OH, MY DEARS!

You can't begin to imagine the story you'll read here tomorrow. A certain aging actor is throwing an enormous affair this evening, and yours truly will be in attendance. And just wait till you see what happens there tonight! And remember, dearies, you read it here first!
Hotshot Hollywood producer Stan “The Man” Silvern pulls me aside as soon as I come through the massive doors. He says the champagne’s still on ice and the caviar’s already paid for, so I should be discreet and let the party go on. A tall order, considering the stiff in the study. But I say I’ll do my best. I learn quick who’s paying my bill.

Who can blame him for not calling in the cops? This place is dizzy with dames and crawling with matinee idios. I try to follow behind Silvern — and past the partying crowd — as discreetly as a lived-in trench coat and scuffed wingtips will allow.

We pass through some gold-colored patterned drapes, pulled aside to reveal the study at the end of the hall, and a wing of private rooms off to the right of the study door. He ushers me into the study.

What a stiff!

He hadn’t told me who’d be sprawled there oozing blood onto the thick carpet. It happens to be the host — none other than Alexander Quinn himself! I raise an eyebrow in surprise.

It appears as if he’s just been presented with his last movie award — to the back of the skull. It’s still there — a little gold man, a few feet from the body — twisted and sticky and red.

“You know what needs doing,” Silvern growls.

And he’s right, I do. He’s used me for such — er — delicate matters like this plenty of times since I left his lot — and a go-nowhere job as a gate security guard. He pays well to keep the skeletons in his closet, I’ll say that for him. So, like I say, I know just what to do — get a headstart on solving this thing before he has to call in the cops. The cops might start digging too deep and get to rattling around too close to all those bones.

This is what I know from Silvern: Quinn was nuts about throwing these big bashes as command performances. He liked to see people squirm, and he was an expert at seeing that they did.

Except for his ending up dead, this party was just about like any other of his glitzy, shallow Beverly Hills to-dos. He was continually going down the hall to his study, calling people in, messing around with their careers or their lives or both, then expecting them to go back and mingle like good little boys and girls.

Silvern says that tonight Quinn seemed nastier than ever — drinking harder, snarling louder, ranting longer. He himself had been in the study with Quinn at 11:30. And he’d seen Quinn later mingling with the guests, though he can’t say exactly when. Then at 12:45 Quinn’s personal secretary came to him with the news. The secretary said he’d gone in to clear away some champagne glasses and to empty ashtrays when he found Quinn lying right where we saw him now.
all dressed up — that he was sending a plane for her to bring her back to the party. Naturally, she’d been very flattered and said yes, she’d come. And, in fact, she had scarcely gotten her last piece of jewelry in place when the pilot arrived. She made it to the party around 9:30 or so.

“When I arrived,” she says, “the butler showed me to my room. Mr. Quinn was in his study at the time. I remember, because that butler made me take off my shoes and tiptoe past it on our way down the hall. I put my things in that darling little room, touched up my face and hair, and joined the party. There were only eight or ten people there at that time. I remember thinking how late everything starts out here.”

When I ask her to describe the evening, she gives me the head-to-toe rundown of every guy in the room. Then she recites — verbatim — every compliment she received, including one I intend to file away for myself — “If you’re fishing for compliments, honey, your bait is the greatest!”

She can remember little else. “I’m sorry,” she says at one point. “I was concentrating so hard on being sophisticated that I just didn’t notice much.”

Frankly, I start wondering if she’s all there, if you know what I mean. Of course, what IS there is choice, and I find myself not caring much how nutso she is.

I try being more direct. I ask her when she saw Quinn tonight and she fidgets a bit. “Actually, I didn’t exactly see him at all tonight. I mean, I saw him around here and there, but, well, I didn’t meet him in his study like he well, I didn’t meet him in his study,” I smile, reciting my stock line.

She opens her eyes wider. “What other one?” she breathes in that wonderful little-girl voice. Perfect.

I ask Miss Diamond about her relationship with Quinn and how she had come to be at the party. She says she’d met Quinn briefly at the premiere of Captain Swashbuckle, his latest picture, only three weeks ago. She herself had had a bit part. He asked to meet with her again, but she’d been on her way to some health spa in Arizona to recuperate from a touch of “influenza” and exhaustion. In fact, she giggled, Quinn had called her in Arizona just that morning, insisting that she get...
“Just one more thing, Miss Diamond, and I’m afraid it’s personal. Were you and Quinn having an affair?”

