

When truck driver Pete Hennessey investigates the hit-and-run death of playboy Ronnie Dykeman, he runs into a hotbed of evil and crime!



The light from the kerosene lamp glistened on the blue steel of Chapman's automatic.

# KILLER'S HIGHROAD

*by*  
**ROBERT J. HOGAN**

**T**HE minute I saw him lying in the middle of the rain-drenched road down at the bottom of the long grade I was sure he was dead. I also had a hunch it was murder, since I hadn't passed any cars going either way in the last twenty minutes.

It was four o'clock in the morning and I had

been thinking that maybe that chauffeur job I had before the war was better than driving a truck. The Dykeman estate, where I used to work, was at the top of the grade but set back away from the highway and overlooking the Hudson River.

Sometimes a poor paying job has advantages if you don't have too much ambition. When I was

a kid I thought it was great to be dressed up in the Dykeman monkey suit, driving their big closed jobs as chauffeur for thirty-five bucks a week.

But since then there'd been a war and I'd begun to wonder where I was heading, which certainly wasn't driving for the Dykemans. I was doing all right now and I could go places.

From the job I had now, at four hundred a month, I could work up to buying my first truck and then there was no limit. Meantime, driving all night and sleeping days wasn't nearly as easy as keeping the Dykeman cars polished and taking the family out driving.

When I saw this body, I was thinking about the Dykemans. They were wealthy people who had nothing to worry about except what was going to bore them next or maybe what might hurt the importance of their family name.

These Dykemans had a son named Ronnie. Ronnie had a nice smile, and, though he was spoiled, he wasn't a snob like his folks. Ronnie had been my pal while I was their chauffeur. He liked women and drinking a little too much for his own good, but he was okay.

Besides their estate on the Hudson the Dykemans had a five story town house in the city. Mr. Dykeman had some nominal job as advisor to the City of New York that didn't pay him much, but it gave him a title that he liked.

Well, I had everything out of gear and my big fourteen-wheel Diesel truck was rolling down the grade at about sixty miles an hour when I saw this guy in front of me. I was carrying a full load of high-speed gears from Syracuse. They didn't have to be in the plant in Brooklyn until seven-thirty, so there was no hurry. I was just trying to save fuel on the grade.

I didn't dare take the ditch on either side of the body. The only thing I could do was try to straddle him. So I bore down on him, trying to miss both his head and his feet.

I braced for any sign of a jolt when I went over him. But I didn't feel a thing so I knew I had missed him. I stopped the truck halfway up the next grade and went back.

**H**E WAS dead, all right. He was lying face down and the rain was falling like somebody had pulled the plug upstairs. Everything around him was washed clean except my wheel tracks.

I dragged him off the road, put a blanket over him and got back in the truck. Our orders were to call truck headquarters first, if anything happened, so I drove on to the next town, found a restaurant open and called my boss. I got D. P. and told him.

"And I got a hunch the guy was murdered," I said.

"Okay," D. P. said, "but keep that to yourself, Pete. Truck drivers are scarce and I'm not paying four hundred a month while they hold you for a material witness."

After the boss hung up I telephoned the state troopers. By the time they came and we had driven back to the bottom of that long grade the rain had washed away all signs of my tire tracks.

I just told the troopers what had happened without mentioning murder. It was when they were going through the pockets of the corpse that I learned the guy was Ronnie Dykeman. His face and head had been pretty well battered, so I hadn't taken much of a look at him.

Later, riding in my truck with the troopers, behind the coroner's wagon, I didn't say anything about having worked for the Dykemans four years ago. The troopers were nice guys. They let me go on with my load to Brooklyn and I promised I'd be back for the hearing at ten o'clock.

The first thing I heard when I got there was that after we'd left the scene, other troopers had found Ronnie's two-thousand-dollar convertible down in a gully and up against some trees. And he'd been carrying plenty of liquor inside him.

It looked to all concerned as if Ronnie had wrecked his car while drunk, had gotten out and back to the highway where he had then been knocked down by a hit-and-run driver. The bruises on his body helped to confirm the hit-and-run accident theory.

However, Ronnie had been a pal of mine—even if he had been a spoiled kid—and I wasn't convinced that it was all accidental. Ronnie had a way of getting mixed up with the wrong people.

Mr. Dykeman, Ronnie's father, was a dignified little man with a face that was usually a little on the pink side. But he was kind of white now. He was nervous and jumpy and I knew why. If there was anything the Dykemans hated it was bad publicity for their social standing.

