

Coffin Custodian

By Stephen McBarron



The only way a trigger trio could unlock the mystery of the missing evidence was to use Detective Nason's body as a coffin key.

RICHTER looked over his beer at me, his mouth still on the rim of the glass, his little agate eyes squinting from under blond, woolly brows. He took his mouth an eighth of an inch from the glass, and without raising his head any higher, said:

“What do you say, Nason?”

I wiggled a thumb toward the entrance to the beer joint, “I say, scee-rew, Richter. No dice.” I leaned over and tapped his chest with a forefinger. “And tell that whack-slappy fighter of yours, Harney,

that he’s taken his last mouthful of resin dust. ‘Cause he’s finished.”

Richter straightened and didn’t look quite so much like a blond, bloated spider any more. “Am I to understand you’re adamant about this?”

I nodded slowly and decisively. “Like One-Punch Harney’s skull.”

I shot another gander at the shrivelled, evidently hopped-up monkey cuddled over a highball glass down at the end of the bar, saw him jerk his gaze away from me. I didn’t notice the two beefy individuals in

the corner booth at all—yet.

I said to Richter: “And if your rodman at the end of the bar wants to make something of it, it’ll be his last gun party.”

Richter had come in alone, but I figured he’d had the rodman all set at the bar, just in case I made trouble. I wasn’t worried, mind. I was prepared, knowing it was high time the vultures gathered to sing dirges at my funeral.

Richter’s thick lips rolled over his teeth, his agate eyes changed to smoky marble. “You’ll be sorry, Nason. You won’t live another day, holding out like this.”

I heard the click of heels approaching our table, looked up, grinned. She was very angry, and it made her very beautiful. I didn’t know how beautiful she was when she wasn’t angry, because I’d never seen her before.

She had on a brown swagger coat, no hat. Her dark hair curled thickly about her ears, and her eyes were a deep, limpid brown—with sparkles, right now. She said:

“Are you the detective, Nason?”

“Yes,” I said, still grinning. “*The* detective.”

Her jaw muscles rippled and a few more sparkles shot from her eyes. She didn’t believe in hedging around the bush, got straight to the point.

“When Jason Felz died yesterday, he left you as custodian of the evidence he had accumulated during his short career as Special Prosecutor. I want that evidence. Or at least that small part of it pertinent to the case of Jeffrey Carlson. I must have it.”

I rose slowly, pushed out a chair for her. “Zat so?”

SHE stepped back, her face a rigid white mask. Maybe it was my slug-flinging reputation that did it. I shrugged,

sat down. If she meant to give me the impression my nearness might contaminate her, I shed it like a duck sheds water.

I looked up at her, jerked a thumb at Richter. “This bedbug has the same thing in mind. You see, his fighter, Slug-daffy Harney, batted a young girl to death one night in a drunken rage. He almost got away with it, but Felz got wind of it, dug up convincing evidence against him—enough to sizzle the bum.”

My thumb waggled at Richter again. “As I said, this mouse wants to buy said criminal findings from me, seeing as how Felz trusted me with the whereabouts of his cached records.”

I spread my palms. “So I just told him to go whistle. Now I’d hate like hell to have to be that rude to you.”

Her little jaw muscle actually bulged. But my attention was pulled from her when Richter shoved back his chair and stood up, fuming.

“So my fighter is a murderer, hanh?” he growled, his fat, ruddy face seeming to take on added pouches because of its deepening color. “And you think I’m a slob, hanh? All right! You asked for it, mister!”

With one more look of baleful rage at me, he swung past the table. I saw his pudgy hand go out in a gesture to the cokey at the end of the bar. Then Richter was gone.

The girl must have sensed what was coming. She stepped back till her gorgeous spine was against the bar, looked from me to the approaching gunman, who had slid from his stool and started for my table.

The tavern, so far as I could see at the time, was empty save for us three and the bartender, who evidently didn’t like trying to argue with the cokey. He just stood behind the bar and watched, his eyes wide, his face pale and troubled.

