

Dicks Die Hard by Frederick C. Davis. Dime Detective, May 1948. Words: 13,000

DICKS DIE HARD

By **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**

Her husband's violent exit labeled sultry Paula Vale as red-hot TNT—but who was that handsome lady-killer, Detective-Sergeant Hibbard, to believe in signs?

Dramatic Detective-Mystery Novel



He was aware of Paula's white face—as he swung the bottle.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder Makes a Widow

HE TOPPLED slowly against the wall, stiffened with pain, gripping the phone, the bullet burning deep in his back. The gun behind him was lifted, he knew—poised to fire again. He couldn't see it, or the two faces turned to him—couldn't twist his shock-numbed body.

That deadly pair had him cornered from the rear. They were hunters waiting for their prey to fall—killers waiting with hot breath held, to see whether he needed another bullet.

If only they had left him the strength to speak again he could have told them no—no, one was enough. That first bullet was doing the job. For him, this was all there

was ever going to be.

He was through now. He wouldn't be playing around any more. He'd never take another fragrant, cool drink. He'd seen his last cuddly babe, and now he was very close to drawing his last breath. Here with his face against the cold wall and the heavy phone clenched in his hands, he was about to die. . . .

Rex Hibbard, detective sergeant on the homicide detail, pulled his car into the garage of police headquarters at seven-twenty that morning, having taken his own sweet time about responding to a hurry-up call from his new chief.

On the way he'd decided what the hell, he'd stop for another cup of coffee; one with a shot of rum in it. He not only needed it—he'd only had three so far—he

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also had to think of the principle of the thing.

Quite a lad for principle, this Rex Hibbard. "Look out for yourself, kid, because nobody else will do it for you." That was it, the big payoff principle you acted on unless you were a chump, which he wasn't. Not any more he wasn't. As of right now he had stopped being anybody's chump. From now on, brother. . . .

He left his six-year-old, waxed-up coupe in its usual stall just as six-thousand dollars' worth of silver-plated limousine rolled in from the street, bearing the remains of the late Lewis Vale.

This big black car with the important corpse in it was the reason behind the tension in headquarters this morning, and behind that urgent call from Hibbard's new chief. It was the city's highest-class killing in ten years; and Hibbard was teased by an angle of it having nothing to do with evidence, routine investigation or justice. His special personal slant, as he watched the big black car with a shadowy smile, was the enticing thought that, thanks to the little job of murdering that had been done during the night, Paula Vale's life and apartment were no longer cluttered up with a husband.

Hibbard had seen the luscious Paula more than once, and had admired her in passing—but only in passing, which was as close as a smart lad should ever get to a fireball babe like Paula Vale. This Paula was no doll for an amateur to fool with; she needed to be handled by an expert, as say, an electrician handled wires charged with high voltage. Maybe that was what was wrong with Lewis Vale this morning;

maybe he'd lost his touch and Paula had suddenly turned into a deadly dose of woman.

Ah, yes, a rich subject for speculation, this murder victim's new-made widow—but Hibbard felt fed up with babes this morning. When was he going to learn never to trust these cute little chicks? Deceitful, heartless little she-devils! Like the one last night who had been Hibbard's special date for the past couple of weeks. He'd caught her two-timing him. With her own husband, at that! The hell with such fickle frills. He was off 'em for keeps, the little witches.

As the Vale car rolled to a stop with its dead cargo, Hibbard moved toward it—a natty lad with a cocky manner calculated to stimulate the babes' curiosity.

The slight habitual smile of a ready wisecracker which he usually wore was not with him this morning. He had turned sour for a change, doubly so, and not merely over last night's babe either, but for a second reason also, which was right here right now. He had put on a poker face to conceal his rankling resentment as he guided his shiny new bluchers past the oil-drips on the cement floor with no haste to report to the man at the wheel of the Vale death car.

THAT was Lieutenant Danwood, brand new head of the homicide detail, a big bear of a guy with grayed temples, thoughtful deep-set eyes and an air of careful deliberation. "Hiya, Hib," he said amiably, ducking out.

"Good morning, sir," Hibbard answered, with all due formality.

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For that Danwood gave him a look. “Where do you get that ‘sir’ stuff? My promotion definitely doesn’t call for that, Hib. We’ve been working together on the same squad for years, haven’t we? Well, we still are, pretty much the same as before.” He smiled with fraternal good humor. “You’ll have to watch yourself on this case, Hib. There are a couple of classy skirts mixed up in it, including the hottest glamour girl in town, Paula Vale.”

“She’s also the hottest poison in town, that Vale babe,” Hibbard said shortly. “Any guy would be asking for plenty of grief if he got himself mixed up with her—especially after this morning.”

Eying the car with the dead man in it, Danwood said, “Yeah, I see what you mean. Just between you and me, Hib, it scares me, the way this big-shot case has hit us my very first morning on my new job.”

Hibbard said stiffly, a subtly derisive edge on his voice, “And orders, sir?”

Danwood’s smile faded slowly. A peace-loving guy, Danwood. The slippers-and-pipe type. Slow to anger on the job. Slow on his feet, and also, Hibbard reflected, slow in the head. Had to mull things over, like a cow masticating a cud, before he could decide where he was. So late on the uptake, he wasn’t sure when he was being needled, as Hibbard was needling him now, slyly and bitterly.

“Who killed him, chief?”

“It’s a little early yet for that question, Hib,” Danwood went on quietly. “All we know so far is that Vale got it while he was sitting in his car near his apartment on Prince Street around two or three this

morning. The case is wide open for us to suspect practically everybody who knew Vale. Ned’s going to check his connections and finances. You’ll look into the family angle.”

His lips twisting a little, Hibbard said, “Sure, chief, I’ll look into that.”

He opened the black door of the death car, turning his back on Danwood. Danwood let it pass again, but with a glitter in his eyes, making a note of it for future reference.

“Frisk him,” he said evenly, watching Hibbard. “We’ll shift him into the morgue after you’ve finished.”

Hibbard paused inside the tonneau with his head ducked down for a close look at the husband whom Paula Vale would presently bury with appropriate tears.

Since the scene of Lewis Vale’s murder happened to be a movable one—the car, that is—he had been brought here inside it as a convenience. In all other ways he had been left untouched.

He wore shiny brown boots, custom-tailored breeches and a green hound’s-tooth jacket, plus an ascot—and it didn’t belong on him, alive or dead. He’d had dough and a mysterious sort of power in his flashy circles, but no breeding.

The trick clothes and the small hour of his death indicated a late party among the horsey set. Earlier in the day the elegant Lew Vale, ex-bartender, had no doubt been riding to hounds and at present the hounds of hell were no doubt riding him. The face he had once had wasn’t there any more—he’d taken a savage beating all over his head with something that had left smashed-in hollows.

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“Probably his own riding crop,” a voice said at Hibbard’s shoulder. “Weapon’s missing.”

Hibbard ignored the voice, having slipped a hand smoothly inside the corpse’s technicolor coat. Shielding himself with his bent back from the dick in the front seat, and from Danwood as well, Hibbard brought out Lew Vale’s wallet. Hand-tooled morocco it was. A billfold fat with upper-bracket folding money, and a portable picture-frame combined. Opening it, Hibbard saw the photograph he had hoped to find. Paula Vale looked up at him.

Huddled over beside her lifeless husband, Hibbard sought to plumb the cryptic depths of the woman’s dark eyes. Dark yet luminous, like a moonlit night—a world of their own inviting secret adventures, veiled with hints of daring and danger. Dark portals through which to glimpse darker temptations that stirred an electrical tingling through Hibbard’s whole body.

THE voice from the front seat was repeating, “Weapon’s missing, Hib. Probably his own riding crop. If so, it was grabbed away and the hard end turned on him so fast he never had a chance to hit back. A murder of passion, brother, this one, and they do say, as to Mrs. Vale—Well, we’re still looking for his missing crop and hoping to find a clear print or two on it.”

This was Ned Larkin speaking. The youngest member of the squad, just up from the uniformed ranks earlier this year, he looked and acted more like a typical

college grind than a dick. He had a lean and hungry look, stooped shoulders, owl-like glasses on a poetic face—and a notebook. Always a notebook. Always jotting down everything observed in that eternal notebook of his, burying a few pertinent facts under a profusion of useless detail. Flipping through his notebook pages now, he frowned over his shoulder at Hibbard.

