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Here is the most ruthless man you've ever met—a killer whom death could not soften nor bullets stop—yet whose relentless fists battered to their last futile gesture that softest thing a man ever finds—the heart of a woman in love. It is with a definite sense of accomplishment that we welcome Miss Brackett to these pages—which many of you will find unforgettable!

The Case of the Wandering Redhead

by LEIGH BRACKETT

I KNEW I HAD her that night. I climbed the dirty stairs, watching my breath steam in the cold, smelling the stale cabbage, and thinking, *Tomorrow she'll be out of this. Tomorrow she'll be Mrs. Marty James.*

Six flights, almost running, thinking of Sheila Burke.

Her mother let me in. A white-haired woman in a faded dress, who wanted to slam the door on me but knew it wasn't any use.

I grinned at her and went in. "Hello, Ma," I said.

She said softly, "Don't 'Ma' me, you cheap little hoodlum."

I turned around, slow, so she could see my clothes. "I've grown up," I said solemnly. "I'm a big hoodlum now."

She looked at me. Hot blue-green eyes like Sheila's. "No, Marty. Inside

you're little, and you'll never be anything else."

She went out and shut the kitchen door on me. I didn't care. I'd waited a long time for Sheila. Any other dame—but she wasn't a dame. That's why I played her slow, and let her fight, because I didn't want to break her. Gentle her, sure. But easy, so she'd still be Sheila when she gave in.

I knew she was where she'd have to give in, now. Tony'd been watching her for me. He knew how her credit stood with the butcher and the guy at the grocery store. A girl's got to eat, and so does her ma.

I sat down, in that cheesy little dump that was twin to the one I grew up in. My heart was choking me, and the palms of my hands were wet.

Then I heard her on the stairs out-

side, and the door opened, and Sheila was standing there looking at me.

Even the hard electric light couldn't spoil her. Her red hair, with its own fire inside it. Her white skin, really white, like milk in a bottle. And her eyes, blue-green and full of sparks. She was wearing some crummy rags out of a basement, and she looked better than any dame walking Fifth Avenue inside a thousand bucks.

Funny how things happened. I just passed her on the street one day, and after that there wasn't any other woman in the world. Funny. Yeah.

I got up. I said, "Hello, Sheila." I couldn't breathe.

She said, "You had it figured pretty close, didn't you? Just how long Ma and me could go without eating." Her eyes met mine, tired, a little scared maybe, but hot. Her voice had an edge on it.

"You fight clean, Marty! Hounding me out of every job I can get, sending those cheap gunsels of yours to hang around me until the boss kicks me out before I can steal the building. Oh, yes—you fight clean, all right! Just like a dirty rat in a drain."

I said, "It's the only way I know to fight, honey." I said to her. "Aw, look, Sheila. I don't want to fight you. I never did. I just . . . I love you, Sheila." I put my hands out.

She slapped me hard across the cheek.

I stood staring at her. Then I closed my eyes and just stood, sweating. Her voice came from a long way off, low and furious.

"Can I get it through your head? I hate you, Marty. I hate everything you

stand for. All I want out of life is decency and peace and maybe a little happiness. You can't give me any of them."

It was hard to talk. I still couldn't look at her. I said again, "I love you, Sheila."

"You act like it. Oh, Lord, Marty, why can't you let me alone!"

"I love you, Sheila."

"I'll never marry you." I could see her face now. It was cold and shut away. It was something I couldn't touch.

"You've got blood on you, Marty. You're not in my world."

I started toward her again. I don't know what I was going to do. Only I had to make her understand, somehow, that all that didn't matter. That where she was concerned I wasn't Marty James the racketeer, but just a guy in love. In love so I wanted to cry with it, like I used to cry for the stars when I was a kid.

Somebody said from the doorway, "I don't think she wants that, mister."

He must have been outside in the hall all that time, beside the door where I couldn't see him. He had three big paper bags of groceries in his arms. He was about four inches taller than me, big and bony and loose and young, with farmer feet and knobby hands and clothes that looked like they came off a scarecrow.

