

LOVE IN THE SHADOWS

Passaic River Trilogy Comes to an End

By Steve Bassett

Chapter 1

On the evening of Monday, August 18, 1947, everything became clear for Margie Bruning, she had to kill her husband before he killed her. His brutal assault that morning finalized her decision.

It had been months in the making. The progression was predictable. Shared frustration as days of fruitless job hunting grew into weeks, then months and Ned's drinking began. He had become a lush and her once bottomless love for him evaporated as his verbal abuse gave way to violence.

"Do you think I haven't been looking?" Ned said, as he was about to leave their apartment on another futile job search. He pulled up short, turned and grabbed Margie by the hair as slaps seared both her cheeks, "That's what you fucking think, that I've been out there playing around?"

The force of the blows spun Margie over the kitchen sink where she blindly reached for the faucet to keep her balance. Once again there was the taste of blood on her tongue.

Margie's rage controlled every move she made. *No, god damn it! Not this time. He's not getting another cheap shot*, she muttered to herself and without thinking, she turned from the sink and in one fluid motion drove her right fist into his left temple.

"Now get the hell out of here. Yeah, you can beat the piss out of me, but it won't be easy. Go on, scram!"

He turned and tenderly rubbed his swelling temple. *This can't happen. What the hell did she just do?*

He was poised to throw his six-foot-two, two-hundred-and-ten-pound frame at Margie, but stopped when confronted by the woman in classic boxer stance, legs shoulder-width apart, both fists at the ready.

“To hell with it. Don't think this is over yet cuz it ain't,” Ned said, and shed of any dignity, slammed the door behind him as he left the kitchen. It was all over in fifteen seconds.

It took a few minutes for Margie to regain her equilibrium. She sat down at the kitchen table and with her right forearm brushed aside the remains of Ned's breakfast. She poured a cup of coffee, Zippo'd a Camel, inhaled deeply and as the smoke flattened like a fog across the table thought, *How the hell did I let it get this god damn far? Because I love him? And I believe he still loves me? That's bullshit, so let's face up to it. It's time for me to get going, while I still have the guts.*

The man she had loved had fallen into an abyss of paranoia as he gradually discovered there was no longer any need for a former Marine Gunnery Sergeant with a Bronze Star and a Good Conduct medal.

There was little demand for a high school dropout, and even his low-level job as a forklift operator at Harrison Foundry ended. The Foundry's owners had taken full advantage of Uncle Sam's endless war time generosity, invested wisely, put their once frenetically active plant up for sale and fled to Rumson. They joined the country club, took up polo and bought a newly restored Chris Craft yacht. Abandoned were two hundred and fifty blue collar workers who sweated around the clock to forge spare parts for Sherman tanks, howitzers, and gun carriages. It didn't

take long for these men and women to realize they were trapped in a back-alley crap game with shaved dice.

This morning she waited for the thud of Ned's heavy footsteps to abate, certain it wouldn't be long before he would be sharing cheap Muscatel with other Harrison Foundry layabouts. With the back of her right hand, she wiped the blood from her chin and felt with her tongue where the left, lower incisor had ripped into her lip. A once unimaginable plan began to take shape.

Two weeks later he took her by surprise in the kitchen with a right-hand blow to her left shoulder. She lost her balance, slammed into the refrigerator and slid to the floor. As Ned had warned, it wasn't over yet.

"That'll teach you to keep your god damn trap shut. Keep your ass right where it is. You got one lucky shot in, better not try it again," Ned said.

In the beginning, she believed that for Ned the enemy was the bosses who padlocked their shops, warehouses and factories. She was wrong. Now she realized it was insane jealousy spurred by her accomplishments that were torturing him.

The Sears Cold Spot refrigerator that he had just bounced her off was one of several glistening surprises Margie bought for his homecoming, along with a Whirlpool washing machine that fit neatly into the far end of their bathroom. She got rid of the old wall-mounted, pull-chain toilet and replaced it with a new porcelain, self-contained flush model.

