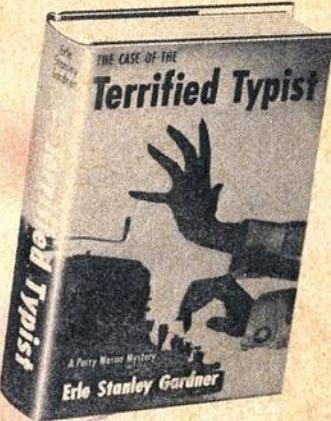


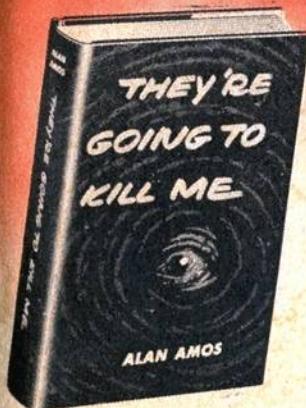
The Case of the Terrified Typist

BY ERLE STANLEY GARDNER



They're Going To Kill Me

BY ALAN AMOS



Backfire

BY EDNA SHERRY



DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB SELECTIONS

**THE CASE OF
THE TERRIFIED
TYPIST**

by Erle Stanley Gardner

THE DAY BEGAN just as any other—except for the new girl in Perry Mason's office—a crackerjack typist. Yet somehow she seemed nervous, even frightened. And when she suddenly vanished she did so without a trace—except for a couple of diamonds stuck under her desk (with chewing gum) and a bunch of highly romantic love letters dumped in a waste basket.

Three days later, Mason was engaged to defend a man for murder.

It's a flamboyant case. And a unique experience for everyone . . . from Mason to readers to chance!

**THEY'RE GOING
TO KILL ME**

by Alan Amos

SUSAN CAREY couldn't believe that her fiancé, Lance Hardy, had enemies who were stalking

(continued on back flap)



**THE CASE OF THE TERRIFIED
TYPIST**

BY
ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

THEY'RE GOING TO KILL ME

BY
ALAN AMOS

BACKFIRE

BY
EDNA SHERRY

Published for the
DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB
by Walter J. Black
ROSLYN, NEW YORK



ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of these books may be reproduced
in any form without permission in writing
from the publishers

THE CASE OF THE TERRIFIED TYPIST

Copyright © 1956

by Erle Stanley Gardner

THEY'RE GOING TO KILL ME

Copyright © 1955

by Doubleday & Company, Inc.

BACKFIRE

Copyright © 1956

by Edna Sherry

THE DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB
Printed in the United States of America

THE CASE OF THE TERRIFIED TYPIST

BY

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Published by special arrangement with
William Morrow & Company, Inc.

CHAPTER 1

PERRY MASON EYED THE BRIEF WHICH JACKSON, HIS LAW clerk, had submitted for his approval.

Della Street, sitting across the desk from the lawyer, correctly interpreted the expression on Mason's face.

"What was wrong with it?" she asked.

"Quite a few things," Mason said. "In the first place, I've had to shorten it from ninety-six pages to thirty-two."

"Good heavens," Della said. "Jackson told me he had already shortened it twice and he couldn't take out another word."

Mason grinned. "How are we fixed for typists, Della?"

"Stella is down with the flu and Annie is simply snowed under an avalanche of work."

"Then we'll have to get an outside typist," Mason told her. "This brief has to be ready for the printer tomorrow."

"All right. I'll call the agency and have a typist sent up right away," Della Street promised.

"In the meantime," Mason told her, "I'm going over this thing once again and see if I can't take out another four or five pages. Briefs shouldn't be written to impress the client. They should be concise, and above all, the writer should see that the Court has a clear grasp of the *facts* in the case before there is any argument about the *law*. The judges know the law. If they don't, they have clerks who can look it up."

Mason picked up a thick blue pencil, held it poised in his hand, and once more started reading through the sheaf of pages, which already showed signs of heavy editing. Della Street went to the outer office to telephone for a typist.

When she returned Mason looked up. "Get one?"

"The agency doesn't have one at the moment. That is, those they have are rather mediocre. I told them you wanted one who is fast, accurate and willing; that you didn't want to have to read this thing through again and find a lot of typographical errors."

Mason nodded, went on with his editing. "When can we expect one, Della?"

"They promised to have someone who would finish it by two-thirty tomorrow afternoon. But they said it might be a while before they could locate just the girl they wanted. I told them there were thirty-two pages."

"Twenty-nine and a half," Mason corrected, smilingly. "I've just cut out another two and a half pages."

Mason was just finishing his final editing half an hour later when Gertie, the office receptionist, opened the door and said, "The typist is here, Mr. Mason."

Mason nodded and stretched back in his chair. Della started to pick up the brief, but hesitated as Gertie came in and carefully closed the door behind her.

"What's the trouble, Gertie?"

"What did you say to frighten her, Mr. Mason?"

Mason glanced at Della Street.

"Heavens," Della said, "I didn't talk with *her* at all. We just rang up Miss Mosher at the agency."

"Well," Gertie said, lowering her voice, "this girl's scared to death."

Mason flashed a quick smile at Della Street. Gertie's tendency to romanticize and dramatize every situation was so well known that it was something of an office joke.

"What did *you* do to frighten her, Gertie?"

"Me! What did *I* do? Nothing! I was answering a call at the switchboard. When I turned around, this girl was standing there by the reception desk. I hadn't heard her come in. She tried to say something, but she could hardly talk. She just stood there. I didn't think so much of it at the time, but afterward, when I got to thinking it over, I realized that she was sort of holding on to the desk. I'll bet her knees were weak and she—"

"Never mind what you thought," Mason interrupted, puzzled. "Let's find out what happened, Gertie. What did you tell her?"

"I just said, 'I guess you're the new typist,' and she nodded. I said, 'Well, you sit over at that desk and I'll get the work for you.' "

"And what did she do?"

"She went over to the chair and sat down at the desk."

Mason said, "All right, Gertie. Thanks for telling us."

"She's absolutely terrified," Gertie insisted.

"Well, that's fine," Mason said. "Some girls are that way when they're starting on a new job. As I remember, Gertie, *you* had *your* troubles when you first came here, didn't you?"

"Troubles!" Gertie exclaimed. "Mr. Mason, after I got in the office and realized I'd forgotten to take the gum out of my mouth, I was just absolutely gone. I turned to jelly. I didn't know what to do. I—"

"Well, get back to the board," Mason told her. "I think I can hear it buzzing from here."

"Oh Lord, yes," Gertie said. "I can hear it now myself."

She jerked open the door and made a dash for the switchboard in the outer office.

Mason handed Della Street the brief and said, "Go out and get her started, Della."

When Della Street came back at the end of ten minutes Mason asked, "How's our terrified typist, Della?"

Della Street said, "If that's a terrified typist, let's call Miss Mosher and tell her to frighten all of them before sending them out."

"Good?" Mason asked.

"Listen," Della Street said.

She eased open the door to the outer office. The sound of clattering typewriter keys came through in a steady staccato.

"Sounds like hail on a tin roof," Mason said.

Della Street closed the door. "I've never seen anything like it. That girl pulled the typewriter over to her, ratcheted in the paper, looked at the copy, put her hands over the keyboard and that typewriter literally exploded into action. And yet, somehow, Chief, I think Gertie *was* right. I think she became frightened at the idea of coming up here. It may be that she knows something about you, or your fame has caused her to become self-conscious. After all," Della Street added dryly, "you're not entirely unknown, you know."

"Well," Mason said, "let's get at that pile of mail and skim off a few of the important letters. At that rate the brief will be done in plenty of time."

Della Street nodded.

"You have her at the desk by the door to the law library?"

"That seemed to be the only place to put her, Chief. I fixed up the desk there when I knew we were going to need an extra typist."

You know how Stella is about anyone using *her* typewriter. She thinks a strange typist throws it all out of kilter."

Mason nodded, said, "If this girl is good, Della, you might arrange to keep her on for a week or two. We can keep her busy, can't we?"

"I'll say."

"Better ring up Miss Mosher and tell her."

Della Street hesitated. "Would it be all right if we waited until we've had a chance to study her work? She's fast, all right, but we'd better be sure she's accurate."

Mason nodded, said, "Good idea, Della. Let's wait and see."

CHAPTER 2

DELLA STREET PLACED A SHEAF OF PAGES ON MASON'S DESK. "Those are the first ten pages of the brief, Chief."

Mason looked at the typewritten sheets, gave a low whistle and said, "Now *that's* what I call typing!"

Della Street picked up one of the pages, tilted it so that the light reflected from the smooth surface. "I've tried this with two or three sheets," she said, "and I can't see where there's been a single erasure. She has a wonderful touch and she certainly is hammering it out."

Mason said, "Ring up Miss Mosher. Find out something about this girl. What's her name, Della?"

"Mae Wallis."

"Get Miss Mosher on the line."

Della Street picked up the telephone, said to Gertie at the switchboard, "Mr. Mason wants Miss Mosher at the secretarial agency, Gertie. . . . Never mind, I'll hold the line."

A moment later Della Street said, "Hello, Miss Mosher? . . . Oh, she is? . . . Well, I'm calling about the typist she sent up to Mr. Mason's office. This is Della Street, Mr. Mason's secretary. . . . Are you sure? . . . Well, she must have left a note somewhere. . . . Yes, yes . . . well, I'm sorry. . . . No, we don't want *two* girls.

. . . No, no. Miss Mosher sent one up—a Mae Wallis. I'm trying to find out whether she'll be available for steady work during the next week. . . . Please ask Miss Mosher to call when she comes in."

Della Street hung up the phone, turned to Perry Mason. "Miss Mosher is out. The girl she left in charge doesn't know about anyone having been sent up. She found a note on the desk to get us a typist. It was a memo Miss Mosher had left before she went out. The names of three girls were on it, and this assistant has been trying to locate the girls. One of them was laid up with flu, another one was on a job, and she was trying to locate the third when I called in."

"That's not like Miss Mosher," Mason said. "She's usually very efficient. When she sent this girl up, she should have destroyed the memo. Oh, well, it doesn't make any difference."

"Miss Mosher's due back in about an hour," Della Street said. "I left word for her to call when she comes in."

Again Mason tackled the work on his desk, stopping to see a client who had a three-thirty appointment, then returning to dictation.

At four-thirty Della Street went out to the outer office, came back and said, "She's still going like a house afire, Chief. She's really pounding them out."

Mason said, "That copy had been pretty badly hashed up and blue-penciled with strike-outs and interlineations."

"It doesn't seem to bother her a bit," Della Street said. "There's lightning in that girl's finger tips. She—"

The telephone on Della Street's desk shrilled insistently. Della Street, with her hand on the receiver, finished the sentence, ". . . certainly knows how to play a tune on a keyboard."

She picked up the receiver, said, "Hello. . . . Oh, yes, Miss Mosher. We were calling about the typist you sent up. . . . What? . . . You didn't? . . . Mae Wallis? . . . She *said* she came from your agency. She *said* you sent her. . . . Why, yes, that's what I understood she *said*. . . . Well, I'm sorry, Miss Mosher. There's been some mistake—but this girl's certainly competent. . . . Why, yes, she's got the work almost finished. I'm terribly sorry. I'll speak with her and—Are you going to be there for a while? . . . Well, I'll speak with her and call you back. But that's what she *said* . . . yes, from your agency. . . . All right, let me call you back."

Della Street dropped the phone into its cradle.

"Mystery?" Mason asked.

"I'll say. Miss Mosher says *she* hasn't sent anyone up. She's had a hard time getting girls lined up, particularly ones with qualifications to suit you."

"Well, she got one this time," Mason said, fingering through the brief. "Or at least *someone* got her."

"So what do we do?" Della Street asked.

"By all means, find out where she came from. Are you sure she said Miss Mosher sent her?"

"That's what Gertie said."

"Are you," Mason asked, "going *entirely* on what Gertie said?" Della Street nodded.

"You didn't talk it over with Miss Wallis?"

"No. She was out there waiting to go to work. While I was talking with you, she found where the paper and carbons were kept in the desk. She'd ratcheted them into the machine, and just held out her hand for the copy. She asked if I wanted an original and three carbons. I said that we only used an original and two for stuff that was going to the printer. She said she had one extra carbon in the machine, but that she wouldn't bother to take it out. She said that she'd only make an original and two on the next. Then she put the papers down on the desk, held her fingers poised over the keyboard for a second, then started banging out copy."

"Permit me," Mason said, "to call your attention to something which clearly demonstrates the fallacy of human testimony. You were doubtless sincere in telling Miss Mosher that Mae Wallis said she had been sent up from her agency, but if you will recall Gertie's exact words, you will remember that she said the girl seemed frightened and self-conscious, so Gertie asked her if she was the new typist. The girl nodded, and Gertie showed her to the desk. At no time did Gertie say to us that she asked her if Miss Mosher had sent her."

"Well," Della Street said, "I had the distinct impression—"

"Certainly you did," Mason said. "So did I. Only long years of cross-examining witnesses have trained me to listen carefully to what a person actually says. I am quite certain that Gertie never told us she had specifically asked this girl if she came from Miss Mosher's agency."

"Well, where *could* she have come from?"

"Let's get her in and ask her," Mason said. "And let's not let her get away, Della. I'd like to catch up on some of this back work tomorrow, and this girl is really a wonder."

Della Street nodded, left her desk, went to the outer office, returned in a moment and made motions of powdering her nose.

"Did you leave word?" Mason asked.

"Yes, I told Gertie to send her in as soon as she came back."

"How's the brief coming?"

Della Street said, "She's well along with it. The work's on her desk. It hasn't been separated yet. The originals and carbons are together. She certainly does neat work, doesn't she?"

Mason nodded, tilted back in his swivel chair, lit a cigarette and said, "Well, we'll wait until she shows up and see what she has to say for herself, Della. When you stop to think about this, it presents an intriguing problem."

After Mason had smoked a leisurely cigarette Della Street once more went to the outer office and again returned.

Mason frowned, said, "She's probably one of those high-strung girls who use up a lot of nervous energy banging away at the typewriter and then go for a complete rest, smoking a cigarette or . . ."

"Or?" Della Street asked, as Mason paused.

". . . or taking a drink. Now, wait a minute, Della. Although there's nothing particularly confidential about that brief, if we keep her on here for four or five days, she's going to be doing some stuff that *is* confidential. Suppose you slip down to the powder room, Della, and see if perhaps our demon typist has a little flask in her purse and is now engaged in chewing on a clove."

"Also," Della Street said, "I'll take a whiff to see if I smell any marijuana smoke."

"Know it when you smell it?" Mason asked, smiling.

"Of course," she retorted. "I wouldn't be working for one of the greatest trial attorneys in the country without having learned at least to recognize some of the more common forms of law violation."

"All right," Mason said. "Go on down and tell her that we want to see her, Della. Try and chat with her informally for a minute and size her up a bit. You didn't talk with her very much, did you?"

"Just got her name, and that's about all. I remember asking her how she spelled her first name, and she told me M-A-E."

Mason nodded. Della Street left the room and was back within a couple of minutes.

"She isn't there, Chief."

"Well, where the devil *is* she?" Mason asked.

Della Street shrugged her shoulders. "She just got up and went out."

"Say anything to Gertie about where she was going?"

"Not a word. She just got up and walked out, and Gertie assumed she was going to the washroom."

"Now that's strange," Mason said. "Isn't that room kept locked?"

Della Street nodded.

"She should have asked for a key," Mason said. "Even if she didn't know it was locked, she'd have asked Gertie how to find it. How about her hat and coat?"

"Apparently she wasn't wearing any. She has her purse with her."

"Run out and pick up the last of the work she was doing, will you, Della? Let's take a look at it."

Della Street went out and returned with the typed pages. Mason looked them over.

"She has a few pages to go," Della Street said.

Mason pursed his lips, said, "It shouldn't take her long, Della, I certainly cut the insides out of those last few pages. That's where Jackson was waxing eloquent and bombarding the Court with a peroration on liberties, constitutional rights and due process of law."

"He was so proud of that," Della Street said. "You didn't take it *all* out, did you?"

"I took out most of it," Mason said. "An appellate court isn't interested in eloquence. It's interested in the law and the facts to which it is going to apply the law."

"Good Lord, Della, do you realize that if the appellate judges tried to read every line of all of the briefs that are submitted to them, they could work for twelve hours each day without doing one other thing, and still couldn't read the briefs?"

"Good heavens, no! Aren't they supposed to read them?"

"Theoretically, yes," Mason said. "But actually, it's a practical impossibility."

"So what do they do?"

"Most of them look through the briefs, get the law points, skip

the impassioned pleas, then turn the briefs over to their law clerks.

"It's my experience that a man does a lot better when he sets forth an absolutely impartial, thoroughly honest statement of facts, including those that are unfavorable to his side as well as those that are favorable, thus giving the appellate court the courtesy of assuming the judge knows the law."

"The attorney can be of help in letting the judge know the case to which the law is to be applied and the facts in the case. But if the judge didn't know what the law was, he wouldn't have been placed on the appellate bench in the first place. Della, what the devil *do* you suppose happened to that girl?"

"She must be in the building somewhere."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, there again—well, it's just one of those presumptions. She certainly is coming back for her money. She put in a whale of an afternoon's work."

"She should have stayed to finish the brief," Mason said. "It wouldn't have taken her over another forty or fifty minutes, at the rate she was working."

"Chief," Della Street said, "you seem to be acting on the assumption that she's walked out and left us."

"It's a feeling I have."

Della Street said, "She probably went down to the cigar counter to buy some cigarettes."

"In which event, she'd have been back long before this."

"Yes, I suppose so. But . . . but, Chief, she's bound to collect the money for the work she's done."

Mason carefully arranged the pages of the brief. "Well, she's helped us out of quite a hole." He broke off as a series of peculiarly spaced knocks sounded on the corridor door of his private office.

"That will be Paul Drake," Mason said. "I wonder what brings him around. Let him in, Della."

Della Street opened the door. Paul Drake, head of the Drake Detective Agency, with offices down the corridor by the elevator, grinned at them and said, "What were *you* people doing during all of the excitement?"

"Excitement?" Mason asked.

"Cops crawling all over the building," Drake said. "And you

two sitting here engaged in the prosaic activities of running a humdrum law office."

"Darned if we weren't," Mason said. "Sit down, Paul. Have a cigarette. Tell us what it's all about. We've been putting in our time writing briefs."

"You would," Drake told him, sliding down into the big overstuffed chair reserved for clients, and lighting a cigarette.

"What's the trouble?" Mason asked.

"Police chasing some dame up here on this floor," Drake said. "Didn't they search your office?"

Mason flashed a swift, warning glance at Della Street.

"Not that I know of."

"They must have."

Mason said to Della Street, "See if Gertie's gone home, Della."

Della Street opened the door to the outer office, said, "She's just going home, Chief."

"Can you catch her?"

"Sure. She's just at the door." Della Street raised her voice, "Oh, Gertie! Can you look in here for a minute?"

Gertie, ready to leave for the evening, came to stand in the doorway of the office. "What is it, Mr. Mason?"

"Any officers in here this afternoon?" Mason asked.

"Oh yes," Gertie said. "There was some sort of a burglary down the corridor."

Again Mason caught Della's eye.

"What did they want?" Mason asked.

"Wanted to know if everyone in the office was accounted for, whether you had anyone in with you, and whether we had seen anything of a girl burglar."

"And what did you tell them?" Mason asked, keeping his voice entirely without expression.

"I told them you were alone, except for Miss Street, your confidential secretary. That we only had the regular employees here in the office and a relief typist from our regular agency who was working on a brief."

"And then what?"

"Then they left. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," Mason said. "I was just wondering, that's all."

"Should I have notified you? I know you don't like to be disturbed when you're working on correspondence."

"No, it's all right," Mason said. "I just wanted to get it straight, Gertie. That's all. Good night, and have a good time."

"How did you know I have a date?" Gertie asked.

"I saw it in your eyes," Mason said, grinning. "Good night, Gertie."

"Good night," she said.

"Well," Drake said, "there you are. If you'd happened to have had some woman client in your private office, the police would have insisted on talking to you and on getting a look at the client."

"You mean they searched the floor?" Mason asked.

"They really went through the joint," Drake told him. "You see, the office where the trouble occurred is right across from the women's restroom. One of the stenographers, opening the restroom door, saw this young woman whose back was toward her fumbling with the lock on the office door, trying first one key then another.

"The stenographer became suspicious. She stood there watching. About the fourth or fifth key, the girl managed to get into the office."

"What office was it?" Mason asked.

"The South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company."

"Go on, Paul."

"Well, this stenographer was a pretty smart babe. She telephoned the manager of the building and then she went out to stand by the elevators to see if this girl would come out and take an elevator. If she did that, the stenographer had made up her mind she'd try to follow."

"That could have been dangerous," Mason said.

"I know, but this is one very spunky gal."

"She could have recognized the woman?"

"Not the woman. But she knew the way the woman was dressed. You know the way women are, Perry. She hadn't seen the woman's face, but she knew the exact color and cut of her skirt and jacket, the shade of her stockings and shoes; the way she had her hair done, the color of her hair, and all that."

"I see," Mason said, glancing surreptitiously at Della Street. "That description was, of course, given to the police?"

"Oh, yes."

"And they didn't find her?"

"No, they didn't find a thing. But the manager of the building gave them a passkey to get into the office of the gem importing company. The place looked as if a cyclone had struck it. Evidently, this girl had made a very hurried search. Drawers had been pulled out, papers dumped out on the floor, a chair had been overturned, a typewriter stand upset, with the typewriter lying on its side on the floor."

"No sign of the girl?"

"No sign of anyone. The two partners who own the business, chaps named Jefferson and Irving, came in right on the heels of the police. They had been out to lunch, and they were amazed to find how much destruction had taken place during their brief absence."

Mason said, "The girl probably ran down the stairs to another floor and took the elevator from there."

Drake shook his head. "The building manager got this stenographer who had given the description, and they went down to stand at the elevators. They watched everyone who went out. When the police showed up—and believe me, that was only a matter of a minute or two; these radio cars are right on the job—well, when the police showed up, the manager of the building briefed them on what had happened. So the police went up and the girl and the manager continued to stand at the elevators. The police weren't conspicuous about it, but they dropped in at every office on the floor, just checking up."

"And I suppose the restrooms," Mason said.

"Oh, sure. They sent a couple of girls into the restrooms right away. That was the first place they looked."

"Well," Mason said, "we seem to be doing all right, Paul. If I don't go out and get tangled up in crime, crime comes to me—at least indirectly. So Jefferson and Irving came in right after the police arrived, is that right?"

"That's right."

"And the manager of the building was down there at the elevators, waiting for this girl to come out?"

"That's right."

Mason said, "He knew, of course, the office that the girl was burglarizing?"

"Of course. He told the police what office it was and all about it. He even gave them a passkey so they could get in."

"And then he waited down there at the elevators with the stenographer who had seen this woman burglarizing the office?"

"That's right."

"A lot of elaborate precautions to catch a sneak thief."

"Well, I'm not supposed to talk about clients, Perry, and I wouldn't to anyone else, but as you know, I represent the owners of the building. It seems this gem importing company is expecting half a million dollars' worth of diamonds before long."

"The deuce!"

"That's right. You know the way they do things these days—insure 'em and ship 'em by mail."

"The strange thing," Mason said thoughtfully, "is that if Irving and Jefferson came in right on the heels of the police, with the manager of the building standing down there at the elevators, he didn't stop them and tell them that they'd find police in their office and—

"What's the matter?" Mason asked, as Drake suddenly sat bolt upright.

Drake made the motion of hitting himself on the head.

"What are you trying to do?" Mason asked.

"Knock some brains into my thick skull," Drake said. "Good Lord, Perry! The manager of the building was telling me all about this, and that point never occurred to me. Let me use the phone."

Drake moved over to the phone, called the office of the manager and said, "Paul Drake talking. I was thinking about this trouble down at the gem importing company. According to police, Irving and Jefferson, the two partners who run the place, came in while they were searching."

The receiver made squawking noises.

"Well," Drake said, "*you* were standing down at the foot of the elevators with this stenographer. Why didn't you tell them that police were in their office—" Drake was interrupted by another series of squawking noises from the receiver. After a moment the detective said, "Want me to look into it, or do you want to? . . . Okay. Call me back, will you? I'm up here in Perry Mason's office at the moment. . . . Well, wait a minute. The switchboard is disconnected for the night, I guess. I'll catch the call at my—"

"Hold it, Paul," Della Street interrupted. "I'll connect this line with the switchboard, so you can get a call back on this number."

"Okay," Drake said into the telephone. "Mason's secretary will fix the line, so this telephone will be connected on the main trunk line. Just give me a buzz when you find out about it, will you?"

Drake hung up the telephone, went back to the client's chair, grinned at Mason and said, "You'll pardon me for taking all the credit for your idea, Perry, but this is my bread and butter. I couldn't tell him the idea never occurred to me until I got to talking with you."

"No credit," Mason said. "The thing is obvious."

"Of course it's obvious," Drake said. "That's why I'm kicking myself for not thinking of it right at the start. The trouble was, we were so interested in finding out how this girl vanished into thin air that I for one completely overlooked wondering how it happened that the manager didn't stop Jefferson and his partner and tell them what was happening."

"The manager was probably excited," Mason said.

"I'll tell the world he was excited. Do you know him?"

"Not the new one. I've talked with him on the phone, and Della Street's talked with him. I haven't met him."

"He's an excitable chap. One of those hair-triggered guys who does everything right now. At that, he did a pretty good job of sewing up the building."

Mason nodded. "They certainly went to a lot of trouble trying to catch one lone female prowler."

The telephone rang.

"That's probably for you," Della Street said, nodding to Paul Drake.

Drake picked up the telephone, said, "Hello. . . . Yes, this is Paul Drake. . . . Oh, I see. Well, of course, that could have happened, all right. Funny you didn't see them. . . . I see. Well, thanks a lot. I just thought we ought to check on that angle. . . . Oh, that's all right. There's no reason why that *should* have occurred to you. . . . Not at all. I'd been intending to ask you about it, but it slipped my mind. I thought I'd better check up on it before knocking off for the night. . . . Okay. Thanks. We'll see what we can find out."

Drake hung up, grinned at Mason and said, "Now the guy thinks I was working overtime, cudgeling my brain on his problem."

"What about the two partners?" Mason asked. "What's the answer?"

"Why, they evidently walked right by him and got in the elevator. Of course, the manager and the stenographer were watching the people who were getting *out* of the elevators. At that time, right after lunch, there's quite a bit of traffic in the elevators.

"The manager just finished talking with Jefferson on the phone. Jefferson said *he* saw the manager and this girl standing there and started to ask him a question about something pertaining to the building. Then he saw from the way the man was standing that he was evidently waiting for someone, so the two partners just went on past and got in the elevator just as it was starting up."

Mason said, "That sounds plausible, all right. What do you know about Jefferson and Irving? Anything?"

"Not too much. The South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company decided to open an office here. Their business is mostly wholesale diamonds. They have their main office in Johannesburg, but there's a branch office in Paris.

"This deal was made through the Paris office. They wrote the manager of the building, received a floor plan and rental schedules, signed a lease and paid six months' rent in advance.

"They sent Duane Jefferson out from South Africa. He's to be in charge. Walter Irving came from the Paris office. He's the assistant."

"Are they doing business?"

"Not yet. They're just getting started. I understand they're waiting for a high-class burglarproof safe to be installed. They've advertised for office help and have purchased some office furniture."

"Did those two chaps bring any stock of diamonds with them?" Mason asked.

"Nope. Unfortunately, things aren't done that way any more, which has cost us private detectives a lot of business. Gems are sent by insured mail now. A half a million dollars' worth of stones are sent just as you'd send a package of soiled clothes. The shipper pays a fee for adequate insurance and deducts it as a business cost. If the gems are lost, the insurance company writes out its check. It's an infallible, foolproof system."

"I see," Mason said thoughtfully. "In that case, what the devil was this girl after?"

"That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question."

"It was an empty office—as far as gems go?"

"That's right. Later on, when the first shipment of gems arrives, they'll have burglar alarms all over the place, an impregnable safe and all the trimmings. Right now it's an empty shell.

"Gosh, Perry, it used to be that a messenger would carry a shipment of jewels, and private detective agencies would be given jobs as bodyguards, special watchmen and all of that. Now, some postal employee who doesn't even carry a gun comes down the corridor with a package worth half a million, says, 'Sign here,' and the birds sign their name, toss the package in the safe and that's all there is to it.

"It's all done on a basis of percentages. The insurance business is tough competition. How'd you like it if an insurance company would insure your clients against any loss from any type of litigation? Then your clients would pay premiums, deduct them as a business cost, and—"

"The trouble with that, Paul," Mason said, "is that when they come to lock a guy in the gas chamber it would take an awful big insurance check to make him feel indifferent."

Drake grinned. "Damned if it wouldn't," he agreed.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN PAUL DRAKE HAD LEFT THE OFFICE MASON TURNED TO Della Street.

"Well, what do *you* think, Della?"

Della Street said, "I'm afraid it could be—it was about the same time and . . . well, sometimes I think we don't pay enough attention to Gertie because she *does* exaggerate. Perhaps this girl really was frightened, just as Gertie said, and . . . well, it could have been."

"Then she must have come in here," Mason said, "because she

knew her escape was cut off. There was no other place for her to go. She had to enter some office. So she came in here blind and was trying to think of some problem that would enable her to ask for a consultation with me, when Gertie let the cat out of the bag that we were expecting a typist."

Della Street nodded.

"Go out and look around," Mason said. "I'm going out and do a little scouting myself."

"What do you want me to do?" Della Street asked.

"Look over the typewriter she was using. Look over the typewriter desk. Then go down to the restroom and look around. See if you can find anything."

"Heavens, the police have been all through the restroom."

"Look around, anyhow, Della. See if she hid anything. There's always the chance she might have had something in her possession that was pretty hot and she decided to cache it someplace and come back for it later. I'll go down and get some cigarettes."

Mason walked down the corridor and rang for an elevator, went down to the foyer and over to the cigar stand. The girl behind the counter, a tall blonde with frosty blue eyes, smiled impersonally.

"Hello," Mason said.

At the personal approach the eyes became even more coldly cautious. "Good afternoon," the girl said.

"I am looking for a little information," Mason said.

"We sell cigars and cigarettes, chewing gum, candy, newspapers and magazines."

Mason laughed. "Well, don't get me wrong."

"And don't get *me* wrong."

"I'm a tenant in the building," Mason said, "and have been for some time. You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes, I bought the cigar stand from Mr. Carson. I—Oh, I place you now! You're Perry Mason, the famous lawyer! Excuse me, Mr. Mason. I thought you were . . . well, you know a lot of people think that just because a girl is running a cigar counter she wraps herself up with every package of cigarettes she sells."

Mason smiled. "Pardon *me*. I should have introduced myself first."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Mason?"

"Probably nothing," Mason said. "I wanted a little information,

but if you're new here, I'm afraid you won't know the tenants in the building well enough to help me."

"I'm afraid that's right, Mr. Mason. I don't have too good a memory for names and faces. I'm trying to get to know the regular customers. It's quite a job."

Mason said, "There are a couple of relative newcomers here in the building. One of them is named Jefferson, the other Irving."

"Oh, you mean the ones that have that gem importing company?"

"Those are the ones. Know them?"

"I do *now*. We had a lot of excitement here this afternoon, although I didn't know anything about it. It seems their office was broken into and—"

"They were pointed out to you?"

"Yes. One of them—Mr. Jefferson, I believe it was—stopped here for a package of cigarettes and was telling me all about it."

"But you didn't know them before?"

"You mean by sight?"

Mason nodded.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't help you, Mr. Mason."

"Well, that's all right," Mason told her.

"Why do you ask, Mr. Mason? Are you interested in the case?"

Mason smiled. "Indirectly," he said.

"You're so mysterious. I may not have recognized you when you walked up, but I have heard so much about you that I feel I know you very well indeed. What's an indirect interest, Mr. Mason?"

"Nothing worth talking about."

"Well, remember that I'm rather centrally located down here. If I can ever pick up any information for you, all you have to do is to let me know. I'll be glad to co-operate in any way that I can. Perhaps I can't be so efficient now, since I am relatively new here, but I'll get people spotted and . . . well, just remember, if there's *anything* I can do, I'll be glad to."

"Thanks," Mason told her.

"Did you want me to talk with Mr. Jefferson some more? He was quite friendly and chatted away with me while I was waiting on him. I didn't encourage him, but I have a feeling . . . well, you know how those things are, Mr. Mason."

Mason grinned. "You mean that he's lonely and he likes your looks?"

Her laugh showed that she was flustered. "Well, I didn't exactly say that."

"But you feel he could be encouraged?"

"Do you want me to try?"

"Would you like to?"

"Whatever you say, Mr. Mason."

The lawyer handed her a folded twenty dollar bill. "Try and find out just where the manager of the building was when Jefferson and Irving came back from lunch."

"Thank *you*, Mr. Mason. I feel guilty taking this money, because now that you mention the manager of the building I know the answer."

"What is it?"

"They came in while the manager and a young woman were standing watching the elevators. One of the men started to approach the manager as though he wanted to ask him a question, but he saw the manager was preoccupied watching the elevators, so he veered off.

"I didn't think anything about it at the time, but it comes back to me now that those were the two men who were pointed out to me later. I hope that's the information you wanted, Mr. Mason."

"It is, thanks."

"Thank *you*, Mr. Mason. If there's ever anything I can do for you I'd be glad to, and it isn't going to cost you a twenty every time either."

"Thanks," Mason said, "but I never want something for nothing."

"*You* wouldn't," she said, giving him her most dazzling smile.

Mason rode back up in the elevator.

Della Street, in a state of subdued excitement, was waiting to pounce on him as soon as he opened the door of his private office.

"Good heavens!" she said. "We're mixed in it up to our eyebrows."

"Go on," Mason said. "What are we mixed in?"

Della Street produced a small, square tin box.

"What," Mason asked, "do you have there?"

"A great big hunk of semi-dried chewing gum."

"And where did you get it?"

"It was plastered on the underside of the desk where Mae Wallis had been working."

"Let's take a look, Della."

Della Street slid open the lid of the box and showed Mason the chewing gum. "This is just the way it was plastered to the underside of the desk," she said.

"And what did you do?"

"Took an old safety razor blade and cut it off. You can see there is an impression of fingers where she pushed the gum up against the desk."

Mason looked at Della Street somewhat quizzically. "Well," he said, "you *are* becoming the demon detective, Della. So now we have a couple of fingerprints?"

"Exactly."

"Well," Mason told her, "we're hardly going to the police with them, Della."

"No, I suppose not."

"So in that case, since we aren't particularly anxious to co-operate with the police, it would have been just as well if you had destroyed the fingerprints in removing the gum, Della."

"Wait," she told him. "You haven't seen anything yet. You observe that that's a terrific wad of gum, Chief. A girl could hardly have had all that in her mouth at one time."

"You think it was put there in installments?" Mason asked.

"I think it was put there for a purpose," Della Street said. "I thought so as soon as I saw it."

"What purpose?" Mason asked.

Della Street turned the box over on Mason's desk so that the wad of gum fell out on the blotter. "This," she said, "is the side that was against the desk."

Mason looked at the coruscations which gleamed through a few places in the chewing gum. "Good Lord, Della!" he said. "How many are there?"

"I don't know," Della said. "I didn't want to touch it. This is just the way it came from the desk. You can see parts of two really large-sized diamonds there."

Mason studied the wad of chewing gum.

"Now then," he said thoughtfully, "this becomes evidence, Della. We're going to have to be careful that nothing happens to it."

She nodded.

"I take it the gum is hard enough so it will keep all right?" Mason asked.

"It's a little soft on the inside, but now that the air's getting to the top, the gum is hardening rapidly."

Mason took the small tin box, replaced the gum and studied it, tilting the box backwards and forwards so as to get a good view of both the top and bottom sides of the chewing gum. "Two of those fingerprints are remarkably good latents, Della," he said. "The third one isn't so good. It looks more like the side of the finger. But those two impressions are perfect."

Della Street nodded.

"Probably the thumb and the forefinger. Which side of the desk was it on, Della?"

"Over on the right-hand side of the desk."

"Then those are probably the impressions of the right thumb and forefinger."

"So what do we do?" Della Street asked. "Do we now call in the police?"

Mason hesitated a moment, said, "I want to know a little more about what's cooking, Della. You didn't find anything in the restroom?"

Della Street said, "I became a scavenger. I dug down into the container that they use for soiled paper towels—you know, they have a big metal box with a wedge-shaped cover on top that swings back and forth and you can shove towels in from each side."

