

ON ICE

By Justin Case (Hugh B. Cave)

To the local farmers the dead man may have been their Jim Holburn. I got one look at him and knew the case was much bigger than they thought. But what about Honeyboy's wife—or was she really his wife?



AT the start it was just a two bit murder. Worth a couple of lines on page one for the ice angle, maybe, but otherwise strictly filler stuff.

Jim Holburn lived out there in a year 'round camp on Blue Lake, with his wife Millie. Someone cut a hole in the ice and Jim fell into it and was drowned.

Alvah Tucks, the sheriff at Kimms Corner, investigated. He talked to Millie. He asked her who cut the hole in the ice and she didn't know. She said Jim must have cut it. It was a big hole, right smack on the path they took across the ice from their cabin to the shed on the opposite

shore, where they kept their car. Jim must have cut some ice for the ice-house, she said, and then stepped into the hole that night on his way home from the village. Drunk, she said.

Alvah Tucks looked in Jim Holburn's ice-house and didn't find any fresh cut of ice. He asked around and learned that Jim was sober when he left the village that night. Cold sober.

What actually happened, Tucks said, someone else cut that hole in the ice without Jim's knowledge, and hid the ice someplace. Then the hole froze over a little, and some snow

fell, and Jim Holburn crashed through to his death.

That's what the hole was, Tucks said. A death trap.

He arrested Millie. He said it was well known around Kimms Corner that Millie had been two-timing behind Jim's back. Lots of times while Jim was in to the village, Tucks said, there'd been strange men visiting the camp. Now Jim was dead, and by God he was going to get to the bottom of this.

I HEARD some of this from Tucks' own lips. The boss sent me up there, you see, to give Tucks a hand. I'm only a newspaper man, but the owner of the *Chronicle*, Big Sam Leahy, is a political boss and was pushing Tucks for reelection. Small stuff, but important.

It was more important than he thought. I looked at the hole in the ice, I talked to Tucks, and I asked to see Jim Holburn. Holburn was in the Kimms Corner jail, under a blanket. I lifted the blanket and looked at his face. Lowered the blanket, stared at Tucks, said, "This is Jim Holburn?"

"Who else would it be?" he cracked.

I knew who else it could be. I knew who else it was. And I knew I had stumbled on a story far bigger than any local murder. The big, dark-haired lad under that blanket may have been Jim Holburn to the local citizenry, but I'd seen that swarthily handsome face too often to be mistaken.

This was something!

"You want to talk to Jim's wife?" Tucks asked me.

I almost said, "Which wife?" but controlled myself. "Sure," I said.

She was locked up, of course, and as Tucks opened the door of her cell I helped myself to a good look at her. With a little more color in her face and something a mite more cheerful than the black dress she was wearing, this girl could have written her own ticket to Hollywood.

I wasn't surprised. Honeyboy Harris had always picked the cream of the crop. I'd known at least half a dozen of Honeyboy's "wives" and all had been gorgeous, young, shapely, dripping with boudoir appeal.

On the other hand, all the others had been just a trifle hard around the eyes—wise in the

ways of the world—and this girl wasn't quite that sort. She had long, slim legs, all right, and the thin black dress hugged a deliciously pert bosom, but she didn't have that sneer, that look of wise sophistication. She appeared to be just a pale, bewildered kid.

"Careful, Johnny," I thought. "Looks are sometimes deceiving. Most likely this sweet young thing would invite you up and slip a knife into you for a couple of bucks spending money."

Tucks introduced me. "Mrs. Holburn, this here is John Kern, from the *Chronicle*. You want to talk to him?"

She looked at me, and I hung onto my breath for a second. Something about those eyes of hers, the way she raised them, stared at me, made me certain I'd met her before somewhere. Or was I crazy?

"What do you want to know?" Millie said.

"How long have you been Jim Holburn's wife?"

She hadn't expected that question. She stiffened. Her breasts thrust sharply against the black dress and she trembled a little. "I—I married him just before we came up here."

"What was your name before you married him, Mrs. Holburn?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Mildred—Smith."

I scowled at Tucks. "You mind if I ask Mrs. Holburn a few personal questions, Tucks?"

