

SQUADROOM

RICHARD S. PRATHER (*Film Strip*) is one of the world's best-selling mystery novelists. Like his carefree private investigator, Shell Scott, Prather lives in southern California; unlike Scott, Prather is married, and refuses to make a habit of being shot at by assorted gunmen. The latest Shell Scott novel, *Dance with the Dead*, has brought Prather's total sales well over the 30,000,000-copy mark in the United States alone.



ROSS MACDONALD (*Midnight Blue*), another Californian, has written an even dozen novels about Lew Archer. His latest novel is *The Ferguson Affair*. Often compared to the late, great Raymond Chandler, Macdonald owes his enormous popularity to the depth, compassion, and insight of his writing. Macdonald's profession is very much a family affair: his wife is the mystery novelist Margaret Millar.

ANTHONY BOUCHER'S appraisal of fictional crime, as mystery editor of *The New York Times*, has made him the reigning expert in the genre. His clear and incisive treatment extends to the factual world of crime, too, as in this issue's in-depth study of the Sangret murder case, *On a Day Unknown*.



HELEN NIELSEN (*Confession*) is one of the very few feminine authors capable of turning out lean, un-sentimental crime fiction in the realistic tradition. Her appearance on the mystery scene was greeted with cheers, one critic calling her "the first major addition to the mystery field in the past decade." Miss Nielsen has since enhanced that reputation with a long list of fine books like her latest, *Sing Me a Murder*. The critic whose accolade launched Miss Nielsen's career, incidentally, was Anthony Boucher.

Hard Sell is one of the last John J. Malone stories by the late **CRAIG RICE**. Miss Rice was the author of such classic mystery novels as *Trial by Fury* and *Home Sweet Home-icide*. **FLETCHER FLORA** (*Assassin*) is the winner of the 1960 Macmillan Award for his new mystery novel, *Killing Cousins*. **RICHARD MATHESON** (*The Faces*), foremost exponent of the modern tale of terror, leads off the *Graveyard Shift* department. **REX LARDNER** (*Reasonable Fearsome*), a long-time *New Yorker* magazine staffer, is noted for his probing studies in print. This time, he contributes a detailed and fascinating *Special Report* on counterfeiting.

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PRATHER FILM STRIP

RICHARD S.
PRATHER

We'd come to the beach
to relax, the blonde and
I. So what was with this
character throwing guys
off cliffs?

FILM STRIP



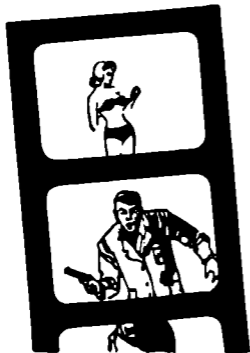
A SHELL SCOTT NOVELETTE

ROBBIE WAS WEARING A TWO-PIECE pink bikini in extremely brazen fashion, or at least without false modesty, and seldom had such astounding curves been so joyously uncensored.

The day was a sparkling Sunday in July, the place was a secluded half-moon beach on California's coast a few miles south of Laguna. It was my first day in a long time away from downtown Los Angeles and my office—*Sheldon Scott, Investigations*—but one day like this could make up for months of smog.

The sun was bright, the air clear, the sand under our bare feet voluptuously warm. The sea was, as always, bluer than I remembered it, and the combers boomed a few yards away, white jets of foam slashing the beach like fangs.

And the girl was Robbie.



Roberta Greta Ducharme. Twenty-four years old, but wiser than twenty-four, and in her blood and bone the best of Mexico, Sweden, and France. Tall enough, with red-burned chestnut hair, sweet lips, gray eyes like warm, solid smoke. And a body—indescribable. I live and work in Hollywood, I've seen a lot of them, but Robbie stood in the sun and left most of the rest in the shade. The measurements were there, splendidly there, but they were statistics that merely whispered: her body did the shouting.

Robbie, at the moment, was very much full of hell.

I was trying out a big Zoomar telescopic lens on my new Bell-and-Howell movie camera, holding on Robbie while she danced and pranced. She posed, flew around, wiggled a little. The word for it was: Sensational.

"Shell," Robbie called to me.

"Yeah?"

"Let me take a picture—I haven't any of you yet."

"Ah, what a tragic—"

"Really. You can give it to me when it's developed, so I'll have proof."

"Proof?"

"Uh-huh. If I tell my girl friends I went out with a devilish private detective six feet two inches tall and a couple hundred and—how many pounds?"

"Five or six. Wearing my trunks."

"With that fabulous tan and crazy white hair sticking up on your head and those white eyebrows—"

"Now, that's enough. I'm not sure you're going at this in the true spirit of—"

"—and all those muscles and all, they wouldn't believe me. But if I have a movie to show them . . ." She frowned, very prettily. "They may still not believe me."

I grabbed her, picked her up, and ran toward the water, but she squealed and wriggled so frantically, yelling, "My hair, my hair! You'll get my hair wet!" that I stopped before she got inundated, turned, and carried her up the beach again. She rested limp in my arms, let her head fall back, thick glossy hair brushing my thigh. She sighed, then said, "Fun, Shell. Very fun."

"True, Robbie. Very fun."

It was. I'd talked to Robbie several times before. She was a model, part-time actress, part-time cocktail waitress. I'd met her during a part-time-cocktail-waitress period and we'd had fun yacking, but this was our first date, first outing together. The beach had been the right choice for sure. We were completely alone here, sea on one side, half circle of cliffs on the other. The only ways in or out were along narrow paths down the cliffs, one at each end of the beach.

I put Robbie on her feet again and she winked at me, tossed her hair, and pranced away like a skittish colt. I got the camera focused on her, took a long shot, and then pushed the little lever that moved the adjustable lens, to bring her up close in the view finder, and *zoom*, right up

there! It was wonderful, and got even better. These were shots I would look at when I got old, to get me young again.

"Shell," Robbie called, gyrating around, "I never told you."

"Told me what?"

"Ever since I was a teenager, I've had a suppressed desire to be a strip-tease dancer."

"Aha, so that's what you're doing out there?" I lowered the camera and grinned at her.

I thought something moved against the skyline a couple of hundred yards away, up at the top of the cliffs. I glanced over there but nothing was in sight. A comber hit jagged rocks at the cliff's base and spurted thick feathers of spray high above them. Maybe that was what I'd seen.

Robbie laughed. "I'm just getting loosened up now. But really—I'm serious. Just once, just *once*, I'd love to really do it! It's crazy, I know—"

"No, it's not."