Mason nodded. "Find anything, Della?"

"Someone had used the receptacle to dispose of a lot of love letters, and the disposal must either have been very, very hasty, or else the girl certainly took no precautions to keep anyone who might be interested from getting quite an eyeful. The letters hadn't even been torn through."

"Let's take a look at them," Mason said.

Della Street said, "They were all in one bunch, and I salvaged the whole outfit. Gosh, I'm glad the rush hour is over. I would have felt pretty self-conscious if someone had come in and caught me digging down in that used towel container!"

Mason's nod showed that he was preoccupied as he examined the letters.

"What do you make of them?" Della Street asked.

"Well," Mason said thoughtfully, "either, as you suggested, the person who left them there was in very much of a hurry, or this was a plant and the person wanted to be certain that the letters would be noticed and could be read without any difficulty. In other words, it's almost too good. A girl trying to dispose of letters would hardly have been so careless about dropping them into the used-towel receptacle in one piece—unless it was a plant of some kind?"

"But how about a man?" Della Street asked. "Apparently, the letters were sent to a man and—"

"And they were found in the *ladies'* restroom," Mason pointed out.

"Yes, that's so."

Mason studied one of the letters. "Now, these are rather peculiar, Della. They are written in a whimsical vein. Listen to this:

"My dearest Prince Charming,

"When you rode up on your charger the other night, there were a lot of things I wanted to say to you, but I couldn't think of them until after you had left.

"Somehow the glittering armor and that formidable helmet made you seem so virtuous and righteous that I felt a distant creature from another and more sordid world. . . . You perhaps don't know it, Prince Charming, but you made quite a handsome spectacle, sitting there with the visor of your helmet raised, your horse with his head down, his flanks heaving and sweating from the exertion of carrying you on that last mission to rescue the damsel in distress, the setting sun reflecting from your polished armor . . ."

Mason paused, glanced up at Della Street, and said, "What the devil!"

"Take a look at the signature," Della Street said.

Mason turned over two pages and looked at the signature—"Your faithful and devoted Mae."

"You will notice the spelling," Della Street said. "It's M-A-E."

Mason pursed his lips thoughtfully, said, "Now, all we need, Della, is a murder to put us in a thoroughly untenable position."

"What position?"

"That of withholding important evidence from the police."

"You're not going to tell them anything about Mae Wallis?"

Mason shook his head. "I don't dare to, Della. They wouldn't make even the slightest effort to believe me. You can see the position I'd be in. I'd be trying to explain that while the police were making a search of the building in order to find the woman who had broken into the offices of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company, I was sitting innocently in my office; that I had no idea that I should have mentioned the typist who dropped in from nowhere at exactly the right time, who seemed completely terrified, who was supposed to have been sent from Miss Mosher's agency, even though, at the time, I *knew* that she hadn't been sent from Miss Mosher's agency."

"Yes," Della Street said, smiling. "With your connections and reputation, I can see that the police would be at least skeptical."

"Very, very skeptical," Mason said. "And since it's bad for the police to develop habits of skepticism, Della, we'll see that they aren't placed in an embarrassing position."

CHAPTER 4

IT WAS THREE DAYS LATER WHEN PERRY MASON UNLOCKED THE door of his private office and found Della Street waiting for him, his desk carefully cleaned and for once the pile of mail far to one side.

"Chief," Della Street said in a voice of low urgency, "I've been trying to get you. Sit down and let me talk with you before anyone knows you're in."

Mason hung up his hat in the hat closet, seated himself at the desk, glanced at Della Street quizzically and said, "You're certainly worked up. What gives?"

"We have our murder case."

"What do you mean 'our murder case'?"

"Remember what you said about the diamonds? That we only needed a murder case to make the thing perfect?"

Mason came bolt upright in his chair. "What is it, Della? Give me the low-down."

"No one seems to know what it's all about, but Duane Jefferson of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company has been arrested for murder. Walter Irving, the other member of the company, is out there in the outer office waiting for you. There's a cablegram from the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company sent from South Africa, advising you that they are instructing their local representative to pay you two thousand American dollars as a retainer. They want you to represent Duane Jefferson."

"Murder?" Mason said. "Who the devil is the corpse, Della?"

"I don't know. I don't know very much about it. All I know is about the cablegram that came and the fact that Walter Irving has been in three times to see you. He asked that I notify him just as soon as you arrived, and this last time he decided that he wouldn't even take chances on the delay incident to a telephone call but was going to wait. He wants to see you the minute you come in."

"Send him in, Della. Let's find out what this is all about. Where's that tin box?"

"In the safe."

Mason said, "Where's the desk Mae Wallis was using when she was here?"

"I moved it back into the far corner of the law library."

"Who moved it?"

"I had the janitor and one of his assistants take it in for us."

"How are you on chewing gum, Della?"

"Pretty good. Why?"

Mason said, "Chew some gum, then use it to plaster that wad with the diamonds in it back on the desk in exactly the same place you found it."

"But there'll be a difference in freshness, Chief. That other gum is dry and hard now, and the new gum that I chew will be moist and—"

"And it will dry out if there's a long enough interval," Mason interrupted.

"How long will the interval be?"

"That," Mason told her, "will depend entirely on luck. Send Walter Irving in, Della, and let's see what this is all about."

Della Street nodded and started for the outer office.

"And fix that gum up *right away*," Mason reminded her.

"While Irving is in here?"

Mason nodded.

Della Street went to the outer office and returned with Walter Irving, a well-dressed, heavy-set man who had evidently prepared for the interview by visiting a barber shop. His hair was freshly trimmed, his nails were polished, his face had the smooth pink-and-white appearance which comes from a shave and a massage.

He was about forty-five years old, with reddish-brown, expressionless eyes, and the manner of a man who would show no surprise or emotion if half of the building should suddenly cave in.

"Good morning, Mr. Mason. I guess you don't know me. I've seen you in the elevator and you've been pointed out to me as being the smartest criminal lawyer in the state."

"Thank you," Mason said, shaking hands, and then added dryly, "'Criminal lawyer' is a popular expression. I prefer to regard myself as a 'trial lawyer.'"

"Well, that's fine," Irving said. "I guess you received a cablegram from my company in South Africa, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"They've authorized me to pay you a retainer for representing my associate, Duane Jefferson."

"That cablegram is a complete mystery to me," Mason said. "What's it all about?"

"I'll come to that in a moment," Irving told him. "I want to get first things first."

"What do you mean?"

"Your fees."

"What about them?"

Irving raised steady eyes to Mason. "Things are different in South Africa."

"Just what are you getting at?"

"Just this," Irving said. "I'm here to protect the interests of my employers, the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company. It's a big, wealthy company. They want me to turn over a two-thousand-dollar retainer to you. They'd leave it to your discretion as to the balance of the fee. I won't do business that way. On this side of the water, criminal attorneys are inclined to grab all they can get. They—Oh, hell, Mr. Mason, what's the use of beat-

ing around the bush? My company has an idea that it's dealing with a barrister in a wig and gown. It doesn't have the faintest idea of how to deal with a criminal lawyer."

"Do you?" Mason asked.

"If I don't I'm sure as hell going to try and find out. I'm protecting my company. How much is it going to cost?"

"You mean the total fee?"

"The total fee."

Mason said, "Tell me about the case, just the general facts and I'll answer your question."

"The facts are utterly cockeyed. Police raided our office. Why, I don't know. They found some diamonds. Those diamonds had been planted. Neither Jefferson nor I had ever seen them before. Our company is just opening up its office here. Some people don't like that."

"What were the diamonds worth?"

"Something like a hundred thousand dollars retail."

"How does murder enter into it?"

"That I don't know."

"Don't you even know who was murdered?"

"A man named Baxter. He's a smuggler."

"Were these his diamonds—the ones the police found in your office?"

"How the hell would *I* know?"

Mason regarded the man for a few seconds, then said, "How the hell would *I* know?"

Irving grinned. "I'm a little touchy this morning."

"So am I. Suppose you start talking."

"All I can tell you for sure is that there's some kind of a frame-up involved. Jefferson never killed anyone. I've known him for years. My gosh, Mr. Mason, look at it this way. Here's a large, exceedingly reputable, ultraconservative company in South Africa. This company has known Duane Jefferson for years. As soon as they hear that he's been arrested, they're willing to put up whatever amount is required in order to secure the very best available representation.

"Mind you, they don't suggest they'll advance Jefferson money to retain counsel. The company itself instructed me to retain the best available counsel for Jefferson."

"And you suggested me?" Mason asked.

"No. I would have, but somebody beat me to it. I got a cable-gram authorizing me to draw a check on our local account in an amount of two thousand dollars and turn that money over to you so you could start taking the necessary legal steps immediately. Now if my company pays your fees, who will your client be?"

"Duane Jefferson."

"Suppose Jefferson tries to get you to do something that isn't in his best interests. What would you do—follow his instructions, or do what was best for him?"

"Why do you ask that question?"

"Duane is trying to protect some woman. He'd let himself get convicted before he'd expose her. He thinks she's wonderful. *I* think she's a clever, two-timing schemer who is out to frame him."

"Who is she?"

"I wish I knew. If I did, I'd have detectives on her trail within the next hour. The trouble is I don't know. I only know there *is* such a woman. She lost her head over Duane. He'll protect her."

"Married?"

"I don't think so. I don't know."

"What about the murder case?"

"It ties in with smuggling. Duane Jefferson sold a batch of diamonds to Munroe Baxter. That was through the South African office. Baxter asked Jefferson to arrange to have the diamonds cut, polished and delivered to our Paris office. Our Paris office didn't know the history of the transaction. It simply made delivery to Baxter on instructions of the South African office. Usually we try to know something about the people with whom we are dealing. Baxter juggled the deal between our two offices in such a way that each office thought the other one had done the investigating.

"Baxter had worked out one hell of a slick scheme. He had faked a perfect background of respectability."

"How did you find out about the smuggling?" Mason asked.

"His female accomplice broke down and confessed."

"Who is she?"

"A girl named Yvonne Manco."

"Tell me about it," Mason said.

"Didn't you read the account about a fellow jumping overboard from a cruise ship and committing suicide a while back?"

"Yes, I did," Mason said. "Wasn't *that* man's name Munroe Baxter?"

"Exactly."

"I knew I'd heard the name somewhere as soon as you mentioned it. How does the murder angle enter into it?"

Irving said, "Here's the general sketch. Yvonne Manco is a very beautiful young woman who sailed on a cruise ship around the world. She was the queen of the cruise. The ship touched at Naples. Yvonne started down the gangplank. She was met by Munroe Baxter, a man who had the appearance of a Frenchman, but the name, citizenship and passport of a United States citizen. You must understand all of these things in order to appreciate the sequence of events."

"Go ahead," Mason said.

"Apparently, Munroe Baxter had at one time been in love with Yvonne Manco. According to the story that was given to the passengers, they had been going together and then the affair had broken up through a misunderstanding.

"Whoever wrote that script did a beautiful job, Mr. Mason."

"It was a script?" Mason asked.

"Hell, yes. It was as phony as a three dollar bill."

"What happened?"

"The passengers naturally were interested. They saw this man burst through the crowd. They saw him embrace Yvonne Manco. They saw her faint in his arms. There was a beautiful romance, the spice of scandal, a page out of this beautiful young woman's past. It was touching; it was pathetic—and naturally, it caused an enormous amount of gossip."

Mason nodded.

"The ship was in Naples for two days. It sailed, and when it sailed Munroe Baxter was pleading with Yvonne Manco to marry him. He was the last man off the ship; then he stood on the pier and wept copiously, shedding crocodile tears."

"Go on," Mason said, interested.

"The ship sailed out into the Mediterranean. It stopped in Genoa. Munroe Baxter met the ship at the dock. Again Yvonne Manco swooned in his arms, again she refused to marry him, again the ship sailed.

"Then came the pay-off. As the ship was off Gibraltar a helicopter

hovered overhead. A man descended a rope ladder, dangled precariously from the last rung. The helicopter hovered over the deck of the ship, and Munroe Baxter dropped to the deck by the swimming pool, where Yvonne Manco was disporting herself in the sunlight in a seductive bathing suit."

"Romantic," Mason said.

"And opportune," Irving said dryly. "No one could resist such an impetuous, dramatic courtship. The passengers virtually forced Yvonne to give her consent. The captain married them on the high seas that night. The passengers turned the ship upside down in celebration. It was wonderful stuff."

"Yes, I can imagine," Mason said.

"And, of course," Irving went on, "since Baxter boarded the ship in that dramatic manner, without so much as a toothbrush or an extra handkerchief, how would the customs people suspect that Munroe Baxter was smuggling three hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds in a chamois-skin belt around his waist?"

"In the face of all that beautiful romance, who would have thought that Yvonne Manco had been Munroe Baxter's mistress for a couple of years, that she was his accomplice in a smuggling plot and that this courtship was all a dramatic hoax?"

"I see," Mason said.

Irving went on, "The stage was all set. Munroe Baxter, in the eyes of the passengers, was a crazy Frenchman, a United States citizen, of course, but one who had acquired all the excitability of the French.

"So, when the ship approached port and Yvonne Manco, dressed to the hilt, danced three times with the good-looking assistant purser, it was only natural that Munroe Baxter should stage a violent scene, threaten to kill himself, break into tears, dash to his stateroom and subsequently leap overboard after a frenzied scene in which Yvonne Manco threatened to divorce him."

"Yes," Mason said, "I remember the newspapers made quite a play of the story."

"It was made to order for press coverage," Irving said. "And who would have thought that the excitable Munroe Baxter carried with him three hundred thousand dollars in diamonds when he jumped overboard, that he was a powerful swimmer who could easily swim to a launch which was opportunely waiting at a prearranged spot.

and that later on he and the lovely Yvonne were to share the proceeds of a carefully written, superbly directed scenario, performed very cleverly for the sole purpose of fooling the customs authorities?"

"And it didn't?" Mason asked.

"Oh, but it did! Everything went like clockwork, except for one thing—Munroe Baxter didn't reappear to join Yvonne Manco. She went to the secluded motel which was to be their rendezvous. She waited and waited and waited and waited."

"Perhaps Baxter decided that a whole loaf was better than half a loaf," Mason said.

Irving shook his head. "It seems the lovely Yvonne Manco went to the accomplice who was waiting in the launch. At first, the accomplice told her that Baxter had never showed up. He told her that Baxter must have been seized by cramps while he was swimming underwater."

"Did this take place within the territorial waters of the United States?" Mason asked.

"Right at the approach to Los Angeles Harbor."

"In daylight?"

"No, just before daylight. You see, it was a cruise ship and it was gliding in at the earliest possible hour so the passengers could have a maximum time ashore for sightseeing."

"All right, Baxter was supposed to have drowned," Mason said.
"What happened?"

"Well, Yvonne Manco had a horrible suspicion. She thought that the accomplice in the launch might have held Baxter's head underwater and might have taken the money belt.

"Probably, she wouldn't have said anything at all, if it hadn't been for the fact that customs agents were also putting two and two together. They called on the lovely Yvonne Manco to question her about her 'husband' after it appeared that she and her 'husband' had sailed on another cruise ship as man and wife some eighteen months earlier."

"And Yvonne Manco broke down and told them the whole story?" Mason asked.

"Told them the whole story, including the part that it had been Duane Jefferson who had been involved in the sale of the jewels. So police became very much interested in Duane Jefferson, and

yesterday afternoon, on an affidavit of Yvonne Manco, a search warrant was issued and police searched the office."

"And recovered a hundred thousand dollars in gems?" Mason asked.

"Recovered a goodly assortment of diamonds," Irving said. "Let us say, perhaps a third of the value of the smuggled shipment."

"And the remaining two-thirds?"

Irving shrugged his shoulders.

"And the identification?" Mason asked.

Again Irving shrugged his shoulders.

"And where were these gems found?"

"Where someone had very cleverly planted them. You may remember the little flurry of excitement when an intruder was discovered in the office—the police asked us to check and see if anything had been taken. It never occurred to us to check *and see if anything had been planted.*"

"Where were the diamonds found?"

"In a package fastened to the back of a desk drawer with adhesive tape."

"And what does Duane Jefferson have to say about this?"

"What could he say?" Irving asked. "It was all news to him, just as it was to me."

"You can vouch for these facts?" Mason asked.

"I'll vouch for them. But I can't vouch for Duane's romantic, crazy notions of protecting this girl."

"She was the same girl who entered the office?"

"I think she was. Duane would have a fit and never speak to me again if he knew I ever entertained such a thought. You have to handle him with kid gloves where women are concerned. But if it comes to a showdown, *you're* going to have to drag this girl into it, and Duane Jefferson will cease to co-operate with you as soon as you mention her very existence."

Mason thought the matter over.

"Well?" Irving asked.

"Make out your check for two thousand dollars," Mason told him. "That will be on account of a five-thousand-dollar fee."

"What do you mean a five-thousand-dollar fee?"

"It won't be more than that."

"Including detectives?"

"No. You will have to pay expenses. I'm fixing fees."

"Damn it," Irving exploded. "If that bunch in the home office hadn't mentioned a two-thousand-dollar retainer, I could have got you to handle the whole case for two thousand."

Mason sat quietly facing Irving.

"Well, it's done now, and there's nothing I can do about it," Irving said, taking from his wallet a check already made out to the lawyer. He slid the check across the desk to Perry Mason.

Mason said to Della Street, "Make a receipt, Della, and put on the receipt that this is a retainer on behalf of Duane Jefferson."

"What's the idea?" Irving asked.

"Simply to show that I'm not responsible to you or your company but only to my client."

Irving thought that over.

"Any objections?" Mason asked.

"No. I presume you're intimating that you'd even turn against me if it suited Duane's interests for you to do so."

"I'm more than intimating. I'm telling you."

Irving grinned. "That's okay by me. I'll go further. If at any time things start getting hot, you can count on me to do anything needed to back your play. I'd even consent to play the part of a missing witness."

Mason shook his head. "Don't try to call the plays. Let me do that."

Irving extended his hand. "I just want you to understand my position, Mason."

"And be sure *you* understand *mine*," Mason said.

CHAPTER 5

MASON LOOKED AT DELLA STREET AS WALTER IRVING LEFT THE office.

"Well?" Della Street asked.

Mason said, "I just about had to take the case in self-defense, Della."

"Why?"

"Otherwise, we'd be sitting on top of information in a murder case, we wouldn't have any client whom we would be protecting, and the situation could become rather rugged."

"And as it is now?" she asked.

"Now," he told her, "we have a client whom we can be protecting. An attorney representing a client in a murder case is under no obligation to go to the police and set forth his surmises, suspicions, and conclusions, particularly if he has reason to believe that such a course would be against the best interests of his client."

"But how about the positive evidence?" Della Street asked.

"Evidence of what?"

"Evidence that we harbored a young woman who had gone into that office and planted diamonds."

"We don't *know* she planted diamonds."

"Who had gone into the office then."

"We don't *know* she was the same woman."

"It's a reasonable assumption."

"Suppose she was merely a typist who happened to be in the building. We go to the police with a lot of suspicions, and the police give the story to the newspapers, then she sues for defamation of character."

"I see," Della Street said demurely. "I'm afraid it's hopeless to try and convince you."

"It is."

"And now may I ask you a question, Counselor?"

"What?"

"Do you suppose that it was pure coincidence that you are the attorney retained to represent the interests of Duane Jefferson?"

Mason stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Well?" she prompted.

"I've thought of that," Mason admitted. "Of course, the fact that I am known as a trial attorney, that I have offices on the same floor of the same building would mean that Irving had had a chance to hear about me and, by the same token, a chance to notify his home office that I would be available."

"But he said he didn't do that. He said somebody beat him to it and he got the cable to turn over the two thousand dollars to you."

Mason nodded.

"Well?" Della Street asked.

"No comment," Mason said.

"So what do we do now?"

"Now," Mason said, "our position is very, very clear, Della. I suggest that you go down to the camera store, tell them that I want to buy a fingerprint camera, and you also might get a studio camera with a ground-glass focusing arrangement. Pick up some lights and we'll see if we can get a photograph of those latent fingerprints on the gum."

"And then?" she asked.

"Then," Mason said, "we'll enlarge the film so that it shows only the fingerprints and not the gum."

"And then?"

"By that time," Mason said, "I hope we have managed to locate the girl who made the fingerprints and find out about things for ourselves. While you're getting the cameras I'll go down to Paul Drake's office and have a chat with him."

"Chief," Della Street asked somewhat apprehensively, "isn't this rather risky?"

Mason's grin was infectious. "Sure it is."

"Hadn't you better forget about other things and protect yourself?"

Mason shook his head. "We're protecting a client, Della. Give me a description of that girl—the best one you can give."

"Well," Della Street said, "I'd place her age at twenty-six or twenty-seven, her height at five feet three inches, her weight at about a hundred and sixteen pounds. She had reddish-brown hair and her eyes were also a reddish-brown—about the same color as her hair, very expressive. She was good-looking, trim and well proportioned."

"Good figure?" Mason asked.

"Perfect."

"How was she dressed?"

"I can remember that quite well, Chief, because she looked stunning. I remember thinking at the time that she looked more like a client than a gal from an employment agency."

"She wore a beautifully tailored gray flannel suit, navy blue kid shoes. Umm, let me see . . . yes, I remember now. There was fine white stitching across the toes of the shoes. She carried a matching envelope purse and white gloves. Now let me think. I am quite

sure she didn't wear a hat. As I recall, she had a tortoise-shell band on, and there wasn't a hair out of place.

"She didn't take her jacket off while she was working, so I can't be certain, but I think she had on a pale blue cashmere sweater. She opened just the top button of her jacket, so I can't say for sure about this."

Mason smiled. "You women never miss a thing about another woman, do you, Della? I would say that was remembering *very* well. Would you type it out for me—the description? Use a plain sheet of paper, not my letterhead."

Mason waited until Della Street had finished typing the description, then said, "Okay, Della, go down and get the cameras. Get lots of film, lights, a tripod, and anything we may need. Don't let on what we want to use them for."

"How about the fingerprint camera? Isn't that a giveaway?"

"Tell the proprietor I'm going to have to cross-examine a witness and I want to find out all about how a fingerprint camera works."

Della Street nodded.

Mason took the typed description and walked down the hall to Paul Drake's office. He nodded to the girl at the switchboard. "Paul Drake in?"

"Yes, Mr. Mason. Shall I say you're here?"

"Anybody with him?"

"No."

"Tell him I'm on my way," Mason said, opening the gate in the partition and walking down the long glassed-in runway off which there were numerous cubbyhole offices. He came to the slightly more commodious office marked "Paul Drake, Private," pushed open the door and entered.

"Hi," Drake said. "I was waiting to hear from you."

Mason raised his eyebrows.

"Don't look so innocent," Drake said. "The officials of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company have been checking up on you by long-distance telephone. They called the manager of the building and asked him about you."

"Did they ask him about me by name," Mason asked, "or did they ask him to recommend some attorney?"

"No, they had your name. They wanted to know all about you."

"What did he tell them?"

Drake grinned and said, "Your rent's paid up, isn't it?"

"What the devil is this all about, do you know, Paul?"

"All I know is it's a murder rap," Drake said, "and the way the police are acting, someone must have caved in with a confession."

"Sure," Mason said, "a confession that would pass the buck to someone else and take the heat off the person making the so-called confession."

"Could be," Drake said. "What do we do?"

"We get busy."

"On what?"

"First," Mason told him, "I want to find a girl."

"Okay, what do I have to go on?"

Mason handed him Della Street's typewritten description.

"Fine," Drake said. "I can go downstairs, stand on the street corner during the lunch hour and pick you out a hundred girls of this description in ten minutes."

"Take another look," Mason invited. "She's a lot better than average."

"If it was average, I could make it a thousand," Drake said.

"All right," Mason said. "We're going to have to narrow it down."

"How?"

"This girl," Mason said, "is an expert typist. She probably holds down a very good secretarial job somewhere."

"Unless, of course, she *was* an exceedingly fine secretary and then got married," Drake said.

Mason nodded, conceding the point without changing his position. "She also has legal experience," he said.

"How do you know?"

"That's something I'm not at liberty to tell you."

"All right, what do I do?"

Mason said, "Paul, you're going to have to open up a dummy office. You're going to telephone the Association of Legal Secretaries; you're going to put an ad in the bar journal and the newspapers; you're going to ask for a young, attractive typist. Now, I don't *know* that this girl takes shorthand. Therefore, you're going to have to state that a knowledge of shorthand is desirable but not necessary. You're going to offer a salary of two hundred dollars a week—"

"My Lord!" Drake said. "You'll be deluged, Perry. You might just as well ask the whole city to come trooping into your office."

"Wait a minute," Mason told him. "You don't have the sketch yet."

"Well, I certainly hope I don't!"

"Your ad will provide that the girl must pass a typing test in order to get the job. She must be able to copy rapidly and perfectly and at a very high rate of speed—fix a top rate of words per minute.

"Now, the type of girl we want will already have a job somewhere. We've got to get a job that sounds sufficiently attractive so she'll come in to take a look. Therefore, we can't expect her in during office hours. So mention that the office will be open noons and until seven o'clock in the evening."

"And you want me to rent a furnished office?" Drake asked.

"That's right."

Drake said lugubriously, "You'd better make arrangements to replace the carpet when you leave. The one that's there will be worn threadbare by the horde of applicants—How the devil will I know if the right girl comes in?"

"That's what I'm coming to," Mason said. "You're going to start looking these applicants over. You won't find many that can type at the rate specified. Be absolutely hard-boiled with the qualifications. Have a good secretary sitting there, weeding them out. Don't pay any attention to anyone who has to reach for an eraser. The girl I want can make that keyboard sound like a machine gun."

"Okay, then what?"

"When you get girls who qualify on the typing end of the job," Mason said, "give them a personal interview. Look them over carefully to see how they check with this description and tell them you want to see their driving licenses. A girl like that is bound to have a car. That's where the catch comes in."

"How come?"

Mason said, "Sometime this afternoon I'm going to send you over a right thumbprint—that is, a photograph of a thumbprint—perhaps not the best fingerprinting in the world but at least you'll be able to identify it. When you look at their driving licenses, make it a point to be called into another room for something. Get up and excuse yourself. You can say that there's another applicant

in there that you have to talk to briefly, or that you have to answer a phone or something. Carry the girl's driving license in there with you, give the thumbprint a quick check. You can eliminate most of them at a glance. Some of them you may have to study a little bit. But if you get the right one, you'll be able to recognize the thumbprint."

"What do I do then?"

"Make a note of the name and address on the driving license. In that way, she won't be able to give you a phony name. And call me at once."

"Anything else?" Drake asked.

"This is what I think," Mason said, "but it's just a hunch. I *think* the girl's first name will be Mae. When you find a girl who answers that general description and can type like a house afire, whose first name is Mae, start checking carefully."

"When will you have that thumbprint?"

"Sometime this afternoon. Her driving license will have the imprint of her right thumb on it."

"Can you tell me what this is all about?" Drake asked.

Mason grinned and shook his head. "It's better if you don't know, Paul."

"One of those things, eh?" Drake asked, his voice showing a singular lack of enthusiasm.

"No," Mason told him, "it isn't. It's just that I'm taking an ounce of prevention."

"With you," Drake told him, "I prefer a *pound* of prevention. If things go wrong, I know there won't be more than an ounce of cure."

CHAPTER 6

MASON SAT IN THE VISITORS' ROOM AT THE JAIL AND LOOKED across at Duane Jefferson.

His client was a tall, composed individual who seemed reserved, unexcited, and somehow very British.

Mason tried to jar the man out of his extraordinary complacency.

"You're charged with murder," he said.

Duane Jefferson observed him coolly. "I would hardly be here otherwise, would I?"

"What do you know about this thing?"

"Virtually nothing. I knew the man, Baxter, in his lifetime—that is, I assume it was the same one."

"How did you know him?"

"He represented himself as a big wholesale dealer. He showed up at the South African office and wanted to buy diamonds. It is against the policy of the company to sell diamonds in the rough, unless, of course, they are industrial diamonds."

"Baxter wanted them in the rough?"

"That's right."

"And he was advised he couldn't have them?"

"Well, of course, we were tactful about it, Mr. Mason. Mr. Baxter gave promise of being an excellent customer, and he was dealing on a cash basis."

"So what was done?"

"We showed him some diamonds that were cut and polished. He didn't want those. He said that the deal he was putting across called for buying diamonds in the rough and carrying them through each step of cutting and polishing. He said he wanted to be able to tell his customers he had personally selected the diamonds just as they came from the fields."

"Why?"

"He didn't say."

"And he wasn't asked?"

"In a British-managed company," Jefferson said, "we try to keep personal questions to a minimum. We don't pry, Mr. Mason."

"So what was done finally?"

"It was arranged that he would select the diamonds, that we would send them to our Paris office, that there they would be cut and polished, and, after they were cut and polished, delivery would be made to Mr. Baxter."

"What were the diamonds worth?"

"Wholesale or retail?"

"Wholesale."

"Very much less than their retail price."

"How much less?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"That information is a very closely guarded trade secret, Mr. Mason."

"But I'm your attorney."

"Quite."

"Look here," Mason said, "are you British?"

"No."

"American?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been working for a British company?"

"Five or six years."

"You have become quite British."

"There are certain mannerisms, Mr. Mason, which the trade comes to expect of the representatives of a company such as ours."

"And there are certain mannerisms which an American jury expects to find in an American citizen," Mason told him.

"If a jury should feel you'd cultivated a British manner, you might have reason to regret your accent and cool, impersonal detachment."

Jefferson's lip seemed to curl slightly. "I would have nothing but contempt for a jury that would let personal considerations such as those influence its judgment."

"That would break the jurors' hearts," Mason told him.

Jefferson said, "We may as well understand each other at the outset, Mr. Mason. I govern my actions according to principle. I would rather die than yield in a matter of principle."

"All right," Mason said. "Have it your own way. It's your funeral. Did you see Baxter again?"

"No, sir, I didn't. After that, arrangements were completed through the Paris office."

"Irving?" Mason asked.

"I don't think it was Irving, Mr. Mason. I think it was one of the other representatives."

"You read about the arrival of the cruise ship and Baxter's supposed suicide?"

"I did, indeed, Mr. Mason."

"And did you make any comment to the authorities?"

"Certainly not."

"You knew he was carrying a small fortune in diamonds?"

"I assumed that a small fortune in diamonds had been delivered to him through our Paris office. I had no means, of course, of knowing what he had done with them."

"You didn't make any suggestions to the authorities?"

"Certainly not. Our business dealings are highly confidential."

"But you did discuss his death with your partner, Irving?"

"Not a partner, Mr. Mason. A representative of the company, a personal friend but—"

"All right, your associate," Mason corrected.

"Yes, I discussed it with him."

"Did he have any ideas?"

"None. Except that there were certain suspicious circumstances in connection with the entire situation."

"It occurred to you that the whole thing might have been part of a smuggling plot?"

"I prefer not to amplify that statement, Mr. Mason. I can simply say that there were certain suspicious circumstances in connection with the entire transaction."

"And you discussed those with Irving?"

"As a representative of the company talking to an associate, I did. I would prefer, however, not to go into detail as to what I said. You must remember, Mr. Mason, that I am here not in an individual but a representative capacity."

"You may be in this country in a representative capacity," Mason said, "but don't ever forget that you're here in this jail in a purely individual capacity."

"Oh, quite," Jefferson said.

"I understand police found diamonds in your office," Mason went on.

Jefferson nodded.

"Where did those diamonds come from?"

"Mr. Mason, I haven't the faintest idea. I am in my office approximately six hours out of the twenty-four. I believe the building provides a scrubwoman with a master key. The janitor also has a master key. People come and go through that office. Police even told me that there was someone trying to break into the office, or that someone had broken into the office."

"A girl," Mason said.

"I understand it was a young woman, yes."

"Do you have any idea who this woman was?"

"No. Certainly not!"

"Do you know any young women here in the city?"

Jefferson hesitated.

"Do you?" Mason prodded.

Jefferson met his eyes. "No."

"You're acquainted with *no* young woman?"

"No."

"Would you perhaps be trying to shield someone?"

"Why should I try to shield someone?"

"I am not asking you why at the moment. I am asking you if you are."

"No."

"You understand it could be a very serious matter if you should try to falsify any of the facts?"

"Isn't it a rule of law in this country," Jefferson countered, "that the prosecution must prove the defendant guilty beyond all reasonable doubt?"

Mason nodded.

"They can't do it," Jefferson said confidently.

"You may not have another chance to tell me your story," Mason warned.

"I've told it."

"There is no girl?"

"No."

"Weren't you writing to some young woman here before you left South Africa?"

Again there was a perceptible hesitancy, then Jefferson looked him in the eyes and said, "No."

"Police told you there was some young woman who broke into your office?"

"Someone who opened the door with a key."

"Had you given your key to any woman?"

"No. Certainly not."

Mason said, "Look here, if there's anyone you want protected, tell me the whole story. I'll try to protect that person as far as possible. After all, I'm representing you. I'm trying to do what is for your best interests. Now, don't put yourself in such a position that

you're going to have to try to deceive your attorney. Do you understand what that can lead to?"

"I understand."

"And you are protecting no one?"

"No one."

"The district attorney's office feels that it has some evidence against you, otherwise it wouldn't be proceeding in a case of this kind."

"I suppose a district attorney can be mistaken as well as anyone else."

"Better sometimes," Mason said. "You're not being very helpful."

"What help can I give, Mr. Mason? Suppose *you* should walk into your office tomorrow morning and find the police there. Suppose they told you that they had uncovered stolen property in your office. Suppose I should ask you to tell me the entire story. What could you tell me?"

"I'd try to answer your questions."

"I have answered your questions, Mr. Mason."

"I have reason to believe there's some young woman here in the city whom you know."

"There is no one."

Mason got to his feet. "Well," he told the young man, "it's up to you."

"On the contrary, Mr. Mason. I think you'll find that it's up to *you*."

"You're probably right, at that," Mason told him, and signaled the guard that the interview was over.

CHAPTER 7

MASON UNLOCKED THE DOOR OF HIS PRIVATE OFFICE. DELLA Street looked up from her work. "How did it go, Chief?"

Mason made a gesture of throwing something away.

"Not talking?" Della Street asked.

"Talking," Mason said, "but it doesn't make sense. He's protecting some woman."

"Why?"

"That," Mason said, "is something we're going to have to find out. Get the cameras, Della?"

"Yes. Cameras, lights, films, tripod—everything."

"We're going into the photographic business," Mason said. "Tell Gertie we don't want to be disturbed, no matter what happens."

Della Street started to pick up the connecting telephone to the outer office, then hesitated. "Gertie is going to make something out of *this!*" she said.

Mason frowned thoughtfully. "You have a point there," he said.

"With her romantic disposition, she will get ideas in her head that you'll never get out with a club."

"All right," Mason decided. "Don't let her know I'm in. We'll just go into the law library and—do you think you could help me tilt that desk over on its side, Della?"

"I can try."

"Good. We'll just go in the library, close and lock the door."

"Suppose Gertie should want me for something? Can't we tell her what we're doing so she can—"

Mason shook his head. "I don't want *anyone* to know about this, Della."

Della went through the motions of throwing something in the wastebasket. "There goes my good name," she said.

"You'll need to stay only to help me get the desk over on its side, and you can fix up the lighting. We'll lock the door from the law library to the outer office and leave the door to this office open. You can hear the phone if Gertie rings."

"That's all right," Della Street said, "but suppose she comes in for something?"

"Well, if the door's open," Mason said, "she'll see that we're photographing something."

"Her curiosity is as bad as her romanticism," Della said.

"Does she talk?" Mason asked.

"I wish I knew the answer to that one, Chief. She must talk to that boy friend of hers. You couldn't keep Gertie quiet with a muzzle. I doubt that she talks to anyone else."

"Okay," Mason said, "we'll take a chance. Come on, Della. Let's get that desk on its side and get the floodlights rigged up."

"Here's a chart," Della Street said, "giving all the exposure fac-

tors. I told the man at the camera store we wanted to copy some documents. You have to change your exposure factor when you do real close-up photography. He suggested that we use film packs with the camera where you focus on the ground glass. The fingerprint camera is supposed to be a self-contained unit, with lights and every—”

“I understand,” Mason interrupted. “I want to get the wad of chewing gum photographed in place on the bottom of the desk, then I want to get close-ups showing the fingerprints. We can get the photographer to enlarge the fingerprints from these photographs in case the fingerprint camera doesn’t do a good job.”

“The fingerprint camera seems to be pretty near—” She paused suddenly.

Mason laughed. “Foolproof?”

“Well,” Della Street said, “that’s what the man at the camera store said.”

