

**Illos by Clif Jackson**

The phone rang several rings before Tully was awake. He had been dreaming about when he was seven years old

and saw a fat woman in a blue flowered dress having an epileptic seizure on the street; she lay on her back and twitched and moaned like a ghost but the thing that scared him the most was the foaming at the mouth. He was still having nightmares.

He picked up the receiver without turning on the light and almost dropped it. He could still see the woman's face, the twitching. "Hello," he said. "Tully here."

"Tully, is that you?" a man's voice said.

"I just said it was," he said. He managed to look at the clock and see that it was nearly two in the morning.

"Who is this?"

"Wellington."

"Couldn't it have waited until morning?"

"Manners says it's urgent. You know how he is."

"Don't you ever sleep like a normal person?"

"Yeah, I sleep sometimes."



"Well, what is it then? I want to go back to sleep and see how my nightmare turns out."

"You're not going to like this job, I'm afraid. It's the sort of thing you hate."

"Just tell me what it is without the editorial comment."

"They want you to kill a guy."

He felt a contraction in his chest. "I'm listening," he said.

"His name is Sidney Keen. He's twenty-three years old. I'm going to send you over a couple of pictures."

"Anything else I need to know?"

"He works at the Paradise movie theatre downtown and gets off work around midnight. He sometimes goes to a bar on his way home and stays there a couple of hours. Should be easy for you to pick off."

"Who wants him dead and why?"

“You know we’re not supposed to ask.”

“When am I supposed to do this dirty deed?”

“Tomorrow night. You know the drill.”

“Okay.”

“Call me when it’s finished. And no slip-ups this time!”

Tully was still awake a couple of hours later when the runner slipped the envelope under his door. He got out of bed, turned on the light, opened the envelope and studied the pictures of the person he was supposed to kill. The first was of a young man in a tuxedo with a blonde in a black dress on his arm, all smiles, off to the country club dance. The other picture was of the same young man dressed in a baseball uniform with a big smile, standing at home plate swinging a bat; obviously just a pose because the uniform was too clean to be real and the young man’s hair too perfectly combed. He was a kid like a million others, not ugly and not pretty. No distinguishing characteristics but a good face with a strong chin and a straight nose.

Tully had killed anonymously before, but not often, and he hated doing it. Each time he had to tell himself there was nothing personal in it; he hoped somehow to convey that sentiment in the last few seconds, without words, to the person he was killing.

He stayed at home all day the next day; went out about seven o’clock in the evening and bought a newspaper. After checking the time of the last show at the Paradise theatre, he had a steak at his favorite restaurant and after that still had plenty of time to go to a hotel bar not far from the theatre and have a couple drinks to give him courage.

Ten minutes before the last show started, he walked to the Paradise and stood in line and bought a ticket. As soon as he entered the theatre lobby, he saw Sidney Keen, smiling at people as he took their tickets. There could be no mistake it was him: the same face as the one in the pictures, the same lock of dark hair falling forward on the forehead.

“Good evening, sir,” Sidney said to Tully as he tore his ticket in half.

“Show any good tonight?” Tully asked just to have something to say.

“Everybody’s crazy about it,” Sidney said. “I’ve seen it three times myself.”

“Must be good, then,” Tully said as he moved on. About half the seats were filled; a fairly large crowd for the late show. Tully took a seat on the aisle in the shadows close to the back and took off his hat and rested it on his knee.

The picture was about a group of misfits pulling off a jewelry heist. They were naïve enough, or dumb enough, to believe they were going to succeed. The main character, who was the head of the gang, was going to go straight after he made the one final haul that would allow him to get away from all the things in the world he hated, such as women who wear too much lipstick and people who mistreat animals.

When the picture was over, Tully stood up, put on his hat and filed out with the others. He stood out in front of the theatre and smoked a cigarette and waited. In a few minutes the marquee went dark and the ushers and other people who worked in the theatre came out and, saying their good nights, went their separate ways.

Sidney separated himself from the others, took a few steps and stopped to light a cigarette. Then he walked briskly off into the night, trailing a stream of smoke. Tully waited until Sidney was about fifty yards away and then began following him.

The street after midnight was deserted, so Tully could have popped Sidney in the back right then and there without being seen, gone home and gone to bed and reported the next morning that all went well. It was too easy, though—he couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. Killing an unarmed, unsuspecting man that way just seemed too dishonorable. There had to be a better way, one that would let him sleep nights and live the rest of his days in relative peace.

