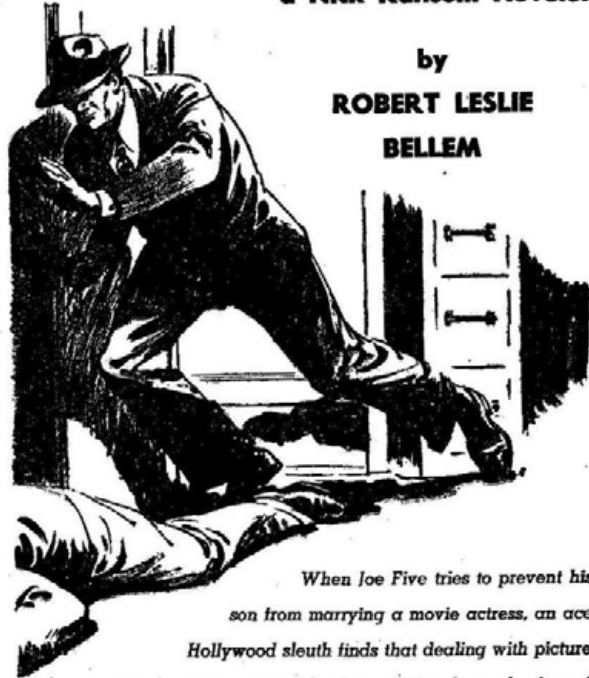


PUZZLE in PERIL

a Nick Ransom Novolet

by
**ROBERT LESLIE
BELLEM**



CHAPTER I

TROUBLE COMES TWICE

THE big beefy guy who ankled into my office looked like a preliminary fighter many years past his prime—a stumble bum. He had a twisted beak, ears like hunks of cauliflower and a kisser thickened by scar tissue, as if he'd spent most of his adult life testing brass knuckles the hard way.

His eyes were pale gray, surrounded by the marks of forgotten beatings, and his sandy hair was cropped close to a skull that had taken its share of lumps. You could see the fine shiny lines left by old surgical sutures, and I recognized them for what they were. I've got a few myself. He came halfway to my desk and stopped. "Ransom?" he asked in surprisingly modulated tones. "The private detective?"

Unlike his bashed face, his voice was smooth, cultured. Moreover, his clothes, though unpressed, were expensive. In the snooping racket you notice things like that. I noticed something else, too, but I didn't let him know it. When sudden death stares you in the teeth it pays to keep a hole card.

"I'm Nick Ransom, although the sign on my door reads CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS," I corrected him amiably. "Sounds more refined." I leaned back in my swivel chair, scratched my ribs. "Sunburn. Itches like crazy," I apologized without truth. Then I reached inside my coat, but this time I didn't scratch. Instead, I unlimbered the .32 automatic I carry in an armpit rig, drew a bead on the big guy's skull. "Okay, pilgrim, take your hands out of your pockets. I don't like strangers barging in on me packing heat."

"Wh-wha-what? How did you know—"

I stood up. “The dukes, bub. Out. And empty.”

“Very clever of you, Ransom. You win—this round.”

The empty hands he showed me were big, bony, with knots indicating ancient fractures—the kind you get from smiting guys on the complexion. This bucko must have been a mighty brawler in his day, I decided. He had taken his share of punishment, yes—but he’d dealt it out, too.

Keeping him covered, I edged around my desk—fanned him. Sure enough I lifted an ugly little gun from the right hand pocket of his coat.

“You shouldn’t have let me see its outlines under the cloth,” I said, and put away my own rod; prodded him with his. “Now make with the dialogue. What’s this all about?”

“As if you didn’t know.” He turned slightly, so I could reach his other pocket, which bulged. “All right, help yourself. You’ll never get away with it, though. That I guarantee.”

TO ME this help-yourself routine was so much double talk, but the bulging pocket challenged my curiosity. I dipped in—and pulled out a deck of crisp green geetus. Most of it was in five hundred dollar bills, with quite a number of thousand dollar denomination banknotes for good measure.

“Hey!” I choked. “What is this?”

“The fifty thousand dollars you asked for.” He gave me a lopsided leer, more menacing than mirthful. “From now on, look out—and I don’t mean I’ll report this theft to the police. Joe Five fights his own battles. And kills his own rats.”

“Joe Five?” I said. “Who’s he?”

“I am.” Suddenly his eyes narrowed. “Wait a minute. The way you said that, it sounded as if you never heard of me.”

“Correct,” I agreed. Then I tossed the dough on my desk, used his gun to paperweight it. “Suppose we retake this

hassle. There seems to be a mistake somewhere in the scenario. First, exactly where did you get the nutty notion I’d asked you for fifty grand?”

“From your wire,” he said, and drew a folded telegram out of his wallet—poked it at me.

HOLLYWOOD 3:15 PM

JOE FIVE

DENVER COLORADO

BE IN MY OFFICE WITH FIFTY THOUSAND CASH THREE O’CLOCK TOMORROW AFTERNOON AND I GUARANTEE NO. WEDDING NO ENTANGLEMENTS

NICK RANSOM

My Hollywood Boulevard agency address was under the signature, but the whole thing was as phony as a dime store diamond.

“I never sent it,” I said. “Some creep helped himself to my monicker.” And to prove I was leveling, I handed him his money and gun. “Now tell me what’s behind this ridiculous rhubarb.”

He hesitated. Then, apparently convinced of my honesty, he began pacing and talking. He had grown up in the early Colorado mining camps—got his start in bare knuckle fist fests—winner take all. With his earnings he’d grubstaked prospectors, located a few claims of his own. Most of his investments had curdled, but when he reached his late thirties and was growing a little brittle for professional bruising, his luck turned. He struck it rich.

He also got married.

His wife passed to her reward a couple of years later, shortly after presenting him with a son. Whereupon all his possessive affection was transferred to the child. That kind of sublimation is fairly common, but Joe Five carried it to extremes.

"I was father and mother to him, Ransom. Eddie was my whole life. My money was just something to spend on him to make him happy, to educate him and make him a gentleman. I even went to college with him, graduated in the same class. I suppose that sounds odd to you."

"A little. Usually it's only certain species of lower animals that eat their own young." Then, when he scowled, I said: "Let it go. Tell me more about Eddie."

EDDIE, it seemed, was a handsome youth with an unexpected ham streak in him. Having emoted in campus theatricals, he'd conceived the notion that he was heaven's gift to the acting trade. Hollywood fever infected him.

"I offered to buy him a studio, make him a star," Joe Five said. "But he insisted on striking out for himself, without even a grubstake. So a year ago he left Denver, came out here to the coast."

"Evidently he hasn't done too well. I haven't noticed the name Eddie Five in lights."