“You listening to this, Hib?”

Hibbard answered, “Sure, oh sure, I’m fascinated,” as his eyes played over the face of Paula Vale. This was a color photo of his wife that Lew Vale had carried with him everywhere, even to the brink of death, and the color made alluringly soft and real the coral red of her mouth. Lips touched with highlights, curved slightly with a glimmer of a smile, parted a little as if on a whispered word—a secret word murmured for no one in the world but the man to whom her dark eyes were giving themselves.

“Fascinated,” Hibbard repeated softly, and Ned Larkin, not knowing what he really meant, went on:

“Nobody’s been questioned yet. He wasn’t found until about an hour ago—although the news is buzzing all around, of course. Lots of nice people in town, and some others not so nice, are waiting right now for a dick to come knocking on their door and hoping he won’t. First on your list, Hib, is Mrs. Lydia Kingsland. The late Mr. Vale and wife spent last evening, or most of it, at Mrs. Kingsland’s place, so that’s where Mrs. Vale’s alibi is, if anywhere.”

“Not quite the first on my list,” Hibbard

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said, mostly to himself. "Not quite the first on *my* list."

He had slipped the likeness of Paula Vale from its morocco pocket; and now, unseen by Larkin, he eased it snugly from sight inside his coat. After all, it wasn't evidence. Backing from the car then, he turned to Lieutenant Danwood, who had stood there wordless all the while, and he proffered the wallet, without that provocative picture. He also gave him a matching leather case containing several costly custom-built cigars, and an unsurprising assortment of keys, change and other oddments.

"Nothing important in his pockets, sir," he reported to Danwood. "I understand I'm to check Mrs. Vale's alibi, sir?"

Big Lieutenant Danwood's jaw tightened a little. "Look, Hib, things shouldn't be so different between us now. The fact that I've been picked to head homicide means I'm going to rely on you as my Number One man. So let's forget that yes-chief formality and get going on this case as a pair of cops and old friends should. You know I mean it, so shall we, Hib?"

Hibbard eyed him for a moment with a face acridly set. So he was supposed to go right on being palsy-walsy with this guy who had crowded him out. He had every reason to hate this big ape's guts, but no, he was supposed to slap his shoulder and drool with good will.

Hell, every man on the force knew why Danwood had been named top man of homicide instead of Hibbard. It was because Danwood was married to the commissioner's niece. There was plenty of

gripping about it in the locker room. "Never mind building up a good record, boys. The way to get places on this man's police force is to marry into the commissioner's family. But unfortunately for us good old Danny has cut us out—the commissioner has no daughters and no more nieces, either."

Sure, every fair-minded guy in headquarters knew Danwood was too plodding and uninspired for his new job; they all knew Rex Hibbard had the stuff for it. Danwood's appointment had been posted on the bulletin board only last evening. Along with the others, Hibbard had gripped Danwood's hand and offered congrats on his splendid promotion and all that sort of guff—and the taste on his tongue had been brassy indeed.

The very first thing that had to happen, of course, was a top-flight homicide dropped into Danwood's lap so he could strut his stuff and pull that corny we're-all-one-big-happy-family line. "Let's forget the trifling matter of my superior rank and boosted salary, dear old chum of mine." Damned generous of him! Downright magnanimous!

"Oh, sure, chief, let's forget it," Hibbard answered with the same unyielding respectfulness, smooth and straight-faced and defiantly mocking.

A FROWN settled over Danwood's deep-set eyes. "All right, Hib. You don't need orders from me to know what to do, but since you seem to expect them—Check with Mrs. Kingsland on Mrs. Vale's whereabouts for all of last night, especially after midnight—and keep an ear cocked,

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of course, for any kind of a boyfriend. While Ned's taking the dead husband from every angle, in other words, you can do the same with the widow."

"Take her?" Hibbard said, beginning to grin. "*Those* aren't orders, I hope, sir. I'm no dope; and besides, I value my health." He swung away with his cocky stride, his grin growing. . . .

Hibbard breezed past the cops stationed at the Prince Street corner on orders of Commissioner Munro. They were keeping the murder scene clear of curious neighbors and tough-talking kids from the bottom of the avenue. Two more members of the detail, Ronney and Hauser, having outlined the position of the death car with chalk lines on the pavement, were working now with tapeline and camera—as if such stuff mattered.

Hibbard thought it was more interesting to notice that at the moment of Vale's death, his big car had been parked more than half a block east of his apartment, in a nice, unfrequented spot where a clandestine date might be kept after midnight—a sweet but short one, but worth the while.

Letting his confreres go on working, earnest and uninterrupted with their chalk and lens, Hibbard parked his coupe and strolled toward the apartment where Lew Vale wouldn't be coming home any more. As Hibbard knew, having been inside it on several occasions on official business, it was the largest in this elegant white stone building—a duplex affair of twelve rooms and eight baths occupying half the two lowest floors.

Signaling his way past another cop

posted at an iron gate, Hibbard went along an arborescenced passageway leading into the elaborately landscaped private court in the rear. A fountain's streams caressed frisky cupids and gay awnings and umbrellas shaded the lounging chairs and shrub-bordered nooks. And in his first few moments there, Lady Luck tipped her hand to Hibbard—he made two discoveries at almost the same time, both offering a special promise.

The first was a bright golden glitter in the morning sunlight. Other dicks searching before Hibbard had missed it, perhaps because the sun's angle wasn't right for them. The gleaming reflection guided him to a low window overlooking the court. He reached up and into a flower-box affixed to the sill just above eye level and took the golden glitter into his fingers. As he brought it down it became the late Lew Vale's riding crop.

The blackened crusts on its leather-bound handle verified the theory that Danwood had expressed to Larkin. It was the weapon of murder. Heavy, Hibbard noted, helfting it by its fine leather loop. Unusually heavy. It was weighted with a solid lead core, actually a blackjack in fancy disguise. Hidden quickly—pushed under the leaves and loose soil of the flower-box immediately following the murder by a killer desperate to get rid of it and get gone.

Then, lifting his gaze farther, Hibbard made his second discovery—this one more electrifying than the first—Paula Vale's dark eyes. He found them staring out at him. The oval of her face was dim in the shadow behind the glass; her lips were

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open, as if on a silent gasp. Startled to find him there, dismayed to see the crop in his possession—but not afraid. She was motionless as she watched him, her eyes dark yet bright with their cryptic shine, but without fear.

He held the bloodied crop in his fingers as he gazed up at her. He began to swing the weapon of murder lightly back and forth, speculating and watching the pale face of the victim's widow, and smiling a little.

CHAPTER TWO So Fair in Black

HE LEANED stiffly against the hard cold wall, the nails of his right hand scratching the plaster in his effort to hold himself on his feet, the phone clenched in his left, the bullet a lump of flame embedded in his back.

It had come so swiftly, only a few seconds ago, and it had come true, so that that one solitary bullet would be enough. It had come dead-center to the killers' target, shattering his life with its impact. There wasn't much left for him now. He was already half way through the process of dying and the rest of it shouldn't take long. Just a few more seconds—a few more.

Nothing was left for him except the final words he wanted to speak—if only he could get up the strength to push them past his pain-pinched lips. He wanted to speak them into the phone, but the phone was so heavy. It was slowly pulling his left hand lower and lower; he could hardly hold onto it any longer.

He felt somehow that if only he could manage to speak those words, someone on the other end of the line might hear him. Even now he thought vaguely that there was a voice reaching toward him from the receiver—"Hello? . . . Hello?" But he couldn't lift the phone, couldn't force the words out of his mouth and over the line.

And those two were still standing behind him—that murderous pair. They were still watching him, waiting for him to pitch lifeless to the floor. The gun that had already driven one deadly bullet into his body remained poised to sink another into his back in case they decided he wasn't dying quite fast enough. . . .

Hibbard gazed up at the woman behind the glass, smiling as he lightly held the weapon of murder that had been used to beat the life out of her husband.

Still smiling slightly, he moved aside then, as if heading for her door. But he had no intention of going in. Not just yet. He figured he'd have nothing to lose by keeping her guessing. Tease 'em—that was the way babes should be handled. Not a startlingly original technique, of course, but effective—especially, Hibbard thought, when mixed with fresh murder.