Her cheeks redden as if the words have slapped her. “Why, certainly NOT. He belongs to Dorothy Getz, and she’s been like a sister to me since we met on the Captain Swashbuckle set. I’d never do anything to hurt her. You have to believe me!” Her whispery voice rises to near-speaking level as her agitation builds, so I say thanks, that’s all I need. I tell her, like I’m about to tell all six suspects, not to leave the place before I say so. She says that’s fine with her because she’s going straight to her room anyway.

“I could stick my fist through a couple of the holes in that statement,” I mutter dejectedly as I get an eyeful of smooth white skin through the black slits that finger down her back from neck to waist. Some bait, all right.

As soon as she’s out the door, in blusters a tall, thin guy who introduces himself as Donald Davies. He doesn’t have all night to wait around, he whines, and since, after all, I AM using his office, he figures he can just get it over with now.

It doesn’t take long to figure out this guy’s hairline is higher than his IQ. And the small, round wire-frame glasses that he’s no doubt chosen for their professorial air give him a goofy sort of look. Right away I don’t like him.

“I know what you’re thinking!” he begins, though I have every confidence he hasn’t the foggiest idea. “You’re wondering why an employee — a — a — mere servant, is dressed like the guests. Well, it’s not by choice, I’ll tell you. Alexander Quinn insisted I be able to blend in when I fetch guests to his study for him. It’s demeaning, really, I’ve never had any actual fun at these things. Oh, maybe a drink or two, sure, but that’s it.

“Take tonight, for example. Worked right here in this room most of the evening. I was back and forth a bit, but I was here from 11:30 on, I can tell you. I know I shouldn’t tell you what I was doing, but you’ll get it out of me one way or another anyway, so what the devil! If you must know, I was typing up a new contract replacing Quinn’s co-star, Dorothy Getz, with Lilly Diamond. And a letter of termination for his stand-in, Jake Fox. I have the papers right in this file over here if you’re interested. Not that I told any of them, mind you, but things like this DO get out fast — seems like a pretty strong motive for a couple of them, huh? As for me, Mr. Quinn and I got along fine, just fine.”

Just to remind myself that somebody else is in the room with this moron, I stick a couple of words in edgewise.

“You see Quinn tonight before you found the body?”

“Yes, sometime before 11 o’clock...10:45 I’d say. That’s when he gave me the instructions about the contracts. I knew that was Mr. Silvern’s job, but I’m only hired to follow orders, so I figure he’s already — er — worked something out with Silvern. Then he ordered me to go get Jake Fox — the stand-in who was about to get the axe — and so I went.”

“Obviously something else occurred,” I say, flipping through my notes. “I have testimonies from two people that they heard voices raised — yours and his — about this time.”

“Oh, well, that. Yes. It was so insignificant I’d — well, it slipped my mind is all. I was asking for a raise in pay. Nothing tremendous, of course, just what I’m due is all. I’m — I was — invaluable to him, after all. He refused, of course. Said he could replace me in a minute. Said I had the personality of a doorknob and the secretarial skills of a second-grader. Naturally, I was offended. I argued, but knew it was a waste of time.” His jaw muscles tense up, go slack, tense up, go slack...I have to wonder why Quinn would keep a guy like this around.

“Did you seem him alive after that?”

“Yes — he buzzed me at 11:40 and told me to get a bottle of champagne he keeps in the locked cabinet in the hallway and some glasses. He also told me to get rid of the ashtray. There was only one ash in it — from Mr. Silvern’s cigar I think, but I took it away and replaced it with a fresh one. I had done that throughout the evening, every half hour or so.”

“So did you return in half an hour?”

“Well, yes I did. I checked in with him at 12:15 and he said no one had used the ashtray, so not to bother with anything just then. Then I went to check in on him at 12:45 — well, that’s when I found him.”

“So you saw him alive at 12:15, and half an hour later, he was dead?”

“Yes. And like I said, I didn’t go anywhere else and I didn’t hear a thing the whole time. Not — not a thing!”

“Let me ask you this, Davies...did you notice the ashtray when you found the body?”

