

## THE BEST LAID PLANS

by Holly West

*June 1948*

Bev Marshall waits anxiously behind the wheel of the Buick, watching for the rest of the crew to emerge from the house. It seems they've been gone at least an hour, but her watch shows it's only 10:45 p.m. Less than ten minutes since they went in. The boys work fast, but not that fast.

There are four of them in the crew. Joe Scullion is their boss and Bev's boyfriend. Alex McGovern is the brawn, and Sean Cregan is a master lock picker. Bev's their driver. They earn their living burgling wealthy neighborhoods all over the Eastern Seaboard, coming home to Philly with thousands in cash and valuables. Five years working together and not a single arrest, not that the coppers haven't tried.

It's been a good run, but after tonight, Bev will be done with all of them.

She thinks she sees movement out of the corner of her eye and snaps her head toward it. Is it them? She squints into the darkness, her hand resting lightly on the key in the ignition. Everything is still and she concedes it must've been her imagination. Wrecked by nerves, she quashes the urge to chew a fingernail and slips her hand into her purse in search of cigarettes. Her fingers brush the thick envelope containing every cent she has—nearly five thousand dollars. Along with whatever money she's able to get for tonight's haul, it's enough to keep her going for a year, maybe more if she lives modestly.

She lights a cigarette and pulls the smoke deeply into her lungs, thinking about Richie O'Neill. She'll miss him when this is done. He runs a hockshop on Vine Street and fences most

of the loot they steal. Over the years, he's become her trusted friend, so when he let it slip recently that Joe had his eye out for a new driver, she believed him. Turns out Joe had fallen hard for some dame he'd met in Atlantic City and he wants to marry her, maybe have some kids.

Richie's words cut her deeply. She'd been waiting for Joe to pop the question nearly ten years and he always put her off, saying their love didn't need the government's stamp of approval.

"Maybe this is a sign from God," Richie said, trying to console her. "Maybe he's telling you it's time to give up this life and find a nice guy to settle down with."

Bev has to admit Richie's a nice guy. He's a criminal, sure, but he's a good, solid man all the same. A heart condition spared him from the war and, never married, he lives at home with his ailing mother and wheelchair-bound sister.

Bev knows he has a thing for her and if things were different—if *she* were different—maybe she'd give him a chance. But she stopped believing in God the day they wheeled her mother's dead body out of the house when she was fifteen. Beyond that, she loves Joe Scullion. Can't help herself, never could. He's well-groomed, six-foot-three, smart as a whip, and handsome like a movie star. Richie, bless his soul, is none of these things.

But that was before the punch. She glimpses the red mark on her cheek in the rear-view mirror, left over from the shiner Joe gave her two weeks ago after a copper pulled her over for speeding. His diamond pinkie ring broke the skin and it's slow to heal. Richie doesn't know about the punch—she told him she walked into a door and dumb lug that he is, he believed her.

She grew up watching men knock her mother around. The physical damage was bad enough—endless cuts, scrapes, and bruises. Once, a broken arm. The emotional damage was even worse. Her mother built the walls slowly, brick by brick, solid and impenetrable, until there was nothing left of her but empty bottles of booze and a vacant stare.

Bev won't let any man get away with hitting her. She'd put up a fight to keep Joe if it hadn't been for that punch. Instead, she began to plan her revenge.

She returns her attention to her surroundings. This weekend, Joe chose a hoity-toity neighborhood in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The homes here are opulent, each seemingly larger than the next, and according to the real estate section of the local paper, not one is worth less than a hundred grand. On Saturday nights, neighborhoods like this are as quiet as cemeteries. Most of the residents are out, off to parties at exclusive country clubs or attending \$100-a-plate philanthropic dinners at swanky downtown hotels. They have no idea they're simultaneously

making charitable contributions to Joe Scullion and his crew.

The minutes tick by and she lights another cigarette. It makes her stomach cramp and her bowels clench, but she smokes it down anyway. What's taking so long? It's nearing eleven-thirty when Alex, followed by Joe and Sean, emerge from the shadows, their gaits made awkward by the heavy canvas duffels they carry. She crushes the cigarette out, starts the car, and steadies her foot over the gas pedal. Her timing must be perfect.

Alex opens the trunk and the car's rear drops a little when he loads the first bag, then the second. Joe and Sean catch up and set their bags next to him, five in all. Joe comes around to the front and Bev fights to keep her breathing even as he tries the passenger side door. He raps on the window with his knuckle after he finds it locked.

*Not yet. Wait for Alex to finish loading the bags.*

"Open up," Joe says, his voice muffled by the glass.

