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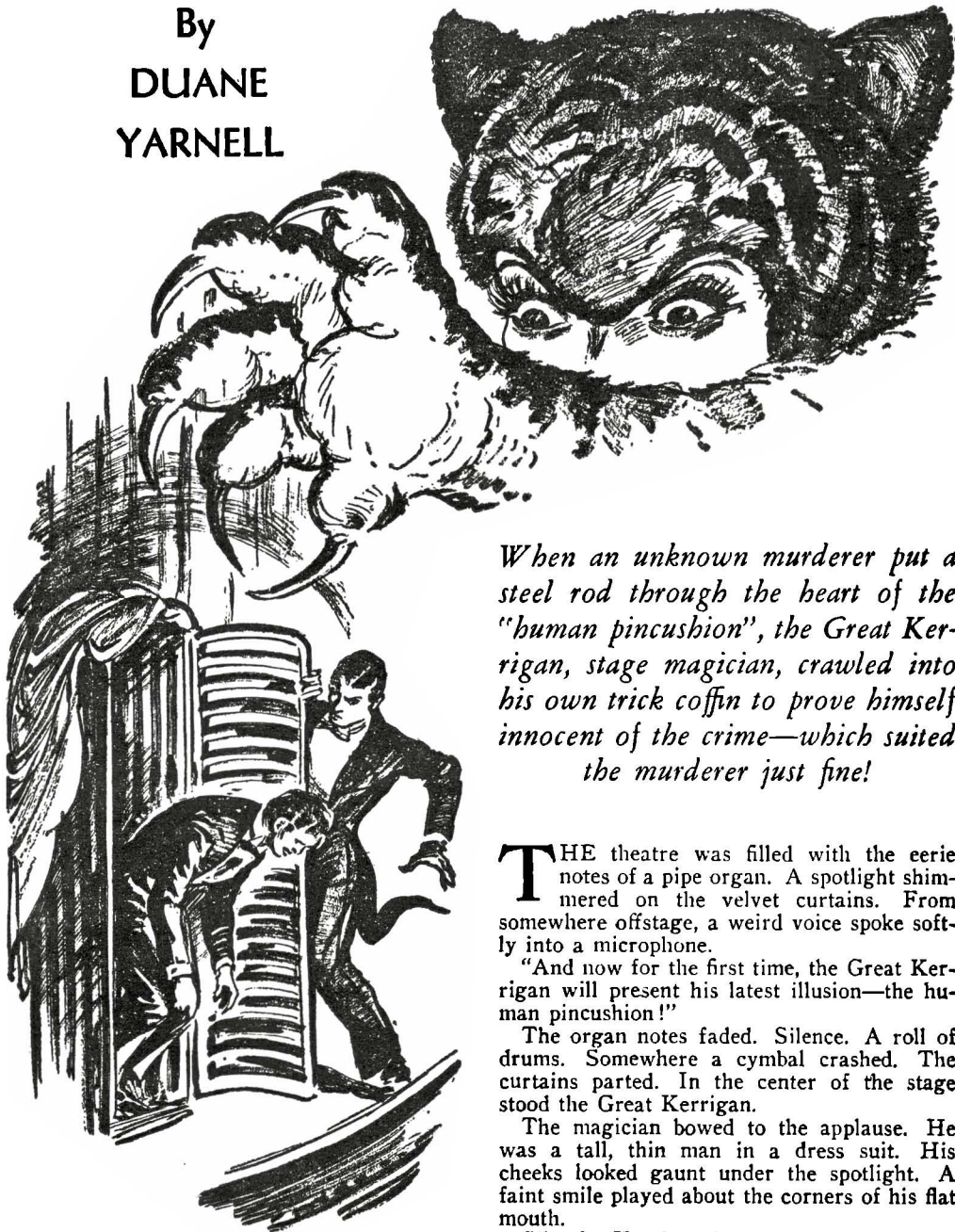
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# Claws For The Tiger Girl

By  
DUANE  
YARNELL



*When an unknown murderer put a steel rod through the heart of the "human pincushion", the Great Kerrigan, stage magician, crawled into his own trick coffin to prove himself innocent of the crime—which suited the murderer just fine!*

**T**HE theatre was filled with the eerie notes of a pipe organ. A spotlight shimmered on the velvet curtains. From somewhere offstage, a weird voice spoke softly into a microphone.

