MURDER An HONEST JOHN CARMODY Story



Some lingering life in her had made her try to climb out of the ditch.

VONNE yawned, and that made her white arms stretch like lovely snakes; the blue robe rounded out over small, firm curves. The stretch made her slimmer at the waist, and her legs straightened in a long, silky reach. "Don't be tiresome," she said. "The car is mine, and I'm keeping it. I didn't tell Walt to dip into the till to buy it for me, and you can't prove that –"

"Look here!" Honest John Carmody hitched the spindle-legged chair a little closer. His face was a bit redder, and the more he saw of Yvonne's peep show, the redder his face became. "I know damn well we can't prove a thing. If you had the actual cash staffed in your sock –"

She lifted a fold of the robe, and exposed the picot edge of a honey-colored stocking. "I haven't It'd make too big a bulge."

That display made Honest John stutter. "I ain't brow-beating you. I'm asking you, turn that bus over, it's worth a thousand bucks as it stands, second-hand. The bonding company's on Walt

SALVAGE by E. HOFFMANN PRICE

It was an old gag that the gang used. And Honest John knew every twist in it. Yet, much as he knew Yvonne had it coming, he felt pity when he came upon her muddy, abused body



Crawford's tail. If he begs, borrows, maybe he can make good and without selling his house."

"My dear man, I didn't ask him to clean the till."

Honest John growled, piled out of the chair, and stood there like an oversized cub bear in a shiny blue suit. He caught the glamour girl's shoulder, and jerked her to her feet.

"I thought you weren't browbeating me," she snapped. "If that fool's house is sold, that's *his* business."

Honest John made another quick move, and then Yvonne did yeep. He had the blue chiffon in his hand, and she stood there, peeled down to a bra and a bit of something about her hips.

"You fluff-witted dime's worth of white meat," he boomed, and shook the blue robe, "this and every other stitch in the house is what Walt Crawford bought you. You're still way ahead, even if you give him back that car. Damn it, he's got a wife."

"He never acted like it. Now, let's not wrangle," she purred, and came closer. "I've been out of work for months, and what'll happen to me?"

She knew he was just another dick, a plug ugly with half-soled shoes; but she threw her weight to make that bra stand out a little fuller, a little more alluring. She wanted him to go for her like every chump did. And she was succeeding. For a second, he did not know what to do or say. He dropped the blue robe.

She'd snuggle up and be sweet. Just sweet enough to follow up with a good laugh. Her big blue eyes, her drooping lashes told him that she was reading his face, and getting a kick out of her advertising campaign. "What'll happen to me, John?" she cooed.

"This."

He slapped her a hefty one. She landed smack on one of her best features. "I've seen some tramps that had a white streak in 'em," he growled over his shoulder, and slammed the door. "You ain't one of 'em."

HONEST JOHN spent the next couple days in routine business: looking around hot spots for other chumps, hanging around race tracks for the same purpose. He was spotting tellers, cashiers, salesmen, assistant vice-presidents, all the white collar lads his bonding company covered. If they gutted the till, his company had to cough up, and then try to recover as much loot as possible.

Throwing a man in the jug didn't bring the dough back. The company would rather have the chump on the hoof, paying off; which he couldn't do in jail. Sometimes, you can stop a fellow before he's too far gone, and make him snap out of it.

Honest John passed Yvonne's apartment several times, but he did not go in. Appealing to her sense of decency wouldn't work, she had none. And she was too smart to be scared. Or was she?

Then, driving up the Ocean Shore road, from Half Moon Bay, Honest John met Yvonne, though at first, he didn't know who the woman was. It's dark and lonesome between roadhouses; artichoke patches dot the heavy black earth, and little farmhouses.

When he tramped on the brake, not far from where the new highway branches from the snaky old Montara Mountain roller-coaster, he said, "Aw, hell, I'm seeing things, I still got that floor show on the brain. Or maybe it's fog."

But it was a woman his headlights had picked out. She was lying on her face, and her blonde hair gleamed. Her hands were all muddy from clawing the black soft earth. But a lot of her was white and round, and hard to miss; you had to slow down for that sharp turn.

When he stumbled through the knee high reeds in the ditch she had crawled out of, he saw that she'd been peeled right down. Not even stockings. He squatted, and got a look at the face. It was Yvonne Latour.

