

The Killing Season

The Killing Season

By Lewis Shiner

1998

Distributed under Creative Commons license. Some rights reserved.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>

Overnight the clouds had rolled in and the summer was dead. I sat at my office window and drank coffee, looking out on a dirty brown Saturday that smelled like rain.

Somebody knocked at the door and I swiveled around to see Pete McGregor from down the hall. “Busy?” he asked.

I shook my head and he came in, closing the door behind him. He poured a cup of coffee and sat down across from me.

“Big shakeup last night,” he said. “I just got a call to defend one of the Preacher’s errand boys.”

“So they finally got to him,” I said, remembering the furor that had raged in the newspapers a few months before. The law had never been able to break up the Preacher’s drug operation, even though it was notorious as the biggest in Texas. “How’d they do it?”

“It’s very hush-hush,” he said, steam from his coffee making his hair seem to ripple. “They squelched the story at the papers, hoping to pull in a couple more fish, I guess. But what I gather is that the thing was pulled off from the inside, from somebody high up in the organization. But nobody knows exactly who it was that sold out.”

“It’ll all come clean at the trial, I suppose.”

He nodded. “Sooner than that, I expect. The DA told me confidentially that they’ll have everything they need by five o’clock tonight. You’ll see it all on the evening news.”

A sharp rapping came at the door and Pete stood up.

“You’ve got business. I’ll leave you to it.”

“It’s probably bill collectors,” I said. “I’ll yell if they get rough.”

He opened the door and pushed past the two policemen that were waiting outside.

They were both in uniform, but I only knew one of them. That was Brady, the tall, curly headed one that looked like an Irish middleweight. His partner was dark and nondescript, sporting a Police Academy moustache.

“Hello, Sloane,” Brady said. “How’s the private cop business?” He was a bit of a hard case, not yet thirty, with the sense of humor of a caged animal.

“It’s a living,” I said. “What can I do for you?” I didn’t bother to get up.

“This is Sgt. Dawson,” Brady told me. “He thinks he wants to ask you some questions.”

“Sit down,” I said, waving at the chairs. Dawson sat, but Brady continued to pace the floor.

“Sorry to bother you like this,” Dawson said.

“No problem. Coffee?” Dawson nodded and I poured another cup. When I glanced at Brady he just shook his head. I knew the game and I wished they’d get on with it. Brady was going to play tough so Dawson could stick up for me and I’d talk to him. I couldn’t think of anything they could possibly want from me. “Mind telling me what this is all about?”

“We’re trying to find Elizabeth Canton. Known as Liz,” Dawson said.

“Good luck. I can give you her address, but it won’t do you much good. I find if I’m patient she comes around to see me every once in a while.” Dawson looked down at his coffee with an absent expression.

“How long have you known her?”

I turned my chair around and refilled my cup. “About six months, I guess. We’ve been going around together for the last couple of those. Is she in some sort of trouble?”

“I’d rather not say. How would you describe your...relationship with her?”

“Oh lay off him, will you?” Brady said. “Get to the point.” That was a switch. Dawson was supposed to be the one taking my side. I shrugged it off. I never would understand police, or their ideas of drama.

Dawson seemed subtly afraid of Brady, or perhaps just not willing to go through a showdown. “All right. When was the last time you saw her, Mr. Sloane?” His courtesy was stretching, and I was beginning to see the thinness of the veneer.

“Night before last, I guess, after she got home from work. Have you tried the hospital, by the way? She works at Brackenridge. “

“We tried it. Have you heard from her since? Any idea where she could be?”

I shook my head. “You don’t know Liz. She runs her own life. I don’t even try to keep up with it. I see her when she wants to see me. I wish I could be more help, but I really can’t.”

“Satisfied?” Brady asked him in an ugly voice. “He doesn’t know anything. Let’s roll.”

Dawson set down his unfinished coffee, and paused at the door. “We just want her for questioning at this point. But if she doesn’t turn up by five o’clock, a warrant goes out for her arrest. So if you see her, let us know.”

I went into the hall after him and saw the look that Brady gave him. It was full of suppressed anger and frustration. They walked to the elevators and Brady slapped the button a little harder than necessary.

