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JOHN McCLOUD Editor
CHAS. W. ADAMS Art Director

E. A. TULMAN Managing Editor
R. E. DECKER Business Manager

MANHUNT VOLUME 1, NUMBER 6, JUNE, 1953. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of St. John Publishing Company), 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, New York. Telephone MU 7-6623. The entire contents of this issue are copyrighted 1953 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of St. John Publishing Company), under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, New York. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U. S. A.



The Faceless Man

BY

MICHAEL FESSIER

*Every town has a faceless man.
That man could be you.*

AT ONE time if anyone had suggested that the residents of Green Valley could conceivably form themselves into a mob, lusting for the blood of a fellowman, I would have called him insane. Now I know better. Green Valley isn't in the Deep South; it's in a midwestern farming state, which proves that lynching isn't a fault of geography but of humanity, And humanity happens to be a family we all belong

to no matter where we live. To those of you who have read about lynchings committed in places far from your homes and who have wondered what sort of a person a lyncher is, I have this to say: A lyncher is neither tall nor short, nor young nor old, nor male nor female, and he is faceless, but, under certain given circumstances and under certain given conditions, he is you and you and you and, yes, he is even me.

The chain of events which led the citizens of Green Valley a long way back down the path of evolution toward their original animal state began during the hot, dry summer when their crops were withering and they were worrying about their mortgages and other debts. Henry Rankins gave them something to talk about other than their troubles by taking Claude Warren, an ex-convict, into his home to live with him and help him run his farm. Claude was hardly more than a kid and his crime had not been committed against us nor among us, but he had served eight months in State's Prison and that was enough to set public opinion against him right from the start.

Perhaps the feeling against Claude might have been passive rather than active if it had not been for Orry Quinn. Orry was the third of Pete Quinn's shiftless sons and he had been employed as a farm hand by Henry Rankins until a week before Claude came along. Henry had fired Orry for general reasons of incompetence and, specifically, for having wandered off one evening to see his girl, leaving the cows in the shed restless and in pain from not having been milked. Any other farmer would have done the same thing under the circumstances and nobody would have been perturbed about Orry's being unemployed, a condition which had grown to be more or less chronic with him anyway, had not Orry seized the

opportunity to become a self-constituted martyr to social injustice. He claimed he had performed his labors faithfully and well, only to be removed on a trumped-up charge to make room for a felon, an ex-convict and, for all anybody knew, a potential murderer. This story was accepted at face value by most of the younger and more discontented non-working citizens of the community, and even men of substance and intelligence, who normally wouldn't have accepted Orry's sworn oath as to the date of his birth, began to place credence in it. Green Valley was composed of a close-knit group of families and they believed in taking care of their own. Whether or not they sympathized with Orry, they found it hard to understand why Henry Rankins would have passed up an opportunity to give a native son much needed employment in favor of an outsider who happened, in addition, to be a criminal.

Finally a small delegation called at Henry's farm to seek the answer. They found Henry in a shed cleaning eggs and placing them in cartons. Helping him was Claude Warren. Claude was a husky, clean-cut, tow-headed kid not much different than dozens of others in Green Valley, excepting that his skin was pale and there was a half-apologetic look in his eyes.

Henry, a small old man with wrinkled, leathery skin, seemed to know why the delegation was there.

"Would you mind taking a walk, son?" he said to Claude. "I think my good friends and neighbors want to have a talk with me."

Claude nodded, then hurried away, his head hanging as if he, too, knew the reason for the visit. Then Henry faced his friends and neighbors.

"Hello boys!" he said blandly. "How're things? How's crops? Been working hard? Been borrowing money from the bank? How much? Got any insurance in case you kick off and leave your families without support?" As he talked, his eyes seemed to be boring into those of each individual member of the group. "How're you getting along with your wives?" he went on. "Any truth to the rumor that one of you slapped his old lady in front of the kids? And how about your daughters? Do you know where they are of nights and what they do?"

He paused and waited as the others shifted their feet uneasily in the dust, avoided his gaze and remained collectively silent.

"You seem to be very uncommunicative today," Henry finally said. "By the way, boys, is there any little thing I can do for you? Do you, by any chance, want to ask *me* a question?"

