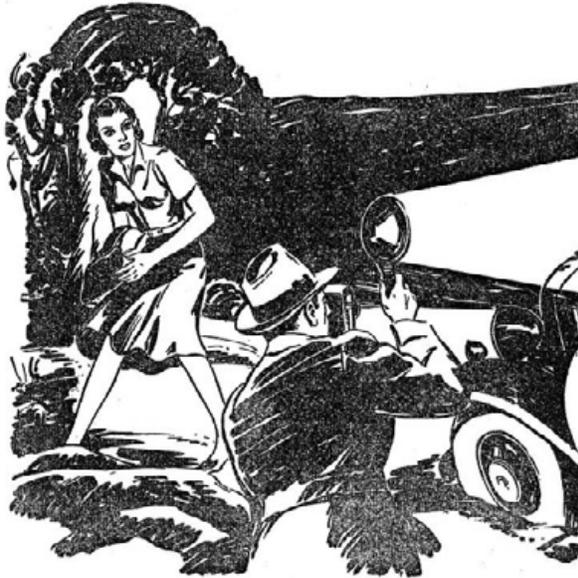


Dames on a Bullet Binge

By Frederick C. Davis



There was Sue, the rich man's daughter—and Donna, the willful beauty—and Rosita, the glamour guy's wife—and Vella, the luscious dancer . . . Young Mike, the lawyer, tried to help them all—and mixed corpses with cocktails on a merry murder binge.

CHAPTER I

I SQUEEZED the package, hefted it and glanced at all its six brown sides with avarice in my heart. Softly solid, it looked ready to be pushed into a parcel post window, except that it bore no address—no mark, in fact, of any kind. And what it contained wasn't jelly jars. Fifty thousand dollars, folding cash, were inside it.

The shaky hands of John Henry Laird, manufacturer of power tools, had put the package in mine. He was gray-cheeked, his dynamic manner had become a fearful flutter and the usual cheerfulness of his eyes was clouded over by a murky blue anxiety.

"You—you'll deliver this, then, Mr. Hooker," he said, short of breath. "Word may—may come at any minute."

"I'm to wait here until you receive their final instructions?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, wait." Laird's fingers darted to his pocket watch. "I—I should have heard from them before now."

Until John Henry Laird had phoned me half an hour ago I hadn't known that his daughter Donna had already been in the hands of her snatchers for three days and nights.

"I don't understand this delay," Laird muttered. "I've kept faith with the kidnapers' demands so far, to the letter, the very letter."

We were in the living room of Laird's Dutch stone house in Bucks County, Pennsylvania—which is populated by a curious mixture of rugged old-timers and the most select groups of cosmopolites outside of Manhattan and Hollywood—and he was suffering the toughest period of his life since the death of his wife years ago.

"The call's only a few minutes late, Dad," Susanna Laird said reassuringly. "It'll come."

She linked her arm through her father's in

an easy, comradely manner. Younger than Donna, she was a little on the plain side, but nice.

“And don’t worry about how Mr. Michael Hooker will handle it,” she added, giving me a smile. “He looks like the man for the job—a born poker player.”

Even if Donna was much prettier; Sue was a swell scout who had plenty of her own brand of moxie on the ball.

“Would you mind telling me, Mr. Laird, why you called me in,” I inquired, “instead of turning the matter over to Sackbush, Sackbush, Scovil and Sackbush?”—which was the Philadelphia law firm that handled all his other affairs.

An impertinent question. A bony young lawyer doesn’t usually ask how the hell his client ever arrived at the unprecedented decision to consult him. He grabs the retainer and scrams to the Fountain House for a sirloin garnished with Martinis, his first in many moons. The trouble with me is that I have less than no respect for policy. Besides, I’d been picked for a mission which might, if it slipped, make me morally responsible for the death of Donna Laird.

THE missing girl’s father answered: “The kidnapers recommended you—named you as the intermediary.”

“That interests me!” I said. I was beginning to get a reputation, even if it was only in certain kidnaping circles. “Do I understand this correctly? I’m to deliver the ransom, bring Donna home, and that’ll wind up my part of it?”

“Yes, except that you’re never to mention the situation to anyone. No news of it must ever leak out.”

I sensed a strange, secret strain in Laird’s anxiety. He went to the desk and sat ready to pounce on the phone the instant it rang. Still fondling the bundle, I joined Sue. She was wearing an engagement diamond. While we waited for the call, she answered my questions

as to how it had happened. Her sister Donna had gone off alone in her car last Tuesday afternoon, to do some shopping, and after a wordless night her father had received the first message by letter. The name and address on the envelope was a printed line cut from the phone book, and the message was made up - of single words clipped from various newspapers. The snatchers had added the blunt threat that they would kill Donna unless their demands were strictly obeyed.

“And dad’s obeying them strictly,” Sue said. “The police don’t know Donna’s gone. None of our friends know. No one does, except the three of us here—and Donna, of course, and the crooks.”

So far it seemed an ordinary snatch, if any snatch can be called ordinary, except for my hunch that there was something screwy somewhere.

I had no chance to ask more questions because at that juncture the phone’s silence ended with a sharp peal. John Henry Laird held the receiver off his ear so I could catch the voice that answered his quavering hello. It was a girl’s and it carried a childlike wailing note.

“Is that you, Daddy dear?”

“Donna—Donna, baby!” Laird blurted. “I didn’t dare expect—It—it’s really you, baby! Are you all right, Donna, are you all right?”

She was talking at the same time, in a babbling rush. If I hadn’t known she was old enough to vote, I’d have guessed she was a terrified twelve. Laird choked up—the typical doting father working himself into a breakdown over the daughter he’d pampered and spoiled. Then another voice took over—a voice muffled and disguised with a throaty brusqueness.

“Gif Mike Hooker the money,” the man said with a phony Pennsylvania Dutch accent. “Tell him Doylestown, see? The drug store near the court house. In half a hour there’ll be a call inna boot’ onna left, see? No tricks, or what Mike Hooker gets back is gonna be dead.

And him, too.”

A click, and that was the message. John Henry Laird sat and shook a little, not daring to hope that his twenty-two year old baby was about to be safely returned. Just the same, his anguish was pathetic to see. With a sympathetic nod I told him I understood the danger, which I did, and then I left the house, thinking how much pleasanter it would be if I were headed for Tahiti with that fifty grand instead of a pharmacy in Doylestown. . . .

In the Rexall store two high school kids dawdled over their strawberry sodas while I waited. When the phone rang I stepped into the booth.

“Leaf your car where it is,” I was told. “Valk down Main, turn past the postoffice, then stop at the lumber yard near the freight station. Vait by the big pipes and be careful.”

I did it, being careful and feeling I was watched. The lumber yards, with their darkly looming sheds, looked like a swell setting for a murder. “The big pipes” were huge sections of tile sewer line stacked in a corner lot. I faded against them, waited in the swirling snow, watched the deserted street. For ten minutes nothing happened. Then came the whisper.

“Throw the package over the pipes,” it said. .

Somebody had been standing silently behind the stack all this time. The words had come through the tubes with a hollow tonelessness. It wasn’t the same voice that had spoken over the phone. I heaved the package up and over, and it landed with a thunk.

“Crawl in,” the whisper said next.

“In where?” I asked.

“Into any of the pipes, head first, all the way.”

That was to put me in an awkward position from which I’d need a moment or two to extricate myself. I didn’t argue. But being a big guy, it wasn’t until I’d done considerable squirming that I was entirely in, except my shoes.

