

DEEP WITHOUT PITY

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

HIS EYES WERE OPEN and his head bobbed around at an impossible angle. He was sitting in about forty feet of water, stone dead, one arm pinned between the rocks. As best I could tell, he had been dead when he landed there. The mud and ooze around him were as serene and smooth as he was.

The cop who was assisting me swam over and made a palms up gesture. I shrugged back at him and began to work the body loose. The corpse had only one leg, and as I worked I wondered what he had been doing in the lake. I got the arm free and kicked toward the quicksilver surface above me. The body turned bloated and heavy when I broke water with it, and it took three of us to load it into the police launch.

I dried off and got a coke out of the cooler. It was getting to be another Texas scorcher, and the sunlight bouncing off the surface of the lake felt like it had needles in it. My mouth was dry from breathing canned air and the carbonation burned like fire. Winslow, from the sheriff's office, sat down next to me. "I appreciate this, Dan," he said.

"No problem." Sam Winslow and I had grown up together about twenty miles outside Austin in a little town called Coupland. We'd fought a lot as kids, and there were still plenty of differences in our politics and educations. But being on the police and fire rescue squad had brought me closer to him again, and I was glad of it. A private detective needs all the friends he can get. "What do you make of it?" I asked him.

"Accidental drowning, looks like." I raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. "He's got a bump on the head that could have come off a rock. We'll see what the coroner says."

"Any idea who he is?"

Winslow shook his head. He'd gained weight in his face recently and his jowls vibrated with the gesture. "No one-legged men on the missing persons list. Looks like it could be a war wound, maybe. Worth a try sending the prints to Washington."

Sailboats like scraps of paper blew across the lake. Winslow turned to the driver of the boat. "Let's get the meat to the freezer."

A burst of static and a chattering voice made me jump. Winslow went to answer the call, and I leaned over the rail and looked at the water. My reflection came back at me—stocky, tan, with a head of short sandy hair that had receded half way up my skull. I looked my age, and it was getting to where that was no bargain any more. A few gulls darted over me, complaining in harsh, strident voices. "You're a long way from the ocean," I said, looking up at them. "You better take what you can get."

Winslow came back, not bothering to hide his excitement. “You can forget nature boy over there,” he said, nodding to the corpse. “We got real news on our hands. I hope you didn’t have anything planned for the rest of the afternoon.”

Winslow was my ride back to Austin, which meant I was along for the duration of whatever emergency had come up. “You know I don’t. C’mon, spill it.”

“They just found Jason King,” Winslow said, and his eyes shifted to a big house above us, over the lake. “He’s been murdered.”

II

THE CURRENT FAD was for sex scandals, so Austin had found Jason King. His story was the usual thing—a not-too-competent secretary who claimed she was kept on for immoral reasons. King was a County Commissioner, which in Texas is a big legislative job, so the papers had been getting all the mileage they could out of it for the last week. Now it looked like it had caught up with King in a very big way.

Ed McCarthy had been waiting for us in the squad car while the boat was out. His baby blue uniform was drenched with sweat, and his dark glasses glinted at me evilly. “How was the swim, gumshoe?” he said.

“Not bad, flatfoot,” I answered. Ed grinned and I grinned and we all got in the car.

Winslow leaned back and said, “That’s the trouble with you guys. You watch too much TV.”

The car took off with a huge billow of dust and we shot down the gravel roads with the siren cranking. Winslow had gone quiet, and I knew he was thinking about the case. Jason King was a hot item, and Winslow was just starting to realize how carefully he was going to have to watch his step. One mistake and he was a scapegoat, both for the sheriff and the people at the capitol. The smile slid quietly off his face and the burned-in wrinkles came back.

McCarthy pulled up in front of a big two-story house. Ahead of us the road ended in a white painted barricade, then fell off a cliff into the lake. There were three or four cars already at the house, including a brown sheriff’s car and an ambulance, its multicolored lights still turning silently. We walked up the flagstones to the house, and it seemed to lean out over us. The upper story sat on a row of colonial-type columns, and the contrast they made with the ranch styling of the rest of the house set my teeth on edge.

The ambulance attendants passed us with a stretcher, and Winslow lifted the sheet for a quick look. The bullet had come through the back of the head, at close range. The face was almost completely gone. Winslow dropped the sheet and nodded, and they carried the body away.

The sound of voices led us upstairs. Inside, the house seemed to be trying to live down its nouveau-riche exterior. The carpets were thick, running to subdued colors and patterns. The upstairs hall was hardwood paneled, with brass light fixtures and framed lithographs on the walls. I recognized a Matisse and a Picasso.

When we got to the door of the study everyone looked up for a minute, then went back to popping flashbulbs, dusting prints and taking measurements. Chalk marks near the door showed where King had fallen, and a rusty stain disfigured the carpet. In the background I could see an English-style library arrangement with leatherbound books and heavy furniture.

A middle-aged cop in uniform who I knew by sight but not by name made his way over to us. He pointed out a heavy set Chicano in white ducks who was wandering around with a look of profound misery. "That's the houseboy," he said. "Name's Chico. He found the body. Yesterday was his day off, so he can't pin down a specific time for the killing."

"How did he find it?" Winslow asked.

"Came up to see if King wanted dinner, and saw him. He's only been here about an hour."

"Did you find the gun?" I asked.

He showed us a Colt long barrel .38, and the spot near the body where it had been found. "Houseboy positively identifies it as King's own gun."

I stepped over a small grey man with a magnifying glass and looked at King's desk. In the center of it was a big loose-leaf scrapbook, the kind that ties together with a silken cord. It was open to an article on the Korean War. I flipped through it casually, recognizing photographs of King, his wife, and various others at various ages. Beside it was a desk pad, and the words "Green Chevy" and a phone number were written on it, surrounded by the short crisp lines of a compulsive doodler. I memorized the number, just to have something to do.

On the corner of the desk, as if it had been put aside, was a steel construction handbook. I looked through it, too, but failed to make any sense of it. A few pages were marked, but it would have taken an expert to tell me what that meant. Under it was a mimeo sheet with the heading "County Bond Proposal." The only other object was a cigarette lighter which I was afraid to touch because of fingerprints. It was standing on end, and from behind the desk I could make out an insignia of some sort, a lightning bolt and the word "Thundermugs."

