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Louie stood frozen for seconds, dazedly looking at the girl. Then the cop who had heard her scream broke into the apartment.



JIMMY BRANDT let himself out of room 722 at the Burrige and, when his attempts to ring for an elevator were unsuccessful, descended the stairs and left the hotel. As he crossed the intersection, a cab almost ran him down. It was almost as if the driver hadn't seen him at all.

Jimmy's destination was definite. He was going to see Dolly. But meanwhile he was asking himself, why hadn't he killed Louie Kortz a week ago, when he'd first intended to? When he'd first found

out about him and Dolly? Jimmy had a vague sensation that he'd waited too long, now.

He paused for a moment, grateful for the faint night breeze stirring through the stifling city streets. Then he headed downtown toward his apartment. Dolly would undoubtedly be there. Dolly, his wife. His lip curled . . . and yet somehow he felt closer to her just now than he had in weeks. She'd be reading, alone—he hoped—her seductive little body curled up in an easy chair, waiting for

• THE THIRD • MAN

It didn't take the girl long to find out just how much humiliation Jimmy would undergo because of his love for her. And Jimmy discovered quickly enough that she liked to see him suffer. But neither of them foresaw the eerie form his vengeance would take



By COLBY QUINN

him. He wondered just how long it would take him to choke her if he found her with another man. . . .

Another man! There'd been *three* other men since he'd picked her up from a taxi-dance hall on Fourteenth Street two months ago and married her. God! the way she'd treated him. Thinking about it made his mouth feel hot and dry; his tongue already was strangely thick and numb.

Two before Louis, he remembered in disgust; one after another, two ratty dance-hall hangers-on who didn't work for their living; helping his wife in her cheap chiseling. They thought it was smart; *she* thought it was smart . . . until he'd discovered her with the first guy, accidentally, and fixed his mug so the girls wouldn't like him for a while.

A TELEPHONE lineman like Jimmy Brandt couldn't stick around all the time just to keep watch over a blonde baby in a Tenth Street apartment. Of course he should have booted her out in the gutter the first time; it was where she belonged; he knew that. But Jimmy was born to be a sucker: he'd never been really in love with a girl before—never *this* crazy about one—and he must have had an idea that he would shrivel up and languish away if he didn't have Dollie. At least, Jimmy had to have something to explain his shame, the degradation of that arrangement he'd finally lowered himself to make—that she could have her boy-friends on the side!

The first one, the guy whose pretty features he'd mussed up, had been just an ordinary cheap gigolo, and Dolly had only laughed (after she discerned that he wasn't going to hurt *her*). But the second one, she wanted him to understand, was a man she really cared for; her lover before Jimmy; was, in fact, the

man she'd been dancing with that night when Jimmy first met her. . . .

On that night, Jimmy remembered, she'd been quarreling with this bird. Jimmy had been standing at the edge of the dance floor with a fistful of tickets, ignoring other girls' invitations just to watch Dolly. He hadn't met her, but he'd been watching her; two dances now with the same guy, and Jimmy was beginning to feel greenish, seeing the possessive way this fellow held her . . . the snaky way one arm pulled her toward him at the waist while his hand rested carelessly, favored by the *ensellure*—that seductive inward curving just above her swaying hips.

A redhead ran her fingers over Jimmy's arm, keeping time to the swing of hot music with a lilting movement of her body, a rhythmic, slight bend of her knees that pushed them almost against his. "Lonesome, honey?" she crooned.

But Jimmy didn't see her. For only a dozen feet away, right at the edge of the crowd, Dolly had suddenly stopped; he saw her face flush darkly as she stiffened; then she spat out some angry word and tried to break away, pushing her elbows into the guy's chest.

He was still holding her, talking steadily in a low tone, when Jimmy pushed the redhead aside and strode lithely over.

"Break!" he urged in a soft-steel gentle tone.

THE fellow gave him one look and then ignored him. Only for a second. Then fingers that had earned their grip handling wire-cutters closed over a soft, pinkish ear, twisted as though opening a stubborn door.

"Ooww!" The head bent back; knees buckled. "You damn—!" Jimmy blotted the strangled mouthings with his other hand, pushed the guy down so quickly that his head slapped the floor.

Another moment and he had the girl in his arms, had whisked her dancing beyond the crowd that started to collect. She shrank up to him, trembling a little, her face white and her eyes wide.

