

DETECTIVE TALES

December Issue
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VOL. TWENTY-EIGHT NOVEMBER, 1944 NUMBER FOUR

Spine-Tingling Crime-Mystery Novel

1. **COME HOME TO THE CORPSE!** *G. T. Fleming-Roberts* 10
Two fear-crazed men stalked this lovely, baffling girl—Wes Robbins, who'd been with her when his knife was plunged into his shrewish wife . . . and the grim-lipped killer, ready to kill and kill again—if it might send Wes to the chair . . .

Two Breath-Taking Novelettes

2. **COME INTO MY PARLOR.** *Cyril Plunkett* 50
Unexpected guests are all right, if they bring what they need . . . Dave Nord's visitor brought everything needed to plaster him with the label, *Murderer!*
3. **THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!** *Day Keene* 80
Life can begin at forty, Mr. Herbert believed, if you've got the necessary courage, and callousness . . . Trouble was, he tried to make his killing at the wrong time. . .

Six Gripping Short Stories

4. **CROOKED PATH TO GLORY.** *Donald G. Cormack* 26
What could bring that mild mouse-man up on his hind legs to defy stronger killers, and murderous gunfire?
5. **KILLERS' REUNION.** *Francis K. Allan* 34
Eddie Simmons found that there is no fear like the fear of the dead who stalk the living. . . .
6. **REPORT TO THE CAPTAIN.** *Charles Larson* 42
Everybody knew the girl's father hated Detective Steve Nebraska—but Steve was the only one who knew the girl's father had been murdered!
7. **SLUGS AND KISSES.** *Jack Bradley* 61
Being on the wagon and trying to solve this mad mixture of love and gun-play was too much for Detective Dugan . . . could he step off—before it became a hearse!
8. **HALF-PINT HOMICIDE.** *Ray Bradbury* 67
Meet the Douser—self-appointed, human monkey-wrench in a deadly crime-machine!
9. **PARLAY ON DEATH.** *Stuart Friedman* 73
The murderer won his blood-bet—then had to double his crimson stake!

—AND—

10. **THE CRIME CLINIC.** *A Department* 6
11. **RAILROAD RANSOM.** *C. T. Sullivan* 8
He tried to blackmail a railroad empire!
12. **WHEN GANGDOM RULED.** *Cedric W. Windas* 49
When rum-running meant grave-digging.
13. **ODDITIES IN CRIME.** *Jon L. Blummer* 72
Covering up the Crime.

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She was very young, very beautiful—and very dead.

By **CYRIL PLUNKETT**

CHAPTER ONE

Beautiful and Dead

THERE was no reason to expect this would be a different day from usual. It was June. The sun was fine and bright and warm. I mean some people claim to chills and premonitions, but I've never had one. It's true I had a hunch the time was soon to come that I'd meet the girl—but that was nothing but a pleasant daydream anyway.

So I can't say that I chilled, or thought once that Death might step into my life today—

I dare say you'd call me Mr. Average Guy. I mean I smoke and bowl and play cards and drink beer. I've served an army hitch—a short one as it happened. I'm twenty-eight and slim, of medium height and blond. I'd fit nicely into almost any crowd, no doubt—David Nord, drug salesman.

I got into Lakeview, my home town and the Acme Company headquarters, this Saturday afternoon as usual, on the three-fifteen.

Spine-Chilling Novelette of Murder

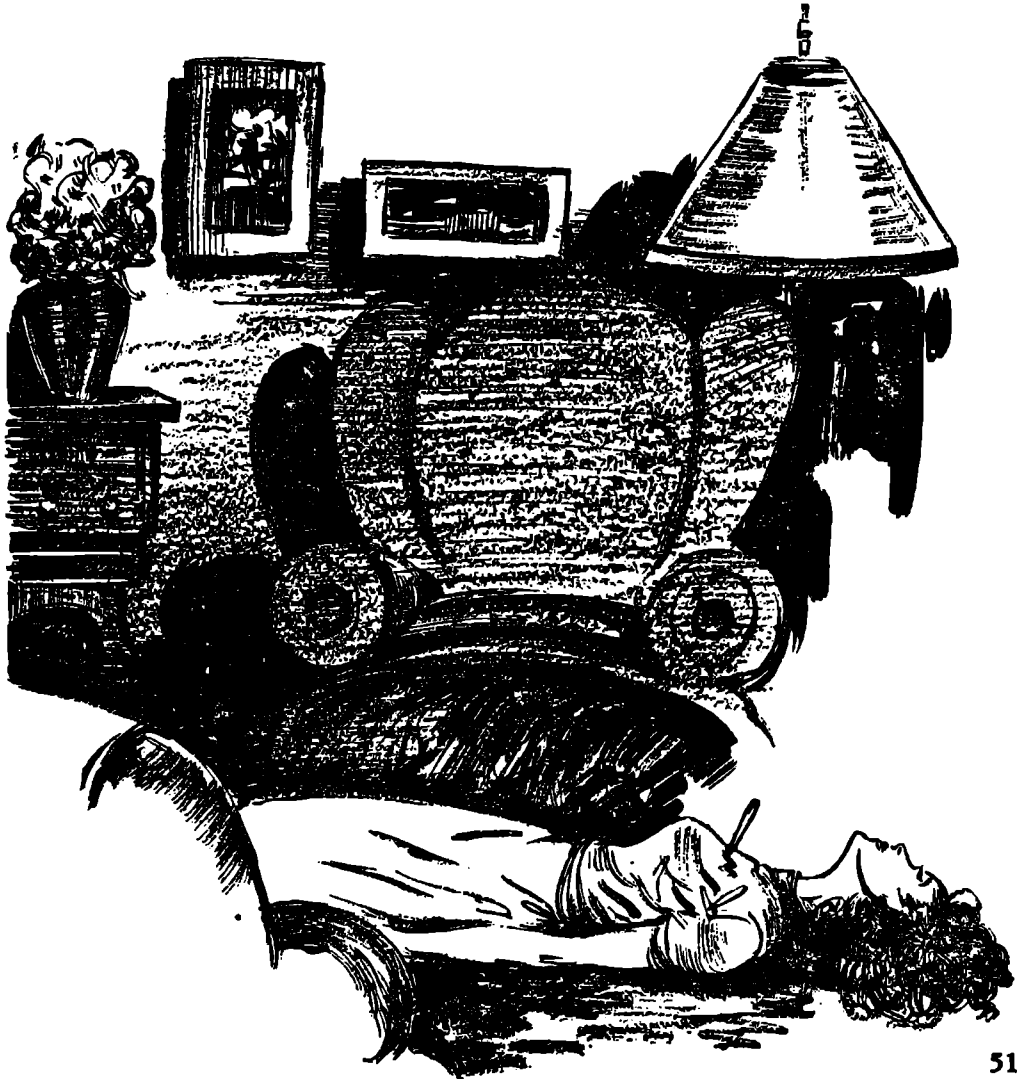
I'd had a good week on the road, a week fat with orders and commissions; and the Hens, the local ball club, were at home, playing Minneapolis under the lights, which meant Skid and I would catch the game, of course—as usual. My Saturdays—my life, as you may have guessed—fell pretty much in pattern. A taxi from the train to the Acme office; a half hour with the "old man"; two more hours sweating over orders at my desk.