I stood for a second, scratching my head. Maybe it was a coincidence that the hour of five o’clock had come up twice that morning, but detectives don’t believe in coincidence. I turned on my heel and marched right over to Pete’s office. His door was open and his secretary let me walk in.

“One question, Pete. Who was the arresting officer in the Preacher case?”

He twisted his eyebrows, then got a manila folder out of a stack. “A Sgt. Brady,” he said, and then, “was that the—”

I rapped a knuckle on his desk. “Thanks, Pete,” I said, and left him there.

So the cops want me to do their dirty work, I thought, sitting down at the phone. The hints had been plain enough. If I brought her in before five o’clock everything would be hunky-dory. If not, well, it would be my own fault. I resented being manipulated, and I didn’t want to get involved in something that was none of my business. It was eleven am, leaving only six hours until the police deadline. So I grumbled and made excuses to myself a while longer, and then I reached for the phone.

*

I called Liz’s house, less because I thought it would do any good than because I had to try it. If the police couldn’t find her it didn’t seem very likely that I could. Her roommate answered the phone.

“Hello, Cathy, this is Dan. Have the police been there?”

“Yes, Dan, just a little while ago. I’m sorry they bothered you. I didn’t realize they would...I mean, I’m sorry I gave them your name.” She sounded flustered and confused, just the way I would have expected her to after a run-in with the law. She was one of the world’s innocents, and sometimes she was just too blushing and vulnerable to be true. Even though she and Liz were the same age, she had none of Liz’s sensuality, only an awkward, childlike prettiness.

“Don’t worry about it. Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“I was going to ask you that. I just thought she was at the hospital.”

“I don’t suppose she left a message for me or anything?”

“No, I...” There was a long pause and I waited it out. “I can’t think of anything to tell you.”

“What were you about to say?”

“Nothing.”

“Cathy, this is important. I’ve got to find her before the police do. What is it you were going to say?”

“Nothing, I told you. I don’t know anything.” The last was almost a sob, and the receiver clicked in my ear. I hung up, dissatisfied and irritable. I didn’t owe Liz anything. From a rational point of view I had no business even knowing her. I kept telling myself that as I put on my jacket to go look for her, a knot of worry in my stomach. She had kept me off balance so long that I suppose I was just off balance without her.

She was not my type, not my style. She lived too fast, and let nobody inside her defenses. But she’d come along at a bad time for me, and I’d been too weak to pass her by. She had a ripe body, with long legs and full breasts and swirls of slate colored hair. And if she was part of the lost generations of Austin, she was still a beautiful woman, and at the time that had been enough.

There was no good place to begin, so I drove home, hoping for a note or message of some sort. I left the windows rolled up, expecting rain at any minute. It never came.

I parked on the curb and checked the porch mailbox. It was empty, as usual. I unlocked the front door and went to the hall phone where I kept a pad and pencil, the place Liz would have been most likely to leave something.

I felt jumpy all of a sudden. Nothing was wrong that I could put my finger on, but I had the feeling that a noise had just stopped, or something had moved soundlessly in another room. I tiptoed into the kitchen and checked the back door. It was unlocked but closed, just as I’d left it. That should have satisfied me, but it didn’t. I crept back to my bedroom and opened a drawer of the dresser to see if anything had been disturbed.

A small shaving mirror sat in front of me, just at eye level. A motion in it caught my attention and I looked up to see the closet door behind me slowly swing open.

I whirled around, but pulled up short when I saw the gun in his hand.

He was short and thin, with long black hair and a drooping moustache. The gun he held was a long barrel .38, accurate and deadly. Unless he got too close I would have no chance to take it away from him.

“Put your hands away from your sides, Mr. Sloane, and back out into the hall, please.” His voice had a slight Mexican accent and he held the pistol with care

and authority. I backed up slowly, keeping my eyes on the gun. There was a smooth place on the sight that looked as if he'd started to file it down and changed his mind.

"You know my name, so I don't guess this is a stickup," I said. "What do you want?"

"On into the living room, please, and sit in that armchair. Slowly." I backed across the room, looking for an opening and not finding one. The kid knew his business and was not going to give me a chance. I sat down. "Put your arms on the chair and hold them still. That's fine."

