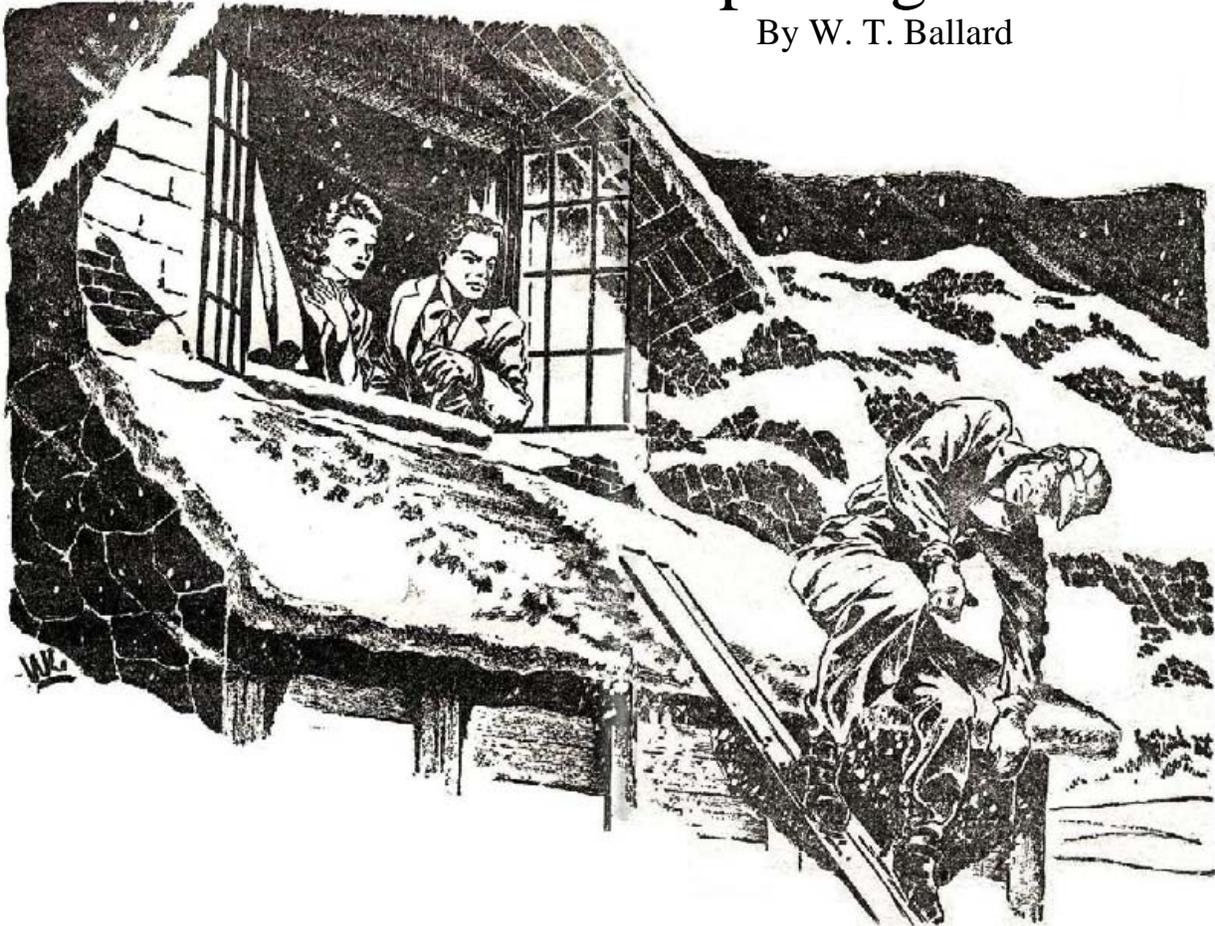


# There's That Corpse Again

By W. T. Ballard



**Happy Valley, with its winter sports, became a suicide playground for Jimmy Doane. For he was haunted by a corpse on skis that was determined to dog Jimmy's snow trail until he reached the brink of hell's jump-off.**

## CHAPTER I

**P**ERSONALLY, when love flies in one window, I want to get the hell out of the other one but quick. That's the way I felt on the morning I dropped into Crawford's for a cup of coffee.

For six years, I'd been head of the claim department of Utility Insurance, and in those six years, I'd seen some funny angles and strange happenings. But I'd never seen anything like the job that had just been handed me.

Old J. T. himself had dished it out to me right on a silver platter and I knew better than

to talk back.

"Know anything about skiing?" I asked the waitress who brought me the coffee.

She looked at me as if I was crazy. Maybe I was. I'd been a lot of things in my life, but never nursemaid to a love-sick jane.

**T**HE PLOWS had knocked a lot of snow off the road, but there was still a lot it had missed, and there was ice underneath.

All the cars that passed me had ski racks fastened to their tops, and most of them were filled with kids. It made me feel like a grandfather to watch them. At times, thirty years can weigh you down about as much as a

hundred.

The town was snow covered. Everything looked clean and white and very cold. It wasn't kidding, either. It was cold as the devil, and my ulster hadn't been built for chilly weather.

I took a look around the joint. It had one long street with a church at one end and the railroad station at the other. In the middle of the main block was the post office and I went in.

A steam radiator was giving out a lot of noise and a little heat and I crowded over against it, warming my hands. There was an old man behind the grilled window and he grinned, his old eyes looking out at me over the edge of steel-rimmed glasses.

"Cold?"

I told him that he was right. "Where would I find Clint Edwards?" I asked.

He consulted a thick watch and scratched his head. "Might try the lodge, he usually shows up there in the afternoon, although it don't open 'til evening."

I tried the lodge. It was a big, sprawling building, built of logs that blended well into the landscape. There was smoke coming out of the front chimney and I tried the entrance, finding it unlocked.

Two men were sitting in split-backed rockers before a roaring fire. Both of them looked at me as I came in and I said, "I'm looking for Clint Edwards."

"I'm Edwards," one said. He was a big man, almost as big as I, and good living had crowded his cheeks and put a roll of fat around his belly.

"The name's Doane," I told him. "Jim Doane. I'm with the Utility Insurance."

"Don't need any."

"I'm not selling insurance," I said. "I'd like to speak to you alone. It's a kind of personal matter. Tommy Gregg of Dawson's said you were a right guy."

He didn't move a muscle at that. He didn't even seem to hear.

I repeated what I'd said. I was getting a little warm, and it wasn't from the fire either. I don't like guys that just sit and look at me when I bring a message from a supposed friend.

"So what do you want?" he asked.

"To talk to you alone," I repeated myself.

"Sammy's all right," he said.

I looked at Sammy. He was a tall man with a long, yellow face and heavy lids that came down like hoods over his eyes.

I didn't like his looks, and apparently he didn't care for me. I might have been a beetle impaled on a pin for all the interest he showed.

I thought it over, fast. Things weren't breaking the way I'd figured. I was used to people being impressed when the Utility was mentioned. These two weren't. It was as if they'd never heard of the world's largest insurance company.

"You've got a ski instructor working up here," I told the fat man. "He's supposed to be a count, or something, a White Russian. Nicholas Bokonviski. I want him fired."

Clint Edwards' eyes were small and round and blue, circled by the layer of fat which covered his big cheek bones. The eyes got smaller now, and very thoughtful.

"So," he said. "And why?"

"J. T.'s daughter is up here. She skis. I understand she is a good customer of yours. That isn't my business. I wasn't paid to check on her gambling losses. I'm merely here to see that she doesn't marry the Russian heel."

"And who's J. T.?" Edwards didn't show real interest.

I was surprised again but I didn't show it. "The president of Utility," I told him, "and my boss."

The fat man heaved himself up out of the chair. It was something of an effort to raise his bulk.

"You look like a bright boy, Doane. I'm giving you a word of advice. Run along, peddle your papers, or you'll be in trouble. I

mean it.”

