

# The Hills of Homicide

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

Published: 1949



The station wagon jolted over a rough place in the blacktop, and I opened my eyes and sat up. Nothing had changed. When you are in the desert, you are in the desert, and it looks it. We had been driving through the same sort of country when I fell asleep, the big mesa that shouldered against the skyline ahead being the only change.

“Ranagat’s right up ahead, about three, four miles.” Shanks, who was driving me, was a thin-faced little man who sat sideways in the seat and steered with his left hand on the wheel. “You won’t see the town until we get close.”

“Near that mesa?”

“Right up against it. Small town, about four hundred people when they’re all home. Being off the state highway, no tourists ever go there. Nothin’ to see, anyway.”

“No boot hill?” Nearly all of the little mining towns in this section have a boot hill, and from the look of them, shooting up your neighbors must have been the outstanding recreation in the old days.

“Oh, sure. Not many in this one, though. About fifteen or twenty with markers, but they buried most of them without any kind of a slab. This boot hill couldn’t hold a candle to Pioche. Over there they buried seventy-five before the first one died of natural causes.”

“Rough place.”

“You said it. Speakin’ of guys gettin’ killed, they had a murder in Ranagat the other night. Old fellow, got more money than you could shake a stick at.”

“Murder, you say?”

“Uh-huh. They don’t know who done it, yet, but you needn’t worry. Old Jerry will catch him. That’s Jerry Loftus, the sheriff. He’s a smart old coot, rustled a few cows himself in the old days. He can sling a gun, too. Don’t think he can’t. Not that he looks like much, but he could fool you.”

Shanks put a cigarette between his lips and lit it with a match cupped in his right hand. “Bitner, his name was. That’s the dead man, I mean.” He jerked his cigarette toward the mesa. “Lived up there.”

“On top?” From where I sat, the wall of sheer, burnt-red sandstone looked impossible to climb. “How’d he get up there?”

“From Ranagat. That’s the joker in this case, mister. Only one way up there, an’ that way is in plain sight of most of Ranagat, an’ goes right by old Johnny Holben’s door. Nobody could ever get up that trail without being seen by Johnny.

“The trail goes up through a cut in the rock, and believe me, it’s the only way to get on top. At a wide place in the cut, Johnny Holben has a cabin, an’ he’s a suspicious old coot. He built there to annoy Bitner because they had it in for each other. Used to be partners, one time. Prospected all this country together an’ then set up a company to work their mines. ‘Bitner and Holben,’ they called it. Things went fine for a while, an’ they made a mint of money. Then they had trouble an’ split up.”

“Holben kill him?”

“Some folks think so, but others say no. Bitner’s got him a niece, a right pretty girl named Karen. She came up here to see him, and two days after she gets here he gets murdered. A lot of folks figure that was a mighty funny thing, her being heiress to all that money, an’ everything.”

So there were two other suspects, anyway. That made three. Johnny Holben, Karen Bitner, and my client. “Know a guy named Caronna?”

“Blacky Caronna? Sure.” Shanks slanted a look at me out of those watchful, curious eyes. I knew he was trying to place me, but so far hadn’t an inkling. “You know him?”

“Heard of him.” It was no use telling Shanks what I had come for. I was here to get information, not give it.

“He’s a suspect, too. An’ in case you don’t know, mister, he’s not a nice playmate. I mean, you don’t get rough with him. Nobody out here knows much about him, an’ he’s lived in Ranagat for more than ten years, but he’s a bad man to fool with. If your business is with him, you better forget it unless it’s peaceful.”

“He’s a suspect, you say?”

“Sure. Him an’ old Bitner had a fight. An argument, that is. Bitner sure told him off, but nobody knows what it was about but Caronna; an’ Blacky just ain’t talkin’.

“Caronna is sort of a gambler. Seems to have plenty of money, an’ this place he built up here is the finest in town. Rarely has any visitors, an’ spends most of his time up there alone except when he’s playin’ poker.

“The boys found out what he was like when he first came out here. In these western towns they don’t take a man on face value, not even when he’s got a face like Blacky Caronna’s. Big Sam, a big miner, tangled with him. Sam would weigh about two-fifty, I guess, and all man. That’s only a shade more than Caronna.

“They went out behind The Sump, that’s a pool hall an’ saloon, an’ they had it out. Boy, was that a scrap! Prettiest I ever seen. They fought tooth an’ toenail for near thirty minutes, but that Caronna is the roughest, dirtiest fighter ever come down the pike. Sam was damn near killed.”

“Big guy, you say?”

“Uh-huh. Maybe an inch shorter than you, but wide as a barn door. And I mean a big barn! He’s a lot heavier than you, an’ never seems to get fat.” Shanks glanced at me. “What do you weigh? About one-eighty?”

“Two hundred even.”

“You don’t say? You must have it packed pretty solid. But don’t you have trouble with Caronna. You ain’t man enough for it.”

That made me remember what the boss said before I left. “His money is as good as anybody’s money, but don’t you get us into trouble. This Caronna is a tough customer, and plenty smart. He’s got a record as long as your arm, but he got out of the rackets with plenty of moola, and that took brains. You go over there and investigate that murder and clear him if you can. But watch him all the time. He’s just about as trustworthy as a hungry tiger.”

The station wagon rolled down the last incline into the street and rolled to a halt in front of a gray stone building with a weather-beaten sign across the front that said Hotel on one end and Restaurant on the other.

The one street of the town laid everything out before you for one glance. Two saloons, a garage, a blacksmith shop, three stores, and a café. There were two empty buildings, boarded up now, and beyond them another stone building that was a sheriff’s office and jail in one piece.

Shanks dropped my bag into the street and reached out a hand. “That will be three bucks,” he said. He was displeased with me. All the way over I had listened, and he had no more idea who I was than the man in the moon.

Two thistle-chinned prospectors who looked as if they had trailed a burro all over the hills were sitting on the porch, chewing. Both of them glanced up and stared at me with idle curiosity.

The lobby was a long, dank room with a soot-blackened fireplace and four or five enormous black leather chairs and a settee, all looking as if they had come across the plains fifty or sixty years ago. On the wall was a mountain lion’s head that had been attacked by moths.

A clerk, who was probably no youngster when they opened the hotel in ’67, got up from a squeaky chair and shoved the register at me. I signed my name and, taking the key, went up the stairs. Inside the room I waited just long enough to take my .45 Colt out of the bag and shove it behind my belt under my shirt. Then I

started for the sheriff's office. By the time I had gone the two blocks that comprised the full length of the street, everyone in town knew me by sight.

Jerry Loftus was seated behind a rolltop desk with both feet on the desk and his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest. His white, narrow-brimmed hat was shoved back on his head, and his hair and mustache were as white as the hat. He wore cowboy boots, and a six-shooter in an open-top holster.

Flipping open my wallet, I laid it in front of him with my badge and credentials showing. He glanced down at them without moving a hand, then looked up at me.

"Private detective? Who sent for you?"

"Caronna."

"He's worried, then. What do you aim to do, son?"

"Look around. My orders are to investigate the crime, find evidence to clear him, and so get you off his back. From the sound of it"—I was fishing for information—"he didn't seem to believe anybody around here would mind if he was sentenced or not. Guilty or not."

"He's right. Nothing against him myself. Plays a good hand of poker, pays when he loses, collects when he wins. Maybe he buys a little high-grade once in a while, but while the mine owners wish we would put a stop to it, we don't figure that what gold ore a man can smuggle out of a mine is enough to worry about.

"All these holes around here strike pockets of rich ore from time to time. Most of the mines pay off pretty well, anyway, but when they strike that wire gold, the boys naturally get away with what they can.

"The mines all have a change room where the miners take off their diggin' clothes, walk naked for their shower, then out on the other side for their street clothes, but men bein' what they are, they find ways to get some out.

"Naturally, that means they have to have a buyer. Caronna seems to be the man. I don't know that, but I never asked no questions, either."

"Would you mind giving me the lowdown on this killing?"

"Not at all." Loftus shifted his thumbs to his vest pockets. "Pull up a chair an' set. No, not there. Move left a mite. Ain't exactly safe to get between me an' that spittoon."

He chewed thoughtfully for a few minutes. "Murdered man is Jack Bitner, a cantankerous old cuss, wealthy as all get-out. Mine owner now, used to be a prospector. Hardheaded as a blind mule and rough as a chapped lip. Almost seventy, but fit to live twenty years more, ornery as he was. Lived up yonder on the mesa."

