

MURDERERS THREE



By
**BRYCE
WALTON**

I heard the door open fast
behind me.

*Three people could be wanting me dead—
my honest partner, my loyal friend,
and my lovely, loving wife.*

I SAT behind the white-oak desk while the three of them came in and sat down. One of them wanted to see me dead, so the three of them seemed like strangers to me. Lara was just another woman. She might be my wife again, and she might

not. She might or might not have killed my friend Martin. I didn't know whether it was she or one of the other two, Burkeson or McWilliams, who had tried to kill me the night before.

McWilliams, a little fat and sweating

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in his business suit, said nervously, "I ought to be down there in the house, Al. It's busy. This going to take long?"

I said it wouldn't take long. "What's the urgency?" Burkeson said. He was as usual neat and brown in expensive sport togs, his thin face sympathetic. "I got your telegram and drove all the way from the Palms like this place had caught fire!"

I got up. My joints felt stiff, and my nerves were scratchy. Lara just sat there with slim legs crossed, her black hair shining, her face as impassive as it 'was beautiful. Three of my closest friends, so when I mixed their drinks, I didn't have to ask them what they wanted. Lara, martini. Burkeson, scotch and plain water. McWilliams, brandy.

Lara didn't look at me. During the trial for killing Martin, and the two weeks since she'd gotten out of it, I hadn't seen her much, exchanged practically nothing but a few clipped words.

They'd noticed the hunk of gauze stuck to my head above the left ear I explained "Someone came that close to putting a high-powered rifle bullet in my head last night. By moonlight. A pretty good shot at that."

Lara's lips twisted a little. Burkeson and McWilliams were very much concerned. They seemed to be. But how could I tell? I couldn't trust any of them. But I could give them the money test, and that way I could find out for sure.

McWilliams said. "Who the hell would try that, Al?" And Burkeson said. "Whoever tried it, won't try it again."

Then Burkeson leaned forward. "Maybe it was just a wild shot, AL"

"No." I was watching their faces. I didn't know why. I'd been watching their faces a long time without seeing anything that would say one of them would try to kill me. "I went out there to shoot jacks, out by Eagle's Head. Some people knew I went there, knew I was going there. They were waiting with high-powered rifles. I fell down like they'd got me, and they didn't try it again, so I guess they believed it. They're not in Vegas anymore, I know that. I'm sure they've gone back to L. A."

"You haven't told Sheriff Higgins?" McWilliams said. I said I hadn't. Burkeson said he could put some of his boys on it if I didn't want to go to the cops. I said no.

"I know who it was," I lied. "And it's personal. Just between them and myself."

They said all the things you'd expect them to say. They couldn't let me risk my neck, they would help me. We were old friends. I explained why they couldn't help -me. How it was a feud that had started before I took this job for Burkeson in Vegas. How a couple of enemies of mine had told me to get out of L.A. and not come back if I wanted to live, so I'd taken this job for Burkeson in Vegas. Evidently, though, their feelings had gotten the better of them, and they'd come here to get me. I made it sound good, I hoped. I would have to settle it now if I ever wanted to sleep peacefully again.

I told them I was leaving for L.A. that night to settle it for good. They protested violently as good friends should. They wouldn't let me make a damn fool of myself.

"I've made out a will," I said. "I have a tape-recorder, going now, taking all this

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down, so we don't need a witness. The will's all typed up, and Richman the lawyer has it now." Lara seemed nervous as she lit a cigarette. But then, I thought, she had gone through enough to make anyone a lot more nervous than she was.

"It's called a conditional will," I explained. "Lara and I've talked this thing over—about cutting you two guys in on my savings and real-estate, and she's agreeable to splitting it. We're all friends. Now—I intend to come back, but I might not. So I've made out this conditional will. It leaves half of what I've got to Lara. You two guys split the other half. A conditional will is— conditional on whether or not I do come back. In the will I say I'm leaving on a dangerous trip to L.A., and if I don't come back, you three get the profit. But if I do come back, then the will's all off. The will's also fixed so that if something happens to any of you, the others get his share."

The big ashtray jangled under Lara's cigarette. They argued some more, all but Lara. Odd how the hands shake, the smiles go off and on, and the words of good fellowship fly back and forth. All automatic, and how can you tell when it's sincere? They protested some more, and finally Burkeson and McWilliams left reluctantly, slowly.

