



The blonde movie starlet had double-crossed Monte French once—and now she'd blown in again. . . to button him up for keeps in a steel-ribbed murder frame.

**Punch-Packed Novelette
of Suspense**

His words were rough: "Don't tell me you're sorry. . . ."

**By W. T.
BALLARD**

CHAPTER ONE

Little Miss Poison

MONTE FRENCH stood watching the crowd surging around the gambling tables. The room was very full. There were so many players that he could not even see the black and red of the roulette layouts, or the hollow crap tables. It was the biggest night they'd had since he had come to town—the biggest night all over Vegas, from all reports.

No one spoke to him. He leaned against the wall, close to the bank of slot machines, his eyes on the crowd. The gambling tables were set in a square, the two roulette layouts at the upper end.

Below them was a twenty-one table on each side, and below these the four crap tables.

Insides the hollow square stood the floor men, walking about from table to table. their sharp eyes on everything that happened.

He wore a khaki shirt and trousers, a Sam Brown belt and gun and a small metal badge which read Special Deputy. He was hired by the hotel along with four others to keep order. He was, in fact, little more than a watchman.

His humorous mouth twisted slightly with self-derision. This was something, a

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special officer at seventy-five a week. Two months ago he had been Hollywood's leading private detective with a yearly income that ran well up into five figures.

Strange, he thought, how the breaks fell, like the dice rolling on the green table. No one knew when they would turn up with a natural or a crap. Well, he'd thrown snake eyes, and there wasn't any need to cry about it. He'd been lucky to catch on, here at the hotel. He'd been dead broke when everything was straightened out, and his license was gone. His partner had ducked the rap and let him take it all by himself: Well, that was the way things went, and all because of a girl.

Monte French didn't hate her. He didn't think she was worth hating. He didn't even blame her. She'd fought to get where she was in the picture business. She'd come to him when they started to blackmail her and he'd rigged a payoff. He'd had a D.A.'s man in the next room, and he'd paid off with marked money, and the cops had picked up Little Joe Forbes and Jack Frost as they left his office.

Everything was set—all Ellen had to do was to go before the court and tell how they had blackmailed her. But at the last minute she'd changed her testimony. She'd pulled a switch. She'd sworn that Monte French had forced her to act as his pigeon, that in reality he'd been trying to blackmail Forbes.

The D.A. had been sore, naturally. He thought that French had tried to use him. He'd had French's license revoked. He'd threatened to send him to San Quentin.

Well, that was that. French had come over here with his last dollar. He'd seen

Hurst, the manager. He'd spent enough dough at this hotel when he was in the chips so that they owed him something.

Hurst had been apologetic. He'd said: "I'm sorry, Monte. It isn't much of a job I'm offering you, but it's all I have. Just coffee and cakes. Maybe later I can do better. If you were only a trained dealer..."

He wasn't a trained gambling dealer. He'd spent his time on the wrong side of the tables, losing the big money that he'd earned for five years. He'd been a prize fool. He knew it now. Most people figured out their mistakes after it was too late.

He'd have to stop thinking, stop remembering back when he had been a guest, not an employee in this very room. And then he stiffened, for Ellen had appeared in the door which led to the lobby.

She looked the same: the long blonde bob, the blue-gray eyes and the blue suit which almost matched her eyes. She looked, as she always did, as if she had stepped directly from a fashion magazine. It was a shock seeing her, but he should have expected it. He knew that she came over here often. Why then hadn't he foreseen that they would meet?

Her eyes swept the room, missing him. That was like her. He wore a uniform now. He was nothing more than a piece of furniture. He wondered, grimly, how long it would be before she actually did see him, and what she would do when she did. Would she ignore him, or would she speak and be sweet and pretend that nothing had happened?

He watched her as she moved forward,

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nodding to one of the dealers at the first roulette table. Then he frowned. Joe Forbes and Jack Frost had appeared in the doorway.

His mouth thinned and he watched the two men with careful attention. Forbes was supposed to be an investment broker in Los Angeles, Frost in the real estate business, but their activities ran back into black market dealings and before that to questionable stock promotions.

Frost was reputed to have started as bootlegger in Detroit, but that was only hearsay, and now both men had money and power enough to have caused him to lose his license.

He looked again at the girl. She had been a model before going into pictures. Her story had been that she had once worked in a night club in which Frost had an interest, that a man had been killed in the club and that she had been tried as an accessory. She'd claimed to have been acquitted, but she said that the publicity would ruin her picture career and that Frost and Forbes had been taking a part of her earnings in return for their silence.

He'd fallen for the story-hook, line and sinker—because he had fallen for the girl. His partner had tried to warn him that he should investigate, but he'd been certain of himself.

And now she was here, Ellen Hoyle, the newest of the screen darlings, and with her the two men who she had sworn were blackmailing her. It simply made no sense.

He told himself he didn't care. He turned away, but he hadn't turned quickly enough. The girl had seen him, and her face had turned to chalk.

"Monte." She was standing at his side. "Monte. What are you doing here?"

He indicated his costume with a little gesture. "Trying to make an honest buck, Sweetheart. It's about all you left me."