Being connected with the City of New York, Mr. Dykeman had some influential friends and so

he'd brought along Inspector Ramsey, who was chief of Homicide in one city district. Although the place where Ronnie was found was out of Inspector Ramsey's jurisdiction, the coroner let Ramsey take over the questioning.

At first, Inspector Ramsey tried to pin the hit-and-run job on me. Everybody stood up for me on that. Mr. Dykeman explained that I had worked for him several years ago and he was positive I was not involved.

On top of that, I pointed out that if I ever hit Ronnie with my truck he would have been banged up much worse than he had been. The troopers who had seen my truck agreed with me.

Well, it looked as if everything was washed up as far as my theory of murder was concerned. Ramsey was all set to close the inquiry when the coroner surprised him and everyone else by spilling something I hadn't even heard about.

"I'm wondering what we should do about this letter from a girl we found on young Dykeman's person."

Old man Dykeman almost jumped out of his chair. The letter was from a girl named Ellen Marshall and Mr. Dykeman's face was plenty white now. He turned to Inspector Ramsey.

"Inspector, you know how we feel about this girl. You'll take care of this please."

Apparently, they'd been through this before the hearing. Ramsey looked over the letter. I got a glimpse of it, too. It was just a note about Ellen Marshall meeting young Dykeman some place last week. I saw her address. She lived in an apartment up in the Sixties.

"You see," Inspector Ramsey explained to the rest of us, "Ellen Marshall is a show girl young Mr. Dykeman had been seeing against his parents' wishes. It would do no conceivable good to have this letter reach the hands of the press. I'm sure she has nothing to do with the accidental death of young Mr. Dykeman."

**K**NOWING the Dykemans, I could understand how they felt about it. Also, being a reader of the papers, I knew how the yellow sheets would play up Ellen Marshall, the show-girl friend of the heir to the Dykeman millions. They'd scream it all over the front pages. The Dykemans wouldn't be able to hold up their heads socially after that.

As D. P. had told me, I'd kept my mouth shut about my murder theory. I hadn't said a word about the fact that I hadn't seen a car going either way that could have hit Ronnie where I'd found him.

Eventually everybody agreed with Inspector Ramsey that Ellen Marshall's name and the letter should remain a secret. But I couldn't forget that letter or her address. It stuck in my mind just as it stuck in my mind that Ronnie Dykeman had been murdered.

When the road is clear and the stars are out and it's three in the morning, the way it was on my next trip, a guy has lots of time to think. I was taking a load of machinery up to Albany and I had lots of time, so I pulled into Tobey's Truck Haven just a couple miles south of Rhinebeck.

Tobey had two good-looking girl waitresses—the kind that make a place bright and pleasant. The drivers liked to kid them in a harmless way. They were both nice kids and they always knew how to keep any wolves among the drivers in their places.

The blonde's name was Helen and the brunette's was Jean. I knew Jean had done some work in choruses. She was nice to talk to and she was very smart.

While I ate my steak and French fries, I kept talking to her, wondering why a swell looking girl like Jean was slinging hash at Tobey's for a bunch of truck drivers when she was good looking enough to be playing around with blue bloods like Ellen Marshall.

I was leading up to asking if she knew this Ellen Marshall when she was in show business, so I asked her.

"Jean," I said, "how is it that a doll like you slings hash in a road stand when she could be running around with young millionaires?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Pete," she said, "I figure that in this life, you get what you pay for, only sometimes you get the fun first and pay later and then sometimes you wait until you meet the right guy and get the right kind of fun later."

"You interest me," I said. "But what do you mean?"

"I don't know whether you ever noticed, Pete," she said, "but once you've been a chorus girl, you've always got two strikes on you unless you stay in line. When you get mixed up with

some guy out of your class, you're in for a lot of trouble.

"Maybe he's a dumb cluck who only knows how to make money. And maybe he's a rich kid with a stuffed-shirt family. In either case, you're just a show girl and you don't fit. If anything comes up, like divorce or robbery or murder, you're it."

"So you sling hash."

"I wait until I fall in love with some nice guy on my level and then I marry him and live like a human being and raise a family."

I grinned at her. "That's old stuff but it sounds good. Maybe you can help me figure out something." I told her about Ronnie Dykeman and Ellen Marshall.

"Ellen Marshall?" I saw the color go out of her pretty face as she said it. "Are they trying to hang this on Ellen Marshall?"

"No," I said. "They whitewashed Ellen Marshall clean as snow because the Dykemans didn't want the bad publicity."

