

# K **MANHUNT**

**WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE**

**AUGUST, 1959**

**35 CENTS**

## **THE EXTORTIONERS**

*The two men had a message for Gordon. He nodded his head and suddenly there was a blur of motion, and a blinding force seemed to cave in the right side of his face.*

*"You got the message Gordon. Now leave town and don't come back."*

**a  
full length novel  
by  
Ovid Demaris**



**Also – NEIL BOARDMAN • FRANK SISK • AL JAMES  
CARROLL MAYERS • BOB BRISTOW • ELWOOD CORLEY**

**EVERY STORY NEW!**

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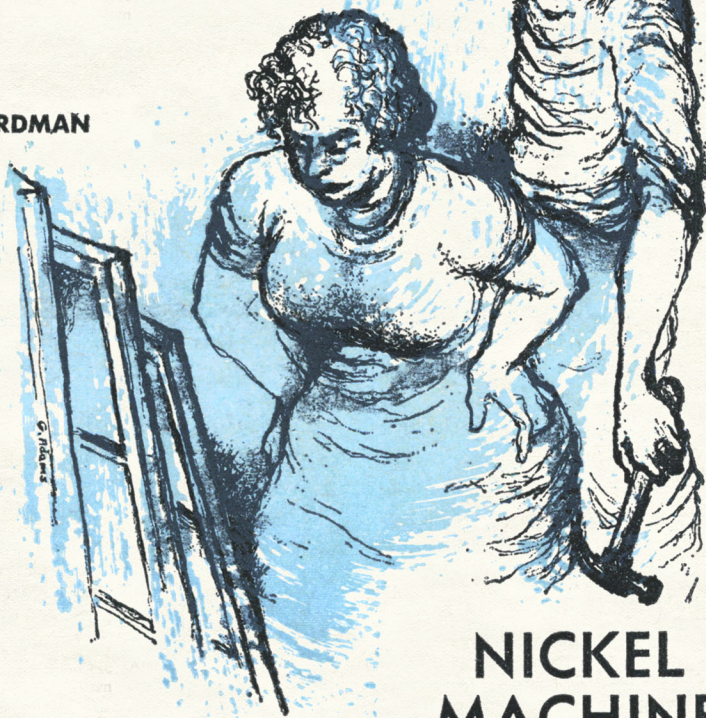


THE ROOM was so hot that the two policemen, the one that had arrested him and the Captain, had long since taken off their coats; but Bennie would have dripped perspiration anyhow. Now the sweat on his forehead and at the back of his neck turned cold when the Captain told him—

"Your wife says she can't believe it."

He had seen the third officer, the

BY  
NEIL  
BOARDMAN



## NICKEL MACHINE

*The colored lights, the tinkling bells, the shiny silver balls... Bennie's pulse quickened in anticipation. He pushed in his last nickel... and nothing happened.*



man dressed in everyday clothes, at the telephone on the other side of the glass partition; and so that was what they had done, after he had pleaded with them not to! They had told Elsa. Just what Eddie Fleener always said: never trust a cop. But then, it was Eddie Fleener himself who—

"She said you haven't got it in you, it must be some mistake," the Captain added.

Bennie nodded. He felt sick; he had felt bad enough before, but now he was really sick, and must have showed it, because he sensed, vaguely, a sympathy in the two men.

"Was it a mistake, then, Bennie?" the Captain asked.

It was an idiotic question. The officer that had made the arrest—Grimes, they called him—looked sore, until he caught the expression on the Captain's face; then he only grinned. A mistake? A lot of their fancy talk had escaped Bennie, but he realized now that they were poking fun at him. A dozen customers in the Grill, besides Fleener himself, and the waitress, too, had seen him smash the machine; how could it have been a "mistake"? Bennie felt like crying; not so much because they were teasing him, but because they had called Elsa. They had snitched on him.

He used to feel this way when he was a kid, and the teacher or principal called his mother, or sent a note home.

"No," he said, because he couldn't stand the long silence, and nobody else would talk. "I done it. I told you I done it. What did you have to call my missus for?"

"Damn it, Bennie, *why* did you do it?" shouted the Captain, bringing his fist down on the scarred oak desk.

Bennie looked at the floor and said nothing. For a moment his attention was caught by the odd pattern of cracks in the concrete, which made the whole floor look like the maps he used to see in his geography book, where the "plains" were cut up into crazy, crooked segments by the rivers. Then the fear returned to him: Elsa had been told, Elsa would be down, Elsa would find out everything. It gave him the cramps, thinking about it; he wondered if they would let him go to the bathroom. If they did, he might escape through the bathroom window.

The detective who had used the telephone poked his head through the doorway.

"Doc Norby just dropped by," he said. "He's got a coupla minutes."

As the Captain wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, the arresting officer stood up.

"You go with Grimes," said the Captain. "The doctor wants to see you. He won't hurt you, for Pete's sake; go on, Bennie, hop. I got other troubles besides you."

They passed through the corridor



of the police station, where several people were sitting. Hunched back on his spine, next to a young woman who was holding a baby and crying softly, was Eddie Fleener. Eddie didn't look at all mean now; when he saw Bennie he jumped to his feet and put out his hand.

"Listen, Bennie!" he said; "you know it ain't a case o' my wanting to see you in the can. It's just the money I'm thinkin' about; I can't afford—I mean, *somebody's* got to pay for that goddam rig, and it don't do me no good to have you rotting in jail. I mean—"

"C'mon," said Grimes, grabbing Bennie by the arm. "Don't pay no attention. He's got to see a guy," he added, turning to Eddie Fleener and winking at him, as if there were some joke between them.

Except for the fact that it had a carpet on the floor, and more pictures on the walls, the office into which Bennie was shoved this time wasn't much better than the one he had just left. A man not in uniform half sat, half leaned on the desk; a skinny guy in a worn gray suit, who chewed on a cigar that filled the room with smoke, making Bennie feel sicker than he had before. Now he was sick at both ends.

"Bennie, this is Dr. Norby," Grimes said in a voice that, for the first time, had an edge of kindness in it. "He wants to talk to you."

Bennie felt an urping in his throat. "Is my wife coming down

here?" he asked; but Grimes had already slipped out of the office.

"Sit down," said Dr. Norby.

Bennie seated himself in a leather armchair that was not so comfortable as it looked. The seat was caved in, and he had the uneasy sensation that a spring might uncoil any moment and spear him. Dr. Norby, laying his rancid-smelling cigar on the edge of the desk, slumped into a matching leather sofa.

"Now, tell me what happened," he said.

An uncomfortable sixty seconds followed. Much as he hated questions, Bennie would have preferred them to this kind of business. He didn't know how to begin; what was there to tell? Everybody knew what had happened; even Elsa knew. He sat staring at the doctor's brightly shined shoes.

"Of course, I know you smashed a pinball machine, but that's nothing; lots of us have felt like doing just that," said the doctor. "What I mean was, what happened before that? Was the machine cheating you?"

So there it was, the same question everybody asked. Bennie could have answered it the first time, but because he hadn't—and he didn't know *why* he hadn't—he didn't think he could answer it now. He didn't know why that was so, either. Bennie was just not one to explore the *why* of things. He'd busted the machine, that was all,



completely busted it, mashed it good, jumping on it with both feet and whamming it with the gum-dispensing machine. The gum machine was busted to hell, too. The hot, angry, but sensually pleasurable feeling that had come over him during the smashing activities returned briefly to him now, driving out the sickness: but the sickness came back, just the same. He glanced up at the doctor's face, then looked quickly away. The doctor's eyes were sticking holes in him. He had done it, and they'd pinched him, and there was no hope for Bennie, because what Eddie wanted was something like a hundred-and-fifty dollars. What if they did know why he had done it? Would it make any difference? He wasn't dumb enough to believe that. A hundred-fifty bucks!

The doctor reached for the stub of his cigar. It had gone out, and smelled worse than ever. Examining it without curiosity, the doctor dropped it into the waste basket. Then he got on his feet, picked up a little black bag that had stood beside the desk, and opened it.

"Take off your shirt, Bennie; we might as well give you a free check-up, hey?"

Bennie fumbled with his buttons. It embarrassed him to undress, even that little bit, in front of people; even in front of a doctor. He wondered if this were not some kind of punishment for his refusing to answer questions.

The doctor listened to his heart; then he thumped Bennie's back, and finally, after making Bennie pull up his pant-leg, cracked him below the knee cap with a little hammer. It made Bennie want to laugh, all this familiar foolishness: what had it got to do with smashing the pin-ball machine?"

"Where do you work?" asked Norby.

"Coleman's," answered Bennie, feeling the coldness come back. If they put him in jail, he would lose his job for sure.

"I see. Selling?"

"Stock man," said Bennie.

Looking at him with mild interest, the doctor said—

"You ought to eat more."

Bennie set his lips tight. It would not do to explain that he had practically quit eating lunches, or why. How would a doctor, who asked so many foolish questions, understand? And yet he *had* admitted to playing the pinball machines himself, in a way.

"Heavy smoker?" asked Norby.

Bennie shook his head. "I quit last month."

"Good for you. Wish I had the will power."

Mingled with his coldness and his sickness—each passing moment, he knew, brought Elsa closer, and he doubted if the whole police department could keep her out, even supposing they wanted to—Bennie felt pride. Will power, the doctor said.



Every second day, Elsa allowed him twenty-five cents for a pack of cigarettes. Since she couldn't stand any smoking in the house—for all her size and the color of her cheeks, Elsa complained constantly of lung trouble and sinus headaches—she hadn't noticed that he had given up smoking. So he had kept on getting that twenty-five cents.

"It's like this," said the doctor, returning to the leather sofa; "if you were in the habit of smashing things when you're irritated, that would be one thing. If not—well, that would be something else again. Do you smash things at work?"

"No," said Bennie.

"Around the house? Lose your temper and throw hammers and stuff?"

"God, no!"

"You don't impress me as being the nervous type. By the way, didn't I hear you mention your wife?"

"I guess so," said Bennie.

"How long've you been married?"

Bennie shook his head.

"How long?"

Once more his eyes sought the floor. "I don't remember," he said.

"Well, you know what I mean"—Dr. Norby took a sheet of paper from the desk, a form the police had filled out, and examined it—"a year? Two years? Ten?"

Bennie shrugged his shoulders. "Ten, maybe?" he said. Then—"No, not so much; not ten."

"Any children?"

"No."

"And you and your wife get along—you know what I mean—fairly well?"

Bennie did not answer.

The doctor sighed. That was a hopeful sign, suggesting that he might be giving up. But instead of dismissing Bennie, Norby switched back to the machine.

"You like to play pinball?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bennie.

"It could be fascinating, all right," suggested Dr. Norby.

A warning sign—the sign to be on guard—lit up somewhere in the recesses of Bennie's brain. The doctor's comment was a challenge; it was intended, Bennie sensed rather than thought, to "bring him out." The doctor suspected something, but he couldn't begin to guess the truth, and never would know it, unless Bennie told him. Of that fact, Bennie was sure. What Norby was asking for was a secret, and one that Bennie wouldn't have wanted to give out even if he had known how.

The lights that blazed off and on, and the bells. The sudden conversion of what had been commonplace, even dirty, into rhythm and color and beauty. Poetry, if Bennie had known the word in any sense except as referring to stuff he couldn't understand. A world different from any other world, even that which jostled it on either side; and you (Bennie addressed himself



in private as "you") were the master, you controlled it, you were the boss, the magician, God: you started it going, the lights and the noises, and the little silver balls, and you kept it going, so long as you had the skill, a skill that increased with each plunge into this hidden, secret, but universally available world.

He could not tell all this to Dr. Norby. The doctor would not understand, or he would laugh, or he would ridicule. Above all, he would ask *why?* Quite suddenly, once more, Bennie wanted to cry; the doctor was staring at him strangely; the doctor had a power and a magic of his own, and was it possible that he understood what Bennie was feeling, what he was thinking, what he *knew*? Why, oh why *had* he smashed the damned machine? That had spoiled everything. Before, everything had been going along fine, he hadn't figured anything out, he had just had his fun, blanking out the hideous universe, Coleman's, the to-and-from bus rides, Elsa, cleaning out the attic, the recollections of despair. Now he was different. He was like a lover remembering a sensual ecstasy. Swallowing hard, biting his lip, unable any longer to endure the torment of the doctor's gaze, he cried out—

"I did it because it wouldn't work on my chocolate bar nickel!"

Having confessed—he knew, he had known all along, that it was a

silly reason for wrecking one-hundred-and-fifty dollars worth of property—he dropped his eyes, rubbed his hands together, and gave himself up altogether to embarrassment.

Dr. Norby got to his feet, crossed the room to the hall tree where his topcoat was hanging, fished around in his pockets, pulled out a fresh cigar, unwrapped it, lighted it, and returned to the sofa. He crossed his legs and blew smoke rings. The rings floated across the office and almost encircled Bennie's nose; the smoke smelled no better than the other smoke, from the old cigar.

Finally, the doctor said:

"I understand about the machine not working—it would make anybody sore—but I'm not quite sure what you mean by your 'chocolate bar nickel.'"

Slowly Bennie raised his eyes. It was beyond comprehension. In some ways, this man was like his wife—the way he kept at you, and squeezed things out of you; but there was a difference, too. The doctor was at least kind. But why did he want to know? Elsa's wanting to know everything, Bennie could understand. But what difference did it make to Dr. Norby?

"It's the nickel I save for my chocolate bar."

"I see." But, by his manner of speaking, he made it clear, even to Bennie, that he did not see. So Bennie went on.

"I got to play the machine. I got



to. I only play the nickel machine; there's a bigger one for a dime. I use my lunch money, but I save out a nickel for a chocolate bar, and I eat that on the way back to work. I call that my chocolate bar nickel. I keep it in another pocket; the one on the left side of my pants. The change Elsa gives me I keep on the right side of my pants. This time it was—I mean, it wasn't going good, so I figured on playing one more, and going without my chocolate bar. So I put in that nickel. And the machine wouldn't work, and when I told Fleener, he laughed. So I got mad. It was because I could hear the bells—I ain't crazy, doctor, I mean the bells I'd just been hearing from the last play—and I wanted more. I got mad. I busted the machine. It was no good. It was broke anyhow. He got no right to have machines that don't work. And then laugh."

They were more words than Bennie had ever spoken in one string before in his life. He felt exhausted, and yet, in a way, triumphant, too. He had made it absolutely clear to Dr. Norby; now maybe they wouldn't try to make him pay the one hundred-and-fifty bucks.

But the doctor had a surprising way of jumping from one subject to another. Out of a clear sky he asked—

"Did your mother used to whip you, Bennie?"

Too startled even to think, Bennie answered promptly, "Yes."

"Often?"

"Yes."

"You were afraid of her?"

"Yes."

"You resented her?"

Bennie did not answer.

"I mean—in a way—you hated her?"

In spite of himself, the tears came to Bennie's eyes. He did not want to wipe them away, because that would only draw attention to them. He wished he were dead.

The doctor stood up.

"I guess that's all," he said. "I don't know what I can do for you. The charge they've got against you is malicious destruction of property. That means smashing stuff—like the pinball machine—just for the hell of it. The man that owns the machine, or is responsible for it—I suppose it belongs to some syndicate—will drop the charge if you pay for it. That's all there is to it. If you can't pay for it, you're in a jam, but if I can help you, I will. Good luck. I know it's tough, but after all, I'm only a doctor."

Immediately Grimes entered the room, which meant that he must have been listening all the time, just outside the door.

"C'mon," said the policeman. "Your wife's here now, Bennie."

The doctor put on his topcoat and hat, and stood watching. If Bennie thought he wanted to die before, he really wanted to die now. He sat tight.



"Shake a leg," said the policeman.

"I got to go to the can," said Bennie.

"All right. So go. Come with me; I'll show you."

Bennie got up and tagged along behind Grimes, not even glancing at the doctor. The first person he ran into in the corridor was Eddie Fleener. The second person was Elsa. He never saw her look so calm; it almost made him faint to see her.

"Where you taking him?" she asked in a loud voice.

"He's got to go to the toilet," answered Grimes.

"Always rushing off to the bathroom," said Elsa. "Worse than a kid."

Bennie stayed in the lavatory as long as he dared; for the first time since he had given up smoking, he wished he had a cigarette. There was a window over the washbowls, but it had bars on it, so there was no hope of escape. He would have liked to have climbed out of the window and just gone back to work, as if nothing had happened. Maybe by the end of the day, the whole thing would have blown over.

Grimes was waiting outside the door for him.

"Bennie," said Grimes, "we're spending as much time on you as if you had robbed a bank, or committed rape. For Gawd's sake, don't give us no more trouble."

He followed the policeman to the desk where the Sergeant was. The Captain was nowhere in sight; just the Sergeant, and Grimes, and Elsa, and Eddie Fleener, besides a couple of unknown hangers-on. Elsa began to look excited; her face was flushed, and her big, fat fingers were clutching her purse, as if she thought somebody was going to snatch it from her. Fleener was the first to speak.

"Bennie," he said, "I think everything's gonna be all right."

His was the only cheerful face there. The Sergeant looked bored.

"I only want one thing, and that's a straight answer from Bennie," Elsa said, keeping herself under control.

"Tell me straight," she went on, her immense, sagging breasts heaving, "did you or didn't you smash Mr. Fleener's slot machine?"

"Pinball machine," corrected Eddie.

"I don't give a crap what it is," bellowed Elsa. "Did you or didn't you? One word, yes or no."

Wildly, Bennie looked at the faces around him. If he had only known it, theirs, like his own, were filled with shame.

"It was a no-good machine anyhow," he said, clenching both fists.

"Of course it was no good; who the hell said it was?" answered Elsa. "I didn't ask you that; I asked you if you smashed it?"

"All right, I did," said Bennie.

"O.K., big boy; I don't know



what you were fooling with the dam' thing for in the first place, but if you smashed it, I'll pay for it." She opened her purse, and Bennie caught his breath. She usually carried only change, except on days when she went to the market; but this time, the pocketbook was stuffed with bills. He wondered if it could be all of Elsa's savings; he knew she had stashed away a lot of money, but he never did have any idea how much, or where she kept it hidden.

"How much?" said Elsa, turning to Eddie Fleener.

"I got to settle for it with the owner," began Eddie, speaking in his best wheedling voice; "even though it was not the newest or best in our stablishment, if you know what I mean, nevertheless it—"

"Oh, shut up and tell me what you want for it," said Elsa.

"One hundred and fifty dollars."

Elsa pulled out a sheaf of bills and counted them. What she stuffed back into her purse was a lot more than she left out, anybody could see that.

"Here you are," she said. "Seventy-five bucks. Next offer is sixty. If you don't like it, Bennie can go to jail and work it off."

Maybe that was the best idea after all. At this moment, jail looked pretty good to Bennie. At the same time he knew, for a dead certainty, that Elsa would win out. She always did. She never bluffed, and

she had an uncanny knowledge of the value of things, even things she knew nothing about or had never heard of. If only Eddie Fleener had the guts. . . .

But Fleener didn't even try. He knew the Bennies of the world, and he also knew the Elsas.

"I'm losing plenty, but I'll take it," he said.

There was a look of contempt on Elsa's broad face. While the men looked on, and Bennie stood silently by, feeling only remotely connected with the transaction, she handed over the money; most of it in one dollar bills, with a few fives, a couple of tens, and no twenties at all.

"I'll take a receipt," said Elsa, when she had finished.

Eddie Fleener had to borrow some paper from the desk sergeant; taking a ball point pen from his pocket, he painstakingly drew up a receipt. After reading it over carefully, Elsa shoved it into her pocketbook on top of the remainder of her money; then she snapped the purse shut.

"All right," she said to Bennie. "Let's go."

There were still formalities, but they didn't take long. Out on the street, standing beside his wife, Bennie shivered: the air was raw, and there was the smell of snow. He was surprised to see Dr. Norby, seated in a station wagon parked at the curb, talking to a woman. The doctor did not notice either Bennie or Bennie's wife; he was busy talking



to the woman, a blonde, and re-lighting his cigar.

"Guess I better hurry back to work," suggested Bennie.

"Crap. I called them and told them you were sick. You're coming home. The storm windows ain't up yet; you can do that this afternoon."

As she started down the street towards the bus stop, he trailed along behind. Neither of them spoke; not then, or while waiting for the bus, or while riding home. None of this surprised Bennie in the least, because he knew Elsa, and he knew what was in store for him. Again in silence they walked the three blocks from the bus line to their home. It was a neat, five-room house across the street from a mattress factory: the neatest house in its block. Elsa unlocked the back door and let them in; taking off her things, she hung them up in the closet that opened off the dining room, leaving her purse on the dining room table.

"Get your clothes changed and get at them windows," she said.

Then she went into the front room and switched on the television.

He knew the pattern exactly, only this would be worse than any other, because the offense was so unspeakably worse. For that reason, it would take her longer to get underway. She might watch television all afternoon, and wait until supper time, or even after, giving

him a chance to get the storm windows all on, and the storm doors, too; or she might become restless, turn off the t.v., and start in gradually while he was still working.

If the doctor hadn't asked him that crazy question, *Did your mother used to whip you?*, Bennie would never have thought of making the comparison now: but this was the way his mother had done things, too. He wondered why, and what the sense of it was. His mother never just grabbed him and licked him, the way other kids' mothers and fathers did: get it over with. She started out easy, and got to talking, and then boiling, until she'd worked herself into a fury. He always thought the whippings were worse because of that. By unmistakable signs, sometimes an hour, two hours before the punishment was administered, he knew what was going to happen, so that his whole body would quiver, with increased intensity as her anger increased, in anticipation of the pain to come. Elsa would begin slowly too, and work up, and she would know everything, and then the terror would really unloose itself, and the night would be a night like that moment in the doctor's office when he wished he were dead—not only because of Elsa, but because of himself, too. She was not so strong as he was weak.

She would know about his giving up his lunch money, about the cigars, about the nickel he held out—



but had failed this one time to hold out—for his chocolate bar. She would know about the nickel machine but she would not know about the splendor of either; she would never understand that, and that would be the rod she would flog him with, her not being able to understand what he could not explain, the glory of it, the lights, the ringing of the bells, the color, the world beyond her world, the hidden meaning, the power—the terrible, unmistakable power. *What the hell's the matter with you? You ought to be locked up, you're nuts; I got a notion to commit you to an institution. How we ever gonna save anything. . . .*

It would go on, not until he was exhausted, but until she was. The bitching voice would never end, and she would make him take his lunch from home now in a paper sack and never give him a dime. . . .

When Bennie had destroyed the five-cent pinball machine, he had destroyed a world.

He went down to the basement, where the storm windows were stored, and got them out. He lined them up against the walls, and then connected the hose. Years ago, Elsa had impressed on him the fact that storm windows had to be washed before they were put on. Though he had never been able to get them clean to her satisfaction, he did the best he could. While he was spraying the big, wide window that went on the front of the house, Elsa shut

off the television. At least there was no sound anymore; the upstairs was perfectly still, he did not even hear her step on the floor.

He finished washing the big window, then turned it around and washed the other side. Still no sound from above. It was a hideous stillness; it made him sick to listen to it. Putting down the hose, he stood watching the flow of water as it gurgled down the drain. He wished he dared go upstairs and take a look; but if he did, she would ask him, "Are you finished?" and he would have to tell her No. Leaning against his meagre little workbench, which Elsa had given him one year for Christmas, and at which he never worked, because it held nothing for him, he listened to the strange silence that had so unaccountably flooded the house. You should be glad for it, he thought; it won't last long. And yet he hated silence, too; this kind of silence.

It was five minutes before he heard her heavy step on the floor just over his head. She must have been standing all that while beside the television set, not moving since she had switched it off; now she was crossing the room and going out into the kitchen. He waited, running his tongue over his lips. She did something in the kitchen, and then he heard the basement door open. Yes, he should be working; he ought to pick up the hose and go on, splashing the window



panes with water; instead, he just stood there among the litter of rusty tools, not able to move. She came down the steps with a kind of limping, one-step-at-a-time gait; she was always afraid of stairs, for fear she would fall and hurt herself.

When she got to the bottom, she looked all around the basement, everywhere except at Bennie. She gave the impression that she thought she was alone, that she did not see him, as if he were not standing there in plain sight. Finally she walked across the cement floor with the mincing gait that he loathed, being careful not to trip over the hose or to get the soles of her shoes wet, ending up in front of the big window. She began to study it, as if looking for flyspecks. Standing within three feet of him, she still pretended he was not there; or, if he were, that it made no difference to her, one way or the other. She wasn't red in the face, or breathing hard, or anything; she was perfectly calm.

And so, maybe for the first time in his life with her, was Bennie. He couldn't have explained why, if anybody had been there to ask him. She was leaning forward slightly, her broad, unsymmetrical posterior sticking out behind. Once again he felt detached from her, as he had when she was counting out the money in the police station. At the same time the recognition came to him that she was unspeakably ugly. Putting out his hand, feeling along

the smooth surface of the board, not taking his eyes from her, he picked up the hammer that was lying on the workbench beside him, swung it with a jerk, and hit her. He struck her on the head with all his might, so that she crumpled to the wet pavement without a sound.

He wondered if she were dead. He knew that lots of people could take a powerful blow on the head, and still survive. They would have only concussion, or something like that. It was bad, but they lived. He struck again, and then again: hard, smashing blows, so that her skull caved in, and blood seeped out through the thick, clotted, ugly hair.

Seeing the blood, he felt certain she was dead.

Putting down the hammer, he crossed the basement floor and turned off the water. Then he went up the stairs, not forgetting to switch off the light before passing through the doorway at the top. He shut the door, went into the kitchen, and had himself a glassful of cold water from the tap. His knees were shaking, but otherwise he felt all right; he felt fine.

Going into the dining room, he saw that her pocketbook was still on the table, where she had left it. He opened it, and the paper money and the receipt burst out, as if released by a spring. Raking the bills up from the cloth, he stuffed them into his trousers pocket, into the chocolate-bar-nickel pocket. Then



he turned the purse upside down and spilled out the change: there were at least two-and-a-half dollars in quarters, nickels, and dimes.

He wasn't sure just how he got back down town. It was like a dream, all right, but not a bad dream; just a senseless, run-of-the-mill dream, in which the only thing in focus was the back of the bus driver's head. From the bus stop he went straight to Fleener's Grill; inside was Eddie Fleener, good old Eddie, big as life, once again full of smiles. It made Bennie feel good to see him.

"My God!" said Eddie; "you can't keep a good man down. You off work?"

"Yes."

"No hard feelin's?"

"No," said Bennie.

His hand shook just a little as he reached into his trousers pocket, the pocket on the right-hand side.

"Sorry your fav'rite machine ain't here right now," said Eddie, "but we decided to send it out for repairs." He guffawed, and two men sitting at the counter, and one of the waitresses, laughed too. Bennie took it all with a grin.

"I like the dime machine better anyways," he said.

"He'p yourself, only don't get sore, now. If it cheats, remember old Eddie's word — 'satisfaction guaranteed or your money back.'"

"O. K.," said Bennie impatiently. "O. K."

He pulled the change out of his pocket, spilling some of it on the floor. With sweating fingers he put in the first dime.

"Hey, ya dropped somethin'," said one of the men at the counter.

Fleener came round and scooped up the change and layed it on the edge of the counter, but Bennie hardly paid any attention to him. "Thanks," he said, and began to play.

It was a wonderful machine, a hundred times better than the one he had smashed. The lights were infinitely brighter, the bells louder. Bells and lights. The lights were in all kinds of colors, everything you could imagine. You had better control, too. He forgot everything, pain, ugliness, even shame. Not a muscle in him quivered; it was all before him, the beauty and majesty and power and control, and how could it ever end?

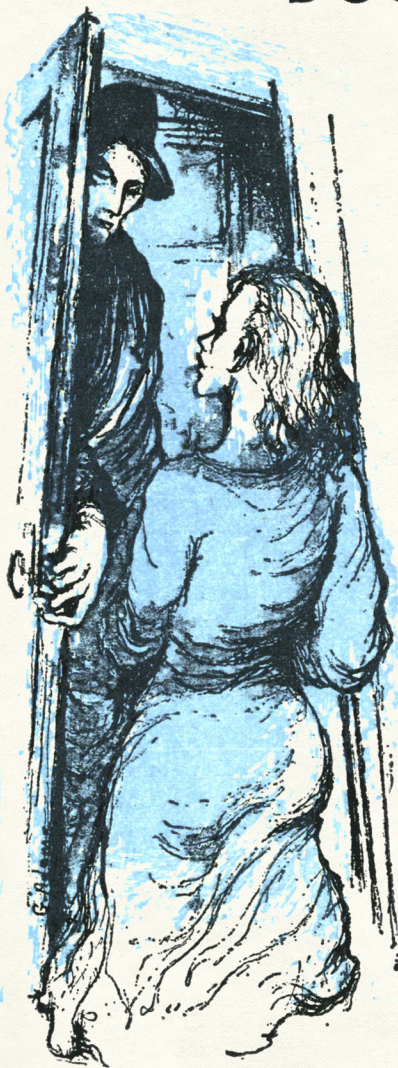
He didn't mean to swear, as such. He had always been a good boy, fearful of punishment; there wasn't a truly blasphemous bone in his body. His words were more like a prayer, like a hymn chanted.

"Oh God, O God!" he whispered softly. The lights, the bells, the little silver balls, and the riot of color. "Cripes! Cripes! Oh, Jeez Cripes!" he said.





# CROSSED AND DOUBLE-CROSSED



*Rumor said that Gina was playing the field. And Gina belonged to "Big Max" ...till Gil went up to straighten her out.*

BY  
CARROLL MAYERS

AFTER the fights we had a couple of beers, then returned to the car. I let Frankie take the wheel, got in back with Big Max. That bugged Frankie—the twitch of his thin lips told me how much—but he let it ride. Starting the motor, he looked around at Big Max with a suggestive grin, deliberately ignoring me.

"Any more action tonight?"

Big Max lit up a fat perfecto. "I could stand some," he said.

Frankie's grin broadened. "Gina?"

"She'll do."

Frankie chuckled, swung the car into traffic. "You really pick 'em chief."

My stomach crawled. In the four months since I'd joined Big Max's organization I'd undercut Frankie's lieutenantancy plenty. The boss was



turning to me more and more whenever a muscle problem came up. I figured another five or six weeks Frankie'd be a total zero. Until then, his constant toadying sickened me.

"Yeah, chief," I said solemnly, "you sure do."

Frankie shot me a withering glance before traffic thickened. Big Max grunted, lolled back on the cushions, relishing the perfect.

That cigar—a dollar item—was typical of Big Max. Behind the front of his Club Java the chief ran a smooth organization. High-bracketed gambling in three states. The profits were fat and Big Max indulged himself in only the best.

Including women. Big Max had a dozen delectable doxies stashed all over town. Right now, his favorite was Gina, a willowy blonde with pulse-speeding architecture and ardor to match. The chief had been giving her the big play steadily. Nobody wondered why.

But when Frankie parked before Gina's apartment building, Big Max kept his seat, looked at me soberly.

"You hear anything about this chick?"

"Anything...?"

"Talk. Rumors."

"I don't follow you," I said.

He flicked his gaze to Frankie.

"How about you?"

"Jeez, chief, I don't know—"

Big Max's pudgy palm sliced air. "Neither do I," he said shortly.

"But I hear some buzz she's branching out. That maybe there's a couple extra keys in circulation."

Frankie said quickly: "Lousy little tramp."

I shook my head. "She wouldn't be that stupid."

"Maybe not." Big Max bit into the cigar hard. "But I want her told no babe suckers me. I want her told real good."

Frankie's dark eyes glittered as he followed the script. "Sure, chief. I'll tell her!"

Fawning creep. I'd seen him covertly eyeing Gina, knew he'd give a month's pay for a night with her.

Big Max spat out a shred of tobacco. "Not you, Frankie," he said. "Gil."

Frankie didn't like it; his eyes were stony as they moved from the chief to me. I did like it. Thought of Gina's versatility triggered a tenuous idea at the back of my mind.

I got out of the car. "How bad?" I asked.

Big Max smiled without humor. "Don't break anything. But make sure she gets the message." He flipped on the dome light, opened an evening tabloid. "Fifteen minutes."

