

THE SKIRMISHER

Algis Budrys

IT WAS A hot day, and near noon, when Ben Hoyt pulled the unmarked radio car to a stop in front of the house. He cut the motor and ran his hand around his neck, where the starch in his shirt collar was leaving a red weal like a rope burn. He thought: One of these days I'm going to marry a woman just to quit using those damned laundries.

But he hadn't been thinking about starch. Not really; it had just been the sound his brain made, idling, while he listened to the steady, monotonous rhythm of rifle shots coming from behind the house. They were sharp and spiteful, and they echoed flatly through the palmetto scrub and turpentine pine behind the house. Hoyt got out of the car and unbuttoned his suit coat so he could get at the .45 stuck in his waistband. Then he closed the car door quietly and walked toward the back of the house. The shots kept up in driving succession, one after the other in a group of three, then a pause, then another group of three.

The house was a new ranch type, with light green stuccoed walls and a low tile roof, with a close-cropped lawn and a solar hot water heater up on the south face of the roof. It was set in a good-sized lot, about four hundred feet to a side, and had a waist-high cinder block fence that walled off the front and sides of the lot, running back into a stretch of pine barren that just kept going until it merged into the Everglades. It looked odd all the way out here, as if a man had wanted to keep inconspicuous and still didn't want to get cheated out of living as if he were in a town.

Hoyt came around to the back of the house with his hand on his .45 just for luck, but he'd had it figured right. The man lying on the ground, squinting through the backlight of a rifle, was shooting at a row of paper targets set at distances of fifty, a hundred, and a hundred and fifty feet away from him. The rifle he was using looked like a standard .22, but it was making too much noise and recoiling much too hard. It had to be a rechambered wildcat model, kicking a .22 slug out of a shell case necked down from a 30-30, or maybe even something heavier.

The man on the ground was about thirty. He was sunburned and as hard as something carved out of solid mahogany. He was wearing a pair of ragged shorts made out of an old pair of denims, and nothing else. There were full and empty boxes of shells lying scattered on the ground all around him. There were fired shell cases strewn out like a glittering carpet to his right. A half-full glass of liquor with the ice almost melted was set down in easy reach. He had a cigarette hanging out of the left side of his mouth, and there were ashes all up and down his sweaty left arm. Hoyt watched. The man pumped a shot into the fifty-foot target, the hundred, and the hundred and fifty, flicking the backlight up a notch every time he palmed the bolt and fed another round into the chamber. His shoulder jumped every time he fired, and the ashes shook off the end of his cigarette. Hoyt looked out past the targets, and every shot was tearing holes in a log backstop. There were white chips of wood trailed out behind it for a good twenty feet.

"Four-oh-eight," the man on the ground muttered to himself. "Four-oh-nine, four-ten."

"Hey, there," Hoyt said.

The man on the ground grimaced and looked back over his shoulder. He had close-cropped black hair, flattened on top, a flat, small face with close-set eyes, heavy ears, and a thin nose that had been knocked over to one side. "Yeah?" Other than that, he didn't move.

Hoyt held out his badge. "You Albert Madigan?"

"That's right."

"My name's Hoyt. Wade County Sheriff's office. Want to talk to you."

Madigan shrugged. "Well, go ahead." He flipped the backsight down and fired into the fifty-foot target. "Four- eleven." The target was cut to ribbons in a scattered group that ranged from around the ten ring to absolute bogeys. The other two targets were even worse. Madigan moved his sight and squeezed off a shot into the hundred-foot target. It punched out wide at four o'clock. "Four-twelve."

"Hey there, I said I wanted to talk to you. Haven't got all day."

Madigan dropped the clip out of the rifle and fed in a new one from a pile of them he had lying on the ground under his chin. "Well, squat down and talk. I'm not about to go anywhere." He put a shot in each of the targets. "Four-fifteen," he muttered, turning on his side and massaging his right shoulder. There was a purplish-red blotch on his skin.

"Stand up, punk," Hoyt said with his fist on the butt of the .45.

"Go chase ducks," Madigan said. He rolled back over on his stomach and the rifle barked three times. "Four-sixteen, four- seventeen, four-eighteen," he muttered.

Hoyt pulled his .45 out and pointed it at the back of Madigan's head. "Stand up, I said."

Madigan looked back over his shoulder. "Go ahead and shut me, Bud. Do you a whole lot of good."

Hoyt stood over him cursing, with the sweat going down the back of his shirt.

Madigan grinned up at him. "Or is there something you want to find out from me?"

Hoyt took a stubborn breath. "Four years ago, a man named Stevens went off the Overseas Highway into the Gulf. His car busted through the guard rail and the barracuda got him. A little later, a man named Powers was getting off the *Champion* at Boca Raton when his foot slipped. He went under the wheels, and the train was still rolling. He was a damn fool for jumping the stop, but he'd of made it if he hadn't put a foot in a busted hair tonic bottle. The bottle wasn't there a minute earlier. Somebody dropped it ahead of him. And Stevens drove into a sheet of newspaper that was blown out of the car in front of him."

"Tough," Madigan said. "Tough, and out of the county, too. What's your beef?"

"Three years ago, a woman named Cummings jumped off Venetian Causeway into the bay. *That's* in the county. And last year a kid named Peterson was riding a motor scooter up U. S. 1 when his back tire blew. He went across the road in front of a trailer truck, and that was in this county, too. After that, there was a fellow named Pines. Diabetic. Went to a drugstore, got some insulin. Came in a sealed box of little glass bottles. Took it home, snapped the

neck off one of the bottles, filled his hypo, gave himself a shot. It wasn't insulin. Somebody'd gotten the boxes mixed up in the drugstore refrigerator. After that, there was a man named--"

"Make your point."

