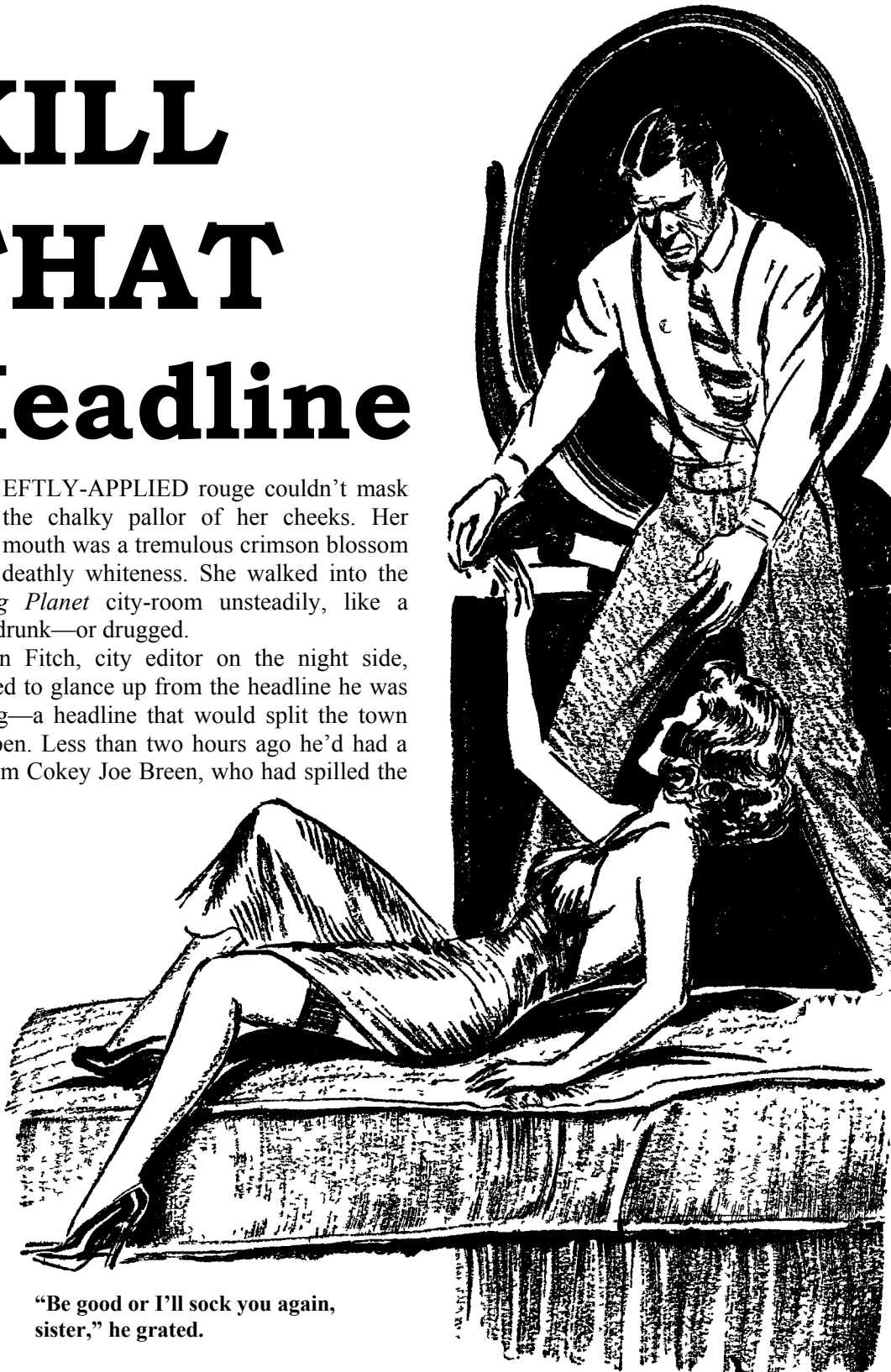


By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

KILL THAT Headline

DEFTLY-APPLIED rouge couldn't mask the chalky pallor of her cheeks. Her mouth was a tremulous crimson blossom against deathly whiteness. She walked into the *Morning Planet* city-room unsteadily, like a person drunk—or drugged.