I STOOD there for a full minute, looking him over, then I turned on my heel and went back to my car, cursing under my breath as I went.

The idea of contacting Clint Edwards and getting Bokonviski fired had been my idea. J. T.'s orders had been merely to keep his daughter from marrying the Russian. That was like J. T. He never bothered himself with details. The length of time you spent working for him was governed by your ability to take care of the details yourself.

There were three hotels in the place. In summer they catered to the fishing crowd, in the fall to the hunters, and in the winter to the ski trains and the automobile sports who were willing to waste gas and rubber for the privilege of breaking their necks on some snowy run.

It was hard to get a room, and the one I got was certainly no bargain. It was up under the eaves with a dormer window that let me look out at a lot of snow.

I got my first took at the count when I came downstairs. There was a gang in ski clothes lined up at the bar which opened off the lobby, and he was the first guy you saw. He was tall and dark, and good looking. Even in the heavy clothes, he moved about with the grace of a trained seal. I asked the bell hop who he was, but I already thought I knew, and my heart sank a little.

This wasn't going to be easy. He might be a phony, but he didn't look like a phony. He looked and acted like a very nice guy.

There were two people with him that I knew by sight, Ralph Scott the golfer, and Marian Kline. The Kline dame had all the money in the world and was number one in cafe society this year. I'd met both of them in a business way, but neither gave me a tumble as I moved quietly into the room and climbed up on a stool at the end of the bar.

There was a man seated at my elbow,

turned so that I could only see his back. He turned around and I saw that it was Hugh Pyle, the sports reporter from the Trib.

“Hello,” he said. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

“I came up to see the boys slide down hill,” I told him as I ordered my drink.

“Like hell you did,” he was studying my face like a domineering grandfather. “I can still add two and two. You work for J.T. and J.T.'s daughter is running loose in these hills.”

I pretended to be surprised. “Is she? I'd like one little glimpse of her. I work for the old man, but I don't know him socially. The only time I ever saw the gal was at a football game, and a hundred and ten thousand other people were looking at her at the same time.”

He considered me with care. I got the idea that he was a little tight, nothing serious, but he'd had one too many. He leaned over before I realized what he was going to do, and pulled back my coat. “Thought so,” he said, staring for an instant at my thirty-eight police special. “Do you carry that pop-gun every time you go skiing?”

“Always,” I said. “I might get a shot at a duck or maybe a moose. You never know what you might find in these hills.”

He still wasn't convinced. He had a nose a little sharper than ordinary, and it could smell a story a long way away.

“Pappy puts bodyguard on daughter. Insurance dick watches ski instructor. How do you like those apples?”

“I don't,” I told him, “and your sheet wouldn't like it either when I sued them. If you want to know the truth, I've a secret love for the Kline girl. She can't see me for dust, or maybe it's snow, but I'm only happy when I'm sitting watching her.”

“Nuts.”

I shrugged. “Have it your way, copyboy.” I tasted my drink, then picking it up, slid off the stool and wandered over to the group in ski clothes. I knew Hugh Pyle was watching every move I made. In fact, I could almost feel

his eyes boring into my back.

**T**HEY were all laughing when I came up. I knew I had to make this good. It takes plenty of acting to fool a guy like Pyle. I was trying to throw him off track, to stop him guessing as to why I'd picked the winter to play around in the hills.

"Hello," I said to Marian Kline. "Remember me?"

She turned slowly, then she let out a little glad cry. "It's my detective."

That wasn't true. I wasn't her detective, but I had recovered a necklace for her during the preceding summer, a necklace that was insured by our company.

"The name," I reminded her, "is Jim Doane."

"I remember." She gave me a large smile. Ralph Scott had nodded. "Hel-lo, Doane."

I said, "Hello," mentally shaking hands with myself. I was in. They'd accepted me, they were introducing me to the count, and the way they acted, I was an old pal they'd known for years.

All but the count. At the word detective, he'd stiffened momentarily. Not enough for the average watcher to notice, but I've been trained in such things. He recovered himself in a moment and giving me his hand, added a smile which showed a lot of white teeth.

"A pleasure," he said with the barest trace of accent. "I have read of detectives, it is something new to meet one."

"Don't let it throw you," I told him. "We don't live up to our press notices."

Before he could answer, the Kline girl said. "Here comes your big moment, Nicky," and we all turned.

The girl had paused in the doorway. She was better than medium height, but not too tall. Her blue eyes laughed a little, her nose was small and cute, and the blonde hair was unbobbed and caught tightly in a small knot at the back of her neck. She too wore skiing clothes, but she looked neither clumsy nor out

of place in them.

"Hi, there," she said, coming forward and pausing in front of me. "Should I know you?"

The words got stuck crosswise in my throat. I wanted to say something clever, to be as easy and light-hearted as they were, but it didn't work that way.

I dummied up; I couldn't get my lips unlocked. I felt my ears begin to turn red and got mad at myself. Hell, what was going on? I hadn't blushed in ten years.

Marian Kline came to my rescue. I don't know whether she guessed what was wrong with me or whether she just liked to talk.

"You should know him," she said. "He works for your Dad. This is Jimmy Doane, the greatest detective since Hawkshaw."

For an instant puzzlement darkened Pat Turner's blue eyes, then they lighted. "Sure, you're Doane," she said. "I've heard my father speak of you. He swears by you."

"Or at me." I'd finally found my voice.

They all laughed and Scott ordered drinks. I turned and had a weak feeling at the pit of my stomach. Hugh Pyle was moving in on us.

In a way, he was my nomination for a high class rat. I suppose newspaper guys have to live and papers have to have news, but in my line of business, the less news we have, the better we like it.

He moved in and he took the party over. "Jimmy Doane has good taste," he said, raising his glass and looking meaningfully at the Kline kid.

They laughed, but the girl only winked at me. I decided I liked her, almost as much as I didn't care for Pyle. "Go home, Junior," I told him. "You're out of your league."

"No more than you are." He had a nasty way of saying things, but I didn't pay any attention. I was watching Pat Turner talking to the Russian and I didn't like what I saw.

We broke it up about six-thirty, everyone heading upstairs to get dressed. We were all going to meet at eight, have some food and then go over to the lodge. I seemed to be part

of the crowd, and the Russian was even threatening to teach me to ski.

He had his skis with him, nice long boards that had seen a lot of service. He picked them up, carrying them with him to the stairs. I went to my room to think. The more I thought, the less luck I had. The guy was a phony of some kind. I've seen too many not to spot them, but how was I going to prove it to the girl?

I didn't know. At quarter after seven I decided to have a talk with her. I rang the desk and got the number of her room. It was right across from mine. I moved over and took a look out the window, it was snowing hard.

## CHAPTER II

**P**AT TURNER opened her door in response to my knock. She didn't open it very wide and I was surprised to see that she was still wearing her ski clothes.

"I want to talk to you," I said in a low voice. "It's important."

She hesitated. For an instant I thought she was going to refuse, then she pulled the door open. "Come in, Jim Doane," she said, and there was a funny tight little note in her voice. "Come in, quick."

I went in and she shut the door, but I didn't say anything because I'd seen the man in the little alcove which led to the dormer window.

He didn't see me though. He'd never see anything again because he was dead.

I shot a quick look at the girl, but she wasn't doing anything. She wasn't even looking at the dead man. She was looking at me. I went across and knelt at his side. I hadn't been certain that he was dead before, but I was certain now.

I'm no doctor, but I've seen plenty of bodies in my business and I've come to be able to figure out the cause of death pretty well.

There wasn't any doubt here. I could tell by the way his head hung that his neck had been broken. That almost stopped me. It isn't so hard to break a neck. There are several ways of doing it, but it's not a common form of murder. I looked around for something, anything with which the count could have been hit. There was nothing there. His skis lay beside him on the green carpet and he still wore his heavy clothes and square-nosed shoes.

