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# MANHUNT

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# Shakedown

BY ROY CARROLL

*Van was a mighty smart guy.  
A little maneuvering, a little luck,  
and he was into a soft, easy life.*

SHE was a cute kid and I hated to do this to her, but it had to be. I couldn't fool around. I gave it to her straight, told her I couldn't afford to get married, didn't want to get married and that I wasn't paying for any operation, either. Those things cost two — three hundred bucks, today. I didn't have that kind of money. I told her, too, that if she tried to put the pressure on me, I'd just take off, fast. I didn't have to hang around this town.

It was while she was putting on the big sob act that I figured an out for her. I told her to shut up for a minute and then I said: "Vera, listen. I think I've got it figured what you can do."

She cut off the tears fast, but her big, brown eyes stayed full and glittery as she looked at me. "What is it, Van?"



"It's simple," I told her. "You know the boss is nuts about you, don't you? Absolutely nuts. So when he hears you and I have busted up, he'll ask you for a date. You give it to him. And you keep on giving it to him. Not only the dates."

She sniffled and dabbed at her nose with a little wad of handkerchief. Those cowlike eyes stared at me dumbly. She said: "Go out with Mr. Owen? I—I don't think I understand, Van."

"You don't understand." I went over to the dresser mirror and started combing my hair. I knew Vera was watching me, thinking what nice curly hair I had, and how handsome I was, and big, like a college football player. I knew that because she was always telling me. It got monotonous.

"What do you want me to do?" I said. "Draw you a blueprint? After a few dates the dumb old slob will want you to marry him. Okay, you marry him. Your troubles are over."

I turned away from the mirror and she was sitting very stiff in the chair, her usually round, pretty face looking drawn and shocked. "Van," she said. "Do you know what you're saying? I — I can't marry someone I don't even love. Especially a fat man old enough to be my father. Van, what do you think I am?"

I didn't tell her.

"Van, you can't be serious. I — What's the matter with you? What's got into you, lately?"

"Nothing's got into me," I told her. "You're the one in trouble. Remember? I'm telling you, that's your out. Your only out. It's simple. Easy."

She came flying out of the chair, squalling and sobbing again and flung herself at me. I held her for a minute. "Van," she said. "I thought you loved me. How can you do this to me? Van, I only want to marry *you*. I only love *you*."

For a minute I almost felt sorry for her. In spite of the fact that she was a good-looking kid, with a body that drove the guys in the office nuts, she was kind of shy and dumb. Maybe that was because she was all alone in the world, no folks or anything, lived by herself, didn't even seem to have any girl friends. I was the first guy she'd ever gone out with steady. I was the first guy, period. But what

good does it do you to feel sorry for someone? What does it buy?

"Look, Baby," I said, softly. "It won't be so bad. Harry Owen is stinking with dough. He's a nice old guy. You'll have the best of everything. And maybe after awhile, you and I can still get together."

She thought about that and the weeps died down again. Finally, she murmured: "Suppose he doesn't ask me to marry him, Van? What then?"

"He will," I said. "If he doesn't, you make him. You tell him he's got to because you're —"

She yanked away from me, and for a long minute she stared at me, a funny look in her eyes. "You're really serious, aren't you?" she said, finally. "You're really asking me to do a thing like that!"

Then she turned and ran out of my flat, still crying, slamming the door behind her. For a minute I was going to go after her, try to talk her into it. But then I realized I didn't have to. She had the idea, now. When she calmed down, she'd go through with it. What else was there for her to do? I knew she was scared stiff of any operation, even if she could get the dough.

The next day at the Owen Advertising Agency where Vera and I both worked in the mail room, she didn't even speak to me. She acted sullen and pouty, all day. Other people in the office started noticing right away and soon they were kidding both of us about it. They stopped, though, when Vera burst out crying and ran

out to the Ladies' Room. That was good. I knew now that Harry Owen wouldn't lose any time hearing about it.

The whole thing worked out smooth and fast after that. I called Vera in a couple of days and she told me she was dating him. She said it was being done on the QT, though, that Harry didn't want the rest of the employees to know about it. Then she said: "You know something, Van, the joke's on you. I'm already beginning to like Mr. Owen — Harry — a lot. He's not so old, after all, and he's not so fat, either. He's kind to me, too, Van. Can you understand what that means to me after going with you? He isn't cruel like you. He doesn't do the — the things you used to do. I think this was a very smart idea of yours, Van. I'm not having any trouble forgetting you, at all."