He liked that. He had the look of a man about to peer into a bedroom window. "No. Go right ahead."

"I mean personal. Private. Just Mrs. Holburn and myself."

His face fell. "It ain't exactly regular. . ." But he caught the look in my eye, shrugged and went out, leaving us alone.

I WAITED until the sound of his footsteps assured me he was well out of ear-shot. Then I leaned forward, put a hand on Millie Holburn's knee. I said, "What Tucks doesn't know won't hurt him. What I know may hurt *you*, though, unless we get together on this." When that got only a frown from her, I added gently: "Honeyboy Harris didn't usually marry his wives. Did he marry you?"

I didn't think her face could get any paler, but it did. Every trace of color ran out of it, and her mouth was a pale, soft, trembling blur in a white

mask of fear. She trembled like a leaf, staring at me. Then all at once she folded, put her face in her hands and went all to pieces, sobbing.

I'm human. I'm thirty and single, and she was a very lovely young lady in trouble. I put my arms around her. She didn't protest.

"A lot of nice girls fell for Honeyboy," I soothed her. "The hell with that part of it. The point is—did you kill him or didn't you? Either way, maybe I can get you out of it."

She needed someone to cling to, that girl. She was scared. And I was handy, and she didn't have much choice—either me or Tucks, with Tucks a shriveled little runt as heartless as Hitler.

She pressed her head against my chest and hung onto me, and I liked it. She was warm and soft. She had a lot of delicious curves that intrigued me. I could feel her breasts throbbing through the thin black dress. I could see an interesting inch of smooth creamy skin where the hem hitched up her leg. I liked the smell of her hair.

After a while, I said, "How about it, Millie? Did you cut that ice?"

"No," she whispered.

"Did you get someone else to cut it?"

"No . . . I didn't. I don't know *who* did it."

I gave her a smile and tipped her face up so I could look into her eyes. "Okay," I said. "You just leave this to your Uncle Johnny. Uncle Johnny likes you." And I kissed her.

Under the circumstances, that was a remarkable kiss. I mean she wasn't in the mood, she just let me kiss her. But the way her soft, warm mouth blended with mine, the way her lips came apart and shaped themselves . . . *uh-huh!* My mind was made up, Alvah Tucks was definitely not going to keep those lips locked up in his two-by-four jailhouse. Not for long!

IT was just getting dark when I parked at the lake shore, beside the shed. The wind off the lake whistled through me, and I tugged my collar up, walked over to the shed, looked in with a flashlight.

Two cars were in there. One belonged to Jim Holburn, alias Honeyboy Harris, and had been there when Tucks showed me around before. The other was a snazzy New York coupe, a new arrival.

Over across, two or three windows of the camp glowed with light. I started toward them,

warily circled the roped-off patch of thin ice where Honeyboy had stepped to his death.

A weird spot, this Blue Lake. About a mile long, it had a flock of hidden inlets and was surrounded by deep woods. The camp for which I was headed was the only one on the lake. In summer you could drive clear to the lodge, but with snow on the ground the road around the lake was too tough for a car, and you walked the ice.

Right now the ice was solid enough to support a team of horses. But beyond the rope barrier lay a patch of deep black water that looked ugly. I gave it a wide berth, and was glad to reach shore. But the lights puzzled me. So did that New York coupe. I'd expected to find the place empty.

Up the steps I went, and rapped on the door. A chair moved inside. I heard a soft pat-pat of footsteps, and the door opened. I got the surprise of my life.

"Fancy," I said, getting my breath, "meeting *you* here!"

She didn't place me at first. Turning her carmine lips into a scowl, she gave me a thorough once-over, and a good sixty seconds passed before her big brown eyes filled with a light of recognition. Then she stepped back, smiling.

"Come in, Handsome, come right in. I'm just dying to meet someone who might *know* about this dirty business!"

I shed my coat and hat and parked in a nice comfortable chair before the fireplace, where pine logs gave out a pleasant glow. Then I got up again and peeked into the bedroom. Sure enough, her slippers were under the bed and a suitcase full of feminine doodads lay open on a chair. She'd moved in.

