

# **Mr. Zero and the F.B.I. Suicide Squad**

## **Suicide Squad**

**by Emile C. Tepperman, 1899-1951**

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*One for all, and all for one—even in death—was the fighting creed of the three wildest, gun-swinging law aces of the F.B.I.!*

## **Chapter I**

### **Prelude to Battle.**

EIGHT paces up, and eight paces down—Pete Sardis did it a dozen times back and forth, and then stopped, clenched his hands and cursed wildly and profanely. His thick cruel features were twisted into a mask of vindictive but helpless hatred. He was like a vicious cobra whose fangs have been drawn. He seized the bars of his cell door in his two hands and wrenched at them vainly. Then he subsided with a futile sob.

Men in the cells on either side listened to his blistering oaths. Men in the cells opposite watched him with awe. He was a convicted murderer.

Fifteen days ago he had come into Falcon City with two companions, and they had held up a pay-roll messenger. They had machine-gunned the messenger and a guard, had made away with a payroll amounting to one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The next day they were cornered in an abandoned farmhouse by the state police. His two pals were shot to death. Pete Sardis, with his eyes blinded by tear-gas, had walked out with his hands in the air. But the hundred and fifty thousand dollars of pay-roll loot was never recovered.

Grover Ellis, the district attorney, had rushed the indictment, and Judge Harley, presiding justice of the superior court had given the case precedence on the calendar. Yesterday, Pete Sardis had been convicted of first degree murder. Tomorrow morning he would face Judge Harley for sentence—"to be hanged by the neck until dead!"

Plenty of men got away with murder in Falcon City, which was the most corrupt municipality in the Middle West. But Pete Sardis was an outsider, and they were railroading him through to make a showing.

The other prisoners in the county jail knew that he had a hundred and fifty thousand dollars cached away somewhere—small bills that could be easily passed and never identified. But that money was not going to help him. He was going to die.

So they watched him and listened to him—with awe and real interest...

PETE SARDIS flung himself away from the iron bars and threw his heavy body on the narrow cot. He was frightened. He had dealt out death to many a hapless victim, and there had always been a cruel grin on his thick lips when his machine-gun burned out the lives of men. But he couldn't take it. He was going to break up. There were bets being made in the cell block on whether or not he'd collapse before he was sentenced.

Pete Sardis buried his head in his thick hairy arms and sobbed with self-pity. There was nothing he could do about it. He was a rich man, with a hundred and fifty thousand dollars hidden away—and he was going to die.

He jerked his head up as footsteps sounded in the corridor. Two guards were at his door, opening it.

"Come on, you!" one of them ordered. "A visitor."

Sardis gulped. He was meek. He was no longer the blustering murderer. "I—I thought the rules said no visiting-hours after eight?"

"For *this* visitor," the guard grinned, "there are no rules."

They led him downstairs to the interviewing-room. There were little tables, with one chair on either side. A pane of glass bisected the table, rising twelve inches high. You could talk across it, but it would be impossible for a visitor to hand anything to a prisoner.

The eyes of Pete Sardis reflected falling hope when he saw that his visitor was a dark-haired girl. She was thin, and pretty—with long black eyelashes and a soft red mouth. She was nervous.

Pete Sardis slid into the chair facing her. "Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"Call me Miss X," she said, in a low voice. She looked to see if the guard was out of earshot. Then, "You are going to be sentenced to death, Pete Sardis. You are going to hang. That swag you have hidden away isn't going to do you any good."

"Did you come to rub it in?" he snarled.

"No. I came to give you a chance to live!"

Suddenly all the blood drained from the prisoner's face. "You—you can get me outa this?"

"Not I," she said slowly. "But the man who sent me owns this city, and this state. He controls the mayor and the governor and the courts. He can get you off."

"You mean—Mr. Zero?"

Pete Sardis had heard of Mr. Zero, as had every crook in the country. No one knew his identity. But it was a national scandal that Falcon City was in the grip of as vicious a criminal ring as had ever throttled a community.

"You should have known better," the girl said calmly, "than to have come here to do a job like that pay-roll robbery—without making a connection first."

Pete Sardis lowered his eyes. "I guess you're right. But we figured we'd get in and out before the cops could lay a hand on us."

"Well," she asked, "do you want to beat this rap?"

"How can I? I've been convicted."

"Under the law of this state, it is within the discretion of the judge to set aside the jury's verdict before sentence is imposed."

A gleam of hope entered the prisoner's eyes. But it quickly died. "Judge Harley would never do that. It would make an awful stink. He'd be impeached."

The girl smiled faintly. "Judge Harley will do it—if Mr. Zero tells him to. But it will cost you one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. You don't have to trust me. If you agree, you will go free tomorrow. As soon as you are free, you must go and get that swag from the place where you have it hidden, and turn it over to me."

"It—it'll leave me broke," Pete Sardis faltered.

"Better to be broke than dead."

"There's something else," he said. "There's a G-man coming from Washington to question me in the morning. They want to ask me about a couple jobs that me and the boys done in other states. He's got a warrant, too. If I'm let outa here, he'll take me to the federal court—"

"The G-man will also be taken care of," the girl said. "There will be no extra charge for that..."

TWO hours later, the phone in Judge Victor Harley's home rang insistently. His wife put down her knitting to answer it, but the judge stopped her. What he said was, "I'll take it, Emma."

Judge Victor Harley was a lean man of fifty with a high forehead and deeply sunken, pallid cheeks. In his lusterless eyes there lurked the shadow of some great tragedy. And his wife's listless demeanor indicated that she shared his suffering. She watched him almost breathlessly as he picked up the phone.

A sharp, metallic voice spoke out of the receiver. "This is Mr. Zero."

Judge Harley's knuckles whitened as he gripped the instrument. "What—what do you want now?"

"A small matter, Judge. A favor which it will be very easy for you to do. Pete Sardis appears before you in the morning. Instead of sentencing him, you will state that you feel the verdict was based upon insufficient evidence—and you will set the verdict aside and discharge the defendant!"

"I won't do it. Damn you, I won't do it—"

Judge Harley broke off. There was a click at the other end. He was talking into a dead line. He put the phone down, and stared across the room at his wife. "You heard?"

Emma Harley nodded wordlessly. The voice had been loud enough to carry across to her. "You must do it, Victor. There is no other way."

"It will mean the end, Emma. I will have to resign."

"Perhaps then he will have no further use for you. Perhaps he will give us back—"

Her voice broke on a choking sob. "No, no. He is too cruel, that Mr. Zero. He means to turn the knife in our hearts!"

Victor Harley came and put an arm around his wife. "There is one hope," he said softly. "A G-man is coming in the morning, to question Sardis. I have spoken to Washington on the phone. They are sending the G-man to see me in my chambers in court. Perhaps if I tell this man everything, he can help us."

"If he ever gets here," she broke in.

AT seven minutes after nine the next morning, the train from Washington pulled into Central Station at the north end of Falcon City. A curly-haired, eager-eyed young man hurried from the train, carrying a briefcase. He went through the station, and entered one of the waiting cabs at the curb.

"I want to go to the superior court," he told the driver.

"Okay," said the cabby, and started the car. As they pulled out, a limousine fell into line behind them.

The cab moved slowly. Suddenly both doors were jerked open, and two men sprang into the cab, crowding against the curly-haired passenger. They both had guns, which they thrust into the young man's ribs.

"Just sit still!" one of them grated.

The young man started to go for a gun in his shoulder holster. The gunman on the right reversed his gun and hit him hard behind the ear. The young man slumped in the seat.

The other gunman covered the driver. "Keep going, pal. Don't look around!"

The driver was white-faced. He kept going. Twice the gunmen told him where to turn, and he obeyed. The limousine continued to follow them.

In ten minutes they reached an outlying section, where there were few houses. They opened the left-hand door of the cab and bundled the unconscious young G-man out into the gutter. He rolled over twice, and lay still.

One of the two gunmen, who had a cast in his left eye, leaned out and signaled to the limousine behind. The limousine put on a burst of speed, accelerated to fifty, and ran over the body of the G-man. The driver directed his car in such a way that the heavy tires struck the unconscious man's neck.

Then the cab and the limousine disappeared.

THERE were beads of sweat on Judge Victor Harley's high, scholarly forehead. Attired in his judicial robes, he was pacing the floor of his small office in the superior court building, in much the same fashion that Pete Sardis had paced the floor of his cell last night.

A dozen times he glanced at his wrist watch. It was twenty-seven minutes after nine. His telephone rang. He picked it up with a trembling hand.

