

CRIME BY CHART

By
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Jerry Cochran Traces a Sinister Murder Pattern and Spikes a Wily Killer's Design for Dying!

JERRY COCHRAN never kidded himself about his dependence on the Hercules Life, Casualty and Indemnity Company. Without them for a meal ticket, he'd have to take down his private sleuthing sign and close his small office for keeps.

But, sometimes, they handed him the screwiest assignments you ever heard of. At least they'd look screwy in the beginning. Then, all of a sudden, you might find you really had something big on your hands. Ferd Dudley, the half-pint Hercules claim adjuster, had a nose that would smell fire when there wasn't even any smoke. Only he never went near the fire himself; that was where Cochran came in.

Take this business of the Chauncey MacDermott policy. When he first heard about that, Cochran thought Dudley was having another of his titanic brain waves.

"I want you to grab the next train for Philly, Deacon," Dudley's thin squeak came over the wire.



Jerry held the dead girl close to him for a moment

"Philly!" yelled Cochran. He had planned going out that night.

"Yes, Philadelphia. Ever hear of it?"

"Sure, spent a week there one Sunday. But why Philly now?"

"Chauncey MacDermott died today."

"So what?" Jerry snapped. "And who's he?"

"He was General Super of the DeLacey Pump Works, just outside of Frankford. And he had a straight life coverage for fifty thousand bucks. For six months he held it, and now he's supposed to be croaked by an accident in his own shop. Double indemnity, too." Dudley's voice became almost hysterical at the end.

"Don't cry about it," said Cochran, sighing. "So I suppose there's a one-year suicide clause in the policy. And you want to prove he bumped himself off, is that it?"

"Anything you can learn, Deke," Dudley said. "It's fishy, somehow—a hunch of mine."

"How's he supposed to have been rubbed out?"

"A machine blew up in his face or something. I tell you, with a policy like that and the ink hardly dry on it, there's—"

"Would a guy knock himself off by running into a machine? You're nuts, Ferd."

The claim man's chirp became apologetic now.

"Well, that's the way it is. So, get down there right away, will you?"

"Okay. Who's the beneficiary?"

"His wife. Lives out on the Main Line, in Ardmore. That's all I can tell you, Deacon."

SO that's how it happened that Jerry Cochran was on the six o'clock Philadelphia express out of Penn Station. Seeing him with his bony knees tucked almost under his chin where he'd doubled up in the parlor car seat, you'd never take

him for a private investigator. With his long face, thin lips and solemn blue eyes, you'd be more likely to think him a mortician, which is high-hat for undertaker. That's why Fred Dudley and a privileged few called him "Deacon." It was an advantage in this racket. Widows fell for it, especially.

And there were plenty of times he hobnobbed with honest-to-God morticians, at that. . . .

Sylvia MacDermott was a dream in chic black. She had an assortment of baby-stare eyes, full red lips, honey blond hair, and soft youthful curves that, item by individual item, might have been equaled elsewhere. All her features were assembled in a way that was far beyond anything Cochran had ever seen. The completed product was a knockout.

He was glad the corpse wasn't here in this snooty suburban home. Chauncey MacDermott, he was told, lay stiff and cold in a closed casket in the best funeral parlor in the burg. And there wasn't anything stiff and cold about his young widow.

"I represent the Hercules Insurance people," Cochran told her.

"Oh," said Sylvia MacDermott softly. "Oh." She dabbed at her rosebud mouth with a ridiculous bit of black-edged lace. "Must such things as money be discussed at a time like this?"

Jerry put sympathy into his tones.

"No, Mrs. MacDermott. That can wait, if you like. The Company wants to express its condolences through me; that's all. I'd like to ask a few questions about your late husband—if you don't mind."

The girl sighed feelingly.

"I suppose it must be done. Will you sit down?"

