

**BLACK  
MASK**

PRESENTS

**Her Last Kiss**

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*M*ichael Shannon heard the party before he reached the ballroom – music, jumbled voices, laughter. He walked into a huge ballroom jammed with men and women in tuxedos and sparkling dresses. Caught the eye of two blondes in blue near the door; turned away, because he knew working girls when he saw them.

The deep, booming laughter of one man drew Shannon to a cluster of tables in a back corner. He stopped at a table occupied by four people: two tuxedoed men and two women, not of the paid-for variety. The older of the two women, her light brown hair cut just above her shoulders, smiled hello at Shannon; the younger woman, a brunette in blue, was too busy spooning fruit cocktail into her lipsticked mouth to say hello. Shannon didn't know her anyway.

The older of the two men, his arm around the brown-haired woman, smiled at Shannon as well, the cigar at the right corner of his mouth rising in salute with the smile. The lines on his face were the only indication of his age, and Shannon still couldn't tell if he was 55 or 65. The man transferred the cigar from his mouth to his left hand, rose, extending his right hand; he and Shannon shook. The man said:

"How are you, Mike? Siddown."

Shannon sat across from the cigar-smoking man, said hello.

Walter Tweeny grinned through a stream of cigar smoke. Shannon nodded hello to the brown-haired woman beside Tweeny – Sylvia, his wife – and she smiled back.

Tweeny gestured to the younger man. "You've never met my son Frank, have you?"

Shannon nodded hello to the younger man seated next to Tweeny, who introduced the younger woman as Frank's fiancé, Rachel. She wiped fruit cocktail juice from her mouth, shook Shannon's

hand.

To Tweeny, Shannon said: "Your message didn't say what you wanted."

"Business," Tweeny said. "I didn't want to tell your wife anything about it. You sure you don't want something to eat first? There's plenty -"

"I'm fine," Shannon said.

Sylvia Tweeny's eyes twinkled as she looked at Shannon. Under the table, he felt the pressure of her nyloned foot rubbing against his calf. He kept his body still.

Tweeny took a long drag on the cigar. "Well, we best go and talk then." He and Shannon rose, Tweeny saying: "scuse us."

Shannon followed the older man down the curving hallway to another big oak door. Tweeny unlocked it, pushed the door open; they went inside.

"Will you drink?" Tweeny said.

"Not tonight." Shannon stopped in the center of the large office with his hands in his pockets. Tweeny, halfway across the room to a drink cart sitting before a bookcase, said: "Don't mind if I do," through another cloud of cigar smoke. He poured some scotch. They sat at Tweeny's desk.

"Been a busy week," he said, exhaling another cloud of smoke with a satisfying sigh. "We're jammed with cases at the office, can't keep up on 'em."

Walter Tweeny was the District Attorney for their city: Brighton Meadows, California.

Shannon had been a Vice Detective on the Brighton Meadows PD, thanks in part to Tweeny's help (as a favor to Shannon's father, a city councilman, who lacked the clout to get his son a slot at the academy), but he hadn't been able to help when Shannon was railroaded off the force for refusing to back a mistaken-identify shooting another officer tried to cover up. Nobody on the force wanted a guy like Shannon on their team: a guy who wouldn't bend over for anybody. He scraped by with the help of his wife's salary and bounty hunting assignments given to him by a bail-bondsman he'd known for years.

Tweeny tapped ash on his desktop. "Part of my problem this week has been some threatening notes I've received," he said. "Routine, normally. You know how it is."

Shannon nodded. On the street they called the DA "Sure Bet" Tweeny, because he never took a case that wasn't a slam dunk. That left plenty of victims out in the cold when their cases weren't so sure. It kept Tweeny in office, because the voters only saw a long string of convictions. Tweeny liked to say he was giving back to the community after years as a trial lawyer, which helped pay for his four-story mansion and the big parties.

"But these letters," Tweeny said, "have been a bit more specific. Mentioning where I've been – like the weekly poker game at Farmers' place on Tuesday. The note I got Wednesday asked me how I did. Nobody knows about that game, only a small group of us. Somebody's watching me." He puffed on the cigar.

Shannon watched him for any hint of nervousness, saw none. Tweeny's hands, eyes, and breathing, were steady.

"I want you to look into it for me," Tweeny said. "Spend a couple weeks; I'll pay you five grand."

"Little high."

"Least I can do," Tweeny said.

"I don't need your charity."

"I'm paying you for work, Mike. If somebody's really after me, I expect they'll be a scrape, and you'll be the one - "

Shannon said: "I get it."