"See what I mean?" she said.

"You know Ellen Marshall, Jean?"

She nodded. "One of my best friends when I was with her in the chorus of *April Showers*. The best kid in the world. But she was always getting mixed up with wrong guys."

"Like what?"

"I wouldn't say for the world," Jean said. "She helped me out once through one of those guys."

**I** FOUND out more from Jean. This Ellen Marshall was a good gal. But she had a way with guys that had money. They loved to shell out to her. She'd borrowed money enough so that Jean's mother could have an operation back when they were in show business together and Jean was pretty anxious about seeing that Ellen didn't get wronged in this Ronnie Dykeman case.

"Don't worry," she said. "That inspector won't take it lying down, Pete. And you've got to see that Ellen doesn't get blamed for anything that happened to Ronnie."

I'd always kind of liked Jean and I always liked Ronnie, too. The two were kind of fighting it out inside me and it ended up with my getting into my best pin-stripe and going to the apartment where Ellen Marshall lived.

It was a nice, modern apartment house. But I began to smell something mighty funny, when, after ringing the bell about six times, I tried the door and found it unlocked. I walked in and shut the door. I didn't want to embarrass the girl, so I called out her name. There was no answer.

I walked across the living room to a door at the far end. There was a bedroom beyond. The room was empty and I could see that the bed hadn't been slept in. I went on to peer into the kitchenette and bath. I was just coming into the living room again when I heard a slight scraping sound. I didn't look at the place where I thought it came from because I suddenly had the feeling I was being watched.

I returned to the bedroom. Immediately the scraping sound began again. I could feel the hairs along the back of my neck rising. It was an effort to keep a casual look on my face as I came back to the living room and stared at the wall ahead of me.

There was a picture hanging on the wall. It showed a cascade of water breaking over the rocks. I noticed with a cold shock of interest that the picture was crooked.

Most people don't notice those things but I do. I've got a crazy habit of liking things straight up and down. At the same time, it occurred to me that the scraping sound was just about where the picture was hanging a little crooked. I started to go over and straighten it. Then I forced myself to turn around and pretend I had to tie my shoe, with my back to the picture.

I watched the picture in a mirror and it moved a few inches. Right beside a notch in the big frame I could see a hole in the wall. When I stood up and swung around the picture was hanging straight again and the hole was covered.

I decided then that this apartment and the adjoining apartment were hooked up together in some kind of racket. Obviously, Ellen Marshall was or had been in on it. It was possible that Ellen Marshall might even be in that next apartment. If not, whoever was in there now probably knew where she was.

I could understand now why Ellen's door was open. There was some tieup with the murder of Ronnie Dykeman.

Whoever was in the next apartment had fixed it that Ellen's door would be open.

Then, if the police or anybody came to investigate, the person next door would be able to watch and find out what the police had on their minds in time to make a clean getaway before the pinch—if things came to that.

Thinking about Ronnie Dykeman and my promise to Jean to see that Ellen Marshall didn't get blamed for the murder, I went out into the corridor and rang the bell of the next apartment.

**A**LMOST before the bell stopped ringing, the door opened and a big, dignified guy came to the door. He smiled at me.

"Yes?" he said.

I barged right in.

"I'm looking for Ellen Marshall. I thought maybe you might know where she is," I said.

He seemed willing to have me come in. In fact, he seemed too willing. He closed the door.

"Well," he said, "perhaps I could help. My name is Chapman. I know her slightly."

I told him my name was Pete Hennessey and he seemed to be trying to place me. He brightened up as he got it.

"Oh, yes. You must be the truck driver who discovered her boy friend, Ronnie Dykeman. I read about it in the paper. Miss Marshall was terribly broken up over it." He smiled again and added: "Will you have a drink?"

"Rye and soda," I said. It would give me a chance to look around his apartment.

He went into his kitchenette and I could hear him cracking ice. I looked at the wall where the hole would be. There was a picture on his side, covering the hole. He called to me as he worked.

"Most unfortunate accident, wasn't it?" He came in with two drinks and handed me one and motioned me to a chair.

"I've got a hunch it was murder, Mr. Chapman," I said and I sat down by a low table.

He sank into a chair about ten feet away and tried to look more surprised than he really was. I took a sip of my drink. It tasted all right, but I didn't like the way he was watching me with his black eyes. He was watching me drink that rye and soda and suddenly the whole setup began to smell like I was being slipped a knockout.

"I thought if I could talk to Miss Marshall it might shine some light on my hunch that Ronnie was murdered," I said.