I looked up at Pat Turner, feeling a little sick. She said steadily, "You've got to do something, Jim Doane. He can't be found here. Dad says you can do anything."

"Sure." I was used to the old malarkey that J.T. passed out when he wanted me to handle a difficult job, and this girl was using the same formula. Her voice was steady, so were her eyes, and she hadn't been doing any crying.

"Did you kill him, Pat?"

She was looking at me levelly. "Would it make any difference if I did? I mean, would you help me anyhow?"

I nodded. Something down deep in me made my head move. I knew that I'd help her, even if she'd used an ax on that Russian's head, and it wasn't because I worked for her Dad either. I just wanted to help her.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm that kind of a fool, chum. I'd help, but I can do a better job if I knew what happened."

Her eyes wavered for an instant, then they came back to me and she said, steadily. "Thank you, Jim Doane. I'm glad you said that." And suddenly she was crying. Not noisily, not hysterically, just a couple of tears squeezing their way out of the corners of her eyes and running unnoticed down her cheeks.

"I didn't kill him," she said. "He was here when I came back, lying just as you see him. I'd only been back a couple of minutes before you knocked. I was trying to decide what to do."

"Where'd you been?"

She shrugged. "Out by the ski lift. I got a call as soon as I came back to the room. A woman's voice told me to be there in five minutes or I'd be in trouble. So I went and waited, but no one came."

"What kind of trouble?"

She shook her head and I saw that the hair was coming loose from the small knot at the back of her head.

"I don't know, Jim."

**S**HE was lying. A girl like Pat Turner doesn't go rushing off to answer a phone call because someone threatens her with a vague kind of trouble. I wondered how much else of the story was a lie, and then, looking at her, I didn't seem to care.

"Look," I said. "We've got to ride this thing through, and it might be tough. There's a nosy newspaper guy staying at the hotel. He's got the idea that your old man sent me up here as a watch dog, and. . ."

"Did he?"

"He did!"

She looked at me a long moment in silence. "It wasn't you who killed the count, was it, Jim?"

"Would I leave him in your room?"

"Not if you could help it," she admitted. "That is, if you're working for Dad."

"I'm not working for his stepfather," I said. "Now, look, we've got to put on an act. You'd better get into some other clothes while I get rid of Junior. Use the bathroom. I'll be busy here for a few minutes."

"What are you going to do?"

I didn't answer. Instead I stepped across the twisted body and took a look out of the window.

It was still snowing. The big flakes were coming down so fast that they looked like a white curtain.

Her window was like mine, it thrust itself out into the steep roof like the prow of a ship. There was some snow on the roof, but not a lot. There would be more later, judging by the

rate it was falling and I figured that any marks made now would be wiped out within half an hour.

I opened the window, then I turned around and, stooping, lifted the body. I was about to shove him out, when my eyes fell on the skis.

The count had lived on his runners, and he might as well die on them. "Come here and help" I told her.

She caught on fast, that girl. "You're foolish," she said, "you. . ."

I snarled. "Don't tell me my business, chum. Just get those trick barrel staves up on the window sill and fasten this jerk's feet onto them. I know what I'm doing."

She didn't believe it, but after a long look, she didn't waste any time arguing. Neither did I. That Russian weighed a ton. It took all my strength to hold him, and it was a clumsy business, but she finally got the boots locked into place and I gave him a shove.

He didn't ride down on the skis. I didn't expect him to, but he did slide down that roof until he reached a valley which it made with another gable. Then he slid down this valley and off the corner of the building.

That was swell. He'd probably land in a snow bank, and with luck, no one would find him for awhile. If they did, he might have been pushed from any of a dozen windows.

Later I meant to sneak out, pick him up and cart him part way up the hill. I'd dump him into the smooth hard track of the ski run, and when they found the body, I hoped it would look as if the fool had broken his neck, trying to run the course at night.

It wasn't that I was hard-hearted, but the count didn't mean anything to me. J. T. did, and the girl did. How much she meant I didn't know, but I had a disturbing hunch that it was going to be too much for my own peace of mind.

"Get dressed." I closed the window and swung around, glancing at my wrist watch. "We've got ten minutes before we're due in the dining room."

"You're a cold blooded devil," there was wonder in her voice. "I couldn't eat, I . . ."

I slapped her, hard. I've seen women building themselves up for a case of hysterics before. I knew the signs and we didn't have time for any right then. "Get dressed."

Her blue eyes smoked up and at the moment she hated me, but plenty. That was okay, as long as she was busy with hate she wouldn't be thinking about the dead Russian out in the snow bank.

Without a word, she gathered up her clothes and slammed her way into the bathroom. I looked around. There was a small bottle of Scotch on the dresser, unopened. I judged that it was medicine, and I needed medicine now if I ever needed it in my life. I opened it and emptied it at two swallows, then I went over to the bathroom door and told her to snap it up.

She did a good job and a quick one. In less than five minutes the door opened and a different woman came out. I'm telling you, it took my breath. In her heavy ski clothes, she'd looked like a slight, handsome boy. She didn't look like any boy now. She was a glamor girl if I've ever seen one.

A single look and I felt like the devil. I hadn't been having any conscious dreams but at the back of my head the idea had been stirring that other punks had married the boss's daughter and it might be a good notion for me to consider the proposition.

But one look and I knew she was clear out of my league. I admit I thought of the body I'd pushed out of the window; a secret like that could be used by the right guy to his own advantage, but I was a poor man because I was cursed with a conscience and the old conscience was still working. I wanted this girl more than I'd ever wanted anything. It wasn't because she was J. T.'s daughter; it was just because she was her. I liked the way her hair curled about her little ears, and the way her mouth lifted when she smiled, and, and everything about her.

But she was not smiling now. She was still burned up from the slap I'd given her.

I said, "Remember, we're both surprised when the Russian fails to show up for chow. Keep your chin up and your mouth closed."

**W**E WAITED twenty minutes in the bar. Ralph Scott sent a bellboy up to the count's room twice. Finally he said. "I wouldn't wait for a czar this long. Come on, let's eat."

We moved out, and down the wintry road toward the lodge. All the hotels had dining rooms of their own, but they must have done poor business because most of the customers were at the lodge. It was fair enough at that. Clint Edwards owned the ski run, he hired the instructors, and he'd put the place on the map.

He hadn't done it for altruistic reasons. People don't ski at night, and they have to be amused. Clint's tables furnished the amusement, and they collected regularly. The place was full, lots of men in uniform. It hurt me a little to see them, but someone had put a bullet through my chest five years before and the army docs didn't think I was a good prospect.

Just inside the door of the dining room I saw the long, yellow face of Sammy. He was in evening clothes, and they made him look like an undertaker. I knew that was wrong. He was a guy who furnished corpses, he didn't bury them.

He saw me and frowned. I didn't like that frown. It reminded me that Edwards had suggested I get out of town. I didn't think the fat gambler was the type who liked people that didn't obey his orders.

So I wasn't surprised when the yellow-faced Sammy disappeared through a side door, nor when Clint Edwards wandered into the big dining room a few minutes later.

He came directly to our table, nodding to all of us. "I'm hunting Nicky," he told Pat Turner. "Have you seen him?"

I watched her shoulders stiffen. I was just

about to cut in when Ralph Scott said. “We haven’t seen him. He had a date to eat with us, but he never showed up. One of his pupils must have wanted a little skiing by moonlight.”

Marian Kline said. “That’s hardly fair to Pat.”

Scott grinned slyly. “The sooner Pat stops paying attention to that Russian title and pays more to me, the better I’ll like it.”

I looked at him sharply. There was a note in his voice that I hadn’t heard there before. He was a tall man, and he didn’t look heavy under the perfectly cut dinner coat, but I knew those long arms which had won the American Open had a lot of strength. Maybe they had enough strength to break a man’s neck, and he was in love with Pat. It was easy to see now.