She winced as if he had struck her. "Monte, please... ."

"Sure," he said, "I shouldn't whine. I played the sucker with my eyes open. I know girls can change their minds. It's a privilege they've born with."

"You don't understand." She turned, saw that Forbes and Frost were bearing down on them and let her words die.

She looked almost as if she wished to run, but there was nowhere to-run. Monte French stood in front of her, Forbes and Frost behind.

Forbes said in his heavy voice: "Well look who's here." He sounded almost jovial. He was a big man, and he liked to appear good humored. He wasn't. "Look, Jack, the boy scout who tried to shake us down, and hiding behind a tin shield, too!"

Frost was small. His dark hair grew down to a widow's peak, and he would have been good looking had his mouth been fuller and his eyes not quite so close together. His skin was ivory despite a sun tan which lay over it as if it had been painted on. He failed to answer Forbes's smile. He took the girl's arm, steering her away. "Come on." It was an order, and she obeyed, not even looking back.

Forbes said mockingly, "Why do you hang around, French? You're all washed up. I'll see Hurst and you won't have a job. I don't like smart punks who hang around."

French hit him then. He'd been wanting to hit Forbes for a long time. His anger,

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both at the man and at himself, had been eating into him like acid. He struck, and felt his knuckles dig deep into the flabby flesh protecting the man's jaw.

Forbes fell as if he'd been struck by an ax. A woman screamed. The crowd turned, a floor man pushed the alarm and the red light above the center table glowed. All play ceased while two other special policemen ran across the room.

The first was tall and lanky and sandy haired, a ranch kid, young and rough, but a good hand. "What's the matter, Monte?" He had his gun out.

"Nothing," said French. He was breathing a little heavily. He'd fixed things for himself again. Hurst couldn't keep him now. Guards didn't go around hitting customers and hold their jobs.

French said: "Take care of it, will you, Luke?"

The boy said, "Sure." He liked Monte French. Monte had been a big detective in Los Angeles, but he didn't act that way; he acted like a regular guy all the time.

Monte threaded his way through the surging crowd and into the lobby. The clerk looked at him as he passed the desk. "Trouble in there?"

"No trouble," he said, and went into Hurst's office.

The hotel manager looked up from his desk. "What happened out there? The alarm bell just rang."

"I lost my head and socked Forbes in the jaw." He didn't look at Hurst. He felt pretty bad. Not for hitting Forbes—the big jerk had that coming—but for letting Hurst down, for causing a disturbance when he had been hired to keep order. He took off

his badge and laid it on the desk and started to unfasten his gun belt.

Hurst said: "Hey, what's the idea?" He stood up. He was about average height with dark curly hair, a straight nose and black eyes. French judged the man to be at least forty. He didn't know anything about him except that he was manager of the hotel, and that he'd given French a job when he needed one bad.

"I'm quitting," said French, "To save you the necessity of firing me."

"I'm not going to fire you."

French stared at the hotel manager. He wasn't used to people giving him a break. He'd fought for everything he'd ever gotten; fought hard.

"Look," said Hurst. "I back up my men. You shouldn't have hit him, but after what you told me happened in Los Angeles I can't say I really blame you."

French didn't answer. This was so unexpected that it left him breathless.

Hurst went on: "He'll be sore as hell, of course. I can't put you back into the gambling rooms until he goes, but we have a ground patrol, too. You can go on that as long as he's here. After he leaves I'll bring you back inside.

He caught French's expression and added: "I'm not doing this because. I'm soft hearted, French. I need a trained man to run things on the special officer squad. When you learn the ropes, the job is yours if a hundred and half interests you."

Still Monte French didn't speak. You never knew where kindness would come from. He answered by picking up his badge and pinning it back into place on his shirt.

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Patrolling the hotel grounds wasn't bad. The air felt cool and sweet after the heat of the desert day. The sprinklers, running in a dozen places on the big spreading lawns, made a faint hissing sound as if from a far distant waterfall. The job was simple. There were a hundred cottages, flanking the curving graveled drives. He had to see that all the lights were burning and that nothing suspicious transpired on the grounds.

There were eight acres in the grounds and it took him some twenty minutes to make his circuit. He timed himself since he had little else to do. Cars arrived, others departed. Bell boys, riding scooter bikes with a square box fastened on in front, conducted late arrivals to their cottages.

At midnight he went in through a kitchen door, got himself a cup of coffee and called the night clerk on the phone for the list of vacancies. There were only four. Business seemed to be good.

He must have been in the kitchen for half an hour. He stepped back into the night and made another circuit. As he came up the curving drive directly behind the hotel, he saw a woman open a car door and start to climb in. Then she stopped, backed out and screamed. It was a low scream, a kind of gasping sound, breathless with startled fear. He was already running, loosening the gun at his hip as he ran. The scream had not been repeated. She stood, one hand pressed against her mouth. It was the hand which kept him from recognizing her until he'd almost reached her. Then he realized it was Ellen, and called her name.

She spun at the sound of his voice and without thought took three steps toward

him. She would have fallen had not his arms gone wide and caught her.

"Ellen, what's the matter?"

"In the car. It's Forbes."