Paula Vale had seen him with the lead-loaded crop in his hands and at this moment she was listening for him—waiting, tense with dreadful expectations, for him to knock at her door. And he wasn't coming. Not just yet. He had something else to do first.

He slid back into his coupe and when he eased it off, the smile lingering on his lips, the weapon was tucked under the floormat. He had only six blocks to drive.

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He braked at a small English provincial house in a high-bracket neighborhood favored by those who had to rake in fifty or sixty grand a year in order to break even on expenses. This one was just the Kingsland's city place, just an occasional convenience; they lived on a two-hundred-acre suburban estate complete with stables and grooms. Unlike the Vales, the Kingslands had been born to it; anything less would have seemed unnatural to them.

Hibbard's badge induced the manservant to conduct him into the music room where two maids were still straightening the mess left by last night's festivities. Looking like part of it waiting to be swept up, James Kingsland, a dissipated thirty who looked forty, had propped himself against the Steinway grand while his wife, still in jodhpurs and sweater, grabbed handfuls of random chords off the keys. She eyed Hibbard warily and stopped, full of candid anxiety and confusion.

"We don't know anything," she began without preliminary. "You could've knocked me flat with an olive pit when I heard it. But don't expect me to tell you who polished him off, because I just wouldn't know."

"But Lewis Vale got it while your party was still on, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard reminded her, noticing that her husband seemed willing to let her do the talking. "Didn't you notice he'd strayed off somewhere?"

"We missed him, certainly," Mrs. Kingsland answered, toying with an empty whiskey-sour glass. "I noticed his car was gone, too, but Paula couldn't say where

he'd gone or why. She phoned their apartment but couldn't raise an answer. I drew blanks in all directions, nothing but blanks. We asked Paula to stay here all night, and she did, and still Lew didn't turn up.

"Then, hours later, the elevator boy in their building phoned. Alden, the kid's name is. Said he was on his way to work when he saw the Vale car sitting in this unusual spot, so he looked in. That gave me the nice little duty of telling Paula that Lew had finally been found, pretty damn dead."

"In a case of this sort we automatically check on the wife first, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard said. "Regrettable, but strictly routine, even when she's obviously in the clear. If you can assure me that Mrs. Vale didn't leave your party at any time during her husband's absence. . . ."

"I can't assure you of anything about it," Mrs. Kingsland put in flatly. "Twenty guests milling around, getting themselves oiled, sneaking off into dark corners—my Lord, who can say who was where and when during yesterday evening?"

Did this observation include James Kingsland, Hibbard wondered? Had the host himself been a little elusive and hard to account for at moments? Hibbard gazed poker-faced at him and saw Kingsland's sensitive nostrils twitch in alarm.

A smooth lad, this Kingsland—a fine specimen of degenerate nobility, in his way. A guy having nothing to do with his life except play—and play around. In case the babe's husband happened to be a friend of his, he wouldn't let that fact occasion him too much hesitancy either.

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HIBBARD figured this angle wouldn't be news to Lydia Kingsland; so he listened carefully as the sophisticated Lydia went on, wondering just how far her sophistication could take it.

"For example, I've no way of knowing how long Lew had been gone before we began missing him. It seems to me now there was a period in there, pretty late in the proceedings, when I don't remember Paula's being around. But then, that goes for everybody else as well."

This was it, Hibbard recognized—a crucial point. It would make a terrific difference to Paula Vale.

It went back to the fact that Lew Vale had been slugged lifeless in the *rear* seat of his car. Why the rear seat instead of the front?

Hibbard didn't think it was Vale who had driven his car from Kingsland's town house over to that dark spot on Prince Street, there to keep a brief rendezvous with some other person, and shift from the steering wheel to the rear seat. Hibbard couldn't see that—not on the part of a man of Vale's resources, who would never have been at a loss to arrange a secret meeting more comfortably than that.

Paula might have had a little trouble with such an arrangement, though. To Hibbard's mind, knowing women and their secret ways as well as he did, it seemed more likely that it was Paula Vale who had slipped away from the party, Paula who had been surprised there in the car by a suspicious husband. Very possibly Lew Vale had overheard a whisper of his wife's at the party, or had eavesdropped on a

phone message. If he had trailed her last night, he had caught her with the goods—"the goods" being some guy she liked too much.

There must have been one other explosive element in the picture, an element which Hibbard couldn't even guess at just now—something that had caused it to burst out in murder.

At this critical moment the thing depended entirely on Mrs. Kingsland's statement. Let Mrs. Kingsland say, "Oh, yes, now I remember—Paula *was* gone from here for a while," and it could mean Paula's trial and possibly her conviction for her husband's murder. Once a single seed of fact was planted in this blood-wet soil of murder—the fact called "opportunity"—this theory would sprout and wind its coils around her and perhaps pull her down to her doom.

Mrs. Kingsland, eyeing Hibbard uneasily, herself recognized the decisive importance of her position. She was a frank young woman, one of inbred independence, conscious of the forces of friendship, but hardly willing to use her own neck to cover a murderer—except possibly her husband.

"You'll be asked to come down to headquarters a little later to sign a written statement, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard informed her. He added, "You too, Mr. Kingsland," which caused the princely young man to wince. "Meanwhile you'll probably get it cleared up in your mind. As you say, you can't possibly swear that everybody was here all the while last night. But on the other hand, can you swear that any one person was definitely

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gone off the place, except Mr. Vale himself?"

"Why, no, I can't," Mrs. Kingsland said. "Why, I wouldn't dream of saying that Paula *did* slip out, because I've no way in the world of being sure about it either way."

"Naturally, Mrs. Kingsland," Hibbard pointed out to her, "we want to nail the killer without making any unnecessary trouble for innocent people. As far as you can say, then, Mrs. Vale acted just the same as any one else last night. Everybody was here playing around and drinking, having a fine time with never a hint—"

"Not the slightest hint," Mrs. Kingsland broke in, sounding relieved. "The news about Lew came as a terrible shock. It's being horrible for Paula, poor kid. She's really *such* a lovely girl."

"Makes it tough, mighty tough sometimes, when such nice people get mixed up in such an ugly business through no fault of their own. A jury might let itself be influenced by a beautiful face, but we cops—" Hibbard flashed a friendly smile—"we've got to be hard-hearted. Well, now, lacking any definite knowledge to the contrary, are you prepared to state that Mrs. Vale did not leave your party at any time during last evening?"

"Yes, I am," Mrs. Kingsland added decisively. "I certainly am ready to say that to the best of my knowledge as hostess, Paula was here all the time. You've helped *so* much to clear up the situation, and I'd like to say also that you're being just as nice about it as any detective possibly could. There, that settles that. I do feel a hell of a lot better than I

did when you came in."

James Kingsland felt relieved also, Hibbard noted—in fact, he seemed almost dizzy, now that the tension was suddenly off.

"Jimmy, darling, make me another whisky sour," Lydia Kingsland said, holding her empty glass toward him. So sure of her favorable position now, thanks to Hibbard's subtle cueing, she had forgotten how honestly uncertain she had been only a few moments ago. "How about joining us in a wee spot, Sergeant?"

"Thanks a lot," Hibbard said with his most captivating grin. "You'll ask me again, I hope. You see, I'm on duty now. . . ."

THE doorman at the Eden Apartments on Prince Street, mummylike in his loose-fitting uniform, recognized Hibbard as a detective at sight. He turned immediately to the house switchboard and was in the act of sinking a plug into Paula Vale's extension when Hibbard's sharp "No!" froze him. He shrugged resignedly and Hibbard strolled closer, idly swinging the late Lew Vale's riding crop by its loop.

"Never mind announcing me, Pop," Hibbard said pleasantly. "I'll tell her I'm coming when I get there. Maybe she'll be more surprised that way."

Hibbard strolled on toward the elevator. A mousy woman had stepped into the car a second ago, opening a letter just received.

"Oh, bother," the woman said petulantly, reading a scrawled page. "Clarence said he can't get back home until the end of next week. Oh, dear, Alden, I'm so disappointed; it's being so

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lonely for me.”

Her scratchy voice and eager glance at the elevator attendant earned a lifted eyebrow from Hibbard. She had doused herself so liberally with heliotrope perfume that the very air reeled, costly as the stuff was.

The operator, Alden, Hibbard decided, was doomed to have many such problems with such scarecrows. This lad, who had reported Vale’s death, was so handsome it hurt Hibbard to look at him—golden blond hair lovely waved by Mother Nature, a profile that would have given Apollo an inferiority complex and a physique that made him a dream walking to females of all ages.