I figured Richter must have been pretty desperate to go to such drastic lengths as to have a gunman down me in a public place. Obviously, in view of what had happened, this lad was of an imported variety, else he wouldn't have worked so openly.

I didn't even stand at the cokey's approach. That's how much respect I had for this bedbug. He moved closer with a spidery-like motion, not fully straightening his legs with each step. His arms swung with a deceptive looseness, his face was a sallow, tight-skinned corpse-head.

He stopped five feet from the table, and his threadlike lips writhed. They said: "Why don't you stop trying to be a smartie, mister? Now I gotta give you a lesson in manners. Not a permanent job, mind. Just a few bullet fractures so's you'll remember to be nice to my boss and do like he says."

"Shoo, Lambkins," I said. "Do you want the bartender should have to shovel you out?"

"Still a smartie, hanh?"

He was tightening up, ready to pull at his cannon. What could I do? I had nothing personal against the guy. Still, I just couldn't sit there and let him punch pills into me.

I caught the beginning of his drawing motion, and went to work. The three shots sounded pretty much like one. His single slug whistled over my head because mine had jerked back his right shoulder. My second slug missed him entirely, but it wasn't needed.

His gun hand dropped and blood dribbled from its cuff. He opened his eyes very wide at me, then his mouth sagged. His gun clattered on the floor, and the next thing to sag was him.

The bartender put a hand on each cheek and moaned. I guess he didn't yell blue murder because I had him worried.

Then it was that I saw the two beefy lads who'd stepped out of their booths. They just stood there, looking pretty disinterestedly from the downed gunman to me, and back.

The girl's face was whiter than ever. When she got over her slight gun-thunder shock, her lip curled scornfully at me. She was such a pretty little tomato, it almost made my heart bleed.

I rose, stepped toward her, shrugging. "Well, what was I supposed to do, let him pot me?"

She tried to cringe farther back, but the bar wouldn't let her. "You—you killer!"

THE guy was far from dead, but I decided not to bother trying to explain to her. I lifted my eyebrows resignedly, turned to leave. But it was no go. On account of the heavy individuals who stepped right up back of me. A gun, screened by a pocket, jabbed my liver.

I said: "For cripe's sake, what now?"

One lad came around front of me, grinned and said: "Moe Holstein wants to see you, Nason." He had a square red face, streaked around his bulbous nose with tiny red veins. He squinted pale blue eyes at me, as if to read in mine what my answer was.

I shrugged. "So I'll go see him. Why the artillery?"

The gun pressure didn't lessen on my back, while Putty-nose, facing me, said: "We thought maybe you'd need persuasion—on account of you and Moe like each other so much."

The lad had something there. Moe Holstein and I were such bosom pals that once he got me into one of his cozy hideaways, my avoirdupois would increase a few ounces—lead ones. But I wasn't thinking so much about Moe just then. I was remembering something the instructor at Flatfoot School teaches all his little

rookies. The lug back of me should have learned this little item, about the carelessness of sticking a gun in a citizen's back.

I said to Putty-nose, "Bol-oney!" then stuck out both elbows as I whirled. One caught him in the stomach, making him say: "Oosh!" The other threw his pal's gun aside and caused its slug to crash through some bar display bottles.

I kept spinning, bringing a left hook around to the gun wielder's chin. It jammed him against the bar and dimmed his surprised eyes.

But I hadn't expected Putty-nose to be so fast. When his open palm caught me edgewise at the base of the brain, and I thought I'd been hit with an axe, it brought home to my thick skull that I wasn't such a smartie after all.

I saw lightning streaks and lurched up against the guy I'd just hit. Then Putty-nose had his gat out back of me, and was tapping me on the bean like he was chopping wood.

The last I remembered was hearing the girl gasp. I remembered feeling queerly happy, thinking maybe she was sympathetic about the pats on the noggin I was getting. Then I was dreaming about her.