“All right,” Mason told her, “let’s go. We’ll take photographs at different exposures. You have plenty of film packs?”

“Heavens, yes! I figured you’d want to be sure you had the job done, and I got enough film so you can take all the pictures you want at all kinds of different exposures.”

“That’s fine,” Mason told her.

Della Street took one end of the typewriter desk, Mason the other. “We’ll have to move it out from the wall,” Mason said. “Now tilt it back, Della. It’ll be heavy just before it gets to the floor. You think you can—?”

“Good heavens, yes, Chief. It’s not heavy.”

“The drawers are full of stationery, and that typewriter— We could take some of the things out and lighten it.”

“No, no, let’s go. It’s all right.”

They eased the desk back to the floor.

“All right,” Mason said, “give me a hand with the lights and the tripod. We’ll get this camera set up and focused.”

“I have a magnifying glass,” Della Street said. “They seem to think that on the critical focusing necessary for close-ups it will help.”

“Good girl,” Mason told her. “Let’s see what we can do. We’ll want an unbalanced cross-lighting, and since light varies inversely as the square of the distance, we’ll space these lights accordingly.”

Mason first took a series of pictures with the fingerprint camera, then got the lights plugged in and adjusted, the studio camera placed on the tripod and properly focused. He used a tape measure to determine the position of the lights, then slipped a filmpack into the camera, regarded the wad of chewing gum thoughtfully.

"That's going to be fine," Della Street said. "How did you know about using unbalanced cross-lighting to bring out the ridges?"

"Cross-examining photographers," Mason said, "plus a study of books on photography. A lawyer has to know a little something about everything. Don't you notice *Photographic Evidence* by Scott over there?" Mason indicated the thick book found in red leather.

"That's right," she said. "I remember seeing you studying that from time to time. You used some of his stuff in that automobile case, didn't you?"

"Uh huh," Mason said. "It's surprising how much there is to know about photography. Now, Della, I'm going to start with this lens at f11, taking a photograph at a twenty-fifth of a second. Then we'll take one at a tenth of a second, then one at a second. Then I'll use the cable release and we'll take one at two seconds. Then we'll try f16, run through the exposures all over again, then take another batch at f22."

"All right," Della Street said. "I'll keep notes of the different exposures."

Mason started taking the pictures, pulling the tabs out of the film pack, tearing them off, dropping them into the wastebasket.

"Oh oh," Della Street said. "There's the phone. That's Gertie calling."

She made a dash for Mason's private office. Mason continued taking pictures.

Della Street was back after a moment. "Walter Irving wants you to call just as soon as you come in."

Mason nodded.

"Gertie asked if you were in yet, and I lied like a trooper," Della Street said.

"Okay, Della. Walter Irving didn't say what he wanted, did he?"

"He said he wanted to know if you'd been able to get any information out of Duane Jefferson about the woman in the case."

Mason said, "As soon as we get finished here, Della, tell Paul Drake I want to put a shadow on Irving."

"You suspect him?"

"Not exactly. The policy of this office is to protect our client and to hell with the rest of them."

"What's the client doing?"

"Sitting tight. Says he knows nothing about the girl who broke into the office, that he doesn't know any girl here, hasn't been corresponding with anyone, and all that."

"You think he has?"

"That wasn't just a casual visit that Mae Wallis paid to their office."

"You've decided she was the girl?"

"Oh, not officially. I'd deny it to the police. But where did the diamonds in the chewing gum come from?"

"Chief, why would *she* plant a hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds and then keep a couple of diamonds with her and conceal them in a wad of chewing gum?"

"I can give you *an* answer," Mason said, "but it may not be *the* answer."

"What is it?"

"Suppose she had been given some gems to plant. She must have had them wrapped in tissue paper in her purse. She had to work in a hurry and probably became somewhat alarmed. Something happened to make her suspicious. She realized that she had been detected."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because she roughed up the office, making it appear she was looking *for* something. Otherwise she'd have slipped in, planted the diamonds and left."

"Then you think the diamonds that she put in the chewing gum were ones she had overlooked when she was making the plant?"

"I said it was *an* answer. After she got established as a typist in our office, she had a breathing spell. She opened her purse to make sure she hadn't overlooked anything, and found several of the diamonds. She knew that police were on the job and that there was a good chance she might be picked up, questioned, and perhaps searched. So she fastened the diamonds to the underside of the desk."

"I keep thinking those 'Prince Charming' letters have something to do with it, Chief."

Mason nodded. "So do I. Perhaps she planted the diamonds in the office and at the same time deliberately planted the letters in the restroom."

"She could have done that, all right," Della Street admitted. "There's the phone again."

She gathered her skirts and again sprinted for Mason's private office. Mason continued to take photographs while she answered the phone and returned.

"What is it?" Mason asked.

"I have to announce," she said, "that Gertie is just a little suspicious."

"Yes?" Mason asked.

"Yes. She wants to know why it's taking me so long to answer the phone."

"What did you tell her?"

"Told her I was doing some copy work and I didn't want to stop in the middle of a sentence."

Mason snapped out the floodlights. "All right, Della. We'll quit. We have enough pictures. Tell Paul Drake I want shadows put on Walter Irving."

CHAPTER 8

A FEW MORNINGS LATER MASON WAS SCANNING THE PAPERS on his desk. "Well, I see that the grand jury has now filed an indictment, charging Duane Jefferson with first-degree murder."

"Why the indictment?" Della Street asked.

"The district attorney can proceed against a defendant in either of two ways. He can file a complaint or have someone swear to a complaint. Then the Court holds a preliminary hearing. At that time the defendant can cross-examine the witnesses. If the Court makes an order binding the defendant over, the district attorney then files an information and the case is brought on to trial before a jury.

"However, the district attorney can, if he wishes, present witnesses to the grand jury. The grand jury then returns an indictment,

and the transcript of the testimony of the witnesses is delivered to the defendant. In that case, there is no opportunity for counsel for the defense to cross-examine the witnesses until they get to court.

"Now, in this case against Duane Jefferson, the main witness before the grandjury seems to have been Yvonne Manco, who tells a great story about how her lover-boy, Munroe Baxter, was rubbed out by some nasty people who wanted to steal the diamonds he was smuggling. Then there is the testimony of a police officer that a large portion of those diamonds was found in the office occupied by Duane Jefferson."

"Is that testimony sufficient to support an indictment?" Della Street asked.

Mason grinned and said, "It certainly wouldn't be sufficient standing by itself to bring about a conviction in a court of law."

"Do you intend to question the sufficiency of the evidence?"

"Lord, no," Mason said. "For some reason the district attorney is breaking his neck to get a prompt trial, and I'm going to co-operate by every means in my power."

"Wouldn't it be better to stall the thing along a bit until—?"

Mason shook his head.

"Why not, Chief?"

"Well, the rumor is that the district attorney has a surprise witness he's going to throw at us. He's so intent on that he may overlook the fact that there isn't any real *corpus delicti*."

"What do you mean?"

"The body of Munroe Baxter has never been found," Mason said.

"Does it have to be?"

"Not necessarily. The words *corpus delicti*, contrary to popular belief, don't mean the 'body of the victim.' They mean the 'body of the crime.' But it is necessary to show that a murder was committed. That can be shown by independent evidence, but of course the best evidence is the body of the victim."

"So you're going to have an immediate trial?"

"Just as soon as we can get an open date on the calendar," Mason said. "And with the district attorney and the defense both trying to get the earliest possible trial date, that shouldn't be too difficult. How's Paul Drake coming with his office setup?"

"Chief, you should see that. It's wonderful! There's this ad in all of the papers, advertising for a legally trained secretary who can type like a house afire. The salary to start—to start, mind you—is two hundred dollars a week. It is intimated that the attorney is engaged in cases of international importance and that there may be an opportunity to travel, to meet important personalities. It's a secretary's dream."

"And the office where he's screening applicants?" Mason asked.

"All fitted out with desks, typewriters, law books, plush carpets and an air of quiet dignity which makes it seem that even the janitor must be drawing a salary about equal to that of the ordinary corporation president."

"I hope he hasn't overdone it," Mason said. "I'd better take a look."

"No, it isn't overdone. I can assure you of that. The air of conservatism and respectability envelops the place like a curtain of smog, permeating every nook and cranny of the office. You should see them—stenographers who are applicants come in chewing gum, giggling and willing to take a chance that lightning may strike despite their lack of qualifications. They stand for a few seconds in that office, then quietly remove their gum, look around at the furniture and start talking in whispers."

"How does he weed out the incompetents?" Mason asked.

"There's a battery of typewriters; girls are asked to sit at the typewriters, write out their names and addresses and list their qualifications.

"Of course, a good typist can tell the minute a girl's hands touch the keyboard whether she is really skillful, fairly competent, or just mediocre. Only the girls who can really play a tune on the keyboard get past the first receptionist."

"Well," Mason said, "it's—"

The private, unlisted phone jangled sharply.

"Good Lord," Della Street said, "that must be Paul Drake now. He's the only other one who has that number."

Mason grabbed for the phone. "That means he's got information so hot he doesn't dare to go through the outer switchboard. Hello . . . hello, Paul."

Drake's voice came over the wire. He was talking rapidly but in

the hushed tones of one who is trying to keep his voice from being heard in an adjoining room.

"Hello, Perry. Hello, Perry. This is Paul."

"Yes, Paul, go ahead."

"I have your girl."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Mae W. Jordan. She lives at Seven-Nine-Two Cabachon Street. She's employed at the present time in a law office. She doesn't want to give the name. She would have to give two weeks' notice. She wants the job very badly, and, boy, can that girl tickle the typewriter! And it's wonderful typing."

"What does the *W* stand for?" Mason asked. "Wallis?"

"I don't know yet. I'm just giving you a quick flash that we have the girl."

"You know it's the same one?"

"Yes. The thumbprints match. I'm holding her driving license right at the moment."

"How about the address?" Mason asked.

"And the address is okay. It's Seven-Nine-Two Cabachon Street, the same address that's given on her driving license."

"Okay," Mason said. "Now here's what you do, Paul. Tell her that you *think* she can do the job; that you'll have to arrange an appointment with Mr. Big himself for six o'clock tonight. Tell her to return then. Got that?"

"I've got it," Drake said. "Shall I tell her anything else about the job?"

"No," Mason said. "Try and find out what you can. Be interested but not *too* curious."

"You want me to put a shadow on her?"

"Not if you're certain of the address," Mason said.

"Think we should try to find out about the law office where she's working?"

"No," Mason said. "With her name and address we can get everything we need. This girl is smart and sharp, and she may be mixed up in a murder, Paul. She's undoubtedly connected in some way with a diamond-smuggling operation. Too many questions will—"

"I get it," Drake interrupted. "Okay, Perry, I'll fix an appointment for six o'clock and call you back in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Do better than that," Mason said. "As soon as you've finished with this girl, jump in your car and come up here. There's no use waiting around there any longer. We've found what we were looking for. You can close the office tomorrow. Take your ads out of the papers and tell all other applicants that the job has been filled. Let's start cutting down the expense."

"Okay," Drake said.

Mason hung up the phone and grinned at Della Street. "Well, we have our typist, Della. She's Mae W. Jordan of Seven-Nine-Two Cabachon Street. Make a note of that—and keep the note where no one else can find it."

CHAPTER 9

PAUL DRAKE WAS GRINNING WITH THE SATISFACTION OF A JOB well done as he eased himself into the big overstuffed chair in Perry Mason's office.

"Well, we did it, Perry, but it certainly was starting from scratch and working on slender clues."

Mason flashed Della Street a glance. "It was a nice job, Paul."

"What gave you your lead in the first place?" Drake asked.

"Oh," Mason said with a gesture of dismissal, "it was just a hunch."

"But you had a damn good thumbprint," Drake said.

"Purely fortuitous," Mason observed.

"Well, if you don't want to tell me, I don't suppose you will," Drake said. "I see they've indicted Jefferson."

"That's right."

"The district attorney says there are certain factors in the situation which demand a speedy trial in order to keep evidence from being dissipated."

"Uh huh," Mason said noncommittally.

"You going to stall around and try for delay?"

"Why should I?"

"Well, ordinarily when the D.A. wants something, the attorney for the defense has different ideas."

"This isn't an ordinary case, Paul."

"No, I suppose not."

"What have you found out about Irving?" Mason asked.

Drake pulled a notebook from his pocket. "Full name, Walter Stockton Irving. Been with the Paris branch of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company for about seven years. Likes life on the Continent, the broader standards of morality, the more leisurely pace of life. Quite a race horse fan."

"The deuce he is!"

"That's right. Of course, over there it isn't quite the way it is here."

"A gambler?"

"Well, not exactly. He'll get down to Monte Carlo once in a while and do a little plunging, but mostly he likes to get out with a pair of binoculars and a babe on his arm, swinging a cane, enjoying the prerogatives of being a quote gentleman unquote."

"Now that," Mason said, "interests me a lot, Paul."

"I thought it would."

"What's he doing with his time here?"

"Simply waiting for the branch to get ready for business. He's leading a subdued life. Doubtless the murder charge pending against Jefferson is holding him back slightly. He seems to have made one contact."

"Who?" Mason asked.

"A French babe. Marline Chaumont."

"Where?"

"A bungalow out on Ponce de Leon Drive. The number is 8257."

"Does Marline Chaumont live there alone?"

"No. She has a brother she's taking care of."

"What's wrong with the brother?"

"Apparently he's a mental case. He was released from a hospital, so that his sister could take care of him. However, elaborate precautions are being taken to keep the neighbors from knowing anything about it. One of the neighbors suspects, but that's as far as it goes at the present time."

"Violent?" Mason asked.

"No, not at this time. Just harmless. You've heard of prefrontal lobotomy?"

"Yes, sure. That's the treatment they formerly used on the hopelessly violent insane and on criminals. I understand they've more or less discontinued it."

"Turns a man into a vegetable more or less, doesn't it?"

"Well, you can't get doctors to agree on it," Mason said. "But I think it now has generally been discontinued."

"That's the operation this chap had. He's sort of a zombie. I can't find out too much about him. Anyhow, Marline knew your man Irving over in Paris. Probably when Marline is freed of responsibilities and gets dolled up in glad rags she's quite a number."

"How about now?" Mason asked.

"Now she's the devoted sister. That's one thing about those French, Perry. They go to town when they're on the loose, but when they assume responsibilities they *really* assume them."

"How long has she been here?" Mason asked.

"She's been in this country for a year, according to her statements to tradesmen. But we haven't been able to check up. She's new in the neighborhood. She moved into her house there when she knew that her brother was coming home. She was living in an apartment up to that time. An apartment house would be a poor place to have a mental case. Marline knew it, so she got this bungalow."

"Living there alone with her brother?"

"A housekeeper comes in part of the day."

"And Irving has been going there?"

"Uh huh. Twice to my knowledge."

"Trying to get Marline to go out?"

"What he's *trying* to get is a question. Marline seems to be very devoted to her brother and very domesticated. The first time my operative shadowed Irving to the place it was in the afternoon. When Marline came to the door there was an affectionate greeting. Irving went inside, stayed for about an hour, and when he left, seemed to be trying to persuade Marline to come with him. He stood in the doorway talking to her. She smiled but kept shaking her head.

"So Irving went away. He was back that night, went inside the house, and apparently Marline sold him on the idea of brother sit-

ting because Marline went out and was gone for an hour or two."

"How did she go?"

"By bus."

"She doesn't have a car?"

"Apparently not."

"Where did she go?"

"Gosh, Perry! You didn't tell me you wanted me to shadow *her*. Do you want me to?"

"No," Mason said, "I guess not, Paul. But the thing interests me. What's happened since?"

"Well, apparently Irving recognized the futility of trying to woo Marline away from her responsibilities, or else the trouble Jefferson is in is weighing heavily on his shoulders. He's keeping pretty much to himself in his apartment now."

"What apartment?" Mason asked.

"The Alta Loma Apartments."

"Pick up anything about the case, Paul?"

"The D.A. is supposed to be loaded for bear on this one. He's so darned anxious to get at you, he's running around in circles. He's told a couple of friendly reporters that this is the sort of case he's been looking for and waiting for. Perry, are you all right on this case?"

"What do you mean, 'all right'?"

"Are *you* in the clear?"

"Sure."

"You haven't been cutting any corners?"

Mason shook his head.

"The D.A. is acting as though he had you where he wanted you. He's like a kid with a new toy for Christmas—a whole Christmas tree full of new toys."

"I'm glad he's happy," Mason said. "What about this Mae Jordan, Paul?"

"I didn't get a lot more than I told you over the phone, except that she's promised to be there at six tonight."

"She's working?"

"That's right."

"What kind of an impression does she make, Paul?"

"Clean-cut and competent," Drake said. "She has a nice voice, nice personality, very neat in her appearance, knows what she's

doing every minute of the time, and she certainly can type. Her shorthand is just about as fast as you'd find anywhere."

"She's happy in her job?"

"Apparently not. I don't know what it's all about, but she wants to get away from her present environment."

"Perhaps a thwarted love affair?"

"Could be."

"Sounds like it," Mason said.

"Well, you can find out tonight," Drake told him.

"When we get her into that office tonight, Paul," Mason said, "don't mention my name. Don't make *any* introductions. Simply state that I am the man for whom she will be working."

"Will she recognize you?" Drake asked.

"I don't think I've ever seen her," Mason said, glancing at Della Street.

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything. Your pictures get in the paper a lot."

"Well, if she recognizes me it won't make any difference," Mason said, "because outside of the first few questions, Paul, I'm not going to be talking to her about a job."

"You mean that she'll know the thing was a plant as soon as you walk in?"

"Well, I hope not quite *that* soon," Mason said. "But she'll know it shortly after I start questioning her. As long as she talks I'm going to let her talk."

"That won't be long," Drake said. "She answers questions, but she doesn't volunteer any information."

"All right," Mason said. "I'll see you a little before six tonight, Paul."

"Now remember," Drake warned, "there may be a little trouble."

"How come?"

"This girl has got her mind all set on a job where she can travel. She wants to get away from everything. The minute you let her know that you were simply locating her as a witness, she's going to resent it."

"What do you think she'll do?" Mason asked.

"She may do anything."

"I'd like that, Paul."

"You would?"

"Yes," Mason said. "I'd like to know just what she does when she's good and angry. Don't kid yourself about this girl, Paul. She's mixed up in something pretty sinister."

"How deep is she mixed up in it?"

"Probably up to her eyebrows," Mason said. "This Marline Chaumont knew Walter Irving in Paris?"

"Apparently so. She was sure glad to see him. When he rang the bell and she came to the door, she took one look, then made a flying leap into his arms. She was all French."

"And Irving doesn't go there any more?"

Drake shook his head.

"What would she do if I went out to talk with her this afternoon?"

"She might talk. She might not."

"Would she tell Irving I'd been there?"

"Probably."

"Well, I'll have to take that chance, Paul. I'm going to call on Marline Chaumont."

"May I suggest that you take me?" Della Street asked.

"As a chaperon or for the purpose of keeping notes on what is said?" Mason asked.

"I can be very effective in both capacities," Della Street observed demurely.

"It's that French background," Drake said, grinning. "It scares the devil out of them, Perry."

CHAPTER 10

PERRY MASON DROVE SLOWLY ALONG PONCE DE LEON DRIVE.

"That's it," Della Street said. "The one on the left, the white bungalow with the green trim."

Mason drove the car past the house, sizing it up, went to the next intersection, made a *U* turn, and drove back.

"What are you going to tell her?" Della Street asked.

"It'll depend on how she impresses me."

"And on how we impress her?"

"I suppose so."

"Isn't this somewhat dangerous, Chief?"

"In what way?"

"She'll be almost certain to tell Irving."

"Tell him what?"

"That you were out checking up on him."

"I'll tell him that myself."

"And then he'll know that you've had people shadowing him."

"If he's known Miss Chaumont in Paris, he won't know just *how* we checked up. I'd like to throw a scare into Mr. Walter Irving. He's too damned sure of himself."

Mason walked up the three steps to the front porch and pushed the bell button.

After a moment the door was opened a cautious three inches. A brass guard chain stretched taut across the opening.

Mason smiled at the pair of bright black eyes which surveyed him from the interior of the house. "We're looking for a Miss Chaumont."

"I am Miss Chaumont."

"Of Paris?"

"*Mais oui.* I have lived in Paris, yes. Now I live here."

"Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

"About what?"

"About Paris?"

"I would love to have you ask me questions about Paris."

"It's rather awkward, standing out here and talking through the door," Mason said.

"Monsieur can hear me?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I can hear you."

Mason smiled at her. Now that his eyes were becoming accustomed to the half-light he could see the oval of the face and a portion of a trim figure.

"Were you familiar with the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company in Paris?"

"Why do you ask me that question?"

"Because I am interested."

"And who are you?"

"My name is Perry Mason. I am a lawyer."

"Oh, *you* are Perry Mason?"

"That's right."

"I have read about you."

"That's interesting."

"What do you want, Mr. Mason?"

"To know if you knew of the company in Paris."

"I have known of the company, yes."

"And you knew some of the people who worked for that company?"

"But of course, Monsieur. One does not become, as you say, familiar with a company, *non*. One can only become familiar with people, with some of the people, yes? With the company, *non*."

"Did you know Walter Irving while you were in Paris?"

"Of course. He was my friend. He is here now."

"You went out with him occasionally in Paris?"

"But yes. Is that wrong?"

"No, no," Mason said. "I am simply trying to get the background. Did you know Duane Jefferson?"

"Duane Jefferson is from the South African office. Him I do not know."

"Did you know anyone from the South African office?"

"Twice, when people would come to visit in Paris, they asked me to help . . . well, what you call, entertain. I put on a daring dress. I act wicked with the eyes. I make of them . . . what you call the visiting fireman, *non*?"

"And who introduced you to these men?"

"My friend, Walter."

"Walter Irving?"

"That is right."

"I would like to find out something about Mr. Irving."

"He is nice. Did he tell you I am here?"

"No. I located you through people who work for me. They have an office in Paris."

"And the Paris office locates me here? Monsieur, it is impossible!"

Mason smiled. "I am here."

"And I am here. But . . . well, a man of your position, Monsieur Mason, one does not—how you call it?—contradict."

"What sort of a fellow is Walter Irving?"

"Walter Irving has many friends. He is very nice. He has—how

you say?—the too big heart. That big heart, she is always getting him in trouble. He gives you too much . . . the shirt off his back. When he trusts, he trusts, that one. Sometime people, they take advantage of him. You are his friend, Monsieur Mason?"

"I would like to know about him."

"This woman with you is your wife?"

"My secretary."

"Oh, a thousand pardons. You seem . . . well, you seem as one."

"We have worked together for a long time."

"I see. Could I say something to you as the friend of Walter Irving?"

"Why not?"

"This Duane Jefferson," she said. "Watch him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he is the one to watch. He is sharp. He is very smooth. He . . . he is filled with crazy ideas in his head."

"What do you know about him?"

"Know, Monsieur? I *know* but little. But a woman has intuition. A woman can tell. Walter, I know very well. He is big. He is honest. He is like a dog. He trusts. But Walter likes what you call the show-off, the grandstand. He likes many clothes and to show off the good-looking woman on his arm. He likes crowds. He likes—"

She broke off and laughed. "He is simple, that one, for one who is so smart otherwise. He cares about a girl, that she should make people turn to look when he walks with her. So when I go out with Walter I put on a dress that . . . well, your secretary will know. The curves, yes?"

Della Street nodded.

She laughed very lightly. "Then Walter is very happy. I think, Monsieur Mason, that this Jefferson—"

"But I thought you didn't know Jefferson?"

"I hear people talk, and I listen. At times I have very big ears. And now, Monsieur Mason, you will pardon me, no? I have a brother who is sick in his upstairs. He will get better if he can be kept very quiet and have no excitement. You are nice people, and I would invite you in, but the excitement, no."

"Thank you very much," Mason said. "Does Walter Irving know you are here in the city?"

"Know I am here? Of course he knows. He has located me. He is

very eager, that Walter Irving. And he is nice company. If I did not have my brother, I would put on clothes that show the curves and go with him to the night clubs. That he would love. That also I would like. However, I have responsibilities. I have to stay home. But, Monsieur Mason, please . . . you listen to Marline Chaumont. This Duane Jefferson, he is very cold, very polished, and treacherous like a snake."

"And if you see Walter Irving, you will tell him we were here?"

"You wish me not to?"

"I don't know," Mason said. "I am simply checking."

"I will make you the bargain, Monsieur Mason. You do not tell Walter Irving what I have said about Duane Jefferson, and I do not say to Walter Irving anything that you are here. We keep this a little secret between us, no?"

"But, Monsieur Mason, please, if this Duane Jefferson has done things that are wrong, you see that he does not pull my friend Walter down with him?"

"You think Jefferson did something wrong?"

"I have heard people talk."

"But his company gives him an excellent reputation. His company feels the utmost confidence in his honor and his integrity."

"I have told you, Monsieur Mason, that companies cannot feel; only the people in the companies. And later on, when the case comes to trial, Monsieur Mason, I shall read the papers with much interest. But you watch closely this Duane Jefferson. Perhaps he will tell you a story that is very fine as stories go when you do not question, but when he gets on the witness stand and finds that he cannot use the cold English manner to hide behind, then perhaps he gets mad, and when he gets mad, poof! Look out!"

"He has a temper?" Mason asked.

"That, Monsieur Mason, I do not know, but I have heard what others say. He is bad when he gets mad. His manner is a mask."

"I thank you," Mason said.

She hesitated a moment, then archly blew him a kiss with the tips of her fingers. The door closed gently but firmly.

CHAPTER 11

PERRY MASON AND PAUL DRAKE LEFT THE ELEVATORS, WALKED down the corridor of the big office building.

"Here's the suite," Drake said, pausing in front of a door which had on its frosted glass only the single word "Enter" and the number 555.

Drake opened the door.

"Well," Mason said, looking around, "you certainly fixed up a place here, Paul."

"Rental of desks and chairs," Drake said. "Rental of typewriters. The rest of it all came with the furnished office."

"I didn't know you could rent places like this," Mason said.

"This building caters to an international clientele," Drake explained. "Occasionally they need a large furnished office for directors' meetings, conferences, and things of that sort. The last time this was rented, which was last week, a big Mexican company had it for a trade conference.

"They expect to lose money on this office, of course, but the international goodwill and the convenience to tenants in the building who have big meetings from time to time are supposed to more than offset the loss. Come on in here, Perry."

Mason led the way into a private office.

"This where the interviews take place?" Mason asked.

"That's right."

"This girl will be here at six o'clock?"

"Right on the dot. I have an idea that girl prides herself on being prompt and efficient."

"That's the way I had her sized up," Mason said.

"You aren't ready to tell me yet how you got a line on her?"

"No."

"Or what she has to do with the case?"

Mason said, "She *may* be the girl who made the surreptitious entry into the offices of the South African Gem Importing Exploration Company."

"I surmised that," Drake said. "It's almost the same description that the police had."

"You have a tape recorder connected?" Mason asked.

"This room is bugged with three microphones," Drake told him. "There's a tape recorder in that closet."

"And what about a receptionist?" Mason asked.

"My receptionist is coming in to—" He broke off as a buzzer sounded. "That means someone's coming in."

Drake got up, went out into the big reception room, came back in a moment with a very attractive young woman.

"Meet Nora Pitts, Perry. She's one of my operatives, working as a receptionist here, and she really knows the ropes."

Miss Pitts, blushing and somewhat flustered, came forward to give Perry Mason her hand.

"I'd been hoping I'd meet you on one of these jobs, Mr. Mason," she said. "Mr. Drake keeps me for the office type of work. Usually I'm on stake-outs. I was beginning to be afraid I was just *never* going to meet you."

"You shouldn't hold out on me like this, Paul," Mason said to the detective.

Drake grinned, looked at his wrist watch, said, "You understand the setup, Nora?"

She nodded.

"Do you know Della Street, my secretary?" Mason asked.

"I know her by sight, yes."

"Well," Mason said, "after this girl has been in here for a few minutes, Miss Street is going to come in. I told her to be here promptly at fifteen minutes past six."

Nora was listening now, her personal reaction at meeting Mason completely subdued by professional concentration.

"What do I do?" she asked.

"I think that this girl will be here by six o'clock, or at least a couple of minutes past six," Mason said. "You send her in as soon as she arrives. I'll start talking with her and questioning her. Della Street will be in at six-fifteen on the dot. We'll hear the buzzer in the office when the door opens and know that she's here, so there'll be no need for you to notify us. Just have Della sit down and wait. I'll buzz for her when I want her sent in."

"Okay," she said.

"You got it, Nora?" Drake asked.

She nodded. "Of course."

Drake looked at his watch. "Well, it's seven minutes to six. She may come in early. Let's go."

Nora Pitts, with a quick smile at Mason, went back to the reception room.

In the office Drake settled down for a smoke, and Mason joined him with a cigarette.

"The newspapers indicate your client is a cold fish," Drake said.

Mason said irritably, "The guy is trying to protect some girl, and we're not going to get his story out of him until after we've got the story out of this girl."

"And you think Mae Jordan is the girl?"

"I don't know. Could be."

"Suppose she is?"

"Then we'll break her down and get her story."

"What do you propose to do then?"

"We'll get a tape recording," Mason said. "Then I'll go down to the jail, tell Jefferson what I have, and tell him to come clean."

"Then what?"

"Then I'll have his story."

"How's the district attorney going to identify those diamonds, Perry?"

"I don't know much about the case, Paul, but I do know a lot about the district attorney. He's been laying for me for years.

"This time he thinks he has me. He must have a pretty good case. But I'm gambling there's a legal point he's overlooked."

"What's the point?"

"The *corpus delicti*."

"You think he can't prove it?"

"How's he going to prove a murder?" Mason asked. "They've never found Munroe Baxter's body. Now then, I can show the jury, by Hamilton Burger's own witnesses, that Munroe Baxter was a clever actor who planned to fake a suicide in order to smuggle in gems. Why wouldn't he fake a murder in order to keep from splitting the profit with his female accomplice?

"I'll tell the jury that it's almost certain Baxter has some new babe he's stuck on, some oo-la-la dish who is ready, able and willing to take Yvonne Manco's place as his female accomplice.

"What would be more likely than that Baxter would pretend he had been murdered, so that Yvonne Manco wouldn't be looking for him with fire in her eye?"

"Well, of course, when you put it that way," Drake said, "I can see the possibilities."

"All right," Mason grinned, "that's the way I'm going to put it to the jury. Hamilton Burger isn't going to have the smooth, easy sailing he's anticipating. He'll surprise me. I'll concede he must have something that will hit me hard, but after that, we're going to get down to fundamentals. He can hurt me, but I don't think he can do any more than that. I can blast his case out of court."

They smoked in silence for a few minutes, then Mason said, "What time have you got, Paul? I have five minutes *past* six."

"I have six minutes past, myself," Drake said. "What do you suppose has happened?"

"Do you think she's changed her mind?" Mason asked.

"Hell, no! She was too eager."

Mason began to pace the floor, looking from time to time at his watch.

Promptly at six-fifteen the buzzer sounded.

Mason opened the door to the reception room, said, "Hello, Della. Come in."

Della Street entered the private office. "No typist?" she asked.

"No typist," Mason said.

"Suppose it's simply a case of her being delayed or—"

Mason shook his head. "That girl wasn't delayed. She has become suspicious."

"Not while she was here," Drake said positively. "When she left the place, her eyes were shining. She—"

"Sure," Mason said. "But she's smart. She went to the Better Business Bureau or a credit agency and got somebody to call up the office of this building and find out who was renting this office."

"Oh-oh!" Drake exclaimed.

"You mean you left a back trail?" Mason asked.

"I had to, Perry. If she went at it that way, she could have found out this office was being rented by the Drake Detective Agency."

Mason grabbed for his hat. "Come on, Paul. Let's go."

"Want me?" Della Street asked.

Mason hesitated, then said, "You may as well come on, and we'll buy you a dinner afterward."

Mason paused in the big reception office only long enough to tell Nora Pitts to stay on the job until Drake phoned.

"If that girl comes in, hold her," Drake said. "Keep her here and phone the office."

They got in Mason's car. Mason drove to the address on Cabachon Street, which was a narrow-fronted, two-story apartment house.

"Apartment two-eighteen," Drake said.

Mason repeatedly jabbed the button. When there was no answer he rang the bell for the manager.

The door latch clicked open. Drake held the door open. They went in. The manager, a big-boned woman in her sixties, came out to look them over. She studied the group with a cold, practiced eye. "We have no short-term rentals," she said.

Drake said, "I'm an investigator. We're looking for information. We're trying to locate Mae Jordan."

"Oh, yes," the woman said. "Well, Miss Jordan left."

"What do you mean she left?"

"Well, she told me she'd be away for a while and asked me if I'd feed her canary."

"She was going somewhere?"

"I guess so. She seemed in a terrific hurry. She dashed into the apartment and packed a couple of suitcases."

"Was she alone?" Mason asked.

"No. Two men were with her."

"Two men?"

"That's right."

"Did she introduce them?"

"No."

"They went up to the apartment with her?"

"Yes."

"And came down with her?"

"Yes. Each one of them was carrying a suitcase."

"And Miss Jordan didn't tell you how long she'd be gone?"

"No."

"How did she come here? Was it in a car or a taxicab?"

"I didn't see her come, but she left in a private car with these two men. Why? Is there anything wrong?"

Mason exchanged glances with Paul Drake.

"What time was this?" Mason asked.

"About . . . oh, let's see . . . It's been a little over an hour and a half, I guess."

"Thank you," Mason said, and led the way back to the car.

"Well?" Drake asked.

"Start your men going, Paul," Mason said. "Find out where Mae Jordan worked. Get the dope on her. Dig up everything you can. I want that girl."

"What are you going to do with her when you get her?" Drake asked.

"I'm going to slap her with a subpoena, put her on the witness stand, and tear her insides out," Mason said grimly. "How long will it take you to find out where Walter Irving is right now?"

"I'll know as soon as my operatives phone in the next report. I've got two men on the job. Generally, they phone in about once an hour."

"When you locate him, let me know," Mason said. "I'll be in my office."

Della Street smiled at Paul Drake. "Dinner," she said, "has been postponed."

CHAPTER 12

MASON HAD BEEN IN HIS OFFICE LESS THAN TEN MINUTES WHEN the unlisted phone rang. Della Street glanced inquiringly at Mason. The lawyer said, "I'll take it, Della," and picked up the phone.

"Hello, Paul. What is it?"

Drake said, "One of my operatives reported Irving is on his way to this building, and he's hopping mad."

"To *this* building?"

"That's right."

"That leaves three objectives," Mason said. "His office, your office, or mine. If he comes to your office, send him in here."

"If he comes to your office, will you want help?"

"I'll handle it," Mason said.

"My operative says he's really breathing fire. He got a phone call when he was right in the middle of dinner. He never even went back to his table. Just dashed out, grabbed a cab, and gave the address of this building."

"Okay," Mason said. "We'll see what develops."

Mason hung up the telephone and said to Della Street, "Irving is on his way here."

"To see you?"

"Probably."

"So what do we do?"

"Wait for him. The party may be rough."

Five minutes later angry knuckles banged on the door of Mason's private office. "That will be Irving," Mason said. "I'll let him in myself, Della."

Mason got up, strode across the office and jerked the door open.

"Good evening," he said coldly, his face granite hard.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" Irving asked furiously.
"Upset the apple cart?"

Mason said, "There are ladies present. Watch your language unless you want to get thrown out."

"Who's going to throw me out?"

"I am."

"You and who else?"

"Just me."

Irving sized him up for a moment. "You're one hell of a lawyer, I'll say that for you."

"All right," Mason told him. "Come in. Sit down. Tell me what's on your mind. And the next time you try to hold out anything on me, you'll be a lot sorrier than you are right now."

"I wasn't holding out on you. I—"

"All right," Mason told him. "Tell me *your* troubles, and then *I'll tell you something.*"

"You went out to call on Marline Chaumont."

"Of course I did."

"You shouldn't have done it."

"Then why didn't you tell me so?"

"To tell you the truth, I didn't think you could possibly find out anything about her. I still don't know how you did it."

"Well, what's wrong with going to see her?" Mason asked.

"You've kicked your case out of the window, that's all that's wrong with it."

"Go on. Tell me the rest of it."

"I'd been nursing that angle of the case until I could get the evidence we needed. She was pulling this gag of having an invalid brother on her hands so she—"

"That's a gag?" Mason interrupted.

"Don't be any simpler than you have to be," Irving snapped.

"What about her brother?" Mason asked.

"Her brother!" Irving stormed. "Her brother! You poor, simple-minded boob! Her so-called brother is Munroe Baxter."

