

A SHROUD FOR MR. HYDE

By BENTON BRADEN



Copp died as he was desperately trying to bring his gun upon Willie

*The goober-eating gumshoe adds a dash of gunpowder to
a boiling crime stew before serving plotters up to the law!*

CHAPTER I

VANISHING LADY

WILLIE BRANN dropped the peanut that he had been on the point of devouring as the tall young man came into his private office at the Cole Agency. Maxey Gates, Willie's right-hand man and pal, who was sitting in a chair that was braced against the wall, lowered his newspaper and stared too. Normally the young man would not have been exactly homely, But now his face was pale, his eyes bloodshot and rolling a bit wildly.

"Brother, you look like a sailor that has had a bad night at sea," Maxey commented frankly.

The visitor did not take offense at that remark. He managed a wan smile.

"I guess you're right." He nodded. "I feel like a wreck, and probably look like one. Instead of a bad night I've had three of them. For three days and nights I've been the guest of the cops. They have a way with them, those cops. They never laid a finger on me—but they put the pressure on me. You're Willie Brann?"

"Nix," Maxey replied, as he wagged his finger at Willie: "That's Willie. I'm only his social secretary."

The young man turned his gaze upon Willie. He looked just a little disappointed. Willie Brann was not impressive on first inspection. He was short, round-faced, and plump, and the fact that he was eating peanuts like a small boy at a circus didn't make him a more imposing figure.

"What did the cops have against you?" Willie asked. "Or were they just trying to get some information out of you?"

"Both. But their main object was to try to make me admit that I had committed a murder. They seemed to be convinced that I killed my own wife. I expect most of the people who read the papers think I killed her. Even you may think so. You see, my name is Tom Painton."

Willie and Maxey looked at young Painton with renewed interest. The name answered a lot of questions. It had been smeared over front pages for the past week. Three months before Tom Painton, a penniless clerk, had created a mild sensation by marrying Alice Dole. Alice Dole was sole heiress to a considerable fortune and she ranked high in the Social Register. Everybody said that the marriage wouldn't last.

Naturally everybody said, "Ah, I knew something like that would happen," when just a week ago Tom Painton had appeared in the small village of Ridgeville and told a rather weird story to a deputy sheriff there.

TOM and Alice Painton had been spending a few days at a cottage on Long Lake near Ridgeville. Alice, so Painton reported, had done a vanishing act. His story was that he had been out on the lake fishing until sundown. By the time he got back the cottage it was dark. His bride had not been waiting for him at the cottage. Tom couldn't give any explanation or even furnish the officers with a reasonable clue. His bride had just vanished and that was all there was to it.

"I guess you haven't had much sleep during the last three days," Willie said. "I know about how they worked on you. They kept you awake and shot the questions at you, hoping that they could wear your resistance down in the end. Did your lawyer

finally force them to turn you loose, get you free on a writ?"

Tom Painton shook his head. "I didn't have any lawyer," he said doggedly. "I wasn't guilty and I figured that an innocent man doesn't need a lawyer."

"You're a guy that likes to do things the hard way," Maxey Gates said with a grimace. "A smart lawyer could have saved you a day or two of that torture."

"I know it," Tom Painton said. "But I wanted to convince the cops I was innocent. I know that the story I told about my wife's disappearance sounds fishy. Alice married me when I didn't have a dime. She had a couple of million, at least. So I can understand why everybody jumps at conclusions and accuses me of murdering her so that I can get at some of her money. That's why I came to see you, Mr. Brann. I want you to prove that the people did jump at the wrong conclusions. I want you to prove that I didn't kill her."

"Most important of all, I want you to find out what happened to my wife. I know she loved me and she knew how much I loved her. So I know she didn't just walk out on me. I want to know what became of her. I've read about you, Mr. Brann, and I know that you are the one man that may be able to find out the truth."

"I want to ask you a few questions before I make any promises, Painton," Willie said crisply. "Now, as I understand it, you and Alice's cousin, Arthur Dole, inherit all of Alice's money."

"That probably is true in the long run," Painton said. "But there's more to it than that. Alice's father left a fortune of about two million to her in trust. Mr. James Hyde is the trustee. He manages the estate and pays Alice the income. That trust will run for seven years more."

"But Alice's death would end the trust, wouldn't it?"

"No. The trust runs for seven years more

regardless of what happens to Alice. I suppose that if Alice is not found the income from the estate would eventually be paid to Arthur Dole and me. But I'll never touch a dime of that money until I have been proved innocent. I mean for my own benefit. I'll spend what I get in trying to find out what happened to Alice. For instance I'll agree to pay you any fee that you may charge."

"Then this cousin, Arthur Dole, had the same motive as you," Willie said. "He benefits to the same extent that you do in the estate. Did the cops suspect him?"

"They questioned him. Arthur was pretty nice to me. He defended me as well as himself. He told the cops that if either one of us had acted to get a share of the estate that we certainly would have arranged it so Alice's body could be found after we had killed her. He said that if her body wasn't found we might not be able to share in the estate for years. His lawyer told him it would be seven years before she would be presumed to be dead and we could come into the money. So Arthur argued that it was ridiculous to suspect either one of us. At least until Alice's body was found."

"That's pretty good reasoning," Willie Brann conceded. "But of course Alice's body may be found at any time. If she is dead. What is your idea about that, Painton? Do you think Alice is dead?"

Tom Painton sighed and said wearily. "I have no idea, Mr. Brann. I haven't the slightest idea what happened to her. That's just what I want you to find out."

"It looks like a tough case, Painton," Willie told him. "There was no clue of any kind found at the cottage when she disappeared?"

"No. She just disappeared in the clothes that she was wearing."

"Then we'll have to look in other directions. I'll make a preliminary investigation, Painton. If I can find a lead to start on I'll follow it up. But I can't promise

anything definite in a case like this.”