She reaches over as though to lift the lock. A moment later, the trunk slams shut. It's her cue. She rights herself behind the wheel, shifts into drive, and steps on the gas. The front tire scrapes the curb as the car lunges forward and she speeds away.

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The two-day trip to Miami is uneventful, but as Bev turns the corner onto Ocean Drive, she has a feeling that's about to change. The air here is energized, humming. Palms line the street, swaying in the balmy breeze. Sunlight reflects off every surface. Latin music hangs in the air and she can already feel an icy cold *Cuba Libre* on her lips.

It was Richie who'd sent her south, though he wasn't happy when she called to tell him she'd stranded the crew in North Carolina and made off with the goods. "Damn it, Bev, I told you Joe wasn't worth it. Why'd you do it?"

"You know why, Rich. I couldn't let the cheating bastard get away with it. Now, you gonna help me or what?"

He sighed. "Where are you?"

"At a pay phone in Charlotte."

"Any idea where Joe might go?"

"How should I know?" She was getting impatient. "Listen, Rich, I don't have time for this. I gotta get the hell out of this state."

He was quiet for a moment, then said, "Give me your number. Stay put and I'll call you back in ten minutes."

It took more than fifteen minutes, but he finally got back to her with the number of a fence named Roger in Miami. “Thanks a lot, Rich,” she said, after she wrote the information on the inside flap of a match book. “I owe ya one.”

“You take care of yourself, Bev.”

She promised she would.

Now, in the heart of Miami’s famous South Beach, beautiful hotels rise majestically, cloaked in glitz and glamour like Hollywood starlets. She passes the National Hotel and recalls reading in a gossip magazine that Lana Turner and her millionaire boyfriend stayed there recently. But her destination is the Shalimar Motel, a place recommended by Richie, which turns out to be a long row of white cottages, strung together with common walls. At a distance, it almost passes for charming, but Bev has seen too many of these cheap roadside accommodations to be fooled. The place is a dump.

She pulls into the lot, noting the lone Ford sedan parked at the opposite end. She cuts the engine and gets out. The sun has yet to set and the air is warm and heavy, but not oppressively so. She pauses to straighten the seam of her stocking then checks her wristwatch. 7:36 p.m. Looking up, she sees a man standing at the window of room sixteen, a lewd grin on his face.

Ignoring him, she gets her purse from the passenger seat and heads for the motel’s office. The Lysol-scented room is paneled top-to-bottom in honey-colored pinewood and the windows are festooned in tropical-themed fabric. A rack behind the desk displays hooks for sixteen keys, each identified by a numbered plastic ring. Number sixteen is missing.

Bev taps the bell and waits. A few moments pass, and she hits the bell again, harder this time. “Be right there,” a female voice calls from an adjacent room in back.

The woman who enters is tall and slim, probably younger than Bev by a few years. She wears no makeup and she’s pretty in an innocent way that suggests she’s never been further than ten miles from home. “Sorry about that,” she says. “I was tending to my boy. I’m Lena, welcome to the Shalimar.” She scrutinizes Bev’s face. “Don’t mind me saying, but that looks mighty painful.”

Bev touches her cheek. She thought the bruise had sufficiently healed so that no one would notice, especially after she’d applied a thick layer of pancake. “It’s fine,” she says. “I’d like a room for the night.”

Lena reaches under the desk and pulls out a ledger. She opens it to the latest page, turns it around, and pushes it toward Bev. “Your name and address here, please.”

“Just the town okay?”

“It’ll do.”

Bev removes the pen from the holder affixed to the desk and writes, *Theresa Simmons, Richmond, Virginia.*

Lena takes the book back and glances at the entry. “That’ll be \$3, Miss Simmons.”

Bev removes a five-dollar bill from her purse and hands it over. As Lena makes a notation in the ledger, Bev notices she isn’t wearing a wedding ring, in spite of mentioning her son earlier. Perhaps she isn’t so innocent after all. “You own this place?” she asks, suddenly curious.

“I inherited it from my parents a few years ago.”

“All by yourself? Seems like a big job.”

She shrugs. “Been doing it since I was a teenager. And I’ve got my boy to help. He’s seven. Anyway, we don’t get as much traffic as we used to.” She turns toward the rack of numbers and selects one. “Room ten okay? You’ll have some privacy there.”

“Yes.”

Lena gives her the key. “I’ll call my boy to help you with your bags.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ve just got an overnight case.”

“All right, then. You let me know if you need anything.”