That same metallic voice crackled in his ear. "Before opening court, Judge, I suggest that you tune in on WAFC at once. It will settle any doubts there may be in your mind."

Again the phone clicked dead.

Automatically, the judge turned the dial of his small radio to WAFC, the Municipal Broadcasting Station of Falcon City. The announcer was saying, "Flash! A man has been found dead on High Street, with a broken neck. He was apparently a victim of a hit-and-run driver. There were no witnesses of the accident. The victim has been identified as James Reynolds, a Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Mayor Devore regrets this accident deeply, as it is the third fatality to Federal G-men in recent weeks. The climate of Falcon City seems to be very unhealthy for G-men.

"Since this was clearly an accident, there will be no investigation. Mayor Devore has already notified F.B.I. headquarters in Washington, but he has warned the

Director that he does not want federal men in this city unless they are here on legitimate business. We are well able to administer the law in this city, and the Constitution of the United States protects us against having our rights and authority usurped by federal bureaus..."

Long before the announcer finished, Judge Victor Harley had left his office. With sagging shoulders he ascended the bench and faced a crowded courtroom and a smirking defendant.

"Peter Sardis," he said, "I have examined your case carefully. I find that the verdict of guilty brought in by the jury was based upon insufficient evidence. Therefore, under power vested in this court by statute, I hereby set aside the said verdict and discharge you from the jurisdiction of this court..."

## **Chapter II**

### **F.B.I. Suicide Squad.**

FOR several years there have been rumors around Washington that the F.B.I. has a Suicide Squad—a group of men who have no regular duties, but who wait for the one inevitable assignment from which there will be no return.

People have wondered just what kind of men comprise this Suicide Squad—and why.

Certainly, the three men who now sat in the private office of the Director would have been the first to deny the rumors—if asked.

Six months ago there had been five of them. Two months ago there were four. Now there were only three—Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw.

Johnny Kerrigan was a big blond, with a pair of dancing blue eyes, and shoulders like a stevedore's. Dan Murdoch was tall and black-haired and black-eyed and thin-lipped. He moved with the effortless ease of a jungle beast, and was just as dangerous. Stephen Klaw was small, compared to the other two. Only five feet seven-and-a-half, he was slim and wiry. Because of that, one might take him for a kid—were it not for the curious gleam in his slate-grey eyes. Many men had, to their sorrow, made the mistake of underestimating him.

So there they were—Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw. And there was one quality common to all of them—the quality of hard-bitten, headstrong willfulness which had wrecked their chances of advancement with the F.B.I.

Johnny Kerrigan had punched a senator's son in the nose in a barroom fight. Dan Murdoch had shot a croupier to death in a crooked gambling house. Steve Klaw had told the chairman of a Congressional investigating committee to go to hell, because he didn't like the tone in which he was questioned as to why he had shot to kill in a gunfight with three bandits, instead of trying to capture them.

Any other three men who had done similar misdeeds would have found themselves out in the cold. But Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw had records which few men could equal. It would have been impossible to explain to a hero-loving public just why they had been discharged from the service.

The Director was looking for an excuse to keep them on the payroll, and he was glad to be able to tell certain powers that be that it would be undiplomatic to oust Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw. But he had to promise that he would use them only in emergencies, and never for routine duties where they might hurt the noses or the feelings of other powers that be.

So he gave them cases that looked impossible, or that looked as if certain death was waiting at the other end. This was one of those cases.

"You three men are going to Falcon City," he told them.

"Aha!" said Johnny Kerrigan. "Into the jaws of death!"

"It amounts to that." The Director spoke soberly. "They're killing our men off, one by one. And they do it so cleverly that it looks like an accident. They don't give us an excuse to go in there in force. If I sent thirty or forty men in there on the present evidence, they'd raise a howl to Congress that we are violating the sanctity of local state government. And if I send one or two men, they'll kill them—like young Reynolds this morning!"

Dan Murdoch grinned thinly. "So Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw go into Falcon City and rip things wide open!"

"Exactly," was the answer. "You three hellions can do it if anyone can. Officially, I'm sending you there to arrest Pete Sardis—to serve the warrant that Reynolds had for him. Unofficially, I want the power of Mr. Zero broken. He's running that city to suit his own vicious taste. He's brought in thugs from the underworlds of a dozen cities, and appointed them police officers. He runs slot machines and gambling establishments, and drug and white-slave dives. He has flagrantly flaunted his power in our faces. Hundreds of law-abiding citizens have written begging us to do something about it. But our hands are tied unless we can prove overt violation of a Federal statute."

"If one of us gets killed publicly and openly," Stephen Klaw broke in, speaking in his soft drawl which was belied by the slate-hardness of his gray eyes, "that would be good cause for the F.B.I. to go in there!"

"I hope none of you will get killed," said the Director. "But it'll be a miracle if you all come out of it alive. Mr. Zero is diabolically clever."

"One of us," Stephen Klaw mused, "would have to go there alone, and openly, to sort of draw Mr. Zero's fire. The other two could be working under cover in the meanwhile."

"You will remember," said the Director, "that if you do anything out of line, you will be disowned. And if you prefer not to take the assignment, I will withdraw it."

"Not a chance!" boomed Johnny Kerrigan. "We've been warming our pants long enough. This is what we've been waiting for!"

The Director smiled, almost with fondness. "At least one of you won't come back from this job," he said. "I—I wish I didn't have to send you."

Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw shook hands with him solemnly, and filed out of the office. Once in the corridor, they let out a wild "*Whoop!*"

Little Stephen Klaw said, "Look, the guy who goes there alone will be the bait. The weaker looking he is, the better. I guess I fill the bill—"

"Nix!" barked Johnny Kerrigan. "We toss. Odd man goes in alone."

Dan Murdoch nodded. They took out coins and tossed. Kerrigan and Murdoch got heads. Steve Klaw got a tail. He grinned.

They walked silently out of the building and went to the parking-space where Dan Murdoch's car was sitting. He got a bottle and three paper cups out of the side pocket, and filled them with rye. Then they all touched cups and drank.

"See you in Hell, boys," said Stephen Klaw.

"See you in Hell, Shrimp," echoed Kerrigan and Murdoch.

Stephen Klaw raised his hand in mock salute, and turned and walked away.

In front of the Department of Justice Building he encountered newspapermen.

"Here's an item for you, boys," he said. "Stephen Klaw, Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has been assigned to go to Falcon City and find Pete Sardis. I am instructed to continue the investigation which Special Agent Reynolds was prevented from completing, due to his unfortunate accident. I am taking the five-fifteen train, and will arrive in Falcon City at eleven-forty-nine tonight." He paused, then added, "And you can say that I'll be wearing a white gardenia in my lapel—to make it easy to identify me!"

## **Chapter III**

### **Date with Death.**

AT eleven-forty-nine, Stephen Klaw alighted from the Washington train at Central Station in Falcon City. True to his promise, he was wearing a white gardenia in his buttonhole. Unlike young Reynolds, he did not carry a brief-case. He sauntered carelessly out into the street, with his hands deep in his coat pockets, and apparently without a care in the world. He got into a taxicab.

"Do you know where Judge Victor Harley lives?" he asked the driver. "I mean the judge that set this Pete Sardis free."

The driver nodded. "Yeah. On High Street."

"All right, that's where I want to go."

The cab started.

Looking through the rear window, Steve Klaw saw that a long black limousine had pulled out from the curb and was crawling behind them.

He was startled by the noise of the opening of both his cab doors, and turned to see that two men with guns in their hands were crowding in on either side of him. One of the men had a cast in the left eye.

"Just sit still!" this one grated.

Steve Klaw sat still. The other gunman poked his revolver into the back of the taxi driver's neck.

"Drive straight ahead," he ordered. "And don't look around."

Steve Klaw smiled faintly. "How's it going to be this time, pal?" he asked. "The same as with Reynolds? Found dead on the street?"

The man with the cast grinned. "We never tell the same joke twice, guy. This time you're going over the bridge. You were a sucker to come here."

"Tell me one thing before I kick the bucket," Steve begged. "Who is Mr. Zero?"

The man with the cast in his eye laughed out loud. "Hear that, Louie? He wants to know who is Mr. Zero!"



Louie attended strictly to the business of keeping the driver covered. He grunted.

"Wise guy! You don't seem to be worried, Mr. G-man. Ain't you got no imagination? How'll it feel at the bottom of the river?"

"I'm not there yet," Steve said slowly.