“I realize that, Mr. Brann. You just go to work on the case. Then I’ll be better satisfied, no matter how it comes out.”

“Painton may be smarter than he looks,” Maxey Gates suggested to Willie after Painton had left. “Now supposin’ he actually did kill her. Maybe he played it so he can turn up the body any time he wants to. In the meantime he has made the cops give up on him. He has put himself in a good position by not even getting a lawyer to go to bat for him. So since he has stymied the cops he’ll think that you won’t get anywhere either. So if you fall down on the job, then he’ll just wait and let the body turn up later when all the heat is off. Then all he will have to do is sit back and collect.”

“I don’t agree with you on that, Maxey,” Willie objected. “If Painton had wanted to kill her it would have been easy to have dumped her in that lake and come up with the story that she had drowned. He could have faked an accidental death in a dozen different ways. The same goes for that cousin, Arthur Dole. If Dole had killed her he certainly would have let the body be found at once, knowing that almost all suspicion would fall on Painton. And Painton said, before he left, that Dole is afraid he will be killed or disappear, too. Dole figures someone might be after him for the same reason that resulted in Alice’s disappearance.”

“Where are we goin’ to start in on this job?” Maxey asked.

“We’ll see that trustee first, Maxey. James Hyde. He can give us the low-down on the estate. And he might have an idea of his own for the motive behind the case.”

MR. JAMES HYDE, trustee, was a busy man, or at least it seemed so to Willie and Maxey when they tried to get in touch with him. It wasn’t until an hour after dark that they finally located him at his home, a

two-story brick house on a quiet residential street. Hyde didn’t show any great pleasure when Willie introduced himself. But he finally shrugged and led them into his living room.

Hyde was a large man with thick iron-gray hair and heavy eyebrows. His manner was highly nervous.

“So Tom Painton employed you, did he?” Hyde asked abruptly. “And sent you to me to ask questions?”

“He hired me,” Willie admitted. “But the questions are my own idea. I’d like to get a fresh start on this case. I know the police have exhausted routine methods. If there is a hidden motive for the disappearance of Alice Painton it seems to me that you are the most likely source of information. Now as I understand it Tom Painton and Arthur Dole, Alice’s cousin, will share the estate equally—if it develops that she is dead.”

“They’d share the income of the estate,” Hyde corrected quickly. “Alice’s death doesn’t terminate the trust. They wouldn’t receive the principal of the estate for seven years.”

“The principal might be worth waiting for,” Willie said thoughtfully. “Particularly if they drew a nice income in the meantime.”

“They won’t get a cent of the income or principal either until they prove that Alice is dead,” Hyde said sharply. “I’ll fight both of them on that. I’m the trustee and I have the say-so. I can beat them in court if they try to force me. Until it is positively proved in court that Alice is dead that income will pile up for Alice’s account.”

“But Dole and Painton would have some rights,” Willie observed. “Since they would get the money in the end they’d have the right to check on you, make you account strictly for the money you handle. I think they’d have the right to go into court right now and examine the affairs of the estate.”

James Hyde started a little. “Are you insinuating that there is anything wrong with

the affairs of the estate?" he asked harshly. "That I might be short in my accounts?"

"I'm not insinuating anything," Willie denied coolly. But he followed up quickly. "As a detective I'm looking for a motive for Alice Painton's disappearance. I'm going to consider all possibilities. I can't overlook the point that, if you *were* short in your accounts, you would have a motive yourself, Hyde. As the matter stands right now you benefit more than anyone, else. You run the estate, you let the income pile up, you don't pay out a cent to anyone. And either Dole or Painton would have to go to court to make you account in any way."

Hyde didn't like it, didn't like it at all. He swallowed hard.

"I'm not short in my accounts," he said angrily. "I can account for every penny that has ever come into my hands. I get twelve thousand dollars a year for my services, no matter how things go."

"May I ask of what the estate consists?" Willie put. "Is there much real estate in the holdings?"

"None at all," Hyde replied. "I have kept everything invested in good stocks and bonds."

"There have been no unusual problems in the handling of the estate lately?"

"No!" Hyde declared emphatically.

Willie Brann smiled just a little. He took a peanut from his pocket, crushed it between his fingers, and ate the meats before he spoke again.

"I started looking for you this afternoon, Mr. Hyde," he said. "Had trouble finding you. I was in at the Third National where you do some business. I met an official in there I knew quite well. He told me, in confidence, that you had been in there earlier in the day. He said you had cashed in some bonds. He said that you acted rather nervous about it. And I noticed that you were nervous when I first saw you a while ago. Why were you cashing in bonds today, Mr. Hyde? Was

there some extraordinary obligation that you had to meet? Or was it something else?"

CHAPTER II

KIDNAP DEMAND

HYDE'S face went white. For a moment it looked as if he might collapse.

"Now I'll have to tell you," he almost moaned to Willie Brann. "You've forced me to tell you."

"Tell me what?" asked Willie.

"That I know that Alice Painton is not dead—that she is still alive. That's why I was raising cash on those bonds. I was doing it on specific instructions from her."

"You mean that she deliberately walked out on Tom Painton up there at the cottage on Long Lake? That she's been hiding out? And now wants you to raise cash?"

"That's not it!" Hyde interrupted. "She didn't deliberately walk out on Tom Painton. Alice was kidnaped! She's being held for a hundred thousand dollars' ransom. A hundred thousand in cash! That's why I was raising that money today."

"You didn't tell anyone you had heard from Alice?"

"Of course not!" Hyde almost shouted. "I didn't dare tell anyone. I was following my instructions to the letter, instructions that came straight from Alice. My instructions I were to raise the cash and have it ready to deliver. I did that. I let my servants go for the day and night so that there could be no possible interference on the part of anyone. I didn't intend to tell anyone—until you forced me."