Skid always phoned me at five-thirty.

"What'cha got new in poisons, Davie?" Skid said.

Skid Lockman. You know Skid. He was in the thirties, slightly bald, with a bland round face and a bland round grin. You know the kind of guy Skid is. Collar open

The girl I found in my room was breathlessly beautiful—and very dead. It should have been a simple enough thing to call the police and report the whole thing at once. . . . But the letter she'd written held me there, trembling behind the locked door, too paralyzed by sheer panic to think or act. . . .



when he's at the ball park. A hot dog in one hand, beer in the other, and yelling bloody murder. You know how he kides the girls in restaurants. Oh he's quite a guy, this Skid.

"Y, a b c d g I O U? How's the vitamin business?" Skid said.

His gags are pretty corny, but he always has one. "Fine," I said.

"Good week?"

"Fine," I said.

"Davie look. I've got two tickets for the game tonight. Kovac on the mound yet! Trouble is, now I can't go. Boss says nixie, Skidsie—you know? Company banquet, and they couldn't put it over without Skid Lockman to m. c. it."

"That's all right, Skid. I'll skip the game and go on home—"

He yelled, "Hey! You won't either! I'm sending your ducat over by messenger—and don't forget to tip him. Might get away myself, by ten. Tell you what, if I do—" Skid laughed and boo-booed like Crosby; then he sang, "Meet you out at the ball game—"

But he didn't.

I ATE alone, six to seven-thirty, slowly while I read the evening paper. You know, at the usual table, and the usual meal at the usual restaurant. Yes, it was just another day, as usual. And the Hens lost in a fast game, so it was early, eleven-thirty, when I dropped off the bus at home. As I turned up the front walk the door opened and Miss Morton came out.

Miss Morton always comes out at eleven-thirty. Every night, I guess. Like the U. S. Mail. Like destiny. Well, six nights a week, at least. She has a room—maybe two rooms, I don't know—up the hall from my suite. The fact is that I've never seen her except on her way to work. Two-three nights a week we pass at eleven-thirty, and she's always wearing slacks, dark glasses and a green scarf; she's always carrying a tin lunch pail. For a long time it was just, "Good evening." Then, as we learned each other's names, it became, "Good evening, Mr. Nord—Good evening, Miss Morton." Tonight she looked at me and paused though.

"Oh Mr. Nord!" she said. "You startled me!"

I have never startled anyone. I look at Skid sometimes and sigh and wish that I could be less like a—a metronome. That's what comes from shyness. I'd never get a sale if the Acme Company didn't have such a good line.

"I didn't expect to meet you," she said, "knowing you had company."

"Company?" I said.

"Yes, the girl. And then I heard your radio—"

"Girl?" I said. "What girl?"

She laughed. "And very pretty too, although I only got a glimpse of her as you let her in."

I shook my head. "But I haven't been home since Tuesday," I said. "Look," I said, pointing to my bag for confirmation.

It was dark, of course; her face was in darkness with the door light behind her, so I could sense, not see, her frown.

"And what's this about the radio?" I said.

"Oh dear," she said. "It was an impression really. I suppose it could have been another door. I suppose I could be wrong. Well—goodnight, Mr. Nord."

"Goodnight, Miss Morton," I said.

I went on up the walk. At the door something made me turn around. She too had turned, and was staring at me. Nuts, I thought. The gal was on the make, I thought. Slacks, dark glasses, a green scarf. Pretty thin, I thought, the way she'd made the play for me. In the lobby now, I stopped to pick up mail. The housekeeper, Mrs. Andras, was in the lower hall and coming toward me.

She frowned. No doubt about it this time, she stopped almost dead. "Why Mr. Nord!" she said.

Rosa is her first name. I was still in uniform the day I saw the For Rent sign and took the two room suite from her; the uniform, very likely, was the reason for her interest in me. Her husband was in service, in the Sea Bees, and often through the month that followed she'd invite me to her apartment downstairs for a chat, a cup of coffee. We'd talk about the war; she had an interesting deep voice and she was slim for thirty-five, and dark, and soon I'd come home from a trip to find my suits all nicely pressed, and Mrs. Andras would see to it I had extra towels—but now she was looking at me queerly.

"You're not just coming in?" she said.

Grinning, I said, "Ball game. You know how it is on Saturday. The Hens in town and Kovac pitching—"

"Yes, but I heard your radio playing," she said.