He was by the door, and he had it open and was gone in the time it took me to realize what he was doing. I went to the window and watched him jog away down the block.

Going after him on foot would have been a waste of time. He was armed and I didn't think he'd balk at shooting me if I forced him to. So I let him get around the corner then sprinted out to my car and threw it into gear. By the time I made the turn he had disappeared. There were a hundred places he could have gone—over fences, down alleys, into empty houses. Just for my own peace of mind I got out and checked the parked cars on the street. Then I went back home.

Things were starting to get interesting. The fact that someone had sent a gunman to my house meant the stakes were higher than I'd expected. A quick look around showed me that the place had been searched, but nothing taken.

It was a neat, professional job, and they probably hadn't wanted me to know it had been done. There was no point in calling the police—I was willing to give even money that the kid had been working for them. And even if he hadn't, there wasn't much the police could do. Professional thugs meant a big operation, one the size of, say, the Preacher's.

That thought bothered me. After a big bust word traveled fast, and things got very quiet for a while. If the Preacher had no operation any more, there was no reason one of his gunmen should have been going through my house. Or the police either, for that matter.

I went back out to my car and drove to Liz's duplex. The temperature was falling and the sky seemed even darker than before. I put my lights on and zipped the

front of my jacket.

The house was empty, which saved my having to tell Cathy a complicated lie. I let myself in with a piece of plastic and went to work. It was time for answers and I was going to get them if I had to tear the place apart.

It took me an hour and a half. It was not lying around waiting for me, and she obviously didn't want it to be stumbled over by accident. It was too well hidden to have been a plant. I went through the drawers, insides and undersides, tapped along shower curtain and closet rods, felt mattresses and shook boxes. I shifted furniture, and when I got to her stereo I noticed something wrong. The speaker cabinets weighed too much for the flimsy portable they had come off of, so I opened one up. Behind the cloth grille was a wad of kleenex, and behind that was a big manila envelope. It was wedged into the enclosure behind the speaker and I didn't want to disturb it. I coaxed the flap open with my pocket knife, enough to see inside. It was crammed full of little white packets of sleep and death. The other speaker held more of the same, but in pill form, packaged in small plastic vials.

I felt something change inside of me. I went through the room again, looking for an address book, old letters, a match folder, anything. The longer I looked, the stranger it got and the more disoriented I began to feel. There was nothing there, no trace of her past, of her friends, of her personality at all. She could have been no more than a cardboard cut-out, the merest shell of a human being.

It was twelve-thirty. I had a sense of time running out. At first I had wanted to help Liz, maybe even protect her. Now I wanted answers from her. I suppose I should have been more shocked at finding the heroin, but I'd almost expected that.

Being with Liz was like following a ticking bomb, and when I looked back it seemed like I'd been waiting for the explosion all along. I'd never pressed her, never used my professional skills to find out about her. Probably because of what I'd been afraid I'd find.

I locked up behind myself and sat in my car, feeling the conditioned response to start it up and get moving, whether I had a destination or not. The car waited with eager obedience, ready to substitute its horsepower for my thinking. It was desperation made me feel that way, but I wasn't doing any good getting

desperate all by myself, parked in a car.

*

Brackenridge Hospital was just south of the campus, close to both the football stadium and Interstate 35. I parked in the lot and went in through the double front doors. There was the same sort of expectant smell inside that the weather had outside. I found the first floor nurses station and asked for Liz.

“She certainly seems popular today,” said the head nurse, a heavy, crinkly-eyed woman of about forty. “The police were here looking for her this morning.” She sounded as if she had mixed feelings about the whole situation.

“What do you suppose they wanted?” I asked her.

“Oh, I don’t know. But they worried me, coming around like that.” She was a professional mother, the very best kind of nurse. I envied Liz for having earned her protection.

“You couldn’t give them any help, then.”

“Not really—” she began, but a voice behind me interrupted her.

“She told them the same thing I’m going to tell you. Nobody’s seen her for a couple of days. So get lost.” The voice was harsh, with Texan overtones, and didn’t fit his small Indian body.

“A little touchy, aren’t we?” I asked.

“This is a hospital, mister, not a referral agency. We’ve got patients to take care of, and we don’t need a lot of people tromping around and getting in the way.”

