

a bier for baby



By Dean Evans

She was all woman, and knew it. As gorgeous a babe as ever got caught in a murder web. . . .

CAPTAIN HART slammed the phone back into its cradle. He cursed and glared over at Detective Lieutenant Sammy Gomez, seated at a desk across the office.

"Another killing," he growled.

Gomez blinked. His dark brown eyes looked old, parchment old, as eyes sometimes can. "Cain's unwanted legacy," he said quietly. "Each day brings murder." He smiled a little at that. "Prose," he explained.

Hart grunted.

"This killing?" said Gomez.

"Yeah. This killing. A bawdy house—in front of it, I mean. North Angeles Street. Four thousand block. You probably can't miss it, with a corpse and all hanging out in front. Hop to it." He looked down, dismissing Gomez, then suddenly looked up again. "And boy? A suggestion. A light little paddy

on this one might be indicated. The joint belongs to G. Llewellyn Phipps."

"Phipps?" asked Gomez.

"Yeah. It ain't exactly on his letterhead, so go easy."

"Councilman Phipps?" Gomez was staring.

"Yeah. Why the surprise? Everybody in the department knows about Phipps. He's got fingers in a dozen pots."

"Everybody but one," corrected Gomez. "I hadn't heard of it." He looked down at his hands and slowly began to rub the fingers together. "I went to high school with his wife," he said softly. "Laura Mang, she was then. Seems a long time ago."

"Well bless my soul," said Hart. "A memory tucked away like a pickle in a bottle of brine. Maybe when we get over it we can trot out and see

about this killing, huh?"

THERE was a corpse, the usual thing. It was a man, head jammed down on the concrete in front of the steps of the house on North Angeles Street. It was no extraordinary man, just a man. About five eight and a half. Dark hair with shots of gray above the ears.

Gomez stood against an iron rafting that went up the steps. He waited until the M.E. had finished and cocked an eye at him. Then he went down on the concrete with the dead man again.

"A little messy, whoever did it," commented the M.E. "Through the left eye. There's a swell term for it, if you care to listen."

Gomez eyed the doctor, said, "No," briefly, and went to work. There was a wallet, and in it a little money. Identification in the form of a little packet of business cards. Driver's license made out to the same man.

Gomez stood again. A couple of cops were shoving along late pedestrian traffic. Wooden-faced, businesslike, as though this thing happened everyday on their beats. Some of the more curious—or avid—of the passersby suddenly remembered they hadn't lit up a cigarette for days. One asked detailed directions about reaching a street in a distant part of town. And then didn't listen. Secondhand thrill seekers. Gomez sighed and went up the steps of the house, knuckled the doorknob and entered.

The room had a wall-to-wall rug of undertaker gray. Against the back wall was a small bar. The other walls were ringed by long sofas, the kind you separate and make corner chairs with. Small wall fluorescents here and there. Long coffee tables in front of each and on them arty magazines. Six or seven big ash receivers.

"You're wanting me, I suppose," somebody said.

Gomez turned. The woman facing him was in her late forties. She was large and tall at the same time. Her hair was a blond compliment to the shop that had rinsed it last. Her skin was getting to the point where it needed tucking here and there. She wore gold-decorated glasses.

"Madame," said Gomez. His lip curled.

The woman ignored it. "A break for the papers," she grunted. "Nine juicy days of scandal. And the usual pain in the abdomen for us. Okay, come along. The girls are all up back."

Gomez stared at the woman. Just like that? A man is murdered outside on the steps and we treat it just like that? He ran his tongue over dry lips and remembered Captain Hart's admonition. Surprise flooded him anew at the recollection.

The woman led him up a flight of steps that was carpeted like the big room downstairs, and then down a carpeted hall. Off the hall were doors, seven or eight of them. At the end, a recreation room that was occupied.

"The girls haven't dolled up, Lieutenant. Didn't have time. Besides, I thought it might be against some department rule or something?" She grinned at her little joke. "Girls, this is a Joe from Homicide about the—ah—accident outside."