Ken Fitch, city editor on the night side, happened to glance up from the headline he was readying—a headline that would split the town wide open. Less than two hours ago he'd had a visit from Cokey Joe Breen, who had spilled the



"Be good or I'll sock you again, sister," he grated.

facts behind that headline—for a cash consideration. And now, seeing the blond girl approaching, Ken Fitch stiffened with surprise.

“Letha Starke!” he muttered.

She came faltering toward the raised platform where his desk was situated—the dais from which he could keep a watchful eye on reporters, rewrite men, and copy-desk slaves under his charge. Pendant green-shaded incandescents sent reflected glints of light shining against the oncoming girl’s metallic yellow hair, revealing every perfectly-spaced wave of her artistic coiffure. Her lush curves were stressed by an expensive mink coat drawn tightly about her, so that each step she took revealed the bold, arrogant lines of her slinky figure.

“Ken——!” she whispered as she gained the platform.

He frowned. He didn’t get up from his chair. A swift, roving glance informed him that every masculine eye in the room was appraisingly fastened on his visitor. Her blatant beauty always

an infatuation he had long since outgrown. Would Molly misunderstand this present meeting?

But she wasn’t paying any attention. She was pawing through a desk-drawer as if searching for mislaid notes. Apparently she hadn’t even noticed Letha Starke’s entrance into the city room. Ken was relieved.

Again he stared up into the blue eyes of the blonde girl. Irritated, he repeated: “What’s on your mind, Letha?”

“I’m in trouble, Ken. Ghastly trouble. I need you—desperately.”

His lips took on a wry twist. “So you’ve come back to me after five years. After giving me the frigid air. After taking me for my bankroll and then handing me the gate. Now you say you need me. Rather ironic, don’t you think?”

“You don’t understand, Ken. This is different. I’m not asking you to forgive me for what I did to you. That’s buried. I was a fool—and I learned my lesson. Too late. But now I’ve got nobody else to turn to. If you don’t help me,

As a newspaperman, he couldn’t decently or ethically do anything about it. But as a man in love with the girl reporter, he had to make his move when she was threatened

did that to the men she encountered. Typewriters had ceased clattering; there was only the steady, spaced click of teletype printers to mar the admiring hush that had fallen over the night crew.

Confronting Ken Fitch, the girl’s back was turned to the others. Her pale blue eyes wavered to meet his gaze. “Ken——!” she whispered again, pleadingly.

He flushed, conscious of the knowing grins on the faces of his subordinates. “Well, Letha, what’s on your mind?” His tone pointedly lacked cordiality. He cast a look toward a desk at the far end of the room—Molly Kildare’s desk.

MOLLY KILDARE was petite, red-haired, wholesomely feminine and a crack reporter. Also, she was Ken Fitch’s fiancée; they were to be married next month. He didn’t like the idea of Molly seeing him talking to Letha Starke. Molly knew of his infatuation for Letha five years ago—

they’ll s-send me to the electric chair!”

He was startled. He crushed out his cigarette. “What do you mean by that?”

“Ken—I just killed a man.” She unfastened the fur coat and permitted it to fall open.

He choked back his sharp exclamation of surprise. She was wearing an evening gown of white satin that adhered like a caress to her lovely body. She was magnificently contoured. Her hips swelled lyrically against the clinging silk, and her snowy bosom was daringly revealed by deep-slashed décolletage. One shoulder-strap dangled, torn as if in some struggle. The front of the gown was splotted and spattered with reddish brown stains. He guessed their meaning before she spoke.

“Blood, Ken,” the yellow-haired girl whispered as she closed the coat about her.

He regained composure. “So you killed a man.”

“Yes. In my apartment. An hour ago.”

"Who was he?"

"I—I don't know, Ken."

"You don't know? Then what the devil was he doing in your apartment?"

She reddened painfully. "I met him on a wild party this evening. He insisted on taking me home. I didn't think he'd—"

"Wait a minute, Letha. You're lying. I don't believe you."

"Oh, I know." Her smile was rueful and forced, without mirth. "You don't believe I'd ever sink low enough to invite a total stranger to my apartment. Well, Ken, you're quite wrong. I was drunk. And I thought I didn't care. The steps always lead downward—eventually. To the gutter."

He scowled thoughtfully. "What about your pal DeWitt Ragan? I thought he was footing your bills?" Asking that, Ken casually covered the headline and the typewritten sheets on his desk—the story he'd been writing when Letha appeared. The story given to him by Cokey Joe Breen.

