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Sometimes one good killing deserves another, and a slayer can be sentenced... without benefit of courtroom or jury!
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Without obligation, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER—all in plain envelope.
NEWARK, N. J., hospital interns were called on to treat an emergency drunk—a dog. Police learned that the dog and a man companion had entered a tavern and the pooch had consumed a quart of wine.

WHILE A COUPLE IN Malden, Mass., were on vacation, their parrot died. Police investigated, but said that the parrot had apparently died of loneliness.

HALF CHOW, a dog, was Exhibit A at a Bristol, Va., trial. The defendant was accused of stealing him. But the judge had to dismiss the case. Exhibit A had jumped out of the window and run away.

NEIGHBORS OF a lady in Marion, Mich., notified police when they saw a light in her basement, knowing that she was out of town. Officers crept up on the house, discovered that the “burglars” were a bunch of sparrows who, entering through a broken window, turned on the lights by perching on a pull chain.

MUSCATINE, IA., POLICE were sent in a patrol car to pick up a dead dog. They radioed back this report: “That dead dog just got up and walked away.”

WHEN BESSIE, a sow of Hayes, England, was found drowned in a pond after giving birth to her ten newborn pigs, her third litter, her death was listed as suicide. “The old girl seemed fed up with life,” Robert Dulieu, her owner, reported.

A MAN IN Pekin, Ill., complained that a dog was beating him out of his delivered newspapers. After the dog had made off with a number of papers from his porch, the man reported that he began racing the pooch for them. “But the dog beats me,” he said sadly.

CORBY, ENGLAND, officials passed a law that people can keep bees if they’ll take out bee-sting insurance to cover any passers-by who might get stung.

LONDON POLICE have been alerted about a booming “black cat market,” which is lowering the city’s feline population. The bobbies are trying to smash a gang which carries coshes (lead-loaded weapons) and sacks and goes about “catnapping.” Cat skins sell for around $1.40 apiece. They’re used in the making of cheap fur coats. One cat owner complained: “There are only two kinds of cats today—the quick and the dead.”

WHEN THREE OFFICERS showed up at a Port Arthur, Canada, farm with a search warrant, the farmer’s peeved nanny goat grabbed the warrant and chewed it up, then took out after the three cops and routed them from the premises.

A JUDGE IN Martinez, Calif., approved $30 monthly support for Bobby, an aging mongrel pooch, as the only heir of an Armenian immigrant who died well off.

SYRACUSE, N. Y., police have been looking for 1,000 “kidnapped” worms. The purloined crawlers were the property of an agriculturist.

IN ATLANTA, a pooch took a fancy to a parked station wagon, hopped up into the front seat and defied the car’s owner, police and humane society people to dislodge him. Officers finally decided there was only one thing to do. They drove the car to the city pound, backed up to a cage and let the city dog-catcher take over from there.
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OF ALL the jezebels who have figured
in murder cases, the strangest of all,
beyond much question, was the one involved
in a homicide melodrama which unfolded on
the outskirts of Milwaukee one wintry night
some years ago.

It was, to be specific, on the night of Nov. 7,
1927, while Fred Tasel, roadside tavern owner,
was closing his place of business, when he
heard a car, which had been swishing along
the snowy road, come to a sudden stop . . .
there was a thudding noise, then the sound
of groaning.

The tavern proprietor ran out into the snow.
A man was lying in the road and he was moan-
ing, “Emma, Emma, where’s my Emma?” He
mumbled this over and over again.

When he became more rational at the hos-
pital where he was taken, he explained to au-
thorities that he was Al Grenwalt and Emma
was his wife. The two had spent the day in
Milwaukee shopping, the heat-up man went on
to say, then had headed for their home in the
Mount Horeb community . . . along the high-
way, another car had come along, forced them
off the road . . . a gunman jumped out, an-
nounced it was a stick-up . . . Emma screamed
and the bandit struck him over the head with
his gun . . . that’s all he remembered.

“Oh, God, where’s Emma?” he cried.

The sheriff’s deputies could give him no
news. Since the place where the attack had
occurred was some miles from where Gren-
walt had been found, it appeared obvious that
the gunmen had driven his unconscious victim
in a car for awhile, then decided to dump him
out. The deputies surmised that he probably
had Emma in his car too. “Oh, God!” Gren-
walt cried.

The deputies asked him if he could describe
the gunman’s car. Al Grenwalt shook his
bandaged head a little, explained he couldn’t
tell them too much, everything had happened
with such stunning swiftness. But he sug-
gested they look for his car, a green Stutz,
anyway. “The bandit probably switched over
to it,” he said.

They asked him what made him think so.
“Well, it’s some car, that green Stutz of
mine,” he declared, a note of pride coming
into his voice. “We were doing 60 and just
sailing smoothly along when that other car
came along. It’s a real honey all right—that
green Stutz.”

A bit wistfully, he added, “I sure hope you
can find her. There’ll never be another car
like her.”

The deputies also went on to learn from
Grenwalt that the bandit had taken $400 from
him. And the next day they found out that
the gunman also had taken two diamond rings
from his wife’s fingers. This was by far the
most horrible of all discoveries. For the facts
about the rings became known after the crum-
pled body of Emma Grenwalt was found on
the side of a road a few miles away, beyond
where her husband had been found in the
snow. She’d been strangled.

The news about his wife seemed to leave
Al Grenwalt inconsolably disconsolate. “Poor
Emma!” he gasped. From acquaintances of
the Grenwals, deputies learned Al, a former
bus driver, now unemployed, and Emma had
been a devoted couple for the fifteen years of
their married life. They’d never been known
to have a quarrel, and no hint of scandal ever
had crossed their threshold.

It turned out that the ex-bus driver had been
right in his observation that the bandit prob-
ably would take up with the green Stutz. A
stolen car, the one, the deputies surmised, the 
gunman probably had used, had been found 
abandoned not too far from where the attack 
had occurred. And the deputies had received 
reports that a green Stutz had been seen around 
the streets of Milwaukee, driven by a short 
muscular man with a mustache.

"I hope you get him," the former bus driver 
said through his teeth, adding with a sigh, 
"and I hope you find that car . . . that was 
one sweet operating baby."

The case began to break wide open when 
the officers learned from a pawnbroker that a 
short stocky man with a mustache had tried to 
pawn two rings, then suddenly had become 
panicky and fled without explanation. But 
even sweeter music to the officers' ears was an 
identification made by some people who'd seen 
the man driving the green Stutz car. They said 
they thought it was a fellow named Dick Betz.

Police didn't have too much trouble picking 
him. But he denied having driven a green Stutz 
or knowing anything about any murder. "You 
might as well confess," the officers told him, 
declaring—it was a convenient falsehood—that 
Grenwalt already had seen a picture of him 
and had identified him as the man who's robbed 
him of $400.

"That's a dirty lie!" righteously declared the 
mustached man. "He only had $3 on him."

Well, after that outburst, Betz went on to 
admit that he'd killed Emma Grenwalt. "But 
I was hired to do it," he told officers.

"Hired to do it! Who hired you?"

"Grenwalt."

"So there was another woman after all!" 
gasped the startled officers.

"Oh, no," said Betz, who, it turned out, was 
an old acquaintance of Grenwalt, the two hav- 
ing worked for the same bus line. "He never 
looked at another woman. The jezebel was 
that green Stutz of his. He was crazy about 
that car. He was about to lose it to the finance 
company, though. Emma had some life insur-
ance on her, enough for him to secure the car.
He had to choose between Emma and the car.
The green Stutz won."

Confronted with Betz's confession, Grenwalt 
broke down and admitted he'd promised Betz 
$500 for killing his wife. Wisconsin has no 
death penalty, so both men were given life 
sentences. The judge ordered, though, that 
every Nov. 7—the date of the murder—Al 
Grenwalt be placed in solitary confinement . . . 
to perpetuate the feeling of horror at the thought 
of a man killing his wife for a green, four-
wheeled jezebel.

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Sometimes one good killing deserves another ... and a murderer

can be sentenced without benefit of courtroom or jury....
Chapter 1

OLD RUFUS MANNERING built the West Meadow clubhouse back in the twenties because he wanted to leave a monument to himself. It was a big sprawling brick structure, now covered with ivy and moss. It stood well out of town, overlooking the greens, and was used for all sorts of entertainment purposes.

You walked into a lobby, nicely furnished in modern. From this room you went directly into the main ballroom which was huge. At one end of it was a stage, with back-

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Chapter 1

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You walked into a lobby, nicely furnished in modern. From this room you went directly into the main ballroom which was huge. At one end of it was a stage, with back-
RUNNING SCARED

drops, a curtain, and an orchestra pit. In an alcove, but in full view of the ballroom, was the bass presided over by one Joe, whose last name nobody seemed to know. Joe was a friend of mine. Whenever I was dragged into an affair here, I spent most of my time with him.

I had my back to the bar now, rotating my highball glass between my fingers while I watched the dancers. Greta floated by in the arms of young Pete Alvord, the latest addition to the legal talent of our town. Although Greta was my wife, I hadn’t the slightest degree of jealousy in me. Really I would have liked it if young Alvord had taken her away with him for a few days and swept her off her dainty feet with tempestuous love-making.

But such a prospect was not likely. Greta and love were only distantly related—like a third cousin you call upon only when the mood moves you.

The barkeep said, in his usual soft voice, “Your wife sure is a doll, Mr. Owen. As pretty as they come.”

“Yeah,” I said, without turning around. “A regular doll.”

I wondered what Joe would have said if I’d told him of the many times I’d thought seriously about killing this doll. Or, for that matter, what Greta would have thought.

I was here in the clubhouse now for two reasons. First of all, Greta had wanted me to come, and what Greta wanted I had better want, too. Second, and more important to me personally, Janie Cooper was singing here tonight.

Janie wouldn’t have been invited as a guest. She wouldn’t have been allowed to sing if women had run the entertainment committee. But men did, and when men thought about entertainment, they thought about Janie. She couldn’t dance, she was a lousy singer, but girls like Janie needed little talent. What she had in the way of plain, unadulterated sex appeal was everything necessary to make her a drawing card. She worked in the hotels and night clubs. In a city of four hundred thousand, there are enough places to keep a popular girl busy.

JANIE always seemed to promise more than she gave, but the implied promise was so alluring that most men promptly forgot they could only look. She was a slender blonde with full red lips and large eyes of that tantalizing purple in a hybrid pansy.

Her expression, while she sang, was slightly vacuous, and at times her face was a complete blank. Which was no indication, however, that she did not know what she wanted out of life. Janie was a simple character—and she wanted me.

What made matters somewhat difficult was that Janie and I both were married. I had first met her when she had needed an attorney to file a divorce action for her, and she had picked me at random. We never had got around to filing divorce papers, mainly because I stalled as much as possible, and after Janie had been in my office awhile she would forget why she was there.

I drank the remainder of my highball in one swallow and turned back to watch the dancing again. Greta floated by once more. It was a constant source of amazement to me that a girl as pretty and pleasant as Greta could be when she wanted to, could also be such a holy terror when she went on a rampage. She had formed the habit of smiling most of the time—with her lips, for her steady gray eyes were always quietly appraising. With her poodle cut she looked about ten years younger than her thirty-four, which happened to be two years older than I was.

Greta had a supple body, too. She wasn’t too tall, but she was well-built. She had good legs—the kind which intrigue. I think her legs were the first thing I noticed about her when we met at one of the annual dances in this very clubhouse four years ago.

She had knee action in her hips. Greta could have made me plenty happy if she’d been able to relax her mind as
much as she relaxed her body. If she would only forget this driving ambition—not for herself, but for me. As the only child of Harold Mannering—the Honorable Harold Mannering—she should have had an equally respected man for her husband, to carry on the tradition of the Mannering clan, even if under another name. The tradition was proclaimed by all the paintings hung in the reception hall of the Mannering home. Below each portrait was a brass plate. Without exception they bore witness that the portrait above was that of an eminent and highly respected judge.

One Mannering had gone to the Supreme Court. One had made the State Supreme court, two the Superior Court and one—the black sheep, I presume—had risen only as far as police court judge. Yet he had made the grade, and there was an “Honorable” before his name and on his tombstone. It always amused me to think that I was expected to follow in such footsteps.

I was bored with watching the dancers when presently the curtain parted, to reveal Janie standing beside a piano. As usual, she wore a gown which seemed to have been wound around her and sewed on so that it would have to be ripped off her before she could change costume. Also, as usual, the tight gown had a long slit up the side so that her wonderful legs were on display, well above the knee.

Janie always sang three numbers. As she began the third this time, I put my glass on the bar, and quietly eased myself along the fringe of the crowd to the French doors. They were open, although the night air was brisk. There still was ice on the dangerous back roads, although it was late winter.

I lit a cigarette and leaned against one of the white pillars supporting the long, wide portico over the carriage entrance. I heard Janie finish her last song, heard the applause, and I moved away, heading toward the smart black sedan which was my car, paid for by the Honorable Judge Harold Mannering because his son-in-law couldn’t drive anything less expensive and imposing, and couldn’t afford anything half as good.

I unlocked the door beside the wheel, slid into the seat and opened the other front door. In a moment Janie was beside me. We didn’t say a word as she came directly into my arms, letting her evening wrap slip from her shoulders so our embrace would be unencumbered.

Janie was a delight to hold. She was soft and yielding—and she was in love with me. Greta’s embrace was one of plain duty, and love with her was unimportant, compared with family.

Janie said, “Mike, you big lug, why haven’t you been to see me?”

“They keep me too damned busy, Janie. Don’t think I’ve wanted to stay away.”

She touched my cheek. “No, I believe you’d have come if you could. Mike, what about my divorce? ‘When are you going to do something about that?’”

“Soon,” I said. “I’m waiting until the right judge is on the bench.”

Janie nodded and cuddled closer. I kissed her with a fervor that plainly showed I simply didn’t care about anything in the world except this blond armful whose warm, sweet breath seemed to blow away the air I meant to breathe. With my arms holding her tight, and my lips against hers, I forgot an obsession that had been bothering me for hours, for she was my only obsession now.

But from the very start of this evening I’d had an odd feeling that it was to be a lousy night. Which is why I don’t believe I was more than mildly surprised when Greta opened the car door beside Janie, Greta was smoking a cigarette without removing it from her lips. The tip glowed as she breathed fast, and she was puffing smoke like a fairy tale dragon.

Janie huddled as close to me as possible. I patted her shoulder comforting-
ly, and wondered what black fate had sent Greta to the car. Not that I cared if she found us like this, but for her to interrupt at this particular moment—

Greta said, “Mike, I want you to drive me home.”

I knew Greta wouldn’t create a scene. No Mannering ever created scenes. I said, “Presently, Greta. Go away.”

“I’ll be glad to, Mike. But in fifteen minutes I expect to find you waiting for me right here in this car. And alone, Mike.”

She turned her head and spat out the cigarette which would have burned her lip in a moment. As she moved away from us Janie exhaled slowly, and fell back against the cushions.

After a couple of silent minutes Janie and I walked back to the clubhouse together. There was no further necessity for secrecy now. Greta knew all there was to know. Janie went through the service entrance to reach her dressing room, and I headed straight for the bar. I drank two shots of brandy as fast as I could gulp them down. On top of what I’d had before, that glow was taking shape. I had two more.

Joe said, “Hey, you better go easy, Mr. Owen. Cognac is okay up to a point, but there’s always one that’ll slap you down.”

“That,” I said, “is the one I like. The one I wait for.”

I paid for the drinks, tipped Joe, and headed for the terrace. The air in the room was heavy and the drinks were hitting me fairly hard. Maybe I’d taken that dangerous one which Joe claimed slapped a man down.

The cold air didn’t help too much, either, and I reeled slightly as I made my way to the car. I rolled down both windows, slid behind the wheel and waited. Greta would have to make her excuses, but if she took too long about it she could drive herself home. I had little heart to face what was coming next anyhow.

But Greta appeared after about five minutes. She got into the car without a word, rolled up her window and told me to roll up mine. I did so automatically. It never occurred to me not to do whatever Greta commanded me to do. I backed the car out a little too fast and had to jam on the brakes or hit the cars parked behind me. Greta gave a nervous cry.

“You’re drunk, Mike! Why must you do this to me?”

I got the car straightened out and rolled on toward the country road. The clubhouse was located halfway up Terrano Mountain, which overlooked the west side of the city. Because traffic was discouraged so near the club the road never had been improved. In the summer it was deep with dust; in the winter, it was sometimes impassable. And always dangerous.

I slowed the car to a crawl. “Greta,” I said, “I’m sorry you had to see what you did tonight. Sorry in a way, that is. But at least now you know. Let’s call it off. We’re not compatible. One of the main reasons you married me was because I happened to be an attorney. Well, if you must know, I hate the profession. but you and your family have lived on it so long the law has become a part of your very existence. I’m a lousy lawyer, and everyone knows it.”

“No, Mike,” she said firmly. “Regardless of what you are and what you have done to me, I love you as much as I can love any man. There has never been a divorce in my family. Father would not permit it. There will be no divorce.”

I stepped too hard on the gas and sent the car skidding over the road. We almost turned around on a thin sheet of ice. Greta, never a calm driver or passenger, screamed. I told her to shut up and shifted gears to make the hill. Once over the crest of that, it would be downgrade all the way home.

I knew the car weaved. That mixture of cognac and Scotch with a glass or two of champagne thrown in for good measure, had a tendency to diminish the brightness of the headlights. It was diffi-
cuit to see where I was going.

Greta said, "Mike, pull over. Let me drive. You're drunk and incapable."

"To hell with you!" I said. "Drunk or sober I can drive. Close your eyes if you're scared, but shut up!"

Chapter II

WHEN we reached the top of the grade we could look down into the valley where the city lay spread out to our gaze. My foot, heavy on the gas pedal for the climb, stayed heavy while the nose of the car eased downhill, and the big black sedan began to pick up speed. Greta cried out in alarm again.

I hit the brake and none too soon. When the car stopped, the front wheels were off the road, and within two feet of the edge of a rugged hillside. I exhaled sharply and wiped sweat off my face. If the brakes had been poor, we'd have gone over. As it was, I must have dug quite a path in the dirt road before I left it.

Greta said, "That's quite enough, Mike. Get out of the car and let me take the wheel."

Perhaps it was the brandy and champagne, or just the sheer desperation I felt as a result of her refusal to cooperate. Perhaps it was an unholy dread of having to live this sort of life with Greta and the judge for the rest of my days. Whatever the reason for what I felt, I don't know, because psychology had always been a weak point with me. All I did know was that I became mad, and that I wanted to grab her slim throat and squeeze it until she wasn't breathing any more.

The habit of obeying her was strong, however. Obediently I climbed out of the car, and the icy air hit my lungs like a knife. Greta moved over behind the wheel.

"Do you intend to stand there?" she demanded. "Damn it, Mike, how much more do I have to take? I'm cold, and I want to go home!"

I said, "Yes, Greta—home."

I opened the door and hit her on the point of the jaw. I'd never laid a hand on her in anger before, but I didn't pull this punch. She hadn't even guessed it was coming. There was just the smack as my fist hit her.

Greta fell over the wheel, her hands still gripping it. And suddenly my brain was as cool as the air.

I reached into the car and released the handbrake. The car stayed there, quite steady. I lifted Greta's right foot and placed it lightly on the gas pedal. Then I gave her a push so that as she fell, her weight was brought down on the right foot. The automatic clutch took care of the rest of it. Given only a slight impetus from the motor, the car started moving. I slammed the door and threw myself back from the sedan.

The front wheels went over. Greta's foot may have slipped off the gas pedal, but it didn't matter now. The forward weight of the car was enough to carry it over. I whirled around. I didn't want to see this. I was running down the road, back toward the clubhouse, when I heard the car begin turning turtle and crashing its way down that steep hillside.

I kept on running, drawing in air that seemed to freeze my lungs. I veered off the road, taking a shortcut, for I had to reach the clubhouse as quickly as possible. I hadn't driven more than a mile, and my running course was mostly downhill so that I actually sprinted all the way, being careful not to entangle myself on any bushes.

I didn't know what I was going to do, except that I had to make it appear I'd never left the clubhouse.

When I reached the parking space, I cut across it and, at the last moment, I veered toward the service door instead of the flagstone terrace. Inside, the big room the orchestra was still playing and people were dancing. I paused long enough to catch my breath, and when I was breathing normally I walked casually along the dark corridor to the dressing rooms.

Janie was the only entertainer to-
night, so she was the only person backstage. Her dressing room door was open and I walked in. Janie, at the dressing table, saw me in the mirror and got quickly to her feet. I think she guessed, even then.

I said, “Have you anything to drink here, Janie?”

“Yes—a flask. I always carry one. You know I like to have a drink or two before I go on.”

“Give it to me. For God’s sake, Janie, I need a drink.”

She opened a drawer in the dressing table and took out the flask. I unscREWed the stopper and drank half the contents. It was rye, sharp and strong enough to gag me.

“Mike, what’s happened?” she asked. “Your shoes are all dirty. What’s happened?”

“It’s a long story, Janie.”

The orchestra stopped and Janie said hurriedly, “I’ve got to go on. Mike, you look like hell. Something’s happened.”

I took both her hands in mine. “Janie, all you know is that I came back here forty minutes ago and wanted to lie down. I was drunk. Very drunk, do you understand?”

She nodded mutely, terror shining from her eyes as she backed to the door.

I tilted the flask and drained it. My stomach almost turned over. I went into her bathroom and felt like being sick, but I controlled myself. Ripping a length of tissue off the roll, I wiped my shoes clean and flushed the paper away. I turned my trouser cuffs down and dusted out any particles of dried grass or bark or dirt.

When I straightened up, the room started moving slowly. By the time I got back to Janie’s couch the room was turning faster. I put the empty flask in the drawer, sat down on the couch, unfastened my tie and opened my shirt. I forced my shoes off without untying the laces.

I passed out two minutes after I laid down, and the last thing I remember is hearing Janie’s voice lilting to the crowd that she was in love with love; and that made me chuckle because she was in love with me.

Three days later, Greta’s funeral was, I suppose, one of the biggest our city had ever seen. Robed justices of the State Supreme Court were lined up on one side of the grave. And it looked as if a convention of attorneys, court clerks, probation officers and judges was present.

Judge Mannering kept it all simple, however. As simple and sincere as his grief. Since I had been shaken awake in Janie’s dressing room seventy-two hours before and told that Greta was dead, the old Judge had changed. He had been forty-five years old when Greta had been born. Now he was seventy-eight, but until that night he hadn’t looked it.

During the three dismal pre-funeral days he seemed to grow taller than his stooped six feet—and thinner than the skeleton he’d been. Instead of smiling with his whole face as he once did, only his lips moved thinly. His eyes, remarkably bright and sparkling for a man of his age, had turned dull and remote.

I was more or less numb during those three days. At first it had seemed like part of a drunken nightmare, then when I fully realized what I’d turned into, that knowledge took the edge off the numbness. I was finally able to answer questions, to lie smoothly and without arousing the slightest suspicion. I talked to a detective named Walter Rydell and he seemed satisfied. There was a brief inquest at which a six-man jury solemnly intoned that Greta had gone to her death by accident.

I didn’t feel like a murderer, I didn’t consider myself one. I was able to look at Greta’s patched-up face and not display any shudders. I could talk in a reasonable way with the police, the medical examiner and with the old judge. A man obsessed by guilt would have been unable to carry on that way.

Nobody suspected me. I was, at the
worst, a misunderstood husband, but genuinely grieving for a girl I’d loved and married.

I turned away from the graveside before the more harrowing details began. I hated funerals, anyway. I walked slowly back to the funeral party limousine in which I’d ridden with the judge. The poor old man would probably stay to the bitter end, but I’d rather wait for him here. I had started to climb into the car when a hand, big enough to grasp my shoulder tightly, made me look around fast.

A man in a chauffeur’s black outfit let go of me and said, “Judge Mannerings asked me to watch for you, Mr. Owen. He is going to drive back in his own car and wants you to ride with him.”

“Who the devil are you?”
"Lempet, sir. Stanley Lempet. Judge Mannering hired me two days ago. I'm the chauffeur."

"Oh—I see. You're a pretty big fellow to be a chauffeur, aren't you?"

"Yeah—I'm big all right. Used to be a wrestler, but I broke a guy's neck, and that finished me in the ring."

"Those things will happen, Lempet," I mumbled.

"Yeah, they happen," he agreed. "Only I wasn't in the ring when this happened. It was just a private brawl, so they gave me ten to twenty. It was the judge who sent me up. Kinda funny, ain't it—me working for him now?"

"Not funny at all. If the judge hired you, you're all right. Anyone he has faith in, must be okay. Where's his car?"

He walked beside me as we cut across several plots. I'm no midget, but I felt like one alongside this man, though I hadn't yet learned that he was two hundred and fifty pounds of Swede-Irish-Canadian ancestry. All bone and muscle, with heavy features, a bald head, a wrinkled neck and mean eyes. A brute—a giant of a man. A dangerous man.

Lempet took a pack of cigarettes from his uniform coat pocket as the crowd at the grave was breaking up, shook one loose, and offered it to me with an easy familiarity. I took it and he shook another one out for himself. I lit them both. Just pals.

"There ain't nothing I wouldn't do for the judge, Mr. Owen," the chauffeur offered, as we walked on. "I guess maybe you can understand that."

"How could I, since I only discovered a moment ago that you worked for him? How come all this loyalty anyway for a man who sent you away, Lempet?"

"Well, I rated the sentence. After I'd served the minimum, the judge took an interest in me and got next to the Parole Board. That got me out pronto."

"How long ago was that?"

"About a year ago."

Smoke swirled around our heads. I glanced at the rapidly dwindling crowd at the graveside, then back to Lempet. "Why did you wait a whole year to come to work for him?" I asked.

"That's easy," he told me frankly. "I got sent up again."

I said, "It didn't take you long. Don't tell me you broke out. Ex-cons usually get a stiff rap."

"I got life. It was a bum rap this time. The first one—okay, I killed the guy. The second time I didn't, but the cops grabbed me anyhow and they got a conviction mostly on account of my word wasn't much good, y'see. But the judge talked to me and figured maybe I didn't do it, so he started nosing around and sure enough he finds it couldn't have been me. So I get out. Last week they sprung me and I told the judge if he ever needed a good strong guy to work for him, call on me. He did—the day after his daughter was killed."

Somehow I didn't like that. I had no idea why, but I didn't like it. A few people drifted my way, shook my hand and murmured appropriate words. Finally only the judge was left beside the grave. I felt sorry for the old boy, and I walked back to join him. I took his arm.

"It's time to go, Judge," I said.

He turned his head my way, but I'll swear his eyes didn't see anything. He surrendered to the tug I gave on his elbow, though, and we walked silently to where Lempet was waiting beside the car. Lempet opened the door and touched the peak of his cap. The judge didn't notice. I helped him in, sat down beside him, and told Lempet to take us home.

Lempet drove sedately, but soon swung the car through the gates of the estate dominated by the big white hundred-year-old house which had known no ownership except the Mannering family.

The house was two stories high, and contained eighteen rooms and five baths. A wide veranda with white pillars ran around three sides of it, and on
the veranda were a number of ancient and uncomfortable rocking chairs, all of which squealed to high heaven when they were sat upon.

Inside, the reception hall was two stories high and made stately by a row of high-backed mahogany chairs with dark red velvet upholstery, and which were rarely occupied. And the portraits. No visitor ever missed them. The oldest one was a likeness of the first Rufus Mannering, who had been a Federal Judge in the days of James Monroe. Then came his three sons, all judges of the state courts, and finally their sons. My father-in-law was the last of the line. His brothers had died without issue, leaving it up to him to carry on.

His only child had been Greta, and my blood had been supposed to continue the line. Perhaps it was because they had looked on me in the light of being a prize stallion that Greta and I had no children. I think that had been the old boy's biggest disappointment. And he'd probably retained hope right up to the time Greta was killed.

Chapter III

The living room of the Mannering home was an enormous place. It had once been a ballroom. The old gas fixtures had been left intact, giving the room an antique look, even though the direct and indirect lighting was as modern as tomorrow.

One small red chair there had been Greta's special property, in which she had curled up to watch television, or read, or discuss current trials in the news. The chair still bore the imprint of her body, and as my eyes lighted on it now as I entered the living room alone I steered away from it. When I did sit down, it was only for half a minute, and then I got up and went over to the built-in bar which Greta had installed. I got cubes out of the freezer, placed three of them in a tall glass, added bourbon and a squirt of seltzer and started back to my chair with the drink.

The old judge came in, more bent than ever. He said, Mike, please prepare me a drink. A measured one."

I knew what he wanted. His doctor allowed two one-ounce drinks a day. He liked them with a lot of soda. I found his personal shot glass which accurately measured the dose, filled it, dumped the contents into a highball glass and put in ice and soda. I swizzled it around and carried my glass and his over to the middle of the room. The judge had seated himself behind a medium-sized ornamental desk.

He accepted the drink. "Thank you, M'ke. Please sit down."

He sipped his drink. It would last him considerably more than an hour. I'd have to hop up three times to replenish the ice and if he drank nothing but water at the end, the illusion was there and he felt satisfied.

"Mike," he said, "I have arranged that Greta's holdings, cash and property, be examined to see which should be liquidated to pay inheritance taxes. I'll await your pleasure about what to do with the balance. It's all yours, of course. Greta died intestate."

I said, "Thank you judge. If I thought you needed any of it, I'd put every cent at your disposal. As matters stand, I don't know what I intend to do. This has been too great a shock. I haven't had time to think things out yet."

He tasted his drink again. "Mike, you don't have to lie any longer. There isn't enough evidence to convict you in any court, but I know you murdered her."

I lowered the glass from my lips slowly. Surely the old boy was bluffing—or had gone completely off his nut from grief. How could he know what not another soul did? And he hadn't even been at the dance!

I said, "Judge, I'm sorry, but I thought you just accused me of murder."

"I did."

"You're not in earnest, of course. Frankly, it's a bit too macabre for me. Don't say such things."

"You wanted a divorce from Greta.
You were determined to have it, and Greta would not consent. There is another woman. An entertainer known as Janie Cooper. There's your motive, Mike. Don't beat around the bush. I know you killed Greta."

"That's strange," I said. I was entirely calm, perhaps from a form of numbness. But my voice was steady. My brain worked efficiently.

"What is strange?" the judge asked. "If you really believe I murdered your daughter, why haven't you done anything about it?"

"Simply because your word is as good as mine, and your alibi would hold up despite anything I say, thanks to that Janie Cooper who seems to be standing by you. Mike, don't lie to me any more. Things are difficult enough as it is. I can't have you arrested and tried. If there was sufficient evidence I would, but it's impossible, and it will continue to be. Perhaps if I did find a way, I would not accuse you publicly. For Greta's sake. She was a proud girl, Mike. A good girl. She left us gracefully and it is better that way. But don't lie again."

I DEMANDED, with rising heat, "Now what in heaven's name makes you think I killed her, Judge? You know what happened. Greta and I had an argument because I was drinking too much. She told me I could join her if I liked, but that she was going home anyway, and I could find my own transportation back. I drank more, mostly out of spite. I all but passed out, and somehow I found my way back to Janie Cooper's dressing room. She wasn't even there. She was out front, singing. I laid down on the divan and blacked out. When they woke me up, I was told Greta was dead. If you believe I was faking that drunkenness, ask any of a dozen people who were there."

"I don't deny you were drunk, Mike. I admit I have no idea how you accomplished it. There were brake marks showing the car had been traveling at a furious pace and didn't make a sharp bend—just kept going over the edge of the road. There is no question but that Greta was driving, or at least was behind the wheel. I don't pretend to know all the facts, but I do know you were with her, that you were asking for a showdown, and that Greta was in fear of her life."

I took a quick drink. "I hate to say this, Judge, but your theories are impossible."

"Oh bosh," he said, "they are not theories. Before Greta left the clubhouse, she phoned me. She said that from the phone booth she could see you reeling out to where the car was parked. She told me she'd caught you and this Miss Cooper in what is known as a compromising position. You had already informed her you wanted a divorce, and that you intended to let nothing stop you from getting it. She asked me to stay up until the two of you returned and we could all discuss the situation. I know you were with her when she left the clubhouse, I know you had good reason to kill her. I know you did."

I considered the problem. This man who was accusing me had sat in judgment on scores of murderers. He knew the ins and outs of crime—the organized, carefully planned, and the spontaneous kind. He knew when a man was lying, he could assimilate and digest evidence, know what it meant and how important it was. He knew I'd killed Greta, and he also knew there was nothing he could do about it.

I said, "We'd better let all this drop, Judge. Rubbing salt into our wounds isn't going to do either of us any good. I'll leave your house, of course. I won't see you again, if that is what you wish. I'll waive any and all possible rights to your estate."

"Will you admit to me that you murdered Greta? That's what I want from you."

"Do you think I'd be such a fool even if I was guilty, Judge?"

"You have my word that there are no
dictaphones in here, no one listening. I merely wish to know the truth, and I promise you it will go no further. Tell me, Mike. Tell an old man who'll never sleep quietly until he knows:"

"This new chauffeur—" I began. "Lempet? I sent him to the garage. I assure you he is there now."

"It seems strange that you hired him at this particular time, Judge."

"I hired him because he's a rough, brutal man, and I don't as yet know whether or not I need a bodyguard. If you killed Greta for her money, you might do the same to me. Lempet will see that you don't."

He wasn't egging me on. I could take his word that whatever I said would go no further. In a court of law his testimony wouldn't be worth a thing. What if he did know the truth? He wanted it.

I rotated the glass on my knee. "I wasn't after Greta's money, Judge. I'm not after yours."

"But you killed her?"

His eyes burned into mine. I said, "Yes—I killed her."

HE SAT back and closed his eyes for a moment. When they opened again, the fire had gone out of them. "Thank you, Mike."

I said, "Judge, it wasn't done in malice. There was no question of hatred about it. I was drunk, Greta was angry. We quarreled. The car skidded almost to the spot where it went over, and she insisted on taking the wheel. I stepped out and she called me an idiot. She told me I could never have a divorce. She was unreasonable and a bit frantic, I expect. I hit her. I still don't know what possessed me to do it, but once done, I had to follow it up. I didn't want to, but Greta frightened me, as you have always frightened me. As those monstrosities hanging on the walls of the reception hall frighten me, I don't belong here. I never have. I was defending what I wanted out of life. What Greta wanted for me, I couldn't take. I haven't the guts for it, nor the intellect nor the ambition. Now do you understand?"

"You have the makings of a good attorney. Perhaps even a judgeship, Mike. I detest you, but I'm sorry for you as well. I hate to see a life wasted, even by a man who has wasted the life of another through murder."

"I did not premeditate what I did, Judge."

"I don't believe you did, Mike. If you had, Greta would have sensed it, and would not have taken any foolish risks."

"I think that's all Judge." I arose and swallowed the rest of the drink. I wanted another badly, but I wasn't going to stay here and listen to him.

"Sit down, Mike. We're not finished yet. Sit down, I say!"

As his courts would obey his commands when he was on the bench, so did I. I sank into the chair, wondering what was coming next. He seemed oddly unaffected by my confession. An ordinary man would have damned my soul to hell, but then, no Mannerings was an ordinary man.

The judge said, "It was necessary for me to know for certain that you killed Greta, Mike."

"For what purpose?" I asked. "You can't make use of the confession."

"I am sentencing you to death, Mike, for the murder of Greta Mannerings. Now do you understand?"

I laughed at him. Perhaps there wasn't much mirth in the laugh, but I managed something that sounded like one.

"You're a senile old man, Judge. Much as I hate to say it, you're slipping."

"Yes, I'm old. But not senile. My body is slipping, but my mind is not. I meant what I said."

"Then how do you intend to go about carrying out the sentence, Your Honor? If you take this into court, they'll laugh you out, and that is something you could never stand."

"I know. I'm quite aware of my limi-
tations under the law, so I am appointing myself your executioner. I shall kill you, Mike, and my conscience will never permit me to consider it any more a murderous act than I did whenever I condemned a man to death at the hands of the public executioner."

I settled back comfortably. He wasn't scaring me—not any more. I said, "Judge, if you're trying to frighten me, forget it. Now I think I'll leave you."

He must have opened the desk drawer while he was talking, because I hadn't noticed or heard it slide out. His hand came from below the desk and it held a short-barreled automatic. For a couple of seconds, I froze in that chair. Then the enormity of it all hit me, and I laughed.

"Go ahead and shoot, Judge," I said. "You might get away with it on grounds of insanity or senility or both. I'd like the bullet between my eyes, if you don't mind."

THE gun came up and leveled. The hand that held it was gnarled and wrinkled, the wrist was as skinny as a broom handle, but that gun was as steady as a rock. I could look straight down its barrel, and the sensation was anything but pleasant.

I said, "I hate being bored, Judge, so shoot if you must because I intend to walk out of here."

He said nothing, but the gun remained trained on me. I put my hands on the arms of the chair and slowly raised myself off the seat. I moved so slowly the cushion springs followed me up. I stood, half-crouched, feeling the first vague symptoms of terror. The gun was too steady.

"Shoot, damn you!" I shouted, and my voice must have been heard half a mile away. The gun never wavered a millimeter. I kept on shouting. "You're a lousy, bluffing old fool! It takes nerve to kill. Nerve—and you haven't got it. All you can do is sit on a bench and order somebody else to do the killing. This is different. You'd wreck the name of Mannering so badly it would go all the way back down the line. Those precious ancestors of yours would bury themselves deeper on Judgment Day because of you. So shoot if you must, and to hell with you!"

I half-turned away from him and walked in front of the desk. Suddenly I lunged and my right hand flicked out, slammed the gun down against the surface of the desk and pinned it there until I could work the wrinkled fingers loose.

They were surprisingly strong.

I picked up the gun and pointed it at the judge. "How does it feel, Judge? Maybe you were right. I could be a menace. Right now I feel much inclined to shoot you."

He smiled and settled back in his chair. "I'm sorry, Mike, but you can't. That gun isn't loaded. I took the clip out."

I turned the gun around. It didn't contain a clip. I yanked the magazine back, but no cartridge was ejected. He'd played it phony all the way down the line.

I threw the gun on his desk.

"That wasn't so funny, Judge. Your sense of humor is pretty warped."

"My sense of humor had nothing to do with it, Mike. I wondered how I'd feel if I were in a position to kill you. Never having been faced with an emergency of that nature, I had to find out."


"Mike," he said quietly, "now I know how I feel about killing you."

"All right. Am I supposed to ask, 'how do you feel, Mr. Bones?' Go ahead and tell me."

"I shall enjoy it. Good-by, Mike. Death may come to you at any time and when it does, remember that it shall be by my hand. Thank you again for being truthful with me."

"And the execution," I said bitterly, "is postponed to another day. An indefinite day."

"Quite right, Mike. Good night."
WALKED into my hotel an hour later, slowed up halfway across the lobby, then reversed my steps and went out to the street again. Like a homing pigeon, temporarily trapped by circumstances, I knew where I was going now. It wasn’t much of a walk to the apartment house where Janie Cooper lived.

I rang her bell, just spoke my name when she answered on the house phone and she told me to come right up. She was in the hall when I stepped out of the elevator and she rushed to me with wide open arms.

Oh, but it was pleasant holding her! Smelling her perfume, feeling her cheek against mine, her body pressed to me. She wore a light blue negligee which could almost have passed for a dress. Her slippers of the same hue had platform heels and soles which added a couple of inches to her height. I passed an arm around her, found her body unencumbered by lingerie and we walked slowly into her apartment.

She had a three-room suite. The living room was the largest, but hardly big enough for a full complement of furniture. A pair of nylon stockings hung on a line between two chairs before an open window for quick drying. A slip was draped over the back of the couch. The gold slippers she had worn the night before were half-pushed under a heavy chair. Her wrap had been tossed over a vase on a table in the middle of the room.

The whole place was always like this—untidy, but pleasantly so, to me. I could feel at home here.

I stripped off my coat, let myself flop into a chair, and put my feet on the cushions of another. It was wonderful. So was Janie, who already was busy making me a highball. She handed it to me, prepared another for herself, sat down, tucked her legs under her, and we raised our glasses.

“‘To us,’” Janie said. “‘At last.’”

“Yes to us, thank God!”

“Mike,” she asked anxiously, “was there any trouble?”

The strong highball had warmed me after my first long pull at it. “Trouble?” I shrugged. “Why should there have been any?”

“Mike, you don’t have to kid around with me. I’m the guy who marked the X where the body’s buried.”

I said, “Janie, I was afraid of this. I haven’t talked to you since that moment when they shook me awake in your dressing room. Do you think I killed Greta?”

“I think you did a damn fine job, Mike. That’s what I think.”

“Janie—I didn’t kill her.”

She nodded happily. “If you say so, darling.”

