
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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Liddell didn't know if it was accident or murder. All he had to start with was a

DEAD DRUNK



A JOHNNY LIDDELL STORY BY FRANK KANE

THE BLONDE STOOD AT THE PICTURE window, stared down at the silver ribbon that was the East River ten stories below. The occasional hoot of a tug or the clank of a barge barely penetrated into the room.

She had been poured into a tight-fitting sheath that hinted at the sleekness of her thighs, the roundness of her hips, and gave up any pretense of disguising the cantilever construction of her façade.

The man was sprawled in an easy chair, a half-filled glass in his hand, a cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. He was eying the snugness of her skirt around her hips with appreciation. When she turned to face him, the effect from the flip side was equally interesting.

She appeared to have made a decision. "All right, Mr. Davis—"

The man swirled the liquor around the sides of his glass. "Tim," he told her. "Mr. Davis sounds so formal."

A brief flash of annoyance clouded the slanted green eyes; the full lips narrowed into a thin slash. "Let's keep this on a business basis, shall we?" She walked over to the portable bar against the wall, picked up a glass, spilled some liquor into it and added ice. "You say you've been hired by my husband to get him the evidence he needs for a divorce." She looked over to where he sat. "So?"

Tim Davis took the cigarette from between his lips, grinned at her. "Baby, baby. You sure didn't try to do much covering up." He leaned over, crushed the cigarette out in an

ash tray. "You left a trail a mile wide." He tapped his breast pocket. "I've got stuff here that would get him that decree in any court in the country." He licked at his slack lips. "Real good stuff."

The blonde took a deep swallow from her glass. "How much?"

The man in the chair shrugged. "Suppose you do buy this stuff back, Lorna—"

"Mrs. Kyler," the woman said coldly.

Davis considered, shrugged again. "Like the guy says. What's in a name? Mrs. Kyler today"—he tapped his breast pocket suggestively—"no Mrs. Kyler tomorrow. You know?"

The blonde drained her glass, set it down, walked back to the window, her full hips working smoothly against the fabric of her skirt. She stood with her back to him. "If you didn't come here to sell the information, what do you want?"

The private detective clinked the ice in his glass against the sides. "Like I was saying, Lorna. It wouldn't do any good to buy this stuff back. There's lots more around where this came from. You buy me off, there's a hundred other oops your husband could buy to get him what he wants."

"So you took the trouble to come up here to tell me how hopeless my position is. How nice of you." Lorna Kyler swung around. "If that's all—"

"Who said it was hopeless?" The man in the chair reached up, scratched at his pate where the hairline had receded. "I thought maybe

you and me, we'd have a talk. I've got some ideas."

A frown ridged the blonde's forehead. "You just said—"

"I just said there's no use trying to buy up all the evidence you left behind." He pursed his lips, dropped his eyes to his half-filled glass. "As long as he's alive, you've got troubles." He rolled his eyes up from the glass to the woman's face. "Big troubles."

The blonde's shoulders drooped slightly. "You have a suggestion?"

"Accidents have been known to happen."

Lorna Kyler stared at the man in the chair for a moment, walked over, sat on the couch facing him. "You're presuming an awful lot to come here and make statements like that. Suppose I should go to the police? Or even to my husband?"

The man in the chair grinned, shook his head. "You'd be crazy to. In the first place, they wouldn't believe you. I'm a licensed private investigator doing a job for your husband. Naturally you'd try to discredit me. And when they saw what I'd managed to dig on you"—he grinned again, shook his head—"you wouldn't stand a chance."

Lorna caught her full lower lip between her teeth, worried it. The slanted green eyes studied the face of the man in the chair opposite her. She realized she was taking a big chance if the man had been sent by her husband; on the other hand, her husband had no need for such traps. The detective was right—she

had left a wide-open trail, overly confident that she could always twist Abner Kyler around her finger.

"Why should you do this?" she asked finally.

Tim Davis took a deep swallow from his glass. "Money." He leaned back, rubbed the heel of his hand along his chin. "Either way, I can't lose. You don't buy the idea, I take what I've got to the old man. You buy it, I make triple my fee."

"I see." The blonde got up out of her chair, made another trip to the window. "How much is that fee?"

The detective considered. "You get the whole package for a hundred thousand."