"He changed it to Eddie Blair, so nobody would associate him with my mining fortune. Not that it mattered," Five added. "He's still an extra. Mob scenes, mostly, and riding in westerns. Then, last month, he wrote me he was going to marry a girl named Candy Callahan. Ever heard of her, Mr. Ransom?"

I played that one cagey. "Sounds vaguely familiar," I said.

Actually I'd met the Callahan quail on several parties around town—a cute little blonde twist with merry green eyes, pert Irish nose, wide generous mouth and a complexion like fresh cream with flecks of butter floating in it—the butter-flecks being freckles. For a small doll she had some of the most astonishing she-male curves I ever ogled, and I've ogled my share. I kept all this to myself at the moment, however. You learn more by listening than by shooting off your lip.

"Miss Callahan is in pictures too; a bit player," Five continued. "Soon as I got the news I made a long distance phone call to an apartment neighbor of hers here in Hollywood, a woman I've known for years—Mrs. Edith Murdock, the widow of one of my former mining partners. I asked her to check on the Callahan girl, find out if she was good enough for my son to marry. The answer was emphatically no." He didn't elaborate on this, but his tone would have smirched the reputation of an angel. "Naturally I took steps."

I restrained myself from sneering a sarcastic: "Oh, natch!" I was beginning not to like Joe Five, and I felt very sorry for his son. I felt even sorrier for any chick unlucky enough to fall for the punk.

As a prospective father-in-law, Five had all the ingratiating appeal of a Tasmanian wart hog. When he announced that Candy Callahan wasn't good enough to marry into his family it annoyed me to the tripes, because in my opinion she was a sweet kid, strictly on the up and up. Whoever had informed him otherwise deserved a swift kick in the slats.

"Ah," I kept my voice expressionless. "So you took steps. Such as?"

"First I wrote to the girl and offered her five thousand dollars cash to break with my son. She not only refused, but she told him what I was attempting to do. He phoned me, and—well, we quarreled. Bitterly. I wound up by making a new will, cutting him off without a cent."

"Corny but characteristic," I commented. "Then what?"

"Yesterday afternoon I received your telegram—I mean the telegram signed with your name. Again I phoned Mrs. Murdock in Hollywood—asked her to find out about your reputation, your integrity. She reported back that you were a former studio stunt man turned private detective, and while you were known for gaining your ends by devious and sometimes unethical methods, nobody had

ever accused you of being crooked.”

“Nice of her,” I said.

The Murdock dame had steered him wrong about Candy Callahan, but she’d certainly scored a bull’s-eye on me. At least this gave her a fifty per cent average for accuracy, which isn’t bad batting for an amateur.

FIVE went on: “I went at once to my bank and drew out fifty thousand dollars, then made plane reservations for today—”

“Wait a minute,” I caught him up. “The wire was dated yesterday at three-fifteen in the afternoon, I noticed. That’s Pacific time. Denver is Mountain Standard, one hour later. Therefore, it was already four-fifteen in Denver when the message was filed in Hollywood. Allowing thirty minutes for transmission and delivery, it must have been quarter of five, Denver time, when you received it. Banks close at three o’clock sharp. Yet you claim you went to your bank and drew fifty grand as soon as you got the wire. What about that, pal?”

He grinned sardonically. “Observant, aren’t you? And a little suspicious. Admirable traits for a man in your profession. But it happens I own that particular bank. Whenever I want a check cashed after hours I get the president to open up for me. In this instance, I didn’t know what I was getting into; didn’t know whether the telegram was valid or sucker bait, so along with the money I brought a gun—which you also observed,” he added wryly. “Thanks for returning it. Now are you satisfied?”

“Yeah,” I said. “In more ways than one. I think I see the hidden gimmick now.”

“Gimmick?”

“How you were to be robbed of your dough.”

He hefted the snub-nosed automatic in his horny fist. “Maybe you’d better explain that.”

“All I can do is guess,” I shrugged, and looked at my watch. “It’s now a little past two.

In a few minutes I think I’ll be getting a phone call.”

Even as I spoke, the bell jingled. Right on cue, I mused as I unforked the instrument. Joe Five was staring at me as if puzzled by the way I’d called the turn. He was probably wondering if I had a crystal ball or employed a gypsy fortune teller to read my tea leaves.

“Nick Ransom talking,” I said into the phone.

“Nick, th-this is Candy Callahan.” A feminine voice quavered: “I don’t know if you remember me. We m-met at—”

“I remember you, sugar. What’s cooking?”

“Oh-h-h, Nick, it’s terrible! I can’t go to the p-police, but Nick, could you—could you come see me right away?” She mentioned an apartment address down on Melrose. “I n-need protection, Nick. If you don’t come right away, somebody’s going to murder me!”

Then there was a gasp, a muffled cry and the dull thud of something inert hitting the floor like the sound effect they use on a radio show for a body fall. After this the line went silent, dead.

CHAPTER II

TIME GIMMICK

IDIDN’T like it. There was enough realism in the routine to festoon my calloused hide with goose pimples the size of ice cream cones, only colder. Then, very slowly, anger commenced to seep into me.

“This you’re not going to like,” I said to Joe Five after I’d hung up.

I had a disillusioned feeling in my brisket, a sensation of disgust with the world in general and myself in particular. As a rule I’m a pretty fair judge of character, but on Candy Callahan I had missed the mark by a mile and seven furlongs.

Instead of being the sweet, upright and innocent chick I had thought her to be, she was a larcenous chiseler—or at least a

larcenous chiseler's accomplice and accessory, which was just as dirty. For once in my life I'd been fooled by an impishly angelic face and a pair of ingenuous green eyes, and the realization fried me to a crisp.

It made me even hotter to know that a son would try to pull a fifty thousand dollar theft caper on his own father. Any punk who would stoop that low deserved to be strung up by the toenails and flogged to a white blister.

Five stared at me across my desk. "What is it I'm not going to like?"

"Having a thief for a son."

I shouldn't have been so blunt about it. I should have led up to it gradually. Pitching it at him all in one lump was wrong. He roared something inarticulate regarding my ancestors, leaped full at the desk, leaned forward and tried to pistol-whip me across the features with the stubby barrel of his gun.

He missed me by an inch, largely due to my rapid reflexes—a hold-over from my movie stunting days. I ducked his swing and it whistled past my profile, which was mighty lucky for me. Otherwise my head would have been knocked from my shoulders like a golf ball off a tee.

"You crazy idiot!" I yelled and lunged sidewise.

I dropped down back of the desk and crab-crawled out of my tight corner. Bellowing like an enraged banshee, Five picked up a chair and whammed it at me. It didn't hit me, though. It merely hit the wall and disintegrated into splintery toothpicks.

