inhale a few weeds, you really hear music, what I mean!"

I'd give it a try, anyway. I started to leave, but Mac put his hand on my arm.

"SIT down a minute, will you, fella?" His fat, kindly face was urgent. "Have a drink with me. There's something I'd like to talk about."

I've always liked Mac. Felt a little sorry for him, too, as I've said. It was kind of pathetic the way he'd always been so devoted to Val. He was forever doing little favors for her when she worked here. Val told me one time that it used to tear her heart a little, he'd be so humble about it and would get so flustered when she'd thank him.

So I said, "Sure, Mac," and sat down on one of the bar-stools. Harry Quist would keep for a few minutes while I listened to Mac. I supposed I was in for some fatherly advice.

I hadn't known what he would say though, and I can't say I liked it when he said it. He poured us each a shot of scotch, but he didn't drink his. He twisted the glass around on the bar, almost diffidently, and his heavy-jowled face was preternaturally grave.

"Of course, it's none of my business," he began.

Usually when somebody starts with that line, you know you're going to hear something you don't want to hear. But I said, "Go ahead, Mac. I'll listen, anyway."

He looked at me, his spaniel eyes pleading in his soft, fat face. "It's about your ex-wife, Gloria. She's been coming in here almost every night. Talking to me, too. Bill, she's still crazy about you."

"Skip it," I said. I got up.

"No, wait a minute!" Mac held my arm. "Look, guy. You loved her once. That doesn't end completely. There must be something left. Why don't you try to fix it up, start over again?"

"No soap, Mac." I shook my head. He meant well, and I didn't blame him. I knew how persuasive Gloria could be when she wanted something. It had been easy enough for her to enlist the sympathy of a soft-hearted guy like Mac.

Mac said, "But, listen—"

"Cut it out!" I didn't blame him, but I didn't like his persistence. Gloria's persistence it was, really. In spite of myself, I was annoyed.

I guess Mac didn't like the brusqueness of my tone. I was sorry, but I couldn't help that. His face set a little. If it weren't so flabby, you might almost have said his face hardened.

But he only sighed, "I meant it for the best."

I started for the door. "That's okay, Mac. No hard feelings. So long. . . ."

I went down the street from the Lanzi-Bar to where my wet convertible glistened, its tan top dark now with rain. It was only a few blocks to the address on Rush Street that Mac had given me. I parked the heap around the corner and

went back to the musicians own hangout.

The joint was a theater-bar, and Monday night or no Monday night, it was jammed to the doors with suckers, happy in the fond and alcoholic delusion that this tawdry dump was a glittering palace. I knew the types. Small-town lads and farm boys, trying now to be the sophisticates they'd always dreamed big-city people were. And over-doing it, as usual.

A dumb-faced stripper was performing on a raised platform. The crowd was yelling encouragement to the vacant-eyed babe.

I looked toward the back of the room. A suave, dinner-jacketed character, with a face that would slice delicatessen ham even thinner, stepped toward me.

"Something for you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Harry Quist," I said.

He eyed me noncommittally.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm a friend of his, and I owe him some dough. He said he'd be here in the back room."

He stepped back. "Straight ahead. Go through the unmarked door."

I went back to a square hall, pushed open the door. A wave of hot licks and thick smoke blasted out at me. It was like getting hit over the head with a spade.

I knew at once I'd wasted my time coming. Peering through the smoke, I saw Harry Quist sitting at a small, scarred studio upright. A brown cigarette drifted smoke from a glass ashtray on top of the piano. I had only to look at his glazed eyes to know that he'd make no sense now if I tried to question him.

But he wasn't so high that he didn't know me, though. He didn't get up from the piano, or stop playing, but his lips drew back from his teeth in a soundless, animal snarl.

That answered one of my questions, anyway. Harry Quist hated me, all right. May even have hated me enough to try to throw acid at me.

I turned around and left. I had headaches enough already without staying to mix it with a hop-head.

I drove to the garage where I keep my car, left it there. The night-man is a garrulous old fellow who'd read the news of my supposed death. I wasted the better part of twenty minutes answering his questions before I walked out of there.

There's a dark alley that runs alongside the apartment hotel where I live. I had to cross it to get to the lobby entrance.

It was from the alley that somebody shot at me.

I DON'T know whether I heard the shot, or if some sixth sense warned me a split-second before. But I did a beautiful swan-dive over the curb, made a perfect three-point landing on elbows and stomach on the wet pavement in front of the hotel's facade. The thud momentarily knocked the breath out of me. I must have skidded three feet.

I scrambled to my feet, grunting. At the corner of the building, I stooped low, peered around its edge, down the dark, wet alley.

I could see nothing in the black dark. I could hear nothing but rain dripping from a gutter.

In a movie, the dauntless hero, barehanded, would grimly stalk the killer down that eerie blackness. But this was no movie, and I'm no hero, and I haven't got a hole in my head, besides.

I turned in the opposite direction, cut diagonally across the street to the all-night drugstore on the corner. I went into a phone booth, searched my pockets for the number Ames had given me in Val's apartment.

I must have wakened him out of a sound sleep, for his voice sounded crabby and groggy at first. I told him what had happened. He took the news calmly enough, and why not? He hadn't been shot at.

"Looks as though the acid had been meant for you, all right," Ames said, when I'd finished.

"There's another thing," I said. "I called Paul Winship."

That made him sore. "You told me you didn't know where he was."

"I took a chance he'd be at his folks' home in Wisconsin Dells." Quickly I told him what Paul had said. "So you see? He'll tell you who the girl is, and you'll want to check on her, even though it seems pretty certain now that Downey was mistaken for me. But she was the only one who knew he'd be in our apartment."

"She and one other."

That startled me. "What do you mean? Who?"

"Paul Winship."

"But that's crazy!" I protested. "And anyway, even if Paul had thrown acid at Downey, he couldn't have just shot at me! It isn't two hours since I talked to him over the telephone at Wisconsin Dells."

"If would be possible for a plane to get him down here in that time," Ames pointed out.

"Barely," I admitted, though I doubted even that. "But it's highly improbable. And what do you think he is, anyway? A homicidal maniac?"

Ames ignored the sarcasm. He went on, "I'd like to see all you people together at once tomorrow. I think I'd learn more that way. Get you talking, possibly contradicting each other. How about your apartment?"

"It's too small," I objected. I thought a minute. "I tell you. Paul should be here by noon. How about all of us meeting in the Lanzi-Bar at one? It will be open, but nobody will be there. They don't do any business before the cocktail hour."

I don't think Ames liked the idea much, but he said at last reluctantly, "Well, all right. I'll notify the others in the morning."

He hung up. I went across the street to my building, went up to the fourth floor in the automatic elevator. *Ames must be crazy,* I thought. *He'll never make me believe Paul Winship would have shot at me. There wasn't the remotest motive.*

But Harry Quist, now. I wondered how far gone he'd really been when I'd seen him in the back room on Rush Street. He could have followed me, hidden in the alley during those twenty minutes I'd been talking to the night-man in the garage.

I went into my apartment, was hanging my wet coat in the hall closet when I heard a sound from the bedroom.

I froze. I had no gun. I looked wildly around for something to use as a weapon. Moving quietly over the thickly carpeted floor, I took the fire-tongs from the set in front of the fireplace.

THEN I went over to the bedroom door, jumped to one side as I threw it open.

Gloria was standing there, in a black gown, smiling at me invitingly.

"For Pete's sake," I said wearily, more tired than irritated. I picked up her coat, and tossed it to her. "Outside! I'm not young enough to fall for that one. I'll never be that young again."

She made no move to catch her wrap, let it fall unheeded to the floor. She came over to me, threw her arms around me.

"Bill! Bill, please! You know you still love me. You know you do! Blow off this redhead. I'm wise, anyway. I know you're just using her to try to spite me, make me jealous."

I stared at her. She really believed what she was saying.

"My Lord!" I said, shaking my head. "The way you women kid yourselves."

Her mouth opened.

I disentangled myself from her arms, tossed the fire-tongs idly from hand to hand. I told her what I should have told her long ago, if I'd only had the opportunity.

"Listen, while I shatter your dreams about Golden Boy," I said. "I know what you read in Gaskell's column—that TBC paid me $50,000 for the movie rights to *Men On Her Mind.* But you're not allowing for Hollywood exaggeration, Gloria." I smiled at her, enjoying this. I'd taken plenty from her. "They came across with just two thousand bucks, that's all. And I've already spent it, to boot."

She stared at me. She believed me, all right. She looked down at her gown, then. To put herself in a position to be what she was thinking. She'd always had brushed off—and for nothing! I knew an easy face to read.

But I wasn't prepared for what she did next.

Her face twisted. She grabbed the tongs from my hand, raised them, swung at me in blind fury. If the tongs had ever connected with my head, I'd have been out for good. As it is, I only just succeeded in catching the blow on my upraised arm. It nearly paralyzed me. But I was able to grab the tongs away from her.

Her purse was lying on the bed. I went over, opened it, rummaged through it, keeping one eye on her.

"What are you doing?" Gloria snarled. She started to throw her coat on. "What are you looking for?"

"A gun," I said. "It isn't here, but you could have thrown it away. I just remembered you had time to get up here while I was phoning Ames."

She looked at me blankly. Maybe she was acting. I don't know.

I said, "Somebody just shot at me."

"Well, I didn't!" Gloria snapped. She grabbed the purse from me, clattered through the living room to the outer door. "But it's too bad he missed!"

The door slammed behind her. I laughed at the painted panels. I was happy. I was rid of Gloria for good.

Unless she got rid of me first. . . .

They were all there in the Lanzi-Bar when Valerie and I walked in at one o'clock the next afternoon.

The bar stools had been pulled around in a rough circle, and ranged upon them in various uneasy attitudes were Gloria, Harry Quist, Paul Winship, and a frail blonde girl I'd never seen before. Just a kid, really, with a tragic face too old for her years.

Mac was leaning against the bar, his fat face interestedly watching Ames as he walked back and forth restlessly before the others.

Paul grabbed my hand, nearly pumped my arm off, his narrow, good-looking face beaming. I'd never believe he'd want to kill me, but I didn't like the narrow way Ames was watching him.

Paul introduced me to the blonde. "This is Bill Holdsworthy, Peggy. Peggy Dow, Bill, Tom's girl friend."

Val put her arm around the girl impulsively, held her close for a minute. "Honey, we're all so dreadfully sorry," she said. Peggy wiped her eyes.

Ames said, "Incidentally, Miss Dow's alibi for Saturday night is okay. She's a waitress, and had to work unexpectedly. She never even knew that Paul had lent Tom the apartment."

I said to Ames, "Did she know what Tom could have meant by saying 'Famine' just before he died?" That still bothered me, kept running through my head.

Ames shook his head. "It was as meaningless to her as it was to the rest of us."

HARRY QUIST was watching me with smoldering eyes, while Gloria was watching Val like a cobra. I looked at Paul.

"Has anything happened to you recently that could have been such a motivating force?" Ames asked.

"Nothing." I shook my head. And then, though I didn't feel facetious, I smiled at Val. "Nothing, except that Val and I became engaged last week."

She smiled back. Ames' thin face creased, too. "Well, that seems hardly—"

I was watching the others—Gloria, Paul, Harry Quist, Peggy, Val and Mac. I seemed to hear the echo of my own last words. And I thought, *Famine, famine.* And then—I felt sick. My stomach seemed actually to turn over. Everything clicked into place at once.

I forced the words out. "I know who threw the acid. And I know now why it was done."

I made myself face the guilty one. I was heart-sick. "You wanted to make my face so horrible that Val could never look at me again without shuddering. You followed me last night, tried to shoot me. You didn't want Val to marry me. You loved her terribly, pathologically, even though you knew she'd never look at you."

The last sentence, the pity in my voice, he must have found intolerable. I don't know where the gun came from. It was in his hand suddenly. I heard the report, felt the bullet sear my neck.

I jumped. Made a flying tackle. Caught him before he could shoot again, knocked him off his feet by the sheer suddenness of my attack.

Ames was there before he could struggle erect, snapping on handcuffs.

I said slowly, "Downey wasn't saying 'Famine.' He was dying, slurring his words. He was saying, 'Fa' man.' He meant the fat man who threw the acid. The fat man who wanted me to go back to Gloria. The only fat man here."

From his handcuffed wrists, Mac raised morbid eyes to look at me, his round, fat face twisted with hate.

By SCOTT O'HARA

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CHAPTER ONE

Hard-Boiled Rover Boy

LIEUTENANT of Police Isaac Jamison gave the girl his most soothing smile. She sat on the edge of the chair placed beside his desk, looking at him with wary suspicion. She was young enough, with a face just a shade too wide for beauty, capable square hands, neat inexpensive suit. Isaac Jamison had noted the worn edge of the red leather shoulder bag, the alligator pumps, well-cared-for, but showing age. He guessed that this girl worked, understood the value of money, was willing to buy the best whenever she could afford it.

Her eyes were her best feature. Blue-gray, direct, without a shred of coyness. And she had the faint antagonism of the self-respecting person not accustomed to contacting the police.

"The man outside said you are a special assistant, Lieutenant. How much authority do you have?"

Isaac Jamison's voice was low, with undertones of warmth. His voice was one of the reasons Deputy Chief Ringold had assigned him to this thankless job. His voice and his smile. His face had a long, bleak bone structure, severe, a thin-lipped mouth with the smallest hint of the fanatic, his beard blue-heavy under the dark skin. But the smile made him warm and human. He used it often in this new job, calculatingly, watching its effect.

He smiled and said, "Enough authority, Miss Dobbs, to refer you higher if this should turn out to be a large-scale crime wave you're reporting to me."

Some of the suspicion went out of her eyes and she relaxed a little. "Maybe I'm giving all this too much importance."

"Tell me about it and we'll see." He composed himself to listen. That was his job. Listening.

Ringold, the new Deputy Chief had said to him, "Jamie, we'll have efficiency here. Every crackpot in the city wants to bend my ear. I can't listen to all of them, and

we can't afford not to listen. One out of every fifty has something we should look into. So you do the screening. I'll give you a nice office, a title that doesn't mean anything, and you listen. You're a smart cop, Jamie. You're relieved of all other assignments."

Protest had been no good. Ringold had listened to his objections with gradually increasing coolness and at last Jamison had stopped, knowing that it was no good to go on. His active cases were reassigned and he had landed behind the big dark desk. Case and Lobund called him 'our new receptionist'.

SIR LANCELOT'S CRIME WAVE

He pivoted, the heavy automatic like a stone in his big hand.

Because he couldn't brush off a lady,
Lieutenant Jamison hunted the racketeer
who'd put her boy-friend—on ice.

Novelette with Hair-Trigger Tension

The worst of it was that Jamison knew in his heart that Ringold was right. The big city department needed a phony special assistant to screen out the cranks.

In one month behind the desk, only two cranks had managed to bull their way through him to Ringold, and he had opened up two cases, one giving a little more dope on a known car-theft ring, the other resulting in the booking of an elderly landlady for extortion. The thing most disturbing to Isaac Jamison was that he had to turn the data over to the appropriate departments. Following through had been his doctrine for eight years with the department.

The girl looked down at her hands for a moment, as though to compose her thoughts, and said, "I'm a stenographer and file clerk for Ballou and Stark, a wholesale drug company. It's large, as you may know, with about thirty in the office. A year ago they hired a salesman named John Kiern. I thought he was fresh at first. His territory is in the city here, so he was in the office a lot. He kept asking me for two months, and finally I went out with him." She flushed slightly.

"He wasn't like I had thought. He was . . . nice. I had fun. We got along nicely. We were even talking about marriage. But to tell the truth, he wasn't doing very well as a salesman. They pay a small salary and then a commission scale. Some weeks he'd make sixty dollars and then he'd drop down to thirty or so. Along with the thirty-seven fifty I make, it didn't seem like enough. I told him so and it hurt his pride. He began to act . . . well, queer. A month ago he changed. He told me that everything was going to be fine and I didn't have to worry any more. He got me this ring."

She held her hand out. It was a quite respectable diamond. Isaac guessed that it was a full carat.

"Nice," he said.

"Too nice. I told him that the man from the store would probably be around to take it back. He laughed at me. He said it was paid in full. He acted as though he were on top of the world for two weeks. And then he disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"He just didn't come to work. He left the company car in the lot. The attendant had the keys. All his display items were in the car. They're still holding a check for him at the office. Back commissions. A small check."

"You tried to find him?"

"He lived in a one-room apartment on Lincoln Avenue. Number 1281. I thought he was drunk, or something silly like that, and I waited three days before I went there. He had moved out and left no forwarding address."

Jamison frowned slightly. Before he could speak, the girl said:

"I know what you're thinking. That he got tired of me and sick of the job and just moved away. But I know that isn't so. It couldn't be!"

"Mind telling me why not?"

She lifted her chin. "I'm not the most fascinating creature in the city, Lieutenant, but I know that John Kiern was in love with me. It wasn't a case of my being fooled by a line. If you want me to put it plainly, Lieutenant, he was on the hook."

"I can't exactly write that in a report, Miss Dobbs. How about relatives?"

"That was one of the things we have . . . had in common, Lieutenant. Both of us are completely alone. I have an older sister that I heartily dislike. She is in Alaska with her husband. He has two cousins in Omaha, but they weren't in touch and he's never seen them."

"How long have you been with Ballou and Stark?"

"Three years. I reported for work there the day after my twenty-first birthday."

"Tell me just why you came here."

FOR the first time she lost her crispness. "Johnny was hard up, Lieutenant. And—and suddenly he seemed to have money. He didn't report for work on a Monday, two weeks ago yesterday. The previous Saturday night he took me to a nightclub, and I know the evening cost him close to forty dollars. We had a Sunday afternoon date and he told me he was thinking of buying a car. He cancelled our Sunday night date because he said he had to see some people. I think, maybe because I always suspected he was a little weak, that he found some crooked way to get money. And I think he's dead."

Isaac Jamison raised one dark eyebrow.

"Dead?"

She didn't sniffle and dig around in her purse for a handkerchief. She kept those blue-gray eyes on him while tears gathered in the lower lids, broke free, rolled down her cheeks.

"When you love somebody, Lieutenant, it makes sort of a bond between you. Lots of people know when somebody they love is in trouble. I woke up after midnight Sunday and I had been crying in my sleep. I went down to work in the morning and I knew that something bad had happened."

"But you didn't go to his place for three days?"

"Stupid pride, Lieutenant. I know that now. But he checked out early Sunday evening. It wouldn't have done any good if I had gone."

"Again, Miss Dobbs, there's nothing I can put in a report."

She quickly wiped her cheeks. "Does that mean that you won't investigate?"

He shrugged. "I can take a description and turn it over to missing persons. Do you have a picture?"

She took it out of her purse. A snapshot, hand tinted. Jamison saw a fairly heavy young man smiling up at him out of the picture. He was blond, with a ruddy complexion, hairline beginning to recede. Though he didn't look over twenty-six, it was easy to see what he would look like at fifty. The young man's mouth was too small.

"What does turning this over to missing persons accomplish?" she asked.

"A description goes out on the wires. And the data is filed for comparison with any unidentified bodies that show up."

"But there wouldn't be an investigation?" There was resignation in her voice. But she still sat bravely, her shoulders squared.

He said, "Not on the basis of what you've given me. If there were more facts to go on."

With a touch of anger she said, "I thought it would be this way."

"The department is not exactly overstaffed, Miss Dobbs. If we were having a lull right now, I might wrangle an assignment of one man to do legwork on it."

She stood up with a quick movement. "Sorry to have wasted your time, Lieutenant. May I have the picture, please."

Jamison groaned inwardly. This was borderline. Less than borderline, actually. The girl was sincere and she had a strong conviction. But Ringold would laugh at her two major premises.

He ran a strong hand back through his coarse dark hair. "Sit down, Miss Dobbs. Can you keep a secret?"

She gave him an odd look. "Of course!"

"Well, I'm just a dummy official set up here to comb out the cranks and please the public. I've been sitting at this desk for a month. If I try to refer this case for investigation, they'll pat me on the head and tell me I fell for a pretty little package with a tale of woe.

"Look—I work from nine to five. At five I'm my own man. The deputy chief would hack off my ears with a dull knife if I went out officially on a case without his okay. But maybe I can dig up a little to add to your story. Then I give you the facts I find and you come in here and tell me those facts and maybe we get some action."

Her voice was soft. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Remember, I'm no cop on this job. I'm a curious friend helping you get data for the cops."

"It will be so good to have someone help, Lieutenant."

"Can you take time off from your job?"

"A girl can have a headache."

"Fine. Tomorrow pick the likely jewelry stores and tramp around until you find the one that sold Kiern that ring. Take his picture along. Make up a song and dance. When you find the store, quit right there. I'll ask the questions later. It's three-fifteen now. Go back to the office and see if you can get your hands on a complete list of all the customers Kiern called on. If you can make it, I'll meet you at six under the clock in the lobby of the Pritchard."

He walked her to the office door. She was taller than he had thought.

Before he opened the door he said, "This will be strictly personal, not official. Keep that straight, please."

* * *

The building superintendent at 1281

Lincoln was a limp and languid young man with a surprising and carefully modulated basso profundo voice.

He stood in the hallway and said, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Is it so tough to understand?" Jamison asked. "Kiern was going to marry my cousin here, Miss Dobbs. If he's run out on her, he wants a good bust in the nose. All I'm asking you is how he acted when he left. I want to give the guy the benefit of the doubt."

The superintendent glanced again at Corrine Dobbs. He coughed, ran a thumbnail along one side of his hairline mustache. "Well, Mr. Kiern seemed in a bit of a hurry. He had ten more days rent coming. But he seemed very . . . gay. I told him I had to check the inventory and check for breakage. His apartment was furnished, you know. He gave me twenty dollars and said he was in a hurry and that money, plus no refund on his rent, should cover everything."

"Was he drunk?"

"I believe he'd been drinking, but I wouldn't say he was drunk."

"When you cleaned out the room, did you find he'd left anything?"

"Nothing important. Some receipted bills, movie stubs, a third of a bottle of bourbon, two soiled neckties. Everything was thrown out but the bourbon. The janitor got that."

"Did he have any guests the last few days he was here?"

"I really couldn't say."

"Was he alone when he left here?"

"His car was parked out in front. I told him not to park it in front of the entrance, but he always did. It had the name of the company he worked for on the door, you know. There was somebody in the car waiting for him."

"A woman?"

"I think it was a man. It was dark, you know. I didn't go out to the car. I glanced out and got the impression someone was smoking a cigar. The glowing end of it was bigger than a cigarette."

"He carried his own bags out to the car?"

"Yes, there were two of them. He was whistling as he went down the walk to the car."

"He did the driving?"

"He got in the car on the other side, so I would imagine so."

"What did he say about a forwarding address?"

"He said he would stop and pick up any mail that might come, though he wasn't expecting any, and when he stopped he would leave his new address."

"That would indicate that he was staying in the city?"

"It looks that way to me."

"Thanks," Jamison said. "Thanks a lot."

"It's nothing, really. Glad to oblige," the superintendent said. He favored Corrine Dobbs with another look that approached sly amusement.

Out in Jamison's car, Corrine said, "Ugh! He's an awful little weasel, isn't he?"

"Did you mind being Woman Scorned?"

"Except for the way he looked at me, no. We—we aren't getting anywhere, are we?"

"One mysterious citizen with cigar, Corrine. He would have the answers. Now we hit the parking lot. Do you know the attendant?"

"Yes. The company let the salesmen use the cars in the evening. We used to park it there when we went to the movies. His name is Charlie something and he's an old man with a bad limp and something wrong with his mouth."

"I'll park a block away then and go back and see what I can do on my own."

CHAPTER TWO

Song and Dance

HE LEFT her in the car. The lot was at the rear of the office building where Ballou and Stark rented a full floor. The tiny gate house was brightly lighted and the lights gleamed on a sign that read: *Not open to the public.*

Jamison's heels were loud on the gravel. The old attendant put down his magazine. He had a scar that bisected both lips and twisted his mouth. His speech was thick and hard to understand. "Something, mister?"

Jamison took out his wallet, flashed the gold-and-blue enamel badge. "Traffic

Division, pop. Understand you park Ballou and Stark cars here."

"Three of 'em."

"Know the men that drive them?"

"Guess I do."

"Two weeks ago last Sunday one of those Ballou and Stark cars went through a red light at about eight o'clock in the evening. The witness didn't get the license number. Have any idea which one it was?"

"Hard to tell, captain. All three of 'em were out, I think. No, let me see, now. Mr. Gardner's car was in. He put it in early. He's the sales manager. That leaves two out. Mr. Brank had one and some new salesman, blond fella, had the other. Mr. Brank is the head salesman of the company and he helps Mr. Gardner in the office, I think."

"Know when those two came in?"

"Brank come in about midnight. The young fella was in earlier. About nine I'd say. He isn't around any more. They got another new one. Good thing. The one that left was a smart punk."

"How did he act that night?"

"He drove in too damn fast as usual. I was all set to give him hell when he came out of the lot."

"Didn't you?"

"No. He parked it over in the back corner—heard him whistling back there. Then some damn kids started slinging rocks at the cars over in the front corner there. I don't get around so good with this leg, captain. I went over to chase the kids. When I came back, that young fella was already through the gate here and over across the street in the shadows.

"He'd tossed the car keys in on the floor of the shack here. Too damn important to put 'em on the table and keep an old man from having to bend over. I yelled after him not to drive in here so fast. But he didn't hear me, I guess. He was still whistling."

"So it was Brank or Kiern, eh?"

"That's his name! Kiern. How come you know it, captain?"

"I checked with the office, pop. Who is your nomination for running the light?"

"I'd say Kiern. Brank is as old as I am and he drives the car like it was full of eggs. But Kiern doesn't work here any more, I guess. My Lord, you people really run down these traffic cases, don't you?"

"Routine, pop. Thanks a lot. Did you catch the kids?"

"Me? Hell, I never even got a look at 'em. Instead of messing around with somebody running a light two weeks ago, you ought to haul in these brats denting good cars with rocks and busting them with eggs and such. I told Mr. Gardener about it a hundred times."

He was still grumbling as Jamison walked back on down to where he'd left his aged coupe. He climbed in behind the wheel, gave Corrine a cigarette, waited for the dash lighter to pop out.

"Did you get anything?" she asked.

"Hard to say, Corrine. How good a business does Ballou and Stark do?"

"Why . . . I suppose it's all right. The big drug companies sell direct to the retailer. We handle lines for companies that sell on a national scale, but are too small to have a sales force. Of course, it's a pretty competitive business. We maintain bulk warehouses at key points for some items, and merely send orders on to the

"Fit for a King"

says GEO. McQUEEN

NEW ORLEANS, La.—"That's why *I* switched to Calvert," says this popular singer. "And I'll warble praises for its milder, mellower taste *any* day. Calvert is truly the monarch of them all!"

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., NEW YORK CITY

manufacturers for others. It's a very old firm. Mr. Ballou has been dead for twenty years. Mr. Stark is retired and lives in the south of France. What has that got to do with it?"

"I don't know yet. There's a warehouse here?"

"Quite a big one. On Front Street near the docks. Lots of times the local salesmen go down there and pick up small orders and deliver them directly."

He smoked in silence. Some latent alertness in him had been aroused.

She said, "Lieutenant, you're looking quite grim, you know."

"You'll be calling me that at the wrong time. Make it Jamie."

"Then Jamie is looking grim." She touched his arm. "Please tell me if you think I might be right . . . about Johnny."

He brushed her question off by saying, "We can't do any more tonight. I'll take you home. But first we'd better eat."

"You're my guest."

"Nonsense! I'll pay."

"Dutch, Jamie, or I insist on being taken home. . . ."

At ten o'clock Isaac Jamison, alone in the apartment he shared with Carl Case of Homicide, searched through the desk drawers until he found the large-scale city map he was looking for.

He spread it out on the desk top, the phone book beside him. Kiern had checked out of his apartment at seven-thirty. He had left the car at the lot at nine. No suitcases had been found in the car and Charlie, the attendant, would have noticed if Kiern had been carrying any.

With a red pencil, he drew an X where the apartment house was, another at the parking lot. The distance between them was about thirty city blocks and, since it was necessary to angle across town to get from one to the other, he calculated the average driving time between the two as about twenty-five minutes. That gave Kiern sixty-five minutes to dispose of the bags.

Corrine had given him a neatly typed list of all the customers Kiern had been authorized to call on. He checked the addresses in the phone book. The hundred and twenty drugstores were all in the southeast portion of the city. It took him an hour to mark them all with a red dot.

Then he carefully shaded the entire area. Kiern's territory had been a kidney-shaped area taking in several suburban shopping areas plus what could be called a slum area. It was that portion of the city furthest from the waterfront.

By driving with respectable speed Kiern could have gone from the apartment out to the middle of his territory, spend ten or fifteen minutes there, and then driven back to the parking lot in midtown.

Of course there was always the possibility that Kiern could have gone directly to the railroad station, checked the bags, returned the car to the lot and then gone on to take a train out of town. But it would have made more sense to take the bags to the lot, hail a taxi outside the lot. It would have saved time and trouble and there were plenty of cruising cabs in the area of the parking lot at night, as it was only a block or so from the theater district.

He made another X, after looking up the address of the Ballou and Stark warehouse. By taking a crosstown thoroughfare, a man could drive from Lincoln to the warehouse, and then downtown to the lot in possibly five or ten minutes more than would be needed to drive directly to the lot. That would give Kiern an hour, more or less, at the warehouse.

JAMISON looked down at the map and it was as though he were suspended high over that city on a Sunday night two weeks before. The little black sedan was down there on the street. It waited. Kiern got in it and drove off. Where did he go? And why? If he already had a new address, it would seem reasonable that he would have given that address to the building superintendent.

He was still sitting there at midnight when Carl Case came in. Carl sat down, tenderly took off his shoes and groaned. "Oh, you lucky, lucky guy. I get a car from the department and then I can park it within a mile of where I want to go every time. You have it soft, lad. Soft."

"Want to trade?"

"I didn't until today. Joe told me you were locked in for a long time today with some very nice stuff."

"Joe talks too much. She's a nice girl." Jamie took a deep breath. "I took her out

to dinner to talk over her problem."

