

Murder for Nothing



By Jeremy Lane

Sally Marsh, attractive reporter on the Bulletin, had a keen sense for news. But the young girl outdid her news-gathering when she hit Mike Breslak, gambling king, over the head with a bottle, left him dead on the floor — and later had to phone in her own crime.

“**C**UT the stalling, baby,” said the heavy-set man, and made a reach for Sally Marsh. He was unsteady with liquor, his eyes blood-shot. He had been in a half-dazed sag over his desk, unable to continue the interview, but now his strength seemed to return with a red surge. There was power in the hand that closed on her shoulder.

“Oh, skip it, Mike!” cried the girl, wriggling back.

“This time I don’t skip it,” he bumbled

in her face, and pulled himself nearer, around the table. “You can’t give me any more run-around. You poke into my affairs, know too damn much. Come up here with your sex appeal and make me talk; make me think it’s personal—and then you print the works in your damn newspaper. Well, now it’s my turn!”

Sally Marsh, of the *Morning Bulletin*, tried the smarter way. She forced herself to smile into the piggish eyes so close before her face. It did not work. She had to

turn away from his seeking mouth. She talked fast and low:

"Mike, listen. Snap out of it. We've been friends. I never double-crossed you. I held back the story of Jack Margolis and the Flanner girl, didn't I? When the Condo boys came in on you—in the old place, remember?—I kept it out of the papers. I even dressed your leg wound, remember? You've got me wrong on this Bantner girl. I didn't know she bumped herself off here in the casino. Everybody knows she played here. That wasn't news. The boss sent me to get some sidelights on her gambling, that's all, Mike. Let me go!"

She had often been warned this might happen some day—big Mike Breslak out of control. Personally and professionally, she was on the level—with her paper, with the police, with the socialites who made mistakes, even with the big shot of the gambling operators, Mike Breslak.

There was a youthful charm in her face and figure, a quiet provoking quality for men. Sally was twenty, light-haired, with pleasing blue eyes, very feminine despite her keen news sense. Until this moment in Mike's inner office, she had never experienced actual fear.

BYOND the steel door at her back, the play was going on, the length of the casino—the spinner at the green table; the tossers with their galloping dice, the cage men, the dealers in the notch of the blackjack tables, the spotters at the doors leading down to the street. Sally knew them all, and half the patrons, too. But now they all seemed hopelessly far away. Nobody would dare butt into the private office.

With another return of wild strength, big Mike was crushing her wrists, heedless of her protests. A horrible panic enveloped the girl.

"Mike!"

He was past hearing anything. His whisky breath seared her neck. She saw the bottle from which he had been drinking—Cantillon, which meant he intended to celebrate. It was the brand he had made popular across the town.

"Mike, please!"

He was thrusting himself over her, the table against the back of her legs. Sally shot a hand back to brace herself. She touched the bottle of Cantillon, partly used, without a cork. Her fingers groped and closed on the damp neck of it. Terror sent strength into her one free arm. She lifted the bottle and, with everything she had, swung it. The dull blow on the back of his head shocked through to her.

Whisky jetted up her arm. Mike Breslak shuddered back a step and went down to the floor. Sally stood shivering, panting. He lay still at her feet, the bottle of whisky mostly spilled beside him.

Faintly through the door she could hear the gaming voices. Unable to think, she picked up her purse and fumbled for a mirror. At sight of her bruised throat and chest, a new pallor blanched her face. Instinctively she pulled her torn dress together and glanced around for the button ripped from her coat. Her hands shook as she patted her hair, fixed her little hat, and used lipstick. Now she dared look down again at the man on the floor. A sharper fear crawled coldly through every bone in her body. Stiffly she knelt.

"Mike!"

He seemed not to be breathing. Sally shoved his shoulder, but it resisted merely by its weight. Then her fingers went to feel for his heart. She stared at his face, which was motionless, a brownish waxen coloration to its skin. It seemed to her now that she had known before she knelt down. Mike Breslak was dead.

IN her two hands, the steel door seemed unusually heavy until it came open with a silent rush against her foot. Sally strove to steady herself. This was Mike's outer office, no one in it now at eleven o'clock at night.

"Hello, kid."

This was Dorsey, the odd-jobs man for Mike, sitting at the base of a small ladder up the back of the payoff cages. Upon signal, it was Dorsey's duty to leap up the ladder and man the machine gun back of the velvet curtain there.

"Hello, Dorsey," faltered Sally. She hastened past him.