By that time I was on my feet and full of fight. Disregarding the gat in Five's grasp, I made like a pogo stick—jumped high in the air and came down on the desk-top. From this lofty eminence I flung my tonnage at the former mining-camp bruiser—landed on him piggy-back fashion.

Big as he was, he couldn't keep his balance under the impact of my hundred and ninety pounds. Down he went on all fours, whereupon I dug in my spurs and showed him

how you gentle a wild stallion.

He bucked. He arched his back and sunfished. He tried to roll over on me and crush me. I just locked my ankles around his chest and hung on, squeezed, and pretty soon he ran out of gas. It's not very easy to breathe when somebody's legs are caving in your short ribs.

Presently he sank down on his stomach. "When I get my second wind I'm going to kill you," he announced in a stertorous wheeze. "With my naked hands."

"Unless I kill you first," I retorted pleasantly—and instantly regretted the remark, for the very good reason that a witness overheard it.

Whether you mean them or not, you should never make killery threats in the presence of eavesdroppers. Something might happen to the object of your threat, and then you're in the soup up to your ears.

In this case it was a sudden indrawn gasp that caused me to squirm around and lamp a scared-looking character peering in my doorway. I recognized him as a young law clerk who worked for a firm of shysters across the hall. A tall, stringy bozo with a receding chin, pale eyes that were ordinarily friendly but at the moment popping with panicky amazement, and a crew haircut which gave him the general appearance of an animated Fuller brush.

His name was Henry something-or-other and I'd encountered him several times in the corner drugstore guzzling chocolate malts. Always passed the time of day with him in a casual way without ever bothering to make it much more than a nodding acquaintance.

NOW, drawn by the sound of furious strife, he was copping himself a flabbergasted gander at the scene of carnage and then backing away, pulling my door shut after him. Judging from his expression he was about to light a shuck for the nearest phone and put in a bleat for the riot squad. He looked

like the type that would call for a gendarme on the slightest provocation.

I wanted the police infesting my premises the way I needed a hole in the head. In the first place I had explanations to make to Joe Five-and I intended to make them no matter how hard he resisted. Interference by the bulls would only louse up the details. Besides, I was planning a little trap to nab the jerk who had counterfeited my name on a telegram. If the cops came, my scheme wouldn't be worth a pinch of fertilizer.

So I lifted my voice and yodeled at the vanishing Henry. "Hey, dopey, mind your own business and quit jumping to conclusions. My friend and I are just rehearsing a few wrestling holds for the Motion Picture Benefit Show next week. Am I right, Joe, old pal, old pal?"

Under me, Five panted: "Quite right, Ransom, old boy, old boy." Then, when the law clerk had squeaked an apology through the closed door and scrambled, Five added: "Get off me, you creep, so I can beat your brains out!"

"Later," I promised him, and rammed his nose down against the office carpet. Vigorously rubbing it to and fro on the threadbare nap, I said: "First you're going to listen to a theory I've hatched out. By the way, what time have you?"

With difficulty he blinked at his strap watch. "Three-thirty." Then he bucked. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything," I chuckled grimly, and thrust my wrist ferninst his features. "What does *my* watch say?"

"Why—why, two-thirty." He sounded puzzled.

"Yeah. Two-thirty, Pacific time. But you're an hour fast. You have Denver time: Mountain Standard. You forgot to set your tick-tock back for the hour you gained flying to California."

He pondered this. "You're right, I did forget. But I don't understand what you're

driving at."

"You will." To make myself more comfortable I swung around and sat on him side-saddle for a change. "Listen carefully. The phony telegram told you to be in my office at three--thirty. In your eagerness to be punctual you got here a few minutes ahead of time, because it's only three-thirty now—according to your watch. But you neglected to allow for the difference in time r zones, so your watch is wrong. In Hollywood it isn't three-thirty, it's two-thirty. You were more than an hour early getting here."

"Make your point," he complained fretfully. "You're stirring up my lumbago."

I got off him, helped him to his feet. I'd gained his interest now; he wouldn't make any more trouble. "Presume a certain person wanted to nick you for fifty grand," I said. "Presume this person capitalized on your desire to prevent your son's marriage to Candy Callahan."

"What person are you talking about?"

I countered with a question of my own. "Well, who knew about your objection to the marriage? The Callahan cutie, for one. You had tried to buy her off." I set myself in case he tried to jump me again when I added: "And the boy himself. You told him you were disowning him, disinheriting him. And here was his chance to save at least fifty thousand clams out of the wreckage if he worked it right."

"Curse you, Ransom! Leave Eddie out of this!"

"So he and Candy sent you a fake wire," I ignored his growled interruption. "It instructed you to come to my office at three-thirty today. They figured you would be on time. They also doped out a plan to lure me away before you showed up. That was Candy's phone call just now, feeding me a load of hogwash about being in danger. The idea was to entice me on a wild goose chase so your son could break in here and be waiting for you to arrive with the dough."

“No. No, I don’t believe it.”

“I hardly think the boy would have nerve enough to impersonate me,” I said. “No matter how good an actor he might be, no matter how much makeup he might wear as a disguise, you would recognize him. So he probably planned to hide behind the door, tap you over the noggin as you barged in. Exit son, exit moolah.”

FIVE knuckled his scarred scalp as if already feeling the impact of the blackjack. “Eddie wouldn’t do that to me. No matter how we’ve quarreled he wouldn’t do that to his own father. He’s like his mother. She was honest, decent, never cheated a soul out of a cent the way I have. And he takes after her, not me. You’re wrong. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying. I also know I was picked for a fall guy.”

“What do you mean?”

“My name was signed to the telegram. The robbery would be pulled in my office. Not seeing who slugged you, you’d naturally put the finger on me when you came to. And I wouldn’t have an alibi because the Callahan frail would deny she phoned me, lured me away. I’d be holding the bag.”

“That still doesn’t prove—”

“If Candy is in on it, so is your son,” I insisted. “It stands to reason. Only by fool luck you forgot to adjust your watch and arrived here more than an hour ahead of schedule—which gave us a chance to compare notes, see through the shenanigan. Now we can do something about it.”

His mouth tightened. “Who says I want to do anything about it? Even if you were right about Eddie being mixed up in this, do you think I’d have him arrested? My own flesh and blood? No. I’m satisfied simply to have the scheme fail. I’ll take the next plane for Denver—”

“Wait,” I cut in hastily. “Maybe I am wrong about your boy. I can make mistakes

the same as anybody. Maybe this Callahan tomato has some other accomplice entirely. Whoever he is, wouldn’t you like to get the deadwood on him—and on Candy herself? That would open Eddie’s eyes to her real character. Then you could break up his wedding plans in a hurry.”

