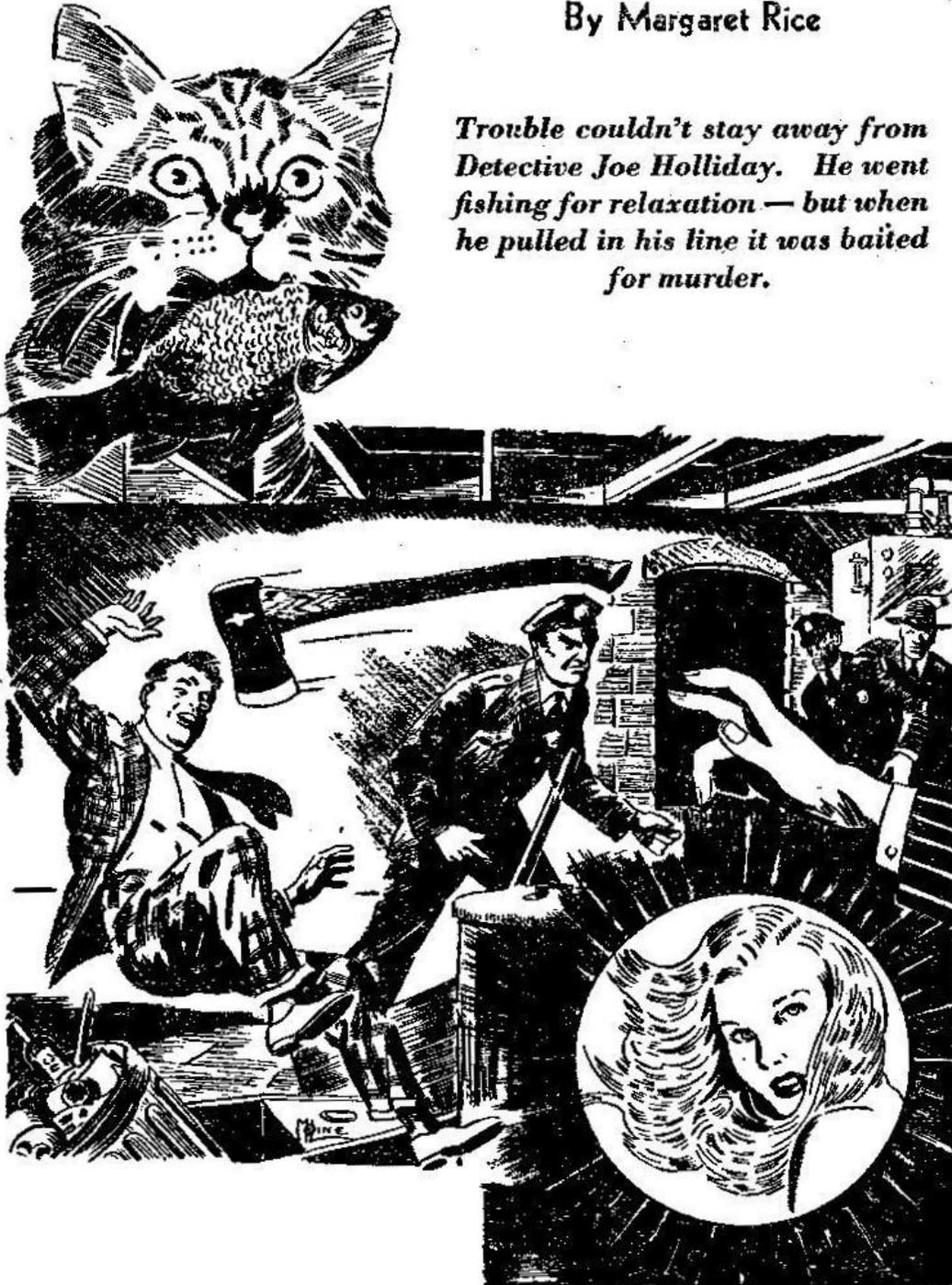


# Homicide on the Hook

By Margaret Rice

*Trouble couldn't stay away from Detective Joe Holliday. He went fishing for relaxation — but when he pulled in his line it was baited for murder.*



JOE HOLLIDAY sat on the lake pier. It was a very ritzy lake banked with de luxe Hollywood houses. Joe was feeling ritzy along with everything. The private detective had hung a *Gone Fishing* sign on his Los Angeles office door. Now he sat blissfully with pole in hand. In his baggy tweeds he didn't look like a big-time sportsman. He looked like a tired guy relaxing, or an unhappy hawk taking it easy.

