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GAME BY HERBERT D. KASTLE

ED GAINES WAS A MAN IN HIS THIRTIES, tall and slim, who had lost the excitement, the drive, the verve of life during the past ten years. Working in Margaret's father's shoe store had done it; living with Margaret herself had done it. So he was running, fleeing down the two-lane highway which stretched over the Texas Big Bend country like a dark ribbon.

He'd left the Fort Worth store at one, saying he had an appointment at the doctor's after lunch. That would hold his father-in-law. And the call he'd made at 5 P.M. from the gas station on the highway would hold Margaret. "I've run into an old friend, dear. . . ."

Now it was almost nine and he'd penetrated deep into the near-desert. His lights tunneled a path through the blackness; a path which could end in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil—he had enough money to go anywhere, to start fresh when he got there. Eight thousand seven hundred dollars; his life's savings; Margaret's,

too, for that matter. He had emptied their joint bank account at one thirty this afternoon. He had taken it in cash, and put it in the money belt fastened around his waist under his clothing. Now he was driving toward the Rio Grande, about three hours away. Now he was heading for a renewal of brightness and youth. Or so he hoped, and the hope was strong enough to keep him smiling and humming.

Until shortly after the gaudy Cadillac hard-top passed his Lark sedan, passed it so quickly that he failed to catch even a glimpse of the occupants. It shot ahead some hundred feet, slowed, and stayed there, matching his own sixty to seventy miles per hour. Together they streaked along the smooth, straight road, through the cloudy-night darkness, deeper into arid country.

Five minutes later, the Cadillac swerved far to the left, across the white line and into the opposite lane of the two-lane road, to smash a

jack rabbit that was attracted by its lights.

Ed Gaines was immediately sickened. He'd lived in Texas all his life; he'd traveled its roads and knew the habits of the jack rabbit and had no particular love for the stupid creature which often ran mothlike into the lights of night-traveling autos. But he'd never met anyone who *deliberately* ran them down. What was more to the point, he had never been so captive an audience to the results—his eyes and senses were offended by the red-and-brown splotch steaming on the night-cool pavement. And within the next sixty seconds, the driver of the Cadillac swung even farther left to destroy a second rabbit. And again the bloody mess came under Ed's headlights.

He turned on the radio, made himself hum, made himself go back to planning the good life. A store of his own. A beautiful woman to arouse and satisfy passion. Leisure time . . .

Twenty minutes later, the road bulged around a huge malpais rock formation, then straightened. During that brief turn, Ed glimpsed the interior of the car before him—a split-second view of two shadowy shapes in the front seat.

He wondered what it was like to be traveling with the kind of man who enjoyed smashing out life at seventy miles per hour. He wondered if the second shadow was a wife, and felt quick pity.

They approached a gas station, small, dark, dead, with a dim light showing from behind drawn shades

on the second floor. Someone lived up there; and someone's dog ran out barking to meet the Cadillac. Ed never did see what sort of dog it was, only that it was small. And while it was a foolish mutt to chase after cars, it wasn't quite so foolish as to cross in front of the hurtling vehicles. But the driver of the Cadillac swung hard right as soon as the dog appeared. The dog tried to reverse field, but the Cadillac plunged off the road, churning up hard-packed sand and scrub grass, hunting it down. The dog was sent spinning up and over the hard-top's roof to land in a mangled, intestine-smearred clot near the pavement.

Ed shouted and pounded his horn and pressed his gas pedal to the floor boards, raging to catch the Cadillac and do something to the man who was driving. But the Cadillac swung back onto the road and shot out ahead, picking up speed much faster than the six-cylinder Lark could. And continued to streak away at what must have been close to a hundred miles an hour, its tail lights dwindling rapidly in the darkness, until Ed was again alone on the road to Mexico—except for a bloody little clump some five miles farther on.

It was a few minutes to ten when he pulled off the road onto the black-top of the Green Circle Tavern, which maintained a dozen cabins in addition to its wine-and-dine facilities. He turned left to park within white guide lines, radiator first against a low wire fence. Walking back toward the road and the entrance to the tavern, he counted four other cars be-

side his own. The last one made him stop. It was the Cadillac hard-top.