Case gave him a look of burlesque surprise. "Jamison, the woman hater! Jamison, the strong and silent man! Dating girls now! The earth has faltered on its majestic orbit around the sun. I am speechless."

"I wish you were."

Case padded over in his stocking feet and looked over Jamison's shoulder at the map. He stopped smiling. He said:

"Jamie, you and I are friends. You got a rough assignment. But just between us coppers, let me suggest that you don't go hero for some babe, without orders."

Jamison quietly folded up the map and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. He lit a cigarette and leaned back. "Homicide needs people with long noses," he said.

Case flushed, turned and went into his bedroom. In a little while Jamison heard the roar of the shower. . . .

Jamison got some information on the phone, made an appointment, skipped his lunch to keep it. Roger Leesh, the C.P.A., was a burly young man with his big hands, a lurid sports jacket and a customer's smile.

Jamison took the chair Leesh indicated. He said, "I made it sound over the phone as if this were official business, Mr. Leesh. It isn't. I'm acting as a private citizen with no authority whatsoever. I found out you audit the books of Ballou and Stark. I know that your relationship with your clients is confidential. So you can tell me to go to hell."

Leesh grinned. "I like that! Right to the point. Look at it this way, Lieutenant. Some time you might come in with authority. The truth is, I wouldn't feel right about answering questions. Some questions. Try a few. If I don't like them, I'll hedge."

"Ballou and Stark makes money?"

"If it were a corporation instead of a limited partnership, I wouldn't be in a rush to buy up a lot of stock."

"It will keep on going for a long time?"

"Call it the transfusion method. Money is the blood of business. Mr. Gardener, one of the partners, is a transfusion expert."

"Do they worry?"

"They don't seem to. That's not my business. Maybe it's a hobby with Mr. Stark. Maybe he sends Gardener the transfusions. I wouldn't know."

Jamison thought in silence for a time. He said, "No more questions."

"That was a lot easier than I expected, Lieutenant. I don't have to say anything about your keeping the mouth firmly closed, do I?"

"Not a word."

"Now I'll ask one. Is there any danger of my losing a client?"

"There's always that danger," Jamison said. . . .

During the afternoon, during a lull in the procession of people who considered themselves too important to get traffic tickets and had to be disillusioned, Jamison called a salesman friend of his, asked some questions, jotted down terminology on a scratch pad.

And then he called Mr. Gardener. He said, "My name is Hunt, sir. I'm lining up wholesale houses for a new product called Lynadrine. We—"

"We can't take on any new items at this time," Gardener said bruskly.

"But we're spending upwards of a million in national advertising, guaranteeing you a local sale of at least a hundred thousand dollars a year, with an eighteen percent gross profit to your firm, Mr. Gardener."

"The offer is attractive, Mr. Hunt, but we find that our present lines are all that we can handle at this time. Thank you for thinking of us." The line clicked dead.

Jamison hung up the phone, slouched in his chair and frowned at the far wall.

At six he met Corrine. She had taken the day off, and found the jewelry store, had the name and address of the clerk who had made the sale. The clerk was young and lived with his parents. They caught him just as he was on his way out.

"Sure, I remember the guy. What'd he do? Steal the dough to buy the ring? It cost him nine hundred and fifty."

"How did he pay?"

"Cash, mister. Cash on the line. All in fifty dollar bills."

"Did he act any different than any other customer?"

"He seemed happy and he told me that the ring was for the most wonderful girl in the world and he was whistling about 'Happy Days Are Here Again'. Say,

miss, you're wearing the ring, aren't you? Yeah, that's the one. What gives?"

Jamison thought fast. He said quickly, "If you see the man again, please don't mention this little visit. Miss Smith wants to borrow a small amount on the ring and I wanted to check and see if the purchase price was as she said."

The clerk looked wise. "Uh . . . Oh, sure. Never saw you in my life. How about a lift downtown if you're going that way?"

CHAPTER THREE

Smoke Screen

CORRINE looked haggard and worried, and she had no appetite. Jamison pushed his coffee cup aside and lit a cigarette. She said, "Why don't you let me in on what you are guessing?"

"How do you know I'm guessing anything?"

"At first you were casual, and even . . . amused. Now you've tightened up. You must be thinking something."

"Tell me what you know about Gardener."

"Mr. Gardener? He's nice to work for. He manages the office as well as being sales manager. He's married and has a nice house outside of town. He isn't a slave driver."

"What does he look like?"

"Fiftyish. Tall and a little heavy. Youthful clothes. Suntan all year round. Don't ask me how."

"Do the men like him? The salesmen?"

"Oh, yes."

"He seems well off?"

"I guess he makes a very good salary, and also he owns some of the firm, you know. But why are you asking me all this?"

"Corrine, if you have a haystack and you suspect there's a needle in it, the best method I know is to keep rolling around in the haystack until something sticks you."

"Felt anything yet?"

"Not yet. Does Gardener seem interested in his work?"

"Very, Jamie. A long time ago he was a pharmacist, before he got into sales work. I guess he's clever. He maintains his own lab down at the warehouse and makes up a special product called Gardener Headache Powders. He's so anxious for the product to catch on that he does all the sales work himself."

Jamison had the cigarette between his thumb and first finger. He looked steadily at Corrine. Slowly he became conscious of having squeezed the cigarette so tightly that the paper tore.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"The needle, honey. The needle."

"Is there enough . . . to refer the case to one of your divisions?"

"Not quite enough."

"Can we get more?"

"If I'm right, we can get a lot more."

"When, Jamie?"

"Ballou and Stark is closed now. Can you get back in there?"

"Why, yes. I have a key. But—"

"Let's go. . . ."

Gardener's office door was locked. Jamison cursed softly. He told Corrine what he wanted. She went to the supply cabinet, found extra desk pads that had been printed for Mr. Gardener's use. *"From the Desk of A. William Gardener."*

She rolled it into her typewriter. Then she had to go and look up the name of the night warehouse man.

Her fingers were brisk on the keys as he dictated.

"Seaton,
I have asked Miss Dobbs to make an early delivery for me tomorrow to a dealer who is out of Gardener Powders. Please turn over a case of the powders to Miss Dobbs."

She found Gardener's signature. Jamison turned the sheet upside down and carefully drew the signature.

"I don't get it," Corrine said plaintively.

"Just be a good girl and do as I say. . . ."

The entrance to the warehouse was at the blind end of an alley, with a high loading platform. Jamison backed his car to the loading platform, helped Corrine out, jumped up, gave her his hand, pulled her up.

A feeble light shone through the wired window of the office door at the side.

Corrine said, "Shouldn't I go in alone?"

"I'm just a guy to carry the box, Corrine." He hammered at the office door. He paused and listened, heard the slow steps coming toward the door. The bolt was shot back. The door opened and a sleepy, elderly man looked out at them.

Corrine said, "I'm Miss Dobbs from the office."

"Oh, sure. Didn't recognize you. Come on in." They stepped into the office and the man shut the door. He yawned, took the note which Corrine handed him.

He moved his lips as he read. Then he looked at Corrine angrily. "Wish he'd make up his mind. Keeps a man confused all the time. Gave me hell a while back for giving out them pet powders of his and told me that no one gets 'em but him, and then he goes and writes this."

"The ones you gave to Kiern?" Jamison asked softly.

"Yeah. How the hell did I know the lad was lying to me when he said Mr. Gardener asked him to get them? How did I know the lad was trying to be a ball of fire on the job by muscling into the boss's private product?"

"He seems to have changed his mind again," Jamison said.

The man cackled. "Little forgetful, though, ain't he? Had that wire cage built and never did give me the key for it. Let's see what he says."

The man went over to the narrow stairway, leaned into it and yelled up, "Mr. Gardener! Hey, Mr. Gardener!"

Steps were heavy on the stairs. Jamison bit his lip. A bad tactical error. They should have asked first if Mr. Gardener was in his private lab. Gardener appeared, first neatly shined shoes, then stained white smock, then a puzzled, heavy face.

"Miss Dobbs!" he said. "What's wrong?"

Seaton answered for her. He held the note out and Gardener took it. Seaton said, "Mr. Gardener, I got to know just how much authority I got here. You give me hell for letting Kiern take them powders and then you send me these orders."

Jamison moved two careful steps back toward the door, watched Gardener's face as the man read the note. It was a heavy, unreadable face, evenly coated with an almost metallic tan.

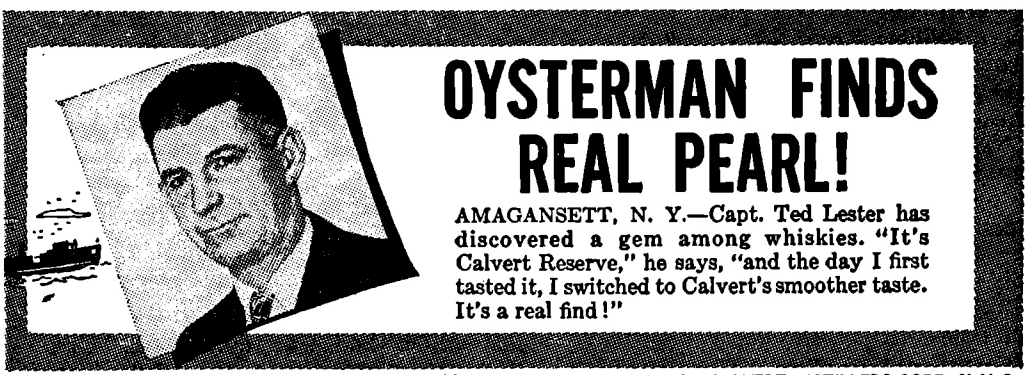
"You didn't give me no key for that stuff," Seaton said, his tone querelous.

GARDENER gave Corrine a keen look. "I don't understand all this," he said evenly. "This certainly looks like my signature. But I didn't write this order. Who is your friend?"

Jamison turned quickly to Seaton. He said, "Where did Mr. Gardener send you Sunday night two weeks ago when he came here with Kiern?"

Seaton had backed toward the oak roll-top desk. There was a slow accumulation of tension in the small room. Seaton said, "He sent me to the office to get his cigar case from on top of his desk. But it wasn't there."

Seaton, with surprising speed, snatched open the desk drawer, pulled out a heavy .45 automatic, held it with unwavering steadiness pointed directly at Jamison's chest. Without taking his eyes from Jamison, he said, "If you didn't write that note, Mr. Gardener, then they come here to steal something. We've got a lot of valuable drugs here. I'll cover him and you



use the phone to call for the cops."

Gardener stepped down into the room from the last step. He said gently, "Before I bring the police in on this, Miss Dobbs, possibly you could tell me what it's all about."

"And when you came back without the cigar case, Seaton," Jamison said, "Mr. Gardener was here alone. He told you that Kiern had to leave, didn't he?"

"So what, mister?"

"So you have a small private pier at the other end of the warehouse. How deep is the water off the end of it?"

"Thirty feet," Gardener said. "Who are you, sir? You don't look the type to be mixed up in a drug theft. Nor does Miss Dobbs."

Jamison realized that it wasn't going well. Gardener was too self-contained, too careful to strike exactly the right note. Jamison looked steadily at Seaton and said:

"Mr. Kiern is at the bottom of that thirty feet of water, and Mr. Gardener put him there."

Corrine gasped, turned so that Jamison saw her strained face, her staring eyes. He hadn't wanted to do it that way.

"Quite a smoke screen, sir," Gardener said easily. He moved to Seaton's side, gently took the weapon from Seaton's hand. "You walk up to Chambers Street, Seaton, and see if you can locate a policeman. I'll watch these two."

Seaton scratched his head. "Now why in hell would he say that about Kiern? Seemed funny to me that Kiern would take off on foot from here. He didn't like walking much."

"Do as I tell you!" Gardener said, a note of strain creeping into his voice.

"Why not use the phone?" Seaton asked mildly. "And what made you act like a crazy man just because I let Kiern take a case of a dozen bottles of those powders of yours?"

"Do as I tell you, or you go off the payroll as of right now," Gardener said. A certain firmness about Gardener's mouth had fled. His underlip sagged loosely and Jamison saw the pinch of nostrils as Gardener breathed heavily.

"These people make more sense than you do—"

Seaton was standing at Gardener's left. Gardener pivoted, his arm straight, the heavy automatic like a stone in his big hand. It smashed full against Seaton's mouth. Seaton fell back against the convex curve of the desk, his knees buckling, sliding without haste down to the floor.

Jamison made a quick step toward Gardener, halted, off balance, as the muzzle of the gun swung back to cover him.

The polished front had cracked, had fallen away. Gardener stood in an atavistic crouch, hate and desperation in every thick line of his face.

Corrine Dobbs said, her voice oddly placid, the voice of a person who talks in the midst of sleep. "Then you did do it, Mr. Gardener. You killed Johnny. I don't know why you'd do a thing like that, but I knew he was dead. All along I've known it."

She stepped toward Gardener. "Back up!" Gardener said, moving the gun toward her. Gardener's voice was a thick, damp whisper.

"I thought you were a good boss to work for. Isn't that silly? He bought me this ring, you know." She held her hand out as she took another step toward him.

Jamison had watched this type before. He saw the tanned finger tightening on the trigger. He knew that Gardener, in spite of fear and panic, was thinking of the percentages. His hope lay in killing all three, trumping up a story of attempted robbery. He saw resolve on Gardener's face.

In a flat, mechanical tone, Jamison said, "I'm a cop, Gardener."

The new factor was injected into the boiling equations in Gardener's brain. The new factor slowed the reflexes, gave rise to momentary hesitation.

As Jamison saw the faint waver of the gun barrel, he drove forward in a long frantic dive, straight-arming Corrine in the shoulder as he passed her, sending her spinning into a far corner of the room.

The deafening smash of the heavy weapon, pivoted down as he dived for Gardener's knees, drew a white line of fire across Jamison's left leg, numbed his left foot. His shoulder smashed against Gardener's knees, toppling the man back.

Once his hands were on Gardener, Jamison worked with quick skill. One slug was slammed up against the ceiling

as the small bone in Gardener's wrist cracked. He thudded a knee up into Gardener's bulk, heard the gun slide away. Pinning Gardener's throat with his left forearm he smashed the man heavily and perfectly on the angle of the jaw.

* * *

Jamison lay on the hospital bed on his stomach and looked without amusement at the way Ringold shook with muted laughter.

"He couldn't have shot you in a better place," Ringold said. "Just where I would have shot you myself."

"Lay off," Jamison said softly.

Ringold sobered. "I talked to the girl. She puts up a good fight for you, Jamie."

"How is she?"

Ringold shrugged. "Shock. Okay now. The report you dictated came out pretty close. He opened up nice. The kid was too eager. He got Seaton to give him a case of the powders. When he went out with them to sell them in his own area, he carries a bottle in his hand. The guy in the store takes the bottle and gives him a fifty. This Kiern catches on quick.

"Seems Gardener was taking standard medicines, cooking out the tiny amounts of dope, accumulating it, bottling it as his private powders and unloading it. Around two hundred bottles a month at fifty per. Kiern got wise and put the arm on him. Gardener told Kiern that with the kid's help he could expand. He told the kid he wanted him in a better section of town and had an apartment for the kid to look at. He softened him up by giving him some more money.

"At the warehouse he slugged him, rolled him on a dolly onto the pier, wired scrap to his ankles and to the luggage and dumped the works off the end. The kid came to just before Gardener dumped him in."

"I had to guess the place," Jamison said. "He didn't have much time, so it had to be there."

"If you had enough to go on, Jamison," Ringold said, "you had enough to refer it to Homicide. What did you have?"

"Gardener being too careful. He wanted the parking lot guy to think that Kiern left from his own car. So he drove in fast. He whistled like Kiern. From the back corner of the lot he threw rocks to draw the attendant away from the gate. Tossing the keys in on the gatehouse floor didn't sound like Kiern. Then I found the firm was losing money, and yet keeping on one hell of a big staff. Cover up. Tell me, is that enough to take to Homicide?"

Ringold fingered his chin. "No. I guess not. But why break it yourself?"

"I didn't. Honest, I just wanted to get hold of one of those bottles and turn it in to the lab. When I get out of here, do I have to be receptionist?"

Ringold stood up. "Happy birthday. I'm giving that detail to Carl Case for a while."

"I don't know how to—"

"Are you trying to thank me? You're going into traffic for six months. By then you'll appreciate being a receptionist again. And you'll be quicker to ask permission to chase wild geese."

Jamison was still groaning when he heard Corrine's soft voice at his elbow say, "Darling, does it hurt that bad?"

THE END

MERELY PECCADILLOS

Not content with the $13 they got off a Philadelphia taxi driver, bandits made him take off his pants and took them too.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ordered to pay $3800 for beating up his former wife, a Chicago man waited for the judge to leave the courtroom—then thrashed her again.

A man complained to Atlanta police that thieves had stolen his garage.

♦ ♦ ♦

North Carolina patrolmen arrested a man near Asheville twice on the same charge: "Operating a horse while drunk."

H. H.

Fast-Moving Novelette of an Unwilling Patsy

I heard a soft movement behind me. . . .

While the police dragnet tightened about him, private-eye Mike Blair rode a wild hunch— to track down the racetrack blonde's real knifer.

LET'S ALL DIE TOGETHER

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Ringer

SOME days you can't make a nickel. For eight hours I'd shadowed the blonde with the beautiful gams. The beauty shop, the furrier, the jeweler, and finally the dim, familiar cocktail lounge off Union Square. Three drinks and a lot of will power it had cost me to sit in the shadows and fight the impulse to stare across the room at the full red lips and the thoughtful gray eyes.

Then the long moment when she had left her table and walked to the dressing room, oozing all the things that make a man wish he'd been born a million years

By HANK SEARLS

before. Finally the shock when the fat, ugly attendant in the white uniform had stepped out of the powder room and handed me the note, carefully, as if my hands were dirty.

I didn't need to read it.

Whoever you are, forget it. I'm going out the window into the alley. Don't think it hasn't been fun.

I crumpled the note and beat it for the door. I sprinted half a block and banked around a corner into the alley next to the lounge. I drew up and stared.

The lowest window was twenty feet above the pavement.

I cursed and headed back for the main drag. Half a block away, in front of the bar, the blonde was lifting one of her beautiful legs into a cab.

It was the only cab in sight.

The blonde turned and waved. Her teeth flashed scornfully and then she was off in a whine of gears.

Slowly I walked back to the bar. I sat at the table next to the one the blonde had left. I ordered a shot of whiskey and a beer chaser and began to swear again, silently, so as not to offend the waitress. I poured down the shot and half the glass of beer and ordered a double bourbon.

Behind me I heard a light footstep and felt a cool hand slide down my cheek. A soft, liquid voice said,

"Hell, Mike. Why so hilarious?"

I turned. Red, coppery hair; cool, sea-green eyes. My heart turned over.

"Sherry," I said. "Where the hell have you been?"

She slid into the chair across the table.

"Around, Mike. Why? Have you been looking for me?" There was a hint of laughter in her voice. I looked away.

"No."

"I didn't think so. How did you happen to stop here today? Did you forget I worked here?"

I felt the familiar tightness in my chest. "No. I came here on a job."

She smiled. "Still breaking up unhappy homes? Or are you tracking down an errant wife?"

I took a long drink of beer.

"I was working on a job for Nick. Until a few minutes ago."

"Nick Parenti? I didn't know things were that bad. Are you collecting mutual slips, or just shining his shoes?"

"You're funny as hell, aren't you?"

Her eyes filled with tears.

"No, Mike. I don't want it to be this way. I'm sorry." She smiled faintly. "What are you doing for Nick?"

I said it as nastily as I could, wanting to hurt her.

"I was trailing a blonde for him. Does that satisfy you?"

She didn't react as I'd expected. She laughed, a real laugh, not forced.

"Things really *are* tough for private detectives. So you're doing his leg work now."

I relaxed a little.

"No. Nick thinks somebody's trying to bust him, get him out of business so he can move in. He figures somebody's fixing races and placing bets. He thinks the blonde is a plant—she won three thousand yesterday and eighteen thousand today. He thought she might lead me to the boss."

She lit a cigarette and inhaled slowly. She gave me a long, thoughtful look.

"Poor Nick," she said. "My heart bleeds for him."

I glanced at her quickly.

"All over?"

"All over." She looked down and ground out her cigarette tensely. "All over, Mike."

THAT'S when I had the feeling that this had happened before. I felt the anger rising in me. I tried to stop the words before they came. It was no use.

"Yeah," I said. "All over. All over again. Just like when we were kids. Nick and Sherry had a fight. Nick doesn't give a damn, and Sherry can always have Mike until Nick is ready to kiss and make up."

My throat was tightening now, and I felt as if I needed air. I stood up. The words tumbled out bitterly.

"Not this time, sister. The three of us have come a long way from that damned alley south of Market Street. Nick's in the chips, you're on your way to the big time, and even old Mike is getting smart. Not this time, *Maggie.*"

The name that she hated brought a quick flash into her eyes and then she laid her hand on my arm.

"No, Mike. This time Nick and I are through. If you meant what you said two years ago—"

"I meant it, all right. Two years ago. Good-by." I picked up my hat and dropped a five dollar bill for the drinks.

"Wait," she said. Her eyes were cool again, almost blank. "The blonde you were following . . . was that the girl who left just before you came in?"

I nodded, surprised.

"She used to hang out here. Her name is Helena—Helena Parks. She lives at the Royal."

"It's too late. The hell with it." I walked out into the afternoon sunlight. . . .

Nick sat behind a desk as big as my whole office, stocky, dark, immaculate, more like an investment broker than a bookie. He looked up and smiled. It was the same smile that had put him where he was; frank, friendly, honest, but there was a cold hardness in his eyes that I hadn't seen in years.

Nick was worried, I realized suddenly; and all at once we weren't in the office at all—we were backed against a grimy wall south of Market Street with the rest of the gang eight blocks away, and the boys from Mission Street closing in, and that same cold glitter in Nick's eyes was holding them off as much as the glitter of the knife in his hand. . . .

I sat down.

"I lost her."

Nick spun his chair around an angry, impatient movement. For a while he gazed out the window at the fog rolling into the bay. Finally he said:

"Did she spot you?"

"Yes."

I saw his shoulder muscles tense, and the blood creep up his neck. I waited for the explosion. It didn't come. Instead:

"Mike, you never expected to see me in an office like this, did you?"

I was surprised.

"I guess not, Nick."

"You can see the whole town from up here. The hill where the big shots live, and the hole where we used to live. It's a good town, Mike. A fine town. I've got lots of friends here. There's not a man in this town that can say I didn't pay off on a bet. Not a man."

I'd never heard him talk like this, and it bothered me to see him in such a fix.

"That's right, Nick."

"I've got a hundred people working for me down there. All friends. Runners, collectors, barkeeps. I've made a lot of dough. I could quit tomorrow, and never do another lick of work. What would happen to them?"

I didn't answer.

"Some people think I'm a crook. Maybe so." He swung back and faced me. "But whoever's trying to break me is a crook, too, and he isn't going to do it. *He isn't going to do it!*"

"Hell, maybe it's just a streak of bad luck. Maybe nobody's trying to break you."

Nick tossed me a telegram. He said:

"The blonde won eighteen thousand today on Hi Pocket—nine to one odds at the post."

I read the wire. It was from Florida.

HI POCKET A RINGER. PETE.

I put the telegram back on the desk.

"Maybe they're not trying to get you, particularly. Maybe if you checked with some other bookies you'd find they got nicked too."

"I CHECKED. here wasn't a better in Reno, L. A., or New York that put more than a hundred bucks on that horse. Just the blonde. And the day before, the jock on the favorite was bribed." He paused. "There's a lot of dough behind this, Mike. A lot of dough. And I don't know where it's coming from."

"Why don't you set a limit?"

"I don't operate that way."

"Why don't you start laying off money at the track?"

"I don't operate that way, either."

I remembered what Sherry had said about the blonde. I came to a decision.

"Are you absolutely sure that you were taken?"

"You're damned right I'm sure." He leaned back in his chair. "You can sense it, when you've been in this racket as long as I have. Last week it was a little guy in a brown hat. He took me for thirteen thousand. I knew there was something going on, but what could I do? I can't turn down bets—I'd go out of business."

"If you're sure the blonde is a crook,

I'll find her and get your money back."

Nick glanced at me. "How are you going to find her?"

I stood up. "She lives at the Royal. If she still has the money, I'll get it for you."

Nick shook his head.

"Not you, Mike, it's too risky. It wouldn't be theft, it'd be grand larceny, and we can't prove a thing. Forget it. I hired you to find the guy that's putting up the dough. If she lives at the Royal, I'll send one of my boys up—"

I was through the door and on my way to the Royal Hotel before I remembered that I hadn't mentioned meeting Sherry. . . .

The Royal is a big hotel, but a private eye gets to know people. I stopped at the bar for a drink and asked Uncle Johnny, the barkeep, for the room number of a beautiful blonde named Helena. He winked one of his tired old eyes and told me she lived in room two-twelve.

I slipped him a buck, rode a crowded elevator to the second floor, and knocked on the door. There was no answer. I went below and walked up to the desk. I elbowed my way through the crowd and smiled pleasantly at the harried clerk.

"Two-twelve," I said.

It worked. Absently, he handed me the key and turned away.

Helena, whatever her racket was, apparently did well. I switched on the light and stepped into the living room of a suite that must have cost two hundred a week—all thick rugs and modern, creamy furniture. Even a console television set. Methodically, I began to take the living room apart.

On my hands and knees I crept over the rug, patting it. Then I started on the furniture, working slowly, but not bothering to put anything back. Somehow, I felt that if I found the money Helena would never swear out a complaint. It gave me confidence. When I came to the television set, I felt suddenly that I was getting warm.

I shoved it away from the wall and tipped it over backwards. With a thud and tinkle of glass it fell on the rug. I stood it up again, and looked down. On the carpet was a shiny patent leather pocketbook. In the pocket-book were more hundred dollars bills than I had ever seen. A thrill of satisfaction went through me and I straightened up. As I did—I glanced through the open bedroom door.

The bedroom was a shambles. It looked as if a cyclone had hit it. But it had been no cyclone. The bedroom had been searched, and efficiently. The window was open, and the drapes were blowing in the damp night air. I went to the door and switched on the light. I stopped and listened. Through the open bathroom door I could hear the drip of water. A sense of calamity began to creep into my veins. Suddenly my hands were clammy.

Get out of here, I told myself. I walked through the bedroom to the bathroom door. I listened outside. I heard nothing but the melodious *plink, plink,* of water, but something held me. Then I knew. It was the drip of water into a bathtub—a full bathtub. My chest tightened. I stepped in.

The blonde lay in the tub, head back, long hair swaying on the surface of the reddened water. One arm hung over the side. A stiletto was buried below her chest, and the horror etched on her face was not a pretty sight. Suddenly I was sick, violently, and then that passed and I found myself in the living room, sweating and shivering.

How long I sat there I don't know—it might have been ten seconds or an hour. Dimly I realized that I still had the handbag. I started to drop it and then thought of fingerprints. The thought steadied me. Quietly I walked to the door.

THEN I heard it—the jingle of a key ring outside the room. I stiffened and looked around wildly. I took two steps toward the bedroom and heard the snap of a key in the lock. The door opened and a tremendous individual, shaped like a ginger ale bottle and obviously the house detective, stood in the doorway, smiling politely.

"Everything okay in here—" he began. He stopped. He surveyed the wreck of the living room.

"Say, buddy, you been having a football game in here?" He closed the door behind him, delicately.

"My Lord, brother, this makes work for the chambermaids. What are you doing here? One of Helena's boy-friends?

Fun is fun, but you could hire a hall. Where's Helena? What's that you've got there?"

I took a deep breath and felt my nerves snap into place.

"Helena's in the bedroom, asleep. She was a little drunk."

He reached over and took the handbag.

"Yeah," he said absently. "Somebody phoned up they heard a scream." He lifted a handful of bills out of the bag and let them fall back in. He looked up sharply. "You always carry a purse? You don't look like that kind of guy. Suppose you just come in the bedroom with me and we'll see that Helena's sleeping comfortable. Okay?"

I nodded, my brain whirling. He grabbed my arm and piloted me toward the bedroom. His grip told me that if I were getting out of this one it would be by brains and not brawn. I did a week's thinking in the three steps I took with him, and came up with an answer.

"Spike," I yelled into the bedroom. "Out the window!"

For his size, the house dick was greased lightning. He shoved me to one side and dove through the door. I stumbled against a chair, leaped for the light switch, fumbled for an eternity with the door knob, and was out in the hall. I slammed the door behind me and raced for the stairs. I burst out on the mezzanine floor and looked around desperately.

Over the rail I could see that the main floor was still crowded. From the mezzanine a wide, ornate stairway led to the lobby. In the hallway behind me I heard the thud of oversized feet. I sprinted for the stairs and took the first six steps in one jump.

Above me I heard the click of an automatic and a bellow. Below I saw a few white, startled faces turning up at me. Then I was in the lobby, bulling my way through the crowd. I crashed through the swinging door and into a waiting taxi.

"The Third Street Station," I said. I was surprised to hear that my voice was steady and calm—unfamiliar, but steady and calm. The cabbie inched away from the curb and crawled out into the traffic, as if it were his cab.

"Come on," I snarled. "Get a move on. I gotta catch a train."

The driver glanced back with a hurt look and the taxi lurched forward. We rounded a corner on two wheels and caromed down an alley. Then we were out in the Market Street traffic and in the clear.

At the station I tipped the driver and hurried in. I walked to the coach window and bought a ticket to Seattle. For a moment I talked to the girl at the window about how nice Canada was going to be this year, trying to make sure that she'd remember my face. Then I went to the phone booths and looked for Sherry Maddigan in the book. It wasn't listed. I sauntered through the station and out the Third Street side.

This was country I knew—every alley, every back fence, every railroad siding. I was home.

CHAPTER TWO

Thrown to the Wolves

I WALKED nine blocks, past the staring deadbeats in front of the two-bit hotels, past a pasty blonde with a question in her eyes, past the nickel beer joints and the union halls. I turned off Third Street up an alley just a little worse than the rest and into a grimy tenement.

Even now I felt the familiar thrill. As a kid, when I'd walked up these stairs, I'd counted the steps. If I got an even number it would mean that Maggie was home—an odd number would mean that her drunken old lady would throw me out again.