He let her go then, stepping quickly forward, using the small flash which was clipped to his belt.

Joe Forbes lay on the floor of the big car. He lay on his side, his big body huddled as if someone had put it forcibly into the too small space. His head was twisted forward so that it was difficult to make out his beefy face.

French bent closer. He saw the blood then, where the knife had been driven into the man's side, just under his left armpit. He stared at it, at the haft pointing downward; and he had a thought he did not like. Ellen was left handed. Supposing she had been standing beside the car, supposing Forbes had tried to kiss her. Supposing she had had the knife.

He tried to put the thought away. from him, but it wouldn't go away. He looked at the heavy body. Could she have managed to stuff it onto the car floor alone? It hardly seemed possible, yet if the car door had been open, if Forbes had fallen backward, she might have been able to lift his feet and turn him completely over.

That could explain the cramped position in which the man lay. But French had seen her opening the car door—or had he? He tried desperately to remember.

He turned to look at her. Even in the uncertain light from the yard lamps she was beautiful. It was no wonder that his heart turned over every time he saw her, that he'd let her make a fool of him as he had never let any one else.

Well, he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

His voice was very hard and careful and contained as he said, "Well, Ellen, what happened?" ,

She'd been watching him, silent, still pressing the hand against her mouth. She seemed calm, but the calm broke now. "Oh, Monte, it was terrible!"

"What was?" He was as unyielding as a granite post.

"Finding Forbes that way. I came for my scarf. I opened the door and reached in before I realized he was there. Is he— is he dead?"

"As a mackerel," said French. "Someone put a knife in his armpit."

The girl shivered at the brutality of his words.

"Don't tell me you're sorry." His words were still rough. "First you call him a blackmailer, then you switch, then you show up here with him. Next you'll say that you loved him dearly."

"I hated him." She put more feeling into the words than he thought possible. "Do you understand, I hated him!"

He didn't understand, but he said sharply: "No matter how you felt, keep it to yourself. This is going to be bad, Ellen, very bad indeed."

She had recovered her composure. "Couldn't we—couldn't we simply close the car door and go away? Let someone else find him later?"

He was tempted. He'd have liked to do more than that—slip into the big car, drive somewhere far out onto the desert, and lose the body. Forbes wouldn't care. He was just a body now, and a body never cares.

He crowded the thought down. He said to the girl: "Go into the kitchen and call the office. Have Hurst come out here and tell him to bring Luke Carson. Don't go into the gambling rooms or lobby yourself. I don't want anyone else showing up here until I've talked to Hurst."

He shut the car door against the eyes of the casual guest and waited as she hurried along the driveway toward the hotel kitchen.

This wasn't just bad for Ellen—it was bad for him, too.

CHAPTER TWO

Hideout

THE police lieutenant was short and squat and looked something like a barrel. He had a square-jawed face and cold eyes. He pulled up in his black and white car with two uniformed men and stepped out to meet Hurst and the others beside the murder sedan. His name was Strongberg, and French thought that he fancied himself an investigator.

"Okay, who found the body?"

French stepped forward, but before he could say anything Ellen Hoyle had turned her smile on the police official. "We did." She pulled French forward.

Strongberg looked surprised. His eyes ranged from the girl to French's uniform, and it was obvious that he had little use for special officers. "How come?"

She said: "I came out to get my scarf from the car. Monte was making his rounds. I opened the door and saw Mr. Forbes and screamed, and Monte joined me."

Listening, French thought: *She's too*

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clever for you, Boy. She's put you right in the middle of the jackpot and given herself an alibi by dragging you in. Now the whole story will come out, and you'll be resting right behind the eight ball.

He was right. It happened fast. Jack Frost had been summoned from the gambling room. He gave Strongberg the whole story: how French had tried to frame them on a blackmail charge, how French had lost his license and had been kicked out of Los Angeles.

Frost turned his cool eyes on Monte. "And then we came up here," he said, "and French attacked Joe Forbes in the gambling rooms. A hundred people saw him do it. He'd have killed him then if the crowd hadn't stopped him."

French looked at Hurst. The hotel manager's face was bleak and unreadable. He looked at the girl. All she needed to say was: "You're wrong. I was at the car first. Monte couldn't possibly have done it. He was on the other side of the lawn."

But Ellen did not speak. She just stood there, waiting.

Strongberg turned to Hurst. His voice changed a little when he addressed the hotel manager. "What about it? If they had trouble, why didn't you fire this jerk?"

Hurst's face looked pained. He opened his mouth, started to speak; then he looked at French, shrugged and spread his hands. "I felt sorry for him. I still think he got a rough deal in Los Angeles."

"But you think he knifed Forbes?"

Again the hotel manager shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I wouldn't blame him much if he had."

"I guess," said Strongberg, "That does

it. Come on, you. Let's have the gun."

The lieutenant was careless there. He should have had his men up behind French. But the country made him careless. The desert stretched for miles in all directions. No one could escape this town; no one would face the dry, waterless miles.

But something in Monte French's head snapped. He reached down as if to unbuckle his gun belt, and suddenly the police special was in his hand, its nose covering them all.