The casino never seemed so long before, so far to the front door. Some one spoke her name. The smile she gave him was meant to be casual, but Sally felt it a stiff mask on her face.

She walked past the groups of players and reached the inner doorman, Tom, a narrow-faced man who had formerly been with the Condo gang until they gypped and froze him. Tom's duty now, was to keep Condo men out at any price.

"Get the lowdown, sister?" Tom inquired, referring to the suicide of the Bantner girl.

"Read tomorrow's paper," Sally told him. "Mike's in the clear on it."

The door rolled open for her.

At the middle passage, where strangers were fumbled for weapons, dapper Swede Hanson spoke to her cheerily:

"Leaving us so early, babe?"

"Yes. Can't make any money here," replied Sally, trying to match his lighthearted tone.

Hanson reached to click the electric latch. Sally passed by him, fearful lest he observe the condition of her clothing.

"Hello, Miss Marsh."

This was the new guard at the outer door by the head of the stairway—a dignified, gray-haired man like a country

banker—Mike's front man for bum steers.

"How do you do?" returned Sally, and she moved by him, aware that he was noticing her dishevelled appearance. He must wonder what had happened. But she was known, and he did not call her back.

Sally heard her own heels on the stairs, and was grateful for the lack of lights there. Yet her brain told her clearly that she didn't have a chance. Any moment now, they would find Mike on the floor in there—and remember who had been with him last.

Two men pressed out of the shadows at the foot of the stairway and came close on each side of her.

"Keep moving, you little dope—and quiet about it!"

The breath jerked dryly out of her lungs. Sally stumbled, but they caught her arms. She did not fall until they had thrust her into the door of a sedan at the curb.

There was a man in the back seat, and she fell across his feet. He grasped her by the shoulder and around the waist, to lift her. The car was moving. Sally glimpsed the butt of an automatic in her companion's under-arm holster.

"How's your old friend, Mike?" he asked quietly.

Sally was startled, but she forced herself to look at him—a young hard-eyed man. She did not remember him at all, and he was not the type she might forget—strong-featured, with athletic build, a grim mouth, and an inhumanly cold gaze.

"I don't know," replied Sally, fighting for an easier breath. "He's all right, I guess."

At that, the two men in the front seat laughed. Sally looked out the window, that they might not study her shattered nerves.

"You were with him in his private office," continued the quiet-voiced man beside her.

She could not drive a word to her lips

in reply. She saw familiar night-streets sliding by as the car wove and slipped through traffic. Like a stranger to herself and the city, she noticed it was time for the theaters to let out. A harsh voice from the front seat jarred her:

"You look sort of mussed up. Was you drinking with Mike?"

"He did all the drinking," Sally answered. "What story am I covering now?"

"Story is right," scoffed one of the men. "That's hot! There's a piece of news we want you to phone in to your paper."

SPEEDING as if all streets were bare, the sedan pressed down Ninth Avenue and the lower West Side.

"We're all friends of Mike," said the harsh voice ahead.

That brought muffled laughter from the driver. Another minute, with Sally unable to nerve herself for more queries of the man beside her, and the car turned quickly into a parking lot. It rolled on through into a small coal yard flanked by dark wooden buildings.

"Here comes your story," said the man beside her, as if nothing in life could greatly interest him. Yet she was aware that his sharp eyes scarcely left her. Experience told her that, of the three, he was the one she must reckon with.

Now he sprang out of the sedan, turned, and with mock courtesy, took her arm to help her alight. The others left the car. Sally was taken into deeper shadows beside a wooden shed, and a door scraped open. Here, it was very dark until one of them opened a door ahead, into a larger room where a single small light bulb burned.

A bleary-eyed dock mug with a vicious, unshaven mouth appeared in the doorway with a drawn gun. He grunted and stepped back as the three men and

their captive girl-reporter came toward him.

In the second, dim-lighted room, Sally saw another prisoner, a youth who was tied into a chair, his face bruised and swollen, hair over one eye, the other eye glinting wildly at her. She gasped. This was young Ardi Breslak, Mike's only son.

It was the ugly dock mug who grated at the younger man, keeping a grip on Sally's arm: "You kept the boss waiting!"

Sally glanced at her immediate captor, saw the distaste that flicked across his face, and followed his eyes to a farther door that was opening. The boss was coming in. Sally saw him and could not understand the odd look on the face of the man beside her. The boss was Joe Condo, slender, olive-skinned, immaculately dressed, younger than his big rival, Mike Breslak. Everyone knew that Condo was the rising power along the East Side. Now he came toward Sally, a faint smirk on his lips.