Loftus chewed, spat, and continued. "Found dead Monday morning by his niece. Karen Bitner. Killed sometime Sunday night, seems like. Stabbed three times in the back with a knife while settin' at the table.

"Only had two visitors Sunday night. Karen Bitner an' Blacky Caronna. She went up to see the old man about five of the evenin', claims she left him feelin' right pert. Caronna headed up that way about eight, still light at that hour, an' then says he changed his mind about seein' the old man without a witness, an' came back without ever gettin' to the cabin.

"Only other possible suspect is Johnny Holben. Those two old roosters been spittin' an' snarlin' for the last four years, an' both of them made threats.

“Johnny lives on the trail to the mesa, an’ he’s got ears like a skittish rabbit an’ eyes like a cat. Johnny saw those two go up an’ he seen ’em come back, an’ he’ll take oath nobody else went up that trail. Any jury of folks from around Ranagat would take his word for it that a gopher couldn’t go up that trail without Johnny knowin’ it. As for himself, Johnny swears he ain’t been on the mesa in six years.

“All three had motives, all three had opportunity. Any one of the three could have done it if they got behind Bitner, an’ that’s what makes me suspect the girl. I don’t believe that suspicious old devil would let any man get behind him.”

“Caronna can’t clear the girl, then? If he had gone up to the house and found the old man alive, she’d be in the clear.”

“That’s right. But he says he didn’t go to the house, an’ we can’t prove it one way or another. The way it is, we’re stuck. If you can figure some way to catch the guilty man, you’d be a help.” Jerry Loftus rolled his quid in his jaws and glanced at me sharply. “You come up here to find evidence to prove Caronna innocent. What if you find something to prove him guilty?”

“My firm,” I said carefully, “only represents clients who are innocent. Naturally, we take the stand that they are innocent until proved guilty, but we will not conceal evidence if we believe it would clear anyone else. If we become convinced of a client’s guilt, we drop out of the case. However, a good deal of leeway is left to the operative. Naturally, we aren’t here to convict our clients.”

“I see.” Loftus was stirring that one around in his mind.

“Mind if I look around?”

“Not at all.” He took his feet down from the desk and got up. “In fact, I’ll go along. Johnny might not let you by unless I am with you.”

When we started up the trail, it took me only a few minutes to understand that unless Johnny Holben was deaf as a post it would be impossible to get past his cabin without his knowledge. The trail was narrow, just two good steps from his door, and was of loose gravel.

Holben came to the door when we came alongside. He was a tall, lean old man with a lantern jaw and a handlebar mustache that would have been a dead ringer for the sheriff’s except for being less tidy and more yellowed.

“Howdy, Loftus. Who’s the dude with you?”

“Detective. Caronna hired him to investigate the murder.”

“Huh! If Caronna hired him, he’s likely a thief himself.” Holben stepped back inside and slammed the door.

Loftus chuckled. “Almost as bad as Old Bitner. Wouldn’t think that old sidewinder was worth a cool half-million, would you. No? I guessed not. He is, though. Bitner was worth half again that much. That niece of his will get a nice piece of money.”

“Was she the only relative?”

“Matter of fact, no. There’s a nephew around somewheres. Big game hunter, importer of animals, an’ such as that. Hunts them for shows, I hear.”

“Heard from him?”

“Not yet. He’s out on the road with a circus of some kind. We wired their New York headquarters.”

“Wouldn’t be a bad idea to check and see where his show is playing.”

Loftus glanced at me. "Hadn't thought of that. Reckon I'm gettin' old. I'll do that tonight."

"Does the girl get all the money? Or does he get some?"

"Don't know. The Bitner girl, she thinks she gets it. Says her uncle told her she would inherit everything. Seems like he had no use for that nephew. So far we haven't seen the will, but we'll have it open tomorrow."

The path led along the flat top of the mesa over the sparse grass and through the scattered juniper for almost a half-mile. Then we saw the house.

It was built on the edge of the cliff. One side of the house was almost flush with the edge, and the back looked out over a natural rock basin that probably held water during the winter or fall, when it rained.

It was a three-room stone house, very carefully built and surprisingly neat. There were a few books and magazines lying about, but everything else seemed to have its place and to be kept there. There was a dark stain on the tabletop that identified itself for me, and some more of the same on the floor under the chair legs. Looking at the dishes, I figured that Bitner was alone and about to begin eating when death had struck.

The one door into the house opened from a screened-in porch to the room where he had been sitting. Remembering how the spring on the door had screamed protestingly when we opened it, there was small chance that anyone could have entered unannounced.

Moreover, a man seated at the table could look out that door and down the path almost halfway to Ranagat.

The windows offered little more. There were three in the main room of the house, and two of those opened over that rock basin and were at least fifteen feet above the ground. Nobody could have entered quietly from that direction.

The third window appeared to be an even less probable entrance. It opened on the side of the house that stood on the cliff edge. Outside that window and about four feet below the sill was a cracked ledge about two feet wide, but the ledge dwindled away toward the back of the house so it was impossible to gain access to it from there. At the front, the porch ran right to the lip of the precipice, cutting off any approach to the ledge from that direction.

Craning my neck, I could see that it was fifty or sixty feet down an impossible precipice, and then a good two hundred feet that was almost as steep, but could be scaled by a daring man. The last sixty feet, though, made the way entirely impracticable.

The crack that crossed the ledge was three to four inches wide and about nine or ten inches deep. In the sand on the edge of a split in the rock was a track resembling that of a large gila monster, an idea that gave me no comfort. I was speculating on that when Jerry Loftus called me.

At the door I was confronted by three people. Nobody needed to tell me which was Blacky Caronna, and I had already seen Johnny Holben, but it was the third one that caught me flat-footed with my hands down and my chin wide open.

Karen Bitner was the sort of girl no man could look at and ever be the same afterward. She was slim and lovely in whipcord riding breeches and a green wool

shirt that didn't have that shape when she bought it. Her hair was red-gold and her eyes a gray-green that shook me to my heels.

Caronna started the show. He looked like a bulldozer in a flannel shirt. "You!" His voice sounded like a hobnailed boot scraping on a concrete floor. "Where have you been? Why didn't you come and look me up? Who's payin' you, anyway?"

"Take it easy. I came up here to investigate a murder. I'm doing it."

Caronna grabbed me by the arm. "Come over here a minute!" He had a build like a heavyweight wrestler and a face that reminded me of Al Capone with a broken nose.

When we were out of earshot of the others, he thrust his face at me and said angrily, "Listen, you! I gave that outfit of yours a grand for a retainer. You're to dig into this thing an' pin it on that dame. She's the guilty one, see? I ain't had a hand in a killin' in—in years."

"Let's get this one thing straight right now," I said. "I didn't come up here to frame anybody. You haven't got money enough for that. You hired an investigator, and I'm him. I'll dig up all I can on this case and if you're in the clear you'll have nothing to worry about."

His little eyes glittered. "You think I'd hire you if I were guilty? Hell, I'd get me a mouthpiece. I think the babe did it. She stands to get the old boy's dough, so why not? He'd had it long enough, anyway. Just my luck the old billygoat would jump me before he gets knocked off. It's inconvenient, that's what it is!"

"What was your trouble with him?"

He looked up at me and his black eyes went flat and deadly. "That's my business! I ain't askin' you to investigate me. It's that babe's scalp we want. Now get busy."

"Look," I said patiently, "I've got to have more. I've got to know something to work on. I don't give a damn what your beef was, just so you didn't kill him."

"I didn't," he said. He hauled a roll from his pocket and peeled off several of the outer flaps, all of them showing a portrait of Benjamin Franklin. "Stick these in your kick. A guy can't work without dough. If you need more, come to me. I can't stand a rap, get me? I can't even stand a trial."

"That's plain enough," I told him, "and it answers a couple of questions I had. Now, one thing more. Did you actually stop before you got to the house? If I knew whether the old man was alive or dead at that hour, I'd know something."

A kind of tough humor flickered in his eyes. "You're the dick, you figure that one out. Only remember: I didn't stick no shiv in the old guy. Hell, why should I? I could have squeezed him like a grape. Anyway, that wouldn't have been smart, would it? Me, I don't lose my head. I don't kill guys for fun."

That I could believe. His story sounded right to me. He could arrange a killing much more conveniently than this one had happened, and when he would not have been involved. Mr. Blacky Caronna, unless I was greatly mistaken, was an alumnus of the old Chicago School for Genteel Elimination. In any rubout job he did he would have a safe and sane alibi.