They glared sullenly and hatefully at him, then turned in a body and walked back to their cars. By the time they had reached the road they had regained their voices

and they were muttering angrily among themselves.

Later on, the same delegation called on Sheriff Ben Hodges. They were thoroughly aroused now and they demanded that the sheriff do something about ridding the county of a known criminal who might at any moment turn out to be a menace to the peace and security of them all. Sheriff Ben was a big man and some of his weight was fat. He was well-disposed and given to indolence, being more inclined to sit in his easy chair and read books than militantly and actively to perform the duties required of his office. He had maintained his job throughout the years by giving the appearance of agreeing with everybody about everything and never taking sides in a public controversy. This time, however, he felt that he had to make a stand.

"Well, now," he said mildly, "as for that kid being a menace, I'm not so sure. You see he's a distant kin of Henry's—son of a cousin on his mother's side, I think—and Henry had him pretty thoroughly investigated before he took him in. Claude lived all his life in the city where they burn coal to make steel and the only patch of green he ever saw was in the public park where the police had signs forbidding him to walk on the grass. One hot evening, when the air was moist and full of smoke and soot, some boys his own age drove by in a car. They had girls with them and they took

Claude along for a ride in the country. It turned out that the car had been stolen and Claude was convicted of complicity in the crime." Sheriff Ben spoke as persuasively as he knew how, trying to make them understand so's not to have trouble with them. "I know," he conceded, "that Claude probably had sense enough to realize that those other boys really didn't own that automobile, but, still in all, when a kid's hungry for a breath of country air, he isn't going to be too particular how he gets it, is he?"

The delegation didn't understand and what's more, they didn't believe Sheriff Ben's version of Claude's crime. Rumor had given them an uglier and more interesting version and they preferred to believe that. They resented Sheriff Ben's attempt at cleaning up Claude's character. Claude was a criminal, they said, and, if the sheriff wanted to, he could find some sort of a pretext to run him out of the community. The implication was that, if the sheriff appreciated which side his bread was buttered on, he would do what was required of him. Sheriff Ben understood the implication. He had eaten the public's bread for many years and sometimes it had a bitter taste; it was buttered with humiliation. On this day he had no appetite for it, and he made the political mistake of openly antagonizing a group of representative citizens.

"As for being a criminal," he said,

"sometimes that's a state of mind and the result of circumstances. I don't suppose that there's many of us here who, at one time or another, couldn't have been in Claude's shoes. During prohibition, for instance, some of you farmers made hard liquor and some of you merchants sold it. Most of us drank it and I, being sheriff, violated my sworn oath by overlooking it." He stared steadily and defiantly at them. "That isn't all I've overlooked," he said, "and some of you wouldn't like it if I got more specific. In any event there're darned few of us who, according to the strict letter of the law and with a little bad luck, couldn't have a prison or a jail record hanging over us."

He rose and waved a heavy hand in dismissal.

"Come to see me again, gentlemen," he said. "As you know, I am always at your services. But the next time you come to me about that kid, who's working ten hours a day for a chance at a decent way of life, I'd appreciate it kindly if you'd have more to go on than your prejudices."

The delegation clumped angrily out of the office and Sheriff Ben realized that he had seriously jeopardized a job that perhaps he didn't deserve and, with it, the money he didn't at all times earn.

After that the citizens of Green Valley sullenly accepted Claude's presence among them. They didn't

offer him any physical harm; no individual would have thought of it, excepting Orry Quinn, and he, being a coward, would not have risked the attempt. They simply ignored Claude and, excepting for Henry Rankins and Sheriff Ben, the kid didn't have a friend or a speaking acquaintance in the community until Laura Hannifer came along. Laura was the only child of one of the oldest families in Green Valley. Her parents had pampered her a great deal and, because she had a will of her own, she was considered arrogant. She had just recently returned home from a visit with relatives in another part of the state, and one day she rode her horse up to Henry Rankins' house and got off and sat on the porch with him.

"Hello, Uncle Hank," she said to Henry, who was no kin of hers, "I just dropped in for a glass of milk and to stick my nose into your business. I understand you're harboring a dangerous criminal hereabouts."

