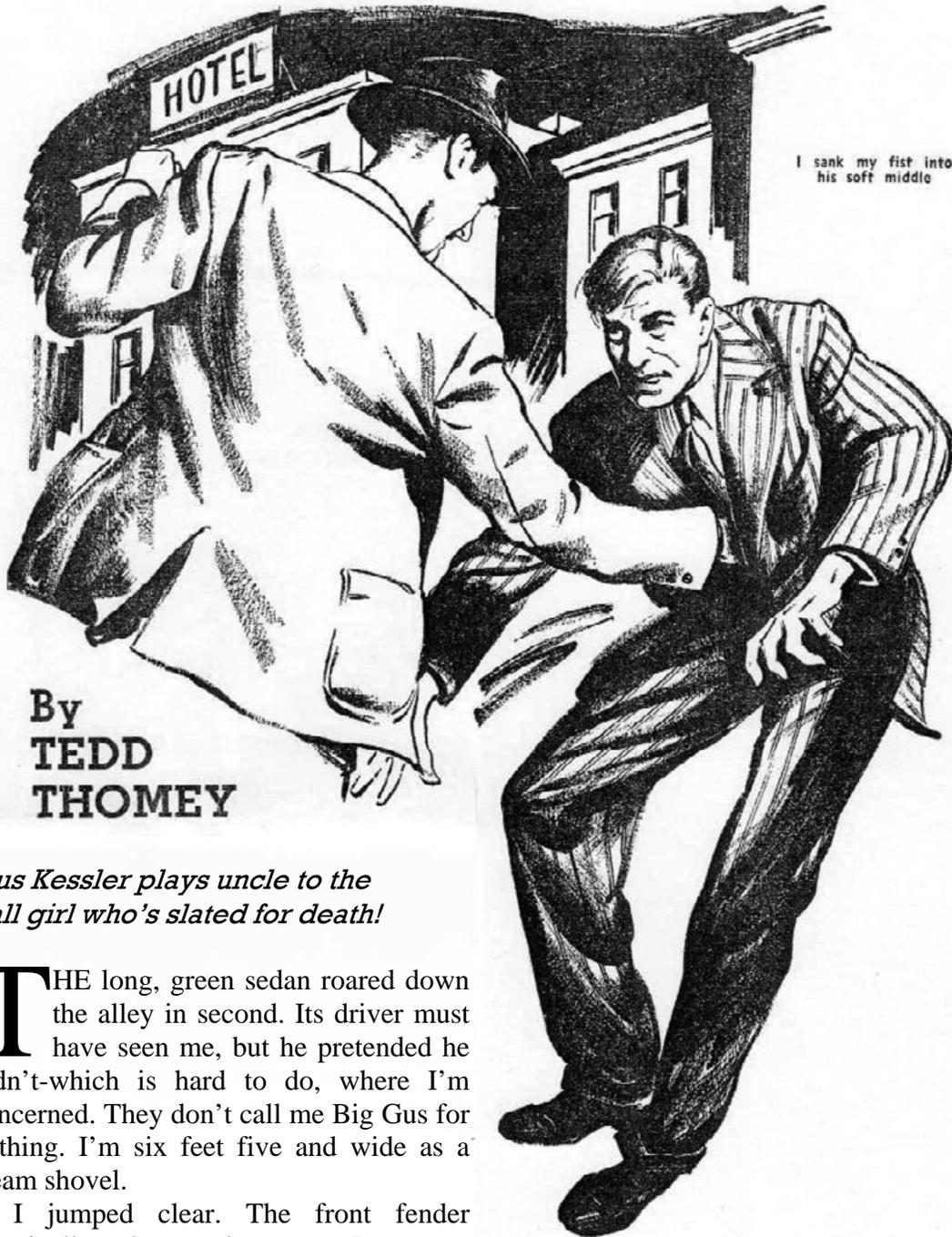


# \$10,000 AN INCH



By  
**TEDD  
THOMEY**

*Gus Kessler plays uncle to the tall girl who's slated for death!*

**T**HE long, green sedan roared down the alley in second. Its driver must have seen me, but he pretended he didn't—which is hard to do, where I'm concerned. They don't call me Big Gus for nothing. I'm six feet five and wide as a steam shovel.

I jumped clear. The front fender practically unbuttoned my coat. I swore at the red tail-light and blating exhaust as they rolled into the darkness.

