

Sweet Tooth  
of Murder  
by Day Keene

(from Dime Detective , 4406)

# SWEET TOOTH OF MURDER

*Mason was a good man, hard-working, well-liked. Why should anyone torture and kill him when all to be gained was a sack of sugar, some guava paste and a box of candy bars? And why should the late Mr. Campbell have dined on dry bread when his shelves were well stocked with jam and marmalade? Two murders for no apparent reason and no clues except a high-powered blonde who favored yellow!*



Stone dove frantically for the road as orange flame streaked from the blonde's gun. "Hello, sucker," she smiled thinly.

# By DAY KEENE

Author of

"The Female is More Deadly," etc.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Deadly Blonde

**I**T WAS five minutes of ten. A big man, given to flesh, Jim Mason was standing in the open doorway of his beach grocery store sucking at a bottle of cold beer when the gray Mercury convertible with the New York license plates roared up the lonely Gulf road from the direction of the Beach Club and braked to a screaming stop in front of his empty gas pumps.

"That's a hell of a way for a man to treat tires," he thought. He called, good naturedly: "Sorry. I haven't a drop of gas."

A vivid blonde in too tight yellow shorts climbed from the car and waded across the golden pool cast by the store lights. "We've plenty of gas," she said shortly. "But we're out of sugar. How's about some, fatso?"

The smile faded from Mason's face. He was self-conscious about his size. "I've some

sugar," he admitted. Still clutching the sweating beer bottle, he led the way inside the store.

The wind had been off shore all day. Night had failed to dispel the heat. The slowly revolving blades of two electric ceiling fans gave an illusion of coolness.

Pint-sized, coldly brittle, the blonde sized up the store shrewdly. "This is Mason's?"

"I'm Mason," Mason told her. "You're lucky you came when you did. In five minutes I'd have been closed."

He felt a vague and sudden uneasiness. The fat wallet in his pocket was stuffed with the day's receipts. He was alone. He didn't like the young blonde's manner or her cold appraisal of the store. He wondered why her companion had remained outside in the car. "How much sugar you want?" he forced himself to ask.

The blonde took a ration book from her purse and tore out the correct stamp. "Five pounds. And when you get the sugar sacked, I'll take a half pound of boiled ham, a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs, and two pounds of drip coffee."

Mason grinned at his own uneasiness as he sacked the sugar. "There's no fool like an old fool," he thought. "For a minute I thought it was a stick-up."

The blonde continued to prowl the store, examining items and prices. She paused briefly before a freshly opened case of guava paste, touched one red-nailed finger to the juice oozing from the wooden box and licked it thoughtfully. "What's this?" she demanded.

Mason glanced up from the ham he was slicing. "Guava paste," he informed her. "It's mighty good if you happen to have a sweet tooth. No points. And it's fresh, too," he added. "That just came over from Tampa this afternoon."

"Sell much?"

"Cases of it," Mason smiled. "It's shipped up from Cuba, you know."

"Yeah. I know," the blonde said quietly. She studied the case of guava paste. Two of the small oblong wooden boxes were missing. She considered briefly, then crossed to the door and called: "O.K., Chico."

**A** SLIM, swarthy, well-dressed man in his middle thirties swaggered in out of the night. "We'll have to work fast," he said crisply. He glanced at the watch on his wrist. "The State Patrol is due to pass a few minutes after ten."

Reaching over his head for coffee, Mason turned, a jar in each hand to face him. "Here," he demanded. "What is this?"

The swarthy man smiled thin-lipped. "No hard feelings, pal. But I'm afraid that you've walked into something." He turned abruptly. "It's all there?" he asked the blonde.

"No. There are two boxes missing," she told him.

He shook his head. "Damn! I was afraid of that when you called me."

Mason came out from behind the counter. "Now wait a minute. I don't get this. What the hell is this all about?"

Ignoring the fat grocer, the blonde reached up and pulled the string that switched off the ceiling lights. "You'd better roll the heap around in back," she advised her partner. "We can load it better there." She studied Mason's face thoughtfully. "Besides, this may take time."

The swarthy man left the store. Mason heard him start the motor of their car and drive it around to the rear door where it would be hidden from the road.

His fat jowls glistening with sweat, Mason took a quick step forward, stopped as the girl took a gun from her handbag and leveled it at his stomach.

"Easy does it, fatso," she warned him. "And if that State copper pal of yours should pull up in front and try the door, don't get any funny ideas or we'll have to let him have it, too."

As she spoke, she closed and locked the door, then began to pull the blinds

From the rear, the swarthy man called: "There's a big back room. I guess we'd better work on him out here."

*Let him have it, too. Work on him out here. This is mad, incredible,* Mason thought. *This ain't happening to me. I never even saw these folks before.*

"Look. There's some mistake," he pleaded. "You're confusing me with someone else. Take what you want from the store. But put that gun away. It might go off."

The blonde smiled at him without humor. "Into the back room, brother. We wouldst have words with thee."

Mason studied her face in the moonlight. He knew with a sick sinking of his stomach that he would never leave the rear room alive.

He planted himself flat-footed. "The hell you say. We'll have them right out here. I—"

There was a flash of silver in the moonlight as the blonde lashed him viciously across the temple with her gun barrel. Mason sagged first to his knees, then sprawled his great bulk on the floor. When he was down, the blonde struck him again.

As she raised the gun a third time, her partner caught her arm. "Easy," he cautioned her sharply. "Leave enough for me to work on. Remember, the man must talk."

**S**HERIFF ORIN WADE of Palmetto County pushed his broad-brimmed Panama back on his sparse gray hair and rolled a cigarette with fingers that shook slightly. "This is way out of my class," he admitted. "Who'd want to do that to Jim?"

Cole White, his deputy, rose from the floor where he had been kneeling beside the dead grocer's body, walked to the rear door and retched. "Whoever it was, was crazy."

The dead grocer wasn't pretty. Most of his teeth were gone. His face had been battered to a pulp. There were charred pine splinters under the nails of both his hands and feet. At the completion of the torture, he had been shot twice through the heart.

Wade lifted the corpse slightly and dug a slug from the floor with his jack-knife. "Small. Most likely a .32," he told his deputy. "If Mrs. Mason can talk, find out if anything's missing."

White left the room, willingly.

Still squatted on his haunches, Sheriff Wade considered the known facts. They were few. Mrs. Mason had found the body at ten thirty when her husband had failed to return from the store. Despite the fact that they lived just across the road, she had failed to hear the shots. Nor had she heard her husband cry out. The condition of the body and the fat wallet in Mason's pocket seemed to preclude robbery as a motive. Mason had known something that someone else had wanted to know.

Wade reviewed what he knew of the dead man. A hard-working, good-natured family man, Mason had been well-liked. He neither loaned nor borrowed money. He had been in business at the same spot for years. He owned his home and store outright. He bought and he sold for cash. There had been no other woman in his life.

"It beats me," Wade admitted. He took his hat from his head and wiped the sweatband. Jim Mason had been his friend. Both were native Floridians. They had been boys together.

White came in from the store carrying a yellow invoice in his hand. "Carrie's still crying too hard to talk," he said. "But I found this on a spike by the register. It's stuff that came in this afternoon." He consulted the invoice. "And unless Jim's got it back here, there are four hundred pounds of sugar, a case of Cuban guava paste, and a half gross of candy bars missing."

Sheriff Wade surveyed the storeroom with a jaundiced eye. "I mis-doubt it's back here. Since rationing came in, Jim always kept his sugar up front."

"Sugar points to 'shiners,'" White suggested.

Wade replaced his hat and pointed to a pile of sacked cracked corn. "That could be," he admitted. "But if it was 'shiners, why didn't they take that corn. Why didn't they take

Tallet? Why did they have to torture him?" The store phone rang shrilly. A car drove up in front. As Wade strode into the store, Doc Hanson, the county coroner, came in the front door. "It's Jim, Doc," the sheriff told him. "He's out in the back room."

"Shot?"

"And tortured," the aged sheriff told him grimly.

Hanson paused to lay a sympathetic hand on Mrs. Mason's shoulder. Sheriff Wade answered the phone.

"This is Pat Ginty, Sheriff," the State trooper told him crisply. "We've got another one."

"Another what?"

"Corpse," the trooper informed him. "The beach is just lousy with corpses tonight. You'd better jump in your car and come down here to Bill's Boat Basin."

Wade asked him who it was.

"Some tourist," Ginty told him. "A skinny little old guy about sixty." He explained that he had been on his way to Mason's when Brown, who ran a small cabana colony at the basin, had flagged down his car. "His name is Campbell," he concluded. "And from what I've got so far, he was a retired postal clerk."

"Shot, stabbed, or drowned?" Wade asked.

"Shot," Ginty said. "I'd say with a .32."

Wade told him that he'd be right down,

hung up the receiver and walked heavily back to the storeroom to tell his deputy and Hanson.

White was superstitious. "Death comes in threes," he insisted. "You mark my words. There'll be another one before the night is out."

THE boat basin was a mile up the Gulf Road on the edge of Fisherman's Pass. To reach it, Wade had to pass the Beach Club. An ornate, low, rambling building, flanked by expensive private cottages and cabanas, the swank hotel catered to the wealthy. Its rates began at twenty-dollars-per-day per person.

The sheriff acknowledged the uniformed doorman's salute with a curt nod. He didn't approve of the Beach Club. He didn't like its clientele. They drank too much for one thing. Few of them knew the value of a dollar. Eight months of the year, the beach lay placid, sleeping, in the sun. There was little, if any, crime. During the four-month tourist season anything might happen—and usually did.

Ginty was waiting for him at the road. "It's the damndest thing I ever saw," he told him. "There the old man is sitting, minding his own business, eating a bit of night lunch, when this dame walks in and shoots him."

Sheriff Wade climbed from his car. "What dame?"

