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FLING**

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MacDONALD**

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YOUR MONEY
SIDE UP**

by **HANK
SEARLS**

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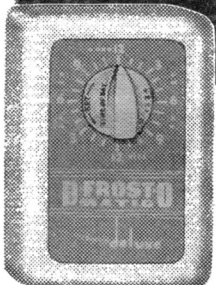
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 - Exclusive Skip Defrost.
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Rush coupon today for **FREE** information about amazing Sure Selling Plan. Easy as making a phone call—clicks with 87 out of 100 prospects in homes, apartments, hospitals. **WE SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE THE BIGGEST MONEY OF YOUR LIFE.**

JOIN THESE MEN FOR EXCEPTIONAL PROFITS WEEKLY!

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 Rush me 20 more D-Frost-O-Matics. Customers are calling at my home for them.
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 I sold 96 units in three weeks spare time. Clear profit over \$600.00.
 John C. West
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 Leon B. Davis
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 Act now—territories going fast
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RUSH COUPON NOW!

D-Frost-O-Matic Corp.
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Rush me full information on making biggest money of my life with D-Frost-O-Matic, using your amazing Automatic Selling Plan.

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HOUR!

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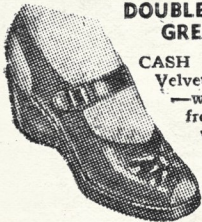
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SLIP OFF!**



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Women everywhere know and trust the Good Housekeeping Seal on Velvet-eez shoes. Neither you nor your customers can lose—and you have everything to gain.

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—W. M. Evans, Louisiana.



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—Charles Tuttle.

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The September issue will be out August 2nd

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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

It's a good idea to always be on the alert when accepting checks. Generally, you ought to know the person whose check you cash—or be sure that his references are real, not forged. Every day we hear about slick, fast-working check passers who manage to gyp honest but careless businessmen with their falsified identifications and bogus checks.

Don't let smooth operators prey on your gullibility, detective fans. Keep up to date on the rackets that may occur in your locality. Reading this column every month will help you be prepared for the petty chiselers who may come your way.

Besides, this column can help you—by your helping us. Send us letters telling of your own personal experiences with swindlers and racketeers of all kinds. We'll publicize the information you send us for the benefit of other readers—and at the same pay you \$5.00 for every letter used.

Of course, you understand that we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters because of the press of mail in the office. Also, we can't return your letters, unless they are accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. If you wish, we shall withhold your name from print.

Be sure to address all letters to The Rackets Editor, care of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 2-5 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Now for data on the current ruses:

Worth Beans to Her

Dear Sir:

It happened on 42nd Street near Broadway. I edged into the crowd that had gathered around a street hawker.

“The Indian Sachet Bean,” he was saying, “gives off a wonderful scent that lasts for years. Here, lady,” he offered, “notice that lovely odor?” He handed me an odd-shaped bean similar to a kidney bean.

I sniffed obligingly. The scent was strangely pleasant, yet strangely familiar, too. With a
(Please continue on page 8)

They Never Knew It Was SO EASY To Play

*Thousands Now Play Popular Songs
Who Didn't Know a Note of Music Before*

You, too, can learn your favorite instrument at home, without a teacher, this quick, easy, money-saving way

THINK of the fun **YOU** are missing! The popularity, friendship, good times! Why? Because you think it's *hard* to learn music. You have an idea that it's a slow, tedious task, with lots of boring drills and exercises.

That's not the twentieth-century way! Surely you've heard the news! How people all over the world have learned to play by a method so simple a child can understand it—so fascinating that it's like playing a game. Imagine! You learn without a teacher—in your spare time at home—at a cost of only a few cents a day! You learn by the famous print-and-picture method—every position, every move before your eyes in big, clear illustrations. You **CAN'T** go wrong! And best of all, you start playing real tunes almost at once, from the very first lesson.

No needless, old-fashioned "scales" and exercises. No confused, perplexing study. You learn to play by playing. It's thrilling, exciting, inspiring! No wonder hundreds of thousands of people have taken up music this easy way. No wonder enthusiastic letters like those reproduced here pour in from all over the world.

Sound interesting? Well, just name the instrument you'd like to play and we'll prove you **CAN!** (Instruments supplied when needed, Cash or Credit.) Mail the coupon or write. Do it now!

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New York 10, N. Y.



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Music is the magic key to friendship, fun, romance. The person who can play a musical instrument is always sure of a welcome. Why not let music open up a new world for you. Thousands have discovered unexpected pleasure and profit in music, thanks to the unique method that makes it amazingly easy to learn.

Send for FREE Booklet and Print and Picture Sample

See for yourself how this wonderful self-instruction method works. Sit down, in the privacy of your own home, with the interesting illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home." No salesman will call—decide for yourself whether you want to play this easy way.—52nd year.



Invited to Parties. "Before I took your course I didn't know one note of music. Then three months later I started to play for dances. I've been invited to many parties. The course is believe me easy and interesting." *R. M. Vancouver, B. C.

Well Worth Money. "The course is self explanatory. One is finished with it there is little one need learn. It is well worth the money and I fully believe you have the finest course on the market today." *R. E. G., Clarksburg, W. Va. Kans.

Surprised Friends. "People who hear me how I do it. They ask if I haven't had lessons from a teacher. To my surprise they find I haven't. I'm glad to be a student of your school." *F. H. Athol, G., Clarksburg, W. Va. Kans.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional models

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Trumpet, Cornet	Piccolo	

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Miss. _____ This Instru. ?
Mrs. _____ (PLEASE PRINT)

Address. _____

City. _____ State. _____

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ON SUNDAY THE GANG IS GOING UP TO SWAN LAKE. WHY DON'T WE GO ANY PLACE ANY MORE?

CAN'T HELP IT, DEAR. WHEN A FORD HAS AS MANY MILES AND YEARS ON IT AS OURS HAS, IT NEEDS REPOWERING



I FIGURE THERE'S NO SENSE IN NOT GETTING THE BEST—THAT'S WHY I CAME HERE TO GET AN AUTHORIZED RECONDITIONED ENGINE FOR MY FORD.

YOU'RE RIGHT! IT'S RISKY NOT GETTING THE GENUINE ARTICLE. IT'S LOW-PRICED AND WE CAN WORK OUT AN EASY PAYMENT PLAN FOR YOU



DAVE, IT RUNS LIKE A NEW CAR! WE'LL BE UP AT SWAN LAKE BY THE TIME THE REST OF THE GANG GETS THERE!

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

woman's curiosity and twenty-five cents, I bought two beans which the man deftly dropped into a cellophane envelope.

Arriving home, I showed my husband the beans. He sniffed, then laughed when I told him I had paid a quarter for them.

"I fell for this one years ago," he smiled, "and since, I've found out how the scheme works." The beans, he told me, were the dried fruit of an ornamental garden vine. The "perfume" they were coated with would disappear in a day or two. It was nothing but that old mosquito-chaser, oil of citronella, mixed with a bit of vanilla extract!

Knowing you've been duped makes you feel foolish and ashamed—but wiser, too!

I. Woerner
 Brooklyn, N. Y.

Needed!

Dear Sir:

This is how I was swindled. During the war I wanted to earn some extra money to help defray expenses so I decided to do some sewing at home. I was tied down with small children at the time and was unable to go out to work and we needed the money so bad. One day a man knocked on my door and asked me if I would be interested in buying a second-hand sewing machine.

I was quite excited as machines were almost impossible to buy at that time, but the "salesman" told me he had a second-hand store and just happened to have several machines left. He assured me he represented a competent firm and showed me a lot of cards and papers from the company to prove to me that he was legitimate.

He explained that I had to be very careful of door-to-door salesmen and went on to tell me of an incident or two whereby women were swindled. Of course after all his big talk I was pretty well convinced that he was okay. So I gave him a down payment of \$10.00, which had taken me quite some time to save. He promised me delivery within a day or two.

But when a week had passed and no sewing machine was delivered, I began to get suspicious. I went to the address the man had given me and found there was no such place. I also went to the sewing machine company and they told me they were sorry, but they had no salesmen going from door-to-door. So—I was swindled and now I do my buying direct from the companies.

Mrs. Nelson Reid
 Winston, Mo.

That's the swindle-sheet for this month, detective fans. Keep shooting in your letters with information on the brazen breakers of the law you've come up against, so we can all be warned.

The Editor

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HIS FATAL FLING •

Pushed to violent extremes was broker Hanifred . . . when he had to hook up with a luscious social-climber— or hang.



Spine-Tingling Mystery Novelette

By **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

CHAPTER ONE

Bound in Blood

DARRIL HANIFRED walked out of the smoke and noise and confusion of the Braydenton's party onto the twelve by twelve low-walled terrace. Before he even sensed the night air's tang, he saw Florence, his wife. She was standing in close embrace with a man whose face he could not see. Hanifred reacted with a precipitate and unexpected violence which, during his childhood had been labeled, by a succession of governesses, "temper tantrums."

He flung himself at them, a half-articulated sob in his throat, his eyes almost closed, his hands upraised and formed into fists. He ran into them, full tilt. The man gave a vast grunt of dismay and Florence made that same hissing intake of breath that she used when they had a close call in the car.

Then Darril Hanifred was on his stomach on the low wall staring down into the dizzy cavern of the street. They were dropping away from him, both of them, with that sickening rapidity with which the runway drops away from a lifting aircraft.

Long after he thought they should have struck the pavement, they were still there, apparently turning slowly. He let out

He ran into them full-tilt.



his breath when they struck. It made a sound as though a small boy had popped a paper bag in a closed closet.

Darril Hanifred stood up. Somehow he had bent the bow on his glasses. He backed away from the edge and took that opportunity, as he straightened the bow between his thumb and finger, to look around and see if by any chance anyone had observed him.

Within him was that desperate sense of guilt and impending punishment. It was no different, except possibly in degree, from the time he had scratched his sister's face with a fork as she slept. Or the time in college, when he had stolen the sedan. Or the time, during the war, when he had informed one of the customers of the brokerage house that an order had not been placed, so that he could take skyrocketing profits on a highly speculative issue for his own.

He adjusted his hand-painted tie and strolled casually from the sun deck back into the party. A girl with an enormous blood-rimmed mouth was doing imitations, shouting over the blare of the music. A dogged Canasta game was going on amid the hubub. The white-coated bartender looked harried and worn.

Darril gave the man a pleasant smile and asked for a scotch and water. As he sipped it, he looked around the room for any eyes that might be on him, any look of questioning. And he tried to see who might be missing. It was odd to kill a man—almost by accident, you could call it—and still not know who on earth it might have been. Tall, dark suit, apparently a deep voice, if a grunt is any clue.

But all the faces he saw were party faces, ingrown by alcohol pondering over what to say next, ignoring all conversations except the continual one within their own minds. He went over to the Canasta game and kibitzed Myra Braydenton. He had always admired her from the rear, with the sleek structure and the long gold-

en hair. A pity that she had a face rather like a rattlesnake. One of Florence's special friends.

She had a fistful of cards and a natural Canasta of sevens in her hand. The pack was frozen and she was cleverly discarding her sevens.

Sirens cut the surface of his mind and growled to a stop nearby. He turned his head slowly, casually. A man he didn't know went out onto the sun deck. Pretty soon the man came back in. Darril moved over toward him.

"What's the excitement? Fire?"

"I think it's a street fight, right under here. Big crowd. Looks like it might be that."

The following minutes were impossibly long. He waited as long as he dared. Tad Cooper, one of his acquaintances, was talking to the bartender. Darril went over and said, "Say, have you seen Florence around lately?"

"Lost your wife eh? There's one place they won't let you look. She's probably in there."

The knock on the door was heavy with authority. It quieted the babble. A girl turned down the record player.

"See who wants to complain about the party," Myra Braydenton said.

Someone opened the door. There was a man in a dark suit and a man in uniform. The man in the dark suit flicked his eyes across the score of faces. "Quite a party," he said quietly.

"Any complaints?" Myra asked. "Come in and have a drink, boys."

The man walked through the room and out onto the sun deck. A flashlight shot its white beam back and forth on the concrete and on the railing. He looked over. He came back into the room.

"Better take a count," he said. "Better take inventory."

"What on earth is this?" the big-mouth girl demanded.

"Lady, it looks to me like you lost a

couple of guests overboard. They had to take 'em away. It's a long drop to the pavement. Now sober up and take a count. You got anybody missing?"

Darril widened his eyes and stared at Myra. "Where's Florence? Where's my wife?"

The man in the dark suit looked at them all with grim amusement. "Maybe that's one. Now we need the name of a guy. Guy in a dark gray shetland tweed. Black hair. The gal had dark red hair, cut short, and a lemon yellow dress. Is that Flo?"

Darril walked stiff-legged to a chair and dropped into it. The muted record-player gave off a Cuban beat. He covered his face with his hands. He stared up at the man and said, "But how? How?"

The girl with the big mouth turned half around and whimpered in her throat as she dropped. She struck the rug as though she had been clubbed.

"The man was John Leyer, her husband," Myra said thinly. "And only Florence Hanifred was dressed like you say and had dark red hair. Everyone else is here. I've been counting."

A few people bent to help Margo Leyer. "Get her on her feet," the man said. "We'll hold transportation down in front. Better get them identified for sure as soon as possible."

At the door he turned and said, "I want a complete list of guests, names, addresses, occupations. We're taking over a room off the lobby. There'll be a cop there to direct you as you come down. We want to talk to everybody. You're Hanifred? Come down with the Leyer woman as soon as she's able and we'll get that part over." He gave a crooked smile. "Sorry to bust up the party this way." The smile faded. "Nobody goes on that terrace understand? Nobody. You keep 'em off, you there with the shoulders."

THEY let Margo Leyer go back to her own apartment, accompanied by a doctor. She alternated between hysteria and apathy. They told Darril Hanifred to wait in a small room for Lieutenant Breck.

When the lieutenant came in, Darril looked up from his hour wait and saw that it was the same man who had announced the death. He sat behind the desk, sighed, pushed his cigarettes across to Hanifred.

Breck took out a handkerchief and patted his forehead. "A hell of a thing," he said. "That's a long drop. But rougher on you, friend. A lot rougher on you. Feel better now?"

"Numb, Lieutenant. Just numb. I can't think about it and my mind keeps turning back to it."

"You won't have to see her again, Hanifred. Now let's get to it. They went over the edge just fourteen minutes before I knocked on the door. Can you remember where you were fourteen minutes before I knocked?"

Darril frowned down at the cigarette. "At a party it's sort of hard to remember. I think that about that time I was kibitzing on a Canasta game."

"Did you go out on that terrace at any time during the party?"

"Oh, yes! Three times in all, I think. I like to take the air when I can. All that smoke bothers me."

"When was the last time you saw your wife?"

"I'd say that it was better than a half hour before you knocked. In fact, I was out on the terrace after I saw her for the last time. I didn't stay out there long. Just long enough to cool off."

"Have you got any theories, Mr. Hanifred?"

Darril rubbed the ashes off the tip of the cigarette into a tray shaped like a rubber tire. "I have. I've been thinking about it. That is a pretty fast crowd. You may have guessed as much. Their

standards—well, they aren't like ours—” He paused. “I can't remember that everything's changed and I must use the past tense now. “Florence and I are . . . were very conservative, you might say. None of this fooling around that goes on in that group. Now, if he could have enticed her out onto that sun deck on some pretext and then tried to kiss her—”

“They were seen going out there together.”

“Oh? I didn't know. Well, Florence wouldn't stand for that sort of thing. John Leyer, earlier in the evening, seemed quite drunk. He could have been unsteady. Now if she had repulsed him violently and he had struggled to subdue her, I rather imagine that they could have accidentally gone over the edge.”

Breek yawned. “Frankly, it begins to shape that way. Leyer was a wolf. Your wife's reputation was only fair, Hanifred.”

“Now wait a minute, Lieutenant!”

“Don't get angry, friend. Maybe those good pals are knifing her a little. They said fair. But there's no evidence that Leyer appealed to her. We got a yellow thread off the edge of the wall. The lab will prove it came off her dress. And that pretty much convinces me that Leyer backed her, drunk as he was, against the wall. It is low enough to have hit her behind the knees. If Leyer was unsteady on his feet, they could have gone over that way, even if she was cooperating.

“But for the sake of your pleasant memories, we'll say she put up a fight. It still fits. The papers are going to give you a going-over. This is a natural for them. Don't let it upset you. You'll have to give evidence in a few days. I say it will go through as accidental death.”

Darril leaned closer. “Lieutenant, could anyone have . . . have pushed them over?”

“It isn't impossible. But I'm voting

against it. I know a legitimate reaction when I see it. Look, go get some sleep. Take pills if you've got any. . . .”

Darril Hanifred awoke and glanced, through habit, over at Florence's bed. He frowned as he saw that it had not been slept in—and suddenly he remembered why. The previous evening had the quality of a dream. He moved through the dream acting perfectly the only possible part that could have saved his life. He had drawn on some unknown reserve of strength. Now, he shook violently with the reaction. Through the back of his mind floated the image of the body he had been forced to identify.

The phone buzzed softly on the bedside table. He waited until it had buzzed four times. As he picked it up, he saw that it was a bit after ten. There was no need to call the office. They would have seen the papers.

The voice was unctuous and soapy. “Mr. Hanifred? This is Mr. Ludlam of Ferris and Ludlam. We want to express our sympathy in this hour of great loss. We have . . . ah . . . brought the body of your wife here to our establishment, but as yet we have no instructions as regards the services you desire. May I suggest, sir, that we—”

“It was Mrs. Hanifred's expressed wish, Mr. Ludlam, that she be cremated. There will be no funeral. I shall arrange with the pastor of her church for a short memorial service.”

“Yes sir. Now there are two other matters. There are certain papers to be filled out, you know. And we should discuss in more detail which type of cremation you would prefer. Then, we wish to know about her rings. When there is a burial, it is sometimes the wish of the bereaved that—”

“I'll be down after lunch to fill out the papers. You can have the rings ready for me to pick up, I imagine.”

“Oh, yes sir. And—”

"Good day, Mr. Ludlam," Darril said firmly.

Darril took a shower. As he shaved he examined himself carefully in the mirror at different angles and at varying distances, as though he were determined to memorize what he saw. It was not a particularly distinguished face. The hair-line had receded until the features seemed oddly bunched beneath the high dome of the forehead. The pale blue eyes had a naked look with the glasses removed. There was softness and self-indulgence about the mouth.

He looked into that face to see what quality it was that had enabled him to bear up so magnificently after the . . . accident had occurred. Could it be a hidden strength in the line of the jaw, or a thin blue flame behind the eyes?

After he dressed he called the office and got in touch with Homer Mershon. The brokerage firm was Connolly, Mershon and Hanifred.

"Terrible thing, Darril," Mershon said portentously. "Dreadful! Ghastly! Was about to phone you. Anything we can do, old boy. Where is she, by the way? Flowers, of course."

"I'll tell you where to send them later, Homer."

"We shan't expect you for a few days, of course. We'll give all your accounts special handling. No need to fret about business in this hour of . . . harrumph . . . loss. Any little thing we can do, you just give a ring, eh?"

"Thanks, Homer."

He walked aimlessly into her dressing room. It held the scent of her. It tingled in his nostrils. He pawed through the racked dresses stirring up more of the scent. The top of the dressing table was covered with jars, bottles, tubes, tins. He uncapped a few and smelled them absently. One turned out to be smelling salts. He gasped and coughed and his eyes ran.

He felt as though it was here he should weep, that here in this room so redolent of her familiar presence, the bars should break down and the great plunging sobs should come.

But there was—nothing. A tinge of regret. A vague annoyance at the enforced change of habit. He remembered the slow downward spinning through the night. Even the horror of it was gone. They had told each other they loved. Then what sort of love could this be, tearless at the end of it?

DARRIL remembered the voice of a governess of long ago. "*Darril, there is no warmth in you. You love yourself far too much to ever love anyone else. You are a nasty, sneaky, egocentric little boy.*"

Of course, he had reported her and she had been politely dismissed.

Maybe part of it was the money. Always having it, always being able to add to it, almost effortlessly.

Still, from one point of view, the marriage had not been what could be called a success. In Florence the fires ran deep and constant. There had been times he suspected her after the first years of marriage, times when she came in late, flushed, bright-eyed, kitten-languid. But suspicions can be forced out of the mind when it is realized that to voice them will mean an inevitable quarrel, an annoying break in habit and routine.

But seeing the two of them like that. That had been another matter. As though in a restaurant, a stranger reaches over and forks a morsel from your plate. Quick anger comes at that. The same stranger could steal the entire plate when your back was turned, and to save a scene you would order again. But if he were flagrant about it, the impulse would be to strike him.

The temper had been surprising. It had been years since he had felt it.

Hanifred surveyed the dressing room. The maid who came in three days a week could probably not be trusted to pack everything up. He remembered the combination and opened the little wall safe Florence had had installed, with a Braque print to cover it.

Her jewels were there. A bright record of anniversaries, birthdays, Christmases. Later he could attend to them. He shut the safe and spun the dial twice.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers. What a fool to forget! Florence's sister in California. He composed a long wire and sent it off by phone.

He went down to lunch across the street at a place he knew was excellent. A girl stood across the street and seemed to be watching him. He looked at her curiously. She gave him a slow inviting smile and he turned away sharply. Not at all an attractive sort. A nice body, at least, but a wide-boned heavy Slavic face with that pure-animal look that some of them have.

It was a warm day. Her suit was flimsy, with the stretched wrinkles of poor cutting. He glanced back at her as he entered the restaurant. She still smiled. Her taffy-blond hair looked parched and unkempt.

He thought of her during lunch. It detracted his attention from the superb sole. He had been approached before in the city, but never so blatantly and never at so early an hour. When he went out, she was gone. He hailed a cab and gave the address of the undertaking establishment.

As Darril leaned back in the seat, he turned and saw the same girl sauntering out of the entrance of his apartment house.

At two-thirty, all details attended to, he left the establishment. Florence's rings, wrapped in tissue paper, were inserted in his lower left-hand vest pocket. He walked by a newsstand and saw one of the tabloids. He bought it. On the back was

a picture of the apartment house, with a white dotted line starting at the terrace edge and looping down to an X on the pavement.

The coverage, as always, tiptoed on the very thin edge of libel. He had become, "the young victim's elderly wealthy husband". He snorted. Florence had been thirty-six, eight years younger than he. John Leyer had become a playboy. Margo Leyer, by dint of a few months singing in a club long ago when it had been fashionable to do so, had become "Leyer's showgirl wife." The hinting was broad and non-specific. He crumpled it angrily and threw it into the gutter.

Restless, he turned in at a second-run movie on Forty-first and wasted two hours. By five o'clock, he was back at the apartment to change. As he went down in the elevator at quarter to six he had half a mind to ask Charles, the doorman, what the hard-looking blonde had wanted earlier in the day. But he realized how easy it was for Charles to misinterpret the question.

Dusk was on the city. Charles presented a properly mournful face. He had extended his condolences earlier in the day.

"Cab, please, Charles," Darril said.

Charles whistled and waved his arm. A cab detached itself from the line at a stand down near the corner. As it cruised up, Darril felt his arm grasped firmly and a hoarse young voice said, "Gee, honey, it sure took you long enough."

He started violently and looked into the face of the blonde. The unkempt hair had been tightly curled into a high style. She wore a flowered evening dress and a startling cerise evening jacket.

"I beg your pardon, but—"

"Oh, I didn't mind waiting. I didn't mind waiting at all, Mr. Hanifred."

She urged him toward the car. Charles held the door with averted, disapproving face. Darril had an intense aversion to

unpleasant scenes of almost any kind.

"You comin' or not, Mac?" the cabby said.

Darril gave another look at her smiling face. The streetlight showed the tiny spheres of mascara at the end of each eyelash. He handed her into the cab, and climbed in himself. Charles slammed the door with a shade more force than usual and the cab plunged out into the early evening traffic.

"I...ah..."

"The Carmen-Plaza, please," the blonde said with husky, haughty tone. "The cocktail lounge entrance."

"You can get out there," Darril said in a half-whisper. "You put on a good act, but it's over. I'm not getting out there."

She hooked her arm possessively around his, warm fingertips touching his wrist. "Like the new outfit? Bought it this afternoon. Hairdresser too. I always say, Mr. Hanifred, that when you're afraid to spend money you'll never get anyplace."

"This is hardly the moment for a discussion of personal economics. I'd like to have you explain yourself and tell me how you happen to know my name."

"Darril Hanifred. That's kinda distinguished, like they say. Florence is sort of an ugly name, don't you think? I always thought so. I'm Kit Gwynn. Kinda cute, isn't it? Hell, it used to be Anya Drastnak back in Throop, Pennsylvania. That's right outside of Scranton, but nobody ever heard of it. Now it's Kit Gwynn, all legal and everything. Cost me fifteen bucks to change it. That's a nickel more than this dress cost me this afternoon."

"Miss Gwynn, please. I don't know what your object is, but I won't have anything to do with it."

She giggled hoarsely, reached up and yanked down on his hat brim. "Ah, you're cute. You're an old cutie-pie."

He pushed her away vigorously.

She moved back and her face was inches from his. Her slightly tilted eyes flashed. She barely moved her lips as she spoke. Her voice was a deadly monotone. "Don't you ever get rough with me again, you old goat! I'll bend those glasses for you. The way they were bent last night. That mean anything to you?"

Darril leaned back. He felt weak and dizzy. He wondered vaguely if he was going to be sick to his stomach. "We... we'll have to talk," he said feebly.

"Why, sure we will! That's what this is all about. That's why I had to buy the clothes, Pop."

"Don't call me Pop," he said through gritted teeth.

"I think I'll call you Hanny. From Hanifred." She ran warm fingertips down his sweating cheek. "Buck up, Hanny," she cooed. "We're about to go places together."

CHAPTER TWO

Devil's Troth

HE FOLLOWED her blindly into the cool depths of the cocktail lounge after leaving his hat with the check girl. Kit walked with her shoulders back and her head up. The new dress fitted far too tightly across her firm body. Smooth muscles in her shoulders rippled as she walked, the hideous cape over her arm.

The waiter pulled out a table for them and they sat side by side on the padded bench that ran across the back wall.

"Martini, please," she said mincingly.

"Make it two," Darril said.

The waiter went away. "You know, Hanny, I saw a picture of the inside of this place once. I always wanted to come here. I guess they touched that picture up a little."

The drinks came. As he lifted his glass, she bumped it soundly with her own. A

splash of martini cascaded onto the back of his hand. He dried it on the napkin.

"To us, honey," she said. "To Kit and Hanny. These things are going to give me the giggles. I tried 'em once before. They've got a bang like the fourth of July."

There were no other couples within hearing distance. He said, "Let's get down to business, Miss Gwynn. Why did you make that strange remark about my glasses?"

"Strange? Don't try to bluff me. It got you in here, didn't it? It's like this, Hanny Panny. Today I quit my job. I didn't even give notice. Boy, were they burned! Now you're supposed to ask me what my job was and I tell you that I was a maid. Being a maid is the real deal in this town. I got a hundred and a quarter a month plus room and board. Two kids, but I'm like a horse and work doesn't bother me none—though I can mention that I don't love working. You see, I gave up a good job."

"Why do you keep talking around the subject?" he asked angrily.

"From the windows I can look down on that terrace where the Braydentons live. The windows are at an angle in the front room of my employers' apartment, so I can see good. I could make out somebody smooching down there and it was maybe like the movies. My people were out and the kids were in bed, naturally, it being midnight. I turned out the light and then I could see better. Believe me, it was better than the movies. It was making me wish it was my night off.

"Then all of a sudden I see a guy come charging toward them from the doorway. Boom! Over they went. Look here. I bit the back of my hand until it bled. I saw him straighten his glasses but I couldn't see his face, not even when it looked like he was looking right toward me. But when he went back in, I saw

he was bald back to here and I saw the pattern on the tie, real clear. I took a chance and sneaked out. Boy, those two were really smashed. It nearly made me sick. I hung around until you left, Hanny Panny, and I saw that tie I couldn't forget on you, a guy with glasses and bald back to here. I memorized your face. I hoped you'd get away with it. I checked this morning's papers. You did.

"It gave a name to go with the face. I quit my job and went over to the address in the phone book. I looked you over. Same guy for sure. I smiled at you and it bothered you. So I got the clothes and the hairdo and joined you. Now don't try to tell me I'm mistaken. Because I know damn well I'm not and I know they can put you in that chair with a hood on, or put you up the river for life. Don't fool with me, Hanny. This is for keeps."

He didn't answer her. He signaled the waiter and ordered another round. She said, "And just for the record, Hanny Panny. Maybe you've knocked other people off. Maybe you could knock me off. Maybe you're thinking about it. I wrote the whole thing out, every word of it. It's addressed to the cops. It's in a safe place. You can't ever find it. I have to go once a week and make an arrangement. Any time I don't go there, the letter gets sent."

He waited until his pulse slowed down. "All right, Miss Gwynn. What do you want? How much?"

"It isn't that easy, Hanny. And I don't want to take dough. Not exactly that way, anyway. I've got a better way. I want to hear a proposal, Hanny. I want to be Mrs. Hanifred. Mrs. Darril Hanifred."

"You're mad!"

"I'm not sore at anybody."

"I mean crazy. Such a thing is—it's unthinkable. You don't know how to dress, or act, or talk. You couldn't entertain. Such a thing."

She smiled at him. It wrinkled her nose and the corners of her eyes. Her teeth were large and white and strong-looking. The powder didn't quite cover a sprinkling of oversized pores in her broad face. Her uptilted nose was a bit bulbous at the tip. Her forearms were slim, but muscular.

"You're the crazy one, Hanny Panny. You've flipped your wig, honey. You're sitting there thinking you're not going to do it. And you know very damn well that you are—because it's the only thing in the wide wide world that'll save your skin for you."

"Of course," he said distinctly, "there's always the chance that by concealing information they'll find you as guilty as I am."

She frowned. "But Hanny! Don't you remember? You saw me in the window, and you hunted me up and told me you'd kill me if I talked. You forced me to marry you to keep me quiet, because a wife can't testify against her husband."

"You have a certain animal shrewdness," he said.

"That sounds like a nasty crack. It won't take long to teach you."

"To teach me what?"

"That for every crack you make you'll pay and pay and pay until you find out it isn't worth it. But that'll come later. Let's get organized. Another round and then you take me to a nice place to eat. Tomorrow I want money. A couple hundred ought to do it. I've got things to do. One of those charm school deals. How to walk and talk. That ought to fix me up."

"How old are you, Miss Gwynn?"

"Twenty. Does it matter?"

"Suppose I say no. Do anything you please. Go to the police."

She looked at him for long moments. She stood up, pushing the table away. "If you want it that way, Pop. I'll call 'em from here."

He leaned forward and caught her

wrist as she started away. He pulled her back. A waiter, sensing trouble, sauntered over. Darril gave him a reassuring smile and he went away.

He turned to Kit. "All right, *all right!* A year ago a friend of mine was attracted to a...girl. He found a very discreet Frenchwoman who smoothed off the rough edges in a month. Phone me at my apartment in the morning and I'll give you her name. You can go to her. I'll take care of the bills she'll send me. I'll make the arrangements in advance."

Again the touch of warm fingers on his cheek. "I knew you were a cutie-pie! Lordy, I'm starving. It's feedbag time, hon. And a month will be about right, because that's when we're getting married. One month from tomorrow. I just decided."

"It's nice to know the date."

"I forgot something. I've got to hear you say it. Go on. Ask me."

Darril swallowed hard. He had the uncomfortable feeling that Florence was about to walk in.

"Miss Gwynn, will . . . will you marry me?"

"Why, sure, Hanny Panny! Natch."

She took a deep swallow of her drink. "First dinner and then a good place to dance. I'm a bear on dancing, Hanny. You better get yourself in condition. I'm going to give you a rough time."

DARRIL was back in his apartment at three, completely and utterly exhausted. At the end of the evening, he found she had taken her luggage to Grand Central and checked it. She insisted on a hotel room. The best. He took a suite for her in a smart uptown hotel. That put her but six short blocks away from him. Her abundant energy dazed him and her harsh laugh still rang in his ears. He groaned as he remembered the expression on the face of the night clerk at the hotel.

He took a hot shower and collapsed into bed. The sleep of utter exhaustion overtook him as his head touched the pillow. He awoke at his customary hour of eight, with a bad taste in his mouth and a great longing to see Florence.

After a drugstore breakfast, he felt too restless to go back to the apartment. It was a cool misty day, the sort of day that takes the press out of clothes and coats faces with what feels like thin grease. It shadowed and muffled the sounds of the city and yet intensified all colors. His best thinking had always been done afoot. He walked slowly downtown.

There had been no time in his life when he had not considered himself the master of his environment. When a strong force opposed him, he had found it easy to move to the flank. He could weight the strength of the opposition and never wore himself out with misapplied effort.

Kit Gwynn stood squarely in his path. There was no subtlety to her. He winced as he remembered the feel of her clean hard body in his arms as they had danced.

"Sometime," she had said, "I gotta teach you the polka, Hanny. I gotta limber you up. You dance like you were carrying a tray of dishes on your head. Get into it, Pops. Swing it around."

Even in the agony of an entire evening of embarrassment, Darril had not failed to notice that Kit was constantly appraised by knowing and interested male eyes. She gave an animal impression of being completely functional.

The very simplicity of her thought processes constituted his greatest danger. She had a single-mindedness about marrying him that, in its own way, was as awesome as the lava flow from Paracutin.

Direct opposition was impossible, even unthinkable. And she had mined both flanks so that deviousness was impossible also. He thought of introducing her to Mershon and Connolly. What would they think of this hasty remarriage? What

would the columnists write? What would his friends whisper? He moaned aloud, and a passing couple stared at him curiously.

Her unexpected demand on him pointed up his own belated realization that the acceptance of Florence's death had been tinged with relief. He knew that he was best suited for bachelor existence.

Remembering his promise of the previous evening, he went into a phone booth and called Roger Winkle, a broker in another firm. The conversation was awkward because Roger was profuse in his expressions of sympathy.

When the first pause came, Darril cleared his throat and said, "Roger, old man, can you talk?"

"Yes."

"A year or so ago you told me about a young friend of yours who needed . . . ah . . . social schooling. I seem to be face to face with a similar situation."

Roger gave a slight gasp of surprise and then chuckled nastily. "Why, you dirty old man, you! The capacities of my friends continually startle me. Wait until I look at my book. Here we go. Write this down. Jeanne d'Agustin. She's very good and very expensive. You know what a hell of a wonderful job she did on my little pal. Phone this number. Tell her you're a friend of mine."

Darril phoned her from the same booth. "Miss d'Agustin. My name is Hanfred. A friend of Roger Winkle. I am wondering if you will accept a new—uh . . . pupil, a young lady."

"It ees possible, Monsieur. But I do not take on anywan who has not the ingredient, you call it. The ingredient, it is beauty. Faces like mud cookies, no. I must look. If I say oui, it is two hundred dollair the week plus the money for what things it is necessary to buy for the lady.

"If she has no good clothes, nothing, the first month she works very hard and the money, in total, is two thousand.

When Jeanne is entirely finish, poof, the lady is so charming one can say she is possibly French. You send her to me and I look, eh? Then I call you and what is your numbar. She comes to me at this address I now geef you."

Darril Hanifred wrote it down. When he left the drug store he turned uptown, walking more quickly. He went up to his apartment. Almost as soon as he was inside, the bell sounded on the foyer phone, the house phone.

Charles said, with overtones of disapproval, "There is a person here who wishes to see you, sir. A young person. A Miss Gwynn, she claims." There was a long pause. "Are you there, sir?"

"Yes. Send her up please."

Kit stayed for one hour. She spent the hour learning the apartment the way a farm cat will learn the intricacies of a new barn. She tried on several of Florence's dresses, came bounding out each

time to spin slowly around, saying, "How do you like me in this one?"

She did odd things to Florence's clothes. When they had swathed Florence's patrician-slim figure, they had expressed the cool disdain of superior couturiere. In a sense, the dresses had worn Florence. But Kit tautened them, strained them, subdued and dominated them so that they appeared to give up their original purpose of remote elegance and concentrated merely on resisting the careless vitality that threatened to sunder the fabric across the more hearty curves.

Kit settled for a skirt of British wool, a tobacco-colored cashmere sweater and a short coat that Darril remembered Florence purchasing in Paris. She balled up the clothes she had worn, winked broadly at Darril and crammed them into a wastebasket. She said she was "borrowing" the outfit. She said that it was too bad she couldn't take any of the shoes, but

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they all seemed too narrow for her.

At the last moment she emptied her purse, threw away most of the contents, transferred cosmetics from the dressing-table drawer to a big alligator purse Darril had bought for Florence in Guatamala, added the few things of her own she wanted to keep, and left for the appointment with Miss d'Agustin.

Darril hated to go out. He would have to pass Charles. Charles would have noted the change in her costume.

He sat, as numb as a broken hand, and across his lips was the metallic taste of the jaws of the trap.

d'Agustin phoned him at noon. "That wan," she said breathlessly. "Oh, that wan."

"You can't...ah...see your way clear to..."

"But oui! She must work hard. She is of surpassing ignorance, but wise, like a naughty child. You will see. You will see. In two weeks, Monsieur, I will permit you to see her. Your check I will expect? One thousand please. More later."

"You'll get it," he said, overcome with relief at the thought of two weeks without Kit.

CHAPTER THREE

The Last Laugh

HE WEPT, at the memorial service, with a sincerity that startled him.

He returned to work. The office staff acted very soberly around him for a few days and then it was once again as it had been before the Braydenton's party. He made new arrangements with the maid so that she came in each day after he had left, cleaned the apartment and made his bed. He did nothing about Florence's belongings.

The sister had flown east for the memorial service. He had given her the

jewelry that had been in Florence's family. He had signed over to her Florence's small inheritance. He had offered the sister her choice of anything from Florence's wardrobe. The sister had demured, said she couldn't think of such a thing, that it would be such a sad reminder. She had ended by taking the mink and the ermine cape.

She was an older, more brittle, edition of Florence and she made it quite clear that she was prepared to show her gratitude. She seemed a bit miffed when Darril carefully skirted the suggestion by purposely misunderstanding. She gave him a sisterly peck on the cheek at the air terminal.

On a Friday, he received a call on his office phone. The voice was soft, throaty, intimate and strange. "Darril, darling?"

"Uh? Who is this?"

"Your Kit. Don't you think it's about time you took me to dinner?"

"Why...yes, I think that—"

"Come for a drink, dear. Say six?"

"At your hotel."

"Of course."

She stood at the open door of her suite as he stepped off the elevator. At first, he thought it was a stranger smiling at someone beyond him. He performed a double take that an actor could have been proud of.

"Come in, darling," she said.

The brass of her hair had, with alchemist's magic, been transmuted to an odd silver, a warm silver, with the wide waves looking as soft as a kitten's throat. The shape of her face had been changed. He saw, only by looking very closely, that it had been done by the shape of the hair style, a touch of shadow at the hollows of her cheeks, a clever use of lipstick. She had lost weight. The dress she wore was most odd. Navy with one shoulder covered and the ram down to the wrist. One wide lapel of stiff white started at the covered shoulder and slashed down across

her all the way to the left hip, where it appeared to be fastened with two large white buttons. The other shoulder and arm were bare, a creamy honeyed hue in contrast with the white.

She pushed the door shut as he entered. She leaned against it, her head back, her chin up, her eyes half closed. "Like?"

"Fantastic!"

The old harsh laugh came from her lips and now it was anachronistic. "I'm half done," she said. "Wait two more weeks, Darril."

She brushed by him and went to the coffee table, swirled the glass pitcher and poured the fluid gold into the fluted glasses. Her walk had changed and her posture. Yet there was no hint of imitation, of iron control. It was as though she had always known how to carry herself. She handed him his glass, looked into his eyes and said,

"Here's to crime, darling."