The sun felt swell. Joe sighed. Then the man sat down next to him.

"Good fishing?" asked the man in a pompous, booming voice.

"Yeah," dreamily answered Joe. He yawned with sheer happiness.

"What have you got?"

"Nothing."

There was some silence. Joe liked it that way. Then the pompous fellow snorted. Joe looked at his neighbor. He saw a middle-aged fat guy with mean brown eyes, elegant sport clothes, and a cigar stuck in a thick vise of a mouth. The guy looked Big Business.

"Haven't you any ambition?" asked Neighbor.

"No," replied Joe. He was getting annoyed. The guy interfered with the sunshine.

"I was six years old when I decided to be a millionaire," the pompous fellow informed him.

Then something jerked Joe's line. Joe wasn't too excited about catching anything. He pulled in a golden-colored fish about five inches long. It was very thin and unimpressive.

The pompous fat man stared hard. Joe freed the fish and raised his arm.

"Wait!" cried the fat guy. "Don't throw it back!"

"Why not?" asked Joe. "Maybe I am a philanthropist."

His companion sputtered with eagerness as he said, "Give it to me."

Joe didn't like the greedy hands that came out. "It is my fish," he said. "I will keep it and treasure it. My son is a midget and it will fit his supper." Carefully he laid it in the basket. It looked so small and lonely that Joe felt sorry for it.

"I collect fish," explained the fat guy, working up a kindly smile.

"I need that specimen to round out my collection. I will give you five dollars for it."

"Five bucks!" cried Joe.

"My hobby is a bug with me," continued the man. "Quick, get some water on that fish! Don't let it die!"

But the fish was dead. Both men knew it. "I get carried away with my hobby," said the man. He looked very upset and unhappy. Joe wished Fatty would get carried far away. He liked dough, but not the face. He got up and marched to his jaloupi.

"Ten dollars," came the offer.

"This isn't Standard Oil stock," pointed out Joe. "This is a lowly fish from the deep. I will go home and fry it." He got into the car and drove away.

IT WAS sundown when he reached the apartment that faced two alleys. Cactus, the black and white tomcat, was sitting on the windowsill. Battered and tough, it regarded Joe with unblinking eyes.

"I am a dope," Joe told it. "I could have had ten bucks. But no, I make a noble gesture to my integrity. The guy griped me, Cactus, and I will feed you this expensive fish."

Joe prepared the frying pan and turned on the electric plate. "It is bad for cats to eat fish raw," he reminded Cactus who was clawing his leg. "Not that anything could poison you."

Someone knocked at the door. There stood Joe's neighbor from the lake. "Fifty dollars," the fat fellow offered. Perspiration beaded his big brow. He must have tailed Joe from the lake.

"Okay," agreed Joe, "I cannot bear to see you unhappy." The guy lurched into the room and demanded, "Where is it?"

"Being fit to be fried," returned Joe as he walked to the table. The fish was gone. Cactus was gone. "The cat took it," informed Joe.

"Cat!" roared the big fat guy. "What cat?"

Wordlessly Joe pointed at Cactus who was strutting atop the fence, showing off the fish. The pompous fat guy had hysterics. "Get it!" he shouted.

Joe called, "Cactus! Here, Cactus." The cat paid no attention.

"Chase down that cat," begged the man. "Here is my card. My heart is killing me and I can't stand such excitement." He lumbered out of the room. Joe tore downstairs.

Cactus had found trouble. The yellow tom from the grocery store was resuming the daily battle for survival. The cats met in a flash of fur, claws and cries. The fish was swept into the dust. Joe picked it up. It was a poor beaten thing. It would look like hell in anyone's collection. He would clean it up and deliver it.

Joe tried fixing the fish but it didn't fix well. He covered it with cotton and put it into a little cardboard box. Then he got into his car. The card said *Nelson B. Lattimer, 601 Lakewood Drive*.

**J**OE knew fifty bucks was a fishy sum for a plain beat-up specimen. He would angle around before delivery. The address on Lakewood Drive was a huge pink stucco Spanish house set in a sprawling garden.

"I should have started ambition when I

was six years old," mused Joe.

He parked the car and walked up the driveway. The afternoon was pleasant and nature was very swell. The fifty-buck motive was intriguing.

An old lady suddenly appeared on the path. She had vague blue eyes and a detached manner. Her purple chiffon dress floated ghostlike around her thin frame. Her white hair was wispy and untidy.