Twice now in five minutes. At last I frowned. "Skid," I said. "Probably he's waiting up for me."

"No," she said. "I don't think I heard Mr. Lockman come home."

She was wrong. She had to be. The funny thing though, Skid comes in like March. Like a roaring wind. You hear a door bang first; you hear humming or a whistle; he runs hell-bent up the stairs, and when he hits the hall you'd think he weighed two-forty.

"But I suppose," she said, "I could be mistaken."

I'd started up the stairs. "You haven't been spiking the coffee?"

She smiled as she answered, "No, but that's an idea!"

I walked along the upper hall, whistling just a little, softly. You know, glad the week was over. Glad that I was home. "Good evening, Miss Morton," I said with a bow at her door. And with a mental picture of the slacks I'd never liked, the dark glasses, the green scarf. I stopped whistling suddenly. Yes, the radio. From my room. My radio. I could hear the music plainly.

It didn't occur to me to wonder much as yet. To question how Skid could have gotten in. He had the suite across the hall from mine—that his key would open my door I just sort of took for granted. So I turned the knob, expecting to barge on, expecting the door would open. It didn't, and I bumped my nose. "What's this?" I said aloud.

But of course Skid had brought some new trick home, to be tried on me tonight. Cautiously I unlocked the door. I opened it. I went in and closed the door again. *Come to me my melancholy baby* . . . plaintive music from the radio. Someone singing. Saxophones and violins. The dial light was very dim. "Skid?" I said.

But there wasn't any answer, and I dropped my bag and reached out for the light switch. "Skid—?" I said. My finger snapped the switch. The light flashed on—and mine became the second motionless body in the room.

She lay on the floor, a girl. On the rug before my davenport. I could see, the knife handle, the blood. She was very young and very beautiful—and very dead.

MY first thought, when thoughts came, was: *the windows*. But no one could see in. The shades were all drawn tightly. Rubber in my legs, I leaned against the door, my heart a frightened thing within me. *Come to me, my melancholy baby*—I looked at the radio. It seemed now the singer shared this secret with me and could see me. I stumbled on across the room and snapped the switch.

For a moment then I had a wild, a mad idea. Skid was behind this. Skid who'd hand you a live toad. Skid who'd say, "Have a smoke on me,"—and double up with laughter when the thing exploded. Yes, Skid was behind this. Doubtless hiding in my bedroom. The girl a friend of his, and the—the blood no blood at all but—

"Skid—" I said. My voice squeaked. My throat was tight and aching. I could hear my ragged breathing. "Skid—" I said. But only silence answered, and now I looked back at the girl, and she didn't come to life, or laugh, or say hello. She just lay there, cute little slippers, little feet and high heels; flesh dead white above her knees, above her sheer rolled hose. Her green silk skirt was badly dis-

arranged, the hem tight at her hips—I took a step. I reached out for her. The first thing I did was pull her dress down.

She wore a sweater, and the sweater fit her nicely—but of course the knife had made a hole in it. Dark hair, very dark, dark brown; I brushed it from her face. Small, sensitive and oval, with lips painted and sweet. There was something there about her lips—but my thoughts, those coming now, were jerky, incoherent. I knew that she was under twenty, maybe only seventeen. I knew—

"Skid," I whispered, pleading he would be here. But the bed was made, the bedroom neat, the bathroom empty. There was nothing, no one in the closets. I tore my suits and coats aside with sudden frenzy. . . .

The next few minutes aren't too clear. I must have locked the door. It was locked when Skid rapped and called out, "Davie!" I hadn't even heard him tramp the hall. I'd been sitting in the big chair, numb, just staring. "Davie!" Skid called. "Should I break in?"

"I—I'm busy."

"Busy, he says!" Skid didn't care that someone might be sleeping. "Who took the game?"

"The Millers."

"Kovac go all the way?" When I didn't answer he began pounding again and yelling, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

My whole body began trembling violently. I caught and held my breath as he turned toward his own door. He unlocked it. He went in, but he didn't *close* the door, so I knew he'd throw his hat to one side, and his coat off to another. I knew he'd tear off his tie, and then—I took a deep breath, snapped off the light, unlocked my door and slipped in to the hall. I'd barely locked the door again and shoved the key deep in my pocket when Skid saw me.

"What's the matter, Davie?" he said.

He was warm. His face was sweaty-red. The red stopped abruptly at his pasty bald spot. He was pulling off his shirt. Lots of fuss. Lots of energy. The window made a loud noise as he raised it. "What the hell," he said. "Come in."

"Something that I—I ate," I said.

"That damn' little restaurant on Monroe Street?"

"Yes, Skid."

"Why, we'll sue 'em! They can't do a thing like that to Davie. How about a drink?" He grinned.

I was glad when he went in his bedroom. He kicked off his shoes. "So the Hens dropped another close one?"

"Yes, Skid."

"What a night," he said, his voice coming to me muffled. "I'm delighted to present our Mr. So-and-so Blah-blah. You know, Davie

speeches. The food was good though. Then we started dancing. Of all the clucks I work with!" He returned now, with a bottle and two glasses.

"Well, bub, here's to murder!"

YOU don't know Skid. Many times I've caught him looking at me queerly. I mean you'd think he was an open book, with large print splashed on all the pages, but he's not so simple.

Look, Skid, I need your help. That's what I wanted to say. Those words possessed my mind, were screaming in it. And still—a thready little doubt crept in. Why should he become involved in murder? Suppose he wouldn't help me? Then what would I say. Then someone else would know about the— the body.

But, Dave—alone—what can you do? I closed my eyes a moment, fighting this thought. I didn't own a car, and Skid didn't, either. I could see myself, the girl lumpy on my shoulder. I could watch, apart, as though I stood aside, each cautious foot of progress that I made. Down the hall, down the back stairs, past Mrs. Andras' door and into the dark court and the alley.