I looked up to see Winslow at the door. "They've got Mrs. King downstairs," he said to me. "I'll be with her for a while." I nodded and went to the window.

Filmy curtains fluttered in the wind, and it seemed cooler to be up above the lake. I was only in the way in the study, and I had no professional interest in the case. So I fought my way back to the door and went downstairs and into the backyard.

The lawn gave out at a six-foot hurricane fence that surrounded the house. I walked down to the gate and let myself out onto the top of the cliff.

I had started sweating as soon as I stepped outside, and the water looked cool and inviting below me. It looked to be about a fifty-foot drop, almost perfectly straight down to the water. I followed the line of the cliff for a while, and found a path that wound its way down to a shelf just above the water. It was covered with a coarse river gravel that was too uncomfortable to sit on, so I crouched for a while and watched the sailboats. They were a symbol to me of

the kind of people, like the Kings, who had everything I never would have—money, prestige, a sense of time. But the sense of time was a lie, and even people like Jason King could die, suddenly, in a brief flash of mortality. I climbed back up the path.

III

“IT’S OPEN AND SHUT,” Winslow confided to me on the way back to town. “Marion King has a motive, what with all this mistress business, and she can’t account for herself at the time of the murder.”

“Why wasn’t she staying at the house last night?” I asked. “She was at her sister’s. She says her sister was sick. I say like hell. Here’s how it was.

“Marion King quarrels with her husband over the mistress and moves out. She thinks it over, decides she wants a divorce, say. Then she tells her sister she’s going to a movie. She doesn’t want her sister to know she’s even seeing her husband again. She goes to the house, tells him she’s leaving him for good. He pulls a gun, threatens her. That’s the last straw, he says, I’d be ruined. They struggle over the gun, it goes off.”

“King was shot through the back of the head,” I said.

“Okay, she pulls the gun and threatens him. He tries to walk out on her, and bang, it goes off. Maybe she didn’t mean for it to.”

The road heaved and dipped over countless hills between the lake and the outskirts of the city. The swaying car and white heat were numbing me. I considered asking Winslow what he made of the scrapbook and lighter, but changed my mind. It wasn’t my case, and there was no point in stirring things up.

They dropped me at my house and I waved as they pulled away. Two bills sat waiting for me in the mailbox and a jug of milk had gone sour overnight. I cooked a couple of hamburgers and took a shower, then went outside with a beer. I sat in the front lawn and drank the beer and pulled Johnson grass. Johnson grass is a vicious, predatory plant that can take over a lawn in a matter of weeks. All its leaves come out of a central root system, and to pull it up you have to track down all the runners and separate leaves and pull them back to the center. Pulling Johnson grass is just the job for an out-of-work detective. I stayed at it until it got too dark to see what I was doing.

IV

MY EMPLOYMENT STATUS changed at ten o’clock the next morning. I heard a tapping at the door and dropped my book into the center drawer of my desk. Before I could say anything, a husky blond kid with short hair and bangs came in. He introduced himself as Jeffrey King, the dead man’s son.

I offered him a chair, noticing a gold cross at his throat and a strong smell of aftershave at the same moment. I guessed him to be about eighteen.

“I assume you know what happened to my mother,” he said. I nodded, and he went on. “She didn’t kill him, Mr. Sloane. If you knew her, you would know she couldn’t have done it.” He had a clear, ringing voice, with a taste of the deep south—Alabama or Georgia—in his accent. He was calm, direct, almost painfully sincere.

"I know the man who's handling the investigation," I said. "He's a friend, and he's an honest man. You can trust him to see that justice is done."

"The Lord said, 'Woe to you lawyers also, for you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.' It doesn't matter to Mr. Winslow whether my mother did it or not. I'd prefer to have someone working with her interest in mind."

His mannerisms and voice were those of a mature public speaker. I had to keep blinking my eyes to be sure he was the same person who'd come in the door.

"Let's hear your side of it," I said.

He paused, collected himself, seemed to be waiting for the right beat to come in on. "I can't claim my mother and father had a perfect marriage. They've been rather...distant from each other for some time. It was perfectly natural for her to leave the house in which my father had committed adultery. 'Do not look back or stop...lest you be consumed.' But that hardly means she would kill. The thought would not even occur to her."

"Do you live with your parents?"

"No. I'm in a dormitory at school, Texas Seminary."

I nodded, made a nonsense note on my blotter. I printed the letters slowly, paying no real attention to them. "Did you get along with your father?"

"I hardly see what that has to do it."

"Look, Mr. King—"

"Jeffrey."

"All right, Jeffrey, if we're going to work together you're going to have to trust me. If I ask a question, it's probably for a good reason."

He blinked his eyes down, then back up to mine. "My father was a difficult man. I respected him, and I honored him, as I was taught to do."

I decided I was not going to be able to crack Jeffrey King, and that it probably wasn't worth my effort anyway. "All right, Jeffrey," I said, "I'm interested." I recited my rates, adding, "Plus a bonus if I get her off. A hundred will do for a retainer."

"Will a check be all right?"

I nodded, and while he started writing I asked him, "Who do you think did it?"

He finished making out the check, tore it out with a long, backhanded rip. Then he looked at me with smoldering eyes. "The whore," he said. "Charlene Desmond."

"Have you met her?"

"No. But I've read what she said in the newspapers. She's evil, Mr. Sloane. A desperate, misguided woman." He was sounding twice his age again, and I wondered just how much he knew about desperate, misguided women.

"What's her motive?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? But she must have known Chico was off on Thursdays. That would be the day when she was used to visiting my father. So when she wanted something from him, she knew when he would be alone. He refused her, probably refused to continue his relationship with her, and she shot him."

“Um hmm,” I said, and picked up the check. “Can I reach you at this number?” He nodded. “All right. I’ll get on it right away. If there’s anything else I need I’ll call you.”

He left and I threw open a window. The smell of baking asphalt wafted in from Congress Avenue, but it was an improvement. I called the sheriff’s office and asked for Winslow.

“Hello, Sam. This is Dan. Looks like we’re going to be working together.”