"Go on," Mason said. "Keep talking."

"Isn't that fact enough to show you what you've done?"

"The fact would be. Your statement isn't."

"Well, I'm telling you."

"You've told me. I don't want your guesses or surmises. I want facts."

"Marline is a smart little babe. She's French. She's chic, and she's a fast thinker. She's been playing around with Munroe Baxter. He likes her better than Yvonne Manco. He was beginning to get tired of Yvonne.

"So when Munroe Baxter took the nose dive, he just kept on diving and came up into the arms of Marline Chaumont. She had a home all prepared for him as the invalid brother who was weak in the upper story."

"Any proof?" Mason asked.

"I was getting proof."

"You've seen Marline?"

"Of course I've seen her. After I got to thinking things over, I made it a point to see her."

"And did you see her brother?"

"I tried to," Irving said, "but she was too smart for me. She had him locked in a back bedroom, and she had the only key. She wanted to go to the all-night bank and transact some business. I told her I'd stay with her brother. She took me up on it.

"After she was gone, I prowled the house. The back bedroom

was locked. I think she'd given him a sedative or something. I could hear him gently snoring. I knocked on the door and tried to wake him up. I wanted to look at him."

"You think he's Munroe Baxter?"

"I know he's Munroe Baxter."

"How do you know it?"

"I don't have to go into that with you."

"The hell you don't!"

Irving shrugged his shoulders. "You've started messing the case up now. Go ahead and finish it."

"All right, I will," Mason said. "I'll put that house under surveillance. I'll—"

"You and your house under surveillance!" Irving exclaimed scornfully. "Marline and her brother got out of there within thirty minutes after you left the place. That house is as cold and dead as a last-year's bird's nest. In case you want to bet, I'll give you ten to one you can't find a fingerprint in the whole damn place."

"Where did they go?" Mason asked.

Irving shrugged his shoulders. "Search me. I went out there. The place was empty. I became suspicious and got a private detective agency to get on the job and find out what had happened. I was eating dinner tonight when the detective phoned. Neighbors had seen a car drive up. A man and a woman got out. The neighbor was looking through the curtains. She recognized you from your pictures. The description of the girl with you checked with that of your secretary here, Miss Street."

"Half an hour after you left, a taxi drove up. Marline sent out four big suitcases and a handbag. Then she and the taxi driver helped a man out to the car. The man was stumbling around as though he was drunk or drugged or both."

"And then?" Mason asked.

"The cab drove away."

"All right," Mason said. "We'll trace that cab."

Irving laughed scornfully. "You must think you're dealing with a bunch of dumb bunnies, Mason."

"Perhaps I am," Mason said.

"Go on and try to trace that couple," he said. "Then you'll find out what a mess you've made of things."

Irving got to his feet.

"How long had you known all this?" Mason asked, his voice ominously calm.

"Not long. I looked Marline up when I came here. She knows everyone in the Paris office. She was our party girl. She always helped in entertaining buyers."

"She's smart. She got wise to the Baxter deal and she put the heat on Baxter."

"As soon as I went out to Marline's place to call on her, I knew something was wrong. She went into a panic at the sight of me. She tried to cover up by being all honey and syrup, but she overdid it. She had to invite me in, but she told me this story about her brother. Then she kept me waiting while she locked him up and knocked him out with a hypo. That evening she left me alone, so I could prowl the house. Baxter was dead to the world. She's a smart one, that girl."

"I was getting ready to really bust this case wide open, and then you had to stick your clumsy hand right in the middle of all the machinery."

Irving started for the door.

"Wait a minute," Mason said. You're not finished yet. You know something more about all—"

"Sure I do," Irving said. "And make no mistake, Mason. What I know I keep to myself from now on. In case you're interested, I'm cabling the company to kiss their two-thousand-dollar retainer good-by and to hire a lawyer who at least has *some* sense."

Irving strode out into the corridor.

Della Street watched the closing door. When it had clicked shut she started for the telephone.

Mason motioned her away. "Remember, it's all taken care of, Della," he said. "Paul Drake has two men shadowing him. We'll know where he goes when he leaves here."

"That's fine," she said. "In that case, you can take me to dinner now."

CHAPTER 13

DELLA STREET LAID THE DECODED CABLEGRAM ON MASON'S DESK as the lawyer entered the office.

"What's this, Della?" Mason asked, hanging up his hat.

"Cablegram from the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company."

"Am I fired?"

"Definitely not."

"What does it say?" Mason asked.

"It says you are to continue with the case and to protect the interests of Duane Jefferson, that the company investigated you before you were retained, that it has confidence in you, and that its official representative in this area, and the only one in a position to give orders representing the company, is Duane Jefferson."

"Well," Mason said, "that's something." He took the decoded cablegram and studied it. "It sounds as though they didn't have too much confidence in Walter Irving."

"Of course," she told him, "we don't know what Irving cabled the company."

"We know what he told us he was cabling the company."

"Where does all this leave him?" Della Street asked.

"Out on a limb," Mason said, grinning, and then added, "It also leaves us out on a limb. If we don't get some line on Mae Jordan and Marline Chaumont, we're behind the eight ball."

"Couldn't you get a continuance under the circumstances until—"

Mason shook his head.

"Why not, Chief?"

"For several reasons," Mason said. "One of them is that I assured the district attorney I'd go to trial on the first date we could squeeze in on the trial calendar. The other is that I still think we have more to gain than to lose by getting to trial before the district attorney has had an opportunity to think over the real problem."

"Do you suppose this so-called brother of Marline Chaumont is really Munroe Baxter?"

Mason looked at his watch, said, "Paul Drake should have the answer to that by this time. Get him on the phone, Della. Ask him to come in."

Ten minutes later Paul Drake was laying it on the line.

"This guy Irving is all wet, Perry. Marline Chaumont showed up at the state hospital. She identified herself as the sister of Pierre Chaumont. Pierre had been there for a year. He'd become violent. They'd operated on his brain. After that, he was like a pet dog. He was there because there was no other place for him to be. Authorities were very glad to release Pierre to his sister, Marline. The chance that he is Munroe Baxter is so negligible you can dismiss it."

"In the first place, Marline showed up and got him out of the state hospital more than a month before Baxter's boat was due. At the time Marline was getting him out of the hospital, Munroe Baxter was in Paris."

"Is his real name Pierre Chaumont?"

"The authorities are satisfied it is."

"Who satisfied them?"

"I don't know; Marline, I guess. The guy was going under another name. He'd been a vicious criminal, a psychopath. He consented to having this lobotomy performed, and they did it. It apparently cured him of his homicidal tendencies, but it left him like a zombie. As I understand it, he's in sort of a hypnotic trance. Tell the guy anything, and he does it."

"You checked with the hospital?"

"With everyone. The doctor isn't very happy about the outcome. He said he had hoped for better results, but the guy was a total loss the way he was and anything is an improvement. They were damn glad to get rid of him at the hospital."

"Yes, I can imagine. What else, Paul?"

"Now here's some news that's going to jolt you, Perry."

"Go ahead and jolt."

"Mae Jordan was picked up by investigators from the district attorney's office."

"The hell!" Mason exclaimed.

Drake nodded.

"What are they trying to do? Get a confession of some sort out of her?"

"Nobody knows. Two men showed up at the law office where

she works yesterday afternoon. It took me a while to get the name of that law office, but I finally got it. It's one of the most substantial, conservative firms in town, and it created quite a furor when these two men walked in, identified themselves and said they wanted Mae Jordan.

"They had a talk with her in a private office, then came out and hunted up old man Honcut, who's the senior member of the firm Honcut, Gridley and Billings. They told him that for Mae's own safety they were going to have to keep her out of circulation for a while. She had about three weeks for vacation coming, and they told Honcut she could come back right after the trial."

"She went willingly?" Mason asked.

"Apparently so."

Mason thought that over. "How did they find her, Paul?"

"Simplest thing in the world. They searched Jefferson when they booked him. There was a name and address book. It was all in code. They cracked the code and ran down the names. When they came to this Jordan girl she talked."

"She tried to talk herself out by talking Duane Jefferson in," Mason said grimly. "When that young woman gets on the stand she's going to have a cross-examination she'll remember for a long, long time. What about Irving, Paul? Where did he go after he left here?"

"Now there," Drake said, "I have some more bad news for you."

Mason's face darkened. "That was damn important, Paul. I told you—"

"I know what you *told* me, Perry. Now *I'm* going to tell *you* something about the shadowing business that I've told you a dozen times before and I'll probably tell you a dozen times again. If a smart man knows he's being tailed and doesn't want to be shadowed, there's not much you can do about it. If he's smart, he can give you the slip every time, unless you have four or five operatives all equipped with some means of intercommunication."

"But Irving didn't *know* he was being tailed."

"What makes you think he didn't?"

"Well," Mason said, "he didn't act like it when he came up here to the office."

"He sure acted like it when he left," Drake said. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing to arouse his suspicions. Specifically, what did he do, Paul?"

"He proceeded to ditch the shadows."

"How?"

"To begin with, he got a taxi. He must have told the taxi driver there was a car following him that he wanted to ditch. The cab driver played it smart. He'd slide up to the traffic signals just as they were changing, then go on through. My man naturally tried to keep up with him, relying on making an explanation to any traffic cop who might stop him.

"Well, a traffic cop stopped him and it happened he was a cop who didn't feel kindly toward private detectives. He got tough, held my man, and gave him a ticket. By that time, Irving was long since gone.

"Usually a cop will give you a break on a deal like that if you have your credentials right handy, show them to him and tell him you're shadowing the car ahead. This chap deliberately held my man up until Irving got away. Not that I think it would have made any difference. Irving knew that he was being tailed, and he'd made up his mind he was going to ditch the tail. When a smart man gets an idea like that in his head, there's nothing you can do about it except roll with the punch and take it."

"So what did you do, Paul?"

"Did the usual things. Put men on his apartment house to pick him up when he got back. Did everything."

"And he hasn't been back?"

Drake shook his head.

"All right. What about the others?"

"Marline Chaumont," Drake said. "You thought it would be easy to locate her."

"You mean you've drawn a blank all the way along the line?" Mason interposed impatiently.

"I found out about Mae Jordan," Drake said.

"And that's all?"

"That's all."

"All right. What about Marline Chaumont? Give me the bad news in bunches."

"It took me a devil of a time to find the taxicab driver who went out to the house," Drake said. "I finally located him. He remem-

bered the occasion well. He took the woman, the man, four suitcases and a handbag to the airport."

"And then what?" Mason asked.

"Then we draw a blank. We can't find where she left the airport."

"You mean a woman with a man who is hardly able to navigate by himself, with four big suitcases and a handbag, can vanish from the airport?" Mason asked.

"That's right," Drake said. "Just try it sometime, Perry."

"Try what?"

"Covering all of the taxicab drivers who go to the air terminal. Try and get them to tell you whether they picked up a man, a woman, four suitcases and a handbag. People are coming in by plane every few minutes. The place is a regular madhouse."

Mason thought that over. "All right, Paul," he said. "Irving told me we'd get no place, but I thought the four suitcases would do it."

"So did I when you first told me about it," Drake said.

"They went directly to the airport?"

"That's right."

"Paul, they must have gone *somewhere*."

"Sure, they went somewhere," Drake said. "I can tell you where they *didn't* go."

"All right. Where didn't they go?"

"They didn't take any plane that left at about that time of day."

"How do you know?"

"I checked it by the excess baggage. The taxi driver says the suitcases were heavy. They must have weighed forty pounds each. I checked the departures on the planes."

"You checked them by name, of course?"

Drake's look was withering. "Don't be silly, Perry. That was the first thing. That was simple. Then I checked with the ticket sellers to see if there was a record of tickets sold at that time of day with that amount of excess baggage. There wasn't. Then I checked with the gate men to see if they remembered some woman going through the gate who would need help in getting a man aboard the plane. There was none. I also checked on wheel chairs. No dice. So then I concluded she'd gone to the airport, unloaded, paid off the cab, and had picked up another cab at the airport to come back."

"And you couldn't find that cab?"

"My men are still working on it. But that's like going to some babe wearing a skirt reaching to her knees, a tight sweater, and asking her if she remembered anybody whistling at her yesterday as she walked down the street."

After a moment Mason grinned. "All right, Paul. We're drawing a blank. Now why the devil would the district attorney have Mae Jordan picked up?"

"Because he wanted to question her."

"Then why wouldn't he have let her go after he questioned her?"

"Because he hasn't finished questioning her."

Mason shook his head. "You overlook what happened. She went up to her room, packed—got two suitcases. The district attorney is keeping her in what amounts to custody."

"Why?"

Mason grinned. "Now wait a minute, Paul. That's the question that I asked you. Of course, the only answer is that he wants her as a material witness. But if he does that, it means she must have told a story that has pulled the wool completely over his eyes, and he fell for it hook, line, and sinker."

"You don't think she's a material witness?" Drake asked.

Mason thought the situation over for a minute, then a slow smile spread over his features. "She would be, if she told the truth. I don't think there's any better news that I could have had."

"Why?"

"Because if the district attorney doesn't put her on the stand as a witness, I'll claim that he sabotaged my case by spiriting away *my* witnesses. If he does put her on the stand, I'll make him the sickest district attorney west of Chicago."

"You're going to play into his hands by going to an immediate trial?" Drake asked.

Mason grinned. "Paul, did you ever see a good tug of war?"

Drake thought for a moment, then said, "They used to put them on in the country towns on the Fourth of July."

"And did you ever see the firemen having a tug of war with the police department?"

"I may have. I can't remember. Why?"

"And," Mason went on, "about the time the fire department was all dug in and huffing and puffing, there would be a secret signal from the police department and everybody would give the firemen

a lot of slack and they'd go over backwards, and then the police department would give a big yo-heave-ho and pull the whole aggregation right over the dividing line on the seat of their pants."

Drake grinned. "Seems to me I remember something like that, now that you speak of it."

"Well," Mason said, "that is what is known as playing into the hands of the district attorney, Paul. We're going to give him lots of slack. Now, answering your question more specifically—yes, I'm going to an immediate trial. I'm going to go to trial while the D.A. is hypnotized by Mae Jordan's story and before he finds out I know some of the things I know and that he doesn't know."

CHAPTER 14

THE SELECTION OF THE JURY WAS COMPLETED AT TEN-THIRTY on the second day of the trial. Judge Hartley settled back on the bench, anticipating a long, bitterly contested trial.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the jury has been selected and sworn. The prosecution will proceed with its opening statement."

At that moment, Hamilton Burger, the district attorney, who had left the selection of the jury to subordinates, dramatically strode into the courtroom to take charge of the trial personally.

The district attorney bowed to the judge and, almost without pausing, passed the counsel table to stand facing the jury.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he said. "I am the district attorney of this county. We expect to show you that the defendant in this case is an employee of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company; that through his employment he had reason to know that a man named Munroe Baxter had in his possession a large number of diamonds valued at more than three hundred thousand dollars on the retail market; that the defendant knew Munroe Baxter intended to smuggle those diamonds into this country, and that the defendant murdered Munroe Baxter and took possession of those diamonds. We will introduce witnesses to show premeditation, deliberation and the cunning execution of a diabolical scheme of murder. We will show that a

goodly proportion of the diamonds smuggled into the country by Munroe Baxter were found in the possession of the defendant. On the strength of that evidence we shall ask for a verdict of first-degree murder."

And Hamilton Burger, bowing to the jury, turned and stalked back to the counsel table.

Court attachés looked at each other in surprise. It was the shortest opening statement Hamilton Burger had ever made, and no one missed its significance. Hamilton Burger had carefully refrained from disclosing his hand or giving the defense the faintest inkling of how he intended to prove his case.

"My first witness," Hamilton Burger said, "will be Yvonne Manco."

"Come forward, Yvonne Manco," the bailiff called.

Yvonne Manco had evidently been carefully instructed. She came forward, trying her best to look demure. Her neckline was high and her skirt was fully as long as the current styles dictated, but the attempt to make her look at all conservative was as unsuccessful as would have been an attempt to disguise a racing sports car as a family sedan.

Yvonne gave her name and address to the court reporter, then looked innocently at the district attorney—after having flashed a sidelong glance of appraisal at the men on the jury.

Under questioning of the district attorney, Yvonne told the story of her relationship with Munroe Baxter, of the carefully laid plot to smuggle the gems, of the tour aboard the cruise ship, the spurious "whirlwind courtship."

She told of the plot to arrange the fake suicide, her deliberate flirtation with the assistant purser, the scene on the ship, and then finally that early morning plunge into the waters of the bay. She disclosed that she had carried a small compressed air tank in her baggage and that when Baxter went overboard, he was prepared to swim for a long distance underwater.

Hamilton Burger brought out a series of maps and photographs of the cruise ship. He had the witness identify the approximate place where the leap had taken place, both from the deck of the steamer and from its location in the bay.

"You may cross-examine," he said to Perry Mason.

Mason smiled at the witness, who promptly returned his smile,

shifted her position slightly and crossed her legs, so that two of the masculine members of the jury hitched forward in their chairs for a better look, while the chins of two of the less attractive women on the jury were conspicuously elevated.

"You go by the name of Yvonne Manco?" Mason asked.

"Yes."

"You have another name?"

"No."

"You were really married to Munroe Baxter, were you not?"

"Yes, but now that I am a widow I choose to keep my maiden name of Yvonne Manco."

"I see," Mason said. "You don't want to bear the name of your husband?"

"It is not that," she said. "Yvonne Manco is my professional name."

"What profession?" Mason asked.

There was a moment's silence, then Hamilton Burger was on his feet. "Your Honor, I object. I object to the manner in which the question is asked. I object to the question. Incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial."

Judge Hartley stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "under the circumstances I'm going to sustain the objection. However, in view of the answer of the witness— However, the objection is sustained."

"You were, however, married to Munroe Baxter?"

"Yes."

"On shipboard?"

"Yes."

"Before that?"

"No."

"There had been no previous ceremony?"

"No."

"Are you familiar with what is referred to as a common law marriage?"

"Yes."

"Had you ever gone by the name of Mrs. Baxter?"

"Yes."

"Prior to this cruise?"

"Yes."

"As a part of this plot which you and Munroe Baxter hatched up, he was to pretend to be dead. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"With whom did the idea originate? You or Munroe Baxter?"

"With him."

"He was to pretend to jump overboard and be dead, so he could smuggle in some diamonds?"

"Yes. I have told you this."

"In other words," Mason said, "if at any time it should be to his advantage, he was quite willing to pretend to be dead."

"Objected to as calling for the conclusion of the witness as already asked and answered," Hamilton Burger said.

"Sustained," Judge Hartley said.

Mason, having made his point, smiled at the jury. "You knew that you were engaging in a smuggling transaction?" he asked the witness.

"But of course. I am not stupid."

"Exactly," Mason said. "And after this investigation started, you had some contact with the district attorney?"

"Naturally."

"And was it not through the offices of the district attorney that arrangements were made so you could testify in this case, yet be held harmless and not be prosecuted for smuggling?"

"Well, of course—"

"Just a minute, just a minute," Hamilton Burger interrupted. "I want to interpose an objection to that question, Your Honor."

"Go ahead," Judge Hartley ruled.

"It is incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial. It is not proper cross-examination."

"Overruled," Judge Hartley said. "Answer the question."

"Well, of course there was no definite agreement. That would have been . . . unwise."

"Who told you it would be unwise?"

"It was agreed by all that it would be unwise."

"By all, whom do you mean? Whom do you include?"

"Well, the customs people, the district attorney, the detectives, the police, my own lawyer."

"I see," Mason said. "They told you that it would be unwise to have a definite agreement to this effect, but nevertheless they gave

you every assurance that if you testified as they wished, you would not be prosecuted on a smuggling charge?"

"Your Honor, I object to the words 'as they wished,'" Hamilton Burger said. "That calls for a conclusion of the witness."

Judge Hartley looked down at the witness.

Mason said, "I'll put it this way, was there any conversation as to what you were to testify to?"

"The truth."

"Who told you that?"

"Mr. Burger, the district attorney."

"And was there some assurance given you that if you so testified, you would be given immunity from the smuggling?"

"If I testified to the *truth?* Yes."

"Before this assurance was given you, you had told these people what the truth was?"

"Yes."

"And that was the same story you have told on the witness stand here?"

"Certainly."

"So that when the district attorney told you to tell the truth, you understood that he meant the same story you have just told here?"

"Yes."

"So then, the assurance that was given you was that if you would tell the story you have now told on the witness stand, you would be given immunity from smuggling."

"That was my understanding."

"So," Mason said, "simply by telling this story you are given immunity from smuggling?"

"Well, not— It was not that . . . not that crude," she said.

The courtroom broke into laughter.

"That," Mason said, "is all."

Hamilton Burger was plainly irritated as the witness left the stand. "My next witness will be Jack Gilly," he said.

Jack Gilly was a slender, shifty-eyed man with high cheekbones, a long, sharp nose, a high forehead, and a pointed chin. He moved with a silence that was almost furtive as he glided up to the witness stand, held up his hand, was sworn, gave his name and address to the court reporter, seated himself, and looked expectantly at the district attorney.

"What's your occupation?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"At the moment?" he asked.

"Well, do you have the same occupation now you had six months ago?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I rent fishing boats."

"Where?"

"At the harbor here."

"Were you acquainted with Munroe Baxter during his lifetime?"

"Just a moment before you answer that question," Mason said to the witness. He turned to Judge Hartley. "I object, Your Honor, on the ground that the question assumes a fact not in evidence. As far as the evidence before this court at the present time is concerned, Munroe Baxter is still alive."

"May I be heard on that, Your Honor?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"Well," Judge Hartley said, hesitating, "it would certainly seem that the logical way to present this case would be first to— However, I'll hear you, Mr. District Attorney."

"If the Court please," Hamilton Burger said, "Munroe Baxter jumped overboard in deep water. He was never seen alive afterward. I have witnesses from the passengers and the crew who will testify that Munroe Baxter ran to the rear of the ship, jumped overboard and vanished in the water. The ship called for a launch to come alongside, the waters were searched and searched carefully. Munroe Baxter never came up."

"Well," Judge Hartley said, "you can't expect this Court to rule on evidence predicated upon an assumption as to what you intend to prove by other witnesses. Moreover, your own witness has testified that this was all part of a scheme on the part of Munroe Baxter to—"

"Yes, yes, I know," Hamilton Burger interrupted. "But schemes can go astray. Many unforeseen things can enter into the picture. Jumping from the deck of a ship is a perilous procedure."

Judge Hartley said, "Counsel will kindly refrain from interrupting the Court. I was about to say, Mr. District Attorney, that the testimony of your own witness indicates this was all part of a planned scheme by which Munroe Baxter intended to appear to commit suicide. In view of the fact that there is a presumption

that a man remains alive until he is shown to be dead, the Court feels the objection is well taken."

"Very well, Your Honor, I will reframe the question," Hamilton Burger said. "Mr. Gilly, did you know Munroe Baxter?"

"Yes."

"How well did you know him?"

"I had met him several times."

"Were you acquainted with Yvonne Manco, who has just testified?"

"Yes."

"Directing your attention to the sixth day of June of this year, what was your occupation at that time?"

"I was renting boats."

"And to the fifth day of June, what was your occupation?"

"I was renting boats."

"Did you rent a boat on the fifth of June at an hour nearing seven o'clock in the evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"To whom did you rent that boat?"

"Frankly, I don't know."

"It was to some man you had never seen before?"

"Yes."

"Did the man tell you what he wanted?"

"He said that he had been directed to me because I was—"

"Just a moment," Mason interrupted. "I object to any conversation which did not take place in the presence of the defendant and which is not connected up with the defendant."

"I propose to connect this up with the defendant," Hamilton Burger said.

"Then the connection should be shown before the conversation," Mason said.

Judge Hartley nodded. "The objection is sustained."

"Very well. You rented a boat to this man who was a stranger to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"From what this man said, however, you had reason to rent him the boat?"

"Yes."

"Was money paid you for the boat?"

"Yes."

"And when did the man start out in the boat, that is, when did he take delivery of it?"

"At about five o'clock the next morning."

"What were the circumstances surrounding the delivery of the boat?"

"He stood on the dock with me. I had a pair of powerful night glasses. When I saw the cruise ship coming in the harbor, I said to this man that I could see the cruise ship, and he jumped in the boat and took off."

"Did he start the motor?"

"The motor had been started an hour previously so it would be warm and so everything would be in readiness."

"And what did the man do?"

"He guided the boat away from my dock and out into the channel."

"Just a moment," Mason said. "Your Honor, I move to strike all of this evidence out on the ground that it has not been connected with the defendant in any way."

"I am going to connect it up," Hamilton Burger said, "within the next few questions."

"The Court will reserve a ruling," Judge Hartley said. "It seems to me that these questions are largely preliminary."

"What did *you* do after the boat was rented?" Hamilton Burger asked the witness.

"Well," Gilly said, "I was curious. I wanted to see—"

"Never mind your thoughts or emotions," Hamilton Burger said. "What did you *do*?"

"I walked back to where my car was parked, got in the car and drove out to a place I knew on the waterfront where I could get out on the dock and watch what was going on."

"What do you mean by your words, 'what was going on'?"

"Watch the boat I had rented."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw the cruise ship coming slowly into the harbor."

"And what else did you see?"

"I saw Munroe Baxter jump overboard."

"You know it was Munroe Baxter?"

"Well, I— Of course, I knew it from what happened."

"But did you recognize him?"

"Well . . . it looked like Baxter, but at that distance and in that light I couldn't *swear* to it."

"*Don't swear to it then,*" Hamilton Burger snapped. "You saw a man jump overboard?"

"Yes."

"Did that man look like anyone you knew?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Munroe Baxter."

"That is, as I understand your testimony, he looked like Munroe Baxter, but you can't definitely swear that it *was* Munroe Baxter. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Then what happened?"

"I saw people running around on the deck of the cruise ship. I heard voices evidently hailed a launch, and a launch came and cruised around the ship."

"What else happened?"

"I kept my binoculars trained on the boat that I had rented."

"What did you see?"

"There were two men in the boat."

"Two men?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Where did the other man come from, do you know?"

"No, sir, I don't. But I am assuming that he was picked up on one of the docks while I was getting my car."

"That may go out," Hamilton Burger said. "You don't know of your own knowledge where this man came from?"

"No, sir."

"You know only that by the time you reached the point of vantage from which you could see the boat, there were two men in the boat?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then what happened?"

"The boat sat there for some time. The second man appeared to be fishing. He was holding a heavy bamboo rod and a line over the side of the boat."

"And then what happened?"

"After quite a while I saw the fishing pole suddenly jerk, as though something very heavy had taken hold of the line."

"And then what?"

"Then I could see a black body partially submerged in the water, apparently hanging onto the fish line."

"And then what did you see?"

"One of the men leaned over the side of the boat. He appeared to be talking—"

"Never mind what he appeared to be doing. What did he do?"

"He leaned over the side of the boat."

"Then what?"

"Then he reached down to the dark object in the water."

"Then what?"

"Then I saw him raise his right arm and lower it rapidly several times. There was a knife in his hand. He was plunging the knife down into the dark thing in the water."

"Then what?"

"Then both men fumbled around with the thing that was in the water; then one of the men lifted a heavy weight of some kind over the side of the boat and tied it to the thing that was in the water."

"Then what?"

"Then they started the motor in the boat, slowly towing the weighted object in the water. I ran back to my automobile, got into it and drove back to my boat pier."

"And what happened then?"

"Then after a couple of hours the man who had rented the boat brought it back."

"Was anyone with him at the time?"

"No, sir, he was alone."

"What did you do?"

"I asked him if he had picked anyone up and he—"

"I object to any conversation which was not in the presence of the defendant," Mason said.

"Just a moment," Hamilton Burger said. "I will withdraw the question until I connect it up. Now, Mr. Gilly, did you recognize the other man who was in the boat with this stranger?"

"Not at the time. I had never seen him before."

"Did you see him subsequently?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was that man?"

"The defendant."

"You are referring now to Duane Jefferson, the defendant who is seated here in the courtroom?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you positive of your identification?"

"Just a moment," Mason said. "That's objected to as an attempt on the part of counsel to cross-examine his own witness."

"Overruled," Judge Hartley said. "Answer the question."

"Yes, sir, I am positive."

"You were watching through binoculars?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is the power of those binoculars?"

"Seven by fifty."

"Are they a good pair of binoculars?"

"Yes, sir."

"With coated lenses?"

"Yes, sir."

"You could see the boat clearly enough to distinguish the features of the people who were in the boat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now then, after the boat was returned to you, did you notice any stains on the boat?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were those stains?"

"Bloodstains that—"

"No, no," Hamilton Burger said. "Just describe the stains. You don't know whether they were blood."

"I know they *looked* like blood."

"Just describe the stains, please," Hamilton Burger insisted, striving to appear virtuous and impartial.

"They were reddish stains, dark reddish stains."

"Where were they?"

"On the outside of the boat, just below the gunwale, and over on the inside of the boat where there had been a spattering or spouting."

"When did you first notice those stains?"

"Just after the boat had been returned to me."

"Were they fresh at that time?"

"Objected to as calling for a conclusion of the witness and no proper foundation laid," Mason said.

"The objection is sustained," Judge Hartley ruled. "Well, how did they appear to you?"

"Same objection."

"Same ruling."

"Look here," Hamilton Burger said, "you have been engaged in the fishing business and in fishing for recreation for some time?"

"Yes, sir."

"During that time you have had occasion to see a lot of blood on boats?"

"Yes, sir."

"And have you been able to judge the relative freshness of the stains by the color of that blood?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's fish blood the witness is being asked about?" Mason interposed.

"Well . . . yes," Hamilton Burger conceded.

"And may I ask the prosecutor if it is his contention that these stains on the boat the witness has described were fish blood?"

"Those were stains of human blood!" Hamilton Burger snapped.

"I submit," Mason said, "that a witness cannot be qualified as an expert on human bloodstains by showing that he has had experience with fish blood."

"The principle is the same," Hamilton Burger said. "The blood assumes the same different shades of color in drying."

"Do I understand the district attorney is now testifying as an expert?" Mason asked.

Judge Hartley smiled. "I think the Court will have to agree with defense counsel, Mr. District Attorney. There must first be a showing as to whether there is a similarity in the appearance of fish blood and human blood *if* you are now trying to qualify this witness as an expert."

"Oh, well," Hamilton Burger said, "I'll get at it in another way by another witness. You are positive as to your identification of this defendant, Mr. Gilly?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he was in the boat at the time you saw this thing—whatever it was—stabbed with a knife?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were these stains you have mentioned on the boat when you rented it?"

"No."

"They were there when the boat was returned?"

"Yes."

"Where is this boat now?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"In the possession of the police."

"When was it taken by the police?"

"About ten days later."

"You mean the sixteenth of June?"

"I believe it was the fifteenth."

"Did you find anything else in that boat, Mr. Gilly?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"A sheath knife with the name 'Duane' engraved on the hilt on one side and the initials 'M.J.' on the other side."

"Where is that knife?"

"The police took it."

"When?"

"At the time they took the boat."

"Would you know that knife if you saw it again?"

"Yes."

Hamilton Burger unwrapped some tissue paper, produced a keen-bladed hunting knife, took it to the witness. "Have you ever seen this knife before?"

"Yes. That's the knife I found in the boat."

"Is it now in the same condition it was then?"

"No, sir. It was blood—I mean, it was stained with something red then, more than it is now."

"Yes, yes, some of those stains were removed at the crime laboratory for analysis," Hamilton Burger said suavely. "You may cross-examine the witness, Mr. Mason. And I now ask the clerk to mark this knife for identification."

Mason smiled at Gilly. "Ever been convicted of a felony, Mr. Gilly?" Mason asked, his voice radiating good feeling.

Hamilton Burger jumped to his feet, apparently preparing to make an objection, then slowly settled back in his chair.

Gilly shifted his watery eyes from Mason's face to the floor.

"Yes, sir."

"How many times?" Mason asked.

"Twice."

"For what?"

"Once for larceny."

"And what was it for the second time?" Mason asked.

"Perjury," Gilly said.

Mason's smile was affable. "How far were you from the boat when you were watching it through your binoculars?"

"About . . . oh, a couple of good city blocks."

"How was the light?"

"It was just after daylight."

"There was fog?"

"Not fog. A sort of mist."

"A cold mist?"

"Yes. It was chilly."

"What did you use to wipe off the lenses of the binoculars—or did you wipe them?"

"I don't think I wiped them."

"And you saw one of these men fishing?"

"Yes, sir. The defendant held the fishing rod."

"And apparently he caught something?"

"A big body caught hold of the line."

"Have you seen people catch big fish before?"

"Yes, sir."

"And sometimes when they have caught sharks you have seen them cut the sharks loose from the line or stab them to death before taking them off the hook?"

"This wasn't a shark."

"I'm asking you a question," Mason said. "Have you seen that?"

"Yes."

"Now, did this thing that was on the fishing line ever come entirely out of the water?"

"No, sir."

"Enough out of the water so you could see what it was?"

"It was almost all underwater all the time."

"You had never seen this man who rented the boat from you before he showed up to rent the boat?"

"No, sir."

"And never saw him again?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know this knife wasn't in the boat when you rented it?"

"Yes."

"When did you first see it?"

"The afternoon of the sixth of June."

"Where?"

"In my boat."

"You had not noticed it before?"

"No."

"Yet you had looked in the boat?"

"Yes."

"And from the time the boat was returned to you until you found the knife, that boat was where anyone could have approached and dropped this knife into it, or tossed it to the bottom of the boat?"

"Well, I guess so. Anyone could have if he'd been snooping around down there."

"And how much rental did this mysterious man give you for the boat?"

"That's objected to as incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial and not proper cross-examination," Hamilton Burger said.

"Well," Mason said, smiling, "I'll get at it in another way. Do you have an established rental rate for that boat, Mr. Gilly?"

"Yes, sir."

"How much is it?"

"A dollar to a dollar and a half an hour."

"Now then, did this stranger pay you the regular rental rate for the boat?"

"We made a special deal."

"You got *more* than your regular rental rate?"

"Yes, sir."

"How much more?"

"Objected to as not proper cross-examination, calling for facts not in evidence, and incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial," Hamilton Burger said.

"Overruled," Judge Hartley said.

"How much rental?" Mason asked.

"I can't recall offhand. I think it was fifty dollars," Gilly said, his eyes refusing to meet those of Mason.

"Was that the figure that you asked, or the figure that the man offered?"

"The figure that I asked."

"Are you sure it was fifty dollars?"

"I can't remember too well. He gave me a bonus. I can't recall how much it was."

"Was it more than fifty dollars?"

"It could have been. I didn't count it. I just took the bills he gave me and put them in the locked box where I keep my money."

"You keep your money in the form of cash?"

"Some of it."

"Did you ever count this bonus?"

"I can't remember doing so."

"It could have been more than fifty dollars?"

"I guess so. I don't know."

"Could it have been as much as a thousand dollars?"

"Oh, that's absurd!" Hamilton Burger protested to the Court.

"Overruled," Judge Hartley snapped.

"Was it?" Mason asked.

"I don't know."

"Did you enter it on your books?"

"I don't keep books."

"You don't know then how much cash is in this locked box where you keep your money?"

"Not to the penny."

"To the dollar?"

"No."

"To the hundred dollars?"

"No."

"Have you more than five hundred dollars in that box right now?"

"I don't know."

"More than five thousand dollars?"

"I can't tell."

"You may have?"

"Yes."

"Now, when were you convicted of perjury," Mason asked, "was that your first offense or the second?"

"The second."

Mason smiled. "That's all, Mr. Gilly."

Judge Hartley glanced at the clock. "It appears that it is now time for the noon adjournment. Court will recess until two o'clock. During this time the jurors will not form or express any opinion as to the merits of the case, but will wait until the case is finally submitted before doing so. Nor will the jurors discuss the case among themselves or permit it to be discussed in their presence. The defendant is remanded to custody. Court will recess until two o'clock."

Paul Drake and Della Street, who had been occupying seats which had been reserved for them in the front of the courtroom, came toward Perry Mason.

Mason caught Paul Drake's eye, motioned them back. He turned to his client. "By the way," Mason said, "where *were* you on the night of the fifth and the morning of the sixth of June?"

"In my apartment, in bed and asleep."

"Can you prove it?" Mason asked.

Jefferson said scornfully, "Don't be absurd! I am unmarried, Mr. Mason. I sleep alone. There was no occasion for me to try and show where I was at that time, and there is none now. No one is going to pay any attention to the word of a perjurer and a crook who never saw me in his life before. Who is this scum of the waterfront? This whole thing is preposterous!"