“But damn it, I didn’t! Greta wanted me to drive her home, but when she reached the car, she decided I was too drunk. She made me get out, and she went off alone. Greta had a temper. When it hit the boiling point, she was apt to be reckless. She took out her anger in driving. The way she tore out of the parking space and zoomed up that hill, I thought then that she was going to have an accident. I watched the car as long as I could see the lights, then I walked around the greens awhile. Greta was right. I was too drunk to drive, but I wasn’t as drunk as I wanted to be. Then I thought I heard a crash. Something far off, like a car turning over and over down a hill. Maybe I didn’t hear it. Maybe it was my imagination, because I’d been thinking that Greta was in no mental shape to drive over that dangerous road.”

“It was quite an accident,” Janie said, with a slow nod of her head.

“But it was an accident. I don’t know what I heard, but it scared the hell out of me. I was fuzzy, anyway. That’s why I told you to alibi me. That’s why I drank your liquor and got myself so plastered I passed out.”

“Of course,” she said. “That’s just the way it happened. What are you worried about, anyway?”
I LAUGHED shortly. Nothing. I have no reason to worry. But people talk, and Greta left me quite a lot of money. Everyone knew we'd quarreled. I just didn't want even a whisper of suspicion to get around. I'm a lawyer—I know what these accidental deaths can do to a survivor when there's even a breath of scandal. You and I haven't been—well, exactly discreet, you know.”

Janie rotated her glass slowly. “All this money of Greta's” she murmured. “Will it make any difference between us, Mike?”

I wondered if her eyes were narrowed and her nostrils pulled in by the downward bend of her upper lip, but decided it was my imagination.

“Just one difference,” I said. “I'll push your divorce through, and we'll be married.”

She took a quick drink, put down her glass and came over to me. I got rid of my glass, too, and pulled her down on my lap. When her lips met mine, I knew it had all been worthwhile. There was such a difference between this girl and what Greta had been. Janie was quick to answer a warm kiss. Eager and unashamed—wanton, if you wish, yet genuine in giving her love.

About an hour later I said, I'm going to the office now. I'll look over the papers and see what I can do about getting your divorce case on the docket.—Oh, yes, I almost forgot. If you want me, I'll be staying at the Hotel Laurent permanently. I hate that old Mannerings house, and the judge has a crazy idea I did kill Greta.”

She let go of me and stepped back as if I'd suddenly become too hot to touch. “Mike!” she whispered tensely. “Are you sure he doesn't know anything?”

“Of course,” I said. “He's an old fool. A senile ancient who has been badly upset by his daughter's death. He even talked about killing me.”

“Oh, Mike! Did he mean it?”

“The poor idiot pulled a gun on me. I took it away from him. The gun wasn't even loaded, so you can see how much stock he puts in his own threats. There is nothing to worry about, Janie, except possibly the fact that we can't get married as quickly as I would like.”

“But we can be together, Mike. That will suit me just fine.”

Nothing she could have said would have pleased me more. I kissed her and got out of there before we both forgot that when two are in love there must be interludes of separation. But they only serve to make the meetings that much sweeter.

I felt gay and buoyed up. I walked to the building where my office was located, enjoying the early evening crowds and the noise and bustle.

The mail was both interesting and depressing. It included several cancellations of cases I had hanging fire. A large corporation informed me bluntly that they were turning their business over to Kirkham, Pease, Woodford and Camp. I was asked kindly to supply them with all the documents concerning their business in my files.

I should have expected this. All that lush business that had fallen my way had come to me only because Judge Mannerings was my father-in-law.

I dragged out the file on Janie's divorce and studied it. Janie had been married when she was eighteen—nine years ago. She'd lived with her husband less than a year. He'd gone off somewhere to hunt a job—I gathered that he was a lazy lout—and had never returned. It was clearly a case of desertion and nonsupport. I could get the case on the docket tomorrow, could have the divorce in a month.

I laid the papers aside for preliminary work on them in the morning, and then decided to call it a day. At that, it had been quite a day. Beginning with a funeral, it had worked up to an accusation of me as a murderer, I'd been given a promise of sudden death, and had all but ended the day with Janie in my arms.

I closed up, took the night elevator to the lobby and walked out to the street.
It was about half a mile to my hotel. I'd have to check in on a permanent basis. I'd have to do something about getting my things out of the judge's home, too. I'd take care of it in due course. I felt unworried.

THE sense of freedom I felt was exhilarating and novel. I'd lived too long with the fixed idea that Greta was waiting for me, and that I'd better be early and sober and prepared to face whatever boring ordeal she had planned. Now I could do as I liked.

I had walked about four blocks before I noticed a man not far behind me. A quiet, small man in gray, whose face was as blank as the side of a wall. Of course he wasn't following me. Why should he be? Nevertheless, I took the next corner fast and stopped short.

Sure enough, he swung down the side street, too, but if the sight of me startled him he didn't show it. He seemed to be in no hurry. He shook a cigarette out of a pack and walked straight up to me.

"I'm out of matches," he said. "Would you mind?"

I felt like laughing at him—at myself—for having had the crazy idea that he'd been on my trail. I'd never even seen him before. I found a pack of matches and handed them to him.

"Keep them," I said. "I have more."

He scraped a match, brought the flame up to his face and looked at me over it. He had the most intense eyes I'd ever seen in a man. Intense and cruel.

He said, "Thanks. Thanks very much, Mr. Owen."

I told him that was all right and he walked away from me, going back to the avenue. It wasn't until he disappeared that I realized he'd called me by my name. For some unknown reason I shuddered. . . .

Janie and I boarded the Montrealer just before train time and the porter led us to the compartment we were to share on the overnight trip. It was sort of a premarital venture, the way I saw it. If Janie saw it any way at all, she didn't express any ideas. But when the door closed, she was in my arms before I had a chance to pull down the curtain.

Almost a month had gone by since the funeral. Things had quieted down. I heard from Judge Mannerling only once—when he sent me a substantial check as administrator of Greta's estate. It was enough to keep me more than solvent and, on the strength of it, as sort of a celebration, Janie and I had decided to spend a few days at a spot I knew of in the Laurentians.

She laid her head on my shoulder and the perfume she had applied to her hair too generously, made me giddy. It was hot in this small compartment. I shed my coat and tie and felt better. Janie shed her dress—to keep it from getting wrinkled, she said.

But I was in a peculiar mood. I'd wanted to go away like this for a long time, even before Greta was killed. True, I had planned now to return soon, but I could already feel what it would be like to leave permanently. I think I wanted that more than anything.

Janie said, "I was surprised when you told me the judge sent you all that money, Mike."

"Why should you have been? It belonged to me."

"Mike," she said, "do you know, "I really did think you killed Greta."

The words bounced off me. Not a nerve twitched, not a trace of conscience disturbed me. I'd conditioned myself well.

"I did, Mike," she repeated. "I—I guess I must have been wrong. The judge wouldn't have sent you that money if he even suspected you'd killed his daughter."

I said, "I'm glad you're rid of that silly notion."

She hauled herself up a little more so she could get her feet on the seat and then she snuggled down on my lap, looking up at me.
“You’ve got to admit I had reason,” she said. “The way you came into my dressing room that night. The way you looked.”

“I was drunk.”

“Yes, but there seemed to be something more than just being drunk. Just goes to show how wrong a girl can be. Forgive me, Mike?”

“I’ll see,” I grumbled cheerfully. “All depends on how I’m treated on this trip.”

She laughed and reached up to kiss me.

I opened my suitcase and took out a bottle of rye. We sent for glasses, ice and ginger ale, made ourselves highballs and sat there watching the Connecticut countryside whiz by.

Around twelve forty-five I was restless and wanted to walk around awhile, but Janie was yawning, and shook her head, so I found the porter and asked him to make up our berths.

“I’ll take a little walk alone,” I told Janie. “We make a stop in about ten or fifteen minutes, and I want to buy a newspaper at the station.”

“All right, Mike,” she said. “So long as you come back to me.”

“Only you could make me stay away,” I said. “See you in a few minutes.”

Chapter V

HEADING the porter for our compartment, I kept on going, all the way to the last car. I had a smoke on the platform, thought a drink at the bar would taste good, and headed back. The bar was closing and so, mildly disappointed, I started back toward my own car, giving up the idea of waiting for the station stop and a newspaper. What the hell did I need with a newspaper, when Janie was waiting in the compartment? I must be getting old, I told myself.

I pushed open a door at the end of a car. The lights on the platform were out between cars. I was just reaching for the other door when an arm came out of the darkness and encircled my neck before I could utter a sound. It was a thick, cruelly strong arm and whoever owned it knew how to cut off a man’s breath quickly.

With my first struggles came the thought that my assailant was Judge Mannering, an idea I dismissed even while I tried to fight. Judge Mannering’s arm wasn’t half as thick as the one holding me, nor did it have one-tenth the strength.

I tried to twist around to get a look at the man, but that was impossible. Besides, I could feel myself beginning to pass out. I wanted to scream. Suddenly I knew what it felt like to die. In another moment, I’d be as dead as Greta. The horrifying thought gave me some added strength, but it was no use. The arm didn’t budge even though I clawed at it and felt my nails rip into the flesh of the man’s wrist and forearm.

Unconsciousness didn’t come slowly, as I thought it must. It came fast—like the kind experienced in a boxing ring. One moment I could see and hear and feel; the next I was surrounded by soft, thick darkness with enough body to act like a soundproof cloud. There was no special sensation other than that. There was no panic or terror. That came later—when I opened my eyes.

I had no idea of how much time had passed, but not a great deal, I surmised. I was still on the train platform, but lying on my back now. Someone was bending over me. My eyes came wide open, but I lay still.

We roared through some small station where the platform was lighted up. Some of the weak light filtered through the dirty window of the platform door. It came in flashes, giving the scene a crazy effect like that of a movie film gone wild.

Somewhere in the middle of that dimly, erratically lighted film was a face. I knew the features. I simply couldn’t be mistaken. It was Judge Mannering who was bending over me! And Judge Mannering’s two hands were
again reaching toward my throat.

Again I tried to scream, and couldn’t. I wanted to move, to sit up, or jump to my feet. But when I raised my arm, someone in the darkness beside me slapped my arm down. Judging by the force of the blow I guessed it must have been given me by the man who choked me into unconsciousness.

The judge’s voice came out of that kaleidoscope of madness. He said, “Open the door, please.”

Cold air came surging in at me. The strong hands grabbed parts of my clothing. I was lifted bodily and dragged out of the way of the platform door. The roaring grew more intense. The pounding of the wheels was maddening. I still wanted to scream, and still I couldn’t. I didn’t know why then. It was not until much later I learned that stark, brutal terror can rob a man of his voice.

Judge Mannerling was tugging at my shoulder, dragging me toward the car steps. He meant to throw me from the train that was moving at better than sixty. If I didn’t fall beneath the wheels, I’d get my neck broken by the impact at the end of the fall.

This was death. Stark and real. It was the same kind of death which Greta may have seen on her way down the side of that hill, if she had awakened from the effects of the blow I’d administered. This was grim reality and no dream. This was the vengeance of Judge Mannerling who must be more than a little mad.

I felt my legs slide off the edge of the platform. In another moment I’d go flying into space. I opened my mouth wide. Somebody clapped a hand over my lips. I tried to struggle. It was no use. Another twelve inches and I’d be off-balance, to go flying out. And the scrappy hands kept tugging at my clothing, kept shoving me closer and closer to the brink of disaster.

The train gave a sudden lurch as brakes were applied. I heard the judge mutter something. His hands let go of me. A big fist smashed down at the bridge of my nose. Now it was coming! They had to hurry because the train was slowing for that station stop. If they meant to kill me, they’d have to get it over with fast now.

My clothes were again seized and this time I resisted. I fought back. I fought with fists and feet, wondering wildly how I’d managed to get my legs back onto the platform. I opened my eyes. A brakeman was holding me by one arm, a Pullman conductor by the other, while a porter watched it all with big, round eyes.

My struggles subsided then. I drew in deep, eager breaths of air, filling my lungs, feeling strength and sanity sweep back into me. My legs threatened to give out, but the two men held me up between them. There was a blessed silence and with the return of my wits I knew the train was stopped. Then I saw the station platform.

The conductor said, “You’ll be all right, sir. You must have struck your head—”

I said, “The hell I did! Somebody mugged me.”

He looked startled. “On my train?” As if a special law had been passed against it.

“I was passing between cars and somebody grabbed me. I was going to be pushed out. The door was opened.”

The conductor glanced at the brakeman. “The door was closed when we found you, sir. I’ll admit you looked a bit rumpled, but—”

What was the use arguing with him? I said, “Never mind. Just tell me this. Did anyone leave the train at this station?”

The conductor shook his head. “We stop only to pick up passengers. No tickets are sold to this station for use on this train.”

Which meant, I suppose, that nobody had got off, but he wasn’t sure. I lurched away from him as the train started up again, and I went through
every car. It was as foolish a gesture as it was vain. Everyone was in bed, heavy curtains covering the berths, closed doors sealing the roomettes, compartments and drawing rooms. I went back to my own room.

Janie was still awake, and rather badly worried. She knew something was wrong as soon as she saw me. She slid out of the lower, wearing the flimsiest nightgown on record. I barely noticed it. I sat down on the edge of the berth.

"We were both wrong about Judge Mannering," I said. "He is, or was, on this train."

"My God!" Janie gasped. "He'll spread the word that we're sharing the same compartment, and—"

"Oh, stop it," I said irritably. "He doesn't care about that. He just tried to murder me."

She sat down too then, heavily and in sudden fear. "Mike, are you sure?"

"He had someone with him—a great big ex-con who did time for murder, I think. They knocked me down, opened the door on a platform and the judge was pushing me out when the train started to slow down for a stop. That scared them off, but in another two minutes I'd have been thrown out."

"Mike!" she cried. "Oh, Mike, what would I have done?"

I thought the question on the silly side, but I didn't comment. I said, "He's making the same crazy mistake you made. He thinks I killed Greta, and he's going to kill me. It has to be that. There's no other reason, and I wasn't mistaken about his identity."

"What are we going to do?"

I WAS thinking much more calmly now. I lit a cigarette, but Janie took it away from me and smoked it nervously. I lit another.

"Obviously," I said, "he is having me watched. Otherwise how could he have known I was taking this train? He had to know ahead of time to plan this."

"Maybe he'll try again," Janie suggested.

I gave her a blank look. "He isn't the type to give up quickly. Sure he'll try again. If we go up to that mountain inn, he'll have a better chance than ever of getting me. We've got to go back, Janie."

"Oh, Mike!" she whimpered.

"I'm sorry. Think of it this way. If he gets me and you're around, he'll have to kill you too, won't he?"

She threw her arms around my neck as though the old judge was in the compartment letting us look down a gun-barrel. We killed our cigarettes and got dressed. I checked the timetable and we sat there, uncomfortably perched on the edge of the bunk, for another hour until the train made its next stop.

We got off, crossed to the other side of the platform and sat down to wait for the next train going in the opposite direction. We were both gravely silent. I didn't want to talk, because I needed time to think. Judge Mannering must have meant every word of the threats he made to me that day of the funeral. He was going to kill me and call it justice. I called it murder, but the name of the crime would be of slight interest to the victim. I had to do something...

About eight the next morning, irritable and foggy from lack of sleep, I went to Police Headquarters and asked to see someone in the Homicide Division. A patrolman took me to a cubby-hole of an office, and there I met Detective-lieutenant Ben Turner.

Turner was a gangly guy. He looked clumsy and inept—both a complete futility, I found out later. He had mild gray eyes, and was still young enough so his job hadn't soured him on humanity, as it does so many homicide detectives.

I said, "My name is Mike Owen. Judge Mannering is—or was—my father-in-law."

He nodded, saying nothing, letting me tell it in my own way.

"You may know that my wife—the
judge's only child—was killed in a car accident about five weeks ago. The judge thought a lot of her. So did I. But—well, I think her death has affected the judge's mind."

Lieutenant Turner showed a trace of interest. "That would be the first time any Mannering ever cracked up, Mr. Owen. I know—because my people are from way back in this town. The Mannering name is pretty much respected."

"He tried to murder me," I said.

Turner's mild eyes weren't quite as mild. "Tell me more," he said.

"The judge feels that I'm in some way responsible for the death of his daughter. It is true that I got drunk the night it happened. She and I were attending a club dance. Greta—my wife—got sore at me, took the car and drove home alone. On the way she was—killed. The judge thinks I should have been with her and the accident wouldn't have happened."

Turner said, "You say he tried to kill you? Where?"

"I'm not sure—somewhere between New Haven and New London, I think. It was on a train. I took a walk through the cars. On one of the platforms between cars. I was mugged into unconsciousness—"

"Now hold on," Turner said sharply. "You're almost six feet tall, and you weigh about one eighty. You're young and strong. Judge Mannering couldn't have mugged you."

"He has a chauffeur, an ex-con who did time for murder," I said. "It must have been him. But when I woke up, they had the platform door open and the judge himself was shoving me off the train while it was moving. I tell you I am not wrong! I saw him."

Lieutenant Turner said, "If you had any witnesses now—"

"Which means you won't do anything," I said.

"Look, Mr. Owen, it happened out of town. You'll have to make a formal complaint to the police where it happened, or to the State Police if you like. They'll notify me to take it up from there, and I'll do the best I can."

"The runaround," I said grimly. "A funny thing, but I knew I'd get it when I walked in here."

Turner shrugged. "Hell, you're a lawyer. You know the law. I can't go up and ask Judge Mannering a lot of questions about an attempted murder which didn't even happen in my bailiwick. Have a heart, man."

"If it was anyone else but Mannering you'd take action my story," I said. "All right—but I want a record made of this complaint. Keep it quiet if you want to, but put it on record. After last night I wouldn't give too big odds that I'll go on living."

"I'll make a note of it," Turner said. "Keep me advised if anything else breaks."

I had a savage retort on my lips, but I held it back and stormed out of there. The son of Satan thought I was crazy. I could tell by the way he looked at me, by the tolerance he showed, the phony sympathetic voice. To hell with him! I'd have it out with the judge myself.

I got my car and drove out to his estate.

Chapter VI

Lempet looked bigger than ever. Apparently he had seen me coming up the drive, and was standing on the veranda waiting for me. He wore his black uniform and a bland smile.

"Hello, Mr. Owen," he said, with easy familiarity. "Nice to see you again."

I said, "Yes, it's been a long time since last night."

His grin widened as he opened the door and let me pass through first. Then he followed me, and I felt uneasy with that giant a step behind me. I knew what his arm could do in the way of choking a man.

The judge spent most of his waking hours in a big room he called his study. It was more like a law office than a
room in a private home, and all four walls were lined with shelves loaded down with legal books going as far back as there was any history extant of the Mannering clan. I hadn’t seen the judge, except for those few panic-filled moments on the train, since the day of the funeral, and when I walked in, I almost gasped. He looked like hell.

The man seemed to have aged fifteen or twenty years. He was more bent, his eyes were sunken deeper in his skull, and the skin around his head was drawn tighter. But he got to his feet when I walked toward him. He didn’t extend a hand toward me, but his voice was cordial enough.

Lempet marched behind me and came to a stop when I did.

Judge Mannerling said, “Good morning, Mike. I’m glad you came to see an old man like me.”

“Yes,” I growled, “I’ll bet you are.”

“I mean it, Mike. I was going to send for you.”

“Why?” I asked. “Because it would be easier to kill me here?”

He sat down slowly, lowering himself as if every movement gave him pain.

“You left a lot of things here, Mike. Clothes—personal effects. I wanted to know what to do with them.”

I said, “I’ll send for them. Have Lempet pack them up.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “Tell me how you’ve been.”

“Forget it!” I said sharply. “Play your damned little games with others if you like, but I’m no idiot. Last night you tried to kill me.”

His expression was as mild as if I’d commented on the weather.

“I—tried to kill you, Mike?”

“You heard me.”

“I’m afraid you’re under a grave misapprehension, my boy. I’d have trouble summoning strength enough to kill a mouse.”

“You had help. Lempet was with you.”

I heard a snicker behind me. I turned fast, before Lempet’s slower moving brain and body could get set. I grabbed his coat sleeve with both hands and gave it a savage yank. It was thin, and parted at the seam. So did his shirt. On his forearm were two deep scratches.

“There’s your proof!” I shouted in triumph. At least they couldn’t call me crazy. “I did that! I scratched this louse when he was mugging me, knocking me out so you could roll me off the moving train.”

I pivoted to face the old man again, and then two hands closed around my throat and I was lifted off the floor. My legs kicked out, my arms flailed wildly. I was being strangled to death. It was like being hung—with human hands forming the noose. Dimly I heard the judge say something. My feet touched the floor, the grip around my throat was released. Lempet stepped back while I clawed at my collar and sucked in the air my lungs demanded.

“I’m sorry,” the judge said. “I apologize for Lempet.”

“To hell with that,” I croaked. “You did try to kill me last night. You can’t deny it.”

He said, “You were fortunate, Mike. We didn’t think the train was going to stop for hours.”

“Then you admit it?” I shrieked.

“Keep your voice down, my dear boy,” he said. “Of course I admit it. Didn’t I tell you I’d see that justice was done?”

I WHIRLED around to face Lempet.

“You heard that. He threatened my life and tried to make good the threat. You heard it and don’t forget.”

Lempet said, “Should I maybe throw him out, Judge?”

“That won’t be necessary, Lempet. I think you’d better go, Mike. I’m a tired old man. Last night’s trip and the excitement was almost too much for me.”

“But you’ll try again,” I said. “You’ll keep on trying. I hope your heart stops beating next time. I hope you drop dead in your tracks!”

“I won’t, Michael. I won’t die until
after you are dead. But we won't wait too long. Next time—well, we can't always fail. That's all, Mike. Drop in again if the impulse seizes you. I'll always be here."

What could I do in a situation like that? Beat his lousy brains out? Not with Lempet standing there just waiting for me to make some move like that. Go to the cops and tell them the judge admitted he tried to murder me? I'd wind up in a strait-jacket. I was faced with the startling knowledge that all I could do was stay on the defensive. Let him strike, then try to parry the blow.

Lempet stalked behind me on the way out, and he was much concerned over his torn sleeve. "These things cost dough," he complained. "Why'n you tell me you wanted to see them scratches? Hell, I'd have rolled up my sleeve."

I said, "There's one thing in your immediate future you can be sure of. If I don't kill you, that means you have killed me. Then you'll burn. Either way you're all done, Lempet."

"Yeah," he said. "It's got so I don't sleep nights no more worrying about it. Things are tough all around."

He gave me a gentle push that sent me reeling out onto the veranda. The door closed behind me. I cursed, and walked to where my car was parked. I drove away wondering if it would be worth facing the electric chair for—the opportunity of killing Lempet and then the judge. How I wanted to kill them both!

Back in town, I put the car away and walked to my office. As I went through the lobby door, I saw a man standing near the elevators but making no effort to enter any of the cars. I'd seen him before somewhere. I tried to think where, but my mind was much too confused.

Getting out on my own floor, I took the keys out of my pocket, and was unlocking the waiting room door when it flashed on me where I'd seen that man in the lobby before. He was the one who'd asked me for a light and called me by name, yet I'd never even seen him until that moment. He was working for the judge, spying on me!

Something had to be done now and done fast, or else I'd soon be a dead man. I needed protection. I had tried to get it from the police, and had failed, so now I checked the classified section of the phone book for listings of private detectives. But there were so many of them I couldn't hope to select one except at random, which could be a dangerous proceeding in my quandry. I needed a capable man, but one who'd keep his mouth shut and his ears open.

I dialed Bob Mason, a friend of mine who was one of the editors of our biggest daily paper. I explained to him what I wanted.

"It's a ticklish case," I said. "I must have absolute reliability and devotion to duty, for my client's sake."

"Private eyes are a little out of my line, Mike," he told me, "but come to think of it, the paper did employ one a year or two ago. He seemed to work out. I've got his name somewhere.—Just a second.—Yes, here's the name. Ben Clint."

I said, "Thanks very much, Bob. I'm sure he'll do if you say so."

I didn't phone Ben Clint, just noted down his address and drove there at once. I had thought all private eyes had two-room office suites with a blond gum-chewer at the reception desk, empty whisky bottles all over the place, and dust over the whisky bottles. Clint had four rooms, carpeted wall to wall in a violent yellow. The reception office furniture was modern, new and clean. The receptionist was a girl who wore shell-rimmed glasses and looked like a librarian.

CLINT himself was a husky man with a serious face, thin hair, bright blue eyes and a yen for money, as I found out quickly enough. He told me to sit down, took a folder from a filing cabinet and opened it. I saw that he kept rec-
ords, as a doctor keeps tabs on his patients.

"Now, Mr. Owen," he said, "I'll hear your story. I do not agree beforehand to accept your case: In the event I do not, I shall destroy my notes before your eyes and forget everything you told me."

I said, "Do you know Judge Manning?"

"I've heard of him. Who hasn't? Though the gentleman and I are not personally acquainted."

"I'm his son-in-law."

Clint pursed his lips, laid his pencil down and leaned back. I knew right then that he'd take my case even if it meant I wanted him to knock somebody off.

I went on when he nodded for me to continue. "The judge's daughter—my wife—was killed in an auto accident, and the judge blames it on me. I wasn't with her at the time, but he thinks I should have been."

"And why weren't you?" he demanded.

"I was plastered."

"Ah—yes. I see."

"The details of the accident are immaterial. The main fact which will concern you is that the judge has lost his reason. He hates me, and to such an extent that he has tried to kill me."

Clint didn't bat an eyelash. "You're positive of that?"

"I was the one he tried to shove off a moving train. Yes, I'm positive."

"Don't take offense," Clint warned. "I'm just trying to get the facts. Now I have been under the impression that the judge is a very old man."

"He has an ex-con, a convicted murderer, doing his strong-arm work."

"All right. We shall assume you are not mistaken. So then—why haven't you gone to the police?"

"I have. They threw me out."

"You mean they didn't believe you?"

"That's about it."

"And what do you wish to do about it?"

"I want protection. Someone to watch me every moment of the day and night."

Not a bodyguard who sticks close, but someone who will shadow me and be on hand if anything else happens. What I mainly want is someone who will not only stop another attempt, but will become a witness if one is made, so that even the police will be forced to believe me."

Clint nodded. "I can do that, of course. It won't be cheap."

"I don't consider my life cheap," I said. "I can pay."

"There will be a five-thousand-dollar retainer. It looks like a long case, Mr. Owen. I'll have to use about ten men in order to cover you constantly. If, of course, the case ends before that sum is used up, I shall refund the difference."

"I'll send you a check tonight," I said. "Have someone on the job right away."

He asked me a lot of questions about my habits, friends, and associates. About Lemport and the judge. When he finally let me go, suddenly I felt secure. I wasn't alone any more. I could call for help and get it fast. Capable, strong help from men who knew what to do under such circumstances. If the judge struck at me again, I'd have evidence enough to make even Lieutenant Turner sit up and take heed.

That night I slept well for the first time since Judge Manning told me he was going to kill me.

Chapter VII

MY SENSE of security grew even stronger over the next couple of days. Janie, too, liked the idea of someone being close by and ready to move in if there was trouble.

Clint's men weren't too subtle about the way they followed me, but that didn't matter. They looked tough, rough, and capable. Sometimes there would only be one; at other times I was sure I could detect as many as three. At night I looked out of my hotel apartment window just before going to bed and I slept better for seeing one of those
men across the street, watching and waiting.

They never spoke to me and I didn't acknowledge their presence in any way. Janie and I took in shows, did a lot of dancing, made a lot of plans, and I tried to get her divorce case past some mysterious stumbling block in the court clerk's office. Judge Mannering's doing, of course, but the whole case seemed to have been pushed aside and I couldn't get it back on the track.

Janie didn't care much. We were together as much as possible, feeling at ease and as happy as two people can possibly be. I gave her money, but that didn't make me think any the less of her. The girl had to live, and if she was with me nights, she couldn't be singing. I knew of several night club dates she cancelled because of me.

I was still looking for a place where I could settle down, though I wasn't in any great hurry now. I had plenty of cash, more coming, and I was more than happy to neglect my practice and concentrate on Janie.

More days passed pleasantly. As the weather became warmer Janie and I took long rides in the country, always shepherded by another car. We were never quite alone, although Clint's boys were more than discreet.

I heard nothing from Judge Mannering or Lempet. Every day I read the newspapers and listened to news on the radio avidly, always hoping for the banner headline or news bulletin that would proclaim to the world the passing of the last member of the clan of Mannering. That day couldn't come too soon for me.

Janie and I went one night to a club where she used to sing. In my opinion the place was a dump, but it was her idea, she knew a lot of people there and was happy, so I was too. They must have had small electric light bills in this cellar establishment because you could hardly see the menu, but I saw the man at a nearby table clearly enough. There was something familiar about him, though I couldn't place him at first. I kept looking his way until even Janie noticed.

"Who is it, Mike? I've never seen him before."

"I have," I said. "Though I can't remember where."

She had an answer for me. "He must be one of that private detective's operatives. You've had glimpses of him, and that's why he seems familiar."

"You must be right," I said. "What's the difference anyway?"

We danced, went to the bar for a drink so Janie could chat with the barkeep who was an old friend of hers. I didn't like the way he looked her over—almost as if he was trying to guess just how much she was getting out of me. I wasn't sure myself, I'd lost track of the cash I'd given her, but I knew the mink jacket she sported cost me fourteen hundred.

When we returned to our table, the man I'd noticed was still at his. Standing up, I had a better look at him and suddenly, in a wave of sudden terror, I knew who he was. I had completely forgotten him, but here again was the man who had stopped me one night, asked me for a match and called me by name—long before I'd even thought of a private detective myself. The man I'd seen in the lobby of my office building, and had been positive was working for Judge Mannering!

I leaned over toward Janie. "Get up and take a walk to the powder room. When you come out, skirt the dance floor and head for the exit. I'll be waiting there."

"What's the matter, Mike? You look sick."

"I see someone—sent by the judge. That man I thought I recognized. He's a killer, baby. If I ever saw one, he's a killer."

"But Clint's men must be around someplace!"

"Maybe—but where? They won't butt in unless there's definite trouble, and this guy isn't the type to wait for interference."
JANIE lifted her glass and some of her drink spilled over on the side. She bolted what was left.

"Listen, Mike, if he’s watching you, he means to start something. But those detectives must be nearby! Sure they won’t show themselves unless there’s trouble, but if I were you, I’d start some. Get the jump on him."

There were times when her cleverness overwhelmed me. This was one of them. The idea was sound—fool-proof. I told her to beat it, for the little girl’s room, gave her a couple of minutes and then, with a significant look around so Clint’s men would realize something was about to happen, I walked over to the table where the man in the gray suit sat alone over an untouched highball.

He looked up at me and smiled. “Oh, good evening, Mr. Owen,” he said.

“Get up. On your feet, wise guy.”

His smile faded. “What’s wrong, Mr. Owen?”

“Don’t give me that. I know why you’re here, and I’m telling you there isn’t a chance of working me into some trap. Because I keep my own boys handy—understand?”

He said, “I’m afraid I don’t.”

“If you’re not on your feet in ten seconds—”

He pushed his chair back and got up. As he did, he lashed out with a right fist that moved like a serpent’s tongue. I never even saw it, but I felt it. The blow hit me in the pit of the stomach, and it drained all the belligerency out of me. I doubled up with a loud groan of pain. When I straightened up again, he was gone. It was just as if he never even existed, but the agony in my stomach told me he most certainly did. I headed for the exit, moving so fast I knocked glasses off a couple of tables and generally raised hell. I didn’t see a sign of him. Nobody else had seen him, either.

Janie hurried up to me. She was sore and didn’t care if I knew it. “Mike, this place is run by friends of mine. I may want to sing here again some time.

You’ve all but wrecked it, and—”

“T’ll pay for the damage,” I said. “A few glasses, a chair or two.”

“You created a scene. I don’t like scenes.”

“To hell with you,” I said. “That guy was ready to start something—Hey! What happened to Clint’s men? Why didn’t they find out what was going on?”

Janie said, “Take me home, Mike.”

The way I felt, I might as well. She didn’t ask me in, either, when we got there. It was the first time she hadn’t, but I didn’t even care. I was too worried about myself to wonder if she was getting sick of the whole rat race.

When I reached the street, a man moved out of a doorway, threw a cigarette away and dropped in behind me. I didn’t feel secure any more. For I couldn’t tell if he was one of Clint’s men or had been sent by Judge Manner- ing. I knew now where the judge was getting the people he employed. Lempt, himself an ex-con, must know a lot of the boys who would like to pick up an easy buck.

I had to know about this one. I started walking faster, swung around the next corner, ran about fifty feet and dived down a dark, narrow alley. When I stumbled against a pile of loose paving bricks I bent down and picked one up.

I could see him when he stopped at the mouth of the alley and tried to figure out where I’d gone. I rasped the brick in my hand against the building wall. He whirled and started moving fast down the alley, straight toward me. He was a dope. I could see him because he was outlined against the light from the street, but I was virtually invisible. He slowed up suddenly, as if he realized this might be a trap, but he kept on coming. I saw him reach under his coat.

He was about fifteen feet away then and if he was going for a gun, I had to beat him to it. I lunged toward the man. He was pulling a gun, but he
never quite got it out of his shoulder holster. I hit him across the forehead with the heavy brick.

I didn’t have to hit him again. The brick made a hollow thump as it struck, like the sound of a ripe pumpkin rapped good and hard. The guy fell down in sections, and as he landed at my feet his gun flew off into the darkness somewhere.

I BENT over him and searched him. I took out every damned thing he had in his pockets and filled my own with the stuff. When he was clean, I checked his pulse. Not that I cared much whether he lived or died, but I was in trouble enough. He’d live all right. I got out of there fast and went straight home. This time nobody trailed me.

In my apartment I locked the door, dumped the stuff onto a table and examined it. I slowly took off my hat and topcoat after that. I dropped them onto a chair, walked dazedly to a table where there was a decanter of whisky and drank right from the container.

In that pile of junk was a home-made blackjack, two sets of dice, a little more than a hundred dollars in bills, some change, an empty wallet, a set of keys, all of which looked almost the same, and from which I gathered that the owner of those keys could go about anywhere he wished without respect to ordinary locks. Then there was a card showing that the chump’s name was Edward Trevor, that he was on parole from State’s Prison, and had been at liberty less than two months.

I didn’t find a badge or private detective’s identification card and I doubted Clint would hire an ex-con. I also doubted the police would license such a man.

I kept the cash, made a bundle of the other junk and planned to get rid of it first thing in the morning. I also planned to pay Private Eye Clint a visit.

That night I didn’t sleep as well as usual...

In the morning, when I walked into Ben Clint’s office he glad-handed me. He was much pleased, he said, that I’d dropped in.

“I have some reports, right up to this morning,” he said cheerfully. “Also, I’m afraid, a bill for further fees and expenses.”

I said, “Last night I was trailed by a parolee. Where were your boys—letting a man like that dog my steps?”

Clint said, “Really? I’m shocked, Mr. Owen, but perhaps it’s all in these reports. I haven’t read the latest ones. By all means, take them with you. I’m sure you’ll find in them an explanation.”

I put the bulky envelope in my pocket. “I’ll study them all right,” I said and added, “There was another incident last evening. I created a disturbance because I wanted your men to come out of hiding and help me. Nobody showed up.”

He waved his hand. “It will all be in the reports, Mr. Owen. Let me know at once if you are not satisfied.”

I started toward the door. “Don’t worry. I—”

He stopped me. “Mr. Owen, I’m sorry, but your account is in arrears. I must insist on a check now, if you don’t mind. Keeping so many men busy on one case is more than my bank account can stand.”

I opened his bill. It was for another five grand. I hesitated, half-inclined to tear it in half. But I knew how much I needed help, even if his agents stayed so far in the background I rarely saw them. I’d go for this five grand, but no more. I went back to the desk and wrote out a check.

Clint folded it, shook hands warmly. “You’ll not regret this, Mr. Owen. And keep in mind that you are constantly being guarded by capable men who know when to show themselves and when to stay in the background. Good morning, and thank you again.”

I had a well-seated hunch that Clint would be on his way to my bank to cash my check two minutes after I left the building. I drifted over to a small public park, found a bench and sat down
to read five thousand dollars’ worth of reports.

They were the damndest things I’d ever read. Clint knew where I’d been and what I’d done each day, but everything was general. At 11:06 I ate a late breakfast in a drug store. I bought cigarettes. I stopped and talked to a man who was later identified—after a lot of investigation—as a client of mine. They had been keeping tabs on me all right, but not the way I wanted them to.

There wasn’t a word about the ruckus in the night club the night before, and yet the operative’s report showed that he had checked me into the place. I sat back and did some thinking. My mind reviewed the ordinary events over the last few days. There was so much lacking in these reports as to make them ludicrous. All Clint had done was watch me at certain times, see where I went, then drop the whole thing until I turned up at one of my usual haunts again. No wonder I’d never been able to spot his operatives. They were rarely working.

But someone had been watching me. Judge Mannering’s men? They had to be. While I had enjoyed all that synthetic security for which I had paid five grand, I’d been in constant danger. More than usual, because I hadn’t even been on guard!

Chapter VIII

I turned the street, I hailed a cab and had myself driven to Janie’s apartment. I didn’t announce myself downstairs, but went straight up and knocked on her door. It took her quite a while to ask who was there. When I told her, she let me in reluctantly. She’d just got out of bed and I wasn’t exactly charmed by her appearance, though that didn’t seem to matter now.

I said, “Janie, we’ve been rooked. Those guys we’ve been thinking were private detectives were ex-cons hired by the judge.” She gasped. “But—but you hired that detective yourself!”

“He played me for a sucker, baby. Just a little while ago he gave me his reports. They’re so general I know I wasn’t being watched all the time—not by his men. We’ve got to get away from here.”

“But how? We tried that, and it didn’t work.”

“We’ve got to try again, baby. Staying here is like keeping my head in a noose.”

She pushed back her untidy hair. “But why are you in such a damned hurry, Mike?”

I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook some awareness and sense into her sleepy brain. “Because the judge is a dying man, and he can’t afford to wait. We’ve leaving as soon as you’re ready to travel.”

She pulled away from him. “I’m not sure I want to go. Being with you is being on the run. Mike, have a heart. I can’t keep it up.”

“Listen, Janie, we’re in this together. We’re sharing everything. Money, love—and danger. I’m not asking you to come with me, I’m telling you.”

She seemed alarmed for an instant, but then she smiled, laid her cheek against mine and went off to get dressed. She did most of the dressing in the doorway of the bedroom, but I paid more attention to looking out of the windows fronting the street than I did to her.

I called the garage and had them send my car to the side street around the corner from Janie’s place so when we hurried out, the means of escape was close at hand. Still, when I pulled away from the curb, so did a car a quarter of a block ahead of me, and at the same time another car swung into the street and stayed behind me.

The one in front stopped me from trying to beat or take the corner light. It went straight on though and I took the turn, rolled up the avenue and did my best to shake off pursuit. Either I wasn’t too good at it, or those men trail-
ing me were a damned sight better than I, for I had no luck.

Janie was scared by now. I paid no attention to her. Finally I took some chances on being picked up-for breaking traffic laws and by the time we hit the outskirts, I was fairly certain we’d lost our tails.

I was streaking along the highway when a light delivery truck came out of a side road, pulling out so fast I had to jam on my brakes to miss it. It hugged the middle of the two-lane highway and paid no attention to my horn blowing. Once I tried to go around it and nearly got a fender taken off.

Janie said suddenly, “Mike, there’s a car coming up behind us. There are four men in it, and I—I think I saw guns!”

I didn’t even bother to look. There was another side road, an old dirt lane just ahead, and to my right. I swung into it without slackening speed by using the brakes so our pursuers wouldn’t be warned by my brake lights.

The truck kept on going. The car followed me. I stepped on it, even though the road was dangerous at moderate speed. So did the other car. When we hit a straight stretch of open country with pastures on either side—that was when they started shooting.

Janie whimpered and slid down as far as she could. They were—lousy shots because none of the slugs even hit the car and I didn’t slacken my speed any. Maybe the bumpy road and the crazy rocking of the car made us a bad target. Maybe their orders were only to prevent me from running away. At any rate about six or eight shots were fired and I didn’t hear the smack of a single bullet.

The road led onto another highway. There I turned back toward town and really let her out. The car behind me finally faded from sight and I could ease up. Janie pulled herself upright again.

I said, “We both need a drink. I’m stopping at the next tavern or inn we come to.”

Janie didn’t comment.

It turned out to be a cheap roadside joint, but better than nothing. Best of all I could drive around to the rear of the building where my car would be hidden, just in case the road was being patrolled for me.

Inside the joint, Janie wrinkled her nose at the smell of grease and stale beer. We took a booth and ordered. Our drinks came in small, thick glasses and were not very good. Just the same I meant to stay here for awhile. I reached across the table and took Janie’s hand between both of mine.

“It can’t last much longer,” I said earnestly. “Stick with me, baby. I need you.”

“I’ve stuck so far, haven’t I?” she demanded.

“Sure, but they never closed in like this before. I don’t blame you for being worried.”

“What’s the matter with that damned detective you hired? What’s the matter with you for hiring a rat like that? Mike—I want to go home.”

