



The Angel Gang, set in 1949 •

When private Investigator Tom Hickey leaves his young and pregnant wife at their cabin on the shore of Lake Tahoe to help clear a woman friend of an arson charge, he annoys a host of bad fellows, including the Mickey Cohen mob.

"Tom Hickey is one of detective fiction's most original and intriguing creations." • San Francisco Chronicle"

A nicely orchestrated rescue set in simpler times, with sturdy prose, nonstop action, and steady suspense. Recommended." • Library Journal

The Angel Gang

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ON ONE OF THOSE DAYS WHEN NOTHING FIT, when every damned screw proved too big or small, Tom Hickey tried to install a window in the new room he'd been adding to the cabin. He wanted to finish before the baby arrived, which gave him two weeks to plaster, paint, lay the tile. Once the baby came, he wasn't going to allow any fumes in the house. Nothing but the rich mountain air. Having to take his pipe outside would be a trial in winter. But this kid he'd vowed to protect a whole lot better than he had Elizabeth. Anybody granted a second chance, he believed, ought to learn from history.

At forty-four, he was bald at the crown. The mustache he wore to distract from his large nose had transformed to gray. Yet he still had the muscles to split foot-wide pine logs with one whack, the wind to climb in a short morning from the dock at Emerald Bay to the crest of the Rubicons, and the courage to dedicate the next twenty or so years to the kid. And to Wendy.

She stood in the doorway between the addition and their bedroom, wearing a quilt draped over her shoulders and squinting-still and watchful, as though expecting her husband to boot the jar of screws. In a couple steps, she crossed the little room. She reached for his shoulder and pressed the tight muscle. "Tom, what songs do you think you'll play tonight?"

He was booked to fill in on clarinet for Walt Ralston, who'd busted a finger when his skis got tangled and he plowed into a tree. Most of his life, Hickey'd played saxophone. He'd gotten the clarinet from Wendy for Christmas, a few months after the atom bombs hit Japan right after the army cut him loose, the winter before they moved to Tahoe. Almost three years now, he'd been working fill-in on tenor and alto sax and clarinet for Charley Wayne's Orchestra, the house band at Harry's South Shore Casino.

"Search me," he said. "Never know what Wayne's mood's gonna be. You wanta come listen?"

"Every night you play I want to come, but I always get so sleepy."

"So we'll do like at New Year's. I'll shark Harry into giving us a room at the hotel. Only this time we'll make it a triple, an extra bed for Claire. Think she'll go?"

"I bet she will. Tom, maybe the green New Year's dress will fit me."

"Easily, babe." He turned and gave her a long hug, pressing against her belly, his favorite of all her curves. She kissed his shoulder and hummed her pleasure.

After they pulled apart, he reached for the jar of screws. He poured a handful and was sifting through when the phone rang. While Wendy hustled to answer, he stood quiet and listened, guessing it would be the bandleader asking him to show a half hour early to rehearse a new number. Though the phone was two rooms away and Wendy spoke softly, their cabin was small enough so he heard her say, "Just a moment, please."

He replaced the screws, met her in the doorway, gave her a kiss on the forehead. He slipped through the bedroom sideways, to fit between the bed and the dresser.

When he grumbled into the phone, the operator announced person-to-person long distance, from the law firm of Worthy, Wright and Wilcox. He flopped into his padded chair.

"Mister Hickey. Dick Wilcox here. Representing Cynthia Jones."

Hickey stiffened and glowered at the phone. The name Cynthia had walloped him like a sucker punch. He recovered by reminding himself that more than one person could use the same first name. "Cynthia who?"

"You might remember her as Cynthia Tucker. Ring a bell?"

"A cacophony of them," Hickey muttered.

"The lady needs your help. She's been arrested for murder."

Shutting his eyes, reaching around the chair, he fumbled on the table behind him for his meerschaum and Walter Raleigh. "Who'd she kill?"

"I take it you think she's capable of murder."

"Yeah. Who'd she kill?"

"They're holding her in the arson murder of her sister's husband. She denies the charge, and I believe her. She has a solid alibi and no apparent motive."

His pipe lit, he took a long drag, blew a smoke ring, noticed Wendy standing beside him. He reached up and laid an arm on her shoulder. "The motive's a feud going back twenty years, Cynthia and Daddy versus Mama and Sis. If she's got a tight alibi, why're they holding her?"

"Her alibi's a crowd of hophead musicians, one of whom has contradicted the others. The DA's sure he can discredit them."

Wendy rubbed his neck, and Hickey said, "Look, fella, I'm going to give you the number of my partner. Name's Leo Weiss. Anybody can fix things, he's the guy."

"She wants you."

"Tell her I'm flattered-and retired. Only investigating I do is security stuff for my neighbor's casino. Leo's your man."

"I doubt she'll accept that."

