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*I swiped the barrel of the .38 across Tallon's temple, hard. I kept whipping him until his knees buckled and he dropped unconscious.*

# NO PLACE TO RUN

BY CARROLL MAYERS

FOR THREE MONTHS Tallon kept clear, hitting seven states, doubling back, always on the move. But tonight, if the tip we had checked out, he'd reached the end of the line. Tallon was through running.

Eddie parked the car across from the dingy bar and grill in the city's river section, scowled at the crumby facade. "Lousy dump."

I lit a cigarette, said, "Just the sort of spot he'd pick if he's working for small dough, afraid to flash any of those C notes."

Eddie grunted. "So what do we do now?"

The *we* bugged me. Although the Syndicate had assigned both of

us to this job, they'd made it plain I was to call the plays. In my book, Eddie was just a young punk bucking for a fast rep, with little moxie to back up a flip mouth. We'd been grating from the first.

"You stay put, I check," I told him.

The inverted pull to his thin lips told me Eddie didn't like it, but he let it ride. I flicked away the cigarette, flexed the rigging under my left arm, got out of the car. "I'll make it fast," I said. Then I crossed to the tavern.

The ill-lighted interior was as drab as the outside, the sluggish air conditioning doing little to dispel a cloying effluvium of stale beer,

body odor and cheap perfume, but there was a fair crowd which made my entry inconspicuous and that was what I'd hoped for. I headed for the rear, sought out a booth where I could watch the bar unobserved.

The tip held up; there were two barkeeps and Tallon was one of them. Mort Tallon, gambling collector for the Syndicate. The stupid son who thought he could make the big grab, who'd waited two years and then skipped with between fifty and sixty grand.

He'd played it as smart as he could, dyeing his blond hair jet black, growing a hairline mustache and wearing glasses. But I recognized him instantly and all the rugged tracking of the past three months crystallized into a glow of satisfaction. Bring this off, I'd really be set with the Syndicate.

The place had one waitress, a perky redhead with sleek hips and a thrusting superstructure, and as I eyed the chick approvingly I noted that for all her swivelling about she constantly gave Tallon the eye. Plainly, he'd made a score.

Satisfied, I started to ease from the booth, but suddenly the girl got around to me and I had to order a double rye. At that, the redhead's proximity and intimate woman scent stirred me. For all her ripe figure she was slim, but her slender arms looked as though they could hold a man close, and her moist, generous mouth promised plenty

of response. Under other circumstances, I'd have tried a pass—

Eddie was irritable when I got back to the car, "You took your time," he muttered.

"Relax," I said shortly, "we're in."

"He's there?"

"He's there."

Eddie's pale eyes flickered. "Now what?"

"We wait," I told him. "When he shows, we'll play it out."

Along about one-fifty the customers began leaving. At two, the grill went dark. A couple of minutes later, Tallon emerged—with the stacked waitress, still in uniform.

The chick tagging Tallon was an angle I hadn't expected. I stiffened, uncertain, then eased, climbed out of the car quickly as the pair turned in a shadowy vestibule adjacent to the tavern. "Snap it up," I ordered Eddie, "we've got a break. Tallon's scored with the waitress. She's probably got a pad over the grill."

Moving fast, we hit the stairs in time to catch the sound of Tallon and the girl entering a second floor front apartment.

We slipped quietly down the grubby hall to the door. Eddie started to withdraw his own gun, but I wagged my .38. "I'll handle it," I said. "When she opens up, barrel in." I knocked on the door. "Who is it?" the girl called.

I muttered something unintelli-

gible. After a moment, the latch clicked and the girl stuck her head out. Eddie slapped her, knocking her back and we stormed inside.

The apartment was a cheap one-room-and-bath efficiency. Tallon had been lolling on the bed; as the chick cried out, he jerked erect, dove for his jacket hanging over a chair. I blocked him, ramming the .38 into his stomach. I caught up the jacket, shook out a nickel plated revolver.

"Nuh uh," I said, tossing the gun to Eddie.

After the initial flurry, it was a tense tableau: Eddie stolidly blocking the door; the girl backed against the wall, knuckles bruising those glistening lips; and Tallon goggling at the .38, throat working convulsively.

I said, "Lousy disguise."

He tore off the glasses, "I—I haven't got any of the money left, Al," he blurted. "It's gone. All of it!"

"You're a liar."

"No! I swear! I lost it all in Vegas."

"You're stupid, Mort," I said. "You ought to know nobody rooks the Syndicate."

A tic began jumping in Tallon's cheek. "But there's none left!"

I levelled the .38. "It'll be in the gut. At three."

"It's gone, I tell you!"

"Where's the money, Mort?"

"Please, Al, you gotta believe me—"

My finger whitened on the trigger. "One."