“All right—pretty soon. I want to wait for the late afternoon traffic. It gets thicker and they won’t try anything if they do find us.”

“You and your ideas,” she grumbled.

“Janie, I can’t lose you now. Give me a break. Tell you what—tomorrow we’ll buy that bracelet you were admiring in Jensen’s window.”

She smiled then and her eyes lighted up. She tightened her lax grip on my hand and became more animated. We couldn’t stand the drinks that had been served us, so we ordered highballs made with bonded whisky. They tasted better, but I’d have bet heavily on the fact that the stuff was not bonded. Gradually we acquired a glow and the false confidence that comes with it. We’d almost forgotten the danger which was closing in on us—until the man in the gray suit came in.

He passed right by me, but I didn’t appear to notice him. He swung onto a
bar stool. Pretty soon he turned around on the stool and our eyes met. His were impassive, cold. Mine were filled with terror. I knew it—and knew Janie had seen that, too. She gave a whimper of fear when she recognized him.

I said, “All right—they found us. But they haven’t got us.” I laid a bill on the table to cover the drinks. “Walk out fast. If he tries anything, I’ll tackle him. Run for the car.”

She ran for the door as well. I looked back. The man in the gray suit was facing the bar again, drinking. The owner was hurrying after me, wanting his money, until he saw the bill on the table. That relaxed him, but not me.

Janie was already in the car and shivering as if it had turned bitter cold. I got the car started and we headed back to town. Half a mile further on, I knew we were being followed and even though the traffic was heavy and I tried every trick I knew, I couldn’t shake that car.

It was dusk when we reached the city limits. There I saw a familiar sight. The same light delivery truck was parked just off the main highway. That truck meant trouble and danger. I swung right, darted through traffic, wasting a couple of dollars’ worth of tires and brake linings, but I made it.

Janie was white-faced by now. She was going to crack if this didn’t stop, and I wasn’t far from it. I looked in the rear view mirror. The same car was behind us. We hadn’t gained a foot.

All of a sudden I realized where we were. This was the road that led to the clubhouse. In a little while we’d start climbing, and soon reach the spot where I sent Greta over the bank to her death. The thought made me cry out.

“What is it, Mike?” Janie asked. “For God’s sake, what’s wrong now?”

I said, “Up ahead—not far—it’s where Greta went off the road and was killed.”

HER scream shattered whatever was left of my nerves.

“That’s where they want us to go!” she shrieked. “That’s where they’re going to kill you! You murdered Greta, you damned killer. You lied to me. You killed her, and that’s why you’re to be killed. But I’ll die with you. Damn you, Mike, for getting me into this. I’ll tell the cops what I know. I’ll—”

I hauled off and slapped her across the mouth as hard as I could. That stopped the tirade, even though I cut my hand on her teeth. The car began to labor a bit and I pushed the gas pedal harder. We were climbing. There’d be the turn, then the place where Greta went over. I set my teeth so hard they hurt, but I kept going. What else could I do? That other car was no more than a hundred feet behind me. I couldn’t turn off anywhere.

We topped the ridge. Down toward the valley I could see the clubhouse where all this had begun. The place was lit up and I remembered then that I’d read about a dance which was to be held there tonight. A supper dance—which meant that the music had already started, that the meal was over, and the heavy drinking had begun.

Then I saw the spot. In my imagination I saw the car poised there, front wheels hanging off into space. I saw Greta’s angry face, then her lax features in unconsciousness. I was running down the road again, listening for the crash as the car turned over and over.

Headlights reflected from the mirror dazzled me, and I came back to life. Nobody was trying to stop me. This particular spot hadn’t been selected for the final payoff. They were letting me go on. True, there wasn’t anywhere I could go except to the clubhouse. Janie seemed to grasp the same thought.

“Go faster,” she said tensely. “A lot of people will be there. They won’t dare do anything to us. Go faster, damn you! Murderer! Wife killer!”

I tightened my fingers into a hard fist to smack her again, then changed my mind. The poor kid didn’t know what she was saying. How could I
blame her if she rambled and raved? We'd been through a great deal. She'd stuck this far, and she'd go the whole route. I had to have her. I was sorry as hell I'd slapped her.

I pulled into the parking space, backed up. The car which had followed us pulled off the road and onto the grass. The headlights died out. They were going to wait. I shuddered, got out of the car and tried to help Janie out. She pushed me away, gave me an elbow in the ribs and walked rapidly toward the entrance.

I caught up with her at the door and we slowed down, trying to look unworried. People we knew hailed us. Janie smiled, hugged my arm in a burst of enthusiasm because this was what she enjoyed. Lights, music, lots of people, dancing.

Without a word I swung her onto the floor, and in a moment she was looking up at me and smiling.

I said, "I'm sorry I slapped you, but you were getting hysterical."

"I can forget it easily when you put that bracelet on me," she said. "I'm sorry too, Mike. I guess we were both damned scared—"

"I'm fine now. When we leave, we'll get someone to drive us. My car can stay here and I'll send for it tomorrow. Those goons may be waiting, but they can't stop all cars to look for us. We'll get past them."

We had a couple of drinks to catch up with everyone else, then did some more dancing. Near the edge of the floor someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to tell a cut-in to go jump in the lake. Instead, I stopped dead in my tracks and pulled Janie so close to me, so suddenly that she gave a surprised grunt as I forced the wind out of her.

Judge Mannering was smiling and bowing slightly. He looked more dead than alive, but it was the judge. He said:

"So nice to run into you again, Mike. Won't you introduce me to your pretty companion?"

I MUMBLED something. It probably was Janie's name—I don't know. My tongue didn't want to work and there was ice in my veins. Janie gave a savage jerk, tore free of me, and fled. I didn't blame her. I wanted to follow.

The judge said, "I think she is the sort of girl you could be happy with, Mike. Brainless, but shapely. Unintelligent, but packed full of sex. Yes, even I can see that, old and sick as I am. How have you been, boy?"

I told him I'd been fine. I backed away from him. Then someone came up to the judge and commanded his attention.

I went to the bar and asked for a double bourbon. I looked around for Janie and saw her talking to young Pete Alvord. Her face was animated, her smile warmer than any she'd given me lately, and I could see that Pete was getting ideas. While I sipped my drink, they walked out. She didn't even give a backward look.

I condemned her to hell with a heartfelt enthusiasm.

Chapter IX

AFTER that, there were three ghastly days. I stayed away from my hotel and lived in flea bags, staying on the move as much as possible. I would have taken a chance and lit out for distant parts except that I didn't have much money and I was afraid to go to my bank to get more, because the judge would undoubtedly have that watched.

I got an idea the third day. Ben Clint, the private detective, might be able to help me. I telephoned him.

"This is Mike Owen," I said. "What the hell happened to all that protection I was supposed to get?"

"What happened to you?" he demanded. "How can I guard you if I can't find you?"

"So that's it," I said happily. "You don't have a staff of investigators. You're a big phony, taking a man's money as if you had a whole crew work-
ing for you. Those reports were yours. You spent a little time checking up on where I'd been, what I did. But at no time did I get the slightest protection."

Clint said, "Good-bye, Owen."

"Wait a minute!" I yelled. "You hang up on me and I'll have the cops down on your private investigator license. You took ten grand of my dough and gave nothing in return. I want it back."

He laughed drily. "Let's see you try to get it, Owen. If you do, I'll have you put in an asylum." He jibed, "So Judge Mannering wants to kill you! The whole idea is so preposterous, it's funny. Don't bother me again, do you understand?"

He hung up on me. I was half tempted to pay him a visit and beat the lousy britches off him, but it was too risky. Every time I stuck my neck out there was danger of the judge's boys spotting me. I had an idea they wouldn't wait again. Next time the judge struck, it would be for good.

Twice I phoned Janie, received no answer, and gave up. She was a twotiming little no-good who took all I had and when she figured I was bled dry, that was the finish. If she had known how much I had left in the bank, she'd have been less hasty in ditching me.

I went out only late at night. Daytimes I stayed holed up in a filthy rooming house where nobody knew me and cared even less who I was. I stayed away from mirrors as much as possible, and stopped shaving. I couldn't stand the sight of myself. I was dirty, red-eyed, whiskered. My clothes were a mess. I was running out of dough and by sheer necessity I reverted to something that tasted and acted like Bowery "smoke."

I knew I couldn't go on much longer. I had to take a chance and show myself. If I didn't, I'd be dead soon anyway, and the judge would have his revenge.

So I concentrated on sobering up, and finally I slipped into my hotel by a side door, took the stairs to my apartment and within a few minutes I was enjoy-

ing a steaming hot bath and some good liquor for a change. I shaved, decided I'd look okay after a full night's rest. I sent down for food, had a good meal, and read a couple of newspapers. Then I turned down the bed, shed my bathrobe, and got ready to enjoy a night's sleep.

The phone shrilled. I answered it mechanically. Those damned instruments ring and even if you don't want to answer them, instinct makes you. I wished I hadn't answered this one.

Judge Mannering's soft voice said, "Hello, Mike. I've been trying to reach you."

"That's fine," I said. "Send your lousy torpedoes to my hotel. If I'm going to get killed, it'll have to be done while I'm in bed. I'm sick of running—running scared. I'm sick of you and of everything else. So do your damndest, but don't be surprised if the whole thing backfires."

He said, "Mike, I want you to come and see me right now."

I laughed at that one. "Do you think I'm nuts? I've been running away from you, remember?"

"Nevertheless, it is most important for you to come to see me, Mike. Within the hour. A great deal depends on it."

I WONDERED what the old devil wanted. Like answering the telephone, curiosity led me on. He sounded serious, as if he meant what he said about wanting to see me.

I said, "I'll take a chance, Judge. I'm crazy, but I'll do it. Mostly because I'm past the stage of being scared. I've probably reached the stage which makes me a fool, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thank you, Mike. I'll be waiting."

I was sorry I'd agreed the instant I hung up, and decided to abandon the whole idea. It was a silly thought. I could no more resist the curiosity he engendered in me than I could stop eating. I didn't even feel tired any more.
NORMAN A. DANIELS

I put on fresh clothes, sent for a bell-hop and had him take the old clothes out to be burned. Then I took a long drink, arranged the folds of my pocket handkerchief, and even gave consideration to the idea of looking up Janie when I got back.

My car was in the garage and I phoned ahead so it would be on the street and ready for me. I drove quite casually in the direction of the outskirts to Judge Mannering's estate beyond.

It seemed funny. Here I'd been running like the wind in the other direction—until I couldn't take it any more. Now I was going to him and not worried about it. Tomorrow, I decided, I'd look up Ben Clint and bust him a few times. Then I'd see about recovering some of my money.

Next I'd let Janie know what I thought of a female louse who ran out when the going got rough. I was finished with her, but I wanted her to know it. I wanted to tell her myself, and show her a few figures about my bank account. Curses might not affect her much, but the knowledge of what she'd lost would.

As I neared the Mannering home I slowed up a bit. Maybe if I'd been traveling at a good clip I might have escaped, what happened then, but when that same light delivery truck pulled out to block the road, I hit the brake. I should have gone onto the sidewalk, knocked down a hedge or two and got clear even with a busted fender. But no, I had to come to a stop. The moment I did, I knew I'd made a mistake. Men came from two directions. Both doors of my car were yanked open. The man in the gray suit clipped me. I don't know what he used, but it was effective, because there was one hell of a loud sound ringing inside my skull, and then the darkness came down....

When I woke up, I was on the floor of a car. In the back, because there were two pairs of feet beside my head and no signs of pedals or mechanical devices. I stirred. Someone bent down, grabbed me by the throat and hauled me up. I let myself go limp the instant I was seized.

"He's still out, Judge," Lempet's harsh voice said.

"Very well," Judge Mannering answered. "We're far enough from the city limits now, and we might as well get this over with. Are they bringing his car up?"

"Yeah," Lempet said. "We'll flatten a rear tire, park it and jack it up. It'll look like he was clipped while he was changing tires. This is old stuff to the boys, Judge. They can make it look so real there won't even be an inquest."

"I'm counting on that," Judge Mannering said. "Because there isn't much time left for me."

"Don't say that." Lempet clucked like a clumsy old mother hen. "You'll be okay."

"I know better, Lempet. If we fail tonight, I'll have to take more drastic action. Like shooting him down. I don't want that to happen, because of my family name. I'd rather do it this way so there is no connection, but I won't hold back if we miss tonight. He has to die—and soon—and by my hand. Nothing else will suffice."

LEMPET said, "Okay, Judge. We'll put it this way. If he gets out of this—and he won't, believe me—I'll have the boys round him up and we'll bring him to you. How's that?"

"Fine. I'm afraid it will have to be that way because I couldn't drag myself out of the house another time. I don't know how I made it tonight except that necessity gave me the strength."

I listened to those plans for my murder. Now I had to do something. Get away and start running again. I dreaded it, but there was nothing else to be done. Get away now, make plans later.

But how? Lempet would drag me back if I so much as made a grab for the car door. I had little time left. I was at the end of my rope—finished, caught up with. I needed one more
break, but where would it come from?

Then it did come. Judge Mannering gave a low moan and fell over on his side. Lempet shouted to the driver to stop the car while with both hands he pulled the judge into a sitting position. A chance like this would never come again. I raised myself, grasped the door handle, pushed it and sent the door open. While the car was still moving I rolled out and did a clumsy somersault. I dimly heard Lempet yelling, then I rolled off the old dirt road and landed on grass.

I was up quickly, wondering if I had broken any bones. Crouched over, I started running. It was a purely involuntary action. I was too mentally numb to think, but I could run and run I did. I ran until I started to stagger and reel, and finally collapsed in a heap. I thought I was in some kind of a pasture, a field of tall dry grass. It didn’t matter. I lay on my back, sucking in cool night air, trying to stop trembling and not getting away with it.

I wanted a drink. I called myself a dozen kinds of idiot for falling into the judge’s trap. I should have known he’d be desperate by now. The old man knew he was dying and couldn’t afford to wait, but he was determined not to die until I was dead.

I felt easier after awhile and able to think more clearly. I remembered what the judge had said. If he failed, he’d put out an order to have me dragged to him where I’d be killed on sight and never mind the consequences. That meant I’d have to sneak out of town, and I would have to begin my trip right now. Go away without money and live in terror from then on. I couldn’t see it. I’d told him I was tired of running, and I’d meant it.

But how could I escape them? There must be some way. If it was the old judge alone with whom I had to contend, I wouldn’t have worried, but I couldn’t even guess how many thugs he’d had Lempet hire. Men who would do his bidding right up to the time he died.

I sat bolt upright. Until the time he died! If he died before I did, the whole crazy business would come to an end. His desire for revenge was personal. If he went first, nobody else would have the slightest motive for killing me. Lempet might, as stupid as he was, as a gesture of gratitude to the old boy, but I could outwit that big ape.

Judge Mannering had to die! The answer, so clear and simple. It had been there all along, but of course I wasn’t the sort who would plan to get out of difficulties by resorting to murder. Greta—maybe—but that had been done on the spur of the moment, and might be classified as an accident even in my own mind.

Kill Mannering! Why not? It would be self-defense. My conscience would suffer no pangs. Hell, my conscience hadn’t even bothered me where Greta was concerned. Wringing the judge’s scrawny neck would be a pleasure.

I didn’t make any plans. I simply told myself I had something which had to be done and the quicker the better. I walked out to the road and got my bearings. Then I burst out laughing because every minute I’d been running I’d been getting closer to Judge Mannering’s estate. I was on a road right behind it now. I could reach the house in ten minutes.

I crossed the fields and wound up beside the back fence. He kept no dogs so I scaled the fence without worry, but I turned stealthy as I made my way past the garage and up to the back door of the house. Again I had to laugh because in my pocket was a key to that door. It was still on my key ring. I’d always entered the house by the back door after I put my car away.

Things were playing right into my hands. I couldn’t fail now, and I’d get away with it somehow. I told myself, Don’t worry about afterwards. Get him first—before he gets you.

I zipped open my key case, found the right key and unlocked the door.
stepped inside and stood there, listening. There was not a sound.

Probably he had everybody out searching for me, blocking all roads back to town. I tiptoed across the kitchen and into the dining room. There was a faint light in the big living room but when I entered, it was empty. At the end of the hall, though, I saw the yellow light beneath his library door. Greta and I had always looked for that when we came in late. If it was on, we had stopped to say goodnight.

I moved toward it slowly. I had a weird feeling that this was my house and that I was going to dispense with an interloper. I felt as if Greta were upstairs, waiting for me, probably to give me hell, but alive and well and waiting as she always had been.

My hand touched the cool brass knob of the study door, closed around it, turned the knob slowly and quietly. I pushed the door open a couple of inches.

The judge sat behind his desk. He seemed to be asleep, for his eyes were tightly closed. I had a terrifying idea* that he might already be dead and that would make me angry because I wanted to kill him myself. I wanted him to suffer what he had planned to do to me.

I had reached the corner of his desk before I could hear his steady breathing. His folded hands twitched. I could see a large vein in his neck throbbing madly. It fascinated me, that vein. It was a symbol of life in a man I hated. If I could stop that throbbing, I’d stop him. If it died away, so would Judge Mannering, and I could live again.

The vein seemed to beat faster, more violently. I hated that vein. I wanted to feel my fingers on it. I stretched my hands forward. The fingers were talons, hooks of murder. The vein throbbed and throbbed until I couldn’t stand it any more. Then I leaped.

I got my hands around his throat. His eyes flew open. I saw a moment of terror in them, then quiet resignation. He didn’t struggle. I don’t think he had the strength for it. I felt something snap under my pressing fingers. Anguish swiftly showed in his features. I squeezed harder.

I gave a wild shout. I said, “You didn’t win this case, Your Honor! Here is one sentence of death that wasn’t carried out. Damn you, you skinny old coot! There’s no more meat on you than there is on a mummy. You look like one. Go on and die. Die, I tell you! This is what you wanted for me. How do you like it? Damn you—die!”

Chapter X

PROBABLY Judge Mannering had been dead when I started my tirade. When I let go of him, he fell back into the chair. His face was blue, and a little blood trickled out of the left corner of his mouth. I stood there, working my fingers, glaring at what was left of him. Still hating him.

Then full realization hit me. I had to get out of here! I turned and ran. I was halfway down the corridor when the front door opened. Lempet came in first, and he was followed by Detective-lieutenant Turner. Of all people in the whole cockeyed world, it had to be Lieutenant Turner!

I saw the flash of a gun. I turned to run again. The gun exploded once. I wasn’t hit, but I stopped fast and raised my hands. Turner put cuffs on them. They felt ice-cold. Lempet came out of the library.

“We were too late, Lieutenant. He’s dead. This is what he’d been afraid of. Why he sent me for you.”

They took me to Headquarters. Somebody gave me a drink and a cigarette. I felt grateful for such consideration and I talked. I denied having killed the judge. I swore he was already dead when I got there, but they had a method of taking my prints off his neck. They asked my motive. I didn’t have any. That’s what I insisted on. Lieutenant Turner made a phone call to a law firm handling the judge’s business. When he hung up, he looked grim.
"So you had no motive, Owen. I suppose you didn’t know the judge drew up a new will after his daughter’s death and left everything he owned to you. Because he felt you were a true son to him. He was sure you’d take the place of his dead daughter. You stinking son of hell, if I wasn’t a cop, I’d beat you half to death right now!"

Somehow I found myself crying a little later. Nobody would believe me. They were suggesting an alienist right now, so I couldn’t plead temporary insanity later on. They said I was a lawyer and tricky, so they’d take no chances, but when I tried to tell them the gospel truth, they wouldn’t listen. I was still crying when they threw me into a cell.

A year can be a long time. It can also pass so swiftly as to seem unbelievable, and to a man waiting in the death house, it has that crazy speed. There was nothing for me to do but think, and I’d done so much of that my brain had grown tired.

My trial hadn’t taken long. Certainly my defense was practically nonexistent. I had thought Janie would help, that her testimony about Judge Mannering trying to kill me could have made it self-defense. Only that wasn’t the way she testified. Later on, I knew why. She was going to marry Pete Alvord, and his family wouldn’t have stood for any scandal. So Janie had forgotten everything she knew about me and the judge.

Acting as my own attorney, I tried to get her to admit I’d sounded and acted crazy. That didn’t work either. They put psychiatrists on the stand who testified I was not only sane but possessed of a better than average I.Q.

I appealed the death sentence, of course. It didn’t do any good. Now time was running out. Tonight at eleven I had a date with a bolt of lightning. It was now five and they’d already shaved a spot on my head, dressed me in thin black pants which would be slit off at the knee before I was led away. They had me in a cell just outside the execution chamber where I could be watched constantly.

I walked up and down, trying to figure it out. Dying was bad enough but going to my death without an answer to the mystery was almost worse. Judge Mannering had made his threat, but he had lost and I had won. Yet I had a deep-seated idea that this was exactly how he had planned it. The whole thing was driving me nuts.

I hadn’t had a visitor since I had been sentenced. Not a letter or even an inquiry. Nobody gave a damn. The guy who had knocked off the wonderful Judge Mannering deserved nothing less than what they’d give me in a few hours.

I kept trying to solve the problem. I knew very well it was only to keep my mind occupied so I wouldn’t think of that other—that moment so dreadfully close at hand. I wasn’t sorry I’d killed the old buzzard nor sorry for the brutal way I’d done it. A crushed throat, the autopsy had shown. A poor, aged, sick, half-dead old man cruelly murdered by a young beast of a human.

That was how they’d summed it up, and that dumb jury had spent exactly forty minutes in deciding my fate. I heard later that thirty of those forty minutes had been occupied in arguing whether or not they’d hold the state up for the price of dinner, but a couple of the jurors wanted to go home.

A key clanked against the outer door. That was all you ever heard in this place—metal against metal. Then I had a moment of panic. They were coming for me. But it was too soon—too soon. They were bringing a reprieve. Maybe the governor had intervened. But no—not that either. He had turned my petition down cold.

I pressed against the barred door, straining to see who was coming. It gave me quite a shock to see Lempet walking beside the guard captain. Towering over him, looking grim. Lempet stopped a dozen yards away as if by prearrangement.
The guard captain kept on coming. He said, "Owen, you have a visitor. It's against the rules for visitors on the last day, but this man comes with a special pass signed by a Supreme Court judge. You don't have to talk to him if you don't want to."

I forced a grin. No matter what, I wouldn't turn chicken. They'd never see me quaver even if everyone went.

I shrugged and said, "Sure I'll see him. He's a friend of mine from the past. Lempet—come here."

He approached the door and I could see that he was ill-at-ease. Nobody with Lempet's criminal record likes a death house even if the door will open for him whenever he wishes it to. I noticed that the captain signaled the other guards, and they all moved quietly to the far end of the corridor. I was being given strict privacy. That letter from the Supreme Court Justice must have been powerful. So was the influence of Judge Mannering, dead a year.

Lempet said, "Hello Owen. You don't look so good."

I said, "I know. I'm going to be fatally sick in a few hours. Why did you come? For the novelty of visiting a man behind bars instead of receiving visitors that way?"

He shook his big head. This was extremely serious for him. "Mr. Owen, I'm here because I promised the judge I'd see you before they burned you. He made me swear I'd do this. He even fixed it so I'd get in easy."

"Can't he let me alone a year from his death—just before I'm to die, too?" "It's gotta be this way," he said. "You gotta listen to me."

"I'm listening, Lempet."

"The judge wanted me to tell you that this was how he planned it. That he swore he'd kill you and he has. Or he will in a little while."

There was a buzzing in my ears. "He—I planned it—this way?"

Of course! It was suddenly as clear as daylight. All nice and legal.

I said, "Lempet, the judge never meant those attempts to kill me at all, did he?"

"He told me we were gonna make you think they were real tries to knock you off, but I wasn't to finish the job no matter what. On the train, we coulda dumped you easy. After that, my boys kept you on the move. They did some shooting, but if they'da hit you, I'da busted them. We had you pegged day and night."

"I was kept on the run," I murmured. "I was scared, made desperate."

"I dunno what it's all about, Mr. Owen. Sometimes I think I got it figured, but then things don't add. But I had to come and tell you this. The judge said his sentence was being carried out just as if he was still on the bench when he passed it."

"Lempet, the old boy was a very sick man, wasn't he?"

"The doc told him he was gonna die
soon. That was even before his daugh-
ter was killed. He hated dying that way
—slow and painfully. I guess you kinda
done him a favor by knocking him off
so fast.”

S UDDENLY I started to laugh. Lempet
backed up a step in quick fear. I
stopped laughing and told him I was
sorry.

“He must have been badly worried to-
ward the end—afraid he’d die before I
killed him.”

“Y’know,” Lempet said with one of his
heavy frowns, “that’s just how it hit
me, only I couldn’t believe it. Take when
he phoned you to come over that night.
If you hadn’t come, I was to drag you to
the house. But when you did, we set that
little trap. But hell, I knew you heard
what we were saying about bumping
you off. I had to play it that way, be-
cause that was how the judge wanted
it.”

“And you were to bring Lieutenant
Turner to the house. Make sure I had
plenty of time to reach the old boy and
kill him. The judge just sat there wait-
ing for me to come. Hoping I’d reach
him before death did.”

Lempet said, “You ain’t sore at me,
Mr. Owen? I don’t want a guy who’s
gonna die in a little while to be sore at
me.”

“You could have told the truth when
I put you on the witness stand,” I said.
“No, I couldn’t, on account of I prom-
ised the judge—”

“You could tell the truth now.”
“I promised—”
“All right, Lempet. It’s okay. You did
your job well. The judge would have
been proud of you. Now get out of here.
I want to be alone for awhile. As alone
as they’ll let a man be in this place.”

He walked away, backing up a few
steps until he turned swiftly and bolted
for the door. The guards came back. I
sat down and laughed again.

Sure, I’d been sentenced to death for
the murder of Greta. All that had hap-
penned afterward—the trial, the sen-
tence, the appeals—weren’t part of it
at all. Judge Mannerling, in the tradition
of the Mannerling family, had passed
sentence justly and honorably. I was
going to burn for killing Greta. I knew
it. Nobody else did.

I looked up. “Hey, Guard, what time
is it?”

He acted uncomfortable. “Six-thirty,
Owen.”

Four and a half hours to doom. I
wished they’d hurry.

I was developing a sneaking admira-
tion for the late Judge Mannerling, who
had died with his reputation intact. Who
would be remembered as a great man
and honored after death.

I wished they’d hurry. Granting the
judge admiration would be the crowning
touch. I didn’t want it to develop too
far, even in my own mind.

I jumped up and banged the bars with
my fists.

Why didn’t they hurry?

MURDER STALKS THE METROPOLIS

in

THE DRAGNET

By WILLIAM Degenhard

- AN EXCITING MYSTERY COMING NEXT ISSUE!
George Scardale's night ride packed TNT—and catapulted him into a sabotage mystery

Chapter 1

SOMETHING was going by me as I lay there, and making a devil of a racket about it. There were cinders under my face, and as I lifted and turned it, I could see, even in the dark, that it was the wheels and trucks of a freight train, rolling by within a yard of my nose.

Then I remembered. I had to catch
that train, and I’d run smack into the post support of an overhead block signal. Fortunately I lay on the outside of that post; the other way and I’d have gone under those turning wheels.

I got up, holding on to the post, and shook my head to clear it. There was some reason that made it important that I catch that train before the rest of it went by.

Then I remembered that, too. I was going to Remmelton to get a job, a job that I was pretty sure of if I got there right away while they needed me.

I let go of the post and found I was all right, except that my head ached, and I was cold. The wind was bitter and it went through my thin suit like needles. And the rattler was sliding past me faster and faster as it gathered speed out of the division point. Gondola after gondola after gondola, and the empty box-car I was looking for didn’t come.

It was going to be murder to ride out in the open, dressed as I was, on a night like this. But way down the line and coming toward me fast, I could see the lights of the crummy—the caboose, if you’ve never hit the road.

So I was in for it all right, and I started to run alongside the train fast until I was going nearly enough as fast as it was to reach for the ladder rungs of a passing reefers and swing myself up.

I crawled up over the edge and sat straddling the catwalk, leaning forward into the wind to keep my balance. It would have been easier to humor the wind by lying flat, but this was my only suit and I wanted to reach Remmelton looking as nearly decent as possible.

The wind carried back a mournful wail from the whistle of the locomotive up ahead in the darkness, and when it had died down I heard the sound of voices from the car ahead.

Yes, I could see them now—or rather, I could see the darker shadows of their silhouettes. They were sitting on the edge of the car in front of mine, with their feet dangling over the edge between the cars, their backs to the wind.

I edged my way forward along the swaying catwalk to join them. I wouldn’t be able to sleep up there on the car, and it would make the trip faster if I had someone to talk to.

Then I was near enough to hear one of them say, “Here comes someone.”

The words were short and quick as though it had been a warning, and then they were silent.

I called out “Hi,” so they wouldn’t take me for a brakie.

“What you want?”

It didn’t sound like a bo’s voice; the enunciation was careful. But the tone of voice made the implication plain. However it was worded.

“Nothing,” I said. “Not a thing, if you feel that way about it.”

“We do. Go on past if you want, but don’t stop.”

There was something about that voice I didn’t like at all, but this wasn’t the time and place to do anything about it.

Then the other voice, the one I’d heard first, cut in.

“We’re talking business, buddy.” The tone was more conciliating, as though he was trying to explain the other’s attitude.

“Okay,” I said, “put me down for a hundred shares of preferred.” And I turned around and went back toward the tail end of the train. What they were talking about was none of my affair, and I didn’t want to stop where they might think I was in listening range.

Probably a couple of hoods, I figured, on their uppers. You meet crooks on the road once in a while, but not often. Mostly they ride the Pullmans. People you meet on the free trains are guys going somewhere to find work or guys going somewhere to get away from it.

A weak and sickly-looking moon slid out from behind the clouds and I could see well enough to walk easily. But I sat down again and took hold of the
boards of the catwalk because the clank of couplings was coming back along the train as it slowed down to stop. If you’re standing up when the jerk hits the car you’re on, it can throw you for a loss.

We started to back into the yards again. Why, I didn’t know and didn’t care, but it would give me a chance to take another look for an empty box-car up ahead and get in out of the wind.

So I went down over the side and stood there and let the train slide back past me. All the gondolas again, and then a string of boxes up near the engine, and luck was with me.

The third of the string was an empty, with the side door open. I ran alongside and got in.

The back end of a box-car is the best place. You can sit facing forward with your back against the wall. I took a newspaper out of my pocket and unfolded it to sit on while I walked into the darkness of the back of the car. Walked slowly, feeling the way with my feet, so I wouldn’t stumble over any bo who happened to be there.

I reached the back end without stepping on anyone, put down the paper and sat on it. I gave a contented grunt to be out of the wind, and shoved my hands into my pockets to get them warm again.

“Hullo,” a voice alongside of me said. “Thought you had to get on back, and I’d have to ride alone.”

IT WAS a girl’s voice. She couldn’t have seen the surprise on my face. I made my answer casual, so that I wouldn’t frighten her.

“Afraid you got me mixed, sister. I’m not—”

Then the clank of couplings started again, at the back of the train this time, because it was going backward. You can’t talk over that noise, so I kept still and leaned my head forward so the jerk wouldn’t slam it against the end of the car. I had enough of a headache already.

Then, as the train stopped, there were voices outside the box-car, as though a lot of men were running along both sides of the train.

I heard the girl start to stand up. “Better sit tight,” I said. “If anything’s up, we’re better off out of it.” “I guess you’re—”

Then the voices were right outside the car we were in and three men, one with a lantern and two with flashlights, climbed up. I could hear footsteps of others going on past.

I stood up, then, and the flashlights bracketed me. All the men had guns, so I stood there while they walked back.

The girl was standing, too. Out of the corner of my eye I could see her backed tightly against the end of the car, as far away from them as she could get. I saw, too, that she was young and that she wore a pair of clean denim overalls and a scarf over her hair.

“Take it easy, guys,” said one of the men. Then, in surprise, “One of ’em’s a dame, Sheriff!”

I began to breathe a little easier. This was only a pinch, at worst.

The man addressed as “Sheriff” came in toward me. I expected to be frisked, but he didn’t do that. Instead, he flashed the light around into the corners of the car. He kicked a crumpled newspaper with his foot, and then picked up the girl’s suitcase and hefted it.

“Um—feels okay,” he said, “but—”

He put it down flat and opened it. His deputy who was wearing a star, too, came over and held the lantern beside him while he pawed quickly through the clothing in the suitcase. Then he grunted, and snapped it shut.

I saw that the third man had wandered to the front end of the box-car, and was looking around up there. Someone had left an old cardboard carton in a corner, and he picked it up and then threw it down without looking inside it.

“All clear up here,” he called back.

The sheriff was standing. He looked at me and jerked his thumb toward the girl.

“Your wife?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Stay right in this car till you’re out
of the state. I oughta pull you in, but—"

"Okay, Sheriff," I said, and tried to make it sound respectful.

He grunted, and without saying anything more, the three men got out of the car and I heard them moving on toward the back end of the train.

"Wait a minute, sister," I said to the girl. Then I walked quietly toward the center door of the car and peered out.

Moonlight was brighter out there now, but it shone on rolling fields and a ridge of mountains in the distance. Not even a building or a car. Nothing to account for the search they were making of the train.

I stuck my head out, and looked up toward the engine. Nothing up that way. But moving toward the other end of the train, at intervals, were a dozen lights.

I felt the presence of the girl behind me, although I hadn't heard her moving.

"Better—better not let them see you looking out," she said.

THAT was so silly I didn't answer.

They'd seen me, when they'd searched the car, and they hadn't done anything about it. They weren't looking for hoboes. I stood there watching and trying to think it out. There'd been something funny about the way they'd searched the car.

They hadn't paid much attention to us at all. No frisk, no questioning. The sheriff had salved his official conscience by asking me one routine question, and he'd accepted my answer without question. Probably he'd guessed I was lying, but he didn't want to waste time picking us up.

He was looking for something else. He'd hefted that suitcase to find it and one of the other men had picked up the cardboard carton and had dropped it when it felt empty, and the sheriff hadn't made a detailed search of the suitcase.

All that added up to one thing. They were looking for something that could fit into a suitcase or a carton, but too big to be carried in a pocket without showing. Something fairly heavy, too.

And then I remembered the tunnel up ahead. Our stop here was just a mile this side of the big tunnel, and that made sense. I thought of what I knew about that tunnel, and then I could see why they'd been looking for a bomb.

The S.R. & T. is the only route that runs into the mountains to the uranium mines at Lassiter, and the S.R. & T. depends solely on that quarter-mile tunnel to get into the mountains and out again.

It had taken them two years to drill that tunnel. It wouldn't take two years to fix a bad cave-in now, but it would take long enough, and while the road was out of operation, those uranium mines would be just about as useful to atomic research as rubber plantations in Malaya.

But I'd been through here before, and I knew they weren't stopping all trains here, before they went through the tunnel. There must be a tip-off that an attempt was to be made tonight. Then came the familiar jerk of couplings, and the train started to roll.

Chapter II

I WONDERED about the girl, who she was, what she was doing here, and what she looked like. I'd had only a glimpse of her out of the corner of my eye when the flashlight had been on in the car.

But you don't ask people questions on the road. You don't even ask names. If a guy wants to tell you his name, he does; and until he does, you call him "Buddy" and let it go at that.

I knew how I could get another look at her without being rude, so I said:

"Want a cigarette? I've got makings."

"If you'll roll me one, 'Fraid I'm not good enough to do it in the dark."

I rolled one for her and one for myself and struck a match. As she leaned forward to light her cigarette, I was able to study her face, and I liked what I saw.
She was young. I don't mean schoolgirl age, but somewhere around twenty-five; ten years younger than I am. And good-looking without any of the babydoll kind of prettiness that I've never cared for.

She had nice features, and wide, clear eyes. You couldn't see much of her hair because she had a scarf tied around it, but the part that showed was dark brown with that faint touch of dark red that makes brown hair rich instead of drab. And there was a smudge of dirt on the end of her nose that seemed somehow to belong there, and to make her face more attractive.

As her cigarette glowed, her eyes lifted to mine over the flame of the match. And I thought, This is the girl I would like to marry.

Without knowing anything at all about her. I thought that, and I was as sure of it as I was ever sure of anything. No matter who or what she was. I wouldn't have called it love, exactly, although I knew it could grow to be that. It was more a recognition of qualities I'd looked for in a woman and never found before.

I knew that this woman, if by any miracle she should ever feel the same about me as I felt about her, could make my life over into something that had meaning.

The match burned my fingers, and I dropped it. The stub of it lay there burning on the rough wood of the boxcar floor. I shifted my foot to stamp it out. Too late, for it flickered its last before my shoe reached it.

But in that brief last flare of the match's life, it lay beside the battered suitcase that the sheriff had searched, and it had illumined the black scuffed leather and the celluloid-covered identification tag which was fastened to one of the straps on the side of the bag nearest me.

I thought I'd made out the name on that bag, and it just couldn't be what it seemed. No, I hadn't really read it, in that brief and flickering light. I'd just seen the capital letters and the length.

I must have guessed incorrectly about the rest.

Deliberately, I struck another match and lighted my own cigarette and then I bent down casually with the match in my hand and took another look at the tag before I dropped the match and stepped on it. I needn't have been so careful, because the girl had turned away and was taking advantage of the brief light to locate the newspaper she'd been sitting on at the back of the car.

The tag read, "Mrs. George Scardale." There was an address, but it was printed in smaller letters and there hadn't been time or light enough for me to read it.

I stood there thinking, and then I went back and sat down beside her.

"I might as well introduce myself," I said. "My name's Joe Williams, and I'm heading for Remmelton to get a job at the Consolidated."

It was seconds before she answered. "Glad to know you, Joe." And for some reason it sounded as though there was a catch in her voice, and it took me a moment to figure out why it had been there. "I—I'm stopping off at Remmelton, too."

THAT would have been wonderful news, a few minutes ago.

"Looking for work there?" I asked.

"Uh—yes. I was working as a waitress at Lassiter, but my place folded up."

"I thought Lassiter was booming," I said, "with the mines running full blast."

"The place is going good, yes. I could probably have got another job but—well, there were reasons."

And those reasons were apparently none of my business, for she let it go at that. Hesitantly, she asked:

"You know anything about Remmelton. Mr.—Williams?"

"Make it Joe," I told her. "I've worked there at the nitro plant before. I know it pretty well."

Pretty soon, if I was right, she'd start pumping me. But there'd be a build-up first.
“My name is Beth, Joe,” she said, “Beth Scardale.”
I wanted to be able to watch her face, but I couldn’t, of course. I had to be content with listening to every faint inflection of her voice.
“I knew a George Scardale,” I said, “while I was working in the nitro plant. He was driving, and I worked inside. Any relation of yours?”
“My husband.”
“Oh. I didn’t know George was married, but then I haven’t seen him since —” I broke off and asked. “Did he ever tell you why he quit?”
“Of course. He lost his nerve, got a phobia against nitroglycerin. But it wasn’t cowardice; it was something he couldn’t help or control. And he wasn’t the only driver it ever happened to. It — it just hit him more suddenly than most.”
I didn’t say anything, and she went on, talking slowly.
“I can understand how he felt. It must be an awful job, driving one of those trucks. With the knowledge that if you hit the slightest bump, or—”
“It isn’t so bad now,” I cut in quickly. “They pack the stuff in sponge rubber and the trucks have special springs.”
“But those mountain roads! George told me about them. Half the time hanging on the edge of nothing, and when you have to pass another car, knowing a few inches the wrong way means death —”
There was perspiration on the inside of my palms, and I dried them with my handkerchief.
“It isn’t that bad,” I said. “And if it happens, it’s clean. No pain or anything. Death is a noise, that’s all, and I don’t think you’d ever hear it. That’s the job I’m going to take this time. Driving a nitro truck.”
“Oh. Then I shouldn’t have said—”
“It’s all right. I know those things already. And the pay is good. Real money.”
“Yes, but—”
“And the army wouldn’t take me, be-
cause of a broken metatarsus. But you don’t need good arches to drive a nitro truck, and they need drivers, need them bad.”
The train was slowing down a little, and I realized we must be near the tunnel. The engine highballed, and between the blasts the sound changed and I knew it was inside.
There was a rectangle of moonlight on the floor of the car opposite the center door, and I watched it.
I knew the sheriff had searched the girl’s suitcase and this car, but I shifted a little toward her so my arm made light contact with hers and I could tell if she tried to move. If she did, I’d have to stop her.
I DIDN’T see what she could do, here inside the box-car, to endanger the tunnel, but I knew she’d been lying to me. It was too big a thing to take chances on.
Then suddenly the rectangle of moonlight up ahead blacked out and the sounds of the moving train became hollow, reverberating sounds, and I knew we were inside.
Somehow, I found that I was holding my breath and holding my body rigid and ready. But the girl didn’t move; it seemed that she leaned more closely against me in that utter darkness. Or perhaps it was I who had moved without knowing it.
We couldn’t have been inside the tunnel more than half a minute, if the train was going as much as thirty, but it seemed nearer half an hour before the moonlit square slid back into position on the floor up ahead and the sounds changed and were normal again. Another half-minute and the back end of the train was through, and nothing had happened.
I turned toward the girl, and now that the echoes of the tunnel were gone, I could hear that she was sobbing quietly. I said nothing to her.
A long time, while the train rushed on into the night, that sobbing beside me
continued, and then gradually it diminished and she was still. Her breathing was slow, and I knew that she slept.