"Aw, darn."

"I hear your sarcasm, Mister Hickey. She said I might have to remind you that you owe her."

"Swell, tell her you reminded me. Wish her luck. Now I've gotta go to work." He gave the man Leo's number, hung up, and leaned into Wendy so his nose lay between her breasts and his chin rested on her belly.

She kissed his baldest spot. "Cynthia's the one you told me ... in the hospital . . . with the baby?"

"Yeah." He lingered, getting comforted, and finally sat up. "Tomorrow I'll go to the hardware, find the right screws, put in the window easy."

"Okay.... Tell me about Cynthia?"

"Let's go for a walk, huh?"

She nodded happily and went for their coats and snow caps, her boots. While she dressed, Hickey stood at their lake-view window, watching pewter-colored shadows darken to steel gray, suppressing the urge to cuss viciously. Because he doubted a guy could hear Cynthia's name without trouble landing on him.

Outside, he grabbed the sled off the porch and tossed it down on the crusty snow at the foot of the stairs. Wendy settled onto it. He picked up the rope and towed. Halfway across the meadow to the beach, she asked about Cynthia.

"Looks like she torched a house," Hickey said dolefully. "Some fellow burned. She's banking on me to save her, on account of she figures I owe her."

"Money?"

"Naw. Remember, I told you, I stopped her from killing her mama's boyfriend, the swami. And if I hadn't snatched her out of TJ, that abortion joint, she wouldn't of had the baby."

"I remember. She doesn't like the baby, so her sister took it home."

"Yep. She wanted to kill the baby."

"Poor people. . . . Tom, how long will you be in San Diego?"

Hickey stopped and turned, knelt in the snow beside her and sank to mid-thigh. She was wearing the look that pierced his heart most deeply. Her sky-blue eyes glittering, her lips and chin pushed out a little, set firm-the look that exposed both how strong and how fragile a human could be.

"I'm not going, babe."

"But maybe they'll put her in jail forever."

"Yeah, and maybe it's where she oughta be."

"Maybe not, though."

"Hey, if she's innocent, Leo can spring her."

Wendy nodded, closed her eyes, thought a minute before shaking her head.

"Leo's not you."

As he stood, he marveled at how blessed a guy could feel when somebody believed in him.. He picked up the rope and towed her over a few low snowy dunes to the beach at the point where their property met the Blackwood estate. He ran her fifty yards up the beach and back, having to duck both ways passing under the Blackwoods' pier. The Blackwoods were descended from a fisherman who'd made his fortune off brown trout. Using ice-packed wagons and boxcars, he'd expressed the creatures to San Francisco, as if the Pacific didn't have enough fish of its own. After they'd netted the lake clean, the family had turned to banking and other respectable schemes. Their house was unstained cedar, like the Hickeys' place, only the Hickeys' cabin could fit in any one of a dozen of the Blackwood rooms. The estate lay on five acres, shaded and hidden by the pine forest. Surrounded by their stables, an arena big enough to hold bullfights, and a riding trail, it was the largest estate in the village except Harry Poverman's.

Poverman owned a swank South Shore Casino. Two years ago, he'd built a monstrosity on the other side of the Hickeys' place. The Blackwoods snubbed Harry in public. In private they pestered Sheriff Boggs about the gambler's houseguests: gun-packing LA and Vegas Jews, Greeks, Italians, who got drunk and raced Harry's speedboats, then chased painted dolls around the neighborhood at 3 A.M., shouting curses and strange propositions.

Living between a brood of snobs and a party house hadn't been one of Hickey's ambitions. But the

gambler employed him and was a cordial fellow, so Hickey didn't complain. And the Blackwoods kept their distance. Except Claire, a daughter-in-law, the only Blackwood he deemed worth knowing. Wendy's best pal.

Hickey towed his wife along the beach to the tallest snowy dune at the south end of their property. On top, as he gave a push and watched her slide toward the golden water, her arms braced tightly against the sled so she wouldn't topple and risk denting the baby, he wondered if anywhere in any age had occurred a twilight so perfect. Crystals of snow displaced by the runners flew up to glitter in Wendy's hair. Her laughter resonated like bells. Beyond her, the lake's golden skin faded into silver, then darkened to a rich cobalt center. Toward the south shore, it turned flint gray, the same color as the only cloud in sight. Arrowhead shaped, pointed down. On its journey over the wilderness they called Desolation, the cloud appeared to have stopped about twenty degrees east of Mount Tallac. If it dropped, Hickey figured, it might splash into Sourdough Lake, where Hickey'd snagged a twelve-pound cutthroat last summer.

Wendy struggled to her feet but slipped, got her feet tangled, began to topple, but Hickey caught her. On the way down she'd grasped her quivering belly and laughed. Nothing enchanted Hickey so much as her happiness. Not a chance he'd desert her to fix things for Cynthia. Especially when he would've taken odds she lit the damned fire.

