

DELL

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A  
**MIKE SHAYNE**  
MYSTERY

A stylized illustration of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue top and a long green dress. She is framed by a wreath of green leaves and red flowers. Behind her head is a large, solid orange circle. The background is dark brown.

**FRAMED  
IN  
BLOOD**

**BRETT HALLIDAY**

# **Framed in Blood**

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## **Brett Halliday**

FOR SOME MINUTES Michael Shayne had been aware of the nervous regard of the young man sitting beside him at the bar. The tall redhead remained placidly impervious to the squirmings which seemed designed to attract his attention. It was not until Shayne lifted his glass to drain it that the young man said, "I guess that's cognac you're drinking."

Shayne set the glass down and turned his head slowly, lifted his bushy red brows, and said in an impersonal tone, "What business is it of yours what I'm drinking?"

The man turned on the stool and faced Shayne. His thin blond mustache was tinged with nicotine on the left side, and his round face, which should have been plump, was haggard. There were dark circles beneath bloodshot blue eyes, and an uncertain smile quivered on his lips.

He said, "You are Michael Shayne, aren't you?"

"So what?"

"So you must be drinking cognac." The young man looked at the empty glass in Shayne's bare hand. "I'll buy one. A double?"

Shayne shrugged his wide shoulders and resumed his hunched position after shoving the glass aside. "Make it a triple if you insist," he said placidly, turning his head slightly to look at the man again. "Am I supposed to know you?"

"Sure." His smile was steady now, his tone eager and placating and hopeful at the same time. "We met a couple of years ago. I was with—"

"Wait a minute. You were with Tim Rourke. Just starting in as a reporter on the *News*." A frown of concentration trenched his forehead and drew his red brows together. "Bert Jackson," he continued after a moment. "Tim was throwing a party for you. You were getting married or divorced or something."

"Married," said Bert Jackson, patently pleased that the detective hadn't forgotten. "It was on the Coco-Palm Plaza roof. I've seen you around since then, and read lots of stuff about you in the paper but I guess—"

"Still on the *News*?" Shayne asked idly when Jackson's voice wavered off to indecisive silence.

"No. I'm on the *Tribune* now." He spoke defensively, with a note of hopeful entreaty or worried expectancy. He ordered the drinks, then appeared to be anxiously awaiting some comment but Shayne remained silent until the bartender set an old-fashioned before Jackson and poured three ounces of Martell into a glass.

"Still married?" Shayne forced himself to ask with a show of interest when the silence became awkward. He was turning the glass absently between his blunt fingers, admiring the clean amber liquid; and thus occupied, he failed to see the look of hurt and disappointment that flashed across his companion's face.

He did notice a thinness in Jackson's monosyllabic affirmative, and waited for him to say more but there was silence.

Shayne lifted his glass and turned toward Jackson to say, "Here's to Tim Rourke."

Jackson's upper lip drew away from his nicotined teeth and tightened, and his red-streaked eyes glinted with anger. He lowered his lids and lifted his glass with seeming effort. "Sure," he agreed listlessly. "To Tim."

Shayne sipped his cognac and wondered what was bothering his companion. Jackson had been a sort of protégé of Rourke's back there in the beginning, he recalled. The older reporter had groomed him for the job, given him a hand up by taking him along on important assignments. He frowned again, recalling that he hadn't heard Rourke mention the young reporter for a long time.

He heard the empty old-fashioned glass thump down on the bar, and Jackson's strained voice said, "How about getting out of here where we can talk privately? I've been trying to catch up with you for a couple of days."

"Rourke could have told you where to find me," said Shayne shortly.

"I didn't want to ask Tim Rourke."

Shayne took a big sip of cognac and washed it around in his mouth as he considered Jackson's terse reply and almost hostile tone. He took his time finishing the drink, then slid from the stool and said, "My place is just a couple of blocks away."

Jackson followed him out of the air-cooled bar and onto the sidewalk where a blast of hot, humid air struck their faces. The street was choked with late-afternoon traffic and the sun-drenched sidewalk was crowded with tanned and bareheaded tourists. The reporter was almost a head shorter than the rangy detective, and he moved his legs rapidly to keep pace as they turned the corner off Flagler toward the drawbridge over the Miami River. There were fewer pedestrians on the Avenue, and Shayne walked faster after crossing Southeast First Street. Shayne's Panama was tipped far back from his forehead, and he strode along with a look of quizzical unconcern on his rugged face. Jackson panted beside him, occasionally pushing his hat back to mop his brow, then pulling it low over his face as though to avoid recognition by passers-by.

Shayne stopped at the side entrance to an apartment hotel on the north bank of the river and opened the door for the reporter to precede him. He nodded to the stairway that by-passed the lobby and elevators and said, "Up one flight." At the top of the stairs he took the lead down the hall and unlocked a door that opened onto a large, untidy living-room with windows overlooking Biscayne Bay.

Jackson entered the room behind him, and Shayne indicated a deep armchair beside the battered oak desk that had served him through the years, until he engaged a suite of offices in a downtown office building. He tossed his hat on the rack near the door, crossed the room to part limp curtains in the hope of inducing a bay breeze into the room, then dropped down into the swivel chair behind the desk.

Jackson sat with both hands deep in his pockets, short legs stretched out, and a sullen expression on his face.

Shayne lit a cigarette, frowning at the somewhat theatrically dejected posture of his visitor. "So you've been trying to catch up with me," he began, leaning forward with both elbows propped on the desk.

"For a couple of days." Jackson's eyes were shielded by the brim of his hat, his gaze intent upon the floor.

"And you didn't want to ask Rourke to find me?" He blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"That's right." Jackson paused, sucking in his lower lip, then added bitterly, "I don't see Tim Rourke much nowadays."

Shayne waited a full minute for him to say something more, but when the reporter did not look up or speak, he said crisply, "My time is worth a certain amount of money, Jackson. You've used up about the price of a triple Martell. If you're going to sit around and brood, you can just as well do it elsewhere."

Jackson pulled himself stiffly erect and lifted a worried, haggard face. "I know," he said hoarsely. "I'm a dope. I don't know where to begin."

"Try the beginning."

"How does one know where the beginning is?" Jackson spread out his hands, and he suddenly looked very young and defenseless. "Two years ago when you met me—on my wedding night? That was one beginning. A year ago when I got canned from the *News*? That was another beginning."

“Why did you lose your job? Rourke used to think you had the makings of a newspaperman.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Jackson’s hands fell limply in his lap. He studied them for a moment, then resumed. “Maybe it began a month ago when—”

“When what?” Shayne prompted him.

“Nothing. That was more of an ending.” He laughed harshly. “To hell with all this. Could I have a drink?”

Shayne said, “No,” flatly.

Jackson looked startled, then belligerent, as though he had been slapped. His gaze went past the detective to the built-in liquor cabinet with an array of glasses and bottles behind the glass door.

“Why not?” he demanded. “If I had a bracer—”

Shayne shook his head, saying, “I’m wasting my time on you, but that’s no reason why I should waste good liquor, too. Have you had a fight with Tim?”

