

# **SKELETON IN OUR CLOSET**

William G. Bogart



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Dan Haley parked the big police sedan near an all-night drugstore just west of Broadway, climbed out, stuck his square jaw into the rain and headed toward Times Square. It was a cold rain, flecked with wet snow, and it added more to the tall homicide dick's grim thoughts.

For two-fisted Dan Haley was on the prowl. The word had already gone out from Centre Street: "Haley's looking for Joey Willet!"

The news flashed through the underworld grapevine. It was on the tongues of stoolies in poolrooms on Eighth Avenue; a fink slipped into a phone booth near the Garden and called a brother rat who lived in a back room on Sixth Avenue. "Lay off that little job on Forty-fourth. Dan Haley's lookin' for Joey Willet!"

The job referred to was the casing of a busy restaurant with the cashier's desk too near the front entrance. The stick-up would be a cinch. Nevertheless, it was being looked over for a few nights.

But now that would be forgotten. Crooks, run for cover! Rats, scurry back to your holes! Dan Haley's on the loose and he's gonna find Joey Willet!

And quiet-looking Dan Haley wasn't the kind of dick who asked questions. He got answers! He wanted Joey Willet. Hell and the riot squad wouldn't stop him because he was the kind of cop who got mad quick. When he asked you something, he didn't expect any, "Well, now, maybe I can hed out for you, copper." He would want to know where Joey Willet was.

Joey Willet was king of the boys who peddled the dope. Joey made a hundred grand a year in the Times Square district, alone. A hundred peddlers worked for him. He had connections in the right places. If you crossed up Joey Willet you were liable to find yourself very dead in the East River.

And yet Dan Haley was looking for the dope king! A nice kid who danced at the Terrace had died a few nights ago. They said one of Joey's sellers had started the kid on the snow. But through a mix-up in one of the little paper wafers of drug that passed hands in shadowy doorways off Times Square, the girl had bought a packet meant for a guy who had been on the stuff for ten years. She got enough dope to kill a horse!

And so she had died, and in dying, she had breathed out the name of the rat who had sold her the stuff—Benny Martin.

Benny, headquarters knew, worked for Joey Willet. Benny had been dragged down to Centre Street a dozen times. But they had never been able to catch him with the stuff actually in his possession.

But the catch was, Dan Haley had been there when that pretty kid died. He had been strolling right along Broadway when someone rushed out of the Terrace for an ambulance. And thus he had hurried to the dressing room upstairs. He had seen the kid gasping her last, and he had decided that this was a certain kind of murder!

To hell with Joey Willet and the myth that was built around him. The only ones, in the past, who had ever been caught in periodic drug-selling raids had been the small fry. The guys on the street who gave you the stuff in the rear seat of a cab, or the ones who left it in one of those dime lockers in the subway and then mailed you the key.

One or two had cracked up under grilling by police. Sure, Joey Willet was the big shot behind the racket. But where was Willet? Hell, brother, no one ever meets the boss.

Well, Dan Haley had made up his mind that he was going to meet him. He was going to meet him if he had to beat up every damn stool pigeon from Brooklyn to the Bronx.

Dan Haley swung into Broadway, swung north past the Automat and Childs and the place where they made doughnuts in the window. Heads turned. Guys spoke swiftly out of the corners of their mouths. Guys who hung out there every night: gamblers and bookies and wise birds who were in the know.

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"Here comes Haley. Better duck! They say he's looking for Joey Willet!"

A sandwich man at Forty–eighth Street suddenly got cramps and had to hurry into the corner beanery and tell the boss he was calling it a night. He disappeared like rain running down a sewer.

A cab driver across the street threw down his flag and decided he would pay what was on the meter himself. He got away from there and sent his heap rattling across town. He had been questioned by Dan Haley once in the past.

But JoJo Smith didn't see the tall dick coming, in time. JoJo was eating an apple at the entrance to a dark alleyway in the middle of the block.

JoJo, it was said, handled a little of the dope, too. An ex–pug, some thought he was a little slap–happy. but he could still take care of himself in a free–for–all.

However, JoJo went backward into the alley, whirled, and headed into its shadowy gloom the moment he spotted Dan Haley. But he was too late.

