

Gun-Point Landing

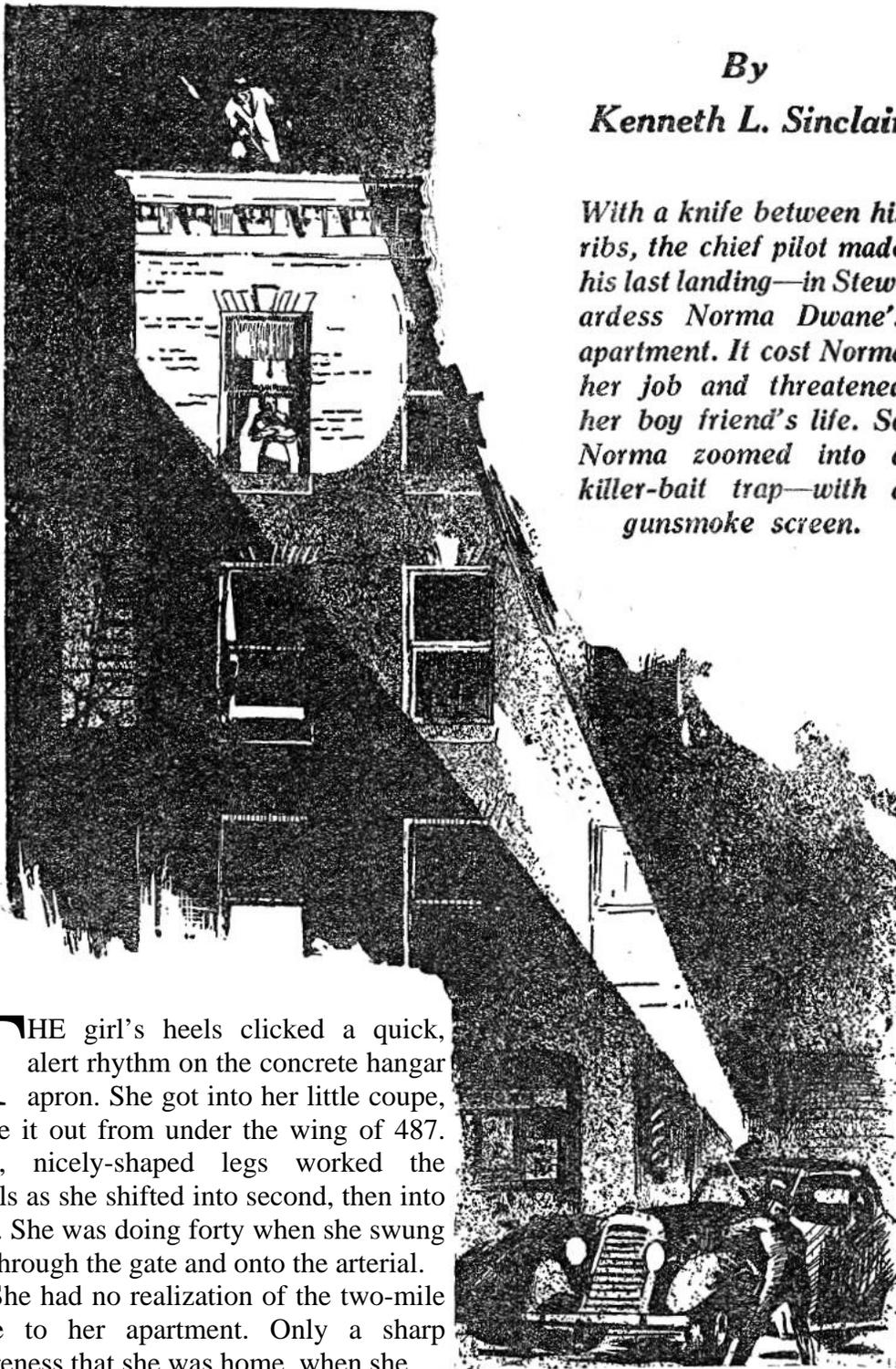
By

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With a knife between his ribs, the chief pilot made his last landing—in Stewardess Norma Dwane's apartment. It cost Norma her job and threatened her boy friend's life. So Norma zoomed into a killer-bait trap—with a gunsmoke screen.

