

## The Tattooed Cobra

A Needle Mike Novelette  
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"What are you trying to do—send us all to hell!"

*Around that severed finger it coiled—the hooded horror of the East—hidden from curious eyes by a slender platinum band. To what ghastly secret was the needled cobra a key? Why should even the craziest murder master order such a symbol inked in the corpse-flesh of his victim's hand?*

### CHAPTER ONE The Severed Finger

**A** GAINST the green plush of the jewel case lay the neatly severed finger of a woman. Ken McNally stared with horror in his eyes; a sick, all-gone feeling in the pit of his stomach. There was no blood, no ghastly touches; the finger lay like a creation of wax, in a setting of green; a platinum wedding ring pinched the slightly swollen flesh.

Maurice Dalton was breathing heavily, wheezily. McNally wet his lips, said, "Your—your wife's?" and nodded toward the open case.

Dalton twisted the fingers of one hand against the fingers of the other as though he were feeling in his mind the blow of the mutilation. He was a dapper man of medium height, his face pasty-white now; and his eyes were reddened from too much liquor. Blond hair hung damply, uncombed, upon his forehead.

"Yes," he said chokily. "There's no doubt of it. There's the ring and there's—there's something else. I'll tell you later. But tell me first what to do. I'm sick, Ken. I—"

Ken McNally didn't doubt that he was sick. He was feeling ill himself and the horror hadn't happened to anyone who was dear to him.

Dalton was fumbling with the whiskey bottle on the library table. He'd already had too much, but McNally didn't have the heart to argue with him.

"You'd better tell me about it from the beginning," he said. "You've been shooting disconnected fragments of the story at me but I can't connect them up."

"It's all my fault." Dalton gagged a little over his drink. Sweat was heavy on his forehead. "If I hadn't passed out last night—"

"Forget that. The beginning, I said!" McNally's voice was sharp. Dalton stiffened, wanted to be resentful but failed.

"There isn't a beginning," he said. "Everything

started and ended the same way. I always drank too much and at the wrong time. Ethel drank too much. We had too much money, too much time on our hands. If we hadn't had so much, we'd have been happy. We loved each other, Ken. We just never got the chance to really prove it."

McNALLY settled back. He didn't know if this were the beginning or not, but Dalton was going to have to tell his story in his own way. The man's eyes were haunted and he kept fumbling with the half-filled liquor glass, sloshing it around noisily.

"Ethel was always superstitious, fearful. Maybe she knew, somehow, that this would happen some day." Dalton's eyes were wide. His voice rose. "Out on the Coast, five years ago, she went to one of these Yogi fellows. She had an idea that something would happen to part us. He told her a lot of stuff about snakes, about the cobra and a circle of eternity; all that kind of rot. She believed it. She was awfully pathetic, Ken, when she believed something—"

The man's voice broke. There were tears in his eyes. He sloshed the drink but didn't raise it. Instead, he extended his left hand and pushed a signet ring off the third finger with his thumb. McNally stiffened.

There was a hooded cobra tattooed on his ring-finger in delicate miniature, the coils running around the finger and the ugly head upraised almost to the knuckle.

"I had that done to please her," Dalton said chokily. "She believed the Yogi. He said that it would keep us together—eternally. It was no harm to believe it. She had the duplicate—"

He swallowed hard and his eyes went to the white finger in the case. McNally's gaze followed his. The ring, however, was wide and it was no time to interrupt the man's narrative. McNally restrained the impulse to examine the finger. Dalton, of course, did not know of McNally's passionate interest in tattooing. That interest belonged to the other side of McNally's life; to the world in which he was known as Needle Mike, tattoo artist, and not as Kenneth McNally, wealthy idler. With an effort, Dalton lifted his eyes from the case.

"It didn't work," Dalton said huskily. "We quarreled a lot. Lately she took to worrying about her looks, looking in mirrors and brooding. She

said that she was getting old before her time, that her eyes were puffy and all that sort of thing."

McNally frowned. "Was she right?"

Dalton choked a little. His face reddened. "She looked all right to me," he said evasively. "We drink a lot. Hangovers do things to you—"

"I understand. Then she disappeared?"

"Yes. We had a quarrel. She left a note that she was going to visit her sister. I didn't worry. It was an all-right note. Look!"

DALTON passed over a double sheet of fine stationery with a trembling hand. McNally hastily read through the short note. It was nicely written, in a firm hand, without haste or apparent nervousness. It seemed like the kind of letter that a woman might write to a man she loved but with whom she was slightly peeved.

"What did you do?" McNally asked.

"I got drunk. That was Monday. Tuesday morning I got this in the mail."

He passed over a single sheet of rough dime-store bond. There was a message typed on it—

Mr. Dalton:

Yore wife has been kidnapped. We have her. She is safe if you do this. Get twenty thousand dollars from yore bank in small bills. Don't take the numbers. At ten tonite, drive yore car to the levee near the Steamer J.S. Drive north to point marked on this map. Park car at X and get out. Walk north till you meet a man carrying overalls under his arm. Give him the money and yore wife is safe. Don't do this and it is too bad. Forget the cops or that is too bad too.

Tug.

McNally was frowning intently, his jaw hard. "You didn't do it?" he asked incredulously.

Maurice Dalton sloshed the liquor around in his glass, threw a deep draught back into his throat and choked on it. "Ken," he said hoarsely, "I could shoot myself. I got the money. Then I was all jittery. I didn't dare tell anyone. I called Louise, my wife's sister, but didn't tell her anything. Ethel hadn't been there. I kept drinking—"

The sweat was heavy on his forehead, his eyes haunted. "Ken, I could drink all day once. That was once. Not now. I must have passed out. It was damn near morning when I came out of it—too late—"

He gulped and looked with gray intentness at

the finger in the case. "That came this afternoon. There was a note."

McNally took the second note. It was like the first except that there was no map and it was shorter.

You had better bring the money tonight, or we'll send you the other fingers tomorrow.

McNally was not unduly squeamish nor was he a tenderfoot in matters of violence. Reading that curt note, however, and looking at the grisly evidence in the case was a little too much for him. He stood up and reached for Dalton's bottle. Dalton stared at him with popping eyes. The man's face was a deathly white and had the wet look of fresh paste.

"I can't—can't trust myself again, Ken," he said faintly. "I need your help. I'm going to—"

His eyes seemed to pop almost to the bursting point. His voice liquefied until only a gurgle reached his lips. McNally took a swift step toward him and threw out his right hand. He was too late. Maurice Dalton came halfway to his feet, twisted grotesquely past the outstretched hand and plunged, face down on the rug, before McNally could close the gap between them.

"Maurice!" McNally dropped on one knee and lifted the limp body partly off the rug. Glassy eyes stared at him but the man's lips twitched and there was a faint, erratic pulse. McNally gently rolled him over on his back and elevated his feet. Ordinarily there might be virtue in the administration of whiskey for a case like this; but McNally knew that Maurice Dalton had had his share of whiskey—and more.

"Maurice," he said huskily. "If you can hear me, I'm going for a doctor. Lie quietly till I come back—"

**H**E got up and whirled toward the door. He felt particularly futile but this was no spot for amateur medical attention. Dalton was too perilously on the brink and he remembered that there was a doctor on the floor below, a specialist of some kind.

There were two phones on the nearby desk; an outside phone and the apartment house-phone. McNally passed them up. There was a dust storm outside and a doctor from any distance away would be too slow; he had an idea that he could get the

doctor on the floor below before he could explain what was wanted to the apartment staff.

Moving with the swift speed of a man in training, he took the stairs three at a time.

A slim, curly headed, languid youth of the matinee-idol type answered the insistently rung bell of Doctor Felix Borne's suite. He seemed annoyed at such vulgar haste. McNally's voice cracked.

"Doctor Borne?"

"You have an appointment?"

"No. There's a man dying upstairs—"

The youth didn't move. "I'm sorry—Doctor Borne doesn't—"

"He damn well will!" McNally's shoulders twitched and he pushed past the startled guardian of the door. A tall, military-appearing man, who wore a Van Dyke beard, was standing in a doorway off what was obviously a reception room. McNally's eyes sought his.

"I believe you heard what I said to your assistant, Doctor. There's no time to lose. The man has collapsed. He had a shock. Heart, I think—"

The doctor's lips tightened. "I do not go in for that sort of thing—"

McNally's lips flattened against his teeth. His eyes blazed. "Doctor," he said ominously, "you'll come in a hurry."

Doctor Borne read something in McNally's face that told him he was not facing a bluffer. A determined man with money and time could make things unpleasant with the medical associations. He shrugged slightly.

"Just a second," he said curtly.

He stepped back into the office behind him and came out with a black bag. He handled it with seeming distaste.

McNally spun on his heel and stalked swiftly past the still startled youth at the door. He heard the medical man's footsteps behind him and flung over his shoulder: "It is Maurice Dalton. Perhaps you know him."

There was a break in the steady pace of Doctor Borne's footsteps. McNally looked back. The man looked startled. As his eyes encountered McNally's, his face became a mask again.

"I treated his wife a few weeks ago," he said.

Then they were at the door of the apartment and McNally pushed in. Just over the threshold, he stopped short.

Maurice Dalton had not stayed where he left him. The man had struggled to his knees, evidently,

and gripped the outside phone with his fingers. It now lay, with the receiver off the hook, just beyond his outflung hand. Dalton himself was kneeling like a Mohammedan at prayer, his knees drawn up under his stomach and his forehead resting on the rug.

Doctor Borne made a sharp, clicking sound with his tongue and crossed the room slowly, brushing past McNally. The house phone rang shrilly.

For a moment, McNally let it ring; then, as the doctor dropped to one knee beside Maurice Dalton, he crossed the room and scooped the phone from the desk. An excited voice came over the line.

"This is the clerk, downstairs, speaking. Is anything wrong up there? There is a police officer on the way up. He says there was a call—"

"I'll let you know." McNally dropped the receiver back into place and turned around. He was a little dazed at the idea of Dalton struggling to the phone for help. The man must have forgotten McNally, must have imagined that he was alone. The telephone girl, of course, would notify the police and the call would go out to the prowl cars by radio. It was fast work.

Knuckles rapped against the door and McNally was conscious of the open green case with its ghastly secret. He picked it up mechanically and snapped it shut; then he crossed to the door. Doctor Felix Borne straightened up from his examination of Maurice Dalton. He rubbed his slender hands together.

"There is nothing I can do," he said. "The man is dead."

