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You Can't Trust a Man

BY
HELEN
NIELSEN

It had been a long time, but now he was back. And he was going to get what he deserved for being so patient . . .

THEY were a couple of very special jobs, — the convertible and the woman. Blonde, streamlined, and plenty of fire power under the hood. The convertible was a later model, at least twenty-five years later, but it didn't have any more pick-up and not nearly as much maneuverability in traffic.

She came across the parking lot

like a stripper prancing out on the runway, a healthy, old-fashioned girl who believed that whatsoever the Lord hath cleaved asunder no Parisian designer should join together. She was wearing the kind of gown that's called a creation and carries a three-figure price tag, and over it hung a pastel mink stole that could feed a family of six for a couple of

years. She opened the door of the convertible and slid in behind the wheel over red leather upholstery as soft as a lover's caress, and was just touching a gold-tipped cigarette to a jewelled lighter when the opposite door opened and a thin man in a shabby suit and a battered hat crawled in beside her.

For just an instant the flame in the woman's gloved hand brightened her face like candlelight before a Madonna, and then the flame and the illusion died together.

"Faithful Tony," she murmured. "I knew you would come."

A spiral of smoke sought the open window like a released soul; then the motor throbbed alive and twin eyes cored holes in the darkness. The woman barely glanced at the shabby man. She was too busy steering that land cruiser out onto a street that was a lot more crowded at other hours when the little shops and the big markets were open for business. Now, only one place was still open, and business was fine. You could see the colored neons and hear the wail of a clarinet being tortured by an orgy of jungle drums, and out in front of a chocolate stucco building without windows you could see the bigger-than-life photo of a full-mouthed blonde who didn't look at all Madonna-like under floodlights.

"Featuring Crystal Coe and her intimate songs," the shabby man read aloud, as they wheeled past the billboard. "You're big time now, baby. Real big time."

There was no enthusiasm in the words. He didn't sound like a press-agent, or an M.C., or a kid with an autograph book in his hand.

"Is that why you wanted to see me?" the woman asked.

"Did I want to see you?" A twisted smile slid across the man's dark face. "I thought it was the other way around. I thought it was Crystal Coe who phoned my hotel and set up this cozy reunion."

"*After* I read your threatening note."

"Threatening?" The smile was wider now. "You've been imagining things, baby. That was just a fan letter."

He wasn't going to be offered one of those gold-tipped smokes, so the man poked around in his pockets until he came up with a crumpled pack of his own. The lighter on the instrument panel worked fine. Any time it didn't this job would be traded in on a newer model.

"Just imagining things," he repeated. "You always did have a big imagination. Remember that story you told me back in Cleveland seven years ago? It was a real heart-breaker . . . 'I can't take the rap, Tony. I can't have our baby born in prison!'"

A deep drag on the cigarette and the man leaned back against the deep-cushioned seat. The way he did it, it was as if he hadn't been so comfortable in a long time. It was as if he'd like to take off his shoes and stay a while.

"I never did get a birth announcement," he added. "What was it, Crystal — a boy or a girl?"

"A girl can make a mistake," the woman said.

"That's right, baby. She sure can."

His voice was as cold as the night air. The woman pressed a button with her left hand and the window hummed upward. Everything automatic. Press a button and the red carpet rolls out . . . as long as nobody turns off the ignition.

"No birth announcement, no letters," the man mused. "Seven years is a long time to sit in stir without letters, but then I guess you were busy. Broadway . . . Hollywood . . . Hell, baby, I never knew you could sing. I always thought you had only one talent."

Up ahead, a light turned red and the convertible stopped with a lurch. Gloved fingers snuffed out a gold-tipped cigarette in a tray that was already overloaded and then tightened on the steering wheel. It was so late the streets were like eyeless sockets in the face of the city. A diesel trailer job thundered up in the next lane, and a black and white prowler car sniffed past the intersection, but that was the only traffic in the time it took for the light to turn green.

"All right, Tony," the woman said, as the convertible leaped forward, "what do you want?"

"Seven years . . ."

It might have been an answer, or

it might have been just a man talking to himself. He wriggled down against the soft leather until the battered hat tipped down over his eyes.

"For me they were empty years, Crystal. For me no bright lights, no big time. At first I nearly went crazy wondering why you didn't write. I thought maybe that stupid gin mill operator got wise that it was your fingers in his till instead of mine. Then I thought maybe something went wrong with the baby. That's a laugh, isn't it? I'll bet you've split your sides over it more than once."

The gloved fingers tightened even more on the steering wheel, but still the woman didn't turn her head. She was driving slowly and carefully. She never took her eyes from the street except to glance at the instrument panel now and then.