Frankie was still glaring at me. I told Big Max: "Fifteen it'll be." Then—with that idea growing stronger—I went up to Gina's apartment.

She answered the buzzer wearing



a moist smile and a flimsy negligee. The smile changed subtly when she recognized me. "Gil. I thought—"

"The chief's down in the car," I said, easing inside. "He wanted me to see you night."

"You . . .?"

"Yeah," I said. "You know my specialty."

A glimmer of apprehension danced in her green eyes. She forced a throaty laugh. "Don't . . . kid me, Gil."

I frowned. "You're not too smart, honey. Big Max's caught up with your off-schedule frolics. They irritate him. He wants me to tell you how much."

"N-no!" Gina knew the plot now. She backed away from me. "He's wrong!"

"He don't think so."

"Please!" The negligee gaped but Gina ignored it as she faced me, lips trembling.

"So maybe I did play a little! You think a girl can take just him all the time! Fat, hulking slob—"

I suddenly grinned at her. I realized now I'd been nursing that idea for weeks.

"That's not what I think kid," I said.

She didn't get it at first. When she did, her eyes widened in disbelief, then clouded uncertainly. "You . . . mean . . .?"

"I could forget what Big Max wants."

Gina's mouth quirked. Abruptly, she flung herself against me, press-

ing hard, hair tossing into my face. "I'll make it up to you, Gil Honest—"

I found her lips. "Sure you will, baby," I muttered.

I felt high when I went back to the car—with an extra key in my pocket. I'd get a real charge, making time with Big Max's favorite filly. Fawning Frankie didn't have the guts but I did. I'd told Gina to plaster her cheek with a strip of adhesive for a day or so to make it look good.

Big Max folded the tabloid as I got in. "Well?"

I smiled, blew on my fist. "Like you wanted, she got the message."

He chuckled, moved to switch off the dome light when Frankie said, "Hold it, chief."

Big Max stayed his hand. Frankie was eyeing me hard. "You really laid it on?"

I met his gaze. "I just said so."

"Slapped her good, huh?"

"Look—"

Big Max cut me short, gave Frankie a quizzical look. "What's bugging you?"

"Him, chief. He works the chick over but don't even muss his tie. No sweat. No scratches."

My pulse picked me up a beat. I said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Frankie ignored me. "Real smooth, chief," he went on. "Maybe too smooth. Maybe Gil's getting ideas. You ever see him look at Gina?"



I swore. "You lying—"

Big Max gripped my arm, narrowed eyes probing my face. Then he told Frankie: "Check it."

My armpits went cold. "What the hell, boss—"

"Check it."

"Sure thing!" Frankie shot me a nasty grin, slipped from behind the wheel. As he entered the apartment building, a sour ball surged into my throat. When the punk saw Gina without a mark—

Big Max kept watching me. "You sick, Gil?"

"That's screwy, chief—"

"All at once, you're sweating..."

I didn't answer. There was nothing I could say or do. A break was out. Big Max's grip was still tight; his bulk would pinion me at the first move. I could only sit there, guts queasy, temples pounding, wait for Frankie's return.

Five minutes passed. Ten. Then Frankie came back. He wasn't grinning, showed no satisfaction as he climbed into the car.

Big Max's fingers bit into my biceps. "So?"

Frankie shrugged. "I was wrong. He lumped her good."

My stomach eased, knotted again as bitter realization flooded in. Big Max smiled coldly. "That makes me feel better." He released my arm. "You know how it is, Gil."

I took a deep breath. "Sure, boss," I said. "Forget it." I had to force my voice even. Because there was

a reason—a damned good reason—for Frankie's lie.

Frankie brought it into the open when we got back to the club, parked behind the kitchen. Big Max went on ahead, but Frankie made no move to tag him. Instead, he sauntered along with me, slack lips twitching.

"Still figure on moving in solid?"

"That's right."

"Easing me out?"

"You know it."

He shook his head, nasty grin back. "Not now. Not after the chief hears about tonight's caper, guesses why. You're through, man."

I fired a cigarette, flicked the match at him. "You should've blown the whistle back at the apartment. You think he'll buy it next week?"

Frankie spat. "He'll buy—when I'm ready. The chick'll help me sell." He quickened his stride, left me.

Inside the club, I caught a gin and tonic at the bar, thoughts churning. Yeah, I read Frankie like a book. Hating my guts, he was going to make me sweat, cat-and-mouse me. Until he was ready. Until he slapped the truth out of Gina in front of Big Max, tore me down—

Only I wasn't waiting. If Big Max should see Gina later tonight—I could bring her down to the club on some excuse—see her really lumped, it would be Frankie's word against mine. And I'd already shaded him plenty with the chief.



Sure, I'd have to work over Gina—it'd really look good, now—but that couldn't be helped. The babe would go along when I explained the foul-up. I'd make her go along.

Big Max wasn't in sight. Neither was Frankie. I drained my glass, quietly left the club, got my own heap. There wasn't much traffic; I made Gina's apartment in fifteen minutes.

I didn't ring, just let myself in—and froze. Still in negligee, Gina lay on her back in the middle of the living room, gorgeous legs asprawl, green eyes staring sightlessly.

I moved into the room slowly, knelt, a tiny tocsin echoing in my brain. Gina was dead, her right temple a crimson mess.

Abruptly, the tocsin keened shrilly. I knew, the whole damned script. I'd read Frankie—but wrong.

He'd killed Gina; discovering I hadn't beaten her, he'd thought fast and shrewd, beaten her himself, kicking her head in. Then he'd gone on with his act, suckered me back to the apartment. I'd played the whole stacked hand—perfectly. By now, Frankie had told Big Max the truth. And Big Max, as payoff for my caper, would let me fry—

"Hold it, mister. Right there."

My heart lurched. That would be cops, with Frankie's anonymous phoned tip about a disturbance in the apartment perfectly timed—

I sprang up, whirled. There were two of them, grim-faced, advancing from the open door. My brain exploded; I lunged, tried to fight past, but hard knuckles rocked my jaw and I went down, yelling it was all a frame. But even then I knew nobody would believe me.

Nobody did.



**RING THE BELL  
FOR  
MENTAL HEALTH  
GIVE!**



*His senses were painfully alert. He tried to signal. But he could not move, could not blink an eyelash, could not even breathe . . . as the embalmer approached with his scalpel.*

**BY  
BOB  
BRISTOW**

## **DEAD ON ARRIVAL**

**S***o this was death.* He tried to move his hands, to touch his face. They remained motionless, dead.

His mind became clear by degrees, like focusing a camera on a close object, fuzzy and distorted at first, growing more defined. He was aware of the white sheet over his head. Or was this the inside of the casket?

Was this the purgatory, the in-between, the waiting period? He





did not know. He tried to close his eyes, but found he was unable to.

He had been working on the platform above the street, washing windows in the only large building in town. How did it happen? Laboriously he turned back the time. He and Albert Swartz were on the suspended platform working on the seventh floor windows. He was telling Albert that they might drive up for a ballgame next week if things were quiet. Albert said he'd like that. They made a nice threesome, he and his wife, Jeanette, and Albert Swartz.

Zack tried to smile at the irony of it all, but his mouth was dead. He wondered how long Albert had been making a play for Jeanette. Strange, he hadn't even suspected. Zack wanted to laugh. *It's always the poor little guy you try to help that sticks it in you.*

He remembered Albert Swartz, a thin, dark-eyed man who needed a shave in the worst way that day six months ago.

"How about a job? I can wash them windows," Albert had said.

Zack looked him over. Albert was only five feet four inches tall and he probably didn't weigh one hundred thirty. The kid's hands were shaking so badly he put them in his pockets.

"Yeah . . . you got the shakes so bad you'd fall off the platform the first day. How long you been sober?" Zack asked.

"Four days," Albert answered.

"You're at the worst of it," Zack had said. He knew that if somebody didn't give the kid a break, he'd roll a drunk and hit the bottle again. Not that he was running a one-man salvation army, but what the hell? The kid needed a break.

"I'll put it this way," Zack said studying Albert's anxious face carefully. "I got a room tacked on the back of the house. I'll let you stay there. My wife will cook for you. And you work for me. Only one thing."

The kid had been almost begging.

"One drunk. That's all. Just pull one drunk and you're out on your lousy ear. I mean it. And don't think you can nurse it along and fool me. I used to heist the bottle a little myself. So you're in if you stay sober and work."

It had been that way. *The kid.* Why did he always think of him as a kid? Perhaps it was just a feeling because Albert Swartz was thirty-three, just six years younger than himself. But the kid did all right. Sure he slipped once. He had been working for six weeks and when he got his pay, he walked uptown for a beer, one beer. He ended up flat on his face. Zack had gone after him. He didn't fire Albert like he had promised. *After all, the guy's had a tough row to hoe. One slip. That's no so bad.*

Zack felt a dullness at the back of his neck. He tried again to move,



but it was useless. When you're dead, you're just dead.

He had been ready to start washing that window up on the seventh floor. He remembered he heard a click. He frowned and turned in time to see his safety belt fall loose. The snap had been opened. He shrugged, still not suspecting.

"How do you like that? I was just . . ." And then he saw the look in Albert's eyes. The windows they were washing belonged to an empty office. No witnesses. It was late in the afternoon. The streets were nearly deserted. "Albert, are you crazy?" he asked, groping for the safety snap.

"Yeah . . . and from now on, I'm gonna keep your wife warm on those cold nights."

Suddenly Albert's arm shot out, knocking Zack off balance. As he went over the side, he grabbed for the floor of the platform. He got one hand on it, seeing the concrete sidewalk below, so far below.

Then his hand slipped as he swung and he fell. But he didn't hit the concrete down there. When he fell, he had swung directly over the windows of the offices on the fifth floor, the ones with the big electric air conditioners that stuck out like a ledge, nearly three feet wide. He heard Albert cry out above him, then felt his body smash against the air conditioners, felt his face turn soft in that instant. The black cloud crept over him. He heard, in the growing darkness, the

scream of a woman on the street below. For a moment he thought he was going to slip off the narrow ledge. He was slipping away slowly.

Then he felt a strong hand take hold of his belt and draw him closer. "Call an ambulance," the voice said. Zack thought it must have been the big bald guy at the insurance agency. "I'll lay him down here," the voice said.

And then the voice faded away. Zack Rogers was dead.

Now he thought of it, remembered it over and over again. Why would Albert think he could get to first base with Jeanette? She had never given him any reason to believe she was interested. And Albert was a kind of cheap show-off, except on him it was funny. You felt sorry for him. Zack and Jeanette had talked about how comical Albert was when he was around women, like he was really scared to death of them.

Zack heard a door open, heard a voice. It seemed very far away at first.

"Please, Doctor . . . I can't remove the body to the Funeral Home until you sign the death release."

"Get some other doctor. I'm due in surgery. It happens to be an emergency."

"There isn't any other doctor in the hospital now. If you don't sign it, the poor guy's wife has got to wait until . . ."

"I'll look at him," the doctor said grudgingly.



Zack tried to rationalize these things, when suddenly a hand swept the sheet away from his head and he saw them, a small, fat little doctor with a stethoscope, and beside him a tall, very dark haired ambulance attendant. The doctor put the stethoscope to his ears and began to listen. Zack could not feel the stethoscope against his chest. Then he knew! *He wasn't really dead.*

He couldn't move, but somehow he was alive. He tried to cry out, tried to shout with relief. He could make no sound. He tried desperately to move, sending mental signals to every part of his body. It was hopeless.

It occurred to Zack that if he could not communicate with them, he would end up staring at the embalming machine, and . . . it was a hideous thought. But there was a chance. If he was alive, his heart would be beating. The doctor would hear it.

The doctor's thumb shoved his eyes open wider. He stared at the doctor, pleadingly. A final time the doctor placed the stethoscope against his chest. *Please, God. Let my heart beat. Please let him hear it.*

The doctor slipped the stethoscope on a hook in the emergency room. "He's dead," he said. "You have the papers?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Well, hurry. I told you I'm supposed to be in surgery.

"Here they are, doctor."

Zack watched the doctor sign the death papers, unable to move or speak.

The doctor opened the door. As he left, Zack saw his wife burst into the room, her face stained with tears, her eyes reflecting the shock of being told her husband had fallen to his death. She came to his side and took his hand and held it between her own, kissed it, and pressed it against her face, sobbing uncontrollably.

When his hand was open, against her face, he tried desperately to move his fingers. Jeanette would notice . . . but he couldn't. She hovered over him, beautiful, young.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Rogers," the attendant said.

She turned away slowly, moving toward the door. Zack watched her. He saw the pretty dark hair, the graceful shoulders, the full firm breasts and trim waist. The door opened. Albert Swartz stood there, still wearing his work clothes.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said to Jeanette, and he slipped his arm around her for support.

Zack felt an anger. But the anger died quickly because it did no good to hate. Albert was a sick man. Someday Albert would want to marry Jeanette. He'd never be able to understand why Jeanette turned him away. No . . . the little guy would never get anywhere with her, but he had damn sure fouled it up for Jeanette and for himself.

Zack saw the cover sliding over



his head again, and realized that he was being loaded into the ambulance.

Zack kept trying to move. Anything to keep them from jabbing him with that formaldehyde needle. When they did that, he was finished for sure.

Why? Why couldn't he move? He tried to think. He remembered that time the child had fallen off the high diving board down at the pool and cracked his head against the cement. They thought he was dead too, but it took a long time before the doctor could decide and luckily the kid had moved an arm.

Or those cases of electric shock, when they give artificial respiration for hours and sometimes the guy comes out of it. You couldn't tell he was alive at all until he gasped for a deep breath of air. Zack knew that he was breathing, knew that his heart was pumping, but at such a depressed rate that it escaped the detection of the doctor, perhaps because the doctor was in too big a hurry to get upstairs to surgery.

The hairy armed attendant removed the sheet and rolled Zack, none too gently, over onto the table. Zack saw the formaldehyde tank, the pump and hoses. He was at the funeral home, to be prepared for burial. The thought was filled with horror.

The attendant arranged Zack with his arms beside his body, and placed his head in the rubber block. Then, leaving him naked on the

table, the attendant gestured to someone out of Zack's line of vision. "Brought you some meat, Jake," the attendant said crudely.

The man merely grunted and the attendant left. In a few moments an old man walked to his side. He was a short, gnome like creature with half inch white whiskers standing out over his face. He looked to be about sixty. This was, Zack assumed, the embalmer. The old man was chewing on a ham sandwich, holding a glass of milk shakily in his hand. As he chewed, he looked down at Zack.

*Move! For God's sake, move. I've got to. Anything.*

To his surprise, the old man began talking to him between bites of the sandwich.

"Zack Rogers. Hell, I know you. You're the crazy fella that gets up on them platforms and washes them windows. I figured I'd sank my teeth into you 'fore this."

*You've got to try,* Zack told himself. And he did. Everytime the old man looked at him he tried desperately to move and speak. He could not. He simply could not do it.

"Well, fella, you sure give me a job. That nose is crooked and I got to do some repair on the face. You plain clobbered the hell outa yourself."

Zack heard old Jake lock the door. Then he opened a cabinet at Zack's feet. He took a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet and poured a water glass half full.



"You want a drink, Zack?" the old man asked. Zack felt like crying, but he couldn't do that either. He watched the old man sip the whiskey.

"You wasn't a bad lookin' guy. Big and tough and mean-lookin' like, but handsome. I'll bet there's many a woman back down the years that will be sorry you got yours." The old man laughed obscenely.

"Yessir . . . I'll bet you known many a girl turn into womanhood." Then sourly, "But that don't help you none now."

The old man took a deep drink.

"Well . . . I guess we might's well get on with it."

Zack saw him bring the lather and brush and razor. He was going to be shaved. He'd read that once but he didn't really know if they did it.

The old man lathered his face. Zack prayed that the razor would cut him, make the blood flow. Anything to show he was alive. The razor moved smoothly across his face.

"You sure did die and leave a nice lookin' woman. I always did say that Jeanette Rogers was the best lookin' hunk . . ." The telephone rang.

"All right," Jake said, deliberately taking a drink of the whiskey before answering. He moved beyond Zack's vision. "Hello." Zack listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Molly, I told you not to call me

down here when I'm workin'. I got a body on the table and you . . . *a pause* . . . Zack Rogers, the guy fell off that platform like I knew he would . . . *a pause* . . . I'll be home when I git done. That's if I still feel like it. I don't aim to have you yellin' at me all night. If you plan on that, I'll just stay here . . . *a pause* . . . well . . . I'll be up when I'm done." And he hung up the phone.

When he returned into Zack's line of vision, he bit off a chew of plug tobacco and finished the glass of whiskey, grimacing.

The old man continued to shave Zack's face. This done, he took soap and water and washed Zack's entire body, letting the water drain at the end of the table where it fell into a large basin, down to the drainage lines. When he was finished, the old man dried him carefully.

"Yessir . . . that wife of yours is a hot little number. I usta know a babe like that . . . wonder what ever became of her . . .?"

Zack had a terrible feeling of impending disaster. He knew it would not be long, not now. Old Jake studied his face.

"Folks never break their damned feet where it don't show. They always got to mess up the face, and Zack, you sure done that all right."

Zack watched him select some tools from the cabinet, pausing to take a quick nip from the bottle.

"I'll fix your head first. Might's



well get your jaw set before the rest."

A U-shaped instrument was placed beneath his jaw, pressing down at the base of his neck. The other end was fitted under his chin and the old man tightened a screw that seemed to press his jaws tight together. This done, Zack's teeth were solid against one another. He could no longer get air from his mouth, if that was how he had been breathing. He did not know.

"Now I'll make you up," the old man said. "I'll make you look like you just stepped out of one of them magazines. Sure do have a lousy bruise on your face there, boy. You musta hit like a ton a bricks."

Old Jake spread the cream and smoothed it gently on his face.

"You'll look more alive than most of the bastards what comes to look at you at the funeral." The old man laughed.

Time was running out. In moments Jake would make the incision, drain all of the blood in his body, and replace it with three gallons of formaldehyde. Once that tube was placed in his artery, it was over. Zack watched the old man dry his hands, removing the excess cream.

"Now that's pretty. That sure is."

The embalmer moved a white instrument tray close and held the scalpel to the light. Then he turned on the pump that would flush the blood from Zack's body. It was

working fine. Zack thought a final prayer.

"I don't know," the old man said, "if your nose was broke like that before . . . or if you broke it in the fall. Maybe I'd better find out."

The embalmer moved away. Occasionally Zack got some of the odor of the formaldehyde into his lungs.

"Hello . . ." the old man said. "Mrs. Rogers, if you don't mind . . . *a pause* . . . By God, I know he's dead, he's right here. I want to ask her about . . . that's better." The old man covered the phone. "You gotta speak your piece in this world . . ." Then amused, winked at Zack. "You remember that, Zack."

"Mrs. Rogers . . . was your husband's nose broke before . . . *a pause* . . . Yes'm . . . well, I'll take care of it. Sure sorry to hear about Zack. Yes, ma'am. You just rest and take it easy," the old man said kindly.

When he hung up the phone, he returned to the table.

"Well, Zack . . . I got to set your nose. It wasn't broke before the fall and folks would notice if I didn't fix it. By the way . . . I'll bet that wife of yours was a furnace under the covers."

Zack knew time was running out. In a few minutes it would be done and then nobody would ever know.

"Might as well set them eyes while I'm at it," old Jake said. He applied a thick cream to the upper and lower lids of his eyes. The old



man pressed the lids together. It was a world of darkness now. Zack tried to open his eyes, but it was impossible. He heard only sounds and these the sounds of a man about to send him to eternity.

"We're 'about done now, son. I'll just pack that nose so it won't look broke so bad."

Zack felt a probe moving inside his nose, felt the nostril packed tightly with cotton. For an instant silence. *I felt it*, Zack thought, aware of the sensation inside his nostril.

"That looks all right. Now the other side."

Zack knew that the instant the embalmer packed the other nostril, his air supply would be shut off. He lay on the edge of the great precipice that separates the living and the dead, and yet, in a way Zack Rogers had already crossed over.

Zack felt the probe at his free nostril. He felt it moving far up. It would be over. It was now. All hope was gone. Zack Rogers waited helplessly for the hand of death.

For an instant he felt the tingling sensation of the probe inside his nostril. Then the tingling reached the center of his brain to some live and functioning nerve. His body contorted and he sucked in air, and then exploded it from his lungs in a loud and violent sneeze.

When he sneezed, he felt a sudden dizziness, as though the pressure had released the nerves of his body from the block caused by his

fall. Suddenly his hands began to feel new warmth. He moved his hand quickly to his eyes and pulled them open, freeing them from the thick jelly-like cream.

He looked at the old man, for the first time able to turn his head and eyes.

"Damn you!" the old man said breathlessly, pressing his body against the far wall, "You dirty no good son-a-bitch. Zack, you dirty son-a..."

Zack heard his own voice . . . "Call a doctor, please."

The old man moved across the room and screamed at the operator as though she were stone deaf, and his chest heaved as he gulped in air. "Git me a doctor. Damn you woman, hurry!

Zack leaned his head against the rubber block, as it had been before. In moments the old man was standing over him, the bottle in his hand, and he drank liberally from it. "You come within a minute of being in hell, Zack Rogers."

Zack smiled, feeling the stiffness of the burial cream on his face.

The doctor arrived from the hospital very quickly. He checked Zack over carefully.

"What happened, Doc?"

"You have a brain injury. For a time the voluntary nervous . . ." The doctor paused. "The pressure on the brain set up a block that suppressed all normal . . ." Then he laughed. "You're going to be all right. But we'll have to keep you



under observation. I'll explain the details to you later."

"Does my wife know?" Zack asked.

"No," the doctor shook his head.

"I'll call her," Zack said.

The doctor shook his head. "I wouldn't. I'll go out there and give her a sedative. When she is under sedation, I'll tell her. This is a terrible shock."

"All right . . . could I make another call?"

"Well . . ."

"To Albert Swartz. He lives in the back of my place. The number is Victor 4-4982."

The doctor dialed the number, then handed the phone down to Zack. As the number buzzed, Zack considered all the things he could do. He could have Albert jailed on attempted murder and perhaps a few other counts. But as he took a deep breath, he thought that it was good to be alive . . . so good.

"Hello," Albert said.

"Hello, Albert . . ."

Albert's voice was suddenly strained. "Who . . . who . . .?"

"This is Zack Rogers."

Zack heard a gasp.

"Yeah, Albert, I wasn't dead."

"I saw you . . . they took you . . ."

The voice was knotted in terror.

"Get out of town, Albert," Zack said. "I don't want to ever see you again. I'm letting you off easy. You know that."

"Sure . . . yes, Zack. It was an accident. I didn't mean to . . ."

"Out of town, Albert. Just get out! Tonight."

"Okay," Albert said. Zack heard him sobbing as he hung up the phone.

"All right, Doc . . . take me back to the hospital. Not many guys make this trip back, do they?"

As they loaded Zack into the ambulance, he turned and faced the old man.

"I heard all you said," he said, "all about my wife."

The old man had had about all he could stand. He lifted the bottle a final time until it was empty.

"Zack, I didn't mean no disrespect. I just said your wife was . . . was . . ."

Zack winked, forgetting the cream that the embalmer had put on his eyes and they stuck together. As the ambulance started away, he pulled his eyes free again and watched the stars from the ambulance window.





# THE RETURN OF JOEY DINO



*The night was split open with the roar of tommy guns. Four men stood framed in the window, flame from their bursting guns pointing toward the street below. Shouts and screams answered their fire and the men fell back, laughing.*

*A Novelette*

BY  
**ELWOOD CORLEY**

FOR SEVERAL years I was a self-appointed protege of one of the biggest gangsters in the country. His name was Joey Dino. He was a cold blooded, ruthless murderer. His skill and grim determination to forge ahead along the road of crime made him one of the most powerful

men in the country. I was a kid on the lower east side and Joey Dino was my hero. I knew Joey Dino well. Used to sit and listen to him give instructions for murder, robberies, smuggling, prostitution, anything and everything.

Dino didn't mind having me



around but no matter how hard I tried I could never get in on any of the jobs. I was just the kid that Dino laughed at. The kid Dino passed a couple of bucks to now and then. And I was there when they took Dino away. And because I'd never learned my trade in crime I had to go legit.

Now, thanks to Dino, I got a grocery store that nets a nice comfortable living, a wife, Tina, and a child on the way. I'd almost forgotten Joey Dino after all the years.

One evening after closing the store, I left Tina upstairs while I went below to get fresh supplies for the shelves. We had extra help Friday and Saturdays. Herbert and Andy to package, two more checkers to help Gloria, and Roy and Ernie to stock the shelves and help out in produce and meats. But through the week we worked it with Hal in produce, Mac in meats, and Gloria checking, with Tina in the office and me filling in where ever I was needed. So the shelves sometimes got behind. But since we had a five room apartment right over the supermarket, I usually stayed down after closing and knocked around filling shelves and doing things anyway.

I had thrown four cases of June peas up and was bringing up a case of prune juice when I saw the man talking to Tina. He couldn't be a customer because the store was closed for the night. We didn't have many friends, not because we were

anti-social or anything but because the business took so much of our time. And because my wife, Tina, and I were still very much in love and there just wasn't much time for anything else.

Both of them had their backs towards me, but I could see Tina talking away, pointing out different parts of the store. I don't know what made me have a twinge, a pang in my chest. But I did. Perhaps it was seeing Tina talking to another man, totally lost in conversation without me. Anyway, I set the case of prune juice down with a loud thud. Both of them turned and looked at me.

"Johnny," Tina said, "... here's an old friend of yours who knows you from way back. I've been trying to dig up some of your dark dirty past." She laughed.

He just looked at me with a small smile playing at one corner of his mouth. He had lost weight. His face was thinner. There was more white in his hair. But otherwise he was the same. I wiped my hands on my apron and stuck it out.

"Dino."

"Johnny! Johnny boy, it's great to see you, kid. Really great."

"You look the same, Dino."

"You're a dirty liar. I look like he . . . the original sad sack. I'm getting old, Johnny. I'm an old man. Look at you, you're a grown man now. You were just a kid when I left. Now you're grown and



raising a family and running a big supermarket."

I pulled Tina close to me.

"It's been ten years," I said.

"Ten years," he said as if he was trying to look back over them. You noticed the lines from the corners of his eyes when he was serious. "A lot of things change in ten years."

"Yes, Dino," I said a little pointed, "a lot of things change in ten years."

"All but one," Dino said smiling it up again. "Friends. Friends are like the vino, the older they get the more mellow they become. Your wife, she's Italian. She knows what I'm talking about, right Tina?"

"I'm Italian," Tina laughed, "but I've never been to Italy. Maybe someday Johnny will take me. But speaking of good things, I am going to make some of the best spaghetti and meat sauce on either side of the ocean. Will you be staying, Mr. Dino?"

"The Mexican Army couldn't move me."

"Maybe Johnny will dig up some of the good vino." Tina squeezed my hand, and, as if on a second thought, kissed me. Then she left. I watched her leave with the slight waddle she had acquired with the weight of the baby. Dino had made her like him just that quick. He could do that when he wanted to. He hadn't changed.

"Tina tells me you have expanded

the store three times in ten years," he said.

I nodded.

"I arranged with Frank Cousa to freeze the partner's split at \$1,000 each a month to allow for expansion. The surplus is either re-invested or saved for emergencies. We were able to spread out and also buy the land out back for added parking space. Without parking space you're dead."

"You got a real head on you, Johnny. When I pick a man for a job, he's the only man who can get the job done. You say you clear better than \$2,000 a month? Grocery's not a bad line."

"People got to eat."

Dino's expression changed.

"How's my baby?"

"You mean your young lady, now. She's fifteen."

"Is she pretty?"

"Beautiful."

"She has to be. Her mother was a dream."

I nodded. Dino looked very old at that moment. But he came to life again immediately.

"She still doesn't know about me."

"She doesn't know."

"She thinks the money comes from a trust."

"Yes."

"And that her father is dead."

I nodded.

His hands went to his face and he shook his head.

"Johnny, you don't know, I'd give



anything in the world if I could go to her—hear her call me Papa.”

I held my breath a moment.

“Why don’t you do that, Dino?”

“Are you nuts?”

“It would make everything so simple, Dino. I know she would go anywhere in the world to be near you if she knew you were alive. She’s sweet and good like her mother. She . . .”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear anymore about it.” Then he calmed down and spoke more to himself than to me. “She doesn’t have to live with the name, the scar of being Joey Dino’s daughter. Her mother was right about changing her name, taking her away. You know her mother, Anna, wouldn’t have any of my money? Called it dirt money. Blood money.” He shook his head. “No wonder we didn’t make it. But she was right about Marie. Now she can walk with her head up high, proud. She can marry anybody’s son. And with a grand a month, she doesn’t have to beg.” He shrugged and grinned. “I just wanted to talk about her a little. I knew everything you told me before I walked in here. I talked with Frank Cousa. And . . . I even went across town where she lives and stood outside this morning to get a look at her.”

I got one of the cases of peas and opened it. I began putting the cans on the shelves.

“You didn’t come to find out about Marie,” I said. I turned and

looked squarely at him. “Why did you come back?”

“Johnny! Johnny! Is that the way to talk to an old friend? A man gets old he gets sentimental. He wants to see his old friends.”

“Let’s not kid around, Dino,” I said. “You’ve done a ten year stretch. Your empire is busted up. Your top men, Angelo, Nevis, Sam, —scattered to the four winds. The only thing you have left here is your daughter Marie and you won’t make yourself known to her. Now what is it, Dino? Straight from the shoulder.”

He stared at me a moment, as if measuring my capacity.

“Alright, Johnny. Straight from the shoulder. A heist.”

“A what?”

“Don’t you hear well anymore? A heist?”

We could hear the traffic moving. Tina crossed the floor upstairs. A subway train roared by underground.

“Me, what do you want from me?”

Dino burst out laughing. I almost thought he had said it for a joke. Then he put a hand above his head and one far below his chin and brought his laughing to a coughing stop. “Kid, honest . . . your face is this long.” He laughed again. “You ought to be laughing too, kid. Don’t you remember how in the old days you were always trying to get in the mob? You used to hang around and hang around all the



time. We couldn't get rid of you. We'd chase you. We'd tell you that you'd bring the cops down on us, a kid your age hanging around the club. But you just wouldn't stay away. . . ."

"I don't want in now, Dino," I said. "I am straight and I . . ."

". . . You were hanging around the club the day Anna left me. You remember that day, kid, I know. Whatever else you have forgotten, you remember that day," Dino laughed affably. "I gave a champagne party at high noon. Just six dames and me. Anna was on her way back to Italy with Marie. She had refused any of my 'dirty blood money.' I didn't care about her at the moment. But I wanted to do something for my kid. So I told Frank Cousa to draw \$15,000, buy out a little grocery store and let you run it. It was partly a gag and partly a way of getting you out of my hair. I really figured to buy a big going business, legit, in Marie's name and let Frank Cousa run it. But you know how it is when you got plenty of everything. You don't get around to do a lot of things because one day is as good for doing it as the next.

"You weren't fifteen then. But I hurt your feelings. You were insulted. You wanted to get into the mob, gun men down, wear tailor-made suits and pal with Angie, Nevis and Sam. I had to talk real sincere with you. I had to explain that the job was only temporary,

that you'd be doing me a big favor and that as soon as you showed you could handle that job, I had bigger things lined up for you.

"I kept you straight, kid. Your hands never got dirty. I . . ."

"I appreciate what you did, Dino. Really I do. But . . ."

". . . How was I to know that some day you'd be able to do the same for me? One heist and I can go straight now."

Again we could hear the traffic.

"One heist?"

"Just one, Johnny. All I need is a pile to get started legit."

"How much do you need, Dino . . . to start off legit?" A new hope rose up in me.

"A hundred grand."

"A hundred grand?"

"You can't reach it, kid," he said. "But I know where we can."

"Dino," I pleaded. "Take my half of the store. I'll run it for you. Right now I run it for \$100 a week above the dividend. You take the dividend and I'll keep running it for the \$100."

"Joey Dino, a grocery man? That's rich, kid, real rich."

"No. The heist is the only way."

"Believe me, kid, if there was another way, I'd take it. That 10 years in stir taught me something."