"A blonde in yellow shorts," Brown, the cabana colony owner, offered. He amended his statement slightly. "I didn't see her shoot him. But I imagine it was she. Anyway she banged my door about ten thirty and asked which was Campbell's cottage."

"You'd know her if you saw her again?" Wade asked.

Brown wasn't certain that he would. "Blondes in tight shorts are a dime a dozen," he admitted. "I really didn't pay much attention."

Ginty led the way to the cottage. It was cheaply and shabbily furnished. A scrawny old man, almost bald, lay slumped on a plain deal table. The front of his old-fashioned, long, white nightgown was sodden with blood. He still clutched a piece of blood-soaked bread in one hand. A pot of coffee had boiled dry on a rusted two-burner oil stove.

Ginty pointed out: "Look at that expression on his face. He never even knew what hit him. She walked right in and let him have it."

Wade stooped and examined the bread. He knew his limitations. He was no detective. But he did have common sense. "There's something wrong here," he said dryly. His eyes flicked across the well-filled shelves above the stove. "Why should a man with peanut

butter, jam, and marmalade sit down to a piece of dry bread?"

"So?" Ginty demanded.

Sheriff Wade shook his head. "So I don't know. I just remarked, that's all. It could just be this killing is tied up with Jim's death."

"He traded with Jim," Brown offered. "He got some stuff this afternoon."

Ginty lifted the body by one shoulder to get a better look at the wound and his lips twisted into a scowl. "Here. What the hell!" he demanded. "Look at that powder burn."

He pulled the body erect so Sheriff Wade could see the charred material. As he did, the gun in the dead man's lifeless fingers slid from his lap to the floor with a dull thud.

Wade stabbed it with his flashlight. It was a cheap mail-order. 32.

Brown was the first to speak. He said: "Well, I'll be damned! It isn't murder after all. The old coot killed himself."

Ginty's mind leaped to conclusions. "Mason was killed with a .32."

"Yeah," Wade said. He mopped at the sweat brim of his hat. "Now all we have to do to pin his murder on a dead man is to find four hundred pounds of sugar in the back of Campbell's car."

The trooper strode out to the lean-to where Campbell's car was garaged. "It's out here," he reported. "But the guava paste and candy bars aren't here."

"Black market stuff, eh?" Brown gasped. "Campbell was part of a gang. But he lost his nerve when they knocked Jim Mason off."

Wade clapped his hat back on his head. "That's a lot of fish dust," he said hotly. His lean face colored slowly. "What the hell kind of rubes do these tourists think we are? Sure, a one-dollar bill gets you ten that's the gun that killed Jim Mason. But Campbell never killed him. And he didn't shoot himself."

Ginty wasn't so certain. "Then who did?"

"I don't know," the sheriff admitted. He strode to the door and looked down the road toward the Beach Club. "But a smart detective," he added, "should be able to find out."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Death Paging Mr. Becker

THE Beach Club patio was dimly lighted and flower-banked. Tall, feathery palms leaned gracefully against a star-studded sky. Against the muted trumpets of a name band, a silver-throated tenor was sobbing softly that he wanted a paper dolly all his own, a paper dolly that the other fellows couldn't have.

Herman (The Great) Stone sipped at his

Cuba libre glumly. "Another two weeks of this and I'd cut him one," he thought.

He was out of his class, and he knew it. In the neighborhood in which he had been born only head waiters, pall bearers, and corpses had worn dinner jackets.

A big man, six feet two, every ounce of his two hundred and ten pounds was bored. He did not like Florida. It was too warm. There were too many palm trees and too much sand and water. He missed the icy winds that howled around the corners of the Loop. He missed the snow and the sleet and the smog.

Most of all, he missed Connie.

He thought of the telegram that he had sent Inspector Grady and grinned. It had read succinctly:

FIRE ME, IF YOU MUST, YOU OLD  
FAT HEAD. BUT I'M COMING HOME,  
SIR, HERMAN SAID.

The Old Man would hit the ceiling of Central Bureau, but there would be nothing he could do. Herman was free, white, and thirty-one.

"If he doesn't like it, he can put it," Stone told his Cuba libre gravely. "This is too rich for my blood. I'm getting out of here."

He eased the big automatic that he had thrust into his cummerbund until it lay flat against the muscles of his belly. If the McGinnis mob wanted a try for him, he was ready that they should have it. Only his defiance with the local sheriff, who had been Inspector Grady's side kick in the first World War, and the knowledge that his stay at the Beach Club was costing the taxpayers of Chicago upwards of thirty dollars a day had made his stay endurable. Now, it was ended.

Feeling better, he ordered another Cuba libre, noting it carefully on his expense account. He looked up, wincing, as a uniformed page boy began to weave through the tables calling softly: "Mr. Becker. Paging Mr. Becker. A telegram for Mr. Herman Becker."

The boy saw Stone and started for him. The big man considered quickly. Grady hadn't been long in answering his wire. "To hell with him," he thought. "I can grab a plane in the morning and tell him that I didn't get his wire."

He peeled two dollars from his roll and laid them on the tray on top of the telegram. "You couldn't find me, son. You understand?"

The money disappeared as if by magic. "Yes, sir, Mr. Becker." The boy added in a lower tone: "I can mislay it if you like, sir."

Stone laid another dollar on the tray. "Now you're cooking with thermite." He added the three dollars to the string of figures in his notebook. "We could use you on the—" He

caught himself in time, amended: "In the business that I'm in."

THE tenor ceased sobbing about his paper dolly to a smattering of applause. A glib M.C. began to fiddle with the mike. Stone started to get up, glanced idly at the band shell, and sat back, no longer bored.

The girl's lips were a slash of crimson across the dead white of her face. Her long, black hair was parted in the middle and wound in two slim Grecian braids around her temples. Her small, compact, firm breasted body was sheathed in shimmering white. Her blue eyes were fresh and starry.

Stone glanced from the girl to her partner. He had the average man's contempt of men who live by dancing. The dancer was slim and dark and smiling, in well-tailored tails.

"The damn gigolo," Stone grunted.

A hard faced platinum blonde dripping diamonds at the next table leaned over and tapped Stone on the shoulder. "Why aren't you in the Army?" she asked pointedly.

The question no longer bothered Stone. He had heard it too many times. "The next time we're alone, sweetheart," he told her, "remind me to show you my scars."

The woman gasped. Her youthful escort started from his chair, took a second look at Stone, and sat back mumbling. Stone returned attention to the girl.

The M.C. had adjusted the mike to suit him and was concluding his introduction:

"... and so, at considerable expense, and for a limited engagement only, the management of the Beach Club takes great delight in presenting, fresh from their triumphant engagement of two years at the Vaal Club in Durban, South Africa, that world-famous dance team, José and Josita."

Stone joined in the applause. The girl did something to him. It wouldn't be difficult to pretend that she was Connie.

The dimmed lights dimmed still lower. The band began a dreamy waltz. A graceful blur of motion in an ivory spot, José and Josita glided, turned, and pirouetted, the girl's red lips parted slightly, her eyes two deep blue wells.

"Yes, sir," Stone assured his libido. "I could go for—"

He stopped short as the familiar muzzle of a gun pressed firmly against his neck.

"Don't move. And don't go for your gun," a girl's voice warned him softly. "I don't want to hurt you. All I want to do is talk."

STONE cursed himself for a fool. Inspector Grady had been right. The McGinnis gang had found him. He placed both palms on the table, answered quietly: "I think that you've made a mistake. My name is Becker."

He felt the gun waver slightly. "The hell

you say!" she whispered hoarsely. "If your name was Becker, you wouldn't have put your hands on the table. You'd have stood up yelling for the cops."

Someone called: "Sit down."

The gun eased away from Stone's neck and the girl slipped into the chair beside him. "It's still on you," she assured him. "And I haven't a thing to lose."

Keeping his hands on the table, Stone stared through the half-light at the girl. She was small, and blond, and frightened. She wore a sheath-like evening gown. A trailing chiffon scarf covered the gun, but it was there. To the best of his sober knowledge, he had never seen her before.

"My name's still Becker," he told her.

She said without heat: "You lie. Your name is Herman Stone. You're an ace on the Homicide Squad in Chicago. They call you Herman The Great because you pick murderers out of the air."

Stone realized that she was crying. The dry sobs that tore her body had been the movement he had felt. "So?"

She spoke mechanically as if reciting a piece. "You saw Hank McGinnis kill a man named Courtney Glass. He shot you twice, in the stomach, but you arrested him. He's now in the Cook County Jail awaiting trial for murder. When you got out of the hospital, your inspector sent you down here to convalesce and lie low until the trial because witnesses against McGinnis have a way of disappearing."

All that the blonde said was true. There had been several accounts in the papers. Only Stone's whereabouts was supposed to be a secret.

"O. K. So I'm Stone." The big detective sucked in his stomach slightly to ease the pressure on his gun. "What happens now?"

He braced himself against the slug he half expected. It didn't come. Instead, the blonde pushed her gun across the table to him. "That was just so you'd listen," she said tersely. "I'm in a jam, a bad one. You've got to help me. They're framing me for murder."

Stone covered the small automatic with one hand. It was a toy, but deadly at close quarters. He sat waiting for the gimmick. The girl sat watching him. "Who's framing you?" he asked her.

The hard-eyed little blonde smiled wryly. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Stone decided that she was either very frightened, or a damn good actress. Her low, throaty voice was pregnant with entreaty. "We can't talk here. Please. Meet me on the beach in five minutes."

She started to get up and Stone caught at her wrist.

"What is this?" he demanded. "Who's

waiting out there? Are you trying to finger me?"

"I swear I'm not." The blonde glanced at the dance floor. José and Josita's first number was almost at an end. "The lights will come on in a minute," she pleaded. "Let me go. No one must see us together. But this is big, I swear it is. And if you can clear me of the frame, I'll split the ice with you."

Stone shook his head. "What ice?"