"Your paper will thank me for this, Miss Marsh," he said evenly. "You like to be first. Very well. Here you are a few minutes ahead of the news. Boys, we'll try the stubborn youngster once more."

AT a nod from sleek Condo, the dock mug stooped and pulled off Ardi Breslak's shoes. The boy, unable to kick, screamed once. A whacking blow across his mouth stilled him abruptly. His head slumped forward, his body supported by its bonds.

"Young Ardi is about to sell me his interest in his father's business," explained Joe Condo to the girl, while his eyes played inquisitively over her bruised throat. "That's news, isn't it? No more warfare between the men of Condo and the men of Breslak. All peace and partnership from now on."

"I begin to get it," muttered Sally.

“Of course you do, a clever newspaper woman. Now Ardi, my young friend, listen to me. Please don’t be difficult. You have no talent for your father’s profession. So you are selling out to me, right now, for one dollar and other good and valuable considerations. Show him where to sign it, boys.”

“I won’t!” yelled the boy, rearing up, straining his useless arms. “You can’t make me! My Dad will rub out every damn one of you rats!”

Words came swiftly to Sally Marsh’s lips. “Condo,” she said. “Are you losing your smart? You can’t make such a partnership stick, and you know it!”

“I’ll decide that,” said Condo dryly. “Just watch a moment.”

Sally forgot herself in the tension of this new situation.

“Oh, I know you can force the kid to sign and sell out,” she said. “But then, what have you got? You know you can’t ever work with Mike and his crowd.”

“That is a fact,” smiled the olive-skinned man. He turned again to the boy in the chair. “Ardi, I am sure if your father was here, he would advise you to sell to me.”

“I won’t do it,” persisted the boy, his speech thickened with rage and terror blended. “If Dad was here, he’d cut you down, you dirty scum!”

“Don’t strike the lad,” interposed Condo to his impatient dock mug. “Listen, Ardi, how would you like to call up your Dad and discuss this with him? I believe, after the call, you will be glad to relinquish your childish rights to the casino.”

“You don’t dare let me call him!” snarled the boy.

Condo turned to the man who stood beside Sally and said: “Hart, get his casino on the wire, and hold the telephone so Ardi can hear well.”

Sally grasped the irony of this. If Ardi

blurted out his misery, the chances were he didn’t know where he was; and by the time the phone call was traced, his captors would have him somewhere else, perhaps in the river. As for the chance of his talking with his father—did these men know Mike was dead? Could they possibly know she had killed him?

It was sickening to watch the wild, unbelieving eagerness of the boy while the telephone connection was being made with the casino. The man called Hart went about it as calmly as if telephoning for the time of day. Ardi yelled into the phone:

“Hello, Patty! Is this Patty Dorsey? Is it Tom? Listen, this is Ardi. They’ve got me! Is this Tom? Is this the casino I’m talking to? Let me talk to my Dad!”

Bending before the youth, Hart held the phone for him and glanced up at Sally. She could not read his chill eyes. Then Ardi suddenly stiffened within his bonds, his mouth open. “What ? Yeah, this is Ardi! What you say, Tom? He’s—”

Sally could not have moved a muscle, or waiting to hear his inevitable outcry. It came—a choking wail. Again Hart looked around at the girl. Ardi began shouting rapidly into the telephone:

“She’s here! She’s right in front of me now! Yeah, the one that killed him! Send for her quick! Come and get me! I don’t know exactly where I am, but it’s—”

AT this point, Joe Condo smoothly fingered down the connection in the telephone cradle. The unkempt dock mug was sneering at Sally, and the two men who had sat in the front seat of the car began to laugh at her. Condo gave her a long, straight look. Then he spoke to the incoherent boy in the chair:

“If you sign the lease and the bill of sale, I’ll release you, and you can have the fun of handing Miss Marsh over to the police—after she makes a certain call for

us.”

“And what if I don’t do it?” yelled the boy.

“Then we release the young lady and let you slip into the deep, cold water, Ardi, my boy.”

“Ardi,” said Sally, with her old-time boldness, “how do you know you were really phoning the casino? They may be faking all this.”

“Sure, that’s right!” chattered the youth, and he looked over at Condo. “I dare you slobs to let me dial that number!”

“Very well,” agreed Condo, and Sally saw she was not getting anywhere.