THE girl's heels clicked a quick, alert rhythm on the concrete hangar apron. She got into her little coupe, drove it out from under the wing of 487. Slim, nicely-shaped legs worked the pedals as she shifted into second, then into high. She was doing forty when she swung out through the gate and onto the arterial.

She had no realization of the two-mile drive to her apartment. Only a sharp awareness that she was home, when she



saw Detective Cotter standing by the hydrant on the corner.

Cotter was a big man, wrapped in a tough, complacent determination that nothing could tear from him. He eased along the walk while she parked the car; then he stuck his head in through the open window and said: "Hi, babe."

"Why don't you give up?" she demanded, getting out of the car on the other side.

He grinned, looked at her across the hood. "Not a chance, babe. Sooner or later that boy friend of yours is coming back to see you."

He stepped around the bumper. The street lights made a play of shadows on his face as he allowed his glance to dwell on her with frank admiration. "I'd do it myself, even though it meant the chair."

"You *are* a fool," she flung at him.

She turned, crossed the street, let herself into the building. Mrs. Higgin's pale, sharp face, with white hair pasted down and done in a knot at the back of her head, poked out of the doorway under the "Manager" sign.

"Good evening, Miss Dwane," she said in a Zasu Pitts voice that quavered under a load of overdone commiseration. Her eyes didn't match the voice—they were sharply on the watch for any bits of information, preferably juicy, that were to be had.

Well, she wouldn't find out, damn her prying soul. Rigidly composed now, Norma Dwane nodded curtly, stepped into the automatic elevator.

In her own apartment, she locked the door and took off her hat. Her face, in the mirror, was too drawn—too taut, unhappy.

Why not? She went into the kitchen, threw together a highball. The first swallow caused her to make a wry face—but determinedly she downed the rest of it. Then she went back into the living room.

Mr. Wray, the division manager, was

such a very *nice* little weasel, behind his big glass-topped desk. "I'm terribly sorry, Miss Dwane," he'd said, fiddling with the radio he'd just had installed. "It's the head office, you know—they're objecting to the scandal and— I'm sure you understand, Miss Dwane. The line can't have its stewardesses getting into things like—like—"

Sure! You come home and find a dead man in your apartment; so you've been "getting into things," and suddenly you're no longer a fit person to point out scenery and give pills to air-sick passengers.

Her red lips quivered. She got up, went to the writing desk, pulled open the drawer and took out her bankbook. Two hundred and sixteen dollars and seventy-three cents.

Apartment rent, forty dollars a month. Car payments, twenty-eight eighty. Food. And no job.

She put the book back in its place, right beside the little pearl-handled revolver that the police finally had let her keep.

SHE sat down again. She tried to think—but every step in the hall sent a stab of chill terror through her. It might be Joe, coming back. Into the police trap!

No. Just people from the other apartments, going in and out. Joe wouldn't come that way, not with Mrs. Higgin's prying eyes checking up on everything. Joe would come over the roof, down through the trapdoor that nobody but the two of them knew about, into the closet. He'd come out of there with an eager smile on his face and worship in his eyes, and take her slim body in his arms. . . .

She forced back a sob. Joe was gone—probably riding the rods somewhere, like he'd done before he'd gotten that job cooking in the Airport Cafe. Joe, who'd had so few of the breaks in life. Who'd

always called this place “heaven.”

Sure, you were a dope to fall for him. An eighteen-dollar-a-week cook. And with a chief pilot making passes—

Like a needle to a magnet, her glance swung to the spot, there on the rug, where she'd found Chief Pilot Morley's body. A chef's knife between his ribs. His coat over the back of a chair. His shoes taken off— All very nice and homelike.