Chapter III

OUTSIDE, the moon was high now. The square of moonlight on the floor had shrunk to a narrow slit just inside the doorway, and I knew we were almost due at Remmelton.

I hoped the girl would continue to sleep and that I could leave her that way. It would make it easier to do what I had to.

The train was slowing down now, and it stopped without awakening her. I rose carefully, tiptoed to the door, and jumped down to the gravel path of the familiar Remmelton siding. No division point here, no yards. The train would stop for water and then go right on unless there were cars to uncouple.

Up ahead were the station lights. And out across the fields to my right, the bright lights of the Consolidated’s nitricating plant where the vat-men were working night and day to keep the soup moving.

I walked up the steps of the station, and pushed through the door. The agent was alone in the room behind the ticket window.

He looked through into the waiting room, saw me and came to the inner door.

“George, old boy!” he said. “Just pull in on the red-ball? Say, something wrong? You look like you’d seen ghosts.”

“I’m all right, Harry,” I said. “Yes, I came back for a job again. But listen, I’ve got to use the phone. Give me a couple nickels for a dime.”

He looked surprised, but gave me the nickels and I crossed the room to the phone booth and shut its door behind me. I asked the operator for the police, and wondered if Captain Craddock was still on nights.

He was; I recognized his voice when he said, “Police Department.”

“This Craddock?”

“Yes.”

“This is George Scardale, Cap,” I said. “Just got in on the redball, and there’s a—”

“Drop around, George. Nothing doing here tonight and we can play a game of cribbage.”

“There’ll be something doing, Cap,” I said grimly. “And I don’t want to be in on it. There’s a girl on this train, asleep in Car Sixty-three eighty-nine hyphen six; the fifth one back from the locomotive. You’d better arrest her and hold her on suspicion until you can investigate.”

“Huh? Well, if you say so. But it’ll take me eight minutes to get around there, and what if it pulls out before—”

“Then phone ahead and have her picked up at the next stop.”

That would be better anyway, I thought; then maybe I wouldn’t have to confront her.

“Sure, but what—”

“I don’t know, Cap. But it could be sabotage—undercover corny stuff. She’s traveling under a false identity. Got my name somewhere, and she’s coming here posing as my wife, probably because it would give her an in for a job here. And—well, maybe there’s no connection, but I got a hunch there’s something up tonight about the Wilmot Tunnel. Maybe she’s in on that, and maybe—”

There was a click and the line went dead. Craddock would be running out the door to his car right now.

I dropped my other nickel into the phone box quickly, because I wanted to try to get away before Craddock arrived. I gave the Consolidated number, and asked for Roy Burke.

“Roy, this is George,” I said. “George Scardale. How you set for drivers?”

“On the nitro trucks? We need ’em, but are you sure you got it licked, George. I mean, about—”

I cut in, “I’m sure.”

“Start any time then.”

“Swell. But won’t I have to check in
through the main office and fill out another application and all that?

“No. We didn’t let you quit, remember? Technically you’re still on leave of absence and that leaves me free to put you on any time. How you set for sleep?”

“Fine,” I lied. “Mean you got one going out tonight I can take?”

“One’s just about loaded that Wescott is scheduled to drive. He’s here ready, but he’s got a bad tooth and he told me to raise a sub for him if I could. You’ll be doing him a favor, if you can make it.”

“I’ll be right around,” I told him.

I ducked into the station washroom and cleaned up as well as I could. A truck out tonight was fine, just what I wanted, to take my mind off what had happened back there on the train.

Then I started across the fields toward the highway. I heard a car driving up toward the station. It probably was Cap Craddock. . . .

I tooled the truck carefully out the gate and turned into the road. The wheel felt good in my hands, and it took my mind off other things.

Just a few hundred yards up the highway was the turn-off that would take me back across the tracks and on the long detour around Remmelton. You never drive a nitro truck through a town if there’s any possible detour around it.

This one was bad—a dirt road, full of pits and hollows. The kind of holes that look like they go through to China when your headlights shine on them from an angle, and then level off when you’re almost there.

I took it at the five miles an hour that’s the maximum for that short chunk of road, with the roar of the engine in low gear so loud I could hardly hear the sound of the freight train that was pulling out.

And way off in the darkness, diagonally across the fields, I could see an arc of light as the conductor leaned out from the crummy to swing the go-ahead with his lantern.

The first half of the train had gone by when I pulled to a stop at the tracks. I was glad of that; at least I wouldn’t have to see the box-car I’d ridden in. It would be deserted now, and I didn’t like to think about that.

The rest of the train slid past, gathering speed. And then it was gone. I shifted the truck into low again and eased forward toward the tracks. There wasn’t any other train due, but we always inched up to the tracks and looked both ways just to be sure. With a truckload of nitroglycerin behind him, a driver never cuts corners.

Just as my foot started to push in on the clutch, there was sudden movement on both sides of the truck, and both doors of the cab were jerked open simultaneously. A short-barreled revolver was poked into my ribs.

“Take it easy, pal,” a voice said softly.

I didn’t recognize either of the men, but the voice was familiar. It was the voice of one of the two men I’d encountered on top of the freight train.

The one on my right got in and sat beside me. He slid his gun back into its shoulder holster for a moment and frisked me while the other held an automatic on me.

He searched thoroughly before he said, “Clean as a whistle.”

“Look in the glove compartment,” said the other.

It was jerked open and slammed shut. “Nothing. He isn’t heeled.”

THE one on my left closed the cab door, came around and got in on the other side.

“Okay, start rolling,” he said. “We’re hooking a ride tonight, pal.”

“Did you read the signs on this truck?” I asked. “Know what it’s carrying? Not that I mind, understand, but it isn’t what most people’d choose for a joy ride.”

“Get rolling.”

I still didn’t get the play. My mind must have been slowed down, because all I could think of was that even if the law was close behind them, they could
find a safer and faster way to travel. And if they meant to hijack the load, they’d have a sweet job finding a fence who’d handle anything as hot as nitro.

But I started the truck and eased it on across the tracks. My run was to Varnesville, and I hoped that direction was what they wanted, and that it was just a matter of a ride and they’d drop off somewhere en route.

We crossed the tracks and hit the Dartown road, and I let it out to twenty-five miles an hour. That road isn’t too good, and the hoods started to act nervous.

“Take it easy, pal,” the nearest one said, “we’re not out for a speed record.”

The uneasiness in his voice made me feel better. It made me realize that my phobia was licked. There wasn’t even a trace, tonight, of the sudden awful fear that had hit me just before a run four months ago, and had made me a neurotic wreck.

Here tonight, I was tooling the truck along at the top safe speed for this kind of road and not worrying in the least about the load behind me.

“Where do I drop you off?”

“We’ll tell you.”

I drove on, and at first only slowly and unbelievably did it come to me that maybe this tied in with what I’d figured out about the tunnel. These thugs had been on that train, and they’d been passed up, as I had, because they had no bomb around. But they had one now!

I’d thought, all too often, of a nitro truck as sudden death for the driver who made a slip, but I’d never before thought of one as a bomb that could be placed deliberately to destroy something.

Good Lord! If the truck would explode in the confined space of the tunnel it would nearly destroy that tunnel beyond all hope of repair. It would nearly blow the roof off the mountain. And there wouldn’t be enough left of the train that hit the truck to make a key chain.

I thought ahead, to figure out when I’d be sure about what they planned. It would be when we came to the side road off the highway just past Barney’s filling station. That road ran up into the mountains, and crossed the S.R. & T. tracks only a few hundred yards from the end of the tunnel.

I kept quiet about that road, because it was a little-used one and it was just possible that they didn’t know about it. I tried to keep outwardly calm, and to play the game as though I believed they were merely forcing their presence on me for the ride.

If my hunch was right, and if they didn’t know I’d guessed their purpose, it would give me an ace in the hole.

There seemed singularly little traffic on the roads that night. We passed hardly a car in the first thirty miles outside Remmelton. Then we began passing a long line of interstate trucks bound the other way.

The window on my side of the cab was down, and I waved at the driver of the first truck.

The revolver nudged my ribs.

“No signals, pal.”

“Okay,” I said, “but it’ll look funnier to them if I won’t wave. We generally do.”

“Go ahead, then.”

As a matter of fact, we generally didn’t, because a nitro driver always keeps both hands on the wheel.

My waving wouldn’t be enough out of the ordinary, though, to make the other drivers suspicious. But it would attract their attention to the nitro truck, and maybe one of them would notice that there were other men in the cab and report it in Remmelton.

I waved to the last of the string of trucks, and then we were on the short steep upgrade that led to Barney’s filling station, and leveled off on top just before the side road branched off.

We went past the station, closed of course at this time of morning. I thought to myself, Another minute and I’ll know whether I’ll ever see the sun
come up again over those mountains.

If they told me to turn in that side road, I'd know for sure what was up, and I'd run this truckload of concentrated hell into the first tree or off the first ledge. The Wilmot Tunnel was more important than I was, right then, to say nothing of the lives of everybody on the train that would crash into the truck.

No, not for all the uranium ore in Lassiter were they going to run the truck up to the tunnel if I could help it. And helping it was pretty obviously going to cost me my life. But—well, this was a bigger chance to do a bigger thing than the army could ever have given me if I'd passed their exam.

I happened to see my hands on the wheel, and they were white with the strain of my grip. I wondered if my face was like that, too, and I tried to make my muscles relax so they wouldn't notice.

Scared? Of course. I was scared stiff.

How had I said it to the girl, earlier tonight?—"Death is just a noise, and I don't think you even hear it." But death, this way, was going to be a pretty loud noise, whether I heard it or not, and it would be a noise that would splash me all over a mountainside. Something was wrong with the engine of the truck. It had stopped turning over, and we were slowing down to a stop.

I glanced at the dashboard and saw that the ignition key wasn't there. It was in the hand of the man next to me. I'd been so busy thinking heroic thoughts that I hadn't seen him reach for it.

"Okay," he said, "stop her."

I didn't have to. The truck had practically stopped itself by then, and it was too late to try to swerve into anything, or even off the road.

The other man was already getting out of the cab and walking around the front. He opened the door on my side and said, "Move over. I'll take it from here."

I slid over, glad that I was to be in the middle next to the wheel. If I didn't give away my intentions, I might still have a chance to reach over and send that truck off the road.

Even the gun in my ribs couldn't go off soon enough to keep me from giving one yank on the wheel, and one would be enough on any of the half a dozen outside turns up there. I hadn't any doubt, now, that we were going to turn into that side road.

And we did. The truck started up the long steep climb of rough gravel road off the highway. Going in low, too slow for me to be sure of getting away with a break here. But plenty of chances up ahead.

I sat quietly, trying not to look like a man who expects to kill himself within a matter of minutes.

Chapter IV

We had gone up the long, slow slope, and still were only crawling. I could see the reflection of the man who was driving, in the windshield, and there were little beads of sweat on his forehead. He was plenty scared, and he wasn't taking any chances with that load on the eight miles back to the crossing.

Then the truck was stopping again, almost halfway between the highway and the tunnel, four miles from nowhere. The stop had been too quick for me to make a play. The ignition key was out of the switch again, and the revolver muzzle tighter than ever against my ribs.

The thug who had been driving opened the door and got out, drawing his gun as he stepped down from the running board.

"End of the line, pal," he said. "This is where you get off."

I'd waited too long! Now, with the truck motionless and the ignition key gone, and with a gun aimed at me from either side, I was going to die, and I was going to die without a chance to take things with me. I'd be shot down as soon as I got out of the cab and away
from the truck.

I hesitated, trying to guess my chances if I dived out and tried to grab the gun in front of me, ignoring the one behind. But there was a way that gave me a little better chance, slight as it might be.

There was a steep slope down from the edge of the road, two yards from the outside of the truck. I slid under the wheel, put my foot on the running board. But I didn’t step down from it normally as they would expect me to do. I left it in a running leap, and was over the edge before a gun roared, and was running diagonally downward as fast as I could.

Guns roared behind me now, but no bullet touched me as I made that mad dash, although half a dozen were fired before I reached the cover of trees at the bottom of the gully.

I slowed down, just enough to let me find my way through by the dim moonlight that filtered through the leaves. I had to get to the other side at once if my plan was to work. There was an inside hair-pin turn ahead of the truck half a mile around the gully. My chance was that they didn’t know the topography well enough to realize that I could make it faster than they.

I was halfway across the wooded bottom when I heard the doors of the cab slam, and the sound of the engine starting. I’d guessed right, at least, in thinking that they wouldn’t try to follow me, once I’d gained cover.

I hurried, reached the bottom of the upslope on the other side, and started to climb. It was so steep I had to crawl on hands and knees part of the way, but I made it just ahead of them.

I stretched myself flat against the steep slope just as the far side of a slight curve in the road. And while I lay there, I found a couple of sizable chunks of rock to put in my pockets. Poor weapons against guns, but better than bare hands.

Then the roaring of the engine in low gear came just above me. I scrambled up across the edge of the road, and ran after the red danger lights on the back of the truck.

It was easy to catch up, at their speed. The back of the body wasn’t designed to accommodate hitch-hikers, but at ten miles an hour I was able to board it, hanging onto the locked handles of the double doors and standing with my feet on the bumper.

It was a precarious grip. I’d never have been able to hang on if the truck had been going fast. But I knew already that the man behind the wheel had plenty of respect for his cargo and he’d probably crawl the truck all the way there.

I was still hanging on when we reached the S.R. & T. tracks and turned off the road. And here, over the bumpy ties of the railroad he went even slower.

MY HANDS ached from their grip on the door handles, but now I could drop down, and I did. I kept up with the truck on foot easily, trotting along behind it and staying a little to the left so I wouldn’t show up in the rear vision mirror.

We passed the switch that converted the double track to a single one for the length of the tunnel, and then were inside the tunnel.

The timing was perfect. Just as the moonlight blacked out, I heard the long, mournful wail of a distant train whistle.

The men in the cab must have heard it, too, because the truck ahead of me started to go faster despite the bumps, for a short distance into the tunnel, and then stopped. Probably they’d meant to drive in farther, but this was far enough.

We were still near enough to the end of the tunnel that I could see dimly. As the truck stopped, I took the two pieces of rock from my coat pockets and held one in each hand.

A door of the cab was opened, and I thought it sounded like the door on the right side. I stood waiting at that corner of the truck. I knew they’d come around the back end of the truck, toward
me, because the far end of the tunnel was too distant.

And as a shadow, darker than the surrounding darkness, came around the corner of the truck, I lashed out. The rock and my fist together must have made a mess of his face. It did unpleasant things to my knuckles and fingers, too, but I didn’t think about that just then.

The door on the other side had already been opened, and I groped my way around the back of the truck toward the other side. This time I didn’t see my opponent, nor he me. We collided in the dark.

I dropped my stones and grabbed at him, trying to pin his arms so he couldn’t reach for his holstered gun. The advantage of surprise was with me, for he hadn’t suspected I was there, and his first reaction was to think that his accomplice had blundered all the way around the truck and run into him.

He tried to push me off, rather than to fight, and said sharply, “Art! It’s—”

The sound of his voice located his face for me. I reached for it, and shoved sideward suddenly with all my weight behind it. His head thudded against the rock wall of the tunnel, and he went down without a sound.

I stepped over him and got into the cab of the truck, flicked on the dashboard lights, and saw that the ignition key was gone. In frantic haste I got out of the cab and searched the pockets of the man I’d just knocked down. The key wasn’t on him.

And then I realized what probably had happened. Force of habit had made him pull out the key when he’d left the truck, then realizing he wouldn’t want it found on him if he was ever picked up, he’d have thrown it down as he left the cab.

It took precious seconds to get the flashlight out of the glove compartment and throw its beam along the ground at the side of the tunnel. But I caught the gleam of metal, and picked up the key.

The train whistled again, nearer, and I knew from the sound that it was in back of the truck, coming to enter the tunnel from the same end we’d gone in.

But I threw the gear shift lever into reverse. Chances were better the short way, even if I had to go toward the oncoming train.

I was just at the end of the tunnel when I heard the whistle again—a frantic warning blast this time. I knew the engineer had seen the truck and would be throwing on the air brakes.

I twisted the wheel and the tires of the truck slid away from the smooth steel tracks twice before they caught and went over. Then I was backing off the rails.

The truck was clear of the track now, and I slammed on the brakes as the back end canted dangerously downward off the edge of the roadbed.

Then there was a sudden hard jolt as the rear bumper of the truck hit a telegraph pole along the right of way with a jolt that almost loosened my back teeth. But, thanks to sponge rubber, the nitro didn’t explode.

I saw the engine go by only six feet in front of the windshield, slowing down, with air brakes screaming.

And then things began to swim in front of my eyes, and something seemed to explode inside my head. I fell into blackness...

I opened my eyes to whiteness, a blurred whiteness that resolved itself into white walls of a room in a hospital.

I turned my head and saw the light of dawn coming through a window. My bed was nearly enough level with the window ledge so I could see other buildings outside. I recognized them and knew I was in the Remmelton Hospital.

It had hurt a little to move my head, and I raised my right hand and found the knuckles and fingers were well covered with bandage. But my left hand was free. I put it my head and found a bandage there, too.

“Feeling okay, George?” a voice said.

I turned, and there was Roy Burke sitting beside the bed. He hadn’t been there before, so I knew I’d dropped off to
sleep again. The light at the window was brighter now, too.

"Yeah," I said. "Did they get both of them?"

"They did," said Roy. "One of them alive, and one in several pieces after the truck and the train had both gone over him. You're Remmelton's favorite hero, George."

But I was staring at something on the wall behind Roy Burke. A calendar. It didn't make sense because it was torn off to May, and this was still March. I couldn't have been out cold for two months. It was impossible!

I stared at the calendar unbelievably, and Roy saw the direction I was looking.

"What date do you think it is, George?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know exactly, but it's the second week in March, isn't it?"

He shook his head.

"Third in May. That's what we figured, that you—"

"You trying to tell me I've been here nine weeks?"

"No. Not quite nine hours. Listen, you remember what happened last night, early in the evening? And early yesterday?"

"Sure," I said. "I left Denver yesterday morning and—"

There was a quiet knock on the door, and it was pushed open. It was the girl who'd called herself Beth Scardale. She wasn't wearing the overalls now, and she was a knockout in regular clothes.

"I heard talking, Mr. Burke," she said. "Is he—"

"He doesn't remember yet, Mrs. Scardale," Roy said quickly. "But he's told me what he does remember, and I can almost put it together now. George, when did you get that bump on the head?"

"Why, when I was running for the train at Wilmot, the division point. I ran smack into a signal post, head down. But why?"

It was silly that he should be calling her Mrs. Scardale and asking me how much I remembered.

Roy was nodding his head. "I'll start back nine weeks ago, George," he said. "You were on your way back here, after you'd had your draft call for the army and you'd been rejected. But in Lassiter you met Beth, here, and you fell for each other and were married."

"But—"

"Let me finish, George. You remained in Lassiter for nine weeks. Mrs. Scardale hadn't wanted you to drive a nitro truck, at first. But then you talked her into it. You were broke, and it was a short trip back here by freight, so the two of you started out from there yesterday afternoon."

Beth, her eyes wide and clear as I remembered having seen them in the light of the match last night in the box-car, took it up from there.

"You got off the train at Wilmot to buy cigarette papers, George, and you told me to stay on, even if it started, because you might have to get on at the back end. And when you were running to get back on, you got the concussion."

I looked at her wonderingly.

"You mean when I bumped my head on the signal post, it caused a concussion that gave me amnesia or something and I thought I was back two months before when I was heading for Remmelton alone?"

"Some concussions are walking cases, George," Roy said. "The doctor told us about them. When you got back in the box-car later on, you told Beth your name was Joe Williams, and you didn't know her."

"I saw her name on the suitcase," I said. "And I thought she was a Commie maybe, and hooked up with a sabotage plot. I didn't want to tell her who I was because she'd have known the game was up."

The girl gasped, and I saw there were tears in her eyes now. "I thought you'd gone mad, George, when you didn't recognize me. I tried to remind you by telling you who I was. And then I tried to humor you by playing it your way until
I could get you to a doctor, and to people who knew you here in Remmelton."

I saw it all now, and as I looked at her, I began to realize that this wasn’t just a small problem; it meant everything to me.

I still didn’t remember. Those two months were gone, but this girl whom I’d known last night was the girl I wanted to marry was already my wife.

That meant she had loved me, and if the tears in her eyes meant anything, she still did.

"Beth," I said.

She came over and sat down on the bed beside me, and put her hand over mine.

"George, don’t you remember even now?"

I looked up at her and smiled, so she wouldn’t cry any more.

"It doesn’t matter, Beth,” I said. "I don’t remember, yet, but even if I never do, it doesn’t matter. I fell in love with you all over again last night, the minute I saw—"

Roy Burke cleared his throat and stood up.

"You have a leave coming to you for as long as you want it. You’ll be out of here in a few days, and you can take a week or a month for a second honeymoon. Then I’ll be seeing you.”

He tiptoed out and left us alone.

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**WHO’S WHO?**

*A Quiz Compiled by Joseph C. Stacey*

Listed below, in jumbled fashion, are 12 “technical” and “slang” names of persons connected with the law (either legally, or illegally) together with a thumbnail description of each. Can you match up at least 8 of them correctly for a passing score? 9 to 10 is good; 11 to 12, excellent.

| 1. ROUNDSMAN | (a) in underworld jargon, a prison guard. |
| 2. SHYSTER | (b) a military or naval officer exercising police functions. |
| 3. PETTIFOGGER | (c) a constable. |
| 4. BLUEBEARD | (d) a professional swindler. |
| 5. BLUECOAT | (e) a magistrate having criminal jurisdiction in a city or borough. |
| 6. BLACKLEG | (f) a police officer having charge of a group of patrolmen. |
| 7. BONNET | (g) a wife slayer. |
| 8. PROVOST MARSHAL | (h) one summoned to make up a jury when the regular panel is exhausted. |
| 9. RECORDER | (i) an inferior lawyer, especially one chiefly employed on low or petty cases. |
| 10. SCREW | (j) a gambler’s decoy. |
| 11. TALESMAN | (k) a lawyer who practices in an illegal manner. |
| 12. BEAGLE | (l) a uniformed policeman. |

(Answers on Page 125)
A quick-thinking girl
photographer throws some
light on the subject when
the law's in the dark!

ENDING almost double so that the
gardenia in her newly set brown
hair would not be knocked awry, Rae
Gibson slipped underneath and in back
of the bar. Nudging Gus, the barman,
out of her line of fire with a sharp,
white-gloved little elbow, she lined up
her target.

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G-Men Detective
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She readied the bulb in her SpeedGraphic and rose swiftly, a slim, pretty girl with curves in the right places and a determined little chin. The bulb flared briefly, blindingly, and Zelda Handley, sensational blond star of the Zombie Revue, was registered, cooling over a drink with her newest escort.

It would, Rae reflected, be a good shot in spite of the big lug with the dark glasses who had elected to play human cyclorama to the more engaging foreground couple. Deftly she ducked back out from under the bar.

As she straightened up, Rae found her passage blocked by Zelda Handley’s companion. When she had snapped him, he had been smiling. But he wasn’t smiling now.

“Okay, miss,” he said in a low voice, which managed to convey plenty of force. “I’ll take that film.” He was holding a ten-dollar bill.

“Sorry,” said Rae. “No sale.”

She didn’t know why she had said it, once it was out. Ten dollars was a lot more than the picture was likely to be worth. But something about this tall stranger’s assumption of command rubbed her the wrong way.

“I shan’t raise the ante,” he said, polite but still firm. “Miss Handley doesn’t wish to be photographed.”

Rae snorted. Zelda Handley didn’t want publicity any more than a shark wanted food—and more food. Since scoring her success in the Zombie Revue, the oh-so-blond Zelda had been photographed in various states of fetching dress and undress from photographers’ studios to the North River piers by way of the Bronx Zoo, where she had posed willingly with a lioness to compare tawarness of tresses.

Rae’s interlocutor had the grace to turn red. But he failed to give ground.

“Do you like photographing people against their will?” he inquired. “Are you happy at this sort of thing?”

“I couldn’t be happier, really I couldn’t, or could I?” countered Rae, resenting his sarcasm.

“Okay, I’ll make it twenty,” he said grudgingly.

“Keep on talking,” said Rae. “You might as well, since your damozel seems to have lammed. Meanwhile, I have business to attend—”

SHE stopped, for he had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared. She caught a glimpse of him bulling his way through the mob around the bar to reach the front exit. For a moment, she stared after him. Then she shrugged, resumed her nine-P.M.-to-four-A.M. smile and wended her way back through the crowded rows of tables in the big inner room.

There, she thought with a trace of regret, goes twenty bucks.

Four pictures later, she had a chance to get her breath while standing in the corner that belonged by rights to Jacques, the Crane Club’s Brooklyn-born French head waiter. Jacques was a good guy. He had a wife and four kids across the East River, and no ideas where Rae was concerned.

“Who was the Lochinvar with Zelda?” she asked him. “He offered me a twenty to give him the shot, then took a powder after her before I could grab it.”

Jacques shrugged.

“With Zelda,” he said, “he could be anything.”

That, Rae knew, was true. Ever since the Crane Club had become un success for six months earlier, the dancer had been appearing there almost nightly. And her escorts changed as regularly as double features at a Forty-second Street movie grind house. Zelda got around.

Rae snapped a half-dozen more couples in various conditions of amour or intoxication, then went back of the orchestra stand toward the developing room.

Although she was making a pretty good thing out of her job at the Club Crane, Rae had not yet learned to revel in the tart, acid odor of the developing room. She had reasserted a childhood fondness for picture-taking when she’d
discovered the model agencies were crowded—except for girls who came from Scranton or Lafayette, Indiana. But being a native Manhattanite had certain compensations. She had picked up a tip about the Club Crane job and had nabbed it.

This evening she found herself liking the developing room less than ever before. Awaiting her inside its battered portal was the heavy-set man with the dark glasses who had so nearly spoiled her shot of Zelda Handley and the man with the twenty dollars.

"Well!" she exclaimed, stopping short on the threshold.

Her right hand held camera and bulb holder, her left rested on the disguised half-size hatbox swinging from a strap on her shoulder, and which contained spare bulbs and film.

"You took my picture," said the burly man.

Something in his tone and manner made Rae feel creepy. It was hard to nail down, but it was there.

"I want it," he added, and his voice, while soft, carried a definite rasp.

Rae debated lying or taking a stand as she had against the tall stranger, but her confidence oozed out under the blank stare of his dark glasses.

"If you'll wait till I develop a print, you may have it," she said, assuming what she hoped was her professional smile. "I have a number of orders to fill. The fee is two dollars a print."

"Print and negative," said the burly one firmly. "I'll go for two bucks. Go ahead, sweetheart. I got time."

For once, words failed her. She hesitated. The situation was ridiculous.

"Get busy," he said.

She got busy. He stood close behind her while she made the prints under the dim red light. But she took her time. Finally there it was—handsome stranger, flamboyant Zelda and unwelcome backstage guest.

"Nice timing," he said enigmatically. He waited in silence while she put the prints in folders, then picked up print and negative. "Here's your two bucks, Beautiful."

She took it. Business was business, even if she had just kicked eighteen dollars away. She found herself trembling as she switched on the light.

"You're a very wise cookie," he told her. "And you've taken a load off my mind."

"I couldn't be happier, really I couldn't, or could I?" countered Rae, no longer frightened, with the light on.

He glowered at her. "Don't spoil it," he said. "Keep it locked."

HE TAPPED her forehead with a stubby, over-manicured finger. And just then the door of the developing room was thrown open. The tall stranger stood there, looking from Rae to the first intruder with astonishment.

"Well I'll be—" he said, and moved swiftly to grab the photograph the burly man still held.

He stared at it, then at the original, and only then saw the stubby little flat automatic which had appeared in its owner's hairy fist and was pointed directly at Rae.

"Okay, Bub, clasp them on top of your head," said the man in dark glasses. "If you don't, the girl gets it."

"Chivalry is not yet dead," said the tall stranger, complying. But his gaiety fell very flat. He added, "Until I saw how you pulled that gat, I missed it entirely, Nick. We've got a movie of you drawing, down at the Bureau."

"That does it," said the burly one. "I guess you'll both have to come along with me. Remember, one fast play and sweety pie eats lead."

They paraded silently out the back way into the alley, the stranger first, then Rae, gripping the edge of her hatbox-holder nervously, then Nick. Nick directed them tersely to a side street where a cab waited, its motor running.

No words were spoken during the short but circuitous ride that followed. They drove to the service entrance of a large apartment house. Never point-
ing his pistol away from Rae, Nick directed them to the service elevator, after tossing the tall stranger some keys and ordering him to unlock the door.

On the twenty-second floor, they emerged from the lift to be directed into a large apartment. They were led down a corridor covered with thick carpet. A lighted doorway at its far end bespoke of a living room, and from it came the sound of voices.

They didn’t go as far as the living room. Instead, Nick ordered them into a large bedroom, ordered the tall stranger to turn on the lights from a switch beside the door. He studied them.

“Okay, G-man,” he said in his rasping voice. “You got the girl into this. It’s up to you whether she gets out. Unload.”

With a sigh, the tall man tossed a revolver onto the floor at Nick’s feet. When the gangster stooped to pick it up, the tall man took a step forward, tensed like a wrestler. But Nick’s gun never wavered. He laughed.

“Easy, Bub,” he said. “Keep quiet until Big Tim makes up his mind what to do with you. And don’t try the Venetian blinds. They’re steel.”

He left them then and they heard the sound of a bolt turning on the outside of the door. Rae sat down on the big bed and looked around. The room was in a state of utter confusion. Bureau drawers had been removed and emptied, closet doors yawned open. Discarded shirts, shorts, undershirts, suits, were strewn about the floor at random.

“Would you mind telling me, tall, blond and handsome,” she said. “What in flaming Hades this is all about?”

The tall stranger sat down beside her, sighed, and lit a cigarette. He offered it to Rae, who took it. “I guess you have a right to know,” he said. “This Nick—Nick Morgan, he calls himself—is big Tim Alamac’s head stooge.”

“Hello, hello!” said Rae, her brown eyes widening. “Then you’re after Big Tim.”

“It looks as if I’ve found him,” the stranger said bitterly. “The Bureau got a tip some time ago that Big Tim was in town, waiting to collect a couple of payoffs before taking a powder out of the country.”

“And you didn’t want that,” said Rae. “Really you didn’t want that, or did you? He’s not a very good citizen.”

“This is not funny,” said the stranger acidly. “We had the pitch arranged neatly. You see, Big Tim is a very possessive gentleman. So we rigged up a multiple play for Zelda Handley—she cost him enough to set up in show business. At least one of us would take her out every night.”

RAE’S eyes opened wide. “And Zelda didn’t tumble?” she asked.

“Zelda is probably the only person walking outside of an institution who could qualify as a moron. We saw to it her goings on got plenty of publicity. We figured sooner or later Big Tim would blow his top and communicate with her.”

“Then why the gag about not wanting the picture taken tonight?” Rae asked.

“That was for me, not Zelda. Nick Morgan doesn’t know me, but Big Tim does. If my mug appeared with hers in the paper, he’d have tumbled.”

“I’ll be darned, really I will, or—”

“For heaven’s sake, check that routine outside,” said the G-man. “Right now, I’m trying to think of a way out of this which won’t cost me my job or get us both killed. Of all the foul luck, that picture you took was the nadir.”

“I don’t get it, I simply don’t,” said Rae.

“In words of one syllable, you snapped it just as brother Nick slipped Zelda the word Big Tim wanted to see her. She had a chance to lam while I was trying to bribe you. It was the only time I took my eyes off her all evening. I went after her, but she simply wasn’t there—or anywhere. She’s probably in this apartment now, explaining herself to Big Tim.”

“Not a job I’d like,” said Rae. “If
SAM MERWIN, JR.

Big Tim has killed all those people they say he has.”

“Nor I,” said the tall man. “Another job I don’t relish is explaining myself to the Bureau Chief. He figured on Zelda leading us to Big Tim before he could take off. So first I lose her, then I go back for that picture and get taken by Nick Morgan like an amateur gumshoe. Now Big Tim is all set.” He glanced around at the disorder in the room. “Somebody’s been packing here.”

“Or maybe just tearing up clothes,” Rae offered with a bright, nervous smile. “What will they do to us?”

“Probably leave us here and tip off the papers once Big Tim is safely away,” said the G-man gloomily. “If there is one thing big-timers like Tim Alamac prefer, to putting bullets in G-men, it’s making idiots out of them. And we have an airtight case against Tim. No income tax rap, either. We’ve got him cold on the business protection racket—taking pictures of witnesses, depositions, affidavits, everything foolproof. But if he gets away now, he’s got money enough to beat an extradition rap.”

“Maybe Friend Nick was bluffing when he said this room was foolproof,” Rae suggested.

The G-man rose and walked to the windows, tested the blinds. They were steel, all right. Furthermore, the cords which supposedly opened them were dummies. He looked around for some sort of a switch, turned to test the door.

“Hey!” he yelled as the lights suddenly went out.

“It’s all right,” said the girl, switching them on again. “I only wanted to see if all of them operated on this switch.”

“What for?” the man inquired, looking as if he were having nightmares now.

“It’s very simple, really it is,” said Rae. She went about her business as she talked. “You see, once in a while, some customer offers a girl like me a fat fee to take pictures at a party somewhere after work. And once in a while one of these once-in-a-whiles gets ideas.”

“I may be dumb,” said the stranger, watching her in bafflement as she unscrewed the bulb from a table lamp, “but I don’t get it.”

“Why, it couldn’t be simpler, really it—”

“Oh, change the record.”

“Sorry,” said Rae primly. “The technique we shutter-mice use is to flee to the powder room and replace the light bulb with a flashbulb, like this. Then we tell Joe Wolf to come and get us. By the time he has his eyesight back, Miss Shuttermouse is halfway home.”

“Of all the—” the man began. Then he looked at her thoughtfully as she took another flashbulb from her hatbox-holder and put it in a wall socket. “But just how do you plan to work it here?”

“You’ll see,” said Rae. She finished the job, leaving but one lamp on. “Can you get over by the door all right?”

“This way?” he asked, obediently.

SHE nodded as he took up a position beside the door. He had the idea now. She struck a match.

“Now turn off the switch,” she said. He complied and the room was in darkness, save for the flare of the little flame Rae held. She screwed one of the flashbulbs in tight, lit another match, screwed in another and another and another until the job was complete.

“What now?” the tall man asked.

“Pray the room isn’t sound-proof,” said Rae. “This is where I use my tonsils. And remember to shut your eyes when the door opens and whoever comes in goes for the switch.”

Rae opened her mouth and let out a series of blood-curdling screams. When she could scream no more she gurgled and groaned and stamped her feet. She paused for a moment, heard nothing outside, thought she had failed. But she had forgotten the depth of the corridor carpet.

She tried again anyway, and was emitting an appalling shriek as the lock
turned, the door was thrown open almost in one gesture. Nick Morgan’s burly silhouette was revealed.

“Hey, cut it out!” he yelled. “What’s going on here?”

Rae closed her eyes, felt the lids glow red as the switch was pressed. When she opened them, the G-man was treating the gorilla with an expert roughness to which he seemed unaccustomed. Nick seemed to take off and land head-first on the floor, almost at her feet.

An impulsive girl on occasions, Rae was seized by an impulse then. Deftly she stooped, removed one slipper and smacked the groggy gangster neatly on the left temple with a sharp heel. Mr. Morgan went to sleep.

The G-man scooped up Nick’s pistol, which had fallen from his fingers, gave him a nudge with the butt on the other temple. In the meanwhile, Rae was screwing her final flashbulb into the camera holder.

When she entered the living room, she got a perfect shot of Big Tim Alamac as he started up from the sofa where he was sitting beside a somewhat disheveled and definitely black-eyed Zelda Handley. If she had had another bulb, she could have caught Big Tim with his hands high while Zelda swooned.

But the G-man was ordering her to telephone a certain number. She did, and then things happened even faster.

A number of quiet, efficient young men entered within minutes and escorted the trio out of there without fuss. Others went through the packed bags which were piled in the hall. Apparently they found what they wanted, for expressions of satisfaction were uttered.

“And anyway,” said Rae’s own G-man, “we can take the pair of them on a kidnapping charge if the others fall through. That’s up to the legal department.”

Suddenly the men were leaving. One of them, who seemed to be in charge, looked back to where the tall man and Rae were standing.

“That was swell work,” he said. “I’ll want to thank you, young lady, with a check tomorrow. There was a lot of money up for Big Tim, and you’ve earned most of it. The flash-bulb caper was a honey. See you later, Bruce.”

“We’ll be downtown in an hour,” said the tall G-man.

But Rae wasn’t listening then. She was making motions with her lips. “Bruce.” She tried it out, looked at him, decided it fit.

Then he was looking down at her, from very close indeed. She smiled up at him—a real, not a professional smile. The other things that had happened to her that night didn’t seem important.

“What’s your last name, Bruce?” she asked.

“Farquar,” he said. “Is it okay?”

“Ummumm,” she replied. Then, shyly, “I’m Rae Gibson, if it makes any difference to you.”

He answered that in the approved gallant fashion, without words. When their lips parted, he looked at her a trifle anxiously. “You didn’t mind?” he asked.

He looked as if it were important to him. She pressed closer into his arms.

“I couldn’t be happier, really I couldn’t, or could I?” she inquired.

“That,” he replied, “we intend to find out.”

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Among Next Issue’s Headliners

HOMICIDE—HERE I COME

A Mystery of Dope and Death by WALTER MONAGHAN
THE FARM lay at the end of a dirt road. There was no other way in or out of the place, only this thin, brown ribbon of road winding through cut-over land that now was green again with second-growth poplar and maple and oak. Will Carson took the bumps in the road in second gear, noting that the lane looked as if it were regularly used even though there was a forlorn, abandoned air in the way the fields about the house lay fallow with orange hawkweed and yellow buttercups dominating the land.

Carson stopped his coupe in the yard in front of the house and stepped out. He cupped his hands to shield the flame of his match while he lit a cigarette, at the same time giving a swift appraisal of the place with eyes uplifted beneath the brim of his gray hat.
HIDE-AWAY

Yellow paint was peeling off the side of the house, but there were clean curtains in the windows and the front steps were swept and scrubbed. Nevertheless, these still held the glare of newness as if they were recent additions that did little to alleviate the squalor of the old dwelling. Off to one side stood an unpainted shed that listed slightly to the side. The wide door was closed but Carson could see the car tracks leading into the barn and this answered his question as to why he did not see any car about.

The whole thing was as he had been told in town it would be. Nobody showed at either the door or windows yet Carson felt that he was being secretly observed by someone in the house. Finally, in irritation, he put an arm inside the open window of his coupe and honked the horn.

Carson was working on the second long, loud blast when the man showed. Carson took his hand away and straightened, eyes narrowing slightly while he watched the fellow descend the front steps almost sheepishly and walk slowly toward him.

"Hello, Art," said Carson quietly. "When I sent you out on this job I didn’t expect you to take off for six months. You bashful or something? Why didn’t you keep in touch with me?"

Hunt tried meeting Carson’s cold stare but could not do it. "I just got tired, Will," he said in a low tone. "I got tired of looking for missing persons and spying for divorce cases. I liked this north woods country and so I settled down here." His voice took on a measure of defiance. "Is anything wrong with that?"

"No," said Carson, "but you could have told me you were quitting." His eyes narrowed. "Before you decided to settle down, did you find any trace of Donna Southworth?"

Hunt’s mouth tightened. "I told you I got tired and quit. I don’t know anything about Donna Southworth."

Carson dropped his cigarette to the ground and stamped it out with his foot. Seemingly engrossed in doing this, he asked quietly, "I was told in town that you’re married. Aren’t you going to introduce me to the wife, Art?"

Hunt said nothing. Carson lifted cold, piercing eyes. "Aren’t you?" he repeated.

"Yes, aren’t you, Art? Or should I introduce myself?"

She had approached quietly, unobtrusively, coming around from behind the house. Carson had been entirely unaware of her until she spoke. He heard Hunt utter a gasp of surprise or of anger and then Carson swung around and was seeing her.

She was tall for a woman, about five-eight, Carson would say. She had a slim, high-breasted body that looked very lissom beneath the light print dress. She wore no make-up and Carson noticed the soft blue-ness of her eyes. Her mouth was rather wide, but to Carson she still was a very attractive woman. The kind a man would like to come home to, he thought somewhat poignantly.

He remembered the pictures he had seen and though it wasn’t entirely unexpected he still could not help a small start inside. "You’re Donna Southworth," he said.

"I am. Only now I’m Mrs. Arthur Hunt."