“Okay, you’ve got me where you want me and you’ve also got the money,” I grunted. “Now, where do I get Miss Laird?”

“Stay there until you hear the high-school clock strike,” the whisper said. “Then you’ll find out.”

Soft footfalls quickly disappeared—with the fifty grand. When the clock in the high school tower started bonging eleven, I writhed out, went around the stack and struck a paper match.

The footprints there, hardly visible under the fresh, downy flakes, had been left by a woman’s galoshes.

CHAPTER II

THE woman hadn’t left any note. Apparently I was expected to pick up the necessary information elsewhere, so I walked back up Main to my car. There was a folded piece of paper on the front seat. Again the message was composed of words and single letters cut from newspapers.

“Drive up 611 through Pipersville,” it instructed me. “Bottom of hill, near Myers’ Dam, turn right onto dirt road. Cross covered bridge. First house on right.”

A beak of a nose appeared at my left elbow and Abe Jackson exclaimed, “Hah! So that’s what’s with the dame!”

Put an oversize Chesterfield, a derby and a pair of spats on a parrot, add a cigar and sling a camera around its neck, and you’d have something which looked approximately like Mr. Abraham Jackson.

He was a newspaper photog perpetually out of a job. The *Inquirer* had booted him out because, wishing to snap some good spills at the six-day bike races, he’d scattered tacks over the track. He was as unscrupulous about getting his pictures as I was prepared to be in the matter of getting a few highly necessary clients.

“You got back from Jersey in a hell of a hurry,” I said, pushing the note deep into my

pocket. "Or didn't you go?"

"Sure I went, why not?" Abe said. "Now I stick with you, Mike, and we pick up that hotsie Donna dame. Ain't it I can smell a pic nine miles off against the wind, and boy, do I need 'em!"

I still wasn't sure what Abe was doing in Doylestown, where the *Intelligencer* uses a local halftone about once a month, but I'd once committed the error of buying him his cakes and coffee and he'd made it a habit of mine. When John Henry Laird had phoned my office tonight, Abe had mentioned having seen Donna at the Cantina Rosita. I'd packed him off to pick up information and to get his camera out of range.

"You don't go with me this trip, chum," I said.

"Hokay, so I don't go with you," said Abe. "So for that I don't tell you what I found out about that hotsie Donna dame and Max Lonardo, on account of what've I got to lose but nothing?"

"Get in, Abe," I said.

He fiddled expectantly with his Speed Graphic while we hit the new cement highway that heads north toward Easton.

"Put that damned box of yours away, Abe. I've already told you the difference between your purposes and mine—remember?"

"Mike, you never mentioned such a thing," Abe lied. "I gotta get me a job, don't I? To get me a job I gotta sell pix, don't I? You're a pal, ain't you, Mike?"

"Above everything else I'm technically a lawyer," I said. "The matters handled between lawyer and client are so confidential in nature as to be privileged. If I let a lens maniac take pictures of a client's troubles and broadcast them in the public prints, I'd be licked before I started. So no pictures. Now or ever. Do it just once, and I'll slit your throat."

Abe's air of resignation was faked. I'd have to think of ways of stopping the ruthless little lens louse without killing him, which wouldn't be easy.

WE WERE winding along the old road now and the snow, thinner here, was melting the instant it landed. Pipersville is a four-corners with one corner empty. We rolled past it and down a long hill into the valley of Tohickon Creek. Stopping on the covered bridge, switching off the headlamps and taking a flashlight, I got out with Abe hustling after me, his camera bumping his broad beam.

The first house on the right was the only house in sight. It was desolately dark.

"There was something said about that hotsie Donna dame and some guy named Lonardo," I reminded Abe, who was coming along the road at my heels, panting. "What do you mean, she's a hotsie?"

"Real hotsie, like tobasco," Abe explained. "The dame's a four-alarm fire, but in a quiet way, get what I mean? I mean she goes for guys. Any guy, from life-guards up. Right now she's nuts about Max Lonardo, the ex-light-heavy, who's married to Rosita, who runs the Cantina, and she's there practically all the time, some nights with this other guy named Lloyd Rowland."

"Now and then, Abe, I can almost guess what you're talking about," I said, going slowly up the hill, "but not tonight."

"So what's complicated?" Abe complained. "Like I just told you, Rosita Lonardo runs this roadhouse, it's called the Cantina Rosita, over in Jersey. Rosita's married to Max Lonardo, who's a has-been pug on account of he's so pretty he's puss-shy. Three or four nights a week this Donna dame shows up there with this Lloyd Rowland. But she's not nuts about this Lloyd who's nuts about her. No, Mike. She goes there because she's torchy for Max, so Lloyd just wanders off and loses too much money in the stud game that runs permanent in a back room upstairs. You don't get the setup? Are you a dope or something, Mike?"

"For Pete's sake, tell it straight, Abe!" I said, stopping. "It's important, especially about Lloyd Rowland's poker losses."

“This Lloyd Rowland is a good kid, but not too bright,” Abe explained.

“He goes upstairs at the Cantina, sits in and loses lots of money which he ain’t got, at stud. Donna don’t play cards. She plays guys. She’s downstairs all this time, with Max, while Rosita’s busy running the joint. Sometimes Lloyd’s pal, Vic Chapman, turns up, and he ain’t no luckier. I guess their families don’t get tipped they’re feeling the bite.”

“For how much?”

“Plenty! I could say markers for a couple grand each, and it’d only be giving a guess, Mike. But plenty!”

“I know and like both Lloyd and Vic,” I said. “But I don’t like what you’ve just told me, and—”

There was a muffled gunshot, then a second. They boomed inside the dark house. Before I could even size up the place—it was just a gray hulk against the black hill behind it—somebody came legging at a wild speed from behind the house and vaulted the picket fence so fast he didn’t see us and we couldn’t sidestep a collision.

Abe Jackson went skidding backward into the ditch, camera flying. Next this guy was toppling against me and my face was in the mud. By the time I got my eyes clear he was running far up the hill out of sight.

Thinking of Donna Laird and remembering those shots, I let him go. The spurting of a motor came from somewhere above and the car hummed off. And now there were footfalls—rapid, ragged, fading—at the rear of the house.

My light was on the front door. It was a pointed-stone farmhouse that hadn’t been occupied for years. Rounding it, I saw nobody and came back. Abe bounced behind me, clucking over his mistreated camera. The bolt of the front door wasn’t set and the hinges squeaked.

Donna Laird lay huddled on the floor, a fur coat covering her dusty dress, a paisley

scarf tied over her glossy black hair. Adhesive tape had been liberally applied to her. A strip glued her eyes shut. Another was plastered over her mouth, and she was squealing through sealed lips. More tape bound her ankles and strapped her wrists tightly together behind her. She could struggle for a week, as she was struggling now, and never get out of that sticky mess.

But she was intact—not shot, just hysterical—as hysterical as her bonds would allow.

The pleasant smell of burned cordite was in the air, plus the unpleasant stench of scorched wool.

My light streaked into the next room, found a rear door sagging open. I took a closer look at the dark blot on its stone sill. The stuff was blood, wet and warm.

If I didn’t have a murder case to top off the snatch, the only reason was that somebody hadn’t aimed quite accurately enough.