He didn't want Letha to see that headline—because, oddly enough, it dealt with this very DeWitt Ragan now under discussion.

The blond girl said: "Ragan? He ditched me more than a month ago—the rat."

THAT struck Ken as sardonically amusing. It was funny to hear her call anybody a rat for ditching her—considering how she herself had ditched Ken, more years ago than he cared to remember. He said: "So Ragan gave you the bum's rush. And since then you've been entertaining strangers. And tonight you croaked one. Why?"

"He was a b-beast. I discovered I couldn't bring myself to...let him maul me."

"Hm-m-m. So what happened?"

"I tried to get him to leave quietly. But he got nasty. There was a struggle. I p-picked up a brass candlestick and hit him over the head..." Her knees seemed to grow wobbly under her. "Ken—Ken—you've got to help me get rid of that corpse; I d-don't want to go to the chair!"

He came to a sudden decision. "Okay. I'll see what can be done." He scribbled some instructions to Biff McQuaide, his assistant; called McQuaide to the desk and left him in charge. Ken and the blonde girl walked toward the exit.

They had to pass Molly Kildare's desk. Ken stopped for a moment while Letha swept onward. He leaned down over the petite red-haired girl. "Be back in a little while, honeysweet. Wait for me."

Molly's eyes were deep violet pools of worry. "You're going out with that Starke woman?"

He grinned and nodded. "Not jealous, are you?"

"N-no..." Molly's adorably piquant face wore a troubled expression; her firm little bosom rose and fell swiftly, as if with inner tumult. She laid a hand gently on Ken's arm. "No. I'm not jealous. But something tells me you're walking into danger, Ken. Intuition—"

He brushed her lips tenderly with his mouth. "Don't be foolish, sweetheart. I'll be okay." He went out.

Downstairs, Letha Starke had a taxi waiting. In the tonneau's darkness she sat close to him, so that he could feel the warm, insinuating softness of her, impinging on his own muscular solidarity. There'd been a time, long ago, when his blood would have run faster at her nearness. His arm would have stolen around her waist in a crushing embrace; he would have buried his face in the perfectly-coiled masses of her yellow hair and then searched demandingly with his lips for her waiting, sensuous mouth....

But not now. That was irrevocably ended. He sat quietly, almost serenely. He paid no attention to her coquettish challenge.

She seemed to sense his indifference. "You hate me, don't you, Ken?"

"No. I passed that stage, years ago."

"Then why are you so cold to me?"

"Listen, Letha. I happen to be in love with someone else. The real thing this time. A girl named Molly Kildare. I'm going to marry her next month."

"She's the one you kissed, back in the office? The red-haired one?"

He smiled. "Yes. So you were watching?"

"I was. I couldn't h-help it. She's sweet, lovely. Oh, Ken—if only things had been different! If I hadn't been such a silly, stupid fool, five years ago..."

"Forget it," he told her.

"Ken—why are you so willing to help me

now, if you don't care anything about me?"

He shrugged. "Maybe because I'm a sentimentalist. Here we are at your place." He helped her from the cab and paid the tariff.

THEY went upstairs to the second floor of the building. She unlocked her door and switched on the living-room's lights.

"The c-corpse is in here...." she whispered. She took his arm and led him into her boudoir, clinging closely to him as they stepped over the threshold. She pointed to her mussed bed.

A man lay there, face upward; his glazed eyes staring blindly at the ceiling. His skull was crushed in. Blood and smeared brains stained the pillows.

Ken Fitch drew a sharp breath. "Good God—!" he rasped. "*Cokey Joe Breen!*"

And then something smashed down on his head, from behind. Something that thudded viciously against his temple as he wheeled around. Something that sent blasting fires of agony searing into his brain.

He pitched forward. The floor seemed to come up and strike him on the face.

Over the roaring in his ears he heard a man's voice snarling: "*Got the lousy snoop!*" Then came Letha Starke's callous, amused tinkle of laughter.

Ken struggled drunkenly to his knees, felt blood running down his cheek from the cut in his scalp where the blackjack had laid the flesh open. He blinked back his daze as he stared up into a man's leering features.

"DeWitt Ragan...!" he mumbled thickly.

His tuxedoed attacker, president of the Ragan Construction Company, snarled: "Right. And if you start anything, I'll feed you another dose of the same."