Condo himself took the telephone for the boy to use, and indicated to Hart that he was to take the girl on into the adjoining room. Mechanically, Sally’s feet obeyed. Hart closed the door after them and faced her in the dingy illumination of a night-bulb.

“Did you kill Mike?” he asked steadily.

“It’s all crazy,” declared Sally, her nerve breaking again. “What’s this about a news story?”

“Very simple. My boss has a quantity of new money, all hand-made and nicely done, a good job. Yesterday he gave Mike his choice—either swap it for good currency and use the phony in his casino, or else sell out to us for one buck and other considerations, the main one of which is the life of his son.”

“Mike didn’t know Ardi was kidnaped,” said Sally.

“No, he didn’t,” said Hart. “And now he never will.”

“Condo feels pretty strong,” said Sally, watching her man.

“Yes, and with good reason. Mike and his crew can’t hold out against Condo any longer. But tell me, is it true you murdered Mike a few minutes ago?”

“Why do you ask such nonsense?” cried the girl.

“Well, Mike is dead. He was hit on the head with a bottle. You were seen to come out of his private office. Your clothes are somewhat the worse for a struggle. I myself saw you go into that office with Mike, alone. I was at the blackjack table. We had this story for you; and my friends were waiting for you, as you know. The telephone call just now says everybody knows you killed him. Is that nonsense?”

“You don’t talk like a Condo henchman,” ventured Sally, on an off chance.

“My mistake,” said Hart, smiling faintly. “And I’d never figure you for the type that kills. But there is a fresh bruise below your throat. And Tom the doorman says the police found the button that is missing from your coat. So it’s open and shut, isn’t it? You must have had a good reason to—”

There was a horrible masculine scream from the next room.

“Ardi is about to sell out,” said Hart.

“What are they doing? Burning his bare feet?”

“Yes. You see, Condo dislikes murder very much. He prefers neater methods, such as a bill of sale—plus a news story in your next edition saying that the redoubtable Mike Breslak has been murdered by an unknown woman, and Ardi the weakling son has sold out all the Breslak interests to Joe Condo. Even if Mike were alive, a newspaper story of his selling out would ruin his prestige forever, wouldn’t it, Miss Marsh? Protection, even if he could pay its increased cost, would be worthless to him, wouldn’t it? Such is the power of the press—and your splendid reputation as a news gatherer.”

“Who are you?” demanded Sally, staring into his face.

“Never mind,” he parried quietly. “You’re a most attractive girl—in every respect, if you’ll pardon my saying so—and you’re in a spot. Tell me honestly, did you kill Mike?”

She tried to think. That was impossible. Ardi screamed again beyond the door. Sally saw only Hart’s steady, cold eyes before her. Experience taught her that some mobsters seem like white men. Hart appeared to be the least hardened of this lot. If she had any chance at all, it was here and now with him—away from Condo and his torture crew. So she held fast to her ebbing nerve and replied:

“Yes, I did.”

THE athletic man with the cold eyes made a curious half-gesture toward her. It was incredible that this could be shyness on his part. Sally tried to understand, but unconsciously moved back from him. Then, behind them, the door opened, and the voice of Joe Condo said:

“Miss Marsh, I need you to witness the boy’s signature. He’s twenty-two years old and in his right mind—the sole heir of the late Mike Breslak. Then you will telephone your paper.”

She turned and met his insolent dark eyes.

“Suppose I do that?” she parried.

“Do it, and my friends here are prepared to alibi you. They were with you elsewhere at the time Mike met his death. You cannot say that I am not generous—a scoop for your newspaper, an alibi for yourself in a murder inquiry.”

“A lot of coincidences around here,” remarked Sally. “Suppose I don’t telephone the news?”

“In that case,” said Condo softly, “we show the signed bill of sale to the other newspapers—have them feature it. Great piece of news. Also, we saw you go racing

out of Mike’s casino, your clothes torn; your face red, marks on your throat—simple justice.”

Through the open door came the sobbing of young Ardi as Hart led Sally to the telephone.

“Go ahead, call your paper,” he commanded.

She glanced up into his face, but found no escape. Dumbly she grasped the instrument. He held it while she dialed her boss. Condo walked up to them.

“I wouldn’t try anything fancy, Miss Marsh,” he warned. “You realize that your life has very little value left in it.” In a nightmare state, Sally heard her call go through the switchboard of her newspaper, heard the familiar sarcastic snarl of her boss’s voice—just now more precious than heaven, and farther out of reach. She felt the eyes of Condo and his men upon her. The bruises exposed on her chest seemed to blaze with guilty radiance. Suddenly the boy in the chair screamed at her:

“You killed my Dad!”