"And now for the first time, the Great Kerrigan will present his latest illusion—the human pincushion!"

The organ notes faded. Silence. A roll of drums. Somewhere a cymbal crashed. The curtains parted. In the center of the stage stood the Great Kerrigan.

The magician bowed to the applause. He was a tall, thin man in a dress suit. His cheeks looked gaunt under the spotlight. A faint smile played about the corners of his flat mouth.

Silently, Kerrigan began his act. He made a motion with his left hand. Sam West, his strikingly handsome young assistant, walked onto the stage. West was carrying easily a

**The lifeless body of young Sam West plunged face forward into the orchestra pit.**

huge roll of burlap and a narrow, slatted box about the size of a coffin.

He upended the box on the stage, and stepped inside. With the lid closed, the lock snapped shut, Sam West's big body was still visible through the slotted openings. Then the great Kerrigan, with a flourish, wrapped the burlap around the box.

He made still another motion with his hands. A girl came from the wings. A slim, beautiful girl in spangled tights. Laura Evans, Kerrigan's other assistant. She carried a tray of long, steel rods that had been made to look like oversized pins. Each pin was three feet long, half an inch around and drawn to a sharp, tapering point.

Kerrigan took two pins, hit them together. They made a tinkling sound. The audience tittered nervously. Slowly, Kerrigan held one of the pins against the very center of the box. The pipe organ trilled a shuddery scale. Kerrigan's white hand flashed downward like an adder striking. He drove the pin through the burlap, through the box. A woman's scream rang through the theatre.

Swiftly, then, Kerrigan thrust the pins home. He drove pin after pin into the box. There seemed to be no rhyme, no reason, no pattern. Faster and faster he worked until he was in a veritable frenzy. When the final pin had been driven home, it was inconceivable that any man in that box could be alive. Kerrigan, faintly perspiring, bowed slightly from the hips, looked questioningly at the audience.

From somewhere in the balcony, a nervous voice yelled, "That's one way of getting rid of him, Kerrigan!"

Kerrigan's smile froze. He drew the human pincushion away from the silken backdrop, pulled it down to the footlights. Swiftly, he removed the pins from the burlap wrapping.

With the pins out, he started to unwrap the folds of burlap. But the burlap wouldn't come off. Puzzled, Kerrigan spun the box on its axis. A gleaming steel pin was sticking into the back of the box. Kerrigan pulled the pin. It came loose with an effort.

Kerrigan unwrapped the box in half a dozen seconds. He unlocked the door. In the wings, a stage hand finally came awake. He jerked the curtain rope. But even as the curtains closed, the slumped, lifeless body of young Sam West plunged face forward into the orchestra pit. The front of his boiled shirt was stained red where the pin had pushed through his body.

**A** BARREL-SHAPED man made his way through the crowd backstage. He was flanked by half a dozen plainclothes men. His name was John Rogan. He was Chief of Police.

Rogan's corpulent face was flushed, his

eyes grim. As Kerrigan watched him approach, he cursed the fates that had goaded him into making a monkey out of Rogan for publicity.

The city, at Rogan's instigation, had just built a new jail. Escape proof, Rogan had proclaimed proudly. For publicity purposes, Kerrigan had offered to escape from the jail. With the aid of a concealed gimmick, he had accomplished the feat in less than ten minutes. The papers had had a field day with the baffled Rogan. And Rogan hadn't forgotten.

Rogan saw Kerrigan standing beside the body. Rogan said, "You're a slick customer, Kerrigan, but how're you gonna get out of this one?"

"Out of which one?" Kerrigan asked softly.