Lara lingered a while in the doorway. The sounds of the roulette wheels, the croupier's droning voice, the clicking of dice tables and the hum of voices crazily getting rid of their money came up to us along the hall.

She had stayed in our apartment during and after the trial. But I'd moved into my

combination suite and office above the Digger Club which I managed for Burkeson.

Now she said. "Thanks for the lawyer, darling." Her face was like a mask. Only her eyes had feeling in them, but I didn't know whether it was real or not. "All I had to do was repeat again that I didn't kill Martin, and your lawyers did the rest. Witnesses, everything, all for me."

"I'm sorry about the whole thing," I said lamely. She'd said she didn't do it. That was what anyone would say. If it were your wife or a close friend, why should you believe it any more than if a stranger said it? That was the question. I had to know the right answer.

What if I'd laughed and said as they do in the movies, "I know you couldn't have done it, darling. I know you couldn't have tried to kill me either. I love you, and that's how I know."

So what if I did that and we went off together down the hall now, I thought, and down longer halls, how could I ever really know? She shook her head slowly and closed the door.

FOR a while I drank scotch. I answered the phone twice. First it was McWilliams. "Let me go with you, Al. I didn't want to say anything in front of Burk and Lara, but you can't do a crazy stunt like this! Let me go with you."

"I'd feel pretty good, wouldn't I, dragging you guys in on something personal like this, maybe getting you killed. These guys are pretty hard."

"But Al—"

He was swearing at me when I hung

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up.

Then Burkeson called. "Don't argue with me, Al. I'm going along."

"No," I said. "That would be silly."

"Listen, I can't let you do this, Al. I'm no business man. I haven't saved, and I'm in debt. The Club's making plenty of profit, but the eastern stockholders plus my own lousy business sense keep me busted. I need you. But it isn't because you're the best damn club manager in the business and I'd be sunk without you. That isn't it!"

I knew it wasn't, I said. So we argued awhile, too, and then I hung up on him.

I killed another hour. And then I got my .25 automatic from the desk, and got my topcoat and went down the back stairs to the parking lot. The lights of Vegas twinkled in the desert dark like the flickering lights of a big gaming machine. Three oranges and you're dead.

The big convertible was gassed and ready. The top raised up and slowly settled down around me. Like a cowl, Lara had said. She hated convertibles. Always afraid the wind would take the top off or that we'd be thrown out at high speed. The parking lot attendant assured me no one had been around the car. I'd left him to watch it.

I left Fremont and hit the highway toward the California state line. If my plan worked right, someone would try to kill me somewhere along the way. It was funny, but the way I felt, the plan would still work out all right for me even if I was murdered—as long as I knew who did it, knew for sure.

As I drove, I tried to kill the suspense

that was rising in me by trying to figure those three. Lara had friends in Vegas—guys like Joe Harvey and Ral Schiller. A lot of friends, and she never had seemed to worry much about whether they were real friends or not. Schiller and Harvey would do a job like this for a small percentage of the take. But she had gotten to be more friendly with me than with anyone. Friendly enough to say she loved me and to marry me. Love and hate, the razor's edge. Sure, I thought, that was it. Only one who loved you the most could hate you enough.

I had the convertible up to seventy-five. Each of them could have a logical motive. I'd made it tempting enough—a few hundred grand. Secondly, if I was murdered, I'd exonerated the three of them in advance by making that tape and saying it was a party in L.A. who was trying to get me and to whom I was going with a good chance of getting killed. One of those three couldn't fail to pass up such an opportunity.

Actually there were no old lethal friends in L.A. I'd never known that kind of guys until I came to Vegas to take the job for Burkeson. He had been an old high school pal and had kept pretty clean, except for some mix-up during the war—something political, for which he'd done some time. The big money offer had sounded too good for me. I'd done all right in the University of California, and later in the war, and had been doing good with a big chain outfit. Working for Burkeson, I'd played the cards close, kept my mouth shut. Falling in love with Lara, the marriage and the honeymoon in Mexico

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were about the only bright spotlights along the way. I was in the wrong racket. I'd made a mess of things.