“How’s that?” His voice had a tentative sound to it, a little frayed at the edges.

“On the King case. His son hired me.”

“Oh really.”

“What’s wrong? You and Jeannie slug it out again?”

“No. No...just can’t see why you’d want to bother with the King case. It’s all over but the trial.”

“Well, maybe so. But I still got to make a living. Listen, can you give me some info? I need to know where the King woman stands.”

“Like what?”

“Like did you get prints on the gun?”

“Yeah. They were smeared, but we got two good sets. One hers, one his.”

“Do you have an address for Charlene Desmond?” He gave it to me and I wrote it on the blotter.

“One mote thing,” I said. “What about traffic up at the King house Thursday night. Did you find out anything?”

“The cab companies say none of their people went up there. Neighbors don’t remember much.” He found a quieter, apologetic tone. “Say, Dan, I have to go.”

“Yeah. I understand. See you, Sam.” I did understand. I’d been around long enough to know the sound of pressure coming down.

V

IN 1959 I GAVE UP my DA haircut and sold my Chevy and joined the Marines. My girlfriend was very proud of me for about two weeks, then she found somebody who was still in the neighborhood, and that was that. When Kennedy sent the “advisors” to Viet Nam in ‘61 I was along for the ride, and I was flying choppers by ‘62. Then my hitch was up, and I was ready to go home. So my sergeant got me drunk and got me to sign a blank piece of paper and I was suddenly in for three more years. They hadn’t been able to make their idea of a man out of me, and they wanted another chance.

I didn’t want to give it to them. I’d been rooked and they knew it, but the pressure was on. I tried to raise a stink, but it was hopeless, and finally the word came down: if I wanted out badly enough I could have a Dishonorable Discharge. I walked out of the Commandant’s Office in Saigon and watched a Buddhist monk pour gasoline on himself and set himself on fire. I went back into the Commandant’s office and talked some more. I finished my hitch at a desk in Germany.

I took my hand-to-hand combat training to Pinkerton while I was at Berkeley on the GI Bill. They used me for muscle while I finished my college,

and let me do my required two years of investigating when I got out. With my license in hand I proceeded to starve for a year in a Northern California full of private eyes and impoverished kids. It was 1971 and the magic that was Berkeley was dead, along with the magic of most everything else.

I moved back to Austin and found some of it again. The kids were here, and it was a wide-open, all-night sort of town. The work wasn't much better, but I made do with odd jobs here and there. I made friends, and I found out that I'd been under pressure for a lot more years than I'd known. And now it was all coming back.

I drove down 11th to the Courthouse Annex where the Commissioners had their offices. I had nothing particular in mind by visiting the place, but it was close enough to be worth the effort. I found a tree to park under and went inside. The withered smell of the place wrinkled my nose.

King's office was locked with an air of permanence. I tried the door and it echoed hollowly down the hall. The next one over was open, though, and said Hoyt Crabtree, County Commissioner, so I went in. A drab, middle aged woman looked up from her typing and gave me an encouraging smile.

"Do you have a key to next door by any chance?" I asked her. "I'm working for Jeff King..." I let the sentence hang as if it explained everything.

"Oh yes. Jeff was such a nice boy. How is he?"

"Fine," I assured her. I sat on the edge of a table and tried to look cheerful and harmless.

"I'm afraid I don't have a key," she said. "Was it important? I could call the janitor..."

I waved my hand. The janitor would doubtless want more credentials than I could offer him. "Not really. Did you know Jason King very well?"

"Oh yes, both him and that dreadful secretary." "Dreadful?"

"Yes. I can't understand why someone would tell lies like that just to get a fine man like Mr. King in trouble."

"You think she was lying, then?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Pshaw. I'm sure of it. He hadn't the slightest interest in her. I don't think she would have lasted another week, even if that awful scandal business hadn't come up. He was forever having to ask me to help out in getting his work done. I swear he only kept her on as long as he did out of pity."

A huge man stuck his head out of the back office, then lumbered into view. He must have been six foot six and weighed over two fifty. "Oh, Mr. Crabtree," she piped, "this nice young man is a friend of Jeff King's." I didn't try to correct her.

"Daniel Sloane," I said as he shook my hand, a broad smile on his face and his eyes utterly vacant. He had graying hair that looked like a stack of hay, and when he spoke he sounded like the pedal notes on a pipe organ.

"Pleased to meet you," he boomed, his eyes already wandering around the room. "Terrible thing about Jason, I could hardly believe it." He was headed out the door and hardly seemed conscious of the fact that I was in front of him. He shuffled forward and I backed out of the way, but then he was coming at me again. "Knew him for years," he said, and I found myself

standing outside his office. He shook my hand again, and said, "Give my sympathies to the family if you see them, pleasure meeting you." The door closed gently in my face.

It took me a minute, but I calmed down enough to shrug and walk away. I imagined that Crabtree had been having a lot of trouble with reporters and rubbernecks. I sympathized with his position. I still wanted to drop a grenade down his shirt.

Charlene Desmond's house sat up on a hill overlooking Pease Park and Shoal Creek. It had been a luxury neighborhood years ago, and now was full of college students, like everywhere else in Austin. The place looked deserted but I knocked anyway. After two or three tries, the door opened back on the chain and a woman's voice said, "What do you want?"

I showed her my license and said, "I'm looking for Charlene Desmond." I could see just a little of her face, wrinkled, wearing too much makeup, topped off by salt and pepper hair.

"She's not in."

"Are you a relative?"

"I'm her mother."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, if I may."

One finger came out from behind the door and pointed at the wallet still in my hand. "Does that mean I have to let you in?"

"No, ma'am. It just means—"

"Oh, Mother," came a friendly voice from inside. "Let him in." She shut the door and I heard the rattle of the chain being let off.

The inside of the house smelled faintly of incense. Furniture was sparse, consisting mainly of throw pillows, low tables, and those bedspreads from India that everyone used to have. Sitting on a divan, legs tucked up under her, was a small blonde who I took at first glance to be a little girl. Her eyes had too much makeup, though, and her body was too clearly developed. She was wearing blue jeans and something I think they call a tube top, that had no other means of support than what she provided herself. She gave me a broad, slightly coy smile. "I'm Charlene Desmond."