"The stiff!" Rogan said wryly. "The corpse. The body. Murder's nasty, Kerrigan."

Kerrigan said, "You sound like the movies."

Rogan's expression didn't change. He pointed toward the body. Then to a frightened Laura Evans, Kerrigan's assistant.

"You had a reason. You were in love with the babe, here. You were gonna marry her. But Sam West was younger. So the babe breaks off her engagement with you to marry him. I read all about it in the papers."

"I wouldn't have killed him," Kerrigan said sardonically, "if I'd known you could read."

Rogan sputtered. "Okay, be a smart guy. But murder ain't funny. You figured if you'd pull it in front of an audience, you could get away with it by callin' it an accident." Rogan turned to Laura Evans. "How about it, babe? Did you jilt him, like the papers said?"

Laura didn't meet Kerrigan's gaze. Her shoulders were shaking and the sound of soft sobs came from her bloodless lips. "Yes . . . I was going to marry Sam," the girl murmured.

Rogan's eyes were triumphant as he stared at Kerrigan.

"Get outa that one," he challenged.

Kerrigan sighed wearily. The stage was just as it had been when the curtains had been drawn. The final two acts had been cancelled. The audience had been told to go home.

Kerrigan pointed to the silken backdrop. "I don't know who killed West or why. But I know it was done by someone who parted the curtains and pushed a steel pin into Sam's back. This morning, I missed three of those pins—but I thought I'd mislaid them. Apparently, they were stolen by the murderer."

Rogan didn't believe it. His eyes were hostile. "Just how was this pincushion trick of your supposed to work?"

Kerrigan said, "I can't tell you. If I did, every magician in the country would steal the trick. It's a professional secret."

Rogan grunted, and turned to study the faces of those gathered around him. There were five women, all members of the traveling

stage show. There were four men, stage hands.

"Any of you have any reason to kill the guy?" Rogan asked.

"I'll bet they tell you," Kerrigan said bitterly.

Kerrigan studied the faces of the five women. The two Anson girls had a tumbling act and they had been due on the stage at the conclusion of Kerrigan's pincushion illusion.

"Where were you when it happened?" Kerrigan asked them.

June Anson's faded blonde face was drained of color. "Betty and I were getting our tables ready for the next act. We were in the wings all the time."

The Chief looked at Carole Bestor, a woman juggler.

"Okay, sweetheart. Maybe you got an alibi too."

Carole Bestor was a small brunette and her eyes were red from weeping. She stammered, "Why—I—"

"She was with me, Chief." The voice came from the wings. The speaker was a tall, willowy girl with dusky eyes and jet black hair. She danced under the stage name of Raven. Raven said, "We were smoking in my dressing room when it happened."

Rogan said, "That takes care of the women. Laura, here, couldn't have done it. She was on the stage all the time."

A man in plain clothes said, "I've checked the four stage hands. They all had jobs to do and were doing 'em at the time of the killing. They're clean."

Rogan had a pair of handcuffs in his right pocket. He started to reach for them. "You men stay here and check the alibis again. In the meantime, I'm takin' the murderer to the station."

Kerrigan started to make a break for it. He bumped into Rogan. But three cops piled him to the floor. When he got up, he extended his wrists. He did it peaceably.

The crowd had started to melt away. Kerrigan preceded Rogan down a narrow, dark alleyway. He smelled perfume, recognized it. He saw her then, standing back of a cement pillar. It was Raven, the dancer. She had an empty beer bottle lifted above her head. Kerrigan was half a dozen steps in front of

Rogan. As he passed Raven, she whispered, "When I hit him . . . run!"

But Kerrigan shook his head. "Not now," he muttered. With his eyes, he flashed his appreciation of Raven's attempt to help him escape.

They walked into the alley where Rogan's car was parked. They climbed in. At the end of the alley, they turned into a wide street. After they had driven three blocks, Kerrigan turned to the Chief.

"One thing about being a magician, Rogan. It takes more than handcuffs to hold you."