“No,” muttered Jackson. “I haven’t seen him for weeks.”

Shayne took a final drag on his cigarette and rubbed it out in an ash tray, made an impatient gesture, and pushed his chair back.

“I don’t know why I’m sitting here beating around the bush like a tongue-tied fool,” Jackson burst out. “As if, by God, I’m afraid I’ll shock you. A guy like you.” He laughed again, harshly and derisively.

A muscle tightened in Shayne’s left cheek, and his gray eyes were cold. “A guy like me,” he said evenly, “is pretty hard to shock.”

“Sure. That’s what I’ve been telling myself the last few days while I’ve been trying to work up the nerve to approach you. From everything I’ve heard about you, this is right up your alley.” Jackson relaxed and slid back to his former position, took off his hat, tossed it on the floor, and wiped the beads of sweat from his face.

“You can hear all sorts of things about me in Miami,” Shayne told him. “What do you think right up my alley?”

“I’ve got a proposition.” Jackson sat up again, slid forward in the chair. “Look—could I have a drink now?”

“If you’re ready to say something that makes sense.”

“You needn’t worry about wasting the price of a drink,” Jackson told him, a strange smile spreading his blond mustache. “There’ll be several thousands in it for you, Shayne.”

“That’ll buy a lot of liquor,” the redhead agreed. He got up and crossed to the cabinet, asking, “Bourbon or rye?”

“Rye. Mixed with a little plain water—if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” said Shayne, “if you want to ruin good whisky.” He poured rye in a tall glass, took another empty glass into the kitchenette where he put ice cubes and water in both, and returned to pour himself a glass of cognac. He carried the rye-and-water to Jackson, and when he was settled behind the desk with ice water and cognac he said, “Let’s have it.”

Jackson took a long drink, settled back with the tall glass clutched in one hand, and began.

“I’ve got hold of something so hot it’s scorching my fingers. I’ve been covering City Hall for the *Tribune* the last two months. An open assignment. Digging up any small items I could. I ran onto this thing and I’ve been holding it back while I covered all the angles. Now I’ve got it!” His tone was exultant. “Names, affidavits—everything. The biggest damned political scandal that ever hit Miami.”

“Miami,” said Shayne, “has had some lovely political stinks in the past.”

“But nothing like this one,” Jackson vowed, jerking himself erect again, squirming around in his chair. “I’ll crack the present administration wide open at its rotten seams and send one V.I.P. to the penitentiary for a long stretch—if my stuff is ever published,” he ended slowly and with waning

enthusiasm.

~~Shayne took a sip of cognac and lazily washed it down with ice water while Jackson gulped~~  
drink of rye. “If?” said the detective quietly.

“That’s what I said. I’ve got this exclusive, see? No one else is in on it. I haven’t peeped a word  
about it to the office. They don’t even know there *is* such a story floating around—else they’d never  
have turned me loose to dig it out.”

“Why are you holding it out if it’s so hot?”

“I’ll tell you why.” Bert Jackson slammed his glass down on the arm of his chair, pounded the  
opposite arm with his fist, and exploded, “Because I’ll be double-damned if I’m going to watch it die  
the way other stories like this one died. You know the sort of rag the *Trib* is.”

“I thought it was a pretty good paper,” said Shayne mildly.

Jackson’s mouth twisted in a snarl. “It’s nothing but a damned mouthpiece for the administration.  
I’ve watched this happen before. A story like mine hasn’t got the chance of a snowflake in hell. Not a  
word would ever see print if I were fool enough to turn it in.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Shayne argued. “Newspapers live on circulation. If this story is  
sensational as you claim—”

“Nuts!” the reporter interrupted violently. “I’ve been around for two years now, finding out who  
oils the wheels. The *Trib* is no worse than any other paper. They all distort the news to fit their private  
policies. Deliberately play down certain stories, and front-page other stuff that doesn’t deserve more  
than a few lines. It’s a stinking, rotten business, and I’m sick of playing sucker.”

Shayne took time to light a cigarette and take a sip of cognac before saying, “I’ve known  
Timothy Rourke a lot of years, Jackson, and I never heard him complain that a story of his was killed  
because it didn’t conform to his paper’s policy. That exposé of insurance rackets a couple of years ago  
that won him the Pulitzer prize. I happen to know his publisher was one of the biggest stockholders  
one of the companies involved, yet there was never the slightest pressure on him to stop the  
investigation.”

“Oh, sure,” agreed Bert Jackson sourly. “A guy like Tim Rourke—Pulitzer prize winner. No one  
dares edit his copy. That’s why—I decided to get in touch with you.”

“Why?”

“I need money.”

“Most of us do these days.”

“I mean money.” Jackson surged to his feet with drink in hand, shaking a tight left fist at Shayne.  
“A lot of money. Ten grand. And I need it fast.”

“What for?”

“That’s my business,” flared Jackson, the red streaks in his eyes glinting between half-closed  
lids.

Shayne took a long puff on his cigarette and deliberately blew smoke upward, trying to decide  
whether to throw the reporter out on his ear or encourage him to keep on talking.

Jackson gulped another drink, set the glass down, and began to pace up and down the room, his  
hands alternately clawing at his long, sandy hair and ramming deep in his pockets, his angry words  
flowing rapidly.

“Know what my salary is? Sixty-two fifty a week. Know what my take-home pay is? Figure  
out. I’m sick of scrimping and splitting pennies to make ends meet. I’m damned fed up with taking  
Betty to a juke joint on Saturday night for a beer while crooked bastards like this big shot I’m talking  
about are drinking champagne at swell hotels.

“Betty’s sick of it, too, and I don’t blame her. It isn’t what she expected when she married me.  
All that stuff Tim Rourke spread around about me being a big-shot reporter in a few years!” F

choked over this, and hurried on. "I don't blame Betty for stepping out on me. Why shouldn't she have some fun?" he demanded, stopping in front of Shayne and glaring down at him.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Shayne drawled. "Your wife is stepping out on you because you don't earn enough money to take her places. Is that all that's bothering you?"

"That and a lot more," he answered with tight-lipped fury. "What's it got me to play it straight these two years? I dig up a real story like this, and what happens? Do I get credit for doing a job? Nuts. If I play Little Boy Blue and turn it over to the front desk, what happens? It lays an egg. A damned rotten egg. And I go on working for peanuts. To hell with that. Why shouldn't I cash in?"

"How?" asked Shayne coldly.

"How much do you think Mr. Big would pay to have my story suppressed? What's ten thousand to him? He'll pick up four times that amount in graft in the next twelve months if he stays out of the pen. Why in hell shouldn't he split some of it with me?"

Shayne lifted one shoulder and settled deeper in his swivel chair. "Shakedowns are dangerous.

"I'm not afraid of a little danger," Jackson snorted. "All I want is my share."

"If you want my advice—" Shayne began.

"I don't want your advice," Jackson interrupted. "I've made up my mind."

"Then what the hell are you doing here?" Shayne snapped. "Frankly, I'm not interested in your personal problems. It's no concern of mine if you're married to a money-hungry female. Go ahead with your sophomoric shakedown and get your ears pinned back."