"I'd be inclined to think so, too," Mason told him, "if it wasn't for that air of quiet confidence on the part of the district attorney. Therefore, it becomes very important for me to know exactly where you were on the night of the fifth and the morning of the sixth."

"Well," Jefferson said, "on the night of the fifth . . . that is, on the evening of the fifth I—I see no reason to go into that. On the sixth . . . from midnight on the fifth until eight-thirty on the morning of the sixth I was in my apartment. By nine o'clock on the morning of the sixth I was in my office, and I can *prove* where I was from a little after seven on the morning of the sixth."

"By whom?"

"By my associate, Walter Irving. He joined me for breakfast at seven in my apartment, and after that we went to the office."

"What about that knife?" Mason asked.

"It's mine. It was stolen from a suitcase in my apartment."

"Where did you get it?"

"It was a gift."

"From whom?"

"That has nothing to do with the case, Mr. Mason."

"Who gave it to you?"

"It's none of your business."

"I *have* to know who gave it to you, Jefferson."

"I am conducting my own affairs, Mr. Mason."

"I'm conducting your case."

"Go right ahead. Just don't ask me questions about women, that's all. I don't discuss my female friends with anyone."

"Is there anything you're ashamed of in connection with that gift?"

"Certainly not."

"Then tell me who gave it to you."

"It would be embarrassing to discuss any woman with you, Mr. Mason. That might bring about a situation where you'd feel I was perjuring myself about my relationship with women . . . when I get on the stand and answer questions put by the district attorney."

Mason studied Jefferson's face carefully. "Look here," he said. "Lots of times a weak case on the part of the prosecution is bolstered because the defendant breaks down under cross-examination. Now, I hope this case is never going to reach a point where it will become necessary to put on any defense. But if it does, I've got to be *certain* you're not lying to me."

Jefferson looked at Mason coldly. "I *never* lie to *anyone*," he said, and then turning away from Mason signaled to the officer that he was ready to be taken back to jail.

Della Street and Paul Drake fell in step with Mason as the lawyer started down the aisle.

"What do you make of it?" Mason asked.

"There sure is something fishy about this whole thing," Drake said. "It stinks. It has all the earmarks of a frame-up. How can Burger think people of that sort can put across a deal like this on a man like Duane. Jefferson?"

"That," Mason said, "is the thing we're going to have to find out. Anything new?"

"Walter Irving's back."

"The deuce he is! Where has he been?"

"No one knows. He showed up about ten-thirty this morning. He was in court."

"Where?"

"Sitting in a back row, taking everything in."

Mason said, "There's something here that is completely and thoroughly contradictory. The whole case is cockeyed."

"The police have something up their sleeves," Drake said. "They have some terrific surprise. I can't find out what it is. Do you notice that Hamilton Burger seems to remain thoroughly elated?"

"That's the thing that gets me," Mason said. "Burger puts on these witnesses and acts as though he's just laying a preliminary foundation. He doesn't seem to take too much interest in their stories, or whether I attack their characters or their credibility. He's playing along for something big."

"What about Irving?" Drake asked. "Are you going to be in touch with him?"

"Irving and I aren't on friendly terms. The last time he walked out of my office he was mad as a bucking bronco. He cabled his company, trying to get me fired. You haven't found out anything about Marline Chaumont or her brother?"

"I haven't found out where they are," Drake said, "but I think I've found out how they gave me the slip."

"How?" Mason asked. "I'm interested in that."

"It's so damn simple that it makes me mad I didn't get onto it sooner."

"What?"

Drake said, "Marline Chaumont simply took her suitcases and had a porter deposit them in storage lockers. Then she took her brother out to an airport limousine, as though they were *incoming* passengers. She gave a porter the keys for two of the lockers, so two suitcases were brought out. She went in the limousine to a downtown hotel. She and her brother got out and completely vanished."

"Then, of course, she went back and got the other suitcases?" Mason asked.

"Presumably," Drake said, "she got a taxicab after she had her brother safely put away, went out to the airport, picked up the other two suitcases out of the storage lockers, and then rejoined her brother."

Mason said, "We've got to find her, Paul."

"I'm trying, Perry."

"Can't you check hotel registrations? Can't you—?"

"Look, Perry," Drake said, "I've checked every hotel registration that was made at about that time. I've checked with rental agencies for houses that were rented. I've checked with the utilities for connections that were put in at about that time. I've done everything I can think of. I've had girls telephoning the apartment houses to see if anyone made application for apartments. I've even checked the motels to see who registered on that date. I've done everything I can think of."

Mason paused thoughtfully. "Have you checked the car rental agencies, Paul?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the drive-yourself automobiles where a person rents an automobile, drives it himself, pays so much a day and so much a mile?"

The expression on Drake's face showed mixed emotions. "She wouldn't— Gosh, no! Good Lord, Perry! Maybe I overlooked a bet!"

Mason said, "Why couldn't she get a drive-yourself automobile, put her stuff in it, go to one of the outlying cities, rent a house there, then drive back with the automobile and—"

"I'd say it was one chance in ten thousand," Drake said, "but I'm not going to overlook it. It's all that's left."

"Okay," Mason said. "Try checking that idea for size, Paul."

CHAPTER 15

PROMPTLY AT TWO O'CLOCK COURT RECONVENED AND JUDGE Hartley said, "Call your next witness, Mr. District Attorney."

Hamilton Burger hesitated a moment, then said, "I will call Mae Wallis Jordan."

Mae Jordan, quiet, demure, taking slow, steady steps, as though steeling herself to a task which she had long anticipated yet which was still extremely distasteful, walked to the witness stand, was

sworn, gave her name and address to the court reporter, and seated herself.

Hamilton Burger's voice fairly dripped sympathy. "You are acquainted with the defendant, Duane Jefferson, Miss Jordan?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"When did you first get acquainted with him?"

"Do you mean, when did I first see him?"

"When did you first get in touch with him," Hamilton Burger asked, "and how?"

"I first saw him after he came to the city here, but I have been corresponding with him for some time."

"When was the date that you first *saw* him? Do you know?"

"I know very well. He arrived by train. I was there to meet the train."

"On what date?"

"May seventeenth."

"Of this year?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now then, you had had some previous correspondence with the defendant?"

"Yes."

"How had that correspondence started?"

"It started as a . . . as a joke. As a gag."

"In what way?"

"I am interested in photography. In a photographic magazine there was an offer to exchange colored stereo photographs of Africa for stereo photographs of the southwestern desert. I was interested and wrote to the box number in question."

"In South Africa?"

"Well, it was in care of the magazine, but it turned out that the magazine forwarded the mail to the person who had placed the ad in the magazine. That person was—"

"Just a moment," Mason interrupted. "We object to the witness testifying as to her conclusion. *She* doesn't know who put the ad in the magazine. Only the records of the magazine can show that."

"We will show them," Hamilton Burger said cheerfully. "However, Miss Jordan, we'll just skip that at the moment. What happened?"

"Well, I entered into correspondence with the defendant."

"What was the nature of that correspondence generally?" Hamilton Burger asked. And then, turning to Mason, said, "Of course, I can understand that this may be objected to as not being the best evidence, but I am trying to expedite matters."

Mason, smiling, said, "I am always suspicious of one who tries to expedite matters by introducing secondary evidence. The letters themselves would be the best evidence."

"I only want to show the *general* nature of the correspondence," Hamilton Burger said.

"Objected to as not being the best evidence," Mason said, "and that the question calls for a conclusion of the witness."

"Sustained," Judge Hartley said.

"You received letters from South Africa?" Hamilton Burger asked, his voice showing a slight amount of irritation.

"Yes."

"Those letters were signed how?"

"Well . . . in various ways."

"What's that?" Hamilton Burger asked, startled. "I thought that—"

"Never mind what the district attorney thought," Mason said. "Let's have the *facts*."

"How were those letters signed?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"Some of them were signed with the name of the defendant, the first ones were."

"And where are those letters now?"

"They are gone."

"Where?"

"I destroyed them."

"Describe the contents of those letters," Hamilton Burger said unctuously. "Having proved, Your Honor, that the best evidence is no longer available, I am seeking to show by secondary evidence—"

"There seems to be no objection," Judge Hartley said.

"I was going to state," Mason said, "that I would like to ask some questions on cross-examination as to the nature and contents of the letters and the time and manner of their destruction, in order to see whether I wished to object."

"Make your objection first, and then you may ask the questions," Judge Hartley said.

"I object, Your Honor, on the ground that no proper foundation for the introduction of secondary testimony has been laid and on the further ground that it now appears that at least some of these letters did not even bear the name of the defendant. In connection with that objection, I would like to ask a few questions."

"Go ahead," Hamilton Burger invited, smiling slightly.

Mason said, "You said that those letters were signed in various ways. What did you mean by that?"

"Well—" she said, and hesitated.

"Go on," Mason said.

"Well," she said, "some of the letters were signed with various . . . well, gag names."

"Such as what?" Mason asked.

"Daddy Longlegs was one," she said.

There was a ripple of mirth in the courtroom, which subsided as Judge Hartley frowned.

"And others?"

"Various names. You see we . . . we exchanged photographs . . . gag pictures."

"What do you mean by gag pictures?" Mason asked.

"Well, I am a camera fan, and the defendant is, too, and . . . we started corresponding formally at first, and then the correspondence became more personal. I . . . he asked me for a picture, and I . . . for a joke I—"

"Go ahead," Mason said. "What did you do?"

"I had taken a photograph of a very trim spinster who was no longer young, a rather interesting face, however, because it showed a great deal of character. I had a photograph of myself in a bathing suit and I . . . I made a trick enlargement, so that the face of the trim spinster was put on my body, and I sent it to him. I thought that if he was simply being flirtatious, that would stop him."

"Was it a joke, or was it intended to deceive him?" Mason asked.

She flushed and said, "That first picture was intended to deceive him. It was done so cunningly that it would be impossible for him to know that it was a composite picture—at least, I thought it would be impossible."

"And you asked him to send you a picture in return?"

"I did."

"And did you receive a picture?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"It was the face of a giraffe wearing glasses, grafted on the photograph of a huge figure of a heavily muscled man. Evidently, the figure of a wrestler or a weight-lifter."

"And in that way," Mason asked, "you knew that he had realized your picture was a composite?"

"Yes."

"And what happened after that?"

"We exchanged various gag pictures. Each one trying to be a little more extreme than the other."

"And the letters?" Mason asked.

"The letters were signed with various names which would sort of fit in with the type of photograph."

"You so signed your letters to him?"

"Yes."

"And he so signed his letters to you?"

"Yes."

Mason made his voice elaborately casual. "He would sign letters to you, I suppose, as 'Your Prince,' or 'Sir Galahad,' or something like that?"

"Yes."

"Prince Charming?"

She gave a quick start. "Yes," she said. "As a matter of fact, at the last he signed *all* of his letters 'Prince Charming.'"

"Where are those letters now?" Mason asked.

"I destroyed his letters."

"And where are the letters that you wrote to him, if you know?"

"I . . . I destroyed them."

Hamilton Burger grinned. "Go right ahead, Mr. Mason. You're doing fine."

"How did you get possession of them?" Mason asked.

"I . . . I went to his office."

"While he was there?" Mason asked.

"I— When I got the letters, he was there, yes."

Mason smiled at the district attorney. "Oh, I think, Your Honor, I have pursued this line of inquiry far enough. I will relinquish the right to any further questioning on the subject of the letters. I

insist upon my objection, however. The witness can't swear that these letters ever came from this defendant. They were signed 'Prince Charming' and other names she said were gag names. That's her conclusion."

Judge Hartley turned toward the witness. "These letters were in response to letters mailed by you?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And how did you address the letters you mailed?"

"To 'Duane Jefferson, care of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company.'"

"At its South African address?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"You deposited those letters in regular mail channels?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And received these letters in reply?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"The letters showed they were in reply to those mailed by you?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And you burned them?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"The objection is overruled," Judge Hartley said. "You may introduce secondary evidence of their contents, Mr. District Attorney."

Hamilton Burger bowed slightly, turned to the witness. "Tell us what was in those letters which were destroyed," he said.

"Well, the defendant adopted the position that he was lonely and far from the people he knew, that he didn't have any girl friends, and . . . oh, it was all a gag. It's *so* difficult to explain."

"Go ahead; do the best you can," Hamilton Burger said.

"We adopted the attitude of . . . well, we pretended it was a lonely hearts correspondence. He would write and tell me how very wealthy and virtuous he was and what a good husband he would make, and I would write and tell him how beautiful I was and how— Oh, it's just simply out of the question to try and explain it in cold blood this way!"

"Out of context, so to speak?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"Yes," she said. "That's just it. You have to understand the mood and the background, otherwise you wouldn't be able to get the

picture at all. The letters, standing by themselves, would appear to be hopelessly foolish, utterly asinine. That was why I felt I had to have them back in my possession."

"Go ahead," Hamilton Burger said. "What did you do?"

"Well, finally Duane Jefferson wrote me one serious letter. He told me that his company had decided to open a branch office in the United States, that it was to be located here, and that he was to be in charge of it and that he was looking forward to seeing me."

"And what did you do?"

"All of a sudden I was in a terrific panic. It was one thing to carry on a joking correspondence with a man who was thousands of miles away and quite another thing suddenly to meet that man face to face. I was flustered and embarrassed."

"Go on. What did you do?"

"Well, of course, when he arrived—he wired me what train he was coming on, and I was there to meet him and—that was when things began to go wrong."

"In what way?"

"He gave me a sort of brush-off, and *he* wasn't the type of person I had anticipated. Of course," she went on hastily, "I know what a little fool I was to get a preconceived notion of a man I'd never seen, but I had built up a very great regard for him. I considered him as a friend and I was terribly disappointed."

"Then what?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"Then I called two or three times on the telephone and talked with him, and I went out with him one night."

"And what happened?"

She all but shuddered. "The man was utterly impossible," she said, glaring down at the defendant. "He was patronizing in a cheap, tawdry way. His manner showed that he had completely mistaken the tone of my correspondence. He regarded me as . . . he treated me as if I were a . . . he showed no respect, no consideration. He had none of the finer feelings."

"And what did *you* do?"

"I told him I wanted my letters back."

"And what did he do?"

She glared at Duane Jefferson. "He told me I could *buy* them back."

"So what did you do?"

"I determined to get those letters back. They were mine, anyway."

"So what did you do?"

"On June fourteenth I went to the office at a time when I knew neither the defendant nor Mr. Irving would normally be there."

"And what did you do?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"I entered the office."

"For what purpose?"

"For the sole purpose of finding the letters I had written."

"You had reason to believe those letters were in the office?"

"Yes. He told me they were in his desk and that I could come and get them at any time after I had complied with his terms."

"What happened?"

"I couldn't find the letters. I looked and I looked, and I pulled open the drawers of the desk and then—"

"Go on," Hamilton Burger said.

"And the door opened," she said.

"And who was in the doorway?"

"The defendant, Duane Jefferson."

"Alone?"

"No. His associate, Walter Irving, was with him."

"What happened?"

"The defendant used vile language. He called me names that I have never been called before."

"And then what?"

"He made a grab for me and—"

"And what did you do?"

"I backed up and tipped over a chair and fell over. Then Mr. Irving grabbed my ankles and held me. The defendant accused me of snooping and I told him I was there only to get my letters."

"Then what?"

"Then he stood for a moment looking at me in apparent surprise, and then said to Mr. Irving, 'Damned if I don't believe she's right!'"

"Then what?"

"Then the phone rang and Irving picked up the receiver, listened for a minute and said, 'Good God! The police!'"

"Go on," Hamilton Burger said.

"So the defendant ran over to a filing cabinet, jerked it open, pulled out a whole package of my letters tied up with string and said, 'Here, you little fool! Here are your letters. Take them and get out! The police are looking for you. Someone saw you break into the place, and the police have been notified. Now, see what a damn fool you are!'"

"What happened?"

"He started pushing me toward the door. Then Mr. Irving pushed something into my hand and said, 'Here, take these. They'll be a reward for keeping your big mouth shut.'"

"And what did you do?"

"As soon as they pushed me out of the door, I made a dash for the women's restroom."

"Go on," Hamilton Burger said.

"And just as I opened the door of the restroom, I saw the defendant and Walter Irving run out of their office and dash to the men's room."

"Then what?"

"I didn't wait to see any more. I dashed into the restroom and unfastened the string on the package of letters I had been given, looked through the contents to see that they were mine, and destroyed them."

"How did you destroy them?"

"I put them in the wastepaper receptacle with the used towels, where they would be picked up and incinerated."

"And then what did you do?"

"Then," she said, "I was trapped. I knew the police were coming. I—"

"Go ahead," Hamilton Burger said.

"I had to do something to get out of there."

"And what did you do?" Hamilton Burger said, a smile on his face.

"I felt that perhaps the exits might be watched, that I must have been seen by someone who had given the police a good description, so I . . . I looked around for some place to go, and I saw a door which had the sign on it saying, 'Perry Mason, Attorney at Law, Enter.' I'd heard of Perry Mason, of course, and I thought perhaps I could hand him a line, telling him I wanted a divorce or something of that sort, or that I'd been in an automobile accident . . .

just make up a good story, anything to hold his interest. That would enable me to be in his office when the police arrived. I felt I could hold his interest long enough to avoid the police. I wanted to stay there just long enough so I could get out after the police had given up the search. I realize now that it was a crazy idea, but it was the only available avenue of escape. As it happened, Fate played into my hands."

"In what way?"

"It seemed Mr. Mason's secretaries were expecting a typist. They'd telephoned some agency and a typist was supposed to be on her way up. I stood, hesitating, in the doorway for a moment, and the receptionist took me for the typist. She asked me if I was the typist, so of course I told her yes and went to work."

"And," Hamilton Burger said smugly, "you worked in the office of Perry Mason that afternoon?"

"I worked there for some little time, yes."

"And then what?"

"When the coast was clear I made my escape."

"When was that?"

"Well, I was working on a document. I was afraid that if it was finished, Mr. Mason would ring up the secretarial agency to find out what the bill was. I just didn't know what to do. So when there was a good break, I slipped down to the restroom, then to the elevator and went home."

"You have mentioned something that was pushed into your hand. Do you know what that consisted of?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Diamonds. Two diamonds."

"When did you find out about them?"

"After I'd been working for a few minutes. I'd slipped what had been given me into my handbag. So when I had a good chance I looked. I found two small packets of tissue paper. I removed the paper and found two diamonds.

"I got in a panic. I suddenly realized that if these men should claim the intruder had stolen diamonds from their office, I'd be framed. I wouldn't have any possible defense anyone would believe. So I just had to get rid of these diamonds. I realized right away I'd walked into a trap."

"What did you do?"

"I stuck the diamonds to the underside of the desk, where I was working in Mr. Mason's office."

"How did you stick them to this desk?"

"With chewing gum."

"How much chewing gum?"

"A perfectly terrific amount. I had about twelve sticks in my purse, and I chewed them all up and got a big wad of gum. Then I put the diamonds in the gum and pushed them up against the underside of the desk."

"Where are those diamonds now?"

"As far as *I* know, they're still there."

"Your Honor," Hamilton Burger said, "if the Court please, I suggest that an officer of this court be dispatched to the office of Perry Mason, with instructions to look at the place described by this witness and bring back the wad of chewing gum containing those two diamonds."

Judge Hartley looked at Mason questioningly.

Mason smiled at the judge. "I certainly would have no objection, Your Honor."

"Very well," Judge Hartley ruled. "It will be the order of the Court that an officer of this court proceed to take those diamonds and impound them."

"And may they be sent for *immediately*, Your Honor," Hamilton Burger asked, "before . . . well, before something happens to them?"

"And what would happen to them?" Judge Hartley asked.

"Well, now that it is known," Hamilton Burger said, "now that the testimony has come out . . . I . . . well, I would dislike to have anything happen to the evidence."

"So would I," Mason said heartily. "I join the prosecutor's request. I suggest that one of the deputy district attorneys instruct an officer to proceed at once to my office."

"Can you designate the desk that was used by this young lady?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"The desk in question was one that was placed in the law library. It can be found there."

"Very well," the judge ruled. "You may take care of that matter, Mr. District Attorney. Now, go on with your questioning."

Hamilton Burger walked over to the clerk's desk, picked up the knife which had been marked for identification. "I show you a dagger with an eight-inch blade, one side of the hilt being engraved with the word 'Duane,' the other side with the initials *M.J.* I will ask you if you are familiar with that knife."

"I am. It is a knife which I sent the defendant at his South African address as a Christmas present last Christmas. I told him he could use it to protect . . . protect my honor."

The witness began to cry.

"I think," Hamilton Burger said suavely, "that those are all of the questions I have of this witness. You may cross-examine, Mr. Mason."

Mason waited patiently until Mae Jordan had dried her eyes and looked up at him. "You are, I believe, a very fast and accurate typist?"

"I try to be competent."

"And you worked in my office on the afternoon in question?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about gems?"

"Not particularly."

"Do you know the difference between a real diamond and an imitation diamond?"

"It didn't take an expert to tell those stones. Those were very high-grade stones. I recognized what they were as soon as I saw them."

"Had you bought those stones from the defendant?" Mason asked.

"What do you mean, had I bought those stones?"

"Did you pay him anything? Give him any consideration?"

"Certainly not," she snapped.

"Did you pay Mr. Irving for those stones?"

"No."

"Then you knew those stones did not belong to you," Mason asked.

"They were given to me."

"Oh, then you thought they were yours?"

"I felt certain I'd walked into a trap. I felt those men would say I'd gone to their office and stolen those diamonds. It would be my word against theirs. I knew they hadn't given me two very valuable diamonds just to keep quiet about having exchanged letters."

"You say *they* gave you the diamonds. Did you receive them from Jefferson or from Irving?"

"From Mr. Irving."

Mason studied the defiant witness for a moment. "You started corresponding with the defendant while he was in South Africa?"

"Yes."

"And wrote him love letters?"

"They were not love letters."

"Did they contain matters which you wouldn't want this jury to see?"

"They were foolish letters, Mr. Mason. Please don't try to put anything in them that wasn't in them."

"I am asking you," Mason said, "as to the nature of the letters."

"They were *very foolish* letters."

"Would you say they were indiscreet?"

"I would say they were indiscreet."

"You wanted them back?"

"I felt . . . well, I felt very foolish about the whole thing."

"So you wanted the letters back?"

"Yes, very badly."

"And, in order to get them back, you were willing to commit a crime?"

"I wanted the letters back."

"Please answer the question. You were willing to commit a crime in order to get the letters back?"

"I don't know that it's a crime to enter an office to get things that belong to me."

"Did you believe it was illegal to use a skeleton key to enter property belonging to another person, so that you can take certain things?"

"I was trying to get possession of property that belonged to me."

"Did you believe that it was illegal to use a skeleton key to open that door?"

"I . . . I didn't consult a lawyer to find out about my rights."

"Where did you get the key which opened the door?"

"I haven't said I had a key."

"You've admitted you entered the office at a time when you knew both Jefferson and Irving would not be there."

"What if I did? I went to get my own property."

"If you had a key which opened the door of that office, where did you get it?"

"Where does one ordinarily get keys?"

"From a locksmith?"

"Perhaps."

"Did you get a key to that office from a locksmith?"

"I will answer no questions about keys."

"And suppose the Court should instruct you that you had to answer such questions?"

"I would refuse on the grounds that any testimony from me relating to the manner in which I entered that office would tend to incriminate me, and therefore I would not have to answer the question."

"I see," Mason said. "But you have already admitted that you entered the office illegally. Therefore, an attempt to exercise your constitutional prerogative would be too late."

"Now, if the Court please," Hamilton Burger said, "I would like to be heard on this point. I have given this question very careful thought. The Court will note that the witness simply stated that she entered the office at a time when the defendant and his associate were absent. She has not stated *how* she entered the office. As far as her testimony is concerned, the door could well have been unlocked; and, inasmuch as this is a public office, where it is expected the public will enter in order to transact business, there would have been nothing illegal about an entrance made in the event the door had been unlocked. Therefore, the witness is in a position, if she so desires, to refuse to testify as to the manner in which she entered that office, on the ground that it might tend to incriminate her."

Judge Hartley frowned. "That's rather an unusual position for a witness called on behalf of the prosecution, Mr. District Attorney."

"It's an unusual case, Your Honor."

"Do you wish to be heard on that point, Mr. Mason?" Judge Hartley asked.

Mason smiled and said, "I would like to ask the witness a few more questions."

"I object to any more cross-examination on this point," Hamilton Burger said, his voice showing exasperation and a trace of apprehension.

sion. "The witness has made her position plain. Counsel doesn't dare to cross-examine her about the pertinent facts in the case, so he continually harps upon the one point where this young woman, yielding to her emotions, has put herself in an embarrassing position. He keeps prolonging this moment, as a cat plays with a mouse, hoping thereby to prejudice the jury against this witness. The witness has made her position plain. She refuses to answer questions on this phase of the matter."

Mason smiled. "I have been accused of prolonging this phase of the examination in an attempt to prejudice the jury. I don't want to prejudice the jury. I'd like to get information which the jurors want.

"When the district attorney was prolonging the examination of Mr. Gilly in an attempt to prejudice the jury against the defendant, you didn't hear me screaming. What's sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander."

Judge Hartley smiled. "The objection is overruled. Go ahead with your questions."

"Will you tell us the name of the person who furnished you with the key that enabled you to get into the office of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, if I answered that question, it would tend to incriminate me, and therefore I shall refuse to answer."

"You have discussed this phase of your testimony with the district attorney?"

"Oh, Your Honor," Hamilton Burger said, "this is the same old gambit so frequently pursued by defense attorneys. I will stipulate that this witness has discussed her testimony with me. I would not have put her on the stand unless I knew that her testimony would be pertinent and relevant. The only way I could know what it was, was to talk with her."

Mason kept his eyes on the witness. "You have discussed this phase of your testimony with the district attorney?"

"Yes."

"And have discussed with him what would happen in case you were asked a question concerning the name of the person who furnished you the keys?"

"Yes."

"And told him you would refuse to testify on the ground that it would incriminate you?"

"Yes."

"Did you make that statement to the district attorney, or did he suggest to you that you could refuse to answer the question on that ground?"

"Well, I . . . I . . . of course I know my rights."

"But you have just stated," Mason said, "that you didn't know that it was a crime for you to enter an office to get property that belonged to you."

"Well, I . . . I think there's a nice legal point there. As I now understand it, a public office . . . that is, a place that is intended to be open to the public is different from a private residence. And where property belongs to me—"

Mason smiled. "Then you are *now* taking the position, Miss Jordan, that it was no crime for you to enter that office?"

"No."

"Oh, you are *now* taking the position that it *was* a crime for you to enter that office?"

"I now understand that under the circumstances it—I refuse to answer that question on the ground that the answer may incriminate me."

"In other words, the district attorney suggested to you that you should consider it was a crime, and therefore you could refuse to answer certain questions when I asked them?"

"We discussed it."

"And the suggestion came from the district attorney that it would be well under the circumstances for you to refuse to answer certain questions which I might ask on cross-examination. Is that right?"

"There were certain questions I told him I wouldn't answer."

"And he suggested that you could avoid answering them by claiming immunity on the ground that you couldn't be forced to incriminate yourself?"

"Well, in a way, yes."

"Now then," Mason said, "you had two diamonds with you when you left that office?"

"Yes."

"They didn't belong to you?"

"They were given to me."

"By whom?"

"By Mr. Irving, who told me to take them."

"Did he say *why* you were to take them?"

"He said to take them and keep my big mouth shut."

"And you took them?"

"Yes."

"And you kept your mouth shut?"

"I don't know what you mean by that."

"You didn't tell anyone about the diamonds?"

"Not at that time."

"You knew they were valuable?"

"I'm not simple, Mr. Mason."

"Exactly," Mason said. "You knew they were diamonds and you knew they were valuable?"

"Certainly."

"And you took them?"

"Yes."

"And what did you do with them?"

"I've told you what I did with them. I fastened them to the underside of the desk in your office."

"Why?" Mason asked.

"Because I wanted a place to keep them."

"You could have put them in your purse. You could have put them in your pocket," Mason said.

"I . . . I didn't want to. I didn't want to have to explain how I came by the diamonds."

"To whom?"

"To anybody who might question me."

"To the police?"

"To *anyone* who might question me, Mr. Mason. I felt I had walked into a trap and that I was going to be accused of having stolen two diamonds."

"But you had been given those diamonds?"

"Yes, but I didn't think anyone would believe me when I told them so."

"Then you don't expect the jury to believe your story now?"

"Objected to," Hamilton Burger snapped. "Argumentative."

"Sustained," Judge Hartley said.

"Isn't it a fact," Mason asked, "that someone who gave you a key to the office which you entered illegally and unlawfully, also gave you a package of diamonds which you were to plant in that office in a place where they would subsequently be found by the police?"

"No!"

"Isn't it a fact that you carried those diamonds into the building wrapped up in tissue paper, that you put those diamonds in a package and concealed them in the office, that you were forced to leave hurriedly because you learned the police had been tipped off, and after you got in my office and started to work, you checked through your purse in order to make certain that you had disposed of all of the diamonds and to your horror found that two of the diamonds you were supposed to have planted in that office had been left in your purse, and that, therefore, in a panic, you tried to get rid of those diamonds by the means you have described?"

"Just a moment!" Hamilton Burger shouted. "I object to this on the ground that it assumes facts not in evidence, that it is not proper cross-examination, that there is no foundation for the assumption that—"

"The objection is overruled," Judge Hartley snapped.

"Isn't it a fact," Mason asked, "that you did what I have just outlined?"

"Absolutely not. I took no diamonds with me when I went to that office. I had no diamonds in my possession when I went in."

"But you don't dare to tell us who gave you a key to that office?"

"I refuse to answer questions about that."

"Thank you," Mason said. "I have no further questions."

Mae Jordan left the stand. The jurors watched her with some skepticism.

Hamilton Burger called other witnesses who established technical background—the exact position of the cruise ship in the harbor when Baxter jumped overboard, passengers who had seen Baxter jump and the owner of a launch which had been cruising in the vicinity. He also introduced police experts who had examined the bloodstains on Gilly's boat and bloodstains on the knife and pronounced them to be human blood.

Mason had no cross-examination except for the expert who had examined the bloodstains.

"*When* did you make your examination?" Mason asked.

"June nineteenth."

"At a time when the bloodstains were at least ten days to two weeks old?"

"So I should judge."

"On the boat?"

"Yes."

"On the knife?"

"Yes."

"They could have been older?"

"Yes."

"They could have been a month old?"

"Well, they could have been."

"The only way you have of knowing when those bloodstains got on the boat was from a statement made to you by Jack Gilly?"

"Yes."

"And did you know Jack Gilly had previously been convicted of perjury?"

The witness squirmed.

"Objected to as incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial and not proper cross-examination," Hamilton Burger said.

"Sustained," Judge Hartley snapped. "Counsel can confine his cross-examination to the bloodstains, the nature of the tests, and the professional competency of the witness."

"That's all," Mason said. "I have no more questions."

Max Dutton, Hamilton Burger's last witness of the afternoon, was distinctly a surprise witness. Dutton testified that he lived in Brussels; he had come by airplane to testify at the request of the district attorney. He was, he testified, an expert on gems. He used a system of making models of gems so that it would be possible to identify any particular stone of sufficient value to make it worth while. He made microscopic measurements of the dimensions, of the angles, of the facets, and of the locations of any flaws. The witness testified he maintained permanent records of his identifications, which facilitated appraisals, insurance recoveries and the identification of stolen stones.

He had, he said, been employed by Munroe Baxter during his lifetime; Munroe Baxter had given him some gems and asked him to arrange for the identification of the larger stones, so that they could be readily identified if necessary.

The witness tried to state what Munroe Baxter had told him—the

manner in which he had received the stones—but on objection by Perry Mason the objection was sustained by the Court. However, Hamilton Burger was able to show that the stones came to the witness in a box bearing the imprint of the Paris office of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company.

The witness testified that he had selected the larger stones and had made complete charts of those stones, so that they could be identified. He further stated that he had examined a package of stones which had been given him by the police and which he understood had been recovered from the desk of the defendant, and that ten of those stones had proved to be identical to the stones he had so carefully charted.

"Cross-examine," Hamilton Burger said.

"This system that you have worked out for identifying stones takes into consideration every possible identifying mark on the stones?" Mason asked.

"It does."

"It would, therefore, enable anyone to duplicate those stones, would it not?"

"No, sir, it would not. You might cut a stone to size; you might get the angle of the facets exactly the same. But the flaws in the stone would not be in the proper position with relation to the facets."

"It would, however, be possible to make a duplication in the event you could find a stone that had certain flaws?"

"That is very much like asking whether it would be possible to duplicate fingerprints, provided you could find a person who had exactly identical ridges and whorls," the witness said.

"Do you then wish to testify under oath that your system of identifying stones is as accurate as the identification of individuals through the science of fingerprinting?" Mason asked.

The witness hesitated a moment, then said, "Not quite."

"That's all," Mason announced, smiling. "No further questions."

The court took its evening adjournment.

As Mason gathered his papers together Walter Irving pushed his way through the crowd that was leaving the courtroom. He came up to Mason's table. His grin was somewhat sheepish.

"I guess perhaps I owe you an apology," he said.

"You don't owe me anything," Mason told him. "And make no mistake about it, I don't owe you anything."

"You don't owe me anything," Irving said, "but I'm going to make an apology anyway. And I'm further going to tell you that that Jordan girl is a brazen-faced liar. I *think* she broke into that office to plant those diamonds; but regardless of her purpose in getting into the office, there was never any scene such as she testified to. We didn't get back from lunch until after she had done what she wanted to do in that office and had skipped out. We can prove that, and that one fact makes that Jordan girl a damn liar.

"And what's more, I didn't give that Jordan girl any diamonds," Irving said. "I didn't tell her to keep her mouth shut. Now that I've seen her, I remember having seen her at the train. She met Duane and tried to force herself on him. As far as I know, that's the only time in my life I've ever set eyes on her. That girl is playing some deep game, and she's not playing it for herself, Mr. Mason. There's something behind it, something very sinister and something being engineered by powerful interests that have made a dupe of your district attorney."

"I hope so," Mason said. "Where have you been, incidentally?"

"I've been in Mexico. I admit, I underestimated your abilities, but I was trying to give you an opportunity to direct suspicion to me in case you wanted to."

"Well, I haven't wanted to," Mason said, and then added significantly, "yet."

Irving grinned at him. "That's the spirit, Counselor. You can always make a pass at me and confuse the issues as far as the jury is concerned, even if you don't want to be friendly with me. Remember that I'm available as a suspect."

Mason looked into his eyes. "Don't think I'll ever forget it."

Irving's grin was one of pure delight. His reddish-brown eyes met the cold, hard gaze of the lawyer with steady affability. "Now you're cooking with gas! Any time you want me, I'll be available, and I can, of course, give Duane a complete alibi for the morning of the sixth. We had breakfast together a little after seven, got to the office shortly before nine, and he was with me all morning."

"How about the evening of the fifth?" Mason asked.

Irving's eyes shifted.

"Well?" Mason asked.

"Duane was out somewhere."

"Where?"

"With some woman."

"Who?"

Irving shrugged his shoulders.

Mason said, "You can see what's happening here. If the district attorney makes enough of a case so that I have to put the defendant on the stand, there is every possibility that Duane Jefferson's manner, his aloofness, his refusal to answer certain questions, will prejudice his case with the jury."

"I know," Irving said. "I know exactly what you're up against. Before you ever put him on the stand, Mr. Mason, let me talk with him and I'll hammer some sense into his head, even if it does result in his undying enmity forever afterwards. In short, I want you to know that you can count on me all the way through."

"Yes," Mason said, "I understand you sent a most co-operative cablegram to your company in South Africa?"

Irving kept grinning and his eyes remained steady. "That's right," he said. "I asked the company to fire you. I'm sending another one tonight, which will be a lot different. You haven't found Marline Chaumont yet, have you?"

"No," Mason admitted.

Irving lost his grin. "I told you you wouldn't. That's where you loused the case up, Mason. Aside from that, you're doing fine."

And, as though completely assured of Mason's good-will, Walter Irving turned and sauntered out of the courtroom.

CHAPTER 16

BACK IN HIS OFFICE THAT EVENING, MASON PACED THE FLOOR. "Hang it, Paul!" he said to the detective. "Why is Hamilton Burger so completely confident?"

"Well, you jarred him a couple of times this afternoon," Drake said. "He was so mad he was quivering like a bowl of jelly."

"I know he was mad, Paul. He was angry, he was irritated, he was annoyed, but he was still sure of himself."

