

# KILLER'S UNION

By Robert Leslie Bellem



Keeping a cute movie extra on ice in his apartment is bound to get Dan in trouble. And part of it is that a gunman doesn't forget how to play rough just because he's turned screen actor.

SOME scatterbrained character had switched off the electric bulb in the basement garage under my apartment stash. Consequently, when I ankled down to get my jalopy that evening, the surroundings were darker than the inside of a Cuban policeman.

I reached the bottom step; hauled out my pencil flashlight to glom a gander at where I was going. Before I could snap on the beam, though, I stumbled over something soft and yielding on the concrete floor.

The instant my toe made contact, a hunch told me the object was made of flesh. Beast or human, alive or defunct, the sensation was damnably unpleasant. I said: "What the hell—!" and tried to recover my balance.

Whereupon some beefy disciple came charging at me out of the blackness; caromed

against me with force enough to knock me backward. I floundered and went down.

Toppling, I forgot all about my date with Sully Chester, the quickie producer who'd just phoned me to come see him at his studio. I was too busy pawing out, making a wild snatch at the unseen bozo who'd slammed into me.

LUCK roosted on my coat-tails. At the instant I hit the floor, I managed to fasten a one-handed grab on the guy's gam. I yanked. He grunted, went into a dive, landed on his trumpet. Then I swarmed all over him with felonious intent. What he needed was a dose of mayhem; and I was just the citizen who could do it.

He squirmed like an eel swimming in fuel oil as I aimed an instinctive poke at his puss. Somehow he must have guessed the

punch was coming, because he jerked his conk aside. My knuckles bashed against the bottom cement step and a streak of pain blasted up my arm; paralyzed me for a split second.

That split second was all the hefty blister needed. He shoved me off his brisket, scrambled out from under my tonnage. Then he went clattering up the stairs, hellity-blip.

I staggered to my tootsies, started after him. When he gained the dimly lighted first floor landing, he turned around, piped me coming. He picked up a galvanized bucket full of sifted sand for use in case of incendiary bombs in an air raid; heaved it down at me.

Ducking, I copped a hinge at his map. He had narrow glims, a flattened smeller, a snarling gash where his kisser should have been. He looked like the kind of lug you'd type-cast for hoodlum roles in gangster pix—and as a matter of fact, that's exactly what he was; a mobster. The genuine article.

I tabbed him the minute I saw his ugly pan. He was Rocco Riccardo, a former mobland torpedo out of Chicago. He'd been here in Hollywood about four months; first playing gunsel bits on some of the less important lots, then finally winding up as personal bodyguard for Maxie Medwick, head mogul of Goldentone Productions, an independent outfit.

Even as I recognized Riccardo, the bucket of sand whammed into my shins; sent me tumbling all the way back to the bottom of the stairs. When I got unscrambled and limped up to the lobby, the flat-nosed rat had powdered.

I couldn't tell whether he'd lammed out the front entrance or used the rear alley exit. While I was still combing sand out of my teeth and wondering which way to chase him, a whimpering moan sounded from the basement garage.

Then I remembered the yielding form that had tripped me in the first place. I said:

"Cripes!" and catapulted down the steps under forced draft.

WHEN I hit bottom, I squirted light from my flash; brought the beam to rest on a sprawled she-male figure. The quail was young, blonde, curvesome; and she looked as if somebody had been using her for a football. Despite her bruises and contusions, though, I knew her. She was Mitzi Milton, a movie extra. She lived here in the building; shared a flat with a red-haired cupcake named Nona Bryce.

Mitzi's golden tresses were mussed to hellangone and there was a purple mouse on her left cheek, scratches on the right. Her flimsy frock was ripped to ribbons, leaving her practically naked to the waist except for a thin bandeau over her cute little breasts. I piped more black and blue marks on her arms and shoulders than a forest has trees.

As I leaned over her, touched her; she quivered and moaned; tried to pull away. I said: "Take it easy, hon. What the hell happened to you?"

She didn't open her glims. She just cringed, let out a pleading bleat. "Please don't hit me any m-more. . . I p-promise I won't tell anything . . . !"

"You won't tell anything about what?" I said, slipping my mitts under her and lifting her. "You needn't be scared of me, babe. I'm Dan Turner, private gumshoe. I live here in the stash. You're okay now."

