

GUILTY

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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THE NUDE IN THE DEEP FREEZE

by
JAMES ROSENQUEST

Rigor mortis had not set in
because the body was on ice



DEATH crashed the party. It was out of place in a party celebrating beauty and talent. Death is talented all right, because it can come to people in so many different ways, and it's always pulling new gimmicks. But it's ugly. As a private investigator, I saw death many times but never got used to it. To me, it's always ugly.

A private eye shouldn't let sentiment interfere with business. But once in a while I have to follow through on something even though there isn't a fee involved. Like when

I happen to be on the scene, and the thing smells so rotten that I want to smash windows to let in fresh air.

So I wound up with a dead girl for a client.

The party started early and would probably end fairly early, because they were working models and needed their beauty sleep. I was on hand as a sort of guard and chaperone, just in case a wolf or two tried to crash the affair. So far, the only guests there were invited ones, and I was enjoying myself thoroughly.

There were some thirty people there. Me, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Coburn, who owned the Coburn Model Agency. Their two assistants, Charlie Merritt and Ray Evans. The rest were gorgeous young ladies, with a handful of male models—but not enough to give me any competition.

I was surrounded by admiring lovelies, nonchalantly talking about some of the dangerous capers I had been involved in. But it was hard to concentrate, and at the same time try to take in red hair, blonde hair, brunette hair. Blue eyes, grey eyes, brown eyes. Figures

with slim, svelte curves and figures with full-blown—. Well, full-blown where it counts.

So I decided to change the subject and let the dolls talk for a while so I could relax and look into the beautiful faces and watch the inviting lips in motion. Besides, most of them did TV spot commercials and had musical voices, so it would be like hearing lyrics without music—no pianist was needed.

After a while, I got around to some of my pet peeves. "The main trouble with commercials is, they show you girls using something. Which is sort of misleading, because you don't come with the product."

A little brunette winked at me. "Maybe, but if we did, it might make the price too high for most people."

"Well, alright," I conceded grudgingly. "Another thing that annoys me is this inflation that most sponsors seem to be going in for lately. I mean, every product is double something or other, or it gives you twice as much in half the time, or it's two-in-one."

A startling blonde in a skin-

tight gown smoothed it down in places where there wasn't a wrinkle. "Good things often come in pairs," she said, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

I stared at the line where the top of the strapless gown left off and the milk-white skin began. "I get your point," I nodded gravely. "You win the argument." In that kind of debate, what man wouldn't give in?

I let them do most of the talking while I did an inventory, mentally ticking off the girls one by one against a list of names I knew by memory. And then I felt uneasy for the first time. Somebody was missing—Elaine Moran a blonde with a generous body; she should have been in the movies, wearing low-cut blouses and giving her all to an eager world.

Elaine Moran—the second reason, although unofficial—why I was there that night. I wasn't too sure what cooked, although, when she called me earlier in the day, she had hinted at something about unauthorized photos. She ex-

plained that she couldn't say much over the phone; she promised to take me aside at the party and spill the details.

But she wasn't at the party—not yet.

ELAINE made the kind of appearance that no one liked.

Mrs. Coburn had gone to the service porch at the rear of the big house, to get some more ice-cubes. I was in the middle of saying something unimportant, when a blood-curdling scream came hurtling into the living-room, knifing through the low hum of voices and ending in a crash of silence. Some one dropped a highball glass, and several models leaped to their feet. Heads jerked around. Ralph Coburn turned pale and called out to his wife what was wrong. There was no reply but a series of gasping sobs, as if Betty Coburn couldn't get her breath.

Ralph and I dashed for the doorway together, but I made it a little ahead of him and ran down the hallway that led to the rear of the house. Betty was leaning against the door

of the refrigerator for support, still sobbing, staring with bulging eyes at the deep-freeze in one corner.

The top of the big box was open, a small fog of chilled air hovering around the edges. While Ralph Coburn comforted his wife, trying to break through her daze, I decided it might be a good idea to look inside the deep-freeze. Two seconds later, I slammed the lid shut, the chill in my brain deeper than the cold in the box.

Elaine—nude and dead—had joined the party. . .

The next few hours were a dizzy, confused nightmare. Ralph had taken Betty Coburn into a bedroom and made her lie down until the doctor arrived and put her into a sort of open-eyed stupor with a powerful tranquillizer. Police milled around the grounds and through the rooms like a small army in blue uniforms. Questions were asked and statements taken down, but there wasn't a thing to be learned.