He drank to her toast and he could not keep his eyes from her. Somehow this had become a woman to be seen with, to be taken to the smart places, to be introduced to acquaintances who might and might not be able to conceal their envy... and their surprise.

Darril laughed. The laugh filled his throat and the room.

"Something amuses you?"

"I am thinking, Kit, of the thousand times a day I've wondered how to trick you, how to get rid of you."

"And now you don't want to?"

"I don't think I do. I—I'm sure I don't."

It was an evening. She had acquired an unruffled coolness. Sometimes her diction slipped. At moments there was an awkwardness. He took her to places where he had gone with Florence.

"How did she teach you to walk like that? Before, Kit, you were like a girl fullback."

"That was the easiest part, Darril. She

has a room with bright lights and nothing but mirrors. The walls are all mirrors. She put a chair in there, a table, a tea service. I had to take off all my clothes and go into that room and walk across it a hundred times, sit down and stand up a hundred times, stand and pour tea and pour it back into the pot until I was ready to kick holes in the mirrors.

"She's an ugly little woman who looks like a toad with the tummy ache. She sat in the corner and made me stand still whenever I was awkward. She made me stand and look at my reflection. She kept saying, 'Eet ees not the flesh, child. Eet ees the bones. When the bones they are in propair position, all else is lovely, non?'"

"All else is lovely, yes," he whispered.

There were more table hoppers than he had ever experienced with Florence. Kit acknowledged the introductions gravely, casually, with just the faintest trace of insolence, which she softened with a smile.

With the blood thudding in his pulse, he took her to her hotel. She turned at the elevator and laid a cool hand in his. "Thank you, darling. It's been a good evening."

"But..."

"Good night, darling."

Ten days later, the license was procured. Darril sensed the disapproval of his friends and business partners. He could almost hear them whispering, "The old goat! Why couldn't he have waited another three months at least? Of course, she is one very exceptional item. Very choice. But it's only a month since Florence..."

He knew they would forget. They always forget. And he suspected that envy kept the male tongues wagging, while jealousy worked on the females...

Mr. Darril Hanifred was united in marriage with Miss Kit Gwyn in a quiet ceremony on the third of June. The bride

looked charming in a traveling costume of gray. She wore a corsage of orchids. Later the happy couple left on a wedding trip which took them, by air, to Mexico City. They stayed three weeks at the Reforma.

The bride was gravely beautiful and Mr. Hanifred, on his return to the city, appeared to all who knew him to have dropped ten years from his age. He was bronzed and his eyes were clear. He dressed more youthfully and he had changed his style of eye glasses to a heavy-rimmed type that was more becoming to him.

The newly-wedded couple entertained quietly and well, at first in the apartment Mr. Hanifred had occupied with his previous wife and later in a penthouse apartment on West Seventieth Street. They were seen together in all the smart places.

IT WAS an August night and Darril Hanifred whistled softly to himself. Life, which a few months ago had seemed so impossible, had re-arranged itself very neatly indeed. Kit was a creature of infinite and unexpected delights. Long ago there had been another Darril Hanifred, an austere and dry and sombre individual living in spiritless respectability with a woman whose face he could barely remember. That Darril Hanifred had been dying in the midst of life and not realizing it.

But now life was as vivid as a match-flame in a darkened room, as rounded and full as a contour of one's beloved, as precious as the flame-sear of known lips. It made him want to write poetry, something he hadn't done since Exeter.

He wore the flannel dressing gown she had bought for him. He stood in the open doorway of the dining room breathing the warm night air, looking out across the roof and the parapet to the city glow against the clouds in the west. Silent lightning played in the far distance, mov-

ing closer. From time to time, the still wind freshened and there was a hint of rain.

Life was good. Their plans were good. The other night, together, they had gone over his holdings and made computations. There was no good reason why he should keep working. Already he had taken the major steps. He had sold out the speculative issues which needed daily watching and had reinvested in the blue chips. It added up to about eleven thousand a year after taxes, without touching capital. Ample for their needs. They had both loved Mexico.

Inside the penthouse apartment, on the desk, was the draft of his resignation. Kit was a good wife. She could help without interfering, offer advice without being annoying. They had worked on the draft of the resignation and the offering of the sale of his partnership together, she standing behind him with her hands on his shoulders.

It hadn't gone well. "Let's finish it in the morning, darling," she had said.

He had made numerous starts at the letter, both here at home and at the office. He lit a cigarette and, as was his habit before going to bed, he strolled out across the roof. His bride of a little over two months was getting ready for bed.

The wind touched his face. He stood and looked down at the sidewalk on the far side of the street ten stories below. A foreshortened couple stood, arm in arm, looking into the lighted window of a book shop. A dog trotted along, a black dot moving with the sideways motion of a puppy. A taxi with roof light glowing came slowly around the corner.

The breeze brought to his nostrils the musky fragrance of her perfume, and he wondered why he could smell it so far away. He was about to turn—when came the fantastic and unthinkable thrust against his shoulders. He put his hands out as though to hold himself away from

the night and the emptiness. The sharp edge of the parapet struck him just above his knees, painfully. He slapped his right hand down and, as he fell face down across the foot-wide wall, his fingers caught the inside edge.

It turned his body so that he could look up at her. Her expression was that of a woman finding the threading of a needle unaccountably difficult.

"Kit!" he gasped. "Kit!"

As he tried to pull himself back, she grasped his right ankle in both hands and threw it up and out. His legs struck the sheer face of the building and the impact tore his hand free from the edge. He went over backwards and the city and the lights and the cab and the window-shoppers and the trotting dog were all images on a wheel that spun slowly around him so that they moved past his eyes at each slow circle. The wheel tilted strangely. There was something he had to remember. He had to remember it. It was....

* * *

Lieutenant Breek came into the pent-house apartment. He carried his suit coat over his arm. His tie was pulled down and the wilted collar of his white shirt was open. It was a day when heat thundered in the city. His shirt was soaked, clinging to his thick chest so that the darkness of chest hair showed through the fabric. His hat was pushed back off his damp forehead.

Kit Hanifred wore no makeup. Her dress was dull black and her gleaming hair was pulled back in severe style.

"A scorcher," he said. He threw his coat and hat on a chair. He held his hands out, one above the other. "This high, with ice in it, honey."

"My name," she said coldly, "is Mrs. Hanifred."

"Okay, Mrs. Hanifred then, honey."

"Why do you keep bothering me?"

Haven't I had enough trouble with—" she sighed—"what poor Darril did?"

"Get the drinks, honey. Get the drinks."

"I can call your superiors, you know."

"Go ahead. Call." He smiled. She stared at him for a moment and then turned and walked into the kitchen. Her back expressed anger. He heard ice cubes tumbling into the sink.

She brought him the drink. He stood up to take it. As she turned away to cross to the other side of the room, he slapped her smartly. She spun around, her face flaming, spilling part of the drink, holding her other hand behind her. "Why you damn little—"

"Hey, hey! What happened to the lady talk?"

"Get out of here!"

He pushed her roughly into a chair. More of the drink spilled on the front of her dress. "Shut up and listen, Anya, honey."

Her eyes slowly widened and her face paled. "My name is Kit."

"Sure. Two weeks I sweat this out now. Two long weeks. I had to take a leave of absence to work on it, honey. I even went to Throop. Little town near Scranton. Ever hear of it? Don't answer that question. Here's another question. Ever hear of a family named Batchelder? You should have. They paid you and gave you a room to sleep in.

"What was tough was finding out whether they were out the night Florence Hanifred took the nosedive. They were. From the front room you get a nice look at the Braydenton's sun deck. So what happens? I find a doorman at your old address, Hanifred's old address. You show up right after she dies.

"Hanifred gets chummy with you right away. I got a squint at the bank's photo-file of cancelled checks on his account. Twenty-three hundred bucks he pays to have that Frenchie make a lady out of you—on the surface. And he paid your

hotel bills while you were getting educated."

"I just happened to meet him when he was mourning for his wife. He liked me."

"Didn't he, though! Now, about his suicide note. Pretty formal, wasn't it?"

"I don't think I know what you mean."

"Hell, I know it by heart. 'I have decided that I do not wish to continue our relationship. This is a step which I must take at this time. I hope that you will understand that I do not wish to cause any inconvenience, but this life has become unsatisfying to me.' Honey, that's right stilted."

"He always expresed himself that way."

"**H**ELL, I got into his desk, honey. There were some funny notes there on a scratch pad. I've got 'em. One of them starts, 'I have decided that I do not wish to continue our pleasant relationship. This is a step which I must take this time. I have enjoyed my years with the firm and my desire to sell out my interest is not due in any part to any dissatisfaction. Frankly, I wish to retire.'"

He went over to her, put his hand under her chin and pulled her head up roughly and looked down into her eyes. "Got to you a little, didn't I? You don't know about those other notes. What were you doing? Helping him write his resignation?"

"Damn you! Damn you!"

"I always do a pretty good tail job, if I say so myself. That lawyer didn't need much encouragement to talk. He kept the sealed envelope in his safe and you checked with him once a week. You made a special arrangement when you went on the honeymoon. Then, four days after Hanifred died, you went and picked up your envelope. You burned it."

"You haven't got enough, chum. You can't make it take."

"Don't give me that," he said quietly.

"Just don't give me that. You know better. You know I've got a case and you know it's enough to make a first-degree charge stick don't you?"

She jumped up, her face flaming.

He laughed. "The lady act is wearing off, honey. Let's go. Let's go talk to the right people."

She made a sudden run for the bedroom. He caught her in three steps, spun her around, splitting her mouth with a backhanded slap that dropped her to her knees. She called him a name. He slapped her casually again. He didn't break her until his hand was sore.

Then she lay on her side on the floor with her puffing, discolored face in her hands and wept. He made a drink for himself. He sat and sipped it and watched her. Finally he went to the bathroom, soaked a towel in cold water, wrung it out, brought it back and threw it to her.

When at last she stood up, wavering on high heels, her eyes were dead.

"Tell me you killed him, honey."

She didn't speak. He walked over to her and doubled his fist. She shrank back. "Don't! I did! I did it!"

"Sit down and write it out. Sign it."

He stood behind her and watched the pen as she wrote. "Now sign it, honey."

He leaned over her, took the statement, waved it in the air to dry it, then folded it and put it in his pocket.

"What should I take with me?" she asked.

"Going some place?"

She frowned. "You've had your fun. What do you want to do?"

"Can you cook, honey?"

"Yes."

"Then let's you make me another drink and then go see what you can whip up. All the Breeks got a hell of an appetite."

She brought him the drink. Her face was purpling.

"I'm not a bad guy," he said as he took the drink, smiling up at her.

"So what?"

"So I'm thinking of getting married. So I'm tired of being a cop. There's no future in it. Now you got just what I need. A wad of dough. With a little more meat on you, you'll be husky enough. And any time I want to slap you around, there isn't a damn thing you can do about it."

She was silent. He put the drink aside, caught her wrist and twisted it violently. "Is there? Answer me."

She whimpered. "No, there's nothing I can do about it."

"That's better. Now go on and start cooking. And you better make it good. For eight years I wait for a chance like this. I'll make you happy, honey. You'll get ten bucks a week for your very own and you'll wonder from now on when I'll get sick enough of you to give you the same treatment you gave Hanifred. You're going to work like a horse and every time you start to pull the lady act on me, I'm going to slap it out of you if I have to bust my hand on you. Inside of a year there won't be a guy who'll look twice at you. So there's your choice. Be Mrs. Breek or be dead."

"Please, I—"

"You want to remember, there's nothing I hate like a killer."

"There's something crazy inside of you. What do you want?"

He lowered his voice. "Something I've always wanted. Something I've got now. Somebody I can smash until I own every inch of them. Somebody that won't dare breathe unless I say breathe. Somebody I can make clean the kitchen floor with her tongue, if I feel like it. Now get out there and start cooking."

He began to laugh. She walked woodenly into the kitchen. She leaned her bruised face against the illusory coolness of the white metal of one of the kitchen cabinets. His laughter filled the penthouse. There was a crazy note in it.

The muscles in her shoulders felt knotted. She arched her back and felt a dull ache. Without looking, she reached down and slid the drawer open. She found the handle of the carving knife, grasped it, took the knife out.

She turned and leaned her shoulder heavily against the cabinet. She looked at the bright blade, plunged it with all her strength into her heart. And there, in that moment of the fading laugh, in the sparkling kitchen, a wisp of fantasy brushed across her mind and it seemed that the blade was one tongue of the flame of a frozen fire.

THE END

TURN TO PAGE 84

*And Read The
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KILL ME, KATE!

by **Frederick C.
Davis**



ONE SWEET FRAME



*She was leaving him flat,
his pretty client warned heel Hamby—
and he had no kick coming.*

*She saw the sharp, glistening
tip of Hamby's shoe go back
for a kick . . .*

By
**JONATHAN
CRAIG**

● ● ●

VINCE HAMBY said, "You're very lovely tonight, treasure." His pale eyes, deep-set in a darkly handsome face, traveled appreciatively the length of Julie March's five-feet-four of slim legs and full-blown curves. "That silk jersey dress is quite effective. Doesn't leave much to a man's imagination, does it?"

The hotel room was air conditioned, but Julie March felt a little too warm. She leaned back against the door, staring past Vince Hamby at the rows of glossy photos that lined the walls. Her own picture was there, along with those of others who called Vince Hamby their agent.

She said, "I didn't come up here to impress you, Vince. There's something you and I have to get straight. Tonight."

"That movie offer?"

"No. We had that out before. You've got my contract, you won't release me, and there's nothing I can do about it."

Vince Hamby nodded, smiling. "That's right, treasure. There's nothing you can do about it." He gestured toward the cocktail table. "Drink?"

She shook her head. "I'm not drinking. This isn't a social call, Vince."

Hamby made a clucking sound with his tongue. "Still got that chip on your shoulder, huh? No reason to act like that, honey. Boys will be boys, you know."

"Maybe," Julie said. "But Stan doesn't see it that way. He knows I'm up here, Vince. I told him this was the last time I'd see you alone, even on business."

Hamby's smile faded. His face set in hard lines.

"So *that's* it! That damned Stan Logan again! If that guy keeps getting in my way he's going to be the youngest has-been in the dance band racket. He'll be just one more trumpet man, playing for peanuts."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Julie asked. "Don't you remember that I called it quits with you the minute I found out you were married?"

Hamby's pale eyes seemed to darken. "Don't give me that!" he said bitterly. "It's just the old, corny story, all over again. You come out of the sticks, a dumb country kid with nothing but the clothes on your back and a half-way decent voice. You come to me because you'd heard I was a big-time agent. You'd read the Broadway weeklies until the lingo was running

out your ears. You thought you knew the whole score."

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," Julie said. "I know I owe a lot to you. But—"

He made an impatient gesture. "Sure. You owe me a lot, and look at the thanks I get. I build you up, put you right in the top drawer. And so what happens? I'll tell you. You give me the go-bye for a second-grade horn man!"

Julie took a deep breath. "Please try to understand, Vince. Stan and I—"

"Stan and you!" he cut her off. "Always Stan and you. I'll have that guy's scalp if it's the last thing I ever do in this racket!"

The skin prickled along Julie's shoulders. "You're angry because Stan opened my eyes. If it hadn't been for him, I might still be falling for that big brother act of yours. I know what you are now. You're rotten all the way through. How I ever could have believed you, I don't know."

Hamby's thin lips peeled back from white teeth. His voice was a strained whisper. "You . . . little . . . devil!"

Julie reached behind her, grasped the door knob. She said, "That's the way it is, Vince. We're through. For keeps."

Vince Hamby's dark face twisted. He cursed, lunged forward.

Julie saw his fist blurring toward her, felt the blow smach against the curve of her jaw. Blinding white light burst behind her eyes, the hotel room revolved lazily around her, and then she was on the floor, pain stabbing downward through her neck and shoulders. She saw the sharp, glistening tip of Hamby's shoe go back for a kick and she twisted away, fighting the numbness in her throat that kept her from screaming.

HER shoulder struck the heavy cocktail table. A half-empty bottle of scotch upended, rolled off the table and thudded to the carpet close to her head. She grasped the bottle by the neck, and

scrabbled quickly to get on her feet.

She stood there, swaying slightly on her high heels, legs wide apart. Her wide-set smoke-gray eyes under their sooty lashes were round with fear. Her lithe body heaved under the clinging silk jersey of her dress. She brandished the whiskey bottle like a club.

"Vince!" she gasped. "Have you gone crazy? Stay back!"

Hamby loomed tall above her. He took two quick steps toward her, then hesitated, his pale eyes shuttling between Julie's blanched face and the upraised whiskey bottle.

Hamby stood there for seconds, fists clenched hard, his lips working soundlessly. Then he let his breath out slowly. His wide shoulders slumped and he shook his head as if to clear it. An apologetic smile spread across his angular face. He held out his hands, palms up in supplication.

"I'm sorry, Julie," he said quietly. "I—I guess I lost my head. I let my jealousy get the better of me again. I've got to watch that." He pushed damp, dark hair away from his sweat sheened forehead with one hand and extended the other toward Julie. "Better give me that bottle, honey," he said. "You wouldn't want to do something you'd be sorry for."

Julie March edged backward toward the door. Her voice was tight in her throat.

"I told you to stay back, Vince. So help me, if you try to hit me again. I'll—"

Snarling, Vince Hamby went for her, his hand stabbing upward for the bottle. Julie jerked her body to one side, saw Hamby's shoulder go back and his hand ball into a fist. She swung the bottle at his contorted face with all her strength. At the same instant something smashed against her like a sledgehammer.

The lights went out for Julie March and she felt herself spiraling backward and downward through cold, moist darkness

When consciousness returned, it was

with a suddenness that brought back all her fear and pain. There was nausea now, too, and a strange pounding in her ears. She came up on her hands and knees, reached out for the arm of Vince Hamby's easy chair and pulled herself erect.

She lurched toward the door, trying to smooth the disordered waves of her strawberry-red hair. She wanted out of here, and fast. Where Vince Hamby had gone to didn't interest her. Her watch told her she had been out almost half an hour. She had to get back downstairs to the hotel's *Grecian Room*. Stan Logan was down there waiting for her. He'd be wondering what was taking her so long. She had to hurry.

And then she saw Vince Hamby. . . .

Julie felt her eyes bulging, the sudden hard pounding of her heart. She smothered a scream.

Hamby lay sprawled on his back, one arm twisted beneath him, staring at the ceiling with death-filmed eyes. At his right temple was a small mound of broken, discolored flesh. There was very little blood. Inches from his head lay the scotch bottle, an ugly dark smear across its white label.

"I've killed him," Julie gasped. "I've killed him."

There was a knock at the door, loud, insistent. A taut male voice demanded, "All right, Hamby! Open up!"

It was Stan Logan's voice. With a stifled cry, Julie tore her eyes away from the dead man and flung open the door.

"Stan!" she choked. "Oh, Stan, I—I—"

Logan's face, under its musician's pallor, was set in tight-lipped anger. His blue eyes were narrowed, his chin thrust out. "It's about time!" he said pointedly. "You said you just wanted to tell him off. You've been up here long enough to tell him your life history!"

He stooped back, took another look at the expression on her face. "Julie! What's wrong. What did that guy do to you?"

Her hands went out to his shoulders. "Stan, he's—I mean, I—"

Cold glints came into Stan Logan's blue eyes. He brushed her hands from his shoulders. "Never mind," he grated. "Whatever it was, it was too much!" He pushed past her and into the room. "Where is he? Where'd the scum run to?"

Julie reached behind her, closed the door. Her whole body felt numbed; she couldn't think. She watched as Stan turned slowly from the dead man on the floor to stare searchingly into her eyes.

She took a deep breath. She would tell Stan . . . and then she would call the police.

"I—I did it, Stan," she said. "I told him we were through. It seemed to drive him crazy. He hit me. I got hold of the bottle, and when I saw his fist coming at me again I swung at him. He—he must have hit me at the same time. I blacked out." She moved around Logan, toward the phone stand.

He reached out, caught her by the arm. "What are you going to do?"

"The only thing I *can* do. Call the police."

"But, Julie. You don't even have a lawyer."

"It was self-defense, Stan."

"I know that. I believe you. But that doesn't mean the police will." He ran his fingers through close-cropped yellow hair, shook his head. "Julie, we've got to think this thing out."

"There's nothing to think out, Stan. I didn't mean to do it. But just the same—I killed him."

Logan's sloping shoulders slumped beneath his tuxedo jacket. A tiny pulse beat at the corner of his firm mouth. "A hell of a lot of good I am. Just when you need me most—"

"Thanks, Stan," Julie said softly. "I know you want to help me. But there's just nothing we can do." Her hand went out again toward the phone. "This is the

right way, Stan. I'm very sure of it."

THE knock on the door was not loud, but it was determined. A woman's knock. Julie's eyes swung from Stan's drawn face to the door. She ran the tip of a pointed tongue across dry lips.

The knock sounded again, a little louder. "Then, "Quit trying to be cute, Vince. I know you're in there. I heard voices."

"Damn," Stan Logan said. "That's Doreen." He glared at the door. "Of all people, it has to be Hamby's wife."

The knob turned and the door swung inward.

Doreen Hamby was taller than Julie, almost as tall as Stan Logan. Gold-white hair was piled high over an oval, delicately featured face. Her eyes were the same deep-green as her tailored corduroy suit. Her small, even teeth were white against the moist redness of her mouth as she looked quizzically from Julie to Stan.

"Hello," she said. "knew Vince had company—" she smiled at Stan—"but I hardly expected *you*, Mr. Logan." She glanced about the room. "Where is that husband of mine?"

She laughed, and then her gaze fell upon Vince Hamby's twisted body. She stood as if transfixed, her green eyes wide beneath arched eyebrows, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

To Julie March it seemed somehow like watching a movie. She knew this was no make-believe, no creation of her imagination—and yet a part of her mind refused to believe this thing that had happened to her. She felt an almost irresistible compulsion to giggle, realized she was on the thin edge of hysteria. She clinched her hands together tightly, felt the long nails bite into the flesh.

"He's dead, Doreen," she heard herself saying. "You may as well know . . . I killed him."

Slowly, the expression of horror went away from Doreen Hamby's face. When

she turned to face Julie again her features were composed, her voice even. "How did it happen?"

Julie said, "Please believe this, Doreen. When I first met Vince I didn't know about you. I didn't know he had a wife. When I found out, that was the end of it. I tried to tell him so. Many times. But he wouldn't let me alone." She glanced at Stan Logan, felt the tightness growing in her throat.

"And then I met Stan. Vince couldn't understand that I was through with him, that there was only Stan. Tonight, when I came up here to tell him how things were, he—he just went crazy. He came at me with his fists. I tried to protect myself with the bottle. It wasn't that I wanted to—to kill him."

Doreen's shoulders straightened. Her voice was level.

"I'm not going to pretend that this breaks me up," she said. "Vince Hamby was one of the lowest things that ever crawled. I hated him. I've hated him ever since he ran out on me, two years ago." She laughed softly, bitterly. "Blondes, brunettes, redheads—they were all the same to him. Even on our honeymoon . . . Oh, what's the use talking about it? It doesn't make any difference now."

"I wish there was something I could say to you," Julie told her.

"There isn't anything you need to say. You weren't the first girl Vince thought he owned, and you wouldn't have been the last." She shook her head. "You poor kid. You poor little kid."

"It was self-defense," Stan Logan said. "Anybody can see that."

There was something close to pity in Doreen's eyes as she looked at Julie. "It's a terrible thing to happen to you, Julie," she said. "Just when you were getting to the top, too. It'll mean the end of your career, Julie."

"I know," Julie said. "But that can't be helped."

"Vince got just what he deserved," Doreen said. "But the newspaper boys will write their own version of it. When they get through with all the angles they can dream up—"

"There's no use talking about it," Julie said. "I guess we may as well call the police, Stan. I—I want to get it over with."

"Julie," Doreen said softly, "do you really think the police will believe it was self-defense?"

Julie looked at her, surprised. "I told you the truth, Doreen!"

"Yes, I know. But what everybody will remember is how you threatened him. It was all over town."

The words hit Julie March like so many blows. She had forgotten that threat, but the scene came back vividly to her now. It was true that she had threatened Vince Hamby; it had happened in his office, at a time when almost a dozen people were there.

It was the day the scout from Zenith Pictures had pleaded with Hamby to release Julie from her contract, only to have Hamby refuse and order him out of the office. Julie had lost her temper, said a lot of things she hadn't meant to say. And among them had been the threat to do bodily damage to Vince Hamby.

"They'll crucify you, Julie," Doreen said. "They really will. All you've got is your story. You don't have a single witness to back you up and there isn't a mark on you to show that he started anything. You threatened him in front of a lot of people, all friends of his, and tonight you've killed him. That's all the cops will need. You won't have a chance."

"But I didn't *mean* to kill him," Julie said, knowing how empty the words sounded. "I—"

"That won't help you any when a smart D.A. gets hold of you," Doreen said flatly. "He'll go to work on you twice as hard, dearie, just because the case will be in the

headlines and he can make himself a reputation. And the women on the jury—they'll do the worse they can, out of pure envy!"

FEAR, swift and consuming, filled Julie March. Her eyes jerked to Stan Logan. "Stan! What am I going to do? She's right, Stan. The police—everybody—will think I *planned* to kill him!"

Logan chewed at his lower lip. His young face was studded with sweat. "It's too late," he said. "If only—"

"Why?" Doreen broke in. "What makes you think it's too late?"

He looked at her in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "I mean that if Julie has to pay for this, why, Vince will sort of be getting the last laugh. I don't know just how to say it, but he'd be wrecking Julie's life, just like he tried to do while he was alive. I'd hate to have him get away with it." Her voice was edged with contempt.

"Vince Hamby never gave me anything but trouble. He made me get down and crawl for the few stinking dollars he had to give me to live on. That's what I came over for tonight, my pittance. Why should I want to see Julie ruin her career, go to prison, just for protecting herself?" She looked straight into Julie's eyes. "You can count on me to the limit. I mean it, Julie."

Doreen turned to Stan Logan. "If we

put our heads together, we might figure a way out. That is, if nobody saw Julie actually come in this room." She glanced back at Julie. "Did they?"

Julie thought a moment. "No," she said finally. "I heard the elevator doors close before I got to the room here, and there was no one else in the corridor."

"How about you, Stan," Doreen asked.

"No. I came up the stairs. I was mad about Julie being up here so long and I didn't want to wait for the elevator. But no one saw me, as far as I know."

"Good," Doreen said. "Nobody saw me, either. That means the cops can't prove we—any of us—were ever inside the room. They can prove we got off at this floor, but that doesn't mean a thing. We knocked on the door and there wasn't any answer so we went away. It's as simple as that. That's the tough part. Now all we have to do is round out the story."

Julie March felt she had to say something, stop this madness before it went any further, but somehow no words would form. Suddenly she turned away from Doreen and Stan, walked to the window. She stood there, motionless, one hand grasping the heavy drapery, staring down into the neon-bordered street three floors below.

There was something wrong, something that she could not quite pin-point in her mind. A vague uneasiness grew within her. It had nothing to do with the police, or

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with the things that would happen to her after they came. It was here, in this hotel room, a feeling of some lurking, intangible thing.

She pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the window, closed her eyes. She *had* to think, force her mind back into a logical pattern.

Behind her, Doreen Hamby said, "How about this? We'll clean up in here, get rid of Julie's fingerprints, and then we'll all go to Julie's room. We'll order drinks sent up so that we can have a witness to say that he saw us there. Then we can go to an after-hours club. We'll be seen together the rest of the time.

"When the maid finds Vince in the morning and the cops start asking questions, we can swear that each of us was within sight of the others all evening. We'll just say we got together a half-hour or so earlier than we did, that's all. That way, Julie will have an alibi."

Julie turned from the window swiftly, faced her.

"How did you know this happened only about half an hour ago, Doreen?" she asked.

"Because," Doreen said patiently, "That blood on Vince's face isn't even dry yet. Surely—"

"That isn't good enough," Julie cut her off. "There's something out of chord here, Doreen. You never spoke a civil word to me, until tonight. Then you walk in here, find your husband dead and that I killed him, and yet you want to help me get out of it. What's this all about?"

Doreen looked at Stan, smiled sympathetically. "I know how she must feel. The poor kid's so distraught she doesn't know what she's saying."

Julie stared at her a moment, and then she turned and crossed the room to where Hamby's body lay. She stooped to peer at him closely, trying desperately to reconstruct that last nightmarish instant when he had lunged at her.

Suddenly every nerve in Julie March's body felt as if it were crawling through her skin.

VINCE HAMBY had been killed by a blow to his right temple—and yet she had held the whiskey bottle in her right hand when she struck at him. The bottle would have hit the *left* side of his head, not the right.

She went down on hands and knees, close to the dead man. She could see it plainly now—the tiny discoloration at the left hinge of his jaw. Her breath caught in her throat. *This* was the mark *her* blow had left. It was enough of a blow to knock him out, maybe, but certainly not sufficient to kill him. The other blow, the one on his right temple, had done that.

"Stan!" she gasped. "Come look! There's—" Her voice choked off.

Doreen Hamby had opened her purse. Now, as Julie watched, stunned, the other girl's hand disappeared into her purse, came back into view holding a small, blue, snub-nosed revolver.

Doreen swung the gun in a lazy arc between Julie and Stan. Her voice was menacing. "Get over here, Julie."

Julie felt as if her legs had turned to rubber. But somehow she forced them to carry her across the room.

Julie found her voice. "*You* killed him," she said. "You did it and tried to make it look like it was me."

Doreen's hand tightened on the small gun. "Of course I did, you little idiot. But you wouldn't have known the difference if you hadn't been so dumb lucky, if you hadn't wanted that second look at him."

She laughed tonelessly. "Sure, I killed him. And why not? I wanted him dead so I'd get his money."

Beside her, Julie heard Stan Logan cursing softly. She knew she had to stall for time. She said, "You must have planned this a long time."

"Don't be a dope," Doreen grated. "I

was going to do it eventually, yes, but not tonight. I just happened to come to the door at the same time you and Vince were having your little scuffle. I listened in, and when I heard sounds like two bodies falling, I tried the door. It wasn't locked, so I let myself in."

"But—but you came back," Julie said.

"I remembered the money Vince always kept around. I meant to have it. Then, when I heard Stan's voice, I knew that all I had to do was walk in. You'd figure your goose was cooked, that I'd blow the whistle on you.

"And you *did* figure that way. Once I got you sweating, I was going to ride along with you on that alibi thing. You know why? Because it would give *me* an alibi. Sort of cute, I thought."

"Listen, Doreen," Stan broke in. "You're crazy if you try anything with Julie and me. We can still alibi each other, the way you said."

Her finger whitened on the trigger. "Nice try, Stan," she said. "But no thanks. Things have changed. The way it is now, I'm going to tell the cops that I came in here, found Vince dead and you and Julie standing over him. You both tried to jump me, but I got this gun out in time. Vince has another gun, an automatic.

"When the cops get here they're going to find your prints on it. I'll say you were trying to get it out of your pocket when I shot you." She tilted her head to one side, looked at him along her green eyes. "Just like that. And I'll have time to wrap Julie's hand around that bottle again, just to make sure *her* prints are around, too."

Stan Logan made a sound from in back of his throat, took one short step toward her.

"Easy there, hero," Doreen told him softly. "Don't make me cut this any shorter than I want to."

Julie March put her hands to her face, shook her head slowly. "Something's

wrong with me," she said. She swayed a little, moved back from Doreen and Stan, back toward the studio couch. "I think I'm going to . . . to . . ." She took one fast look at the heavy, cast-iron cocktail table, got it in a direct line between herself and Doreen Hamby.

Her eyelashes fluttered; she sighed softly, collapsed to the floor.

"I wondered how long she could take it," Doreen said scornfully. "Well, Stan, it looks like you're Number One."

Julie March sucked in her breath. With all the strength of her sleekly-muscled leg she suddenly straightened out her bent knee, sent the heavy cocktail table blurring across the floor. It smashed against Doreen Hamby's legs, threw her completely off balance. Her hands went out instinctively to break her fall. The small gun flew from her fingers and thudded against the wall.

Stan Logan shouted, grabbed for her. She screamed, throwing herself backward, away from him. Her shoulders struck the window. Glass shattered. Doreen's hands clutched wildly at the drapes, and then she disappeared through the window into the darkness. . . .

It was almost noon the next day when the police finally finished with Julie and Stan and told them they could leave headquarters.

On their way out of the gloomy gray building, Julie said, softly, "She must have suffered horribly, Stan."

He was silent a moment. Then he said, "We're just lucky she lived long enough to tell the police what happened. Whatever she was, whatever she did—she still cleared us."

They went down the steps to the sidewalk.

They walked slowly along the street, not going anywhere in particular, just savoring the wonderful feeling of being together—and alive.

CORPSE-GATHERING CUTIE

For the fraction of a second, he hesitated . . .



On a hunch that the cuddly bundle in his arms was fingering him for a hot-seat fuse— Detective Jimmy Rock pulled a few switches.

AT SEVEN FORTY-FIVE p.m. on the nose, I reported to Mr. Hiram Rickler, the night manager of the Walker Hotel. I was dressed, but conservatively, wearing a dark blue suit, standard for house detectives, a

**By MEL
COLTON**

white collar and nice four-in-hand blue tie.

My shoes were shined, my face bright as a three-way torch and my gun in belt so as not to bulge the coat. No cocked bowler; just wavy brown hair, nicely combed and cut short. Mr. Jimmy Rock, security police, on duty.

Hiram Rickler, the night manager, was looking important. A dandy, this Rickler, with puffs of gray hair, large expressive brown eyes, a pencil-thin mustache above soft lips set in a florid face. He was dressed in expensive tweeds, white shirt and red flowered tie. He walked with a swivel-hipped movement and his hands seemed to flop as he walked and talked and probably when he washed his teeth.

He looked me over with eyebrows arched, shrugged, then showed me my room which was formally Clem Stewart's, handed me the hotel keys which were Clem Stewart's and Clem Stewart's security badge. I was waiting for him to hand me the bottle Clem had emptied.

Then he went into a windy explanation of the hotel's rules and regulations which made as much impression on me as a wet match on a slippery pavement.

Rickler finished thickly: "Clem Stewart, who had been with us for years, got a little too familiar with the bar's liquor and we had to let him go. I hope you fully understand the policy of help drinking, Mr. Rock."

I said I did. However I knew Clem, the house dick that got canned. Clem was a drinker from way back, and could hold his load with the best. To suddenly discover this fault of drinking had the old "convenience" fringes hanging all over it.

But I gave Rickler the old two-fingered salute, walked into the lobby and pulled an elbow rest on the cigar counter. It had all the earmarks of the routine, dull evening.

The bar was part of my rounds. And I first saw her at the bar perched upon a

leatherette stool, drinking alone. She was tall, well dressed in a light green suit and fancy lace blouse that added grace to a very graceful smooth neck. She was about twenty-five. Dark flashing eyes accented by a fair skin and platinum hair that set straight back on her head, with a white line of scalp cutting the middle.

To describe her quickly, one would say she was Russian, with that Russian paradox of appearing cold and calculating but with a fever heat intoxication for a game called love. She was an attractive bundle of invitational disaster. Boiled down to one word: Luscious.

During one of my rounds I stopped and watched her. She was solo, and it seemed that was the way she wanted it. That didn't mean she wasn't given the opportunity to look into some handsome Joe's deep flashing eyes and listen to hilarious jokes way back from college days; but she warded off the passes with the same indifferent stare of a subway rider.

CAME one-thirty a.m. and I made another round. The lobby was showing the slow measured traces of the long drawn-out wait for the morning to grow up. The small lamps were dotting dimmed-ringed lights on the carpet, and the clerk behind the round reception desk was moving with the cramped steps of one who is just putting in time.

I yawned and moved to the bar, which was just off the lobby, two steps down. The crowd had all gone to the resting place of drinkers. The bar was empty and quiet and sedate. Six feet of blue smoke still hung in layers like fog, and the indirect lighting that glowed down from small ceiling portholes was turned out. Only the bar lights were on.

Half-way down the bar, she sat drinking, watching the ice cubes bounce in the glass. I came down and rested elbows on the far end of the bar. The bartender, a moon-faced, weary-eyed individual in a

white jacket and black bow tie came up to me."

He said: "You the new house man?"

I said: "Yeah."

He started to wipe off a glass. "Guess you know about Clem?"

I said: "Yeah." I was full of conversation. My eyes were full of the girl, conspicuous as a lone pin left standing in a bowling alley.

He raised his eyes to me. "I could get you a drink."

I said: "Thanks, buddy, but I need a little more mileage in this place for that." Then I nodded with chin outward. "The girl. She a guest here?"

"Yes, she is. Checked in yesterday. Waiting for somebody, I guess."

"Looks like a stand-up, and to a girl like that."

He looked at me and managed a sick smile. "Yeah, if you care?"

He loaded that one. If I didn't catch his meaning, brother, I was last place in the moron run for backward children.

The girl in question took a final sip and rattled her ice cubes. The bartender perked up, fixed his black tie and sauntered over to her. She said something. He nodded, looked over in my direction and shook his head. It meant yes, or come over, pal, or let's have a party?

I instinctively fixed my tie—she was that kind of a dame—and did a casual walkover to her perch.

She greeted me with a smile. "Bill tells me you're the house detective?"

I nodded. That made the bartender's name Bill. That made them acquaintances. That put me in the middle.

She batted her eyelashes a little and winked at Bill. "Are all house detectives that young and handsome?"

Bill scratched his nose. I tried a shrug and a silly grin. I felt my face get hot. I laughed and started away, but she held me with her hand on my sleeve. "Can a house detective have a drink?"

The bartender looked at me and lifted his eyebrows.

"Gimme a beer," I ordered and sat down beside her. As I did, I felt, her brush against me, just momentarily, but it carried shock, believe me.

The bartender moved to the other end where the draft set-up was, and out of earshot. I felt her fingers pinch my sleeve.

"Don't go away. I'm frightened. Please."

I got facetious. "You have me. You have a hundred and ninety pounds in six feet. I've got a gun and I'm the house man. You have protection."

She smiled; red, lush lips on a cold, white face.

My beer came with a nice top and the bartender went back to his glass cleaning. I looked at the foam and said quietly: "What's the pitch?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Forget it." I made a move to go. She made a move with her hand again to keep me from moving. She easily succeeded.

"Another beer, Bill," she ordered. "For the house man."

I was chain-lighting a smoke when the frosted glass door swung open from the street side and a tall man entered and steadied by the door. The door swung closed behind him. He was wearing a snap-brim hat that shaded small jerky eyes.

HE HAD high narrow cheekbones that drew tight skin down to his jaw. His lips pressed around a cigarette and he stood, topcoat collar up to his ears, and let his eyes range the shadowy bar. His color was pale ash-can gray and about as expressive. He moved to the far end of the bar, his steps set like fixed calipers.

The bartender ran a slow thumb along his chin and went down the wooden walk toward the stranger. I felt the girl's fin-

gers tap my hand. She kept her eyes glued to her drink.

The man in the topcoat addressed the bartender: "Still serving?"

"We stop serving at two. You got a few minutes yet."

"Make it a fast scotch."

The bartender nodded and bent down behind the bar for a scotch bottle. The tall stranger had difficulty focusing his eyes in the haze of the blue smoke. Then he seemed to straighten up and he stared down at us.

It all seemed to happen at once. The girl looked away from her glass and straight at him and gasped:

"Karl!" It was short and cryptic and forced. Then she slid into my arms.

The stranger's hand swept in and out of his coat pocket in a smooth action and came up with a black, powerful-looking gun. For the fraction of a second he hesitated, as if the action of the gun was secondary to a sudden doubt that had formed in his mind.