The woman at the window whirled. "You must be crazy. A hundred thousand! Why—"

"There'll still be plenty left. A lot more than if I turn over what I've found." He managed to look sad. "That way we're both out."

Lorna started to argue, then shrugged. "I'd be the first one they'd suspect." She shook her head. "It wouldn't work."

"Why don't you leave that to me?" Davis told her. "You'd be out of town when it happened. There'd be no way they could tie you to it." He tilted the glass to his lips, drained it. "I'm not exactly an amateur."

The blonde couldn't repress a slight shudder, rubbed the backs of her arms with the palms of her hands. "How would it happen?"

Tim Davis leaned over, deposited the empty glass on the edge of the coffee table. "Leave that up to me,

too. The less you know about it, the less you're likely to spill if they do start questioning you." He consulted his watch. "Is there someplace you can go for let's say a week?"

The blonde bobbed her head. "I have friends up on the Cape." She licked at her lips. "Would it take that long? I mean . . ."

The man in the chair pulled himself to his feet. "Don't worry about when it's going to happen. That way you'll be all the more surprised when they send for you." He made an ineffectual attempt to smooth some of the creases out of his pants. "I'll be in touch in about ten days." He walked to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob, turned back. "If you have any idea of renegeing on the price, forget it. The money wouldn't do you any good in a shroud." He pasted a grin on his lips that failed to make his eyes, pulled the door open and closed it after him.

Lorna Kyler stood looking at the door for a moment, then ran to it. She reached for the knob, hesitated, then dropped her hand. She turned, walked back to the portable bar, poured herself a stiff drink.

In the hallway, Tim Davis waited for two minutes, then grinned his self-satisfaction. He knew he had her figured right from the minute he started digging into her background. But even some of these case-hardened babes backed away from murder. He was glad she didn't.

Johnny Liddell walked down the corridor to the double glass door at

the far end of the hall bearing the inscription SEAWAY INSURANCE CORP. He pushed through into the ante-room, walked up to the girl at the desk in the enclosed area.

"Lee Devon."

The girl behind the desk stopped pecking at the typewriter keys and turned a pair of incurious eyes on him. "May I have your name?"

"Johnny Liddell."

"Mr. Devon's expecting you." She got up from her chair, waited until Liddell had pushed through the gate, turned and headed for an office diagonally across from her desk. "Will you walk this way, please?"

Liddell watched for a moment, shook his head sadly. "Sorry, honey. I just don't have the equipment."

The girl gave no sign that she'd heard, held the door open for him. He had an impression of full breasts and firm thighs as he squeezed past her into the room.

Lee Devon looked as if he had been jammed into the armchair behind the desk. He was fat and soft-looking, and was swabbing his forehead with a balled handkerchief as Liddell walked in. His eyes were two bright-blue marbles that were almost lost behind the puffy pouches that buttressed them. He nodded to the girl, his jowls swinging. "I don't want any calls, Janie." When the girl had closed the door behind her, he turned to Liddell. "Sit down, Johnny. I think we've got some business for you."

Liddell pulled a chair up to the desk, dropped into it.

Devon picked up a folder from the

corner of his desk, flipped it open. "You read about Abner Kyler?" He rolled his eyes upward, studied Liddell from under heavily veined lids. "Millionaire, got himself boxed out of his mind, got himself killed when his car went through a railing over the viaduct leading to the Hamptons."

Liddell reached over to the humidor on the desk, helped himself to a cigarette. He stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "I read something about it," he said. He scratched a match, touched it to the cigarette. "You don't think that's how it happened. That it?"

The fat man picked up a cigar, tested it between thumb and forefinger. He pursed his lips, made and broke bubbles between them. "Let's just say that I want you to find out if that is the way it happened."

"Any reason for thinking it wasn't?"

Devon bit the end off the cigar, spat it at the wastebasket. He stuck it between his teeth, chewed on it. "Nothing I can put my finger on. Just a feeling." He held the unlit cigar in the center of his mouth, seemed to be selecting his words. "You fly a desk like this for twenty years, you get a feeling every so often." He squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "I'm not as active as I used to be, so I figured maybe you'd like to check this one out for me."

Liddell nodded. "What've you got?"