"—but I almost have to *fight* it sometimes."

"Robbie, dear, don't fight it. Don't you know suppression can warp your tender little brain all out of *whack*? You can get whacky, you can get . . . complexes and all that jazz."

"Some of those girls must have *fun* when they slither out on the stage"—she made a little slithering motion—"and *sway* and *wiggle* around"—she made some little swaying and wiggling-around motions—"and then . . . get all wound up . . . and let . . . *go*— Oh, what am I saying? I almost got carried away."

"Don't stop, don't stop. You were just going good there."

She laughed again. "I've seen them on the stage in the lights. The men just whoop and holler, you know it?"

"Yeah, I know it. In fact—"

"And they actually whistle when the girl glides around and then stops and . . . gets all wound up . . . and lets . . . go— Oh, there I go again."

"Drat it, you *didn't* go. Robbie, you can't just . . . are you going to leave everything so . . . all half-finished . . . and just dangling like—"

"I tell you what I'll do, Shell."

"Yeah?"

"I'll *do* it. Do a strip-tease, right here, I mean, just like on a stage. And you can make a movie of it— if you promise never to show it to anybody but me."

"I *promise!*"

"You won't think I'm awful—"

"What a ridiculous—"

"—or a brazen hussy, or bad or anything?"

"No, no—"

"I just feel so free . . ."

"Free . . ."

". . . so good . . ."

". . . good . . ."

She'd been prancing about, but now she stopped and stared at me, head slightly lowered, smiling, white teeth pressed together. "I'll really do it—unless you stop me."

Well, you know it: I sure as hell didn't stop her. Still smiling, she began to dance again. Slowly at first, then a little more wildly.

"Make the movie!" she said, laughing.

I shot a few feet of film as she spun and arched and whirled. I thought something moved again on the edge of that cliff, but just then Robbie stretched both hands behind her back, reaching for the bowknot of the bikini bra. And I forgot to look away. The movement made her breasts seem to swell, burst forward against the cloth as if they were going to thrust completely through it.

She pulled at the strings of the bra and it loosened, started to fall. But she brought one arm forward quickly, pressed her hand against the middle of the cloth, held it there while the outer edges fell, half-baring the white roundness of her breasts.

Well, it began feeling as if my blood were vulcanizing the lining of my veins, as if I were cooking from the inside out. I could actually feel the increased heat of my skin. Because there was something unique about this Robbie, a kind of wild witchcraft or mesmerism, an electrical atmosphere all around her, impalpable and invisible but there just the same.

It was like getting hit with an invisible sap, almost as if, when she stood twenty feet away and I looked at her, there was really no distance between us. As if she moved in some fourth dimension of her own—and that fourth dimension was sex. It wasn't anything conscious or purposeful; it was just there, all the time, and you couldn't ever be completely unaware of it even when she was sitting still. And she was not sitting

still, she was moving, swaying almost lasciviously now, the bra sliding, slipping.

And I guess I slipped, mentally, into some kind of different dimension myself. Because there were men on the brink of the cliff now, two of them clearly outlined against the sky. A tall man and a short one, the shorter man slumped, held almost erect by the other. Part of my mind noted those other movements, registered them all, but none of it penetrated more than a few cells deep into my brain, not at first.

Robbie laughed softly, delightedly, let her arm fall to her side, the pink brassiere dangling from her fingers. Sunlight silvered the tops of her full, bare breasts, shimmered on them as they swayed and trembled.

On the cliff, the men awkwardly moved a step or two forward, onto the very edge, seemed to float above the emptiness at their feet.

Robbie spread her legs and leaned back, away from me, shoulders rocking slowly, then faster, faster. The film mechanism stopped. She straightened again. I wound the camera quickly as she twirled the brassiere around her head, threw it to the sand. I put the camera to my eye again, let film click past the lens. She stood in one spot for seconds, posing. Body straight, head back, hands gliding slowly up her sides and past her face, brushing her thick, red-brown hair with the backs of her hands and letting it fall, tangled, against her shoulders.

The taller man gave the other a

shove. He went over the cliff's edge, fell, turning. Robbie's hands were fumbling at the side of her narrow bikini trunks. The falling man hit a projecting ledge of earth, skidded, went spinning over the side, arms and legs flailing crazily. There was another forty feet of space between him and the rocky beach below.

It was sudden, quick. I knew what was happening, but dimly, vaguely. It was occupying more of my mind. Not quite enough yet.

Robbie said something to me but I didn't understand her bubbling words. The bikini briefs were untied now, held up only by the light touch of her fingers, hands at the curve of her hips. She leaned forward slightly, breasts swaying, slid the bikini briefs down. It seemed to me that she moved very slowly—and that the tumbling man fell very slowly, too. The pink cloth slid downward, her hands brushing the white flare of her hips. Then I heard the thud.

He hit the beach almost two hundred yards away, but I heard the dull, deadly sound clearly. Before, it had been like a silent movie, shadow without substance; but that ugly sound suddenly made it real. I jerked my head. The other man was scrambling down the path.

From the corner of my eye I saw Robbie bend forward, raise one leg, reach and grab something pink before she straightened up. Only now the impressions were reversed. Robbie was on the periphery, and in the center of my consciousness was—murder.

It sent a chill over my skin. I glanced at Robbie. One vivid glimpse of her standing a few feet away in sun-limned nakedness, splash of pinkness in one hand, standing straight, back slightly arched. Just a glimpse of her, half a second—and then I was running. That taller man was still scrambling down the path. He'd probably thrown the other man over the cliff alive but unconscious, and was going down to make sure he was dead.

When I was halfway to the body, the man saw me. He froze on the steeply slanting path, jerked his head toward me. Then he turned, started back up in a hurry, feet sliding. There wasn't a chance I could catch him. He'd be gone in seconds—and I didn't have any idea who he was, what he looked like.

The camera was still in my hand; I'd forgotten it, been unaware of it while running. I slid to a stop, raised the camera, and centered it on the man, shoved the Zoomar lever forward as I started the film unwinding. His body grew larger in the view finder. I shouted as loudly as I could, and he turned. He stared—and I had him.

Then I lowered the camera, ran forward again. Twenty yards away now lay the sprawled body. As my eyes fell on it, there was a sudden sharp sound. A spurt of sand leaped close on my left. That sound I knew well—a gunshot.