The blow that silenced him was echoed, somehow, by a thudding sound in the forward small office. From the darkness there, she heard a swift splintering of glass. Then the curtained window near Condo’s elbow crashed in. She saw Condo himself fade to one side of the window, wheeling to plow a hand for his gun. Hart stood alert beside her.

“Reach!” came a command through the broken window. “You’re surrounded! One move, and you’re all getting it. This is the law, Condo.”

Hart spoke one tense word in Sally’s ear: “Drop!”

The place went completely dark. Sally dropped to the floor, guessing that Hart had caused the sudden darkness. His hand fumbled to grasp her wrist. He was crawling, and she had to crawl with him.

Before her ears could register, she saw

the pinkish splay-fingers of flame from guns at the window and across the darkness just above her head. The police had come.

Hart was rudely dragging her after him, below the level hail of slugs that roared and snapped across the room, the rapid fire of a Tommy-gun. Hart yanked on her arm—and she realized why, when a wounded figure collapsed on her. She wriggled free and kept crawling.

Some foot kicked her. Plaster rained down in the acrid darkness. Gritty particles clung to her hand, which was strangely wet and warm. The floor creaked and jarred beneath her. Hart was pulling. There was a dull sound like a dropped weight. Instantly Sally's lungs filled with stifling agony, from a tear-gas bomb pitched near her feet. Hoarse curses rattled between the flaming crashes from the guns. Madly she scrambled to get away.

Now the racket dimmed slightly. Hart had slammed a door. He was drawing her to her feet.

"Hurry!" he urged, not letting go her hand.

HE hurt her arm as he pulled her around an invisible corner in the darkness. She could not see where to step.

Like whipcracks now, the firing sounded less violent and farther behind them. Hart was forcing her to run. Another step, and they were in the open air of night. The man seemed to be attempting to study her face, at close range.

"Don't be too scared," he said.

Now the whitish glare of a flashlight made her gasp. It was her escort, holding the flash with its light turned full upon his own face. He had an arm about her and was rushing her forward down a wooden walk in deep shadow. It seemed insane, to use a light—and if it must be used, not to turn it to advantage for their bewildered

feet.

Here came Death, thought Sally, and her heart stopped as a blurred figure with a shotgun loomed out from behind a coal shed.

"Hartley," said her companion, identifying himself to the deputy with the gun. "This girl goes with me. Mike's boy is tied up in there, probably shot. Joe Condo is the man, the master mind. The phony cash is in the third office. Tell the Chief I'll report later."

The flashlight winked out, and in the darkness Sally was again obliged to respond to the violent drag of his hand. They were running across a lightless areaway. They ducked around the corner of a deserted building, and then he eased their pace to a walk. He was looking at her, almost anxiously.

Sally could not speak. He had gotten her out of that ghastly trap of bullets and gas. True, as Condo said, her life was worth very little now; but she felt glad to breathe outdoor air. She wanted to thank Hart or Hartley. Whatever his name, she knew now he was not one of Condo's men. He did not release her arm.

"Was it too tough for you?" he asked.

"Oh, thanks—it isn't that," she husked, her throat dry.

The familiar world, with the grinding rumble of the elevated and its, high, angular shadows above her, seemed but a taunting moment of freedom. In her future, such moments were to be rare indeed—for a murderess.

Hartley was winging down a taxicab. He helped her into it at the curb. She felt faint.

"Here, snap out of it!"

He lightly slapped her cheeks and commanded, leaning closer: "Look at me. Sally Marsh. Don't let go now! You said something in there, just before the boys arrived, that gave me half an idea about

your difficulty. Now, sit up straight and help me figure the other half. What did you mean about so many coincidences tonight?"

"What are you, anyway?" she feebly inquired, with an earnest look into his eyes.

"Look here—is that blood on your hand? Is it yours?"

"I don't think so."

"I'm just somebody that would like to get you out of trouble—and keep you out of it. Now talk straight. I'm not a Condo man or a G-man. I work by myself. Been tracing my way to Condo for two months, without knowing he was the man I wanted. I was even on his payroll. Tonight I needed the police. I figured I might, so I tipped them this afternoon. But tell me—how was it with you and Mike?"

Unaccountably, Sally Marsh began to cry. She leaned into his arms. The cab went jolting up Ninth Avenue. As intelligibly as she was able, Sally sobbed:

"Take me home—please! Let me get this awful—blood and dirt off of me."