"Don't move," he said. "None of you move if you want to live."

Strongberg swore. "You fool! You can't get away. You're only making it tougher on yourself."

"How tougher?" said Monte French. He was almost shaking with rage, but his mind was cool and detached. "Nothing can be tougher than a murder rap, and you've got me all buttoned up for that. Haven't you, wise guy?"

Strongberg's face had gone a dirty bluish red. "We'll get you," he promised. "And when we do, you'll wish you'd never seen this country."

"Sure." French jerked his head toward the police car. "Get in. Under the wheel." He looked at the two uniformed men. "If you want to see your boss again, you'll just sit tight and do nothing for the next ten minutes."

They stared at him unblinkingly. Strongberg hesitated for an instant, then slid under the wheel. "I suppose you realize you're laying yourself open for a kidnap rap also?"

"You're making me cry," said French. "Get going."

THE policeman ground the starter into life. The car surged ahead. "Take the rear drive," French told him. They swung left where the drives divided and pulled around the row of closely built cottages.

They were hardly out of sight of the men clustered around the murder car when French ordered Strongberg to stop. The police lieutenant stared at him in surprise. "What now?"

French leaned forward and cut the switch. As he did so, he struck with his other hand, using the leather sap from his pocket. Strongberg went forward against the wheel.

French worked fast. He had the door open almost before the car ceased rolling, and he dragged the unconscious man out. He couldn't have the man with him. He meant to take off, straight across the desert as far as the police car would go. He turned back to it and heard someone call his name.

He swung around quickly, the gun almost leaping into his hand, and then he saw the long frame of Luke Carson round the drive from the other way.

"Hey, Monte, wait." The boy was breathless. "I saw you drive out and ran toward the other gate." He was panting. "I'm going with you. You need someone who knows the country."

"You're nuts!" It must be a trap. This bean-pole kid couldn't be that simple.

Luke pulled up at his side. "Where's the cop?"

French jerked his thumb toward the bushes.

Luke chuckled, then sobered. "You

won't get a mile in that car. I know, run it in that garage." He jerked his head toward an empty garage between two cottages. "They may not find it for hours."

"And what'tl I do, hoof across the desert on foot?"

"My car's in the main parking lot—the old Ford, last one on this side. Get in, down on the floor. I'm off duty in a couple of hours. I'll drive you home to my place. Get going—I'll take care of this." He was already moving around the police car.

Monte French hesitated for a moment, then he shrugged. "Why not? If the kid were on the level, it was a chance. If not, he was probably better off in jail than out on the desert. His raging anger had cooled enough to make him realize how much of a fool he had been to ever try to get away.

He slipped between the close-built cottages, made the parking lot unseen and slid in onto the floor of Luke Carson's old car. He lay there, silent, waiting. He heard the sirens as more police cars arrived. He heard the excited voices when Strongberg came to and finally staggered into the hotel. But evidently they had not found the police car, for the search went away from the hotel.

It seemed hours before he felt the Ford sway as Luke opened the front door and climbed in. The boy took an old blanket from the back of the front seat and spread it over French. He did not speak as he turned the car out of the parking space and into the road. He did not speak during the ten minutes it took him to drive home. Not until he had pulled into his shed garage did he turn and lift the shielding blanket.

"Okay, Monte."

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French climbed stiffly from the car. His muscles were so cramped that it was hard for him to walk. He saw the boy grin in the half light from the window of the house and said, "Thanks."

"Forget it. You always treated me okay."

French looked back at the three days he had been at the hotel, trying to recall anything he might have done for this kid. He could think of nothing. He'd been pleasant, sure, but that was all.

He said again: "Thanks. If you'll tell me which way to get out, of town, I'll start moving."

A shadow touched the boy's face. "Don't be foolish, Monte. They've got all the state cops. out and all the sheriff's men. You wouldn't get anywhere at all."

"So?" French hesitated.

"So, come on in. You can stay here at least until things blow down."

French said: "Have you thought about what would happen to you if they found me here?"

The boy was embarrassed. He scuffed at the dirt floor with the toe of his shoe. "They won't find you." French tried again. "How do you know I didn't kill that guy? I did hit him."

Luke Carson's faith refused to be shaken. "Hitting a guy and sticking him with a knife are two different things. You aren't that kind of a guy, that's all."

French looked at the big, gangling kid. He thought: *If I ever get out of this mess this punk can have anything I can give him.* "Okay," he said, "but you gotta promise me one thing. If they find me, I

threatened you, see. I put a gun on you and threatened you and you were afraid to talk. It will make you out a coward, but they won't be able to do much to you."

Carson had a prominent Adam's apple. He swallowed a couple of times unwillingly, but he finally promised and they went into the house.

The girl who met them in the kitchen was very young. At first French thought she must be Carson's sister. She didn't seem old enough to be anyone's wife. If he'd known that the boy was married he'd never have come.

Ann Carson smiled. She had a nice smile. He started to apologize. but she wouldn't listen. "If Luke says it's okay," she told him, "it is." Her pride and faith in her husband were obvious.

"He's been talking about you for three days," she added. "He thinks you're a great man."

