

# GUILTY

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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# THE SHOWDOWN

by  
GIL SCHECHTMAN

Bernie was getting out of prison. Could he stay top dog with his former gang?



THERE were five of them waiting in the one-room cabin. Nothing had been said for an hour, and Stella Carney was becoming very tired of the silence and the tension and the hot, sick smell of five people in a room not big enough for two. They had been holed up for two long months and it had seemed to Stella more like two years.

"How long a drive is it from Joliet?" Kyle asked no one in particular. He didn't look up as he said it, but kept his face on the cards set out in front of him. He picked up a red jack and put it on a black queen.

"About two hundred miles," Racowski answered after no one else said anything. "Four hours, maybe a little more."

"You sure Bernie's getting out of stir today?" Kyle asked

indifferently, trying to keep it casual.

"That's the word," Corrigan said, "at twelve noon." He was sitting at the wooden table peeling the paint off with his finger nails. Corrigan owed a lot to Bernie. Seven years in Leavenworth for a postal violation had sucked the guts out of Corrigan, and when Bernie had picked him up he had been nothing. Bernie had turned him into a wheel man, steady, sure, not afraid to take chances with an automobile if he had to.

"Maybe Bernie don't know where we are," Lud Krauss growled. He was pacing back and forth like a caged animal. Bank tellers in seven states would have recognized the wild cruelty in his eyes and the restrained ferocity of his huge ape body. Bernie had been able to keep Krauss under control. But when Bernie had gone back to Joliet Kyle hadn't been so successful in keeping Krauss in line. Lud had gotten out of hand and killed a bank guard in a hick town in Tennessee and they had been holed up for two months because of the heat it had generated.

"He knows where we are," Corrigan said. "That's the word I get from Joliet. Anyway, he can use his head. He knows we're holed up and he knows we'd go to the cabin."

"Yeah," Kyle said, picking up the cards. "I suppose so."

Stella looked at Kyle out of the corner of her eye from the cot where she lay reading a magazine. She wondered how Kyle felt.

Kyle had come a long way since Bernie had taken the fall eight years ago and had gone back to Joliet because an eager state trooper had recognized him from a wanted poster for an old supermarket job. Kyle had taken over the gang without a murmur. He had done it with coolness and without trouble. "Well boys," he had said, "I guess I'll run things now. Any objections?"

There had been none. Racowski was a follower. Corrigan was too tired to quarrel; he wanted to be left alone and to drive and that was all. Krauss was an ox with a gun and no brain. So Kyle had taken over. He had certainly come a long way from being

the punk reform school graduate that Bernie had picked up in a skid row tavern. And with Bernie gone he had moved up even faster, gaining the assurance he needed after a couple of successful jobs.

He had taken the gang and he had taken Stella just as casually. "I do Bernie's job," he had said, "and I sleep in Bernie's bed. Be there tonight."

And she had been there. What did it matter? She had had seven lousy years with Bernie. It couldn't be worse. Only it was, a little. Because Bernie was only bad mean when he was drunk or when things weren't going well, but Kyle had a mean dog in him all the time and he fed it with Stella. He took her in bed as brutally as he might mug some bank teller who didn't move fast enough.

And then, after Krauss dropped that guard in Tennessee, it was even worse because they were all cooped up together.

And then, as if things weren't bad enough, they got the word that Bernie Frank

was being released. There could be no doubt that he would head back to the gang. None at all. So it was going to be Kyle or Bernie, one of the two, and they all knew it. Kyle *could* step down; but he wouldn't. The step down was a long one and once you made it you never came up again. Or Bernie *could* set up another operation somewhere; but he wouldn't. He had worked too hard to weld four indifferent punks into a smooth group.

So it was a showdown; Kyle or Bernie. And showdowns made Kyle jumpy. Stella had the scars to prove it.

For the past two nights Kyle didn't sleep. He paced the floor and he laid out the cards and he raised hell with Stella and then finally he made a decision. That morning Krauss had gone out behind the cabin in the woods and dug a hole, eight by six by two. And everyone knew what that meant. *When* it would happen, *how* it would happen, they didn't ask. But *that* it would happen, they knew.

"I wish to hell he'd hurry,"

Kyle said slowly, banging down the cards.

"Two hours more, maybe a little longer, that's the way I figure it," Racowski said.

IT wasn't two hours, it was five hours, before they heard an automobile taking the rough road through the woods to the beginning of the foot path which led to the cabin. In that five hours Kyle had lost some of his cockiness. The cards had been thrown to the floor. He had asked Stella for a cigarette and when she hadn't had one he had slapped her and thrown her back on the cot. Like a dog, Stella had thought. Fifteen years of it altogether, seven with Bernie, eight with Kyle, and she still wasn't used to it.

The sound of the car motor stopped. Bernie had come to the footpath.

Which way would the rest of them go? Stella wondered idly. Kyle was beginning to sweat. He had taken off his suitcoat. He had unbuttoned his collar and loosened his tie. How would the rest of them stand?

Racowski, for instance. Ra-

cowski was a follower. Whoever came out on top would do for him. As long as there was someone to tell him what to do.

Corrigan? Something had happened to him in that seven years in Leavenworth. He was a wheel now, competent to drive a car, fast and sure, but beyond that he didn't care.

Krauss? An ape. He dug a hole for Kyle because Kyle had told him to, and he would just as soon put Kyle into it as Bernie Frank.

"Stella," Kyle snapped, "will you—," but he stopped short. They heard footsteps in front now, climbing the stairs.

The door began to open. They all stiffened. Corrigan took his hands away from the table. Kyle stood up. Krauss stopped in his tracks.

The door opened and there was Bernie Frank as big as life. He shut the door behind him and walked in. No one said anything for a minute.

Stella looked up at him from the cot where she lay. Eight years hadn't made as much difference as she had thought it would. He had lost weight and

he was very sallow, but his eyes had the same bright glimmer as always and the smile was the same. She would know that smile anywhere. When he was tensed and ready and mean he had that smile. She had been his dog long enough to know that smile.

Kyle and Bernie looked at one another for a long minute during which no one breathed.

Then Bernie said slowly, "Glad to see me, Kyle?"

Kyle's answer came from his pocket in one fast motion, the black, ugly Luger.

There was a shot like the crack of a whip and in stunned surprise Kyle clutched his belly and fell.

The smile was gone from Bernie's face, replaced first by fear and then astonishment

that he was still alive. They all looked at the same time at the cot where Stella sat with the small automatic still smoking.

"Stell!" Bernie gasped. "For godsake, Stell." His body relaxed with relief and gratitude.

Without changing her expression she squeezed the gun again and it spat flame. Bernie fell with a low moan.

She turned to them all then. Even Corrigan was taut with attention. "All right, Krauss," she said calmly to the ape, "go dig another hole. Then get back in here fast. We've got a lot to talk about."

Stella sat back and breathed deeply and enjoyed it. She had been somebody's dog for fifteen years, and that was a very, very long time.

THE END