I RETURNED to the front room and luckily I arrived midway between Abe’s lens and Donna Laird just as his flash-bulb glared. At best he had a blurred closeup of my back. I spun on him, pinned him against the wall, yanked one bulb after another from his bulging pockets. They went into the fireplace forcibly, making a series of glassy popping noises.

Abe just stood there when I released him and looked at me with his great, grieved eyes, like a sorrowing pony.

I peeled the adhesive off Donna’s lids. Her eyes were dark, smouldering, and I began to realize what Abe meant. I took the stuff off her mouth, and her lips were as alive and sensitive as an exposed nerve. Next I freed her ankles—very nice—unwound the tape from her wrists, helped her up and grasped her shoulders to prevent her tearing straight out of the house.

She breathed swiftly and her whole body quaked, not with the cold but with fright.

"I'm Mike Hooker. I'm going to take you home, Donna. But first, what happened? Who fired that gun? Who was shot?"

Sobbing, her eyes fiery dark, she tried to wrest herself out of my hands.

"You were lying there strapped up," I insisted, "but the gun went off only a few feet away. Why? You couldn't see, but you could hear. There were at least two people. Which—"

She was so terrified I couldn't hold her. Breaking loose, still sobbing, she threw herself out the front door. For a moment I couldn't find her. Then there was a soft roar and a car backed swiftly out the open end of the barn. It was a light Boar convertible, apparently Donna's. The snatchers had evidently brought her here in her own car and had left it, considering it too hot to handle. She was veering it recklessly into the road when I hopped to the runningboard.

"Hold it! Where're you going?"

"Home!" she screeched. "I'm going home!"

I dropped off at a run. She rocked down the hill and around the bend. Turning back, I collared Abe.

"Make sure she turns toward Buckingham," I urged him. "Get moving, will you?"

Donna was out of sight by the time Abe took off, so he stepped on it. Returning to the house, I opened Abe's camera case, pulled the slides from all his holders and turned my light on the super-sensitive film they contained. That was a precaution against Abe's getting any pictures this trip. Then I angled my light into the corners and began finding things.

The first was a screwdriver. It lay beneath a window, surrounded by flakes of plaster. Part of its handle was greasy and part was clean. In the wall above it was a fresh gouge mark. Not knowing what it might mean, I left it there.

Next, nearby on the floor, I found two flattened lead slugs fired from a twenty-two, and both ejected shells. The trigger had been

pulled at close range. The two bullets had completely pierced a soft part of their target's anatomy and had bounced off the wall.

Well, lawyers don't often have corpses for clients. But they often have live killers. Such evidence as I had just found never does a guilty murderer any good. So, playing a hunch, I dropped the two slugs and the two shells into my pocket.

The blood on the sill of the rear door was darkening. My light followed a line of squashy footprints. They led across a field and behind a narrow wooded tract, then cut over to the road. I saw the lights of a car. Its motor was ticking but it wasn't moving. Its nose was in the ditch.

A chap was slumped over the wheel, eyes half closed, jaw loose, arms dangling. It was Lloyd Rowland.

The two bullets had pierced his middle just below the breastbone. His desperate run from the house had fatally aggravated the internal bleeding. He'd lived long enough to stumble into his car, turn on the lights, start the motor, and that was all.

One pocket of his camel's-hair coat was heavily sagging. I slid my hand in and brought up a twenty-two automatic. The muzzle had the right smell—very recently fired.

The gun wasn't a stranger. This wasn't the first time I'd held it in my hands. On several occasions I'd potted away at paper targets with it, just for an idle hour's sport, over at the Chapman place, near Newtown. The gun was brand new then, and I remembered how proudly Vic Chapman had handled it.

I was stuffing it into my pocket—the same pocket that contained the slugs it had fired through Lloyd Rowland's body—when the silent lightning of a flash-bulb struck from behind me.

CHAPTER III

I'D BEEN so intent on the weapon of murder that I hadn't noticed Abe Jackson

sneaking up, silent-footed as a cat. I remembered then that I'd overlooked the holder in the camera itself. Evidently I'd also missed a couple of peanut bulbs hidden in some corner of his coat, which had as many inside pockets as a magician's. He'd captured a prize—caught me in the very act of concealing evidence.

I slammed him into the mud, sat on him and said: "Abe, I'm going to cram this damned contraption down your gullet." I ripped the films out, struck a match and let him watch them burn. He looked up at me with mournful, wounded eyes.

"With that shot I could've got a job, Mike," he blubbered. "Even anywhere, I could've got big money."

"And I could get a long pull in the jug. You'd send me up, you conscienceless hound, just for the sake of selling your lousy pictures. Get up and come on!"

I left Lloyd Rowland as I'd found him.

When we pulled into Doylestown I grimly escorted Abe to his car and said: "Hike back to the Cantina Rosita and try to decide whether there's a dame in the place who might go in for snatching a hotsie, as you'd put it. Be smart."

Abe sniffled. "Two kids need a lotta cash bad and fast, so they snatch a hotsie friend of theirs whose old man's got it. Then one of 'em scares at the last minute and wants to renig, so in the argument one guy pops the other guy. So—"

"The Cantina Rosita," I reminded him. "I'll be along."

Abe drove off, sadly, without his camera, which I'd confiscated for safety's sake. The only phone booth still available at this late hour was inside Krout's bar.

"Miss Sue Laird? Michael Hooker. Has—"

"Yes, Donna's back," Sue said quickly.

"Your father should know that I may not be able to keep this as quiet as he'd like. After all, it's a case of murder. Lloyd Rowland has been shot dead."

Sue gasped and disconnected.

Next I dialed a number that's printed on the front of the phone book. There are two County Detectives. The one I know is named Brennan.

"Mike calling, Dan. I'm in Pipersville on a confidential errand. Coming along Stump Road just now, I saw a stalled car. Lloyd Rowland's in it, and getting cold. Naturally I didn't touch anything. I can't wait around here for no practical purpose, so I'll see you about it first thing in the morning."

Before he could differ with me I hung up.

On the way to Newtown I hit seventy. The Chapman place was even richer than John Henry Laird's. Dr. Price Chapman was a retired heart specialist who'd inherited big money, married more and earned plenty above that. A car turned into the tree-lined driveway just ahead of me—a light Boar coup, much like Donna's, only this one wasn't a convertible. Sue Laird hopped out of it, ran to the door and banged on the knocker.

SHE spun on me and said breathlessly: "Why are you here? You don't really think Vic—had anything to do—"

"Besides liking Vic Chapman a lot personally, it's too soon to judge," I answered. "There are too many angles. The ransom, for instance. Suppose your father doesn't get it back. Will he miss it much?"

Sue's steadfast eyes searched mine. "On account of the national defense program, Dad's started expanding the plant. It's taking a lot of capital. He'd never have parted with that fifty thousand unless—" Then she added, almost to herself: "He'd promised to finance a shop for me—a new dress shop in Bryn Mawr—but that's impossible now."

Vic Chapman opened the door. Husky, charmingly kiddish in some ways yet serious-minded, he was taking his pre-med courses at Penn and usually came home for weekends. He was pale, tight-nerved. In the living room Dr. Price Chapman was pacing the rug. With

his wavy white hair and firm self-possession, Vic's father looked like a senior officer of the British Army.

"What in heaven's name happened?" he asked.

"Vic," I said, "I'm going to be tough on you for your own good. You were at that house when the shots were fired. I ought to know. Look at the mud on your shoes and my clothes."

