

SATAN HOLDS THE KEY



On the trail of a fortune in stolen goods, Mike Dobson runs into murder—and battles to unlock the sealed door of a bewildering crime mystery!



A NOVELET BY B. J. BENSON

CHAPTER I

Killer On A Rampage

IT WAS Thursday, the day I was covering the pawnshops. I was looking in the window of the Central Loan Company on Water Street near the Center City railroad station, looking at the usual collection of cheap musical instruments, clocks and sporting goods. It was the ninth shop I had hit that afternoon and I was getting tired.

I opened the door and went inside. A rusted bell jangled feebly over my head. The wrinkled old man behind the cashier's grill looked up at me.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Dobson," he said. "I thought for a moment it was a customer."

"You never can tell, Mr. Greer," I said. "Some day I might come in and hock my tin wrist watch."

"No, not you, Mr. Dobson. I was just telling my wife last night what a fine business you do. You get more private detective work than you can handle. I know. It's too much for

one man. You should have a partner."

"No, Sam. I like to work alone and I don't like to make too much money. I might get soft and start to slip."

"Well, maybe you're right," he said. "Me, I work alone because I can't afford to keep a man. All hours, too. But it's a living and I'm not complaining. But you now, I suppose you're looking for something."

"Yes. Jewelry. I'm working on the Binns case."

"The Binns case. My, my, that was some robbery. Right in broad daylight, too. The papers say it amounted to thirty-seven thousand dollars. Newspaper talk, I suppose."

"No," I said. "That was the take. But the Binns Company only had ten thousand dollars coverage on it."

"Too bad. But a big professional job like that—they wouldn't come to a little shop with the stuff."

"It's a funny case, Sam. You know how the insurance companies work. The Seaboard Casualty has the usual reward out, twenty-five percent of the coverage. So far we haven't had

a word from the usual places. Nothing's showed. We're not sure it was a professional job."

"No wonder you're not getting any action," Greer said. "You're paying only twenty-five hundred dollars for almost forty thousand dollars worth of goods. How come a big wholesale jewelry firm like Binns should have such small insurance?"

"I told you it was a funny case, Sam. Arthur Slater, the salesman whose car was robbed, ordinarily handles less than ten grand in samples. Tuesday, the day of the robbery, he had a special account to see. That's why he carried the big load."

THE old pawnbroker gave me a shrewd glance, and then shook his head.

"Sounds like monkey business," he said.

"Yes, but that part of it was all right. Slater parked his car in front of Pierre's, the big account he called on. He brought the sample cases in, got a big order, and came out. It was noon. He locked the jewelry in the car and went around the corner to have his lunch. When he got back a half hour later the car was still locked, but the stuff was gone. And right downtown in Center City, too."

"Monkey business," Greer said. "I read where he had a burglar alarm on the car, and there was a cop directing traffic at the next corner. The alarm didn't go off? It was broken?"

"No. It was perfect. We tested it ourselves. The alarm is wired to a dry cell in the trunk. There's an alarm lock on the door. You can't open the door unless you first shut the alarm off with a key. If you don't the siren sounds under the hood."

"So they forced the trunk or hood and disconnected the wires."

"You can't do that either. You can't force a door, window or the trunk or hood. The whole, car is wired. The alarm would go off. Slater didn't lose the keys, either. He had them with him."

"It's still monkey business," Greer said. "This Slater could have planned the whole thing. He could have had extra key made and given them to somebody to do the job."

"He could have," I said. "That's what the cops think."

"But you don't think so?"

I shrugged. "I've got a hunch the kid's on the level. He's a new salesman and his wife's expecting a baby next month. His job is now suspended until the bonding company clears him. After the robbery he came to my office and wanted to hire me. He was desperate. He didn't have much dough, but he said he'd try to borrow some somewhere. That's why to me it doesn't figure. Of course I told him to save his dough for the new kid. I was getting paid by Seaboard."

"Then I hope you're right," Greer said. "But I don't know if I can help you. Business has been very quiet and I haven't taken in much. How far back do you want it?"

"Just since Tuesday, Sam."

He brought out a short list and I ran my eye down it. I saw nothing until I hit the last item. It was a seventeen-jewel, ten-carat, gold-filled Hamel wrist watch. The name said Howard Jones.

I pointed to it.

"About two hours ago," Greer said. "This little fellow comes in and wants twenty-five for it. I offered him ten. He took twelve."

"Did he have it in the box?"

"He was wearing it, but it looked brand new."

"You said a little fellow?"

"That's right."

"A skinny little fellow, with small mean eyes and a long nose. A nervous little guy."

"That's him."

"Eddie Balkus," I said. "An habitual small time grab-and-run artist. We sent him up a couple of years ago for stealing jewelry out of a department store. He got two-to-five. I guess he's out now."

I took out the notebook with the serial

numbers of the Binns' watches. Greer got out the ledger. He turned it around the counter to me. I compared figures.