Yet, one thing I knew. Whether he had killed Bitner or not, and I doubted it, he was a dangerous man. A very dangerous man. Also, he was sweating blood over this. He was a very worried man.

Loftus was talking to Holben, and Karen Bitner stood off to one side, so I walked over to her. The look in her eyes was scarcely more friendly than Caronna's. "How do you do?" I said. "My name is—"

"I'm not in the least interested in your name!" she said. "I know all about you, and that's quite enough. You're a private detective brought up here to prove me guilty of murder. I think that establishes our relationship clearly enough. Now if you have any questions to ask, ask them."

"I like that perfume you're wearing. Gardenia, isn't it? By Chanel?"

The look she gave me would have curdled a jug of Arkansas corn. "What is that supposed to be—the psychological approach? Am I supposed to be flattered, disarmed, or should I swoon?"

"Just comment. How long has it been since you've seen your uncle? I mean, before this trip?"

"I had never seen my uncle before," she said.

"You have a brother or cousin? I heard there was a nephew?"

"A cousin. His name is Richard Henry Castro. He is traveling with the Greater American Shows. He is thirty-nine years old and rugged enough to give you the slapping around you deserve."

That made me grin, but I straightened my face. "Thanks. At least you're concise. I wish everyone would give their information as clearly. Did you murder your uncle?"

She turned icy eyes on me. Just like the sea off Labrador. "No, I did not. I didn't know him well enough to either murder him or love him. He was my only relative aside from Dick Castro, so I came west to see him.

"I almost never," she added, "murder people on short acquaintance—unless they're detectives."

"You knew you were to inherit his estate?"

"Yes. He told me so three years ago, in a letter. He told me so again on Saturday."

"I see. What's your profession?"

"I'm a secretary."

"You ever let anybody in to see your boss?" I asked. "No, don't answer that. How many times did you see your uncle on this visit?"

"Three times, actually. I came to see him on the day I arrived and stayed approximately two hours. I went to see him the following day, and then the night he was killed."

"How did he impress you?"

She glanced at me quickly. "As a very lonely and tired old man. I thought he was sweet."

That stopped me for a minute. Was she trying to impress me? No, I decided, this girl wouldn't try to impress anyone. She was what she was, for better or worse. Also, with a figure like that she would never have felt it necessary to impress anyone, at least any man.

For almost an hour we stood there; I asked the questions and she shot back answers. She had met her cousin, a big, handsome man given to many trips into the jungle after his strange animals, a few years before. He had his own show traveling as a special exhibit with a larger show. They made expositions and state



fairs, and followed a route across country, occasionally playing carnival dates or conventions.

Her short relationship with her uncle had been friendly. She had cooked lunch the day before he was killed, and he had been alive when she had left him on her last visit. He had said nothing to her about his trouble with Caronna, but she knew he was very angry about something. Also, he kept a pistol handy.

“He did? Where is it?”

“In the sideboard, on the shelf with some dishes. He kept a folded towel over it, but it was freshly oiled and cleaned. I saw it when I was getting some cups.”

Then Bitner had been expecting trouble. From Caronna? Or was it someone else, someone of whom we had not learned?

That night, in the café, I sat at my table and ran over what little I knew. Certainly, the day had given me nothing. Yet in a sense it had not been entirely wasted. The three suspects were now known to me, and I had visited the scene.

The waitress who came up to my table to get my order was a sultry-looking brunette with a figure that needed no emphasis. She took my order, and my eyes followed her back toward the kitchen. Then I saw something else. She had been reading a copy of *Billboard*, the show business magazine. Dreams, even in a small town...it made me wonder.

Caronna came in. He was still wearing the wool shirt that stretched tight over his powerful chest and shoulders, and a pair of tweed trousers. He dropped into the chair across from me and leaned his heavy forearms on the table. “You got anything?” he said. “Have you got anything on that broad?”

I cut a piece of steak, then looked up at him. “A couple of things. I’m working on them.”

He was in a pleasanter mood tonight, and I noticed his eyes straying around, looking for somebody, something. I even had an idea who he was looking for. “They got nothing on me,” he said, not looking at me. “The old man an’ me, we had a fuss, all right. They know that, an’ that I went up the trail to see him. That wasn’t smart of me. It was a sucker’s trick, but despite that they’ve got less on me than on that Bitner babe.

“Nobody can prove I went in the house or even went near it. Holben can testify that I wasn’t gone long. Your job is to dig up something that will definitely put me in the clear.”

“Maybe I’ve already got something.”

He leaned back in his chair, looking me over. It was the first time he’d taken a good look. This Caronna was nobody’s fool. He had more up his sleeve than a lot of muscle, but I couldn’t see him killing Jack Bitner. Not that way.

Murder was not new to Caronna, but he knew enough about it so he would have had an out. He was in this, up to his neck. That much I believed, and I was sure there was more behind the killing than there seemed. That was when I began to get the idea that Caronna had a hunch who had done the job, and somehow figured to cash in.

The waitress came over, and while I couldn’t see their expressions, and she only said, “Anything for you, Mr. Caronna?” I had a hunch they were telling each other a thing or two. She dropped her napkin then, and Caronna picked it up for her.

Where did they think I was born? I caught the corner of the paper in my glance as they both stooped, but the paper was palmed very neatly by Caronna as he returned the napkin to the waitress.

Caronna left after drinking a cup of coffee and rambling on a little. When I went over to pay my check, the *Billboard* was still lying there. Deliberately, although I had the change, I sprung one of Caronna's C-notes on her. I was praying she would have to go to the kitchen for change, and she did.

This gave me a chance at the *Billboard* and I glanced down. It was right there in front of me, big as life:

GREATER AMERICAN  
PLAYING TO BIG CROWDS  
IN NEVADA

When I got my change I walked outside. The night was still and the stars were out. Up at the mine I could hear the pounding of the compressor, an ever-present sound wherever mines are working.

I really had my fingers on something now, I thought. If Greater American was playing Nevada, then Castro might have been within only a few miles of Ranagat when Bitner was killed.

If Loftus knew that, he was fooling me, and somehow I couldn't picture that sheriff, smart as he was in his own line, knowing about Billboard. There was a telephone booth in the hotel, so I hurried over, and when I got the boss in Los Angeles, I talked for twenty minutes. It would take the home office only a short time to get the information I wanted, and in the meantime I had an idea.

Oh, yes. I was going to check Karen Bitner, all right. I was also going to check Johnny Holben. But all my mind was pointing the other way now.

There were several things I had to find out.

Where had Richard Henry Castro been on the night of the murder at the hour of the crime?

What was the trouble between Caronna and Old Jack Bitner?

What was the connection between that walking hothouse plant in the café and Caronna? Or between her and Castro? Or—this was a sudden thought—*both* of them?

Had either Holben or Karen seen anything they weren't telling?

It made a lot to do, but the ball was rolling. From the sign, I saw that the restaurant closed at ten o'clock, so I strolled back to the hotel and dropped into one of the black leather chairs in the lobby and began to think.

Not more than an hour after my call went in, I got the first part of an answer. The telephone rang, and it was Los Angeles calling me. The Great American, said the boss, had played Las Vegas the day before the murder... and its next date had been Ogden, Utah!

In a rack near the desk were some timetables, and some maps put out by filling stations. I picked up one of the latter and glanced over the map. Something clicked in me. I was hot. It was rolling my way, for there was one highway they could have

followed, and probably *did* follow that would have carried them by not over a mile from the mesa!

Studying it, I knew I didn't have a lot, although this did bring another suspect into the picture, and a good one. One thing I wanted to know now was the trouble between Caronna and Bitner. I walked restlessly up and down the lobby, racking my brain, and only one angle promised anything at all. Loftus had hinted that Caronna was buying high-grade ore from miners who had smuggled it out of the mines.

Then I looked up and saw Karen Bitner coming down the stairs from her room.

Somehow, the idea of her staying here had never occurred to me, but when I thought about it, where else in this town could she stay?

Our eyes met, and she started to turn away, but I crossed over to her. "Look," I said, "this isn't much of a town, and it's pretty quiet. Why don't we go have some coffee or something? Then we can talk. I don't know about you, but I'm lonely."

That drew a half smile. After a momentary hesitation, she nodded. "All right, why not?"

Over coffee our eyes met and she smiled a little. "Have you decided that I'm a murderer yet?"

"Look," I said, "you want your uncle's murderer found, don't you? Then why not forget the hostility and help me? After all, I'm just a poor boy trying to get along, and if you aren't guilty, you've nothing to fret about."