"Daniel Sloane. May I sit down?"

"Sure." I took off my coat and sat in the only real chair in the room. She turned and stared at her mother until the older woman left. "Mother has been such a help this last week I can hardly believe it. But she does go too far sometimes. Drink?"

"No thanks," I said. It was too early for me by about five hours. There was a table to my right, by the front window, and she stood at it and poured coke over some bourbon. Light from the drawn Venetian blinds made intense stripes across her hands.

"I expect you've had a good share of visitors lately," I said.

"Yes," she said, and took a big slug of the drink. If it weren't for the violence of her makeup and the lines it didn't quite hide around her eyes, I could have taken her for a teenager. "It's pretty exciting, really. I'm used to attention—" here a not-quite-shy smile—"you know...but not anything like this."

“Do you mind if I ask you some questions?”

“That’s what I figured you were here for. What sort of questions?”

“I’m a private investigator. I’m trying to clear Mrs. King.”

“Oh.” She looked down at her glass and shook the ice cubes around in it. She seemed almost embarrassed that I had brought up the idea of the murder.

“How did you get drawn into all this?” I asked.

She shrugged, still looking down. “The usual way, I suppose. I came in from the pool when *his* regular secretary got married, and I just stayed on.” She stubbed out the remains of one cigarette and lit another with a lighter sitting on the table. It was a standard Zippo, with a lightning bolt insignia on it. It was an exact duplicate of the one on Jason King’s desk. “Then he asked me out—I guess I’d been there about a week—and I knew better than to say no. I’d had enough trouble getting on there in the first place.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Well, my typing’s not very good.” She showed me her dimples. “But I have a nice telephone voice, and a good memory.”

Her flirting was irritating, not so much on a personal level, but because she didn’t seem to be able to turn it off. “How did you finally get hired?” I asked, leaning back and propping my head up with one arm.

“Mr. Crabtree needed somebody one day while I was there trying to get in, and took me. He didn’t even know I wasn’t in the pool. Then they sort of had to let me in. It’s complicated. Like a union, sort of.” She finished her drink and went over to get another one. “Sure you won’t join me?” she asked.

I shook my head. The inertia was starting to get to me, and I felt like I was wasting my time. The woman was shallow and a little on the cheap side, but she didn’t strike me as a killer. She lit another cigarette and I asked her about the lighter.

“Did that belong to Jason?”

She looked down at it as if she’d never seen it before. “I suppose so,” she said. The whiskey seemed to be affecting her. “The Thundermugs...must have been his outfit, huh?”

She reminded me of a high-school kid just out for the summer. She seemed disjointed, adrift in the moment. It was all a big vacation, and Jason King had paid the bill, first in publicity and now with his life.

By the third drink she was talking about King without being prompted. She had the conversation under her arm and was running with it.

“He was a nice man. Not a big spender, but not a tightwad. He’d take me out sometimes. Sometimes we’d go to his house. He lives out by the lake. Once we went down to the beach by his house, it was late at night, and we made love right there, in front of God and everybody,”

I’d had enough. I stood up and looked around for my coat.

“You can knock it off now, Ms. Desmond,” I said. “You were no more Jason King’s mistress than I was. You don’t know enough about him to talk for a full minute without repeating yourself. There’s no beach by King’s house. There’s a rocky ledge, but believe me lady, I wouldn’t try it. The reporter that bought your story should be kicked out on his ass.”

She sat up, stunned. She looked as though I’d hit her. “Now look here,”

she said, her words a little slurred. "I don't want that kind of language in this house."

"Did you come up with this little scheme on your own or did somebody put you up to it?" I walked over to her, but not close enough to have to smell the whiskey.

"I think you should get out," she snarled. "Mother!" Her voice got shrill and I put my coat on.

"Call me if you change your mind," I said, and stalked out of the house.

Driving back to the office, I made a quick recap. If the Desmond woman was out, that left me high and dry. I had two suspects left, the kid who'd hired me and the woman I was supposed to clear. I'd scored one point though, since Marion King's motive *was* pretty well shot. Charlene Desmond's story couldn't have held water at the bottom of the ocean, and I doubted that Mrs. King would have fallen for it.

I parked around the corner from my office and went into the GM Steakhouse. After a \$2.07 sirloin and a large milk I was in a better mood. After all, I had a client and a hundred dollars. What could go wrong?

The phone was ringing when I got back to the office. I caught it in time, and heard Winslow's voice.

"Found out who our bathing beauty was," he said. "His name was Ernie Singleton. He was a grunt in Korea, lost the leg there. Last residence was Dayton, Ohio. No relatives, no friends, no nothin'."

"So why did he come here?" I asked.

"To drown, looks like."

"Ha ha, I got a hot one for you, now. The King sex scandal was a put-up job."

"That's not too funny. You got proof?"

"I don't need it. The chick is as phony as a three-dollar bill. She'd never wash in court."

"Well maybe the wife believed her."

"Hey look," I said, "I've heard of blind justice, but don't you think you're carrying this a bit too far? Don't you even want to check this out?"

I listened to a long silence on the other end of the wire, then Winslow said, "Uh, something's come up. I'll get back to you, okay?" and he was gone.

I held the dead receiver in my hand for a minute, then hung up and dialed the Austin American Statesman. "City desk, please."

I had time to tap my fingers on the desk a couple of times and scratch my nose, then a voice said, "Hello?"

"Bennie? This is Dan."

"Let's see...Dan...Dan..."

"Don't rub it in, I'm sorry. I've just been out of circulation for a while."

"I'll say. Did you marry her?"

"No. I got out at the last minute. It was close, though. Listen, I may have a story for you in a bit. I need some information first, though. Like who would a County Commissioner have for an enemy?"

"A bad enough enemy to bump him off, you mean? I thought the wife did it."

“Maybe not that bad. Maybe just bad enough to throw a little dirt on him.” Bennie whistled. “That way, huh? Okay, I can give you a list. How long you got?”

“Just hit the high points.”

“A County Commissioner wears a lot of hats, friend. To start with, of course, it could be somebody who lost an election to him, or thinks he could take over the job. Or one of the other Commissioners. But what you’re after probably has to do with County contracts.”