Now she was Sherry, not Maggie, and she didn't live here any more, and her old lady was just another beaten-down, whining alcholic. I knocked on the door

It took plenty of knocking and there was a lot of noise inside before it opened. I didn't recognize the old woman at first. Bloated, fat, sloppy in a filthy bathrobe, orange hair bedraggled, she was even worse than I remembered. But she recognized me and she was in one of her jovial moods. I steeled myself.

"Michael," she said, her bleary eyes starting. "Michael, my boy." She threw her arms around me and I dodged backwards as I caught a whiff of stale gin. "Come in out of the dark, boy, where I

can see you. Come inside and sit down."

I smiled politely and followed her into the messy flat. She swept a pile of newspapers off of a table in the middle of the room and cleared a chair for me. She stepped into a kitchen that smelled of grease and dirty dishes and dragged out a warm beer. Expertly she knocked off the cap on the edge of the table and seated herself opposite me, breathing hard.

"Now, then, Michael, drink your beer," she wheezed. She motioned expansively. "There's plenty more where that come from. I ain't much on frills here, but I do keep me in beer. Of course, now you and Nick Parenti and Maggie moved over to the other side of town, I don't guess you drink nothing but champagne, with your big-shot friends." She looked at me slyly.

I forced a smile and let the warm, sour beer trickle down my throat.

"Now, if *your* mother, the Lord rest her, was alive," she crossed herself, "I bet you'da seen she had more than beer in her old age." Her eyes turned bitter. "But not Maggie. Oh, no. The medicine I need, and I ought to see a doctor about my heart, and all I did for that girl. And what does she send me?" She glared at me scornfully. "Ten dollars a week." She took a long swallow from her bottle. "Ten dollars a week."

All you did for her, I said silently, *and it's ten dollars a week too much.* I shook my head sympathetically.

"Where does she live now, Mrs. Maddigan?" I asked suddenly.

She started to speak and then a shadow of caution crossed her face.

"Well, now, I dunno. Why? Don't you know?"

"Not any more."

"Well, I dunno either. She never comes down here no more. Too good for this neighborhod, that one."

You can say that again, I thought savagely. I forced myself to smile.

"Where do you phone when you need money?"

She shrugged. "A lot of good that does me, to phone her."

"But you do know her number."

She set her lips stubbornly and looked away.

"What's the number?"

She shook her head.

I pulled out my wallet. "Look. You say you need medicine. Here's ten bucks. Get all the medicine you need."

Her eyes lit up and she reached for the money. "Now, that's mighty nice of you, Michael—"

I held on to the bill. "The number."

She sighed and got up. She moved behind a screen and I could hear her pulling out drawers. Finally she came back with a dirty slip of paper.

"Here it is. And tell her I ain't never got a cent this week, and I gotta make a payment on the radio."

I pushed back the chair and stood up. She looked relieved—eager, I guessed, to hurry down to the liquor store for her medicine.

"Thanks for the beer, Mrs. Maddigan. And the number."

The air on the street was heaven after the smell of the flat. I walked up to Phil's, the neighborhood beer hall, and ordered a shot and a bottle of beer. I went to the back of the bar and phoned Sherry, cupping my hand over the mouthpiece. The phone rang and rang and rang again. I looked at my watch. Three a.m. She ought to be back from the last show. . . .

There was a sharp click in my ear and I heard her low, throaty voice.

"Hello?"

"Sherry? Mike. I'm in trouble. Can you meet me somewhere? Right away?"

"Where are you?"

"At Phil's."

"At *Phil's*?" There was a pause. "I'll be down right away. . . ."

WE SAT at booth in the back of the room and I told her the story. When she heard how the blonde had died she turned white.

"Poor Helena," she said. "She was so pretty, and she had so much to live for."

"What did she have to live for?"

"She was just a kid, and some fellow wanted her to wait until he could get a divorce . . . a wealthy man."

"Do you know him?"

"No. He never came to town. She used to leave the city to see him."

"Where'd she go?"

"She'd never say. She used to come down to the lounge at night, when I was

singing. I think the poor kid was lonely. Sometimes she'd leave with a man; but usually she'd leave alone. You couldn't blame her for loving fun. She was all alone in the hotel."

"Well, she's not alone now. Half the homicide squad and every reporter in town is in that bathroom. In a couple of hours, when they get the fingerprints off that purse, they'll be looking for Michael Blair, the great private eye."

Sherry's hand slid across the table and over mine.

"You'd better turn yourself in, Mike. They can't hurt you. You didn't do it."

"Can't hurt me? My love, Sherry, I got in the suite by fraud. I tore the place apart looking for the dough. The house dick caught me red-handed walking off with what was left of the eighteen thousand dollars. I was working for Nick Parenti, who is the one guy that might want the blonde knocked off—and you say they can't hurt me. Hell, they get me, they won't even bother to ask me if I did it."

A shadow of fear crossed her eyes. "What'll we do, Mike."

"Here's what I want you to do. This and nothing else. I can't contact Nick—it's too dangerous. I want you to ask him who he sent over there to get the money and ask him what he figures to do about it. He won't let me take the rap for one of his hoods." I paused. "I hope."

"Are you sure it was one of Nick's men?"

I looked at her. "What the hell do you think?"

She nodded thoughtfully. "And where will you be all this time?"

"I'm renting a room in one of these palaces down here for two bits a night, and staying there until I hear from you or Nick."

She shook her head. "No, you're not."

"What do you mean?"

"You're coming home with me."

"You're crazy as heil."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not. Hell, they'd hold you as accessory after the fact. You'd spend the rest of your life milking cows at the State Farm for Women."

She leaned forward. Her face was tense.

"Listen, Mike. You can't stay in this neighborhood. You know that as well as I do. This is the first place the cops look when they want a man. When we were kids, there wasn't a day that went by that they didn't search one of these flop houses. Remember?"

I remembered, but I wasn't admitting it.

She added: "And you're too well known downtown to hide out there."

I was too tired to argue.

"I could stay at the Royal," I offered, trying to smile. "They'd be glad to have me."

"Sure." She stood and threw her coat over her shoulders. "Pay the check and let's go."

SHERRY'S apartment was in the artists' colony on the hill. The place was an apology for the way she'd had to live as a child. It was small, neat, and everything fitted. It was like her; warm, glowing, restful. It was a place for a man to stretch out and relax. I did.

I sat on the couch in front of the bay window and looked down at the lights on the water while Sherry mixed a drink. Sherry and Nick, I reflected, both from the slums, both fighting their ways to a place in the hills, as if they had to be physically transported as far as possible from their early days.

Even I felt a security up here that I hadn't felt earlier in the evening.

Sherry was moving behind me, turning down the lights. She set a highball in front of me on the cocktail table.

"Like it?" she whispered.

I looked at the faint gray glimmer of dawn over the bay. The whiskey caressed my nerves and they untied slowly, almost audibly.

"I like it," I muttered. . . .

The sun was high when I awakened. It was streaming into the bedroom through the French windows, and from a house down the hill came the strains of *Santa Lucia* on a victrola. From the street I heard the clopping of a horse's hoofs for the first time in years and a foreign voice wailing, "Rags, bottles, sacks."

I stretched luxuriously, and then remembered that probably half the town

was looking for me. I sat up suddenly.

"Sherry?"

Her voice floated out from the kitchenette. "Coming, Mike."

She walked into the room, and I gulped. She had on a white bathrobe, the thick stuff they make towels out of—nothing luscious about it but the way she filled it out. The late morning sun put golden lights in her coppery hair. She was carrying a tray: fresh orange juice, eggs up, sausages, toast, and coffee. She leaned down and kissed me. I leered up at her.

"What, no morning paper?"

She looked away quickly, too quickly. A chill raced up my spine.

"The morning paper, Sherry. Let me see it."

She turned to me miserably. "Eat your breakfast, Mike."

"The paper."

She left and came back with it.

The police had worked fast, fast enough for the early morning edition. They'd identified the fingerprints on the patent leather bag, it said, as those of a private investigator. A guy by the name of Mike Blair. It seemed that there was a dragnet out for him from Vancouver to Tia Juana. The one nice thing that the paper had to say was that I had maybe gone to Canada. I blessed the girl in the ticket booth.

I looked up. "Well, I guess I get a lot of free publicity out of *that*."

"Eat your breakfast."

I ate it, slowly, every bite. Sherry had dressed and finished the dishes when I came out, sitting in front of the window smoking a cigarette.

"Anyway," I said. "They don't seem to know I was on a job for Nick."

"I'll see him this morning."

"You don't have to, you know. If they find out he's tied up with me—"

"Don't be silly. I'll be back before I go to work. Don't you dare go out."

"You think I'm nuts?"

She kissed me and gathered up her handbag. "Anything you need?"

"A razor. A razor, and you."

She smiled and left.

I SMOKED a pack of cigarettes, read a detective novel, and even sat through a soap opera on the radio. When I began to feel like the average American housewife, I sat and watched the afternoon fog roll in over the Golden Gate, wondering if they'd picked up Sherry. Three times I lifted the phone to call Nick's office, and then set it back on its cradle.

Finally I ground out my remaining cigarette and went to the phone for the last time. I dialed Nick's number. A key grated in the lock. I hung up and whirled around.

Sherry was tired. Her face was white and drawn, and her shoulders sagged. I took her in my arms and kissed her. I let her go and she dropped wearily to the couch, kicking off her shoes.

"What happened, honey?"

She shook her head and I could see that she was trying not to cry. I mixed her a drink.

"At first he wouldn't see me." Her voice was small and tight. She took a deep breath. "At first he wouldn't see me, and I waited outside his offce for an hour." She lifted the glass and gulped the liquor.

"Then I thought maybe it was because we'd had a fight, so I sent word that I wanted to see him about a mutual friend. He sent work back that that's what he'd thought, and that he didn't have anything to say. Once I tried to get in and that big redheaded gangster he keeps as a bodybuard threw me out. Nick was standing looking out the window and he didn't even turn around."

I felt the anger rising in me. My stomach was churning and my fists were clenched. I got up and put on my coat.

"No, Mike," she said. She grabbed my arm. "That won't do any good. Sit down."

She went on:

"Finally the redheaded gorilla left for a minute and I went in. Nick was sitting at the desk with that cold look he gets. I told him I knew where you were and that you wanted to know what he was going to do about the murder.

"At first he didn't say a thing. Just looked at me with those frozen eyes. Then he said that he wasn't going to do a damn thing. He said: 'Mike got himself into this, let him get himself out.' "

She paused and her eyes filled with tears.

"And then he said—" her shoulders shook and she covered her face with her

hands— "then he said: 'Murder doesn't go in my league, and I'm not covering for any damned fool that gets scared and kills, whether he's worknig for me or not.' "

I walked to the window. It was dark now, and the fog was so thick that I couldn't see the next house down the hill. In the bay a foghorn moaned wearily. I turned back to Sherry.

"So he's throwing me to the wolves? That's what it adds up to, isn't it?"

She nodded dumbly. I sat down beside her and took her hand.

"Money does funny things to people, Sherry. Funny things. I'm beginning to see how Nick made his dough. If that's the way you do it, count me out." I got up again, shrugged into my overcoat, and put on my hat. Sherry glanced up, fear in her eyes.

"Where are you going?"

"You know."

She walked to the door and faced me. "Don't be silly, Mike. They'll pick you up before you ever get there. Or else Nick will call the cops."

I shook my head. "It's a chance I have to take."

"It won't do any good. He's not going to admit anything. He'll just have you thrown out. Stay here, Mike. We'll get a lawyer, or we'll get out of town—go to Mexico or Canada—"

I put my hands around her waist, lifted her, turned around and deposited her away from the door, and kissed her. She clung to me, her lips on mine. I shook my head and gently removed her hands from my shoulders. Then I walked out into the fog.

CHAPTER THREE

Who Done It?

NICK lived in one of the swankiest apartment houses on the hill—in the penthouse, no less. I rode up in the elevator and stepped into a dark foyer. I rang the bell, waited, and rang again. I tried the door. It was locked. I looked around and saw an antique wooden bench with a high back. I sat down in the shadows and waited.

It was a long wait, and a hard bench. Twice I almost fell asleep. I started to light a cigarette and decided against it. Every time the elevator whined I tensed, and every time it stopped below I relaxed. Then it whined again, and I heard it creaking up the shaft. I slid further down into the shadows, and heard the elevator gate slide open.

A dark, stocky figure stepped out, and a much larger figure stood framed in the elevator door. The giant was Moose Rainey, Nick's redheaded bodyguard. The thought of his tremendous hams touching Sherry started the blood pounding in my ears.

"Night, boss," he said hoarsely. "See you in the mornin'."

Nick nodded and turned. Moose slammed the door and the elevator started down. Nick fumbled with his keys and I stood up, my right hand in my empty overcoat pocket.

"Open the door, Nick. Don't holler, and walk straight in. And keep your hands where I can see them." Nick turned, his face impassive. He shrugged and opened the door. I followed him in.

The apartment was dark. I switched on the light and looked around. The place was beautiful. Nick, like Sherry, had taste. The scheme was Old English, even to the oaken beams in the ceiling. I motioned to a leather chair in front of a tremendous fireplace, and Nick sat down. I sat opposite him, watching him warily.

"Keep your hands in sight and start talking," I said.

"What's there to talk about? Say, you better get the hell out of town. There are a lot of people looking for you."

"Let's talk about that, then. Who killed the blonde?"

"I wonder."

"Look, Parenti, there're only the two of us here. I know it was one of your boys, and you know it was one of your boys, so let's start from there. What are you going to do about it?"

Parenti moved his hand to his pocket and I stiffened. His hand stopped. "Mind if I have a cigarette?"

"Yes."

He smiled wearily and let his hand fall to his lap. Deliberately I removed my hand from my pocket and lit a cigarette. I blew a cloud of smoke his way.

"We're going to sit here all night until you decide to turn over whoever killed the blonde to the cops. If you don't decide by five a.m., the cops will be looking for me for a new murder, and this time they'll be right."

Parenti shrugged. He took off his hat and sailed it across the room. Then he leaned his dark head back and closed his eyes.

"Who did it?" I demanded.

He didn't move.

"Open your eyes."

The eyelids flickered and opened.

"Who did it?"

He sighed. "Look," he said, his voice flat and bored. "Who you trying to convince? I know you went up there for the money. Whether you were going to turn it over to me or keep it, I don't know. I don't care. The blonde was in the tub, you didn't see her; she saw you going through the place and sat tight. It almost worked, but finally you spotted her. Then you got scared and killed her, thinking I'd keep my mouth shut about your being there. Maybe I will, too. But you got caught. So it's your problem now."

"Who'd you send up for the money?"

"Nobody."

A light flashed in my brain. "Say, you wouldn't have decided to do that job yourself, would you? Just to scare these people out of town? And incidentally to get the money?"

Nick laughed. "Hell, yes. Every time somebody wins eighteen grand from me, I kill them. It makes people like to do business with me."

"She was knifed. With a stiletto."

His eyes glittered. "So what?"

"I seem to remember that you used to carry one."

He seemed to grow bigger. His eyes drilled into mine.

"Shut up," he said softly. "Shut up, or so help me, I'll get you if it takes the rest of my life."

"The rest of your life is going to be about five minutes long if you don't start talking."

His eyes wavered a moment and returned to mine. I heard a soft movement behind me, and then there was a blinding flash and I plunged into a deep, aching darkness. . . .

FAR away I could hear someone speaking, and I felt a hand going through my overcoat pocket. A hoarse, familiar voice muttered: "So the doorman says some guy come up here and never come down, so I come up to see if everything was jake." The hand left my pocket. "He ain't got a gun, Boss."

"Just bluffing. Okay. He's killed once; I couldn't take a chance. Lay him on the couch."

I felt a pair of tremendous hands throw me roughly onto a leather couch.

"What'll we do with him, Boss?"

"Take him across the bridge, put him on the highway, and tell him to get out of town. Tell him if I see him again, I'll turn him in to the cops. You do it. I'm going to bed. And no rough stuff."

"No rough stuff?" Moose sounded as if his heart were breaking.

"No rough stuff." Nick's voice was soft. "He used to be a friend of mine. . . ."

It was a long walk to the nearest all-night filling station from where the bodyguard dropped me. Every time I saw a pair of lights coming, I had to make like the South Pacific and dive for a ditch. But I had a lot of time for thinking as I trudged along, and I came up with an answer.

I phoned Sherry, long distance. In an hour she was out to get me. On the way back across the bridge I told her the story. She listened quietly.

"And now what?" she asked when I was through.

"Now I'm going to prove to the cops it was Nick. Or one of his men."

"How?"

"I don't exactly know. If I can find out who the blonde was tied up with—" Something clicked into place. Nick had mentioned another winner—a little man in a brown hat. "Say did you ever see this dame with a little guy in a brown hat?"

Sherry thought for a while, weaving through the traffic on the bridge.

"No, I didn't. Why?"

"I just wondered. . . ."

The next morning Sherry screamed like a wounded eagle when I told her I was going out again. And she grew more bitter when I told her that I wouldn't be back until I found what I wanted.

I took a cab downtown to Nick's office. Across the street was a shoeshine stand. Keeping my hat pulled over my face, I crossed the street and climbed into one of the chairs. I buried my nose in a newspaper, told the boy to shine my shoes, and watched the entrance to Nick's.

When the boy was through I tipped him a buck, told him I was waiting for someone, and said I'd stay where I was. He looked at me suspiciously, as if I were a cop, and then went on to the next pair of shoes.

At noon I sent the boy up the street for a sandwich and tipped him another dollar. I'd read the whole paper between glances across the street, and found that I was still front-page stuff. But at least they weren't running my picture, I reflected, and I was safe as long as my face was buried in the paper.

At three in the afternoon I was ready to quit. In and out of Nick's had gone housewives, flashy jokers in sports coats with "tout" written all over them, kids from the college extension up the street, young girls, old men, all kinds of people. But no little man in a brown hat. I took my feet off the foot rests and stretched. Suddenly I stiffened.

In front of Nick's a little man hesitated momentarily, looked up at the building, and darted in. A little man in a brown hat. I waited tensely. If he was the man I was looking for he wouldn't be inside long.

He was the man I was looking for, and he wasn't inside long. He came down fast, with the gigantic redheaded bodyguard beside him. The little guy was almost collapsing under the weight of the hand resting on his shoulder. His face was white, and he seemed worried.

Moose had a set smile on his red face. Unless you were watching, you would never have seen the tiny shove that sent the little man on his way, and almost knocked him over.

I was out of the shoeshine parlor and crossing the street as the little guy scurried into the crowd. He was in a hell of a hurry, and it was hard to keep up with him.

Finally Brown Hat dodged into a second-rate hotel. I stopped outside and watched through the plate-glass front. He walked through the tiled lobby past the traveling salesmen and two or three of the girls and into a little bar off the lobby. I waited a few moments and stepped into the bar through the street entrance.

The little man in the brown hat was at the end of the bar, sipping a glass of beer. I sat two stools away from him and ordered a shot and a glass of beer, and opened my paper. I drank the shot and glanced at the barkeep, a bitter-looking individual with a gray face, angrily polishing glasses.

"It's a crime about this blonde was murdered in her bathtub," I said, loud enough for the little guy to hear me. I watched him jump and gulp his beer. The bartender went on polishing glasses.

"You know," I continued. "The papers don't say it, but that eighteen grand the guy was trying to steal—down at the track I heard she just won it from a bookie. I heard she won it on a fixed race—some other outfit was trying to run this bookie out of town, and he had her knocked off by this guy Blair as a warning to lay off."

The bartender went on with his glasses. I sneaked a glance at the mirror behind the bar. The little guy had a strange expression on his face, as if he'd just seen a ghost. His hand trembled and suddenly he knocked over his glass. The barkeep looked at him in disgust and mopped up the mess.

"Another beer for the gentleman," I said. I turned to the little guy. "You know, if they could tie up this blonde with the outfit that was trying to move in, they'd have a real case against this bookie. Of course the cops don't know she won the money from him, or the papers would have got hold of it."

A look of fear and suspicion darkened the little guy's face. Then he relaxed and a crafty gleam wandered into his eyes.

"You can't never tell," he muttered. He finished his beer and walked briskly out into the lobby, like a man who has just thought of a sure way to kill off his mother-in-law.

I PAID the bill and strolled into the lobby. The little guy was standing by the phone booth, rubbing his chin. He looked cautiously around and darted in.

I walked back of the phone, sat down in a leather chair, hiked it next to the booth, and opened my faithful newspaper. I heard a nickel drop in the slot.

"Long distance—Reno, River 2364, collect. Mr. Smith calling." There was a long wait. "Mac? The boss there?" Another wait. "Boss, this is Shorty in San Francisco. Parenti just kicked me out of his place. Yeah, I know, but I just got an idea that can't wait. Look, Boss, how about spilling all about Helena to the D.A. down here? Tell him you were trying to break Parenti, and Helena was working for you, and let him figure out for himself who killed her?"

Silence. Then: "Yeah, you can prove it. Prove the horse was a ringer—so it was a ringer, what they goin' to do about it? Makin' book's illegal too. When they send Parenti up, we wait a month or two and then move in."

More silence, and then in an ingratiating voice, "Yeah, Boss, sure I thought it up myself. Who else? Okay, Boss, I'll be goin' back tonight on the sleeper."

I got up and moved to the cigarette counter. I turned and watched the little guy as he left. There was a jaunty bounce to his step now. A real genius. . . .

I stretched out on Sherry's couch and sipped a long, cold drink. Sherry moved around in the kitchenette. There was the smell of sizzling steak in the air. The whiskey relaxed me, and I felt like the smartest piece of talent in forty-eight states. This, I reflected, was the way to operate. Just like judo, let the other guy do the work.

"Of course," I called to Sherry. "This won't get me off the hook, even if it works, unless they put enough pressure on Nick to make him tell the truth. He can still claim he sent me up there to do the job, and then we'll both burn. But I think when it comes to saving his own hide, he'll talk, and he'll talk straight. Unless, of course, he did the job himself."

Sherry didn't answer. I shrugged and took another drink. "You know, sometimes I think I'd have made a good politician—"

"Dinner's ready," Sherry interrupted. Her voice was flat. I unglued myself from the couch. I walked over and lifted her face. Her eyes were wet.

"What's the matter?" I asked quietly.

She looked away. "I don't know."

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "I really don't know, Mike. I just hope you're sure of what you're doing."

I sat down and dived into my steak.

"Of course I'm sure. I can't be any *worse* off, that's for sure. This way, even if they get me, they'll get Nick too."

"That's what I mean. Are you sure Nick had anything to do with it?"

I paused, my fork half way to my mouth.

"Who the hell do you think killed her?"

She didn't answer. I put my fork down carefully and looked into her eyes. Softly I said:

"Listen, Sherry, you don't think *I* killed her, by any chance?"

"Mike!" Her eyes were startled. "Don't say that. Don't ever say anything like that again."

"Okay. Now eat your steak."

She shook her head miserably and pushed her chair away from the table. "I'm not hungry." Suddenly she blurted: "And I *don't* think Nick did it!" She sobbed once and ran into the bedroom.

I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach. Not again, I whispered, not again. Not when she knows he's a heel, and a murderer. . . . I felt the old anger surging up and I shoved at the table. It turned over with a crash. I grabbed my hat and coat and walked out into the night, slamming the door as hard as I could. . . .

I tramped to the top of the hill and stood staring into the fog, the familiar ache still inside me. What did he have over her, I asked myself, as I used to in the old days. A guy who would let his friend hang to protect a murderer—or was *he* the murderer?

I lit a cigarette. It calmed my nerves and I tried to think in a straight line. Sherry didn't believe that Nick had had the blonde killed. Well, maybe he hadn't intended it that way; maybe he'd sent someone up to get the money and whoever it was had murdered her on his own. Moose, for instance, would be stupid enough to do it. And maybe Nick had preferred to believe his own man to me.

That didn't make sense either—Nick

had known me too long. The only other explanation was that Nick himself had murdered her. My mind was working now, coolly and logically. Suddenly I knew that whatever else Nick was, he wasn't a killer.

I flicked my cigarette down the hill. Something was wrong in this case . . . something smelled bad. Who else would it have been?

Then I had it. The thing burst on me like a light. I cursed and headed back down the hill. I was late, plenty late, but there was still a chance.

CHAPTER FOUR

As the Bird Flies

SHERRY'S car was in front of her garage, waiting to be put away for the night. The key was in the ignition. Everything I needed—except a gun. My gun was in my apartment—it might as well have been on Mars. I slid behind the wheel and stepped on the starter. The window above me opened and I heard her voice:

"Mike?"

"I'll be back tomorrow," I yelled. "Maybe." I backed out onto the street.

I had a long drive before me, three hundred miles, first through the traffic over the bridge, then across the humid Sacramento Valley, then through the Sierras. By the time I got to the mountains it was dawn and I was shaking my head and rubbing my neck to keep awake.

I scooted over Donner Pass and there it was—the sleeper from San Francisco, racing through the snow sheds. It was going to be close, and still sixty miles to Reno. I roared through Truckee, hoping that the sheriff was still in bed, and then I was on good road again, good all the way to Reno. I lit a cigarette and tramped on the accelerator.

The worst was over, and the San Francisco train was still in the mountains behind me. I was making seventy now, and the speed woke me up. In twenty minutes I should be in Nevada, with no speed limit and no highway patrolmen to worry about. . . .

I glanced into the rear view mirror and chilled. Behind me was a black dot, and blinking in the morning sunlight was a red light. I thought of being stopped—no proof of ownership of the car, Sherry's name on the registration, unshaven, bleary-eyed. Hell, it wouldn't be a ticket—they'd hold me.

And if they held me I was a cooked goose; there wasn't a cop in the state that wasn't looking for me. I pushed the gas pedal to the floorboard. The speedometer trembled and climbed to eighty. And that was tops.

Behind me the blinking light grew closer. I began to look for the agricultural inspection station at the state line, and a new worry nagged me. If it was open this early in the morning they'd stop me, and I'd be a goner. The sweat started out on my forehead.

I roared over the Truckee River at eighty, around a curve, and into a straightaway. I watched the mirror and counted off the seconds until the patrol car appeared around the bend. I counted up to twenty-three and then the red light was with me again.

I rounded another turn, slid off the shoulder in a cloud of dust, fought the wheel, and was back on the road. My heart pounded madly. This time the count was eighteen and the car filled up a quarter of my mirror. I listened and heard the far-away wail of a siren. The Truckee River flashed under me again, and ahead was a group of buildings that I recognized—the inspection station.

Out of the buildings walked a man in the uniform of the state agricultural department, carrying a sign. Behind me the siren was blasting into my ears. The patrol car began to pull to the left to pass me. I jerked the wheel and blocked him and flashed over the state line as the startled fruit inspector set up his sign:

STOP FOR AGRICULTURAL INSPECTION

Behind, I could see the California patrolman slow reluctantly, and my heart slowed with him. I was in Nevada, man's country, where if a guy was racing the night train from San Francisco it was strictly between him and the train.

It was seven in the morning when I got into Reno. Already the place was beginning to heat up for the day. I found the

station and parked the car. I walked in and discovered that the San Francisco train wasn't due for twenty minutes, so I sat at the coffee counter. The waitress was fooling with the coffee gear.

Absently I noted that even in her plain white uniform she was constructed from the rear as no waitress at a railroad breafast counter had a right to be. She turned, and I drew in my breath. Her hair was jet black, smooth and shiny, and her eyes were a dark, startling blue. Her nose was small and straight, her lips had the slightest hint of a pout. When she smiled, I saw that her teeth were even and white. I took hold of myself and ordered a cup of coffee, black.

She brought it and leaned on the counter. "You look tired," she said suddenly. "Are you?"

"Does it show?"

"Yes," she said simply. "You should get some sleep."

"OK. Right here?"

She laughed. "We have hotels. Even in Nevada."

"Name a good one."

"Three Gables."

"You must own it."

"I live in it."

Well, I thought. *That certainly was quick.*

"Don't get any ideas," she said, and her eyes never wavered. "I just thought you looked tired, and you seemed like a stranger, and I thought you might not know of a place to stay."

"Are you always that accommodating to strangers?"

"No. Only when they don't *look* like wolves. Sometimes I'm wrong."

I drew my finger across the counter. "Chalk one up for— What is your name, anyway?"

"Alma."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Alma. I'm Mike. Mike—" I stopped just in time. They have papers, I reflected, in Reno too. "Just call me Mike."

"Okay, Mike," she said cheerfully, and began to wipe off the counter. I looked at my watch. I had two minutes. Reluctantly I stood up. "Well, Alma, next time I need a cup of coffee. . . ."

She smiled. It was a nice, honest smile. "Or a hotel?"

"Or a hotel." I walked away, feeling a hundred percent better. Coffee, I mused, did that for a man. Or maybe it had been Alma.

The passengers from San Francisco were struggling down the platform, laden with bags and sleep. I waited in the shadows until the crowd had passed. My heart sank. The little man in the brown hat was among those missing. I started to turn away—and then I saw him.

HE WAS fighting a suitcase as big as himself and I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

He passed me and headed for the taxi stand. I went out a side entrance and cilmbed into Sherry's car. I watched him talking to the taxi starter. The starter signalled and a cab drove up. Brown Hat got in and the driver pulled away from the curb.

I trailed the cab through town and out onto the highway. We drove for about eight miles and then the taxi pulled off into a driveway. I cruised on by and saw the little guy getting out in front of an expensive looking ranch-type dwelling.

A mile down the road, I parked the car off the highway, and started back on foot. My heart was hammering in my chest. The closer I got to the house, the harder it hammered. I wished again that I had a gun, even a BB gun, even a bean blower. I'd fooled Nick with the hand-in-the-pocket-routine.

But I knew now that Nick thought I'd killed the blonde; naturally he wouldn't take a chance. If I was right, though, these people knew I hadn't killed her, and they might not go along on a bluff.

I cut through an orchard and stopped in the shadows. Carefully I surveyed the place. There was a garage attached to the house, a back door, a front entrance. There didn't seem to be anyone around. I decided on the back door.

I hurried across the lawn and tried the kitchen door. It was locked. I was about to try the garage door when I looked up. The kitchen window was open, with no screen. I lifted myself and looked inside. There was nobody there. I glanced over my shoulder and hoisted myself in.