That night Tina fairly glowed in the dark. Dino had made himself a rousing success. He clowned. He talked about Italy and he praised her cooking. He talked about the bambino coming and he



fabricated an exciting past for the ten year stretch he did. He was a gifted liar and he did it with ease and amusement.

Sitting there looking at him, knowing that he knew I knew he was lying, I was perhaps more spell-bound than Tina in her naiveté. I was too overwhelmed to say anything. When he finally left, the place seemed quiet and deserted.

In bed Tina wanted to talk. I pretended I was sleepy. But half an hour later Tina knew I hadn't gone to sleep and she tried to find out why I was keeping her out.

I wanted to talk. I wanted to start from the beginning, from the first time I saw Joey Dino and tell her everything. I had often wanted to do that, but never so much as that night. Tina didn't know anything about that part of my life. I had been running the store eight years when I met her. Dino had served eight years in the pen, and the few strings that had tied me to my past seemed so flayed that I never expected them to be put together again.

The ironic part of it was, if I had told her about the past before, before Dino returned, it would have been something remote, a thing with no real anchor in reality and would have changed absolutely nothing. But now I couldn't tell her because the past had suddenly come alive and linked up with the present and the future.

But that night I remembered.

I remembered Anna Dino, tall and beautiful. She had an olive complexion, and I could still see her in a white pleated sailor skirt outfit with those quick movements of hers. She was a high spirited person and she reveled boisterously with Dino, living life to the hilt. Until Marie was born. A complete change came over her then. Mentally and socially, she cut all ties with the past. She begged and argued with Dino to get out of the rackets, to buy into legit businesses. He always said it was his idea but I know it was Anna's.

Dino never heard her. She told him she was leaving but he didn't hear her then. And the day she left, he didn't believe it until the Queen Mary sailed.

None of us ever saw Anna Dino again. In less than a year she died of cancer. But she had time to get a divorce from Dino, change Marie's name from Dino to Petrola. And finally when it became apparent that she was going to die, she gave her sister specific instructions about Marie's up-bringing.

Her sister brought Marie back to America. Dino promised never to make himself known to her. But at first he lavished gifts and money on her, sending the things to her aunt. During that time, the \$1,000 a month the store brought her as half share was chicken feed because Dino would send over \$10,000 at a time.

Then the government lowered



the boom. Dino went into a protracted legal fight and finally ended up in prison. Gradually the store became Marie's sole support. She never knew that Dino, the notorious Joey Dino, was her father.

And I remembered the time that Joey Dino had only to wave a finger and a man would die, a prostitute would be beaten, a junk pusher cut from his supply, a detective put back on the beat, or a politician came running on the double. Dime a dozen punks cut each other's throats to get Joey Dino's attention. Bookies, number runners and even undertakers were Dino men.

I remembered Nevis, a cold eyed killer with a thick, twisted bottom lip. I remember the night Nevis shot a pregnant prostitute and left her drowning in her own blood. I remembered Nevis telling of the ride he gave a stoolie. Only the stoolie wasn't in the car. He was chained to the back bumper by his ankles and dragged over a dump pile, and finally left on the pile to die. This was the Nevis too who killed a well known politician because he began to get independent ideas.

And I remembered Sam, a big ox of a man with arms as strong as a bear. I remember Sam taking a man they caught trying to switch dice at one of Joey Dino's tables out to an alley. The next morning they picked up the body and counted eighteen broken bones. Sam who killed a man with his bare hands,

right in the Tombs, because there was nothing else to kill him with.

And I also remember Angelo Rastelli.

Angelo was really Joey Dino's top man. Angelo was as tough as Nevis or Sam. He was just smooth with it. And he didn't have to do dirty work. But Dino always said, if he was ever cornered, just give him Angelo, Nevis and Sam and he'd come out.

I also remembered a reed-thin hungry lawyer who came to Joey Dino begging for work. Dino took him on. And the lawyer grew fat and rich. And when Joey Dino went to prison, and his gang fled and his empire crashed around him, the lawyer stayed fat and rich and out of jail.

Yes, I remembered Joey Dino almost as well as I remembered my father, because my father was a Joey Dino punk and he taught me that the greatest job I could get was to become a Joey Dino man.

I remembered all those things, things long buried. But I could not tell them to Tina. Not now. Not after the impression he had made. There would be no reason for bringing them up unless I told about the heist. And I didn't intend to do that because I didn't see any way of getting out of going on it myself. And if Tina knew that. . . .

"Honey, you're not asleep. Why are you trying to pretend? Did I do something wrong tonight?"

"No. No."



"Then what's the matter?"

"Please, Tina, go to sleep. It's just one of those nights. I'm upset. Perhaps it's the excitement. I just can't sleep."

She lay quietly, but I knew that she was looking at the ceiling, going over the evening, wondering what she had done. Sometimes her innocence frightened me. I wanted to take her in my arms and crush her. I wanted to smooth her dark hair and feel the smooth line of her scalp. But I couldn't. I got up.

"Johnny?"

"I'm going for a drink."

She didn't say anything.

"I don't want to know anything about your past, darling," she once said when we were going together. "I don't want to know about the people who shared the hours and days, weeks, months and years with you before me. Let's pretend we are new people." She kissed my lips. "Our lips are just beginning, our eyes, our lives just starting at the same time, together."

Another time she said, "You will never have to account to me for anything, Johnny. You are my everything. Whatever you do . . . what can I do? I am yours."

She had no right to end up with anybody like me. And the baby. . . .

I found the bottle of wine without turning the light on. I turned the bottle up to my lips and swallowed deeply.

One heist, I told myself. Dino was just out of stir from a ten year

stretch. Would he take a chance? He had connections. Nobody will ever know. You have kept your past from Tina all this time, will one heist make the load any heavier?

You sure as heck owe it to him. You could have been, would have been, one of those who went to prison for a long stretch, or maybe even one of those who went to the graveyard on a one way trip, if Joey Dino had just said the word. If he had just let you, for you really wanted to do it. Did ten years of time cancel a debt like that? And look at the store? He gave that to you. If you had never gotten the store you would have never met Tina.

Just one heist. A fat soft set-up heist.

I thought about the baby again and I took another heavy swallow from the bottle.

The light came on.

"Johnny, please . . ." She was crying.

"Get back to bed! You hear me? Get back to bed!"

She backed out of the kitchen.

I slumped to the table and pounded my fist on it. I turned the bottle to my mouth again and didn't take it down until it was empty. Then I lay my head on the table.

"Johnny?"

I sat up. I didn't know how much later it was.

"Johnny, I won't ask you any-



thing. Please come to bed." That time I let her lead me back to bed. I didn't know when we got there.

The sun was high and Tina stood over me with a breakfast tray when I woke up. It was noon.

"I have to get my husband drunk to get him to take a day off," she said sitting on the side of the bed.

"I'm rotten."

"You're sweet."

"How's the store?"

"Nothing can be as good without you. But I think they will make out."

"I left the place in a mess. All those cases in the floor."

"Honey, you really should hire a manager and take everyday off with me."

I kissed her forehead. I finished off the orange juice but I pushed the eggs aside. Suddenly I had things to do. Important things. Out of the orgy in the dark last night had come a bright idea on how to get the money for Dino's start. I had \$35,000, in my personal account. I was probably good for another \$20,000 from the bank. The checking account had about \$15,000. That was \$70,000. And I should be able to get the other \$30,000 from Frank Cousa. If I could, Dino would have his start, and I could bury my past. I began to feel pretty good despite the dryness in my mouth and the throbbing in my head.

Frank Cousa's office was in one of those small old-fashioned build-

ings that startled you when you looked up at them because while the ground floor fitted in with the neighborhood, the second story had somehow been left behind. It was horse and buggy days architecture and you wondered why you never noticed it before.

When Frank Cousa first moved into the building, I understand, it was *the* legal building. It was located between the courthouse and the precinct and every young lawyer tried to get into it. But now the courthouse and the precinct have moved. So have most of the lawyers. But Frank Cousa stayed on. Not because he couldn't afford to move, but because he didn't have to move.

As Joey Dino's mouthpiece, Frank Cousa dealt with the top criminals of the state and some of the top men of the nation. As long as Dino was in power Cousa was raking it in with both hands. Some people say he is a millionaire, that he only continues in practice because if he closed his doors too many sleeping dogs would get up. So he stays on, must stay on as long as he lives, though he will never spend all he's made.

He handled Marie's half of the business. He had the books audited twice a year and I mailed him Marie's check twelve times a year. For that he got a small fee that hardly made it worth his while. But that was one of those sleeping dogs.



His outer office was empty. It was small and crowded. Thick law books, steel file cabinettes and work baskets full of papers made it a cluttered little place. This was a real business. I thought how stupid the saying was, "crime doesn't pay." Here was a going business, licensed by the sovereign state of New York to make and transact millions of dollars a year, walking the tight rope between the law and the lawless.

The secretary came out of Frank Cousa's office. She didn't look like she belonged in a Frank Cousa office. She had long straight brown hair and soft brown eyes. She was too thin, but her clothes were well made.

She stood with her back to the door and stared at me a moment as if she was trying to remember me.

"Yes?" She blinked.

I went up to the rail that separated her office from the waiting room.

"I'd like to see Mr. Cousa?"

She went to her desk in one of those patented secretary strides. She flipped a book, not really looking at it.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No I don't," I said. "My name is John Wade. I mail a check to this office every month from the Eastside Supermarket."

She sat down.

"Come in, Mr. Wade," she indicated the interview chair. I sat

down. She clasped her fingers and smiled.

"So you're Johnny," She smiled.

I nodded.

"I've often wondered what you were like. It is a sort of game. I handle these accounts and they are just figures and systems. They become a personality themselves but I often wonder about the person behind them. Is something wrong, Johnny? Did you wish to make an adjustment or something?"

"No, I wanted to see Mr. Cousa."

"No trouble, I hope."

I just smiled back at her.

She rang the inner office.

"Mr. Cousa, Mr. John Wade, Eastside Supermarket account, is here. Can you see him?"

"I was going out to lunch, but send him in."

She nodded.

The inner office was plush. Frank Cousa stood and extended his hand.

"Johnny."

"Frank."

"Sit down. Drink?"

I shook my head.

Frank was much heavier than he had been in the old days when he looked almost like Abe Lincoln. Now his brows were bushy and graying. His hair, though almost white was abundant and wild. He looked like John L. Lewis. But his eyes were sharp and alert.

"Well, what kind of trouble brings you here?" he said, sitting back down.

"Frank, I need some help."



"Most people who come here need help," he said.

"Money help, I need money help."

He was silent a moment. It was hard to guess a mind like his. They say he was a real sharpie. He carefully unwrapped a cigar.

"The store was in good shape the last time the books were audited. Don't tell me you are playing the ponies."

"Frank, I need \$30,000."

He didn't flinch. He didn't whistle. And he didn't look at me.

"That's a lot of money," he said working on the cigar.

"I can pay it back, Frank. Business is good. I'll pay you every month when I mail the check for my pardner."

He finished sawing the end off the cigar with the letter opener and put it in his mouth. He lit up.

"I'm down to five a day," he said. "All this talk about cancer and tobacco. I don't know if it's better to go ahead and die of cancer or hang around and die of craving a good cigar. My doctor smokes eight a day."

He got up and went to a bookcase. He ran his finger along the titles and selected one, opened it.

"When will you need this money?"

"Today . . . tomorrow . . . as soon as I can get it."

Frank puffed and flipped pages in the book.

"You want it in small bills? Tens

and twenties?" He snapped the book shut. "What kind of touch is this, Johnny? You are a good solid citizen. The store is a going business and you've got money in the bank. Who's reaching you?"

"All I ask you for is a loan, Frank. Nothing else."

"Thirty thousand, like that," he snapped his fingers. "No questions asked."

I didn't like the way he was taking it. I never knew him to try to be tough. He handled tough guys, but usually he did it quietly.

"Frank . . ."

Frank leaned over me.

"Tell me," he said, "What has Joey Dino's return got to do with you suddenly needing money?"

My sharp glance gave me away. Frank straightened up and went behind his desk. He sat down and took the cigar out of his mouth and looked at it.

"They say tobacco can filter out tars and so forth if you don't smoke them too long, that is, till they get too short. They say it's a good filtering action."

I sprang up to his desk.

"Listen, Frank. I know you don't like Dino. You never did. He took you in when shysters were two for a quarter and starving to death. He gave you work. He made a rich man out of you. He gave you everything you have; this, your home, sent your kids to college, everything!

"I know he didn't like you either.



He just took you on and made you big so he could enjoy knowing that he could break you when he wanted to. But he was good to you. He went up the river for ten years. You didn't go for a day."

"Get off my desk," he said.

I think I wanted to smash his face then. I had never liked him, perhaps because Dino didn't like him. But at that moment I think I hated him. I was a long time straightening up from the desk. He waited. When I was standing, he got up.

"Let me tell you what Joey Dino did for me," he said. "Joey Dino took away my self respect, my pride, my decency. He took a bug-eyed decent young kid looking for excitement and made the dirty filthy thing you see here today. He made me a wet nurse for killers and thieves, the go-between for a whole world of slimey social misfits.

"Wounded gunmen came to me for help in reaching unlicensed doctors. Frightened boys, recruited in prisons, came to me to make contact with the underworld. Jewels, hot money, illegally transported prostitutes and even arrangements for murder were cleared in this office. There is not a more infamous name in the state, outside of Joey Dino himself, than Frank Cousa. That's what Joey Dino did for me.

"And what did I get for it? Nothing. Not one filthy thing. Everything you see me with; this, my home, my children in college,

I had them all before I ever met Joey Dino. My father was Jimmy Minelli, millionaire junk and paper salvage man. I see you knew about him. He died heart broken over me and left his fortune to charity."

"Frank, believe me, I didn't know these things about you." And I didn't. Suddenly he took on a new dimension. It didn't make me like him any better but I did understand him a little. "But whatever happened in the past, whatever Joey Dino did, he paid for. He paid with ten years of his life. That's what the law said he should pay and he paid. Now he wants to go straight. All he needs is a chance, a start. One hundred thousand will give him that chance. Now I can get up seventy grand. If you will loan me another thirty personally, not Joey Dino, Johnny Wade, I can give him that start. If you loan *me* the money, you won't be doing anything for him. You will be doing the favor for me. He loves his daughter, Frank. He wants her to love him. If he gets a good clean start, someday he might feel worthy of letting her know who he is, that he is alive."

Frank massaged the bridge of his nose, shook his head.

"You stupid, stupid little fool. You miserable, gullible stupid idiot." He laughed without mirth. "You think Joey Dino needs money?" He shook his head. "I never confide in anyone. It's not healthy in my business. But you're



a good kid, Johnny, and I don't want to see another good kid get taken. Joey Dino has a million and a half in cash. And there's another million in Marie's name that he can get anytime he signs for it."

I don't know how long I rode around trying to make sense out of it. There was absolutely no reason for Frank Cousa to lie about Joey Dino. He had nothing to gain by telling me that Dino was a millionaire. A lie or the truth, he was putting himself on the spot. Dino had approached me for money. Frank Cousa said he didn't need it. Dino doesn't like to be called a liar even when he is lying. All I had to do was go back and wait for Joey Dino and tell him what Frank Cousa said.

But on the other hand, why would Dino tell me that he needed money when he didn't? There could be a million reasons. But a holdup. Why? Millionaires don't rob people. Not with a gun. And Joey Dino might get a charge out of conning an innocent girl like Tina into believing he was a retired businessman. And he might joke about Italy. Or about his daughter Marie. But when Joey Dino talks about a heist, somebody gets robbed. He just doesn't kid about business.

I couldn't figure it. So I decided to play it safe. As far as I was supposed to know, Dino was broke and wanted one hundred thousand

for a clean start. So that's all I knew. I had started out trying to get the money for him. I would keep on trying. I would act as if I hadn't seen Frank Cousa, hadn't heard the things I did.

I went to the bank. I arranged for a loan for all I could get. They said I could get \$25,000, and I could pick it up the next day when I brought over the papers on the store. Then I closed out my savings account, withdrawing my \$35,000. I didn't bother about the checking account because I could write out a check for the balance anytime.

I drove to the store. I put the \$35,000 in the store safe downstairs and checked with Mac, Hal and Gloria to see how things were going. Then I ran upstairs, taking two at a time. Dino had broken into a number of very lovely routines that I suddenly began to miss.

When I got upstairs I found Tina talking with some stranger. I guess I looked rather stupid, the way I stood in the doorway gawking at them, him first, then her. He was a slim wiry type man with a crew cut that made him appear younger than he was the first time you looked at him.

"Honey, this is Mr. Rothchild from the Police Department," Tina said. It was more of a question than a statement and her eyes searched mine.

"Hello, Johnny," he waved. He shook out a couple of cigarettes and



offered one to me. I waved it away and waited. He lit up.

"Call me, Arne, Johnny," he said. "Will you sit down or shall I stand up?"

I sat in a chair across from him.

"Johnny, what do you know about Joey Dino?"

"What's this all about?" I looked from Rothchild to Tina and back to Rothchild. Tina's face was blank.

"I just want you to tell me everything you know about Joey Dino," he said. He had a soft relaxed way of speaking. I suppose it was supposed to induce talking.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

I shifted. You don't talk about Joey Dino unless you know what Joey Dino wants said and then you stick strictly to the script, I knew this. But I didn't know what this cop wanted. Nor did I intend to give it to him. Not with a wife, and a baby coming. And Dino playing games about being broke.

"Suppose you tell me what this is all about," I said again.

"You know, Johnny," Rothchild leaned forward with his elbows on his knees like a guy about to give his best friend some good advice. "We don't have anything on you downtown. For all official records, you are a young successful businessman, clean cut and average. Now why would a person like that be cagey with his knowledge about Joey Dino?"

I didn't say anything, no matter

how incriminating it made it look.

"You got any good ideas why a guy like that wouldn't talk with the police?"

"Listen . . ."

"No, you listen," he said in a stronger voice. "For all official records, you're clean cut. On the surface. But when Joey Dino called on you last night all that changed and we went to digging beneath the surface. You want to know what we dug up?"

"Not really," I said.

"I'll tell you anyhow." He got up, stuffed one hand in his pants pocket and came and stood over me. "We dug up your first license for this store. You had just turned 15. Frank Cousa was your legal guardian for the deal. Frank Cousa means Joey Dino.

"We kept digging and we found that Frank Cousa is still legally your partner which means that you are still tied to Joey Dino. Now tell me, why would Joey Dino put you in business?"

"Look," I said. "Do you mind getting to the point? What is this all about?"

Tina came to me and knelt beside the chair.

"Please, Johnny, tell him anything you know," she said.

"What do I know?" I asked her.

"I know who he is," she said. "After you left today I went to Papa. Last night Mr. Dino mentioned some places in Italy I had heard Papa talk about, so I asked



about him. He told me who Mr. Dino was."

"So you know Joey Dino," I shouted. "What's he done? Why are you chasing him? He's done ten years. What do you want from him?"

"I'll tell you," Rothchild said quietly. "I'll answer your questions because we got nothing to lose by you knowing. But now I know where you are in this thing. Hear this good, now and get the sense of it. Joey Dino is going to reorganize his underworld empire. A coast to coast hook up. My job is to smash it before it gets started. At best it's a cute trick because technically nobody is guilty of anything until he steps out of line. If we wait that long with Dino, it maybe too late. Once he's back in the saddle again, a lot of heads are going to roll, a lot of blood is going to spill and a lot of lives are going to be smashed before we get him out again."

Reorganize? Impossible! That's why I knew it must be true.

"It just never occurred to you that he might want to go straight, did it?"

"Let's not crack jokes, Johnny," Rothchild said. "I know everything I need to know except what his first move will be. And I have a hunch he told you. Now how about a little cooperation? I answered your questions. Now you answer mine."

I bit a fingernail. I had to see Dino. Quick. I had to get some

answers, and not just for other people.

"Assuming that I did know something, why should I tell you? Look what happened to Arnold Schuster. How about Willie Moretti?"

Rothchild wet his lip.

"There are a lot more people killed because they didn't rely on the police than because they did."

"I am only interested in two people."

The phone rang. Tina got it.

"It's for Lt. Rothchild."

Rothchild took the phone. "Rothchild—uh huh—uh huh—uh huh," he looked at me. "I see—okay. Good. See you in a few minutes. Yes—Yes, pick me up here." He hung up. He gazed at the telephone a moment as if trying to figure out how to start again. Then he turned to me. "Alright, Johnny. This is your last chance. You going along with us or you going along with Dino? For you, there is no middle ground."

Coming the way it did, his voice sounded like doom. But I didn't panic. One thing about the cops, they have to work a certain way. Joey Dino didn't have to go by any rules. If he thought you needed a working over, he didn't have to worry about any jury deciding whether his tactics were legal or not. If he decided that your pregnant wife was too pretty, too healthy, there was no jury in the world that could stop him from



making whatever adjustments he wanted to make.

"I tell you I don't know anything," I said. "Dino stopped here on a social call. Nothing more."

"Honey, *please!* If you love me . . ."

"Alright," Rothchild said in a clipped tone. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Wade. For you and the baby." He turned to me. "That call was from my partner, Mike Kelner. We have had a tail on you since Dino left last night. He followed you to Cousa's office this afternoon, and from there to the bank. You withdrew thirty-five grand from your personal savings and made arrangements for a loan. You brought the thirty-five here and put it in your safe downstairs just before you came up."

"Johnny, why?" Tina's voice shook.

"And one more thing. Fifteen minutes after you left Frank Cousa's office, he was killed. Slashed to death. The slashes are reminiscent of the kind of work Ronny Nevis used to do."

Frank Cousa dead? Nothing was making sense anymore.

"You're out in deep water, Johnny," Rothchild continued. "And I don't have time to play with you. Out of regard for your wife and the coming baby, I am going to give you until six this evening to call me if you think of anything you want to tell me. Here's my home phone number," he gave me a card. "If you haven't called by

six I am going to have the word spread that you sang. I don't have to tell you what that means."

Then he was gone.

"Tiny, Baby . . ."

"Johnny, please don't try to explain anything. I am not the least concerned." She got up and went to the bedroom window.

"What kind of talk is that?" I said. I followed her. "What do you mean you're not concerned?"

"Should I be? I know less than anybody. You don't need me. All you need is . . . that Joey Dino." She broke down. I went to her but she wouldn't let me touch her. I let her cry awhile, get it out of her system.

After a few minutes she let me take her in my arms.

"Tina, Baby, ten years ago Joey Dino put me into business to keep me from becoming a gangster. He didn't plan it that way but that's the way it worked out. Yesterday he asked me to help him get started in a legitimate business. He needs one hundred thousand. I was trying to help him go straight the same way he helped me. I don't know anything about this reorganizing business."

She wiped her eyes. "That's all?"

I hated to lie to her. I had never lied to her except for the night before when I told her about not being able to sleep.

"That's all."

"But where would you get that



kind of money? He ought to know better than that."

"There is one other thing I'd rather you heard from me than anyone else. My partner isn't Frank Cousa as the cop said. It's Joey Dino's daughter, Marie Petrola."

"Joey Dino's daughter?"

"She's just a *kid*. Just fifteen. She was only five when the partnership was formed." I went on to tell her about Marie and how Dino fixed her with money.

"You'll have to leave for a few days, Tina. If that cop puts the word out that I squealed, things will get rough."

"But what about you?"

"I can take care of myself, if I know you are alright."

She thought about it a moment.

"I can't leave you."

"You *have* to leave. Don't you see, as long as you are here I am vulnerable."

"Where could I go? To Papa?"

"To Canada."

"To Canada?"

"Please hurry. Don't take anything except the money downstairs in the safe. And don't talk to anyone, just go."

"Johnny . . . the baby . . ."

"Please, Tina. Hurry."

She smoothed my hair and kissed me.

After Tina left I ran a hot bath. We have an old fashioned deep tub and I slid down in it till the water was up around my neck. I soaked

and tried to put some of the loose ends together.

Why had Frank Cousa been killed? The more I thought about that one the more the question inverted itself. Why had Frank Cousa been left alive so long? According to Joey Dino's code, he had been a marked man since the bust up of the mob. He must have still been useful. Why had that usefulness run out just after our talk? Had it just been a coincidence that he had been killed right after I left?

Then there was still the mystery of the heist, and this reorganization business. And the line Dino handed me about being broke. And the talk about Ronnie Nevis being in town.

And where did I fit into the picture?

The warm bath didn't have the answers. I toweled and tied the towel around my middle and went to the little bar. I poured a stiff scotch as best I could in the dark and went to the bedroom. I looked out the window. I didn't see anyone and there were very few cars in the block. But they were there, cops and Dino men. I downed half the scotch and went for the light switch.

"Don't touch that switch, sweetheart."

It took me no more than a second to realize that the voice belonged to Ronnie Nevis.

"Nevis?"

"Yes, baby?"

I couldn't think of anything else



to say. Thoughts of being slashed to death kept crowding everything else out.

"Come over here, sweetheart. It's nice here in the dark."

I moved towards his voice. I could just make out the shape of his twisted lips and the close haircut he always got.

"Canada's nice," he said.

An icy hand caught and squeezed my heart. How long had he been in the apartment?

"I was there once. There was this fellow, Al. Ran a little club upstate, only he didn't know that it belonged to Dino. One night he decides that he'll take off. That was alright. Only he took the bank account with him. Naturally he looks for the first border. I got the call to go for him. I never could stand being called at midnight. You know, it's cold and you're all shacked up for the night. But give it to them, they laid him away real nice. Canada's alright."

"Nevis..."

"We got nothing against Canada."

"My wife..."

"How should I know? She left didn't she?"

"She left."

"Like I say, we got nothing against Canada. You can go there and live till you rot of old age... after things are right here."

"Then she's safe?"

"How should I know?" Nevis

said with a dangerous edge on his voice. "We didn't stop her."

I relaxed.

"What are we going to do tonight?"

"We? Kid you ain't doing nothing. Looks like you just can't get into the mob no matter what you do. You was booked to help Dino get started by going on the heist with him, but now that's out. Like the man said, I got nothing to lose answering your questions, because where you go I go. If you go over the line to the right, I slice your right side off. If you go over the line to the left, your left side goes. And if you get all the way away, I go to Canada."

"You were here when Rothchild was here?"

"I came here straight from friend, Cousa."

"Then you know I didn't talk."

"Yes you did talk, kid. I heard you myself."

A lump lodged in my chest.

"Look, Nevis, I didn't talk. If you were here, you know I didn't."

"You did so talk," Nevis insisted. "Only you didn't tell them anything. And that's good. We like people we can trust."

I closed my eyes and sighed. I finished the scotch.

"Mind if I put on some clothes?"

"Not at all."

I dressed in the dark.

"Why does Dino want to pull a heist if he already has millions?"

"Well, it's like this, sweetheart.



Maybe you do and maybe you don't know it, but Joey Dino was once the most powerful man in the United State. More powerful than the president even. He could have a man killed, any man, anytime, anywhere, he wanted to without a jury or a trial.

"One way or another he had more people on his payroll than the governor of New York. He controlled the political machines of more big cities than you could count on both your hands. And when you added dope and policy and bookmaking and prostitution and protection, together with a few other things, you come up with an economic factor right behind General Motors and U. S. Steel.

"They broke the network up into a thousand little pieces when they smashed Dino. Right now the little pieces are lying around the nation. Five years ago, Dino began to map out his comeback. He got Cousa to line up newspapers all over the nation to announce his release when it happened. All except New York State. Cousa did a fairly good job with the hicks. But he made a mistake that I am still not sure was an error. The publicity blast was to alert all the little pieces. But if the New York papers played it up big, then the pressure would be on. Dino couldn't move freely.

"Some of the New York papers did play it up, big. Not here in the city, but upstate. That was enough to put the boys downtown on the

alert. They smelled the rat. Cousa had goofed. When he talked the way he did when you called on him, he'd had it."

"You were there then?"

Nevis laughed.

"No. Margo was planted in Cousa's office to keep tabs. She got word to Dino. The first plan was to keep me and the other top men out of town until Dino pulled the big heist. The heist was to be the signal for the little pieces to fall in line because Dino was back and open for business.

"For that job he needed unknowns. People he could work quietly with. If a flock of top men converged on the city on the heels of Dino's release, the cat would be out. But when Cousa raised the lid, I booked passage to town, fast."

I finished dressing and sat back beside Nevis in the corner of the room. I had to shake my head.

"Big stuff, eh sweetheart? Joey Dino plays it big. For the moon, he goes. He hasn't played for anything small since he shot his last game of marbles."

"When is the heist set to go off?"

"If everything went well, it's over now."

"They pulled it tonight?"

"Tonight. If it comes off okay, tomorrow we begin a new era. This time, nothing's going to smash us. There are ways."

We sat there a long time in the dark, each lost in his own thoughts.

The old mob set up again.



I lost track of time, thinking of how this was going to effect Tina, the baby and me. Nevis brought me back.

"Well there it goes, baby doll. It went off okay. We're in."

"What? How can you tell?"

"The light in the apartment across the street. The light goes out, we got company down in your cellar. Dino, Angie and Sam."

"Here?"

"Right here, kid!" There was a new voice in the room. It was Joey Dino.

"Everything went okay?" Nevis asked.

I could see Joey Dino's grin in the dark.

"Like a sewing machine," he said. He peeled off some gloves. "You can read all about it in the morning paper. By noon tomorrow the pieces of the network will be falling over each other to get to us."

"Where do you want me to set up office?" Angelo asked.

"Scala's Gym is Nevis' contact point for the coast. DeMarco's bar is Sam's contact point for the mid-west. And you handle the East from Phil's Billiard Parlor. Me, I'm going to a good hotel and take myself a bath and a shower. Then I'll get a two inch steak, rare, and go to bed and sleep for twelve hours. Angie, when I wake up, you see to it that I'm not alone."

"Right, Joey. Alright everybody, we spend the night in the cellar. Johnny, you see to it that nobody

comes down there for anything. Get us up at five. We got to get away from here..."

The doorbell rang. It startled all of us. I have never heard it ring so loud before.

"You expecting anyone?" I heard myself say.

"We got our own way of getting in," Angelo said.

"Everybody had better go downstairs."

Joey Dino took charge.

"Angie, Sam, downstairs in the store. Stay handy. Nevis, we stay here. In there," he indicated the closet.

The bell rang again.

"Sweetheart."

"Yes?"

"Watch your step, won't you?" I rushed downstairs to the door.

"Who is it?"

"Rothchild. Open up."

I played it safe and stalled for time.

"Rothchild? What's your telephone number?"

"Stop stalling, Wade and open up."

"The telephone number."

He gave it.

I opened the door then. Rothchild and his partner pushed the door in roughly as if they half expected someone besides me on the other side.

"What's going on here?"

They followed me upstairs. Rothchild called for the lights.



"What's the big secret, Wade?"

"You blow the whistle on me and then ask me that?" I said. "I am waiting for one of Joey Dino's men to come and pickle me. The least I can do is make it hard for him."

"Oh, that. I hoped to force them to make a play for you."

"Don't work too hard at it."

Rothchild's partner left the room, cautiously looking in the other rooms for stowaways.

"That's why I'm here," Rothchild said. "We have lost Dino and Nevis. And Angelo Rastelli and Sam Peligreni are in town and we don't know where they are either."

"Some protection."

"Mrs. Wade is safe, anyway."

"Tina?"

"She's down at the station house. We picked her up when we lost contact with the gang. We are holding her in protective custody. She accepted it."

"Tina's in jail? Why you . . ."

"That's right, hit me, so I can run you in. I've had just about all I can take off you. If you had co-operated things might not be like they are."

"If my wife has our baby in jail, you will hear from me, Rothchild. Just remember that. You will hear from me. Say, has that guy got a warrant to go poking around my place?"

Keltner came back into the room.

"Why? You got something to hide?"

"Yeah," I snapped. "I got Dino, Angelo, Nevis and Sam and the whole syndicate stashed away, haven't you found them yet?"

"Bright boy." Keltner went to the closet and grabbed the knob.

"Come on down to the station with us," Rothchild said. "We want to make sure you stay with the living for the time being."

"You arresting me?"

"No."

"Then, no thanks."

"What makes you so dumb and pig-headed? Joey Dino robbed a jewelry store tonight. Everybody in sight was killed. Four people. The killings were unprovoked. They just happened to be around. Nobody works like that but Joey Dino. He wouldn't hesitate to kill you. I am an authority on Joey Dino. I put him behind bars ten years ago and I came out of retirement to get him this time. And I will too."