"Hamilton Burger hates me. He'd love to get me out on a limb over a very deep pool and then saw off the limb. He wouldn't even

mind if he got slightly wet from the resulting splash. Now, there's something in this case that we don't know about."

"Well," Drake said, "as far as this case is concerned, what does he have, Perry?"

"So far he doesn't have anything," Mason said. "That's what worries me. Why should he have that much assurance over a case which means nothing. He has a woman adventuress and a smuggler; he has a man who concededly planned to fake a suicide. The man was a strong swimmer. He had an air tank under his clothes. He did exactly what he had planned he was going to do, to wit, jump over the side of the ship and disappear, so that people would think he was dead.

"Then Hamilton Burger brings on the scum of the earth, the sweepings of the waterfront. He uses a man who deliberately rented a boat to be used in an illegal activity, a man who has been twice convicted of felony. His last conviction was for perjury. The jury isn't going to believe that man."

"And what about the girl?" Della Street asked.

"That's different," Mason said. "That girl made a good impression on the jury. Apparently, she was hired to take those gems to the office and plant them. The jury doesn't know that. Those jurors are taking her at face value."

"Figure value," Paul Drake corrected. "Why did you let her off so easy, Perry?"

"Because every time she answered a question she was getting closer to the jury. Those jurors like her, Paul. I'm going to ask to recall her for further cross-examination. When I do that, I want to have the lowdown on her. You're going to put out operatives who will dig up the dirt on her. I want to know everything about her, all about her past, her friends, and before I question her again, I want to know where she got that key which opened the office."

Drake merely nodded.

"Well," Mason said impatiently, "aren't you going to get busy, Paul?"

The detective sat grinning. "I am busy, Perry. I've been busy. This is once I read your mind. I knew what you'd want. The minute that girl got off the stand, I started a whole bunch of men working. I left this unlisted number of yours with my confidential secretary. She may call any minute with some hot stuff."

Mason smiled. "Give yourself a merit badge, Paul. Hang it, there's

nothing that gets a lawyer down worse than having to cross-examine a demure girl who has hypnotized the jury. I can't keep shooting blind, Paul. The next time I start sniping at her, I've got to have ammunition that will score dead-center hits.

"Now, here's something else you'll have to do."

"What's that, Perry?"

"Find Munroe Baxter."

"You don't think he's dead?"

"I'm beginning to think Walter Irving was right. I think the supposedly half-witted brother of Marline Chaumont may well be Baxter, despite those hospital records. In a deal of this magnitude we may find a big loophole. If this fellow in the mental hospital was so much of a zombie, what was to prevent Marline Chaumont from identifying him as her brother, getting him out, then farming him out and substituting Munroe Baxter? What are we doing about finding her, Paul?"

"Well, we're making headway, thanks to you," Drake said. "I'm kicking myself for being a stupid fool. You were right about those car rentals, and I sure overlooked a bet there. Two of those car rentals have agencies right there at the airport. In order to rent a car, you have to show your driving license. That means you have to give your right name."

"You mean Marline Chaumont rented a car under her own name?"

"That's right. Showed her driving license, rented the automobile and took it out."

"Her brother was with her?"

"Not at that time. She left the airport by limousine as an incoming passenger, went uptown with her brother and two suitcases, then came back, rented a car, picked up the other two suitcases, drove out, picked up her brother, and then went some place."

"Where?" Mason asked.

"Now, that's something I wish I knew. However, we stand a chance of finding out. The car rental is predicated on the mileage driven, as well as on a per diem charge. The mileage indicator on the car when Marline Chaumont brought it back showed it had been driven sixty-two miles."

Mason thought for a moment, then suddenly snapped his fingers.

"What now?" Drake asked.

"She went out to one of the suburban cities," Mason said. "She's

rented a place in one of those suburbs. Now then, she'll want to rent another car, and again she'll have to use her driving license. She was afraid to keep that car she had rented at the airport because she thought we might be checking there."

"We would have been checking within a matter of hours if I'd been on my toes," Drake said ruefully.

"All right," Mason said, "she rented a car there. She was afraid we might trace her, get the license number of the car, have it posted as a hot car and pick her up. So she got rid of that car just as soon as she could. Then she went to one of the outlying towns where they have a car rental agency and signed up for another car. She's had to do it under her own name because of the license angle. Get your men busy, Paul, and cover *all* of the car rental agencies in those outlying towns."

Paul Drake wormed his way out of the chair to stand erect, stretch, say, "Gosh, I'm all in myself. I don't see how you stand a pace like this, Perry."

He went over, picked up the unlisted telephone, said, "Let me call my office and get people started on some of this."

Drake dialed the number, said, "Hello. This is Paul. I want a bunch of men put out to cover all of the outlying towns. I want to check every car rental agency for a car rented by Marline Chaumont. . . . That's right. Everything.

"Now you can— How's that? . . . Wait a minute now," Drake said. "Give that to me slow. I want to make some notes. Who made the report? . . . All right, bring it down here at once. I'm in Mason's office—and get those men started."

Drake hung up the telephone and said, "We've got something, Perry."

"What?"

"We've found out the ace that Hamilton Burger is holding up his sleeve."

"You're sure?"

"Dead sure. One of the detectives who worked on the case knows the angle. He tipped a newspaper reporter off to come and see you get torn to ribbons tomorrow, and the reporter pumped him enough to find out what it was. That reporter is very friendly with one of my men, and we got a tip-off."

"What is it?" Mason asked.

"We'll have all the dope in a minute. They're bringing the report down here," Drake said. "It concerns the woman that Duane Jefferson is trying to protect."

Mason said, "Now, we're getting somewhere, Paul. If I know that information, I don't care what Hamilton Burger thinks he's going to do with it. I'll outgeneral him somehow."

They waited anxiously until knuckles tapped on the door. Drake opened the door, took an envelope from his secretary, said, "You're getting operatives out checking those car rentals?"

"That's already being done, Mr. Drake. I put Davis in charge of it, and he's on the telephone right now."

"Fine," Drake said. "Let's take a look. I'll give you the dope, Perry."

Drake opened the envelope, pulled out the sheets of flimsy, looked through them hastily, then whistled.

"All right," Mason said, "give."

Drake said, "The night of June fifth Jefferson was down at a nightspot with a woman. It was the woman's car. The parking attendant parked the car and some customer scratched a fender. The attendant got records of license numbers and all that. The woman got in a panic, gave the parking attendant twenty bucks, and told him to forget the whole thing.

"Naturally, the attendant had the answer as soon as that happened. She was a married woman. There's no doubt the guy with her was Duane Jefferson."

"Who was she?" Mason asked.

"A woman by the name of Nan Ormsby."

"Okay," Mason said. "Perhaps I can use this. It'll depend on how far the affair has gone."

Drake, who had continued reading the report, suddenly gave another whistle.

"What now?" Mason asked.

"Hold everything," Drake said. "You have as juror number eleven Alonzo Martin Liggett?"

"What about him?" Mason asked.

"He's a close friend of Dan Ormsby. Ormsby is in partnership with his wife. They have a place called "Nan and Dan, Realtors." Nan Ormsby has been having trouble with her husband. She wants

a settlement. He doesn't want the kind of a settlement she wants. He hasn't been able to get anything on her, although he's tried.

"Now, with a juror who is friendly to Dan Ormsby, you can see what'll happen."

"Good Lord!" Mason said. "If Hamilton Burger uses that lever—"

"Remember, this tip comes straight from Hamilton Burger's office," Drake said.

Mason sat in frowning concentration.

"How bad is it?" Drake asked.

"It's a perfect setup for a D.A.," Mason said. "If he can force me to put my client on the stand, he can go to town. The jury isn't going to like Duane Jefferson's pseudo-British manner, his snobbishness. You know how they feel about people who get tied up with the British and then become more English than the English, and that's what Jefferson has done. He's cultivated all those mannerisms. So Hamilton Burger will start boring into him—he was breaking up a home, he was out with a married woman—and there's Dan Ormsby's friend sitting on the jury."

"Any way you can beat that, Perry?" Drake asked.

"Two ways," Mason said, "and I don't like either one. I can either base all of my fight on trying to prove that there's been no *corpus delicti*, and keep the case from going to the jury, or, if the judge doesn't agree with me on that, I'll put the defendant on the stand, but confine my direct examination to where he was at five o'clock on the morning of the sixth and roar like the devil if the district attorney tries to examine him as to the night of the fifth. Since I wouldn't have asked him anything about the night of the fifth—only the morning of the sixth—I can claim the D.A. can't examine him as to anything on the night of the fifth."

"He'll have to make a general denial that he committed the crime?" Drake asked.

Mason nodded.

"Won't that open up the question of where he was on the night of the fifth when the boat was being rented?"

"The prosecution's case shows that the defendant wasn't seen until the morning of the sixth, after the boat had been rented—that is, that's the prosecution's case so far. We have the testimony of Jack Gilly to that effect."

"Well," Drake said, "I'll go down to my office and start things going. I'll have my men on the job working all night. You'd better get some sleep, Perry."

Mason's nod showed his preoccupation with other thoughts. "I've got to get this thing straight, Paul. I have a sixth sense that's warning me. I guess it's the way Hamilton Burger has been acting. This is one case where I've got to watch every time I put my foot down that I'm not stepping right in the middle of a trap."

"Well," Drake said, "you pace the floor and I'll cover the country, Perry. Between us, we may be in a better position tomorrow morning."

Mason said, "I should have known. Burger has been triumphant, yet his case is a matter of patchwork. It wasn't the strength of his own case that made him triumphant, but the weakness of my case."

"And now that you know, can you detour the pitfalls?" Drake asked.

"I can try," Mason said grimly.

CHAPTER 17

JUDGE HARTLEY CALLED COURT TO ORDER PROMPTLY AT TEN o'clock.

Hamilton Burger said, "I have a couple more questions to ask Mr. Max Dutton, the gem expert."

"Just a moment," Mason said. "If the Court please, I wish to make a motion. I feel that perhaps this motion should be made without the presence of the jury."

Judge Hartley frowned. "I am expecting a motion at the conclusion of the prosecution's case," he said. "Can you not let your motion wait until that time, Mr. Mason? I would like to proceed with the case as rapidly as possible."

"One of my motions can wait," Mason said. "The other one, I think, can properly be made in the presence of the jury. That is a motion to exclude all of the evidence of Mae Jordan on the ground that there is nothing in her testimony which in any way connects the defendant with any crime."

"If the Court please," Hamilton Burger said, "the witness, Dutton, will testify that one of the diamonds which was found on the under-side of the desk in Perry Mason's office was one of the identical diamonds which was in the Munroe Baxter collection."

Mason said, "That doesn't connect the defendant, Duane Jefferson, with anything. Jefferson didn't give her those diamonds. Even if we are to take her testimony at face value, even if we are to concede for the sake of this motion that she took those diamonds out of the office instead of going to the office to plant diamonds, the prosecution can't bind the defendant by anything that Walter Irving did."

"It was done in his presence," Hamilton Burger said, "and as a part of a joint enterprise."

"You haven't proven either one of those points," Mason said.

Judge Hartley stroked his chin. "I am inclined to think this motion may be well taken, Mr. District Attorney. The Court has been giving this matter a great deal of thought."

"If the Court please," Hamilton Burger pleaded desperately, "I have a good case here. I have shown that these diamonds were in the possession of Munroe Baxter when he left the ship. These diamonds next show up in the possession of the defendant—"

"Not in the possession of the defendant," Mason corrected.

"In an office to which he had a key," Hamilton Burger snapped.

"The janitor had a key. The scrubwoman had a key. Walter Irving had a key."

"Exactly," Judge Hartley said. "You have to show some act of domination over those diamonds by the defendant before he can be connected with the case. That's a fundamental part of the case."

"But, Your Honor, we *have* shown that act of domination. Two of those diamonds were given to the witness Jordan to compensate her for keeping silent about her letters. We have shown that Munroe Baxter came up and took hold of that towing line which was attached to the heavy fishing rod; that the defendant stabbed him, took the belt containing the diamonds, weighted the body, then towed it away to a point where it could be dropped to the bottom."

Judge Hartley shook his head. "That is a different matter from the motion as to the testimony of Mae Jordan. However, if we are to give every credence to all of the prosecution's testimony and all inferences therefrom, as we must do in considering such a motion, there is probably an inference which will be sufficient to defeat the

motion. I'll let the motion be made at this time, and reserve a ruling. Go ahead with your case, Mr. District Attorney."

Hamilton Burger put Max Dutton back on the stand. Dutton testified that one of the gems which had been recovered from the blob of chewing gum that had been found fastened to the underside of Mason's desk was a part of the Baxter collection.

"No questions," Mason said when Hamilton Burger turned Dutton over for cross-examination.

"That," Hamilton Burger announced dramatically and unexpectedly, "finishes the People's case."

Mason said, "At this time, Your Honor, I would like to make a motion without the presence of the jury."

"The jurors will be excused for fifteen minutes," Judge Hartley said, "during which time you will remember the previous admonition of the Court."

When the jurors had filed out of court the judge nodded to Perry Mason. "Proceed with your motion."

"I move that the Court direct and instruct the jury to return a verdict of acquittal," Mason said, "on the ground that no case has been made out which would sustain a conviction, on the ground that there is no evidence tending to show a homicide, no evidence of the *corpus delicti*, and no evidence connecting the defendant with the case."

Judge Hartley said, "I am going to rule against the defense in this case, Mr. Mason. I don't want to preclude you from argument, but the Court has given this matter very careful consideration. Knowing that such a motion would be made, I want to point out to you that while, as a usual thing, proof of the *corpus delicti* includes finding the body, under the law of California that is not necessary. *Corpus delicti* means the body of the crime, not the body of the victim."

"Proof of *corpus delicti* only shows that a crime has been committed. After the crime has been committed, then it is possible to connect the defendant with that crime by proper proof."

"The *corpus delicti*, or the crime itself, like any other fact to be established in court, can be proved by circumstantial as well as direct evidence. There can be reasonable inferences deduced from the factual evidence presented."

"Now then, we have evidence which, I admit, is not very robust,

which shows that Munroe Baxter, the purported victim, was carrying certain diamonds in his possession. Presumably he would not have parted from those diamonds without a struggle. Those diamonds were subsequently found under circumstances which at least support an inference that they were under the domination and in the possession of the defendant.

"One of the strongest pieces of evidence in this case is the finding of the bloodstained knife in the boat. I am free to admit that if I were a juror I would not be greatly impressed by the testimony of the witness Gilly, and yet a man who has been convicted of a felony, a man who has been convicted of perjury may well tell the truth.

"We have in this state the case of *People v. Cullen*, 37 California 2nd, 614, 234 Pacific 2nd, 1, holding that it is not essential that the body of the victim actually be found in order to support a homicide conviction.

"One of the most interesting cases ever to come before the bar of any country is the case of *Rex v. James Camb*. That was, of course, a British case, decided on Monday, April twenty-sixth, nineteen hundred and forty-eight, before the Lord Chief Justice of England.

"That is the famous *Durban Castle* case in which James Camb, a steward aboard the ship, went to the cabin of a young woman passenger. He was recognized in that cabin. The young woman disappeared and was never seen again. There was no evidence, other than circumstantial evidence, of the *corpus delicti*, save the testimony of the defendant himself admitting that he had pushed the body through the porthole but claiming that the woman was dead at the time, that she had died from natural causes and he had merely disposed of the body in that way.

"In this case we have, of course, no admission of that sort. But we do have a showing that the defendant sat in a boat, that some huge body, too big in the normal course of things to be a fish, attached itself to the heavy fishing tackle which the defendant was dangling overboard; that the defendant or the defendant's companion thereupon reached down and stabbed with a knife. A knife was subsequently found in the boat and the knife was smeared with human blood. It was the defendant's knife. I think, under the circumstances,

there is enough of a case here to force the defense to meet the charge, and I think that if the jury should convict upon this evidence, the conviction would stand up."

Hamilton Burger smiled and said, "I think that if the Court will bear with us, the Court will presently see that a case of murder has been abundantly proved."

Judge Hartley looked almost suspiciously at the district attorney for a moment, then tightened his lips and said, "Very well. Call the jury."

Mason turned to his client. "This is it, Jefferson," he said. "You're going to have to go on the stand. You have not seen fit to confide in me as your lawyer. You have left me in a position where I have had to undertake the defense of your case with very little assistance from you.

"I think I can prove the witness Mae Jordan lied when she said that you came into the office while she was still there. I have the girl at the cigar counter who will testify that you men did not come in until *after* the manager of the building was standing down at the elevators. I think once we can prove that she lied in one thing, we can prove that she is to be distrusted in her entire testimony. But that young woman has made a very favorable impression on the jury."

Jefferson merely bowed in a coldly formal way. "Very well," he said.

"You have a few seconds now," Mason said. "Do you want to tell me the things that I should know?"

"Certainly," Jefferson said. "I am innocent. That is all you need to know."

"Why the devil won't you confide in me?" Mason asked.

"Because there are certain things that I am not going to tell anyone."

"In case you are interested," Mason said, "I know where you were on the night of June fifth, and furthermore, the district attorney knows it, too."

For a moment Duane Jefferson stiffened, then he turned his face away and said indifferently, "I will answer no questions about the night of June fifth."

"You won't," Mason said, "because I'm not going to ask them on direct examination. Now just remember this one thing: I'm going to ask you where you were during the early morning hours of June

sixth. You be *damn* careful that your answer doesn't ever get back of the time limit I am setting. Otherwise, the District Attorney is going to rip you to shreds. Your examination is going to be very, very brief."

"I understand."

"It will be in the nature of a gesture."

"Yes, sir, I understand."

The jury filed into court and took their seats.

"Are you prepared to go on with your case, Mr. Mason?" Judge Hartley asked.

Mason said, "Yes, Your Honor. I won't even bother the Court and the jury by wasting time with an opening statement. I am going to rip this tissue of lies and insinuations wide open. My first witness will be Ann Riddle."

Ann Riddle, the tall, blond girl who operated the cigar stand, came forward.

"Do you remember the occasion of the fourteenth of June of this year?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you at that time?"

"I was at the cigar stand in the building where you have your offices."

"Where the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company also has its offices?"

"Yes, sir."

"You operate the cigar stand in that building?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you remember an occasion when the manager of the building came down to stand at the elevator with a young woman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see the defendant at that time?"

"Yes, sir. The defendant and Mr. Irving, his associate, were returning from lunch. They—"

"Now just a minute," Mason said. "You don't *know* they were returning from lunch."

"No, sir."

"All right, please confine your statements to what happened."

"Well, they were entering the building. The manager was standing there. One of the men—I think it was Mr. Irving, but I can't re-

member for sure—started to walk over to the manager of the building, then saw that he was intent upon something else, so he turned away. The two men entered the elevator."

"This was after the alarm had been given about the burglary?" Mason asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You may inquire," Mason said to Hamilton Burger.

Hamilton Burger smiled. "I have no questions."

"I will call the defendant, Duane Jefferson, to the stand," Mason said.

Duane Jefferson, cool and calm, got up and walked slowly to the witness stand. For a moment he didn't look at the jury, then when he did deign to glance at them, it was with an air of superiority bordering on contempt. "The damn fool!" Mason whispered under his breath.

Hamilton Burger tilted back in his swivel chair, he interlaced his fingers back of his head, winked at one of his deputies, and a broad smile suffused his face.

"Did you kill Munroe Baxter?" Mason asked.

"No, sir."

"Did you know that those diamonds were in your office?"

"No, sir."

"Where were you on the morning of the sixth of June? I'll put it this way, where were you from 2:00 A.M. on the sixth of June to noon of that day?"

"During the times mentioned I was in my apartment, sleeping, until a little after seven. Then I had breakfast with my associate, Walter Irving. After breakfast we went to the office."

"Cross-examine," Mason snapped viciously at Hamilton Burger.

Hamilton Burger said, "I will be very brief. I have only a couple of questions, Mr. Jefferson. Have *you* ever been convicted of a felony?"

"I—" Suddenly Jefferson seemed to collapse in the witness chair.

"Have you?" Hamilton Burger thundered.

"I made one mistake in my life," Jefferson said. "I have tried to live it down. I thought I had."

"Did you, indeed?" Hamilton Burger said scornfully. "Where were you convicted, Mr. Jefferson?"

"In New York."

"You served time in Sing Sing?"

"Yes."

"Under the name of Duane Jefferson?"

"No, sir."

"Under what name?"

"Under the name of James Kincaid."

"Exactly," Hamilton Burger said. "You were convicted of larceny by trick and device."

"Yes."

"You posed as an English heir, did you not? And you told—"

"Objected to," Mason said. "Counsel has no right to amplify the admission."

"Sustained."

"Were you, at one time, known as 'Gentleman Jim.' a nickname of the underworld?"

"Objected to," Mason said.

"Sustained."

Hamilton Burger said scornfully, "I will ask no further questions."

As one in a daze, the defendant stumbled from the stand.

Mason said, his lips a hard, white line, "Mr. Walter Irving take the stand."

The bailiff called, "Walter Irving."

When there was no response, the call was taken up in the corridors.

Paul Drake came forward, beckoned to Mason. "He's skipped, Perry. He was sitting near the door. He took it on the lam the minute Burger asked Jefferson about his record. Good Lord! What a mess! What a lousy mess!"

Judge Hartley said not unkindly, "Mr. Irving doesn't seem to be present, Mr. Mason. Was he under subpoena?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Do you wish the Court to issue a bench warrant?"

"No, Your Honor," Mason said. "Perhaps Mr. Irving had his reasons for leaving."

"I daresay he did," Hamilton Burger said sarcastically.

"That's the defendant's case," Mason said. "We rest."

It was impossible for Hamilton Burger to keep the gloating triumph out of his voice. "I will," he said, "call only three witnesses on rebuttal. The first is Mrs. Agnes Elmer."

Mrs. Agnes Elmer gave her name and address. She was, she explained, the manager of the apartment house where the defendant, Duane Jefferson, had rented an apartment shortly after his arrival in the city.

"Directing your attention to the early morning of June sixth," Hamilton Burger said, "do you know whether Duane Jefferson was in his apartment?"

"I do."

"Was he in that apartment?"

"He was not."

"Was his bed slept in that night?"

"It was not."

"Cross-examine," Hamilton Burger said.

Mason, recognizing that the short, direct examination was intended to bait a trap into which he must walk on cross-examination, flexed his arms slowly, as though stretching with weariness, said, "How do you fix the date, Mrs. Elmer?"

"A party rang up shortly before midnight on the fifth," Mrs. Elmer said. "It was a woman's voice. She told me it was absolutely imperative that she get in touch with Mr. Jefferson. She said Mr. Jefferson had got her in—"

"Just a minute," Mason interrupted. "I object, Your Honor, to this witness relating any conversations which occurred outside of the presence of the defendant."

"Oh, Your Honor," Hamilton Burger said. "This is plainly admissible. Counsel asked this question himself. He asked her how she fixed the date. She's telling him."

Judge Hartley said, "There may be some technical merit to your contention, Mr. District Attorney, but this is a court of justice, not a place for a legal sparring match. The whole nature of your examination shows you had carefully baited this as a trap for the cross-examiner. I'm going to sustain the objection. You can make your own case by your own witness."

"Now, the Court is going to ask the witness if there is any other way you can fix the date, any way, that is, depending on your own actions."

"Well," the witness said, "I know it was the sixth because that was the day I went to the dentist. I had a terrific toothache that night and couldn't sleep."

"And how do you fix the date that you went to the dentist?" Mason asked.

"From the dentist's appointment book."

"So you don't know of your own knowledge what date you went to the dentist, only the date that is shown in the dentist's book?"

"That's right."

"And the entry of that date in the dentist's book was not made in your own handwriting. In other words, you have used a conversation with the dentist to refresh your memory."

"Well, I asked him what date I came in, and he consulted his records and told me."

"Exactly," Mason said. "But you don't know of your own knowledge how he kept his records."

"Well, he's supposed to keep them—"

Mason smiled. "But *you* have no independent recollection of anything except that it was the night that you had the toothache, is that right?"

"Well, if you'd had that toothache—"

"I'm asking you if that's the only way you can fix the date, that it was the night you had the toothache?"

"Yes."

"And then, at the request of the district attorney, you tried to verify the date?"

"Yes."

"When did the district attorney request that you do that?"

"I don't know. It was late in the month sometime."

"And did you go to the dentist's office, or did you telephone him?"

"I telephoned him."

"And asked him the date when you had your appointment?"

"Yes."

"Aside from that, you wouldn't have been able to tell whether it had been the sixth, the seventh, or the eighth?"

"I suppose not."

"So you have refreshed your recollection by taking the word of someone else. In other words, the testimony you are now giving as to the date is purely hearsay evidence?"

"Oh, Your Honor," Hamilton Burger said, "I think this witness has the right to refresh her recollection by—"

Judge Hartley shook his head. "The witness has testified that she

can't remember the date except by fixing it in connection with other circumstances, and those other circumstances which she is using to refresh her recollection depend upon the unsworn testimony of another. Quite plainly hearsay testimony, Mr. District Attorney."

Hamilton Burger bowed. "Very well, Your Honor."

"That's all," Mason said.

"Call Josephine Carter," Burger said.

Josephine Carter was sworn, testified she was a switchboard operator at the apartment house where the defendant had his apartment, that she worked from 10:00 P.M. on the night of the fifth of June until 6:00 A.M. on the morning of June sixth.

"Did you ring the defendant's phone that night?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Shortly before midnight. I was told it was an emergency and I—"

"Never mind what you were *told*. What did you *do*?"

"I rang the phone."

"Did you get an answer?"

"No. The party who was calling left a message and asked me to keep calling to see that Mr. Jefferson got that message as soon as he came in."

"How often did you continue to ring?"

"Every hour."

"Until when?"

"When I went off duty at six in the morning."

"Did you ever get an answer?"

"No."

"From your desk at the switchboard can you watch the corridor to the elevator, and did you thereafter watch to see if the defendant came in?"

"Yes. I kept watch so as to call to him when he came in."

"He didn't come in while you were on duty?"

"No."

"You're certain?"

"Positive."

"Cross-examine," Burger snapped at Mason.

"How do you know the phone was ringing?" Mason asked smilingly.

"Why I depressed the key."

"Phones get out of order occasionally?"

"Yes."

"Is there any check signal on the board by which you can tell if the phone is ringing?"

"You get a peculiar sound when the phone rings, sort of a hum."

"And if the phone doesn't ring, do you get that hum?"

"I . . . we haven't been troubled that way."

"Do you know of your own knowledge that you fail to get that hum when the phone is not ringing?"

"That's the way the board is supposed to work."

"I'm asking you if you know of your own knowledge?"

"Well, Mr. Mason, I have never been in an apartment where the phone was not ringing and at the same time been downstairs at the switchboard trying to ring that telephone."

"Exactly," Mason said. "That's the point I was trying to make, Miss Carter. That's all."

"Just a moment," Hamilton Burger said. "I have one question on redirect. Did you keep an eye on the persons who went in and out, to see if Mr. Jefferson came in?"

"I did."

"Is your desk so located that you could have seen him when he came in?"

"Yes. Everyone who enters the apartment has to walk down a corridor, and I can see through a glass door into that corridor."

"That's all," Burger said, smiling.

"I have one or two questions on recross-examination," Mason said. "I'll only bother you for a moment, Miss Carter. You have now stated that you kept looking up whenever anyone came in, to see if the defendant came in."

"Yes, sir."

"And you could have seen him if he had come in?"

"Yes, sir. Very easily. From my station at the switchboard I can watch people who come down the corridor."

"So you want the Court and the jury to understand that you are certain the defendant didn't come in during the time you were on duty?"

"Well, he didn't come in from the time I first rang his telephone until I quit ringing it at six o'clock, when I went off duty."

"And what time did you first ring his telephone?"

"It was before midnight, perhaps eleven o'clock, perhaps a little after eleven."

"And then what?"

"Then I rang two or three times between the time of the first call and one o'clock, and then after 1:00 A.M. I made it a point to ring every hour on the hour."

"Just short rings or—"

"No, I rang several long rings each time."

"And after your first ring around midnight you were satisfied the defendant was not in his apartment?"

"Yes, sir."

"And because you were watching the corridor you were satisfied that he couldn't have entered the house and gone to his apartment without your seeing him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why," Mason asked, "if you *knew* he wasn't in his apartment and *knew* that he hadn't come in, did you keep on ringing the telephone at hourly intervals?"

The witness looked at Mason, started to say something, stopped, blinked her eyes, said, "Why, I . . . I . . . I don't know. I just did it."

"In other words," Mason said, "you *thought* there was a possibility he might have come in without your seeing him?"

"Well, of course, that *could* have happened."

"Then when you just now told the district attorney that it would have been impossible for the defendant to have come in without your seeing him, you were mistaken?"

"I . . . well, I . . . I had talked it over with the district attorney and . . . well, I thought that's what I was supposed to say."

"Exactly," Mason said, smiling. "Thank you."

Josephine Carter looked at Hamilton Burger to see if there were any more questions, but Hamilton Burger was making a great show of pawing through some papers. "That's all," he snapped gruffly.

Josephine Carter left the witness stand.

"I will now call Ruth Dickey," Hamilton Burger said.

Ruth Dickey came forward, was sworn, and testified that she was and had been on the fourteenth of June an elevator operator in the

building where the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company had its offices.

"Did you see Duane Jefferson, the defendant in this case, on the fourteenth of June a little after noon?"

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"Well, he and Mr. Irving, his associate, rode down in the elevator with me about ten minutes past twelve. The defendant said he was going to lunch."

"When did they come back?"

"They came back about five minutes to one and rode up in the elevator with me."

"Did anything unusual happen on that day?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"The manager of the building and one of the stenographers got into the elevator with me, and the manager asked me to run right down to the street floor because it was an emergency."

"Was this before or after the defendant and Irving had gone up with you?"

"After."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"About how long after?"

"At least five minutes."

"How well do you know the defendant?" Hamilton Burger asked.

"I have talked with him off and on."

"Have you ever been out with him socially?"

She lowered her eyes. "Yes."

"Now, did the defendant make any statements to you with reference to his relationship with Ann Riddle, the young woman who operates the cigar stand?"

"Yes. He said that he and his partner had set her up in business, that she was a lookout for them, but that no one else knew the connection. He said if I'd be nice to him, he could do something for me, too."

"You may cross-examine," Hamilton Burger said.

"You have had other young men take you out from time to time?" Mason asked.

"Well, yes."

"And quite frequently you have had them make rather wild promises about what they could do about setting you up in business if you would only be nice to them?"

She laughed. "I'll say," she said. "You'd be surprised about what some of them say."

"I dare say I would," Mason said. "That's all. Thank you, Miss Dickey."

"That's all our rebuttal," Hamilton Burger said.

Judge Hartley's voice was sympathetic. "I know that it is customary to have a recess before arguments start, but I would like very much to get this case finished today. I think that we can at least start the argument, unless there is some reason for making a motion for a continuance."

Mason, tight-lipped, shook his head. "Let's go ahead with it," he said.

"Very well, Mr. District Attorney, you may make your opening argument."

CHAPTER 18

HAMILTON BURGER'S ARGUMENT TO THE JURY WAS RELATIVELY short. It was completed within an hour after court reconvened following the noon recess. It was a masterpiece of forensic eloquence, of savage triumph, of a bitter, vindictive attack on the defendant and by implication on his attorney.

Mason's argument, which followed, stressed the point that while perjurers and waterfront scum had made an attack on his client, no one had yet shown that Munroe Baxter was murdered. Munroe Baxter, Mason insisted, could show up alive and well at any time, without having contradicted the testimony of any witness.

Hamilton Burger's closing argument was directed to the fact that the Court would instruct the jury that *corpus delicti* could be shown by circumstantial evidence, as well as by direct evidence. It was an argument which took only fifteen minutes.

The Court read instructions to the jurors, who retired to the jury room for their deliberations.

Mason, in the courtroom, his face a cold, hard mask, thoughtfully paced the floor.

Della Street, sitting at the counsel table, gave him her silent sympathy. Paul Drake, who had for once been too depressed even to try to eat, sat with his head in his hands.

Mason glanced at the clock, sighed wearily, ceased his pacing and dropped into a chair.

"Any chance, Perry?" Paul Drake asked.

Mason shook his head. "Not with the evidence in this shape. My client is a dead duck. Any luck with this car rental?"

"No luck at all, Perry. We've covered every car rental agency here and in outlying towns where they have branches."

Mason was thoughtful for a moment. "What about Walter Irving?"

"Irving has flown the coop," Drake said. "He left the courtroom, climbed into a taxicab and vanished. This time my men knew what he was going to try to do, and they were harder to shake. But within an hour he had ditched the shadows. It was a hectic hour."

"How did he do it?"

"It was very simple," Drake said. "Evidently it was part of a pre-arranged scheme. He had chartered a helicopter that was waiting for him at one of the outlying airports. He drove out there, got in the helicopter and took off."

"Can't you find out what happened? Don't they have to file some sort of a flight plan or—"

"Oh, we know what happened well enough," Drake said. "He chartered the helicopter to take him to the International Airport. Halfway there, he changed his mind and talked the helicopter into landing at the Santa Monica Airport. A rented car was waiting there."

"He's gone?"

"Gone slick and clean. We'll probably pick up his trail later on, but it isn't going to be easy, and by that time it won't do any good."

Mason thought for a moment. Suddenly he sat bolt upright. "Paul," he said, "we've overlooked a bet!"

"What?"

"A person renting a car has to show his driving license?"

"That's right."

"You've been looking for car rentals in the name of Marline Chaumont?"

"That's right."

"All right," Mason said. "Start your men looking for car rentals in the name of Walter Irving. Call your men on the phone. Start a network of them making a search. I want that information, and I want it now."

Drake, seemingly glad to be able to leave the depressing atmosphere of the courtroom, said, "Okay, I'll start right away, Perry."

Shortly before five o'clock a buzzer announced that the jury had reached its verdict. The jury was brought into court and the verdict was read by the foreman.

"We, the jury impaneled to try the above-entitled case, find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree."

There was no recommendation for life imprisonment or leniency.

Judge Hartley's eyes were sympathetic as he looked at Perry Mason. "Can we agree upon having the Court fix a time for pronouncing sentence?" he asked.

"I would like an early date for hearing a motion for a new trial," Mason said. "I will stipulate that Friday will be satisfactory for presenting a motion for new trial and fixing sentence. We will waive the question of time."

"How about the district attorney's office?" Judge Hartley asked. "Will Friday be satisfactory?"

The deputy district attorney, who sat at the counsel table, said, "Well, Your Honor, I think it will be all right. Mr. Burger is in conference with the press at the moment. He—"

"He asked you to represent the district attorney's office?" Judge Hartley asked.

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Represent it then," Judge Hartley said shortly. "Is Friday satisfactory?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Friday morning at ten o'clock," Judge Hartley said. "Court is adjourned. The defendant is remanded to custody."

Reporters, who usually swarmed about Perry Mason asking for a statement, were now closeted with Hamilton Burger. The few spec-

tators who had been interested enough to await the verdict got up and went home. Mason picked up his brief case. Della Street tucked her hand through his arm, gave him a reassuring squeeze. "You warned him, Chief," she said. "Not once, but a dozen times. He had it coming."

Mason merely nodded. Paul Drake, hurrying down the corridor, said, "I've got something, Perry."

"Did you hear the verdict?" Mason asked.

Paul Drake's eyes refused to meet Mason's. "I heard it."

"What have you got?" Mason asked.

"Walter Irving rented an automobile the day that Marline Chaumont disappeared from the airport. Last night he rented another one."

"I thought so," Mason said. "Has he turned back the first automobile?"

"No."

"He keeps the rental paid?"

"Yes."

"We can't get him on the ground of embezzling the automobile, so we can have police looking for it as a 'hot' car?"

"Apparently not."

Mason turned to Della Street. "Della, you have a shorthand book in your purse?"

She nodded.

"All right," Mason said to Paul Drake, "let's go, Paul."

"Where?" Drake asked.

"To see Ann Riddle, the girl who bought the cigar counter in our building," Mason said. "We may be able to get to her before she, too, flies the coop. Hamilton Burger is too busy with the press, decorating himself with floral wreaths, to do much thinking now."

Drake, his voice sympathetic, said, "Gosh, Perry, it's . . . I can imagine how you feel . . . having a client convicted of first-degree murder. It's the first time you've ever had a client convicted in a murder case."

Mason turned to Paul Drake, his eyes were cold and hard. "My client," he said, "hasn't been convicted of anything."

For a moment Drake acted as if his ears had betrayed him, then, at something he saw in Mason's face, he refrained from asking questions.

"Get the address of that girl who bought the cigar stand," Mason said, "and let's go."