In the front of the house I could hear talking. On the sides of my feet I walked

to the swinging door and stopped. I began to move the door, slowly and carefully. The refrigerator started with a click and I jumped. I forced myself to relax and pushed the door another inch. I stuck one eye to the crack and looked through. The next room was a dining room and held a long table.

At the head of the table, finishing what appeared to have been a whole platter of bacon and eggs, was the fattest man I had ever seen, wearing the reddest face. Behind him stood an old woman, apparently the artist who had cooked the bacon and eggs. The fat man was beaming and rubbing his belly.

"Myrt," he said. "You are a boon to my old age. You cater to my every whim."

Myrt giggled nervously.

"Now get the hell out of here and fry me some more. You think I can get along on five lousy eggs?"

Myrt ran for the door. It was now or never. I tensed, put my hand in my pocket, and stepped into the dining room.

"Put your hands on the table, Fat Stuff," I said.

Fat Stuff looked at me blandly. "Do you mind telling me who you are?"

"Yeah. Put your hands on the table."

He put a pair of puffy hands on the table. I heard a footstep in the front room and stepped out of line with the door. The little guy came in, minus his brown hat, and bald as a light bulb. He saw me and a flash of recognition raced over his face. His mouth dropped open.

"Yeah, it's me, Shorty. The guy in the bar. The guy that gave you the Big Idea. Now put up your hands and don't move." I turned to Myrt. "And that means you, Myrt." Myrt raised her hands as if she were reaching for a high line drive.

"Sit down," I told the little guy. "Keep your hands on the table."

I turned to Fat Boy. "Who else you got around here?"

"Nobody. Son, if this is a holdup, you won't get a thing. You better go try the bank."

"It's no holdup. You and Shorty here are going for a ride with me. Down to the city. You're going to drive, and Shorty is going to be your co-pilot, and when you get there, we're going to the police station. You're going to sing."

The fat man laughed.

"You have a quaint way of putting things. What are we going to sing about?" he asked.

"About a blonde named Helena. And incidentally, there's a guy around here named Mac, I think, and he's going too."

The fat man's smile eased for a moment and then returned. He turned to the little guy.

"You know, Shorty, if I didn't know you any better, I'd think you met this guy in San Francisco. I'd think you'd been talking too much."

Shorty opened his mouth and the fat man said:

"Shut up." He glanced at me. "What makes you think that we're going to do any singing? Assuming that we know what you're talking about."

I ignored him.

"Call Mac," I said. He sat and smiled. "Call Mac," I repeated, moving my hand.

He called Mac.

MAC ambled in, a seedy-faced kid of about twenty, with flat, slate-gray eyes. Gunman was written all over him. He was chewing a toothpick. When he saw me he stopped, raised his hands automatically, and spit out the toothpick. He never changed his expression. Mac, evidently, had seen a lot of gangster pictures or had been held up before.

"You sit down too," I told him.

He sat down too.

"You," I said to the fat man. "What's your name?"

The fat man studied me curiously, still smiling broadly. He ignored the question.

"You know, Mac," he said finally, "I don't believe this guy has a gun."

My heart dropped. I growled:

"You don't? All right, make a move and find out."

"I don't think he has a gun," the fat man repeated slowly. "Find out, Mac."

I moved the hand in my pocket, my heart pounding. I wished I'd frisked Mac, but it was too late now. Mac seemed to be given the matter a lot of thought.

"You heard me, Mac," said the fat man, still smiling and studying me.

Mac came to a decision. Slowly and coolly he moved his hand inside his coat. I started toward him, but it was no use.

His hand came out with a forty-five automatic. Suddenly he chuckled, mirthlessly.

"What da ya know about that?" he said. "Say, Boss, that's all right. How'd ya know?"

The fat man began to giggle and then to laugh. His tremendous belly shook and he gasped for air. He stopped and then started again. Finally the laughs subsided, and he struggled to speak.

"I didn't, Mac. I didn't...."

I sat at the table while they went through my wallet and talked about me.

"So you're Mike Blair," said the fat man. "The guy that killed the blonde."

"You know damn well I didn't kill her."

The fat man chuckled. "That's what the papers claim, Mike. As Will Rogers used to say, 'I only know what I read in the papers.' " This he thought was hilarious, and he started again. All at once he sobered.

"What kind of a tie-up you got with Shorty here?" he asked suddenly, nodding toward the little guy.

"We're brothers," I said nastily. "He sold me the whole story for a free beer."

Shorty turned an unhealthy green.

"That's a lie, Boss. I only seen this guy once, in a bar. He done all the talkin'."

"Say, he didn't put that idea into your head about sticking Parenti with that murder rap."

The little guy looked sheepish.

"I thought it was a little too bright for you." The fat man's brow wrinkled. He put his chin on his hand and closed his eyes. Suddenly he opened his eyes, dull and a shade of dirty green, and grinned at me.

"You know, that was a good idea. You still mad at Parenti, son?"

I thought it over. "Maybe."

"Maybe we'll be able to use the idea after all. How would you like that?"

It looked like a way to stall. On second thought I knew that whatever he'd dreamed up, I was the fall guy.

He continued: "You're a smart guy. I can see that. How would you like to make two grand and get a nice vacation in Mexico?"

I thought fast. There was a catch to this, but I might as well go along with it. I shrugged. He went on:

"How would you like to write the D.A. a letter, tell him Parenti hired you to kill the blonde and get the dough? We'll give you the stationery, a stamp, two grand, and a ticket to Mexico City. How would you like that?"

I tried to play it smart, but my Irish blood was too much for me.

"How," I asked pleasantly, "would you like to go to hell?"

The fat man chuckled delightfully. "Okay, Mac," he said. "Convince him."

Mac shoved his chair out from behind the table and walked around it. Slowly he lit a cigar. It looked too old for him. He puffed twice and then his hand moved quickly. A searing pain shot into my eyelid as he ground the cigar into my face. I started to get up and a crashing blow on my neck sent me to the floor. Two kicks in the solar plexus did the rest. The room grew dim around me. In the distance I could hear the fat man chuckling.

"Mike," he reminded me. "This lad's young. He can do that all day."

TO PROVE he was right Mac kicked me again. I stayed where I was.

"Get up," said Mac politely. "Sit down again. He's our guest, ain't he, Boss? He shouldn't be lyin' there on the floor." He kicked me again and I struggled to my feet. I lurched for the chair and felt it whisked out from under me. As I fell he kicked me again. A flash of pain shot up me.

"Okay, Mac," said the fat man. "Let him up."

I struggled to my chair again. This time it stayed put.

"See, Mike?" said the fat man. "Mac thinks you should write that letter too."

I shook my head. The fat man shrugged.

"All right, Mac. Take him up the Mount Rose Grade and dump him. They'll find him in the spring."

Mac hoisted me from my chair, a thin smile on his blank face. He turned me around roughly and shoved me toward the kitchen. I looked at Myrt, the cook. She was smiling and nodding virtuously. *Crazy as a loon,* I knew suddenly.

I changed my mind about the letter. It can happen in a spot like that, no matter what kind of a hero you think you

are. I turned, hunched my shoulders. "I'll write it."

The fat man smiled paternally.

"That's a good lad. Myrt, some writing paper out of the desk. And don't pick up the paper in your hand. Bring the whole box."

Myrt disappeared into the front room and came back with a box of stationery. The fat man took a pen out of his pocket and handed it to me politely.

"Now," he said. "Take a piece of paper, not the top one, and write down what I tell you. Shorty," he said, "phone the station and tell them to reserve a compartment for four on the afternoon train to San Francisco."

Four, I though, my mind whirling. Who was the fourth? Not the cook. Somebody else? No, it was going to be me, Mike Blair, in person. Well, at least they weren't going to kill me here—they were going to take me back to San Francisco. To turn me and my "confession" over to the cops? No, that was too risky.

But a confession found, for instance, on a conscience-stricken suicide; that was something else. I had a feeling that I wasn't going to see San Francisco. Unless I got awful smart awful quick. An idea was rattling around in my feverish brain, a long shot, but maybe....

"You ready?" asked the fat man. He wasn't smiling now and his pig eyes were lost in thought.

"Say: 'To Whom It May Concern'. Got that? 'Nick Parenti paid me twenty thousand dollars to kill Helena Parks in the Royal Hotel. He did this because she won eighteen thousand dollars—' You getting this?"

I nodded slowly. I was getting it, but it wasn't what I was writing. I fought to keep my hand from trembling. The fat man continued:

" 'Because she won eighteen thousand dollars on a fixed race. I want to get this off my chest before I kill myself.' "

I stared at him, trying to act as if I'd just been tricked by my best friend. I jumped up, my hands shaking, and tore the paper across the middle. I let the pieces drop to the table.

"Wait a minute," I stuttered. "What do you mean, before I kill myself? You said—"

His face was deadly serious now. Softly he said:

"Blair, if you don't get another piece of paper and write down what I say, Mac will have you screaming for suicide in a half hour."

I looked at Mac. He was licking his lips eagerly. I sat down and took another piece of paper out of the box.

"Write what I said, sign your name, and hand it over."

I did. He picked up the paper in a handkerchief and read it. He nodded and looked up with a smile.

"You write a beautiful hand, Mike. A little shaky, maybe. A college man?" He folded the paper, still using the handkerchief, and slipped it into his pocket.

Quietly, slowly, I let my hand slide over the top half of the first note, the torn one, and slid it off the table. I crumpled it in my lap and pushed the ball of paper into my pocket....

CHAPTER FIVE

Hot-Squat Grand Slam

OUTSIDE the station it looked as if everyone in Reno was going to San Francisco on the afternoon train. The fat man walked on my left and Brown Hat on my right and Mac brought up the rear, hands in his pockets. The fat man made me carry his suitcase. "To make it look good," he said. It was a heavy suitcase, and I longed to hurl it into his bloated belly.

We went through the entrance and I shot a glance at the coffee counter. A slim, graceful form moved swiftly up and down the counter—Alma. My heart leaped. I put down the suitcase.

"Let me buy a pack of cigarettes," I asked the fat man.

He hesitated and then smiled. "Sure. Mac'll go with you, in case they think you're too young to buy them."

As I walked up to the counter, Mac close alongside and watching every move, Alma glanced up and saw me. She smiled and I shook my head slightly. She looked puzzled and moved toward our end of the coffee stand.

I picked up a pack of cigarettes. I crushed the ball of paper in my pocket

and palmed it in my hand. I gave her a quarter and let the ball of paper fall on the counter. My heart sank as it rolled off behind the stand. I looked into her troubled face, my eyes begging her to understand.

Mac shoved me roughly and jerked his head toward the fat man. I gave her one last look. Maybe, I thought, the last beautiful girl I'd ever see....

The fat man crowded himself into the compartment and established himself on the seat facing forward. He lit a tremendous cigar and leaned back with a sigh. Mac and Shorty and myself jammed ourselves into the opposite seat. I felt like a lamb in the stockyard. It was a long ride, and nobody said much.

Brown Hat went to sleep as we started up the Nevada side of the Sierras, the fat man buried himself in a racing form, and Mac sat back and stared at me, chewing a toothpick. I lit a cigarette and began to think. I had about the chance of an ice cube in a furnace, I told myself. I began to wonder just what was holding them up.

I didn't wonder long. It was dark now, and the train was hurtling along the Truckee River. Suddenly it slowed and began the long climb up the Donner Grade. My stomach tightened. I could have cut the tension in the compartment with a knife. Brown Hat woke up with a start. The fat man put down his racing form and looked at me speculatively. The palms of my hands began to sweat.

"Stand up, Mike," he said softly. I got up slowly, my knees shaky under me. The fat man reached over and slipped a piece of paper into my coat pocket. "Cheer up, Mike. Think how happy this will make the cops—the whole case cut-and-dried. They'll find you on the Donner Grade tomorrow—tomorrow night every cop in Frisco will sleep like a baby."

Somehow it didn't make me feel any better. The fat man nodded to Mac. Mac got up slowly, opened the door, and looked out. Then he stepped back and motioned me out with a jerk of his head.

Brown Hat stared, his expression a mixture of horror and fascination. I started to speak and couldn't. Mac shoved me and I found myself in the passageway.

"Move," he snarled. I moved.

He crowded me to the vestibule between the cars. A young fellow and a girl were standing there smoking. *Stay here,* I told them silently. *Stay here until we get to Sacramento.* The young fellow smiled at the girl and dropped his cigarette. He ground it out under his foot, opened the door, and they went back inside the car. I groaned inwardly.

Mac took another look through the vestibule windows, pulled his gun out of his pocket, and opened the side door. The night air was cold and the smoke from the engine was bitter in my nostrils. We were swaying over the top of the pass now, and I heard the lonely whistle of the engine as we passed the summit. The clacking of the rails increased in tempo. Mac looked out of the corner of his eye at the drop below.

"This is the end of the line, Blair. They're gonna think you jumped out of an airplane when they find you down there. Have a nice time goin' down—it's gonna be hell when you hit." Swiftly he stepped behind me. I stiffened.

At least, I thought, when they find me I might as well have a bullet hole in me—nobody throws me off a train like a candy wrapper, without killing me first. I pivoted and swung and missed. Like a flash Mac twirled his gun in his hand. I saw it gleam dully in the vestibule light and then there was a crashing blow on the side of my head. I felt myself falling and grabbed at the only thing in sight—Mac.

Again the gun came down. This time it missed my head. Pain raced up my shoulder. But it cleared my brain. I swung him around and clutched at the gun. The train lurched; for a split second we poised on the brink of eternity; a desperate hand clawed at the collar of my overcoat.

I caught a glimpse of a fear-crazed face, jerked at the gun, heard a scream falling away in the darkness, and staggered backwards into the vestibule.

I SAT on the floor and grabbed for my cigarettes. My fingers were shaking like leaves in a hurricane. It took me half a book of matches to light up. I was dizzy, sick, my head ached, I would have given my right arm for a drink, but I was alive. And finally, for the first time since I'd

followed the blonde into the cocktail lounge, I had a gun. It gave me ideas. I flipped the cigarette out into the night, closed the door with a clang, and strolled back to the compartment.

I braced myself in the passageway and put the gun in my pocket. Then I opened the door and stepped in. Brown Hat looked up nervously and his face froze in a look of terror. The fat man was reading the racing form. He didn't bother to glance up.

"Nice work," he said. "He give you any trouble?"

"Not much," I answered pleasantly. "Thanks for asking."

Slowly, incredulously, the fat man raised his head. His lips moved. "Why that brainless son of a—"

I raised my hand.

"Speak kindly of the dead, Slim. Who knows? You too may fall off a train some day. Any day."

The fat man sat back and chuckled.

"You're a pretty bright kid, Blair. Pretty bright. But now what are you going to do? Try to keep us in here? Both of us?"

I moved my hand in my pocket. "Yeah. It won't be hard."

"You don't think you're going to get away with that little-gun-that-wasn't-there routine again, do you, son?"

I shrugged. "You can't blame me for trying."

"Shorty," said the fat man suddenly. "Get up and see if he's got Mac's gun."

Shorty shook his head, watching my hand.

I smiled at the fat man. "You do it, Chubby," I invited. "Come on. You're a gambling man, a bookie. If I don't have a gun I'll give you back the suicide note. Okay?"

The fat man didn't move. I took the note out of my pocket. "Eat it!" I said suddenly. The fat man turned white. I took a step toward him. "Eat it," I said again. With my left hand I jammed it into his face. He pursed his lips. I let him have it with the back of my hand. His mouth fell open and I crammed the paper in. Carefully I wiped my hand on his lapel.

"Chew it well, now. We don't want to get indigestion, do we?"

He chewed it for a long, long time, and then, so help me, he swallowed it.

"Now the big smile," I said. "Remember the smile?" He actually tried to smile. I sat down and lit a cigarette. I was feeling better every minute.

"Blair," said the fat man suddenly. "What are you trying to do? You won't get away with this. You're wanted in San Francisco—and now you've killed Mac. They'll hang you from the first lamp post they find."

"For killing Mac I should get a medal. I guess he just stepped out there with me for a quiet smoke?"

"That's our story."

"You'll be damned lucky if you tell any story. You know why?"

The fat man didn't answer.

"Because Nick Parenti is meeting this train in Sacramento. Nick and his gorilla. They've driven all the way from San Francisco just to welcome you." I hoped I was right.

The fat man looked startled.

"Go ahead with your racing form," I said. "Not that you'll need it where you're going."

"What do you mean?"

"They got a gas chamber for murderers in this state."

The fat man shifted uneasily. "The blonde? I was playing poker at the Silver Lady all day the sixteenth. A hundred people can testify to that."

"What about him?" I jerked my thumb toward Shorty. "Was he there?"

The fat man's eyes gleamed. He said slowly:

"I don't know where he was." The little guy moved his mouth. Nothing came out.

ONCE in Sacramento, I didn't have to wait long to find out that Alma had found the note and Nick's phone number. The train had no sooner stopped than I heard compartment doors opening down the car, and apologies, and more compartment doors, closer, and more apologies. Then our door opened and there were no more apologies.

Nick Parenti stepped in, his hand under his coat. The big redhead followed him, wearing his hand the same way. Nick looked at the fat man.

"Hiram Schultz," he said quietly. "As I live and breathe. Don't tell me it was you? I might have known."

The fat man grinned weakly and stuck out his hand. Nick looked at it, his own hand came out of his coat, and a gun swung in a short arc. There was the crack of metal against bone and the fat man groaned and grabbed his wrist. Nick turned to me.

"Sorry, Mike," he said. He stuck out his hand. I took it.

"Forget it," I said. "I'm sorry too. I should have known it wasn't you. I guess you want to know the story."

Nick nodded. There was a knock and a low, lilting voice came through the panel. "Can I come in now?" The door opened and Sherry crowded in, tired and drawn, but as beautiful as ever. I grinned at her and she smiled back faintly.

"Well," I started, "I got to thinking about who killed the blonde. Sherry didn't think it was you, and it makes me wonder. In the first place, you acted as if you thought I killed her, falling for that bluff about the gun in my pocket. Unless you thought I'd already killed, you wouldn't have worried about my shooting you.

"But who the hell had killed her, then? I was pretty sure it wasn't *me*. Then I remembered something. I'd followed the blonde all day after she won the dough. She'd spent plenty; beauty treatment, furrier, jewelers. Presumably that dough was supposed to go back to what's his name here—Schultz. Evidently the blonde didn't see it that way.

"Apparently Schultz didn't trust her. Shorty here must have been tailing her too. Shorty sees her a spending all this dough and calls Schultz. Schultz says okay, she double-crossed me, kill her and get the dough back. And use a stiletto—that was an afterthought—to maybe throw the scent your way in case the cops found out she'd won the money from you.

"So Shorty does it. He's scared, but he gets in the hotel suite and hides. Then he knifes her in the tub. Finally he starts looking for the dough—in the bedroom, where it wasn't. But then he hears me at the door. That *really* scares him. He goes down the fire escape.

"Well, I knew from a phone call he made that he was going to Reno, so I beat him up there."

Nick looked puzzled. "How'd you get word to me? Some dame called up from Reno, said she had a message that she didn't know anything about. Claimed the message said to call me and tell me to meet the train in Sacramento, Mike was in trouble. It sounded phony as hell, but I figured I'd better come."

I looked at the fat man. He was staring at me.

"That message was just part of an old, torn-up suicide note I wrote once. Right, Schultz?" He shook his head dumbly. "And I guess I must have passed it to the waitress when I got the cigarettes at the station. Check?" Schultz looked as if he were going to break down and cry.

I turned to Sherry.

"I'll take you to Reno to get your car. I guess you'll have to drive back alone. These two bums aren't going to talk without a lot of working over by Red here, and I don't want to get to town before they clear me." A happy smile broke over Red's face, and he looked pleasantly at the fat man.

"I'll send you a check," said Nick. "Thanks, and good luck, Mike. These monkeys will talk if it takes us a week. Get up, gentlemen, the rest of the trip is by car."

I turned to Sherry. "Coming, honey?"

Sherry's eyes were downcast. Suddenly she raised her face. There were tears in her eyes. She laid her hand gently on my arm. I could see it coming again, and I waited for the anger to well up in me.

"I'm sorry, Mike. I'm going back with Nick."

She said it tenderly, as if she expected me to break down and cry. Strangely, I found that I didn't give a damn. For the first time in a week I felt free.

"Okay, honey," I said cheerfully. "I'll drive your car down when I come back." She looked surprised, and a little disappointed. I stepped into the passageway.

"Mike," she called after me. "Where can I write you?"

I thought of a pair of blue eyes and dark, shining hair.

"I don't know," I yelled back. "You might try the Three Gables Hotel."

THE END

MURDER—PAID IN ADVANCE

His fingers closed at the base of her throat.

QUINN NORMAN watched his ex-wife come out of the lighted doorway of the apartment house across the quiet street. He felt a shiver go all the way through him as he pulled back into the shadows—as though Cindy would recognize him now after five years in the pen.

He stood there in the darkened doorway for a moment, watching Cindy move along the street. A tall, poised woman who looked younger than thirty. He wondered if other men still thought her as lovely as he had, before he knew how shallow and empty she actually was.

There's a price no man should pay ex-con Quinn learned— even to rub out a . . . deathhouse dolly.

By TALMAGE POWELL

Go after her Norman, his desires urged. This is what you wanted. This is the moment you waited for. Get it over with. Give the world a break.

But he didn't move. He stood watching as she rounded the corner, and was lost to sight. He wiped his sweating palms on his shabby coat. Slapped his right fist softly against his left hand. He knew where she was now. There wasn't the urgency that had hurried him three thousand miles west here to the brink of the Pacific.

The strange urgency driving him to kill her. In place of that urgency settled a cold calm. To kill her wasn't enough. To kill her and get away with it was the thing he wanted. He had paid for a murder he hadn't done. It was simple arithmetic that he was owed a kill.

When he knew she was gone, Norman stepped out of the doorway and moved off in the opposite direction. His shadow bumped along ahead of him on the gray walk. For a while he watched it: elongated, shortened, widened, thinned. He had cast that shadow in a lot of places in his search for Cindy. It had been long and tiresome, asking about her, seeking, being sure and then finding: a blind alley, a stone wall.

Then, begin all over again. Start and ask and check and keep moving until your money ran out. Then you took a job for a while, and then it began again. He'd been here in San Jueneme for a month, and he hadn't even been sure he'd found Cindy yet.

Until tonight.

He entered the paint-peeled boarding house and started up the stairs, his mind full of Cindy and all the things she had done to him. As he turned on the second landing, a girl's cheery voice called out to him through an open door.

"Coffee, Quinn?"

HE STOPPED with his hand on the bannister. He tensed his lean, wide shoulders. It had been all right, he'd told himself, to be friendly with dark-eyed Judy Conroy.

But it couldn't be any more. Not since he had found Cindy. That changed everything. Quinn knew he had tried to keep it light and casual, but the way Judy felt about him wasn't casual. . . . And he refused to analyze the way he felt about her, at all.

"Tired," he mumbled over his shoulder.

She had a dimple in her right cheek when she smiled. "Then you do need coffee, man!"

She stood in her open door, her smile growing more unsure as he hesitated. The light spilled out around her slender, lovely body. *She's so damned young,* Quinn told himself. She spoke again.

"Please, Quinn? I won't even make you stay for a second cup. Word of honor."

Unwillingly, letting her see that he was unwilling, he followed her into her one-room apartment. Coffee was warming on the small stove, all right. Probably she'd lighted it when she heard his footsteps on the stairs.

He hurled his battered hat at a straight chair, and missed again. He always missed, and Judy smiled. Sitting at the oilcloth-covered table, he stared at the gray steam crawling from the coffee spout.

Judy poured his coffee, filled her own cup, and returned the pot to the stove. He drank his coffee absently, black, but Judy didn't sit down facing him. She stood before him and smiled.

"Lose your job, Quinn?"

He looked up at her. He didn't have a job to lose; he was still living on the last of the money he'd made on a job in Nevada. But he had let Judy think he worked. It was easier than explaining where he was all those hours, all those days he'd been seeking Cindy this month.

He sighed heavily. He'd let Judy believe a lot of things in the month since he'd met her on the stairs out there. He'd been going down hurriedly, and she'd been coming up, arms loaded with groceries. By the time they'd gathered up all the spilled apples and canned goods, they were friends.

He knew Judy was a model agency receptionist. Infrequently, she made extra money modeling. She thought he was a loader in a wholesale fruit place. It was one of the jobs he had held in his trek across the country. It was the first lie he could think of when Judy asked him.

Grimly, he gulped down the steaming coffee. She thought he was a working

stiff, honest and down at the heels. She was forever fixing meals for him, on any pretext—except the truth: it was charity. She was sorry for him, and wanted to be sure he had enough to eat. In many women, he thought, it's a simple transition from a feeling like that to love. Cooking for a man. Seeing him across a table. Neither was the male of the species immune to that kind of chemistry.

Standing, Quinn looked down into her troubled brown eyes.

"Everything is swell," he told her. He tried to smile. But his mouth felt stiff, and his rigid face muscles wouldn't relax. You couldn't find the woman you meant to kill, and then smile lightly.

"Sure," she said, trying to keep it light and casual, "you've found another girl. I bet she can't even make coffee."

His voice was suddenly rough and brutal. It surprised both of them. "I haven't found another girl," he said harshly. "I never even knew any other girl but you. Do you understand?"

She laughed with sudden relief. "I've had men try to kiss me," she said. "But you've certainly got a new approach. Scare-'em-to-death-Norman, he is known as."

Quinn tried to laugh as he went past her to the door.

UPSTAIRS, in the bleak quiet of his room, he did not bother turning on the light. He stood by the window in the darkness, tasting five years poison. If he wasn't any good any more, it was Cindy's doing.

When he had married her, he had been sole owner of one of Miami's swankiest night spots. Quinn Norman whose friends were columnists and actors, senators and publishers, gamblers and bankers, and all of them big time. He shook his head, unable to believe it himself, any more.

His club, the *Casa Mañana*, had caught on, and he'd hired two managers who knew all there was to know about swank night spots. Ansel Breen, suave, poised and smooth; women loved his lifted brow and his small mustache, and his quick glittering smile that actually didn't mean a thing in the world except that Breen had pretty teeth, and knew it. Rudy Mackalvain, the other manager, had been tall, very dark and very quiet, but he was a financial wizard.

Rudy Mackalvain had been a financial magician, too. After the fire that had destroyed the *Casa Mañana* beyond repair, Mackalvain had disappeared from the face of the earth, and with him went most of Quinn Norman's money.

After the fire, Breen's body had been found in a storeroom behind the club. All that was left of him was his expensive, charred wrist watch, and a round bullethole in his skull. Quinn was accused of the murder. But he had been alone, driving with Cindy.

Except that at the trial, Cindy shook her lovely head. She wanted to lie to save Quinn, she said. But she couldn't. Knocked cold by the very hugeness of her lie, Quinn heard himself sentenced to five years for manslaughter, the most they could pin on him. With him safely in the pokey, Cindy had sold out his holdings, divorced him, and disappeared. . . .

When Cindy opened the door of her apartment at eleven-thirty that night, Quinn Norman was in a chair facing her. She had closed the door and snapped on the light before she saw him.

What happened to her face was hell to watch when you remembered how lovely Cindy had been. She looked suddenly old, with her rouged cheeks pulled down into shadowed hollows, the corners of her mouth shaking.

Quinn Norman stood up.

"Where—how did you—get here?" she whispered.

"The service entrance. The fire escape. I had to crack a pane in one of your windows to get it unlocked."

He took a step toward her. "After all, Cindy, you've had five years. Five years on my money while I sat in prison. Cindy, even you must have known five years wouldn't last forever."

He put his hands on her shoulders. She trembled, sucked in a breath and swallowed hollowly, but she didn't move.

His fingers closed at the base of her throat. The small pulse, like a tiny heart, pounded out its terror against him. Her throat felt as it had in all his nightmares these five years of waiting for this moment.

His haggard face drawn with hatred,

he stared down into her eyes. What was he seeking? Repentance? Regret? Sorrow at what she had done to their lives? None of it was there. Only self-pity, and agony and fear. That was her face.

Suddenly he flung her from him to the floor. She pulled herself back against the wall, trying to dig herself into it, to get away from him. He looked at her. His breathing was a whispered sound.

"I guess the laugh is on me, Cindy. In five years I never stopped to think you weren't worth the effort it would take to kill you."

He heard the door latch click, twisted to see the door swing open.

THE man at the door was smiling suavely, and his perfect teeth glittered. Then Breen stiffened, mirroring the astonishment in Norman's face.

Breen was fast. The small automatic was out of his pocket before Quinn could move. Breen stepped into the room and kicked the door closed with the toe of his expensive oxford.

Quinn stood there with his shoulders pulled round, his mouth parted as he stared at Breen. But Breen had died in the nightclub fire five years ago! *I ought to know,* Norman thought crazily, *I paid the penalty for killing him.*

"As you can see, Norman, any reports of my death are grossly exaggerated," Breen said evenly. "I suppose it's all very clear to you now?"

Quinn nodded numbly. He looked at Cindy, who had pulled herself up from the floor and was straightening her blonde hair before the mirror.

Norman said, "You and Cindy. You planned it. You fired the club and got away with my money."

Breen laughed sharply, remembering. "We got rid of Rudy Mackalvain, too, and his prying. All it cost me, Quinn, was a very expensive wrist watch. Mackalvain dies, everybody thinks it's me, and Cindy and I are on our way with a fortune. Simple?"

He cut a glance at Cindy. "Now that he knows, we'll take Quinn where it's quieter—someplace where he can get lost—for good."

Quinn Norman dragged in a deep breath. If they got him out of this apartment, out of this building where the sound of a small automatic might go unnoticed, he would emulate the proverbial snowball in hell.

As Cindy turned away from the end table, Quinn faded. He clutched at her.

Cindy screamed. Breen flipped the automatic smoothly in his fist and clubbed at Norman's head. Quinn felt it rake a red, hot path across the back of his skull.

He kept moving. Clutching Cindy's arm, he thrust her between them, shoved her against Breen and followed in fast. He closed his fingers on Breen's gun arm.

Breen tried to wrench free. They reeled back, slammed against the wall.

There was a sharp, sudden pop, and the acrid gray gun smoke wreathed up between them. Quinn staggered back. The gun clattered to the floor from Breen's hand, and rolled off the rug.