Her long lashes fluttered and she hung the groggy gander on me. A shudder ripped through her fragile framework. "Oh-h-h . . . th-thank God . . . !" she whimpered. And she went limp in my arms like a rag doll with its starch missing.

At first I was afraid maybe she'd slipped her moorings permanently. I jammed a palm under the cushiony sweetness of her breast; felt steady pulsations there. She wasn't defunct, after all; she'd merely passed out cold. I started probing around for possible

broken bones.

I got a hell of a thump out of the job. Who wouldn't? She was a damned delishful dish of candy. Her gams were slender, tapered; her hips just shapely enough to be completely feminine. And the creamy mounds that nestled in the cups of that mesh brassiere were treasures to dream about on a rainy Sunday.

Not finding any serious damage, I toted her upstairs; took her to my wikiup on the third floor. I dumped her gently on the davenport, started chafing her wrists.

She swam out of her swoon. "Where—what—"

"Take it easy, Mitzi," I said. "Everything's under control now. Tell me something. Why did Rocco Riccardo load you up with lumps?"

"Because I know t-too much. . . No, I can't tell you!" her voice changed to a terrified wail. "Please don't ask me . . . !"

I patted her hither and yon until she got quiet. Then I said: "Why shouldn't I ask you? I took a dose of the same medicine from the Riccardo rodent. That puts us in the same boat. So go ahead and spill."

She cuddled closer to me; shivered like a kitten coughing marbles. "I w-won't talk. I don't d-dare. He'd come b-back and . . . beat me again. Maybe k-kill me!"

There was something pathetically wistful about her; a helpless, friendless quality that reached down inside me and tossed me for a sympathetic goal. On impulse I leaned forward, planted my kisser on hers. "He won't croak you, sweet stuff. I'll see to that."

**S**HE shrank away from me for an instant; then her arms slid around my neck and locked there. She clung to me, flattened her creamy curves to the front of my shirt. Oddly enough, though, I didn't draw as much thrill out of this as you might expect. I sensed something phoney about her actions all of a sudden, as if she might be forcing herself to

do the things she was doing.

She practically proved it when she moaned: "No! I don't want y-you to mix into it. Promise me you'll forget everything that happened . . . !" And she fed me a kiss that sent a charge of live steam past my goozle.

I caught hep to the play. She was offering me a load of love if I'd lay off Rocco Riccardo. Well, I'm as human as the next slob; and with a nifty number like Mitzi Milton in my embrace I'm liable to promise my right adenoid.

So I said: "Okay, beautiful, if that's the way you feel about it." And I returned her kiss with compound interest.

She whimpered gratefully, fused herself to my wishbone. I began sizzling like grease on a hot stove. The temptation was too much for me. I kicked my inhibitions out the window and settled down to enjoy life. . .

**P**RESENTLY I said: "You'd better stay here in my igloo tonight, Mitzi. Riccardo might come and look for you in your own flat. You can have my bedroom; I'll flop on the couch here when I get home." Then I reached for my hat.

She swayed to her feet. "You—you're going out? L-leaving me all alone?"

"Yeah. I'll try not to be too long, though."

She fastened the accusing glare on me. "You're going out to have Rocco Riccardo arrested!"

"Nix, hon," I shook my head. "I've just got a date with Sully Chester, the quickie impresario. He wants me to handle a job for him, is all."

"Y-you're telling the truth?"

"Sure. Now you lay low until I get back." I blew her a kiss, ankled out before she could hand me an argument.

Driving over to Chester's lot on Gower Street, I kept wondering why the Riccardo hood had run Mitzi through the wringer. He had a motive; but what was it? And why

hadn't the blonde wren wanted me to have him pinched for assault and bashery? That part didn't quite make sense.

It was still pestering me as I parked in front of Chester's ramshackle studio. I climbed out of my heap; waltzed to the main entrance gate. It was nine o'clock on the nail, and I was thirty minutes late for my appointment.

As I reached the gate, it swung open in my puss and Sully Chester himself darted out at me like an excited little gadfly. He was a middle aged shrimp with a hooked beak and a perpetually worried expression in his big brown glimmers.