“As a matter of fact, before I went for Silvern, I cleaned up the champagne glasses and the ashtray. Stupid of me. There might have been fingerprints or something. It was just automatic. I didn’t realize till later that I shouldn’t have touched anything. Anyway, yes, there was a cigarette in it. No lipstick on it though. But one of the glasses did have lipstick on it. Bright red.”

“Tell me, Davies, if you know so much about Quinn’s affairs,” I press, “perhaps you can tell me about his will...and who’s named in it.”

“I most certainly cannot, Mr. Stuart. If you need details about such things, you go to his lawyer. That is totally inappropriate for me to discuss.”

“All right,” I say, “just tell me this. You know I can check it, so don’t bother lying. Are you in it for more than ten grand?”
“Well, not that it’s any of your business, of course, but as a matter of fact, I am, but—”
“That will be all for now.” And as he huffs out, I say, “One more thing, Mr. Davies. Who looks good in the fourth race at Darbonville tomorrow?”
“However would I be expected to know that?” he says icily. “Mr. Quinn had his faults, but gambling wasn’t one of them.”

A few more guests come and go, and I find myself facing a guy who, for me, becomes suspect number three. Jake Fox, Quinn’s stand-in. I’m surprised to find that he’s no slouch in the looks department. He appears to be in a lot better shape than Quinn was, and I tell him so.

“I heard the old guy was ready to can you,” I say. “But you’ve been doubling him for years, haven’t you?”
Since his first lead picture, if I’m not mistaken. 1928. Forever in Agony. The first time Quinn and Getz appeared together. I can’t resist. I’m a treasure trove of Hollywood tidbits. "Why would he fire you now?"

Fox seems very intense as he answers, “Alex was becoming obsessed with age. His hair was beginning to gray. His paunch was starting to show. He thought if he got a new double — a younger guy who could do more athletic stunts — he would be perceived as younger, too.”
“Your’re not exactly past your prime,” I say.
“Well, Alex thought I was. He thought I drank too much — and especially smoked too much. He wanted me out and that was it. So he called me in about 11 o’clock and laid it out. Boom. No discussion. Just Your termination papers will be ready to sign before the night is over.”
“Did you know he was also dumping somebody else this evening?” He looks up quickly — a little too quickly. “Whadayamean?” He sounds almost testy.

“He was also ending Miss Getz’s contract —”
He acts completely surprised. “Why that — but Miss Getz has been his leading lady for almost ten years! He had no authority — she had a contract for five more pictures, same as me.”
“Yeah...but look what happened to you,” I say quietly. “Let me ask you this. Fox. What do you do now? Without him?”
“I’m not sure, I guess. I — I have some options, but I can’t really discuss them right now.”
“You better think about discussing them, pal. It just could look to somebody like you killed him in a rage over losing this job. People have been murdered for less, you know.”

I ask a few more questions. He claims he left the study soon after eleven and returned to the party. “I was determined not to let him ruin the evening for me.” He says he saw Quinn with the guests after that, but doesn’t remember when. And, he says, he’d been returning from the kitchen and passed near Quinn’s study sometime just before midnight when he heard a loud argument. He wasn’t sure, he says, but he thinks it was Lottie Larsen, the gossip columnist.

When Dorothy Getz comes in, I rise to greet her. It’s like a reflex action. She’s one Hollywood dame who deserves the title “star” I confess, I’m a little in love with her myself. And here she is before me, the woman I’ve gawked at so many times in black and white. Here she is, in living, breathing color, with skin as smooth and pale and delectable as warm Cream of Wheat and a halo of strawberry blond hair framing two of the best cheekbones in the business.

It’s obvious that Silvern — or somebody — has had to get her from her room. I’m not stupid. She and Quinn have been an item for years. It stands to reason she’d have a room here somewhere.

She’s in a great-looking ivory-colored silk evening gown, just a shade or two creamier than her skin, but rumpled now at this late hour. The jewels and the gloves, which I’m sure a lady of her class would have been wearing, are gone now. Her face is blotchy from too many drinks, but I could swear the streaks are older than the news she’s no doubt just received. Though she seems to be almost in shock, somehow she hangs on to that gracious, cool screen image. What class.

I ask her about the evening and about the contract business. Yes, she says, she had seen him in his study; she can’t remember the time. Everything is a muddle, she says groggily. I wonder if Silvern — or someone else — has given her a sedative. Quinn had told her about the contract thing, she continues, and she had been a little upset, of course, but she was sure whatever was bothering him would go away by morning. While he’d never gone quite this far, he had done this sort of hurtful thing before, and she was sure he would change his mind.