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Bev backs the Buick into the spot in front of room ten. The room key sticks in the lock when she tries to turn it, but a little jiggling is all it needs. The door swings open and she takes a quick survey; the room looks like the office, only the fabric curtains are red and green plaid to match the bed’s coverlet. Christmas in June. She uses the dingy bathroom, unceremoniously breaking the paper strip across the toilet that reads, “Disinfected for your comfort.”

She sits on the bed and roots through her purse, searching for the matchbook. She’d already called Roger, the fence, when she stopped in Georgia the previous night, to check if he was square and to give him some advanced notice. Satisfied he was on the up-and-up, she promised she’d contact him as soon as she arrived in Florida.

A woman’s raspy voice answers and Bev hears the phone clunk when she drops it to go get Roger. There are footsteps, then, “Hello?”

“It’s Bev. I’m in Miami, at the Shalimar Motel. Ready to make a deal?”

“Like I said, I can’t make any promises until we see what you’ve got. Which room are

you in?”

“Ten.”

“We’ll be there by midnight.”

She waits until well after dark before going back out to open the car’s trunk. By this time, room sixteen’s curtains are closed and the Ford is gone. She takes one more look around to make sure no one is watching then heaves the first bag out with an unladylike grunt. It bangs against the rim of the trunk and slips out of her hands onto the ground. *Damn it.* She’s sure something inside has broken. She drags it into the room, hoping there aren’t too many casualties.

She’s struggling with the last bag when a car turns into the parking lot, its headlights momentarily blinding her. It’s the Ford. There’s no time to close the trunk before a short, puffy man gets out and ambles over. He flashes the same disgusting grin as before and says, “Hey darlin’, let me help you with that.”

Bev knows his type—traveling salesman, always on the lookout for an opportunity to play around. Not a wolf so much as a possum. Before they met Alex and Sean, she and Joe made a good living running cons on these guys. She’d accept an invitation to their rooms, coyly implying they were about to get lucky. Joe stood by, pounding on the door just as their pants fell to their pasty white knees, holding them at gunpoint while she cleared the room of cash and valuables. How many suckers had they sent home with “lost” wedding rings? Too many to count.

“I can manage it myself, thank you,” Bev says.

“Aw no, honey, you’ll hurt yourself.”

He takes hold of the bag’s straps, staggering when he realizes its full weight. “What do you have in here, rocks?”

Bev moves to block the door to her room. “Thanks for your help. You can leave it right here.”

“Nonsense, sweetheart. Step aside so I can bring it in.”

“That’s quite all right, Mr.—”

He sets the bag down and removes his hat. “Harlan Jennings. You got any plans tonight, darlin’? How ‘bout you let me take you out for a little supper?”

“I appreciate your offer, Mr. Jennings, but I’m afraid I can’t join you.”

Jennings grabs her forearm. “Come on now, little lady, you can spare a quick half hour. I did you a favor, remember?”

“You need any assistance there, Miss Simmons?” It’s Lena, calling out to them from the office doorway. The light above the door illuminates a shotgun in her hands.

Jennings releases Bev’s arm. “No trouble here, I assure you,” he says. “I’m just helping this little lady.”

“Doesn’t look like she wants your help,” Lena says.

Jennings mumbles something about no good deed going unpunished before walking toward his room. Lena and Bev exchange understanding smiles before Lena goes back into the office.

Bev lugs the bag into her room and locks the door behind her. Five canvas duffels lie on the crunchy brown carpet and she’s almost afraid to look inside them. But whatever these bags contain, they represent her future and it’s time to face it. She unzips the first one.

There’s the usual assortment of treasures: sterling silver flatware sets, furs, tangles of expensive jewelry, coin collections, gold-plated candlesticks, fine china, crystal. A few pieces are chipped or broken but most are intact. She lays the items on the floor, separating them into piles. Bag two contains a sterling desk set, a humidor filled with expensive cigars, three watches—one of them encrusted with diamonds. Items from a man’s study.

She opens the third bag, putting her hand in slowly in case of broken glass. She touches fur—not the soft pelt of a mink or fox, but something wiry. She screams and pulls her hand out, her heart pumping hard enough to pop out of her chest. She waits a beat, certain whatever it is will scurry out, but nothing happens. She pulls out a stiff gray raccoon, its menacing glass eyes shining, claws permanently stiff, clutching at nothing. *Damn that Sean Cregan.* He has a fascination with taxidermy and probably stole this monstrosity to display as a trophy.

There’s a knock on the door and Bev freezes. “Miss Simmons? It’s Lena.”