Borne snapped shut the catch of his emergency case as the young copper from the prowl patrol entered the room. The medical man's face was grim.

"There's no case for the police here," he said crisply. "The man had a weak heart and he'd been drinking too much. He's dead now and he was dead before I saw him. You might have the medical examiner stop by. He wasn't my patient. I don't want to make out the death certificate—"

The patrolman removed his cap and wiped the sweat from the inside of it while his eyes took swift inventory of the room. He was a young man of the alert type usually found on prowl-car duty.

"I guess that's right, Doctor," he said, "but I've got a report to make and I'll need a few facts."

He took a notebook from his pocket while the medico exhibited a testy impatience. "I'll have to

have your name, Doctor, and—" He moved across the room to the desk and stopped. The two ransom notes were lying there where Maurice Dalton had laid them. McNally had been very conscious of them since the policeman entered the room. The cop saw them now. He broke his question in half and picked the top note off the desk.

"Oh, oh," he said softly. "Maybe you better have a seat for a moment, Doctor." He wheeled to the phone. It was the house phone; the outside one was still lying on the floor.

"Hello—desk? Give me police headquarters. Right. . . . Yeah. . . . Kane? This is Prescott. . . . Yeah, this Roney Apartments call . . . Guy's dead. . . . Heart disease, maybe. . . . Better have homicide take a look. . . . There's angles. . . . A snatch mixed up in it. . . . Yeah? Corbin? Swell. Have him over. . . . Better send the doc out, too. . . ."

He hung up and looked quietly from McNally to Borne. The doctor's cold stare did not intimidate him. He was the law and he knew it.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said, "but you'll have to wait a few minutes. It will save misunderstandings. Sergeant Corbin is only a few blocks from here on another matter. He'll be right over. Let's get the facts down."

HE had the book out and he was starting after the facts with questions aimed at the tight-lipped Doctor Borne. McNally fumbled for a cigarette and looked longingly at the half-filled whiskey bottle. He was not much of a drinker but this was one case where he felt that he needed it.

Dalton's death was a shock and somewhere Ethel Dalton was facing further mutilation unless something were done. To top it all off, Corbin was coming over.

McNally knew Corbin all too well. The hardboiled sergeant had been on several cases in which Needle Mike, the tattoo artist, had played a part—and Needle Mike was McNally's other self.

The crisp young patrolman was shooting incisive questions and an angry medical man was answering them. The mills of the law were grinding and it would be McNally's turn soon. His brow furrowed. Like the highly incensed medical man, he had not wanted to walk into anything like this and now that he was in, he was not sure of his own position.

If the police decided that Ethel Dalton had been really kidnapped and that Maurice Dalton had died

a natural death, the McNally reputation would be proof against annoyance; but if the police suspected another angle involving Ethel Dalton, it might be tough.

The patrolman was writing in his book and Borne had risen to lean over the desk and inspect the written record. For the moment, McNally was screened behind the doctor's back. It was an opportunity that he had hoped for and he didn't miss it. He reached out and picked up the green plush case.

There was one thing that he had to know and, as the lid snapped back, he reached in and slipped the ring down a bit. Where the ring had been, there was a tattooed cobra!

His lips tightened and he started to slip the ring back into place; then something about the tattooing arrested his attention and he took a closer look. His lips pursed and for the moment, he was rigid; his body bent forward.

The door into the hall opened and McNally sensed it rather than heard it. He straightened and he was closing the green case as he turned. He was too late. Detective-sergeant Pete Corbin was staring at him, his eyes narrowed. A cigar was balanced aggressively in the corner of his wide mouth.

"I'll look at the case—" Corbin's voice was harsh. Doctor Borne turned around, startled. The young policeman looked up.

McNally shrugged and handed over the green case. "It came with the second of those notes," he said.

Corbin grunted and pressed the catch. His eyes widened and the cigar all but leaped from his mouth. He shot a venomous look at the uniformed copper.

"A swell job you're doin'," he growled. "Everybody paws the evidence before we print it and . . ." His voice trailed off in a disgusted growl. He set the case down gingerly and took a chair, his eyes straying indifferently over the body on the floor.

"Let's have it from the beginning," he said. Doctor Borne drew himself up.

"I've given all the information that I can give already," he said. "I'm Doctor Felix Borne and the man was not my patient. I must insist that—"

Corbin waved one heavy hand. "O.K., Doctor. Sorry you were bothered. We'll call you if we want you."

He ignored McNally and bent a hard look on the

suddenly flustered cop at the desk. After a moment of hesitation, the doctor turned and walked stiffly from the room. The patrolman was summing up tersely and McNally followed the medico. Nobody stopped him but he sensed the fact that Corbin watched him go. He knew how Corbin worked. The dick wouldn't let anyone go far if he didn't think that he could pull him back.

**B**ORNE started for the stairs and McNally caught up with him. "I'm sorry if the delay inconvenienced you, Doctor," he said, "but if you knew the Daltons, you—" He broke off, aware of the fact that Borne did not intend to pay any attention to him. Ken's lips tightened. When the medical man turned to descend the stairs, McNally stopped him with a hand on his forearm.

"Doctor," he said, "the Daltons were my friends. Ethel Dalton is still missing. Will you tell me if there was anything serious the matter with her when you treated her?"

Doctor Borne's eyes were coldly expressionless. "A reputable physician does not discuss his patients," he said.

McNally stepped back. "Just like that," he muttered. "Well, maybe I asked for it." He turned back into the room, a feeling of inferiority rankling him. He was out of his element; outranked, in this case, by both police and medical men. His eyes clouded. He was merely the man whose aid Maurice Dalton had asked. Well, it was enough. As he turned back into the apartment, a man got off the elevator, followed him in.

The new arrival was the police medical examiner and McNally stayed in the background until he was through. There were other technicians on hand now—a fingerprint expert and a photographer. This wasn't a murder case but the background of kidnapping and extortion gave it murder rating.

Corbin was chewing his cigar grimly. He was on the homicide squad and always ready to entertain ideas of foul play in a mysterious death. His eyes stabbed McNally.

"I've seen you someplace," he said bluntly.

McNally didn't change expression. "I wouldn't know where," he said.

Corbin didn't know, either, but he had a reputation for remembering faces. He wouldn't be looking for Needle Mike in expensive tweeds and minus the traditional limp, the scars and the dirt.

McNally didn't care to be around, however, when the matter of the tattoo design under the ring was discussed. Sheer association of ideas might put Corbin on the trail. It was a ticklish spot.

McNally turned to the medical examiner, a keen-eyed man of middle age who was studying the finger in the case with professional interest. "Can you tell, Doctor," he said, "if that finger was amputated from a living body or a dead one?"

That question focused even Corbin's attention. The medical examiner tilted the case thoughtfully. "It was cut from a living body," he said. "Yes. The tissue looks healthy. No signs of decay."

Corbin's jaw snapped. He reached out one big hand and pulled the telephone to him. When he got headquarters, he barked his report into the transmitter. "I've got a hunch this is the same gang that got the Gerspach and the Stone woman," he growled. "Keep the lid on the press and we've got a chance. Clamp down on everything till I get in."

**H**E wheeled around again and leveled one thick finger at a man in gray who stood inconspicuously in the doorway. "You, Carmody, get downstairs and grab that doc, also the guy on the desk. Tell 'em to button up and talk to nobody—"

The phone rang and he turned back to it without completing the sentence. He listened for a moment, his face reddening; then he hung up with a curse.

"Somebody's already tipped off the papers," he growled. "They're sniffing around headquarters and they'll be here any minute." He slashed through a quarter arc with his big fist. "That clerk downstairs, the triple-plated, blinkety blank—"

McNally rose and laid his card on the desk. "I've told you all I know," he said, "but if you want me, you can get me. I've got to go along now."

Corbin merely grunted. There was no charge that McNally could be detained on and one doesn't hold material witnesses to death from heart attack. McNally turned to the door.

He'd be followed, of course. He expected that and it would be up to him to shake the trailers. He was going to do just that. For one thing, he was going to have to be Needle Mike again and for another, there was the matter of locating Ethel Dalton in a hurry.

He was not quite so sure, as was Corbin, that the clerk at the desk had tipped the papers—and he had one puzzle in his mind that hadn't even occurred to

the cops as yet. Dalton had identified the ring and the tattoo as his wife's, and the medical examiner had declared that the finger came from a living woman. But Ethel Dalton had had her tattooed cobra for years and McNally was willing to wager Needle Mike's professional reputation that the cobra on the amputated finger was only a few weeks old.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Jade Ring

**I**N the shabby little office that he rented on a side street east of Broadway, Ken McNally slipped out of his stylish tweeds and climbed into shabby gray trousers and blue shirt. After a few deft touches, the measles scars on his cheeks became blue-black powder-marks, his sleek black hair became tousled and streaked with gray, his eyes reddened and bloodshot, his tanned face a dirty yellow.

McNally grinned into the propped-up mirror and Needle Mike grinned back. There remained the adjustment of the especially made dental bridge which clipped to two sound teeth and held a gold cap over one of his canines. There was little of McNally left and the chunk of wax under his upper lip removed that trace. Needle Mike's mouth was slightly awry.

McNally stood up. Rolling back his right trouser leg, he adjusted an ovular device of cork and rubber that fitted snugly to his knee. With that in place, there was no fear that he would ever forget to walk with the characteristic limp of Needle Mike; he could walk no other way.

It was done. Whistling softly through his teeth, McNally turned and hobbled out of the office. He took a pull from a bottle of particularly villainous whiskey and spilled enough of it on his clothes to give him the odor of ten tough days on a bat. He was now ready to come home to South Broadway; home, as he always came home, lurching and slightly tipsy and in a rile mood. The half-world knew a man only by his habits and Needle Mike had established a tradition.

The usual thrill of exchanging identities was missing tonight. Ken McNally felt no glow of adventurous spirit in his veins; instead, he felt a sense of foreboding. Ken McNally might make blunders and still get by on his reputation; Needle Mike could make no mistakes because Needle

Mike had only a shady reputation to fall back upon. Needle Mike was a dweller in the shadows, a seemingly drunken old vagabond whose tattooing business and locksmith shop had often enough come under police suspicion.

Yet, upon Needle Mike's shoulders rested the responsibility of saving Ethel Dalton from her captors. Doors opened for the Needler that Ken McNally could never crash in fancy tweeds; men who would whisper carelessly where Needle Mike lingered over a whiskey, would sit stonily silent in the presence of one who was not of their world.