The license number wouldn't be hard to remember—9H1402, only a few digits different than my own. I kept watching the

sedan. When it had gone about half a block, a rear door opened. The car was near a yellow arc light, so I could see what happened.

A girl jumped out. She landed on her

feet, but her knees buckled and she went sprawling on her stomach. She rolled over twice, long legs flying, her skirt tangled in her elbows.

I started running toward her. The sedan squealed to a stop and three guys piled out. The girl was on her feet, sprinting unevenly. She had lost a shoe and the remaining high heel was worse than running on one stilt.

I was still fifty yards away when the first guy caught her. He put a hand on her shoulder and dragged his feet. Her reaction must have surprised him. She stopped, whirled free of his grasp and slapped him so hard he staggered. It sounded like a shot.

The other two guys were closing in on her by the time I got there. I grabbed one by the shoulder and turned him around. He was a little fellow—only six feet. I sank my fist into his soft middle.

His eyes crossed and he had trouble with his breathing. He took a step backward, just far enough so I got a good swing on his chin. My knuckles burned and he decided to lie down.

The girl was doing fine. And why not? She was a good three inches taller than the other two guys. She was slapping one with both hands and he was yelling. His face was becoming a peculiar purple.

I recognized the other guy. Spoons Moran, a nasty little crook with blotches on his face. He pulled out a .45 and pointed it at my vest.

I did a foolish thing. According to the book, you should never try to take a gun away from a man unless you've got him covered or he's dead. But I grabbed for his gun wrist. And I caught it. He didn't even pull the trigger. I brought my other hand into play and twisted his wrist. Something snapped and the gun clattered to the pavement.

Spoons broke away and ran to the sedan. He was holding his broken wrist and whimpering.

"Scram!" he yelled at the other two. "Get the devil outa here!"

The man the girl had been slapping ran to the sedan. The one I had socked got up and rushed, somewhat drunkenly, to the rear door.

As he climbed in, I got out my service .38. I aimed at the tires and the bullet *bong-g-g-ed* off the roof. I aimed for the driver and missed the car completely. It gained speed and I fired once more—this time at the gas tank. I hit a garbage can.

**W**ELL, that's the way it goes. I've been on the San Francisco force eight years now, ever since I was twenty-one. And I've never hit anybody with my gun—except the time I threw it at Little Kelly and knocked him out. I've only killed one man and that was accidental. He had kicked me below the belt. I got sore and smashed him in the jaw as hard as I could. He died of a broken neck.

The girl was breathing hard and staring down the alley after the sedan. Her skirt was split up the side, her long black hair was tangled and that brush with the pavement had covered her with grime. But she still would have rated a long, low whistle from Billy Rose. And a big guy like me appreciates a queen that tall even more.

I turned my back on her for a moment and wiped the tears from my eyes with a handkerchief.

She looked at me inquiringly. Then she said, "They were going to kill me." She shuddered and added, "How can I ever thank you?"

"Bah," I said. "You didn't need my help. Five minutes more and you'd have piled them up like firewood."

She smiled and I glanced down at the pavement. She certainly had long legs. The lithe, slender kind, developed by high board diving or six sets of tennis dally. The toenails on her bare foot were painted red.

“Where’d you lose your shoe?” I asked her.

She scanned the alley. “I had it when I jumped. Oh, there it is.” She hobbled a few steps and picked up the shoe. Then she balanced neatly on one foot and slipped it on.

“Who were those three guys?” I inquired.

“That’s just it!” she said. “I don’t know them. I don’t even know why they wanted to kill me.”

That sounded a little wacky. “Are you sure?” I said.

“Of course, I’m sure,” she cracked. “Usually, when people want to kill me, I at least know why.”

I grinned and snapped down the brim on my hat. “Sounds mysterious,” I said. “But let’s not just stand here in the alley all night. How about telling me all about it over a cup of coffee and a sandwich?”

Her blue eyes grew wary. “Well—I don’t know,” she said.

“It’s all right,” I explained. I drew out my wallet and showed her the brass gimmick pinned to the leather. “Inspector Gus Kessler,” I said.

“That’s different. I’m starved. Those men kept me in their car all day and only gave me a hamburger.”

My coupe—it’s a police car without official markings—was parked a little further down the alley. I had been walking toward it when the sedan nearly knocked me down. We got in and I pulled the radio-phone from its rack under the dash. I gave headquarters the sedan’s license number and asked them to put out a net for Spoons Moran.