As nearly as he could tell, two slugs had drilled her back, and a third, her head, behind one ear. Small slugs that did not tear her up. Then he looked into the ditch, and saw a new, flimsy gray blanket; it had blood on it. His headlights didn't reach down, but a match made it all clear. He was surprised that he could be sorry for Yvonne. Dumped into the ditch as dead, some lingering life had made her crawl toward the road. He made a move to get the blanket, and thought better of that. He took off his coat, and laid it over the huddled corpse. She was cold, cold as the ocean mist, but he could not let her lie there utterly uncovered. Then he stamped away, snorting, "Dizzy –, had it coming. Hah. Hope that fool of a Crawford didn't do this. Wouldn't blame him, though. She had it coming."

As he highballed back to the nearest roadhouse to phone the sheriff's office, he began to understand a few details. Stripping Yvonne had been to prevent identification; hauling the corpse to San Mateo County would also help, though even in San Francisco, Yvonne was just another of a swarm of tramps playing the field when not taking turns at floor shows or hustling drinks. Finally, lying in the ditch in that lonely stretch, her weight would have carried her slowly into the mud.

All he reported was the actual discovery. He wanted to keep the inside track by letting the killer believe that there was no identification; also, he wanted to keep immediate suspicion from Walt Crawford. If the chump was guilty, turn him in. If he wasn't, let him have what little chance there was at getting a fresh start. He was really a nice guy.

TWO hours later, Honest John was in San Francisco, where an unidentified corpse in San Mateo County would not get more than half an inch in the classified advertising. The drive took forty minutes; the rest of the time had been devoted to making his statement and saying to the sheriff, "Hell, even if she'd been dressed, I wouldn't know her."

He had a thin ribbon of spring steel and a few assorted keys which were routine in his job; also, his stumpy fingers had a surprisingly slick touch. It did not take him long to get into Yvonne's apartment.

The feminine fragrance of the bedroom did not thrill his nostrils; he shivered a little, thinking of that dark ditch. Yvonne's silver fox coat was not in the house. There was nothing else he could check. There were half a dozen handbags, but none had a driver's license, or keys. Honest John cursed bitterly, and said half aloud, "She's deader'n hell, probably got no folks except some she don't keep track of; the public administrator'll take that sweet little convertible; the chump hasn't a chance at it now."

Then he began frisking every cabinet and drawer in the place; he was looking for the certificate of registration. Morally, the chump had a right to the car. If Crawford faked Yvonne's signature and peddled the bus he could make just that much more restitution. She was dead – who'd spill the beans?

But Honest John found no trace of any certificate. He found no evidence of a safe deposit box. Yvonne lived from chump to chump, and didn't salt anything down. Not even a checking account.

In the living room he found two glasses of Scotch, one with a lipstick smear, and empty; the other, half emptied, and a elean edge. Both glasses had raffia jackets. Some of the cigarette butts wore smears matching Yvonne's lip rouge. The others had been flicked out of a holder; *a* different brand. Some man had dropped in. He hoped it wasn't Crawford.

Then he saw the clipping from the advertising column: "41 Packard 120 convertible, widow leaving town most sacrifice. Phone 2-2426."

That was Yvonne's number. It looked as if some fellow had come in to dicker with the "widow."

She wouldn't take it to a used car lot. She'd bet on being able to high pressure a better price through a private sale. He eyed the blue mules lying at the foot of the lounging chair, the depressions in the cushions, the robe carelessly flung over the arm.

"First she wore that glamour robe to get the guy dizzy, and then –" He shook his head. "Maybe he did offer her more'n it was worth... she always got more'n she was worth..."

But when, after further search, he found a threatening letter, he could not be too sure that the private customer had put two slugs into her back, and a third behind her ear. Not after that letter.

It was one for a postal inspector. But Yvonne hadn't crumpled the letter. She'd kept it for two weeks. It was worn from reading and handling. He pictured her there, enjoying the lines; she wanted men to go for her, and she loved to have women hate her.

Walt Crawford's wife had signed the poisonous page.

A woman's sized gun had finished Yvonne.

Honest John pocketed the letter. Maybe Linda Crawford was a sourpuss and pretty nearly deserved having Yvonne cutting in. But she didn't deserve having her house sold over her at a whacking loss, when another thousand in cash would have fattened the kitty. Selling the house even at a forced sale would leave her with a few berries after the payoff, but it was the principle of the thing. So he kept the letter.