"It's a Binns watch, all right," I said. "I'll give you a receipt for it and take it along."

Greer went to the safe to get the watch. I fished in my pocket for my cigarettes. The bell jingled behind me. I heard the door open. I twisted my head around to see who had come in.

He was wearing a cheap blue flannel suit and his face was pale and bony. He was small and skinny and he had small mean eyes and a long nose. There was a gun in his hand pointing in our general direction.

My hand moved instinctively to my shoulder holster. His eyes narrowed a little.

"Were you going to do something, Dobson?" he asked.

I looked at the automatic he was holding and dropped my hand.

"No, Eddie," I said. "I wasn't going to do a thing."

"That's what I thought," he said softly. "I know you, Dobson, so no tricks. Move away from the counter."

I EDGED away. Balkus moved in, reached over the counter, and turned the portable radio on loud. Then with his eye on me he stepped around in back and pushed old Greer against the wall with his free hand.

"Open the safe, Pop," he said.

"It's open," Greer said.

Still watching me, Balkus turned the handle on the old safe. With one hand, he began stuffing things in his pocket. Going to the cash register, he rang it open, snorted in disgust, and closed it.

"You never were smart, Eddie," I said. "But this is about the stupidest stunt I ever saw pulled."

"No lip, Dobson. You ain't so tough that you can't stop a slug."

"Don't push me, Balkus," I said. "To me, you're still a two-bit punk."

"This time I got insurance, wise guy," he said as he looked down at his gun. "Remember that when you get a tummy full of lead."

He took me completely by surprise. He turned to Greer who stood with his hands in the air. He lifted the gun and shot Greer twice in the face. I dropped at the sound of the first shot and clawed for my gun.

As he swung the gun to me, my own was out spitting flame. He shot at the same time, the bullet whining off the steel cashier's grill near my head. Mine caught him full in the neck. As he started to fall, I had another going in to make sure. He dropped heavily to the floor the jewelry spilling from his bulging pocket.

Outside the store a woman's scream pierced the air as pedestrians scattered. I got up off the floor and turned him over. He was dead. I went behind the counter where Greer was huddled like a bag of old clothes. I didn't have to feel his pulse; not after looking at what was left of his face.

I got up from the body of the old man and wiped my forehead although the air was cool. I reached in my pocket and finally got out the pack of cigarettes. I lighted one and took a deep drag. Then I heard the wail of a siren and a prowler car careened up to the front of the store and squealed to a stop.

CHAPTER II

Brass Candlestick

LIEUTENANT Gillis looked out of the pawnshop window at the cops shooing the crowd along. He took his hat off and ran long white fingers through his sparse reddish-brown hair. Then he turned to me again.

"Too bad about Sam Greer," he said. "Nice old man. Been on this spot for forty-seven years. Ran a clean business."

"Yes," I said. "A rotten way to finish off."

"Well, I'm the one who has to tell his

wife," he said, scratching his thin wise face. "Mike, one of these days I am going to quit this homicide business and get me a job as custodian in a public library."

"You've been saying that for years, Pete. You'll never quit. They'll have to break your leg to retire you. You were born a cop."

"Maybe," he said. "But I still don't see where the Binns job ties in here. Balkus could have picked up that watch anywhere. I can't see a small time grifter like Balkus mixed up in a big haul. He wasn't that smart. He didn't think that big."

I shook my head. "He could have been part of it. Only he forgot he was finally in the big time and pledged the watch for a piece of quick change. The way it looks to me he was stooging for somebody who had the brains. Somebody who found out that Balkus hocked the watch and spoiled the whole pitch. That somebody made him come back to pick the watch up and knock off Greer, or anyone else around. They were taking no chances on an identification."

"Maybe," he said. "But the Binns job was smooth. So smooth that either the rankest amateur or the slickest pro pulled it. The only pro who could have pulled it was Jerry Noyes. And if Noyes hadn't been in the jug these four years I'd swear it was his work."

"Noyes?"

"That's right, you were in the Army when we grabbed him. Came into town and started cleaning up the big homes in the Alton Park district. Jewelry only. The stuff never showed and we found out later that he had fences out of state. He was smart. He pulled the jobs during the summer when the people were gone. Did them in broad daylight. Drove a car with gas company seals on the front door panels. We grabbed him by luck. A real gas company man had a call next door to a house Noyes was working on. The gas man got suspicious and called the cops. It was one of those thousand-to-one shots."

"What's all that got to do with this?" I

asked.

"Just reminiscing. I was thinking of Noyes's wife. Some black-haired ex-showgirl. I saw her in the courtroom and I realized what it must have meant to Noyes to cop fifteen years. That was the first time I ever felt sorry for a criminal. She was some dish."

"Snap your mind back to the present."

Gillis took a deep breath. "Okay. Here it is in simple language. Balkus couldn't have done it alone. Noyes is in the pokey. That leaves you with an amateur to find. No charge for the advice, old boy."