The fat man licked his lips, as if not quite decided, then he said to me, “See you a minute, Doane?” It was a command. I knew it whether any of the others realized it or not. I nodded, excused myself and rising, followed him. As I did so, I saw Hugh Pyle enter the dining room, look around and then move toward the table which I had just left. .

His presence didn’t make me feel any easier. In fact, he worried the hell out of me, but I forgot him as Edwards led the way into his office and shut the door.

Sammy had been standing behind the door and there was a gun in his yellow hand. He looked more like an undertaker than ever, for he was smiling, and it wasn’t humorous to watch.

I looked at him, then at the gun. “Put it away, Junior,” I said. “It might go off and trim your fingernails.” Then I turned my back and faced the fat gambler. “Well, Edwards?”

He said, “Where’s Nicky?”

I shrugged. “Look, pal, I can’t keep track of all your punks. I had a couple of drinks with him. Maybe the liquor was too much and he’s sleeping it off.”

“He’s not in his room,” said Edwards, “and it’s not like him to run out with the

Turner turkey around.”

**T**HAT made me sore. The way I felt about Pat, I didn’t like this lump of flesh calling her a sucker, even if she was one. I had the impulse to drive my fist into his belly, clear to the elbow. But Yellowface was still behind me, and Yellowface still had the gun in his mitt.

I said, “If that’s all you want, I’ll go back before my soup gets cold.”

“It’s not all I want,” his eyes were small and careful. “A newshawk named Pyle was in here, giving me the lowdown on you, Doane. He says you’re smart and nosy. We don’t want that kind around here. There’s a train out at midnight. Take it.”

I just grinned.

“Sammy will stay with you,” he said. “You won’t be the first passenger he’s helped to ship out of Happy Valley”

“I might be the last if he tries it,” I said. “Keep him off my back, Edwards. I don’t like Junior, and I don’t like being pushed around,”

“Let me plug him,” It was Yellowface’s voice. He might have been asking permission to take a drink. “Let me plug him, Clint. He’s too smart.”

Edwards shook his head. “No trouble,” he said. “He’ll smarten up by train time, Sammy. Don’t worry. He’ll smarten up.”

I didn’t answer. I just turned and walked out of the door. They made no effort to stop me and I was surprised. I didn’t go back to the dining room. I used a side entrance and stepped out into the cold night.

Snow was falling all around me like a thick shroud. It seemed to deaden sound, until all the world had a muffled feel. I wanted to think. For some reason that was not quite clear, Edwards wanted me out of town. The obvious thing of course was that he was backing the Russian’s play, trying to marry his instructor to Pat Turner.

But I’ve learned to fear the obvious. I stood for a couple of minutes, thinking about

it, then I moved toward the hotel. If they were already hunting for the Russian, the sooner I toted the body up the mountain, the better. I moved quickly, watchfully, careful that I didn't meet anyone. At the corner of the hotel, I turned and followed the snow covered alley around the building to a point under the corner where the count must have fallen. He wasn't there.

At first I thought that I had made a mistake, that I was on the wrong side of the building. I looked up, counting the windows. No, I hadn't made a mistake. This was the spot at which he had to have fallen. I bent down, and there were marks in the snow. He'd been there all right, but he wasn't there now, and the steady fall of white flakes was wiping out the marks rapidly.

I turned and looked around. Someone had beaten me to the punch, who, and why? I didn't linger long. It might have been the cops, and they might have staked out the spot.

I hurried back to the street and stopped. A man was just going into the hotel, his shoulders clearly outlined in the beam of light from the door. There was something familiar about those shoulders but for a moment I couldn't place them.

When I did, I swore under my breath. The man was John Turner, my boss. I just stood there, figuring. What in the devil was he doing in Happy Valley and when had he arrived?

### CHAPTER III

**M**Y PARTY had finished their dinner and moved into the gambling rooms before I rejoined them. Hugh Pyle was still tagging along, and he gave me a malicious grin as I came up. "What are you and Clint Edwards cooking?"

I never blinked an eye. "Clint wants me to round up the reporters and hurl them out of town. He doesn't like leeches."

Pyle's smile was mocking. "Any better than you do. What did you do with the count,

dunk him in a snow drift?"

I gave him a quick, hard stare. I heard someone catch their breath and turned to see Pat Turner staring also.

"Snap out of it," I told her in a whisper. "You and Scott try the wheel."

She turned to look at me, smiled, and then took the golfer's arm.

Pyle watched them go, the smirk still on his face, then he looked at Marian and grinned. "I know when I'm riding extra." He turned and walked away.

She said, "What a strange man. What did he mean?"

"He thinks that I'm in love with you," I told her.

She looked at me closely. "He's blind. Any fool could tell there's only one girl in the room for you."

I flushed at that. It was too obvious.

"You mean Pat," I tried to laugh.

"Stop acting," she said. "I'm on your side, pal, but you've got tough competition."

"And why should you be on my side?"

She had a direct way of speaking. "Because I want the Russian bum for myself. He's no good, you don't have to tell me, but I want him, and I haven't a chance as long as Pat Turner is around. You see, Hawkshaw, it isn't generally known, but little Marian is broke."

I gaped at her and saw the bitter lines about her young mouth. Suddenly I could almost read her mind. The Russian had made a play for her, thinking that because of her cafe society background she had dough. When he found out, he'd dropped her and made a play for Pat. The thought made my blood boil, but it also made me look at the Kline gal in a new light.

Underneath her glossy exterior, the little gal knew what she wanted and would go after it. If she got mad enough, I had no doubt that she could kill. But to break a man's neck . . .

Still, if she'd had something heavy and narrow, like an iron bar, a blow in the right

place. . . . I tore my thoughts away. "Do me a favor, grab off the golfer for a couple of minutes, I want to talk to Pat."

She obliged, and I found myself at Pat's elbow, watching her lose chips on seventeen.

The ball spun a dozen times, not once coming near her number and she turned finally, taking my arm. "This is no fun, Doane. Buy me a drink."

It was the same tone of voice that she might have used to order her chauffeur to bring around the car. It burned me, but I wanted a chance to talk to her, so I kept control of my rising temper.

"Guess who I saw going into the hotel?" I said.

She looked at me. "I'm not good at games."

"Your father, keed, and the count's body is missing."

She got the thought that was riding me, and her face lost all its color. "No, Jimmy, no!"

I shook my head, throwing a quick glance around. Both Marian Kline and Ralph Scott had disappeared. They simply weren't in the gambling room at all. Hugh Pyle was over beside the bar, having a drink and watching us with sardonic eyes.

"Stay here," I told her. "Go back to the table and lose some more dough. As long as you're losing, I think you'll be safe."

"But Jimmy," she forgot to use the Doane, and she forgot to use the tone that she would to a servant. Maybe it was because she was scared, but I hoped there were other, better reasons.

"I've got to find your dad," I said. "I've got to warn him, and I don't want that newshawk over there to find out J. T. is in town."

**I** TURNED and left the room, trying to make my exit casual. After a moment I stepped back to the door and took a look at the room which I had just left. Hugh Pyle was still

at the bar and he seemed interested in nothing but his drink.

I went away fast. I moved up the street through the falling snow and walked all around the hotel just in case the body was there and I'd overlooked it somehow. There was one other possibility. One of the skis might have jammed somehow and the body might still be on the roof. I stopped to think. Marian Kline was somewhere in town, so was Ralph Scott. And Scott was in love with Pat. I didn't like it, but I had to think of J.T. first. I started back around the hotel and something knocked my hat off. I didn't hear the sound until after the hat had left my head, then I heard the sharp, whip-like crack of a rifle.

I dropped flat on my face in the snow. It was deep enough so that the white fluffiness almost covered my body. I dropped quick, but I managed to have my right hand free. I used it to wrench the gun out of my shoulder holster, but a lot of good it did me..