CHAPTER 19

MASON, HIS FACE IMPLACABLY DETERMINED, SCORNED THE chair offered him by the frightened blonde.

"You can talk now," he said, "or you can talk later. Whichever you want. If you talk now it may do you some good. If you talk later you're going to be convicted as an accessory in a murder case. Make up your mind."

"I've nothing to say."

Mason said, "Irving and Jefferson went into the building *before* the excitement. When they entered their office, Mae Jordan was there. They caught her. The phone rang. They were warned that the police had been notified that a girl was breaking into the office and that the police were coming up; that the girl who had seen the woman breaking in and the manager of the building were waiting at the elevators. There was only one person who could have given them that information. That was you."

"You have no right to say that."

"I've said it," Mason said, "and I'm saying it again. The next time I say it, it's going to be in open court."

"By tomorrow morning at ten o'clock we'll have torn into your past and will have found out all about the connection between you and Irving. By that time it'll be too late for you to do anything. You've committed perjury. We're putting a tail on you. Now start talking."

Under the impact of Mason's gaze she at first averted her eyes, then restlessly shifted her position in the chair.

"Start talking," Mason said.

"I don't have to answer to you. You're not the police. You—"

"Start talking."

"All right," she said. "I was paid to keep a watch on things, to telephone them if anything suspicious happened. There's nothing unlawful about that."

"It goes deeper than that," Mason said. "You were in on the whole thing. It was their money that put you in the cigar store. What's your connection with this thing?"

"You can't prove any of that. That's a false and slanderous statement. Duane Jefferson never told that little tramp anything like that. If he did, it was false."

"Start talking," Mason said.

She hesitated, then stubbornly shook her head.

Mason motioned to Della Street. "Go over to the telephone, Della. Ring up Homicide Squad. Get Lieutenant Tragg on the line. Tell him I want to talk with him."

Della Street started for the telephone.

"Now wait a minute," the blonde said hurriedly. "You can't—"

"Can't what?" Mason asked as her voice trailed into silence.

"Can't make anything stick on me. You haven't got any proof."

"I'm getting it," Mason told her. "Paul Drake here is an expert detective. He has men on the job right now, men who are concentrating on what you and Irving were doing."

"All right. Suppose my gentleman friend *did* loan me the money to buy a cigar stand. There's nothing wrong with that. I'm over the age of consent. I can do what I damn please."

Mason said, "This is your last chance. Walter Irving is putting out a lot of false clues, shaking off any possible pursuit. Then he'll go to Marline Chaumont. She's in one of the outlying towns. When she and Irving get together, something's going to happen. He must have given you an address where you could reach him in case of any emergency. That will be Marline's hide-out. Where is it?"

She shook her head.

Mason nodded to Della Street. Della Street started putting through the call.

Abruptly the blonde began to cry.

"I want Homicide Department, please," Della Street said into the phone.

The blonde said, "It's in Santa Ana."

"Where?" Mason asked.

She fumbled with her purse, took out an address, handed it to Mason. Mason nodded, and Della Street hung up the telephone.

"Come on," Mason said.

"What do you mean, come on?" the girl said.

"You heard me," Mason told her. "We're not leaving you behind to make any telephone calls. This is too critical for us to botch it up now."

"You can't *make* me go!"

"I can't make you go with *me*, but I can damn sure see that you're locked up in the police station. The only bad thing is that will cost about fifteen minutes. Which do you want?"

She said, "Stop looking at me like that. You frighten me. You—"

"I'm putting it to you cold turkey," Mason said. "Do you want to take a murder rap or not?"

"I—" She hesitated.

"Get your things on," Mason said.

Ann Riddle moved toward the closet.

"Watch her, Della," Mason said. "We don't want her to pick up any weapons."

Ann Riddle put on a light coat, picked up her purse. Paul Drake looked in the purse and made sure there was no weapon in it.

The four of them went down in the elevator, wordlessly got in Mason's car. Mason toolled the car out to the freeway, gathered speed.

CHAPTER 20

THE HOUSE WAS IN A QUIET RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT. A LIGHT WAS on in the living room. A car was parked in the garage. A wet strip on the sidewalk showed that the lawn had recently been sprinkled.

Mason parked the car, jerked open the door, strode up the steps to the porch. Della Street hurried along behind him. Paul Drake kept a hand on the arm of Ann Riddle.

Mason rang the bell.

The door opened half an inch. "Who is it?" a woman's voice asked.

Mason pushed his weight against the door so suddenly that the door was pushed inward.

Marline Chaumont, staggering back, regarded Mason with frightened eyes. "You!" she said.

"We came to get your brother," Mason said.

"My brother is—how you call it?—sick in the upstairs. He has flies in his belfry. He cannot be disturbed. He is asleep."

"Wake him up," Mason said.

"But you cannot do this. My brother he— You are not the law, *non?*"

"No," Mason said. "But we'll have the law here in about five minutes."

Marline Chaumont's face contorted into a spasm of anger. "You!" she spat at the blonde. "You had to pull a double cross!"

"I didn't," Ann Riddle said. "I only—"

"I know what you did, you double-crosser!" Marline Chaumont said. "I spit on you. You stool squab!"

"Never mind that," Mason said. "Where's the man you claim is your brother?"

"But he *is* my brother!"

"Phooey," Mason told her.

"He was taken from the hospital—"

"The man who was taken from the state hospital," Mason said, "isn't related to you any more than I am. You used him only as a prop. I don't know what you've done with him. Put him in a private institution somewhere, I suppose. I want the man who's taken his place, and I want him now."

"You are crazy in the head yourself," Marline Chaumont said. "You have no right to—"

"Take care of her, Paul," Mason said, and started marching down the hall toward the back of the house.

"You'll be killed!" she screamed. "You cannot do this. You—"

Mason tried the doors one at a time. The third door opened into a bedroom. A man, thin and emaciated, was lying on the bed, his hands handcuffed at the wrists.

A big, burly individual who had been reading a magazine got slowly to his feet. "What the hell!" he thundered.

Mason sized him up. "You look like an ex-cop to me," he said.

"What's it to you?" the man asked.

"Probably retired," Mason said. "Hung out your shingle as a private detective. Didn't do so well. Then this job came along."

"Say, what're you talking about?"

"I don't know what story they told *you*," Mason said, "and I don't know whether you're in on it or not, but whatever they told you, the jig's up. I'm Perry Mason, the lawyer."

The man who was handcuffed on the bed turned to Perry Mason. His eyes, dulled with sedatives, seemed to be having some difficulty getting in focus.

"Who are you?" he asked in the thick voice of a sleep talker.

Mason said, "I've come to take you out of here."

The bodyguard said, "This man's a mental case. He's inclined to be violent. He can't be released and he has delusions—"

"I know," Mason said. "His real name is Pierre Chaumont. He keeps thinking he's someone else. He has a delusion that his real name is—"

"Say, how do you know all this?" the bodyguard asked.

Mason said, "They gave you a steady job. A woman handed you a lot of soft soap, and you probably think she's one of the sweetest, most wonderful women on earth. It's time you woke up. As for this man on the bed, he's going with me right now. First we're going to the best doctor we can find, and then . . . well, then we'll get ready to keep a date on Friday morning at ten o'clock.

"You can either be in jail at that time or a free man. Make your choice now. We're separating the men from the boys. If you're in on this thing all the way, you're in a murder case. If you were just hired to act as a guard for a man who is supposed to be a mental case, that's something else. You have your opportunity to make your decision right now. There's a detective downstairs and police are on their way out. They'll be here within a matter of minutes. They'll want to know where you stand. I'm giving you your chance right now, and it's your *last chance*."

The big guard blinked his eyes slowly. "You say this man *isn't* a mental case?"

"Of course he *isn't*."

"I've seen the papers. He was taken from a state hospital."

"Some other guy was taken from a state hospital," Mason said, "and then they switched patients. This isn't a debating society. Make up your mind."

"You're Perry Mason, the lawyer?"

"That's right."

"Got any identification on you?"

Mason handed the man his card, showed him his driving license. The guard sighed. "Okay," he said. "You win."

CHAPTER 21

THE BAILIFF CALLED COURT TO ORDER.

Hamilton Burger, his face wearing a look of smug satisfaction, beamed about the courtroom.

Judge Hartley said, "This is the time fixed for hearing a motion for new trial and for pronouncing judgment in the case of *People v. Duane Jefferson*. Do you wish to be heard, Mr. Mason?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Perry Mason said. "I move for a new trial of the case on the ground that the trial took place in the absence of the defendant."

"What?" Hamilton Burger shouted. "The defendant was present in court every minute of the time! The records so show."

"Will you stand up, Mr. Duane Jefferson?" Mason asked.

The man beside Mason stood up. Another man seated near the middle of the courtroom also stood up. Judge Hartley looked at the man in the courtroom.

"Come forward," Mason said.

"Just a minute," Judge Hartley said. "What's the meaning of this, Mr. Mason?"

"I asked Mr. Jefferson to stand up."

"He's standing up," Hamilton Burger said.

"Exactly," Mason said.

"Who's this other man?" the Court asked. "Is he a witness?"

"He's Duane Jefferson," Mason said.

"Now, just a minute, just a minute," Hamilton Burger said. "What's all this about, what kind of a flimflam is counsel trying to work here? Let's get this thing straight. Here's the defendant standing here within the bar."

"And here's Duane Jefferson coming forward," Mason said. "I am moving for a new trial on the ground that the entire trial of Duane Jefferson for first-degree murder took place in his absence."

"Now just a moment, just a moment!" Hamilton Burger shouted. "I might have known there would be something like this. Counsel can't confuse the issues. It doesn't make any difference now whether this man is Duane Jefferson or whether he's John Doe. He's the man who committed the murder. He's the man who was seen committing the murder. He's the man who was tried for the murder. If he went under the name of Duane Jefferson, that isn't going to stop him from being sentenced for the murder."

"But," Mason said, "some of your evidence was directed against my client, Duane Jefferson."

"*Your* client?" Hamilton Burger said. "That's your client standing next to you."

Mason smiled and shook his head. "*This* is my client," he said, beckoning to the man standing at the gate of the bar to come forward once more. "This is Duane Jefferson. He's the one I was retained to represent by the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company."

"Well, he's not the one you defended," Hamilton Burger said. "You can't get out of the mess this way."

Mason smiled and said, "I'm defending him now."

"Go ahead and defend him. He isn't accused of anything!"

"And I'm moving for a new trial on the ground that the trial took place in the absence of the defendant."

"This is the defendant standing right here!" Hamilton Burger insisted. "The trial took place in *his* presence. *He's* the one who was convicted. I don't care what you do with this other man, regardless of what his name is."

"Oh, but you introduced evidence consisting of articles belonging to the real Duane Jefferson," Mason said. "That dagger, for instance. The contents of the letters."

"What do you mean?"

"Mae W. Jordan told all about the letters she had received from Duane Jefferson, about the contents of those letters. I moved to strike out her testimony. The motion was denied. The testimony went to the jury about the Daddy Longlegs letters, about the Prince Charming letters, about the gag photographs, about the getting acquainted, and about the dagger."

"Now, just a moment," Judge Hartley said. "The Court will

bear with you for a moment in this matter, Mr. Mason, but the Court is going to resort to stern measures if it appears this is some dramatic presentation of a technicality which you are using to dramatize the issues."

"I'm trying to clarify the issues," Mason said. "What happened is very simple. Duane Jefferson, who is standing there by the mahogany swinging gate which leads to the interior of the bar, is a trusted employee of the South African Gem Importing and Exploration Company. He was sent to this country in the company of Walter Irving of the Paris office to open a branch office. They were to receive half a million dollars' worth of diamonds in the mail.

"Walter Irving, who had been gambling heavily, was deeply involved and knew that very shortly after he had left Paris there would be an audit of the books and his defalcations would be discovered.

"This man, James Kincaid, was groomed to take the place of Duane Jefferson. After the shipment of gems was received, James Kincaid would take the gems and disappear. Walter Irving would duly report an embezzlement by Jefferson and thereafter Jefferson's body would be discovered under such circumstances that it would appear he had committed suicide.

"The trouble was that they couldn't let well enough alone. They knew that Munroe Baxter was smuggling diamonds into the country, and they decided to kill Baxter and get the gems. Actually, Walter Irving had been working with Baxter in connection with the smuggling and for a fee had arranged for the stones to be delivered to Baxter under such circumstances that they could be smuggled into this country.

"The spurious Duane Jefferson didn't need to be clever about it, because he intended to have the shipment of stones in his possession and the real Duane Jefferson's body found, long before the police could make an investigation. However, because of a tax situation, the shipment of gems was delayed, and naturally they couldn't afford to have the spurious Jefferson disappear until the shipment had been received, so that Walter Irving could then report the defalcation to the company. Therefore, the real Duane Jefferson had to be kept alive."

"Your Honor, Your Honor!" Hamilton Burger shouted. "This is simply another one of those wild-eyed, dramatic grandstands for

which counsel is so noted. This time his client has been convicted of first-degree murder, and I intend to see to it personally that his client pays the supreme penalty."

Mason pointed to the man standing in the aisle. "This is my client," he said. "This is the man I was retained to represent. I intend to show that his trial took place in his absence. Come forward and be sworn, Mr. Jefferson."

"Your Honor, I object!" Hamilton Burger shouted. "I object to any such procedure. I insist that this defendant is the only defendant before the Court."

Judge Hartley said, "Now, just a moment. I want to get to the bottom of this thing, and I want to find out exactly what counsel's contention is before I start making any rulings. Court will take an adjournment for fifteen minutes while we try to get at the bottom of this thing. I will ask counsel for both sides to meet me in chambers. The defendant, in the meantime, is in custody. He will remain in custody."

Mason grinned.

The tall, gaunt man standing in the aisle turned back toward the audience. Mae Jordan moved toward him. "Hello, Prince Charming," she ventured somewhat dubiously. Jefferson's eyes lit up.

"Hello, Lady Guinevere," he said in a low voice. "I was told you'd be here."

"Prince . . . Prince Charming!"

Mason said, "I'll leave him in your custody, Miss Jordan." Then Mason marched into the judge's chambers.

CHAPTER 22

"WELL?" JUDGE HARTLEY SAID.

"It was quite a plot," Mason explained. "Actually, it was hatched in Paris as soon as Walter Irving knew he was going to be sent over to assist Duane Jefferson in opening the new office. A girl named Marline Chaumont, who had been a Paris party girl for the company and who knew her way around, was in on it. James Kincaid was in on it. They would have gotten away with the whole scheme,

if it hadn't been for the fact that they were too eager. They knew that Baxter was planning to smuggle in three hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds. Gilly was to have taken the fishing boat out and made the delivery. They persuaded Gilly that Baxter had changed his mind at the last minute because of Gilly's record. He wanted these other men to take the boat out. Gilly was lying when he testified about his rental for the boat. He received twenty-five hundred dollars. That was the agreed price. Marline Chaumont has given me a sworn statement."

"Now just a minute," Judge Hartley said. "Are you now making this statement about the client you're representing in court?"

"I'm not representing him in court," Mason said. "I'm representing the real Duane Jefferson. That's the one I was retained to represent. I would suggest, however, that the Court give this other man an opportunity to get counsel of his own, or appoint counsel to represent him. He, too, is entitled to a new trial."

"He can't get a new trial," Hamilton Burger roared, "even if what you say is true. You defended him and you lost the case."

Mason smiled coldly at Hamilton Burger. "You might have made that stick," he said, "if it hadn't been for the testimony of Mae Jordan about all of her correspondence with Duane Jefferson. That correspondence was with the real Duane Jefferson, not with the man you are trying for murder. You can't convict Duane Jefferson of anything, because he wasn't present during his trial. You can't make the present conviction stick against the defendant now in court, because you used evidence that related to the real Duane Jefferson, not to him."

"What you should have done was to have checked your identification of the man you had under arrest. You were so damned anxious to get something on me that when you found from his fingerprints that he had a record, you let your enthusiasm run away with you.

"You let Mae Jordan testify to a lot of things that had happened between her and the real Duane Jefferson. It never occurred to you to make certain that the man she sent the knife to was the same man you were trying for murder.

"The spurious Jefferson and Irving drugged the real Jefferson shortly after they left Chicago on the train. They stole all of his papers, stole the Jordan letters, stole the knife. It will be up to

you to prove that at the next trial—and I'm not going to help you. You can go get the evidence yourself. However, I have Marline Chaumont in my office and I have a sworn statement made by her, which I now hand to the Court, with a copy for the district attorney.

"Just one suggestion, though. If you ever want to tie this case up, you'd better find out who that man was who was in the boat with Kincaid, because it certainly wasn't Irving.

"And now may I ask the Court to relieve me of any responsibility in the matter of the defendant, James Kincaid, who is out there in the courtroom. He tricked me into appearing in court for him by artifice, fraud, and by misrepresenting his identity. My only client is Duane Jefferson."

"I think," Judge Hartley said, "I want to talk with this Duane Jefferson. I suppose you can establish his identity beyond any question, Mr. Mason?"

"His fingerprints were taken in connection with his military service," Mason said.

"That should be good enough evidence," Judge Hartley agreed, smiling. "I'd like to have a talk with him now."

Mason got up, walked to the door of chambers, looked out at the courtroom, and turned back to smile at the judge. "I guess I'll have to interrupt him," Mason said. "He and the witness Mae Jordan are jabbering away like a house afire. There seems to be a sort of common understanding between them. I guess it's because they're both interested in photography."

Judge Hartley's smile had broadened. "Perhaps, Mr. Mason," he suggested tentatively, "Miss Jordan is telling Mr. Jefferson where she got that key."

T H E E N D

THEY'RE GOING TO KILL ME

B Y

ALAN AMOS

Published by special arrangement with Doubleday & Company, Inc.

C H A P T E R O N E

"Sorry, boys, but if that's the way you intend to play it, just count me out."

The other four men sitting around the scarred old table stared at him. At half past five on a winter afternoon the traffic roared by along Columbus Avenue, but here in 'Jerry's Joint' it was the slack hour, and the long narrow room was empty save for two truck drivers wolfing down a hot meal at the front counter, and the little group in the rear, near the door that led out into the alley. In the light of the dim and dusty bulb that hung on a long cord from the ceiling, the faces looked colorless, tense, and in the surrounding gloom, starkly revealed. A modern version of an old master, Grayson Fiske thought, looking around at them. The sort of thing Rembrandt would have painted, were he alive today. John Cramer, burly, blond, with stubborn ice-blue eyes; Frank Fitzpatrick, red-haired, with avid eyes and sharp-pointed nose and chin; Max Tully, dark and clever-faced, with a bush of hair receding at the temples; Jerry Morgan, owner and proprietor of the 'Joint' in a white coat, already beginning to put on weight on his own cooking. A commonplace-looking guy, but with some quality in him—a determination, an unflinching sense of purpose—that had already, in the mere six months since his return from Korea, turned this grimy hole-in-the-wall into a potential gold mine. The quality that made the others follow wherever he led.

"Whaddaya mean—count you out?" he growled.

"Just what I say. If it's murder you've got in mind, I'm not playing."

"That ain't what you said yesterday," said Fitz. "You said you were with us."

"I said I'd go along with you to teach him a lesson—to get even—something like that. Not killing. It's not down my alley."

Cramer said flatly, "There's only one way to get even."

Max shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Johnny. It's

over too quick, and it doesn't hurt enough. I'd rather see him live and suffer. There are ways——”

“This ain't going to be quick,” said Jerry. “He'll have plenty of time. He's going to know all about slow death before we're through with him. And he'll suffer—don't make no mistake about that. Remember, he's yellow to the bottom of his guts. He's the kind that'll die a thousand deaths before we finally decide to put him out of his misery.”

“Why not leave it at that, then?”

“Because”—Jerry's voice was low and gritty with hate—“I swore I'd kill him. I swore it day and night for two years and a half. And that's just what I'm going to do.”

Fitz leaned forward sharply, elbows on table, his small, red-rimmed eyes blazing. “Say, listen, fella. Have you forgotten that rotten rice—and the bugs—and us crawling out to the latrine on our hands and knees because our legs wouldn't hold us up? Remember Pete Littlefield catching cold when they threw that bucket of ice water over him? He'd been alive today if we could 'a' got a hot drink into him, and a blanket to put over him. Remember what they done to Phil?” He gulped and swallowed noisily. “Remember that fence where they flogged him—and the water freezing on him as fast as they threw it, till he didn't come to any longer, and then they just left him hanging there in the ropes till he died—six days—six bloody days and nights——” He dropped his face in his clenched hands and this thin body shuddered. Then his head flung up again. “Remember how they took us—the dirty yellow scum? Whistling the song—Phil's song ‘... poor little lambs who have lost their way . . .’ the song he taught 'em, the—to save his own precious hide——”

Gray looked at him. “Yes, I remember everything, Fitz. I'll never forget it—any of it. But it's done—and nothing can undo it. Not even murder.”

“The way I look at it, it ain't murder,” said Jerry. “It's execution—for war crimes. That's legitimate. The high brass done it—to everyone they could catch.”

“Not without a trial——”

“Damn it, what could any trial find out that we don't already know? We don't need any evidence—we've got proof—right in our own souls and bellies——”

"It's still murder in the eyes of the law. And you know what the penalty for that is—the electric chair. I'll be damned if I'll go to the electric chair for that guy, on top of everything else I've suffered because of him."

Max nodded his bushy head. "He's got something there, fellows."

Fitz turned on him furiously. "So you're backing out too?"

Max shrugged an uncertain shoulder. "Well, I don't know—I got to think about it. You better go slow—"

Fitz spat vileness at him. Jerry said levelly, "All right, so where do we go from here? You know where this puts you, Fiske? You sat there and listened, and we gave you all the dope—thinking you were on the level—"

"Not when you began to talk about murder. That's when I backed out—"

"So when the rat gets killed, you go to the police with the whole story. That stuff about the electric chair—you'll make damn certain we get it—"

Cramer growled, "You damned holy joe, you're just as bad as he is."

"Now wait a minute." Deliberately Gray lit a cigarette and took a long deep drag on it. Then he said, "No, I won't go to the police—"

"That's what you say—"

"Listen. I hate the guy just as much as you do—I hate his rotten guts—or the place where his guts would be if he had any. You've got your way of dealing with him, and it isn't mine, but I've got plenty of sympathy with it. Everything you've told me is perfectly safe—you've got my word for that."

"That ain't good enough," said Cramer stolidly.

"Yes, it is," said Jerry sharply. "We've been through plenty with Gray. What he says, he'll do."

"But get this, boys." Gray's tall lean body straightened up in his chair, and his eyes were cold, hard, holding them. "I won't let you kill him if I can help it. That's for your own sakes more than his. I wouldn't have to tell the police—they'd get you for it—make no mistake about that. I don't want to see any of you take the rap for it—"

"So you'll save us in spite of us," Fitz sneered.

"How you going to stop us?" Cramer demanded.

"Any way I have to."

"Whaddaya mean by that?" Frank Fitzpatrick's sharp fox-like face thrust at him. "Maybe you couldn't—without killing. What about it—if it was us or him, what would you do?"

"That's a bridge I won't cross till I come to it. If you've got any brains at all, you'll make sure I don't have to make any such decision. But I'll tell you this much—if I had to sacrifice one of you to save the others, I'd do it."

"And keep that louse alive?"

He nodded shortly. "That's it. I told you I'm not going to let you kill him if I can help it, and that's final."

"Who appointed you his keeper?"

"Shaddup, Fitz," Jerry said shortly. "I dig what he means. He's crazy as a coot, but if that's the way he feels—okay." He looked at Gray with opaque, expressionless eyes. "I guess this is where we split up, Fiske."

"I guess it is." Gray shoved back his chair and got to his feet and stood looking down on them. Out of the mesh of fine wrinkles at the corners, his airman's eyes had a look that was almost tender in its comprehension, and the corners of his mobile mouth curled down in a grim smile that held no hint of humor.

"I'm sorry, boys. We were a good team. . . . Let's get together again—someday. Don't let him do this to us too."

No one spoke. Only Jerry's eyes met his, and they were cold and bitter with hostility. Gray drew a long breath and made a futile gesture with his hand.

"Well, so long, boys. How about you, Max—are you coming along?"

Max looked up at him, a quick searching look. He rose slowly, uncertainly. "Yes, I'd better be going. But I—I'm going in the other direction, Fiske. I've got an errand—something I've got to do. . . ." His mouth twisted in a travesty of a grin as he looked down on the three who sat unmoving, silent, around the table. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

Still no one spoke, and Max started for the door, hurrying, as if eager to escape. More slowly, Fiske followed. When he reached the sidewalk Max had disappeared.

C H A P T E R T W O

Susan was at the back of the shop tidying the books when Lance Hardy opened the door.

"Hi, Susan! Don't you know it's after five—time to throw down your pick and shovel?"

A stoop-shouldered, scholarly-looking man with untidy gray hair glanced up hastily from the book he was reading at the table by the window.

"Dear me, I didn't realize it was so late!" He gathered up the pile of books before him and hurried to the shelves to put them in place. Susan gave Lance a smile over her shoulder.

"I'll be with you in a minute. Want some candy? There's a box on the desk. Help yourself."

"You bet I do," said Lance. "Can I have all I want?"

"Yes, of course, infant! I'll be glad to see the last of it. One of my customers gave it to me, but you know I never touch it. I didn't realize you were starving for candy. Why don't you buy a box?"

He grinned a bit sheepishly. "The aunts won't let me—not chocolates. They have a horrid memory of the pimples I used to have when I was a kid, and they're convinced chocolate is sheer poison. So I have to eat it on the sly, if at all. Gosh, these are good!"

The elderly gentleman washed his hands in the toilet room behind the screen. Then he came back to his table and shrugged into a well-worn tweed coat, wrapped a scarf around his throat, and picked up a dilapidated brief case and a pair of woolen gloves.

"Well, good night, Miss Carey. I hope I haven't been a nuisance."

She gave him a warm smile. "Not a bit, Mr. Turner. I'm glad to have company. See you tomorrow?"

"If you are sure it isn't an imposition." He was quite a tall man, thin almost to the point of emaciation, with deep-set eyes under bushy gray brows, and his long bony face was seamed with wrinkles from the nostrils to the corners of his mouth, giving him a chronic expression of weariness and depression except when, as now, he smiled kindly. "When you want me to start paying rent just let me know. . . . Thank you. And good night."

He gave Lance a vague nod of courtesy as he passed, and the little bell over the door tinkled as he went out.

"I won't be long, Lance," said Susan. "Mr. Turner was so engrossed in the Toynbee that I hadn't the heart to tell him it was time to shut up shop."

"Go through the whole ten volumes, did he?"

"Not yet—but he will before he's through."

"I'll bet he won't buy them."

"Buy them? Of course not. If he could buy them he wouldn't spend so much time in the bookshop."

"Who is he, anyway?"

"A retired professor from some college I never heard of out in the Middle West somewhere. He has a room up on the hill—Myrtle Street, I think."

"Why doesn't he go to the public library?"

"Oh, this is much more convenient," she said lightly. "And it's quiet and cozy. I'd much rather sit here and read than in some big public reading room. Wouldn't you?"

His lips twisted. "You're a pushover for the free-loaders, Susie. You'll never make any money until you develop some hard-boiled merchandising technique."

Irritation flickered in her brown eyes. "What you fail to realize—" Then her smile came back. "Oh, Lance, you don't sell books the way you do stocks and bonds. I love having people come in and browse. Making money—if any—is quite incidental. There's a little old lady, Miss Leslie, who comes every Thursday and stays almost all day. And what do you think she reads? Cookbooks! She plans all the unusual and delicious meals she'd serve over the weekend, if she had weekend guests. Imagine! Poor little thing, I'll bet she lives in one room and cooks her meals on a hot plate. And the small boys who come in to pore over the latest science fiction! They make sense out of it too. That's more than I can do. . . . Now do sit down a minute, Lance, and stop fidgeting. There are some new mysteries there on the desk. See if there's anything you'd like to take along."

He laid his hat on the desk and picked up a book, but he did not open it. His eyes followed Susan as she moved about, quite unconscious of his scrutiny. She was trim and slender in her simple brown skirt and cashmere sweater, with a natural grace in every

line from the set of her smooth dark head to the poised movements of her slim feet. Under the shaded reading lights, her face had a cool clean beauty.

He had almost forgotten how lovely she was, how desirable, during those horrible years in the air force. True, he had carried her picture with him, but during those wretched endless months the likeness of a girl with level, honest eyes and faintly smiling lips had lost its reality for him. He had almost forgotten her charm, the warm intimacy of her smile, the gay little crinkle of humor about her eyes. He had even forgotten the grace of her lithe, lovely body, and the uneven clamor of the blood in his veins when she was near.

He watched now the proud lift of her head, the sure unhurried movements, the serene confidence that only generations of gentle breeding can produce. She belonged to his world; the sort of girl a man of his background would be proud to have for a wife.

A sense of guilty distaste stirred, deep under the surface of his mind. Why, at a moment like this, should he think of Velma? That brief episode had been only an incident born of boredom and rebellion, to while away the deadly hours of inactivity at that dreary little training field on the gulf coast of Alabama. Looking back, an inner eye seemed to bring Velma suddenly into focus—the embodiment of every quality he loathed in a woman. She was shrill, vixen-tempered, and coarse-mouthing, with brassy curls and too much make-up, clumsily applied. A gold digger with snatching claws for fingers; a hysterical little harpy with an appetite for diamonds and a taste for the shoddiest of tinsel. How in the world had he ever let himself become involved with such a creature?

He shook his head sharply, to clear away the memory. That was all Velma was now—only a dim shadow of an incident which was best forgotten, a part of that unbelievable nightmare, entirely detached from his actual life, which was his period of service in the air force. Now he was back in his rightful place, surrounded by all the protective safeguards which were his heritage; the devotion of his aunts, Cecelia and Amelia, his social position, and his junior partnership in the conservative investment house which was founded by his great-grandfather. And, not far in the future, there was the pleasant prospect of a home of his own, and Susan as his wife.

If the truth be told he was growing a bit impatient about Susan. He had been back almost a year now, but they seemed no nearer the altar than they had been immediately on his return. No doubt it was his imagination, but it had seemed to him that Susan's attitude toward him had changed perceptibly in the past few months. She was still a gay charming companion, but something of spontaneity had gone out of their relationship, and when he tried to talk to her about setting a date for their wedding she always managed to turn the conversation in another direction. It was high time, he thought, to take matters into his own hands and demand a showdown.

She was humming softly under her breath as she crushed a scrap of yellow suède down on her head and took her fur coat from the closet. He sprang to hold it for her, and resisted the impulse to let his hands rest for a moment on her shoulders in a swift caress. Susan didn't care for that sort of thing. She picked up her handbag and preceded him out of the door, trying the handle behind her to make sure the door was locked.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

Home-going traffic was heavy on Charles Street. They stood on the curb at the corner waiting for a break in the noisy surge of cars. When it came they dashed across and turned toward the embankment, down Chestnut Street. It was that magical moment of early dusk when lights glowed yellow and soft, and the occasional patches of dirty snow were violet shadows banked in the angles of the walls. A new salmon-colored sedan, parked halfway along the block, was a jarring color note in the muted pastel twilight. Just before they reached it the car pulled out from the curb and turned left toward Beacon.

"Well, I'm glad *that's* gone out of sight," Susan observed lightly. "It doesn't belong. I detest that color car, don't you?"

"I don't know that I ever thought of it."

She laughed. "Well, I don't suppose there's any reason to get vindictive about it—I don't have to ride in one. But that color makes my teeth squeak—it looks like synthetic orange juice with whipped cream in it."

The river lay dark and sullen under the embankment, touched with the stain of purple from the afterglow, and in the distance the Harvard Bridge was black lace against the sky. The converging streams of cars swept along the parkway drives, up from the underpass, in from Beacon Street, yellow headlights weaving an intricate pattern of moving light.

"I love the city at this time of night," Susan said. "Especially in the winter. It looks so clean and gay and glamorous. And the Tech buildings over there might almost be the Taj Mahal."

He chuckled. "You certainly have a vivid imagination. Taj Mahal, complete with neon illumination."

"Yes, the neon signs do rather destroy the illusion. I think all advertising signs are an abomination, don't you? If there weren't any—if they'd never been invented—the world would be so much more beautiful."

"Haven't you ever heard of competition, and the efficacy of the reiterated impact?"

"Frankly, advertising reiterates me into utter revolt against the whole competitive system. If I could find anything—*anything*—that was never advertised, I'd buy large quantities, whether I needed it or not."

"Which would no doubt so encourage the manufacturers that they would start a nationwide campaign to explain their sudden success and persuade the buying public to follow suit."

She sighed. "That's what's so depressing about the whole thing. I'm really afraid advertising is here to stay, and there's nothing I can do about it."

They walked on in companionable silence. The raucous confusion of the parkway was muted by distance to a pleasant fabric of sound that had music in its rhythm—the swift steady purr of tires, the throb of motors, the occasional toot of a horn. Susan was humming softly under her breath, the almost inaudible melody keeping pace with their brisk footsteps. It was a habit she had.

"Happy?" he said.

"Happy? What makes you—oh, because I'm humming? You ought to know by this time that it doesn't mean a thing—it's just a silly habit. It must be annoying. Remind me if I do it again."

"Oh, I like it. I knew a guy once—he did the same thing—"

She glanced at him swiftly. "In the war?"

"Yeah."

Clearly he didn't intend to tell her anything more. Lance didn't like to talk about the war. They walked on, and presently she began to hum again, the same throaty thread of a tune, and this time he knew what it was. He said sharply, "That thing you're singing, Sue—"

She looked at him, surprised at the sudden grate in his voice. "What? Oh—Whiffenpoof. I hardly realized what I was singing. . . . It reminds me of Chad Thatcher. I used to go down to Yale house parties with him, remember? . . . That darn thing has been running through my head all day. I must have heard it somewhere, to start me off."

They were approaching the wooden footbridge that angled up from the embankment park to overpass the traffic on the drive. Neither of them noticed the salmon-colored car that slid slowly along in the right-hand lane, letting the faster traffic whizz by, gaining on them imperceptibly until as they climbed the wooden flight of steps it was almost below, passing under the bridge.

Suddenly, from almost under their feet, a burst of music blurted out, as if a loud-speaker had been turned on at full volume, and Lance gripped Susan's arm with abrupt violence. "Listen! They're playing it—"

A sharp explosive sound cracked across the roar of traffic—a sound that might have been the backfire of an engine—and the wooden railing splintered. The car raced on, picking up speed fast, leaving behind the unnaturally loud wail of a singing voice ". . . poor little lambs who have lost their way . . ."

"Lance"—Susan's voice was shaking—"that—that was a shot!"

He nodded, wordlessly. He was staring, white-faced, at the raw yellowish gash in the weathered wood, and the long splinter that stuck up from it at an odd angle. Another step—his stunned mind was thinking—one more step, and it would have got me. If I hadn't heard that infernal song, and stopped—

"It was the same car!" Susan choked. "Or one just like it—"

"What car?" he muttered, thick-tongued.

"That orange one! Don't you remember—we saw it on Chestnut Street—it started up just ahead of us—"

He nodded dully, staring up the parkway as if his eyes could still pick it out in the maze of swiftly moving traffic. "Did you hear—that song?"

"Of course I did! Who could help it, making a racket like—Oh!" She caught her breath as her mind suddenly accepted the thing her ears had heard. "Why, how—how queer!"

"I'll say it's queer!" he grunted savagely. "What was it? Am I crazy—or was it—"

"It was the Whiffenpoof Song." Her voice was unsteady, frightened, but she managed a halfhearted laugh. "Quite a coincidence, wasn't it? They must have had a portable radio or phonograph—and they were obviously feeling no pain. . . . I thought for a minute somebody'd fired a shot, but of course it must have been a backfire—"

"Did you ever see a backfire do that?" His finger pointed at the raw gash in the handrail.

In the dusk Susan's face looked white. She whispered, "They *did* shoot! But why? Why would they be shooting at *us*?"

"That's what I want to know! And that damned song—— Susan, you said you must have heard it, to start you humming it. Where did you hear it? When?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"You must have! Think back—was it this afternoon? How long since you started humming the thing? Damn it, you *must* know!"

Her head flung up, and she looked at him. Standing there on the narrow footwalk high above the roaring traffic, they seemed to be suspended in a strange zone of silence. Before the cold anger in her eyes the flaming violence in his faded.

"I—I beg your pardon, Susan. I shouldn't have spoken like that. I didn't mean——"

"I can't imagine what you did mean," she retorted. "I have already told you I may have heard it somewhere, but I can't tell you where. And it hardly seems important enough for you to swear at me. . . . Shall we go?"