Once on the street, he headed for the garage where Yvonne stabled the sleek red bus; the chump had told him where that was, in the ground floor of the building, which sat on a steep side hill. He barged in, found a young fellow in white coveralls, polishing a big Cad. He had "Leo" worked, on his coat in red letters.

"Hi, Leo." The young man looked up, and Honest John went on, "Miss Latour's car in?" He grimaced ruefully. "She's not answering."

Leo's swarthy face crinkled in a knowing grin. "She often don't. But this time, she's really out."

Honest John slipped him a silver dollar. "Who with, pal? Tell me."

"Sorry, I can't. She phoned, I drove it to the front, and took the keys to her door."

"Didn't get a look in?"

Leo grinned. "A look, yeah. Man, man. Even if the door wasn't open more than this much –" He held his hands a few inches apart. "It was a good look, but I couldn't see past her."

"Past her what? Hell, keep the buck anyway."

HONEST JOHN stepped into a drug store and dialed Crawford. "This is Carmody, of the surety company, is Mr. Crawford in?"

A sweet, weary voice answered, "No, he's been out all day. Can't you quit hounding him? He won't run out."

"Now, Mrs. Crawford, I ain't hounding him, honest, I'm all for helping him, I been at it the past couple days. Can I come out and talk to you? I been working on that Latour woman."

"Oh...." Linda Crawford's voice took on a peculiar lilt that Honest John could not quite make. "Yes, do. If there's anything I could suggest – I know you're just doing your duty."

Honest John kicked the starter, a moment later, and grinned. She wanted to get all the dirt on Yvonne; find out what the wench had. She wanted him to say Yvonne was a two-bit floozie. For pride's sake.

So he drove out to a section where white houses stood on terraces overlooking China Beach; not ritzy, but a damn sight better than he had ever HUNGAN PICLICA PART

afforded. Life was funny. With a little sense and honesty, Crawford would still be dug in solid in this swell little place. But Carmody, refusing to play ball with crooks, had been edged out of the police force; the fat boys winked, called him Honest John, and settled him.

So here he was, trying to give Crawford a chance. The man hadn't meant to be a crook. Probably Yvonne hadn't, either. Just two chumps. All this as he prodded the door bell.

He was prepared for something faded, perhaps washed-out pretty. But not this woman. She'd be swell if she took off that gingham house dress and put on wine-colored velvet, to hug that creamy bosom and those round hips. She was no doll; there was too much character in that mouth, though not enough to spoil the kissing. But most of Linda Crawford was in her eyes.

This was while she was saying, "Come in, Mr. Carmody."

"Honest John," he corrected, and got dizzy from trying to guess what was going on behind the dark eyes that sized up his pieshaped mug. "Honest John, madam."

He followed her into a living room with ten year old furniture; good but old fashioned upholstery. When she faced him again, those

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eyes thrilled him and they puzzled him. But he could understand why they gave her something that Yvonne didn't have, couldn't ever have had; why her nicely rounded figure and her legs looked better every second; why she didn't need a fluffy robe to advertise nearly everything she had.

He fumbled for the letter. "You wrote this to that tramp. Sure you ought to cut out her heart and stuff it... ah, down her throat. Sure she's a... ah... ought to wear a brass collar and a license plate. But you hadn't oughta written that, Mrs. Crawford. Once she gets tired of feeling happy over it, she might put the bee on you for sending threats through the U. S. Mail."

As far as he could see, Linda's face hadn't changed a bit when he spoke of Yvonne as of a living person. Maybe Linda hadn't killed any one, *yet*, and was just full of murder inside. She patted the chesterfield, and moved over, saying, "Sit here and tell me why you really come. I know that letter was foolish. I've never seen her. Tell me."

THERE was no sense-tickling bouquet about this dame, but she was exciting. He wanted to get a hold of her, and he had a funny hunch that she wouldn't mind; but that idea was crazy. She was a one-man woman, if ever there was one. "Uh... you want me to tell you about Yvonne? You already know, don't you?"

She laughed, softly. "Only what Walt told me, when he broke down, all stuttering and red and calling himself a fool, and telling me he really didn't care for her, it was all in fun."

"She's a hot number, built for modeling imported nightgowns, frilly and helpless-acting, and she'd act up for a cigar Indian if nothing else was around. People fall for it, I used to myself. Walt got a run for our money."