The snow came down like a white curtain directly into my face. I couldn't see five yards, and by the same token, the lad who had taken a crack at me, couldn't see very far either.

I looked around, trying to figure it out. I wasn't having any success when I happened to look up. There was a hotel window directly above my head and it was open.

I twisted to look at my hat. It was a blob of darkness against the snow, a few feet away. From its direction, I knew that the shot had come from that window. It was easy to see why the marksman had missed me. It's hard to figure the angle when you're shooting down.

I had my gun up and was watching that window like a hawk, but I didn't need to. Whoever had been there had gone. I climbed to my feet, dug the snow out from under the collar and realized that I'd ruined the front of my shirt. But I didn't give it a thought.

There was a neat round hole though part of my hat brim. An inch lower and that bullet would have clipped its way through my skull. I put the hat on, but I kept my gun in my hand

until I got out of the alley. I'll admit I was glad when I stepped into the lobby. The lights were on there and there were a lot of people around. I'm not the bravest guy in the world.

**J**. T. WASN'T registered. I went over to the desk and played with the book while the clerk searched for a telegram I pretended to be expecting. He hadn't signed that book, either with his own name or a phony one. I knew his handwriting well enough to tell.

I turned away and moved toward the stairs. He might be waiting for me in my room. I'd left the door open purposely. I'd rather expected that Hugh Pyle would search it just in the hope of turning up something.

I climbed the stairs, turning over in my mind just what I was going to tell the boss. He'd be glad that the Russian count was dead. There wouldn't be any danger of her marrying a dead man, but he wouldn't like the idea of the body being in her room, even if I had gotten rid of it.

I didn't like the idea either, and I didn't like the body being missing. If the cops had found it, they were keeping very, very quiet. If they hadn't, who had, and why had they bothered to move it from the snow bank?

My room was dark. J. T. wasn't there. I almost didn't turn on the light. Then I remembered that my shirt was ruined from the snow, and that I'd better change it. I clicked up the switch, shut the door, and turned around.

Count Nicholas was lying across my bed. The skis, one broken, were on the floor at his side, and melted snow had made dark wet spots on the green carpet.

I flipped over the bolt, and then I walked slowly across the room. I didn't touch him. I had no impulse to touch him. In fact I was getting very tired of Nicholas Bokonviski, alive or dead.

"So you came back," I said.

His lips were twisted up into what might have been a kind of horrible grin. He lay there,

his head twisted out of any normal position, and seemed to sneer at me. It was rather terrible, and yet it kind of fascinated me. I stood there for two or three minutes, trying to decide what to do. The obvious move was to give him another slide down the roof, go outside, pick him up and lug him to the ski course or run, or whatever they called it.

But there was something to consider. Someone had taken a shot at me from the second story window. That meant that the killer was in the building. He would probably be watching me, and if I started lugging any bodies around, he'd probably yell copper.

I might have difficulty in disclaiming any knowledge of the corpse if they found me packing it around the hills. It might be better to leave it where it was and shout copper myself.

I was saved the need of making the decision, for someone started hammering on my door, and they made it sound businesslike.

I had a hunch. I turned to the phone, lifted the hook and said to the clerk, "Get me police headquarters, quick.

He sounded surprised. "But the . . ."

I cut him short. "Save the chatter. Get me police headquarters."

The pounding got louder. "Wait," I called. I put the receiver down on the night stand and went to unbolt the door.

**T**HERE were two of them outside, both in uniform. "Police," I said in pleased surprise. "I was just calling you." I turned and went back to the stand, picking up the receiver.

"Wait." The first man in was tall and thin, and looked something like Clint Edwards' bodyguard. He took the receiver from my grasp and spoke into the instrument. Then he replaced it and turned around puzzled, to say to his companion. "That was Mac on the wire. This lug did call the station at that."

They both stared at me with unblinking eyes. I jerked my thumb toward the bed. "Do

you blame me? I come in and find this. Who am I supposed to call, the army?"

"Wise guy." It was the second cop. He was short, but his body wasn't any thicker than that of his companion, at a guess I'd have bet he wouldn't weigh one-ten, dripping wet.

The tall one didn't answer. He walked over to look at the count, then he turned around. "Okay, why did you kill him?"

I looked startled. "Me kill him? You're nuts. I only found him a couple of minutes ago. I've just come from downstairs. Why, I was at the desk, not over six or seven minutes ago."

"So what?"

"So the body's stiff as a poker. That guy's been dead hours. Not only that, but his clothes are wet. If you want to know what I think, he was killed out in the snow somewhere and dragged in here."

"I don't care what you think. Search him, Bud."

Bud was the short one. He searched me quickly and expertly, found my gun, and was disappointed when he learned that it hadn't been fired.

"I've got a permit for that. . . ." I began, but Bud cut me short. "We know all about you, chum. You're a hot-shot dick from the big city, and you came up here to wash out a romance. Well, I take off my hat, you did a swell job. What did you use, a crow bar?"

I held my temper. It wasn't hard to guess where they'd gotten the dope on me. From what I'd seen, I judged that Happy Valley, police force and all, was very comfortably in Clint Edwards' pocket.

Bud picked up my hat from where I'd dropped it and examined the bullet hole with interest, but he made no comment. His partner was calling some doctor. I judged that he might also be the coroner.

I said. "Look, sweethearts. I don't like trouble and I didn't like the boy scout on the bed. But I didn't kill him. I've been with someone ever since five-thirty this afternoon

with the exception of a few minutes in the last hour, so go find your killer somewhere else."

"Tell me," said the tall guy. From the telephone conversation with the doctor I'd learned that his name was Harnner.

I shrugged. "Before dinner, I was drinking with the count, Ralph Scott, Marian Kline, Pat Turner and a newspaper dope named Pyle. We all went to dress about six, but I didn't change. Instead I went to Miss Turner's room with her. I had some things to talk over with her."

"As what?"

"They were private matters!"

He laughed, sounding surprisingly like a horse. "You're supposed to be a dick. You know that there's nothing private from the cops in a murder case. "

**I** DIDN'T answer. I was thinking rapidly. "Okay," I said. "You asked for it. I went there to ask her to marry me."

That caught them both off base. The little one mumbled. "You're nuts. She was marrying the Russian."

I laughed. "You're funny," I told him. "The Russian was only a gigolo on barrel staves. You don't think that a sweet kid like Pat Turner would go for a phony like that."

They didn't know what to think. My words had thrown them off stride, and something happened that threw them off further. Pat appeared suddenly in the half open doorway.

"Darling." I was at her side before anyone could move. "Darling," I had my arms about her and was turning her surprised face up to mine. Her lips were parted to protest, but I kissed her, hard, stopping anything that she might have said.

"Stall," I whispered, my lips barely moving against hers. "Stall." Then I kissed her a second time. The second kiss wasn't exactly needed, but it was an opportunity which probably would never come my way again and I meant to make the most of it.

"There's something terrible happened," I

told the girl. "Don't look, go to your room and wait."

"No, you don't." It was Bud. For a little guy, he gave a lot of orders. I decided then and there that I didn't like him.

He pushed me out of the way and motioned the girl forward. "Ever see this guy before?"

She put on a good act, just enough surprise, just a touch of horror. "Why, it's Nicky. What happened? What. . ."

"He's dead," said Bud, as if he were announcing a great discovery. "This guy killed him."

She swung to look at me, and I moved my head in the negative.

She picked up the cue like a veteran. "Jimmy killed. . . are you crazy?"

Bud was unperturbed. "Where have you been all evening, say from five-thirty on?"

"Why I . . ."

"Tell him," I said. "I've already admitted that I was in your room, that I asked you to mar. . . ." The tall man hit me neatly behind the ear with his sap and I went over onto my face. The blow didn't put me out, but that guy was an artist. It paralyzed every nerve center in my body.

But it didn't paralyze the girl. She swung and jumped at him like a tiger. He put up both arms to fend her off, but the fingernails got to his face before Bud could grab her arms from behind.