". . . Empty years," the man continued. "Then, all of a sudden, they weren't empty any more because one day I saw a newspaper and guess whose picture? I didn't recognize you right off, not with the blonde hair and the fancy clothes and that name — Crystal Coe. But the paper said you'd just changed your name by marrying that band leader. Whatever happened to him, baby? Was he the one who turned alcoholic, or was that the Hollywood agent?"

The light from the instrument panel caught the man's twisted smile, but Crystal Coe's face was like marble, cold, hard, and silent.

"No, I remember now," the man reflected, "the agent was the one who shot himself. I read all about it in a fan magazine. 'Crystal Coe's Tragic Loves' — that was the name of the story. But then it went on to say that you'd found happiness at last with an older man . . . old enough to own a few dozen oil fields."

"All right, so we've had the story of my life!" Crystal snapped.

"Not quite, baby. I was thinking about that when I read that magazine story. They left out a few things. Maybe I should do a sequel: Crystal Coe's Secret Love.' How do you like that for a title?"

"It'll never sell!"

"Why not? Because I can't swim in oil?"

"Because you can't prove anything!"

Marble shouldn't get hot so quickly; it was liable to crack. The man shook his head sadly.

"You know better than that, Crystal," he said. "No matter how many little pieces of paper you destroy, there's always a piece left somewhere."

Outside the wind was rising. It howled up from the desert a hundred miles away, whipping the dry fronds of the skinny palms and flapping out the rhythm of the canvas p against the steel frame. Inside everything was cozy. Any time it isn't, there was another button to press.

The man stretched out his legs

and leaned back his head so he could take it all in. All the chrome, all the leather, all the buttons . . .

"Nice," he murmured. "Real class. Not like the old days."

"You don't have to remind me," Crystal said.

"I'll bet I don't! Some things you would like to forget. That cheap apartment with the garbage smell in the halls — that lousy saloon where I found you talking the boys into buying another drink. You always were a good talker, Crystal, especially when you kept your mouth shut . . . That's something else the story in the magazine got wrong. It said you started out as a waitress."

He reached out and pressed one of the buttons. In a couple of seconds the radio began to give out with a jump tune from somebody's all-night platter show. An old jump tune. Seven years old, anyway.

"Remember that one?" he asked. "Remember how we used to feed nickels in the juke box so we could kick that one around? Takes a dime now. Seems like everything's a lot more expensive than it was seven years ago."

"How expensive, Tony?"

If the woman had been looking at him, she would have seen how his mouth twisted upward at the corners. But she didn't look at him, and he didn't answer her. The brasses took a chorus and then the piano came up strong. Whoever was playing it must have had ten fingers on each hand. Then the bass came in

like the amplified heartbeat of a bad case of hypertension.

"You can't beat the old tunes," Tony said. "The old tunes, the old days . . . the old loves. Sometimes, when I was sweating out those seven years for you, baby, I'd wake up in the night and forget where I was. I'd reach out for you in the darkness and grab an armful of air, and then lie awake all night going crazy with memories. We did have some good times in the old days. Even you must remember that."

"I stopped remembering," Crystal said, "a long time ago."

"Before you knew me?"

There was no answer but the whine of the tires as they took the turns. The street was developing curves now. The little shops and the markets had been replaced by neatly clipped lawns and a geraniums.

"It must have been before you knew me," Tony said. "You must have started forgetting early to be such an expert so young . . . But I couldn't forget. I'd keep remembering how I used to feel whenever I worked the late show and came home to find you out at that dive again. It's in the blood, I guess. Once a saloon tramp, always a saloon tramp. But it didn't matter. That's the crazy part of this whole thing, baby. Whatever you did, I made excuses. Even when you took that money I blamed myself because I was just a lousy movie projectionist and couldn't make enough to give you the things you wanted."

Suddenly the man threw back his head and laughed, high-pitched and humorless.

"Remember how I used to tinker around in the basement trying to invent something that would make us rich? Always something. Always some new idea I was going to turn into a fortune so I could dress you in mink . . ."

He reached out and stroked the soft fur where it rested close to her throat. There was no pressure in his feeling fingers, but she trembled slightly at the touch.

". . . Always something," he murmured. "I used to think about that whenever I read about one of your divorce settlements. I guess no invention is ever going to improve on nature."

"A girl has to live!" Crystal snapped. "She can't wait around for some tinkering fool forever! She has to live!"

"Are you sure of that, baby? Are you real sure?" The laugh came again, thin as the distance between his fingers and her throat. "I could have saved those suckers a lot of money if I'd sounded off, couldn't I? Me, the jailbird Crystal Coe couldn't acknowledge even to a judge. . . . But that would have spoiled everything."

