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**J**OE MARCATO was stumped. He paced the floor of the small office; he bit off the end of a cigar, then threw the cigar away; finally, he walked over to Sol Arnold's desk, and shook a paper under his nose.

"Do you know what this is?" he demanded.

Falls, Bureau of Detectives. These three were the Bureau. Local jokesters sometimes referred to them as the "three blind mice." Joe was Chief of Detectives.

"Do you realize," Joe bellowed at both men, "that, for a small town, we have some of the best crime detection equipment in the

## WRONG VICTIM

*Ike Baker confessed the murder of his wife. That seemed simple enough . . . except Ike's wife had not been murdered.*

BY  
W. DELOS

"Sure, Joe," said Sol, placatingly. "That's Ike Baker's confession. I was here when he signed it."

Joe turned and pounced on Len Douglas, the third man in the room. "And do you know what he confesses?" Joe asked.

"I was here too, chief. He says he murdered his wife. She's up in the hospital morgue right now."

The black lettering on the door of the office said: South Baltimore

*whole damn state?"*

"Sure, Joe."

"And the facilities of the states Criminal Bureau at our disposal?"

"Sure, Joe."

"Then why can't we wrap this case up?"

"Could it be," asked Sol, "because the coroner's report states that the woman's death was due to natural causes?"

"So this—whats his name—"

"Ike Baker," said Len.

"Yeah, him. What's his angle? Why does he call us yesterday, and say he murdered his wife? Why does he sign a confession saying he strangled her? Is he nuts?"

"Sure," said Len, "he's a nut."

"Chief," said Sol, "why don't we go over the facts, such as they are, and see what we come up with?"

"Great," said Joe. "The only fact we have is that the Baker woman died of cancer—with no outside help, as far as an autopsy can determine."

"Check," said Len. "The coroner's report says death due to lymphosarcoma. Coroner also notes there is a scar on her neck of recent origin. He further notes this was probably the excision of lymph nodule for biopsy. Time of death—early Tuesday morning."

"But," Sol broke in, "Baker called us Tuesday afternoon, six or eight hours later. What'd he do all that time?"

"A good question," said Joe.

"He's just a nut," Len exploded. "Why don't we have him examined by a head doctor, and certified, or committed, or whatever it is that they do?"

"What about Baker's confession?" asked Sol. "We can't just ignore it."

"Let's see how the psychiatrist explains it," said Len.

"What do you think, Chief," asked Sol.

"Len's probably right, but while

we're getting Baker's head examined, why don't you do some checking? Talk to his neighbors, employer, tradespeople, see if you can get some background on him. I'll take Doc Gertmann out to see Baker. I'll find out how he spent his time yesterday, too. Len, you stick by the office, and we'll keep in touch."

The hot August afternoon had turned sticky when Joe returned to the office. The air had that breathless feel that precedes a thunderstorm.

"Sol back yet," he asked Len.

"Out in his 'lab'," said Len, nodding toward an adjoining room.

"Sol," Joe shouted, "come on in here a minute." Then, turning back to Len he asked, "Anything new here?"

"Not much. Andy Case, the coroner, called. He said no doctor in town did the biopsy on Mrs. Baker. Thought we'd like to know."

"That's interesting," said Joe, "but I don't know what it proves."

Sol came hurrying in. "Hi, chief. What's Doc Gertmann's verdict?" he asked eagerly.

"Sit down, Sol," said Joe. "You know about Len's report from Andy Case?"

"Yeah. For a while I thought I had a lead that tied in with it, but I drew a blank."

"I guess I just about drew a blank, too," admitted the Chief. "I took Gertmann out to Baker's place. We didn't let on to Baker

who he was. I told Baker we weren't quite clear on his confession, so we went all over it again. We quizzed him for nearly two hours, to give Gertmann a chance to observe him."

"And—?" asked Len.

"Well, Gertmann said it's difficult to draw any positive conclusions from such a limited observation, but he says Baker has a very suspicious and excitable disposition."

"That's all?" asked Len.

"He also said," Joe continued, "that Baker must have hated his wife. She may have been cheating, as he says in his confession."

"Or the other way around?" asked Len.

"Yes, it's possible that he wanted out of the marriage and she was giving him a bad time. Or it's possible, the Doc also pointed out, that there's some money angle we don't know about. At any rate, he apparently had a subconscious, or even a conscious desire to kill her. Her death from disease frustrated that desire. Now his subconscious is satisfying that death wish by telling him he killed her."

"You see," said Len, "I told you he's a nut."

"But," Joe added, "Doc Gertmann also pointed out that Baker has decided paranoiac tendencies and would be quite capable of murdering his wife."

"Well," said Sol, "I'm just about convinced there's more to this than just some mental hocus pocus."

"You've found out something, then?" asked Joe.

"I started with Baker's employer."

"He said he works in a junk yard," added Len.

"Yeah. Triangle Salvage. There are only two employees, besides Herb Anson, who owns the place. Herb says Baker was a good worker if left alone. He did his job and Herb left him alone. The other employee mostly drove a truck, and had little contact with Baker."

"Baker give any references when he took the job?" asked Joe.

"Herb advertised in the 'Help Wanted.' Baker came in and said he could do the job. Its not complicated. He operates a metal shear and a hydraulic press. He gets \$80 for a forty hour week. He claims two dependents, himself and his wife. That's all Anson could tell me."

"How long's Baker worked there?" Joe asked.

"Since last February. About six months."

"Where'd he come from?" asked Joe.

"He never said. Herb never asked," said Sol. "So then I went out to check with his neighbors."