"Why should I get my ears pinned back?"

"What makes you think Mr. Big will pay off?"

"I've told you—"

"You've told me a lot of things," Shayne broke in wearily. "Among them is your conviction that your paper will suppress the story if you turn it in. Then you talk about blackmailing Mr. Big by threatening to do just that. Why in the name of God would he pay you blackmail if he knows your paper won't print the story?"

Bert Jackson dropped into his chair and took a long drink of rye, warm, now, and weakened further by melted ice cubes. "I thought about that angle," he admitted, his haggard face twitching. "That's what had me stymied until I thought about Tim Rourke."

"What about Tim?" Shayne's voice was suddenly harsh.

"You said it yourself a minute ago." Jackson tensed forward and continued eagerly. "If it were Tim's story, no one would dare suppress it. It would be front-paged just the way he wrote it—and Mr. Big knows that as well as we do."

"But it isn't Tim's story, nor the *News's* story."

"I could turn all my stuff over to him."

"To a rival paper?"

"Not to be printed," said Jackson quickly. "Just to put pressure on Mr. Big. He'd pay plenty to keep it quiet if he knew Timothy Rourke had the lowdown on him. A lot more than ten grand. And ten grand is all I want out of it. Rourke can have the rest. You and Rourke—to split between you."

Shayne was silent, watching his perspiring visitor through half-closed eyes to hide the rising anger in them. Jackson's damp, sandy hair lay aslant his forehead, adding a maniacal look to his grimy face. "Where do I come in?" he asked after a brief period.

"You put it up to Rourke. I'll give you part of what I've got, enough to convince Tim it's the real thing."

"Why don't you put it up to Tim yourself?"

Jackson licked his lips and combed his bangs back with nervous fingers. "Let's say for personal reasons. What's that to you? You'll get a nice cut just for passing it on to Tim."

“Tim Rourke didn’t get where he is now by suppressing legitimate news,” said Shayne shortly.

~~“But he won’t be suppressing anything. Not really. Don’t you see? There’s nothing actual-~~  
unethical about my proposition. The way things are now, Rourke can’t print the story because he hasn’t got it. I can’t print it because I know my publisher will turn thumbs down on it. So, what the hell? We can all collect a chunk of money from a situation that can’t be changed.”

Shayne finished his drink and came to his feet. His face was deeply trenched, and white showed at the knuckles of his clenched fists. “I wouldn’t insult Tim Rourke by suggesting it. You’d better get out of the newspaper game and tout for the races or some other place where your particular talents will be appreciated. And get out of here fast if—”

“Wait a minute, Shayne. Don’t go off half-cocked.” Bert Jackson was on his feet, backing away from the redhead’s slow advance. “Why don’t you try Rourke on it and see what he says?”

Shayne stopped in his tracks. A peculiar intonation, a suggestion of sneering bravado in the reporter’s voice struck him as being all wrong. He tightened his mouth and studied the man appraisingly.

Jackson returned his scrutiny with sullen self-possession. “Don’t be so damned certain about Rourke,” he warned. “He might fool you. Why don’t you call him and see what he says?”

Shayne shifted his angry eyes from Jackson’s drawn face and instinctively massaged his ear lobe as he stared bleakly at the wall beyond his would-be client. “I will,” he said decisively, and went back to the desk. “And when he tells me to kick your proposition right down your throat that’s what I’ll enjoy doing.” He picked up the receiver and gave the switchboard operator the number of the *Daily News* while Jackson picked up his warm drink and sauntered nonchalantly around the room.

The City Room of the *News* told Shayne that Rourke was out and was not expected back soon. Shayne asked for the City Editor and waited until a voice said, “Dirkson speaking.”

“Mike Shayne, Dirk. You know where I can locate Tim?”

“I’ve got a telephone number,” said Dirkson cautiously. “Is it important, Shayne?”

“Since when did Tim start playing hard to get?”

“It’s just—he gave me this number privately, for us in case something special came up—an emergency. I guess that includes you.” He gave Shayne a number and hung up.

Shayne clicked for the switchboard and gave the number, holding the receiver against his ear. The phone rang four times before a woman’s voice answered. A low, intimate voice that conjured up a vision of a bedside table, a silken negligee, and cocktails for two. The kind of voice he was prepared to hear after Dirkson’s hocus-pocus about a private number and a long acquaintance with Timothy Rourke.

He said, “I want to speak to Tim Rourke,” and heard a breathy murmur of astonishment, then Rourke’s voice rasping with irritation.

“What the devil is it, Dirk? Can’t you let a man—”

“Mike Shayne, Tim. I’m calling for a friend of yours. A kid named Bert Jackson.”

There was a long moment of dead silence. Shayne glanced around and saw Jackson emerging from the kitchenette, heard the clink of ice in his glass, and watched him stop at the liquor cabinet and pour more rye over the cubes.

“What about Bert Jackson?” Rourke’s voice blustered defensively against Shayne’s eardrums.

“He’s offering us a proposition—to join him in a small blackmailing deal.” Shayne sketched the details of the reporter’s offer, and added, “He insisted that I put it up to you before kicking him out.”

“Don’t kick the kid out, Mike,” said Rourke.

“Why not?”

Rourke’s next words came swiftly, muffled, as though he pressed his mouth against the

instrument and tried not to be overheard by someone in the room. “Stall him, Mike. Pretend to go along. Get whatever you can and arrange to see him later. I’ll call you.” Before Shayne could speak he heard the receiver click. He slammed the instrument on the prongs and glared angrily at the recumbent form in the chair beside his desk.

“Did you really think Rourke was so lily-white he’d turn down a thing like that?” said Jackson, sneer of triumph lifting his sparse mustache.

Shayne picked up his glass and drained it, thumped it down and said, “It’s nothing to me, youngster, but I have yet to see a blackmailer come out on the top of the heap. It never works out that way. Who’s the guy you plan to put the clamps to?”

“Oh, no.” Jackson took a long swig of his fresh drink, smiled with cocky assurance, and said, “Once you and Rourke had the name you could handle it without cutting me in. Tim’s got ways of digging up the same stuff I’ve got.”

Shayne set his teeth hard, silently cursing Rourke for placing him in this ambiguous position. After a moment’s deliberation he creaked the swivel chair forward and said persuasively, “Look, Jackson, I’ve been around Miami since you were wetting your diapers. There’s a lot of loose money in this town and a lot of ways of picking up a fast buck. Blackmail isn’t one of them. Give this stuff over to me and I’ll figure out another angle. If Tim and I can’t find a paper to break it locally, we’ll put it over a wire service and give you full credit.”

“Damn the credit. I’ve got to have cash.”

“How much?” Shayne swiveled forward and propped his elbows on the scarred desk. “I’ll advance you something. It depends on how good the stuff is after you lay it on the line for me to see.”

“Ten grand,” said Jackson sullenly.

“No story is worth that.”

“This one is—to a certain party.” Bert Jackson finished his second drink and wavered to his feet. Steadying himself with one hand on the back of the chair he said belligerently, “I tell you I’ve got enough to send Mr. Big up for life.”