I stood in the center of the living-room, my hands deep in my pockets and my teeth grinding in frustration and

rage. I kept swearing to myself that somebody would pay for this, in what I thought was an undertone, until I became aware that somebody was staring at me. I looked up. My old buddy, detective-sergeant McKesson, loomed before me like the Rock of Gibraltar.

"Well, if it isn't Johnny O'Rourke," he greeted me sourly. "What's the matter, boy? You seem to be taking it hard. Did you lose out on a fee?"

In no mood for kidding, I took it straight. "No, Mac, it's not a fee that bothers me. I considered Elaine a friend."

"And one of many. How good?"

"What?" I snapped irritably.

"How good a friend was she?" He repeated patiently, as if talking to a child.

"I'd give my right arm to have her alive right now. And my left arm to nail the killer. That's how good."

"A trade like that wouldn't make it pay to renew your license next year."

I shook my head. "It would be worth it, Mac."

He grunted. "So you do have

feelings, after all. But enough of the chit-chat. What do you know, if anything?"

I closed my eyes wearily and tried to think, and said shortly: "Not much. Not much, Mac."

Looking up again, I saw him fixing me with what was supposed to be a penetrating gaze. "Don't hold back on me, Johnny," he warned.

"Don't give me that withholding-information routine." I muttered, then sighed with resignation. "So all right. She called me earlier today. Said something about unauthorized photos, but wouldn't tell me more until she met me at the party. That's it."

"You mean she might have been working for another agency on the sly, and—?"

I waved away the question impatiently, not waiting for the rest of it. The first cog slipped into place in my brain, in a familiar pattern, and I hoped the rest would start meshing soon until I had the whole thing working.

"Of course not. You know, Mac, she did meet me here, and she did tell me something," I said slowly. I saw his eye-

brows shoot up, and guessed what he was thinking, so I hurried on.

"No, I don't mean that she told me something, in so many words. I didn't see her until Betty Coburn found her in the freezer. But the fact that she's dead tells me that they were the kind of photos a model would n't want peddled around."

The shaggy eyebrows went down again, frowning now. "I didn't think she was the type who would pose—you know what I mean."

I tried to rub the sudden headache out of my forehead with a weary hand. "She wasn't and she didn't. I'm sure of that. Somebody must have taken some nude studies without her knowledge or consent, and she found out somehow."

McKesson bit off the end of a small cigar and spat it out. "Got any ideas how and who, maybe?"

"Not yet, but I intend to find out. Mind if I look around some more?"

"Help yourself, but be sure to cut me in."

I nodded, and shuffled off through the crowd of scared,

crying models and busy police. Ralph Coburn was darting about among the models, clucking sympathetically, like a mother hen among her chicks. Charlie Merritt fumbled nervously with a shirt sleeve while he answered another round of questions, and Ray Evans was draining a glass with trembling hands. Betty Coburn was probably fast asleep by now—if they had a new tranquillizer that powerful.

A male model whom I disliked, a pretty boy named Rocky Shore, was fumbling in his wallet for something, and a wad of large bills fell out. He retrieved them quickly and stuffed them back in. I made a note of it.

WHEN I got back to the service porch, I had it to myself. The body was gone. The police photographers had taken their pictures—and few people would ever see *those*. The fingerprint men had done their stuff and left. So now the corpus delicti was established—which meant that any fool could see that a crime had been committed. So now all we had

to do was find out why, and more important: Who?

I inspected the scene thoroughly this time, searching every square inch of floor. I even looked inside the refrigerator. I forced myself to look inside the big freezer. I got down on my hands and knees.

Then I found something. I stood up slowly, turning it over in my fingers, then palmed it and put it in my pocket. I wasn't sure what it meant, if anything, but I was sure going to find out.

On my way out, McKesson looked at me questioningly, but I shrugged and held out my empty palms, and made a fast exit.

The next day turned out to be busier than I expected it to be. A call on McKesson just to verify the cause and time of death: Elaine had been struck heavily on the back of the head, then placed in the freezer. She might actually have been alive but died of suffocation, never regaining consciousness.

The thought made me even madder. The time of death could not be determined, be-

cause the freezing of the body threw everything off schedule, including old *rigor mortis*.

The vicious brutality of the murder started me thinking even harder, and I was busier than a bee on benzedrine. The next stop was the Coburn Agency.

The secretary, whose face was blotchy under heavy make-up, ushered me into Ralph Coburn's office—a swanky setup, but I didn't have time to admire the furnishings. I threw myself into a chair and regarded Ralph somberly. His forehead was creased and he looked sick, as if he had a hangover, and I couldn't blame him.