Cindy scooped it up. She moved fast, away from Quinn, covering him with the gun. He heard the loose, dull sound of Breen's sliding down the wall to the floor.

"He's dead," Cindy said. "You've killed him, Quinn!" The words weren't screamed, but they had that effect.

"Stand there," Cindy said, her face contorted. "You've killed the only man I ever loved. I'm going to call the police. This time you'll rot in jail forever!"

Quinn Norman looked at her empty, angry eyes. *What did I ever see in her?*

"Sure," Quinn said, "call your cops, and explain how Breen got here. I killed him five years ago in Miami, remember? And I've already paid the bill. Sweetheart, this time *you* figure a way to get rid of the body!"

The last time he looked at Cindy, her eyes had lost all contact with reality. She stood staring down at Ansel Breen with a slow, hard shaking beginning to crawl over her. . . .

By the time Quinn reached the silent street, he was feeling better. Free. Clean. Wonderful. He began to take long, rapid strides toward that apartment house and the open, bright door on the second landing. In his mind he could already hear Judy's cheery call:

"Coffee, Quinn?"

OPIUM DREAM

By NOAH JACKSON

Mee Toy's lovely pawn.

THE sickly sweet smoke from many opium pipes rose wraithlike, filing that little den on Mott Street with the ghosts of thousands of weird dreams.

As the detectives pressed into the room, a lovely white girl stepped from behind a silken Chinese curtain. Her hard gray eyes surveyed the raiders in disdain. Then she yawned, stretched her arms above her, and the red kimono which clung to her figure dripped liked blood from her arms.

* * *

The sales girls had reached Lizzie Niznick's little drygoods store early that misty October morning of 1919, and found the front door locked.

"She must be sick," one of the girls said. "We'd better get a doctor." They met a cop who rattled the door. It was locked, all right. Going to the side door he found it had been jimmied. The cop lumbered up the rickety wooden stairs. Throwing his weight against Lizzie's apartment door, he fell into the apartment.

The fat body of Mrs. Niznick was dumped grotesquely, like a battered rag doll, beside her bed, her skull caved in.

The haul had been $600. Not enough, the cops thought, for such a brutal killing and thorough wrecking.

But, as in the story books, there was *one* clue. Beneath a pile of rubbish in the kitchen was an empty chewing-tobacco wrapper.

Not too long afterward, a detective disguised as a hoodlum entered the premises of one Max Lipp, owner of a second-hand furniture store in Yonkers. Max was more affectionately known as Sam the Landlord, for his store was only a front for his more profitable rent-collecting racket. He also fenced stolen goods.

After some haggling the detective said: "Give me a chew will ya, Sam?"

Sam the Landlord reached out a dirty paw with a tobacco package. It was the same brand as that found in Lizzie Niznick's place.

That day six policemen swooped down on Sam's store. In the back room, on top of a rubbish can, they found Lizzie's silver watch and a pearl necklace.

Sam didn't hold back long. He admitted he helped ransack the apartment, but he claimed the actual killing had been the work of Harry Givner.

Givner, alias Aaron Gioner, was a two-bit punk who liked his ease—and didn't like to work for it. He had curly blond hair which women loved to run their fingers through. His occupation, when he didn't have a woman supporting him, was burglary.

The Yonkers police went right to work.

(Please continue on page 129)

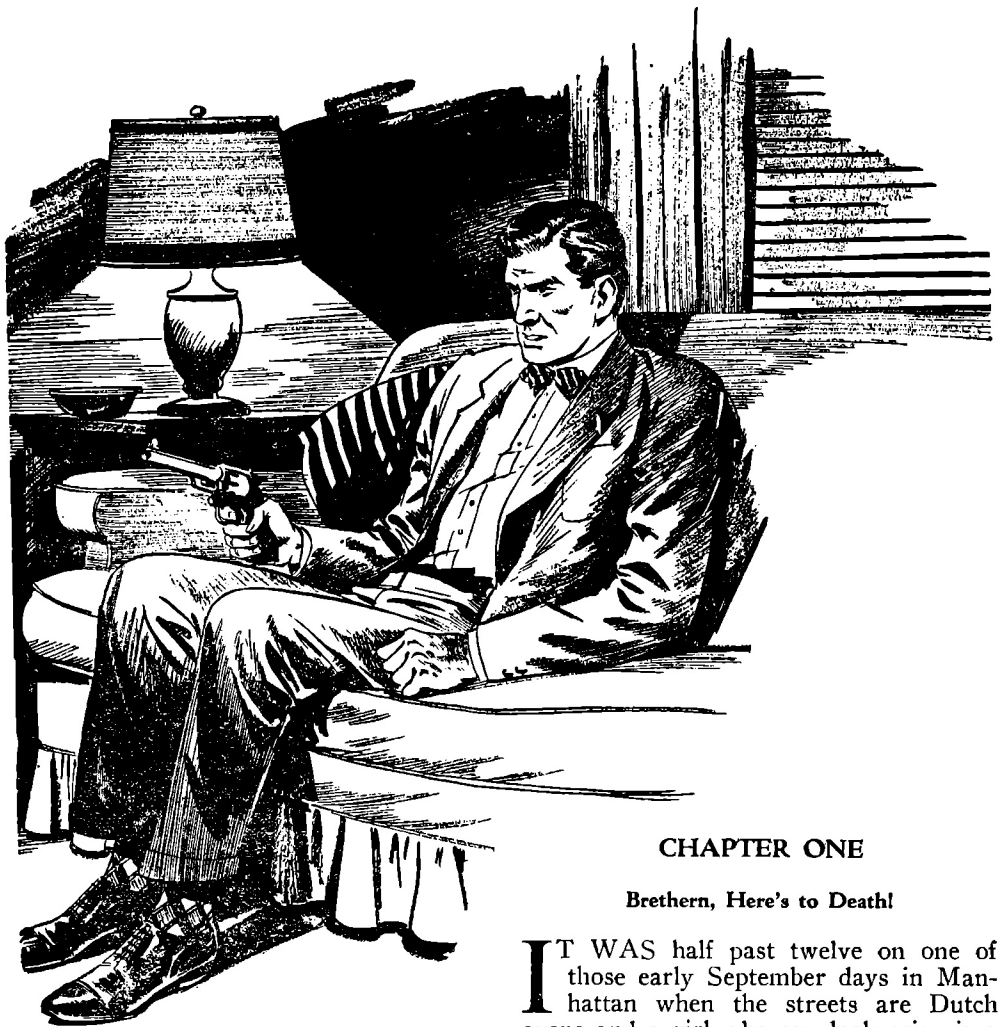
PLUS

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

To trap the murder-mind who turned his frat into a slaughterhouse . . . brain-boy Arlin and his campus queen— played sitting duck.

COLLEGE-CUT KILL

By JOHN D. MacDONALD



"How do you like the end of the road?"

• • •

CHAPTER ONE

Brethern, Here's to Death!

IT WAS half past twelve on one of those early September days in Manhattan when the streets are Dutch ovens and a girl who can look crisp is a treasure indeed. I was completing the last draft of the current three-part blast, with Dolly sitting at my elbow noting the changes I wanted.

Miss Riven came in simultaneously

with her crisp rap at the door, and said, "Mr. Engelberg wishes to see you immediately, Mr. Arlin."

She did a Prussian drill-sergeant's about-face and went back through the door, shutting it with a crisp clack that only Miss Riven can seem to get out of a door.

"Her!" Dolly said. "Her!" She made it sound like a dirty name.

"She thinks I work here," I said. During the six weeks that I had been provided with office space and Dolly, she and I had become good friends. "Look, lovely. I can't see anything more we need. Type it up with three carbons and get one over to the legal eagles for checking."

I hesitated, decided against my coat, and went down through the offices full of common people to the shrine where Engelborg, the almighty, flings his weight around.

Miss Riven gave me a cool look, glanced at her watch and said, "You may go right in, Mr. Arlin."

I pushed the door open. Engelborg, who looks like a giant blond panda, said, "This is Arlin. Joe, meet Mr. Flynn."

Flynn merely nodded but he stared at me intently. He was a big, sagging man in his late fifties with an executive air about him. There was a bloodhound sadness about his eyes.

"Arlin," said Engelborg, "is just finishing up a hot series on real estate swindles."

"It's all done," I said. "Ought to be out of the typewriter tomorrow. That is, if the lawyers have no kick."

"Good," Engelborg grunted. "I want you to understand, Mr. Flynn, that Arlin isn't a part of this organization. He works on a free-lance basis and this particular job was so hot we wanted him right here so we could coordinate more closely. What are your plans, Joe?"

I didn't like the sound of that. I said, "I am going to wait until I get page proofs on the first installment and then I am going to go to Maine."

"I understand," Flynn said, "that you're out of college two years. The University of Wisconsin. You were a Gamma U there?"

"That's right." I couldn't smell which way this was going. Flynn looked at me as though he resented me in a tired way.

"He looks young enough, doesn't he?" Engleborg said.

Flynn nodded.

That has been a sore point with me. When I was twenty I looked fifteen. Now, at twenty-eight, I look twenty. Professionally that has its limitations. Emotionally it's all right. I play on their maternal instincts.

"So I look young," I said. "Gee, thanks."

"Take it easy, Joe," Engelborg said. "Real easy. Don't get upset. How'd you like to go to college?"

"Thanks, I've been."

Flynn spoke heavily. "Let me talk, Arlin. My son is dead. He died last June at the age of nineteen. Everyone says he hung himself. I went down there. He was at West Coast University in Florida. I cannot believe he hung himself. He was a Gamma U. Other boys in that house died last year. In different ways. Automobiles. One drowned. Too many died. I cannot get help from the police. A private investigation firm would be too heavy-handed.

"Mr. Engelborg has been my good friend for many years. Last night I talked to him about this. He mentioned you. We discussed it. I want to pay you to go down and register for this fall term which starts very soon. I have certain influence and so does Engelborg. It can be arranged. We have a friend at the University of Wisconsin. The first three years of your credits will be transferred so you can enter as a senior. I know the secretary of the national chapter of Gamma U. There will be no trouble from that end."

I sat down. I kept my voice as calm and logical as I could. "Mr. Flynn, I appreciate your problem. There are many inexplicable suicides among young people."

"Teddy did not kill himself. I know that. I must have it proven. I have two other boys, younger boys. I don't want this thing hanging over them."

"Which would be better? Suicide or murder? If it isn't one it's the other."

"Suicide is a sign of basic weakness. Teddy was not weak. I want you to go down there and live in that house and find out what happened." He was as positive and undeniable as an avalanche.

I appealed to Mr. Engelborg. "Look,

that isn't my line. I find things out to write them up."

Engelborg said, "You've done some very slick investigatory work, Joe. Those dock gangs, the Bermuda dope setup."

"I'm my own man," I said. "I do what I please."

"That's right, Joe," Engelborg said.

"I don't want to go to college. I want to go to Maine. Brother, it's hot down there now. I'm tired. I want to go fishing."

"You'll wonder," Flynn said, "all the rest of your life. You'll wonder what kind of a thing you might have uncovered. What kind of a twisted, diseased thing it is that causes the deaths of fine young boys."

"I won't do it," I said.

"You will be paid all expenses, plus a thousand a month plus a bonus of five thousand when it is all over, no matter what your conclusion is."

"I hate Florida," I said.

THE blue gulf sparkled on my right as I drove south. The sun glinted off the chrome of the convertible, needling through the dark glasses. My luggage was stacked in the back end and I had not had to change to kollege kut klothes because the veterans pretty much took that aspect out of higher education. I had been one myself, the navy taking out a four-year chunk so that I got out when I had turned twenty-six.

The town of Sandson where the university was located turned out to be half on the mainland and half on a long island connected to the mainland by a half-mile public causeway. The university was inland from the mainland half of the town, perched on a hill a hundred feet high—which made it a mountain in that locality.

The timing was good and I arrived on the last day of registration. I dumped cash and traveler's checks into the Sandson National Bank and drove east along the wide main drag. The university turnoff was to the right just beyond the city limits. A curving road led up to the haphazard collection of Moorish, Neo-Gothic, Spanish and Twentieth Century Lavatory construction. The bright young girls walked and cycled by in their thin dresses, brown legs flashing, eyes measuring me and the car for possible future reference.

I told myself this was a wild goose chase, a big mistake, a bunch of wasted time. I told myself again. Then I stopped telling myself. It was too much fun dropping back into the college frame of mind. But this time I was doing it the way I wished I had been able to do it at Wisconsin. At Wisconsin I had been knocking myself out, wondering how tough it would be to make a living later. Here I was getting paid for the deal.

Temporary cardboard signs were tacked up, pointing the way to Administration and Registration. I parked beside the indicated building, took the transcript of my three years out of the glove compartment and went in. There were tables with people working at them, filling out the desired schedules of classes. I took one of the catalogues and one of the blanks and went to work. I laid out six courses.

Literature IV (Creative Writing), Psychology VIII (Abnormal), Philosophy III (Ethics), Political Science VI (Ecology of nations) Modern History II (1914—1950). Lastly, I dipped for an elective into the Business School, Accounting I (Basic Methods), because I have never been able to see quite eye to eye with the Collector of Internal Revenue.

Then I joined the line leading to the window titled A to K. The young lady was very crisp. I gave the name we had agreed on—Rodney J. Arlin. It's my name. The one my stuff has been published under is R. Joseph Arlin, and we thought the name might be just a shade too familiar to the reading public of one certain large magazine.

She checked her card file. "Arlin, Rodney J. We have you listed as a transfer. You have your transcript?" I handed it over. She checked it carefully.

"We can give you full credit for the hours shown here, and admit you as a senior. As a senior you are not restricted to living on the campus. Do you have a place to live yet?"

"Not yet."

"Advise us immediately when you have an address. Your schedule is approved. Tuition will be three eighty-five for each semester. Yes, a check is acceptable. Take one of the getting acquainted bulletins as you leave. They're on that far table. Class

hours and rooms are posted on all bulletin boards. Compulsory meeting tomorrow morning at nine. As a senior you will attend the meeting in the Science Building auditorium. Next, please."

I found the cafeteria, had a quick lunch and went off in search of the brethren. I found them in a rambling Miami-type house of cinderblock, with a big overhang to kill the heat of the sun, sprinklers turning lazily on the green lawn. There was a parking area to the left of the house with a dozen cars lined up in it, eight of them convertibles of recent vintage. I parked and went around to the front. The door was open. The interior looked dim and invitingly cool.

I punched the bell and stepped inside. Two of the brethren came into the hallway and stared at me curiously, warily. One, with heavy bone-structure, I immediately type-cast as a working guard or tackle. The other was the smooth-dan type that inhabits all major fraternities. Careful, casual, a shade haughty and a bit too handsome.

I picked him to slip the grip to. "Brother Arlin," I announced. "Beta chapter at Wisconsin. Just transferred here as a senior."

He looked slightly pained. "Nice to see you, Arlin. I'm Bradley Carroll and this is Brother Siminik."

He was giving me the inch-by-inch survey—and I knew right then that it was a political house. By that I mean one with cliques, possibly two strong ones. Bradley was trying to decide whether I'd be any addition to his clique, or whether I might be permitted to join the other as dead weight. We were like a couple of dogs that circle each other, stiff-legged.

I sighed inwardly. The next move was too obvious. "I put my wagon in the parking area. Hope it's all right there." I took out a pack and offered him a cigarette. Siminik refused it. I lighted Bradley Carroll's with a gold lighter, wide-ribbed, a thing I would never buy for myself, but something that a girl named Ann thought I ought to have.

"You drove down?" he asked politely. *"Where from?"* is what he was trying to say.

"From New York. Three days on the road."

"Oh, you live in New York?"

"No, I just took a place there for the summer. Everybody says it's a hell of a place to spend a summer. Not me."

He was still wary, but warmer. "Say, we're being pretty inhospitable, Arlin. Come on back to my room."

It was an exceedingly pleasant room. The bottle on the coffee table was the very best bourbon. Siminik wasn't drinking. Carroll mixed me a stiff one. He kept his good-looking slightly bovine eyes on me during our casual talk. I let him know without saying as much that I had no financial worries, that I was neither an athlete nor a bookworm, that I intended to sandwich a very good series of very good times in between the necessary study.

We went through the slightly oriental ceremonies until it was time to come to the point. "Would you recommend living in the house?" I asked.

He hadn't expected the question that way. "It's . . . very pleasant. The food is good." He suddenly realized that he was on the defensive, an unthinkable position. "But of course," he said quickly, "I can't say whether there'd be room for you. I mean a private room, of course."

"The house is too small?"

"Not that. Seniors are entitled to private rooms if they wish to live in the house. Juniors go two to a room and sophomores bunk in the dorm. There are only eight private rooms and all those are spoken for this semester."

Siminik said, "Brad, the room that Flynn was going to—"

Brad Carroll said hastily, "Quent is taking that one, Al. I thought you knew."

"Somebody drop out?" I asked very casually.

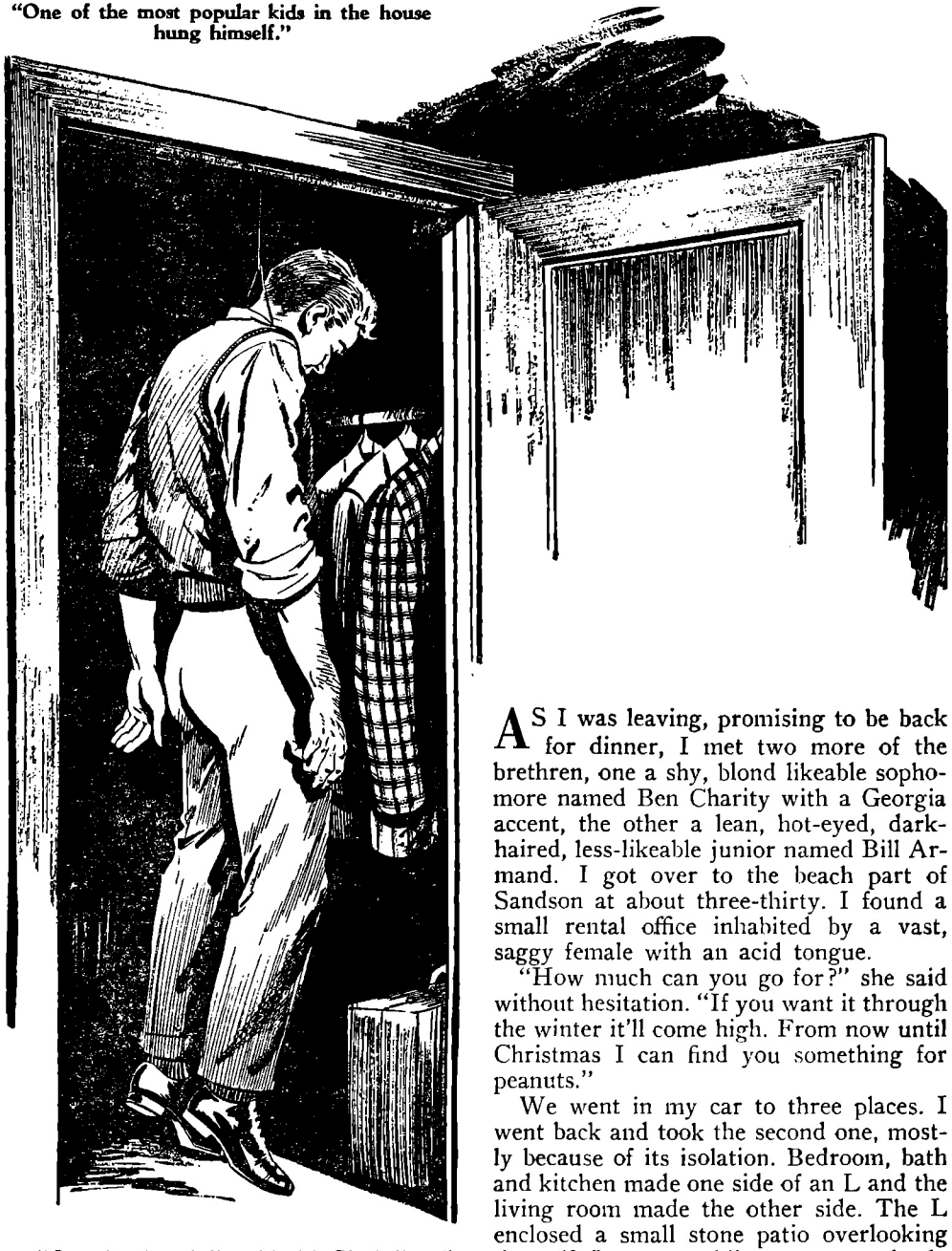
"No," Siminik said, "he—"

"—won't be here this year," Carroll said.

I let it go. No point in pushing.

"You'll have to see Arthur Marris anyway," Brad Carroll said. "He's house president and he handles the quarters problem. You might care to bunk with one of the juniors. That's been done before and I think there's one vacancy."

I yawned. "I don't know as I want to stay in the house anyway. I want to look around first. Maybe I can get some sort of a layout on the beach."



"One of the most popular kids in the house hung himself."

"On the beach," said Al Siminik, "it costs like there's a river of oil under the land."

Brad looked at him as though he had made a rude noise in public. He gave me an apologetic glance that said, *"What else can you expect from knuckled-headed athletes?"*

AS I was leaving, promising to be back for dinner, I met two more of the brethren, one a shy, blond likeable sophomore named Ben Charity with a Georgia accent, the other a lean, hot-eyed, dark-haired, less-likeable junior named Bill Armand. I got over to the beach part of Sandson at about three-thirty. I found a small rental office inhabited by a vast, saggy female with an acid tongue.

"How much can you go for?" she said without hesitation. "If you want it through the winter it'll come high. From now until Christmas I can find you something for peanuts."

We went in my car to three places. I went back and took the second one, mostly because of its isolation. Bedroom, bath and kitchen made one side of an L and the living room made the other side. The L enclosed a small stone patio overlooking the gulf. It was sparkling new, completely furnished, and though the gulf front lot was small, a high thick hedge on either side kept the neighbors out. The car port was at the rear and it was ample protection against salt mist off the gulf. Two-eighty a month until the end of December. Four hundred after that.

I paid my two months in advance, unpacked, raided a package store for all the necessary, bought a typing table and still had time for a dip in the warm gulf before dressing to run back over to dine amid the brethren.

The house was noisy when I went in. In the lounge somebody had racked a bunch of very poor bop on the machine. There was laughing and shouting going on back in the bedroom wing. Suitcases were stacked in the hall. Through the doorway to the dining room I could see the waiters setting the big table in the middle, the smaller tables around the walls.

A little redheaded sophomore with the face of an angel collared me. "Are you Brother Arlin? Come on with me. Brother Carroll said to wait for you and take you back to his room."

I told him I could find it and went back by myself. Brother Carroll was being the merry host. He smiled at me with what I guessed was his nearest approach to friendliness and steered me over to a tall boy. I found myself liking him immediately. He had gauntness and deep-set eyes and a firm-lipped wide sensitive mouth. He was older than the others.

"I'm Arthur Marris," he said. "I'm glad to know you, Arlin. You do have a first name."

I swallowed hard and said it. "Rodney. Rod, usually."

Siminik was there, drinking gingerale, and another senior named Step Krindall, a bulging, pink, prematurely bald boy.

"Martini all right?" Brad asked. I nodded and took the cool cocktail glass he handed me.

"I think we'll be able to make you comfortable if you'd like to move into the house, Rod," Arthur Marris said.

"I can see you're pretty crowded and I'm an outsider," I said. "I've taken a place on the beach. Turn left at The Dunes. Right at the end of the road. I see no reason why it can't be the Gamma U annex."

Arthur Marris looked a little hurt. He glanced at his watch. "One more round and then we'd better go in," he said.

The names and faces were slightly blurred at dinner. I knew I'd get a chance to straighten them out later. The cliques began to straighten out in my mind. Brad Carroll, with Siminik as a stooge, ran the opposition to Arthur Marris. The controlling group in the fraternity during the past years had been composed of veterans. Marris was one of the last of them in school. Bald-headed Step Krindall and Marris were the only two left in the house.

Brad Carroll was the leader of the group trying to get the reins of authority back into the hands of the younger non-veteran group. His biggest following was among the sophomores. Better than half the seniors and almost half the juniors seemed allied with Marris. With enough voting strength, Brad Carroll could effectively grab the power from Marris this year, even though Marris would retain the title as president of the house.

I found that there were thirty-three members. Ten seniors, nine juniors and fourteen sophomores. They hoped to take in fifteen freshmen who would not be permitted to live in a house until their sophomore year. Of the active members living in the house, eight were seniors, seven were juniors and ten were sophomores. My presence brought the number of seniors up to eleven.

After dinner, much to Brad's poorly concealed concern, Arthur Marris took me off to his room. Daylight was fading. He lit his pipe, the match flare flickering on his strong features.

"How do you like the chapter?" he asked.

"Fine. Fine! Of course, I'm not acquainted yet, but everything seems—"

"You're not a kid, Rod. You don't handle yourself like a kid. You spoke of the navy at dinner. How old are you?"

"Twenty-six," I said, chopping off a couple of years.

"I'm twenty-five. I can talk to you as man to man. That sounds corny, doesn't it? I want to ask you if you've noticed the tension. I can feel it. It's all underneath, you know. I brought you in here to talk to you about it. Part of my job is to protect the reputation of the chapter. You'll make friends outside the house. They'll gossip. I prefer that you hear the bad things from me, not from outsiders."

I shrugged. "So the boys get a little rough sometimes. Is that serious?"

"This is something else. This is a

jinxed house, Rod. I want to tell you a little about last year. I was a junior. The house president was a senior named Harv Lorr. In October, just as the rushing season was about to begin, two sophomores on their way back from Tampa rolled a car. Both of them were killed."

I whistled softly. "A tough break."

"That's what we all thought. Just before Christmas vacation one of my best friends went on a beach party. His body was washed up two days later."

"Accidents in a row like that aren't too unusual."

His voice was grim. "In March a boy, a senior, named Tod Sherman, was alone in his room. The guess is that he was cleaning his gun, an army .45. It was against the rules to have it in the house. His door wasn't locked. It went off and killed him."

"Maybe they come in threes."

"In June, during the last week of school, one of the most popular kids in the house hung himself. A boy named Teddy Flynn. He was a senior, a very bright boy. He was graduating a week before his twentieth birthday. He hung himself in this room. I took it for this term because no one else wanted it. He used heavy copper wire and fastened it to a pipe that runs across the ceiling of that clothes closet."

It bothered me to think that it had happened in this room. It made the whole situation less of an academic problem. It made me realize that I had taken a smart-alec attitude from the beginning. Now that was gone. There was a tangible feeling of evil. I could taste it in the back of my throat.

"Let me get this straight, Arthur. Why are you telling me this?"

"One, two or three deaths might be written off as accident and coincidence. I think five can too, in this case. But outsiders don't see it that way. They think it's fishy."

"Do the police?"

"Oh, no. I didn't mean that responsible people consider it fishy. The kids in the other houses do. By next year, it will all be forgotten. The transient population will take care of that. But this year is going to be rough. It'll affect our pledge total. There'll be a lot of whispering. For those inside the group it'll mean a stronger unifying force, I suppose. I thought you, as a senior transfer, should know all this."

"Why did the Flynn boy kill himself?"

"We'll never really know, I guess. His gal was really broken up. She was a junior last year."

"Did she come back?"

"I saw her at registration. Her name is Mathilda Owen. Tilly. You'll probably run into her sooner or later. This is a big school, but she'll travel in our group, I imagine."

"The five boys that died, Arthur. Outside of their being members of the fraternity, is there anything else to tie the five of them together?"

"No. Nothing."

"Teddy Flynn hung, Tod Sherman shot, two sophomores killed in a car and one unnamed guy drowned."

"That's it. The boy who drowned was Rex Winniger. The sophomores were Harry Welly and Ban Forrith. It was . . . a pretty bad year here."

"I can imagine."

He leaned over and put on the desk lamp. Evil was thrust back into the far shadows. He smiled without humor and said, "There had better not be any accidents this term."

I made myself laugh. "Hell, all the accidents for the next ten years are used up now. We're over the quota."

CHAPTER TWO

Axes to Grind

THE creative writing deal met once a week for a two-hour session, Friday from ten to twelve. It was taught by a dry but pompous little man who, the year before, had hit one of the book clubs with a novel that had little to recommend it but the incredible size of the heroine from the waist up and the frenzy with which she met all emotional experiences.

Tilly Owen was in the class. I located her at the first session, a tallish dark-haired girl, almost plain. Her face showed nothing and I was disappointed in her. She took notes meekly, her dark head bent over the notebook. But when she walked out, I did a quick revision. The tall body had an independent life of its own. Her

face showed a clear and unspectacular intelligence, an aloofness—but the body was devious and complicated and intensely feminine, continually betraying the level eyes. She went off with a few other girls before I could make an intercept.

During the week leading to the next session when I saw her again, I enlarged my circle of friends inside the fraternity. Brad Carroll thawed a great deal, particularly after I had a few of them out to the beach house for cocktails. I began to learn more about the insides of the brethren.

Step Krindall, with the baby blue eyes and the pink head, was as uncomplicated and amiable as a dancing bear. Arthur Marris had too deep a streak of seriousness in him, verging on self-importance. His touch was thus a shade too heavy. The better house president knows when to use a light touch. Every house has its types. Bill Armand, the dark, vital junior was the house skeptic, the cynic, the scoffer. Ben Charity, the shy blond Georgia boy was the gullible one, the butt of most practical jokes. The angel-faced redheaded sophomore named Jay Bruce was the house clown. There was the usual sullen, heavy-drinking kid on his way off the rails—one Ralph Schumann, a senior.

The rest of them seemed to merge into one composite type, a bunch of well-washed young men in a stage in their development when clothes, women, snap courses and hard-boiled books had a bit too much importance. They talked easily and well, made perhaps a shade too confident by their acceptance into one of the most socially acceptable groups on the campus. And, in many ways, they were exceedingly silly, as the young of any species is likely to be.

Their silliness pointed up the vast gulf that my two years out of college had opened up. I could see that in their group mind I was becoming rated as one hell of a fellow, a quick guy with a buck, a citizen who could handle his liquor, keep his mouth shut.