Rogan looked straight ahead, chuckled. "Don't give me that stuff. Them handcuffs are fool proof."

Kerrigan said, "The hell of it is, I'm not a fool. Look."

Rogan looked. His eyes bugged. Kerrigan's wrists were free. Rogan hit the brake with his right foot. Kerrigan clipped the Chief under the chin with a straight, hard fist. He put the cuffs into his pocket and stepped out and lost himself in the crowd.

**R**AVEN'S eyes were large and dusky and startled. Her hands flew to her white throat. She stared fascinatedly at the man who had just entered her dressing room.

"Kerrigan . . . you were in handcuffs! How—"

Kerrigan said, "When I tried to escape back stage it was a phony act. I bumped Rogan and switched a pair of my trick cuffs for the ones in his pocket. I felt more at home when he put *my* cuffs on me. That's why I didn't let you try to help me escape. I didn't want you to get involved. But thanks, baby, anyway."

"What are you going to do now, Kerrigan?" "Find the murderer," Kerrigan said. He looked speculative as he eyed Raven. "You tried to help me once. Maybe you can help me again. Do you know why any of those women would have wanted to kill Sam West?"

Raven said slowly, "Every woman in the act was upset. Sam West had three of them thinking that each was the one he loved. I know that he borrowed money and didn't pay it back."

"Who were the women, baby?"

"Carole Bestor was one. And from the way

the Anson sisters acted, I think he must have been borrowing from them, too. Then there was Laura. Maybe she found out about him—"

Kerrigan frowned. "Laura couldn't have done it. The Ansons might have. But Carole Bestor was in your room when it happened. So that lets her out."

Raven watched a thin coil of smoke drift ceilingward. "Yes. That eliminates Carole."

"And leaves only the Anson sisters. The tumblers."

"There might have been others," Raven said.

Kerrigan studied Raven's dark, exotic face. "Why are you helping me, baby?"

A faint smile hovered on the girl's lips. "Don't you know, Kerrigan?" she asked softly.

Kerrigan walked over to her. He looked deeply into her eyes. What he saw unnerved him. He had looked into Laura's eyes before but he had never felt like this. His arms slipped around her. He kissed her full upon the mouth, released her.

"Baby," he said, "why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Slim white hands gripped Kerrigan's. They were hard hands. Strong hands. Raven said, "You'll be sentenced to death in this town, Kerrigan. Rogan's out to get you. I've got a home up in the Catskills. And enough money to live on. We'd hit it off, you and I. We can get married and stay there until they forget about you."

It sounded interesting. But Kerrigan said, "Maybe later, baby. But not now. I've got to clear up this other first."

Kerrigan eased the door open. The cop was gone. Directly across the hall was Sam West's dressing room. Kerrigan entered it. The light was on and Sam's trunk was closed. That pleased Kerrigan. Rogan had been so sure of Kerrigan's guilt that he hadn't bothered to investigate Sam West's background.

Kerrigan found what he wanted. A pack of scented letters. He broke the string around them, pulled up a chair. This was going to be interesting. He started to leaf through the envelopes—

The lights went out. Kerrigan half turned. That was all that saved him. Otherwise, the blow would have landed squarely on top of his head instead of glancing. Knocked from his chair, he felt a hand brush over him, snatch the letters. He tried to move but he was paralyzed. He felt the blackness rolling down over him. He fought it . . . fought . . . it. . . .

Kerrigan was out only a moment. He got up, found the lights. His head was a mess, with his right ear torn, and blood everywhere.

But the letters were gone.

Kerrigan stepped into the hallway again.

Raven's door was closed. Through the panel, a cop was saying, "I know you didn't do it, sister, but I gotta go through the motions of checkin' your alibi. Why don't we do it at the Canabarra Club after I get off at midnight?"

A sharp slap of a hand against flesh came through the panel. Kerrigan grinned as he walked quickly down the hallway. He turned a corner. The door of the Anson sisters' dressing room was half open. The Ansons were fighting.