The Green Circle's taproom held three separate couples at three separate tables. Ed Gaines walked to the bar, took a stool and glanced into the long mirror. To his right, near the door and just visible past the barrier of his own reflection, were two middle-aged women chatting over the remains of a meal. To his left was the greater part of the room, and the other two couples. The one nearest him—just a few feet away—immediately claimed his attention. The man was big and heavy and graying, but it was his face that made Ed feel a swift return of the rage he'd experienced on the road. He quickly cautioned himself about judging people by their looks, and moved his eyes to the woman. She created another quick surge of emotion. She was slender, yet fully fleshed; small-boned and curved and catlike; a dark, sleek girl with wide-set eyes. And those eyes rose, as if in response to his, and searched his face in the mirror. They looked at each other a moment, and in that moment, Ed knew she was full of sickness, full of despair. As if to point to the reason for this despair, her glance flicked to the man beside her. The man laughed, and said quite distinctly, "Would you like *him* for your Prince Charming, Cecily?" She paled, picked up a cocktail glass and drank. The man laughed and drew on a cigarette and looked at Ed in the mirror. Ed's first impulse was to drop his eyes, but he controlled it. He stared back at the thick-faced, hard-

faced, cruel-faced man. And something made him move his eyes slowly, deliberately, to the lovely woman and smile at her. The man laughed again.

Ed examined the last couple— youngsters; honeymooners, probably; wrapped up in each other. He made himself consider the possibility that they, or the middle-aged women now rising from their table, were the occupants of the Cadillac. Or a person or persons not present. But then he returned his eyes to Cecily, and she was again looking at him, and her sickness, her *hatred* of the man beside her, again came through. And the soft, thick laughter again sounded, and the deep, taunting voice said, "He's definitely the Prince Charming type, Cecily."

Ed turned and looked at the lovely girl. "You and your friend driving to Mexico?"

The man laughed. "I told you, Cecily." He nodded at Ed. "We are. Or we were. But we've had a few discussions, my lovely wife and myself, and we're undecided now."

The bartender finally made his appearance. Ed ordered beer and a ham sandwich. His heart was pounding wildly, and he wondered why he was doing this. And said, "That your Cadillac in the parking lot?"

Cecily's eyes remained on the table; her face remained deathly pale. Her husband looked surprised. "That's right." Then his smile grew and a note of vindictive delight entered his voice. "You're the one we passed, aren't you? You're the one who blew

his horn." He slapped his hands on the table. "He's the one, Cecily. I tell you—"

She jumped up, whispering, "Let me go, Carl! *Let me go!*" She stopped then. The young couple was staring.

Ed's mouth was dry, but he said, "My name's Ed Gaines. Mind if I join you?"

Cecily looked at him. There was surprise in her face, which was quickly replaced by a childish surge of pure hope.

"By all means," her husband said, and he was shaking his head and laughing heavily, consistently.

Ed walked to their table. As he sat down, one clear thought emerged. *This girl was the beauty and passion he'd wanted all his life!*

Cecily was still standing. Ed examined her, openly, not hiding a thing from the heavy-set man. She wore a simple, tight sheath; pale-blue, sleeveless, perfect because her body was perfect. He smiled at her. She sat down.

The bartender came with his beer and sandwich. He raised his glass, and cleared his throat. "It might help to tell me what the trouble's all about."

Carl lighted a fresh cigarette. His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "Why certainly, Ed. Cecily wants me to give her a divorce. She wants to get away from me as soon as possible—tonight; tomorrow morning; just as soon as she can." He smiled, his hard face genuinely amused. "But I won't allow it. I like having her."

"Having me," Cecily whispered.

Carl nodded, looking at her. "I spent thousands feeding, clothing and entertaining you. That proves I like having you, doesn't it?"

Her face flamed.

Ed sipped his beer. He looked at that wide, cruel face, at the smirking lips, at the amused but cold eyes, and felt a sudden chill. Dogs and rabbits weren't the only things that man could kill. Yet he said, "Are you sure you want to leave your husband, Cecily?"

She put her hands to her cheeks and whispered hoarsely, "God, I've never been so sure of anything in all my life! If you asked me whether I'm more sure of that or of wanting to live, I couldn't answer."

"Then I offer you transportation."
"I accept."

He nodded, the blood pounding in his temples. "Would you like to leave now?"

"Yes, but . . ." Her eyes broke away.