"Hawkshaw!" he yipped. "We were beginning to think you'd never get here!"

"We?" I cocked an eyebrow.

"Yes. Maxie Medwick of Goldentone Productions is in on this conference. He's waiting in my office."

I stiffened. Medwick was the guy who employed Rocco Riccardo as his personal bodyguard. I said: "That's damned funny."

"What's funny?"

I covered up by saying: "I though you quickie producers never got together, Sully."

He lowered his voice nervously. "Usually we don't. But it's different this time. We're in a hell of a jackpot."

"Jackpot?" I pinned the squint on him.

He nodded. "Some lousy *schlemiel* is secretly organizing the independent extras and bit players in a blackleg union. It's not connected with either the C.I.O. or the A.F. of L. In fact it's nothing but a racketeering chisel."

"No kidding?"

"It's the truth, Philo. The boys and girls are being forced to join; to cough up twenty per cent of their earnings on top of a stiff initiation fee. If they balk, they get the tripes kicked out of them."

I felt the short hairs prickling at the nape of my neck. I rasped: "Bigahd, that explains why Mitzi Milton got pasted for a loop!"

Chester paid no attention to my interruption. He went on: "We Poverty Row outfits are over a barrel, Dan. We've been warned to boost wages; to hire nobody but members of this illegal union. If we refuse, they threaten to put us out of business."

"Who does this threatening?" I asked him.

"The head of the racket. We don't know who he is. He stays under cover, works through a mob of hoods."

I SET fire to a gasper, let the smoke drift up to goose my grey matter. From what Sully Chester was telling me, he was up against the old squeeze play. The independent producers were being coerced to hire nobody but union extras; the extras themselves were blackjacked into joining that union. Wages would go up, maybe; but the little people wouldn't drag any benefit out of it. The racketeers would shake all that additional geetus from their pay envelopes, plus a lot more. Any way you looked at it, the setup stank.

Chester babbled: "We're not standing still for it, Sherlock. We're hiring you to find out who's behind the chisel. We want you to put him on ice."

"That ought to be easy," I told him. "I've already got a hell of a promising lead."

"You have—?"

"Yeah. A strongarm named Riccardo just fed the fist to Mitzi Milton at my apartment dugout a while ago. Maybe you know her; she plays extra stuff and bit parts."

He blinked at me. "I know her. But did you say Riccardo?"

"That's right. Which is why I'm a little late. I left Mitzi in my tepee. Riccardo got away clean—but you can see he's the monkey we're after."

The beak-nosed shrimp made clucking sounds with his tongue. "I can't believe it! You must have made a mistake somewhere, gumshoe. Why, Rocco Riccardo is Maxie

Medwick's bodyguard!"

"Yeah, I know it."

"And he's in my office with Maxie right now," Chester added. Then he yipped suddenly: "*Oh, my God—!*"

As his voice soared to a yelping yodel, the earth seemed to jump up and down under us. A blast of explosive sound split the night wide open; flames shot skyward to the high fog. Riding the roar, a wave of superheated air slugged me like a sledgehammer; knocked me on my reverse lap. Pieces of wooden building started raining down like toothpicks out of guns.

Sully Chester's quickie sound stage had been dynamited plumb to hell.

**I**ROLLED toward the little producer to see if he was okay. A splintered scantling had parted his curly hair, scalp and all; thick red gravy was seeping out of the gashed place on his noggin, while protracted groans issued from his kisser.

He didn't respond when I shook him. He just sagged against me, semi-conscious. I staggered upright, lifted him out past the studio gate to the sidewalk, and stretched him there. Then I pivoted and went sprinting toward the bombed studio.

Somebody hit me with a flying tackle as I pelted for the ramshackle building's ruins. "You fool!" a voice screamed. "You can't go in there!"

I squirmed to face the squealer; piped Maxie Medwick, the Goldentone mogul. He was a bald, porky character with three chins and a shape like a barrel—especially about the elly-bay. Two trips around his belt line would be a sleeper jump.

