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Four magazine salesmen were dead—and the big problem, Malone told himself, was how to avoid solving the case.

A JOHN J. MALONE STORY

"MALONE," THE VOICE SAID, "YOU'VE got to help me."

The little lawyer wagged a finger at Joe the Angel and sat impassive while the bartender poured another double shot of rye. Then he swallowed the rye, reflecting thoughtfully that clients were always turning up when you needed them the least. "I don't have to help you," he said without bothering to turn around. "My office rent is paid a month in advance. My secretary is paid a week in advance. My bar tab is paid several drinks in advance. So go away."

"Money," said the voice, "is no object."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Malone said. "Besides, if you want me, why don't you call me at my office?"

"I tried," the voice admitted. "I talked to a girl named Maggie. She said *this* was your office."

Malone turned around, deciding firmly that Maggie would never again be paid anything in advance. He found himself looking at a large man with iron-gray hair, blue eyes, and a prominent chin. The man looked so healthy that Malone wanted to turn away again. "Go ahead," he said. "Tell me all about it."



"Can't we go someplace private?"

"This is my office," Malone reminded him. "How private can you get?"

The man looked around vacantly, then back at Malone. "My name is Gunderson," he said. "Frank Gunderson. Mean anything to you?"

"Nothing," Malone said. "So far."

"I sell magazine subscriptions," Gunderson announced.

"That's nice," Malone said pleasantly. "Working your way through college?"

Gunderson looked very unhappy. "I don't exactly sell them," he explained. "I employ salesmen. Gunderson Sales, Inc. Door-to-door sales of leading magazines. A customer buys one or two magazines and gets another free. It's a very attractive offer."

"I'm sure it is," the little lawyer agreed. "But I can't read. So you're wasting your time."

"You don't understand," Gunderson said. "It's like this, Malone. Somebody's been killing my salesmen. One after the other, day after day, my men have been murdered."

"By prospective customers?"

"By a fiend," Gunderson said. "First Joe Tallmer, struck down brutally by a hit-and-run driver. That was a week ago. Then, two days later, Leon Prince was pushed into an empty elevator shaft. The very next day Howie Kirschmeyer was shoved from an elevated platform and mangled by an oncoming train. And—"

Malone held up a hand, both to

silence Gunderson and to summon Joe the Angel. He downed the double rye that Joe poured and fixed sad eyes on Gunderson.

"Accidents," he said soberly, "can happen."

"But, Malone—"

"Three accidents," he went on. "The first one got hit by a car. The second one was too dumb to wait for the elevator. The third one tried to walk across the tracks. It figures, in a way. Anyone dumb enough to sell magazines for a living—"

"You don't understand," Gunderson cut in. "There was a fourth one. Just this morning."

"What happened to him?"

"He was shot through the head with a .45," Gunderson said. "He's dead," he added unnecessarily.

John J. Malone suddenly felt very tired. "Sounds like murder," he admitted. "But I'm sure the police can take care of it."

"I don't see how," Gunderson said. "The man's name was Henry Littleton. He was sitting over coffee while his wife was upstairs making the beds or something. Somebody came in, shot him, and left."

"The gun?"

"It was on the breakfast-room table. No prints, no registration."

"Hmmm," Malone said.

"You see," Gunderson continued, "the police can do nothing. Littleton wasn't murdered by someone who knew him. He was murdered for the same reason as Tallmer and Prince and Kirschmeyer."

"And why were *they* murdered?"

"I wish I knew," Gunderson said.
"I wish I knew."

Malone paused to light a cigar. "Come, now," he said gently. "You must have some idea. Otherwise you wouldn't be here annoying me."

Gunderson hesitated. "Malone," he said, "I don't want to sound paranoid. Not good, sounding paranoid. But I think someone is trying to ruin me, Malone. Killing my men one after the other. Crippling my sales force. Two of my men quit me today, Malone. Left me cold. Told me they couldn't take the chance of working for me. One of 'em said he had a wife and kid. Hell, I've got a wife and kid. Two kids, as a matter of fact. And—"

"Shut up for a minute," the little lawyer said absently. "Who would want to cripple your sales force? You have any competition in this little con game of yours?"

Gunderson colored. "It's not a con game. But I do have a competitor."

"Does he have a name?"

"Tru-Val Subscriptions," Gunderson said.

Malone sighed. "That's a strange name for a man," he remarked. "What do they call him for short? Troovie?"

"That's the company name, Malone. The man's name is Harold Cowperthwaite."

Malone looked around vacantly. He could understand the murder of door-to-door salesmen, especially if such murder were performed by dissident customers. But he didn't want

to understand, not now. He didn't want the case at all.