“Maybe I should come back with a cast on,” I offered.

“Don’t tempt me.” The tag on his intern’s smock said his name was Dakhar something, but I missed the last name as he scowled and walked away. I didn’t like to be threatened by people half my size, but I didn’t see anything I could do about it. The nurse had gone back to filing her charts and didn’t look up again. Doctors ran the show, and nurses took what they could get. I didn’t particularly like that, either.

I walked up and down the halls restlessly. The big clocks hanging from the ceiling kept reminding me that it was after one. At five o'clock the dam was going to break. Police with warrants would find the goods in Liz's apartment, and things would really start getting tough. For everybody.

I finally caught sight of Dakhar again, and tagged along behind him. I didn't bother being subtle about it, and the set of his shoulders told me he was aware of me. He ducked into a small tiled room and I went in after him.

We were in a small kitchen with a sink, an icebox, and a coke machine. I closed the door behind me and put my weight against it.

"All right, what do you want?" he asked. Surliness and anger alternated behind his face.

"Answers," I said. "What makes Liz such a hot topic? What is it you want quiet?"

He started cursing me, and I reached over to slap him. His right hand made a sudden blur and I drew back, but not quickly enough. There was a knife in his fist and a thin red line behind my knuckles.

It happened like it always does, suddenly, without warning. My defense mechanisms took over and all I could do was let it happen. I fainted with my eyes and snatched his wrist, hard. This time I was faster, and I felt the bones of his arm grind together in my grip. The knife clattered to the floor and I opened his lip with two quick slaps.

He had no tolerance for pain. He weakened instantly, but I had to force myself to ease off on his wrist. It was the legacy of my days in Viet Nam, and I was not proud of it. "Talk," I said, as gently as I could.

"Prescriptions. I wrote her some prescriptions." His throat sounded knotted up, and he was taking in a lot of air. "That's all."

"For what?"

"You know. Downers. Seconal, Valium, Quaaludes."

"How much?"

“Just a few, not often.”

“Did she pay you to do it?”

“Christ no, man. Everybody does it. You think it’s a big deal?”

“If it’s no big deal, what are you so scared of?”

“The heat’s on.”

“How do you know the heat’s on? It wasn’t in the papers. The cops know better than to spread it around. So who tipped you off?”

His face told me he’d said too much, and that he was through talking. I was convinced he’d be dead before I’d get it out of him. It was late and I was wasting time.

I scooped the knife off the floor and dropped it down the sink. He could fish it out, but it would take him a couple of minutes. Then I let go of his wrist and closed the door on him.

The cut on my hand was starting to hurt. I tied a handkerchief over it and flexed the fingers, relieved that it was only a scratch, angry that I’d let it happen at all.

*

Somebody had been to my office before me. It was subtle, but I could sense the difference instantly. They were one step ahead of me, whoever they were, whatever they wanted. They had the organization to know when I’d left for the office in the morning, and when I’d gone back home. I felt the delicate touch of fear on my neck.

My thoughts spinning, I sat down at the desk. The phone rang and I stared at it for half a minute before the message got through to me. Then I jumped at it and snatched it off the hook.

“Sloane speaking.”

“Hello, Sloane.” I recognized the voice and my pulse picked up again.

“Go on,” I said.

“A couple hours after I left your place this morning,” the Chicano said, “somebody took a shot at me. Does that give you any ideas?”

“No. Should it?” I cradled the phone in my shoulder and reached for the office bottle. Splashing a little bourbon on my handkerchief, I dabbed at the cut wrist.

“Somebody’s hot because I spilled the goods on his girlfriend. Are you reading me yet?”

“If you’re talking about me, you’re crazy. If you’re not, I’m lost.” I took a sip out of the bottle and felt better instantly.

“Sounds like you’re way behind the times. Maybe we should get together.”

“Let’s. We had so little time this morning.”

“There used to be a co-op dorm across from Harris Park. Big building, empty now. You know where that is?”

I said that I did.

“I’ll be there in forty-five minutes. Bring a hundred dollars in ten dollar bills.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

“Mexico’s not that close, either, if you follow me.”

“I think I’m beginning to,” I said.

“Forty-five minutes,” he said, and hung up.