"Aren't you here to prove me guilty?"

"No. Definitely not. I was retained by Caronna to prove him innocent. Surprising as it may seem, I think he is. I believe the man has killed a dozen men, more or less, but this isn't his kind of job. He doesn't get mad and do things. When he kills it's always for a good enough reason, and with himself in the clear.

"Also, from what he has said, I have an idea that he wants anything but publicity right now. Just why, I don't know, but it will bear some looking over."

"Do you think old Mr. Holben did it?"

That brought me up short. After thinking it over, I shook my head. "If you want my angle, I don't think those old reptiles disliked each other anywhere near as much as they made it seem. I've seen old men like that before. They had some little fuss, but it probably wore itself out long ago, only neither one would want the other to know. Actually, that fuss was probably keeping both of them alive."

"Then," Karen said, "with both Caronna and Holben eliminated, that leaves only myself. Do you think I did it?"

"I doubt it," I said. "I really do. If you were going to kill a man, you'd do it with words."

She smiled. "Then who?"

"That, my dear, is the sixty-four-dollar question."

She smiled, and then her eyes flicked over to our sultry waitress, who was keeping an eye on us from behind the counter. She asked softly, "Who is the Siren of Ranagat? An old flame of yours? Or a new one you've just fanned into being? She scarcely takes her eyes off you."

"My idea is that the lady is thinking less of romance and more of finance. Somewhere in this tangled web she is weaving her own strands, and I don't think my masculine beauty has anything to do with it."

Karen studied me thoughtfully. "You do all right, at that. Just remember that this is a small town, and you'd be a break here. Any stranger would be."

"Uh-huh, and she has a lot of fancy and obvious equipment, but somehow I doubt if the thought has entered her mind. I've some ideas about her."

It was cool outside, a welcome coolness after the heat of the day. The road wound past the hotel and up the hill, and we walked along, not thinking much about the direction we were taking until we were standing on the ridge with the town below us. Beyond, on the other mountain, stretched the chain of lights where the mine stood, and the track out to the end of the dump.

The moon was high, and the mining town lay in the cupped hand of the hills like a cluster of black seeds. To the left and near us lay the sprawling, California-style ranch house where Blacky Caronna lived and made his headquarters. Beyond that, across a ravine and a half-mile further along the hill, lay the gallows frame and gathered buildings of the Bitner Gold Mine, and beyond it, the mill.

On our right, also above and a little away from the town, loomed the black bulk of the mesa. There were few lights anywhere, but with the moon they weren't needed. For a few minutes we stood quiet, our thoughts caught up and carried away by the quiet and the beauty, a quiet broken only by the steady pound of the mine's compressor.

Then, from the shadows behind the buildings along the town's one business street, a dark figure moved. Whether I saw it first, or whether Karen did, I don't know. Her hand caught my wrist suddenly, and we stood there, staring down into the darkness.

It struck me as strange that we should have been excited by that movement. There were many people in the town, most of them still awake, and any one of them might be out and around. Or was there something surreptitious about this figure that gave us an instinctive warning?

I glanced at my watch. By the luminous dial I could see that it was ten minutes after ten. At once, as though standing beside her in the darkness, I knew who was walking down there, and I had a hunch where she was going.

The figure vanished into deep shadows, and I turned to Karen. "You'd better go back to the hotel," I told her. "I know this is a lousy way to treat a girl, but I've some business coming up."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "You mean...about the murder?"

"Uh-huh. I think our Cleopatra of the café is about to make a call, and the purpose of that call and what is going to be said interest me. You go back to the hotel, and I'll see you in the morning."

"I will not. I'm coming with you."

Whatever was done now would have to be done fast, and did you ever try to argue with a woman and settle any point in a hurry? So she came along.

We had to hurry, for we had further to go than our waitress, and a ravine to enter and climb out of, and much as I disliked the idea of a woman coming with me into such a situation, I had to hand it to Karen Bitner. She kept right up with me and didn't do any worrying about torn hose or what she might look like when it was over.

This Caronna was no dope. Stopped flat-footed by the hedge around his place, I found myself respecting him even more. This was one hedge no man would go through, or climb over, either. For the hedge was of giant suguaro cactus, and between the suguaro trunks were clumps of ocotillo, making a barrier that not even a rattlesnake would attempt. Yet even as we reached it, we heard footsteps on the path from town, and then the jangle of a bell as the front gate opened.

That would be the girl from the café. It also meant that no entry could be gained by the front gate. Avoiding it, I walked around to the rear. There was a gate there, too, but I had no desire to try it, being sure it would be wired like the other.

Then we got a break. There was a window open in the garage. Crawling in, I lifted Karen in after me, and then we walked out the open door and moved like a couple of shadows to the wall of the house. I didn't need to be told that both of us were right behind the eight ball, if caught.

Blacky Caronna wouldn't appeal to the law if he caught us. Knowing the man, I was sure he would have his own way of dealing with the situation.

Caronna was seated in a huge armchair in a large living room hung with choice Navajo rugs. With his legs crossed, his great shoulders covering the back of the chair, he looked unbelievably huge. He was glaring up at the girl.

Taking a chance, I tried lifting the window. Everything here seemed in excellent shape, so I hoped it would make no sound. I was lucky. Caronna's voice came clearly. "Haven't I told you not to come up here unless I send for you? That damn cowtown sheriff is too smart, Toni. You've got to stay away."

"But I had to come, Blacky. I had to! It was that detective, the one you hired. I saw him looking at my copy of Billboard."

"You had that where he could see it?" Caronna lunged to his feet, his face a mask of fury. "What kind of brains you got, anyway?" he snarled, thrusting his face at her. "Even that dope will get an idea if you throw it at him. Here we stand a chance to clean up a million bucks, and if he gets wise, we're through!"

"But they've nothing on you, Blacky," she protested. "Nothing at all."

"Not yet, they ain't, but if you think I'm letting anybody stand in my way on account of that sort of dough, you're wrong, see? This stuff I've been pickin' up is penny-ante stuff. A million bucks, an' I'm set for life. What do you think I brought you up here for? To make a mess of the whole works?"

"The way it stands, nobody knows a thing but me. Loftus don't know what the score is, an' neither does this dick, an' they ain't got a chance of finding out unless you throw it in their faces. Let this thing quiet down, an' that dough go where it's gonna go, an' we're set."

"You'd better watch your step," Toni protested. "You know what Leader said about him."

"Leader's a pantywaist. All he can do is handle that pen, but he can do that, I'll give him that much. I'll handle this deal, an' if that baby ever wants to play rough, I'll give him a chance."

"You shouldn't have hired that detective," Toni said worriedly. "He bothers me."

"He don't bother me any." Caronna's voice was flat. "Who would think the guy would pull this truth-and-honor stuff? It looked like a good play. It would cover me an' at the same time cinch the job on that dame, which was the right way to have

it. It don't make no difference, though. He ain't smart enough to find his way out of a one-way street."

There was a subdued snicker behind me, and I turned my head and put a hand over her mouth. It struck me afterward that it was a silly thing to do. If a man wants a girl to stop laughing or talking, it is always better to kiss her. Which, I thought, was not a bad idea under any circumstances.

"Now, listen." Caronna stopped in front of her with his finger pointed. "You go back downtown an' stay there until I send for you. Keep your ears open. That café is the best listening post in town. You tell me what you hear an' all you hear, just like you have been. Keep an eye on Loftus, and on that dick. Also, you listen for any rumble from Johnny Holben."

"That old guy? You really are getting scary, Blacky."

"Scary nothing!" he snapped. "You listen to me, babe, an' you won't stub any toes. That old blister is smart. He's been nosin' around some, an' he worries me more than the sheriff. If he should get an idea we had anything to do with that, he might start shootin'. It's all right to be big and rough, but Holben is no bargain for anybody. He'll shoot first and talk after!"

She turned to the door, and he walked with her, a hand on her elbow. At the door they stopped, and from the nearness of their shadows I deduced the business session was over. This looked purely social. It was time for us to leave.

Surprisingly, we got out without any excitement. It all looked pretty and sweet. We had heard something, enough to prove that my first guess was probably right, and it didn't seem there was any chance of Caronna ever knowing we had visited him.

That was a wrong guess, a very wrong guess, but we didn't know at the time.

We didn't know that Karen's shoe left a distinct print in the grease spilled on the tool bench inside that garage window. We didn't know that she left two tracks on the garden walk, or that some of the grease rubbed off on a stone under Blacky Caronna's window.