She whispered: "Don't be coy. We've half a million dollars worth." Just as the music ended and the lights came on, she tore her wrist free and fled.

**T**HERE was a well-bred smattering of applause. "Now I've seen and heard it all," Stone thought. Ice meant diamonds. And a half million dollars was a lot of ice. Mechanically he started to applaud and found that he still held the blonde's filmy scarf in one hand and the automatic in the other. He stuffed them in his pockets and applauded heartily.

The clap of his big hands boomed like a drum above a light pattering of rain. The dance team glanced in his direction and the black-haired girl tore a rose from the sheath of American Beauties that she carried and tossed one to the big detective.

"He like," she told her partner.

José saluted Stone, smiling, white-toothed. "*Gracias, Señor. Estás muy cumplido.*"

"Thank you, sir. You are very courteous," the woman at the next table translated, sniffing.

"Dogs, drunks, dancers, and dowagers are my weakness," Stone assured her. "Thank God I'm a man of low tastes."

He laid a bill on the table and strode out of the patio into the lobby in the direction that the girl had fled. He knew either too much, or too little. If the little blonde had been a come-on, if she had been putting on an act, he wanted to know that, too. The Department had been after Hank McGinnis for years and Herman The Great was determined that he would be one witness who didn't disappear.

"You see a little blonde about that high in a yellow evening dress?" he asked a bell boy.

The boy pointed to the door that led out to the beach. "Yes, sir. She went out toward the boardwalk, sir."

Stone glanced at his watch. It was five minutes of midnight. "The witching hour of murder," he said sourly. He stepped back of a potted palm and made certain that the clip of his gun was filled. On second thought, he transferred it from his cummerbund to his pocket.

As he stepped from behind the palm, Sheriff Wade walked in the front door and Stone cursed softly to himself. He wasn't in a mood

for yarning. He had business to attend to.

Wade stopped to talk to the desk clerk, mopping his forehead.

"The old man looks worried," Stone chuckled. The grin faded from his face at the thought that Inspector Grady might have wired his friend to ask Stone to reconsider his decision to return. "I'll be damned if I will," he grunted.

He slipped through a French window to the boardwalk that led down to the Gulf. There were several couples leaning on the railing staring at the moon. There was no sign of the blonde. One hand on the gun in his pocket, Stone walked the length of the boardwalk cautiously.

Here the wind and the pound of the surf were stronger. He could no longer hear the band. A night bird screamed over his head and Stone drew his gun instinctively. A city man, accustomed to pavements, he was out of his element.

At the far end of the walk, he stood staring at the steps that led down to the beach. The blonde had said to meet her on the beach. His eyes swept the sand in the moonlight.

The girl was waiting. He could see her plainly as the moon emerged briefly from behind one of the swift scudding storm clouds that had materialized out of nowhere. She was alone. Beyond her was more sand. It stretched in an unblemished ribbon. There was no place where anyone could be hidden.

Satisfied, Stone thrust his gun back in his pocket, lighted another cigar, and walked rapidly up the beach. The sand sang under his heels. It even seemed to have an echo.

The girl's face was buried in her hands. Hard sobs shook her body.

"You, blonde!" Stone called. He had to shout to make her hear above the pound of the surf and the rising wind.

She heard him. Her lips parted in the semblance of a smile. Then her face contorted in fear. Her eyes began to roll wildly. "No, Chico! Please don't kill me!" she screamed. "I swear I didn't mean to tell him. I—"

A streak of flame spat by Stone's ear, followed by the blast of a heavy gun. A small, round hole that widened rapidly spotted the girl's forehead. She touched it with one fingertip as if in disbelief, then sank slowly to her knees, the light fading from her eyes.

Stone's hand dove for his gun. "What the hell!" he bellowed, whirling. "Who—"

The gun exploded a second time, this time in Stone's face. A searing pain like the brand of a white hot poker burned through the big man's skull. He clawed for a moment at air. Then he took two quick, unknowing steps, bent sharply at the waist and dropped lifelessly in the sand.

The man who had shot him smiled thinly.



"Death paging Mr. Becker, eh? Alias Herman The Moron."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Murder-Go-Round

**H**IS head a ball of fire and his nostrils stuffed with sand, Stone rolled stiffly on his back and lay staring at the sky. The stars were gone. The moon was obscured by clouds. The hard little pellets that had drummed him back to consciousness were rain. Drops, growing even larger, splashed now on his face. He licked at them gratefully.

"That," he thought, "was close."

He tried to raise his right arm and couldn't. It was asleep. He had lain on it after he fell. It felt strangely light and disembodied. He raised his left hand to his head. The slug had furrowed his scalp but the blood had already clotted. That meant he had been unconscious for at least ten or fifteen minutes. He sat erect with an effort and stared at the luminous dial of his watch. It was twenty minutes after twelve.

He looked across the sand to where the blonde had fallen, got to his feet swearing softly. There was no body. He fumbled his lighter from his pocket. There were a few

reddish stains on the sand. The rain was fading them rapidly.

Stone had no doubt that the girl was dead. He had seen her eyes glaze as she fell. But the killer had been smart. He had left nothing behind that might be traced to him. The sand of the beach was hard packed by the tide. Neither Stone's own footprints, nor those of the man who had trailed him from the hotel were visible. It began to rain still harder.

Tacking unevenly, the big detective walked back down the beach through the downpour to the stairs and up the boardwalk to the hotel. The sudden storm had driven the couples from the walk. The patio was rain-swept and deserted. The band was playing in the ballroom. The lobby was crowded with men and women in evening dress. A few had set up card tables and were playing bridge. Another group had clustered around José and Josita. Among them, he saw Sheriff Wade.

Stone made his way to the elevator, unnoticed. "Take me up," he told the boy. "Then tell Sheriff Wade I want to see him."

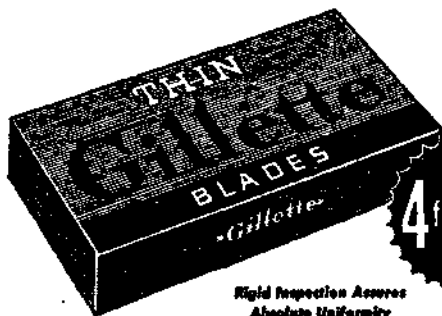
The boy gaped open-mouthed. The big detective's white dinner jacket was sodden with rain, blood, and sand. His close-cut blond hair was matted. One eye was swollen almost shut. "Holy smoke, Mr. Becker!" he gasped. "Who clipped you?"

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"I only wish I knew," Stone said dryly.

He went to his room, ripped off his coat and shirt, and examined his wound in the mirror. The furrow in his scalp was painful but not serious. He bathed his face and head with hot water and was painting the wound with merthiolate when Wade came into the room without knocking.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded. "The boy said that—" He stopped short and stared at Stone's head. "You've been shot!"

"And left for dead," Stone told him grimly.

"Who—"

"I'll be damned if I know," Stone admitted. He stoppered the bottle of antiseptic and returned it to the medicine cabinet. "But I mean to find out by morning."

In clipped, curt sentences he told Wade about the blonde who had asked him to meet her on the beach.

Wade asked: "She wasn't wearing yellow shorts by any chance?"

Stone stared at him, puzzled. "She was wearing a yellow evening gown. Why?"

The aged sheriff sat down on the bed wearily. "It beats me to hell," he said grimly. "And it's probably going to cost me my job. I came here to ask you to help me. I've got two dead uns on my hands, and there's a blonde who favors yellow mixed up in both killings." He told Stone of Mason and Campbell.

Stone asked incredulously: "And all they stole was four hundred pounds of sugar, a case of guava paste, and a box of chocolate bars?"

Wade nodded. "Leaving a wallet with almost five hundred dollars in it on Jim's body."

"And you found the sugar in Campbell's car?"

The sheriff rolled a cigarette, said dryly: "That was a plant and a poor one to pin it on Campbell. He had no more hand in torturing and shooting Jim than I had. Furthermore," he concluded, "I no sooner walk in the hotel, than that little Spanish dancer, Josita, comes running up to me all hot and bothered because some of her jewels and her maid have turned up missing."

STONE considered briefly, then took a bottle of rye from the closet, uncorked it, and half filled a water glass. His head couldn't hurt any worse than it did. The whole affair didn't make sense. There was no central pivot point.

If the blonde had been used as a lure to get him down on the beach, why had she been killed? Who was Chico? Stone tried to recall the exact words that the girl had used.

"I'm in a jam, a bad one. You've got to help me. They're framing me for murder."

The girl's fear had been genuine. Of that much Stone was certain. But who were *they*? And if the girl was the same blonde who had been involved in the Mason and Campbell murders, what had the half million dollars worth of diamonds she had mentioned to do with the theft of four hundred pounds of sugar, a case of guava paste, and a half gross of candy bars? What had Mason known? Why had he been tortured? And where did he come into the picture?

Stone refilled his glass and offered the bottle to Wade.

The sheriff shook his head. "I'm woozy enough now. This couldn't be the McGinnis mob down here after you and picking up some change to pay expenses?"

"I doubt it," Stone finished his drink and rinsed the glass. "Whoever shot me wasn't from Chicago. Our boys do a better job." He changed to a pair of gray flannels and a sports shirt. "The lad who trailed me from the hotel was either an amateur or working against time. Otherwise he would have stopped to make certain I was dead. What's this maid of Josita's look like?"

"We didn't get that far," Wade admitted. "José doesn't speak English. And Josita was so excited that she was just beginning to make sense when the boy said that you wanted to see me."

Stone handed him the phone. "Ask her to come up here. Then get Brown on the wire. I want a description of the blonde who asked for Campbell."

"You think they're the same?"

"They could be."

The big detective fished the chiffon scarf and the small automatic from the pocket of his sudden dinner jacket and laid them on the dresser. The affair was beginning to form a vague pattern in his mind.