"Your company's, and –" She waved that slim olive colored hand. "And mine, too. I'll bet I have no clothes like she has."

"I ain't seen all your clothes. Now look here. Yvonne's sold that car. She stampeded, figuring maybe we could grab it. You game to help me try for the money? It'll be strictly unlegitimate. I wouldn't do it on my own account, that's why they eall me Honest John. But I'll help you. It takes a woman playing the cards, I can't do it single-handed. I tell you again, it's risky."

"Am I game?" She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Tell me how and when!" She twisted, caught his upper arms, leaned closer. She couldn't have killed Yvonne, because if she had, she could not possibly look so eager now.

HONEST JOHN had to stall. First he had to find Yvonne's car. Already, he was willing to bet that some slicker had asked for a demonstration, and then knocked her off. Next, the slicker'd take the certificate of ownership, which Yvonne would have signed, and peddled the bus quick. That game had been played before; and the effort to prevent immediate identification clinched it. A professional touch; Honest John needed Linda Crawford to help him trap the crook, and get the money.

He did not want to tell her about Yvonne's death. Not yet. He asked, "Where's Walt?"

"He's down on the Peninsula, trying to raise money." That gave Honest John a chill; maybe Walt bad knocked the blonde off. He shivered, glanced over his shoulder. Then he got a real shock. Linda pulled herself closer, still holding to him, and said, "Don't worry, he won't be back for quite a while, he phoned me."

He still couldn't believe it. Not this woman, telling him that her husband wouldn't be back for quite a while. He said, "Huh?"

She smiled at his amazement, and that made her lovely. "I've been a fool long enough. I've been broadminded with him, and now he's given away the house, my house, mine even if he did earn the money. So for once I'm going to be broadminded with myself – don't stare at me that way – I mean it – I believe you will help me against her – so –"

When she kissed him, he had to believe her. He knew that he was only an accomplice, an ally to help her save her pride as well as her house. He caught her in both arms and said, "Lady, if this is your idea –"

"It wasn't, at the start. But when you told me about her –"

Then the forgotten woman told him to turn out the lights.

WHEN Honest John left, long after midnight, Linda understood the play he proposed; except that she believed that they would put the slug on Yvonne. Just a detail wrong, for the principle remained the same: get the price of the car before the seller had shot the roll. In the morning, he made his rounds. For all the used car lots in San Francisco, the task was not as great as it seemed. Some dealt only in jalopies. Some worked on a shoestring and couldn't dish out a thousand bucks for one number. Others specialized in quick turn-over items. And he knew enough insurance men to get all the angles to round out his own knowledge. So after a day's hoofing, he found that irridescent red bus.

His feet ached, and he was sweating. He stood there looking at the long, lean hood and narrow radiator shell. "Luck," he muttered. "If they'd kept it or caravanned it, I'd been outa luck. But not many '41 convertibles on the lots, so far."

A fat little man with a cigar and a smile came up and said, cheerily, "Lots of class, real zip, only two thousand miles. Three hundred bucks down, twenty-four months for the rest."

"Too new to be full of cork dust."

The salesman laughed. He touched the starter. He beamed as Honest John listened to the silken whispering under the hood. "Ain't many of these, how'd you pick it up?"

"Widow leaving town. Sure you've heard that one before, but it's a fact this time."

Honest John grinned. "Huh. Maybe I'd rather have the widow. Say, I've seen this bus before. Blonde girl –" He made cupping gestures with both hands. "But streamlined, *and* legs. Mmmmm – and would she look swell in Bali, with a basket on her head." He looked at the registration slip on the steering column; he frowned. "You mean this is Yvonne Latour's bus?"

"Well, what does it say, friend?"

"I don't care what it says, how come she's selling this, last time I saw her, she had a Ford."

"You don't keep in touch. It was Yvonne Latour, in person. I gave her my check, then drove her to the bank so she could cash it, and –"

"Nuts! This belonged -"

"Yeah, to a blonde, you said." The trader was now pretty sure with the knowledge of his kind, that Honest John was not buying, and didn't intend to buy. He cut the ignition and said, "Sorry old home week doesn't click, this gal was a brunette."

