

Boomerang
Scoop
by Frederick C. Davis

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BOOMERANG SCOOP

By

FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Author of "A Stiff in Time Saves Nine," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Ah, Sweet Mystery of Death

THE second shot was a cracking echo of the first. Separated by only a split second, they were sounds of deadly spitefulness in a room meant to be cozily quiet. Both burst out with ear-stinging intensity, but to the man seated at the fireplace the second report seemed no louder than the snap of a breaking violin string.

The singing of violins filled his ears, growing muted. In a corner of the richly furnished room a mammoth phonograph was playing. A moment ago it had been reproducing softly a flowery arrangement of Victor Herbert's *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*. Now, the volume control having been twisted, the melody was blaring. Loud as it was, however, it hadn't blanketed the two gunshots completely, and although the violins screamed, they had already become a faint and far-away wail in the darkening consciousness of the man seated before the fire.

Something frightful had happened to his sense of sight, also. With the impact of the bullets in his chest, his eyeballs had filled with a pinkish-white light as blinding as the blaze of the sun. He no longer saw the gun pointing at him or the wisps of powder-fumes twining from its bore. He saw nothing but that glare blotting out everything, even while it rapidly grew more and more dim.

The sensation in his bullet-pierced chest was not quite pain, but rather a spreading numbness. In a misty, distant way he was aware of



movements in the room. While mortal darkness descended on him the music cried as if from another world many light-years away: *Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last I've found you—* Involuntarily he blurted two words: "No! Death!" and those hoarse sounds from his own throat were the last he ever heard. . . .

"Bill, old man, you're our one and only police reporter again. You've kissed Lora Lorne good-by forever," Garrett cooed. No more would he be the Recorder's champion of chastity, batting out his homespun advice to lovelorn nymphs. There must be a catch, and there was—the Elbridge libel suit, with only two ways out: whitewash Beth Elbridge Smith in the Lyster killing, or prove she was guilty as all hell!

On the ground lay the man whom Brent had followed to this graveyard—his face a pulpy mass, his chest crushed in and both his hands almost torn off at the wrists.



IN THE apartment above, Miss Ella Peebles sat stiff-backed with alarm in her favorite rocker. Miss Peebles, fiftyish, was a "maiden lady" who looked it. Her dress was dark and prim, she wore her gray hair in a hard bun, and her bright blue eyes looked eagerly for interests with which to relieve the loneliness of her long days. Having no one else to talk to, she often talked to herself.

"Great gracious, Ella!" she said. "That sounded exactly like shots, didn't it?" And she answered herself: "It certainly did!"

She gazed at the clock. Being an avid reader of crime stories, she was well aware of the importance of the time element in many criminal cases, and she had developed the habit of noting the hour whenever anything out of the ordinary occurred.

"Ella," she informed herself, "it's exactly ten minutes past five." After a moment she added: "And just listen! Mr. Lyster never plays his phonograph that loud, does he?" Her own answer was: "No, he doesn't. I'm quite sure something very unusual's going on down there. Hadn't you better go and see, Ella?" Having thought it over, she rose decisively. "That's exactly what I'm going to do."

Stepping into the hallway, Miss Peebles thought she heard swift footfalls on one of the lower flights of stairs. They sped away while she hurried down, her long skirts swinging. On the floor below she found the door of Mr. Lyster's apartment standing open an inch. She knocked on it, but, because the phonograph was still playing so loudly, she was quite sure Mr. Lyster hadn't heard.

She pushed the door open with gentle and neighborly solicitude, and at that moment the phonograph gave out a metallic click, automatically shutting itself off. In the silence that followed Miss Peebles called politely: "Mr. Lyster?" Then the swinging door revealed, first, a revolver lying on the rug, and second, Mr. Lyster sitting before the fire with his head lolled forward on his bloody chest. A mouselike squeak of fright rose behind Miss Peebles' clenched teeth. . . .

In the street below, a boy of sixteen was trudging along with one shoulder sagging under the strap of a heavy canvas bag which bore the bright red legend, *Recorder*. Quickly and compactly folding a copy of the *Recorder's* home edition, he skimmed it onto the stoop of the house he was passing. In this way he progressed from door to door, and now he had reached the middle of the block.

Here, at Number 713, a small apartment house, he had not one paper to deliver, but four—one for Mr. Lyster, another for Miss Peebles, and two more for the other occupants of the building. He noticed that somebody was playing a radio very loudly and that it was

abruptly shut off. Then, having tossed the fourth paper to the steps, he was trudging on when he heard a door bang and quick footfalls cross the sidewalk.

This being a quiet neighborhood where nobody ever moved with such haste, the boy looked back just in time to see an uncertain figure ducking into a sedan parked in front of 713. At once the starter snarled, the motor whirled and the car spurted away. Its headlights were not turned on until it had almost reached the corner, and its departure was so precipitant that the boy thought it worthy of special attention. He had something in common with Miss Peebles and thousands of others—he was a devoted listener to the crime-busting serials on the radio, and he knew what to do about a matter of this suspicious sort. He peered at the rear license plate of the fleeing car, straining his eyes to read its numbers in the early spring dusk. But before he could be sure he had them right, the car veered out of sight past the corner.

Standing there thoughtfully, the boy heard a gruff voice ask: "What's on your mind, sonny?"

He looked up into the weather-seamed face of a uniformed patrolman. The cop had spoken amiably, but he looked hard and also dumb. Having a fear of cops, the prudence to mind his own business when challenged, and a lot more *Recorders* to deliver, the boy gave him an evasive answer.

"Nothin'."

He was moving on, and the patrolman was continuing his tour in the opposite direction, when Miss Ella Peebles appeared on the stoop of 713, white-faced and frantically wringing her thin hands.

"Police!" Miss Peebles screeched. "Oh, great gracious, Mr. Policeman! Nice Mr. Lyster's been murdered!"

All of which had nothing whatever to do with Bill Brent. . . .

EVEN when the murder of Anthony Lyster had become almost twenty-four hours old, it still was no concern of Brent's. In his private cubbyhole, a partitioned space no bigger than a broom-closet which separated him from the more self-respecting departments of the *Recorder's* city room, he applied himself necessarily to a task outside the pale of news reporting. While he morosely labored there, however, he was conscious that something unusual was cooking at the desk which had previously been his own.

That desk was the domain of the *Recorder's* police reporter and its present occupant was noteworthy as the only police reporter anywhere who wore a brassiere. Miss Valerie Randall was also distinguished as the most beautiful police reporter in the history of news-

paper publishing, and also, in Brent's none-too-private opinion, as the most incompetent. Brent had often noted, with the disdain of a seasoned veteran for a bumbling neophyte, that she was usually unable to accomplish her day's stint without gnawing the lacquer off her nails, and that often the presses had had to wait because she'd stopped somewhere to darn a run in one of her nicely filled stockings. Today, however, to Brent's wonderment, she showed signs of having snagged onto something hot and special.

She had attracted Brent's puzzled notice because for the past hour she'd been tripping in and out in a high fever. She'd pounded her typewriter with an enthusiasm suggesting that she had the story of the year by the tail, and she'd gone into frequent buzzing conferences with Garrett, the *Recorder's* hard-bitten city editor, who seemed equally feverish. Since Val was Garrett's particular pet, he simpered upon her daily—meanwhile being tough as rawhide to all other members of the city staff, especially Brent—but today they evidently had something big between them. Whatever it was, Brent refused to believe it could be the result of anything but the sheerest luck on Val Randall's part.

Garrett was keeping his phone wires hot, and Brent's perplexity was deepened by the fact that Val had now brought into the city room a lad of sixteen whom she was earnestly interviewing. The boy was evidently one of the *Recorder's* army of carriers, for slung over one shoulder he had an empty canvas bag bearing the paper's name in red. Answering Val's insistent questions, he bobbed his head, round-eyed, and she squirmed with excitement while making notes. Next she shoed the boy out and went back to banging at her typewriter with even greater zest. Finally she whisked her steaming copy to Garrett, who swiftly edited it, and gave him a tickled-pink grin as he shot it down the tube to the compositors, both of them evidently expecting sensational results.

"Phooey," Brent said skeptically to himself. "She's having another hare-brained tizzy, that's all."

He tried again to read the letter he had in his hand. It was one he'd plucked off the top of the never-decreasing pile of letters on his work table. In numbers and in contents they revolted him, and this particular specimen was one which especially sickened his soul.

Dear, dear Lora Lorne—

I know, oh, really, I do know how wise and good your advice to me has been, but what can I do when my heart just won't listen to you? Of course my mind tells me it's perfectly true that I'm a married woman who should be faithful to her husband, and it's perfectly true, too, that I should stop dream-

ing about someone else—but oh, Miss Lorne, I can't stop loving the man I really love!

Brent drew a deep breath of disgust. Normally this misbegotten job of his was detestable enough. By all odds it was the most repugnant chore on the paper, the most ridiculous, the most tragic and the most worrisome. It made him an object of amused scorn to the rest of the staff, and his most desperate desire was that no one outside these walls should ever even learn what it was. For Bill Brent, to his everlasting mortification, functioned as the *Recorder's* celebrated specialist in *affaires du coeur*, Lora Lorne.

Lora Lorne was the grandmotherly mentor whose picture had appeared daily for the past twenty-three years at the head of the *Recorder's* rapture column. It portrayed her as a smirking old dame with snowy hair, eyeglasses chained to a reel pinned on her sympathetic shoulder, and a face sweeter than a vanilla éclair. The portrait was a figment of some forgotten artist's imagination. Actually there never had been anybody named Lora Lorne. It was a copyrighted "house name" behind which, until Brent's advent, a succession of underpaid female quidnuncs had hidden while irresponsibly advising other people in wholesale lots how to live their lives. Brent was the first male ever to suffer the indignity of wearing Lora Lorne's saccharine false face. He considered himself eminently unqualified for the job, but it definitely was his. For far too many moons now he had tried to do it conscientiously, and it was killing him.

THOUSANDS upon thousands of the *Recorder's* readers addressed him under the name of Lora Lorne, seeking his—or rather, her—inspired guidance. Were you a trusting young girl whose sweetheart had cruelly walked out on you? If so, you turned faithfully to wise Lora Lorne for counsel as to how to win him back. Were you a good wife whose spouse sometimes forgot to come home nights? From Lora Lorne you could learn how to keep him contentedly by his own hearthside. Were you a young mother embarrassed by the lack of a marriage certificate? Would you like to learn how to cure your sailor brother of the habit of shooting craps, or how to decline a young wolf's invitation to a hideaway weekend without wounding his feelings? In any case your supplications would be hopefully addressed to Lora Lorne. And—as in this special case which engaged Brent's disgusted attention now—if you were a two-timing young wife so infatuated with a lover that you'd write to Miss Lorne again and again, each time praying for advice, while at the same time confessing yourself unable to follow it, you would drive Bill Brent nuts.