She’s relieved it isn’t Mr. Jennings, but she isn’t eager to open the door for Lena, either. *Doesn’t anyone around here have anything better to do than stick their noses in other people’s business?*

As it happens, Bev’s business is strewn across the floor. She opens the door, careful to block the view into the room with her body. “Good evening, Lena.”

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right, Miss Simmons.”

“I’m fine, really. But thank you for intervening before.” She shakes her head. “Men. Sometimes they won’t take no for an answer.”

Lena hesitates. “I don’t want to make assumptions, but this here is a respectable

establishment. I can't allow any funny business, you understand?"

"Of course. You've got nothing to worry about from me."

Lena gave an awkward nod. "Well. Good night then."

"Good night."

It bothers her, knowing Lena's watching. She wonders if she should call Roger back and arrange to meet somewhere else. But where? She's already got everything unloaded and she'll face the same challenges no matter where they meet. At least she knows what she's dealing with here.

There's nothing else unusual in the bags—thank God, her nerves have suffered enough—and when it's all done, she appraises the take. She figures the haul is worth at least two grand. They'd had better nights, but she doesn't care because this time she doesn't have to share it.

She flushes with excitement. A person can last a long time on seven thousand dollars, especially in someplace cheap, like Mexico. She pictures a little *hacienda* on the beach, maybe a handsome *caballero* by her side. Yes, Mexico would suit her nicely.

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Bev is in the bathroom re-applying her lipstick when the knock comes. Her watch says it's a quarter to eleven, they're early. Or has that lout Harlan Jennings come back to bother her?

She fluffs her hair and slips her feet back into her shoes before putting her ear to the door.

"Who is it?"

"Roger."

She takes a deep breath and opens the door without removing the chain lock. She wants to get a look at these guys before letting them in. The crew never carried guns when they were on a job—Joe wasn't after that kind of trouble. When they found weapons inside the houses they robbed they hid them so nobody got hurt if a homeowner returned while they were there. Consequently, Bev doesn't own a gun. She's never even fired one. But she'd taken a switchblade from Joe's bedside table before they left for North Carolina and now she fingers its mother-of-pearl handle in her pocket.

The man at the door is wearing a black stocking cap and mask. "You're gonna to have to open the door a little wider if you want us to come in," he says. He's disguised his voice, but not well enough. Her heart gives a jolt as she realizes it's Alex, the muscle from Joe's crew.

Bruiser that he is, he rams his shoulder into the door, splintering the trim as the chain gives. Bev screams and fumbles for the knife, but Alex knocks her down before she can grip it. She

falls into the pile of the family silver and folds herself into a ball on the floor, trying to protect her head and stomach as Alex kicks her.

A second masked man enters and tells Alex to stop it. He pulls the mask down under his chin and hovers over her. It's Joe. His voice is calm even if his words are angry. "You stupid bitch. You thought you could get away with it." He grabs her by the wrist and pulls, twisting her arm painfully so that she has no choice but to get up. He throws her against the bed.

A third masked man, this one tall and gangly, is standing in the broken doorway. Bev knows it's Sean. He surveys the loot on the floor and says, "We gotta get this stuff outta here. Where are the bags?"

Alex throws the closet door open and finds it empty except for a couple of dresses. "Must be in the car," he says. He addresses Bev, who is struggling under Joe's weight. "Where are the keys?"

"Please, Joe," she coughs. "I can't breathe."

Joe backs off just enough so that she can speak more clearly. "Tell him where the keys are," he says.

Before she can reply, Sean spies her purse lying on the chair. He opens it and rummages until he finds the keys. "Here they are."

Bev thinks of the envelope filled with her money and prays he'll ignore it. No luck—he tosses the keys to Alex, freeing up his hand to pull it out. He lifts the flap and a broad smile spreads across his face. "Well, well. Take a look at this, fellas."

"Hot damn," Alex says. "How much is in there?"

Joe takes the envelope and slaps it against Bev's thigh. "Where'd you get this, huh? You steal this from me, too?"

"I earned that money myself, every penny of it," Bev says. She makes a grab for it but misses. "Take the loot if you want, but the money is mine."

Joe laughs. "Believe me, we're taking the loot. I'll consider this money compensation for the time and expense it took to come down here to get you. Get the bags and pack this stuff up, boys. We're getting the hell out of here."

Nobody notices Lena standing in the doorway until she cocks the shotgun. She's got it raised and ready to shoot Alex's head off. Relief rushes over Bev like a cold shower. With the boys distracted, she slips the knife out of her pocket and releases the blade.

She has a split-second to decide: how badly does she want to hurt Joe?

She jams the knife into his arm.