"Thanks," I said. "What do I do? Buy an ouija board?"

"You might tell Sergeant Truro to get off his fat hams and squeeze Slater a little. Slater's an amateur. He might sing a pretty song. I've seen those jobs pulled before, too, you know."

"You and your police mind. You wouldn't trust your own mother-in-law."

"Not with thirty-seven thousand in jewelry, I wouldn't. Anyway, that's Robbery Squad's headache—Truro's headache—not mine. My end here is all wrapped up. I can close this as a routine stick-up. I'll take you downtown and square this justifiable homicide rap. It won't take more than an hour."

"Let's go and get it over with," I said. "I have work to do."

At four o'clock I left the District Court, got into my car, and drove back uptown. Across from the Jewelers Building I found a parking space and jockeyed my heap in. I got out of my car and noticed I was parked in front of a five and dime. There was a neon sign in the window which said:

KEYS MADE WHILE U WAIT

I looked at it for a moment then crossed the street into the Jewelers Building.

The elevator starter was a big fleshy man of about forty. He was six feet tall and he looked like he weighed two fifty. He had a fat red face and blond bristly hair like a

porcupine. He wore white gloves and a tight fitting maroon uniform with brass buttons the size of quarters. His name was Raymond Asher.

"No," he said after looking at my shield. "I didn't see anybody suspicious hanging around Tuesday morning. Mr. Slater takes his stuff down the freight elevator in back. There's always a guard there from the J.P.A. What's it all about, Mr. Dobson? The police asked me the same thing."

"Just making sure Mr. Asher," I said.

HE looked around, saw the first elevator was filled, and signaled the girl with his hand snapper. The elevator doors closed.

The second elevator had come down and emptied out and I said thanks and went over to the girl. She was wearing the same maroon uniform but it did more for her than it did for Asher. She was small and round and cuddly with baby blue eyes and an innocent look on her round face. She flashed me a big smile. Her name was Lydia Earnshaw.

"You're late," she said with a smile. "The police asked us all that yesterday. No, I didn't see a thing, Mr. — Do I have to call you *Mr.* Dobson? Is that because you're a married man?"

"Nobody would have me," I said.

"You're kidding me," she said. "You're cute, Mike. I didn't know private detectives were so good looking."

"I was going to say the same thing about elevator girls. Ever see this salesman, Slater, talking to anyone here in the lobby?"

"No. I know who he is. He runs in and out. Always a worried look on his face. You can't trust those quiet ones. These kind of robberies have happened here before, if you know what I mean."

"I know," I said. "But not very often. Thanks for the information."

"Oh, that's all right. I'm always anxious to please. . . especially somebody with big shoulders."

"They come with the suit," I said, getting away fast. I noticed the first elevator was empty, that the operator was waiting for customers. I went over to it.

This girl had jet black hair cut in a feather bob. She had soft skin and no makeup except for dark red lipstick." She had a short nose and a nicely rounded face. She was wearing the same maroon uniform—the skirt flaring out over a pair of well-rounded calves. She smiled. She had nice teeth. Her name was Mildred Case.

"The police asked me that," she said. "I told them I didn't see a thing on Tuesday." She looked at me again, a little more closely. "You look like you have an honest face, mister."

"It's my only virtue," I said. She smiled again.

"I *did* see something funny that morning," she said. "But I didn't want to get mixed up in any trouble."

"There'll be no trouble," I said. "Just the opposite. There's a good reward out."

"I don't care about any reward," she said. "I mind my own business." She looked at the elevator starter and then back at me. "We're not supposed to talk to anybody while on duty. They're very strict about it here. I live in a rooming house at Three-Twenty-Seven West Linden Street. Tonight at eight o'clock. Room four."

I nodded my head.

I checked with the other two elevator girls and found out nothing. I left there and drove down to Police Headquarters. Detective Sergeant Truro had just come in. He looked unhappy.

"Just got back from Pierre's and vicinity again," he panted, wiping the moisture from his warm fat face. "It's no use. Nobody around there saw a thing. Nothing. What about you? Heard you knocked off Balkus. What'd they find on him?"

"Nothing except a gun, a pawn ticket, and a few bucks. They're checking the gun."

"And the watch?" he asked hopefully.

"All we have to do is to find out how Balkus got it."

"That's all, just that," he said. "Boy, this one's a beaut. Let me know if you find anything. Let's have some cooperation this time."

"You know me, Phil," I said.

"That's just the trouble," he complained. "I do know you. You'll play it solo."

It was seven-thirty when I showered and shaved, got dressed, and slipped on my shoulder holster and the .38 Smith and Wesson. I left my apartment, got into my car, and drove out to the west end of the city with its long grimy rows of cheap tenements of red brick and peeling paint. I turned up West Fifth Street and passed used clothing stores, used furniture stores, and cheap neon signs of furtive seedy hotels. Scattered here and there were the pawnshops I had covered in the afternoon.