It was midnight by the time we traveled the seven blocks to O’Looney’s cafe on Haight Street. On the way over, the girl drew a mirror from her shoulder-strap bag and fixed her lipstick and hair. When we got out she was as good as new, except for the split in her skirt, which gave her the daring look of an Apache dancer.

We sat in the beige, leather-and-wood booth in the rear and ordered liverwurst sandwiches. I highly recommend O’Looney’s liverwurst sandwiches. They have personality.

“Now, then,” I said to the girl. “How did you ever grow so tall without getting over-sized feet?”

“I’ll ask you the same question,” she smiled. “How did you?”

I stuck my shoes out in the aisle. “I didn’t. Look. The navy used ‘em for carriers during the Battle of Midway.”

She laughed and two dimples appeared out of nowhere.

“What’s your name?” I said.

“Jackie Loring.”

“Occupation?”

“Model.”

I whistled a little. “I’d have guessed that. Phone number?”

She lifted a restraining hand. “Wait a minute,” she said. “Let’s not get carried away.”

I dug inside my coat and pulled out my notebook. “For the record,” I grinned. “I have to turn in a report.”

She relented and gave me the number and her address. I copied them down and asked: “Now when did those men pick you up?”

She didn’t get a chance to reply.

A gun exploded near the door. Two holes appeared in the wood near Jackie’s head and chips flew into her dark curls.

**L**IKE a fool, I had sat with my back toward the door. I didn’t even get to

see the gunman. By the time I had drawn my revolver and started down the aisle, he was gone. I spent two or three useless minutes looking for him out on the street.

When I returned, O'Looney and his other four customers were jabbering like crows in a bean field. Jackie's face was white.

I finished wiping my eyes again and put the handkerchief away. Jackie was looking at me strangely and I knew why.

"Come on," I said, taking her wrist. "Let's get out of here. Let's talk in the car. It's harder to hit a moving target."

We drove up the bumpy Haight Street hill behind a straggling streetcar. I turned right at Masonic and went into Golden Gate Park. According to the rear vision mirror, we were not being tailed.

"Those guys aren't playing tiddly winks," I said, turning into the park's main boulevard. "They're out to get you!"

"I know," Jackie said. Her words were strained. "I'm scared."

"And you don't even know why they're trying to kill you?" A note of incredulity sneaked into my voice. I couldn't help it. The thing sounded so unconvincing.

"It all started this morning," Jackie explained. "I was standing on a corner on Howard Street waiting for one of the electric buses. Suddenly this sedan pulled up and two of the men jumped out. They grabbed my arms and hustled me into the car. I was so surprised I CJ didn't even fight back. All day we drove around. One of the men, the one with blotches on his face, kept getting out every so often and making phone calls."

"That was Spoons Moran," I said. "The boys may pick him up. Any idea who he was phoning?"

"No. He seemed to be trying to get instructions from somebody. Around eleven-thirty tonight, we stopped in front

of a bar on Mission Street—I think it was McCarthy's Big Glass. He phoned again and I guess he found out what to do with me. He told the driver to head for the alley and he got out the gun. I couldn't believe he was going to shoot me. There was absolutely no reason.

"All day I had asked them why they were holding me and they wouldn't say. We came down the alley. I was so scared. He was really going to shoot me. And then we passed you. It was my only chance. I jumped out the door—I don't know why he didn't shoot then."

"Probably saw me," I said, "and didn't want a witness."

I turned the car around and headed back toward the business district. "They may try for you again," I said. "You need protection. Got an extra cot at your place?"

Jackie's mother and father had raised her well. She wasn't sure she wanted seventy-seven inches of cop in her apartment all night. But then she must've remembered that those two marks which had appeared in the woodwork near her head weren't worm holes. She also remembered that the apartment across from hers would be vacant a week. Two of her friends on vacation.

I went to sleep in the friends' apartment across the hall from Jackie's. I was close enough so I could hear her scream if anyone tried to get funny during the night.

The phone rang the next morning while Jackie and I were breakfasting in her little ivory-painted kitchen. I kept on eating eggs and toast while she answered it.

She talked two or three minutes and wrote something on the note-pad beside the phone. When she got back to the table, her eyes were shining with excitement.

"It's so silly," she said.

“What is?”

“He said I’ve just inherited fifteen thousand dollars! Isn’t that silly?”

“The devil it isn’t. That’s money. Very handy stuff.”

“Yes,” she said. “But I don’t know the man who phoned. And I’ve never heard of the old lady who left me the fifteen thousand dollars, either!”