Joe cries out and falls back, clutching at the blade's handle. "You goddammed bitch," he screams. "I'll kill you!"

Alex's eyes dart between Lena and Joe. "What'd she do, boss?"

Bev crawls away from Joe, intending to join Lena by the door. But Sean lunges at Lena and she takes the gun off Alex to bat Sean's head with its barrel. Alex uses the reprieve to hunker down and run toward her, pushing her into a table set in front of the window. She loses her grip on the gun and Sean grabs it and trains it on her.

Joe is sweating now, clearly in pain. The knife is still in his arm. "Tie her up," he says.

"Let her go," Bev says as Alex moves toward her. "This is between you and me."

"We turn her loose and the first thing she does is call the cops." Joe says. "Tie her up."

Sean forces Lena into a chair while Alex holds Bev's arms behind her. Joe grunts with pain as he takes hold of the knife and pulls it out of his arm. He lays it to the side and breathes heavily, trying to get his bearings.

Lena's eyes are brimming with fright. "Just do as they say," Bev tells her. "It'll be all right."

The barrage of uniformed men with guns that storm in takes everyone by surprise. There are only five of them but in the chaos the small room feels full to bursting. Bev doesn't know whether to be terrified or relieved.

One of them shouts, "Nobody move. Put your hands up."

The crew, including Bev, does as they're told and stands stock still. A short, puffy man enters the room, his badge held up for everyone to see.

It's Harlan Jennings, and this time, he isn't grinning.

#

Bev sits alone at a table in a gray-walled interview room. It's hot in here and the dirty ashtray beside her makes her crave a cigarette. They took her purse—her cigarettes and the envelope full of money with it—when they brought her in. She's been here an hour, but it feels like much longer. Exhausted, she scoots the chair back and rests her head in her arms. A nap is out of the question but at least she can rest her eyes.

Funny that in ten years of running cons and pulling jobs with Joe, this is the first time she's seen the inside of a police station. She has Joe to thank for that. From start to finish, his planning had always been meticulous.

Trusting Richie was the fatal flaw in her own plan. She thought his feelings for her meant

he'd put loyalty and friendship above money, but he'd apparently contacted Joe as soon as he hung up the phone with her. How else would the crew know where to find her?

The door opens and she sits up to see who it is. "Sorry to keep you waiting," Harlan Jennings says. He lowers himself into the metal chair across from her. "You want anything? Cigarette? Coffee?"

"A cigarette, please."

He gives her one and holds out a lit match so she can light it. "You haven't called an attorney yet," he says, pausing to light a cigarette for himself. "I'm glad to hear it. Lawyers just muck things up. The truth is we've got enough evidence to put you all away for a very long time. But you've got a fine future ahead of you if you put your mind to it. I don't want to see you go to jail."

*You and me both*, Bev thinks.

"I'm here to see if we can come to some kind of understanding," he continues. "See if we can make a deal."

Recalling his piggish behavior earlier, Bev thinks she knows precisely what kind of deal he wants to make. She stiffens and folds her arms in front of her.

Jennings chuckles. "Nothing like that, Bev. May I call you that? Believe it or not, I'm a happily married man. No, what I want from you is information. Your pal Richie O'Neill was kind enough to provide us with quite a few details, but now we need you to fill us in on the rest."

"Richie ratted us all out?" Bev is taken aback. She knew Richie told Joe where she was, but had he dropped a dime on the entire crew?

"Don't judge him too harshly. We gave him the same choice we're giving you—turn state's evidence or face a trial which would almost certainly result in a conviction and jail time. In the end it wasn't a tough decision for him—he's a mama's boy. What would happen to old Mrs. O'Neill if her son went to jail? Not to mention his poor little sister." Jennings pauses and takes a long drag on his cigarette. "If it makes you feel any better, Richie was concerned about what would happen to you if he cooperated with us. We told him we couldn't make any promises. Now, what happens is up to you."

It was true Richie encouraged her to get out of the life. Begged her, even. And he hadn't been happy when she called to tell him she'd pulled a fast one on Joe. Still, a rat was a rat, and he could've warned her that the Feds were on their tail. It's his fault she was in this mess.

She'll deal with him later.

She reaches up and grazes her cheek with her fingers. It's no longer tender to the touch, but the scab Joe's ring had caused felt rough. It'll probably leave a scar.

Bev had known Joe Scullion for ten years and less than a month ago, she never planned to leave him, let alone rat him out. But that was before the punch. If there was one thing lower than a rat, it was a man who beat up on his woman.

Sometimes, plans change.

She grinds her cigarette out in the ashtray and asks Jennings, "What do you want to know?"

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