The letter went on:

What can I do, Miss Lorne, when I feel myself drawn so overwhelmingly away from my husband and into the arms of my true lover? I tell myself how terribly wrong it is, and I swear I'll never again go to see T.—but then I hear the sound of his charming voice on the phone. I remember the ecstasy of his embrace and, despite myself, I go running to him—oh, gladly, gladly!

She was telling Brent! This was the eighth or tenth letter he'd received from this joyfully immoral young woman, and all of them had taken this same tenor. She signed herself "Infatuated," and she certainly seemed to be that, hopelessly. Brent had bled himself white in his efforts to get this conscienceless nymph to stay at home in her own bed. He'd appealed to her "better nature," he'd asked her to appeal to the decency of her lover, he'd even urged her to come clean with her husband, which might have taken the spice out of her liaison—and also, incidentally, might have mercifully got her head shot off—but none of Lora Lorne's admonitions had had the slightest curative effect on her. Still she kept coming back for more advice. Brent had given it to her abundantly via the Lorne column, but as her latest letter clearly showed, she was undoubtedly the most incorrigible and blissful unfaithful wife he'd ever coped with.

It's so heavenly being with T., Miss Lorne! I'm sure he adores me just as madly as I adore him, but sometimes I wonder why. I'm not especially pretty. Could it be because I dress more smartly than most other young women, because I get all my clothes at a big discount? But still I feel it must be something far deeper. Fine as my husband is, I forget all about him when I'm with T., and so it must be that T. and I are really and truly soul-mates.

"God help us all!" Brent groaned.

This had been going on for several months now, and the dizzy doll had actually worked him up into a state of sleepless anxiety. Personally Brent couldn't help feeling envious of T., but this sort of thing was absolutely intolerable in the eyes of moralistic Lora Lorne. Although he felt frustrated, too, he couldn't give up trying to reform this wanton wench. There was no way he could get at her personally—her letters were all typewritten on ordinary white paper, including her signed *nom-de-l'amour* of "Infatuated," and the plain white envelopes never bore any clue as to their source. So Brent's only recourse was to print her latest effusion in the column and add a stern rebuke promising her plenty of hell-fire, which, he knew hopelessly in advance, would still find her romping back to her love-nest rather than a nunnery.

HE WAS laboring over Lora Lorne's answer when a copy of the *Recorder's* early edition was dropped on his table. The eight-column headline blew all thoughts of "Infatuated" out of his head. This was Val Randall's journalistic achievement, a black-headlined story that hit Brent like a punch on his crooked nose.

PRIME SUSPECT IN LYSTER MURDER TRACED BY RECORDER REPORTER

"Impossible!" Brent gasped.

He stared incredulously at the two-column lead topped with the line, *By Val Randall*. It sped on:

Acting upon information supplied them by this reporter, the local police, as this edition goes to press, are questioning a young woman suspect in the murder of Anthony Lyster, with every expectation of charging her and indicting her for the first degree homicide committed at 713 Webster Street late yesterday afternoon!

She is Mrs. Elizabeth Smith, 24, wife of Thurston Smith, 32, an income tax consultant with offices in the Carter Building. Their home is at 397 Federal Street, this city.

When the *Recorder* asked Mrs. Smith for a statement just prior to her arrest, she refused to make one.

Her apprehension is the direct result of the testimony of an eye-witness overlooked by the police in their investigation but found by this reporter. The witness is Albert Foster, 16, an observant boy who handles the *Recorder's* home-delivery route on Webster Street, and who actually saw Mrs. Smith's car fleeing from the scene a few seconds following the murder yesterday afternoon!

Stunned, Brent still couldn't imagine Val Randall pulling off as creditable a piece of detecting as this, but he read on:

While Mrs. Smith remained unsuspected by the police for a full twenty-four hours following the killing, they nevertheless had in their possession certain evidence pointing directly to her—a packet of love letters written to Anthony Lyster by a woman signing herself "Honey Bee."

Brent winced. Any mention of love letters was painful to him, particularly now, while he was sweating over "Infatuated's". He had felt all along that "Infatuated's" extra-marital activities were exactly the sort that might breed murder, and he naturally wondered if there could be any connection here. It seemed unlikely. "Infatuated's" latest letter was postmarked as of yesterday afternoon, within an hour or so of the killing. Brent considered it very improbable that her emotions could have shifted so quickly from adoration to murder-

ous hatred. Val's next paragraph, moreover, made it still more unlikely that "Honey Bee" and "Infatuated" were the same woman.

These love letters were found as the result of a court order obtained by the police to open a safe deposit box held by Anthony Lyster. Although the police have released no information concerning these significant letters, this reporter learned today that they are ardent in tone and typed in passionate red on mauve stationery. The theory on which the police are now working is that the murder of Lyster grew out of his use of these letters as a means of blackmailing Mrs. Smith.

The identity of "Honey Bee" remained unknown to the police until this reporter, seeking witnesses who might have been near the apartment at the time of the murder yesterday afternoon, questioned the *Recorder's* carrier, Albert Foster. Young Foster told of seeing a car fleeing the scene, and even supplied its license number—564,782, which is registered in the name of Elizabeth Smith. Another significant link in the chain of evidence was supplied by Mrs. Smith's neighbors, who say that her friends call her "Beth" or "Bee."

Brent wagged his head. That it was a highly competent job of sleuthing he couldn't deny. Why, he couldn't have done better himself! Even though he had always looked with contempt upon Val's efforts to cover his old police run, he was damned if it didn't look as if she'd actually gone and cracked herself a first-class murder case!

Anxiously absorbed in Val's amazing story, Brent hadn't noticed the continuing excitement in the city room. Kimball Martin, the managing editor, had marched out of his sanctum to snarl at Val and Garrett, and then had marched back again, irately, but Brent hadn't seen that. He was unaware that Val and Garrett, both obviously distressed, had hastened into conference in Martin's office. He was astonished when he saw Garrett bearing down on him with an expression of dismay such as Brent had never seen before on his stony face.

"Bill," Garrett began in a tone of camaraderie—and this astonished Brent even more. Garrett usually called him "Lora" or "Grandma", scathingly. "Bill, old man, would you like to go back to your old desk, back to the police trick where you really belong?"

Brent gaped at him. "Don't kid! Not about that, for God's sake!"

"Who's kidding? I mean it, Bill, old boy!" Garrett's answer came in a voice so friendly and imploring that Brent suspected his ears were playing tricks on him. "You're our one and only police reporter again, Bill. Val's taking over the passion pillar. It's all hers from now on and you've kissed Lora Lorne good-by forever!"

CHAPTER TWO

Turnabout

WHILE Brent goggled, Garrett added with incredible affability: "In Martin's office right away—very important, you know, Bill, old boy," and hastily he headed back to the door bearing the managing editor's name.

Dizzily Brent told himself there had to be a catch in this somewhere. For month after month now he'd yearned and earnestly endeavored to get himself back on the police run while Garrett had sternly and unmercifully kept him relegated to the passion department. Brent couldn't quite trust Garrett's unprecedented change of heart. It was too good to be true!

Brent sat still in Lora Lorne's miserable cubicle, hoping fervently that this wasn't a sadistic prank on Garrett's part. Long ago Garrett had brought him from New York as a special crime reporter under contract. Brent had sailed into his new job happily, but because this city was a strange one to him he had felt obliged to become thoroughly acquainted with it, particularly in regard to its taverns and tootsies.

His study of these subjects had absorbed

SEEING-BELIEVING

THIRST-RELIEVING

What happens when you look at the circles
(and move your head from side to side?)



ANSWER: The circles spin like a wheel.



him so profoundly that he had missed more editions than he cared to remember. It was then, as a punitive measure, that Garrett, the hide-bound disciplinarian, had sentenced him to an indefinite stretch in Lora Lorne's atelier of love.

Brent had suffered indescribable anguish while functioning as the *Recorder's* handmaiden of Aphrodite, but he'd found himself inextricably trapped. His contract was watertight and it still had years to run. Under its strict terms he couldn't quit without getting himself blacklisted with every newspaper in the country, facing drastic court action, and revealing on the witness stand that he was none other than that champion of chastity, Lora Lorne. Since Brent was six feet and two hundred pounds of rugged, liquor-savoring masculinity, the humiliation of this would have been greater than he had the fortitude to bear. Having no choice but to wallow in Lora Lorne's mess of amatory tribulations until such time as Garrett might take mercy on him, he had worked desperately in the hope of winning a respite. Nothing he had done so far had caused his martinet of a city editor to relent, but now, all at once, Garrett had apparently turned human. He'd actually said: "You're our one and only police reporter again, Bill—you've kissed Lora Lorne goodbye forever!"

Like a long-dead man who'd miraculously sprung back to life, Brent simply couldn't get used to it. As in a vision he saw Garrett standing at the managing editor's door, actually smiling and beckoning to him to come.

Brent responded grimly and suspiciously, yet hopefully. He was further stunned to find Garrett patting his shoulder like an old-time pal.

"Play along with this, Bill," Garrett urged. "Help us to pull out of this mess and you'll have our everlasting gratitude. The paper needs you badly, Bill, old man."

Taking no time to explain further, Garrett ushered him through the door with the courtesy and deference he might have shown a wealthy maiden aunt. Inside the managing editor's office Brent found a conference progressing under tension. Kimball Martin was presiding under circumstances which obviously distressed him deeply. With a subtly imploring gaze at Brent he rose, gesturing to all the others present.

"You understand, of course," he announced, "that Miss Randall has been merely a substitute reporter. The manpower shortage obliged us to use her despite her regrettable lack of experience. She has now been transferred to another department of much lighter responsibilities. Allow me to present our special crime reporter, who had no hand in her story—William Coleridge Brent, a young man of

remarkable experience, reliability and integrity."

Even more dazed by this tribute, Brent looked first at Val Randall. A great change had come over her. No longer full of feverish elation, she was, instead, steeped in despondency and crying softly into a wet wad of handkerchief.

"Mrs. Elbridge," Martin continued with a bow across his desk, "Mr. Brent."

A woman of forceful presence and striking appearance, Mrs. Elbridge gave Brent a slight nod. Her trimly done hair was pure white although her pretty face was youthfully alert. She was smartly tailored and her bearing was that of a capable, confident executive.

"Mrs. Elbridge, owner and manager of Elbridge's department store?" Brent inquired quickly.

"None other!" Martin answered. "And this—"

His gesture now designated a young woman seated at Mrs. Elbridge's side, the sight of whom sent an electrical tingle through Brent. Her naturally red hair, worn in a long bob, was gorgeous. Her green eyes were intense, flashing. Her mouth was very red, luscious and suggested daring. She was as delectable a doll as Brent had ever beheld, as biologically vital as the older woman seated at her side was intellectually brisk. Yet between them there was a marked resemblance.

"And this," Martin went on with something like the sigh of a doomed soul, "is Mrs. Elbridge's daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Smith. Have a chair, Brent."