That gave the old brain a tickle. “I see what you mean,” I said. “Who was the guy that phoned?”

Jackie consulted the note-pad. “David Jessop. He said his aunt left me the money. And he wants me to come out to—let’s see—9660 Jackson Street, and sign some papers around eleven this morning.

I smelled a large and shaggy rat. “Great,” I said. “You’ve just been appointed trigger-bait again. The idea is for you to hop out there so Spoons and his boys can continue where they left off last night. That fifteen thousand dollars is just a gag.”

Jackie was disappointed. “It would have bought a lot of shoes and hats,” she said. She pushed out her lower lip in a pretty pout. Then she added. “What do we do now?”

I didn’t come up with the answer right away. After five or six minutes, I said, “We’ll go out there at eleven and look over the set-up. If we play our cards right, maybe we can get to the bottom of the whole thing. Want to take the risk?”

Jackie did. She phoned her agency and said she would be away for the day. Then she cleared the dishes off the table. Because I insisted, she let me wash them. She dried. When we were nearly finished, she looked at me inquisitively.

“I’ve got about as much tact as a giraffe,” she observed. “I’m just burning with curiosity. I know I shouldn’t, but could I ask you something personal?”

“Sure,” I said. I had a hunch that I knew what was coming up.

“Well, twice last night you were crying. And I’ve been wondering why. Am I embarrassing you?”

My face felt a little hot. “No,” I said. “Anyway, I wasn’t crying. I just had tears in my eyes.” That sounded a little contradictory. I hurried on: “It always happens after I’ve been through a little action. Last night, it was right after the fight in the alley. And after they fired at you at O’Looney’s. It’s nothing serious. My eyes just fill up, that’s all.”

She was still looking at me curiously. “I’ve been to a psychiatrist,” I said. “He says it’s easy to explain. It’s perfectly normal—for me. Part of the let-down after a lot of excitement. Some guys’ hands shake. Others twitch a little. Me—well, I get tears in my eyes.”

Jackie was smiling. I guess I did look sort of funny trying to explain it. “It sure raises blue mud with me on the force,” I added. “The men are always ribbing me.”

“I think it’s very nice,” she said. “It shows you’re a sensitive man. Besides, it’s cute.”

I didn’t say anything more. Frankly, I’ve never been able to see anything cute about a guy six feet five bawling like a kid with a busted rattle.

**WE DROVE** out to Jackson Street in my coupe. On the way over I parked for a few minutes. Using the radio-phone, I called Captain Neeley at headquarters. I told him what I was working on and that I thought I might run into Spoons and his buddies. Then I asked for a squad car with four men to rendezvous with me at the Presidio’s south gate. The gate is about six blocks from the Jackson Street address.

Neeley’s a good man. In half an hour, I was working out a plan with four of the

boys at the gate. We decided that I would park in front of the house and send Jackie in. The squad car would park a block away.

At the first sign of trouble, she was to holler for me. I would signal the squad car and go roaring in.

Jackson Street is in San Francisco's finest residential district. The address turned out to be a three-story brick house, covered with vines and overlooking the blue bay. The lawn was smooth as a ping-pong table. I parked in front and Jackie got out.

"Remember," I cautioned. "If you weren't big enough to take care of yourself, I'd never let you go in alone. But don't try to handle it all by yourself. If you just so much as see Spoons, yell for me. And don't let them try to kid you with that fifteen thousand smacker routine."

"Yes, Uncle Gus," she said, sweetly. She straightened her coat collar and went up the brick path. I watched her go. It's something to see a girl that tall just walk. She moved like a model, all right—no extra wiggles.

I couldn't see who let her in. About ten minutes passed. I smoked a couple of cigarettes and kept shifting around in the seat. I cursed the department for giving me a car with so little leg room.

Suddenly, I heard two shots fired in rapid succession. I got out of the coupe, drew my gun and waved at the squad car. When I was halfway up the path, Jackie shouted: "Gus!" There was terror in her voice.

I flung open the front door and found myself in a hallway. On the left was a wide entrance-way and steps leading down to a drawing room. I bounded down them.

Jackie was standing in the center of the deep blue rug. She was holding an Army style .45 and looking down with trembling lower lip at a prostrate man. There were

two red holes over the left pocket of his yellow sports shirt. I've had a lot of practise. I can usually tell whether a man's dying or dead. This one was gone.