An angry flush had come over Hunt’s features. "Why didn’t you stay inside like I told you?" he said to the girl.

"He’d know about me," she said, looking
at Carson. "Once he found you he'd find me, too, wouldn't he? I think he should know everything, Art."

"You get in the house," Hunt said in a low, savage tone.

She was staring calmly, appraisingly at Carson. He could not help but get the feeling of a keen intelligence behind those eyes and he supposed it came from much reading and studying and many visits to the public library. She looked just like the type.

"What should I know?" he asked her.

"Donna?" Hunt said in a warning tone. "Did you hear what I said, Donna?"

Her mouth tightened stubbornly. "It's best this way, Art. Carson looks like the kind of man who'd understand."

"Understand what?" asked Carson.

"Donna!" Hunt said it almost despairingly as if he knew she would never heed him. Then he spread his hands and shrugged resignedly.

THE GIRL kept her eyes locked with Carson's. "Does my father still want me back, Carson?"

"He does. He's worried about you a lot. When Art went after you and never reported back, your father gave me no rest until I dropped everything and took that job. It's costing him a lot of money he can't afford, Donna."

She lowered her eyes now as if considering something. She was silent a while and then she said in her quiet way, "I'd like to go back home but you see, Carson, I've killed a man!"

The words sounded almost ludicrous to Carson. He stared at the girl narrowly. She was no more than nineteen. She had a sweet, wholesome face and nice blue eyes. There was no harshness, no sophisticated callousness about her. She didn't look as if she had the heart to kill a fly, Carson thought.

"This man you killed," he said slowly. "Who was he?"

"The man I ran away with. Eddie Ketchum."

She spoke readily, almost eagerly. Carson could feel it touch his heart a little and this angered him for he never wanted his heart to enter into his business.

He glanced at Hunt who stood with hanging head and a tight, bitter look on his face. "Did you know this, Art?" asked Carson.

Hunt nodded.

"Do you know how it happened?" Carson went on.

"She told me all about it. I had no trouble finding her, Will. She was just a scared, simple kid and she spilled everything to me not ten minutes after I'd been talking to her. I didn't have the heart to bring her back, Will."

"How did she say it happened?"

Hunt glanced at the girl, then turned defiant eyes on Carson. "You can believe it or not, Will. I believe it and that's enough for me. I won't ever let anything change my mind."

"Let's have the story, Art," said Carson patiently.

"Donna never got out much. You know that, Will. Her father told you about that when he hired you. She met Eddie Ketchum and he swept her off her feet and talked her into eloping with him. Then she found out that Ketchum was a no-good hood and burglar and he threatened to kill her if she ever squealed on him. She started to run away but he caught her. They had a fight and she killed Ketchum in self-defense. That's it, Will."

Carson looked at the girl. The strain was apparent on her face, her mouth twisted in a crooked line, a haunted look in her eyes as if she were living the awful, terrifying moments all over again.

"Well, that's not too serious," Carson said gently. "Why not go back and make a clean breast of it, Donna? The law is lenient when a person merits it."

Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. "It isn't as simple as that, Carson," she said through pale lips. "I—I lost my head. It happened out in the country. We were in Eddie's car. He had picked me up and was driving me back to where we were staying. He stopped the car by a ravine and threatened to kill me and dump me in it. He pulled a gun. I don't know. Maybe he intended only to frighten me. We strug-
bled for the gun and it went off and then I lost my head when I saw Eddie was dead. I took all identifications away from him and then I rolled him over the edge of the road and into the ravine and drove off. It doesn’t look good for me, does it, Carson? But I lost my head.”

She told it all in a plaintive, heart-rending way. Carson could not help a silent curse at the fate that had assigned this job to him.

“You’ll keep making it worse by running away,” he said quietly. “The best thing is to own up to it of your own free will. If you’re ever arrested for it, then it will really be bad for you. I’d go home and confess everything if I were you, Donna.”

There was a cool, thoughtful look in her eyes. “Do you intend to take me back, Carson?”

“I do.”

Hunt moved over close to her and put an arm around her. Determination lay in the glitter in Hunt’s eyes and in the tight line of his jaw. “You aren’t taking anyone back, Will,” he said evenly. “Look. Ketchum was no good. If you don’t believe it, why don’t you check up? I’m sure he had a record. Eddie Ketchum was a no-good hood and a bum. Donna did the world a favor by killing him.”

“We aren’t harming anyone, Will. We’re married and settled down here. I’m working in the iron mines. She made a mistake but aren’t we all entitled to one or two in our lives? Go on home and tell Peter Southworth you don’t know what happened to Donna or me. Would you do that, Will?”

CARSON drove back to Irontown and made several long distance calls to the midwestern city where he operated. In these conversations he learned a few things and he lay on his bed in his hotel room for a couple hours, running the facts over in his mind and trying to reach a decision.

No matter which conclusion he arrived at, the result left a bitter taste in his mouth. He realized that the longer he put it off, the harder the job would be. So he sighed and went down and outside and got his car.

He turned off the paved highway onto the gravel road that lifted and dropped over a series of rolling hills as it stabbed straight and deep into farming country. In his rear view mirror Carson noticed the car behind him, hanging rather far back and making no attempt to pass him even though he was not going very fast. But Carson supposed this was due to the dust he was raising. It was when he turned off the gravel road onto the dirt road that led to Hunt’s farm and saw the car still following him that the first apprehension struck him.

This road followed the lay of the land. It was just laid down on the contours of the ground, going up and down as the land lifted and fell, going straight where the earth permitted and when some obstruction like this immense, jutting rock ahead arose, the road took the way of least resistance and went around the obstacle. The road made a sharp curve around this rock and on the other side, Carson stopped his coupe and quickly got out.

A blackbird began to scold raucously in a poplar above his head. The muted purr of the approaching automobile fell gently on his ears. Carson reached under his coat and loosened the .38 in its shoulder holster.

The car popped into view abruptly and came to a halt with a screech of the brakes as the driver noticed Carson’s coupe standing still and Carson alongside it, waiting. A chill sense of premonition, the reason for which he could not understand, descended on Carson as he recognized the driver.

It was Art Hunt.

He got out of his car and stared at Carson awhile without saying anything. There was a pallid strain on Hunt’s face and hostility in his narrowed eyes.

“So you didn’t leave Irontown,” Hunt said finally. “What are you coming back for? Donna?”

“That’s right.”

Hunt’s lips pinched tightly. “Why don’t you leave us alone?” he cried. “We’re not hurting anybody. She’s just a poor, scared kid who made a mistake. What she did wasn’t too bad. No one’ll miss Eddie Ketchum. Or didn’t you check up on him?”

“I did,” said Carson quietly. “That’s
Why I’ve come back.” He stared thoughtfully at Hunt. The thing was quite clear to him but he doubted that Art Hunt would see it the same way. Hunt was too much in love to see anything straight, Carson realized sadly.

“I checked on Ketchum,” Carson went on. “What you said about him was true. He had a police record. His specialty was burglary—fur coats and expensive dresses and the like.” Carson wished he knew just exactly how to put it, the thing was that delicate. “The police claim that Ketchum didn’t work alone. They say he had an accomplice.”

Carson left it like that for Hunt to reach his own conclusion. It was not long in coming. Hunt’s face slowly flushed and he took a menacing step forward, fists clenching.

“Are you trying to insinuate that Donna was the accomplice?” he said through his teeth.

“I’m not insinuating anything,” Carson answered evenly. “I’m only telling you what the police said.”

“You’ve got a dirty, filthy mind,” said Hunt, voice trembling with rage. “Maybe Ketchum had an accomplice but it wasn’t Donna. She didn’t know anything about Ketchum until after she eloped with him. She’s a sweet kid who never had very many dates. That’s why Ketchum fooled her.” His eyes glared at Carson. “You’re leaving her alone, Will.”

Carson’s voice hardened. “You know me better than that, Art. You worked for me long enough to know that when I take on a job I finish it.”

“This is one job you won’t finish,” said Hunt, reaching for his hip pocket.

A cold feeling clutched at Carson’s throat. It wasn’t fear, he had been in too many dangerous situations to know fear at an instant like this. It was something more like regret and distaste for he had no heart for a thing like this.

As Hunt reached back under his coat, Carson stepped quickly ahead. Hunt saw the blow coming at his stomach and he tried to hurry up but he was too late with his gun. Carson’s left fist rammed against Hunt’s belt buckle and the breath whooshed out of him. The pain of it doubled him up but with a straining singularity of purpose he brought his gun up and started to level it.

Carson slammed his right fist against Hunt’s face. The man went sprawling back, bringing up against the front fender of his car. He cried out with hurt but doggedly hung on to his pistol and started to aim it again.

“You’ll never hurt Donna,” he said thickly.

Reluctance clogged Carson’s throat. He had never done anything he disliked more than what he was doing now. He closed in and with his left hand smashed the gun aside while with his right he struck Hunt hard on the jaw. Hunt’s mouth slackened, the whites of his eyes showed, and then he was suddenly limp and sliding to the ground.

Carson retrieved the pistol out of Hunt’s lax fingers. “I’m sorry, Art,” he whispered. . . .

The house looked just as lonely and forlorn as Carson drove up but this time he did not have long to wait. As he was getting out of his car, the door of the house opened and the girl stepped out. She walked directly, unhesitatingly up to him. As he watched her come, Carson could not help thinking that she looked like the dream he had always had. There was nothing like having a good, sweet girl to come home to, he thought. What made it affect him so was that thus far he had not found such a girl and, in his bitterness, he had begun to give up hope that he would ever meet one.

She stared at him with that calm, appraising manner of hers. Carson found himself wondering if she ever smiled, she always looked so sober and thoughtful.


“I’m taking you home, Donna.”

Slowly, resolutely, she shook her head. “No, Carson. You aren’t.”

Carson watched her closely, trying hard to make up his mind about her but unable to arrive at a definite judgment. “You don’t have to be afraid of what you did to Eddie.
Ketchum. He was a no-good hoodlum. What have you got to be scared of?"

Again she shook her head. "You're going back alone, Carson."

Carson's voice thinned. "What are you afraid of, Donna? Eddie Ketchum had an accomplice. Is that what you're afraid of?"

The color drained slowly from her face, leaving her lips white. A strange, calculating hardiness came into her eyes but no fear.

"Are you trying to say that I was the accomplice, Carson?" she asked quietly. "Look at me. Do I look like someone who'd help a burglar break into warehouses and steal furs and dresses? You know my family, Carson. Do you really think I'm a common thief?"

"Then you've nothing to be afraid of. Come home with me to your father, Donna."

She clasped her hands tightly until the knuckles showed white. Her eyes lost their coolness, they wavered, her glance dropped to the ground. "All right, Carson," she said, and her voice quivered. "I'm scared. Do you want to know what I'm really scared of?"

She lifted an appealing face to him. "I'm listening," he said.

"It's Art. That's who I'm scared of."

"Art?"

She moved in close to Carson. She was near enough for him to reach out and embrace. Suddenly he realized that she was no longer only the sweet, good girl he had thought her to be. Now she was a vital, desirable woman, too. An aching stiffness filled Carson's throat.

"He made me do it," she said, grasping Carson's arms with urgent fingers. "He made me lie to you, Carson. I didn't kill Eddie. Art killed him, Carson!"

HE LOOKED at her narrowly. Her face was very earnest. Her blue eyes seemed full of a swirling terror. "Why would Art want to kill Ketchum?" Carson asked.

"Because he was jealous and wanted me." She pressed close to Carson, putting her face against his chest, her whole body trembling, her voice muffled with emotion and fear. "You don't know the hell that I've gone through, Carson. I had to pretend to you that I killed Eddie to make Art believe I really cared for him and would never betray him. I had to do that because I was afraid he'd kill me.

"Oh, Carson—Will, take me away. Not home. I'll never go home. I'm too ashamed to ever go home. Take me away with you, anywhere, just so I'll be away from Art." She lifted a tear-streaked, begging face to him. "Please, Will? Please?"

Carson could feel his heart being twisted by cold, throttling fingers. His mind would not grasp it at first. He was too confused. His brain told him one thing, his heart another. Gone was the old chill detachment with which he had always regarded matters in this business.

He lifted his head and looked up at the house, gazing at the building and beyond it without the image registering on his brain, as he tried to get his mind straightened out. He saw the man come out on the steps and lift the gun. He saw the gun point at him and only then did he realize that it was Art Hunt.

Hunt had recovered sooner than Carson had expected. Hunt must have hurried back and cut through the fields to the house to obtain another gun and now he was here again, lining up the big automatic with Carson's head. All this flashed through Carson's mind in the instant that he flung Donna from him and reached under his coat for his .38.

The automatic roared as Carson went down on his knees. The slug made a vicious, snarling whine as it passed over Carson's head. He had his .38 out and leveled. His throat clogged.

"Art!" he shouted, and knew sickeningly that it was no use. The automatic dropped slightly to come in line with him again. Carson wanted to cry out once more, to explain, to plead, to threaten, but he realized that even if he had the time it would do no good.

Hunt's face was twisted in a grimace of unreasoning rage and hate. His eyes glared insanely above the sights of the automatic.

Knowing he had no choice, Carson fired. The automatic blasted again but the barrel
was tipping toward the sky and Hunt’s knees were sagging. He took a stumbling step forward, the automatic weaving crazily in his hand, his mouth working soundlessly, and then he abruptly collapsed.

Carson rose shakily to his feet. He started toward Hunt’s sprawled body but when he was five feet from it he could force himself no further. He halted and holstered his .38.

Donna shrieked Hunt’s name. Carson heard her come running but he could not face her. He could only stare off past the house over the fields and trees, seeing nothing, not even the blue of the sky. Sobbing brokenly, the girl dropped on her knees, her back to Carson while she huddled over Hunt’s dead body.

The shock was just passing from Carson’s brain when the girl suddenly rose to her feet and turned to face him. Her tears were gone and there was no anguish on her face, only a cold, venemous purpose. In her hand she held Hunt’s automatic. The barrel pointed at Carson’s stomach.

“All right, Carson,” she said in a low, determined tone. “It’s your turn now.”

He stared at her and at last saw her for what she was. The clear blue eyes, the lack of make-up, the serious, unsmiling mien had deceived him up to now. At this moment, however, he witnessed the transformation and hers was no different from any of the rottenness he had found in so many of her kind since he had been in the detective business.

“Art doesn’t mean a thing to you, does he, Donna?” Carson asked quietly, bitterly. “He died for you but that doesn’t mean anything, does it?”

“That’s right, Carson,” she said, lips moving stiffly, eyes gelid and uncompromising, the automatic rock-steady in her fist.

“You really killed Eddie Ketchum, didn’t you?” Carson went on. “You were in with Eddie all the way, weren’t you? Those times your father said you went out at night to the public library and to visit girl friends, you were with Ketchum while he worked his dirty, sneaking trade. When Art found you, you spotted his softness and so you passed yourself off as the innocent, sweet young thing and fooled him completely. Isn’t that right, Donna?”

A VAIRN smile touched her mouth. “That’s right, Carson. I fooled everybody like that. My family, Art, and you, too. You were ready to go along with me, weren’t you, Carson, until Art made his damn fool play. Well, you know me for what I am but it won’t do you any good. I won’t let you stand in my way. I won’t let any one stand in my way.”

Carson stood and listened dully, watching the feral viciousness flicker across her face while inside him the ideal he had built and worshipped slowly crumbled to sharp-edged shards that knifed his heart.

“I killed Eddie because he was just a small-time burglar and would never amount to anything more. He was too dumb to climb any higher and I wasn’t going to tie myself to him for the rest of my life. He wouldn’t let me go and so I killed him. Just like I’m killing you, Carson.”

He saw her breast swell with the immense breath she was taking and he knew it was on its way. He swiftly measured his chances, all the while eyeing the automatic, and found only one slight hope. He did not know if it would work and if it didn’t he wouldn’t be alive to rue its failure so he felt there was nothing to lose.

He kept his voice calm and casual. “You can’t shoot an automatic with the safety on, Donna,” he said.

Her eyes dropped instantly to the weapon in her hand. Then as the truth dawned on her, she spat a curse and pressed the trigger but Carson had stepped in swiftly, striking out with his hand. He knocked the gun aside as it blasted and the bullet shrieked off the fields. The girl fired again but by now Carson had grasped her wrist and yanked it high and the slug snarled up at the sky.

Control broke in him. He felt the rage start deep down inside him and rush upward, fanning through his head and brain, diffusing him with a singular, overwhelming ferocity. With a violent twist that tore a scream out of the girl, he sent the gun flying from her fingers. She screamed again

(Concluded on page 125)
Nash tried to duck...and the gun caught him on the back of the neck.

Shy, poetry-writing Fred Nash became a private eye just for the gag.

Chapter 1

A HUNDRED years ago the building had been a mansion; now it was a converted office building. The ancient courtyard was still there, with a fountain and flowers and wisteria bushes as thick as a fat woman's leg. Most of the tenants were young lawyers who found the inconvenience of the location more than overcome by the fact that the owner never pushed for his rent.

Inside, there was no elevator. You walked up three flights of steps where the bannisters were made of solid mahogany. On the top story, at the end of the hallway, was the owner's office, but the lettering on the door said nothing about real estate. It read:

FRED NASH
Personal Investigations

Nash was a biggish blond young man with a pleasant, rather shy face. He sat

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FRED NASH
Personal Investigations

Nash was a biggish blond young man with a pleasant, rather shy face. He sat hunched over a typewriter and his forehead was wrinkled with thought, his eyes narrow. He wrote:

A black-winged bat crossed the new-mad moon,
Out of the silver into the blue.
And the black pines stirred with the first faint breeze.
That out of the purple ting twilight blew.

"You can't rhyme 'blue' with 'blew,'" Fred Nash said half aloud. He took a pencil and marked out "blew" and wrote in "grew." He marked that out and wrote "flew." Then he marked that out and put "grew" back.

Finally he dropped the pencil, swung the chair around so that he looked out the window into the courtyard. The smell of wisteria and the tea olive came gently to him.

"'From the courtyard,'" he said aloud, "'perfumes like remembered music rise.'"
hunched over a typewriter and his forehead was wrinkled with thought, his eyes narrow. He wrote:

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_Out of the silver into the blue._
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“‘From the courtyard,’” he said aloud, “‘perfumes like remembered music rise.’”

_Originally published in April, 1949, Thrilling Detective_
Diamonds Rhyme with Death in the Strange

He stopped there, fortunately. He didn’t think much of the line and anyway he couldn’t think of another line to go with it.

He looked at his watch. The time was three forty-two.

Maybe I can make it to the track in time for the fifth race, he said to himself.

But he didn’t move. He was no gambler, but he liked the horses because they were beautiful, and he liked to see them run. Still, he didn’t care enough about racing to hurry himself on a spring afternoon.

At the same time, he was bored with sitting here.

That was the situation when a knock sounded at the door.

Fred Nash swung his chair half around. “Come in!” he shouted.

Hugh Copeland was a handsome man and would have been more so if it were not for his chin. His chin was like a girl’s, soft and round, and giving his whole face a slightly weak look.

“You busy?” he asked.

“Let’s not be funny. Come in. How are you, Hugh?” Nash crossed the room, hand outstretched. “I was just thinking about going to the track but couldn’t get up energy. You want to drive out?”

“No.” Copeland stood there, neat, conservative in a double-breasted blue suit. But there was something strained about him. “Margaret told me she saw you at the track the other day.”

“Yes. First time I’ve seen her in—at least two years. How about a drink?” Nash was already at the portable bar. “I keep this to give my tenants whenever they pay their rent. Trouble is, they are always coming in for a drink and forgetting the rent.” He dropped in ice from the electric tray. “Pull that chair over here and put your feet in the window. How are things going? This is the first time I’ve seen you in.

I don’t know when.”

“It was Margaret saying she’d run into you at the track that reminded me—” Hugh Copeland let the sentence drift off. He took half his drink in one pull.

“Margaret said you were still with Le Clerc and Bradford and doing quite well.”

“Yes. You haven’t married?”

“The only girls stupid enough to marry me,” Fred Nash said, grinning, “are too stupid for me to have anything to do with.”

Hugh Copeland smiled faintly. “I think Margaret wanted to marry you at one time.”

“She never told me anything about it,” Nash said, coloring slightly. He added, “We were just kids then.”

Hugh Copeland had lost interest. He stood up and made himself another drink. He gulped half of it, then swung around. His lips were tight against his teeth but not so tight that they did not tremble.

“When Margaret said she’d seen you, it reminded me you had gone into business. That’s why I came. I—I’m in trouble, Fred. I’m in bad trouble. It’s my own fault, but—I need help, Fred.”

“What are you talking about?”

Copeland jerked his thumb toward the lettered door. “You’ve opened a detective agency, haven’t you?”

“Detective agency?” Nash felt a curious tingle of emotions, like those of a small boy approaching the moment when he must make a public speech. “That ‘investigations’ was sort of a gag,” he said. “That’s the result of being bored and of reading detective stories and drinking liquor, all at the same time. I was about half tight when the idea hit me and before I knew it, I had that sign on the door and a license. I even thought about getting a blond secretary, but I never got that tight.”

“You were in the Military Police dur-
and Baffling Case of the Stolen Necklace!

ing the war," Copeland said.

"Sure. Maybe that’s what gave me the idea. But it was just a gag, Hugh. I’ve never had a customer."

"You’ve got one now."

"No—"

"I’ve got to have help," Hugh Copeland said. "And I—I can’t trust just anybody. You’ve got to help me, Fred. You’ve got to!" They stood looking at one another. "It’s about the firm," Hugh Copeland said. "I took—"

"Wait!" In Nash’s voice was a touch of panic. And then he said more calmly, "Don’t tell me what you’ve done. Not yet. Give me a moment."

He turned back to the window and stood there, looking down into the courtyard but not seeing it.

He thought, Why did I put that sign on the door? Why did I get a license to practice as a private detective?

The motive was obscure, buried in the past, and until now he had not faced it clearly.

Fred Nash’s father had been an extremely wealthy man. The boy had been lonely, too sheltered, and not popular, even with the few children he knew. He had had too many possessions, and the other children had resented them.

S O HE had grown up, shy, with a passionate desire for friendship and popularity, and at the same time a fear of these things because he had quickly learned that most of the persons who made overtures to him sought only to benefit themselves. It had been that way with girls as he got older. All of them were not gold-diggers, of course. He had known that and had made a definite effort to be honest.

But he had never been sure. Take Margaret, for instance. Had she really liked him or was it only his wealth that had interested her?

He had met her when he was in law school where he had gone, not because he liked law but because his father expected it of him. Fred had never wanted to practise law, had never hung up a shingle. Then the war had come, and his years in the Army had been the happiest years of his life. For the first time he’d had a feeling of useful accomplishment. Then the war was over, and he was back in civilian life again, without aim or purpose.

Fred Nash would joke and say that nobody ever burst into a flood of sympathetic tears when he explained that he had all the money he could comfortably spend and was, therefore, at a loss what to do with himself. But to Nash it was a definite problem. He had no ambition to make more money nor was he content simply to fritter away his excellent, steady income.

He was troubled by a social consciousness. If he had been left all the Nash fortune, he would have worked hard and happily at spending it intelligently, at seeing that donations went into the proper charitable and educational institutions. But his father had left him only enough for a comfortable income. So now his wealth was no problem, but what to do with himself was one. He wanted to make himself useful and had found no definite way.

The sign on his door was, as he had said, partially a joke. Yet it was more than that. He had hoped, without actually admitting it to himself, that he might help in some small way the attainment of justice—that he might help
somebody. He had never admitted this, because he was almost ashamed of it, afraid someone would laugh at the idea as childish. Yet it was true.

Now there was someone here, wanting help, and he had to make up his mind.

He turned away from the window.

"I'm not a regular detective, Hugh," he said. "I don't know that I could help."

"I don't know that anybody can help," Copeland said. "But you've got to try. I can't trust anybody else."

Nash could feel a trembling in his muscles. But the little boy was on the stage now; he had to make his speech or run off the stage in disgrace.

Chapter II

COPELAND took his third drink and came and sat down in the chair before the window. His smooth girl-like chin trembled and was still. He didn't look at Nash.

"Do you know Sylvia Ilightower?" he asked.

"No."

"She's a witch. I don't think she's human."

"Did you say 'witch' with a 'w'?"

Copeland raised his face then. It was tortured and sallow.

"I'm not joking. Oh, I don't mean anything supernatural. Or maybe I do. Did you ever read Of Human Bondage? You remember the girl in that, the things she could do to the hero?"

"I always thought it was the man's fault," Nash said. "He could have left her if he'd had the strength."

"But he didn't have the strength," Copeland said. "And he couldn't leave her." He looked away again. "It's like that with me," he said slowly. "I know she's evil and I can't leave her."

"And Margaret?" Nash asked.

"I don't think Margaret knows anything. I'm not sure. Anyway, she isn't the problem. Not now. It's the firm. I took a diamond necklace, and it's lost. And I've got to get it back."

"Wait!" Nash said. "Go slower. How do you take a diamond necklace from Le Clerc and Bradford? And what did you do with it? Start at the first and try to make sense."

"Sylvia had a new dress. I had given it to her. And she said it ought to have a diamond necklace to go with it. I told her I could get one, just to loan it to her for a night. She swore she'd be careful with it. So I took it from the A. B. Huntington safe deposit box at the office."

"You what?"

"I know I shouldn't have done it. But she promised to return it the next morning. And the Huntingtons are out of town. They weren't supposed to come back for a month. Now I hear they'll be back next week, and I've got to have that necklace."

"Now wait!" Nash said again. "How in the name of common sense do you steal something from a safe deposit box?"

"Le Clerc and Bradford isn't a bank," Copeland said. "We manage estates, investments. We look after estates for wealthy persons who—er—don't have the time or inclination to look after their own."

"I know," Nash said. "The firm managed a good part of my father's property, and my grandfather's before him. And you still manage most of what was left to me. An ancient and respectable firm. And how do you steal from a safe deposit box there?"

"It wasn't stealing. At least—"

"All right. How did you get the necklace?"

"We aren't a bank, as I said, and the boxes don't operate on exactly the same principle. Our clients often call and ask for things to be brought to them. Or sometimes sent to them outside the city. So it is necessary for us to keep a set of keys. Of course, no one is supposed to touch them, except under prescribed conditions. I'm the only one, in fact, who can get at them. So—if the necklace is missing, they'll know I took it."

“Where is it now?”

“I went to get it from Sylvia this morning, and she—she said she'd lost it. She thought she'd left it in Kerry Corbett's automobile, but he said it wasn't there.”

“You mean,” Nash said, “you stole a necklace so that this woman, this Sylvia Hightower, could wear it, and a dress you gave her on a date with some other man?”

“I can’t often go to public places with her. I'm married, and there's the firm. They wouldn't want a scandal.” His face was more tortured than ever now. He wasn't even remembering the necklace. “She likes to go out. She likes other men. I can't keep her from it. If I tried to, she—she wouldn't have any more to do with me.”

“My God!” Nash looked at him with disbelieving eyes. But the truth of what Copeland had said showed in the man’s anguished face.

Nash shook his head and turned away to the bar. “All right,” he said, mixing a drink, “what do you think happened to the necklace? Did the girl really lose it?”

“I don’t know.”

“And this Kerry Corbett? I’ve heard that name.”

“He's got money. I don't know why he should take it. But he—he’s crazy about Sylvia, too.”

“He is?” Nash said. “You’re sure this girl’s name isn’t Circe? What does she do—burn opium for incense? All right,” he said quickly, “I won't joke. I'm just a little dazed that you should get yourself in a jam like this. And what is it you want me to do?”

“You've got to get the necklace for me,” Hugh Copeland said. “I'll pay. I'll pay whatever I have to. But I've got to have it before Wednesday, when the Huntingtons come back...”

Sunset advertised with neon in the west as Nash drove out to the address Copeland had given him. The pink and gold reflected high in the sky, filtered down again to this oak-lined street, giving the air a kind of misty shimmer. Lights were coming on in some of the houses. Children loitered on the sidewalks, knowing it was time to go home and not wanting to go.

Nash found the number. It was a square, two-story building cut into four apartments, each with its own entrance. It was prosaic, middle-class, the sort of place where young married couples live until the first child gets too large and noisy, or a second child is on the way.

Nash stopped his car and sat there and looked at it. It didn't look like the bower for a siren, for the sort of woman Hugh Copeland had talked about.

He pushed open the car door, went up the walk and rang the bell. A moment later the door opened, and a girl stood looking out at him.

“I'd like to see Miss Sylvia Hightower,” Nash said.

“I'm Miss Hightower.”

Most of the light was behind her so that her face was in shadow. His first thought was that she didn't look as he had expected. She wasn't beautiful. Attractive, but not beautiful. Her hair was blond without being gaudy—just a light brown, really.

He saw that she was smiling at him. “You look surprised,” she said.

He felt himself flushing, and it angered him. He had always been too easy to flush.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “My name is Fred Nash. I'm a friend of Hugh Copeland's.”

“Come in, Mr. Nash.”

The living room was small, furnished with taste but not extravagance. The lights were shaded, but bright enough for a person to read in comfort. Nash noticed these things at the same time that he saw the man on the sofa.

The man stood up. Physically he and Fred Nash were enough alike to be twins—the same height, the same spread of shoulders, narrowing waist, long legs. But there the resemblance ended. Where Nash always seemed a
little shy, awkward even; this man moved with feline grace and assuredness. Nash was blond, fair-skinned; this man's hair lay in black smooth waves across his head. His face was sharply cut and handsome, his eyes dark and arrogant.

“Well, hello, Fred,” he said, smiling. “You know one another?” the girl said.

“I've met Mr. Lassell,” Nash said. “I've dropped quite a few dollars on his roulette and crap tables.”

“Not enough,” Frank Lassell said. He looked at the girl. “The trouble with Fred is that he has so much money already he has no desire to make any more.”

“Yes?” She turned and looked frankly and openly at Nash, her eyebrows slightly arched. “I never heard of such a person.”

“That's it,” Lassell said. “Fred Nash is the only wealthy private detective in the state. Maybe in the world.”

Nash had often been kidded about the sign on his office door, as he told himself that Lassell was only kidding now. There was no way that this man could know about Copeland and the fact that he, Fred Nash, was actually working at this moment.

But the girl was saying, “Private detective? Are you really a private detective, Mr. Nash?”

“I got tight once and put a sign on the door. It was a gag.”

LASSELL stood up. “He probably wants to quiz you on some robbery and murder case, Sylvia. So I'll leave you in his clutches.”

Then he was gone, and Nash and the girl were alone. She sat directly opposite him, relaxed, leaning back in her chair, her eyes cool and steady on his face. And he looked back at her without speaking, trying to untangle his own thoughts and emotions, to be sure of himself before he went ahead.

She was not actually beautiful, he thought again, and yet she possessed a quality of something beyond beauty. Her eyes were light blue and set level in her face. Her lower lip was full, puffed out and down from the upper lip. It had a moist look, and he thought instantly that she would be good to kiss. And when he thought this, he knew that every man who saw her would think the same thing, think it immediately on seeing her.

Her appeal was not that of breathtaking beauty, but of intense femininity. She was a woman born for men and for trouble, he thought. Not wanton. There was nothing of that in her face. Some day, married to the right man, she might make a perfect wife. But until then she could no more avoid men than they could avoid her. She would never be without men, though she knew they stole or even murdered because of her.

“I don't look as you expected me to, do I?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

His gaze slipped down from her face. She was wearing a street dress of some gray-blue material. It was modest enough, both in price and design, but it did not hide the fact that her figure was good.

“How did Hugh say I looked?”

“He didn't say. Somehow I got the impression you were older than you are.” He thought she was about twenty-five, not more.

“Hugh asked you to get his necklace, didn't he?” she said quite calmly.

“Yes.”

“I wish I could give it to you. But I told Hugh the truth. I lost it.”

“Where did you wear it?”

“I remember having it on at the Blue Moon. You know where that is?”

“It's one of Frank Lassell's places.”

“Yes. I had it on when we first got there, but we danced and gambled a bit, and it could have been lost there. I didn't notice it was missing until I got home and started to undress. Then I thought it must be in Kerry Corbett's car, but when I called him, he looked and said it wasn't.”
“Where did you go after you left the Blue Moon?”

“We rode around for a while, then came home.”

“That’s all the help you can give me?”

“Yes. I called Frank Lassell, and he said he would ask all his employees. But tonight he told me none of them had found it.”

Maybe she was lying, Nash thought. Maybe she wasn’t. He felt an inclination to believe her, and for some reason that half angered him.

“I’m willing to pay for the necklace,” he said. “Without any questions.”

Her eyes were quite steady on his. “I haven’t got it. I wish you’d believe me.”

“I believe you. Sure.”

“It doesn’t help to be insulting.”

His temper had a raw edge that he couldn’t understand or control.

“All right,” he said. “You haven’t got the necklace and maybe you didn’t even know Hugh was married. Maybe you didn’t know that he was spending more money on you than a man in his position could afford to spend.”

“Yes, I knew he was married.”

“His wife’s name is Margaret,” Fred Nash said. “She never had much money. She worked her way through college, worked after she got out. A tall, pretty girl. Not so lush as you, of course. But she left other women’s husbands alone.”

“Are you in love with her?”

HE MADE a sound meant for laughter.

“I’ve seen her once—and that by accident—in the last several years. But I don’t like for her to be hurt by—”

“I never meant to hurt Mrs. Copeland.”

He stood up. “That’s fine. That helps a lot. Good night.” But with his hand on the door he swung around. “Does either Lassell or Mr. Corbett know where you got the necklace?”

“No.”

“Well, let’s leave Hugh out of it then. Just pass the word to your friends that I want it. And I’ll pay for it without questions.”

He pushed open the door and went down the steps into the gathering darkness. Behind him the girl said:

“Good night, Mr. Nash.”

Chapter III

K E R R Y C O R B E T T was not at home. He had taken a plane for New York about noon, a servant told Nash. No, he didn’t know exactly when Mr. Corbett would return, but it probably would be within two or three days. No, Mr. Corbett had left no New York address. Was there any message Mr. Nash would care to leave?

It was personal, Nash said; of no importance.

“I didn’t know Kerry was always dashing off to New York,” he added as an apparent afterthought. “What’s he got up there?”

“It’s his first trip in more than a year, sir. And quite sudden. I don’t know the cause of it.”

“Well, thanks. I’ll see him when he gets back.”

From the first corner drug store he phoned the Blue Moon, got Frank Lassell on the line.

“This is Fred Nash, Frank. I’m playing detective. You know the necklace that Miss Hightower lost? Well, I’m trying to find it.”

“Having any luck?” Lassell asked.

“I’m just starting. Miss Hightower thinks she lost it at your place. So I’d like you to pass the word that I’m willing to pay a reward for it—and no questions asked.”

“How much of a reward?”

Copeland had told Nash he didn’t know the exact value of the necklace but estimated it at twenty thousand or more.

“I’ll go as high as any fence would,” Nash said, “and I don’t mean that as a pun. Besides, I’ll be safer to deal with.”

He could hear Lassell’s easy laughter.

“I don’t think it was lost here, Fred. But I’ll see that your message gets around.”

“Thanks.”

It was five minutes after nine when
The house loomed large and rather impressive, a larger place than you would think a young man getting started in business could afford. But Margaret would like a large house, Nash thought. She had always been ambitious, hard-working.

It was Margaret who answered his ring.

"Why, Fred! Come in. It’s good to see you."

"Thanks. I was passing and thought I’d stop and speak to Hugh a few minutes, if he’s in."

"He’s out right now. But he’ll be back soon, I’m sure. Come in and wait."

She made him a drink, and they chatted, the small talk that people use while they are waiting for something else to happen. No, she hadn’t been to the track since that day she had met Fred.

"Actually it was quite a fling for me to go that day," she said. "I can’t afford it, but—" Her voice trailed off.

She sat holding her glass with nervous fingers, a tall, slender woman, dark-haired, her high cheek-bones making faint angles across her face. With the shadows under her eyes it gave her face an almost hungry look.

Then her gaze lifted, dark and intense, to Nash’s face.

"Fred, what’s happened to Hugh? What’s he done? Is he in trouble, Fred?"

Nash swallowed. He had never been good at lying. "He’s in no trouble that I know of."

"He was asking the other day if you hadn’t gone into business as a private detective. And now you come here, for the first time since we were married." He tried to interrupt, but her voice plunged on. "I know about the girl, Fred. At least, I know there is somebody. I’ve seen bills for jewelry and dresses that never came to me." Her voice had a kind of viciousness now. "Things he could never afford to buy me!"

"—I don’t know anything about it."

"Then why are you here?"

"I was planning on taking a trip, going to Mexico, and thought I might leave some business with Le Clerc and Bradford. That’s all."

She put down her glass and crossed the room to stand over him. And he stood up then, so they were close together. He could smell the perfume she was wearing.

"Don’t lie to me, Fred," she said. "You’re no good at it." She put her hands on his arms. "Don’t you think I have a right to know, Fred?"

HE HAD no chance to answer. There was the sound of steps on the front porch, the door opened and shut. Margaret moved away from Nash and picked up her glass. Hugh Copeland came in.

"Hello, darling," she said. "Here’s an old friend come to call."

A few minutes later she left them, and when she was gone, the door safely closed behind her, Nash told Copeland what he had done since seeing him that afternoon.

"But there is a good chance," Nash said, "that the necklace was lost accidentally, just as Miss Hightower claims. Anybody in the city may have found it. Or nobody."

Sweat made tiny circles under Copeland’s eyes. "I don’t care who found it. I’ve got to get it back."

"I’ve advertised in all the papers, under my name," Nash said. "That’s in case it was found accidentally, not stolen. And I’ve tried to pass the word that I would pay." He hesitated. "How high are you willing to go, Hugh?"

"As high as I’ve got to. I’ve got to have it back."

Nash didn’t want to ask the next question. He didn’t like to poke his nose into other persons’ business, which was a fine way for a detective to feel, he thought, and yet he had to know.

"You have that kind of money, Hugh?"

Copeland’s face was haggard. "I’ll try to raise it. I thought maybe you
might help me."

"Sure," Nash said. He finished his drink and stood up. "Maybe we'll hear something tomorrow...."

All day, that next day, he sat in his office, waiting for the phone to ring. And it didn't ring.

He thought of Hugh Copeland as he had been in college—likable, good company on a party, a little weak, smart enough, but not above cheating on exams for which he wasn't prepared. And there was Margaret.

Nash wondered if he himself really had been in love with her. There had been the childlike suspicion that he wasn't liked, not really, for himself, that her affection might be for his wealth rather than for him. And Hugh Copeland had always been in love with her.

Now, evidently, Sylvia Hightower had got into Hugh's blood like the need for dope. Nash thought of the old superstition that an evil spirit could move into a man's soul and take possession of it. That was the word from the Salem witch-burning days—"possessed."

Nash thought of the girl as he had seen her last night, her hands folded and motionless in her lap, her blond hair loose, looking almost uncombed, about her face. Not beautiful and yet—

He swung around to the typewriter and began to write:

Beauty is not in the binding-iron,
Man will not follow beauty,
Light loveliness is not the ring in the nose of a
man's soul
By which this woman leads him
Helpless beyond desire for help.
It is her womanness—

"It is," Fred Nash said aloud, "punk." He ripped the paper out of the typewriter and threw it into the trash basket.

"The ring in the nose of a man's soul," he said. "I better go strengthen myself with dinner if I can eat after that."

So it was after dinner, and he was at his apartment, reading, when the call came. Over the phone the voice was muffled and indistinct.

"Fred? Is that you, Fred?"
"Yes."
"You've got to come out right away! Hugh's in terrible trouble!"

He could scarcely understand the words. "Who is this?"

"Margaret. You've got to help me!"
"I didn't recognize your voice. Where are you? What's wrong?"

"We're at the summer cottage at the lake. You know where it is?"
"Yes."

"Hugh's in trouble. There's somebody who—" Her voice stopped.

"Margaret! What's wrong, Margaret?"

There was no answer. Just the humming of the wire, and quiet.

"Margaret!" he said again.

Her scream was not loud but thin and terrible, muted, as though in the moments of silence she had moved away from the phone. Then her cry broke, jagged as shattered glass. And in the same instant there was the sound of a shot.

Nash knew it was a shot, although it was muffled. It shook at the phone, faded into silence, and the silence dragged into deadly seconds. Then came the sound of the steps. Slow, unhurried, they sounded louder, more clearly as the person moved closer to the phone.

There was a click of the phone being replaced on its hook, and all sound ended.

Fred Nash moved with that fast, non-thinking precision of which some men are capable in time of emergency. The gun was in a dresser drawer in his bedroom. It was a Luger which he had brought back from Europe and had never fired, not being a man who cared much for guns. He slipped it under his belt, inside his shirt. He caught up a coat and went out fast, running down two flights of stairs without waiting for the elevator.

As he ran out the front door, he looked at his watch. It was thirty-one minutes after eight, not more than
thirty seconds since he had heard the sound of the shot over the phone.