We were picknicking together in a woods. A lovely spot. The afternoon sun made a halo of her hair, picking out glints in it, as she sat beside me. And every once in a while, when I'd stop munching idiotically on a quadruple-decker sandwich, she'd place her ripe, moist lips on mine. It was real cute. Until the pains came.

They came in the thumbs first, and dimly I thought that was a bit screwy. Until I found out why. Meantime, the headache came, sending live wires down the back of my cranium till it seemed to hum and swell momentarily.

I took a peeping gander and saw things popping around. When the things stopped moving I saw I was in a room and that the things were its furniture.

Hazily, I noticed it was a divey little room, evidently the kitchen of a tenement flat. There were stained green blinds over two windows, a rusty, unenameled sink in one corner, rickety chairs and a thin-sprung folding bed. There was a girl sitting on the bed.

I bit my lip to keep from moaning. Somebody had torn a hunk of plaster from the ceiling and had attached two stout hooks to the exposed beam. Two thin but strong ropes led from the hooks to where they were tied around each of my thumbs, which looked like over-ripe plums.

I tried easing the pressure by stiffening my toes like a toe dancer, but it was no go. I'm a pretty heavy slug, and I was suspended in such a manner that my toes barely touched the floor—or rather the large tin pie plate that some one had put under me.

That pie plate got me a little more worried. Somebody evidently had the bright idea about playing with fire when I should recover consciousness. Because my shoes and socks had been removed, into the bargain.

I tasted the blood that ebbed out of my bitten lip, saw through pain-hazy eyes that the girl on the bed was looking up from her magazine at me. She had bright blonde hair, a plumply oval face with full, very red lips, and two very shapely pins, one of which she swung casually as she smiled at me.

I tried not to let the pain clog up my voice as I said: "Look, cream puff. How's about being a sport and cutting me down? That is, if you're finished reading the style ads."

She kept swinging chiffon, said: "If I cut you down, Moe Holstein would cut my

heart out.” She grinned, flicking the magazine pages. “Besides, there *are* some more ads.”

And damned if the rock-hearted tomato didn’t get interested in them again.

“Where does Holstein expect to get, doing this?”

She didn’t bother to look up. “The boys went to phone Holstein, and to get a beer. Maybe when they get back, they’ll enlighten you.”

BETWEEN wondering when my thumbs were going to burst or my head split, I wedged in a short spell of thinking. Holstein owned Barney Martin, the leading contender for Jim Harney’s heavyweight crown, and their big fight was scheduled for next month.

Martin was good, but in the opinion of the wise Broadway boys, not good enough, their idea of proper odds being eight to five against him. Then again, there was a late rumor that Martin had sprained his wrist at his training camp.

Summing up everything, what was more natural than that Holstein, a shady character with undoubtedly a couple of hundred grand on his boy, should want the murder evidence against Richter’s fighter, Harney, for killing that girl? Why? So he could hold it over Harney’s head and force the champ to take a dive.

Richter had wanted the evidence for just the opposite reason, to prevent his fighter from being indicted for murder, which of course would necessitate calling off the fight altogether. Naturally Richter, too, gambler that he was, had plenty mazuma on the fight.

No wonder, I thought, I was being treated so sweetly! There was big dough mixed up in this, with lots of noughts after the numbers. I cursed inwardly, especially anathematizing the lunkhead reporter who’d sneaked in on Felz’ death and heard

Felz’ instructions to me regarding the evidence against Harney, Jeffrey Carlson and a few other sinful characters.

That is, all but the whispered part that’d informed me where the papers were hidden. The reporter had gotten his stuff printed, and now everybody in town knew I had Felz’ briefcase full of dynamite.

I’d stuck the papers away in a little cubbyhole of my own. Tomorrow I was supposed to hand them over to D. A. Manners, after he got back from his vacation. He was supposed to go on where Felz had left off, me being only temporary custodian. Until another day, though, it looked like trouble was sitting on my side. Tomorrow might find me on a slab, cooked, and not only figuratively.

