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Written by Charles Williams

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Confidentially Yours

Charles Williams



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CHAPTER 1

THE DAY IT BEGAN WAS January 5th. I'd gone hunting that morning, and it was a little after one P.M. when I got to the office.

Clebourne's the main street, and the central business district is about seven blocks long. Warren Realty is in the second block from the west end, with J.C. Penney's on one side and Fuller's cafe on the other, and, except that it's mine, it could be any small-town real estate office anywhere—the plate glass window with a few of the current listings posted in it, a split-leaf philodendron here and there, two salesmen's desks forever cluttered with papers, and, as a sort of focal point like the medulla oblongata of the human nervous system, another desk with a typewriter, several telephones, a Notary sign, and a girl who knows where everything is buried, including the bodies. The girl in this case is Barbara Ryan, if girl is the correct term for a 30-year-old divorcee. She has reddish mahogany-colored hair that always seems a little tousled, a wide mouth in a rather slender face, cool blue eyes, and an air of good-natured cynicism, as though she were still fond of the human race in spite of the fact she no longer expected a great deal of it. When I came in she was alone in the office, speaking into one of the telephones.

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“Just a moment, please. Here’s Mr. Warren now.” Then she added, “It’s long-distance.”

That was probably Frances now, calling to say she was on her way home. I’d tried twice the night before to call her, but she hadn’t come back to the hotel. “Thanks,” I said. “I’ll take it inside.” I went back to my office and closed the door, grabbing up the phone as I dropped into the chair behind the desk. “Hello.”

It was Frances. “Really, John,” she said petulantly, “do you have to bark? Didn’t the girl tell you it was me?”

Here we go again, I thought. She should realize by this time that the only way I can speak over a telephone is abruptly; I’ve tried, but I can’t change it. Also, she knew Barbara’s name as well as I did, and I could see no reason for referring to her as “the girl.” I brushed aside the annoyance. “Sorry, honey. I tried to get you last night—”

“Yes. I know. But after the concert, the Dickinsons wanted to do Bourbon Street, so it was after three when I got back to the hotel, and it was too late to call back then. I just woke up; in fact, I’m still lying here in bed.”

I thought of the way she looked lying in bed, the swirl of dark hair across the pillow, the blue-green eyes in the beautifully made and sensuous face, the long smooth legs, and began to feel more than ever like an underprivileged husband. “What time are you starting back? Are you all packed?”

“No-o, dear. That’s one reason I called; I’m thinking of staying over till Sunday.”

“*What?*”

“The Dickinsons have invited me to dinner tonight. And tomorrow there’s a cocktail party—”

“But, dammit, honey, you’ve been gone a week now.”

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“Well, really, John, it’s just two more days. And you’ll probably be duck-hunting anyway.”

“No. I was out this morning—” I stopped; there was no use arguing about it. Even if I got her to change her mind, it wouldn’t be any good. She’d arrive in a bad mood and there’d be an argument, or several days of sweet martyrdom, which was worse. Maybe I was being selfish, anyway. “Okay, honey. But make it Sunday, will you?”

“Of course, darling.” There was a slight pause, and then she added, “Oh, by the way, I’ll probably have to cash a check today.”

“Sure,” I said. “How much?”

“Do I hear five hundred?” she asked playfully. “I have to do some shopping, and that’s a nice round number.”

“Good God!”

“Was that another bark, dear, or more in the nature of a growl?”

“It was a grunt,” I said. “I was getting up off the floor. Look, honey, you’ve got every credit card known to man, and charge accounts at most of the stores down there.” I was about to add that she’d also had six hundred in cash when she left here, but thought better of it and didn’t.

“But I don’t have any account at this shop, dear,” she explained patiently, “and they have the most adorable suit, and the accessories. It’s a Balenciaga copy, and I think I have the figure for it.”

She knew damned well she did. “As I seem to remember it,” I said, “you do, though it’s been some time since I’ve been able to check. Okay, sexy, but when you get it dressed, will you for God’s sake bring it home?”