I found that I had not lost the study habit. Necessary research during the two intervening years had kept me from losing the knack. The courses were amazingly stimulating. I had expected boredom, but found intellectual excitement.

On Friday came the second writing class. As per instructions, the entire class had done a short-short apiece and dropped it off on the previous Wednesday at the instructor's office.

He gave us a long beady stare and we became silent. "I should like to read one effort handed in," he said. He began to read. I flushed as I recognized my own masterwork. I had banged one out with an attempt to give him the amateur stuff he expected.

He finished it and put it carefully aside. "I shall not tell you who wrote that. I read it because you should all find it interesting. I do not care to be laughed at. That story had complete professional competence. No doubt of that. And it is a devilishly clever parody of the other stories that were turned in. It is a tongue-in-cheek attempt to cover the entire scope of the errors that beginners make.

"Yet the perpetrator of this—this fraud, could not conceal his ability, his very deft turn of phrase and control of emotion. I am mystified as to why he or she should be taking my course. I suggest to this unnamed person that he or she give me credit, next time, for a bit more intelligence."

I shot a wary look to either side. No one was watching me. I forced myself to relax. Another dumb stunt like that and I would destroy my purpose, if I hadn't done so already....

At noon I elbowed my way through the mob and went down the steps behind Tilly Owen. I fell into step beside her and said, "My name is Rod Arlin, Miss Owen." I gave her the very best smile. "I offer lunch, an afternoon on the beach, early dinner in Tampa, and a few wagers on the canines at Derby Lane."

She quickened her pace. "Please, no."

"I come well-recommended. Arthur Marris will vouch for me."

"I have a date."

I caught her arm above the elbow and turned her around. Anger flashed clear in her gray eyes.

"And a Mr. Flynn in New York considers me to be a bright kid, if that means anything."

The anger faded abruptly and her eyes narrowed. "If this is some sort of a—"

"Come on. My car's parked over in the

lot behind Administration." I gestured.

She sat demurely beside me in the car. I parked in front of her sorority house. She dropped off her books, changed to a pale green nylon dress beautifully fitted at the waist and across the lyre-shaped flare of her hips, and came back out to the car with swim suit and beach case in an astonishing twenty minutes. She even smiled at me as I held the door for her.

At lunch she said, "Now don't you think you ought to tell me why. . ."

"Not yet. Let's just get acquainted for now."

She smiled again, and I wondered how I had managed to think of her as plain. I got her talking about herself. She was twenty-two, orphaned when she was eighteen. A trust fund administered by an uncle was paying for the education. During the summer she had gone north to work at a resort hotel. She adored steaks, detested sea food, kept a diary, lived on a budget, hated the movies, adored walking, wore size eight quad A shoes and thought the fraternity and sorority system to be feudal and foul.

She gave me a surprised look. "I don't talk like this to strangers! Really, I'm usually very quiet. You have quite a knack, Rod. You're a listener. I never would have thought so to look at you."

"What do I look like?"

She cocked her head to the side and put one finger on the cleft in her chin. "Hmmm! Pretty self-satisfied. Someone who'd talk about himself rather than listen. And you're older than I thought. I never noticed until just now those little wrinkles at the corners of your eyes. Quite cold eyes, really. Surprisingly cold."

"Warm heart."

"Silly, that goes with hands not eyes."

We drove out to the beach. She was neither awed by nor indifferent to my layout. "You should be very comfortable here," she said.

The sun bounced off the white sand with a hard glare. I spread the blanket, fiddled with the portable radio until I found an afternoon jazz concert. The gulf was glassy. It looked as if it had been quieted with a thick coat of blue oil. Porpoise played lazily against the horizon and two cruisers trolled down the shore line. Down by the public beach the water was dotted with heads.

SHE came across the little terrace and down across the sand wearing a yellow print two-piece suit. Her body was halfway between the color of honey and toast, fair, smooth and unblemished. I rolled onto my elbows and stared at her. It put a little confusion into her walk, a very pleasing shyness—with the mind saying don't and the body saying look. That kind of a girl. That very precious kind of a girl.

"Well!" I said. She made a face at me.

She sat on the blanket, poured oil into the palm of her hand and coated herself. We lay back, the radio between us, our eyes shut, letting the frank Florida sun blast and stun and smother us with a glare that burned through closed lids with the redness of a steel mill at night.

"Now," she said sleepily. "Now tell me."

I reached over and closed the lid of the radio. "Have you made any guesses?"

"Just one. That was your story he read today, wasn't it?"

It startled me. "A very good guess indeed. Mind telling me how you made it?"

"Too simple, really. Somebody in the class had to be there on . . . false pretenses. I'm a senior here, you know. So I happened to know everybody else in the class except you."

I told her why I had come.

She didn't answer. When I glanced over I saw that she was sitting up, her forehead against her raised knees. She was weeping.

I patted her shoulder. It was a very ineffectual gesture. The oil she had used was sticky.

She talked without looking at me. "I didn't want to come back here. I wanted to go to some other school. Every day I see places where . . . we were together."

"Do you feel the way Mr. Flynn does?"

"That Ted didn't kill himself? Of course. We were going to be married. Almost everybody knew that. And now they look at me and I can see in their eyes that they are full of nasty pity. The girls won't talk to me about dates or marriage. I thought I'd die this summer. I worked every day until I was too exhausted to

think about anything, just go to sleep."

"If he didn't kill himself, somebody else did."

"That's the horrible part." She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were red. "That's the awful part, having to accept that. And that's why I came back. I thought I would try to find out. The first thing is to find out why anyone should kill Ted, why anyone should want him dead."

I took her in on my reasoning thus far. "If you assume that he was killed, you have two choices. The other deaths in the house were either accidents or they were caused too. If they were accidents, somebody was after Ted as an individual. If they were not accidents, then you have two further choices. Were they linked, or were they separate crimes? If they were linked, there is no use looking in Ted's history for an enemy. If they were linked, he and the others were killed as symbols, not as individuals. Do you follow me?"

"Of course. I've been thinking the same way. But you've organized it better."

"That may be the reason I'm here. The use of orderly thought processes acquired through feature work now applied to murder. Do you think you would slip in public if you called me Joe?"

"No. I'm Tilly, of course. But let's get on with it. Five died. Sherman, Winniger, Welly, Forrith and Ted. Suppose they were killed as a symbol. It had to come from someone inside the house, or an outsider. Each guess leads to a different set of symbols, Joe."

"You are doing very nicely. Keep going."

"If they were all killed by a fraternity brother, it had to be because of jealousy, spite, house politics . . . . all that doesn't satisfy me, Joe. Those reasons seem too trivial somehow. And if it came from outside the house, you have to agree that it was a male who was willing to take the chance of being seen inside the house. There the risk is greater, but the motives become stronger. The fraternity system is based on a false set of values. Kids can be seriously and permanently hurt by the sort of cruelty that's permitted. A mind can become twisted. Real hate can be built up.

"When I was a freshman, one sorority gave my roommate a big rush. She wanted to join and so she turned down the teas and dances at the other houses. When the big day came she was all bright-eyed and eager. The stinkers never put a pledge pin on her. She offended somebody in the house and in the final voting she was blackballed. But she had no way to fight back."

"What happened to her, Tilly?"

"She left school before the year was over. She wrote once. The letter was very gay, very forced. But even though it hurt me to see what happened to her, I was too much of a moral coward to turn down my own bid that night she cried herself to sleep."

"Then," I said, "if this is a case of a twisted mind trying to 'get even' with Gamma U, we have to find out who took an emotional beating from the brethren in the pledge department, eh?"

"Doesn't it look that way to you? And you can find that out, you know. There are six thousand kids in the university. Two thousand belong to clubs and fraternities and sororities. Four thousand are what we so cutely call barbarians. Barbs. Outcasts. Spooks, creeps, dim ones. There, but for the grace of the Lord—"

"It can be narrowed down a little, Tilly," I said. "The first two were killed last year just before the rushing season started. That means that if the assumption we're making is correct, the jolt came the year before and the party brooded about it for almost an entire year before taking action. That would fit. He would be a junior.

"Assume, with the even split between male and female, there are seven hundred and fifty juniors. Five hundred of them are barbs. Out of that five hundred, probably fifty were on the Gamma U rush list two years ago. Out of that fifty, I would guess that fifteen to twenty were pledged. The rush list should be in the files. If we both work on it, we ought to be able to narrow it down pretty quickly."

She looked at me and her eyes filled again. "Joe, I . . . some day I want to tell you how much it means that you've come here to. . ."

"Last one in is a dirty name," I said.

She moved like I thought I was going to. As I reached the edge, she went flat

out into a racing dive, cutting the water cleanly. She came up, shook her wet hair back out of her eyes and laughed at me.

We swam out, side by side. A hundred yards out we floated on the imperceptible swell. "Ted and I used to swim a lot," she said in a small voice. And then she was gone from me, her strong legs churning the water in a burst of speed. I swam slowly after her. When I caught up with her, she was all right again.

"It's clear today," she said, going under in a surface dive. I went down too, and with my eyes squinted against the water I could see the dance of the sunlight on the sandy bottom. I turned and saw her angling toward me, her hair streaming out in the water, half smiling, unutterably lovely. I caught her arm and, as we drifted up toward the surface, I kissed her.

We emerged into the air and stared at each other gravely. "I think we'd better forget that, Joe," she said.

"That might be easier said that done, Tilly."

"Don't say things you don't mean, Joe. Ever."

ONLY three to go. I parked in the shade and was glad of it when I found he hadn't come back yet. It was a tourist court and trailer park. The layout had been pasted together with spit and optimism. Neither ingredient had worked very well. Dirty pastel walls, a litter of papers and orange peels, a glare of sun off the few aluminum trailers, some harsh red flowers struggling up a broken trellice. I watched his doorway. The sign on it said *Manager*. A half hour later a blonde unlocked the door and went in.

I walked over and knocked. She came to the door, barefoot. In another year the disintegration would have removed the last traces of what must have once been a very lush and astonishing beauty. That is a sad thing to happen to a woman under thirty.

"Maybe you can't read where it says no vacancy," she said.

"I want to see Bob Toberly," I said.

"If it's business, you can talk to me. I'm his wife."

"It's personal."

She studied me for a few moments. "Okay, wait a sec. Then you can come in and wait. He's late now." Her voice had the thin fine edge that only a consistently evil disposition can create.

She disappeared. Soon she called, "Okay, come on in."

Her dress was thrown on the unmade bed. She had changed to a blue linen two-piece play suit that was two sizes too small for her.

"I gotta climb into something comferrable the minute I get in the house," she said defiantly. "This climate'll kill you. It's hell on a woman." She motioned to a chair. I sat down. She glared at me. "Sure I can't handle whatever it is you wanna see Bob about?"

"I'm positive."

She padded over to the sink, took a half bottle of gin out of the cabinet and sloshed a good two inches into a water tumbler. "Wanna touch?"

"Not right now, thanks."

She put an ice cube in it, swirled it a few times and then tilted it high. Her throat worked three times and it was gone. The room was full of a faint sour smell of sweat.

The room darkened as Bob Toberly cut off the sunlight. He came in, banging the screen door. He was half the size of a house, with hands like cinderblocks. He looked suspiciously at me and then at the bottle on the sink.

"Dammit, Clara, I told you to lay off that bottle."

"Shaddup!" she snapped. "I drink what I please when I please with no instructions from you."

He grabbed her arm and twisted it up behind her. He pushed her to the door, shoved her outside. "Wait out there until I tell you to come in."

He turned to me, ignoring her as she screamed at him. "Now what do you want?"

"I'm making a survey of local students who were turned down by the local chapter of Gamma U. It's for a magazine article condemning fraternities. I got my hands on the rush list for two years ago. Your name was on it."

He rocked back and forth, his lips pursed, staring down at me. Suddenly he grinned. "What do you want to know?"

"What was your reaction when you

weren't pledged? How'd you take it?"

"I wanted to go bust those smart guys in the chops."

"Did you know why they turned you down?"

"Sure. They were rushing me because they figured me for eventual All-American here. But the timing was bad. In early practise I got a bad shoulder separation. It happened during rush week. They got the spy system operating and found out I was out for the year, probably out for good. From then on I was just another guy with muscles."

"Has it made any change in your life?"

He frowned. "I got stubborn. I decided I wanted to stay in school. But they dropped me off the athletic scholarship list. I married Clara. Her daddy had just died and left her this place. It brings in enough to swing the school bills." He turned and stared at the door. Clara stood outside looking in through the screen. "I didn't know at the time that she was no good."

Clara screamed more curses at him. He went over casually and spit through the screen at her. A charming little family scene. I got out as quickly and quietly as I could. As I drove out onto the road I could still hear her.

CHAPTER THREE

No Suicides Today

THE next to the last was a washout, the same as Toberly. The last was a kid named Harley Reyont. I found him at his room in the dormitory and I took him down the street to a beer joint. I knew he had seen me around the campus so I had to use a different approach with him.

I said, "I'm a transfer and I've been thinking of whether or not to hook up with the local chapter of my fraternity. But I don't like some of the things I've seen around there. I thought the smart thing to do would be to find somebody they gave the dirty end of the stick to."

I saw his hand shake as he reached for his stein. He was a pale, thin, pleasant-looking boy. "What makes you think I got the dirty end of any stick, Arlin?"

"I saw the rush list. They didn't pledge you and neither did any other group."

"They did me a favor, that bunch."

"Just how do you mean that?"

His mouth curled bitterly. "I was just as wide-eyed and eager as any of the rest of them. Hell, I thought I'd die when I wasn't tapped on pledge night. I thought something was wrong with me, that maybe I was a second-class citizen. I've smartened up since that night, believe me. My clothes weren't right during rush week and my conversation wasn't smooth enough to suit those snobs. They could see I wasn't going to be an athlete. So I got passed over in the rush."

"Was that good?"

"Take a good look at them, Arlin. A good look. Then come back and tell me what you think of their set of values. It's a damn superficial life, fraternity life. If they'd take me in I'd be like the rest of them now. Cut out of the same pattern."

"But you resented them at the time. Maybe you still do."

He frowned down at his stein. "No, I don't think I still resent them. I feel a little bit sorry for them."

"Didn't you want to get even?"

He looked up quickly. "I see what you mean. I suppose so. I sublimated it. I hated them and I had to show them. I turned in straight A's for the freshman and sophomore years. I'll do it again this year. But not because I still resent them—because in the process of acquiring the high grades, I learned that I'm actually pretty bright. I enjoy the work." Again the bitter smile.

"You could say the brothers helped me find myself." He sighed. "Hell, Arlin, I guess I still resent it. I'll resent it all my life. Sour grapes, I suppose. Only I went for a walk along fraternity row during one of the big weekends. I could see them through the windows, dancing with their tall cool women, all wearing that same satisfied smirk. I wanted to bust the windows with rocks. I wanted to be inside there, one of them.

"I wanted to be Brother Reyont, the Big Man on the Campus. I walked back to the dorm and read Kant. He always puts me to sleep in short order. It took twenty pages that night. But I don't blame Gamma U. Any other house would have done the same thing. I was a pretty dim

I got her over my shoulder and weaved up to the house.

little freshman, that I can assure you."

"Thanks for being so frank with me."

"You're buying the beer, aren't you? . . ."

When I drove in I saw that my lights were on, and I knew that Tilly had used the key I had given her. I parked quietly and stopped and looked through the window. She was in the big chair wearing that green dress I liked. Her legs were tucked up under her and she was reading a news magazine. The lamplight brought out the very fine line of her cheek and throat.

She looked good to me. Having her waiting there for me made me play too many mental games. It wasn't healthy. On a crap table the wise man plays the field. Anybody who bets all night on the same number loses his shirt.

I went in and she came up eagerly out of the chair.

"Aha!" I said. "So you are here about the mortgage! Heh, heh, heh."

"Please, sire! The night is cold. You will not throw me and my piteous child out into yon snow."

"Mind your tongue, girl, or I shall feed you both to the wolves."

We laughed together. Silly people. She

stopped suddenly and said, "Oh, Joe, it seems so long since I could laugh like this."

"Easy, easy," I said warningly. "Go weepy on me and I'll turn you over to the dean of women. They'll hang you for—damn! I'm sorry, Till. Foot in the mouth disease."

"That's okay. How did you do?"

"Reyont is off the list. And he's the last one, that is if you covered your boy. Did you?"

"That's why I came, Joe. I saw him. He . . . he's very odd. He frightens me a little. His name is Luther Keyes."

"Do you think he's capable of—what happened?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. You'd better talk to him tomorrow. He's in my nine o'clock class, room fourteen in the Arts Building. I'll arrange to walk out with him. We'll come out the west door."

"Done. What did you tell him? What sort of a story did you give him?"

"I played the gossip. I asked him if he thought one of the Gamma U men had been killing his fraternity brothers. You know, dumb innocent questions. Baby stare. I won't tell you how he reacted. You be the judge of that." She looked at her watch. "Gosh, it's late."

"And a bright moon and a warm breeze. It just so happens that I picked up a suit the other day that ought to fit you."

She stared hard at me. "No nonsense, Joe?"

"Promise."

I waited for her in the living room. She went out first. I turned off the lights. There was a trace of phosphorescence in the waves as they broke against the shore.

WE WENT out too far. The fear came without warning. She was surging along, ten feet ahead of me. All knowledge of the shore line was gone. We were in the middle of an ocean.

"Tilly!" I called. "Till!" She didn't stop. I put on a burst of speed that I knew would wind me completely if I had to continue it for long. As I made a long stroke, my fingertips brushed her foot. I reached and caught her by the ankle.

"No, Joe," she gasped. "Let me go! Oh, please let me go! Don't stop me!"

She fought to get free but I wouldn't let her go. "What good would it do? You're trying to run away from something."

Suddenly she was passive. "All right, Joe. I'm all right now."

"Come on, we'll get you in." That was easy to say. In the struggle we had become turned around. I could get no clue as to the direction of the swells. I could see no lights on shore. I knew then that we were out so far that the lights were too close to the horizon for us to see them from our angle of vision.

"Which way, Joe?" she asked, her voice tautening with panic.

Oh, fine, I thought. *This was your idea and now you don't care for it much.*

Then, like a letter from home, I saw the pink on the sky, the reflected city lights of Sandson.

"That way," I said. "Come on. Take it easy."

After a long time I was able to correct our course by the lights of a familiar hotel. It seemed that we would never, never make it—and then my knee thumped sand. She stood up, swayed and fell forward. I tried to get her up. She was out cold. I got her over my shoulder and weaved up to the house. I dumped her, dripping wet, on the couch. I turned on the hooded desk light, got big towels,

Her lips were blue. Her eyes opened and her teeth were chattering so badly she couldn't speak. It was a warm night. I poured a shot and held her head up while she drank it. She gagged but she kept it down. I got blankets, covered her. She cried for a long time, softly, as a tired child will cry. I sat beside her and rubbed her forehead with my fingertips until she went to sleep.

After she was asleep, I sat for a long, long time in the dark and I knew, without her telling me, just how it had happened. She had grieved for Ted. But not enough. She had been strongly attracted to me, as I was to her. With a person of her intense capacity for loyalty, it seemed an unthinkable deceit. It made a strong conflict within her. What she had done had seemed to her at the time to be the only solution.

I knew that when she awakened, her reaction would tell me whether or not I

had guessed right about her feelings.

I sat there until the eastern sky was gray shot through with a pink threat of tomorrow's sun. She stirred in her sleep, opened her eyes and looked at me with no alarm or surprise. She held her arms up and I kissed her. It was as natural and expected and unsurprising and sweet as anything I'll ever know.

"I had a nightmare," she whispered.

"A long, long bad dream, darling. It's all over now. For good."

"Don't ever say anything to me that you don't mean, Joe. Ever."

"Promise."

"And Joe . . ."

"Yes, darling."

"Please. Go away from me for a little while. Way over there. I feel like a hussy. I don't want to be one." She grinned. "Not quite yet."

"We ought to get you back."

"Isn't today Saturday?"

"Don't ask me like that. I always look at my watch when anybody asks me too quickly what day it is. Yes, it's Saturday."

"No classes, Joe. I can cook. How do you like your eggs?"

"After a swim at dawn, of course."

"Then go on out and swim, dear. You're dressed for it. I'll call you when it's ready. How's the larder?"

"Full of ambrosia."

"Come here, Joe. Now go swimming. Quickly, Joe. Quickly."

I swam. She cooked. She called me. I ate. We kissed. We made silly talk. Words are no good. Ever.

That Ted had himself a girl, he did. I was glad he was dead. To be glad for a thing like that gave me a superstitious feeling of eternal damnation. Bad luck. It gave me a shiver. She saw it. We held hands. No more shivers. No more bad luck, I hoped.

* * *

During that week, after I rubbed Keyes off our list, we plotted. I could speak more freely because now I could talk about Ted without it rocking her as badly at it had in the beginning.

I said, "We tried one way. I have a hunch that guy you mistrust is just another zany. Now we go at it from the other direction. We forget motive and try opportunity. We back-track on the beach party, the return trip from Tampa, the gun-cleaning episode, Ted's apparent suicide. Now from the motive viewpoint you brought out that the case is stronger for an outsider.

"From the opportunity point of view, the case is stronger against one of the brethren. Two of the incidents happened inside the house. At the beach party most of the members were present. The car accident is the hard one to figure out. I suggest that we drop it for the time being. Maybe it was a legitimate accident. Maybe it just served to give the murderer his idea. Were you on the beach party? Yes, I know you were, because I know Ted was there. And it was all couples."

"You want me to tell you about it."

We were in deck chairs side by side on the little terrace, our heads in shade, our legs outstretched in the sun. She took a cigarette. I held the lighter for her.

She leaned back. "The beach party was just before Chirstmas vacation started. It was a fraternity affair, but there were a few outsiders, guests. Rex Winniger, the boy who drowned, was with a casual date, a snakey little blonde that I disliked on sight. Rex had broken off with Bets, a girl in my house. It seemed too bad. He was very popular and a good athlete, but not much of a swimmer. He came from Kansas, I think."

"Where was the party?"

"On a long sand spit called Bonita Island. We used a big launch belonging to Harry Fellow's father. Harry graduated last year. We moored it on the mainland side of the island and we had to wade ashore. We got there in mid-afternoon. Everybody swam and toasted in the sun. The drinking started a little later. Nearly everybody drank too much. The party got a little wild.

"The party broke up a little after midnight because some of the boys had passed out and their dates were yammering to be taken home. Somebody thought of counting noses. Rex and the little blonde were missing. Some of the group thought it would be a big gag to leave them marooned there. Then they went looking with flashlights. They found the little blonde asleep

on the sand. They got her awake and she said she hadn't seen Rex in she couldn't remember when. You could feel people getting a little worried and a little soberer then.

"The boys made a line across Bonita holding hands—it's only about seventy feet wide. They went right from one end to the other. Quite a few of the other boys could have swum to the mainland as a joke. But Rex really couldn't swim that well. Then we all hoped that maybe he'd tried it and made it all right. But on the way back people were laughing in that funny nervous way that worried people do. Ted whispered to me that he didn't like the look of it at all. We girls were taken home.

"In the morning Ted met me and he looked haggard. He said that Rex hadn't showed up. They reported it early that same morning. Hundreds of people looked for the body. The papers made a big story of it and the blonde got her picture on the front page, looking tearful. Well, you know the rest. The beach party was on a Thursday night. They found his body on the beach on the mainland on Saturday afternoon, about three miles below Bonita Island."

"Did you notice if he got drunk at the party?"

"Everybody was drinking. Some of them got pretty sloppy. But I don't remember that Rex was sloppy. We talked about that later. We compared notes. After dark everybody was in the water at one time or another, because the surf was coming in beautifully."

"Was there any incident, any trouble that caught your eye?"

She thought for a few moments. "No . . . I guess not. Nothing really unusual. When people drink they say things they normally wouldn't say. There were quarrels and poor jokes and some spiteful talk. Harv Lorr was president of the house. He saw that things weren't going too well. He tried to keep all the boys in line. Arthur Marris helped him, even though Arthur was only a junior then. Ted could have helped but he didn't want to leave me alone for as long as it would take."

"All in all, a bust party, eh?"

"Not a nice party, Joe. Full of undercurrents."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sweating Bullets

AT THAT moment a car drove in. I heard it stop. Till gave me a quick look. I got up out of the chair. Bill Armand, the faintly vulpine junior, and Brad Carroll came around the side of the house, carrying suits and towels. One of Armand's dark eyebrows went high in surprise as he saw Tilly.

"Why, hello, Tilly!" Brad Carroll said in his careful voice. "Hi, Rod. I didn't know you two were acquainted. Rod, we decided this was the day to take you up on your standing invite."

"Hello, Brad," Tilly said, "And Bill. I met Rod in our writing class. The guy is persuasive."

"We've noticed that," Bill said. "Tilly, you're looking wonderful."

"Thank you," she said gravely.

There was a moment of awkwardness. I said, "The bar is the kitchen shelf, mates. Select your venom and some for us. Till's is rum and coke and I'm on bourbon and water if you feel industrious. You can change in the bedroom."

They went inside. Tilly reached over and touched my arm. "Joe, darling. This is going to give them a very choice bit of gossip."

"Do you really care?"

"Uh uh."

"That's my girl."

They came back out bearing drinks. Bill clowned it his towel over his arm like a waiter's napkin. He bowed low as he handed Tilly her drink, murmuring, "Madame." In trunks he was deeply tanned, whip-lean, with long smooth muscles. Brad was whiter, softer, thickening a bit in the waist, with a small roll of fat over the top of his yellow trunks.

Bill sat on the edge of the terrace turned toward us, with one eyebrow still high enough to give him a knowing look. Brad said, "We didn't do this right. We should have come armed with charming blondes and a couple of jugs to salve our conscience. We thought you hadn't had time yet to live dangerously, Rod."

"I keep telling you that we're underestimating the guy," Bill said.

"Where's Al Siminik, Brad?" I asked.

It seemed odd to see Brad without his shadow.

"By the time we see him again, we'll have forgotten what he looks like. He's earning his keep, throwing his muscles around," Bill answered.

I eyed Bill. "What's your sport, Armand?"

He laughed. "Molly."

Tilly bristled. "That isn't a nice thing to say, Bill?"

"Protecting your sisters?" he jeered.

I was amazed at how cold Tilly's gray eyes could get. "The only thing I have against Molly is that she's stupid enough to find you attractive, Bill Armand."

He held up his hands in mock defense and ducked his head. "Hey! Take it easy."

Talk became more casual. After a while Bill drove to the main road and phoned Molly. He came back and said that Brad's girl, Laura, was coming out and bringing Molly with her. Shortly after that, Bill and Tilly went in for a swim. Brad moved over into the chair where Tilly had been.

His smile was very engaging. "Rod, you strike me as being a pretty canny guy."

"Oh, thank you, sir."

"No gag, Rod. I mean it. You're smart enough to see how things stand at the chapter. Arthur is one of the best friends I've got." He was working the knife out of the sheath very slowly and I knew why he'd decided to come out. Carroll, the tireless politician.

"But..." I said.

He gave me a quick look. "Oh, you see it too?"

"Better tell me what you see, Brad."

"I'll be frank. I wouldn't want this to go any further. I see a sweet guy who completely lacks the executive touch. He's too heavy-handed. Now take Harv Lorr. There was a great president. We used to have a penny-ante poker game going on weekends in his room. Will Arthur go for that? Not for a minute. It says in the book no gambling in the house. The boys resent that rule-book attitude, Rod. But a lot of the fellows figure it this way. They say that Arthur was elected and he'll graduate in June, so why not play along with him."

"And what do you say?"

"I say that this is a whole year out of our lives. Why let Arthur make it a poor fraternity year? Every member has a vote. Right now, because of some people's sense of duty, Arthur swings the majority. But if the rest of us who don't quite agree with some of his measures could consolidate our vote, we could do just about any thing we pleased."

"In other words, let Arthur have the title and let you have the real push."

"I didn't say that!" he said in a hurt tone.

"Doesn't it amount to the same thing?" I asked disarmingly.

He pretended to think it over. "Well, it would be one way to put it, Rod."

"Let's get it out in the open. You want me to vote with you."

"Only if you sincerely believe that it's the thing to do."

"Let's take the gloves off, Brad," I said. "I'm a transfer. I'm a senior. I'm not living in the house. As I see it, there's no reason for me to get messed up in local chapter politics. With either you or Arthur running things, the food is going to be good, the lounge is going to be comfortable, the dances are going to be fun. I don't care about anything else."

"That'" he said firmly, "is what I consider an irresponsible and selfish attitude."

"Consider it anything you want to."

"Then I may take it that you'll vote with Arthur?"

I saw I had hurt his feelings. Or at least he had decided that should be his attitude. "You may take it this way. I'm not for you or agin you. When I attend chapter meetings I'll refrain from voting. Then you won't have to worry about a counterbalancing vote."

His smile was full of satisfaction. "I'm glad to hear you say that. Frankly, a lot of the younger boys would be willing to follow your lead in preference to mine, even. You've made quite an impression, Arlin. Quite an impression."

"Do you want some advice?"

"What do you mean?"

"Take it or leave it. You're creating tempests in teapots, Carroll. You're misdirecting a very strong itch for power. Find some new direction for it."

He dropped all expression. "Am I to

judge from that that you consider the fraternity to be unimportant?"

"Take it any way you please."

"You damn veterans are all alike. Everything is a big joke. Arthur is the only one I ever saw who takes things seriously. Just because you fought a war, you've got this superior attitude. Frankly, Arlin, it makes me sick to my stomach."

"Vote for Carroll!" I said. "Vote for a square deal!"

"Go to hell!"

"Now you're being stupid. Offend me too much and I'll get interested enough to bust a few spokes out of your big wheel."

He chewed that around in his mind for a while. I was rewarded with his most charming smile, an outstretched hand. "Sorry, Rod. I get too worked up."

"Forget it," I said, yawning.

He stood up. "I'm glad to see Tilly dating, Rod. Poor girl. She needs a few good times."

"I'll tell her you said so."

He flushed. "You're damn difficut to talk to sometimes."

At that point a car stopped behind the house. We heard a girl's voice over the sound of the surf. They came around the side of the house. Bill and Tilly came out of the water to meet them. Molly had a trim little figure, chestnut hair, a set of large trusting eyes and a vulnerable mouth. Her eyes glowed as she watched Bill Armand walk toward her. Laura was as dark as Tilly, but taller, a shade leaner, with a face so patrician that it looked inbred. Her speech was a finishing-school drawl.