I stared at him for a long time. He had mild gray eyes under a fuzz of light hair, and a queer, hard, icy look that didn't match the rest of him. I shivered and dragged my breath in and went toward him.

Sheila got between us.

"It isn't any of his fault, Marty! I picked him up in the park. You had it figured right, Marty. I had to get food from somewhere. Tod pawned his watch. He's just a clean kid off a farm."

I said, "That's tough."

She took hold of my coat lapels. "It isn't his fault! Let him alone, Marty. He's not in your class."

I RUBBED MY KNUCKLES. I looked at the groceries the kid had bought for Sheila. I thought about him standing out there listening to me spill my insides out. Watching me get my face slapped, and then telling me to lay off.

I said, "Shut up," and pushed her away.

Ma Burke must have come in some time, because I heard her voice behind me. But just then the kid spoke up, sort of choked and raspy. He was white around the lips all of a sudden, not looking at anybody.

He said, "I ain't lookin' to have no trouble."

I watched him a minute. Then I laughed. He shut his eyes and stiffened up, and that was all. I turned back to Sheila.

She had that still, white look again. "You won't listen to me, Marty. You won't let me alone."

I said, "I've taken a lot from you, Sheila. More than I ever took from anybody. I've played easy. I've given you time. Okay. Now let's quit this. It isn't doing either of us any good. We'll get married tomorrow."

"No," she said, very softly. "No."

"Don't make me get tough, honey. I don't want it like that. But I—" I had her in my arms, then. She was cold and still, but her hair had a warm smell like flowers in it. I kissed her. I never kissed any woman that way before.

Her lips had no life in them. I let her go, and from a long way off I heard feet running hard up the stairs. I turned around, slow.

It was Tony, my sidekick. A dark little guy in a tight striped suit, a prime gunboy with eyes you couldn't see into. He was out of breath, but he said, "Boss," and jerked his slick black head.

I said hoarsely, "Get out."

Tony flipped his black eyes around. "I been on the phone to Capper, Boss. Business. And right now." His eyes stopped on Sheila and stayed there. He said softly, "Cripes!"

Things began to come back in focus then. My breath stopped choking me, and I could see again. I picked up my hat. Sheila hadn't moved. Ma Burke was beside her now, looking cold hate at me.

I said, "Okay, Sheila. We'll talk some more later."

She shut her eyes. She was locked away again, something I couldn't touch even when I kissed her. She whispered, "I'll say the same thing. Always."

I didn't answer her. I started out. The kid was still standing by the door, holding the groceries. I hit him across the mouth with the back of my hand. He didn't move. The blood ran out over his lip, and he didn't even look at me.

I said, "If I see you here again, I'll beat your face off."

I went down the dirty stairs—six flights, not seeing them, not even hearing Tony's feet hit the treads behind me. I got into my car and got the flask out of the glove compartment. Tony slid under the wheel and started driving. After a while I put the flask away and said:

"Buckwald?"

Tony nodded. "I got the tip from Capper ten minutes ago, when I called to check with him. That guy's a smart stoolie! So damn smart I'd plug him if I was you. Anyway, he says Buckwald has your horserooms all cased and he's gonna move in soon as a couple guys get in from St. Paul. He don't know you smell a thing."

"Where's Buckwald now?"

"Home with that blonde wife of his, feeling like a hog on ice."

I leaned back, rubbing my knuckles. They get stiff like an old man's, I guess from the scar tissue in the joints.

"Okay," I said. "You know where to go."

Tony looked at my hands. "You're gonna need something meaner than that, boss. Buckwald is a hard boy."

"All by himself with a dame? Don't kid me. Besides, that's what I keep you around for, Tony. To pack the gun."

"Sure," he said. "Sure." He looked at my hands again and laughed. "Cripes! This is gonna be good."

Buckwald lived in a block of flats that was pretty snooty about not being slum even if it was right next door. He was one of those ambitious guys,

and there's never room for two in one territory. I'd known for a long time I was going to have to slap him down, or else.

We went up the back way. Nobody saw us. I wasn't thinking of Buckwald. I was thinking of Sheila's white face, locked away and untouchable, and wondering why I felt sick. I knocked on Buckwald's door, with Tony standing by my left shoulder.