"He couldn't have loved you, June. He loved me! Why, I loaned him half the money I earned—"

"So did I! And he told me I was the only one. Why, that cheap chiseler—he got what was coming to him!"

"Stop talking about him! I loved him so. I won't stand for it—"

"Quit blubbing. You're lucky he was killed." The door opened the rest of the way. June Anson came out. Kerrigan had to move fast to make it into his own dressing room. He heard June Anson leave by the back exit. An instant later, footsteps came across the hall and Kerrigan's door opened. Betty Anson was holding one of the gleaming steel pins that had been stolen from Kerrigan.

When she saw him, the pin clattered to the floor. Kerrigan said, "Okay, Betty, maybe you can tell me what you did with the third one. You killed West with one. Here's the second—"

The girl's drab face was flushed crimson. "I—I found it hidden in my dressing room. I didn't want to get caught with it. I—I was only bringing it back."

Kerrigan said, "I'll remember it when I talk to Rogan."

Betty Anson's eyes narrowed. "I thought you were *with* Rogan." She withdrew hastily. Kerrigan knew that she was going to find a telephone.

He beat her to it. He went back to his own room, called Rogan on the phone. He said, "Rogan, I don't want to be on the prowl forever. I'll make a deal with you. Give me twenty-four hours of unmolested freedom. If I don't turn up your murderer by then, I'll come in voluntarily."

Rogan said, "Next time I see you, I'll plug you."

Kerrigan said, "Answer my question. Will you talk business with me?"

Rogan said, "You know who done it—besides you?"

Kerrigan said, "It could have been any one of several women. If you bring your boys into it, the gals will clam up and I'll be the goat again. There's only one way to break this case and that's by a confession. I think I can get it."

"You're stalling," Rogan said.

Kerrigan said, "Give me twenty-four hours. Or start looking for me now. I'm hanging up, Rogan."

Rogan was desperate. "I—I'll lay off. But it's highly irregular. I—"

"And tell the papers I've been cleared," Kerrigan said. "Tell 'em it wasn't my fingerprints on the murder weapon. Tell 'em I'm nice to my Sunday school teacher. Tell 'em anything, you kluck!"

Kerrigan hung up. Rogan hated his insides, but Rogan would keep his word. Tomorrow, Kerrigan could call Rogan and have a long talk with him. In the meantime, he needed to do some thinking.

**T**HE theatre was packed. The curtains were drawn. Backstage, Kerrigan listened to the eerie roll of organ music. He stood in the wings. In a moment, he would go on for his human pincushion act. But tonight Kerrigan was going to be the victim. The press had announced that Kerrigan had been cleared of the killing, that the police expected an arrest at any moment. Tonight, theatre seats had been at a premium.

Kerrigan studied the faces of the women in the wings. The Anson sisters were visibly upset as they prepared their tables for the tumbling act that was to follow. They had been fighting between themselves all day. Carole Bestor was red eyed and no amount of makeup would hide it. Raven, too, seemed to have the jitters.

The organ music grew shrill. Kerrigan looked at the women, said to them, "If the murderer hadn't made one mistake, I'd have been in jail by now. But the crime wasn't perfect. I know who did it and after this act, I'm going to prove it."

Kerrigan was lying and he knew it. So, it seemed, did the women who listened to him. They were not impressed. Kerrigan went out and the curtains parted. A new assistant brought the coffin shaped box and the burlap onto the stage. Kerrigan stepped into the box. It was very close to the silken backdrop.

The door was closed and the burlap wrapped around the box. Kerrigan tapped softly on the floor of the box. Slowly, the floor lowered under him as he was eased through a trap door.

That wasn't the trick. Doing it this way was hard on Kerrigan's ego. It was a breach

of his professional ethics. But this time it was justified. Looking up through the box, Kerrigan could see the steel pins being run through the burlap and the slats.

Kerrigan was below the stage. He walked noiselessly up a flight of stairs, into the wings. There were two backdrops, the one back of the burlap box and another five feet back of that. It was dark between the two drops. Kerrigan crept silently along the rear backdrop, stopped when he had reached the center of the stage.