"All right. The Cummings woman jumped because her boyfriend called her up and told her he was going back to Oklahoma with his wife. Only the boyfriend never called her. Fellow in a lunch counter phone box heard this other fellow in the next booth. Didn't take much notice of it until after she made the papers. Then he told us about this fellow: Five eight or nine, broken nose, black hair, half-moon scar on his right cheek. The boyfriend didn't look one bit like that. How good're you at imitating voices, Madigan?"

Madigan grinned. The scar on his cheek lost itself in the wrinkles.

"We didn't have much to tie that on to. We let it ride. The boyfriend wasn't even married. Now, this Peterson kid on the scooter. He hit a piece of board with a nail on it. The board fell off a truck in front of him. There was a fellow sitting on the tail-gate. Hitch-hiker. The driver remembers him because he wanted a ride up to Dania, and after the accident when he got there he crossed the road and started to thumb back toward Miami. Looked like you."

"Lots of people look like me," Madigan said, grinning like a reptile.

"Quit stalling around, Madigan," Hoyt said, hefting the .45 in his hand. "I got a busy schedule."

Madigan shrugged. "Tough."

Hoyt narrowed his eyes. Madigan had a funny, dangerous look about him. Hoyt had seen a few men like him during the last war--guys who'd got caught in combat, somewhere, and whipsawed to the point where they knew they were going to die. Then, for some reason, they got out of it, but after that they didn't care about anything. Nothing could touch them any more, and they were very hard to kill. Still, it took a lot of combat to get a man to a point like that, and Hoyt wondered just where somebody Madigan's age could have found enough of it. "You want to see me get tough, Madigan?"

Madigan shrugged. "Suit yourself, Bud. Seeing you're so busy, though, why don't you come back when you can say what you want me for?"

"I know what I want you for," Hoyt said coldly. "How long did you think you could get away with it?"

"With what?"

"Come off it, Madigan. We tied you up with the Cummings woman. We tied you up with the Peterson kid. We know you delivered that mislabeled phony insulin. The same kind of car as the one you rented that day was barreling down the road in front of the Stevens car when it went into the Gulf. So us, and the Howard County cops, and the state cops, we got together and started comparing notes. See, we had this funny coincidence to work with: that diabetic was going to get married the next day, and the Peterson kid was on his way up to Allandale to run off and elope with this high school freshman. And one of the Howard County cops remembered these other three cases in the past two years, where people got accidentally killed just before they were going to get married. So he checked it, and what do you

know?--there was this same guy, with the same funny scar, mixed up in all three of them somewhere."

"Yeah?" Madigan was smirking.

"Yeah! So we started taking it from the other end. We went into the marriage license records, and checked out everybody in south Florida who took out a license but never got married. And, you know what? Fifty-three of them died. Fifty-three in five years. Now, you figure it out. That's a lot of accidents. So we checked 'em. Some of them turned out to be for real. Some of them, we're not so sure. But guess who else we found on the list? Two people: Powers, the guy on the train, and Stevens, the guy in the car. What's the matter, Madigan--you hate newlyweds, or something?"

Madigan grinned and shook his head. "I don't give a damn for newlyweds one way or the other. It's their grandchildren that bother me."

"Make sense," Hoyt growled.

"Nah--nah, *you* make sense. You tell me how the county prosecutor's going to convince a jury that anybody in the Year of Our Lord 1958--"

"'57," Hoyt corrected automatically.

"Okay, '57." Madigan shrugged. He looked at Hoyt like somebody on the right side of the bars in a zoo. "You just tell a jury how a man could rig those accidents."

"We'll figure it out."

"You couldn't do it in seventy-four years, Bud. And that's a fact. Well, so long, Hoyt."

Madigan turned suddenly and started to run, but he wasn't trying hard. He loped easily, barefoot, picking his steps with care.

"Stop!" Hoyt shouted.

Madigan grinned back over his hard shoulder and kept loping, dodging perfunctorily toward a tree now and then.

"Stop!"

Madigan kept running. Hoyt raised his heavy .45 and shouted for the last time: "Stop!" He fired over Madigan's head.

The heavy recoil jarred his arm. He took a small step to correct his balance, and his foot nudged the half-full glass of liquor over on its side. His foot slipped in the mess of suddenly wet shell cases, and he fought wildly to keep from falling. The .45 flew out of his hand, and Madigan was out of the handgun's short range. Hoyt scooped up the abandoned rifle, thumbed the sight, and fed a round into the chamber. He put the bead of the hooded foresight between Madigan's shoulder blades and squeezed the trigger. And the weakened chamber burst, exploding jagged steel into his skull.

He lay in the pine needles and shell cases, blind and relaxed. He heard Madigan stop running and come walking casually back, but that was no longer any affair of his.

It was a comfortable feeling, knowing you were going to die in a minute, before the shock could possibly wear off and let the waiting pain reach you. It freed you of the problem of your messed-up face. It freed you of any problem you cared to name.

There, now--it was beginning to hurt just a little. Time to go, Hoyt--time to go...slip down, slip away...that waitress at the lunch counter...hell, Hoyt, you've got the best excuse in the world for not keeping that date with her tonight....

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