A woman's voice said, "Who is it?"

"Western Union," I told her, keeping my voice high.

She opened the door. A flashy blonde in a red negligee. I pushed in fast. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. A big, good looking guy in shirtsleeves got up off a sofa, knocking his drink off onto the floor. Buckwald and Del. Tony was just behind me.

Yeah. Tony, my pal, my sidekick, my prime gunny with eyes you couldn't see into. He hit me then, back of the ear, with the rod I paid him to carry.

WHEN I COULD see again I was sprawled out in an overstuffed chair. My wrists and ankles were tied with handkerchiefs. Buckwald sat in front of me, still in his shirtsleeves. He was holding a .25 Colt automatic. Tony was leaning against the wall near him, working on a highball and watching me with his black eyes. Capper had come in from somewhere, the bedroom I guess, and was standing beside me, close, bouncing a sap up and down on the palm of his hand. He was a stocky, red-headed guy with a dumb-looking pan that wasn't dumb at all.

Del sat on the arm of the sofa, swinging her long leg and smoking. She was some looker, all right. But Sheila had it over her like a tent.

Buckwald grinned at me. "I don't want to plug you right here, pal. Del don't like blood on her carpets. But I can take you through the eye with this toy, and don't think I won't if I have to."

A .25 doesn't make much noise, and it's as good as a cannon if a guy knows where to put his shots. Buckwald did. I said, "Okay, Buckwald. I'm the original Johnny Sap. Now what?"

"Now we wait a while for traffic to slack off, and then we take a little ride in your car, just as far as the railroad bridge. After that. . . ." He shrugged his beefy shoulders. "Why worry yourself?"

Tony snickered. "Pity to waste a whole quart of good Scotch on him."

"Yeah," said Buckwald. "But we got to make it look good."

I began to get it. You knock a guy dizzy, pour a bottle of booze over him, leave his car in gear and jump, fast. The cops don't find anything but little pieces of a guy with too much in him to drive. Accidental death, and good riddance. No kickbacks on a murder rap.

"It's a good trick," I told him. "Seems like I saw it in a movie one time, but it's still a good trick."

"Sure," said Buckwald. "It's tough on you, Marty, but that's the way it goes. I been on the bottom long enough. I figure it's time for a change. After all, that's the way you climbed up, on Hank Bligh's neck."

"Yeah." I looked at Tony. "Only I played it a little different. We stood up facing each other, and Hank went out blazing. I'm still carrying his lead."

Buckwald shrugged. "No percentage in that, Marty."

"No. I guess not." I was still looking at Tony.

He looked right back. Black, hard eyes and a rat's grin. "It's your own fault, Marty," he said. "You don't tend to business no more. When a guy goes simple on a dame, like you have, it's time for a change."

Capper laughed, bouncing the sap up and down on his palm. "It's all over town," he said. "Marty James, the big gee, the hard boy with the fists, jump-in' through hoops for a babe that wouldn't step on him if he was a rug. They're getting a kick outa you, Marty."

I said, "Yeah?" I started to get up. Capper hit me across the throat with the sap. Not too hard. They didn't want too many marks on me. I sat down again and spit up some blood, and Del said, "Can't you for cripe's sake wait'll you get off my furniture?"

Buckwald grinned. He was enjoying himself. "Sorry, Del. Just relax, Marty. You heard what the lady said."

I bent forward over my knees, coughing blood onto the handkerchief tied around my wrists. I just stayed there, covering my face. Tony went for another drink. Capper moved around to look down on me.

"Hell," he said. "And I always thought you was tough."

I had the knot chewed loose, then. Not much, but enough to pull one hand

out. I rammed my elbow into Capper's gut and dived forward.

Right then I knew I was going to have to eat Buckwald's lead. He got up shooting, and he'd have had me, only I rolled over my shoulders so that I got the first slug in the thigh instead of the head. It hurt, but a guy can take a .25 steel jacket if he has to. The second one burned my ribs, and then my heels had whipped over and hit Buckwald low.