“Then sell it to him,” Shayne snapped. “It’s your neck, not mine.”

Jackson bent down carefully, still clinging to the chair back with one hand, picked up his hat, and carefully fitted it on his head as he straightened. He then hiccuped and patted a sagging side pocket of his coat, leered at Shayne through half-closed lids, and said with drunken emphasis, “Don’t worry about my neck. Just let him try to get tough.”

“The sort of man you’re talking about,” Shayne told him wearily, “will have a dozen hoods on his payroll. You’d be safer tangling with a buzz saw.”

“So you’re backing out on it?” Jackson demanded.

“I haven’t been in on it. It’s okay if you and Rourke want to play, but count me out.”

The young reporter swayed indecisively beside the chair, still holding onto the back with one hand. Suddenly he let go and held himself rigidly erect. He rammed one hand in his trouser pocket and jangled coins nervously. “That’s just what I’ll do, Mr. Shayne. And thank you for—nothing.”

“You’d better get out, and fast,” Shayne said quietly. Bert Jackson tugged the brim of his hat low over his face and with the measured tread of the very drunk went out, slamming the door behind him.

The ringing of the telephone broke stridently into Shayne’s confused thoughts. He picked up the receiver and heard Timothy Rourke’s anxious voice coming over the wire before he clamped it again to his ear.

“Mike—I’ve been calling your office, but no answer.”

“Lucy and I closed up early,” Shayne told him.

“Where’s Bert Jackson?”

“He just left, half tight and headed for trouble.”

“What sort of trouble?” asked Rourke. His voice was high-pitched, nervous, and excited.

“I told you about the screwy proposition he was making us not more than five minutes ago,” Shayne said impatiently. “Why did you tell me to stall him? A thing like that doesn’t make sense.”

“Hold on, Mike,” Rourke said sharply. “There’s no time to discuss the ethics of it now. Do you mean you turned Bert down flat?”

“I told him he could go to you, but I wasn’t having any.”

“Do you think he will—come to me?”

“I—don’t know,” said Shayne, thinking rapidly. “He seemed pretty sour on you. Have you had a fight?”

“Well, sort of, Mike,” Rourke answered cautiously. “Do you think he’ll try to put it through himself?”

“He was hell-bent on it when he left here,” said Shayne indifferently.

“For godsake, Mike,” Rourke exploded. “We’ve got to find him. Fast. Have you any idea—”

“You find him,” Shayne snapped. “I’ve had all of Bert Jackson I can stomach for one evening.” He slammed the receiver hard on the cradle and was eyeing his empty glass when a loud, urgent rapping sounded on the door. He strode toward it angrily, determined to conduct Bert Jackson to the top of the stairs and give him a swift kick down.

Shayne jerked the door open and saw an athletic figure with dark hair brushed neatly back from a smooth forehead. He was hatless, and attired in a sports jacket with gray gabardine slacks.

“My name is Ned Brooks, Mr. Shayne,” he said. “A friend of Tim Rourke. I work on the *Trib* with Bert Jackson.” His face was broad and squarish, his complexion dark and richly sun-tanned.

Shayne blocked the entrance with his tall, rangy body, looking down at the shorter man with a scowl. He said, “What do you want?” harshly.

“I’d like to talk to you a minute,” Brooks said. “About Bert. I saw him walking up this way with you a while ago, and I’ve been hanging around the lobby waiting until he left. He’d be sore if he knew I came here.”

“Why?”

“Because—well, look, Mr. Shayne,” Brooks said nervously, “Bert and I have been teamed on a story for some time. I know he’s got onto something big down at City Hall, and he’s holding out on me and the *Trib*. I want to know why—what’s he planning to do.”

“What makes you think I know?”

“Because of hints he let drop,” said Brooks, folding his arms across his massive chest. “It’s my story as much as it is his, and I have a right to know why he doesn’t break it into print.”

“Why don’t you,” Shayne parried, “ask Bert?” He remained solidly in the doorway and showed no inclination to invite the reporter in.

“I have. But he’s gotten funny lately. I’ll tell you why I think he was here, Mr. Shayne, and if I’m wrong you can say so, and I’ll beat it.”

Shayne turned and waved a big hand toward the chair Bert Jackson had vacated and said, “I’ve got a few minutes to waste.”

Ned Brooks sat down carefully to preserve the sharp creases in his slacks. “I think Bert’s got some crazy idea of selling the story for cash instead of turning it in and he came to you for help putting over some sort of deal.”

Shayne lowered one hip to the scarred desk. The blank expression on his face told the reporter nothing.

Brooks wet his lips nervously and went on. “You can see why that worries me. We’re working on it together, and anything he does reflects on my integrity, also. Don’t let him do it, Mr. Shayne. You can prevent it if you will. Aside from my own personal connection with it, I hate to see Bert get mixed

up in a shady thing like that. He's married to a nice girl and he's got a big future in the newspaper business if he'll just be patient."

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"What's come between Bert and Tim Rourke?" Shayne asked abruptly.

Ned Brooks hesitated, shifting his gaze from the detective's. "They had a bust-up. About a year ago when Bert got fired from the *News*."

"What do you know about it?"

"Well, I—not too much," Brooks hedged.

"Do you know Bert Jackson's wife?"

"Sure. Betty's a swell kid. I'd feel sorry for her if anything happened to Bert."

"That's not exactly the way he told it to me."

"You mean Marie? What did Bert tell you about her?"

"Not much," Shayne said, and it seemed to him that Ned Brooks was faintly relieved by his reply.

The reporter leaned back and produced a neat leather case from an inner pocket. He took some time selecting a cigarette, lit it, and asked anxiously, "Was I right about what Bert wanted from you?"

"I don't discuss the private affairs of my clients," Shayne told him shortly.

"Then Bert is a client? You agreed to help him?"

"Or the private affairs of people who come to me, whether I take them as clients or not."

"Would you tell me this one thing?" urged Brooks. "Did he mention my name at all?"

Shayne considered for a moment, then said flatly, "No. And now I've wasted all the time I have to spare."

Ned Brooks arose swiftly, and was overprofuse in his thanks and apologies as he went to the door.

Shayne waved him away impatiently, and frowned when the door closed behind him. He wondered who Marie was, then angrily pushed the question from his mind, reminding himself that it was absolutely none of his affair.



MICHAEL SHAYNE WAS STEPPING from the shower half an hour later when his phone rang. He snatched up a heavy towel and dried himself sketchily as he went to answer it.

A throaty female voice with a suggestion of tears came over the wire. "Mr. Shayne? Can I see you?" There was a faint note of familiarity about the voice, but he couldn't place it.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Downstairs. May I come up?"

"Who are you?" Shayne said swiftly, dabbing at his wet body with his free hand.

"I'm Betty Jackson. I have to see you about Bert. I'm terribly worried—and frightened."

"All right," growled Shayne. "I'll leave the door on the latch. Come in and wait. I'm dressing." He hung up and padded to the front door, threw off the night latch, and went to the bedroom.