"Malone? Here's a check. Twenty-five hundred dollars. I'll have another check for twenty-five hundred for you when you clear this up. Plus expenses, of course. Will that be sufficient?"

Malone took the check and found a place for it in his wallet. He nodded pleasantly at Gunderson and watched the man leave the City Hall Bar, walking with a firm stride, arms swinging, chest out. Then he looked around until he found Joe the Angel again and pointed to his empty glass. It was, he decided, time to begin piling up expenses for Gunderson.

Harold Cowperthwaite was not helpful. He looked as sickly as Gunderson looked vigorous, and was just about as much fun to be with. Malone decided that he disliked them both equally.

"—incredible accusation!" Cowperthwaite had just finished shouting. "A couple of his doorbell punchers keel over and he blames me for it! Blames me for everything! Ought to sue him for libel! Serve him right!"

Malone sighed, wishing the little man wouldn't talk exclusively in exclamation points. "Then you didn't kill them," he suggested.

"Kill them!" boomed Cowperthwaite. "Course I didn't kill them! I wanted to kill anybody I'd kill Gunderson! Know what I think, Malone?"

Malone was totally unprepared for

the question mark. "Hmmm," he said. "What do you think?"

"Think he killed 'em himself!" Cowperthwaite shouted. "Throw suspicion on me! Make trouble for me! People bothering me all the time!"

"Oh," said Malone. "No, he couldn't have done that."

"No?"

"Of course not," Malone said. "He's my client."

Cowperthwaite's words followed the lawyer out of the door marked *Tru-Val Subscriptions*. Malone managed to close the door before the man reached the exclamation point. It was, he decided, a day for small triumphs.

"The way I see it," von Flanagan said, "we wait until he kills another one. Then maybe he leaves a clue."

"He?" Malone said, lost. "Who he?"

"The killer," the big cop said. "The bird who killed Littleton and the others without leaving a trace. Pretty soon he'll find another magazine salesman and kill him. Maybe we get lucky and catch him in the act. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"For everybody but the magazine salesman," Malone agreed. "You don't seem to be taking much of an interest in this one. Something wrong?"

"Plenty," von Flanagan said. "For one thing, it's an impossible one to solve. For another, I don't want to solve it."

"Why not?"

Von Flanagan shook his head

wearily. "Malone," he said, "have you ever had a run-in with a magazine salesman? Have you ever had one of those little monsters stick his foot in your door and tell you how much you needed his rotten magazines? Have you, Malone?"

Malone nodded.

"They should kill every last one of them," von Flanagan said. "I mean it, Malone. Anybody kills a magazine salesman he deserves a medal."

Malone sighed. "The case," he reminded von Flanagan. "Let's talk about the case. Tell me all about it. Everything."

"There's not much to tell," von Flanagan said, relaxing into a chair. "This Littleton is thirty-three years old, has a wife and two kids. One is a boy and the other—"

"—is a girl," Malone guessed.

"You know the story? Then why bother me?"

"I'm sorry," Malone said, sorry. "Please go on."

"He's a hustler," said von Flanagan. "Holds down two jobs at once. Works real hard. Sells magazines evenings for this Gunderson character and works nine to five in a garage. Hasn't got any money, though. He's had a tough run of luck lately. Doctor bills, things going wrong with the kids, you know. But he's not in debt either. A good, steady guy. A guy you might like if he wasn't a magazine salesman."

"The crime," Malone said gently.

"Murder," von Flanagan said. "Not by the wife, either. I thought

of that, Malone. I didn't want to be-
cause she's such a sweet little worn-
an. A doll. But she was upstairs with
the kids at the time. The kids said
so. They wouldn't lie. Too young to
lie."

Malone lit a cigar. "He was shot
by somebody inside the house?"

Von Flanagan nodded. "At close
range," he said. "It almost looked
as though the killer wanted to make
it look like suicide. But he didn't
try very hard. No powder burns, for
one thing, and the gun was lying
near Littleton's left hand. And he was
right-handed. We checked."

"Clever of you," the lawyer said.
"So it was murder, and not by the
wife. How about the other salesmen?
Tallmer and Prince and Kirken-
berger?"

"Kirschmeyer," von Flanagan cor-
rected. "That's the funny part of it.
Tallmer was a typical hit-and-run.
Prince and Kirschmeyer look more
like accidents than most accidents.
But with them all coming together
like this—"

"I know," Malone said gloomily.
"Did Littleton have any insurance?"

"Insurance?" von Flanagan looked
lost. "Oh," he said. "Littleton, insur-
ance. Yeah. A big policy. But that's
out, Malone. The wife is the only
beneficiary and she's clear. So that's
out."

"Thanks," Malone said. "So am
I."

"So are you what?"