French's mouth was a bitter line. He started to say that he was a great fool. probably the greatest yet unchanged; then he shut up. It was bad enough for them. to have him here without him griping.

He said: "You kids don't realize what you're up against. I'll have to lay over here today, but as soon as it's dark again, I'll scam. There's no use waiting around."

"Why not?" said Luke. "You're a detective, aren't you? All we have to do is to discover who killed that Forbes guy and clear you."

Monte French looked at him. He couldn't believe that the kid was as dumb as he sounded.

They ate at the kitchen table with the blinds pulled down. Luke said: "I'll do the

leg work, but you'll have to furnish the brains. I'm a little new at this detective business."

French tried to make his words light. "If brains were a dime a dozen, I'd be the poorest guy in the country. I let a girl make a sucker out of me."

"That Miss Hoyle, she's beautiful."

"So's deadly nightshade. I've had nothing but trouble since the first time I saw her."

"Think she killed Forbes?"

French shrugged tiredly. "I don't know. She had plenty to gain. He'd been blackmailing her about an old killing in a Detroit night club, and I guess he really had something on her... ."

"That's one," said Carson, holding up a bony finger. "What about this Jack Frost character? He struck me as the type who would stick a knife into his best friend if it would pay off."

French nodded. "You an have Frost too."

"Anyone else?"

"There might be a hundred," said French. "Forbes is the kind of a bird who people could easily take a violent dislike to."

Luke Carson nodded his head slowly. "Anyone in town you can trust?"

"The only one would be Hurst," French said, then shook his head. Why should the hotel manager do anything for him? He had already put himself out on a limb, trying to help."

"I tell you what you do. If you can manage to send a wire to the Detroit police and find out about the night club killing Ellen Hoyle was mixed up in, it might

help. Trouble is, the local law will wonder why you're asking questions."

"Don't worry about that," Carson told him. "I've got a friend who works in the telegraph office. He can handle it for me."

CHAPTER THREE

Two Fugitives Meet

Monte French slept most of the day. It wasn't a restful sleep. He dreamed that he was in an old mineshaft and that Strongberg and the rest of the cops were closing in. He awoke in a cold sweat to find that it was dark outside the window.

He rose, doused his head with cold water and went down stairs. Ann Carson was just setting the dinner table. She gave him a little smile and handed him the folded newspaper.

He said: "Why'd you let me sleep so long?"

The girl shook her head. "Luke said to. He said there wasn't anything you could do and you were better off asleep."

French nodded and sat down in the rocker in the corner and opened the paper. His name leaped at him in black type. He read the story twice. They'd found the police car hidden in the garage between the cottages. The police theory was that someone at the hotel must have helped him escape. It was intimated that the help must have come from one of the guests, since many of them were also from California.

He breathed easier after that. Apparently, no one had yet suspected Luke Carson. With luck he'd be away after dark. Maybe the girl could drive him out one of the desert roads. With water and a little food, traveling at night, there was a chance

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that he might make the Mexican border.

He froze suddenly, his hand going to the gun at his side. There was noise on the porch. Then the door opened and Luke Carson came in. He looked very tired.

"Any luck?" He asked it, not because he expected any, but to be polite.

Carson sank into a chair. He drew a telegram from his pocket and passed it over. It was from the Detroit police department, addressed to Luke Carson, Special Officer and read:

ELLEN HOYLE ACQUITTED IN BROTHER SENT TO PEN ONE TO TEN RELEASED LAST WEEK STOP NO KNOWLEDGE OF HIS WHEREABOUTS STOP SIMMONS KILLED IN CLUB OPERATED. BY JACK FROST AND JOE FORBES.

French looked up. Both the kids were watching him. Carson said: "Does that help?"

"Maybe." He wasn't certain that it did.

"Would it help if I told you that someone is hiding in Miss Hoyle's cottage over at the hotel?"

He came alert then. "What are you trying to tell me?"

The boy shrugged. "Nothing, maybe. I was off duty this afternoon, but I hung around the hotel grounds, watching her cottage. One of the maids told me there was a man there. I checked. He isn't registered."

"Was it Frost?"

The boy shook his head. "No, I saw Frost a dozen times."

French stood up. "All right. I've got to

get over to the hotel."

"You're crazy. Let me do it."

"What I have to do," he said, "can't be done by anyone else, I'll be all right. They won't be looking for me around town."

He had his way. He borrowed an old hat and a white shirt from Luke. The boy's pants were much too long, but the hat and shirt changed his appearance. He was tanned. That was good. In this country everyone was tanned.

He said: "Drive me out to the hotel when you go back to work. If I have to, I'll hide in the car as I did last night. Oh, and one other thing. Can you get me a pass key?"

"Sure, but—"

"What's the matter?"

"You—you aren't going to hurt her?"

French had a sudden desire to laugh. Luke was afraid he meant to kill Ellen Hoyle. French hoped he could convince the actress of the same thing. He wanted a showdown.

"I won't hurt her," he said, "but I'm going to throw a scare into her that she won't forget for awhile."

He stuffed his gun into his hip pocket and followed Luke out to the car. Ann Carson came out with them into the darkness. He turned and took both her hands.