Right now his tubby corporation was shaking like a mountain of aspic; fear jiggled his jowls, popped out his peepers from their bags of fat. "I—I came out to look for Sully. J-just as I walked out of the building it b-bub-blew up!" Then he turned fishbelly white. "God! I left Riccardo in there—"

I copped a swift swivel at the burning wooden structure. Nobody inside could have survived the blast. But maybe the Riccardo gunsel had followed his fat boss out into the open. I gave Medwick a shove; lunged past him.

The flames blistered my whiskers, drove me back. But I got a brief hinge inside Sully Chester's ground floor office where one wall had been blasted away. I saw a guy on the floor with his clockworks strewn hither and yon, the fire licking at his bashed map. No damned doubt about it, he was Rocco Riccardo. And he was as dead as fried hamburger.

Nothing but dumb luck had saved the two quickie producers, Chester and Medwick, from the same dose. If they'd been in that office when the blow-off came, they'd have been blasted defunct. And if I hadn't been half an hour late for my appointment, I'd have gone to glory with them.

The bare thought gave me the shivering jitters. I ran back to Medwick, while fire-engine sirens yowled in the distance. I rasped: "Come on, Fatso. We've got to see about Sully Chester. He got conked by a chunk of lumber."

"Guh-God!" the Goldentone bigwig choked. And he wheezed at my heels, put on an extra burst of speed, passed me as we went sailing through the gate to the street.

He was several steps ahead of me when he reached Chester's sprawled form. He leaned over the unconscious little guy, then straightened up.

"Turner—look! I found this p-pinned to Sully's c-coat!" And he handed me a sheet of dirty paper.

**I**SNATCHED it from his pudgy mitt, read it in the light of the flaming sound stage. The message was typewritten:

*“There will be more dynamite used unless union demands are met without protest. Producers take heed—and don’t hire any more private detectives. Destroy this and say nothing to the police. Let them think the explosion was accidental. Disobedience means death!”*

When I gave the message back to Medwick, I noticed a strained look on his triple-chinned phiz. “This is terrible!” he quavered. “Maybe my studio will be next!”

I told him I didn’t think so. “The rat behind this fake union racket was your own bodyguard. He’s croaked now; his own bomb backfired on him.”

“My bodyguard—? You mean Rocco?”

“Yeah. I caught him beating up an extra chick tonight. Probably because she didn’t want to join his lousy union.”

The porky mogul licked his thick lips. “Rocco! And to think I trusted him! But wait a minute, Turner. Maybe he was in on it. He couldn’t have been the brains, though. He was working for somebody higher up.”

“How do you add that?”

“It’s plain enough. Who the hell planted this note on Sully Chester’s coat just now while he’s lying here on the sidewalk? It wasn’t Rocco. He’s dead.”

I caught his point, cursed myself for a dimwit. “All right,” I growled. “That makes it my job to uncover whoever’s at the top of the chisel.”

Medwick reached into his pocket, hauled out a thick stack of cabbage, shoved it at me. “Here. Take this two thousand d-dollars. Chester and I chipped in to pay your fee. We wanted you to put the arm on the union’s brain guy.”

I said: “Thanks. I’ll do my best.”

“No,” he bleated. “Now I’m paying you to lay off the case—understand? *Lay off!*” His voice sounded edgy, almost hysterical.

“Why should I lay off?” I growled.

“You saw this note, didn’t you?” And he

deliberately tore it to shreds. “From now on I’m obeying their orders! I’d sooner be squeezed than have my studio blasted like Sully’s. I’m not reporting anything to the cops. The explosion can go down as an accident—and you keep out of it!”

ON THE sidewalk, Sully Chester groaned, stirred. He bumbled: “I agree with Maxie. You’d better lay off, Sherlock. Oh, God . . . my poor head. . .”

Well, what the hell? After all, I’m not in business for my health. Mine isn’t a healthy business. I’m trying to accumulate enough scratch to retire on before they start measuring my six-feet-plus for a plush-lined coffin. My luck can’t hold forever. Sooner or later I’m likely to take one case too many if I stay in the game long enough—and then that plush-lined box will catch up with me.

Besides, it was only Rocco Riccardo who’d got creamed; and he had brought it on himself. He was nothing but a damned woman-beating creep; the hell with him. And if these two quickie producers preferred to be gouged by some unknown racketeer, the hell with them, too.