"Making yourself right at home, Lou?" I said, returning to my chair.

She said, "Why not, Handsome? The joint's mine now, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"I legally married the guy. He may have run out on me, but I'm his legal widow. Got papers to prove it."

I didn't argue. If Lou Lester said she had papers to prove it, then she had papers to prove it. I knew Lou. I'd seen considerable of her—and I mean just that—six months or so ago when Honeyboy Harris bucked the Orio mob, found them too tough, and went into hiding. The coppers had wanted Honeyboy for questioning concerning

the machine-gunning of Frank Orio's brother George. Some of us newspaper lads had stuck close to the hunt anticipating a scoop.



The coppers hadn't found Honeyboy. He'd been hiding out here at Blue Lake, as Jim Holburn. Now he was dead. The gal with whom he'd been hiding out was in jail, accused of murdering him. And here, warming her luscious self at the fire, was Honeyboy's wife.

I LOOKED her over warily. Not too long ago, Lou Lester had wowed the customers of the better class night spots with a very slinky feather-dance and strip act. She hadn't lost any of her figure. Right now she was wearing a thin, pale-blue pair of lounging pajamas that hid practically nothing.

Lou Lester had shape. Curves where curves belong. She had long, slim legs and long slim arms, classic shoulders, a full, arrogant bosom. I stared at her and it wasn't the fire that sent waves of heat through me. It wasn't the fire that made the tips of my fingers tingle. I was remembering some very torrid memories.

"Drink, handsome?" Lou said.

I nodded, and she was back in a moment with a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. She poured a drink, watching me. I said, "When," and she said, "You're slipping, Handsome," and went right on pouring. When the glass was full she sat on the arm of my chair, held it to my lips. It warmed me, that Scotch—but not half as much as the lips that shaped themselves to mine a moment later.

"One for old times," Lou whispered.

She meant one for the book; and the book had flaming red covers! Her arm slipped around my neck, warm and soft, and she slid down close to me, so close that when her mouth melted against mine and she began trembling, I could feel every delicious tremor of her body.

Some ladies never learn how to kiss like that. With them it's purely lip service. But a kiss with Lou Lester was an all-out gesture extending from the tinted tips of her toenails to the topmost wisp of her blonde hair. A kiss with Lou Lester was a combination of limp, luscious surrender and fiery totalitarian attack.

I forgot about Honeyboy Harris for the next few minutes. I even forgot about the sweet little trick in Alvah Tucks' jail. With Lou Lester in my arms, I forgot everything but Lou Lester—the thirsty pressure of her soft red lips, the eager quivering of her mature young body, the pulsing of firm, rounded breasts.

We paused for breath. "Still like it, Handsome?" she smiled.

What a question!

We had another drink, and it didn't do me a bit of good. Another half hour elapsed; then, reluctant but tired, and somewhat deliciously disheveled, Lou untangled herself and made repairs. "Now tell me," she said, "about Honeyboy. Did that girl really put him on ice?"

I said, "She's a nice kid, Lou. I don't think she set that trap for Honeyboy."

"Who is she? What's her name?"

"Millie—Mildred Smith."

Lou smiled. "Oh yeah?"

I stuck out a foot and kicked a glowing ember back into the fire. With studied indifference I said, "You want to see the kid burn, Lou?"

"Why not—if she killed him?" Lou shrugged. "I sort of liked Honeyboy, even if he was a rat."

"He gave you the air, Lou. Deserted you."

She shrugged her shapely shoulders, stared into the fire a moment. "If things had been different, and he hadn't had to go into hiding . . . oh, what the hell. You're fond of this Millie Smith, Johnny?"

"Me? Hell, no."

"Then why the concern?"

"She's just a kid. And I don't think she had a thing to do with Honeyboy's death."

"You think it was an accident?"

"No. but—"

Lou looked at me, hard. Lamplight spilled down over her shoulders, outlining the soft curve of her throat, revealing the dusky allure of shadowed breasts. "I don't know who put Honeyboy away, Handsome. I'm not even sure I care. I came up here to look around, see what I could do. When it's over, I'm going back." She looked around, shivered. "Brrr! Catch *me* living in a God forsaken place like this!"