NUMBER 327 West Linden Street was sandwiched in between some old brownstone houses. It was a two-story run-down job with dirty curtains in the windows and a sign on the front door glass that said *Rooms*.

I went up the front stairs and inside. There were a row of moldy old bells with numbers and cards underneath. I saw Number Four and the card under it read *Mildred Case*. I pressed the button and waited. I thumbed it again and waited. The hall had that musty lodging house smell of mice and old furniture and dust. Then I started up the rickety hall stairs.

I passed rooms One, Two, and Three in order. Number Four was the last door in a narrow ill-lighted hall. I knocked. There was no answer. I tried the door. It was locked. I was about to turn away when I heard a sound like a moan inside.

I went back and hit the door with my two hundred pounds. The door gave. I kicked it open and went inside.

The room was poorly furnished with an old four-poster bed, some well worn overstuffed pieces and a shredded old rug on the floor.

There was a parchment shade lamp casting a small light over a battered table.

At first all I saw was something that looked like a rumpled brown dress on the floor. But sticking out of the dress, clad in the rolled stockings, were a pair of legs wearing brown leather pumps. I went over fast and looked at her. She was lying face down and the back of her head was badly dented. Her jet black hair was matted and the blood was still oozing down to her neck from where it, went sideways onto the floor and rug.

She moaned again. I lifted her head gently. But as I did, she gave a gasp, some blood trickled out of the corner of her mouth, and she was gone.

I felt of her pulse but it was all over for Mildred Case. I stood up and looked around and then I saw a pair of black ankle strap platform shoes protruding out from under the curtain that was used as a closet.

In them were a pair of perfectly shaped silken ankles.

I eased my gun out of the holster and moved over to the curtain. I kept feeling I was doing it all wrong. I started to turn around but I never quite made it. There was a step behind me—a slight, slithering sound—and something hard came down on the back of my head and exploded in a blaze of white sparks. I saw the faded carpet come up to meet me as I went out. . . .

When I opened my eyes again and sat up, the body of Mildred Case was still there across from me. Otherwise the place was empty, the black shoes, and the legs with them, were gone from behind the curtain. The door to the hallway was closed. On the floor was my twenty-dollar hat with the back of it mashed in. I got up and put it on. Then I looked at my watch. It was eight twenty-five. I had been out twenty minutes.

There was an old, heavy brass candlestick on the floor. It had done a good job on me but a better one on the body on the floor. I didn't touch it. I looked around for my gun. I crawled under the bed. I went into the tiny kitchenette alcove, I tore the closet curtain apart. The gun was gone.

I went out and closed the door. There was nobody around and the hall was silent. I went down the stairs to the pay telephone on the wall. I rested my aching head against the faded wallpaper, fished a nickel in, and called headquarters. .

"Let's have Lieutenant Gillis of Homicide," I said.

CHAPTER III

Slater Remembers

THE police didn't waste any time in getting the investigation started. "Dead about thirty minutes maybe more," the M.E. said with a frown. "Blunt object. The cause of death was a hemorrhage from a bad fracture at the base of the skull. Any further information would have to come after the autopsy."

Gillis pointed at the candlestick which now lay on a white cloth on the table. "Could that be it, Doc?"

The medical examiner looked at it. He scratched a fat red ear. "Yes. That could be the object, Lieutenant."

Gillis looked over at the print man. The print man looked sad.

"All smudges, Lieutenant," he said. "But we're dusting the whole place."

"I can see how this one is going to run," said Gillis. "All we'll pick up here is plenty of worry." He turned to the doctor and the photo men. "All clear?"

They said yes, packed their equipment, and went out. Gillis spoke to one of his plainclothes men. "Rafferty, tell the landlady we'll see her now." Then he turned to me.

"Here we go again," he said. "Every time I bump into you we have corpses on the floor."

"I'm just plain lucky," I said. "I'm still on the Binns job. And this is part of it."

"No," he groaned. "Don't tell me you've dragged me into it."

"The girl was an elevator operator in the Jewelers Building. I saw her this afternoon. She said she had a lead for me." I told him the rest of it. I told him everything. He looked at me thoughtfully.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The shoes under the curtain," he said. "A Mrs. Peabody reported that there was a yellow convertible parked near the pawnshop this afternoon. A blonde girl was sitting in it with the motor running. When the cops came she took off fast."

"Good. She get the number?"

"No. She was so busy admiring the girl's hairdo that she didn't even know what the make of the car was."

"Lovely," I said. "I can just picture Balkus with a beautiful blonde. The next thing you'll have me doing is believing in Santa Claus. What about Balkus's gun?"

"A thirty-two German Walther. He could have picked it up from anyone of five million ex-G.I.s. Talking about guns reminds me they took Mike Dobson's gun away."