Two short spurts not loud, spit from the bartender's hand as he came up slowly with a small gun. The tall stranger stiffened; the gun tight in his hand as his head started to turn slowly toward the bartender. The bartender shot again.

The stranger took his time in falling. But when he decided to fall, he fell all at once, head first upon the carpeted runner.

He spread out, arms flung V-like, and his gun turned his wrist as they hit the floor.

The girl's hands were all over my lapels in a frenetic action. Then she buried her head in my chest and began to jerk in heavy sobs. The bartender, bathed in perspiration, came up to full height and bent over the bar to peek at his target.

He ran a sweaty hand through his curly black hair and came out with a wet palm. Slowly he turned to me, his weary eyes sinking deeply into his face. His breath was pulling hard, rasping like a cold

motor dragging on a nearly-dead battery.

"You saw it. He tried to hold us up. You saw it."

I saw it. I saw too much. I saw the bartender come up with a gun—a very conveniently hidden gun—and shoot fast and sure without hesitation. I said nothing. I nodded noncommittingly. The gun was still glued to the bartender's hand as if he would have to go through life just that way with it—stuck.

I reached around to the girl's shoulders and set her on the stool and held her. She plucked the handkerchief from my coat pocket and held it against her face and went into more bouncy sobs.

The bartender came out and around the bar, looked down at the dead scotch drinker, then carefully walked around him and came up to us. He laid a soft hand on her shoulder and his eyes were watery under the sweaty forehead.

"Maybe you oughta get her to her room," he advised.

She seemed to rise with me as she again buried her head in my chest. As we walked up the steps, Rickler came waddling down toward us.

"What happened, Rock? I heard..." His eyes caught the dark long shadow spread out on the floor and his jaw sagged.

I walked the girl pass him. "Better get some law and quick. And close up the bar."

The bartender said: "Good idea. I'll lock up. Will you get the police, Mr. Rickler?"

I guess Mr. Rickler said yes, but I wasn't sure. We were half-way across the deserted lobby and heading for the one open and lighted elevator. There was nothing slow or unsteady about her walk. We were trying to get as far away as possible and quick. Her face still hugged close to my chest. At that, this hotel racket had its good spots.

The elevator operator came from behind a cubby hole and nodded as we entered:

"Take us up to—" I stopped. I didn't even know her name.

From the vicinity of my chest, via handkerchief, came the slow murmur: "Ange Clarkson, six fourteen."

The guard gate closed and the glass door banged and we went up, as slowly as elevators will go when you're chasing every second.

And in my mind: *Ange Clarkson. Ange Clarkson. Ange Clarkson.* Very familiar . . . somewhere and somehow? Then the name became associated with "Karl" and I had it. Just like that, I had it. And I didn't feel so good about having it, either.

WE STOPPED at six, and the elevator boy said: "What happened in the bar, Boss?"

"Dead man. You didn't see it and keep it that way."

We left the elevator, turned to the right and went down the hallway, Jimmy Rock and a beautiful girl, arm in arm, accompanied by sobs, now slowing up to a dead stop. Ange Clarkson straightened up and handed back my handkerchief. She took a deep, clearing breath.

"I'm sorry for being such a coward. Forgive me. I—I just went all to pieces when that man brought out a gun and pointed it at us."

We made another turn, this time to the left and passed 612. "You expected him?" It sounded like a question but I didn't push it much.

She turned active eyes on me. "Expect him?" She made her answer a big question.

She stopped in front of 614 and faced me and slid two fingers up my tie and down my tie. She smiled with lips that were meant to detour a man's sensible thoughts. She bent her head a little. Being a tall girl, she didn't have to reach up too much to reach my lips. I didn't make it tough for her.

She said: "Now. There."

I pushed her away, gently. I liked it, don't misunderstand. I like beautiful dames kissing me at two-ten in the morning outside their hotel rooms. But the hallway was cold and gloomy and damp with the thought of a dead man downstairs filtered with bullet holes and the police to come, and with me operating on my first night as house man playing comforter to a witness.

Angles. Always angles.

I said: "Look, beautiful, some other time, but right now let's quit horsing around. You just saw a killing and go all to pieces with music against my chest. Now suddenly you get cuddlesome on one elevator ride." I grabbed hold of her arms tightly, and I shook her a bit: "It comes again, sister. What's the pitch?"

She made an effort to get out of my grip. Her face lined up very unsweetlike and her voice lifted a few notches, loud enough to rattle down the silent corridor like tin cans rolling off a junk truck. "Let go of me, you house dick, you!"

I shook her. "Off the scream," I warned.

"You're hurting me." Her voice went up the scale. "Let go of me!"

In spots like this, you don't have much choice. You have a dame ready to scream in a hotel hallway, and whether she is drunk, sober or conniving, you got yourself a bad time; practically, you're on the skids and greased, but good.

So you do one of three things. You run like hell—which is not so good; or you slug them to shut them up—which is worse; or you talk it low and professor-like—and hope against hope. I tried hope against hope.

"Look, sister. There'll be cops downstairs a mile long and two deep. You better lay off the charm stuff and get a good story because—"

She wiggled from my hold and brought up a hand, clawed it sharply across my

cheek. It stung and bit. She tried a number two swing, but I caught that and shoved her hard against the door.

It happens. It invariably will happen. 612 opened up and a bald-headed old man without teeth showed.

"What's going on there?"

"Drunk," I snapped. "Go back to sleep, grandpa."

Grandpa didn't go back to sleep. He came out farther in tight pajamas. He cocked his head: "Who's drunk?"

I snapped: "Relax. House man. Just making the rounds."

"Kinda loud, ain't it."

I turned to the old man. 614 opened and shut, quickly. I turned back. No more Agnes. So I waved at the old man, coyly, as if I were waving a dainty at the Queen Mary pulling out. He shut the door in my face.

And that was that. Nice and quiet and refined. Hotel business? Nuts.

I walked back to the elevator, but it was a closed, black rectangle. I turned left down a short hall to the steps where the carpet ends and the cement begins. As I reached floor five, I was thinking and trying to figure why the stranger named Karl who handled a gun like he was born with two loaded holsters on the Fourth of July should suddenly hesitate?

And I was doing a lot of "whying" which is not good business for a house dick, alias a private snooper—especially when, because of said occupational mental therapy, something sneaks up from the shadows and bangs the head, high and firmly enough to bring down the heavy curtain. I slumped and lunged crazily, grabbing at nothing, hitting rug, miles of dirty rug and then the curtain.

LEAVES were falling and I was under them. Some joker with a sharp rake was playfully gouging my face. I yelled and jumped; with consciousness hitting me first, then a breaker of nausea, then

air and sight and faces. Take your choice of faces: Angry, curious, indifferent.

I settled and shook my head. A heavy head, leaded. I was in my assigned hotel room, on the bed, and looking up at Hiran Rickler. His was the angry face and his eyes were telling me that as a house man for the Walker Hotel I was washed up.

There was the moon-faced bartender with his head hanging from exhaustion, and he was between two blank-mugged huskies that said: cops.

The indifferent face belonged to a tall, thin man dressed in a sharp brown gabardine suit with the Hollywood touch along the lapels. That could fool you because he was Captain Simms from Central Homicide, my old boss. His face was light-skinned and his eyes were light blue and his lips were gentle, but he was hell on wheels and double-tough in the clinches.

The guy pushing me and shaking my teeth and blowing stale breath in my face was Sergeant Hallran, a former flatfoot with brains to match.

Sergeant Hallran slapped my face. I rolled and sent out an arm which pushed him aside, temporarily. I sat up and blinked. Hallran came back with intent showing in two ready firsts. Captain Simms grabbed his arm and nodded him aside.

Simms addressed me: "Rock, you're in trouble again. What happened?"

I ran a hand over my cheek and felt the scratch marks with whichANGES Clark-son had bid me good night. I moved the hand up and behind my head, where a small round ball greeted me with pain.

"Sapped, Captain. High, but professionally. Sapped."

Hallran snorted: "Still dramatic, Rock."

I raised an eye, the mean one: "Still a flatfoot."

Hallran came again. I got up. Simms

was between us. "Break it. Now, Rock, you have a lot of talking to do, so do it here or down at headquarters. Some of the boys downtown, unfortunately, are just waiting for the chance."

Hallran said: "Amen, Brother."

I glanced at Rickler. He hedged my look by examining his fingernails. His lips moved together and stuck. The bartender's eyes were half-way up in his head.

So I told Simms, up to and including the sapping job on floor five. It didn't sound so good telling it. It sounded too pat; it was jumpy and inconsistent and as hurried as an impatient society doll at Reno.

Simms took out a pack and extracted a cigarette and lit it. "You knew this Karl Testman," he said.

"So it *was* Karl Testman."

Simms said tersely: "It was Karl. Back after serving his full five years. Back to meet his wife, who took her maiden name as Anges Clarkson." Simms stopped. I said nothing. Simms added: "Well, take it from there."

"Take what?"

"Take it from there. Smooth it up for me. You were on that case when you were on the force."

I said: "Karl Testman was a reformed juvenile delinquent who had a bookkeeper's job with a metal manufacturing company. He finagled fifty grand from the books and then gave himself up. Blamed it on horses. Not a cent left. He got five years."

"I understand the insurance company put a tail on his wife for years. No sign of the fifty grand. She worked as a nurse and lived up to a nurse's income. No sudden spurting of money." I raised my eyes and pointed a finger at the bartender: "So what's his story?"

Simms said: "Shot in self-defense. Said as soon as Karl showed a gun, he thought it a hold-up. He happened to have a

gun—and sure grabbed it out fast."

"Happened to have a gun?" I interrupted.

Moon-face managed to build up a weak sneer. Hallran had a healthy sneer, but Captain Simms had training—he showed a small mirthless smile. Rickler liked the looks of his fingers.

"Have you checked Anges Clarkson?" I asked.

That brought the group to attention. All eyes seemed glued to me with nasty thoughts in them. Simms came close and muttered: "Good idea. Let's go see her."

"Six fourteen," I informed.

Simms nodded: "I know."

We single-filed out and up the stairs to the sixth floor. At 614 there was a unformed cop stationed; and there was a lump forming in my throat as we went into the room. There was the untouched bed, the one window with shade down, the dresser, the small telephone desk and Anges Clarkson.

ANGES was still dressed in the green suit with the fancy lace blouse. She was sprawled unladylike on the rug, her head was resting against the telephone desk leg. Dead. Horribly dead. The only recognizable part of her face was the platinum-blond hair.

Simms pressed his lips and said sharply: "Head bashed in back and front. Found as is. Coroner just left and said she died between one and two in the morning, or minutes either way."

Simms handed me a funny look. I was looking at the girl on the floor and I shrugged. I bent down, careful not to touch her and examined her head and face and hands and fingernails. I didn't miss a trick. Then I got up and shrugged again, this time with confidence.

"Better cut the rough edges for me, kid," Simms said. "We have a witness in the room six twelve as to the noise you two created and that you threatened her.

It was around two a. m. in the morning."

I stood, just stood. Simms added; "That cheek of yours. She scratch you in the fight?"

"She scratched me," I admitted.

Hallran, almost gay, said: "Don Juan Rock. Down one, hah."

Very funny.

The bartender went into a series of harsh, sandpaper coughs. His eyes rolled up into his head and he braced himself against the bed. "Don't feel so good. I'd like some sleep."

Simms watched him. "Let him get some sleep."

Hallran poked an elbow into the bartender's side. "Go ahead and get some shut-eye. But stay in the hotel."

The bartender looked sheepishly at Rickler. Rickler turned slightly: "Have the clerk set you up with a room."

The bartender said, "Thanks," and stumbled out of the room holding onto his head.

I moved to the door, nonchalantly. A big hand reached out and grabbed my forearm and swung me around. I was facing Sergeant Hallran.

He said, sweetly: "Where'd you think you're strolling to, Sherlock?"

I looked at him. I looked at his hand and said: "Off the arm, Utility."

Dumb Hallran. Big and dumb Hallran. Strictly blockade Hallran. He tightened his grip on my arm and started to

drag me to him, which caused him to bend in the middle and naturally set his jaw out just close enough for me to haul off with my free fist. I felt his jaw give like fresh meat and his bone ripped like toothpicks breaking.

Hallran, with no eyes now, just wide openings, and a jaw that jellied, fell back and sat like a passive Buddha.

The uniformed cop came in with a, "Hey, what—" I caught his shirt, turned him around and sent him stumbling against Captain Simms. I closed the door and bounded down the hallway.

I had seconds, precious seconds to accomplish what had been in my mind ever since I checked Anges Clarkson against the telephone desk.

I ran down the corridor, passed the elevator again and down the stairs. I loped around the landing turns like a kid playing *Run, Sheep, Run*, and I hit the first floor. Ahead of me, one flight down was the hurrying figure of Bill, the bartender, headed for the basement.

HE GLANCED back over his shoulder. His face wrinkled with surprise as I dove and hit him amid-ships. We rolled on the cement floor and crashed against a steam boiler.

I went to work. I got up and cuffed his ear. He sprung and staggered and dumped. He got up slowly, shaking his head and lifting a hand in peaceful ges-

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ture. I shot in a straight right that missed his chin but landed on his windpipe. He sputtered and hawked and hacked like a dog with a chicken bone in the throat. His knees bent and his back bent and his head hung; he coughed and spit with a beet-red face and eyes pinned with fear.

As his breath came back, I moved in again. I grabbed his hair and shoved his head back. His hands went to his neck, protectingly.

I was sore. My temples hammered against my skull and I had a headache. I shouted at him, savagely:

"I don't like frames. I don't like them with murder and gals with bashed-in faces. I don't like billy's sapping my head." I jerked his head and his feet began to slip. I jacked him up. "Now, who is she?"

He tried to speak but his throat clogged, so I eased up on his head. I slapped his face, hard, purposely. "Who is she?"

His Adam's apple bounced as neck cords vibrated. Finally: "Agnes Clarkson... Karl's wife."

I slapped him again. I put meaning into it. I don't go for free-for-all murder dances around the pole, with me the pole.

Veins, like aqueducts lined his forehead. Pressure was beginning to bulge his eyes. His lips twitched and I got: "Lil Gordon."

"Where is she?"

His head swayed and hung. He slumped to the floor. He wanted sleep. He was getting it.

I wasted a lot of time. You can do that when you push too hard for answers. I looked down at the bartender. I thought of this Lil Gordon. But where? Where the hell could she be? Where the hell *else* could she be?"

I looked right and left and then walked passed the row of boilers, through an open door to the steam pressers, all lined like hospital beds in a county ward. Over to the far corner, next to a wall partition,

was a desk and a cradle phone. I lifted the phone and waited. I whistled. I waited some more.

Finally a monotonous voice: "Operator."

Sharply: "Captain Simms speaking. Police. In what room is Lil Gordon registered?" I made it sound official.

"Beg your pardon?"

"Lil Gordon. Room number. Quick."

If you play it snap-snap, you get it snap-snap. It's some sort of a psychological game or law. Came the voice respectfully: "Miss Gordon is in room eleven-twelve. Shall I ring?"

"No. Definitely no."

"Yes, sir."

I hung up. . . .

Small white glass letters on a black square background over the door announced: 1112. I hesitated. I looked down the hall. A small light was feebly trying to keep the shadows from being swallowed by the early morning's yawn.

On the door of 1112, I knocked lightly. Silence. Once more. I knocked with short staccato taps. A movement of a chair, a shuffling of feet and a hushed voice by the door:

"Yes?" Feminine. Cautious. Soft.

"Bill." I whispered.

"Just a moment, Bill."

So I waited again. This time no whistle; just wait, with my shoulder pressed firmly against the door and my feet solid, spread, like a football player ready to hit the dummy.

The seconds tugged and dragged and fooled around with the minutes, while Captain Simms was probably playing posse down the corridors looking for Bad-Man Rock, the split-second kid.

The door bolt slid back into the lock. The door opened with inch-by-inch precaution. I pushed my shoulder and swung the door open. I looped my hand around with the lunge and caught the wrist by the knob, whirled into the room, clamping

my other hand in the general direction of where the face should be.

I bull's eyed and the momentum carried us both over a chair and onto the floor. My weight broke her breath and she lay still. I got up, facing her. Her face caught life again and new breath flushed her cheeks.

I WAS looking down at Anges Clarkson, or Lil Gordon. But she wasn't blonde now, she was raven-haired, a new freshly dyed brunette. Her hair was still damp. She was dressed in a long gray dress, caught in the middle with a gold belt. She had on stockings and high-heeled shoes and she showed a lot of nylon as she bent a knee to get up.

I said: "So you're Lil Gordon."

She got to her feet and flashed her dark eyes at me. She ran a hand through her hair and then straightened her dress. She caught some more breath.

"You play rough," she puffed. "I didn't think you cared this much."

She seemed almost happy to see me, but there was a reason for it, and it was behind me closing the door.

"Guess who?" she asked.

I only had one answer and it had been in my mind for some time. I said: "Clem Stewart."

Her face pinched. I turned around and faced Clem Stewart, who was showing me a .25 with much pride and security. Clem was short, with two hundred and fifty pounds to spread around. His flabby face was screwed up as if he had a lemon in his mouth and couldn't spit it out.

He said quietly: "You figured it, eh Rock?"

"I figured it."

"Too bad."

I looked around his gun to new airplane luggage banked against the far wall and to an old gladstone bag near the radiator by the window. Clem watched me and his face loosened up.

"If you figured it, then you figure the bag, too," he said.

"Yeah. Fifty grand that Karl swiped and hid and left to his faithful wife to hold. Fifty grand for five years service in the Big House. Ten thousand a year. Not bad. But he ended up with slugs in his belly as compound interest."

Clem wiggled the gun. "Sit down, Rock, on the bed. And face me with your hands on the bed."

I did as the man said.

The now-brunette Lil Gordon walked around me, keeping away from the line of fire.

Clem backed to the bathroom door and leaned against the frame. The one window rattled and a whiff of air sneaked in the room. I was cold enough. I didn't need any help.

"Tell me more," Clem teased. They're all alike. When they got you, they want to rub it in.

"Knob-polishing and cigar-takes in the lobby, Clem, that's for you. You're too old and fat to move anything else. You handled this lopsided."

Lil stepped behind Clem and into the bathroom. She left the door open and started two faucets running full into the bowl. Running water helps soften the noise of a gun shot from a smaller caliber, and the gun in Clem's hand was a .25. Then she turned on the shower. A gal as smart as that had possibilities. Definitely.

Clem kept his eyes pasted on me. I kept going with talk. "You've been throwing it down the hatch for years, Clem, and I never saw you actually drunk. Ah, but suddenly Clem Stewart, the guzzler from way back, gets so drunk he gets fired. I don't buy that."

The brunette came to the bathroom door and I added one for her: "And I don't buy the sweet act in the hall. The loud act. With witness. A dead husband downstairs in the bar and a homespun quarrel

upstairs. It surely smells from frame.”

Clem nodded. He might be too old and fat to move something big, but he had a brain yet. He proved it.

“And now you come up here,” he said, cutting off each word sharply, “and Miss Gordon, not knowing you as the house dick, shoots you as an intruder. In self-defense, of course. It fits, Rock, it fits.”

“Except for one small item,” I injected. “Lil Gordon can’t possibly shoot me, *but Anges Clarkson Testman can!*”

ANGES CLARKSON’S face etched with worry lines. Her arms stiffened and her hands clenched. Clem turned all sour again. I scored. So I started to tell stories. You tell them fast and furious and they sound good.

I carried on: “The girl downstairs as Anges Clarkson is Lil Gordon, because Anges Clarkson gets kind of tired and frustrated hiding fifty grand of ready dough which she can’t spend, since as Anges Clarkson she’s a marked woman. And she’s supposed to be faithful to her husband Karl Testman, who gets out after five years.

“So she wires him to meet her at the Walker Hotel, where she has a set-up with the house detective who’s getting old and fat with no pension future, and a bartender stooge named Bill. The house man gets himself canned, because he needs time and the freeway to set up a fall guy.

“Anges takes care of the charm on the new man, while Bill takes care of Testman—and Clem takes care of putting Lil Gordon in Anges Clarkson’s room, face beyond recognition. Then Anges Clarkson can walk out of the Walker Hotel as Lil Gordon with fifty grand and no insurance tracers.”

They were too occupied with my great deductions to notice that my arms were braced on the bed. I smiled at Anges.

“And it plays well, beautiful,” I con-

tinued. “But you upset it. You didn’t expect resistance to your charms and you didn’t figure a rough dick. So you slapped him and drew blood from the check. My blood, beautiful. *And Captain Simms knows about this—*” this I was making up—“and he’s going to check the dead woman’s fingernails for my bloodstain to clinch his case. So?”

She forgot about Clem. She took a step forward and brushed his arm.

Clem snapped: “Look out, you fool!”

I didn’t wait for the rest. I leaped from the bed, head down and caught them both as the gun went off, angling off Anges’ hip. Both hit the bathroom door at the same time, like bargain shoppers in a revolving door.

Anges slid away to the entrance while Clem and I hit the bathroom floor together. My hand dug into his face. I lifted his head and dropped it against the tile, until it stayed down.

I got up and stepped over his body, which squeezed in just right between the tub and wall. I locked the door on him.

In the room, Anges was rolling and moaning and holding her hip. I took hold of her gray dress collar and dragged her into the closet and closed the door, tried to blot out the bitter memory of an innocent girl dead on the floor in room 614, with just platinum hair and no face to leave this world.

I sat down on the bed and thought about Karl Testman, who had a workable idea, but who trusted his wife too much. Did he hesitate with the gun under the tension of the moment? Or under the fear of shooting his wife? Or because by shooting his wife, he was also killing any chance to get the fifty grand he gave up five years to get?

I got up from the bed and picked up the telephone. Why keep chasing a long foul ball? I asked for Captain Simms. Let him come up and bat his brains on it.



While producer Wells shot a dangerous water scene with stunt-man Bill Ryan, two-timing Mrs. Wells cooed on the sidelines with an oily stranger.



With Mrs. Wells was her co-worker on a children's charity drive, glamorous Merna . . . who *almost* got carried away by Ryan's escape from drowning.



Going to Merna's office, Ryan threatened to prove her charity a fraud—when they heard Mrs. Wells scream. An ice-pick had cooled her . . .



. . . and left Merna and Ryan framed, in Michael Morgan's thrilling novel—"Charity Begins At Homicide"—in the Sept. issue, published Aug. 2nd.

KEEP YOUR MONEY SIDE UP

Her hands lashed out at
their faces . . .

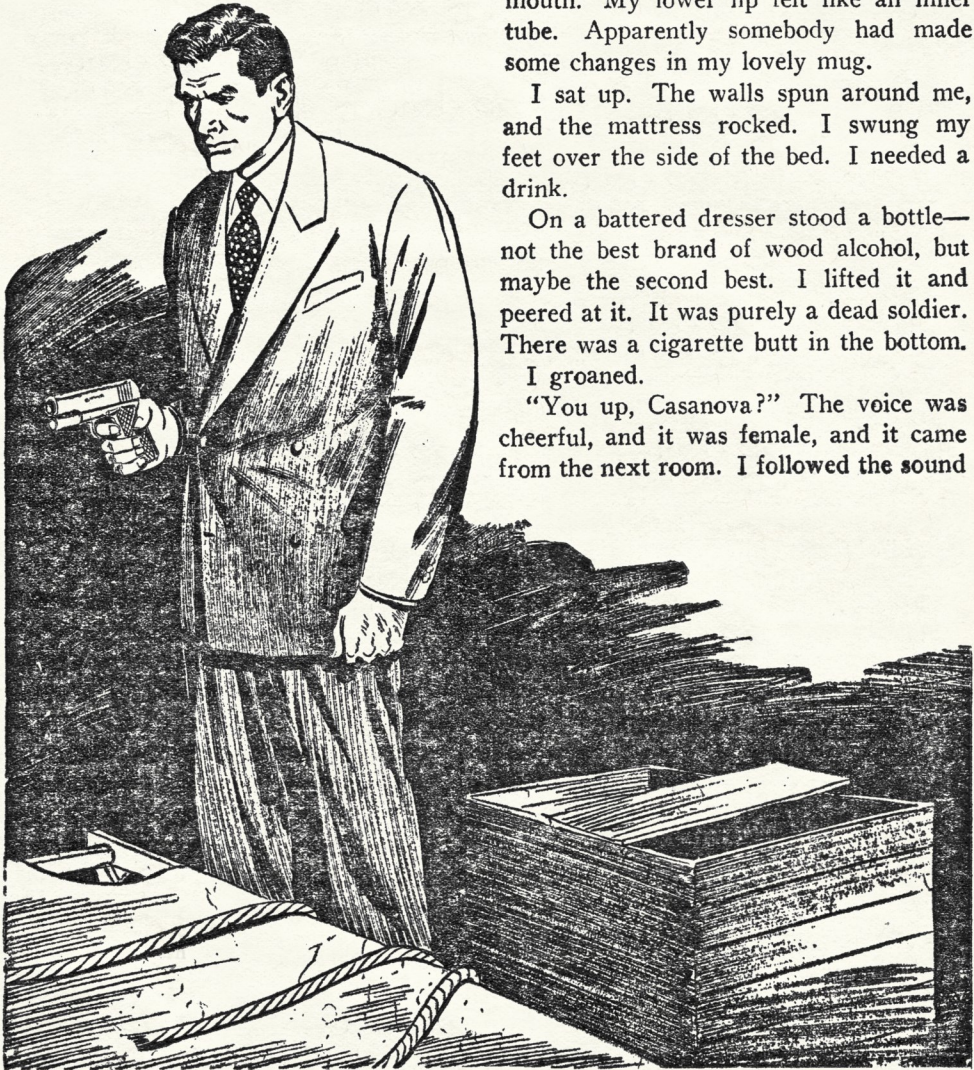


*When the rod-happy cardsharps tried to heist
a Barbary Coast flame's cold-deck winnings,
Shamus Mike Blair rolled up his sleeves—
and started playing for coffins.*

CHAPTER ONE

Flame's Buddies

I WAS lying on a strange iron bed in a strange bare room and my head throbbed. Something told me I had been rolled, but outside of that I was feeling no pain.



It had been quite a night.

A tune was racing through my head, and a flashing smile, and flaming red hair and taunting lips

A fog horn moaned, so I knew I was still in San Francisco.

This, for some obscure alcoholic reason, made me very happy. I tried to whistle. Nothing came out. I touched my mouth. My lower lip felt like an inner tube. Apparently somebody had made some changes in my lovely mug.

I sat up. The walls spun around me, and the mattress rocked. I swung my feet over the side of the bed. I needed a drink.

On a battered dresser stood a bottle—not the best brand of wood alcohol, but maybe the second best. I lifted it and peered at it. It was purely a dead soldier. There was a cigarette butt in the bottom.

I groaned.

"You up, Casanova?" The voice was cheerful, and it was female, and it came from the next room. I followed the sound

Rapid-Fire Detective Novelette

By HANK SEARLS

and staggered into a tiny kitchen. There were two eggs frying on an electric plate and a jug of wicked-looking coffee. Tending the whole mess was the most beautiful cook I had ever seen.

She had red hair and taunting lips. She was wearing a flimsy housedress and she was flung together like the girl on a hardware calendar. She seemed vaguely familiar. I felt as if I ought to know her name.

"Hello," I said as if I'd known her all my life.

"Hello, Casanova," she said. "Remember me?"

"How could I forget?" I lied gallantly.

"What's my name?"

"Name?" I stumbled. "What's in a name, anyway? You are as gorgeous as a spring day. I will call you Gorgeous."

"You, Casanova, are drunk. You will call me Flame, which is my name."

"Flame? Very, very pretty. A little corny but very, very pretty. It matches your hair."

"That's why I picked it."

"The hair?"

"The name. Have a cup of coffee."

I had a cup of coffee. It was just a little thicker than pea soup, but it cleared my misty brain.

"And now, Flame, do you mind telling me how I got here?"

"Not at all, Casanova. I brought you up because I hate to see a good man sleeping in the gutter, which is where you planned to spend the night."

"The name isn't Casanova. It's Mike. Blair."

"Last night it was Casanova. Casanova Blair, king of the underworld, czar of the Barbary Coast, emperor of the waterfront."

I shook my throbbing head. "I must have been drunk."

"Yes," she said. "You were drunk. You were cooking with gas. You were so fractured that they almost threw you out of the Club Tornado, and when you're that

fractured, brother, you're pulverized."

"Club Tornado . . . Club Tornado."

The name struck a chord. "A dive down in North Beach, with palm leaves all over and goldfish swimming in a tank behind the bar?"

"That's it."

"And you're the singer. Right?"

"That's right."

"You were singing requests for me. Right?"

She nodded. "Until the request got too rugged. Some of the things you asked me to sing!"

A little man began hitting me on the head with a large sledge hammer. I had another cup of coffee.

"I seem," I remarked, "To remember something else."

"That's right, Mike."

I felt my lower lip. "Something about a fight."

"You were in a fight, all right. That's why I brought you here."

"Why did I start a fight? And how does the other guy look?"

"Other guys, Mike. And you didn't start it. They did."

"There was more than one?"

"Yes, there were three. And they had guns."

My heart dropped into my fluttering stomach. "Guns? I *must* have been drunk."

"You were drunk, all right, but it didn't slow you up any. You were out of this world."

I looked at her closely.

"Are you sure you aren't thinking of somebody else? Ordinarily I can't punch my way out of a paper bag."

She laughed. "Well, you could last night. Of course, you talked as if you owned the town. That might have had something to do with it."

"I did?"

"You said you were the biggest wheel in San Francisco. Casanova Blair, pride

of the crime belt. All you had to do, you said, was whistle, and you could fill the place as full of hoods as a prison yard at lunch hour. That slowed them up, and in the meantime you started pitching bottles."

"And they had *guns*?" I couldn't get over it.

"They had guns. They were shooting at you, too. That only seemed to make you madder."

"WHAT was it? A stickup?" If I'd broken up a heist at the Club Tornado, it ought to take care of the liquor situation for a while.

"No, Mike, they were after me."

"After *you*?" This was even better. "What for?"

She hesitated. "Maybe they thought I had some money. But you stepped in." She gazed at me seriously. "Drunk or sober, you were fine, Mike."

"Oh, well." I began modestly, shrugging.

She stepped toward me. "Shut up," she said. "You're scared stiff at what you did, and I know it, and I love you for it." She put her hands lightly behind my neck, drew down my head, and kissed me, hard. Her lips were warm and soft, and there was a faint smell of good, clean soap in her hair. I felt my blood pressure rising.

She stepped away. "You wouldn't let me thank you last night."

"I *wouldn't*? Say, what was I drinking, anyway? This doesn't sound like me at all."

She shrugged. "I guess not. Well, how about some eggs?"

My stomach turned over. "Not right now, thanks," I muttered weakly. "You wouldn't have a drink around somewhere, would you?"

She took a bottle out of the kitchen cabinet and set it on the table. She sat down to her eggs. And I drank my break-

fast. I refreshed my bloodshot eyes with another look. She was out of this world. I wondered why she was singing in a hole like the Club Tornado and living in a dive like this.

"You're new at the Club Tornado, aren't you?"

She nodded. "I'm new in San Francisco."

"What are you doing singing in a dump like that? A girl with your looks ought to be hitting the big time."

She shook her head sadly.

"No voice," she said. "As you'd know if you'd been sober. A song in my heart, but just no voice. Booking agents go crazy at first, but there always comes a time when I have to sing, and that finishes me. Of course, in a place like the Club Tornado, nobody hears me anyway, so it's all right."

The fluttering in my stomach was beginning to settle down. "You can sing to me any time, honey. Any time at all."

She smiled, and the dingy kitchen was brighter. I tried to gather up the ends of my own private lost weekend. I had been on some sort of job, a job for a client. Client, client. It wasn't as if I had a lot of them.

Suddenly it came to me—Mrs. Chalmers. Mrs. Chalmers was purely routine. She suspected Mr. Chalmers and his private secretary. So I had tailed Mr. Chalmers to the Club Tornado and found that the Missus was right about Mr. Chalmers but wrong about the secretary.

Actually, it was a waitress in the company cafeteria. Now all I had to do was break the good news to Mrs. Chalmers, tell her to be sure to mention me to her friends, and pick up fifty bucks. I shoved my chair away from the table.

"Well, honey, thanks for the lodging and the liquids. Are you singing tonight?"

She looked up quickly. "You aren't leaving?"

"It's breaking my heart, but I'm a

working man. I thought I might drop down to the Club Tornado tonight, to see if your voice is as bad as you say."

"I don't think the Club Tornado will open tonight. You should have seen it when we left." A shadow crossed her eyes. "Don't leave, Mike."

It sounded attractive as hell, but fifty bucks is fifty bucks. I got up and walked behind her. I ran my hand through her hair. "I'll be back this evening. If you don't have to sing, we'll go out and spend some of the cabbage I'm picking up today. Stick with me, honey. You'll be wearing diamonds."

She turned and grabbed my wrists. Her hands were shaking. "Please, Mike. Don't go."

I wavered. "What is it? Is there something bothering you?"

She walked to the window. "No. Skip it. Go ahead. I'll be here when you come back."

MRS. CHALMERS took the news well; in fact she seemed overjoyed. I could almost see the alimony shining in her eyes. She wrote me a check for fifty clams and I went to my office to pick up my mail. There was nothing but bills, so I banged out a couple of reports.

For some reason, I couldn't concentrate. The redhead was on my mind. She was beautiful, and she was very much available, but that wasn't all. There was something about her that bothered me.

She was frightened. She was so frightened that she'd *begged* me to stay with her. What was she worried about? Then I remembered what she'd said about the fight. The men had carried guns, and they had been after her. She'd said that she didn't know why, unless they'd thought she had money; but that didn't ring true.

Why would they go into a bar full of men and try to hold up the singer? They wanted her for something else, and suddenly I felt that *she* knew why. I grabbed

my hat and quickly hopped into a taxi.

I lunged up the dark, creaking stairs to her apartment, three steps at a time. I knocked. There was no answer. I tried the lock and walked in.

The place was a shambles. It looked as if Gargantua had been playing leapfrog with the furniture. It was scattered all over the living room. The drawers in the kitchen were pulled out and tossed on the floor. The mattress in the bedroom was slit, the pillows were torn, and there were feathers on the floor ankle-deep. Flame's clothes were tossed everywhere.

No one was home. Well, maybe she'd been looking for something in one of her drawers. Maybe she'd stepped out for a moment to buy a paper. Maybe she'd gone to work.

And maybe she'd been snatched.

For a moment I wondered if I wanted to go on with this. I wasn't a cop any more, and Flame wasn't my client, and there was nothing I could do anyway, except waste time. I touched my lower lip and asked myself if I wanted more of the same. For all I knew, Flame was a cheap crook, a stool-pigeon maybe, who'd been ferreted out by a hoodlum who owed her something.

Then I remembered the look in her eyes when she'd asked me to stay. . . .

I decided to find her. The trouble was, there was no place to look.

Idly, I kicked at the clothes on the floor. I looked around in the kitchen and the bathroom. Not a clue, naturally. I decided to go to the Club Tornado. Maybe she *had* gone to work, after all.

"Hold it, buddy."

I jumped as if I'd been jabbed with an electric needle. I swung toward the door.

A natty young fellow, with clear gray eyes and thin lips, stood in the doorway. In his hand he cradled a stubby .32 automatic.

"Hold it," he said again. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

He stepped toward me. "Let's not play games. Where is she?"

I decided not to play games.

"Flame? I don't know. I just got here. Maybe she's at work."

"She's not at work, and you know it. Where's the money?"

"Now *there*, Mac, you got me. I don't know anything about any money."

"Where's Nino?"

"I don't know any Nino, either. I just met Flame last night. I don't know where she is, if she isn't at work. I don't know who messed up her apartment. If you're a friend of hers, you better get to looking for her, and cut out the detective-story stuff."

He didn't seem to be listening. He gazed at my face thoughtfully. "What's your racket? I don't remember seeing you at Nino's."

"That's not unlikely—I never heard of him."

"What're you doing in Flame's apartment?" His voice was tight. It looked as if I was rapidly becoming one corner of an eternal triangle. I thought pretty fast.

"I'm a theatrical agent, caught her act last night and thought I might get her a booking at a better place."

"Where's she working?"

"At the Club Tornado."

He motioned me with the gun. "Come on. We're going. And she had better be there."

He slipped the gun into his coat pocket and left his hand in with it. He stood aside as I went out the door, and with his free hand gave me a very quick and expert frisking. He whistled for a taxi and we sat in the rear seat, very chummy, me with the .32 in my ribs.

I began to get irritated.

"Listen, buddy," I said. "I can get you for assault with a dangerous weapon. I—"

"Shut up," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Meet Mr. Slay-Boy

WE DREW up in front of the Club Tornado, and my friend paid the driver. The place was just opening up. We walked in. The Club Tornado looked like its name.

The goldfish tanks behind the bar were shattered. The goldfish, apparently, had lost their happy home in the brawl last night. There was a tiny, ominous hole in the wall behind the piano, and the rest-room attendant was sweeping up broken glass. The bartender a long, loose-jointed character with buck teeth, was shining glasses. He was very disconsolate. He looked up and saw me and turned white.

"Say, you're the guy. Listen, Blair, the next time you wanta play hero, do it somewhere else."

"That's a fine way to talk to a guy that broke up a robbery in your cheap joint. I thought you jokers would roll out the velvet carpet for me."

"Yeah? Look at the place. We hire a bouncer for the strong-arm stuff. And we carry insurance for robbery. So next time you get the urge to be a boy scout, try the bar across the street."

My buddy with the gun raised his eyebrows. He slid onto a barstool and nodded to me, his hand still in his pocket.

"Go on," he said to the barkeep. "You interest me. What did what's-his-name—" he jerked his head at me. "What did Blair do last night?"

The bartender shrugged. "Some strong-arm boys busted in and started for the singer. A hold-up, that's all. Everybody is taking it real easy except Casanova here. He's got to shoot off his mouth and start heaving bottles." The bartender swung his arm around. "Look at the place. And it almost got into the papers."

My buddy looked at me thoughtfully.

He turned back to the bartender.

"You say they started for the singer first?"

"That's right."

"Where is she tonight?"

The barkeep shrugged. "Hasn't showed up. Maybe she figured we wouldn't open up after yesterday. Well, she can't sing anyway."

"Would it be all right," I asked my friend, "if I had a drink? Or don't you approve of drinking?"

He nodded and ordered himself a martini. I ordered a shot of bourbon and a glass of beer.

"Cheers," I said. "Would you please take your hand off that gun so I can enjoy my drink?"

He smiled tightly. "I guess you're not tied up with Nino, if you broke up that job last night. Why'd you stick your neck out for Flame?"

"Like I said, I'm a theatrical agent. I hate to see talent shoved around."

He shook his head. "You're not a theatrical agent. You're a cop."

Certain parties in the police department would have loved to have heard that one.

"That's a lie," I said.

"You're right," he said pensively. "You're not a cop. You're a private eye."

Only the boys who live near the underworld can spot a cop or a private eye. Once they do, there's no use trying to fool them.

"Yeah, I'm a private investigator. Why? You have anything you want investigated?"

He thought for a while.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I want you to find Flame."

"Why?"

"I have reasons. First, why were you in her apartment if you're not a theatrical agent?"

"I like her looks. I wanted to take her out tonight. But when I got there she was gone, so I decided to look around. I'm

just one of those very curious guys."

His voice was low.

"You wanted to take her out? Well, just get that idea out of your head right now. It'll be healthier for you."

"Oh?" I sipped my beer. "You know, Buster, you're beginning to get on my nerves, waving a gun at me and talking like that. I don't appreciate it, and I don't scare, so why not quit?"