Lanky Dan Haley came into the alley, too. The guy, JoJo thought, must have eyes like a lynx, for in the next instant his shoulder was grabbed and he was flung around.

Dan Haley, standing on solidly planted feet, said quietly: "Where's Willet? Where can I find that guy?"

JoJo Smith was still clinging to his apple. Some light filtered in from Broadway. He took a bite from the apple, stared sort of dumbly at trim–looking Dan Haley and muttered, "Huh?"

Crack!

Dan Haley's smashing fist took part of the apple with it into JoJo's mouth. The thick–necked, burly fellow gagged, weaved around and finally managed to get his breath again.

"Hell, copper," he gasped, "now about this Joey Willet—"

Dan Haley, his gray eyes like steel, said very precisely, "I have asked you about Joey Willet. I am asking you a very simple question. I want to know—where is Joey Willet?"

Fear leaped around in JoJo's eyes as fast as the fish in the big chewing–gum sign on Times Square. For JoJo understood something about Dan Haley when he talked in that flat, precise way, pronouncing every word carefully. It was a thing the grim–jawed dick always did when in a bad mood.

"Honest!" JoJo wailed. "I ain't got an idea, Haley! I'd like to help you out, but you see—"

Dan Haley put JoJo up against a wall of the brick–lined alleyway. He put a fist into the ex–pug's face. He crossed a right to the jaw.

JoJo whimpered and got his hands up finally and threw a few, himself. JoJo Smith remembered a few of the tricks. He'd earned ten dollars a day beating up guys going to work on the ship piers when a strike had been called.

He used his knees and his feet. He used the heavy gold ring on his right hand. Then he found himself flat on the ground.

Dan Haley picked him up. He stood him against the rough brick wall once again. He said evenly, "I am asking you very politely, punk—where is Joey Willet?"

"Look!" gasped JoJo. "I told you—"

JoJo Smith, as he lay down after the furious blow, remembered that Dan Haley's bleak gray eyes only blinked once, and that was because of the rain dribbling over them.

Dan Haley strode out of the alley. He shrugged his compact shoulders beneath his damp coat. He continued on to Fiftieth Street, crossed over, then started downtown again. His sharp gaze missed no one. It was said that Dan Haley knew every crook on the rialto. The dick had been with the Broadway squad before being promoted to homicide.

He knew the ones who were yellow, and the ones who would slip a knife in your back for fifty bucks, and others who would rat on their own brothers so you wouldn't shut down on their measly little numbers racket.

But Dan Haley was only interested in murder. A young girl had died. A kid six months out of Bennington, Vermont, and with no more sense than to try a shot of snow for a thrill.

And this wasn't the first case. There had been other deaths, and a few people had been rubbed out because they had crossed up Joey Willet. But Joey Willet merely laughed at the law and went right ahead with his dealing in destruction. You only heard the rumors about this mythical leader of crime, and you never caught up with him. At least, so far, the law had not.

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And so Dan Haley sought out only those he knew were suspected of being in the know; those who had been rounded up before, only to escape the rap through smart attorneys handsomely paid by someone higher up.

Joey Willet!

At the corner ahead, Dan saw the group of three go into the quick huddle. One man glanced his way, lights of a large overhead sign making his features look like pasty dough in the cold rain. The other two tried to cover his movements as he started a sneak toward a side street.

Dan Haley said, moving up fast, "Tony!"

Tony swung back, knowing that he had been seen. He gave a forced, crooked grin and said nasally: "Hiya, copper. Pretty wet out, ain't it?"

The other two—larger men, with fists shoved deep in their topcoat pockets—merely watched without saying a word.

"Save the talk," said Dan Haley quietly. "I am going to ask you a question, Tony. I would like you to give me a straightforward answer. I want to know—where is Joey Willet?"

Tony took a step backward toward his two burly friends. He spread his hands in what was supposed to be a helpless gesture.

"Gee, Mr. Haley," he said like a fawning pup, "I don't get y'u." He kept grinning in a sickly way. "I heard y'u was looking for some guy by that name, but—"

The homicide dick did not hit Tony with everything he had. But perhaps Dan Haley recalled that this slinking rat had been hauled into court, just last month, on a charge of kicking his wife downstairs. Some crook friend had bailed him out. Anyway, Dan Haley didn't exactly pull his punch!