“Hey, blonde!” I grouched. “Would it be too much to ask you for a drink of water?”

She tightened her lips disgustedly and slammed down the magazine. “Damn, but you’re a pest.”

I said: “I’d get *you* a drink, if you were strung up.”

She went to the sink, came back with an aluminum cup. The door opened just then, and Moe Holstein, taking in the tender scene with a glance, stepped to the blonde and slapped the cup from her hand.

“Ixnay, Jean,” he lipped, grinning at me like at steak and onions. “We don’t want our pal Nason should get feeling happy, do we?” The beefy gents were with him, and they, too, were joyous about it all.

I gave him a cheer, a Bronx one. He slapped me viciously with the back of his hand, and a groan wrenched out of me on account of the tug on my thumbs.

He stepped back, said: “Nice work, boys. You’ll get a bonus for this, after Nason spills his guts.”

Jean picked up her feathered green hat and checkered jacket from the bed,

remarked casually: “Be seeing you, Moe. Blood and groans don’t help my sleep any. Toodle-oo.” At the door she turned, blew me a kiss. “Remember me in your darkest moments, handsome.” Then she went.

Holstein sat on a rickety chair before me. He was tall, deep-chested, with slick blond hair and a pair of gray-greenish eyes. There was a deep cleft in the square chin of his square face, a nasty leer on his thin-lipped mouth.

“You know what we want, Nason. Felz’ evidence. Where is it?”

I gave him another cheer. He grinned maliciously, as if he’d wanted an excuse. He nodded to Putty-nose. “Sic ‘em, Hal.”

Hal’s partner sauntered to a chair, sat down, like at his favorite movie house. Hal grinned and lumbered up to me like a tank. He put his knuckles into my teeth, but swiftly, and blood ran warmly inside my mouth. I could feel the mashed lips beginning to swell almost immediately. But the thumb pain was infinitely worse.

I spat at Holstein: “District Attorney Manners got the stuff, you dope!”

“You’re a liar,” Holstein returned. “He doesn’t get back from his vacation till tomorrow, and you wouldn’t take a chance on sending the stuff to him by messenger.” And to Hal: “Give some more.”

HAL put his heavy hands on my shoulders and pulled downward. I opened my mouth for a scream, fought it down, stuck my teeth into Hal’s cheeks and bit through. Hal shrieked, pushed himself off, his cheek dripping red. Meanwhile the room was swimming for me, on account of my own pain. Holstein and the other gunman were up, growling.

I wasn’t sure what it was Holstein was saying, but Hal’s partner grabbed my legs while Holstein took a newspaper from his pocket, rumbled its pages separately, and stuck them in the pie plate under my feet.

Hal, a handkerchief to his cheek, his eyes burning at me murderously, said: “Wait. Lemme do it.”

He knelt, applied a match to the paper. The flames licked up around my toes in no time, but the gunman held my legs firmly against the reaction.

Things got real hot. The room swam faster, my stomach churned. The boys were grim-faced, intent on me. Holstein said: “Spill!”

“Okay,” I moaned. “Cut me down.”

“Nix,” Holstein growled, himself sweating. “Tell papa first.”

“In my apartment—fastened back of bookcase.”

Holstein cut the ropes, Hal stamped out the fire. The big, putty-nosed tramp pushed me and I crashed to the floor, all but out.

Holstein leaned his blond puss close, said: “I hope it’s true, Nason. On account of it’ll be awful—next time.”

To Hal he said: “You and me’ll go to the shamus’ place. Maxie stays and watches Fancy Pants.”

“Nobody,” said a voice from the doorway, “goes any place.”

I took one look, said, “Ah, the Marines!” then went bye-bye.