"Listen, Casanova, or whatever your name is—"

"Mike. Mike Blair. And you?"

"Kid Farrow. Blair, lay off Flame Condon. Unless you want to end up under a stone." He sounded as if he meant it.

I shrugged. "That's up to her. You say you want to find her. Why?"

• "You want to take on the job?"

"I don't work for free."

"If you find her, I'll pay you."

"Oh no. I don't operate that way. Twenty-five bucks a day, and expenses. And fifty dollars in advance."

He reached into his pocket and hauled out a roll. He peeled off fifty dollars and slapped them on the bar. His fingers were slim and sure, and he handled money like a gambler. I picked up the money and stuffed it into my wallet.

"Okay," I said. "Now you can brief me on everything you know. I assume that the same guys that tried to snatch her last night got her today?"

He nodded. "If she was snatched, they snatched her."

"Why?"

He looked at the bartender, shining glasses a short way up the bar. "Say," he called. "Are you missing any of this? You want us to move closer, so you won't strain an eardrum?"

The bartender looked up, drooling injured innocence. "Whatta ya mean? I'm not listenin' to ya."

"Come on," said Farrow. I followed him to a booth. He glared at the bartender and leaned over the table.

"I'M A gambler," he said. "I make my living knocking over the big boys. There's this place in Reno—Nino Costa's. Big-time operation, five roulette tables, eight crap tables, about a dozen blackjack games. Well, I took a blackjack game for twelve grand in one afternoon.

"I guess Nino let it get that high because he figured he'd roll me before I got out of town. Only, I shook the hood he put on me and left town that night, for New York."

"Yeah," I said. "Very clever. What's that got to do with Flame?"

"Flame was singing at Nino's. We were—"

I thought of the beautiful redhead falling for a jerk like this. "Go ahead," I said impatiently. "I guess you gave her the dough so if they rolled you, they wouldn't find it."

He nodded quickly. "That's right."

"That was thoughtful. Then what did you do?"

"As I say, I lit out for New York. I told Flame to hang on in Reno for two weeks, and then quit and come to San Francisco. She sent me her address when I was in New York."

"So Nino's boys found out where she was, and decided to pick up the dough before you did. Right?"

"I guess so."

It began to look as if the boys who had Flame were playing for keeps. I didn't like it.

"Suppose I give you back your fifty bucks and we call in the FBI? If she's kidnapped, they'll find her. By the time I track her down, she's liable to be dead."

"I don't want the FBI in on it."

"Why not? All you did was win some money. You have nothing to hide. Or have you?"

He spoke slowly, his lips tense.

"I don't want the FBI."

"Even if it means this guy Costa might

knock her off?" I thought it over. "All right. I'll work on it for twenty-four hours. If I don't have any luck, I'm calling in the Feds. Take it or leave it."

"If you call the cops, I'll get you if it's the last thing I do."

I began to dislike Kid Farrow.

"What's the matter? You afraid you won't get your money back if we call the cops? What do you want? The girl or the money?"

He looked at me sullenly.

"That's what I thought," I said. "All right. As I say, I'll work on it until tomorrow. If it looks as if I'm spinning my wheels, I'm bringing in the cops." I finished my beer and started for the door.

I stepped out into the foggy night. I heard Farrow call my name and ignored him. I started down the street, looking for a taxi. I heard the door of the Club Tornado open and close.

"Blair? Hey, Blair!"

A man in a gray overcoat, collar turned up, stepped out of an alley ahead of me and sidled past. A short, fat man, with his hat pulled down. I heard Farrow's quick footsteps, following me.

Then there was a muffled shot in the gray void behind. I spun and dodged into a doorway. I heard the slap of running feet on the wet pavement and the clash of gears. A car pulled away from the curb, lights dim.

Cautiously I poked my head around the corner. I heard a groan. I broke into a run for the Club Tornado, my heart pounding. I stumbled over something soft and heavy and looked down. It was a man. I stooped and turned him over.

In the yellow glare of the street lamp I saw his face—Kid Farrow. A dark stain spread over the sidewalk, running off into the gutter. And in the gutter was a police .38. Whoever had shot him wasn't going to get caught with the gun. . . . I felt for a pulse. There was none.

Well, I thought, it couldn't have hap-

pened to a nicer guy. And now there'd be no objection to the F.B.I. I stepped into the Club Tornado, determined to wash my hands of the whole thing.

The bartender was just hanging up the phone. When he saw me, he almost dropped his uppers.

Instead, he very calmly just raised his hands.

"What the hell?" I said. "Call the cops. There's a guy been murdered outside."

Slowly the barkeep lowered his hands, watching me keenly.

"Call the cops," I said again. "What's wrong with you?"

"I called 'em. I called 'em when I heard your shot."

"My shot? I didn't shoot him and you know it."

"No," said the bartender quickly. "I never said you did. I never said you did, Mr. Blair. You gonna stick around and wait for 'em?"

"Of course I'm going to stick around. Why not?"

The bartender looked away. "Sure. Why not?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "What are you going to tell them? I just have a feeling—"

The barkeep looked at me eagerly. "You got nothing to worry about. I'll tell 'em it was self-defense. I saw him run out there and call after you. And he had a gun on you when you came in—I saw that."

The guy was certainly getting ready to hang me!

"Listen," I said. "I didn't—" In the distance I heard the lonely howl of a siren. "I didn't—"

What was the use? He wouldn't believe me, and the cops wouldn't believe me.

Even my very own mother wouldn't believe me.

I stepped back into the night. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Laddy on the Lam

THE trouble with a guy on the lam is that he always heads for the cheapest flophouse in town. And strange as it seems, that's where the cops go to look for him.

But not old Mike. I was too smart for that. I was going to take my fifty bucks and register at the best hotel on Nob Hill. Then I was going to wait until things cooled down, and light out for Reno to solve the Flame Condon kidnapping, and incidently clear my fair name of the charge of murder.

I thought of all this as I stumbled through the alleys in the fog. I thought it all out as I swung onto the Powell and Mason cablecar. I thought of it as I entered the ornate lobby of the Nob Hill Hotel and slogged through a carpet so thick you could drown in it.

I told the room clerk that I'd like a quiet room. I was still thinking of how smart I was when I signed the register. And I was feeling absolutely brilliant by the time I dropped off to sleep.

I slept like a drugged alligator for about three hours. Then something deep in my subconscious awakened me. I had forgotten something. Whatever I had forgotten loomed bigger and bigger in my mind.

I lit a cigarette. I tried to remember what I'd done. I knew my fingerprints were on the glass at the Club Tornado, so all the cops had to do was check with the FBI and the Navy file would tell them who they were looking for. All right. The bartender had heard Farrow call me by name, anyway. Nobody had paid any attention to me when I registered in the hotel.

When I had registered at the hotel—

That was it! I tried to think of the name I had registered under. Joe Smith?

Robert Brown? Casanova? John Doe?
No, I'd registered under my *own name!*
Just plain Michael Blair.

What a hot criminal I was.

A guy like me couldn't shake a blind detective with a broken leg. A guy like me should see a psychiatrist.

I jumped out of bed and threw on my pants and shirt. I draped a tie around my neck and tossed on my coat. I started for the door.

I heard whispering outside. Then: "Okay, Blair, open up."

I whirled and looked for the fire-escape. There were twelve stories of good gray fog outside my window, and the fire-escape was three rooms down.

I walked across the room and opened the door. The room filled with San Francisco's finest . . . in and out of uniform. A big, dark-eyed detective named Morello, who had gone to school with me on the wrong side of Market Street, eyed me curiously.

"I thought I recognized the name. Well, Blair, it seems as if you're in the soup. Why did you do it?"

"I didn't."

"Naturally," said Morello. "Naturally. Well, come on."

"Listen," I said. "Listen Morello. That barkeep had the wrong idea. I know who killed that guy. He was a short, fat character, and he stepped out of an alley in front of me. He drove off in a car."

Morello scratched his nose. "Did you see the guy's face?"

"Not very well. It was foggy."

"What kind of a car?"

"Like I say, it was foggy."

"Come on. . . ."

I sat in Morello's office. He lounged behind a battered desk, smoking a cigar. He offered me a cigarette. I took it.

"Well, Blair, it's been a long time."

I nodded. This was going to be the friendly treatment.

He smiled. "What are you doing for

a living now? What's the latest dope?"

He knew what I was doing for a living, and he probably knew I knew. I sighed.

"After I got out of school, I went on the L.A. police. Now I'm licensed private investigator. Divorce and insurance cases."

"Is that so? This guy Farrow, the deceased. Where did you meet him?"

"Before we start playing quiz games, am I under arrest?"

Morello shrugged and pushed out his lips. "Well, yes."

"What's the charge?"

"Suspicion of murder."

"You don't expect me to talk without a lawyer, do you?"

MORELLO flicked his cigar. "In a case like this, why not? It doesn't look too serious—maybe self-defense. Why fool with a lot of red tape? Tell us what happened, and maybe we can get you out on bail."

Same old stuff. Underplay the crime, convince the criminal that everything will be all right if he just cooperates, get his signature on a confession.

"Look, Morello, I was in this racket once myself. You can cut out *that* stuff."

He tried once again. "We went to school together. Give me a break. Make me look good."

"I appreciate your problems, Morello. I liked you in school, and I like you now. But I didn't kill the guy, and I want a lawyer."

He shrugged. "Which lawyer?"

"Tony Driscoll."

He pressed a button, and a little turn-key came in.

"Lock him up, Pete. And call Tony Driscoll. . . ."

I'd been on the wrong side of the bars once before, for breaking into the wrong room in a divorce case. That time, they'd tossed me in with a bunch of drunks. It

had been kind of chummy, in a smelly sort of way.

But this time the taxpayers were providing me with a private cell, outside exposure, inside plumbing, and an inner-spring plank to sleep on. I climbed onto the bunk and lit a cigarette. I dropped off to sleep and dreamed of scaffolds, and gas chambers, and hot seats, and flaming red hair. . . .

At some unearthly hour the next morning a bell jangled and the normal prison noises began. I needed a shave, and a toothbrush, and a drink of whiskey. I hollered for the guard.

He arrived, towing Tony Driscoll, the poor man's mouthpiece. Tony had a shaving kit, cigarettes, and no whiskey. He draped his long body over the bunk and lit a cigarette. He mussed his carefully rumped hair.

"Well, Tony," I said bitterly. "I hope this isn't too early in the morning for you."

"Sorry, Mike," he said. "I wasn't home. I just got word. What's the story?"

I told him the story. He only showed interest once, and that was when I mentioned the redhead and told him to get the FBI on the case.

"That redhead," he said. "She was really all right?"

"She was," I said. "Are we going to discuss her, or are you going to put that massive brain of yours to work and get me out?"

"Get you out? How can I get you out? There's no bail for murder."

"Yes, Tony, but I didn't murder the guy." I looked at him closely. "Or do you think I did?"

He walked to the tiny window. "If you killed a man, even in self-defense, I'm the president of the WCTU."

I relaxed. "Thanks, Counsellor. What'll I do?"

Tony chewed his lip thoughtfully. "I don't exactly know." There was a tap

at the door of the cell. The gate opened and Morello shuffled in.

"You've got your lawyer now, Blair. Come down to my office. I'd like a statement."

We sat in Morello's office, with a stenographer, and Morello began reading from a notebook.

"It seems that the bartender thinks Farrow had a gun on you when you came in. He heard you arguing about a girl named Flame—a singer at the Club Tornado. Then, it says here, you moved to a booth. Your voices were raised, you argued in the booth.

"Then you got up and left. Farrow followed you. He called your name. There was a shot outside and the bartender looked out the door and saw Farrow lying on the sidewalk. Then you came back in. What have you got to say?"

"I—"

Tony broke in: "Did you question the bartender, Morello? Personally?"

Morello looked up. "Me? No. These are the facts that the boys on the night shift got. Why?"

Tony shrugged. "I just wanted to know." He walked to the window. "No, Morello, you're on the wrong track. My client wasn't even in the bar. He never saw Farrow."

I GASPED. Tony sounded as if he were taking it in the arm. My prints were on the beer glass at the Club Tornado, the bartender had seen me twice. Tony's sad story just wouldn't stick.

Morello laughed. "Honest, Driscoll, sometimes I wonder. The bartender will identify him. Anyway, we're checking the prints on the glass he used. What's your angle?"

"I want a line-up."

"What for? We've got a print, probably. You're wasting our time."

"I want a line-up anyway. The print won't prove anything. My client was in

there the night before—maybe you have a glass he used then. How do I know?”

Morello pushed a button and a cop came in. “Chuck, call the bartender at the Club Tornado. Have him get down here right away. Then get seven or eight vagrants out of the cell-block for a police line-up.” He looked at Tony bitterly. “Or do you want a couple of dozen, to make it harder?”

Tony said calmly. “Seven or eight will be fine. Well, do you mind if I go back to the cell with my client?”

Morello shook his head and left with the guard. When they closed the cell door, I swung on Tony.

“That bartender can identify me. Besides, they have my prints on the glass.”

“Mike, you used to be a cop. Would any of the boys on the night shift be around this time of the morning?”

“No. Why?”

“Then there won’t be anybody at the line-up who saw the bartender last night.”

“Nobody but me. What are you driving at?”

“Listen. Whatever happens at the line-up, don’t be surprised. Even if the bartender doesn’t identify you. Understand?”

“He’ll identify me. Don’t forget, he saw me two days in a row. Besides, what about that glass with my prints on it?”

Tony lit a cigarette.

“Suppose he claims that he didn’t wash the glasses. Suppose he says the guy that shot Farrow might have had your glass from the night before?”

I peered at him in the gloom of the cell. An idea filtered into my head.

“You’re not going to try to bribe this joker, are you? Hell, Tony, you’ll lose your license—they’ll disbar you.”

He recoiled as if I’d hit him. “Mike! Bribe him? How can you say such a thing? Now just sit tight, and leave it to Uncle Tony.”

He pounded on the cell door and was

gone . . . leaving me with my thoughts.

It wasn’t fifteen minutes before the turnkey came to get me. He led me to a paneled room with a miniature stage at one end. There were half-a-dozen drunks and pickpockets lined up, horsing around in front of the footlights. When I walked in, they stopped and leered at me. A big cop was in charge.

“Okay, you guys, quiet down. When the man comes in to see you, keep your eyes straight ahead. No pointing, no fooling around. Understand?”

I stood near the end of the line, trying to see past the footlights. The door opened and Tony Driscoll walked in with Morello. A seedy character followed them, a man I’d never seen before, a man who needed a shave. A very self-conscious man, with shifty eyes, who looked as if he wanted to leave. A thought struck me.

“Okay,” growled Morello, turning to Shifty-Eyes. “You see them all. Which one is the man who was in the Club Tornado the night of the murder?”

Shifty-Eyes moved to the foot of the stage and gave us a bleary inspection. Finally he shook his head. “I don’t see him here, nohow, Inspector. He ain’t any of these.”

Morello jerked as if he’d been stabbed in the back. “*What?*”

I tried to look as if I’d known it all the time.

“Look ’em over again,” barked Morello.

Shifty-Eyes inspected us again. He wagged his head sadly. “Nope, Inspector. The guy in the bar was kind of skinny. He ain’t here.”

“All right,” said Morello sharply. He turned to Driscoll. “We’ll have word on those prints this afternoon. I’m holding your client until we find out.”

“Just a minute,” said Tony. He looked at Shifty-Eyes. “That glass you showed the police. Had it been washed from the night before?”

The character looked away. “Don’t

tell my boss, but I didn't have time to wash them glasses. Busy day."

MORELLO acted as if he were going to blow a gasket. "You say that glass hadn't been washed from the night before?"

Shifty-Eyes shook his head regretfully. "Can I go now?"

Morello grunted. "Yeah. Get out. But stay in town!" He looked at Tony. "You know," he said dangerously, "if I didn't know you better, I *might* think you'd been doing a little cabbage-passing on the side."

Tony frowned. "Watch it, Morello. Did you ever hear of slander?"

Morello grated: "I'm keeping Blair anyway. There's something funny about this."

Tony said: "Good, I'm glad to hear that. Blair hasn't got much dough, but when we slap an attachment on your salary for false arrest, we'll both be fat."

Morello reddened. "All right," he yelled suddenly. "Get you and that phony private eye out of here. But see he stays in town, or so help me, I'll—"

Tony nodded toward the door and we left. Shifty-Eyes followed us out. As we rounded the corner toward the desk, he tapped Tony on the shoulder. His voice was hoarse: "Say, buddy, you think that job was worth another fin?"

Tony reached into his and slipped him a bill. "Okay. Now stay out of sight. In about ten minutes, every cop in town'll be looking for you."

The little guy scurried away.

"Tony," I said quietly. "How the hell did you get rid of the *real* bartender?"

He started to answer.

"Shut up," I whispered. A man was standing at the desk as we passed. A tall, lanky guy. A guy I'd seen before. The guy I'd seen behind the bar at the Club Tornado. I turned my face away, my heart pounding. The desk sergeant

had my valuables—but he could keep them. Then we were out in the street, and climbing into Tony's car.

"How'd I get rid of the *real* one?" said Tony. "That's easy. I just beat him to the punch. I didn't get rid of him."

"You're telling me," I breathed. "You're telling me. . . ."

We went to a little bar called the Friars and sat in a booth near the back. We ordered two boilermakers and lit two cigarettes. My hands were clammy and I still needed a shave.

"Well," said Tony.

"Well," I answered.

A pretty blonde waitress arrived with our drinks and was rewarded by Tony with a pat on the hand.

We lifted our glasses. "I guess," said Tony, "I'm the cagiest, smartest, sharpest character practicing law in this town."

"I'll say you were," I agreed. "What are you going to do for a living when Morello finds out what you pulled?"

"Break rocks at San Quentin," Tony said sadly.

"Greater love hath no man," I said sweetly. "It was such a nice practice, too."

We drank to Tony's practice. We drank to Tony. We ordered another round and drank to the waitress. We drank to Morello, then we drank to me.

"Mike," said Tony. "From here on, you've got to clear yourself. I don't want to be around when Morello discovers that I ran in a ringer on him. I'm leaving town."

"He's already found it out," I said. "The *real* bartender was at the sergeant's desk when we left."

Tony shrugged. "Well, what are you going to do?"

I thought it over. "I'm going to Reno. I'm going to find that girl, if she's still alive. Then I'm going to head for Outer Mongolia. I'll come back when Morello drops dead."

"That seems like a very good idea, but why bother with the girl?"

He had something there. Why bother with the girl? Why not head for Mexico, or Canada, right away? Wait until things cooled down, and then come back and try to clear myself? I thought of the red hair and the laugh that had brightened up the grimy kitchen; the taunting lips and the desperate look in her eyes when I'd left. I decided to find the girl.

"First the girl, *then* the Big Skip," I said. "I'll need some money."

"How do you like that?" said Tony reaching for his hip pocket. "I wreck my career for you and now you want me to pay for the privilege. Such a client shouldn't happen to a dog. Will two hundred do you any good?"

"Thanks, Tony," I said. "Thanks a lot."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Gambling Fool

I FIGURED the cops would be watching the municipal airport, so I grabbed a cab and went to a little field near Palo Alto. I bargained with a hangar bum who wore a tattered Air Force jacket and owned a battered surplus trainer.

We staggered into the air heading East. It was very rough, especially going over the mountains, rougher than the Aleutians in '41. But we made it, landing with a bounce and a bump and a sigh of relief at a little airport outside Reno. I tottered out, shook hands with the pilot, and called town for a taxi.

Reno was hot, glaring hot after San Francisco. I registered at an air-conditioned hotel under the name: "Paul Reinsen." I was very proud of the name. I might not be so smart, but I had improved since the night before. I bought a razor and finally got my shave and shower. Then I gulped a beer.

I was in Reno, and the cops were looking for me in San Francisco. What did I do now?

Well, the only way to get a line on the redhead was to find the gambling establishment of one Nino Costa.

Of course, I might call the FBI. But suppose I was wrong? If I was wrong, the FBI wouldn't do the girl any good and I'd land in the same smelly cell in San Francisco. I decided to give myself twelve hours. Then I'd call the FBI, spill the whole story on the phone, and light out for far-away places and strange-sounding names.

This eased my conscience. If Nino Costa, whoever he was, had the girl, I might be able to get her. If I could convince him that Kid Farrow had told me where the twelve grand was, maybe he'd release her. Of course, when Nino found out I *didn't* know where the money was, I'd probably end up at the bottom of the Truckee River. . . .

I decided to visit Nino. I asked the bartender for the name of Nino's club. Strangely enough, it was: "*Nino's*," and only a block away. I slapped four bits on the bar and moved out into the shimmering heat.

Nino Costa ran a nice place. Just as Kid Farrow had said, he had roulette wheels, crap tables, blackjack games. It was clean and cool. A bar stretched across one end of the room, a mirrored bar, gleaming with chromium and nickle. There were a few cowhands, genuine and tourist, leaning on it. There were waitresses, pretty little girls dressed in cowboy boots and Stetson hats and fake guns and not much else. I liked Nino's.

Stepping to the bar, I said: "Where do I find the boss?"

The barkeep was a tall, baby-faced young fellow with carefully groomed hair. In spite of the baby-face, you felt that you didn't want to tangle with him.

"He's not here just now, sir. Do you

want to leave a message for him here?"

"Tell him a friend of Kid Farrow was here to see him."

The bartender nodded. "A drink, sir?"

"A shot of bourbon and a bottle of beer."

He poured it and stepped under the bar. In a moment he was back. "Mr. Costa was in, after all. He'll see you in his office."

"That's what I figured," I said. Taking my time, I finished the whiskey and beer. I swung off the leather bar stool and stared straight into the eyes of a blackjack dealer behind me. He was absently dealing to an empty table, and he had been watching me.

Short and fat with thick, greasy lips, he had cloudy blue eyes. As I looked, he shifted his glance. Next to him stood a big man, all shoulders and broken nose, carefully not watching me. They looked as if they'd seen me before. I wondered if I'd seen *them*. Maybe in the Club Tornado two nights before? Who could say? Guys in my racket should stay sober.

I walked to the rear, found a door labeled *Manager*, and walked in.

Behind a polished desk sat an immaculate, saintly character with snow-white hair. He smiled and stuck out hand. His grip was firm and friendly.

"Nino Costa," he said. "You're a friend of Kid Farrow's?"

"I was."

"Was?"

"Kid is dead. Killed, in San Francisco."

"No!" He allowed himself to look surprised. "This is a blow. What happened?"

"Somebody shot him. Outside a bar."

Nino Costa clicked his tongue. "That's a tragedy. He was a good boy. He used to come in here often."

"So he told me."

The old boy looked at me sharply. "Is that so? And what did you say your name

was again? I didn't quite catch it."

"I didn't. Remsen. Paul Remsen."

"Would you like a drink, Mr. Remsen?" He moved to the wall and pressed a button. A bar swung out from a panel. He turned and smiled. "A man works all his life to own a gadget like this. Just like in the movies. What'll it be?"

"Bourbon, straight." Watch it, I thought. Always watch the boys with the charm. Like a hawk, watch them.

HE BROUGHT me my drink. I heard the door open and close behind me and knew without turning that it was the lad with the shoulders and the broken nose. It was. He walked silently across the room and sank into a leather chair. He pulled out a detective magazine and began to read it, about as relaxed as a steel spring.

"William," said Costa. "Kid Farrow was killed in San Francisco. Did you know that?"

William looked up. "No," he said. He went back to his magazine.

Costa turned to me. "Kid used to come in here all the time. A good boy. Free with his money when he had it, always paid his debts. A good gambler."

I sipped the bourbon. It was older than I was. Apparently I was getting the full treatment.

"Yes," I said. "He told me he won twelve thousand dollars here a while back."

Costa shrugged. "That might be. That might very well be. A good gambler."

"Twelve thousand dollars is a lot of money," I ventured.

"Yes it is," agreed Costa. "A lot of money."

This was getting us nowhere. I began to wonder if Costa already knew where the money was. Well, I could try a bluff.

"Before he died, Kid told me where the money was."

Costa's expression didn't change. Still

not interested. I looked at his hand on the desk. His fist was clenched. His knuckles were white. He was interested.

He walked to the window.

"He must have trusted you, to tell you where he put it. I imagine he put it in a vault?" Yes, he was interested, and it meant Flame hadn't told him where the money was, and it meant that Flame was probably still alive. I wasn't in a very good spot, but for the first time in two days I felt good.

"No," I said. "He didn't put it in a vault. First he gave it to a girl to keep for him. Later he took it back and put it away."

Costa turned. His expression had changed. He wasn't smiling now, and his lips were tense.

"Listen. I've got a story to tell you, about your friend Farrow. About your friend Farrow and that twelve grand he won. You know how he won it?"

"No."

"He slipped in a cold deck on my dealer."

Having known Farrow, it seemed like a good theory. It would explain why Costa was so keen after the money, too. When a legitimate gambler loses twelve grand, he doesn't go chasing around trying to get it back, unless he had a bum shake in the first place.

"That money's mine," continued Costa. "Where did he put it?"

I lit a cigarette. "You know, I *thought* you'd ask that question."

Costa nodded to his trained ape. The ape put down the magazine and strolled over. He stood in front of me, leaning back against the desk.

"The boss asked you a question," he said hoarsely.

"I heard the boss." I glanced at Costa. "Get this monkey out of here. I don't like to be threatened."

Costa offered me a cigarette. He was smooth again.

"All right, Remsen," he said. "If that's your name. What's your angle?"

"Where's Flame?"

"Flame?"

"The girl who used to work for you. The girl Kid gave the money to. The girl your boys snatched. Where is she?"

"Now, wait a minute. I know who you mean, but I never had her snatched. I don't know where she is."

I shook my head. "That's too bad, because until you produce her, nobody's going to know where the money is but me."

"I don't know where she is."

"I guess you didn't send your hoods down to San Francisco to get her."

He hesitated. "What do you want?"

"I want you to let the girl go. Then I'll tell you where the money is."

"Tell me where the money is, and *then* I'll let the girl go." He pushed a buzzer on his desk. Behind me, I heard the door open. I watched Costa closely, but I never had a chance. He nodded, I started to rise, there was a crashing blow behind my ear, and my brain exploded in a shower of stardust. . . .

WHEN I came to, I was propped in a corner and someone was pouring water over my head. I opened an eye. Willie was bending over me. He drew back his foot. It flashed and landed in my chest. I felt as if I were going to die.

I rolled on the floor, trying to get my breath. He got in two kicks as I squirmed, and I felt a rib snap. In the distance I heard Costa's voice:

"Hold it, Willie. Are you ready to talk, Remsen?"

Remsen . . . Remsen. That was me. I tried to say no. All I got was a groan. I shook my head. Willie's foot landed on my jaw and the stardust dropped again. . . .

The rest was a nightmare. I remember rolling around the floor, with the taste of

blood in my mouth and searing pain racing up my back and down my chest. I remember a kick to the throat that almost strangled me. . . . The last time I woke up, I kept my eyes closed.

"Wait'll he comes to again, boss. He'll talk or buy new teeth."

Half-conscious, I heard Costa answer: "He isn't going to talk, Willie. You're wasting your time. . . . Is he all right?"

I felt Willie's tremendous hand on my aching chest.

"He's still breathin', boss."

"Okay, Willie. Go on out and get the boys. Have them take him to the ranch."

The ranch? I wondered if Flame was at the ranch . . . Flame . . . Flame . . . go away . . . come again another day . . . My brain spun crazily. My lungs were on fire, and a drop of blood tickled my cheek. I tried to tie down my thoughts.

Something was bothering me . . . somebody I'd seen tonight, I'd seen before . . . One of the hoods who'd been in the fight at the Club Tornado? Maybe.

Thinking hurt my head. Breathing hurt my chest. I didn't believe I'd ever move again.

Very carefully, I opened an eye. Costa was sitting at his desk, watching me. From his drawer he lifted a heavy service automatic, cocked it, and layed it down. He turned and poured himself a drink.

Come on, Mike, I thought. *This is it*. I tensed my muscles. Even thinking of getting across the room hurt. But now was my chance, with Willie gone. I could move faster than an old guy like Costa—or could I?

CHAPTER FIVE

Playing for Coffins

QUIETLY, painfully, I gathered my legs under me. Costa turned suddenly and I relaxed. I heard him shoot soda into his drink. Then I was

up and surging across the room in a flash of pain.

Costa turned, spilling his drink.

Diving for the desk, I tripped, and crashed into it. I got a finger on the gun as I fell. The gun slid off the desk and into the waste basket. I jammed my hand in after it, grabbed it, and rolled away. From the floor I groaned:

"Okay, Costa. Stay where you are!"

He froze.

Painfully I got up.

"Sit down at your desk." I limped to the door. "When Willie and the rest of your boys get here, have them come in. This gun's going to be pointing right at your head, so you'd better play ball. Then you and Willie are going to have your teeth kicked out."

"You won't get away with it."

"Shut up!" There was a knock at the door. "Tell them to come in."

He hesitated. I waved the gun.

"Come in," he said. The door opened and I moved behind it. Willie came in first, followed by three flashy characters and the blackjack dealer. "Hey, boss," said Willie. "Where's—"

"Here I am. Put up your hands."

Slowly, five pairs of hands came up. I limped over and frisked them. They were carrying enough artillery to pull a job on Fort Knox.

I tossed it in the corner.

"All right, turn around." They turned around.

Suddenly I had it. The blackjack dealer! I'd seen *him* before. But where? I stared at him. He looked away.

"What's your name?" I asked. "You, short and fat."

"Lippy," he muttered. "Lippy Larson."

"And where have I seen you before?"

"One of Mrs. Astor's tea parties, maybe?"

"Very funny," I said. I had an idea, for a change. Kid had won twelve grand

at a blackjack table. A cold deck? Maybe; but very unusual. Very, very unusual, unless—

Unless the blackjack dealer had cooperated. Unless it was an inside job. All right. Suppose it was an inside job. Wouldn't Costa have known it? I turned to Costa.

"This guy Lippy. Was he the dealer Kid Farrow won the twelve grand from?"

Costa nodded. "Yes. Why?"

"Did you ever figure it for a put-up job?"

"No."

"Why not? Do you let your dealers throw that much money away?"

"Farrow slipped a cold deck in on him."

"That's right," Lippy broke in eagerly. "He cold-decked me."

"Nasty break," I said. "How long you been dealing blackjack?"

"Look, buddy," said Lippy, "like I said, it was a cold deck."

Well, it was none of my business if Costa had been taken for a ride. I was interested in Flame. I waved the gun at Costa.

"All right, Costa. Where's the girl?"

"Like I told you, I don't have her."

"Like you also told me, you'd get her if I got the money."

Costa flushed. "That was a bluff. So help me, I don't know where she is."

"I guess you never sent these boys down to San Francisco to get her?"

Costa leaned forward intently. "Yes, I did. When she quit her job here, I figured Farrow might have given her the money, in case we found out about the cold deck and rolled him. I'd heard she went to San Francisco. So I sent these three guys down to San Francisco to get her." He nodded toward the three flashy hoods, went on:

"But some drunk at the joint where she worked cut loose at them when they tried to pick her up. So they came back without her."

One of the hoods, a kid about twenty with a pimply face, spoke up:

"Boss, *this* is the guy that broke it up."

Costa stared at me. My brain whirled. If Costa was telling the truth, where was Flame?

"Was Lippy on that caper in San Francisco?" I asked.

Costa shook his head. "No."

I LOOKED at Lippy again. I knew I'd seen him, but where? Short and fat—the man in the fog. The man outside the Club Tornado. The man who'd shot Farrow!

"Costa," I asked slowly. "Did Lippy work yesterday?"

"No. He went to Tonopah on business."

"And his buddy Willie? Did he work?"

Costa shook his head. "He had the day off."

"That's what I figured," I said. "That's what I figured." I swung on Lippy. "All right, Larson. Where's the girl?"

Larson turned white. "What girl?"

I stepped over and let him have it across the mouth with the flat of my hand. "You still want to know *what* girl?"

I heard a rumble from Willie and he was on me before I could swing my gun. Instinctively I lashed out with my foot. He dropped, white-faced, and sat stupidly.

"All right," I said to Willie, drawing back my foot again. "Now I'm doing the drop-kicking. Where's the singer?"

Willie was yellow. Clear through. He groaned: "At Lippy's. In the cellar."

I looked at Costa. He was standing, his eyes wide. "What—"

"Skip it," I said. "Come on. Everybody. And nobody make a quick move."

I marched them out of the gambling house like Sergeant York. The three hoods I released outside. I got a cab and filled it with Costa, Lippy, Willie, and myself. I let Costa give the directions to Lippy's house, a nice little place in the

suburb, not far beyond the city limits.

Lippy unlocked the door sullenly, prodded by the .45.

"The cellar," I said. He hesitated and then led me to a door. I herded the whole outfit to the basement and switched on the light.

The cellar was filled with old newspapers, bottles, garden tools—a normal cellar. But in the corner was a folding cot, and tied to the cot, gagged, wide-eyed, and angry, was Flame.

"Untie her," I snarled. Lippy looked at Willie and Willie looked at Lippy. "Untie her," I repeated. "Both of you."

Reluctantly they moved to the cot. Nervously they released her hands and feet. They jumped back, but not fast enough. Her hands lashed out at their faces. As they stumbled backwards, I saw angry red scratches on their cheeks. Flame whipped off her gag.

"Why, you—" she began. Her voice broke. She weaved unsteadily and then she was in my arms. "Oh, Mike . . ."

* * *

Flame sat close to me in the cab going back. Her face was dirty and her hair was tangled and she was sobbing, but she still looked like a million dollars. We got out at Costa's and I marched the boys back to his office, my hand on the gun in my pocket.

"All right, Costa," I said. "I want you to call the San Francisco Police. Homicide Bureau. Get a guy named Morello on the phone."

"Never mind. Get your hands up." The voice came from behind me. I got my hands up. I turned and stared. Morello stepped from behind the door.

"What—Boy, am I glad to see you," I began.

His hands went over me expertly. He slipped the gun out of my pocket. "And I'm glad to see you. Very glad. Didn't

you think I'd check *all* of the airports?"

"Here's the man who killed Farrow," I jerked my thumb at Lippy. "And the ape here drove the car for him."

Flame broke in: "Kid was *killed*?" I nodded. She moved to the window and looked out.

"This guy shot him?" asked Morello. "Very interesting. What makes you think that?"

I took a deep breath.

"I was there. This man, Lippy Larson, I saw in the fog the night of the murder. He's a blackjack dealer here. He let Farrow slip a cold deck in on him; let him win twelve grand. They were going to split the score. Farrow gave the money to Flame, in case Costa might have him rolled. Then Farrow lit out for New York and Flame went to San Francisco. She didn't know it was a crooked deal."

Flame turned. "Thanks, Mike."

"She didn't know it was a crooked deal," I repeated. "But when Lippy told Costa about the cold deck—that was according to plan, so he wouldn't lose his job—when he told him about the cold deck, Costa guessed that Flame would be holding the money for Farrow. They'd been going together here. Right?"

Costa nodded.

"So he sent three of his boys down to pick up Flame. They didn't get her. For various reasons," I added modestly. "In the meantime, Lippy thought maybe his cut wasn't going to be enough—he'd take the whole works. He went to San Francisco with his buddy Willie. *They* snatched the girl, right out of her apartment.

"She wouldn't tell them where the money was, so they decided to take her back to Reno. They knew she worked at the Club Tornado and they checked to see if Kid Farrow had arrived in town and might be waiting for her there. They were lucky.

"He was there, with me. Lippy left the girl in the car with Willie, and waited

outside the club. When Farrow followed me out, Lippy stepped past me and let him have it. I remember where I saw him now—it was in the fog that night. Then they got away with the girl.”

Morello turned to Flame.

“Did these men kidnap you?”

She nodded.

Morello glared at me. “You know, Blair, I’ve got a good mind to run you in for obstructing justice. If you knew this girl was kidnapped, why didn’t you call the FBI?”

I hung my head. “I forgot.”

“You forgot! Did you forget what the *real* bartender in the Club Tornado looked like? That was a slick deal, too.”

I stepped forward and grabbed his arm: “Morello, don’t hold that against Driscoll. Don’t get him disbarred.”

Morello seemed to be fighting a smile. Finally he said: “You think I’d let that story get out? I’d be pounding a beat. You can tell your lawyer to come back to town—if he’ll keep his mouth shut.” He jerked his head at Lippy and Willie. “All right, you guys, you’re coming with me. I’m having the Reno police arrest you for kidnapping— and murder.”

Costa broke in turning to Morello, his eyes were blazing. “Mister,” he said, “before you take Lippy, let me have him alone for ten minutes . . . just ten min-

utes. Let my boys talk to him. You’ll save the state money.”

Morello laughed. “No soap, Costa. After this, pick your help better. Blair, be at the station tomorrow. And you too, sister.” The door closed behind them.

I turned to Flame. “This guy Farrow Did he mean a lot to you?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I went through hell to keep his money for him. Now I find out it wasn’t his. I guess I knew he was no good. I just wouldn’t admit it.”

Costa was smiling. “Yes,” he said smoothly. “That money. What do you think ought to be done with it?”

“It goes back to you,” Flame said quickly. “It’s yours.”

Costa shrugged. “Suppose we split it? After all, you kept it for me.”

Flame opened her mouth and I cut in sharply:

“That sounds good,” I said. “Where’s the money?”

Flame smiled. “I should tell you to turn around, I guess.” She raised her skirt on the prettiest gam in the world and dragged a slim pack of bills out of her stocking. “A very unusual place for a girl to keep her money,” she said.

I looked at Costa. Costa looked at me. We shook our heads.

“I’ll be damned,” I said.

THE END

FIRST YOU READ IT IN DIME DETECTIVE— NOW YOU’LL SEE IT ON THE SCREEN!

You Dime Detective fans read “Some Like ’Em Cold!” in the February 1949 issue.

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See the picture, and let us know how you enjoy keeping abreast of the suspense-thrillers of the year—by reading them in Dime Detective.

THE BUSY BODY



He thrust the splintered shaft
at my face. . . .

When the frisky frill was cooled,
Chief Inspector Kramer got out his ax . . .
and invited gumshoe Rory—to climb inside his meat wagon.

By **JOHN
GRANGER**

THE blonde wore a yellow satin swimsuit, one black eye and a ribbon in her hair. She was washing down an old sedan in the driveway and managed to endow even that prosaic oc-

cupation with a high degree of spectator appeal.

I glanced over the hedge into the next yard and decided she must have plenty of appeal for the hefty citizen in shorts and dark glasses, stretched out there in the shade of a big oak tree. He needed those sunglasses like he needed a third ear. The thought occurred that he might be sporting them to sneak a peek at the blonde without getting caught.

It was hardly the sort of neighborhood where they require or can afford the services of a private detective. White Birch Drive, Cape Cod bungalows on forty-foot lots, Japanese maples and Japanese beetle traps and a lot of Hi, neighbor!

But the address was right and the wrought-iron scottle on the front lawn said: *The Carmichaels Live Here.*

I cleared my smoker's throat. The blonde glanced up, making no effort to hide the shiner.

"I'm Malone, M. B. Malone," I told her, with no fanfare. If Junior on the other side of the hedge wanted to hear what I had to say, he would need that third ear.

"Well!" she said briskly. "You certainly got here fast enough."

I gave her my fine manly smile, the one I reserve for new customers, and followed her into the house.

She waved me to a bulky sofa, dropped into it beside me, lit a cigarette and crossed her legs. They were neat smooth legs the color of apricots, and I had a little trouble keeping my eyes on her face.

That was worth looking at too, despite the shiner. The lips were full and shiny and just now a little sullen, the one good eye a deep and liquid brown. I have no aversion whatever to brown-eyed blondes.