José and Josita came in while Wade was still talking to Brown. Stone stood admiring the girl. She wasn't as pretty at close quarters, but she oozed sex appeal.

"Mr. Stone is a big detective from Chicago," Wade told the dance team when he had completed his call. He added, in a lower tone to Stone: "Campbell was murdered all right. A tech man from the State Patrol just made a paraffin test of his hand and it came out as clean as a hound's tooth."

José looked at him, puzzled.

"José does not speak the Eenglish," Josita explained to Stone.

"This maid of yours," he asked her. "What does she look like?"

"Ees vary bad, thees girl," Josita told him earnestly. "José and I to her are vary good. She ees, what you say, weethout moneys, stranded in Durban. José and I geeve her the job. We pay the passage to thees country."

Her blue eyes flashed angrily. "And now, she deesappear and weeth her go my reengs."

She held out her hands for Stone's inspection. They were small and white and ringless.

"Describe her," Stone demanded.

Josita wrinkled her forehead prettily. "Ees about as beeg as I weeth yellow hair." She tried to describe her with her hands, saw the chiffon scarf on Stone's dresser, snatched it up and faced him angrily. "Ees Wanda's scarf! What ees eet doing here?"

José said something in rapid Spanish and Josita turned to Sheriff Wade. "You know thees man? You trust heem?"

Wade assured her that Stone was a detective. "And the description checks," he told him. "This Wanda was the girl Brown saw."

Stone picked the automatic from the dresser and showed it to the dance team. "Did either of you ever see this before?"

José took it in his hands, examined it closely, and shook his head.

Stone raised one eyebrow slightly but said nothing. "Suppose," he suggested to Josita, "that you tell us everything you know about this Wanda."

The black-haired girl's eyes flashed hotly. "Ees a bad girl, that wan. She weel come no good end."

And by frequent interpolations in Spanish to José she spoke rapidly for five minutes while Stone made frequent notes.

THE missing blond girl's full name was Wanda Murray—at least so her passport had read. She claimed to be half of an American sister song-and-dance team and had been stranded in Capetown when she and her partner had quarreled. The partner had subsequently married a rich Boer farmer in the Transvaal. Wanda had come to José and Josita's dressing room at the Vaal Club in Durban and had asked them, as fellow performers, to help her. Knowing that they were about to return to the States after a brief engagement at the Pink Flamingo in Havana, Josita had given the girl a job as her maid and secretary. The salary that they had been able to pay her was small, but they had paid her steamer passage and all of her expenses.

Tears formed in Josita's eyes. "And thees ees the way she repays us," she concluded. She examined her ringless fingers. "We are not reech, José and I. We, how you call eet, dance for our suppair. And my reengs were not censured."

Stone demanded: "And when was the last time you saw her?"

Josita consulted with José in Spanish, told him: "Eet was just before the performance tonight. She came eento our dressing room

all excited, steel wearing a pair of play shorts, and wanted we should geeve her much moneys so she could go away."

Sheriff Wade got up from the bed. "That clinches it. But what the hell did Jim Mason know? And why should she want to kill Campbell?"

"Keel?" Josita asked, excitedly. "Wanda has keel someone?"

Stone patted the girl's slim shoulder. "Don't you worry your pretty head about it. This doesn't concern you at all." He thought a moment, the pattern growing clearer in his mind, and added: "Just tell me this. During your stay in Durban did you ever hear her say anything about illicitly purchased diamonds?"

Josita translated the question into Spanish for José. He shook his head and answered her in kind.

The black-haired little dancer's eyes grew round. "Thees ees the first time I hear thees," she told Stone. "José says ees vary beeg penalty for buying diamonds from an unlicensed sellair. Ees sometheeng about a syndicate."

"That's right," Stone admitted.

Wade looked at the big man, puzzled.

Stone explained, crisply: "It only costs about twelve dollars a carat to mine diamonds. The high artificial value is maintained by the De Beers' syndicate by restricting the output. Custom duty doubles that. The blonde mentioned a half a million dollars worth of diamonds. It could be that she was tied in with a gang of I. D. B's., and just took the job with Josita to smuggle the ice into this country."

The dancer stared at him wide-eyed. "But the custom man ees make a vary careful search. They go through each piece of luggage."

Stone shook his head. "They wouldn't have come in with your luggage. A gang would be too smart for that."

José spoke rapidly in Spanish, tapping one lean, brown finger on the dresser.

"José say," Josita translated, "that you should look for *un Italiano*. A young, swarthy *Italiano* who shows two gold teeth when he smiles. He says he ees see Wanda talk een confidence to thees man both een Durban and een Havana."

Stone added the description to his notes, then stabbed a finger at José. "His name wouldn't be Chico, would it?"

If he expected reaction, there was none. The male dancer merely looked puzzled. Josita translated the question, told Stone: "José says that he does not know hees name. He ees not know thees man. He ees but see heem talking to Wanda."

Stone let it go at that. "O. K. And thanks a lot."

He assured Josita they would find her rings if possible, thanked them for their information and told them they could go.

They left chattering volubly in Spanish.

"WHO'S this Chico?" Wade demanded.

"The lad who shot the blonde and had a whack at me," Stone jerked a thumb after the dance team. "And check them with customs in Tampa. Make certain they're who they say they are and that their passports are in order."

The sheriff protested: "What the hell! You don't suspect—"

Stone slipped into a loafer coat. "Re half a million dollars, I'd suspect Morgenthau, Jr. How many men can you deputize in the next half hour, men whom you can trust?"

Wade considered. "Perhaps a dozen."

"Get them. If we can find the body of the little blonde we'll have a starting point. Have them search every room if they have to. To hell with what the management says. This is murder. And I've a hunch her body is still here on the grounds."

"And the gold-toothed Italian lad?"

"Cable Havana. Find out if he's known there. And check with the State Patrol, the St. Pete, Clearwater, and Tampa cops. If he's mixed up in this, the chances are he's in this section of the country and someone else beside José has seen him."

Stone stuffed his gun between his belly and his belt and strode down the hall, Wade trying to keep pace beside him. "And you—"

"I'm headed for Mason's. That's where this whole thing started. And no killing is ever perfect. All killers leave some clue!"

Stone left Wade in the lobby wondering which of his phone calls to make first, and damning all crime and tourist seasons.

Under the canvas marquee that stretched from the front door of the Beach Club to the drive, Stone sucked his lungs full of air. It was hot and moist. It reminded him of the steaming air in the Garfield Park conservatory.

"Now I know how a banana feels," he thought.

He suppressed a nostalgic twinge for the crisp, biting, northern nights and stared at the star-studded sky. The sudden downpour had ended as abruptly as it had begun, leaving the road between the Beach Club and the parking lot an inch-deep silver river that gurgled in the moonlight.

There was no longer a doorman on duty. His car was across the road. There was nothing to do but wade. Stone turned up the cuffs of the gray flannel slacks that Connie had insisted he buy and sloshed glumly through the water.

As he reached the middle of the road, a gray Mercury convertible with New York license

plates roared from the parking lot, its bright lights blinding him and wings of water cascading outward from its wheels.

Stone shouted angrily: "Look out, you damn fool! You're going to splash—"

The car slowed abruptly as it reached him. Stone had a fleeting glimpse of a blond girl in yellow crouched low behind the wheel.

"Hello, sucker," she smiled thinly.

Stone stood in paralyzed silence, the hackles rising on his neck.

One of the blonde's hands left the wheel. Moonlight glittered dully on blued metal. Forcing himself to move, Stone dove frantically for the road as orange flame streaked the night. A slug burned across his jaw. Another tugged at his ear lobe. The remainder shattered the plate glass in the front door of the Beach Club.

The big detective hit the wet road, rolling, his own gun in his hand. As the motor of the car accelerated, he shook the water from his eyes and blasted at the moving tail-light of the car. The red light winked out abruptly but the car continued to gather speed.

Sheriff Wade hurried out on the porch, a long-barreled dogleg in his hand. "You hurt, Herman?" he demanded.

Stone picked himself up from the road. The sports clothes into which he had changed were soaked. White beach sand clung to him like rime. He would have to change again.

"Hell, no!" he exploded hotly. "But cut off the search for a dead blonde and put out a pick-up on a live one." He surveyed his sodden clothes glumly as he limped back to the porch to join the sheriff. "Put a stop at all the bridges and causeways. Enough is enough. This is the second time tonight I've done a strip tease to the tune of *Pistol Packin' Mama*."

"It was the same blonde, then? The one you thought was dead?"

Stone stared up the road in the direction that the car had disappeared. "If it wasn't, it was her sister," he said grimly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Hot Ice

APERT, young girl reporter from the St. Petersburg Times stopped Stone as he tried to enter the store. "You connected with this case, Mister?" she demanded. She poised her Graflex at her eye. "You an FBI man, or something?"

The big detective thought of Inspector Grady and winced.

"... and if you get in a jam, or get your picture in the papers, or do anything that might tip off the McGinnis gang to where you are before we can bring Hank to trial,"

*the red-faced old Irishman had warned him, "I'll pull you off the gravy squad, put you back in brass buttons and a blue uniform, and send you out to herd the nannygoats in Craigin before you can say Mayor Kelly."*

"No," Stone shook his head. "I'm just a friend of Sheriff Wade. My name is Herman Becker. I'm in the garment business."

She sniffed and lowered her camera.

Stone strode on into the store. He felt more like himself than he had in weeks. He was wearing his work clothes, the only dry ones he had left. A battered gray Borsalino was pushed back on his head. The vest of his blue serge suit was smudged with ashes. A big cigar was tucked in one corner of his mouth.

Uniformed men filled the store. The back room was blue with smoke. An opened bottle of rye stood on a packing case. There was a constant coming and going. The phone rang incessantly.

Wade looked up as Stone entered. "There's no trace of the car," he told him, "nor any of the blonde. At least they haven't shown up at any of the causeways."