She led him into a rose and gold drawing room, where he sat on the edge of a spindle-legged chair that he was afraid

would fold up under him. This Sylvia, on a thirty foot divan, crossed a pair of legs you could have insured for a warm—not cool—million. She looked at him sad-eyed now.

“Just a matter of routine,” Jerry said gently. “It’s tough having to question the bereaved ones so soon, I know. But it has to be done. Your husband was in good health and of sound mind?”

A pitiful little catch was in the girl’s voice.

“Oh, yes.”

“He hadn’t any important worries? Like money or anything?”

The girl’s eyes widened. Her forehead washboarded in thought.

“No-o,” she said, thinking hard. Of course, he’d lost some in the market. “But”—those screen-starry eyes swept the luxury around them—“we had everything we needed. Do you mean . . .?”

“Oh, nothing implied, madam,” Cochran said hastily. “I have to ask you these things. You’re fully convinced it was an accident?”

“Why—why, of course.” The dazzling widow stood up. “But you can find out about that at the Works. Everyone knows about it there. I don’t understand it, naturally. There was a mistake of some sort and one of the pumps went to pieces. Poor—poor Chauncey was—”

Jerry was genuinely sorry.

“I know, I know,” he said, soothingly. “And I’ve hated to do this.”

“Oh, it’s all right.” The vision in black suppressed a little sob and turned toward the door.

JERRY COCHRAN knew when he wasn’t wanted. On the way out he cursed Ferd Dudley and the Company impartially. Any guy with a place like this and with something like this Sylvia in it would be a crackpot to take a run-out

powder the hard way.

And now he had to stay over in Philly for the night so he could go out to that plant and ask more fool questions. . . .

The DeLacey Pump Works was a whale of a big place. A fine modern office and a dozen huge factory buildings sprawled around inside a mile square of high fencing. It was situated way out in the middle of what used to be a huge swamp before it was filled in with cinders and stuff. The place was going full blast when Jerry got there next morning.

He didn’t know where to begin, so he got an unlimited pass in the executive offices and started roaming about. His credentials were good.

MacDermott’s private office was his first stop and here he met up with another shock. Feminine again. If the dead man’s wife was something to look at, so was his secretary. And how!

Marie Coppola, her name was. She was a vivacious little black-eyed package of obvious Italian extraction and a regular Madonna. Just the opposite of Sylvia MacDermott in coloring but, if possible, of even more appeal to a guy’s eyes and senses. Cochran began to be glad he’d come on this wild goose chase now.

She looked up at his six feet of stooped solemnity with sort of a scared fluttering in those big eyes of hers. Jerry saw dark lashes an inch long bat down on her peaches-and-cream cheeks, then up—and he was ga-ga from the lights underneath.

“I want you to tell me all about the day before yesterday,” he told her. “When your boss was killed.”

“Do I have to?” the girl asked, kind of panicky.

“It’d be better.” Cochran’s eyes narrowed, noting the girl’s confusion. Maybe Dudley’s hunch wasn’t so bad after all. “And, tell me first about him personally. You worked for him a long

time?"

"Three years."

"Good boss?"

More color came into the girl's face.

"The best ever," she said. "He was the best and kindest man I ever knew. He did everything in the—" Suddenly, Marie Coppola was sobbing uncontrollably, her head down over her typewriter, her smooth shoulders heaving.

"So that's how it is," thought Jerry. He patted one of those nice shoulders. "Sorry," he said aloud. "I know you must be hit hard, girlie. Must have thought a lot of him."

The dark head came up defiantly.

"I loved him," she blurted out through the tears. "And I don't care who knows it now. There wasn't anything wrong, but there was some talk. It worried him, too. I—"

"If I were you I wouldn't tell that to anyone else."

She dried her tears, steadied herself.

"Why?"

"Ever stop to think his death might not have been accidental?"

All color fled abruptly from the cameo face.

"You think someone—"

"I didn't say that. Get yourself together, Miss, and tell me what you know. Everything."