Her lips worked uncertainly; then she smiled and squeezed his arm above the elbow with quick fingers.

"Thanks, darling," she said warmly. "Take me out of here, will you. . . . It may mean my job, but there'll be plenty trouble if I stay."

They didn't even wait for her to get her coat or purse. Five minutes later Jimmy had her in a taxi.

"You want me to take you home?" he asked. He didn't touch her, but his heart was thudding strangely against his ribs.

"I—don't know." She glanced up at him, then, "Yes, will you, please?" She moved a little closer.

Jimmy offered her a cigarette. Puffing it, she seemed calmer. She told him her address and Jimmy ordered the driver.

She reached up and pulled the cigarette from his mouth, turned her face to him and melted her lips liquidly to his. They were moist with the warmth of pulsing blood, parted enough to let him feel her breath on his lower lip. Jimmy closed his eyes dizzily and put his arms around her, and her kiss was soft and sweet for a few brief seconds.

She whispered with a bright smile in the semi darkness; "That's for helping me . . . if you like it." She watched his face for a moment and laughed gently. "You do like it, don't you?"

Jimmy mumbled something and his arms tightened. One of his hands slid down over the smooth skin of her bare back. She kept both arms around his neck, and the cigarettes she had been holding dropped to the leather seat. Her breasts, firm and unconfined beneath her cheap gown, met his chest and yielded against him as he kissed her, and Jimmy

felt the aching pressure of her knee and thigh against his own.

THAT was the beginning: she wouldn't let him go. Inside her cheap furnished room, she started humming as though she'd forgotten all about the man he'd taken her away from. With half-shy smiles when she met Jimmy's glance, which was often, she set about brewing coffee over the gas plate.

He hovered near, already lost, drinking in the flowing loveliness of her movements, watching the bright yellow of her hair, the grace of her long, slim legs. It was the kind of gown you paid for at a dime a dance; the kind that told everything and asked nothing. He couldn't keep his eyes off the bold bosom that slid its firm, pointed roundnesses beneath the silk of her bodice, and she knew it.

When they sat down to drink coffee, she was careful to cross her knees and leave the hem of her dress a little above them; it looked careless, though, and Jimmy watched the taper of her slender shapely calf and felt his blood hum. She wore no stockings, and her thighs were smooth as satin where they swept into the shadows beneath her gown. Jimmy sat watching her and trying to hold himself steady until he had finished his coffee.

He didn't know anything about her except that she was a taxi-dancer he had never seen before tonight. He didn't want to know anything about her; all he knew was that she attracted him, drew him, as no other woman had ever done before, and that he was crazy about her.

She seemed to know that, too, for when presently he walked over and put his hands on her shoulders, she stood up slowly, inside his arms. She let him kiss her, first, as if she didn't care; then she started breathing in deeply, and shud-

ders convulsed her as her arms locked about him. . . .

FOR three weeks Jimmy lived in heaven and came home to the angel every day after work. Then one day he happened to come home at the wrong time and the next thing he remembered was kicking a guy down the stairs after bashing in his face.

Dolly was sobbing hysterically when he came back into the apartment.

"All right," she whispered without looking at him. "I'll get out."

Fangs of jealousy bit deep inside him. But he clenched his hands and asked calmly:

"Why—why?" Bitterness blackened his voice. "Are you that *cheap*?"

Gasping, sobbing, she suddenly flung herself on him. "Oh God, Jimmy! Jimmy I love you so! Honest t' God I do, darling! This wasn't anything—really it wasn't. He—he's a guy I used to know, and he just came in. I don't know how he knew where I was. He said hello and then grabbed me and kissed me, and just for old times' sake I let him k-kiss me—and that was all. . . ."

"Aw, shut up!" He flung her away, heavy disgust in his voice. He started for the door, opened it. Then he lost. He shut the door again, walked back over to her slowly, where she huddled in a chair with her face buried in her arm.

"It didn't mean anything to you, did it?" he asked desperately. "You still—love me?"

He was sickened of himself then. In that moment, he knew he was asking for more, begging her to push the knife in deeper and twist it *hard* next time.

But he couldn't help it; if she'd been in the arms of six other men that day, he still loved her too agonizedly to leave her; he'd made himself a slave to her, to her red lips and that delirious drink-

ing kiss that drained him so pleasantly.