Thomas, the tech man of the State Patrol, said crisply: "I'm beginning to doubt that there is a blonde." He waved a hand around the room. "There wasn't a single print in here, or any in Campbell's cottage."

"That merely shows it's big time," Stone told him. "Petty crooks would have taken Mason's wallet."

White, Wade's deputy, scoffed: "I still say it was a black market killing by a gang of petty hoods who lost their nerve and dumped the sugar in Campbell's car. Look"—he pointed out the three known missing items on the invoice—"this is the stuff that came in this afternoon. Four hundred pounds of sugar, a case of guava paste, and a half gross of candy bars. Does that look big time to you?"

Stone glanced at the wholesaler's name. It was de Alvila & Garcia of Ybor City, Tampa. "You know them?" he asked Wade.

The sheriff shook his head. "Garcia is a common Cuban name. It's like Smith in this country."

"And it was Cuban sugar?"

Pat Ginty shook his head. "No. I saw the sacks in Campbell's car. It came up from Clewiston."

"That's down on Lake Okeechobee," White added, "about two hundred miles from here."

Stone drew a mental line through the item. The same held for the candy bars. They were Milky Ways made in Chicago. "But what the hell is guava paste?" he asked.

Wade explained: "It's a jam-like paste that's made from guavas. Most of it comes from Cuba in little wooden boxes."

"Then that's our baby," Stone said shortly. "Someone get this de Alvila & Garcia on the phone."

"But it's two o'clock in the morning," White protested.

Stone took a drink from the bottle, then felt his scalp wound gingerly. "Yeah? So what? That blonde isn't looking at a clock. José and Josita made a stop in Havana, didn't they? So what does this Wanda do? She gets a bright idea and stuffs the hot ice in this paste. I tell you, it's a natural."

"Sure," White jeered. "And then she consigns the case to Jim Mason, a guy she never even heard of."

"That takes explaining," Stone admitted.

State Trooper Ginty shook his head. "But we don't know it was diamonds. Our only tip there is what the blonde told you. And why should she tell you the truth?"

"She was boasting," Stone said promptly. "Most crooks are like that. They're cleververts. They have to tell someone how clever they are, even if it's only a lug they intend to rub out."

White protested: "But why mix you in at all?"

A THICK flake of white ash dropped from Stone's cigar onto his coat lapel. Mindful of Connie's admonitions to keep neat, he rubbed it thoughtfully into the goods. "That's one I don't know," he admitted. "Look. Here's how I see the picture. This Chico and Wanda pick up a flock of cheap hot ice in Kimberly, Capetown, or Durban. She makes a contact with José and Josita as Josita's maid and gets it as far as Cuba. So far, so good. But they're stuck. What with the war and all, getting that much ice through the customs is a sticker. So what do they do? They buy up a case of this Cuban paste, load it with the stones and consign it to some front in Tampa. But somehow it goes astray and winds up here at Mason's. They trail it down through the wholesale house, and then the fun begins."

"But why torture Jim?" Wade demanded.

Stone grunted. "That's elemental. *Because he had already sold some of it and he wouldn't spill the customer's name.*" Struck by a sudden thought, he asked Wade: "You checked José and Josita with Tampa customs?"

Wade nodded. "I did." He consulted a slip of paper. "His full name is José Rosario Garcia La Rioja Cordoba. He's from Argentina originally. Josita is Brazilian, like that Carmen Miranda dame. The lad I talked to remembered them real well. They came in on a six months *artiste* permit. What's more, they had a Wanda Murray with them when they docked. She was listed as Josita's maid."

A car braked to a screaming stop in front

of the grocery store and a County trooper hurried in. "We've found the gray Mercury, Chief," he reported. "No wonder it didn't show up at any of the causeways. You know that sharp bend in the road, about three hundred yards below the Beach Club, just before you get to Bill's Boat Basin?"

"I do."

The trooper continued: "Well, that's where it is. From the skid marks in the sand, the blonde failed to make the turn and hit the water doing ninety. That was at high tide. Now the car is kinda standing on its nose with only the rear end showing."

Ginty and White raced for their cars.

"The blonde's still in it?" Stone demanded.

The trooper grinned. "I doubt that like hell, Mister. The tide comes through the Pass at sixty miles an hour. It goes out almost as fast. And there's nothing in an open job like that to hold her in. Unless she's hung up on a sand bar, her body's somewhere out in the Gulf by now."

Wade left with the trooper. Stone sat staring at the rye. The alleged solution was too pat, too perfect. With Wanda Murray established as demised, he doubted if Mason's and Campbell's murders ever would be solved. He would never know why the frightened little blonde—and she had been frightened—had lured him to the beach. Sweat starting on his forehead, he suddenly doubted that she had.

*The girl who had begged him to meet her on the beach, the girl who had offered to split the diamonds with him if he would save her from a murder frame, and the blonde who had shot at him from the car, had not been the same girl.*

He recalled his own words, grimly: "If it wasn't, it was her sister."

*Wanda Murray was dead. He had seen her die.*

**H**E STRODE to the front door of the store and stared out into the night. It was still hot and moistly oppressive. He was alone. The State and County troopers, the several photographers, even the girl reporter, had left for the new sensation at the Basin.

The store phone rang behind him. About to answer it, he turned back again to face the night, the short hairs on his neck tingling. Somewhere out in the darkness, someone was watching, waiting. He could sense them.

"They've been clever," Stone mused. He thought he saw the whole thing now. The hell of it was, he couldn't prove a thing.

He turned back to answer the phone, one hand on the butt of his gun.

"This is Doc Hanson calling," a weary voice informed him. "I'd like to speak to Sheriff Wade."

Stone told him that Sheriff Wade was not

there at the moment but offered to take a message.

"Tell him," Hanson said, "that I have just completed the autopsy on Campbell's stomach as that fool Chicago detective suggested, and I didn't find a thing suspicious. There was nothing but some bread—"

"And some guava paste," Stone finished the sentence for him.

Hanson gasped: "How did you know? Who are you?"

"I'm Herman The Fool," Stone told him.

He banged the receiver back into its cradle. The phone rang immediately. He disregarded it. He had been right about the paste. Campbell had been a customer of Mason's. His sweet tooth had killed him. Tortured beyond endurance, the grocer had gasped his name.

Stone strode back into the storeroom and finished the bottle of rye. With his fellow members of the Headquarter's Homicide Squad and all of the physical and technical resources of a large city force behind him, this thing would be simple. As it was, he would have to play it on his own. And he would have to play it quietly. If he was given any of the credit, the Old Man would skin him.

The rye set his wounded head to throbbing and his prickly heat to itching. He had to open the neck of his shirt to breathe.

Damning the deep South, he thumbed the safety off his gun and walked warily out to his car, momentarily expecting a gun blast that didn't come. "They're saving me for something worse," he thought. "I know, and they know I know."

He drove slowly to the Beach Club and parked just off the road. The lobby was deserted. A good many of the cars in the parking lot were gone. As he sat scowling, debating his first move, the early morning bus from the airfield at Tampa drew up in front of the marquee and three smartly-dressed women, and a man got out. All he could see was their backs. One of the women reminded him of Connie. Her heels clicked in the same rapid tattoo as she followed a bell boy into the lobby.

The big detective grinned. "Connie would give me hell," he thought, "if she was here. She'd say this wasn't my affair and if the local cops couldn't solve it, why should I risk my neck for free?"

He drove on slowly, debating if he should tell Wade what he suspected, and wash his hands of the affair. He knew he wouldn't.

**T**HERE was an almost festive air at the Basin. The missing cars from the hotel parking lot rimmed the water in a semi-circle, their headlights spotlighting a huge floating crane.

As Stone parked, a gasp rose from the

crowd, changed into a collective sigh. The rear end of the sunken car had lifted briefly from the water, only to sag again.

Stone sat staring at the faces lighted harshly by the headlights. Wade, White, and Ginty formed one group. All were up to their knees in the shallow water that sloped abruptly from the bank, Wade directing the operations of the crane.

He looked for Josita and saw her standing on the pier, bright-eyed with excitement. She was wearing slacks and a sports coat but had thrown a white Spanish shawl over her head. He could not see José.

Not far from where Josita stood, the hard-faced platinum blonde, minus her diamonds, but clinging tightly to her youthful escort, watched the scene with interest.

Brown, the owner of the cabana colony, came up to Stone's car. "I've warned the county a hundred times," he complained, "that someone was going off that curve. But would they do anything about it? No. Someone has to go and get themselves killed."

There was a creaking of steel cable and the submerged car broke water again, this time its full length exposed.

A woman in the crowd screamed shrilly: "My Gawd! That's my car!"

Stone pushed Brown aside, too late to see who had called out. Josita was staring with interest at the car. The platinum blonde was biting at her knuckles.

Sheriff Wade turned and faced the battery of lights. "Who said that?" he demanded.

There was no answer. The crane swung the car to the bank. There was no body in it. Stone had not expected that there would be.

State Trooper Ginty fished a soggy mass from the rear seat. It was a paper carton filled with equally soggy candy bars. He held up a handful of Milky Ways. "Here's part of the loot," he told the crowd.

The sheriff sloshed up on the bank and tore a card case from the steering post. "Who was the woman," he repeated coldly, "who called out: 'My God. That's my car!'?"

A woman pointed to the hard-faced blonde. "It was Mrs. Wainright. That lady over there."

"Wainright?" Wade looked from the woman to the wet card case in his hand. "That's not the name on the license," he announced.

Her escort swung on the sheriff wildly. "Shut up, you damn rube."

Two County troopers closed in on the woman and the man and hustled them to a patrol car. Cole White, who had been fiddling with the glove compartment, called: "Bingo!" He held a jewel case over his head, then bent to examine it under a headlight. A glitter of cold crystal fire lay on the wet black velvet.