In the morning I sat over my coffee for a long time. No matter how I sized up the case, it all came back to the same thing. Caronna hadn't killed Old Man Bitner, but he knew who had. And despite the fact that he wasn't the killer, he was in this up to his ears and definitely to be reckoned with.

That copy of *Billboard* was the tipoff. And it meant that I had to get out of here and locate the Greater American Shows, so I could have a look at Dick Castro. Richard Henry Castro, showman and importer of animals.

Caronna came into the café and he walked right over and sat down at the table. I looked up at him. "I can clear you," I said. "I know who the killer was, and you're definitely in the clear. All I need to know now is how he did it."

He dismissed my information with a wave of the hand. His eyes were flat and black. "Here." He peeled off five century notes. "Go on home. You're through."

"What?"

His eyes were like a rattlesnake's. "Get out of town," he snarled. "You been workin' for that babe more than for me. You've been paid—now beat it."

That got me. "Supposing I decide to stay and work on my own?"

“You’ve got no right unless you’re retained,” he said. “Anyway, your company won’t let you stay without dough. Who’s going to pay off in this town? And,” he said coldly, “I wouldn’t like it.”

“That would be tough,” I said. “I’m staying.”

The smile left his lips. It had never been in his eyes. “I’m giving you until midnight to get out of town,” he snarled. Then he shoved back his chair and got up. There was a big miner sitting at the counter, a guy I’d noticed around. When I stopped to think about it, I’d never seen him working.

Caronna stopped alongside of him. “Look,” he said, “if you see that dick around here after midnight, beat his ears off. If you need help, get it!”

The miner turned. He had flat cheekbones and ears back against his skull. He looked at me coldly. “I won’t need help,” he said.

It was warm in the sunlight, and I stood there a minute. Somehow, the sudden change didn’t fit. What had brought about the difference in his feelings between the time he had talked with Toni and now? Shrugging that one off, I turned down the street toward the jail.

Loftus had his heels on the rolltop desk. He smiled at me. “Got anything?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Trouble.”

“I don’t mind admittin’,” Loftus said, “this case has got me stopped. Johnny Holben knows somethin’, but he won’t talk. That Caronna knows somethin’, too. He’s been buyin’ high-grade, most of it from the Bitner Mine. That was probably what their fuss was about, but that ain’t the end of it.”

“You’re right, it isn’t.” Briefly, I explained about being fired, and then added, “I don’t want to leave this case, Loftus. I think I can break it within forty-eight hours. I think I have all the answers figured out. Whether I do it or not is up to you.”

“To me?”

“Yes. I want you to make me a deputy sheriff for the duration of this job.”

“Workin’ right for me?”

“That’s right.”

He took his feet off the desk. “Hold up your right hand,” he said.

When I was leaving, I turned suddenly to Loftus. “Oh, yes. I’m going out of town for a while. Over to Ogden on the trail of the Greater American Shows.”

“There’s a car here you can use,” he said. “When are you leavin’?”

“About ten minutes after midnight,” I said.

Then I explained, and he nodded. “That’s Nick Ries, and he’s a bad number. You watch your step.”

At eleven-thirty I walked to the jail and picked up the keys to the car. Then I drove it out of the garage and parked it in front of the café. It was Saturday night, and the café was open until twelve.

Karen’s eyes brightened up when I walked into the café. Toni came over to wait on us. Giving her plenty of time to get close enough to hear, I said to Karen, “Got my walking papers today. Caronna fired me.”

“He did?” She looked surprised and puzzled. “Why?”

“He thinks I’ve been spending too much time with you. He also gave me until midnight to get out of town or that”—I pointed at Nick Ries at the counter—“gives me a going-over.”

She glanced at her watch, then at Ries. “Are—are you going?”

“No,” I said loud enough for Ries to hear. “Right now I’m waiting for one minute after twelve. I want to see what the bear-that-walks-like-a-man can do besides look tough.”

Ries glanced over at me and turned another page of his newspaper.

We talked softly then, and somehow the things we found to talk about had nothing to do with murder or crime or Caronna; they were the things we might have talked about had we met in Los Angeles or Peoria or Louisville.

She was getting under my skin, and somehow I did not mind in the least.

Suddenly, a shadow loomed over our table. Instinctively, my eyes dropped to my wristwatch. It was one minute past twelve.

Nick Ries was there beside the table, and all I had to do was make a move to get up and he would swing.

It was a four-chair table, and Karen sat across from me. Nick was standing by the chair on my right. I turned a little in my chair and looked up at Nick.

“Here’s where you get it,” he said.

My left foot had swung over when I turned a little toward him and I put it against the rung of the chair in front of Nick and shoved, hard.

It was just enough to throw him off balance. He staggered back a step, and then I was on my feet. He got set and lunged at me, but that was something I liked. My left forearm went up to catch his right, and then I lifted a right uppercut from my belt that clipped him on the chin. His head jerked back and both feet flew up and he hit the floor in a lump.

Shaking his head, he gave a grunt, then came up and toward me in a diving run. I slapped his head with an open left palm to set him off balance and to measure him, and then broke his nose with another right uppercut.

The punch straightened him up, and I walked in, throwing them with both hands. Left and right to the body, then left and right to the head. He hit the counter with a crash, and I followed him in with another right uppercut that lifted him over the counter. He dropped behind it and hit the floor hard.

Reaching over, I got a lemon pie with my right hand and plastered it in his face, rubbing it well in. Then I straightened up and wiped my hands on a napkin.

Toni stood there staring at me as if I had suddenly pulled a tiger out of my shirt, and when I turned, Jerry Loftus was standing in the door, chuckling.

Finding Castro’s Show was no trouble. It was the biggest thing on the midway at the fair, and when I got inside I had to admit the guy had something.

There were animals you didn’t see in any zoo, and rarely even in a circus. Of course, he had some of the usual creatures, but he specialized in the strange and unusual. Even before I started looking around for Castro himself, I looked over his show.

A somewhat ungainly-looking animal, blackish in color with a few spots of white on his chest and sides, took my interest first. It was a Tasmanian Devil, a carnivorous animal with powerful jaws noted for the destruction of small animals



and young sheep. There was also a Malay Civet, an Arctic Fox, a short-tailed mongoose, a Clouded Leopard, a Pangolin or scaly anteater, a Linsang, a Tamarau, a couple of pygmy buffalo, a babirusa, a duckbilled platypus, a half-dozen bandicoots, a dragon lizard from Komodo, all of ten feet long and weighing three hundred pounds, and last, several monitor lizards, less than half the size of the giants from Komodo, Indonesia.

I glanced up when a man in a white silk shirt, white riding breeches, and black, highly polished boots came striding along the runway beside the pits in which the animals were kept. On a hunch I put out a hand. "Are you Dick Castro?"

He looked me up and down. "I am, yes. What can I do for you?"

"Have you been informed about your uncle, Jack Bitner?"

His handsome face seemed to tighten a little, and his eyes sharpened as he studied me. Something inside me warned: This man is dangerous. Even as I thought it, I realized that he was a big, perfectly trained man, who could handle himself in any situation. He was also utterly ruthless.

"Yes, I received a forwarded message yesterday. However, I had already had my attention called to it in the papers. What have you to do with it?"

"Deputy sheriff. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

He turned abruptly. "Bill! Take over here, will you? I'll be back later." He motioned to me. "Come along."

With a snappy, military stride, he led me to the end of the runway and through a flap in a tent to a smaller tent adjoining. He waved me to a canvas chair, then looked over his shoulder. "Drink?"

"Sure. Bourbon if you've got it."

He mixed a drink for each of us, then seated himself opposite me. "All right, you've got the ball. Start pitching."

"Where were you last Sunday night?"

"On the road with the show."

"Traveling where?"

"Coming here. We drove all night."

"How often do you have rest stops on such a drive as that?"

"Once every hour for a ten-minute rest stop and to check tires, cages, and equipment." He didn't like the direction my questions were taking, but he was smart enough not to make it obvious. "I read in the papers that you had three likely suspects."

"Yes, we have. Your cousin, Johnny Holben, and—" deliberately I hesitated a little—"Blacky Caronna."

He looked at me over his glass, direct and hard. "I hope you catch the killer. Do you think you will?"

"There isn't a doubt of it." I threw that one right to him. "We'll have him within a few hours."

"You say *him*?"

"It's a manner of speaking." I smiled. "You didn't think we suspected you, did you?"