The man behind the desk shoved the folder toward him. Liddell dumped the contents on the desk,

skimmed through a flimsy on the police report, glanced at the findings of the coroner.

"Alcohol concentration point three in his blood?" Liddell whistled. "This boy didn't do things halfway."

The fat man bobbed his head, starting the jowls swinging. "According to the A.M.A., a concentration of point one five would mean he'd had twelve ounces of hundred-proof stuff. A point three concentration would mean twenty-four ounces."

Liddell dropped his eyes back to the coroner's report, then picked up a glossy showing a smashed car lying on its top, the tangled legs of a body visible inside it. A second picture showed the dead man after he had been removed from the car, his head lopsided, his eyes staring blankly upward.

Liddell flipped the glossies back on the desk, turned to the coroner's report, checked through it, grunted. "Compound fracture of the right frontal." He looked across the desk at Devon. "You'd think the wheel would be enough to keep him from cracking his head against the windshield, wouldn't you? A broken neck, or the top of his head crushed in, sure. But the front of his head caved in . . ." He shook his head.

"Anything could happen in a freak accident like that. When it crashed through the barrier, the car did a flip, landed on its roof twenty feet below." Devon chewed on the unlit cigar, half-veiled his eyes with the heavily veined lids. "Thing that

bothers me is that there was still plenty of alcohol in his stomach." He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, touched his tongue to a loose strand of tobacco, pasted the cigar back into place. "But it was after four o'clock and there wasn't a bar open within fifty miles. No sign of a bottle in the car or anyplace near it."

Johnny Liddell leaned back, nodded thoughtfully. "I read you real clear. Who benefits?"

The fat man screwed his features into a grimace. "Dry run. His wife collects everything. We checked her out real good. She spent the four days up to the accident on the Cape with friends. No phone calls, no letters, never out of sight."

"But?"

The fat man shrugged his shoulders, spilling his jowls over the side of his collar. "This wife—she's half his age, stacked. From what I gather, she's been living it up but good for the past few years."

"Have a talk with her?"

Devon grunted, shook his head. "She has a real fancy-pants lawyer. The boys upstairs have turned hands down on anything but polite conversation unless we got something concrete. And this we don't have."

Liddell got up from his chair, walked over to where a water cooler was humming softly to itself, drew a paper cupful of water. "You say she was young and pretty. Maybe the old man knew about her cutting up and figured that was a small price for rent on the chassis?"

The fat man pulled the cigar from between his teeth, stared at the soggy end, bounced it in the wastebasket. "He wasn't. He wanted out. At least, he had a later model he wanted to trade her in on. And from the little we've been able to dig, he wouldn't have had much trouble doing it. If he hadn't gone and got himself dead."

"And the model?"

"Gita Ravell, a little redhead who acted as his secretary. She claimed she saw him earlier that night, that he left her about one and that at that point he hadn't had a drink. A couple of hours later, about fifty miles away, he shows up reeking of alcohol and dead." He sighed lugubriously. "And that's all she did have. Suspicion. I let Legal talk to her and they ruled it out. But she still insists he wasn't much of a drinker. Definitely not in that point-three-concentration league. She never saw him take more than two Scotches, she insists." He raised his hands, palms out. "Not much to give you, but that's the story. Think you can do anything with it?"

Liddell scowled. "Like you say, it's not much. Where do I find this Gita Ravell?"

"Kyler had an office in the Graybar Building." He leaned forward, pulled a desk calendar toward him, flipped back a few pages. "She has a pad in the Village. Fifty-one Perry." He sank back with a sigh. "I think you're wasting your time talking to her. Our boys pumped her for every price thing she has. Nothing." He stared

down at his hands clasped across his midsection, dimples where the knuckles should have been. "Our only hope is to break down the wife." He rolled his eyes upward, shook his head. "And that's not going to be easy."

The directory listed Mrs. Abner Kyler's address as the Cathedral Arms on East End Avenue. It turned out to be an oppressively modern pile of bricks and plate glass towering over the East River at 89th Street.

Johnny Liddell dropped the cab at the curb, headed across the lobby to where a rheumy-eyed old man in a dark jacket stood guard at the desk.

"Mrs. Kyler. Mrs. Abner Kyler," Liddell told him.