"When did you hear from Alice, and how?" asked Willie.

"It was a phone call last night, right here in this room. A man was at the other end of the wire when I answered. When he was sure that I was James Hyde he put Alice on the phone. She said she was being held for one

hundred thousand dollars and for me to raise the money at once.”

“You’re absolutely sure it was Alice Painton?” Willie asked.

“Sure?” Hyde countered. “Absolutely sure? How could I be? I thought it was Alice. It sounded like her voice. Enough to convince me, make me reasonably certain that it was Alice. I couldn’t be absolutely sure unless I could see her as well as talk to her. No kidnapers would agree to anything like that. I had to make up my mind right then. I told Alice that I would raise the money and follow her instructions. I didn’t dare do otherwise. I couldn’t gamble with her life—not for any hundred thousand dollars. I had to take the risks involved.”

“When are you to pay over this hundred thousand to the kidnapers?”

“I’ve already paid it,” Hyde said stiffly.

“You’ve paid it!” Willie couldn’t keep the astonishment out of his tone. “You’ve paid it, but Alice hasn’t been released yet?”

“No. They didn’t agree to release her at the exact moment I paid over the money. Remember I was doing exactly as Alice told me to do. She told me to be in Sherman Park with the money at dusk tonight. I was to walk down a certain path where a man would meet me. The man would take the money and tell me where to find her.”

“You did that tonight?”

“Yes. I returned just a few minutes before you came. I walked down that path. A man met me and took the money.”

“He told you where you would find Alice?”

“He did. There’s a country schoolhouse a few miles outside the city limits. It’s called the Bald Hill School. He told me to drive out there, time myself so that I would arrive at that schoolhouse at exactly nine o’clock. He said that Alice would either be there when I arrived or would appear there a few minutes later. Not later than ten minutes at the most. I’ve got to leave in a few minutes now.”

“I’d like to go with you,” Willie said quickly. “Now that you’ve already paid the money they couldn’t have any objections to that. They wouldn’t even know about it, for that matter.”

Hyde hesitated a moment. “I guess it would be all right,” he said then. “Just you alone, Mr. Brann, not the two of you. We’ll leave right away. It’s getting a little chilly out so I’ll get a topcoat. Then well leave at once.”

He left the room. Maxey looked at Willie and made significant motions with his hands. It was plain that Maxey Gates didn’t believe a word of that kidnaping story. Maxey moved over near a window and was standing there when Hyde came back into the room.

“You go back to the office and wait for me,” Willie instructed Maxey as he stowed a final goober away. “Mr. Hyde and I ought to be back in an hour or so. If Alice Painton is waiting for us at that schoolhouse we’ll phone in so you can notify Tom Painton and Arthur Dole at once.”

THEY went on out to the street. Maxey got in his car and drove off. Willie got into the other car that was parked at the curb. James Hyde took the wheel and drove. Hyde drove fast and hardly a word was said until they had passed out of the city and were well out into the country. Hyde turned left on to a narrow road.

“That schoolhouse is just three miles down this road,” he said. “We can only hope that those kidnapers will keep their word and have Alice there.”

“Kidnapers don’t have the reputation of keeping their word.” Willie said dryly. “They got that hundred thousand from you easily. They might reason that they could force you to raise another hundred thousand just as easily.”

“They’ll get fooled if they try that,” Hyde said. “I didn’t dare refuse to payoff

this first time. Suppose I had refused and they had murdered Alice? Everybody would blame me. But if they doublecross me it will be different. I'll refuse to deal again without iron-clad guarantees that Alice will be delivered."

A few minutes later Hyde turned off the road. The vague shape of a square building loomed before them. The little cupola on top marked it as a country schoolhouse. Hyde drove close to the building and parked.

"We'll just wait here a few minutes," he said tensely. "That's what Alice said I should do."

They waited five minutes. Alice Painton didn't appear. There was no sound or movement in that dark space that surrounded the building.

"There's no use waiting here longer," Willie said. "Let's get out and search the grounds. They might have left her tied up somewhere."

They searched that school yard foot by foot. Later Willie Brann walked about and called out at the top of his voice. There was no response.

"They've crossed me," Hyde said bitterly at last. "They took the money but didn't keep their word to turn her loose. Still I feel, under all the circumstances, that I did the only thing I could do. But I'll not be tricked again. If they let Alice talk to me again I'll tell her that I won't deliver another cent to them unless she is turned over to me at the same time."

They drove back to the city in silence. Hyde announced he was going straight home. Willie got off at a convenient corner and took a taxi to the Cole Agency. Maxey Gates was waiting for him there. Maxey pointed to the big package on Willie's desk and grinned.

"It was a cinch," Maxey said. "After you and Hyde left I sneaked back to that window I had unlatched while Hyde was getting his topcoat. I went right to work, frisking the

house. I figured that if Hyde was lying about Alice Painton he'd have that dough hidden in his own bedroom.

"I was right. He hadn't expected any interference tonight so he had taken the dough home and put it in a suitcase. It was on a shelf in his closet. I took the dough out and filled the suitcase with magazines and stuff so it would feel about the same if he lifts it. He won't tumble unless he opens the suitcase again. There's the hundred grand on the desk. In cash. What you goin' to do with it?"

"We'll put it in the safe for the present," Willie decided. "Now I'll run out to Arthur Dole's apartment. It's a bit late but he will probably be up."

Arthur Dole was up. He didn't seem pleased at receiving visitors. And Willie sensed, after a few seconds, that Arthur Dole was a badly frightened young man. He was a slight fellow with blond hair and a narrow face that showed weakness. His pale blue eyes were shifty.

Dole was not alone. There was another man with him in his living room; a square-shouldered man of about thirty who sat in an easy chair. There was nothing like fear in his impassive face. His gray eyes were cold and challenging.