"Where did the dough for all this come from?" Ned asked after she had led him by the hand on a tour she was certain would end with a kiss and a hug. Not so.

"I earned the money, every cent of it," she remembered answering. Her answer only increased his incredulity.

“You earned it? I knew you got a defense job at Todd Shipyards, but hell, this had to cost a lot.”

“Got it all on sale and that’s not all,” she said, taking a small black book from her apron pocket. Her pride echoed from every word as she thrust a New Jersey Bank & Trust bankbook to Ned. “Here, take a look. Seven hundred fifty smackers.”

“And I sacrificed to give you money every month,” an agitated Ned said, leafing through several pages of the deposit book. The veins in his neck and temples close to exploding. “Jesus, fucking Christ! How’d you think I’d feel about this?”

“Don’t know if you realize it, buster, things have changed,” she said, at the same time pushing against him with her hip while rolling up the right sleeve of her blouse. “Here, feel this.”

She tightened her shoulder and forearm, pumped three times and guided his left hand to her undoubtable biceps. “Thirty months as a hot-rivet catcher-holder. Then they had me wrestling with ten lift and throttle levers in the cab of an overhead crane. Got a little raise, said I would have fun working the crane. What bullshit.”

It was then that she got the first ominous hint to where their marriage was going. She no longer recognized the man she had married, and she was now convinced that Ned could never accept the woman she had become.

Before Ned’s three years of overseas service, she had been hauling food trays, pushing food and liquor carts, and rearranging chairs and tables at the Hahne’s Department Store’s upscale Pine Room. A lithe, smooth-muscled body emerged strong enough to convince the misanthropic foreman at Todd Shipyards she could handle any slop jobs they gave her.

And it didn’t take long for Margie to convince dirty-minded creeps to get lost if they knew any better. That was proven at a Weehawken saloon not far from the shipyards.

Chapter 2

The proof came just before the saloon closing when a drunk co-worker sidled up to her at the bar. “Nice tits, and a face that ain’t too bad, even without makeup,” the punk said. “Betcha it’s nice down there, too don’t cha think?” he sneered grabbing the crotch of Margie’s bib dungarees.

Using the dexterity she had earned as a riveter and crane operator, Margie pushed back knocking over her stool, threw her beer in the guy’s face with her right hand, and landed a hard left-hand punch to his right temple. He lost his balance and landed on his ass.

Co-workers moved in and it was all over in a few seconds. Margie picked up her stool, made her way down the bar and squeezed in between two welders who were still laughing after watching the mini-brawl. They made room, and the one on her right asked, “What’ll you have Margie? I’m popping for it.”

“In that case, it’s a boiler,” she said, then turned to the barkeeper who had set a coaster in front of her. “Make it a Four Roses with a tall Ballantine chaser.” She was the only one at the bar who realized it was more than a one punch slap-down. It was a matter of dignity, such as it was amid the camaraderie of war-time defense workers.

For the next fourteen months, Margie enjoyed the respect from her co-workers that victory punch had given her. When she got her pink slip a month after VE Day, the new reality was like a fist to the gut. Shift boss, Emil Sandowski, waiting at the timeclock, told the twenty-two women working for him to step aside for their male co-workers to pass through. When the last guy clocked-out, he motioned the women over, visibly pissed-off and embarrassed by what he had to do.

“I’m not gonna soft-pedal this,” Sandowski said, taking the top envelope from the stack on a table next to him. “Perkins. Here you are Dottie. All I can say is....” He paused, searching for the words to express his feelings. “It’s one fucking shame, and the white-shirts in the office can shove it up their asses.”

Sandowski was saying goodbye to a family of women he had nurtured, grudging skepticism giving way to the hardnosed reality that as their physical strength and mental toughness increased, his gals were doing men’s work, and in some cases doing it better.

He loved those posters of Rosie the Riveter warning Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini that they had bitten off more than they could chew. For three years, his admiration grew, and you didn’t have to look any farther than diminutive Angela Massima and Flo Simmons to see why. They weighed in at no more than one hundred and ten pounds, but had to be seen to be believed as they positioned heavy steel plates for the welders and riveters, never complaining as they worked their asses off.