But suppose someone heard or saw me? And where would I take the body when I got outside with it? We live near a crosstown street, near a business district. You heard footsteps on the sidewalks all night long, cars and doors, radios and late laughter. How far could I get before—?

I shuddered as I knew I'd have to take the trip though. . . .

"Golly, what a night," Skid said. He held up the bottle. It was nearly full and he took a swig from it. "It's too warm to sleep. How's about it, Davie, should we sit around and chin?"

"No, I—I'm too tired."

"I'm not—I'm all pepped up."

"N—not me, Skip."

"Well—" He yawned. "Then I'll read a bit, I guess."

I knew I had to go back. The night, the darkness that I needed was already half gone. But how long would Skid read? And would he hear me when I left, when I took the girl down? I said goodnight and began to close the door.

"Leave it open, Davie."

"Open?"

"Sure, why not? I want a breeze."

"But you—" I bit my lip. "You won't be dressed, Skid?"

"Okay." He grinned. "I won't be dressed then. Who's to see me anyway?"

"Yes, Skid."

"Leave it wide open."

I took a deep breath. "Yes, Skid."

CHAPTER TWO

The Crimson Crevice

I HUDDLED in my living room. In the big chair, in the darkness, that Skid might think I'd gone to bed—and that I wouldn't have to see what was here, lying near me. I began to count the passing seconds, ticking off a finger at each sixty, but I got mixed up the second time around, and all the while I thought, *Relax, kid. Keep your head. Stay cool.* There was a place two blocks down, a vacant lot, a sort of thicket on the alley. I'd only have to go two blocks with the body.

Two blocks. That meant a street to cross, a lighted thoroughfare. And I visualized the street, a drugstore on one corner of the alley, and a big house on one corner, and a garage on one corner—but what else? No cajoling and no whipping spurred my mind; the fourth corner remained nothing, just a blot, and I became excited with this lapse of memory, fearful of the fourth dark corner. I began to tabulate all the stores, the buildings in that block. The grocery and the bakeshop and the little restaurant where I went for breakfast every Sunday morning. *This* was Sunday morning—I struck a match to see the time.

It was one o'clock.

How long would Skid read? I could hear him, the little sounds he made. He cleared his throat once. Then he turned a page, slapped it—or perhaps he'd put the book down? But he didn't get up, and I began to count again.

Why was the girl *here*? Who was she? And what time had the murder happened? The shock of coming home, tired but secure, and finding her had been too much at first; I'd been dazed. My mind had sort of blanked out, until Skid came. Now, curiously, I fought these questions, used every little device, such as counting seconds, visualizing stores and streets, to bypass or ignore them. There had to be a reason, of course, for this subterfuge, and sub-consciously I already knew the reason. *Something about the body—something dreadful.* But what? I didn't try to see or analyze. Get rid of the body! There was my one cry, above all else. All danger stemmed from the body—so get rid of it!

I rose at last, tiptoed to the door. Skid yawned then—ho-ho-ho-hum—loudly; his book shut with a crack. Now he'd get up! Now he'd go to bed! But he didn't. I waited and waited, stiff with tension. It was very still though. What could Skid be doing? Presently I got down on my knees, removed the key and looked through the keyhole. His room remained lighted, and I could see his legs, his stocking feet stretched out on a hassock. I knew his eyes were closed.

But did he sleep?

Damn that open door! He faced the door. Everything could be lost if he so much as opened an eyelid. I put the key back in the lock and turned it; slowly turned the knob. Oh, so slowly! There was a click, the lock released. The door moved toward me. A little moan came from across the hall, a snore.

Now, I thought. Now in a few more minutes. I could feel a breeze from Skid's room, blessedly cool. The wind was coming up. And then Skid's door began to move too, an inch, two—three inches, the hinges squealing. I stopped breathing. I knew I'd have to close Skid's door before the wind did. I knew I'd have to act at once—and fast. So I took a step, into the hall—the door swung ever farther and it slammed a split second before I reached it.

Nothing happened. There was no sound but silence. Finally I turned, sobbing as I reached my room; just standing in the darkness, trembling then, until—the questions. They drilled deep down in my brain. Lightning low on the horizon? It struck as I snapped the light switch.

The knife. *My* knife. Of course my subconscious mind had known it. I'd refused to see it earlier. I'd tried in every way I could to postpone all decisions. Yes, my bone handled, razor sharp letter opener. I saw more, the girl's fine strong teeth—and the crimson crevices. I saw the ring on her left hand, on the middle finger. An old ring, an old setting with great curved prongs. There was a dark thread, an inch or more long, caught in one of them. I saw a purse lying off to one side; and I picked it up and opened it—

SHE'D written a letter. She'd dated the letter late this very afternoon: *four-thirty*, it read, in round school-girlish hand at the top. *Darling*, it read; and then—

David, dearest—your poor little Jennifer! Oh David, I'm desolate! We've done things we shouldn't. Not our love, our kisses. Darling, you know what I mean—those papers. Oh, we'll suffer for that—I know we will! I think Father might suspect me already. He watched me last night, oh so strangely. I wanted to call you last night, but I couldn't. I couldn't be alone at the phone.

David, what will we do? I must come to see you again, talk to you, plead with you. I won't stay so long as the last time. Please, David? I must talk to you. David, I must.

It ended there, suddenly, unfinished. It began there, for me. She'd written the letter, to *me*. She'd brought it to *me*. Here, where she'd been at least one time before. And I didn't know her, had never once seen her—and she was in love with me.

But to how many friends had she confided her love for—"David"?