The clerk deigned to consider it, shook his head judiciously. "Mrs. Kyler isn't receiving. There's been a loss, you know."

"Suppose you ask her. Tell her I'm a private detective and I've been doing some work for her husband. I thought she might be interested in what I discovered for him."

The clerk *tsk-tsked* his annoyance, made a production of picking up the desk phone. He murmured into it, waited, then replaced it on its hook. "Mrs. Kyler will see you," he told Liddell with no show of enthusiasm. "She's in Suite Ten F." He wrinkled his nose, dabbed a handkerchief at his rheumy eyes, followed Liddell's progress toward the elevator bank with disapproval.

The elevator whooshed gently to

a stop at the tenth floor, the doors sighed open. Suite 10F was at the end of the corridor, facing out over the East River.

The woman who opened the door in response to Johnny Liddell's knock was tall, blond. He ran his eyes appraisingly from the top of her blond head to her sandaled feet with appropriate stops on the way.

"Mrs. Abner Kyler? My name's Johnny Liddell. I'm a private detective."

The woman stepped aside, permitted him to enter the large living room, closed the door behind him. In the light of the room, he could see that she was a little older than her silhouette would indicate, but still comfortably on the right side of thirty-five.

"All right, mister," she snapped. "Now suppose you tell me what this is all about." The slanted green eyes snapped angrily, the full lips were drawn into a thin red line.

"It's just like the lilac-scented character on the desk told you—"

"You were working for my husband and wanted to tell me what you'd found out," she mimicked. "You're a liar. Look, mister. I don't have to put up with this. Either you level with me right now, or I call the police. What are you doing here?"

Liddell scratched at the side of his jaw. "Your husband wanted a divorce, lady, and—"

"You've got things a little mixed up, haven't you? I'm the one who wanted the divorce. And if he'd

lived a few weeks more, I would have got it."

Liddell managed to look confused. "Maybe you didn't know it, but your husband did a complete check of your background."

The blonde sneered at him. "My husband knew what I was when I married him; he went into it with his eyes wide open. I never tried to hide from him the fact that I hated being married to an old man and that I wanted out. He refused to give me a divorce, even flaunted that red-headed floozy he was keeping in my face. Just a few more weeks . . ." She brushed past Liddell, picked up a cigarette from a pack on the coffee table, tapped it against her thumbnail. "Who really sent you? The Ravell woman?"

Liddell scratched at his head, found a match, lit the blonde's cigarette. "Actually I'm checking out a report that your husband wasn't much of a drinker, that he never would normally have been as boxed out as he was that night."

Lorna Kyler filled her lungs with a deep drag, let the smoke dribble from between parted lips. She turned her back on him, walked to the window. When she turned back, some of the anger seemed to have drained from her face. "Who'd know more of a man's vices? His wife—or some young floozy he had big eyes for?" She indicated the filled bar at the side of the room. "It was one of Abner's worst failings. There were days on end he'd just lay here and empty bottle after bottle."

Liddell held his hands up. "That's what I wanted to know. I'm sorry if I upset you. I was just trying to earn a fee."

The blonde studied him, seemed to be seeing him for the first time. "I'm sorry, too. It's just that—well, I don't like the insinuations. I don't like the way the insurance company is trying to twist this thing around." She dropped her voice. "But that's no reason for me to take it out on you." She indicated the bar. "Would you like a drink? I could use a Scotch." She walked over and perched on the arm of a chair.

Liddell walked over to the bar, dropped ice into two glasses, spilled some Scotch over them. He brought one back to the blonde.

She smiled up at him. "I'm not always this inhospitable." She brought the glass to her lips with a shaking hand, spilled most of it down the front of her gown. "Damn!" she exclaimed. She swabbed at the wet portion with a hopelessly inadequate wisp of linen, stood up. "Pardon me while I get into something dry." She headed for the bedroom.

Johnny Liddell took his drink, wandered to the picture window, stared down at the river below. The blonde had made no attempt to hide the unsavory past Lee Devon had indicated, but what the insurance man apparently didn't take into consideration was the woman's contention that it was she, not Abner Kyler, who wanted the divorce. He sighed, took a deep swallow from the glass. If she could make that stand up, it

would be understandable that Kyler might have got himself boxed out, especially in view of her statement that he was a secret drinker. It could even be suicide, if she could project the picture of an old man who felt things closing in on him. Liddell swore under his breath. Either way, Lorna Kyler wasn't the type to do too much leaning on.