I said warily "How did you know Jim Holburn was Honeyboy?"

"One of the boys told me, some time ago."

"Then the big town knew . . .?"

"A few of Honeyboy's old trusties knew," she said. "That's all."

"And maybe," I muttered, "some of his old enemies found out, too. That would explain a lot of things, Lou." I poured myself a short one, downed it, stood up. "Well, Lou, so long."

"So—soon, Handsome?"

I hesitated. She looked disappointed, and I thought of how cold it was outside, and of how warm, how deliciously warm I could be if I lingered.

"I'll be back, Lou. It you're in bed, don't get up."

Lou yawned, gave me a beautiful smile. "I wouldn't think of it, Handsome," she said softly.

WHAT I had in mind was this: If Millie Smith hadn't cut the death trap for Honeyboy—and why *should* she?—then suspicion logically rested on one or more of Honeyboy's big city connections. But the man who cut that ice must have planned the job carefully. He must have known Honeyboy was going to the village that night. He must have known there'd be a fall of snow to cover the skim-ice that formed over the hole.

You need time to gather such information. You need to be around a while.

Tucks had talked about strangers visiting the camp during Honeyboy's absence. Okay. Maybe Millie would talk about them, too, if I applied pressure.

I hiked across the lake in the dark, giving the hole a wide berth. But I didn't get to the car. Down the shore a light winked on and off, and I watched it. It winked again. Someone was prowling over there.

I closed in.

It wasn't too hard. The guy was taking his time, hugging the shoreline, and I cut straight across the ice, in the dark, to overhaul him. The snow on the ice was soft and I made no noise.

He turned into a hidden little cove well out of sight of the camp, and now the light went on and stayed on. He was a big fellow, bare-headed, wearing a leather jacket, corduroy pants and heavy boots. The light played over a mound of snow-covered ice blocks near the shore, moved across the pile and focused on a ragged red sweater draped over the end of an old log.

He strode forward, reached for the sweater. From twenty feet away I barked, "All right, you! Hold it!" and he froze.

I walked up to him, a gun in my fist. "I'll take that," I said, grabbing the flashlight. "And this, too." And I reached for the sweater.

He was a tough baby with plenty of intestinal fortitude; say that for him. It took him just about six seconds to realize trouble was on the make for him. He used up another two seconds sucking a breath into his big chest. Then he flung himself at my legs.

Almost reluctantly I stepped back and swung the gun. It smacked him where the hair grows thin. He leveled out, slid on his face and hands along the ice, and lay still.

I walked over to the pile of iceblocks. They were fresh cut. I looked at the ragged red sweater. The manufacturer's label was worn thin, but the owner's name, lettered in indelible ink, was still legible. P. Burke. In one of the two pockets I found a pack of cigarettes, almost full, and a piece of torn newspaper containing a weather forecast.

We were getting somewhere, but fast! I tied the sweater around me, worked the guy over my shoulder. He was no lightweight, but neither am I.

We got back to the car all right. Half an hour later I lugged him into Alvah Tucks' little red jail, dropped him on the floor.

Tucks blinked at him. "You know him?" I asked.

Tucks nodded.

I said quietly, "I found that cut of ice, Tucks. It's piled up in a little cove. This—" and I slapped the red sweater on his desk—"was draped over a log nearby. The boy friend here was after it. Left it behind, evidently, when he stacked that ice, and figured it might get him into trouble unless he went back for it." I gave the diminutive sheriff a scowl. "Is his name Burke?"

"Paul Burke," Tucks said, nodding.

"All right. Swell. Now maybe you'll give Millie a break and believe her."

Tucks put the sweater down, peered at the pack of cigarettes and the weather forecast, put those down too and shook his head. "This don't clear Millie. I never figured Millie cut that ice without help. This just lets us know who helped her."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Paul Burke used to work at the camp," Tucks said, "until Jim Holburn fired him a while ago. Everyone said Jim fired him for being too friendly with Millie. This bears it out. It also gives us a motive for the murder." His mouth twisted in a crooked grin. "You've been a great help, Kern. Thanks."