I didn’t believe a word of this. I felt sure that Five’s son was the brain guy back of the plot. But I had to sell Five on the idea of cooperating with me, because I’m plenty vindictive when somebody tries to use me for a patsy. If Eddie and the Callahan doll could be trapped I intended to trap them, come brimstone or high water.

Five studied me—and took the bait. “What’s your plan?”

“We scam out of here. Separately. Right now. I’ll go to Candy’s apartment stash, pretending I swallowed her sheepdip about being in peril. As soon as she’s sure of me, certain the coast is clear, she’ll probably signal her confederate. Whether or not he turns out to be your son remains to be seen. The point is, he’ll sneak into my office and prepare his ambush.”

“And then?”

“At three-thirty, correct Pacific time, you will drift in as if you hadn’t been here before. But you’ll be prepared for trouble. If somebody tries an assault and bashery routine on you, give him his lumps and hold him for the showdown.”

“What kind of showdown?”

“I figure to fetch the Callahan cookie here, by force if necessary,” I said. “You’ll have her accomplice on ice by that time. The stage will be set to make them confront each other—to trounce a confession out of them. Then they get tossed in the jug for a nice long stretch.”

“I see,” Five said slowly. “And I’m willing to play it your way—with one provision. If anybody tries to bushwhack me, and it turns out to be my son, I won’t hold him until you get here with the girl. I won’t hold him, period. I’ll let him go, and there’ll be nothing

you can do about it.”

That’s what you think, I reflected silently. I’ll have Candy on the scene before you can let the punk escape, and if you interfere with me when I’m running him through the wringer I’ll hammer your ugly hide to the wall.

But I didn’t say it aloud. I just grinned at him. “Let’s not cross that bridge until we come to it, hunh?”

“It’s a bargain,” he said, and offered me his hand. Those were the last words he ever spoke to me, because the next time I lamped him he was deceased.

CHAPTER III

RANSOM ON THE RUN

CANDY Callahan screamed when she saw the dead man.

I pushed my office door open, urgently propelled her over the threshold ahead of me and felt my hackles prickling when she gave with this hysterical screech. For an instant I thought she’d been leered at by Frankenstein’s monster, and I dealt her a swift sidewise shove—catapulted past her and assumed a protective stance in the middle of the room.

Suddenly I wished I hadn’t. It isn’t pleasant to trip over a murdered guy.

Joe Five lay crumpled alongside my desk with his coat pockets inside out and empty. Quite a lot of ketchup had flowed from the stab wound in his left side, and a little was still oozing. Much more must have leaked internally, though, if you could judge from the appearance of the puncture. It had evidently been inflicted by a long, thin and very sharp shiv in the hand of an expert who’d known exactly how to reach the heart with one quick thrust. Maybe Five had lived long enough to see who did it, but he would never tell me now.

I choked, and broomed the office with my glims, but saw no trace of the killer. Nobody was behind the door—nobody lurked in my

closet. There wasn’t even any sign of the murder weapon.

Behind me, Candy Callahan collapsed in a swoon.

This was just too much. I pivoted as she started to fall, and managed to grab her before she hit the floor. Then, slamming her into a chair, I shook the bejunior out of her.

It wasn’t the first time I’d used a mild touch of violence on the Callahan muffin in the past hour. As a matter of fact it had been less than an hour ago that I’d thumped on her apartment portal and greeted her with a supercilious sneer she answered my knock. The sneer had been a little forced, though, after I copped a hinge at how she was dressed.

Or rather, undressed.

I’ve always been a pigeon for blondes, anyhow; and this Callahan cupcake had hair the color of tawny gold coins. It was natural, too—it had the kind of lustrous sheen that you don’t get out of a peroxide bottle. It complemented the freckle-specked clarity of her complexion, the melted-emerald greenness of her eyes, the provocative carmine of her wide, generous mouth. Any time you see an Irish colleen with yellow hair you’re looking at something extra special.

But my own admiring gaze was busy with other blandishments—of which Candy Callahan owned more than her quota. She was small, dainty—but she had the kind of curves you usually find only on magazine covers. At that particular moment they were embellished by something extremely frilly in the way of negligee: a diaphanous nylon confection not quite as transparent as glass but twice as enticing. I’ve heard that nylon is cool to the wearer. I wouldn’t know—I’ve never worn any. But this stuff looked plenty warm to me. I could feel a wave of heat traveling through me all the way down to my shoestrings.

So okay. So I was impressionable. Then I remembered I was also a private snoop on a professional errand. I got my sneer back in working order and growled: “Hi, Tutz. My

name's Ransom in case you've forgotten."

"Forgotten? But—but of course I recall you, Mr. Ransom!"

"Fine. Where's the danger?"

SHE gave me the mystified focus.

"Danger?"

"Yeah. The jeopardy you phoned me about." I bulled past her, into a living room cheaply furnished but gay with chintz. "There was a creep seeking to abolish you. There was also a gasp and a sound effect of somebody falling down. Don't tell me you've developed amnesia."

She regarded me with puzzled disfavor. "I'm not telling you anything except that you're either drunk or out of your mind. Or both."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," I said. "I'm hep to the caper. I know all about the time gimmick and Eddie Five, alias Eddie Blair."

Her peeper got as stormily green as bad weather on the Arctic. "Eddie? Time gimmick? What kind of double talk is this? And what right have you to push yourself in here?"

"Get dressed," I said. "Bandyng words only wastes time. You and I are going to take a ride, see? And I imagine you'd sooner wear a dress than that hunk of peck-a-boo fluff you've got on. A little speed, please. Snap it up."

She started breathing gustily, to match the storm in her eyes. "If this is your idea of a practical joke I've got no sense of humor. If it's a new technique in making like a Hollywood wolf, I'm calling the cops. And if you were hired by that nasty Joe Five to come here and push me around, I'm phoning Eddie to hurry over and beat your ears off." She darted around a corner, where there was a phone on a stand.

I blocked her. "Try it and you win bruises, baby. As a rule I don't hit women, but in your case I'll make an exception. Now get dressed

or I'll do it for you."

"Wh-why, you—y-you—" Abruptly she whirled around, pattered to the door, raced out into the hallway. I lunged after her with my mitts outstretched to clutch at her tresses, drag her back. I missed her hair and caught a small pinch of negligee. It was too fragile—it tore. She outdistanced me across the corridor, pelted to the portal of an opposite apartment which was slightly ajar. She smacked it open. "Mrs. Murdock—help!"

The dame who appeared at that opposite doorway was tall and willowy in a well-girdled way. The kind of dame who preserves her girlish figure with the help of a two-way-stretch foundation garments, which is another name for corsets. Her makeup was a work of art, her sleek hair as black as a paint brush dipped in ink. Maybe she did dip it in ink, at that. A dye job is one way of making your late forties look like your early thirties.