The crowd moved closer, curious, the black-

haired little dancer among them. "My reengs," she cried. She clapped her hands, excited. "Come, queek, José. The police have found my reengs!"

Stone watched José push rudely through the crowd. Josita greeted him in voluble Spanish, then threw her arms around White's neck and kissed him on the lips.

The deputy's face colored as half a dozen flash bulbs popped. The watching crowd rocked with laughter.

"She could do that to me," Brown said.

Stone turned on his ignition and made certain that the road behind his car was clear. "I imagine," he said dryly, "that she's done it to a lot of guys."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Message to Garcia

THE night outside the windows of his speeding car was a blur of scrub palmetto and tall, long-leaf yellow pine. The tread of the tires made a soothing, sucking sound. A half mile up the road, coming swiftly closer, the red lights of the twin radio towers on either side of the causeway burned dully like the wing lights of low flying planes. Stone glanced in his rear vision mirror. The car that had pulled out of the boat basin behind him was still following doggedly.

He took his gun from his belt and laid it on the seat beside him. Florida, New York, California, Illinois, all chains were alike. Tire chains, daisy chains, murder. All had one weak link.

He braked as he neared the toll gate and came to a skidding stop. A trooper got out of the blue and white State Patrol car that had been parked just off the road and scowled at Stone's license plates.

"You were going pretty fast, weren't you, Illinois?" he said coldly. He recognized Stone and grinned. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Becker."

Stone stared at his rear vision mirror. The car that had been trailing him came on steadily, then turned sharply to the left down what appeared to be a secondary road. "Can you get to Tampa that way?" Stone asked the trooper.

The trooper nodded. "You can. Up through Safety Harbor and around the end of the Bay. But it's a lot longer that way. Why?"

The big detective stared after the speeding car until its tail-light disappeared in a low-lying white bank of mist. He had a hunch that the car held a killer and was headed for the same place that he was. "I just wondered," he told the trooper.

There was nothing he could do without proof of what he knew. He sighed. And if

he got caught getting the proof, Inspector Grady would skin him of his well-cut blue serge and put him back in uniform.

The trooper was glad of company. "A tough break for us, eh, the little blonde running her car into the Basin, that way? Sugar, guava paste, and candy bars. It don't make sense. Now I guess we won't ever know who really killed Mason and Campbell, or why they killed them. It will be one of those unsolved mystery cases like you read about in books."

Stone doubted that very much. He did not say so. He asked, instead: "Have they established ownership of the car?"

The youthful trooper jerked his head at the radio droning in his car. "Yes and no," he chuckled. "It seems that some hatchet-faced platinum blonde admits that it is her car. But it wasn't reported-as stolen." He closed one eye in a salacious wink. "And the name under which she registered at the Beach Club ain't the name on her driver's license. Catch?"

Stone relighted his cigar. "I'm way ahead of you, son. I could draw you a hand-painted picture on a Reno divorce decree." He raced his motor. "Now if you'll take your foot the hell off my running board, I've got a date to see a dog in Tampa about two dead men on the beach."

"Something new on the case?"

"Yes and no," Stone admitted. He thought of Inspector Grady and added, hastily: "It's all Sheriff Wade's idea. I'm really just running an errand for him."

He drove on slowly across the long causeway that bridged upper Tampa Bay. It was low tide. The Bay lay dark and sullen under a waning moon. Frogs croaked hoarsely on both sides of the road. There was a wet smell of dank mud, and fish and rotted vegetation. Stone fought a nostalgic twinge. It smelled just like Maxwell Street.

He tuned his own car radio to the local short wave police band. There was nothing new. He turned it off and speeded up the car. Here on the causeway it was cool. There was something majestic about the night, the silence, and the purple water.

"If Connie were here, this wouldn't be so bad," he thought.

**H**E THOUGHT of the telegram he had sent Grady with a sick sinking of his stomach. It all just went to show what happened when a man stopped drinking whiskey and started lapping Cuba libres. He lost his head. There were no detectives in Chicago. Even the boys on the gravy squad were plain policemen assigned to detective duty. He wondered if his old uniform would still fit. The last time he had been broken he had smelled so badly of moth balls that Connie had threatened to divorce him.

With him murder and insubordination were twin diseases. He couldn't resist either. On the other hand, he defended his present mission, not even Connie or Inspector Grady could expect him to go to bed after having been shot at twice. Besides, old Sheriff Wade was Grady's friend. It was his duty to help a veteran of the last war since a punctured eardrum and various pieces of lead scattered about his big anatomy during his fourteen years on the Force were keeping him out of this one.

Reassured by his reasoning, the big man drove on, smiling. At the far end of the causeway he swung into the drive of a dimly lighted juke joint that had a small blue and white tin sign announcing a public phone. There was one point not clear in his mind.

There was no one in the bar but the owner and an early rising, or late retiring, trucker.

Stone ordered a double rye and dialed Long Distance. "I want to talk to a Jerry Hawley in Chicago," he told the operator. "He's a theatrical producer with an office in the Woods Building in the Loop, but you'll have to look up his home address."

She said she would call him. He straddled a stool at the bar. "Either of you guys ever hear of a wholesale firm in Ybor City named de Alvilá & García?"

"I have," the trucker told him. "They're an old firm. Been in business for years. Got a fine reputation. Why?"

It wasn't the answer that Stone had expected. He replied evasively and sat scowling at his drink until the phone rang.

The booking agent's voice was fogged with sleep, but firm. "I don't give a damn who you are," he began the conversation. "So you got cleaned at Hialeah, so what? I'm not wiring anyone dough to get back to Chicago from Miami."

"Cut it," Stone said crisply. "This isn't one of your trained seals. And I'm not calling from Miami. This is Herman."

Hawley recognized his voice. "Oh," he said, "I'm disappointed. We heard that you were dead." His voice grew apprehensive. He and Stone had been friends for years. "Nothing's gone wrong, has it, Herman?"

"No," Stone assured him. "All I want is some information on a dance team. Look, Jerry. Did you ever hear of, or handle a sister act that went by the name of Murray? One of the girls was called Wanda. They're supposed to have stranded in Capetown, South Africa some time last year and one of them married a farmer."

"I never handled them," Hawley answered. "But I know the pair you mean. And if either one of them married a farmer, she did it for a laugh. You remember them, Herman. They were mixed up in that Gold Coast badger



game two or three years ago. That's the reason they lit out of the country. Remember? One of them was married to an Italian or a Spaniard, or an acrobat or something."

Stone did remember the case. But it had been handled by the Morals Squad. He had never seen either girl. "Describe them, will you, Jerry?"

The agent described the girl who had begged Stone to meet her on the beach. "That's Wanda. The other one's name was Glenda. Same size, same shape, perhaps a year or two older. Both of them are natural blondes."

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm positive. Well, so I've been told," the theatrical man amended.

Stone digested the information sourly. If Hawley was correct, there was something wrong with his theory. It was, at best, only half complete. "How about the husband?" he demanded. "You wouldn't remember his name?"

"The hell I wouldn't," Hawley crowed. "It was Chico. You know, like the hero in the movie *Seventh Heaven*."

Stone thanked him and hung up. The killer had been clever. But not quite clever enough. His old record, if he had one, would be enough to trip him.

The operator called back immediately. At her insistence, Stone dropped two more quarters in time, and a nickel in the slot, bought a glass of luke-warm beer to chase the rye that he had gulped, and walked out to his car.

The trucker's voice followed him through the screen door. "Two bits to a dime he's one of them Chicago gunmen," he whispered hoarsely to the bartender.

"White slaver, probably," the barman agreed. "They ought to take guys like that out and shoot 'em."

Stone ground on the starter of his car. He wondered if the statement was prophetic. Someone had been doing his best to shoot him for the last four hours.

YBOR CITY was quaintly foreign. Most of the names over the stores and on the windows were Spanish. A few of the buildings had old-fashioned wrought-iron balconies that ran their length. The squat, two story, red-brick warehouse of de Alvilva & Garcia was one of them.

Stone drove by it slowly, made a sharp U turn, and parked at the opposite curb half a block away. There was a bright light in one of the upper windows of what appeared to be the office. It was the only sign of life. There were no pedestrians. His was the only car on the dimly lighted, squalid street.

Here, between the buildings, the heat closed in again. Stone sat fanning himself with his hat, staring at the warehouse. The car that had

trailed him from the Basin had not as yet arrived, nor was it parked on one of the side streets.

The big man considered briefly. He was on his own. He wasn't a cop down here. He didn't even have a deputy's badge. What might be explained away in Chicago would be breaking and entering in Tampa. Anyone in the building who had a legal right to be there could shoot him down with the sanction of the law.

"Any fool with sense would keep right on rolling," he thought.

He stuffed his gun into his belt, walked back to the warehouse and tried the main door quietly. It was locked. He had expected that it would be.

He found a smelly, refuse-laden alleyway on one side of the building and tried a small rear door. It opened easily. He struck a match and examined the lock. It had not been jimmied. The door had been left unlocked for his convenience. This was the way that he was supposed to enter.

Stone opened the door a trifle wider. A rush of cool air, aromatic with freshly roasted coffee, greeted him. He struck a second match. Stairs led to the second floor. A distant rumble of voices reached him faintly. The set-up was inviting. All that he had to do was mount the stairs, throw his gun on the killer, and the case was in the bag.

"In a pig's eye," the big man grunted.

Leaving the door ajar, he stared up at the fire-escape. It ran past the balcony and on up over the roof. By standing on the nearby loading platform, he could just reach the lower rung. He caught at the lower rung and swung his weight from the ground, praying the rusted iron would hold him. It did.

Hand over hand, he pulled himself up the ladder, keeping his feet clear of the rungs to avoid making any noise. All amateur killers were alike. They were bright boys. They thought they could teach their grandfathers how to suck eggs.

Now the voices were clearer.

"He's taking his time," a man said distinctly.

