

# PRIVATE MORGUE

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There was a dead man under the blanket

An Invitation to a Murder Suddenly lands Private Detective Gary Norman in a Hot Spot!

**G**ARY NORMAN held the flashlight in one hand and reached out with the other to pull down the blanket that covered the face of the corpse. The private detective's eyes narrowed as he saw the keen-bladed hunting knife sticking into the chest of the dead man.

"Hold it, please!" said a soft voice behind him.

He whirled just as a flashlight bulb a

glared brilliantly. For an instant he was blinded by the sudden bright glare in the black darkness of the cellar, then he saw the slender, auburn-haired girl who was holding a camera in her hands.

"I always wanted to get a picture of a murderer returning to the scene of his crime," she said coldly.

"And I usually look so silly in snapshots," Norman said ironically. "Believe it or not, Miss Patterson, I was

just waiting for a taxi.”

He turned his flashlight on the girl. Martha Patterson—he knew her at once as the daughter of the owner of this house—was tall and pretty, and wore a long red evening frock with a short red jacket. She moved back, touched a switch along the wall, and a light gleamed overhead in the ceiling of the old stone cellar.

“Now would you mind taking the light out of my eyes,” she asked, and then Norman switched off the flashlight and dropped it into the side pocket of his raincoat. “Thank you,” she said coolly.

“Photography is a nice hobby,” said Norman. “I go in for it myself. But after all there is a time and a place for everything.” He nodded to the corpse on the stone bench. “Perhaps you might be willing to tell me the name of the deceased?”

“You must know that—since you killed him,” said the girl.

**G**ARY NORMAN, a lean-faced, hard-looking man who obviously knew his way around, frowned and shook his head. He disliked women with fixations and this girl seemed determined to make him out a murderer. It sounded as if she were firmly convinced that he had stuck the knife in the dead man’s heart.

“Listen, sister,” he said, his voice hard. “Let’s quit playing charades and get down to brass tacks. An hour ago I’m sitting in my office cogitating on the follies of humanity when the phone rings. I answer and admit to the bass-voiced lug that starts asking questions over the wire that I’m one Gary Norman, private detective.”

“Oh,” said the girl in surprise. “Then you are Gary Norman.”

“In person, and in the picture you just took of me,” Norman said sourly. “But to continue. The guy on the phone says, ‘Mr. Gary Norman is cordially invited to attend

a murder on the Blakely Patterson estate between the hours of eight and nine P. M. on Thursday evening, November the twenty-fifth.’ Then he hangs up.”

“It sounds utterly insane!” exclaimed Martha Patterson.

“You’re telling me!” Norman grinned. “I’ve run across some goofy setups in the private detective racket, but getting a formal invitation to a murder was a new one on me. Then I get to thinking I’d like to know what it’s all about, so I drive out here to the Blakely Patterson estate—”

“You called me Miss Patterson,” said the girl. “How did you know me?”

“That’s easy. I read the papers and don’t miss the rotogravures. But don’t ask questions, gal. You’re making a short story longer. Anyway I decided to do a little exploring after I get here. So I go wandering around in the rain, find a cellar door open, come inside and find the corpse.” Norman’s tone suddenly grew hard. “Now who is he?”

“I don’t know,” said Martha. “I—”

She caught her breath sharply as from somewhere upstairs in the big house there came the unmistakable sound of a shot. It was loud enough to have been fired by a heavy-caliber gun.

“You people certainly play rough around here,” Norman grimly observed. “What’s all the shooting for now?”

Martha shook her head, fright in her eyes. The slender, auburn-haired girl was plainly worried, but she was putting up a good front. That was all right with Gary Norman. He liked women with nerve.

“Uncle Seth has been threatening to commit suicide,” she finally said slowly.

“He picked a nice night for it,” Norman said shortly.

Norman could hear someone coming down the cellar stairs slowly and deliberately, making quite a lot of noise about it. The girl heard the footsteps and

looked anxiously at Norman. He frowned as he drew an automatic out of a shoulder holster and thrust the gun into the side pocket of his raincoat.

A tall man with a thin face and a bald head loomed into view. He wore the livery of a butler, and his expression did not change when he saw Norman and the girl.

"What is it, Heath?" asked Martha.

"I beg pardon, Miss," said Heath, "but there's been a calamity. Mr. Seth has killed himself." The butler caught a sharp breath as he saw the corpse on the bench, but he clung hard to his composure. "Your father asked me to find you."