She barred the entrance to her igloo—prevented the Callahan wren from rushing in.

"What on earth goes on here?" she demanded icily. You could almost see the frost forming on the words.

"This m-man—" Candy panted. "This man is t-trying to—"

I FLASHED my special tin. "Butt out, lady. It's a pinch."

"I see," the brunette said, indulging herself in a refrigerated smile. "I'm not at all surprised." She surveyed Candy the way a hangman would inspect a condemned criminal. "I always thought you would wind up in handcuffs. Now Mr. Five will realize I was right about you." She withdrew, slammed the door.

So that was the Murdock widow who'd told Joe Five that Candy wasn't good enough for his son—the one who had recommended me as a reliable dick. She was a shrewd she-male, no doubt about that. I wasn't so sure, though, that I liked her kind of shrewdness. But at least it was better than downright

crookedness, I reflected as I grabbed the blonde Callahan doll.

“You threw snake-eyes seeking sanctuary with Mrs. Murdock,” I said grimly. “And now you’re going to put some clothes on. Or go with me as you are. Take your choice and make it snappy.”

She tried to wrestle free but she didn’t have the muscles for it. I horsed her back into her own flat; made like Simon Legree while she shucked out of the negligee and inserted her shapely contours in a simple little print frock that had probably cost no more than thirty hermans but looked like a thousand-dollar creation on her brand of curves. Then I glued the grasp on her elbow, steered her outside, downstairs and outdoors to my jalopy parked ferninst the building.

“In with you, sister,” I grated.

She obeyed because she had to, but she was neither subdued nor resigned. “You won’t get away with this, you big heel,” she said in a voice that held more indignation than fear. “Just wait until I tell Eddie!”

“Which may be sooner than you expect,” I grunted.

Then I kicked my starter and we went away from there in a cloud of waffle batter. Presently it was three-thirty, and a few minutes after that I nudged the jane into my office. Whereupon she cut loose with a horrified yelp and I stumbled over Joe Five’s lifeless husk.

Five hadn’t been defunct very long. The fact that the dagger-stab in his side was still seeping gravy proved this. All the same, enough time had elapsed for his murderer to escape, and now Candy complicated the mixture by pitching forward in a faint.

I caught her, deposited her in a chair and shook her until her eyeballs rattled. Getting nowhere with that therapy, I dashed for a glass of water—tossed it in her lovely face. She gasped, opened her glimmers and started shivering like a kitten coughing soup bones. “You—y-you—”

“It’s too late for name-calling, Tutz,” I said. “You and your sweetie had a nice tight scheme for glomming a quick fifty grand, but he carried it a step too far by butching his own father. Now he’ll sniff cyanide in the gas chamber, and you’ll get the same medicine as his accessory.”

“What?”

“Don’t play innocent. That dead bozo on the floor is Joe Five. Yeah. The guy who objected to you as a daughter-in-law. As if you didn’t know.”

“I—I don’t—I didn’t—”

“Malarky. Eddie quarreled with the old man and got disinherited. Then he cooked up a scenario to clip his pappy for a stack of cabbage!” I told her all I knew about the plot, fed her the whole dirty mess. “So now I’m calling copper,” I finished. “I’m turning you over to the law. They’ll put out a dragnet for your boy friend and have him by the neck before he can get two miles out of Hollywood.” I started for my phone.

She stood up, swayed toward me, barred my way. “No. Y-you’re insane. I never m-made a phone call to you. I never told you I was in danger. I swear I didn’t! I didn’t know wh-what it was all about when you c-came to my apartment.”

“Try to convince a jury.”

“But it’s t-true!” she wailed. “Eddie isn’t a th-thief. He isn’t a murderer. He wouldn’t kill his own father!”

“That’s what his father thought, too. The poor old guy was so cocksure of it he probably lowered his guard when he ankled in here and saw it really was his son waiting to waylay him. So the punk beefed him with a stiletto, prowled his pockets for the fifty G’s and took it on the lam.”

TEARS as big as mock oranges burgeoned in her optics, spilled over and skidded down her freckles. “Please, Mr. Ransom—N-Nick—can’t you see how illogical that is? Even if Eddie had been waiting to rob his d-

dad, he could have done it without killing him.” She fastened the clutch on my lapels, pushed herself close to me. “That’s the part that do-doesn’t make sense. That’s where your theory falls to p-pieces!”

“Not necessarily. Maybe they had another quarrel before Eddie pulled a knife. Maybe Five hadn’t yet carried out his plan to make a new will—and accidentally mentioned it. That would give Eddie plenty of motive to bump him off, thereby preserving his own status as sole heir. Now quit trying to vamp me. I’m calling the cops. They can dig up the murder motive when the time comes.”

She fooled me. She fused herself against me, clinging like a lovely mustard plaster, and I thought she was trying to bribe me with her gorgeous charms. Instead, she hooked one leg back of mine and gave me a sudden shove.

I toppled backward. For the second time in a few minutes I tripped over Joe Five’s remainders; went into a reverse somersault. I tried to twist around, break my fall. Instead, my noggin banged on the edge of my desk with a thundering impact.

You couldn’t have rendered me more unconscious with a baseball bat.

When I woke up, the Callahan cookie was long gone. I was not alone with Joe Five’s corpse, though. A tall, stringy character sporting a crew haircut that made him look like a Fuller brush was using my telephone, squalling into it faster than a news broadcaster trying to finish a flash announcement with his coat tails afire. He was the nosy guy named Henry something-or-other who law-clerked for that firm of shysters across the hall—the timorous citizen who had peeped into my room when I was having my tussle with the late lamented ex-bruiser from Denver.

He was yacking to the cops, dumping me in the hot grease. And the way he was telling it, I could already feel myself being conducted to the San Quentin smoke house for permanent fumigation.

CHAPTER IV

SUN BURN

FUZZILY at first, then with increasing clarity, I heard Henry giving his pitch to the police.

“. . . right here in his own office,” he was caterwauling. “Out cold, lying alongside the body of the man he killed . . . I saw them fighting about an hour ago and overheard Ransom threaten to murder him, but. . . How’s that? Why didn’t I report it at the time? Because Ransom lied to me. He said it was a wrestling rehearsal for a motion picture benefit. . . Yes, certainly I believed him.

“How could I know he was going to stab the fellow later? The door was ajar just now as I was going out for a chocolate malted, and I happened to glance in . . . At first I thought they were both dead, but it’s only the stranger who’s been knifed . . . You’ll send a squad right away? Good! Yes, Ransom is still unconscious . . . Better hurry, though.” He rang off.