"No neighbors," growled Joe. "Except that gas station down the road a ways. Too bad Baker didn't live half a mile farther out. The county sheriff could be doing the honors instead of us."

"That's the old Greene home-

stead, the Bakers are living on," said Sol. "It used to be a big farm. The family never sold off any of the land, so no houses got built around there."

"How'd Baker get it?" asked Joe.

"He rented it through a broker. The place is real run down. He rented cheap."

"That all?" asked Joe.

"I also found out no milk man, insurance man, or anybody else goes to the house."

"That guy is Mr. Anonymous of 1960," said Joe.

"Baker pays his insurance at the office," continued Sol. "Its cheaper. There's a \$500 policy on his wife; \$1500 on himself. He had six tons of coal delivered Tuesday. Didn't want to lose the summer discount. The electric meter is on the outside of the house. The meter man has never been inside."

"How about that guy," said Len. "His wife just died and he worries about a six dollar discount on coal. He's really a nut."

"How about the gas station?" asked Joe. "Anybody there ever notice Baker or his wife around the house?"

"I dug some pay dirt there, chief," said Sol. "The guys at the gas station never noticed any activity around Bakers place. But Baker buys his gas there. He drives a beat up 1954 sedan. He had it serviced last Friday afternoon. I took a look at the car."

"Where?" asked Joe.

"In the barn, where he keeps it. While you and Doc Gertmann were keeping him occupied, I cut across lots and looked over his outbuildings. The car was in the barn."

"That's illegal," said Len.

"I didn't know what I was looking for, so I didn't want to alert Baker. You know that little sticker they put on the door frame when they service a car?"

"Keep going," said Joe.

"They put one on Baker's car when they serviced it Friday. They marked the mileage—56,240. Baker's speedometer reads 56,358 right now."

"How does that figure?" asked Joe.

"Look," explained Sol, "Baker worked a half day Saturday. He went to work again Monday. Yesterday and today, he didn't go in. A round trip between his house and the Triangle Salvage yard is just over six miles. I clocked it. Two trips—twelve miles. But he put 118 miles on his car since Friday afternoon."

"A difference," said Len, figuring, "of 106 miles."

"Any idea where?" asked Joe.

"I thought I had, but it didn't check out. I drew a circle with a fifty mile radius on the map. Lincoln falls on the circle."

"There's the Hope Memorial Hospital at Lincoln," said Len. "Exclusively for cancer treatment."

"I checked with them," said Sol. "No record of a Margaret Baker."

"That all?" asked Joe.

"One more thing," said Sol. "I was able to lift some fingerprints off Baker's car. Three different sets."

"Whose," asked Joe.

"Don't know yet. One set was only on the door handles on the right side. The other two sets are on both doors and the steering wheel. Some of those must be Baker's."

"How about the guy in the gas station?" asked Len. "He'd leave prints on the steering wheel."

"That's an idea," said Joe. "We can check that. The other prints, just on the one door, are probably Baker's wife's."

"Thing is, Chief," said Sol, "none of these prints belong to the woman we've got in the morgue!"

"What?" said Len.

"No fingerprints on Baker's car match our customer's," Sol repeated patiently.

"How do you figure it, Sol?" Joe asked.

"You ever hear the story about the guy that called a doctor in the middle of the night? 'Come quick Doc,' he says, 'my wife's got appendicitis.' 'Impossible,' says the Doc, 'I took her appendix out two years ago. I never heard of anyone having another appendix.' The man says, 'Now, Doc, you get right on over here. You ever hear of anybody having another wife?'"

"Sol, I think you've hit it," snapped Joe, jumping to his feet.

"Len, call in the prowler car. Ride up to Baker's with them, and bring Baker in. Don't arrest him unless you have to. Just bring him here. C'mon, Sol, we've got work to do."

Fifteen minutes later, Baker came in, accompanied by Detective Len Douglas and a uniformed policeman.

"Sit down, Baker," said Joe in his friendly tone. "It's about that confession of yours. It's giving us a lot of trouble, you know."

"I don't see why, Mr. Marcato. I killed her. I admit it, so why don't you arrest me?"

"Why'd you kill her?" asked Joe, sharply.

Baker sat forward stiffly. "She had to be punished," he said, looking at Joe sidewise over his nose. He spoke rapidly, almost unintelligibly. "For her wickedness. She thought I didn't know, but I knew. Drinking, and men, and all manner of vileness. She was clever. I never caught her, but I knew. The devil's . . ."

"Why'd you call us?" Joe broke in on his raving. "Why not let it go as a natural death. It looked that way to us."

"It was an execution," mumbled Baker. "An execution must be public, as a warning to others. It had to be made known. Her wickedness . . ."

"Where is she now," snapped Joe.

A change came over Baker. He leaned back. His hands relaxed.

His eyes half closed. "Why, she's at the morgue. You took her there. Isn't that where you took her?"

"Len, lock him up," said Joe. "Get the shovels, Sol. Baker, we're going out to your place. How long do you think it will take us to move six tons of coal?"

Baker's head dropped. After a long pause he said softly, "All right, she's there. I strangled her and put her in the coal bin. They dumped the coal on her without knowing it."

"And the other woman?"

"Her sister, poor soul. She was the good one. We brought her

home from Lincoln last Saturday. From the hospital. There was nothing more they could do for her. When she died, there was nothing to keep me from punishing the other one."

"Punishing her for what?" asked Joe.

"For the evil ways, for her uncleanness . . ."

Joe motioned to the policeman in uniform. "Take him out and book him for the murder of his wife. We've already got his signed confession."

"Just like I told you," said Len. "He's a nut."