"I can pull you, Tom." Wendy swept thick blond-and-brown-mixed hair from her face and held it back in a short horsetail. She smiled and rubbed a snowflake from her rosy cheek. Kicking a step through the snow, she leaned her head on Hickey's shoulder. "Want me to pull you?"

"Naw. I'd bust the sled." Hickey rubbed his belly. Jiggled the ten or so pounds he'd stacked on during the year since his marriage. Not from his wife's cooking. They'd been sharing a house six years, since the war. He just moved a little slower these days, burnt less steam. His restlessness had fled once Wendy had cured him of the suspicion that either he possessed an uncanny knack for sabotaging every break he got or life was rigged against him.

He grabbed the sled rope and towed with his left hand while Wendy held the other, swung his arm a little, and shuffled her feet in the snow, walking more like a tomboy than a woman of almost thirty due to give birth in twenty-some days.

Rather than cutting back across their meadow, they kept hiking, toward the horse trail that passed through the redwood grove on Harry Poverman's land. To pass under Harry's dock, they had to wedge single file between two beached speedboats. Wendy led the way. When Hickey'd gotten through, he said, "I oughta run over, ask Harry about the room."

She rubbed snow from her eyes and squeezed his hand. "Tom, you need to go to San Diego."

"Naw, darling. What I need is to stay here with you."

When she cocked her head to face him, her eyes glistened as if she were standing over a bonfire. "But maybe they'll never let Cynthia out of prison," she whispered. "Maybe she'll stay there until she dies. And you'll get nightmares."

Hickey dropped her hand, reached around, and pulled her so close they walked like tipsy people into the grove. Fifty yards ahead, in the clearing, he glanced up and saluted the bodyguard who sat smoking on the rear deck of Harry's place.

The Poverman house was a sprawling eyesore, single story, white and burnt orange. A bunch of connected cubes, it looked as native to the forest as a herd of camels would've. Tyler, the bodyguard, waved back and threw his feet up onto the deck rail. The Hickeys cut between three lighted tennis courts and a drained swimming pool, into the meadow that led to their cabin.

According to most citizens of the village, the Hickeys' place, with its rough-hewn boards, miniature stature, and cheap asphalt roofing, should've been relegated to butler's quarters, towed to some

logging camp, or burned. The Hickeys had built it themselves. All they owed was taxes. At least their lot was as foresty, with as long a beach, frontage, as most anybody's.

Inside, around the wood stove, for an hour Hickey deflected his wife's arguments. That Clifford wouldn't arrive for three weeks. That she felt as strong as ever, and braver. Besides, Claire would stay with her, but poor Mrs. Jones might have nobody she could trust in such a jam except him. Tom was the best of anybody at saving people, she contended.

Finally he caught the notion that the strongest reason she loved him was on account of his always helping people. A minute later, he relented.

By 7 P.m., Wendy'd made a phone call and Claire Blackwood had joined them. She was tall and prim with a soft round face, bobbed hair, and pierced ears sporting baubles of silver and turquoise. A widow who lived in a guesthouse on the family estate of her late husband, who'd fallen on the march across Bataan, she wrote poetry, painted landscapes, and wore turtle-necked sweaters, embroidered Mexican blouses, and skirts to her ankles. In summer she'd go barefoot. She appeared as classy as Wendy looked ingenuous. The Hickeys loved her dearly.

Three times, Hickey got Claire's promise to stick by Wendy every minute. He worried that she might slip and fall on the ice, that her water might break or the baby drop suddenly into labor, that a nightmare might strike like they used to, catapulting her back into Hell, where he'd found her-a Tijuana dive where, for a month during 1943 Nazis, Mexicans, and gringo soldiers had groped her with their fingers and damned yellow eyes. Where her brother had lain with half his head gone, splattered on the window and wall, on the night they'd freed her and Hickey'd stormed into her life.

He considered bargaining. If Wendy wanted him to help Cynthia, he could propose that she go with him to San Diego and stay at the bayside cottage with his daughter, Elizabeth. Except that before they moved up this way and ever since, on their few trips off the mountain, anyplace but here she couldn't lose the haunted expression, the flicking eyes, the tension that made her spook like a shell-shocked veteran. As though on the flatland demons surrounded her, but up here in the place she used to call heaven, angels gathered around.

He gave Wendy and Claire five San Diego phone numbers: the lawyer's, Leo's, Elizabeth's, and home and work numbers for Rusty Thrapp, his old pal, a captain with the San Diego police. He promised to stop and phone every few hours on the drive. The second she wanted him, he'd turn the Chevy into a jet and flash back up the mountain. No matter what, he promised to drive home Monday night. He'd give Cynthia forty-eight hours, tops.

[For the rest of the story . . .](#)