As I listen, I keep getting the feeling that while she’s talking about his never going “quite this far,” I’m hearing “contract,” but she’s meaning something else altogether. So I keep pressing her, figuring I’m more likely to find out what it is while she’s in this state. Nice business, huh?
Finally, she admits that, yes, the contract is just the tip of the iceberg. That she had found out that her beloved Taddy (his real name is THADDEUS, she says!) was dumping her as his love interest not only on the screen, but off. She wouldn’t say for whom, only that the hussy herself had told her, gloating shamelessly.

She had immediately gone to Quinn’s study to have it out with him — and he had told her the rest. Devastated, she had left the study and run down the hall to her room. She’d been there ever since, she says, until Silvern brought her the terrible news. I ask if she can please remember what time she’d gone to her room.

“I — I’m sorry — I really have no idea. I’m — I’m so tired.”

“Just one more thing. Can anyone verify that’s where you went?”

“Why, yes”...someone had passed her in the hallway, she says, going back toward the study — or to the party — but she hadn’t looked up to see who it was.

I thank her and she leaves. I want to believe her, but her alibi is weaker than a third cup of tea from the same soggy bag. Her room is right down the hall from the study. She could easily have come back down that hallway sometime after 12:15 and before 12:45 without anyone seeing her. But was cold-blooded murder the act of a dame this classy?

By now it’s 2:45 a.m. I’ve run out of Camel’s and am starting to see double. I find Silvern and ask him if Quinn has any smokes. Figure he won’t need them now. Silvern says “Hell, no!” Quinn wouldn’t be caught dead — pardon the expression — with cigarettes. He detested smoking — especially hated Silvern’s cigars. But Silvern goes out and gets a pack for me from one of the guests.

I ask Silvern to sit down for a while. Immediately he gets his back up. “I hired you, confound it! Do you think I’d have gotten the best if I’d done it!”

In my business you learn never to trust a compliment... I ask my opinion on a couple of the others I’ve just questioned.

“Obviously,” I say, “Lilly Diamond is holding back a thing or two. Why didn’t she tell me about Quinn wanting her as his new leading lady? Didn’t she know?”

“Hell, yes, she knew. I told her myself!” growls Silvern. “Quinn and I met at 11:30. He told me to find her, break the news to her and tell her to meet him in his study for a champagne toast at 11:45. He had that pasty-faced secr...ness about his bring in a bottle of his favorite champagne and empty the ashtray. I tell you, I flick one ash in there — two, tops — and he goes crazy.

“Anyhow, I tell him I’ll get Diamond if he’ll get out there and mingle with the guests for a couple of minutes. It looks bad when he’s never out there. I find Diamond and tell her the great news. She’s — how you say — not exactly overwhelmed. Especially when she hears about the little toast to seal the agreement. ‘I’m not nobody’s floozy,’ she says to me. I say, ‘Dollface, if you want to get ahead in this business, you better learn to be.’

And I warn her that if she doesn’t cooperate with Quinn she can kiss her career good-bye. Quinn had ruined other starlets who wouldn’t play his little game.

“And that was it. I didn’t see her before that and I never saw her again tonight. Course, I figured Quinn had his eye on her, so I took both mine off, if you get my drift.”

“What about Fox?” I say. “He didn’t seem too broken up about losing his meal ticket. Was that an act?”

“I doubt it. Getting released from his contract would be the best thing that could happen to him. He knows I’ve been interested in testing him for bigger parts...have been for years. But there’s no way he could — or would — break that contract. He’s always been amazingly loyal to Quinn. Anyway, Quinn would have killed him if he’d left. And one thing you’ve got to remember about Fox — he looks like a leading man, and maybe he could even learn to sound like a leading man, but he just doesn’t have the brushness or the confidence — or the ego — that catapults someone like Alexander Quinn to the top. But maybe all that could come with time. I still say getting out of that contract was the best thing for him. He might have been disappointed at the way Quinn handled it, but he wouldn’t have flown into a rage about being fired, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He pauses a second. “OK, Stan, confession time.