BRENT needed a chair. Suddenly and clearly he saw that the *Recorder* was foundering in an appalling predicament, one far more serious than any Lora Lorne had ever tackled. Elbridge's, of which Mrs. Reba Elbridge had become the sole owner and manager upon the death of her merchant husband some six years ago, was by all odds the city's largest and classiest department store. As such, it was also the *Recorder's* most lavish and most highly cherished advertiser. Never a day went by that Elbridge's didn't buy a full page of space. Often it used two. For its regular monthly sales it usually used a total of four pages. Once a year, when it staged its anniversary super-sale, it actually bought an entire sixteen-page tabloid section. In the course of any twelve months, Elbridge's advertising account added up to considerable coin—a fortune of such magnitude that without it the *Recorder* would wind up its books in the red. And what was this incredible thing that had happened now? The *Recorder* had—unwittingly, of course—made a public accusation of murder against the daughter of its most important source of revenue!

To himself Brent moaned, "Good God!" and aloud he said quickly: "But Mrs. Elbridge, I don't remember the news of your daughter's marriage!"

"That's not surprising," Mrs. Elbridge answered in a crisply outraged tone. "The news wasn't given out. Elizabeth was married five months ago, but it was my wish that it be kept secret for a time."

A sob broke from Val Randall. "If only you'd announced it, this terrible thing wouldn't have happened!"

"I've every right to conduct my private family affairs as I judge best, Miss Randall," Mrs. Elbridge answered with a snap. "Nevertheless it has happened—a flagrant, unforgivable and malicious piece of carelessness on your part. You shall all regret it deeply."

As a veteran newspaperman, Brent could understand how Val and even Garrett had committed this staggering boner. Having grabbed hold of a sizzling hot front-page story, they'd naturally rushed it into print. Of course they'd checked their facts with what would have been, under normal circumstances, care enough. Certainly the commonplace name of Elizabeth Smith, and her address in a modest residential section, hadn't suggested any powerful connections. Harassed by a deadline and carried away by their enthusiasm, they simply hadn't checked sufficiently thoroughly to turn up the utterly unsuspected fact that Elizabeth Smith was the same young woman who had been mentioned prominently countless times in the *Recorder's* society columns as Beth Elbridge, daughter of the distinguished Mrs. Reba Elbridge. Because her mother was the paper's most valued advertiser, Beth had always been favored with the greatest deference in its column, until suddenly, today, it had unknowingly blasted a scandalous and bloody accusation against her!

Shocked with consternation, Brent scarcely heard the next introduction. The dark, curly-headed, handsome young man whose hand he grasped was Thurston Smith, Beth's husband. Besides looking hurt and worried, he was fully as indignant as his mother-in-law and his wife. The final introduction snapped Brent to full attention, however. The big-fronted, shrewd-eyed man who stood protectively at Mrs. Elbridge's shoulder was Doughton Snowden, the most awesomely successful trial lawyer in the state. Mr. Snowden smiled genially—with the superior geniality of an uncompromising fighter who already had his adversaries exactly where he wanted them.

"Mrs. Elbridge," Brent said thoughtfully, "of course I understand how distressed you must be by Miss Randall's story. But the *Recorder* can't compromise on its policy of honest reporting, and after all, murder is murder. If the facts are as stated—"

In response to this, Kimball Martin grimaced, Garrett flinched, Val sobbed again and the party of complainants all began talking at once.

"I didn't even know Anthony Lyster!" Beth Elbridge Smith exclaimed. "Anyway, there must be simply thousands of girls in town called Bee."

"The blackmail theory's crazy!" blurted the young lady's husband. "I'm doing all right as a tax consultant, but I don't make so much money that Beth could pay fancy blackmail to anybody. Besides, since our marriage, we haven't received a penny's worth of financial help from her mother."

"Not a penny!" Mrs. Elbridge agreed. She said it with an emphasis suggesting that this was the way she had insisted it must be, and that she was proud of her daughter's and son-in-law's self-reliance. "Not a single cent!"

"As for the rest of your so-called facts," Doughton Snowden spoke up in his booming voice that never failed to impress a jury, "there are none, none whatever. The boy who identified Mrs. Smith's car is irresponsible and mistaken. Mrs. Smith was nowhere near the scene of the murder at the time it was committed yesterday, as Mrs. Elbridge can testify."

"I can and do, most unequivocally," Mrs. Elbridge stated. "I'd invited Beth and Thurston to have dinner with me last evening. They were to pick me up at the store and drive me to my home. I was expecting them at five-thirty, but—"

"But Thurston had a puncture in the driveway just as we were leaving," Beth Elbridge Smith chimed in, "so I phoned Mother at the store to say we'd be a little late. We both talked to her. He asked her what time it was then and she said—"

"It was ten minutes past five," Mrs. Elbridge went on. "That, I believe, is the exact time the murder was committed, according to a woman who lives in the same apartment building. Beth was at home then and Thurston was changing the flat tire so, of course, neither she nor the car could have been at 713 Webster Street. They came straight to my office, arriving only a few minutes late. Then we all drove to my home together and had dinner—and I must say that at no time did my daughter look or act as if she'd just committed a hot-blooded murder."

DOUGHTON Snowden thereupon summed up the whole unfortunate matter. "The truth, then, is this. First, Mrs. Smith did not even know Anthony Lyster. Second, she didn't write the love letters signed 'Honey Bee.' She therefore had no reason to pay blackmail to Lyster, and third, she had no means of paying blackmail to anyone. Fourth, and finally, she was not and could not have been at Lys-

ter's apartment at the time of his murder. Your paper has published a totally false story and has made utterly baseless charges against my client. Now naturally—"

"Naturally," said Reba Elbridge, standing straight, "I am canceling my entire advertising account at once."

Kimball Martin closed his eyes in pain, then opened them wide. "Please, Mrs. Elbridge! After all, it's highly necessary for you to advertise, and the *Recorder* is by far the best medium—"

"I shall do very nicely without the *Recorder*. The contract is canceled once and for all, and that's final."

"And furthermore," Snowden added, "I'm immediately filing against the *Recorder*, against Miss Randall, against Mr. Garrett and also against you, Mr. Martin, a suit for libel, asking damages of one million dollars. It will be quite futile for you to attempt to placate my clients by publishing a retraction, and equally futile for you to suggest a private settlement. We demand vindication in court and full damages. That is, I think, all we have to say. Good day, good day."

Snowden politely opened a door through which Mrs. Elbridge, Mrs. Smith and Mr. Smith passed in file, all still indignant. Leaving last, he closed it with a final pitying smile at Martin. The dismayed hush he left in the office was broken after a moment by a blubbing wail from Val and a quick question from Brent.

"For God's sake, what do you expect me to do about this mare's nest?"

Kimball Martin stuck a cigar into his pale face and chewed on it savagely. "You heard her. That canceled contract is a terrific kick in the teeth. We'll fight Snowden but he'll win his libel suit hands down and probably wipe us off the publishing map. We can't do a damned thing but take it. But we *can* work like hell to save our reputation as a reliable newspaper. There's only one possible way. Get into the Lyster case and cook up new sensations to take the public's mind off today's brainstorm. That's up to you, Brent."

"Oh," Brent said wryly. "Merely that."

He snatched open the same door. Mrs. Elbridge and party had paused at the top of the iron stairway for a momentary huddle. Now they were descending, Doughton Snowden in the rear. Brent grasped the lawyer's arm and steered him back. A man of great poise and confidence, Snowden didn't resist. Instead, he responded with a smile of supreme amusement. Once he was inside Martin's office again, with the door shut, Brent aimed a forefinger at him.

"Would you mind telling me why Beth Elbridge Smith's marriage was kept under wraps?"

"Don't mind at all," Snowden answered with a chuckle. "It's really a heartwarming little romantic story. Beth and Thurston Smith eloped. The marriage came as a very unpleasant shock to Mrs. Elbridge. Young Smith, you see, is not the sort of son-in-law she'd hoped to have. A fine young man, to be sure, but he has no family background, no money and no position, and at the time he was actually out of a job. The marriage would have caused no end of gossip, particularly if it didn't last, as Mrs. Elbridge feared it wouldn't. It might be just another escapade on Beth's part—she's given to them, you know—and if so, then it could be quietly written off as a bad break. For three months now, as a result, only Beth's closest friends have known about it, although she's been living with her husband in a home of their own."

"Is the marriage busting up," Brent inquired, "because Beth's still playing around?"

"Nothing of the sort," Snowden chuckled. "They're very happy together. Matter of fact, the marriage is turning out far better than Mrs. Elbridge expected. She was quite tough about it at first, you know—refused to give them any financial help at all and insisted that Thurston must make a go of it entirely on his own. He's done that. He had enough money to open up his office, and I understand he's doing splendidly, thanks to the complexity of the new income tax laws. In fact, Mrs. Elbridge has grown quite fond of him, and quite proud of the way he and Beth are proving themselves."

"**L**UCKY for Beth!" Brent said tersely. "I've heard plenty about that babe. She's a wild number. She's been in more scrapes than you could shake a stick at. Raids on gambling dens, shady road-houses, nude bathing parties, brawls in the lowest sort of dives, drunken auto crack-ups and God knows what else. Let me remind you, in fact, that the *Recorder* has refrained from shaking a stick of type at her more than once. Many's the time we could have plastered her scandalously all over the front page and didn't."

"Because of the high regard in which you held her mother's ad contract, of course. Oh, I concede all that," Snowden continued, chuckling again. "Matter of fact, that's an important aspect of my case. Some time ago, because of these very escapades you mention, Mrs. Elbridge ran completely out of patience with Beth. She took stern measures—cut down Beth's allowance to almost nothing, for example. Then came Beth's elopement with young Smith, and that was the last straw. Mrs. Elbridge handed down an ultimatum. Beth and her husband would have to make good independently or Mrs. Elbridge would wash her hands of them. By that I mean she would

actually disown Beth. Without violating a confidence, I may say that for some time now Mrs. Elbridge has had a new will, drawn up by me, all ready for signing the next time Beth slipped. It would cut Beth off completely.

"Beth, however, has straightened out beautifully and become a model young wife. So you see, Mr. Brent, the *Recorder's* story today was an extremely damaging attack launched without any cause whatever against a guiltless young woman who might not have been able to disprove it to her mother's complete satisfaction. It might have cost Beth her very sizable inheritance. That she was able to establish her innocence reflects no credit on this irresponsible newspaper. I'll make much of that at the trial, of course. Are there any other questions you'd care to ask?"

"Yes," Brent said hopelessly. "Have you thought of the hundreds of deserving employees who'll be thrown out of work in case you force the *Recorder* to the wall? Have you forgotten that the *Recorder* is a noble, long-established institution which will be sorely missed by its hundreds of thousands of devoted readers? Have you—"

"Good day," Snowden broke in, smiling pleasantly and turning to the door. "Good day, all."