The inherited Latin temperament sprang to the fore now.

"She drove him nearly crazy," she said angrily. "His wife, she's no good. Playing around with another man always. I know who; everyone knows about it. And she had the nerve to be catty about me."

"Wait a minute, girlie. Wait a minute. You don't have to blow off like that. What's it got to do with his death?"

COLOR flooded back and the girl's look was contrite.

"Oh, I'm so ashamed," she said. "But it's true—every word of it. Mr. MacDermott was so upset I don't think he cared whether he lived or not."

"Now, we're coming to it," Jerry said, beaming. "Do you think he did it himself?"

Red lips made an "o" around the pearly teeth.

"Suicide? Why, that would be impossible. No, it was an accident. It was a big coupling between the test floor motor and a new pump. A draftsman's error called for cast iron coupling halves instead of cast steel as they should have been. Iron wasn't strong enough and when the pump was nearly up to speed the coupling failed. A chunk of it tore— Oh, I can't say it. It's too horrible!"

The girl was going to cry again.

"Now, now," Cochrane soothed her, "you don't have to go into that. Who was the draftsman that made the error, and the checker?"

"Charlie Petersen and Joe Lindquist," Maria said, controlling herself. "And they both feel terrible, of course."

"Of course." Jerry wrote down the names. "That's all for now, Miss Coppola. And thanks a lot. I'll see you later."

Cochran rose from beside the girl's desk to leave. Then she was on his neck in a flurry of emotion. Soft young arms crept around him and her body pressed against his, trembling. Being only human, Jerry pulled the fragrant dark head down to his chest, holding her close for a moment. He tried to make it seem fatherly.

"I—I was a fool," the girl was whispering. "Please, Mr. Cochran, don't say anything about what I told you; about Chauncey and me. My brother'd kill me if there was any more talk."

So it was Chauncey! Jerry disengaged the girl gently before he had a chance to lose his head. This one had what it took,

and no fooling.

"Don't worry," he said, grinning. "You're as safe as if you confessed in a dream."

In the hall he took a deep breath and stood a minute to cool off before going to see the chief engineer. He had a lot of things to wonder about now. . . .

Luke Borden, the chief engineer, was a tall athletic looking guy with a Charlie Chaplin mustache. He was energetic, keen, almost too young looking and handsome for this responsible job. A ladies' man, Cochran figured. The kind either Marie or Sylvia might go for. But he seemed to be okay and was deeply concerned about the drafting room.

Jerry had him call in the two men from the drafting room, sitting there folded up in Borden's chair like a jack-knife to question them. The first one, Petersen, was a little round-faced guy with a flabby mouth and a green eyeshade. Lindquist turned out to be a big Swede with a mop of yellow hair straggling down over his eyes and a tobacco-stained Vandyke. Both first-class men, the chief told him.

Petersen was almost weeping.

"I can't understand it," he said, moaning. "My calculation book is correct. The maximum stresses figured twelve thousand pounds to the square inch. Too high for cast iron. I marked the book for cast steel. How it came out specified cast iron on the drawing I'll never know. It haunts me; I haven't slept since."

"Suppose it was correct on the drawing, wrong on the tracing," Cochran asked. He hadn't studied engineering for nothing some years ago.

"There wasn't any drawing, only a tracing," Peterson said. "You see this was only a modification of an older design. I drew in soft pencil on tracing cloth pinned over the original one of the old coupling. There were only a few minor changes in

dimension. Then this soft pencil tracing was inked."

"Could the tracer have made the mistake?" Cochran questioned him.

"Not much chance. The tracer was a girl who doesn't know cast iron from brass. She only follows what's there. Besides, Lindquist checked it."

THE big Swede could hardly talk at all. He couldn't understand it, either. And he was just about sick over it, too. He wanted to quit his job and go die some place in peace. Cochran asked for the tracing.