“Whoa. What sort of contracts?”

“Mainly roads, but all the contracts are let through Commissioner’s Court. That includes libraries, parks, hospitals, you name it.”

“Good. What else?”

“Commissioners appoint county officials, run the welfare department, handle the budget and all that. Each Commissioner is responsible for the roads in his precinct, and since King used to be in construction, you’ve got a tie in there. He could have brought along some old enemies when he moved up. Let’s see, there’s a bond issue coming up, but the contracts on that haven’t been given out yet, so I’m afraid that’s no help.”

“It’s help,” I said, “but I wish you could have narrowed it down a bit more.”

“That’s the breaks, kid. Now what about that scoop?”

“I’ll let you know. ‘Bye.’”

So there I sat. Not at a dead end, but facing an endless field of possibility. The bond issue mayor may not have been important; it had been on his desk when he was killed, but I had no way of knowing what it meant.

I looked at my cards, and I was holding no suspects, no clues, and didn’t even have a long suit. It was time to get some help.

VI

I STILL HAD FRIENDS at the county jail, and they hustled Marion King into a visitor’s booth for me in no time at all. I could tell from her bearing that she was merely allowing the guard to lead her. She had a lot of dignity and authority in her walk. They were obviously treating her with respect; she was still in her street clothes and her long brown hair was neatly brushed out. Her eyes looked dull and resigned, but she gave me a weary smile anyway. “My guard thinks pretty highly of you,” she said. She was naturally gracious, had an instinctive ability to put people at their ease.

“I try to get along,” I smiled. She was a handsome woman, with a sort of strength that denied the years that were visible in her face. She settled herself in the chair beyond the glass and waited.

“I’m not sure where to start,” I said, “but if it means anything to you, I know your husband was not involved with Charlene Desmond.”

Her mouth made an ugly line across her face. “Tell me something new. Jason would no more have had that tramp for a mistress than he would have robbed a bank. He just didn’t have it in him.”

“Just how do you mean that?” I asked, intrigued by the hint of resentment in her tone.

She sighed. “You’ve met Jeff, so I think you can understand. Jason was very much like Jeff, without the religious mania. That’s why they didn’t get along—they were so similar. Both of them were so demanding, so harsh, even toward themselves. There were times when I wished Jason would have taken a mistress, anything, just to get him out of his shell. But I’m sure you didn’t come here to listen to my discontents.” She was the hostess again, detached from her surroundings.

“On the contrary. I’ll take any information I can get right now. Do you have any idea who might have killed your husband?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sloane, but I never kept up with my husband’s business.”

“Couldn’t it have been somebody from his personal life?”

“What personal life? If he had someone over to the house it was either in connection with the county or with his construction work.”

“He was still active in construction, then?”

“Only as a consultant. Anything else would have constituted conflict of interest. Not that he couldn’t have gotten away with it, of course, this is Texas, but my husband was a very scrupulous man.”

“Why did you move out on him, then, if you’ll pardon my asking?”

“I didn’t move out. I went to stay with my sister because she was ill. Jason hardly cared whether I was there or not, and both of us knew the scandal was nonsense. I saw no reason to stay around simply to avoid gossip.”

“I’d like to talk with your sister. Where does she live?”

“Off Cameron Road, north of the airport.” She gave me the address. “Her name is Jenny Shaw. She lives alone. That’s why she needed me.”

I was silent for a moment, looking at the sunlight through the intersecting lines of the barred window.

“Do you—” Her voice caught and she cleared her throat. “Do you think they’ll convict me?”

I shrugged. “It would help if you’d tell me what you know.”

She looked me in the eyes and said, “I already have.” It was not too bad, but she shouldn’t have pulled her eyes away at the end. I stared at her for a minute, but it was no use. I wasn’t going to get anything more out of her.

“If you think of anything else that might help at all, tell your guard. She’ll get word to me somehow.” I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was hiding something, but I had no clue as to how to get at it.

The sergeant at the desk let me use the phone. “Jeffrey? This is Dan Sloane.”

“How are you? Any news?” He didn’t sound particularly concerned.

He and Winslow had both given me scenarios of the murder, and now a third one was taking shape in my mind. It was ugly, and I wanted to get rid of it. It started with Jeff waiting till the house was empty on Thursday night to confront his father. They quarreled, Jason walked away, and Jeff reached for the gun. The he stopped and wrapped his hand in a handkerchief so he wouldn’t leave any prints...

No. No soap. People who shoot in anger worry about prints afterward, not before. Still, he seemed to have a real martyrdom compulsion, and people have been known to hire detectives to punish themselves. In more ways than one.

“Your friend the scarlet woman didn’t do it,” I said. “Your father never gave her anything but letters to type. And not many of those, from what I hear.”

“It seems I’ve made a serious mistake. And it’s too late to rectify it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I had an awful, sinking feeling that the kid was about to confess. I held on tight to the receiver,

“He has cursed his father...his blood is upon him.”

“Jeffrey, have you got an alibi?”

“I beg your pardon?” He sounded like I’d just woken him up.

“Where were you when your father was killed?”

“With a bible study group.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Never mind.” I sighed, a little, and began to understand what Marion King had been talking about. If his quotations didn’t get me, his self-righteousness would. I decided to give him written reports from that point on. I said goodbye and drove out to Cameron Road.

The house was mass produced, built to last three years and now in its fourth. I parked at the curb, and a herd of little kids rattled past me on plastic tricycles with huge front wheels. I noticed that the lawn had lost its battle with Johnson grass.

Jenny Shaw answered the front door with a wary smile. “I’m Daniel Sloane,” I said. “I’m a private investigator.” In all the years I’d been doing it, I’d yet to find a positive name for it. When I introduced myself I had to be ready to face hostility and distrust. The private detective had lost all his glamour, was back to being the dirty little peeper at the window. Sometimes I felt that way about myself

“Come in,” she said, and held the door open. She was cast out of the same mold as her sister, with the same rich brown hair and the same large but attractive features. Her hair was cut shorter, though, and fell in a more relaxed way. Her eyes were brighter, less strained. She was perhaps five years younger, but looked more like ten. She was one of the more attractive women I’d seen in a while, and washed Charlene Desmond from my memory like a long drink of water.