"Good for you," I said and slammed the receiver in her ear. I don't know what I got so damned sore about, but I did. Wasn't everything working out the way I'd planned? But it bothered me, somehow. I got mean drunk that night, the kind of drunk I don't like to get. The next day I was all right, though.

It was about a month or so later and I wasn't sure whether Vera was beginning to look a little chubby already or if it was just my imagination, when she called me one night, told me she had to see me. I tried to shake her off but she insisted. She came up to my place.

She looked terrible, her hair not fixed right, kind of ratty looking and her eyes too dark underneath and with a kind of haunted look. She sat there, twisting her hands in her lap and told me how she and Harry Owen had gotten real cozy together and he'd told her he loved her, wanted to put her up in a swanky apartment and like that. But he never even came close to asking her to marry him. Well, today, one of the other girls in the office made a funny remark to Vera and she knew she couldn't wait much longer. So tonight she gave Harry the business. She told him.

"Van, he went crazy," she said. "He told me I'd have to get it taken care of, I'd have to. He'd pay for everything. I told him that was out. I told him I wouldn't go for an operation, no matter what, and he couldn't make me, and that my — condition was his responsibility and he had to marry me. Well, he really went wild, then. He cursed me and, all of a sudden, he grabbed me, and started choking me. Look."

She undid a little silken scarf around her throat and showed me the imprint of his fingers. I didn't know what to say, couldn't figure it. Harry Owen was one of these Man Of Distinction types, gray temples, clipped mustache, a little paunchy, but always well groomed. Always quiet and polite, too. Every inch a gentleman. I couldn't even picture him doing something like that. Something was wrong, somewhere. I'd

never even heard him raise his voice in the office. I didn't get it.

"What am I going to do, Van?" Vera said. "I — I'm afraid of him, now. No kidding. Van, he wasn't fooling. His eyes were murderous. He would have killed me right then and there, but I managed to break away."

I said: "You go home and get some rest. Try to forget about it. Maybe he'll calm down and be sorry and change his mind after he thinks it all over. What else can you do? Forget this crap about being afraid of him. He was just trying to frighten you. Guys don't kill girls for things like this, today. What have you been reading, *American Tragedy* or something?"

I talked to her some more, calmed her down, and got her out of my place. But the thing kept bothering me, all that night. I didn't sleep much. I knew that these quiet, gentlemanly guys like Owen were the worst kind when they did finally flip about something. I wasn't really so sure Vera had nothing to worry about. But it wasn't my business any more. This was between the two of them.

The next day, I noticed that the boss was grouchy and irritable, the first time I'd ever seen him that way. He looked pale and drawn and about ten years older, too, as though he hadn't slept very well. But late in the afternoon, I met Vera by the water cooler. Nobody else was around. She broke out in a big smile.

"It's all right, Van," she whispered. "He apologized today. And he said he'd be glad to marry me. He said it was just that the shock of finding out about my — you know — condition, was too much for him. But he was sweet as pie, today. Tonight he's going to drive me up to show me his country place in Westchester. And next week we'll announce the wedding. Isn't that swell, Van?"

I said I guessed it was and then somebody came along and we couldn't talk any more. At five o'clock, going down in the elevator with Joe Harvey, the office manager, it came to me that something was wrong. A guy doesn't change just like that. Not from one complete extreme to the other. And this taking her up to see his country place sounded a sour note to me. Down in the lobby, I told Joe Harvey I had a big date tonight, and would he loan me his car? He said sure.

I drove right to the block where Vera had a room and parked there and waited and watched. About seven-thirty, Harry Owen's big Lincoln swerved to the curb in front of the building and he went in and got Vera and the two of them drove off. I followed them.

They drove up deep into Westchester before the Lincoln turned off into a lonely dirt side road. I cut the lights on Joe's car, eased in behind them, way behind, because Owen would have suspected something if he'd seen another car behind

him on this lonely country lane. Then I saw him stop, about a quarter of a mile ahead. I slewed into the side of the road, cut the engine, quick. I got out and started to walk, keeping in the shadows, toward the red glow of the Lincoln's taillight, up ahead.