Wasting himself here, Hibbard felt—he should have been, if not a star on the screens of the nation’s movie temples, at least the captain of ushers in one of them. But he seemed able to size up his customers with a keen eye. He stopped the car at the second floor without having asked where Hibbard was bound.

The elevator continued upward with the heliotrope-drenched crone and its beautiful pilot, leaving Hibbard in the vestibule of the Vale apartment. Its door was closed. Hibbard heard a voice through it—Paula Vale’s normally husky voice unnaturally raised in a rage.

“Operator, I’ve had enough of these calls! The damn bell hasn’t stopped ringing all morning. If you can’t cut the connection there, then the damn phone is going out of order right here—and *don’t* send a man around to fix it!”

Smiling, Hibbard heard the taut tearing sound of the cord being yanked from its

moorings and the clatter as Paula Vale flung the instrument to the floor. He had quietly pushed the door open and now, stepping in, he caught her giving the phone a furious kick. She ran her long-nailed hands dextrously into her loose russet hair—and then she saw Hibbard.

She lowered her hands slowly across her white face, her dark eyes fixed on him steadily. “How’d you get in here?” she said hoarsely. “I left orders downstairs. Everybody’s supposed to be kept out.”

“I’m different,” Hibbard said, his voice quiet. “I’m a dick. I get places where ordinary guys can only hope to get.”

Her eyes dropped to the crop in his hands. They recoiled from it, yet they were held in shaking cold fascination. Her chin quivered, and after a moment she forced her eyes to lift from the weapon back to Hibbard’s.

“You don’t remember me, Mrs. Vale,” he said, taunting overtones in his voice. “I was the detective who guarded your room full of wedding gifts the day you married Lew Vale. Then there was another time you received a few threatening letters from a crank, when I was ordered to—” his grin slowly grew—“be your bodyguard.”

“Of—of course I remember you,” she said, short of breath.

Hibbard shook his head. “No, you don’t, Mrs. Vale—you really don’t remember me any more than you remember the clerk that sold you your last dozen pair of nylons. But maybe I’ll make a little stronger impression on you this time.”

The color was returning to Paula Vale’s cheeks; she was finding a new grip on

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herself. "I don't like being walked in on, the way you just did. You gave me a scare."

"No need to be scared of me, Mrs. Vale," Hibbard said smoothly, moving forward. "It's true the reason I'm back this time is a little more serious, considering the fact that your husband's been murdered—but you didn't do it, did you?"

Her dark eyes still fixed on his, she said hoarsely, "No!"

"But you know who did."

"I don't know anything about it. How could I? I was at the Kingsland's every minute of the night."

"Sure," Hibbard said, his grin growing a little. "Sure you were. Every little minute. I wouldn't have it any other way, either. . . . Besides, you look so beautiful in black."

He swung the crop by its loop and strolled past her. It was like passing a transfixed bolt of lightning. He felt her eyes on him, heard her small feet pacing after him, step for step, as he moved through a living room where it seemed a Hollywood set-designer must have outdone himself.

He turned along a hallway, glancing into the rooms as he passed them—all lushly decorated, all empty. His pulse was in high; he was scarcely aware of anything except Paula Vale's palpitant presence as she followed him.

They went down curving stairs into a game room that somehow missed the artificiality of the others and became real. It might have been lifted bodily out of an eighteenth-century inn. Worn wooden stools were lined up at the ancient walnut-railed bar. Paula Vale went behind it. Her

white hands moved quickly. Ice tinkled in thin crystal, soda fizzed and she proffered to Hibbard an expertly mixed drink—smiling.

Not touching it, he watched her until at last, a vein beating fast in her throat, she lowered it to the bar, her smile gone again. Hibbard's tour of the apartment had told him that Paula was alone here, entirely alone. He liked that part of it, too. It could be arranged again. As a cop he could fix that easily. This babe was poison, sure—but the right kind of poison for him, the kind he could take and like.

As she gazed at the black-cruled crop in his hands—the weapon of her husband's murder which he had kept gently swinging, swinging, swinging—he drew out his handkerchief and slowly wiped it over the leather handle, obliterating any fingerprints that might have been left on it.

Her red lips parted on a silent gasp and her eyes flew to his, feverishly shining.

He said softly, "Now let's talk things over—shall we?"

CHAPTER THREE

Dark Watch

THE bullet, hot and deep in his back, was sucking all his strength into itself. Devouring even his power to stand on his feet, it was letting him slide lower and lower against the slippery wall. And the phone in his left hand had become an almost insupportable weight.

He heard it twanging at him, "Hello? That you, Hib? Hello, Hib?"

He had had the phone at his ear when the bullet stabbed in, close to his spine. He

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had finished dialing headquarters' number and had said crisply to the switchboard operator, "Hibbard calling Danwood—and snap it up."

Danwood hadn't yet answered when the unsuspected gun behind Hibbard had cracked out. The shock of it jumbled his senses; he couldn't be sure whose voice it was in the receiver, rasping at him now. But no matter who it might be, he had news to give—the answer to this murder case.

He knew the two killers were crowding closer behind him, cornering him, watching as he tried to pull the phone upward toward his mouth. He knew his attempt was inviting a second bullet from the gun that was poised at his back; but he tried. The one more thing he wanted to accomplish, the one last thing before he died, was to nail his own murderers.

His lips were drawn tight across his teeth and his fist was clenched white on the phone. He dragged it slowly upward while the deadly gun watched with a black, forbidding stare. . . .

Hibbard wore an ironical grin when he proffered the murder weapon, hung from one finger by its loop, to Danwood.

"Found it in the street, right there where it had already been looked for," Hibbard said, lips curling as he watched Danwood's troubled face. "In a crack in the cement in the gutter, wedged down probably by one of our own cars in passing."

Frowning, Danwood poked a pencil through the leather loop and lowered the crop gingerly to his desk.

"Hardly any use putting it through the

lab, though," Hibbard added, subtly ridiculing Danwood's carefulness. "There probably isn't a usable print on it. Chances are a thousand to one against pulling a clear print off leather like that."

"I know," Danwood agreed.

"As for Mrs. Vale's alibi, sir," Hibbard continued, his tone still distant, "it's plenty solid. Mr. and Mrs. James Kingsland will sign a statement saying positively that Mrs. Vale never left their place all night—and can we argue with their mountain of dough?"

Danwood said, "Okay, Hib, sit down," and swiveled his chair to include Ned Larkin in the report.

Poring over his eternal notebook like a Phi Beta cramming for an exam, Larkin sat beside his chief's desk. The tension drawn up by the Vale murder could be felt throughout headquarters, but most sharply here in the drab-walled homicide bureau.

"Ned's been checking Vale's connections, as you know, Hib," Danwood said. "He picked up a little information about Mrs. Vale along the way. He tells me—"

Hibbard interrupted resentfully. "What's the idea, Ned, cutting in on my angle? What are you trying to do, work yourself up to a better job on merit? If so, it's high time you put yourself wise to the way they handle promotions on this force, chump."

Danwood flushed and Larkin turned pale. For a moment both of them simply stared at Hibbard, startled by his swift, heated two-way thrust.

Danwood said then, evenly, "Ned wasn't trying to crowd you over, Hib.

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When he was talking to Vale's friends, he found a few logical openings to ask about Mrs. Vale, too, that's all. Naturally he couldn't pass them up. What I'd started to tell you was that the information Ned picked up won't do Mrs. Vale any harm."

Hibbard listened with well-concealed relief as Larkin explained, in his thin voice, "That's right, Hib. Talking with various men about Vale's business connections, from the mayor down to a handfull of stoolies, I just mentioned that maybe they'd seen Mrs. Vale stepping out now and then when her husband was too busy otherwise. Well, it surprised me no end to hear every one of 'em say that the only man anybody ever saw her giving her time to was Vale himself."

HIDING his own surprise, Hibbard said, "So she's a dame who looks super-charged but happens to be on the level, is that it? Just a little homebody after all! Maybe she's too smart to let any talk get around for her husband's friends to smack their lips over. Maybe she's been hiding a guy right along, a sweetie-pie that nobody else ever tumbled to—except maybe Vale himself last night.