She stopped then. "Jimmy, Jimmy darling, are you all right? If they've hurt you. . ."

I managed to drag myself to my knees, then I collapsed forward onto my face. The room was going round and round. I wanted to lay there, more than I had ever wanted anything else in my life, but I just couldn't. There were things to do.

I tried again, and this time I made it, using the corner of the bureau as a cane. "Thanks," I told the tall cop, "I'll remember that." He was swabbing at his cheek with a handkerchief. The girl hadn't missed after all.

Bud let go her arms and said, "You two are in a bad jam. One of you killed the Russian, or maybe both of you did."

"I always hide my victims in my own bed," I told him. The circulation was returning, but my neck still felt stiff. I couldn't help but think that the Russian had been killed by the same kind of blow, and I looked at Harnner thoughtfully. He worked for Clint Edwards. Maybe Edwards had wanted his skiing instructor very dead.

#### CHAPTER IV

I WAS surprised that they let me go. I'd fully expected to spend the night in jail, but after half an hour's questioning they turned us loose. The girl was silent as we walked down the snowy road to the lodge.

"You were swell," I told her. "You picked up that cue beautifully. As far as this burg is concerned, we're engaged, and the way you clawed that cop made me love you if I hadn't already lost what little sense I've got." I hadn't meant to say that, but my head felt fuzzy and I still wasn't thinking too clearly.

She turned to look at me, and the expression on her face was one of surprise. It had stopped snowing and the moon had sneaked out from under a cloud bank, turning everything into a pale blue silver.

"Why Doane. . ."

"Forget it," I said. "I open my mouth, and things I don't mean to say come out. I've got to find your dad."

Her surprise turned to quick worry and I said, "Look honey. I'm not trading on the phony engagement, but you haven't come clean with me."

"Clean?" she was stalling.

"I'm playing on your team," I told her. "You're scared of something. An unknown woman calls you on the phone before dinner and you run out to the ski lift like a frightened rabbit. What are you afraid of, sweet? I can't work in the dark any longer."

She didn't answer, she just quickened her pace and before I could catch up, we were at the door of the lodge.

Sammy was waiting, just inside. He reached out with long yellow fingers and grabbed my arm as I went past him. "Clint wants you in the office."

I turned slowly. The girl went on without stopping. "Take your fingers off me, Junior."

He grinned mirthlessly. "It's going to be a pleasure to kill you, chum. I'm going to love to squeeze the trigger."

"A lot of tougher punks than you have had the same idea. I send the cemetery flowers every May thirtieth." I turned and went along the hall to the gambler's office.

Clint Edwards was behind the desk. He stared at me with his little blue eyes, but he didn't waste time. "So you got them, pal. I heard you were good, you got them, and you wiped the mad Russian out."

I didn't say anything. I didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about, but I seldom admit I'm in the dark. It isn't good practice.

"You owe me one," he said. "I told the cops to let you go. Bud didn't want to. He thinks he's got a case."

"I wondered about that."

Edwards grinned. "You're no fool," his voice was grudging. "I could use a man like you."

"Not enough dough." I managed to sound uninterested.

"That's what you think," his voice was full of meaning which I didn't quite get. "There's plenty of dough in this racket, but I suppose you think you're all set. I hear you're engaged to the girl. Was that the price you chiseled out of the old man for taking the count off his neck?"

He might have been talking Greek for all the sense I could make out of his words, but I just smiled knowingly. "What do you think?"

"I'll tell you what I think," he said, leaning forward. Suddenly his voice was hard, and his

little eyes were like slivers of blue ice. "You're smart, you played it well, and you built yourself into a nice spot. But there's one thing that you didn't count on. That's me. If you don't play ball, I'll have Bud and Harnner toss you in the can, and I'll promise you one other thing, you'll hang for the Russian's murder. We still use the rope up here, remember."

**H**E WASN'T kidding. I could feel the sweat gather between my shoulder blades, and it wasn't hot in that office either. I don't know how I managed to keep my voice level, but I did. "What is it you want?" I said. "You talk like you know things. I think you're stalling."

His face changed at that. He was stalling, at least he didn't know all the answers. "I . . ." he said, and he was uncertain for the first time since we'd met. "Look, Doane. I know this much. The Russian had the dead wood on your boss. I don't know the full story. Nicky could keep a close mouth when he chose which was all right by me as long as I got my cut. He was going to marry the jane and pay me off afterward.

"I backed him. I gave him a job as ski instructor, and now he's dead."

"And what do you think he had? What do you think I took away from him?"

The fat man licked his lips. "Some pictures," he said. "Some very interesting pictures."

I sensed that he was playing a game, and I played it, right along with him. "Pictures of what?"

"Damn it." He lost his temper. "You know that if I could answer that, I wouldn't be here, talking to you. I don't know what those pictures were. I only know that that Russian bum showed them to Turner's daughter and that they worked like a charm, that if you hadn't butted in, he'd have married the wren, and I'd have gotten a hundred grand."

I grinned. I had to. He looked so unhappy

about the whole business. No one in the world can look as unhappy as a fat man.

"I'm sorry for you, my friend." I used the words, but I didn't mean them and he knew that I didn't mean them.

"Be sorry for yourself," he said. "If you don't deal with me, you won't win. You'll hang."

I managed to shrug. "That won't do you any good for two reasons, Edwards. First, I didn't kill the Russian, and you boys are going to have trouble proving that I did, and second, I never heard about the pictures until you mentioned them a couple of minutes ago. I was fishing for information, and you came through nicely."

If looks could kill, I'd have been struck dead where I stood. The fat guy was almost beside himself, with the pictures of a hundred grand slipping through his thick fingers.

"Stop it," he bawled at me. "I know you're lying. You came to me to get Nicky fired."

"Sure," I admitted. "He was playing around my girl and I didn't like it, but I never heard of your pictures. If you want to know what I think, I'll tell you. There never were any pictures."

"This Nicky guy was a smart bird. He knew a soft thing when he saw it, and he played you for a sucker. And you'll be a bigger sucker if you try to sic those trick cops on me. Good night."

I turned around and walked out. I expected to be stopped, but I wasn't. I went into the gambling room and looked around. Pat wasn't there, but Marian Kline was, alone at the bar. I went over and hung myself on a stool at her side. She turned around and I saw that she was drunk.

"Hello, murderer," she said.

I just looked at her. She'd been crying and she didn't care who knew it. "Stop it," I said. "The guy was a heel. He wasn't worth your tears."

She nodded, and had me order her a fresh drink. "You're right, Jimmy. I should thank

you for killing him."

"I didn't kill him," I said. "But he was a heel. How long ago did he walk out on you?"

"Two months." She took most of the drink at one gulp. It made her feel better. "Two months. He just walked, out."

"How'd he act?"

She thought that over. "Like a guy who had just discovered gold. We were getting along all right. He had a job dancing at a club and I saw him every evening. One night he acted excited. He said he'd made a deal, that he was coming up here. The next I knew, he was here, and Pat Turner was hanging around."

"Ever hear of any pictures?"

Her blank look told me that she hadn't, so I paid for the drink and went away. I had to find J. T. He was somewhere in town. There weren't many places he could be on a cold snowy night. He might of course be at one of the other hotels, but I didn't think so. I thought I knew where he was, and wondered why in the devil I hadn't thought of it before.

**A**T THE DESK I pretended to be embarrassed. I told them that I'd lost my room key. I wanted to know if I could borrow the pass key for the floor.

They gave it to me without argument. I climbed the stairs, but I didn't head toward my own door, I headed toward the room Pat Turner occupied.

I was quiet, putting the key into the lock, and I threw the bolt over without sound, then I edged the door open.

John Turner was standing at the far side of the room, with his back to the door, examining something that was spread out on the table before him.

I dosed the door carefully, but. I must have made some sound for he swung around, and there was a gun in his hand.