I put the phone down and looked at my watch. It was getting to be a bad habit. I drove to my bank, cashing a check and sealing the money in the little envelope they gave me. Then I headed back north toward the campus, trying to put together what I had.

I had no doubts that Liz was involved. All that was left was the question of how deeply, and I wanted to believe it wasn’t very far. At the same time my pride was telling me that I’d been a sucker long enough, and I ought to leave her to the

wolves. But only after I learned the whole truth.

I passed through the tree-lined streets north of the university. A long dry spell had left the city withered and yellow, and the threatening but impotent clouds overhead were no help. It was a burned out, jaded and pale world and I was a part of it. What hurt the most was that I belonged there. The faded people sat on their porches, long-haired, easygoing, used up.

I swung past the old dorm once at cruising speed, just to make sure there weren't any machine guns hanging out the windows. It was built up the side of a low hill, with a good view of both sides and the park in front of it. I left my car out of sight on the edge of the park and took the long way around the house.

I came in from the back side, through a yard overgrown with weeds, wondering if I should have brought a gun after all, despite my dislike of them. The back of the house had only one window, a big single sheet of glass, but the sun was directly on it and I couldn't see through the accumulated dust. I was trying to decide whether I should go straight in or circle back to the front when I heard the shot.

I charged up to the door, then hesitated. There was no more gunfire so I opened the door and went in.

Inside was a single long room. I ducked out of the lighted doorway and waited for someone to shoot me. Finally my eyes adjusted and the feeling of vulnerability began to pass. I could see bare walls and a long, empty wooden floor. There was an interruption in the middle of it, and as I got closer I could make out the body of the Chicano who had called me. He was leaking blood onto the shiny waxed woodwork. He wouldn't be needing his hundred dollars.

Something moved in the shadows. I looked around for cover, but there wasn't any. A silhouette detached itself and moved toward me with familiar grace. In one hand was a pistol, and I could practically see smoke leaking out of the barrel.

"Hello, Liz," I said.

*

At first I thought she was drugged, but then I decided it was just detachment,

almost shock—a withdrawal from the harsh fact of death. Her face was slack, and what might have otherwise passed for beauty seemed coarse. She was wearing old jeans and a dirty tee-shirt, and probably had been for a while. She half turned from me in the dim light and raised one arm in a vague gesture of despair. It was the one with the gun in it, held by the tips of her fingers like an ashtray. I took it away from her and put it in my pocket. It was a .38 Police Special; the barrel was warm and stank of cordite.

“Did you shoot him, Liz?” It was a stupid question, I suppose, but I had to ask it.

“Hello, Danny,” she said dreamily.

“Answer me, Liz. Did you shoot him?”

“What are you doing here, Danny? You shouldn’t have come. It’s dangerous here.” I might have been talking in Siamese, or not at all.

I left her and bent over the body. He was face down, so I didn’t have to look at the messy side, where the bullet had come out. I fished the wallet out of his back pocket and pawed through the cards. The first one said his name was Carlos Quintana. The second one said that he was a police officer for the City of Austin.

I tucked the rest of the cards away, wiped the wallet, and stuck it back in the pocket. “I’m over my head, Liz. I can’t cover this up. It’s murder now, and everything’s different. I have to call the police.”

She pirouetted slowly away from me. I didn’t know what else to do. I started for the door.

Police Sgt. Brady stepped into my path and the refracted sunlight glinted off his gun. “You don’t need to call the cops, Sloane. The cops are here.”

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

“Side door. I heard the shot and came to check it out. Now let’s have that gun out of your pocket. Set it on the floor real nice and kick it away.” I did so. “Fine. You want to tell me why you shot him? If it was to clear your girlfriend, you just made a big mistake. They’re not going to get anything on Liz.” Something about the way he wasn’t really looking at her seemed odd, but it was a fleeting thought and was soon gone. “Okay, outside. We’re taking your car.”

That was the last straw. It was bad enough having the police show up without being called. When things stopped making sense altogether, it was time for me to get out. I started slowly for the front door, and Brady made the mistake of letting Liz get between us. It was all I needed. I hit the door hard and slammed it behind me. I heard a slug tear through the wood as I started running.