"I really feel bad about mentioning it," Carl said, "but I still want her around. At least for a while yet." He shook in laughter.

"This is the United States," Ed said. "You can't force a woman—"

Carl's laughter ended. "You're wrong, Prince Charming. I *can*."

This was the part Ed feared; the part where the claws would begin to show. "How, if we just drive away?"

Carl rose slowly. "I have money, and money can buy all sorts of services, and I also have the will—" his smile was pure malice as he looked down at his wife—"and the contacts

to carry out that will. If you doubt me, leave with Cecily while I'm washing up. I won't follow. I'll just use the phone." He walked away.

Ed raised his glass, but his hand was trembling and he put it down again. "Want to leave?" he asked.

"He means what he says!" And then, face and voice suddenly shy, "Why in the world would you want to . . ." She didn't finish.

"I'm running away myself," he murmured. "We could run together."

Her hand came across the table and touched his. His fingers reacted as if with a will of their own, meshing in hers. The trembling flowed through both of them, merged, and stilled. Her eyes blinked back tears. "So quickly—yet we both feel . . ." She shook her head. "But it's a waste, Ed. Only when he dies . . ."

"It can happen." He heard himself say it, and didn't wonder. He only *wanted*. He'd wanted to leave the old life, and had done so. Now he wanted to gain the most important single component of his new life—a woman to arouse and satisfy passion—and would do so. He stood up, jerking his head at the archway. "Just for a minute, Cecily, please?"

She flushed at the hunger in his voice, and rose. They went along the central corridor to the doors, where it was dark. He touched her arms, and she turned. A second later, she was tight up against him, her lips parting moistly under his. Then her breath tingled his ear. "Money and possessions, that's all he ever thinks of! That's why I hate him. *Feelings*

—excitement and warmth and human feelings—they don't mean a thing to him. But you, Ed! You're what I've wanted! You're doing this, even though you heard what he said."

He backtracked. "He wouldn't actually try to—"

"He would! He's not just an ordinary businessman. He manufactures games—pinballs and one-armed bandits and dice cages and roulette wheels. He has contacts with all sorts of people. He'd have me killed—you, too." Her head jerked; she made sure her husband wasn't returning. She whispered, "He's had others—at least one I know of—taken care of. Please don't doubt that, Ed! He can kill without a thought!"

Ed nodded slowly. Thinking of that dog, he believed her. And for a moment, he wanted to walk away. But in the next moment, her lips returned to his; her kiss was pure fire; they rocked together, burning. He spoke to her, and learned they were staying the night, and got the number of their cabin. And said, "If it's the only way, so be it." She trembled against him. They spoke again, whispering frantically, interrupting each other frequently. Then it was settled.

When Carl came to find them, they were sitting on straight-backed chairs, smoking. Carl laughed. "For a minute I thought I'd have to make those calls. But Prince Charming's sensible, isn't he? Try again in a year or so, Prince Charming. I might be ready to dump her."

Cecily left. Carl laughed. Ed returned to the taproom, just as the

honeymoon couple was leaving. His sandwich and beer were still waiting. He ate slowly, alone in the room. The bartender began cleaning up. Ed finished, paid, and said, "Well, back to the road." He went outside. Hugging the building shadows, he moved toward the line of twelve cabins a hundred or more feet back. And noticed that only the Lark and Caddy remained in the parking lot, and that no other car was visible at the cabins. Still, he moved carefully, quietly, as he approached the one lighted cabin. When he reached the door marked with a brass FOUR, he put his hand on the knob and turned. Cecily had done her part. The door opened and he stepped inside. And from then on was in mortal danger, because the important part of his plan was that there be no plan at all when it came to this.

Carl was standing near the bed, fastening a blue silk dressing gown around his thick body. Cecily was on the other side of the bed, face twisted, saying, ". . . never again!" They both turned to Ed. Carl's mouth dropped open in surprise. Cecily said, "On your right, Ed." Ed saw the table, and the two full bottles of whisky. He took one by the neck. It felt heavy in his hand. He was terribly afraid.

Carl said, "Get out of here, *fast!* You can still save your life!" He stepped forward, fists rising.

Cecily moved then. She picked something up off the lamp table—a long nail file. Carl glanced at her. Ed moved forward with the bottle.