"Personally I wouldn't know, but I wouldn't trust her one damn inch if it weren't for the fact that her alibi is leak proof. So if anybody has it in mind to ask me, I think she's scratched off our list of suspects and the whole thing boils down to the obvious setup."

Danwood said—not seeming aware that Hibbard was glibly showing him up—"Obvious, Hib?"

"Yes, sir, if I may venture an opinion,

sir," Hibbard said, a faint derisive curl on his lips. "The key question is—where did Vale get his dough? Nobody's even been able to find out exactly, and I doubt that we'll ever uncover more of the story now. In a general way, though, we know he was tied up with slot machines, the numbers racket, and a few fancy dens around town, and we believe, but can't prove, he was head man for all the bookies in the city.

"In a setup like that, as soon as a hotshot gets too big for his striped pants, or as soon as another guy with ambition decides to move up on him, then murder's inevitable. That's elementary, of course, sir, and I believe that's the answer, in a general way." Hibbard's smile grew subtly more derisive. "How soon do you think we'll pin it on some specific guy, chief?"

Danwood said in pained tones, "Look, Hib. Please drop that 'chief' stuff now. And leave out the sirs. For years, until yesterday, I was always Danny to you. Don't hold anything against me that I can't help."

Hibbard kept the taunting smile fixed on his face and said nothing. An expression of sadness, of heart-sickness, settled like a shadow on Danwood's face; and after a moment Ned Larkin broke the embarrassed silence by clearing his throat.

"What you said, Hib, about the question of where Vale's money came from—that's important, all right. But even more important, I think, is the question of where it went. He pulled in plenty and paid out plenty, but that still leaves plenty more unaccounted for."

Danwood took it up, watching Hibbard's face go poker-blank. "He lived

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high, as everyone knows, and spent it almost as fast as it came in, but he must have cached a good sockful away somewhere.

“The puzzle is where. All his bank accounts stayed at a conservative level. He had only one safe deposit box, joint with his wife, and we’ve found nothing in it but a respectable man’s papers—no cash. He *must* have left a trunkful of coin tucked away in some odd corner—and it may mean something in this case.”

Hibbard almost horselaughed out loud at that big dimwit of a Danwood. Mean something? It was the most vital segment of the puzzle; it was the added extra quality in the murder of Lew Vale—the dynamite that Hibbard had been looking for. Suppose Vale had kept his cache of dough a secret even from his luscious little home-girl of a wife—and then suppose Vale had overheard Paula scheming with some sharp guy ways and means of uncovering it and skipping together with it.

Once Paula had made the mistake of unwittingly tipping her mitt to her husband about it, he would boot the witch out in sheer self defense, and her only chance of getting her lovely little mitts on the swag would be to kill him. . . .

“I doubt that Vale would let anybody in on his private sugar-bowl,” Danwood added thoughtfully, “so maybe he had a built-in safe hidden in some odd corner in his apartment. I’m going over there right now with a search warrant. Meanwhile Ned will look deeper into Vale’s connections—and Hib, I want you to keep a close eye on Mrs. Vale.”

“A pleasure, sir, of a certain kind—like watching the cobras in the zoo,” Hibbard said.

Damned little hot-head, Paula Vale, for tearing out her phone! Without it Hibbard couldn’t get through to her in a hurry. He might have slipped a tip to her ahead of Danwood, but as it was, she’d have to run her chances. Not that she was afraid to run them. Risks were her meat. She didn’t know the meaning of fear, that audacious little—

“Watching yourself, Hib?” Danwood asked, rising, clumsily trying to make it sound like a pal’s joshing. “Not letting yourself fall for Paula, are you?”

“Not me,” Hibbard said shortly, touching him with a sharp glance. “I’m through playing myself for a sucker over babes. With Paula Vale I’d be the worst sort of chump. She’s way up out of my class, that doll. Besides, she’s either an angel—or she’s murder—and who knows which?”

Sure, chief. He wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot pole, chief. Not any faster than he could get there by running. . . .

“THE funeral,” the *Herald* had said, “will be private.” The chapel was mobbed by the invited and the uninvited. Mayor Hasman sat up front with his family, hog-fat, looking as greasily grief-stricken as if he’d lost a brother. Twenty-odd officials of lesser rank, some of them in honest sorrow, were also present. The classier grade of bookie was represented, as was the better-dressed of muscleman who had loyally cracked skulls for Vale when business policy called for it.

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The city's riff-raff, who had paid Vale their dimes and pennies in the hope of winning it back some day, stood massed and bare-headed on the steps and the sidewalks. And the focal point of this reverent ritual was not only the man lying dead on the dais, but also the woman garbed so beautifully in black who sat dry-eyed facing the closed casket.

Lewis Vale could not be seen by his admirers today, his murderers having done too thorough a job of beating his face in.

Standing at the side of the chapel while the organ sang its lament, Rex Hibbard dutifully watched the widow and scanned the faces of the mourners. Among them were minds buzzing with conjecture, of course: *Did she kill him? Did she really do it?*

The ghost of a smile on Hibbard's mouth, not quite appropriate to the occasion, was his own answer to that question. Who the hell cared who'd knocked the guy off? Not Hibbard. Let Danwood the plodder and Larkin the note-scribbler worry about that.

Now the service was ended and the pallbearers, including the sweating mayor, were lugging the casket up the aisle. Floral offerings were being piled high in the cars behind the hearse when Hibbard went to an official car at the end of the procession. He ducked inside it to find Danwood there, looking baffled, and Ned Larkin with his inseparable notebook.

"Just dropped over from Vale's apartment, Hib," Danwood explained heavily. "Thought I'd have a little freer hand with my search warrant if I poked around while Paula was out burying her

husband."

"Sweet setup there, if a little odd," Larkin put in admiringly. "An apartment just like a movie set in a building where the doorman's a living skeleton and the elevator boy smells of heliotrope."

"The elevator boy—?" Hibbard paused to add thoughtfully, "Hmmm."

Danwood went on, "But if Vale left a hoard of dough tucked into any odd corner of that apartment, I didn't get a smell of it."

Hibbard felt his pulse accelerating as Larkin added, "Might be outside somewhere. Maybe under the base of one of those statues in the fountains, or buried in the garden somewhere. Look, Danny. We're not sure yet whether there *is* any coin cached away; or if there is, we're not sure whether it ties in with the murder; so maybe our best play is to sit tight and keep an eye cocked for somebody else to start trying to sniff it out."

Hibbard swore silently at Larkin, the bright lad with the notebook; but Danwood nodded.

"I've had that in mind. That's one reason, Hib, why I won't want you to let Paula Vale slip out of your sight. When she turns in tonight, knock off; then we'll start tailing her again tomorrow. With the funeral off her mind then, something may begin to cook."

"Don't give it another thought, chief," Hibbard said. "She won't get away from me if I can help it. If something begins cooking, I'll be around."

The funeral procession had started. Danwood and Larkin slipped out of the police car, leaving it to Hibbard. He rolled

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along toward Vale's last resting place, bored with the gaudy process of disposing of him. But Hibbard could be patient. A moment would come, he promised himself, which would not be boring. . . .

At the mausoleum, when Vale's casket was slid at last into a bronze-doored niche, the funeral party began to scatter. Half a dozen of the cars still followed Paula Vale's. Hibbard's was one of them. He trailed them to the apartment building on Prince Street. He sat in his car below the Vale windows, and watched and waited.

It grew dark while Mrs. Vale's friends remained inside, consoling her in her bereavement with the help of her velvet-smooth scotch. The Kingslands were the first to leave. The convivial evening moved on, crawling for Hibbard, with a car rolling away now and again; and Hibbard waited, keeping an eye on Mrs. Vale as ordered by his superior officer.

Finally—a little past midnight now—the last of Paula Vale's fellow sorrowers drove off. As the car disappeared at the corner, Hibbard slid out. He watched the apartment again and saw the lights in the living room upstairs blink out. Windows darkening in groups, one after another, marked Paula's movements from room to room as she left darkness behind her. No lights remained on now except those in Paula's bedroom and those in the game room downstairs. She was alone there again, probably lingering over a drink—entirely alone once more.

Hibbard crossed the street, quietly opened the iron gate and followed the dark passage into the court. Through another lighted window he could see Paula now.

She was standing beside the bar, slender fingers curled around a tall drink, her face lifted and pale as her dark eyes peered all around, searching.