"I know who you are," Arthur Dole said jerkily. "Tom Painton told me he had employed you. This—" he flipped his thumb at his companion— "is my bodyguard, Copp."

"You're expecting trouble?" Willie asked in a mild tone.

"I'm just playing safe," Dole said nervously. "Alice was my cousin. She's disappeared, vanished into thin air. That leaves me the only living member of the Dole clan. How do I know that the parties who worked on Alice won't come after me? I'm taking no chances."

"You think Tom Painton is in danger, too?" Willie asked.

"I don't know. He's not of the blood. And how do I know what's behind all this? Painton might be himself—although I don't think he is. But if he is, if Painton disposed of Alice to get at the Dole money, he might decide to do a good job of it and take care of me, too. Right now I'm not giving anybody a chance to get at me. But I've no reason whatever to suspect Painton, other than the fact that he was up there alone with Alice when she disappeared. But it seems to me that if he had killed her, he'd have arranged to have let the body be found so that he could immediately share with me in the income from that estate."

"From that point of view you had practically the same motive as Painton," Willie suggested with a faint smile. "You and Painton would share almost alike in the event of Alice Painton's death."

COPP broke in, in a flat harsh voice. "Now, look here!" he said. "Dole hired me to see that he wasn't pushed around. He's already talked to the cops and they give him a clean bill. So don't you come in here with the idea that you got a right to grill Dole. You ain't goin' to push him around while I'm on the job."

Willie Brann shrugged as he took a peanut from his pocket and crushed it in his fingers. He transferred the meats to his mouth. He flipped the shell, apparently aiming at a vase that stood in a corner. But the shell took a perverse course and went straight for Copp's head. Copp ducked it.

"You got a crust," he said indignantly. "Throwin' them shells on a nice carpet like this. Ain't you been taught no manners?"

Willie didn't seem to hear as he concentrated on another goober.

"Copp—Copp," he mumbled to himself. "I don't seem to remember the name. You got Copp from an agency, Dole? He's a regular bodyguard?"

"Nah, I ain't," Copp said quickly. "Dole

just happened to know me, know that I was on the up and up and he could depend on me. So he called me up and asked me to watch out for him for a few days. And that's what I'm goin' to do. There ain't nobody goin' to push Arty Dole around as long as I'm on the job."

"I see," Willie Brann acknowledged as he flipped a peanut shell in the direction of the vase.

But again the shell went wild and again Copp had to duck. Copp's face reddened with anger.

"Now, look here, you little wart!" he howled. "There ain't nobody can push me around. If I thought you done that on purpose I'd smack you so hard you'd—"

"Charley!" Arthur Dole interrupted him sharply, "He wasn't aiming those shells at you at all. Here!" He got the vase and put it on the table beside Willie Brann. "You can drop your shells in it now. Now it's getting late, Mr. Brann, and I'm tired, but since you're working for Tom Painton I want to help you in any way that I can. Was there anything you particularly wanted to ask me?"

"Yes, Mr. Dole. I'm trying to get at the real motive for Alice Painton's disappearance. Now what is your opinion of Mr. James Hyde, the trustee?"

"I don't like him, Mr. Brann. I'll admit that frankly. But on the other hand I don't see how he could profit by Alice's disappearance. He is trustee of the estate for seven years yet, no matter what happens. He draws down a straight salary. I don't see how he could be involved."

"Suppose he was short in his accounts," Willie suggested. "Suppose he had speculated with funds of the estate, and lost. Isn't there a chance that—"

"I hadn't thought of that!" Arthur Dole cried. "That may be the answer. I know he has broad powers under the terms of the trusteeship. If he were short he might decide

that his only way out was to get rid of Alice. And me, too. And maybe Tom Painton, if Painton tried to make him account. I'll find out about this right away. I'll have my lawyer go right into court and get orders to make Hyde account for every dollar. We'll do it tomorrow! If Hyde has pulled anything like that, we'll find out the truth at once."

"You don't need to worry any, Arty," Charley Copp said. "That Hyde won't get no chance to pull a vanishin' act on you as long as I'm around."

"You see your lawyer in the morning," Willie advised Dole. "It will be better for you to demand an accounting than for Tom Painton to do it. I think you will find that James Hyde has a shortage."

"The dirty crook," Charley Copp exclaimed. "We'll sure put him behind the bars if we find he's gone south with any of Artie's dough."

"Then I'll just mark time until you check up on him," Willie said. "If Hyde is behind this thing the accounting will probably turn up an additional motive for Alice's disappearance."

Willie Brann politely picked up the vase and put it over in the corner where it had originally stood. He went back to the table and turned a little as though he were about to leave. Casually he crunched another peanut. He took the shell and flipped it—straight at Copp.

Copp ducked. But the shell went wild again. It rattled as it fell in the vase in the corner. Copp looked at the vase, frowned and bared his teeth at Willie.

"Good night," Willie said pleasantly, as he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER III

MURDER TRY

WHEN Willie Brann and Maxey Gates left their apartment the next morning

they went down the street to a little cafe where they often ate breakfast. They were drinking their coffee when Maxey, who was facing the entrance door, frowned a little and said:

"Willie, I think we're going to have company."

Willie looked. Lieutenant of Detectives Deneen was coming in. They had bumped into Lieutenant Deneen in many of their cases. Deneen was pretty smart. He came right on to their table.

"What a surprise!" Maxey said, rolling his eyes. "Imagine seein' you here, Lieutenant. Sit right down and have a cup of java with us."

"I'll just do that," Deneen said in his quiet voice. "Haven't seen you boys for quite a while. Nice to meet you again."

"Can we depend on that?" Maxey asked. "You mean you just happened to drop in here by accident?"

"To be perfectly truthful, I didn't," Deneen admitted with something like a sigh. "I went up to your apartment first. No one answered. I knew you sometimes ate breakfast here. So I came on down here."