"Don't remind me."

"Mike Dobson, the tough private eye. The Mayor's favorite hero. The All American boy. Just like he was a kid with a water pistol. It'll make nice reading in your favorite paper."

"Go ahead," I said. "Slap it on. I can use it. It goes well with my headache."

"So now we have three good clues. A blonde, a pair of fancy shoes and your gun. We mustn't forget your gun, must we?"

"Fat chance I'll have of you forgetting."

"If you hadn't stuck your neck out, if you hadn't tried to play it alone like you always do, we might have bagged the whole thing tonight."

"I play things alone," I said, "because I get better results that way. If I stick with cops, everything's got to be strictly legal. You can't do it in private work and get results. And if I had told Truro about the lead, do you think he would have bothered? He'd say 'Run along, Mike, and let's know what you find.' He's got a small squad. Murphy's trailing the salesman. Gilbert's on the Mayberry job and he, himself, is sending the jewelry readers over the teletype and covering pawnshops at the same time. How could he spare another man?"

"All right, all right," Gillis said. "You know we're shorthanded. Why don't you tell your buddy, the Police Commissioner, that?"

"Anyway, the girl might not have known a thing. She might have seen Slater wink at the girl at the cigar counter once. That could have been a lead."

"Not any more, it could have been."

"No, not now. She had something. But I didn't know. I'm no mind reader."

"Look," said Gillis. "Now he's sore."

THE landlady, Mrs. Troy, came in just then with Rafferty. She was a middle-aged harriidan with red dyed hair and a big dirty house dress on. She had bleary red eyes and a thin compressed mouth.

"That poor, poor girl," she whimpered.

"Did you hear anything, Mrs. Troy?" Gillis asked the red-eyed woman.

"I didn't hear a thing all night. I was in my living room having a cup of tea with Mrs. Frawley who occupies Room Three. I try to keep a respectable place. I'm not a well woman and the doctor said if I work too hard—"

"What do you know about Mildred Case?" Gillis asked.

"Not much. I don't poke my nose in my tenants' affairs. I keep a respectable place and I try to—"

"We know all that," Gillis said. "How long did Mildred Case live here?"

"Six months," she sniffed, taking out a dirty rag of a handkerchief. "A nice, sweet, quiet girl. Minded her own business. Didn't have any visitors, and paid her rent regularly every Friday. Just the type of tenant I keep in this respectable place of—"

"Yes, Mrs. Troy," sighed Gillis. "Where did she come from?"

"She told me she came from a little town called West Bend. She was an orphan and she worked in a textile mill there. She got tired of it and came to the city and got a job as an elevator operator. A lot of good it did the poor soul. This sinful city. I watched out after her like she was my own daughter. And let me tell you, her own mother couldn't have—"

Gillis said: "You say she never had any visitors?"

"Nobody. She'd go to a movie once or twice a week and that's all. She didn't know anybody in Center City."

"Thank you, Mrs. Troy. That's all for now. You can go." He turned to Rafferty. "Check the other two roomers when they come in. Also this West Bend business. Known enemies, boy friends, relatives, previous employment, debt, everything. I'll talk to Mrs. Frawley myself." He looked at me and took his glasses off. His face was pinched.

"A lot of good we'll get out of that," he said. "It all comes back to the Binns case. I'll tell you where the tie-in is. It's Slater. I'm going to have him brought in right now. I'll sweat him myself. He'll talk, or he'll stay put until he does. I'll throw a charge on him if I have to."

"Look, Pete," I said. "I've thrown a lot of weight around this town, and my old man before me when he was mayor. I remember you before the clean-up when you were growing hair on your ears as a sergeant in Records And Identification. I helped get you out and back into Homicide. I never asked you for a favor and you never asked me. That's how clean it's been, all the way. Now I'm

asking you for one. A small one. Just lay off the kid for another day."

"Why?"

"Sure you'll get him to talk. He's in such a bad way, he'll say anything you want him to. He's young and he's just starting out and he's had a lot of tough luck. And when the cops get through with him he's liable to get soured like stale milk. He's got a frightened wife, a kid coming, and no job."

"You still think he's on the level?"

"I think so," I said. "I want you to let me work alone for another day. If I miss out I'll come in and bring Slater with me. Fair enough?"

He thought for a moment.

"Fair enough, Mike."

I stood up and felt my throbbing head.

"You all right?" he asked.

"My head hurts that's all. I'm going home."

"Go ahead," he said.

Later, back in my home, the ornamental clock over the fireplace of my living room said 10:15 when the door buzzer sounded. I went over and opened the door. A man was standing there. He was about twenty-four, medium height, plain looking, with a plain gray suit and a plain gray hat. His face was pale and thin and he looked like he hadn't had much sleep lately.

"I came over as soon as you called," he said.

I shook his hand. "Sit down, Slater. Drink?"

He said, "Yes, thanks." And I poured him a good hooker of good bourbon.