I sat up on my haunches. “They’ll never hurry fast enough,” I snarled. “And you’re wrong, I’m not still unconscious—I’m awake and ready to ramble.”

To prove this I scrambled upright—braced myself against the desk until the dizzy feeling went away. There’s always a certain amount of vertigo when you’ve been clipped on the conk, even if your conk is as durable as mine. But when Henry emitted a frightened bleat and frantically made a break for the door, I forgot my aching steeple and caromed full-tilt after him; caught him.

“Just a condemned minute, buster,” I said.

“No—d-don’t k-kill me!”

“Stop being silly. I’m not going to croak you, you fool.”

He flapped and fluttered in my grasp. “I only d-did my d-duty when I c-called the p-police.”

“Duty my adenoids. You horned in on something that was none of your business—accused me of a kill I hadn’t pulled. Now you’re going to make up for it.”

“You let me g-go!”

“Sure. And I’ll go with you.” I walked him Spanish out of the office, headed him toward the stairs. Riding the elevator would be too conspicuous, so I marched him down the steps to the lobby—jostled him outside. “Where’s your car? And don’t tell me you haven’t got one—I’ve seen you driving around in it.”

He was sweating like a fountain. “You—you can’t—”

“Look,” I said. “It so happens that I’m pretty sure I know who cooled that bozo in my office. But you put me on the spot, fingered me to the law. Which means it’s up to me to nab the guilty guy in a roaring rush or take the fall myself.”

“But—b-but—”

“Therefore you’re going to chauffeur me hither and yon while I make like a detective. After the way you jackpotted me, that’s no more than fair. Come on, where’s your car?”

“You—you’ve got a car of your own. What’s the idea of wanting m-mine?”

“When the homicide tech squad finds out I’ve scrambled from the scene of the crime they’ll have a radio reader out for me. Every copper in town will be on the lookout for my coupe, which is very familiar to the local bulls, unfortunately. I can’t risk a pickup until I’ve collared the killer. Consequently you’re elected to supply transportation. Now where’s your kettle? Hurry up and yep before I yank out your arm and beat you over the head with it.”

He moaned piteously. “Around the c-corner.”

Then he led me to a decrepit-looking sedan that must have cost a pretty penny when new. It hadn’t been new for many a long year. We piled in, he inserted himself under the wheel and we rumbled off with a growling of worn gears.

PRESENTLY I spotted a drugstore with a vacant parking space in front. “Stop here, bub.” Then, when he latched his anchors: “Come with me. I’m taking no chances on you. You might lam while my back is turned. You might even try to beckon a flatfoot. I don’t trust you. I don’t trust anybody. I’m a cynic.”

Shivering, he trotted reluctantly along as I entered the druggery and pawed through a phone book. I found no listing for Eddie Blair—none for his real name, Eddie Five. That didn’t mean anything, however. Lots of Hollywood hams considered it smart to have blind telephone numbers—even obscure extra hams like Eddie. Maybe it makes them feel important.

Then I remembered Joe Five telling me his son worked mainly in mob scenes or riding horses in oat operas. This meant he got most of his jobs through Central Casting and would have a card on file at that bureau. I spent a nickel, dialed the number and had some luck—hooked onto a guy who owed me a favor. Now was his opportunity to repay it.

“Eddie Blair?” he said when I told him what I wanted. “Sure, Sherlock. Just a moment.”

He left me dangling, then came back on the line, and slipped me the necessary information. I made a note of the address, thanked him, hung up—set fire to a gasper and waltzed my pal Henry out to his ancient sedan.

We rolled again. En route, I tested a possible hypothesis on the jittery law clerk. Actually I was talking more to myself than to him, trying to get the facts straight in my mind.

“Suppose a chick and her sweetie cooked up a robbery-and-kill caper to be pulled in my office,” I said. “Assume the sweetie carried out his end of the deal, knifed his victim and scrambled with swag. Then suppose I forced the girl into my joint and she tripped me so that when I fell I knocked myself out against the rim of my desk. That gave her a chance to

escape. Assuming all those things, where would she head for?"

He made a peevish mouth. "I don't know and I'm not interested. All I'm interested in is that you're compelling me against my will to drive you around in my car. That's the legal equivalent to kidnaping, which is a capital crime in California the same as murder. Besides," he tacked on in fretful accents, "what assurance have I that you're telling the truth about any of this? Did I see a girl in your office? No. Did I see her trip you? No. It sounds pretty far fetched for a man as big as you are to be knocked unconscious by a girl as small as Miss Callahan."

"Quit splitting hairs," I said. "Take my word for it. I'm not a murderer. As for kidnaping, you just happened to be the handiest expedient when I needed a fast ride, so don't make a production number out of it. Now to get back to the Callahan tomato. Having left me senseless in my office, where would she go first?"

"A rhetorical question," he lifted a lip. "You're just asking it so you can give the answer yourself."

I GRINNED. "You'll make a sharp lawyer one of these days. All right. She would powder to her sweetie, her accomplice, the creep who did the killing. She would want to warn him I was wise to the caper, and then they'd both try for a fast getaway."

"That seems obvious—assuming that all you've told me is true. So what?"

"So now we're, heading for her sweetie's stash. If we're lucky we might catch them before they get going. She hasn't got too big a start on us," I glanced at my watch.

He looked panicky. "Include me out. I'm driving you because I can't help myself, but you're not forcing me into any violence. I detest violence."

"Have it your way, so long as I get there in time. Goose this heap, Henry."

Henry goosed it all the way to its top velocity of forty-five miles an hour, which was miraculous for a vehicle of that vintage. Bye and bye we gained our destination: a shabby little clapboard-and-stucco bungalow court on a side street east of La Cienega. I bounced out, blipped around to the left, opened Henry's door and beckoned. "Coming, chum?"

"No!"

"Oh. Yellow, eh?"

He didn't even blush. "I refuse to have anything to do with any arrests you may make or fights you might get into, justified or not. I told you I detest violence."

"Okay, Henry. But don't even think I'm going to leave you in a position where you can take a runout. In the first place Eddie Blair may not be in his cottage, in which case I'll need you to ferry me on his trail. In the second place I don't want you blowing the whistle on me to the homicide cops from the nearest telephone. Therefore, by way of insurance, I'll render your chariot temporarily decommissioned." I reached past him, plucked the ignition key from its dashboard switch.

"Hey!" he yelped indignantly. "You can't—"

"Then," I ignored his interruption, "I'll double the insurance by attaching you to the tiller so you can't wander away on foot." I whisked forth my nippers, snicked one cuff around the steering wheel column. The other I fastened to his slender, stringy wrist. "Now you'll stay put," I said.