"So knowing Miss Patterson always hangs around in the cellar you came down here at once," Norman said dryly. He nodded toward the corpse. "Do you know this man, Heath?"

"No, sir." Heath looked down his nose. "And I don't know you either—if I may say so."

"Haven't we been lucky up to now?" Gary Norman's voice was hard. He didn't like the Pattersons' butler. "I'm Gary Norman, a private detective. I was invited to the murder."

"Mr. Norman," said the butler. "Oh, yes, of course. I was the one who phoned you—acting under Mr. Seth's orders. The message struck me as a bit ambiguous."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Norman. "Let me get this straight. Seth Patterson had you phone me and invited me to a murder. Who did he expect would be killed?"

"He didn't say, sir," said Heath. "But he committed suicide just a few moments ago. We found him lying on the floor of his room, a bullet in his head and the gun beside him."

**N**ORMAN scowled. There was something sinister in the butler's attitude, in the suave way he admitted that

he had phoned the detective inviting him to a murder. Plainly enough, Seth Patterson had reason to want a detective in the house, but if he had given that order he had taken a spectacular way of getting one. And somehow the suicide angle didn't fit. That didn't seem the deed of a man who possessed that much imagination.

"I—I guess I had better go upstairs if Dad wants me," said Martha.

She walked toward the cellar stairs, with Norman and Heath following her. No one spoke as they went up the stairs and into the big kitchen of the old house. A stout Irishwoman, obviously the cook, and a faded blond in a maid's uniform were seated at a table in the kitchen, frightened and tearful.

Martha led the way through a door and into a long hall that ran from the back to the front of the house. Norman glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the butler was no longer with them. Heath had stopped in the kitchen.

"How long has Heath been working here?" he asked, as he walked along the hall beside the girl.

"About a month," said Martha. "Our old butler left suddenly. I miss him. He had been with us ever since I was a little girl."

A distinguished-looking, gray-haired man appeared in the doorway of the big living room. Norman recognized Blakely Patterson, for he had seen many pictures of the millionaire.

"Martha—are you all right?" There was relief in Patterson's tone as his eyes answered his own question. "I have been worried about you. Where have you been?"

"She was down in the cellar waiting to take pictures of the guy who examined the corpse," Norman said quickly, before the girl could speak.

"Corpse?" Patterson frowned. "What do you mean?" He glared at Norman. "Who are you, anyway?"

"He's a detective, Dad," said Martha. "Uncle Seth asked him to come here. This is Mr. Gary Norman."

"Maybe I'd better tell you the whole story, Mr. Patterson," Norman said promptly, and quickly related how he had received the phone call inviting him to a murder, and how he had found the corpse in the cellar. Patterson listened silently.

"How did you happen to be down there with your camera, Martha?" he asked, when Norman had told about the girl having taken his picture.

"I planned to do some work in my dark room down there," said Martha. "There were some enlargements I was going to make later. I wanted to blow up some of those shots of the miniature scenes Uncle Seth made with his toy soldiers." The girl's lip quivered. "I—I don't believe I ever want to make them now."

"Of course not, dear," Patterson said soothingly. "I understand . . . And then you found this body in the cellar, Martha?"

"Yes, Dad. Then I heard someone moving around in the dark. It was Mr. Norman. When I discovered he was using a flashlight I became suspicious. I was sure he must be the murderer returning to make sure his victim was dead. So I took Mr. Norman's picture."

"I've phoned for the police," said Patterson. "Even though Seth committed suicide I thought they had better investigate. I didn't know about this mysterious corpse in the cellar, of course." The millionaire frowned. "The police should be here soon."

"Wonder if you would mind if I took a look at Mr. Seth Patterson's body while we're waiting?" asked Gary Norman.

"Go ahead," said Patterson. "His room

is right at the head of the stairs on the second floor. Nothing has been touched." He drew a door key out of his pocket and handed it to Norman, then hesitated and drew back his hand. "After all we really should be careful at a time like this, Mr. Norman. If you have your license with you—"

"Certainly, Mr. Patterson." Norman produced his card showing that he was a licensed private detective and, as the millionaire examined it, he said: "I'm glad you didn't take me at my word. That would have been careless of you."

WITH the key in his hand Norman found himself on the second floor of the house a few minutes later. He unlocked the door of Seth Patterson's room and went in. The body of a stout man about fifty years old was sprawled out on the rug. He was in his undershirt and trousers and white soap flakes were caked on one cheek. An automatic was lying on the rug beside the corpse.