He held her quietly against him, patting her shoulder. And once, when she looked up, he smoothed her cheek with his fingers.

THE cab had turned up her street, and Hartley was watching out the window.

"There a *News* photographer, and the fellow with him is from headquarters. Isn't this where you live?"

"They're waiting for me!" cried Sally.

"Driver," said Hartley, "keep going."

The taxi drove past the familiar entrance. Hartley said seriously:

"You must tell me about Mike. Why did you go to see him tonight?"

"I wanted a story on the Bantner girl's suicide."

"Was Mike alone in his private office?"

"Yes."

"Did he try to annoy you?"

"Yes."

"Did he happen to be drinking a bottle of Cantillon whisky?"

"Yes, he was. I hit him with the bottle."

"Did you drink with him, Sally?"

"I never drink with people like him."

Hartley laughed and halted the cab near the corner drugstore. Again his hand had tightened on the girl's arm. "I think I see the answer to this," he said. "Condo ordered that bottle sent to Mike—faked it as a gift from one of Mike's grateful customers. Yesterday I saw that bottle. I was present, as a Condo man, when the plan was worked out to fool Mike. Today, in Joe Condo's own bathroom, when I had to go to his apartment to bring down part of the counterfeit money, I noticed an ounce of cyanide. I didn't see the connection then, but it's possible. How many drinks did Mike pour for himself from that bottle?"

"Three."

"All right. Come on while I make a phone call."

He hurriedly led her from the cab, into the drugstore. Vainly she dabbed at the blood and dirt on her hands and coat and skirt. People in the store became quietly curious, perhaps sympathetic for her as he pulled her along with him and thrust her inside a telephone booth. He came inside with her. She watched him dial a number. It meant—police . . .

"Hello, captain," said Hartley into the telephone. "I'm with Sally Marsh. There's a warrant out for her arrest. She hit Mike Breslak on the head with a Cantillon whisky bottle. Get that bottle, quick. You remember, Mike made that brand famous during Prohibition, until Joe Condo chiseled in on him.

"I didn't know until an hour ago that

Condo was master-minding this new, phony money. I figure now that he slipped cyanide into that gift bottle for Mike. Never mind why I think so. Get the bottle and analyze whatever remains in it. I won't produce Sally Marsh until you have a report from the chemist on it. And I suggest you instruct the coroner to open up Mike's stomach."

Hartley hung up and squeezed around in the crowded space to grin at his close companion.

"Your turn—so call your paper," he said, and lifted a nickel to the drop. "Tell your boss you saw the police—directed by Captain Ira Shaughnessy—when they surrounded and broke in on Joe Condo, poison-murderer of Mike Breslak, kidnaper of Mike's son, and passer of synthetic money."

Sally grasped the receiver, and thrust herself up to the mouthpiece, first asking him:

"What was the address of that coal yard?"

THEY were in a taxicab again, spinning on Riverside Drive toward the bridge.

"I have a married sister across the river," he said, "about your size. We're going there to borrow some clothes for you. In a couple of hours the police will know you didn't murder Mike. You socked a poisoned man on the head. That's plain enough now."

"He didn't seem merely drunk," declared Sally, coming to life. "He was

slipping too fast. He'd sag and look sick; then he'd come at me like a bear. Mike was never that way."

"He was dying, and neither of you knew it," said Hartley. "You had me scared. At first I thought you might be working with Condo. Besides, I thought newspaper women were hard characters. But you're—lovely!"

Sally found she could laugh. "I'll bet I am, all messed up this way."

He made her look at him again. "Are you committed to anybody?"

"Nobody wants me except the police."

"You're wrong two ways on that," he said earnestly. "You hit Mike in self-defense. If you couldn't prove that, the worst they can lay on you is manslaughter, and that's easy to beat. Only you didn't kill him. And quite apart from all that, I want you, personally."

"How time flies!" said Sally, pretending to be thoughtful when really she wanted to cry out for joy. "An hour ago I'd never seen you. Ten years from now, we'll be old friends. If I go to prison, will you bring me chocolate bars?"

"How often do you want them?"

"Oh, every Saturday," she said.

"With or without cyanide in them?"

"Preferably, without."

The cab lurched for a turn. Sally was thrown against the man who had saved her life at least twice during the past hour. For so hard-eyed a man, his kiss was surprisingly gentle, tender, easy to remember. But Sally kissed him again to make sure.