I dug one foot into the sand, skidded, slowed, and then jumped forward, jerking my head up. He was

below the top of the cliff, facing me, right arm extended. The gun cracked again, but the bullet hit yards from me. All I could think of for a moment was that if I got a film of him shooting at me his goose would be cooked to a crisp. It didn't occur to me that I might get a film of the ape killing me; that the .38 Colt Special I usually carry was now two hundred yards down the beach; that I was standing out here in bright sunlight shooting a camera at a guy who was shooting a real gun at me. I just swung the camera up, held it on him for two or three seconds, getting a stupendous shot—through the telescopic lens I could even see the faint flash of fire from the gun's muzzle. It was an astounding, a remarkable shot, a real murderer, real bullets. . . .

That was the one that filtered. That brought me to my few senses. Real . . . bullets?

I let out a great blast of sound and jumped six feet through the air. That gun cracked again. I felt the impact, the sudden shock. It jarred me, turned me. The camera flew from my hands. I slammed down on one knee. I rolled, got to my feet again, squatting low, looked up. The man was scrambling upward again and as I watched he went over the cliff's edge and out of sight.

Slowly I straightened up, heart pounding. I looked down over my bare skin, felt over my back and swim trunks. No blood. No holes. Then I saw the Bell-and-Howell on the sand. He hadn't hit me; he'd hit

the camera. It was twisted, case sprung open, and film half out of the sprockets, sunlight glaring on it all.

I clambered up the face of the cliff, but he was long gone. A haze of dust hung over the dirt road leading to Coast Boulevard a quarter of a mile away. From the cliff's edge I looked down the beach. The sun was getting low, and the hellish glare that at certain hours bounces from the sea almost blinded me. I couldn't see Robbie unless I squinted and looked carefully—which explained why the guy hadn't seen us down there.

On the beach again, I picked up the camera, forced the gate closed over the ruined film, walked to the body on the beach. The man was quite dead. But he was still warm, limp, not dead long. Almost surely he'd been alive when pushed over the cliff's edge. It would probably have passed as an accidental death, instead of the murder it was. He was a short man, maybe a hundred and fifty pounds, bald, his skull caved in above his left eye. His face was deeply pimpled where it had hit the sand.

I left him, walked back down the beach.

Robbie was in her bikini again, still a gorgeous sight, but somehow not quite the same now. The difference between my one brief but marvelously vivid glimpse of Robbie unadorned, unashamed, compared to Robbie adorned—even in a brief pink bikini—was the difference between prime ribs and hamburger, be-

tween wine and sour grapes. And in me started growing a cold, concentrated, surging desire to get my hands on that slob who'd just gotten away and slowly pull off his head.

As I stopped near her, Robbie said, with a chill as of early winter in her voice: "You can take me home now, Scott."

Scott. Not Shell any more. That probably meant she wanted to hit me over the skull with something large and heavy. What was the matter with her? Didn't she realize I'd had no choice?

I said: "Simmer down. Didn't you hear those shots?"

"Shots? Is that what they were? I heard some noises." She tossed her head. "All I know is, there I was all . . . well . . . and off you went. Actually *running*. Running *away*."

Nobody will deny that women have a different approach to logic than do men. They sort of sneak up on it from behind, like an Indian skulking through the grass. But this was too much.

"Robbie, my dear little imbecile," I said with some heat, "I have just been eyeballing a most unpleasant corpse, not to mention the fact that I just got shot at several dozen times—three or four times, anyway—and the stupendous damned movie I took of the killer is all shot to hell—get it through your head a guy has just been murdered."

"I'll murder you."

"I'm serious!"

"I'm not?"

"Robbie. You really don't under-

stand!" I took a deep breath. "Dear Robbie, I am aware of what's eating you. I realize it is not considered cricket in your dizzy set—in which at the moment I include all women—for a man to race wildly over the sand immediately after—"

"What do I care? I really couldn't care less. I really couldn't. Take me home."

I grabbed her shoulders, looked into her face. "I have a surprise for you. There is a dead guy lying down the beach a ways. His head is all crashed in, and most unbeautiful. That's why I went tripping away, dear heart. I saw a tall cat fling him off the cliff."

Apparently she hadn't seen anything except me whooping along the tidemarks, running like a coward. Coward—little did she know.

"Of course," she said. "There's a massacre. Custer is down there—"

I grabbed her hand and yanked her after me. In arguments with women there comes a time when words are useless and positive action is indicated. I hauled her after me, her feet dragging and kicking, and she rattled a great deal of popcorn-popping Spanish at me, a language she used when at a temperature which would split clinical thermometers. She didn't even see the dead man until we were almost on top of him.

Then I stopped, turned her around, and pointed. "There, lame-brain. I was telling you the complete truth. I *did* see a guy fling him off—"

I won that argument. She fainted.

Night fell softly as we drove back toward Los Angeles. The police had been notified, the body trundled away, and Robbie and I had that behind us now, the evening ahead.

She had forgiven me. Not all at once, but unreservedly at last. Now she was snuggled close to me on the seat, hanging onto my arm. The top was down on my Cadillac, and a spiced breeze washed around us.

We had been discussing the afternoon, and now she asked me a question she hadn't asked before. "Shell, the man who pushed the other one off the cliff. What did he look like?"

"Why, he was . . . I don't know. I was so busy trying to get the film of him, and then dodging bullets, I never did really get a look at him." I considered the sad fact. "I haven't the faintest idea what he looks like. And I don't have the film now, either."

"How will they catch him?"

"Part of it could depend on how soon they identify the body. There were no papers on him, no clue yet to who he was. Once they figure out who had a motive to kill him, the field might narrow down. Right now it's wide open."

"Maybe he'll even get away with it."

I snarled silently, glaring ahead. "Not if I . . . have anything . . . to say about it." I was remembering what he had interrupted back there on the beach. Of all times for an ape to start sailing bodies around. And

that slug in my camera had not only ruined the shots of him, but of Robbie. "I will . . . tear him . . . limb from limb," I growled. "I will beat one half of him to death . . . with the other half of him."

She purred softly, snuggled closer, and hugged my arm.

I discovered I was halfway into the left lane, driving along with a sappy smile on my face. I pulled over where I belonged. Once again I had been remembering Robbie standing on the beach, blue sea behind her—just before that other body went flying through the air. I'd gotten *one* look, but only one, and oh, so brief, of her standing there, pink pants in her hand. Maybe in the space of a few seconds then I had been subjected to so many sensational sensations and brain-twisting sights that it had blown a neuron fuse in my nervous system—but something new had indeed been added.