I had tentatively crossed him off my list of suspects because I knew him fairly well. Besides which, he was making enough from commercial photography without having to need a side-line in pornography. So I didn't beat around the bush.

I asked, "Did Elaine ever say anything to you about some nude pictures?"

He shook his head sadly. "No, but I wish she did. No telling how many other of our

models are being sold under the counter right now. Something like that, cropping up some day when one of our girls has hit the jackpot in Hollywood, might make it very embarrassing for her."

I thought that over—another angle. "They might not only be selling under the counter now—some of them might be held in reserve for the future, for a little blackmail. Did you think of that?"

Ralph Coburn wrung his hands, a gesture of distress and helplessness. "Good heavens, no! I suppose it's possible." Then he seemed to remember something, and reached into a drawer and drew out an envelope and handed it to me.

The envelope bore the message, "To be opened in case of emergency." Lifting the flap, which had already been opened, I drew out a photo of Elaine. She was completely naked and in the act of bending over. It would have been appetizing under other circumstances.

"It came in the mail this morning, in another envelope," Ralph volunteered. "Sergeant McKesson, has seen it. He wants it as evidence, but said

to hold it for a while in case you dropped in."

"Thoughtful of him." I muttered, and returned the photo quicker than I would have done if she were still alive. "By the way," I added, "is everyone at work today?"

"Some of the models are home, with cases of the jitters. Some have no assignment today. My wife is at home in our town apartment, under the care of a nurse. We closed the bill house temporarily."

"Mind if I look around the studio?"

He had no objections, so I went over the place with a fine-toothed comb, as they say, ignoring the curious glances. Finally I found it. In a sort of large supply closet next to the women's dressing room, a wood support with a clothes hook on it slid aside in a hidden groove and revealed a small hole, but a hole big enough to let somebody take pictures with a miniature camera. This narrowed down the field.

I returned to the office and asked Coburn if he could give me a key to the closed bill house. He fished it out and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I said. "I don't expect to be using it until tonight though, after you close shop. There are some other errands first."

TIME went fast. I checked on some addresses. Men's addresses. A few skeleton keys got me into the apartments, as nobody was home to let me in. I searched carefully, but came up with a big zero. But I had found matchbooks in one of them, from a dive in the downtown area, and it gave me an idea. I got into my car and barreled down the Freeway, turning off on Spring Street.

I parked and walked a block to a big magazine and paper stand presided over by a crippled, sixty-year old news "boy." We were friends, and he had given me some valuable tips in the past. So we chatted for a while, and then I got to the point.

"Joey," I asked, "what's new in sexy photos lately?"

He scratched the stubble on his chin. "Don't handle the stuff myself, of course. But you might try the *Pot of Gold*, over on Third Street."

I bought a paper with a five-dollar bill and walked away without the change. It was cheap enough for the information.

The "Po:" was a cheap joint, reeking of cheap draft beer and cheap bar bourbon. There was a cheap-looking bartender, so I got what I wanted with another five. I reeled off three good descriptions of three men, and on the third one he nodded and said the guy came in fairly often.

"He always sits at the same corner table. Always alone. Then after a while he gets company. Funny thing. The other guy orders drinks, then walks out a few minutes later. I could swear that they leave a wad of change—I mean bills, not small change—and the fellow you described pockets it."

"Ever see anything change hands? Like photographs?"

"Nope. Told you all I know." The bartender walked down to the far end and began to make a project out of wiping the top of the bar with a rag. I knew that was all I could get out of him, but it was enough.

It was getting dark when I returned to my flat. There were still two calls to make. The first was the town residence of the Coburns. Ralph answered in a taut voice. I had one question: What made Betty Coburn look in the freezer last night? Simple enough—they hadn't used it in months. His wife thought she heard another hum over and above the one made by the refrigerator when she went back to the service porch. So she checked to see if the freezer was on, and why. And found Elaine.

I thanked him and said I wouldn't be needing the key after all, and would mail it to him. The first part was a lie, because I had a hunch, and would use the key after all—but nobody had to know that.

On the second call, there was no answer. I let it ring twenty times to make sure, then hung up with grim satisfaction. Strapping on the holster and the .45, I donned my coat and ran downstairs and out back to the garage. The car had wings as I urged it up the winding roads to the hill house. I thought I saw a small

light go out somewhere inside, as I braked the car in front of the house and leaped out. I checked the rear of the lot to make sure, but there was no other car in sight.

Of course not. He would have parked it far away, in a secluded spot, and walked to the house.

Using Coburn's key, I let myself in noisily and turned on all the lights after pulling the shades down. I walked around the living room with heavy feet, whistling, as if I had no idea that I had company.