“Could I get you a cup of coffee?” she asked. “Or something stronger?”

“Coffee would be fine. Please.”

I sat on the edge of a chair and looked at the prints on the walls. Her taste ran to symbolists and expressionists. She came back with two cups of coffee and handed me one. “There’s cream and sugar on the table,” she said, pointing.

“Black is fine.”

She sat on the sofa and examined me. “You’re working for my sister?”

“Your nephew, actually,” I said, “but it comes to the same thing.”

“How can I help you?”

“I’m not sure. I seem to be losing ground faster than I’m gaining. All I know at this point is that someone set Jason King up for that scandal. Maybe the secretary, maybe someone behind her. It might even be a reverse blackmail

scheme, where they would have dropped the charges if King paid them. Whoever set it up probably killed him, or is at least involved in the murder somehow. But I don't have any clue as to who it is. I think your sister does, but she won't tell me."

There was a long silence. I could tell she was thinking something over, and I didn't want to give her an opportunity to let it go. At last she said, "Can I trust you?"

I shrugged. "That's a pretty vague term. If you mean will I lie, cheat and steal to protect a client, no. If you mean do I have a conscience, yes, but I put caution and common sense above it."

"That's a fair answer," she said. "You see there's...something I didn't tell the police. I may have been wrong, but then again they never asked the right questions, either. They seemed to have their minds made up, and I saw no need to bring something up that might look, well; compromising for my sister."

"The police have a little trouble thinking along more than one track at once," I agreed, thinking with regret of Winslow.

"The day of the murder—that is, the afternoon before it—Marion got a call here. I answered it and it was a man's voice, a soft, gentle voice. He asked for her by her first name, so I didn't think it was a reporter or anything. It even sounded sort of familiar somehow. Anyway, I let her talk to him. I went in the next room, and I only heard bits and pieces of her side of the conversation. "

"Can you remember anything, anything at all?"

"Well, at first she sounded really shocked, stunned, to hear the voice. She sounded as if she didn't believe it. Then she got very quiet. I had to come back in the room for something and I heard the tail end of it. She said something like 'all right, eight o'clock at Jason's' or something like that. I know she was making a date to meet him there. Does that make sense to you?"

"It makes a lot of sense. Whoever that was could be our blackmailer. Did he happen to say where he got your number?"

"No, but it would have to be from Chico or Jason, wouldn't it?"

I agreed that it would. "One more question. This could be a hard one. Do you think your sister was having an affair?"

"No. Not that she wasn't capable of it. She certainly didn't have enough feeling for Jason to stop her. It's just that I suppose she hadn't had a good enough offer. That's usually the case, isn't it?" Her smile was enigmatic, and too sad to be threatening.

"Would there be anybody else she might be trying to protect?"

"Not that I know of. *Cherchez l'homme*, is that it?"

"Right. Just find a man with a gentle, soft-spoken voice. No problem."

I got ready to leave. She took my hand at the door. "I think you're a good person, Mr. Sloane. I'm glad you're on our side."

I didn't know what to say. It was too sudden, after having had doors slammed in my face all day. I muttered a thank you and walked out to the car.

So now I had a suspect again. A man with a voice. Marion had set up an appointment with him, possibly to pay the blackmail. But what was her relationship to him? Was she involved in the setup? Was she the killer herself?

The warm openness of the afternoon was telling me to call it a day. My eyes burned and I felt heavy and sour with sweat. The air was just right for a swim, or at least a sunbath. And part of me wanted to go back to the little peeling house and ask Jenny Shaw to dinner.

I fought off all the evil impulses. The devil, as I was sure Jeff King would have told me, was finding work for my idle hands. I had plenty of time still to go out to the house on the lake. So I slammed my car into gear and rattled off toward Lake Travis.

VII

“NO SIR, I DON’T KNOW.” A trace of accent still touched Chico’s voice, but it was barely noticeable. He had lines of sorrow etched in his face, and I saw Jason King in the new light of the respect, perhaps even friendship, he had earned from this man. “I hadn’t heard the voice before. But I trusted him, somehow. He said he was an old, old friend of Mrs. King’s, and I believed him.”

I paced up and down the kitchen, unable to put my finger on what was bothering me. It had started when I walked in the house, and wouldn’t let me go.

“Did Mr. King leave the house much at night? To go out to a nightclub or eat or anything?”

“No sir. Particularly not lately, since his car has been in the shop.”

I turned to him. He looked like an old man in the steeply filtered light of the afternoon. “You mean he had no car the night of the murder?”

A look of anguish came over the man’s face. “No sir. I wanted to stay with him, but he said he would be all right. I wish I had stayed anyway. I feel as if..”

“Don’t blame yourself,” I said. “There’s nothing you could have done.” Suddenly I wanted to go to the study. I couldn’t explain it, but the hunch was strong, and was reason enough in itself “I need to go upstairs. Is that all right?”

Chico nodded. “Of course. You are a friend of Mr. Winslow’s. Please make yourself at home.”

Everything was just the same as it had been the day before. The chalk outline of the body stared up at me from the carpet. I walked around the room, reading the titles of books off the shelves, then came back to the desk. I opened the book of photos and paged through them from the beginning. There were school pictures, through high school, and in several of these and later ones I saw a younger version of Marion King. In two of them there was another man. Once picture didn’t have Jason in it at all.

Marion and the man were posed in front of a fountain. They had their arms around each other, laughing. I felt instinctively that Jason had taken the picture himself, and they were laughing at something he’d said. I stared at the man’s face. I tried to visualize it older, with wrinkles. Then I tried to see it with various combinations of facial hair. Finally I tried to see it heavier, with jowls, or bloated with fat.

Then I had it.

I called the sheriff’s department. A voice told me Winslow was out, but I

didn't try to force the issue. I asked for McCarthy and got him.

"I understand I'm not too popular down there," I said.

"Not very, but you didn't hear that from me."

"Thanks, Ed. Listen, you got a teletype from Washington with the file on a GI named Singleton, Ernie Singleton. You think you could find it for me? It just came in today."

"I'll check. Hold on."

After a moment I heard a sound of pages rustling on McCarthy's end. "Got it." he said.

