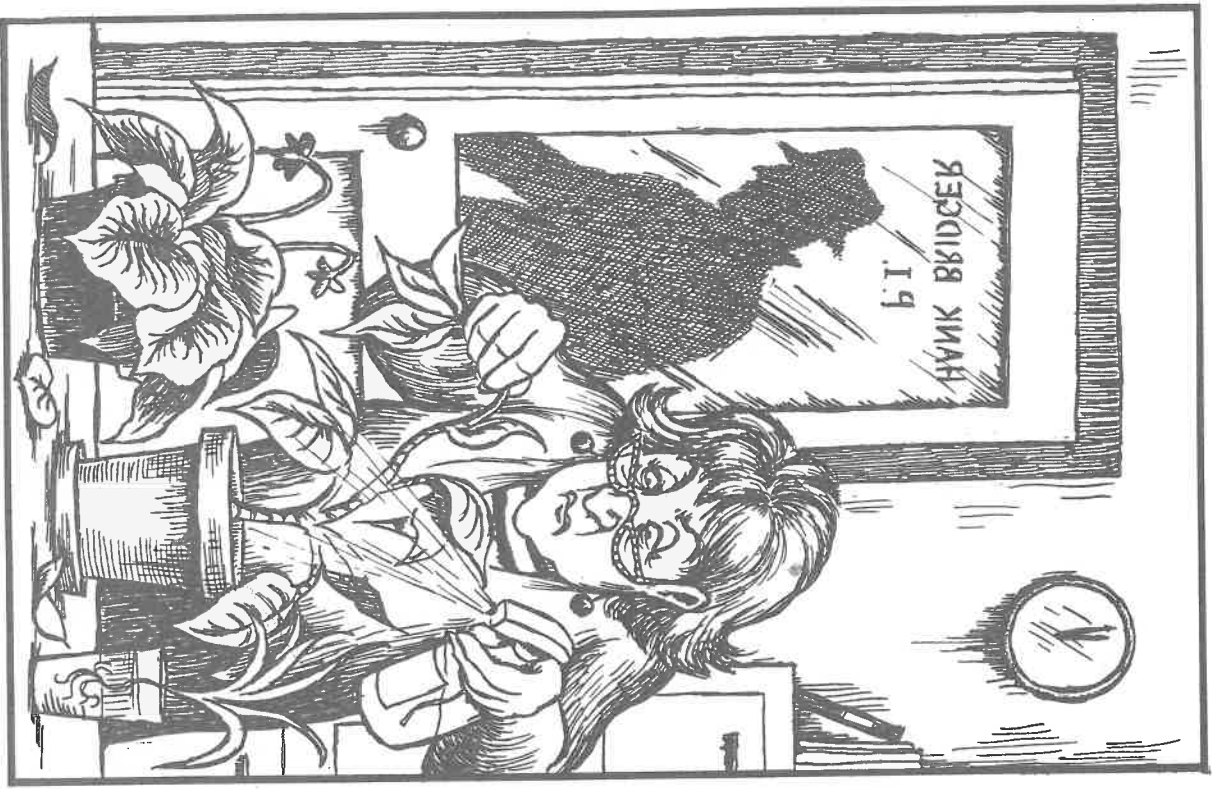


# Swallowing the Gun



*May 12, 1:25 P.M.:* The police arrive on the scene of what appears to be a grisly suicide. Inside a small, two-story office building lies the body of Hank Bridger, private investigator. Hank had apparently sat down at his desk and shot himself in the mouth. The officers seal the site and then talk to witnesses, beginning with Ethel, the deceased's secretary.

"Hank was out on a case. He came in about noon. I was in his inner office, spraying his plants for bugs. He never takes care of them, and I get tired of looking at the aphids. Anyway, Hank told me to go to lunch and be back by 1:00. Seems he had a lunch appointment of his own at 1:00.

"I had a burger at a fast-food place and did a little window shopping. I was just heading back to the building a few minutes past 1:00. That's when I heard it. Sounded like a truck backfiring. Hank's office is on the first floor; so, it was probably less than 3 minutes from the time I heard the shot until I walked in. When I opened the door to his inner office, I saw him right away, just the way he is now, fallen back in his chair, the gun lying in his hand."

The rest of the story is filled in by another tenant, Blake Barlow, an accountant. "First you have to understand. The four of us own this building. The four tenants are Hank and me on the first floor, Dr. Russell and Milton Engels, a lawyer, on the second. We run the building as a corporation with Hank as the president. Naturally, I do the books.

"Well, recently I ran across something that didn't smell quite right. It looked like one of the corporation members had embezzled quite a decent sum from our escrow fund. Very cleverly embezzled, although I could be wrong. A little past noon today I gave Hank a call. I told him what I'd found. I told him I needed some papers from his safe to check out my suspicions. I said I would drop by to pick them up when I left the office today about 5:00."

Blake gazes down at the body. Hanging on the coat tree by the desk is Hank's empty shoulder holster. Beside it is a paper shredder that had disgorged several sheets of incomprehensible confetti. "I guess that settles it," Blake says. "Hank was the

thief. After my call, he opened his safe, destroyed the papers, then sat down and shot himself."

An old lieutenant is taking notes. "Did you tell any of the other partners about your suspicions?"

"No. Just Hank. He said he couldn't believe one of us would do something like that. He even got insulting about my book-keeping. I guess he was trying to bluff me into ignoring it. But I wouldn't. So, he killed himself."

The initial investigation points to the same conclusion. There are no bruises or signs of a struggle. Powder burns on the victim's face support the theory that Hank had opened his mouth willingly, wrapping it around the gun barrel. "Maybe he was asleep in his chair, snoring, and the killer caught him unawares," the lieutenant suggests.


"No," says Ethel. "You see, this office is equipped with an electric-eye alarm system. As soon as someone enters either room, an annoyingly loud bell goes off. That would've woke him instantly. He's a light sleeper. Uh, that's what his wife tells me."

Engels, the lawyer, offers his opinion. "No one in his right mind would sit by while someone took a gun and struck it into his mouth. Has to be suicide."


The lieutenant shakes his head. "Looks bad, all right. Especially since the rest of you weren't even aware of Mr. Barlow's suspicions. But I knew Hank from his old days on the force. I can't believe he'd steal and I can't believe he'd kill himself. There's got to be another explanation."

**Whodunit?** (1) How did the embezzler know he or she was in danger? (2) Who killed Hank Bridger? (3) How did the killer manage to shoot Hank in the mouth with his own gun?

**Evidence** *This crime can be solved in 3 clues.*

 Crime Scene Report

 Autopsy Report

 Medical Guide to Poisons (Research)

 Ethel's Statement (Affidavit File)

 Partners' Alibis (Affidavit File)