Tony went to sleep even before he landed back in his partner's arms.

The two big thugs snarled something that was not quite audible. One quickly lowered the limp Tony to the sidewalk. Both moved in on Dan Haley.

One snapped, "Say, copper, y'u can't do that to our pal. Y'u cant get away with—"

Dan Haley stood very straight. Bits of wet snow stood out on his eyelashes. He looked steadily at the one who had spoken and said: "Perhaps you are the one who is going to tell me where I could possibly locate a skunk named Joey Willet?"

One of the threatening two rapped out: "Nuts, copper!"

There was just the most imperceptible shrug of Dan Haley's solid shoulders. Then the sarcastic one's face was in front of the detective's fist in a manner that was very fast and surprising.

At least, it must have been surprising, because the fellow's glazed eyes stared with surprise as he landed in the sidewalk trash basket.

Dan Haley swung to the other big man. The fellow, however, showed no signs of handing out free information concerning one Joey Willet. He was letting go with a haymaker!

He missed. Rather, Dan Haley's head didn't seem to be where he had thought it was. And so the big fellow lost his balance, slipped on the wet sidewalk and went to his knees.

Dan Haley gave him a hefty kick in the seat of his pants and thus helped to further flatten him out on the dirty sidewalk. He whirled back to face two other men who had come running from a doorway.

The two came out of a penny arcade behind the fast-moving detective. They had "hood" written all over them. One of the two, Dan Haley recalled, had been up on a charge of printing labels for Hoboken whiskey—the kind made in a cellar.

Dan Haley started to say, "Perhaps you two individuals might be able to tell me—"

And then he shook his head almost sadly. "No," he murmured, as though to himself, "I'm afraid not." He got his hands up and his head behind them.

When the patrol wagon arrived ten minutes later, there were a whole lot of people gawking and standing around, watching the battle. Some more friends of Tony had come out of the arcade. One was still on his feet and sticking it out, though anyone could tell he didn't have a chance. A patrolman a block away, aroused by the commotion, had put through the call for the wagon.

Dan Haley piled his victims in the police car, looked at the uniformed man and said: "Send them to headquarters. Don't let any damned mouthpiece get to them. I am afraid I will need a little more privacy in which to talk to them."

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The patrolman stared. "But on what charge, sir—"

Dan Haley looked around. His eyes touched the wet pavement, gleaming in the light of countless bright signs. "Spitting on the sidewalk," he directed, and moved on.

He continued down Broadway to Times Square again. He saw not one familiar face; that is, the kind of familiar face for which he was looking. Stool pigeons had dropped from sight. Crooks, small fry and even pitch men selling ten-cent gadgets had disappeared like wraiths.

Dan Haley passed the big dime store on the Seventh Avenue side of the street, the one that was open until midnight. It was still crowded with people buying stuff for Christmas time.

The detective crossed over to Broadway, gave one more hopeful look up and down, then headed around the corner where the police car was parked. He had another neighborhood in mind.

Sally was sitting behind the wheel of the heavy car.

Sally was almost as tall as Dan Haley, himself, and she had soft red hair and the kind of eyes that make you forget about guys like Joey Willet.

Dan ought to know, for Sally was his wife.

He opened the front door, almost sat down on the pile of packages placed on the seat, paused and said: "Now look, chicken, it's bad enough to make use of the city's property like this, but why do you have to turn on the short-wave radio and let a whole lot of people know this is a headquarters car? Besides—"

Sally looked hurt, pushed the packages into a heap between them and gave him room to sit down.

"Dan, I was shopping for some things we'll need for the first, over there at the dime store. I figured you might be around; so I looked for the car—"

The short-wave loud-speaker was saying:

"A disturbance at Fourteenth and Seventh. Man pushed through window. Cars—"

Dan Haley flicked off the speaker. The car he was using was a plain black, heavy sedan. Ordinarily, strangers would not know the machine as a police car. But with the police short-wave radio switched on, you might as well have stuck a flag on the radiator.

Sally continued: "Hon, what I was saying—"

Suddenly, something penetrated Dan Haley's thoughts. A remark Sally had made. His eyes clouded and he asked:

"What was this about shopping for the first?"

His pretty wife indicated the packages. "You know—balls of string and stuff. And wrapping paper." Sally smiled. "Remember?"