Water brought me around. Holstein, not liking it but threatened by a little gat in my dream girl’s hand, was pouring cups full of water on me. The ropes had been taken from my thumbs, but they were still black and very large. I didn’t have to see the blisters on my feet to know they were there.

I wobbled to a chair, started getting shoes and socks on. Meanwhile, the girl got Holstein and his stooges against a wall with their hands up. She watched them very carefully, her brown eyes bright and piercing, her little round chin determined.

“I am sorry I was rude to you about the man you shot,” she said. “I know now you

had no other choice.”

“Think nothing of it, gorgeous,” I returned, waving a hand airily. The gesture almost tore me from my chair.

“Back at the tavern,” she went on, “your kidnapers told me to keep my mouth shut, then carried you out as if you were drunk. I slipped out after them, followed in a cab. My driver lost them in this neighborhood, but after driving in circles, finally spotted their parked car.” She smiled a nice smile. “The door below was unlocked so I came right up.”

“You’re an angel.” I rose gingerly, took my cannon from Putty-nose Hal. Then I belted him into a corner, felt better. I took Holstein’s and Maxie’s guns, continued to the girl: “What made you do it? Humanitarian instinct?”

She made a pretense of glaring at Holstein. “I just—just couldn’t leave *anybody* to the mercy of such men.”

I sucked a tooth and let it go at that.

I told Holstein: “This ain’t the last, baby. You’re practically in the clink now.”

I helped Hal up from where he’d fallen—with my foot; then herded the three of them into another empty room where I shoved them into a large but cozy closet. Fortunately there was a key, which I turned, then threw in a corner of the room. It was a bum prison, but would have to do till we got the cops.

I limped more than was necessary and got the desired result. Dream Vision and I went down the stairs quite close, like a couple of drunken pals.

It was a quiet block at the tail end of a slum section, most of the houses empty and boarded up. There was a drug store upon the corner, and I figured to have the girl call headquarters from there while I had the clerk patch me up.

I REMEMBERED to ask her just who she was, and she talked between gasps

caused by my weight on her shoulders. She was gorgeous and I liked her a lot. But if I had known what she was up to, I’d have bopped her then and there, for my own safety.

“I am Janet Carlson,” she said. “Jeffrey Carlson’s sister. Now you know why I want that evidence against him so badly. He’s young; his law career is still ahead of him. That evidence in court will ruin it.”

She stopped, pulled me around to face her. Her eyes pleaded. “I rescued you tonight. Couldn’t you do me this favor in return?”

I knew I’d have gotten her the torch from the Statue of Liberty, the way I felt about her then. That’s why I said: “Let’s get the cops, then talk.”

She let out an exasperated sigh, turned and continued toward the drug store. Briefly I thought of Carlson. He had been Joshua Felz’ assistant till Felz found he’d been stooling to Holstein, who was quite a sinful citizen. Felz, working undercover, had discovered that Carlson had welched on some large gambling debts to Holstein, that Holstein was holding this over the young lawyer.

It was tough, but young lawyers shouldn’t gamble beyond their means. I wanted to help the girl, but after all, there’s an oath I swore when I took out my license. I like to live up to it.

I didn’t do any more thinking along that line, because of the peculiar thing that happened right then. We were about ten yards from the corner store when our feet suddenly seemed to get tangled. I didn’t suspect then that Janet had deliberately tripped me.

I stumbled, almost carrying her with me. She still held one of my arms, and the other was so stiff and sore it crumpled on the pavement under me. My skull bounced on the concrete, and that was all that was

needed to change my grogginess to total unconsciousness.

I was bouncing around when I came to again, found I was in a taxi, and alone. If ever there was hospital bait, I was it. I didn't know which pain to suffer from most. Thinking of pretty Janet Carlson and the lousy trick she'd played on me, added mental anguish to everything else.

I knew why she'd done it. She'd been outside the door of my torture room when I'd told Holstein the whereabouts of the evidence cache. When I'd stalled about giving her what she wanted, she'd ganged up on me, then shoved me into a cab. I figured that by now she was ransacking my apartment.