My right hand was inside my coat, feeling the comforting metal of the .45. I looked in every room, first peering through the cracks of each open door to make sure I wasn't ambushed. I didn't miss the johns, even pulling back shower-curtains. Where the hell was he? Or had my hunch been all wet?

Gloomy, I returned to the front room and stubbed out a half-smoked butt in a clean ash-tray. *Clean?* I looked again, and really saw the other butt for the first time. It was out alright, but that wasn't the

point. After last night's murder party there should have been one of two things: either the trays should be full, or else they would all be clean if the Coburns or some friends had done some housecleaning before the place was locked up.

All the trays were clean except this one—and it now contained two stubs. Mine, and some one else's, here, *now*.

Whistling a low, off-key tune, I strolled casually to the service porch and stared at the big freezer. Then, with quick steps I crossed to the far corner, and turned the handle that fastened the lid down. After all, I didn't actually *know* that there was somebody inside it. I strode away fast, because I didn't want to hear any pounding noises.

But as I walked through the big house toward the front door, my steps got slower. And when I glanced into a hallway mirror, and saw the look in my own eyes, I knew it was all wrong. I found a telephone and dialed a number. Then I went back to the service porch, opened the catch on the

freezer, and threw back the lid.

I stood back with my .45 in one hand. "OK., Charlie," I said in a soft voice, "you can come out now."

The .45 and I kept him company until the police came.

McKESSON fingered the small brown leather button I gave him, shaking his head. "I don't know how they missed it," he growled, red-faced. "Somebody is going to get chewed out!"

I shrugged. "Don't take it hard, Mac. Like I said, it was wedged all the way into a crack in the wall behind the freezer, and it's the same color exactly. I wouldn't have found it myself if I didn't come back tonight"—which was sort of stretching the time-element, but no harm was done.

McKesson was already briefed on my leg-work in the studio and at the *Pot of Gold*, and was a little annoyed that I hadn't told him earlier, but he had no real beef.

"You see," I explained, lighting his cigar for him, "since I was sure that Elaine would never voluntarily pose

for nude pictures, I guessed that they must have been taken in the agency studio on the sly. Like when some model had to make a complete change—getting into a bathing suit, for example."

McKesson blew a cloud of blue smoke, and smiled wryly. "So then you found the peep-hole in the storage room."

It was my turn to be surprised. "You knew about that?"

"Naturally. Or do you still have the notion that the police just bumble through every case?" He snorted disgustedly. "Also, for your enlightenment, we deduced that Charlie Merritt must have arrived at the hill house first, so as to meet with Elaine by arrangement and put the first bite on her. She put up an argument and he conked her. He realized that if the body was found, all dressed up, we would know that she arrived before the party started."

Nodding, I broke in. "What I figured. So he stripped her naked and put her in the freezer, which had a double purpose. It served to hide the body until he could get rid of

it. By turning on the freezing mechanism, he fouled up the time of death." I frowned. "But how did you settle on Charlie Merritt?"

McKesson grinned at me. "We did some searching, too. But legally..." I avoided the sharp glint in his eyes. He went on, "There was nothing in his apartment—as you probably know, Johnny—so we searched his car. We found her clothes. Merritt removed the back seat and stuffed them in there and replaced the seat. We also found a stack of nude photos, same place."

"Never thought of that," I murmured. "Well, then I guess that makes us even up."

"That it does, Johnny. We found the clothes and the photos. You found the button, and remembered seeing Charlie Merritt fooling with his coat sleeve at the party. He realized where he must have torn it off, and came back to look for it—and hid in the freezer when he heard you come in."

"Some gall," I ground out bitterly. "Hiding in the same place where he hid Elaine's body!" Then I thought of

something else. I almost remarked that I never did find the jacket with the button missing, but caught myself in time. "Where did you find his coat?"

McKesson chuckled. "Oh, *that*. It wasn't in his apartment. We checked at the dry-cleaner's also—no dice. Guess where it was?"

The light dawned on me. "In his car, under the back seat?"

"Right." McKesson laid a hand on my shoulder. "A little fatherly advice, Johnny. We appreciate your help—but next time you find a clue, don't sit on it for twenty-four hours. Check?" He lumbered off without waiting for a reply.

So Charlie Merritt had tried to think of everything, but the fickle finger of fate still put the tag on him. I was very happy that I had decided not to play judge, jury, and executioner all in one.

It would take longer, but the State would take care of Charlie, after he sweated for a while.

Besides, a gas chamber is just as stuffy as a freezer.

THE END