
SQUADROOM



FRANK KANE (Dead Drunk) is licensed to practice law, the result of his young wife's insistence that he secure a law degree as a safeguard in the event that he failed to earn enough at his typewriter to support them. Kane hurried through a law course, passed his bar examination and then—having gotten *that* over with—promptly broke into radio and became one of the highest-paid writers in the business, doing scores of scripts for such shows as "Gangbusters," "The Shadow" and "Nick Carter." Later, he became even more successful as the writer of the Johnny Liddell mystery novels, which have sold millions of copies and been translated into a dozen languages.



IRVING SHULMAN (Because We're Friends) began his career as a novelist with the publication of *The Amboy Dukes*, a harsh, compelling story of street gangs in Brooklyn. The book became a nationwide best seller and today is used in many colleges as a textbook and sociological classic. Since then, Shulman has written many other best sellers, including *Cry Tough!* and *The Big Brokers*. He lives in Hollywood and also writes screenplays; among his credits is *Rebel Without a Cause*, which starred the late James Dean.



FREDRIC BROWN (Before She Kills) worked for the Pinkerton Detective Agency before he became disillusioned with the lack of glamour in real-life detective work. He turned to writing in the early 1940's and his first book, *The Fabulous Clipjoint*, which introduced Ed and Am Hunter, won the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar award. Brown is one of the world's best writers of suspense novels, the latest of which is *Knock Three-One-Two*.



STUART PALMER (Cure for a Headache) is the creator of the famous spinster-schoolteacher-detective Hildegarde Withers. The attention he gained from the Withers books sent him West to write for the movies—often working on scripts with his good friend Craig Rice. Currently writing for TV in Hollywood and working on a novel, Palmer has also written a great deal in the field of nonfiction crime, and for many years has been a student of classic murder cases.

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**BECAUSE
WE'RE
FRIENDS**

IRVING SHULMAN

**He had it made—
wealth, success, fame. Then the girl broke into his apartment....**

EYES WARY, JAWS HARD, WIDE-legged stance as if about to draw, and rubbing his thumb across the raised gold initials of his money clip gave Tucson (name chosen by 4-Square Productions as suitable for the star of their Western series) a fillip of confidence and, more important, moments to think. He recognized the ma'am—girl—on his sofa; saw she was drinking his good Scotch, and had made herself free with ice, soda and cigarettes, all of these his property.

"I didn't think you'd mind," Rhoda said.

"You didn't?" he repeated but permitted his features to relax, and he moved to the fireplace. Above the mantelpiece was a pair of twisted steer horns, tips ringed with gold.

"Of course not," she continued. "You wouldn't mind because we're friends. Or aren't we any more?"

"That's hard to say," he said. "I haven't seen you since when."

Rhoda raised both legs and swung them around to strike her heels against the carpeting as she sat erect. Now her heavily made-up eyes, shadowed in royal blue and framed by false lashes, each of them beaded, actually glowed as she beckoned for Tucson to come closer.

"I want to take a look at you." She continued to waggle an index finger. "After all, seeing you inside a twenty-one-inch screen or so isn't the same as seeing you in person."

"Right now, Rhoda, I'd rather either one of us was inside the idiot box."

"But then we'd be just like all the other idiots who won't do anything on Wednesday nights between seven thirty and eight because Tucson Cross, the All-American saddle tramp, the restless wanderer of the wasteland"—she parroted the voice that rose above banal woodwinds to announce "Saddle-Sore" and its story theme of the restless hand who sought to find himself and peace but always rode into injustice and violence, which he corrected by killing in twenty-six minutes, interrupted this year by three dentifrice commercials, bullies, villains, cheats, land sharks, and other menaces to the good frontier society; once the justice by violence was fulfilled, he could no longer remain in this place, so, saddle-sore and weary, Tucson rode off, head bowed and shoulders slumped, hating himself and his fast gun hand, into the last commercial, where he flashed his choppers to plug his sponsor's product and advised his fans to meet with him next week; thanks, friends—"is bringing justice to the West. And you wouldn't want me to be that way, Sam? Or would you since they changed your name to Tucson? Man," she reflected, "if that handle isn't gaslight."

He was twenty-two, but looked several years older, and had known

Rhoda since he was nineteen, when he had been dropped off in front of Schwab's, at the east end of the Strip, by the swell people from Ohio; they had picked him up in Las Cruces and provided him with food, shelter and five dollars for luck because he had admitted having some coins in his pocket that didn't add up to a dollar; the swell people hadn't known he had already stolen ten dollars from the woman's purse. Now his gold money clip held at least five hundred, because fifty dollars less than that magic number made him nervous.