A shudder racked her body. She'd had to steel herself, to find a pair of Joe's old shoes and lace them onto the dead man's feet. She hadn't been able to find Morley's own shoes anywhere in the apartment. The cops hadn't found them either—hadn't even looked for them, because Joe's had fit the dead man rather well.

In fact, the police had given the place only a once-over search. So they hadn't found the trapdoor in the closet. They were sure of their case—Joe had tangled with Morley more than once, over the pilot's passes at Norma. They'd had a fight, in the dark space between Hangar Two and the repair shop building, the night before Morley's death. Joe had gotten the worst of it, because he wouldn't fight as cruelly, as ruthlessly, as Morley did.

Now Morley was dead. Joe's fingerprints had been all over the doorknob—they'd checked with the prints on file out in Seattle, where Joe'd been in trouble once.

Open and shut, they said. The pilot was replacing Joe in Norma's affections, and Joe was sore about it.

What the cops didn't know was that Norma and Joe were planning to marry, just as soon as Joe could save a few dollars for the ring and the license. He was too proud to use her money.

It was the real thing, this time. And Joe was gone. A fugitive, with a police trap awaiting him here.

She realized, suddenly, that her eyes throbbed. She'd been staring too fixedly at that spot on the rug.

It had been to the cleaners, of course—but they hadn't been able to remove all the stain. Blood was hard to take out, they'd said. But they'd gotten all of those little, sticky spots of black material. . . .

She stiffened, stared at the closet door. She gave a little cry, and ran from the apartment.

Cotter, leaning against a pole and wielding a toothpick reflectively, looked up and showed languid interest. His eyes followed the interesting flash of chiffon-clad legs as the girl ran down the street.

Ten minutes later she was back, with a neat package under her arm. She didn't look at him. She went into her apartment. She relocked the door, labored to push the divan and the easy-chair into position to barricade it. She switched off the lights.

Then she opened the package, dumped the contents of ten little pasteboard boxes on the table.

That made quite a pile of .32 S & W shells. She took the pearl-handled revolver out of the drawer of the writing desk, loaded it, and stepped to the partly open window.

She fired five shots, just above Detective Cotter's head.

HAD she been in a different mood she'd have laughed at the way he jerked, pulled in his neck and jumped for cover. Like a small boy caught stealing apples.

The heavy blare of his police positive shook the night. The venetian blinds jerked—there was a clamoring tinkle of glass fragments cascading down the slats.

Norma Dwane was on her knees behind the windowsill, reloading the little .32. Her red mouth was drawn to a taut, determined line.

She heard the sounds of questioning voices run through the neighborhood. In this warm weather everyone's windows were open; everyone had heard the shots. Mrs. Higgin's thin scream lifted above the rest. Then Detective Cotter's shout:

"Get back in there, Mrs. Higgin! Call the station, tell 'em Joe Burton's come back. Tell 'em I got him cornered in the apartment. Tell 'em to get the squad out here fast! Tell 'em—"

Norma Dwane interrupted that with two shots placed against the stone wall Cotter was using for a shelter.

All over the sleeping city, sirens leaped into wailing life. They converged on this apartment—nearer, nearer.

The first police car came around the corner on squealing tires, lurched to a halt, then backed hurriedly into a driveway, in response to Cotter's warning shout.

A man with more gold stripes than the rest showed himself gingerly. "Hey, Burton!" he yelled. "You haven't got a chance! We have tear gas here. We've got a fire engine and a ladder wagon coming. If the gas won't get you, two thousand gallons of water a minute, poured into that apartment, will! Think that over, Burton; and come out with your hands high!"

The girl replied to the proposal with a couple more shots, carefully aimed to miss.

More police cars arrived. Systematically, the cops went to work. They trained searchlights on the window. They herded everybody out of the apartment building, including Mrs. Higgin, who complained nasally about damage to the place.

Norma Dwane, keeping carefully out of sight in the darkened room, fired some more shots. She felt a trembly, half-hysterical mirth—she never had imagined herself as a gun-girl, but here she was. . . .