"Out," Malone said. "For a
drink."

With two double ryes under his

belt and a pair of beer chasers keep-
ing them company, Malone felt in
condition to use the phone. He called
Charlie Stein, a useful little man who
served as Dun and Bradstreet for a
world far removed from Wall Street,
running credit checks for gamblers
and similarly unsavory elements.

"Take your time on this one," he
told Stein. "Nothing urgent. I want
to find out if there's anything around
on a man named Henry Littleton.
And," he added sadly, "there prob-
ably isn't."

"You're wrong," Stein said.
"There is."

Malone came back to life. "Go
on," he said. "Talk to me."

"Henry Littleton," Stein said.
"He's into Max Hook for seventy-
five grand. That all you want to
know?"

"That's impossible," Malone said.
"I mean—"

"Impossible but true."

"Oh," Malone said. "Well, you
better cross him off, Charlie. Some-
body shot him in the head."

Malone hung up quickly, then
lifted the receiver again and put
through a call to Max Hook. The
gambler picked up the phone almost
at once. "Malone, Max," Malone
said cheerfully. "You didn't order a
hit for a guy named Henry Little-
ton, did you?"

"Littleton? That's the fink who
owes me seventy-five grand. Sev-
enty-five grand he owes me and a
nickel at a time he pays me. That
guy." There was a pause. Then, with
the air of someone just now hearing

what Malone said in the first place, Hook said: "You saying somebody chilled him?"

"This morning. It wasn't you, was it?"

"Of course not," Hook said. "Why kill somebody who owes me money? That doesn't make sense, Malone."

"I didn't think it did," Malone said pleasantly. "Just checking, Max." He put the receiver on the hook and made his way back to the bar.

"You don't look so hot," Joe the Angel said thoughtfully. "You want me to leave the bottle?"

Malone sighed. "Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Then I wouldn't have anybody to talk to." He closed his eyes and tried to think. This Littleton had been hard-working, honest, and seventy-five thousand dollars in debt. Hook hadn't killed him, and Cowperthwaite hadn't killed him, and his wife hadn't killed him, and he hadn't committed suicide. The whole thing was terrifying.

"I'm glad I found you," von Flanagan was saying. "You're drunk, but I'm still glad I found you. I want to tell you you've been wasting your time. We thought there was a connection between the salesmen. But there isn't."

"You're wrong," Malone said magnificently. "But go on anyway."

"Tallmer," von Flanagan said, ignoring the interruption. "The first one. A guy walked into the station-house and said he was the hit-and-runner. Conscience was bothering him. And there was no connec-

tion between him and the rest. Accidents. Like we figured."

"Wrong," said Malone sadly. "Completely wrong."

"Hub?"

"I'll explain," said Malone. "I will tell all. I sort of thought something like this would happen." He sighed. "Tallmer was a typical hit-and-run. That much you know."

"That much I just told you."

Malone nodded. "Prince and Kirschenblum—"

"Kirschmeyer."

"To hell with it," said Malone. "Anyway, the two of them were murdered. By the same person who killed Littleton."

"If you're so smart," said von Flanagan, "then you can tell me that person's name. The one who killed them all."

"Simple," said Malone. "The name is Littleton."

He explained while von Flanagan sat there gaping. "Littleton was in debt," he said. "Seventy-five grand in debt. With no way out. Then Tallmer got hit by a car."

"Precisely," said von Flanagan.

"And Littleton got an idea," he said. "He wanted to kill himself but he didn't want his wife to lose the insurance. So he killed himself and made it look like murder."

Malone lit a fresh cigar. "He set up a chain," he went on. "Chucked Prince down an elevator shaft and heaved Kirschengruber in front of the elevated."

"Kirschmeyer."

"You know who I mean. Anyway,

Littleton did this, and set up a chain. A subtle chain. Then he shot himself."

"Left-handed? From a distance?"

"Of course," Malone said. "If you wanted to make it look like murder, would you use your right hand and put the gun in your mouth? See?"

Von Flanagan thought it over. "So it's suicide," he said. "And we write it off as murder and suicide, with Littleton the murderer. Right?"

"Wrong," Malone said. "You write Prince and Kicklebutton off as accidents and Littleton as murder by person or persons unknown. If he

went to all that trouble there's no sense in conning the wife and kids out of the insurance. Besides, you'd never get a suicide verdict. Not unless I persuaded the coroner's inquest. And I won't."

Von Flanagan shrugged. "How are you going to collect your fee?"

"I'll tell Gunderson his salesmen are safe," Malone said. "I'll offer to repay the fee in full if another one gets murdered. And if that's not enough for him, he can keep the twenty-five hundred he owes me. Remember, I didn't want this case in the first place."