"You were making purely a social call, I suppose," Willie chuckled.

"Not exactly, Willie. I understand you're employed by Tom Painton."

"That's right, Deneen."

"Have you uncovered any startling evidence yet?"

"I can't say that I have," Willie replied cautiously. "What's your angle, Deneen? Why were you looking for us?"

"A small angle, Willie," Deneen said, matter-of-factly. "I just wondered if you would mind answering a few unimportant questions about the kill."

Willie and Maxey blinked at that. "You're a bit ahead of us there, Deneen," Willie said. "You don't mean that Alice Painton has been found!"

"No. Not that. It was a gentleman who

suddenly departed this life. The body was found this morning. The set-up, at first glance, suggested a suicide. But there were some small items, such as the position of the body, that made us suspicious. On close inspection of the murder scene we discovered some really revealing clues. You were careless, Willie. Leaving those peanut shells on the floor.”

“Hyde!” Willie exclaimed. “James Hyde!”

“Can I take that as a confession, Willie?”

“You know Willie better than that,” Maxey said. “If he had been around there after Hyde was dead you’d never have found no goober shells on the floor.”

“Right,” Deneen conceded. “Therefore I can deduce without fear of contradiction that Willie was in the living room of the Hyde residence before Hyde was killed. You can go on from there, Willie. You should be able to save me a lot of mental effort in the case.”

“But I can’t, Deneen,” Willie told him. “I called on Hyde last night, after Tom Painton had employed me. I wanted to find out all about the estate of Alice Painton that I could. But this murder is a complete surprise to me. It was the last thing I expected. I had half a hunch that James Hyde was responsible for the disappearance of Alice. I’m pretty sure that Hyde was short in his accounts. I can’t even make a guess as to who might have killed Hyde.”

“That makes it tough,” Deneen said slowly. “I’m fairly sure that Hyde did not commit suicide.”

“Let it ride for a suicide for a while,” Willie said. “Let the killer think he got away with it. Then he may get overconfident and make a break.”

“You sure you didn’t have any idea that Hyde might be killed?” Deneen said narrowly. “You sure you aren’t holding out on me?”

“The only thing we’re holding out is a hundred thousand dollars,” Willie said, and

smiled.

Deneen looked as though he were missing the point of a joke. Willie told him what had happened, of the fake kidnapping that Hyde had promoted. Deneen agreed that that also should be kept under cover for the time being.

“The case has me completely confused,” Deneen said finally. “Hyde is dead, so it is extremely unlikely that he had anything to do with the disappearance of Alice Painton. It’s hard to believe that either Tom Painton or Arthur Hale had anything to do with it as long as her body remains hidden. They can’t collect either principal or income from that estate until she has been proved to be dead, or a number of years have elapsed. I’ve never met a killer yet that was any too patient. There must be somebody else in the background who is pulling the strings. They’re bound to show their hands sooner or later.”

Willie and Maxey parted from Deneen when they left the cafe and went on to the Cole Agency. They had been in Willie’s private office about fifteen minutes when Tom Painton walked in. Painton’s manner was furtive.

“What’s the matter, Painton?” Willie inquired. “You act as though you’re afraid someone might have seen you come in here.”

“That’s exactly what I am afraid of,” Painton said hoarsely.

“Why? What difference does it make?”

“I’m violating my orders when I come here,” Painton said mysteriously. “I’m not supposed to. In fact I’ve been warned not to consult anybody.”

“Consult anybody about what?”

“About—about the pay-off,” Painton almost whispered. “You see, I’ve heard from Alice. She was kidnaped, when she disappeared at the cottage.”

WILLIE and Maxey stared. This was the second time within twenty-four hours they had heard this same story and Tom Painton's version sounded as phony as James Hyde's story had sounded. Willie Brann had already convinced himself that Alice Painton's disappearance was no part of a simple snatch scheme. The disgust on Maxey Gates' face showed plainly that he didn't believe a word of it.

"And now the kidnapers have contacted you?" Willie asked.

"That's right," Painton nodded. "I heard from them this morning."

"How much do they want?"

"One hundred thousand dollars."

Maxey shut his eyes and winced a little.

"How did they contact you?" asked Willie.

"I got a letter in the mail. It gave me complete instructions how to proceed. I'm to go to the bank where Alice does business and show them the letter. The bank is supposed to advance the hundred thousand when they're convinced the demand is an authentic one, that these men really have Alice and are holding her for ransom."

"A bank may be hard to convince," Willie said.

"I don't think so," Painton said. "Not when they see the note that Alice put in. Anybody who knows her handwriting will know she wrote that note."

"Can I see the note?"

"Sure," Painton said eagerly. "I was warned not to go anywhere but to the bank, but I made up my mind not to do anything without your approval, Mr. Brann. Here's what I received."

Willie took the letter from Painton and removed two sheets of paper from it. One of them was printed in pen and ink and read:

Painton:

We've got your wife. You can have her back for one hundred thousand dollars. Alice says you can raise this money by going to her bank and showing

them the note she has enclosed for you. Get the money first. Consult no one but the president of that bank and warn him not to talk. You should receive this tomorrow—Wednesday morning. At nine o'clock Wednesday night drive slowly out on Vinson Street, starting from the University. Come alone. Have the money in a bag. At a certain point on Vinson Street a car will pull alongside you. Pull over to the curb and stop then. We will have your wife in the car with us. We will trade you your wife for the money. If you do not follow orders in every detail your wife will be killed at once. We enclose a note from your wife to prove that we are not faking.

Willie Brann took the other sheet. It was written in a feminine hand and Willie knew that writing would be difficult to fake. He read:

Dearest Tom:

Do exactly as they tell you in the letter. My life depends on it. I am well and have been treated fine. But I am anxious to be freed and come back to you, so raise the money and bring it out on Vinson Street as they tell you to. Show this note to Mr. Ellsworth, president of my bank. He can verify my handwriting with you. Don't fail me, Tom. I will be killed if you do not follow instructions.

