

No More Manhunt?

VOL. 1, NO. 1

MANHUNT

JANUARY, 1953

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MANHUNT • Volume 1, Number 1, January, 1953. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$1.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of St. John Publishing Company) 345 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, New York. Telephone MU 7-6623. Application for second class entry is pending at the Post Office, New York, New York. The contents of this issue are copyrighted by Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of St. John Publishing Company) under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under International 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, 345 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.

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The Set-up

BY SAM COBB

It was a perfect opportunity. Too perfect to pass up, when the dough in the drawer was a passport to Francie and to everything else he wanted.

IT WAS late at night, and I sat around the station house, idly thinking that my newspaper needed me here like it needed a hole in its columns, when the homicide call came in.

Perkins, from the *Globe-Press*, jumped up and grabbed the address from the desk sergeant, and said, "C'mon, I got my car outside. The company pays for the gas and the burned rubber."

I nodded and we headed for the car. Perkins revved it, made a sharp left turn out of the police lot, and we were off.

"Ain't we got fun?", he asked, driving with one hand and buttoning his shirt collar with the other.

"Dropdead," I said. Mechanically, I watched him fumble with the button and then the tie, but my mind was a million and a half miles away.

"A ten says we get a front-page story this time. I've got a hunch." Perkins was young, and he chatted the way he always did when there was the scent of excitement.

"Just think about driving the car

and we'll be all right," I told him.

I would have taken the punk's money easy enough if I had ten bucks to cover the bet, but I didn't have a sou to my name. My paycheck was sliced up more ways than a restaurant pie, and between the bookies, bartenders and a chick named Francie, who knew how to drive me half-crazy, I was in hock up to my elbows.

"You ain't listening," Perkins said, as we slowed down behind a bus driver who acted like he had an inside tip that his company owned Eighth Avenue from curb to curb. "I asked you if you thought it might be a perfect crime. I never covered one of those."

"Naw, you've been reading too many mysteries. Why don't you try comic books for a change; they're educational, help you in your job." He looked grumpy and maybe for a few minutes he'd let me alone. I hoped so. I had been thinking about Francie all evening and I couldn't stop. I had to figure out something to tell her tonight.

She was a nice kid when you had the old mazooma, but when your pockets dried up, so did she. When the horses were hitting she couldn't get close enough. Now that nothing was hitting she was going to cut me off. I couldn't let her go. Never mind what was wrong with her. I had to come up with some awful good promises tonight when I saw her, or some awfully good dough.

Perkins turned to me. "I read comic books too. So what?" he said.

"Keep it up," I said. "That's how guys become managing editors, just reading comic books, that's all. Now get off my back, Junior."

He didn't open his mouth for the next five minutes, and I didn't say anything either. I just sat there, trying to think of something, but nothing came up that sounded like quick money in the bank.

We pulled up sharply in front of a brownstone house in a neighborhood that couldn't make up its mind about whether or not it was respectable. We were about twenty seconds behind the prowl car. Half-heartedly, I stepped out and acted like a reporter. We didn't have to get past the vestibule to find out what happened and who did it. Standing by the hall pay phone was a mangy character, sobbing, surrounded by a bunch of people who didn't seem to speak English. He did, though, and you couldn't stop him from talking once he saw Kozlewski, the cop, a few steps

ahead of us.

"Me! I did it!" he screamed. "I killed her like this —." He shot his hands out in the air and clenched an imaginary throat, shaking as if he had the chills.

Perkins turned to me and grabbed my arm. "He must have strangled her," he said. Sometimes this Perkins acts like he's brilliant.

Kozlewski knew me from before and he nodded, which meant I'd better get his name spelled right. Then he turned to the crowd bunched in around us. "Vamoose. Scram. Get lost," he said. He held his man firmly. "Now speak slow, Buster, so I can understand you, and start from the beginning." Perkins and I reached for notebooks. This character started talking.

"I came home tonight from work," he said. "It was a little earlier than usual, but still it was late. I work a funny shift.

"I started up the stairs to our apartment. Halfway up I saw a man just leaving our door. I thought maybe he was selling something, so I didn't think too much of it. When I walked in my wife looked surprised. She was just putting away a bottle and carrying two glasses into the kitchen. She was only wearing a housecoat. It was open all the way. She had nothing under it."

He had to stop to compose himself. The poor slob. In a second he was ready to continue.

"I asked her who the guy was and what was happening. She shrugged

her shoulders and said something about me not bringing home enough money to give her what she wanted and she knew how to make it." All of a sudden, like that she said it to me. I don't remember what I said. I grabbed her neck and squeezed until she turned blue and fell to the floor. I couldn't run away. I came downstairs and called the police."

He had to lean against the wall. The small hallway was smoky and booming with chatter. Kozlewski motioned to a fat old lady who was clucking away.

"Which apartment is his?" he asked. She pointed upstairs and said, "Number Two."

Kozlewski grabbed this character by the arm and we all headed upstairs. He probably figured when the detectives came they'd ask about the place and he'd better look it over. Very thorough, I thought, especially on an open-and-shut case.

He took a quick look at the not-so-pretty body on the floor and let his eyes wander over the room. It was sloppy, but nothing unusual.

"Okay," Kozlewski said. "Let's head back downstairs so I can call in." The character was still whimpering. I turned to Perkins and muttered, "You head down and see if you can get some quotes from the guy. I'll stay here for a minute and see if I can pick up notes on the room and maybe find a picture of the babe. We can swap later."

It sounded all right to Perkins, and Kozlewski didn't argue because

he still wanted his name spelled right.

When they left I looked around. There was a bureau in the far corner with a drawer slightly open. I walked over to it and started to leaf through the drawer.

Halfway down, under some sweat-ers and slips, my hand touched something and suddenly turned to ice. It was a roll of bills. We're back in business, Francie, I thought to myself. Instinctively, I looked to the door, but no one was there. I started to edge the money toward my pocket. Then, as I turned my head back, I glanced into the mirror over the dresser.

My back grew prickly and the short hairs on my spine played ping-pong with the balls of sweat which suddenly appeared there. She was moving. Sitting up and rubbing her throat. Watching me, staring at the green bundle in my hand. In another second she'd be composed enough to scream, "Thief!"

I shoved the money in my pocket and took three quick steps toward her, cursing the weak joker downstairs who didn't know he was crying over nothing. Then I found my hands were clutching her blue-marked throat until my fingers were like white pieces of steel twined around her neck. I smiled as I thought for a second about Perkins and his perfect crime. "You aren't gonna holler, sister," I heard myself muttering. "No cheap tramp is gonna make me lose my girl."