She looked sidelong at me and said with no preamble, "I just shot at my husband." As though she were telling me she just got back from the movies.

Well, you get used to hearing things

like that, even at ten in the morning.

"Where's the body?" I asked her in my best casual manner.

"I missed him, of course."

"And where is Mr. Carmichael now?"

"He went to work."

"Nothing fazes this husband of yours, does it? Shot at one minute and busy at the old job the next."

"He loves his work." She shrugged her bare shoulders, inhaled on the cigarette and leaned back against the sofa. That improved the outline of a torso that was impressive enough to start with. I couldn't see why Mr. Carmichael was so in love with his work.

"What does he do—manage a chorus line?"

"He's an agent for the Clyde Mutual," she snapped. "One of those insurance collection routes. I want you to get me a divorce."

"Let me get this straight. You were using him for a target this morning, but you want to sue *him* for divorce."

"You grasp a situation very quickly, Mr. Malone."

"Object alimony?"

"Naturally."

"What grounds have you got?"

She got to her feet. The good eye narrowed, glittering.

"Look, mister, I didn't call you up for the pleasure of listening to you crack wise. If you don't want this job, say so and get out of here!"

"I'm not selling good manners," I told her coolly. "I don't like divorce work. But I'll take it on, if there's anything to work with and no frame-up involved. And you'll get your money's worth. But no matter what grounds you have, your husband will have a good point in court when he brings up the matter of this shooting."

"How can he prove it?" she said scornfully. "He won't even report it to the police because he doesn't want that kind

of scandal. Besides, he knows I can take care of myself downtown."

"Good connections?"

"They'll do. But you're not using them. I got into this mess on my own and that's how I'll get out of it."

"Tell me about this morning."

"**WE HAD** a fight," she said readily, pointing to the bruise beneath her eye. "He handed me this and I got sore and shot at him. I came pretty close, too."

"What was the fighting about?"

"He's been playing around with a redhead named Sanders on his route. Georgia Sanders. She lives on Furman Street, near Essex—and that's where you come in."

"How'd you find this out?"

"I followed him. Twice last week and once the week before, when he said he was going out on night business calls. Business! Each night he went straight to the Sanders woman's apartment and stayed at least a couple of hours."

I gave it a quarter's worth of thought.

"Okay, Mrs. Carmichael. My fee is twenty-five a day and expenses. Something in advance." I grinned at her.

But she dug into the top of the swimsuit and came up with some neatly folded green stuff. There were five twenties, faintly perfumed.

"I'm paying *you*," she said acidly, "with money."

That held Malone all the way to the street. . . .

The address she gave me belonged to a fancy new apartment house on Furman Street. The doorbell directory listed a Sanders in One A. Behind a concrete pot full of wilted palms, I lurked in the lobby for over an hour.

Shortly after half-past twelve, a tall thin young man, wearing rimless eyeglasses and the grim, eager look of a new school-teacher, hurried into the lobby.

The long black collection book under

his arm was stamped *Clyde Mutual Insurance Company*, and pamphlets sticking out of seersucker pockets bore the same caption. He looked as though Mrs. Carmichael might be just a few shades too much for him.

He made two calls on the floor, each taking about six minutes. Then he came hustling past my potted palm, giving me about as much attention as he would an aphid, and rang the bell to One A. He was in there about six minutes too.

When he came out, the expression on his face was about what it was when he went in, that of a man with premiums, dividends, and a Family Income Policy on his mind.

I let him go, then went down to a corner bistro for a blue plate special that had to be entombed under two cents' worth of bicarb. I smoked a cigarette and went back to the apartment house and rang the Sanders doorbell. The door was opened by the redhead herself.

"I'm Inspector Carroll," I said, "of the Clyde Mutual Home Office. May I have a look at the books, Mrs. Sanders?"

"Certainly. Come in." Gloria Sanders was a very tall girl, pleasantly and fashionably lean. She was wearing a gray tailored suit that set off her long strawberry-blonde hair, the pale and lovely skin. She looked like a girl Carmichael might find it easy to get along with after ducking slugs from his wife's gun.

I made a pretense of examining the premium receipt books, scribbled hieroglyphs in them to represent an inspector's initials and settled myself into the deep armchair, trying hard to look like a company snoop on a courteous prowl.

"Mrs. Sanders, I'm wondering if you're having any difficulty with our agent, Mr. Carmichael."

Two puzzled lines appeared between her eyes. "In what way?"

"Frankly, Mrs. Sanders, the company has received an anonymous complaint that

Mr. Carmichael has been annoying you, making unnecessary evening calls and so forth."

She flushed. "If that means what I think it means, Mr. Carroll, your question is insulting not only to Mr. Carmichael but to myself!"

"Sorry." I shrugged. "We try to protect our policyholders."

"Possibly. For the information of your company, Mr. Carmichael has indeed been here several evenings, to see my husband—who has been thinking of taking out additional life insurance. After this episode I doubt very much that he will have anything more to do with the Clyde Mutual."

She stood up. So did I.

"Now, Mrs. Sanders," I began, but she was holding the door open for me.

"You had better," she said coldly, "come back here this evening and see my husband."

"No. No indeed. Not at all necessary."

"Then I fear your Home Office will have a visit from him, since I intend to tell him about this extraordinary visit."

I could almost feel her hot breath on my neck as I escaped into the hall.

CARMICHAEL'S plight didn't worry me for long. With that boyishly sincere face of his, he should have little trouble convincing the Sanders' that they were all three the victims of an unsavory joke.

Mr. M. B. Malone's situation bothered me much more. Mrs. Carmichael was not going to enjoy hearing what I had to tell her. She would want back her retainer, of course, and might be reluctant even to pay me for the day's work.

But in this business you develop a nose for a straight story and I was willing to bet my license for the year that John Carmichael didn't even know the color of Gloria Sanders' hair, not with the vision floating before his eyes of a fine plump

commission. And that was what I was going to tell his wife.

I dropped by the office to see if there was any mail, found three bills which I threw in the wastebasket, an ad for a new kind of .38, and a friendly letter from a forger who was doing three years because I recognized him at a church dance.

I had me a nibble or two out of the bottle in the drawer, and then two or three more, just to prove to myself that the day was wasted. Then I went out to the car and leisurely drove the five miles to White Birch Drive.

The Carmichaels' front door was open and the blonde was not in sight. I punched a finger at the bell and took it back as though nipped by a poodle. There had been a loud crash inside the house, then a faint tinkling. That could be anything, including the heaving by Mrs. Carmichael of a vase at the photo of her adored hubby.

What came next, spurted the adrenalin through my veins.

Three heavy choking sobs—then silence.

The screen door opened easily. It took half a minute to prove I had the ground floor strictly to myself. I slid up the stairs, close to the wall, noisy as a cat stalking mice. Four steps gave forth with plaintive squeaks.

Cautiously I peered into the short hall of the upper floor—and saw Mrs. Carmichael for the second and last time in my life.

She was lying on her back across the carpeted hall, still in the yellow satin swimsuit. A small table was overturned and there were scattered fragments of a china lamp. Above the bruised neck her face was blue and puffy.

I shivered a little. You never quite get used to seeing them. Hairs prickled on the back of my neck. My nostrils felt pinched and I had trouble breathing. The revolver was out of its hip holster and in my hand. I stared at it a bit thickly, not

remembering the draw. Then I waited.

Nothing happened. Through the open windows came the blare of an auto horn, the cries of children playing down the street. But the house itself was quiet as the inside of a plush box in a cemetery vault.

Then, gradually through the silence, came a faint sound from the bedroom beyond. The sound of breathing.

I stepped forward stiffly, over the body, and waited outside the door. The breathing came louder, a little rasping. Perspiration broke out on my face and it was cold. I held my breath and listened to the bouncing of my heart.

I waited, tension mounting, for a century or two—but the other one broke first.

A hoarse sob. A shadow filled the doorway. I dropped back just in time to miss a golf club whipping viciously down before my face. The shaft struck a doorknob and snapped, the head thudding on the floor.

He made a quick recovery, thrusting the splintered shaft at my face. I sidestepped in the narrow hall and he missed my throat by a wide margin. Two inches.

I clouted the back of his neck with the flat of my gun and knocked him into the bathroom doorjamb. He dropped the shaft but came at me this time with clawed fingers. Tears flooded his skinny, contorted face.

"Nuts," I said, and jammed the heel of my hand against the tip of his nose. He screamed and dropped away like a falling tree. It gave me time to slip the revolver into its holster and meet his next furious rush with two hands.

This time he went for my eyes with those nasty skinny hands. I grabbed one wrist with both hands, pivoted around his lunging body and shoved the arm high in a bar hammer lock, pushing his head toward the floor.

He tried to kick my shins. I grabbed

a handful of hair with my right hand and yanked him upright, pushed up on his locked arm with my left, sparing him nothing. He groaned and went limp. I lowered him to the floor. He was out cold, a thin young punk with sandy hair and features like a girl's.

Old man Malone wasn't breathing hard—no harder than a gouty asthmatic after a hundred yard dash.

With two bath towels I roped him hand and foot, limped into the bedroom and phoned the police.

LIEUTENANT LEJEUNE of Homicide sat in my car outside the Carmichael home, shook his head sadly, and said, "This time you're in a jam, Malone. The dead woman was a niece of Inspector Kramer."

"This is one damn funny investigation. You out here making small talk and that fathead in there trying to make like a cop."

"I said Blanche Carmichael was a niece of Inspector Kramer."

"The Inspector Kramer? What's that supposed to do for me? I didn't kill her."

An hour ago the medico and the fingerprint boys had gone, five minutes before *The Inspector Kramer* and his cavalcade of stooges had arrived and entered the Carmichael house. A little later, Lejeune had come out and joined me in my car, his sardonic and angular face dark with blood that wouldn't go away.

"This Kenneth Suter," he sighed, "the guy who went for you with the golf club—he says you did."

"Did what?"

"Killed her—killed his sister."

"He's shagging it. The kid killed her himself. I heard him choking her when I came up on the terrace."

"Suter says he came to borrow some dough. He didn't get any answer to the bell, so he went upstairs and stumbled over the body of his sister. He knocked

over the lamp. You heard that. And the choking noise you heard I think was Suter, too. He's nervous, I guess.

"We been listening to that sobbing of his in there for half an hour. He says his sister was all he had in the world. He says she was sending him through college. He wants to kill himself."

"Don't stop him. She probably cut off his allowance and he killed her in a pet. He's got a lovely temper."

Lejeune said slowly, "This scene is filthy with the dead lady's relatives, but this much we have to believe: he didn't kill her just when you arrived. Doc says she'd then been dead at least four hours."

"That'd put the murder just about—"

"Yeah, four hours." Lejeune was sombre. "Just about the time you left here. We can fix it by Major Gorsby next door and by a lady named Gray on the other side."

"Gorsby—is he a beefy guy with sunglasses?"

"The same. And Mrs. Gray is a thin old lady without sunglasses. And they both saw you leave around eleven this morning."

"Why do you tell me this? You want a confession?"

"They said Suter arrived about three, a few minutes before you came back. That's all I got to hear. Kramer chased me out to keep an eye on you as Number Two suspect while he finishes 'grilling', as he likes to call it, Mrs. Gray and Major Gorsby."

"I thought you had the case?"

"So did I, until it turned out the corpse was Kramer's niece."

"Who's suspect Number One? The husband?"

Lejeune nodded. "John Carmichael. Seems Inspector Kramer had no use for his niece's husband and wouldn't mind at all hanging the rap on him. Funny, Carmichael hasn't showed up. It's after six."

"What's he got to come home to? A wife who tried to rub him out just this morning?"

"Nice clients you pick! We had a couple earfuls from the team of Gray and Gorsby. Self-defense, she called that shooting, showing you a pretty little mouse under her pretty little eye! These nosey neighbors heard the whole show. Blanche Carmichael got out of Eddie Sweetman's pea-green convertible late last night. Bold as brass. Right in front of her own door.

"A couple minutes later the fun starts. Carmichael calls her everything in the book. Maybe he looks like a schoolteacher, but they say he's got one handy vocabulary. She yells back that he's called her names for the last time. Gorsby doesn't see what happens next, but Mrs. Gray does. She can look right down into the Carmichaels' living room.

"She sees Blanche Carmichael with a little gun in her paw. Before the Gray woman can get her breath, your client shoots at her husband. Gray sees Carmichael knock the gun out of his wife's hand. Mrs. C. fades from sight a moment. When she makes her entrance again, she's waving a kitchen knife in her hand. That's when Carmichael hands her the shiner."

"This Eddie Sweetman," I said. "Is that the same Sweetman who the opposition says has a big slice of the book-making in town?"

NOW Lejeune clucked. "You know better than that. You know that since Chief Inspector Kramer got to where he is, there hasn't been any gambling in our fair city."

"I know. But *is* that the same Eddie Sweetman?"

"It is."

"You pulling him in for questioning?"

"That—" Lejeune gave me a wintry grin—"will be the inspector's problem."

Chief Inspector Kramer came briskly

down the walk of the Gorsby house. He waved two uniformed cops into the prowler car just ahead of us. He was a thin and sallow gentleman with horn-rimmed glasses, a thin bald head, a thin and worried mustache.

He had come up from the ranks the hard way, by marrying the Police Commissioner's daughter. Kramer and I had a thriving disrespect for each other. He addressed Lejeune.

"Lieutenant, I want this man Malone booked on suspicion of murder."

Lejeune got out of my car, swearing under his breath, took Kramer by the arm and whispered in his ear.

"Never mind, Lieutenant," said Kramer at last, peevishly. "The charge will be suspicion of murder."

I had to add my two cents' worth. "Hold me on what? The word of two silly busybodies and a neurotic kid?"

Kramer stalked around to my side of the car, his thin jaw set as grimly as possible.

"That kid happens to be my nephew, Malone. Let me point out that you were seen leaving this house just about the time my poor niece was murdered. In your possession was one hundred dollars of her money. Then at three you returned here—with the strong odor of liquor on your breath.

"It could be a fair assumption that you came back after further loot. You hid yourself when Kenneth Suter arrived, then assaulted him over the body of his sister. How do you like *that*, Mr. Malone?"

"You holding Eddie Sweetman too, Inspector? He was around here with your niece last night, I hear. But as a friend and business associate of yours, he'd probably be immune."

"Malone, I'll have your license for that!"

"Before you get it, I owe my client a hundred bucks' worth of investigation

—even if she is dead. Particularly because she's dead. While I'm gone you might be examining a possible connection between the gambler, Blanche Carmichael and the chief inspector. How do you like *that*, Mr. Kramer?" I stepped on the starter.

I thought he would have a stroke.

"Turn off that motor! Lejeune! Lieutenant! Arrest this man!"

Throwing the motor into gear, I let in the clutch. The car leaped forward and Kramer was knocked aside, yelling. Lejeune drew his gun from force of habit, but I wasn't worried about that.

I whipped around the prowler car, made the corner and turned it on the outside wheels. I heard the siren at the next corner, but looking backward as I rounded it, I could not see the prowler car. Half a block away a yellow inter-urban bus wallowed along the curb. I passed it, swung into a side street and abandoned ship.

As I boarded the bus, the moan of the siren mounted in a crescendo and the prowler car came racing down the boulevard, ogled curiously by the passengers. It stopped suddenly with a squeal of brakes. They had spotted my car in the side street.

The police coupe roared backward a few feet, curved swiftly ahead and dove out of sight like a seagull after a wounded bass. I left the bus at the next stop, crossed over to a taxi stand.

By the time the worried lads in blue got back on the trail, my cab was well out of that neighborhood, lost in the uptown suburban maze.

ON FURMAN Street I made three calls as Home Office Inspector Carroll and learned that Carmichael always started his Tuesday route at the "Save Your Soles" Shoeshine Palace, corner of Seventh and Bright.

The swarthy proprietor informed Home Office Inspector Carroll that Mr. Car-

michael had been in that morning at about nine-fifteen, not even stopping for coffee and a bagel at the one-arm across the street, "like mosta those insurance guys." By eleven, he had finished his collections on Bright Street and moved over to Furman.

I made four more calls on Furman and satisfied myself that Carmichael had still been working his route between eleven and twelve-thirty, when I saw him enter the Sanders apartment. Which left Malone with a wide-open field.

Eddie Sweetman's Club Troc was just inside the city line. I rode out in a cab, gave the driver a fin and asked him to wait. It was now full dark, but early for the Troc. In the parking lot were only a few cars. I went up between imitation marble pillars, crossed an imitation Colonial veranda and entered the nightclub that was Eddie's front.

The headwaiter, a Federal parolee I knew from of old, gave me a sweet smile and waved me through a far door into a dimly lighted hall.

"What d'ya want?" he growled, dropping the welcome face as soon as we were out of sight of the patrons.

"Eddie."

"You'll see Tony."

So I saw Tony, in a chromium-and-leather office at the end of the hall. He called himself Tony Mercury and he looked like a chorus boy, but I knew better. With him was a big hood wearing a face like a cobblestone.

"Long time, Malone," Tony said.

"Long time no see," I finished, that being the special lingo the hoods around here expect.

"I hear the cops are looking for you."

"News travels, doesn't it?"

"What's on your mind?"

"Some business with Eddie."

Tony Mercury shook his head. "No dice."

"What's the pitch?"

"Eddie's out of town. I'm handling things for him."

"He was *in* town real late yesterday."

"You mean anything by that, Malone?" he asked carefully.

"Just thinking out loud, Tony. I'm wondering could Eddie be out of town for the same reason I'm on the lam."

Tony Mercury's dark and gentle eyes were blank. He shrugged his shoulders and looked completely indifferent.

I said, "The Carmichael kill."

Tony glanced at the cobble-faced hood, then back at me. "Well," he murmured. "Well—"

"Eddie took her home. And she was dead by eleven."

"Well," he murmured, "well."

"Don't overdo it, Tony. The movies have a patent on that act."

He got swiftly to his feet behind the leather-topped desk, his smooth dark face flushing.

"Hit it, peeper. The front door's waiting."

"Just," I added, "like in the movies."

But I walked out the door with both eyes wide open and wary.

The headwaiter picked me up in front of the orchestra stage and escorted me silently toward that fine old Colonial veranda. I found a chance to bump against him and push a twenty into his palm.

"Where's Eddie?" I whispered.

Back it came, fast. "Jail."

"You kidding?"

"**D**RUNKEN driving. They got him leavin' the Carmichael frill's place and soaked him away."

"Not Eddie Sweetman!"

"It was some new cop. Tony'd just as soon as it kept under the lid."

"Sure. No bail?"

"Judge Selwyn. You know him."

I knew Judge Selwyn. He was on the other side of the fence and made careful speeches about the gamblers who ran the

town, but nobody seemed to know for sure whether he was leveling or just making a show at the expense of the boys on the inside.

"So long till Christmas," I said, and started across the veranda. A bulky figure in a blue uniform detached itself from one of the tall pillars.

"Just a minute, Malone." He took me by the arm, not gently.

"Nice pinch, Casey," I told him. "Did Tony tip you?"

"What d'you care? Just don't make no wrong moves."

"Casey, I don't want to go downtown. Your fatheaded inspector has me tagged for the Carmichael murder and I got to dig myself out of the woods."

Casey sneered. "Don't get too big for your britches. No one wants you for murder, on'y assault."

"Assault?"

"Yeah. Inspector Kramer. Seems y'almost broke his arm this afternoon, drivin' away the way ya did."

"What about the murder?"

"Don't ya read the papers? Carmichael hanged himself in Blue Bay Park this afternoon. It made all the late editions."

"Blue Bay Park? Anyone see him go in?"

"On'y the girl who runs the bathhouses. She seen him go in around two-thirty."

"Alone?"

"She says some old gent went in with him but she didn' know the guy. Hell! What'm I standin' here talkin' to you for? Come on inside while I call the wagon."

I caught his arm. "Casey, wait a minute. This is important. Was that business about the old gent in the papers too?"

He hesitated. "Sure. They want to talk to him about it, but he ain't showed up."

"What's the girl's name?"

"How should I know!" he growled

irritably. "Some fancy monicker: Lisa Somethin' or other. Come on along now!"

"Casey, how would you like a promotion?"

"You're nuts, Malone. Lay off the arm."

"I mean it, Casey. All you do is—"

"Lay off that arm!"

"Okay. Then let me call Lieutenant Lejeune."

"Lejeune's in the doghouse," he sneered. "Seems Dave Kramer didn' like the way he acted up this afternoon."

He tightened his grip on my left arm.

I was wanted for assault on the sacred person of the Chief Inspector. Should I boggle at a chance to do in Officer Casey? Mayhem Malone, the Boy with the Democratic Touch. Sock 'em all, big and small.

My right travelled fourteen inches to a strategic point on Casey's jaw. He sagged, and I caught him under the arms and lowered him to gentle slumber on the pavement. Two girls in evening clothes looked at me curiously, but that was all. Lots of funny things happened in Sweetman's Club Troc.

I skimmed down those marble steps to the waiting cab. "Blue Bay Park! Quick!"

"I dunno," said the driver, uncertainly. "That was a cop you just slugged."

"Don't be silly," I told him coldly. "That guy was just an impersonator. I'm the law."

I flashed a tin, a nice shiny Pontotoc County Wheat Warden badge, issued to three hundred thousand folks during National Eat-More-Wheat Week.

"Okay, okay," he muttered. "Just looked funny, thassall."

BLUE BAY PARK has bathhouses and a beach, hot dog stands, bingo, a ferris wheel, chance booths, and a popular little woodland with picnic tables that nobody ever uses—for picnics. The rustic gate was closed and a bluecoat stood on either side of it.

About a hundred yards away was the entrance to the bathhouses, under a neon sign that read:

*"Moonlight Bathing—Every Tuesday—
Every Saturday Nite"*

Tonight was Tuesday. I marched up and paid for a ticket. The girl in the booth was strikingly pretty, a slender brunette with blue eyes and skin like cream. I know it's been said before, but it still was skin like cream. Just now she looked very tired.

"Long day?" I asked.

"Long enough." Her voice was warm and throaty. "Tuesday's always bad, but today we had to have a suicide." She nodded toward the cops guarding the rustic gate to the woodland.

"You been on all day? Then you must be Lisa Dunn, the girl who saw Carmichael—"

"Lisa Crane," she said wearily. "I suppose you are another reporter?"

"No, just a guy who's nosey. Is there a telephone around?"

She pointed a finger inside. I went through the gate and found a phone where I could keep an eye on her, and dialled headquarters. It took them ten minutes to find Lejeune. I thought they might be tracing my number.

"Thanks for the ride today," Lejeune snapped bitterly. "For that I should be pounding a beat by next week."

"Get out to Blue Bay Park on the double and I'll give you a murderer. It should be worth a captaincy."

"It'll boot me off the force."

I breathed earnestly into the mouth-piece. "If you never listened to me before, Lejeune, do it now. The Carmichael killer should be out here tonight, paying a visit on a little lady who talked to the press too freely today."

"You got snow up your nose. Carmichael hanged himself out there today, right after strangling his wife."

"Kramer's fitted you with a pair of blinders. John Carmichael was murdered—by the same killer who got his wife."

"Who makes your crystal balls these days?"

"Look," I whispered, one eye nervously on the girl in the ticket booth. "I don't know why I talk to you, even. But here it is: Carmichael could not have murdered his wife. She died around eleven this morning and Carmichael was working his route from nine-fifteen to twelve-thirty. He didn't have time to get half way across town to kill her. That's one of the things Kramer's blinders kept you from finding out."

"Kramer." His voice was troubled. "Kramer was so sure Carmichael came back to his house after you left."

"Where'd he hear that?"

"I don't know. He dummied up on me after you made your getaway. That punk nephew was at his elbow all evening, trying to sell him you as the murderer. But Kramer had his sights fixed on Carmichael."

"You better get out here fast. It was in the papers about this ticket seller, Lisa Crane, seeing someone go into the woods with Carmichael. I got a nasty hunch the same party did in both Carmichael and his wife, and won't hesitate to add this girl to the list."

Lejeune was silent a long moment.

"All right," he said slowly. "Stand by and keep your eyes peeled. I shouldn't pay you any attention, but this seems to be your year for homicide cases. Sometimes, Malone, I think you're a Typhoid Mary. Murder follows you like a cat follows a fishcart."

"I don't order them that way." But Lejeune had hung up.

CAME midnight most of the crowd in the pool had gone, and still no sign of Lejeune. The pretty brunette in the

ticket booth put out the lights and started to count her change. I began on my next year's supply of fingernails.

The runway was deserted. Across the way, the high rustic gates had long ago been locked and the cops were gone. I felt lonely as the lead at an execution.

Lisa Crane—nice name, I thought—opened the back door of the booth and came out with the cash box under her arm.

She started toward the park office. Her route took her past the woodland fence. I let her have a couple hundred yards start, then drifted along in her wake.

She was well out of the lighted area and under the quiet, overhanging trees—when a movement on the other side of the palings froze me in my tracks. A moment later, and I saw a shadow clambering down the outside of the fence, halfway between the girl and me. It hit the ground and paced silently after her. I began to make some long strides myself.

I barely made it.

The shadowy figure raised an arm and something glinted in the moonlight.

Yelling, I left the ground in a flying tackle. The shadow whirled and I missed. I heard Lisa scream. The figure loomed above me. The knife started down in a deadly stroke. Weakly I raised a leg, felt the cloth of my trousers rip, the knife slice into the flesh. The leg became abruptly warm, wet and warm.

I raised the other leg and kicked the fat face.

The shadow went over backward, got up in what they used to call a trice, and ran erratically toward the park gate. I hauled out my .38 and triggered it double action after the fleeing form. It sprawled headlong somewhere around the fourth or fifth shot.

Blanche Carmichael's neighbor, Major Gorsby of the sunglasses and the leisurely life, lay on his back, still.

Lisa Crane stared at him in the silence of shock, her blue eyes wide with horror. I dragged myself over to her, retrieved the fallen cash box. She took it mechanically.

Suddenly she sobbed. I put an arm around her shoulder. Before I knew what was happening, she had both arms about my neck and was sobbing completely out of control.

I patted her back and felt just like the hero on the white horse. Then I felt something else, my bleeding leg, and almost passed out. . . .

They patched me up at the hospital and assured me that I would not even have a limp. Lejeune paid me a visit the next day and said he was sorry for his delay in getting out to the park, but that he would try to make up for it by testifying that it was his shooting that brought down Gorsby, thereby saving me the annoyance of facing a technical manslaughter charge.

And the annoyance, I thought to myself, of telling the reporters how I broke a case, after the police thought they had it safely on ice. I kept that to myself for the time being and said to Lejeune:

"What took you so long?"

"Kramer was at the station. He had them trace your call to Blue Bay Park. After I talked to you Kramer insisted, in front of half the squad room, that I go out to Blue Bay Park—to arrest you.

"I didn't agree with Kramer. He got very personal. I told him to go to hell. He told me he was Chief Inspector Kramer and would see that I was working the chicken detail by next week. All the boys, including Kramer's pets, were watching to see what would happen. So I slammed him on the chin. That chin is not built for short jabs."

"What'll you do now, sell insurance?"

Lejeune grinned. "The commissioner made me a captain this morning. It broke his crooked heart, but he couldn't face down three morning editorials. The pub-

licity blasted his son-in-law Kramer clean out of the department. He's going to work for his wife's old man, selling vacuum cleaners to the city."

"For a while I thought Kramer might be our killer."

"I GAVE it some thought myself. He was so anxious for me to think Carmichael came back to the house yesterday morning. Then, after you called last night, when he wanted to make out you were off your crock—and in front of an audience—he bragged about his evidence against Carmichael: Major Gorsby had told him privately that Carmichael had returned to his house shortly before noon, was in there half an hour, and left hurriedly. You had already told me Carmichael was on his route all morning. I began to wonder about Major Gorsby.

"It would have been a routine case, I suppose. Check the neighbors, check the tradesmen, check the visitors—except that Carmichael had had a fight with his wife, and except for his 'suicide', and except for the fact that Chief Inspector Kramer never was a cop and wouldn't be a cop if he stayed on the force twenty years."

"I heard you dug some skin fragments out of Gorsby's fingernails and picked a few blonde hairs off his collar. I heard that made him talk a little."

Lejeune drew hard on his cigarette. "It made him talk a lot—before he croaked. Watching Blanche Carmichael prance around the driveway in that yellow swimsuit brought back his youth.

"You no sooner left the house yesterday morning than Gorsby was in the back door. She told Gorsby to get out.

"Well, it was more than Gorsby could take. He lost his head and killed her."

"Then he killed her husband so it would look like murder and suicide."

"You're sharp today, Malone. Gorsby and Carmichael used to play Thursday

night pinochle and Gorsby knew his habits pretty well. He knew where to find Carmichael on Tuesday, drove out to Furman Street and told Carmichael his wife had been murdered. He said the cops were looking for Carmichael as a dangerous lunatic—which in this man's town means shoot to kill. Carmichael knew that much at least.

"He was scared and went with Gorsby out to Blue Bay Park, on Gorsby's promise to keep him under wraps until he had a chance to tell his story. When he got Carmichael in the woods, Gorsby slipped him a rabbit punch, then strung him up to a tree, dusted off his hands and came back home. A sweet clean job all around and nothing to worry about."

"Until he read in the papers about Lisa Crane."

"I heard the fair Lisa was in to see you this morning."

I grunted. "Do I get to keep the hundred bucks?"

"You get to keep the hundred bucks. The city's generous that way. You prevent a murder, hand them the murderer on toast, and they let you keep a hundred bucks of someone else's money. Why don't you take that hundred and take Lisa out and show her a good time?"

I grinned. "You're nose-y as a match-making old woman, Lejeune. Eddie Sweetman thinks he owes me something for helping to lower the boom on Major Gorsby. He sent around an invitation this morning. Miss Lisa Crane and Mr. Rory Malone are doing the Club Troc just as soon as they let Mr. Malone out of bed."

It was Lejeune's turn to grin. "Better make it fast. We're clamping the padlock on the Troc tonight. It's the new order."

So Malone took Miss Crane out for a ride in the country, which, after all, is the kind of a date a private eye can best afford.

But we stayed away from Blue Bay Park.

DEATH WAS THE BRIDE



She was calm and cold
now. . . .

*What happens to the wise guy
who forgets that a woman
always has the last word?*

**By H. HASSELL
GROSS**

ARTURO (the Dude) Costello wasn't looking so good when 15-year-old Harry Shaw found him with a knife hilt broken off in his throat. His pictures in the tabloid sheets looked better—so much so, in fact, that a number of girls and women who had never seen him in the flesh attended the funeral and wept for days after.

Arturo's friend, Pete, who was seen

running away from the scene of the murder, said the sorrowful dames were lucky that Arturo was dead. This sweeping statement prejudiced Pete's attempts to prove his innocence. Pete admitted that he hadn't liked the way the Dude treated women.

As for Harry Shaw's evidence—sure, he'd been on the bridge where Arturo was killed. Just like Harry testified at the inquest, he'd run past him toward 129th Street and Morris Avenue a few minutes after the knife entered the Dude's throat. But that didn't make him a murderer.

Under further questioning, Pete admitted seeing the blow struck. A woman had killed the Dude, he said, and added defiantly that he thought she'd done the Bronx a service. He wasn't telling her name.

Police Detective Blaney knew Pete's record as a small-time heist artist. This gallantry, if it wasn't a blind to cover guilt, was amazing. He visited the boarding house where Arturo had lived just before his murder. The proprietress, Mrs. Angelina Testro, was occupied with her eleven children.

The young man had lived in her house less than a month, she said. She shrugged off the news of his death between spoon-feeding her youngest and tucking three or four of the others into bed. Her eldest daughter, Rose, seemed more effected. The pretty, seventeen-year-old girl had been weeping, Blaney noticed. Efforts to question her brought Mrs. Testro's wrath down on the detective's head.

On his way out of the house, Blaney glanced into the closed parlor. The flower decked parlor made him wonder even more than Pete's gallantry had. . . .

It was two days before he returned to Pete's cell. The turnkey saw him enter, pat Arturo's one-time friend on the back and begin to talk.

"You didn't like it when the Dude made you ask Mrs. Testro for money."

Short, stocky Pete made no betraying move, but his swarthy skin paled. A moment later, without another word, Detective Blaney left the cell. He had the answer to a triangular puzzle in which all the unknown angles had to be figured backward.

There was the matter of Arturo's good looks for instance, and their effect on women. Pete was heavily-built, broad-nosed—and a sentimentalist with regard to what was then called the weaker sex. He hadn't liked it when Arturo shot off his mouth on the subject.

Take a dame, Arturo was accustomed to saying, all she wants is the money; a guy, that's all he wants, too. Then what's the good of him sacrificing to the skirt? If you're gonna bother with women, Arturo said, hustle up one that's a real dope and will turn the mazuma over to you.

Nobody but the Dude would have had the conceit to suppose that Angelina Testro was made to order for such a scheme. A hard worker who had taken in boarders to support herself and her family since she became a widow, everybody in the tight little Bronx neighborhood praised her character.

True, she was a little vain and hot-tempered—but then she had been a beautiful girl. You couldn't find fault with an aging woman if she showed impatience with her hard lot or spent a little too much money on dress. Her hair was still beautiful, black and luxuriant. She seemed to cherish it as the one remnant of her youthful beauty and happiness.

Arturo noticed this and it set him to thinking. "An old dame what goes around with curls piled on top of her bony head is a dame what wants a guy to make a play," he told Pete. It was a Sunday afternoon in late November and the two were loafing in Arturo's new room at Mrs. Testro's house.

An hour or so later they ambled down to the street, passing the window as she

hurried along the hall with a dustpan. Arturo winked at Pete behind her back.

"That's a swell hair-do you got, Angelina!" he called boldly. The eagerness with which she turned and smiled told him—and Pete—how hungry she was for compliments. In that moment pity for her was born in the tough heist artist.

"Thought you didn't believe in that kind of talk to dames!" Pete scoffed when they were out on the street.

The Dude grasped him by the shoulder. "I'm gonna get paid for them sweet words, buddy. They're gonna cost her plenty. That old dame's got money put by—and little old Arturo's just the lad to spend it!"

An admiring wave of the hand indicated his sharp lapels and flaming silk tie. He cake-walked a few steps, twirling an imaginary malacca. "Class, huh? Wait till you see me English spats!"

"You're fulla hot air," said Pete scornfully. "Angelina Testro ain't got no real dough. Now if you was to fall into a job with me—say like that warehouse over on Webster Avenue—that would be a real stake for a fellow. But scrounging pennies offa this nice woman—!"

The Dude grinned. "Think I wanta waste me good looks in stir? Them heists is all right for a monkey like you. Me, I'm strictly for the smart money."

BUT Angelina thought she was in love. She blushed like a young girl when Arturo praised her hair. He brought back her youth, but still she was a little ashamed of herself, a woman of 43 and a widow with children. Arturo was only a kid—the right age to be her son. However, he seemed steady and reliable, she told herself. He was even fond of the children.

"Kids around me was always what I wanted," he said. He told her he had a good job and offered to prove it by Pete, whose part in a number of holdups gave the Dude a hold over him.

Threatened, Pete obligingly assured the widow that Arturo worked regularly at his uncle's cigar store. He did, in a manner of speaking. The Dude hung around the place daily, steering strangers to a nearby crap game. Pete even admitted to Mrs. Testro that Arturo's salary wasn't much; but then, he added, Uncle Caesar would probably take him in as a partner soon.

The combination of Arturo's flattery—he was now telling her she was the most beautiful woman in the world—and Pete's recommendation was too much for Angelina. On Christmas Eve, when the Dude helped her decorate the children's tree and piled expensive gifts for all of them on the imitation snow at its feet, she promised to marry him. The Dude forced himself to exchange a betrothal kiss with her.

When he went so far as to fondle her black curls, Angelina was too happy to question his sudden interest in her finances. She took it as further evidence that he would be a careful, business-like husband in spite of his youth.

Indeed, Arturo gave her little time to think. He insisted that they must be married at once, not wait to have the banns called properly in church on three consecutive Sundays. The sooner he could begin to be a real help to her the better, said her ardent fiancé.

They'd be married on the 29th, five days from now. It didn't enter her head—until later—that Arturo knew she was making a bank deposit on the 28th which would bring her account up to five hundred dollars. . . .

Arturo spent the morning of his wedding day in various saloons, ending up three hours before the ceremony was due in Uncle Caesar's cigar store. He motioned Pete into a corner.

"The old dame'll be waiting for me with a priest and a gang of gabbing neighbors and relatives," he said. "But I ain't showing."

Pete's jaw dropped. "What's this? You gonna jilt her?"

Arturo's cheeks were flushed, but he was by no means drunk; he seemed excited and pleased with himself.

"Nope. But she's gotta come across before she gets me to stand up in front of a priest." He grasped Pete's arm. "I planned it swell. Listen—she's waiting there for me, she's getting more and more anxious. When the set time comes and no Arturo—" he gestured scornfully—"she'll be wild and she'll do anything I say. That's when you come in, Pete. See? You go there and you speak to the old dame alone. You tell her no mazuma, no husband! Get it? She's got to pay me to marry her!"

"You mean—but she expects you. You promised . . . and the priest—you can't get away with this with the priest there." He brushed Arturo's hand from his arm. "Not me. I ain't mixed up with no disrespect to the priest and I ain't telling a waiting bride no such thing as that."

The Dude laughed. "Okay. Then I spend my wedding night singing to the coppers about you. And the old dame can wait till she rots." He shrugged. "I ain't lost nothing."

"But the priest—he's waiting. You dassen't keep no priest waiting. It's probably a sin," Pete demurred.

Arturo took hold of his shoulder again. "Listen, do I tell the coppers about you or not? This old dame has got five hundred in the bank. Easy, legal pickings for me. When she comes across with it, I marry her—not before."

"But when you're married, the money is yours; she'll give it to you," Pete insisted.

"No old hag like her is gonna think she got me for free," the Dude boasted, glancing at his friend, and laughing scornfully.

The hour set for the wedding ceremony was six. As five o'clock came and passed,

Angelina grew more and more nervous. For the first time the idea entered her mind—suppose her young fiancé never came?

The merriment of her guests seemed loud and hideous; she trembled when she looked at the innocent countenances of her children. What if their mother should be shamed before their very eyes? By five-thirty she could no longer stay away from the window. Openly, she watched the darkening streets for her laggard bridegroom.

When the clock on the mantel struck six, she knew she had been a fool; with whitened cheeks she turned back into the room. One or two of the guests tittered. His eyes downcast in pity, the priest took her hands and murmured words of sympathy. Only one, her eldest daughter Rose, dared to look her in the face as if she had not been shamed—and that hurt her most of all.

ONLY then, before any of the guests could rise and excuse themselves, the doorbell rang. Her heart rose in her throat and she was suddenly drunk with hope. She hurried alone to the door. But when she opened it, only Arturo's friend, Pete, stood outside.

He finished what he had to tell her, and she stood with one hand lifted, shielding her cheek, as if she had been struck there. But she was calm and cold now, not suffocated with pain and anger as at first. The whole business went through her mind again, the terms on which Arturo would consent to marry her.

Something about the bargain struck her. "Four hundred dollars?" She knew that she had told Arturo she would have five hundred in the bank today. "Why only four hundred?" she asked wonderingly. Pete shuffled in embarrassment.

She stood staring at him. "So—you made him leave me a hundred?"

(Please continue on page 130)

PLUS

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

By **FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**



CHAPTER ONE

Warning to the Reader

THE following account—a good example of how fouled up you can get when you start messing around with murder—stands just as I wrote it, hour by hour, while it was happening.

If it seems a bit dizzy in spots, that's because the most important parts of it didn't make sense at the time.