With an effort I shoved the sliding panel aside, asked the driver: "Where are we off to, my friend?"

"You gotta go to a hospital, bud," he replied over his shoulder. "Your wife told me to take care of you."

"My wife, hanh?" I slid my cannon out, shoved it against his neck. "Look, Joe. If you don't get that hospital destination out of your brain, I'll splatter it all over your boat."

"Jeez! So that's the way it is!" The brief glance he gave me showed me a wide, frightened eyes. "Okay, mister. Where do you want I should drop ya?"

I gave him my address, sat back, after telling him: "No funnybones, either. I killed a blind man and an old woman tonight—out of pure vindictiveness. I wouldn't think anything of adding a cabby to the list."

We drove across town, and ten minutes later turned into my street, drove up to the door of my apartment house. There was a cab there, ahead of us; and just as my driver braked his pushcart, a slim figure hurried out of the foyer toward the parked taxi.

I shoved a bill at my cabby, tore open the door, leaped out. I forgot to wince as my feet contacted the pavement.

"Janet!" I yelled.

I had a brief glimpse of her white face, a briefer glimpse of her shapely gams as she slid into the parked taxi. The taxi started off. I whirled to my own, but it was already rolling away from the curb.

"Wait, you dope!"

But his face was plenty worried as he glanced at me before whisking away. That boy didn't want any part of me!

Fuming, I watched Janet's cab disappear, then my own. I knew it was too late to try following her now. I knew, too, that it was too late to do anything about Holstein and his pals, that they must have battered down the closet door not long after our departure. I limped into the foyer of the apartment house, took an automatic elevator to the fourth floor, entered my apartment.

I said, "Oh, oh," then went over and sat in my pet chair. I lit a butt, expelled smoke gratefully. Then I blew away the blue screen to get a better look at the corpse of Walter Richter—sprawled on its back on my rug.

There was a bullet hole in his forehead, over the right eye. Five feet away lay a heavy calibre gun, a blue-steel .44. It was the gun I'd taken from Holstein, but which hadn't been on my person when I'd recovered consciousness in the cab. I had figured at the time that Janet had relieved me of the extra guns because I was entering a hospital, and it wouldn't look nice.

SIGHING dismally, well knowing what to expect from the disordered appearance of the apartment, I pulled out the book case. Felz' brief case was no longer there. Savagely I ripped away one

of the remaining strips of adhesive tape, rolled it in my fingers.

I thought: "You can never tell about a beautiful girl!"

I went into the bathroom, washed up, massaged my thumbs till they were almost down to normal. I had a reason for not yet calling homicide. Instead, I took vaseline and gauze, fixed up my feet, then stuck them into my largest pair of shoes. It wasn't so bad.

I was wondering if I should leave the .44 on the floor for the headquarters dicks to find Janet Carlson's fingerprints on it, when the bell rang. My pulse jumped, then I went to the door, pulled it open.

The guy who stood there almost filled the doorway. He was a half head over me, heavy-shouldered, dark. His face had been battered around some, but he still wasn't a bad-looking guy. His heavy-lipped mouth curled scornfully at me, his gray eyes were slits of dislike.

He said: "Where's Richter, shamus?"

He couldn't see the corpse, because it lay to the left of the door.

"What made you think he'd be here, Harney?"

"He told me he was going to have a talk with you tonight," the prizefighter said. "He's been gone from our apartment for hours, and it's near train time. We're shoving off to our camp in Jersey."

"Well, he's here all right," I said. "Come in."

He took two big steps in, and that brought him right to the corpse. He stood that way, stiffly, head bent down, for what seemed a long time. Then he took a deep breath and turned to me. His dark face was darker.

In a deadly, level monotone, he said: "Richter was okay. He picked me out of the armories and made me a champ. I'm gonna tear your heart out for this. Right now."

And he came at me slowly, his hamlike fists poised.