He had finished his drink and was building a refill when the door to the bedroom opened and the blonde reappeared. She had changed into a loose, Nile-green dressing gown.

"Sorry to be so long." She smiled at him. "I promise not to be so clumsy if you'll make me a new one." She walked to the couch, dropped down onto it, watched him make a second drink. "Why can't we be friendly instead of tossing implied threats at each other?"

"I'd prefer it that way," Liddell conceded. He brought her drink over to the couch, dropped down alongside her. "Like I said, I'm only earning a fee."

The woman took a deep swallow from the glass, nodded. "I'll tell you the whole story." She leaned forward, set her glass on the coffee table, turned the full power of the slanted eyes on him. "That is, if you're sure you won't be bored."

He wasn't.

It was growing dark when Johnny Liddell walked out of the Cathedral Arms and waved down a cruising cab. He gave the cabby the address of the redheaded secretary, leaned

back against the cushions, speculated on what Lorna Kyler had been trying to tell him in her rambling story of a small-town cigarette girl who'd married an elderly millionaire. He finally gave up.

Fifty-one Perry Street was a brownstone building nestling anonymously in a row of identical brownstones. Liddell climbed four steps from the sidewalk level, pushed his way through the vestibule door. A highly polished brass letter box supplied the information that Gita Ravell occupied street floor rear. He followed the dimly lit hallway to the rear apartment, knocked.

When there was no response to his second knock, he tried the knob. It turned easily in his hand. He pushed the door open and stepped into the small vestibule. The room beyond was in darkness accentuated by drawn shades.

As he closed the hallway door behind him, he was aware of an oddly familiar smell pervading the room—a sickly smell that made his nostrils twitch, the hair on the back of his neck rise.

He fumbled for the light switch, spilled light into the room beyond.

Gita Ravell sat in a chair facing the doorway. Her hair was a thick coppery pile on the top of her head; her eyes were half closed, her lips parted as though she were on the verge of saying something.

The ugly, gaping wound in her throat made it improbable that she would ever finish what she had started to say.

Johnny Liddell stared at her, swore under his breath. He walked over to the chair, laid his hand against her cheek. The skin was beginning to cool. He reached down, caught her sleeve, lifted her arm. Clutched clumsily in her fist was a long-bladed knife, its edge red-tinted.

Liddell straightened up, looked around the apartment. There was no sign of a struggle, no evidence to support his conviction that the girl's fingers had been wrapped around the handle after her throat had been slashed. He bent over the body again, examined the gaping wound. It was a clean slash, no sign of the hesitation marks, the telltale little scratches that invariably precede the lethal cut in a suicide. It satisfied him that the girl had been murdered, but the district attorney might require more proof.

Liddell stared at the face of the girl, once undoubtedly pretty, now caricatured by death. He wondered why it would be necessary to murder her, tried to imagine what she could have known that made her dangerous. In his mind's eye, he reviewed everything he knew about the case. Gita Ravell had insisted Kyler was murdered, but she had nothing to prove her contention. Or did she have something she wasn't aware of? Something the killer was afraid she'd remember or find?

Suddenly, as he studied the face of the dead girl, things began to fall into place. He again checked the warmth of the dead girl's cheek,

made a fast estimate of the time of death. It was a hunch that would require checking in the morning—but for the first time, things were beginning to make sense.

It was after midnight when Tim Davis stalked into the lobby of the Cathedral Arms. He ignored the night man behind the desk, headed for the elevator bank, pushed the button for the tenth floor.

Lorna Kyler opened the door in response to his knock, drew in her breath sharply when she recognized the private detective. "What are you doing here?"

"Let me in. Or do you want me to discuss our business from out here?"

The door swung open. Tim Davis pushed through, closed it behind him.

"You should know better than to come here at this hour," the blonde stormed at him. "You gone crazy?"

"No. But maybe you have. If you're trying to pull something." He pulled an edition of the *News* from his pocket, shoved it at her.

She stared at him, dropped her eyes to the front page of the tab, walked into the living room, held it under a lamp. After a moment, she looked up, wide-eyed. "Gita Ravell was murdered last night. You?"