Norman drew out a white handkerchief, dropped it over the gun so that he would not make any fingerprints, then picked up the .45-caliber weapon. He held the barrel to his nose. There was a faint odor of powder. The gun had been recently fired. He placed it back in the spot where he had found it, took away the handkerchief, and stood looking down at the gun.

"So that's it!" he exclaimed.

As he looked closely at the automatic he saw that the safety catch was on. Whoever had fired the gun had unconsciously snapped the safety catch back on. That was a precaution that would be almost automatic upon the part of someone accustomed to handling guns, but hardly the action of a man who had just shot himself with the weapon.

"Murder—not suicide," Norman

muttered. "I suspected as much."

There was a click as someone pressed the wall switch, plunging the room into darkness. He whirled as someone lunged at him from the doorway. Powerful arms caught him around the legs in a flying tackle and he went down with a thud that jarred him from head to foot as he landed on the floor of the room beyond the edge of the rug.

Because the waxed floor was slippery, Gary Norman managed to writhe around, escape the clutches of his attacker, and leap to his feet. An instant later powerful fingers grasped his left ankle and gave a quick tug. Norman went down again, striking his head with such force that for a moment it left him dazed.

He had his gun out as he struggled up. He fired as a shadowy figure loomed in the doorway. A man cursed as though the bullet had come dangerously close, then Norman heard footsteps pounding along the hall. Norman leaped to the door and looked out, but no one was in sight along the dimly lighted corridor.

Patterson came hurrying up the stairs with his daughter close behind him, and both stopped short when they saw Norman standing in the hall with a gun in his hand.

"What's the matter now?" demanded Patterson. "Who were you shooting at, Norman?"

"The man who murdered that young man in the cellar," Norman said coolly. "And probably the same guy who killed your brother!" He glared at Patterson. "Why did you lie to me about sending for the police? If you'd called them they would have been here before this." His voice was hard. "Why?"

"Because—why, I did phone them," stammered Patterson.

"Quit stalling," snapped Norman. "Do you and your daughter think I'm a fool? I suppose I'm to believe that her normal

reaction was to hang around hoping to get a picture of the murderer when she found that corpse in the cellar. Hell, any girl suddenly discovering a dead man like that would probably let out a scream that could be heard for blocks!"

"Wait a minute, Norman!" Patterson shot out at him angrily. "You can't talk to my daughter or to me that way! I won't stand for it."

"Be quiet!" growled Norman. "You'll take it and like it. In the first place that guy down in the cellar has been dead at least eight hours—maybe longer. Rigor mortis has set in. All of you here knew the body was there." He scowled. "Maybe this whole thing was to be a frame, and I was meant to be the fall guy. I get an invitation to a murder, find the corpse—and the gal takes a picture of me leaning over the body. Suppose you all are planning to swear to the police that I knifed that guy—and Miss Patterson shows them the picture to prove it?"

**H**IS foot touched something and he glanced down. Lying on the hall floor near Seth Patterson's door was a toy soldier about two inches high. He picked it up. It had been battered with a hammer until there was a big hole in the soldier's chest.

Norman stalked back into Seth Patterson's room and switched on the lights. Then he saw that a table in one corner had been fixed up to represent a miniature battle scene, with soldiers attacking a fort. The soldiers were replicas of the battered one he held in his hand. Beneath the table he saw a battered Gladstone bag, decorated with stickers from African hotels.

"When did Seth Patterson get back from Africa?" demanded Norman, lips grim as he glared at the millionaire and his daughter in the doorway.

“Just a week ago,” said Patterson. “He came on a tramp steamer.” He shook his head sadly. “Poor Seth—he lost a fortune in the failure of a diamond mine. It affected his mind. The only thing he brought with him was his collection of toy soldiers—his hobby. He got them somewhere in Europe before the war. He thought a lot of them—always acted as if they were his most precious possession.”

“He told me that he would kill himself if anything happened to those toy soldiers,” Martha put in quickly. “It’s strange, too—I’ve noticed that some of them have disappeared during the past week. There used to be twenty-four—now there are only fifteen of them.”

Norman picked up one of the soldiers from the table. It was light and appeared to be hollow. He picked up a small metal hammer lying on the table and began pounding on the lead soldier. Patterson and Martha watched him in wide-eyed amazement, but made no attempt to interfere.

Finally he had pounded a hole in the toy soldier’s chest. He shook the soldier and a small, gleaming stone rolled out onto his hand.