Miss Morton popped into my mind, slacks and dark glasses, saying, "And she was very pretty. I saw her as you let her in." Miss Morton wouldn't forget that. Nor I couldn't forget how she'd turned and looked back at me queerly. And Mrs. Andras, the housekeeper—very likely she'd meet the police first. "Yes," she would say throatily, "I thought he was home—before I met him coming in later, that is. Yes, I suppose he could have been in and gone out again."

Oh, I could hear them, the barbs in what they would say; and I could hear Skid's, "Yes, he did act—well, strangely. He said he was sick, but—" Well, what would I say? That I'd been to a ball game? And wouldn't *that* be a fine alibi! You could wander in and out of the stands and no one ever would notice. You could describe the game, inning by inning—but who couldn't, with a play by play account in the papers?

Jennifer. Poor kid. I looked at her. Jennifer who? My head began aching and pounding. Not the thicket down the dark alley, not now. And no fourth corner to worry about. Jennifer had come; Jennifer would stay. Here? I looked around. The bedroom? The bathroom? The closet? I remembered the sticky, the hot night. The sun, to blaze down on the morrow.

Oh my God, I thought, *what will I do with her?*

CHAPTER THREE

"Where's Jennifer?"

I AWOKÉ sitting in the chair. The wonder that I slept! But I'd seen the dawn, the gray of it becoming red. Yes, the night was

long—but now what would the day bring?

For a moment I just sat there, and then I heard again the sound that must have wakened me. Someone knocking. Someone tried the door.

"Who's there?" I said.

"It's I, Mrs. Andras."

"What—" I bit my lip. "What's wrong?"

"Aren't you going to church this morning, Mr. Nord?"

I waited all too long, and with each second knew less what to answer. She didn't go away though. "Mr. Nord?" she said. So I got up and shook myself and staggered to the door. She had a cloth tied around her hair, an apron and long gloves on. She had a dust pan and a vacuum cleaner and a floor mop. Crazily, I noticed how thick her eyebrows were when she didn't pluck them.

"Aren't you going to church this morning, Mr. Nord?"

I looked at her, and she thought, I guess, most reasonably, that I'd just got up. She laughed and said, "What a bout you've had with the sandman!" Then she sobered quickly. "I meant to tell you last night, and it slipped my mind. I'm going to the blood bank in the morning. The last time—Mr. Nord, I must be getting old. The last time I felt wobbly for two days. So I thought, since you'd be out to church, I'd clean your rooms today."

"Why don't you skip it this week?" I said.

"Oh, I couldn't do that, really!"

"I—I've scarcely been at home."

"There's plenty dust though." She was looking past me, and she saw the bath mat on the rug before the davenport. "Mis-ter Nord!" she said. "Tsk-tsk," she said, and she'd have come in if I hadn't jerked the door.

"Should I come back in an hour?" she said.

"No. No, I'll be busy."

"But you're going out to breakfast, aren't you? I'll do the rooms quickly. It won't take me an hour—"

I knew grimly she'd never spend an hour in this suite today. "I haven't decided when I'm going out," I said. "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Andras."

"Oh dear." She was a strong, a determined woman, not given lightly to shrugging off defeat or disappointments. "Is Mr. Lockman up yet?"

"I don't know."

"Oh dear," she said, "I won't feel like working much tomorrow."

The wheels squeaked on the sweeper as she pushed it down the hall. Yes, she was a determined woman, and she'd be back, later in the day or early in the morning. The next time she'd become suspicious. I looked at the bath mat. It barely hid the dark spot, the dark stain.

It was going fast on eleven now, and the

heat, the sun, was fingering at the windows and poking in. The heat promised to be terrible. How long before—an odor? I caught myself sniffing, and stopped then and shivered and looked around furtively. Too soon, yet, for an odor—but how long?

Strong white teeth, with crimson crevices. . . . Yes, I remembered each minute detail, the picture whole or in part, the horror of it. And I'd searched and weighed and wondered until my mind was going round in circles. A blue-black thread, caught on the prong of her ring. . . . A clue? Hope to hang my life on? Of course it was a clue. But if I guessed or used it in the wrong way, if now I made the wrong play. A girl who was named Jennifer. . . . *Look, mister, you maybe know a girl, oh maybe so high, a ring on her finger, named Jennifer! Hello, is this the bull shop? The cops? Don't try to trace or check on this call—it's on a pay phone—but you got a kid on the books listed missing? Who? Would I call if I knew? Her name, all I know is it's Jennifer.* There were no brass rings on this merry-go-round.

I sat down and put my face in both hands. The noose of Mrs. Andras was measured for my neck all right. She'd watch. I knew her. She'd see me, if I tried to leave the building—and I wouldn't reach the corner and the bus stop before—Yeah, I could see her in my mind, darting for her sweeper and her mop, her dustcloth and her dustpan. And the sweeper would squeak in the hall again, until—She'd unlock the door. She'd trundle in. "Tsk, tsk," she'd say, and reach down for the bath mat—

Suddenly there was sound in the hall, way up, by the stairway. I heard a man's deep voice. "It's the fourth door?" he said.

"Yes," Mrs. Andras said, "the fourth door on the right."

"Thank you," the man said.

Doom walked with his footsteps. They were heavy, inevitable. He rapped.

MY fingers were all thumbs. I'd lurched from my chair, to run to the bedroom; I'd grabbed a suit from the closet—without looking in. I'd begun to change then furiously. A dark suit, a dark tie. And my money? Just in case? *In case I squirmed and ran and got away from him.* I stuffed the wallet in my coat pocket, shaking now all over. The man rapped again.

"Yes?" I said.

My heart stopped beating. The crack I opened in the door revealed a uniform. My heart gulped and beat on swiftly. He was a naval officer. "Mr. Nord?" he said.

"Yes."

"David Nord?" His eyes were bright beneath tight and dark brows. He was big and

in the forties, forty five or so. He said in a crisp hard voice, "It would be best, I think, if you'd let me in."

"Yes," I said, "come in."