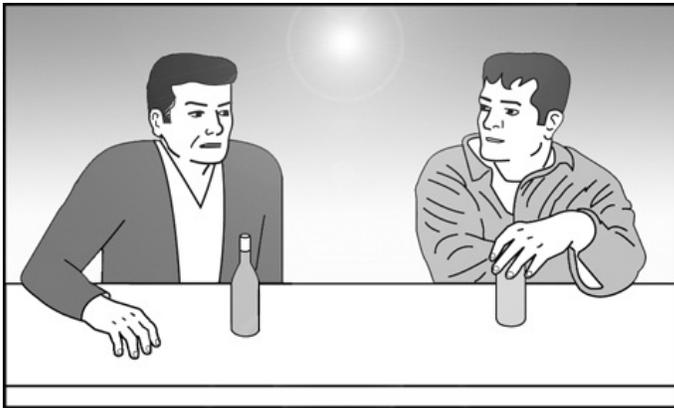
Sidney came to a small bar about three blocks from the theatre called *The Midnight Hideaway* and went inside. Tully

waited about five minutes and then went in himself.

The place was smoky and dark, lit by blue lights that barely allowed people to see where they were going. There were a few drunks sitting at the bar, some couples sitting at tables. Canned jazz music played softly in the background, punctuated by low conversation and drunken female laughter.

Sidney had taken a seat at the bar. Tully sat in the seat two over from Sidney and lit a cigarette. When the bartender asked him what he wanted, he ordered a scotch and soda.

“You were following me from the theatre, weren’t you?” Sidney said, turning to his left to face Tully.



“What’s that?” Tully said. Playing innocent was easy.

“I said you were following me from the theatre.”

“Not at all.” He downed his drink and the bartender served him again.

“Then why are you here?”

“Everybody’s got to be someplace.”

“How did you like the picture?”

“I was a little disappointed in the ending. I’m always hoping the crooks get away with it and live happily ever after.”

“They can’t do that. Have stories turn out that way, I mean. It’s against the code of morals and ethics. People who commit crimes have to be punished.”

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

“I’ve been in the motion picture business now for two years, first behind the candy counter and then as an usher.” “Sounds like you’ve got a real career going for you.” “No, I’m going to quit soon. I don’t have to work if I don’t want to. I’ve only been doing it this long to have someplace to go in the evenings to get out of the house.” “Independently wealthy?” “My father is

in the final stages of heart disease. I'm the principal beneficiary of his will."

"Why are you telling all this to a complete stranger?" "I'm not sure. I think I felt some kind of connection with you the minute I first saw you in the lobby of the theatre. You were looking at me in a way I've never been looked at before."

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not that sort." "What sort is that?" "If you don't know, I'm not going to explain it to you."

"No, it's nothing like that. It's on a higher plane than that."

"I don't know anything about *planes*. But I do you know you should be careful who you spill your guts to. The enemy is everywhere."

"That's an odd thing to say." "I'm an odd sort of a fellow, I guess."

"I have this stepmother, though. She'd like to see me dead."

"Why do you say that?"

"My father's will stipulates that I get the bulk of his estate. I think it has something to do with guilt over the way he treated my mother. There's this other woman, though, that he's has been married to for about five years, my darling stepmother. While she's mentioned in his will, she's not sitting as pretty as I am. The only way she can get the whole caboodle is if I die."

"If something happened to you, wouldn't the stepmother be the first to be suspected?"

"Well, yes, but she'd make sure there was never a shred of evidence connecting her to my death. People could suspect all they wanted to, but it would never go any farther than that. If she could arrange it, she'd make it appear that I was killed randomly by a crazed escapee from an insane asylum or in an accident. A runaway bus that just happened to run up onto the sidewalk where I was walking and flattened me would be the answer to her prayers."

"Maybe she's not as bad as you think."

"She's ten times worse. She's Satan's doxy. She'd sell her own young to the highest bidder."

“Why did your father marry her?”

“He was afraid of being alone. She was available.” A drunk fell noisily to the floor, pulling a chair over with him. Everybody turned to see what the disturbance was. Sidney took advantage of the lull in conversation to stand up in preparation for leaving.

“It was a pleasure talking to you,” he said. “I hope I didn’t bore you too much with my problems.”

“No, it’s all right,” Tully said. “I wasn’t bored.” “Could I give you a lift somewhere? I have my car.” “No, thanks. I’ll get a cab.” “You won’t be able to find a cab this late, I’m afraid.” “All right. You can drop me off downtown.” When they left the bar, Sidney told Tully to wait for him on the street corner while he went to get the car. Tully waited so long he believed Sidney wasn’t coming back, but finally he pulled up at the curb and stopped for Tully to get in.