"Really?" he said. "Well, I'm afraid Miss Marshall can't be reached. She's been out of town for several days."

The minute he said that I was sure he knew where she was and knew a lot about her. I also knew that he was lying, because he'd said at the start she was broken up about Ronnie's death less than two days ago. But now he claimed she had been away for several days.

The whole thing was fishy but I had a hunch that if the knockout stuff in my drink worked, I'd get to see Ellen Marshall. However, I couldn't run the risk of passing out. As it was, I already had a queer feeling from that first sip of my drink.

I felt around in my pockets.

"You wouldn't have a cigarette, would you?" I asked.

It was a relief to see him get up. He went to a table, saying, "I'm sorry. Very thoughtless of me." He opened a drawer in the table at the side of the room and came back with a pack of cigarettes.

While his back was turned I managed to empty the glass onto the carpet under the table beside me. When he swung around to me again I was just tipping the glass up as if I had tossed off the rest of my drink.

I could feel that sip I'd had working, so I knew that I was supposed to pass out quickly—which I did. I let everything go limp and lay back in the chair and pretended I was out cold. I could hear him talking to himself. He thought out loud....

It seemed he'd like to kill me where I was but the "hideout," as he called it, would be safer. He seemed to think that with things closing in on him he'd better get rid of the girl, too, and take a powder.

I could have turned him in then, but I wanted to find where Ellen Marshall was and learn what her hookup was with this guy.

So I stayed limp and he carried me down a back stairs and into the trunk of his car. He didn't tie me up. He was trusting his dope to keep me unconscious. From the way that little sip I'd taken was acting on me, he wasn't far wrong. I got so sleepy and dizzy from that one gulp that I felt certain I would have been out for a week if I'd swallowed the whole glass.

We drove for several hours. Every time we halted for a red light I'd shift my position. It got

tiresome but the constant activity kept me awake.

**F**INALLY, we stopped and I heard him get out. He walked away from the car and after a few seconds a door opened somewhere. It sounded like a house door. Then I heard a woman's voice. She sounded young and I figured it might be Ellen Marshall.

I started doing some hard thinking. If this was the Marshall girl, then I'd found what I wanted. Chapman must have gone in, because I heard the door close and the sound of talking stopped.

The chirping of crickets and other woods, insects told me we were out in the country somewhere.

Meanwhile I kept thinking of what Chapman had said in his apartment about getting rid of the girl along with me, and I decided it was time to get out of my hiding place.

The business coupe whose trunk I was occupying was just like a car that the Dykemans had had on their estate for the help to run errands in. I found some tools in the trunk and started working with a wrench and a screw driver on the panel behind the seat.

I finally got the panel off and was starting to climb out of the trunk through the tonneau when I heard Chapman coming out of the back door.

Something was squeaking as he walked. It sounded as if someone were swinging an empty pail.

I got down in the seat and waited, the wrench still in my hands. Chapman went toward the rear of the car and I got set to have him explode when he opened the trunk and found me missing. But he didn't open the trunk.

There was a squeak of the cap to the gasoline tank being unscrewed. Next I heard gasoline bubbling and running out of the tank into the pail. It wasn't hard to figure how Chapman was going to get rid of Ellen Marshall and me.

He was going to burn the house down over us and he was getting gasoline out of his tank with a syphon tube to light the fire and make sure it burned fast.

Suddenly I realized that he must have already knocked Ellen out or killed her.

The thought of Jean and how I'd promised to do what I could for Ellen drove me to instant

action. With the wrench in my hand, I yanked the latch on the door and jumped out.

Chapman was surprised. He stepped back, but it was dark and I couldn't see too much. All I could do was to keep hitting out with the wrench in my hand.

It was a good thing it was dark. Before I could hit him once, he pulled out his roscoe and started to blast away at me.

I felt a slug tear through the side of my shirt. It burned me, but it didn't stop me. I kept fighting him. With my free hand I trapped his gun wrist. We threshed around in the darkness while his gun roared twice. Both shots went wild.

I belted him along the side of the head with the wrench. As he started to go down I let him have it again with everything I had. He collapsed like a slugged steer. I hit him so hard that I was scared I'd killed him, but I was more worried about Ellen Marshall.

I found her in the house, lying in the small front room. It was a farm house and there was an oil lamp burning on the table.

There was a bucket of water in the kitchen sink and I tossed it over her.