Honest John swung around in the seat. He dug up his credentials "Tell me more, pal. I couldn't kid you long, you can't kid me long. I'm a surety dick, and I got an angle on this." "All right, wise guy. I sent the certificate through, and if the registry bureau says the signature is okay, it is okay."

"Pal, it is okay by me anyway. It probably was when the cops made their morning inspection for hot iron."

"Sure it was, so what are you interested in?"

"All you know about the dame. Play ball, or the cops may be back before you get rid of this baby."

That softened the salesman. He described the brunette woman; not Linda Crawford. At least, in her indignant display of her scanty wardrobe the night before, Linda had shown him neither hat or coat of the kind the man mentioned.

"Who was she with?"

"She was alone. I offered to drive her from the bank to her house, but she said never mind, she was shopping."

"I want to look a bit." "Help yourself."

HONEST JOHN did just that. He found no bloodstains on the ivory upholstery, but wedged under the rear floor mat, he did find a .32 automatic cartridge. He pocketed it. In the front locker, on the driver's side, was a traffic citation made for Yvonne Latour. The time 8:30 A.M., ten hours after Honest John had found the blonde's corpse. That meant that some dame had handed Yvonne's license to the cop. A dead woman was taking the rap for doing fifty in a forty-five mile zone, between the airport and South San Francisco.

"Huh. That stinking speed trap. And this smooth job, she'd not notice she was hitting fifty. And the cop didn't notice the dame's hair was black, those guys never notice anything but a chance to rook someone."

He walked away whistling. He drank a couple beers, ate a bowl of chili, and bought a handful of cigars. Then he headed down Van Ness to the used ear department of a big dealer, and spent an hour dickering for a late model. Since he knew the boys, he laid twenty, bucks on the line and got the bus on three days driving trial. The exchange of winks meant that they knew he wasn't buying; that if he wanted a joyride and was willing to forfeit his deposit when he returned it as "unsuitable", they wished him luck.

"Is she blonde, John?" the friend asked.

"Nuh-uh. Dark and hot, Van. Red leather upholstery's just the stuff for a complexion like that."

So Honest John put an ad in every paper: "38 Cad sedan. Widow leaving Pacific Coast, closing house, sacrifice."

If he didn't hook them in two-three days, he'd chisel another bus, and try again. The Frisco papers barely mentioned the murdered blonde near the artichoke patch.

One look at the coat, and she went wild.

That evening, he drove out to Crawford's house. The chump was in; big, blonde, goodlooking and worried; he had the face of a hurt child. He still couldn't understand why the world had kicked him. Honest John felt a bit squeamish about shaking his hand, and not because that hand had dipped into the company's till. But Linda was very smooth, and without any of that fierce glitter in her eyes. He knew that he'd never again kiss her. Her pride had been restored.

"I was telling Walt," she began, "that you came over last night to figure out a final chance to save the house."

"What is it, Carmody? God, I've gone around in circles."

"You keep circulating, nicking every friend who'll ante in a buck, five, or fifty. Keep away from this house. Mrs. Crawford is for the time being a widow."

"Eh? Widow?"

"Yeah." Honest John stepped to the window, pulled a drape, and pointed. "See that zippy big Cad? Your wife is selling that."

"I – I don't get it. How the hell can she?"

"It sounds unlegitimate, but it ain't. You be out of this house before the ad gets into circulation. Me, I got to stick around till someone comes to buy. To buy for the amount you're still short."

Crawford spent a moment perplexedly eyeing the beefy mug who didn't look too brilliant; the round faced man in box car shoes; the kind of man anyone would leave alone with any woman. "I still can't figure it out, you're not selling your car to help me."

"Me, a bus like *that*? No, it ain't hot, and I ain't really selling it. Listen, Crawford. Did you hear about a blonde woman being found dead around Half Moon Bay? A blonde girl, peeled down to the buff, with three .32s in her frame?"

"My God –" He jerked around. 'Linda – Good – Lord –"

His wife's color faded, her hands opened and closed. "Our gun is a .25, Walt."

He stuttered, "Get it – let's see –"

Linda wasn't any too steady when she went for the heater. Crawford said to Honest John, "I didn't know – I didn't – I stayed away from her – like I told Linda – and you – I would. Was it – Yvonne"

"It was, and I found her. Keep your trap shut. If anyone should get a hunch and make you look at the stiff, say you never saw her before. If she's identified, you're sunk, your shack's gone!"