I was speechless. I sat down, brooding. Damn it, I'd thought I was helping the girl, to repay her for the trusting look in those soft, sad eyes of hers!

Tucks lifted a pair of handcuffs from a desk drawer and put them on Burke's wrists. He wrestled the big guy onto a chair, got some water and revived him. Burke glared at me, and I wondered if Tucks were right, after all. This lad was young and husky and good-looking. Almost any girl would look twice at him.

"Well," Tucks said, confronting him, "you got anything to say, Burke?"

"A little," Burke growled.

"Well . . . ?"

"Just this. Go to hell."

Two hours later, when I walked out of there, he'd repeated those three terse words a few hundred times—but he hadn't said anything else, and wasn't going to.

WHERE I spent the rest of that night is my business, but brother, I didn't suffer from the cold any; I was warm and cozy and comfortable. In the morning I went back to the village, saw Tucks again. He was adamant.

"Far as I'm concerned," he snapped, "this case is solved. Millie got Paul Burke to cut that death trap, Without Jim's knowin' it. They wanted Jim out of the way because they were sweet on each other. That's all there is to it. They're both in jail and by God they'll sit there till I get confessions out of 'em!"

I went in to see Paul Burke, hoping a night in jail had softened him. It hadn't. But my call wasn't wasted. Unusually alert for that hour in the morning, I noticed something odd about Burke's cell. It was too clean. Not a cigarette butt in sight. You lock most men up, and they smoke themselves into a stupor.

"Matter?" I said. "Tucks deny you cigarettes?"

He gave me a queer look. "I don't smoke," he said.

I checked with the sheriff. Sure enough, Paul Burke didn't smoke. Yet there'd been a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of that ragged red sweater.

That started me thinking. The cigarettes were on Tucks' desk, and I took another look at them, noted the brand. In a big city, that brand would have been common enough, but here in Kimms Corner . . . well, I had my doubts. So I went shopping.

They didn't have any at the grocery or the drugstore. They didn't have any in Kimms Corner's only restaurant. I tried the barroom. The barkeep shook his head. I straddled a stool and ordered a beer.

The place was empty. The barkeep said conversationally, "It sure is too bad about Jim Holburn, ain't it though?"

"Sure is," I said.

He looked at my beer, poured one for himself. "Reckon I was one of the last to see him alive. He was in here, chewin' the rag."

"Drunk?"

"Well, he was more talkative than usual, but it wasn't from liquor, I guess. He was kind of put out. Dunno what about, but he was sore. Moody, sort of. I sold him a pint of rum but he never touched it. Just had a few beers at the bar here and sat around. Sulky, sort of."

I felt sulky, sort of, myself. One thing, I realized, had to be proved. The fact had to be established that Honeyboy Harris was drunk when

he left town to go home. Proving it wasn't going to be easy. Still . . . I had *something*.

I went back to the jail and wheedled Tucks into allowing me another conference with Millie. Looking at her, I felt sort of guilty for not having spent the night out in the cold. She had that trusting, wistful look, and she was trying so damned hard to be brave.

I sat on the cot and put an arm around her. A nice, fatherly gesture. But when she began sobbing, began trembling against me, all warm and alive, I didn't feel fatherly. Not Johnny Kern. I just whispered, "Okay, baby," and silenced the sobs with a kiss.

As before, she didn't exactly kiss me in return. But her soft, warm mouth shaped itself to mine, and through the thin fabric of the cheap black dress she was wearing I could feel the thrust of her hot little breasts, the quickening of her heart.

She clung to me for a moment; then I said gently, "Tell me something, child. The night Honeyboy was drowned, were you planning a trip to the village?"

She gave me a wondering look, nodded.

"With him?" I asked.

"No. Alone."

"Why didn't you go?"

"I—I hurt myself," she said, and without meaning to, she gingerly touched her shoulder. "I—I fell." All at once, for no apparent reason, she seemed terribly embarrassed. Tears welled in her eyes.

I stood up, scowling. I looked around, to make sure we were alone, and then, almost as if I were dealing with a child, I deliberately unbuttoned the front of the cheap black dress and slid it down over her shoulders. I knew what I'd find. Sure I knew.