He drove fast, but not too fast, not wanting any trouble with cops. If Margaret had wanted the police, she would have phoned them instead of him, Nash thought. Then he was outside the city, and the highway stretched like a strip of adhesive tape before him, unrolling in the glow of his lights.

Fifteen miles of this and he braked, turned left on an unpaved road that twisted and wound off through the trees. His headlights sliced the trees and threw sharp, leaping shadows. On his left was the lake. Under the moonless sky it seemed as if in dreamless sleep.

He passed one cottage which was dark, apparently unopenened yet for the summer. A hundred yards more and he was at Hugh Copeland's.

Lights burned in the front room. Nash drove past, pulled over to the side, and parked. He could hear the lake, lapping at the beach, rhythmical as the ticking of a watch. A wind stirred in the oak trees. That was all.

He left his car. Another car was parked under the shelter beside the house, and he had to pass it to reach the steps. He went up these, pushed open the screen door, and went across the porch. The door into the front room was open, and light flowed out over him. He moved to one side, into shadow, and stood looking into the empty room.

"Margaret!" he called. And after a moment, "Hugh! Anybody home?"

There was no answer, and he realized that he hadn't expected one. His mouth was dry. He could feel the Luger pushing into his side, uncomfortable, and he put his hand to it, touching it through his shirt. Then he stepped out of the shadow and through the lighted doorway into the living room.

It was like any one of a thousand summer cottages. The furniture was wicker, comfortable but not expensive. It was coated with dust now. Evidently the place had not been opened and cleaned for summer occupancy.

The telephone was on a table in the rear hallway. Nash stared at it as if it should be able to give him some message. He could imagine Margaret standing there, clutching the phone, talking to him in that agonized, almost unintelligible whisper.

Which way had she been looking? What had she seen?

**Chapter IV**

In front of Fred Nash was the living room. He could see across it to the front door, the light making a streak across the porch. On his right was a blank wall. On his left was another door into darkness. He turned his head and saw that behind him was a third door, closed now, which must lead outside.

He chose the door on his left. He groped inside, found a light switch and turned it on. This was the kitchen. There was a half-empty bottle of whiskey on the table, a half-dozen dirty glasses. All but one looked as though they had been dirty a long time. This one was a third full, and the outside of the glass was misted with moisture. Nash touched it with his finger. It was cool. The ice had melted, but the glass was still cool.

In the stillness the sound of the knocking that suddenly came seemed as loud as gunfire. Nash whirled, crouching in that instinctive way that a man has of trying to make himself small in time of danger. Then he realized what the sound had been and he straightened, took a long breath, and stepped into the shadowed hallway. From here he could see the porch and the screen door beyond. A man stood there, barely visible against the night.

The man knocked again. It wasn't a loud knock; almost soft and cautious.

Nash went down the hallway, across the living room, across the porch.

"Hello," he said.

The man was small, with a dark, bony face. In this light that was all Nash
could tell about him.

"Is Mr. Copeland here?" the man asked. His voice was small and thin, too.

"I don't know. I just came and haven't seen anybody. But that's his car in the garage, isn't it?"

The little man didn't turn his head, so he must have noticed the car already. Nash realized that his own car, pulled to the side of the road, was out of sight.

"It's his," the man said, "but he ain't here?"

"Doesn't seem to be. Come in, if you want to."

"No." He backed down the steps. "No. I'll come back later."

Nash pushed open the door and followed. "Who shall I tell him was here?"

"It's all right," the man said. He was getting into his own car now. "It ain't important."

"He'll want to know your name." The little man had already started his engine, but Nash was leaning against the car, one arm resting on the window.

"Jones," the little man said. "Sam Jones."

He drove off fast, the tail-light making a white glow over the license plate, showing the number 52-437. Nash took out the notebook in which he usually wrote ideas for poems and wrote down the license number.

He went back into the house, through the living room into the bedroom on the right. He groped around inside the door but could find no light switch. Light from the living room made a streak across one end of this room, leaving the rest in gloom.

Nash flicked a cigarette lighter into flame and, holding this face-high, he stepped away from the door. The little blaze flickered and jumped. Nash saw the pale sheen of an overhead light, a chain hanging down from it. He stepped forward to catch the chain.

His foot hit something yielding but heavy. He staggered. Then his left foot shot out from under him as though he had stepped on a roller skate, and he fell face-down. There was an instant of half-blind panic in which he felt clothing, cooling flesh, the features of a man's face. Blood was slimy between his fingers.

Somehow he was on his feet. Somehow he had found the overhead light and clicked it on. The naked glare of it was almost blinding, and instinctively he raised a hand to his eyes. He saw the blood on his hand and stared at it as if his own hand were something he had never seen before. Then his gaze went beyond his spread fingers, and he was looking at Hugh Copeland.

Copeland lay on his back. His eyes were open. Blood had run out of his mouth and across his chin and throat. It made a pool on the floor under his head.

He had been shot twice, once high in the chest, once through the stomach. . . .

The sheriff, a dark, burly man with John Lewis eyebrows, was named Beauchamp.

"Let's get this straight," he said. "Mrs. Copeland phoned you at exactly eight-thirty."

"Within one or two minutes. It was eight thirty-one when I left my apartment."

"I reckon that times it better than the coroner can do. Now, Mrs. Copeland said her husband was in trouble and for you to come out here?"

"Yes."

"If he was in trouble. why'd she call you? Why not the cops?"

It was a question Nash didn't want to answer. Hugh Copeland had come to him for help and Copeland was dead now, murdered. The murderer had to be found, and the police should have any information which would help them find him. Yet he didn't want to drag a dead man's name through the mud more than was necessary.

And there was Margaret—if she were still alive. That was the thought that
kept hounding him. Where was she? What had happened to her? She must have seen the murderer. Would the murderer let her go free after that? But if she were alive, he wanted to protect her as much as possible. That was his job, now that Hugh was beyond help.

"I was a friend," Nash said. "I've known both of them for years."

"Then maybe you know what kind of trouble her husband was in."

"She didn't say."

"And you didn't find the gun?"

"No."

Beauchamp lifted his heavy shoulders. "All right. We'll find Mrs. Copeland eventually, though I got an idea she's going to be dead when we do. And we'll find this little guy who told you his name was Jones. At least, if that's his license number you got, we'll find him. And maybe—"

He stopped, hearing the sound of a car outside. There were steps, the door opened, and a deputy came in.

"We found her, Sheriff," he said.

"Mrs. Copeland?"

"Yeah."

"Where?" Nash asked.

The word seemed thick in his throat. He stood up slowly. As he did the front door opened again, and Margaret Copeland came in.

She stopped just inside the room. Her face was so pale it seemed almost gaunt, and her eyes were dark and sunken. Her eyeballs moved slowly, in little jerks, as she gazed around the room. Her gaze went to the bedroom door, shuddered away, and came finally to Fred Nash.

"Fred," she said, "what—"

He went to her. She held out both her hands, and he took them.

"Where—is he?"

"You're all right now," Nash said. "Sit down."

Beauchamp had her by an elbow, and together they helped her to a chair.

"There's something screwy, Sheriff," the deputy said.

"The whole business is screwy," the sheriff said. He pushed a thumb through his thick eyebrows. "I know you're upset now, Mrs. Copeland, but try to help us for a few minutes. Tell us what you saw when you were phoning Mr. Nash."

She looked at the sheriff as though she realized she should understand his words, yet couldn't.

Her gaze shifted to the deputy, then back to Fred Nash.

"What does he mean, Fred?"

"When you phoned me at eight-thirty," Fred said. "What happened? Did you see—"

"Eight-thirty?" She put her hand to her forehead. "I didn't phone you, Fred. I haven't telephoned you in five years."

Nash felt the breath go out of him as though he had been struck in the chest. He could only stare at her. The sheriff was staring at her, too.

"I told you, Sheriff," the deputy said.

"I found Mrs. Copeland playing cards with the folks who live next door to her in the city. She said she hadn't telephoned anybody and hadn't been out here since last summer. She didn't know anything about her husband being shot."

Margaret said, "We were to go over to the Steve Raymonds' at eight o'clock." Her voice was hollow. "About eight-twenty, or eight twenty-five, when Hugh still hadn't come home, I walked over alone. I thought he'd be over soon."

The sheriff stepped back. He carefully smoothed down both eyebrows with his thumb, then bristled them wildly with a second push.

"Look here," he said to Nash, "I thought you said you were a friend of Mrs. Copeland's. I thought you recognized her voice on the phone."

"It was muffled. I thought it was because she was afraid, whispering." He was trying to remember everything that had been said, the tone of voice. "I had to ask who it was. But after she
—after whoever it was—gave Margaret’s name, it didn’t occur to me to doubt it.”

“At least you’re certain it was a woman?”

“Well—not any more. It was a whisper. It could have been—”

The sheriff’s face was getting red. “Are you sure there was a phone call? You’re sure you hadn’t been taking dope?”

“I—”

“Mr. Nash is trying to protect my husband,” Margaret Copeland said. “He knows Hugh had been running around with some woman, buying her clothes and jewelry. Maybe he had been stealing from the bank to do it. I don’t know where he got the money, because we didn’t have it at home.” Her eyes were like flames in her white face. “Are you trying to protect her, Fred? If she killed him, why don’t you tell the police?”

The strength went out of her. She put her face in her hands and began to weep, her body shaking with terrible dry sobs. Nash was sorry for her. He wanted to put his arms around her and try to comfort her and he knew there was nothing he could do or say.

“So he was playing around,” the sheriff said. “Who’s the woman, Mr. Nash?”

He didn’t have to tell them, Nash thought. He had no way of knowing that Sylvia Hightower had killed Copeland. Suddenly he could remember her as clearly as if he were looking at her—the hair so light brown it was blond, the curving mouth, the hands motionless in her lap as though she were waiting for the right moment to reach out and touch him.

He felt a sudden, reasonless desire to protect her, and then he remembered that she had known Hugh Copeland was married. She had known what she was doing. And the police could find out who she was, whether or not he told them.

“Her name is Sylvia Hightower,” he said and gave the address.

Chapter V

LATER, Fred Nash drove Margaret home. The headlights sliced at the blackness of the trees, the lake lay quiet and empty to their right. Neither of them spoke until they reached the highway.

“I shouldn’t have told the police about that woman, should I, Fred?” Margaret said then.

“They would have learned anyway.”

“I shouldn’t have told them. But I hate her, Fred. Without knowing her, I hate her.”

Tires made a soft whining on the pavement. The lights of the city were a haze in the sky.

“What is she like, Fred? Is she very beautiful?”

“No. Not beautiful.”

“What did she give Hugh, then? What was it that made him like—he was so dope fiend in need of his drug?”

“I’ve only seen her once.”

“I want to see her, Fred.”

He glanced quickly toward her. She was sitting back in the corner of the seat, her hair dark about her face. Her hands, small and white, were clenching and unclenching. They were never still, he thought; like white butterflies always in motion. He could remember the touch of them from years ago.

“Will you take me to see her, Fred?”

“It would do no good. What good could it do?”

“I just want to see her.”

He didn’t answer, and they drove on in silence into the city. . . .

It was three-fifteen the next afternoon when Sylvia Hightower came into Nash’s office. Her dress was blue and white and as modest as the average dress a girl would wear shopping or to work. Yet something about the woman herself gave it an air of reckless daring. It clung no more tightly than did the usual dress, yet the male eye followed the curves with a kind of breathless expectancy.

Nash held a chair for her. He sat
opposite her and was aware of nervousness in himself. He waited for her to speak—and she sat there quietly, motionless, watching him.

"Will you have a drink?" he finally asked.

"Thank you."

He got up and went to the bar. She did not turn to look at him. From where she sat she could see out the window and into the courtyard below.

When he gave her the drink, she said. "The police were at my place all morning." She smiled faintly, almost apologetically. "I don't blame you for telling them about me. You were Hugh's friend. But I didn't kill Hugh, Mr. Nash."

"I never claimed that you did."

"I didn't phone you, either. The police kept asking about that."

"They asked where you were last night at eight-thirty?"

"Yes. I was in my apartment with Frank Lassell. They called Frank in, too, and asked if he'd heard me phone you. Of course he hadn't."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

"No. The police asked me about the presents Hugh had given me." Her eyes were clear as a child's. "They didn't ask about the necklace. And Hugh hadn't given that to me. It was only a loan. So I didn't tell them. Don't they know about it?"

Perhaps he should have told them, Nash thought. But he hadn't. Hugh Copeland had asked him to find that necklace, wanting to return it to its real owner. Copeland was dead now, and there was no need to make him out a thief if it could be helped.

"The night I wore that necklace," the girl said, "Kerry Corbett and I went to his lake cottage after leaving the Blue Moon. It might have been lost there."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I asked Kerry to look. He said he had but he may have been lying. And since then he's disappeared. If you'll drive me out there, I'll show you where it might have been lost."

**THEY** drove through the late afternoon. Sylvia put down her window; the wind whipped her hair, and she made no attempt to control it. Any young girl riding in a car with the wind blowing her hair has an intensified look of freshness and beauty, Nash thought. Yet most of them try to control their hair, to hold it in the smooth, too-perfect waves of the hairdresser. This girl sat with her head back, her face turned now and then into the wind as if it were sheer physical pleasure to breathe.

She did not talk much, and yet he was intensely aware of her. He knew what she had done to Hugh Copeland. And Hugh was dead now, and perhaps this girl had killed him. He did not forget that, yet at the same time he was aware of her, of the almost tangible, physical appeal of her face and body.

And because of this his other senses seemed sharpened also. He felt more keenly the rush of the wind past his face, he saw the wind catch dust in the gutter and spin it along in a tiny tornado, the sight seeming beautiful beyond reason, he was aware of the odors from the walled courtyards they passed, the tea olive and wisteria, the new-rain smell of azaleas—and with these the other odors of the city, the dust and dirt and decay.

He remembered that it had been this way years ago when he first had known Margaret and had been half in love with her. Being near her had sharpened all his senses. Perhaps it was always that way, he thought, when you were falling in love with a new girl.

Only he wasn't falling in love with Sylvia Hightower, he told himself. You didn't fall in love with a girl who might have murdered your friend. You didn't love a girl who lived as Sylvia Hightower lived. But if not love, what did you call it? What had Hugh Copeland called it? "I know she's evil," Copeland had said, "but I can't leave her."

He saw that she was looking at him.

"You'll never forgive me, will you?" she said.

"Forgive you?"
"Because Hugh was married."
He did not answer. They were going through City Park now, and boys were playing baseball in the fields. He could hear them shouting to one another, the words caught up by the wind, snatched away again.

"It’s no defense, really," she said, "but I never asked him to visit me."
"You didn’t deny him?"
"No."
"You took the presents he gave you without asking whether or not he could afford them."
"I like pretty things, Mr. Nash. I never asked for gifts, but I accepted them."
"How much did he give you?"
"The police looked at the things today. They must have cost twenty to thirty thousand dollars, the sheriff said. I didn’t realize it was that much. You don’t have to believe me, but I never really thought about the value."
"Not even the necklace?" Nash said.
"Not even a diamond necklace?"
"I knew it must be expensive, if I had thought. Not the diamonds so much but the way they were strung and the clasp. I never saw a necklace like it."

It was the same road Nash had driven over the night before. When he left the highway, the road wound through trees, and the lake was a coffee-colored shimmer on their left.
They went past the cottage where Hugh Copeland had been killed, past another a quarter mile away. At the third cottage she said:
"This is it. Pull over here."

In front of them was a sand beach, then the lake where the colors of sunset were beginning to run now like dye dropped into water. Off to the right a sailboat was visible, going away.
"Kerry and I parked here," the girl said. "Just about this spot."

GETTING out, they went over the ground carefully, inch by inch. Nash didn’t expect to find the necklace and yet he wanted to find it. Strangely, it seemed more important now than ever before that he find it, that he learn it had not been stolen, but only lost.

But there was no trace of it.
"It could be in the cottage," the girl said, "if we could get in."
"I thought the cottage was a more likely place to have lost it."
She looked at him. "Are you really such a Puritan, Mr. Nash? Or is it just because you’re angry?"
"I’m not angry. Why should I be?"
"Because I went to the cottage with Kerry and had a drink doesn’t mean there was anything else."
"I’m only interested in the necklace," he said. "Not your morals." And he went away from her, up the slope of the lawn, toward the house.

It was a much larger and more imposing place than most of the summer cottages. There was a curving driveway, a garage attached to the house. The door of the garage was closed now, and the cottage apparently deserted, the windows shut.
Fred Nash went up the front steps and tried the door. He expected it to be locked. Besides, he was unreasonably angry and he twisted the knob, pushed with the force of a man who is testing a locked door.

The door jerked out of his hand. He stood there on the threshold, staring into the face of a man who looked back at him with an expression half-anger, half-fear.
Sylvia Hightower came up the steps behind Nash.
"Hello, Kerry," she said. "I had no idea you were here."
"Is that why you bring some other man to my place?"
"Don’t be silly. We were looking for that necklace I lost. This is Mr. Fred Nash. Mr. Nash, Mr. Corbett."
"Hello," Nash said.

He had never met Corbett before, but realized now that he had seen him on several occasions. He was a slender blond man with the face of a spoiled child. When he was young, his parents
had given him too much money and too little affection. He was convinced that money should have the power to buy anything, and when he had found something that money could not buy, he was afraid of it at the same time that he wanted it with a starved hunger.

You could envy him his money or feel sorry for him because of what money had done to him. But the average human being would find it impossible to like him.

He shook Nash’s hand, knowing his name and feeling a kinship because both were wealthy, being suspicious of him and hating him instantly because he was with Sylvia.

“I dropped by to see you the other night,” Nash said. “Your man told me you’d gone to New York.”

“Yes.”

“Mr. A. B. Huntington is in New York now, isn’t he?” Nash said, quite casually.

Shadows flickered in Corbett’s eyes.

“I think so. Why?”

“I just wondered.”

“You didn’t find the necklace, did you, Kerry?” Sylvia said. “It might be in the kitchen.”

“It’s not.”

“I’ll look.”

Chapter VI

SYLVIA went past Kerry Corbett and he turned instantly and went after her, leaving Nash alone in the living room. He made a quick inspection of it, flipping back the pillows on the chairs, the sofas, expecting to find nothing.

In the bedroom, the bed was a huge thing built low on the floor, piled with pillows. The window shades were drawn and the room was deep in gloom. Nash flipped on the light and began to search.

“I say! What are you doing?”

He turned to see Corbett staring at him from the doorway, with Sylvia at his side.

“I was looking for the necklace,” Nash said.

“Mr. Nash was quite sure the bedroom would be the place to look,” Sylvia said.

Corbett whirled on her. “Why?” His face was pale, his mouth twitching. “He wouldn’t think that unless he had reason. What have you been doing?” He caught her by the arm. “You—”

She stepped away from him, her face cold. “Don’t talk to me like that, Kerry.”

The man kept looking at her, breathing hard. Watching him, Nash knew this girl was one thing Corbett’s money had been unable to buy. Probably he had spent a fortune in the effort, and frustration and hunger were eating at him. Hugh Copeland had said, “He’s crazy about Sylvia.” Maybe there was more truth in the colloquial use of that word than Copeland had realized. Certainly Corbett would hate any man he believed Sylvia had loved.

“Why?” Corbett asked her again.

“Mr. Nash doesn’t like girls who go with married men,” she said. “Besides, Hugh’s wife—”

“Widow,” Nash said. He watched Corbett’s gaze swing wildly toward him.

“You’ve been away,” he said. “You may not know. Hugh Copeland was murdered last night about a half mile from here.”

He could not read Kerry Corbett’s face, except to see the man was under some terrible emotional strain. It was hot here in the house with the windows down. Sweat stood on all their faces.

“Murdered?” Corbett said at last.

“Why?”

“I think it was because of the necklace,” the girl said. “Was that the reason, Mr. Nash?”

“I don’t know—yet,” Nash said. . . .

Sheriff Beaufchamp had had a deputy investigating Fred Nash, and the reports brought back did not make sense to the sheriff. Beaufchamp was quite sure that no man could have more money than he wanted. He was even more positive that no man would hang out a shingle and seek work unless he hoped
to make money from it. Also, any man who wrote poetry, professional or amateur, was, in the sheriff's opinion, definitely suspect. The deputy had brought him a sample of Nash's verse which began:

The March wind is a king's jester,
A fool gone mad with spring,
Who pinches the king's daughter
And limericks will sing.

At this point the sheriff had muttered something about the justification of starving in attics and had quit reading.

But he knew a good bit about the Nash fortune, and he was a great respecter of wealth. He also had a respect for votes and he knew, far better than most, the close association between these two. So, although Fred Nash rode high on his personal list of suspects for the murder of Hugh Copeland, the sheriff was polite and cooperative when Nash called on him.

"The license number you gave us," the sheriff said, "belongs to a man named Meisner. He's a jeweler with a second-class shop on Decatur Street. But we haven't been able to locate him. His shop was closed all day yesterday and still is this morning. We opened up the place this morning and looked through it, but there's nobody there."

"How about his home?"

"He had a room in the back of his jewelry store and it seems that he stayed there sometimes. Probably had another place, too, but we don't know where."

"Did he handle stolen jewels through his shop?"

"Not that we know of."

Trying to add it all together, Nash felt futile and inadequate. It seemed to him that he should have done a great deal more than he had to recover the necklace, to protect Hugh while he was still alive, to help Margaret now. And he wasn't even sure which way to turn. Le Clerc and Bradford, Inc., was checking on Copeland's accounts there, but so far had found nothing, the sheriff had told him.

"This Frank Lassell who was with Miss Hightower when Hugh was killed—is he in any new rackets?" he asked.

With his thumb the sheriff smoothed his eyebrows, then bristled them again. "He's in all the rackets he can get in. What new ones you talking about?"

"You said this Meisner was a jeweler."

The sheriff stared at Nash, his eyebrows jutting out like windblown thistles.

"You mean Copeland may have been buying some more jewelry for the blond babe he went with? Maybe he was getting her something big and hot, and maybe it got too big or too hot?"

Later, as Nash was about to leave, his hand on the door, the sheriff said:

"Did you ever check to see if Mrs. Copeland was at her neighbors' house when you got that telephone call?"

Nash held onto the door knob. "No," he said. He had the feeling of coming face to face with something he had long tried to avoid. "Should I?"

"The next woman who shoots her husband because he's playing around won't be the first one. Besides, Copeland was carrying twenty thousand dollars insurance."

"That's no more than most men in his position carry."

"I reckon not," the sheriff said. "Anyway, she did go over to her neighbors' house at eight-thirty that night. I've checked. So she couldn't have been at the lake."

"Margaret couldn't have killed her husband, anyway," Nash said. "I've known her for years."

"So I hear," the sheriff said. "I hear you two used to be pretty thick."

"That was a long time ago. I haven't seen her recently."

"You were at the race track with her on the fifteenth."

"That was an accidental meeting. And the first time I'd met her in a year or more. Two years, I expect."

The sheriff smoothed his brows. "That's what I understand. I was just
showing you, Mr. Nash, that in this law business you got to look at all the angles.—Well, drop back any time.”

Nash closed the door behind him. His mouth felt dry. He went slowly down the hall to a water cooler and let the water spurt against his lips.

He thought, The sheriff believes I killed Hugh. He thinks I did it.

He stood there feeling the shadow of suspicion, the shadow of the electric chair, cold and damp upon him. He remembered once during the war when he had been told he was to join the combat infantry the next morning and move up with the attack on Naha. The feeling had been a great deal like this—a coldness in the chest, a tightening of the throat muscles, and the need to make some kind of joke to break the tension.

He thought again, Maybe I ought to go make a pass at Margaret. If I’m going to take the blame, I ought to have some of the fun.

It was a poor joke but it served its purpose. He shrugged and walked out into the warm spring sunshine.

He got back to his office at three-twenty-five. On his desk were two letters and a small package, evidently left by the postman on his last visit. The letters contained poems of his, returned by publishers. The package contained a diamond necklace with an elaborate wrought-gold clasp and small gold figures between the strung diamonds.

But there was nothing to show who had returned it.

At five minutes of four his phone rang, and a voice said, “Fred, this is Margaret. Can you come over here?”

“Of course. When?”

There was a pause. “In an hour or two? You can have dinner with me.”

I T WAS a quarter of six when she opened the door for him. Her black hair lay smooth and close about her head. Her face was pale. Without make-up, except for the crimson lips. She wore a white spring dress and she was aware of Nash looking at it.

“I’m not in mourning, Fred,” she said. “How could I be, under the circumstances?”

“You loved him.”

“I did once. But he’d changed. I didn’t love him when he died.”

Her eyes lifted and met his. Her lips parted, framing words that she didn’t speak, and he knew, or thought, that she had been about to say, “Perhaps I never loved him, really. I married him because I had given up hoping to marry you.”

But she did not put it into words. Her eyes lowered, and she led the way into the living room and did not look directly at him again until she was handing him a drink.

“Over the phone you sounded as though something had happened,” he said.

“Yes.” She shifted her glass from hand to hand. Her slim white fingers were never quite still. “I had a telephone call from someone with a high, thin voice. At first, I thought it was a girl, but it must have been a man. He said his name was Meisner. Do you know him?”

“I think he’s the man I saw at the lake cottage the night Hugh was killed. The police have been trying to find him.”

“He told me to come and see him at ten tonight. He said he’d done some work with Hugh and that it was very important I see him, that it could mean a lot of money for me if I didn’t tell the police.”

“Did you tell them?”

Her dark eyes met his. “I called you. You don’t know what it is to want money, Fred, but—” she paused—“Hugh left me his insurance and his debts. If there is any money that I can have, honestly—but I’ll do what you say.”

He said it would be best for her to call the sheriff, but he said it without emphasis. He finished his drink.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll go see Meisner for you. I’ll talk to him.”
"He wanted me, Fred. So I'll have to go. We'll go together."

Chapter VII

The section was one of old homes turned into tenements. The streets were dirty. What had been lawns were semi-garbage dumps now. But the oaks still grew massive and darker against the darkness.

Nash drove slowly. Margaret leaned from the car window, trying to see numbers.

"This must be the house," she said at last.

There were tin cans and trash in the yard. A distant street light that filtered through the trees made a can gleam like a cat's eyes for an instant. The wind shook gently in the oaks.

The front door of the house stood open and beyond it a small bulb burned in a vast hallway. A quarter way down the hall a spiral staircase rose into darkness. There were the ancient odors of dirt and decay.

"The apartment number was One F," Margaret said. Her voice was little more than a whisper.

They went down the hallway, past the stairs. The gloom thickened and merged around them. Overhead, a door slammed open. A woman's voice shouted drunkenly. Her voice cut off. The door slammed again.

"A nice cozy place," Nash said.

Margaret was a step behind him, her fingers on his arm.

"The next door," she whispered.

He stood between Margaret and the door but enough to one side so that anyone looking out the door could see her. Because it would be Margaret that Meisner would expect to see when he first looked out. Anyone else might frighten him into flight.

Nash knocked. For a moment he thought he heard sounds inside, as though someone was coming to the door. But the door did not open, and he couldn't be sure.

He knocked again. Still there was no answer.

"Call him," he whispered to Margaret. She put her mouth close to the door. "Mr. Meisner! This is Mrs. Copeland. May I come in?"

"All right," Nash said after a moment. "Maybe he isn't there."

He tried the door knob, and the door swung open into darkness.

He reached in, felt along the door frame but could find no light switch. Margaret was crowding close behind him.

"Wait a moment," he said.

He took out his cigarette lighter, flicked it on, and stepped forward into the room.

The blaze of the light reflected on the gun like a streak of toy lightning. Margaret screamed. Nash tried to duck, and the gun caught him on the back of the neck rather than the head, and he went face down into the floor. The dark figure stepped over him, caught Margaret by the shoulders, and whirled her into the room.

Nash had hit the floor rolling. His vision was blurred with shooting lights, and through these he saw, only half-consciously, the figure of the man. He lashed out with his foot. The man was going out the door, and Nash's foot caught him behind the knee. The man's leg went out from under him, and he went backward. Nash rolled and caught at him with one hand.

The man coiled like a snake. His gun struck out against Nash's ribs. It glanced off his face. Nash caught at the man's wrist, felt it slip through his fingers as the gun swung up.

Then the room was filled with light, and Margaret was standing beside the light switch on the opposite side of the door from which Nash had felt for it. On the floor, Nash and Frank Lassell clung to one another, Lassell with his gun raised to strike again. But the light seemed to stun them so that they lay blinking at one another.

Lassell was the first to recover. Still
stretched on the floor, he said:
“Fancy meeting you here, Mr. Nash.”
“You were expecting Dr. Livingston, I presume.”
Nash sat up and the light seemed to
grow bright and then dim before his
eyes. He could see Margaret, still with
her back against the wall, her face
white. He could hear her voice without,
for a moment, being sure of the words.

Lassell stood up. He put the gun
into a shoulder holster, smoothed
down his coat over it, straightened his
tie, ran his hand over his gleaming dark
hair.
“Don’t be frightened, Mrs. Copeland,”
he said. “Fred and I are old friends, or
acquaintances, at least.”
She was staring at him. “Who—”
“My name’s Lassell. You are Mrs.
Hugh Copeland, I expect?”
“How do you know?”
He was still breathing hard but
seemed to be perfectly at ease. “I heard
you call through the door that you were
Mrs. Copeland. And Hugh was the only
Copeland I know of who palled around
with Meisner.”

Nash was on his feet now. His head
hurt and one rib felt as if it were
cracked, but the light had stopped wav-
ering.
“What did Hugh and this Meisner
have to do with one another?” he asked.
“That’s what I was trying to find out.”
“Where’s Meisner now?”
“I expect he’s still hiding in the
closet.”
The closet door was half open, block-
ing the view from where they stood.
Nash had to walk past the door.
It was a big closet, and the man was
small. He lay inside, except for his feet
which stuck over the sill into the room.
He was on his stomach, his face to one
side. It was the little man who had come
looking for Hugh Copeland at the Lake-
side cottage.
He had been shot from behind, just
under the left shoulder-blade.
“He was that way when I found him,”

Lassell said. “And though I’m no detec-
tive—” he grinned unpleasantly at Fred
Nash— “it looks fairly obvious that
somebody has given this room a thor-
ough searching. At least, I couldn’t find
anything.”
“The gun?”
“No gun,” Lassell said. “And no dia-
mond necklace.”
“So it was your own gun you tried to
kill me with?”
“I’ve a permit for it. But I didn’t try
to kill you, Nash.”
Fred Nash rubbed the back of his
head and said nothing.
“Under the circumstances, however,”
Lassell said, “I did want to get away
without being recognized.”
Margaret Copeland had moved away
from the front of the room, along the
wall, until she could see past the open
door of the closet. For seconds she stood
there, staring at the body. Then, with-
out a sound, she slid down the wall to
the floor before Nash could reach her.

Mr. Harrison Bradford was a big man
with white hair, a benign face, and
small, hard eyes. He was the senior
member of Le Clerc and Bradford, and
as such his pure devotion to Fred Nash’s
father and fortune had been a thing of
beauty. Fred no longer had the mass of
that fortune, but he had enough to make
Mr. Bradford leap to his feet and wel-
come Fred to his office.
“What can I do for you, my boy?”
Nash looked as if he had not slept.
His face was drawn, and in his eyes
there were the shadows of ancient pain.
“I’m working for Hugh Copeland,”
he said. “Hugh hired me to find and
return a necklace he had taken from a
safe deposit box in your firm.”
Mr. Harrison Bradford sat back in his
chair. “That’s impossible.”
“Hugh had charge of the safe deposit
boxes?”
“Yes. But—but—”
Nash took a package from his pocket
and opened it, and in the fluorescent
lighting of Mr. Bradford’s office the dia-
monds seemed to quiver and flow together.

"I think this is the necklace," Nash said. "If so, it came from the box of Mr. A. B. Huntington. I'd like that verified and, if this is the necklace, have it returned."

"How—" Mr. Bradford sputtered. "How—"

"That was all I was hired for," Nash said. "To find this necklace and return it. It's kind of late to try to protect Hugh, and things have got out of hand." His shoulders were bent forward, and his mouth was sad and rather bitter. "Mr. Bradford, could you have your safe deposit box holders check their boxes to see what's missing? Especially jewelry. Not missing outright, but replaced with imitations?"

"This is absurd!"

**N**ash said, looking at it as if it were a coral snake, beautiful and deadly. "This necklace couldn't easily be imitated. Look at the way it is made. It would take weeks, possibly months, and perfect workmanship to make an imitation that wouldn't be detected on sight. So it had to be replaced. But there must have been other jewelry in other boxes that could be imitated easily by a good jeweler. Few persons can tell real jewels from fakes. And a person taking his own possessions out of his own safe deposit box wouldn't think he needed to have them examined by an expert. If he went to his box and found something missing, he would know that and report it.

"Hugh told me he was the only man who had access to the safe deposit boxes, and therefore if anything was stolen from them, he would be held responsible. But if a woman came in and took jewelry out of her box and didn't find out for days or weeks, maybe years later, that it was fake, she would have no way of knowing when or where the substitution had been made."

Nash raised his eyes to Bradford then. "So I think you will find that anything stolen has been replaced by imitations. You should have an expert examine them."

Mr. Bradford's face was a mixture of red and white splashes.

"This is absurd! This firm is over a hundred years old, with an unsullied reputation!"

"I've got this necklace," Nash said wearily. "And Hugh told me where it came from. I can go to the sheriff with the story, if necessary. I thought this way there would be less publicity."

He stood up and reached for the necklace. Mr. Bradford's hand beat his to it. "Now, now, my boy, I didn't mean that I refused to cooperate."

"I want to know what you find out," Nash said.

He went back to his office when he left Bradford and for a while he sat at his desk, his face in his hands. Finally he opened the phone book to the classified section and began to phone the U-Drive-It garages. After that he sat for a long time looking out the window into the courtyard. The odors of the flowers came softly to him and with them the memory of one of Coventry Patmore's poems, and he quoted, half aloud:

\begin{quote}
Till 'gan to stir
A dizzy somewhat in my troubled head—
\textit{It WAS the azalea's breath, and she WAS dead.}
\end{quote}

He thought, Only not dead, not yet. He saw the girl coming across the courtyard. It was noon now, and the sun shone down on her hair, making it more blond than usual, almost golden. He could see the way she walked, sense the easy flow of her body under the demure dress. From a first-floor window one of the young lawyers whistled exultantly. The girl looked up and smiled and came on into the building.

Nash turned away from the window. He waited, and a few moments later Sylvia Hightower came into his office.

"I thought maybe you would take me to lunch," she said.

He looked at her without answering. He knew now what it was that had led
Hugh Copeland to make a fool of himself over this girl, finally to be killed because of her. "Light loveliness is not the ring in the nose of a man's soul," Nash had written. An awkward line and yet, to him at least, it had meaning. It was not beauty alone with which Circe had brought men into her house and changed them into swine.

"It's not lunch you came for," he said at last. "What is it?"

She sat down in the chair before the window. She looked at him and said, "I'm afraid." He did not answer, and she said, "The sheriff keeps questioning me about Hugh's death. And now, today, about some man named Meisner. The sheriff made me go to the morgue and—look at him. I had never seen him before. I had never seen a dead man before."

"Not even Hugh? Not even the man you killed?"

"I didn't kill him."

He shrugged. "Go ahead. What else are you afraid of?"

"Kerry Corbett. He keeps threatening me. I—I think he's gone a little mad."

"He was never very smart."

"No. But recently—And I don't know what he's threatening me with, except that it has something to do with the necklace I lost."

"What does he want?"

Her eyes were on his face for an instant, then she looked away, out the window into the courtyard.

"What he has always wanted."

"And has tried to buy with gifts, with his money. And now he's finding out it takes more than money, and he's using fear. Well, you got yourself into it."

"I am no worse than other girls, Mr. Nash."

"Perhaps not," he said bitterly. "Only you have more talent." He stood up. "Let's go to lunch. I want a drink."

After lunch he left her at the table while he phoned Mr. Harrison Bradford. "I—er—I'd rather not speak about this over the phone," Bradford said.

"But you have found substitutions?"

Nash went back to the table where the girl was waiting.

"Come on," he said.

"Where are we going?"

He did not look at her. "Out to see Mrs. Hugh Copeland," he said.

Chapter VIII

Neither of them spoke again until they were in Nash's car, in that small, private world of leather and steel with other worlds passing to right and left like stars in the sky, without heed for each other so long as each stayed on its course.

"Why are you going there?" the girl asked. "What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "So help me, I don't know." He glanced at her. "I read a book once where the author spoke of emotions as colors—white for love, red for hate, black for despair. All the things that motivate a man's actions listed as colors. If that were true, would any action ever have a stream of only one color behind it? Is anything ever done solely because of love? Love and hate get mixed, and greed sneaks in on everything. Any action would trail behind it a scotch plaid of reasons. And when you try to see them all, you only grow confused and can't tell good from evil."

He parked in front of Hugh Copeland's home, and they went up the walk together. Margaret answered his knock.

"You told me you wanted to meet Sylvia Hightower," he said. "I brought her to meet you."

The two women looked at one another. Neither of them spoke. And Nash, going past Margaret, went into the house. He went down the hallway. The telephone was there. He went past that and into a butler's pantry at the rear. Here, when the door was shut, he was closed off from the outside world on all four sides. He got down on his hands and knees and began to search.
The door of the butler’s pantry opened.

“What are you looking for, Fred?”
Margaret said.

“For the bullet-hole,” he said. “Here it is, under this shelf. The bullet must have gone through the floor into the ground. Probably the sheriff can get it, to compare with the ones he found in Hugh and Meisner.”

Her hands were clasped together in front of her, and it was the first time, he thought, that he had ever seen them completely still.

“What are you talking about, Fred?”
He stood up. He dusted his hands against his trousers, not looking at her, unable to look at her.

“You followed him to the lake cottage, using a U-Drive-It from Goodall’s garage. Maybe you didn’t mean to kill him then. Maybe you thought he was going to meet Sylvia Hightower, but it was Meisner he was to meet, so he must have had some jewels with him.

“Or maybe the jewels had been sold already, and what he had was the money from them, and he was to pay Meisner his share. Because Meisner must have made the imitations for him. Maybe you knew all this or maybe you went only because you knew about Sylvia and hated him for that. Maybe you didn’t learn about the money, or the jewels, whichever it was, until you found him at the cottage. But you already hated him. You knew he was trying to leave you. And you had the gun with you.”

He could hear her breathing, but still he did not look at her.

“Hugh was killed at eight-thirty,” she said. “You heard the shot. I was next door, playing cards at that time.”

“I heard one shot. And Hugh was shot twice. The shot I heard wasn’t fired at the lake. It was fired here, in this closet, where the sound could be heard over the phone but not outside the house.”

“Why would I have done that, Fred?”

“No autopsy can tell to the minute when a man is killed. You wanted an alibi. You wanted us to think that the shot I heard was the one which killed Hugh, and I did think that for awhile. But Hugh had been dead a half-hour or more and you had rushed back to the city, checked in the U-Drive-It, taken a cab home, then called me.”

“I was next door when you heard that shot.”

“Under normal conditions people don’t notice the time to the minute. I looked to see the exact time of the shot I heard, but your neighbors didn’t notice to the minute the time you came into their house. You told the sheriff it was about eight-twenty or twenty-five. They told him about eight-thirty, and that could have been a few minutes off. Time enough for you to walk from here next door.”

“Fred—”

He looked at her then. Her hands were still clasped, but trembling.

“You have no proof of these things,” she said. “How can you say them?”

“There’s the bullet-hole in the floor here. And last night, looking for Meisner’s house, you said, ‘This must be the house,’ before we reached it. In the hallway, you said, ‘The next door;’ though half those doors had no letters on them. And then, in the room, when I was fighting with Frank Lassell, you found the light switch instantly, and it was on the wrong side of the door.

“It was an old house, and the electric lights must have been put in by some amateur, because the switch was on the side of the door where you couldn’t reach it when the door was open. You couldn’t have known that unless you had been there before. How could you know you had to close the door, at least partially, before you could reach the light switch?”

“So you think I had been there before?”

“Meisner was at the lake when Hugh was killed. How much he saw or heard, I can’t know. But he must have tried blackmail.”

Her hands were no longer folded.
They were plucking at the throat of her dress now.

"You have it all figured out, haven't you, Fred? Can you tell me why I would ask you to go with me to Meisner's?"

"I can only guess. You searched his room for jewels and perhaps you forgot about fingerprints until later. Then you realized your prints were all over the place and you had to have some reason for them to be there before the police found the body. So you got me to go with you. Then any prints that were found later you could say had been left when we were there together."

Her face was ghostly, the lipstick like smeared blood across it.

"You believe all these things, don't you, Fred? And yet you were in love with me once—or almost in love with me."

"I know," he said. "I think that is why I came to tell you—before I went to the sheriff."

He had almost to touch her to get past.

He was so close he could smell her perfume and it was the same she had always worn.

Sylvia Hightower was waiting in the front room.

"Come on," he said.