"You're swell," he told her. "Luke doesn't know how lucky he is. If I'd had someone like you around, I might not have made so many mistakes." He turned, then, and got in and sat on the floor of the rear seat.

At the hotel Luke parked the car and went away. He came back in ten minutes

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and gave French the pass key.”

“I swiped it from the kitchen,” he said. “I don’t think they’ll miss it.”

French let him go. He waited ten minutes more; then he peered out. One was even close to the car. He left it on the far side and faded into the bushes which were planted thickly against the edge of the cottages. Luke had told him Ellen’s cabin was at the far end of the grounds. He started in that direction, moving along the outmost drive. Twice he passed guests but they paid no attention, apparently taking him for one of the workmen who tended the sprinklers,

Beyond the fence was the raw desert, making a sharp contrast with the hotel’s carefully tended lawns. He stayed close to the fence, meaning to go over it if he met one of the yard watchmen or a policeman.

But he failed to meet one as he gained the shadow of the girl’s cottage. There were no lights on inside, but the venetian blinds were closed so that he could see nothing. He eased his way around onto the porch and worked the key soundlessly into the lock. Then, with his gun held ready, he pushed the door gently open.

The room was big. The twin beds hardly noticeable because of the size. There were three easy chairs, a bureau, a desk and a desk chair.

The girl sat on the edge of a twin bed, her back to the door. A man sat in one of the easy chairs, facing her, the cone of light from the floor lamp shining directly down on his dark head. Monte French had never seen him before. He stared at the skin, showing white under the lamp light; then

he slid through and closed the door.

The man was saying: “I’ve got to get out of here. Every minute I stay it gets more dangerous. I tell you, that maid saw me this morning.”

“You can’t go now,” said Ellen Hoyle. “The roads are hot. They’re watching for Monte French. Wait a couple of days until things quiet down; then I’ll get you on a plane.”

“Wonder where that guy French is?”

“He’ll get clear. Monte can take care of himself.”

“Well, thanks,” said Monte French.

They both jumped at the sound of his voice. The girl came off the bed as if it were hot. The man tried to rise from his chair.

“Sit still,” said French, and there was that in his voice which made the other freeze.

“Monte, what are you doing here? Where have you been?”

“Around.” His mouth was bitter. “Not that you’d care.”

“Monte, stop it. Don’t talk that way.”

“Save the act for the cameras, Sweetheart.”

The man said: “Don’t talk to her that way.”

French’s ready anger was riding up in him again. “Look, Squirt, I’ve had about enough from your lovely sister. I can’t hit her, but I sure as hell wouldn’t mind bending this gun barrel across your head. Keep the mouth closed or you’ll be choking on loose teeth.

Ellen Hoyle caught her breath. “You know who he is?”

“Sure,” French said and found no

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satisfaction in the words. "He's your brother. just out of stir in Michigan. He hopped himself out here and knocked over Joe Forbes with a knife. I should thank him for that, but I don't like to be put in the grease for another man's kill."

"He didn't, Monte. He didn't kill Joe, I swear it!"

"You're good at swearing to things," his voice was grim. "First you sold me a bill of goods that Forbes and Frost were blackmailing you, then you double-crossed me and swore that I was pulling a fast one. You put me behind the eight ball all right."

"I couldn't help it.' She was almost crying. "I meant to make it up to you, Monte, but you. walked out before I could see you. I didn't know where you were."

"Save it."

Anger glinted in her eyes. "Look, I'll admit that I handed you a rough deal, but my hands were tied. I couldn't help myself. I had te do what I did. But I meant to pay you... ."

"Pay me?" He almost spat the words at her. "What kind of money do you think you have, Miss Hoyle, that would pay a man for the loss. of a business he'd spent seven years building? For his self respect and—"

"Monte." Her anger was gone, "I'm sorry... ."

"Forget it." He was already cursing himself for letting go. "That's water over the dam. But this Forbes kill isn't—this is new and fresh and raw. It's my neck if they catch me, unless I can pin it on the one who swung that knife."

Her face was bloodless. "What do you mean?"

"Your brother," he said. "Your brother went up for a night club killing in Detroit. He got out; he came here and settled with Forbes."

"No." She took a step toward him.

He said: "Stay where you are, Beautiful. I won't shoot you, but I sure as hell will bounce a bullet off your brother's wishbone."

She believed him, She stayed where she was, motionless, her eyes looking enormous in her white face. "You don't believe Eddie killed him."

"Why shouldn't I? Isn't that the way it happened?"

"No—no!" —

"Then you knifed him."

There was a growl from the man in the chair. "Keep. her out of this!"

"I can't. She keeps crowding in."

Eddie started to rise, thought better of it and settled back. "She had nothing to do with any of it, understand? If you'd let me tell you about it—"

"I'll tell it," said the girl. "I should have told you everything in the first place... . Six years ago, I was singing in a club in Detroit. Eddie," she indicated her brother with a jerk of her head, "was the bartender. Forbes and Frost were customers at the club. Rumor had it that they'd been bootleggers and that they'd put up the money for the place. It was run by a man named Simmons. And Simmons kept making passes in my direction.