At Louie's direction, the quaking cab-driver swung east over the North End Bridge. They came to a place where the W.P.A. was repairing the roadbed. The side rails of the bridge had been temporarily removed.

"We get out here," said the man with the cast.

"I won't go," said Steve.

"Too bad, pal," said the man with the cast. He reversed his gun and raised it to strike Steve behind the ear, while Louie turned to keep him covered.

Stephen Klaw fired the automatic in his right hand pocket and the automatic in his left hand pocket simultaneously. He shot through the cloth without aiming very much, but he shot each gun three times quickly.

All three slugs from the left-hand gun tore into the abdomen of the man with the cast in his left eye. The pellets from the right-hand gun hit Louie in various places, one of which was over the heart.

The cab driver leaped out of his seat and ran away with fear pistoning his legs.

Stephen Klaw clambered swiftly over the body of Louie, and leaped to the roadbed just as the limousine came abreast of him.

There was only one man in the limousine, at the wheel. He had a gun in his hand, but he was hampered in using it by reason of having to hold the wheel with one hand. Stephen Klaw shot him in the head.

The limousine swerved sharply as the man slumped, and cut across the bridge at a sharp angle. It hit the guard rail and came to a stop.

Steve looked inside the taxicab. The man with the cast in his eye was not dead yet. But he was unconscious, and there was little chance that he would live till he could get to a hospital.

Steve Klaw smiled grimly and turned and walked back toward the city end of the bridge. Twice he stepped into the shadow of a girder as police cars with screaming sirens raced past him. He got over without being stopped and found a second-hand clothing store down near the river front, where he bought a new jacket to match his trousers. He threw the old jacket into a trash barrel after removing all identifying tags.

Then he took another cab and went to the Falcon City Hotel in the heart of town. He entered a telephone booth in the lobby and called the Falcon City Broadcasting Station—WAFC.

"Please announce," he said to the person who answered the phone, "that Stephen Klaw, Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, is still alive, and that he is now in the Falcon City Hotel, awaiting the next move of Mr. Zero. Convey my compliments to Mr. Zero, and tell him that I wish him better luck next time!"

He hung up before the startled recipient of the message could throw further questions at him.

He inserted another nickel in the slot, and called Judge Harley's home. "This is Stephen Klaw, Special Agent of the F.B.I.," he said. "I am here in place of Agent

Reynolds, who was killed this morning. I understand you wished to make a statement."

"I am sorry, Mr. Klaw," Judge Harley interrupted. "I have nothing to say!"

Steve's eyes narrowed. "You have changed your mind about asking assistance from the F.B.I.?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me the real reason why you freed Pete Sardis this morning?"

"No," said the judge.

"Did you do it at the order of Mr. Zero?" Klaw asked.

"I have nothing to say." There was a click as Judge Harley hung up.

Stephen Klaw came out of the telephone booth thoughtfully, fingering the gardenia in his buttonhole. He purchased a copy of the *Falcon City Evening News*. There was a headline that caught his eye at once:

*F.B.I. SENDS PROFESSIONAL KILLER TO FALCON CITY*

*Stephen Klaw, who has already been under investigation for his murderous deadliness with guns, is on his way to Falcon City with a gardenia in his lapel...*

Steve grinned at that, and glanced at another headline:

*DISTRICT ATTORNEY ELLIS DEMANDS IMPEACHMENT OF JUDGE HARLEY*

STEPHEN KLAU crumpled the paper and dropped it in a waste-paper basket. He crossed the lobby and entered the Hotel Grille through the side door. This was a spacious dining-room where the elite of the city came at night.

Several people at the tables looked at him curiously, eyeing the gardenia. He allowed the headwaiter to seat him at a table near the dance floor.

"Just one in your party, sir?"

"No," said Steve. "I'm expecting company."

"A lady?"

"I doubt it. I'm expecting to hear from—Mr. Zero!"

The headwaiter's face became pale. "I—I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Never mind. Bring me rye whiskey in an *unopened* bottle," said Steve.

"A bottle, sir?"

"And unopened. I don't like knockout drops in my drinks."

The man grew frigid. "That's an insult—"

He stopped at the sudden cold gleam in Stephen Klaw's gray eyes. His voice trailed away.

"Y-yes, sir. An unopened bottle." He hurried away.

There was a hard-jawed, powerfully built man sitting with a party of six at a near-by table. This man was watching Steve with a frown. He excused himself to the others at his table and got up and came over quietly to where Steve was sitting.

"Do you mind if I sit down for a moment? I am District Attorney Grover Ellis."

Stephen Klaw nodded.

Ellis seated himself. His eyes bored into Stephen Klaw's, then dropped to the gardenia. "You are the G-man who announced your arrival in the newspapers."

Steve inclined his head, but said nothing.

Ellis went on, frowning. "You're mad, Klaw. I wouldn't give a nickel for your life. Mr. Zero will get you. And you can't get him. I know—I've tried for three years. He only lets me live because he needs a little opposition for the sake of publicity. And I can't hurt him much. Even when I convict a murderer like Sardis, he gets him off. But you—you are deliberately challenging his power in the city. If you stay alive, all his thugs and gunmen will lose respect for him. I'm surprised he hasn't tried already—"

"He's made one try," Stephen Klaw said. "I'm waiting for the next."

"Damn it, man!" Ellis exploded. "What are you trying to accomplish?"

"I'm trying to get myself killed in a spectacular way," Steve told him. "With plenty of witnesses to prove it wasn't an accident. So the F.B.I. can come in here and really go to town."

"My God!" said Ellis. Then he recovered himself. "Mr. Zero won't play into your hands like that. He'll get you the way he got the others the way he does everything else in Falcon City. It's suicide. You're throwing your life away."

"It's my life, Mr. Ellis."

The district attorney grew red in the face and pushed up from the chair. "You're a hard man to try to help, Klaw!"

"I'm not asking you for help."

District Attorney Ellis shrugged his shoulders, and left the table.

Stephen Klaw glanced at his wristwatch. It was fifteen minutes since he had phoned the broadcasting station. Plenty of time for Mr. Zero to have received the news, and to make another attempt. He sipped his rye highball, keeping one eye on the door.

A girl came into the dining-room, and stopped just inside the doorway. She wore a finely tailored blue suit which set off her slender figure excellently. She had long black lashes, and a soft red mouth. There was a queer expression in her eyes—perhaps fear, perhaps nervousness.

She saw the gardenia in Steve's lapel, and came directly to his table, slipped into the chair which Ellis had just vacated.

"You're looking for Pete Sardis," she said without preamble.

Stephen Klaw studied her for a full minute. "Do you know where he is?"

She nodded jerkily. "I'll take you there."

Steve grinned slowly. "Did Mr. Zero send you? Are you going to lead me into a trap?"

"Yes!"

She was outwardly cool. But Steve detected a slight trembling of the slim hand which held the purse at her breast. She went on hurriedly, speaking so low that he barely caught the words.

"We are being watched by a dozen people who would gladly report everything I'm saying, to Mr. Zero. He has made plans to get you, in one way or another. If those men failed at the station, I was to come here and lure you to your death, using Pete Sardis as the bait. I have done Mr. Zero's contact work for months now. I am the one who made the proposition to Sardis, in jail. God forgive me, I have done

other terrible things at Mr. Zero's orders. But I'm through. I won't take you to your death. Refuse. Refuse to come with me."

Steve Klaw smiled. "You expect me to believe that you have suddenly changed sides?"

"No, no. It isn't that," she said. "I dared not refuse to work for Mr. Zero. Just as Judge Harley dared not refuse to discharge Pete Sardis. But I have never helped him to do murder. This—this will be murder. If you come to the place where Sardis is, you will surely die, and it will be murder!"

"That's what I want," said Stephen Klaw.

"You don't understand," the girl argued. "You'll be found dead somehow, but there'll be no proof that it was murder."

"How?" Klaw asked.

"I—I don't know. He never takes me into his confidence."

"Who is Mr. Zero?" he insisted.

"I don't know that either. I get my orders over the phone." She halted.

"What hold has he over you?" Klaw asked now.

"My brother—George Payne—is in the death house in the County Jail. He was framed for a murder he never committed. Judge Harley has been postponing the date for sentence. Each month he sets it ahead for thirty days. If I should disobey Mr. Zero, my brother will hang."

"I see," said Stephen Klaw, softly. He got to his feet. There was an unholy glitter in his eyes. "Take me to Pete Sardis."

"But it's a trap. You'll *die*—"

"Take me to Pete Sardis!" he repeated harshly.