SHE tried to stop me. She whispered, "No—no, please!" but I was determined as hell by this time, and had my way. And I was right. The smooth, ivory skin of her shoulder wore a purple blotch, a bruise, yellowing at the edges.

I inched the dress a little lower, and my gaze roved over firm, tempting contours. She was beautiful, this girl, and I mean ravishing. The cheap black dress hadn't done her justice. Her skin against that black shroud was white as milk. Her soft young bosom was molded from pure

gypsum, alluring as something seen through the seductive mist of an opium dream.

I stared rudely, and my heart began to thump. My temperature went up, but rapidly. All my nerve ends began to itch. But I bottled these emotions up, because I was supposed to be looking at the bruises on this girl's lovely body—not at the body itself.

There were plenty of bruises. Ugly ones. Someone had given Millie Smith a terrific pounding.

"Honeyboy?" I growled.

She said almost inaudibly, "Y-yes."

"Why? Drunk?"

She shook her head. "No, Mr. Kern. Not—not drunk. It's just that he—he sometimes had a temper."

I said sternly, "Are you holding out on me, Millie?"

"No," she insisted.

I pulled the dress back up, with gestures; kissed her and told her to keep a stiff upper lip. On the way out I didn't say anything to Tucks about the bruises. Hell, he'd have considered it just another strand in the rope with which he meant to hang the girl.

Half an hour later I got out of my car on the road in to the lake and began looking. That's right—looking. There hadn't been a fall of snow since Jim Holburn's "accident" and the thing I hoped to find would be along that road somewhere. It should be lying where it fell when Honeyboy Harris tossed it out of his car.

And I found it, not far from the shed. An empty pint rum bottle, the label still new and bright, undimmed by time or weather. Into my pocket it went, carefully wrapped in a handkerchief.

One thing more was needed. One little thing. I hiked across the lake, knocked on the lodge door and walked in.

A sound of running water in the bathroom ceased abruptly. Lou Lester's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Johnny," I said. "Your old pal Johnny."

She laughed merrily. "You gave me a start, Handsome. I'm taking a shower. Thought you might be a bear."

I thought of last night. "You should be afraid of a bear," I sassed. "You'd make a rug of him in

one session, sweetheart." She laughed again, and I went through to the kitchen.

I figured it like this: You live in a place like this, where a good snowfall is apt to bottle you up for a spell, and you buy supplies in bunches, store them until needed. Cigarettes, for instance. Especially when the brand you favor is not for sale in the village.

I hauled three full cartons of those cigarettes out of a kitchen cupboard, and the job was done. I knew who'd murdered Honeyboy Harris. I could prove it. Elated as hell, I hiked back into the living room—and got the shock of my life.

I hadn't heard him come in. I hadn't heard a sound except the running water in the bathroom, and even that, I realized now, was silent. But there he was in the doorway, aiming a gun at me. Alvah Tucks' gun. And his scowl said he meant business.

I said, "I thought you were locked up, Burke."

He took a step forward, a crazy glint in his eyes that dripped icewater on my nerves. "Think again, mister," he snarled. "And think fast. You ain't got much time."

There wasn't much I could do. With a cold-blooded killer, sure of himself and sure of you, you can sometimes play for time. But Paul Burke was trembling with rage; his mouth was working and his face was waxy white. And I had my hands full of cigarette cartons and didn't dare drop them; didn't dare make any sudden move that might cause a convulsion in the guy's trigger-finger.

I stared at him, chilled to the tips of my fingers, and said, "Why pick on me, Burke?"

"You're too smart to live!" he snarled.

I said, "Hell, it didn't take brains to solve this case. Killing me won't save you. Someone else will figure things out."

He took another step toward me and pushed the door shut behind him. There wasn't a sound from the bathroom; not even a whisper of noise.

"There won't be nobody else figure things out," Burke snarled, "after you're dead!"