"Anyhow, there was a row one night and Eddie cracked Simmons with a bottle. I didn't see it, but Simmons is supposed to have pulled a gun. Eddie tried to take it away from him. It went off and Simmons

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was killed. That's the story Forbes told in court. Afterwards he came to me and said that that wasn't the true story at all. He said that Simmons left the room, that Eddie got a gun and went after Simmons, that it was premeditated murder instead of manslaughter. He said that he'd testified as he had because he liked me... . Then Hurst sent for me to come to Los Angeles."

"Hurst?" Monte French started. "You mean the Hurst that's manager of this hotel?"

THAT'S right. He'd been the manager of the club in Detroit until Simmons got killed, then he came to the coast. He had a spot for me, singing in his club. I took it and a producer saw me one night and offered me a screen test. I thought I was sitting on top of the world—and then Forbes and Jack Frost showed up.

"Forbes started to shake me down. It took everything I made to satisfy them. But I didn't dare squawk. And then it came time for Eddie to get out of prison on good behavior. I thought they couldn't do anything more to him then, and I met you. I told you about the blackmailing and you fixed it to catch them. But after they'd been arrested, Forbes sent for me. He said that if I didn't get them off, he'd tell what had happened back in Michigan. He said they could retry Eddie and send him back to prison for life. So I switched on you. ..."

Monte French didn't know whether to believe her or not. It sounded like a straight story, but everything else she'd told had been convincing. He said harshly: "What's he doing here?". and pointed at Eddie Hoyle.

"Hurst offered him a job, He wrote to him while he was still in prison. Eddie wrote and asked me. I told him to take it. Hurst is one person you can depend upon."

Monte French said: "If all that's true, what are you doing up here with Forbes and Frost?"

She flared. "I didn't come up with them. I just happened to walk into that gambling room at the same time they did. I didn't know they were here."

French considered. The story was convincing—almost too convincing. And there was one hole in the pattern. What were Forbes and Frost doing here? Was it merely coincidence that they and the girl should show up on the same night?

He said: "One more thing—how did Forbes and Frost get along? Could Frost be our man?"

Brother and sister stared at each other. Eddie Hoyle said slowly: "It could be. Frost is a cold-blooded fish. I always figured he was the brain, that he used Forbes as the front. If he thought it would be to his advantage to get rid of the fat man, he'd do it as quickly as he'd step on a spider. But he'd have an alibi, and he'd have a fall guy to take the rap."

"I don't know about the alibi," said French, "but he had a perfect fall guy after I socked Forbes in the gambling rooms, I might as well have tied a card around my neck marked *murderer*."

"But what are we going to do?" It was the girl.

"We're going to get Frost over here and face him," French said. "I need your help, both of you."

The girl shook her head quickly. "Not

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Eddie. Don't drag him into this."

"What about me?"

She turned to look at French. Before she could speak, her brother cut in.

"Look, French has had a rough ride. Let's stop thinking about us for a minute and think about him."

The girl said: "Oh, Eddie, I— Monte. ..." She turned and came swiftly across the room. Monte didn't know what she was going to do. You never knew with Ellen Hoyle. She came up on tip-toe, ignoring the gun which he still held, and kissed him full on the lips.

"I've been a fool," she said; "a terrible fool. But all my life I've been trying to take care of Eddie. I—"

Monte French was terribly embarrassed. He wanted to put his arms around her and tell her that it was all right, that everything was all right. But it wasn't, not quite. He wondered if he would ever thoroughly trust her again.

He made his voice hard. "Forget that now. We've got something important to do."

She pulled back as if he had slapped her. She said quietly: "What is it you want me to do?"

"Call the hotel. Get hold of Frost and tell him to come over here at once."

"He'll be suspicious. I haven't been exactly friendly."

Monte French thought for a long moment. "Call Hurst then. Tell him you have evidence against Frost and want him to get the man out here without letting the cops know." He waited until the girl had made the call, then he said: "Both of you follow my lead. No matter what I do or

say, play it straight. Remember, we haven't any evidence, We're going to have to out-think a gambler."

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown Play

MONTE FRENCH stood inside the bathroom. The light at his back was off and the door open a crack so that he could see the room.

Eddie Hoyle was in the closet. The girl stood alone beside one of the windows. If she were nervous, she concealed it well. There was a noise at the door and she called, "Come in."

The door was thrust open and Jack Frost stepped through. He was followed a moment later by Hurst. The two men looked at the girl, puzzled.

Hurst said: "Here he is. He didn't want to come, but I told him he'd better or I'd phone the police."

Frost's tone was a bluster, "Look, Sister, you haven't got a thing on me. I didn't knife Joe Forbes. For my dough, you're the little girl who pulled the trick."

Hurst was startled. "How do you make that out?"

Frost turned cold eyes on the hotel manager. "This little girl reverses herself but plenty," he said. "You can't tell where she stands. She tied up with that Los Angeles dick to get us, then when Joe pressured her, she switched and threw him to the wolves."

Hurst's teeth gleamed again. "And you think she switched back and helped him kill Forbes?"

"That's right," said Frost.

"Don't bet on it." Monte French stepped into the room, his gun hanging loosely in

his hand.