"I need his war record. See if it lists who his commanding officer was at the time he was wounded." There was more rattling of paper. Then the sound stopped and there was a long pause.

"Did Sam see this?" McCarthy asked.

"I don't think he paid much attention to it. C'mon, let's have it."

"I think you know."

"Tell me anyway."

"Wounded 13 May 1953. Commanding officer Lt. J. King."

VIII

THE JAIL WAS TWILIGHT DARK, dismal, eternal. The kind of light that things and people disappear in. A ragged light came on in the ceiling as they let me into her cell.

I didn't waste my time. If Marion King had murdered her husband, I had spent a long day for nothing. I had to find out.

"Ernie's dead, Mrs. King. You can stop covering up for him now."

She whirled on me with fiery eyes. "How do you know about that?"

"I fished him out of Lake Travis yesterday. It looked to me like he'd been murdered, but it was none of my business at the time. As to your relationship to him, what I know is just from legwork. I want you to tell me the rest of it. I don't want to threaten you, but if the DA finds out about Ernie it could be bad for you."

I'd pumped the anger right out of her. She sat down on the hard cot. "How far back?"

"All the way. If you tell me something I already know, I can stand it."

"All right." She took a breath. "Ernie and Jason and I were a threesome. Jason and Ernie were best friends. They both loved me. This was in the early fifties. Jason was in ROTC in high school and he went to Korea when he graduated. So did Ernie, as a private. When they got back, I was to have decided who I was going to marry. I don't know which I would have chosen, but I didn't have to decide. Ernie didn't come back." Her voice stayed level, but the tears were starting in her eyes. I didn't interrupt her.

"The first I knew he was alive was when he called me two days ago. I nearly fainted. He told me he had something important to tell Jason and me, and he sounded like he was in trouble. We set up a time to meet at Jason's house. He didn't show up."

"Ernie was missing a leg, Mrs. King. He lost it in Korea, under your husband's command. Given the circumstances, I think he might have been

bitter toward your husband, even blamed him for the injury.”

She was hiding her face, and her shoulders trembled a little. “Jason confessed to me that night, before he was killed. He left Ernie to die. It was the only evil thing he ever did in his life, and he’s suffered for it ever since, inside.

“I don’t know why Ernie waited so long to come back, but yes, Ernie had plenty of cause to hate my husband. Do you think he killed Jason?”

I shook my head. “It just doesn’t work out. If it was murder and suicide, how did Ernie get to the house? The police checked the cab companies, and they were all negative. He couldn’t have gotten very far without a crutch, but none was found anywhere near the body.” I shook my head again. “You don’t get a lump like that falling through thirty feet of water. You’re just not moving fast enough. Unless he hit himself over the head, he was murdered.”

“By my husband?”

“No. Same reasons. How would your husband have brought him there? His car is in the shop. Likewise Ernie’s crutch, his clothes, any other personal effects. Your husband had no way to get rid of them. And it doesn’t make sense that he’d kill Ernie at the foot of his own driveway. It’s too obvious.”

“So who killed my husband? Who killed Ernie?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

IX

IT HAD BECOME time for a drink, a little past it, in fact. I sat in a rocking chair on my front porch with a glass of straight rye and thought about luck. Some people had it, some didn’t. I had gotten close, built up a good, solid case. But unless I could produce the real killer or killers, I had wasted my time. The State could turn Ernie Singleton into a whole new motive and put Marion King away despite all my beautiful logic.

The only clues I had left might not have been clues at all. The bond election, which might or might not have made an enemy for Jason King. The steel book which might or might not have been used to discover a piece of shaky engineering. The words “Green Chevy” and a phone number, which might refer to a new car to replace the one in the shop.

Frustration was eating up my gut. I could say goodbye to a night’s sleep unless I did something.

I went into the living room and got out a piece of paper. I sat by the phone and wrote out two numbers. One of them belonged to Jenny Shaw. The other I had memorized from the pad on the dead man’s desk. I tore the sheet in half and folded the numbers, then mixed them up on the desk.

If Jenny Shaw’s number came up, I was going to take her out and buy her a drink, or maybe several, if she would have me. If the other number came up I would at least exhaust my remaining clue. I closed my eyes and picked one.

It was the number from King’s desk. My stomach was heaving worse, now, and I wondered if I weren’t making a mistake. Almost certainly there would be no answer at all, at worst an irate stranger that I’d pulled away from his TV. But that was not what I was afraid of. I was afraid that a murderer would answer the phone and I had no idea what I was going to say to him.

I dialed the number. My hand shook and I loused it up the first time. So I dialed it again.

The phone rang once, twice, three times. It took an eternity. I was starting to breathe easier when I heard a sharp click.

“Hello,” said a deep, booming voice. My stomach lurched and my mouth dried up. I recognized the voice, and I started adding things up that should have been obvious long before.

“Is this Hoyt Crabtree?” I said, forcing my voice low.

“Of course it is. What do you want?”

I took a shot at it. “Bonds. I want to talk to you about some county bonds.” My brain spun while I waited for his answer. If he bit, then Crabtree was in it up to his gills. If not, then I was at another dead end.

“Maybe you’d better come over here,” he said at last. “I think we need to talk.”

“Maybe I’d better. What’s the address?” I wrote it down, my pulse hammering in my ears. “I’ll be right over,” I said.

X

HE LIVED OVER the river, west of town. I parked in his driveway, behind a green Chevy, and walked up to his door. For a moment I wished for a gun, but I knew it wouldn’t do me any good. In any situation where I needed it I probably wouldn’t get the chance.

I was right. A big cowboy answered the door, let me in, then threw me at a wall. I leaned against it, stunned, and fought back the reaction that started to come over me. I concentrated on the man’s hands as he searched me in the clumsy, embarrassed manner that country people have when they have to touch another man. When he was done I turned and looked at him, seeing limp blonde hair, a western shirt, jeans. I might have hit him, but at that moment I noticed Crabtree.

He sat casually in an armchair, and there was another big cowboy to his right. There was a dull look to Crabtree’s face, and a big .38 in his hand. “Sit down,” he said, and I sat on the couch behind me. My head felt soft and pulpy.