"Perhaps Dino will arrange your retirement this time."

"Why you little punk." Keltner released the closet knob.

"Leave him alone, Mike. Maybe he deserves Joey Dino."

They went downstairs.

"Wade?"

"What?"

"Whether you like it or not, we are going to send a couple of men into your cellar."

Before I could say anything the door slammed.

Dino and Nevis came out of the closet with .45s in their hands. "Get



those shades down," Dino said, "And cut those lights."

I pulled the blinds shut. I cut the lights off.

"You should have let me take them, Dino," Nevis said. "I could have taken both of them and we could have gained some time."

"How was I to know he was going to put men in the cellar? He didn't say it until he got downstairs. But we can take care of the men in the cellar. Then we can head for another hideout I already have. They can't prove a thing on us. All we need is time."

Angelo and Sam came running up the steps two at a time. Angelo carried six .45s, four tommy-guns and four carbines. Sam was loaded with three cases of ammunition.

"I brought the stuff up from the cellar," Angelo said. "You heard Rothchild?"

"I heard him."

"How many you think they will put down there?"

"Probably two."

"Sam and me will take care of them. What about him?" Angelo nodded at me.

"I don't know," Dino said. "I honestly don't know. He's not a gangster and he's not a cop. He isn't clean and he isn't dirty. He isn't tough, but he doesn't panic. I don't know where he fits in. But he stays. We might need him." To me, he said, "Who was that fooling with that door knob?"

The cop with Rothchild."

Dino shook his head.

"He'll never know he was in the grave tonight and they were about to throw dirt in his face."

"Alright, Sam," Angelo said. "Let's move out. We got work downstairs..."

"Joey Dino! Dino!" Rothchild's voice came over a loud speaker. All of us froze.

"We know you're up there, Dino. You, Angelo Rastelli, Ronnie Nevis and Sam Peligrini. You lost us when you went to pull that job but our men found your private entrance to the store while you were gone.

"We knew you were in the closet when we were up there. Keltner can smell rats a mile away. We didn't take you then because we didn't know where Angie and Sam were. It won't do you any good to hold Wade for a hostage because we wrote him off when he wouldn't come down with us. We could have pressed him harder but we didn't want to tip you.

"Now listen. Come out quietly. Throw your guns out the window, come out one at a time with your hands on your head. You will save all of us a lot of trouble. The block is surrounded. The store is surrounded. The cellar and the store are loaded with men. You don't stand a chance. Now COME ON OUT OF THERE!"

Dino beckoned for a tommy-gun.

"You know, I always said, if I ever get cornered, just give me you



guys and I'll come out. Well this is it. And we're going out. Sam, check on the store."

Sam got one of my hats and the broom. He tiptoed downstairs, cautiously. At the bottom of the stairs you can either go out to the street or there's a door going into the store. Sam carefully opened the door going to the store. He put the hat on the broom and stuck it into the store.

Nothing happened.

Sam smiled back up at us. He started into the store. A barrage of shots greeted him. Sam fell back. He turned and ran back upstairs.

"They're there alright," he said stupidly.

"I knew I should have taken them on when they were up here," Nevis spat with disgust. He rammed a fist into his palm. "I knew it, I knew it," he said with growing vehemence. "You've been in stir too long, Dino. You've lost the touch."

"Alright, Dino," Rothchild boomed. "Turn on those lights if you intend to come out. Otherwise, we're coming after you."

"I'll take care of you later," Dino said to Nevis.

Nevis didn't back up.

"Don't wait," Nevis said. "Do it now." Ronnie Nevis was a follower, Joey Dino a leader. But there wasn't a man on earth Nevis was afraid of, including Joey Dino.

Angelo took a step toward Nevis. Sam's eyes shifted from one to the other. It was a charged moment.

Then a rifle shot rang out. Right behind it a tear gas bomb crashed through the window. Angelo dashed to it, and tossed it quickly back out the window.

"Alright!" Dino snapped. "Let's get to work."

Each of them got a tommy-gun and checked it. They lined up.

"Ready. One, two, three, go!"

All four of them charged the windows and cut loose with the tommy-guns. For a second the night was ripped with rapid shots. Then Dino called, "Ho-o-o-o," and all of them fell back, laughing.

From outside several agonized cries rang out. I sat in the darkened room stunned. At that moment I realized what a selfish fool I had been, thinking only of Tina and myself. No person, no single family unit is alone in the world. They are all one. They are all linked together by moral ties stronger than the law of self preservation.

Dino counted again.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, go!"

They charged again. Again the night was filled with shots. "Ho-o-o-o!" They withdrew. More cries filled the night.

Then the cops opened fire. They poured on a steady stream of it.

"Anybody want to chicken out?" Dino peered at his men cautiously. They were silent.

"One, two, three, four..."

I moved slowly toward one of the



carbines.

"...six, seven..."

Suddenly the cops stopped firing. The night was deathly silent.

"Papal Papa!"

"Nine..." Dino stopped counting.

"Go on," Nevis said.

"Papa. Papa. It's me, Marie. Please come out, Papa."

"Keep counting," Nevis said, coldly.

My hand was almost on the carbine.

Joey Dino rose up like a man in a trance.

"Marie..." The tommy-gun slid from his hand. He went to the window, climbed out on the ledge.

"Papa..."

"Marie... Baby..."

Ronnie Nevis' arm swung in an arch. I didn't know what he was doing until Joey Dino went rigid on the window ledge. For a moment he stood stock still. Time seemed to stand suspended. Then

slowly, like it was happening in slow motion, Dino started to fall. Only then did I see the knife sticking out of his back.

I caught up the carbine, cut loose. I kept firing at first one, then another and another and on back around again until all three forms were spread out before me on the floor, still. Nevis gave a last twitch and I emptied the carbine in him.

I turned on the lights and went to the window.

"Johnny?" Rothchild called. He forgot about the mike.

"Yes." I didn't know if they could hear me or not. I was too weak to say it any louder.

I went downstairs. Tina ran to me.

"I told them about her, Johnny. Thank goodness you're not hurt."

Rothchild came to me with his arm in a crude sling. In the street, Marie hugged Joey Dino's head, sobbing. Joey Dino was dead.



***A subscription to MANHUNT insures you of  
128 pages of exciting and baffling mystery  
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*Amy was an ornithologist who parlayed her evening vigil with the binoculars into a hundred dollars a week alimony settlement ... and she'd never even been married.*

# THE BIRD WATCHER

BY  
FRANK  
SISK

A SEA-SALTED chill was beginning to run through the evening air as Alden Doxius walked carefully along the sandy path that led to Miss Calendar's cottage. There was no welcoming light on the little porch, but a faint illumination shone through the two curtained windows to the left of the door. As he noticed this, Doxius also noticed with uneasy surprise that the big house on the cliff, uninhabited and for rent during the summer, was now practically effulgent against the purple sky. He could even hear distant music, waltzy Viennese, drifting down from it across the gray dunes.





Somebody's idea of an autumn retreat, he thought. They'll be elderly people.

He reached for the dull gleam of Miss Calendar's door-knocker. He tapped once, discreetly, and the door opened immediately as if by reflex.

"Miss Calendar? Miss Amy Calendar?"

"Of course," replied a rather tall silhouette just inside. "Come in, please."

"Thank you."

The interior presented the distinct odor of old chintz slightly mildewed; a New England seaside incense of damp isolation.

"I'm Alden Doxius," said Alden Doxius as he surrendered his hat and topcoat. "But since you've been expecting me, I don't suppose it comes as a surprise."

"I haven't been surprised in years, Mr. Doxius."

He tried his most jovial chuckle. "Perhaps out here, miles away from life's daily conflicts, that is the way it should be. The quiet inevitability of nature."

"You are a poet, Mr. Doxius."

"You're ironic, Miss Calendar. No. If anything, I'm just a small philosopher."

The gloom of the ante-room was thinning. Doxius began to see his hostess as a person: tall, yes; thin, yes; and with the long bony face which reminded him of Vera's, yet without the tractile femininity that made Vera's face, bones notwith-

standing, deceptively attractive. The voice, too, might have been Vera's coarsened by ten extra years of life.

"To your left, Mr. Doxius. I was having tea."

"Well, thanks." He rubbed his plump hands together and gave her an engaging smile. "By the way, in view of our former connection as in-laws, shouldn't we try to be a bit less formal? Why don't you call me Alden?"

"I'd prefer not to, Mr. Doxius."

"As you wish. True, we are really strangers. Let's hope that can be remedied in the future."

Miss Calendar preceded him into a low-ceilinged room where the mildew, if not the chintz, seemed less obvious. "The future rarely improves upon the past," she said sententiously. "Please sit there, sir." The tone and gesture with which she directed him to a chair was almost military. "Tea? Or would you rather have sherry?"

"Sherry, if it's convenient."

Miss Calendar crossed to an antique buffet. Doxius observed her with a fixed smile that did not wholly conceal his growing antipathy. He had not come prepared to like her, but in his cool accountant's mind he had pre-arranged his behavior so that she would be forced to like him, or at least pretend to. He would have been quite satisfied with the pretension.

"Very gracious of you," he heard himself say as he accepted the glass



of sherry. "It will help take the chill off."

The wine was very inferior. Taking a second sip to hide an involuntary grimace, he was struck by the fact that nearly everything in the room was inferior. The chair he sat in was the cane type usually found on summer porches. The rug underfoot was threadbare. The floor lamp at the far end of the room leaned dangerously and its shade was scorched.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked, continuing to inspect his surroundings.

"Not at all. There's an ash tray at your elbow."

It was, of course, an oyster shell.

It was then, after lighting a cigar, that he saw the superior, the really superior, photographs on the wall. They were simply framed but beautifully printed, and they diverted his critically wandering eye from the faded wallpaper on which they were casually imposed.

"Are those yours?" he asked with genuine interest. "I mean, did you take them yourself?"

"The birds, yes." Miss Calendar, for a moment, appeared to be human. "I've always liked birds. Is the sherry palatable, Mr. Doxius?"

"It hits the spot, Miss Calendar. You know, inadvertently I almost called you Amy. Seeing these pictures. Vera, come to think of it, did say you were interested in ornithology."

"Vera regarded me as a bird

watcher, Mr. Doxius. Ornithology, as you must know, was a word somewhat beyond her. Both the word and the practice of it."

Doxius emitted another chuckle. "Sisterly semantics, but so right. She did refer to you as a bird watcher. Frankly, she referred to me as worse."

"I'm quite aware of that, Mr. Doxius. She called you, in her infrequent moments of clarity, an insidious bookkeeper."

Doxius tried another chuckle. "That's not bad, Miss Calendar. It's better than she ever did to my face."

"Is it better," asked Miss Calendar, "than you ever did to her face? Or is that beside the point at this phase of your life?"

Doxius thoughtlessly took another sip of the impossible wine. "You make me feel that we're talking at cross purposes, ma'am."

"Oh, I think not." Her cold greenish eyes contemplated him over the tea cup. "I feel that the purpose of this meeting is transparently clear to both of us."

Doxius felt a sudden chill that sherry could never dissipate, but he maintained his aplomb. "Miss Calendar, I don't know what preconceptions you may have formed regarding my visit, but I want to assure you that my intention is pure and simple. I am merely trying to ascertain the whereabouts of my wife."

Miss Calendar allowed herself a humorless smile. "To be precise,



your ex-wife. I like to be precise, Mr. Doxius."

"A slip of the tongue. Yes, my ex-wife."

"What gave you the idea, in the first place, that she was no longer here?"

Doxius moistened his lips. "Well, is she?"

"No, she is not. I told you that the other day when you phoned from Boston. What I am attempting to learn, purely as a matter of curiosity, is why you made that call at that time."

"Permit me to say, ma'am,—and without offense, I hope—that I feel my own curiosity in the matter should be appeased before yours."

"That's a matter of opinion. But all right, then. What do you expect to learn from this visit that you don't already know?"

"Now that's better." Doxius nearly took another sip of the wine, then thought better of it and set the glass on the table next to the oyster shell. "Well, let me recapitulate, if I may. Just in case there were any misunderstandings on the telephone."

Miss Calendar nodded expressionless assent.

"Since our divorce seven years ago, as you may know, I have been paying Vera alimony at the rate of one hundred dollars a week."

"Vera's financial matters were never a topic of discussion between us. However, I have been recently advised about this alimony. You

pay it from the goodness of your heart, not because of a court order."

Doxius grinned at his cigar. "You are a relentless ironist, Miss Calendar. But in this instance there's more truth in what you say than what you think. The goodness of my heart made it possible for Vera to obtain the divorce in the first place. The goodness of my heart prevented me from contesting the action. And if I had contested, there would have been no decree."

"Which, I should imagine, would have been a terrible penalty for each of you."

"You've hit the nail on the head," said Doxius approvingly. "There had to be a compromise, and these weekly payments represent an aspect of it. Vera has always been very careful to keep me posted as to her current mailing address solely because she wanted the money on time."

In a voice touched with rancor, Miss Calendar said, "It was her nature to insist that obligations to her be met promptly."

"On the other hand," said Doxius in a lower, more confidential tone, "her obligations to others were generally neglected, or even ignored. Correct me, ma'am, if I'm wrong."

"That's valid enough," said Miss Calendar stonily.

Doxius began to feel easier. "Your directness brings an amusing thought to mind." Rolling the cigar between moist lips, he paused



long enough to ascertain that no comment would be forthcoming. "It is you, not your sister, who should have been named Vera. Unless my little Latin is letting me down, Vera stands for truth, and you surely square away to the facts of life."

"And to carry your allegedly amusing thought further, Amy stands for love. A gross misnomer, isn't it?"

"Believe me, Miss Calendar, I didn't mean it that way."

"Believe you! That's quite amusing too, Mr. Doxius, coming from such an implausible man."

"I wish I knew why you find me implausible. Particularly on such short notice."

"Don't you think we may find the answer to that as we examine the reasons which make this meeting inevitable?" There was icy mockery in her voice.

Doxius again lost his tiny inward grip on equanimity. Under the returning chill, he still maintained the outward presence, however, of a stout man sitting in a cane chair amiably regarding his outlying shoes through upcurling cigar smoke. Looking at the signet ring encircling one fat finger, he said carefully, "Yes, I suppose this meeting was inevitable." He cleared his throat. "I'll come to the point."

"I wish you would."

"Well, late this spring Vera wrote me a note from Florida. She said she was coming here to this house

and would make it her residence until further notice. I was rather surprised."

"Why?"

"For one thing, Vera never cared for New England. Ever since our divorce, she has lived as far away from it as possible. For another thing, I've always held the impression that you and she did not generally see things eye to eye."

"You are correct on both counts. You've seen the big house on the cliff?"

"The big house—" Doxius raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yes, I did notice it as I arrived this evening."

"Of course you did. Well, that house was left to me by an uncle who died last winter. Vera, upon hearing of this legacy, entertained the mistaken idea that she was intended to share in it. The purpose of her visit is thus simply explained."

Doxius nodded. "Typical."

"It was difficult to convince her that the property was solely mine. But when she saw the size of the mortgage and the tax encumbrance, she very sensibly lost interest."

"And that is when she left?"

"I believe we can fix the time exactly, Mr. Doxius. Right to the hour."

He regarded her with hooded comprehension, then laboriously, almost painfully, he extended a billfold from the inside breast pocket of his coat. As he opened it, he said in a voice that now contained



a hint of uncertainty, "You are talking somewhere over my head, Miss Calendar. All I have to go on, all I have to tell me something is definitely wrong, are these." He produced a sheaf of checks and spread them fan-like. "Just these, Miss Calendar."

Her attitude, he noticed, was steadfast as concrete.

"Take a look," he said, edging toward the end of the chair.

Miss Calendar laughed frigidly. "No need to. You have a number of cancelled checks. Each is made out to Vera for a hundred dollars. You are so pitifully implausible, Mr. Doxius."

He felt peculiarly off balance, but he pressed on. "Miss Calendar, please observe—" he turned the checks face down on the table near the tea pot—"please observe the endorsements. You will notice that from July twenty-second they are all forgeries."

"That is true."

"But you haven't looked."

"It's unnecessary. I realize they are forgeries. Fourteen weeks of them. Fourteen hundred dollars." She rose to her feet and walked to a window. "Vera terminated her visit on July seventeenth. After that I began signing her name."

Doxius tried to register amazement. "I'm afraid you are talking over my head, ma'am."

"In that case, stand up and come here."

Obediently but hesitantly, Doxius

joined Miss Calendar at the window. That close to her, he smelled a chalkiness that was neither woman nor human.

"I'm a bird watcher," she said.

"Yes, so I understand."

"At this time of the day, at dusk, it is my habit to watch birds. With these." She lifted heavy binoculars from the sill.

Doxius was aware that his teeth were cutting severely into the cigar.

"Try them," said Miss Calendar. "Focus them especially on the porch of the big house and on the stand of trees near the cliff. Here." She passed him the glasses. "I think you will find them powerful enough to bring even the detail of a pine cone right into this room."

Automatically Doxius raised the binoculars to his eyes. The big house with its lights spilling yellow paths along the barren ground moved swiftly in on him.

Miss Calendar's voice seemed a distant whisper. "If you were a bird watcher, you would now see jaegers chasing terns across the seascape. Nothing else. But if you were not interested in birds and if you were able to recapture a summer twilight—last summer's, to be exact—you wouldn't notice the birds at all. You would be much more interested in watching Vera walk along that cliff. She had, as you know, a sentimental streak regarding sunsets..."

The bloodless voice went on, like chalk scratching on a blackboard, but Doxius was hardly aware of it.



Through the glasses he could clearly see the shadowed side of the porch of the big house; he could see a man crouched there; he could see Vera dramatically facing the darkening ocean; he could imagine the steep jagged face of the cliff slipping downward to phosphorescent foam.

He lowered the glasses. His hands were trembling a little but his voice was controlled. "She wouldn't keep her part of the bargain," he said as if to himself. "That was her downfall."

"And her downfall was fatal, wasn't it, Mr. Doxius?"

"I assume so." He turned woodenly from the window. "When I agreed to the divorce, we set the alimony limit at five years. Verbally. It couldn't be arranged any other way and remain, for me, a tax deduction."

"Keeping books is your forte, certainly," said Miss Calendar. "Keeping bargains was not Vera's."

"I warned her repeatedly, after the five years was up."

"Verbally, I imagine."

"Yes, just verbally." Doxius rubbed his eyes, then he seemed to emerge from stupor. "It's strange that I never saw anything about her death in the newspapers, and I've been reading them very carefully. Very. Why is that, ma'am?"

Miss Calendar smiled thinly. "Her death has not been reported, Mr. Doxius."

Doxius began to smile, too. "I

thought as much when I saw the first forged endorsements. Well, Miss Calendar, you have shown your hand, and now we stand here alone."

"In a sense, yes."

"Please elaborate."

"The people to whom I rented the big house fourteen weeks ago, at a price so low as to be irresistible, have been informed that I am entertaining my brother-in-law this evening. They also have in their possession a sealed envelope containing an excellent photograph taken from this window on July seventeenth. Unlike my other prints, it does not go to the Audubon Society in the event of my death."

"I see," said Doxius. "It becomes a matter of blackmail then."

"Even though a spinster, I prefer to think of it as alimony."

"And do you think of yourself as an accessory, Miss Calendar? Your knowledge, concealed as it's been, invites an equal share of the guilt. If I refuse to submit to this—this blackmail, you could do nothing about it without jeopardizing yourself."

"Theoretically that may be true, Mr. Doxius. However, if you carefully weigh the difference in our interests, I am sure you'll conclude that justice might not treat us with equality. Also consider the fact that I love only birds and you love life." She squared her bony shoulders. "Now I must ask you to leave. And



"By all means." Miss Calendar met his gaze unwaveringly. "Mean-

"I think you should. In matters of alimony, I understand, a failure to make payment can lead to contempt of court. Good-bye, Mr. Doxius."

"Good evening, Miss Calendar."



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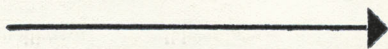


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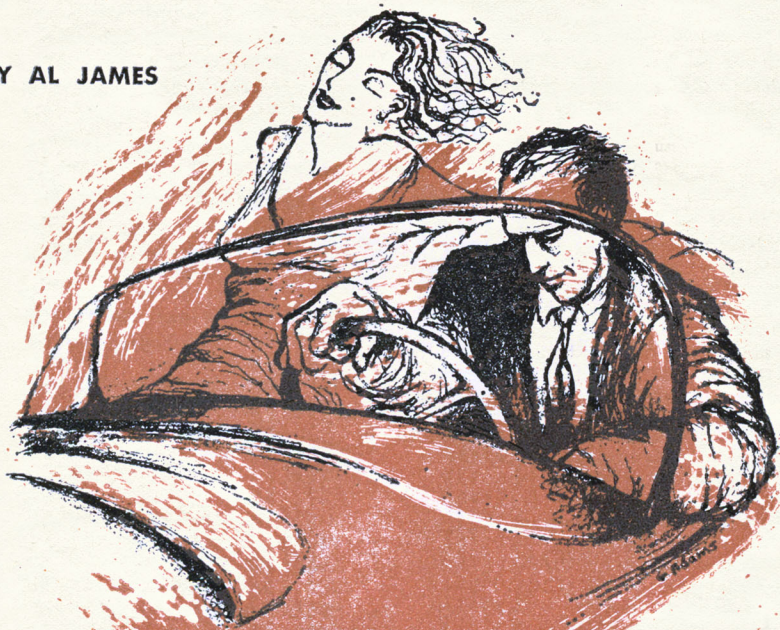
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# SUNDAY KILLER

BY AL JAMES



*"You sure can drive a car honey." The girl laughed and stretched, half naked in the wind. He pressed the accelerator to the floor and pointed the car toward the sound of the tolling church bell.*

PETE spun off the hot highway onto the gravel in a shower of stone. He expertly guided the big convertible around the neon sign announcing; 'Bennie's Bar — Beer And Wine', skidding to a sudden stop inches from the stone front of the building.

For a minute the man behind the wheel sat motionless rubbing his long lean face with a dirty hand.

The headache was back. He tried to scrub the pounding away. But it stayed. It always stayed when it came. How long had it been since the last one? Pete shrugged to himself. It was hard to think. He took a cigarette from the pack on the dash and lighted it, blowing heat into the already superheated air. It helped—a little.

He took a deep breath, looking



around him. There wasn't a hell of a lot to see. Just the squat building that fed beer to beat booze hounds. And the mountains in the distance. Tall, rocky peaks leaning on the blank desert for support.

Pete grunted and slid out of the car. Despite the headache he felt good. All this room and it was his. Nothing confining. He crunched across the gravel and punched his way through the glass door until cool air slammed him in the face.

The bar was empty. An empty room filled with empty bar stools. He picked one out and slid onto it.

"You sure scared the hell out of me," a prissy figure in white spouted, moving up to face him across the wood. He waved in the general direction of the parked car. "Coming in here the way you did. Thought you'd take the front off the place."

Pete grinned. "I didn't did I?"

The figure in white hesitated, his hands moving in aimless circles. "No," he admitted. "I guess you didn't."

"Then gimme a beer and shut up."

The bartender still hesitated, studying the young figure in front of him. His eyes settled on the youthful, almost chalk white face topped by jet black hair. "I dunno," he said slowly. "You look kinda young to me. This is California. I can't take a chance on serving minors." He pointed a well dirtied fingernail at a framed piece of

paper hanging crookedly on the wall. "Took me a long time to get that license. Can't take a chance on losing it."

The youth started to get mad, then shrugged instead, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a wallet. He flipped it onto the bar.

The barkeep thumbed to the driver's license. "John Maxer, age thirty," he mumbled half to himself. His face found a smile. "I guess it's okay," he admitted, reaching into a box and pulling out a bottle. "But you sure don't look thirty."

Pete didn't hear him. He sucked at the beer, thinking. If only the damned headache would go away. Everything would be all right. He tried to forget it, remembering why he'd come this far. It was a pleasant thought. He smiled grimly, savoring what the next three hours would bring. "I'll teach that lousy double-crosser he can't get away with it," he said aloud.

The barkeep bounced down the bar. "You say something?"

Pete shook his head. "Uh uh. Just thinking." He added, "You know how far Palmville is from here?"

"'Bout twenty miles down the road. Backs against the San Bernardino Mountains."

The dark haired youth shoved the empty bottle across the bar.

"You sure like to drink early in the morning." He glanced at the clock. "Not ten yet."

Pete brushed a fly from his ear,



looking around at the barren room. "You shouldn't complain. Looks like you need any business you can get."

The older man leaned forward on his elbows, glad to have someone to talk to. "It's always that way on Sundays. First thing folks go to church and get choked up on religion. Then later they come in here and get whiskeyed up and take out across the desert after anything with skirts."

Despite his aching head, Pete was forced to smile. He was saved further comment by the bus. It hissed to a stop in front of the bar and the door swung open.

"Don't tell me they're using a bar for a bus stop now?" Pete commented.

The bartender shook his head. "Nope. Probably Mrs. Baxter. Her husband's homesteading a hunk of this desert 'bout ten miles out. She went to L.A. last week to see her mother. He'll pick 'er up in a few minutes."

Pete sucked at the beer, watching the activity outside. He felt the pounding in his head increase as a young girl stepped through the open bus door. The desert wind picked at her skirt, whipping it well above the knees. She modestly tugged it into place.

"Damn," the youth muttered. "What a looker." It'd been one hell of a long time. Too long. Despite the air conditioning he felt sweat gathering on his forehead. He re-

membered what the doctors had said and laughed out loud. The jerks. What did they know about such things?

The girl had moved into the bar and was sitting at a table across the room. The bartender leaned against the wall, talking to her. Pete waited until he moved into the back room. Then he carried his half full bottle of beer to the table and set it down.

"You're Mrs. Baxter, eh," he said.

She looked surprised. "How did you know?"

Pete didn't say anything for a minute, instead studied the seated figure. She was a real doll. The thin dress didn't cover much. Long dark hair drifted across the bare shoulders, framing a smooth white face. If she was twenty five he'd have been surprised. Her perfume drifted above the odor of stale beer.

He jabbed a thumb in the direction of the door the bartender had vanished through. "The guy told me who you were when you came in. You care for a beer?"

The hesitation broke into a smile. "Yes, I would. It's hot out there."

Pete went behind the bar and helped himself. He was shaking so hard he had trouble opening the stuff. His head threatened to come unscrewed.

You never know about dames, Pete decided three beers later. It hadn't done his headache any good but the gal had certainly loosened up. He'd already found out she hated her husband and the desert.



The only reason she stayed with him was his bank account.

"Why don't we take a little ride," he suggested at last. His mouth was dry as he waited for her answer.

She smoothed the wrinkles in her skirt, a smile threading the tiny features. "You mean more than a ride, don't you?" Her voice was beer thick.

Pete wiped his wet hands on his pants. "Yeah," he admitted. "I guess I do."

The girl laughed pleasantly, glancing out the window across the desert. "My husband didn't expect me until three." She glanced at the clock above the bar. "It's only eleven now." She pushed back the chair and stood up a little unsteadily, her voice suddenly sultry. "We have plenty of time—for a ride."

Sounds of singing poured like cooling water through the open doors and windows of the church. Rising and falling waves of sound on a sandy beach. It stopped and a mantle of heavy heat spread through the congregation as they put the hymn books back in the racks and sat down.

Reverend Robert Boyd, seated at one side of the altar, waited for the shuffling to quiet. Then he slowly got to his feet and moved to the raised pulpit, placing the clean stiff sheet containing his sermon in front of him. His eyes swept the blank faces.

Miss Perkins in the second row

squirmed as sweat trickled down inside her girdle. Harry Bonte, sheriff of Palmville, ran a nervous finger beneath his tight collar, glanced at his watch, wondering if he'd get home in time to watch the ball game. The faces, all bright with desert sweat, continued to stare at the young man fumbling with his papers.

Coughing to clear his throat, the Reverend Boyd plunged into his subject. "Today, my friends, I shall take up the subject of. . . ."

His mouth continued to move but the words were drowned by the tortured scream of a motor gunning rapidly into gear in front of the church. Tires squealed as the car spun the corner and raced down the street. The congregation twisted together, on the same string, to see what the commotion was. But it was over. Only the thin thread of a speeding car disappearing rapidly in the distance.

The girl laughed happily, twisting in the seat, watching the rapidly vanishing steeple. "You certainly know how to drive," she complimented.

Pete grinned at the compliment. Beneath his foot he felt the solid rubber of the accelerator as he shoved it further to the floor. The line of magnolias siding the street flashed past like blazing pinwheels on the fourth of July. He stole a glance at the girl beside him, his head aching with excitement at the



feel of power beneath his hands. He remembered the hour since they'd left the bar and his pulse threatened to explode. Her dress lay crumpled on the back floor. He reached across but she pushed his hand away.

"Not here in town." She glanced at the speedometer standing at ninety. "And not while you're going so fast." The girl pouted. "Why don't you get your business over with so we can get back to the motel?"

Pete shrugged, spinning the car past the fountain bisecting the middle of the town. Beyond, the road pinched out onto the desert. "Too early. And don't worry about my driving. I used to be a real hot shot on the tracks. Me and my brother. He had to quit after he killed a couple of people. Just chicken I guess."

But Pete'd had enough of small talk. He slid the car to a stop, wheeling it through a cloud of dust onto the desert. Before it halted he was across the seat, grabbing, his head threatening to burst from want. To hell with what the doctors said, he thought, reaching for the girl.

But the beer had worn off. She pushed him away, her mouth ugly. "Get me home," she snapped. "I shouldn't be doing this." She reached down behind the seat, found her dress and began putting it on.

Swearing, Pete wrenched at the

material, ripping it from her hands. The girl screamed, pulling at the door handle to get out.

"Witch," the youth spat, yanking the car into motion. The rapid acceleration pasted the girl to the seat. At the same time he heard something in the distance and smiled suddenly, unmindful of the woman spitting curses beside him. Church bells. That was what he needed. He swung the car around and headed back towards Palmville.

Reverend Boyd stood near the curb, shaking hands with the parishioners streaming out of the church. A short distance away several children played hop-scotch on the walk.

Sheriff Bonte hurried into the heat, anxious to get home. He extended his hand to the minister. "Good sermon, Bob."

"But you have to get home to the ball game," the minister added.

Bonte flushed. "How'd you guess?" The sheriff liked the young minister. He'd only had the church six months but he wasn't always throwing the devil at everyone. He knew it was his first assignment. Bonte clapped his broad brimmed hat on his bald head and started away.

The noise stopped him. A high pitched whine of a tortured motor. Both men looked up the street at the same time.

The car was coming fast. At first a dot in the distance, then a blob



of red steel. When it was less than a block away it veered across the center line coming along the curb.

The sheriff swore. It was all he had time for. Confusion erupted. The smell of burned oil and tires, women screaming.

Boyd moved fast, shoving the sheriff back towards the building. He started for the three children on the walk. There wasn't time. The roaring car leaped the high curb. Something inside it screamed as it was catapulted high in the air. The metal monster bore down on the kids. Two got away. The one that didn't flew high in the air and landed with a sickening thud near the trees of the sanctuary.

Without slowing, the car screeched back onto the street and was gone as fast as it'd come.

The sheriff got to his feet from the point he'd landed after Boyd's shove. In seconds his eyes took in the situation, his lined face gray with anger. "You see who it was, Bob?"

The young minister, ashen, shook his head. "No one from around here."

Sheriff Bonte started for the parking lot. "I'll call an ambulance. Then I'm going after him myself."

Boyd started after him. The wind whipped at his black frock. "Let me go along, sheriff."

For a second the lawman hesitated. There was something in the minister's face he didn't under-

stand. But it made his decision for him. "Okay, let's go."

The two men stared ahead, their eyes aching against the blaze reflecting on concrete. For the last half hour the black speck in the distance had stayed a speck. The sheriff's knuckles ached from clenching the wheel, trying to get more out of the cruiser.

"It's no good, Bob," he said at last. "He's on the mountain road. Once he gets into the Bernadinos we'll never get him."

"Can't you radio ahead?"

The old man shook his head. "Not a chance. There isn't another cruiser between here and Palm Springs on the other side."