THEN Linda came back with the gun. It was dusty, inside and out. Honest John pulled the slide, jacked out a couple of tiny slugs. He said, "This gat didn't do it. All right, Crawford, move out before that ad gets a rise in the morning. Get a room." "You mean, whoever killed her did it to sell – uh – that car?"

Honest John nodded. Crawford headed to the rear to pack a bag. When he came back, Honest John said, "Call the company and tell 'em you're moving out, blame it on you're wife."

Crawford's desperation made him snap at the chance. He had sold his own ear, and the garage was empty. He did not wait to see the creamcolored Cad take its place. A few minutes later, Linda took the keys and said to Honest John, "You'll be back early?"

"Before sunrise, so I'll be planted way ahead of time."

Honest John waited all the forenoon, sitting in the kitchen, listening to Linda going about her housework. He wanted to smoke a cigar, but widows rarely use them. He burned up a pack of her cigarettes.

He wondered what Linda was thinking of. Certainly not of that one evening. He wondered if it was well controlled nerves that made her polish every bit of metal and enamel on the range, every inch of the sink, the refrigerator; or whether she was happy from thinking of the house she might save, or if she was taking farewell of a home she could not save. As the day wore on, he looked for cigarette butts to light, and he said, "Next guy says he understands women, I'll tell the _____ he's crazy, nobody does."

He jumped when the phone rang. He listened to Linda's sweet voice. Not a fumble, not a tremor; she said, "Fourteen-fifty" as smooth as silk. And then, "If you saw one the other day for twelvefifty, you'd better buy it."

More calls. They all thought \$1450 was too stiff. Which it was. Only one kind of purchaser would come to the house: the guy who intended to tap the widow on the conk, and get the car free.

That evening, things began to tick. She had barely said, "\$1450" when the speaker must have asked about seeing the bus. Linda answered, "Right away, if you wish."

She was not even breathless when she came to tell Honest John, "It's a man."

He felt foolish about asking her if she remembered her lines; but he did. She answered, "I'll know what to say when the time comes, I'll think of some way of getting to his house."

She didn't have any qualms about Honest John's ideas for keeping her from being knocked off in transit.

HE WAS in the room across the hall from the living room when the bell rang. A tall, thin faced man was at the door. He didn't look like a cold-blooded killer, they seldom do. He said, pleasantly, "I'm Art Garth, Mrs. Crawford," and fumbled with a little square of newsprint he took out of his vest pocket. "It's a '38 Cad?"

She went on to tell him how swell it was, how her late husband had babied it, how it never had gone over forty; and she had to have cash, five hundred down on the line. Notes for the rest, any bank would handle it, she was sure.

Garth did not whimper. "Five hundred, Mrs. Crawford? Well. ..." He smiled, turned a vest pocket inside out. "The funny thing is, I just hit a long shot at the races, but the money's at home. I expected to give you a check. Well, we can pick it up, and anyway, I'd like to have my wife try the car."

"I need cash, tonight."

Garth glanced about. "You have your certificate of ownership?"

She took it from her bosom, spread the yellow slip on the table. "Of course your wife should try the car, she'll love it. And you won't mind driving me back? I have so many things to do before I leave. Won't you phone, so she'll be ready when we get there? There it is, call while I get my coat. I'm so pressed for time."

Honest John heard him call the number, and penciled it on the wall. Then Linda was beside him, squeezing his hand, she whispered, "You trace the number and get there ahead of us. Much better than trailing. I'm not afraid."

Garth followed her to the garage. Before the big engine was fairly rumbling, Honest John was telling the operator that it was police business, and got the address Garth had called. But when the long car backed out and made a U in the street, he clamped down on the cigar he had been saving all those hours. He ought to trail them.

But she said no, and her way was really best. Crooks fall into habits. This was a team. Garth got the victim, his woman sold the loot. One to drive, one to sit in the back seat with the owner, get her out in the sticks, and then pour it to her. As long as Garth was alone with Linda, she was safe enough.

So he took a short cut.

THE address was off Allemany Boulevard, on a side street, where only a few houses dotted the hilly lots. There weren't any neighbors close enough to see or wonder. Just the spot, and handy

to the highway leading down the lonely shore to Half Moon Bay.