Dan groaned. "I thought it was next month!"

Sally shook her head very slowly. "No—o, darling, this month!"

Dan was abruptly speaking in that precise way of his. "Now you listen to me, pet. We have discussed this thing at various times. I have always given in to you. But this business has become a skeleton in the closet. It is—"

Dan stopped shortly, stared through the wet windshield of the car and hunched his shoulders forward slightly. Abruptly he was sliding out of the seat, heading toward the sidewalk. "I'll be right back," he snapped.

Sally stared. But she could not have seen the figure that Dan's keen eyes had spotted. The figure of the nattily dressed man ducking into a side entrance to the large, all-night drugstore on the corner.

It had been Jeeper Jones, and Jeeper, Dan had heard, knew a whole lot about Joey Willet, drug king.

Dan Haley went through the side entrance, continued through the busy drugstore and past the long luncheonette counter. His quarry, apparently had done the same—to continue out the front.

The cashier said, worriedly: "Check, please!" But Dan Haley kept right on going. Next door to the drugstore, a movie house was just letting out. Hundreds of people surged all over the wet sidewalk.

Dan Haley pushed through the mob, then gave up in disgust. His man could be three blocks away, by now. He turned around and went back to where he had left Sally.

But Sally, his wife, was gone.

And so was the headquarters car.

But a little street urchin kept watching Dan Haley from the doorway of the darkened playhouse. The kid had some sodden newspapers tucked beneath his thin little arm, and after a moment he stepped out to the sidewalk and



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asked:

"Mister, you lookin' for a big car that was here?"

Dan Haley, tense, gripped the lad's arm and said quickly: "Yes! Did you see it?"

The boy held out the small piece of folded paper in his hand. "They said you might be lookin' for the car. They told me to give you this. They gave me two-bits for watchin' for you!"

Suddenly worried, Dan prodded: "They? Who?"

"The two fellers who were in the car with the girl. I guess they were cops, because I heard the police radio, and I'll bet you that the girl was pinched by them!"

Dan Haley was trembling. He pulled a dollar from his pocket, pressed it into the lad's hand, and asked: "She was sitting with them?"

"Yeah!" the boy said. "Between them, and she looked awful scared. That's why I think she got pinched by—"

His fingers quivering a little, Dan Haley opened and read the scribbled note. It read: You asked for it, wise guy. So now you meet the big boy. We'll be right at your apartment. You come alone, and be ready to talk turkey. You're gonna lay off this case—or the little woman dies! Guess you know what we mean!

There was no signature.

Dan Haley's eyes were frosty gray. His heart squeezed up inside his chest. "Guess you know what we mean!" How well he knew!

In the past, when it had often looked like this mythical Joey Willet was to be finally seized, everything had gone haywire. There had been cops, witnesses who had suddenly forgotten certain pertinent details. They weren't sure about crooks they had picked up on suspicion, or about information leading to Joey Willet.

And now Dan Haley understood. Pressure had been put on those people trying to do their duty. Perhaps even they had been put in spots like this one. They couldn't talk! Perhaps they had been forced to take a bribe!

These things whipped through Dan Haley's brain in a fleeting instant. A precious fleeting instant.

Then he whirled on the youngster who was still standing in the rain beside him. "You saw those two men, kid? You know them?"

The lad shook his head. "They were big guys with their collars up—on account of the rain, I guess."

Dan quickly patted the boy's thin shoulders, "All right, kid," he finished. "Now scram along home. You keep off the streets the rest of tonight. Hear?"

The kid nodded, gripping the dollar bill in his small fist. He scurried off down the dark side street.

And lanky Dan Haley leaped toward the corner drugstore. He had already made a quick estimate of passing moments. It had been perhaps three, four minutes since he had left his wife. They could not have gone far with the police sedan!

Dan had a nickel out even before he was in the phone booth. He got a fast call through to headquarters, asked for the dispatcher in the control room.

Dan Haley's palms were wet with perspiration by the time he was connected. He asked quickly: "Mike?"

The clear, level voice of the radio dispatcher at headquarters answered. Dan knew Mike well. Mike was a right guy.