Vic looked at it in consternation while Sue said quickly: "Donna was kidnaped three nights ago, doctor. She's back home now. Mike Hooker says Lloyd Rowland was one of the kidnapers and another was—"

"I didn't say that," I corrected her. "For everybody's sake, I hope it's not true." The Chapmans, the Rowlands and the Lairds were all close friends. Sue was engaged to Vic. It would be the worst mess possible. "But if Lloyd actually planned the snatch, as a means of paying off a flock of IOU's, the cops will argue that his pal Vic Chapman was in it with him."

Vic came to me with his shoulders squared. "This is straight, Mike. I wasn't."

"This is your gun," I said, taking it out of my pocket.

Sue winced. Dr. Chapman stared. Vic tried to swallow.

"And this gun killed Lloyd Rowland. He was struggling to get possession of it, or keep it, when it went off. He clenched it, wrested it away, ran with it up to his car and died—without having tried to shoot back. He didn't try to shoot back!"

Dr. Chapman blurted: "It's unlawful, your taking possession of that gun—unlawful!"

I placed it on the table together with the two smashed slugs.

"I took the bullets, too, so that the police won't be able to trace the weapon of murder. It's illegal as hell, but do any of you care to tell them about it?" Nobody answered. "Would you rather the police had this evidence?" Still nobody answered. "In any

case I've had it long enough. I leave it illegally with you."

Dr. Chapman dumped the evidence into a drawer. So much for the ethics of the situation.

"See here, Mike," he said. "It's impossible. If Vic and Lloyd kidnaped Donna, she'd have recognized them."

"Not with adhesive plastered over her eyes, and not if they refrained from using their voices."

"See here, Mike!" Vic exclaimed. "Lloyd borrowed my gun several days ago—but I don't believe he had a hand in it, either."

"Then why did he borrow the gun?"

Vic said rapidly: "Lloyd was crazy about Donna, but he wasn't getting to first base with her. Somehow he must have tumbled to the fact that she'd been kidnaped. If he could get her out of the crooks' hands he'd make himself a hero in her eyes. In some way he was actually able to find the house where she was being held prisoner. So he took the crazy risk of facing those crooks single-handed, and they—"

"It's possible," I said. "But it doesn't explain how you happened to be there."

"When Lloyd borrowed my gun I got worried. This afternoon he was so jittery I decided to watch him. After dinner he drove off alone. I lost him the other side of Gardenville. After a lot of looking, I found his car, empty. That led me to the house. I heard voices inside—a man and a woman, I think, quarrelling in low tones. I didn't know whether Lloyd was inside or not. Then those shots. A back door opened and I thought somebody was gunning for me. Well, I'm no hero. I got the hell out of there."

"Dan Brennan will be around soon," I said, "and that's too much to tell him."

Dr. Chapman decisively took up the telephone. "You'll say nothing at all without the advice of my lawyers, Vic. I'll have Homer Thomason out here within an hour."

"An excellent idea," I said. "There's

nobody better than Thomason, Atkins, Stewart and Humbert, of Philadelphia, when it comes to corporate litigation. None of them has ever touched a murder trial, but of course they'll handle this one expertly—since your son's life depends on it.”

Sue was on her feet. “Wait, doctor! Mike Hooker knows a lot that might be turned against Vic if the State should call him as a witness. But if he were Vic's lawyer, all his information would be privileged—they'd have no way of getting it out of him.”

Smart girl!

Dr. Chapman eyed me dubiously.

“I'll insist on handling it strictly on my own, doctor,” I said. “My retainer is five hundred, and if the case reaches trial my final fee may be as high as five thousand.”

Grimly Dr. Chapman opened his desk and his checkbook. I had a big-shot client. He was a friend and I wanted to believe him innocent.

AFTER warning Vic to answer none of Dan Brennan's questions I drove over to John Henry Laird's place. It took him a minute to get downstairs to answer my ring.

“I'm making Donna rest,” he said hoarsely. “The poor child's terribly distraught. I haven't dared tell her about Lloyd.”

“Keeping it under wraps is going to be a pretty tough proposition now,” I said, “with a murder investigation under way.”

There were quick, pattering footfalls on the stairs. Donna appeared on the landing, barefoot, wearing only a gossamer nightgown and absently pulling on a silk robe. Her eyes were black fire, her lips trembling. I realized again what Abe had been driving at.

“Lloyd?” she said breathlessly. Evidently she'd overheard us. “Lloyd's dead?”

Laird rushed up the stairs to her, blurting paternal admonitions. Donna kept chattering about Lloyd as he steered her back into his room. I followed and found her again in bed, tensely sitting up, her eyes bright with black flame.

“Lloyd's dead,” she murmured hypnotically. “Dead—Lloyd's dead.”

“You didn't know he'd come to that house?” I asked.

“They shot him,” Donna whispered. “Killed him. Killed Lloyd.”

“Why was he there?” I insisted. “Was he trying to get you away from them?”

“I heard the gun, but I didn't know it was Lloyd. I didn't know. They shot him—shot him.”

Her father gently pushed her shaking shoulders down to the pillow, then grasped my arm and drew me into the hall.

“As a friend of Lloyd Rowland's family, you'll want to do everything you can to help get those crooks, Mr. Laird,” I said. “The law's best bet is the ransom money. Did you list the bills?”

Donna was rising again, staring after us in almost irrational distress, as Laird closed the door. He rubbed his palsied hands over his gray face, then slipped a folded sheet of paper from his inside pocket.

“Yes—yes, I have the list here. I'm still terribly afraid for Donna's safety—but if this list will—will bring them to justice—”

Suddenly the door flashed open. Donna sprang up. She snatched the paper from her father's hands, backed away. She was like an aroused jungle cat.

“They'll kill me if you give this to the police—kill me as they killed Lloyd!” She said it in a single swift rushing breath. “I won't let you do it. They'll kill me!”

She slammed the door in our faces and twisted the key. There were sharp, ripping noises as she tore the paper to shreds. Her bare heels thumped on the floor, there was the noise of flushing, then the bouncing of the bed. She'd done it out of sheer selfishness. Never mind if the murderers of her friend went unpunished. Above all else her own lovely skin must be safeguarded.

John Henry Laird gestured hopelessly. “That—that was the only copy.”

It was all right with me—in case Vic Chapman had any ransom money cached away somewhere.

Donna was sobbing again, but quietly. We went downstairs. Laird fumbled with a pen and managed to write a check for the one hundred dollars he'd offered as my fee for acting as intermediary.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm now Vic Chapman's counsel, but that won't prevent my trying to get your fifty thousand back. In case I do, I'm sure we can agree on a mutually satisfactory reward."

John Henry Laird nodded vaguely and I saw again, in the anguished lines of his face, a hint of a strange and secret fear.

ABOUT ten cars were dozing in the lot beside the Cantina Rosita, indicating that business wasn't too abundant. Inside, it was full of colorful Mexican touches, chiefly travel posters, shawls, sombreros and decorated gourds.

When I went in the lights were dimming and the floor show was under way. An orchestra featuring an xylophone was twanging into a slow, smooth rhumba. An orange spotlight tunnelled through the smoke, ready to pick up a dancer. At the bar Abe Jackson was munching pretzels and smacking his lips over a gin-and-bitters for which I was expected to pay. The little screwball's tastes are inexplicable, but his technique for satisfying them never varies.

"That's Vella," he said blissfully. "Vella Catrilla. Vella nice, too, eh, Mike?"