He had been away and he could not plunge back into his role immediately because he had never done it that way. He would have to follow his accepted custom and he would have to putter when he wanted to rush. The underworld is never hurried and it distrusts people who have to have quick answers.

Then, too, there were the police. Once let Corbin learn that the tattooing on the severed finger was new—there would be hell to pay. Tattooing in St. Louis meant Needle Mike—to the police. Only McNally himself, and a very few others, knew that there was another needle artist in the shadow-world; and McNally could not prove the existence of that other. It was that knowledge which had sent McNally to South Broadway and the role of Needle Mike. Now, if only he could scare up a lead before the cops fell on him!

**D**OWNTOWN St. Louis was blacker than usual as Kansas dust settled like a fog over the city and dimmed the street lights. McNally hobbled along with his head down, his face grimly set. Music blared from a tuneless radio in a corner restaurant and he found some frivolous part of his brain fitting words to an old drinking-party dirge. It was *St. Joe's Infirmary Blues*—

She gone, let 'er go,  
Gor blyme 'er,  
Wherever she may be . . .

He swore softly. The words were too pat, fitted too well into the pattern of his thought. Ahead of him he could see light streaming from the penny arcade that was only a few doors south of his tattooing parlor. He was nearly in. He'd have to stop at the Irishman's for a whiskey to announce his return, if there were no cops hanging around.

A hoarse voice hailed him from the shadows. "Mike?"

He slowed, turned toward the hail. There was a dark hallway leading back from a door opening flush with the sidewalk. McNally caught the flash of a hand that beckoned, the darker shadow of a man in waiting. He felt an uneasy prickling of his scalp but his shoulders twitched irritably. It was probably some bum trying to make a touch.

"Whozit and whaddye want?" He turned to the doorway with his jaw jutting. The man who had hailed him coughed harshly.

"Never mind gettin' tough, Mike. Get on my tail and off the pave—"

"Skeeter!" McNally felt a stir of interest as he limped into the hallway. He'd recognized the voice and the cough and he didn't need anything else. If Skeeter had a deal, it would be worth a few minutes' delay to hear it. Down the hall, a door opened which shed a pale yellow rectangle of light for a moment. McNally hurried toward it and the door closed until he reached it; then it opened hurriedly to admit him—and closed again. Skeeter stood leaning against it on the inside, a strangely gaunt figure in the pale, flickering gaslight.

There was no describing Skeeter and no explaining him. At twenty he was an old man with stooped shoulders and a chronic cough. He sold papers on a South Broadway corner, in all weather, for a few pennies, yet time and again he had had big stakes which he flipped away at dice tables. He had no conscience to torment him and no moral code, but he managed, somehow, to be likable in the face of his utter worthlessness. His blurry features were twisted now in a knowing smile.

"Mike, you were walkin' right into a pinch."

McNally turned. "What fur?"

Skeeter passed one bony hand caressingly across his loose lower lip. "Don't kid me, Mike. I flagged you down and saved you the ride. I want in."

"Are you nuts?"

"Not me." Skeeter was studying him. "There's dough in a good snatch racket if it's worked right. I want a cut."

McNally was far from forgetting that he was Needle Mike. He cursed fervently and with emphasis, jerked a flimsy chair out from the wall and flopped into it.

"You're a dirty little chiseler, Skeeter," he snarled, "and you're spotting me for somebody."

Whatinell's it all about?"

For the first time, Skeeter looked doubtful. He also looked startled. Moving more slowly than McNally, he straddled the only other chair in the room. "Mike," he said, "you maybe ain't a liar. You ain't—on any evidence I've got, anyway. Kick in. Are you on the snatch or ain't you?"

McNally grunted explosively. "Not me. You're just as nuts as I figured."

Skeeter seemed deflated. He took a shabby crumpled cigarette from his pocket and lighted it. "I still saved you from a pinch," he said. "That ought to rate something."

"Yeah? Tell me about it."

Skeeter exhaled. "Rafferty, the big harness bull was watching your dump. I couldn't figure it. Nothin' in the paper tied to you any. And I remembered that it was time for the Scientific Sleuth program on the radio—he was the guy that spotted you, Mike."

"Yeah?" McNally was smoking and slumped back in the chair. He seemed uninterested but there was a tingle in his blood. He knew about that radio program. Some smart-aleck had tapped a leak at detective headquarters and was scooping the newspapers every afternoon on police news under the name of the "Scientific Sleuth." Skeeter was nodding his head.

"The guy says, Mike, that the cops have information that the guy behind the snatching of all these women is a tattoo artist. Is that a kick in the pants?"

"It's worse! What else?"

"Well, Corbin is talking to Rafferty when I come down the street and they're both sore as hell when somebody tells 'em about the radio program. They figure that maybe you won't come back now and—"

McNally's eyes narrowed. "You were the guy that told them about the radio program!"

Skeeter grinned. "O.K. They'd a' heard about it anyway. It don't hurt a guy in my business to do a cop a favor."

There was tension in the room. McNally felt trapped, a little smothered. He had just thought of something that brought the sweat to his forehead. He'd been criminally careless. It wasn't just the tattoo design that had put the cops on his trail—it was worse than that. To cover his sudden feeling of panic, he took the whiskey bottle from his pocket and drank. It took all of his fortitude to keep from

gagging. Skeeter reached out his hand and McNally passed the bottle over. Skeeter tilted it.

FOR several moments the scrawny newsboy coughed his heart out. He raised streaming eyes to McNally and spat across the room. "You win, Mike," he gasped. "Nobody that had a big-dough racket would be drinkin' that kind o' rowboat paint. Wow—"

He wiped his thin hand across his lips and stiffened suddenly, his eyes narrowing. "That's one damn nice ring, Mike," he said slowly.

His voice was ominous. McNally looked down at his own hand and cursed inwardly. He was slipping badly. This was colossal blunder number two. The jade ring on his hand was the gift of a Japanese nobleman and it belonged in the life of Ken McNally; it had never come before into the haunts of Needle Mike. It did not belong on South Broadway.

Skeeter held out his hand. "The ring, Mike," he said, "for telling you about the cops and"—he paused—"for not telling the cops about you."

There was friendliness in his voice and no hint of threat, but, because he was Skeeter, he did not have to threaten. He was an ally to be bought and he had never pretended otherwise. In that policy lay his strength. McNally looked him in the eye and cursed with all the vigor of Needle Mike.

When he had finished cursing he passed the ring over. Skeeter put it in his pocket and rose. "I'm still in if you've got a snatch racket, Mike," he said.

McNally's jaw was suddenly hard. He reached out swiftly, as he rose, and gripped the skinny arm of the newsboy. "Skeeter," he said, "forget it. I haven't. But I gotta find who has. Do you know where that Polynesian girl, Benita, went to when—"

Skeeter's eyes widened. "The one that was in that cult business?"

"Sure. Can you find her?"

Skeeter's eyes went back behind slits. "For how much?"

"Twenty bucks."

"Make it fifty."

McNally hesitated as Needle Mike would be expected to hesitate. "You're a damn robber. I won't do it."

"I'll make it forty, Mike."

McNally grunted. "O.K., but it's still too much. Find her and let me know. I'll be at the public lib'ry. Newspaper room."

“Check. Watch out for cops.”

Skeeter slid from the room as though anxious to be on the trail. McNally took a deep breath. It was a long shot but he was in no position to complain about the odds.

He'd pawed the green plush case and its metal fittings like a raw yokel while the cops were waiting to fingerprint it—and he'd closed the doors to all explanations and alibis when he did it. Ken McNally could never claim those prints, now, and the arrest of the kidnappers would not clear the logical suspect.

The police had the prints of Needle Mike on file.

### CHAPTER THREE Infirmiry Blues

THE newspaper reading room of the public library is the most democratic spot in St. Louis. McNally, in his role of Needle Mike, was not conspicuous among the businessmen, students and down-and-outers who lingered over the out-of-town newspapers. McNally, however, was not interested in the papers of other cities. In a corner of the room, he searched carefully through ten issues of the *St. Louis Star*. The first headline of interest was exactly ten days back.

#### **ST. LOUIS WOMAN KIDNAPPED Leaves Home to Visit Mother, Disappears Husband Receives Ransom Demand**

That was the Gerspach case. The detailed files running down to date gave a running narrative of police efforts to locate the kidnappers, and of the husband's despair at his failure to hear further from the people who had taken his wife.

The second case was only six days later and the headlines shrieked—

#### **SECOND WOMAN KIDNAP VICTIM Kidnappers Break Faith With Husband George Stone Appeals to Police After Paying Futile Ransom**

The bald facts in this case were much the same as in the first. Mrs. Stone's husband was a well-to-do businessman and she had disappeared after first announcing her intention to visit relatives in

Illinois. There had been no evidence of violent abduction, no clues. With the Gerspach case still in the public prints, Stone had taken no chances of notifying the police. He had paid the twenty-thousand-dollar ransom demanded and kept his mouth shut. His wife, however, had not been returned.

McNally frowned thoughtfully as he read hastily through the accounts. They checked in all the essential details with the case of Ethel Dalton. Apparently there had been no violence in that case, either. She had written a neat, unhurried note, then vanished. The ransom demand had also been for twenty thousand. In only one particular did the Dalton case differ.

No other husband had received his wife's finger in the mail.

McNally watched the library clock. Skeeter was taking plenty of time and the library was not the best place in the world for a wanted man. The police made regular checkups of the floaters who hung around there. The papers were barren of any startling facts and McNally craved activity. He flipped the pages over impatiently; stopped to con a story by the *Star's* regular crime writer.

#### **RUMOR MANY WOMEN SNATCHED HERE**

The police are reported to be in possession of information on other kidnapping cases similar to the Gerspach and Stone cases. According to rumors current today, many prominent St. Louis men have paid ransom. . . .

It was a vague story and it betrayed the fact that the writer had few facts to go on, but the germ of an idea was there. It was easy to believe. The technique of the kidnappings was smooth and the ransom demanded in each case was comparatively light in comparison to the resources of the victims. But if there had been other cases in which the women were safely returned, why was Stone doublecrossed after paying the ransom? Why didn't the women, who were previous victims, come forward and tell their stories? And why the mutilation in the Dalton case?

That amputated finger bothered McNally. If it wasn't Ethel Dalton's—and it wasn't if her tattoo was several years old—then whose finger was it? Why did the snatchers cut the finger from another woman after going to the trouble of duplicating a tattoo mark? If they were going to mutilate, why

use one woman rather than another?