He heard the footsteps. A vague form was outlined in the darkness. The form came to a halt. A hand, barely visible, drew back. It was holding a long, steel pin. This, then, was the third one that had been stolen. The hand moved swiftly and the pin was driven through the curtain, into the burlap covered box out front.

Kerrigan leaped forward. His left hand went around the woman's waist. His other hand went over her mouth. The woman bit him and he swore. She kicked him and he bent her back across his body and carried her into his dressing room.

He snapped the door shut behind him, turned the key. Then turned on the light. Carole Bestor, the woman juggler, looked as if she'd been drawn through the eye in a needle. Kerrigan shoved her roughly into a chair.

He said, "I've got to get back and finish my act. I hope you don't mind." He bent down, tied a rope around her feet. "When I come back, you can tell me why you were silly enough to try to murder me the same way you murdered Sam West!"

"I—I didn't kill Sam. I loved him!"

"You and half a million others," Kerrigan said.

"You've gone crazy," Carole Bestor cried. "You killed Sam! You killed him just as I was going to kill you. With a stab in the back."

Kerrigan put a gag in her mouth, tied her hands. There was no terror in her eyes. He said, "I'll be back soon. And when I come, I'll have Rogan with me."

Kerrigan went downstairs. He was just in time. The steel pins were being withdrawn from the cage. He stood on the automatic lift and was carried up into the box. The bottom snapped shut. The box was unwrapped and Kerrigan stepped out and took his bow.

He felt like a fish in a large glass bowl.

The curtains closed. The Anson sisters shoved their tables onto the stage as Kerrigan walked past. He sighed and walked heavily down the hallway toward his dressing room. He opened the door.

Carole Bestor was sitting in the chair, just as Kerrigan had left her. Her hands were untied. Her hands were resting on the head head of one of those gleaming, iron pins. Her pretty white hands, all covered with blood.

The pin had been driven into her heart.

Kerrigan could imagine facing Rogan now. Kerrigan would say, "Yonder sits the babe who killed Sam West."

Rogan would say. "Swell. Now who killed her?"

Kerrigan would say, "Suicide!"

And Rogan would reply, "You're gonna fry on the hot seat, my slick and slimy friend."

**K**ERRIGAN left things as they were. He walked down the hall to Raven's dressing room. She was painting a pair of sheer stockings on a lovely white leg when he entered.

Kerrigan said, "Carole's dead."

Raven's eyes were startled. "Who killed her?"

Kerrigan said, "It's suicide. She couldn't stand it without the boy friend."

Raven smiled softly. "Then that lets you out, Kerrigan. They can never try to blame it onto you."

Kerrigan sat down beside a telephone. "Peace, it's wonderful." He sighed. "Baby . . . is that offer still open? That place up in the Catskills?"

Raven came gliding across the room. She was wearing a soft, silken robe and she held her arms out to him. He got up and stepped into the pleasant circle of them.

"I'm ready when you are," Raven said.

Kerrigan did not pull away. He reached down, picked up the phone with his left hand and dialed a number. He saw the question in Raven's eyes. He said, "Send a bottle of whatever you've got over to the Rialto. Dressing room number seven. Hurry it. There's a little celebration."

Raven's eyes smiled at him and she snuggled against his shoulder. She said, "Kerrigan, I'll always love you."

Kerrigan's voice was dreamy. "And I'll always love you, baby." He pressed his nose into the hollow of her shoulder. "Why'd you kill Sam, baby? And Carole Bestor—"

She stiffened. "Kerrigan—you're joking!"

Kerrigan said, "I'm not joking. You killed Sam West because he jilted you. And last night, you damn near killed me to keep me

from finding your letters among the others."