She laughed. “I love it when you sound like Boyer.”

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There was something in the background that sounded like a trumpet. “Don’t tell me you’ve bought an orchestra,” I said.

“It’s the radio,” she replied. “I’ll turn it off. But never mind, I’d better start dressing. I’ll see you Sunday, dear.”

After she’d hung up, I was still conscious of vague dissatisfaction. Maybe it was the day; it was still and oppressive, with that feeling of uneasiness that precedes a storm. We’d successfully skirted an argument, but I wondered if I’d backed down too easily. Some friends of hers in New Orleans had had an extra ticket to the Sugar Bowl game; I hadn’t been able to get away, even if another ticket had been obtainable, so she’d gone alone. The original three-day trip had stretched to a week, and now it was nine days. I didn’t like it, but there didn’t seem to be a great deal I could do about it. I thought wryly of the surprise this pussyfooting attitude would cause among a large part of Carthage’s population who considered me an outspoken hothead who was always charging headlong into something with at least one foot in his mouth.

We’d been married less than two years. Was it the town she was bored with, or me? She’d grown up in Florida, mostly in Miami. Carthage, God knows, is no hectic round of gaiety, but at the moment I wasn’t too sure it was the town. I tried to take an objective look at this fellow who called himself John Duquesne Warren, but I suppose it’s impossible; the picture is always clouded by the mood. Sometimes I was able to see myself as quite a lad—sharp, aggressive, successful, popular—but all that came through now was yesterday’s second-string tackle with a receding hairline, the small-town businessman with a fading and beat-up dream or two, a beautiful but sometimes puzzling wife, no children, and a few jokes his friends were probably heartily

sick of hearing—a nonentity and a crashing bore. Nobody would ever name a bridge after me, or a disease, or a gazelle.

Except for eight years away at school and one in Korea, I'd lived here all my life. My mother, who died when I was eight, had left me three pieces of commercial property on Clebourne Street, one of which I'd sold, using the proceeds to speculate in Florida real estate. I'd made a fair minor-league fortune out of it. I still owned the other two properties, which brought in a comfortable income. Warren Realty was in one, and the other was the old Duquesne Building on the northeast corner of Clebourne and Montrose, which contained Lackner Optical, the Sport Shop, and Allen's Stationery store, as well as the professional offices on the second floor. My father, who was in the Citizens National Bank, had died in 1952, while I was in Korea.

It was right here in the office that I'd first met Frances. She came in one morning, two years ago this week, and wanted to rent the vacant store space in the Duquesne Building—the one now occupied by the Sport Shop, with the living quarters in back—to open a dress shop. My first impression was that no woman that good-looking and that young—she was only 25—could know anything about running a business, but develop it she did. She and her husband had owned a very successful dress shop in Miami until they'd split up the year before. After the divorce she'd wanted to get away from Miami and had started for the Coast in her car, stopped overnight in Carthage, and became interested in its possibilities. In the end I rented her the space, and then in less than six months did myself out of a tenant by persuading her to marry me...

I tried to shrug off this mood of futility, and attacked the accumulation of paperwork on my desk. Evans, one of the salesmen, came in to discuss an offer he'd received on one of the

listings. At three I went next door to Fuller's for a cup of coffee. The cold front was going to be on us in less than an hour; angry masses of clouds, dark and swollen with turbulence, were beginning to pile up in the northwest. People were rolling up the windows of parked cars and keeping an eye on it as they hurried along the sidewalks. I wished it had come through before daybreak this morning, as originally forecast; I might have got some ducks.

Barbara came in to take some letters. She was sitting in the chair near the corner of the desk with her legs crossed, the shorthand notebook on her thigh, and as I dictated I found my train of thought being interrupted from time to time. It would be asinine to say she had worked for me for over a year without my ever having noticed that she was a very attractive girl, but this was apparently the first time I'd ever consciously thought of it. Leaning forward as she was, a strand of reddish-brown hair had swung down alongside her face, framing the line of her cheek. She was wearing a blouse with long full sleeves gathered closely at the wrists, and I found my eyes returning time after time to the slender, fine-boned hands below them with their delicate tracery of blue veins and the tapering fingers moving so gracefully at their work. I stumbled in mid-sentence.