Hibbard gently tapped the pane. Paula stiffened at the sound, lips parted. For a tight moment she gazed out at him. He smiled at her and moved aside to the door that connected directly with the game room. There he waited again with the patience of a man who knew what he was waiting for.

The latch clicked. When Paula Vale opened the door she was a slender silhouette against the light, her dark hair a smoky cloud. He stepped in, closer, shutting the door behind him. Her breath was fast; and suddenly his arms were binding her to him, and her lips were hot and clinging. . . .

Tapping out his report next morning, with fingers not quite sure of the keyboard, Hibbard wrote, "When her last guests left at 12:20 A.M., Mrs. Vale retired to her bedroom. Before going off duty, however, I made reasonably sure there would be no later callers."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Happy Trio

HE COULD see, through a haze of pain as he bent his head down, the shining drops falling to the floor near his feet. There were only a few of them in a red cluster, but each one was precious, each marked off a brief interval in the advancing process of his death. There would not be many more.

The phone—the voice calling from a

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distant star. . . . In a moment of clarity the voice reached him again. "Hib? Hib, this is Danny. Are you okay, Hib?"

No, he wasn't okay; not entirely. He was dying. He was spending his last living moments on his feet, trying his utmost to stay there while he dragged at the phone. His breath had quickened with a surge of elation. He had managed to lift the phone as far as his chest.

Its enormous weight was trying to pull his hand down again, but he couldn't let it. Not when he was this close. His all-consuming objective now was to lift it & few inches farther—to speak a few words through it to the cop listening at the wire's far end waiting for the murderers' names.

Behind his bullet-pierced back his murderers watched him; and the deadly hand holding the gun lifted it a little, making ready to fire again. . . .

Danwood scarcely glanced at the report when Hibbard handed it to him. He tossed it to his paper-piled desk and resumed his pacing with his big shoulders hunched and his fists thrust deep into his pockets. Hibbard knew the reason for Danwood's agitation this morning, of course. The papers were loudly reporting no progress in the Vale homicide. The commissioner was pressuring Danwood for results—and Danwood in his dull way didn't know where to find them.

"Running into a few snags, chief?" Hibbard asked him tauntingly. "Didn't the lab find any fingerprints on the riding crop? With Mrs. Vale out of the murder picture, are you finding first-class suspects a little scarce?"

Danwood paused to frown at him—not

an unfriendly frown, but earnest. "No prints. Hot suspects are scarcer'n hell, and the other possibilities are too plentiful to mean much. I can't put on an act, Hib, and pretend I'm not worried. My very first case is the town's biggest in ten or twelve years, and so far it's headed straight for the unsolved file."

Hibbard asked with a fine edge on his voice, "You don't feel your men have laid down on you, do you, chief?"

Danwood shook his head. "No, no, Hib. You and Ned and the others are clicking right along. Trouble, this is a tough case. All we can do is keep on slugging at it." He lifted his square chin. "I've got a new idea, Hib. A smooth worker like you might be able to run it for a touchdown."

"You're the chief, sir," Hib reminded him.

"Maybe if you got better acquainted with Paula Vale, sort of personally. . . ." Danwood fumbled with the suggestion and Hibbard struggled to keep his face straight. "Sort of work into her good graces, Hib—fix it so she'll take her hair down. Handling her that way, maybe you'd get somewhere."

"Yeah," Hibbard drawled. "I might get somewhere, at that."

"It's not the way I like to work a case, Hib," Danwood said soberly, "but this one calls for pretty special measures."

"Sure," Hibbard agreed. "It's pretty special, all right."

Maybe even a little more special than Danwood suspected. . . .

Hibbard took a sniggering sort of smile along with him on his new assignment. He checked over the angles as he tooled his

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old coupe toward Prince Street.

A cheap and worn-out piece of junk, this heap he was pushing around. He'd like a new one, say one of the new convertibles that put an extra shine in a moonlit night. With a dreamboat like that, and his lousy job chucked, and the babe he'd been looking for all his life. . . . Sure, why not? In a special case like this anything was possible—if you knew how to shoot the angles Hibbard's way.

He left his waxed-up jalopy around the corner and walked into Prince Street. Murder had faded quickly from the scene; nothing here showed it now, not even a curious passer-by. Hibbard strolled along close to the building, to avoid a chance glance from the Vale windows; then quietly turned into the lobby.

THE skeletal doorman was somewhere else at the moment, but the blond, painfully pretty elevator boy was sneaking a cig behind the switchboard. Caught with it, he didn't grind it out, but held it arrogantly, eyeing Hibbard with his beautiful face a shade haughty—and Hibbard caught a whiff of heliotrope off his perfectly waved golden hair.

"Busy lad, aren't you, Alden?" Hibbard said wryly. "You'll probably feel relieved when Thursday comes. But after all, a young guy's got to get along."

"I get along all right," Alden said cynically. "Second floor for you?"

"Any visitors up there?"

"No visitors."

"I never call on slick young widows without a chaperone, Alden," Hibbard said, poker-faced. "You savvy how to get

along with cops, too? It's easy. Just stay clammed up about 'em."

"Thanks for the tip," Alden said through a cloud of sneaked smoke. "But I get along."

Hibbard nodded and strolled out, clearing the heliotrope from his nostrils and permitting Alden to believe he had merely made a routine check on Mrs. Vale. Unseen, he turned again into the passageway leading to the deserted court. The morning sunshine streamed over the rippling fountains and the splashy umbrellas. Nice, Hibbard thought, but there were choicer spots and he was the guy to find them. He turned to the game room door, tried the knob, found that the forgotten latch had been left open, and he quietly stepped in.

The game room was deserted; but Hibbard heard noises from upstairs. Scraping sounds, like furniture being shifted. Bumping, clattering noises indicating an exasperated search in progress. He listened with an oblique smile—until high heels began ticking rapidly down the stairs. Then he dodged aside.

He sidled through a door into a large closet where case goods were stacked ceiling-high—the late Lew Vale's "cellar." As he stood there in the dark he saw, through a crack, Paula moving in with her smoky hair disarrayed and her red mouth set hard.

She paused, peering across the room, her eyes prowling as Hibbard had seen then prowling last night—but this time they glittered with an avid determination. Paula was on the hunt, in the mood to kick

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obstacles out of her way, to smash through a jungle of possibilities until she found it. Her eyes were like fingers feeling in crevices, poking into dark crannies, then darting on to pry again.

Hibbard watched her as she systematically attacked the corner behind the bar. She opened cupboard doors and banged them shut, still baffled; she cleared shelves; she peered under the counter. Then Hibbard saw her stiffen with the first glimpse of a discovery.

She came off her nylon knees to peer into the stainless steel sink. Then prying her long nails under its beaded edge, she lifted it. As it rose from the cavity that had been built for it, it trailed a drain hose of black rubber. She peered into the depths she had uncovered and gasped.

Then guile seized her—wily caution. Playing for big stakes, she thought fast, and quietly lowered the steel shell into its cleverly contrived bed. Hibbard, watching her, felt the same stepped-up sense of hunger for all her discovery meant. His pulse fast, he pushed open the door that had concealed him—and it gave off a slight creak.

The tiny sound cried danger to Paula Vale. Instantly she closed the hidden cavity and snatched up an empty glass, as if she had been about to mix herself a drink. Hibbard in the same swift moment had stepped forward to the mouth of the hallway, as if he had just come out of it. Her dark eyes shone across her shoulder and she smiled.

“Oh, hello! Didn’t hear you come in, darling, but I left the upstairs door unlocked for you.”

He went behind the bar, smiling, with a sharp wonder how it could ever be possible to trust this woman.

She kissed him and put her head against his chin and said, “You’ve been gone so long, darling. I can’t seem to do anything while you’re gone, except wait for you to come back. Drink with me, darling?”

“I’ll take Guatemala,” he said.

She lifted her night-dark eyes and gave a puzzled little laugh. “What, darling?”

“Or Honduras,” he said. “Any of those Central American dream-spots where money goes far and the U. S. law doesn’t go at all. You’d like it, too. You’re made for a paradise like that.”

Her cheeks had lost color. “Would we dare?”

“We’d be chumps to play it any other way. Once we’re across the border we’ll be safe. The trick is to get across without being stopped along the way. As a cop I’ve learned what mistakes are made by crooks on the lam. I know how to avoid them. Would you like to hear how?”