I wondered who would manage the club for Burkeson if I disappeared. In Vegas you can't have any fingerprints on file and still own a casino, not officially. But Burkeson had trusted me. So the club had been in my name. I was the legal owner, but only took a salary, a good one though. It was all done on trust. He'd put up the initial investment, and he really owned it, but it was in my name.

Lara might kill me, I figured, just for the money. She seemed to like nice things. Since the fracas with Martin, which had turned her into a stranger to me, she would be scared I'd get a divorce, deprive her of money, so maybe she had decided to kill me. So far, I'd told her I'd changed no will, or decided to make no changes in property settlements. But she might not trust me. I'd heard rumors that maybe she and Burkeson had been strongly interested in each other. I didn't know whether to believe that or not, either. That could also be a motive. She might be a little crazy. She probably was—plotting a big theft with Martin that way, then flipping her lid and killing him. I couldn't believe it of Martin, or her either, And still—I didn't know.

We'd all got the best lawyers to help get her off. But you help friends and wives in a situation like that even if you don't know whether they're guilty or not. It's known as loyalty.

And Burkeson? He depended on me as manager of the Digger Club. Why would he want me dead? Love for Lara? Or he

might be afraid I'd suddenly take my position as legal owner seriously and start raking the profits and put him on a salary. He might have lost faith in my integrity.

And McWilliams? Hard to imagine a motive for Mac. No apparent reason for him wanting to kill me. He might have been raking off a little private percentage of the house money and wanted to get rid of me before I found out. Then it would be a cinch to pull the wool over Burkeson's eyes. Burkeson didn't know the difference between a ledger and a comic book. He hired his brains and spent their money. He paid well, though.

And for all three of them—money. That was the real test.

And then I saw the lights waving at me up ahead.

I slowed down, got the automatic out and put it on the seat beside me. The other car, a dark sedan, angled across the lonely stretch of highway. I stopped and sat there. I got the spotlight on the left side of the car ready. So far it had seemed a kind of game, not real. Now it was no game at all, and it was too damn real.

I felt my stomach flutter. There was a cold wash of fear over me. I thought suddenly how crazy it all was. I should have got out, run away, started over. What was I trying to prove? Why should I get myself murdered trying to show that someone loved me, that I had a friend in the world?

Some twenty-five-dollar a session headshrinker could tell me, I figured, but it was a little too late to think of that now. The two were close enough. I flicked on the spotlight. I got what I wanted—a look

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at their faces. A bullet went through the glass.

I got my head down, scooted across and out the other side and behind the car, then went on around the back of the car, stepped out and started shooting. That's how simple it was for me. I didn't feel any more fear or excitement or anything. I'd seen their faces, and suddenly I didn't care.

LARA'S pals. Harvey and Schiller. So now I had the answer. I thought then that it would have been better if I'd never found out. Her contact with them had certainly seemed okay—until all this mess had started. Lara was friendly with everyone. Pals. Buddies. Nothing serious. Broadminded people. Schiller played golf and she wanted to learn. "He's really a stupe, Al, but he plays golf and so I learn golf from him. And Harvey's a good swimmer, and I want to learn to swim. He's a stupe, too, but I'm learning how not to drown."

I'd spent late hours at the club. Lara understood that. I'd never thought about it much except that Higgins had said both of them had run around with some pretty rough strings.

I must have yelled Lara's name, because Harvey laughed in the dark and said, "You're right, Al, and now you're dead."

I was on one knee. I fired again. And then I felt that odd whamming in my arm, as though it were ripped from its socket. It flung me flat on my back. I lay there seeing the flame in my face. My heart felt like ice, and I could feel the blood the bullet "brought.

Harvey's face was up there, twisting above the gun. No one else. Just Harvey now. I realized then that Harvey couldn't see my eyes open. He thought I'd passed out. He was giving me the *coup de grace*. Way off, I heard a car coming, felt the pavement tremble. I lifted the gun above my face when Harvey had to take a look the other way for the car. My arm was stiff, and when I fired, I remember how it drove my shoulder into the pavement like a hammer.

It got Harvey under the chin. His body snapped back, and he windmilled ten feet before he fell. There was another one there. Two of them stretched out.

I managed to get up. My arm felt as though it was going to fall off, and then as though it wasn't mine at all. I put my folded handkerchief over the wound as a compress and held it there and got back into my car and got it backed around and headed back toward Vegas as the other car came up.