Holding it to the light and looking through the pale blue stuff, he couldn't see a sign of erasure or change. There it was, in the bill of material square in the upper right hand corner—C.I. Not C.S. as it should have been. Petersen and Lindquist identified their own signatures at the bottom. All the shop prints had been struck from this.

"That's all, fellows. Thanks. And I wouldn't feel too bad about it," Cochran told them. "Anyone can make mistakes."

He looked idly through a stack of other tracings on the chief's desk as they slow-footed out.

Borden was morose and grouchy about it all. He couldn't figure it out, either. It was reflection on his department, he said. But he couldn't fire the men; they were too good. The Company needed them. And there were no other bad errors in their records from years back.

"It was just one of those things," he summed it up. "They do slip though sometimes, however careful we are. Usually, it's only a matter of scrapped material and money lost. This time it cost a human life and a valuable one. It's a damn shame. Mac was a swell guy and a go-getter."

It even had Cochran down. He went

out into the shop.

In Number Three shop, he found them cleaning up the mess around the test block where it had happened.

The motor was still there. And the pump, with the upper half of the casing removed and the rotor out and resting on horses alongside. It was the biggest pump he had ever seen. A centrifugal, of course, designed to run at nine hundred turns a minute and pump seventy-five thousand gallons of water a minute against thirty foot head. It took a six-hundred and fifty horsepower motor to do the job. And that needs a pretty husky coupling to hook the two together.

Where the coupling had been, there wasn't anything but smashed flooring and twisted girders underneath. There was a big hole in the brick wall behind, where they said a hundred pound chunk had bulleted through and landed two hundred feet away out in the yard. Another chunk, about the same size, had just about torn off MacDermott's head. Funny, he happened to be there just at the right time.

The test floor supervisor was an obliging gent and told Cochran all he knew about it, which wasn't much. John Riley, his name was, and he breathed hard through his nose when he wasn't talking. He reeked badly of cheap whiskey. He was always dropping a folding rule out of his pocket and grunting when he picked it up.

"The Super often came down here?" asked the investigator.

"No, hardly ever," Riley said. "Queer, too. This time he came hotfooting up the main aisle just as we'd finished the scheduled ten minute run at half speed. We were just bringing her up for the full speed test when he stuck his nose right in the middle. Then, barn! She let go. Almost like he smelled it coming and was here right on the dot asking for it."

"Hm! Anyone down here send for him?"

"Not as I know. Anyhow, even if they had it in for him, why should they? How was anybody here to know the coupling was weak?"

"Didn't anyone down here know it was cast iron and should have been steel?"

Riley snorted and Jerry backed away from the strong whiff he caught.

"We all knew it was cast iron, sure," Riley said. "Hell; lots of them're cast iron, them that ain't stressed too high. But how in hell do we know what the stresses are? We ain't designers."

A DARK and husky, sullen-eyed mechanic was hanging around. Getting an earful of this, Cochran figured. He jerked a thumb toward the man.

"Who's that?" he asked Riley.

The test man grinned.

"Mike Coppola. He works in my crew. He's kinda steamed up about this. Didn't like the Super much. Damn fool actually laughed when he saw it. But he's harmless."

"Coppola? That his sister, the Super's secretary?"

"Yeah." Riley's dropped eyelid said plenty.

The mechanic had lost himself in the maze of machinery that cluttered up the test floor. Jerry decided to let it drop here.

Out in the yard, he looked over the big plant appreciatively as he started toward the office building at the other end of the property. It was the last word, all right. One long main assembly shop with material receiving at one end and shipping at the other. Five huge manufacturing shops feeding into it at an angle to get the utmost in assembling' efficiency. The foundry, forge shop and power house were all set way back from everything. Long ago, Cochran had dreamed of working in a

place like this. But his wanderlust wouldn't let him.

"Hey, you!" The snarled words were almost hissed in his ear.