"For both of us, Tony."

"For both of us," he echoed. The fingers touched her skin now, slowly, carefully, they barely touched her skin. "Now you're getting the idea, Crystal. That's what I've had in

mind all these years. So Tony kept his mouth shut and just went on remembering and tinkering. They have places for that even in stir. Always something. Always figuring something . . .”

“How much, Tony?” she asked.

“You’re not the only one who likes expensive things, baby. Seven years of hunger can sure give a man an appetite for expensive things.”

“I asked you: how much?”

“For what I want, you won’t need your checkbook.”

“Then what?”

The crooked smile sliced across the man’s face again, and the fingers were real busy now.

“I just told you,” he said. “Seven years is a long time to live on memories . . . What do you think I want, Crystal? After all, I’m still your husband.”

When the record stopped playing on that platter show the announcer started selling used cars and Crystal’s hand plunged him into silence. For a few blocks it was terribly quiet. All that horsepower under the hood barely whispered at the darkness, and the street elbowed in close to the hills where even the wind was subdued. The lawns were wide and deep now, and the night had that lush hush of a neighborhood where nobody worries in public.

. . . Silence, and then a woman’s voice speaking as unemotionally as if the man in the shabby suit had suggested stopping someplace for a nightcap or a cup of coffee.

“I’ll have to stop for gas,” she said, glancing at the instrument panel again. “The tank’s nearly empty.”

“And then what?” the man asked.

“There won’t be anyone at the beach house tonight. We never use it in winter.”

Just like that. No argument at all. The smile lingered on the man’s face. The specialty of the house wasn’t so expensive after all if you had a membership. Just ahead the white glow of a twenty-four hour service station came into view like an actor responding to cue, and the little green arrow on the instrument panel clicked the left hand warning for all the traffic that wasn’t in sight. As the convertible slid alongside the gas pumps the man began to laugh again. He was laughing like a fool by the time the station jockey poked his head in the window.

“Fill it up,” Crystal said, and whirled about to meet the laughter. There wasn’t a trace of that marble face make-up now. She was wearing a colorful blend of bewilderment and anger.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

Tony’s hand was on the door handle. “That’s my business,” he said. “This is where we part company.”

“I don’t understand —”

“I’ll bet you don’t! Nobody ever walked out on you, did they, baby? Nobody ever turned down such an invitation! That’s what I figured

while I was giving you the big buildup about the hungry years. I wanted you to learn how it feels to have the only thing you can offer thrown back in your face . . . Don't you get it, baby? I'm the chump who sweated out seven years in a cell because I loved you. You were in my blood, even when I knew about all those other guys. I used to rip your pictures apart, pretending they were you! A thousand times I've smashed your face until it wouldn't look good to any man; a hundred times I've killed you in a hundred ways! All these years I've dreamed of what I'd do when I got out and found you again . . .

" . . . Last night I did find you. I went to that club where you sing, if that's what they call it now, and I saw the woman I'd gone through so much hell for, — just a cheap, overdressed saloon tramp, that's all. Seven years is enough to give any saloon tramp. I went back to my hotel and wrote you that note just so you'd know I was out again, so you could do the sweating for a change; but I never intended to see you again. I've had it, baby. I'm cured. I don't need your dirty money, and I don't want you in that beach house or anywhere else. I wouldn't touch you if this was the coldest night of the year!"

It wasn't cold at all. In the last few moments the temperature had gone high in the front seat of that fancy convertible, and there was no button to press that would cool it off.

Anger, surprise, and something else livened Crystal's face: something like excitement. Her package had been delivered C.O.D., but she wasn't ready to let the delivery man go.

"Wait! Not here!" she commanded. "Don't get out yet!"

Tony drew back from the door. "I get it," he said. "The station man — you're known here."

"Yes, I am."

"And you wouldn't want a shabby bum to be seen getting out of your car under all these lights any more than you wanted him calling at your dressing room. A parking lot is darker."

She didn't answer. All this time the automatic pump had been whining out gallonage; now it stopped and she leaned across to open the glove compartment. She could have reached without rubbing so close to him, but this was her routine and she played it her way. He got the treatment again as she drew back with the coupon book.

"Nice try," Tony murmured, "but I'm not aroused —"

Not by the routine, maybe, but by something else. He never finished his speech because suddenly he was too interested in what he saw inside that lighted glove compartment. It was a gun, — a small, snub-nosed revolver . . .

"That'll be four-ninety, lady," the station jockey said at the window.

Crystal scratched her pen across

the coupon and handed it to the man. "Here, you finish filling it out," she said. "I can never remember the license number."