All my love,
Alice

"What do you think of this handwriting, Painton?" Willie asked.

"It's Alice's writing, beyond any shadow of a doubt," Painton replied emphatically. "Somebody's got her. I've got to raise the money."

"No, you don't," Willie said forcefully. "All you've got to do is make the men who meet you on Vinson Street think you have the money. I know for sure now, Painton, that there is far more to this than a simple kidnaping. It won't do you any good to have the money—because those men won't have your wife with them. They'll take your dough, and kill her anyway in the end. But you go on over to the bank and show Mr. Ellsworth this note. Have you a sedan?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"It's in our garage—that is, Alice's garage. At her home in Edgewood."

"Have Mr. Ellsworth fix up a fake package for you that will appear to be the currency," Willie said. "Tonight take that package and get your sedan out of the garage just in time to make Vinson Street at the appointed time. That way, anyone watching you will conclude that you are going it alone. But I will be in that sedan."

"But," Painton objected miserably. "I'm afraid that if I don't pay them they'll kill Alice!"

"Listen!" Maxey Gates roared. "You come up here and hired Willie Brann because you thought he was the smartest dick in the city, didn't you? Well, you were right. He is. Now are you goin' to take a hundred grand out there, turn it over to those punks, and get your wife killed anyway? Or are you goin' to do as Willie says and have a chance to save her?"

"I'll do as he says," Tom Painton agreed meekly.

Willie Brann got Mr. Ellsworth, the banker, on the phone right after Painton left the office. It was an hour later when Ellsworth called back.

"That note was written by Alice Painton," the banker informed Willie. "No question about it. I am familiar with her writing myself and we have several samples of it here. I called in Milton who passes on questionable signatures for us and he said it was Alice's writing. We fixed up a package for Painton. I hope things work out right for you, Mr. Brann."

"It must be on the level then," Maxey Gates said, wide-eyed. "I guess Painton is on the level. But I sure thought he was pullin' a fast one on us when he came in here with the same song and dance that Hyde had used. Now what's goin' to happen when you meet those punks on Vinson Street?"

"It will be their move," Willie said shortly. "I hope they make it a good one so

we can break the case fast. . . ."

IT WAS just eight-thirty when Tom Painton drove the sedan from the garage and rolled out along the driveway to the street. Willie Brann was sitting on the floorboards in the rear. All he could see was an occasional street light that flashed by.

"Watch your mirror," Willie told Painton. "Try to see if we're being trailed. These lads might move in on us before we get to Vinson Street."

But they didn't. They reached the University without incident and Tom Painton drove slowly north on Vinson. After a mile they were driving along a quiet, elm-lined street that was only dimly lighted by infrequent lamps.

"There's a car coming up behind us," said Tom Painton unsteadily. "This must be it."

Willie raised his head a little, saw the car as it came alongside. It was a sedan and it was no more than a vague shape in that darkened part of the street. A voice called out an order and Tom Painton slowed and stopped. The sedan on the left stopped squarely abreast.

"You're Painton?" That voice came from a man whose face appeared only as a white blob from the front seat of that sedan.

"Yes. I'm Painton."

"You've got the money with you?"

"Yes."

"Hand it out through the window so I can take it."

"You—you've got Alice with you?"

"Sure. She's in the back seat. Alone. I had to tie her hands and gag her to play safe. But when you hand me the money I'll open the rear door and she can step out to the pavement. Then after I leave you can untie her and take her in your car. Now—hand over that dough!"

Tom Painton lifted the package from the seat beside him and passed it through the

window. Eager hands reached out from the sedan and seized it.

"Okay," the voice said as the package disappeared. "Here's your wife. Right in your lap!"

Willie Brann saw the object that came hurtling through the air. It swished past Tom Painton's face and landed on the seat beside him. Willie was over the back of the front seat and grappling for it in a second. His hands touched metal. He caught hold of it and hurled it back out through the window.

The sedan opposite them was already beginning to move.

"Get going, Painton!" Willie yelled. "After him!"

Painton shot the car forward. It hadn't gone ten feet until there was a terrific explosion behind them. That grenade or bomb had exploded on the pavement as it rolled. The driver of that car had had a double objective. One was to collect that hundred grand and the other was to kill Tom Painton, and Willie had a hunch that the latter was more important than the money to the killer.

Willie leaned out of the window on his left with a gun in his hand. The car ahead was not more than twenty-five feet ahead. Willie shot slowly, planting every shot where he wanted it.

The cars were picking up speed fast. The sedan ahead began to swerve. After Willie's last shot the driver seemed to lose control of it. It headed across the street, bounced up over the sidewalk, smashed head on into the trunk of a big elm tree.

That stopped it cold.

CHAPTER IV

GUN CHALLENGE

BRANN and Tom Painton looked at the wreck a minute later. The man at the wheel of the wrecked sedan was dead. Willie

searched the car and the man quickly. There was only one thing that he thought worthy of attention. It was the half of a blue ticket, such as a ticket seller tears off a roll in the box office of a movie house. Before Willie had finished Tom Painton came back from the house where Willie had sent him to phone for Lieutenant Deneen.

Deneen got there quickly. When he used his flashlight on the face of the dead driver of the sedan he nodded.

"A tough lad by the name of Mangum," he said. "Lippy Mangum, they call him. A long police record, but he's no leader. Was he alone in the car?"

"I think so," Willie answered. "It was so dark we couldn't see into the interior of the car when it stopped. But we didn't see anyone else get out of it, either when it was moving or after it smashed up. Let's check on this Mangum and see who he runs with."