## Chapter IV

### G-Men Ask For It!

AT ABOUT the time when Stephen Klaw was ordering his rye and ginger ale in the dining-room of the Falcon City Hotel, two disreputable-looking characters might have been seen near the residence of Judge Victor Harley on High Street.

Their clothes were wrinkled and dirty, and they had a stubble of beard on their faces. But the car which they parked around the corner on Clay Street had a powerful eight-cylinder motor which could do ninety without trouble. It is doubtful if anyone who did not know them well would have been able to recognize big Johnny Kerrigan and Dan Murdoch in these two bleary-eyed stumble bums.

They had tapped the telephone wire in the judge's house, and were going to take turns at sitting with the earphones in the cellar.

Dan Murdoch was just getting out of the car when his hand froze on the door handle. A long seven-passenger car was pulling up at the door of the judge's house, around the corner. And at the same instant, Judge Harley and his wife emerged from the house.

Murdoch's eyes narrowed as he saw them enter the car. "Do you see what I see, Johnny?"

There were two men in that limousine, one at the wheel and the other in the rear. The man in the rear was adjusting a blindfold bandage to the judge's eyes. He finished, and then turned to do the same for Emma Harley.

"This is the break, Dan!" exclaimed Johnny Kerrigan. "We'll tail them."

"If those mugs are taking Harley and his wife anywhere, they wouldn't be dumb enough to let anyone stick on their tail," was the answer. "I'll ride with them. You follow my flash."

Kerrigan nodded. This was a trick they had tried several times in the past. Though dangerous, it had often succeeded.

Murdoch slipped away and sidled around the corner, keeping on the blind side of the limousine. Just as it began to pull away from the curb, he stepped up on the rear bumper, and got hold of the spare tire with one hand. He rode that limousine just the way street kids will steal a ride on the back of a passing car.

Kerrigan waited till the limousine was a block away, then swung in after them. He let them gain another block before he switched on his lights.

The trail led through unfrequented portions of the city. Twice Kerrigan almost lost them, but each time he caught the flicker of Murdoch's flashlight as the limousine turned a corner far ahead. He realized the wisdom of Murdoch's decision to ride with them. The driver of that car was deliberately twisting and turning in order to lose any possible tails. At last the man was apparently convinced that he was not being followed, for he swung into Eastern Boulevard and headed out of town.

Kerrigan remained almost a quarter of a mile behind, guided by Murdoch's flashlight. They drove that way for thirty minutes. Then the limousine swung into a private driveway leading up to a low, rambling stucco structure set far back from the road.

Kerrigan parked his car and walked up toward the house. He got a glimpse of the door being opened by a huge, hulking man, dressed like an interne in white trousers and jacket, and with a short club hanging by a thong from his wrist. The judge and his wife, still blindfolded, were led into the house by the two men who had brought them here, and then the door closed, shutting off the little light that had been cast on the driveway.

Kerrigan moved more quickly now. He saw Murdoch come out of the shadow of the limousine, which had been left in front of the door. They moved up close to the porch, and saw that there was a small metal plaque alongside the door:

### **DOCTOR RUNCIE'S PRIVATE SANITARIUM**

Murdoch and Kerrigan moved around to the side of the house. All the windows were heavily barred. They were ten or twelve feet above the ground, so that it was impossible to look inside.

Murdoch was a little in advance of Kerrigan, and he stepped around toward the rear of the house. Abruptly a shadow appeared before him. It was the figure of a man with a rifle.

"Where do you think you're going, bozo?"

Murdoch said, "Want to make something of it, guy?" and moved deliberately in toward the muzzle of the rifle.

The guard raised the gun. "Don't move or I'll give it to you in the guts—"

He broke off short as the huge figure of Johnny Kerrigan came hurtling in at him from the side. Before he could fire he was sent sprawling, with Johnny on top of him. Johnny smashed a right and a left down into the man's face. His head bounced against the concrete walk, and he lay still.

Kerrigan got up and dusted his hands.

Murdoch patted him on the back. "Nice teamwork, Johnny."

Kerrigan grunted. "We can leave him. I don't think he'll be getting up for a while."

He pointed to a window in the rear of the building, where a man was pulling down a shade. It was one of the men from the limousine.

THEY followed the concrete walk till they got under the window. Kerrigan clasped his two hands together, and held them waist high. Murdoch stepped up on them, and his head came level with the window.

There was a crack about a half inch wide where the shade didn't come all the way down, and he could peer inside.

Judge Harley and his wife were in there, without the blindfolds. They were both kneeling beside a cot upon which lay a pallid girl of about seventeen. It was easy to see that she must once have been beautiful. But now her cheeks were sunken, and dark were circles under her eyes. She wore a white flannel hospital nightgown which exposed her arms. Murdoch saw dozens of tiny needle pricks on her left arm from elbow to shoulder.

The two men from the limousine were standing on either side of the door, with guns in their hands.

Judge Harley was dry-eyed as he knelt beside the cot. But Emma Harley's body was wracked by short, jerking sobs. She threw her arms around the pallid patient on the cot, and buried her head on the girl's breast.

The girl raised a hand which was thin almost to transparency, and stroked Mrs. Harley's hair.

Murdoch could see her lips slowly forming words, "Take me home, mother—please take me home."

Mrs. Harley screamed with pent-up emotion, and sprang away from the cot. She swung on the two guards at the door. Her voice was so loud now, that Murdoch could plainly hear her.

"You devils, you can't keep her here any longer!"

One of the two men snarled something, and stepped forward and slapped her hard across the face with the back of his hand. She fell back across the cot from the force of the blow.

Judge Harley, his face livid with fury, sprang to his feet and started toward the gunman. The fellow sneered and brought his gun up to cover the judge.

Dan Murdoch had seen enough. He called down, "Don't drop me now, Johnny," and drew his revolver. He raked it across the narrow strip of exposed window between two of the bars, shattering the glass. He stuck his fingers in through the aperture and yanked at the shade. It rattled all the way up on its roller.

The two gunmen were momentarily startled into immobility. But when they saw Murdoch's grinning face in the window, they started to shoot. Their aim was spoiled by their haste, and they didn't get the chance to fire again.

Murdoch pulled his trigger twice, with cold deliberation. That cold grin remained fixed on Dan Murdoch's dark handsome face as the two hoods went crashing back into the door—one with a ball in his heart, the other with blood spurting from a torn throat.

From somewhere in the hallway beyond the closed door a hoarse shout echoed the reverberating din of the gunfire. The bodies of the two gunmen were shoved aside as the door was thrust open. The big white-coated man with the club came barging in.

Murdoch covered him from the window, and said, "Stand still, boy-friend!"

The man's face went white when he saw that killer's grin on Murdoch's lips. Slowly he raised his hands in the air, with the club swinging from his right wrist.

"If you want to get your daughter out of here, Judge," said Murdoch, "pick up a gun and cover that baby."

Judge Harley, still a little dazed, got one of the revolvers dropped by the gunmen and pointed it at the big man.

"I'll keep him covered all right," he said savagely. "I only hope he tries to escape. He's one of the men who tortured my daughter!"

"We're coming in the front way," Murdoch told him. Then he said to Kerrigan, "Okay, Johnny."

Kerrigan lowered him to the ground. They started toward the front of the house, and suddenly they heard the sound of a motor racing. They broke into a run and got around in front in time to see a small coupe tear down the driveway and swing into the road heading back toward the city.

"Some one's making a break!" Murdoch exclaimed.

Johnny Kerrigan gave him a little push. "Go after them, Dan. I'll handle this!"

MURDOCH leaped into the limousine in front of the door. He jammed the starter down, got in first and raced her down to the road, taking the curve at the foot of the driveway on two wheels.

He kept his foot all the way down to the floorboards, and the big car ate up the road, the speedometer moving to seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five.

He caught sight of the two red taillights of the little coupe, and began to overhaul it rapidly. Grimly he took out his gun and put it on the seat beside him. Slowly but surely he began to pull abreast of the coupe.

There was only one man in the fugitive car. He was stout and ball-headed, and there was terror in the face that he turned as Kerrigan came abreast of him.

Dan picked up the gun and waved it in signal for the fat man to pull over. The fat man obeyed.

Dan swung his limousine in front of the coupe, and got out. He came around and yanked open the door of the coupe and put a big paw on the fat man's collar. He pulled him out bodily.

"And who might *you* be, my fat friend?" he asked, almost gently.

"I—I'm Doctor Runcie. What—what is the meaning of this?"