So I stuffed the two G’s in my pocket and said: “Okay, boys. I’m out of it.” I watched Maxie Medwick’s full-moon puss. An expression of relief came into it.

Just then the fire department rolled up and an ambulance skidded to the curb. I didn’t wait to watch Sully Chester being loaded on a stretcher. I wasn’t very damned interested any more. I barged over to my jalopy, piled in, drove away.

En route home I stopped at a bottle house, treated myself to a whole case of Vat 69 out of my two grand. Then I rolled to my apartment joint, lugged the liquor upstairs.

But when I started to unlock my front door, an ugly premonition nibbled me under the hip pocket. The portal was slightly ajar, whereas I’d warned Mitzi Milton to lay low until I got back. The unlocked door was

strictly haywire.

I dropped the case of Scotch, made a dive for the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulder rig. Then I kicked the portal all the way open and bounced over the threshold, primed for trouble.

Trouble had beaten me to the punch. I took a swivel at the scene before me and gulped: "What the hell—!"

The yellow-haired Milton cookie was still on my davenport; but she wasn't gorgeous any more. She wasn't breathing, either. The top of her thatch was caved in where some sharp apple had belabored her brains out with a blunt instrument. Ketchup was all matted in her wavy golden tresses and she was as dead as a Jap's conscience.

Her flesh was still warm when I touched her, which meant she had been bashed to her reward during the past five or ten minutes—while I was stopping to buy that case of skee. She must have been asleep when the killer sneaked in through the window from the fire escape. There was no sign of a struggle, indicating the murderer had maced her and then lammed out the front door, leaving it ajar.

**I** BLAMMED to my phone, dialed police headquarters, made contact with my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. "Turner calling. Flag your pants over here with a meat wagon. A cupcake just got cooled in my igloo!"

He shrieked: "Jeest, why don't you leave town? Then maybe I'd get some peace! I'll be right there, dammit."

I rang off, started pacing the carpet. By the time I'd burned three gaspers, Donaldson barged in. He took one squint at Mitzi Milton's remnants and gulped: "Cripes! Who did it?"

"That's what I aim to find out," I said. "She was mixed up in some studio union racket. A thug named Rocco Riccardo beat all the fur off her earlier this evening on

account she wouldn't pay her dues or something."

"Riccardo, hunh? Bigahd, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing as far as he's concerned. He's deceased." And I sketched the details of how Sully Chester's quickie studio had been bombed.

"You got any hunches?" Dave asked me.

I said: "No, not yet. Hey, wait! Yes, I *have* got a hunch!" I damned myself for a numbskull as I dived for the door.

Dave tried to stop me. "Where the hell are you going?"

"Out to make an inquiry. You stay here until I get in touch with you." Then I sprinted along the corridor, galloped down the staircase to the second floor and knuckled the portal of the flat Mitzi Milton had shared with the quail named Nona Bryce.

Presently the red-haired Bryce babe opened up. I must have roused her out of bed, because she was embellished in a nightie that looked like spun whispers. The things I piped through the gossamer material were copious with sex appeal, including the usual assortment of shapely shafts, lilting hips, and voluptuous breasts. She could have given away a ton of come-hither attractions and still had plenty left over for a rainy afternoon in a boudoir.

I said: "Hiya, Toots. My name's Turner."

She smiled, motioned me in. "I've seen you several times in the lobby. What's the matter, lonesome or something?" There was a significant sway to her torso and a throaty invitation in her voice.

Under ordinary circumstances I might have been interested. I go for red-haired frails anyhow, especially if they have that up-and-down movement when they walk. Just now, though, I had other matters on my mind.

"I'm always lonesome, hon," I said. "But at the moment I need information. Are you a member of the independent extra's union?"

Her smile froze and her peepers narrowed. “Oh. So you’re working for that outfit!” Ice cubes dripped off her tone as she walked across the room, picked up her purse, flashed a purple card at me. “Here’s my membership. I’m paid up. Or am I going to be chewed for another ten spot?”

I said: “No more squeeze. I’m just trying to find out a few things. Who collected the fee from you? Rocco Riccardo?”

“Cert—er, what is this, anyhow? I’m not talking. I don’t enjoy being smacked around.”