She did not try to get away from him. Instead, she pressed even closer. Her voice was very husky. "All right, I did kill Sam! He was too weak to live!" Her eyes had a blazing intensity as she looked up at him. Her arms pressed tighter around his shoulders. "You're my kind of man, Kerrigan. I know it, now. You're hard. You're strong. We can still have a great life together. Carole Bestor was a worse chiseler than Sam West. I killed her, too. I was going to make it look more like a suicide—until I heard you coming. We've still got time to make it look that way, Kerrigan. We can both go free. We'd have a wonderful life together."

Kerrigan hesitated. Raven saw that hesitation. She pressed still closer to him. "Kiss me, Kerrigan!"

He leaned forward to kiss her. He felt the pressure of the knife blade against his back. It sent a little tingle down his spine. He whirled and grabbed Raven's wrist. She bit him. But he got the knife that she had been carrying in the sleeve of her robe. He threw her across the room and onto a divan. She tried to leap up but he pushed her in the stomach with his knee.

He said, "You wonder why the knife didn't go through my back? I'll tell you, baby. With so many guys being stuck in the ribs, I figured I'd better protect myself. I'm wearing an 'iron' vest under my coat."

Raven's eyes were the eyes of a wounded tigress. Kerrigan looked sad. "You thought if you told me you loved me, I'd never suspect that you had loved Sam West enough to kill him when he jilted you." Kerrigan shrugged. "It was fun, though, while it lasted."

The door opened. Rogan came in. Rogan looked very upset. "I gotta give you credit," he said. "You delivered the goods."

Raven stared at Rogan. She looked accusingly at Kerrigan. "When you called for the liquor, you were really calling Rogan. And you left the receiver unhooked so that he could hear!"

Kerrigan said, "I had to do it, baby."

Rogan said, "Sweetheart, we got you cold." He turned to Kerrigan. "With all the dames having the same motive, how'd you decide it was this one?"

Kerrigan said, "I eliminated the Ansons early. It takes both of them every second they have to get their tables ready to follow my pincushion act. The night of the murder, they were ready to go on when the curtains were drawn. They didn't have time to do the job."

"How did you eliminate Carole Bestor?" Rogan asked.

"I THOUGHT she was guilty," Kerrigan admitted. "Until I returned to my dressing room and found her dead. I knew it couldn't be suicide. You see, three pins were stolen from me. One was found in Sam West's back. You have it as evidence. Another was hidden in the room of the Anson sisters and the third in Carole's dressing room—probably to provide additional suspects in case you couldn't make your charge stick against me. Betty Anson found the pin in her room and returned it. Carole Bestor found the one in her room and in a fit of rage, tried to kill me with it, just as she thought I'd killed Sam West."

Kerrigan turned and looked at Raven. "You'd have gotten away with it, except for one thing. There was only one pin available and it was sticking through the curtain into the back of the box, where Carole had driven it. You were the only suspect free to have taken it."

"But why'd she kill Carole?" Rogan demanded.

Kerrigan said, "Last night, Carole didn't have an alibi. So Raven said they were in her dressing room smoking. That gave Carole an out. It also gave Raven an alibi. But when I caught Carole trying to kill me to-

night, she was half hysterical. Raven knew that if I turned Carole over to the cops, they'd break down her alibi. And then Raven would have had to explain where she was during Sam West's murder."

Rogan said, "It checks." He looked at Raven. "Come on, sweetheart."

Raven stood up. Her chin was up and her eyes were staring at Kerrigan. Pityingly, Kerrigan thought. As Raven left, she brushed close to Kerrigan. "If I'd used a knife on Carole, instead of that steel pin, it could have gone as a suicide. You know, Kerrigan, I'm sorry I didn't. We'd have had fun in the Catskills!"

He watched her leave. The fragrance of her perfume lingered in the room. Kerrigan sat down and poured a drink. He tried to relax, but couldn't. He kept remembering the tigerish fierceness of Raven's kiss. What was the matter with him? The girl had tried to kill him!

He tried to think of Laura. He knew he could have her again. Laura with the gentle kisses.

The thought left him cold. His mind flashed back to Raven. He leaned forward, buried his head in his hands and stared miserably at the floor.