But to get back to that afternoon. He had stood before Schwab's and gaped at the interior through a plate window, felt thirsty and walked into Googie's next door because there were too many people in the drug-store. The interior of the small restaurant with its large mosaics in primary colors was cool, the piped music soft but with a good beat, and the waitresses in their neat uniforms cool, crisp and understanding, because as he was about to seat himself at the counter, one of them with really made-up eyes tilted her head toward the rear of the restaurant and he had understood.

When he returned, washed and somewhat refreshed, his mouth feeling cleaner and teeth less gritty, he saw that Rhoda had set a place for him in one of the booths and stood there with a pitcher of ice water and half pack of cigarettes. That was how they had met. She had seen that his portions were extra large and the double scoop of ice cream on the pie

was a little gift from her. It was almost quitting time, she explained, and if he didn't have a place to go, the court apartment she rented was only streets away and the bathroom was larger than the living room but there was a large stall shower, all tiled, and while he really cleaned up she would do his laundry.

"Do you do that for everyone who comes in off the road?" he asked and was immediately sorry because the question indicated he thought of her as a tramp. Son, his mother had once said, in this town of ours, the whores could make a pretty good living if it wasn't for the waitresses. That was his mother, sharp of tongue and observation, and one of the reasons he had decided to leave home; the other was his father and what his mother's observations had done to him.

But Rhoda didn't look at all offended. "Of course, not for everyone. Neither would you. But wouldn't you do it for a friend?"

"Sure."

"That's it," she continued. "I knew right off we were gonna be friends. Because I only have good-looking actors as friends."

"Actors?"

"Naturally. To each his own. Are you formal or method? But whatever you are, you've got a wonderful chin. And deep, deep eyes."

Which was not the reason at all. Sure, he had hoped to see some movie stars, see their houses and the places they hung out. He had read about Schwab's in the Hollywood columns and as the tourists from

Ohio had driven along Sunset Boulevard on their way to relatives in Santa Monica, and he had become increasingly nervous about being hailed as a thief, he had seen the sign above the drugstore and decided to leave the good folks there. But not because he wanted to be an actor. The thought made him grin and his strong, handsome face, tanned and darkened by sun and wind, was warmed by a smile that revealed his white, even teeth. An actor? What he had hoped for was a job in an aircraft plant or something similar, a plant where he could make use of his ingenuity with tools and ability to use the micrometer and read a blueprint, talents which had always amazed his family because no one close to them had ever been anything but farmers or clerks. But he had no place to go, fifteen, almost sixteen dollars wasn't much, and Rhoda had changed into tight shorts, a tighter sweater, and had drawn her long brown hair into a bun. While he had showered, she had sprayed gold highlights into her hair, fixed her eyes by adding dark lines of pencil around the lids and made two highballs. She was older than he, this he knew, but only by two or three years. Still, in a girl it was an awful lot of years. But he was nineteen, good-looking, lean and handsome, this he knew, this he had been told, and if someone who had obviously been around and knew this place as well as Rhoda thought he could be an actor. . . .

"Changing my name doesn't mean I've changed my friends." He re-

turned to the present with an outrageous lie. "But I've a question for you"—he forestalled an obvious gibe. "Just how did you get in here?"

The apartment was in a good building on Beverly Glen and the superintendent had strict orders that no one was ever to be admitted when he wasn't there. This was necessary because several fan-club presidents of jail-bait age had once been found in the apartment and they had made themselves free with several bottles and more personal souvenirs. And Rhoda, still wearing the high make-up, her hair pretty well shot because of many bleachings and dyeings, its ends brittle and broken because she would decide that certain colorings had to be done immediately rather than over extended periods, was not the sort of person who could sweet-talk the super. She was wearing too-tight black elastic slacks with metallic threads that refracted light, and her black cotton turtle-neck sweater was thin at the elbows and, as always, too tight. But it was the scuffed and shapeless flats of cracked patent leather that told him Rhoda was really down on her luck. At her feet lay an oversize purse that bulged. But in her case, clothes still weren't necessary to make the man, and at another time—some years before—he might have laughed at finding her in his apartment and got into the branding spirit.

"I want to know how you got in here," he demanded.

"You showed me," she said after a long sip of her drink. Deliberately

she tonged two cubes of ice into her almost empty glass and covered them liberally with Scotch. Then, hoping to make him laugh, she passed the bottle of soda above the glass; the comedy bit was too old and fell flat. "I always watch your show. That's to give you one intelligent person in an audience of millions."

"I showed you?"