"Hello, J. T." I pretended I hadn't seen the gun.

He was speechless for an instant, then he

growled. "What the hell are you doing in this room, Doane?"

"I came up to see the pictures," I told him without even batting an eye.

That stopped him. He was standing so that his big square body blocked my view of the table. I guessed the pictures were there, but I couldn't be certain.

Neither could he. It was obvious that he couldn't understand. My being in his daughter's room puzzled him. My reference to the pictures worried him. I was his employee, and yet. . . . He cleared his throat with a rasping sound. "Which side of the fence are you on, Doane?"

"My own." I kept my voice even. "I've got a little stake in this game, J. T. Some men think my neck is involved, and I don't like the thought. It may not be a pretty neck, but it's the only one I own, and I'd like to keep it for awhile."

He grunted. He had the most expressive grunt in the insurance business. "So. . . ."

"So," I said, "There's a man dead. I gather that he was a blackmailer, and that he deserved death. As far as that goes, I'd have loved to kill him myself. But I didn't, and I don't think I'm going to quietly take a rap for something I didn't do."

He frowned at me. Usually his frown gave me cold chills, but now, for some reason, it didn't matter.

"Are you suggesting that I killed that ski instructor?"

I shrugged. "You've got the pictures. . . ."

He didn't deny it. In fact he moved restlessly to one side so that I could see three prints and three films lying on the table. From where I stood, I couldn't see what the prints were.

"Yes," he said. "I've got them. I came up here to get them."

"If you'd told me then what it was all about, I mean, yesterday morning when you started me on this wild goose chase, I might

have handled things better." I was watching his face.

As I watched, that face seemed to crumple. I knew before he started that he was going to talk. The toughest, man in the world has to talk some time.

"I didn't know then," he told me. "All I knew at the time I ordered you up here was that my daughter was making a fool of herself over this Russian. I didn't know why."

"But you learned?"

He nodded. "I learned, two hours after you started. I got a phone call."

"Man or woman?"

"Man. He asked me if I remembered an automobile accident that happened three months ago. He said this Russian had three pictures, showing me bending over the dead boy. He said that the Russian was blackmailing my daughter with them, blackmailing her into marriage, but that he'd sell out for a hundred thousand dollars. I got the money, and started out here at once."

**I** WALKED past him and looked at the pictures. They showed plainly enough. It was J. T. all right, in front of his car, standing over the limp figure of a boy.

"Tell me about it," I said, looking up.

He wet his lips. "It was out at the Powder Hills Country Club. I'd been there to watch a golf match. I started home, drove around the circle, and this child jumped out of the bushes directly into the path of my car. It wasn't my fault. I had no chance to stop. He was dead when I got out and looked. If he'd been alive, I'd have rushed him to the hospital, but he was dead.

"I saw no one. It was nearly dark and I got to thinking. Our company writes more automobile insurance than any other. This publicity would be a terrible thing. Believe me, I was thinking more about the company than I was about myself."

I believed him. He was that kind of a duck. The Utility Insurance was a kind of master.

He'd given his life to it.

"I drove on," he said. "I searched out the boy's parents and managed to do what I could for them. I knew nothing about these pictures until yesterday morning."

I walked over to the table and picked up the film. It was three frames, and it had been cut carelessly from a roll of candid shots, the kind you make with an Argus or Leica. Then I turned around.

"So to save a hundred grand, you broke the Russian's neck?"

He denied it sharply. "I didn't even know the Russian was dead. I drove into town just after dark tonight. It was snowing and a man in an overcoat with his hat pulled low, stepped into the roadway ahead of me.

"I stopped. He asked if I were Mister Turner. I said that I was and he told me to drive on through town and wait for him at the end of the ski run. I obeyed. I waited an hour, then he came out of the darkness and asked me if I had the money. I pulled out the envelope and he gave me the pictures and films."

"And you didn't see his face?"

"I did not. I thought from the accent that I was dealing with the Russian."

"One more question. Does Ralph Scott belong to the Powder Hills Club? Was he by any chance at the club on the afternoon you ran over the child?"

John Turner nodded. "Of course. He was playing in the match. It was for the Club finals."

I remembered the match then. It had had heavy writeups in all the papers. "Why didn't you get out of town after you got the pictures?"

He looked at me. "I had to see my daughter, and yet I didn't want it generally known that I was here. I came to the hotel and bribed a bellboy to open the door and then lock me in. I've been waiting ever since."

"Then you didn't know the Russian was dead?"

He nodded. "I knew. These doors are thin, remember. I could hear you and the police. I even heard what you said to my daughter, about her marrying you."

I flushed. "That was camouflage. We had to cover up some way." I was thinking as I talked. His story of the locked door was good. It gave him an alibi as far as moving the body was concerned, or did it?

I went to the window and peered out. The snowy roof showed beyond. It was steep, but an active man could have grasped the top of the gable and gotten across to the one that opened into my room. I turned around and picked up the pictures. "We'd better get rid of these, they're dynamite, and there are some very tough boys in this town hunting them."

He scowled. "I want to show them to Pat."

"Pat can take your word," I told him, pulling out a match and holding it to the corner of the prints. I didn't burn the film, and I don't think he noticed. He was too busy with his own thoughts.

## CHAPTER V

**H**E DIDN'T like the idea of going to the lodge. I didn't like it myself, but I couldn't see any other way. I told him, "You're going down there whether you want to or not."

He frowned at my tone. I don't think any employee had ever used that tone to him before. "Now listen, Doane . . ."

"You listen," I told him. "I said a while ago that my neck is involved and I don't like the setup. It's too bad that everyone has to know you're in town, but there isn't any other way out. I want you at the lodge. I want you to look around and see if you can spot the man that you paid for these pictures."

"It was very dark," he protested.

I shrugged. "You might recognize the voice, even if the guy was using an accent when he spoke to you, or you might recognize something else. It's worth a try."

He stopped arguing. He was being very meek. That ought to have worried me. When J. T. was meek, hell was brewing for someone. But I was past worrying. The only thing that I regretted was my gun. The cops still had it, and I knew that they wouldn't give it back.

I said as much to J. T. "Have you got one?" I asked him.

Surprisingly he nodded. "There's one in the glove compartment of my car."

"We'll get it," I decided. "If my little plan works, I might need one bad."

He didn't say anything. He didn't even know what my plan was. Maybe he guessed, but it didn't matter. We walked down the street to where his car was parked and got the gun. I thrust it into my pocket and we went on to the lodge. It was late, but the place was still going strong.

I couldn't understand it. If I'd spent all day wandering about the mountains with two pieces of wood hooked onto my feet, I'd have hit the hay long before, but these people didn't seem to know that they were tired, or maybe they just didn't care.

Sammy, yellow face and all, was standing just inside the entrance. I was surprised that his big feet hadn't worn a hole in the rug, he stood in that same spot so often.

He gave me his undertaker's grin and then narrowed his eyes as he saw J. T.

I couldn't decide whether he recognized the boss or was just trying to figure out who he was.

I didn't say anything, and J. T. didn't even look Sammy's way. He was staring across the big gambling room, and I turned to see what was attracting his attention.

It was Pat. She had her back to the door and was talking to Ralph Scott. They seemed to be arguing about something, something very important. They were so engrossed in their argument that they were paying no attention to Marian Kline.

She sat three stools away from them, and a

glance showed me that she wasn't any soberer than she had been when I'd left her at the bar. I couldn't be certain, but I thought she was sitting on the same stool.

Hugh Pyle was at the end, watching the argument, and he apparently had not seen us.

I turned so that my back was to Yellow-face and pulled the boss's gun out of my pocket. I wanted to see if it was loaded. It wasn't and a cold chill chased itself up my back. A fine thing, I might have pulled the gun only to hear it click on an empty cylinder.

I saw it was a thirty-eight, and there were some spare shells in my vest pocket. I always carry half a dozen, just for luck. I managed to thumb them in because no one was paying any attention to me.