It stopped, but I kept on going. I felt dizzy and weak as I drove, but stronger than the pain and weakness was the hot angry flame in me as I thought of Lara.

I went directly to Lara's apartment down at the end of Fremont, parked and got out and stopped at a public phone booth there on the corner. It had occurred to me all at once to phone Burkeson and McWilliams and tell them I was okay. I'd need them too in a little while. I told Burkeson what had happened, about the will being a test, and that I'd found out who'd tried to kilt me.

"You damn fool," he whispered and started to say something else but I hung

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up.

And then I hesitated outside Lara's apartment door on the second floor. I had a bad shot in the upper arm, but I didn't seem to feel it at all now. All I could feel was the way I felt about Lara and that was worse than any physical pain.

I guess I hadn't really believed any of it, not really, up to tonight. All that about her and Martin planning to run off together and take about a hundred grand from the house bank, and Martin deciding at the last minute to skip without her, with all the dough for himself. And then her shooting him. And the idea of her trying to kill me. I hadn't really believed it until tonight.

I didn't know what I was at her apartment for, except that I had to see her admit the truth. I had to tell her what I thought of her. Maybe I had an idea of doing something a lot worse than telling her off.

I still had a key. I went in and flicked on the floor lamp. Evidently she had heard me rattling at the door, because she was standing there in the opening into the bedroom looking at me.

I could see the efforts at control working and pulling behind the surface of her face.

The lamp cast a subdued green glow. Her skin was pale under the tan so that for a minute, in her negligee, she looked like one of those sparsely-dressed mannequins in a store window. My throat was dry and there was a painful tension in my chest, but not the kind a bullet brings. I felt sweat itching my neck.

I moved in a little farther and stood there. I called her some names I'd never

called any one before. She swayed and put her hand on the back of an overstuffed chair for support.

"You're hurt," she whispered. "Al—"

"But your friends didn't get me," I was saying. "They won't be bothering any one anymore, except maybe the morticians."

"What?" she whispered.

"Harvey and Schiller. I got them instead. Not that that matters much now. What matters is that I found out what I wanted to know. I know now what you are."

"Do you know, Al?" she said. "You sure?"

I told her about the conditional will being just a test. And all the time she stood there as though she didn't believe it.

I was wondering then if that laughter was hers, but it didn't sound like laughter anyway. It was pushing hard at hysteria. I could see the cords straining in her throat. "You poor Simon," she said then. "Love's a funny thing, and I guess no matter how much of it there is, it can be stretched too far. Anybody, everybody—they can take too much. Al, you'd better get out. Get out, Al—"

"What would you do, plug me?"

"Get out, Al. Please—right now—"

I heard the door open fast behind me, and Lara's eyes got bigger as she looked over my shoulder.

I started to turn.

"Just stand that way, Al" I heard Burkeson say. "She's right. You got to get out, Al. But Lara, too. You, too, Lara, you come along."

HE MOVED around into the room so I

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could see him better. I felt someone else's hands go over me, the automatic taken from my pocket. "You can turn around now," Burkeson said.

Burkeson looked a lot different than I'd ever seen him. His face drawn and dark, his eyes seeming glazed a little and distant. He'd put up a wall, or maybe he'd had the wall up all the time, and now it wasn't there anymore. Behind him, with a gun on me, was a little man in a business suit, wearing glasses. Someone like a bank clerk I'd never seen before.

"You got those two boys of mine,"

Burkeson said. "I didn't think you were that tough, Al. I really didn't."

"Your boys," I said. I felt a lot sicker then than physical pain or the fear of dying . can make any one. I didn't look at Lara who stood behind me now.

"Come on," Burkeson said. "You too, Lara. It's chilly out. Maybe you'd better put on a few more things."

I started to say something. Burkeson cut in. "I'll explain it to you, Al, on the way to L.A. .That's where we're going. It'll be a waste of time telling you, because nothing will mean anything to you very much longer. But being that we're old friends, I feel maybe I should tell you. The principle of it."

The man Burkeson called Jimmie drove. Lara sat up there with him. I sat in the back with Burkeson, and he held the gun on me all the time. We went back down the highway toward L.A. This time the night seemed heavier, blacker, more silent, and we went a lot faster than before.

It was a one-way ride. Lara knew it, and so did I, and for a while no one said

anything. Finally I said, "Lara." She didn't turn around. Burkeson grinned at me when I said it again.