"You came about the rabbits?" she asked, staring at Joe. "You are the rabbit man, aren't you? I'm Miss Martha Lattimer and I telephoned."

"I came about a fish," gently replied Joe.

"Well," she concluded, gathering her billowy skirt as it caught in a rose bush, "I'm interested only in the rabbit man—and knitting, of course. I love to knit. Fish—it must be about Uncle Herman's fish, then, but it's gone."

"Who's Uncle Herman?" casually asked Joe. "And where did the fish go?" Any minute he expected her to float away.

"Oh," said the old lady, "Uncle Herman died last week. We are having a frightful time about the rabbits. He collected them and we don't want them now and I telephoned for a man to get them. Are you sure you didn't come about rabbits?" Hopefully she regarded Joe. "Uncle Herman had only one fish and my cousin Nelson got angry and threw it out of the window into the lake. Do you think you might be mixed up about the fish?"

"Why did Nelson get angry?" pumped Joe.

She gathered her skirts and rambled on, "Because, just before he died, Herman said he had disinherited all of us. He just sat there and laughed and laughed. Nelson was so angry he grabbed the fish out of the bowl and tossed it out of the window into the lake. Herman loved the fish and Nelson wanted to hurt him. But then

Herman laughed more and more and it was so awful that I ran out of the room. A half hour later Herman died.” Suddenly she vanished into the shrubs, saying, “Something must be done about the rabbits, but it is time for me to knit.”

Joe shrugged his shoulders and followed the driveway to the house. It was a cinch some big joke had been on Nelson regarding the fish. He wondered if the fish figured in the will—if in some way it was valuable.

A GIRL was kneeling on the front porch. She was hitting a hammer against a big blue flower pot. Finally she picked up the pot and banged it onto the concrete. She pawed through the dirt. She was a red-haired girl with anxious blue eyes and a creamy skin. Joe admired her pink cotton peasant dress and the way her hair fluffed around her shoulders. There was plenty to admire about her. If she weren't so upset she would look like a nice, happy kid.

“Digging for clams?” asked Joe. “Staking out a claim?”

She jumped and glanced up. “Gardening,” she answered shakily. “I am gardening.”

“You are so hard on things,” reflected Joe.

Then she asked with hope, “You are here for the rabbits?”

“I am here to see Nelson Lattimer. Is he home?”

“The gold mine is in the back garden,” she said. She obviously bore no love for Nelson B.

“Are you related to him?” asked Joe.

“Cousin—we are all orphans around here except the rabbits.” She seemed very disappointed about not finding anything in the dirt. Nervous tension got her and tears hit her eyes. “I am Alice Lattimer.”

Joe was about to unbend sympathy

when he heard someone coming. He wanted to ask another question and he got it out quick. “Why do you call him a gold mine?”

“If you knew him well, you could answer that one,” she replied. “His life interest is making money—that’s all he cares about from five cents up.”

Joe was curious about the quest in the flowerpot. He hit for hedges but didn't go too far. He found a spot made for eavesdropping. Any information about this whacky family would be welcome. He was tempted to toss the fish to Nelson B. and collect his bucks and vanish.

A man came out of the house—a weak-faced guy with red-rimmed eyes and thin blonde hair. His sport clothes hung gaudy and scarecrow-like on his gaunt frame. His pale grey eyes narrowed as he whined, “Still looking for it? Well, I bet you won't find it. Know why?” He glared unpleasantly.

“Why?” asked the girl. “Do you think Aunt Martha has it? She isn't looking for it, Sonny.”

“That old ghost,” remarked Sonny, “doesn't know about anything except knitting and getting rid of the rabbits. She went to sleep when the lawyer read the will.”

“Why do you think I won't find it?” demanded the girl. “The will said the one who found the pearl could keep it.”

“Because,” snapped Sonny, “I believe our fat-headed cousin Nelson has found it, or knows where it is. The stinker wouldn't even loan me a thousand to cover my bank overdrawal—I get the ax there tomorrow. Oh, he pretends to be busy looking for it when I come around. But when I leave, he sits down and sticks a cigar in his trap. I tell you, Nelson has found the pearl. Well, why doesn't he say so? I'm tired of looking for it.”

The girl wailed, “Why couldn't Uncle

Herman have simply willed the pearl to one of us? And that crazy will—that fish—well, it's gone. And Nelson cut his own throat there—he was to receive ten thousand dollars a year if he cared for the fish as long as the fish lived." She jumped up and added, "I'm going to ask Nelson point-blank if he has found the pearl."