“Of course, darling!”

“We drive. That’s all. We just get in a car and roll—but in a smart way. Maybe we switch plates. Anyhow we don’t follow the main highways or even the secondary roads. We wind through the backroads, on dirt lanes that are never patrolled. We avoid big cities and small towns and pass through nothing but crossroads hamlets where the hicks hardly know the world stretches beyond the next county. We’ll sleep and eat at farmhouses along the way. We’ll be a nice young couple on our honeymoon and everyone will smile on us and hope we’ll be very happy together.”

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Her dark eyes large and round, Paula said, "But in case someone stops us, darling—asks questions—gets suspicious of. . . ."

"Then I flash my badge. I've just picked you up on orders, see, and I'm taking you back in your own car, as my prisoner. I've got extradition papers to prove it, all filled out and signed and sealed. In a case like ours a small-town constable doesn't talk back to a big-town dick. He speeds us through."

"Why, that's wonderfully clever, darling!"

"It's simple. I'll pick up the official blanks down at the bureau and fill them out tonight. As a forger I'm good enough. We'll leave tomorrow, baby. By the time my dumb ox of a chief wakes up, we'll be practically halfway to heaven."

"But darling," she said softly. "Lew's estate will be tied up for six months and the insurance is being delayed for some reason. I haven't much else. What will we use for money?"

"Simple," he repeated. "I'll fix that in a flash."

HE STEPPED past her, lifted the sink from its bed and watched her face. He saw no dismay in it and no phony astonishment. She instantly accepted the fact that he had outsmarted her on this turn—and the game was to go on from there.

Eager to play along with that, he pushed the shell aside, plunged both hands into the hollow of the false bottom and brought up two handfuls of snugly banded thousand-dollar bills.

"Darling," Paula said in a husky

whisper. "Let's go. As soon as you can get those papers ready. The sooner the better, darling."

"Don't worry, baby. We're practically on our way right now—heeled to the extent of at least a quarter million."

He turned quickly, ran along the hallway and up the stairs. When he raced back down again with one of the late Lew Vale's briefcases in his hand, Paula still stood where he had left her behind the bar, gazing with a consuming fascination at the money. He brushed past her, caught up the packets of banknotes, began stuffing them into the case.

She asked quickly, "Why are you doing that, darling? Why don't you leave it there?"

"I want to know where they are—and where *you* are—when I come back, darling." Hibbard's smile was crafty. "Just a slight precaution, you see, to—"

She had gasped. He froze, looking up at her, alarmed by her sudden paleness. She was staring at something at the far end of the bar, behind him. He twisted quickly, peering at the window there, and saw a face.

Ned Larkin.

Larkin looking in, finding him in the act of cramming Lew Vale's hoard into the case.

Hibbard straightened swiftly. He couldn't guess what had brought Larkin here, except, of course, more of his characteristic glory-grabbing.

Cursing him behind clenched teeth, Hibbard forced himself to wag a fraternal greeting to Larkin. Delighted to see him! Just in time! Another signal from Hibbard

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urged Larkin to come to the door. Larkin nodded eagerly and began to move. The instant he was out of sight, Hibbard grasped a bottle by its neck. He warned Paula tersely, "I'll take care of this."

He held the bottle in his right hand, concealing it behind his thigh, as he opened the door for Larkin with his left.

"Hustle in, Ned. Take a slant at what I just found. Man, our fine new chief will be glad to see *that*."

Larkin was a step past him now, heading for the bar. Hibbard was keenly aware of Paula—aware of her tight stillness and white, unreadable face—as he swung the bottle. He delivered it with cleaving power behind Larkin's left ear. The single whizzing blow was followed at once by a rattling thump as Larkin limply hit the floor.

Hibbard stood over him, breath rushing. "He won't be getting up again."

Paula backed away, holding her red-nailed hands to her face, staring at Hibbard.

"Damn it!" he burst out. "I had to do it. I couldn't let this flukey snooper cost us the works. I had to do it for us both. Well? Get busy, baby. Bolt that door. Cover up those windows. Order those flunkeys in the lobby to let nobody in here—and that means nobody. The rest I'll handle myself so we can hustle out of here quickly, with no more trouble."

While he bent behind the bar, pushing the last packet of Lew Vale's money into the briefcase, he heard the bolt click and the venetian blinds clatter down. He pulled the straps tight as Paula hurried back.

"But you can't take the money,

darling," she said hoarsely. "It's mine."

"It's ours and I'm taking it," he said flatly. "You don't think I'd cross you up, do you, baby? I'll bring it back tonight. As early as I can make it. We'll have to leave as soon as I've finished taking care of this guy who got a little too nosey. When we're ready to light out we'll all three be together again, a happy little trio. For keeps. You, me and the dough."

He strode quickly to the door, the case-handle tight in one fist. She unfastened the lock for him, and he kissed her. Then he eased out, and he heard her bolting the door again behind him. He left her there with the man he had killed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Play Lady Luck Along

THIS was the one and only try he would ever get. He had to make it this time or never.

The voice in the phone had been still for a short moment. Danwood, at the far end of the wire, seemed to sense the deadly importance of this silence. He said, with soft terseness, "Let's have it, Hib. Give it to me, boy."

He sounded so close now. Hibbard had brought him near through unlimited space. When Hibbard answered now, Danwood would be able to hear.

Then another voice spoke—another man's—behind Hibbard. It warned, "Drop that phone. I said drop it, or—"

Hibbard swore he wouldn't drop it. Not as long as he lived. He had dragged it up, far up from the very bottom of the universe. He had achieved the stupendous

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feat of bringing it near his mouth, and if only he could find the breath he needed now he could speak. It was all he had to do—to speak the two names of his killers.

The man's voice behind Hibbard snarled, "Drop that phone!"

Hibbard whispered into it, "Listen . . . Listen. . . ."

Hibbard was driving. The car was his old coupe, and this, the way he figured it, was just about the last time he'd ever push another weary mile out of it. Next trip, beginning any time now, he'd have a nice, soft spot behind the wheel of one of the Vale custom-built jobs, with Paula close beside him, her hand curled on his arm.

Hibbard sent his old heap along the boulevard at its top limit, forty-five, with Danwood sitting tensely beside him in the front seat. They had by-passed the central section of the city. This was a main highway ribboning through a recently developed middle-class suburb. The headlamps shone on newly built cottages and others still bare-sided. A quiet, respectable neighborhood, not too risky for a quick job of dumping.

Danwood said in a dazed manner, "I can't believe it. Snezeck must be wrong. It's got to be somebody else."

Hibbard had been back at headquarters, in the bureau, hands washed and breath recovered, when the call had come in to Danwood. Patrolman Snezeck, of the North Side branch station, was reporting. "These kids playing on this stack of cinder blocks, see, they happened to find him. Larkin. Sergeant Larkin, yes, sir. I'm keepin' the kids off and stayin' right here with him till you take over."

"Can't believe it," Danwood insisted woodenly. "Ned Larkin. Such a quiet, sweet guy, it hurt his feelings when he had to arrest somebody. What was he doing way out here in this corner of town anyway? I—I just don't get it."

Hibbard kept pushing his shining wreck-on-wheels at its limit—driven by a sharp, panicky awareness that he had overlooked something important. An oversight on Hibbard's part that could make a life-or-death difference—Larkin's notebook!

Working in furtive haste, under a constant strain, fearing discovery at any moment, Hibbard had forgotten about that damn notebook of Larkin's. After being agonizingly careful of everything else! He had waited for darkness so that he could finally get Larkin out of Paula's apartment safely; he had skillfully removed every possible trace from the game room floor. No one would ever know.

Sneaking the body out to this far-removed section of town, he had gotten all the breaks. He'd pulled off a slick job of it, all right, except for the one detail of Larkin's everlasting notebook. He'd remembered it too late, just as Danwood was getting Snezeck's call. But he recalled all too clearly Larkin's habit of jotting down everything, even a time-table of his own movements.

Hibbard couldn't guess how closely Larkin's scribbles had followed his course to his own death; but that notebook was still on him. And it could wreck the works for Hibbard with a disastrous crash.

Hibbard was chasing it now, as fast as he could roll his ancient crate, goaded by

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the necessity of getting his hands on it first, before Danwood, before anyone else at all—

“Right there,” Danwood said suddenly, pointing. “Stop ’er, Hib.”