I said, "Sure they will. It's open and shut, Burke. Somebody cut that ice and paid you to help. Right now, Tucks thinks you did it alone, for Millie, but he'll catch on after a while. Why hell, *you* weren't wearing that red sweater. It was your sweater, but the other guy was wearing it. The guy who smoked this brand of cigarettes." I tried to stare the murder-lust out of his eyes. "You

know who I mean, Burke. Jim Holburn. Tucks will figure it out in time."

HE licked his lips, and for an instant I thought I had him. Rushing on, I said rapidly, "The rest is easy. You and Holburn cut that ice, then Holburn fell in by mistake on his way home that night. In other words, he was drunk. Tucks says he wasn't drunk, but Tucks doesn't know about the pint of rum Jim bought at the barroom and drank on the way home." I measured the distance between us and got ready to heave those cartons of cigarettes; tensed myself for a dive at his legs. It was my only chance. "Hell, Burke, Jim Holburn cut that death-trap to get rid of Millie. It's open and shut. He even tore the weather report out of the paper when it promised snow—snow to cover the trap. Tucks will catch on, and then—"

He jerked the gun up and I stopped talking. His grin was ghastly. "How do you know I helped him?" he snarled. "How do you know he didn't just borrow my sweater?"

"How did *you* know the sweater was there?" I cracked.

He said, "You're smart. But you won't never put Tucks straight, where you're goin'."

I didn't think I would. My fingers tightened around the cigarettes and I sucked up a breath to quiet the sledging of my heart. Then the bathroom door opened. Burke looked, and his mouth fell apart.

It wasn't his fault, really. I mean you can't blame the guy for being human. In the first place he didn't know there was a soul in the camp besides me. In the second place, he certainly never expected to see what he saw.

Lou Lester put on a good act. Her eyes widened and she said, "Oh!" as if she were just too, too surprised. She made a fluttering gesture with her hands, as though to cover up certain portions of her gorgeous anatomy. But she didn't try too hard.

There she stood, with just a couple of cobweb wisps of this and that snugly clinging to her more important curves. Even I stared. But then, Lou Lester was decidedly not ordinary. They say all ladies look alike *when*, but that's malarkey.

Lou's half-draped body was a symphony of satin curves, deliciously white and tempting. You could see right through the strip of mist that cradled her powdered breasts. You could see the

sleek swells of pale loveliness rise and fall with her breathing. And brother, you looked!

Paul Burke was still looking, mouth agape, when I stepped into him. I connected, and my good right fist drove his lower jaw damn near through his roof. He rolled his eyes. Blood spurted from his nose. Meek as milk, he folded at my feet.

"Whew!" Lou said. "That was close, Handsome!"

I looked at her. She was right—it had been close. But it wasn't half as close as Lou and I were a moment later, when I commenced to allow my gratitude. Nor was the guy on the floor nearly as limp as Lou became, when I cradled her warmly in my arms and whispered my words of thanks.

She said, "Hell, Handsome, you had a break coming. You're a good guy. Run along now, and take care of Millie."

I stared at her. She stared back at me, and gently straightened the wisps of silk that hugged her curves. Then, smiling, she lightly slapped my face.

"Run along, Handsome. She's more your type. And if you're worried about the six months she spent with Honeyboy, I'll tell you something. Are you worried, Handsome?"

I shrugged. "I'm no angel myself, Lou."

"You're a good guy," she said. "A very likable cuss, Johnny." Her fingers touched my mouth, and suddenly, impulsively, she gave me one last kiss. I'll never forget that kiss. It shook me to my toes and raised my blood pressure to an all-time new high.

"Her name isn't Smith," Lou said then. "It's Southey. Mildred Southey. Her brother was a cop until Honeyboy sent him to the morgue. She swore she'd get even, Handsome. Maybe in time she would have, if Honeyboy hadn't found her out and tried to drown her—and drowned himself instead."

I blinked. "How the hell—?"

"I got wind of it just a while ago," Lou said. "That's why I came up here to warn Honeyboy. I could have left it to one of the boys; they visited him off and on . . . but I thought I'd come myself. I got here too late."

Lou put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it, patted my cheek again.

"Anyhow, Handsome, she's a nice girl. And you're a nice guy." She blew smoke at me and turned toward the bedroom.

"See you both in church some time," she said.

THE END