The room was crowded and noisy. Besides the dead man, there were Jackie, myself, the four patrolmen and three other people—a grand total of ten. Plus four dogs.

I was relieved to see that Spoons and his boys hadn't been invited. But I didn't like that gun in Jackie's hand.

Everybody was yapping at once. A tall, gray-haired man pointed a slender finger at Jackie.

"She killed him!" he said. "She shot Mr. Jessop!"

"I didn't!" exclaimed Jackie. "I didn't!" She was scared stiff.

A woman of about fifty was on her knees beside the dead man. Tears were in her eyes and she was holding his head. "In cold blood," she kept repeating.

It took a few minutes to get order. They wouldn't shut up until I bellowed at them. I took the gun away from Jackie, covered it with my hankie and dropped it in my coat pocket. I told one of the patrolmen to phone for the coroner and the fingerprint squad and the photo boy. Then I started asking questions.

It took time—they were all so distraught—but I finally got the story.

The dead man was David Jessop, the man who had phoned Jackie and told her about the fifteen thousand dollars. He was about forty-five, tanned and lean, the outdoor type.

The tall man was Albert V. McVey, a lawyer. He had curly gray hair and a curly mustache. His hands were blue-veined and covered with brown spots. He wore a tight-fitting black coat and was every foot a gentleman.

The elderly woman beside the body was Miss Adele Rosemont, the dead man's

cousin. She was rather skinny and wore a lacy dress with small flower prints. The four dogs, I learned, were hers. She was strictly the school teacher type. Her grief seemed genuine.

The other woman was the housekeeper. She was large-boned and had a heavy red face.

The house, it developed, was owned by the late Miss Bedelia Rosemont. She had died two or three months before of pneumonia. McVey was a long-time friend of the family and the executor of her will. The dead man, Jessop, and Miss Rosemont were her nephew and niece.

The lawyer, the niece and the housekeeper were certain that Jackie had killed Jessop. But—and this was important—none of them had actually seen the shooting. They had only heard it.

While I was questioning them, one of the patrolmen came out of the adjoining room. He handed me two cartridges. “I found them in there,” he said. “In the library. The shooting must’ve been done in there. Blood on the rug.”

During all this time, Jackie had said nothing. She was still nervous and excited, but the pink was returning to her cheeks. “Please, Inspector,” she said, “could I talk to you alone? In there?” She motioned toward the library.

I nodded and we went in. I chased out a couple of dogs and closed the door. It was a large room with two entrances. Books of all sizes filled the walls from floor to ceiling. There was a little blood on the rug near the heavy oak table. We sat in two black leather chairs. Jackie crossed her long, nyloned legs. We didn’t say anything for a minute or two.

I was thinking.

And I didn’t like what I was thinking. The gun in Jackie’s hand was too significant to be ignored—no matter how much I liked her. If she were the murderer,

then her whole story had been lies. Maybe Spoons had a good reason for wanting to knock her off. Maybe she was a member of his gang and had double-crossed him. Maybe she had killed Jessop because he wouldn’t come across with the fifteen thousand dollars. Frankly, I was bewildered.

And I felt like the very devil. For the first time in my life, I had met a great big beautiful girl—someone really my height—and she turns out to be—well, what? Sometimes this crazy job makes me so mad I feel like flinging my badge into the bay and getting a job driving a truck. It may be a lot harder on the posterior—but it’s easier on the mind.

Jackie had been watching me. There was a hint of tears in her blue eyes. “I didn’t kill him,” she said. “I didn’t—I never saw him before in my life.”

I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help thinking she was trying to double-talk me again. “What happened after you left me?” I said.

“Mr. Jessop let me in. He thanked me for coming. He told me again that his aunt had left me fifteen thousand dollars. I said I didn’t even know his aunt. He said that was all right—she knew me. He was awfully excited. We talked for five or six minutes and it didn’t make any sense at all. Once he said I would have to go away to New York or Pennsylvania.”

“Where was all this?” I asked.

She pointed at the drawing room. “Out there. He said he wanted to get the money and the paper for me to sign. So then he came in here.”

“Did you follow?”

“No. I waited out there. Suddenly there were shots. It was awful. Somebody threw the gun through the door. I was scared. I thought maybe someone was going to try to kill me again like those men last night. I picked up the gun—to defend myself. And

then Mr. Jessop came stumbling back through the door. And he fell—”

“When did you first see the lawyer and the cousin?” I asked. “And the housekeeper?”

“They came running in about the same time you and the other policemen did.”