She was. With a swirl of her variegated skirts and a roll on her castanets, she spun into the spotlight. Not more than eighteen, she was a delicious, supple brown. Her legs were nimble as a gazelle's. Her face was a joyous child's and her eyes were a worldly wise woman's. Nobody drank while she danced—everybody got their intoxication from watching the weaving of her body. Vella was indeed a vella delectable dish.

"You wanted I should find out something, Mike," Abe said, "so I found out Max Lonardo wasn't here around eleven o'clock. Right now he's sitting over there in the corner, with his wife for a change."

Lonardo was sleekly Latin, downright beautiful—a glamour guy. His pugilistic career had faded at an early stage due to his weakness for looking in mirrors. "Puss-shy," Abe had termed him, meaning that he'd kept beyond range of his opponent's gloves for fear they'd mar his classic pulchritude. It was easy to understand how Donna Laird could go for him and how his wife wouldn't mind keeping him.

"May I introduce myself? Mike Hooker, attorney. This is a professional visit, Mr. Lonardo. I understand you were a witness to an auto accident in Norristown at about twenty minutes past eleven tonight."

Lonardo said: "Somebody's made a mistake." He could speak without an accent if he wished, but the accent made him a more romantic personality. "I haven't been near Norristown."

"That's strange," I said. "I distinctly understood you were in Norristown at eleven-twenty tonight."

"I couldn't have been," Lonardo answered. "I was right here."

"Well, just to keep the record straight, is there anyone who can verify your statement that you were here at eleven-twenty?"

Lonardo's smile snapped off his face, then flashed back. He said, a strain in his voice: "You'll have to take my word for it."

"Go ahead and tell him the truth, Max," Rosita said quietly. "Tell him where you really were at twenty minutes past eleven."

There was poison in her tone, but none in her looks. Rosita Lonardo had once been prettier than she was now, but she was still lovely. The electrical sparks in her night-black eyes told me that her husband was, to her, so much loco weed. She knew he was a louse and hated him for it, and at the same time she was

utterly silly about him. At the moment she seemed to be grasping a delightful opportunity to torture him.

“Aren’t you going to tell Mr. Hooker where you were at eleven-twenty tonight, Max?” she asked him softly.

“Yes, do tell me,” I chimed in. “Where were you, really, Max, at twenty minutes after eleven?”

Rosita laughed, rose and left him squirming. As he muttered Mexican maledictions upon me, Vella’s dance ended. She wafted off the floor and the lights went up. Lonardo’s gaze followed her, then switched back to the door. Then man who had just come in wasn’t exactly another customer. It was the easy-mannered Dan Brennan.

Lonardo ignored me as he kicked his chair back and walked up a flight of dark stairs. I climbed after him into a long, gloomy corridor. In one of the rear rooms, according to Abe’s cryptic report, the non-stop stud game must be in progress.

LONARDO was disappearing into a door nearby. I eased in after him, and he spun about to face me. It was a woman’s dressing room. Stockings and various pink garments were draped about. A chintz curtain, which hung across one corner, was settling to rest—somebody was behind it. Lonardo had his dimpled chin down.

“All kidding aside, Max, it was murder plus,” I said. “Donna Laird will probably be showing up again soon, but Lloyd Rowland won’t be coming with her any more. The only place he’s going to is the graveyard.”

“I’ve got an alibi,” Lonardo said.

“That’s fine, Max.”

“But if you repeat this,” Lonardo warned me, “I’ll beat the juice out of you.”

“I’m making no promises.”

“If it gets back to Rosita—” Lonardo closed his hands. “A few miles north there are some roadside cabins. Joe Weinik runs the camp. I went there after the second floor

show—about eleven.”

“Not alone.”

Lonardo smiled. A laboratory analysis wouldn’t have found a chemical trace of gallantry in him. A right guy would have gone to hell before falling back on such an alibi, but Lonardo seemed proud of it. The curtain in the corner fluttered. For one brief moment I saw a pair of eyes shining in consternation in the shadow. They were not Rosita’s eyes.

“The alibi is for me,” Lonardo said evenly. “My friend doesn’t need one.”

“Maybe she does. This case is full of female dynamite.”

Lonardo said: “Check up with Joe Weinik, but leave her out of it. I’m telling you, if one word of this leaks out—”

The door was opening slowly and Rosita was standing just beyond the sill. She was full of hair-trigger fury, tense with fierce hatred. Behind her left shoulder was Abe Jackson’s beak. The chintz curtain in the corner flicked again, and, again I saw those frightened eyes—the eyes of Vella Catrilla.

Lonardo realized with stunned abruptness that he’d spilled it himself. Now it was no longer hidden, it couldn’t be ignored. Lonardo was facing a marital crisis as hot as they come—thanks, he considered, to me.

It had always been my opinion that professional fighters are reluctant to use their fists outside the ring on untrained adversaries. Lonardo had no such scruples.

His first explosive blow sent me tottering back against Vella’s bed. Abe Jackson, rallying to the cause, leaped into the room, dashed his gin-and-bitters into Lonardo’s face, threw himself into a flying tackle and began to gnaw on Lonardo’s hip. Lonardo slapped him to the floor, then went to work on me in earnest.

Though I have never been inside a concrete mixer going at full speed, it would probably be an experience similar to the one I underwent then. In a vague way I found myself kneeling in the hall at the top of the

stairs. Dan Brennan was looking down at me with calm curiosity. Rosita and Vella were now screeching and tearing at each other inside the dressing room, and Lonardo was trying to keep them apart. Nobody displayed any real appreciation of my condition, except Abe, who tenderly aided me to my feet.

I wiped the blood off my nose and chin, promising to pay Lonardo back for that, no matter how, then negotiated the stairs, paid Abe's bill at the bar, groped out to my car and crawled under the wheel.

"Thanks, friend," I said gratefully. "Would you do me one more slight favor?"

"Should I get my camera back, Mike," Abe asked quickly, "hokay!"

Too numb to consider the probable consequences, I nodded; "Stick around. Keep an eye on Lonardo. If he makes a suspicious move, ring me at the office."

When I reached my desk the phone was clamoring and it was Abe.

CHAPTER IV

ABE said: "Maxie just got a phone call. He looked like it was the Pot o' Gold program. Right now he's out in his car, turning north. I tail him, don't I? So you'll buy me a dozen flash-bulbs in the morning, ain't you, Mike? Hokay!"

I hadn't said yes.

The Cantina Rosita was about to close when I got back there. The barman couldn't tell me anything about Abe Jackson, except that he'd gone off with a pocketful of pretzels and an unpaid bill, which I was thereupon required to settle. I turned my car northward. About a hundred yards farther on, in the center of the cement pavement, I found the first broken pretzel.

Though I often regretted the fact, Abe's resourcefulness was as unlimited as it was screwy. Presently the pretzel fragments on the highway were spaced closer together. Abe had driven more slowly here. Three pretzels in as

many yards indicated a left turn toward the Delaware on an unpaved road. Suddenly Abe was jumping up from the ditch and wildly waving his arms. While Abe reported he chewed pretzels.

"Max turned into another road right ahead and stopped. Another car was waiting for him. Both of 'em are still there, Mike. He's talking with somebody and it sounds like one of 'em had a puncher."

"A puncher?"

Abe shrugged. "Without a puncher, why should somebody change a tire?"

We walked quietly toward the turn Lonardo had taken.