"A couple of weeks ago." She nodded and raised the glass to him in a salute. "Remember where you had to get into the sheriff's house and the windows were locked? So you cut a window with a glass-cutter and you taped the glass and gave it a sharp tap so that it broke out but didn't drop. It works," she said with awe. "I thought it was some sort of a trick but it works."

He strode to the bedroom at the rear of the apartment, saw that the window at the fire escape had been opened and knew how Rhoda had avoided the superintendent. Someone who would burgle her way in wouldn't hesitate to walk through an alley, and getting to the lowest fire escape was simple. And she was wearing black. But how had she got his address?

"Celebrity Service," Rhoda explained from the doorway, and he started and turned with his hands raised as if to conceal his head. "It took my last five to find out. My name and number you'd probably find scrawled on a rest-room wall. But to get your address costs."

Tucson smiled as he took the gold money clip from his pocket. "Let's

say that was really casting bread on the waters, because it's going to get you much more. How much do you need?"

"Money?"

"Money." He nodded. "Or bread. That even makes the old saying more meaningful. You sure look coffee-house." He shook his head in friendly disapproval. "Just what's been happening to you?"

"As if you care."

"Must someone care to ask? Rhoda, look, I've gotta get dressed and meet some people." He looked at his large gold wrist watch. "So finish your drink and tell me what you need and get going? But you'll give me your number and I'll call you."

"When?"

He thought for a moment with his head raised to tighten the skin of his throat. Rhoda had always loved, raved about his chin and jaws; now her love was emulated by millions. "Day after tomorrow," he said with a quick nod. "It's the last day of shooting and then I'll be free." Again he shook his head. "Poor kid, you sure look awful."

"And you sure look great," she said. "Clean and All-American. And I've read you're strong on English TV. So you're a cultural asset, too." Gravely closing one eye, she raised the glass, held it at arm's length and turned it slowly to see the cubes from varying angles. "How come you never thought of me for a part in your show?"

So this was it, he sighed with relief. "I never thought of it," he ad-

mitted in a tone that sounded truthful. "But if you want me to put in the word with casting—"

"You have." She interrupted him with sudden ferociousness. Deliberately she poured the drink on the thick taupe carpeting before she tossed the glass across the room to shatter against the wall. "It's out—all over town—that you gave orders that anyone who showed up and said they knew you when wasn't to be taken on. It's true"—she pointed at him—"and don't give me the honor pitch. I believed it. I wanted my friends to be actors, to honor the old traditions. Even today being an actor doesn't mean you have to be a louse."

"If you want me to put the word in with casting . . ." he repeated. "If you want me to make the call right now . . ." He pointed at the phone at the side of his king-size bed; the spread was of thick candlewick embroidered with ranch brands and his name across the middle; he had to get this creep Rhoda out of here before the San Marino doll put in an appearance, and that was within the half hour; damn, how would he explain the broken window and the broken glass? "What's the point in chewing the past, Rhoda?" he asked. "Let's plan a little future. Yes?"

"I've got no future." Her voice was dull and she rubbed her eye with a finger to smear some of the dark pencil. "I'm washed up and out. But what makes me wonder is why?" Lips screwed into twin lines of anguish, she turned away to stare at a lamp base made of cactus; the shade had

once been an Indian ceremonial drum. "Why you and not someone else?"

"Maybe it's because I didn't really want it," he said.

"You didn't want it?"

He traced his old initials in the carpeting with the toe of a custom boot, fitted by a firm that catered only to Texas and Oklahoma millionaires; one of each had sponsored his feet for measurement.

"I was broke when I got here and you were good to me and if you thought I'd come out to the Coast to be an actor, why make a friend unhappy?" he explained. "Come on, Rhoda." He wanted her to see his impatience. "I want you to get ahold of yourself."

"Why?"

"Because we're still friends, I hope."

She pointed to the bed. "Prove it."

"You're drunk. If you don't get out, I'm gonna call the super—the cops." He paused to negate this threat; scandal was the last thing Tucson wanted when he was waiting for Miss San Marino and everything she stood for. He had told her, this slender, poised, low-voiced graduate of the Marlborough School and Mills and member of The Spinsters, just who he was, where he had come from, and it hadn't mattered because she had brushed his lips and told him that they lived in a democracy, didn't they, and too much inbreeding did to people what it had done to cocker spaniels—made them stupid. Although it had troubled him to be

thought of in terms of a stud, he consoled himself with the knowledge that the stalls of sound horseflesh were always cleaner than a bunkhouse. But he had also learned to take the bad if it was part of the good, and someday soon he would have to write to his father and invite him out, and the invitation would pointedly ignore his mother; she shore could've stood off a passel of Injuns by her lonesome.