He wondered about Betty Jackson as he finished drying himself and got into fresh clothes. And about Timothy Rourke and the extent of his interest in the young couple. And how Mrs. Jackson had learned about Bert's visit to his apartment.

He was prepared thoroughly to dislike Mrs. Bert Jackson as he buttoned a clean white shirt and knotted a gray figured tie around his neck. He vaguely recalled meeting her at the wedding party two years previously, and retained an impression of softness and youth and superficial prettiness as she clung to her new husband's arm, wide-eyed with adoration.

That had worn off fast, he told himself grimly. Judging by what young Jackson had said, at least. Less than two years of marriage, and she was stepping out with other men because her husband earned only sixty-two fifty a week.

Shayne knew lots of men who earned less and whose wives made homes with that amount. He was angry at himself for bothering with Betty Jackson as he made a pretense of brushing damp, unruly hair.

He had heard no sound from the outer room, but when he opened the bedroom door and stalked out he saw her sitting in the same deep chair where her husband had sat a short time before. He stopped abruptly and looked at her.

Much of her softness and youth had been shorn away by two years of marriage, and she had become a beautiful woman. Her eyes were large and velvety black and imploring. She was thinner, and the good bone structure of her face was more delicately outlined. Dark hair was brushed smoothly back from a high forehead, her dark brows heavy and slightly arched, her mouth full-lipped, and long lashes black against deep sockets as she looked up at Shayne. She sat erect with her feet planted close together and a hand pressed on each arm of the chair as though prepared to leap up and throw herself into his arms.

"I had to see you," she said. "Please tell me about Bert—what he said to you and where he has gone."

Shayne moved slowly toward her and said, "Among other things, your husband told me that you're not satisfied to live on his salary and that you've been going out with other men who can buy champagne."

She winced, and her eyes grew moist, but she did not move from the strained position. "What were some of the other things he told you, Mr. Shayne?"

"First, tell me how you knew he was here." Shayne crossed to his swivel chair and sat down.

"Tim Rourke phoned me. Do you know where Bert was going when he left here?"

"No. He could have been headed straight for the devil so far as I was concerned."

She winced again, caught her lower lip between her teeth, and blinked her lids. The lashes were

moist when she opened her eyes and strained forward to say, "I know Bert's a fool, Mr. Shayne. But—I love him—and I'm frightened."

"Women who love their husbands don't drive them to unethical and criminal acts to pick up a little extra dough." Shayne's tone was uncompromising, and he turned his eyes slightly to avoid looking directly into hers.

"What did he say?" Her voice rose hysterically. "Is he going through with his crazy plan to extort money for that story?"

"Don't you approve?"

She sprang up and went toward him, anger blazing in the black eyes that had been liquid and shining a moment before. "Damn you!" she raged. "You've no right to say that to me. Bert's crazy with jealousy, and he's got everything wrong. Did he give you the idea he wanted that money for me?"

She was standing over him, and Shayne looked up into her eyes. "Didn't he?" said Shayne coldly.

"No!" She turned away and sat down again. "He wanted it for her," she told him in a dull voice. "So he could leave me. What did he say about Tim?"

"That he hadn't seen Tim for several weeks. I gathered they aren't friends any longer."

Betty Jackson buried her face in her hands for a moment. Her cheeks were streaked with tears when she took them away, and there was a wild glint of hysteria in her eyes. "Something happened while Bert was still on the *News*," she cried. "I don't know exactly what, but it gave Bert this crazy idea he has now. Something about a story that Tim got paid money for covering up. Bert accused Tim of it, I guess, and Tim got him fired. All he's talked about since then is how he was going to do the same if he ever had the chance."

"What's Tim Rourke to you?" demanded Shayne.

"Just—a good friend." Color flooded her pale face under Shayne's searching gaze, but she lifted her chin defiantly. "Tim has been like a brother to both of us."

"Does Tim buy you champagne?"

"Sometimes," she answered aloofly.

Shayne studied her for a moment, allowing himself to wonder. He knew Rourke's weakness for beautiful women. Then he made an impatient gesture and growled, "All this stuff about your personal life doesn't interest me. Why did you come here?"

"I want to find Bert."

"Start looking in the nearest bars," Shayne advised her callously. "It's not more than an hour since he left here. I doubt if he's gotten far."

"Tim said he would check the places where Bert usually goes," she said dubiously. "But we're both afraid he'll try to do—that other—by himself."

"You mean the extortion deal?"

"Yes. He's been getting up his nerve for weeks. I've tried to make him see how foolish it is, but he insists." She paused, and again her voice rose hysterically. "It's that other woman! She's driven him to it—wanting money—offering to go away with him."

"That's twice," said Shayne patiently, "that you've mentioned some other woman in connection with your husband. He gave me the impression he wanted the money for you."

"Then he lied! All this last month—"

Her mouth trembled, and she was making a supreme effort to control herself when Shayne got up and said, "Let me get you a drink."

"No thanks," she said angrily, then added with heavy sarcasm, "You probably haven't any champagne."

Shayne was at the liquor cabinet reaching for a bottle of cognac, his back turned toward her. He grinned briefly. Along with her beauty, he decided, Betty Jackson appeared to have spirit and courage.

“No champagne,” he told her evenly, “but I could mix a cocktail. Sherry?”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “Sherry will be fine.” She was relaxed with her hands folded in her lap when he came back with two glasses. He gave her the sherry and resumed his seat, took a sip of cognac, and nursed the glass between his palms.

Betty Jackson sipped her sherry, then said, “I want to tell you everything and get your help. Tim says you’re perfectly wonderful.” A wan smile flitted across her lips and she added, “You know, we always call you Mike when we speak of you.”

“Tim Rourke is full of blarney,” he replied. “Call me Mike if you like, and I have just fifteen minutes to listen before I have to go out.”

She moved to the edge of the chair and leaned toward him, her eyes wide and hopeful, her lips parted, as though she considered her thoughts carefully before speaking.

Her expression disturbed him. He said impatiently, “Let’s get down to cases. I gather you know about the scandal your husband has dug up and hopes to sell for a big price.”

“Yes. He’s been gathering the data for weeks, but it’s only lately that he’s been talking about holding it back from the paper.”

“Who’s the man in the scandal?” he asked bluntly.

“I don’t know. But when I told Tim about it he said it was crazy and about as safe as playing with an atomic bomb. Tim says no matter who it is, if the man is mixed up in the sort of graft Bert claims he’ll have all sorts of underworld connections who won’t hesitate to commit murder to keep the story quiet.”

“Tim’s probably right,” Shayne agreed. “You’re afraid Bert will go direct to the man tonight after I turned down a chance to help him collect?”

“Yes.” She shivered, then took a quick sip of sherry before saying, “I know that’s what he’ll do. Mike. He’s bewitched by that woman and by his insane jealousy of me.”

Shayne glanced at his watch. It was almost time for him to leave to keep his dinner date with Lucy Hamilton. “If you really want to find your husband before he does anything foolish, why don’t you check with this woman you’ve mentioned? That’s probably where he is.”

“But I don’t know who she is. That’s one thing Tim said you could do, find out her name and whether Bert is there tonight.”