"Keep going," Boyd snapped. "We can at least try."

The sheriff started to argue, then changed his mind.

The radio snapped into life. "Control to Sheriff Bonte," it crackled.

The sheriff picked up the mike. "Bonte. Go ahead."

"The boy struck at the scene of the hit and run was dead on arrival. There was also a girl, twenty five, Mrs. John Baxter. She was also dead. Appeared to have been attacked by the occupant of the fleeing car. We had a report that matched the hit and run vehicle. It was stolen from John Maxer last evening, near San Bernadino. Ten-four."

"Ten-four," Bonte snapped, putting the mike away.



They were in the mountains now, climbing rapidly in and out of the shadows. The other car was at times tantalizingly close as it climbed ahead of them. But with each passing minute the sheriff fell further back as he braked slowly around the right angle curves. At last Boyd spoke up. "Would you mind if I tried catching him, sheriff?"

The old man shrugged. He couldn't lose anything. At least the minister was younger, his reactions faster. He braked to a rapid stop.

Sheriff Bonte, seated next to the minister had never traveled so fast through the mountains. He watched the edge of the road creep up on them as they skidded at full throttle around the bends. Thousand foot drops seemed on the brink of swallowing them up, only to be pushed away at the precise moment by accurate braking or pressure on the accelerator.

Very slowly at first—then more rapidly, the fleeing car ahead of them grew larger. Both cars spun dust and gravel into the rapidly cooling air.

When they were a thousand yards apart the sheriff pulled his gun.

"Don't use it, sheriff," Boyd cautioned. "You couldn't hit anything on a road like this." He gritted his teeth. "We'll get him."

He was right. As they spun out of the last curve, a short straight road stretched before them. The

young minister smashed the gas pedal to the floor. The cruiser leaped ahead until its bumper almost touched the convertible ahead. A white faced youth turned in his seat, his black hair flying in the breeze. When he faced forward again it was all over. The car failed to make the sharp curve. For a long second it hung poised in space. Then it fell a thousand feet before fire burned it to a crisp.

The sheriff and Boyd stood on the brink of the precipice, watching the dying inferno. At last Bonte turned to the man next to him. "You knew the fella in the car, didn't you?"

Boyd nodded his head slowly. "Yes," he admitted. "I knew him. He and I were once race drivers. We both made the Panama run together." The young minister cleared his throat. "There was something wrong with him. He went wild when he saw a girl. Once he killed two of his mechanics when he ran off the course at South Carolina. He'd been too busy waving at a girl to pay any attention to the track. I thought he needed treatment and had him committed to a sanitarium. He threatened to kill me for it. I guess he knew I was the minister in Palmville from the last letter I wrote him. He must have escaped last night." Boyd took another look at the wreck far below and started back for the car. "He was my brother," he said simply.



THE YELLOW Cadillac came to a squealing, bouncing stop before the huge sprawling ranch house. Joe Rizzola switched off the ignition and leaned forward, his thin neck craning, his small close-set eyes popping with admiration.

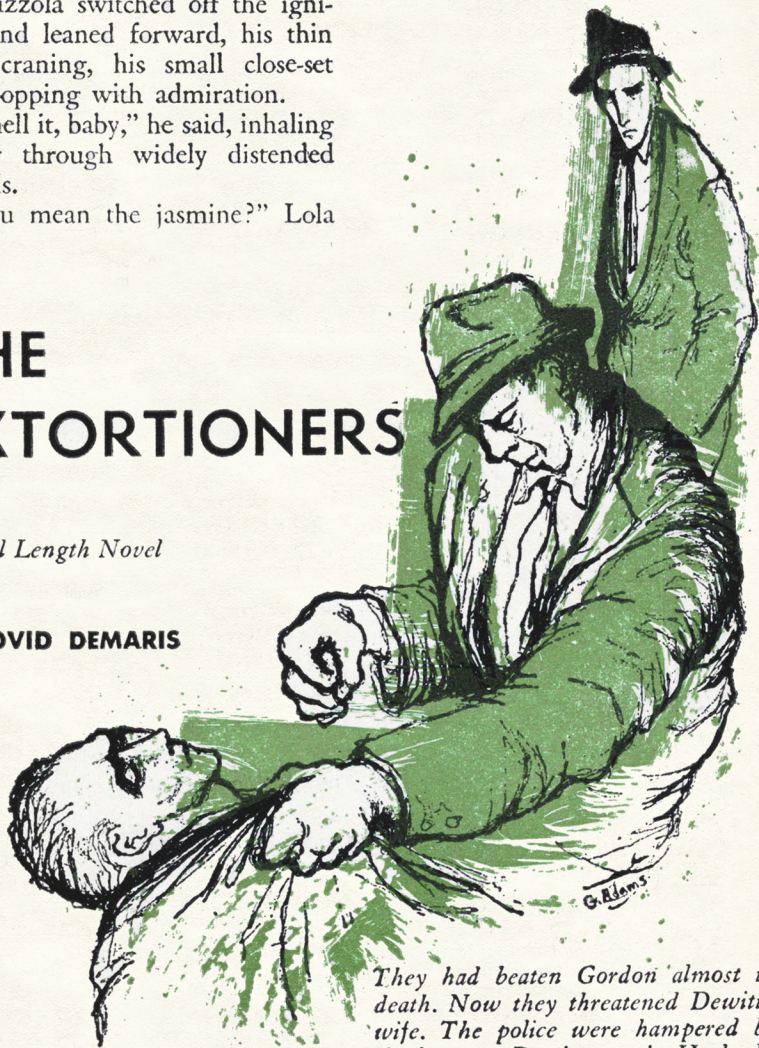
"Smell it, baby," he said, inhaling deeply through widely distended nostrils.

"You mean the jasmine?" Lola

# THE EXTORTIONERS

*A Full Length Novel*

**BY OVID DEMARIS**



*They had beaten Gordon almost to death. Now they threatened Dewitt's wife. The police were hampered by the law . . . Dewitt wasn't. He broke open the .38 and popped shells into the cylinder.*



asked, turning to stare at her husband, her faded blue eyes puzzled by the remark.

"Naw. I mean the money. The mazoola, kid. The smell is everywhere."

"You're silly," she laughed vapidly, shaking her blond head. "It's night blooming jasmine, and maybe some lilac, too. We always had lots of it at home. Smelled real good on hot summer nights."

"Aw, come of it. This is no hick farm, sweetheart. Around here, that smell means money. Look at this crazy layout. At least two hundred grand."

"It's gorgeous," she said, her short stubby fingers reaching up to press against her painted cheeks, her faded blue eyes studying the massive white-brick structure. "You mean Hugh DeWitt lives here?"

"The one and only, baby. He's big now."

"You really going in there?"

Joe's head spun around, startled by the remark. "What do you mean? You're damn right I'm going in there. Listen, that sucker laid down a sawbuck on the nags every day for years. Then he just ups and quits. Man, I don't like losing that kind of a mark."

"How'd you know he lived here?"

"I saw a piece in the paper about his striking it big in oil and having this house warming tonight. So here we are."

"I don't know. It's so big and all.

Makes me feel sort of peculiar. Like I was naked or something."

Joe laughed. "That shouldn't make no difference to you, baby."

"What do you mean by that crack?"

"Never mind," Joe said, leering. "Maybe you've forgotten."

Lola's face tightened as she swung with her open hand, striking him just under the left eye.

"Hey, what the hell," Joe cried, slowly rubbing the stinging flesh with his hand. "I was just kidding."

"You've got a filthy mind," she said.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Lay off. I've got business to attend to and the sooner the better. Let's go."

They slid out of the car and hurried up the flagstone steps, pausing before the large white door.

"Good Christ," he said, shaking his head in admiration. "Look at this goddam brass knocker, will ya. It's big enough to stake me to a week in Vegas."

All the lights were on in the house and they could hear music and laughter within. "I don't know," Lola said, pulling on his arm. "We don't belong here. It makes me feel creepy inside."

"Forget it," Joe said. "Everything will be smooth as silk. Take my word for it, baby. You're traveling with Joe Rizzola now."

Lola glanced at him, her eyes level with his creased forehead and dark curly hair. "Yeah," she said. "That's what worries me."



Neil Gordon came out of the den and leaned against the doorframe, his soft brown eyes casually sweeping the crowded living room, his ears closed to the droning buzz of conversation. He smiled knowingly and slowly relit his pipe, his thick eyebrows arching over as he puffed noisily, the sweet smelling smoke tantalizing his nostrils.

Neil Gordon was thirty-six and vice president of the Dewitt Drilling Company. He was Hugh's cousin and his closest friend. Besides owning twenty percent of the Drilling Company, Gordon had a ten percent interest in the fabulous Dewitt-Small discovery in Calabasas Canyon. These holdings had made him independently wealthy. But the new found wealth had not changed his way of life. He still lived in the same four room apartment in Sherman Oaks, and still drove the same three year old Thunderbird.

For a long while Gordon devoted himself solely to the pleasure of smoking his ancient briar, his slender fingers like pincers around the bowl, his eyelids half-closed in concentration. It was amusing, he was thinking, how people chattered the moment they had a drink in their hands. Slowly, effortlessly, he started across the congested room, gently but firmly elbowing people out of his way, mumbling a greeting or an apology, smiling pleasantly; fragments of conversation drifting in and out of his hearing.

He stopped now and looked up,

over the bobbing, weaving heads, toward the upper level of the entrance hall. Hugh Dewitt was standing by the door, talking to a short dark man and a large bosomy blond. Neil frowned as he recognized Joe and Lola Rizzola, and started out in their direction.

Hugh Dewitt smiled and ran his hand through his thin receding red hair, the fingers casually scratching at the pink scalp. He was a big man, well over six feet, and thick bodied, with square powerful shoulders and a huge neck. At fifty-one he was gradually losing the battle against weight. Just that morning at his daily weighing he had passed the two-twenty mark, a fact which greatly distressed him. Having been proud of a strong body most of his life, the very sight of his own nude body now repulsed him. Each morning after his shower, he examined himself closely in the full length mirror, and each morning he solemnly promised to cut down on the rich food and liquor. But unfortunately his determination was not as strong as his desires. Dewitt enjoyed eating and drinking, and detested any form of physical exercise. In the old days, the hard work had kept him in excellent condition, but now there was no need for hard work. Other people did the work and the money flowed in as quickly as eight oil wells could spew it up. Hugh Dewitt had succumbed to the softening process of the good life.



"Joe Rizzola! What in hell are you doing here? Who's watching the store?" Dewitt's voice boomed, and he shook his head, grinning at Joe and Lola.

"Listen," Joe said, reaching up to give Dewitt a friendly tap on the shoulder. "When a buddy of mine makes it, I want to be there to congratulate him. Know what I mean, pal? Rizzola never forgets a buddy."

"I'll be damned," Dewitt said. "You're the last person I expected to see tonight. Glad you could make it."

"Well, we weren't exactly invited," Lola said. "But Joe insisted you'd be glad to see us. We wanted to pay our respects."

"Yeah, that's right," Joe said. "Haven't seen you in a helleva long time, buddy. Thought you'd cashed in or something. Then I read this story in the paper and, man, was I surprised."

"Not bad, heh?" Dewitt said, waving his arms. "You've got to have a drink and look around."

"That reminds me," Joe said. "You haven't placed a bet in a long time. What'd you do? Switch bookies?"

"No time for horses," Dewitt said. "And I've got all the money I need. I could buy Santa Anita if I wanted to." Dewitt knew that it was the liquor doing the talking, but he didn't care. At that moment he wanted to shout so that everyone could hear him. He was Hugh Dewitt. A guy who had started out in

life with nothing and who had worked hard for thirty-five years, since the age of sixteen. But now he had plenty; more than most guys who had been born with it. And he had made every cent of it the hard way. A lot of people thought that owning an oil well was a pretty soft deal, and maybe it was for those who stumbled across one accidentally; but not for the oil man, the wildcatter who broke his back year after year for nothing. For every wildcatter who struck it rich, there were thousands who died paupers. You had to be tough and clever and experienced and maybe a little lucky to end up like Hugh Dewitt. So why shouldn't he be proud of it? It wasn't done every day. Hugh could count the guys who had made it this big on the fingers of one hand. And he had known a lot of wildcatters. Some had been tough. Some had been clever. And some had been experienced. But it took a combination of all three to really make the grade, and Dewitt had it. Standard Oil had offered twenty million dollars for the Calabasas leasehold, and he and his partner Nathan Small had turned it down. That's how big it was. He had plenty to brag about if he felt like it, liquor or no liquor.

"Man! I'll bet you could. Really made a big killing, didn't you?"

"Gee, I sure love your house, Hugh," Lola said, glancing around the room. "You got a swimming pool?"



"Yeah. Out back. Don't swim much myself, but the wife and daughter are crazy about it."

"Wow. That's what I'd like. It's real good for the figure. Tones up the muscles real nice. When I was in the show in Vegas, I used to swim with the gaud every day."

"You want to take a swim?" Dewitt said. "There's plenty of suits in the dressing room out there."

"Well, gee, that would be grand."

"Never mind that," Joe said, glaring at her. "We just dropped in to wish you all the best. You know, buddy, I was sort of worried the way you just stopped coming to the store. I always treated you squarely. You used to buy all your liquor from me. My prices are as low as anybody in town. I remember one time back there when you was in to me for some loot but you didn't hear me squawk."

Dewitt smiled. "You've got a good memory, Joe."

"You bet I do. I never forget. For example, I remember one time you and I were yakking it up at the store and you were looking for some backers for one of your ventures. Well, I wanted to help, but I didn't have the loot, so I gave you some names. Good names. Guys with big dough."

"I never used them," Dewitt said, starting to pull away. "The deal fell through."

"Look," Joe said. "I'll tell you what. This is a big deal you've

hooked on to. The kind of a deal I'd really go for."

"Anybody would," Dewitt said.

"Well, I mean I'd like to buy into it. You know, get a piece of it."

Dewitt laughed, clasping a huge hand on Joe's thin shoulder. "What are you smoking these days, Joe?"

"Now wait a minute," Joe cried, his pinched face alarmed. "I mean it. I'd like to buy an interest. I've got the loot."

"There's nothing for sale," Dewitt said.

"Why not?"

"Well, everything . . . no, wait a minute. I think there will be something for sale if you're serious about having the money. There will be a two percent royalty—in fact, it's an overriding royalty—for sale in the next few days. I've been thinking of buying it myself, but what the hell, I don't need it."

"Thanks, buddy-boy," Joe said, his face breaking into a wide grin. "I'll take it."

"Not so fast. I'll try to get it for you. That's all I promise. I'll check on it first thing in the morning. Let you know for sure tomorrow night. But you understand it's going to cost plenty."

Joe laughed, disclosing a mouthful of tiny sharp teeth. "Didja hear that, baby? I'm going to be a goddam oil tycoon like my buddy here."

Dewitt grinned and turned to see Neil Gordon approaching. "Hey, Neil, look who's here," he called.



Neil's lips curved in a thin condescending smile as his gaze moved from Dewitt to the Rizzolas. "How're you Joe? Lola? Out slumming?"

Joe laughed, slapping Neil on the arm. "This guy's a riot."

Neil ignored the annoying but playful gesture and casually thrust his hands deeply into his jacket pockets.

"Joe was worried about me," Dewitt said. "Thought I'd kicked off."

"Well, after all, Joe doesn't exactly relish the thought of losing a good customer."

"Sucker, you mean," Dewitt cried, slapping Joe on the back. The blow brought Joe up on his tiptoes.

"Sucker, hell," Joe said. "You about cleaned me out there a couple times."

"Never mind," Joe said. "After this little deal tonight, we don't need nobody's patronage. I'm gonna be an oil tycoon."

Neil looked quickly at Hugh. "What's he talking about?"

Dewitt noticed the tightening of muscles in Gordon's face and hesitated. "I told Joe about Stanton selling out and he's interested in buying it."

"I see," Neil said. "Does he have any idea how much this will cost?"

"I told him it'd be plenty. But he says he can swing it. Right Joe?"

"You're damn right, buddy. But, Christ, don't let that Stanton stick me. I don't know nothing about the

business. What does this two percent buy anyway?"

"It buys an override on a leasehold of three hundred and eighty-five acres. Your cut comes from the top, before expenses. There are eight wells producing right now which means about four thousand a month income."

"You mean I get four thousand a month?"

"That's right."

"Holy jumping Jesus!" Joe's eyes flashed widely as he grabbed Hugh's hand and began pumping his arm. "I'll have to get someone to help me swing this deal. It's bigger than I thought. But don't forget, it's mine."

"It's up to Stanton. All I promise is to talk to him."

"You sure he's going to sell?" Joe said, his pinched face suddenly worried. "Man, I want that bad. I've been looking for a deal like this all my life."

Dewitt glanced at Neil and shrugged his shoulders. "Let's wait till tomorrow and see, Joe. Why don't you and Lola have a drink now and take a look around?"

Neil waited until they had disappeared into the crowd before speaking to Dewitt. "You're either drunk or out of your mind," he said, the anger tightening the muscles along his jawline.

"Take it easy," Hugh said. "I know you don't like Joe, but what the hell, his money's okay."

"It's crazy," Neil said.



Dewitt grinned understandingly and placed an arm around Gordon's shoulders. "What's crazy about it? Joe's not such a bad guy."

"He's a cheap little hood," Neil said, pulling away from Hugh.

"He's a bookie, but what the hell's so wrong about that?"

"If you don't know, there's no use my explaining it."

"For Christ's sake, Neil, don't get superior on me. I've known a lot of bookies in my day and they were a long way from being hoods. They're just trying to earn a living like anybody else."

"I don't know about your other friends, but Rizzola is a creepy little rat-faced punk who would do anything for a buck. He doesn't have that kind of money and I shudder to think who he'll drag into this deal as his partner."

"Look, Neil, let's wait and see. Stanton might not want to sell or he's probably already sold it."

"Let's hope so for both our sakes."

Upstairs in the Rizzola apartment over the liquor store, Joe's close-set eyes sparkled as he deftly punctured a hole in a pint size beer can and tipped it up to his mouth, the cold liquid gurgling noisily down his throat.

"Close the refrig door," Lola said. She sat at the kitchen table, sipping from a steaming cup of black coffee.

Joe closed the door and when he spoke his voice quivered with ex-

citement. "Baby, our worries are over. This is the big one."

"Where are you gonna get that kind of money?"

"Don't worry. I've got just the right guy."

"Who?"

"Jimmy Grazio." Joe waited, letting that name sink in before going on. "Jimmy did me a favor once and this is a good way to pay him back."

"You're crazy. Jimmy Grazio won't have nothing to do with you."

"That's what you think. Jimmy's a buddy of mine."

"Jimmy is big time. There was a lot of talk about him when I worked in Vegas. They say he owns the Arabian Hotel and they say a lot of other things about him. Things that are not so nice, like he's a gangster and a killer. All kinds of stuff like that."

"He's a big man and that's what I need for this deal. In case Dewitt tries to back out or something. And besides, Jimmy can give him other things besides money. Like protection and stuff like that."

"Yeah, but what if he decides to take the whole two percent? What then?"

"He won't. Jimmy's a square guy with his pals."

"What makes you think you're his pal?"

"Never mind that crap. I'm a bigger man than you think I am. I've been in the same racket with all those boys a long time. The



guy I make book for is a buddy of Jimmy. I'm in good standing with all those people. You think I'm nobody because I own a two-bit liquor store, but you've got to remember the book. I made fourteen thousand on the book last year and without taxes. Then I cleared another seven grand with the store. That's twenty-one grand. It's nothing to sneeze at."

"I'll bet Jimmy makes that every week."

"Okay, so maybe he does. But he's a top man. It's like any business, the top man always makes more. That's why I want him on this deal. With Jimmy in on it nothing can go wrong. I like doing good turns for those people. They can help you with any kind of goddam trouble all over the United States. That's how big they are. They don't come no goddam bigger."

Lola smiled. "Okay. Call him. I want to see how far you get with the great Mr. Jimmy Grazio."

"I don't like your attitude. I don't like being treated like some punk, especially by my own wife. Not when my good money covers her with silk."

"Don't get sweaty. I don't say you're a punk, but you're not a big shot either."

"Yeah, well nobody is born a big shot. It takes time to get there. Just give me a little time, baby, you'll see."

Lola stood up and walked to the

refrigerator. "I think I'll have one of those beers myself."

"Bring me another one. I'm going in the living room to call Jimmy."

Jimmy Grazio hadn't personally murdered anyone in more than four years. He had ordered it done a number of times since then and, though the legal penalty was the same in either case, the danger and prestige were not. He had started out as a muscleman with the Syndicate at the age of seventeen, had graduated to enforcer at the age of nineteen, and had become an organizer at the age of thirty-eight. Now at forty-two he considered himself a businessman and gentleman. Besides being a major stock holder in plush hotels in Miami, Las Vegas and Havana, Jimmy owned interests in dozens of corporations, large and small. This was what he liked to call his "Uncle Sam" income.

Jimmy knew celebrities from all over the world, but considered only five places as important enough to be worthy of his time. These places were New York City, Miami, Havana, Las Vegas and Hollywood. Except for his occasional business and pleasure trips to Havana, he never left the boundaries of the United States. He was an immigrant with a police record and he didn't believe in taking chances. There were too many important cops who would jump at a



chance of deporting him back to Sicily.

His reputation with women, or more specifically actresses and showgirls, had reached such lethal dimension that it had finally landed him at the top of every studio's blacklist. No established or aspiring actress could afford to be seen with Jimmy Grazio.

Though the Las Vegas newspapers prefixed his name with laudable titles, the practice was not followed elsewhere, especially in Los Angeles and New York where the press consistently labeled him "mobster" and "hoodlum."

Jimmy Grazio had spent the evening in the pink and gold suite of Marsha Moore at the Arabian. Marsha was a thirty-four year old platinum blond who had built a large reputation in the movies as a baby-faced sexpot. Her eyes still had the bright blue innocence of a child and her skin was baby fresh and satiny, devoid of any wrinkles. She had big dimples and a slightly upturned nose that wrinkled up with all the sweet devilish guile of a teenager. But from there on down she had the lush provocative body of a circe. She was reputed to have the largest authenticated bustline in Hollywood, measuring over forty-three inches. She had wide hips, a full-rounded bottom, firm sturdy thighs, and an amazing twenty-two inch waist. In eighteen years, her career had fluctuated from bad to good to great and to good again.

From her present position she could go to great or bad, depending on the next few roles the studio offered her. Her career was in what her agent had termed a precarious position, one that could not afford the notoriety of a Jimmy Grazio in the background.

That had been the occasion for the champagne dinner in her suite that evening. The studio had heard about Jimmy and had given her the word. She had to get Jimmy out of her life and didn't know how to tell him. In an affair that had lasted for more than six months, Marsha had learned that Jimmy was not a man who easily gave up once he wanted something. His fierce temper had demonstrated this characteristic on a number of occasions. Throughout the long evening she had been at the point of broaching the subject a number of times, but the words had stuck in her throat. Now they sat on the long white sofa together; she in a supine position, her head resting on his lap, her blue eyes troubled as she gazed up into his half-lidded dark brown eyes. The sheer pink negligee had been pushed open all the way down the front.

"What's the matter with you?" he said. "You look worried."

She closed her eyes and wrinkled her nose. "Maybe I am."

"What about?"

She hesitated. "It's nothing."

"Who are you kidding?"



"Nobody, darling. I just don't want you to get mad."

He shifted impatiently. "Quit stalling."

"That's what I mean, see. You're already mad."

"Who the hell's mad?" he snarled.

"I want a drink." She sat up and leaned over to the coffee table, pouring herself a glass of champagne. "Want some?"

"Naw. Just tell me what's bugging you."

She drank the champagne and poured herself another glass, leaning against the back of the sofa this time. "I'm going to Europe," she said as if she had just discovered that continent.

"Oh, are you now. And when did you get that bright idea?"

"I have to go for a new picture."

"Is that so. What picture is that?"

"Oh, it's a marvelous picture, darling. Just what my career needs right now. They say it might even get me an Oscar."

"Bull! Who are you trying to con?"

"But it's true. It's too good a part to pass up."

"What's the picture? Who's producing?"

"I can't say right now. It's still under wraps. Very q.t."

Jimmy's hand shot out and snaked around her wrist, twisting it until she screamed out in pain. "Stop conning me," he said, "or I'll break it, so help me!"

"But it's true," she cried, slowly sliding off the sofa until she rested on her knees, her baby face twisting painfully.

Grazio released some of the pressure. "You're not going. Understand?"

"Yes, yes, please!"

"You better." He released her arm, his brown eyes hard and cruel as he stared at her. "Don't you ever forget it. I'll break both your arms. I'll cut that baby face to hamburger."

She came up off her knees and fell on the sofa, her white silky hair in her face, sobbing wildly.

"You're not fooling around with some pansy actor now. I'll tell you when it's time to go. Until then you keep your stupid mouth shut."

He waited a moment, then stood up and walked to the door. "You better go to bed," he said. "I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight." And suddenly the smile was back on his handsome face.

"Goodnight," she sobbed, looking up at him through the disheveled hair.

He went out, closing the door softly behind him, and walked a few doors down the hall to his own suite. Jack Nitta was sitting in an easy chair, his feet up on the coffee table before it. Nitta was of average height with a thin face and a heavy body. He was pushing well into his sixties. Now as Grazio came into the room, Nitta grunted his greeting and waved feebly.



"You got a million phone calls," he said.

"Anything important?" Grazio said, slipping out of his suit jacket, loosening his tie.

"Pete wants to see you next time you're in L.A. There was a call from Joe Rizzola. You know that character that married that stripper." He's one of Frank's bookies. Strictly a two-bit punk."

"What did he want?"

"Says he's got a big deal for you. All excited. Wanted you to call him the minute you got back. I told him to go to hell."

Grazio stopped in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt. "You told him what?"

Nitta hesitated. "I didn't like his attitude."

"You get him on the phone. Now!" Grazio slipped out of the shirt and kicked off his shoes. "Some of the best deals I got were from little suckers like Rizzola."

Nitta was already putting through the call. He nodded his small head and handed Grazio the phone. Jimmy smiled at the receiver. "Joe, this is Jimmy. What can I do for you, buddy?"

The voice at the other end of the line was thin and full of tension. "Hi, Jimmy. Remember me? We shot crap together one time there at the Arabian. I was with Frank. Then we went up to your room for a drink."

"I remember," Jimmy said. "What's on your mind?"

"Jimmy, I've got a real hot one for you. I know this guy, see. His name is Hugh Dewitt. He's a millionaire oilman. Well, he used to place bets at my shop and I got to know him real well. That was before he struck it rich. Well, I was out to his house tonight. Man, it's as big as the Arabian. A real classy layout." The sentences were punctuated by nervous laughs. "I was kidding with him, you know, and told him stuff like I would like to own a piece of it, and things like that."

Jimmy cocked his head, holding the phone against his shoulder and lit a panetela. He blew a great cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling.

"Well, the next damn thing I know, he's offering me a two percent royalty. You know, one of them overrides. Pays off about four thousand a month interest. Well, this deal is too big for me to swing alone and I remembered how nice you'd been to me and Frank that night and I thought I'd give you first try at it. We could go in fifty-fifty. That would be two thousand a month for each of us. Not bad, heh. Whaddya say? Want in on it?"

"Slow down," Grazio said. "Let's take this one step at a time. You say this guy plays the ponies?"

"Yeah. He used to all the time."

"How about now?"

"Well, not since he struck the oil."



"What kind of a guy is he?"

"Big guy. Tall..."

"No, wait a minute. I mean is he a drinker, whorer, you know."

"Well, average on the liquor. He's married. Don't know nothing about his sex life."

"Okay. How much does he want?"

"I don't know, yet. It'll be plenty."

"Listen, you put up five grand and I'll get five grand to you in the morning. Ten grand should swing it."

"You're kidding, Jimmy. This thing pays four thousand a month interest."

"Don't worry about it. You give him the ten grand. Tell him I said it's a deal."

"Well, he don't know you..."

"Shut up and do as I say. I'll be in touch with you later on this week. No slip-ups now, buddy. It's a good deal."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

Grazio grunted into the receiver and dropped it on the cradle. "We're in the oil business," he said, his white teeth gleaming through the fixed smile.

It was late afternoon one week later when Neil Gordon received his first telephone call from Joe Rizzola.

"Hey, Neil, this is Joe. How are you, buddy boy?"

"Joe who?"

"Rizzola. Joe Rizzola. I've been trying to reach you all day."

"Well, you've got me now."

"I'll tell you, buddy, I've got a little problem I'd like for you to help me with."

"You sure came to the right guy."

Joe laughed. "Listen, buddy boy, I'm in a jam. You were there at the party, you heard Dewitt offer me this two percent in that oil deal. Well, now he says I can't have it. And man, I've got important people interested in this deal."

"What the hell can I do about it?"

"I want you to come down here and explain to this man about how it was and everything."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, come down here and I'll explain the whole thing."

"Joe, if you've got a problem with Dewitt, my advice is to call him up."

"Christ, man, I've been calling him all week, a dozen times a day. He's always out. He called Lola up the other day and said the deal was off. Just like that. That guy's out of his goddam mind."

"There's nothing I can do about it."

"For Christ's sake, Neil, I know that. All I ask is for you to meet with this man and tell him how the deal stands."

"Why don't you tell him?"

"I did but I don't think he believes me."



"Then why should he believe me?"

"Well, it's different. You're a disinterested party, see what I mean. I think he thinks I've pocketed the money and bought the percentage for myself."

"What money are you talking about?"

"The five grand he gave me for his share of the deal."

"Who is this guy?"

"I can't tell you that right now. But take my word for it, he's a big man. Very big."

"I don't see why I should get mixed up in this mess. Take it up with Dewitt."

"Jesus Christ, Neil, don't you understand what I'm telling you? This man is not gonna stand still for a no answer unless he knows the whole score. Come down, will ya? You're gonna be doing Dewitt a bigger favor than me. This man can play rough when he don't get his way. He don't like no doublecross."

"There's no doublecross to my knowledge. Dewitt told you he'd try to get the royalty, he didn't promise anything. It just so happens that I personally know that Stanton has already sold it. There's nothing Hugh can do about that."

"Okay," Joe said. "All I want you to do is to tell it to this man. That's all."

"Is he there now? Put him on the phone, I'll tell him."

"He'll be here at nine. A phone

call won't help nothing. Just come down. Christ, it's not gonna kill you to drive down here, will it? It won't take more than five minutes and we'll get this thing straightened out, once and for all. How about it, buddy?"

Neil shrugged. "Okay, Joe. I'll try to be there by nine."

"Thanks, buddy. You won't regret it."

"I'm not so sure of that," Neil said, hanging up the phone.

Joe Rizzola was alone in the liquor store when Neil Gordon arrived a few minutes before nine. They exchanged greetings and though Rizzola smiled and talked a lot, Neil could tell that the little man was sharply on edge. The muscles along his jawline seemed stiff and his eyes remained wary even when he laughed.

"You're gonna like Jimmy. A real prince of a guy. This man would do anything for a buddy. I mean that, Neil. Any goddam thing in the world."

"I still don't know what he wants with me."

"Here's the thing, Neil. The man says, 'All right. I'll see Stanton tomorrow. You know, you heard him yourself. And nothing happened. So it's just a case of—it's just a case of this, Neil. The man gave me money because I told him he was going to get in on a good thing. Goddam it. The deal—well, you know, the louse welshed. Now this man



stayed away from me and didn't call. He comes into town and he's ready to blow my head off because the deal is great—he knows everything, gets it all checked—and he thinks I've got his money in my pocket. I run off and maybe I've got the damn deal in my pocket and he knows nothing about it. It's just like you want to put in five G's in that damned Calabazas Canyon deal and I'm supposed to do it and you think you're in and then you're out, and you'd be goddam mad, too, and it's just a simple thing."

"I know, but what the hell can I do about it?"

"Just explain to the man. You're vice president of Dewitt Drilling, you can straighten the whole thing out."

"Why won't he believe you? I thought you said this Jimmy was a friend of yours. What kind of a guy is he?"

"He's an awful nice guy. Those people are all wonderful guys if you're on the right side."

"What side is that?"

"Our side, buddy. That's what I wanted to tell that goddam fool Dewitt. These people on your side can do you an awful lot of good—that's all—and I'm still gonna say it."

