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The Promise

BY RICHARD
WELLES

Any man will run from the electric chair. But Joe was running because they wouldn't execute him if they caught him.

MY BROTHER Joe was hiding. Somewhere in the shadows of the city he crouched in terror, trying desperately to evade the law, the men who would lock him up.

It's a funny thing, the way different people react to circumstances. Take Joe and me, for instance. During the war he was brave, almost calm in the face of some of the most

brutal fighting men have ever seen, while the toughest battle I fought was against the gnawing fear inside me that told me continually to turn and run. But later on things were different . . .

Toward the end of the war we were both captured and spent eight months in a POW camp. It was no picnic for me, but it was so much of a nightmare to Joe that he cracked completely and was almost crazy by the time the war ended and we got out. I talked to the Army psychiatrist about it, afterwards, and he used a lot of big words, but it wasn't hard to understand. Joe had claustrophobia, something deep down in the recesses of his mind that made being locked up a horror to him.

And that was why he was hiding now.

He was hiding because his wife, Laura, was dead, and so was Nick Mantell, the nightclub entertainer. Joe had come home early that afternoon from work and found them together in his bed. It must have hit him like a ton of steel, Laura and another man, and he got hold of a gun and shot them both. Then he ran.

I thought about this as Sergeant McKean tried to put his feelings into words. "I'm sorry, Al," he said. "I can't tell you how much."

If you're wondering why McKean knew me well enough to call me by my first name, I'll explain, and then you'll understand why the murders hit me doubly hard when I was

called in and told about them. Because, you see, Joe came out of the Army and married Laura and got a job in an office, but I came out and became a cop . . .

"What made her do it?" I asked McKean. "What made her cross Joe up for a punk like Mantell?"

"Who knows?" McKean said. "Women do some goddamn queer things at times. Some of them are just born bad, I guess." He looked at me, and put a hand on my shoulder. "Listen, you take a few days off. I'll fix it up."

"No!" I said. "*Don't you realize the one thing my brother fears more than anything else is being locked up?* And he knows this town — he knows what our juries always do when a man commits an unwritten-law murder here. He knows that, some places, a man who kills a cheating wife always gets acquitted, and other places the guy gets the chair like any other kind of murderer, but here juries make a crazy compromise and give the guy guilty with recommendation of mercy — life imprisonment."

I turned away. "Jesus, McKean," I said, "Joe'll never give himself up to any other cop — he'll kill anyone else who tries to take him. That's why I've got to go after him and take him in . . ."

McKean didn't answer for a minute. Then he said, "All right, Al. All right. But you understand that we can't just stop dead while you're looking for him."

So the wheels began to grind. All the bus depots and railroad stations were checked, and so were the car-rental companies and airports. Every exit from the city was blocked up tight. And McKean figured they'd get Joe this way.

I didn't go along with the theory. I knew my brother better than anyone else; I knew what he'd do when he realized people were trying to find him and lock him up. His one thought would be to hide, hide someplace where they'd never think to look. Someplace he'd be safe from the men who wanted to lock him up.

I tried to think where he could be. I sat for hours trying to think of where he'd run, and then, suddenly, it hit me.

I got into my car and pushed my way through the traffic toward the river. When I came to the ravine, I pulled up, and stumbled down the steep hill to the dirt road. The bridge was a couple of hundred yards down the road, and when I reached it, I stood there for a minute and looked up.

Three hundred feet above me, the bridge was a black shadow against the crimson of the evening sky. I scrambled over the broken ground to the bridge foundation on the left side of the ravine. There was an old garbage can there, and I inverted it and stood on it, so I was able to reach the ledge where the girders stretched themselves upward and across the chasm. Joe was

taller than me; he'd have been able to reach it without the garbage can.

Finally, I reached the top. A catwalk, one yard wide, stretched from one end to the other, with a low handrail running along one side. I stepped onto it gingerly and began to inch my way forward. I was only a foot away from the end when I fell, and for a tense moment I dangled in space, and as I hung there I felt my gun slip from its holster and hit the ground below. It made a crashing sound, doubly loud in the silence, and then I heard a bullet scream past my ear.

"For God's sake, Joe," I yelled. "It's me — Al. It's me." And then there were no more shots and I regained my footing.

I saw him then, sitting there in front of me, his eyes glassy and staring, his hands hugging his knees. He was doing something I hadn't seen him do in twenty years — he was crying.

I walked up to him and took the gun from his hand. "Easy, kid," I said. "Easy. It's all right now."

He couldn't talk for a minute, and then the words came in a rush. "Don't let them lock me up, Al," he said. "You know they'll lock me up for life if you take me back and put me on trial. Promise me you won't let them lock me up — I couldn't take it. Promise me . . ."

Something inside my chest was crushing hell out of me. "I promise," I said. Then I pointed his gun at his heart and pulled the trigger.