“You won’t get smacked around if you level with me,” I promised. “So it *was* Riccardo that made you join up. Okay. Who’s he working for?”

“I don’t know.” The answer sounded sincere.

I said: “What about Mitzi Milton? She a member?”

“Yes. She paid her dues the same time I did.”

**M**Y TICKER began to thump overtime. I grabbed the Bryce cutie’s wrists, hauled her close to me. “Listen, sweet stuff. Mitzi’s defunct. She got bumped tonight.”

“My God . . . !” she swayed against me. “Who . . . how . . . ?”

I said: “I’m not ready to tell you yet. The question is, are you willing to help me put the knuckle on her killer?”

“If—if I can. Yes.”

“Then tell me. Was Mitzi horsing around with Riccardo?”

“Horsing—? No, of course not! The very idea!”

“She had a boy friend, though, didn’t she?”

“What of it? After all, this is Hollywood.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So who was her hot papa?”

“Up until a w-week ago it was Maxie Medwick. Then she had a row with him;

started going around with Sully Chester for spite.”

That gave me the answer to my puzzle. I said: “Climb into a set of threads, hon. You and I are going places.”

She slid out of my arms, went into the bedroom. She left the door partially open and I could see her at an angle in the bureau mirror. When she drifted out of her nightie, I copped a gander at scenery that melted ten years off my age. . . .

In three shakes and a wiggle she was dressed, ready to travel. I took her upstairs to my stash, introduced her to Dave Donaldson. By this time the Milton quail’s cadaver had been carted off to the morgue and my flat was free of all homicide heroes except Dave himself.

I told him: “Mitzi wasn’t cooled because she refused to join the jackleg union. She was already a paid-up member.”

His puss got purple. “Then why the hell was she bumped?”

“Because she knew too much about the racket. And now we’re going to trap the killer—with the help of Nona Bryce, here.” Then I outlined my plan.

Dave let the scheme trickle through his think-tank. Presently he said: “Let’s go,” and we went down to his official sedan. He and Nona sat in the tonneau while I drove. I headed for Maxie Medwick’s tepee in Westwood.

**W**HEN we reached the fat mogul’s dive I barged to the porch by myself, rang the bell. A Filipino house-boy let me in; backed off when I flashed my special badge at him. I clumped upstairs to Medwick’s bedroom.

He sat up in his four poster when I switched on the lights. His peepers widened and his triple chins quivered. “Turner! Who invited you—”

“Crawl into your rags, Fatso. I need your help. We’re going to visit Sully Chester.”



"What for?" he bleated. "If it's about that racketeering union chisel, no dice. I told you to lay off."

I said: "Guess again, chum. This is a murder beef. Will you get dressed or shall I drag you along in your pajamas?"

His porky elly-bay twitched under the covers. "Murder beef? You mean Riccardo being killed by that blast?"

"No. I'm talking about Mitzi Milton."

He recoiled as if I'd spanked him on the mush with a niblick.

"Mitzi . . . d-dead? Oh, my God!" And he bounced out of bed like a pudgy jack-in-the-box.

The news of the blonde wren's decease seemed to cut him up plenty. Which was natural, considering how she'd been his sweetie until a week ago when he lost her to the little Chester half-pint. Of course, his flabbergasted manner might have been phoney; but at least he wasted no time donning his duds.

I steered him down to Donaldson's chariot and we made knots for Sully Chester's wigwam a few blocks away. The house was dark, deserted looking, as I nudged Medwick to its front door with Dave and Nona Bryce following at a discreet distance.

Instead of thumbing the bell I fished out my ring of master keys, found one that worked the lock. I whispered: "Quiet!" and pushed the fat Goldentone executive ahead of me until we came to Sully Chester's room. Then I located the wall switch, gave it a fast flip.

**I**N THE sudden light, Chester raised his bandaged noggin from the pillow; blinked at me. "Hey, what's the idea—?" Then, as the sleep unfogged from his optics, he said: "Turner! Maxie! Is anything wrong?"

"Plenty," I grunted. "I've got a piece to speak."

"What about?"

"About the unknown brain guy behind the fake labor union racket," I said. "The guy who hired Rocco Riccardo to do his strongarm stuff for him."