“So you’re the private eye. Yes, I know who you are. I checked you out after you came snooping around the office. I’m amazed at your persistence.” There was malice in his eyes and the shaggy white hair brought out the red in them.

“While you were checking that out,” I asked, “you didn’t happen to mention anything to the sheriff about a nice quick conviction for Mrs. King, did you?” The man by the door reacted to Crabtree’s expression and slapped me across the face. He carried a lot of weight, and my head almost went into the wall again.

Crabtree’s gun barrel came to rest in line with my stomach. “You won’t need to hit him again,” he said. “He’s going to tell us all he knows.”

I didn’t like his attitude. “I know a lot of things,” I said. “Two and two are four, Lincoln is the capital of Nebraska...”

The hammer of the gun clicked back. It was cheap drama but effective.

“You may have to help me a little,” I said slowly. “But I think I have most of it now. Jason King caught you taking kickbacks on road contracts. He knew enough about the business to know your contractors were cutting corners. So you scared up a sex scandal to get him out of the way.

“Then he got something on you. Not the scandal, obviously. You wouldn’t kill somebody as important as King over a little thing like that. But you would kill somebody you thought might not be missed. Like Ernie Singleton. That’s what Jason King found out, and that’s why you had to kill him.”

Crabtree laughed. “Who’s Ernie Singleton?”

“He’s the boy who really had the goods on King. He showed up at Charlene’s, for some reason, and offered to throw in with her. He left a lighter behind that had an insignia of the outfit that he and King were in. I don’t know what he offered her, but she was afraid to handle it herself. That was when she made her mistake and called you in.

“That tipped Ernie off that something was phony, and I’m sure it didn’t take him long to find out what it was. But he knew about your connection, so he had to go. You dumped him in the lake because it was as good a place as any, and because if the body did show up it would only be something else for Jason King to explain. Only our local sheriff didn’t make the connection, and by then it was too late anyway.

“Because Jason King had been watching for Ernie, and he saw your car. A green Chevy. I saw it just now, outside. He recognized it and called you up.”

“I like your imagination,” Crabtree said.

“Not imagination. King doodled while he talked on the phone, and it’s all on paper. When you came over, he pulled a gun and threatened to call the police. But he didn’t have the heart to use it, and you took it away from him, shot him carefully in the back of the head, and ran. What could you lose? Mrs. King was perfect to take the rap.”

I noticed that I was trembling, and the adrenalin in my system was reaching a critical level. Crabtree said, “I don’t think anybody will believe that.”

“Sure they will.” My voice sounded like it was coming from the other side of a waterfall. “Not the murders alone, or the scandal. But throw in the bond deals, the pressure on the sheriff’s office—it’s clear as a bell. Your name is the one thing that ties everything together.”

Crabtree seemed to think it over. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Let’s go for a ride.”

I got to my feet. I could feel the oppressive heat in the room as if it were a jungle, and my nose was full of that sickly sweet Asian smell that I’d never been able to wash away. I was shaking with the tension of it.

Charlene Desmond burst into the room. Her face was puffy and red, and she was staggering. “Hoyt, you lied to me,” she shrieked. “You killed that soldier, and you promised there wouldn’t be anything like that! And Mr. King! You...” I saw her move through the air at him, fists bunched up in little girl style.

“Look out, you idiot!” Crabtree yelled, but he was too late .

She had deflected the gun and I had lost control.

I had gone icy cold and everything was moving in slow motion. I hadn’t

wanted it to happen, but the Marine Corps' instincts had taken over and there was nothing I could do to stop it. My stiffened hand took Crabtree's wrist, and I felt the bones shatter under it. I kicked the gun in the corner and planted my foot in the closest of the cowboys. He went down and the other one swung at me. I slipped under his arm easily and started punching, short hard throws of the fists with snap at the end. He sank to the floor.

I turned to Crabtree, breathing hard and looking for something to kill. I stood in front of him, blood lust racking my body and my hands shaking with it. I fought for control, got it back, lost it, got it back again. My eyes cleared and my head pounded like a jackhammer. Then my knees got soft and I was all right again.

"Call the police," I said to Charlene, and watched her until she did it. The room was quiet, and Crabtree's eyes, full of hatred, followed me as I sat in a chair. I remembered the pistol, finally, and picked it up out of the corner.

When she finished on the phone Charlene sat on the couch across from me. "He still loved her," she said, her voice drunkenly sentimental. "He stayed away because he loved her. He only came back because he thought her husband had betrayed her."

I realized she was talking about Ernie Singleton. "He didn't want to hurt Mr. King, I know he didn't. He was just angry. I don't think he would have done it. He just loved her, that was all. Isn't it sweet?" She looked up at me with wet red eyes. "Isn't it just too sweet?"

Eventually the police arrived.

XI

AT SIX IN THE MORNING Winslow had let me go. Crabtree was behind bars and Marion King was out. It was over.

"You've still got your license," Winslow had said to me, "but then it wasn't my decision." I looked for a trace of the friendship that we'd still had only two days before, but it was gone. A hundred things came to mind, but none of them would

have made any difference if I'd said them. I'd made everybody look bad, and stepped out of line time after time. People didn't forget things like that easily. Maybe after a few months we'd all be friends again. I'd go back to Winslow's house for dinner and we'd get drunk on beer and laugh it all off. But I thought not. We'd learned too much about each other in the last two days for things to ever be the same again.

Jeff King was waiting for me when I came down the steps. He must have been there for hours, He gave me a check for five hundred dollars and an anemic smile. "God bless you," he said to me. I shook his hand and drove away.

I was too full of coffee, too hypertense, too frightened by the Viet Nam flashback to get any sleep. So I drove out to Lake Travis and watched the sun come up over the water. I changed into a bathing suit and swam out into the chilly waters of the lake. It was going to be another beautiful, clear, broiling hot day. There would be more days like it, and suddenly it was going to be fall, and Austin would have tricked us out of another year.

That was when I hated the city, the times when it fooled you into thinking the days would never end, that time itself did not exist. It had fooled Jason King, and he had let that ugly part of his past slide away, and believed it could not touch him. But time was there, deep as a lake, without pity or sorrow or love. A man could drown in it.

I swam back to the shore and fell asleep under the neutral, staring eye of the sun.

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