Robbie was—and for that one super-stimulating half-second there on the sun-warmed beach had been—so absolutely stunning that now it was as though a small perfect replica of her had been heated to a white-hot sizzle and used to brand my brain. It stayed up there, about the fourth convolution over, glowing and letting off pretty sparks. It was a new experience in many ways. I could merely close my eyes and see us up there, sparking. Or, rather, see *her* up there. I shook my head, trying to organize my striking thoughts. But they remained disorganized.

Robbie didn't speak again until we were on North Rossmore in Hollywood, almost to the Spartan Apartment Hotel, where I live. And where we were going. Then she said: "I was just thinking about that man, Shell. You don't know what *he* looks like. But I wonder if he got a good look at *you*?"

I hadn't carefully considered that angle. I pulled over to the curb, parked across the street from the Spartan. "That's a good question," I said.

I took the keys from the ignition, opened the car door, and stepped into the dimly-lighted street. "A disturbing question, Robbie. Unfortunately, I don't have the answer."

I started around to open the door on her side—and *blam-blam*, two quick shots, one after the other. The first one got me. It spun me to my left, banged me against the car, knocked me off balance. I fell awkwardly, turning, thudded down on my right shoulder, and rolled onto my back.

I came up again fast, yanking the .38 from under my coat, bent forward in a crouch. I didn't even know where the shots had come from. But then I heard the slap of fast-pounding feet, a short silence, then the roar of a car's engine, the scrape of tires sliding on asphalt.

I jumped toward the Cad, then remembered I'd had the keys in my hand. I'd dropped them, they were somewhere here in the street. I found them, but by then the guy was at least a mile away.

I swore softly, then felt over my chest and arm, near where that slug had smacked me. I didn't know how badly I'd been hit; you seldom do for a while. But then I found the spot. The bullet had passed between my holstered gun and side, gouging out a cubic inch or two of skin and flesh. Nothing serious. My holster had taken most of the blow; that had really been what spun me around. My gun seemed all right, but the holster was ruined. Fine; that was better than me being ruined.

Robbie's head appeared in the window on my side.

"She-ell," she said shakily.

"It's okay, honey. Everything's all right. Except that sonofa—he got away." I paused, hauled in a couple of deep breaths. "Incidentally, Robbie. That question you just asked me. Now I can answer it."

"What . . . what'll we do?"

"We'll go up to my apartment, and have a tall, cool, potent drink."

We did. I unlocked the door of my apartment, pointed out the tanks of tropical fish for Robbie, ignored Amelia—Robbie would inevitably lamp that yard-square nude painting I found in a pawnshop, and cherish—and showed her where the booze and ice were in the kitchenette.

"Fix us something exciting," I said, then went into the bathroom, peeled off my coat and shirt.

The slug had chewed me up a bit, and the wound was beginning to feel unpleasant, but it wasn't bad. Just bloody. There was quite a lot of blood.

I dunked a washrag in warm water, and right then Robbie said from behind me: "Try this."

I turned around. She had two tall glasses in her hands. Then her eyes dropped to the side of my chest and her mouth stretched wide as if she were going to scream, though no sound came out.

Finally she said: "You're bleeding! Shell, you're bleeding!"

"Don't get excited. It's nothing to—"

"But you're shot! You're in pain!"

"It's . . . only a little shooting pain."

"I'll call an ambulance."

"Robbie, dammit. I've got healed scars on me more dangerous than this. Really, relax." Her face was pale and she looked weak. I said, "Robbie, we'll get it all fixed. But it isn't bad—it's just all the blood." I grinned. "My blood, you see, is so red—"

"Are you really all right?"

"Yes. I'm just so red-blooded—"

"Come in and sit down."

She wouldn't let me get the conversation headed in the right direction at all. I mopped some of the blood off, clamped a towel under my arm, and went into the front room with her. She insisted we call a doctor—which I had fully intended to do anyway—so after phoning the police I called the room two doors from my own, where Dr. Paul Anson lives. Paul is a good M.D., with a very sharp eye for the ladies, and is also a very good friend of mine. He said he'd be over in a minute.

When he knocked I yelled for him to come on in and he stepped inside, pushed the door shut with his medical bag. Then he walked toward the chocolate-brown divan on which Robbie and I were sitting, and he did not see me at all. His eyes landed on Robbie and opened wide, then went back to normal, except that they had a sly little squint to them, which squint I had seen before.

Very tall, ruggedly good-looking, fired with purpose, he strode straight across the room to Robbie and said in his best bedside manner, "Well, what seems to be wrong with us, my dear?"

"I," I said, "am what's wrong with us."

He looked at me and grinned. "Ah, well. What is it this time? Shot again, hit on the head, busted eardrum—"

"Your tender solicitude gags me, Doctor. Dedicated Paul Anson, swooning on the altar of humanity. 'I swear on the holy scalpel of Hopocraxopy—'"

"Hippocrates?"

"You know what I mean. I'm shot. I'm bleeding to death. I feel faint, I'm getting dippy!"

"You sure are. Let's take a look." He examined the sliced area of my chest and side, going "Hmm," and "Ahh," and then said: "I think a large Band-Aid will do it. But I'll give you an expensive shot."

He expertly cleaned and bandaged what he referred to as my mortal wound, stuck a needle into me, keeping up a running fire of sophisti-

cated chatter and worldly commentary—looking at Robbie all the time; he didn't say another word to me—then had a drink with us. Just before he left—I had to tell him to get the hell out, of course—he tugged his eyes from Robbie, leaned close to my ear, and said: "You rotter, you despoiler—wait till you get my bill."

"I know. Two appendectomies, a tonsillitis—"

"Tonsillectomy, you ignorant—"

"—removal of spleen and gizzard, go."

He went. With one last leer at Robbie.

As the door closed behind him she said: "He's nice, isn't he?"

"Is he? I hadn't noticed—"

"But he's so witty, and knows so much about the world and all—"

"Nuts, he makes half of it up. Sheer fabrication. It just sounds good in that oily voice of his. Hah, witty, knows so much—"

"Why, Shell, you actually sound jealous."

"Jealous? Me? Why, I never heard such a—"

She laughed. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, now that he's gone, I'm all right. What do you mean, witty? He didn't say anything even intelligent—"

"Shell, lean over here and rest a little."