I grinned wolfishly, shoved my cannon at him. "Look, slugeroo. I'm sick of being mauled around. One more belligerent motion out of you and I'll perforate your tonsils."

Harney was a smart boy. He wanted to get at me, but didn't like my little pill-popper. He moved back slowly, stopping when his back touched my desk table. His hands were down at his sides, and now one of them reached back to the handle of the desk drawer.

I cocked the trigger of my cannon and grinned amiably at him. "Just keep it up, Harney."

His hand stopped fumbling. He said: "This ain't smart, Nason. You can't get away with murder. Not this one. You'd better call the bulls."

I told him to forget it, and to look in the phone book for Jeffrey Carlson's number. "I'll tell you who Richter's murderer is as soon as I see Janet Carlson."

He gave me the number, also a sneer. As I dialed and waited for an answer, I watched Harney, not failing to notice the window behind him, wide open to the night breeze. I was pretty sure I had all my answers now. I hoped I wasn't wrong, because Janet Carlson's fingerprints were all over that murder gun, and she was such a nifty dish.

Jeffrey Carlson himself answered, and his voice was shaky to the point of hysteria. When I told him who I was, and that I'd much rather talk to his sister, he moaned:

"Nason! For heaven's sake, what has she been doing? She came in a quarter of an hour ago with a black eye. Before I had time to find out where she had been, three men entered with guns, told her to come with them. When I intervened, one of them

hit me with his gun. When I awoke I was alone. What's it all about?"

"You yellow rat!" I rasped. "If you weren't such a ninny, she wouldn't be in this mess, trying to straighten you out! All you can do now is sit tight, you dog. I'll get her out of it—or bust!"

I jammed the receiver down extra hard, motioned to the door to Harney. "Get going, Muscles. I'm gonna find that girl, and I want you along, just so's you don't get a brain storm in my absence."

I MEANT to hunt down Holstein, knowing he had the girl. Holstein and his stooges must have busted out of the closet back in the tenement, right after we'd left. He might even have watched from a window as we walked up the street, might have seen the girl trip me and shove me in a cab. And guessed her purpose. He must have gone straight to her apartment, waited till she'd showed. Then he had stepped in for the evidence.

Harney looked like trouble. He was glaring at me, showing his teeth, bunching his muscles. "I'm damned if I'll leave here with Richter lying there. If you didn't do this to him, then get the bulls and let them find out who did."

"Move, slug!" I was getting a little fed up with everything.

But then I saw I wouldn't have to go searching for Janet, on account of she just walked in the door. Her face was dead white, and her eyes seemed all the more alive for it. Her thick, dark hair was mussed, there was a welt on her cheek, a purple mouse under her left eye.

Her eyes lit up, and I gulped when she cried: "Jed!" You see, that's my name.

She almost tripped over the corpse. Her eyes widened, her hands rose in front of her. She stepped back into Holstein, who was grinning over her shoulder.

"Don't get funny, Nason. Drop the

gat." He eyed the corpse, grinned at me. "So you caught him snatching the stuff and peppered him, hanh?"

I shook my head slowly. "Nope."

"The girl says she hasn't got Felz' evidence," Holstein sneered. "We searched her place and it ain't there. So maybe she didn't get it after all. Maybe you still got it, hanh, smartie?"

I shrugged. "It's gone. I told you it was stuck behind the bookcase. Take a look, and you'll see where it was fastened."

Hal and Maxie were back of him, had closed the door behind them. Hal offered: "Maybe the gal threw it some place, boss, between here and her place. Richter must have got the idea he'd search Nason's place. The girl came up while he was at it, shot him and lammed with the stuff."

Harney had sunk into a chair, had his hands locked on his lap, was looking on with a faint sneer on his battered face.

Holstein said: "Maybe Hal's right." His face clouded, became ugly. "I'll say one thing. I'm sick and tired messing around all night looking for that stuff. If either you or the girl got the stuff, Nason, maybe you'll talk when the canary hollers."