Tully, sitting on the seat two feet away from Sidney, fingered the gun in his pocket. He thought about how easy it would be to shoot Sidney in the head and be done with it. He thought about the freshly laundered sheets on his bed and how good it would feel to get between them and shut out the world, to have his work behind him and have nothing to think about.

“Now, maybe you can tell me who you really are and why you were following me,” Sidney said.

“I already said I wasn’t following you.”

“What’s your racket?” “I don’t have a racket.” “Did *she* send you to kill me?”

“Of course not.”

“I knew you weren’t there to see the show. All we get for the late show are smooching couples and giggling adolescents. People like you have better things to do than come to a third-rate theatre late at night to see a second-rate feature. What’s your story?”

“I don’t have one.”

Sidney surprised him by pulling a gun out of his clothing and pointing it at him.

“Put the gun away,” Tully said with a little laugh. “You don’t need it.”

“I started carrying a gun when I realized my life was in danger.”

“Why don’t you go someplace far away where nobody knows you? Change your name if you have to. Then when your daddy dies you can collect your inheritance and give the evil stepmother the boot.”

“It’s not that easy. I need to stay around and keep an eye on things.”

“Why don’t you go to the police and tell them your stepmother is trying to have you killed?”

“I don’t have any proof. They would just say I’m imagining things.”

“Look, just drop me downtown and I’ll forget you threatened to shoot me.”

“You still haven’t told me who you are.”

“I’m nobody.”

“What brings a nobody like you to this part of the city this late at night?”

“I have trouble sleeping. I’m a roamer. I like to roam around and go places I’ve never been before. I stop at a bar I’ve never been to before and have a couple of drinks and then I go back home and go to sleep.”

“I don’t believe you. Why were you at the theatre tonight?”

“People usually go to a theatre to see a show.” “That’s not why you were there. I could see it on your face. When you saw me, you recognized me. Have we met someplace before?”

“No.”

“Are you a friend of my stepmother’s?”

“Of course not.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’m going to shoot you in the leg.”

“Why don’t you just stop the car right here? I’ll get out and we’ll forget we ever had this conversation.”

“And then you’ll come back tomorrow night and finish the job?”

“You’ve been seeing too many movies, sonny.” To Tully’s surprise, Sidney shot him in the thigh. Tully pulled his gun out

from where he had it hidden against his chest and pointed it at Sidney.

“You little bastard!” he said. “I’m going to blow your head off!”

“I’m driving fifty miles an hour. If you shoot me, and, if you survive the crash, don’t you think you’d have some explaining to do?”

“Just pull over and I’ll kill you properly, the way I should have done when I had the chance.”

“Now we’re getting down to cases. You *are* a hired killer, aren’t you?”

“I’m an operative. I do what I’m told.”

“And that involves killing people you don’t know?” “It beats working in a factory. I’m going to bleed to death if you don’t stop the car and let me out so I can see a doctor.”

“It’s a flesh wound. I could have shot you in the knee and you would have walked with a limp for the rest of your life.”

“What makes you so tough?”

“It’s a rotten, stinking world. You’re either tough or you’re dead.”

“You’re just a kid. That’s why I didn’t kill you as soon as you left the theatre. I felt bad about killing somebody who looks so young.”

“How much did my stepmother pay you to kill me?”

“I don’t know anything about that, or even if it was your stepmother. It could have been somebody else, maybe your boss at the theatre or a girl friend you’ve wronged. The higher-ups make the arrangements



and then give the assignments to the operatives to carry out.”

“If you don’t kill me, they’ll send somebody else?”

“There’s always somebody else.”

“Just go ahead and kill me, then, but not in the car or on the street. I’ll get a room in a cheap hotel and lie down on the bed and you can plug me in the head and leave quietly afterwards. Just make it quick.”

Tully put his gun away. “Drop me off at the hospital. My leg hurts like hell and I’m bleeding all over your upholstery.”

“And you’ll come back tomorrow night and kill me?” “I won’t but somebody will. If you want to go on living, you’ll take my advice. Don’t go back to the theatre or the bar. Go into hiding for the time being. Hire a couple of body guards. Somebody paid ten thousand dollars to have you killed. That’s all I can tell you. When that much money is involved, there’s determination to get the job done.”

“And what about you?”

“I’ll be fine after I get the bleeding stopped.”

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