“How am I supposed to find out her name?”

“Tim says you’re the best detective in the country,” she answered simply.

“Yeh,” grated Shayne. “But how in hell does a detective find out the name of some woman you think your husband is in love with?”

“I know where she lives,” she told him, eager and hopeful again, “At the Las Felice apartment on Northwest Sixty-Seventh Street. Tim said you’d know how to go there and check up on all the women and find out which one Bert goes to see.”

“Tim says a lot of things,” Shayne growled. He glanced at his watch again, frowned, and hurried on. “Frankly, Mrs. Jackson, after meeting your husband this afternoon I can’t work myself up into a lather about what happens to him. I have an engagement.” He drained his glass and started to rise.

“I wish you’d call me Betty,” she said wistfully, coming to her feet. Her face was tragic and full of despair. “You’re supposed to be Tim’s friend. You care about what happens to him, don’t you?” She took a few steps toward him, swaying a little.

“What’s Tim got to do with it?” he demanded roughly.

“He’s out looking for Bert right now. If he finds him while they’re both in this mood—I don’t know what might happen.”

“Tim can take care of himself.”

“But don’t you see that Bert is using the thing that happened on the *News* as a lever?” she cried

out. "If anything happens to him and it all comes out—"

~~She was weeping openly now, moving close to him. Shayne had to catch her in his arms to prevent her slipping to the floor as she flung herself upon him. Her arms went around his neck and she clung to him, sobbing convulsively.~~

"Please, Mike. Don't you see that Tim is determined to prevent that? I'm so frightened. If they should meet while they're both angry and upset—"

Shayne had both hands under her armpits to push her away when the door opened.

"Pardon me, Mr. Shayne," Lucy Hamilton said frigidly. "If I'd known you were entertaining a client I wouldn't have dreamed of intruding. But the door was on the latch."

Shayne whirled about angrily, slipping his hands along Betty Jackson's clinging arms to disengage them from his neck. He growled, "Skip it, Lucy. This isn't a client. It's Mrs. Jackson—friend of Tim Rourke's." Lucy was cool and poised in a frosty-green cocktail dress, lace gloves, and a wide-brimmed hat. She looked down her straight nose at Betty's tear-stained face and murmured, "How nice for Tim. I came up to save you the trouble of stopping by for me, Michael, but if you're otherwise engaged—"

"I'm not," Shayne assured her. "Mrs. Jackson is on her way out." He took her firmly by the arm and led her to the door, thrust her into the corridor without a word, and swung back to try to make peace with Lucy.



THE INSISTENT RINGING of the telephone wakened Shayne. He lay in the darkness and mechanically counted the rings. On the tenth, he threw back the covers and turned on the light. A long-standing arrangement with the switchboard operator in the hotel gave him no hope that the phone would stop ringing until he answered. Not if the call was important. If the operator considered it unimportant he would let it ring three times, inform the caller that Shayne was not in, and break the connection.

Shayne took his time, stretching and yawning widely. He looked at his watch. The time was seven minutes after two. He padded into the living-room, barefooted and gaunt-faced after less than an hour's sleep. Lifting the receiver he growled, "Mike Shayne."

"Dead drunk—from the time it took you to answer." Chief Will Gentry's gruff voice rumbled over the wire.

"Not yet," said Shayne amicably. "Hold the line a minute, Will, while I pick up a bottle."

"Damn it, Mike," Gentry protested, before Shayne laid the receiver down and went across the room where he took a half-filled cognac bottle from the liquor cabinet. He drew the cork as he returned to the desk, took a long drink, grinning at the unintelligible snorts emanating from the phone instrument.

Plunking the bottle down hard, he picked up the receiver and said, "What's on your mind, Will?"

"Your office, Shamus," Gentry snapped. "Get down here as fast as you can."

"What about my office?" Shayne scowled at the wall. "What in hell are you doing there?"

"I'll expect you in ten minutes," Gentry said flatly.

The banging of the receiver rang in Shayne's ears. He hung up, took another drink from the bottle, and tugged absently at his left ear lobe as he slowly returned to the bedroom.

It took him five minutes to dress and only a few minutes more for his long-legged strides to carry him the few blocks to the downtown office building where he had rented a suite because Lucy Hamilton, his secretary, did not consider it proper to work in her employer's apartment.

Chief Gentry's sedan and two radio cars were parked at the curb, and a uniformed patrolman guarded the entrance to the building. The officer intercepted Shayne as he swung into the doorway.

"Nobody allowed in—" he began, then stepped aside. "It's you," he amended. "Chief's waiting for you upstairs, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne strode to the elevator which was manned by another officer whom he didn't recognize. He stepped inside, and the man fumbled with the controls to get the door closed, sent the cage jerking upward to the third floor where Shayne got out and went down the corridor.

He stopped in front of an open door that was scarred from jimmy marks around the lock and bore leaf-gold lettering on the frosted glass reading: *Michael Shayne—Private Investigator*.

Detective Sergeant Riley stood just inside the reception room over which Lucy Hamilton presided from nine to five every day. Around her desk and the filing-cabinet papers were scattered over the floor.

Shayne's bleak gaze swept over the disorder and came back to the sergeant's face. "What the hell goes on, Riley? If you guys wanted something—"

"The chief's inside," Riley interrupted, jerking his thumb toward a closed door marked *Private*.

Shayne set his jaw and stalked to the door, flung it open to a scene of devastating wreckage. The drawers of his desk were pulled out and piled on the floor. The compartments of a tall green metal filing-cabinet stood open, and piles of papers and cardboard folders lay haphazardly around it.

Two men squatted on the floor, their backs toward Shayne, pawing through the papers. Shayne

closed the door quietly and watched for a moment, his eyes smoldering dangerously.

“If you’re looking for a drink,” he said, “I keep a bottle stashed in the top compartment.”—

Will Gentry turned his graying head slowly, grunted as he heaved his bulk upward, and turned to face Shayne; but his companion continued to squat on his heels, poking industriously through the papers.

Shayne lounged forward and lowered one hip to a corner of his desk. He lit a cigarette and said, “Even if you’ve got a search warrant, Will, you might have called Lucy and asked her to get whatever you’re looking for. Sometimes she has a little trouble finding things, but she never has to go this far.”

Chief Gentry was a big man with a normally ruddy and good-natured face. Now, purple veins stood out from the ruddiness, and his murky gray eyes were angry. “You know we didn’t do this,” he snorted.

“What the hell am I supposed to think?” said Shayne. “I find the two of you squatting on your haunches going through my stuff.”

“Cut it,” said Gentry wearily. He went to the swivel chair behind the desk and dropped into it. “Let it go, Morgan,” he said to the officer. “Go on out and wait with Riley. And close the door,” he added as the Homicide dick reluctantly arose and let the paper in his hand flutter to the floor.

Shayne’s eyes narrowed when he recognized Detective Morgan. He waited until the door was closed before asking Gentry, “How does Homicide come into this?”