Eight women faced Gomez, eight pairs of eyes wise with the wisdom of these places. Eight women in flesh.

Gomez took a breath. "Which one of you women?" He asked quietly.

There was no answer.

"He *was* coming out of this place when he was shot?"

The large woman grunted loudly. "Don't be scared, kids. This is routine. Incidentally, Lieutenant," she tipped her head to the left. "It was Paula there."

"You are Paula?"

"Me, sir. Yes."

Gomez turned to the large woman. "Will you all leave? I'd like to speak with this woman."

The large woman grinned. "Paula's room's down the hall. She'll take you. You can check with me on the way out."

Gomez's mouth tightened. He followed Paula from the room. He left behind a few snickers, a chuckle.

PAULA led him into a small, very warm room. A steam radiator in one corner near the only window was giving off a hissing noise. Gomez took in the heavy scent of some perfume that hung in the air like a steeplejack on a slippery spire. He snorted through his nostrils and then went over to the window and tried to raise it.

The woman sat down on the bed. "It's stuck. Been stuck a long time."

Gomez turned. He looked down at her, at the heavy breasts that sagged unhidden beneath the flimsy nylon of her robe. "You knew the man?"

"No. He was just—just one of them, you know."

"I see. He came here often?"

"I guess. I know I seen him once before that I remember."

Gomez looked around at the untidiness of the room. How do you say it to this girl, in a place like this? How do you say, was anyone in here *jealous*—the word seemed incredible—of this man, and of you? Instead, he said only:

"All right. Your name? Full name?"

"Paula Henderson."

Gomez nodded, thanked her, and left the room.

Downstairs the large woman was seated on one of the sofas, a king-size cigarette tucked between her lips.

"Did you know the man?" asked Gomez.

The woman shrugged. "Do you know any of 'em?"

"He just walked out of that door and down those few steps and that was all?"

The woman raised a blond eyebrow. "Not *quite* all, buster. Somebody shot him. . . ."

CAPTAIN HART peered up at Gomez. "Tell it," he said.

Gomez laid a report and a photograph on the desk. "Briefly," he said, "a man was coming out of the place on North Angeles Street. Someone took a shot at him. It went through his left eye. He fell down four concrete steps in front of the house and died there."

"Like that, huh?" Captain Hart rubbed a large hand over his chin. "He a customer in there?"

"He was."

Hart winked. "How were they?"

Gomez leaned angrily over the desk. "This man was shot dead, Captain," he said distinctly. "Shot and killed dead."

Hart flushed. "Damn it, Gomez, you make me sick. However"—he lifted a conceding shoulder—"you're right in a sense. It doesn't matter whether it was a grocery store or a saloon or what. Somebody murdered him."

Gomez straightened slowly from the desk. He pushed the photograph over in front of Hart. "Pix men just finished this."

"Good job," grunted Hart. "They'll be ditching the department someday and going to Hollywood. The guy looks almost alive."

"But he isn't."

"Well, naturally. Doesn't he look somehow familiar to you?"

"He does."

"Who?"

"Councilman G. Llewellyn Phipps."

Hart nearly leaped out of the chair.

"It. isn't," said Gomez calmly, "but it resembles him a little. He was a photographer—a freelancer. He had a place on Willert Avenue."

"That ain't no business district, boy."

Gomez shrugged. "I'll check that. His business card said Willert Avenue, that's all I know."

Hart nodded. "Yeah. H'mm. The guy sure was a ringer for Phipps, wasn't he?" He looked thoughtful for a moment and then jerked his head up. "Just thought of something. It's silly, but just suppose there was a new doll in there—in the joint, I mean—who had a brother, or a boy friend, who was taking a healthy scorch about the matter. And suppose he suddenly found out Councilman Phipps owned the place and decided to do something about it. And suppose that today he sees this photographer—Smithers's the name?" He looked down at the report, nodded. "This Smithers coming out of the dive and on account of Smithers is a dead ringer for the councilman he makes a mistake and plugs the wrong man. Whaddya think?"

Gomez sighed. "It isn't too silly. It had occurred to me also."