Hibbard’s hard thrust on the brake pedal pulled them down to a shuddering glide. He was hopping out of the car almost before it had entirely stopped. Striding faster than the lumbering Danwood, he crossed the clay-heaped yard of a bungalow under construction—knowing exactly what he would find lying there in the darkness behind the stack of concrete blocks, where the sober-faced patrolman was standing guard.

Hibbard paused just long enough to ask, breathlessly, “Did you frisk him, Snezeck?”

“No, sir, Sergeant. Never touched him.”

Hibbard stooped quietly while Danwood came closer across the muddy yard. His fingers slipping into Larkin’s vest pocket pinched on the little black notebook at once. Still bent, he slipped it into his own coat pocket; and when he straightened, to turn to Danwood, it was like walking safely from a nightmare.

“It’s Ned, all right.”

DANWOOD stood still, gazing down, his face sadly set. “I’ll wait here with him, Hib,” he said. “The meat wagon will be along any second now. I’ll go back with him. You find a phone and notify the commissioner.”

Hibbard turned away, glad of a chance to go. He had taken only two steps when Danwood said, “Hib.” He waited, not breathing, as Danwood came closer.

“Larkin’s notebook, Hib.”

“What about Larkin’s notebook?”

“Turn it in when we get back to the office.”

Hibbard answered with a snap. “What the hell do you mean? What would I be doing with Larkin’s notebook? Isn’t it on him?”

“No.” And Danwood said again, quietly, “Turn it in when you get back to the office, Hib.”

Hibbard stared into the reaches of the night and walked to his car. Danwood stood back there near the stacks of blocks, near the cop and Larkin’s corpse, as he started away. He drove while his mind came to a rolling boil of conjectures. He couldn’t guess how far he could bluff this one along.

When he was well out of Danwood’s sight, he braked under a street lamp. He fished up Larkin’s notebook and flipped through it to the last scribbled page. Larkin had noted, with his typical meticulous attention to detail:

11 AM. *Watching Vale apartment.*

11:20. *Hib entered V. apt, using private door in rear.*

11:25. *Have decided, while Hib’s keeping Mrs. V. busy, good chance for me to give gardens quick once-over.*

That was the last entry. Hibbard expelled a breath of deep relief. This notebook in Danwood’s hands—Lord, it would have documented the whole story! Now, of course, Hib had to get rid of it, at least that last page. But that would be easy.

No need to stew over such minor details now. Hibbard had other things to do. For

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instance, a new life of his own to begin. In paradise. With Paula. And he had to get going on it tonight, now, without making any more mistakes.

He sat for a while under the street light, his mind buzzing over every possible mischance, checking every step in his plan of flight. He'd be a chump to rush off in a panic. The smart way was to take it slow, to feel it along from one moment to the next. Play Lady Luck along just like a new babe, with the Hibbard technique that had always produced such gratifying results. Take it easy—no rush—just keep on playing it smart

Danwood might be expecting him back where Larkin lay dead, but Hibbard wasn't going back. He drove instead in the opposite direction—to fatal Prince Street.

He stopped his car around the corner—to leave it there forever—and from under the seat cushion he pulled the late Lew Vale's briefcase. He had kept it buried there all the while. It was the reason he had insisted on using his own car tonight. But now he was done with it, done and leaving it behind forever, and he was opening the door of a dream.

He went with a brisk stride and a cocky smile into the lobby of the Eden Apartments. The wizened doorman permitted him to pass without a word. Alden, the Apollo of the elevator, kept his beautiful face blank and said nothing as he piloted Hibbard to the Vale vestibule. As he left the cage Paula opened her door for him—ready to travel, in a smart black suit, her dark eyes shining, her lovely smile eager.

She closed the door behind him quickly

and her willing lips came to his for a long moment. When she drew back her cheeks were fiery, her eyes full of a quick fever. She asked Hibbard quickly, "All set, darling?"

"All set. You see, I really did bring the money back," he said. "Every buck of it. I'd never cross you up, honey."

"Did you bring the papers too, darling—the ones you said we might need?"

"Sure, here," and he tapped the pocket over his heart. He gazed at the bags she had packed. Just two small ones, waiting. Ready to go, yes—ready to walk out on all this opulence with a guy named Hibbard, to leave it all behind as casually as he was leaving his rust-eaten heap in the street.

She meant it. She was primed for action, really leaving for far parts. A babe who didn't know how to be afraid. He could go places with her, all right. From this beginning, right now, he could keep going at top speed with her until the end of his days.

"All set," he said, smiling. "All we have left to do is get in your favorite chariot and tool off. Tomorrow will be another day in another world, baby. . . . But just one thing first. I've a phone call to make."

He turned to the table in the corner where the phone sat. At his urging she had had it put back in working order. He placed the briefcase casually on a chair, took up the phone and dialed a number which he had called many times before but would never call again.

A rookie in the telegraph bureau answered, "Police headquarters."

"Give me Commissioner Munro," Hibbard said. "Official."

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“The commissioner’s right now making a speech at a Kiwanis Club dinner.”

DANWOOD was probably back by now. Hibbard felt tempted to leave an artfully misleading message with him. Perhaps “I’m coming right in,” or even better, “Maybe I’d better keep an eye on the place where Larkin was dumped and try to turn up his notebook.” Either message would keep Danwood waiting indefinitely.

Grinning to himself, he said into the phone, “Okay, then. Hibbard calling Danwood—and snap it up.”

Then, hearing a step behind him, he glanced over his shoulder.

Startled cold, he saw a hand curling around the handle of the briefcase—a man’s hand, its nails gleaming. His eyes snapped next to a face he knew—Alden’s. Then another lightning-like flick took his gaze to Paula’s face and he saw her standing still, dark eyes narrowed, as inscrutably fearless as he remembered her at the moment when he had suddenly killed Ned Larkin.

He swung swiftly into two savage moves at the same instant. He slashed down at Alden’s hand with the phone while grabbing inside his coat for his shoulder-slung police positive. They were on him like leaping dogs—both of them together, grasping his arms. They crowded him back into the corner with grim and greedy teamwork. Paula’s fine sharp teeth flashed to Hibbard’s raised wrist and the pain numbed him. His gun was torn out of his fingers, then swiftly whipped back on him as a club.

The crack of the butt against his head knocked him twisted against the wall. Dazed, he hung there, helpless a moment. Then the single sharp sound barked out and the bullet pierced hot and deep in his back.

They waited, the deadly two behind him, Alden with the gun in his hand, Paula tense at his side, watching to see whether Hibbard would need another bullet.

No. No—he knew one was enough. That first bullet was doing the job. But he couldn’t tell them that. And he couldn’t tell them how clear everything had become to him at his first glimpse of Alden’s handsomely manicured fingers stealing around the briefcase handle.

Alden was so perfectly all that Paula wanted. Of course none of her husband’s friends had seen her stepping out—because Alden had been always at her door. It must have been that very convenient proximity which had aroused Lew Vale’s suspicions to the extent that, seeing Paula slipping away from the Kingsland’s party, he had followed her. Paula and Alden had already schemed to cheat him of his money too, if only they could uncover the hoard.

And now that it was found, they had allowed a police dick named Hibbard, the chump, to provide them with a slick plan of escape and forged papers to speed their flight. . . . So clear—how clever they were—what a sucker he was. So clear now. . . .

Danwood’s voice in the phone was saying, “Let’s have it, Hib. Give it to me, boy.”

“Listen,” he whispered. “Listen—”

Alden’s voice snarled behind him,

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“Drop that phone!”

“Listen, Danny.” He hadn’t called Danwood that in a long while, but it seemed right now. “They did it together, Danny. Paula Vale and Alden—”

The gun blasted a second time. The second bullet smashed Hibbard between the shoulder-blades, jarring him harder against the wall. But he didn’t drop the phone. He clenched it as tenaciously as he kept his grip on the last few seconds of his life. . . .

And it wasn’t so bad. Not so bad any

more. Dying was like—like the soft enclosing warmth of a woman’s arms.

“They’re hitting out tonight, Danny—Paula and Alden—heading south for the border with fake papers. You can stop ’em before they can even get started. Get ’em, Danny—get ’em—”

A third time the gun blasted, deafening loud in the room but only a murmur in Hibbard’s ears.

Then he fell—for the dark, haunting face of Death.

THE END