And the study window shattered.

Tweeny's eyes widened, Shannon turned; saw a black revolver in a gloved fist and a masked face on the other side of the window. The revolver barked once, twice.

Tweeny's body jerked, the slugs opening his chest, his right hand jammed in a half-open drawer. He slumped in the chair. Shannon ran behind the desk, pulled the drawer open all the way, grabbed the automatic inside and fired two rapid shots at the retreating gunman.

Pounding on the door, the knob rattling. Shannon raced across the room, hauled the door open, and told the black-suited security man standing there: "Walter's been shot; shooter's outside."

The guard nodded, raced back down the hall as he shouted into a walkie-talkie.

Shannon shut the door, returned to the desk, tucked the automatic into his belt. He looked down at Tweeny's body – the man's blank eyes wide open. Shannon let out a breath and thumbed the eyes shut.

The police showed up five minutes later. Two uniformed officers and a plainclothes detective. They found Shannon seated in Tweeny's office, legs crossed, a cigarette burning in his right hand.

The detective, a balding, rugged-faced man named Joe Bennett, stood in front of Shannon.

"So?" Bennett said.

"So the stiff is right there," Shannon said.

"What happened?"

Shannon related the story in a bored monotone, gesturing at Tweeny's body, the window, blowing smoke up at Bennett's face when he'd finished.

"Up," Bennett said.

Shannon dropped his cigarette on the carpet and ground it out, stood, raised his arms. Bennett patted him down, withdrew the automatic in his belt. He stepped away, sniffed the barrel. Popped out the magazine to see that two rounds had indeed been fired per Shannon's story. He said: "You pop Tweeny yourself?"

“Shooter was outside the window.”

“Tweeny was shot twice and there are two rounds gone from this gun,” Bennett said.

“Tweeny was shot with a revolver – probably a .357 or a hot .38,” Shannon said. “The killer smashed the glass from the outside – that’s why there are shards on the floor. You don’t get that when you break a window from inside. A real detective like you should know that.”

Bennett huffed. A third uniformed officer entered the office, told Bennett the party guests were secured but Tweeny’s family wanted to come inside. Bennett nixed that, and the officer nodded grimly because he had to be the one to go back and tell them.

“Am I free to go?” Shannon said.

Bennett looked him up and down, frowning; when he nodded, Shannon left without a word of thanks. Within minutes crime scene technicians flooded the office, began collecting evidence to put the puzzle of the murder together. By then, Mike Shannon was halfway home, his hands tight on the wheel of his car. He didn’t like the thoughts running through his head.

A finger poked into his back. “Mike?” A whisper. More poking, harder now. “Mike?” A louder whisper. A hand gripped his shoulder, shook. “Wake up.”

Mike Shannon groaned, rolled over. Through his foggy eyes he saw the pretty face of his wife Pamela leaning over him. What looked like a strange radio antenna on her head was actually a trio of curlers, her brown hair wrapped around and through each of them.

“What is it?” Shannon said.

“Somebody’s at the door.”

Shannon listened, heard the pounding on their apartment door. He rolled out of bed, pulled on a robe. Yawning, wiping more fog from his eyes, Shannon went through the open bedroom door, down a short hallway. He slowly unlocked the chain, twisted the deadbolt, opened up to see Detective Bennett and a younger plainclothes officer standing there.

“You an underwear model now?” Bennett said.

“What?”

“Belt your robe.”

Shannon looked down at his open robe, stifled a curse, quickly tied the belt around his middle.

Bennett said to his partner: “Good thing he wasn’t wearing the Superman shorts, right?”

The corners of the younger detective lips twitched. He wasn’t sure if he was allowed to laugh and his eyes pleaded with Bennett for either permission or denial. Bennett smiled, said to Shannon: “We need to talk.”

Shannon stepped back and let the detectives inside. He switched on the kitchen light, leaned against the counter with his arms folded. He said: “Talk.”

“You were right – Tweeny was shot with a .357 Magnum. You own a .357 Magnum, don’t you?”

"I own a .357 Magnum."

"I need to see that and your other gun, too."

Shannon stared at the stove.

"Don't make this hard," Bennett said. His young partner pushed his hands into the pockets of his pants, exposing the badge and gun on his belt.

"Honey?" Pamela said, leaning around the corner and looking into the kitchen.