For instance, take the way Victor Gaylord got himself murdered. Even granting that Gaylord was fairly sure to die a

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*She was there—just outside
the door!*

*When the television producer got knocked off
by a spike-heels killer,
Trexler didn't have time to rejoice—
for coming up . . . was his own curtain call!*

KILL ME, KATE!

heel's death some cozy night, it seemed unnecessarily rough. I mean, we might easily imagine some lush babe shooting him or knifing him, or poutingly handing him a scotch well laced with cyanide, which would have been a ladylike way of doing it. But for some peculiar, private reason, this killer in high heels chose, instead, to kill him with a Boy Scout hatchet.

It was also tough to figure a sensible reason why this same man-killer should then go tripping daintily straight into the bright headlamp beams of a passing car. Having just hacked a guy's skull to splinters, a girl would naturally be a little nervous and in rather a hurry to get gone. If she had only waited at the gate for a few seconds, I would have rolled on past without seeing her at all.

She must have noticed the glare of my car coming, but nevertheless she went flurrying right out into the street, making herself as conspicuous as a ballerina in a spotlight. This was bad timing even for an inexperienced murderess.

However, that's the way I saw it happening. And that was only the beginning—just a taste of more giddy deadliness to come.

Here's the record, written in the thick of it, starting with:

*Tuesday, April 11—
3:30 A.M.*

Twenty minutes ago I arrived here at my apartment with a bullet wound in my upper left arm.

The blood and the hole had ruined my suit coat, which was also rain-soaked and smeared with mud. My shirt, one of those new nylon jobs, looked like a total loss also.

When I sloshed antiseptic onto the wound, it really burst into flame. Until it subsided, I hung onto the washbowl with my eyes clenched shut and called a certain young female murderer all the uncomplimentary

names I could think of. Except her own. I didn't know who she was.

Then I wrapped bandage around it—awkwardly, because I could use only one hand. The flexing of the torn muscles started it to bleeding again. In exasperation, I held a towel against it, while I paced around the room wondering what to do.

By the time the blood had stopped seeping out again, I had decided that one thing I definitely did not want was to get myself fouled up in a murder case reeking with scandal. That meant I would conceal my gunshot wound from the police, and act as if I knew nothing at all about the murder.

This might be illegal, I realized, and also it might be dangerous—particularly if the police should somehow later learn about my part in it. In that event, I could anticipate a rough time making them understand why I had kept quiet.

This decided me that it would be a smart plan to make a written record of what I had seen and done, a record which I would keep entirely to myself, and not show to anyone else—unless it should become necessary for me to put it into the hands of the police . . . or my lawyer.

This, then, is a true, up-to-the-minute record of tonight's little bouquet of violence.

Let's take it back to two a.m. tonight, to the routine, daily act which dropped me smack into an ugly muddle of homicide—the simple act of going home from work.

The rain which is still falling now began soon after dinner last evening—dinner for me having consisted of one ham-on-rye and a quart of black coffee sent in to my desk. As I worked I could hear the rain rolling gently on the old shingle roof. Finally, at two a.m., I called it a night.

UNTIL now, I hadn't realized I was entirely alone in that cavernous barn of a place out on Ashley Road. Since I

was, I switched off the last light and latched the stage door behind me.

I hadn't brought a raincoat and I walked through the rain to my car without caring much. Mine was the only car left in the parking lot. Everyone else, even Allene Giles, my writer on the Moonbeam show, had given up and staggered homeward several hours ago.

I had an odd feeling, as if I had been abandoned in a dark, hollow world, like a character lost inside a television tube after the set had been turned off.

Sliding under the wheel, I sat for a moment looking wearily at the rambling structure of weather-scored wood wherein I spent my days and much of my nights cultivating ulcers. It should have stayed what it once was, a barn—but years ago it had been converted into a rustic summer playhouse. More recently it had been reconverted into a television rehearsal studio.

The sign across its front, *Raphael TV Productions, Inc.*, looked top-heavy on such an unpretentious building. It seemed tranquil enough now, sitting there in the fresh spring rain, surrounded by the soft country night; but early in the morning executives and technicians and glamorous actresses and yummy chorus girls would come crowding back in to turn it back into a place of fantastic turmoil again.

I tooted off toward my apartment feeling more than willing to hit the sack, after I'd had a few stiff nightcaps. I drove slowly, pass the large, gardened homes of people obviously in the chips. This charming suburb, one of the choicest in Westchester, was the last place you might expect to find a plant manufacturing television musicals.

Why had it been chosen, then? Because of sheer lack of enough working space in New York, and also because it was handy to the telecast studios in Manhattan, but mostly because Raphael TV's top executives had their homes here. Very conven-

ient for them, you see, although it had created a tough housing problem for several hundred others on Raphael TV's staff.

I had been lucky enough to find myself this one-room-and-bath over in the gas-pump-and-hamburger belt near the Boston Post Road. So, at a few minutes past two tonight, I was heading for it the shortest way—turning corners automatically, half asleep.

Then suddenly I wasn't half asleep any more, but awake and staring. Because that was when I saw death on spike heels come tripping out of Victor Gaylord's back gate, death with big, round, scared eyes.

She popped into sight through Gaylord's gate and headed straight across the street with her nylons twinkling in the shine of my headlights. She was wearing a black cape of the Dracula variety, but much shorter. She had the hood pulled over her head and, with one hand, was clenching it over the lower part of her face.

When I first glimpsed her I was not more than a hundred feet away; I had a perfectly clear view of her, and while I watched her for those few seconds, of course, I rolled even closer.

Then, when she was squarely in the middle of the street, she seemed to realize she had spotlighted herself. Instead of scrambling out of there even faster, she stopped dead still. For several seconds she stood there gazing round-eyed straight toward me. My mind photographed her unforgettably.

Framed in the black of her cape's hood, her eyes were round and scared, really terrified. Her hand clenching the hood concealed her mouth. The cape had swung open, revealing that her dress—a bright red dress—was ripped.

She was wearing platform sandals, sandals with inch-thick soles, also red, and in her panic she teetered on her high heels.

Her other hand was raised under the cape in a warding-off gesture, as if in instinctive fear that I might run her down.

One other detail put a chill into me. On her one visible hand were dark spots of something wet and sticky-looking. Somehow, I felt sure it was blood. Understand, that hand was not bleeding. The dark stuff was spattered over the whole hand and the wrist also. I sensed somehow that the blood was someone else's, that I was looking at the hand of a murderer.

FOR a few seconds she was as motionless as a manikin. Although I could see no feature of her face except her eyes, I had an odd sense of recognition. Rather, I had the feeling that I *ought* to recognize this girl—that I had seen her somewhere before—but at the same time I could not place her.

Then she was running again. Sleek legs flashing in the bright beams of my headlamps, she flew to a car sitting parked on the left side of the street. She ran around to its far side, ducked into it. Almost instantly the car was whirring away. Her take-off was so fast that I suspected she had left the engine idling.

She was alone in that car. She was driving it, and driving it like a bat. It had already accelerated to at least forty before she switched on her headlights. At the first corner she whipped it into a screeching turn and jackrabbited out of sight.

I resisted an impulse to chase her. I was too tired to throw myself into the wild sort of chase she could lead me—it was too likely that I would wind myself around a telephone pole. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do with her if I caught her.

What she had left behind her, however, might be something else again. The place from which she had fled in such panic was the home of Victor Gaylord, president and

head producer of Raphael TV, and my big boss.

I braked, swinging slowly to the curb. Not wishing to walk in on any brawls, I cut the switches and sat for several minutes listening.

A gal dashing out of Gaylord's back gate in the small hours of the morning was hardly a novelty. On any other night I would have shrugged it off. The thing that hooked me into it tonight was the blood I had seen on her hands.

The rain sprinkled on me as I left the car and went quietly to the gate. Except for this single opening, the rear of the Gaylord grounds was screened by a high, thick hedge. Just beyond sat Gaylord's guest house, a charming white cottage surrounded by garden terraces. The main house, much larger, sitting beyond, was entirely dark. The only light was the soft glow fanning out from the cottage's open door.

I slowly approached that open door along a flagstone walk. Just outside it small red footprints were dissolving in the rain. Just over the sill, the footprints were clear-cut and red. They led me to the spot in front of the fireplace where Victor Gaylord lay dead, with the red Boy Scout hatchet lying beside him.

Oddly, my first reaction was one of relief. It was a selfish reaction because Gaylord had been about to stage a drastic shakeup at Raphael TV. It might have meant my job. There would be no shake-up now, not right away. Naturally I felt glad of that. Selfish no doubt, but human. Scores of others at Raphael TV would feel just as I did about it. In that sense, a killer had done us a favor.

I stepped back to peer around and became aware of the odor of burned cordite in the air. That was odd too. A gun had been fired in this room only a few minutes ago. A firearm added to the hatchet seemed superfluous indeed. There was no sign of a bullet wound on Gay-

lord's body, however—so far as I could see simply by bending over him—and there was no sign of the gun itself, either. I made a quick circle of the room and it stayed missing.

Now I began to feel that instinctive, prickly sensation of being watched. I listened, but there was no sound of a lurking presence, just the dripping of the rain. I went slowly to the door connecting with the room beyond.

It was empty now, although someone had evidently been here. Another woman. There were a small pair of pumps on the floor, a dress and a jacket trailing over the back of a chair.

This picture fascinated me. Gaylord appeared to have had not just one visitor tonight, but two. One of them had evidently been here in this room when the other came bursting into the cottage with a hatchet in her fist and murder in her jealous heart.

This left me with the beguiling question of what had become of the first one. To judge from appearances, she must have dashed out in terror, while the second babe was busy hacking the life out of Gaylord—dashed out minus her shoes, dress and coat.

It would be interesting to watch which of the girls around Raphael TV turned up with a cold tomorrow.

I was getting the jitters. The air reeked with the kind of rumors that would get smeared across every front page in the nation.

I STARED at the telephone sitting within a few feet of Gaylord's body, recognizing that to report this to the police would be to drop myself into the thickest of it.

"Don't be a chump, Trexler," I said, half aloud. "Get out of here right now and play dumb."

Besides, I still had that crawly feeling that I was being watched.

"Out, Trexler," I insisted to myself. "On your way. Before somebody walks in on you."

Then, going to the door, I found the note. It lay there on an open leaf of an antique secretary. It was the gray-blue color used for Raphael TV memos. A closer look showed me that it was actually a sheet from one of our pads, with the printing cut off the top. It was a note written in flowing, stylized handwriting and it said:

*Tonight, darling—
Same place—
Same time—
Same reason too.*

No salutation, no signature. On a note like that it would hardly be necessary. The woman who had written it had evidently had reason to believe that Gaylord would know just whom it was from.

It bothered me. There was a haunting quality about that handwriting. Like the fleeing woman I had seen in the street, it seemed familiar, yet it wasn't. I felt I should know whose writing it was, yet I couldn't actually recognize it.

Somehow that note, so full of warmth and secrecy, stirred me up inside with an emotion I couldn't define. I couldn't explain it to myself then, and I can't explain even now, why I decided to slip that note into my pocket and take it away from there—but I did.

I have it here with me now. When I look at it I get a deep-down feeling that perhaps in some way this note is important to me personally.

I went to the door. My intention was to get back into my car, drive on home, have a couple of extra nightcaps and go to bed as if none of this had happened. So I stepped out onto the terrace—and that was when the house seemed to collapse on me.

Possibly it was a short length of pipe. It may have been a jack handle or some

similar tool. It came slashing down out of the darkness at my side so fast that I didn't know what was happening until I found myself sprawling face down in mud—actually mud, a small plot of rain-soaked garden at the side of the terrace leading to the house.

The blow had glanced across my right ear hard enough to drop me but not quite hard enough to black me out. While I lay there stunned, something sharp and pointed pressed down between my shoulder blades. It felt like the point of a saber.

Actually it was a spike heel.

By twisting a little I could vaguely see a red platform sandal, a nylon leg. Little Miss Killer had circled back to the scene to watch me. Evidently she had decided I was the troublesome busybody type who had done a little too much snooping to-night.

Next, a loud, ear-splitting bang. A numb, pinching sensation sprang instantly into my left upper arm. That answered the question of what had become of the gun missing from the death room. The killer had taken it away with her. Just now she had given me a taste of warmed-over lead.

Too stunned and shocked even to roll over, I felt her sharp heel lifted from my spine and heard her running off. As she passed the open door of the cottage, I glimpsed her legs flashing again and her black cape flying. This time she raced off toward the front part of the Gaylord estate.

After a moment her car whirred away in the night.

I lay there in the rain wondering dizzily how-come I was still alive. Either this babe was a damn poor shot, I decided, or else the wound in my arm was a warning. It seemed to say that unless I kept clammed up about tonight's little incident the next bullet would catch me closer to the ticker.

CHAPTER TWO

Crimson Eavesdropper

THAT brings us up to now—4:45 a.m., Tuesday. Mostly I have been sitting here, pecking at this type-writer with only incidental help from my left hand. There is a towel wrapped over the bullet-cut, with a knotted necktie holding it in place. It hurts like hell and it's stiffening up. I expect to have a sweet time acting as if it isn't there.

I keep wondering if Gaylord's body has been found as yet. All that chop-chopping and bang-banging in the quest cottage might have disturbed the neighbors.

Also, what about Louise, Gaylord's wife? Her room, separate from her husband's, is in the front of the big house, facing away from the cottage. Sooner or later somebody around there ought to be noticing the smell of murder.

I have spent more minutes studying that intimate little gray-blue note:

*Tonight, darling—
Same place—
Same time—
Same reason too.*

It still stirs me up. I still feel I should know who wrote those words. But I don't.

Pacing around the room again, I decided that this written record should be backed up by some sort of corroboration. As it stands, the police might choose to brush it off as an elaborate falsification, a fancy cover-up. They can point out that a lie written on paper is no truer than a spoken lie. They can say I've gone to a lot of pains to whitewash myself.

It's possible that I unwittingly left traces of myself back at the cottage where Gaylord was murdered—perhaps a footprint, or fingerprints. As an explanation of such evidence, this statement will draw a very fishy eye from the cops unless there

are other circumstances or other statements to verify it.

So a few minutes ago I took up my phone and called Bryce Elwyn's home. Bryce is also an assistant producer at Raphael TV. We work together on the big Moonbeam Theatre show and share its major headaches.

He answered my ring immediately. Instead of sounding sleepy and resentful at being wakened, as I'd expected, he sounded normally awake and habitually worried.

"Bryce, this is Trex," I said. "Lord, you been working all night?"

"Not quite," he answered wearily. "My eyes gave out on me, so I turned in at a little past two." I knew that Bryce had taken home a truckload of scripts to read, more or less. "Set the alarm for four. I can tell you there is hardly any pastime more diverting than reading the book of a twenty-year-old musical comedy at four in the morning."

"Bryce," I began, and stopped.

In the background I heard a noise like sobbing. It was faint, as if it were coming through a closed door. It was a sound of feminine anguish.

"Anything wrong there, Bryce?" I asked.

"Mona had a nightmare," Bryce answered impatiently. "TV is making a nervous wreck of her." It's well known that Mona Elwyn is one of the most popular dramatic stars in the new medium—that she is building up a fine new career in TV after having skidded out of the movies through a series of bad breaks.

Bryce added, "She won't let up, though, and these nightmares she's been having lately are getting to be a nightmare to me too."

"Sorry, Bryce."

"She woke up screaming her head off a few minutes ago. I've had a hell of a time quieting her. Sleeping pills don't seem to help her very much any more." He added,

as if fed up with that subject, "She'll be all right and back on the job tomorrow. What's on your mind, Trex?"

"I just had a peculiar telephone call," I said. "It's got me worried."

"Why?"

"It was about Gaylord. Somebody rang me a few minutes ago and said there's serious trouble over at the Gaylord place."

"Don't you know who it was calling?"

"No. It woke me up and I couldn't even tell whether it was a man or a woman. He or she said just that much, then hung up. I don't get it and I can't say I like it. You and I both know the way Gaylord has been asking for trouble for a long time."

"Sure he has." By now Bryce sounded plenty worried himself. "If anything serious has happened to Gaylord, it could kick up one hell of a nasty mess."

"That's why I'm calling you about it, Bryce," I said. "I don't want to get mixed up in it any more than I can help, naturally. I can't ignore that call, but on the other hand I want to protect myself. I thought it might be smart to tell somebody in advance what I intend to do about it."

"Why not simply tip off the cops?" As soon as Bryce asked it, he saw a good reason why not. "No, there might be good friends of ours involved."

"That's it. Now listen, Bryce. I'm going to get dressed and drive over to Gaylord's place. I'll take a look-see. Then I'll report to you again. I hope the call was somebody's cute idea of a practical joke. But if something is seriously wrong over there, then we can decide together what's best to do about it."

"O.K., Trex," Bryce agreed. "Better get rolling right away. I'll wait right here to hear from you again."

Before he hung up I heard again that same sobbing in the next room. Mona's nightmare seemed to be having a remarkably lasting after-effect. She'd better take it a little easier on this new career of hers, I thought, or else she'd fall apart soon.

I HELD the phone in my hands for a minute, feeling like half a heel. I had tried to sound convincing, and Bryce seemed to have taken my yarn at face value, in good faith. Still, I figured it couldn't hurt him. In helping me to account for myself, even falsely, he was helping to account for himself also.

I peeled the bloody towel off my wound, made sure it had stopped bleeding, then taped more gauze over it. I put on a fresh shirt and changed to a blue pin-stripe suit. My arm was surprisingly stiff; it wouldn't be easy to use it naturally.

Before leaving the apartment I stuffed the other suit and shirt, the messed-up ones I'd been wearing, into the laundry hamper. I cleaned stains off the wash-bowl, then stuffed the reddened towels out of sight also. The bath needed a better cleaning than this, but there wasn't time to do a proper job now.

I went down to the street where I had left my car locked. Driving at a normal speed, I retraced my usual course.... When I reached the rear gate, I got out and looked across the grounds at the cottage. It looked exactly as I had first seen it, with soft light fanning out its open front door; but I was trying to act as if I had never seen it this way before.

I went in the gate, along the walk and across the terrace to the open door. I paused there, craning, behaving as if this was all new to me. Then I went inside and stood for a moment staring at Gaylord's corpse. Nothing seemed changed. Every detail seemed exactly as I had left it before.

Next I simply went back to my car, walking fast, and buzzed away.

Four or five minutes later I turned my car into the driveway of the house where the Elwyns are living.

The drive circles to a ranch-type dwelling, only one story high, surrounded by plenty of open space. Elwyn had rented it at a very reasonable figure from a friend

of his, a radio writer, who had been called out to Hollywood to do a new show. It's so roomy inside for only the two of them that Bryce and Mona joke about rattling around in it—but it has plenty of privacy and comfort.

A light was burning in Bryce's study. It was the only light in the house until I rang the bell. The other lights flashed on, marking Bryce's progress to the door.

He looked out at me in surprise, having expected another phone call rather than a personal visit. My face warned him it was really serious. As he closed the door behind me I told him quietly,

"That call was the McCoy. Gaylord's been murdered."

Bryce is a man of reserve and self-control. He didn't start, or mouth exclamations, but just gazed at me gravely. The exceptionally long dressing gown he was wearing made him seem even thinner than usual. He looked tired almost to the point of illness, his eyes dull in the heavy plastic rims of his glasses.

"That's nice," he said finally. "That's going to provide a lot of jolly fun for all of us."

He led me down the pine-panelled hallway toward his study. Following him, I was reminded for no particular reason, that Mona's nightmare had occurred back in the rear wing. That part of the house was now entirely dark. Apparently she had quieted down. At any rate, the place was full of a pre-dawn quiet when Bryce Elwyn led me into his study where scripts and musical scores were piled on tables and chairs.

He closed the door behind me and made a place for me to sit while we talked. He also poured two stiff shots of scotch from a decanter and passed one to me. For a moment I wasn't sure whether this was intended simply as a nerve-soother or whether he was about to propose a hearty toast to Gaylord's sudden death. Gaylord had been the kind of dog who would make

the latter seem almost fitting and proper.

"I did what I told you I was going to do, Bryce," I went on. "That is, I parked in the street behind Gaylord's and looked in. There were lights burning in the cottage, with the door standing wide open, so I went in farther for a closer look. Gaylord was killed with a hatchet. I came right out again."

"Hatchet?" Bryce said, wincing.

I nodded. "It's lying there beside the body. Nobody need worry about Gaylord's coming back to life. He definitely won't. Neither need anybody feel surprise over the fact that a woman did it to him. She left a trail of bloody footprints across the floor when she left. To make it cozier, there wasn't just one woman there tonight. There were two at once."

Bryce's eyebrows arched over the rims of his glasses. "Two? How do you know?"

"Clothes left in the other room. Evidently the first doll was in there when the other suddenly barged in with her little hatchet. Apparently the first one scrambled fast while the second concentrated on murdering the rat. Then—"

Bryce broke in, startled. "Why, then the first one knows who the second one—the murderess—is!"

Of course that had to be true. For some reason this angle had escaped me until now, but it was solidly logical on the basis of the evidence as I had seen it. The identity of Gaylord's killer must be known to the other woman who had been present in the cottage.

"Where does that get her?" I wondered.

Bryce shrugged.

For another moment I mused over the question of what that other woman might do about it. The answer, offhand, was nothing. She might wish to accuse the killer, women being the jealous little minxes they are, but she couldn't do that without revealing herself.

On the other hand she could be rather sure that the killer, when caught, would vindictively blab out every juicy detail, certainly not omitting the babe in the room.

"ALTOGETHER a sweet situation," I went on to Bryce Elwyn. "Very probably we're acquainted with both the murderess and the witness to the murder."

Bryce agreed. "With Raphael TV crawling with luscious lasses these days, the chances are that both those babes *are* working for us."

"Beginning tomorrow every pretty face in the place will take on a new interest for me. It'll be fascinating to watch 'em," I said.

"Got any ideas as to who the two may be?"

I sampled the scotch before answering. "No. No idea at all about either of them. It might be any dame in the place. Also, the second one, the hatchet woman, might very well have been Louise Gaylord. She'd have a better reason to murder the heel than any of the others."

"I heard Louise is away."

"Where?"

"I think Chicago. I heard Gaylord mention it to Allene Giles this morning."

We sat staring at each other for a while, realizing how this thing could spread its poison. The virus would creep insiduously into the minds of husbands and boy-friends. On the other hand, my future and Bryce's, and that of scores of other executives in Raphael TV, would be definitely pleasanter, now that an exterminator had sweetened the air.

"All right," Bryce said. "We're in it already. What are we going to do about it?"

I sat silent. I wasn't thinking but listening. Slight creaking noises—perhaps the weight of feet shifting along the floorboards of the hall—seemed to hint that somebody was tuning in on this confab.

It would have to be Mona. She could be awake and easing closer to the door of Bryce's study to eavesdrop. On the other hand, the noises might simply be the kind of noises that houses make of themselves in the quiet hours.

"We should tell the police, shouldn't we?" Bryce said.

I felt like a heel again, because I was holding out so much on him. I had described my second visit to the cottage, but not my first. I had not mentioned finding that note, much less that I had taken it away—removing evidence being a slightly illegal act. I was telling nobody that I had seen a very guilty-looking girl fleeing the scene of the murder—and I certainly intended to keep to myself the fact that I was carrying around a nasty bullet wound presented to me by that same hard-hitting babe. I greatly preferred to keep all this entirely under wraps, without making a slip that might give the cops a chance to pry it out into the open.

"Wait," I said. "Before sticking our necks out, let's find out where we stand. If we notify the police of a murder, they'll bear down on us to account for ourselves. That's not an easy thing to do in the middle of the night. For instance, I was working in my office, over at the studio, until two o'clock, and I was all alone at the last."

"I was working alone here too," Bryce said. "Mona can't back me up in that, either. She went to bed early, dosed up with scotch and barbiturates. I didn't happen to look in at her during the night, but I can say I did, and that can put her in the clear."

"Come to think of it, Bryce, we can vouch for each other fairly well. You phoned me several times, remember? Twice about stage cues in *Kill Me, Kate*. That second time, I remember, was just before two o'clock. That lets us place each other pretty definitely. From the

looks of Gaylord's body I'd say he was dead before two, so—" I hesitated, then said, "Still, Bryce, I want to stay as clear of all this as I possibly can."

"You mean you'd rather not ask for trouble by notifying the police."

"Maybe I'm wrong but I'd rather not."

Bryce was silent. I could feel him picturing a dead man lying alone, neglected and undiscovered. He squirmed over it and went on thinking.

"This person who phoned you about trouble over at Gaylord's," he said. "Why did he or she do it? Why was that call made to you instead of to somebody else on the staff?"

"I don't know."

Bryce sat wordless again and I wondered uneasily if he suspected there had not actually been such a call. In the quiet I thought I heard again a creaky hint of Mona eavesdropping on us in the hallway. I felt a curious temptation to jerk the door open and catch her at it; but I sat still.

Bryce's decision, the one he was trying to make now about notifying the police, was important to me. If he agreed we had better keep quiet, then he would involve himself in a minor way that he would want to keep concealed too, and this would force him to play along with me and back me up, in case the going got rough.

"All right," he said abruptly. "Keeping quiet won't hurt anybody and it may help. Let's forget the little we know about it. We're going to have a tough day tomorrow, I think, so let's catch up on our sleep."

He rose decisively, scraping his chair back. If Mona had been prowling in the hallway, that sound would be enough to warn her off. Bryce went directly to his study door and snapped it open; and there was no sign that anyone had been lurking out there. No sign, that is, until I turned and the light happened to catch a dark, shiny mark on the hallway wall.

It was a fresh red smear left by a woman's hand wet with blood.

CHAPTER THREE

Handwriting on the Wall

BIDDING Bryce good-by at his front door, early this morning, I kept a straight face and made no mention of the mark I had seen on the wall. Driving away, I turned it upside down and sideways in my mind, looking at it from all angles.

I was sure it was Mona who had been eavesdropping on Bryce and me from the hall. It was her hand that had left a fresh smear of blood on the wall. But I couldn't make it add up to anything definite. Anyway, I decided, it was not my worry, but Bryce's—if he was aware of it.

I drove past Gaylord's place again on my way home, and regretted it. This time it was no longer a dark, quiet spot. More lights were blazing, several cars were parked along the curb and men were prowling around, some of them scanning the ground with flashlights—including the muddy garden spot into which Little Miss Killer's sap had spilled me.

I couldn't guess who had tipped the cops, but there they were, brother. They had taken over and were already hard at work.

Dawn was breaking when I got back to this apartment. I felt nervously unstrung and half dead from lack of sleep. Still, I took time to bring this record up to the minute before finally falling into bed.

Then sleep wouldn't come. I kept expecting a set of official knuckles to rap on my door, I kept worrying about those bloody clothes and towels crammed into my bathroom hamper. I tried to think of a way I could get rid of them so that they couldn't be traced back to me. When I finally got up again, still dead tired, the

best I could do was to cram them down deeper in the hamper.

My arm was swollen, pulsing and fiery red. I was afraid it might become infected. That would be ducky. It would leave me with a choice of dying of blood poisoning or going to a doctor—who would be legally forced to report my wound to the police.

I flexed my arm painfully to limber it up, taped fresh bandage over the stain, got dressed and sized myself up in the mirror. I looked like something out of Skid Row. My face was gray and old. To me I looked exactly like a guy who had poked into a murder that was none of his business, then had spent the whole night trying to scramble back out of it.

After a drugstore breakfast—this time detouring around the Gaylord place—I drove out Ashley Road to Raphael TV. A noticeable tension hung over the place. The grapevine had spread the news of the murder early, and space was now at a premium in the parking lot.

Among the scores of cars were several costly land-yachts belonging to the big dough behind Raphael TV. There were also several more modest ones bearing the insignia of the police. The cops were here now, tireless, smarter than we knew, and boring in.

I stepped inside, sensed even tighter confusion. Even empty, this ex-barn, where once placid cows had peacefully chewed their hay, looked like something out of a futuristic horror movie.

Great banks of lights hung overhead, fat electric cables trailed around the floor like homeless boa constrictors. Microphones dangled like moss and those fantastic, top-heavy TV cameras stood about on their rubber-tired dollies. A street lamp stood here, the corner of a middle class living room there, beside the front of a Western frontier saloon—all parts of sets. This morning it was packed with people trying to work with their minds

on murder, speculating on the killer.

On one stage Dinah Coyle, our dance directress, was putting a row of pretties through their paces. In playsuits and swimsuits, their lovely long legs kicked in unison—reminding me, with a twinge, of a hatchet chopping.

On another stage Bryce Elwyn was attempting to direct a love scene between a fluttery soprano and a jittery tenor. I looked around for Mona Elwyn and didn't spot her, but did see Allene Giles, my writer, wandering aimlessly with two fists full of script, a cigarette pinched in her mouth, strictly against the rules. The atmosphere turned my own nerves on edge and the pain in my left arm began to grow sharper.

I climbed wooden stairs to what was formerly the playhouse balcony. The upper reaches of it had been made over into a group of offices for the executives. They were arranged in order of protocol, the big shots near the stair landing, the little shots over in the remote reaches.

The first doors were closed and men were talking behind them—the big brass conferring with the cops. Victor Gaylord's office was also closed. When I reached my own cubbyhole, down in the bass section, I was astonished to find it fastened also, from the inside.

A moment after I tried the knob, however, the bolt snapped out of its socket and the door was yanked open. I went in to find that Valerie Wayne had closeted herself alone here. She had been waiting for me in an increasing state of agitation. The air was fogged and a dozen rouge-stained butts lay crushed in my ashtray.

VALERIE came to me on quick impulse, slid one arm around my neck and gave me a lingering kiss. Then, as suddenly, she pushed me away.

"Pardon the error," she said in her husky voice. "I don't usually do that to men who break dates with me."

It was true that I had been forced to break a dinner date with Val last night, due to pressure of work—and it really had been pressure of work. *High* pressure, at that. Among the many things I would greatly prefer not to do, breaking a date with Val stood at the top of the list.

She sat on the edge of my desk, eying me narrowly through the fumes of her cigarette, nervously swinging one neatly shod foot.

The many hundreds of thousands of men who have fallen in love with Valerie Wayne via TV really haven't seen anything yet, because they miss her coloring. Her reddish-blond hair is cut short, in the new style, and on her it looks delicious.

As no customer of the Moonbeam Playhouse show needs to be told, she is attractive from that lovely haircut every inch of the way down to her toes. She is the most luscious woman I have ever known, and I have not the slightest inclination to try to find a more luscious one. I will gladly settle for Val any time.

Not that she is perfection itself. She drinks too much sometimes, smokes too much all the time, and is ridden by too much ambition. I often have it tough, persuading her to forget her career for a few minutes at a time.

As she sat there gazing at me with a calculating glint in her green eyes, and swinging one lovely leg, I said, "What's the idea, locking yourself in here?"

"I had to be the first to see you this morning, Trex, darling," she said quickly. "I've simply *got* to know what's going to come of all this. I *am* all set for Moonbeam straight through, aren't I, darling?"

I put on a wry smile, opened a window—using my right hand only—then turned to my chair. Val's voice is fully as lovely as the rest of her. She opens that lovely mouth of hers and up from her lovely throat comes lovely music. She has sung the lead in most of the Moonlight mu-

sicals so far, winning plenty of notice.

The show is growing rapidly in popularity. As late as yesterday a decision had been reached to give her star billing in the entire series, but so far the terms of her contract hadn't been fought out. What she was so upset about, of course, was her fear that the murder of Victor Gaylord might queer the deal.

"You'll have to wait for the answer to that one, Val," I said wearily. "At least until Gaylord's corpse cools off."

She crushed out her cigarette and immediately began fishing up a fresh one. "Vic wanted me there, darling," she reminded me unnecessarily. "It was just a question of—of working it out." She added hastily, "If I seem a little ghoulish this morning, it's only because a good chunk of my life depends on what comes next."

Yes. And a good chunk of coin, too—more than I could ever anticipate for myself. Val has it all dreamed out. In several more months the Moonbeam Musicals will sign off for the summer. By that time Val's popularity will enable her to keep busy on the straw hat circuit and cash in nicely.

Sooner or later, there'll be Hollywood, top money and even glossier fame. When this happens, incidentally, a little guy named Johnny Trexler will be left somewhere far back along the track, carrying a great big torch.

"Murder is a little upsetting to others, too, sweet," I reminded her. "Not even the big wheels here can guess so early how much Gaylord's death will change our plans. My own job was on the fence until this morning, and for all I know it may be still. So let's relax, Val. You don't really appreciate how cuddly you get when you relax."

She leaned forward and kissed me again. "You're right, Trex, darling, I *am* being a little previous. I really shouldn't fret so much. I know how much I can

count on you—you'll get my contract through just as soon as you possibly can."

"Me?" I said in astonishment. "Gaylord handled all the contracts personally, and now that he—"

"I know, darling, but somebody will move up to take his place, of course!" Val interrupted. "Everybody *knows* you're the man who deserves it."

"I deserve it, all right, my sweet," I said ironically. "But don't let yourself hope for it too much. They'll probably bring in somebody new over the heads of all the rest of us. You don't realize how much executive ability a man acquires when he buys a block of stock. I don't happen to own any Raphael TV Common. Do you?"

She shook her pretty head and, as we sat there gazing thoughtfully at each other, Allene Giles appeared in the door. Unlike Val, Allene is virtually unknown to the TV audience, although millions of viewers are entertained by her work every week. She is a writer and quite bitter about it.

ALLENE is bitter about the fact that writers' names are rarely noticed on the screen and writers' purses aren't fat. She is also bitter about the fact that she would rather be a writer than anything else. The total effect of all this has been to make her one tough babe to handle.

This morning her yellow hair was drawn back as sleekly and parted as meticulously as ever; her dress was as tidy as usual, and I had no doubt the seams of her nylons were ruler straight, as always. But she did have dark crescents under her eyes and she did look like a bad night.

She came to my desk with something black in her hands. She hesitated as if not knowing where to begin, then said, "Have those bright boys from headquarters gone to work on you yet, Trex?"

"Not yet, but they will."

Allene hesitated again. Her face would have been nicer without quite so much hardness in it. So would her heart. Perhaps she wasn't exactly cold, but only cynical.

Trying a new tack, she said, "They reached Louise at her brother's place in Chicago."

"I'd heard she'd gone there," I said.

Allene nodded. "Louise's brother was throwing a big party last night with Louise hostessing for him. She was right there in the middle of forty or fifty people until dawn. Couldn't want a better alibi. Some women have all the luck."

"Such as having a ratty husband like Vic Gaylord bumped off for her," Val said cynically. "I'm sure she appreciates the favor somebody did her last night."

This trenchant remark reminded Allene of the black thing in her hands. With a quick motion, she spread it over my desk. She did it so unexpectedly, shocked me so badly, that I jumped up and backed away.

The garment on my desk was a short, hip-length black cape with a cowl.

All three of us gazed at it in silence until I said, "Well, what about it?"

"Belongs in the wardrobe department," Allene explained. "We're due to use it in *Kill Me, Kate* night after next. Looks like we'll have to have it dry-cleaned first, though." She turned over part of it and pointed to a stain as big as a grapefruit surrounded by a lot of grape-sized stains and smaller. "I'm not sure," she added, "but that looks like blood."

We gazed at each other again. I instantly knew that this was the same cape I had seen worn by a killer fleeing from the murder scene last night. Allene and Val, both being bright girls, could at least suspect a connection. It clinched a point that Bryce and I had mentioned last night. There could be no doubt now that the murderer of Victor Gaylord was closely associated with Raphael TV.

"I don't know what the hell to do about this, Allene," I said, "except to turn it over to the cops. Do that, will you?"

She nodded, turned and went out with it. It struck me then that this was another of those senseless things that had begun turning up. Why should a woman take the trouble and the risk of snitching a garment from our wardrobe department to wear when visiting Gaylord either to kiss him or to kill him? Offhand I could see no point in it, except that maybe she had done it to keep the blood off her own clothes.

"Trex, darling," Val said, appearing to forget the blood-stained cape immediately. "When I sign that contract—"

"Val, darling, my sweet," I broke in, "for Pete's sake let up. Frankly, from my own selfish viewpoint it'll be fine with me if you never sign the contract. I have other things to worry about this morning, such as my own paltry future."

"But the salary Vic mentioned—"

"Val!" I blurted. "If you don't shut up about it, I'll put in a pitch for Mona Elwyn instead." That had the desired effect—hit her with dismay, because Val and Mona loved each other like the pair of competing prima donnas they were. "Tell you what, Val," I suggested, trying a little butter next. "Make a note of the main points you want in your contract and I'll take it up with the big brass as soon as the chance comes."

She got busy at once, using my desk pen to scribble on a memo pad. My nerves were jerky, my arm more painful. The noise in this place seemed worse than usual this morning—an orchestra tootling, the chorus girls' slippers slap-slapping, carpenters' hammers banging, the soprano trying to out-sing the tenor, technicians yelling at each other over the din.

Although Val is very pleasant to have around, I was actually glad when she dropped the note on my desk and slipped around for a good-by hug.

"Sometimes I'm sure you're right, Trex, darling," she murmured. "I'd be happier, I know, if I'd just relax and settle down and let a big strong man take care of me. But somehow I just can't. Not yet, anyhow, darling."

She left me with one of her heart-stopping smiles. I picked up her note with the intention of chucking it into my file, unread.

But suddenly it was sticking to my fingers like flypaper and I was staring at it in cold shock.

Val's handwriting on that blue-gray bit of paper looked exactly like that on the endearing note I had filched from the scene of Vic Gaylord's murder.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fast Trip to Hell

THE preceding section of this record was a quickie, written partly in my office in longhand and partly here in my apartment during a hurried lunch hour.

After discovering the startling similarity between Val's script and that on the note, I locked myself inside my office and tried to pull my wits back together. It was a shock that really jolted me.

Instantly Val seemed to fit perfectly into the murder picture. Gaylord's romancing, Val's driving ambitions, her stormy emotions at times—all this was enough to turn my blood icy and leave me numb with heartsickness.

I came back here to my apartment at the very first chance for just one reason—to make a direct comparison between the two notes. I went straight from the door to the shelved book in which I had hidden the love message. One look clinched it. There was no possible doubt that Valerie Wayne's hand had written both.

I sat and stared at nothing, convinced that this murder case was answered then

and there, once and for all. As I saw it, there had been two women present in the cottage for a few dramatic minutes at the time of Gaylord's death. It would have been small comfort to me to decide that Val was the one in the adjoining room. I knew she wasn't that one.

The abandoned shoes, dress and coat were not new, but also they were items of attire which I had never seen Val wear. So she wasn't the woman who belonged to those clothes, but the other one—the one with the hatchet in her hand.

That was it. So far as I was concerned, there was no need to take it any farther than that.

Then I began to wonder about the angles. Could Val have loved Gaylord so violently as all that, for instance, and at the same time showed affection toward me so consistently and apparently so genuinely? The answer to that one, and to other disturbing questions as well, is this—Val is a skilled, experienced actress.

One other angle is even more disturbing. Maybe this was why Gaylord's murderer had shot me in the arm, as a warning, instead of shutting me up permanently on the spot—because Val does care for me, in her way. But that puts an odd twist on it too. It seems to say that the murderess loved one man so much in one way that she killed him and loved another man so much in another way that she couldn't bear to kill him.

Without trying any farther than that to make sense of it, I went back to the studio with both notes in my pocket. The parking lot was as crowded as before, if not more so—there were a pack of newspaper photographers and reporters now prowling the place. The lunacy that is TV was still going on unabated inside. Conferences were continuing portentously behind closed doors. And in my office again, waiting for me, was Val.

I stopped short to peer at her. It was all so easily understandable. She was so

attractive in every line, every posture, every gesture—and so definitely career-minded.