This time he left behind him an even sharper sense of impending disaster. Kimball Martin slumped low in his chair, gnawing hopelessly at his cigar.

"Get to work!" he barked.

With alacrity Garrett and Val hastened through the door connecting with the city room, Val still blubbering piteously. "For God's sake, pipe down!" Garrett growled at her. "Be grateful we're both not fired out on our tails!" Seeing, with profound gratification, that he was steering her toward Lora Lorne's cubbyhole, Brent hastened ahead to usher her in with a sweeping gesture.

"Welcome, Miss Randall, God help you! Do have a chair. You'll find this job quite a simple one. All you have to do in this miserable sewer of love is work your head off producing two full columns of type every day, six days a week, time without end. This beautiful pile of letters is your raw material, which you will never lack. You merely read these silly missives, select the worst cases and publicly prescribe remedies. Of course nobody on earth's equal to such a task, and you'll spend many a wakeful night wondering how many lives your well-intended advice is wrecking, but that's all there is to it. As a starter, you might try reforming this irretrievably lost soul who calls herself 'Infatuated'."

One good look at that heap of varicolored, variscent correspondence caused Val to break out in a wail of purest despair. Brent happily left her sobbing there. Although he

still couldn't quite feel that at last he'd actually cast off Lora Lorne's hated apron strings, he trudged grinning into the corner where Garrett was seated despondently behind a trash-piled roll-top desk.

"Now," Brent said eagerly, "what other lead is there on this Lyster case?"

Garrett glared at him. "What other lead, you ask me! My God, would I have gone overboard on the Smith angle if there'd been any other lead at all? There isn't any! Nevertheless, Brent, this is your chance of a lifetime, your chance to really deliver. We've got to save our face. Give me the hottest stuff you can snag onto, and as much of it as possible. Don't ask me where you're going to get it. You're to crack this case in a hurry, but I don't know how the hell you're going to do it. Maybe it can never be cracked, but our salvation depends on your doing just that, and fast. And for God's sake crack it right this time! That's all, Brent, that's all!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Dead Survivor

BRENT treated himself to the blissful experience of seating himself at his old desk. This was a moment of sweet triumph which he'd often thought he might never live to savor. It aroused him to gleeful ruthlessness. Yanking open the drawers, he thoroughly emptied them of bobby-pins, old lipsticks, needle and thread, a box of nose powder and a bottle of sun-tan leg make-up. All these he carried into Lora Lorne's cubicle and dumped in front of their owner, whereupon she emitted another heartbroken howl and he grinned.

Intently he plunged again into Val's disastrous front-page story. In the light of later developments he could see holes in it. A glaring example was the paper carrier's testimony to the effect that the license number of the car he'd seen fleeing the murder scene was 564,782. The boy might easily have misread one or more of these digits, and evidently he had. Even granting that he'd got all of them right, he'd apparently remembered them in the wrong order. Being familiar with the laws of chance, Brent made a brief computation and discovered that any six digits could be arranged in no less than 720 different sequences.

As a lead for Brent's own uses, this was no good. To list these 720 numbers, trace down 720 car-owners all over the state and check 720 alibis was far too impracticable. All the other details in Val's account were equally unhelpful, with one possible exception—her statement that "Honey Bee's" love letters to Lyster were typed in red ink on mauve notepaper.

Again Brent wondered whether by any

chance those passionate missives of Honey Bee's might have been written by the same young woman, now Val's headache, who'd repeatedly addressed Lora Lorne over the signature of "Infatuated." It was not impossible. Any love-dizzy dame inclined to put her raptures on paper would surely seek Miss Lorne's sibylline ear sooner or later. And there was another reason behind Brent's conjectures—the dead man, named Anthony, had probably been called Tony by his innamorata, and "Infatuated" had referred to her lover as T. A very tenuous connection, this, but at least it was something to mull over.

Even if "Honey Bee" and "Infatuated" were the same woman, Brent couldn't see how that fact would help him, since the police had evidently been unable to trace "Honey Bee" just as Brent had been unable to trace "Infatuated." Deciding to check, nevertheless, he invaded the amatory mill which was now Val's, found her blinking her teary eyes over "Infatuated's" latest letter and plucked it away.

He searched for characteristics peculiar to the typewriter "Infatuated" used. They were easy to find. The lower loop of the small "g" was nicked. The small "l" leaned slightly to the left. The lower case "m" was impressed more distinctly on one side than the other. These three examples were enough. In combination they distinguished "Infatuated's" machine from all others, and if they were also present in "Honey Bee's" correspondence, then there could be no doubt whatever that the same typewriter had produced both sets of letters.

With a gesture of reassurance to the crest-fallen Garrett, Brent strode happily from the city room. It was the first time in far too long that he'd openly trailed an assignment on his own hook, and he'd never felt finer in his life. His first source of information lay close at hand—the central postoffice standing only a block away. Knowing that it served Webster Street directly, he talked his way past several clerks until finally he buttonholed a meek, droop-shouldered little man in a blue uniform, the postman who had delivered Anthony Lyster's mail.

"You surely remember, Mr. Hofstедder," Brent said. "The envelopes must have matched the notepaper. Red typing on mauve stationery. You must have noticed them."

Mr. Hofstедder shook his head vaguely. "Nope."

"But you couldn't have missed them!" Brent insisted.

"I wish I was back on the route I had six months ago," Mr. Hofstедder said irrelevantly, shrugging. "This one's too heavy. I gotta notice names and addresses, sure, and sometimes there's fancy letters what make me look twice, but I get too tired to remember like you

want me to." He cocked his head quizzically. "Funny, there was another man come around askin' me this same thing. Said his name was something like Russia."

THAT would be Captain Russo, chief of the homicide squad. Brent's next stop was an office in police headquarters which was this same Captain Russo's reception room. There Brent found the captain's secretary's desk deserted. After waiting a moment, he knocked on the inner door, heard no response, twisted the knob and peered in.

The inner office was also vacant. Grasping an opportunity to snoop, Brent scanned Russo's desk. On the blotter lay a pearl-handled .32 revolver. A tag looped through its trigger-guard bore the name of the late Anthony Lyster. This was the weapon which had sunk two bullets in Lyster's chest and, according to police records, it had been Lyster's own property. His murderer had been familiar enough with his apartment to know just where it had been kept, impolite enough to use it on the host and smart enough to wipe it clean afterward.

Also lying on Russo's desk was a subordinate's report on Lyster. Tracing his personal history, it put an odd light on his character. Prior to the war he'd prospered in the pin-ball racket, but when the manufacture of these machines was prohibited because of the strategic materials used in them, he hadn't turned to the black market for supplies. Instead, he'd retired—a crook with queer overtones of loyalty to the war effort—and if he'd recently indulged in less unpatriotic crimes, there was no mention of it. Instead, he'd apparently lived a life of idle but not extravagant ease, his evenings brightened by erotically playful women.

Brent puzzled over a third item. It was an official photograph of a group of three fingerprints. Left in a latent state on some sort of object which was tubular and black, they had been developed by means of aluminum powder. Beneath the impression was a line of embossed lettering reading: STERN ELE. Frowning, Brent examined a file card clipped to the photo. This had been supplied Russo by the Bureau of Criminal Identification and on it were recorded a complete set of prints of one Pete Spatz. Some four years ago Pete Spatz had been sentenced to a year in jail for hit-and-run driving, which was the full extent of his criminal history. The three silvery prints in the photograph were identical with those of the three middle fingers of Spatz' left hand.

Cerebrating over this, Brent became aware of a ghostly presence in the doorway. Captain Russo had appeared there, an unearthly quiet, sad-looking man, as cadaverous as the corpses he continually investigated. His lackluster eyes were fixed on Brent with morose disapproval.

"At least you prowl more or less openly, Brent," he said in a tone sounding as hollow as a deserted mausoleum. "Miss Randall hid behind doors."

"That's the way she hooked onto the dope about 'Honey Bee's' letters?" Brent asked, scandalized.

Russo nodded and came forward, his joints seeming to grate like those of a dried-out skeleton. "Two of my men were in here reading them out loud, joking about them. She had her shell-like ear to the keyhole. It showed a regrettable lack of ethical judgment. Headquarters and the *Recorder* had always played ball, but now we don't love you as much as we did."

"But look, Russo," Brent argued earnestly, "you can't hold Val's kid trick against the paper or me!"

"Can't I?" Russo's eyes were as inscrutable as those of a week-old corpse. "Well, she tipped out mitt on the 'Honey Bee' letters, so there's no use holding out on them any longer."

He sorrowfully produced them from a drawer. Eying them, Brent saw that Val had accurately described their passionate color scheme. Lyster had not kept the envelopes, but only the enclosures. Each was dated with a day of the week, Tuesday or Friday, and so on. They were torrid stuff, even hotter than Lora Lorne had ever seen. Brent searched for the typographical characteristics of "Infatuated's" letters and found none. There was no nicked "g", no leaning "l", no uneven "m". In fact, these letters of "Honey Bee's" were done in elite type and "Infatuated's" were in pica. There wasn't the remotest possibility that both sets of missives had rolled off the same machine.

"Val's through police reporting," Brent informed Russo, returning the amorous evidence. "You and I can work as a team, can't we?"

Russo sat, unhappily. "She damned well should be through! She and Garrett at least had the decency to tip me to their story just before they started the presses rolling, but it didn't take me five minutes to decide the whole thing was a bowl of hogwash. In this game, Brent, when a woman as solid as Mrs. Elbridge alibies her daughter, you beg her pardon for having intruded—unless you're sure beyond all question, which in this case we certainly are not—and you start looking for someone else you can invite to sit down in the electric chair."

"In this case," Brent suggested hopefully, "a guy named Pete Spatz. But why?"

Russo sighed mournfully. "Val's remarkable performance reflects unfavorably on my department. She made me look like a congenital dunce, crowed over me and at the same time angled her yarn so as to make it appear I was

having the same nightmare. Now I've got to show our citizens I'm really a little brighter than that. Just leave the working of this case to me, Brent, and you stick to reporting such information as I may release. Otherwise keep your paws strictly off it. Am I clear?"

"If you mean that you think you can get along without any help from me," Brent said soberly, "you're clear."

"That's what I mean," Russo intoned. "At the moment I've nothing to say for publication. I'll continue to have nothing to say until I've spiked the killer. Good-by, Brent."

Finding himself shut out, and knowing that argument was useless, Brent rose and muttered: "Good-by."

HE RETURNED in haste to the *Recorder* plant. Garrett looked up expectantly as he pushed into the city room, but he circled through to the adjacent morgue, pausing only long enough to observe, pleasantly, that Val Randall was suffering the tortures of the damned in Lora Lorne's salon of passion. For minutes he pored over a series of bound volumes of the *Recorder*. Finally striding to Garrett's desk, he brought an expression of elation.

"Let this be a lesson to you, chum," he began, grinning. "Being a woman, Val's prying took an emotional turn in the wrong direction. I, on the other hand, have smelled out certain criminal facts which are much more to the point."