He folded up, and caught his gun hand on the way down. He tried to slug me, but he was too sick for a minute. I pinned one on his jaw. I was mad. I think his neck was broken before I shot him.

Del started screaming, a shrill flat sound with no sense in it. I kicked and squirmed to get Buckwald off my legs. My feet were still tied. I could see Capper coming, with the sap, and a Colt .45 in his left hand. He was still doubled over, looking green, scared and ugly.

Tony was close to Del. He had his own rod out, and he hit her under the jaw with the barrel of it. She lay down on her face, quiet.

"Shut up, damn you! You want the cops?"

She didn't hear him, not then. He jumped over her, coming for me. He was in the same spot Capper was. He packed a Police Positive. The apartment was soundproofed, but not good enough to soak up the noise of a couple of heavy guns blasting. They were going to try and beat me down before I could untangle myself from Buckwald.

They knew one thing. They didn't want me walking out of there alive.

I hooked the cushion out of the chair Buckwald had been sitting in and threw it into Capper's ankles. I was scared of that sap. The force of the throw helped twist me over, so I was on my hands and knees. I pulled my feet out from under Buckwald. Capper stumbled over the cushion. The sap whistled down past my ear and whacked the floor, and while he was still bending over I straightened up and hit him across the temple with the flat of the .25. He fell down, and then Tony was on top of me.

I took the first blow on my shoulder. It damn near broke it. Tony was good at pistol-whipping. I couldn't stand up with my feet tied, and he was too smart to get close enough to be dragged down. He stayed behind me, moving faster than I could, so I couldn't see to shoot, making me roll and dodge. And about that time Capper came to enough to take a shot at me. He was past worrying about the noise.

THE SLUG WENT past my nose and caught Del just under the eye. That was tough on Del. But she never knew it, and a gunman's girl knows what she's sticking her neck out for. I put one of my baby bullets through Capper's cheekbone before he could fire again, and rolled away over him, fast. Tony's .38 whammed. He missed me by a quarter inch, and by that time I was on my knees again. It was tough having my feet tied. There was a lot of noise in the room.

It scared Tony. He beat it for the door, crouching and taking two snap shots at me over his shoulder. He missed. Not much, but he missed. I guess I missed him the first time, too. The second one took him through the neck.

He turned around, slow, leaning his shoulders against the door. The gun dropped out of his hand. He opened his mouth. Blood came out, and he put both hands up to his neck and slid down the door, like a man who is very tired. He watched me with his black eyes, and I still couldn't see into them. He coughed once and then fell over on his side. A hell of a mess, but Del wouldn't be worrying about carpets any more.

I worked fast. I cut the handkerchief off my ankles and put it and the other one in my pocket. I wiped Buckwald's gun and closed his fingers on it. My rib wound was just a graze and there were two holes in my thigh, so I knew I wasn't carrying Buckwald's card away with me. Then I jammed my hat down over my eyes and turned up my collar. I picked up Tony's gun and kicked his body away from the door, and went out.

There were heads sticking out of doors along the hall. I fired a couple of times into the ceiling. The heads went away, fast. I ran for the back stairs. My leg hurt, and I was trailing blood. I felt tired and heavy and sick, and the sweat was turning cold on me.

I beat the sirens down the stairs and out to the side street where my car was parked. I got away clean, but so close I could feel the cops breathing on me.

I wiped off Tony's gun and threw it away. I drank what was left in the flask and then drove, not hurrying at all, to a room I paid rent on. A room that wasn't anywhere near my apartment.

I've seen too many guys go up because they needed clothes and bandages in a hurry and couldn't go home to get them. I wasn't going to get caught that way. Nobody saw me. About thirty minutes later, changed and cleaned up, I was climbing the cold, empty fire escape to Sheila Burke's window.

Six flights, with thin snow beginning to fall, thinking of Sheila's voice saying, *There's blood on you, Marty. You're not in my world.*

I thought, *All right. That's the way it is, Sheila. That's the way we'll play it.* I was colder than the snow, and numb.

I pushed the window up and climbed through. I had a gun in my hand. A .25 that I took away from a dame once, before she could kill me.