I didn't care about Burkeson being there. I wanted to talk to Lara. "You didn't kill Martin either, did you, Lara? I know you didn't do that either."

Lara didn't say anything. Burkeson said. "No, she didn't. It was all fixed—to put the blame on her, and then get her out of it. I had to get rid of him, but I didn't really want Lara to take the rap."

Helpless rage choked in my throat. "Why?" I said.

"You brought in your C.P.A. pal Martin, and he found out some things about me.

He talked to me before coming to you so he never got to you. He knew you and I were pals, so he thought he could talk to me first and maybe straighten it out. It was a mistake. I got him over to Lara's that night and got him killed, and later there were witnesses I had to show why Lara had shot him. It was all a frame, and you never questioned it, Al. I figured you wouldn't."

"And I told Lara the score—that I'd get her off if she'd play it dumb. And if she didn't, I explained how I would kill you. I convinced her. She played it dumb."

Lara, I thought. Turn around. Look at me. The car went faster, boring into the dark.

"But now," Burkeson grinned, "things aren't like they were, so Lara's got to go, too. That's what love does. Sometimes you have to go all the way." He laughed.

So Burkeson explained the rest of it. Martin had found out about Burkeson's

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income-tax evasion, and about some wires tapping other rackets in L.A. "He didn't want me to know. As I was the legal owner of the club, Burkeson had figured all along that his dirty business would get stuck on me. That's why he hadn't been too careful. Martin started pressure though. And Burkeson got to thinking about the Feds cracking down. So Burkeson finished Martin, then decided to get rid of me too. If I died before any investigation, still the club's legal owner, they'd just stick me with the crime and bury me and forget the rest.

But if they investigated and I was still around, I'd have known the score and could have given dangerous information that would have put Burkeson in a bad spot. Dead, of course, I couldn't defend myself. It would all be on my ledger, not Burkeson's.

I guess it was in the back of Burkeson's mind from the start—to get rid of me eventually while all the crime could be stuck to me.

My killing out there by Eagle's Head would have been fixed to look like an accident. Everybody knew how I went out to hunt jacks all the time. He believed the conditional will story of mine. It seemed like a golden opportunity for Burkeson. He could murder me, take me into L.A. and drop me. The evidence was on the tape, about my going into L.A. to settle it with some old enemies. My expecting to get killed. He needed the money. He was in debt. He could kill a couple of birds. He'd sent the boys out there, still making me think it was Lara, when those two boys had been Burkeson's all the time. Higgins,

Burkeson said, would take care of the story about those two. He had a car out there and had cleaned the mess up already. There was nothing there when we went by.

The car rocked with a misleading gentleness, considering its speed through the dark.

"When you came back and called me tonight, Al, it seemed even better. No one knows you came back to Vegas except Lara and me and Jimmie. So the conditional will still works for me. Now we take care of Lara, too. Lara and you get killed in L.A. McWilliams and I get her half the money.

Mac doesn't suspect anything. He'll be good to have around to make things look better, and he knows the business pretty good. And it'll probably look like Lara was one of those who had it in for you in L.A., or maybe they'll think she contacted them to help get you. After all—she's already been on trial for one killing."

And he wouldn't be in it at all, I thought. I owned the club, legally. Burkeson would get the money, and all the dirty stuff would be pinned to my gravestone and Lara's.

"We're driving into L.A. in your car," Burkeson said, "so we can plant it right. We've got alibis, witnesses to show we've never left Vegas tonight. We take a private plane back tonight. Another boy of mine you don't know is driving Lara's car to L.A., and then he'll come back with us on the plane."

"You've got everything figured out," I said. And I thought how actually I had really fixed it. I'd fixed everything, fixed things for good.

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:WE'VE got the spot all picked out," Burkeson said. "We've even got some evidence planted to throw some leads into a couple of guys in L.A. we don't like. You didn't mention any names, Al. That was thoughtful of you. Why not have some real guys there, I figured?"

"Why not?" I said. I wouldn't be around to care. The one person in the whole mess who shouldn't be in it was Lara. So I had to try something, anything at all, but something. Lara couldn't die. But what if she did? *Turn around, Lara, I kept thinking, and look at me, just once. . . .*

She didn't turn around.