"Don't gloat," Garrett snapped. "Let's have 'em."

"Certainly," Brent said with an air of seasoned self-assurance. "A little more than four years ago a shady character named Pete Spatz made the mistake of slamming down a man with his car and trundling along regardless. He was found, tossed into the clink and released after a year of penitence."

"Cut out the flowery declamations," Garrett growled. "What of it?"

"Next let me refresh your memory concerning the payroll holdup at the Apex plant about one year ago," Brent continued cheerfully. "It was a daring and sensational job. A company car containing two employees and a bagful of frogskins had left the Merchants National and was just turning into the gate of the plant, a mile outside the city, when another car rammed it into the ditch. The other car whizzed off with the payroll. The chase was close—so close that it turned out pretty disastrously for the crooks. Remember?"

"Get on with it!"

"Patience, patience. After all, I'm rescuing you from one hell of a jam," Brent said. "In the chase, two of the heisters were shot rather dead. However, the other two of the quartet managed to elude the cops, along with their ill-gotten gains. In fact, the loot and this pair are

still missing. The name of one of them remains unknown, the police having been unable to get a lead on him. They did identify the fourth man, though, through fingerprints found in the abandoned getaway car. Matching these prints with others already on file, they learned that he was the same Pete Spatz who'd done a single stretch for hit-running."

Garrett was frowning. "They never caught him."

"But they tried hard," Brent went on. "They tried to round up Spatz' friends for questioning, without result. They also tried to find Spatz' girl-friend who'd disappeared right after the robbery, also without result. The search spread into all our adjoining states, still without result. Nobody on earth seemed to have known Spatz, any of his cronies, or even any of their names. So the case dragged on resultlessly until yesterday, when Russo happened to find Spatz's fingerprints in the apartment where Anthony Lyster had absorbed two slugs."

Garrett sat up. "What?"

"Fact," Brent said happily. "You see, of course, what all this means, pal? Spatz had returned to town. Why? Because, of course, the payroll loot had been cached somewhere in this vicinity at the time of the getaway. The case had now grown cool enough so that Spatz could safely come back for his cut. Now, consider the fact that Spatz' prints were found in the room where Lyster died. It means—"

"Lyster was the third man, the other survivor of the holdup, and a doublecrosser!"

Brent looked delightedly complacent. "And there we are, aren't we? It would seem that Spatz returned to learn that Lyster had already dipped deep into the loot. Resenting that, he evidently demanded a goodly share of what was left. Lyster must have told him to go to hell, with the result that Lyster himself went to hell instead, with two bullets lodged near his avaricious ticker. Simple, isn't it? How much happier you'd be now if only poor deluded Val had snagged onto this realistic fingerprint lead rather than going hog wild, like the romantic female she is, over a packet of love letters."

"Hell's hinges!" Garrett blurted. "If we can nail Spatz before the cops get at him, we'll score a scoop that'll make the public forget all about Val's little fantasy. Moreover, this angle is one that could never make a big advertiser cancel a contract or sue us for libel. Go after it, Brent! Lean on it with everything you've got!"

"That," Brent said, rising with a broad grin, "is approximately what I had in mind to do."

BREEZING thoughtfully out of the city room, Brent felt himself at a distinct disadvantage.

Headquarters, with all its manifold facilities for crook-catching, evidently hadn't come anywhere near Pete Spatz so far. Russo, moreover, must have a set of Spatz' rogue's gallery pictures which Brent hadn't seen. Brent faced this same lead entirely single-handed, knowing only that Spatz might or might not be somewhere in the city. The job of tracing him unaided being obviously a tough one, he cast about in his mind for some quicker means of getting results.

The *Recorder's* urgent problem had two phases. Brent's part was to produce a new story spectacular enough to overshadow Val's disastrous little essay. Even if he should manage to pull off this feat, however, the Elbridge advertising account would still be lost and the libel suit would inevitably knock the *Recorder* off its foundation. Brent could think of nothing that would please Martin and Garrett more than Mrs. Elbridge's forgiveness. If he could somehow achieve that apparent impossibility, he would become the *Recorder's* blue-eyed boy forever more. And anything that might guarantee him complete and permanent freedom from Lora Lorne's petticoats, Brent considered, was well worth a try.

Since Mrs. Elbridge might be best approached through her daughter, Brent figured, he tackled this angle by driving directly to the Smith home at 397 Federal Street. It was a bungalow, neat and modest, quite unsuggestive of Mother's millions. Brent's ring at the arched door was answered by Thurston Smith.

Having recovered his aplomb, Smith greeted Brent without rancor, looking even more handsome now, with his curly hair shining blackly, his dark eyes sparkling and his smile one of confident affability. When Brent said he'd come with the latest news in the Lyster murder case, if they'd like to hear it, Smith answered, "Why not?" and hospitably ushered him in.

Astonished and less amiable eyes greeted Brent in the living room. Mrs. Elbridge was there with her delectable daughter Beth, both being their comely selves, the girl in a green dress matching her audacious eyes, the mother dignified and matronly, yet brisk.

"Mr. Brent," the owner of the city's largest department store said at once, "if you wish to discuss my advertising account or the libel suit, it's Mr. Snowden you should see."

"But I don't, Mrs. Elbridge," Brent said, putting on a smile which he hoped was utterly charming. "I'm a reporter, not a lawyer. Anyway, my private sympathies are all yours. Just between us, I think Miss Randall's story about Beth is the worst piece of journalistic injustice ever perpetrated."

"Really?" Mrs. Elbridge said, obviously pleased.

Beth's luscious smile made Brent profoundly envious of her husband. "Well, well," she said. "Putting it delicately, you sound like one hell of a swell guy." She eyed him teasingly, her long, crossed legs clad in sheerest nylons. With her mother running a big department store, she'd evidently accumulated a choice hoard of stockings.

"Still," Brent said, "a trial won't make anybody any happier. Our lawyer will dig many scandalous episodes out of Beth's past. Why air all that dirty linen? Wouldn't it be far better—"

Mrs. Elbridge rose decisively. "Mr. Brent, I adhere to high standards of conduct and, naturally, I'm very particular about the way my only child lives her life. I suppose it's no secret that Beth hasn't been a discreet young woman exactly, and I must say that if she were guilty of half the charges your paper has made against her, I wouldn't lift a finger to save her from her proper punishment. After all the warnings I've given her, I'd consider her hopelessly lost. But this time she's quite blameless, thank God, and since I'm certain of it, I'll stop at nothing to rectify the frightful wrong the *Recorder* has done her. Good night, Mr. Brent."

Stymied again, Brent nevertheless bowed courteously to Mrs. Elbridge as her son-in-law escorted her to the door. At the same moment the telephone rang. Beth untwined her lovely legs and rose off the back of her neck to answer it.

Brent went wandering about the room with apparent aimlessness, his objective a portable typewriter he'd spied sitting on a modernistic desk in the far corner. Its ribbon was black and dried out. Since a sheet of paper—blue, imprinted with Beth's monogram—was already rolled under the platen ready for use, Brent tapped a few keys while Thurston Smith said good night to his mother-in-law and Beth talked over the phone.

"Carl?" she was saying. "Carl who? Oh, Carl, of course! I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you. . . Well, later— That would be much better, yes. Do call me back, Carl. . ."

The specimen of typing that Brent had produced showed none of the characteristics of "Infatuated's." Neither could this machine have produced "Honey Bee's" letters, for her type was elite and this was pica. Brent turned back, unenlightened, as Beth put down the phone and Thurston Smith returned from the hall.

"How about a drink?" Smith said eagerly.

"I'll take a rain check, if you don't mind," Brent said reluctantly. "I'm busy running down another lead. It goes far in the opposite direction, you'll be glad to hear."

Smith turned back to the door with him. "You're being damned decent about all this,

Brent. Look here, I'm interested in this new lead of yours, naturally. Mind if I stroll along while you tell me a little about it?"

Brent said he'd like to, and Beth said Thurston could trot right ahead. She'd make herself a drink and be perfectly happy until he came back. She would, too, Brent surmised. She gave them a flashing farewell smile as they went out together.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bus to the Graveyard

PASSING through the picket gate, Brent sensed a movement nearby. A man, an uncertain figure in the darkness, had been in the act of crossing the street. He'd paused to stare at them. Now he turned abruptly and faded back. Frowning, Brent slid under the wheel of his car, took a last look around and started off. And although he drove with a sense of being watched, the rear-view mirror showed him that no car was tailing him.

By the time he turned into Webster Street, Brent had told Smith about the payroll robbery angle and Smith had answered with complimentary murmurs of astonishment. In front of 713 Brent found a special police car. Lights were burning behind the lowered Venetian blinds of the second-floor apartment that had been Anthony Lyster's. Saved the problem of somehow inveigling his way inside it, Brent simply opened the door and stepped in, Smith at his heels. Captain Russo was there, looking spooky and supervising an important operation.

"Not only does it take me more than a whole day to get a locksmith on the job, but also I have unwelcome reporters of both sexes getting in my hair," said Russo, who had no hair. "Don't let me keep you, Brent."

Brent said: "I've got plenty of time and you're not in my way," and he watched the other man in the corner. Fat and wheezy, he was the locksmith. He'd swung out a hinged section of a bookcase, had revealed a small black safe sitting in a niche and was attempting to defeat the combination. While he fingered the dial Brent noted the furnishings of the room, including a seductive-looking couch and a desk where another portable typewriter sat.

"Mmm," the locksmith said. "That's it!"

Russo wafted toward him, thereby giving Brent a chance to look more closely at the desk. First Brent saw that although a bell-box was affixed to the wall beside it, there was no telephone. Next he found a bit of dog-eared cypypaper in his pocket and fed it under the platen of the typewriter. He was tapping the keys when he felt a bony hand grip his shoulder.

"Brent," Russo's hollow voice said, edged with anger, "no meddling! Get out of here!"

Brent yanked the paper from the machine and stuffed it into his pocket. Russo had brought a long brown envelope from the safe. Its open flap revealed a sheaf of banknotes inside. They gave off a queer odor. Despite Russo's spectral glare Brent lowered his nose to them and inhaled a smell as earthy and dank as the breath of a grave.

"Out!" Russo commanded again.

Thoughtfully Brent steered Thurston Smith along with him. On the stoop he paused for a look at the specimen of typing done by Lyster's machine, but there was too little light. Stuffing the paper back into his pocket, he perceived a shadowy figure drifting along the opposite side of the street. His hand closed hard on Smith's arm.

"Don't look now," he warned, "but we're being haunted. That guy fading along over there is the same one I spotted in front of your home. He's showing a queer interest in this case, thanks to today's *Recorder*, probably. Pretend you haven't seen him and trail along with me."

Complying, Thurston Smith strode with Brent to the corner. As they turned, Brent sensed the shadow coming after them. They were on an avenue lined with stores, delicatessens and an occasional taproom. Brent steered Smith into the nearest bar. Ordering, he made a show of keeping up an animated conversation with Smith, meanwhile glancing into the reflection of the street windows in the mirror. Presently he nudged Smith.