. . . A small, snub-nosed revolver. When she looked around it was resting in Tony's hand.

"Go ahead, take it," she said. "It's yours."

"You've kept it all these years," he murmured.

"They're difficult things to get rid of."

"You bet they are — especially if you happen to be an ex-con! No thanks, baby, I don't want this gift either."

He started to put the gun back in the glove compartment, but Crystal intercepted the attempt. She seemed to feel better when it was tucked just inside the open handbag in her lap. She sighed as if something had been too tight and now it was loosened.

"Here's your book, lady," the station man said at the window again.

"Did you get the number?" she asked.

"I sure did, lady."

She was relaxed now. Not cold, not marble at all. "I wonder if Sunset's open all the way out?" she asked. "They were working on it last week."

"Working on it?" echoed the station jockey. The bright overhead light made his face look as white as his uniform. "Oh, sure. It's okay now, lady."

"Fine. Then I'll just stay on Sunset."

She was smiling, actually smiling. The convertible cleared its throat and swung back onto the boulevard. Within a few seconds the bright white glow of the all night station had been swallowed up in a blackness punctuated only by an occasional street lamp marking the curving sweep of a road that climbed and dipped on its way to find the sea.

"It's always nice to know where to find a station open at this hour," Crystal murmured. "I usually have the chauffeur get the tank filled every morning, but this morning I didn't. It's easy to get careless, isn't it, Tony?"

There was such a thing as being too relaxed. Some people shouldn't be friendly.

"You must have been really scared," Tony said, eyeing her face in the glow of the instrument lights. "How come you set up this intimate little rendezvous if you thought I wanted to kill you? Did you think I'd be sucker enough to try something at that station?"

"As you say, Tony, there's always a piece left somewhere."

"A piece?"

"A record, a proof of our marriage. Fortunately, you're the only person on this earth who would ever think to look for it."

"Fortunately — ?" Tony didn't laugh any more; he didn't even smile. "Look, I told you," he said, "I want no part of you, and I

wouldn't dream of ruining your 'career.' The chump who marries Crystal Coe deserves all the grief he gets, even if it isn't legal . . . You can let me off at the next bus stop."

"You'll never get a bus at this hour."

"Then I'll walk!"

"You don't have to walk, Tony. I'll take you where you're going."

She meant what she was saying, whatever it was. The accelerator moved closer to the floorboards and the convertible took the hills as if they were gulleys.

"What's the pitch?" Tony demanded. "Is your pride wounded? Do you still think you can stir up the embers at that beach house?"

"Maybe that's it, Tony."

"And maybe it isn't? . . . What the hell's that?"

One minute there was nothing on the face of the earth but that big white convertible gouging a tunnel through the blackness, and then they had company. A pair of bright headlights were bouncing in the rear view mirror, and a red spot was flashing a signal that meant trouble in anybody's neighborhood . . . especially to an ex-con who suddenly felt a little conspicuous among all the guilt.

"The police!" he gasped. "Damn you, what is this? What are you trying to do?"

It was such a jolly ride. The man had his laugh at the service station, and the woman had hers as she bore

down on that foot pedal. "I'm trying to shake them, Tony," she said, "trying to out-distance them, like the man told me."

"Man?" he yelled. "What man?"

She laughed again. "Why, the man who's holding the gun on me, of course! The man who crawled into my car back at that parking lot and was too busy enjoying his big joke to worry about why I wanted his fingerprints on his own gun . . . or to notice what I wrote on a gas coupon. Do you want to know what I wrote, Tony? I wrote — 'this man is going to kill me . . . call the police!' . . . Don't you get it, Tony? Don't you understand?"

Understanding always took a little time, a few seconds, maybe, a fraction of a second. Time enough for the convertible to make a sudden turn off the boulevard, barely miss a row of brooding pepper trees, and go roaring down a dark side street that stretched like an empty corridor to nowhere. Time enough for a passenger, without a steering wheel to use as a brace, to pick himself off the instrument panel and make a lunge for that gun in the open handbag . . . and come in second.

"Too late," Crystal said, without laughter. "You should have killed me back at the station when you had the chance . . . but I knew you wouldn't. You never had that kind of nerve, and it takes nerve, Tony, to get what you want . . . and keep it!"

"You're crazy!" he yelled. "I told you I was clearing out!"

"If I believed that I would be crazy! Nobody walks away from a sure thing! If I let you live, you'd bleed me white —"

"But I don't *need* your money — ! You don't understand —"

Shout at the stars . . . shout at the wind trying to pull loose from the nodding pepper trees . . . shout at death, it was all the same now. Those headlights were in the rear view mirror again and the lights of the convertible had picked up a row of red buttons on the dead-end barrier ahead. It was time to hit the power brakes and brace against that steering wheel once more, because every ride had to end sometime . . .