“So, this is it,” Margie said removing her final paycheck from its envelope. “Whoa there, fifty-three bucks and eighty cents, I can’t remember any OT last week.” She turned to Sandowski with a wink and a smile, “You’re a sly dog, boss.”

Every family member reacted the same way, knowing that the extra gravy was the big Polack’s way to say thanks. Many of them teared up and didn’t care who saw them.

“Hey, none of that ladies. Now let’s get over to Barney’s, the drinks are on me.”

The laughing, damp-cheeked contingent followed their boss to the saloon knowing their close-knit camaraderie was of the once in a lifetime variety. Pushed aside, at least for tonight, were any thoughts of the subservience that would soon be expected from them. Don’t bet on it, pal.

It took months for Margie to reach the conclusion that it was all over for her and Ned. Thanks to the physical demands of her wartime work she was muscular and agile, but she was no match for her husband, six inches taller, seventy pounds heavier, with long arms and fists as hard as rocks.

After making up the bed, she walked over to the smallest of three kitchen cupboards, pulled out the bottom drawer, and withdrew an object she hoped never to use. It was a gift from Eduardo Solano, a shipyard co-worker who worried for her safety after learning she lived alone at the corner of Fulton and Rector.

“Not good for you to live by yourself in such a neighborhood,” Eduardo said after they had hoisted a few cold bottles of Pabst Blue Ribbon at Barney’s. A week later, same time, same place, he pulled from under his peacoat his weapon of choice, sharpened and with a leather sheath, its Marine insignia clearly visible. He refused to take no for an answer and after four turndowns, Margie accepted his gift, but only after he unsheathed it and put the handle in her right hand. “I saw you welding, and know this is where you’re strongest.”

He waited until she had hefted it to her satisfaction, awkwardly jabbed its needlepoint blade into the empty darkness of the alley before grabbing it from her. “No, no. This stiletto is serious business, not for punching holes in dummies,” Eduardo admonished. “It’s simple, here I’ll show you. Push in all the way to the handle, then you can twist up or down, side-to-side. All very easy,” the wiry smooth-muscled Puerto Rican advised with a smile that acknowledged he spoke from experience. The war made for strange bedfellows.

During her three and a half years at the shipyards, Margie become one of the top dart players at the Weehawken saloon. A healthy part of the seven hundred and fifty dollars in her

savings account were dart game winnings. It was a natural transition from darts to a perfectly balanced, razor sharp stiletto that, from a distance of twenty feet could split a three-inch target. She hoped never to use it, but here it was in its leather sheath, the perfect weapon.

Margie rewrapped the stiletto, and returned it to its hiding place. *God damn him down to hell if he forces me to do it. One more attack, and that's it. Never again, I mean it this time, never again will I suck my own blood,* she thought, as she washed her face, combed her hair and applied fresh makeup in the bathroom.

Satisfied with what she saw in the mirror, she went to the closet and removed her newest dress, a blue cotton shift, with three-quarter sleeves and white trim. The loose belted shift disguised her muscular stature and the sleeves, as intended, hid the bulge of her biceps. Sheer hose, white heels, a Bulova wristwatch, white gloves, a faux pearl two-strand necklace, and matching earrings completed the ensemble.

She took a bus downtown, got off at Broad and Market, walked to Hahne's Department Store, and after only a half-hour interview, she was hired as the late afternoon and evening Pine Room hostess, a high-profile job that paid more than twice her waitress salary including tips. They had called her, she hadn't called them. It had Rita Metcalf written all over it. Rita, a well-designed, still-closeted lesbian, had barely hidden her desire for Margie during her three years as a waitress. She and Margie shared a split of French Chablis in the Pine Room to celebrate, recounted what they had been doing for the past three years, then parted outside the store's entrance with a soft kiss on the cheek from Rita. After her crucible of fire at Todd, Margie was confident she could handle this. Punches and slaps to the face were something else again, but now she had a plan, and she and the stiletto were waiting. //