"Rhoda, doll," he cajoled, both palms pressed together in prayer, "tell me how much you need and give me your number so that me and casting can call you?"

"I don't think I can act any more," she said. "I've suffered too much. And that burns you out. Just like a rocket." She raised her right arm in trajectory. "You suffer and glow and light up the sky all around you. Then you just drop. A black nothing falling through a deeper black and no one sees you. And if they did"—she paused to sniffle against a knuckle—"no one cares."

"That's not bad, Rhoda. Not bad at all!" He crossed to put both arms around her and interlace his fingers against the small of her back before he rested his chin against her forehead; that way she might not see his grimace of distaste because she smelled dirty, sweaty, of cheap toilet water and underarm deodorants; she should never have quit her job as a waitress, because that required cleanliness; then her hair, no matter how elaborate the setting or bizarre its color, had always been fresh. "You know, maybe you've been following

the wrong thing all the while. Acting." He raised a hand as if to wipe her face free of pain, for she had stepped back and he could see her unhappiness and the wild glints of—it could be all the feathers coming loose in her bonnet—but call it frustration in her eyes, suddenly bleary as tears wet her lashes and ran into the blue shadow and black outline to make Rhoda look as if she had just been declared loser in a free-for-all. "Any girl who can express herself like that ought to be writing. That's it!" His fingers snapped with the suddenness of decision and surety that delighted Tucson's younger fans; the national imitation was of concern to certain child-guidance clinics. "I'm gonna see about having you put on as a writer! You'll have to join the Writers Guild, but anybody can do that, and maybe you can come up with some woman's-angle stories written by someone who is one instead of a wishful thinker. That's it, Rhoda doll." He was genuinely pleased with himself and the absence of protest as he led her from the bedroom and through the living room toward the two steps that rose to the foyer and the front door. "You made an actor outa me. So I'm gonna make you into a writer."

Overconfident that he had done as well in real life as Tucson would do as guided by script and director, he had relaxed his hold on Rhoda's arm and could not keep his grip as she wrenched free, tearing the thin elbow of her sweater. Her breasts rose like two eight balls as her fingers plucked

at the torn elbow to enlarge the tear before she ran for her purse, fumbled in its deep interior and came up with a gun. Eyes hot with rage, she moved slowly toward him.

He recognized the Frontier Colt with the carved bone grip because it was similar to one that he carried in the series, and she laughed as he ran to the bedroom and returned quickly to swear at her in an accomplished monotone, for she had ransacked his bureau, found the gun, and it was loaded.

"You've got such good publicity." She held the gun on him as she relaxed in the sofa. "Publicity that tells how you keep one of your guns everywhere so you can keep practicing and practicing your quick draw. Tell me"—she leaned forward—"did you really win that quick-draw contest at San Jose?"

"I'll answer after you give me the gun. Crazy broad, is that the way to treat a friend? Maybe that's why I stopped being your friend," he said accusingly. "Because you stopped behaving like a friend."

"Who stopped seeing who?" she began to shout. "Who took you around? Introduced you? Got you a job parking cars at the Interlude so you'd get the attention of people? Who got you plants in the trades and paid for your Screen Extra's card? Who?" She screamed and punctuated her questions with jabbing movements of the gun. "You'd better answer who!"

"You did," he admitted. "Now put that gun down."

"I'm giving the orders," she continued. "Tucson!" She spat the name. "You're just plain stinkin' Sam Slocum to me. Some name. And you can even thank me for writing a fan letter to 4-Square and getting all the people I knew to write also that we liked your new name and the part you were playing. That's what a friend does." She was mournful. "That's why it hurts so much."

The girl from San Marino prided herself on punctuality. People looked so alike, she said, with all the luxuries available for purchase on five down and five when you were dunned, and credit cards handed out to anyone who asked for them, that it was well nigh impossible to identify people that really mattered except by little secret habits, and she considered punctuality as one of the more important contemporary identifications. Which meant she would be pressing the button in fifteen minutes and when the chords of his theme music would sound, she would expect him at the door, promptly, smiling, leaning forward to kiss her gently; ardor would come later.

"Some hero," she wept. "Lets my hand go when I needed a lift. When I'm scraping bottom so hard all the skin's rubbed off."

"It wasn't me but my agent," he protested. "And I'm not with that galoot any more. I'm sorry, honest. So why not take this and we'll talk tomorrow?" Carefully, but calling upon his shy, lonesome grin, the one that made so many women want to mother him, he removed all the

money from the clip, then put back a ten, and kneeled to place the money on the carpet where Rhoda could reach it. Once she stretched an arm, and if she lowered the gun, he would make his move. And for sure he was going to call the police, and if San Marino objected, then the hell with her, because a man faced with a shootin' iron capable of putting a hole through him the size of a fist couldn't be concerned with too many niceties. "That's almost five hundred." He pointed at the money. "Count it."