The man plunged forward. He was clawing at the door as he came up, but it was much too late. The snub nosed revolver had been in the woman's hand ever since the turn-off, and she wasn't going to let him go without a farewell present.

"The first lesson I ever learned was that you can't trust a man," she said. Then she pulled the trigger. Once . . . twice . . .

A frantic hand grabbed at her, ripping away the front of that three-figured creation . . . Three times . . .

He was dead when the police reached the convertible, dead and bleeding all over the soft red upholstery.

The woman was sobbing hysterically over the steering wheel.

Crystal Coe sobbed for a long time. Nobody asks questions of a sobbing woman; they just stand around looking miserable and wait for her to tell her own story in her own way . . . and in her own time. The time was almost dawn. The window behind the police lieutenant's head had begun to show a foggy gray, and the white ceiling light was starting to pale from competition. In the anteroom outside the lieutenant's office, the representatives of the press were waiting for another front page spread that would crowd the minor problem of world survival back to the obituaries where it belonged, and inside the office Crystal Coe was waiting for an annoyance to end. She sat small and helpless in her chair, her face drawn and her eyes appropriately red. At her side stood a paunchy old man with a sweaty bald head and an accumulation of chins. In one hand he held a white Stetson hat; with the other he caressed her bare shoulder. Crystal restrained a shudder and smiled bravely.

"I guess the good Lord was riding with me," she said, in a husky voice. "I knew from the moment the man climbed into my car that he meant to kill me . . . or worse." She paused to draw the mink scarf tighter across her de-bosomed gown. The lieutenant dropped his eyes, and the hand on her shoulder tightened. "All I could do was drive slowly and try to keep him talking —"

"You're a brave woman, Miss Coe," the lieutenant said. "Most women wouldn't have had the presence of mind."

"But there was no choice, officer. I had to take a chance on a prowler car being near that station . . . I had to swing off on that dead end street so he wouldn't make me lose it when it came. That's when he fell against the instrument panel and dropped the gun. That's when I — Oh, it was so terrible!"

Crystal Coe buried her face in a handful of damp linen and smothered one last sob. "My wife's been through enough for one night," the paunchy man said. "I'm takin' her home right now!" It was the voice of a man who didn't expect an argument when he spoke, and he didn't get one now. There was a gun on the lieutenant's desk that was covered with a dead man's fingerprints, — there was a coupon from a gasoline credit book covered with a frightened woman's message. There was no argument at all.

Behind the damp linen, Crystal Coe smiled. She was safe now. Nobody would have any curiosity about a crazed ex-convict. She could pose for the photographers outside and wait for the afternoon editions to finish up the story . . . "Crystal Coe Slays Attacker" . . . "Singer Escapes Rapist." She could go into seclusion for a week or two to rest her nerves, and then go shopping for a new convertible. The old one had bullet holes in the upholstery.

"The man must have been crazy," the lieutenant muttered, "just plain crazy. That station attendant said he was laughing like a maniac."

He couldn't know, of course, what brought the flash of anger to Crystal Coe's eyes. Not knowing, he mistook it for something else.

"Now, don't you trouble yourself because you had to kill a man like that," he said quickly. "He'd have done the same to you — and worse. But his death is going to cause a big headache for somebody. I'm just glad it isn't in my department."

Crystal came to her feet slowly. She didn't want to ask. She didn't want to do anything but get out of this awful place fast, but she had to know.

"A headache — ?" she echoed.

"A big headache," the lieutenant said. "You see, Miss Coe, we had a report on this man a few days ago. He was an ex-convict, a parolee from another state, but he had special permission to leave that state and come out here to close a business deal. Seems he'd invented something while he was in prison — some kind of equipment for showing motion pictures. Signed a contract yesterday that's supposed to guarantee a quarter of a million dollars, cash, for his patent."

"A quarter of a million!"

"Just plain crazy," he repeated, "but can you imagine the kind of investigation it's going to entail to dig up this man's past and find his beneficiary?"

MUGGED AND PRINTED

HELEN NIELSEN is one of the prettiest writers in the detective field, but her stories are as hard-bitten as those of the most muscular



male authors. She makes her debut in *Manhunt* this month with a story that proves the latter point: the wry and powerful *You Can't Trust A Man*. She's the author of many popular detective novels, including *Detour*, *Obit Delayed* and her latest, *The*

Woman On The Roof. We agree with the *Saturday Review*, which called her one of the best writers in the field.