My mind was working as soon as I hit the pavement. So far there was one solid piece of evidence in the whole case. It was at Liz's house. Brady had said they weren't going to get anything on Liz. That suddenly made the evidence more important than I'd thought. But I didn't have time for the possibilities. Unless I got there first it wasn't going to make any difference.

I was into the trees before he got the door open and his sights on me. I think I heard him yell "halt" but I could have been wrong. Another bullet ripped open a tree to the left of me and I dodged for deeper cover. He was clearly shooting to kill; at least I knew I'd done the right thing to get away. That left me with the one small problem of staying alive to explain it.

My keys were already out, and I didn't shut the car door until I was rolling. I figured I had no more than a couple of minutes' head start, and I needed every bit of it. I didn't have the time or concentration for any complicated thinking, I worked at keeping the car on the road and nothing else. Liz's house was only a few blocks away, and I could hear a siren not far behind me. My old Mustang was taking the curves well, but they could probably follow me just from the noise of the tires.

I swerved left to avoid a bicycle and screamed to a stop in front of the duplex. Cathy's car was in the driveway. I took the walk at a hard run and slammed both fists into the door. Cathy finally opened it, looking mildly annoyed, but I didn't give her a chance to say anything.

My breath was coming hard and I had to fight to make sense. "The cop that was here this morning," I gasped, "Brady—you'd seen him before, hadn't you?"

She got a trapped look in her eyes and didn't answer.

"You'd seen him all the time, hadn't you? Hadn't you?" I must have been yelling because she burst into tears.

"I can't! I can't tell you!" She might as well have just said yes.

“Get out of the house, fast,” I said. “There’s about to be a lot of trouble. Go to a neighbor, call the police, and then stay there.” I must have hit some sort of parental tone that got through to her. She left the house without a word.

I could hear the siren again, not far off. Brady had known, obviously, where I was going. I didn’t worry about the mess this time, but threw shredded kleenex in a pile on the floor. My hand closed on stiff paper and pulled it into the light.

Brady was too late. I’d seen the rubber stamp on the front of the envelope.

It said PROPERTY OF AUSTIN POLICE DEPARTMENT.

I must have expected it, but my mind had shut out the consequences. Now that it was in front of me, everything snapped into place. I’d been on the heels of the police all day, and everywhere I went people were shifty-eyed and evasive, afraid to talk and ready to lash out at anything.

There was a noise outside. I stuffed the envelope down the back of my pants and tucked my shirt in over it. I threw the speaker and kleenex in the trash and pretended to still be searching when Brady came in with Dawson behind him. I looked down the dark tunnel of Brady’s gun again, with no more corners left to turn.

“Where is it?” Brady demanded, gesturing with the gun barrel. There was a smooth place on the gunsight that I had seen before.

I suddenly realized that my chances were about slim and none. All my clever detective work had just earned me a metal tag around the toe. If I had a chance at all, it hung on the fact that Brady had been alone when he’d found me with Liz. If he’d ditched his partner it could mean that Dawson didn’t know the score. If I was right, I had to make Dawson want to keep me alive. It didn’t sound like much of a chance at all.

“Shoot me, Brady,” I said. “It’s the only way. Otherwise I’m going to talk.”

I’d cut it fine, and for a moment I thought I’d gone too far. Then he added things up and his eyes shifted, just barely, toward Dawson. He was going to try to talk his way out of it.

“Stop trying to scare me,” he said. “It’s harder than you think.”

“Maybe not. I’ve got three things to say, and I don’t think you’ll like any of them.”

“Go ahead.” This time it was Dawson talking. He was suddenly interested.

I had to buy time. If I sprang the envelope right off, I wouldn’t live to see the reaction. “The first is not so much in itself. It’s just funny. Funny that there should be so much activity today when there was a big bust last night. People getting shot, and shot at. It almost seems like the big dope racket wasn’t cleaned up at all. Maybe it just changed hands.”

“Feelings aren’t worth a damn,” Brady said.

Dawson said: “Let’s hear the other two.”

“Number two. I don’t think Dawson can give you an alibi for the half hour or so before Carlos was shot. I think you were in the house the whole time. I think you left Dawson cooling his heels down the block, and only went back to him because you needed a car to chase me. I think it was your gun that killed Carlos. I think you pulled the trigger.”