"He thinks he's clever," a second voice whispered tersely. "He's probably taking off his shoes and creeping up the stairs."

The back of his heavy coat sodden with sweat, Stone pulled himself over the rail and tip-toed down the balcony toward the lighted window.

THE office was modestly furnished. A pot-bellied, dough-faced Cuban sat huddled behind a desk, staring at the closed office door. A second man, his back to Stone, stood flattened against the wall, a heavy automatic in one uplifted hand. He was so close that Stone

could have reached in the window and touched him. Their eyes never leaving the door, the men spoke in low, terse whispers.

"It's a natural," the man with the gun whispered. "When he steps in, I let him have it. Then I give you the gun and beat it. You call the cops. They won't even be suspicious. You were working late on your books. You didn't know who he was. You thought it was a stick-up."

The Cuban's eyes were agonized. Stone knew the look. He had seen it in men's eyes before, hard-pressed businessmen who had been tempted beyond their ability to refuse, but who abhorred the thing they were doing. "I was a fool to listen to you," the Cuban said. "You told me it would be simple, that there would be no trouble."

The man with his back to Stone shrugged his shoulders expressively. "There wouldn't have been any trouble if that fool clerk of yours hadn't mixed up those invoices and sent the paste out to Mason's by mistake. We were lucky to get it back."

"You got it all?"

"All but one box. The old fool said he'd die before he'd tell us where that was," He added grimly: "He did."

Stone whistled mentally. The missing box of guava paste would cinch the case. He thought he knew where it was.

"We'll go to the chair," the Cuban moaned. "We'll burn. You blackmailed me into this, you and that damned blond tramp. That fellow Stone is clever. I've read about him. They call him Herman The Great."

The other man laughed shortly. "His being at the Beach Club was a bad break, sure. But once he's dead, no one can prove a thing. That old fool of a sheriff isn't even suspicious of me. And once Stone is out of the way, we can peddle the ice, and you and Glenda and I will have enough to retire on for life."

The fat Cuban looked more hopeful as greed overcame his fear.

The time for action had come. Stone thumbed the safety off his gun. "And what makes you think, Mr. Garcia," he called softly, "that Chico's going to let you live? Once I'm dead, you're the only man who can send him to the chair."

Their minds intent on the door through which they believed he would enter, both men were briefly confused, as Stone had known they would be.

The fat wholesaler scrambled to his feet, staring wildly in all directions, his black eyes wide with terror.

Chico shot out the light, screaming: "Damn you!" His second shot chipped brick, inches from Stone's face.

The big detective held his fire. He could have killed him easily. But he had no official

standing. This was Sheriff Wade's case, not his. He couldn't even afford to appear in the solution. To save his skin with Grady, he had to take the man alive.

"You'd better throw down your gun," he warned. "I have you covered."

Garcia whimpered in the dark. "Por Dios! I told you—"

Ignoring Stone's warning, Chico fired a third time. The shot cut Garcia's whisper to a choked gurgle. There was the plop of a heavy body as it sagged into a chair, overbalanced it with its weight and fell heavily to the floor.

Stone called: "That's murder, Chico." He squatted on his haunches as lead spat over his head. "That makes four of them now—Mason, Campbell, Wanda, and Garcia." He fired to the left and above the gun flash and was rewarded by a scream. "That should have kissed your ear lobe," he continued calmly. "Unless you want the next one through you, you'd better throw down your gun and let's scam out of here."

A second blast of lead answered him. Stone glanced apprehensively at the street below. Lights had flicked on in numerous windows. He knew that phones were ringing. The police would be here soon.

"How about it?" he demanded.

The air of the office was suddenly heavy with silence and spent powder. There was no sound, no movement. Stone froze, suspecting a trap. Then he heard running feet on the stairs. The killer had lost his nerve and fled.

Cursing, Stone hurdled the window sill and plunged after him down the stairs. He was in time to see him scale a high board fence in the rear of the building. Stone fired a second time. Chico screamed and disappeared.

Stone made no attempt to follow. He knew what the killer's next move would be. He knew where he could find him. All murder followed a pattern. Now came indignant denials.

"I was home. I was in bed. My wife can prove it. It was someone who looked like me."

"The hell you say," Stone said.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Murder Bugs

IT WAS dawn, but not yet light, when Stone parked his car in front of the Beach Club marquee and hurried into the lobby. A beard had sprouted on his jowls. His eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep. The merthiolate with which he had painted the wound on his scalp had run down onto his forehead. His heavy wool suit was soaked with sweat and streaked with rust. It looked as if it had been slept in.

Sheriff Wade was waiting for him. "You're sure of your facts now, Herman?"

"As Grady is my judge," Stone told him sourly. "You haven't flushed the covey?"

"You said not to over the phone."

"Good. Give me five minutes to wash my face and change my shirt and I'll be with you." He asked for his key at the desk.

"Mrs. Becker has your key, sir," the desk clerk told him, smiling. He handed him a yellow envelope. "But here is a wire that just came in this minute."

Preoccupied, Stone stuffed the telegram into his pocket and stepped into the elevator working at the knot of his tie. There still was a lot to be done, but the case was in the bag. As soon as he'd had a stiff drink and washed his face. . . . The cage had reached the second floor before he fully realized what the clerk had said. "Hey!" he demanded of the boy who worked the morning shift. "What the hell did that desk clerk mean? What Mrs. Becker has my key?"

The boy opened the grille gate, cackling: "They say it's against the law to have more'n one wife, Mister Becker."

Stone glowered at him. "They're all nuts down here," he thought. "It must be the climate."

He shrugged out of his heavy coat and strode on down the hall unbuttoning his wet shirt. "And if I ever get out of this squirrel cage—"

He left the sentence unfinished. His door was closed but unlocked. Stone opened it cautiously. He could see no one in his room but the spread on his bed had been thrown back and the bed itself had been slept in.

He drew his gun and lit the light. There

was a pair of woman's high-heeled pumps underneath his bed, make-up littered his dresser. The room was fragrant with perfume. A pair of slim, sheer hose and a woman's more intimate garments were hung neatly on a chair back.

"A frame, by God!" Stone swore.

The killer had been clever. More, he had worked fast. At best he couldn't have bettered his own time to the hotel by more than a few minutes. He had, undoubtedly, phoned from Tampa, as he himself had done.

The big detective started for the phone, stopped at the sound of water running in his bathtub. "Mrs. Becker!" he exploded. "If I don't—"

His room door opened and closed quickly.

"'Allo."

Wearing a low-cut, sheer, black negligee that revealed almost as much of her lovely body as it concealed, Josita, the black-haired little dancer, advanced slowly toward him, her arms outstretched, huge tears in her eyes.

Stone looked from the dancer to the bathroom door, then back.

The dancer slid her white arms around his neck. "Believe me. Trust me," she pleaded. "José—"

"By God," Stone admired. "You have nerve."

The forced tears disappeared. Her blue eyes suddenly turned green. Her face contorted with hate. "O.K., you asked for it, sucker." She clung to his gun arm with both hands, threw back her head and screamed.

The room door opened a second time. José strode in, unsmiling, leaving the door open behind him. He was wearing a maroon dress-

**YOU'RE NEITHER  
TOO YOUNG  
NOR TOO OLD!**

**I GET THAT  
"JUST RIGHT" LOOK  
FROM SMOOTH  
STAR BLADES!**

ANX PROCESS

DOUBLE EDGE

SINGLE EDGE

ing gown and slippers. Stone noted, with satisfaction, a band-aid, recently applied, just below the dancer's right ear lobe.

"*Quita allá!*" the dancer shouted. Beside himself with rage, he loosed a torrent of crackling Spanish.

Josita stopped screaming, briefly. "Stop playing the heavy husband. Shoot him. I can't hold his arm all day."

Stone tried to tear his arm free. Josita clung to it, desperately, screams peeling from her throat.

Doors were beginning to open in the hall. José circled for a vantage point from which to fire. His knuckle whitened on the trigger, paused as the door to the bathroom opened.

"HEY. What goes on here?" the girl in the bathroom doorway demanded. Her eyes were blazing. For the moment she saw only Stone and the girl with whom he was struggling.

Stone stared at her, incredulous. A trim, red-haired, pretty little woman in a white terry-cloth robe, her feet were bare. Her hair was still damp and curly from her tubbing. "Connie!" he gasped, unbelievably.

Her eyes flicked across his battered face. "Drunk again, eh?" One bare foot tapped the floor. "Why didn't you meet me at the airport as I wired you to?" Her gray eyes stabbed Josita. "And as for you, you black-haired hussy, I'm going to—"

The cough of a gun cut her short. At that distance, José couldn't miss. He didn't. Lead smacked solidly into Stone's shoulder. The impact spun him away from the black-haired girl. Then the gun in his own hand jerked.

Blood spurted from the dancer's wrist. His gun fell to the floor. "Damn you!"

"Careful, Chico," Stone warned him coldly. "You forget that you don't speak English."

Blind with terror, the dancer ran from the room and into Wade's waiting arms. "Let's go back inside, son," the elderly sheriff said coldly. "And I wouldn't try to make another break if I were you. I won't shoot at your hands. Jim Mason was a friend of mine."

Pat Ginty and Cole White followed him into the room. White closed the door behind them, then laid a small wooden box still in its original colorful wrapping on the dresser. "You were right," he told Stone. "Mrs. Mason said that when Jim came home to supper he brought this here box of guava paste with him, him having a sweet tooth and liking it on bread for night snacks."

Connie Stone clung to her husband, her eyes swimming in tears. "Herman. You're hurt. Please. Someone get a doctor."

Stone chuckled: "What the hell! I've stopped worse slugs. All that I need is a drink."

He reached for the rye bottle on his dresser, felt the room begin to tilt, then everything blacked out. When he came to he was lying on his bed. Doc Hanson was hovering above him, nodding sagely: "Yes, sir. A nice clean wound."