"Where does this Jimmy live?"

"Lots of places. Every time you turn your head he's off to some place."

"He's in town now, though?"

"He's in town today. He's def-

initely in town, but he's in a very important meeting and he's gonna take time out to come here and talk to you. He wants to get to the bottom of things. All I want to do is get you people together and sit down and tell them what happened, and then I want to clear myself and you, as far as that goes. That's all."

"Me? What do I have to be cleared about? Listen, what's going on here anyway?"

"Nothing. Look, if they want to do anything, the great Dewitt is the one—it's entirely up to them. I don't want to have anything to do with it, that's all."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Gordon asked, staring at Rizzola, completely perplexed.

"Look, I wouldn't have gone to this man if I'd thought Dewitt was gonna welsh. This is a big man and otherwise I wouldn't have gone to him and said, 'look, let's have this so we can have this, and then the man is gonna expect this, this and this from us. If he's got any beefs, we have to represent him, and we will.' So we're all right, you're all right. The big guy is Dewitt."

Gordon walked over to the large cold storage vault which occupied one whole wall and reached in for a cold can of beer, puncturing it on an opener fastened to the side of door. Slowly he walked back and stopped before Joe, shaking his head. "I swear, Joe. You're a mental case."



Joe hurried to the refrigerator and got himself a can of beer.

"I'm telling you the facts. Don't you get it?"

"No. I guess I'm stupid."

"Well, it's a goddam shame that I thought we were in on this deal and I went to this man for money, because I like doing those people good turns. They do me good turns and goddam it all, I thought that the man was going to be set up and the windup is I told you what good they can do Dewitt and all of us—which they can—with any kind of goddam trouble all over the United States, as far as that goes."

"They must be pretty big people."

"They certainly are, Neil. There's no bigger. There's no goddam bigger—period, and I mean that sincerely."

"Joe, you've got to understand I have nothing to do with this deal. Dewitt said he'd try and as far as I know he went to Stanton but it was already sold. Since that's the case, there's nothing left for sale."

"All right then, there's nothing left for sale, Neil. Then he better grab his best goddam hold because he's in for a rough time now. I can't speak any plainer than that, can I?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's the difference? Why go into any lengthy—the hell with it. Jimmy will lay it on the line."

Neil placed the empty beer can on the counter top and took out

his pipe, slowly lighting it. "Okay, Joe, I'll wait."

Joe Rizzola got himself another beer. "It's a goddam shame," he said, shaking his head sadly. "But that crazy fool should know better."

Just then the front door opened and Jack Nitta entered the store.

"Hi, Jack," Joe said, smiling nervously. "Where's Jimmy?"

Nitta ignored the question. "Is this the guy?"

"Yeah. This is Neil Gordon."

Nitta nodded his head toward the door. "Come with me," he said.

Neil did not move. "And where's that?" he asked.

Nitta smiled coldly. "Right in front. Jimmy wants to see you alone in the car."

"I don't know if I want to see him alone in the car."

Nitta laughed scornfully. "He's not gonna bite, mister."

"It's okay, Neil," Joe said. "Jack Nitta works for Jimmy."

Neil shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," he said. "Lead the way."

The black Cadillac was parked at the curb, behind Gordon's Thunderbird. As Neil approached the car, he saw that the man was sitting in the back seat, his face hidden in shadows. Nitta opened the front door and nodded for him to get in, then closed the door and went back to the store. Neil turned in the seat and stared at the man before speaking. He was tall and impeccably



dressed, his dark features handsome in the dim light.

"I'm Neil Gordon," he said, holding the large bowled pipe close to his lips. "What's on your mind?"

"Jimmy Grazio," he said, pausing for emphasis. "Joe was telling me how you're vice president of Dewitt Drilling. Is that right?"

"Yes. That's correct."

"Then you're Dewitt's partner in this Calabasas Canyon deal?"

"Well, indirectly. Dewitt Drilling is a general partner. I'm a stockholder in the company."

"What percentage?"

"Twenty percent."

"Not bad," Jimmy said.

"Well, it's not as good as it sounds. You see I only get twenty percent of thirty percent."

"You mean Dewitt Drilling only owns thirty percent of the leasehold?"

"That's right. Nathan Small owns the other thirty percent and forty percent is owned by four limited partners who each own ten percent."

"All right," Jimmy said. "What's wrong with Dewitt?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"Why did he welsh?"

"He didn't welsh. As I recall he merely told Joe he'd see what he could do about getting him a two percent royalty. However, he was too late. Stanton had already sold it."

"Don't you con me now, buddy."

"Why should I?"

"How much do you know about Rizzola?"

"Not much. I've been here with Dewitt a few times. That's all."

"Do you think he's already got the royalty?"

"No, I don't."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"How do you know?"

"Well, as I just told you, Stanton sold out before Dewitt got to him."

"Well, I don't give a damn! I'm gonna get that two percent royalty so you better tell that stupid Dewitt to get to work on it."

"That's going to be pretty hard to do when it's already sold."

"Don't give me any smart talk. It's not gonna be hard at all compared to what its gonna be if he don't get it. I'm telling you, buddy, I'm not playing games. He better get it up, but fast."

"Is that what you want me to tell him?" Neil could feel the perspiration forming all over his face and he wondered if Grazio had noticed it. There was a penetrating coldness to the man's voice, an edge of violence and menace that evoked an uncontrollable fear in Gordon's chest.

"I want more than that from you, buddy. I want you to arrange a meeting with Dewitt and let's get this thing straightened out before it's too goddam late. Now, you set it up with Joe. No need anybody getting hurt for nothing. Okay, buddy?"



"I'll do what I can," Neil said. "I can't promise. But I'll ask him. That's all I can do."

Grazio's lips parted in his famous fixed smile, revealing his white even teeth. "I don't want any old college try. You set up that meeting and no goddam butts about it. Understand?"

"Well, what can I do if he refuses?"

Grazio shook his head. "You don't know me very well, do you, buddy?"

Neil shook his head. "No, I don't."

"Listen friend, I've got a reputation in this country and if you don't believe me, you better check around. You'll find out when I want something I get it. Christ himself can't stop me. And now I want that two percent. You arrange that meeting and no more arguments."

"All right," Neil said.

"Now, that's better," Grazio said. "Do me a favor, will you, and tell Jack I'm ready."

Neil frowned, puzzled for a moment, then quickly opened the door and stepped out.

"Goodnight," Grazio said, with a friendly wave of his hand. "I'll be seeing you. Thanks for coming down."

"Goodnight," Neil said, more puzzled than ever.

The door chimes burst into melodious sound and Hugh, stretched out on one of the sofas, heard the

footsteps of the maid crossing toward the front entrance hall.

Neil came into the room and Hugh noticed that he looked pale and tense, not up to his usual aloof self. They shook hands and Dewitt got out the Scotch and two glasses.

"Sit down," Hugh said. "You look worried. What gives, boy?"

"I've just had a most extraordinary experience," Neil said, gulping down half of the drink. "Your friend Joe Rizzola won't take no for an answer on that royalty. Or should I say, his friend won't take no. Joe would be perfectly willing to forget the whole mess, I'm sure."

"So that's it," Hugh said. "That jerk's been calling here all day long. I finally told Bessie to say I was out whenever he called."

"I think that was a mistake. You should have talked to him."

"Well, goddamit, I did. I told him the royalty was sold. That's it. What else does he want?"

Neil finished the rest of the drink and got up and mixed himself another one. He sat down again and carefully repeated, almost verbatim, the entire conversation with Rizzola and Grazio.

Hugh nodded disapprovingly as he listened, his blue eyes annoyed.

"The hell with them," he said, when Neil finished. "Who the hell does that punk think he is anyway?"

"Look, Hugh, all you've got to do is see the guy and tell him. Explain the whole situation."



"Why should I? I had no deal with this Grazio. Hell, I had no deal with Joe as far as that goes."

"I know, but that's not the point. This Grazio thinks you had and he wants you to keep up your end of the bargain."

"I don't believe that. Those bums are trying to squeeze me, and they're not gonna get away with it."

"Well, I don't know," Neil said. "I just don't want to get in the middle of this squabble."

"Why should you?"

"Well, you know. This Grazio wants me to bring you there for a conference."

"For Christ's sake, Neil, you're not afraid of him, are you?"

"It's not that. I just don't want to get involved. I told you at the party you were making a mistake. Rizzola's a hood, just like I told you."

"Well, it's not gonna do him a goddam bit of good."

"I'm telling you, Hugh. This Grazio is a mean customer. I think maybe we ought to check up on him."

"You mean call the police?"

"I don't know. It might be a mistake. There's nothing to call them about. At least, not yet."

"I agree with you. I don't like running to the cops even if it's just checking on somebody. They always want to know too many things, and this would sound pretty stupid. There's been no actual threat made. Frankly, I think it will all

come out in the wash. Don't worry about it."

"I wish I had your optimism," Neil said. "Maybe you wouldn't feel so confident if you had met this Grazio."

"I doubt that," Hugh said. "I doubt that very much."

The telephone in the Dewitt household began to ring at all hours of the day and night after Neil Gordon's visit to the liquor store. During the first week the calls came in on the regular line and were answered by the servants. At first Hugh had been puzzled when the servants had told him about the numerous calls and the one word message: "Welsher." It seemed silly to him. Silly and even childish. What did they expect to gain by such amateurish methods? Did they think he would run out and give them the royalty just to stop the calls? Then when the calls started coming in on his private unlisted line he became annoyed. The phone would ring and he would pick it up, saying "Hello" as usual, and there would be a long dead silence, then that one word, "Welsher." At first Hugh had merely hung up, but after a number of these calls, some of them as late as three and four in the morning, coming in on his bedroom extension, the annoyance had turned to aggravation and then anger. "You better cut this out," he had warned. "I'm getting goddam fed up." But no matter



what he said the voice at the other end never answered him. He could hear the caller's heavy breathing and he was certain that this too was on purpose. They were trying to frighten him. The next day he had the telephone number changed and did not receive any calls for two days. The number was changed four times in a three-week period without success. The tempo of the calls increased during the night hours until it became impossible for Hugh to get any sleep. It would ring three and four times between the hours of one and six in the morning. It got to the point where Hugh finally left the receiver off the hook. Since much of his business was transacted by telephone, it was impossible to disconnect the telephone permanently as Nancy had recommended. The calls were beginning to get on Nancy's nerves and one night, in exasperation, she had suggested that Hugh call the police.

But Hugh had shaken his head stubbornly. "The police can't stop it. What can they do? Tell Rizzola and Grazio to stop calling us? They would deny it and that would be the end of it as far as the police are concerned. No! I won't give those hoods that satisfaction. I say let them call. It's a lot more work for them than it is for us."

And so the discussions went on and the weeks passed and calls never stopped. One morning while driving to the field Hugh noticed

a black sedan behind him. Suddenly he was positive that he had seen that same car behind him a number of times in the past week. Hugh made a mental note to notice in the future. That evening on his way home, the black sedan was behind him again. On an impulse, Hugh steered the large Lincoln Continental to the side of the road and stopped, watching the sedan in his rear-view mirror. It seemed to waver for a moment as if the driver were undecided as to his next move, then suddenly shot forward with an increased burst of speed. Hugh watched closely as it sped past him, but all he saw was the blurred image of a fairly corpulent man of dark complexion. Hugh waited until the sedan had disappeared over a rise ahead, then slowly brought the Continental back into the traffic lane and drove home at moderate speed, his eyes scanning both sides of the road and side streets, but he never saw it again.

That night he called Neil Gordon and compared notes. Neil had also received calls but not as many. He had talked to Rizzola a few times and it seemed that the little man was greatly disturbed. Neil suggested again that Hugh reconsider about the conference, but Hugh declined. "I don't have anything to discuss," he said. "There's no deal and that's all there is to it."

The next morning Hugh drove to his office in Van Nuys before going to the oilfields. He parked



the Continental near the building entrance and slid across the seat, coming out on the curb side. He closed the door and pressed a coin into the parking meter. He turned and Joe Rizzola was standing at his shoulder.

"I want to talk to you," Rizzola said.

"Okay, talk."

"That's Jack," Rizzola said, pointing to Nitta who sat in the yellow Cadillac which was parked just one car length in front of the Lincoln.

"Jack who?"

"Jack Nitta," Rizzola said. "He's a friend of Jimmy Grazio's."

"Okay," Dewitt said. "Now what do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Here I am. Start talking."

Rizzola gave a nervous laugh, his close-set eyes watching Nitta, who sat calmly cleaning his fingernails with a small pocket knife.

Hugh started to pull away. "Wait," Joe said.

"What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Well, goddamit, talk."

Rizzola shrugged his thin shoulders. "I want you to talk to me personally."

"Come in my office. I have a long distance call coming in from San Francisco."

"I want you to meet my partner. Would you come by my place tomorrow?"

"I can't. I'm having trouble with circulation in the well."

"Come after. I don't care what time. Any time."

"I can't promise."

"You're making a lot of trouble," Rizzola said.

"Is that all you've got to say to me?"

"I've got to talk to you."

"Goodbye," Hugh said. "I've got work to do."

At ten-thirty that same morning, Hugh received a phone call at his office.

"Is this Hugh Dewitt?" a soft well-modulated voice asked.

"Yes," Hugh said.

"This is Jimmy."

"Who?"

"Jimmy."

"Jimmy who?"

"I want to see you," the voice said.

"Well, I'm at my office."

Silence.

"I'm leaving for the field in an hour."

Still silence.

"Who did you say it was?"

"Jimmy."

"Jimmy Who?"

"Jimmy Grazio."

Then the line went dead.

That afternoon Neil Gordon was at the field when Hugh arrived, and he briefly told him about the two encounters. Neil was thoughtful after Hugh finished.

"I don't know, Hugh. I have a feeling about this thing and it's not good."



"Well, for Christ's sake, what can they do?"

"I don't know. That's just it. I've been doing some checking around and I find that this Grazio's been mixed up in all kinds of crimes, including murder. You know he was arrested four years ago as a suspect in the Hollywood murder of those two characters who were killed while sitting in the front seat of their car. He's a known extortionist. That's the way he makes his living."

"Well, I can't help that," Hugh said. "There's no two percent to sell. What can I do about it?"

"It's like I told you. It can't hurt to talk to them."

"No. That would be a mistake. As long as I stay away from them I don't have any deal whatsoever."

"Maybe your right. But Rizzola keeps calling me and now it seems that I'm implicated."

"That's it. You went down to his store. You shouldn't have done that. Evidently, that's the way they work. They tell you to do something, and whether you want to or not, it's a deal."

"The way things stand now, I don't see how this is going to end."

"They'll get tired and give up soon enough."

"Let's hope so," Neil said.

Hugh nodded and started out of the small tarpaper shack. "Anything happening at number eight yet?"

"No. Casing pressure went to

zero sometime during the night."

"Well, are the boys baling?"

"Yeah. They washed it with calcium chloride and started the bale fluid."

"We'll put this baby on the pump this time. Too damn much sand down there to flow by head."

Hugh went up to number eight to supervise the work. He gave orders for a while, then took off his suit jacket, and the next time Neil saw him he was working right along with the men, his clothes black with the oily scum, his face flushed, his blue eyes excited. Neil shook his head and lit his pipe, keeping a respectful distance from the hard work and the slime.

That evening Hugh invited Neil home for dinner. They were on their second drink when the phone rang. A moment later Bessie came out and announced that the call was for Mr. Gordon.

"Take it in the den," Hugh said.

"I didn't tell anybody I was coming here tonight. I didn't even know it myself until the last minute. You better come with me, Hugh."

Hugh stood up and nodded. "We'll be right back, honey. Let's have dinner on the patio. Okay?"

"That's fine with me," she said. "Don't be too long."

Hugh closed the den door and sat on the edge of the desk, leaving the ornate leather chair for Neil.

"Have you got an extension you could listen on?" Neil asked. "I



have a feeling it's one of those characters again."

Hugh nodded and hurried out of the den, returning seconds later with a telephone extension which he plugged into a wall outlet.

"Let's come on together," Neil said, and they both lifted their receivers simultaneously.

"Hello," Neil said into the mouthpiece.

"Neil, buddy?"

"Who's this?"

"Joe."

"What's on your mind, Joe?"

"Neil, we're gonna have to straighten this goddam thing out. These people are getting anxious. They're not gonna stand still much longer."

"What do you want from me?"

"Well, Jimmy's pretty goddam mad. If I was you I'd do something. I wouldn't want a guy like that mad at me, buddy."

"Why is he mad at me? What have I done?"

"You know. You were supposed to set up this conference. You said you'd set up a date."

"I said I would do what I could. I didn't promise anymore than that."

"Well, that don't cut no goddam ice with that man. Those people can do plenty if they get mad enough."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Look, buddy, I'm your pal. I'm only passing the information along. Jack was in here a while ago and

from what he said I wouldn't want to be in your shoes, buddy."

"What do you mean? What did he say?"

"They've been watching you every minute of the day. They know all your movements. See, they told me you was at Dewitt's place. Goddamit, I'm innocent like you. I don't know these things. They tell me. They say, look Joe, Gordon went here and there, he bought this and that. They know everything. They've got a goddam network. All over the country. I'm telling you, they're big people."

"What did they say about me?"

"Oh, they made threats. They were pretty sore."

"What kind of threats?"

"Hell, Neil, buddy, those people don't care. They'd just as soon split your head open as spit on the sidewalk. They're that kind of people."

"Is that what they said they'd do to me?"

"Yeah, that and other things."

"What for? What the hell can I do if Dewitt won't come down?"

"I don't know. Let's forget it then."

"Listen, what's this Jimmy's number? Let me talk to him. This is ridiculous."

"Look, buddy-boy, I'll be here till ten, you understand? So you make a date with Dewitt, talk to him, just do that and I'll call up those people right in front of you and say, 'Now look, this man has done what he said he'd do and he's all for us. He



brought the man to me and the man is here.' That's all, buddy. There won't be another peep out of them. Believe me when I tell you this. All you do is bring Dewitt down here so I can find out why the hell he's doing what he's doing. Then I call those people up right in front of you and say 'Your man is Hugh Dewitt. Gordon did what he's supposed to do — period. Now I don't want anybody bothering him.' And no one will. You've got my word of honor."

"I see."

"Well, can you do that?"

"I'll try."

"Listen, buddy-boy, you won't regret it. You do that and nothing will happen to you. In fact, the man will shake your hand and pat you on the back. Now, you believe me when I tell you something."

"There's only one thing, Joe. What if he won't come down?"

"Well, then, I wash my hands of the whole thing. If that crazy fool wants to get his head blown off, good luck to him." "I just wanted to give you guys fair warning."

"What have you gotten us into, Joe?"

"Look, Neil, what can I do about it? I tried to give the man his money back and he won't take it. He's been in and out of town for a whole month. He's a busy man. A very busy man. Well, now he's here to stay awhile, and he's gonna bring trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Well, you'll find out, buddy. You've never had trouble until you deal with guys like this. I'm trying to help you, don't you see?"

"Well, I'll talk to Hugh and see what he says."

"Do as you please. Only remember, if he doesn't cooperate I'm washing my hands of this whole mess."

"You mean you're out of it entirely?"

"Well, if there's any deal, I represent those people, nobody else. And if I'm in the deal, certainly they're in behind me, and any trouble you may have, no matter what, I'll guarantee my people will lean over backwards, sideways, forward—because I'll see to it that they do. Dewitt will never have a worry the rest of his life if he wants protection wherever he goes."

"All right, I'll talk to Dewitt and let you know."

"Okay, buddy, you do that. I'll be waiting for your call."

Neil held the phone until he heard it click at the other end, then slowly replaced the receiver on the cradle.

Hugh stood up. "That little snott-nosed punk," he said, his face flushed with anger.

Neil leaned back in the chair and took a deep breath, letting it escape with a hiss through clenched teeth. "This thing is getting out of hand. As fantastic as it sounds, I have a weird feeling that Joe isn't kidding. If you'd met Grazio you'd understand what I mean."



Hugh came forward and sat on the edge of the desk, his blue eyes critical as he studied Neil's worried expression. "Forget it. Those bums will never own a part of any business I'm in."

"Well, what do we do now?"

"Nothing. They can all go to hell."

"That's all right for you to say. I'm the guy they're really after."

Hugh smiled sympathetically, the anger suddenly forgotten. "Neil, don't let that little punk scare you. It's just a lot of hot air."

Neil took out his handkerchief and carefully mopped his brow.

"I wish I could believe that," he said. "I sure in hell wish I could."

"Well, why not? For God's sake. What else can they do? Think, man what else can they do but talk?"

"I don't know. I hope to God you're right."

"Sure, I'm right. Now, come on, let's have dinner and forget about this nonsense."

Later that evening, after Neil had left, the phone rang again. Hugh picked it up in the den. "Hello."

"Dewitt?"

"Yes."

"Listen, welsher, we're all done playing games. You asked for it and now you're gonna get it."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind. You'll find out soon enough."

"I want you to stop calling here, understand?"

"Yeah, well let's see if you understand this. Either you string along, or you and that junior partner of yours better start running."

Hugh jumped up, almost knocking the phone off the desk. "Damn it, don't try threatening me . . ."

"Shut up," the man shouted. "Maybe, we'll save it for your wife. How about that, pal?"

Hugh dropped the phone and went into action. Orders were given and decisions were made with speed and authority. Nancy was not to leave the house under any circumstances. A call was made to Neil Gordon and when he heard Hugh's voice, he jumped out of bed and hurried to the Encino estate. Nancy and Neil now sat in the den listening to Hugh.

"Going to the police may be dangerous. We're being watched every minute of the day, and as far as I know, the phone could be tapped. They certainly could have done it easily enough. And that goes for your phone, too, Neil. Don't say anything on that phone you don't want them to know."

"Great," Neil said. "I hate to say I told you so, but I did the night of the party. Now, see what a mess we're in. That little creep of a Rizzola, I'd like to break his skinny neck for him."

"Let's forget that," Hugh said. "Now the way I figure it, the call to the police will have to be made from a phone booth."



"You want me to make it?" Neil asked.

"Yes, tonight."

"Well, if I'm followed won't that look suspicious?"

"Maybe. Stop and buy some gas, and while they're servicing the car, make the call."

"All right. What shall I tell the police?"

"Tell them someone is shaking me down. But don't tell them any more than necessary. Let's save that for the meeting."

"And where shall we hold the meeting?"

"I've got that one figured out. My lawyer's office at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. They should get there at least a half hour earlier."

"Okay, Hugh. I hope you're right. They're going to find out, sooner or later, about our going to the police. They might get awfully mad."

"That's a chance I'll have to take. Nobody threatens me and gets away with it."

Neil nodded and, without another word, got up to leave. Hugh watched him go, then turned and smiled apologetically at Nancy.

"He'll get over it. He blames me now for having started the whole thing by offering that percentage to Rizzola. Neil's not used to trouble and he's frightened."

"Well, I'm not afraid," Nancy said. "I don't see why I have to stay home. I have all kinds of

things to do in the next few days. I just can't stay home. It's impossible."

Hugh reached over and patted her knee. "Now, sweetheart, don't you give me any trouble. Just do as I told you. I'm sure everything will be straightened out in a week at most."

Hugh Dewitt's lawyer was Tom Kelly, a short corpulent man with a shiny bald head and an air of importance far beyond his comic appearance. He was soft-spoken and extremely reticent for an Irishman. Now he sat at his desk, listening incredulously to the two men in front of him. They were Captain Olin Martin, head of the Los Angeles Police Intelligence Division, and his assistant, Sergeant Ernie Tucker.

"Are you sure you don't know anything about this?" Martin asked.

"Not a word," Kelly said. "I better call Mr. Dewitt. There must be some mistake."

"No," Martin said. "Don't call him. We'll wait if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Make yourselves comfortable."

The first one to arrive was Neil Gordon.

"This is quite a mess," he said. "I hope you people can clear it up before anything tragic happens."

"Who's behind this shakedown?" Martin said.

"Well, there are two or three people. But I believe the leader is a



man by the name of Jimmy Grazio."

Martin smiled and winked at Tucker. "Well, Ernie, how does that sound to you?"

"Not bad," Tucker said.

"You know something about this man?" Gordon asked.

"A few things," Martin said, leaning back in his chair, bringing his hands up behind his head.

Hugh came in then and was introduced by Tom Kelly. Hugh looked tired and nervous. "I hated to leave my wife alone," he said, after shaking hands with Tucker and Martin. "I want to get back as soon as I can."

"Give us the story from the beginning," Martin said. "And don't skip anything. I want all the details."

Hugh nodded and sat down. He told the story from the meeting with Rizzola on the night of the party to the threat against Nancy the night before. Neil interrupted at times to give his version of the phone calls and of his meeting with Grazio at Rizzola's liquor store. Tucker took notes as he listened, asking Hugh or Neil to repeat when they spoke too quickly.

"Typical M.O.," Martin said when the two men had finished. "Now here's what we'll do. I want recordings of all phone calls. I'll have Sergeant Tucker at your house with a recorder and an induction coil. Then we'll see what happens."

"Both our places are being

watched," Neil said. "They'd spot you in a minute."

"Let us worry about that," Martin said. "I think your house would be best Mr. Dewitt. Now that they've got you on the run, they're more likely to start making the threats direct. And besides, we can help them out on that score."

"Anything you say," Hugh said. "Just give me some action. Because I'm telling you right now. If they hurt my wife, I'll kill them myself. And that's a promise."

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Dewitt. Jimmy Grazio is no amateur. I would wager he's personally killed at least a dozen men. Your chances of ever finding and killing Jimmy are a million to one. So forget that and leave the whole thing to the police. We've had plenty of experience with his kind."

"My promise still stands," Hugh said.

Martin smiled patiently. "Okay, Mr. Dewitt. Now the plan is this. Sometime this evening we'll smuggle Sergeant Tucker into your home. I would advise you to be there also Mr. Gordon. Once the sergeant gets there the phone will be busy."

"How do you plan on doing that?" Neil asked.

"I don't know just yet," Martin said. "But I'll think of something."

Hugh stood up. "I better get back," he said. "Damn it, everything happens at once. I really should be out at the field right now. I'm



having circulation trouble with our number eight well."

"Why don't you go to the field?" Martin said. "They're not going to do anything just yet. They could have done it last night if they had wanted to. All they're interested in right now is trying to scare you. And from what happened last night, I'm sure they feel they've succeeded."

"I can't take that chance," Hugh said. "So if that's all you want, I'll be off."

"Just one more thing," Martin said. "I have a couple of forms for you and Mr. Gordon to sign. Strictly routine."

"What is it?" Neil asked.

"It's written permission to tap Mr. Dewitt's phone line and to make tape recordings. You can sign as witness. Otherwise, you know, it's illegal in this state. Sergeant Tucker will also have a complete statement for you to sign this evening."

"Is that routine also?"

"Oh, yes. We can't assign men to a case unless there's a complaint."

Neil shook his head. "You know, it's ridiculous. I'm just an innocent bystander. How the hell did I get involved in all this? I wish somebody would explain it to me."

"I will someday when I have more time," Martin said. "Right now you better sign these forms and leave. We'll wait a few minutes and make sure you're tail is gone before going out." Martin stopped and

smiled at Hugh, extending his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Dewitt, for coming to us. It was a very smart move on your part."

Back at Police Headquarters, within the confines of his private office, Captain Olin Martin was pondering the tricky problem of entering the Dewitt household without being seen by Grazio's men. He sat leaning far back in his swivel chair, his feet up on top of the gray steel desk, his eyes closed, his hands clasped behind his head.

Sergeant Tucker stood by the window, absently staring down at the busy street, seven floors below. Tucker was also lost deep in thought. He was thinking about Jimmy Grazio. Although he had no proof, he was certain that Grazio had had a hand in the bombing of Alan Avery's house. Avery had been a teacher who had witnessed a gangland slaying. In an attempt to silence him, one of the gang members known as "The Little Bomber" had planted a time bomb in the Avery home, killing not only Avery, but his wife and two daughters as well. Tucker had worked on that case for a solid six months. He'd ended up with a lot of theories about the men involved, but not a shred of incriminating evidence. Now there was a chance for another crack at Grazio. And Tucker found himself hoping that this time he could get his hands on enough evidence to bust Grazio and



his whole dirty syndicate wide open.

"Have you come up with anything yet?" Martin asked, not moving from his position, his eyes still closed.

"What?"

"This is no time for daydreaming," Martin said. "Have you come up with a plan yet?"

"Oh, no. I'll tell you one thing though. We better get Grazio under surveillance. I want to know where to pick him up when this thing breaks. We don't want him slipping out of town."

"I'll get the boys to check this out," Martin said. He opened his eyes now and sitting up in his chair. "Now all I've got to do is figure some way of getting you inside the damn place."

Tucker frowned thoughtfully as the captain went on. "We could use a delivery truck, but I don't know. They might get suspicious. If they've been watching the place for a month, they're bound to spot a phony."

"I've got it," Tucker said. "I'll use a cab. Get me a woman and a kid. I'll put the recorder in a suitcase. Just visiting relatives."

"Not bad," Martin said. "It might work. I'll get Alice Moresby. She can use one of her own kids. Christ, she's got enough of them."

"You mean Sergeant Moresby in bunko?"

Martin nodded. "We'll wait till it's dark. Some of those boys could recognize you. The idea is to make

those guys talk on the phone. Get them angry enough to make threats and for Christ's sake, get it all on the tape, Ernie. Be careful what you say to Dewitt and Gordon. The defense attorney will be hot as hell after them. They'll try to show collusion. We've got to be clean. Tapes are a damn touchy subject in our courts. I'd hate to go through all this trouble and lose out at the trial."

"I'll be careful," Tucker said. "I've done it before. I know the score."

"Okay, Ernie. Good luck. Don't leave the house until you've got a case. I don't care if it takes a week. Stay there."

Tucker left the window and walked up to the desk. He leaned forward, his deep-set eyes gravely studying the Captain. "Do you honestly think we can make something like this stick to a guy like Grazio?"

"Yes. Absolutely. If we play our cards right, we'll send him up for at least five years."

"That's all I wanted to know," Tucker said.

Tucker sat in the back of the taxicab, next to Alice Moresby, softly humming to himself. Alice held her youngest daughter, three-year old Marjorie on her lap, gently stroking the child's blond curls.

"Mommy."

"Yes, darling."

"I want to go home."

"Pretty soon now, dearest. Lie



your little head against Mommy and rest a bit."

"Mommy. What's the man saying?"

"Daddy is just humming, baby."

"Mommy. That's not my . . ."

Alice quickly clasped a large coarse hand over the child's mouth. "Now, shush, and go to sleep."

Marjorie began to whimper. Alice quickly removed her hand and began stroking her hair again. Tucker let out a sigh of relief as the child obediently closed her little eyes and dozed off.

After a while the cab turned up the circular drive and came to a stop before the Dewitt home. Tucker paid the driver and the three of them walked up the flagstone steps. They waited quietly as the chimes sounded within the house. The door opened and Hugh Dewitt stood before them, his large body filling the doorway.

Tucker extended his hand and spoke softly. "Act like you're glad to see us. You know, long lost relatives."

Hugh nodded and his voice boomed out. "You old son of a gun. Glad you could finally make it out this way. Come in." He bent down and swooped up the little girl in his arms, whirling her about. Marjorie squealed delightedly as Alice and Tucker followed him into the house. Tucker closed the door and dropped the heavy suitcase. "This is Sergeant Alice Moresby and her daughter, Marjorie," he said.

Hugh set Marjorie down gently and shook hands with Alice.

"You worked it out beautifully," he complimented Tucker.

Neil Gordon and Nancy came to meet them in the entrance hall, and after introductions, the three men went into the den and closed the door.

Joe was stocking up his front shelves with beer when Jack Nitta walked in.

"My goddam luck," Jack said, going to the back of the store and the small sink in the washroom. Joe followed him. "I got a flat miles from nowhere. Goddamit, I was supposed to meet Jimmy in Beverly Hills for an important conference."

"What are you doing around here?"

"What the hell do you think I'm doing around here?"

"I don't know. Did you want to see me?"

"I was just out talking to the boys casing Dewitt's place and out at the oil field. All I can tell you, buddy, is we better get some action, goddam quick. Jimmy is running out of patience."