"I sure have," said Henry, grinning at her. "A regular killer-diller."

"Good for you," said Laura. "I've been hearing about him and I understand that the citizens of our community don't like him. Well, anybody these people around here don't like has a long running start toward being my pal. I don't like most of *them*, either."

Then Claude Warren, his face smudged with grease from his working on the tractor, came around the

corner of the house and stood staring at Laura as if he'd never seen a girl before. Certainly he'd never seen a girl so healthy and tanned and with such golden hair and with such a friendly look in her eyes.

"Hi, Dirty-face," she said gaily to him. "Come on over and sit a spell." As he stood and goggled at her she laughed at him. "Don't be bashful," she said. "I came over here just to see you. Robbed any interesting banks lately?"

Her grin was so infectious and friendly that he grinned back at her and finally obeyed her command and sat beside her on the porch. Henry departed to get a glass of milk and, when he returned, Laura had already succeeded in thawing Claude out. He was talking to her, a little embarrassed, but with the eagerness of a kid who has long been starved for companionship.

It might have been sympathy and understanding on Laura's part at first, but it soon grew beyond that and presently everybody in Green Valley was discussing the outrageous carryings-on of Laura Hannifer with the ex-convict. The carryings-on weren't very spectacular. After attending a village dance and being frozen cold by the others, Claude and Laura contented themselves with hunting and fishing and riding horses together, and, in order to give Claude time for that, Laura helped him with his chores around Henry's place. The mere fact that Laura kept company with Claude,

however, constituted a howling scandal.

Ramsy Hannifer and his wife did their best to break up the affair. At first they pleaded with Laura, and then they threatened all sorts of punishment, but she defied them. She loved Claude, she declared, and she intended to marry him one day. Any interference from them, she told them, would only succeed in hastening the event. They knew her well enough to realize that she meant business. Finally, in the hopes that the whole thing was merely infatuation on Laura's part and that eventually she would come to her senses, they ceased to offer any open opposition to the affair. They had, however, a definite plan of action which they intended to adopt in case the thing went too far.

Other residents of Green Valley did not know of this plan and they were of the opinion that immediate and drastic action should be taken to end what they considered to be an intolerable breach of public morals. There was some talk of forming a citizens' committee to remove Claude forcibly from the community, but it is doubtful if anything would ever have been done about it if, one afternoon, Henry Rankins had not been found dead in a pool of blood on the floor of his barn. Jason Watters, the county tax assessor, who discovered the body, did not bother to investigate the cause of death. He ran from the

barn and called for Claude and discovered that Claude was nowhere in sight and that, in addition to this Henry's car was missing. Jason telephoned Sheriff Ben and then proceeded along the road to town, spreading the word that Henry Rankins had been murdered and that Claude Warren had disappeared.

By the time Sheriff Ben arrived at the farm, a dozen cars were parked in front of it and the barn was filled with men who milled in a circle about the body and disturbed or destroyed whatever evidence there might have been. This had not prevented them from forming opinions, however. They had picked up and handled and passed around various instruments, one of which they were certain had been used to crush Henry's skull, and they were in disagreement only as to which was the true weapon. Even if Sheriff Ben had been an expert, which he wasn't, he could not have gained much information from conditions as he found them. He ordered the others out of the barn and then telephoned Doc Doran, the coroner, to come get the body.

By the time Sheriff Ben came out of Henry's house after making the phone call, the crowd in the yard had doubled and they were excitedly discussing a new aspect of the case. Laura Hannifer, it had been learned, had also disappeared. Her worried parents didn't know her whereabouts, but they were afraid

that she might have eloped with Claude Warren. This was all the crowd needed to know. They scattered to their cars and the search for Claude and Laura was on.

Sheriff Ben went back to his office and waited. It was not long before Lonnie Hearne, his deputy, assisted by Orry Quinn and another volunteer posseman, came in, dragging Claude and Laura with them. Claude had evidently resisted arrest and he was considerably banged up and bloody about the face. Laura, whose clothes were torn, was breathing fire and defiance and still struggling in the arms of the two possemen.