There were too many questions to answer and they couldn't be answered by anyone who sat around in libraries. McNally got up in disgust. Skeeter was taking his own sweet time and, meanwhile, the dragnet was out for Needle Mike. Logically, the quickest escape from that was a quick switch back to the identity of Ken McNally—but that, too, had its dangers besides imposing definite limitations upon his activities. The police might get the idea of taking McNally prints to eliminate them from prints found on the ransom messages or the jewel case.

A direct link between Kenneth McNally, Needle Mike and Maurice Dalton, at this stage of the game, would be hanging evidence.

**E**YES alert, McNally hobbled toward the main entrance of the library. A sharp-eyed youngster of eleven or twelve came up the Olive Street steps, two at a time. When he saw McNally he slowed his pace and a wide grin lighted his pinched features.

"Gotta message for yuh . . ." he panted.

McNally stopped. He was wary of messages. "Who from?" he growled.

"Skeeter." The youngster held the grimy envelope tightly. His young-old eyes were suddenly calculating.

"I gotta have expense money. Taxi," he said.

McNally looked at him more closely as he put a seemingly reluctant hand in his pocket. It was thus that Skeeters were developed. He brought out a quarter and the youngster surrendered the envelope. There was a single slip of paper inside and a scrawled line—*Thanks for the tip, Mike. Skeeter.*

For a long minute, McNally stared at the message while a blue vein danced on his jaw line and fury gathered in his eyes. He'd been sold out. Somehow Skeeter had stumbled across the path of the girl, Benita, and the path led to the snatch ring. Skeeter was declaring himself in; he was a body and a soul for hire. McNally cursed.

"How about a taxi back? My feet hurt."

The youngster who had brought the message was shifting nervously from one foot to the other, his eyes bright. McNally glowered at him. The kid had probably never ridden in a taxi in his life and didn't intend to ride in one now. It was a gouge. Ken McNally wouldn't care but it was Needle Mike's cue to be good and sore about it.

"You got two bits. Beat it!" he growled.

The youngster stopped shifting. "If I take a taxi," he persisted, "I ain't goin' to run into any cops. If they see me, they'll maybe ask me did I see you someplace and if they catch me lying to 'em—"

He broke off as McNally reached into his pocket. Needle Mike's growl was fervently deep. "How much?"

The youngster's eyes glowed. "A buck," he said.

"Here. Beat it!"

McNally passed the bill and watched the youngster scurry away. It was the Skeeter proposition all over again; a shakedown. The underworld lived like that, declaring itself in for a cut on every deal—and from the youngest to the oldest, the clippers took their toll.

"Damn Skeeter!"

**M**CNALLY turned back into the shadows of the library pillars. He was more alone than ever, now; and the man that he had depended upon was playing his only card and playing it for personal gain. It was something, however, to know that his guess was good. The tattoo clue led to Benita and Benita led to the mutilating snatchers. But how to pick up the trail?

"If I could circulate around!" McNally shrugged. There was no sense in thinking about that. He couldn't circulate. He'd last about ten minutes in downtown St. Louis before he was picked up. There had to be another trail out of the library and into the heart of the mystery. Break the Dalton case and he had a fighting chance for his freedom; fail and—

Unbidden, the dirge-like melody of *St. Joe's Infirmary Blues* echoed in his brain; silly words to a bad tune.

She's gone. Let 'er go,  
Gor blyme 'er,  
Wherever she may be . . .

Then suddenly, out of the maudlin song, he had the answer. His body stiffened and he snapped his fingers. He had a hunch, he had an idea—and there were three phone booths to his right.

He thumbed hastily through the directory and jotted down the phone numbers of Harvey Gerspach and of George Stone. As he waited for his connection on the first number, a crazy jumble of words ran through his brain.

“Infirmiry . . . hospital . . . hospital . . . doctor . . . gone . . . let ‘er go . . . amputation . . . hospital . . . doctor . . .”

There was a click in the receiver and then a voice at the other end of the line said, “Hello.” McNally’s shoulders twitched. He had Gerspach on the line.

Fifteen minutes later, after getting George Stone on the third attempt, McNally stepped out of the telephone booth with a gleam in his eye and a hard slant to his jaw. He had asked each man four questions about his wife and his wife’s disappearance—and he had received the answers that he hoped to receive, the answers that Maurice Dalton would have given if Maurice Dalton were alive to answer questions.

The trail led out of that booth to the lair of the snatchers and he was betting his life and his liberty on it. He hummed a doggerel tune under his breath and choked it off when he stepped out into a St. Louis night that was heavy with Kansas dust. He had slipped off the leg clamp in the booth and the telltale limp of Needle Mike was gone. A cruising cab poked up Olive and he whistled to it.

#### CHAPTER FOUR The Bite of Steel

THE body of Maurice Dalton had been removed and the police had departed. Life was going on as usual at the Roney Apartments. McNally had left his taxi two blocks away and had walked up on the far side of the street from the apartment house. There were good-looking cars around the entrance and a party of people in evening clothes had just emerged. McNally slipped further back into the shadows.

A man who wore the tattered outfit of Needle Mike would look strange as he walked through that lobby—if he got that far.

McNally didn’t put the matter to the test. There was an alley and a tradesman’s entrance. The Kansas dust had created a light-dimming fog even in this, the higher part of town. The alley was a black pocket and the one bulb over the service entrance was weak. McNally picked three empty bottles and a paper bag from the receptacle inside the alley fence and walked confidently into the basement. A colored woman looked at him curiously but the package sidetracked any possible questioning. Repeal had not stopped nighttime

bottle deliveries at the Roney.

McNally didn’t bother with the elevator. He ascended the back stairs slowly and carefully. At the fourth floor he reconnoitered before leaving the stairwell. There was no one around and he could see the dignified metal plate on the door of Doctor Felix Borne’s office from where he stood. Something glowed in his eyes. He was only a few steps away from high hazard and something wild sang in his blood. His fingers dipped into the bag and shifted the position of the bottles. They were a gag, so far; they could be used as weapons.

The same slim, languid, curly-headed, young man opened the door. There was a faint fragrance in the air about him and he was beautifully marcelled. His eyebrows lifted inquiringly. McNally lapsed into the gruff speech of Needle Mike.

“The doctor in, buddy?”

“No. He is not. Are you sure that you have the right address?”

“Sure I’m sure. I got three bottles.” McNally pushed the package at the matinee idol so abruptly that the man’s reaction was instinctive. He put his hands up and McNally gave him the bottles. The youth looked startled. For a few seconds, he held the package as though he had never had a package in his hands before.

McNally stepped in, closed the door behind him and leaned against it. “Buddy,” he said, “we’re going to swap talk.” A hard grin crossed his lips. “Just try screaming and the roof will fall on you.”

The guardian of Doctor Felix Borne’s door took a backward step. There was swift panic in his face but no resolve. He was the kind of youth who has things happen to him; he was not the type to make things happen. And he was looking into the fighting face of Needle Mike. Even in the rougher dumps along South Broadway, nobody went out of his way to make passes at men who looked like the Needler.

“Anybody but you in this dump?” McNally’s voice matched his looks.

The slim youth swallowed hard. “Nobody. But—”

“Never mind the repartee. Just back slowly into that reception room.” McNally thrust his chin out belligerently and followed that chin. He was not packing a weapon and he was conscious of the lack—it would have been a help. Lacking a gun, he needed courage, lots of courage.

THE youth backed across the reception room and, still holding the bottles, sat in a corner chair. His eyes were wide and there was perspiration on his high, white forehead. McNally stared steadily at him.

“What’s the doctor’s business?” McNally growled.

“Er—why—he’s a nerve specialist.”

“Whose nerves? Women?”

“Why—er—yes. Of course.” The elegant secretary seemed relieved at the easy questions and his face brightened. McNally studied that face. It didn’t take a Sherlock Holmes to guess that Felix Borne’s specialty was women patients. The sweetly scented male attendant was the tip-off on that. A man with bad nerves wouldn’t be able to stand it. McNally balanced his weight forward.

“What’s his other specialty—besides nerves?”

Fear leaped into the man’s eyes. He moistened his lips. “I don’t know what you mean,” he faltered.

McNally took two swift steps, jerked the man out of his chair and slapped him back into it with his open palm. The paper bag crashed to the floor and the empty bottles rolled.

“I’ve got no time for waltzing. You answer my questions.” The words snapped from McNally’s lips. “I asked you what his other business was!”

The fashion plate cowered. He had been hired to greet nervous women, not to confront roughnecks from South Broadway. He put his hand before his face in a protective gesture.

“He—he’s a plastic surgeon—” Fear surged whitely into the man’s face. “I’m not supposed to know.”

McNally hid his elation under a scowl. “You mean that he’s a face-lifter? He makes old women look young? That sort of thing?”

“Ye-es. Sometimes—”

“Sure. When that’s what they’re nervous about.” McNally couldn’t keep the scorn out of his voice. Legitimate surgery was one thing; undercover rackets was another. He drilled the cringing man before him with hard eyes. “Where’s his hospital?”

“I—honest—please—” The man gagged, his eyes terrified.

“Please, hell! You’ve snooped. If you don’t know what’s going on, you suspect.” McNally’s fists were iron balls. He took one step. It was enough.

The marcelled youth pressed back against the

upholstery, his face putty-gray. “Don’t! I’ll tell you! He’ll kill me! It’s down near the barracks. . . .” He whispered the address hoarsely and he was too frightened to lie. McNally grunted.

“How much staff has he got?”

“I—I don’t know—really—”

There was a clicking sound behind him and McNally whirled. He was not quite quick enough. The door had opened and closed again. Doctor Felix Borne was standing with his back against the panels, a heavy cane in his right hand.

One glance was enough for the doctor. His cold eyes swept from the frightened man in the chair to the roughly dressed, aggressive figure of McNally. His thumb pressed on the handle of the cane and the sheath fell to the floor. A long, slender blade glittered coldly in the light.

“Make one move, my friend,” he said grimly, “and you’ll regret it. I am an expert—” A slight motion of his wrist flashed the blade. He nodded his head slightly to the man in the chair. “What is the meaning of this, Winkler?”

Winkler put one slender hand to his throat. The coming of the doctor had not relieved his fright; it seemed to intensify it. He choked over his words. “I don’t know. This man forced his way in—”

“What did he want?” Doctor Borne’s voice was cold, metallic. He had advanced from the little hall into the reception room and he held the long blade with practiced ease. McNally admired the man’s nerve while he cursed his own helplessness.