He looked around, at the mantle, the stand, a chair; a long and searching glance. Then he sat down on the davenport, his feet flat on the bath mat. "Sit down, Nord," he said, "I want to talk to you."

"Cigaret, sir?" I dropped the pack and picked it up and lit one. I'd tried—and failed—to keep my voice from quaking.

He didn't speak at once. He just stared at me, stripped me with his eyes, probed, looked into me. At last he said, "Where's Jennifer?"

In winter it's a howling wind, and perhaps the house rocks. But there always is a lull, a still and silent moment. The wind off somewhere, slinking into forests, or crouching on the hilltops, or with snow and ice, on mountains. To regain its spent strength. To get its second breath. And finally, when marshalled, it would try again, coming with a high and weird wail—

I listened. A car stood off outside, near, the motor running; in the alley perhaps. And someone yelled, across the court, "Ma, I can't get my dress on!" I heard a plane, high up in the sky. Heavy voiced, a transport or a bomber. But the wailing, the high and weird note, the wind? Despite that it was June I trembled and I braced myself.

"Is that your answer?" he said. "Silence?"

I tried to get the words out; coming, they surprised me. They were so unexpected and so clever. "I—I guess that I'm puzzled."

"Puzzled?" He didn't like the word, suspicious of it, not quite sure. "Nord, we found the diary."

I nodded. The diary—

"We thought that she'd retired last night," he was saying. "Too early; yes, we should have known. But she said she had a headache, and she went upstairs a little after eight o'clock last night."

He frowned. He made a small, a helpless motion. "We heard her in her room. It was warm, you know, and later we sat outside, on the terrace—"

I pitied him. I couldn't help it. I saw him on the terrace with his wife, the "we" he used; and I could almost hear the murmur of their anxious voices: "Yes, she's acting strangely. . . . She hasn't been herself for— for weeks. If only she would open up, confide in us—" But pain was fighting now with something else there in his dark eyes.

"She must have come down then, and stolen out the back way," he said. "We didn't go into her room. We called once, at ten or so, and she didn't answer and we thought that she was sleeping. Well, Nord, where is she? What did you do with her?"

My legs felt the chair behind me. I sat down. I crushed out my cigaret and looked at it. Then I said, "What makes you so sure she came to—me?"

He was trying to be patient. "I've told you. The diary. This morning we called her, at eight, for breakfast. And we went up and she wasn't in her room. The bed had not been slept in. We phoned several of her girl friends. Then we found—" He reached into his pocket, pulled out a stubby black book. He leaned forward as he leafed the pages. "It begins two months ago, with '*I met David.*'"

"Where?" I whispered, only when the pause had gone too long.

"Where?" His voice whipped at me. "What has that to do with it? You met her, and you've seen her, again and again. Always, according to the diary, here, or in the park, a dark place. Always without my knowledge, or her mother's, clandestinely. Why clandestinely? There must be something you want to keep hidden, something foul about you."

ANOTHER moment passed, while he took a deep breath. While he seemed to be trying desperately to control himself.

"Look, Nord. I try to be an intelligent man. An intelligent parent. I didn't come with a blacksnake. Frankly, I'm surprised at what I see. Nervous, yes, but you're young and rather clean-cut. Tell me—did you hope to marry her?"

I'd picked up the ash tray, something just to hold to. It slipped from my hand as he moved a little, as he kicked the bath mat. Gnawing at his lip he reached down. He straightened it. The beginning of the blood stain wasn't one half inch from his fingers.

"No answer?" His eyes blazed as he looked up at me. Then he rose. "All right, Nord. I've tried to keep my head. She's a lovely girl. I'm aware she's wilful and impetuous. Yes, I've tried to put myself in your place. But now—damn it, where is she? Where did you take her?"

Yes, I pitied him. I pitied *me*. Why couldn't I put aside this burden and tell the truth to him? A silly, a forlorn hope. *No, I didn't kill your daughter, mister.* Then what would he do? He crossed the room and stood above me, scowling.

"Damn you, is she *here*?"

I didn't want to look *that* way, toward the bedroom. I couldn't look at him though. He sucked in his breath and spun around, and I lost my senses in that frantic moment. I caught at his arm. He hit me. I don't know how it happened. One moment I was scrambling to my feet, and the next I was lying on the floor. He'd hit me. His hard fist traveled only a few inches. I lay there dazed as he strode to the bedroom.

"Jennifer!" he called.

He disappeared—I heard him at the bathroom door. "Jennifer!" he called. He raked the shower curtain.

Yes, this was the wind, the high wailing, the weird note. Fresh from snow and ice and strong from forests and high places. Bitter now and merciless. *He came around the bed and reached out for the closet door.*

"Jennifer!" he called.

He tried the closet door. Oh thank God that I'd locked it. The key was in my pocket, and I closed my eyes; when I opened them again he stood looking at me, his face becoming dirty red.

"All right, Nord," he said. "For my wife's sake I don't want a scandal. I'll give you two more hours. If there's an ounce of sense in your thick head you'll go to her and reason with her and ask her to go home. Because God help you, Nord, if you don't produce her, unharmed, when I come back."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Spider's Web

"I'M going to the blood bank in the morning," she'd said. Mrs. Andras. "I'll clean the rooms in so little time today, if you'll let me in." What difference did it make now when Mrs. Andras cleaned the suite? I could keep her out a few more hours, yes, perhaps one more day—but not this man, this— My mind stumbled. It struck me then that I didn't know his name. *Mr. Jennifer*, I thought. He was going to cost me everything, my life, and I didn't even know his name.