"No!" With a choked cry the girl flung herself against Tallon, clung to him. "Tell him!"

So the chick knew the score too. Tallon swore. "For God's sake, Floss."

"Tell him, tell him!"

I said, "Two."

Tallon was sweating, face ashen, but it was the girl who broke. Wrenching away from him, she pulled open a closet door, frantically scattering a litter of shoes in one corner. When she turned, she thrust a green canvas bag at me. "Take it!"

I passed the bag to Eddie. "Check it," I said.

Eddie emptied the bag on the bed, briefly sorted the money packets. "Could be all here."

The girl's ripe lips trembled. "It is!"

Tallon swore again. "Dammit, kid—"

I cut him short. "The chick's smarter than you, Mort," I said. Then I swiped the barrel of the .38 against Tallon's temple, hard. He cried out, reeled, but I caught him, swiped him again. I kept whipping him until his knees buckled and he dropped unconscious.

The girl sobbed, fell to her knees, cradling Tallon's bloodied head. Then she glared up at me in wordless hatred.

I shoved the .38 into my rigging. "He's lucky," I told the redhead. "I

could've given him a permanent payoff."

She kept glaring at me, face flushed, high-riding breasts stormy. Right then, her woman allure stirred me again, and I grinned in sudden inspiration. "Maybe I'm lucky too," I suggested.

Eddie read my mind, gave me a dark look. "Let's go," he said curtly.

I shook my head. "I'll be along shortly."

"What the hell, Al—"

I took off my jacket and rigging, put them on the chair with the money bag. "I said, I'll be along," I told Eddie.

His stony glance held for a moment; then he turned, strode out of the room. Still grinning, I swung back to the chick. "You can make this rough or easy," I said.

She sucked in her breath, tried to evade me, but I caught her, pulled her to me. She ground her hips, tried to rake her nails down my face, but I pinned her arms.

Afterward, the girl huddled on the bed as I shucked into my coat. "Nice. Very nice," I said.

Her face was an emotionless mask; only her upper lip twitched. "You . . . filthy . . . bastard," she whispered.

I grinned once more, hefted the money bag, gave Tallon's unconscious form a final glance. "Thanks—for everything," I told the girl. Then I left.

On the street, Eddie wasn't in

the car. I fought down a surge of irritation, headed for the only spot open, an owl drugstore up the block.

Eddie was at the lunch counter, coffee before him. I said, "I meant for you to wait in the car."

"While you strain the arteries with an off-schedule frolic."

I rested the money bag on the counter. "We got what we came for."

"Like I said, you got a little more."

The son really bugged me; I said thinly, "I call the plays. All of them."

He shrugged, leisurely finished the coffee. "Let's go."

Back at the car, Eddie got behind the wheel, then wriggled uncertainly, shifting haunches. "Damned seat's crooked," he muttered.

"Forget it."

He shook his head. "Not when I'm driving." He got out, waited for me to follow; then he yanked, tipped the seat to straighten it.

That was when we both glimpsed them: two money packets, stuffed beneath the cushion, plainly visible in the glow from the dash.

A warning bell echoed at the back of my brain. Eddie shot me a bleak look, said softly, "A hold-out, eh, Al?"

The bell was louder now; I started to sweat, said quickly, "Now wait a minute—"

"Best hiding place you could

think of in a hurry, voting your person out. Only you should've checked the cushion."

I knew then—the whole damned script. The redhead hadn't surrendered all the money. Fumbling in the closet for the bag, she'd slipped out a couple of grand. At first, she'd undoubtedly meant the dough as a stake for herself and Tallon. But watching from the window after I'd left, seeing me veer from the car, her loathing had suddenly spawned another use for that money. She hurried down, planted those packets. She'd caught the hostility between Eddie and me and she'd left the seat crooked, hoping that we'd pull it out to straighten it, that Eddie would see the money and think—

"You're crazy!" I blurted. "That babe upstairs—"

Eddie's cold smile was humorless. "A frame for your frolic? I

don't buy it, Al. Neither will the Syndicate."

My guts went queasy; a sour lump choked my throat. If Eddie told the Syndicate I'd tried a hold-out and they believed him—

I went for my .38, never got it clear. Eddie anticipated my move, was faster with his own gun. Two slugs tore into my chest.

I slumped; a haze swirled before my eyes. Eddie desperately prodded and kicked at my inert bulk, sprawling over the seat. I tried to grapple with him, couldn't. Then I spilled into the street and the car roared away.

The haze was darker now, my chest on fire. I balled my fists, crawled out of the gutter. Somehow, I had to run, get clear. But first I was going to pay off that red-headed bitch. I struggled to my knees and then the paving tilted and I pitched forward on my face.