There’s no stalling any longer. Tell me what Quinn had on you. How’d he get you to give him the green light on all his whims? There ain’t no way he had the power to release Miss Getz and Jake Fox from their contracts and choose a new leading lady. That’s your job. He must’ve had something good on you, and you might as well tell me — unless you want to tell it to the cops.”

He sinks lower into his seat and clenches his cigar in his teeth. “Cops!” he snarls. “I just called ‘em. They’ll be here any minute. Just after you’re through questioning everybody, if we’re lucky. So sit down...we have to wrap this up, so you might as well know...He had some blackmail business. Wasn’t pretty. A few indisc...et photos of me and a blonde wearin’ an ankle bracelet and a smile. My wife knows I look around, but she wouldn’t take well to this. She’d cut me off
It was a few minutes after 11:30. I know, because I had to get it in before my midnight deadline. I waited till the last minute so I could get a reaction from one or two, well, ‘key’ people,” she smirks. “Right after that I went in to see Alex. It must have been 11:45 or so. The dear, sweet man was uncorking some outrageously expensive bottle of champagne and we toasted our love.”

“And after that?”

“Oh, well, why I went to the powder room to freshen up a bit, then I went back to the phone — the only one Alex has in the front of the house, the one right in the middle of the party — at 12:15 or 12:20. I called in more details and some darling quotes from dear Alex. I wanted to keep my voice down so no one would overhear, but I had to talk loud enough to be heard myself, so I don’t know if anyone can verify this or not.”

“I did pass that secretary creature in the hall on my way from the powder room. He was looking quite shaken, if you ask me. Anyway, I was on the phone till I saw him return later and pull Stan Silvern aside. It must have been 12:45 or 12:50 by then. I could tell something was up, so I rang off. When I found out what had happened — when I saw Alex’s slack body and that bloody statuette lying there nearby, why, I actually swooned. But then, of course, I had the good sense to go quickly and find the party photographer from our paper and send him back to develop what he’d shot. I figured maybe, somehow, the pictures might be of some help. He assured me he’d be here early in the morning with everything he shot. Then — and only then — I collapsed.”

She’s dramatic and colorful with her words, all right, but she’s much too smooth, too practiced. She leaves soon after these comments and we exchange glances. Hers is defiant, victorious. Mine is not buying any of it.

I have some calls to make, so I stay in Davies’ office. Silvern has set everyone up with a place to sleep the party and the shock off a bit, and has told them, at my instruction, to gather in Quinn’s study at 8 a.m. I’ve also told Silvern to get those photos to me the minute the guy comes in with them. Probably nothing to them, but you never know.

The police and the coroner have come and gone. Quinn’s body is gone. Silvern timed it just right. When the police inspector finds that Silvern has stalled and that everyone has retired for the night, he is furious. Understandable. But he’s a good Hollywood cop and there’s nothing he can do now but toss Silvern a few choice words and leave. He says he’ll be back first thing in the a.m., which I know means not a minute after 9:30.

Silvern pops his head in. “I hate cops,” he reiterates. “There’s a bonus in this for you if you get this thing wrapped up before that infernal inspector comes back in the morning.” Then he leaves, ready, I assume, to head off the press which has begun to arrive in droves.

I’ll tell you up front, the last suspect — Lottie Larsen — is not one of my favorite people. She’s been raking my favorite stars over the Hollywood coals in her column for too long now. Clients of mine tell me that unfavorable publicity in her column is even more coveted than favorable.

It makes the folks at home talk about them more and remember them longer, they say. But I’m not sure I buy that. I don’t want to know who Jack Randy punched out in a drunken brawl or where Harmon and LaRousse were seen together on the sly and what his wife thought of it all. It’s just not decent, in my book.

So it’s slightly gratifying that she looks like a wreck. It being 3 a.m. may have something to do with it, but not altogether. Something is eating at this dame and I can see it. Problem is, she knows all the tricks of the interrogation trade. I know she’s not going to let go of a thing she doesn’t want me to know. Unless I’m very lucky. Or very sharp. At 3 a.m., I’m rooting for luck.

She sniffs into a wilted hanky two or three times. “Oh, the poor man. The poor, dear, sweet man!”

“Give me a break, lady. You never had a decent word to say about him in your column. Seems like every day you were criticizing him in some way or another.”