She set her teeth. Better get hold of yourself, girl. You've got to, you've got to.

They threw tear gas bombs. But their aim was poor—several of the bombs missed the window entirely. Others struck the venetian blind and rolled off the sill and dropped into the court. Two landed inside the room—Norma snatched them up, flung them out. And the bombs, exploding in the court, drove the police back, made more accurate aim impossible.

But several cops had gotten into the building. They chopped at the apartment door. Norma Dwane fired several shots into the top framework of the door. The chopping ceased. The cops yelled at those outside, wanted to know why those outside hadn't gotten the tear-gas bombs into the apartment.

A fire engine arrived. They tried to connect hoses to the hydrant on the corner. A half-dozen shots from the .32 drove them back.

Norma was trembling all over. She couldn't go on—but she had to. She had to hold out. She had to make them think Joe was here.

Because, somewhere in the city, there must be a person who was vitally interested in this. The person who had really killed Morley, and then framed it onto Joe. The person who couldn't rest easy until Joe was caught and convicted.

She bit her lip, choking a little on the acrid powder fumes that swirled in the half-dark, and tried to think who might have killed Morley.

Somebody whom he knew, and trusted, of course. The police had said that the killer must have gotten very close to the pilot, facing him, before suddenly making the fatal stab. And Morley was a husky man—he'd never have let that happen without defending himself, unless

he knew the killer well enough to be taken entirely by surprise by the move.

But Morley had so many friends. People with flash, swank. A fashionable crowd. There was Linklater, towering and bronzed and too handsome, who talked polo incessantly; Rosita Andella, chic, dark little actress who'd found Hollywood boring; Heston, the complacent bald man whose obscure "business connections" required innumerable phone calls made in a lowered voice. Others.

Norma had wondered how Morley, even on a chief pilot's pay, managed to keep up with them. And, what with their drinking and gambling, how he managed to keep his pilot's rating intact.

Her head throbbed. Those fumes were getting her. She heard something thump against the windowsill, outside; and she peeked through the mangled venetians to see.

IT WAS the top of a ladder. The police had sneaked along the base of the building's wall into the court. Now they could come right up—and she couldn't fire shots to scare them away, not at the downward angle she'd have to shoot, without showing herself. And that would spoil everything.

A little wildly, she looked around. She felt a stinging despair. Someone was coming up that ladder. Even if she had a pole, or something, to push it out from the building, the man on the ladder now was high enough to be killed by the fall.

This whole thing had been a wild and useless idea, conjured up by that highball. She'd been a fool. A frantic little fool.

She stood up very straight, faced the window.

"All right, babe!" That voice came not from the window, but from somewhere behind her. *From the door of the closet!*

She whirled, faced Detective Cotter.

He had a gun in his hand and an angry, determined glint in his eyes. "Where's that boy friend, babe?" he yelled, much more loudly than was necessary.

The girl hardly heard him. She was staring past his big shoulder. Her eyes, first wide with the shock of astonishment and then quickly narrowing in thought, were fixed upon the little man who stepped out of the closet. The man who kept behind Cotter and walked as gingerly as if he had a rotten egg in each pocket.

The nice little weasel. Manager of the mountain division of Atlas Airways. Wray.

Cotter was yelling again. "Damn you, girl! Where's Joe? Don't just stand there. Is he in the kitchen? Toss me that gun, babe—"

Cotter was excited. Cotter was scared—afraid of a man who wasn't here. It was funny, but it wasn't funny. . . .

She tossed the little pearl-handled .32, but not to Cotter. She tossed it past him, straight to Wray. And the little manager, seeing the weapon coming toward him, was startled but could do nothing but catch it.

Cotter charged to the door of the kitchen, looked inside, then darted to the bathroom and looked in there. Then he swung back. "Where's he at?" he yelled again.

When Cotter got hold of an idea he was like a dog with a bone. Norma giggled, dangerously near hysteria—now, when above all else she must keep her head.