Dan Murdoch grinned. "*You tell me.* And talk very fast, my fat friend."

Runcie tried to bluster some more. "This is an outrage! I don't understand!"

Murdoch's eyes were dancing points of fire. He smashed a fist into Runcie's mouth. "I said to talk. I mean talk *sense!*"

Runcie bounced back with Dan's blow. Then he cowered as Dan raised a fist again. "Wait! Wait! I'll talk. I—I thought you were—were robbers, so I escaped."

Murdoch hit him again.

He went down to the ground, moaning.

Murdoch picked him up by the collar, held him dangling off the ground. "Want more?"

"No, no! God, no! What—what do you want me to tell you?"

"You were holding that girl back there at Mr. Zero's orders. Who's Mr. Zero?"

"God, I don't know," said the doctor. "I get my orders by phone."

"Suppose you had to get in touch with Mr. Zero in a hurry? What would you do?" The G-man waited.

"I'd call that girl."

"What girl?"

"I don't know her name. I just have her telephone number. It's Falcon Two-four-one-four-o."

"I see," said Dan Murdoch.

## Chapter V

### Girls Mean Trouble.

THE girl parked her car on Pitt Street, in front of a remodeled brownstone. "This is where Pete Sardis is hiding," she said to Stephen Klaw. "Apartment Four-B, on the top floor, in the rear. Pete Sardis is up there."

"Ah," said Stephen Klaw.

His eyes were busy searching the shadows on either side of the street. He saw nothing. There was a car parked about fifty feet away, on the opposite side. From here it looked unoccupied. But there might be men in it, out of sight. There were dark doorways on either side of the street. Men might be lurking there. Mister Zero would be sure to give Pete Sardis reinforcements for his job.

He turned and saw the girl looking at him intently.

"If you go up there, Mr. Klaw, you're going to your death," she said. "Why don't you get the local police to help you?"

He smiled faintly. "And have some of Mr. Zero's boys right with me when I go up? Thank you for the suggestion. I'll be safer alone."

She shrugged. "I told Mr. Zero that I wouldn't bring you here without warning you that it was a trap. He said it would be quite all right. He said he was certain you would choose to come alone."

"Thank you for that, too," said Stephen Klaw. "And now, if you will forgive me, I must do a very unpleasant thing."

He took handcuffs from his pocket, and snapped them around her wrists, running the links through a spoke of the steering wheel.



"Just so you'll be here when I come back," he explained. "If I don't come back, it'll be simple for Mr. Zero's boys to take the key from my pocket and release you."

She offered no resistance. "You're a hard man, Stephen Klaw."

Then as he climbed from the car, she spoke again, softly—so softly that he almost did not hear it. "I—I wish you luck!"

He nodded, and walked away from the car, directly toward the entrance of the brownstone. He walked with his hands deep in his jacket pockets, almost with a slouch—so that he seemed barely more than a kid. But there was that curious gleam in his slate-gray eyes, and he was missing nothing that was to be seen on the street. For instance, he saw the limousine that turned the far corner, slowly, and came to a stop almost at once. As it passed for a moment under the street light, he recognized that it was the same make and year as the one in which he was to have been sent hurtling over the bridge tonight.

His lips tightened. Mr. Zero was making sure that his escape would be cut off.

He did not stop. He put his hand on the door knob and thrust it open, and stepped into the vestibule. He tried the vestibule door, and found it unlocked. They were making it easy for him.

He stepped into the hall. There was a soft light here. The staircase was directly ahead. He could not see into the shadows behind it, neither could he see what was on the first floor landing.

He took out his flashlight and sent its beam lancing upward. There was no one on the stairs. He sent the light into the shadows behind the stairs. There was nothing there.

He held the flashlight in his left hand, and kept the right buried in his pocket. Firmly, without attempting to deaden the sound of his steps, he started to mount the stairs. Each step might presage a burst of machine-gun fire. And then again, they might let him reach the top.

He reached the first-floor landing without opposition. Now came the next test. He must cross that hall to the next flight of stairs. And while he crossed, the door of the apartment behind him might open and spew death.

He walked here on the balls of his feet, lightly, so that the sound of an opening door would be sure to reach him. But there was nothing.

He used his flashlight once more, and began to mount the second flight.

Suddenly he stopped dead. A sound reached him—the sound of a foot scraping the floor on the next landing.

At the same instant he heard another sound below him. The door of the front apartment on the first floor was being cautiously opened.

His eyes gleamed. He was to be caught between two fires here. If he tried to go up, the gunner on the next landing would get him. If he tried to go down, the gunner on the first floor would get him.

Suddenly a powerful flashlight from the next landing clicked on, bathing him in merciless light.

Stephen Klaw acted almost before that flashlight focused. He dropped his own light. His right hand came up with an automatic, and began to trigger shots upward. His left dived into the pocket and came out with the other gun.

His swift shots thundered in the hall. The flashlight up above disintegrated, and a man screamed. Then, little scarlet points of fire began to lance downward from

the landing, to the accompaniment of the trip-hammer tapping of a machine-gun. Lead hammered into the stairs.

But Steve was not there. Instead of going up or down by the stairs, he had vaulted the bannister—with agility. He landed on his feet on the carpeted hall of the first floor, facing that opening door. It was open about six inches, and the muzzle of a sub-machine gun was coming out.

Steve didn't give it a chance to open any farther. He sent four shots from his left-hand gun crashing in quick succession into that aperture. The door sagged open, and the gun-muzzle dropped to the floor.

Stephen Klaw raced across the hall and kicked the door wide open. He sprang inside, with his guns going first. But there was nothing to shoot at in here. The apartment was empty, unfurnished. The dead machine-gunner lay just inside the door, on top of his gun.

Steve shoved him over, and picked up the tommy-gun.

The hallway was still thundering with gunfire. The gunner on the next landing was firing burst after burst down the stairs.

Steve waited.

At last the man above stopped. He called out cautiously, "Hey, Joe! Did we get him—"

Stephen Klaw didn't give that man a chance to finish. He stepped out quickly and raised the machine-gun and depressed the trip. The weapon bucked in his hands. Flame stabbed upward, cutting the man's words off in his throat, transforming them into a scream.

Stephen Klaw stopped after the first burst. A machine-gun came bouncing down the stairs. It was followed by a body. The body rolled over and over, and ended up at the foot of the stairs.

The stench of cordite was high in Stephen's nostrils, and the echo of the gunfire was in his ears. It was reverberating through the whole building.

He heard someone groan up above, and then he heard footsteps retreating upward.

He felt around in the clothes of the dead machine-gunner at his feet, and found what he sought—a flashlight.

He flicked it on. The man who had rolled down the stairs was dead, his chest virtually shot away by that single burst.

Steve raced up the stairs to the next landing. Here lay the body of the man with the flashlight, whom he had shot first. He was on his face. Steve turned him over, beamed the light into his face. He sucked in his breath.

It was Pete Sardis. Two of Steve's slugs, barely six inches apart, had caught him over the heart...

BUT the thing that held Stephen Klaw's attention was the fact that Pete Sardis was bound and gagged. His hands were tied behind him. There was a dirty handkerchief stuffed in his mouth and held there by a strap around his head. And the shattered flashlight was tied to Sardis' arm by a strip of wire.

They had used Sardis as bait all right. They had bound and gagged him, and stuck the flashlight on him, and dragged him here to be shot by the first slugs

from Steve's gun. Then they had figured to shoot down Stephen Klaw, and untie Sardis.

The evidence would be there for everyone to see—the G-man had been killed while attempting to capture Pete Sardis. It would have been just another kind of accident, with no back-trail to Mr. Zero to justify an F.B.I. investigation. Mr. Zero had freed Sardis from the threat of hanging, had no doubt collected the hundred and fifty thousand dollars from him, and then had deliberately sacrificed him.

In Stephen Klaw's ears there still sounded the patter of retreating footsteps limping upstairs. One of these gunmen was getting away. And from the sounds, the man must be wounded.

Steve raced up the stairs after the man. Several doors opened tentatively, then closed again swiftly as the house-holders realized that the shooting was not over yet.

The man above was moving slowly, and Steve caught him before he reached the top floor. The man turned, snarling, as Steve's flashlight pinned him to the stairs, and raised a tommy-gun weakly. But he had not the strength to hold it. It fell from his hands.

"Oh, Gawd, don't shoot!" he called out weakly—and fainted.

Steve came up quickly and examined him. The man was hit in the shoulder and in the groin. Steve seized his arm, slung him across his back none too gently, and carried him downstairs.