“But you don’t — you don’t understand,” she sniffs. “All that venom — all those snide remarks — were meant to hide from the world our growing clandestine love affair. He — he loved to read the things I’d print about him. The nastier the better. He could never get enough. Tonight was to be our night of triumph. He was finally dumping that horrid Getz character officially so we could announce our engagement. In fact, I phoned it in just hours ago.

without a cent. I knew I could find some loophole in those original contracts, so I said OK. I couldn’t do much for Dorothy, but any other studio would pick her up in a minute. And like I said, I did tell Fox to call for a screen test next week.”

“But weren’t you worried about being blackmailed by Quinn again?”

“Naw. Quinn is — was a skunk, all right, but I knew what kind of a skunk. I felt I could read him right. Once he got what he wanted, he’d let loose. And if he tried the same trick twice, well, I figured I’d deal with it any way I had to.”

“Including murdering the guy?” I ask with a smirk.
At 7:55, a few short hours later, the six suspects, looking exhausted and on edge, begin gathering in Quinn’s study. Lottie Larsen and Dorothy Getz sit on opposite sides of the room. Silvern plops down in the largest red leather chair. Fox is smoking his third cigarette. Davies is clenching his jaw muscles and twitching his right leg up and down a mile a minute. Lilly Diamond comes floating in, somehow looking radiant, and apologizes all over the place for being late. “Have I missed everything?” she asks breathlessly.

No problem, I say. We’re just about to begin. And I do:

“Mr. Silvern is paying me good money to be prepared to hand one of you over to the police inspector when he arrives, and I have every intention of earning my dough. From questioning you all, here’s what I know—or think I know...

Quinn was killed by a blow from behind to the right side of his skull. As luck would go, all six of you are right-handed. The murder weapon was such that it could have been used to great effect by a woman as well as a man.

Quinn was attacked sometime after Davies saw him at 12:15 and before Davies found the body at 12:45.

“But you know, I’m not so sure any of you have been straight with me. Some of you haven’t exactly lied, you just haven’t told me everything you know. And frankly, I resent it. I take it personally. But that’s my problem.

YOUR problem—each of you—is that since you decided not to level with me in private, now you will have an audience to hear the things you hoped to hide.

Take you, for instance, Miss Larsen. Did you really think I wouldn’t call your paper and check your story? Yeah, you called in before midnight to announce your engagement to Quinn (“What?” shouts Silvern), but you failed to mention that you called back half an hour later in a dither—trying to cancel the story. Saying that Quinn had threatened to sue for libel if the story went to print.

“Close your mouth, Miss Larsen, and let me go on. Quinn was just using you, wasn’t he? He was getting real nervous about losing his star appeal, and found that playing along with you guaranteed his name in print.

“Stop it! Stop it!” she cries. “All right. I should have leveled with you. I just couldn’t face you with this, on top of everything else that happened last night. Yes—I went in to see him at 11:45. He’d just poured two glasses of champagne. I took one from him. ‘Thank you, darling!’ I said, and began drinking it. ‘Oh, wait, I think a toast is in order!’ I say. Then he looks at me with a strange, cruel smile, and I realized suddenly that I didn’t know this man at all.

That’s when he told me he’d been using me to keep his name in the paper, but that now he had big plans to rejuvenate his image. And yes, he said if the engagement story hit the paper, he’d sue. He—he said the champagne was for— for someone else. I didn’t wait around to hear any more. I screamed something at him and left. I went to the powder room, as I said, to calm down, then I made a beeline for the telephone to retrace the story. But that nasty scene with him took place before midnight. You said Alex was alive at 12:15, so I couldn’t have killed him. Believe me, the thought crossed my mind, but from 12:15 to 12:45 I was on the phone. You can find plenty of witnesses if you want—”

“Thank you, Mr. Davies...”

Immediately, Davies’ jaw sets and he fixes his gaze somewhere four inches above my head.

You say you went in earlier in the evening to ask for a raise. But isn’t it true that you actually went in to ask for a huge sum to cover some recent gambling debts? Oh, you were very clever when I asked about the races, implying that Quinn was the gambler. But, my friend, you didn’t empty your wastebasket, and I found plenty of evidence to prove that your debts were well over $10,000. A couple of phone calls verified that.

“Isn’t it true that you went in to Quinn at 10:45, not to ask for a raise — or even to ask for the money — but to try a little blackmail?”

“No, no!” he cries.