Dan Haley went on: "Listen, Mike, my wife has just been snatched. You've got to—"

The dispatcher cut in with a whistle of dismay. "I'll put it right on the air. I'll get every car in town—"

"No!" Dan Haley ripped out. He breathed a prayer. "Not that, Mike. They've got me in a spot. They've got a car with a short-wave radio in it, and they'll hear! Now you do this—"

"Yeah?" Mike asked tensely.

Dan talked swiftly. He could almost feel the dispatcher's reaction over the wire. Mike had met Sally; he or any man in the department would have carried out the request.

Two minutes later the words were on the air. Every police car in New York picked them up. And a lot of prowl-car cops must have thought a car dispatcher had gone screwy.

The message they heard was: "Attention, all cars! It is 0. K. about the skeleton in the closet. We'll make the change immediately, understand? Immediately! This goes especially for Red. Remember, Red, the change takes place immediately—"

Dan Haley, as those words went out and covered every suburb of New York, was in the cab that raced uptown. He had flagged down the cabbie the instant he had raced outside the drugstore, and the fellow had stared

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a moment in terror as the grim-jawed cop leaped into his hack, He knew Dan Haley.

"Listen, Mr. Haley," the driver pleaded, "I got a wife and kids. Me, I ain't mixed up with that Willet guy I heard you're lookin' for. I don't know a thing—"

"O. K.!" Dan Haley rapped. "Now you just drive this crate. You just drive like all hell was after you. You do that and you will not have any trouble with me."

The hackie drove uptown, as Dan Haley directed. He about broke even on tearing through both red and green lights. At Ninety-sixth Street, they cut over to the Henry Hudson Parkway. Here, there were three wide lanes of smooth cement, with few cars out because of the cold rain.

Dan Haley barked: "Shove over!" and took the wheel. He got in the center lane and kept his foot against the floor boards.

The driver stared, sort of white. "Gosh! Mr. Haley, we might skid!"

"We might," said the grim detective, and cursed the car because it would only do seventy.

A few minutes later they ripped past a startled attendant at the toll bridge at Spuyten Duyvil. Two minutes after this, Dan Haley left the parkway, cut along a street that bordered new apartment buildings in Fieldstone. He skirted the campus of Manhattan College, ran the cab up a dark side street. He jumped out of the car, ordered: "You wait right here in the dark. After a while, if you hear a racket, call the cops!"

Back at the corner, there was a small park facing this side street. Dan Haley raced through the deserted park. On the far side of it was the big group of apartment buildings that were just about a year old.

Dan held his breath as he went into one entrance to the group. He had gambled on time. If the other car had been faster—

But that was the chance he had to take.

Stairways in the now quiet building led off at various points of the large, deserted lobby. They angled upward and to hallways that led through the spreading buildings.

Dan Haley got his keys from his pocket, glanced at them once, then reached 2-A. He went into the apartment with his .38 held ready in his right fist.

Nothing happened. He let out his breath with relief. Disregarding the light switch, he moved across the shadowy, small foyer, then down two steps that led to the long, sunken living room.

On one side of the big room was a big fireplace and mantel. The fireplace was built so that it protruded a good two or three feet from the wall. On either side were spaces for book racks. Dan Haley slid into one of the spaces.

He waited. Every movement he made seemed to sound throughout the long, wide room.

About five minutes later he heard a key turn in the door, and then he caught the scuffle of quietly moving feet. Someone spoke in a hushed, subdued voice. Another man answered. They were in the foyer, inner hallway, and next their steps approached the living room.

"All right," a sharp voice said in the darkness. "Turn on the lights. We got six guys planted around the park outside. If Haley doesn't come alone, we'll get the tip-off in plenty of time."

Lights came on with white brilliance from a cluster overhead.

Someone exclaimed: "Hell, boss! This is an empty flat!"

Dan Haley came out from behind the fireplace and said icily, "Not quite empty, punks!"

There were four men, two of them holding pretty Sally. In their surprise, the two gripping the arms of Dan Haley's wife let go and reached for shoulder holsters. The other two already had their gats out.

Sally whipped clear of her captors, flung herself beyond an ell that formed part of the slightly raised balcony overlooking the sunken living room.

Guns roared, lead smashed, and two crooks went down before the furious trigger speed of Dan Haley. Plaster showered around the cool gray-eyed dick's head as the third man fired wildly, still confused by the sudden developments.