"Caught 'em with the goods," Lonnie announced proudly. "They were in Henry's car and Claude had a pocketful of money that he didn't earn as no farm hand."

While Lonnie prodded Claude with his revolver, the two kids told their story. They had discovered that Laura's parents had been secretly planning to send her to California to live with relatives, and, aided and abetted by Henry, they had decided to get married. Henry, they claimed, had lent them his car and the money for the elopement and the last they had seen of him he was in good health. They had not known, they declared, that Henry was dead until Lonnie and the others arrested them.

"And that's the truth, so help me," said Claude.

"It's a damn lie and, this time,

nobody's going to help you," said Lonnie, viciously jamming the revolver against Claude's spine.

"Up until the present moment," said Sheriff Ben, knocking the revolver out of Lonnie's hand, "you're neither judge, jury, nor executioner for this commonwealth, Lonnie. You, Orry, let go of that girl and all of you clear out. I'll take over from now on."

After the others had made a reluctant departure, Sheriff Ben turned to Claude.

"Maybe you're telling the truth," he said. "I don't know. Anyway, I'm going to lock you up until we get a better idea of what the truth is."

Following a struggle with Laura, who insisted on being locked up too, Sheriff Ben succeeded in placing Claude in a cell. Then he sat and talked with Laura until her parents arrived and, after a great deal of difficulty, persuaded her to go home with them.

At first there were only a dozen men in front of the jail. They stood around and talked angrily but without purpose. Orry was one of them. After awhile he detached himself from the group and went into the village where he found a cluster of citizens gathered in front of the hotel discussing the case. He shoved his way into the center of the cluster and soon dominated the conversation by boastfully telling of his part in the capture and subjugation of Claude Warren, the murderer.

"How do you know he's a murderer?" someone asked. "Did he confess?"

"Well," said Orry, hesitating a moment, "not in so many words, but he *practically* did."

Then Orry went about the village and told his story to other groups of eager listeners, embellishing it as he went along. By the time he had reached the end of the main street he had dropped the word *practically* from his narrative. Claude, according to his story now, had *actually* confessed to having beaten Henry Rankins to death for his money. The news swept back up the street and presently even those who had heard Orry's first version of the story, were convinced that Claude had admitted his guilt.

"And what's more," Orry said importantly to a new group of listeners, "they're not going to let him get away with it. There's talk of breaking into the jail and stringing him up."

Soon word flashed through town and into the farming district that a crowd had gathered in front of the country jail for the purpose of lynching Claude Warren. This story in itself created the crowd which previously had not existed. Men, women and children flocked into the square facing the jail and waited expectantly for something to happen. Nothing happened. The crowd had no purpose or direction and they lacked leadership. Each individual member of the throng

considered himself not a potential participant in whatever was about to take place, but merely a spectator to what the others were going to do.

An hour passed and it began to grow dark and the crowd grew more and more restless. They were in the mood of an audience that has paid out good money to see a show, the opening curtain of which has been delayed too long. If they had been in a theatre they would have stamped their feet and whistled. As it was they milled about and looked questioningly at one another and began to murmur, at first petulantly and then angrily. Finally, the shrill piping voice of a small boy rose above the murmur: "*We want Claude Warren!*" Others eagerly picked up the cry and, as they began to roar in unison, they ceased to be individuals and became a mob.

Inside his office, Sheriff Ben sat at a desk with three loaded revolvers before him. He opened a box of shells and began to load a shotgun. Lonnie, the deputy, was nervously pacing the floor.

"You're not going to be fool enough to resist them, are you, Ben?" he asked.

"Can you figure out anything else to do?" asked the sheriff.

"It's crazy," said Lonnie. "They'll tear us to pieces. I ain't going to risk my life for no lousy killer. That ain't what I'm being paid for as a deputy."

"And you're not a deputy any

more," said Sheriff Ben. He ripped the badge off Lonnie's shirt front, unlocked the door and shoved him out. "Now go howl with the rest of the jackals."

He locked the door again and went back and sat at his desk. He listened to the growing roar from outside and he began to tremble and the palms of his hands were moist. In electing Ben Hodges sheriff, the citizens of Green Valley had not bestowed on him superhuman courage. Sheriff Ben was afraid.