“I mean, you owed an awful lot of money to some pretty tough characters. How long were they going to wait? You knew you needed that money — and fast — and Quinn was your only hope.”

“No! It’s not true! I didn’t try to blackmail him. I just leveled with him. I told him I was in a terrible mess. But he didn’t care. He said I’d have to get out of it on my own this time. ‘Just don’t let them break any fingers’ he said.
“You’ll be out on your can if you can’t type.” Yes, I shouted at him. But I didn’t kill him!

“You were the last one to see him alive, according to this testimony,” I say.

“That doesn’t mean I murdered him!” he shouts. There’s a low rumble in the room. I love this dramatic stuff.

There’s a knock on the door. “You ready for the pictures yet, Mr. Stuart?”

“Yeah, Jerry, bring ‘em in!” I turn to the others. “Jerry here was good enough to bring these by an hour ago. Pictures he took last night. And a few of them reveal some very interesting things.”

I take four off the top and spread them on the desk. “In fact, these four are going to prove which one of you is a murderer.”

STOP
PUT THE PUZZLE TOGETHER NOW

(Hint: It may help for you to make a timetable of events — both those mentioned in the text and those observed in the four incriminating photographs!)
SOLUTION

"So what do these prove about me?" Thar is me own way in the company of blondes?" growls Silvern. "No big news, Jimmy."

"One thing it points out," I say, "is that you, Mr. Davies, were not in your study all night long as you claimed. In fact, you were being rouged up by your gambling buddies at just the time you claim to have been checking on Quinn...You never talked to him at 12:15, did you? You never even saw him."

"All right, so I didn't. Big deal."

"The big deal, Davies, is that Quinn could have been killed earlier. Before midnight, even."

"Do you mean you suspect that Lottie Larsen could have done it after all?" asks Jake Fox. "I heard them fighting. I heard her shriek. That's it, isn't it? That glass with the lipstick. The cigarette without it. She had a cigarette holder. Her cigarette wouldn't have had lip marks!"

"But look, Fox," says Silvern. "Here's Quinn at 12:15 leaving the study and here he is at 12:20 after he joined the party. Looks like he's alive and drinking to me!"

"No," I say, "Miss Larsen may be guilty of bad judgment and bad taste, but she's not guilty of all this, anyway. I have someone else in mind altogether. Someone who had also been jilted by Quinn last night. Someone who had a lot more years in him. It's killing me to do this to someone I've admired for so long. Especially as she squares her shoulders and looks straight at me."

"You mean, don't you?" Dorothy Getz asks indignantly.

"I KNEW it!" hissed Larsen.

But I told you, I went to my room long before that time!"

"And you also told me there was someone who had seen you. Well, I happen to know who it was. She let it slip, while she was trying to protect you. Didn't you, Miss Diamond?"

"No, no, no. I told you clearly that I didn't see anybody running down the hall in tears! She cries, looking around at the others."

I realize you figured that was pretty shrewd, Miss Diamond, but the plain fact is, doll, you're not a good liar. You saw Miss Getz, didn't you? You saw Miss Getz running down the hallway at 12:30, just minutes before Quinn's body was discovered."

"Everyone starts talking at once. Everyone but Miss Getz. She just sits looking at her lap. And looking guilty as hell."

"There you are, Mr. Silvern," I say quietly. "The inspector should be here any minute to add his official stamp to this. As if on cue, the inspector walks in. Silvern looks at Miss Getz, then at the inspector. "Evidently, Inspector, we have our — er — murderer right in front of us!"

"So, Getz is making a terrible mistake! Miss Getz wouldn't hurt anyone. It was me! For God's sake, it was ME!" Jake Fox was on his feet, moving toward me as he talked.

"That's noble of you, Fox, but it's obviously just as as crazy about her. You can't take her for the fall, though. The evidence is too strong against her."

"This is crazy! I tell you I did it! I did it as the clock was striking twelve. You've done something to the pictures! You're trying to frame me, but I'm telling you, it was me!"

"I overheard Larsen announcing their engagement. But it wasn't 12:20, like in this picture. It was before midnight! I knew the announcement would break Miss Getz's heart, so I waited till I saw Quinn return to his study. When I got there, I overheard that Larsen woman proposing a toast. I hid next to the liquor cabinet in the hallway, so she wouldn't see me as she left. While I waited, I heard loud noises coming from another office — Davi—"

"Yes, I guess. Some toughs yelling threatening."