The fourth man—a short, wiry-looking dark man in a camel's-hair coat—got his gun leveled on Dan Haley at the instant the dick spun to cover him. Both held a deadly aim.

But the wiry man paled. He held his fire, suddenly realizing that he was stalemated.

A cold smile touched Dan Haley's lean features. He said, "And now, punk, we will learn about Joey Willet. Drop that gat!"

Perhaps the deadliness in the detective's steel-gray eyes caused the man to drop the gun from his right hand.

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"And now—talk!" Dan Haley repeated.

The wiry man shrugged. "O. K., shamus." He made a helpless gesture with his arms, then rapped suddenly, "I'm Joey Willet!"

The small derringer had dropped from his coat sleeve into his left fist. Dan Haley's gun arm had relaxed, as the man had seen.

The derringer made a solid, flat sound. Dan Haley's arm, relaxed momentarily, was a split second later in getting the .38 in line again. Gun sound smashed around the room.

But Dan Haley did not go down. Fifteen feet from the wiry man, he watched calmly as the other staggered and fell back against the wall. The wiry man was clutching his stomach,

Dan Haley was only holding onto his left arm, where the slug had creased it. He said, coolly: "Fella, those derringer's are only good at very close range!"

He whipped forward, picked up the small, deadly-looking weapon. His gaze was thoughtful as he spoke. "Two months ago we found a guy dead from one of these things—a guy that used to sell dope. I have a hunch ballistics will be able to tie up the slug we got from that poor devil's body with this rod!"

But Joey Willet didn't feel like arguing the point. He merely lay groaning.

Dan Haley whirled to his wife.

Her sweet face a strained white, lovely blue eyes wide with horror, Sally came out of the protecting ell. She gasped, "Dan! Dan, I'm afraid I'm going to be a sissy!" She swayed weakly into his arms.

And just then hell broke loose outside the apartment building in the small park. There was gun sound and shouting and racket. And after a while cops piled into the apartment where Dan Haley was holding his wife. They were followed by the cab driver Dan had left waiting on the side street.

"Gee, Mr. Haley," the driver said, "I didn't wait like you said. I drove right off after those cops you mentioned!"

Two of the uniformed men were from a prowler car. They had heard the cockeyed message coming over the air. One asked:

"Say, Dan, would a screwball report we heard a little while ago have anything to do with—"

It was pretty Sally who spoke up. She was still trembling, but being held by Dan was something to make her fearless again. She said: "You mean that stuff about skeleton in the closet?"

The copper nodded. "Yeah! What the devil—"

Sally gave her husband a significant smile. She explained, "The first of each year, when our lease runs out, I get a yen to move. I like new apartments. I—"

Dan cut in with: "We live in this building, the floor just above." He indicated the big room they were in. "But now she wants a fireplace and a sunken living room."

Dan Haley grinned. "That was the skeleton in our closet. Moving day! Every year, the first of the year, we moved. We've had flats without kitchens and flats with kitchenettes. We've been classy and had apartments with two baths. We've had—"

Sally said, "I gave him the extra key to this apartment this morning. He was supposed to get some curtain rods." She smiled at Dan. "I'll bet you forgot."

He nodded. For the benefit of the others, Sally explained further. "Those terrible men were going to hold me in my apartment, until Dan came home and they forced him into some sort of agreement. We were in the police sedan, and that broadcast came through about skeleton in the closet and about it being O. K. to make an immediate change. Well, I knew Dan wanted me to tell those men this was our apartment, and lead them here because he knew there would be some shooting and Dan, Jr.—upstairs in bed—might be hurt."

Sally stared around at the fallen plaster, at the huge chips that were out of the fireplace. She murmured doubtfully, "Hon, I'm afraid it won't do. I don't think we'd better move."

Dan Haley no longer looked like the tough dick he was. A grin spread over his face. He didn't even notice those who were busy taking care of wounded and dead rats.

"Red, that's the nicest thing you've said in years."

Sally started to say, "Don't call me Red. You know how I despise that name—" And then she caught herself, gave a little gasp and clutched at her lean husband's shoulders.

"Sorry," she murmured. "If you hadn't used the name in the police dispatch, I might now be—"

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Dan Haley took her arm. He said quietly, "Red, I think we should get the hell out of here. It appears that we are having an audience."