**J**OE was quite fascinated by the conversation. Pearl—fish—the big joke on Nelson B. Joe could see it now. The pearl was in the fish. Maybe old Uncle Herman had hidden the pearl in the fish bowl and the fish had swallowed it and Herman knew it. The old guy had gotten a great kick when angry Nelson had thrown away the fish containing the pearl—how sick Nelson must have been when the will had been read. He had lost ten thousand a year allocated for taking care of the fish, but he realized from Herman's reaction that maybe the pearl was in the fish.

Joe was quite happy when he took the fish out of his pocket. He got very unhappy when he slit it open. There was no pearl. Joe felt very bad at the nice theory gone haywire. What did Nelson want with the dead fish? He would stop snooping and visit Nelson. He glanced back at the house. The cousins—Alice and Sonny—had, like the old lady Martha a little earlier, vanished.

Ten minutes later Joe found the fat man—Nelson B. Lattimer. Nelson was sitting in a wicker chair and he looked very unpleasant. An ice pick was sticking in the back of his neck. Nelson Lattimer was dead. An empty wallet lay near-by on the lawn.

After Joe got over feeling sick, he decided to check. Nelson had been dead about ten minutes. The cousins weren't around. Joe figured one of them could have taken a short cut and had time to do the murder. He'd check them quick.

"So he's dead," someone said. Joe whipped around. Martha Lattimer was viewing her relative. "It should have happened forty years ago," she remarked. Then she demanded, "Why is he dead?" She was still ghostly fragile but Joe saw the steel in her.

"Maybe you could answer that one," he replied.

She considered the statement and said, "But I didn't kill him—I wouldn't waste my time or have it on my conscience." Joe believed her. She added, "And I know nothing about it. Are you sure you didn't come about the rabbits?" Quietly she vanished into the garden.

Joe started back to the house. He regretted he had dallied over theory—he might have apprehended the murder if he had reached the garden sooner. He should call the cops. The fifty bucks was shot to hell but in the presence of vicious death, it was a minute item. He couldn't forget how Nelson's eyes popped like hunks of frozen brown glass. As he rounded the path, he saw the cousins, Alice and Sonny, on the patio.

Alice was saying, "I looked for Nelson—I went down there but couldn't find him." Keeping his eye on the pair, Joe slipped into the house and found the telephone by the window.

He dialed headquarters and asked for a headache named Elsing. He got it with a rasp and a roar. In his bulldog voice Elsing grunted and promised to come right away. Joe hung up and strolled through the patio door.

**A**LICE was pounding a pot on the porch—she hadn't gotten far—just one more. Joe figured she had time to kill a cousin. Sonny was looking through the pillows on the sofa.

"There won't be anything left to this house," remarked Joe, "when you two get

through with it.”

“Who are you?” demanded Sonny. Then he added suggestively, “You are here about the rabbits?”

“Nelson wants to buy a fish,” said Joe. “He offered fifty bucks for it.”

A light, greedy and unholy, broke over Sonny’s face as he cried, “The fish! I’ll give you one hundred for it.”

“What’s this about a fish?” asked Alice. She looked very tired and angry. Joe still liked the way her red hair hit her shoulders. Then she said, “You have the fish? The pearl is in the fish. I’ll bid two hundred.”

“One thousand,” whimpered Sonny, his chin quivering.

“Okay,” snapped Alice to Sonny, “you can have it. I don’t want the damned thing. I am sick and tired of it. I can always earn fifty bucks a week beating a typewriter. But how come Nelson isn’t in on the bidding?” She looked hard at Joe and added, “My fat cousin will bid within a penny of the pearl’s worth.”

She went into the house and her high heels clicked sharply with anger. Joe wondered if she had killed Nelson and had found enough money in his wallet to become unconcerned about the pearl.

It was very quiet. Joe regarded Sonny’s damp face and heavy breathing.

“A check,” offered Sonny. “I’ll write you a check.” Joe watched the shaking fingers take out a checkbook. He recalled Sonny’s previous statement that his bank balance was overdrawn and money was needed. He figured that maybe Sonny had got rich quick—a few minutes ago—by picking a dead man’s wallet. Joe started to spin the net.

“Wait,” he said, “maybe I don’t sell. I should give Nelson a chance to bid.”

“He can’t,” cried Sonny. “I mean, I need it and he doesn’t.”