She indicated, with a gentle pat of her hand, where I was to lean. I stopped arguing. I leaned. Resting dandily, I said: "Robbie, I have a splendid idea. You must stay here

while I recuperate. It may take days, of course, but—"

"The doctor's right down the hall. What could I do?"

"Well, you could . . . What good is a doctor? You can be my nurse, dear. And nurse me back to health."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"Why, you could undress my wounds—*dress* them, I mean, and cool my fevered brow, fever my—"

"You be quiet. Now I'm *sure* you're all right. And I have to go."

"Go?" I said. "Go?"

"Yes. I can't stay here."

"Who says?"

"I says. Really. Oh, Shell, sit down. Don't stand out there waving your arms. You'll spring open and bleed to death."

"It wouldn't happen. Even if it did, I have blood to spare, red blood, wild blood, it sings in my veins and yodels in my arteries, savage blood—listen to the drums! Don't you hear it? Can't you *feel* it? I—"

"Shell, stop waving your arms around. And sit down here and rest." She patted again. "Or don't you want to rest?"

"It isn't exactly what I had in mind. Listen, you don't know all there is to know about my blood yet—"

"I know more than I realized was possible. And if you want the truth, I believe you. But I really do have to go."

"Go?" I said. "Go?"

"Yes. In about . . . five minutes. But I'll go right now if you don't sit down and behave yourself."

"Well, okay. I'll sit down."

She meant what she'd said. After five minutes of resting she got up and said, "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Yep. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow—"

"I'll call a cab."

"The devil you say. I'll drive you home."

"No, I wouldn't think of it."

"I will drive you home."

I won that argument, too. The first one since she'd fainted.

Later, alone and relaxing in bed before going to sleep, I thought about what had happened today. The police didn't yet know who the dead man was, much less the identity of his killer; the killer, therefore, might be roaming around free for days or even weeks. He, on the other hand, obviously knew who I was, realized I'd made a movie of him which could be his ticket to the gas chamber, and probably believed I knew what he looked like. Clearly he did *not* know his last shot at me had ruined the films.

So he would be roaming around trying to get those films—and kill me.

Maybe I ought to take a full-page ad in the local papers, I thought, addressed to the killer: "You shot a hole in my camera before you shot a hole in me. The films are kaput. Stop worrying!" And sign it Shell Scott. But he probably wouldn't believe me. The fool would probably just go on trying to murder me.

Then another link formed in my

chain of thought. Maybe I should take that ad, after all, and phrase it differently. Something like: "Sensational films of murderer! Shell Scott shoots killer, killer shoots Shell Scott! Stupendous film sequence, blazing guns, murderer fleeing! Have You Seen This Man? See colossal preview this afternoon at the Colossal Theater. . . ."

I grinned in the darkness. It might work. Still thinking about it, I fell asleep.

3.

It was 10:00 A.M. Tuesday morning. I was driving down Hollywood Boulevard toward the Chasen Theater, off Hollywood on Van Ness Avenue. The thing was set. I knew Jim Chasen, owner of the theater, which was why I'd chosen his movie house. With his cooperation I had run my advertisements in several newspapers yesterday and today. As long as the killer believed his chops were really going to be on the big screen, he would almost certainly try to grab the films. Since we had no way of recognizing the man among the other customers, and therefore couldn't keep him from getting inside with the crowd, we'd have to wait until he made his move. Jim figured, and so did I, that the action would take place in the projection room, where the killer would naturally expect the films to be.

The Chasen wouldn't open for business until 1:30 P.M., the bill to start at two, but I wanted to be

staked out inside well before then. The "Fleeing Murderer . . . Guns Blazing!" added attraction was scheduled for 3:45 P.M., at the break between two halves of a double feature. We figured our man would make his move sometime during the first half of the twin bill. It all seemed logical.

Robbie, however, had not been logical. I hadn't told her of my plan, but she'd seen the ad and called me, raising hell. If I was going to the theater, she wanted to go along; I'd do something crazy and get killed if she didn't keep an eye on me; a lot of other people would be there, one more wouldn't hurt. I told her no. We argued. I told her no. Firmly. And that settled that.

I parked a block from the Chasen, walked to the alley entrance behind it. Jim Chasen let me in.

"All quiet?" I said.

"Yeah. Glad you're here, though. I'll be in the projection booth, you know."

"So will I. He'll have to shoot me before he can shoot you, Jim." I grinned. "He may not even show up. If he does, there probably won't be any trouble."

He laughed sourly. "You make it sound like fun. Want some coffee?"

"Sounds good."

We walked through the empty theater. Soft music was playing; as we went into the projection booth I commented on it and Jim said: "I always pipe the records in while I'm setting up. Sort of creepy otherwise. Good for the customers, too, when

they come in. Gets them in a pleasant mood while they wait for the show."

He poured hot black coffee. I raised the steaming brew toward my mouth, then froze, cup halfway to my lips. "Jim," I said, "I'm an idiot."

"Huh? What's the matter?"

"We've been figuring the guy would walk in unobserved with the other customers. We'd have to let him come in, because we don't know what he looks like. But *he* doesn't know that. He undoubtedly thinks we've got him made, even have a moving picture of him—that's the whole idea of this setup. We've been looking at this from *our* point of view, instead of his."

"Sure, I . . . Oh."

"Yeah. If he thinks we know his face, he's not likely to show it on the way in." I swore. "More likely he'd try to sneak in here *before* the rest of the customers. Maybe . . . about now."

Jim tried not to show that he was worried. He just spilled his coffee. "You don't think—"

"Did you look the place over yet? Johns, closets, backstage?"

"No." He swallowed. "I thought . . . you said . . ."

"Yeah. I know what I said." I stood up. "Maybe it'll work out that way, too. But I'll take a look around, anyway." I paused. "Just in case . . . maybe you'd better wait out front until I give you the all-clear. If he should be here—"

"You're right!" He didn't let me

finish. "If something happens—ah—I can call a cop. That seems like a good idea, anyway. Call several cops."

"Yeah. They won't be overjoyed by my little plan, but that seems the least of our worries at the moment."

He said there were two rest rooms off the lobby, another small one, for employees, down at the left-front corner of the theater, and told me where closets and a storeroom were. We left the projection booth and went into the empty lobby. As I took my Colt from its new clamshell holster, Jim scooted with unseemly haste out through the lobby doors. I checked both rest rooms. They were empty. I walked back past the projection booth, down the carpeted aisle. When I was a few feet from the rear entrance through which Jim had admitted me earlier, I heard the door rattle softly. The knob moved slightly; it couldn't be turned from the outside, but could be opened from inside.