Stone raised himself on one elbow. The morning air sweeping in the window off the Gulf was fresh and cool. His head was clear. He felt fine. "O.K., then stop admiring it and wrap it up," he told the doctor.

Hanson snorted indignantly. Stone felt for Connie's hand and squeezed it. "And you," he told White, who was holding José, "wallop that guy on the fanny."

Puzzled, the deputy did so. The dancer's face turned gray with pain.

Stone told the doctor, grinning: "There's more work for you. I thought I got him in the trousers right after he killed Garcia."

"Ees a lie," Josita screamed. "José has been weeth me all night. Not once deed he leave our room."

"Then how the hell did he get in here?" Stone asked her dryly. "Turn it off, Glenda," he advised. "The curtain's down."

"It's all right for him to talk?" Wade asked the doctor.

Hanson snorted. "Herman The Great. Herman The Loud-Mouth," they mean. "You can't kill his kind with a crow-bar."

Connie pressed her lips to her husband's. "I like him," she admitted. She glowered at the black-haired girl. "But who are these people, Herman? Two of the McGinnis gang?"

The big man shook his head. "Hell, no. They're a pair of cheap badger artists." He told the story as he saw it. "Maybe there is a real José and Josita. I wouldn't know. For a man of Chico's caliber forged passports aren't hard to get. They came from South Africa, sure. Maybe they danced at the Vaal Club. That doesn't matter. I do know that they tried to smuggle a flock of diamonds into the country. The three were working together—Wanda, Glenda, and Chico. One of them contacted Garcia. How, we'll find out at the trial. I heard Garcia claim that he was blackmailed into receiving the case of guava paste in which the hot ice was hidden."

He asked Sheriff Wade to pry off the cover of the box of guava paste that Mason had taken home.

Wade jabbed into the paste with his knife blade. "It's full of stones of some kind," he said, excited. He lifted one out with his knife blade, his face falling. "But they aren't diamonds, Herman. They're just a rough, dark looking pebble of some kind."

"They're diamonds," Stone assured him. "You don't think they find them in the ground all polished and cut so many facets to the carat." He looked at the stone closely. "Even

after it's cut, that stone that you have there will weigh about eight carats."

Wade whistled softly.

Stone continued: "You'll probably find the others in their room. They were dumb enough to think they could get away with this."

"I'll take a look," Ginty said. He started for the door.

Chico tried to stop him. "The hell you will. Not without a warrant."

Stone jeered: "I thought you couldn't talk English."

Wade cut in: "Never mind a warrant. I'll take the responsibility. This is murder."

STONE nodded grimly. "The one invention of mankind that no one has ever been able to get all of the bugs out of since Adam's boy, Cain, killed his brother. 'Something always goes wrong. In this case it was a dumb clerk of Garcia's. Instead of holding the paste when it arrived, he got his invoices mixed and shipped it out to Mason's with an order of sugar and candy."

"That's right," White backed the statement. "Mrs. Mason told me this morning that Jim hadn't ordered guava paste. But the wholesale truck dropped it off. There not being any ration points on it, Mason was mighty glad to take it."

"When Garcia discovered what had happened," Stone continued, "he phoned Chico at the hotel. Chico and Glenda were desperate. One of the three had recognized me by then. I was a big-time detective. You didn't intend to kill Mason, did you?" he asked Chico.

The dancer glowered at him sullenly.

"I don't think they did," Stone told Wade. "They merely intended to steal the paste. But two of the boxes were gone. They had to get them back. They got Campbell's name from Mason as the buyer of one box. Then he got wise and clammed up. He was afraid they'd harm his wife. He told them he'd die before he'd tell them where the other box was, and he did."

Ginty returned with a small dressing case. "They're in here," he told Wade. "But the guava paste is gone. They must have flushed it down the drain."

Stone continued: "They took the sugar and the candy bars as a cover. After they'd killed Campbell and recovered the one box, one of them got the bright idea of making it look like a black market raid by dumping the sugar in his car and putting a gun in his hand."

Sheriff Wade protested: "But the girl who asked for Campbell was a blonde."

Stone nodded at Josita. "That puzzled me until I figured it out. Josita, or Glenda, is wearing a wig. During the time they were running around on the prowl, she couldn't

very well afford to be recognized as Josita."

"And the other blonde, this Wanda?"

"That was one of the bugs. She probably wasn't here when Garcia's call came. And when they told her what had happened, she jumped to the conclusion that they were trying to frame her. The more they tried to explain, the more frightened she got. Then she lost her head and came to me. They saw her leave my table when the lights came on. Or perhaps they recognized the scarf. And right then the fun started. Josita did a solo dance for their next number while José followed me down to the beach, shot me, and killed Wanda."

Wade interrupted: "And that story about her stolen rings—"

"Was a cover to divert suspicion from themselves. Also, if anything slipped they could blame the whole thing on the dead girl."

"And that second attempt on your life—"

"Was genius. They overheard me asking you to deputize a posse to search the hotel and grounds." Stone asked Connie to light him a cigarette, sucked smoke deep into his lungs, continued: "Wanda was dead but they hadn't had time to dispose of her body." He scowled at the little dancer. "So, using the same stolen car they had used before, and removing that black wig that she's now wearing, Glenda took a second whack at me. If she killed me, fine. If she didn't, she still had completely muddled up the trail by bringing a dead girl to life. Running the car in the water was simple. She jammed the gas, jumped out, and walked back to the hotel."

"Ees a lie," Josita scoffed. She was no longer crying. She seemed to be coldly amused.

"Ees true," Stone mimicked her accent. "You put on a good show, Glenda, but José muffed a cue in the first scene. That's what first made me suspicious of you."

Sheriff Wade looked puzzled.

Stone explained: "José wasn't supposed to be able to speak or understand English. But when I showed him the automatic that Wanda had slipped me as evidence of good faith, and asked him if he had ever seen it before, he shook his head."

Wade scratched his sparse gray hair. "By golly, I mind that now. But I missed it at the time."

Connie kissed Stone soundly. "He's wonderful!" she beamed. "He's my Herman The Great."

STONE continued: "Garcia was the weak link in their chain. I knew that there had to be one. That's why I lit out for Tampa with Chico not far behind me. I tried to pick him up there but he ran out on me. Facing a man with a gun who knew how to use it and

killing unarmed old men and a woman were horses of different colors." He sucked at his cigarette until the tip was glowing red. "And well, I guess that's it." He motioned to the gun with which the male dancer had shot him in a last desperate attempt to seal his lips. "Except, if you can't pin the other murders on him, you can use that gun to tie him up with Garcia. Have ballistics check it with the slug in the stiff. It looks like the same gun to me."

The black-haired little dancer wrenched her wrist free from Ginty who was holding her and walked up to Sheriff Wade. "As Dios ees my judge," she swore soberly, "that man ees lying. I do not know how these diamonds get eento our room. We have not keel anyone. And I am not thees Glenda that he speaks of. I am Josita Rosario Garcia La Rioja Cordoba." She pointed an accusing finger at Stone. "Thees Glenda Murray, she have yallow hair, no? And you are say that I wear the black weeg?"

Stone said, thin-lipped: "That's right."

The dancer unwound her long braids from her temples and offered one of them to Sheriff Wade. "Pull," she urged. "Pull hard." Her voice grew shrill with anger. "Then tell that madman there that thees ees my own hair!"

Sheriff Wade touched the braid as if it were a black snake, tugged at it tentatively, then looked incredulously at Stone. "It—it's her own. It's not a wig."

"So!" Josita cried, triumphant.

"So what?" the big detective grinned. "So you aren't wearing a black wig. But you did wear a blond wig when you helped murder Mason and Campbell, and when you took those shots at me. And you aren't Josita Rosario Garcia La Rioja Cordoba. Your hair is dyed black. You're really a natural blonde by the name of Glenda Murray."

"Ees a lie!"

Stone grinned. "Yeah?" He nodded to Sheriff Wade. "Take her up to the county jail and turn her over to a matron."

The little dancer collapsed in tears. "O.K. You win."

Wade nodded to Ginty and White. They led the pair from the room, screaming at each other and offering to talk.

"And what," Wade demanded of Stone, "do I tell the reporters?"

Stone thought of Grady then and winced. "Keep me out of it," he said sourly. "Tell them that you solved it through brilliant detective work."

Sheriff Wade grinned and left the room. Alone with his wife, Stone felt strangely embarrassed. It had been over a month since he had seen her. "It—it sure is great to have you here. But, well, how did you get here? I mean—"

Connie curled up on the bed, modestly covering her bare feet with the skirt of her heavy robe. "Inspector Grady sent me. He paid my fare out of his own pocket because he said that you were getting restless."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Stone felt more kindly toward the Old Man than he had for years. He thought of the telegram. It was probably from Grady. It was. He read it aloud to Connie:

"RETURN IF YOU MUST, MY HEAD-STRONG LAD, TO WHERE THE OLD FAT HEAD SITS. BUT IF YOU DO, MAY GOD HELP YOU, AND I HOPE THAT YOUR UNIFORM FITS."

Stone laughed and poured a drink. The Old Man was all right. The whole world was all right. Florida was swell. It hadn't been the climate after all but the miles between him and Connie.

He poured a drink for her and carried it to the bed. "Love me?" he demanded.

She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You know that I do, Herman." She wrinkled her forehead prettily. "But there is just one little thing."

"Yes?"

She fingered the bandage on his shoulder. "Tell me the truth now, Herman. You never saw that girl before, did you?"

"No, darling."

"And you never made love to her?"

"Never."

"In all your life?"

Herman The Great raised his right hand. "In all my life," he swore.

His wife's eyes narrowed slightly. "Then, darling, how did you know her hair was dyed?"

"Why, I—" Stone began, then groaned.

This thing could go on forever. He had no doubt it would.

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