Shannon went toward his wife. "It's okay," he said, following her down the hall. Bennett and his partner stood in the kitchen a few moments, the younger officer clearing his throat a few times; Shannon returned with two rectangular gun cases secured with locks. He set them on the kitchen counter, unlocked the cases, lifted the lids. A stainless-steel Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum revolver sat in one case, a blue-steel Colt .45 automatic in the other. Bennett picked up the Smith & Wesson, sniffed the barrel; opened the cylinder, sniffed the cylinder.

"Dry as a bone," Bennett said. Turned to Shannon.

Shannon said: "Haven't been to the range lately. Bullets are expensive."

"Or you cleaned it," Bennett said.

"Pam will tell you I came home, told her what happened, had a drink, and went to bed."

"Sure she will," Bennett said, returning the revolver to the case. "Lock it up."

Shannon closed the case, snapped the lock, handed it to Detective Bennett. He said: "I want a receipt."

The young detective quickly scribbled a receipt on a piece of notebook paper, tore it out, gave it to Shannon. Shannon's eyes didn't leave Bennett's. He said: "This is a mistake and you know it."

"Tweeny's not here to help you anymore," Bennett said. "Be seeing you."

And Bennett opened the door for him and his partner to exit. Shannon reapplied the chain, snapped the deadbolt.

Pamela Shannon sat up against the headboard, knees up, the covers pulled up to her chest. The left shoulder strap of her nightgown had slipped off. She watched her husband enter the bedroom, place the remaining gun case on the top shelf of the closet, toss his robe on a nearby chair. She followed him with her eyes as he rolled back into bed. She scooted down beside him.

"What did he want?" she said.

"Compare my gun with the one that killed Walt."

She snuggled close, made circles on his chest with her fingernails.

"He still hates you," she said.

He closed his eyes. "Mmm-hmm."

Bennett had been one of the detectives who wanted Shannon off the force after he refused to back the mistaken shooting cover-up. They'd been friends before that, but Shannon wondered if that were ever really true.

Shannon stood in the open doorway of the Tweeny home, the night's cold biting through his jacket. Dave Pearson, Tweeny's executive secretary, nodded at Shannon.

Shannon looked down to meet the shorter man's eyes. "Sylvia called me."

Pearson said: "I'll check and see - "

"Let him in, David," Sylvia Tweeny said. Pearson stepped back and Shannon entered.

Sylvia, dressed in a tight-fitting black dress that showed off her wide hips, looked down from the top of the staircase. Shannon noticed she was leaning a little too heavily on the rail. He walked up the curving staircase; she fell into his arms, letting out a stream of warm breath that brushed his neck. She felt heavy, fleshy, weak. He eased her away, led her down the hall, into a small study.

He pushed the door shut as Sylvia weaved to a couch. She dropped onto the couch and stretched her legs out, the tightness of her dress only barely keeping her knees together. Shannon put his hands in his pockets, watched her.

"Been a long day," she said. Her glassy eyes moved up and down his body. She kicked off her heels. She said: "I'm glad you came."

On the table in front of the couch, a trio of bottles stood: one was empty, a second only half so, the third hadn't been opened yet.

"Want a drink?" Sylvia said, rolling up to pour into a lipstick-stained glass. The ribbon holding her hair back had come undone; the tousled strands hung crazily. She held the glass up for him. He didn't move. She shrugged, swallowed the drink in three gulps.

"You're a mess," Shannon said.

She pointed a finger at him. "No I'm not. I brushed my hair before I went down." She laughed, sat back, patted the cushion beside her; said in a soft voice: "Sit with me."

Shannon swallowed. Let out a breath. Sat down. She set her head on his shoulder and he put his left arm around her. She sighed, her body relaxing. "I'm glad you're here."

"I've been doing some thinking, Sylvia," he said.

"I don't like thinking."

"Somebody set your husband up," he said. "Somebody knew the routine of the guards, that's how the shooter slipped through. Somebody else knew we'd be in the office."

She pulled away long enough to grab the half-full bottle from the table. She held it by the neck, took a long drink. Shannon grabbed it, drank a little. He held the bottle next to his leg; Sylvia nuzzled him again.

"Talk about something else," she said. "What did you have for breakfast?"

He shook her. "Look at me." She raised her head, couldn't keep it still. She laughed loudly into his ear; he flinched.

"You need another drink," he said.

"I need another drink!" she said, grabbing the bottle from him. Drained most of what remained. She belched, laughed, Shannon taking the bottle from her. He drank the rest. She grabbed the other bottle and twisted the cap off.

"This is Walt's best stuff," she said, laughed again. "I raided the cabinet this morning. This is the last bottle." She pouted. "The booze was the best thing about him." She took a long drink, the amber fluid bubbling out of her mouth, trickling down her chin, neck. She coughed, setting the bottle down hard on the table.