HE took the drink fast—at one take—with no chaser. I poured him another. The color came back to his face a little.

"I just came from Mildred Case's place," I said, watching his face. "She's dead."

He looked puzzled. "Mildred Case?"

"You don't know her?"

"No."

"Do you know any Mildreds?"

"No. The only Mildred I ever heard of is an elevator operator in the Jewelers Building. I don't know her last name."

"Her last name's Case. She was murdered tonight. That's why I called you over here. Tomorrow night the cops are going to take you in and talk to you. They have ways of making you say things."

"What am I going to do?" he asked, opening and closing his hands.

"Lieutenant Gillis won't rough you up. He has other ways of making you responsive. I thought I'd ask a few questions first."

"We went over everything Wednesday. But anything you want to know Mr. Dobson. Anything."

"All right. Did you ever hear of a guy named Eddie Balkus?"

"Not until I read tonight's paper. I read where he stuck up a pawnshop and you killed him."

"Never hear of him before that?"

"No."

"Any stranger talk to you about your business recently?"

He shook his head. "Not that I can remember."

"Anybody hang around the loading platform?" I asked. "Now I know there's a guard there from the Jewelers Protective Alliance. I mean any employee from another company who had no business there. Anybody?"

"I don't think so."

"Notice anybody follow you Tuesday? Near Pierre's? When you went to lunch?"

"No."

"Arthur," I said. "I'm in a blind alley. I know you've contributed to this whole thing. I can't find out how."

He stood up. His face was white again.

"I'd better leave," he whispered. "You're a big man in this city, Mr. Dobson. Your father was mayor for twelve years. You have big connections. I know you're the only one who

could clear me. But now you don't believe me either. I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you I'm innocent, that I don't know anything about the robbery or the killings."

"Sit down, kid," I said. "You've got me wrong. I didn't mean it that way. I mean the whole thing has been too slick. Those things don't happen just like that. Someway, somehow, you contributed to it unknowingly. You did something which, in itself, was unimportant. Now I want you to think and think hard."

"I was thinking. I was thinking that a wax impression could have been taken of the alarm lock and a key made. There was plenty of chances of that."

"Not on your lock. Those locks are fixed so wax impressions can't be made."

I got up, went over to the table, and got myself a cigarette. I brought him one. We lighted up. I sat down again.

"It's those keys of yours," I said. "I know that's where the connection is. You had those keys on you at all times Tuesday?"

"Yes."

"They never left you? Not for a minute?"

He hesitated. "Wait a minute. They did."

"When?"

"A lot of salesmen load every morning on the back platform. Sometimes I couldn't get my car in. So I'd leave it out front when I'd come in in the morning and give the keys to the elevator starter, Asher. When I was ready, I'd call down to the lobby and Asher would drive the car around back for me. That was so I could stay with the stock when I brought it down the freight elevator."

"And this Tuesday morning Asher drove the car around for you?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell him you were going to carry a heavy load?"

"Yes, I did," he said. "I told him it would take me half an hour to get it ready. The car was waiting when I got out back."

I went over to the desk drawer and took

out the big Colt .45, putting a full magazine in. I slid it into my pocket. His eyes widened.

"You mean you have something?" he asked.

"Just a good sized hunch, that's all."

"Then I'll go along. I want to help, Mr. Dobson."

I went over to the wall switch and turned the lights off.

"What's that for?" he asked.

I called him over to the window and spread one of the slats of the venetian blinds.

"Look out there," I said. "In the doorway across the street you'll see a tall guy who looks like the Washington monument with ears. His name's Murphy. He's a cop. He's been on your tail steady since Tuesday. You go home and stay home. That way you'll take Murphy with you and away from me."

CHAPTER IV

A Trap Is Sprung

CONNOR, Night Superintendent of the Jewelers Building, had a list of all the building employees. He gave me Asher's address. It was 2012 Atlantic Avenue.

I came out of the building quickly and got in behind the wheel of my car. I spun it around and headed east. A light drifting fog had come up, hazing the street lamps, and making the pavements damp.

Atlantic Avenue was a cobblestoned street running along the harbor and parallel to the wharves. The fog was drifting in heavier, bringing in the salt sea air. Foghorns were now mourning in the harbor.

I cruised along slowly until I spotted the number. It was a single doorway next to a marine hardware store that had a second-story apartment. All windows were dark.

It was 11:18. I stood outside the door looking up. A police car went by slowly and disappeared in the thickening fog. I tried the door to 2012. It opened. I flashed my pocket

light at the bell inside. It said Raymond Asher.

I moved upstairs on my toes. At the top there was a narrow door facing me. I eased the doorknob very slowly. It was locked. I got out my steel wire and jiggled the old-fashioned lock open. The door creaked as I went in.