He shrugged. "Everybody in a case like that can be a suspect. Although I'm in no position to gain by it. The old man hated me and wouldn't leave me the dirtiest shirt he had. He hated my father before me. Although," he added, "even if I could

have gained by it, there wouldn't have been any opportunity. I don't dare leave the show and my animals. Some of them require special care."

"That Komodo lizard interested me. They eat meat, don't they?"

He looked up under his eyebrows. "Yes. On Flores and Komodo they are said to occasionally catch and kill horses for food. They are surprisingly quick, run like a streak for a short distance, and there are native stories of them killing men. Most such stories are considered fantastic and their ferocity exaggerated. But me, I think them one of the most dangerous of all living creatures." He looked at me again. "I'd hate to fall into that pit with one of them when nobody was around to get me out."

The way he looked at me when he said that sent gooseflesh up my spine.

"Any more questions?"

"Yes. When did you last hear from Blacky Caronna?"

He shifted his seat a little, and I could almost see his mind working behind that suave, handsome face. "Whatever gave you the idea I might hear from him? I don't know the man. Wouldn't know him if I saw him."

"Nor Toni, either?"

If his eyes had been cold before, they were ice now. Ice with a flicker of something else in them. "I don't think I know anyone named Toni."

"You should," I said grimly. "She knows you. So does Caronna. And just for your future information, I'd be very, very careful of Caronna. He's a big boy, and he plays mighty rough. Also, unless I'm much mistaken, he served his apprenticeship in a school worse than any of your jungles—the Chicago underworld of the late Capone era."

That was news to him. I had a hunch he had heard from Caronna but that he imagined him to be some small-time, small-town crook.

"You see," I added, "I know a few things. I know that you're set to inherit that dough, and I know that Blacky Caronna knows something that gives him a finger in the pie."

"You know plenty, don't you?" His eyes were ugly. "This is too tough a game for any small-town copper, so stay out, get me?"

I laughed. "You wrong me, friend. I'm not a small-time cop. I'm a private dick from L.A. whom Caronna brought over to investigate this murder. We didn't get along and he fired me, but then the sheriff swore me in as a deputy."

He absorbed that and he didn't like it. Actually, I was bluffing. I didn't have one particle of evidence that there was a tie-up between Castro and Caronna, nor did I know that Castro was to inherit. It was all theory, even if fairly substantial theory. However, the hint of my previous connection with Caronna worried him, for it could mean that I knew much more about Caronna's business than I should know.

This was the time to go, and I took it. My drive over had taken some time, and there had been delays. It was already growing late. I got up. "I'll be running along now. I just wanted to see you and learn a few things."

He got up, too. "Well," he said, "I enjoyed the visit. You must come again sometime—when you have some evidence."

"Why sure!" I smiled at him. "You can expect me in a few days." I turned away from him, then glanced back. "You see, when you were in this alone, it looked

good, but that Caronna angle is going to do you up. Caronna and Toni. They'd like to cut themselves in on this million or so you'll inherit."

He shrugged, and I turned away. It was not until I had taken two full steps into the deserted and darkened tent that I realized we were alone. While we were talking the last of the crowd had dwindled away, and the show was over.

My footsteps sounded loud on the runway under my feet, but there was a cold chill running up my spine. Castro was behind me, and I could hear the sound of his boots on the boards. Only a few steps further was the pit in which the huge dragon lizard lay.

The dank, fetid odor that arose from the pit was strong in the close air of the darkened tent with all the flaps down. With every sense in me keyed to the highest pitch, I walked on by the pit and turned down the runway to the exit. He drew alongside me then, and there was a queer look in his eyes. He must have been tempted, all right.

"You think I killed Bitner," he said. He had his feet wide apart and he was staring at me.

Why I said it, I'll never know, but I did. "Yes," I said, "I think you killed him."

"You damned fool! If I had, you couldn't prove it. You'd only make an ass of yourself."

That, of course, was the crux of the problem. I had to have evidence, and I had so little. I knew now how the crime had been done. This day had provided that information, but I needed proof, and my best bet was to push him into some foolish action, into taking some step that would give me further evidence. He was, as all criminals are, overly egotistical and overly optimistic, so with the right words I might light a fuse that would start something.

We had turned away from each other, but I could not resist the chance, for what it was worth. "*Ati, ati,*" I said, "*sobat bikin salah!*"

His spine went rigid, and he stopped so suddenly that one foot was almost in the air. He started to turn, but I was walking on, and walking fast. I had told him, "Be careful, you have made a mistake!" in Malayan... for the solution to this crime lay in the Far East.

At the edge of the grounds I stopped to light a cigarette. He was nowhere in sight, but I noticed a canvasman I had seen earlier and the man walked up. "How's for a light, mister?"

"Sure," I said. "Wasn't this show in Las Vegas a few days ago?"

"Yeah," he said. "You from there?"

"Been around there a good bit. Have a hard drive over?"

"Not so bad. We stop ever' so often for a rest."

"Who starts you again—Castro? I mean, after a rest stop?"

"Yeah, an' he usually gives us a break once in a while. I mean, sometimes when we're movin' at night he lets us rest a while. Got to, or we'd run off the road."

"Stop many times out of Las Vegas? That desert country must have been quiet enough to sleep."

"We stopped three, maybe four times. Got a good rest out in the desert. Twice he stopped quite a while. Maybe an hour once, maybe thirty minutes again. Boy, we needed it!"

Leaving him at a corner, I walked over to my car and got in. There were several cars parked along the street and in one of them I saw a cigarette glow. Lovers, I thought. And that took my mind back to Karen Bitner. A lot of my thinking had been centered around her these last few hours, and little of it had to do with crime.

The car started easily and I swung out on the highway and headed west. It was a long road I had to drive, across a lonely stretch of desert and mountains with few towns. When I had been driving for about an hour, a car passed me that looked familiar, but there was a girl and man in it. I grinned. Probably the two I'd seen back in town, I thought.

Wheeling the car around a climbing turn, I made the crest and leveled off on a long drive across some rough, broken country. Rounding a curve among some boulders, I saw a car ahead of me and a man bending over a rear wheel. A jack and some tire tools lay on the pavement, and a girl, her coat collar turned up against the cool wind, waved at me to flag me down.

Swinging to the opposite side of the road, I thrust my head out. "Anything I can do?" I asked.

The girl lifted her hand and she held a gun. "Yes," she said, "you can get out."

It was Toni. If the motor had been running, I'd have taken a chance, but I'd killed it when I stopped, believing they needed help. The man was coming toward us now, and with him was still another man who had unloaded from the car. The first was Nick Ries, Caronna's man, but the other I had never seen before. "Yeah," Nick said, "you can get out."

I got out.

My gun was in my hand, and I could have taken a chance on a gun battle, but it was three to one, and they had a flashlight on my face. I'd have been cold turkey in a matter of seconds. With a flit of my right hand I shoved my gun off my lap and behind the cushion, covering the movement by opening the door with my left. I got out and stood there with my hands up while they frisked me. "No rod," the new man told Nick. "He's clean."

"Okay, get him off the road. We've got work to do."

They pushed me around behind some rocks off the road. I could have been no more than fifty yards from the road where we stopped, but I might as well have been as many miles. Nick stared at me, his eyes hard with enjoyment.

"Looks like it's my turn now. Tough guy, huh? All right, you tell us what we want to know, or we'll give you a chance to show us how tough you are." He waved the gun at me. "Did you see Castro? What did you tell him?"

"Sure I saw him. I told him he was the guy who murdered Bitner. I asked him what Caronna wanted from him, and when Caronna got in touch with him last. It struck me," I added, and this was for Toni's benefit, "that he was a pretty smart joe. I think you guys are backing the wrong horse. Anyway," I continued, "I'm riding with him."

"You?" Toni snapped. "What do you mean?"

"Hell," I said, offhand, "figure it out for yourself. I was ready to do business with Blacky, but he wouldn't offer enough dough. Castro's a gentleman. He'll play ball with you. That's what you guys should be doing, getting on his side!"

“Shut up!” Nick snapped. Then he sneered, “You know what happens to guys that double-cross Blacky Caronna? I do. An’ I don’t want any part of it.”

“That’s if he’s alive,” I said. “You guys do what I tell you. You go to Castro.”

The line I was using wasn’t doing me any good with Nick, I could tell, but I wasn’t aiming it at him. I was pretty sure that Toni had her own little game, and that she was playing both ends against the middle. If I could convince her I was playing ball with Castro there was a chance she would lend a hand. A mighty slim chance, but I was in no mood or position to bargain with any kind of a chance.