I began to feel a little better. Jackie’s story was pretty thin—but if you examined it with the proper attitude it made sense. She had picked up the gun because she was scared. Under the circumstances, I think I would have done the same thing.

**WE TALKED** a little longer and Jackie began to be less frightened. Her eyes regained that clear, alert look and her red mouth was almost gay again.

“Oh,” she said. “There’s something I didn’t want to tell you while we were in front of the others. Before Mr. Jessop died he said twice: ‘It was Al—it was Al.’”

I didn’t have to be smacked on the head with a mallet to get the point. “Sure,” I said. “He meant McVey, the lawyer.” I checked my notebook to make sure. “Yeah. *Albert V. McVey.*”

“Do you think he did it?”

“It’s plenty reasonable. The old dame must have had money. He’s been messing around with her will and probably fixed things to suit himself. A smart, crooked lawyer can make a fortune if the family trusts him—and they seem to trust this man.”

“Why would he kill Mr. Jessop?”

“That’s easy. Jessop found out he was juggling the will.”

I rubbed my scalp meditatively with my fingertips. “What we’ve got to do,” I said, “is trick McVey into revealing himself.”

It took Jackie and me about five minutes to work out a little plan. I decided to arrest her for Jessop’s murder. This, we hoped, might make McVey—if he were

the murderer—feel safe and he might unwittingly tip his hand.

We went back out to the drawing room. It was like Market Street on New Year’s Eve. The fingerprint and camera squads had arrived and were bustling around. Two boys from the coroner’s office were loading Jessop onto a stretcher.

I placed Jackie in the custody of one of the patrolmen. Then I got McVey over in a corner. “How long have you known the tall girl?” I asked.

“I’ve known *about* her for several months,” he said. “She’s mentioned in Miss Rosemont’s will. Today was the first time, though, that I met her.”

“Hadn’t you gotten in touch with her about her inheritance?”

“No. There was some delay in probating the will. It was Miss Rosemont’s wish that the girl not be notified until the money could be presented.”

Well, that part of his story could be true. I wondered how he would react to my next maneuver.

“I’m going to lock the girl up,” I said. “Manslaughter. She’ll probably get out on bail this afternoon.”

I don’t think he heard me. The slender little school-teacherish woman—the niece—came up to him just then. She complained of a headache and asked him to get her a glass of water and an aspirin.

McVey went upstairs. Which was just as well. I didn’t want to bother baiting him then. Of course, I couldn’t jail Jackie on manslaughter. That was just a gag to arouse the natural lawyer’s suspicion in McVey. She’d have to be jailed for suspicion of murder—unless I could work out a deal with the Chief.

I turned the gun over to the fingerprint boys. They took Jackie’s prints and then I drove her down to the Hall of Justice. We went in and talked to the Chief. He’d just

had his lunch. He's always a reasonable man when his stomach's full, always willing to listen to a proposition.

He agreed with me that there was enough evidence to hold Jackie on suspicion. I think he liked Jackie's size or the dimple in her chin or something. Anyway, I could see he thought there was a good chance she was innocent. I asked him to place her in my custody for a few days while I worked out a method to trap McVey.

After I told him about Jessop's dying, "It was Al" statement, he agreed. I don't know much about law, but I do know this. A dying man's last words are considered the truth in court—even if he says fire freezes.

Jackie and I went down to my office on the second floor. It's more of a joke than an office. I share an old wooden desk with six other lieutenants and inspectors down in one corner of the squad room. Rats, even the prisoners in the tank have more privacy.

We sat on the desk for a few minutes trying to dope up something. Jackie kept swinging her legs and I couldn't think of anything else but—Jackie.

Finally, I exercised my mind enough to call the Rosemont house and ask how the prints were coming. I wasn't too pleased to learn that the only prints on the gun were a single set of Jackie's. The gun had apparently been wiped clean before she picked it up. Suddenly, it occurred to me that—as a smart cover-up—she might have wiped it off herself and then replaced her prints. That would make it look like someone else had wiped it clean and then tossed it in the room. While I was mulling that over, Jackie invited me to lunch at her apartment.

I reacted to her invitation in two ways. The wolf in me thought it was a great idea. But the cop in me was suspicious. I

suggested that she go home in a cab and fix lunch, while I went over to Probate Court to look up the old lady's will. As soon as she left, I told one of the plainclothes boys to tail her.