The mob had now achieved purpose and direction and it was not long before they obtained leaders. The people of Green Valley had long looked to certain men for leadership in politics, civic enterprises, and church affairs. It was only natural that, in this current project, they looked to the same men for guidance. And those men, out of long habit, accepted the responsibility. Orders were given and eagerly obeyed and soon a heavy timber had been produced and was aimed as a battering ram at the door of the jail.

"Sheriff Ben," yelled Dolph Hardy, one of the leaders, "we'll give you one last chance to deliver Claude Warren before we come in after him."

There was a moment of waiting and then the door opened and Sheriff Ben appeared. Orry Quinn, who was in the forefront of the mob, yelled an obscenity at him and

the Sheriff made a move toward him. Orry scurried back into the crowd.

"If I lay my hands on you, Orry," said the sheriff, "I'll slap your face to pulp." Then he looked over the mob. "I am quite willing, however," he said, "to discuss matters with responsible members of this community."

"Cut out the talk," said Dolph Hardy. "We want Claude Warren."

The mob surged forward but Sheriff Ben held his ground.

"Who said you couldn't have Claude Warren?" He held out his hands placatingly. "Take it easy, boys," he urged. "I'm a reasonable man." As the men in front fell back a little and stared expectantly at him, Sheriff Ben continued to speak in a soothing voice. "The thing is," he said, "I don't want any mob tearing through my jail and ripping things apart. This is your own property and if you destroy it, you'll have to replace it out of your own pockets."

At this there was an angry, impatient murmur from the mob. The sheriff held out his hands for silence.

"I'm not saying you can't have Claude Warren," he declared. "I'll deliver him to whichever one of you wants to come in in an orderly and decent manner to get him." He looked at Dolph Hardy. "How about you, Dolph? You've been hollering your head off for him. Supposing you come in and get him?"

Dolph gave the sheriff a startled look and tried to press himself back into the mob. The others urged him on, however, and finally and reluctantly he came up the steps toward the sheriff. Sheriff Ben shoved him inside and then locked the door.

"There he is," Sheriff Ben said to Dolph, pointing to a corner of the office. "He's all yours."

Dolph turned and faced Claude Warren, who was sitting in a chair, his wrists bound by handcuffs and his face swollen and discolored from the beating administered by his captors. Claude looked up at Dolph and his eyes were alive with hopeless, helpless terror. Dolph stared into those eyes and then his mouth dropped open and he shifted his feet and seemed to be at a loss as to what to do next.

"Funny thing, Dolph," said the sheriff musingly, "but Claude looks a lot like your youngest son, Willie, doesn't he? Same size and age. Want to sock him a couple of times before you deliver him to the mob Dolph? Go right ahead. He can't hit you back, he's handcuffed."

Dolph cringed and turned his face away from the look of animal fear in Claude's eyes.

"Better yet," said Sheriff Ben, placing his hand on Dolph's arm. "Why don't you kill him right here and now, Dolph?"

Dolph stared unbelievably at Sheriff Ben and began to back toward the door.

"Why not?" asked Sheriff Ben. "You were so all-fired blood-thirsty a while ago. You were willing to *help* kill Claude. Do you mean to say you haven't got the courage to do the job all by yourself? And, look, Dolph, if you do, someday those people out there will be awfully grateful to you. If they kill Claude collectively tonight, someday they're going to have to answer for it individually to whatever God they believe in and, if they happen to believe in hell, why, they're going to have to roast for it. If you take sole responsibility Dolph, think what a terrible load you'll lift from the conscience of your neighbors in Green Valley."

He took Dolph by the elbow and led him over to the desk where the guns were.

"Would you like to shoot him, Dolph?" he asked. "Help yourself. Which do you prefer—a shotgun or a pistol?" As Dolph stared in horror at the array of weapons, Sheriff Ben opened a drawer and picked up a blackjack. "Or maybe you'd rather take this and beat his brains out," he said.

He extended the blackjack toward Dolph and Dolph stepped back, his face beaded with perspiration and his eyes sick with dread.

"Of course," went on Sheriff Ben, "your original intention was to hang him, wasn't it?" He turned and looked about him. "Now, let's see," he said, "where can I find a really good sturdy rope?"