Joe noted the answer and got a theory going. Then the doorbell cut the tension. The cops had come. Sonny’s startled glance went to the door and then to Joe. He pleaded, “Give it to me.” He looked like a nervous jellyfish.

“Where can I meet you in twenty minutes?” asked Joe. “I must think it over. I promise not to discuss it with Nelson.”

“The basement,” said Sonny. “Yes, in the furnace room.”

“A deal,” promised Joe. “I’ll take care of the doorbell.” Sonny looked puzzled, but he nodded and hurried away.

Joe opened the door. There stood Los Angeles’ toughest detective—a sight that often appalled Joe in his work. Joe shuddered at the belligerent red face and balding head but managed, “Business for you in the back garden—dead about twenty minutes.”

“Yeah?” grunted Elsing. “Haven’t you solved it yet?”

“Yeah,” replied Joe. “I have.”

The cop looked purple and went red. He snorted as he demanded, “Who do I arrest and why?”

“You want too much too quick,” pointed out Joe. “After all, I am no boy wonder but a simple ordinary guy. This I will tell you for sure: The guy is dead because of a pearl which he thought he had cold but didn’t. He was killed for the pearl, though. The killer was disappointed but cleaned the dead man’s wallet. I can’t prove it yet but I can pin the robbery on somebody—and maybe the murder.”

“I am only a cop,” reminded Elsing. “I don’t know about the wallet and the pearl. I’m interested, but please talk English.”

Joe sighed as he answered, “I don’t know the house layout but I want you to come down to the basement with me.”

“Where is the body?” asked Elsing. “You did mention a stiff. Us cops aren’t

like private detectives—stiffs is evidence and we got interest in them.”

JOE decided not to get angry. So he answered politely, “The body is in the back garden. It can be recognized by the ice pick sticking in the back of its neck. Listen, I am not asking you to come down the cellar to see my pickled peaches. I’m meeting a guy there who a little while ago couldn’t meet his bank overdraft but suddenly can write me a check for a thousand. Also, the dead man’s wallet is empty. I do not know about pinning a murder rap but I’d like to try.”

Elsing strung along. He sent two men to the garden and took two with him. As Joe walked down the basement stairs, he was glad for the cops. It was cold and lamp and lonely. He thought about the gun in the office drawer and wished he had it. Even with the lights switched on, the cement corridor looked like a death trap. The furnace room was at the far end. It had a very expensive heating plant but lots of murky shadow. Elsing tailed along behind. There was Sonny half hidden by the huge pipes and lots of dark.

“Here’s the check,” said Sonny eagerly from the shadow.

“I’m not selling,” replied Joe.

“You said you would,” whined Sonny. “I’ll make it two thousand.”

“How can you write a check for two thousand,” pointed out Joe, “when you are broke? I heard you tell Alice Lattimer that you were overdrawn at the bank and couldn’t meet it.”

“Nelson loaned me money after all,” cried Sonny, looming closer but still partly hidden by the blackness.

“You robbed Nelson after he was dead. You gave yourself away when you said he wouldn’t bid. You knew he was dead because you killed him.”

“Yes, yes, I killed him,” said Sonny. “But he didn’t have the pearl. He wouldn’t give me the loan either and it was life and death to me.”

Then the axe came cutting through the air. Joe caught the flash of the blade before he crashed into the long, long black of oblivion . . .

The light hurt. Joe wondered why someone had turned on the sun. He opened his eyes to find out. Elsing was so ugly that Joe quickly turned his head.

“Wake up!” came the roar. “We got a body and a killer who is weeping confessions all over the place, but I don’t understand it. Wake up, Holliday! You only got slugged by the ax handle.”

Joe got up. They had brought him upstairs into the living room. Cousin Martha was viewing him. “The fish man,” she said. “Are you sure it isn’t about rabbits?”

“Real sure,” replied Joe. “You have the pearl, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” she admitted, “I saw Herman hide it in the bowl and I took it out when he was asleep. He thought the fish swallowed it. I knew they were looking for it but it didn’t bother me—the exercise was good for them. They think I am rather odd and they were quite right but still, I have the pearl.” She adjusted her draperies and seemed to float out of the room.

Alice Lattimer was sitting by the fireplace. She was sobbing, “Nelson is dead, Sonny is a killer, and Aunt Martha has the pearl.”

Joe enjoyed feeling sorry for her. He thought about Nelson B. and reflected, “I’m glad I didn’t have ambition when I was six years old.” After a side glance at Alice, he added, “That doesn’t mean I haven’t ambitions now.”