THE doctor had had to rely on his own wits and his powers of observation for his assumption that the blade would be a valid threat. A gun would have made it useless, but he had evidently reasoned that McNally would have had the gun in evidence if he possessed one. McNally had witnessed miracles of speed on the part of fencers in the past and he knew that, in expert hands, a sword was only a shade less effective than a gun.

Winkler was still pressed back in the chair. He seemed to be trying to force a lie through his trembling lips, but it wouldn’t go. “He wanted to know about your business!” he blurted.

Borne’s face betrayed cold, inflexible purpose. The beard gave him a devilish appearance. His lips curled. “You didn’t know anything, of course. . . .?”

“No—no—”

“You’re a liar. It’s written in your face.” Borne’s eyes drilled past the cowering Winkler,

held hard on McNally. McNally had not dropped his role of Needle Mike. He was standing in a half crouch, his face sullen. His mind, working at top speed, grasped at an excuse.

"The monkey's O.K.," he growled. "I coulda tore him apart. I'm just outta stir, see? A feller told me you could fix me up; new mug, new fingertips, see? I'm goin' lamister on the parole and—"

Borne's face told him the story was going to miss. That was one branch of criminal surgery, evidently, that the plastic man had not yet touched. The doctor's eyes blazed.

"Who told you anything like that?"

"A feller. I ain't namin' no names."

It was terribly still in the room, graveyard-still. Something had come into Felix Borne's face that had not been there before; something that followed hard on his first expression of disbelief. His racket was hot, judging from the events of the afternoon, and McNally's visit was too pat. There was death in his eyes.

"Tie him up, Winkler," the doctor said harshly. "I'll take care of him!"

Winkler got up unsteadily. "The police?" he faltered.

"No, not the police. There'd be unfortunate publicity, a lot of bother—" Felix Borne almost purred. The blade was held very stiff but the man's body had relaxed into a catlike pose. Looking into his eyes, McNally saw two purposes.

The man expected him to object to the tying and that would call the steel into play—or, if he submitted— McNally shook his shoulders. There were too many things at a medical man's command; deadly things that could be pressed to a tiny cut with swift and horrible death as a result. He could not afford to be helplessly tied.

Winkler stepped up behind him and McNally moved.

With a quick collapse of all his muscles, he hit the floor, tensed and scooped for one of the bottles. He had it in his fingers but he had no time for a throw. Felix Borne's body seemed to flow behind the blade. It flashed like silver lightning and McNally felt the prick of steel against his throat.

A thousandth of an inch away from bloody death, he looked up into the blazing eyes of the surgeon who was facing the ruin of his career and his life. The motive and the will to kill were there, but something had checked the plunging rapier, something that drove the blaze out of the man's

eyes.

"Don't make a move!" Borne's voice was cold. He held the point of the blade where it was. McNally felt the sweat on his forehead. He crouched, stiffly motionless. He could hear the smothered breathing of the perfumed Winkler somewhere behind him. The room was terribly still; then Felix Borne laughed.

"Winkler," he said, "it's all right. We won't mess up the rug. I know this fellow."

**R**ECOGNITION! That fear had walked long with Ken McNally. It was a much older fear than the fear of steel against his throat. For a moment he forgot the threatening blade as he stared up into the burning eyes of Doctor Felix Borne.

"I know this fellow," the doctor had said.

That one statement cut right through McNally's dual life. It hung him—a man without an alibi—on the hooks of crime. The public thrills to the sins and the weaknesses of the wealthy and the successful; and the public always gloats when a proud name goes down into the mire. McNally's name meant something in St. Louis and who was going to believe that Kenneth McNally became Needle Mike and lived in a slum for a thrill and for a feel of raw humanity's elbow touch? There would be a smell of scandal in the story, a heavy smell—and Ken McNally would not be around to answer the whispers.

He could read that in the eyes of Felix Borne. Alive, he was a menace to the doctor; dead, he would still be a menace and a problem, perhaps, if it were not for the double-identity. The mystery of his death would be overshadowed by the revelation of secret chapters in his life.

Doctor Borne had seen him only once as Ken McNally. And now— The whole puzzling sequence of thought passed through McNally's mind in split seconds; the cold touch of death was on his throat and the threat of recognition in his ears. Then Borne's lips curled.

"This fellow is the tattooer that the police are looking for, Winkler. There's a picture of him and a description in tonight's paper. I read it coming up—" He flipped a rolled paper out of his pocket with his left hand. "See if I'm right, Winkler."

McNally almost sighed aloud with relief. He had not considered the possibility of being recognized as Needle Mike because Borne had never seen Needle Mike. The danger had been in

being recognized as Ken McNally while he wore the garb of Needle Mike.

“Stand up, you!” Doctor Borne stepped back a few feet, the blade poised carefully. His manner was suddenly contemptuous. He was not dealing with a disguised cop and the knowledge steadied him. Winkler clucked his tongue excitedly.

“It’s the same man!” he said. “Indeed, it is!”

McNally had risen. He looked with interest toward the paper. There was a front-page picture. He remembered that. It was probably the only picture of Needle Mike in existence. A bone-headed news cameraman had made it when he came out of police headquarters the time that he was questioned about the death of Snuffle Magee. As a likeness it was too good, but it had had its good points. It looked nothing at all like Ken McNally. His disguise had been perfect that day.

“My gun out of the drawer, Winkler!” Borne snapped the command, his eyes still on McNally. Winkler, his confidence returning swiftly, was anxious to please. He made fast work of getting the gun out of the drawer—but he did not make the mistake of passing within reach of McNally. The surgeon took the gun and his hand fitted it like a hand accustomed to guns. He laid the blade aside and sat down.

“Put that back in the sheath, Winkler,” he said.

“How about me, boss? You know who I am.” McNally dripped an East Market Street whine into his voice. “You know I spilled you a fact. I’m lamister from the cops and—”

The face behind the Van Dyke might well have been cold-chiseled out of hard wax. There was the hard surface gleam of polished glass in the doctor’s eyes.

“I understand and I sympathize,” he purred softly, “but I do not, of course, operate here. I will take you to my private hospital.” He beckoned to Winkler. “You will bring out a clean shirt and one of my suits, the blue with the pin stripe will do, for our patient. He must not occasion comment when he leaves.”

**W**INKLER was goggle-eyed. He bobbed his head a couple of times and gulped. He was not the kind of young man who retained his composure upon encountering the unexpected. He needed women nerve patients around to be at his best. As he scuttled away, the eyes of McNally and Borne met.

They were not kidding each other very much and they were only going through the motions of trying to.

Somehow, Borne had grasped at an idea into which he had fitted Needle Mike. He was not taking seriously the claim that anyone would look him up for change-of-identity surgery; and, since he had gained the upper hand, he wasn’t caring much what purpose McNally might have had in mind. He was concerned with his own purposes. McNally couldn’t guess at those.

But McNally was figuring the blue suit as the uniform of a one-way ride—and he wouldn’t have bet a dime on Winkler’s chances, either. If Winkler were going along, it would be Winkler’s first trip to that “hospital.” A first trip for such a weak, babbling slob would be a last trip.

The atmosphere of the room oozed murder.

“Here you are, sir. I brought a necktie and socks, too, sir.” Winkler was back with his bright air of willingness to please. The doctor nodded.

“Very good. Get into them, you!”

McNally grunted and was suddenly glad that he had always been thorough in his characterization. When he became Needle Mike, he was Mike from the skin out. The underwear of the tattooer would not have looked well on a Lindell Boulevard line. He was glad, too, that he had discarded the knee-clamp. A doctor might have been curious. The clamp was in his pocket and nobody had been interested enough to search him.

He undressed and dressed in silence. When he was ready, the surgeon rose briskly and put the gun into his side pocket. “I am taking you at your word,” he said, “but you can’t expect me to trust an avowed criminal. If you attempt the unexpected on the way out, I’ll shoot you in your tracks!”

“You won’t have to.” McNally nodded surlily. There was nothing more said. They went down the elevator and out to the doctor’s car without drawing a curious glance.

“You may drive, Winkler.” Borne edged McNally into the back. “I’m riding with you,” he said.

“O.K.” McNally sat back. Winkler turned his head.

“The address, doctor?”

Borne’s eyes seemed to glow in the darkness. His body was stiff, rigid. “You know it,” he said coldly. “Drive to it!”

WINKLER shivered perceptibly but he did not argue. He put the car in gear and they rolled out into the evening flood of traffic. A policeman on a motorcycle passed them without a glance, his predatory gaze fastened on a flivver full of carousing Negroes who were doing about thirty-five. McNally's lips twisted in a wry grin. Life, at times, was full of laughs.

It was a laugh, too, that they had to pass the darkened quarters of Needle Mike when they wheeled into South Broadway, but that was all the comedy there was. The long, dark stretches of South Broadway, as they sped toward Jefferson Barracks, were in the mood of the grim company. No one spoke.

Some distance short of the Barracks, they turned off and an old-fashioned stone house loomed ahead of them. There was yellow light behind discreetly drawn shades and, when Winkler silenced the motor, there was the deep sighing song of the Mississippi.

She gone, let 'er go,  
Gor blyme 'em,  
Wherever she may be . . .

Some frivolous side to McNally's mind sought to fit the words of that doggerel dirge to the ageless melody of old Mississippi, but they wouldn't go, somehow. Felix Borne stepped carefully out of the car.

"Either I am very careless or you are very alert, Winkler," he said. "You didn't waste a mile."

There was a deadliness in his tone that the words themselves didn't carry. The doctor beckoned to McNally. "Step out!" he said.

McNally heard a door open somewhere. He rose from his cramped position in the corner of the car and bent over as he stepped out of the low car door. He was off guard and a setup for slaughter. He sensed, too late, the shadow of the upraised gun and he had no hole into which he could pull his head.

White light crashed upon his brain and spread out to all the crannies in his skull. He felt his body plunging forward from the running board of the car, felt his own terrible inability to check its fall—but he felt no impact when he hit. From some immeasurable distance he heard a cold voice saying: "You may carry him in, Winkler. If he is too heavy, McBain will assist you."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Tattooed Cobra

McNALLY came back to consciousness slowly with a subtle perfume in his nostrils, a throbbing pain in his head and sharp stabs of agony in his hand. He shrank from the effort of opening his eyes but he became increasingly conscious of the pain in his hand, pain that was now centering in one finger. It was like the pain in a tooth under the dentist's drill. He opened his eyes.

The Polynesian girl, Benita, was crouched over him and she had his left hand flattened against a board while she worked on it with a glittering needle.