I was about ten yards from their car when I saw Harry Owen get out of the driver's side, walk around the car to the other door, open it and start to drag something out. I edged a little closer. What he was dragging out, I saw, was Vera. He was dragging her out by the legs and her skirt got hiked way up and the starlight gleamed on the whiteness of her thighs. Then Owen went around to the trunk compartment of the car and got out a spade. He held the spade under his arm while he dragged Vera's corpse into the woods. I followed him and saw the clearing where he was going to bury her, and then I got out of there, fast. I drove home.

All that night I was so excited I could hardly sleep, hardly wait for tomorrow. I knew it would be better that way. Be more of a shock to him. When nothing had happened by morning, he'd pretty well figure he was safe. I waited most of the next day, too, until the middle of the afternoon. Then I took some mail into Harry Owen in his private office.

"Hi, Harry," I said. "How's Vera?"

He took it nice. He just looked up quietly and said: "Vera? Oh, you

mean that little brunette you used to go with?"

*The one I used to go with.* I had to admire this guy, the way he'd got control of himself, even though he did look terrible. I said: "Yeah, that one."

"She doesn't work here any more," he said, fussing with papers on his desk, not looking up. "I got a call this morning, said she was resigning, had another job."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yes, Van. She was a nice girl. Too bad you two had a falling out. I'm busy, Van. Anything special on your mind?"

"Yes," I told him. "Vera. I'm wondering how she made that call this morning. Any phone booths up in those lonely Westchester woods? You know, where she's tucked in for the long sleep?"

He jerked almost out of his skin. His head went back so hard his neck snapped. I've never seen such a scared, sick look in anybody's eyes. His face looked like crumpled parchment. He didn't say anything. Just looked at me.

"She didn't quit any job, did she, Harry?" I said. "She just took a one way ride along a dirt road, off the Hutchinson River Parkway, with a guy who had her in some trouble."

"Van," he said. His voice sounded like a frightened child's. He tried to say something else but all he could do was keep saying my name over and over.

"Don't worry about it," I told

him. "I won't be greedy. But I think it's about time I got promoted, got a big raise, don't you, Harry?"

He said: "Go away, Van, for a few minutes. Leave me alone. Let me think."

"There's nothing to think about. I've been here long enough to get promoted, get more pay. Nobody will think anything. Not like what they would think if they knew about that grave up there in Westchester. I could take the cops there easy. I know just where it is."

"Wait a minute, Van," he said. Some of the color was coming back to his face. He loosened his collar. His eyes narrowed a little. "You're forgetting a few things. Vera and I were very — uh — circumspect. Nobody knows about our relationship. Not anybody at all. There's nothing to tie her in with me. I went back to her place, last night, and got rid of all her stuff, left a note written on her typewriter, explaining to the landlord that she'd gotten a better job in L. A. That angle's well covered. Van, the way it's set up, *you'd* be the one the police would jump on. Everybody in the office knew *you* were going with her, then had a fight when she got in trouble. It will just look like she let it go for a month, then really went after you. You got panicky — and took that way out. That's the way the police would figure it. So, you see, you've got no real hold on me."

I stared at him, unbelievably. That turned my guts over for a mo-

ment. But not for long. I laughed. "Nice try," I told him. "But police work is super-scientific these days. When they go over your car, they'll find proof that Vera was in it, last night. They'll go over that car with vacuum cleaners, with a fine tooth comb. There'll be plenty of evidence that you're the killer and you'll never in a million years get rid of it. The shoes you wore, the shovel. "I grinned at him. "A nice attempt to pass the buck, Harry, but it won't work. Let's talk about that raise some more."

I got to be Supervisor of the mailing department that day. With a big raise. And from then on I began living it up. I got a better apartment, a lot of clothes. My boss was a real good guy. Whenever I ran short I could always borrow a hundred from him. He wasn't in any sweat about me paying it back, either. Especially since I didn't overdo it. Poor Harry Owen wasn't enjoying life so much, though. He began to drink a lot. Even in the office, during the day, you could smell it on him. It started some talk but not much. So maybe business was bad or something and he was worried.

Once, I got curious, and asked him: "Why did you do it the hard way? Why didn't you marry the kid? She wasn't so bad."

He told me, then, that he was already married, although separated, and that his wife was against divorce. I borrowed an extra fifty from him, on that.