I got up off the floor. *Yes sir, I locked the closet door. The key? But you can't search without a warrant, sir! Oh, Mr. Jennifer swore out a warrant, did he? And you're police, detectives? All right, but it's hot in there. Like a bake oven. Hot as hell. You'll have to be prepared. I mean she won't look like she did last night, her skin so smooth and fair, you know—* I felt along my jaw. Two hours. Two hours. And five minutes gone already, or was it ten now? Why look into the mirror? Why stand there wiggling your chin and munching? *Your jaw isn't broken, Dave—and what difference would a broken jaw make anyway? The chances are you won't do much more eating.*

I found a pocket comb. I combed my hair, and all the while the two words that haunted, puzzled and dismayed me were *crimson crevices*. There was a lilt in them—only because of the alliteration? They prodded. They intrigued. But what did they mean? I removed my wallet, the dark thread I had put away. I studied the thread a long moment before replacing it. This clue, at least, was tangible.

Then I opened the hall door and peered out.

There was no one in the corridor, and all the doors were closed. Mr. Whosis, who lived up the hall, was not yet home from church. And Mrs. Something, up the hall, worked on Sunday in a restaurant. Of course Miss Morton slept. Slacks, dark glasses, she got home from work at eight or thereabouts—I wondered if she slept in them, the slacks, the green kerchief and the glasses. Did you ever have a dead girl in your closet and try to keep your mind clear?

I went across the hall, to Skid's door. Rapped.

He hadn't locked the door. I opened it when he yelled, "Come in." He'd just got out of bed and he wore only shorts and his eyes were bloodshot and the ruff of hair stood out around his bald spot. "Oi!" he said. He hit his head to show me how it ached for him.

"Going someplace, Davie?" he said. I still had on my suitcoat, my hands now in the pockets. "Or Davie, coming from?" he said. "Wait till I get some clothes on and we'll have breakfast."

"Sleep good, Skid?" I said.

He grinned. "In the chair, till almost morning. Look, the bottle there." It was down, the contents a lot down since I'd seen it last night. Since we'd had a drink together. "Now Davie, what did I have to do that for? With rationing yet! And oi, my head!"

"Skid—" I wet my lips. "Did I leave my key here last night?"

"Key?" He blinked. "I don't know, kid. Did you?"

"Remember three-four weeks ago? One night, Skid? I left it on the stand."

I'd followed him, back to the bedroom. He looked at me. "What's the matter, Davie?" he said. "What happened? You look—scared."

"So you didn't like to dance much with the clucks last night?"

He wrinkled up his face, his nose. "I don't get it?"

"I mean they wouldn't miss you—if you disappeared. You could come back then, in say an hour, and the clucks wouldn't be the wiser."

He'd stepped into his pants. He drew them halfway to his waist and stopped and stared. "Kid, have you gone nuts?" he said.

I walked over to his closet. "Where's the dark suit, Skid?"

"Dark suit? Oh, the cleaners. Why?"

I skipped his question, said, "When? And remember, you're going to have to prove it."

HE DREW up his belt. His big chest expanded. "Skidsie had a drink last night," he said. "You know how Skidsie is when he's poured a few in quickly. The wheels stop

turning. Or maybe I'm just dumb. But what the hell are you talking about?"

"Jennifer."

"Jennifer?"

"You killed her," I said.

He said, "I *what*?"

"You played around with this kid, and because she was under age you used my name, to protect yourself. You knew every move I made, and when I was out of the city you used my rooms to sweeten the dish. But the salad soured. Jail bait, something like that; and Skidsie wouldn't go to jail. Oh no. Skidsie's cute. The payoff's due, so he contrives to send me to the ball game, while he attends a party and alibis himself, and then—*I'm accusing you of murder, Skid. Damn you, Skid, you killed her. You left her lying on my floor.*"

He sat down on the bed. His feet were bare and they felt around for slippers, missed the slippers. He just sat there. "Oh, my God," he said.

"And you're going to burn," I said. "The suit's the rubber trick. You can't alibi that, Skid. We'll find it, cleaners or wherever it is. Her ring caught somewhere on your suit and snagged a thread."

"A—a thread?"

"Oh, you missed that little detail?" I laughed bitterly at him. "Like hell you did. You caught it all right later, and then you ditched the suit—"

He repeated queerly, "Snagged a thread?"

I was aware of something wrong. He wasn't looking at my face. His gaze was glued chest high on me. Then he got up, and suddenly he was coming toward me, but not cursing and not lunging. These were uncertain steps, slowed by—by awe or incredulity?

"Davie," he said, "I don't get it yet, not all of it, except—" He raised a hand and pointed to my left lapel. "Is it the woods you can't see, Davie, because of the trees?"

A puckered raveled area. On my coat, my lapel. My temples became pounding drums as now I looked at it, and scarcely knowing what I did I reached for my wallet. Yes, the thread matched. *From my coat, my lapel.* The room spun. I stood in the center of it, of a top. The walls spun round and round, and out of it, this mad and throbbing whirlpool, I heard Skid's voice, a flat stone skipping over water. The pitch too high. Coming through a filter microphone, it seemed, as he said,

"Now what's this, Davie—about murder?"

He crossed the chasm, the step or two apart from me. "Easy, Davie. Don't—*don't run away!*"

He lunged, hands outstretched to grasp; they touched but didn't hold me. They slid off my shoulder, off my sleeve. *But I'd seen and realized at last that something would have*

been—and wasn't—on his strong and stubby hands. I don't know how I got through the bedroom doorway then, so quickly, or how I got the door shut, but I was on the right side, and Skid was yelling, pounding on the other. I'd slammed the door and turned the key.

It didn't matter now when Mr.—Mr. Jennifer was due. The clock had leaped an hour. The clock *could* stop entirely when Skid broke free. But never had my mind seemed quite so keen, so clear. The suit. *My suit.* The suit had suddenly become dimensional. Important beyond measure. The rainbow's end, the key, the solvent.

Yes, the suit—and Skid's hands. *Not a mark on them.* So I knew who had killed Jennifer. And why. I knew the meaning of the crimson crevices.