“A stiff,” grunted Gentry. He took out an ugly blackish cigar, looked at it distastefully with slightly protuberant eyes, and returned it to his inside pocket. “When were you here last, Mike?”

Shayne half-stood, turned, and lowered the other side of his buttocks onto the desk to face Gentry. “About four-thirty. Lucy and I closed up early. We had a dinner date, and she went home to doll up.”

“Neither of you been back?” Gentry persisted.

Shayne shook his red head slowly. “Who’s the stiff, Will? Give it to me.”

“Can you prove you haven’t been here since four-thirty?” Gentry parried.

“I had to doll up, too. You know how Lucy is. Do I need an alibi?” he asked impatiently.

Gentry took the cigar out again, lit it, and said, “What you working on now, Mike?” He emitted a puff of noxious smoke and watched it float drearily through the airless room.

“Nothing. That’s why we closed up early.”

“No recent client?”

“Look, Will,” said Shayne patiently, “if I had a client I’d be working.”

“Put it this way, then. What have you got hidden in your office that somebody’d go to all the trouble to find?” He waved a plump, stubby hand over the wreckage.

“Not a damned thing,” said Shayne promptly. “I mean it, Will. All this stuff is junk—stuff from old cases that are closed.”

“A man was murdered tonight,” Gentry rumbled, “so that killers could get in here and go through your office.”

“Who?”

“The night elevator operator. Don’t hold out on me, Mike. It’s got to be a case you’re working on.”

“I’m not working,” Shayne reminded him. “Mike Caffrey?”

“That’s the name we found on his operator’s license,” said Gentry.

Shayne ground out his cigarette in a desk ash tray. A muscle twitched in his angular jaw, and his eyes were bleak. An innocent old man who addressed him as “Mr. Shayne” and whom he always called “Mike” was dead. And a wide-eyed dame named Betty, a fanatic named Bert—and maybe Tim Rourke, plus a reporter named Brooks were probably responsible—plus a Mr. Big and a girl named

Marie.

~~He was brooding over the possibility when Gentry said, "We haven't anything to go on, Mike. Just Caffrey with his head smashed to a pulp. Soon as we know what they wanted from your office we'll have something to work on."~~

"I swear I don't know, Will," he said solemnly.

"Can you tell if anything is missing?" Gentry demanded.

Shayne looked at the piles of papers and said disgustedly, "Lucy might—after a month or so of straightening up and refileing. You know how I work. When I'm on a case I carry most of my stuff here." He tapped his temple. "Lucy records the case afterward with whatever documentary evidence comes to light."

"That's not good enough." Gentry bobbed forward in the new, well-oiled swivel chair. "You must have some idea—"

He was interrupted by a rapping on the door which opened immediately to admit the tall, emaciated figure of Timothy Rourke. He whistled expressively as he closed the door and said, "I just got home and was ready to park my car and turn in when I got the flash. What's up, Mike?"

"Ask Will," said Shayne. "He's telling the story. I'm on the side line this time."

"I doubt that," said Gentry. "It has to be something important—worth killing for."

Rourke's slate-gray eyes glittered in their cavernous sockets, and his nostrils flared. "Could it be the Bert Jackson deal, Mike?"

"As I've told Gentry," Shayne said calmly, "I have no idea what anybody could be after."

"Who's Bert Jackson?" Gentry demanded, his half-closed lids rolling up like miniature awnings, his murky eyes fixed on Rourke.

"A punk I threw out of my apartment this afternoon," Shayne interposed. "I told you that, Tim. I told you I wouldn't touch his proposition with a ten-foot pole."

"Yeh. You told me that," said Rourke. His eyes shifted feverishly from Shayne to Gentry and then to the littered floor.

"What sort of proposition?" rumbled Gentry.

"What does it matter?" Shayne said hastily. "I've told you I turned it down flat." He didn't look at Gentry, but turned to study Rourke with brooding curiosity. He caught a glimpse of panic in the reporter's expression before he turned away and slumped into a chair.

There was a long silence between them. Gentry chewed his cigar across his mouth twice, then said, "You can go home if you're not going to give us anything we can use."

Shayne slid from the desk and took a turn around the small private office. Rourke was sprawled in the one extra chair in the room, his head lolling against the back and his eyes closed.

Stopping before Gentry, Shayne said, "You know I'd give if I had anything, Will."

"If you thought you wouldn't pass up the chance to make a buck. Don't lie to me."

"Have I ever lied to you?" Shayne demanded.

"Hell, yes. Any time it suited you. And I think it suits you now, by God." Gentry struck the desk resoundingly with the heel of his doubled fist. "When I prove it, you'll lose your license. I've been lenient before, but I warn you that this time I mean it."

Shayne rubbed his angular jaw thoughtfully. "We've been friends a long time, Will."

"And I've taken a lot from you," fumed Gentry. "What about this Bert Jackson? Rourke said—"

"Why don't you call Lucy and ask her?" Shayne interrupted.

"I did call Lucy, before I called you."

"And?"

"How do I know you hadn't called her first and told her to keep quiet?"

"But I didn't know about any of this," Shayne declared, waving his big hands toward the muss-

papers, "until I got here."

~~"Maybe you didn't and maybe you did," said Gentry wearily. "You can get out of my way now and let me finish up here."~~

"If you find anything, let me know," Shayne said. He tapped Rourke on the shoulder, and the reporter jumped as though suddenly awakened from a deep sleep.

They went out together, closed the door, and as they walked silently to the elevator Shayne scowled in deep concentration. The cop took them down, and when they emerged from the building Rourke said, "I've got my heap here. Let's find a bar where we can talk."

"Okay." Shayne's tone was stiff and his fists clenched. There were deep trenches in his gaunt cheeks when he walked around the press car and settled beside the reporter. He took off his hat and laid it on the seat as Rourke pulled away from the curb, leaned his head back against the cushion to let the night air from the open window blow across his face.

After a moment of relaxation he became aware of an uncomfortable wetness against the back of his neck. Glancing aside he saw that Rourke had his head out the window watching for a place to stop. He sat up and ran his palm over the short hairs, then dabbed the back of his hand against the seat.

From long experience he knew that the sticky, viscous stuff on his hands and neck was partially dried blood. He got out a handkerchief, wiped his hands, then sat rigidly erect to avoid contact with the seat cushion again.

Shayne's thought went bleakly back to another case when Rourke had jumped the gun in an effort to scoop a story and had received bullet wounds that nearly cost him his life. Now, there was even indication that he was mixed up in this one right up to his scrawny neck.

Rourke slid the car to the empty curb before a dingy all-night bar. They got out and walked silently through the door, and it was not until they were seated with drinks on the table that Shayne frowned at the palm of his right hand and said, "Why in the name of God did you mention Betty Jackson to Gentry?"

"Do you know that Bert hasn't been home yet?" Rourke countered. "I phoned at two o'clock, and Betty said he wasn't there."

"I don't know and I don't give a damn if he never goes home," said Shayne angrily. "Do you?"

"Of course I do," said Rourke gravely. "Why in hell do you think I've been hunting all over town for him tonight?"