He poured on the power, though he knew that Garth would take his time; a ticket was the last thing that Garth wanted. Honest John, uneasy because a woman had her neck on the block, kept telling himself, "Hell, I couldn't pinch him, I couldn't knock it out of him, only the longest chance that anyone could prove he was in Yvonne's house, much less knocked her off. And that wouldn't get the dough, the dough Linda needs."

Lights out, he skimmed silently past the house that must be Garth's; the only lighted one in that lonely block. He had checked numbers in his guide, as he approached the district. Once past, he bumped up over a curb and parked in a vacant lot. From there he could watch.

Soon the long cream-colored Cad loomed up. Linda stepped out, and Garth slid from the wheel. He followed her into the house. Honest John waited and chewed his cigar. He had handcuffs; nail the two, shackle them together, when they came out. Then frisk them, frisk the house, get the payoff. They'd be afraid of banks. Get them both out of the house, off guard and thinking of a nice dark spot to cool Linda.

But minutes passed. He began to pace in the gloom. He was afraid. He wanted to give them time for chit-chat, time to dig out the five hundred cash for Linda, time to offer to drive her home, if "Mrs. Garth" liked the bus.

Suppose they varied their routine? They might risk conking her in the house. The more he saw of the place, the more he knew that it would be easy to bring a stiff to the car. He had not figured on such a nice spot. He had half considered trailing them, crowding them into the ditch, and putting the slug on them. Nailing them on their own steps was a last minute change.

God, how long...?

He headed for the house. To hell with this. He couldn't take it.

He heard a scream, the dry, small smack of a pistol. Then no sound at all. Honest John went wild. He sprinted to the porch. He lashed out with his handcuffs, and swept the glass out of a French window, and barged into the living room, gun leveled. He shouted, "You lousy _____! I'll –"

THEN he cheeked himself, and stood there, gaping. There was a trim brunette in a red hat

and fur coat, grabbing her shoulder. Garth, looking sick as the girl. One hand frozen in an unfinished grab for a table drawer. Linda's face was hard as her voice, and she was saying, "Get the other five hundred or I'll empty this gun into you. Hurry, Garth."

Honest John took charge. "Cut it, Linda, you fool, who'd you shoot? Garth, you and the dame poke out your hands, here, by the banister."

In a moment, he had them cuffed, and the connecting link passed through the balustrade. Linda lowered her pea-shooter, and said, "I saw the label of that coat, the coat that fool Walt bought Yvonne, he told me about that. So I knew – I couldn't be wrong –"

He eyed her, drew her into the hall, where the two cursing captives couldn't shout him down. He said, "With the right dress, baby, you could beat any rap. But I went wild, now they know I'm playing your hand. Even if they are caught with Yvonne's coat, they'll still squawk for that dough."

"I don't care, John. I'll face it out."

He told her to keep her gun on the prisoners while he frisked the house. In half an hour he had found plenty. Yvonne's rings on the dresser. Garth's girl had to grab them, and the coat. But in the basement was the payoff: a grave. They'd changed their minds about dumping the next victim. Discovering Yvonne's body so soon had scared them, and had almost finished Linda.

Honest John was no longer sweating when he went to the captives and said. "Shut up, shut up! I got your prints on the glass in Yvonne's room. You grabbed the glass too high. Enough of her stuff is around here to sink you, and then there's the traffic cop in South City. But I'll give you one break, one break which maybe you can use."

Garth asked, "What?" The rat was scared sick, shaking.

"Maybe you can plead the old white flame stuff when you poured it to Yvonne. You can explain the blanket, easy. But that grave in the basement, way back out of sight, where I just stumbled on it. If the cops see that, it makes the both of you *premeditating* murder, it nails your girl friend and you. I'll shut up, as long as you shut up about the dough we're taking. The price of Yvonne's bus."

"You mean – you'll – let us go?" the girl said, choking.

"Yes. To hell." He grinned. "I'm out to sink Garth. He's facing the works for Yvonne, but he has a chance for his life, pleading impulse or something, or she tried to shoot him first. You can claim he stepped out on you, and you didn't know the car was hot, and you're clear, pretty much. But sister, that open grave, that'll finish you, if I squawk."

So they played it that way. Crawford, the chump, squared himself, and he's got a new job. Linda has her house, and she has clothes now. Lots of them.

Honest John? He's got memories. Which isn't bad for a guy that's red-faced, kind of bald, overweight, and not too smart-looking.