There was a coin to toss yet though. I locked Skid's hall door, walked swiftly to Miss Morton's room.

She cried out at my first knock, "Yes—who's there?"

I kept right on banging at the door and calling out, "Miss Morton! Miss Morton!" Twin-fold, my purpose. To drown out the barely muffled bellow from Skid's suite, the thuds and splinter as his beefy shoulders drove against the panel. To surprise Miss Morton and confuse her with my urgency. "Miss Morton! Miss Morton!"

The key chattered as she unlocked her door. She'd thought to open but a chaste crack. I leaned against the door and it swung wide.

"Oh!" Miss Morton gasped.

No slacks? No scarf? No dark glasses? There was no time to be surprised though. She wore a sort of halter thing, a silky wisp of nightgown, her flesh, the round soft slimness of her body showing through it. "Oh!" she gasped and darted for a robe. I put surprise aside. It was *her* hands I'd wanted to see. Shoulders, arms, hands, her skin was fair and unbroken.

WHAT she thought or what she did when at last she turned around I don't know. I wasn't there when she turned around. I'd tossed and read the final coin. I was running down the hall, the back way, down the dusky stairs. There was a dark, a sharp turn, a corner where no sun would ever shine. A door there in the corner, ajar for breeze—and inside, the little room where I'd sat once on a sofa sipping strong hot coffee.

She stood in the little room. Dressed to go out, white purse, white jacket, white hat—and white gloves. Surprised? She was very clever.

"David!" Mrs. Andras said. "Mr. Nord!"

I leaned against the wall, panting from the run, fighting for my breath and to still the trembling in me.

"They'll be here soon," I said. "The police

—for Jennifer. They'll know, as I did, her killer was familiar with her and lives here, in this building."

She sat down suddenly.

"David, are you ill?"

I glared at her. She must be—*had* to be the one. I caught a flicker in her returning glare—and with it a staggering idea. She was so slim, so neat, but—why did she have to wear my suit?

And then I remembered something—an old trick out of a book. Still holding her eyes, I fished out a pack of cigarettes, stuck one in my mouth and tossed her the pack.

"Have one."

She caught the pack. But I'd seen enough. Beneath her trim skirt, her—his—knees jerked together. It wasn't that he wasn't sure of catching my toss. It was that his knees—just like Huckleberry Finn's—weren't used to letting a skirt catch anything. . . .

I lit my cigarette with shaking fingers. He was puzzled by that toss. He didn't yet realize he'd given himself away.

"David, are you ill?"

"The poor kid," I said. "Too young to really know what she was doing. She met a man, and she thought the feeling that she had for him was love. There was nothing that she wouldn't do for him, you see, and she was blind to the fact that she was being used. To steal some plans? The papers that she mentioned—something her father knew, or had invented, and concerning the Navy? Yes! She'd show her love, even to becoming spy, the poor kid.

"Well, she paid, *Mrs. Andras*, didn't she? Terribly, for her one terrible mistake. I wonder now how far your net has spread, to how many others? But at least Jennifer at last realized that what she'd done was wrong, and she came here last night, to 'me', whom she knew as David Nord, the man she knew as Nord to plead with him. A letter hadn't been enough."

"Mrs." Andras snapped, unsnapped the gold catch on the purse. He said jerkily, "What are you—talking about?"

"Of course you couldn't be '*Mrs. Andras*' for Jennifer. You had to be yourself—a man. You had to have male attire, too. But why use a suit of your own—when you had access to mine? Why rent when you had my apartment? I was away; you had a key. Yes, it was my suit snagged by Jennifer's ring—and that snag in my coat clarified everything. A man was the killer I wanted. A man who couldn't use his own clothes. And I suppose the idea behind the masquerade is that the

F.B.I. wants you—badly."

Andras flushed. I should have read the rush of blood, the glitter in his eyes, and then the ebb, his white lips. But the spring had been wound far too tightly.

"Did you see the crimson on her teeth?" I said. "In the crevices? Did you miss that, or think it wouldn't matter? The crimson was blood. Jennifer fought for her life and bit the hand of her killer—and *that's why you're wearing gloves today.*"

Yes, I should have gauged his temper and his cleverness; I should have watched his *purse*. There was a gun in his hand suddenly, and suddenly he was crouched a little and saying, "Fool! You stupid oaf!"

He backed around me, smiling as he found the doorway with his free hand. "I'm going to kill you, Mr. Nord," he said. "I'm simply going to shoot you and run screaming up the stairs. And then, before the police come, 'Mrs.' Andras will have disappeared."

He was talking low and very fast, and he was far enough away so that I knew I couldn't close the distance before death came. The gun up and his trigger finger whitened.

"But I won't believe you, pal," Skid said. From the hall and close behind him! I had never seen Skid move so fast. The other tried to turn, but Skid had his wrist and twisted it. The gun fell. Then Skid hit Andras and he fell to the floor. . . .

* * *

You know how it is, the trembling, the reaction. The cops, summoned by Skid Lockman—he'd phoned them from his room—had come, had gone. They'd gone upstairs, to my suite, with the killer. And Skid was upstairs too again and yelling, "Come on, Davie, we got to make more answers."

I sat on the top step with Miss Morton.

"Of course, the way you broke into my room," she said. "The way I was—" She blushed and looked away from me. "Then I heard Mr. Lockman, trying to break down his door and I unlocked it. We could hear you downstairs, every word—"

Hard to believe, I thought. Her feet were so darned cute in the tiny sandals and the high heels. And her eyes were—I got lost in them. The slacks, the scarf, the dark glasses were like putting housepaint on a Rembrandt.

"Hey!" Skid yelled. "The cops say to make it toot sweet!"

That was the word I wanted. Sweet. I smiled as I rose with Miss Morton. "You don't work Sunday nights though, do you?" I said.

THE END