Dolph turned from him and rushed to the door, clawing at the lock with shaking hands. Sheriff Ben unlocked the door for him and shoved him out into the opening in the face of the tensely expectant mob.

"It seems," said Sheriff Ben in a loud voice, "that Dolph doesn't want Claude Warren any more."

Dolph looked over the mob and it seemed that suddenly he hated every individual in it.

"Go home, you fools!" he cried. "He's only a kid!"

And then his large shoulders shook with sobs and he stumbled into the mob, pushing aside or striking at anyone who stood in his way and crying out loudly for all to go home.

The stunned mob milled about uncertainly for awhile, and then the rumor started and swept through the ranks that, in an adjoining county, the real murderer of Henry Rankins had been captured and was being held in jail. The mob became a group of shamefaced individuals and the individuals hurried from the scene as if fleeing from some nameless terror. Soon the square in front of the jail was deserted.

Of course the rumor that had dissipated the mob was as unfounded as the one that had created it, but, later that night, Doc Doran, the coroner, came into the office and found Sheriff Ben sitting at his desk, now cleared of weapons.

"I just finished the autopsy on Henry," Doc announced. "He died

of heart failure. He must have been pitching hay up in the loft when the stroke hit him and, in falling, he sustained those head injuries." Doc looked curiously at the sheriff, who seemed not to be listening to him. "Say, what's this I hear about a mob forming in front of this place?"

"They went home," said Sheriff Ben. "Their kids were sleepy."

Sheriff Ben sat slumped over his desk long after the coroner had left. He had, he realized, no more reason to be proud than any member of the recent mob. At first, in his abject fear of personal harm, he had wanted to hand Claude Warren over to the mob. Then he had decided that, no matter what he did, his days as sheriff of Green Valley were ended and his fear had turned into blind, unreasoning hatred and he had felt the urge to turn his guns on the mob and to kill as many of them as possible, not in the interests of justice, but to avenge himself against the others for having placed him in such a predicament. He had been spared having to make a choice between the two alternatives only because, out of his desperation, a third expedient had occurred to him.

That is why I say to you that a lyncher is neither tall nor short, nor young nor old, nor male nor female, and he is faceless, but, under certain circumstances and conditions, he is you and you and you and, yes, even me.

I am Ben Hodges.

MUGGED AND PRINTED

MICHAEL FESSIER, after staying thirteen years in Hollywood, where he wrote and produced motion pictures which were consistently successful, returned to the East to have another whack at his first love — novel writing. The result was *Clovis*, a fine follow-up to his first novel, *Fully Dressed and in His Right Mind*. Married and with two children, he also continues to turn out fine short stories like *The Faceless Man* in this issue. This is a terrifying account of what happens to an irrational mob that gets out of control.



IN THIS ISSUE:

TNT

Henry Kane is here with a Peter Chambers novelette that mixes a high-diving blonde and a \$50,000 policy with murder and mayhem. Richard S. Prather has thrown Shell Scott into a mess of stolen jewels and the people who stole them in a thrilling tale titled *Hot-Rock Rumble*.

TROUBLE

Harold Q. Masur is on tap with a Scott Jordan story about an empty safe deposit box — emptied on its owner's signature while the owner is in prison! And Evan Hunter starts his *Small Homicide* with a dead baby girl in a church, and takes us on the fascinating police hunt for the killer.

THREAT

Michael Fessier is back with *The Faceless Man*, the story of a sheriff, an ex-convict, and the angry mob that wanted his life. And Richard Deming has put a wounded man, his beautiful wife, and a hungry gunman together in a snowbound cabin in a story of flaring emotions and hate.

TERROR

Charles Beckman takes us to Ybor city, Tampa's Spanish district, for a murder committed in a dark alley, and the driving motivation of the man out to solve it. Emmanuel Winters is here with *The Caller*, the terrifying tale of a woman receiving phone calls from a stranger with one thing on his mind.

TIEUP

And wrapping up the issue with a solid knot is a story by Hunt Collins, plus *Crime Cavalcade*, plus Manhunt's *Movie of the Month*. A jam-packed June jamboree!