They went out together into the warm spring sunlight. And when they reached his car they heard a sound that might have been another car backfiring somewhere.

Or it might have been a gun.

"Will you drive?" Fred Nash said. "I don't feel like it. I think I'm going to be sick."

She drove, and after awhile he said, "The sheriff won't bother you any more. It's all over now. And Corbett won't bother you, either. The necklace has gone back to the person that it belonged to."

"Who had it?"

"It was sent to me through the mail. I don't know who had it and I don't care if I never know."

"You must have an idea."

"I have an idea. I think Kerry Corbett had it all the time. He knew the Hunt-ingtons and probably he recognized the necklace when he saw it on you. Then he found it in his car, where you'd dropped it—and I hate to try to follow the workings of his mind."

"It isn't a nice mind," she said.

"He went to New York, probably to talk to Mr. Huntington, to make sure he had the right necklace. I don't imagine he told Huntington about it, however. Just, 'Where's that beautiful necklace your wife used to wear sometimes?—Oh, stored with Le Clerc and Bradford, eh? That's where Hugh Copeland works.' So he must have figured that Hugh stole it. Maybe he thought you knew that. Then he meant to use his knowledge to force Hugh out of competition, to force you—"

He shrugged.

She said, "But he sent the necklace back to you."

"After you told him Hugh had been killed because of it. That scared him. He wanted to get rid of it fast. Actually, Margaret never knew about that necklace. It had nothing to do with the murder."

They were in the downtown section of the city now.

The courthouse and sheriff's office were only a block away.

"It may not be of any interest to you, Mr. Nash," the girl said, "but I think that I've learned something. I think I will definitely avoid married men in the future."

"It's time," he said.

Some day, married to the right man, she might make the perfect wife. But until then—

This was the thought which had crossed his mind the first time he had seen her, and now he found he was thinking it again, watching the way her hair blew in the wind.

"Unless you happen to be married to him," he said.
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a Wildcat

A Novel by LEE E. WELLS

Chapter I

Just taking a quick squint, this trip looked good, but there was a lot of things brewing under the surface. Like me, taking a swing at a guy named Harper in a swank office on Wall Street. He came back with a punch like the kick of a Missouri mule that took all the battle out of me. Then he adds insult to injury by showing me nice-like out the door, saying he ain't going to call the coppers.

“You've been listening to some wild stories,” he had said. “There are men who have invested hundreds of thousands in Standard Steels and they feel it's safe.”

Me, I had gambled fifty bucks, and that looked kind of small right then. But fifty bucks earned the hard way, wild-catting, is something you don't lose laying down.

Still, this guy Harper talked convincingly, and his big maul-like fist was cocked ready for another swing at my chin. So I left his office at least half-convinced and went down to the travel bureau to pick up my load.

It was a wildcatter’s dream, a full load straight through from New York to Los Angeles with the money on the barrel head. Yeah, that's me, Jim Thorne, wildcatter. For three years the travel bureaus had been advertising me in the papers:

Man driving through to Los Angeles. Will take two or three to share expenses.

That's a laugh! I soak 'em thirty-five smackers fare to Los Angeles and the bureau's cut is two. This time I had five passengers, so my pay for the trip is a hundred and sixty-five dollars. Out of that I buy gas and oil, I pay anything that goes wrong with the bus, I dodge state troopers from Pennsylvania clear to the Pacific.

In order to cut expenses, I keep on driving day and night, with one of the passengers taking the wheel now and then. I ain't got a license to carry passengers for hire and if I get caught, I got to pay a fine and maybe lay thirty days in some foul jail. If everything goes right, I make a few dollars. If it don't, I could even lose the car, since it is financed, and I am not supposed to leave the state.

This trip I drew a cuddly blonde, heading for the West Coast to wow 'em in the movies. Betty Andres had what it took, curves in the right places and a million-smacker smile. There was Martha Tillings, a sharp-nosed, sharp-faced old maid who figured on a couple of months' vacation with her sister in Glendale. Harry Brent was a big guy with muscles like a stand-in for Tarzan. He talked and dreamed airplanes and had his eye on some of the big West Coast plants like Lockheed or North American.
There were two other passengers—Arthur Beauman and a gal named Carmen Fuller. Beauman had a thin face and his hooked nose reminded me of an Indian getting ready for a scalp-lifting party. But he was a good-looking duck, dark and tall, wavy black hair, and white, perfect teeth. He had deep brown eyes and a grin that made even Martha Tillings start simpering like a schoolgirl.

So that was the setup and it looked good on the surface. But it seems I was headed for a murder mess served up piping hot direct from the devil himself.

Things went haywire in a hurry. I got pinched in Ohio and had to shell out a good half of my take so a justice of the peace could forget I was hauling passengers without a license. Then, in St. Louis, I read where this fast-talking Wall Street mug, Harper, had taken a powder.

Sure, Standard Steels was no good. Harper and his partners had powdered just before the pay-off, and my fifty smackers were gone goslings. I groused for awhile and then tried to forget it. That worked swell until Flagstaff, where my generator burnt out and two tires let go. I figured I'd never make it to L. A. on what little dough I had left.

So there I was, at three in the morning in the middle of the Arizona desert, taking a worried squat at the gas gauge. It was too low for comfort. Running out of gas in the middle of eighty miles of empty desert ain't no fun.

Betty Andres must have seen the worry sticking through my stubble.

"We going to make it?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I can gas up at Kingman, but after that I'm broke. There's a garageman at Las Vegas, though. George Meek'll come across with a loan."

This time of the morning, in Kingman, there was only one of the cutthroat gas stations open. Of course, down the street, just beyond where the road to Boulder started north, was one of the big stations all lit up like a drunken Comanche. Me, I had to watch the pennies. So when I spied the dim lights of the small station with the little café attached to it, I wheeled in beside the pumps and stopped. Everyone woke up.

Martha Tillings's dry-dust voice cut right in from the back seat. "Now what?"

"Gas," I said and stretched. "Maybe we'd better get out and lap up some coffee."

They groaned and creaked and managed to tumble out of the car. All of 'em came to life when they saw the café. I watched them troop in, Beauman in front, Carmen Fuller staying as far away from him as possible, then the Tillings woman, Betty and Harry. I counted the change and the bill or two in my pocket, did some fast arithmetic and told the wizen-faced old guy to "Fill her up."

I stood by the pumps, watching him work. You can't trust these cut-rate fellows.

Far down the street, the way we had come, I saw a lone pair of headlamps. Whoever it was pulled over to the side about half a block down and turned off the lights.

"The coppers pretty busy?" I asked weasel-puss.

"They're at Topock and Needles," he said. His nose met his gums every time he said anything. "You wildcatters keep them boys pretty busy."

"We gotta make a living, don't we?" I growled. "How about Las Vegas?"

"Ain't heard nothing up there. But at Yermo and Barstow the California troopers are stopping them."

I GRUNTED, disgusted, and paid the old boy. I had fifty cents left, just enough for a pack of cigarettes and some food. I locked the ignition and went into the café. My gang was lined up on stools at the counter and the Chinese cook was getting a workout. Arthur Beauman was at one end of the line, and Carmen Fuller at the other.
A heavy Colt was in his hand.
"You've seen too much," he said.
This Carmen Fuller was a lucious dish and a gal that seemed to know her way around. She was about as tall as me—and I'm six foot—with long, beautiful legs, a body by Betty and the wisest pair of eyes I'd seen in a long time. They were set wide apart in a high-boned, angular face. She had full, deep-red lips that smiled slow-like and got a guy to thinking of Miami beaches, moonlight and soft music, penthouses and etchings. And, mister, that's not healthy for a wildcatter! She was travel-stained, tired, but she showed class through it all.

Martha Tillings sipped precisely from a coffee mug a size too large for her. I slipped onto the stool beside Betty and ordered coffee and a sandwich. There wasn't much talking. We were all too tired and looked too much like the wrath of God.

They were all figuring that some time late in the afternoon we'd be in Los Angeles. So was I, if I could get some dough and if we weren't stopped in Barstow or Yermo. I didn't say anything—just drank my coffee.

Beauman banged his mug down and got up. "Driver, how long before we start?"

I shrugged. "I dunno—ten, fifteen minutes. Long enough to eat."

He yawned. "I'm going to get some sleep in the car while there's room to stretch out. Make me get in my own corner when you come."

I nodded, and he paid his check and left. I saw him in the door a minute, then he walked by the windows to the car. I couldn't see the bus and that was just as well. I was getting awfully fed up with that money-eater. I kidded Betty until I got a straight look at my face in a mirror.

I'm not a handsome guy, but I looked terrible tonight. There was an inch-long stubble over my big jaw, and my eyes squinted up until they looked like holes burnt in a bedspread. My two-colored hair was a mare's nest, blown every which way by the wind. There was a dirt streak down the length of my long nose. My wide mouth was all drooped down at the corners with deep, dirty lines running back up to the flaring nostrils. I took another peek and excused myself.

Carmen Fuller also stood up, with the puzzled look I knew well enough from hauling women over a million miles. I jerked my thumb to the back, and she smiled her thanks. I beat it for the men's washroom. I was in there maybe ten minutes. I looked better and felt better when I came out.

Miss Fuller was just returning, and the rest had about finished their sandwiches and coffee.

"Let's roll," I said.

I could hear the sigh along the counter. Harry Brent wearily lit a cigarette and offered one to Betty.

"Last lap?" he asked.

"We gotta go by Boulder and Las Vegas," I said, to stop questions. "The coppers are hot around Topock."

We dragged ourselves back to the car. Beauman was asleep in his corner, the hat pulled down over his face, his head leaning back against the seat. Martha Tillings and Carmen took their places without disturbing him. Me and Harry and Betty climbed in the front seat. I lit a cigarette, put the key in the ignition.

"Poor Mr. Beauman is sound asleep," the Tillings dame said.

"Let him sleep," I sighed. "He's better off'n the rest of us."

I stepped on the starter, meshed the gears and we rolled out onto the street. There was a darkened auto close by.

THERE'S just two main roads out of Kingman. One continues almost direct west toward Oatman, Topock and Needles, then on to Barstow. It climbs the mountains in some hair-raising cutbacks and loops, clinging to the edge of the canyons that give you the jitters. The other road goes north, bearing a bit to the west. This road follows a mountain valley for seventy miles to
Boulder, then cuts back to Las Vegas and joins the first road at Barstow. That was my way.

I was just making the turn to the right when I saw headlights flash on behind us. I kept on going, but wondered if it was the Arizona cops. In a few minutes, through the rear-view mirror, I saw the flash of the car as it headed directly west. I felt better and settled myself for the seventy-mile desert grind to Boulder.

Nothing much happened that ride. There was only the desert around us. A wind had come up and it swept dust devils across the road and made ghost whispers in the cactus that was like an army of skeletons lining the road. It grew even darker, no stars, and I began to worry about a storm. Cutting sand blown by a high wind can raise a barrel of trouble.

I drove steadily, sometimes thinking of the little scrap of change I had in my pocket and praying that something didn’t happen before we reached Las Vegas. Brent was starting to snore in an off rhythm that got on my nerves.

There was nothing up this road, except now and then a crooked sign pointing off toward the distant mountains naming a gold mine. We passed two houses with silent, ghostly pumps standing outside. No sign of life. Carmen Fuller shifted her position in her sleep and muttered something about money.

I thought, Lady, you and me both.

It was mighty silent, driving to Las Vegas, and I was glad to see the lights of the town from the top of the long, downhill slope the highway takes to the city. To save gas I cut off the motor, and we silently coasted along.

I didn’t hit the main stem of Vegas, all lit up with neon where the gambling halls run all night. I turned off on the road to Barstow and stopped before a dim-lit café. To the east there was just the faintest glimmer of daylight. I nudged Betty.

“Better get another bite to eat and a stretch. If I see my garageman, we’re not stopping again this side of L. A.”

The Tillings dame was awake, and Carmen struggled awake. Beauman still had his hat down over his face, and Martha Tillings beamed at him, maternal-like.

“I haven’t the heart to wake the poor boy,” she cooed. “He’s just dead!”

I was opening the door. “Suit yourselves. I’ll be gone a half an hour or so.”

When I left, they were straggling into the little café, four sleepy people I’d carted all the way from New York. Tillings had had her way about Beauman. He wasn’t with them as they opened the door, and I turned a corner to George’s.

George had just opened his garage. He was a big guy with the face of a gorilla, a voice like a buzz-saw, but a heart as big as all Nevada. I gave him my hard-luck tale, and he barked right back.

“No! You guys think I’m made of dough. I ain’t got five dollars.”

I let him mumble and swear, and after awhile he wasn’t so loud. His jaw wasn’t so set and his eyes got softer. I just waited and said something about being stranded, and what the coppers’d do to me.

Finally George waved a dirty five-spot under my nose. “Take it, Jim. But this is positively the last I’m lending anyone.”

I stood up. “I’ll pay you on the trip back.”

“Yeah, I’d like to believe it!” George said and turned away.

I LEFT the place feeling a whole lot better. Now I could get safe to L. A. It was much lighter when I came out on the street again, and the whole eastern sky was all rosy, blue, pink, and a million other colors. I started whistling.

The old bus was empty when I rounded the corner, and I heard Brent’s laugh from the café. I opened the car door and slid in the front seat to check the gas gauge. Beauman was still sound asleep in his corner. I saw I’d better gas in Las
Vegas, just to be safe, then I felt sorry for Beauman. The guy'd better eat or he'd be starved by the time we reached L.A.

"Hey, Beauman," I called.
He didn't answer. I turned around.
I noticed the suit he wore was all wrong. It was dark, like Beauman's, but this one had them little fine stripes. That snapped my full attention to him. The hat covering the face wasn't the same. Then I looked at his coat—and nearly stopped breathing.
The whole front of his coat was a big mess of dried blood. I felt cold and panicky all over. My hand shook when I reached over the front seat and tried to pull aside the coat. I had a glimpse of where a heavy slug had torn into his chest—and then his hat fell off, and he rolled heavily to one side.
I almost let out then. The face was young and unlined. The dead, staring eyes were light blue. This was some guy I'd never seen before in my life!

Chapter II

My jaw hung down on my chest and chills made a race-track of my backbone. I stared at the dead face. My brain was numb and cold with shock. I must have sat gripping the seat for several seconds, unable to move. Then my Adam's apple began to choke me, and I swallowed. My throat was raspy dry.

I was scared green and my head was in a panicky flutter. Try finding an unknown corpse in your car some time! I managed to loosen my fingers from the seat and pull myself out of the car.

It was still that uncertain time between dark and full dawn. The street was deserted, empty except for the line of parked cars on both sides of the curb. The light from the café was beginning to fade as I cautiously slipped to a corner of the big window and peered inside. There was Betty Andres and Harry Brent. Martha Tillings had Carmen Fuller cornered in a booth and was talking away for dear life. Beauman wasn't there.

I think that's what gave me the crawling dithers. Somehow I figured Beauman could explain this mess. Why, I don't know, but I counted on seeing Beauman. He wasn't in the café, and I lost my head. Somehow Beauman had changed into a guy with a .45 slug in his brisket. And in my car.

Murder reared its ugly head and gave me the wink. I could see a lot of unpleasant things about to happen to me in a hurry. What chance had I at looking like an angel to a cowboy jury that'd figure a corpse had no business in my car in the first place? Me, I was scared. My feet itched to go, and I went.

I made a false, instinctive move toward the car, and then I remembered the guy in the back seat. I turned around in a hurry, feeling sick. I watched my chance and darted by the café window while everyone was looking the other way. It was just getting gray dawn when I turned the corner, headed back to George's.

I must have looked terrible when I went into his garage. He straightened up from a sick motor, took a squint at me and dropped his tool.

"Jim, what's wrong?"
I sank down on an oil-stained box and got a hold on my nerves. I didn't know what to tell him. He helped me.
"Did the coppers spot your bus?"
"Yeah," I said, looking up. "Yeah, that's it. They were waiting for me but I ducked back around the corner, quick."

"What you gonna do, Jim?"
For a minute that had me and then I saw a neat little black job sitting back in the shadows. I had an idea.

"Is that bus over there in storage?"
George made an ugly face. "No, in hock. The gink owes money for repairs. The big wheels uptown took his dough."
"Look, George, loan that car to me."
I saw him get set to shake his head. "It's all right, George. Just to L.A. I got friends there that'll lend me dough and I can pay my fine here and get my
own bus from the coppers."

George didn’t like the idea. “I can’t do it, Jim.”

I was afraid to see a trooper walk in the door any minute and I was lying like a house afire. They’d find that stiff soon now, if one of my passengers hadn’t already walked into the mess. I sounded desperate — I was desperate — and George listened.

“Look, George, I’ll be back tomorrow night. The guy won’t unhock his bus before then. Give me a break!”

George took his time, but at last I saw he’d give in.

“T’ain’t no use, Jim Thorne, but go ahead. The keys are in the lock.” He stopped me as I scuttled across the floor. “Remember, Jim, you be back here tomorrow night sure.”

“Yeah, George. You’ll hear from me.” And that was no lie.

I rolled the car out of the garage, took a turn away from the Barstow road and cut up toward the railroad station. I hadn’t any idea where I was going, except that I was getting out of Nevada. Maybe that’s why I blindly turned the car toward Boulder. Arizona was a heap closer’n California.

I kept going, somehow managing to stay at a reasonable speed. I kept watching the mirror for a motorcycle or troop car to come up behind me. The sun was full up now, and I knew the dead guy had been found long ago. The coppers’ start looking and asking questions and sooner or later they’d come to me. Right then I figured things’d end with me in the gas chamber.

Sure, it was crazy. Sure, I should have stayed right there in Vegas and faced the music. But not for Jim Thorne. I wanted to put a lot of miles between me and murder.

I did. I was beyond Boulder and rolling down the hot road to Kingman before the first glimmer of sense began to come to me. It hit me all of a sudden what a stupid fool I’d been. I suddenly felt cold in the pit of my stomach. I pulled the car to one side of the road and stopped.

For a long time I just sat there, sweating, and staring through the windshield at a million miles of empty desert and a thin slab of road. I began to see what I had done.

I’d just given myself an embossed invitation to the gas chamber. I’d run away from a murder scene and crossed a state line. Nevada would trace me sooner or later and then the Arizona police’d want me.

State line! My sick mind reeled again at the thought that I’d be sort of interesting to the F.B.I., too. And them boys ain’t playing for the fun of it, either.

Gradually some sense began to come back and I tried to figure some way out. I felt like a trapped rat. Every way I turned I faced a murder rap, except—

There was one slim chance, just the ghost of one.

I had to find the guy who’d slung a .45 slug in the stranger’s chest and then swapped him for Beauman. And I had to do it before the Arizona police, the Nevada police, and the F.B.I. put the finger on me! It was my only way out. For now that I’d run out of Vegas, no jury’d believe my story on a stack of Bibles as high as the moon.

I felt a little better and put the car back on the road. For all my new idea, I still didn’t have the nerve to go back to Nevada. I went on to Kingman.

I came to the junction of Highway 66 and spied a tavern not far off. It was a little place, looked sort of safe. I decided I needed a cool beer and a chance to do some hard thinking.

It worked well enough. I lost the last shreds of my panic and tackled the problem. I stared into my beer and asked myself questions.

“How now’d that dead guy get in my bus?”

It was a pretty tough one to answer but I began to see daylight.

“Jim, they’s only two places he could’ve done it. He wasn’t there when
we drove up to the filling station right here in Kingman. You weren't out of sight of the car from then on to Vegas. So it was here—or Vegas—and it looks more like Vegas."

I pulled myself up short and thumped the beer stein down on the table. I began to get ideas about Kingman, and I tried to recall the movements of every one of us.

First, Beauman was very much around when we drove up, and he had gone in with the rest of us to eat. Then he had returned to the car and, so far as actually seeing his face, that was the last any of us had a look at him. I was on that line of thought when I remembered something else.

Carmen Fuller had been away from the crowd for awhile. Had she gone out the back, circled the building and met Beauman at the car? If so, why?

I began to feel sick and panicky. Anyway I figured I couldn't get the right answers. But recalling the long-legged Carmen and the snappy slacks she poured herself into, I began to have a glimmer of more ideas—just half-thoughts that now began to have some meaning.

CARMEN FULLER and Arthur Beauman always stayed as far away from one another as possible, and they always spoke distant-like to each other. But there were other things I recalled. Like once in Tulsa I caught Carmen looking at Beauman's back. The wise eyes were glowing like a high school girl daffy over the football captain. At the time I thought it was just the usual reaction to Beauman. But now? I wasn't so sure.

I began to see that a sort of faint trail started in Kingman. Carmen and Beauman probably knew one another but weren't letting on to the rest of us. I remembered now they were always slipping in good, long looks when they was sure no one saw them.

The last time any of us could swear we really saw Beauman was at the little café. Now Beauman was gone and there was a stiff taking up his corner of the car. It added up to—find Beauman and the whole hidden mess would be uncovered.

I was sure of one thing and it gave me the crawling willies to think about it. All of us had ridden for hours with a corpse! A corpse that had got that way from a .45 slug and that had just come from nowhere to enjoy the ride. I shivered again, paid for my beer and climbed into George's car.

I wanted to see old weasel-puss and I prayed under my breath that Kingman hadn't yet heard of the murder. I drove up to the station and an attendant came out. He was a young punk, all sunburned. I asked about weasel-puss.

"He won't be on till evening, sir. 'Bout six o'clock."

Here it was eight in the morning. "Where does he live? I gotta see him."

The kid grinned. "Well, you'd never find him. He's got an old broken-down 'dobe northeast of town. You'd have to live here to even understand the directions."

I could believe that, once a guy got off the paved roads. I stood there wondering what to do. The kid was waiting.

Finally I sighed. "Well, I'll see him at six."

"Sure, if he ain't tequila-soaked by then and forgets to come to work." He laughed good-naturedly.

Then I drove east of town a ways and about fifteen miles out found a little short road that led toward the railroad tracks. It ended there at a section shanty. I pulled off the main highway, not wanting to make myself conspicuous-like. It was blazing hot, like the hinges on the seventh inner gate of hell. Heat waves shimmered up, making the cactus look like drunken cooch dancers. My eyes squinted to cracks and I was still half-blinded by the sun.

Right by the railroad tracks I came to an extra thick clump of cactus that hid me from the road. I backed the car around, cut the motor, and stretched out on the back seat. I was dead tired
from the driving and worry and lack of sleep. But I was going to stay awake. I couldn’t get caught now.

Chapter III

It was along about four in the afternoon when I woke up, drenched with sweat, my tongue thick and my stomach yelping for food. I took one squint at the sun sending long rays across the desert and hightailed it for Kingman. I saw the kid was still on duty when I drove by the station so I kept on until I saw a café that looked like my speed.

I ordered. Then I noticed the crumpled newspaper at the end of the counter. I tried to look unconcerned when I picked it up and smoothed out the wrinkles. My heart did a back-flip when I saw the murder spread big and black across Page One.

I read it all. Sure, there it was:

James Thorne, the driver of the car, is missing and it is believed that he fled with—

I blinked my eyes and read again—Carmen Fuller! So she’d taken a powder, too!

The stiff had been identified as Carl J. Watson of New York City. But that didn’t mean near so much as the next lines:

It is believed that James Thorne and Carmen Fuller fled together after the crime was committed, and a three-state police net has been thrown out across all roads from Las Vegas. An arrest is expected within twenty-four hours.

The waiter brought my java and he saw what I was reading. He grinned.

“Some murder, eh? Betcha this Fuller dame argued Thorne into killing the guy and then they pulled out.”


He shrugged. “Oh, one of them triangles. Where they’s a dame, they’s trouble.”

He walked off, and I kept on reading:

The occupants of the car have been held by the police as material witnesses pending the apprehension of Thorne and Miss Fuller. Another man, Arthur Beauman, is also missing. The police have his description and are searching for him. It is believed that this man may have some information bearing on the case.

You and me both, coppers!

I folded the paper, my mouth grim. When I finished eating there was still an hour before weasel-puss would come on duty. I went out and sat in the car. I had to talk to weasel-puss and then get out of town pronto.

Luckily I caught the old duck just as he started his trick. He hadn’t had time to read a paper. He remembered me.

“You was the guy that had all the passengers,” he mumbled through his gums, “and they all had something to eat. Yep, I remember you, all right. There was just you and another car between three and dawn last night. Business was bad.”

“Did you se—” I started, but the old boy kept right on recalling the night before.

“Just two of you and both right together. It was a funny looking car—”

This time I broke in. “Two of us? Did the other bus come in just before I did or after?”

“Huh? Oh, just after. He was sitting over there alongside the road when you left. I saw his lights flash on and he went down the street a piece, then he circled and came back. Pulled in here to the pumps.”

I began to have hunches fast. “Right out there?” I pointed to the place where I’d passed the parked car when I left the station.

“Yep, they was two men in it and they didn’t have much to say. One feller scrouched down in the seat and he was frowning like he was plumb mad. The other feller, the driver, he just ordered me to fill her up. Had a New York plate and it was a car like I never seen before. I asked the feller about it. He wasn’t saying much. He just grunted when I asked him and he tells me, short-like, ‘It’s a Mercedes.’ Mister, that’s a new one to me.”

My brain was ticking like a time
bass of the body. Like the rest of us, in
the dark, she thought Beauman rode on
to Vegas. Then she found that Beauman
had pulled a shenanigan and left her
holding the sack. Maybe Beauman was
in cahoots with the guy with the gold
tooth. Anyhow, Carmen figured she
knew where Beauman was and skipped
out from Vegas.

I couldn’t see the why’s of a lot of
things yet, but I’d bet Beauman was the
killer and that he and Carmen had fig-
ured all the angles.

I was right at the fork of the roads;
one north, the other west. The Mercedes
went out the Gold Road, so said weasel-
puss, and that highway hit Barstow.
Carmen faded in Las Vegas. Barstow is
on the main highway southwest from
there. Everything led to Barstow, and I
saw that if I wanted Beauman, I had to
find the man with the gold tooth, and
I knew I’d find him there. I headed west
on Route 66.

Except for mountains and bad cut-
backs, nothing happened right up to the
Arizona-California line. But I was jitt-
ery enough. I figured I had one slight
advantage over the police. As yet they
wouldn’t be on the lookout for George’s
car. If I was smart, I could slip through
the net on the Nevada plates. Speed was
the answer, though.

It seemed no time before I caught the
gleam of the Colorado River and the
long bridge that crossed it. I slowed
for the “bug stop” on the Arizona side,
but the plant-inspecting officer waved
me on.

I didn’t have time to feel lucky,
though. I rolled onto the bridge, where
I couldn’t turn back, and saw that
trouble was waiting up ahead. On the
California end of the bridge was a
whole army of troopers and they was
stopping every car. I couldn’t turn back
and I knew them coppers was looking for
me.

For a minute, I thought seriously of
jumping over the bridge rail and taking
a chance on the Colorado River. I got
a fresh grip on myself. I’d depend on
the Nevada plates on my car and play it through. And all the while I drew closer to the patrolmen.

I was getting more shaky every minute; my hands were wet with sweat, and I couldn't even breathe. Glassy-eyed I watched a big trooper approach. His holster flap was turned back to allow easy reach for the gun. He looked straight at me.

I couldn't meet his eyes, I don't know why, but I kept watching the glitter of the sun on the handle of the revolver that peeked out of his holster. I was going at a snail's pace but all set to tromp down hard on the gas if he stopped me.

He looked at the car, and I saw his glance shift to the Nevada license plates. For a minute he seemed uncertain, like maybe he'd talk to me. Then he raised his hand—and—waved me on!

IT TOOK a lot of control not to shoot the gas to the crate and scoop hell-for-leather down the highway. But I managed it. I even worked up a friendly grin, but his broad back got it. He was stopping a car headed east. I took the first turn and rolled through the town. The further I got from the border and the patrol, the better I liked it.

The sun was real low in the west and it wouldn't be long before night. Still hot, of course, and just on the ragged edge of being endurable. I settled down for a long grind.

Mile after mile rolled back and there was yet mile after mile ahead of me. There was nothing to do but drive steady and think. I figured that George hadn't yet talked about me borrowing his car. Give him time, though; give him time and the kind of scare them cops'd throw into him when they found I'd been hanging around. But bad as I needed the car, I knew I couldn't drive it much longer. I toyed with the idea of stealing another crate in Barstow and letting this one sit.

Then I got to thinking how I was going on a lot of hunches, just a few scraps of real information. The rest of it my mind had pulled out of the blazing blue. I didn't dare think of what might happen if I didn't find Beauman, or Carmen Fuller, or the guy with the gold tooth in Barstow. Once the thought hit me, I felt sick and had to gulp a couple of times in a hurry. Then I shivered it off and stopped thinking.

By this time it was night and there was one of them big, lopsided desert moons, all orange, that at first made the sky look like a fire behind the mountains. Then, after awhile it got a little higher and the desert changed to silver with deep shadows that was twice as black as they ought to be.

Pretty soon I saw the lights of Barstow and I could feel my nerves all tightening up again. If my hunch was right—But I'd said that over and over so much that I was getting a little sick of it. The answer had to be here!

I rolled into town, not too slow, just a sort of innocent-like speed. My gas was almost gone when I spotted a cut-rate station. I wheeled in by the pumps. I was standing there, watching the tank fill when a State Police car pulled up and stopped.

I sort of sidled around the jaloppy so it was between me and the troopers. I was all set to run if it was me they wanted. When I heard them drive away, I felt mighty relieved. I came around the corner of the car—and near bashed my nose on the chest of a copper.

I was so scared I was paralyzed.

The big guy drew off and said, "Oops! I'm sorry, bud."

It sounded friendly enough, and I got my tongue back in working order.

"'S all right," I managed.

He was just standing there, watching the highway. The police car must have dropped him off. I tried to keep my knecaps from chattering and made my voice casual-like.

"Looking for someone?" I asked.

He lit a cigarette. "Yep, there's a guy we want."

"Bad?" I gulped.

"Pretty bad. He's hooked up with the
killing in Las Vegas."

"Oh, that." I let it lay for a few minutes and then tried another tack. "Anything new?"

"About what the papers say. The driver got away, but Arizona, Nevada and California have a net out that he can't get through. It stretches from the New Mexico border to Los Angeles and back again."

I put my hand against the car for quick support.

"Looks bad for him," I was able to say.

The copper nodded. "That dame is still missing, but she didn't move fast enough. She's going to be picked up either here or in Vegas. Then that other fellow that's missing, Beauman, he'll be caught, too."

"Wasn't there some other passengers?" I asked.

"Yeah, they're in the Vegas jail. Material witnesses when we get Thorne, the punk that did the killing."

My grin must have looked like it was plastered on a zombie.

"Oh, he did it?"

The trooper nodded. "I figure it that way."

"Well"—I edged toward the car—"thanks. I'll be seeing you."

"Sure. If you happen to meet Jim Thorne, hold him for me." The trooper laughed and turned his attention to the road.

Chapter IV

CLIMBING into the car, I rolled out of there, slow and easy. I got safely around the corner. It was a side street, quiet-like, and I pulled up to the curb to figure just what to do.

I knew one thing, sure, talking to that trooper. I couldn't move around much without arousing suspicion. I was afraid to register at a hotel or tourist camp and, besides, George's fiver was down to a couple of wadded bills and some coins. So I slept in the car all night.

The sun was slap in my eyes when I woke up the next morning, and I figured it was about seven. There was an old lady standing in her yard, giving me the cold eye. I got the kinks out of my back, gave her a grin and mumbled something about, "It's like this when you're broke, ma'am," and rolled out of there.

Right where the Vegas road joins 66 is a big garage, and I gave it a good look as I went by. I wanted to see a Mercedes with a New York plate, and it might be there. Not that I'd have known a Mercedes, never having seen one. But I figured it'd be sort of odd-shaped and spell a lot of money in painted metal and leather. Nothing like that showed, though, and I went on to a Chinese café that was clean and had good food.

I was right in the middle of a big stack of wheats when one of the China boys switched on the radio. It crackled a moment, and then a news announcer's voice came blaring out like a band. The China boy tuned it down so it made sense.

War news, tax bills, more war news, and I kept shoveling in wheat cakes. Then the news guy started talking about the murder in Vegas. I stopped the shoveling and listened. For the most part it was old stuff. Beauman and Carmen and me was still missing, and the police had a fresh grip on a batch of sure leads.

I almost dropped my fork at what came next.

"Arizona police," the radio said, "have trailed Jim Thorne to Kingman. He drove there in a car borrowed from George Meek, a Las Vegas garageman. Meek innocently loaned the fleeing man the car but quickly reported to the police when he learned of the murder. The police have the license number and a description. Thorne is known to be headed west, and Nevada, Arizona and California police are redoubling their vigilance to apprehend him. It is believed that Thorne is in Barstow. This is the most baffling murder—"

I wasn't listening any more. I was staring out of the window where
George's buggy waited at the curb—out there in broad daylight, and every copper in the state wanted to put his finger on it. I was just living on borrowed time.

I shuddered, and the wheat cakes weren't good any more. George's car was pure TNT so far as I was concerned.

I paid my check and left the place. I didn't even look at the car but walked off down the street. I went along 66, watching license plates. There was all kinds but New York, and the autos didn't come anywhere near looking like a Mercedes. I cut back and started down the street that is the Vegas road. Nothing there, and I began to wonder if maybe my hunch about Barstow was all wrong. Then I thought of the tourist camps at the edge of town.

Some of them are pretty swanky and a guy with a Mercedes could easily lay up in one of them. I headed right back toward the café, intending to make a desperate gamble. I needed a car to cover the camps.

I cut close to the pumps of that big garage, a two-story brick with a corner cut out to make a shed for the drive and pumps. I got cautious and took a peek around the corner of the Chinese café.

There was a crowd around George's car. One trooper was in the front seat, examining the glove compartment. Two others had one of the China boys gabbling excited-like, waving his arms and shaking his head.

I was in a panic but I managed to get a grip on myself and I slipped away from there fast. I was worried stiff. Things were getting too close; the police were closing in. My brain was racing with all sort of plans that I rejected as quickly as they came to me. I had to do something—now. The only angle I had to work on was that Mercedes. If I didn't uncover it pronto—

I'D BEEN standing on the sidewalk, lost in thinking. Maybe I'd been looking at the best hotel in Barstow for five minutes before I realized it. But I woke up with a bang. My idea was to circle the hotel to the garage and take a squint at the cars. Maybe the Mercedes with the New York plates would be there. It was a long, long shot, but I was at the point where I had to play 'em.

I crossed the street, headed for the drive that led to the garage. I turned in and was just planning what to say to the attendant when I got my first real break. The hotel door banged open, and a girl came out. She hurried away from me down the street.

But I'd know that hip-swinging walk anywhere and them long legs. It was Carmen Fuller! I thanked the god of wild-catters and swung around to follow her.

I wasn't an expert on tailing, but the Fuller dame didn't once look around. She was too interested and intent on getting where she was going. She was headed straight for the main drag and would walk right into the arms of the troopers examining George's car. I felt like warning her, then thought better of it.

Never for a minute did I think she might not be going to Beauman. If she knew I was anywhere near, she wouldn't take me to him. He was the gent I wanted to see, but bad! The sight of her had brought all them hunches to sizzling life again, and I was riding them with spurs.

Sure enough, she went right to the main drag and crossed the street. I could see the car and the coppers and the crowd. I took a deep breath and kept after Carmen. They didn't spot us.

About half a square down she turned in at a frame house that had a hotel sign across the front of it. The screen door slammed after her, and I pulled up short. I didn't know what to do. I was pretty certain Beauman was in there. Finally I squared my shoulders and walked right in.

It was a renovated building. The lobby had a long hall which extended to the back. A dinky counter stood to one side and just beyond it was the stairs
leading to the second floor. A young fellow with a sissy mustache gave me a sweet smile.

“Yes, sir? Can the Homestead House make you comfortable?”

“Easy,” I said. “There was a girl just came in, a long-legged dame. I got to find her.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Really!”

I was at the counter. “Look, Little Eva, we’re driving through, and she gets out to see a fellow she knows. We got to scoot in a few minutes and we can’t leave her behind.”

“What was she visiting?”

He had me there. Dollars to doughnuts Beauman hadn’t registered in his own name. Besides, if I gave his name, Beauman had been used so much by papers and radio the last two days that Lacy Pants behind the desk would hook it right up with the murder. Then hell would pop. I had to stall.

“I don’t know his name, Bud—it is Bud, ain’t it—but he’s a tall guy—” I went on to describe Beauman. It didn’t register, and I finally gave up. “I’ll wait down here awhile. She’s sure to come out.”

“Oh, suit yourself,” he lisped and turned away.

I picked me a comfortable chair where I could watch the hall and stairway. The minutes passed, a whole flock of them, and Carmen Fuller didn’t show up. I fidgeted around and began to wonder if she’d spotted me and ducked out the back way. If I only knew which room she’d taken, then I could smoke Beauman out. I kept twisting around in the chair until Lacy Pants got suspicious. He swished over and scowled down at me.

“Are you sure you’re waiting for a lady?”

“That’s right, Bud. Remember, the long-legged girl.”

He looked uncertain and smoothed down the pointed mustache with his long, soft fingers. “I really don’t like this. You know, we have to be so careful.”

“With me it’s okay—” I started to say but that was as far as I got.

Upstairs, somewhere, a woman screamed. It was one of those long, awful things that jerk the nerves right out of your skin. I grabbed the chair arms, and Lacy Pants and I stared at one another. He was scared, and so was I.

I came up out of that chair in a flying leap that carried me to the foot of the stairs, pounded up the steps and skidded to a halt in the upper corridor. All the doors were closed. The clerk was right behind me. Then the girl screamed again.

I raced down the hall and barged through a door. It was the parlor of a two-room suite. Nothing there but the furniture. I was across the floor and into the bedroom in one long stride.

Carmen stood there. Her hands gripped the brass rail of the bed until I thought the knuckles would burst through her skin. Her face was a horrible, pasty white and all eyes. She was staring at something across the room. My eyes swiveled in that direction.

I felt my knees buckle and my stomach wanted to crawl up through my throat. There in the open closet I’d found Arthur Beauman—at last.

He was stiff and glassy-eyed. The front of his white shirt was covered with dried, clotted blood. Someone had blasted him with a .45 and then carefully set him up against the wall.

There was a rustle of sound behind me. I whirled around. Lacy Pants, paper-white, gurgled queerly and then slid down the wall in a faint. Carmen opened her mouth for another lungful of scream. I slapped her, hard, across the face.

Her mouth snapped shut and some sense came into her eyes. For a moment she stared at me, then she bolted out the door. I took another look at Beauman, jumped over the desk clerk on the floor and streaked out after Carmen.

I caught up with her in the hall and
I wasn't any too gentle stopping her. She stood, breast heaving, pushing herself against the wall, and I was getting all set to tell her off. She gulped air, deep.

"Don't argue now," she said in a swift, whisper. "We've got to get out of here. We'll both hang for this one. We'll talk later—if the police don't catch us."

Chapter V

SHE WAS RIGHT. Already doors along the hall were open and people were looking at us like we was something from the zoo. I could picture Beauman dead there in the closet. Worse, I knew exactly what the police would think when they found him and learned me and Carmen was hooked up with this second murder.

I looked quickly up and down the corridor and chose the back way. I grabbed Carmen's hand and we ran the full length of the hall, thankful to find a back stairs. We were down them in no time, ending up in a small passageway at one side of the kitchen. Carmen tugged me toward the back door.

We were free of the hotel and running hard. There were faint shouts from the hotel, and I knew that Beauman had been found. I realized with a dull, awful feeling that the fat was really in the fire now. I must have slowed down a little, for Carmen urged me on.

"Where?" I asked. It looked pretty hopeless to me.

"My cabin," she answered. "I'm staying in a tourist camp at the edge of town."

"As good a place to be pinched as any." I nodded. "Lead on."

We stayed off the main drag, heading west by side streets. Once we thought we heard a police siren and for a minute we stared at one another, scared silly. It wasn't repeated, and we kept on.

Her cabin was a roomy place, cozy-fitted with wicker chairs and a gleaming white spread across a brass bedstead. The whir of motors on the highway sounded soft and far off. The chintz curtains had been pulled over the windows, and the sun made funny splotches of the colored design in them. The room was fairly cool.

I sank into a deep wicker chair. Carmen leaned against the wall for a minute, her eyes closed, her red lips twisted like she was hurt bad inside. Then she gripped her lower lip with her teeth, sighed deep, and walked to a little cupboard. When she turned, she had a bottle and some glasses that she set on a rickety-legged table.

"We're going to need this." She poured the drinks, straight.

I didn't say anything, just tossed the whisky straight down. She paced back and forth, like a tiger all caged up, and her bony face wasn't very good to look at. Her eyes showed she was real mad.

I watched her a minute and then I got tired of waiting for her to do some explaining. I could feel my face set.

"Let's have it, sister, and make it good. I'm dodging the Nevada gas chamber!"

Her stride broke and she swung around to face me. She looked ten years older, just all of a sudden. I could almost see the black circles form under her eyes. Her teeth had caught her lower lip again. She turned sharply and went to her open suitcase that stood on a chair near the bed. She rummaged around among a lot of silk things until she found what she wanted.