She was not immediately aware of his eyes on hers. Her small features were set in the hard mask of cruelty. Her lips were very red and she kept touching them with the tip of a tongue that was, itself, too red. Her teeth gleamed whitely in the intervals when her tongue disappeared. They were small teeth. Her eyes were shiny brown and there was glitter in them.

The needle flashed in and out, stabbed wickedly, savagely, but with an unholy, deft skill. The light in the room was soft and, under it, the girl's skin was creamy, maddeningly seductive. Under her skin there were smooth muscles that moved with sensuous rhythm. She wore few clothes and there was no single line of her ripe figure that was blurred or broken by clothing; the few wispy things she wore flowed to the lines of her body and merged with them.

"You're a butcher!" McNally's voice was harsh, husky. The girl's head jerked up. She smiled wickedly.

"I should butcher you good, no?"

Their eyes dueled and they were both remembering. McNally, as Needle Mike, had broken up the obscene love-cult racket in which this girl had been a prominent figure. Benita had been outwitted, in that case, and her vaunted allure had been flouted. She had cause to remember and she did.

"I do on you a serpent. It is proper, yes?"

McNally's eyes focused on his flattened left hand. It was hard to see because he was bound securely with tape. Even the left arm was fastened. His shirt had been removed and rolls of thick tape held the arm against his body above the elbow,

leaving only the forearm and hand free for the girl's manipulation.

On the third finger of his left hand, she was working the design of the hooded cobra.

McNally cursed. The curse was fervent and came from deep inside him. He was not slated to get out of this mess alive, of course, but if he did get out, they were ruining him. Not only was he damned by the prints of Needle Mike on the jewel case, but now they were engraving on his skin the indelible sign that made a dual role impossible. He could never again jump from the role of McNally to Needle Mike, and back again, while he bore a mark that proclaimed the two as one and the same man.

The girl was looking at him. "You do not like?" she said. "I show you one trick. See!"

**S**HE had a moist pack in a bowl. It looked like a mess of pressed leaves. She took it out and laid it against his finger holding it there. "It is quick tattoo," she said. "This heals verra fast. Makes verra clean picture. See!"

She whisked the pack away. McNally was startled. The part of his skin that had been rough and swollen, with the blurred design, had smoothed down. The design had come up. He knew, now, that she had been treating the finger at intervals as she worked. It was a native trick, a trick that he didn't know.

"You put that thing on a woman recently!" he said.

The girl stabbed him viciously with the needle. "Yes," she said. Benita was almost dreamy about it and the savage pain-lust was in her face again. "She screamed and hollered. She did not like it." The girl raised her left hand. "Once she bit me. See!"

There was a healing mark on her forearm. Her eyes met McNally's and there was something unholy and unclean in them, something that chilled him. "For what she did," she said softly, "the doctor let me help him when he cut that finger off."

McNally was scarcely conscious of the cruelly driven needle as it jabbed his own skin. He was thinking of that other scene and trying not to think of it. This girl was scarcely human. Even in her tattooing, she was a fiendish sadist. Where a tattoo artist prides himself that he does not puncture the true vascular skin nor draw blood, this girl stabbed deep and gloried in the blood. Before her, on a little table, he noted the model from which she worked.

It was a set of two photographs which showed the hand of a woman; a hand that had the third finger circled by a tattooed cobra.

McNally stiffened. That photograph made many things clear to him. Borne, of course, had spotted that tattoo when Ethel Dalton came to him for treatment weeks ago. With an eye to the future, he had photographed that hand. There were many excuses he could have used, X-ray or what-not.

But who was the woman that he had turned over to this little fiend of a torturer—the woman he had mutilated? It had not been Ethel Dalton. She had already had the cobra on her finger and it would not have been necessary to put one there. The only excuse for it at all was to provide identification to Maurice Dalton and frighten him into action.

It was all guesswork, of course, but it excited Ken McNally and made him forget the biting needles and the pain in his head. The girl was softly humming and he turned his head away from her. With an effort, he controlled his sudden surprise.

The door to his left had opened without a sound. Swift as a shadow, a man glided through the opening. His arm went back and a bottle flashed across the room.

Benita never knew what hit her. Her body stiffened and a choked cry died on her lips. The needle in her hand once more bit viciously into McNally's hand; and then her body became a slumped heap on the floor.

Skeeter closed the door softly and grinned as he leaned against it. "Howarya, Mike?" he said softly. He was carrying a five-gallon can which bore the label—*Gasoline*.

**S**KEETER crossed the room in quick, awkward steps, put the can on the floor. He bent above the girl, swiftly flipped a black case open and took out two rolls of adhesive tape.

"Handy stuff, tape," Skeeter grunted. "I'm goin' to stick up her kisser first. She's got a screech like a hoot-owl. That's why I had to bop her."

McNally was staring at him. "You could have busted her conk that way," he said bluntly.

Skeeter looked at Needle Mike and his mouth twisted wryly. "Hell, Mike," he said, "it was an *empty* bottle."

He was working with amazing speed and rolling the girl's body around as though it were a dummy. He had each hand lashed to the sides of her chair and her legs fastened at ankle and knee before he

stood up. McNally wriggled.

"O.K., how's to cut me loose?"

Skeeter considered that. He was grinning faintly. "No can do, Mike." His voice was pitched to a confidential whisper. "I muscled in, see? They think there's two of us; one on the outside and one on the inside and that we know the racket. That gives 'em no premium to bump me if there's a loose squawk to trip 'em up."

"Sure. Tell me how bright you are some other time. How's to cut this tape?"

Skeeter rubbed his hands together. "I was telling you. It's harder collectin' my way than crashing in. I got another angle. There's a dame in here they been holding for a twenty-grand squeeze. It's too much, I tell her. I'm takin' her out of here for ten grand. Cut-rate, Mike. That's why I conked Little Bo Peep. I'll fix her up so she won't do any hollerin', and no runnin' around, neither! She'd better be careful or you'll be—"

Skeeter stopped talking, went to the door to listen. Satisfied that there was no one within hearing distance, he began emptying the can of gasoline on the floor of the room near the unconscious Benita and the now frantic McNally.

On a table, in the corner, stood an unlighted kerosene lamp. Skeeter carefully lighted it, turned up the flame and balanced it in the tightly taped lap of the unsuspecting Polynesian.

McNally raved: "What—what are ye tryin' to do—send us all to hell? Fer God's sake, Skeeter, I'll—"

Skeeter cut in: "Shut up, Mike! If you an' the bimbo don't move—don't interfere wit' me—ye won't get hurt. Otherwise—" He added: "The gal's got some keys I kin use, an' I t'ink they're in here." Skeeter frisked Benita's purse which lay on the corner table, turned to McNally in triumph.

He held the keys up in one hand, then shoved them into his pocket. "I gotta leave you out, Mike. You're a souse and a stumble-bum and you got a bum prop. I can't have a gimp stumbling around this shanty and raising a hell of a noise."

McNally stared at him hotly. "You doublecrossing little tramp—"

"Pass it, Mike. I'll cut you in for five percent when I collect. Clean gravy for you, Mike, if you live to collect." He grinned crookedly as he turned to the door. "Treat the little girl like a gentleman, Mike."

Benita had passed out with her needle in

McNally's flesh. During the few moments in which she had been a limp heap beside him, McNally had worked his fingers around the needle and palmed it in frantic haste. He had it now. The girl must not awaken before he could free himself! After that, he'd be all right!

Exerting all of his strength, he brought his left arm up across his chest and forced the long tattooing needle into the tape that went across him there. Once he had made the initial tear, it was swift work. He ripped the tape in a dozen places and broke it with the bulge of his muscles. There was a hard smile on his face when he stood up.

The girl was coming out of the fog, but her eyes weren't focusing well yet. She looked cross-eyed. He felt her pulse and decided that she would do as she was. He carefully removed the lamp from her lap, extinguished it, and turned to the door, working the stiffness out of his limbs as he crossed the room.

**O**UT in the hall there was an eerie silence. The house was well lighted but the hushed quiet and the faint medicinal odor was a tip-off to what it actually was. Legitimate or not, this was a hospital.

From somewhere downstairs there came a faint hum of conversation as hushed and indistinct as voices from a radio that is turned down low. McNally stole like a shadow along the upper hall. He did not know how many men might be downstairs, but he had an idea that they would remain down there until Benita had had time to mark him with the sign of the cobra. He didn't need any diagrams for that play.

The sudden police activity, following the death of Maurice Dalton, had Borne and his outfit scared. They had to head the police off from the tedious, damning, piling-up of evidence that they would engage in once the case loomed up as mysterious. McNally's disfiguration and death had been intended for an easy solution—to mislead the police.

A known tattoo artist and already on the broadcast sheet as wanted, he was the logical suspect. If his body turned up, somewhere, with the same mark on his ring finger as that on the finger in the jewel case, the kidnapping might still be puzzling but the police would have a solution of sorts that would throw them off the real trail.

There might even be another body found with McNally's—the body of one of the kidnapped

women.

Well, that little act was temporarily postponed. McNally tested one of the doors opening off the hall. It was locked and he could detect no sound from within. The knob of the third door turned under his hand. He pushed it slowly inward. It had opened barely a crack when he heard Skeeter's hoarse whisper.

"Naw," Skeeter was saying, "that's the only thing you can be sure of. I ain't trappin' you. I ain't in with 'em. They just think I am. The reason I'm on the loose in this dump is, I know this mug, Otero. He thinks I got an outside lineup like maybe I have and he knows me. He knows I don't spill to cops. No marbles in that for me. . . ."

McNally slid away from the door. He shook his head dazedly, choked back the curse that threatened to crack through his stiff lips.

"Otero!"

He remembered the big, blue-jowled man very well; so well that he would have figured him in this play, when he found Benita in it; would have figured him in for a certainty, only for the fact that the man should have been doubly dead.

Rigged in a scarlet cowl, Otero had run a poisonous blackmail racket that had destroyed lives and reputations galore. Needle Mike had wrecked that game and McNally's mind still carried the vivid picture of Otero crumpling before him as he pumped a bullet into the man's body—was still capable of recalling with horror the terrible wall of fire that had raced down the corridors of the blackmail den.

And Otero had escaped!

It was hard to credit. Only a bulletproof vest and a quick recovery from the shock of the slug could explain that. McNally backed slowly down the corridor. He was not interested in explaining anything. If Otero were still alive, explanations didn't matter.