I stepped quickly to the door, held my gun ready, turned the knob, and yanked. As the door flew open I stepped forward, brought up my gun, and jabbed it into a soft white breast. I knew it was soft; I knew it was white; it was Robbie's.

For a moment my nerves sputtered, and I sputtered, and then I grabbed Robbie's arm and yanked her inside, pushed the door shut. "You little fool," I said. "What do you think—"

"Don't be angry—"

"Don't be *angry*? Don't be—"

"I just wanted to be here. I was in at the start, and I want to be in at the finish."

"It'll be your finish, if you don't—"

"Anyway, I told you I was coming."

"And I told you you weren't."

"Poof."

I groaned, turned around, and slapped a hand on my head. Then I got a grip on myself. "Robbie, please listen. The guy may be here right now. Or he may show up any second."

"But you said—"

"I know what the hell I said." I paused, thinking. "Did anybody see you come down the alley? Or come inside?"

"No. Nobody was out there. Only a fellow sweeping."

"Sweeping? Sweeping the *alley*?"

"No, silly. Just in back of his shop. I suppose it was his shop. They sell things made out of driftwood—"

"Maybe it was his shop. I'll brace that guy and make sure before you go back out there. You'd better wait in the projection booth . . . No. That's the place he'll head for. Just stand still a minute."

I eased the door open, looked up and down the alley. Nothing. Nobody was in sight. Probably Robbie was right, just a guy sweeping out his shop. But I couldn't be sure—and if he'd seen her come in . . .

I turned to Robbie. "Of all the—"

"Don't swear at me."

"Well, if this isn't a—"

"I thought you'd be glad."

"You what?"

"I thought you'd be glad. That I wanted to be with you, in the heat of battle, in the thick of—"

"Never mind. Boy, here we stand yakking like a couple of psychos while that guy may be drawing a bead on my fat head, squeezing—look, you stand right here while I look around . . . no, I can't leave you alone. Come with me. No—"

"Make up your mind."

"I will make up my mind to sock you if you don't shut up. Come along while I check this joint. But stay behind me. I'm thick enough to stop at least a couple of bullets. And I probably will now. Oh, brother, one of these days—"

"I thought you'd be glad."

I quit. "Come on," I said.

We gave the backstage area a good going over. It was a little spooky back there, with the ropes and electrical cables, speakers and back side of the big screen, and the gloomy corners. But the area was empty of people. I figured I'd checked everything except the employees' john that Jim had mentioned. It was reached through a short hallway behind curtains at stage left, under a softly glowing "Exit" sign. I went down the little hallway, Robbie silent behind me, reached the door of the small rest room.

I was thinking that after I had checked this spot, and looked around in the alley for the egg who'd been sweeping, I could send Robbie on

her way. I was thinking that the guy I was after might be clear across the Mexican border by now. I was thinking once in a while of Robbie, and the fact that although she'd complicated things a bit, it was pleasant in a way that she'd wanted to be with me, and even thinking—briefly—of other facets of Robbie.

I was thinking of entirely too many things.

4.

I pushed open the door and didn't see anybody, and stuck my head inside for a better look, and from behind the door on my left he jammed the gun so hard against my temple that it knocked my head six inches sideways.

The .38 was in my right hand. I started to slap it forward. Six inches from my ear the *click-click* of the hammer going back on a revolver. And two words: "Go ahead."

I heard the soft intake of breath outside, a few feet away. Robbie. For a moment she was all I could think of. I wondered if the guy had heard her soft, sudden breath. I hadn't even seen the man yet.

There were faint whispering movements behind me. Robbie. Moving, no telling where. I started talking, not worrying about what I said, just stringing words together to cover the sounds Robbie was making.

"You're stuck, friend. You can't get out of here—the place is lousy with law. You don't think I'd come here alone, do you?" My head was

throbbing; he'd really banged me with the gun.

He spoke again, his voice flat. "I figured it for a setup. But I also figured you'd expect me today, pal. That's why I came in last night. I'll get out, Scott."

"You know my name, hub?"

"Sure. And you know me. Drop the heater."

I dropped it, slowly turned my head. As I did, he stepped back, kept the gun in his hand out of my reach. But it looked me in the eye.

I did know the guy. Only by reputation, mugg shots. And I'd seen him a time or two in bars where heavy men hang out. His name was Billings, or something like that, but he was called Spade because another gambler had caught him with an extra ace—the ace of spades—in a poker game and shot him. Unfortunately it hadn't killed him. He was a safecracker, a professional thief.

He was about my height, thin, with a dark angular face and a nose sharp enough to slice cheese. His eyes were red-rimmed, lips drooping. I said, "You were right. It is a setup. And you walked into it."

"I'll walk out, too. Pal, we're going to get them films—only I'm not going to try getting away with them. I'll ruin them right here, see? When they're gone, there's nothing left but your word—and I can beat that if it ever comes to court. That's if I'm stopped. But I figure to make it out, pal."

"Not if I can help it."

He grinned unpleasantly. "You

won't be able to help it. And if there's no films, and no Scott, nobody's going to tag me with any murder rap. Not in a hundred years."

He didn't know how right he was. Even I hadn't known until now that it was Spade we wanted. He'd actually be in the clear—if he got out. I said: "There's just one thing wrong, Spade. You got in all right. But the only way you'll get out now is on a stretcher."

"You're just as dumb as all the cops I ever met. I told you I figured this for a trap. So I don't plan to be seen going out." He stepped back against the wall. "Take a look, pal."

I moved forward a little as he gestured with his gun. "Maybe I'm not so dumb, Scott."

Maybe he wasn't. I started to get it when I saw the hole. In the wall of the rest room was a jagged hole about two feet in diameter. The wall of this rest room was also the outer wall of the Chasen Theater. But I didn't know what was on the other side of the wall.

Spade told me, bragging a little. "Next door's a shoe store, Scott. I had a friend get me the architect's plans of this dump, plus the joints on both sides. The shoe store was perfect." He gestured at the hole. "Through there's a storeroom, back end of the shoe store. The old duck that runs it's in there now, tied up and gagged." He grinned. "Took me most of the night to get through. Just about like the Western-Federal job."

That rang a bell. Six months or so

back the Western-Federal Savings and Loan had been burglarized. The thieves had broken through the wall between it and the adjoining clothing store, blown the safe, and left before dawn with \$80,000. Leaving, they'd been spotted by a police car and chased, but they'd gotten away after several shots had been fired. A police officer in the car had been hit, and died the next day.