Shayne took a drink and made a distasteful grimace before saying, "From what Betty Jackson told me, I assume it's because you were afraid he was going ahead with the blackmail deal on his own without cutting you in on a share of the loot." His voice was bitter and his gray eyes bleak.

Rourke looked at him in astonishment. "For God's sake, Mike! You don't believe I'd go into something like that!"

"I phoned you when Bert was with me," Shayne reminded him. "You didn't say no then."

Rourke swallowed half of his drink, set the glass down, and rested both elbows on the table. "What did Betty tell you?" he inquired casually.

"A little about some incident on the *News*," Shayne said, studying Rourke's anxious face. "The way I got it, you pulled the same stunt Bert's trying to pull, and Bert was in on it. You got him fired because he knew too much."

"Betty has it all wrong, Mike," Rourke told him gravely. "She's been listening to Bert."

"How was it?"

"Lay off me," Rourke grated. "Damn it, Mike, if you feel that way—"

"How am I supposed to feel?" Shayne spread his right hand, palm up, showing the dark stain clearly. "Know what that is? It's blood. Know where it came from?"

Rourke leaned forward and squinted at the detective's palm. "Where?"

"From the back of the seat cushion in your car," Shayne told him. "You say you were chasing Bert Jackson all over town tonight. You'd better level with me, Tim. Did you catch up with him?" He looked up and met Rourke's eyes.

Rourke moved his head uneasily under Shayne's hard stare. "What in the name of God have you got on your mind, Mike?"

"I don't know," he confessed wearily. "Betty Jackson was worried about what might happen if you and Bert met. I'm wondering if you did meet."

"Why? Why was Betty worried?" The reporter's eyes were feverishly bright again.

"Because of that thing on the *News*, I guess. Because she thinks you're afraid Bert will bring you out into the open if anything happened while he was trying to pull the same stunt. For God's sake, Tim!" Shayne exploded. "I can't go on in the dark. Tell me where you stand and what this is all about. I keep thinking about the crack you made about Jackson in my office. Why pull that in front of Gentry?"

"Because it hit me all of a sudden," said Rourke slowly. "Someone killed the elevator operator and tore your place up looking for something. Could be the guy Jackson planned to blackmail—if Bert didn't get to him tonight."

"Why would he tear up my place?" said Shayne. "I ran Jackson out—"

"I know, you told me that," Rourke broke in irritably. "But I got to thinking." He paused, raking his fingers through his sparse hair and drawing them down over his bony face.

"You got to thinking that I lied," Shayne said in a flat, toneless voice. "You decided that I threatened you with Bert and that I lied to you to cut you out of your share of the blackmail. Damn it, Tim."

"Get off your high horse," Tim shouted hoarsely. "We'll get nowhere suspecting each other that way. I didn't think anything like that. I did think maybe you'd got the kid to leave his story with you and that maybe you'd stall him like I asked you to over the phone." He stopped talking long enough to drain his glass, then flung the accusation.

"That thing at your office looked exactly like what might happen if Bert had spilled everything. Now that he has disappeared, I wonder."

Shayne looked at the liquor in his glass, and his mouth tightened with distaste. "It's what might have happened if he had turned his dope over to me." He stood up. "Lucy and I will have a mess cleaned up in the morning."

Rourke arose with him. "I'll drive you over." Neither of them spoke until Rourke drew up to the curb at the side entrance to Shayne's hotel. The detective opened the door, got out, said, "Good night," and turned away.

Rourke hesitated, hunched over the steering-wheel. His face showed intense strain. Then he jerked his door open and followed Shayne in, hurrying up the stairs behind him. Catching up with him on the top step, he panted, "I'll be damned if I'll let it break off this way, Mike. We've been friends too long to let a couple of punk kids come between us."

Shayne shrugged and continued down the corridor. "You're always welcome to a drink, but I don't—"

He stopped abruptly as he reached the door of his apartment. It sagged open, and the marks of a jimmy scarred the doorframe. He reached inside to switch on the lights and began to curse deep in his throat when he saw the wreckage.



TIMOTHY ROURKE WHISTLED SHRILLY. “Somebody is certainly looking for something,” he said with conviction.

“That,” said Shayne grimly, “is the understatement of the year.”

There were fewer papers here to be scattered, but the same intensive search as of his office was evidenced. The desk drawers were pulled out and the contents dumped on the floor; chair and couch cushions had been removed and tossed aside.

Shayne stalked into the bedroom to find chests of drawers emptied and mattress and pillows from the bed piled on the floor. In the kitchen the same careful search had been made of cupboards and refrigerator. His gray eyes were bleak when he re-entered the living-room slowly, massaging his angular jaw.

He made a sudden, savage gesture and went to the liquor cabinet muttering, “The bastards were too big a hurry to drink my liquor, anyway. Rye, Tim?”

Rourke, after quietly peeking into the bedroom, was straightening chairs and replacing cushions. He nodded assent, then said, “If Gentry wasn’t convinced by your ransacked office, this will be the clincher that you’ve got something someone wants badly and in a hell of a hurry.”

“Yeh. If Will saw it,” he agreed, moving toward his desk with two bottles and glasses. “I think I’ll keep this to myself.” He set the bottles and glasses down and gazed restlessly around the room. “I gave it to him straight, Tim. There’s not one damned thing in my office or apartment worth a dime to anyone. And no reason for anyone to believe there is. I’m not working on anything, and haven’t had a client for weeks.” He sat down heavily and creaked the swivel chair forward, poured two drinks, glanced at his watch, and noted that less than an hour had elapsed since Gentry’s call had awakened him, and went on absently. “They didn’t waste much time breaking in here after I left for the office.”

Rourke drew up a chair, sat down, reached for his drink, and suggested, “They probably had your tags when you went out.”

Shayne scowled. “Do you know how the cops got onto my office so fast?”

The reporter moved his head slowly and negatively. “I just got a piece of it over my car radio. When they said it was your office I beat it down there, even though I knew our man at headquarters would cover the regular angles.”

Shayne took a long drink, thumped his glass down, and said, “See if you can get him on the phone and find out. I’ve a hunch it was a tip-off to drag me away so they could make a try here after they failed to get what they wanted at the office.” He leaned back with a look of fierce concentration on his rugged face while Rourke picked up the receiver and asked for a number.

After a moment Rourke contacted his fellow-reporter, asked a couple of questions, hung up, and reported. “Your hunch is probably right, Mike. The cops had an anonymous call at one-thirty saying a man had been killed during the burglary of your office. They beat it down there and found the operator dead inside his cage.”

“Knowing that I’d be called right away,” Shayne ruminated. “Which gave someone the opportunity to do this job in a hurry.” Again his angry gaze roamed over the wreckage. “In the name of God, why?”

The strain that had threatened their friendship a few minutes before vanished with this new development. Rourke was silently thoughtful, his slate-gray eyes glittering in their deep sockets. “Do you suppose Bert Jackson might have slipped an envelope—or something—out of his pocket,” he suggested with some delicacy, “and hid it behind a cushion or somewhere while he was here?”

Shayne nodded slowly, recalling the drink Bert Jackson had helped himself to, getting ice cubes

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