"He's in. Ignore him."

The man stood just inside the entrance, his hat pulled low to shade his pasty face. He seemed uncomfortable in his ill-fitting suit and shiny new shoes. After a moment he shuffled into the rear of the room and sidled into a telephone booth.

"I got a glimpse of him," Smith said. "Who is he? What's he following us for?"

"Never saw him before," Brent answered.

They were finishing their drinks when the man eased from the booth. The telephone conversation he seemed to have had caused him to lose all interest in Brent and Smith. He left the tavern, but he went no farther than the corner. They saw him waiting there. Presently a bus labeled *Greenwood Heights* rolled into sight and stopped. The man boarded it and the bus ground on.

"Mr. Smith," Brent said, sliding off his stool, "my 'A' card permits a short ride toward Greenwood Heights."

THEY strode rapidly back to Brent's car. He angled it through somnolent streets until he spotted the bus cruising ahead. After running close enough to make sure their man

was still a passenger, he dropped back. Smith evidently considered all this to be something of an adventure. He was obviously excited. Brent let him fidget and kept following the bus through a suburban section.

His man remained among only a few passengers who lived on the fringe of the city limits. After several more stops, the bus speeded along with no one else inside. As it neared its final station, Brent cautiously pulled to the shoulder of the road, braked to a halt and cut his headlamps. When the bus stopped again the badly-dressed man alighted and hustled off in the darkness.

Immediately the bus turned about and headed back for the city. Brent slid out of his car. Smith hurrying at his side, he reached the stop and peered about. There was a scattering of pin-point lights from a few distant houses. A black-paved road led off to the right. Brent reasoned his man must have gone that way. Following it, with Smith swinging along at his side, Brent found no sign of him. They passed through even deeper darkness until twin gleams appeared ahead. These became iron posts topped by white globes. Between them stood a closed iron gate which was part of a fence trailing off into the night on both sides, and in the scant light a sign was visible: *Greenwood Cemetery*.

"What the hell!" Brent said. "If he came here he's got to come back soon, unless he intended to crawl into a tomb for keeps."

"I don't like this," Smith answered in a hushed tone. "Say, do you hear that? Listen!"

The slow night wind brought a muffled, rhythmic sound. Brent peered through the gate, trying to place it. Dark as the night was, the white gravestones were vaguely visible, like a company of watchful, frozen ghosts. The sound ceased, then came again and continued—until, suddenly, it was wiped out by a blasting report that sounded violent enough to shake the dead in their coffins.

It was a strangely pulsating explosion that seemed to burst out not just once, but five times in rapid succession. Startled, wondering if this effect was caused by echoes, Brent stared at Smith. Something like a groan of fear broke from Smith and Brent sensed his impulse to run.

"It's all over now," Brent said quickly. "Stick with me."

He skirted along the iron fence. Highest at the gate, it sloped until it was only waist-high. Scaling it, Brent caught a pungent scent in the air. He headed into the wind, muttering encouragements to Smith. Presently he paused, head lifted to listen to another sound—it was a car rushing along the highway beyond—then struck a match and cupped the flame.

Thin vapor floated in the flickering gleam. The sweetish-sharp odor was stronger here. Brent began prowling in a circle. He stumbled and swore as his match died out. Firing another, he stooped and felt Smith shivering behind him.

"Good Lord!" Smith gulped.

At the base of an elm a shallow excavation had been dug. The sod had been torn up and tossed aside. On the other side of the hole fresh black earth was heaped. On the ground lay a long-handled spade evidently filched from the caretaker's shed. Beside it, lay the man whom Brent had followed to this graveyard. He had come to an appropriate spot. An explosive force had transformed his face into a pulpy mass, his chest was crushed in and both his hands were almost completely torn off at the wrists. He'd died violently within the space of a second by the clock.

Halfway out of the hole, rotten with mold and also torn by a terrific blast, lay an empty leather bag marked in tarnished gold with the words, *Merchants National Bank*.

BRENT had had little sleep and a full day. He'd spent long hours at headquarters learning nothing from Russo, and it was already past five P.M. when he reached the city room. There he found Val Randall laboring disconsolately in Lora Lorne's wretched cubbyhole, but he had no time to enjoy the sight. Eight other reporters were belaboring their typewriters, which meant that the first deadline was perilously close. Before Brent could assemble his notes, Garrett discovered his presence and howled for him. He responded with placating gestures.

"Keep your hair on, chum," he said, feeling somewhat less sure of himself than he sounded. "I've got it sewed up."

"Then bat it out, but quick," Garrett ordered. "Brent, it's finally happened. We've all been served in the libel suit and on second thought Snowden upped the ante to two million. Mrs. Elbridge has had a bale of flyers printed to take the place of her full-page ads. She's hiring boys to distribute them from house to house for so much pay that we're losing our delivery crew to her, including Albert Foster, good riddance to him. The *Recorder's* demise is merely a matter of time unless you can save us with a series of the hottest stories we've ever printed. I hope to God you've got this one, as you say, sewed up."

"You'll read it," Brent promised, "and weep for joy."

He sailed into his typewriter. Having knocked off a steaming lead, he settled down to narrative details. None of this had been given to him by Russo. It was his own stuff and he put everything he had into writing up the story:

... a diabolically clever plan whereby a corpse was enabled to kill the man who had murdered him!

The evidence indicates that Anthony Lyster had planted an infernal machine inside the buried bag which had previously contained the Apex holdup loot, and it was this explosive device that killed Pete Spatz after Spatz had previously killed Lyster.

A reconstruction of the crime begins with the theft of the Apex payroll which was perpetrated by four crooks more than a year ago. In the resulting chase two of the crooks were killed. However, Lyster and Spatz escaped with their swag. Together, it is surmised, they buried the stolen money at the edge of Greenwood Cemetery, presumably agreeing to leave it there until such time as it could safely be dug up and divided.

Because Spatz' fingerprints were found in the getaway car, he was forced to flee the city. Lyster, however, being unsuspected, was able to remain here under the very noses of the police who were trying vainly to identify the nameless fourth member of the stickup gang. Meanwhile Spatz remained under cover elsewhere for a year.

Finally returning for his share of the loot, Pete Spatz went to Lyster. It is believed that during his visit to Lyster's apartment day before yesterday he learned that his ex-partner in crime had doublecrossed him. In retaliation he shot Lyster. It is logical to suppose, further, that Spatz had first forced Lyster to tell him where the "remainder" of the money could be found. In reality no money at all had been left buried at that spot. Instead, there was only an explosive device, like a land mine, set to blow up when it was uncovered. Digging it up, Spatz was instantly killed by the blast. In this way Lyster actually killed a man after he had himself been a victim of murder at the hands of that same man more than twenty-four hours before!

Brent heard Garrett's hard voice bawling across the city room. "Val! Snap it up! I need a Lorne column, and quick!"

How often Brent himself had been on the receiving end of this loathsome demand! How deeply he could commiserate with Val! How happily he could go on batting out his loveless crime stories while she wallowed in Miss Lorne's slough of ardorous dependency!

One proof of this theory is the paper money found by Captain Russo in Lyster's safe last night—money giving off a dank, mouldy smell, indicating that it had been long buried in the ground.

Brent kept his typewriter humming in high. As he finished each page he slipped it into the hands of the copy boy, who whisked it to Garrett's desk. Editing it at white heat, Garrett shot it down to the compositors. By the time Brent had hit the end of his last page most of his story had already been tubed back

to the city desk in the form of galley proof. It was to have a triple-deck, eight-column head. Brent sat back, drawing a deep breath of relief but looking oddly unhappy.

It was then that a lightning bolt of remembrance struck his mind. Hastily he fished into his coat pockets. He'd been so diverted by the sensational death of the man in the graveyard last night, and he'd been so continually on the move since then, that he'd forgotten about the specimen of typing he'd taken from the portable in Lyster's apartment. Here it was, a crumpled bit of paper. Brent pored over it, looking dismayed. Suddenly he bounced from his chair, heading for Lora Lorne's foxhole of fervor.

He hastened back to his desk with every letter "Infatuated" had ever dispatched to Miss Lorne. A moment's examination was enough. The sample from Lyster's typewriter revealed the three peculiar characteristics of "Infatuated's" missives. Brent stuffed all of them into his pockets and for a moment he sat with his jaw dropped.

WEARILY, then, he trudged into Garrett's corner and sat again, weakly. "Take it easy, chum," he said in a moaning tone. "Phone the pressroom foreman to hold it. My story's off the beam. You've got to kill it."

Garrett stared at him. "Off the beam? Kill it? Have you gone balmy?"

"No," Brent growled. "I've had an acute attack of enlightenment. It sinks that story. We can't print it."

"You're off your trolley!" Garrett barked at him. "It's what the doctor ordered! It's sound as a dollar! We need it like a baby needs its mother!" His eyes narrowed at Brent. "Just what the hell's wrong with it?"

"A little bit of everything," Brent said. "First take Albert Foster. He's a discredited witness, sure. He looked at that license number cockeyed, sure. But he wasn't having hallucinations on a grand scale. He didn't imagine a car beating it away from Lyster's apartment. There *was* a car."

"O.K., there was a car, and Pete Spatz was in it."

"If Pete Spatz fled the murder scene in a car, why didn't he drive himself out to the cemetery last night instead of taking a bus?" Brent morosely wagged his head. "The guy who got himself blasted last night couldn't have had any car, on account of he'd been out of prison only a few days."

Garrett's stare hardened. "What the hell!" "Obvious," Brent said. "He was as pale as a flounder's belly—prison pallor. He was wearing a prison-made suit—a bad job of tailoring, but still in fairly good press. He wore prison-made shoes, still shiny, not yet scuffed up. Being just out of the clink, he

couldn't have afforded a car *before* getting his mitts on part of the holdup loot. So the guy who got blasted in Greenwood Cemetery last night wasn't Pete Spatz at all."

"Wasn't Spatz!" Garrett swallowed. "If that's true, Brent, you've done a damn fine job of slaughtering your own story! I hope to God you can't prove it!"

"The proof's staring you in the face," Brent went on. "If Pete Spatz had taken a room inside our state prison, or inside the prison of any of our adjacent states, our local police headquarters would have heard about it automatically. Russo has had no such news. Spatz has only one rap on his record, and that's the hit-run incident predating the Apex holdup. So the guy who got killed last night couldn't possibly be Spatz."

Looking harassed, Garrett picked up the telephone. "Press room?" he groaned. "Hold the presses! Tear out Brent's story. Stand by to remake the front page." Then he peered at Brent with sick eyes. "If it wasn't Spatz, who the hell was it?"

"It'll be a job finding out. We'll have to canvas at least six of the nearest state prisons, just as Russo is probably doing. Anyway, the guy's name doesn't matter a damn, since Lyster couldn't have been one of the Apex holdup gang anyway."