I switched the lights on half-expecting to find a body on the floor. I was wrong. There was nobody home. It was a two-room flat and a bathroom. The bedroom ordinary, maple furniture, clean and masculine. The living room simply furnished and well taken care of.

I began to dig. Everywhere. Everything. I probed the upholstery in the living room furniture, the walls, light fixtures and molding. I tapped the water closet in the bathroom. In the bedroom I hefted the mattress, ran through three neatly pressed suits and three dresser drawers of personal effects.

I flipped the pages of the few books and magazines. I ran through the kitchen and even knocked on the plumbing traps. I did a good job. I found no jewelry, no safe deposit keys, no names, no pictures, no claim checks, no addresses. I found nothing.

I went over to the telephone table and flipped the telephone book again. I shook it. I opened the inside cover and then I noticed the faint pencilling on the inside flap. It said Valerie Clements and the number was 5-5700. I thought about the two zeros for a moment then ran through the classified section. I was right for once. It was a hotel in a nice part of town. I dialed the number and waited. The switchboard at the other end said, "Sherwood Arms" and I said "Miss Valerie Clements" and waited again. Then the phone went up and a voice answered.

"Hello," I said. "Valerie?"

"Yes," she said after a little pause. Her voice was low and sultry and just a little bit cautious. "Who's this?"

"Say, I'm looking for Ray Asher," I said quickly. "Is he there?"

"Not right now—I mean—whom did you say—?"

I hung up.

I went out, got in my car and drove over to the Sherwood Arms.

It was a swank apartment hotel of white limestone with a high arched entrance, a fringed canopy, and a huge doorman with fifty dollars worth of gold braid on his uniform.

I went through on the thick carpet and into the big marble and gold lobby. At the desk there was a thin clerk with thin hair and a tired but polite smile on his face.

"Miss Valerie Clements," I said.

"Whom shall I say is calling?" he asked.

"Tell her Vic Balkus. Eddie's brother. She'll know."

He picked up the house phone and spoke into it softly.

"Go right up, sir. Suite Eight-Two-Five. That's on the eighth floor."

The gold and glass cage glided up to a smooth stop at the eighth floor and I moved out over a hall runner that seemed a foot thick. When I came to a door marked 825, I had my hand on the Colt in my pocket. I pushed the little pearl button and heard the chimes inside. The door opened almost immediately. I took my hat off when I saw her.

She wore her sleek blond hair in a long bob with bangs in front. She had tiny jade earrings in her small ears and a mouth which was warm and sensual. Her face was oval with a small tipped nose and tiny nostrils. She was on the tall side with perfectly shaped legs sheathed in sheer nylon and she was wearing a skin tight green dress like she was poured into it, with just the right curves in just the right places.

She waved me in with lacquered red nails. I went by her. Her perfume smelled like thirty dollars an ounce.

"Sit down," she said, flicking long eyelashes over her lake blue eyes.

I SANK down into a down filled, gold colored divan and looked around. The place was expensively furnished in light-colored

mahogany and thick white shag rugs. There was a Capehart playing muted music.

She sat down beside me and passed an opened teakwood cigarette box.

"No thanks," I said.

"Drink?"

"No. Thanks again."

"You're not Vic Balkus," she said as she curled her legs cozily under her. "Eddie didn't have a brother."

"No. My name's Dobson. Mike Dobson. I knew Eddie only professionally."

She picked up a silver cigarette holder from the table and fitted a cigarette into it. I lighted it for her.

"You're the private cop who killed Eddie today," she said. "What are you looking for?"

"I was wondering how Balkus fitted in with all this," I said, waving my hand. "And looking at you now I was wondering about other things."

"He didn't. Is that all?"

"No. I'm looking for jewelry. I had a deal from the Seaboard Casualty."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about, Dobson. Your hat's over there."

"You don't care to have a little chat?"

"Your hat, Mr. Dobson."

"Okay," I said. "Those are nice shoes you're wearing. They stand out. Especially under a closet curtain in a dead girl's room. Does that change your mind?"

She took a deep draw on her cigarette then wreathed the smoke out through a perfectly shaped mouth.

"That's different, dear," she said. "Let's talk, shall we?"

"Glad to. You must be an expensive girl friend for Asher. How'd you chum him up?"

"I found he was the elevator starter at the Jewelers Building. He was in a very good spot and didn't know it. I met him at a bar a week ago. It was easy."

I looked her over. I could see it was.

"What else do you know," she said.

"I know that Tuesday, before Asher drove the car around the block to Slater at the loading platform, he gave the keys to Balkus. Balkus ran into the five-and-ten across the street and had duplicate keys made. Then when Slater went to lunch Balkus went over to the car and took all the stock out. He must have worn his clean shirt that day."

"He did. Eddie was instructed very carefully."

"It was a perfect job," I said. "But something happened. The elevator girl, Mildred Case, saw Asher pass the keys. Asher got suspicious at the way she was looking at him. Tonight you and Asher went over and killed her."