Molly was a giggler. Bill treated Molly with affectionate amusement. Brad treated Laura as a girl who had earned the right to share in his reflected glow as a large wheel around the university. Both girls tried without success to conceal an intense curiosity about Tilly and me and our current status.

Tilly turned feline on me, and in the process she was as cute as a bug. I saw her wondering how to handle the problem. Finally she gave me a meaningful stare and said, "Rod and I are so glad you could come out here. What are you drinking? Rod, fix them up, like a dear, will you?"

Laura gave Molly a meaningful look.

It was a complete essay, that look.

We swam, we loafed in the sun—three couples on a late Saturday afternoon. To any onlooker we were young and carefree and casual. Uncomplicated. I lay with Till sprinkling sand on the back of my arm and thought about us.

One vulnerable little girl heading for heartbreak, one icy maiden as ambitious as her grasping boy-friend, one young cynic complicated by a streak of ruthlessness, one lovely girl who had been persuaded the night before that this was not the time to die—and one pretender, a young man who had thought it possible to come to this place and solve a pretty problem without becoming emotionally involved, and who was slowly finding it impossible.

THE police station of Sandson and the fire department shared the same building. It looked vaguely like a Moorish castle.

The man they steered me to was a Lieutenant Cord. He was an unlikely six foot six with a stoop that brought him to six three. He had a corded throat, heavy wrists, and a slack liver-spotted face.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Arlin?"

"I'm at the university, Lieutenant. I've been doing some work in psychology. One of the case histories assigned to me is the case of Tod Sherman, who was killed during March this year."

I made it pretty breezy. He leaned back in his chair and for the first time I noticed a very alert intelligence hiding behind his sleepy gray-green eyes.

"Let me get you straight. I remember Sherman. How does it hook up with psychology when a lad had a bad accident like that?"

I took a deep breath. I had to make it better than I thought. "You know, of course, about accident-prone people and how they contribute the lion's share of motor vehicle accidents and accidents in the home. The study of such people is a legitimate part of modern psychology. I have reason to believe that Sherman was an accident-prone. Actually it is the death wish operating on a subconscious level, or else the result of a childish desire for attention."

"What do you want from me?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, a summary of what happened. I've talked to the other members of the fraternity who were there at the time. Their reports are confusing."

He looked at the wall clock. "I guess it won't take too much time. We got the call on a Sunday afternoon. They don't operate the dining room at that house on Sunday's and nearly everybody was out. A boy named Flynn, the one who hung himself three months later, was the one who heard the shot and traced it to Sherman's room. Flynn was in the lounge at the time, and it took him, he said, maybe ten minutes to find out who and what it was.

"One other lad, a sophomore named Armand, was in the house at the time. He was asleep and the shot didn't awaken him. Flynn was smart. He phoned the campus infirmary and then us. He didn't touch the body. He checked the time. We got there as the ambulance did. The doctor pronounced him dead. We were both there a little less than twenty minutes after the shot according to Flynn's watch. Sherman had been sitting at his desk by the window. There was an oily rag and a bottle of gun oil on top of the desk. The gun was a .45 Army Colt.

"The slug had caught him under the chin and gone up through the roof of his mouth, exploding out of the top of his head to lodge in the ceiling. He had fallen to his left between the chair and the window. The gun was under his desk. The ejected cartridge case was on the window sill. A full clip was on the desk blotter beside the oil bottle. It was the standard mistake. Ejecting the case and forgetting the one in the chamber.

"As I see it, he was holding it pointing up toward him, and he pulled the slide down so he could look through the barrel. His hand was oily and the slide got away from him. When it snapped up, it fired the shell in the chamber."

"Were you complety satisfied with the verdict of accidental death, Lieutenant?"

He smiled humorlessly. "Now what kind of a fool question is that, Arlin? If it wasn't accident it would screw up this psychology report, wouldn't it?"

I tried again. "Did you investigate to see if anyone said he was depressed?"

"Sure. Lots of guys are cagey enough to do a hell of a good job of faking an accident when they want to knock themselves off. But in that case there is an insurance angle, usually, and the guy himself is older. No, this Sherman was apparently a pretty popular guy in the house. He wasn't depressed. He'd busted up with his girl, but he had a new one pretty well lined up. He had enough dough, a good job after graduation, and his health."

"You've been very kind, Lieutenant." I stood up.

"Any time," he said.

I went to the door. As I turned the knob he said, "Just a minute." I looked back at him. He smiled. "Do me a favor, Arlin. Come around some time and tell me what the hell it was you really wanted."

"I don't think I know what you mean."

"See you around, Arlin."

I went out and sat in the car. There was a coldness at the nape of my neck. Up until the talk with Cord, I had been willing to go along with the theory of a chain of accidents. I had tried to be thorough for the sake of the pay I was getting. Mr. Flynn had just been a man pathetically anxious to prove his son was not a suicide. Tilly had been a girl who had not been able to understand how Ted Flynn's mind may have been unstable, along with his undeniable brilliance.

But now everything had a new flavor. It was something that Cord had said, and yet, going over his words again and again, I could not pick it out.

I knew, sitting there in the sun, as well as I knew my own name that the odds were in favor of someone else's finger pulling that trigger. I was sweating and yet I felt cold.

For the first time I realized that my operations were a bit transparent. If someone had killed Sherman—and I didn't know why I was so sure they had—then that someone might still be in the house. If so, he was watching me. It would be natural for him to watch me. I was a stranger. I was an unknown factor.

I sensed a quiet and devious intelligence at work. A mind that could plan carefully and then move boldly.

I drove away. My hands were too tight on the wheel and my foot was shaky on the gas pedal.

CHAPTER FIVE

Acccidentally—On Purpose

I CUT the History class. Tilly cut her class at the same hour and we drove down Route 19 through Clearwater to Largo and then turned left to Indian Rocks Beach. I found a place where we could park in the shade and watch the placid gulf. On the way I had told her of the talk with Cord.

She took my hand, looked into my eyes and said, "For the first time it's real to you, isn't it, Joe?"

"That's one way to put it."

"It's been real to me all along. You know how when people go with each other, they talk about everything under the sun. Once Ted and Step were arguing about suicide. It was after Sherman had died. Step couldn't see that it was wrong—but Ted told us that the only time he could see the remotest justification was when a person was painfully and incurably ill—that the world is too wide and wonderful a place to leave before the time you have is up. He wasn't just talking, Joe."

"I think I would have liked him, Till."

"You would have. I know it. When they told me he'd hung himself, I found out later that I'd screamed that he didn't do it, that someone had done it to him. I'm still just as certain of that as I was during the first moments. He was incapable of it. They were holding the last meeting of the year, the election of officers for the next year it was. They waited and waited and then they went looking for him.

"Brad cried like a baby. They cut him down and then he was shipped north for the funeral. I couldn't go to that. I couldn't even go to the memorial service for him in the chapel at school. I was too sick. They had me in the infirmary. When I got out I went north and took that job."

"Up until now," I said, "I've been playing an intellectual game. Mental musical chairs. Now it isn't a game any more."

"For me it never has been." She bit her lip. "Joe, you'd better not let anything happen to you. You'd just better not."

I kissed her then, there in the cool shade with the warm wind touching our faces, and she came alive in my arms in a way I've never before experienced. Holding her was holding flame and purpose and a clean, wanting strength. It shook me, and shook her too. We sat apart from each other.

We said very little on the drive back. I left her off at the sorority house. I went to a bar and had a few. I arrived at Gamma U in time for dinner. I talked and I listened politely and the table conversation went over the surface of my mind while below the surface a tallish, faintly awkward girl walked, and her eyes were more than promise. . . .

I woke with a start at dawn. The bedroom had an outside door. I had left it open and latched the screen. A tall figure was silhouetted there.

"Rod," he said. "Rod, let me in."

I went to the door. "Oh, Arthur! Man, it's a little after six. I didn't know you boys were going to drop in at this time of day."

I unlatched the door. He brushed by me, walked to the bed and sat down, staring at his big hands. His faintly Lincolnesque appearance was more pronounced. The eyes had sunk deeper into his head. His cheeks were more hollow. I suddenly knew that this was no time for patter and laughter.

"I can't depend on anybody else," he said. "You've got to help me."

I sat beside him and reached over and took my cigarettes from the bedside table. I lit both cigarettes with my lighter. "What is it?"

"The most awful mess yet, Rod. The worst. Everybody's running around like headless chickens. I came out here to talk to somebody with sense. This time it has rattled me."

"Get to it, Arthur. What happened?"

"The police phoned the house at three this morning. It happened at the Onyx Court." I barely concealed my start of surprise. That was the court and trailer outfit owned by the Toberlys.

"They said that they had a body tentatively identified as Bradford Carroll. I dressed and went over along with Bill Armand. The place was swarming with police. Brad's throat had been cut. I told them that it was Brad all right. I still

feel sick. There was blood all over. . . ."

"Take it easy, Arthur."

"They were still questioning Bob Toberly. He's a student too. We rushed him a couple of years ago and passed him over. He runs the place along with his wife. It's sort of a crummy place. Toberly said that Brad and his wife, a tall dark girl that he recognized as a student, had registered in at about ten for the night. He said they'd done it many times before. He said that they were secretely married.

"Well, Bill, standing beside me, said 'Laura!' They turned on Bill and made him admit that he thought it sounded like Laura Trainor. They got the name of the sorority house and two cops went to pick her up. They're holding her now. I've done all I could. I wired Brad's parents, and the sorority sisters phoned Laura's father. I heard he's on his way down. Rod, it would be bad enough without all that trouble last year, but this is absolutely the worst. I don't know what's going to happen."

I left him sitting there and made him a stiff drink. Laura was one of Tilly's sorority sisters, along with Molly. So Tilly would know already. I made a second stiff one for myself. He took his glass numbly and drank it as though it were water.

"The razor was right there," he said. "I saw it. A straight razor. He used them. I guess it was an affectation. I guess he had a kit with him so he could get cleaned up and go directly from the Onyx Court to class."

"Do you think Laura did it?"

He shuddered. "How do I know what to think? I don't think she's capable of a thing like that. But they could have quarreled."

"What will happen?"

"It was too late for the morning papers but the afternoon papers will give it a big play. They'll bring up all that stuff from last year. There were reporters there. Toberly's wife put on her best dress. To her it was like a party. They're giving Toberly a bad time. Brad voted against Toberly, of course, two years ago. Most of us did. They'll twist and turn until they make a motive out of it."

"How can I help?"

He gave me a tired smile. "You've helped by listening. I have to go back now. I have to get everybody together and tell them to keep their damn mouths shut. Then I have to pack Brad's things. A policeman is going to help me. He'll be looking for evidence. He's in the house now, sitting on a chair outside Brad's room. He was there when I left anyway."

"What about Brad's people?"

"They'll be down, I suppose. I ought to make a reservation for them at the hotel. Look, would you do that for me?"

"Sure thing."

He stood up and put the glass on the bedside table. "Thanks, Rod. That drink helped a lot."

"Let me dress. I'll go in with you."

"No, I'll go along. I'll be at the house. See you there."

SOME of the brothers were having an early breakfast when I went in. The single waiter acted jittery. Lieutenant Cord was sitting in the lounge. He came over to me and said, "Is this another one of those accident-prone guys?"

I kept my voice low. "Do you think he cut his throat?"

Cord shrugged his big sloping shoulders. "He could have. The razor's in the right place. At least it was. But usually people that take a hack at their own throat, they're timid about it. This was a good try. He damn near slashed his head off—that is, if he did it. Now I got what the boys call an unhealthy interest in you. Want to talk right here?"

"It doesn't matter to me."

"You come in and give me a queer line of chatter and the next thing I know one of your friends is dead. I like to get all the loose ends pasted in or clipped off. Let's you stop trying to kid me."

"How do you mean?"

"I checked your schedule after you left and had a few words over the phone with your professor. I didn't mention your name. He told me somebody was kidding me and that the department wouldn't send a student out like that. So talk, Arlin."

"Suppose I tell you that my reason was good but that it's my business?"

"First let's see how you check out last night. You had dinner here and left. Where did you go?"

"Right back to my place on the beach. I studied until about eleven, wrote a few letters and went to bed at about quarter to one."

"No proof?"

"Not a shred."

"Now this Toberly tells me that somebody was around asking him questions about how Gamma U turned him down. The guy said it was for a magazine article on fraternities. He didn't give a name. Toberly gave me a description. It fits you pretty good, Arlin. Want to come on down to see if Toberly can make identification?"

"I give up. It was me."

"Now don't you think you better tell uncle?"

Two sophomores walked through into the dining room and stared at us curiously. "Someday I'll get smarter," I said. "Come on out and sit in my car for a little while."

The sun was climbing higher. Cord's face was drawn with fatigue. I told him my situation. He listened with a sour expression.

"What answer have you come to, Arlin?"

"I can't give reasons. It's just a very strong feeling. I say that four of them were murdered. Carroll is the fourth. I don't know about the automobile accident. We'll skip that one."

"And you think," he said bitterly, "that three murders took place right under our noses. You think we're that stupid!"

"It's not that you're stupid, Lieutenant. It's that the guy behind it is one clever operator. Take the beach party. No trick to get Winniger out into the surf and drown him. No special trick to take advantage of the empty house on a Sunday, start a conversation with Sherman and trick him. And if a guy were disarming enough, he could talk the Flynn boy up onto a chair in the closet on some pretext.

"And now Brad. This last one is bolder than the others. This last one was permitted to even look a little like murder. Was it hard to find out where Brad and Laura had a habit of going? Would it be difficult to wait until Laura left to go back to her sorority house? There was a moon last night. What time did it happen?" I asked Lieutenant Cord.

"Around two, I guess. The way it was discovered so fast, this Toberly couldn't sleep. He went for a walk around the place. He saw the light on and it bothered him. He took a quick look and phoned. We were there at quarter to three. Doesn't that spoil the moon angle?"

"Not completely. Sneak in there and find the razor and let him have it. Then snap on the light on the way out to make it look more like a suicide."

Cord studied me. "You talk a good game, Arlin. You almost get me believing it. Except for one thing. Why would anybody do all that? What the hell reason would he have?"

"Are you going to expose me, Lieutenant?"

He shrugged. "There's no point in that. Keep playing your little game if you want to, as long as you're getting paid for it. But stay out of my way. Don't foul up any of my work."

He got out of the car. He regarded me soberly. "And don't leave town. I'm taking a chance on believing you, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to do some checking to make sure."

I had no heart for the classes. I ate and went over to pick up Tilly. She came running out to the car. She climbed in beside me and her fingernails bit into my wrist. "Oh, Joe, I can't take it any more! All this horror! I keep seeing him the way he was out at your place. Smiling and happy."

"How did Laura take it?"

"They had to stop questioning her. She's in the Sandson General Hospital. Shock and hysteria. They're fools to bother her," she said hotly. "Laura goes all green if somebody steps on a bug."

"Have you eaten?"

"No, I couldn't. And I couldn't stand going to classes today, Joe. Start the car. Take me away from here. Drive fast, Joe."

WE DIDN'T get back until late afternoon. We bought a paper and read it together.

MYSTERY DEATH OF COLLEGE STUDENT.

That's the way they covered it, speak-

ing neither of suicide nor murder, but hinting at murder.

Bradford Carroll, accompanied by a coed to whom he was secretly married, registered in at a local tourist court at ten o'clock last night. He was discovered shortly before three this morning by the proprietor of the court—who was attracted by the light which was left on. His throat had been cut with a straight razor which was found near his right hand.

Police took the coed into custody. She had returned to her sorority house some time before the body was discovered. Police report that before his wife collapsed, she testified that Carroll had been alive when she left, at approximately ten minutes of two.

Carrol, a senior at West Coast University, was a member of Gamma U, that same hard-luck fraternity which lost through suicide and accidental death, five members during the previous school year.

From there on the article went into his history and the school groups of which he was a member.

"It's a ghastly thing," Tilly said.

"The police," I said, "promise an early solution of Carroll's mysterious death."

A friend of Tilly's came over to the car. Tilly introduced us. The girl said, "How do you like the new ruling, kids?"

"Haven't seen it yet."

"No? It's on all the bulletin boards. Curfew for all students living on the campus in either houses or dorms. All special senior privileges rescinded. Now we stand a bed check just like the lower classes. All absences from living quarters after eleven are to be reported to the office of the dean until further notice. How do you like that?"

"I don't," Tilly said. "But what else can they do? Anxious parents will be giving the school a very bad time. They've got to have some sort of an answer."

I dropped Tilly with a promise to pick her up later, and went to the house. Step Krindall looked as glum as his round pink face permitted.

"Special meeting tonight," he said.

Bill Armand was standing in the lounge, staring out the windows toward the palms that bordered the drive. He gave me a crooked smile.

"Come to college for a liberal education," he said. "Where have you been all day?"

"Comforting the shaken."

"Tilly? When you need a stand-in, let me know."

I was surprised at the sudden feeling of jealousy. "Sure, Bill," I said easily. "What's the voting around here? Murder or suicide?"

"The dopes, which I might say covers about ninety percent of our membership, favor suicide. They overlook the very real argument that Brad was too selfish to kill himself. He wouldn't think of depriving the world of his presence for the next forty years."

"I thought he was your friend!"

"Is friendship blind, like love?"

"Armand, the adolescent cynic. Who stepped on you, Bill? And how hard?"

His lips tightened and his face turned chalk white. He turned on his heel and walked away.

I ate with placid Step Krindall, Arthur, Al Siminik and a quiet senior named Laybourne at a table for four. It was a very subdued meal. Once I went to a slaughterhouse. I saw the look in the eyes of the steer after that first brutal smack between the eyes. Siminik wore that look. Arthur ate doggedly, as though from a sense of duty.

After coffee, Arthur looked up at the dining-room clock. He rapped on his glass with a knife. "We'll go up to the meeting room in five minutes. You Step —you other latecomers—hurry it up."

We filed up to the meeting room. It was a meeting without ritual, the lights on full. Arthur took the chair. "We'll dispense with the minutes of the previous meeting and with the treasurer's report. This is a special meeting called for a special purpose. What happened last night was a severe shock to all of us. Brad was . . . our brother and our friend."

Siminik startled the group by sobbing once aloud. He knuckled his eyes like a small boy.

Arthur went on. "I have talked with the police, just before dinner. It begins to appear that the verdict of the coroner's jury will be death by his own hand."

"Nuts!" Bill Armand said loudly.

Arthur rapped for order. "That's enough, Armand. If you can't control yourself, I'll order you out of the meeting. Lieutenant Cord has made it clear to me

that he anticipates that some of you will find a verdict of suicide hard to believe and will make some foolish, amateurish attempt to uncover evidence turning it into a crime. Murder. I have called this meeting to tell you that the police intend to deal with any such quixotic impulse very harshly. I will deal with it very harshly from this end. What happened is police business and will be handled by the police. I hope I've made myself clear.

"Now for my second point. The students will ask us Gamma U's innumerable questions. Was Brad depressed? Did we know about his marriage? It will be the duty of each and every one of you as a Gamma U to politely but firmly evade all such questions. It is our duty as Brad's friends to keep our mouths shut. By that I do not mean to go about with mysterious and knowing looks. Brad is dead. Nothing can alter that. The policy of this house will be to say that Brad had been troubled lately and that we did not know the cause. Any comment?"

"Yeah, what was he troubled about?" Armand asked.

"I consider that question impertinent, Armand. Any other comments?" He stared around the room. "All right, then. This meeting is adjourned. Wait. One more point. This is for you boys that live in the house. The bed check and curfew will be adhered to rigidly."

Chairs were shoved back. Arthur walked out first. I went down the stairs and out the door. Tilly was sitting in my car.

"I walked over," she said. "I didn't want to be stood up."

"How did you know I was going to?"

I turned on the lights and motor. She moved over close to me. "We're going to your place and talk, Joe. I can think more clearly now."

CHAPTER SIX

Shooting at Windmills

SHE went in ahead of me and put the lights on, as I put the top of the car up against the dew. The gulf was rough, the waves thundering hard against the beach. We dragged chairs out onto the terrace. I held her tightly against me for a moment. "Hey," she said, "I want to keep on thinking clearly for a while. Leggo!"

"Chilly woman."

"Hush!" She sat down and after three tries we got our cigarettes going. "This," she said, "is probably silly. You'll have to let me know. Remember when we talked about what the dead boys had in common except the fraternity?"

"I remember."

"Brad's death makes the pattern more clear, Joe. Can you guess what they had in common?"

I thought for a time. "No. Give."

"Rex Winniger, Tod Sherman, Ted and Brad were all very positive people. Strong personalities. They had influence in the fraternity. Every house has a certain quota of nonenities. But there was nothing wishy-washy about any one of that four. They had power in the house and on the campus. Is that going to help?"

I felt the excitement. "That *is* going to help. You are a lovely and intelligent gal. I was so close to it I didn't even see it. Wait a minute now. Let me think. It doesn't make motive any stronger from a sane person's point of view, but it does make it clearer. Jealousy. Lust for power. If the pattern is anything other than accidental, it means we have to look among the membership for our boy. And we said a long time ago that insiders would have the edge by far on opportunity."

I guess we got it both at the same time. She reached over and held my hand. Her hand was like ice. "It couldn't be, Joe. It just couldn't be."

"Come on inside. I want to read you something."

We went in and shut the terrace doors against the wind. I found my lecture notes from the abnormal psychology class. They were fragmentary, but I could piece them together.

"Listen, Tilly. One of the types of insanity least vulnerable to any known treatment is the true psychopath. It's as though the person were born with some essential part missing. Conscience. The psychopath has no understanding of right and wrong. To him, the only thing is not to get caught. Has reasonable-sounding motives for all his actions.

"This type of person, if displeased with

service, will set fire to a hotel and think nothing of the consequences as long as he is not apprehended. Entirely blind to the other person's point of view. Many murderers caught and convicted and sentenced are true psychopaths. Motive for crime often absurdly minor. True psychopath shows high incidence of endowment of brains and charm of manner. Is often outstanding. Often basically arrogant.

"Delights in outwitting others. Capable of carrying on long-range planning. Constantly acts in the presence of others. Often a liar as well, with amazingly intricate and well-conceived fabric of untruth. Society has no good answer as yet to the true psychopath."

I put the notebook away. She frowned at me. "But Joe! He's such a sweet guy! Gentle, understanding. He was so nice to me after Ted . . . died."

"High endowment of charm of manner. Constantly acts in the presence of others. Delights in outwitting others."

"But with all he's got on the ball, he'd be almost as big without . . . going to such crazy lengths."

"Motive for crime often absurdly minor."

"But to kill . . . just for the sake of fraternity house politics. Joe, it's crazy!"

"A true psychopath is an insane person. He hides among us normal jokers because he looks and acts and talks just like one of us . . . up to a point."

"Will the police listen to you?" she finally asked.

"They'd laugh in my face. What proof have I got? We've got to show that each murder helped him, even though it helped him in a minor way."

She crossed the room. "Hold me tight, darling. I'm scared. I don't want to think about him. I wish it were Bill, or Step, or little Jay Bruce, or even Al Siminik. Anybody except Arthur Marris."

"We've got to get hold of Harv Lorr, the fellow who was president last year. He can help us straighten out the timing on those other deaths. He's probably in North Dakota or some equally handy place."

"He's a Tampa boy. He's working in the family cigar business. With luck, Joe, we can be talking to him in an hour or so."

HARV LORR came across from the door to our booth. "There he is," Tilly said. I looked up and saw a tall man approaching. He was prematurely gray and there were deep lines bracketing his mouth. He wore a light sport coat and an open-collared shirt.

"It's nice to see you again, Tilly," he said. His smile was a white ash in his sun-darkened face.

I had slid out of the booth. "Meet Joe Arlin, Harv," she said. We shook hands and murmured the usual things. We all sat down.

Harv ordered beer. He sat beside Tilly. He turned so he could look at her. "You sounded a little ragged over the phone. What's up?"

"It's about Brad," she said.

Harv frowned. "I read it this evening. Terrible thing. How do I fit?"

Tilly looked appealingly at me. I took over. "Mr. Lorr, I want to ask you some pretty pointless-sounding questions. If you stop me to ask me why I'm asking them, it will just take that much longer. Believe me, there's a definite pattern in the questions. First. The two sophomores who were killed in that automobile accident. Were they of any particular importance in fraternity politics? Were they active?"

Harv looked puzzled. "They were two votes. At the election of officers the previous June they'd voted for me as house president for the next year, rather than Ted Flynn."

"We'll move on to the next question. We weren't particularly interested in those two sophomores anyway. The next guy we care about is Rex Winniger. Was he active?"

"He was the outstanding man in the junior class. If he'd lived, I don't think there was any doubt of his becoming house president during his last year. It was a blow to all of us."

"He died in December. Then in March of this year it was Tod Sherman. He was a classmate of yours, as Flynn was. Was he active in house politics?"

"Everybody is to a certain extent, Arlin. When I won out over Ted, Ted gave up having any pronounced opinions. There is usually a couple of strong groups in the house. Tod Sherman was my opposition. We fought each other tooth and

nail, but it was good-natured. At the time he died, we were pretty well lined up for the June elections. I wanted Arthur Marris for president and it was understood that Tod Sherman was pushing Brad Carroll.

"In a house that size the cronies of the pres get the gravy. You know that. Tilly said over the phone you were in the fraternity up at Wisconsin. You know then how a president on the way out through the graduation route tries to get one of his boys in for the following year."

"And so after Sherman died, Ted Flynn took over the opposition."

"If you knew all that, why ask me?"

"I didn't. I just guessed."

"I don't see how you could guess a thing like that. Ted was quite a boy. He went to work on the membership. It began to look as though Brad was going to give Arthur a very close race or squeak in himself in Arthur's place. But, of course, it was all shot to hell when Ted killed himself. In fact, we had to vote by mail during July, after school was out. I handled it.

"Arthur made it by a good ten votes. If Ted had lived to give his little talk in favor of Brad, it might have been a different story. Probably would have been, as Arthur sometimes makes a pretty poor impression in spite of his ability."

I leaned toward him. "And what would you say if I told you that Brad had organized a pretty effective resistance to Arthur and was hamstringing him very neatly by having acquired a majority of the voting strength?"

Harv gave me a quizzical look. "Now wait a minute, Arlin, let's not go off—"

"Can't you see the picture? First Winniger, then Sherman, then Ted, and now Brad. Which did each death help. Which man? Arthur. Every time."

He gave me a long scornful look. "Now hold it up, Arlin. That's kid stuff and you know it. Sure, the boys play politics. It's a game. It's good training. But nobody—nobody *ever* took it that seriously! Man, are you trying to tell me that old Arthur goes around killing people so he can get to be house president and then so he can keep his authority." He turned to Tilly. "You ought to know better than that!"

Tilly counted if for him on her fingers. "Winniger, Sherman, Flynn, Carroll. All in the way, Harv. All dead, Harv. You know the law of averages. If you don't care for our answer, give us your answer."

I could see it shake him a little. But he kept trying. "People, you don't kill guys for that sort of thing. Look! It's a college fraternity."

Then Tilly carefully explained to him about psychopaths. I was surprised at how much she remembered. She told it well. When she was through, Harv Lorr knew what a psychopath was.

"It seems so incredible!" he complained. But I saw from his eyes that we had him.

"If it was credible," I said, "somebody would have found out a long time ago. If there'd been a million bucks at stake or something like that—some motive that everybody would be willing to accept, the whole thing would have looked fishy and friend Arthur would have been stopped in his tracks. But this way, for a goal that seems unimportant to the common man, he can hack away almost without interference."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked humbly. He had given up. He believed us.

"Just sit tight," I said. "Be ready to give over the facts when they're called for."

"What do you two plan to do?" he asked.

I looked at Tilly. I kept my eyes on hers. "We've got to give the guy a new reason," I said, "and then jump him when he jumps."

Her lips formed a soundless, "No!"

"There's no other way," I said. And there wasn't. I wanted her to talk me out of it. I was ready to be talked out of it. I wanted no part of it. But she saw the logic of it, the same as I did.

"Keep your guard up," Harv said.

"I'll make him be careful," Tilly said.

I looked at my watch. "If we can make fifty miles in fifty minutes, you stand a chance of not being expelled, Miss Owen."

We left. I got her back in time. I went out to my place on the beach and wished I was in Montreal. I wished I was in Maine looking at the girls in their swim suits. I wore myself out swimming in the

dark, parallel and close to the shore. I had a shot. I tried to go to sleep. I had another shot. I went to sleep. I dreamed of Arthur Marris. He had his thumbs in my jugular . . .

I WAITED for the coroner's jury. I told myself it was the smart thing to do. They might force the issue. Then they returned a suicide verdict and sad-eyed people shipped Brad to his home state in a box. Laura went abroad. . . .

Call it a ten-day wonder. A small town might have yacked about it until the second generation. A college has a more transient sort of vitality. Life goes on. Classes change. New assignments. Next Saturday's date. Call it the low attention factor of the young. A week turns any college crisis into ancient history.

Tilly and I talked. We talked ourselves limp. The conversations were all alike.

"We've got to get him to make the first move, Tilly."

"But to do that, Joe, you've got to be a threat to his setup. You've got to take Brad's place."

"You don't think I can engineer a strong opposition move?"

"I know you can. That's the trouble."

"What's the trouble?"

"You fool! I don't want you being a target."

"The other boys didn't have their guard up. Not one of them knew until the very last moment. It must have been a horrid surprise. He won't be able to surprise me."

"How can you be sure?"

"By never being off guard."

"People have to sleep, don't they?"

"Now you're handing me quite a sales talk, Till."

We talked. At the drive-ins, between races at the dog tracks, on my small private beach, riding in the car, walking from class.

I didn't tell her, but I was already starting the program. I took over Brad's sales talk. I buttonholed the brethren and breathed sharp little words into their ears.

I racked up a big zero.

It was funny. When I had no axe to grind, I was Rod Arlin, a nice guy, a transfer, a credit to the house. As soon as I started to electioneer I became that Arlin guy, and what the hell does he know about this chapter, and why doesn't he go back to Wisconsin. . . .

Arthur tapped me on the shoulder after dinner. "Talk for a while, Rod?"