I said, "Just sit tight. Everybody. And don't yell."

I don't think they moved at all while I went around locking doors and pulling window shades. They were still at the table, Sheila and her mother and the grey-eyed kid. They were eating lemon pie with meringue on top, and the place smelt good of food. Sheila didn't even put her fork down. I can still see her white face, watching me.

The kid put his hands flat on the table, and the glazed, queer look came over him again. Ma Burke looked like she wanted to pray.

I said, "I've just killed three men. Nobody saw me to identify, nobody can prove I was there. But the cops are going to look for me because two of the men belonged to my crew. I've got to have an alibi, and I haven't time to go all over town trying to buy one. So I'm telling you. I had a dinner here in this room with you. I haven't been away from here."

Ma Burke started to get up. I think she was going to throw the coffeepot at me. "Take it easy," I snarled at her, "Get another plate and dirty it, quick."

Ma Burke went out in the kitchen, and I moved around where I could watch her through the open door. The kid was watching me, not moving or speaking. I couldn't read his eyes. They made me think of Tony's. Funny, because they were grey, but I couldn't see into them. I shivered all of a sudden. I was tired as hell, and I hurt.

Ma Burke came back with a plate with some stuff on it, and a cup. I said, "Don't forget the silver. Okay. Now sit down and keep still. You, Sheila—go get your coat on."

She got up, slow, staring at me with big, still eyes. "Coat?"

"Yeah. We're going to get married."

The kid made a noise in his throat. Ma Burke sucked her breath in, hard. I said, "Shut up! I been carrying the license for a long time, Sheila. I know where we can get a sky pilot to do the job. Hurry up, will you?"

She whispered, "My God, Marty, haven't you any heart?"

"I don't know, kid. I thought I did. Maybe you killed it for me. I don't know. But you three people stand be-

tween me and the chair, and a wife can't be made to testify against her husband."

I looked at her. She was beautiful. She was like something the wind might cut out of a snowbank, with the red fire of her hair on top. Her eyes met mine, and there was an awful coldness in them, like I'd killed the spark inside her.

It was hard to talk. "I didn't want it like this," I said dully. "But that's the way it is. I guess maybe your ma and the kid catch onto something else, too. As long as I have you, Sheila, nobody better talk. Because I can always get you before anybody can get me."

Sheila's throat worked. I could hardly hear her voice. "You haven't any heart, Marty. You haven't a soul. You aren't human."

"Yeah. I'm human, Sheila. Human enough to go crazy over a girl. Human enough to be scared of dying, strapped down in a chair with no chance to fight, and all because a couple of dirty rats got back what they were handing out." I rubbed my hand across my eyes. "Get your coat. I want to go before the cops think of coming here."

The kid got up on his feet, then. He didn't say anything. He just came for me, swinging, and he looked half nuts.

I dropped the gun in my pocket. I let him hit me three or four times in the face, rolling my head enough to kill the force, and then I laid him out. He was clumsy and wide open, and his size didn't do him much good. The women screamed a little when he fell.

I said, "He's okay," and got down beside him, pulling the gun out again,

and unwinding the muffler I had around my throat. "A hell of a Galahad. Is he nuts, charging a gun like that?"

Sheila whispered, "You wouldn't understand. You couldn't ever understand."

I put the .25 in the kid's hand. "Don't tell me he's in love with you."

"No. It's a long story. You wouldn't understand. Why did you let him hit you, Marty? What are you going to do now?"

I WRAPPED THE MUFFLER around the gun and kid's limp hand to deaden the noise, and then got my finger behind his on the trigger. I fired three shots into the wall and then put the gun back in my pocket and the muffler around my neck.

"I got two holes in me," I said. "Now I got an explanation for them. A parafin test will show powder specks on the kid's hand. The third shot will take care of what I couldn't get off my own hand. I'll say it went off when I took it away from him." I laughed, not because anything was very funny. "You get it, Sheila? We were fighting over you. The nice kid trying to hold off the gunman. I guess that'll make sense even to the cops."

I yelled at her then. "Get your coat on, damn it!"