"He isn't here," she said distinctly. "He hasn't been here."

Cotter's jaw sagged. "You mean to say you did all that shootin'? You stood us off for half an hour? Are you crazy, girl?"

Had it been that long? She felt dizzy. But she said: "No, I'm not crazy." She had to be sure of herself now. It was all she

had left to cling to. "I'm not crazy. But Mr. Wray is. Or he wouldn't have come here."

Cotter's uncomprehending glare swung from her to Wray. The little manager's moustache twitched. "Hysterical," he said.

"You were," she told him. "You haven't had a minute's rest since Joe got away. Everything worked out perfectly, up to that point—then his escape spoiled it all. You couldn't be safe until he was convicted and—and executed for the killing. You've been listening to the police radio every minute, day and night. You even had a radio installed in your office. You heard the call for this business here tonight—and you came on the run, to make sure of things.

"When you thought Joe was standing off the police and might get away again, you got excited, thought you'd help the police kill him by showing them that other way to get in here. Over the roof, from the building next door. He did volunteer that information, didn't he, Mr. Cotter?"

"Yeah. Sure. But what does that—"

"How did you happen to know about that way in?" she flung at Wray.

His face became white, set. He seemed to wizen down. But he grinned at Cotter. "After all, I'd been here before. This girl—"

"That is a lie," Norma said. "You knew because you'd watched this place for a long time, planning that killing! You'd seen Joe use the roof, at night after the front door was locked and Mrs. Higgin could hear the click of a key in the lock.

"You brought Al Morley in here by way of the roof, the day he died! You did that because you didn't want your fingerprints on the doorknobs—you wanted to make it look like Joe had let him in. You knew Joe's prints would be there.

"You brought Morley here on some pretext—maybe to catch Joe and beat him up again. Then you killed him. And then you noticed that roof-tar had stuck to his shoes. It was a hot day, and—"

"He didn't have any shoes on!" Wray spat. "Everybody knows that!"

NORMA sensed Detective Cotter's sudden, taut alertness. She said, "You're wrong, Mr. Wray. *Only you and I knew that*—because when I found him I put a pair of Joe's old shoes on him. I—I was afraid of what people might think about a man being in my apartment without any shoes on.

"You'd taken his shoes with you, after you failed to scrape the tar off them, because you knew the tar would reveal the fact that he came over the roof instead of through the door. That would spoil things, and might possibly lead the police to you. I'm betting they'll find those shoes, and a pair of yours, too, in your home. With tar on them! Or else their ashes in your furnace!"

Wray spoke with a forced sort of calmness. "It's all very silly. Why should I kill my best pilot?"

Cotter said: "By damn. That tip we had, about shortages in the airline accounts—"

Wray crouched. There was a nasty, animal fury in his face. His lips rolled back from his teeth. He aimed the little pearl-handled revolver at Cotter, and jerked the trigger.

The weapon's futile click was lost in the roar of Cotter's gun. Wray buckled to his knees, clawed briefly at an invisible wall. He groaned horribly, worked his legs like a drowning swimmer. Then he was still.

Cotter said: "Steady, babe. Hell, he didn't even hit me!"

Norma said: "That gun was empty. But I'm not sorry I gave it to him! The little weasel—after what he tried to do to Joe! Then—then Morley must have been blackmailing him over those shortages! He made Wray take more and more—so he could keep up with those fancy friends of his!"

"It's a good guess, babe. In fact, after the way it got a rise out of him, I'd say it was a cinch."

She swung to face him. "But you said you had a tip—"

He grinned. "Couldn't let a redheaded dame get ahead of me, in baitin' a killer." He was staring at Wray's body, crumpled on the exact spot where Morley had died. "If I'd known that gun was empty— What the hell. Maybe murder loves company."

But the girl didn't hear him. Joe, wherever he was, would learn about this. Joe would come back.

Her eyes were shining. In every fiber of her being, she was glad.