Both men swung to stare at him. Jack Frost uttered a cry deep in his throat. Hurst, recovering, grinned.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding.”

Monte French didn’t answer that one.

Frost said: “So it’s a showdown.” He sounded almost glad.

“A showdown,” said French.

“You’re wise. You haven’t got a chance to get out of town. Strongberg has this place sewed up like a tent.”

“That’s fine,” said French. His eyes were very watchful. “Only you’ve got the wrong angle, Frost. I don’t take the rap for this one. I didn’t knife Forbes.”

The man laughed, a mocking, hollow sound. “Remember what happened to you in Los Angeles?”

French ignored him. “Tell me, Pal, how did you and your fat playmate happen to come to Vegas at this time? Did you just feel lucky, or did you have a reason?”

“What’s it to you?”

French sighed. “That’s the trouble with you guys, always suspicious. Someone marked you for death, Bud, you and your partner, and now you’re trying to cover for him.”

“Marked us?” Jack Frost turned his cold eyes toward Hurst for a long moment. “What are you talking about, French?”

Monte French had seen the look. He suddenly had a feeling of exultation. He said: “Who sent for you, Pal? Hurst?”

“Well, yes, but—”

French grinned at the hotel manager. Hurst’s face was blank, without expression.

French said: “Hurst fixed this very

nicely. He planned to kill Forbes, and maybe you, and he planned to tie the crime to me. It was very simple. I came up here and told him my troubles, and at once he saw a chance to get Forbes and make me the fall guy. That’s why he gave me a job. The only thing I haven’t got is the motive.”

Hurst’s face went grim. “This is the thanks I get for trying to help you!”

“Good old Hurst,” said French. “Old helping hand himself. He doesn’t care who hangs for his murders.”

The girl had made a tiny cry of protest. Hurst laughed suddenly.

“A pipe dream, French. You haven’t a thing to go on.”

“Nothing but a witness,” said French. “Come out of the closet, Eddie, and tell Mr. Hurst how you saw him stab Forbes.”

Eddie Hoyle pushed open the closet door.

French had a momentary fear that the boy would not be able to go through with his part of the act. But the shock of seeing Eddie Hoyle step into the room was more convincing than any words.

Hurst reacted. He reacted so rapidly that he caught French unprepared. He jumped sideways, caught the girl around the waist and pulled her in front of him as a shield with one hand while he jerked a gun free with the other.

He laughed then, without mirth. “Smart guy,” he said. “Had to go in for heroics. Well, French, that little surprise act you put on will cost your life.” He deliberately brought up his gun.

The window pane shattered behind him. A gun roared, and for an instant French thought he’d been hit. Then he saw Hurst’s

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arm slide from around the girl's waist, saw him slip to the floor, and raising his eyes, saw Luke Carson grinning at him through the broken window.

"You shouldn't have shot!" French gasped. "You might have hit Ellen."

"Shucks," said Carson. "That wasn't nothing. I can shoot out a buzzard's eye at a hundred feet."

* * *

Strongberg wasn't very happy about the whole thing. He said: "Frost finally talked. He and Forbes and Hurst were in the original kill together. They framed Eddie Hoyle for it and then blackmailed his sister. But Forbes got hungry. Hurst had pulled the trigger when Simmons was murdered, and Forbes put the bite on him.

"But Hurst got a bright idea. Eddie Hoyle was coming out of prison. He'd send for Eddie and give him a job, then he'd get Forbes up here, murder the man and frame Eddie. But Eddie hesitated. He wrote to his sister first. She was busy then, trying to shake off Forbes' blackmail herself, and she didn't answer at once.

"Then French came up here, told Hurst his sad story and asked for a job. Hurst saw a chance to go ahead with his murder plans, using French instead of Eddie Hoyle. He hired French and told Forbes and Frost to hurry up here for a new deal.

"In the meantime, Ellen Hoyle came up on the same plane to meet her brother, who had sneaked into town without telling Hurst. Does that cover it?"

The girl said: "I still can't believe it.

Hurst was so good to me."

"And took most of your salary through Forbes and his blackmail," French reminded her. '

She nodded. "I guess so. I—I've been a fool."

French laughed. "What about me?"

The girl was very serious. "No, Monte. Not after what I did. I should be horsewhipped for switching my testimony in Los Angeles. But I'm a coward, Monte."

"A darn pretty one," he said.

Strongberg coughed. "Break it up." He turned to the silent Luke Carson. "How'd you happen to be outside that window?"

The boy said promptly: "I was working for French."

"Oh, you were. I'll bet you hid him out last night. I should run you in."

"Nuts," said Luke Carson. "Do that and I'll tell the newspapers how you almost railroaded the wrong guy."

Strongberg swore. "Don't get cute, Kid, or I'll have that special officer's badge.

"Have it," said Luke and spat between the policeman's feet. "Me and Monte are going back to L.A. We're partners, aren't we, Monte?" :

"You said it," said French, and panned. "Anyone who can shoot out a buzzard's eye at a hundred feet is the kind of guy I need around, all the time."

He reached out and they silently shook hands.

THE END