She was a beautiful blonde even though she looked rather mussed up. Evidently she'd given Chapman a tussle before he succeeded in knocking her out. I worked on her a few minutes before she came to. Then I carried her to a couch where she could rest easily. When I asked her what she knew about Ronnie Dykeman's death she looked as surprised as I'd told her the Atlantic Ocean had suddenly dried up.

"Ronnie dead?" she repeated. All at once she was sitting up and had hold of my shoulders and was shaking me. "But he can't be. Not Ronnie."

"Jean figured you couldn't have murdered him," I said and I told her about Jean up at Tobey's.

She started to cry.

"Oh, Ronnie, Ronnie!" she kept saying over and over again.

"You were in love with the guy?" I said.

She kept nodding her head and sobbing.

"I know you and Chapman were together in something," I said. "What was it—blackmail?"

**S**HE kept nodding her head.

"Yes. He picked Ronnie for me to go out

with. He was planning to shake down the Dykemans when Ronnie fell for me. Chapman was going to make them buy me off with pictures he was going to take through a hole in the wall between our apartments."

"And you fell in love with the guy. Right?"

She looked at me with her beautiful eyes, then grabbed my shoulders and started talking fast. "But I didn't have anything to do with killing him. I loved him."

"What were you doing up here—hiding out?"

"That was Chapman's idea. I came up here four days ago. He said we were suspected and—"

"You mean the blackmail racket you had going was being suspected?"

"Yes, yes," she replied. "But I didn't have anything to do with Ronnie's death. I loved him."

"When did Chapman kill Ronnie?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Well," I said, "I think you're telling the truth. But it's time to call in the troopers. Where are we?"

"We're in the back country southeast of Peekskill," she said.

I went to the telephone. It was an old wall number with a crank. I cranked and tried to get central. I could hear a hum as if the line was open and that was all. Most likely the operator was asleep. I kept ringing.

Finally the operator spoke. She sounded sleepy. I opened my mouth to tell her I wanted the state troopers when the door busted open and Chapman stood there.

"Drop that phone," he ordered.

I could see the light from the kerosene lamp glisten on the blue steel of his automatic.

I hung up the phone like a good boy.

"Looks like I came to just in time," he said. "Get those hands up. This is the finish for both of you."

I was pretty desperate. I started playing for time.

"You had a neat racket worked out there, Chapman, with that hole in the wall between your apartment and Ellen Marshall's."

"Okay," he said. "Got anything else to say before you die?"

"I'd like to know one thing," I said. "Why did you want to kill Ronnie Dykeman?"

"Simple," he said. "She fell in love with the

brat. She was going to marry him. The only way I could keep her with me was to get him out of the way."

"So you killed him, beat him up so it would look as if a hit-and-run car had done it, drove his car into the ditch and left his body on the highway. Right?" I was scared as I finished. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"That's right," Chapman said. He had his gun pointed right at my heart. "Start praying, snooper, if you know how."

He took a step toward me. I could see his black eyes in the lamp light. They were looking right through me.

Ellen Marshall was still on the couch, too scared to say anything. She had her hands at her throat and she was as white as her ghost was going to be.

I was trying to figure what chance I'd have if I rushed Chapman when somebody came charging in the back door that Chapman had left open. Chapman wheeled around. When he did that I grabbed the nearest chair and jumped him.

A FARMER was standing in the doorway. He had a double-barreled shotgun in his hands. It was pointed at us but he didn't have a chance to use it because the chair I was swinging came down over Chapman's head and dropped him. The farmer had heard the shots and come over to see what was going on.

Everything came out in the hearing before Inspector Ramsey and the coroner and the troopers. They made Chapman talk plenty and he repeated the facts he had told me. After it was over, Inspector Ramsey shook my hand. "Pete," he said, "I want to thank you personally for your help in getting Chapman. This man has been suspected of being mixed up in blackmail rackets, but he's been too smooth for us. This is the first thing we've been able to pin on him and it'll be the last. If you ever need a little help from my department don't hesitate to call on us."

It made me feel good, but D. P., my boss, went them one better a week later. Seemed the papers had played up the story and they'd plastered the name of his trucking company all over the New York papers. And old D. P. had just enough ham in him to like the idea of having his name in print. D. P. gave me that raise I'd been

wanting to ask him for.

It all made me feel like quite a guy.

Meanwhile, Ellen was sure to get away with a very light sentence for testifying against Chapman. That would make Jean feel very good.

I began to think about stopping over on my next run to see Jean at Tobey's Truck Haven. I'd tell her what I'd done.

Maybe she'd get to think I was a great guy, too.