"That's not the point. She was discovered by Johnny Liddell. The same Johnny Liddell you were supposed to be keeping here until I had a talk with Ravell. A few minutes

earlier and he might have walked in on me." He caught the blonde's arm, squeezed it cruelly. "If I thought you tried—"

Lorna Kyler shook her head. "I didn't. I kept him here as long as I could. I thought you were only going to reason with her."

"She knew too much. The canceled checks came back today. One of them was made out to me. Signed by Kyler." He dug his hand into his pocket, brought out a check. "It could blow hell out of our story."

The color drained from the blonde's face, leaving her make-up as garish blobs on the pallor. "And now?"

Tim Davis tore the check into pieces, dropped them into an ash tray, touched a match to them. "I fixed it to look like she did the Dutch." He looked up from the ash tray. "They'll figure she was so upset about the old man dying, she cut her own throat." He grinned crookedly. "But I guess this changes our deal."

"I should have known. I suppose you want more money." The woman's lips were twisted with contempt. "Your kind always does."

"Is that a nice thing to say to your prospective husband?"

Lorna stared for a moment. "Prospective husband? Now I know you're crazy. If you think I—"

Davis grinned crookedly. "No. I don't think you want to sit in the electric chair. That's why you're going to marry me. A wife can't testify against a husband, you know."

The grin became strained. "But it's a two-way street. A husband can't testify against a wife, either."

"Testify about what? All I did was keep Liddell here while you went to talk to the girl. I didn't know you were going to kill her."

"I know that, baby. And so do you. But if they ever started putting the heat on me at headquarters, who knows what I'd be likely to say. You know?"

"That's blackmail."

"Insurance, baby. Electric-chair insurance. And the premium isn't very high."

"Just half of everything I've got."

"Look what you get in return. You get to keep on living."

The blonde shook her head from side to side. "It won't work, I tell you. They'd smell a rat in a minute if I were to marry you so soon after Abner—"

"Nobody has to know. We don't announce it for a year or so unless they get lucky and stumble on something." A hard note crept into his voice. "Don't forget it's for your good as well as mine. If I get to sit in that chair, you'll be sitting in my lap."

The blonde stared at him with stricken eyes. "There's no other way?"

"That's not very flattering, baby. Good thing I'm not sensitive." Davis grinned at her. The grin got broader as she swung away from him, headed for the bar and poured herself a stiff slug of Scotch. She swallowed it in one gulp, coughed as it burned her throat. "When do we do it? Get mar-

ried, I mean?" she asked without turning around.

Davis shrugged. "The sooner the better. We can drive out tonight, get down to Baltimore, get it over with and be back before morning."

Lorna poured herself another drink, swallowed it slowly. She set the glass down, bobbed her head jerkily. "Okay, I'll get dressed. I won't be long."

Davis nodded. "Sure, baby. Only leave the door open. Just so I know you're not making any phone calls. Like the one you made to me while Liddell was here. The one where you told me to take care of the redhead."

Lorna whirled on him, started to retort, shrugged her shoulders. She headed for the bedroom, left the door open.

Davis grinned as she disappeared into the other room, licked his lips in anticipation. He poured himself two fingers of liquor, sipped it contentedly. He was almost finished with his drink when the girl reappeared in the doorway. He frowned his displeasure when he noticed she hadn't begun to change.

"I told you as soon as possible, baby." The hard note was back in his voice. He saw the .38 in her hand for the first time, gasped as she brought it into firing position. "You crazy? I warned you—"

"Sure. You warned me—husbands can't testify against their wives. But neither can dead men."

Davis dropped his glass, his hand streaked for his lapel. The gun in the girl's hand bucked, spat yellow flame.

The detective's body staggered backward as the slug hit him. He struggled to free his gun from its holster, fielded two more slugs in the midsection. He laced his hands across his body in a futile effort to stem the flow of red that was already beginning to seep through his fingers. His knees buckled under him, he hit the floor face first, didn't move.

Lorna Kyler moved swiftly. She scooped up the glass Davis had been using, quickly dried it and replaced it on the bar. Then she ran to the hall door, pulled it open, started screaming.