He emerged into the street to hear a siren clamoring in the distance. The girl was still handcuffed to the wheel of the coupe in front of the door. The limousine down at the corner roared into life and came racing down toward him. One of the doors came open.

"Git in, quick!" someone shouted.

This was the getaway car—intended for any of the gunmen who might survive the battle with Stephen Klaw.

Steve's eyes glittered. He held the unconscious gunman over his right shoulder. He had an automatic in his left hand. He raised the automatic and fired three times at the limousine—once at the driver, and twice at the man who was holding the door open in the back. Guns roared...

Someone in the car screamed. The scream ended in a gurgle. The driver slumped over the wheel. His foot must have pressed down on the accelerator, because the limousine didn't stop, but kept on going right past the house, gaining speed and swerving crazily.

It struck a fire hydrant across the street and virtually stood up on its front wheels, then went over the hydrant and hit a building with a sickening crash.

STEPHEN KLAU carried the gunman to the coupe without once looking at the wrecked limousine. He dumped the unconscious man into the seat, pushed him over close to the girl, then crowded in beside the inert figure.

The girl was looking at him with wide eyes. She wore a trembling smile—almost of gladness—on her lips. "You—you're alive—and unhurt!"

He nodded grimly. "Thanks to your warning." He reached over and unlocked the handcuffs. "Think you can drive?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then let's go. That siren is getting louder. And people are looking out of their windows."

The girl reached down and turned on the ignition, and got the coupe going. It was cramped driving with the wounded and bleeding gunman slumping against her.

Stephen Klaw, looking at her sideways, saw that her teeth were pressing into her lower lip. She turned the corner just as a police car screamed into the street at the other end. She drove swiftly for several blocks, making two or three turns. At last she slowed up.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I guess there isn't a safe place in Falcon City for you after tonight," he said. "Mr. Zero will be after you for helping me get away."

"I don't care for myself!" she exclaimed. "It's my brother. It's what'll happen to George."

"What's your first name?" he asked her. "Mary?"

"No. Nina. Nina Payne."

"All right, Nina. Stick with me," he said. "Gamble your brother's life on this deal. I'm not playing a lone hand here in Falcon City. There are two more men here—two of the best. They're working somewhere. We have a good chance of winning now. If we win, I'll take care of your brother. If Zero wins, your brother loses out. It's a fifty-fifty gamble. Will you take it and play along with me all the way?"

She kept on driving slowly for five minutes, staring straight ahead into the night. Suddenly she squared her chin and spoke. "I'll do it! I'd trust you with my own life—gladly. If George knew you, I'm sure he'd gamble on you. I'll do it!"

"Good girl!" he said quietly. He reached across the unconscious gunman and pressed her hand, on the wheel.

"Now—where can we take this bozo—where Zero can't get him back?"

"There's one place where he'd never think to look for him—my apartment," she said. "Zero doesn't know yet that I've double-crossed him. No one is alive back there to tell him."

"All right," said Stephen Klaw. "Your apartment."

## **Chapter VI**

### **Death Lies in Wait.**

SHE lived in a corner building in one of the quieter residential sections, on the third floor of a self-service elevator apartment. She parked around the corner, in front of the service elevator. She kept control of herself like a real thoroughbred while Stephen Klaw lifted up the wounded gunman and carried him on his shoulder in through the basement to the service elevator. She operated the elevator.

Steve carried the man into the small two-room apartment, and put him on the bed. He went through the man's pockets, and found papers which identified him

as Joseph Lukas, of Chicago. He set to work to cleanse the two wounds, with Nina helping him by bringing hot water and bandages.

While he was working, the man opened his eyes and groaned.

Steve said tonelessly, "Well, Lukas, you're at the end of the trail."

"I'm going to die?"

"No," the G-man said. "You're shot twice but it's nothing that a doctor can't fix up. How about Mr. Zero? Who is he?"

"Go to hell!" snarled Lukas.

Steve's slate-gray eyes remained expressionless. "Okay, Lukas!" He put down the bandage and turned and started out of the room.

"When—when is the doctor coming?" asked the thug.

Steve turned at the door. "Doctor—Hell! I'm going to let you bleed to death."

"Gawd! No! You can't do that. You're a G-man. G-men don't let guys bleed to death!"

"*This* G-man does!" said Steve. He went out and shut the door, cutting off Joe Lukas' frantic voice.

Nina Payne was standing in the living-room, with face flushed, and hands at her breast. Her eyes questioned him terribly. "Steve! You can't let him die!"

"You want to save your brother, don't you?"

She dropped her eyes. "It—it's too cruel!"

"Did Zero or his men have mercy on you? On your brother?" he asked. "This is war. It must be fought like war. We must kill or be killed. Lukas will weaken."

He took her by the arm. "If you are Mr. Zero's contact man, you must have some way of getting in touch with him in an emergency."

She nodded.

"How?"

She told him, "I call a private, unlisted number—Falcon Seven-two-one-two-one. It never answers. But he must have some way of hearing it ring. He always calls back within an hour or two." She hurried on as she caught the gleam of interest in Steve's eyes. "Oh, it's no good trying to trace him through that number. I—I tried it. It's a private line, and the phone company won't disclose the name of the subscriber. But I have a friend in the central office, and I got it. The number is under the name of a Mr. John Jones. It's a small office, in the Strand Building, in City Hall Square, right behind the county courthouse. No one ever comes near it. I—I've watched it for hours. I—"

She was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone.

They looked at each other silently. Her eyes were wide with consternation. She whispered, "*Mr. Zero!*" Woodenly, she picked up the phone and said, "Yes?"

A voice crackled over the wire, and her eyes flashed. She shook her head in the negative, to indicate to Steve that it wasn't Mr. Zero.

The voice rattled on excitedly for a full minute. Steve could see growing excitement in her face, and in the swift rising and falling of her breasts as she listened.

The voice stopped, and she said, "Wait a minute, Runcie."

She covered the phone with her hand and whispered excitedly to Steve, "It's Phil Runcie. He's a doctor who has a private sanitarium out on Glendale Road. He does

a lot of work for Mr. Zero. I think he has something to do with the hold that this Zero has over Judge Harley."

"Yes?"

"Runcie is in trouble," she explained. "He says two terrible men attacked his place and have taken it over. He just barely escaped. I don't like the way he sounds. There seems to be something the matter with him now."

"What does he want you to do?" Steve asked.

"He wants to tell Mr. Zero. Zero controls the police force. He could send a crew of police out there to recapture the place and kill those men."

Steve smiled. "I think I know who those two terrible men are." He pressed her arm tightly. "Tell Runcie to come here. Tell him one of Zero's men is wounded and needs treatment."

SHE gasped, but obeyed. She spoke quickly into the phone. Runcie's quavering voice objected. She insisted. He began to talk very loud to drown her out, so that Steve could hear what he was saying. His words were jumbled, however.

Nina covered the phone once more.

"I think there's someone with him," she said. "Someone who's forcing him to make the call."

"I don't doubt it," said Steve. "Tell him to come here, no matter what the situation is—that you'll take care of it."

She repeated that into the phone. Then, at Runcie's acquiescence, she hung up.

"Put in that call for Mr. Zero," Steve ordered her. "When he calls back, tell him what Runcie told you."

Her eyes widened, but she did as he directed. She called Falcon 72121. There was no answer. She left the receiver off the hook, so it would continue to ring.

Steve nodded, and went into the bedroom.

Joe Lukas was bleeding like a stuck pig.

He had been calling out feebly to Steve all the time that they were in the next room, but Steve hadn't heeded.

"For Gawd's sake," Lukas begged, "get a doctor. Those slugs are burning me up!"

Steve came over and stood grinning down at him mercilessly. "You know who I am?"

"Yeah."

"You've heard of me?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. You—you're a killer. I—I should of known better than to take the job!" Lukas groaned.

"Then you ought to know I'll let you die if you don't talk."

"Gawd, there's nothin' I can talk about. I don't know who Mr. Zero is. We get our orders on the phone!" Lukas winced.

"Too bad, Lukas. Too bad you have to die."

"Wait! There—there's one thing I can talk about," the man said. "It—it'll land me in the death house. It's murder. But—Gawd how those slugs hurt! Maybe I can beat that rap. I—I can't beat this rap—without a doctor."

"All right, talk," Steve said. "If it's worth it, I'll get you a doctor."

"It—it's murder. I—I killed the man that that guy George Payne was framed for."