Leaving him to his meditations, I barged on down the central walkway of the bungalow court until I found Eddie Blair's cottage, the last in the right-hand row. Its portal was about as substantial as a papier mache backdrop on a movie sound stage, the kind you didn't dare knock too hard for fear of ramming your fist all the way through. I started to give it a light knuckling; froze my hand in mid-motion.

From within, a chesty masculine voice was saying: ". . . the filthy louse! All right, Candy

darling, I'll be right over to your apartment and we'll discuss what's the best thing to be done. I'm leaving now." There was a metallic clatter, as of a phone slamming into its cradle.

An instant later the door was yanked open fernist my face and I was confronted by a tan, husky bimbo in tweeds—a bleak-featured, rugged-jawed young character whose massive tallness made my own six-feet-plus look as if I were standing in a post hole. He not only towered several inches over me, he outweighed me by at least fifty pounds—all of it muscle. You couldn't have cooked two ounces of lard out of his bulk if you barbecued him.

I needed nobody to tell me he was Eddie Five; screen monicker Eddie Blair. He was a youthful, living replica of his father, an improved and unscarred edition of the late Joe Five. He was also a lad who looked capable of strewing your parts all over the precinct. And there was shocked anger in his pale peepers, an expression of dark determination on his map.

HE STARTED to brush me aside. "Whatever you're selling I have no time to buy. Out of my way, please."

The hand he laid on my arm was not as large as a quarter of beef, and the push he dealt me was as gentle as a summer breeze. I went staggering under its force—almost took a dive into a nearby clump of begonias. Eddie didn't know his own strength.

I knew mine, though. I knew I was outclassed. I regained my balance, whipped out my roscoe and brandished it.

"What I'm selling is slugs," I said. "Back up or I'll let you have some free samples." I jockeyed him into his living room and gave him a swivel at my badge. "I'm going to use your phone, call headquarters. Make a move and it gives perforated giblets."

"Sa-a-ay, what the heck is this?"

"Quiet. You're under arrest for croaking your old gent." For safety's sake I took a brief

once-over at the joint. "Candy isn't here, eh? She's the one I heard you talking to on the phone just now. That's fine. We'll know where to find her for the pinch."

He inspected me narrowly. "That was no regular police shield you flashed. It was a special. You're not a cop, you're a private peep."

"Yeah. Name of Ransom."

"I thought so. Ransom. The guy that got rough with my fiancée. Quite a hand at bullying women, aren't you? I wonder if you're as brave with men." He started coming toward me.

I steadied my cannon. "Better not, sonny."

"You think I'm scared of your cap pistol?" He kept coming. "I can take all you can throw and still stay on my feet long enough to tote you to hell with me." He showed me his teeth. "Besides, I don't think you've got the guts to shoot."

"Watch it," I warned him. "Plugging a murderer wouldn't weigh on my conscience two minutes."

"But I'm not a murderer. Candy told me about your accusations. I'd laugh if it weren't my own dad who was killed. I've been home all day long hoping for a job call from Central Casting. I'm a movie extra. All movie extras sit home by the phone when they're between pictures."

"That's an alibi you'd have a hard time proving," I said. "Get back, bub."

He swung on me.

It was a sucker punch. He led with his right, full at my jaw. I let it slide past me—started to counter. It turned out he was a southpaw. Leading with his right wasn't a sucker punch, it was beautiful strategy. He dug his left fist nine inches deep into my midriff.

I doubled over like a wet pretzel, sickened, gasping. The only thing that saved me was the thick web of abdominal muscles I'd developed in my stunting days; otherwise the solar plexus wallop would have abolished me. As it

was, I managed to save just enough strength to flail his ribs like a kettledrum as I folded forward. Then I grabbed, clinched.

He broke free, knocked the gat from my grasp. He laid a right cross on the side of my head that stirred up a swarm of hornets in my bonnet. They buzzed like a bandsaw concerto. I grunted and saw an opening—let drive at his chin. The impact traveled up my arm worse than a high-voltage electric shock. I waited for him to fall down. People always fall down when I nail them with my Sunday punch.

Eddie fell down the way the Empire State Building does when a humming bird hits it. He shook himself and rushed me.

I rushed too. But backward. I mounted my bicycle and got into reverse gear, ducking, weaving, angling back and forth across the room with two purposes in mind: one, to keep from being fractured, and secondly to find my dropped gun.

I never did find it. But I didn't get fractured, either. By darting behind various hunks of furniture and tossing them in Eddie's path, I managed to keep him off me. It was very tough on the furniture, though. He wallowed through obstructions like an army tank, leaving wreckage and havoc in his wake. Every now and then I would see a chance, sail in and bunt him a chop on the mush—but for all the good this did me I might as well have tagged him with a feather duster.

Eventually he cornered me, fed me a glancing buffet that made me hear sirens. The sirens were distant, but they kept growing louder. Suddenly I realized they weren't in my head; they were outdoors and real. They growled to a stop nearby, and then suddenly the wigwam was full of uniformed cops and plainclothes dicks headed by my old friend Ole Brunvig of the homicide squad.

Tall, dyspeptic and clad in black like an undertaker, Brunvig stood there. "Okay, break it up," he said. "This is the armistice. And Ransom, you're under arrest."

CHAPTER V

KILLER'S COME-UPPANCE

OLE Brunvig's arrival was as unexpected as a magician pulling a silk hat out of a rabbit. It was also very timely indeed. He saved me from annihilation at the hands of Eddie Five. At that moment I loved Brunvig like a brother.

I gave him a welcoming scowl. "How the devil did you get here?" I demanded.

"Phone tip," he said succinctly. "While I was in your office examining the man you murdered."

Henry, the law clerk, was the guy who had summoned Brunvig to my joint. And Henry was the only character who knew I could currently be found in Eddie Five's bungalow. But I'd left Henry handcuffed to his elderly sedan—so how could he have phoned Brunvig to come nab me?

I started outside to see how he'd performed this feat. Brunvig blocked me. "No you don't, Hawkshaw. I told you you're under arrest. I meant it."

"Don't be a dope," I snapped. Then, in abbreviated sentences, I fed him a synopsis of the whole scenario. "So you see," I ended, "I'm not guilty of anything except trying to help the law catch a killer."

Ole's smile was sardonic. "You should have left that job for the experts. As it is, I'm going to jug you until I can investigate the mess all the way to the bottom. You too," he turned to Eddie. "Come on, both of you. March. Keep an eye on them, boys, in case they make a break," he commanded his minions.

Single file and lockstep, we ankled out into the sunset. Parked at the curb were two official sedans and Henry's ancient boiler. Henry wasn't in it. I took a chance—risked sidling to the elderly bucket to find out how the law clerk had scrambled. Brunvig was

indulgent enough to permit me this small boon.