A surging seethe of fury entered Ken's soul. He bounced to his feet as anger gave him new strength. He lunged at Ragan; bashed a knotted fist at the contractor's snarling mouth. The blow connected solidly. Ragan's gums spouted blood like squeezed sponges, and he spat out broken shards of teeth as he staggered back. Fitch followed him, battered at him—

Blam!

Another man had leaped into the room. He had a reversed automatic in his hand. He thudded it against Ken's head savagely. And this time the

lights went completely out for the newspaperman.

WHEN he opened his eyes, he was trussed to a chair in the living-room. DeWitt Ragan was bloodily grinning at him, his arm encircling Letha Starke's supple waist. Over on the divan sat the man whose blow had stretched Ken Fitch unconscious. Ken recognized the fellow as Ragan's chauffeur.

Ragan said: "You lousy sap! So you wanted to help Letha, eh? Too bad, sucker. Because I'm dealing the cards my way from now on."

"Meaning—?"

"You know damned well what I mean. Cokey Joe Breen spilled his guts to you tonight about my city hall contract for the new bridge across East Bay. You figured to pin back my ears by running a scoop on the graft I'm getting."

Ken blinked. "So you caught Breen and made him squeal."

"He squealed, all right. And now he's dead. Which is what you'll be—unless you kill that story about me."

Squirming against his fetters, Ken rasped: "Have another guess, Ragan. That story runs in tomorrow morning's edition. You can't stop it."

"No. But *you* can. And you will."

The newspaperman laughed shortly. "Go ahead and do your damndest, you filthy crook. The minute you turn me loose and send me back to the *Planet* office, I'll blast hell out of you. Not only for graft—but for murder." He glanced significantly toward the boudoir, where Cokey Joe Breen's body lay.

Ragan approached the chair. He raised his fist, smashed it to Ken's jaw. He snarled: "Shut up!"

Ken shook his head jerkily to clear away the blur. Then he grinned again, "You think you can scare me by beating me up? Nuts, Ragan! You're a bigger fool than I thought you were."

The contractor's scowl was savage with wrath. "Hero stuff. Maybe you won't feel so brave when your red-haired girl friend ankles in here."

Ken stiffened. A sudden icy shock trickled down his spine. "What—!"

"Yeah." Ragan laughed triumphantly. "I phoned the *Planet* while you were knocked out. I imitated your voice. I talked to your sweetie. I asked her to come up here right away. She's on

her way now.”

Flooding, impotent rage churned in Ken Fitch’s heart. Molly Kildare—walking straight into a trap! Sweet, unsuspecting Molly—heading innocently into murderous danger! “You wouldn’t dare—!” he shouted.

Ragan’s lips peeled back from his broken teeth. “No? Guess again. *I’ll bet that’s her now!*” he added as a knock sounded on the door.

Ken twisted ineffectually against the ropes that held him. He raised his voice. “Molly—for God’s sake—*run!*” he shouted hoarsely.

But Ragan’s ape-like chauffeur had already launched himself at the door, jerked it open. He reached out, made a grab—and dragged Molly into the room.

The red-haired girl went white as she clawed at her captor. She saw Ken Fitch tied to the chair, and her violet eyes widened in terror. “Ken——!”

The chauffeur slapped her viciously across the mouth, his hard palm splatting like the report of a gun. “Button your kisser, babe!” he growled.

She staggered; then she renewed her struggles. She kicked at the thug; tried to pound his face with her tiny fists. He twined his fingers in her auburn hair; jerked her head far back. He struck her again; tried to carry her across the room.

She fought him like a tigress. His hand caught in the neck of her frock, ripping it from one shoulder. She wailed and tried to cover the flesh exposed under the torn material. Her attacker forced her to the divan and bounced her against the cushions. The hem of her skirt flew up past her stocking-tops. There was a flash of smooth, ivory skin.

Beaten, cowed, she crouched shivering on the sofa as the chauffeur pinned her wrists. He grunted: “Be good or I’ll sock you again, sister.”

LETHA STARKE interrupted. “No, you needn’t bother. I want that pleasure for myself. String her up to the chandelier.”

Ken Fitch’s throat went dry. “You damned fiends—you can’t get away with this!”