Of one thing I was sure. When they stopped that car they had no idea of ever letting me get away from this place alive. I had to talk fast. “I never expected,” I said, flashing a look at Toni, “to find you out here. If we’re going to get anything done, it will have to be done in Ranagat.”

“Shut up!” Nick snarled.

“Hold it up a minute, Nick,” Toni said. “Let the guy talk. Maybe we’ll learn something.”

“What I was going to say was this. I’m in this for the dough, like you are. Caronna fires me, so I tie on with Loftus, figuring if I stay where the big dough is, I’ll latch onto some of it. So what do I find out? That Loftus and some others have a beautiful case built against Blacky. He’s got a bad rep, and the owners are figuring on getting rid of him over this high-grade deal. So they have all gone in together—the mine owners, Loftus, Holben, an’ all the rest. They are going to swear Caronna right into the death penalty. By the time that case goes to trial Caronna will be framed so tight he can’t wiggle a toe.

“Why do you suppose he wanted me up here? Because he knows they’re out to get him. Because he’s hotter than a firecracker right now and he can’t afford to go on trial.

“What I’m getting at is, why tie yourself to a sinking ship? Caronna’s through. You guys can go down with him, or you can swing over to Castro and make more money than you ever will from Caronna.”

“But,” Ries objected, “the will Castro has leaves the money to him. Why should he give us a split?”

“He’s leery of Caronna. Also,” I said, grinning, “I’ve got my own angle, but I’ll need help. I know how Castro killed the old man.”

“How?” Ries said shrewdly.

I chuckled. In the last few minutes I’d been lying faster than I ever had in my life, but this I really knew. “Don’t ask me how. You guys play ball with me, and I’ll play ball with you.”

“No,” Nick said. “We got orders to bump you, and that’s what we do.”

“Wait, Nick.” Toni waved a hand at him. “I’ve got an idea. Suppose we take this lug back to town. We can cache him in the basement at the café, and nobody’ll know. Then we can study this thing over a little. After all, why should Blacky get all the gravy?”

“How do we know this guy is leveling with us?” Nick said. “He gives us a fast line of chatter, an’—”

Toni turned to me. “If you know Castro, and if you’re working that close to him, you know about the will. Tell us.”

Cold sweat broke out all over me. Here it was, and if I gave the wrong answer they'd never listen to me again. Hell. I wouldn't have time to talk! I'd be too dead.

Still, I had an idea, if no more. "Hell," I said carelessly, "I don't know what anybody else knows, but I know that Johnny Leader wrote that will, and I know that Castro stashed it away when he killed Bitner."

"That's what Caronna figured," Toni said. "This guy is right!"

They didn't see me gulp and swallow. It was lucky I had seen that sign over the small concession on the midway, a sign that said, JOHNNY LEADER, WORLD'S GREATEST PENMAN. And I remembered the comments Caronna had made to Toni about Leader. When I'd glimpsed that sign, it had all come back to me.

At last they let me put my hands down, and we started back to the cars. I wasn't out of the woods by a long way, but I had a prayer now. "Toni," Nick said, "you come with me in this mug's car. Peppy can drive ours. We'll head for Ranagat."

It couldn't have worked out better unless Ries had let Toni and me drive in alone. Nick had Toni get behind the wheel and he put me in alongside of her, then he got in behind. That guy wouldn't trust his grandmother. Still, it couldn't have been much better. My .45 was tucked into the crack behind the seat cushion right where I sat.

As we drove, I tried to figure my next play. One thing I knew, I wasn't taking any chance on being tied up in that basement, even if it meant a shoot-out in the streets of Ranagat. Then I heard something that cinched it.

"Blacky's figurin' on an out," Nick said to Toni. "He don't know about this frame they're springin' on him. He's all set to bump the babe and make it look like suicide, with a note for her to leave behind, confessin' she killed Bitner."

A match struck behind me as Nick lit a cigarette. "He's got the babe, too. We put the snatch on her tonight after he found them tracks she left."

"Tracks?" I tried to keep my voice casual. My right hand had worked behind me as I half turned away from Toni toward Nick, and I had the gun in my hand, under the skirt of my coat.

"Yeah," Nick chuckled. "She got into his place through the garage window an' stepped in some grease on a tool bench. She left tracks."

Toni glared sidewise at me. "Weren't you kind of sweet on her?"

"Me?" I shrugged, and glanced at her with a lot of promissory notes in my eyes. "I like a smart dame!"

She took it big. I'm no Clark Gable or anything, but alongside of Caronna I'd look like Galahad beside a gorilla.

We rolled into the streets of Ranagat at about daybreak, and then I saw the sight that thrilled me more than any I could have seen unless it was Karen herself. It was Jerry Loftus. He was standing in the door of his office, and he saw us roll into town. This was a sheriff's office car, and he would know I wouldn't be letting anyone else drive for fun, not with Nick Ries in the back seat, whom he had seen me bash the night before.

Something made me glance around then, and I saw two things. I saw a gray convertible, the one I had seen standing back of Castro's tent, turning into

Caronna's drive, and I saw Nick Ries leaning over on his right elbow, fishing in his left-hand pants pocket for matches.

My own right hand held the gun, and when I saw Ries way over on his elbow, I shoved down with my elbow on the door handle. The door swung open, and at the same instant I grabbed at the wheel with my left.

The car swung and smashed into the curb and then over it. We weren't rolling fast, but I hit the pavement gun in hand and backing up, and saw Loftus coming toward us as Peppy rolled down the hill in the following car. "Get that guy!" I yelled.

Nick was screaming mad. "It's a double cross! It's a—" His gun swung up, and I let him have it right through the chest, squeezing the two shots off as fast as I could pull the trigger of my gun.

Nick screamed again and his mouth dropped open, and then he spilled out of the car and landed on his face in the dust and dirt of the gutter.

Another shot boomed behind the car, and I knew it was Loftus cutting loose with his six-shooter. He only shot once.

For once Toni had been caught flat-footed. My twist of the wheel and leap from the car had caught her unawares, and now she stared, for one fatal instant, as though struck dumb. Then her face twisted into a grimace of hate and female fury, and she grabbed at her purse. Knowing where her gun was, I went into action a split second sooner and knocked it from her hand. She sprang at me, screaming and clawing, but Loftus and a couple of passing miners pulled her off me.

"Hold her," I said. "She's in it, too."

"Karen Bitner's disappeared," Loftus told me. "Have you seen her?"

"Caronna's got her."

Diving around the sheriff's car, I sprang for the seat of Peppy's convertible, which had been stopped alongside the street. I kicked her wide open and went up the winding road to Caronna's house with all the stops out. Skidding to a halt in front of the gate, I hit the ground on both feet, and this time I wasn't caring if there was a warning signal on the gate or not. I jerked it open, heard the bell clang somewhere in the interior, and then I was inside the gate and running for the steps.

As I went through the gate I heard something crash, and then a scream as of an animal in pain—a hoarse, gasping cry that died away in a sobbing gasp. I took the steps in a bound and went through the door.

Caronna, his eyes blazing, his shirt ripped half off, was standing in the middle of the room, his powerful, trunklike legs wide spread, his big hands knotted into fists.

In the corner of the room Castro was lying, and I needed only a glance to see that Richard Henry Castro had tackled a different kind of jungle beast, and had come out on the short end. I could surmise what had happened. Castro must have jumped him, and Caronna had torn the man loose and hurled him into that corner and then jumped right in the middle of him with both feet. If Castro wasn't ready for the hospital I never saw a man who was, and unless I was mistaken, he was a candidate for the morgue.

One chair was knocked over, and the broken body of Castro lay on the floor, blood trickling from a corner of his mouth, blood staining the front of his white

shirt and slowly turning it to a wide crimson blotch. Yet his eyes were alive as they had never been, and they blazed up to us like those of a trapped and desperate animal brought to its last moment and backing away from the trapper with bared teeth.

Caronna was the thing that centered on my mind and gripped every sense in my being. Somehow, from the first I had known I would fight that man. Perhaps it began when Shanks had told me I wasn't man enough for him. That had rankled.

I stood there looking at Blacky Caronna, a solid block of bone and muscle mounted on a couple of powerful and thick legs, a massive chest and shoulders, and a bull neck that held his blunt, short-haired head thrust forward. He saw me and lunged.