Then she turned like a striking snake. My feet hit the floor with a thump and I froze. I was staring right down the muzzle of the nastiest little job Mr. Colt ever made. In that instant the whole crazy, murderous setup took a spin and a new angle came popping up.

"It was you that killed Watson and Beauman?"

Her voice had the crack of a whip. "Don't be a fool! I'm getting out of Barstow, quick. I haven't any time to waste on you."

"Look," I said, my eyes on the gun, "I got a stake in this, mess, too. I'm
slated for a murder rap. Listen, sister, if you know something, spill it.”

She shook her head and started edging for the door. She was going to pull freight, and fast. I had to hang onto her somehow or other. She knew too much about Beauman and, maybe, Watson. But how to hold a gal that’s got an automatic lined on your stomach? I pulled a long-shot guess.

“You’re in love with Beauman,” I said fast and low. “You and him was running off from someone. But the guy caught up with you in Kingman. It was this Watson, and your boy friend shot him.”

HER FACE got real white. “No!” she whispered.

“Don’t kid me, sister,” I kept right on. “Beauman and you stuck that corpse in my car and you ride along to give your boy friend a chance to make a getaway. Then, when the lid blows off, you beat it here to Barstow and meet him. Only one of Watson’s friends evened the score by putting the finger on Beauman."

She was running her hand up into her hair, her eyes glazed with terror. The gun hand dropped, and she sank into a chair.

“No! No! Art never killed Watson. I know!” Her voice became dull. “But if you believe it happened that way, so will the police—the courts.”

“Sister, you can say that again! Maybe you and me ought to get things straightened out.”

I waited while she figured the angles and I could see that her brain was going like lightning. Her eyes slitted and her face hardened.

“Meet me at the El Grande Hotel, Room Three Twenty-one,” she said. “I’ll give you the murderer in half an hour.”

I shook my head.

“Sister, are you trying to give me the old runaround—” I stopped. That little gun had come up again and she was backing toward the door.

“This is on the level, Jim Thorne, and you’re not stopping me. Be at the El Grande and you’ll get the whole story.”

She sounded persuasive, but the gun looked a lot more so. I could only give her a warning.

“Don’t try leaving Barstow, sister. You’re hot, and I don’t mean with S. A. The coppers want you bad.”

She nodded. In the next minute she was out the door and I heard the running tap-tap of her feet fading away.

I remembered the gun and decided to take up her promise. Half an hour, the El Grande Hotel. I laced me up another tight one from the bottle and downed it.

The more I thought about it, the more I knew that Carmen Fuller was playing things straight across the board with me. While we’d been talking something had clicked in her mind, something that fitted in with what she knew and that led direct to the killer. Whoever had planned these murders was a cold-blooded devil, I was thinking.

That brought me upright. I thought of Carl J. Watson, the young punk with blood on his shirt, sitting coolly in my car. I thought of Arthur Beauman, killed the same way and then propped up against the wall of a clothes closet. I thought of Carmen Fuller promising me the killer’s scalp—and going right after it.

She didn’t mean much to me but she was facing a ruthless murdering maniac.

I came up from the chair and tore out of the place. It was a long time before I found a cop and then I was clear up in town. He was standing on a corner, a big burly guy with a captain’s bars on his shoulders, and was I glad to find him!

I walked right up to the trooper. My hand was trembling as I lit a cigarette.

“Hiya,” I said as he nodded, puzzled. “I’m Jim Thorne. Trail me close for half an hour and I’ll hand you the murderer of Carl J. Watson and Arthur Beauman. . . .”

The state troopers needed a mess of arguing, but I talked fast, and there
must have been something desperate in my voice that finally turned the trick. Captain Gowan, the copper I surrendered to, seemed a right guy. He stood back from the rest of them suspicious troopers, rolled his cigar around in his mouth, and listened.

"Give him a chance," he said. "We can’t lose and he can’t get away. He’d be a dope to give himself up if he couldn’t back his statements."

SO THERE I was, alone, on the third floor of the El Grande Hotel. No one but me in the hallway, but the whole place was guarded by troopers as wary as cats at a rat hole. If Carmen Fuller had been lying to me, I was as good as gassed right now.

I found Room 321, a dark, smooth door that looked a little too innocent. For a brief instant, I figured the Fuller dame would be well on her way to parts unknown and that I held the sack.


The door opened, and my jaw dropped in sheer surprise. He was a big guy with a broken nose and flinty blue eyes. He was dressed in a neat gray suit and looked like a Notre Dame tackle. He gave me a cold, frowning once-over.

“What do you want?” he asked. His voice was husky like he had a permanent cold.

I held an ace in the hole now and I played things cautious.

“Miss Fuller,” I answered.

The guy looked puzzled. He shook his head and smiled.

“You must have the wrong room. There’s no lady here.”

He said it so convincingly that I might have believed him—but for the smile. The gold tooth told me something else again. He tried to close the door, but my foot stymied that play.

“She’s a tall girl,” I insisted. “She said she was coming here.”

“You’re making a mistake, Bud.” He tried to be patient. “I’ve never heard of a Miss Fuller.”

I kept pushing, and he couldn’t make too much ruckus. Finally I was in the room, and he was getting madder by the minute.


That got him, a bull’s-eye. Sure, it was Harper, the guy that had talked me out of fifty smackers in New York.

“Help yourself,” he growled.

He closed the door and watched me prowl through the rooms of his suite. There wasn’t a trace of Carmen Fuller, and I began to feel awful bad. She had pulled a doublecross. And this Harper guy was beginning to fit into a picture with a lot of nasty angles. Old weasel-puss, back in Kingman, had described that gold tooth and Harper looked like he might, possibly, drive a Mercedes.

I was back near the door of the living room and I must have shown my discouragement.

“You see?” Harper smiled. “Your girl friend isn’t here.”

I shrugged, took a last look around, throwing a glance into his bedroom. My eyes dropped to the floor. I could feel the color leave my face and I couldn’t hold back the sudden gasp that rushed past my lips. There was a sluggish, red stream angling and inching its way from under the bed to the edge of the rug by the closet door. I moved like a man in a dream, swinging around to face Harper.

Chapter VI

THE SMILE was gone from Harper’s broken-nosed face. A heavy .45 Colt was in his hand, a black automatic that I knew had blasted the life from Watson and Beauman.

“You’ve seen too much.” He waved the gun toward a chair, and I sat down quick. I wet my lips.

“You killed her!” I gulped.

Harper nodded and bolted the door. “Had to. That goes for you now.” He sighed. “Seems like the first one cuts
the rest loose. You have to keep on killing to protect yourself."

"I'm beginning to savvy," I swallowed noisily. "You and Beauman and this guy, Watson, was in together on this Standard Steels swindle you pulled in New York."

"Yeah," he said. "It was a sweet play while it lasted. Watson was just a young chump we used for a front. He was Harvard, Boston and Social Register."

"They crossed you and you bumped 'em," I said.

Harper shook his head.

"Not that easy or crude. Beauman and I were to skip just before the blow-off, leaving Watson to hold the sack. He was dumb enough to have it coming. There was my secretary, Catherine Fullmeier, known to you as Carmen Fuller and at present"—his eyes shifted—"under the bed. She and Beauman pulled out a little ahead of schedule with all the dough. That put me in the same boat with Watson, and I couldn't see the joke."

I could begin to fill in the rest of the story now.

"So you teamed up with Watson," I said, "putting it to him that unless you caught Beauman and the girl friend, young Carl was slated for a long term behind a flock of bars. He played ball—he had to."

Harper grinned, a lopsided affair.

"Yeah. We made a quick check of the bus, railroad and airlines and couldn't get a line. Both Art and Carmen's cars were in the garage. I knew the country would be too hot to hold them, so they had to be traveling. Then I remembered the travel bureaus and the wildcat busses."

I shifted, watching the gun.

"It adds up," I said. "You got a check from the bureau that a couple matching their descriptions left with me and you learned my route. You and Watson started after us."

Harper nodded and sighed.

"That was a job! It was Tucumcari before we had a glimpse of you and knew our friends were riding along."

"Day and night driving," I said. If that gun slipped an inch—"Tough on the muscles but saves hotel bills. I can see the angles now. Somewhere between Tucumcari and Kingman Watson gets cold feet and wants to quit. You're afraid he'll squeal, so you let him have it."

"Just outside Kingman," Harper said. "I had to keep you in sight. Luckily it was night and Watson looked as if he were sleeping."

I edged forward a little.

"I stopped for gas," I said, going on with the story, "and my passengers ate. When Beauman came out alone, it was a perfect setup for you. You forced Beauman out of the car and made him put Watson in his place. After I pulled away, you and Beauman drove off. So, tag! I was it, with a corpse in my crate." A grudging respect for Harper came to me. "You play the angles quick and close. What'd you and Beauman do?"

Harper shrugged. "Rode and talked. I was going to kill him and dump him somewhere along the Gold Road, but he had given the stock money, two hundred grand of it, to Catherine as insurance. It worked. I couldn't touch Beauman until he had met Catherine and had the money."

"We came to Barstow. Beauman, by then, was playing ball, thinking to wriggle out once he met the girl. I let him think I trusted him again, even let him go to another hotel. We laid low, watching what developed when Watson was found. Too bad you were the fall guy."

I grinned. "Sure, but I was always hard luck. This Carmen figured Beauman had been kidnapped or changed his plans of a sudden. She'd seen that angle since she knew Watson and was sure he'd been with you. So she took a powder from Las Vegas with the dough, looking for Beauman. She landed here and found him—"
Harper shook his head. “Not Beauman, me. That was another break. I gave her a song and dance after I learned she actually had the dough and arranged for her to meet Beauman. But I went there first, and let him have it.”

That gun had gone a little off center. I broke in, “You knew Carmen would go to see him. You beat it to her tourist cabin, filched the dough and came back here. She’d have her hands full, explaining Beauman’s death after running out of Vegas, and you’d have a clear field to take off. But she figured the play and returned too soon. You had to shut her up. The gun again?”

“No. Knife—it’s silent.” His cold, blue eyes darkened. “Too bad! She and I might have gone places if it hadn’t been for Beauman.” He frowned. “But what led you straight to me?”

I grinned. “The gal gave me your room number. You got a gold tooth and drive a Mercedes. The station attendant at Kingman remembered that. I couldn’t help figure the guy that drove that car had something to do with Watson’s body in my crate. So I was looking for you.”

“That’s where you made your mistake,” Harper said.

My muscles were tensed. “Maybe.”

I shot from the chair, bent low, my arms reaching out for him. He sidestepped, but not quick enough. I heard the heavy blast of the .45. It missed me. My head rammed him in the stomach. He staggered back, hitting the wall with a thud. He tried another shot. It sang past my ear.

I was on him. I clawed wildly for a grip on his gun wrist, had it. My fist pounded at his face, giving his broken nose some brand new angles. We banged into a chair, got tangled in the legs, and down we went still fighting.

For an agonizing minute I lost my grip on the gun wrist but recovered it before Harper could send a slug into me. Dimly I heard pounding on the door, muffled shouts. Harper’s fist caught me square in the face, snapping my head back. I twisted away, blinking the tears from my eyes and tasting blood as it gushed from my nose.

His weight was counting. I cleared my vision, sunk my fist into his stomach. It doubled him up, and he was wide open. I made the uppercut count, landing beautifully on the button. Harper’s eyes rolled back and he was out of the game. I struggled to gain balance and staggered to the door. I unlocked it, flung it wide. Them coppers looked awfully good to me.

Captain Gowan took charge. I gave him Harper’s automatic and told him the dough was hidden somewhere in the suite. The ballistics boys would cinch the case with the gun and my story of what happened gave Harper a swell start to the gas chamber. They pulled Carmen Fuller from under the bed.

I took a single look at her and staggered from the room. I was out in front before Gowan caught up with me.

“You can’t go yet,” he said crisply.

“Why not?” I demanded. “You know I didn’t bump anybody.”

GOWEN just nodded and pointed to a State Police car at the curb.

“Get in,” he ordered. “The boys can take care of things upstairs. I got to turn you over to the Nevada police.”

“Why? You just said—”

“We don’t want you,” Captain Gowan interrupted, “and there’s no murder charge. But you have to clear yourself about the garageman’s car. It’s a matter for the Nevada authorities.”

“That’s just a formality, ain’t it?” I asked.

Captain Gowan grinned. He held open the door of the police car.

“That’s right. But what about wildcatters? Seems the Nevada boys want to talk to you about that.”

Boy, was I burned up! Of all the cheap tricks! Then I began to hope that maybe the Nevada police’d forget wildcatt ing since I’d turned up their murderer.

At that, a wildcat rap for thirty days was a whole lot lighter than one for murder—triple murder.
Van Camp was old, his beautiful wife was young, and the lover was impatient

This was going to be a suicide which no one would believe

EVEN THE need to get rid of the butler tonight had been shrewdly woven into his plan so that it would supply another nail of evidence in the coffin that would bury Madeline and Barry. It was important that no witnesses be present in the big lavish mansion when he executed his scheme. He would plant a lie in the butler's mind. When the evidence began to pour in tomorrow, Raymond's testimony would tie another knot in the noose.
The loud repeated knocking on the door of his den informed him he would not have to send for his faithful manservant.

"Come in!" Gilbert Van Camp called gruffly.

Raymond, the butler, entered hesitantly. "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but your broker has been phoning all day trying to reach you. He says it's very important."

"He always says that. I can't be bothered tonight. Raymond, why don't you take the night off? I've got a lot of work to do, and I'm expecting some visitors later this evening. I won't be needing you."

"Visitors?" The butler's mouth gaped open. Worry stretched taut his long aged face. "You mean Mrs. Van Camp and—"

"None of your business who I mean... I'm sorry, Raymond. No use taking it out on you. Yes, they're coming here. My darling wife and—" He left it unsaid. "They want to make a settlement. Maybe—maybe I can change her mind, show her what she's like, what she's letting herself in for. I hope to heavens I can!"

"You know better than that, sir. You'd think they wouldn't dare show their faces after the scene they made... Begging your pardon, I'd like to stay."

"No. If there is another scene, I'd rather not have an audience."

The butler left, his back bent and shoulders drooping sadly. Van Camp went back to work, quickly setting the stage, completing the steps to his plan.

First, he called Western Union and had a night letter sent to his lawyer telling him where to find a certain package, in his vault. It contained, said the wire, important evidence, which he could use in the event that he did not hear from Van Camp by noon tomorrow.

Then he called the police.

"This is Mr. Van Camp. I have reason to fear my wife and her lover may make an attempt on my life. I overheard something the other day which made me suspect— Oh, there's someone at the door. I'll call back later."

He hung up, quickly, relishing the thought that every word of what the police now probably considered a crank's complaint would be remembered and repeated with deadly effect at the trial. It was like looking forward to a show you knew would be a masterpiece but wouldn't live to see. He had deliberately slammed down the receiver before they could trace the call. Without his first name or an address, they would not bother to investigate.

The police would never dream it was the Gilbert Van Camp, wealthy member of one of the proudest names in the state, who had announced his fears to them just before it happened. When they saw his name in the papers the next day, or were called to his home by the butler or cook, then they would remember and convict his "visitors".

Madeline and Barry were not coming tonight or any other night. They were having a rendezvous in the hunting lodge. They had been pursuing their illicit love there for weeks. They knew he would not have detectives watch them or gather information against them. Their privacy and security tonight would cost them dearly. Tomorrow they'd lack the slightest shred of an alibi.

HE HAD not seen Madeline since that terrible scene on the night of June 4th. Madeline had told him then, brutally, that she loved Barry and was leaving him, forever. They wanted him to agree to an exorbitant divorce settlement out of court. He had been warned that any effort to contest the suit or bring a countersuit would result in a scandalous court battle which would drag his highly respected family name through the ugliest filth and mud of scandal, disgrace and the kind of false accusations which Barry would find easy to concoct. In the end, Madeline could not fail to obtain the divorce as well as a large share of his fortune. It was almost impossible to buy a woman in a divorce battle in this state.

He had always known she was too young and beautiful, too wild and pleasure-seeking to be completely content with him in spite of the ease and luxury he had lavished upon her.

If it had happened at the beginning of his marriage, he could have faced it. He would have accepted it, philosophi-
cally, as the pitiful illusions of an old fool—quickly shattered by reality. But, after so long a time, he became convinced that their closeness and intimacy, their common experiences had shaped a love which must be, at least partly, shared.

It hurt deeply that all she sought from him now was an enormous divorce settlement. It would go to a handsome, muscular opportunist, Barry, who would leave her speedily on the day her last dollar was spent. Unfortunately, he thought bitterly, she would obtain more than enough money to last a lifetime of high-living and he could do nothing to prevent it.

The zest for life, the enthusiasm for drawing pleasure and novelty from each day, had been extinguished within him. He wanted to die and he wanted to hurt them. Most of all, he did not wish to leave them in a position where they benefitted from his tragedy. The prospect of his wealth blessing the union of such creatures was abominable to him.

Only after the thought of suicide had crossed his mind did the fantastic possibility of achieving succease and revenge with one stroke occur to him.

He lifted the long barreled target revolver from the gun rack in his den, carefully loaded it. This was going to be a suicide which no one would believe.

The steady ringing of the phone finally penetrated his thoughts. It had been ringing for many minutes before he realized it. How many precious hours civilized man spent answering stupid phone calls! His mind returned to checking off details of his plan. He ignored the phone.

The lawyer would find love letters from Madeline and Barry which he had found and hidden. The package would also contain an insurance policy he had taken out only a few weeks ago for one hundred thousand dollars with his wife as sole beneficiary. He had taken pains to impress upon his insurance agent the fact that he considered the new policy a completely unnecessary nuisance as he already owned a fortune and had some life insurance, though the latter was not commensurate with his station in business and society. But his wife, he had explained, had been urging and nagging him to take out a more substantial policy and he had finally submitted to her wishes.

Afterwards, it would appear that Madeline, in her greediness, had engineered this to assure herself the maximum possible riches upon his death. It certainly would not fit into the picture of a suicide brooding over his wife's infidelity.

But the master stroke, the pièce de résistance for the police, was the short impulsive note Barry had sent Madeline when he was out of town on business. He must have gotten lonely and desperate to have been so careless. The "business" had probably been cleaning up the details of the last rich female he had seduced more for loot than love. Perhaps it hadn't gone too well. Perhaps his pockets were unusually light that day. He may even have distrusted Madeline's devotion in his absence. Gilbert had found the loaded letter and hidden it with the others in the incriminating package. He had worked on this letter. It was dynamite. It read:

Dearest:

Unavoidably detained here on business. Miss you terribly. Darling, when I return we must settle this once and for all, regardless of consequences. Will meet you usual place at 7 p.m. on June 4. We will see your husband and tell him the truth about us. We'll demand he grant you a divorce. I'll make him understand if I have to kick some sense into him. You're too young and beautiful to waste your life on Gilbert. That would be a tragedy for both of us. I love you. I want you. You are with me every moment.

Barry

It was the stupid wild kind of thing a professional like Barry should have known better than to write. The letter had been picked up at a rented address box by Madeline so, apparently, Barry hadn't much feared that Gilbert Van Camp would ever see it. But Madeline was too sentimental to destroy her letters. This one would be powerfully damnatory because of the date and what Gilbert had done to alter it.

JUNE 4TH had passed ten days ago.

There had been a painful scene and Gilbert had refused to grant their exorbitant demands for a large cash set-
tlement and divorce. But the fear of a scandalous court battle had so shaken him that they must have seen very clearly in his expression that he would not dare fight and publicly protest.

Madeline had not been home since that night. She had barricaded herself in the hunting lodge and only called occasionally for some things she needed. He knew Barry had been visiting and staying with her there. They would have no alibi for tonight.

It had been child’s play to have one of the less potent letters analyzed by a chemist in order to have the ink duplicated. It was a common brand of blue-black ink and dipping his pen into the same kind of fluid he had performed an ingeniously simple forgery—one it would be practically impossible to detect.

He had simply inserted the numeral “one” in front of the “4” in the sentence to make it read: “Will meet you, usual place, at 7 p.m. on June 14.” That was tonight. Let anyone try to show forgery or individuality of handwriting in a mere downward stroke symbolizing the numeral one!

He lowered the gun barrel, broke it open and examined the loaded chambers as if seeking to delay the moment of destruction by thoroughness in its preparation. The gun returned to his temple. His finger began to close on the trigger. One second, no, a fraction of a second of biting, pounding shock through his brain, a loud report of the explosion throughout the house—which he would not hear—and it would be ended forever. His life and that of two others whose doom would justify and satisfy his.

The phone rang again. How the routine and trivial—how the banal and irrelevant intruded upon even our most dramatic moments! Almost automatically, perhaps with an unconscious loyalty to the petty earth to which he was still anchored, he answered it, pulling the phone up to his mouth and ear before he was consciously aware of the idiocy of answering the phone at such a time.

It was his broker again:

“Mr. Van Camp? Good lord, I’m glad I got you in! Where in the world have you been all day? I’ve been going frantic trying to reach you . . .”

“I’m very busy. If it isn’t important couldn’t you—”

“Important? Man alive, your stocks have been taking a headlong dive on the market all day long. They’ve been crashing without halt. You’ve got to sell—you’ll be wiped out. I couldn’t believe it wouldn’t stop falling or I would have taken the initiative myself. But you’d lost so much I hoped we could recoup some of it. Now, I think it’s hopeless. If you want to salvage something, sell now, sell everything left!”

Van Camp was suddenly very rigid, still. His lower lip, as if an independent entity, began to quiver nervously. The twitching mouth made the vaguest hint of a broad smile about to break through.

“What did you say would happen if I don’t sell?”

“You’ll be wiped out. Unless a miracle occurs and it goes skyrocketing up again, you’ll be penniless!”

The twitching had ceased and a full smile had taken its place. A low chuckling began to force its way through his clenched teeth.

“Mr. Van Camp, didn’t you hear me? What should I do?”

“Don’t sell. Let it ride. Every share I have. Let them ride, you hear? And—thanks, thanks a lifetime, for calling me.”

He hung up and let loose a roar of laughter which had been snowballing within him as he heard the news, laughter he had barely restrained until he slammed down the receiver. “Ha, ha, hoo, ha, ho, ha!” He hadn’t laughed so hard in years. The room was vibrating to the laughter. His belly churned and ached and tears popped into his eyes.

HE HAD no sooner quieted down when a glance at the gun in his hand started the thunderous laughter again. The gun looked enormous and comical. It now seemed to him a silly, incongruous stage prop for a ridiculous comedy situation.

No need to kill himself now. No need for any complicated plots. No need for any meticulously engineered frame-ups. Let them have their divorce. Let them have each other forever. They’d have
precious little else.
Without money Barry would quickly
tire of Madeline. He would not long
waste his time on so unremunerative a
soil—even though Madeline was an en-
chanting beauty. Beautiful women and
casual love affairs were as plentiful as
water to a man like Barry. He could
only afford to devote his talents to
money, or at least monied beauty.
A poor Gilbert would be as punishing
to them as a framed conviction. In its
honesty and fairness, Gilbert felt, it
would be infinitely more satisfying.
It was delicious to dream of their
looks and words when they found out
they were trying to rifle a poorbox. It
was something to look forward to, some-
thing to live for. What a fool he had
been to think of such a way out!
He even wallowed for a moment in a
vague luxurious idea that Madeline
would eventually be driven back to him
so that he could turn her away as if he
were an oriental despot condemning an
unfaithful wife—or take her back to
the hearth with all the bittersweet
pleasure of such a gesture.
The sound of footsteps caught him
off guard, made him feel as nakedly
embarrassed as one would experience if
someone entered while in the act of
posing and grimacing before a mirror.
He self-consciously slipped the gun into
his pocket.
He was just rising from his chair
when the door opened. It was his wife
Madeline, a milk-skinned beauty with a
crown and brows like black flames but
with an unfamiliar hardness in the
sculptured lines. Barry was with her,
hers ruthless, handsome lover, striding
forward aggressively, possessively.
Surprised and unprepared as he was,
Gilbert tried to make a sociable, hy-
critically "civilized" greeting.
"I'm very glad to see you tonight for
a special reason. This is an unexpected
pleasure. I've something to tell—" Even
as he spoke, unthinking, he wondered if
he really should tell them now, at this
particular occasion, that he was practi-
cally stripped of his fortune.
"Shut up," Barry said. "You don't
have to put up a front for us. Sit down.
We won't be long."
Gilbert had put out a hand in a puz-
zled sign, was about to continue, when
Barry moved upon him, shoved him into
the chair with a powerful thrust of his
open palm. "Just keep quiet, old man.
Madeline and I don't feel like waiting or
dragging through an annoying court
decision. We've decided to arrange the
best settlement—you die. Madeline gets
everything. I marry Madeline."

GILBERT'S EYES bulged. He was
looking now into the yawning bar-
rel of another gun—one Barry held
pointed at him. His tongue was thick
when he spoke. "I see you're planning
to use my own gun—from my hunting
collection."
"Yes. Of course. Your own gun.
You're going to commit suicide. You're
very unhappy about the difference in
age and temperament between your wife
and yourself. You know she no longer
loves you. You've been troubled by poor
health lately. You thought this was the
best way. Your own gun will be found
clenched in your hand. Your butler will
be a witness that your wife left you.
It'll be too simple and obvious for any-
one to bother investigating."

Madeline stood at a respectful dis-
tance. She avoided his eyes.
"We thought we'd just lay the ground-
work today," Barry said. "but Ray-
mond's absence makes it perfect."
"I'm sorry, Gilbert," Madeline said.
Her eyes refused to meet his. "But
you're old. You haven't much longer to
live, anyway. With me gone, you'd have
nothing to live for. This is the best way.
I'm... sorry."
"Don't cry too much." Van Camp
said, bitterly. To himself he said, does
anyone ever really feel they are too old
to live? Does anyone ever console him-
self this way or is it only a convenient
rationalization for the guilty?
Then, as he saw the gun stab at him,
clamp against his temple. he shouted,
quickly, something for them to remem-
ber. something for them to keep, to
gnaw and choke them later almost as
brutally as the noose they would shortly
wear. "I was thinking of taking my own
life this evening... anyway. I don't
think I'll mind too much..."

Then the explosion was vibrating and
echoing in the room as his laughter had
a few minutes before. Even the blood and gore that was his head could not
mar the bliss and triumph of the deep
smile that framed his mouth as sharply
as though it were carved in marble.

Madeline shuddered at that smile.
Barry missed it completely. Both would
soon know its fullest meaning. For the
false evidence Gilbert Van Camp had so
carefully compiled to prove that suicide
was murder would now implicate them
in a web of circumstantial evidence.

The gun in Gilbert’s pocket, indispu-
tatably contradicting any stamp of sui-
icide, the forged note containing to-
night’s fatal date, and the cryptic phone
call to the police, would furnish a
signed, sealed and delivered murder rap
against Barry and Madeline.

“Let’s get out of here fast!” Madeline
shivered. “I can’t stand the smile on
his face.”

HIDE-AWAY
(Continued from page 73)

and began clawing at his face with her free
hand and kicking at his shins.

He released her long enough to strike her
hard across the mouth. Then, as she turned
to flee, he grabbed her again, fingers closing
about her throat. “Carson,” she gasped,
clawing at his straining hands. “You’ll kill
me, Carson, you’ll kill me.”

“You bet I’ll kill you,” he snarled, his mind
holding only the pain and disillusionment
he had suffered. “Art was a fine boy and
you caused his death. Why shouldn’t I kill
you?”

“Carson,” she gasped, her struggles grow-
ing weaker. “Carson, Car—”

The enormity of what he was doing
dawned on him as his rage ebbed a little.
His fingers slackened and the girl slid to
the ground. She huddled there on her knees,
rubbing her neck and making harsh, gasp-
ing sounds. Carson stared at her awhile
and then he said, “Well, Donna, shall we
get started? It’s a long way home...”

Answers to Quiz on Page 60
1-i, 2-k, 3-i, 4-g, 5-l, 6-d, 7-j, 8-b, 9-e, 10-a, 11-h,
12-c.
I'll Get What's Mine

By HENRY GUTH

Murder can be a sloppy way of dealing with a hopeless situation...

LUJACK dreaded what he must do, but there was no way out of it. A promise was a promise—even if made two months ago, and to himself alone.

It was particularly hard to plan under these circumstances. The three of them isolated here in Irish Mountain. The nearest town twenty miles down the valley from the mine, and Caliente, the ore shipping point, about seventy miles away. Nothing else nearer than that.

He couldn't kill a man and expect the crime to go unnoticed. He might as well try to kill off one-third the population of New York City and hope no one would miss it.

Grosner, came into the tent, untroubled, chewing on a match. He looked contentedly around to see what needed doing. Thirty years of this kind of life had made him mellow-rough, like the cattle that grazed the mountain slopes.

He poured water from a kettle into the dishpan, and rattled plates around in it. "When Bix's finished sharpenin' the drills, he'll go up and drill the blast hole. You muck out yesterday's stuff, and wire the new detonator."

The body was littered with quartzite dust...
Lujack burned. Always the menial, dirty jobs—like mucking out—that didn’t require any skill. He glared out the tent flap at Bix, muscles and confident, chipping away expertly at a drill point on the anvil.


A spot of red, reflecting Lujack’s anger, glowed in the forge.

“He goin’ after deer again?” Lujack grunted.

“Might’s well,” Grosner said. “We need meat.”

Lujack wiped the plates, slapping a towel over them carelessly and piling them in the upended egg-crate shelf. “The plates go on the bottom shelf,” Grosner said. “Remember, will you?” Then he followed the muttering prospector out to the truck and helped wrestle six empty water drums aboard.

“Remember, don’t blast until I get back from the spring,” Grosner said. “Want to see that new detonator work.” The truck went snarling down the canyon.

Bix loped from the forge, carrying sharpened drills, wrapped in burlap, dynamite sticks and a rifle. Lujack picked up the single jack and canteen and followed him up the burro trail without speaking. Pines and mahogany dripped moisture and towering stone cliffs locked the trail in chill shadow. But up over head, over the tree tops, the mine dump bulged from the quartzite, glittering like a blister of glass.

“You’re not still sore about Hope, are you?” Bix said, standing on the dump. “She couldn’t help herself.” His white teeth flashed. “She wasn’t for you, so forget it.”

Lujack rubbed his sweaty bushlike face, feeling hatred well up in him.

“Hell!” he said. “I brought an empty canteen. How we going to make the lamps work?”

Bix laughed. “There’ll be water collected in a hollow around here somewhere.”
Damn him. Always knew what to do. Even how to grab the only girl a man ever had.

HE THOUGHT of Hope Adams, in Caliente. A funny name, Hope. But sorta fitting, because she was all his hopes wrapped up in one soft, passionate bundle. Everything that had any meaning to him. Somehow, in a life of moody drifting, he had never had much success with women. They shunned him. But he had had Hope, and would have kept her, if Bix hadn't—

Bix's hand pressed his sharp shoulder blades.

"Let's concentrate on finding the body of ore that's going to make us rich, Lujack. You muck out, then I'll drill. And then old-timer can blast, while I hunt a deer."

The mine was a good one. They'd followed a 200-ounce stringer thirty feet below ground, blasting through solid quartzite that shaded from white to gray. But outcroppings and talc formations indicated a big body of low-grade silver in the hill—an ore pocket. Grosner, experienced prospector, was already married to the claim.

"Where the devil's the shovel?" Lujack growled. He hunted around angrily, until he found the shovel, halfway down the dump where he'd flung it yesterday.

She couldn't help herself. Damned conceited tramp. Forget it. A thing like that!

It came to Lujack, in a flash of blinding anger, that now he would do it!

"Haul up!" he shouted from the shaft bottom. "That's the last." The rock-loaded bucket rose as Bix, above, cranked on the winch.

Then Bix came sliding down the ladder, lamp hissing and shooting white flame.

"Want to show you something," Lujack said, his voice tight.

Bix brushed by, unwrapping his drills.

Lujack looked down the tunnel darkness to the face, forty feet in. "That seam. I think we have a stope behind there."

Bix grunted and knelt to examine the holes he'd drilled yesterday. "It'll keep, if it's there. I want to hunt that deer."

Lujack bit off a snarl. He thought of Hope to keep his emotions in check, and the ugly void within him filled with bright, burning anger. "We might have to drill different, if there's a stope back there."

Bix sighed, and hefted a bar. "Surprised you noticed." He jogged down toward the face of the tunnel.

Lujack picked up a chunk of jagged white quartzite and followed him.

Bix poked a hand into the split that ran from top to bottom of the dark wall of rock. He pressed his cap, with the hissing lamp, into the split and strained to examine it. "Wall falls away after about a foot," he said. "I'll stick the bar in there and see if I can pry something loose."

Lujack stared as the muscles on Bix's back rippled. He recalled the way Hope used to admire those muscles and tell him how clean and strong Bix was.

He saw Bix's back bend against the bar, the muscles leap and strain against the weight of a solid mountain.

He smashed the chunk of quartzite down on Bix's head.

IT BIT through the soft cap, crunched through bone. Bix folded up with a weary sigh, and the iron bar clanged on the tunnel floor.

Lujack stepped back, scalp itching, skin quivery. Then tension and emotion drained away.

It was done.

Now he had to drill the hole, and wire the detonator, before Grosner returned from the spring.

He went to work. Drilling. Finishing the hole in the quartzite tunnel until it was one foot deep. Back-breaking work with a single jack, the four-pound hammer.

Two drill points snapped, and one dulled, and the hole was done. All the
while, Bix was lying there beside him, dead, bleeding on the tunnel floor. Soiled for a change.

Lujack felt dry, his throat clogged, with more than rock dust. Again memories of Hope swept through him. How she used to talk, in almost inaudible whispers, about the way it would be with them. Private and glorious. And how it had been when he and Grosner worked the mine alone—before they cut in Bix because he had a grubstake.

It made him feel grim. Now, he’d get what was his. He’d get her.

He tamped dynamite in the holes and placed the caps. He climbed out of the shaft, to the dump and wired the caps to the detonator, the only modern gadget they owned, that Grosner had picked up from the Army in Las Vegas, and wanted to test today.

He saw Bix’s .30-30, and placed it in a wide crack in the cliff, where it wouldn’t be seen from the dump, and plainly reveal that Bix was here, and not hunting over the ridge.

Then he slid down the ore chute to the canyon bottom.

Soon Grosner’s levi-clad figure came through the pines. A match rotated slowly in the prospector’s mouth. “What’re you doing down here?”

Lujack stiffened. “All set up there.”

He couldn’t confess to a fear of being alone with a dead body. “Been looking over that outcropping there across the canyon. It may be a copper deposit, but it’s just loose stuff.”

Grosner glanced swiftly at the outcropping of black rock. “That’s magnesium, boy, magnesium. Ain’t you learned ore signs yet?”

They climbed the steep trail. Grosner’s hardened legs carried him smoothly up the chute.

“Which way Bix hunt?” he asked, plodding steadily up the slippery groove.

“Straight over the ridge,” Lujack panted.

They clawed up over the dump, and examined the detonator and the loops of
wire and the battery. Grosner peered down the shaft.

"Everything set to blast?"

Lujack licked his lips. "Yeah."

Grosner hunched over the plunger. "Might's well then," he said, and leaned on it.

A MUZZLED roar came from the mouth of the shaft followed by the splintering sound of rock tearing loose in the tunnel. A trickle of dust and smoke came up from the shaft. Rock seemed to patter like rain down below for several seconds. Then it was still.

"Beats lighting a fuse, and then running like hell," Grosner said, pleased. "Where's the shovel?"

Lujack jerked. "I'll muck out." He hurriedly descended the shaft, with a lighted lamp.

The bucket came silently down on the winch cable after him.

In the glare of his lamp, he picked up the shovel and poked around in the blown rock until he found the body. It was littered with gray quartzite dust and chunks of stone.

He screamed, urgently, "Grosner!"

Grosner's boots scraped on the ladder. Then the prospector strode into the light of his lamp.

"What's the matter, boy?"

Lujack shrank against a wall and pointed.

"Blazes!" Grosner's breath sucked in with an explosive sound. He kneeled in the dust.

Flattened against the tunnel wall, Lujack wanted to thrash out, or run, or shout, or cry—he didn't know what. He felt crazy.

"God," Grosner said, "what's Bix doin' down here? What's he doin' back down here?"

Lujack swallowed. "Must have got a deer, and come back to tell us," he said.

He watched Grosner rummage through the rocks, and lift a chunk of quartzite, smeared and bloody. "This tore through his skull," Grosner said.

All the despair in the world seemed to be written in the prospector's seamed, anguished face. . . .

Up above they spread the crushed body on the dump.

Lujack now felt elated. The worst was over, the big step had been taken, and it had worked. The biggest thing he had ever done.

He thought of Hope, the girl in Caliente who would cry a little, moan a little, and then come back to him.

Grosner was staring at the body. His eyes, searching around, found the .30-30 propped in the crack of the cliff and studied it warily. He looked at the detonator, the battery and the wire with a baffled frown. "We couldn't know he was down there," Lujack said.

"Thing puzzles me," Grosner said, "is why Bix didn't unhook the detonator before he went down. That's not like Bix. Now if it had been you . . ."

Lujack swallowed, and started to speak.

Grosner's eyes, boring suddenly like forge-heated steel, stopped him.

"You know why that girl in Caliente turned from you, boy, and took up with Bix?"

Lujack shook his head dumbly.

"You're sloppy, that's why." Grosner's words were hard and sharp. "And murder, boy, is a sloppy way of dealing with a situation."

Lujack felt himself pressed back against the cliff.

You never noticed, did you, that the tunnel shaded from white to gray? That it was white where you mucked out, and gray back at the end where we found Bix's body." He shoved harder. "Gray, boy. But this blood-smeared rock is white. It never came from the blast."

Grosner stepped away, arm drawn back. His voice rang with emotion, fury. "The only way it could have gotten back in the tunnel, and gotten smeared with blood, was for you to carry it back and use it as a club. You lousy little murderer!"

The blow almost tore Lujack's head off.

● ● ●
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Act now to get more of the good things of life. I send actual lessons to prove NRI home training is practical, thorough. My 64-page book “How to Be a Success in Radio-Television” shows what my graduates are doing and earning. It gives important facts about your opportunities in Radio-Television. Take NRI training for as little as $5 a month. Many graduates make more than the total cost of my training in two weeks. Mail coupon now to: J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4GQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 40th Year.

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Amazing New Easy Way Can Quickly Put Pounds & Inches of Firm Solid Flesh On Scrawny Figures

NO CRAMMING WITH SUGARY TONICS, NO FISHY OILS, NO DRUGS, NO OVEREATING

AT LAST! THE ALL-IN-ONE CONCENTRATED MEAL OF EASIER DIGESTED, BODY-BUILDING CALORIES YOU'VE LONG HEARD WAS COMING!

If you are skinny, thin and underweight mail this coupon for this latest discovery of modern medical science. It's called WATE-ON and anyone in normal health may quickly gain 2, 4 as much as 5 lbs. in a week... then 10 pounds, 20 pounds and more so fast it's amazing! Not a medicine, not intended to cure anything. Instead WATE-ON is a new different formula that's pleasant to take as directed and is loaded with concentrated calories so prepared as to be far easier to be used by the system in building wonderful body weight. Cheeks fill out, neck and bust-line gain, arms, legs, thighs, ankles, skinny underweight figures fill out all over the body into graceful curves that draw admiring glances. WATE-ON also improves the appetite, gives quick energy, guards against fatigue, sleepless nights, poor endurance, low resistance. Also makes for better digestion of fats that put on weight naturally. Try WATE-ON today.

Easy Weight Gains of 5 Pounds in 7 Days Reported

Gosh, Jean, you sure are popular since you put on those extra pounds!

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Each daily dosage is as rich in calories as many a skinny person's regular meal.

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WATE-ON is entirely safe, contains no drugs, no stimulants, nothing but a "new and now concentrated food formula that's EXTRARICH... over to assimilate calories with other proven weight building elements.

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Mail the ON APPROVAL coupon below to send for your generous size bottle of new WATE-ON. On arrival pay $3.00 or $5.50 for double size plus C.O.D. postage on the guarantee if the first bottle doesn't increase your weight to your satisfaction all you need do to get your money back is return the empty bottle. Now today... mail the coupon. Youngsters, get mother or dad to order for you.

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WATE-ON COMPANY, Dept. 15J, 230 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, III.
In Canada: WATE-ON Ltd., 320 Jones Avenue, Toronto 6, Ont.

Name: ..........................................................
Address: ......................................................
City: .................................. Zone: .... State: ....

( ) Pay $3.00 for double size plus C.O.D. postage on arrival.
( ) Pay $5.50 for double size plus C.O.D. postage on arrival.

Send one bottle WATE-ON. I'LL pay $3.00 plus C.O.D. postage on arrival on guarantee I must be satisfied with first bottle or money back when I return the empty bottle.

Cash orders mailed postage prepaid.