The investigator whirled to walk right into a vicious punch that caught him under the chin and snapped his head back. He saw a million stars and sat down abruptly. A kick in the ribs tipped him over. It was this Coppola guy!

Cochran's long lean body was very deceiving. It looked like a reedy, awkward thing. Actually, it was all springs, wire and solid as steel. His head clearing, he was springing up like a monkey. His long right lashed out and Coppola cursed as he spit out a couple of teeth. A crashing left caught him in the middle and doubled him up in pain. But he came back like an enraged tiger and Jerry had his hands full.

A whistle blew shrilly then, up on the bridge where the main gate of the plant was located. The officers up there had seen what was happening.

The mechanic bored in slugging. And he packed a punch, no fooling! Jerry took one in the ribs that almost stopped his heart beating and made everything go black for an instant. He backed away from a tattoo of jabs that had him swallowing for air. What was the matter with this guy anyway? If he'd killed MacDermott, this wouldn't get him anywhere.

Cochran blinked through a red haze and took careful measure. One-two. And his fists cracked like rifle shots against a hard jaw. Coppola's arms dropped loosely at his sides. His eyes glazed. But the cops from the bridge were there in time to keep him from falling.

"Lock him up," said Jerry, panting. "I'll prefer charges." He showed a card that had gotten him lots of places—and things.

Sore in body and mind, he went on to the office building. Things were beginning

to shape up a little. Just a little. MacDermott hadn't gone the suicide route; he'd been murdered! Just how and by whom was something else again. It looked to Jerry like Coppola had a good reason. But how could he have phoned the blueprints when the original tracing was wrong? It didn't make sense. And yet—

HE speeded up and went straight to the Super's office as soon as he was inside the building. Marie Coppola smiled uncertainly up at him.

"I'd like to look over the boss's desk," he told her.

"Why—why, of course. I haven't been in there—couldn't go. No one else has gone in, either." She showed him the door to an inner office.

Cochran went in and took a look around. There were a couple of bookcases full of technical books and magazines; a broad mahogany desk with a swivel chair behind it; a conference table with a dozen straight backed chairs. A good quality rug covered the floor and pictures of big and little pumps in all stages of construction plastered the walls. It was the desk Jerry was interested in.

Ever see the scribblings and crazy designs a guy often marks down on the nearest surface when he's talking on the phone if there's a pen or pencil handy? Sometimes they mean a lot, sometimes not a thing. It was something like this that Cochran was hunting for. He hardly expected to find words. But he did.

On a calendar pad by the desk phone there were a lot of angular figures scribbled. Showing an upset mind, according to some psychiatrist.

But there was also:

Vibration. No. 2 and No. 3 bearings. S.O. 1717-3.

Shop Order 1717-3 was the unit where the coupling had let go! And number two and three bearings were the ones straddling the connecting portion that had snuffed out the Super! Someone had called him just at the psychological moment, sending him down there to his death. It was as plain as the nose on your face.

Cochran stalked out into the girl's office so abruptly she jumped three feet out of her chair.

"Did anyone call your boss on the phone just before he went down to the shop that day?" he demanded.

The girl wrinkled her smooth forehead just a little, between those swell eyes.

"All his calls came through you, didn't they?" the investigator prompted.

"Yes. I took them first. I'm trying to think."

"Well, think hard, girlie. Someone sent your Chauncey to his death. I know that now. And it was whoever made that last call."

Suddenly the girl's worried face brightened.

"Yes," she said brightly. "I remember. It was—"

They went into a huddle. This *was* a girl for you.

After she'd spilled everything she knew, Jerry didn't have the heart to tell her about her brother. But he left the plant and went over to the local hoosegow to talk with the sullen Mike. Then he went back into Philly, to his room in the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, and made a few telephone calls of his own. The last was to Ferd Dudley.

"You can quit worrying about the MacDermott policy, chiseler," he told him. "You won't have to pay up."