THE next room, beyond the one in which Skeeter conspired with some captive of the ring, was likewise unlocked. McNally slid the door open, listened for a moment and stepped into the black darkness of the room. He had no plan. With Skeeter and Otero added to the odds against him, his alternatives were few.

There was no percentage in crashing in on Skeeter. McNally didn't know which of the kidnapped women had bargained with the

newsboy. If it were Ethel Dalton, he'd be safe in crashing; but a woman who was a stranger would trust Skeeter more readily than she would trust Needle Mike. A scream now would ruin everything.

He tried to create a mental picture of Ethel Dalton. She was the keynote of any plan that he could evolve. If he reached her and got her out of this place, her story would bring the police in with a rush. Alone he would encounter suspicion and delay and there would be time enough for the gang to clean out. He passed his hand across his eyes. His mental picture of Ethel Dalton was dim. It was a long time since they'd moved closely within the same circle; the Daltons had traveled much.

Slim, vivacious, pretty as a girl, Ethel Dalton had looked a little hard and more than a little tired the last time he'd seen her. She had been rather bulgy; not merely with a fullness of figure but rather with a deterioration of body, the lines coarsened and sagging. It was that fading of her beauty that had led her here, led her to clutch desperately at plastic surgery for rescue from the sea of habit, from careless living.

He seemed to hear Maurice Dalton's words ringing in his ears. "She had an idea that something would happen to part us." McNally's fists clenched. "I've got to find her," he muttered. "Got to get her out of—"

He stiffened suddenly and turned. There was a rustle in the room behind him.

For several seconds he held himself motionless, staring; then the rustle was repeated and he located the source. It was on the far side of the room. He crouched a little and held his breath and it was seconds before he heard the sound again. The element of surprise was gone now and he could analyze the sound. There was nothing dangerous in it. It did not seem like the quick, furtive movement of a stalker; it was slower, dragging, helpless.

Tense against the possibility of an error in judgment, he crossed the room with quick strides. The sound quickened as he approached but it was not menacing. He made out the blurred lines of a cot and he fumbled in his pockets for a match. He was still wearing the suit given him by Doctor Felix Borne. He had taken time in the room, from which he had escaped, to put on his shirt and coat again. In the breast pocket of the coat, there was a paper of matches. He struck one and pale light glowed.

There was a cot—and there was a man lying on it, a man whose hands were securely tied behind him with tape and whose mouth was cross-taped with narrow strips. Agonized eyes pleaded with McNally and McNally whistled under his breath.

The man on the cot was Winkler.

With recognition, the tiny flare fizzed out. McNally dropped the matches in his pocket and bent over the cot. “This isn’t the worst thing that could happen to you,” he said. “You could be dead. You’ve still got a chance—”

HE didn’t think that Winkler deserved any more encouragement than that. After all, the man had known about this slimy racket and had kept his mouth shut; greeting women and playing the gigolo while he knew the fate that awaited them.

The gang had evidently delayed knocking him off until they had a means of ridding themselves of his body. It gave the man a chance and he didn’t rate any more than that. McNally turned to the door.

“There’s no way I could use him,” he muttered to himself. “The sap would doublecross me to get back with Borne and he’d get himself killed anyway.”

He was halfway across the room when some instinct speeded his stride. He had heard nothing that could be definitely defined as sound, but some alert monitor in his brain warned him of movement in the hall. He opened the door to a thin slit.

The stairs were within his line of vision and he had a swift vision of Skeeter as the newsboy turned to descend. There was a woman half hidden from McNally by Skeeter’s bent body. McNally enlarged the crack of the door and the woman turned her head.

For a moment he could see her face plainly.

There was terror in the eyes that stared fearfully back along the hall, but the face itself betrayed nothing. It was a beautiful face, satin smooth in the softly diffused light of the hall; strangely beautiful. McNally had never seen a woman’s face quite like it. It was ageless, characterless; as beautiful as a face in a retouched photograph but lacking the lines and the marks of living and of having lived.

He only saw her for a fleeting few seconds, but McNally decided that he had never seen her before. She resembled none of the women whose photographs had appeared in the papers he had

reviewed. He had a sense of uneasiness. Perhaps she was a plant. Skeeter might have walked into something.

He didn’t care about Skeeter. The little mutt had asked for it. But a sudden break of any kind, now, might bring swift disaster upon McNally himself. Even if the woman were on the level, there was the possibility of sudden surprise for the two of them at the foot of the stairs. McNally fumbled in his pockets.

He would have to move swiftly and he would have to have luck on his side. The locked door that he had passed intrigued him. The gang had not considered it necessary to lock up the room into which they had dumped Winkler, but Skeeter had needed keys to get to the woman he had released. There was that other locked door. What lay behind that?

His fumbling fingers closed on his key ring. Borne had not considered it necessary to confiscate Needle Mike’s few belongings when he made him change clothes and the keys looked innocent. McNally’s lips curled. He didn’t run a locksmith shop as a sideline for nothing. He separated the last key on the ring from the others and ran his nail down along the groove.

The key parted into two sections.

That was his own idea, borrowed in part from a South Broadway neighbor whose police record was longer than his pedigree. The two sections of the divided key were as efficient as most of the elaborate lock-picking kits. McNally moved swiftly to the locked door.

His nerves were drawn taut and he listened for a half-expected alarm from downstairs as he bent over the lock. It was a simple one and it clicked back in less than two seconds. He stepped into the room and pulled the door closed after him.

There was a rustling sound in the darkness.

He wasted no time now on scouting. He expected to find a cot on the far side of the room, and he did; he expected to find someone trussed up on the cot, and he did. A match flared in his fingers—and he almost dropped it with the shock of what he saw.

The trussed-up body was the body of a woman; but the face, out of which wild eyes stared, was the face of a gargoyle. Creased and furrowed and sagging and scarred, it was recognizable as human only by reason of the staring eyes and by the soft aureole of blond hair that framed it.

And as he stared nervelessly, there came a piercing scream from downstairs—  
Skeeter had failed.

CHAPTER SIX  
Blond Gargoyle

THE scream from downstairs was still echoing when the match in McNally's hand went out. He was conscious of an increase in the desperate squirming of the bound woman on the cot, conscious of the fact that he didn't want to look at that hideous face again; and conscious of the fact that it was showdown time. This house would be in a mad uproar any minute now and another escape from it would be out of the question. Borne and Otero would want to know why Benita did not come down to investigate the commotion and they would find out what had happened to her.

He was striking another match as the thoughts marched double-quick through his brain. He didn't want to see what botched surgery had done to a woman's face, but he had to see. There was something that he had to know. The match flamed.

In the feeble light, he saw the woman writhing. Her eyes were almost popping from her head and in them he read a fierce desire to scream and to keep on screaming. To release the gag on her lips would be to fill this house with sound. He shuddered a little and bent down. Her hands were bound behind her and he turned her gently.

The third finger of her left hand was missing.

Ethel Dalton! It couldn't be. This woman's body, too, had deteriorated, had lost the clean lines of youth and health and vigor; but there was a solidity to it that Ethel Dalton's couldn't have had. This woman was older. Besides, there was the matter of the new tattoo and Benita's gloating tale of tattooing a woman who screamed. The cobra on Ethel Dalton's finger had been reproduced upon the finger of this deformed creature on the cot. He didn't know why, but this was not Ethel Dalton.

The scream of a woman sounded again from the stairwell and he heard the tapping steps of one who runs in high heels. It was a frantic tapping and a hoarse voice called a threat. McNally wheeled to the door.

It was a time for action. He was not willing to wait and be hunted like an animal nor was he going to cower in a room while a woman was hunted. Crouched low, but with his body delicately

balanced, he hit the hallway.

The girl with the expressionless face was almost at the top of the stairs. Behind her, heavy feet pounded and a snarling voice threw a command: "I'll shoot you in the leg—"

It was a threat calculated to stop a woman more quickly than the threat of death, but the girl kept on. McNally saw her face, a face as placid as though she were serving tea—but made weird by the blazing terror in her eyes; then he was looking over the banister into the Van Dyke-adorned face of Felix Borne.

The surgeon, his eyes on the fleeing girl, did not see him. He was raising a pistol—and McNally plunged over the banister.

IT was a sheer, feet-first drop and McNally had time to experience the all-gone sensation of falling; then his heels bit into the shoulders of the medico and he was part of a dizzy human pinwheel that bounced crazily down the stairs.

The gun in Borne's hand went off and there was a booming roar that woke echoes through the old house. A shower of plaster cascaded down from a punctured wall. McNally was conscious of it pattering on him as he struggled to free himself from the doctor's grip. He lashed out savagely with short-arm lefts and rights and he was scarcely conscious of the return blows any more than he had been conscious of bouncing against the stairs. The doctor's lean fingers fastened to his windpipe, as he struggled to his knees, and he saw the man through a thin haze. For a second he fought for balance and then his right hand came across under Borne's rigid arm.

The Van Dyke tilted back and Doctor Felix Borne hit with a thud. Something crashed into McNally as he turned and he felt the blow glance off his jaw. He rolled groggily and back-pedaled desperately as he came to his feet. Otero's broad, cruel, blue-jowled face seemed to bob around unsteadily through the film over McNally's eyes. He couldn't quite locate the man, but he knew that he was there before him and that he was swinging.

Otero had always been a proud brute who liked to break a man up with his hands as long as he was running in front and it was safe to do so. Somewhere behind the fists of Otero, however, there was always a knife for emergencies. He didn't need the knife now. McNally had been battered, dazed and off balance before Otero came

into the picture and Otero didn't give him a chance to get set. McNally's blows lacked steam and he could feel the iron fists smashing through his guard. His shoulders bounced against the wall and he saw Otero's right go back for the kill.

"Stop that! I'll shoot—"

The shrill, almost hysterical, voice of a woman broke on the tableau like the report of a gun. Otero hesitated and spun on his toes, his big body drawn into a crouch. McNally shook his head and drew the air into his lungs in deep gulps.

Skeeter was lying in a corner of the hallway. His face was bloody and he looked dead. Felix Borne, in another corner, was sitting up, dazedly, and holding onto his head. In the center of the hall, her back against the door, stood the girl with the mask-like, expressionless face. Her eyes were wide and, for all of her dramatic challenge and the threat of the gun in her hand, she was a grotesque figure.

Her face might have passed for that of a girl in her teens; her body was more like the body of a schoolgirl's mother. Youth and age warred in her and she was neither one thing nor the other. The gun was Doctor Borne's and she held it with a firm hand.