This guy just might make it, I thought. Through the hole, out the shoe store, and home free.

"Okay, Scott, let's get the films. In case anything goes wrong, you get a pill in the head." He paused. "And don't try to get close to me. I've been awake all night. I'm tired. I'm sleepy and damned hungry. What I mean, I'm on edge."

I didn't say anything. We went out, down the short hallway into the empty theater. If I told Spade there weren't any films, he wouldn't believe me; and no matter what I said, he'd check for himself after coming this far. We started up the aisle. The music still throbbed around us; it was an incongruous note now. I felt a little as if this were a funeral march, but the record was "When the Saints Come Marching In"! Which isn't exactly a funeral march these days.

I said, "Why'd you kill the guy, Spade?"

"Personal thing. He was the only guy knew I shot that cop after the Western-Federal job. He was cracking up, first the booze, then H. Sooner or later the cops would sweat

him, keep him off the dope—and my tail would be in the sling. Just one of those things that had to be done. Like this.”

We were twenty or thirty feet up the aisle when a weird sense of unreality started creeping over me. I thought I had heard a squeal—one of those high-pitched feminine squeals you sometimes hear . . .

I shook it off, took another step. Couldn't be. Just something wrong with my ears. Then I heard it again. Either my ears were getting very musical, or . . . I knew. All of a horrible sudden, I knew.

Before I stopped, before I turned my head and looked, before the sight actually walloped me in the eyes, I knew what was happening. As I stopped stock still and started craning my head around, and Spade mumbled something I didn't catch, I heard it again: “*Yee-yi!*” it sounded like. High and full and fruity.

“No . . .” I said to myself, aloud, my voice hollow. “No . . . It can't be . . .”

It was.

Robbie. There she was, on the stage, gliding about, wiggling, gyrating. She wore a pink brassière and pink pants and was twirling her skirt around her head. “*Eee-yi-oo!*” she went.

Spade shook all over, yanked his head around, and gawked at me, his face twitching. “What in the—” he said.

My mind was racing—every which way. He might decide just to shoot me. He might decide to shoot Rob-

bie. He might decide anything. He backed over against the seats at the edge of the aisle, moved up a couple of feet to where he could watch me and the stage at the same time.

“What in the—” he said again.

I didn't say anything. My mind refused to function. I opened my mouth, in there trying, but nothing came out.

On the stage: “*Eeee-ooo-eee!*”

The skirt had gone flying through the air, and her brassière was sliding off. While she swayed and gyrated and snapped her head, brush of auburn hair flying wickedly.

When the Saints . . . come marching in . . . POM—POM!

When the Saints—POM—Come marching—POM—in . . . POM—POM!

Oh, she was glorious, stupendous, unbelievable. Only I couldn't enjoy a bit of it. Not a glide. Not a POM! I broke out in a cold sweat, then hot flashes, then got gooey all over. My brain seemed to unravel, crumble, get soupy.

I couldn't think straight. What in the hell did she think she was doing up there? Why here? Why now? Why?

Spade's head snapped back and forth, from me to the stage, his jaw sagging about half an inch. He was bewildered—even more bewildered than I. And a small surge of hope fluttered in me. His snaps were getting less snappy. He was looking more at the stage, just rolling his eyeballs back toward me.

And slowly hope turned to cer-

tainty. My confusion disappeared, my thoughts steadied, focused. In a moment of peculiar clarity it seemed that this had a kind of inevitability about it, and all I had to do now was let it happen, merely watch history unroll while I played my small part in it.

5.

Because history, I suddenly realized, was now repeating itself. This was essentially the same scene with which all the trouble had started. Same girl, Robbie; same dance; same guy, me; same lousy intruder, Spade. Except that it then had been on the beach and was now in a theater, all of the original elements were again present—only, like a big flea with small cats on it, the positions were reversed.

Then it had been Spade who ruined everything for me—and maybe for Robbie. Now, with Robbie's marvelous help, I was going to ruin everything for Spade. It seemed a thing of beauty, almost poetic: *Justice!*

I almost smiled as Spade's eyes wobbled toward me and then snapped back toward the stage. In a kind of starchy tone, stiff and yet gummy, he said: "Do you see what I see?"

"What are you talking about? I don't see anything."

It was a hot flash of inspiration. Logic would tell him this couldn't be happening. If I agreed with logic, he might get completely unstrung.

"But—that music," he said.

"What music?"

He twitched. "Don't you hear the music? Don't you hear the music?"

"What music?"

"Something is cuckoo."

"Spade," I said, "you are getting all pale, Spade."

On the stage, plenty of movement.

Just high-heeled shoes and pink pants now. And Robbie's hands were at the top of the pink, diddling and dawdling as she had diddled and dawdled that grand afternoon at the beach. I remembered how that sight had transfixed me, riveted my entire attention even while murder had flickered in the corner of my eye. I took a deep breath, squeezed the fingers of my right hand together.

"She's *there!*" Spade cried. "Hear the music?"

"Spade, you're getting awfully pale."

I guess at this point he didn't care if he turned purple. Spade hadn't forgotten me completely, but I was growing less important by the minute. It was inevitable. Robbie's fourth dimension had practically zoomed into the fifth, and now she was approaching the most climactic climax this stage—maybe any stage—had ever experienced.

Down slipped the pink, then it was a pink blur in her hand, and a moment later flying through the air. Spade's jaw sagged two more inches.

Robbie gyrated, wound up. The music was screeching to a nerve-shattering peak of wildness. Any second it was going to happen. It was, I knew, going to be memorable,

marvelous. Something had happened to Robbie up there. She knew she had an audience, she was on stage, doing the thing she'd always wanted to do, and it was as though slow lightning flowed through her. She was getting rid of those repressions and suppressed desires all at once, flinging them every which way, and she had in these moments risen to peaks of magnificence even she might never reach again.

And, as I moved toward Spade, a kind of hot sadness wallowed all over me. I'd missed her three masterpieces on the beach, and now I was going to miss the grandest one of all. But it was sure doing the trick. I pulled my eyes from Robbie and looked at Spade, stepped toward him. Spade didn't know I was there. He didn't know he was there. All he knew was that *Robbie* was there.