Ragan snarled: “Shut up, snoop. Don’t make me slug you unconscious. I want you to be awake—so you can see what’s happening.” He helped his chauffeur bind Molly’s wrists with a length of clothesline. Then they lifted her to the

center of the room; fastened the rope to the overhead lighting-fixture.

The red-haired girl dangled there, moaning; her little feet barely touching the floor. Ragan took off his leather belt and handed it to Letha Starke. “Okay, kiddo. Have your fun.”

Letha stepped forward, prepared to lash Molly with the strap.

Ken Fitch shouted again. “No—for God’s sake——!”

The yellow-haired woman laughed; brought the leather belt swishing venomously in a circling arc. Splat! The belt stung into Molly’s smooth flesh, left a red weal on white, where its end touched her bare shoulder. *Splat!* Again the improvised whip licked out. Molly whimpered—

Ken roared: “Quit! Stop it! I’ll kill that damned story! I promise!”

But Molly Kildare’s voice halted his outcries. “No, Ken. Let them go ahead and whip me. If it’s something that should be printed—*print it!*” Her proud eyes swept the room. She faced Letha Starke. “Go ahead. Help yourself.”

Letha started to strike once more. But Ragan grabbed the strap. “Nix, kiddo. I’ve got a better scheme.”

“What do you mean?”

He untied the red-haired girl; carried her to the divan. Then he winked at his chauffeur. “All right, guy. I’ve been watching you. You’ve had your eye on this dish ever since she ankled in. Well—she’s yours!”

Helpless fury scalded Ken Fitch’s soul. “You rats—you lousy, stinking swine! You can’t—you wouldn’t—”

Ragan slugged him in the mouth, silenced him. He tasted the salt tang of his own blood from split lips. Raging, struggling vainly against the cords that held him to the heavy chair, he saw the chauffeur go to the divan and lean over Molly’s cringing form....

She whimpered—once. Then the thug had her in his arms; glued his thick lips to her averted mouth.

Wildly Ken shouted: “Stop! I give in! I swear it! I’ll kill the story—I’ll do anything you say!” And this time Molly gave him no contradiction....

Ragan grunted: “Okay. Let up, Terry.”

The chauffeur released Molly; growled sullen reluctance as he swung around.

RAGAN was at work on Ken's bonds. He snarled: "Listen, Mister. I'm giving you this one chance. You're going back to the *Planet* office. You're going to destroy every bit of the stuff Cokey Joe Breen gave you. I'm sending Terry with you—in case you try any funny stuff. He'll have a roscoe, and he hasn't got any scruples about using it."

Ken Fitch was desperately sparring for precious minutes. "Your gorilla won't have to shoot me, Ragan. I give you my word I'll destroy that story. Nobody knows about it except me. All I ask is that you let Molly go—"

The contractor said: "Nuts, boyfriend. The jane stays right here—until you come back with proof that you killed that headline. I'm giving you thirty minutes to get the job done. If you aren't back here by then—well, something damned unpleasant will happen to your girl friend. Gargle that one."

Ken stole a glance at Ragan's wrist-watch; saw that he'd been away from his city-desk five minutes less than a full hour. His heart began to hammer against his chest. Five minutes to go.... It seemed like a bleak eternity stretching out before him. He knew that he didn't dare leave this apartment until that five minutes had snailed by....

Time! He had to gain it somehow. Ragan had already untied the ropes at his ankles; was now at work on his wrist-bonds. The contractor was working swiftly. Too swiftly.

And then Ken was free. He swayed to his feet. Ragan stood before him. Over by the door was Terry, the chauffeur—with his fist in his coat pocket and an ominous bulge that told of an automatic's muzzle poking the cloth. Letha Starke hovered near the davenport, keeping guard over Molly....

"Get going!" Ragan rasped.

KEN FITCH took a wild, desperate chance. He tensed his sinews—and went smashing at the contractor like a stone from a catapult.

The move took Ragan by surprise; bowled him backward. Ken's fist lashed out like pistons; impacted against his enemy's jaw. He felt the jarring thud all the way to his own shoulders.

Ragan's head snapped back as if hinged. He went down.

Letha Starke screamed a gutter oath. The

chauffeur came slamming across the room, his gun drawn. He yelled: "Stand back, Miss Starke—I'll plug him!"