Maxey Gates drew the job of running down that theater ticket. It was identified the next afternoon at the Green Avenue Theater. The girl at the box-office said that the color and the number showed that it had been sold two days before. The Green Avenue Theater was far out on the north side. It wasn't a thickly populated part of the city.

Maxey began a systematic canvass of the restaurants in that vicinity. On his sixteenth call, at a rather large cafe located about half a mile from the theater, the cashier nodded when she looked at the two pictures that Maxey held out for her inspection.

"Yes," she said. "I know the faces of those men. I've seen them in here."

"Old customers?"

"No. I don't believe they've been eating in here for more than a week. And then not regularly. And not always together. I'd say that they have been in here four or five times."

At the dinner hour Maxey stationed himself near the door that led from the kitchen into the dining room. He stood there

for an hour and a half before he got the signal from the cashier. She indicated the single customer who walked over and sat down at a table near the wall. Maxey went out the rear door of the kitchen. He moved around to the front of the cafe and took up a position across the street from it.

The front of the brick building was unimpressive and there was no sign to indicate the nature of the business within. Willie Brann opened the door, went through a short hall, opened another door and stepped into a bar. There were half a dozen tables lined against the wall opposite the bar.

Willie stood there for a moment, then walked the length of the room toward a door at the rear. The door opened just before he reached it. The man who came out was tall, slender, well-dressed. There were streaks of white in his hair and his face showed the tense lines of a gambler.

"Why, hello, Brann," Duke Elston, owner of the gambling place said, and grinned. "Don't tell me you want to go up and buck one of my crap tables?"

"No, Duke. I just want to talk to you for a minute."

"Sure," Duke said affably. "Let's sit down at a table. Have a drink on the house."

They sat down. Duke Elston waited, still smiling.

"I guess you've read about this Painton case," Willie said.

"Sure. Who hasn't? You working on it, Brann?"

"That's it, Duke. I think I'm going to break it wide open in a few hours. Now a lad by the name of Lippy Mangum was killed last night. He was in on the Alice Painton job. You know anything about him?"

"A little, Brann. He worked for me a while."

"What did he do for you?"

"Guard. You know a place like this always has to watch out for a stick-up. We have to have at least one man around who

knows how to use a gat. Mangum had a small rep for that so I figured no one would try to take the place when he was standing around."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"No. Not for three or four months. I don't know what he has been doing since he quit me."

"It doesn't make much difference about him, Duke. He's dead. It's another man I'm really interested in. When we checked on Mangum we found out he was a pal of a lad name Charley Copp. Now Copp is still very much alive and I'd like to get my hands on him."

Duke Elston shook his head. "Sorry, Brann. I can't help you there. I never heard of any fellow by the name of Copp. You need him to break the case? You think he'd be able to tell what happened to Alice Painton?"

"I know what happened to Alice Painton," Willie said. "If everything breaks right I'll have her in six hours. I'm getting ready to pull all the strings right now and blow the case wide open. It would just simplify things a little if I could land this Charley Copp first. But it will all be the same in the end."

"The way I figured it, from what I read in the papers," Duke Elston said, "I thought this Alice Painton was dead. You think she is still alive?"

"Yes, I do," Willie said with emphasis. "You read the papers in the morning and you'll find out I'm right. I've got a hot lead. I'll find her within six hours. I was just hoping that I could get a lead from you through Mangum that would take me to Copp. But he's probably scared by this time and under cover anyway."

"I knew Mangum all right," Duke said. "But I don't think I ever heard him mention this Copp."

"Thanks just the same, Duke," Willie said as he got up. "I'll have to roll along.

I've got a lot of ground to cover in the next few hours. . . ."

Willie Brann and Maxey Gates lay out on the ground and looked through the darkness at the two-story structure that was barely outlined against the sky. It was a frame house of perhaps ten rooms. Willie and Maxey were in the back yard, about forty feet from the kitchen porch.

The exterior of the house was not unguarded. There was a man on duty and he walked around the house every few minutes, keeping close to the walls where his shadowy figure could hardly be seen. They saw him come around the rear of the house, then turn the opposite corner and go back toward the front.

Willie got up and moved forward to the side of the kitchen porch. He flattened himself against the side of the porch and waited. It was five minutes before he heard the soft crunch of feet. A moment later the figure of a man loomed in front of him. Willie struck down with the gun in his right hand. The man crumbled to the ground without a sound. Willie stooped and searched him. His hand came up with two keys.

One of those keys, he found out a minute later, unlocked the back door. Willie Brann opened that door, stepped into the blackness of the kitchen and closed the door behind him. He stood there and listened, but heard nothing. Using a small flashlight, he spotted a door at his right. He opened it. There was a small hall and a stairway there. Willie went up the stairway.

He found the room from which the murmur of voices came. Just a little light showed beneath the door. Willie moved close to the door and listened.

"We've got to move!" a voice was insisting. "We haven't got a minute to waste."

"You're crazy," Copp's flat voice was sneering. "It's all a bluff. How could Brann

locate this place? You say you're sure he didn't tail you here? You're sure no one tailed you?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that. But how do we know that Mangum died instantly. He might have squawked before he died?"

"Mangum didn't squawk!" Copp denied angrily. "He was my pal. No cop could make him squawk. No matter what they did to him. You've just got the jitters. Besides, we've got no place else to go. We can't drag the dame around in a car for long. We got to have a place to light with her."

"We've got to get rid of her," the other man said in a panic. "I tell you Brann isn't bluffing. And even if he is, we don't dare take chances. We've got to get rid of her, plant her somewhere where she'll never be found."

"We'd be planting a million bucks. Me? I'm not tossing off any dough like that without a fight. We keep the dame alive. If you've got to move her out of this place—okay. But I ain't goin' to throwaway a million on no false alarm."