Did I shoot him? Hell, what man who fights with his hands can think of a gun at such a moment? I dropped mine as Caronna lunged for me, and as I dropped it I hooked short and hard with both hands.

My feet were firmly anchored. I was set just right and he was coming in. My left smashed a bit high, slicing a deep cut in his cheekbone, and then my right smacked on his chin. I might as well have hit a wall. He grabbed at my coat, thinking perhaps to jerk it down over my shoulders, but I whipped a right uppercut that clipped him on the chin, and as all my weight was driving toward him, I jerked my chin down on my chest and butted him in the face, blocking his arms with my elbows.

He grabbed my forearms and hurled me away from him so hard that I hit a chair and it splintered under me. He came in with a rush. I hurled my body at his legs. He fell over me, kicking out blindly for my face, and one boot grazed my head, but then I rolled over and came up.

It was wicked, brutal battling. Through a kind of smoky haze in my mind, caused by crashing punches to my head and chin, I drove into him, swinging with both hands, and he met me halfway. It was fist and thumb, gouging, biting, kneeing. Using elbows and shoulders, butting and kicking. It was barroom, backroom, waterfront style, where anything goes and the man who goes down and doesn't get up fast enough is through... and he rarely gets up.

A thumb stabbed at my eye in a clinch, and I butted and gouged my way out of it and then clipped him with a right to the chin as he came in. I struck at his throat with my elbow in close, and then grabbing him by the belt, heaved him from the floor and hurled him back on a table. He kicked me in the chest as I came in, and knocked me into the wall.

My coat and shirt were gone. Blood streaked my body. I could feel a stiffness in the side of my face, and I knew my eye was swelling shut. There was no time to rest, no rounds, no stopping. I stepped in on the balls of my feet and hooked hard to his chin. He blinked and slammed a right at me that I ducked but I caught a sweeping left that rocked me. Weaving to escape his bludgeoning fists, I forced him back against the desk and jamming my left forearm against his throat, I slammed three right hands into his body before he threw me off and charged. I stabbed a left at his face and he took it coming in as though I'd hit him with a feather duster. My right missed and he hit me in the belly with one that knocked every bit of wind out of me.



He hurled me to the floor and jumped for me with both feet, but I jerked up my knees and kicked out hard with both feet. They caught him midway of his jump and put him off balance, and he fell beside me. I rolled over, grabbing at his throat, but he threw a right from where he lay that clipped me, and then I ground the side of his face into the floor by crushing my elbow against his cheek.

We broke free and lunged to our feet, but he caught me with a looping right that staggered me. I backed up, working away from him, fighting to get my breath. My mouth hung open and I was breathing in great gasps, and he came around the wreck of the table, coming for me.

He pushed forward, bobbing his head to make my left miss, so I shortened it to a hook and stepped in with both hands. They caught him solidly, and he stopped dead in his tracks. He shook his head and started for me, his eyes glazed. My left hook came over with everything I had on it, and his cheek looked as if somebody had hit it with an axe.

He took it coming in and scarcely blinked, hurt as he was. For the first time in my life I was scared. I had hit this guy with everything but the desk and he was still coming.

My knees were shaky and I knew that no matter how badly he was hurt, I was on my last legs. He came on in, and I threw a right into his stomach. He gasped and his face looked sick, but he came on. He struck at me, but the power was gone from his punches. I set myself and started to throw them. I threw them as if I was punching the heavy bag and the timekeeper had given me the ten-second signal. I must have thrown both hands into the air after he started to fall, but as he came down, with great presence of mind, I jerked my knee into his chin.

Jerry Loftus came into the room as I staggered back, staring down at Caronna. "I could have stopped it," he said, "but I—"

"Why the hell didn't you?" I gasped.

"What?" His eyes twinkled at the corners. "Best scrap I ever saw, an' you ask me why I didn't stop it!"

"You'd better get cuffs on that guy," I said, disgusted. "If he gets up again I'm going right out that window!"

We found Karen in another room, tied up in a neat bundle, which, incidentally, she is at any time. When I turned her loose, she kissed me, and while I'd been looking forward to that, for the first time in my life I failed to appreciate a kiss from a pretty woman. Both my lips were split and swollen. She looked at my face with a kind of horror that I could appreciate, having seen Caronna.

Hours later, seated in the café over coffee, Johnny Holben and Loftus came in to join us. Holben stared at me. Even with my face washed and patched up, I looked like something found dead in the water.

"All right," Loftus said doubtfully, "this is your show. We've got Caronna no matter how this goes, due to an old killing back East. That's what he was so worried about. Somebody started an investigation of an income-tax evasion and everybody started to talk, and before it was over, three old murders had been accounted for, and one of them was Caronna's.

"However, while we don't know now whether Castro will live or not with that rib through his lung, you say he was the one who killed Bitner."

"That's right," I said. "He did kill him."

"He never came up that trail past my place," Holben said.

"But there isn't any other way up, is there?" Karen asked.

"No, not a one," Loftus said. "In the thirty years since I came west with a herd of cattle to settle in this country, I've been all over that mesa, every inch of it, and there's no trail but the one past Holben's cabin."

"Your word is good enough for me," I said, "but the fact is, Castro did not come by any trail when he murdered Old Jack Bitner. How it was done I had no idea until I visited Castro's show. You must remember that he specializes in odd animals, in the strange and the unusual.

"He got his method from India, a place where he had traveled a good deal. When I saw his animals, something clicked into place in my mind, and then something else. I knew then he had scaled the wall under Bitner's window."

"That's a sheer cliff," Loftus protested.

"Sure, and nothing human could climb it without help, but Richard Henry Castro went up that cliff, and he had help."

"You mean, there was somebody in it with him?"

"Nothing human. When I saw his show, I tied it in with a track I saw on the ledge outside Bitner's window. The trouble was that while I knew how it was done, and that his show had been stopped on the highway opposite the mesa, I had no proof. If Castro sat tight, even though I knew how it was done, it was going to be hard to prove.

"Like any criminal, he could never be sure he hadn't slipped up; didn't know who to fear or how much. My problem was to get Castro worried, and his method was one so foreign to this country that he never dreamed anyone would guess. I had to worry him, so in leaving I made a remark to him in Malayan, telling him that he had made a mistake.

"Once he knew I had been in the Far East, he would be worried. Also, he knew that Caronna had seen him."

"Caronna saw him?" Loftus demanded.

"Yes, that had to be it. That was the wedge he was using to cut himself in on Castro's inheritance."

"How could Castro inherit?"

"There's a man in his show named Johnny Leader, a master penman with a half-dozen convictions for forgery on his record. He was traveling with that show writing visiting cards for people, scrolls, etc. He drew up a will for Castro, and it was substituted at the time of the killing."

"Get to the point," Holben said irritably. "How did he get up that cliff?"

"This will be hard to believe," I said, "but he had the rope taken up by a lizard!"

"By a what?" Holben demanded.

I grinned. "Look," I said, "over in India there are certain thieves and second-story workers who enter houses and high buildings in just that way.

"Castro has two types of monitor lizards over there in his show. The dragon lizards from Komodo are too big and tough for anyone to handle, and nobody wants to. However, the smaller monitor lizards from India, running four to five feet in length, are another story. It is those lizards that the thieves use to gain access to locked houses.

“A rope is tied around the lizard’s body, and he climbs the wall, steered by jerks on the rope from below. When he gets over a parapet, in a crevice, or over a window sill, the thief jerks hard on the rope and the lizard braces himself to prevent being pulled over, and they are very strong in the legs. Then the thief goes up the wall, hand over hand, walking right up with his feet against the wall.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Loftus said. “Who would ever think of that?”

“The day you took me up there,” I told him, “I noticed a track that reminded me of the track of a gila monster, but much bigger. The idea of what it meant did not occur to me until I saw those monitor lizards of Castro’s.

“Now that we know what to look for, we’ll probably find scratches on the cliff and tracks at the base.”

Karen was looking at me, wide-eyed with respect. “Why, I never realized you knew things like that!”

“In my business,” I said, “you have to know a little of everything.”

“I’ll stick to bank robbers an’ rustlers,” Loftus said. “Or high-graders.”

“You old false alarm!” Holben snorted. “You never arrested a high-grader in your life!”

We were walking out of the door, and somehow we just naturally started up the hill. Dusk was drawing a blanket of darkness over the burnt red ridges, and the western horizon was blushing before the oncoming shadows.

When we were on top of the hill again, looking back over the town, Karen looked up at me. “Are your lips still painful?”

“Not that painful,” I said.

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