He gestured to Max and Hal. "Watch the two lugs." And his stooges circled away from him and the girl, guns in hand.

Holstein grabbed Janet's arm, pulled it up back of her. She winced, bit her lip. "Please, I don't know where the papers are!"

I said: "I only hope you live long enough to rue this day, Holstein."

He pulled her arm higher. "It'll break soon. Spill, somebody."

I looked at Harney and said: "Well, why don't you tell him where you hid it, you louse."

The fighter leaned forward, squinting. "What?"

Holstein had let up. I said to Janet:

“How did you get the black eye. Tell the whole thing.”

She looked at me a long moment, then I saw assent in her eyes.

“I wanted to save my brother. That’s why I was so—so harsh on the street, when you were wounded. I thought you wouldn’t let me have what I wanted. After I put you in the cab, I came here, found that man” —she indicated Richter— “unconscious on the floor. Just as I came in the door, I heard a movement behind me, the lights went out, and some one struck me.”

With her free hand, she touched her eye gingerly. “When I recovered consciousness,” she went on, “I—I saw he was dead. Really dead. I ran out.”

TO HARNEY I said: “You bet all you had on the fight, didn’t you? Richter found out you meant to take a dive and make a cleanup, decided if he had Felz’ evidence against you for murder, he could make you fight to win.

“But you’d already laid your bets, and if you won, it would have ruined you. You guessed what Richter was up to, followed him here, killed him, and took the briefcase. It’s somewhere down in the back yard now, isn’t it?”

Harney was no longer sneering. He seemed amazed. “How—how—you must be crazy!”

“Yeah, must be,” I said. Holstein had let go of Janet. He and his thugs were intent on Harney. “You were never in my apartment before,” I went on. “So I knew you’d been here tonight, when I saw you reach for that desk drawer a while ago. How else would you know there was a gun in there, unless you had searched the place tonight. When Janet told us she’d been attacked here, I knew it had to be you.

“Right after you knocked out Richter, intending to kill him next, she barged in.

on you. You decided she was just in time to be framed for the kill. When you knocked her out, you shot Richter with Janet’s gun, planted the gun on the floor, lammed with Felz’ briefcase down the fire escape, because you were afraid some one would see you going out the front way. When Janet awoke, she didn’t notice the gun you’d planted there, and beat it, too amazed to think.

Harney leered: “So then I bounce right back here, where somebody’ll find out I murder him. Boloney!”

“That’s just what you did, to see that everything worked out like you’d planned. That window was closed when I left here today. That’s how I knew you used it.” I turned to Holstein. “Send Hal down into the courtyard. You’ll find Felz’ evidence there.”

Holstein squinted at me. Then he motioned to Hal, who walked to the window, climbed out on the fire escape and disappeared from view.

Harney rose, took a step toward me. “I’ll kill you, Nason,” he said. “I’ll kill you.”

“Don’t move, you!” Holstein warned.

Harney whirled to him, brushed the girl aside, lunged into Holstein’s booming gun. His heavy body jerked, then he had Holstein’s gun hand in one of his paws, the gambler’s neck in the other. Maxie stepped around, his eyes slitted, put his gun to Harney’s broad back and pulled trigger. He watched Harney slump away from Holstein.

I stooped leisurely, picked my gun from the floor, whacked the back of Maxie’s head with it, then shoved it at Holstein. “Drop it!” He did.

From below came Hal’s voice. “It’s here, boss. I got it!”

A short while later, when his head popped above the window, I told him to come in, like a nice boy. He did, surprised,

with Felz' black leather briefcase in his hand.

I said to Janet: "Get the cops on the phone, dream girl. And while they're coming, maybe you and I can find something among Felz' papers that even he might agree you earned tonight."

She came to me, glad-eyed. And I was hard pressed to watch Hal and Holstein and collect my reward at the same time.

I thought her lips tasted even better than in the dream.