I got over to the court and read the public copy of Miss Rosemont's will. It surprised the daylights out of me. I showed the old gent behind the counter my badge, jammed the copy in my pocket and left in a hurry.

While I was waiting for the signal to change at Howard and Tenth Streets, I began to worry about Jackie. The plainclothes man had instructions not to follow her into her apartment building and someone could have been waiting for her inside.

I parked beside the fireplug in front of Edward's Drug and called her from the dial phone back of the glass prescription counter. The radio-phone takes longer and I was in a hurry.

"Hello?" Jackie said. Her phone voice is like Ann Sheridan's.

"You all right?" I said. "This's Gus."

"Sure."

"Good. Say, I got news for you. You ought to read the old gal's will!"

"Do I get the fifteen thousand dollars?" She sounded a little excited.

"It'll surprise you," I teased.

"Please," she said. "You're mean. If you want to torture people, get a thumbscrew or a rack or something. Come on, read it!"

"Okay," I said. I dug the papers out of my pocket and spread them on the counter. I began to read: "I, Bedelia Rosemont, the undersigned, being of sound mind and body, do this day, July 5th, execute this, my last will and testament. To my attorney and trusted friend, Albert V. McVey, I bequeath the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars; to my dearly beloved nephew, David Rosemont Jessop, I bequeath the

sum of one hundred thousand dollars—”

“Good heavens!” Jackie interrupted. “No wonder he got killed!”

“Wait’ll you hear the rest of it. . . . And to my beloved niece, Adele Rosemont, my darling El, I also bequeath the sum of one hundred thousand dollars. And to—”

I heard Jackie catch her breath. “Wait a minute!” she exclaimed. “What was that nickname she gave Adele?”

“El,” I said. I spelled it out.

Jackie’s voice climbed a few notes and she talked fast. “Why, that’s what Mr. Jessop said just before he died. I thought he said Al because I’ve never heard of anyone being nicknamed El. Now I remember plain as day. He said ‘It was El!’ ”

It was my turn to gasp. “Jumping Jupiter!” I said. “That means that skinny little niece killed him! And she had plenty of motive. The will says if one of the heirs dies his dough goes to the others. And that’s why she—”

Jackie interrupted. Her voice was taut. “Hold everything!” she said. “Someone’s opening the door.” There was a clatter as she dropped the receiver on the table. I heard footsteps—and then nothing.

**I** POUNDED out to the curb and into the coupe. I roared for a block in second. The transmission screamed so loud I must have scattered gear teeth all over Howard Street. I called myself assorted profanities for letting Jackie go home alone.

I parked on Lexington, the narrow side street on one side of Jackie’s apartment building. I ran around to the front. The plainclothes man was standing in the doorway of a nearby barbershop. I told him to stay where he was and keep his eyes open.

Then I walked over to the row of buttons beside the apartment house door.

Surprise was going to be my best weapon, so I didn’t want to ring Jackie’s bell.

I rang a Mrs. Flossie Kimball’s bell and waited in a blue funk for her to press the button that would buzz open the door. Finally, I heard a woman’s eager voice on the door phone. “Hello, George?” she said. “Come on up. He won’t be back until six.”

I said: “Swell!” The door buzzed and I went in. I decided against the elevator—too noisy. Drawing my revolver, I took the carpeted steps three at a time. Jackie’s apartment was on the fourth floor. I tiptoed down the hall to her door—a tough thing for me to do. My toes just aren’t made to carry 265 pounds.

I pushed the door open slowly and sent up a silent tribute to the man who oiled its hinges. Somebody was talking—it sounded like the niece. I peeked around the door into the living room. Nobody was there. That meant Jackie and the old gal were in the kitchen. So far as I could tell, Spoons Moran and his boys were sitting this one out.

My breathing was giving me a little trouble and I was sweating all over the gun handle. I took two careful steps across the hardwood floor and shut the door gently behind me. I took another step and a board squeaked. It sounded like a cat yowling at midnight.

The niece apparently hadn’t heard it. She was doing a lot of talking. “Don’t you see?” she said. “I had to shoot David. He couldn’t have taken care of his money any better than a mouse could. And I need it. I’m going to build the finest dog hospital San Francisco’s ever had. It will cost a million dollars.”

“But what’s that got to do with me?” Jackie asked. Her voice was frightened.

“I’m sorry,” said the niece. “After I shot David, I found the paper and the fifteen thousand dollar check he was going to give you. Poor David. He should have

known that paper wouldn't stand up in court. So you see, I'll have to kill you, too. I should have known better than to trust that fool Moran. I should have done it myself the first time."