Garrett held his dizzy head. "For God's sake, stop it! What you're telling me is that this beautiful story of yours, which at first appeared to be perfectly water-tight, is wrong—er than Val's. Hell's hinges! Why couldn't Lyster have been one of the Apex holdup gang?"

"Definitely not the type," Brent said. "He liked to lounge about in seductive settings. His pin-ball career never involved any first-hand violence. Anyway, an ex-racketeer who had scruples against dealing in the black market certainly wouldn't stoop to robbing a plantful of defense workers of their justly-earned dough. And there's one other indication that Lyster liked to work subtly. You've been following the letters of 'Infatuated' in the Lorne column? Well, he wrote 'em."

Garrett blinked. "Lyster wrote 'Infatuated's' letters? In God's name, why?"

The sound that forestalled Brent's answer was a wail of anguish. Val Randall was tripping across the city room on her high heels, her eyes streaming tears of direst distress. In her hands she had a sheaf of cypypaper, the makings of a new Lorne column. Vehemently she tore it to strips.

"I can't do it!" she screeched. "It's killing me! I'd rather die quick than be tortured to death by such a lousy stinking job! I've quit!"

In despair Garrett pulled his hair. He strode desperately into Kimball Martin's office. Val sobbed while Brent patted her

shoulder compassionately, for no one on earth could feel more sorry for her than he. In a matter of seconds Garrett was storming back, having found Martin's office empty.

"You're driving me out of my mind!" he roared at them. "Brent has just turned a sizzling, first-rate yarn into scrap paper, so we haven't got a follow-up to cover your brainstorm of yesterday, Val, and we haven't got a Lorne column either. God save us! Listen!" He graved Val's arm. "Our only hope now is to throw ourselves on the mercy of Reba Elbridge. At least we can fill today's front page with an elaborate retraction. You've got to appeal to her, Val, as woman to woman. Drown her in your tears! Melt her heart! Get her to reconsider her libel suit and her canceled contract. Think you can work that?"

"My God," Val said whole-heartedly, "I'll spend the rest of my life kissing her foot rather than be Lora Lorne for just one day!"

"Then," Garrett snarled at her, "get set to start smacking it, but good."

CHAPTER FIVE

Boomerang Scoop

THEY hustled from the city room and piled into Brent's car. Driving rapidly and heading for Reba Elbridge's show-place residence, Brent detoured into Federal Street on the chance that she might be visiting her daughter again. A gleaming car sitting in front of the Smith bungalow indicated that she was. They approached its entrance purposefully. Halfway there, Brent paused and jerked Val to a stop.

"We'd be a little better off," he said, "if we had an ace up our sleeve. Try to find one, Val. Ease around to the back door, sneak in very quietly and start snooping. Don't ask me what for! My God, we're fighting for our sanity and the salvation of the *Recorder*. If you can smell out some specific dirt about this outfit, it may give us a toe-hold on 'em. It's nasty, but necessary. Go ahead—prowl upstairs while Garrett and I keep 'em occupied in the living room."

Although bewildered and uncertain, Val nodded and drifted along the walk leading to the rear door. Garrett let her go with a shrug. He'd reached the hopeless point where any idea seemed good. Brent tapped the knocker and again Thurston Smith answered. Debonair and courteous, he gestured them in and as they entered Brent whispered in Garrett's ear: "Let me handle this. I'll have to feel my way along, but leave it to me."

In the living room, as before, they found personable Reba Elbridge and her attractive daughter. Also as before, Mrs. Elbridge eyed Brent coolly and Beth welcomed him with an enticing smile. Garrett repressed an im-

pulse to wade into them argumentatively while Brent became most affable.

"Please forgive this intrusion," he began. "We've come here most humbly. After all, the *Recorder* is dedicated to printing the truth, and the position you've taken against us is news which we'll present impartially, I assure you. And there's nothing personal in it either way—it's a simple matter of justice."

"Spoken like a gentleman," Beth said, her green eyes dancing. "Thurston, let's all have a drink on that."

Her husband immediately became busy at the little bar. Mrs. Elbridge, however, seemed disinclined to enter into a conciliatory spirit. Unabashed, Brent beamed on her.

"If only we had a capacity for foresight as keen as our hindsight!" he said, chuckling genially. "Those letters signed 'Honey Bee,' for example. We should have seen immediately that they aren't of recent vintage at all. Instead, they're quite old. Lyster's postman doesn't recall them, as he certainly would if he'd delivered them. But then, he's been on the Webster Street route for only six months, so they must have been delivered to Lyster by the present mailman's predecessor, more than half a year ago—months prior to your daughter's marriage, in fact."

"I can't see how this concerns me, really," Mrs. Elbridge said distantly.

"Oh, but it really does." Still beaming, Brent gratefully accepted a highball from Smith. "Another significant thing is the typewriter 'Honey Bee' used. Well, everyone knows that all standard typewriters have been off the market quite a while, and portables are available only as rentals. This means of course, that 'Honey Bee's' typewriter must be quite old now, if she still has it, or, if she doesn't own it still, she must have traded it in on a new one prior to the freeze order. All this raises the question of why Lyster waited so long to make use of her letters for blackmail purposes."

"Really—"

"It's a very interesting line of thought," Brent insisted in his most courteous manner. "You see, escape from blackmail is the most likely motive behind the murder of Tony Lyster. But what made it possible for him to use some woman's old love letters for a new blackmail scheme, one put into operation quite a while after they were written? Well, the likeliest possibility, of course, is that the woman, his former mistress, had meanwhile become married."

Thurston Smith spoke up. "She must have married one hell of a stuffy foggy, then. Good lord, this is a modern age. The double standard has largely disappeared. Women live independently and freely these days, and why not? At least, I feel that way about it. For

example, I know Beth played around a lot before she married me, but no man she'd ever known could blackmail her for that. It would be something she'd already told me and I'd laugh in his face."

"Certainly a broad-minded viewpoint," Brent conceded. "Suppose, however, that the blackmailer was aware of this attitude of yours. Suppose, instead, that he undertook to bleed Beth, not under the threat of telling you of Beth's past indiscretions, Mr. Smith, but of telling her mother?"

Mrs. Elbridge retorted: "What could anyone possibly tell me about Beth that I don't already know?"

"Suppose Beth had done something especially reckless which you actually knew nothing about," Brent suggested politely. "Her marriage to Thurston Smith was almost the last straw with you, Mrs. Elbridge, and this unknown incident could be made definitely the last one. You'd handed down an ultimatum to Beth. She must make good on this hasty marriage of hers, you told her, or else you'd disown her, write her out of your will. That would cost Beth an inheritance amounting to millions. Now suppose the blackmailer threatened to expose to you an old affair of Beth's which would lead to the further revelation that these young Smiths weren't really making a go of their marriage at all."

Beth and her husband looked startled, but Mrs. Elbridge answered loyally: "Preposterous! Thurston's quite successful in his business and Beth's so happy with him that she's become a new woman."

Garrett made haste to intervene. "Please overlook Mrs. Elbridge's remarks, Mrs. Elbridge. They're in very bad taste. The last thing in the world we wish to do is offend you further." He asked sternly: "Isn't that true, Brent?"

Still smiling charmingly, Brent nodded. "I am doing a lot of supposing, but, after all, what's the harm in it? No hard feelings, I hope? Just fascinating speculation, of course. To go on, for example, suppose Beth had romped about a bit with Tony Lyster at one time, say about two years ago. So far as you were concerned, Mrs. Elbridge, it might easily have been one of her less noticeable diversions. During it she could have written Lyster a series of passionate letters on a typewriter which she traded in soon afterward for a newer model. Suppose, despite their passionate strain, this affair didn't last, due to the fact that Beth met another man for whom she went overboard—one named Pete Spatz."

Beth and Thurston were staring at Brent, puzzled. So was Garrett, angrily.

"Enough of that, Brent!" Garrett snapped.

"I think Mr. Brent had better go on with it, at his peril," Mrs. Elbridge said quietly.

"He seems to be trying to make a point."

"I am," Brent agreed. "It's pure supposition, of course. O.K., let's surmise that some eighteen months ago, Beth met Spatz in one of the gambling dens or other low dives where she hung out. This new affair, the hottest yet, was another which Beth kept under wraps, let us say. Her reason for this, Mrs. Elbridge, was that you would strongly disapprove, Spatz being an underworld character. And the necessity for secrecy became even greater when Spatz took part in the Apex payroll stickup—naturally, because his fingerprints were found in the getaway car, and also because Beth was the one who'd spirited away the loot and buried it."

"What's this?" Mrs. Elbridge said sharply.

"Boy!" said her daughter, taking a quick gulp of her drink. "What an imagination!"

"Thank you," Brent said genially, ignoring Garrett's forbidding scowl. "As you say, all this is conjecture. Still, it's known that Spatz had a moll who vanished following the holdup, at the same time as the loot disappeared, and it's not too far-fetched to suppose that you were she. This finally gets us back to Lyster. Having pipelines into the underworld himself, Lyster doubtless knew of your relationship with Spatz and suspected that it was you who had cached the loot somewhere. Knowing also how drastically your long-suffering mother would react to the information that you'd acted as an accomplice in a major crime, he was therefore in a position to blackmail you."

"My goodness!" Beth remarked mockingly. "Mother, do you recall that I was getting such a big allowance from you, about a year ago, that I was able to pay somebody lots of blackmail?"

"Of course not!" Mrs. Elbridge answered. "At the time I'd cut your allowance drastically and I adhered to it strictly."

Beth laughed. "Anyway, Mr. Brent, you've got me all agog. This story of yours is better than the funny papers. Do go on with it."

"O.K.," Brent agreed, also chuckling. "As you've shown, Beth, Lyster couldn't have blackmailed you then. You had no money of your own to kick over, and his hold on you was none too secure. So he waited. Let's say he held off until a really good opening came—when you eloped. Your position then was most precarious, your mother being all but completely out of patience with you. So Lyster simply said: 'Pay up, babe, or I'll tell your mother you were mixed up in the Apex robbery, and she'll disown you, which will cost you a sizable fortune.'"

"It sounds perfectly thrilling!" Beth exclaimed. "What did I do then?"

"You paid up," Brent said, "and every time Lyster put the pressure on you, you paid up again."

"Put the pressure on me?" Beth repeated, her lovely eyebrows puckered. "How did he do that?"

Brent pulled a fistful of paper from his coat pocket. "By writing letters to Lora Lorne. He made them seem so important that Miss Lorne had to print them in her column. Tell me, Mrs. Elbridge, you read Miss Lorne's stuff, don't you?"

"Who doesn't?" Mrs. Elbridge said, smiling wryly.