Stephen Klaw turned just in time to steady Nina Payne, who was suddenly swaying on her feet. She clenched her hands and forced her swaying body upright.

"Go—*on!*" she whispered.

Stephen Klaw took out paper and a fountain-pen. "Talk!" he ordered. "I'll write it—and you'll sign it!"

Joe Lukas talked. He exonerated George Payne. He told how he had been ordered to kill a man—ordered by the sharp, metallic voice of Mr. Zero. He told how he had left a key ring of George Payne's at the scene of the murder—the key ring that had convicted Nina's brother.

When Steve finished writing, Lukas scrawled his signature. Steve and Nina witnessed it.

"All right," said Steve. "Lie quietly. A doctor will be here right away. Take it easy."

Nina went into the next room and hung up the receiver. Almost as soon as she did so, the phone rang. She grew suddenly tense, and picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

A sharp, metallic voice came over the wire. "You wanted me?"

"Yes." She looked inquiringly at Steve, and when he nodded, she hurried on. "Doctor Runcie's sanitarium has been attacked by two men. Runcie thinks they are G-men. He said to tell you that they have taken over the place. He says you will know how important it is."

For what seemed an infinite period of time there was silence on the wire. Then the metallic voice spoke again. "All right. Remain at your phone. I will call you again."

"What do you want Runcie to do? I told him to come here."

"Let him wait there." Mr. Zero hung up.

"Good," said Steve. "I hope Johnny and Dan had sense enough to clear out of there with whatever they found."

"Runcie ought to be here any minute," she said. "He was phoning from the city."

The doorbell rang.

Stephen Klaw took out one of his automatics. "Open it," he said.

She went to the door and pulled it open.

Doctor Runcie, fat and sweating, with a bleeding lip, was standing there. He started to say something, but someone shoved him hard from behind and sent him sprawling into the room.

Dan Murdoch and Johnny Kerrigan, shoulder to shoulder, pushed in through the doorway, with guns in their fists.

"Everybody hold it!" Murdoch barked. "This is the law—" He broke off when he saw Stephen Klaw.

"Hell, Johnny," he said. "The Shrimp beat us to it!"

Murdoch and Kerrigan came into the room grinning, and put their guns away.

"Hyah, Shrimp?" said Kerrigan.

"Hello, Mopes," said Steve.

"Glad to see you alive," said Murdoch.

"Nuts to you," said Stephen Klaw.

That was all. But the glow in the eyes of Johnny Kerrigan, and the faint twitch of the thin lips of Dan Murdoch, showed more than words the relief they felt at seeing Stephen Klaw still alive and kicking.

AFTER Murdoch and Kerrigan, an assorted group of people entered the small room. Judge Harley came in, still holding a gun on the big burly man in white. Then came Emma Harley, supporting her daughter. There was also a boy of thirteen, who turned out to be the son of the chairman of the state parole board. He had also been released from the sanitarium. And his presence explained why so many gangsters had been prematurely paroled in the past six months.

Steve Klaw took Runcie by the collar and bundled him into the bedroom.

"Do the best you can for him, Runcie. We need him. Let him die, and I'll kick your face in!"

He came back into the living-room. Nina Payne was brewing tea for the women. Kerrigan was trying to get a little attention from Nina, and Murdoch was fiddling with the radio, looking for shortwave.

Kerrigan swiftly told Steve what they had done at the sanitarium. "I brought Runcie back there after he told me about this phone number. We bundled everybody in two cars and headed back for the city. Then we made Runcie call this number, figuring it would give us a lead to Mr. Zero's contact man. Imagine our surprise when she told Runcie to come over, and gave him the address!"

Murdoch got the radio set for police calls, and came over.

"So it adds up to this: Zero's hold on the superior court is broken. Judge Harley doesn't have to take Zero's orders any more, now that he has his daughter back. But everything else remains intact for Zero. He still controls the police."

The radio sputtered to life on the shortwave band, with a police announcer's voice:

"Attention all cars! Signal Forty-three! Block all exits from city. Stephen Klaw and two accomplices are wanted for murder. Stop all vehicles leaving town. Search carefully. Shoot to kill. These men are dangerous. Relay orders to patrolmen at all railroad and bus stations to watch for these men. They must not leave the city. All reserve patrolmen and all officers now off duty who hear this call are ordered to report to their precinct houses immediately for emergency duty in forming cordon around the city. I will repeat: *Shoot to kill...*"

"We'll fix that!" Steve said. He picked up the phone and put through a person-to-person call for the Director of the F.B.I. at his home in Washington. In five minutes he was reporting to his chief.

"It means, sir," he finished, "that we still don't know who Mr. Zero is. But we have enough evidence of criminal conspiracy to violate the federal anti-racketeering law—enough to warrant our coming in strong. I suggest that you route as many agents as are available in near-by cities and order them to fly to Falcon City at once. There will be trouble popping any minute, and a show of force may be necessary."

"*Now!*" he said when he hung up. "Mr. Zero is looking for Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw—so Kerrigan and Murdoch and Klaw will go out and accommodate Mr. Zero!" He took Nina Payne aside. "Where did you say this office was in the name of John Jones, where Zero gets the phone calls he doesn't answer?"



"At the Strand Building," she told him. "Room Three-fifteen. The building is directly opposite the county courthouse."

"All right. When Zero calls you back, don't tell him that Judge Harley and these others are here. But tell him that I was here—and that I've gone to investigate a lead at the Strand Building."

Her eyes widened. "You—you're going to wait for him to get you?"

"We're going to wait for him to *try* to get us!" he corrected her. "We'll give him one last chance!"

As the three members of the F.B.I. Suicide Squad filed out of that room, Stephen Klaw saw Nina Payne looking after him as if she wanted to call him back.

He smiled, and closed the door.

## Chapter VII

### F.B.I. Finish Fight.

KERRIGAN and Murdoch and Klaw braked their car to a stop directly before the entrance of the Strand Building. Across City Hall Park there was the wide facade of the county courthouse. At the north end of the park there was the low squat police headquarters building, where there seemed to be a lot of activity.

Murdoch grinned. "Those boys would eat nails if they knew we were right here watching them while they're blockading all the roads to cut us off!"

"Let's tell 'em," said Johnny Kerrigan.

"Nuts!" said Steve Klaw. "Let's go. We have work to do."

Kerrigan and Klaw got out of the car, leaving Murdoch on watch. They went up to the third floor, and tried the door of Room 315. It was locked.

Johnny tried to pick the lock, but couldn't make it. "It's some new-fangled contraption," he said. "I'll try the old shoulder-and-arm system."

He stepped back five feet, got set, and sent himself hurtling into the door. It splintered under the powerful impact of his heavy stevedore's shoulders, and he went sprawling inside.

Steve Klaw covered him with a gun, in case there was anyone lying in wait in the office. But there was nobody here now.

There was virtually no furniture in the little eight-by-ten room. There was a small ten-dollar desk, but no chair. There was a telephone on the desk. In one corner, near the window, was the telephone box. Hooked to the wall alongside it there was another box. A wire led from this box out of the window.

Steve's eyes narrowed. He opened the window and looked out. Alongside it, screwed into the window frame, there was a contraption that looked like the blinkers on a dray-horse. Steve leaned far out to see what was between the blinkers. He heard Murdoch yelling from downstairs.

"Look out, Shrimp! I'd hate to have to catch you!"

But he didn't answer, because he had just made a discovery. There was a bulb of some sort between those blinkers.

He yelled down to Murdoch, "Walk across the park and see if a light goes on!"

Then he ducked in and said to Johnny Kerrigan, "I think I got something!"

He knelt on the floor and fiddled with the telephone box till he got the cover off. Then he shorted it so the bell jangled. He kept it ringing for a minute, then popped up and looked out of the window.

He could see Murdoch in the park. Dan was shaking his head in the negative. He motioned that he would go farther back.

Steve pointed to the county courthouse, and Murdoch nodded. He turned and trotted toward the courthouse building.

Johnny Kerrigan was scratching his head. "What's biting you, Shrimp?"

"This is how Zero gets notice that he's being called on this phone. When it rings, a light of some sort goes on outside. He sees it, and knows this phone is ringing. He doesn't have to come near this office. Apparently the light can only be seen from a certain spot, because of the blinkers. If we find that spot, we got a good chance of finding Mr. Zero."

"I hope," said Johnny, "that we find Mr. Zero before Mr. Zero finds us."

Steve had kept on short-circuiting the telephone box while they talked, causing the bell to ring constantly. Now he stopped, and looked out of the window. He couldn't see Murdoch, so he went back and rang it some more. He kept that up for five minutes, then looked out again.