Hart nodded. "Great minds," he said. "Okay, guy, go on out and earn some more of your pay."

A STAINED SLAB of redwood hanging from a wrought iron pole at one edge of a big horseshoe drive identified the place. The slab had on it in gold leaf:

EL RANCHO DEL RIOS
(G. L. Phipps)

Gomez pulled his head back in the prowler car and drove up into the blacktop drive. He parked behind a green convertible that stood directly in front of the big white door of the house. He got out, walked up one flat step and punched a half-moon button in the door frame.

It had been years, of course; she'd have forgotten completely. How could a woman be expected to remember back to school—a woman with a Cadillac and furs. A woman who probably made little pilgrimages every so often down to L.A. for her clothing.

The door opened.

She looked older, but her hair was still the purplish black that had always been her beauty. And there were fine lines around wonderful dark eyes now that shouldn't be there. It was a pity. Age lines.

Her eyes widened. "Sam Gomez! Good heavens, I almost didn't know you. Won't you come in?"

Gomez said, "How have you been, Laura?" and followed her through a charming, dim little hallway into a huge, comfortable room.

Over in a corner a big phono console murmured music softly. Built into the far wall was a whispering eucalyptus log fire in a deep pit of a fireplace. The fireplace itself was adobe brick and went up in one tremendous sweep to the ceiling. A heavy pastel yellow rug snuggled down on the floor and stretched lazily in all directions: to a big fawn-colored sofa, to a deep, warm-looking tan leather chair with ivory hand rests.

In the chair was a good-looking young man with wavy brown hair whose small mustache seemed to give him a rather friendly look. He *was* friendly. Just now he was lifting a pink, healthy hand in greeting. It was not G. Llewellyn Phipps, of course, a man Gomez had never before seen.

Laura Phipps smiled at him. "Sam, you don't know Darrol Spence, of course. Dar's practically a member of the family."

"Hi," said the slender, friendly young man.

"And Dar, I guess you don't know Sam. Sam's the Carson City Police Department, aren't you, Sam?"

Gomez laughed. "Hardly, Laura. Detective Lieutenant Sam Gomez. Only." He stopped, shook his head. "Somehow it sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?"

"Yipe!" yelled the friendly young man in mock alarm. "Cops! We been bad again?" He grinned.

GOMEZ stuck out a rigid forefinger, raised a vertical thumb and wagged it playfully up and down at them. He felt like laughing again. Somehow he felt happier than he had in years. And then he suddenly remembered something. The smile faded from his eyes.

"Husband home, Laura?" he asked.

"Why . . . why no, Sam," she said. "Lew's working late, I believe. At least he told me he was going to when he left this morning. Is there something wrong?"

Gomez shot a side look at the friendly young man and guiltily chopped it off before—he hoped—the other could notice it.

But the woman noticed it. She said quickly, "Dar, be a good little man and run along now? And we'll see you later?"

"Why, shore!" agreed the young man. "Been here so long I'm practically rooted." He got up, patted Laura affectionately on the shoulder, stuck out a hand at Gomez.

"By, kids. Lieutenant, I'm glad I met you." He strode across the heavy rug to the door, swung it open, winked back at them. Gomez winked in return.

They heard the convertible outside start up and wind slowly down the drive. The woman went over and shut off the phono console.

Gomez sighed. "It'll be over the newscasts later, Laura," he said. "A man was shot down in front of a—a place owned by your husband." He stopped, looked down into her eyes. "He looked enough like your husband to be his twin, Laura."

"Twin? Sam, tell me—" Her dark eyes were searching his.

"Now, Laura," he said. "The man probably had enemies—most likely did. But you see politicians make enemies too, and it was suggested that because of their resemblance he might've been shot down by mistake."

"*Sam!*" The dark eyes looked to Gomez like big black frightened saucers.

Gomez sucked in a breath. How do you comfort an ex-flame? A married ex-flame at that? Perspiration beaded his forehead. Can a man keep his arms from around a woman when the woman is six inches from him, looking up at him—a woman like this?