Without looking up she read back, "—not presently included within the corporate limits of the city of Carthage comma nor expected to be so included within—" One corner of her mouth twitched humorously. "Not 'foreseeable future', I hope?"

I grinned. "No. I've often wondered what that meant, myself. How about 'near future'?"

I went on, but I was still having difficulty concentrating on the letter. I was disgusted with myself and wondered if that was what I was going to become, a middle-aged ogler of secretaries. It wasn't difficult to imagine the contempt she'd feel if she were

aware of this scrutiny; she'd already had one experience with a philandering husband—her own. Just then, before I could stumble again, the telephone rang. She answered it, and passed it to me. "It's the Sheriff."

"Sheriff?" I repeated stupidly, wondering what Scanlon would be calling here for. "Hello."

"Warren? Listen, did you go hunting this morning? Out at Crossman Slough?"

"Yes," I said. "Why?"

"What time?"

"I got there a little before daylight, and left—I think it was about a quarter of ten."

"You didn't see anything of Dan Roberts out there?"

I frowned. "No. I saw his car, though. What's this all about?"

"He killed himself. I'm trying to get some idea of what time."

"*Killed himself?*"

"Yes. Dr. Martin and Jimmie MacBride found him about a half hour ago, and called in from Vernon's store. Doc said he'd blown most of the side of his head off, and apparently it happened sometime early this morning. He was in that blind around to the right from the end of the road, the number two, I think you fellows call it. Where were you?"

"Number one. Straight down from the end of the road. But, good God, how'd he do it?"

"I don't know. Mulholland's out there now, with the ambulance. Doc said the gun must have been practically in his face when it went off, so I guess he was picking it up by the barrel. Was he still doing any shooting over there when you left?"

"No," I said. "There was nothing to shoot at. I never saw a duck the whole morning. The only shots I heard were just about daybreak."

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“That would have been before legal opening hour.”

“I know,” I said. “I remember being a little burned about it and wondering who it was. We’re pretty strict about that.”

“It’d have to be Roberts, because you two were the only ones out there. I’ve talked to everybody else. But did you say *shots*?”

“That’s right. Two.”

“How close together?”

I thought about it. “It’s hard to say, but probably less than a minute apart.”

“Not like a man trying for a double on a flight of ducks?”

“No. Too far apart for that. They’d have been out of range before he got off the second one. It was more as if he’d knocked down a cripple that started to get up so he had to shoot it again. That’s what I thought it was, actually. A single.”

“Nothing came over you?”

“No. As I said, I didn’t see a duck the whole morning. The chances are they would have flared out over that number one blind where I was, because it’s on that point between the two arms of the slough, and even if they’d gone behind me I’d have heard the wings.”

“It’s damn funny, all right. And you never heard anything at all after that?”

“Not a sound.”

“I see. Oh, there’s one more thing. You don’t know anything about his next of kin?”

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry. My understanding is he came from Texas, but I’m not sure where.”

“Well, we’ll try the store, and his personal gear. Thanks.”

Barbara was watching wide-eyed as I hung up. I told her about it. “Oh, no!” she exclaimed. “How awful.”

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“It’s a rotten shame.” He was probably still in his twenties. But at least he didn’t have a wife and children to break the news to, as far as I knew. In spite of the fact he was a tenant of mine, I didn’t know a great deal about him other than the fact he was a deadly shot at skeet and drove a high-powered sports car. He was a lean, dark, Indian-looking type who was pleasant enough but never talked much about himself. He’d come to Carthage about ten months ago and opened the Sports Shop in the Duquesne Building, in the same space where Frances had had her dress shop, and lived in the small apartment behind it. Just before hunting season he’d joined the Duck Club, buying Art Russell’s membership when Art moved to Florida. We kept it limited to eight members.