I had crossed the rug, taking one careful step after another. Finally, I was able to peer into the kitchen. Little Miss Rosemont's face was pinched and stern. She was pointing a pistol up at Jackie's heart. Jackie was at least twice as tall as the older woman.

Miss Rosemont would have had to turn her head slightly to see me. Jackie, however, saw me right away. I put a cautioning finger to me lips. What I did next wasn't the brightest thing in the world, but it worked.

I let out a yell. A terrific bellow, like a rhinoceros being speared to death. Miss Rosemont's head snapped in my direction. Jackie reacted immediately. She slapped the little lady so hard, she went flying backward, landing in an undignified heap under the orange breakfast table. The revolver skidded under the stove.

I picked Miss Rosemont up and set her on a chair. She didn't weigh much more than a rag doll. Her face was white, except for where Jackie had slapped her. There it was red and growing purple.

Jackie picked up the gun and handed it to me. "You okay?" I asked.

She daubed a dish towel at the perspiration on her forehead. Then she came over and wiped those blasted tears out of my eyes.

"I'm fine," she said. She smiled wryly. "But still scared. It was bad enough without you yelling like that."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't want to shoot. I know I'd have missed—always do. And I didn't want to whop her on the head with the butt. She's so little, I'd have killed her sure." I shrugged. "See how it was?"

Jackie nodded. "I wasn't complaining," she said. "That's twice in two days you've kept me from getting shot. How am I ever going to repay you?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll think of a way."

AFTER I put the cuffs on Miss Rosemont, the three of us went down to the coupe. I sent the plainclothesman back to the station and we got in the car. Miss Rosemont sat in the middle. She didn't say a word. Jackie and I did all the talking.

"Well," said Jackie. "I can see why she would kill her cousin for one hundred thousand dollars. But why was she after me? That fifteen thousand smackers I was supposed to get was pretty small for that sort of thing."

"You weren't left fifteen thousand dollars," I said.

Jackie snapped her fingers. "That's the way it goes. One minute you've got it, the next you haven't. Anyway, why should a perfect stranger leave me any money?"

"No, you weren't left fifteen thousand dollars," I repeated. "That's what I was going to tell you on the phone. The old lady left you seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Jackie was so surprised I thought I heard her eyes pop. A truck passed us at the time so I'm not positive. She managed to gasp: "Why?"

"That's all explained in the will," I said. "It's really something. It seems the aunt was a woman about your size. Maybe not quite as tall, but more than six feet anyway. When she was in her teens, she got awful sensitive about her height. Developed some kind of a complex which even all her father's money couldn't cure. She stayed home all the time and wouldn't meet people. Thought they were sorry for her and figured she was a freak."

“Well, she inherited all her Dad’s dough. He was Rosemont, the tea bag king, or something. And when she made out her will, she thought she’d do something worthwhile. She decided to give most of her money to the tallest and prettiest girl in town, a girl who wouldn’t stay home like she did, but who would certainly get some fun out of the money.”

“Really?” said Jackie. She was incredulous.

“Yeah. She wrote letters to all the girls’ colleges and high schools in town and to the model agencies. To make a long story short, she finally decided to give you the seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars.” I paused and did some calculating. “Let’s see. You’re six feet three—that’s seventy-five inches. So you get about ten thousand dollars an inch. Not bad, huh?”

Jackie’s face was flushed and her eyes glistened. “It’ll be weeks before I really believe it,” she said. “What a crazy two days these have been. The nightmare

turned into a dream.” She paused and then asked: “But why did Mr. Jessop say I had only inherited fifteen thousand dollars?”

I had been wondering about that, too. “The way I’ve got it figured,” I said, “is that he had his own little plan to beat you out of the rest of your dough. I guess he didn’t know about El’s here. He was going to give you the fifteen thousand dollars and probably get you to sign a tricky paper giving up all your rights to the inheritance. He figured you’d be so happy to get the fifteen thousand dollars you’d sign anything.”

“And I would have,” she said.

We stopped for the signal at Market and Kearny Streets. “What’re you going to buy first?” I asked.

“A bed,” she said. “A bed long enough so I won’t have to sleep tied in a knot. And, on second thought, I think I’ll buy two of them. One for you and one for me!”

My eyebrows were up under my hat somewhere. I wasn’t exactly sure what she meant—but it sounded fine.