She looked at me languidly. I might have been talking about the price of copra in New Guinea.

"There's one thing I haven't got straight," I said. "How'd you get Eddie Balkus?"

"My husband recommended him, dear. He's doing fifteen years. He met Balkus in prison. When Balkus got out, Jerry sent him to me."

"Jerry," I said. "Jerry Noyes. You're his wife. The hair fooled me."

"It's a woman's privilege to change her name, her mind—and her hair. Jerry did very well in the jewelry business. He had contacts out of state."

"He's got contacts inside the state now, state prison. But if he's a good boy he'll be out in five or six years. You don't look like the type who'd wait, though."

"I'm not, dear. But he still has good ideas. He spoiled me. He gave me expensive tastes."

"Those tastes get you in trouble."

"I manage, darling," she said. "You said you had a deal from the insurance company."

"Had," I said. "Past tense. There's been a couple of killings. All bets off."

SHE looked at me calculatingly for a moment or two. Finally she spoke:

"I still have the jewelry. Your job is to get it."

"I think we'll find it. This looks like a good place."

"We could make a deal," she said moving closer. "I love to make deals."

"You probably do all right, too."

"I have a lot to offer."

"I can see that. But I've got to cut two others in on the deal. I'm not on this alone."

"Who, darling?"

"There's Lieutenant Gillis and Sergeant Truro. They'd get mad if I didn't let them in on it."

I got up and went over to an ivory phone on a desk. As I got there I heard a voice. A man's this time.

"Put up your hands, Dobson."

I raised them and turned around. It was Ray Asher standing in the door leading to the bedroom. His face was flushed and he was breathing hard. He had my .38 Smith and Wesson in his hand. I looked reproachfully at Valerie.

"That's not fair," I said. "He was here all the time."

She laughed, showing perfect teeth. "Why, darling, you didn't think I'd let you use the phone? Not after me saying all those intimate things?"

"It's not cricket," I said. "He isn't wearing his uniform. Not only that but he's using my gun."

"No cracks," he said. "See if he's carrying anything, Val."

She glided over and patted me carefully. She was sure not to get between me and Asher. She found my Colt and took it out.

"It's getting so you can't trust anyone," I said.

"Get away, Val," said Asher. "I'll give it to him right now."

"Not on this nice white rug," I said. "Besides, what would the management say when they saw you lugging me out on your shoulder?"

"Raymond's very impetuous," Valerie said to me. To Asher she said, "We'll walk him out of here. My convertible is parked out in front. We'll take a little ride and then we'll drop him somewhere, and the gun, too." She sighed. "Too bad, such a lovely hunk of man."

"Get smart, Asher," I said. "I know this type. She'll throw you to the wolves the first chance she gets."

"I'll take my chances," he said as Valerie went into the bedroom to get her coat. She came back and put the Colt in her large purse.

"Put your gun in your pocket, Ray, and keep it on him," she said.

We went out of the apartment. He had the gun in his pocket pushed against my side. We went down the golden cage together.

"Cozy, isn't it?" I said in the elevator.

"Shut up," he warned as we stepped out into the lobby.

We started out to the entrance. When we got halfway through I stopped.

"Get moving," whispered Asher.

"I'm in no hurry," I said. "I was supposed to meet someone here."

Valerie stopped and looked at me. "Too easy," she said softly. "Yes, indeed. I *thought* he let us take him too easy."

"I'll shoot him," Asher said.

"Not here in the lobby," I said. "You've seen too many movies, Asher. What would all these well dressed people say? What would the night clerk say? They'd be horrified."

"I've got nothing to lose, funny man. I'll shoot and we'll make a break for it."

"You'll never make it," I said. "There are cops all over the place."

"You're bluffing, Dobson," he said.

"It's no bluff, Asher." I turned at the voice. Asher tried to but he couldn't. Lieutenant Gillis had his long arms wrapped around him. Another plainclothes man stepped up and put his hand on Valerie's bag. She slapped his face as he took it. People began to mill around us until two uniformed cops came in and cleared a path to the outside and the

waiting police cars.

"You're a fine one," I said to Gillis. "That cost me five years of my life."

"It was your idea," he said with a straight face. "You said you wanted to lead them down here so we could grab Asher with the Smith and Wesson on him."

"Yeah, but I said to take him when we stepped out of the elevator."

"You wanted to be the guinea pig." He was grinning. "We had enough time. I wanted you to appreciate the value of cooperation."

I turned around and started back into the lobby.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm still working for Seaboard on this one. I'm going upstairs and pick up the jewelry."

I went up the elevator again to the eighth floor. When I got in the apartment, the first thing I did was to call Slater. After that I felt better. I ran through the place. The jewelry was easy to find. She had it all packed away and locked in her luggage.

I didn't check the jewelry myself, either. Like the cop he is, Gillis sent two men along after me.

Not that he didn't trust me, he said.