During that next month, I began to take it easy on the job, too. When I felt like taking an afternoon off or something, I did it. If I felt like sitting around, reading for awhile, I did it. Who was going to say anything? Harry Owen? It griped a lot of people in the office. They got jealous. I didn't care. The hell with them! One wise guy even said:

"Who does this guy Van think he is, a privileged character or something? I never saw a guy get away with so much. He must know where the body's buried or something."

The funny part was, he wasn't kidding. He just didn't realize it, that's all.

This went on for a month. Then one morning, in front of the whole office, when I came in an hour late, Harry Owen told me: "Van, you come in late one more morning, take another afternoon off, or sluff on the job any more, and you're through. You're fired."

I looked at him as though he'd said something in Arabic. "What?" I said. "Are you kidding?"

He'd aged badly in the last month but right now his jaw was set firmly. His eyes looked sunken way into his head and bloodshot from drinking so much, but they held mine steadily enough. "Try it and find out," he said.

There was only one thing to figure. The guy'd gone crazy. He couldn't do that to me. For this, for humiliating me like that, I was really going to rub his nose in some dirt. Now he

was really going to pay. I'd get ten grand out of him, or else. From now on I'd bleed him dry. But it was late afternoon before I got into his office to see him. By then he was pretty drunk. A kind of controlled drunk, so that he could still talk all right, and sit fairly straight in his chair. But he was loaded, no question, in spite of that.

He didn't even give me a chance. "Whatever you're going to say, skip it," he told me right off. "The honeymoon is over, Van. You have no more hold on me."

I got so mad I felt as though I was swelling, like a puff adder. My collar got too tight. "I haven't, huh?" I said.

"No, Van." He showed his teeth in a ghastly grin. "I moved it. It isn't where you saw me put it, any more. I put it where nobody'll ever find it. Never. So now what can you prove?"

It took me a moment to get it through my head. I said: "I can still go to the cops."

"Sure," he said. "And they'll go up there and find nothing, and slap you around for bothering them."

"Wait a minute. You couldn't have moved her. She's been there a month. She'd have been a mess."

He looked for a moment as though he was going to throw up. Then he got control, and said: "She was. Don't let's talk about it any more, Van. It's all over."

"You're bluffing!" I shouted it at him. "What do you think I am, a



chump? There wouldn't be enough left of her to move."

"Okay," he said. "Have it your way. Now get out, before I call someone to throw you out."

I went back to the mail room but I kept thinking about it and the more I thought the more I knew he wasn't bluffing. Yet he *couldn't* have done what he said. I had to find out. I borrowed Joe's car again that night and drove up there. Along that same dark, dirt road, to the same spot. It gave me the creeps a little. I hadn't brought a flashlight and in the dark it took me a little time to find the clearing. But I found it. The only thing was, he was right; he hadn't been bluffing. The shallow grave was still there but it was all dug up. It was empty. She was gone.

"I'll be damned," I said, out loud.

"Yeah," someone said, and I whirled around to stare into the blinding beam of three flashlights. Three flashlights held by cops.

They took me back into the city and I told the cops the whole story. I had to. They thought I'd killed Vera, buried her out there, just as Harry Owen had first said that they would. They'd gotten an anonymous phone tip about the corpse and where it was buried, earlier in the day. They'd gone out and dug it up. The same tip told them to watch me.

I told them, of course, that their phone tip had been Harry Owen.

They said they questioned him, after that, investigated him. He denied knowing anything about any of it. Apparently, as he had said, they weren't able to dig up any connection between him and Vera. They couldn't find anybody who'd ever seen them together, or knew they were seeing each other. They'd been circumspect, all right. He was clean. I wasn't, as far as the cops were concerned.

I knew what had happened. I'd pushed him too far. He'd finally decided to take a chance on winding the whole thing up, getting rid of me, by putting the cops on me. It hadn't been much of a chance. He'd realized that the police couldn't see anybody but me. It was cut and dried. They wouldn't investigate him, too much, Harry Owen figured. And he was right.

I couldn't talk the cops out of it and my lawyer couldn't convince the jury, either. After the trial he told me that he'd heard Harry Owen was drinking himself to death, had wound up in the Alky ward a couple of times, already. A lot of good that did me.

The stupid part about the whole thing, the Police lab worked on the remains. And like I'd heard it happens sometimes, Vera may have had all the symptoms, but according to those lab boys, it must have been something else, because they said she wasn't that way at all.