"Yeah, well, I'm in favor of action, all right."

"Did you talk to Dewitt today?"

"No, I'm waiting like Jimmy said. They oughta be calling themselves after the deal last night. I understand that bit about his



daughter really scared the hell out of him."

Just then the phone rang and Joe hurried to the front of the store to answer it. Nitta followed, wiping his hands on a large white handkerchief.

"Rizzola's Liquor Store."

"Joe. This is Neil."

"Hey, how are you, buddy?"

"Not good. Those friends of yours are going too far."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean threatening Dewitt's wife was uncalled for. It can only lead to trouble."

"Now, wait, buddy. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't."

"Hey, wait. Jack Nitta was going to attend a big meeting with Jimmy but got a flat tire on his car. He's here now. Maybe you'd like to talk to him."

"Who's he?"

"What do you mean, who's he? He's Jimmy's right arm."

"Okay, put him on."

"Hello, Gordon."

"Jack, what's the story on threatening Dewitt like that?"

"Listen, I'm going to tell you something. You just worry about yourself and tell Dewitt we're through waiting for him to make up his mind."

"Why should I worry?"

"That's something you better ask Jimmy. I haven't got anything to do with that. Unless, of course,

you've got something constructive to offer."

"I can't do anything. This is Dewitt's problem. What have I got to do with it?"

"Let me tell you something, Gordon. Jimmy's not going to listen. He's not going to listen because everytime you tell him something you back out of it."

"What have I done?"

"He didn't see Joe."

"Huh?"

"He didn't see Joe."

"I know, but it's not my . . ."

"How do you think Jimmy feels about that?"

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

"Well, he's goddam mad."

"Look, why don't you have Jimmy call me? I'm at Dewitt's..."

"I know where you are, buddy. I know where you are every minute of the goddam day and night."

"So I understand. Why?"

"Are you gonna be there a while?"

"Yes."

"I'll see if I can get Jimmy to call you."

"I'd appreciate it."

"Okay."

Neil Gordon dropped the receiver and waited for Sergeant Tucker's reaction. Tucker pushed a couple of buttons on the recorder and it stopped spinning. He looked up and smiled.

"Not bad. Not bad at all for number one."



"Enough there to implicate those two characters?" Hugh asked.

"It's a beginning. There'll be bigger and better ones before we're through."

"You did a good job, Neil," Hugh said.

"Thanks."

"I'll tell you," Tucker said. "When Grazio calls up, let him do the talking. Act as if you're scared of him. Don't tip your hand. Let him hang himself. If I know Jimmy he will."

"Are you sure he'll call?"

"Oh, he'll call, all right. You're ripe enough for him now."

Dewitt fixed some drinks and they sat, waiting. Tucker toyed with the recorder, playing back the conversation, grinning at some of the damning statements. The telephone had been placed on top of an induction coil, which in turn was connected to the tape recorder. The amplifier was turned on so that the voices came out of the speaker as they were being recorded on the tape. That way he knew exactly what he was getting on the tape.

The call from Jimmy Grazio came almost an hour later. Neil answered the phone.

"Hello."

"Who's this?"

"Neil Gordon."

"Jimmy."

"Oh."

"Look, somebody called me and said you wanted to speak to me."

"Yes. Listen, Jimmy, what is this all about?"

"You listen to me, Gordon. I want to be a man with you and I want you to be a man with Dewitt. Now, this has gone far enough, believe me. We put up our goddam money. People are talking. Now, I'm not gonna stand for it. And I'm going to tell you another thing. As far as Dewitt is concerned, I don't give a damn. People can go to the police all they want. The police aren't gonna watch him twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. You know that."

"What do you mean?"

"If he so much as thinks coppers, he's gonna die. I'll tell you right now, Gordon, I'm plenty goddam mad about this whole deal. So, you tell Dewitt I want to talk to him. Will you put him on the phone?"

"I sure will. Let me ask you one thing, Jimmy. Why are you so damn mad at me?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Gordon. I know that you're in with Dewitt and I know you've done a little talking about me. Do you understand? I don't like it."

"Well, that's where you're mistaken. I haven't talked about you. If somebody told you that I did, he's a liar."

"Let me talk to Dewitt."

"All right. Just a minute."

Neil handed the receiver to Dewitt and shook his head. Tucker held up a thumb and finger to-



gether to indicate that everything was just dandy.

"Yes," Dewitt said into the mouthpiece.

"Let me tell you something, Dewitt. Now, we're not going to get fouled up on this deal. You know that, don't you?"

"I didn't know I had any deal with you."

"Well, you had a deal with Joe. Is that right?"

"I started the deal with Joe and told him that the deal was off."

"Well, it's not off with me, and I'm gonna tell you one goddam thing—and I don't give a damn who knows it, coppers or no coppers, I'll blow your goddam head off."

"Now see here, Grazio, don't hand me that kind of talk. I don't even know you."

"You aren't going to. You don't have to know me, Dewitt. All you've gotta know is that I'm giving you one goddam week to straighten this thing out and if you don't, I'll blow your goddam head off. All your money won't do you a damn bit of good."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You, Gordon and Joe straighten this goddam thing out and straighten it out fast. Now, get off the line. I want to talk to Gordon."

"All right." Hugh glanced at Tucker's grinning face and tried to smile, but the anger pulled the corners of his mouth down so that the smile turned into a snarl. He handed the phone to Neil and went

over to fix himself another drink.

"Yes, Jimmy."

"Now, look here, I told that Dewitt, you understand. I'm gonna give him seven days to straighten this thing out."

"Yes."

"I don't give a damn who goes to the police, you understand? I've got so much heat on me now a little more won't make any difference. So you better get hold of Dewitt. Nothing is gonna happen to you, if you play ball."

"I'll do the best I can."

"Okay."

Tucker flipped off the recorder switch and loudly clapped his hands. "Right on the money," he said, grinning widely. "Jimmy sounded in good form."

Dewitt crossed the room, holding a water glass half-full of bourbon. "I'd like to get my hands on that bum for just one minute."

Neil had his handkerchief out and was carefully mopping his wet face. "I don't like it. That guy's insane enough to do exactly what he said."

Tucker frowned. "They're all nuts. I haven't met the hood who wasn't yet. But you're right. He'd kill both of you in a minute if he thought it'd do him any good."

"Great," Neil said. "Wait till he finds out about our going to the police. I'm sick."

Hugh took a swallow of the bourbon and looked closely at Neil.



"Maybe, I ought to send the wife out of town."

"She's safer right here," Tucker said. "You've got nothing to worry about after this tape. We'll take care of Grazio. He's finished." He turned to Neil. "Do you feel up to making one more call?"

"Who?"

"Rizzola. We don't have enough to tie him in, yet."

"That I'll do," Neil said. "I want that little rat-faced punk to get his."

"Make him think Dewitt is worried and scared. The more afraid you are, the harder those rats like to jump on you. Try to buy him off. Make them think Dewitt is willing to pay to get off the hook."

Neil wiped his hands on the handkerchief and picked up the receiver and dialed.

"Hello."

"Joe? Neil here."

"Hi, buddy, what's doing?"

"Grazio just called."

"Oh, he did? Good."

"Good, nothing. Dewitt is in a state of collapse."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Well, Grazio threatened to blow his head off if he didn't get the royalty. He's given him seven days to straighten . . ."

"Wait a minute, Neil, I want to show you how these things happen. Now, I don't know a thing about these calls. I've been sitting here trying to contact the man myself. See how these things happen. That shows you how innocent I am."

"Okay, but Grazio still wants the percentage and there's just no percentage available. I tried to tell him but you can't get a word in edgewise with this man. He does all the talking."

"Let me show you something, buddy. The man knows that Calabasas is a success. I don't have to tell him. He can read. He knows the guy that works for Dewitt, for Christ's sake, that he talked to today. I want to show you how close they are. He talked to him today and he said the eighth well was on the pump and that you're not gonna drill any more wells this year. Now, does that sound like I know what I'm saying?"

"Well, I'm not arguing."

"All right. He tells me these things, Neil. Ask Dewitt if that's right. That shows you how close they are to the picture. I'm only trying to help you."

"You mean they even have men in the oil field?"

"Why, certainly. What do you think I'm telling you?"

"That's a hell of a note."

"Listen, buddy, all they want is what Dewitt promised them."

Well, he doesn't have that. Look, Joe. What can he give them? What do they want?"

"The hell with it. I want out of the goddam thing. But not these people. They know it's a success. He won't take his money back from me. He says, 'I want my two per-



cent.' Now what do you want from me, Neil?"

"Damn it, Joe. Can't you understand? There is no royalty. What can he do otherwise for them?"

"All they want is what the man promised."

"Jesus Christ, Joe. He doesn't have it. He can't give a percentage. It's a corporation. Hugh Dewitt doesn't own anything. It's owned by the Dewitt Drilling Company. He cannot give anything, and he cannot sell it. If he did, there's some other big stockholders now that have come into this thing. Why, he'd be in the can before he turned around."

"Say, Neil, let me tell you this. If Hugh Dewitt owns the Dewitt Drilling Company . . ."

"He doesn't own it; he's president."

"Then Hugh Dewitt can do what he pleases."

"He cannot."

"Just a minute, buddy, if there's any goddam stockholder who tries to interfere, just let me know, and once I pass the word on, believe me, you won't hear any more about it."

"Let me explain something. In the first place, to assign a two percent royalty to Joe Rizzola and Jimmy Grazio or anybody else, Dewitt must go before the Corporation Commissioner's office and apply for a permit to do so."

"I know that."

"Okay. Now the minute he ap-

plies for a permit there would have to be a stockholder's meeting to ratify it. Any stockholder whether he owns one share or ten can protest, which they undoubtedly would do, and then Dewitt is helpless."

"How do you know they would protest it?"

"Any stockholder would protest it. Dewitt is only the president. There are other directors."

"I know it."

"Mitchell Smith."

"Jimmy knows him well."

"Jimmy knows Mitchell Smith?"

"Are you kidding? I'll guarantee he knows him better than Dewitt. What the hell is the matter with you, Neil?"

"I don't know these things."

"Well, I'm telling you."

"How would I know? I never heard of the man."

"Listen, Neil, this man knows so many goddam big people it would make your hair stand up."

"All right, there are still eighteen other stockholders, anyone of which could protest."

"Okay, why don't he try it?"

"It's impossible. Could Grazio fix the Corporation Commissioner's office?"

"Certainly, he could. You're goddam well right he could, and I'll bet money on it."

"I wouldn't bet you. I don't know the man."

"You tell Dewitt to go down to the Corporation Commissioner's office tomorrow and put in the ap-



plication and see me and find out if there's any beef down there. Let me know who the people are. I'll call up this man. He'll find out who the head man is and he'll find somebody who knows him because he always does. He knows more of what the hell is going on than Dewitt does."

"Well, I don't . . ."

"Wait, Neil, call me back. A customer just came in."

"All right."

The search for Jimmy Grazio dragged through its third day without promise. By now Martin had fourteen men assigned to the case. On the first day, Tucker and two other officers had been sent out with the warrants and with orders to keep it quiet. Grazio must not learn of his impending arrest. Nothing was done about Rizzola and Nitta. The man they wanted was Grazio, and they knew that once Jimmy got wind of what was up, he would vanish from the scene and stay vanished until the case was dropped. Things would start happening to the Dewitt family, and though Dewitt was a pretty tough guy, he was still very vulnerable when it came to the safety of his wife and daughter. Grazio knew that and would not hesitate to exploit it to its extreme limits.

Now fourteen officers were checking all the plush hotels in Hollywood and Beverly Hills, the restaurants and nightclubs on the Sun-

set Strip, and the early morning hangouts throughout the city. Only the most reliable sources were questioned.

By the end of the third day, Martin was convinced that Grazio was not in town. He called Tucker in and the two of them discussed the various aspects of the case.

Martin seemed agitated. He sat straight up in the chair, his feet on the floor, his hands squeezing the armrests. "I think we better bring Rizzola in. I'm sure Jimmy's not in town."

"I don't know," Tucker said. "That's gonna tip our hand."

"Well, my hope is that Joe will tell us where to find him."

"He knows, all right. That's quite evident from the tapes. But whether he'll tell is something else again. I can't figure Joe being that stupid."

"Let's do it quick so that no one knows he's been picked up, not even his wife."

"I know, but what if he won't talk?"

"I'm afraid that's the chance we'll have to take."

"How about my going to Vegas? That's probably where he is right now. You know he gave Dewitt seven days. Maybe that's the reason. He knew he was going to be out of town for that length of time."

"I've thought of that. If Joe refuses to talk, I'll ship you out there real quick before anyone knows what's going on."



"Okay. Want me to pick Joe up now?"

"Yeah. But be careful. Do it when his wife is not around."

It was early evening when Tucker parked across the street from Rizzola's Liquor store. He watched the place for an hour. When he was certain Rizzola was completely alone, he slid out of the car and headed for the store. Joe was sitting on a box behind the counter, drinking from a can of beer when Tucker came in.

Joe did not move, his close-set eyes warily watching Tucker. Slowly, he placed the can on a shelf and stood up, leaning against the counter.

"What is it, buddy?" he asked, wiping the beer foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

Tucker did not answer until he had reached the counter and stood facing Joe, only the two-foot wide counter separating them. "I'll tell you, buddy," Tucker said, handing Joe the warrant. "You're under arrest."

Joe dropped the document, his small eyes popping out like huge marbles. "What for?" he stammered. "What have I done?"

"Extortion. Know what that means, Joe?"

"Extortion? You're kidding. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Know what it means?"

"I know nothing."

Tucker laughed. "It means five years, Joe. You'll be up in Quentin with Jimmy and Jack and all their friends. How about that, Joe. Sounds good, heh?"

"You're riding me?"

"Ever hear of Hugh Dewitt and Neil Gordon?"

"Yeah. Hey, you don't mean they're the ones? They're crazy. We had a deal and Dewitt tried to back out. That's all."

"Really. That's not the way I heard it, Joe."

"They're lying through their god-dam teeth if they say it was any different."

"We'll see, Joe. We'll see, buddy."

Tucker's confident manner had Joe completely flustered. He knew it was bad, he could feel it eating away at his stomach. He knew that the police were wise to the whole scheme and at this moment he was a lot more worried about what Jimmy would say and do than he was about the police. "You got Jimmy and Jack too?"

Tucker smiled. "We will. The warrants are out."

"That stupid jerk," Joe suddenly cried out. "I told him who he was dealing with. I told him I wanted my name left out of it. You'd think the moron would understand enough to stay away from the cops." Joe stopped and shook his head, bewildered. "I want out of this deal. I had nothing to do with it. You've got to understand that."



It wasn't my idea. Dewitt made a deal with me and backed out of it. He double-crossed all of us. Wait till I see that bum. You just wait."

"Don't worry about it. You'll see him plenty soon in court."

At nine o'clock the next morning Sergeant Tucker boarded the plane for Las Vegas. He had been up all night but he could have just as well gone to bed for all the good it did him. Joe had remained true to the hoodlum code.

Tucker carried the warrants in his breast pocket but he was not too confident about his present venture. Finding Grazio in Las Vegas was not going to be simple. Jimmy was a big man in that town with a lot of rich and influential friends. He could run the Los Angeles police ragged for months or years even.

Tucker sighed and settled back in the seat, fastening his safety belt as requested before the takeoff.

As Tucker's plane roared down the runway, Lola Rizzola picked up the phone and dialed. Her face was swollen with sleep and her faded blue eyes were worried. She had thought it unusual for the store to be locked when she had gotten home from the movies last night, but she had been too tired, with both her feet and head aching, to think about it. She had taken a double shot of whiskey and had immediately gone to bed. Now it was morning and still no Joe.

She waited while the phone rang at least a dozen times before someone lifted the receiver.

"Miss Moore's residence," a woman with a Spanish accent answered.

"I want to talk to Mr. Grazio," Lola said.

"Who, please?"

"Jimmy Grazio."

There was a pause before the woman spoke. "Just a minute, please."

Lola reached over and slipped a cigarette from a crumpled pack on the night stand and quickly lit it. She dragged deeply on the butt, exhaling through large indignant nostrils.

"Who's this?"

"This is Lola Rizzola," she said. "Is that you Mr. Grazio?"

"Yeah. How did you get this number?"

"I got it from Joe."

"Well, keep it under your hat, sweetheart. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Grazio." Lola hesitated to give emphasis to her words. This was a dramatic moment and she wanted to make the most of it. "Joe is missing," she said. "I haven't seen him since last night."

There was dead silence at the other end of the line, then finally Grazio spoke. "When did he leave?"

"I don't know. I was out to a movie and when I got home around ten-thirty, the store was locked and he was gone. I'm worried."



Another dead silence. "Forget about it until you hear from me," he said. "Don't call anybody. Understand? Let me check on it. And don't call me here again. I'll call you."

Jimmy let the receiver drop on the cradle and looked over at Marcia. She was still asleep. He reached for his clothes, dressed quietly and hurried out.

Jack Nitta was lying in bed, reading the morning paper when Jimmy came into his room. "What's up?" he said, pushing the covers back and standing up.

"See anything in the paper about Joe?"

Nitta blinked quizzically. "About Joe? Why? Has he been arrested?"

"How the hell would I know? He's missing. Lola just called. Says he hasn't been home all night."

"Ah, he's probably just whoring around."

"Not Joe. He's got all he can handle at home. Listen, I want you to start checking. If Joe's in the can I want to know. And I want to know why. Understand?"

Nitta shrugged his acquiescence. "Okay. You're the boss."

"Do it by phone. Don't you leave this house unless I tell you. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Get in touch with our contact at the LAPD. I want to know what's wrong and I want to know it right now."

It was ten-thirty a.m. when Tucker stepped off the plane at McCarran field. He took the limousine to the Arabian, making a mental note to rent a car later if the need came up.

The Arabian was like all the other hotels on the strip, except it was a little larger and had a little more of everything else the others had. Tucker pushed his way through the second inch-thick glass door and sighed loudly as the cool air hit him in the face. To his left was the huge casino room, opened twenty-four hours a day. It was quiet now at this time of the morning and only two or three tables were in operation.

It would be hours yet before the professionals (gamblers, performers and regular howlers) made their brief appearance.

Tucker stopped off at the dining room for breakfast and then returned to the lobby. Martin had given him a twenty-four hour time limit. Find Grazio or come back, he had said. And now, standing at the edge of the lobby, he wondered about his next move. Should he contact the local police or should he try the more obvious maneuvers on his own? He decided to inquire at the desk, then go from there.

The desk clerk was a tall, gaunt-faced man who looked like the excitable type.

Tucker gave him a friendly smile. "Could you tell me if Mr. Grazio is in his room?"



"I beg your pardon," the clerk said, in a voice which was at least five octaves above high C.

"I'm an old buddy of Jimmy's from the East Coast. Just thought I'd say hello."

The clerk eyed him critically from head to toe and it was obvious that he knew something about the value of clothes.

"Mr. Grazio is out of town."

"I see. Too bad for me. Oh, by the way, is my other old buddy, Jack Nitta, around these days?"

"He's also out of town."

"This is my day, all right. Could they by any chance be in L.A.? I'm driving there later on today."

"I'm sure I haven't the faintest notion," the clerk said.

"That's tough."

"Whom may I say called when Mr. Grazio returns?"

Tucker grinned. "Tell him his old buddy Joey was asking about him."

The clerk looked heavenward, exasperated, "Joey who?"

"Joey Adonis," Tucker said, walking away, but not before he saw the gaunt face grow stiff and the eyes bug out. Tucker's exit was momentary. He returned, casually moving behind a giant philodendron, to observe the clerk's reactions. Gaunt-faced hadn't changed positions. He seemed transfixed. Only his fingers moved, drumming nervously on the desktop. Slowly, he seemed to come back to life, his head moved and his eyes scanned

the room, then his body shifted sideways as he reached for a stack of mail. He turned, facing the hundreds of pigeonholes, and started distributing the envelopes.

Tucker was disappointed. The clerk's actions seemed to confirm his statement that Grazio was out of town. He made no phone calls, spoke to no one, made no movements that were in the least suspicious. The use of Adonis' name had been for more than shock value. Tucker had hoped it would send him running to Grazio. He waited about fifteen minutes before leaving for police headquarters.

Lieutenant Frank Webber re-read the warrant for the third time. He coughed and shook his head, his eyes were wet and he kept sniffing.

"I don't understand this at all," he said, taking out his handkerchief and loudly blowing his nose. "Why would a man like Jimmy Grazio try to extort a lousy two percent on this oil deal. The man's rich. He owns more property in town than the state of Nevada. I just don't figure it."

Tucker sat on a straight back chair, a thin knowing smile on his lips. "He's a thief," he said. "That's why. And this lousy two percent pays an income of about four thousand a month."

"Even so. I think you've got the wrong man. There must be some mistake. I know Grazio, and he seems like a fairly nice guy. Oh, I



know he was mixed up in the rackets years ago, but now he's legitimate. He's never pulled any rough stuff around here. Of course you know, we wouldn't stand for it."

"Well, it's no matter," Tucker said. "The courts will have to decide that question. My job is to bring him back to Los Angeles. Now are you gonna help me or not?"

Webber's wet eyes flared angrily for an instant, then he smiled. "Sergeant, don't be impatient. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. You wait for me in the outer office while I make a few calls. I'll tell you in five minutes flat if Grazio is in town."

Tucker wanted to laugh in his face but he was too angry. This had been a mistake. If Grazio was in town, Tucker would never find him now. Not after Webber got through with his calls.

"You go ahead and make your calls," Tucker said. "I'll be on my way. If I find Grazio, I'll be in touch with you."

"What the hell," Webber said. "No need getting huffy about it."

Tucker had a few choice words he could have spoken at this time, but he clamped his jaws tightly together, shrugging his shoulders. "Thanks for nothing," he said, opening the door, and slamming it angrily behind him.

At ten o'clock that evening, Neil

Gordon drove into the carport behind his apartment house. He had stopped for dinner at the Queen's Arm and had lingered in the bar afterwards reminiscing with an old acquaintance he hadn't seen in years. During this time, he consumed four or five drinks, but they hadn't done anything for him except to make him feel dull and tired. What he needed now was a cold shower and some sleep, he thought, as he slowly stepped out of the car and started toward the back staircase.

"Hold it, Gordon. I want to talk to you."

Neil stopped, slowly turning around, squinting into the darkness as he tried to make out the shadowy figure only a few feet away. The shadow moved forward and he soon recognized Jack Nitta's peculiar bowling pin shape. Nitta was grinning, his thin face pale in the darkness.

"How you doin', buddy?" Nitta said. His left hand was thrust deeply in his jacket pocket while his right hand caressed his sloping chin.

Neil felt a quickening in his heart beat. "I'm getting by," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"Not much. Just want to have a little private talk with you. That's all."

"Come up to the apartment," Neil said, and started to move away.

Nitta's right hand reached out and grasped Neil by the arm. His left hand remained in the jacket



pocket. "Take it easy, buddy. I'll tell you when to go."

"Take your hand off me," Neil said and stepped back, but Nitta held on.

It was then that Neil heard the footsteps moving up quickly behind him. He started to turn but Nitta's fist tightened on his arm. "Relax, sweetheart."

The footsteps stopped, and Neil felt the man's enormous presence without seeing him and his first impulse was one of panic. He wanted to run wildly and scream for help, but he knew it was hopeless. The monster at his back would crush him in a second.

"What's the meaning of this?" Neil asked, angrily aware of the quivering note in his voice.

Nitta laughed and nodded his head. Suddenly, the big man's hands were running down Neil's body, quickly and professionally.

"He's clean," he said, the voice booming like a bass drum in Neil's ear.

Neil tried to turn but the man pressed his huge body against him, his large hands grasping his shoulders painfully.

Neil groaned as he futilely tried to slip out of the steel grasp. "God-damit, you're hurting me," he cried out. "Let go."

"You better behave," Nitta said. "Before Tony really hurts you."

"This is stupid," Neil said. "What do you want?" He tried to sound

angry and indignant but it came out in a tremulous whine.

"Let's go," Nitta said, pulling on Neil's arm. "We're gonna take a little ride and talk this thing over."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You're funny," Nitta said. "Show him the way, Tony."

Tony rumbled menacingly as he brought one hand behind Neil's neck and squeezed. Neil gasped as he was propelled forward, the excruciating pain in his neck sending chills racing down his spine and up into his scalp.

Nitta led the way to a big black sedan and opened the rear door, quickly moving aside as Tony shoved Neil headlong into the back seat, jumping in after him. Nitta closed the door and got in the front seat, behind the steering wheel.

Neil sat up straight, rubbing his bruised neck, afraid to speak out for fear that Tony would squeeze him again. He glanced furtively at the gargantuan monster sitting at his side and fully realized the futility of any action on his part. It was useless to yell for help or to try to jump out. In either case, he would never make it. All that remained for him to do was talk.

"Would you mind telling me where we are going?" he asked.

Nitta chuckled but did not answer. Neil turned to Tony, but he was looking straight ahead, his large hands resting on his knees.



"I don't understand any of this," he spoke again, "what have I done?"

Nitta glanced at him in the rear-view mirror and smiled. "Save your breath, buddy. You're gonna need it."

"Look, if it's about that royalty, you've got the wrong man. There's nothing I can do about it. I tried to help. I even came down to Joe's liquor store and talked to Grazio just as a favor to you fellows. I never promised any royalty."

"Shut up," Nitta said. "It's too late for that jazz."

"What do you want? Tell me. I've got money. I'll be glad to give you some."

Nitta's lips puckered and he started to whistle a popular tune.

Neil looked out the window and saw that they were headed toward the Mohave desert. The car started to bounce, violently swinging from side to side, and Neil quickly looked out the window, his jaws dropping open, his eyes wild with terror. They had left the road and were now going cross-country along a barren stretch of the Mohave desert, kicking up a huge cloud of dust behind them. Neil's teeth began to chatter and he felt faint. He knew now that he was going to die, but he refused to think about it. He couldn't die. Not really and actually. It was all like a bad dream, and for an instant he clung to that hope.

Suddenly, he realized that the

car had stopped and Nitta was standing by the open door on his side, his thin face, cunning and cruel, as he grinned at him.

"This is it, buddy. The end of the line."

Neil stared at him, his eyes glazing over with fright as he pressed himself deeper into the cushions of the seat. Then Tony had him by the neck again and he came flying out of the car, landing on his hands and knees. Slowly, he stood up, absently brushing at his clothes. When he looked up Tony was coming toward him. Neil saw him feint with a left and something exploded into the center of his face with the power of a sledge hammer. He staggered backward, landing on his back, his feet kicking air. He lay there shaking his head, dizzy and sick, the blood, sticky and sweet, flooding his mouth. He turned over on his stomach and tried to spit, but his whole face felt frozen as if with novocain. He couldn't feel his teeth or lips or nose, and he raised a trembling hand, brushing it against his face, trying to stir feeling into the numb tissues. He shook his head in an effort to clear his vision and painfully pushed himself up from the sandy ground until he was on one knee, in the classic pose of a boxer waiting for the full count before returning to battle.

Finally, he stood up and Nitta came up close to him. "Listen, Gordon," he said, "I've got a message



for you. Leave town and don't come back. The next time we'll kill you. Understand?"

Neil nodded his head in agreement and turned away. And again there was a blur of motion, and a great blinding force seemed to cave in the right side of his face. He staggered backward, his legs turning to water, and pitched forward on his face. He lay there, breathing dust and sand into his lungs, unable to change position. Then, as if in a dream, he felt himself lifted straight up so that his feet barely touched the ground, and almost immediately, he was struck on the left side of his face and then the right side and again squarely on the mouth. His head bobbed from side to side, held there only by a limp, rubbery neck. He tried to scream, but the sound was only in his head. Then he felt someone behind him, supporting him up, and his head fell limply forward. And then the blows were hammering against his body, and he grunted and groaned and gasped and fought to retain consciousness. The blows were painless now and he tried to grin, his sightless eyes pressing the heavy eyelids open, his head rotating with the blows.

"That's enough," Nitta said, and quickly stepped back, releasing his hold on Neil.

Neil wavered a moment, took one giant step forward, the leg collapsing under him, and fell headlong into the dirt.

Tony stood above the limp, now unconscious body, grinning, slowly removing the shiny brass knuckles from his huge fists.

"Take his shoes and let's go," Nitta said.

Tony giggled. "That's a long walk without shoes."

"Give him a chance to think. Let's go."

Sergeant Tucker took the eleven o'clock morning flight back to Los Angeles. He had been up all night, going from one club to the other, casually questioning the characters along the strip and Fremont Street. He had talked to at least fifty fat gut hoods in the uniform of deputy sheriff. All of it had been a royal waste of time. No matter how casual or friendly Tucker had tried to appear, they had instantly spotted him as a cop. It was irritating to carry the marks of one's occupation so plainly for all to see. But then it was typical of hoods to smell out a cop, specially one who was so typically a cop.

Tucker sat down and unbuttoned his jacket, careful not to display the .38 special on the belt holster at his left side. He leaned his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

Ten minutes before the landing he awoke. He sat up in the seat and looked over the heads down the row of seats in front of him, his eyes stopping on a man's bald spot. At first Tucker's interest was only in the long thin strands and the



pattern it created on the shiny skull. Then the head turned and Tucker caught a glimpse of the profile. Tucker came forward in the seat, straining for a better look and at the same time, the head slowly turned, as if commanded to do so, until the man, whose name was Al Rebos, faced Tucker across the rows of seat. He stared at Tucker for only a split second, his magnified eyes puzzled, then suddenly his right eye blinked and that side of his face collapsed in a twitch. Quickly, he turned away and slid down in the seat, completely disappearing from view.

Tucker leaned back in the seat, his mind flipping through mugshots like an IBM machine. He either knew this punk or he had heard about him. At the moment, he didn't know which. In either case, this was no ordinary John Doe citizen. Tucker would have bet a year's wages that the punk had a police record. More than that, Tucker would have bet that he was no ordinary hood. There was something at the back of his mind, something important, and he closed his eyes, concentrating on it.

Tucker had heard many stories about the "Little Bomber" after the Alan Avery and one of the stories had been concerning the "Little Bomber." He had heard other stories about this character before then but his operations had usually been in the East. Along

with the stories, Tucker had gotten thumb-nail descriptions, and one of the descriptions had mentioned something about a convulsive twitch. He had been described as short and tall and fat and thin and every other which way, but the twitch had never changed in the telling.

If this was the "Little Bomber" then Tucker was determined to keep him in his sight after they landed. Maybe, his trip to Las Vegas hadn't been a complete failure, after all. As Tucker understood it, the "Little Bomber" now worked exclusively for the Syndicate, and Grazio was a big man in the Syndicate. Maybe, there was even a connection with this case. Who could tell? Stranger things had happened.

Captain Olin Martin stood in the hospital corridor, his hands in his jacket pockets, his head nodding from time to time. He was listening to Hugh Dewitt and it was obvious that the captain was uneasy.

"I know, I know," he said. "But what could I do about it?"

Dewitt's sparse red hair was disheveled. He was perspiring and angry, his blue-green eyes flashing and snapping with each word he uttered. "If that man dies, Captain, I'll hold you personally responsible. Setting up a guy like Neil as a clay pigeon and then not protecting him is criminal negligence."

Martin coughed, clearing his



throat. "I'm sorry about this. I wish I could have prevented it."

"Being sorry doesn't help a damn thing, Captain."

"Well, what's done is done and there's nothing I can do about that. But I am placing a detail at your house on a twenty-four hour basis."

"I don't want your detail. I'll take care of my own family."

Martin shook his head. "But that's silly."

"Captain, you don't know me. This is my fight and I'll fight it my own way. Coming to you for help was a mistake in the first place. Neil wouldn't be in there right now, fighting for his life, if I had taken care of my own problem."

"Okay," Martin said. "I understand how you feel and in a way I don't blame you. But what you don't understand is the kind of people you've run up against. You're dealing with some of the toughest hoods in this country. I'm surprised they just didn't shoot Gordon and bury him in the desert."

"Well, that's where you're wrong," Hugh said, shaking his finger at Martin. "They're still trying to intimidate me. In fact, I got another phone call last night. My last warning, they said. Either I drop the charges and give them the two percent, or the same thing will happen to me and my wife. Well, they'll find out quick enough I'm not Neil Gordon."