But how had he done it? While I’d never hunted with him, I had shot skeet with him a couple of times at the Rutherford Trap and Skeet Club, and he was a natural with a gun. He followed the safety rules in that automatic way of men who’ve been handling guns all their lives. But then hunting accidents were nearly always inexplicable. I tried to push it out of my mind and go on with the letters, but the feeling of depression persisted.

The storm struck a few minutes after five. I went out front and stared through the window at the rain-lashed street where the ropes of tinsel still up from Christmas whipped and billowed in the wind. Evans and Turner had already gone. Barbara was covering the typewriter and taking her purse from a drawer.

“I’ll run you home,” I said.

She smiled, but shook her head. “Thanks. I brought my car today.”

Just as she was going out the door the telephone rang. I motioned for her to go ahead, and picked it up myself. It was

Scanlon again. "Warren? Can you get over to the courthouse right away?"

"Sure," I said. "What is it?"

"It's about Roberts."

"Have you been able to figure out how it happened?"

"We're not sure. I'll tell you about it when you get here."

I locked the front door and made a run for the car. It was only three blocks over to the courthouse on Stanley, the second street north of Clebourne. It was perceptibly colder now, and already growing dark under the downpour. I found a parking place near the entrance and dashed up the steps.

The sheriff's office was on the lower floor left. It was a big room, separated from the doorway by a chest-high counter and a railing with a gate. On the far wall was a large-scale map of the county and a glass-fronted case containing several .30-30 carbines and a couple of tear-gas guns, while most of the space on the right was taken up by a battery of filing cabinets. There were four desks with green-shaded droplights above them. Mulholland, the chief deputy, was standing at the end of one of the desks near the left side of the room, intent on several objects atop it under the hot cone of light. One was a Browning double-barreled shotgun with the breech open, while the others appeared to be a shotgun shell, an envelope, and some photographs. Just as I approached, Scanlon emerged from his private office at the left beyond the desk. He was a big man, still slender and flat-bellied in middle age, and was coatless, the collar of his shirt unbuttoned and the tie pulled open. The graying hair was rumpled and he looked tired, but the hawk-beaked face and gray eyes were expressionless.

Without a word he handed me one of the big 8-by-10 photographs. I looked at it and felt my stomach start to come up into my throat. It had apparently been taken in the entrance to the

duck blind. Roberts had fallen back into the small boat in which he'd been sitting, most of the side of his head blown away above the right eyebrow and the eye itself exploded out of the socket by some freak of hydrostatic pressure. I shuddered and put it down on the table, and when I looked up Scanlon's eyes were on my face.

"Did you shoot him?" he asked.

I was still shaken, and it didn't penetrate at first. "What?"

"I said, did you shoot him?"

"Are you crazy? Of course I didn't—"

He cut me off. "Look, Warren, better men than you have shot someone accidentally, and panicked. If you did, say so now, while you can."

"I've told you already," I said hotly. "I didn't even see him. And I don't appreciate—"

"Keep your hair on." He took a cigar from his shirt pocket and bit the end off it. "I just asked you."

"I thought you said he shot himself."

"That was what we were supposed to think," Mulholland put in with a supercilious smile. He was a big, flashy ex-athlete who always walked as if he were watching himself in a mirror. I'd never liked him.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He wasn't killed with his own gun."

"How do you know?"

He shrugged, and looked at Scanlon. "You want me to tell him?"

Scanlon was lighting his cigar. He waved a hand. "Go ahead."

Mulholland pointed to the shotgun. "Both barrels were loaded, but only one had been fired. Here's the empty shell." He

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touched the empty with his finger, rolled it over so the printing was uppermost. "See? Number 6 shot, it says."

"Yes. So?"

He moved his hand to the white envelope, tilted it, and six or eight shot pellets rolled out onto the surface of the desk. "So these are some of the shot we took out of his head, and they're number 4's."