Gomez glared down into the flames in the fireplace pit. He took his eyes from that and glared upward. He blinked. He hadn't seen that when he'd come in. Hanging over the fireplace pit, attached to the tremendous brick facade above, was an oil painting of Laura. It was done to look as she had looked a few years back. The woman's soft dark eyes; the woman's figure, covered by a diaphanous veil-like substance that seemed in the painting to hold her borne aloft; her unbelievably startling purplish hair—everything.

He pulled his eyes downward. "We just wanted to warn him, Laura," he said softly. "That was all. Just to take care of himself."

THE ADDRESS on Willert Avenue was an apartment house. Not a hand-me-down place, for this wasn't a hand-me-down neighborhood. The rents weren't over—or under—a hundred-fifty a month. That kind of an apartment. *Arroyo Arms*, said a little blue neon over the doorway.

There wasn't the usual tiny vestibule with myriad mailboxes. The place had a small lobby instead. Gomez walked across a rubber runner to a little desk off to one side. There was no one in attendance. He pulled out a business card from his pocket and glanced at it. 4C. The elevator was down. Gomez rode it up.

Four-C was at the end of the black and white asphalt tile corridor. 4C had a little gilt lettering on the door. A little blurb. *H. Smithers, Photography. Special Assignments. Enter.*

Gomez entered

It had been a living room at one time. Directly in front of the door was a maple desk with fluorescent lamp, typewriter, telephone. Behind that three large metal filing cabinets. On the left a small table with a couple of photo fan mags. Hard-backed chairs were grouped around. To the right was the only homey piece in the room: a mohair davenport done in dark blue. The walls were covered with professional black-and-white sixteen-by-twenties. The floor was covered with a carpet done in drab and dust.

Gomez went around the desk. A door in the left wall was slightly ajar. He went through to a bedroom, Hollywood bed, no head, no foot. Squat modern dresser in blonde. Big sliding-door clothes closet, door open. The fourth wall was broken by another door and immediately to the left of it, on a table, was a small phono-radio, a box-like affair with the lid up. It shared the table with a rack filled with records. Under the table, stacked one on another, were record albums.

Gomez opened the door in the wall. It was a darkroom. He could just dimly make out a foot switch on the floor, over beneath an enlarger. He stepped in, touched the switch. Amber lights flooded the place, showing cabinets, sinks, acid trays in a corner, a big rinsing tank with its two hoses. Overhead, film drying lines. A shelf over the cabinets. Two mini cameras sitting on the shelf. The man really was in business.

There was one door in the back of the room. It opened on a bathroom.

Gomez turned out the lights, went back to the

bedroom, then to the living room-office. He went to the big filing cabinets behind the desk. The drawers in both cabinets held office folders, but the bottom drawer in the second was a little different. It held a large magnifying glass, with black handle and chrome metal rim. Besides the glass the drawer contained a small metal box—a security box—with a tiny hasp and padlock. The padlock was open.

GOMEZ took the box to the desk and sat down. He lifted the lid, and found envelopes stacked neatly. He picked one out. On the face of it in neat penciled script were the words: "*Gravy train. Five hundred quarterly.*" There was no name. He opened the envelope. It held a miniature negative and a miniature print. Both were the size of a postage stamp. He stared hard at the print for a moment, then went back to the cabinet and got the magnifying glass. He put the print directly under the fluorescent, and held the glass above it.

It was one of those things, an almost nude woman who appeared to be standing on a table. Her face held a giggle—probably a drunken giggle. A man's hand was coming from the left edge of the picture—long fingers, reaching.

Gomez snorted disgustedly. Special assignments, indeed. Special assignments in blackmail. He took the rest of the envelopes from the box. They each held a negative and miniature film and they all had various notations on the fronts. And various amounts of money.

All but one, that is. The last one. Written on the envelope was: "*Asking price, \$10,000. Nevada Hotfoot, for sure.*" The envelope was empty.