"You're not being reasonable," Martin said.

"Reasonable, or not, that's what I intend to do."

Martin scratched his head. "Have you heard the details of Gordon's condition?"

Hugh took a deep breath and quickly brushed his hand over his face. "Five broken ribs," he said, his large hands clenching into hard fists. "Nose ruined. I mean really smashed to a pulp. Right cheekbone broken, jaw broken in three places. He may lose sight in his right eye. Most of his front teeth gone." Hugh stopped and tried to compose himself. "But that's not the worse of it. He had some bad internal injuries. His feet are also in pitiful condition. He walked out of there barefoot in the darkness, stumbling over cactus and Joshua thorns, he's pretty badly cut up. It took a lot of courage and determination to walk out in the condition he was in."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Martin said.

"Let me tell you something. I don't know how he feels about it. But if this ever goes to trial, Neil Gordon will not be involved in any respect."

"But he's an important witness."

"I don't care. Neil is all done with this mess."

"But you don't understand about the law. Tape recordings and phone taps, bugs, all of that stuff, is only corroborative, secondary evidence. It must be done with the consent of the witness and it must be so shown in court."



"Captain, that's your problem. All I'm saying is that Neil Gordon will have nothing else to do with this case."

Martin shook his head. "I can't promise that," he said.

"You don't have to, Captain. I'm promising it."

Sitting tensely in the back seat of a cab, Sergeant Tucker followed Al Rebo's green sedan to the Hollywood Astor, a shabby side-street hotel in the heart of Hollywood. He waited while Rebo's parked in the lot north of the hotel.

After landing at International, Tucker had left the plane ahead of Rebo's and had waited at the end of the passenger ramp, hidden in the crowd. Rebo's had been almost the last one to leave the plane, and he looked meek and pathetic as he hurried by with his head down. Tucker followed at a safe distance as Rebo's walked directly to a green sedan in a parking lot with acres of automobiles. There was no hesitation or confusion. Rebo's knew exactly where he was going. Tucker signaled for a cab and went out the toll gate the second car behind Rebo's. The trip from International to Hollywood was a long one, but the cabby had no trouble keeping the small sedan in sight. Rebo's was evidently a most careful driver.

Tucker paid the cabby and stepped out just as Rebo's disappeared into the hotel. He strolled casually across the street and went up the

brick steps, stopping before the half-glass swinging door. Rebo's was nowhere in the lobby. Tucker moved to the back of the room and sat down in one of the leather chairs. He reached over and picked up a section of the morning paper and held it up before his face. He could question the desk clerk but that would be risky in a dump like this. He decided to just sit and wait awhile.

Al Rebo's walked down the corridor and stopped before number 428. He listened at the door a moment then took out the hotel key and quickly unlocked the door, his small body slipping inside and locking the door in one smooth motion.

Jack Nitta stood by the window, looking down into the street. He turned now as Rebo's entered into the room and grunted a greeting. Rebo's stopped, startled for a moment, his magnified eyes staring at Nitta, then he smiled, his face collapsing in another twitch.

"Had a nice trip?" Nitta asked.

Al nodded and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, here's the picture. This is a torch job. There's a couple cans of mag powder in the trunk of the sedan. We want it done tonight."

"Wa-wa-wait a-a-a-a s-s-secl!" He stopped and tried to get control of himself. "Th-th-at's to-to-to- s-s-soon. I-I-I've go-go-got to-to-te-to c-c-ca-case . . ."

The stuttering made Nitta im-



patient. "Why? What's to case? Christ, you've got all day. This doesn't have to be perfect. We just want a goddam fire. It doesn't have to burn to the ground even. We want this character to know we mean business. If it burns to the ground, okay. If it traps and burns them up, okay, again. If it doesn't, still okay. Understand? Here's the name and address."

"O-o-o-o-o," he stopped, his eyes bulging out with the effort.

Nitta waved his hand and walked to the door. "Save it," he said. "I get the message."

Rebos waited until the door slammed behind Nitta before speaking. "Okay," he said, his eyes pleased by the freedom of speech he enjoyed when alone. "I'll burn the goddam place down and everybody in it."

Tucker stood up and walked to the telephone booth at the far end of the Astor lobby. He closed the door and dropped a dime in the slot. By twisting his body in the small booth, he was able to observe all arrivals and departures. Slowly, he dialed police headquarters, his eyes shifting from the numbers on the dial to the front entrance.

"City Hall."

"Give me extension nine two four five."

"Thank you."

"Intelligence Division, Lieutenant Phillips."

"Tucker. Is the captain in, John?"

"No, Ernie. Just come in?"

"Yeah. Listen, do you know where he is?"

"Last time I heard he was at the hospital."

"At the hospital? What's he doing there?"

"Oh, you haven't heard? Neil Gordon got a working over last night. He's in pretty bad shape."

Tucker grunted angrily, his interest in the front entrance forgotten for only a brief moment, but long enough for Jack Nitta to walk out of the hotel unobserved.

"How bad?"

"Critical last report I got."

"I'm coming in," Tucker said. "Listen, John, I think I've got something here. Will you send down a surveillance car to relieve me?"

"I don't know, Ernie. Does it have anything to do with the Dewitt case?"

"Look, John, it's too involved to explain right now. Send the car down, I'll take full responsibility."

"Okay. You explain it to the skipper."

"I will but do it right now, will you?"

"It's on it's way. Where are you?"

"I'm at the Astor in Hollywood. Tell him to come into the parking lot on the north side of the joint. I'll be there waiting for him."

Tucker waited about fifteen minutes then went out to the parking lot. There was no attendant on duty and except for a woman who was driving out of the lot, the place



was deserted. Tucker walked over to the green sedan and looked inside, his hand reaching down and turning the registration holder on the steering column so that he could read it. According to the certificate, the car was registered to a Frank Nelson at a San Diego address. Tucker took out a note pad and wrote down the information. Then he walked to the front of the lot and stationed himself near the entrance.

The police car arrived a few minutes later and he signaled to the plain clothes officer to follow him. The surveillance car was a dark maroon low-priced model without personality. It was like thousands of other cars one saw every day but never noticed. Tucker had the officer park a few rows from Rebo's car.

The policeman smiled up at Tucker who stood leaning against the car door. "Who's the pigeon, Sergeant?"

Tucker grinned. "See that green Ford over there?"

"You mean the fifty-four model?"

"Right. There's a little creep that goes with it. About five-six, one hundred thirty pounds, partly bald, thick glasses, has a twitch on the right side of his face. Don't let him out of your sight. And keep in touch by radio in case something develops."

"Will do."

"I don't want him to get suspicious. Keep your distance."

"Yes, sir. How important is he?"  
"Important enough," Tucker said, and walked away.

On the way home from the hospital, Hugh Dewitt stopped at a sporting goods store and bought a box of .38 shells. He knew he had an automatic packed away somewhere in the house. It took him nearly two hours to find it. It was buried in an old trunk in the garage with a lot of other junk he had collected through the years.

He stood up and placed the automatic in the top drawer of his desk. Before leaving the den, he telephoned the hospital and inquired about Neil. After being switched to four different nurses, he learned that Neil was off the critical list, but that his condition was still serious. The hemorrhaging had been stopped for the time being but there was no guarantee that it would remain that way.

As soon as Dewitt cradled the receiver the phone started ringing again. Hugh stared at it thoughtfully then picked up the receiver and put it to his ear.

"Yes? This is Dewitt."

"Welsher. Gordon was just a start. Next time it'll be your wife. We've got special plans for her. You got the message?"

Dewitt slid open the desk drawer and removed the pistol. "I got the message, you bastard. And what you did to Gordon isn't half of what I'm going to do to you."



Hugh hung up and went to the wall safe, taking out a large bundle of money. He turned and saw Nancy in the den doorway, watching him.

He stopped and smiled clumsily. "I have to go out for awhile," he said. "It's urgent business. You're not afraid to be alone, are you?"

Nancy ran to him, her arms circling his neck. "Hugh, don't, please."

"I have to," he said. "A man can take just so much. Then he must do something."

"Do you really have to?"

"Yes."

"Will you be long?"

"I don't know. Just keep the place locked. I don't think there's any more danger here tonight. They've done their work for the night. It's up to me now." He kissed her lightly on the lips and tried to smile.

She walked with him to the front door. He leaned down and caught her face in both his hands and gently kissed her mouth. "Now, go in," he said, and waited until she had locked the door behind her.

It took Al Rebos less than five miles to spot the policeman on his tail. Rebos' first reaction was one of terror. His face collapsed in frantic twitches and his hands shook and his heart thudded wildly. The impossible had happened. Finally, somebody had pointed an accusing finger at Al Rebos. The mystery man was no longer a mystery. After leaving the Los Angeles hotel that

afternoon, he had decided to drive down Wilshire to over the Sepulveda Pass into the San Fernando Valley, and then West on Ventura to Encino and Mr. Hugh Dewitt's little palace. This would give him plenty of time to case the layout in daylight.

But things were drastically changed now. There wouldn't be any torch job. In fact, there might never be any other job. Not if they knew about him, or even suspected. If that were the case, it was time to retire. What he needed now more than anything else was time to think and collect himself. Ahead, he saw a drive-in and decided to stop.

Captain Olin Martin did not do much listening before he lost his temper. He was in no mood for any stupid grandstand plays by anybody, including Sergeant Ernie Tucker.

"Goddamit to hell," he barked, slamming the desk with his fist. "Who the hell told you to follow some little creep? I sent you down there to find Grazio. Nothing else. For Christ's sake, Ernie, when are you gonna learn to follow orders?"

"But I'm telling you, there might be a connection," Tucker protested.

"Get off it. Listen, let me tell you something. The Avery case is closed. Understand? Closed for good. I'm not gonna stand for it. I'm the head of this division and by God it's gonna be run the way



I want it. You do what I tell you, and only what I tell you. What you do on your own time, that's your business."

"You don't understand, Captain. I think this guy works for Grazio. I know it's a wild shot, but sometimes in cases like these it's the wild one that pays off at the end. What can we lose?"

Martin stopped pacing, stabbing out his finger at Tucker. "I'll tell you what we can lose. We can lose our goddam minds. Listen, I don't have half the men I need right now to run this department the way it should be run. I'm not sending any of them out on a wild goose chase. Who is it?"

"Pierce."

Martin reached over for the intercom switch. "Phillips."

"Yes, Captain."

"Call Pierce back in."

"Want somebody else to replace him?"

"No! Just tell him to come back. We've got plenty of work for him right here."

"Yes, sir," Phillips said.

Martin flipped off the switch and glared up at Tucker. "Now, let's get back to Grazio. You're positive he's not in Vegas?"

Tucker stood up and walked over to the window. He hated to lose that tail, but everything wasn't lost. Not yet. He still knew where the creep was staying and maybe he could pick up the tail from there himself tonight. He kept his back

to Martin as he spoke. "I'm not positive about anything. I couldn't find him. That's my report, Captain."

"Oh, now, let's not assume a wounded attitude. Earlier you said you were positive. Now, you don't know."

"Okay, I'm positive," Tucker said. "Look, Captain, can I knock off now? I'm dead. I've been up two nights. I need some rest."

Martin studied him a moment, a knowing grin slowly creasing his craggy face. "Ernie," he said. "You're a character. You really are. Okay, take off. If you can make it, I'd like for you to cruise by the Dewitt place a few times this evening. I'll have a couple cars doing this every half-hour or so. Dewitt doesn't want a stake out, but he can't stop us from driving by. If you see anything the least suspicious get on the radio before checking it out. Let's be a team player. I don't want any goddam dead heroes in this department. Understand?"

"I understand," Tucker said, also grinning. "I always do."

Rebos stared bug-eyed at the large menu in his shaking hand, the muscles in his throat straining to reproduce sound, the twitch collapsing his cheek, making the eye blink on and off like a caution signal. "C-c-cu-cu-cup-cup-cupa j-ja-j-ja-va," he said finally to the waitress, quickly handing her the menu.



She nodded and went back to the restaurant.

Rebos had noticed that the car tailing him was now parked at the end of the row, three or four cars past his. There was no doubt about it in his mind now. It must be the police. Who else would follow him? Could Jimmy have somebody checking up on him? He shook his head. That didn't figure. There was no reason for Grazio to do that. But how could the police know anything?

The waitress brought the coffee, attaching the metal tray to the side of the door. He kept his eyes averted until she had left. He didn't like people looking at him. Suddenly, he remembered the flight from Vegas and the character who had stared at him. That jerk had been a cop for sure. Rebos was never wrong when it came to spotting a flatfoot. He had that mean face and way of looking at you that immediately tagged him as a lousy cop.

Well, it was too late now. He'd have to call Grazio and tell him the job was off. First of all, he would have to lose that snooping copper in traffic, then he would take off for parts unknown and get lost for a while.

He reached over for the coffee and suddenly stopped, his hand in mid-air, his small mouth gaping open. The maroon sedan was backing out of the drive-in. Rebos followed it with his eyes, studying the

features of the driver. He didn't look like a cop. Looked more like some college kid. Rebos laughed as the car disappeared into the traffic. Christ! Was he getting jittery. A lousy college kid. A freakish coincidence and he was all set to run out on the job and hide. He took a big sip of the hot coffee, angrily remonstrating with himself. I need a vacation, he thought. A long, long one.

Now, things were back to normal and he had to start planning the job. He reached for the glove compartment and opened it, taking out the facial tissues and the cellophane tape. Slowly, methodically, he began to fashion a trailer.

In his hotel room, Jimmy Grazio and Jack Nitta sat on the sofa, arguing. It wasn't exactly an argument, but Nitta was trying to make a point as diplomatically as he could.

"I know how you feel, Jimmy," he was saying, his thin face intensely sincere. "I agree with you one thousand percent. This bum Dewitt's got to be taught a lesson. But, and that's a big goddam but, ain't we going a little too fast on the thing?" He stopped, waiting for Jimmy's reaction.

Grazio took a long puff on the panetella. "I'll tell you, Jack. Dewitt is gonna die. I don't give a damn how many coppers are protecting him. You understand that?"

"Sure, Jimmy, I understand. And



I fully agree with you. My only question is when we should do it. Look, I'll be glad to do it myself in a couple months. But this is too fast. I'd like to wait until the whole thing dies down. Let's go to Havana for a while. You've got business there. Then when things have died down, we fix up a good alibi, and take care of that bum."

Grazio stood up and began pacing the room. Nitta waited quietly, knowing how Jimmy hated to be disturbed when he was thinking out a problem. Finally, Grazio stopped pacing, and pointed a manicured finger at Nitta.

"Okay, call Rebo off the job. But I want Tony to stick to his orders. The idea right now is to get Dewitt to drop the charges. You're right, we'll take care of him later. You know me, buddy, I'll wait a year or two if I have to, but I'll get him in the end."

Nitta stood up, smiling. "Thanks, Jimmy. Now, all I have to do is find Al. I'll try the hotel first. Then if he's not there I'll scout around Dewitt's place. Be seeing you, buddy."

Sergeant Tucker had four hours of sleep after he left Captain Martin's office. Then he shaved, showered, and had a thick steak with an extra side order of french fried potatoes and a huge roquefort green salad. By the time he reached the Astor he felt almost human again. He went into the lobby and looked

around for something to read. He turned toward the elevators, then froze where he stood, only his heart moved, and it thumped wildly.

Jack Nitta had just walked through the lobby and stepped into one of the self-service elevators. Tucker decided it was time to act. He walked to the desk clerk, a short fat man with a bulbous nose, and glared at him a moment before flashing his badge. The man glanced at the badge, shrugging his shoulders.

"So, what do you want from me?"

Tucker leaned across the counter, his face not two inches away from the fat man's. "Listen, good," he said. "I'm not gonna repeat myself."

"What are you trying to do, scare me?"

Tucker's eyes bore into the fleshy insipid face. "You give me any trouble and I'll crack your stupid skull with a gun barrel. Now, tell me. Who is the creep with the thick glasses and the twitch who came in early this afternoon?"

"His name is John Smith. If you don't believe me, you can check the register. Here, look at it?"

"Is he in right now?"

"No."

"Do you expect him in?"

"How would I know. Christ, they don't tell me. What the hell."

"Did he have advance reservations?"

"Yeah."

"Who made it?"



"Made by phone."

"Don't lie to me."

"I swear it."

"What room is he in?"

"Four-twenty-eight."

"Has he stayed here before?"

"I don't know. Never saw him before that I can remember."

"Do you know Jack Nitta?"

"Never heard of him."

"Do you know the man who just passed the desk a minute ago?"

"I didn't notice anybody."

"Okay, fatso," Tucker said. "Go back to your stamp collection."

Tucker moved across the room, toward the elevators, and sat down in an old straight back mahogany chair, facing the elevator. He didn't have to wait long. He heard it coming down and he reached into his back pocket for the handcuffs. The door slid open and Jack Nitta started to step out, but Tucker roughly knocked him back inside and slammed the door shut. Before Nitta had a chance to say a word, Tucker had both his hands cuffed behind his back.

"What the hell are you doing?" Nitta cried out, his pinched face startled. Then suddenly he recognized Sergeant Ernie Tucker. "You sonofa . . ." he started to say but never finished it. The flat of Tucker's thick hand landed against the side of his head with sickening force. It felt like a piece of board. Nitta rocked on his heels, his eyes blinking rapidly. Tucker took the elevator to the fourth floor and

pushed Nitta along the corridor until they stood before room 428.

"Okay, where's the key?" he asked.

"Go to hell," Nitta said.

Tucker's right hand came up and Nitta tried to duck his head, and Tucker grinned as he buried his left fist into Nitta's fat gut. Nitta gasped, his body folding up with the pain.

"Where is it?" Tucker said, calmly looking at him.

"In my coat pocket," Nitta mumbled.

Tucker unlocked the door and pushed Nitta inside, locking the door behind them. Nitta stood in the center of the room, a sick expression on his pale face.

"Now," Tucker said. "We're gonna have a nice quiet little talk." He slipped the revolver from his belt holster and bunched it in the palm of his hand. "I'm not gonna hurt my hands convincing you, either."

"You'll regret this," Nitta said.

Tucker pushed him into a chair and stood towering above him. "I want you to get one thing straight. You're going to talk. The only question is when. But believe me, buddy-boy, you'll never walk out of this room on your own power if you don't."

"I don't know anything," he said. "And that's the truth."

Tucker leaned forward and gently tapped the barrel of the gun on the back of Nitta's head. Nitta



screamed, rubbing the stinging bruise against the upholstered back of the chair.

"That's just the beginning," Tucker said. "Before I'm done you're going to have more than a headache. In fact, you're gonna look worse than Neil Gordon."

"You don't understand," Nitta whined. "I can't talk."

Tucker grinned. It was going to be a lot easier than he had first anticipated. He looked down at the top of Nitta's head and tapped it lightly with the gun butt.

Lights exploded inside Nitta's head and he struggled to get up. "Don't," he cried. "You're busting my head."

"Okay," Tucker said. "Here's the first question. What's the little creep's name?"

"I don't know."

Tucker held the gun by the barrel, aiming it like a hammer, squarely at Nitta's nose. Nitta stared at the gun, his eyes almost popping out of his head. "Jesus Christ," he pleaded. "Don't."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. I don't . . ."

He never finished the sentence. The gun butt came down, flattening the pointed nose with a sickening crunch. Blood gushed down into his open, screaming mouth.

Al Rebo had been under the house only a few minutes and he had a lot of work to do. His purpose at the moment was to spread

magnesium powder along the entire length of the house. First he had to crawl almost two hundred feet, lugging his supplies with him, then as he crawled back out he would sprinkle the powder in a nice little mound and then at the end he would leave room for a twenty foot trailer of tissues. This would allow him plenty of time to get out of the neighborhood before the joint went up in flames. That was going to be a real hot fire when it got started. Magnesium powder was the best there was in the business. Left no trace, either. Everything burned right to the ground. There was so damn much debris and junk after the fire, the inspectors never found a thing. Rebo giggled. He had never burned a house this big and expensive before. This was going to be a real big treat.

Lola Rizzola opened the door, and stared bewilderedly at Hugh Dewitt.

"Whaddya want?" she asked, stepping backward.

Hugh came in and closed the door. "Where's Joe?"

Lola grimaced. "Out. What's it to you?"

"I want some information," Hugh said, taking out the huge bundle of money. "And I'm willing to pay for it."

Lola stared at the money, her glazed faded blue eyes getting larger the longer she stared at it. "How much is that?"



"I don't know. Five thousand, anyway. Maybe more. All I want to know is where Grazio is."

She rubbed her hand across her forehead, shaking her head. "I don't know," she said. "He'd kill me if he found out."

"Five thousand. You can go a long way with that much money."

"No. He'd kill me."

"He won't find out."

"Yes, he will. He always does."

Hugh picked up the money and threw it at her. "You don't have to worry," he said. "I'm going to kill him."

She leafed through the money, seeing all the hundred dollar bills and the fifties and twenties. "What if you don't kill him."

"I'll tell him Joe sent me."

She clutched the money to her bosom. "Will you? You promise?"

"I promise."

One of the patio lights was on and for a brief instant, Nancy caught the shadow of a man swiftly passing by the darkened window. She stood up, alarmed, listening for the slightest noise. Then she heard a slight thudding sound and she hurried to the sliding glass door of the bedroom. Slowly, she pulled back the drape and pushed the door open, slipping out through the small opening. The area was empty. She came forward a step and looked down, her eyes staring at the gaping opening under the house. The screen panel was missing and she

leaned forward to examine it better. Suddenly, there was a rustling sound behind her and she felt a sharp blow on the nape of her neck, knocking her down to her knees. An arm quickly encircled her neck in a suffocating hold, pulling her head back, and a knee was pressed in the small of her back. She tried to struggle, twisting her strong body sharply, and they both fell forward. She lay there, trying to breathe, her eyes even with the opening under the house. It was then that she saw it. The small flickering flame slowly burning itself deeper under the house.

Jimmy Grazio lighted another panetella and bit down hard into it. He was getting worried. Nitta should have been back by now. At least he should have called. Jack was pretty dependable that way. That's why Jimmy had kept him around for so many years. Jack was more than dependable. He was a clam. He knew a lot about Jimmy's business but he never talked about it. Jimmy would know if he did and that would be the end of Jack Nitta. Nitta knew it. Jimmy knew it. And it was this knowledge that made the arrangement possible.

When the bell rang, Jimmy was in the kitchen, impatiently pacing up and down while Marsha tried to fry some eggs and make toast and coffee.

"Answer that," Jimmy said.



"I can't. This stuff's gonna burn. Go on. It's probably Jack."

"You be quiet. I'll see who it is."

He went out to the living room and crossed to the front door. He waited a moment before calling out. "Who is it!"

"Let me in. I want to talk to you."

"Who are you?"

"Hugh Dewitt."

Jimmy stepped back from the door, the fixed smile frozen on his pale face. "Get out of here," he called. "Before you get hurt."

"Open up," Hugh said. "I'm coming in."

Grazio turned a complete circle, undecided as to his next move. He hadn't carried a gun in over two years. He couldn't afford to. You don't carry a gun when every cop in the world wants to see you behind bars.

"I'm asking you for the last time," Dewitt called.

"Go to hell," Grazio said, stepping back, his thoughts in a furor of confusion.

There were three simultaneous explosions, sounding as one, and the door flew open, slamming against the wall. Hugh stood in the doorway, the smoking gun in his hand, transfixed to the spot.

Jimmy Grazio held his stomach as he staggered forward, and the dark red blood oozed through his fingers, dripping on the floor. His mouth twisted in protest but he

was too stunned to speak. Suddenly he collapsed in a dead faint.

Marsha came into the room, staring wide-eyed, her baby face frightened. Hugh dropped the gun in his jacket pocket and stepped into the room, kneeling before Grazio. "I won't hurt you," he said, glancing at Marsha, then carefully pulled Grazio's shirt open to examine the wound. It was a stomach wound, not necessarily fatal if he got immediate help.

"I've got to go," he said. "You call a doctor right away. He'll be all right. My name is Hugh Dewitt."

He stood up and waved to her. "For God's sake, get on the phone."

"I will," she said, her hands fluttering before her. "I will."

Hugh left then, slamming the door shut. Marsha ran to the window, pulling the curtain back to peak out, her eyes watching the red tail-lights until they had disappeared down the street. Then she turned back and sat on the floor next to Jimmy.

"You're gonna die," she said. "You're gonna bleed to death. Know why? 'Cause I don't want you around anymore. You're bad for my career. I told you I wanted out. You wouldn't let go, okay, sweetheart, see how long you can hold on now."

The small flickering flame suddenly burst into a white blinding force that made the ground tremble



under Nancy. She tried to scream, rocking her body wildly, her eyes terrified as she saw the intense fire spreading everywhere, the blast of smoke and heat striking her face.

Rebos tried to hold on, his arms locked tightly in a death grip around her throat, his knee pressing down with all his weight and might in a last desperate attempt to break her neck. Her strength and endurance was the most formidable thing ever encountered by Al Rebos. He was actually frightened of her. He knew he couldn't hold on to her much longer. His strength was running out. He had to get away. And fast. Neighbors and firemen and cops would soon be swarming all over the place. Another five minutes and the whole joint would be a hopeless inferno.

Nancy's lips were pulled over her teeth and her eyes were beginning to swell from the pressure around her throat.

In a last wild burst of strength, she pushed herself to her knees and started to crawl toward the sliding glass door leading to another bedroom. Rebos rode on her back, his left hand around her throat, and his right hand beating her on the head. She threw herself headlong then, and rolled free of Rebos.

Rebos scrambled to his feet, staring in the darkness, nearly blind without his thick lensed glasses. "I'll kill you," he screamed, dropping to his hands and knees as he

felt the ground for the spectacles.

Nancy was gone by the time he found them. He ran to the sliding glass door and looked inside the smoke filled room. She was carrying a revolver, coming toward him at the door. Quickly, he closed the door and pressed his body against it.

Rebos never even heard the explosion. Tucker shot him in the back of the head from not more than ten feet away. He sank to the ground without a whimper, his thin exhausted body like a small neat pile of rubbish.

Firemen and policemen and sightseers bumped into each other and loud voiced officials yelled instructions, and people ran in all directions, some hauling heavy hoses, others ladders and axes. Powerful floodlights equaled daylight intensity and above everything else, was the hot crackling noise of the bright glowing fire.

Then Hugh Dewitt was running up to them, his usually flushed face deathly white until he saw his wife sound and safe. He reached down and swept her up off the ground, pressing her against his chest.

Tucker stepped forward. "I'm sorry Mr. Dewitt we didn't have a chance to save your house."

Hugh shook his head and pressed his wife closer. "Funny," he said, "it doesn't seem to matter now. Just that it's over, and we're still around. That's all I care about."



# A MATTER OF JUDGEMENT

*The barrel of the gun was inches from Phil's head. The man looked at the girl and smiled, "Now you get out of the car." Phil felt her fingernails dig into his arm.*

BY  
**JORDAN BAUMAN**

PHIL HAD parked the car on a deserted country road. It was a sultry July night and the thought of soft music from the radio, of a cool breeze drifting in through the windows while they made love in the front seat was a pleasant one.

And now Phil stared blankly at the dark, unshaven man who had suddenly sprung from the thicket, and felt Fran's fingernails bite into his arm as the man pointed a chrome revolver into the rolled-down window frame.

The engine of the automobile idled mutely, and for a scant moment Phil considered jamming the gearshift into reverse, of smashing his foot down on the accelerator in a bold attempt at flight. But the gun was there, ten inches from his head, and perhaps the man only wanted money, would rob them and leave as quickly and silently as he had arrived.

"What do you want?" Phil asked nervously, realizing the inadequateness of the question too late.

"Flip on the dome light," the man snapped. Phil could smell the rancid odor of cheap whiskey on the intruder's breath. He reached over Fran's knees and snapped on the dashboard switch. The interior of the car lit up in a dim yellowish glow.

"Now, you," he addressed Phil with a dry, harsh voice, "get out of the car and keep your hands up."

Phil hesitated, saw the gun move an inch closer to his head, then swung open the door.

"Oh, Phil," Fran clung to his arm, her grip tightened with hysteria. "Phil, be careful . . ."

"Sure, honey, sure." He unloosened her fingers gently and stepped out of the car.

"I haven't much money," Phil said, "but it's all yours."

"That's right, pal, just be cooperative and there won't be any trouble. I wouldn't want my finger to get itchy. You know, an itchy finger . . ." The man laughed then,



a high-pitched, strange laugh that filled the surrounding forest with an ominous echo. "Hey, sister," he called excitedly to Fran, "switch on them headlights."

A second later the lights burst on like huge white firecrackers, and Phil and the dark man stood bathed in the twin beams.

"Okay, pal, drop the money. All of it."

Phil lifted out his wallet and handed it to him. Removing the money from the billfold, the dark man counted it under a headlight. "Not bad," he remarked casually, as though he weren't actually interested in how much money the wallet contained. "Not bad at all—twelve bucks."

Phil took a cautious step forward, trying to seem as inconspicuous as possible, hoping the man would be through with him now—would be satisfied with *just* money.

"Not so fast, pal," the man stopped him with a wave of the gun. Phil felt a queer numbness in his stomach as the man's hand fastened around his wrist. He could feel a repugnance sweep through him under the man's cold touch.

"The watch, pal. Let's not forget that."

Phil sighed, almost relieved, and pulled off the wristwatch. He moved toward the car again, and this time the dark man did not stop him. Phil opened the door and slipped into the seat.

"May we please leave now?" Phil

asked humbly, trying to stifle the outraged trembling that was beginning in his hands, that was spreading like an epidemic throughout his body.

The man laughed again, the same hollow and warped sound as before, contaminating the subtle country air with a dank sickness.

"Oh, God," Fran murmured to herself. "God . . ."

"In a minute, pal." His eyes fastened on Fran with an odd glimmer. "You—" he snapped at the girl, "now *you* get out."

Phil's head spun around sharply. "That's not necessary; she hasn't any mon—"

The man slapped the barrel of the gun against Phil's face. Not hard. Just a short, stabbing blow. And a moment later Phil began to feel the blood ooze from his crushed lips, felt it roll down his chin in warm, sticky streams.

"Phil?" she said weakly. "Phil..?"

"You'd better do as he says, Fran. Give him your purse and let's get out of here."

She climbed out of the car, and Phil watched as the man snatched the tiny leather purse from her hand and quickly emptied the contents. Fran, her face a ghostly white under the glare of the headlights, turned swiftly and started back toward the door, and for a moment the dark man stood alone and vulnerable before the steel bumper of the car.

Phil's right hand crept up to the



gearshift, and the dark man seeming to sense the movement, suddenly looked up from the purse and smiled mirthlessly at the windshield.

"Wait!" the dark man shouted into the night, and Phil's hand froze in place, the lever still lingering between neutral and drive. "You, sister, hold up a minute."

Fran halted beside the right front fender. She stared into the front seat of the car, and in that moment Phil saw the naked pleading in her eyes.

"Fran . . ." Phil whispered. He could see the perspiration beginning to seep through the fine white linen of her blouse, could feel his own perspiration gathering in hot moist pools.

"This way, sister," the man swung his gun down the road away from the car. "Get moving."

"Phil," she screamed. "Do something, Phil . . ."

"Shut up and move."

They walked further down the road, the man pulling Fran by her arm, Phil following them as they became smaller and smaller and ultimately began to blend into the darkness of the forest.

He sat in the car feeling the dull

throb in his lips. And he saw, rather vaguely, the pair struggling on the side of the narrow road, saw the shiny gun abruptly drop from the man's hand and fall off the road into the summer dense foliage. He heard, once again, Fran's weakening cry for help.

Phil could taste the caked blood on his lips. He had a brief vision of himself running down the road, of seeing the dark man searching in the tall roadside grass for the gun, of finding it before Phil reached him . . .

He rammed the gearshift into reverse, the rear tires churning up dry country dirt as the car knifed backwards into the night. When he reached the highway the headlights no longer exposed the slowly waning conflict in the forest.

He raced the car down the smoothly paved road, watching the speedometer needle climb above fifty, sixty, seventy . . .

He did not think of the girl he had met earlier that day in a cocktail lounge, the girl who was now back in the woods with the dark man.

He sped home to his wife and two children and ranch house in the suburbs.







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