Shannon took out his handkerchief, wiped her chin and neck. She tilted her head a little and smiled at him. "You're always so nice to me," she said.

He tipped her head up, looked into her eyes. "Why did you do it, Sylvia?"

She laughed. Tried to swing a leg over to his lap, but the tight dress prevented that. She cursed the dress, stood up, struggled and shifted crazily while she worked the back zipper down. She let the top fall to her waist and wiggled her bottom in front of him as she shed the dress. Shannon closed his eyes. She wore nothing underneath; there'd been a time when he would have laughed with her about that.

"Hey," she said, smacking the side of his head. He opened his eyes. "Don't close you eyes at me." She laughed again, straddled his lap.

"Sylvia - "

"No talk," she said, pulling his head against her chest. "No more talk." He pulled his head back.

"Sylvia."

Her eyes were shut, a tear running down her left cheek.

"Sylvia."

"No," she said, shaking her head back and forth. "No," she said again, moving her head roughly from side to side. He grabbed her by the waist to keep her from falling. Her skin was cold, clammy.

"Why did you do it, Sylvia?"

"No!" she said again, a second tear streaking the other cheek. She leaned forward against him, resting her face on top of his head. Her body shook with a sob. Shannon eased her onto the other side of the couch. She brought her knees up, cried softly. Shannon picked up her dress and tossed it at her. She covered her front with the fabric.

Shannon stood, paced the floor. She kept sobbing. He said: "I told you we were done. It was a fun game. We really pulled one over on Walt. But I told you we were done."

She pulled the dress over her face, sobbed into it.

“Did you think with Walt out of the way I’d come back?” he said. A sob, a gasp for air, answered him. “You knew I wasn’t going to leave Pam. It was a game, Sylvia. You wanted it to be a game.”

He stopped pacing, looked down at her. She peeked from behind the bundled dress, her eyes red, cheeks stained with ruined make-up.

She whispered: “Michael, please don’t.”

“You know me better than that.”

“Michael, please.”

He shook his head.

“You hated Walt,” she said.

“I despised him,” he said. “I hated everything he stood for. But he did me a favor once. I owe him for that. Crazy as it sounds, I owe him for that.”

Her eyes remained fixed on his face.

“Get dressed,” he said. He crossed the room to a desk, picked up the phone.

She watched from behind the bundled dress. He dialed.

“Bennett? It’s Mike... shut up. I’m at Walt’s. I have your killer. I mean I have the insider. Shut up and get over here. No. Just do what I tell you.” He hung up.

“Michael, please,” she said. “Tell him it was Pearson.”

Shannon laughed, sat against the desk. “I’d love that. But it wouldn’t be the truth.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. She stood up and pulled the dress over her head, shimmied and shook until the dress was in place. She walked over to him with the straps hanging off her shoulders, turned her back. He zipped her up. She turned back to him. Stretched out her arms, circled them around his chest, lowered her face against his chest. Her body rocked with hard sobs for five minutes, her tears staining his shirt. He kept his hands on the desk, his face straight.

Muffled voices down the hall. Shannon looked at the door. Sylvia gripped him tighter. Somebody knocked. Shannon said: “It’s open.” And the door opened and Detective Bennett, with his young partner, entered, Pearson bringing up the rear.

“What is it?” Pearson said, standing on his toes to see over the shoulders of the detectives.

Bennett shut the door in his face.

“Well,” Bennett said.

“Michael, no,” Sylvia said, squeezing Shannon tight.

“Take her away, Bennett,” Shannon said. Then laughed at the open-mouthed, stunned expression

on the detective's face. "She sent the death threats. She knew Walt and I would talk in his office. She knew the guard's routines. She hired the shooter."

"You're insane," Bennett said. "Prove it."

"Ten minutes under the lights and she'll tell you everything," Shannon said.

Bennett stared at Shannon a moment; Shannon stared back, waiting. Bennett shrugged. Shannon pressed his hands against Sylvia's shoulders, moved her away from his body. "Take her away."

Still bent at the waist, Sylvia turned to the detectives. Bennett made a gesture to his partner, who approached the woman, cuffed her arms behind her back. Bennett opened the door for him. The young detective led the woman out. Sylvia snapped her head around to Shannon, said: "I love you, Michael." And then they were out the door and Bennett shut the door and frowned at Shannon.

Who didn't see the frown, because his head was bowed, a finger tracing the edge of the tear stain she'd left behind.

THE END