"All right," she said, with no feeling in her voice at all. "All right, Marty. I'll get it."

She turned away, and then Ma Burke started for the door. Moving slow, not looking at me, talking quietly over her shoulder.

"I'm going to call the police, Marty. You can kill me, sure. But it'll be tough to explain away the body."

Sheila cried out, "Ma!" in a little, strangled voice.

Ma Burke said, "Be quiet, baby. I didn't bring you up to be a gangster's wife, not while I'm alive."

I said tiredly, "Oh, hell, Ma, don't make me hit you." She didn't stop, and I started for her, and Sheila came across the room toward both of us.

Then the kid got up on his hands and knees and said hoarsely, "You hit me."

At that I looked over my shoulder at him. He was getting up, hanging onto the table. His face wasn't human. It wasn't sane. He said again, "You hit me."

I said, "Sure. Behave, or you'll get some more." Ma Burke was reaching for the key. I went over fast and shoved her away, and the kid yelled. He was white as new snow, and his eyes were blazing. He let go of the table and came toward me on his big feet, and his voice was soft and quiet and deadly.

"Don't touch her again," he said. "Don't touch her."

Sheila cried, "Tod! Tod, don't!"

He didn't hear her. He came on, his big fists swinging loose.

Sheila ran to me and tried to hold my arm. I put the heel of my left hand under her chin, and shoved, and she staggered back.

I left the gun in my pocket. I didn't want to kill the kid, and I knew he was too punchy to see it anyhow.

The kid said softly, "He used to do that to my mother. My stepfather. He

beat her. He used to make her crawl in the mud, out on the stinkin' farm. She used to cry all the time, because he beat me, too."

He swung at me. I dodged and knocked him down, but he got up again. He must have had a cast-iron jaw. He said, almost whispering, "You hit me. Ain't nobody gonna do that to me any more."

I knocked him down again. He didn't feel it. He was crazy. He caught me around the knees and pulled me down, and he was heavy and strong as a dray horse. He landed a couple of hay-makers on me before I clapped him over the ears and stunned him so he let go. And by that time Ma Burke had the door open, and Sheila was standing in it so if I was going to shoot I'd have to hit her first.

She was beautiful, standing there. She was something I could never touch, any more than the stars I used to cry for.

The kid moved. He was getting up again. Sheila said, "And you thought he was a coward. He didn't want to fight, Marty. He isn't safe when he fights. His stepfather beat him from the time he was a little kid, and that's why he left the farm when his mother died—because he knew the next time he'd kill his stepfather."

She looked at me. White, still, and locked away. "You can kill him, Marty," she said. "He's still dazed. Why don't you kill him, for spoiling your plans?"

I watched him get up on his feet again. He couldn't see much, but he was coming in again. Maybe he thought I was his stepfather. Or maybe he

didn't care, because I was somebody that hit him, and pushed women around.

I ducked under his hands and pushed him, hard. He fell over. I could have killed him, sure. But it wouldn't have done me any good.

I couldn't hear Ma Burke on the stairs any more. And I was tired.

I looked at Sheila. I couldn't think. I couldn't even feel. I just looked at her a minute and then turned away across the room and climbed out on the fire escape. I didn't say anything. There didn't seem to be anything to say. The last I saw of her, she was crying, leaning against the doorframe.

Down six flights of cold iron in the thin snow and not seeing or feeling anything, thinking of Sheila Burke.

Her mother must have met the prowling car just as it pulled up in front, hunting for me. They met me down in the alley. They took my baby bullets, and handed me their '38's.

Maybe six or eight hours, now. Maybe less. Anyway, there won't be any chair. I'll go out clean, which is more than I deserve for being such a chump. But that's the way it goes in this business. A guy makes a dumb play, he pays for it.

If I'd never seen Sheila Burke, if I'd stuck to dames like Del who know what's what and won't throw you in a pinch. . . . Yeah. But I didn't. I had to reach for the moon. Simple, Tony said. He was right. I brought it on myself. A sap crying for the stars.

But I still wish I could have kissed her just once, when she wanted to be kissed. ♣ ♣ ♣