Gomez stared at the thing. Had somebody paid? It was quite an amount, and he felt sorry for whoever it was. He put the envelopes back again in the tin box. When he came to the empty one he stared at it again. He started to stuff it in with the rest, then stopped, slitting his eyes at the thing. His hands began to itch. Almost in surprise, he looked down at them.

"*Nevada Hotfoot, for sure.*" It was a tormenting thing, like a familiar line of verse that runs through the mind, unidentified.

He looked at his watch. Five after midnight. He reached for the phone, dialed a number, waited. Then he said, "It would still be Glenn Miller if it hadn't been for the damned war," he said softly into the mouthpiece.

"Huh?" A pause. Then, "Oh! Hi, Gomez. How's

crime? Dull night down at the grind house?"

"Not dull, Charlie. Good to hear you again."

"Yeah. Me, too. Name it and I'll spin it, fella. A Miller?"

"Information only. I'm not up on the discs nowadays. Is there a record named *Nevada Hotfoot*?"

"There is. Quite a cutting—depending on how old you are, of course. Wanna hear it?"

"Not now," said Gomez. "Thanks, Charlie."

HE PUSHED AWAY from the desk and went to the bedroom, looked down at the record player, then at the records. There was no *Nevada Hotfoot* among them. He stooped down over the albums. He found it in the fifth from the top.

You've proved something. You've proved a man named Smithers had a record named Nevada Hotfoot. You're an A-1 detective, Gomez. Captain Hart will reward you for it. Let's call him up and tell him.

He began to perspire. He switched on the record player, put on the disc, lowered the pickup arm. The thing began to play. His hands felt wet and hot. And then wet and cold and dead.

He gripped the sides of the record player. Pain lines formed under his eyes as he listened.

He switched the player off and stared grimly down at the circular paper label in the center of the disc.

Nevada Hotfoot?

Well, yes, in a sense. There was logic in it. Cruel, distorted logic. And—Gomez sighed deeply—deserved logic.

He picked up the record, turned off the lights and left the apartment.

The prowler car radio was blating when he slid behind the wheel. He reached over.

"Car Fourteen," he said. "Come in."

Captain Hart's voice banged back at him instantly. "Gomez, where the hell have you been?"

There was a pause, then Gomez said simply, "I've been busy."

Captain Hart came back in, swearing. "Yeah? Well get this. Somebody put a slug through Councilman Phipps up in his office in City Hall! The charwoman found him lying over his desk and the office was a mess. Damn it, I want action on that thing, or else there's gonna be a new lieutenant in my office. Get me? The same guy did it as did the other."

"I know," said Gomez quietly.

"You *know*? Then for God's sake get going. That guy's liable to shoot up everybody connected with that damned red-light joint."

"No," said Gomez. His voice sounded old, and tired as the everlasting brown hills of this old country the Spanish had long ago named Nevada.

"No," he repeated. "Phipps was the last."

THE LARGE HORSESHOE was a thing of shadowy blacktop. The house, set back on the property, looked not quite so bare, not quite so cheerful. There were lights still burning inside.

He touched the half-moon button and the woman opened the door as before.

"Sam!" she said. "Oh, I'm glad it's you. I'm so worried, Sam."

"Are you, Laura?"

The dim little hallway wasn't charming now, it was cold; and the huge comfortable room was a barn of a place. The fireplace pit was black. A heavy pastel rug that smirked traveled straight to a chair in which sat a man in his late thirties. He wore a slitted affectation of a mustache. His pink, overfed hand held a highball glass. He said, "Hi, Lieutenant. We been bad *again*?" His voice grated on Gomez's ears.

"Sam, I'm worried stiff," said Laura Phipps. Her voice had a slightly alcoholic edge. "Lew hasn't come home yet, Sam!"

He raised his eyes up the tremendous brick facade of the fireplace, up to an ugly oil painting of a very naked woman done by nobody who would ever matter. He dropped his eyes again, looked at the woman before him.

"How long had he been trying to blackmail you, Laura?" he asked.

"What?"

"Smithers," said Gomez patiently. "His price was high, wasn't it? Too high. There had to be another answer—so you shot him." Gomez looked down at the man in the leather chair. "Or was it you who actually pulled the trigger, Spence?"