There was still no sign of Murdoch, but suddenly the phone on the desk rang by itself.

Steve scooped it up.

"Shrimp!" It was Murdoch's voice "I'm in the county courthouse. I'm in the only office you can see that light from. Guess whose office?" He didn't give Steve a chance to guess. "No less a personage than the Honorable Grover Ellis—district attorney of Falcon County!"

"Boy!" said Steve. "He was the baby who offered to help me out! Come on back, Dan. The show ought to be starting any minute!"

He hung up and looked at Johnny Kerrigan. Johnny had heard what Murdoch said over the phone.

"Well, that breaks the case!"

"All we have to do is get out of here alive, Johnny—"

The telephone rang once more, and interrupted him.

This time it was Nina Payne. She was excited, and talking fast. "Steve! Mr. Zero called me just a few minutes ago. I told him you had gone to the Strand Building. He hung up at once. And just now there are new orders going out over the short-wave. All cars are ordered to surround the Strand Building. All the reserves are being ordered there, with machine-guns and tear-gas—"

"Okay, Nina. I see them. They're coming across from police headquarters. Listen, if we don't get out of this—tell our chief that *Mr. Zero is Grover Ellis!*"

She cried out in anguish. "Steve! I—Oh, God, don't let him die—"

STEPHEN KLAU hung up on her. He joined Johnny Kerrigan at the window. They saw Dan Murdoch in the park. He had been coming across, but he was cut off from them now, by a stream of blue-coated men who were running from the direction of police headquarters. Half a dozen squad cars were already at the curb, and men with riot guns were leaping out.

Steve said tightly, "Cover me, Johnny. I'm going down to cover the door. Got to keep them out of the building..."

He was out of the office before he finished, and as he almost tumbled down the stairs he already heard Kerrigan's heavy service revolver barking. Kerrigan was probably firing directly down, keeping the front entrance under fire so that the bluecoats couldn't enter.

Steve reached the lobby and took up a position behind the elevator shaft. He saw a group of bluecoats with tear-gas guns and riot guns, in a huddle well away from the angle of Johnny Kerrigan's fire. He could hear rifles popping out in the street. Men were firing up at Johnny.

They were not bona fide police but hired thugs, in cop uniforms—in the pay of Mr. Zero.

Grimly, Steve went into action. He leveled his two automatics, and let go with both of them into that huddled group.

Men fell under the twin hail of lead, and the group disintegrated. He saved three shots in one of his automatics, while he inserted a fresh clip in the other. By the time he had that done, Johnny Kerrigan had joined him behind the elevator shaft.

The police were approaching warily now, in open formation. Three men with tear-gas grenades were in the lead.

Johnny Kerrigan fired three times, and the three grenade throwers fell before they were within hurling distance of the door.

"Got to make them keep their distance," Johnny muttered: "I hate the smell of tear-gas."

"Me, too," said Steve.

"How many rounds you got, Shrimp?" Johnny asked.

"Two clips for each gun," Steve told him.

"Me, I got thirty cartridges. Not much between us."

"Well, I'm glad Murdoch is out of this," said Steve. "One of us ought to go back and say hello to the chief."

The police were employing new tactics. They were driving a squad car up on the sidewalk, with the evident intention of riding it directly through the door and into the lobby. The car was full of men, and as the car rolled to the door, they kept up a continuous fire.

"Well, it looks like curtains," said Johnny.

"So long, Shrimp, see you in Hell."

"So long, Mope," said Steve. "See you in Hell."

And then the deadly work began. The car crashed through the doorway, and a fusillade of lead swept the lobby, driving Johnny and Steve back behind the shaft. Steve dropped to the floor, poked a hand and an eye around the shaft, and snapped just one shot at the car. It splintered the windshield, pierced it, and hit the driver squarely in the forehead. The car stopped.

"That was a lucky shot," said Steve. "Let's go."

He and Johnny came out shooting, and the bluecoats, apparently never very enthusiastic about the whole thing, retreated, leaving the car in the doorway.

"Look," said Johnny. "Santa Claus!"

He jumped into the car and threw out the body of the dead driver. He got behind the wheel, and Steve climbed on the running-board and started to shoot at the police in the street, while Johnny backed the car out at top speed.

He swung out into the middle of the street, and lead came flying at them from every direction. Steve ducked inside the car.

"Let 'er go!"

Kerrigan put her in first and gave her plenty of gas. They sped down the street.

Across in the park, a squad car with a sub-machine gun rigged on the roof swung to rake them. Steve could see the gunner squinting in the sights.

"He'll get us, Johnny. It was a good try—"

He broke off, and began to curse softly under his breath.

"*Look at that crazy devil!*"

Dan Murdoch had run out in the street and had picked up a sub-machine gun from one of the fallen men.

And now, surrounded on every side by the enemy, exposed to their fire, without protection of any kind, he was standing there spraddle-legged with the typewriter hugged against his shoulder, and he was spraying the machine-gunner on top of that truck!

He was deliberately throwing away his life to give Kerrigan and Klaw a chance!

MURDOCH let go two bursts, and sent the gunner flying off his perch, before they got him. He staggered, with a ball in his back, and a tight, wild grin on his face. Then he deliberately turned around and sent a final burst in the direction from which the shot had come which felled him.

And then he sank to the ground.

A dozen police started to run toward his prone body.

"Johnny!" yelled Steve.

Johnny Kerrigan didn't need to be told twice. There was moisture in his eyes as he swung that car around in a crazy loop and sent it hurtling toward the group advancing on Dan Murdoch's prone body.

"Damn them!" he choked. "They shot him in the back!"

Steve Klaw was out on the running-board again, and emptying his last two clips at the group of bluecoats. They scattered, as much because of the rolling juggernaut of death which Kerrigan was hurtling at them, as because of Steve's shots.

Johnny stood on the brakes as they came abreast of Murdoch's body. He lifted his revolver and kept it spitting to cover Steve Klaw.

Steve leaped out, seized Murdoch's body, and dragged him into the car. At once, Johnny sent it flying ahead again.

Now the police began to concentrate lead upon them. If they could only get out of the square, they might have a chance. But—no. The street at the other end was blockaded by a row of cars. They'd have to crash these cars, or stop. Death was the end, either way...

Dan Murdoch was still gripping the machine-gun. Steve pried it loose from his fingers.

"Stop, Johnny. This is a good place to die."

Johnny braked the car. Steve swung out to face the mass of attackers, with a grim hard smile on his lips.

And then he involuntarily raised his eyes to the sky, attracted by the sudden upsurge of a new sound—the deadly drone of a diving airplane!

"Johnny!" he shouted. "It's an F.B.I. plane!"

The fighting ship was coming down at two hundred miles an hour in a terrific power-dive. The F.B.I. markings on its wings were plainly visible now, and the twin streams of tracer bullets from its synchronized machine-guns swept across the square just over the heads of the fleeing, panic-stricken blue-coats who were fighting to get out of that square. Those men, imported thugs from every slum section of the world, had no guts for this kind of fighting.

The F.B.I. plane had come out of its dive, and it was rising again, while a second and third plane wheeled overhead, prepared to dive if that warning was not heeded.

Now the first plane banked into the wind and came down on the broad plaza of City Hall Square. The director of the F.B.I. himself, climbed out of the cockpit.

Johnny Kerrigan started to run toward it, with Steve following him. But just then Steve caught a slither of movement near the edge of the square. He swung around and recognized the figure of the big man who had started to run.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop or I shoot!"

Grover Ellis swung toward him, snarling. He raised a long-barrelled revolver.

Stephen Klaw was still holding that sub-machine gun. That familiar glint came into his eyes. He leveled it and pulled the trip.

Slugs marched back and forth across the body of Grover Ellis. Not till the man was riddled like a sieve did Stephen Klaw let up on the trip. Then he threw the gun from him and climbed into the car where Dan Murdoch lay.

"I paid off for you, Dan," he started to say. And then he saw Murdoch's eyes flicker. "Dan!" he yelled.

Murdoch's face was pale. There was blood under his shoulders. He stirred, and opened his eyes weakly. "Hyah, Shrimp?" he murmured.

"Hyah, Mope," said Stephen Klaw. "Glad to see you alive."

As the director approached with Johnny Kerrigan, Stephen Klaw turned and faced him, with a very suspicious trace of moisture in his eyes. He gulped.

"Glad to report, sir," he said, "that there are no casualties in the Suicide Squad today!"