The car was like a big black coffin taking us to hell, whooshing dark and powerful through a tunnel of its own light into a darkness no one could know. *If I wasn't afraid for Lara, I thought, I could do it. I could get us all.* Jimmie was a hell of a fast driver. The speedometer would be up around ninety, I figured, and I could feel the air whining past the black metal. One lunge up over the seat and onto Jimmie would do it. Burkeson wouldn't have time to do anything. One sharp swerve of the wheel—

But we'd all go probably, and I wanted Lara to live. If I waited, something might come up. Always a chance as long as we stayed alive. . . .

"We're going fast," I said.

"We sure are," Burkeson said. "Jimmie's a great little driver. What's she hitting now, Jimmie?"

"Ninety-three."

"One of the tires might not be so good,

Jimmie," I said.

Jimmie didn't look back. The car picked up speed, if anything. "I can handle any wagon," Jimmie said. "Even without tires."

"Best man at the wheel I ever saw," Burkeson said.

"His mother must be proud of him," I said and added, "Lara doesn't like to go fast. Specially in convertibles."

I hoped she'd take the hint. Sweat ran down my face. Lara would catch on, know what I was getting at. She wanted to live.

Burkeson saw her sudden movement, but he didn't have time to do anything. She raised up, her hand jerked down, released the catch that latched the top. No need to pull out the T-bar that set the hydraulic device to working. When the catch was released, the top came up a little, just enough to catch that ninety-five mile an hour wind. The wind ripped the top back, twisted metal, ripped steel.

Burkeson screamed as I grabbed at his gun arm. I heard and felt the crunch of bone in his left arm as the twisting steel came back and ground through flesh and bone like sheering blades. The gun came away from him without any trouble. He hardly noticed it as I dragged myself up, felt the burst of air sweep around, sucking at me like a tornado.

I got the barrel against Jimmie's neck and all he could do was concentrate on the wheel. I yelled into his ear for him to slow her down, for him to turn her around and go back to Las Vegas.

Jimmie did that. I felt Lara's hair under my arm. as I leaned forward. Burkeson was passed out, his arm torn half into by

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the twisting steel of the top.

It took a lot of unscrambling, but it was finally over, and I was out of it. The Feds were moving in anyway to investigate Burkeson, and the notes Martin had hidden and McWilliams' and Jimmie's and Schiller's testimony cleared things for me.

I settled up with my lawyers, arranged for a divorce under whatever terms Lara wanted but I didn't see her. I went to McWilliams, and he was getting ready to go to work for Drake over at the Last Chance.

He shook hands with me as though nothing had happened, and he wished me luck. I was intending to apologize for thinking him capable of killing me, but I just mumbled something and got out.

That last look at McWilliams was the clincher. When a guy gets to the point where his friends, his wife, anybody, might want to kill him, it's the way he sees the world that's mostly wrong. When you get to seeing people that way, it's high time to start taking a long fresh look at yourself. So that was what I was going to do.

I went back to the apartment, and Lara wasn't there, so I packed a few of my things and went back out. I started along the sidewalk toward my car, and the taxi came up and Lara got out.

She was standing there near me under the street light, her hair moist and glistening, her eyes bright. I didn't want to be there, I didn't want to see her. I wanted to get out and leave her own world to her.

She said, "Where you going in such a rush, Al?"

I told her how I'd fixed it the the lawyers so she could go ahead and arrange it any way she wanted.

"She stood very close to me, and her eyes seemed darker than I had ever seen them.

"So you made some mistakes, Al," she whispered. "Don't make another one and leave your old pal."

"What?" I think I said, and then I was holding her and her face was soft and wet against my cheek. .

"I was wondering how much it would take to drag you out of that shell of yours," she was saying. "You've found out something, Al, about yourself—and I've always waited for you to find it out. I always knew what was there. You never lacked faith in me or other people, Al, but only in yourself, and I guess that's because you were in the wrong place, the wrong business, and you didn't want to admit it," :

"You're so right," I mumbled.

"Trouble with men is," she said against my ear, "they should cry more, like women, but they don't. It makes men sick not to cry."

"Then I ought to start getting healthy."

"One thing," she said, "one thing, darling."

"Yes—?"

"We trade the car in for a sedan. I never trusted convertibles."

And we did that the very next day.