He cut off on Dudley's excited squealings and went down to grab a cab for Ardmore. . . .

Sylvia MacDermott was just as much

knockout as she'd been the night before. Between here and the big plant, Jerry was getting dizzy from being close to so much feminine oomph. He assumed his undertaker bearing now.

"Madam," he told the young widow. "Sorry to bother you again but I learned something important from going through your husband's papers and my inquiries around the plant. Great guy, your husband."

The baby stare never wavered but you could see the dame was angry. "I suppose you learned about his office wife?" she said bitterly.

"Marie Coppola? Yes, I learned a lot about that. You think it possible that someone bumped off your hubby on account of her?"

NOW he was getting results. Her big eyes flashed fire.

"Why," gasped the girl. "I never thought of that. Her brother, maybe? It was a scandal around the place, really, and I heard he was wild with rage. Oh, Mr. Cochran, you don't think it was that, do you? Poor Chauncey; whatever he may have done, he didn't deserve that."

"I wasn't thinking so much about that," Jerry said. "What I wanted to talk to you about concerns some papers I found in his office safe." Both of which were lies.

"A—a will? You found a will?"

"Yes." Another lie. "A will."

"Oh, I wouldn't be surprised if he left a good deal of money to Marie," she said warmly. "But that has nothing to do with the insurance, has it?"

"Not directly. But we have to have everything straight about all the circumstances of his estate. And there are some other papers there you'll have to see before I go back to New York. That's why I came."

"Did you bring the papers?"

"I couldn't. You see, I can't take them without a court order. And you really should have them anyway. Will you come out to the plant with me to get them; then we can talk it all over?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that. Wives never go there; at least not wives of those higher up. I'd be mortified to death."

"We can go after working hours. Tonight. Okay?"

"Yes, if it's so important."

"It is, believe me. Suppose I call for you at eight."

"Very well, Mr. Cochran," she said smiling. "The chauffeur will drive us out in my car. That's the easiest way."

That was that.

At the door, the widow sighed feelingly and said:

"Oh, I'll be glad when this is all over. I'm going abroad to forget it all. And please, Mr. Cochran, please don't let anything happen to blacken poor Chauncey's name, will you?"

"Not if I can help it," Jerry assured her.

And he meant it. . . .

The big drafting room was deserted at DeLacey's when they arrived. They had to go through it to reach the front offices. A few cleaning women were around, scrubbing amongst the covered tables.

"How intriguing," said Sylvia MacDermott. "I've never been here before. Of course, Chauncey's told me about it. But—"

"Here we are," said Cochran, shoving open a door and nudging her through.

"But this isn't Chauncey's office," she objected, seeing the name lettered on the door.

"No, it's Luke Borden's," he said. Come on."

Dragging back slightly, she went through with him to where the big, dark-mustached man stood in shirtsleeves over

a drawing board.

"Sylvia!" exclaimed the debonair chief engineer, paling swiftly. "What are you doing here? How'd you know I was working late? And you, you—" He turned wrathfully on the investigator.

Jerry grinned.

"Surprise," he said. "She didn't know you were working, Borden. But I did. I checked up."

The door opened again and Marie Coppola sidled in, flushing. She was pretty as a picture in the scornful look she tossed at the other woman.

"But the papers," Sylvia was saying wildly. "Mr. Cochran, where are the papers?"

"There aren't any papers, lady," snapped Jerry. "This is the pay-off."

HE walked over to Borden's drafting table. Leaning down, he yanked the roll of tracing cloth from the brackets at its end. Just then, the Frankford cops walked in with Mike Coppola in their midst.

Marie threw herself on her brother, sobbing softly in surprise.

"Sorry, Sis," he muttered. "It was for you. There was talk—"

"What's all this about?" said Borden angrily. "Get out of here, all of you. Except you, Sylvia."

"Forget the dramatics, Borden," the investigator snapped. "You too, Sylvia MacDermott. You're a pair of murderers, the two of you. It was you who killed the Super, Borden. And she put you up to it."