Ken dived for the floor. He hit the carpet just beyond where Ragan had fallen. He grabbed for the unconscious contractor; used the man's limp form for a shield. "Go ahead and shoot!" he panted. "You'll kill your boss if you do!"

The thug's finger relaxed its pressure on the trigger of the automatic. He darted sidewise, seeking a clear aim at the newspaperman. Ken rolled, keeping Ragan in front of him—

But he forgot Letha Starke. She darted in, flung herself on Ragan, dragged him aside. Ken was wholly exposed to the chauffeur's weapon, now. He scrambled to his feet, zigzagging. With a blow of his fist he sent the blond woman sprawling. She went down in a flurry of white satin skirt; her chiffon legs kicked and thrashed as she landed.

The chauffeur jumped as Letha landed at his feet. He swerved around her. That was Ken's chance. He sailed full at his antagonist before the man could again raise his gun to firing position.

They met with a thumping crash of flesh against flesh, brawn against brawn.

From the divan, Molly Kildare screamed: "Ken—look out! Ragan's getting up!"

And then Fitch smashed his right fist square into the chauffeur's mouth. The fellow sagged; went to his knees. The automatic dropped from his hand. Ken lashed out with his foot; kicked the thug brutally. The chauffeur doubled over, retching and holding his middle.

Whirling, Ken saw Ragan coming at him—with a gun.

It was too late to scoop up the chauffeur's weapon. Too late to do anything—except brace himself for Ragan's bullet. The contractor's narrow eyes gleamed with murderous malice. He grated: "You asked for it—now take it!" He squeezed his trigger.

BUT even as his gun vomited flame, the apartment's door crashed inward. A knot of uniformed men came thundering into the room. Ragan's shot went wild; a slug screamed past Ken Fitch's ear. And then the police were grappling with DeWitt Ragan, disarming him, handcuffing him. They jerked the fallen chauffeur to his feet,

manacled him to his employer. And they lifted Letha Starke; pinioned her.

Ken Fitch saw his *Planet* assistant, Biff McQuaide, in the thick of things. He yelled: "Biff—thank God you got here before it was too late!"

McQuaide grinned. "You should have made it thirty minutes instead of an hour, from the looks of things."

DeWitt Ragan was snarling, fighting his handcuffs. "What the hell—who—how—"

Ken's eyes gleamed bale fully. "You aren't quite smart enough, Ragan. In the first place, I knew Letha's story was a lie. I knew it the minute she walked into the *Planet* city-room. I realized she was trying to trick me, trap me. That was obvious enough."

The contractor stared. "You—you knew?"

"Yes. Letha said she'd killed a man, in a struggle. She showed me bloodstains on her dress. Okay. The blood was genuine. *But there hadn't been any struggle. Because her hair wasn't mussed!*"

Ragan stiffened.

Ken went on. "You heard me. Her coiffure was a work of art. Not a single wave was out of place. So I knew her yarn about a struggle was all phony. So was her torn dress. So was everything else she told me.

"I figured she was lying when she claimed you'd thrown her over. If she was so damned hard up that she had to entertain strangers, what was she doing with that expensive mink coat? Nothing

added up right. So I guessed that she was trying to lure me into a trap.

"Who'd want to trap me? Nobody but you—on account of the story I was going to run about you. Well, I deliberately walked into your scheme, Ragan. Because I wanted to find out the truth about you. I wanted to make sure Cokey Joe Breen had handed me a right steer when he gave me that information about your grafting.

"I went haywire in just one detail. I didn't expect you to conk me and lure Molly Kildare up here. You almost won out by doing that. Almost—but not quite. Because when I left the *Planet* office I scribbled a note for McQuaide, my assistant. I instructed him to wait an hour—and then, if I hadn't returned, *he was to come to this apartment with a squad of cops.*"

RAGAN wilted. "I'll take a plea. They won't fry me..." he drooled. "I've got influence..."

An officer jerked him toward the door. "Nuts, buddy. Get goin'."

Slowly the room cleared. One bluecoat was left to stand guard over Cokey Joe Breen's corpse in the adjoining boudoir. Ken Fitch slipped over to the divan; lifted Molly Kildare in his arms.

She clung to him fiercely. "Oh, Ken...." she whispered.

He kissed her. He said: "Let's not wait until next month, honey-sweet. What do you say?"

She wrapped her soft arms around his neck and held up her mouth for another kiss. It was all the answer he needed.