"Has Rosita kicked him out, along with Vella?" I asked.

"He talked his head off to Rosita. So Rosita gets around to letting it ride. For right now, anyhow—and for reasons of her own, maybe."

"Layoff those damned pretzels. You make more noise than a brace of truck horses chewing grape nuts. Who was Max's call from?"

"Should I be a mind-reader? On the way out he passed Vella. I heard him whisper, 'Tomorrow—maybe tonight—so get set.' So do I know what he meant? No, Mike. Have a pretzel?"

This side road sloped down. The two cars were vaguely visible. There was a tinny pounding noise and metal squeaked against metal. They were working without lights. Hearing Abe and me approaching, they stopped, straightened, uttered exclamations.

Something skimmed through the air and smacked me full in the face. It felt like a manhole cover. I nose-dived and somehow Abe got tangled up with me. Motors roared and exhaust fumes clouded over us. By the time I unwound myself from Abe and got up out of the gully, both cars were gone.

The thing that had slapped me down was a Boar hub-cap, as big as a pie-plate, but heavier.

“You, Abe, are worse than a voodoo doctor’s curse,” I said bitterly. “Please go the hell home.”

Leaving him volubly protesting, I swung across the river to the Laird estate. There was a second gate in the rear. I left my car on the river road and walked along the driveway. The garage sat a considerable distance from the house, which was now dark except for a room at the front—probably Sue’s.

Laird’s big sedan was in its stall beside his two daughters’ Boars. Walking around them both, I found a wheel that lacked a hub-cap. It was the right rear wheel of Sue’s coupe.

Having brought along the hub-cap that had knocked me tail over tincup, I fitted it in place. Then I took my cuts and bruises home.

SHORTLY after I’d bought Abe his breakfast the next morning he bounced into the office with his Graphic and a package.

“So I put fresh film in my holders just in case, and these are the bulbs you promised I should have ‘em, Mike, so I charged ‘em to you,” he announced, ripping the paper off two dozen.

Dan Brennan didn’t show up or phone. At times Brennan’s easy, soft-spoken manner can be a strain on the nerves. When it comes to figuring out a setup his mind, in contrast to his slow perambulation, runs on ball bearings. Also, he is inflexibly dutiful. Having in my zeal committed various infractions of the law last night, I found none of this pleasant to recall.

It was a tough day because absolutely nothing happened.

In the early evening I said to Abe: “I feel a little conscience-stricken about burning up your films last night, chum. Go back to the camera shop, get something else you need and add it to the bill.”

“Hokay!” Abe cried, springing up. “I gotta have a new range-finder. It’s only twenty-four fifty. Mike, you’re a real palsie.”

It was costing me twenty-four fifty to get

him out of the way, but it was well worth it. Taking advantage of his expensive absence, I drove over to John Henry Laird’s and found Dan Brennan there.

Brennan was just leaving. A glint in Laird’s eyes warned me that the kidnaping hadn’t been mentioned. With a few denials and falsehoods, Laird was still safeguarding his pet child. A violin began to sing upstairs.

“It’s Donna,” Laird explained. “She practices for hours almost every evening. She says it relieves her nerves, and I never interrupt her—never.”

Nodding, I asked: “What about Max Lonardo, Dan?” As I mentioned the name, the violin stopped with a sharp wail. “Are you holding him?”

“No use,” Brennan said mildly. “His alibi checks. He really was at the roadside camp with Vella Catrilla for a couple of hours last night.”

“Suppose Lonardo decides to take a trip right now. Will you stop him?”

Brennan’s genial smile grew. “So far as I’m officially concerned, he can leave his wife and run off with a dancer if he wants to.”

“Mr. Laird,” I suggested, “I’d like to talk to Sue.”

Though it wasn’t easy to figure, I was wondering how it might work out if a girl should undertake to abduct her own sister.

“Sue isn’t here,” Laird said. “I—I don’t know where she’s gone. Perhaps with Vic Chapman.”

The violin began again, playing a swift, crying melody. I said good night to Laird and went out with the detective. Brennan eyed me, and I wondered how close he was to nailing me, or Vic.

“Why was Lloyd Rowland killed, Dan? Something to do with money?”

“Seems to be the only possible angle,” Brennan answered.

“Well, as a fighter Lonardo’s washed up. Rosita’s his meal ticket. If he’s tying a can to her in favor of Vella, who works for a living,

he'll need to be well heeled. Maybe he's been pulling off a shakedown or something, in anticipation of leaving his wife. If so, I'd say Lloyd stumbled into it and Lonardo decided he needed quieting."

"Not bad," Brennan said, "except that Lonardo didn't kill that boy. Therefore Vella couldn't have had a hand in it with him. Take my word for it, the alibi covering both of them is leakproof."

The situation wasn't looking any better for Vic Chapman.

"Customers aren't swamping Rosita's cantina these days," I said, taking another tack. "Realizing that Max is going for Vella, Rosita might be the one who engineered the plan for getting big money in order to keep him. Into which plan Lloyd stumbled, with fatal results."

Brennan eyed me carefully. "What were you doing in the neighborhood of where Rowland was killed—or is it still confidential?"

"Still confidential," I said.

"Good night, Mike," Brennan said very softly.

With another wry, searching glance he drove off. The violin was scraping through a succession of practice scales when I veered out the gate, pointing my radiator cap in the direction of the Cantina.

In the parking space I stopped beside a Boar convertible with Pennsylvania plates. I'd left Donna at her home practicing her violin exercises, and here at the roadhouse in Jersey was her car.

I went inside and saw Rosita at once. Looking ill, her face drawn, she was asking of the barman: "Where *is* Max?"

"Went off in his car, senora, that's all I know."

Angrily Rosita turned about and disappeared through the swinging doors of the kitchen.

THE place had that peculiar sepulchral atmosphere peculiar to hotspots in their cold moments. Maybe the crowd tonight would grow. If not, Rosita wouldn't come anywhere near making her nut.

"You know Miss Laird?" I asked of the same barman. "I was to meet her here. Her car's outside, but—"

"She's upstairs."

I climbed the stairs, guessing the reason behind Donna's visit. She'd evidently eavesdropped on Brennan's remarks concerning Lonardo and Vella, and she'd burned up the road with the purpose of finding out about it. Max being gone, she'd apparently decided to get her information direct from her more successful rival. So I went to Vella's door and found it locked.

But I heard a squealing sound—the same stifled screeching that Donna had uttered last night in the abandoned house.

I put my shoulder to the door and pretty soon it gave, the process of forcing it having produced scarcely a sound. The room was dark. I snapped the switch, stood still and felt cold-footed mice skittering up and down my spine.

Donna Laird was lying on the floor in almost exactly the same condition I'd found her last night—adhesive plaster over her eyes and mouth, more around her ankles, tight straps of it fastening her wrists together behind her.

Vella Catrilla was face down on the bed, her milk-chocolate body clad only in a dance set, a big kitchen knife driven handle-deep into her lovely back.

"Be quiet!" I snapped at Donna. "It's Mike Hooker. . . . You're all right. You don't want to be found here with a corpse, do you? Then stop that noise!"

She stopped.

I eased from the room, leaving Donna bound and the door shut. The inside knob felt sticky, but no color was left on my fingers. There were several phone booths down the

hall. I called the Chapman home and got a maid.