Carl jumped back. His face

changed. He was afraid. He said, "Now just a minute. Now hold it a minute. Maybe—"

"He'll have us killed," Cecily whispered. "If he ever gets to a phone, we're dead."

Carl laughed—a braying, panicked sound. "That was just talk. Big talk with nothing—"

Cecily was near enough to jab his shoulder. Carl said, "No, please!"

Ed didn't want to do anything to this frightened man. But then Carl grabbed Cecily's wrist and the nail file clattered to the floor. "Silly broad!" he said, triumphant and threatening again.

Ed hit him with the bottle. It broke. Whisky flooded the graying hair, soaked the blue dressing gown. Carl sat down on the floor, hands over his head. "Stop," he murmured. He fell over on his side and his eyes rolled back. He said something else. Ed bent, trying to hear. "Again," Cecily said, and put the other whisky bottle in his hand. "Again, Ed, again, or he'll kill us!" So he hit him again, and yet again, as Cecily directed.

They worked hard, cleaning the cabin of everything but liquor, moving Carl and their luggage to the Caddy. Ed didn't allow himself to think of what he'd done. He merely walked to the Lark as Cecily went to the restaurant-bar. It was 2 A.M.

Ten minutes later, he was parked at the side of the road, waiting. Cecily was to tell whoever was on night duty that she and her husband were getting an early start for Mexico. She

was to ask for a bottle of bourbon, and pay as much as necessary to get it. She was to act drunk, and intimate that her husband was even drunker. If she heard Ed pulling out of the lot, she was to raise her voice to cover his exit. Failing that, she was to say it was a car on the highway. Then she would go to the Caddy and drive off.

If everything went well, that is.

The Caddy pulled up behind him. He got out. Cecily ran over. "The bartender was the only one there," she said. "He didn't hear you." He nodded and went to the Caddy. She went to the Lark and pulled onto the highway. He followed her, refusing to glance at the body propped up beside him.

Eight or ten miles farther, he saw the sign on the right reading ARROYO NEGRO—BLACK CANYON. Cecily pulled over and waved her hand at car tracks packing down the sandy soil. He drove carefully, though moon and stars gave plenty of light. And saw the low picket fence and second sign—a warning to stop here as the canyon commenced within fifty yards. He went off the car tracks and around the brief fence and saw the change in land ahead; saw the black gash in the earth which was Arroyo Negro. Cecily had been here before, on her honeymoon.

He opened the Caddy's door. He stepped on the gas. As he'd seen so many times in movies, he sent the car spurting forward and leaped clear. It went over, hit the side with a tremendous rending of metal,

bounced, and continued down to the bottom, about three hundred feet at its deepest point. There it settled with a chattering of smashed parts. There it lay in the moonlight, even more of a wreck than he'd hoped.

Cecily stood beside him, brushing at his clothes, examining him for cuts and bruises. There weren't any, except for a mildly skinned wrist. "We're all right," she said. "It'll be found, but not soon. They'll think I got out and died in one of those caves. Or wandered into the desert. Or maybe wasn't in the car when it crashed. Anyway, we'll be in South America. Far away. We'll be together. Forever. We'll be so happy. . . ." She was gripping him about the waist. He felt her body pulsing against his. But he was very tired now; very dull and drained and tired.

They returned to the Lark. He asked if she minded driving. He just had to rest for a while. She kissed him and said of course she would drive. She would do whatever he wanted from now on. Weren't they bound together by the strongest of ties—blood?

They pulled onto the road. He slumped low in the seat and put his head on her shoulder. Her fragrance came to him, soft and delicate. After a while, he slept.

He awoke, knowing something was wrong. It was still dark, and he was still in the car, and she was still driving. Nothing had changed from the time he'd fallen asleep, so nothing could be wrong. And yet he *knew* there was.

His thoughts came to an end as he squinted up at her. She was sitting—or crouching—over the wheel, lips parted, eyes wide and fixed, dampness covering her forehead, face and neck. And even as he stared, a new and terrific tension entered her body.

He moaned once—a sound embodying his sudden and complete loathing for this terrible stranger to

whom he was tied forever; this stranger who might yet cost him his life. She didn't hear him. She was too engrossed in swinging the wheel hard left, peering intently at the road directly in front of the swerving, hurtling car, and then releasing her pent-up breath in a gasp of pure delight as the thump and sodden, squishing sound filled his ears and all the world.