Maxie Medwick broke in on me. "Rocco was my bodyguard, yes. But if you're hinting I had anything to do with his union shakedown work, I'll sue you for slander!"

"Cork your yapper, Fatso," I growled. "I haven't named this brain guy yet. I'm merely saying he might have got away with his illegally organized labor chisel if he hadn't croaked Mitzi Milton. That dumped him in the grease. Funny thing about Mitzi; she ran around with both you boys."

Sully Chester's hook-shaped beak flared at the nostrils. He said: "What of it?"

"Nothing much, except she must have stumbled across something that linked one or the other of you to the labor shakedown," I said. "That's why Riccardo was sent to bump her. The idea was to shut her up, keep her from belching. The trouble was, he didn't finish her off in my basement garage. I interrupted him and he had to lam."

"Well?" Maxie asked me over the top of his three chins.

I said: "Riccardo didn't get a chance to report to his boss about failing to cool the Milton cutie. And yet she was bumped a little later in my apartment. "Who knew she was hiding there? Only one guy—a guy I'd told it to, myself."

Fatso Maxie tensed. So did the Chester shrimp.

Then I pulled my fast one. "Unfortunately for the killer, he was seen leaving my stash after conking Mitzi." I raised my voice. "Come in here, Nona Bryce. Finger the murderer far me."

**M**ITZI MILTON'S red-haired roommate showed herself at the door of the bedroom. Even as she appeared, the guilty guy went for his roscoe. But I was waiting for him to make the move. I whipped out my

own gat and yelled: *"Too late, Sully Chester. You're done for!"* And I shot his rod out of his duke.

The beak-nosed shrimp yeepped, nursed his bullet-shattered fingers. "Damn you! Damn you to hell—!"

I stood aside while Dave Donaldson lumbered in to handcuff him. Then I set fire to a gasper, blew a stream of smoke around my reconstruction of the case.

"You were the brains behind the fake union, Sully," I said. "Rocco Riccardo did your dirty work; covered himself by getting a job as Maxie Medwick's bodyguard. But you were his real boss.

"And to make a front for yourself, personally, you called a conference with Maxie; suggested hiring me to ferret into the union racket. That made it look as if your studio was as big a victim as any other independent outfit.

"You had a time bomb planted in your office, set to go off and croak Maxie so it would scare other quickie producers into line. As for the damage to your sound stage, that was probably covered by insurance.

"You also arranged for Rocco Riccardo to be killed in the explosion. His usefulness was ended, anyhow. Once the other independent moguls fell into line, you wouldn't need strongarm methods. So you left Maxie and Rocco in the building when you came out to meet me at the main gate. They were both supposed to get blown to glory.

"Several things went haywire, though. First you got conked by a board; although you weren't hurt as badly as you pretended to be. Second, you learned from me that Mitzi Milton was still alive and in my

bachelor dugout. And finally you saw that Maxie Medwick had escaped the blast.

"But you still thought you could get by with your schemes. You'd prepared a typewritten threat in advance; and as you were sprawling on the sidewalk you pinned it to yourself. Nobody else could have pinned it on your coat because nobody was near enough to you.

"Later you ducked the ambulance, sneaked to my stash, cooled the Milton wren. Then you figured you were safe. She and Rocco were the only two who were wise to you, and they were both defunct. But Mitzi's death tripped you up, on account of *you were the only one who knew where to find her.*"

AS I finished, the little louse pulled an unexpected move. He leaned down with his handcuffed dukes, used the uninjured mitt to pick up the cannon I'd shot from his fingers. He shoved the muzzle in his kisser, pulled the trigger. And that was the end of Sully Chester.

Donaldson was stunned for an instant. Finally he got hold of his voice. "That saves the State the cost of a trial."

I said: "Yeah," and turned to Maxie Medwick. "It also saves you quickie guys from worrying about the shakedown from now on. Have I earned that two grand?"

He admitted I'd earned it.

I slid an arm around Nona Bryce's slender waist. "Thanks for acting out the lie about seeing the killer, babe. Let's haul bunions." Then I added: "I hate to stay in my tepee tonight after Mitzi was creamed there."

She pressed against me. "There's plenty of extra room in my apartment . . . if you're interested."

She must have been reading my mind.