Borden laughed easily, almost naturally, plopping into the chair at his desk. Sylvia stood still, the baby-stare wider than ever. The cops said nothing, but they had let loose of Mike Coppola, who had an arm around his sister.

"You're crazy, fellow," said Borden, snarling. "Who do you think you are, anyway? You've got nothing on me."

"I'm the undertaker," said Jerry, mournfully. "The guy who finally caught up with you. I've got something all right—learned a lot here and a lot from your precious Sylvia."

"It's a lie!" screamed the widow. "I never told—"

Borden was looking at her coldly, as if he'd never seen her before. His hands gripped the desk edge in front of him. He thought she'd spilled the beans, as Cochran had anticipated.

"Shut up, you!" yelled Jerry as Sylvia started whimpering. "Borden, being an expert engineer, you're also an expert draftsman. You traced that original drawing line for line, even copying the signatures. Then you destroyed the original, the one that had 'C.S.' in the corner the way it should be. How do I know? Because this tracing cloth you use here in private is different from that in the drafting room. It's a better grade.

"You knew the test schedule for that pump; knew to a second when the ten minute half speed test'd be finished. You knew it'd take the Super almost exactly eight and a half minutes to walk from here to the test block; you'd timed it a dozen times to be sure. So you phoned him just at the right instant to get him there when they were beginning to come up for the full speed run.

"Being an engineer, you knew that that coupling stress would be four times as great at full speed as at half—way beyond the tensile strength of cast iron. Also the vibration that appears at full speed does not at half. You knew Mac'd want to feel around those bearings for the vibration you'd lied about for a minute or so anyway. He'd wait there for the full speed vibration. But the coupling wouldn't last up to full speed.

"So you had him just where you wanted him when it ripped itself to hell.

And he got his, poor devil. Also it was you who argued the Super into that big insurance policy in the beginning. You had this planned for six months. And Sylvia was in on it with you. You've booked passage on the *Empress of India*—with her. You were counting on that hundred grand from Hercules to—"

Quick as lightning, Borden's hand flicked up from the middle drawer of his desk. In it was clutched a stubby automatic. Cochran flung sidewise toward Marie Coppola just as the gun barked twice. It was Sylvia MacDermott who screamed. A crimson fountain cascaded up from the low cut neck of her black dress as she slumped down. But Jerry's gun was already out. He fired just once.

LUKE BORDEN, with a neat round hole in his temple, laid his head very slowly and deliberately on the desk. It jerked once and was still. Then Jerry bent down and held Sylvia close to him to see if she was still alive. But she was quite dead. He stood up then.

"Cripes!" gasped one of the coppers. "That was quick. We didn't expect anything like this when they told us to bring Mike over. But maybe it's better. Saves the state a trial."

Strangely, Jerry found he had both Coppolas in his embrace. He pushed Mike away gently but kept his other arm around the girl. He got a big thrill right now, feeling her palpitate against him, sensing her eventual calming down. Poor kid! This killing was brutal.

"Mike," Jerry said, grinning, "take good care of this swell sister of yours. But don't go around all your life bopping guys on her account. It'll keep you too busy and too often in the hoosegow."

"Withdraw your charges, Cochran?" asked one of the cops.

"I did already. All you have to do now

is ring for the morgue buggy.”

Starry black eyes looked up at Deacon Cochran, who didn't look or feel at all like a deacon now.

“But how did you know all those things?” the girl asked admiringly.

“Some of it I guessed,” Jerry admitted. “But mostly it was your memory that

helped me. I'd hate to have you taking my phone calls.”

Impulsively, he bent down and kissed her on those ripe, carmined upturned lips.

Mike growled deep in his throat.

“Forget it, Mike,” advised Cochran. “This little girl is aces. And she was meant to be kissed. Kisses'll never hurt her.”