"And didn't you notice a number of peculiar references in that series of letters signed, 'Infatuated'?" Brent pointed to the most recent one. "Here's a line reading: 'I get all my clothes at a big discount,' which, of course, is true of Beth, since her mother owns the city's biggest department store. Here's an earlier letter mentioning, 'my mother's prominent career.' And there are other such mentions—'since the death of my father,' and 'I've been in awful jams before' and 'my new husband' and 'my husband's financial work.' Rather subtle, yes, but taken all together, Mrs. Elbridge, didn't they make you feel that 'Infatuated' resembled Beth? They should have. That was Lyster's intention. That was his way of putting the bite on Beth. Every time she balked about paying up, he'd send another letter to Lora Lorne and another of these vague allusions would appear in print. Beth would become fearful that you'd tumble, and so she'd cough up again."

"Mr. Brent!" Mrs. Elbridge frowned at him. "Are you implying that all this is actually true of Beth?"

"Don't be silly, Mother!" Beth put in. "After all, as we've said before, we know perfectly well I had no money to pay."

"But you had," Brent pointed out. "The payroll loot. It had stayed buried for the better part of the year, being too hot to handle, but Lyster's demands forced you to dig it up and use it to keep him quiet."

"Keep him quiet!" Beth burst out incredulously. "Why should I? Just because Mother was in a high dudgeon over my marrying Thurston?"

"That might have been enough, but more particularly," Brent said, "it was because you'd married that same fugitive crook, Pete Spatz."

They all stared at him, Garrett in utter despair.

"Well, for God's sake!" Beth's husband exclaimed. "Sweetheart, were you married before?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, then, this little fantasy has gone far enough. Let's call it off and have another drink."

"One moment," Brent suggested.

He reached for the glass in his host's hand.

Plucking it up by the rim, he quickly flicked his breast pocket handkerchief around it and stowed it inside his coat.

"Captain Russo will be interested in it," Brent explained cheerfully. "He'll probably get a good set of prints off it. Pete Spatz' prints, of course."

"Good Lord!" said the young man. "Now I'm not who I am, but somebody else I've never heard of before!"

"You're Spatz," Brent insisted. "Who else could you be? Two of the holdup men were killed. Another, name unknown, got away—and I'll come back to him in a minute. You, of course, were the other, Pete Spatz. After staying in hiding somewhere for the better part of a year, you came back with your hair dyed and curled, looking so different from your rogue's gallery pictures that even Russo hasn't recognized you. Of course Beth was overjoyed to see you again. Still nuts about you, she romped off and married you under your new false name. And then trouble really started cooking."

Garrett was eyeing Brent in bewilderment now. Beth had grown tensely quiet and her husband was pale.

"Mr. Brent," Mrs. Elbridge said, frowning indignantly, "I demand that you explain yourself!"

"That's exactly what I'm doing. Surely the picture's clear enough now. When you handed down your ultimatum to Beth and your new son-in-law, they were in a spot. 'Make good!' you'd ordered them. But how could they? Well, they could make a show of becoming prosperous, thanks to the cached loot. Pete, or Thurston, opened an office downtown. My guess is that he's rarely there and that he doesn't have any clients. How could Pete Spatz be qualified as a tax expert, anyway? No, that office is a false front to account for his income. Meanwhile he charmed his way into your approval."

"But with Lyster blackmailing Beth and knowing how disastrous the truth would be to them if ever you learned the truth, they found themselves in a still worse spot. Lyster was demanding too much coin—leaving them so little for themselves that it threatened to destroy the false picture of happy industry which they'd built up especially for your eyes, Mrs. Elbridge."

"Now see here!" the son-in-law began, but Mrs. Elbridge coldly signaled him to be quiet. She said briskly: "Get on with this, Mr. Brent!"

"Naturally they had to put a stop to Lyster's blood-sucking. This they did, yesterday afternoon. No doubt Beth went into Lyster's apartment alone while her husband acted as lookout. Hearing the shots that killed Lyster, Pete quickly joined her. At once they telephoned

you at your office, Mrs. Elbridge, with their fake story of being delayed at home. How could you know they weren't actually at home, but at Lyster's place? You couldn't, of course. You took them at their word. Having established a false alibi in this way, they rushed off to join you. If your daughter showed no signs that she'd just murdered a man, Mrs. Elbridge, it's because she's a ruthless expert in the art of deception."

Beth was sitting straight, her green eyes flashing. "I've changed my mind about you. You're really a house for spouting all this guff. Of course you can't prove a single bit of it."

"You forget," Brent said. "You wiped the gun clean, but Pete wasn't so careful about the telephone. The prints of three fingers of his left hand were found on it, over the trademark of the company that makes practically all phones in this country, Western Electric. Captain Russo removed that phone as evidence, but I saw a close-up photo of the prints Pete left on it. You want more proof?" Brent produced his wallet and from it extracted a ten-dollar bill. "Can you give me two fives for this, Mr. Spatz? Or perhaps you'd rather not let me smell your money. It has the same moldy odor as the bills found in Lyster's safe, of course, because Lyster's money was part of the blackmail Beth had paid him."

"Last night takes us back to the fourth holdup man, whose name I know only partially—Carl. When Carl escaped the city a year ago, following the holdup, he promptly ran into a new, unrelated bit of legal trouble in an adjoining state and was jailed for a short stretch. Last night, having been released, he came back here, wanting his share of the loot you'd cached, Beth. I was here when he phoned you. When I left with your husband, he approached, recognizing Pete, but then he faded back, being uncertain of me. He followed us, then phoned you again, as you'd asked him to. You instructed him to meet you at the gate of Greenwood Cemetery right away, where you said you'd give him his part of the swag."

"Of course you had no such intention. You couldn't pay him. But you could get rid of him. You beat it out to the cemetery in your car, met him there, led him inside to the spot where the loot had actually been buried once—although only the empty bag was there now—and let him dig a little. Then—"

Brent's eyes narrowed at Beth's husband. "You'd recognized Carl. When you heard that blasting report you knew what had happened to him. Small wonder you were scared, standing there and hearing your wife blowing the life out of an ex-crony. And knowing, too, that she was protecting you as well as herself. The payroll angle was out now, and she

wanted no one to suspect that her husband was Pete Spatz. She wanted the dead man to seem to be Spatz instead. That's why she contrived it so as to blow away his face and both his hands, to make him unrecognizable as the man he actually was. There was a peculiar thing about the report of that explosion—or, rather, the reports of those explosions. It wasn't a single blast, with echoes, such as a booby trap would have made. Actually it was a series of five reports in rapid succession. What do you hunt, Pete? Ducks?"

"Smart-guy reporters," came the unpleasant answer. "Cut out this stuff, see?"

"Mrs. Elbridge," Brent inquired hastily, "when this splendid son-in-law of yours spoke to you over the phone at just ten minutes past five the day before yesterday, did you hear music in the background?"

Mrs. Elbridge paled, but lifted her head and answered: "But of course, Beth has a phonograph in her bedroom and keeps it going most of the time, so—"

"Mother!" Beth screeched.

At that moment, shocking everyone, a deafeningly loud sound vibrated throughout the cottage. This was not an explosive report, like last night's. Coming from somewhere upstairs, it was prolonged—a thin screeching combined with a rhythmic throbbing. Music! Powerfully amplified, the melody blared through the house. *Ah, sweet mystery of li-ife, at last I've found you-u . . .*

Beth screamed. Suddenly she broke into a wild run. Her sleek legs flashed up the stairs. Her husband pushed close to her high heels. Brent sped after them while the deafening music continued to rattle the roof. Near the top of the flight a door was standing open. In the bedroom beyond stood Val Randall. The radio phonograph which Val had put into ear-splitting operation, after discovering the record that sentimentally duplicated Lyster's, sat in one corner. Beth flung herself crazily at Val, but her husband, moving headlong, inadvertently bumped them apart. Brent, still climbing, saw Val fleeing the room and Pete Spatz slamming the door shut. A bolt clicked into its socket.

"Get away from that door, Val!" Brent warned.

He pulled her aside. For a moment there was nothing but tense silence. Turning quietly to a table in the hallway, Brent picked two books off it. He tossed them, not too hard, at the closed door. There was a response, instantaneous and violent. The bedroom was shaken by a swift series of blasting reports. Like the explosions in the graveyard last night, five of them came so rapidly that they seemed almost to be one. Simultaneously a pattern of gaping, splintered holes appeared in

the door and broken plaster dropped off the opposite wall.

"Automatic shotgun!" Brent gasped. "It's empty now. But she's probably got plenty more shells in there."

Dragging Val, Brent bounded down the stairway. In the lower hall Garrett was turning from the telephone. Pressing on, Brent encountered Mrs. Elbridge.

"Mr. Brent," she said hoarsely, "I can't thank you for opening my eyes, but at least I have the fortitude to abide by the truth."

Outside, Brent backed off to watch the bedroom windows. Beth and her husband weren't attempting an escape through them. Evidently—recklessly wild to the last—she intended to stage a siege. The odds were against her. In the night air a siren wailed, approaching, and seconds later another joined it. Garrett had telephoned headquarters first, and prowl cars were swarming. The end was inevitable, and this was all of the show that Brent cared to see.

"Pile in!" he howled at Garrett and Val, sliding into his car.

They were only halfway in when he spurted off. He whirled them dizzily across the city and led them in a headlong ascent of the iron stairs to the *Recorder's* city room. Garrett's telephone was clamoring. He picked it up.

"Snowden? Damn right we know your libel suit's off! Certainly Elbridge's can have a new contract! But that won't spare Beth. This paper prints the truth and we're telling the world she's a murderess as bloody as they come!"

He slammed the phone down and kept barking: "I'm holding the presses. Get at it, Val!"

Give it the works! Under your old by-line, of course. Hit it with everything you've got!"

"Wait a minute!" This was Brent, stupefied with dismay. "What the hell do you mean, Garrett? This is *my* story. I'm the guy who cracked this case. I'm the police reporter who's giving it—"

"What the hell do you mean, Brent?" Garrett rasped at him. "Just what've you done? You've punched a false alibi full of holes, maybe, but that's all. You didn't produce a single line we could print. Val had this case slanted right at the very beginning. It's panning out exactly the way she figured it. Naturally it's *her* story—naturally!"

"Good God!" Brent howled. "You merciless back-stabber, you can't mean I've detected myself right off the police trick again!"

"You have! You've proved that Val's the gal to handle it. Meanwhile, Grandma, don't forget we need a Lorne column for this same edition. Get busy, Lora!"

With utter incredulity Brent saw, as in a nightmare, Val feverishly pounding the typewriter which had, for one sweet but brief interval, been his own again. He turned away, shoulders drooping. When he trudged back he had his hands full of bobby-pins, old lipsticks, powder and a bottle of leg lacquer. Soul-sickened, he dropped them into the drawers of the desk that was again Val's.

Then he headed for that miserable cubby-hole in the far corner—a self-defeated man again condemned to exile with palpitant Lora Lorne, thinking wretchedly of the song he'd heard crying above the blasts of a murderess's gun: . . . *love and love alone the world is seeking* . . .

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