Pat had glanced up into the back bar mirror, seen her father and swung around. She was wordless, her face dead white, her eyes staring. Anyone who wasn't blind could have guessed that there was something the matter.

I shot a look toward Pyle. His eyes were half closed, and he looked sleepy, but he wasn't missing anything.

CLINT EDWARDS chose that moment to come out of his office. He saw me, saw the boss at my elbow, hesitated for an instant, then came forward.

He ignored J. T., and taking my arm, dragged me off to one side. "Ready to deal? I can't hold the cops off of you much longer."

"Ask Turner," I suggested, indicating the boss.

He didn't get it for a full instant. When he did, his face changed, and got funny-looking with surprise.

Pat had recovered herself with a visible effort. She came forward now, trying to put a smile on her lips.

But it didn't caver the strained look about her mouth. Whatever else the kid was, she was no actress. "Dad," she said. "Dad," and she couldn't say anything more.

Ralph Scott was looking at us, then he

moved slowly toward a side entrance.

"Wait a minute," I told him, raising my voice. "You might as well be in on this. I want to ask you something."

He stopped, turned, looking surprised. "In on what?"

"Come on into Clint's office," I said. "There's no use in making this so public."

Marian Kline didn't move. I guess she was past hearing. But Hugh Pyle did. "Does that mean me?" he asked.

I looked at him. "Why not? You can't keep the press out of anything. Mind, Clint?"

The fat man didn't like it, but there wasn't much that he could do. We filed into the office, Yellowface bringing up the rear. He shut the door, and stood with his back to it.

Scott was looking around. "What is this?"

"I'd like you to identify some pictures," I told him, drawing the bit of film out of my pocket.

Pat said, "No, Jimmy, please don't."

I pretended not to hear her. J. T. had started to speak, then stopped when he saw the film. I guess he had thought that I'd burned the film along with the prints.

I went forward, holding my thumb over the prints that showed J. T. and his car. The half print below where the film had been carelessly cut, showed three-quarters of a man's figure. He was bent forward, a putter in his hand. I held the bit of film up to the light and said to Scott, "Recognize this?"

He came over to my side, squinting at it. "Pretty small," he said, "but it's a picture of me, putting."

I nodded. "Remember when it was taken?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Certainly, it's one of the pictures taken at the Powder Hills Championship. They ran a border of them all around one of the papers."

"It was the *Tribune*," I said, turning so that I could watch Hugh Pyle. "It was a nice story, with about fifty candid camera shots, and it was written by Hugh Pyle."

He didn't move. He just stood there,

looking at me through his sleepy eyes. "So what?"

"So there are other pictures on this roll," I told him. "So this roll of film and the prints made from it were in Nicky Bokonviski's possession. He was killed, and his murderer sold these pictures to a certain man in this room. You were that murderer, Pyle. You killed the Russian and you sold these pictures."

He just laughed. "Prove it, wise guy."

I told him levelly, "I don't need to prove it, Hugh. All I need to do is to make Clint Edwards believe me. Clint's the law in this village, and Clint stood to make a lot of money if the Russian hadn't been murdered. Think it over. He'll see that something happens to you."

Pyle was thinking, but my words hadn't shaken him. "Go ahead, talk."

I shrugged. "I've told you that I don't need to prove it, but I can, just the same. You sold those pictures tonight. You met a man down at the end of the ski run. You were all bundled up, but he recognized you. He's tired of all the mess. He's ready to go into court and tell his part. But he'll tell about you . . . They'll use a rope, Hugh, this is one of the few states that they still use a rope in."

"Damn you," he said. I'd been watching him, but he moved faster than I expected. I tried to get J. T.'s gun out but it caught in my pocket lining.

I'd have been a dead duck, but J. T. had moved. He wasn't the kind of guy that liked to be shoved around. His daughter had been blackmailed by this rat. I guess that's about what he thought as he jumped.

His big hands were out, reaching for Pyle's neck. They never connected for Pyle emptied his automatic into J. T.'s chest. It was one of those guns which keep firing as long as you hold the trigger.

J. T. went down, just as I wrenched his gun free of my pocket, but I had no chance to use it for Yellowface shot past me once. His

slug caught Pyle in the stomach and knocked the reporter back across Clint Edwards' big desk. That was all. I didn't get a chance to use the gun, much as I wanted to.

**I**T WAS still cold, and the chains made a steady noise against the ice as we turned back toward the city. Pat wasn't crying, she just sat there, staring at the ice-bound road.

"It's okay," I told her. "I had a talk with Clint Edwards. I told him that we'd forget his part in the blackmail setup if he'd just get the official record straight. It reads now that Pyle got drunk, picked a fight with the Russian and they killed each other. Your father was standing by, tried to interfere and got killed by a chance shot."

She didn't answer and I went on. "The films are destroyed. No one will ever know about the accident. Pyle was a rat, but he talked before he died. He was coming through the bushes in front of the country club on the night of the accident. It was still half light and he had infra red film in his camera since the day had been overcast. He saw the accident and snapped the pictures.

"He couldn't decide what to do with them. He and the Russian were pals. He got tight that night and told the count what he had. The Russian warned him against straight blackmail. He said that your father was a tough old egg who would fight back, but you were different; with the films, the Russian said that he could marry you, and grab off your dough. Then he'd split with Pyle.

"But they were both broke, and they needed somewhere to work. They knew from the papers that you spent a lot of time up here skiing, so the Russian contacted Clint Edwards and framed his play. But he didn't mention to Edwards that Pyle had a part of it.

"Things went along, but they didn't move fast enough for Pyle. Finally he decided on direct measures. He called your dad, pretended to be the Russian, told him about the pictures and said that he'd go ahead and

marry you, unless your dad bought them for a hundred grand.

"Then he demanded the pictures from the count. The Russian laughed at him, so Pyle killed him. He thought that it would be a good idea to put the body in your room. Then if there was ever any talk of the blackmail, it would look like you or your father had killed the count. He disguised his voice when he phoned you to make you think it a woman's.

"But I showed up. That worried Pyle. He dropped hints to Edwards about me, and when he found that the body was gone from your room, he went down, got it from the snow, and put it in my bed. The effect was the same. I worked for your dad, and it would put the cops on my trail."

She spoke for the first time. "But what made you suspect him?"

I shrugged. "I know Pyle. He isn't the kind of guy that would be up here without a reason. He's too big a shot to merely cover a ski meet. He was keeping sober, which he seldom does, and he was definitely picking on me.

"Then when your dad showed me the films, I recognized that shot of Ralph Scott. I happened to have seen it in the papers. I couldn't have seen it anywhere else. That pointed to Pyle, but I had no evidence. I tried to scare him with Clint Edwards, but first I had to know whether Edwards was in with Pyle. If he had been, he would have recognized your dad when we came into the lodge.

"He didn't, so I went on with my act. But it didn't work, so I lied. I said that your dad had recognized him. That acted as a switch. The rest you know."

She was silent a long time. Finally she said, "You're a smart guy, Doane. Do you think that you're smart enough to run a big insurance company?"

I was surprised and hurt. This was the way that she was paying me off. She was offering me a big job, a whale of a big job, but it wasn't what I'd hoped for. I wanted her, but I

could see what a sap I'd been. She didn't want to be under obligation to me, so she was paying off with a job.

"Hell no," I said. "That's too big for me, kitten. You don't owe me a thing."

She didn't look at me, but I'd slowed so that I could take my eyes off the road. "That's too bad," color had come up into her cheeks. "My dad gave his whole life to Utility and my husband will have to do the same."

I didn't get it for a full minute, then I jammed on the brakes. But we weren't going slow enough even then, for the car turned half around on the ice. It took me a couple of minutes to straighten it out, but that was okay, it gave me time to think. By the time we were straight in the road, I knew what to say, and how to say it.