“Mr. Victor is not at home.” As far as Vic was concerned, the situation still wasn’t improving. I went back into the murder room. Donna lay still. Several packed suitcases sat beside the bed and only one dress hung in the closet. Vella had been preparing to quit the Cantina. The knife, I decided, might have been brought from Rosita’s kitchen or any other.

Peeling the adhesive off Donna’s face and ankles, I recalled that the police make good use of a file called the *modus operandi*, which lists crooks according to their habitual methods of operation. The way Donna had been strapped up this second time was exactly the same as the first, which was definite proof that Lloyd hadn’t done it. The instant I unwound the last of the stuff from Donna’s wrists she sprang up to stare wildly at the dead Vella.

Guiding her from the room, I again felt that the knob was sticky and lowered my nose to it. It smelled rather like a doctor’s office. Donna walked beside me, trembling, with flame in her dark eyes. Once we were outside her control broke. She tore from me, ran to her car, jumped in. She sobbed as she streaked for the road.

I managed to keep her tail-light in sight. She drove like a she-devil, but when she neared the rear gate of the Laird place she slowed, switched off her lights and swung to the garage with stealthy facility. She’d evidently done this same thing many times before—slipped in and out unseen. Abandoning my bus outside the gate, I caught up with her while she was hurrying toward the house.

And again I heard the violin! Donna’s instrument was still running through its exercises in Donna’s room upstairs, and Donna was outside with me.

Biting her lips, she squeezed into a side door. There were voices in the living room.

On tiptoes Donna sneaked up the rear stairs, and I followed at her heels. All the while the violin played on. She crept into her room and as I closed the door I saw the obvious explanation for the disembodied music.

The big phonograph was a Capehart, one of those expensive instruments which play both sides of twenty or more records and then repeat. Unless switched off, it will continue to produce music until some part or other eventually wears out.

“You had those records made of your own playing,” I said in a low tone. “There are studios in Philadelphia or New York where it can be done. You tricked your father into believing you were here at home almost every evening, conscientiously improving your musical education, when in reality you were miles away at the Cantina Rosita.”

SHE stood close, her face lifted, her lips trembling, and was silent.

“Just what did you mean to do about Max and Vella tonight,” I asked.

Donna said in a breath: “I think you’re so swell for getting me out of there!”

“Never mind how swell I may or may not be. Max had already gone. Vella was almost all set to join him when that knife in her ribs prevented. Getting strapped up with adhesive is not a pleasant experience, but you should be damned glad you underwent it. It’s all that keeps me from thinking your pretty hand held that knife.”

Donna blurted: “I’m so glad you believe in me!”

“You don’t know what I think of you, so let’s skip that angle,” I answered, eying her. “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you—because I trust you, Mike,” Donna said. “I opened the door of—of that girl’s room, just stepped in and—and somebody grabbed me from behind. I must’ve fainted, and when I came to I was tied up. Then I recognized your step. I knew it was you—so direct and strong. Mike, you won’t

let them drag me into it, will you? You won't, Mike?"

Her hands were sliding up under my coat. Her lips were yearningly lifted. It made me dizzy. I remembered what Abe had said. "Any guy from life-guards up." One yielding move and I'd find myself Max Lonardo's successor. I thought of how grand a girl Donna might have been, but apparently she couldn't help it. It was crazy. *She* was crazy. I was going crazy myself. I pushed her away and strode from the room. And falsely the violin played.

I went directly down the front stairway and into the living room. Startled, John Henry Laird frowned at me. Sue's eyebrows lifted in bewilderment and Vic Chapman tightened as I confronted him.

"How long have you been here, Vic?"

"Why, I don't know, Mike. Sue and I came over from my place—about an hour ago, maybe."

I then turned to John Henry Laird and proceeded to inflict considerable damage on my future as a lawyer.

"Sir, I strongly advise you to lock Donna inside a cage. She's not the poor, sweet baby you imagine. She's selfish, scheming—ruthless. No good'll ever come of her and you'd better wake up to that fact, if it isn't too damned late already."

I slammed out.

CHAPTER V

SEVERAL New Jersey State patrol cars sat outside the Cantina Rosita. Four respondent troopers were stationed at the doors. Dan Brennan's car was also there.

The official photographer's floodlight glared from the window of the death room. The customers had been herded out. The musicians, waiters and kitchen help were being released one by one after brief questioning. I ambled behind the barman and the xylophone player, listening.

"Rosita found her," the drinkslinger said.

"But where's Max?" asked the musician.

"Max wouldn't kill Vella," said the barman, "but it looked bad for Rosita."

"Rosita wouldn't kill Vella like that, either," the other remarked. "She'd kill Max first."

"Maybe she did and we don't know it yet."

"I hope so," said the player of sweet melodies.

They drove off.

Drifting across the parking space, I watched operations. Presently a car swung off the highway, slowed, then crept cautiously around to the rear of the Cantina. The troopers, obliged to stick to their posts near the doors, took no particular interest in it. The driver was unaware that I was standing nearby in the shadows. He got out. Two Gladstones were in the back of the car and he was carrying a briefcase.

"Hello, Max," I said.

He spun about as I came slowly forward.

"If your alibi this time is as good as the first," I remarked, "you're a genius."

He tightened all over, keeping a grip on the brief-case, his eyes flashing darkly under his hat-brim.

"But I won't be surprised if you're in the clear again, Max. I see how it is. You didn't dare leave with Vella, bags and all. You went first out of Rosita's reach, after arranging to meet Vella somewhere later. You've been wondering what was delaying her and you came back to find out. Well, she has a pretty good excuse for being late, Max. She's thoroughly dead."

Lonardo sucked in his breath.

"I'm curious about you, my friend. What were you and Vella going to use as legal tender?"

He turned quickly, began to duck into his car. Catching his arm, I stopped him.

"Leaving so soon? Before chatting with the officers? They'll be disappointed, Max. Just a moment and I'll tell them you're here."

He swung the brief-case. His left came

from the opposite direction like a mule's hoof. My advantage this time was that he didn't want to let go of the brief-case, but he kept slamming it against my head, driving up with his left. A stunner of an uppercut sent me staggering backward. Blinded by a stab of light, I thought at first that it was caused by my eyes being jarred in their sockets. But it wasn't that. It was Abe Jackson.

Using the flash-bulbs he'd charged to me, Abe was so busily shooting pictures of the battle that he had no time to lift a helping finger.

Whirling, I grabbed the Graphic out of his hands. Swinging its strap, I let Lonardo have it over the head. It had hard, sharp corners. He rolled off the fender and went flat on his face.

Two state troopers came loping over with their service revolvers out. They covered me while I unbuckled the straps of Lonardo's brief-case. A flashlight spotted my hands and I glanced up to see that it was aimed by Dan Brennan. He just stood there while I pulled out packet after packet of banknotes.

Some of them were spotted with black grease, and it was an easy guess that the lot would total fifty thousand dollars.

BRENNAN said: "Hmmm. What's the charge, Mike?"

"None that I know of, Dan, worse luck. You probably can't get Max for anything important enough. I doubt that he stole this dough or blackmailed anybody. Very likely it was given to him."

"Given!" Brennan murmured. "You're not talking sense, Mike. You must be Lonardo's lawyer."

"If I were, I'd plead him guilty to the book. Get the story from him, Dan, and let me go away from here. I've got a bellyfull of this business and what I'm going to do about it won't be funny. Talk to me later."