"Then let's get out of here—get out at once. We'll take her in the car. I know a shack out in the country where we can take her, until we find a better place. You go get her, Copp. We'll get out of here right away. There's not a minute to lose."

Willie Brann had his hand on the doorknob. He turned it and threw the door wide open. The two men whirled and faced him.

"You see?" Duke Elston moaned. "I was right! I was right!"

"Yes, you were right," Willie told him. "We had this house located before I came to see you. I reasoned that you were the brains behind this job, Duke. So I forced you. I figured you would come out here in a hurry if you thought I would break the case in a few hours and find Alice Painton. I couldn't prove anything on you. I wanted you here. I got here ahead of you and waited, saw you

come in here not half an hour ago.”

Duke Elston took two steps backward until his hand rested on a small table. Willie saw wires leading down to the floor from that table. The wires ran around the edge of the room and disappeared beneath another door.

“It was apparent from the first that Alice Painton wasn’t dead,” Willie said. “If either Painton or Arthur Dole had killed her she’d have been found dead so they, at least, could have collected the income from the trust. That told me that someone else was behind the play, someone who was a bit smarter than Arthur Dole. I checked Dole, though. I found that he had raised around ten thousand in cash about two weeks ago. I also found out that he had frequented your gaming tables, Duke. He got acquainted with you and Copp and Mangum.

“Maybe he lost money to you and couldn’t pay. Maybe he just bellyached about being hard up. Anyway, you showed him a nice easy way to get in the money. You pointed out to him that Alice Painton was the only obstacle to his prosperity. Dole paid you that ten grand to kill Alice—and leave her body where it could be found.”

“He’s a mind reader,” Copp sneered.

“But you weren’t doing the job for a measly ten grand,” Willie went on. “You knew your big play was to keep Alice alive. No wonder the weakling, Arthur Dole, was nervous and scared. He was just tumbling to the fix he was in. And you Copp, were with him, not as a bodyguard, but to keep him in line and see that he didn’t make any breaks to strangers. You talked Dole into paying you ten grand for a simple murder. But your real plan was to kill James Hyde, the trustee, and Tom Painton. Then Dole, as the only living interested party, could get himself appointed trustee and comply with the legal terms of the trust. There’d be no one left to check on him.

“Over the years you could make him pay

you any amount—as long as you kept Alice alive. But you didn’t want to wait years for the full pay-off. So you figured you could collect a hundred grand from Tom Painton at the same time you got rid of him. That hundred grand would keep you in velvet until you could get time to work on the two-million-dollar estate with Arthur Dole. Only it didn’t work out that way.

“Hyde had big ideas, too. He thought Alice was dead. He was short a hundred thousand. He got the snatch idea, too, as an easy way to get the money to cover up his shortage. He didn’t dream that he was marked for death. But he was the only one who died on schedule. Your scheme didn’t pan out. You’re still two murders short. Two murders short—and you are through. For only ten grand that you won’t live to spend.”

DUKE ELSTON’s face was as unexpressive as a poker player with all his chips in the pot. “Not quite, through Brann,” he said. “We’ve still got Alice Painton.”

“The cops have got Arthur Dole, too,” Willie said. “He’s a weakling. He’ll wind up by laying it all on you and trying to save himself.”

“You think you’re all set to polish us off, don’t you, Brann?” Duke Elston said quickly. “I know how fast you are with your gats. But you won’t be fast enough now. I made up my mind from the first that no one would ever catch us with Alice Painton—and get her alive. You see these wires that run down from this table? You know where they go? They run to the bed where Alice Painton is lying. You know what’s beneath that bed, Brann? There’s enough dynamite to blowout that whole side of the house. Wired and ready to go up.

“All I’ve got to do is press this button, and you can’t draw fast enough to prevent me. It will be some blast, Brann. Maybe the whole house will go. I’m not sure. But it’s a

chance for us. Maybe we'll be able to get out while you're lying here, stunned. The lights will all go. And there won't be anything left of the girl for the cops to identify. So you see, we've got a chance."

"You expect me to fall for that threat and let you walk out of here?" Willie asked.

"You haven't got much choice, Brann. You don't dare reach for a gun. I can beat you to it, press this button before you can show metal. You don't dare draw. I think ahead, Brann. I'm a man who wants to live as long as he can."

WILLIE BRANN'S right hand moved. Moved slowly.

"Don't do it, Brann!" Duke shouted frantically. "I'll blow us all to eternity!" Willie's hand moved faster and Duke snapped his finger down on the button. He pressed it down hard again—but nothing happened.

"Alice Painton is on her way back to her husband," Willie said easily. "I've been in the house a little longer than you think. I found her, disconnected the wires you fixed so painstakingly in that room. Maxey Gates took her out of the house as I came in to this room."

Willie hadn't drawn a gun. His hand had dropped carelessly back to his side.

"Just how fast are you with your guns, Brann?" Copp spoke and his tone was desperate. "I think we'll find out now. I've heard a lot of stories about you. But I know you're no magician. You're just another who's fast with your guns. Well, I'm fast, too. I been in the business a long time. Come on, Duke. We've got him two to one. We can outgun him."

"Sure we can, Copp!" Duke Elston said. "One of us can surely drop him before he gets both of us. You ready? Let's go!"

Copp was ready for that command. His right hand streaked for his left shoulder holster and his hand was fast. Copp didn't lose his nerve when he saw that his hand wasn't moving as fast as Willie's. He didn't shoot wildly. He didn't fire at all. He died as he was desperately trying to bring his gun on Willie and get in one true shot at Willie's heart. Copp went down, his gun still in his hand.

Duke Elston stood with his hands high in the air and looked down at Copp.

"Well, I let the sucker try his luck, Brann," Duke said dryly. "I thought he had an outside chance to beat you to it. But he was too slow. You can come over and get my gat now, Brann. I'm still a man who wants to live as long as he can."