"You disappointed me again, Trex, darling," she said calmly. "I wanted you to take me to lunch. I felt the need of three or four extra-dry martinis—but they weren't as good without you there."

Her technique was perfect. A very clever girl, this Val. Ordinarily I would have burst into a glow, but today this gambit didn't win her even a smile. Unfortunately for her, too, it led directly into the subject uppermost in my mind.

"That makes two bad connections. Lunch today, dinner last night. May I ask, my sweet, how you spent your evening after I broke our date?"

Something in my manner warned her of stormy weather ahead. She slowly found herself a fresh cigarette and slowly lighted it, eying me. Instead of getting jittery she turned calmer and quieter than normal.

"I mixed myself a few highballs," she answered evenly, "decided to skip dinner, read a book for a while, then went to bed early."

"So when the cops ask you to account for yourself at the time of Gaylord's murder, if they haven't already, you'll tell them that? You were alone at home and peacefully sleeping?"

"Just like millions of other people," Val added, her voice low. "I can't prove it, of course, any more than those millions of others can." Then she said, frowning prettily, "Trex, darling, I don't like the way you're looking at me."

"I don't like the way I'm seeing you," I said flatly. "How about this as proof—that you're lying?"

I placed the rendezvous message on my desk top. She frowned down at it, drawing a long pull on her cigarette. Then she gazed up at me, seeming puzzled.

"I don't get it, Trex."

"You wrote this note, Val."

HER answer startled me. I had expected a vehement outburst of denials. Instead, she shrugged and admitted, "Yes, I wrote it. What of it?"

"What of it?" I stared at her. "After making this little tryst with Gaylord last night, you kept it, didn't you—with a hatchet?"

She smashed out her cigarette, seeming annoyed rather than indignant. "Let's get this straight, Trex. This note I wrote has nothing at all to do with Gaylord, or a hatchet, or with anything else that happened last night."

It took a stiff effort to keep myself from snapping out: "*No? Then how come I found this note near Gaylord's dead body?*" That might have spilled me straight into the fire. I managed to hold it back and ask, instead, "Then just what *does* it mean, Val?"

Suddenly she laughed, lightly, even delightedly. I was entertaining her—although I couldn't see how and I certainly didn't feel comical. But she laughed her beautiful laugh, and then impulsively kissed the corner of my mouth.

"It was used as a prop in the Musical Romances show last week, Trex, darling—and you're being just too wonderfully silly about it!"

I didn't feel silly as yet, either. "As a prop?"

"Why, yes. The plot called for a secret rendezvous between the sweethearts in the play, and a close-up shot showed my hand writing this note. Trex, darling, it's really *sweet* of you to be so deliciously jealous over it!"

"Look, Val," I said shortly. "With three different shows in production continually, a lot goes on around here that I don't have time to notice. I'm too busy to catch all our shows even when they're screened. If there was such a shot in the show you're talking about, it's definitely one I missed. Still, it's easy enough to check."

She was laughing again, feeling delightfully flattered. "Please do check, Trex, darling! It's one Bryce directed, remember?"

At that point I certainly had no choice but to push it through. I left my office and halfway down the stairs, with Val trailing me, chortling to herself, I spotted Bryce talking with Allene. I caught his eye, signalled him to come. I went back to my desk with Val to wait for him.

A moment later he came in, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, looking worn. Allene trailed in with him, evidently not understanding that I hadn't wanted her to. But now that she was here, it didn't seem to matter.

I pointed to the note and asked Bryce, "Recognize it?"

"Why, yes," Bryce answered immediately. "We used it in a close-up on the Musical Romances show last week. Val wrote it. What about it?"

I sat heavily in my chair, gazing ruefully at Val. I felt like a good-sized heel and an even bigger jerk. I could never get finished with apologizing to Val. At the same time I was dizzy with a sense of relief to discover that I had committed such an unjust piece of foolishness.

Val, however, seemed less amused now. She was gazing at me with a peculiarly puzzled expression on her face.

"Nothing about it, Bryce," I heard myself answering him lamely. "Somebody used it to play a cute little practical joke on me, that's all. Funny how I can get so jealous about Val with so little reason."

Bryce and Allene grinned, but Val and I found it a strain to join them. I knew what was troubling Val. She was wondering why I had connected this note with Gaylord's murder—wondering where I had found it.

On my part, I found myself facing another of those angles that didn't quite make sense. I mean, why should one of Gaylord's playmates, in making a tryst

with him, use a discarded prop note written by another woman? Just to tease him, maybe? A false lure dangled before a gluttonous fish? Yes, maybe.

"Bryce," I asked, "not that it's important, but can you remember what became of this note after it was used in last week's show?"

He shook his head. "You know how props get scattered around. I didn't give this one a thought. Hadn't seen it since, in fact, until just now. Somebody used it to rib you, Trex? Sometimes I think this place is too full of off-screen comedians."

A chilling thought hit me. Suppose some practical joker had decided it would be a great prank to slip this prop note inside an envelope and leave it on Gaylord's desk. This funny, funny man would imagine Gaylord tantalized by the fact that the note was unsigned, then waiting for its amorous writer to keep a rendezvous with him—and wondering who she would turn out to be.

It would be more hilarious still if this same clown had slipped notes, forged with Gaylord's name, into the handbags or lockers or desks of three or four women who were suspected of being friendly with him, or who wouldn't mind being. In that case, this clever prankster could look on the results of his work this morning—murder liberally garnished with witch's brew.

"Well, let's keep this little incident quiet, anyway," I suggested. It struck me that this was the first time today—since coming to work—that I had seen Bryce. I also remembered that I still hadn't seen Mona around. "Mona's catching up with learning her part, isn't she?" I asked.

BRYCE shook his head, looking troubled. "Mona's staying in bed this morning, feeling ill."

"Sorry to hear it, Bryce. Mona's been having it pretty rough lately, hasn't she?"

What does the doctor say about her?"

"She wouldn't let me call the doctor this morning. It's just a hangover plus lack of sleep plus overwrought nerves, as usual. A little rest will put her back on her feet. Don't worry, Trex—she won't let us down."

I wasn't worrying so much about the show. Another actress could take it over on short notice. But I did feel uneasy about the way Mona was keeping herself out of sight today, and I kept remembering that smear of fresh blood on the wall where she'd spied on Bryce and me last night.

Now important noises came into the hallway. A door in the high-bracket section of our offices had opened, and several men were approaching. Two of them paused outside my door to exchange a few words in whispers.

One was Rexwell Barrett, the biggest wheel in Raphael TV—the back-slapping, haw-hawing type, but filthy rich. The second man was a stranger—a quiet-moving, sharp-eyed lad who looked exactly like a detective.

Barrett came breezing into my office in a surprisingly jovial mood, considering that one of his fellow hot-shots had been chopped down only a few hours ago. He greeted Val and Allene in what he imagined was a courtly manner, then greeted Bryce and me in the manner of a Major General loosening up to a couple of shave-tails.

"Terrible confusion here today," he began in his unnecessarily loud voice. "Nobody's getting anything done. No use keeping it up. I have a little suggestion and I'd like to hear what you think of it."

Naturally he expected us all, in advance, to think yes.

"Let's close up shop for the rest of the day. Everybody come over to my place for a buffet supper and a swimming party. Plenty to eat and drink, plenty of chance to relax and get our bearings. My party

entirely, of-course. A pool party strictly—every lovely lady must bring her swim suit. Take the men's minds off less pleasant matters, haw-haw!"

While he assured him that this was a wonderfully kind and generous idea of his, and brilliant besides, I eyed the stranger who was waiting in the hallway. I got the impression that in his quiet way he was the mind behind this move.

"That's the way Vic would want it," Barrett boomed on. "No grieving, no long faces. Eat, drink and be merry." *For tomorrow we die?* No, I supposed not; he stopped with the merriment.

Turning to me, he added, "You and Bryce spread the word around, Trexler. Stress the fact that it's a *swimming* party, especially for all the girls. Nothing like sparkling water and freedom from too many clothes to relax the nerves. All right, boys, take care of it."

With that, he raised one hamlike hand and gave me a jovial slap on the arm. It was an habitual farewell gesture of his, the kind you can easily get fed up on. Today it was damned near catastrophic—because that heavy hand slammed hard against my bullet wound.

For two frantic seconds I was caught up in a whirl of desperately clashing impulses. Pain of blow-torch intensity paralyzed me. My mind was a runaway carousel, complete with flashing lights and bonging bells.

Only with a clenched-teeth effort did I keep myself from yelling out and smashing my fist into Barrett's face in retaliation. It was a fast trip through hell and when I arrived back in my office, shaken, I was amazed to find that no one seemed to have noticed my reaction.

Barrett was just then delivering a slap to Bryce's arm, exactly as he had mine, then cruising on out. The room was steadier for me now, but a new panic was forcing me to hold my breath. I was thinking, "*It's bleeding again!*"

I felt what seemed to be a warm trickle under the bandages. I could picture the blood streaming down, soaking my shirt and my coat sleeve. I could imagine people staring at my blood-soaked clothes, and myself making a crazy effort to explain it away.

But then, after half a minute, I could go back to breathing again because it didn't seem to be bleeding after all. It had started, then stopped after only a few drops that wouldn't be noticed. If anybody there in the office saw me mumbling to myself at that moment, I was just offering up a short and fervent prayer of thanks.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bathing Beauty's Blood Bath

THE idea of the pool party was bringing out various reactions. Val seemed impatient with the notion of topping off a murder with merriment. Bryce simply began rolling his sleeves down, a gesture that said his day's work was done. But Allene—

She was standing back against the wall, her face suddenly deathly white. For a second her eyes were round with a kind of terror that I couldn't account for at all. Then she swallowed hard, pushed herself into motion and went hurrying out of the office.

We were a fine collection of nervous wrecks, all right, I thought.

I had noticed that Rexwell Barrett, after leaving us, had stopped to speak again to the quiet stranger in the hallway. Something was definitely cooking between them. Whatever it was, I had a hunch that Barrett had just handed me a song-and-dance and that in some way he was using me as a tool—and using me not entirely honestly, at that.

Although I had no real reason for resenting it, still, perhaps because of that

excruciating slap on my arm, it did start me on a slow burn. The next thing I knew I was out in the hallway, button-holing that quiet-acting stranger.

"My name's John Trexler," I said.

He nodded, as if he already knew that. "Mine's Ray Ferry," he answered. "Detective, local force."

I went on bluntly, "This idea of the pool party is yours, isn't it?"

He smiled a little, studying me. He was really a likable guy, not handsome, but decent-looking. The masculine type, with plenty of character in his face, although he was still young. Dogged, too. Tenacious and clever and tireless—somehow I could see those qualities in his clear blue eyes. Ray Ferry, I knew at once, was a man to watch out for in case you happened to be a murderer.

"Look here," I said. "Most of the people who work here are my friends. I'm not the type who enjoys putting over a fast one and I don't want them to think I am." Considering my actions last night this sounded ironic to me, but I went on. "I mean, I'm not quite willing to pull them into this pool party unless I know what's behind it."

Ferry's smile grew a little, quizzically. "Will you keep this confidential, Mr. Trexler?" At my nod, he went on, "You see, we're just trying to work fast. The pool party is a way of saving us a lot of time. We could get the same results in other ways, but this way we'll get them quicker."

I shook my head, signifying that I didn't understand, and he went on. "We figure that the woman who killed Gaylord last night is wounded."

My arm gave an extra twinge. "How do you know that?"

"Well—this is the way we think it happened, Mr. Trexler. Gaylord was there in the living room of his guest cottage. Suddenly this woman burst in. One look at her warned Gaylord that she meant

him no good. Probably she had the hatchet gripped in her fist. In self-protection he grabbed for his revolver. It was probably in a drawer of the desk and it took him a few seconds to get hold of it. Meanwhile the woman with the hatchet kept on coming at him, obviously intending to give him the business."

I let Ferry go on.

"Gaylord had time to fire one shot, at least. We doubt that he fired more than one, but that point is not important. He did manage to pop one bullet at the woman as she came at him. It landed in the woodwork across the room.

"We found the bullet hole, dug out the slug, identified the gun it was fired from—a .38. There's legally registered in Gaylord's name—and missing. We also put the slug through various chemical tests, which showed that the bullet passed through part of a human body before sinking into the wall."

If I looked astonished, my astonishment was entirely real. "In other words, Gaylord's shot at least nicked the woman who killed him—but you don't know just how badly?"

Ferry nodded. "That's exactly it, Mr. Trexler. As you can easily understand, this is an important fact in the case. We want to find a woman with a fresh bullet-wound somewhere on her body. As I said, we could corral all the more likely babes, line them up and have our police matron examine them all one by one, but that would waste a lot of time and be a big bother for everybody."

"But with beves of girls frolicking about a pool in their little swim suits—" I took it up—"you'll be able to sift out the little innocents in jig time."

He still smiled quietly. "And if a few women seem to prefer not to wear swim suits, or if a few don't show up at all, that very thing will make them especially interesting to us. We'll have to ask them to explain how-come they're so modest."

I found myself smiling also. "I've got to admit it's a clever, practical idea, not to mention entertaining as well. The best thing about it is that the guilty woman can know it's a trap, but knowing it won't help her much. Every little dilly in the place can know all about it, in fact, and it will work perfectly just the same."

I added with a sense of relief, "I'll keep it quiet anyway, and I'll start spreading the invitations around the studio right now."

I WENT back into my office. Val was alone there now. She still looked puzzled, and I knew why. That note was still troubling her mind.

"You probably noticed," I said quickly, trying to switch her on to her favorite subject, "Barrett isn't falling all over himself in his eagerness to ask me to fill Gaylord's shoes here."

Val said softly, "Trex, darling, just where and when did you pick up that prop note?"

I looked at her hard. "I have a new thought about it, my sweet. Your explanation of that note sounded pretty solid at first, but actually it doesn't stand up. Unquestionably that note *was* used as a prop in a play. But that fact does not rule out the possibility that it may have been used again by the woman who wrote it, to arrange a real meeting with Gaylord."

Val stood up straight, her eyes narrowed. "Really, Trex, I've had enough of this. You're going a little too far, and I don't like it."

"I like it even less than you do, precious. You thought it was a cute notion to pass Gaylord a note that was already scented with fictional romance, was that it? Then when you went to meet him—"

Suddenly I was sick of the whole subject. I shrugged at Val and said wearily, "The whole thing will be settled very shortly now, at Barrett's pool party. You'd

better be there, sugar-pie.—You'd better wear your newest and wispiest Bikini, too. Because the cops know that the woman who killed Gaylord was slightly wounded. They're looking for a little lovely having a small bullet hole in her pretty hide."

Then Val flared up. "Why, you! Swimming party! Why wait?" She kicked off her shoes.

"If you want to see a completely intact pelt, Trex, I'll prove to you right now that I own one!"

Much as I regretted the necessity, I did the only safe thing—I scrambled out of there fast, banged the door shut behind me and kept on heading away at top speed.

* * *

This part of this report will have to go fast. Our little mess of murder is now fouled up far worse than before. Something new has been added. Another corpse.

At this moment—Tuesday evening, 9 P.M., I am the only one who knows the killer has struck again. I have no idea how soon or how late the corpse will be found. The corpse doesn't care, I'm sure, that I have not yet notified the police.

But the police will definitely care when they learn that I have now held out on them twice. That's why I have stolen a few minutes from the evening's festivities to dodge back here and, for whatever it may be worth, bring this running account up to the minute.

I'm typing as fast as my fingers can poke the keys, in the hope that nobody will notice I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

Let's take it back only as far as the pool party at Barrett's—and I wish I were there right now, with no second murder on my mind.

Even making allowances for its grim undertones—actually the occasion was a trap set to catch Gaylord's murderess—

it was downright idyllic. Considering the short notice, Barrett really tossed off a little masterpiece of party-giving. It goes to show that having a mountain of dough has certain advantages.

Lanterns had been hung in the gardens and along the walks. Tables were heaped with the tastiest smorgasbord this side of Stockholm. Waiters in monkey jackets circulated continually with trays of any bacchic whim you might imagine. Even more stimulating was the fact that all the little pretties present had fallen nicely into the spirit of the occasion. Their little swim-suits vied with each other's in not-thereness, and the pool was a dream of loveliness.

The award for the lightest-weight Bikini, had there been such a trophy, would have been won hands down by Miss Valerie Wayne. Val had evidently decided I meant it when I suggested she take the test seriously. She had outdone herself, had scorned to add to her costume even with shoes or a flower in her hair. She wore only that wisp of a suit and absolutely nothing else. The detectives present could feel no doubts whatever that she was entirely unscratched from head to toe.

What's more, none of the other lovelies sported any bandages, either. All of them were clad in a little fabric and a lot of epidermis, thus proving their complete innocence. It can be put down as an absolute and incontrovertible fact that there wasn't one little bullet hole in the lot of them.

As lusciously as Val had presented herself to the challenge, however, her eyes remained ice when she looked at me. I felt like four kinds of a heel for ever having doubted her—my doubts having been obviously absolutely groundless. I thought she might give me a break even so, but no; she was an unbelievably desirable woman who gazed at me with frigid scorn. Also, she kept giving me

trouble by walking away, when I went after her, and getting herself lost inside a beaming crowd of junior executives.

Detective Ray Ferry obviously felt that he had really pulled off an admirable idea here. I'm sure he never worked on a murder case he enjoyed more. He did not neglect his duties in any way in satisfying himself as to the innocence of every little chick. With a beatific expression, he checked off each name on a long list.

I WATCHED the cars streaming in and the honeys frolicking in the pool and tried vainly to win a half-way warm glance from Val. All the time the back of my mind was worrying about that list of names with which Ferry had been provided.

It included the name of every woman who worked for Raphael TV, of course, and no doubt others as well. At every opportunity I snatched a look over his shoulder, to see who hadn't shown up yet. With the help of four quick scotch-on-rocks, I began worrying about Allene Giles.

Allene was conspicuously absent. So was Mona Elwyn, for that matter—Mona, at whom I hadn't had so much as one look since Gaylord's murder. If Mona didn't show up, it could be put down to a temper tantrum or a load of rye or another slug of sleeping pills or even to just plain perversity. Allene, however, was a very solid doll. She had talent, she could take a lot of toil, she knew what the score was—and I did not want to lose her as a dependable worker.

Yet I kept remembering that expression of stark terror that had appeared on her face this afternoon, there in my office. Why? Had she realized instantly that the pool party was a trap set to nail a murderess, realized instantly that she wouldn't dare come?

I began running a fever over Allene's absence. Ferry was getting too thought-

ful about it, too. The party was well under way now, there were only a few women who hadn't shown, and the case was rapidly boiling down to them as the chief suspects in the murder. I decided suddenly to check on Allene on my own, so I wormed my way into the house and found a phone.

Allene's number didn't answer.

As I turned away, my host and big boss, Rexwell Barrett came at me. Deliberately I turned so that he couldn't take another swing at my wound. I still felt the punishment of his last friendly swat on my arm. He did it again, but luckily landed this time on my shoulder.

"We have a duty tonight, Trexler," he suggested. "Louise Gaylord arrived back home from Chicago this afternoon. The police have been talking to her—being too damned stuffy about it, if you ask me—keeping her friends away. However, I am going over to the Gaylord home to see Louise very shortly and I thought it would be a thoughtful gesture if you and Elwyn came with me."

"Of course," I agreed. "Just let me know when you're ready to leave."

Bryce Elwyn had arrived late—and alone. Ferry had been getting his help in checking the gals against their names on the list of guests. More worried than ever, I buttonholed Bryce the first chance I found, and asked, "Have you seen Allene?"

"No—and Ferry's getting interested in her."

"And where's Mona?"

"I don't know where the hell Mona is," Bryce answered, looking badly worn and harassed. "When I got home I found she'd gone without leaving a message. I haven't been able to locate her. She's done that before. But I don't understand about Allene. Allene definitely said she would be here."

With my nerves rubbed ragged by the strain of last night, that was all the sus-

pense I could take. I found my car and followed a driveway to a gate near the servants' quarters. With so many people coming and going and milling around, I think I eased away without being especially noticed. I headed straight for the place, not far from here, where Allene had found herself a one-room, ground-floor apartment with a private entrance.

The door was unlocked. I went in and found her in almost the same position that I had found Gaylord—lying in front of the fireplace. She was wearing a bathrobe twisted around her. The murderer evidently hadn't planned in advance to kill Allene—this time the hand of death had not used a bright new Boy Scout hatchet, but, instead, a poker from the hearth.

I can tell it a little more calmly now, but it came then with a jolt that really rocked me back on my heels. I could hardly register the fact that Allene had been so brutally killed. Only a short time ago, too—the blood was still wet.

She had really planned to come to the pool party. There on the bed lay the dress she had selected to wear, and beside it a sleek, sun-yellow swimsuit.

And there was an important point about Allene—she had had no bullet wound.

CHAPTER SIX

Flexing His Muscles

PLENTY has happened since that last short report on the murder of Allene Giles. It's hard to believe, in fact, that I began writing this account less than twenty-four hours ago. When I began it I thought it would remain a comparative brief statement. Instead, it has kept building up on me, and last night was no let-up.

After completing that short section above, I drove back to Barrett's estate, where the festivities were gathering

momentum. I eased through the service entrance, left my car in a dark spot and returned to mingle with the happy crowd around the pool, while pretending I had been there all along.

The first character I met was, of course, Ray Ferry, who eyed me as if I had taken on a new interest for him.

This was my opportunity to come clean and tell him what I had found in Allene's apartment. I was afraid that once he began questioning me it might grow to be too rough for my twitching nerves. I gazed at Ferry poker-faced and swallowed, first, a lump, and second, a martini.

Val Wayne, having proved her point beyond all possible question, had gotten back into her party clothes. This time she actually noticed me—gave me a curious glance. It was welcome, except that what it signified was not good. She knew I had slipped away from the party.

Next came the big wheel, Rexwell Barrett, rolling importantly along. "Been looking for you, Trexler!" he boomed. "We're leaving now. Come along."

He already had Bryce Elwyn in tow. The three of us went to a car that was waiting for us, complete with liveried chauffeur, in the driveway. Climbing in, we found that the party no longer consisted of three, but of four. Detective Ray Ferry had decided to join us.

"I say, Ferry," Barrett protested. "Aren't you detective fellows going to let up on Louise soon? Aren't you making it a bit hard on her?"

Ferry gave him a sidewise glance and answered quietly, "Murder is almost always hard on people, Mr. Barrett—especially the victim."

Barrett fell heavily silent. Ferry pointedly scanned his long guest list with all the check-marks on it. That was an opening for me to ask, "Well, you know now who stayed away. What's the score?"

"There are not many girls," Ferry said. "To begin with, Dinah Coyle."

"Girl?" I said. "Dinah's pushing fifty. She's our dance director. If she wanted to kill a guy, she wouldn't need a hatchet. She'd take him by the ankles and pound him against the floor."

Still quietly, Ferry added, "Mona Elwyn."

"My wife," Bryce informed him. "I haven't seen her since this convivial little wake was announced. I doubt if she's even heard about it yet."

Ferry nodded and added, "Allene Giles." Nobody commented, so he added, "And a few others. Checking on them will be easy and quick. The party certainly boiled 'em down fast."

Barrett grunted. I was thinking uneasily about Allene, trying to figure an angle. I remembered something Val had said to me about Allene.

"It's true Allene would rather be a writer than anything else. But that doesn't mean she'll go on taking the chump's end of the deal. Allene can produce or cast or direct. She can even go up higher than that, into the really big jobs in TV. That's exactly where she's heading, too. Also, she knows exactly what it may take to get her there, so she's playing it plenty cagey."

All right. Let's also say that that sort of thing has been done before. But in Allene's case, then she would definitely not endanger her future with Raphael TV by murdering one of its top execs in jealous pique. So that left one other possibility—that Allene was the other woman who had been there in the cottage at the moment of murder, the woman who had left lastly, with the secret of the killer's identity.

With Ferry at my side, this was a chance to feel out this angle even before he had learned about Allene's sudden death. There had been a lot of news about the Gaylord murder in the evening papers.

The abandoned clothes had now been

mentioned in public, so I could safely ask about them.

"Among the few women left on your list—I mean those who didn't show up at the party—are there any who might fit the clothes left in the cottage?"

Ferry smiled slowly, not too happily. "We know who fits those clothes," he answered.

I STARED at him, thinking that this was fast work. "You actually know the identity of the second woman who was there in the cottage at the time of the murder?"

He answered cryptically, "I said we know who fits those clothes. It's not quite the same thing."

Puzzled, I asked, "The gal's name is a deep, dark, official secret, no doubt?"

Ferry shrugged. "Not exactly. I'll let you in on it." Then he added, deadpan, "Those clothes were custom-tailored for Miss Lois Garth-Smith."

I went on staring at him in disbelief. The Garth-Smiths are one of the most socially elevated families in this choice suburb in Westchester. So far as I knew, their daughter Lois had never had any association whatever with Raphael TV, and I had never heard her mentioned in connection with Gaylord.

"The shoes also belonged to Miss Garth-Smith," Ferry went on. "She had an exceptionally tiny foot—a three-and-a-half A."

Rexwell Barrett, who knew the Garth-Smith family, was making indignant noises.

"You may recall reading about Miss Garth-Smith in the papers recently," Ferry said. "She died last week."

As news it couldn't have been more stupefying.

"Miss Garth-Smith died in a fire in her home. She made the mistake of falling asleep while smoking in bed. The blaze

was discovered by a servant, in time to prevent much damage to the house, but by then the girl was asphyxiated."

Dead a week ago!

"Following her funeral, her clothing was being aired on clothes-lines in the rear of the Garth-Smith place. That was one day late last week. A few pieces were stolen, among them the shoes, the coat and the dress later found in the cottage with Gaylord's body."

I heard myself saying, "Some of the little chorus girls who work for us don't make out too well. Their pay is far from lush and some of them have the expense of commuting out here."

Ferry gave me an acrid glance. "Back there at the party, I was looking for something besides a wound. I was also looking them over for size. A sort of Cinderella operation without actual use of the shoe. Also, I've been asking questions around. Well, I haven't yet found a girl who is small enough to wear Lois Garth-Smith's dress and shoes."

I shook my head dizzily. "So there wasn't any other woman in Gaylord's cottage when the murderess busted in on him."

"That's right," Ferry said.

"I must be caving in," I groaned. "I hear what we're saying but I can't make it mean anything."

Ferry handed out one more bit of information. "Those clothes were a plant—put there by a killer who is really a very tricky worker."

A plant? A woman had planted another woman's clothes in Gaylord's bedroom just to give herself an excuse for chopping him up with a hatchet? It seemed hardly necessary. If there was any sense in it at all, in fact, I just couldn't find it.

Again I found myself wondering numbly about Allene. It hadn't been Allene for the reason that there hadn't been any woman there at all. It hadn't been Allene

who killed Gaylord, either. So how had Allene gotten herself fatally tangled up in all this, and why was she dead?

I couldn't even begin to guess.

Barrett's big car had just turned into the Gaylord driveway. Two cops blocked it. Ferry held a brief conference with them while Bryce and I looked around. More cops were patrolling the rear grounds. They were there to discourage the morbidly curious public from tearing pickets off the fence or uprooting prize rosebushes as souvenirs.

We went to the front entrance of this fine Colonial mansion. Our ring was answered by a detective. We were escorted into a living room that was a model of charm, comfort and color. Louise Gaylord, the murdered man's widow, came to us graciously, with one patrician hand extended in welcome.

As we exchanged the usual expressions of grief and sympathy I could not help admiring Louise's poise. Obviously she was badly shaken but she had complete control of herself. The only signs of agitation in her came when, once or twice, she looked slowly all around the room and then shuddered slightly. Always before she had shown great pride in her home; but now murder seemed to have done something ugly to it.

"I can't stay here tonight," she said suddenly, in her tired voice. She was strikingly dark. She carried herself beautifully. Sometimes when I admired her I thought of finely bred horses and sleek greyhounds. Being far from a fool, she knew her husband's kind, and had taken plenty of cruelty from him, but she had held up straight and fine under it. I couldn't help thinking how fortunate it was that she had been hundreds of miles away when murder had struck down a heel who had so richly deserved it.

"I couldn't rest here tonight," she went on, "with policemen moving around the place all night, and horrible people

ready to peer in the windows at the first opportunity. If only I could be alone where none of this could reach me—”

Rexwell Barrett began chivalrously, “Mrs. Gaylord, may I—” and stopped. Suddenly he realized, red-faced, that he could not offer her his hospitality, not with the place swarming with merry revelers.

BRYCE ELWYN took it up. He had said almost nothing since leaving the party, and he looked tired beyond words, but he made his offer sincerely. “Come to our place, Louise. We have plenty of room and it’s perfectly quiet there. Mona loves you and will like taking care of you tonight. Nobody will know you’re there, I promise.”

“Thank you, Bryce,” Louise said, smiling. “I can’t think of any place I would rather be tonight.”

She still had the packed bag she had brought with her from Chicago. Under quiet strain, she simply went about doing what she had decided to do. We all went back to Barrett’s car and in a few minutes we were rolling on our way.

Nobody said much. Louise remained dry-eyed and perfectly poised every minute of the trip. I couldn’t speak for Barrett, but Louise was certainly in better shape than either Bryce or I was.

Lights were shining inside the Elwyn place. Bryce said in a mutter, “Well, thank heaven, Mona seems to be home again.” He opened the way for us and we went into the living room. Mona was there and, of all things, quietly reading a book. Moreover, she was entirely sober and on her good behavior.

Seeing Louise, she gave out a half-glad, half-grieving cry, rushed to Louise and hugged her hard. They chattered at each other, while Bryce explained that Louise would spend the night here. This went on until a quiet descended—a tenseness that came of the discovery that Ray Ferry

was gazing searchingly at Mona Elwyn.

“Who is this guy?” Mona asked of Bryce. “What’s the matter with him?”

“His name is Ferry and he’s a detective, Mona,” Bryce told her. “He probably wants to know why you didn’t show up at the party.”

“Party?” Mona answered impatiently. “What party?”

“You hadn’t heard?” Ferry asked smoothly. “Or did you decide you’d rather not come?”

“You mind your own business,” Mona said with forthright unreasonableness. “I’ll go to parties when I feel like it. As it happened, I didn’t even know about this one—and even if I *had* known, I wouldn’t have been interested.”

Ferry persisted quietly, “Why did you stay away, Mrs. Elwyn?”

Mona faced him with her fine chin lifted. She was darker than Louise, and taller, and full of nerves. Her face, once beautiful, had become lined and strained, but it was still photogenic. Whenever she registered an emotion, she registered it full scale, and at the moment she was burning with annoyance at Ferry.

“I’d heard Louise was back from Chicago and of course I wanted to see her. I drove over to her place but those dumb gumshoes of yours wouldn’t even let me in the gate. I waited in the car a long while, thinking Louise might come out, but she didn’t. So finally I came home and tried to get her on the phone but all I got was busy signals and more moronic gumshoes.” Mona’s raven-black eyes flashed. “Next question?”

Ferry did the smart thing. “No hurry, Mrs. Elwyn. Tomorrow will do, or the next day. Good night, now.”

He withdrew—too quietly, I thought. Mona immediately began urging Bryce to mix up a round of drinks. Barrett demurred, insisting that he must get back to his guests.

Since I had left my car at the party,



"I can turn you in for murder—or cash in on it with you."

I had small choice but to go with him. I bid Mona and Louise and Bryce good night, and with Barrett and Ferry, both silent, I cruised back to that fairyland where the crowd around the pool was still making merry.

Barrett went pompously into the great house while Ferry began making the rounds of the other detectives present. I looked for Val, but didn't find her. Snagging a double scotch off a passing tray, I gathered a handful of canapes and found myself a quiet shadow. The little sandwiches and the big scotch were all gone, when I heard a quiet approach in the dark. It materialized in front of me in a

shape that could be nobody's but Val's.

She had a 'glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She came close, said softly, "Have I been a little rough on you, Trex, darling?"

"Not very," I said. "At least, you stopped short of murder."

"Poor boy," Val murmured.

She tossed her cigarette away. It disappeared in the darkness in a cometlike arc. She brought her lips to mine and kept them there. Her free hand slid up my left arm and she stiffened as her fingers ran over the lump of bandages. Suddenly she was squeezing my wound—*hard*.

At that moment Miss Valerie Wayne, captivating television star, came within a hair of losing all her pearly teeth down her lovely throat. I wrenched myself back with a gasp and managed to keep my knuckles out of her face, realizing that with that nimble mind of hers, Val had reasoned there was only one place where I could have found that unsigned love message—the scene of the murder.

"Let's not play quite so rough any more, Trex," she whispered. "After all, we have so many mutual interests—and we *do* have to think of our future, don't we, darling?"

Then she hurried off.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rendezvous Crashers

AT THAT point, when I had written that far, an interruption came—a knock on my door. I sat frozen, hands lifted, in front of this typewriter, cold sweat popping out of my forehead. Not having much choice, I forced myself to get up and let the cops in.

Only, it wasn't the cops, but Val.

She came in slowly and curiously, dressed as I had last seen her. Evidently she had been spending some wakeful hours in her own feminine scheming. Back there at Barrett's castle she had left me hanging on that last cryptic remark of hers—"We *do* have to think of our future, don't we, darling?" and I had let it ride at that.

Here she was again, with something more on her mind—and I knew she hadn't come to bake a cake.

"What are you typing so industriously at this hour of the morning, Trex?" she inquired lightly. "A long love letter to me?"

She went straight to my typewriter for a look. Like many starry-eyed women, however, Val is very far-sighted. She hadn't brought her reading glasses along,

so the words I had last written were merely a blur.

I offered her no explanation. She went to the table where a tray of the makings sat, and she used them to make. Then she sank into a chair, crossed her lovely legs and gazed at me through the smoke of a fresh cigarette.

"Well?" she said. "You've had time to think it over now. Strictly business, Trex."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

She smiled beautifully. "Well, Vic Gaylord was a wild spender, so there's not much left for Louise except the house and his insurance—and his shares in Raphael TV. They're enough to give her a pretty solid voice in what goes there."

"What's Louise got to do with me?"

"The man who marries her will become a power in Raphael TV, thanks to those shares. Won't *you*, darling?"

"Just a minute," I said. "Me marry Louise? The notion has never popped into my head—or into Louise's either, I'm sure. Not that she isn't a thoroughly desirable woman, but for Pete's sake, Val, haven't you sort of picked up a hint by now that *you're* the gal I want to marry?"

Val's smile faded and she shrugged. "But you're also the lad who plays the angles, Trex. We all have to do it in this crazy back-stabbing racket. Not all of us would go as far as murder, though. If you felt you had to push it that far, why—"

She shrugged again, cynically. "Anyhow, I'm counting on you to put across a nice, plushy contract for me, Trex, darling."

"Are you nuts? I'm not even half-sure of my own job at this point, let alone—"

"Please, Trex. It was easy for you. All you had to do was rig up some fake evidence at Gaylord's cottage and leave him dead there. Soon you'll marry Louise and move into a soft spot in the top

brackets of Raphael TV. I don't approve of murder, darling, but you seem to have a fairly good chance of getting away with this one. I couldn't bear to turn you in for murder, so I really haven't much choice but to cash in on it with you."

I stared at her. "Val, you're wrong," I said heavily. "I didn't murder Gaylord. The cops believe he was knocked off by a woman, remember?"

"It was you who went at him with your little hatchet," she insisted. "That's when he shot you, in the arm, isn't it?"

I was getting plenty sore at Val for forcing me to defend myself with a confession. "A woman did it, Val," I insisted. "That's what the cops think—and I happen to know they're right."

"Do you really?"

"Yes. I saw her. I was driving past the rear gate of Gaylord's place when she came popping right out into the shine of my headlights."

Val laughed lightly. "Careless little dear, wasn't she?"

"I know it sounds cockeyed, but I can't help that. I saw it happen in just the way I'm telling you now. I watched Gaylord's murderess go looping off in her car. Then I went into the cottage and found him dead. I also found that love note you'd written—as a prop or otherwise."

"And you carried it away to protect my good name," Val said. "Why, Trex, darling, I'm touched."

I decided that if she went on laughing at me like that I would presently put both my hands on her pretty neck and wring it. "Then I left. I didn't know the murderess had sneaked back to watch what I was doing. She must have been afraid that I'd recognized her, although I really hadn't. Anyway, when I stepped out of the door onto the terrace she slugged me down."

"Then she tried to silence you by shooting you in the arm." Val was giggling

over her drink. "Come, now, Trex. Hadn't you better think up a more likely—"

"Val!" I broke in heatedly. "I don't know why she shot me through the arm instead of through the head or through the heart. All I'm sure of—and I'm sure of this much—is that the arm is where she shot me. How else can you explain that wound, my pet?"

"Easily. As I said before, it was Gaylord who shot you." Then Val added, "How do you like that medicine, Trex? It's the very same brand you spooned out to me this morning. Ugly-tasting stuff, isn't it?"

Yes. She was handing it right back to me. She was just as mistaken about me as I had been mistaken about her, also. I felt I had less than a chance of convincing her of it. I think she actually believed I was guilty of murder. I decided, all right, let her. I was too burned up and too disgusted to care much about defending myself further.

During this sweetly charitable conversation I had turned to the phone at intervals to call Bryce Elwyn's number. My mind was nagged by worries about the late Allene Giles. Perhaps her dead body was still waiting to be found. I hadn't yet had a chance to brief Bryce on that. But Bryce's number wasn't answering.

I rose and said sourly, "Thanks for covering me, Val. Naturally I won't forget the favor when I become one of the big wheels of Raphael TV—but you may have to wait as long as next week."

I went out. My car was parked at the curb and when I reached it Val was close behind me. As I turned to face her, she asked, "Where are you going, Trex?"

"Nowhere much," I told her. "Just out to commit a couple more murders. I'm a little behind in my quota for tonight." Suddenly sickened by the childishness of these cracks, I added sourly:

"Val, let me alone. Go on home."

I slid under the wheel of my car. Val hustled to plump herself into the seat beside me. I stared at her hopelessly. I might yell my head off at her, I knew, and still she would stay right there. I might heave her bodily out of my car and she would follow me in her own. So I did the wisest thing a man can do when up against a woman in Val's frame of mind—saved my breath.

NOT speaking, I angled through streets full of pre-dawn darkness. Presently I turned into the driveway of Bryce's place. The sprawling L-shaped ranch house was all dark except for one window, that of Bryce's study, off in the wing.

The guy was punishing himself too hard, I felt. Despite the strain we were all under—nerve-racking even when it wasn't topped off by a murder—he had evidently been working through the night again. A very silly way to kill yourself, I thought . . . by producing TV shows.

I braked at the front of the house and Val came with me to the entrance. After ringing the bell we waited. Nobody came. I sensed Val tightening up; she turned her head to listen. The night seemed utterly quiet until I focussed my ears carefully, and then I caught the same sound that had interested Val—low, quick voices.

Inside the house or out? We couldn't tell. They were just the fast whispers of two people speaking together urgently.

Val, never one to stand on ceremony, made a quick grab at the knob of the front door. It was unlocked; it opened at her first thrust. She breezed right in, that alert, audacious mind of hers having fastened on something. I couldn't guess what it was, so far, but she wasn't letting it go.

She stopped in the center of the living room, in a position allowing her to gaze down the long hallway of the main

wing of the house—at a series of doors.

The whispers had stopped, but now there were the sounds of quick motions. Val moved again, fast. She went down the hall on tiptoe, stopped suddenly again, then turned and pushed one of these doors wide open. She went even farther—stepped into the room and snapped the wall switch.

I stopped behind her in amazement. This was Louise Gaylord's room for the night. Louise lay there in bed, her lovely dark hair splashed across a pastel blue pillow. She did not stir under the glare of the ceiling light, or respond to the noise of our sudden entrance. I began to get sore at Val for busting in on an overtired woman, like this—until Val's finger pointed at the window.