Her kick at the money fluttered the bills. "Don't have to. You're honest. Tell me"—she looked at him—"tell me the secret."

"Of what?"

"Your luck." She looked surprised at his unawareness of good fortune. "Is that the secret? That you didn't push yourself and other people always did? You know what the kids say about you?"

"Your friends?" he asked.

"Once they were your friends, too."

"Sound another note, will you?" he told her flatly. One of her kind was too many, but he was willing to go along until she got out of the apartment. Then would he fix her wagon! First, he would prefer charges, then as an act of charity which would be well applauded, would withdraw them. But the police wouldn't let her go because she had threatened him with a gun. "Any time the sponsors get a letter saying how lousy my show is, I wonder which

one of my friends has been using his poison ballpoint. Look, Rhoda, I'm trying awfully hard to keep things *amigo* between us. If I haven't seen you recently—"

"More'n a year!"

". . . it's because I've been busy. Thirty-nine shows and personal appearances to keep the small fry happy don't give me much time for friendlyizin'! You've been here. Had time to look around the spread and see what's to be seen." Again his arms swept the apartment. "And you didn't find girl things around? So there." He spread both arms in a gesture of nobility. "I haven't picked up any new friends."

"Liar."

"Acquaintances, yes. But side kicks, no." He was gently didactic. "Now look, Rhoda—"

"You look." She pointed the heavy gun at him and held it steady with both hands. "I've just got to test that luck of yours." For a moment, she stared at him along the sight and Tucson felt his palate and lips become dry as cold beads of perspiration began to dot his lips. "I've just got to see how lucky our big Western star really is. So we're gonna play Russian roulette."

"You're crazy!"

"Say that again and you'll find your luck's run out," she warned him. Now she stood to point the gun at his middle and moved to place a sofa between them. "I'm taking out five bullets," she said as she broke the Colt. With the airy grace of a princess, she dropped five bullets on the

sofa and warned him not to approach by raising the Colt. "Who goes first?"

"Me," he said too quickly.

Her laughter was contemptuous of the obvious: if she had agreed and given him the gun, there wouldn't be any game. Still laughing, she spun the cylinder and locked the gun with a hard snap before she retreated toward the bedroom.

"We'll play in there," she said. "It'll be like old times."

"Rhoda—"

"Before, neither one of us amounted to anything but I meant more than you. I had a chance"—she beckoned to him with the big blue gun—"because I had some luck. But I gave it all to you. All to you," she repeated dully. "I let it pass from me to you and you never said thanks."

"All right, thanks!" He pounded the upholstered back of the sofa. "Now take the money and get out and call me tomorrow if you want to get put on as an extra or want to try writing. But get out, you goddamn pig! Out!"

Her eyes were half closed in an expression of pity as she used the gun to compel him to follow her into the large bedroom, where she turned for a quick look at the bed before she yanked the candlewick spread half off and flopped against one of his monogrammed pillows.

"I'll try it first," she said. "Now, if I were playing by myself, I'd be sure to blow my head off. Do you know where the bullet is?"

"Are you— I wish you'd cut it out!"

Her reply was to kick both flats across the room. "Come over here," she ordered. "And sit right here. Nearer." She smiled.

"Rhoda, listen—"

"Such a pretty Western shirt." She cooed and laughed as she grasped a pocket to tear it free down one side. "You can afford it."

She saw his terror, the heavy sweat that ran down his cheeks, saw the dryness of his lips and the quick movements of his eyes.

"I'm ready." She pointed the gun at him. "Ready for you to pull the trigger for me."

"No—"

There was no strength left in him, her moist, nut-brown eyes bordered in blue and black were wide and staring, the gun was pointed at his head, and with her lips parted in a bloodless smile, she reached for his right hand to fit the gun into his palm, and as the coolness of the bone grip made him shiver, Rhoda put his finger on the trigger. As he cried out, she turned the gun toward her forehead and squeezed hard. The gun went off with a roar to split her face in two as the chimes of his theme music for "Saddle-Sore" sounded through the apartment and Tucson rose slowly, the gun in his hand, realized that the dead girl on his bed would wash him out with Miss San Marino.

Rhoda's luck had been bad, as always; sobbing, he wondered if his would hold out, for his prints were on the grip and trigger guard, and the way things looked, well, Rhoda might have put up a struggle.