"Say, old guy—" began a ragged voice from the depths of the chair. The hand that held the highball glass wavered slightly.

"It doesn't matter, really," said Gomez.

"I suggest you're out of your mind, boy," said the ragged voice. It was a hard voice now.

Gomez watched the woman take a few jerking steps across the rug to the sofa. There were no pain

lines in his eyes now. Numbness perhaps, but no pain.

"I suggest, too," said Gomez wearily, "that Smithers laid down an ultimatum. Either pay up or he'd show the picture to your husband. He had to be removed. And it looks like he was removed a little too late, for it became necessary for the husband to die also."

"Sam!" The voice was the woman's. Gomez tried to put a finger on it, but couldn't. It was not hysterical; a voice trying to be something but not hysterical.

And then another voice, the man's, said, "What picture?"

"You know what picture better than I, for I haven't seen it yet. After all, he sent a print to your husband, didn't he, Laura? And you decided to cash in on the police idea at once? The resemblance between the two men, and the police theory I mentioned?"

"Sam! Lew, I—*Sam!*" The woman's voice sounded almost drunk in Gomez's ears.

"What picture?" the slender man demanded again, holding the highball glass almost aloft now, like some sort of defiant torch.

Gomez looked at him for an instant before he unbuttoned his topcoat and took out the phonograph record he had held under his arm under the coat. "And it profited nothing," he said. "For you couldn't find it. Could you?" He sighed, held the record out.

"A new record," he said. "It says on the label *Nevada Hotfoot*. Maybe you haven't heard it, you two." He crossed the room to the big console against the wall. He put on the record, switched a knob. The pickup arm descended.

"Are you *insane?*"

A softly haunting music filled the room. To Gomez's ears it brought back memories as it does to anyone who hears it for the first time since the war.

Gomez looked over at the woman, looked away, looked over at the man. "It plays a love song called *Laura*," he said simply.

GOMEZ SHUT OFF the console, lifted the record. "Smithers's little irony," he said. "Or maybe he was afraid of you toward the last. Maybe you threatened him in turn. Only you would know about that. He pasted a *Nevada Hotfoot* label on top

of the *Laura* label. What was in between?"

He raised his eyes to them, waiting. Neither spoke. He looked back at the recording, snicked his thumbnail along the edge of the paper label and pried carefully, like prying a stamp loose from an envelope. It came away, tearing. He dropped the pieces and held up what had been hidden between the labels.

"The print," he told them. "And the negative, the precious damning negative. Were you drunk at the time, Laura, or was he one of these under-the-shade operators?"

Gomez was looking at the woman, not at the man. But he heard the man's voice. It suddenly cut in, rasping and hoarse.

"It was her idea! It was all her idea, Gomez! Let's stop at this motel, she said, where nobody knows us, she said. And the other was her idea, too. It was her gun . . ."

Gomez was still watching the woman. He was watching the utter and final hate coming down into her darkly venomous eyes. He was watching her dig an arm down under one of the sofa cushions. He was watching her bring up the arm with a gun in the hand. He was watching her flip it up, pull the trigger.

The man with the mustache opened his eyes wide with the blast. They were dish-pan blue, Gomez noted. The highball glass bumped to the thick rug, rolled a little, lay still. It didn't make much noise. The man followed it then, slowly. He didn't make any noise at all.

Gomez sighed. He carefully laid the record down, stuck the negative and tiny print in a vest pocket. Then he went over and took the gun away from the woman's trembling hand. She was very drunk now, he saw.

"Sam." It sounded to Gomez like whimpering.

"Where's the phone, Laura?" he asked. There was no feeling at all in his voice.

The woman said his name again.

Gomez turned and looked around the room; at the big heavy rug, the fawn-colored sofa, the deep leather chair with the ivory wooden hand rests; at the huge brick facade—and the oil painting up there. Then he turned and looked at the woman herself.

Captain Hart had said like a pickle in a bottle of brine, he remembered.