"Well, Mike," Brennan said dubiously, "near Lloyd Rowland's car last night I found a burned-out flash-bulb. Inside a house standing

not far away I found other things, and tonight, in the room where the girl was killed—Well, the same adhesive tape both places. Listen, Mike, you've been in and out of these cases like a mole, and you were seen—"

"Dan," I insisted, "give me an hour. You'll lose nothing by it. Inside an hour maybe all these questions of yours will be answered."

"All right, Mike," Brennan said, almost too readily. "At my office, inside an hour. Not later."

"Just incidentally," I said, "I represent the true owner of that fifty grand and I'm putting in a claim."

They were picking Lonardo out of the cinders when I trudged to my car. Abe Jackson clambered in, tsk-tsking over his slightly loose-jointed camera.

I stopped at a drugstore and bought a ten-cent roll of one-inch adhesive tape.

The car standing in front of John Henry Laird's house was Sue's coupe to which I had restored the hub-cap last night. She answered my knock and followed me anxiously into the living room. Abe trailed me expectantly, camera and all. Laird was there, and Vic Chapman and Donna, who gave me a lofty, scornful look.

I went straight to Vic.

"This is probably the payoff," I said, "so listen hard. There are two courses of action I can take with you. First, I can let the law follow its inevitable procedure. You'll be arrested, charged with the murder of Lloyd Rowland and brought to trial. I'd like that. As your lawyer, it would give me a nation-wide buildup, a chance to put on a sensational show in the courtroom. If I got you off, I'd be made. But there's one little thing wrong with that picture. Maybe the verdict wouldn't be an acquittal. That wouldn't be so tough on me as it would be on you. It would play hell with the seat of your pants."

Vic was sickly pale.

"The other thing is to crack this case off short before the law puts his hands on you.

That's the right way for me to protect my client. My part will be less spectacular but more substantial. It will mean a great deal less anxiety for you and your family, though somebody else is going to get badly hurt—which is inevitable, anyway. You don't know what I'm driving at? Well, this second course is the one I'm taking and I'll show you just what I mean."

LAIRD and his two daughters watched me in bewilderment as I pulled Abe's camera from his hands, jerked his oversize Chesterfield off and guided him over to a door. I then took the roll of adhesive from my pocket and wound the tape loosely around the circumference of the doorknob, allowing the last ten inches or so to dangle. Meanwhile I talked.

"Circumstances point to only one answer. You, Mr. Laird, have been afraid of it from the very beginning. You've tried to deny it in your own mind, but that's no longer possible. Stand still, Abe! Do exactly as I say."

I jockeyed Abe so that his back was near the knob. I fixed both his hands behind him, fingers intertwined, then touched the dangling end of the tape to one of his wrists, where it adhered.

"Lloyd Rowland wasn't the one who strapped up Donna. Vic swears he didn't do it. Max Lonardo has an alibi, and so had Vella Catrilla. Next there's Rosita—the question of why she should bind up Donna in the dead Vella's room. To delay the discovery of the body, to gain time for an escape? No—Rosita attempted none. There's no sensible reason for Rosita's doing it, so let's count her out. And then there's Sue."

They watched me—Sue breathless, Donna tightly calm, Vic puzzled and Laird numbly fearful.

I nudged Abe. "Keeping your wrists pressed together, rotate them around the knob and pull the tape tight." As Abe did so, I continued, "But why should Sue kidnap her

own sister? So as to pay off Vic's debts for him? To open her dress shop in Bryn Mawr at the cost of her father's plant expansion program? Such tactics would be unthinkable to her, but not to the only other party involved. Not to the remorselessly selfish Donna."

They stared at Donna, and Donna laughed scornfully.

"She enlisted Lloyd's help. He was so crazy about her he'd do anything for her. She hid in the abandoned house while he brought her food and handled the ransom messages. She'd promised him a share of the money, enough to pay his gambling debts. With the rest she meant to buy Max Lonardo for herself and run off with him. If her long-suffering father suspected the truth later, she could count on his indulgence. But she didn't count on murder."

DONNA was smiling derisively. Abe was moving his wrists up, down and around the knob.

"Lloyd got scared at the last minute and wanted to back out. Donna had already collected the ransom from me. She'd had time to divide it into four parts and hide it inside the big hubcaps of her car. Everything was going according to plan, except Lloyd's last-minute rebellion.

"Crazy to get Max, Donna insisted on going through with it. Lloyd had Vic's gun. In a fit of rage Donna tried to take it from him, to turn it against him and so force him to obey her. It went off, fatally wounding him. He ran from the house. But this she-devil went right ahead with her plan. Her perverse ingenuity—those phonograph records upstairs are another example of it—fooled me completely at first, when I found her helplessly strapped up."

Donna was white-faced, and not smiling.

"She'd plastered tape over her own eyes and mouth and around her own ankles. She'd also done the apparently impossible stunt of strapping her own wrists together behind her. At the deserted house she'd first wrapped the

tape on the handle of a screwdriver driven into the wall. Turn around, Abe.”

Amazed at what he had done to himself, Abe complied. Simply by means of the circular motion he had peeled the entire length of adhesive off the doorknob and in so doing had wound it around his own wrists.

“Donna stole from this house later that same night and met Lonardo. She took the ransom money out of the hubcaps of her car and gave it to him. Then, with typical selfishness, she tried to shield herself at her sister’s expense. Sue’s car being the same make and year as hers, she pried a hub-cap off it and put the cap in place of the missing one on her convertible.

“Her plan was to run off with Lonardo and the money as soon as the investigation bogged down. She didn’t suspect he was double-crossing her. He wanted Donna’s money, but the girl he wanted was Vella. He was all set to run off with Vella when Donna learned the truth. She overheard Detective Brennan and I talking about it here in this room. She raced to the Cantina. She was too late to stop Max, but in a vengeful fury she stopped Vella from joining him. Then she again strapped her own wrists behind her, using the doorknob to hold the tape this time. Mr. Laird, I’m sincerely sorry, but that girl is emotionally irrational. There’ll be more Lonardos in her life, and heaven knows how many more crimes she’ll add to the two murders she’s already committed, unless—”

Donna screamed. While the others stood paralyzed with consternation, Donna spun

about and ran wildly out the door. I went after her, with Abe stumbling behind me, his hands still bound behind him. Donna was at the wheel of the car that had been sitting at the entrance. She flung it down the main driveway at a crazy speed.

The rear wheels skidded as she veered through the stone gate. It slammed sidewise into the massive post, then careened on, weaving, rocking. Out of control, it shot across the road. There was a deep drainage ditch lined with heavy rocks. The car plunged and stopped with a shattering shock. Donna was pinned inside the crushed mass.

Her death was typical of her life. The demolished car wasn’t her own. It was Sue’s.

Abe was yipping. “Lemme loose, Mike! Take this stuff offa my wrists! Gimme my camera! With these pix I can get a job anywheres! Lemme loose, Mike!”

I went back to the house. Stunned, John Henry Laird was stumbling toward the wrecked car. Sue’s eyes were closed. Vic Chapman, too dazed to move, gazed blankly at me.

“It’s better this way, Vic,” I said.

Abe Jackson was howling. “Mike, quick, please, quick, lemme outta this stuff! What you’re doing to me, Mike, you shouldn’t do to a dog. Lemme loose, Mike, for just one little pic, please, Mike. Please, lady, you lemme loose! You, guy, get me outta this stuff, will you? Somebody—anybody—lemme loose!”

Nobody paid him any attention.