It was half open. The screen was unhooked and hanging loose. From outside came, faintly, the sound of running feet.

Val moved again, with electrical speed. She whirled about and flew back out the front entrance. My tired brain was finally catching on, so I headed in the opposite direction, fast—down the hallway to a rear door. I stood in the dark listening; but now the night was silent, the running footfalls gone.

I looked around and saw nothing in the faint shine of the night except the light gleaming from the window of Bryce's study. I wondered why he hadn't answered the bell, but mostly I stood there numbly trying to grasp the fact of Louise's nocturnal visitor.

She was only pretending to be asleep now, of course; there had been somebody in that room with her who'd left fast at our approach—and to me he was a totally unexpected and amazing character.

Presently Val came hustling quietly across the grass. She paused beside me, breathing fast, and asked, "I didn't spot anybody. Did you?"

I shook my head. "Might have skipped

Her bandages concealed a bullet wound. . . .



out the back way, to a car parked down the road. Anyway, some guy seemed to know where to find Louise tonight. I wonder how."

"Well, who *did* know?" Val asked eagerly.

"Rexwell Barrett and a detective named Ferry," I answered ironically. "Nobody else that I know of. Her whereabouts were supposed to be kept under wraps, so she wouldn't be hounded by reporters and such disturbers of the peace."

"She knows how to use a phone, doesn't she?" Val said quietly. "There could be

a certain person she felt she wanted to talk to—someone she hadn't seen since her return from Chicago. So she waited until Mona and Bryce had retired, then she made a call to suggest a private little conference here," Val gave me a significant glance. "Interesting, don't you think, Trex?"

"To me, especially," I said. "At least it shows you that if there is another guy in Louise's life—I'm not him. I doubt there is one, anyhow. But it can wait. I'm worried about Bryce. Why hasn't he noticed we're here? The way he's been overworking himself, he could drop dead at any minute."

I cut across the patio to the study window. The bamboo blind was down, but through the cracks I could make out Bryce seated at his desk. Val dogged me, as I turned to the rear door of the smaller wing.

It was also unlocked—people who drink a lot have a tendency to forget such things as putting out the cat and locking the door, I'd found—so Val and I eased in.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bandaged Lady

WE QUIETLY opened the door of Bryce's study and found him at his desk with his head down on his arms. Scripts were piled around him. His thick-rimmed glasses lay aside. His posture was that of a completely exhausted man.

After drinking with Louise and Mona in the living room, Bryce had evidently tried to bolster himself with more drinks here, in order to get himself through a night's work. His collar was open and his shirt-sleeves were rolled up, but he hadn't lasted very long. Near one of his limp hands was a tall glass still a quarter full of straight scotch.

Val and I looked a silent question at each other: *Shall we put him to bed?* I shook my head. Better not to disturb the poor guy, I thought. Before long he'd probably wake up and take care of himself. So I reached to his desk-lamp, snapped it off, and we went out quietly, leaving him in the peculiarly pearly darkness that means dawn is not far away.

Now that I was well launched on a snooping tour through the Elwyn household, I felt there was one more bit of prying I must do. Without explaining to Val, I went along the dark hallway to the door of Mona's room. The distance from this door, to that bloody spot on the wall beside the door of Bryce's study, was about twenty feet. I listened for a moment with my hand on the knob, then looked in.

The blind was down, the room black. Mona was just a shapeless form on the

bed. Her breathing was slow, heavy, deep. I sensed that, unlike Louise, she wasn't faking. On top of the drinks she had had, she had probably taken her usual dose of sleeping pills—for her, a highly dangerous habit. I stepped in quietly, Val close behind, crossed to the bedside table and pressed the switch.

The light fell across the bed. Mona lay like the dead, unnoticing. She was curled up under a blanket, the strain gone out of her face in sleep. She looked almost beautiful again, like the Mona who had once enjoyed a promising career in the movies. She was lying on her right side. Irresistibly my hand went out to the blanket and I slowly drew it down.

It was there. On her left upper arm, in almost the same position as my own wound. Bandages spotted with dried stains, swollen flesh, reddened skin. I did not need to look farther to be certain that the dressing concealed a bullet slash exactly as old as my own.

Val saw it and gasped. She stepped back, pale, shocked. Val and Mona had never been good friends—on the set they were venomous rivals—but I'm sure Val would never have gone so far as to wish to see a murder pinned on Mona.

Gazing at this staggering evidence, I thought back. Was it Mona I had seen rushing from Gaylord's cottage? I still could not feel sure. There was nothing in the picture to show that it *hadn't* been Mona, and the wound in her arm seemed to be proof enough. I could picture her then rushing back home, terrified at what she had done, made hysterical by the pain and the danger inherent in that injury.

"A nightmare," Bryce had explained to me on the phone—covering up for her, of course. Then, when I had come to the house with the news of Gaylord's murder, she had crept close to the study door to eavesdrop, and a few trickling drops on her fingers had marked the wall.

Well, I told myself, it all fits again, even

to the fact that Mona had been unaccounted for at the time of Allene Giles' death.

Mona stirred a little as Val and I stared down at her. I turned then to Mona's clothes closet. It was a large one, but it was packed with dresses and suits and skirts and coats. I poked and tugged until I found a bright red one, then pulled the dress loose. Detaching it from the rod, I brought it closer to the light. A little groan came from Val as she bent over it, and I felt a surge of heartsickness.

THE skirt of the dress was ripped and it was spattered with dark spots that had to be blood—Gaylord's blood.

I turned back to look for the red platform sandals. Mona had dozens of pairs of shoes of all kinds in racks and piled on the floor. The red sandals I had seen a murderess wearing were not there—but the dress was more than enough.

It was hard to understand why Mona had been so careless as to put the blood-stained dress back in her closet—the very first place the cops would look. But then, she had hardly been in condition for straight thinking since the murder.

We were startled by a motion on the bed. Mona stirred out of her lethargy. She pushed herself up, blinking at us, then stared at the dress Val was holding. A sound of confusion and despair came from her throat. She pushed herself to a sitting position, her hands clenching the edge of the bed.

"Whadda ya doin' here?" she said thickly. "Where'd you get that?"

"Out of your closet, Mona," I said. "Just now."

She shook her dark head. Wakefulness was coming back to her rapidly now, pushed by fear. "It's not mine," she said next. "Never saw that dress before." She closed her eyes and blurted, "I don't understand what's happening to me! It's horrible—and I can't understand it."

"Nightmares, Mona?" I asked wryly.

She opened her eyes again, wide. "No. That wasn't true. Bryce told you that to cover up what really happened. He didn't really believe what I told him, but he thought we'd better keep quiet about it. He didn't want to tell anybody else until he got it straight from me. That's what he kept saying—'Don't hold out on me, Mona, tell me the truth.' I was telling him the truth, but he wouldn't believe me."

I was watching Mona closely. Like Val, she was an actress of experience and skill. Being married to one wouldn't necessarily make it easier to tell when she was coming clean or when she was putting over a fast one.

Even Val was listening to Mona now with an alert, searching light in her eyes.

"Tell us, Mona," Val urged her quietly. "Tell it to us just the way you told it to Bryce."

She gazed at us with appealing eyes. "All right. This is how it was. It was last night, the night Vic Gaylord was killed." She swallowed. "Bryce was in his study, in the middle of a long night's work. I'd gone to bed early. I was right here, right in this bed, asleep. Then I began hearing a sound. It was a scratching at the window. It woke me up and I looked and—I guess I was pretty bleary—but I saw it. There in the dark—" she pointed—"a hand scratching at the screen."

She looked around the room next, as if thirsty for a drink, but neither Val nor I moved.

"First just that hand in the dark, and then a voice," she went on. "A voice speaking my name. It said, 'Mona, Mona, please. Help me, Mona. Mona, come out, help me.' I was scared. Didn't know whose voice it might be, but it had to be somebody who knew me, somebody who'd turn to me in an emergency. 'Please, Mona, come out, help me.'"

"Well, I was woozy from sleeping pills, or maybe I wouldn't have gone out. Wobly on my pins too. But I went hustling

out the back door, the closest way—and as soon as I set foot outside I got grabbed.”

Mona shuddered and hugged herself. “Grabbed and knocked to the ground. Face down. I was held there and then a gun was fired.” She touched the bandages on her upper left arm. “That’s where the bullet hit me. Then I was suddenly alone. It was all over, except that I went right into a fine, full-blown fit of hysterics.”

“As who wouldn’t?” Val said, showing Mona a surprising degree of sympathy.

“Bryce came bursting out and picked me up. He took care of the wound, said it wasn’t anything to worry about. But I couldn’t make him understand what had happened. He just couldn’t believe I’d been shot right outside our back door for no apparent reason.”

“But he must have heard the report,” I said.

“He couldn’t help hearing it,” Mona agreed. “He came out right away. After I told him what had happened, he went out and stared around at the ground as if looking for proof. He said he couldn’t find a thing, kept saying he couldn’t understand it.”

IT OCCURRED to me abruptly that, on my part, I was unable to prove my own story. I had been lying on the rain-softened soil of a garden when I was shot. The bullet had undoubtedly driven deep down in the ground. Maybe it could be recovered, maybe it couldn’t. If not, there would be nothing to back up my story. The same thing applied to Mona—if she was telling the truth.

“Bryce said that calling in the police wouldn’t do any good, and he didn’t want that kind of trouble. He said we should keep quiet and try to find out on our own what it meant. Well—” Mona smiled ruefully—“we found out.”

I tried to put myself in Bryce’s shoes, pictured myself hearing a gunshot on my doorstep in the middle of the night and

then finding my wife punctured in the arm and explaining it with a tale which made no sense. I went on to imagine myself, in Bryce’s place, next hearing the news of Gaylord’s murder, then having it topped off by the additional news that Gaylord’s murderess was marked by a bullet wound.

By that time I would feel justified in doubting wife’s story a little more, I would be wondering what to do about it and I would be looking for an opening to drink myself to death.

Mona was staring at me. “Don’t you see what it *really* means? Somebody’s framing me!”

To myself, I remarked that that’s what they all say, sister. I told myself that this was the answer, this was it, there couldn’t be any more.

Mona said with a groan, “You don’t believe me either!”

Val, wordlessly thoughtful, left it to me to answer that one.

“I don’t know what to believe, Mona,” I said. “In the past two days and two nights I’ve had so little sleep that I can’t think any more. This was none of my business to begin with, except as it might affect my friends—and I shouldn’t have been snooping in here tonight, either, except that in some oblique way I was trying to help.

“Instead, I seem to have fouled it up even worse. I’m sorry, Mona, sincerely sorry for you and Bryce both—and all I can say now is that if there is any way in the world that I can help you, you can count on me to do it.”

“That goes for me, too, Mona,” Val said.

She murmured, “Thanks,” and it was a sound of hopelessness. She fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. “Just send a bunch of posies to my funeral after they’ve fried me, kids,” she added, her voice shaking. “Never mind anything else. It would be waste motion.”

I stood there holding the red dress up in one hand and pulling at it with the other. For the first time I saw the rip in the left sleeve—the bullet-tear, in the same position as the wound in Mona's arm. With a gesture of regret, I dropped the dress on the bed beside Mona. After that there seemed to be nothing more to say and nothing to do but for us to leave quietly.

Val and I went out the back way. We walked to my car, got in and sat there. I looked at the house and thought of Louise pretending sleep, Bryce passed out from overwork and drink, and Mona practically as good as nailed for murder, and I thought that we were leaving a really fine mess behind us.

Then Val said, surprisingly, "Mona didn't kill him."

I jerked and stared at her. "How do you know?"

"I just *know* Mona didn't kill Vic Gaylord," Val insisted.

"Womanly intuition, hey?" I said sourly. "Very solid stuff, that. Just tell it to the judge and he'll let Mona right off with an apology."

"It's better than that," Val asserted softly. "I see it now. I see the whole thing perfectly clearly."

"Smart girl," I said with weary cynicism. "I don't see a thing. Would you mind spelling it out for me?"

Val stared off into the dawn without answering.

"All right, don't," I muttered. "At this point I am too bushed to care who killed anybody. To me, at this moment, Victor Gaylord seems as far off as Garfield."

I started driving. I drove and turned corners and drove some more. All the while Val sat there with her thoughts humming inside her beautiful head and somehow her silence—so sphinxlike, so eternal, so feminine—threw a chill into me.

CHAPTER NINE

The Mourning After

THIS entry written at 5:45 a. m., Wednesday morning, will have to be another quickie. In a few minutes Val and I are going to leave this apartment. I feel there's a fair possibility that I may never see it again—at least not without a steel cuff on my wrist. It wouldn't surprise me too much to find myself writing the last of this record in a snug little cubbyhole in the clink.

When Val and I came in here, not many minutes ago, we found a tired, sober-eyed guy named Ray Ferry waiting for me.

I had just driven Val back from the Elwyns'. Her car was here. I said, "I don't know why the hell I'm suggesting this. But come on up and have a night-cap."

Still thoughtfully silent, Val had come on up. I opened the door for her and we stopped short. Because there in my living room, sitting beside a drink he had mixed for himself, was Detective Ferry in person.

Instantly my thoughts and fears began pin-wheeling. Those bloody clothes in my laundry hamper—had he found them? This record, which I had tucked out of sight inside a magazine between takes—had he found it and read it? Would he ask me to account for myself tonight? There were so many lovely possibilities that I began to feel tried, convicted and sentenced already.

"Come in, pal," I said to him sourly. "Come right in and have a drink."

Ferry didn't smile. He didn't apologize either. He just said, "Your door was open."

All right. Val had left my door open when hustling out after me, on our way to the Elwyns'. Other doors had been left open tonight and I had taken advantage of a few of them myself. But I still

didn't like wondering how long Ferry had been here in my apartment and how much snooping around he had done. That grave look on his face didn't make me feel any happier about it, either.

He put his drink down, stood up and said, "O.K., Trexler, start giving out."

"With what?"

"I understand you can give me certain inside information about the woman who murdered Gaylord."

"You understand that from where?"

"From somebody on the phone. From one of those muffled voices that sometimes rings up a cop and drops a hot tip. This one sounded level. I came right over. So give out, Trexler—about murder."

I didn't get it, couldn't figure why anyone should phone such a tip to Ferry, couldn't figure who it might have been. I *was* sure of two things about it, however. First, I would not finger any friend of mine. Second, my wisest play was to stay clammed up.

So I shook my head and said, "Sorry, Ferry, but I have nothing to give out about either of them."

Ferry pounced on those last words like a hungry fox hitting a drowsy rabbit. "Either of them? *Either of what?*"

I groaned inwardly again. *That does it, brother!* I had tipped my mitt that time, but good. Because I had unwittingly revealed my knowledge of *two* murders. The way Ferry had jumped me for that, it meant either that they still didn't know Allene Giles was dead, or, if they did know, then they hadn't given out the news.

Ferry asked sharply, his eyes glinting, "Just what did you mean by that, Trexler?"

"Why," I heard myself muttering, "I meant that I can't give you any inside information about *either* Gaylord or his murderess."

Ferry shook his head. I wasn't fooling him. He knew it was a revealing slip of the tongue. He instantly grasped its pos-

sible meaning. He turned so grim that I, on my part, felt sure that Allene Giles' dead body had not been found. Ferry stood there, peering at me and knowing he faced the job of finding another corpse about which I already knew.

A cruder cop would have begun roughing me up then and there. Ferry was too smart to risk weakening his own case with such tactics. First he had to make sure.

WHAT he needed to clinch it was not more witless babbling from me, but a murder victim. He wasn't a guy to waste time throwing his weight around, either. Abruptly he brushed past me to the door.

"I've been ringing doorbells all night," he said, stopping there. "Those women on my list, you know—the ones who didn't show at the party. From one of them I didn't get an answer. Allene Giles, her name is. I figured she had probably flown the coop, but now I think I'll go back and try her door again."

Val was staring at me.

"Stick around, Trexler," Ferry added. "Understand what I mean?"

We understood each other, all right. I listened to him running down the stairs and knew he would be back soon; and when he came back I could tell myself, "*Trex, kid, this is all there is for you—you've had it.*"

Val blurted, "Trex, darling, you look—sick."

"Who, me?" I snapped at her. "Why, I never felt better in my life."

Looking hard at her, I told myself that this gal knew something solid. In some way she had it all figured out. This smart cookie had come up with the answer ahead of me. I didn't know how she had done it, but she had. Right now was the time for me to go to work and get it out of her.

But before I could even start, the phone rang.

I fumbled for it and heard a breathy voice saying, "Trex? This is Louise."

I said wryly, "Up early today, aren't you, Louise?"

Val came closer to the phone as Louise went on,

"Is Val still with you?"

"Ah? How did you know—"

"Of course I know that you and Val were here at the Elwyns' place tonight," Louise broke in quickly. "I know you noticed something—well, something questionable. That's why I'm phoning. I want to explain."

"Go ahead," I said.

"Not over the phone, Trex!" she blurted. "I want to see you and Val personally—and as soon as possible. Will you both meet me in Vic's office as soon as you can get there?"

"Why in Vic's office?"

"Because Vic once told me that in case anything happened to him, I should look in a certain section of his personal file in his office. He said I'd find something very important there. I haven't had a chance before to look, and I want to get there before the crowd starts mobbing in—but I haven't a key. You have one, haven't you, Trex?"

"Yes. All right, Louise. I'm hardly conscious due to lack of sleep, but I'll try to keep from falling on my face first. When you see Val leading a zombi around, that'll be me."

"Right away, Trex," Louis urged. "I'll leave in Mona's car just as fast as I can get dressed. See you there."

The connection clicked off. For a few seconds I hung onto the phone feeling that there was something wrong with that call, something tricky about it. In some subtle way, I sensed that this murder case was coming to a head now. A killer is still on the prowl and anything can happen. That's why I have taken time to bring this record up to the minute again—just in case.

Val and I are leaving right now for the studio of Raphael TV.

CHAPTER TEN

Holding Hands With Homicide

IT'S all over. It ended suddenly, yesterday morning, at the Raphael TV studio. It wound up with a bang, and Corpse No. 3 was a very near miss. But there won't be any more murders now. Not in this case.

Immediately after finishing the previous instalment of this record, I drove Val out Ashley Road to the studio—neither of us suspecting then that we were heading straight into the big blow-up.

It was a little past dawn when we arrived, but still murky, with a promise of more rain. It wasn't the first time I had arrived for work at the studio this early in the morning. More than once I had found Bryce Elwyn already there. This morning, however, mine was the first car in the parking lot and I unlocked the door on vast, silent darkness.

I snapped switches and bulbs sprang to life among the mad hodge-podge of the stages. More switches lighted the stairs and the hallway in the balcony. I paused at the door of Victor Gaylord's office, found it locked—by the police, of course—and decided to wait for Louise to arrive before trying to open it. I felt as leaden as the humor of a TV comedian as I escorted Val into my own office.

She had been silent the whole way, with her busy brain buzzing. Now she sat at my desk and went on being wordlessly thoughtful. I rummaged around, found a bottle half full of dark rum, poured a shot into a glass for Val and four or five shots into a bigger glass for me. Then I eyed my beautiful song-warbling girl-friend with the Sherlock Holmes mind and I asked myself, "*Trexler, if this chick can figure it out, why can't you?*"

So, half-dead as I was, I began trying, while we waited for Louise. After trying for half a minute I said the hell with it.

"The only way I can see it," I informed Val, "is Mona."

She sipped her rum.

"Mona did some planning in advance," I went on. "She wanted to set the scene there in a way that would mislead the cops. She saw a chance to steal some clothes out of somebody's back yard, so she did, and left them in Gaylord's cottage as a teaser. She chose a weapon that would be impossible to trace—there being millions of Boy Scout hatchets in the world, and you don't even have to be a Scout in order to acquire one."

I paused there, puzzled, realizing that this, though it was valid, didn't explain the hatchet completely. There must be more of a reason than that behind the choice. Was it just because violent women seem to have an affinity for hatchets? No; that couldn't be it either. There was something else, some other way of accounting for the choice of a hatchet, but I was too tired to think of it.

"Mona," I mumbled again. "She hasn't a prayer of beating this little murder rap."

"Stop being silly, Trex, darling," Val said impatiently. "I told you, Mona did not kill Vic Gaylord."

"Convince me," I said skeptically. "Go ahead, try to prove it to me."

Val fished up a cigarette and talked while nervously lighting it. "Mona told the truth about that dress. It's not hers. It came out of our wardrobe department, the same as the black cape."

"Sure of that, are you?"

"Yes," Val said flatly. "It was worn in a show week before last by an adagio dancer. The dress got torn like that during the dance. I saw that number on the set at my apartment—and so did you, darling."

It came back to me then. On the screen the dress had looked gray, since we aren't televising color yet. But now that Val had mentioned it, I did remember the tear.

"So answer me this, my fine, groggy lad," Val went on. "Why should Mona wear a prop cape and an adagio dancer's torn dress when dropping in on Vic?"

"Why would any other woman do it, for that matter?" I retorted. "To disguise herself, of course."

"Who from?" Val countered. "Not from Vic. She couldn't, at that close range, and anyway, Vic would stop mattering as soon as he died. So who else would she expect to have to fool?"

"Anybody who might happen to see her." I wagged my head, again realizing somehow that this must be only a partial answer. "You're being very bright this morning, sugar, but all this celebration of yours doesn't prove anything. I was there—I saw the gal wearing that outfit—and you can't argue with that."

Val crushed her cigarette with quick, tense motions. "It couldn't have been Mona you saw. Why should Mona kill Gaylord anyhow? Because she was jealous of him? That's silly. I've never seen a sign of it and neither have you, Trex. The fact is, Gaylord's death was a bad blow to Mona professionally, a bad upset."

"How?"

"ALLENE told me about a conference she got wind of last week. A meeting of the top brass of Raphael TV. All the big shots there felt that Mona should be dropped next option-time because she was getting to be too unreliable. All of them, that is, except Gaylord. He felt she would snap out of it in time."

"He wanted a chance to talk it over with her first and they deferred to his judgment. Gaylord alone was keeping Mona in and she knew it. She would *never* have killed the man who was helping her in her come-back."

I heard myself muttering, "Why doesn't somebody tell me what goes on around here? All right, you've sold me."

I stuck to the subject. "So Mona isn't the dame who did the murdering. That means she was right when she said she's been framed. So that means, further, that her story about how she got shot must be true."

Then I blurted, "Hey, wait a minute! Suddenly it's beginning to make sense."

Val didn't comment, didn't even seem to be listening to me.

"The real killer has been scrambling like crazy since the murder," I went on quickly, "because of the fact that Gaylord shot and wounded her!"

Val frowned at me, as if wishing I'd shut up.

"I mean this," I persisted. "The killer's plan was simply to walk in, hack Gaylord to death, then leave. She could then frame Mona, since her plan included that, simply by slipping the bloody dress into Mona's closet. Other circumstances, such as Mona's lack of an alibi, would help to pin it on her. That was the original scheme—a straight kill and doublecross. But when Gaylord shot and wounded the killer, it brought an unexpected complication into the picture."

Val said, "Don't you think it's taking Louise too long to get here?"

"The murderess, being smart, knew that the police these days have a lot of slick scientific tricks up their sleeve, including tricks with blood traces and bullets. But that wasn't all. There was also the plain fact that the red dress now had a bullet hole in the left sleeve. This made it necessary for Mona to have a bullet-wound in her left arm, in the same location, because otherwise the frame would not fit.

"This forced the murderess to take the time and trouble to shoot Mona in the arm in an apparently fantastic, unprovable way. That is, she wasn't shot indoors, where the slug would lodge in the floor or a wall—it was done outside so the

slug would then be lost in the ground."

"You talk too much, darling," Val said shortly.

So I stopped there for a moment to wonder why the killer had shot me also, in the very same way. I had become so fascinated in all this that I had wakened a little and I was still holding the glass full of rum in my fist, untasted.

"So you're right," I went on. "Mona is innocent but caught in a damn bad frame. Besides this, you seem to feel just as sure of who is really guilty."

She rose suddenly and began pacing around behind the desk. "I'm in a fine fix, Trex. This could mean a whale of a lot to me. What I know is worth so much that it could buy me anything I might want from this outfit—any contract, any job. It's what I've worked like hell to get and now I've got it within my grasp."

"All yours," I said quietly, "just for keeping clammed up about the identity of the murderess. Fame and fortune based on a little ladylike blackmail. Very fine, very noble."

She turned on me. "Damn it, Trex, you know I couldn't do it at the cost of seeing this thing pinned on Mona. You know Mona and I have never been pals. But I could never stand by and let her take the rap for this, no matter how big it might pay off—I couldn't."

"That's better, Val," I said. "So what are you going to do about it?"

She grew quiet. "I'm going to figure the angles, like a lad I know named Trexler. I mean, as long as Mona stays in circulation, I won't have any reason for sounding off. Will I, Trex?"

"**H**ONEY, you don't dare. Getting fancy with a killer is a very good way to get yourself dead. Just letting her know you've tagged her could be fatal." I added, "You'd better take a lesson from Allene. She tried it—and died of it."

Val gasped and stared. "Allene?"

"Ferry has found her body by now. I found it earlier this evening. In some way she had learned the killer's identity too."

"But how, Trex? *How?*"

"I don't know how. I think that in some way the realization struck her right here in this office. Maybe it was something said or done that the rest of us didn't even notice. I saw her face a second afterward and it was deathly white; she seemed terrified. That must have been when she suddenly *knew*. But I still don't know how."

Then from below, from the tangled and gloom-filled depths of the studio, there came the noise of a latch clicking, then a door being shaken by a hand on the knob.

"That must be Louise," Val said quickly. "Didn't you leave the latch open for her?"

"I thought I did, but at this point—" "I'll let her in."

Val hurried out first and along the hallway. I followed, but slowly, the drink still untasted in my hand, my mind still ruminating among my private accumulation of facts and guesses. Some of the things that hadn't made sense before had taken on solid meanings now—for example, the significance of the gunshot wounds. But one thing that was still only half explained was the choice of a hatchet as the weapon of murder.

Silence. That must be part of the answer too. A weapon with a long reach—longer than a knife or an ice-pick, for example, far more effective than either of them, too, and faster—and silent. It must have been especially important in some way for the killer to want to do the job as quietly as possible.

And the way she had run right out into the beams of my headlights—that was still a puzzler.

Then I startled myself by coming up with a bright thought, a really spectacular thought, considering my condition: Suppose this killer is different from all other

killers in one special way. Another killer might naturally wish to disappear without a trace after doing the job, but suppose this killer *wanted to be seen!*

I was moving automatically, like a sleepwalker, following Val down the stairs with the untasted drink in my hand.

That supposition started clearing up the picture fact. It showed why the silence of the hatchet was important. Actually Gaylord had fired a shot, but it had not aroused the neighbors—a lucky break for the killer.

The important thing was that the murder should not be discovered immediately, or too soon—because the killer wanted to wait there.

The killer wanted to wait for an opportunity to be seen fleeing the scene!

The killer had waited until a car came along—cars being scarce in that neighborhood at that small hour of the morning. The first to come along—it was mine—gave the killer the desired chance of being seen. I remembered that surprisingly fast getaway, as if the motor of the waiting car had been left idling. To me it had seemed like an accidental encounter, but every move of it had been in advance.

Why? So that I, an eye-witness, could supply the police with a completely misleading picture—a false picture that would conceal the real murderer's identity and help to nail the frame around Mona Elwyn.

By this time Val and I had reached the bottom of the stairs and were moving toward the door. She was a few steps in front of me when she grasped the knob and pulled the door open. Then, in that instant, the picture I had just been examining in my mind sprang into life again.

She was there again—just outside the door now—the same unforgettable figure that I had first seen running through the beams of my headlights!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hatchet Honey's Surprise

VAL gasped, shrinking back, and I stared in paralyzed consternation. Again she was wearing a black, hip-length cape with the hood drawn over her head, with one hand clasping it over the lower part of her face so that only her widened eyes showed.

Under that she was wearing some sort of garish dress—not red, this time, but a ghastly green twinkling with sequins. Her legs gleamed in nylons and she was teetering again on those same platform-soled, spike-heeled red sandals.

She had a revolver gripped in her fist—Gaylord's gun, I knew instinctively—and she was pushing it straight at Val.

She fired twice, swiftly. I saw Val's body jerk with the impact of the bullets. The force of them knocked her back against me. She groaned with shock and her breathing went jerky. For a fraction of a second the killer paused to make sure that the bullets had hit her. Then the gun lifted a little again to signal that more bullets were coming, that Val was meant to die then and there.

My response was crazy, instinctive and ineffectual—except that it sent the next two bullets wild. I simply dashed out my glass, sent rum flying. Not much of it landed, but at least it forced the killer to duck aside and that motion sent the next bullets wide of Val.

She was sliding down against me, I was making a groping effort to hold her up—and then that hideous figure in the cape hurled the gun. It came whizzing from that deadly hand straight at my face. I ducked, but not fast enough. The steel slammed over my left eye and I went down backward, hard, with Val sprawled over my legs.

When the world stopped rocking there was no sound. If the killer had come in

a car, it was gone again now. I hadn't half a thought of giving chase anyhow.

"Val— Val!"

I got my legs out from under her—she was a limp, dead weight—and twisted myself around. Two of the bullets had hit her. She could die of those wounds—one under the collarbone and one by the ribs—unless she got help fast.

Somehow I had enough sense to leave her right there where she had fallen. I scrambled up the stairs, into the nearest open office and used the phone. I called for an ambulance, making very clear exactly where it should come. Then, as I started down the stairs again, I heard a car pulling into the parking lot, closely followed by a second.

I was bending over Val, checking her pulse, when the door opened. Not until then did I notice that the vision in my left eye was dancing fantastically. That was the eye the hurled gun had very narrowly missed. Several seconds passed before I could recognize the man who came in. It was Ray Ferry.

He stared down at me, hard-faced, saying nothing.

"I know how it looks," I snapped out at him. "It looks like I'm the guy who killed Gaylord, then Val found it out and I just now tried to shut her up. There's Gaylord's gun on the floor to back up your theory. Only that's not how it is." Then I added in what sounded like a snarl,

"If you touch her before the ambulance gets here, I'll cut you down to size!"

Ferry just nodded. His face stayed rock-hard and he kept staring at me. Then the door opened again and this time it was Bryce Elywn who came in. He stopped short, staring down at Val. Then he hurried over for a closer look. His face turned ashen, he closed his eyes and turned away and for a second I thought he was going to be sick on the floor.

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"THIS is going to be too bad for a killer," I heard myself saying next. "Because Val isn't dead. And she's not going to die. She's going to live to tell what she knows." Then, feeling dizzily amazed at myself, I heard my voice saying, "But we won't have to wait that long. Let's finish it up right here and now."

Ferry stepped closer. Bryce turned back, his eyes watery behind the rims of his glasses, his face expressing utter weariness.

"Louise isn't really coming," I said. "That phone call of hers was just an invitation to Val and me to walk into a trap and get carried out dead. I know now when it became necessary to kill us. Louise was awake, of course, when we left your place this morning—awake and watching us. Val sat beside me in my car and said right out loud that she knew the answer, and Louise heard it, which meant more killings to be done."

Ferry asked suddenly, "Where is she now?"

I shrugged. "Still back at the Elwyns', I suppose. That doesn't matter. Louise hasn't committed any murders, at least not personally. She was a party to the plan, of course, but they weren't her hands that got bloody."

Part of me was listening for the first bong of the approaching ambulance. No sign of it so far.

"Val's getting shot up seems to have made me a bright boy all of a sudden," I went on bitterly. "I can even figure out how Allene tumbled to the truth. A few minutes ago I couldn't, but now I can."

Bryce gazed at me with his shoulders drooping, his eyes dull.

"There in my office yesterday morning, Allene was standing back against the wall. You were standing in front of her, Bryce, at my desk. Barrett had come in, the hail fellow, the back-slapper. He

Kill Me, Kate!

whacked my arm, here, over my wound. I almost blacked out with pain and I was terrified that it would start bleeding. He did exactly the same thing to you, Bryce—same arm, same spot.

"A second later Allene, behind you, was looking deathly pale and scared. Because, just before you rolled your shirt-sleeve down, she saw the blood trickling down to your elbow. My wound hadn't bled, but yours had, and you didn't cover it quite fast enough to keep Allene from seeing the fresh running blood."

I stepped forward, one hand raised for a blow, and said, "Shall we try it again, Bryce, just to show Ferry how it works?"

Bryce's fist smashed at me. He attempted to whirl away and bumped head-long into Ferry moving up. I dove in from the side. For half a minute it was a crazy struggle between the three of us. Ferry and I between us forced him to the floor. Then we pulled at his coat and his shirt and bared it—the bandaged wound on his upper left arm, in exactly the same position as Mona's and mine.

But it was something else that really clinched it. While Bryce lay pinned to the floor, I lifted his feet and pulled up his pant-leg. He was wearing a pair of full-length smoke-colored nylon stockings.

Somewhere down the road an ambulance bell was bonging. Val, still huddling on the floor, had begun to sob. I went to her and bent low. She hooked one arm around my neck.

"Take me away from this, Trex, darling," she choked out. "Please marry me, Trex. Please make me be a quiet little homebody. Please, Trex."

I thought to myself that this gal was plenty delirious, all right.

WHEN Ferry staged that scene again, under the same conditions, it was a pretty ghastly thing.

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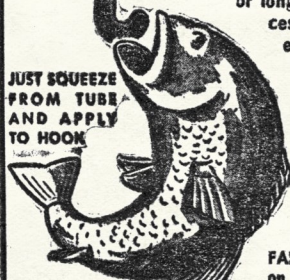
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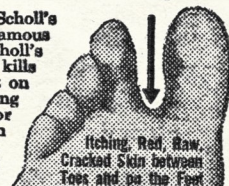
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Frederick C. Davis

street behind Gaylord's. Dark it was, headlights on. Then he stood Bryce Elwyn in the headlight beams, just as I had first seen him. Black cape—at least a dozen more was in the wardrobe room—adagio dancer's torn dress, nylons again and those red sandals we'd found in the trunk of his car. Now we could see his feet straining the straps and bulging over the paltform soles—but those thick soles left small prints regardless.

It was so easy to check back now and see how Bryce had planned it in advance. The dead girl's clothes stolen from the line, for example. The other stuff filched from the wardrobe department of Raphael TV because he was too large to wear one of Mona's dresses, which, of course, he would have preferred to do.

Sending Louise to Chicago, also, so she would have a perfect alibi. Planning it so that Louise's husband and Bryce's wife were both eliminated, thereby bringing Louise and Bryce together in a fine, enduring union based on murder and a double-cross.

The timing also. That night, when he had phoned me at the studio just before two a.m., he had called from Gaylord's cottage, even then in costume. Unwittingly, during that call, I had said I would leave in a few more minutes, and that had been his cue to get set to stage his carefully planned scene of the fleeing murderess.

Easy to see now, also, why Louise chose to go into seclusion at the Elwyns'. It was Bryce talking to her when Val and I barged in, forcing him out a window, then over into his study, where he had convincing faked a picture of a sleeping, exhausted man.

As to why he had shot me, as well as Mona—that was in case the cops learned that the killer was a man.

"I'd like to mention," Ferry said as we finished that demonstration in the

Kill Me, Kate!

dark street behind Gaylord's, "that nobody actually phoned me a hot tip that you knew the murderer's name. That was just a way I took to pry you open. It paid off, too." He grinned, then grew sober and added, "Don't ever do this again, Trexler."

"Brother," I assured him, "that's for sure!"

Then I went over to the hospital where Val was doing beautifully and looking beautiful too.

"I can't believe it," I said. "Such a luscious woman with such a pretty voice and such a fine brain, too. Very smart about figuring out things such as careers and murders. You haven't told me how you doped out the murder thing?"

"I guess being a woman helped some," Val answered. "See, it went like this. It seemed to be a crime of jealousy, but that appearance was faked. So it had to be a practical murder, one done for gain.

"The gain had to come through Louise's shares in Raphael TV. That inevitably meant a man. Since it wasn't you, it had to be some other man in about your position, such as Bryce. And since it was Bryce's wife who was being framed, the whole thing became very clear."

"It seems so simple now," I said. "One other thing. This is something you mentioned the other morning. Now's your chance to take it back. You were all shot up when you said it, and out of your head, so I won't hold you to it. About marrying me, I mean."

Val smiled enchantingly and said, "But Trex, darling, I've always been a woman of my word and I love you very much for bringing me to my senses. If you'll just lean over this way a little, I'll prove it."

As I mentioned at the beginning, when you start messing around with murder it can lead to the darnedest things.

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(Continued from page 83)

Arturo's friend turned his head aside. "In fifteen minutes, Mrs. Testro, if you send the money or a check—he'll be here in fifteen minutes and the wedding can go on."

She laughed shortly. "And you think my neighbors won't know I've had to pay him?" she mocked. "Why, even my children will know and laugh at me. An old woman, so ugly she had to pay! No." She backed into the hall and stopped with her hand on the doorknob.

"Tell him," she said clearly, "to meet me at nine o'clock on the bridge at Mott Avenue." She paused, thinking. "It is the bridge over the railroads, where the trains clatter. At nine o'clock, tell him I'll be there with money." She moved to shut the door.

"But your wedding, Mrs. Testro?" Pete said. "Are you gonna marry him now?"

"Oh that!" she said with a strangely serene air. "That can be—later."

* * *

"And so it was," Angelina Testro told Detective Blaney as she finished her story. "He would not wed me—I wedded him . . . to death! And now I will not let Pete suffer because I avenged myself."

True to the promise he had made her, Blaney had Pete released the minute she entered the jail. In a way, though, the puzzle-solving detective hated to make the exchange. Angelina had won his sympathies, as she did those of many others during the trial.

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EMMETT KELLY

World's most famous circus clown, says:

"LOOK INSIDE FOR INSIDE PROOF"

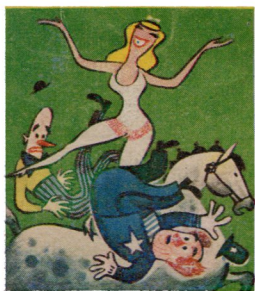
"Under the Big Top the secret of top performance is teamwork," says Emmett Kelly. "And a look inside a B. F. Goodrich Silvertoen shows that's true of tires as well."

Look inside a B. F. Goodrich tire yourself: Note how the cords are precision spaced in live rubber with no cross-threads! That's why they flex in rhythm (see below) to give you the best tire value—"Rythm Ride!"

Yet "Rythm Ride" tires cost no more. See your B. F. Goodrich retailer for convenient terms and generous trade-in!



IF YOU CAN TELL WHICH CIRCUS RIDERS ARE BEST, YOU CAN TELL WHICH TIRE IS BEST:



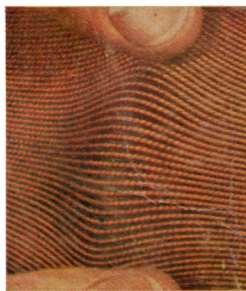
1 Every tire has thousands of cords that flex as you ride. In most tires, these cords are hampered by *non-working* cross-threads. Result: They're *out of rythm* like the bareback rider and clowns above.



2 B. F. Goodrich tire cords have *no cross-threads* to hinder their action. They work in *rythm* like the circus stars above. Carry impact from one to another, smother road shock, reduce wear, cushion bumps.



3 Most tire cords are bunched and gapped by slender cross-threads. Weak spots, "slacker cords", overworked cords result. BFG cords, instead, are sealed in live rubber, with uniform spacing and tension.



4 Look inside—then decide. Only B. F. Goodrich can give you "rhythmic-flexing cords" in every tire for every need. See your BFG retailer. Buy now. The B. F. Goodrich Company, Akron, Ohio.