She raised her head, eyes bright, cheeks feverishly spotted. "You know I can't love any other man," she said. "Would it—hurt me like this if I could?"

Vaguely he knew that some emotion he had felt for her at first, now curled dead inside him; but that didn't matter now. He swept her into his arms, picked her up and held her high, thrilling at the rich, sensuous feeling of her limbs against his chest. His eyes ate up the white flesh of her through the gossamer negligee, and in his delighted nostrils her perfume stung him like an anesthetic to his betrayed love. . . .

THAT was the first time. The second time, she couldn't put up quite the same defense of innocence; because—well, for one thing she discovered he had come in too silently; had been waiting and watching for long minutes behind the half open door of the front room.

He'd hesitated there, Jimmy had, when he'd heard soft voices; even when, through the crack of the door, he recognized the good looking blonde man he'd taken her from that first night.

She was in his arms now, and she wore only two piece pajamas—black lace jacket and snug-fitting trousers that he'd given her, just so she could wear them for *him*.

Jimmy stopped breathing; his impulse was to break in and kill the man, but somehow he restrained himself. He had to know for sure this time, even—even if it meant. . . .

What it meant he learned in the ten years of the next twenty minutes, watching his faithless wife lavishing on another man every one of her little arts and gestures of love that he had made himself believe no one could know but himself. The maddening way she hugged herself against him, tight as hell one



The next thing Jimmy remembered was kicking a guy down stairs, while Dolly started to sob hysterically.

minute, and the next just close enough for her swaying breasts to brush lightly against his chest. The way she could shiver and moan and let those quick shudders take her when a man's arms wound around her!

Jimmy almost groaned aloud. This other guy was acting as if Dolly belongs to him; was taking for granted every one of her embraces; caresses and favors that he would have bought with his blood, that he would have wrung out his heart to hold sacred. . . .

Sacred, hell! As sacred as the way she had danced with a hundred men in the dance hall, as reserved as the way she was pulsing and palpitating now in this man's pirating embrace.

Bottled in bond, his inward brain ground icily. Cut behind your back. So he just stood there watching, reeling, as murder-lust claimed him like vertigo, all but hurling his consciousness from the precipice of that single passion.

He staggered back, sank limply into a chair, hearing only the man's low laugh and Dolly's little squeals of delight.

Let them find him here, he thought dimly. Then the explosion would come.

BUT after long minutes he perceived that the man must have slipped out by the other door. For Dolly, humming a snatch of a popular tune, came tripping lightly through the doorway. The tune rose to a quick, sharp yelp, and Jimmy, his eyes on the floor, watched her feet stop moving, saw her toes curl down sharply inside the satin mules.

"God!" she whispered. Then, "Damn!" These two words expressed a great many of her emotions.

Jimmy looked up at her and sighed. When he didn't say anything, she suddenly burst into a torrent of defiant profanity.

"Why, you lousy rat!" Her voice rose

in pitch. "You were out here all the time—*watching* us! You cheap heel, nobody but a scum would—"

She broke off and her voice trailed down, as though she saw it wasn't working.

"All right," she said sullenly; "what are you going to do about it?"

"For God's sake, why did you do it?" he groaned. "Haven't you got a single decent—?"

"I like him!" she cut in, defiant and snarling. "I like him—that's why."

She watched him a moment, hands on her hips, and then said cruelly:

"Get wise, big boy. What d'you think I am—a girl scout? Well, if you wanta know something, I lived with this fellow—Julius he is—before I ever saw you. I was mad at him, that's the reason I married you. God! I musta been nuts!" she finished in tones of deep disgust. . . . yet there was a thread of fear tightening in her words. It was as though she were trying to turn away his anger by reviling him first.

But even then she hadn't found out how mad Jimmy was about her; what he would take. She knew the thrills you get from love—love of the kind she understood—and she knew what it was to be "gone" on a man; it meant you'd rather have him kissing you than anybody else.

Dolly wouldn't have been able to understand, even if Jimmy could have told her—and he had tried to tell her—how he felt about her. She might have been flattered if he had told her that during the whole day he was away from her, he could hardly go five minutes without shaping her name with his lips and seeing her in his mind and running over, in indulgent visions, some of the scenes of their love. She would have liked hearing it, but she wouldn't have believed it.