"Then I heard Quinn and Larsen arguing. Then I heard Quinn and Larsen arguing. Then I heard Quinn and Larsen arguing."

"I told Quinn I wanted to know what the hell was going on. He said, 'Relax! I'm not going to marry Lottie Larsen!' He claimed it was all for publicity."

"But then in the next breath he said, 'But as for — Fox looked at Dorothy Getz. "Getz could be precious Miss Getz, we're through. I'm interested in your awards now.' He walked over to his awards shelf. See these? I won't get another as long as Getz is hanging around my neck..."" Fox clears his throat. "I don't want to go on here with all the things he was saying. But he said something about Miss Getz's personal life and despised the whole idea of the actress and despised and declas and the clock in the entrance began to strike midnight, I saw it as my perfect chance to do it without anyone hearing me. So I picked up the first thing off that awards shelf and I let him have it. And, so help me, if he said such a thing about Miss Getz again, I'd let him have it all over again!"

"Fox takes a breath and sinks into a chair. The inspector looks from me to him. "Please come with me, sir," he says to Fox."

"Wait — I want to ask Mr. Stuart how he could have thought Miss Getz could ever do such a thing."

"Why, Mr. Fox. I never did believe it. And I apologize sincerely to Miss Getz for my cruel trick. But I knew it would be the only way to get a confession out of you. You see, Miss Getz weren't doctored. You just didn't look closely enough. See this one of you overhearing the phone conversation? Well, look in the corner here. This is the edge of the mirror. I changed your end so you couldn't get Fancy shot."

"So you're right — it wasn't 12:20, it was 11:40. So Quinn wasn't there at 12:20, he was there at 11:40."

"As for Miss Diamond seeing Miss Getz in the it all — 12:30, well, I'm afraid that was just a lucky break that worked right into my little plan."

"Look closely at this photo of Miss Diamond holding her champagne glass — and you'll see at the clock. Her watch is one hour ahead. Didn't anyone think it strange when she rushed in this morning thinking she had already missed everything? I first realized it with this picture of her and Stan here. Stan said she saw her one time last night, just before 11:45. But Miss Diamond said she was sure she had gotten her boa at 12:30. So why is she already wearing it in this picture?"

"I realized, she had gotten dressed for the party in Arizona, where the time is an hour ahead. And knowing what little I know about her, it seemed perfectly natural for her to forget that fact. So you see, I knew the only way I could get you to confess was if you thought Miss Getz was in danger of being blamed."

"How did I know about your feelings for her? I'm afraid they're really very obvious, Mr. Fox. When I asked you if you knew that someone else had been dumped last night, you looked very nervous. Now I understand what that look meant. You thought I was referring to Miss Getz's personal life and you didn't want me to break the news to her if she hadn't heard. And your rage over her being fired, I'm afraid, was the rage of a man in love."

"So then I understand why you'd been so 'loyal' all these years to a man who treated you like dirt under his fingernails. You did it to be close to the woman you love. Just like you murdered Quinn for the woman you love."

"But what about this picture of Quinn leaving his study at 12:13? Is that flipped around, too?" Silvern asks to support his theory.

"No, my good man. Actually, what the photographer captured here is a perfect shot of the killer leaving the scene of the crime. Fox is his stand-in, after all."

"Cigarette? Miss Quinn be smoking? I hardly think so, with what I've heard about him. Correct me if I'm wrong, Fox, but I assume you spent those fifteen minutes in the room getting your wits together."

"But the fingerprints on the picture were all yours, Fox. And even doing what you could to implicate Lottie Larsen, the other person who had hurt Miss Getz. Maybe you smoked a cigarette and thought to take this photo?"

"Before the cops take Fox away, Getz goes and takes his arm a little squeeze. "Thank you for being so good to me," she says. "I'm sorry I never really noticed you before. Alex was my one passion, and unlike him, I didn't have a roving eye." She even promises to visit him in the big house. Having finally won the attention — perhaps even the affection — of the woman he's loved so long, Fox is now a man of mixed emotions as he is led away."

So there you have it. As for me, I got Silvern's bonus all right. And I blew it all on one night on the town. With a little gem of a blonde named Lily Diamond.

THE END