He was bent slightly forward, stretched taut like a bowstring and sort of tilted toward the stage, his eyes stretched wide and protruding just a little. His mouth flopped open completely and his gun wavered a full six inches. I planted my feet solidly, hauled back my right arm, wound my fingers into a fist like a job of cement, and started to launch the blow.

I must have started to launch at the same split second as Robbie started to launch. The music had risen to its crashing crescendo as if the musicians were all busting their lungs. My fist whistled through the air, past my ear, on toward Spade's chops. In that last grand, climactic

moment he was transfixed in a kind of rapture. Timed to perfection, the music, Robbie's masterpiece, my fist, and Spade's transfixed expression all blended into a moment of explosive completeness—*POW!*

Spade had completely, entirely, absolutely forgotten about me. His concentration had been totally on Robbie's masterpiece, it was his entire area of being, his all, and that sudden *POW!* must have been the most shocking thing that had ever, ever happened to him. He must have thought the impossible had happened and it had catapulted through space and smacked him. Maybe she was there, maybe she wasn't there, but *something* had sure walloped him a good one.

He didn't go out immediately, there was a delayed reaction of perhaps two or three seconds, as if he were by sheer force of will and Gargantuan desire hanging on in defiance of man and nature. He twirled around, slammed back against the edge of a seat, and there was for a moment on his chops the most stunned and perplexed expression imaginable, a kind of stupefied disbelief blending with petrified contentment.

Then his eyes suddenly looked artificial, his face went blank, and he flopped to the floor.

As he fell, his gun went off. Either he'd convulsively squeezed the trigger, or the impact had fired the gun, but it made a great crash.

I bent over and grabbed the revolver, straightened up as a door

slammed. Feet pounded, getting closer. On the stage Robbie looked toward the entrance of the theater and let out a squeal, hopped four inches up in the air, spun around, and grabbed her clothes, ran off stage. I got a glimpse. Again.

That's all. Just a glimpse. It seemed as if that was all I ever got. Bodies falling, squinty-eyed doctors, safecrackers interrupting everything, doors slamming. I was beginning to get pretty sour about it.

A uniformed policeman ran up. I briefed him quickly, wound it up: "This is the character who did it," and started backstage. Then I stopped, turned to the officer, and said: "Incidentally, when he comes to, don't believe everything he tells you. Some of it may sound strange. We—I hit him pretty hard."

He bent down by Spade. I trotted backstage. Robbie was practically dressed, just zipping up her skirt. As she slipped on her blouse I told her she was marvelous, she'd saved the day, but what in hell had ever possessed her to do it?

"First, I just got away," she said rapidly, a throb of excitement in her voice, "went backstage and hid there. I was scared, that was all I could think of. But then I started worrying about you—then I heard you both talking. I looked, saw you both walking up the aisle, and he was pointing a gun at you. I almost died!"

She paused, eyes wide. "Yes," I said, really interested now. "Go on, go on."

"I knew I had to do something, but I thought: What can I do? What can I do? I'm only a woman, only a woman. . . . And suddenly it came to me. I couldn't help myself. Something *moved* me."

"It sure moved you in the right directions," I said.

"Actually, there wasn't time to think about it." She chuckled suddenly. "I always wanted to—to, you know—anyway. And all of a sudden I was doing it." She sighed. "It was as if my cocoon dropped away, as if something *told* me."

Her face was flushed, she looked ecstatic.

She sighed again. "I knew if I could get his attention, you'd do something clever."

"Not so clever. All I did was sock him."

"That was clever. Anyway, I knew you'd do *something*. And I thought I knew how to get his attention."

"You sure did. You petrified it. And it was wonderful. Probably saved my life."

"Oh, that," she said, as if it were nothing. "But how was I? How was my dancing?"

"Tremendous," I said a little sadly, thinking of how much of it I'd missed. As I thought about that, the sadness started getting a bitter edge to it. Would it *always* be like this? Would history keep repeating itself in a vicious circle? With me always brought to the brink but never shoved over the cliff? Always a bridemaid and never a bride?

While I was trying to untangle

that, Robbie said: "Shell, how was that last one? The only *real* one. And I did it for an *audience*. It gave me goose bumps."

"Yeah."

All we ever seemed to do was talk about it. It was really starting to sort of burn hell out of me. Here it was all over, and she was buttoning up her blouse.

"Well, how did I look?" she asked.

I could feel the corners of my mouth turning down. "I haven't the faintest idea," I said. "How in hell would I know? I'd be the *last* person to know—"

"I mean there at the end, when I just got all zizzly and went around, and around, and then— Oh, there I go, almost did it again."

"Yeah. Almost. Yeah. It's always almost. Dammit. Yeah."

"Shell, what's the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing's the matter. Dammit. Everything's grand. Swell, dammit. Hunky-dory. Yeah, dammit, I swear—"

"Shell, what in the world is the matter?"

I told her. She put her arms round my neck, pressed close, and said: "Is *that* all?" and spoke in whispers.

"Let's go!" I said.

"Let's go!" she said.

We went.

Seldom had such astounding curves been so joyously uncensored. The day was a sparkling Tuesday in July, the place was a secluded half-moon beach, the sun was bright, the air clear, the sand voluptuously warm. . . .

And the girl was Robbie.

Well, friends, that was all months ago. And the spirit which moved Robbie that day continued to move her. Maybe that, too, was inevitable. There was an enormous amount of publicity, and Robbie was all fired up with hot goose bumps anyway. She went on to become the toast of Hollywood, then the toast of New Orleans, Miami, New York—everything but a command performance, which she may get yet. Maybe you saw her here on the coast, or back East—you'd know her name, if I told you. Robbie, of course, is not her real name.

Those next months led to several interesting escapades, some involving me. . . .

But that's another story.

87

THE CROWD WANTED RONNIE TO DIE—AND WHAT RONNIE SAID JUST DIDN'T MATTER AT ALL...

HELEN NIELSEN

CONFESSSION



THE MOB THAT HAD CROWDED into the sheriff's office closed in ominously on Ronnie Edwards, making him feel cowed and small in the straight-backed chair. He stood six foot two, if they had allowed him to stand; he weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, was a crack shot, expert swimmer, hottest driver on the drag strip, and star tackle at Desert Bend Union High. He had a blond flat top and clear blue eyes that make the chicks tremble. He was Mr. Big until the mob taught him that even a grown man can be filled with such fear that his mind fogs and his mouth goes as dry as flannel. "Tell them, Ronnie!" Lisa cried. "Don't let them kill us! Tell them that you did it! Tell them!"