“You’re crazy.” His voice wasn’t as steady as it should have been. A drop of sweat started at the edge of his curly hairline. “This gun hasn’t been fired in days.”

“That’s not your gun. It’s Carlos’. I saw him with it this morning when you sent him to search my place. Just before you decided he wasn’t worth the risk and put the word out on him.

“You didn’t think you’d have to kill him yourself, but when he showed up at Liz’s hideout, you lost your head a little. It was a smart idea to change guns with him, but you won’t get away with it. The ballistics people have samples from your gun downtown, and they’ll connect you up with the killing sooner or later. Unless you pull a fix.”

“So we got our guns mixed up,” Brady snarled. “Why should I kill my own man?”

“Because he knew too much about the setup. He knew you’d staged the whole bust just to take over the organization. You were the man at the top that tipped

off the police-tipped off yourself! Carlos was the only one who knew you in both roles, on both sides of the fence, because he was working both sides too. Carlos —and Liz.”

Now I had scared him. He looked more like a fighter than ever, but this time he was on the way down. The sneer was gone off his face and instead I saw what Carlos couldn't have seen before he died. There was nothing human in his look. It was not a happy sight to end your life with.

“Number three,” I said. My mouth was dry and it was hard to talk. I'd come to the place where I was probably going to get shot. “Dawson, there's an envelope under my shirt. I want you to come get it out.”

Brady's jaw went white. “It's a trick.” He seemed to be talking through clenched teeth. It was obvious he was afraid, why couldn't Dawson see it? What was he waiting for? “It's a trick, goddammit. Stay away from him, Dawson!”

We might have stood there all afternoon, but Brady's hand started shaking. He used his left hand to steady it, and the gesture must have touched nerve in Dawson.

It happened in a blur. Dawson reached for his holster, but he moved too fast. Brady swung on him, startled, and I could see the pistol rising to cover him. I could see Brady's finger on the trigger, and I could see the finger start to tighten, and then I moved.

I kicked as hard as I could and Brady's gun roared angrily at the ceiling. Then I was on top of him. I hit him twice before I knew what I was doing or where the impulse had even come from. I might have kept on, but the feel of cold metal in my neck made me stop.

“Get up,” Dawson said. “That's enough.”

“Not yet.” I was breathing hard and my hands were like ice. I didn't care about guns anymore. “Shoot if you want.” Brady had a dull look in his eyes, but he was conscious. I grabbed the edges of his shirt and held them tight. “I want to know why,” I said to him. “I want to know why Liz was going to take the rap for you.”

He choked on his laugh. “They couldn't have made it stick. A paraffin test would

clear her and give the trail time to get cold. And once they found out the murder was a frame-up they'd believe the drugs were too. They only had Carlos' word, and he's dead."

He still hadn't told me why, but by then I already knew. Sometimes it takes me a long time to see the most obvious things. Carlos had tried to tell me, and it was on Brady's face every time he'd looked at her.

I stood up and let Dawson put me against a wall and search me. When he got to the envelope, his eyes narrowed and he looked at me as if he was almost sorry to have to go through with the rest of it. He read me my rights, slapped the bracelets on, and took me outside.

Liz was handcuffed to the back seat of the prowl car. They put me in next to her. I couldn't think of anything to say. I could have asked her what she saw in a man like Brady, what he gave her that I couldn't, but that was all high school stuff. I was too old and had seen too much of it before.

"So Cathy spilled it all," Liz said bitterly. "I should have known I couldn't trust her." It was a childish remark and it brought me back to reality. I thought of Cathy and her despairing refusal to talk.

"No, I said. "It wasn't Cathy."

Another carload of cops pulled up and a moment later they came out of the house with Brady in tow. He was in handcuffs, too.

"I suppose you hate me now," Liz said. "I guess I can't blame you."

"Shut up," I said. "Just shut up. Please."

Dawson started the car and we pulled away from the curb. It was over for me, but a long night still lay ahead. I wondered if Pete was going to be able to get me out of this one.

The sky overhead was the color of watery mud. It stared back at me in shifting silence and refused to rain.

(c) 1998 by Lewis Shiner. First published in *Private Eye Action As You Like It*, July 1998.

Some rights reserved. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>