I opened the front door of the heap and saw the answer. There was an oil can on the front seat, and my handcuffs dangled from far down on the steering column. One cuff was still fastened to the post, below the registration certificate. The other, which had encircled Henry's thin stringy wrist, was now empty—although nobody had opened its lock. I felt the shiny metal and my fingers came away greasy.

Obviously the guy had lubricated his wrist and skinny hand by squirting himself from the oil can which he probably kept in the glove compartment. Then he had slipped out of the bracelet, made himself absent.

"Very neat," I said sourly. "I hope he lost some skin." Looking Brunvig full in the glims, I added: "Candy Callahan's apartment stash is on our way to the bastille. Shouldn't you stop and make a clean sweep of the suspects?"

He scrubbed his bristly chin with the back of his hand, noisily. "Always telling me my business," he complained in the tone of a man whose indigestion is killing him. "One of these days, gumshoe, you'll go too far. This may be the day."

I noticed, however, that when we were settled in his police wagon he gave Candy's address to the uniformed driver.

Six minutes later we were in front of the Callahan cookie's igloo. I got out of the car without being invited. "I want to be on deck for the nab," I announced.

EDDIE FIVE blipped to the sidewalk, shaking off two homicide detectives the way a Great Dane shakes off water. "Try and keep me off the scene," he said darkly. "If you lay so much as a finger on Candy, this town will be needing a new police force."

"You don't say," Brunvig purred in ominous accents. "Threatening the cops, hey?" Then, after a moment's pondering: "All right, come along. We'll have a third degree session in your girl's flat. The sooner the

quicker."

We trudged upstairs. But just as we neared Candy's portal I made a sudden lunge—hurled my heft at the door across from hers. It smashed inward and I careened across the threshold combing splinters out of my ears. Mrs. Edith Murdock was leaning over a davenport, tossing clothes into a suitcase and looking haggard. For all the dyed blackness of her hair and corseted youthfulness of her figure she somehow seemed old, shopworn. Maybe it was nervous tension.

"Going away, lady?" I said.

"Why, I—I—" She straightened up and went pallid under her makeup.

"I understand you're a widow." I said. "Your husband used to be one of Joe Five's mining associates. Right?"

"Y-yes. But—"

"Five hinted to me that he'd done some cheating in his palmy days. How much did he cheat your hubby out of?"

"Fifty thous—" She choked it back. "What do you mean?"

Behind me, Ole Brunvig grabbed my coat collar. "Yeah, Sherlock, what's the big idea?"

"Quiet," I said. I stared moodily at the brunette dame. "All these years you've been brooding over the fifty grand that Joe Five hornswoggled from your late husband."

I was guessing, piecing it together from remarks that had been dropped, things that had happened. But even though I was firing blind, I'd already startled Mrs. Murdock into admitting the amount of dough involved. And if her frightened eyes meant anything, I was scoring dead center on every shot.

"Five didn't know you were aware of his crooked dealings," I went on. "He even thought he was safe in phoning you from Denver, confiding in you when his son wanted to marry a movie quail who lived across the hall from you. He asked you to check up on her character."

"I—I—"

"By way of revenge, hurting him through

his son, you tried to sabotage the romance. Then you went a step farther. Maybe you could get back that fifty thousand dollars Five had bilked from your hubby if you played your cards right. So you sent him a wire, using my name. You invited him to bring fifty thousand bucks cash—guaranteed to scuttle the nuptials. I was to be the fall guy. You're the jane who phoned me, impersonated Candy Callahan, tried to lure me out of my office with a pitch about being in danger. That gasp was mighty realistic. So was the sound effect of a body fall and a dead phone."

She squared her shoulders. "You can't pin Joe Five's murder on me. I haven't been out of my apartment all day."

"Ah. So you know he was murdered."

"Why, I—that is—I—"

"That's a damning statement," I said. "It's guilty knowledge. Maybe you're leveling when you claim you haven't been out of your apartment an day. But that doesn't apply to your son."

AS I SPOKE, I broke loose from Brunvig and went rocketing toward a rear door that stood ajar. I smashed it open; came to grips with the guy who'd been skulking behind it.

"End of the line, buster," I said to the tall, stringy youth with the Fuller brush haircut—the punk who law-clerked for those shysters across from my office. I hauled him forth, mauled him into Brunvig's waiting clutches.

He squealed like a trapped mouse. "Mom – Mom – don't let them – Mom—!"

"She can't help you now," I said. "I should have realized you were the killer when you were driving me in your car; when I put a hypothetical case-history to you and asked for an opinion. Remember I mentioned a guy and a girl in cahoots, and spoke of the girl tripping me so that I fell and hit the desk, knocked myself unconscious? I didn't say who the doll was—but you came back at me by doubting

that a muffin as small as Candy Callahan could render me senseless.

"In other words, you knew it was Candy I'd been talking about. And yet you claimed you hadn't seen her in my office. It didn't register, though, until I looked in your car to see how you'd escaped from my handcuffs. Then I noticed the registration certificate."

"What do you m-mean?" he gulped.

"Until then I'd never known your full name. You were just Henry something-or-other. But the automobile certificate was made out to Henry Murdock. And the address was this apartment stash, where there was a Mrs. Murdock mixed up in the mess. That was the final tip-off. No wonder you selected me for a patsy. You worked for an outfit across the corridor from me. You knew all about me. I was a convenient sucker for your fifty-grand scheme."

"No. No! I didn't—"

"Nuts," I sneered. "You even eavesdropped at my door when Joe Five showed up more than an hour ahead of schedule. Maybe your original plan had been to impersonate me, claim you were Nick Ransom. But you heard me comparing notes with Five, and you altered the plot. When he walked back into my office at three-thirty, you knifed him."

He sagged against Brunvig. "I d-didn't mean to! I only threatened him with the knife to s-scare him, and—oh-h!" he clapped a hand to his kisser as he realized how he had spilled the beans. Then, suddenly, he grew up. He changed from a mouse to a man—he even looked like a man. "My mother knew nothing about the killing until I came home and told her. I'm the one who plotted to rob Joe Five. The money was rightfully ours, anyhow."

"I prevailed on Mom to make that phone call to you, but she did it against her better judgment. And she had no other connection with the scheme. I sent the telegram. I laid the ambush. I'll take my punishment. The money

will be returned. But my mother is innocent. She had nothing to do with the murder.”

Moreover, he made it stick when he went to trial. At that, I suppose the Murdock dame suffered enough retribution when her Henry was convicted.

The verdict was brought in the same day Eddie Five and Candy Callahan got hitched. I

attended the wedding—but when I copped a gander at the bridegroom’s dimensions and remembered how he had trounced me, there was one thing I was sure about.

This was once in my life when I wasn’t the best man.