Inspector Herlehy of Homicide stood at the picture window, stared down at the river below. Behind him, the men from the medical examiner's office were lifting Tim Davis' body onto a stretcher. They covered him with a blanket, strapped him on. One of the men approached the inspector, held out a form to be initialed.

Herlehy looked up at the knock on the door, scowled when he recognized the newcomer as Johnny Liddell. He initialed the form, gave it back to the man from the mortuary section.

"What are you doing here, Johnny?" he wanted to know.

"Representing Seaway Insurance, Inspector." Liddell nodded to the shrouded body on the stretcher. "My company has an interest in this character. When word came through that he got himself dead, they asked me to drop by."

"What kind of interest?"

Liddell shrugged. "A big client,

Abner Kyler, was supposedly killed in an automobile accident. This character had been doing a tail job on Abner. Supposed to have been keeping an eye on the old man and his secretary."

Herlehy suddenly looked as though he had a sour taste in his mouth. "The one who cut her throat." He nodded toward the dead man. "Davis tried to blackmail her and she couldn't face it. So we're sending him down to keep her company."

Liddell pursed his lips. "Where'd you get all this?"

"Mrs. Kyler. Davis came here after he left the secretary. He read about the secretary doing the Dutch in the early edition of the tabs, and he saw a chance to make some real money by selling the whole story to a scandal magazine. He wanted money from Mrs. Kyler to keep quiet about the whole mess." He shrugged. "She didn't want the scandal so she started to argue with him. When he started to push her around, she tried to call the police. In the struggle, she killed him."

Liddell considered it, nodded. "Sounds like it could happen."

"The night clerk saw the guy come in. He wasn't here much more than fifteen minutes when the shooting and screaming started." Herlehy pushed his hat to the back of his head. "Want to talk to Mrs. Kyler?"

Liddell nodded.

The Inspector led the way to the bedroom door, knocked. There was a muffled invitation to enter. He turned the knob, pushed the door open.

The room beyond was a large bedroom with a small balcony that overlooked the river. The blonde was sprawled out on the bed, a handkerchief pressed against her mouth. She sat up when she saw Liddell, then looked from him to the Inspector and back.

"Mr. Liddell! You heard?"

Liddell nodded. "What happened?"

"He tried to blackmail me. When I refused, he beat me. He threatened to kill me. I managed to get the gun—"

"You did real good, chickie, but it was a waste of time." He turned to Herlehy. "On my advice, Seaway will refuse to pay the claim on Abner Kyler." He looked back to the woman on the bed. "We're convinced it was no accident."

Lorna Kyler jumped to her feet. "What are you saying?"

"We're saying that Abner Kyler was killed because you wanted his money and you knew you wouldn't get a cent if he got his evidence against you into a divorce court. So you made a deal with Davis to kill him."

"You crazy?" the girl gasped. "I hired Davis to get evidence of his carrying on with the Ravell woman."

"You can stop lying, chickie. Davis was working for your husband. That's why Davis was able to get him."

Herlehy scowled. "You can prove some of this, I hope?"

Liddell turned to the Inspector. "That's why the secretary had to be killed. The canceled checks came back today, and when she saw the re-

tainer check made out to Tim Davis, she put two and two together."

"You can't prove that," the blonde snapped. "There is no such check."

"Don't count on it, chickie. Even if Tim Davis did destroy the check itself, the bank makes photostats of all checks paid out."

Herlehy watched the play of emotion on the girl's face. "Even so, why should she kill Davis?"

"It was getting too hot. Maybe he raised the ante. Maybe he wanted it all, huh, Lorna? With you thrown in for a bonus?" The blonde stared at him, started to back away. "You kept me here while he went to scare the redhead," Liddell continued. "That bit of spilling the liquor on the dress was pretty transparent. But I couldn't figure out why. When

I found the redhead dead, I knew."

The girl started to shake uncontrollably. "You're wrong," she muttered. "All wrong."

Liddell shook his head. "We haven't got all the pieces yet, chickie. But now that we know where to look, it won't take long."

The blonde continued to stare at him for a moment, then with a scream, she turned and ran for the balcony. Liddell looked away, heard the Inspector swear as he started after her. When Liddell looked up, the balcony was empty. The Inspector was leaning over the edge, looking down.

From somewhere below there was the sound of a soul in agony, then with breath-taking suddenness, there was quiet.