Jimmy didn't understand it himself; perhaps, since she was the first girl he'd

surrendered himself to wholly, she meant everything in a girl he had dreamed of finding. Dolly didn't know, until Jimmy spoke again, that he was so mad about her that she could not break him. And then she thought he was crazy.

FOR Jimmy said matter-of-factly: "Do you really want to leave me, Dolly?"

"Want to?" she gasped. Then, intuitively, she had the right answer. Her voice was sullen: "I dunno—honest I don't. I like Julius—lots. And I like you. But I gotta see him again."

"Suppose you stayed with me," Jimmy said deliberately, "and you could see him, too . . . Then what?" What agony it was to say that! Remembrance of Julius holding Dolly close . . . visions of the way she'd hugged herself to Julius . . . it was all a torture that released subtle poisons in his blood and made his stomach a hateful hollow. Yet—like the delight of a hair-keen razor, a peculiar sensation of pleasure flowed through him . . .

He began to wonder if he had not held himself back a few minutes ago because he liked the feeling of sharp and almost unbearable jealousy which hissed about his quivering nerves like a cat-o'-nine-tails . . .

"You're—you're kiddin' me," Dolly said uncertainly. But then she suddenly knew he wasn't. She came and sat on his lap, soft-fleshed and warm and *loving*. . . "You really mean it, honey?" she asked, maliciously sweet. She kissed his forehead, put her hand to the back of his neck to press his head closer, and her fingernails bit into his skin. "You mean you'll let me see Julius again, you'll even let him come here while you're not home . . . if I stay with you?"

"My God—don't! Don't!" cried Jimmy wildly, standing suddenly and

thrusting her away. But she crept in and hugged him.

"You're a darling, Jimmy," she laughed softly. "You're a swell guy to love me the way you do. I really love you too—you know that, don't you?—except that—well, I guess I love Julius too!"

He gritted his teeth. She laughed and kissed him.

THAT was the second time. And after that, Jimmy knew that he wasn't in his right mind. The girl was like a drug; a dope that he had to have with him all the time or die. Only—he hadn't foreseen the particular pleasure it would give Dolly to be cruel to him. Now that she knew how things were—that she could keep on pushing his face into the mud and making him eat it—she seemed to make her arrangements especially so that he could catch her with Julius as often as possible.

He would come in loudly, slam the door; but still Dolly would wait a moment before she looked up lazily; and then jump swiftly as though in sudden shame. "Oh, is that you, honey?"

Julius was apprehensive at first, but this changed to a growing boldness; finally, after a couple of weeks, he came to grin and laugh a little, and look away when Jimmy came in. His laugh had an unclean sound, and Jimmy wanted to choke it out.

Then Julius would leave, taking his time and whistling coolly, yet never saying a word to Jimmy. Jimmy just looked out the window until the other man was gone and then, wanting to kill himself, he'd pounce on Dolly as a starving hound on a helpless animal. The more she tortured him the more he needed her.

In dope, you have to keep increasing the doses, and Dolly would throw up her arms in ecstasy. Then later, she would

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THE THIRD MAN

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try to make him listen to what she had to tell him about dear Julius

"Stop! Stop it—for Heaven's sake!" he almost screamed once. And then he leaped back from the silently laughing girl and put his hand to his mouth. He swallowed blood. She had bitten deep into his lip.

WHEN he found her with Louie Kortz, then, Jimmy knew he was definitely crazy. Louie didn't act scared like the others; but he was leaving; he jerked out a thirty-eight automatic and backed out of the apartment.

Dolly didn't even make a defense this time. She just said contemptuously, confidently: "Do you still love me."

And the reason Jimmy knew he was crazy was that he said yes. His hands worked, his fingers curling in like claws, as he pulled her close to him; but he kissed her with a hungry groan.

He was too wretched to ask much about Louie Kortz, but he knew him by

sight as a pin ball front. A good guy, any cigar-store or small restaurant owner would tell you shakily after having taken Louie's pin-ball machines to keep from having a bomb tossed in his window.

But when he met Louie Kortz coming out of his apartment, Jimmy stopped dead; some flicker of reason seemed to prompt his words.

"Listen, Kortz," he said slowly, "I want to talk with you."

Louie backed away. He wasn't afraid, but he didn't like shootings—when *he* did the rod-work. And if Jimmy laid bare hands on him, Louie knew he would suffer.

"Sure," he said greasily. "I don't mind talking to you, guy." He glanced at his watch. "Say in an hour, over at my hotel room, huh?"