“Mm—a diamond!” Patterson said dryly. “There must be one in every soldier. So Seth did smuggle some of his diamonds into this country! No wonder he wouldn’t let me loan him any money. He must have been cashing in on the diamonds a few at a time . . . That’s why the soldiers have been missing, Martha.”

“Right,” said Norman. “And the murderer found out about it, killed Seth, and tried to make it look like a suicide. Your brother must have realized his life was in danger—which was why he invited me to a murder. The murderer didn’t want to take the soldiers away yet. That might be too hard to explain to the police since they were only supposed to investigate a

suicide, and it would have looked suspicious if they were missing.”

Gary Norman scowled. There was one angle that still puzzled him—the corpse in the cellar. Who was that man? And how had he come to be there?

“Who is the man in the cellar?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” said Patterson. “Early this afternoon Seth told me that he had discovered that an old enemy of his had followed him here. Claimed the man tried to knife him, but that in the struggle he killed the fellow. I didn’t want to have to turn Seth over to the police until I knew more about it, so we left the corpse in the cellar. I—I guess it was the wrong thing to do.”

“It was,” Norman said grimly. “But we won’t worry about that now.” He looked at Martha. “Listen, Miss Patterson, I want you to take a closeup of the corpse’s face so that it can be used for identification purposes. Will you do it?”

“Of course,” said Martha. “Shall we do it now?”

Before Norman could answer Heath appeared, and with him was a hard-faced, stocky man dressed in a raincoat and a soft hat.

“Sergeant Marshall, of the police,” announced the servant. “He insisted upon seeing you at once, Mr. Patterson.”

“What’s going on here?” demanded the sergeant. He glanced at the body on the floor. “Suicide, eh?”

NORMAN glanced out the window. It was raining hard—“Sergeant” Marshall’s hat and raincoat were both dry!

“Come on, Miss Patterson,” said Norman. “Let’s take care of that little matter I suggested.”

They headed for the cellar where Martha got some flashlight bulbs from her dark room and took pictures of the corpse

of the dark-haired man. Finished, she placed a new bulb in the flashgun that was synchronized with the trigger of the camera—and at that instant a gun roared.

Norman felt the bullet whistle by his ear as he ducked. He saw the stocky man, who had been announced as from the police, smoking revolver in his hand. Norman's own automatic flamed then, and he heard the thud of lead striking flesh. The man called Marshall pitched forward on his face on the stone floor, to sprawl there motionless.

Martha stood stockstill, camera in her hands. Unable to cry out or call a warning, her eyes widened as the butler suddenly loomed behind Norman with a wicked-looking knife raised, ready to strike.

"Look out!" Martha managed to scream, as the man leaped.

But she had kept her presence of mind. She pressed the trigger of the camera. There was a blinding flash as the bulb glared, so unexpectedly that Heath leaped back. Norman whirled, smashing his automatic across the butler's face. The blow landed with such force that Heath dropped the knife as he reeled back.

He got his balance in an instant though, and lunged forward, grabbing for Norman's gun. It was his arm, striking it, that made Norman's trigger finger tighten. Heath moaned in pain as a bullet got him in the chest, near the heart.

"Got me!" he muttered weakly as he slid to the floor, and as if he knew his life was counted in moments he forced out words, racing against death. "Wanted diamonds—young man was customs inspector. He found out—about smuggling—came here to question—Mr. Seth . . . Marshall fake detective—working

with me. We killed customs man—told Seth we would kill if he didn't—confess—killing . . . He had me phone detective—invite to murder. I was—going to tell—he had confessed killing—old enemy—then suicide."

HEATH shuddered and lay still. "He's dead," said Norman. "I knew Marshall was a fake when I saw his raincoat wasn't even wet. He had been hanging around the house for some time. I wanted those pictures to send around and try and find out if there was a customs inspector missing who looked like that corpse there." He smiled. "That flashlight of yours sure went off just at the right time."

"I had enough pictures of dead men without wanting one of you dead also," said Martha. "And you might have been."

Patterson came tearing down the stairs, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his daughter was safe.

"They locked me in a closet!" shouted the millionaire. "But I managed to break out! And I've really phoned for the police this time."

"Good!" said Gary Norman dryly. "Three corpses in the cellar are enough for me. And a couple more dead men around the house sort of clutters up the place too much."

"Are you really as hard as you sound and look?" asked Martha, with a faint smile.

"Who—me?" Norman grinned. "Naw, I'm weak when it comes to being a push-over for a pretty gal. Maybe you'll let me come and see you sometime?"

"Maybe," said Martha. "After all you must see your photograph."