Otero faced it snarling and the full force of his predicament must have registered in his mind. His right hand moved with a conjurer's speed and, as a long knife flashed in his hand, he leaped.

The girl gave a choked scream and her finger tightened on the trigger. McNally launched himself from the wall in a diving tackle and the thunder of gunfire beat against his eardrums as his fingers slipped along the seams of Otero's trousers and his shoulder crashed against the man's knees.

He could feel the man folding even as he hit him; but through the echo of the shot, the girl's scream rang again, piercingly and with a new, terrifying note.

She fired again as she screamed.

**O**TERO died before he hit the ground. McNally felt the death-jerk in his muscles as his own grip tightened. He rolled free as the big man crashed against the boards and came up on his hands and knees, facing the girl.

She had her shoulders pressed hard against the door and her legs braced stiffly like one who sets herself against a shock. There was a bloody froth on her lips and a spreading stain on the front of her dress. Her heels were slipping in straight grooves

on the floor and letting her body down slowly along the door. Her eyes were wide, startled.

McNally, leaping, caught her and her body jerked in his arms. She blinked and the startled look left her eyes. Her fingers closed tightly on McNally's arm and her voice was a broken whisper.

"Maurice . . ." she called softly. "Maurice! I lacked faith, Maurice. The cobra. It would keep us always together. They removed the cobra, Maurice. . . ."

Her voice was fading out and her eyes were settling into a fixity of expression as though she were looking out beyond the bloody hallway. McNally felt a choking dryness in his throat. He was looking down on the face of a dying woman, a face he had never seen before—and it belonged to Ethel Dalton.

"Ethel!" he said. "Hold on, Ethel! I'll get you help—"

He was lowering her to the floor. Her head turned slightly as she spoke. There was an eager, hurt, pathetic note in her voice.

"Maurice . . ."

He had to leave her there. He was feeling again the terrible futility of a layman in the presence of death. A doctor might save her. He was afraid not, but he hoped. He looked around wildly for a telephone.

Skeeter was still lying in a corner but he had changed position slightly. Otero was a crumpled mass of flesh already in the chill grip of death from which he would never return. There had been no bulletproof vests in the way of these bullets!

There was no phone. McNally took a step toward the nearest room; then he whirled. His mind had been dazed. There had been something missing from that hallway, something that should be there. With that realization he ceased to worry about a telephone.

Doctor Borne was gone.

Scooping the gun from the floor, McNally leaped for the door. As he flung it open, he heard the whine of a starter and the choked, protesting gasp of an automobile engine that has been choked too much. The car which had brought him here was standing in front of the house.

It was twenty-five yards from the porch to the driveway where the car stood and McNally was hitting the top of his sprint when he heard the engine catch and roar into life. He pulled the gun

up to hip level and blazed a snap shot at the car. His voice rode on the echo.

"Hold it, Borne! I'll lay the next one into you!"

McNally couldn't tell if his voice carried to the man in the car but he had the gun in readiness and his legs pumping like a sprinter's when the car, after a jerky, uneven start, pulled back against the curb.

Doctor Felix Borne slid from under the wheel. His eyes were blazing pools of hatred and desperation but his face was paste-white and his left arm hung limply at his side.

"I could not have driven anyway," he said hoarsely. "I have a broken arm!"

McNally's lips set in a thin line. "I don't care if you've got a broken neck!" he said grimly. "You've got a job to do! Back to the house—"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Horror Hospital

**T**HE bloody hallway of that horror hospital was weirdly still. Doctor Felix Borne was bent above the body of Ethel Dalton. Over in a corner, Skeeter numbly sat and held his head. Slowly the surgeon straightened. His face was gray.

"She's dead," he said.

McNally had expected that but he felt a strange sense of shock. He had stumbled into the private lives of two people whom he had known all of his life and yet known scarcely at all. He had found in their weak characters the existence of a strong love. He had seen them both die within twenty-four hours. The haunting, doggerel dirge rang through his brain—

She's gone,  
Let 'er go . . .

His shoulders twitched in protest against the shoddiness of it and his lips moved. "The Yogi didn't lie to her," he said stiffly. "Maybe the cobra had nothing to do with it, but they weren't parted."

He looked up to meet Felix Borne's burning eyes. McNally still had the gun in his hand but the fight was gone out of Borne. "What are you going to do with me?" he asked.

Skeeter groaned and struggled to his feet. McNally remembered suddenly that he was Needle Mike, that he must remain Needle Mike in the presence of Skeeter.

"I'm goin' to throw you to the cops," he said hoarsely. "Whaddye think?"

"Don't! Wait! I'll pay you—" Borne's eyes were desperate, staring. Skeeter snapped back to life with a rush.

"O.K.," he said thickly. "Lemme handle him, Mike. I know how much he's got!"

McNally's jaw hardened. "Stay where you are, Skeeter!" he growled. "You crossed me up and this roscoe means you, too. Don't get in the way of it."

He shook the gun suggestively and Skeeter pressed back against the wall, his jaw dropping. "Mike," he said, "you know better. I'd have cut you in—"

McNally ignored him. He threw a hard stare at the desperate doctor. "Spit your story about this racket!" he said. "I'll listen."

A look of hope came into Borne's eyes. He mopped at his forehead with his right hand. "It wasn't mine," he said brokenly. "I was trapped. Most of my patients weren't nerve cases at all. They were just wearing themselves out fighting the years, women who didn't dare grow old. They wanted new faces. I used to send them to plastic men, then I went to Vienna and studied the art there. I—I was very successful—"

Some of the old vanity seemed to return to the man and for a moment his eyes were alight; then he slumped. "The Gerspach case ruined me. Something went wrong. I couldn't restore her face and she was hideous. She saw herself in a mirror that I didn't know she had. She—she killed herself!"

**T**HERE were beads of sweat on his forehead. "I had an assistant. I didn't know what to do with the body and he knew about an underworld undertaker who could get rid of it. I called him in. This fellow, Otero, and the girl came with him. They blackmailed me."

The doctor's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "None of my patients wanted their husbands to know that they were going to have their faces lifted. They made excuses when they left home. As soon as they were in the hospital, Otero sent letters to the husbands and said they were kidnapped. I—I was helpless—"

McNally leaned forward. "You even tried to shake down the Gerspach woman's husband after she was dead?"

"Otero did."

“Who is the woman upstairs?”

Borne shivered. “Mrs. Stone. I was nervous when I operated on her. She turned out wrong, too. She heard too much around here. She was going to make trouble.”

“Why cut her up and make believe her finger belonged to somebody else?”

Skeeter cut in. “I can tell you about that, Mike. They figured a few little jolts like that would make husbands pony up quick. The racket couldn’t last long. They wanted a quick stake. They was agoin’ to send back the women that turned out right and they figured they’d be glad to keep their mouths shut and keep outta the publicity if they weren’t hurt none.”

McNally shivered. He could not picture the type of man who would keep a woman alive in order to produce ghastly souvenirs—fingers and perhaps toes or ears later—with which to threaten and scare husbands.

“There’s tape in that case of his, Skeeter,” McNally said. “Tie him up!”

“But—” Borne rose desperately to his feet. McNally gestured menacingly with the gun.

“As you were!” He turned hard eyes on Skeeter. “Step into it—fast!”

Skeeter had been around and he knew when a man wasn’t fooling. He whipped the tape out of the case and went to work. When the surgeon was trussed up, he stepped back. Far away, on Broadway, a police siren screamed, coming closer. Someone had turned in an alarm.

Skeeter wet his lips. “You can’t feed me to the cops, Mike. I’d spill you into it.”

“You can’t!” McNally leaned slightly forward. “I could knock you cold and leave you here. Then I’d have an alibi. Think anyone would believe you?”

Skeeter’s face paled. “Aw, Mike—”

The siren was coming closer. McNally fixed his hard stare on the jade ring that had been a gift to him from a Japanese nobleman. It was on the hand of Skeeter now. McNally stretched out his hand.

“The ring, Skeeter!”

Skeeter hesitated, then hope glowed in his eyes and he passed the ring over.

McNally looked once around the hall.

There was the body of Otero, the body of Ethel Dalton and the trussed-up figure of Felix Borne. Upstairs, there was a weak sister of a man who had had a bad scare and who would spill all he knew

under pressure, and there was Mrs. Stone who had been a “troublemaker” and who had ghastly evidence to present—on her own face. That was evidence enough to send the police to trial with a full case. Benita was a pretty woman and she might wiggle out, somehow; the assistant to Borne had escaped, but he was hardly necessary to cinch the case.

McNally shrugged. “Let’s go,” he said.

THE dust storm lingered through the night and the morning was dirty gray. In the little shop on South Broadway, McNally had just completed an indigotin disulphic treatment on his finger. The snake tattoo design was unrecognizable. In time it would be gone entirely. Skeeter was sitting at the battered table with a greasy pack of cards in his hands. The door banged open and Detective Sergeant Pete Corbin stood in the doorway.

“Mike,” he growled, “it’s damn funny that you just showed up.”

“What’s funny about it?” McNally was rolling a cigarette. His eyes were freshly reddened and there was a reek of whiskey about him. Corbin squinted at him appraisingly.

“You been wanted,” he said, “and you don’t show till the case is cracked. Maybe you figure that lets you out?”

McNally grunted and looked toward the glaring headlines of the morning *Globe* that proclaimed last night’s cleanup and the full confessions of Bert Winkler and Doctor Felix Borne. Corbin’s grunt echoed his own.

“It don’t!” Corbin said. “They tell a funny story about you bein’ in the mess in a screwy way and—”

McNally had expected that. He knew that the story would be screwy to the police and that there would be nothing in it that would be a criminal linking of Needle Mike with the kidnap ring.

“Aw!” he growled. “They’re trying to protect that dame, that female tattooer. I know her. She came in here one day and bought some needles. I put ‘em in a jewel box on account of her being a woman and—”

Corbin’s face reddened and he glared. “I was coming to that,” he said. “We had your prints on that case.”

McNally grinned. “Sure. Skeeter here was in the dump when I give it to her. I didn’t wear gloves or nothin’.”

Skeeter stiffened. A strange expression came

into his eyes and he looked briefly at McNally. His face was bland as he turned to Corbin.

“That’s right!” he said.

Pete Corbin rocked slowly from his toes to his heels. “Mike,” he growled, “you’re a damn liar and

some day I’ll prove it!”

He wheeled and stalked angrily out into the dust. Skeeter tilted his chair back and laid the cards down. “That’ll be ten bucks, witness fees, Mike,” he said softly. “Baby needs shoes.”