"Anywhere," Jimmy said. "What hotel? What room?"

"Seven-twenty-two at the Burrige." Louie turned away. "All right?" he asked carelessly.



He jerked out his gun and backed out of the room.

"I'll be there." Then Jimmy went inside; while Dolly wasn't looking, he slipped out of his desk drawer the old forty-five automatic he'd worn in the army.

IN AN hour he'd gone to the Burrige, found room 722. But instead of Kortz, he had discovered two heels who leaped upon him without warning, pummeling him with blackjacks. There'd been a fight about which he now remembered nothing and didn't seem to care. The parched agony of his tongue and fevered lips tried to remind him of something, and he entered a gin mill thinking of a cold glass of beer.

The bartender looked like a nice guy; yet he stared past Jimmy and ignored his order, seemingly. Presently, however, he slid a stein along the bar. It stopped at Jimmy's elbow, but now he found that something must have happened to him in that fight; his fingers apparently were paralyzed or incredibly weak. He couldn't seem to get a grip on that stein. And just looking at the head of cooling foam heightened the dry torture which racked his mouth.

After a moment the man next to him took the stein right out from under his nose, and Jimmy concluded it hadn't been meant for him anyway. He strode out in disgust. Only after he was outside did it occur to him that he didn't remember having opened the door going either in or out of the gin mill.

But he gave no wonder to that now, for he was thinking of Dolly. Suddenly like a gust of clean air came the knowledge, the conviction, that he was free; that he no longer needed the drug of her tawdry affections. Yet somehow it seemed to him that he still loved her, and because he loved her, he wanted to kill her. That seemed odd, yet he was

sure it was the only way to purify their love and bring Dolly and him together as he had dreamed of their being, from the first.

He turned a corner and eased up the stairs to his apartment, effortless as wind. He found Dolly leaning back in a chaise longue, and he stood over her for a moment before he bent and wrapped his fingers about her throat.

Then he remembered that peculiar paralysis that had prevented him from lifting the beer stein. Yet it wasn't paralysis, he saw now; his fingers were flexing vigorously, yet they seemed to make no impression; they sank right into the white flesh and left her throat as smooth and unmarred as before. Doggedly, despairingly, he bent all his will to making his fingers grip solidly.

There was a puzzled frown about Dolly's eyes. "Louie," she said, her heart thudding unaccountably, "do you think—do you think something could have happened to Jimmy?"

LOUIE KORTZ looked up sharply, suspiciously from the drink he was pouring just inside the kitchen doorway. "What makes you ask that?"

Then suddenly before his bulging eyes, Dolly began to scream and clutch at her throat. "Here he is now!" she gasped. "Save me! He's—trying to choke me!"

But though she saw him, and saw those arms reaching and knew the hands were at her throat, she felt nothing. For Jimmy wasn't succeeding despite all his efforts. And now he knew why: he remembered, as the agony in his throat stabbed again with unendurable pain. Why, he couldn't be here! Those two thugs had blackjacked him until he was only half conscious and then hanged him to a bar in the clothes closet. Now

he realized why people hadn't seen him, why he had walked through doors and couldn't grip anything with his fingers; he wasn't here! He wasn't anywhere except back in that hotel room closet!

Yet there was Dolly screaming: "Louie, help me! He's choking me! Don't you see him?"

Across the room, Louie Kortz wondered how the girl's husband had got into the apartment so quietly—and how he had in the first place got out of that hotel. Kortz dropped the drink and whipped out that thirty-eight and laced two slugs into the figure leaning over Dolly. One of the bullets zipped into the plaster of the wall beyond; the other took the girl square in the mouth of her back-tilted head.

Louie stood frozen for seconds. For now there was nobody there but Dolly,

and she was very still. And there was a pounding on the apartment door: the cop who had heard her scream broke in.

After one look at the girl and another at Louie, standing there with the gun dangling limply in his hand, the cop prodded him in the belly with his own revolver. He had seen her bloody mouth and the hole in the back of her head.

AT THE moment Louie shot Dolly in the mouth, Jimmy seemed to be holding her in his arms, and that cheap and furtive expression had faded from her face, leaving her lovely as he had first seen her; and nobody else could have her, now or forever.

Back in that clothes closet in the hotel room, Jimmy's body twitched feebly, clawing fingers stiffened where they were tied behind his back, and he died.