"Why, sure."

We went to his room. He closed the door. I glanced toward the closet. I sat down and the little men were using banjo pics on my nerves. But I worked up a casual smile. "What's on your mind, Arthur?"

I didn't like him any more. That warm face was a mask. The deep-set eyes looked out, play-acting, pretending, despising the ignorance of ordinary mortals.

He stood by his desk and tamped the tobacco into his pipe with his thumb. He sucked the match flame down into the packed tobacco with a small sound that went *paaa, paaa, paaa.* He shook the match out.

"It pleased me that you transfered here, Rod. I liked you when I first met you. I considered you to be a well-adjusted person with a pretty fair perspective."

"Thanks."

"Lately you've been disappointing me."

"Indeed!" I made it chilly.

"This job I have is fairly thankless. I try to do my best. I could understand Brad Carroll when he tried to block me in my job. Brad was a professional malcontent. Not mean—just eager. You know what I mean?" He was bold. He half sat on the edge of his desk.

"I know what you mean."

"When you try to operate in the same way, I fail to understand you, Rod. What have you got to gain? You're only spending one year in this school. I want this chapter to run smoothly. The least thing we can have is unity among the members."

"And you're the great white father who's going to give it to us."

"Sarcasm always depresses me a little, Arlin."

"Maybe you depress me a little. Maybe I think that if you can't run the house right, a voting coalition should take the lead away from you."

"Look, Arlin. You have your own place on the beach. You have a very pleasant girl to run around with. You have a full schedule of classes. If you still have too much energy left over, why don't you

try taking on a competitive sport?"

"Is it against the house rules to buck the pres?"

He sighed. "I didn't want to say this. But you force me. You may have noticed that there is a certain coolness toward you among the membership."

I nodded. I had noticed it.

"The membership feels that you are stirring up needless conflict among the more susceptible boys. We had a small closed meeting of the seniors the other day. It was resolved that I speak to you and tell you to cease and desist. If you had any chance of being successful, I wouldn't speak to you this way. But you have no chance. You just do not have enough influence as a transfer."

"If I don't?"

"Then I can swing enough votes to deny the privileges of the house to you."

"That takes a three-fourths majority."

"I have more than that."

I knew that he did. It was no bluff. I made my tone very casual. "Well, you've taken care of me a lot easier than some of the others."

He took his pipe out of his mouth. "I don't think I quite understand that, Rod."

"Then we'll drop it right there." I stood up.

He put his hand out. "No hard feelings?"

I ignored his hand. "Isn't that a little trite?"

He was good. He actually looked as though he wanted to weep. "That isn't the Gamma U spirit, Arlin."

"You take your job pretty seriously, Marris."

"I do the best I know how."

"What man could do more!" I said breathlessly. I turned and walked out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Setting Up the Kill

TILLY had stayed up until three, she said, finishing a story for our mutual Friday class. She wanted me to read it. She had brought her carbon with her, in her purse.

"Right here?"

"No. The atmosphere has to be better than this, Joe. Wine, soft music."

"At my place I can provide the wine and the soft music. Would you okay the background?"

"Look, I'm blushing about the story. I thought it was something I'd never try to put on paper. Maybe I don't want you to read it."

It was Friday afternoon. We went out to my place. I put on dark glasses and took the carbon out on the beach.

Tilly said, "One thing I'm not going to do is sit and watch you read it, Joe." She walked down the beach away from me. I watched her walk away from me. No other girl had such a perfect line of back, concavity of slim waist, with the straightest of lines dropping from the armpits down to the in-curve of waist, then flaring, descending in a slanted curve to the pinched-in place of the knee, then sleekly curving again down the calf to the delicacy of ankle bone and the princess-narrow foot.

She turned and looked back and read my mind. "Hey, read the story," she said.

I read it. She'd showed me other work and I'd been ruthless about too many adjectives, about stiltedness. This one was simple. A boy and a girl. The awkward poetry of a first love. The boy dies. Something in the girl dies. Forever, she thinks. She wants it to be forever. She never wants to feel again. But as she comes slowly back to life, she fights against it. In vain.

And one day she has flowered again into another love and she cannot fight any more—and then she knows that the bruised heart is the one that can feel the most pain and also the most joy. There was a sting at the corners of my eyes as I finished it.

"Come here," I called. My voice was hoarse.

She came running. I held her by her sun-warm shoulders and kissed her. We both wept and it was a silly and precious thing.

"I do the writing in this family," I said. "I thought I did. Now I don't know. Now I don't think so."

"In this family? That is a phrase I leap upon, darling. That is a bone I take in my teeth and run with."

"Trapped," I said.

"I release you. I open the trap."

"Hell no! I insist on being trapped. I want to be trapped. I am a guy who believed in a multiplicity of women. I still do. You're all of them. You'll keep well. You'll last. How will you look at sixty?"

"At you."

"I'll be six years older. I'll sit in the corner and crack my knuckles."

"With me on your lap it'll be tough."

"We'll manage."

"Is it good enough to hand in, my story?"

"Too good. We won't hand it in. We'll whip up something else for the class. This one we keep. Maybe someday we'll sell it." Something stirred at the back of my mind. She saw then the change in my expression.

"What is it, Joe? What are you thinking about?"

"Let me get organized." I got up and paced around. She watched me. I came back and sat beside her. "Look. I can't power Arthur into trying anything. It won't work. I can't become dangerous. But there's another way."

"How?"

I tapped her story with one finger. "This way."

"How do you mean?"

"I write it up. Other names, other places, but the same method of death in each case. I'll twist it a little. I'll make it a small business concern. The similarity will be like a slap in the face."

"You'll have to write an ending to it. How does it end, Joe?"

"I won't end it. I'll take it right up to a certain spot."

"Then what are you going to do with it?"

"Easy, my love. I'm going to leave it in Arthur's room and wait and see what happens. I am going to have it look like an accident. I am going to do it in such a way that he's going to have to give some thought to eliminating one Joe Arlin."

"No, Joe. Please, no!"

"I've got to finish it off. One way or another."

She looked at me for a long time. "I suppose you do," she said quietly.

"Be a good girl. Play in the sand. Build castles. I want to bang this out while it's hot."

DUST clouded the page in the typewriter and I put the desk lamp on. Tilly sat across the room reading a magazine. I could feel her eyes on the back of my head from time to time.

I had brought my bad guy up to the Sherman death.

". . . stood for a moment and took the risk of looking to see that nothing had been forgotten. The gun had slid under the desk. The body was utterly still. He saw the full clip on the desk beside the bottle of gun oil and . . . ."

"Hey!" I said.

"What, darling?"

"I've got a slow leak in my head. So has Lieutenant Cord. So had the murderer."

She came up behind me and put her hand lightly on my shoulder. "How do you mean?" I pointed at the sentence I had partially finished. "I don't see anything."

"Angel," I said, "Lieutenant Cord spoke of a full clip. I do not think he meant seven or six. I think he meant eight. A clip will not hold nine. There was one shell in the chamber. So how did it get there? To load a .45 with nine you put in a full clip, jack one into the chamber, remove clip, add one more to the clip and slap it back into the grip. A guy loading with nine is not likely to forget he has done so. Let us go calling. . . ."

Lieutenant Cord was about to leave. He frowned at me, looked appreciatively at Tilly. I put the question to him.

"Yes, the clip was full, but what does that prove? Maybe that one had been in the chamber for months. It even makes the case stronger my way. The guy takes out the clip, counts eight through the holes, and forgets the nine load."

"Or somebody else palms another shell out of the box he had and puts it in the chamber."

"What kind of tea do you drink, Arlin?"

"Be frank with me, Lieutenant. Doesn't this make the whole thing just a little more dubious to you?"

"No," he said flatly.

"You," I said, "look at life through a peashooter. You can focus on one incident at a time. Don't you ever try to

relate each incident to a whole series?"

"Not this time."

"Miss Owen and I know who did it, Lieutenant."

"She drinks tea too, eh?"

"You don't want to know?"

"Not interested. Go play games. Go play cop. Maybe it's a part of your education."

We left. "For a time there he seemed brighter than that," I said.

We got into the car. "Joe," she said. "Joe, why don't you go back to New York? Why don't you tell Mr. Flynn that in your opinion Arthur Marris did it? Why don't you let him take over? He could build a fire under the lieutenant. Why don't you go to New York and take me with you?"

"Shameless!"

"Determined. You're not getting out of my sight again, Joe."

"I propose and what do I get? A bloodhound yet."

"Take us home, Joe."

"Home! Haven't you ever heard the old adage about street cars?"

"Yes, but you have a season ticket. Home, Joe."

What can you do? . . .

I finished the unfinished yarn, folded one copy carelessly and shoved it into my pocket. I finished it Saturday. Tilly, who'd driven down early, was singing in the small kitchen, banging the dishes around.

"I go to leave the epic," I said.

"Hurry back. And, Joe, bring two of the biggest steaks you can find. The biggest. I've never been so hungry."

I felt like a commuter going to work. Kissed in the living room. Kissed at the door. Waved to. Told to be careful, dear.

ALTHOUGH the brethren with Saturday morning classes were at them, the others were in bed, most of them, with a few others looking squinty-eyed at black coffee in the dining room. I had some coffee with Step Krindall. This morning his baby blue eyes were bleary.

He moaned at forty-second intervals, wiping his pink head. He said, "That wrist watch of yours, Rod. Could you wrap it in your handkerchief and put it in your pocket? The tick is killing me."

"A large evening?"

" I don't know. I haven't counted my money yet. I missed the curfew and the bed check and the last bus out here."

"Seen Arthur around this morning?"

"He was coming out of the communal shower as I went in. A ghastly memory. He smiled at me. He slammed the door."

I finished my coffee.

"You slurp a little, don't you?" he said weakly.

I gave him a hearty slap on the back and went back to the row of senior rooms. I tapped on Arthur's door.

"Come in!" He looked up from the desk. He was studying. He frowned and then forced a smile.

"I came in to tell you I was a little off the beam the other day, Arthur. I'm sorry. Must be the heat."

"You don't know how glad I am to hear that, Rod. Frankly, you had me puzzled. I was going to suggest a check-up at the infirmary. Sometimes the boys get working too hard. A lot of times you can catch them before they crack."

I looked at him blandly. "Too bad you didn't catch Ted Flynn in time."

He nodded. "I've felt bad about that ever since. Of course, it was Harv Lorr's responsibility then. But all upperclassmen should look out for all the other brothers, don't you think?"

"I certainly think so." I pushed myself up out of the chair, said good-by and left quickly before he could call my attention to the folded second-sheets I'd left tucked visibly between the cushion and the arm. I had written it up without my name so that anyone would naturally read it to find out whose it was. And I was depending on the narrative hook I'd inserted in the first sentence to keep the reader on the line until it broke off on page nine.

I went and bought two steaks as thick as my fist, frozen shrimp, cocktail sauce, an orchid with funny gray petals edged with green, a bandanna with a pattern of dice all adding up to seven or eleven, gin and vermouth, both imported, and a vast silly shoulder bag of woven green straw. I wanted to buy her the main street, two miles of waterfront beach and the Hope diamond, plus a brace of gray convertibles that would match her level eyes. But I had to save something to buy later.

When I got back, she was gone. I stowed the perishables in the freezing compartment and jittered around, cracking my knuckles, humming, pacing and mumbling until she came back at quarter to one.

"Just where do you think you've been?" I demanded.

"Hey, be domineering some more. I love it."

"Where did you go?"

"I took a bus to school and found Molly and talked her out of this." She took it out of her purse and handed it to me. It was ridiculously small. On the palm of her hand, it looked as vicious and unprincipled as a coral snake.

"Her father gave it to her," Tilly said.

I took it and broke it and looked at the six full chambers. I put out one load and snapped the cylinder shut and made certain the hammer was on the empty chamber.

"I thought we ought to have one," she said in a small voice.

"You're cute," I said. "You're lovable. Come here." I opened the bottom bureau drawer and took out the .357 Magnum. If the one she brought was a coral snake, this is a hooded cobra. "Now we've got an arsenal."

"How was I to know, Joe?"

"Look at me! Am I a bare-handed type hero? Am I a comic-book buccaneer? Uh uh, honey. At moments of danger you will find Arlin huddled behind the artillery. You should have seen me in the war. Safety-first Arlin, they called me. The only man in the navy who could crawl all the way into a battle helmet."

Suddenly she was in my arms and shivering. I laid the weapons on the corner of the bureau and paid attention. "I'm scared, scared, scared," she said.

"Hold on for twelve hours," I said. "To yourself—not to me.Junior will move fast. He has to. The chips are on the table. The mask has slipped. The hour is on the wing and the bird in the bush has become a rolling stone."

"You're not making sense."

"What do you expect? Get out from under my chin. Stand over there. Okay. This is the order of battle. Arthur will show. He has to. He will show in one of two ways, but first night must fall. He will either come in here playing house president looking for an opening, or he will sneak.

"We will have the daylight hours in which to be gay. Then, come night, we must be boy scouts. We must guard against the sneak play. The surf makes considerable racket. A sneak will come from the beach.

"Thus, the answer is to be invisible from the beach and to be brightly lighted. The south corner of the living room answers that purpose very neatly. We will move the couch there and sit pleasantly side by side with weapons available and wait. In that way we shall be facing the door at which he will knock, should he decide to come openly. Should he knock—you, in great silence, will dart into the living room closet.

"Either way, we shall have two witnesses, you and me. Should he come openly, you must rely on my reflexes and my glib tongue, darling."

"I love your reflexes."

"On the ice you will find two mastodon steaks, shrimp that need no cleaning and one wild flower. The wild flower is for you.

"If the steaks turn out poorly, due to the cooking thereof, I shall take away the flower."

Oh, we were glib and gay throughout that long afternoon. We swam, drank, ate, told jokes, sang, held hands. Nothing did very much good. Our laughter was too brittle and high, and our jokes were leaden.

There were ghosts lurking behind our eyes.

Violence belongs in damp city alleys and shabby tenements and sordid little bars. It doesn't fit into an environment of white sand and the blue-green gulf water, and the absurd and frantic running of the sand pipers, and the coquinas digging into the wash of wet sand. Murder doesn't go with the tilt of white gull-wings against the incredibly blue sky, or the honeyed shoulders of the girl you love.

From time to time during that afternoon I would almost forget, and then it would come back—the evil that hid behind the sun and under the sand, and under the water and around the corner of the house.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Booby-Trap

THE sun sank golden toward the gulf and then turned a bank of clouds to a bloody fire that was five thousand miles long. Dusk was an odd stormy yellow, and then a pink-blue and then a deep dusty blue. A cool wind came from the north west, and we shivered and went in and changed. We were as subdued as children who have been promised punishment.

It was possible that he might listen. As night gathered its dark strength and the sea turned alien, we sat in the brightness in the corner and read silently together from the same book, but even that was not powerful enough to keep us from starting with each small night noise. The wind grew steadily. The Magnum was a hard lump by my leg. She had clowned possession of the .32, stuffing it under the bright woven belt she wore, but it did not look particularly humorous.

When the knock came, firm and steady, we looked at each other for a moment frozen forever in memory. Her face was sun-bronzed, but the healthy color ran out of it so that around her mouth there was a tiny greenish tint. I squeezed her hand hard and pointed to the closet. I waited until the door was closed so that a thin dark line showed.

"Come on in!" I called. I let my hand rest casually beside me so that in one quick movement I could slap my hand onto the grip inches away.

Arthur Marris came in. The wind caught the door and almost tore it out of his hand. He shut it. The wind had rumpled his hair so that strands fell across his forehead. It gave him a more secretive look.

He smiled. "The night's getting wild."

I made myself put the book aside very casually. "Sit down, Arthur. I wrenched my ankle in the surf. If you want a drink, you'll have to go out into the kitchen and make it yourself. I want to stay off the foot."

I admired his tailor-made concern. "Oh! Too bad. Can I fix you one too?"

"Sure thing. Bourbon and water. Plain water."

I sat tensely while he worked in the kitchen. He brought me a drink and I was relieved to see that he had a drink in each hand. I took my drink with my left hand and as I did so I braced myself and moved my fingers closer to the weapon. He turned away and went back to the chair nine feet away. He sat down as though he were very weary.

I lifted the drink to my lips and pretended to sip at it. I set it on the floor by my feet, but I did not take my eyes off him as I set it down. It made me think that this must be the way a trainer acts when he enters the cage for the first time with a new animal. Every motion planned, every muscle ready to respond, so much adrenalin in the blood that the pulse thuds and it is hard to keep breathing slow and steady.

"I'm troubled, Rod," he said.

"Yes?" Casual and polite.

"This is something I don't know how to handle."

"Then it must be pretty important."

He took the folder copy out of his pocket. "Did you leave this in my room by accident?"

"So that's what happened to it. No, don't bother bringing it over. Toss it on the desk. I can see from here that it's mine."

"I read it, Rod."

"Like it?"

"What do you intend to do with it?"

In the game of chess there is move and countermove, gambit and response. The most successful attacks are those, as in war, where power is brought to bear on one point to mask a more devastating attack in another quarter. But before actual attack, the opponents must study each other's responses to feints and counter-feints.

"It's an assignment for my Friday class. Due next week."

"I suppose you realize, Rod, that you've patterned your story, as far as it's gone, on the series of misfortunes we've had in the house. You've twisted it a bit, but not enough. The method of death and the chronology are the same."

"I still can't see how you're troubled."

He frowned. "Is that hard? I had two other people in the house read it this afternoon to see if their slant was the same as mine. You can't hand that in the way it is.

Your instructor would really have to be a fool not to tie it up with what has happened, particularly because Brad Carroll's death is still fresh in everyone's mind."

"What if he does?"

"You've made an amazingly strong case, Arlin, whether you know it or not. Until I read your . . story, I thought it was absurd to think of what has happened as anything except a series of tragic accidents and coincidences. No one can read your story, Rod, without getting, as I have, a strong suspicion that there is some human agency behind this whole affair. Absurd as the motives may seem, I have been wondering if . . ." He frowned down at the floor.

"What have you been wondering?"

"I took a long walk this afternoon. I tried to think clearly and without any prejudice. I want to ask you to hold up sending in that assignment for a time. Is the original copy here?"

"In that desk."

"Are there any other carbons?"

"No. You've seen the only one."

"I'd like to have you come back to the house with me, Rod. Right now. We might be able to clear this up."

I smiled and shook my head. "Not with this ankle."

He stood up and came two steps toward me. "I'll help you, Rod. You see I want you to come back there with me, because even though your reasoning might be right in that story, the conclusion is . . ."

Marris stopped short and stared at the leveled weapon. He licked his lips. "What's that for?"

"What do you think it's for? How do you like the end of the road."

He smiled crookedly. "Look, Arlin. You can't possibly believe that I . . ."

The room was gone as abruptly as though the house had exploded. Too late, I remembered the fuse box on the outside of the house, in typical Florida fashion. We were alone in the sighing darkness, in a night that was utterly black. The outside door banged open and the sea mist blew in, curling through the room, tasting of salt.

I moved to one side, toward the closet, as fast and as quietly as I could go. I took three steps when somebody ran into me hard. A heavy shoulder caught my chest and I slammed back against the closet door, banging it shut. The impact tore the gun out of my hand and I heard it skitter across onto the bare floor beyond the rug. I touched an arm, slid my hand down to the wrist and punched hard where the head should be.

I hit the empty air and the wrist twisted out of my grip. Something hard hit me above the ear and I stumbled, dazed and off balance. I fell and had sense enough to keep rolling until I ran up against a piece of furniture. I had gotten twisted in the darkness. I felt of it and found it was the desk. Tilly screamed at that moment and the scream was far away because of the closed closet door.

Crawling on my hands and knees, I patted the floor ahead of me, looking for the gun. Somebody rolled into me and there was a thick coughing sound. I slid away. There was a thumping noise. The shots came, fast and brittle against the sound of the sea. There was an angry tug at my wrist and then a liquid warmth across my hand.

The terrace doors we had locked splintered open and the white glare of flashlights caught me full in the face as I sat back on my heels.

Two figures tramped toward me and around me. I turned and saw that they had gone toward a moving mass in the center of the room. One of the figures who had come in towered over the other. I got to my feet and reached the closet door and opened the closet. At that moment the electricity came back on.

Tilly stared up at me and said, "I thought you were . . . I thought you were . . ." She leaned against the wall of the closet, closed her eyes and sank slowly toward the floor.

I turned and saw Lieutenant Cord pulling a man off Arthur Marris. Arthur lay on his back. His face was dark and the breath was whistling in his throat. His eyes were closed.

"Back up against that wall," Cord said quietly to the other man who had risen to his feet.

STEP KRINDALL blinked his baby-blue eyes. Droplets of sweat stood on his pink bald head. He stared incredulously at Arthur. He said, "I

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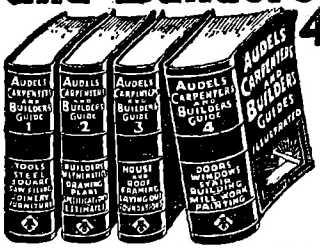

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thought I had my hands on Arlin! My heaven, I thought it was Arlin! I was strangling Arthur." He worked the fingers of his fat pink hands convulsively.

"You were trying to kill Arlin like you killed Carroll?" Cord asked, very casually.

"Sure," Krindall said. "And the other ones. My heaven, I have to take care of Arthur. He's not smart you know. He'd let them push him around, Arthur would. I've been watching out for Arthur now for a long time." He looked appealingly at Lieutenant Cord.

"He knew what you've been doing?"

"Oh, no! He wouldn't like it even though it helped him a lot. I never told him. He won't die, will he?"

Arthur stirred. He opened his eyes. He gagged and rubbed his throat as he sat up.

Krindall took a step forward, ignoring Cord. "Arthur, you're not sore at me, are you? I knew you wouldn't be sore. I was helping you. And then when you showed me that story today, I just thought Arlin would make trouble for both of us and it would be better if he was dead."

He reached down as though to touch Arthur's shoulder. Arthur pulled himself away, violently, hunching along the floor.

Step looked at Arthur for one incredulous moment and then began to blubber, his eyes streaming, his hands making helpless appealing flapping motions.

"Who was shooting?" Cord demanded.

That reminded me forcibly of Tilly. I turned back to her.

She was sitting on the closet floor staring at me. She wore a curious expression. "I felt myself fainting. I sort of expected to wake up on the couch. Only—I didn't."

Cord saw the punctured door, thin plywood splinters protruding. "You were shooting from inside the closet?" he asked incredulously.

"I was locked in," Tilly said with dignity as I helped her to her feet. "I thought Mr. Arlin was being killed. I wanted to create a diversion."

"Great diversion," Cord said dryly, staring at my hand. The blood was dripping from the tips of my index and middle fingers. Tilly looked down. This time I was ready. I caught her and put her on the couch.

(Please continue on page 126)

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(Continued from page 124)

Arthur stood up shakily. He said, "Rod, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. You built such a strong case you got me thinking about Krindall. Little things that I had half forgotten. I still couldn't believe it."

Krindall stood, weeping silently. But there was a gleam in his tear-damp blue eyes. I said,

"Look at him! Great emotion. Great acting. He's standing there trying to figure an angle. All this doesn't actually mean anything to him. This great devotion to Arthur is just a sham."

The tears stopped as abruptly as though they had been turned off with a pipe wrench. He looked like an evil, besotted child. "I could have got you, Arlin," he said. "I could have got you good. I rode Rex under the water and towed him out to where it was deep. I got Tod into an argument about guns and slipped a round into the chamber. The argument was whether you could see any glint of light down the barrel.

"I fixed the noose for Ted and got him on the chair to tell me if it was water pipes in the top of the closet. He didn't see the noose until I slipped it over his head and yanked the chair away. Then I had to keep pulling his hands off the pipe for a little while. I knew about Brad and his wife. When she left, I went in. It didn't take long. All of them were stupid. All of them. I've been smarter than any of you."

"Yeah, you're real bright," Cord said speculatively. "Real bright. We got some mind-doctors who can check on you."

"Doctors! You think I'm crazy!"

He made a dive to one side. Even as he moved, I saw the butt of the Magnum peeping out around the edge of the chair leg. I needn't have worried. Cord took one step and swung a fist that was like a bag of rocks on the end of a rope. The fist contacted Step Krindall in mid-flight. It made a sound like somebody dropping an over-ripe cantaloupe. Cord sucked his big knuckles and stared down at Krindall.

"Real bright," he murmured. He looked over at me. "You worried me, Arlin. I thought it wouldn't do any harm keeping an eye on this place."

(Please continue on page 128)

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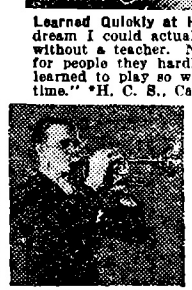

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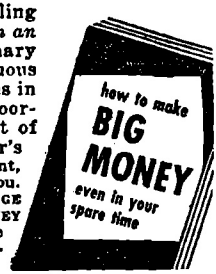

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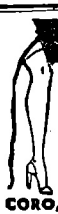

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John D. MacDonald

(Continued from page 126)

Tilly revived and Krindall came to enough to be walked out. As I held my punctured epidermis under the cold water faucet, I apologized to a glum Marris.

We were alone again and the night wind still blew, but it was not alien. The sea sighed, but it was a domesticated beast.

Then we had a solemn nightcap together. Tilly said that she thought I ought to drive her back to the campus and I said why of course. We put the top up and I took her back as though we were returning from a very average date.

* * *

Ten days later I hit rain as I crossed into Georgia. I took the coast road and the rain stayed with me. The wipers clicked back and forth and the blacktop was the color of oiled sin.

I thought of facing one Mr. Flynn and telling him what had happened, what I had found out. He would have some of the details from the papers. There were others he should know, and others I would spare him. It wouldn't be pretty, but it was something that had to be done. Krindall would be institutionalized.

Tilly stirred and yawned and stretched like a sleepy cat and smiled at me. Depression went away as though the sun had come out.

"Hungry?" I asked.

"Mmm. Famished. Let's find a place to eat and then go find a nice court to stay in. We'll stay there until a sunny day comes along, huh?"

"What'll thinkle peep, honey? It's eleven o'clock in the morning."

"Who cares what they think, huh? Show 'em the license."

"Hunting, driving or marriage?"

"Hunting, of course. No, I'll tell 'em we had to get married."

"Then they'll ask why."

"Then I'll say because you got me expelled from junior high."

"You don't look old enough to have been in junior high."

She curled against me. "Just old enough to know better, hey?"

It was raining like crazy in Georgia and the sun was shining bright.

THE END

Opium Dream

(Continued from page 89)

They flooded the country with Harry's picture under: *Wanted for Murder.* ...

One of these circulars landed on the desk of narcotics chief, Dr. Simon.

Two years later, while he was working on a narcotics clean-up, his men brought in a badly bruised and hopped-up man.

His sister had fallen into the hands of a notorious Chinese. The youth had been on the Chinaman's trail ever since. And just that day had found out his name and was going downtown to kill Mee Toy.

Through Dr. Simon's connections with the respectable element in New York's Chinatown, the narcotics chief learned that Mee Toy was actually Len Hong, a tong hatchetman.

Mee Toy's den was raided that night by Dr. Simon and three detectives who kicked in its lacquered door. When the white girl appeared, Dr. Simon knew she was indeed the sister of the young man.

When the detectives began to go through her belongings, the girl came to life and began to claw the lawmen. After quieting her down, a detective came across a picture of a blond young man. It was signed: *From Harry to Mabel.*

Finally the bored beauty talked. And each word was a step towards deathhouse row for Harry Givner.

It wasn't long after this that Harry strolled out of a Brooklyn movie house with a doll on his arm—and a gat under his shoulder. The cops picked him up.

Sam the Landlord got life, and Mee Toy was sent up for a long stretch. As for Harry Givner, he got the chair for the murder of Mrs. Lizzie Niznick.

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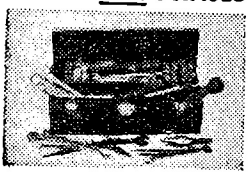

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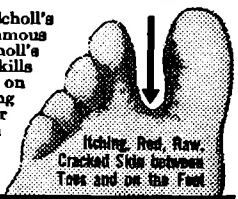

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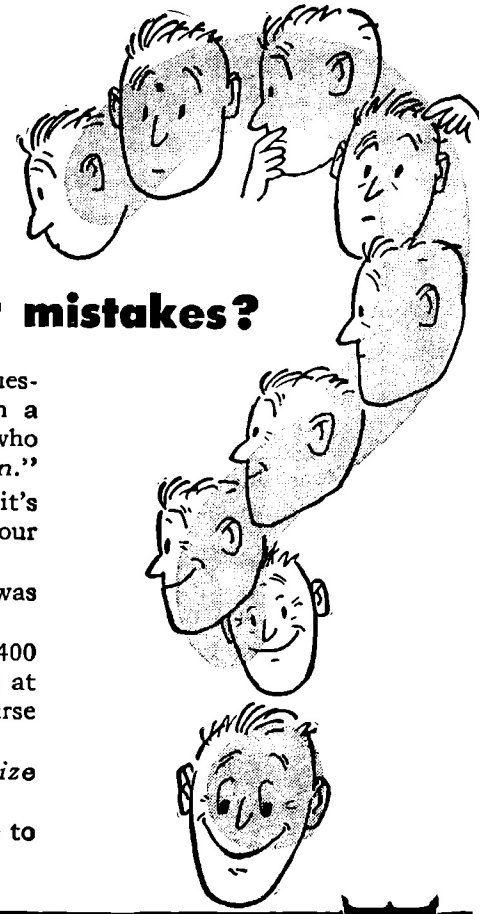

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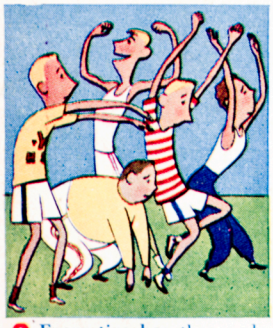

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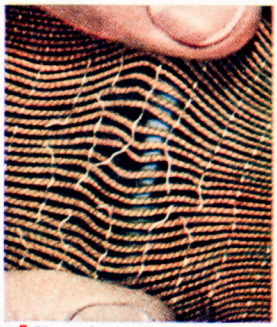

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