They went on across the bridge and down the long flight of steps on the other side, and it was not until they had nearly reached

Beacon Street that either of them spoke. Then Susan slipped her arm in his, and her voice was warm again.

"Let's not be silly about it. I guess we were both pretty edgy about that shot. But it's ridiculous to think they could have been shooting at us. They must have been drunk. But it's awfully dangerous—playing games with guns on the parkway. Don't you think we should notify the police?"

"What's the use? They're miles away by now."

"Just the same, a flashy car like that—there can't be very many like it on the road——"

"No." He said it with finality. "I'm not going to bring the police into it."

She glanced at him curiously. "Lance—do you know—do you have any idea who was in that car?"

"No, of course not! I simply don't want to get involved. As you say, they were probably drunk. And there's no harm done."

She shrugged lightly. "Just as you say. Personally, I've got a phobia against being a target for revolver practice. I always think maybe the next time they'll score a bull's-eye. Silly, of course, but that's just the way I am."

"Let's hope there won't be a next time." He cleared his throat and managed a rather unconvincing smile. "Think nothing of it, Sue. As you say, they must have been drunk—starting their Christmas celebration early. . . . By the way, the aunts are counting on you for Friday night—Christmas Eve, you know. You haven't forgotten?"

"Of course not. I'm looking forward to it. I adore Christmas Eve on the hill. It's like a bit of Merrie Olde England, as I've always imagined it. Full regimentals, I suppose?"

"Oh, certainly." He grinned. "It isn't a party—there'll be just the four of us, but the aunts always want to put on a good show, to give the lookers-in a thrill. Silly business."

"Oh, don't be so stuffy, Lance. Dad and Mother always felt the same way. It's one of the things I miss, living in my little apartment—it's almost as if I had become one of those on the outside looking in. People may laugh at stodgy old Beacon Hill, but when it's part of you, right in your blood stream, you can't help but love the old ways, the musty old traditions——"

"I know. You never really get away from it, do you?" They had

reached the remodeled brownstone apartment building where she lived. They mounted the front steps and he waited while she unlocked the door. "Next year we'll have a party of our own—a big one. The aunts will love it—"

"One Christmas at a time is all I can cope with," she said lightly. "Will you come up for a drink?"

His fair, thin-skinned face flushed with quick anger. "Why do you always put me off? Every time I say anything about getting married—"

"Oh, were we talking about getting married?" Her eyes teased him gently. "I'm not a mind reader, you know. . . . But let's not get into any matrimonial discussion right now. It's too cold. Remind me to talk about it some evening when we're sitting by a good roaring fire. . . . How about that drink?"

He shook his head brusquely. "I have to get home—the aunts are expecting me. They're having a sherry party, and I promised to drop in. . . . I'll pick you up Thursday night, about quarter past seven."

C H A P T E R F O U R

"Stop here just a minute, Thomas, will you?" Susan cried. "I want to look at it." The correct, elderly chauffeur obediently brought the aunts' pre-war Packard to a halt at the mouth of Louisburg Square.

It was like a scrap of mid-Victorian London transported bodily through time and space and deposited in the middle of metropolitan Boston with a charter of perpetuity, she thought, looking at the tall narrow brick and sandstone houses standing shoulder to shoulder around the garden plot. The square was in festive dress tonight, with wreaths of Christmas green on every door and lighted candles in the windows. Here and there one glimpsed a shimmering, gaily decorated Christmas tree, but even these had a stylized appearance, as if they had been placed with a careful eye for the picture to be seen from outside rather than for the benefit of those inside the house. She sighed softly.

"It doesn't change much, does it, Lance? I wonder who is living in our old house now."

"I believe some people named——"

She put out a hand swiftly. "I'd rather not know. It seems so—so *final*, if you know what I mean. The old house looks just the same—even to the candles in the attic windows. We're the ones who change."

"I haven't changed, Susan."

For an instant she did not answer. Then she said softly, "Oh yes, you have, Lance. We all have."

"Just what do you mean by that?" There was a quick resentful challenge in his voice. "For the worse, I suppose?"

Her hand touched his lightly. "I didn't say that. Everybody changes—it's what living does to you. The only ones who don't change are dead—whether they know it or not. . . . You may drive on now, Thomas."

"But I'm just the same as I always was," he insisted stubbornly.

"Don't tell me I'm dining out with a walking corpse," she protested, and deftly changed the subject. "Isn't it nice it's a white Christmas? There's a fairy-tale look about these old houses with the fresh snow on the roofs and shutters."

He was still silent and a trifle stiff in his manner when the car drew up at the door of the Hardy home a few blocks farther on. Susan's long skirts brushed the snow lightly as she crossed the sidewalk and mounted the stone steps.

"Don't forget my bag, Lance," she reminded him. "I hope we can slip out later on and go down to look at the decorations on the Common, but I certainly can't do it in these trailing robes. I've brought a sweater and skirt and pair of galoshes."

The front door was opened by a smiling middle-aged woman in sedate black uniform and white apron. "Good evening, Miss Susan," she said. "And a merry Christmas to you."

"Thank you, Mary." She slipped out of her coat and stepped to the mirror to smooth her hair, a vivid picture in her full-skirted gown of holly-red velvet.

"And a beautiful Christmas dress it is indeed," the woman approved with the uninhibited frankness of an old family retainer. "Lanny-boy, you take her right in and show her to Miss Amy and Miss Cissy. They're waiting for you in the drawing room."

The lovely long room was lighted only by tall white tapers in antique sconces on each wall and on the marble mantel above the hearth, where a gentle coal fire glowed, and by the twinkling flames of the tiny candles on the Christmas tree which stood in the bay window. The aunts were hovering over it like ancient priestesses tending the sacred fires, straightening the little candles in their holders and moving the glittering tinsel ornaments out of possible contact with the tiny flames.

For the moment they were so engrossed in their finicky occupation that they were unaware of the new arrivals. Pausing just inside the door, Susan watched them. They were very much alike, tall and thin and rather fragile-looking, with withered-rose complexions and faded, mild blue eyes. Amelia was wearing dark blue velvet, and her white hair was arranged in soft short curls, with a velvet bow nestling among them. Cecelia's gown was maroon velvet, and her hair lay close to her head in neat careful undulations. They both wore velvet bands around their long scrawny throats.

As far back as Susan could remember she had known the two elderly aunts who had brought Lance up, since the death of his parents in an automobile accident when he was eight years old, and she had always felt for them a warm affection, slightly tinged with the gentle amusement with which a younger generation is wont to view the older. But tonight the warmth and tolerance seemed to have deserted her, and for the first time, with the clarity of understanding which seemed to have come to her during the past few weeks, she saw them as a sinister influence in Lance's life. Not that there was actually anything evil in either of them, poor dears; it was simply that their extravagant love for him had robbed him of some quality which a man must have if he is to achieve his full manhood. The signs of it had been there during his Exeter and Harvard days; it was evidenced by his uncertainty in coming to any decision of his own, his occasional peevishness when he could not have his own way, the almost childish egotism he betrayed at times. It was this immaturity, this softness of character, which had held Susan back when he urged her to allow their engagement to be announced officially.

But whenever she had been astonished and shocked at these things Susan had reminded herself that his doting aunts were responsible for retarding his maturity, and that he would get over it

very quickly, as soon as he was on his own. His service in the air force had seemed to present just the opportunity he needed to get away from their daily cloying supervision of his life and accept full responsibility for his own actions. It would be a hard experience for him, but in the end, she felt sure, it would be worth it.

But the last few months, since he returned to civilian life, had proved that she was wrong. Like a terrified child who has been lost, he had tossed aside his adult responsibilities with his uniform and scurried back into the smothering security of the old house on Mt. Vernon Street, and Aunt Cecelia and Aunt Amelia had wrapped their adoring tentacles about him more tenaciously than ever.

"Oh, there you are!" said Aunt Amy, and fluttered across the room to kiss Susan. "Dear Susan. How nice to have you with us tonight—just our own little family—no outsiders. I always think Christmas should be a family celebration, don't you? It's so in keeping, symbolically speaking—the Holy Family, you know——"

"And the gown is so very suitable," Aunt Cissy's lips were like warm crumpled rose petals on Susan's cold cheek. "It will be such a lovely note of color, looking in from outside, you know. I always think we have a great responsibility——"

"You're a little late——" Aunt Amy broke in, gently reproving. "We planned to serve the sherry at seven thirty, and it is already a few minutes after that. But it doesn't matter a bit."

"It's my fault," Lance said hastily.

"Now don't you think anything about it," said Aunt Cissy. "Lanny, you didn't wear your overshoes!"

"What would I need overshoes for, driving in a closed car?" He smiled tenderly.

"But crossing the sidewalk—you couldn't help but step in the snow. And your throat is so delicate—you've still got a cough from that cold you had——"

"Ah, here is Mary with the sherry! Lanny, draw that little table closer to the tree, dear, and take that chair, where you can watch the candles on that side. Susan, sit here, and keep an eye on the ones nearest the lace curtains. One has to be so careful of fire, you know—— Lanny, perhaps you'd better draw the curtains a little bit *farther* back—it's better to be safe than sorry."

Obediently he rearranged the curtains. Then he brought a cushion for Aunt Cissy's back; a footstool for Aunt Amy. Watching him,

and listening to the antiphonal patter of the two old ladies, Susan's holiday spirits sank under a weary weight of depression. Why, he really likes it, she thought, incredulously. He is like a small spoiled boy, doing what he's told, responding earnestly to their trivialities, and happily at home in this overheated, tradition-cushioned old mausoleum. He loves to be the center of their narrow lives—to be the object of their doting, finicky concern. And the worst of it is that he doesn't realize how petty and stifling it all is. Lying back in a deep easy chair, he wore the beatific expression of one who basks in the warmth of the climate most salubrious to his nature.

And he expects me to move right in and bask with him! He couldn't be more wrong. The very fact that he can look forward complacently to such a future, and that he expects me to be able to do it too, proves how little he knows about me.

The fact is, she told herself in sober honesty, Lance and I don't really know each other. All those years when we were growing up, going to the same school, the same dancing class, the same parties, we were thrown together in an easy companionship, and it was a natural thing to drift pleasantly along toward a nebulous future which, of course, we would share with one another. But now the future is here. I am a woman making my own living in the sort of job that I love, and Lance has been through a war, and presumably has had his character molded into the shape it will hold for the rest of his life. And seeing him here in his own home, I don't really like what I see.

"If you've finished your sherry, dear, we'll go in to dinner," Aunt Cissy said, recalling her from her unhappy musing. "Lanny dear, you'd better put out the candles. You can light them again when we come back. It's too bad there is no one to watch them while we eat—we've always left them burning—but with the servant problem what it is— Be very careful, dear, and don't drop any wax on the carpet, will you?"

Susan had always considered the dining room in the Hardy house one of the loveliest rooms she had ever seen. It was oval in shape and beautifully proportioned, with ivory walls paneled with a tracery of antique gold, and tall windows looking out on the back garden. It had never been more charming than it was tonight. The flickering candle flames picked up the highlights on the heavy,

ornate silver which loaded the buffet and brought out the rich patina of the ancient mahogany. The oval table was covered with a lace cloth and set with Limoges and crystal, and there were masses of bronze chrysanthemums in a flat silver bowl in the center.

But tonight in her new sensitivity of mood, those graciously circling walls seemed to close about them like a prison, and Susan felt penned in, conscious of a nervous tension that was akin to claustrophobia. She was very glad when dinner was over and they returned to the drawing room. As Lance relit the candles she glanced out into the street, where already little knots of people were strolling up and down.

"Do you think the aunts will mind if we slip out for a little while?" she whispered.

He frowned uneasily. "I don't think so, a little later. But we'd better stick around for a while. Give a festive look to the house, you know. That red dress of yours ought to give the peasantry a thrill."

She stared at him. "Peasantry? Was that what you said, Lance?"

He had the grace to color and laugh uncertainly. "Oh well, you know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't."

He gestured vaguely. "Those people—the kind that come up here on the hill Christmas Eve—they're just curiosity seekers, wanting to get a peek at the inside of houses they'd never get a chance to see otherwise. We may as well give them their money's worth."

She did not smile. "I always thought," she said slowly, "that the kind of people who like to come up here on Christmas Eve are the really fine ones. The kind of people who cherish the simple, sentimental things—who love old houses and old ways—the kind who read Dickens' Christmas Carol to their children. I think they come because this is one spot where a little bit of the old spirit of Christmas still survives. And I don't think curiosity has anything to do with it."

"Well, let's not make a thing out of it. It's hardly worth it, is it?" he said lightly.

To her horror she felt the sting of futile tears behind her eyelids and turned away from him hastily. Unthinkingly, to bridge the awkward moment of silence, she fumbled in her evening bag and

found her cigarette case. Then with hasty consideration she turned to the aunts.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

Lance drew a quick audible breath. Aunt Cissy straightened up sharply in her chair, and Aunt Amy said, in a shocked tone, "Smoke? A cigarette, you mean? I didn't realize you used them."

"Why, yes, I do—occasionally." She forced a smile into her voice. "But of course, if you'd rather I didn't—"

"Well, I suppose . . . I don't know that the question has ever arisen before. Sister and I do dislike the smell intensely—it gets into the carpets and curtains, and I'm sure it never comes out entirely. But of course, if you feel you must—"

"Oh, certainly not." She put the case back in her bag and closed it with a snap.

"They say," Aunt Cissy murmured unhappily, "that when one becomes an addict, the craving is quite irresistible."

"I'm certainly not an *addict*—in that sense of the word." Laughter was bubbling up, threatening to overflow, and that, of course, would be quite unforgivable. But it really wasn't funny. Susan's fingers interlaced and twisted as she turned again to the window and forced herself to composure. Lance was beside her, whispering softly in her ear.

"I ought to have warned you. But it really doesn't matter in the least. There's no reason to feel embarrassed—"

She turned her head to look at him, curiously. "Embarrassed? But I don't— Lance—you smoke all the time. Don't you ever do it in your own home?"

"Why, no, I wouldn't think of it. I wouldn't let the aunts know. It's a matter of principle with them. They'd think I was headed for hell by the short route."

"And of course, that's what they think about me."

"Oh, they'll get over it." He chuckled insincerely. "But just watch your step, Susie. There's no use getting them down on you. After all, it's their home—"

Her eyes met his, levelly. "If I should marry you it would be mine. What then?"

He made an irritated gesture. "Why worry till the time comes? It's a very minor thing, anyway. It wouldn't do you any harm to give up smoking, I guess."

For a moment longer her eyes held him. She said quietly, "Yes, you're right, Lance. Smoking is a very minor matter, compared to some others. . . . Oh look! Here come the carolers. I think they're going to stop here."

A little band of young people were coming down the snowy street, following the leader who carried a lighted lantern. They halted in front of the house, responding, no doubt, to the evident interest of the pair in the lighted window, and began to sing "Adeste Fideles." Attracted by the sound of the fresh young voices, groups of sight-seers drifted toward the spot, until a ring of listeners stood on the shadowed sidewalks. The hymn ended and after a moment of indecision and consultation the voices lifted again, singing "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." The aunts were standing in the bay window now, looking out.

"Now doesn't that sound sweet?" Aunt Amy murmured, and went on, in a satisfied tone, "And to think they came right here, the first thing! Usually they go straight down to Louisburg Square."

The singers ended their second carol and set off down the street, trailing most of their audience with them, and the aunts returned to their chairs, one on either side of the hearth. "Well, I really enjoyed that," said Amy with a little sigh. "It makes all the trouble worth-while, to know that people really appreciate it. We feel that we should make a special effort, now that so many of our neighbors feel that it is no longer necessary."

Aunt Cissy nodded, as she plunged her hand into the big knitting bag which hung on the arm of her chair, took out a half-finished wool scarf, and began to knit industriously. "Yes, we made our little contribution. . . . Lanny, what are you going to do to entertain Susan? Don't you think, perhaps, a game of chess——"

So the party's over, thank God, Susan thought. It wasn't a party, actually; it was simply a tableau, a show window with properly dressed manikins in it, set up for the benefit of the Christmas Eve strollers, to carry out a custom of many years. And they don't seem to realize it isn't important any longer; that those people out there in the snowy streets aren't interested in what goes on inside these old houses. Wandering around Beacon Hill is just something to do on Christmas Eve, and the carol singers are probably just a bunch of kids out for a lark. For a moment longer she lingered in the bay window, intent on her own thoughts.

Abruptly her eyes came to focus, as she realized that she was looking straight into the eyes of a young woman who stood on the sidewalk only a few feet away. The light fell full upon her face, and Susan saw the cheap fur coat, the red velvet hat, and the blond hair that whipped untidily about a pertly pretty face with sulky lips and hard, avid eyes, intent now with curiosity as they peered into the lighted room. For a long moment the two girls looked at each other. Then, faintly embarrassed at that bold stare, Susan turned away.

"Lance," she said softly, "there's a girl outside the window staring in—almost as if she was—well, spying on us—"

He shrugged. "Just curious, like all the rest of the snoopers—"

"I don't think so. It looked to me as if she was peeping in for some purpose—as if, perhaps, she knew us—wanted to see who was here, or what we were doing. It really made me uneasy—"

He turned to the bay window and peered out. "I don't see her."

"She was there, just a minute ago."

"Well, there isn't anybody out there now. Think nothing of it—some of them have the most incredible nerve—"

Lance snapped off in midsentence and his whole body seemed to stiffen as he listened to the musical tinkle of bells not far away. Susan started to speak but he made a swift gesture. "Listen! Do you hear—"

"Why, it's the Swiss Bell Ringers! I haven't heard them for years—they always used to—"

"Do you hear what they're playing?" His voice was tense.

It took Susan a moment, listening intently, to make the old-fashioned jangle of the bells resolve into a recognizable tune. She caught her breath in puzzled astonishment.

"It's—Whiffenpoof, Lance! . . . poor little lambs who have gone astray . . . What an odd thing for them to be playing on Christmas Eve! . . . I didn't realize it was so popular—everybody seems to be playing it lately—"

He was swearing under his breath. His face had a queer pallor, and as he put up his hand to rub his cheek nervously she saw that it was shaking.

"What is it, Lance?" she said. "You look as if— Does that song have anything to do with you?"

"With me? Good Lord, what a crazy idea!"

Her eyes held him. "No, it's not crazy. Every time you hear it you're frightened. . . . As if there were something menacing—malignant—about it. Almost as if you thought it was directed at you—that it was a message of some kind—"

He laughed, a little too loudly. "That's ridiculous! The thing gets on my nerves, that's all."

"Why? Because you've heard it two or three times in the past few days? It's such an innocent, silly thing—"

He said huskily, "Well, if you must know, a fellow I knew used to sing it. He got killed. When I hear it, it all comes back—"

"Oh, I'm sorry," she whispered contritely. "I shouldn't have made you talk about it. . . . It's over now. Listen, they're playing 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.'"

He gave her shoulders a comradely squeeze. "Forget it, Sue. I haven't quite got rid of my war nerves yet, but I will—just give me time. . . . How about taking that walk down to the Common?"

C H A P T E R F I V E

The snow was crunchy under their feet as they went down the front steps and walked briskly up the hill.

The bell ringers were at the corner of Walnut Street. They were playing "Silent Night," and the ring of listeners that surrounded them, muffled in heavy coats and scarfs, and shuffling their feet to keep warm, were singing softly the familiar words. Lance drew Susan closer, across the street.

"Let's listen a minute—rather good, isn't it?"

She did not need to answer. She too was singing under her breath, smiling, and in the flickering Christmas lights her eyes had stars in them. She'd forgotten all about Whiffenpoof.

Halting at the outer fringe of the listening group, Lance studied the musicians. They wore woolen caps pulled down over their ears, and scarfs wrapped high about their chins, and they seemed faceless padded figures without identity. There was nothing familiar about any of them.

As the song ended one of them pulled off his cap and went hur-

riedly around through the crowd, collecting nickels and dimes. He was a scrawny middle-aged man with a straggling old-world mustache, and passing the hat was all in the day's work to him. They were here to pick up what they could—for a couple of dollars they would play anything they were asked, of course.

Then he saw the man standing in the recess of a doorway, looking down across the heads of the crowd. He wore no hat, and he had a shock of bushy hair, receding at the temples, and a pair of dark eyes that were looking straight at Lance.

He did not realize that he had made any sound or movement, but Susan glanced up sharply at him. Her eyes followed his.

"That man in the doorway—do you know him?"

"Come on, let's get out of here," he said curtly, and hustled her away into the comparative darkness of Walnut Street.

"Wait a minute, Lance," she panted, clutching at his sleeve. "Don't go so fast. This hill is slippery."

"Sorry—"

"Lance, did you know that man? I thought he looked as though he recognized you."

"Yes, I know him."

"Well"—she laughed uncertainly—"why are we running away from him?"

He made an irritated sound. "I'm not *running away*, as you put it. I just don't like the guy, that's all. I had all I could take of his kind during the war—I don't have to put up with him any longer."

"I should think," she said hesitantly, "that if you'd been through a war together you'd have a lot in common—"

He laughed shortly, grittily. "Don't be sloppy, Sue. There's just one thing Max Tully and I have got in common—we loathe and detest each other."

They came out of the mouth of the dark narrow street into a new strange world, a fairyland where the old Boston and the new were framed together in a scene of incredible beauty. The State House crowned the hill, its chaste magnificent proportions outlined in shimmering light against the winter sky. The Christopher Wren tower at the foot of Park Street was a lovely spire of radiance. They stood at the railing, looking down over the quiet expanse of the Common, drowsing in its ancient peace against the theatrical backdrop of the modern city, piled up behind Tremont and

Boylston streets, the towering façades agleam with endless rows of sparkling windows and garlands of colored lights. Here and there in the dark Common were little pools of illumination marking the floodlighted Christmas tableaux, and off to the left a tree blazed with thousands of tiny lights.

They stood for some moments silent before the scene, and imperceptibly some of the tension drained out of Lance's nerves. The sight of Max Tully, while it confirmed his fears, had at the same time mitigated some of his panic. He knew Max, and he wasn't afraid of him; at any rate, not with the ultimate, heart-stopping terror he had felt when the persecution began. The thing he was afraid of was death. But Max, he thought, wasn't capable of murder. A deliberate, coldly cruel campaign of terrorism—yes, Max could plan that and carry it out with relish. But when it came to the point of actual killing he wouldn't go through with it. He was too shrewdly calculating, too careful of his own hide, to risk the consequences of murder. If it were Jerry now, or Fitz—or even Jack Cramer—

"I'm getting cold," said Susan. "Let's walk."

They came to the broad stone steps leading down into the Common, and strolled along the almost deserted paths, stopping now and then to look at the scenes of the Nativity scattered here and there among the trees. Presently they came to the beautifully designed crèche, with life-sized figures of the Holy Family, the Wise Men with their gifts, and the shepherds surrounded by their flocks, and halted at the edge of the enclosure to look at it.

"It's lovely!" Susan exclaimed. "And such a wonderful idea, to put it here in the center of the city, where everybody can come and—Oh! There she is again!"

He stared at her, frowning. "Who?"

"The girl who was looking in the window." Her voice was low, for his ear alone. "Don't look now, but she's across on the other side, just beyond the shepherd's dog—"

He turned casually, glancing across the enclosure as he did so, and his heart seemed to lose a beat. He turned away again hastily and stared with fierce concentration at the tableau of the Holy Family, while the blood pounded in his ears with violent insistence.

"She keeps on staring at us," Susan murmured. "Why do you suppose—"

"I'll go and find out," he said with abrupt decision. "You stay here."

"Oh, I wouldn't, Lance!" she protested. "Probably she isn't even aware she's looking at us——"

He made a curt gesture and marched away around the semicircular enclosure. The girl must have seen him coming, for she turned and darted in among the evergreen trees. He reached the spot where she had stood, and hesitated.

"Velma," he said softly.

There was no answer, but he thought he heard a faint movement among the trees. He stepped in among them. It was dark among the low-hanging branches and the crisp air was spicy with the fragrance of cedar.

"Velma, where are you? I want to talk to you." He spoke softly still, but with a crisp insistence.

She pushed aside a heavy branch and stood facing him. A little light filtered through a rift in the foliage and showed him her face, cheaply pretty, with sullen lips and scheming eyes. "Hello, Lance. Surprised to see me, are you?"

"I certainly am. How do you happen to be in Boston?"

"Oh, I came to see you." Her shoulders lifted pertly in the fur coat.

The blood was thudding heavily in his veins as some instinctive wariness stirred, but his lips fashioned a cool friendly smile. "I'm flattered. I'd like to show you a good time. If you're going to be around the first of the week we'll have to have lunch together. Wish I could get loose right now, but I'm pretty well booked——"

"Oh, you don't have to apologize. I didn't come here to be entertained. That's the girl you're going to marry, isn't it? Susan Carey?"

He caught his breath. "How did you——"

"Oh, I know all about it. Max tipped me off——"

"Max? You mean Max Tully?"

"Who else?" she said airily. "Max and I have kept in touch ever since you boys left the field—except for the time he was a prisoner. It seemed like a good idea; and it's paid off—at least, it's going to."

He swallowed painfully, and his voice was husky. "What do you want, Velma?"

"Nothing—for me." The airy tone left her voice, and her eyes,

lifted to his, were like a cat's, blazing in the darkness. "But Butch now—well, that's different. You sort of ought to do something for Butch, hadn't you?"

"Butch? Who's Butch?"

"Why, my kid—and yours. Fancy your not knowing who Butch is! Name is Lance, of course, but everybody calls him Butch."

There were pinwheels of light spinning before his eyes, and the ache in his throat almost choked him. He mumbled, "I didn't know anything about it, Velma. I never dreamed—"

"That's no alibi, is it? I thought you'd write and let me know where you were, but you didn't see fit to. Then the time kind of went by, and I decided you couldn't do much till you got back home. But it wasn't till Max wrote me, after he found out you were in Boston—"

He cut her short. "What do you want? What are you after?"

"Now don't take that tone of voice. Anybody'd think I was holding you up. I only want what's right. I've got Butch's future to think of, you know."

He seized her arm and shook it. "Come to the point, Velma. How much?"

Her brows went up and the yellow cat's eyes widened. "You mean—money? Why, Lancey, I wouldn't want to put it on that basis. Of course, it's going to cost money to bring Butch up, the way you'd want him to be; but he needs more than that. He ought to have a father—and the name that belongs to him."

A wave of physical sickness swept over him, and his hand went out and gripped a branch to steady himself. What am I going to do? What am I going to do? The frantic words cried themselves over and over in his brain. The aunts—they won't let her do this to me; they'll find a way—— But it would kill them if they knew. And Susan—— Why didn't I make her marry me months ago, when I first got back? Then Velma couldn't—— But the way things are now——

No, I've got to get myself out of this, somehow. No one else must know. Somewhere deep in his quaking soul a cornered scrap of wily belligerence backed up against a blank wall of desperation and began a puny battle for survival.

He forced a sick smile. "I know just how you feel, Velma. And I'll do the right thing—you can depend on that."

She was clearly taken aback. "Well, I—I might have known you'd feel like that. You're a swell guy, Lance——"

"You want me to marry you—is that it?"

"Sure." The words had an uncertain bravado that encouraged him. "That's only fair, ain't it?"

His lips quirked up boyishly. "Yes, I guess so. It's kind of an awkward situation though, Velma. There's Susan, you know. She'd never understand——"

Her eyes narrowed. "She would if I told her."

His stomach churned. He shook his head. "No need to do that. If we decide to get married I'll handle Susan. But it's only fair to warn you you may be getting into something you won't like——"

"I'll take a chance."

"We'll have to live with my aunts. They're old and pretty set in their ways. No parties, no drinking, no smoking. . . ." A brilliant thought struck him. "And they handle all the money—you'd have to ask them for every cent, and if they didn't approve they wouldn't give it to you——"

"You're kidding!"

"Oh no, I'm not. You'd hate it, Velma."

She eyed him suspiciously. "How's Susan going to like it?"

He smiled easily. "Oh, they're crazy about Susan. They'll let her do anything she likes. And besides, she's got money of her own—plenty of it."

"If you think," she said venomously, "I'm going to swallow that tripe and let you off scot free——"

"Hell, no. I told you I'd treat you right, Velma. But you'd do a lot better if I just gave you a lump sum——"

"How much?" Her yellow eyes blazed. "Where'd you get it?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I guess I could arrange it—my trust fund, you know—have to handle it through the trustees, so my aunts wouldn't know——" he invented vaguely. "Listen, Velma, this is no time to decide anything. Susan's going to wonder what the hell has happened to me, and it would just complicate things if she decided to come and investigate. Let's get together the first of the week and talk it all over."

"Don't think you're going to run out on me——"

"Don't be silly. I couldn't, even if I wanted to. I'll tell you what

you do, Velma. Come up to the house Monday afternoon—at three o'clock. My aunts won't be there—they sew at the hospital every Monday. Don't ring the bell—I'll be watching for you. We can talk the whole thing over quietly and decide what to do."

"Well, I don't know—"

He tipped up her sharp little chin and smiled down into her eyes. Then he bent and kissed her on the lips. "Don't worry, darling. It'll all work out—I promise."

The kiss did it. She smiled up at him. "Okay, Lance. You always were a swell egg. See you Monday."

Then she was gone, slipping away through the trees. He took off a glove and wiped sweat from his forehead and stood for a moment swaying dizzily, his eyes closed. Frantic thoughts chased each other around his spinning mind. All right so far, but where the hell do we go from here? Money—I could manage ten thousand without any awkward questions being asked—but will she be satisfied with that? Perhaps if I promised her so much a year. . . . For the rest of my life? . . . And how do I know she wouldn't up the ante, when she finds out about my real financial condition? She could do it, no doubt, and then she'd insist on marriage. . . . But I won't—I'd kill myself first. . . .

Behind him a branch moved and a fine dust of snow sifted across the back of his neck. For an instant he stood rigid, his eyes still closed, like an animal frozen to immobility by sudden terror. There was somebody standing there, almost at his shoulder, savoring his panic, remorselessly prolonging that moment of unbearable suspense. Then, close to his ear, he heard a soft, almost inaudible breath of sibilance, like the ghost of a whistle, "We are poor little lambs who have . . ."

With a smothered cry he whirled, but it was too late. There was a swift violent movement behind him, and a blinding flash of pain, and he dropped to the ground under the cedars with his head in a soft drift of snow.

CHAPTER SIX

Susan looked worriedly across the Nativity enclosure at the clump of cedars. It seemed like a long time since Lance stepped in among the trees, out of sight. Only a few minutes, probably, but in this icy wind it seemed like hours. What could he possibly say to the girl that would take so long? Unless he knew her—

Susan cupped her gloved hands about her face and tried to warm her cold nose with her breath, and soberly considered. Something very queer was going on, and Lance seemed to be at the center of it. He was being pursued by an innocuous college song with a persistence that could hardly be coincidence, and for some inexplicable reason it seemed to have a terrifying effect on him; an effect which was hardly justified by the explanation that it reminded him of a buddy who was killed in Korea. She simply didn't believe that.

Then there was his odd behavior when he saw the man standing on the doorstep, watching the bell ringers. They had known each other during the war, and there was no doubt that there had been mutual recognition. But neither of them had given any sign, and Lance had hustled her away in precipitate flight. If it were not so completely preposterous, she would have thought he was afraid of the other man.

And now this encounter with the girl who had peeped in the windows and then apparently followed them down here to the Common. Why—unless he knew her—had he so promptly decided to go over and speak to her the moment he saw her face? But if he knew her, why didn't he say so? Could this meeting, in some incredible way, be part of the mystery? For the dozenth time she considered going to try to find Lance and rejected the idea. It was too much like snooping. But she did wish he would come.

She shoved back the cuff of her coat and turned her wristwatch toward the light. It was almost midnight. The Common was practically deserted. Only one man stood not far away, leaning on the fence and apparently engrossed in watching the motionless figures grouped around the manger. Susan took a few steps up and down

the snowy path, stamping her feet in their fur-cuffed overshoes, trying to get them warm.

As she passed him the man glanced at her with a tentative smile. "Cold night, isn't it?"

The words were courteous and entirely impersonal, and she returned his smile. "It certainly is. I'd rather be home by the fire."

"You're waiting for someone?"

The collar of his rough tweed coat was turned up and he was not wearing a hat, but even so he had an unmistakable look of trustworthiness. He was tall and well built, with frank gray eyes in a pleasantly rugged face. His crisp dark hair showed, incongruously, a white streak running diagonally through it. She nodded, and gestured with her head toward the clump of cedars.

"He went over there to speak to someone—it seems like hours ago. But it's probably only a few minutes."

A faint frown wrinkled his forehead. "I've been here at least fifteen minutes myself, and you were alone when I got here. See here, why don't I go find out what's holding him up? He ought not to keep a girl like you waiting out here in the cold."

"Oh, would you?" Her smile twinkled up at him. "I'd go myself, but I wouldn't want him to think I was checking up on him. He went over to speak to a girl."

He grinned back at her. "I can't imagine what she's got, to keep him away from you all this while. Wait here—I'll be back in a minute."

He strode away around the enclosure, his footsteps creaking in the crisp snow, and when he reached the cedars she saw him brush aside the heavy branches and duck his tall head as he stepped out of sight. It was several moments before he reappeared, beckoned to her peremptorily, and disappeared again. Sudden apprehension seized her, and she ran toward the spot, her feet sliding and stumbling in the snow.

He was down on one knee beside the dark figure that lay on the ground. With a cigarette lighter in his hand, he was examining the unconscious man with the inadequate illumination of the tiny dancing flame. Susan dropped down beside him.

"Lance!" She turned frantically to the man beside her. "What happened to him? Is he—is he dead?"

"Oh lord, no." His tone was quiet and reassuring. "He seems to

have got a bump on the head—whatever gave it to him knew just where to put it. Feel it?" He took her gloved hand and guided it to the spot. "Knocked him out for a few minutes, but he'll be all right. His pulse is good."

"But he mustn't lie here in the cold—here, take my fur coat and put it over him——"

He stopped her curtly. "Keep your coat on. He's warm enough in his own. . . . He's coming to, already. There's nothing to worry about."

He rose and brushed the fine snow from his trousers. "I'd better go find a taxi; I'll bring it around to the steps—up there on Beacon Street. Get him on his feet as soon as you can and bring him up there. He'll be groggy, but he'll be able to make it in a few minutes." He thrust the lighter into her hand. "You'd better keep this."

"But—he may be seriously hurt!" she protested. Surely this pleasant stranger wasn't going to walk away like that——

"He isn't," he said shortly, and departed.

C H A P T E R S E V E N

Lance pushed aside her hands and struggled to a sitting position. He stared wildly around the shadowy nook among the cedars. "Let me go!" he muttered. "Don't hit me—don't——"

"You're all right, Lance," she said; and repeated it more emphatically, holding up the tiny light so he could see her face. "You're perfectly all right. See—I'm here—Susan——"

"They're going to kill me!" he gasped, and suddenly was clinging to her with frenzied hands, hiding his face against her fur coat. His words were muffled, desperate. "Don't let them kill me, Susan!"

His almost irrational fear communicated itself to her, but she put it away resolutely. "Nobody's going to kill you, Lance. You just got a little bump on the head. Come, you mustn't lie here in the cold. Can you get up by yourself?"

"I can't! I can't! They'll be waiting——"

"Snap out of it, Lance!" she commanded, realizing he was on the

verge of hysteria. "Give me your hand and I'll help you get up. . . . That's fine! Now come along—we'll get a taxi at the top of the steps."

He was like a child, following obediently where she led, his feet stumbling a little as they went up the broad flight of stairs. The taxi was waiting, and the driver had the door open when they reached it, and he took Lance's elbow to help him in. He was roughly sympathetic.

"So you had a little spill, did you, sir? These pavements is pretty treacherous, get snow and ice on them."

"I didn't—" said Lance, but the door slammed before he could get the words out.

Susan tapped on the glass to give the driver the address, but he waved a hand reassuringly and set off without hesitation along Beacon Street. Evidently he knew exactly where he was going.

Lance slumped in the corner of the seat, but he still clung to her like a terrified child. Her hand was limp and nerveless in his, and she seemed unable to summon any sympathetic response. Her heart felt constricted, as if a chilly hand had closed about it.

It's inhuman to feel like this, she thought, appraising her own sensations quite impersonally. I suppose I ought to be clucking over him like a mother hen, but I can't. This—this quaking jellyfish—is Lance, the man I thought I was going to marry. I suppose I've known, in a vague way, for weeks—for months, even; ever since he got back. But I refused to face the truth. Now I know. When the taxi door shut just now it was like slamming a door on about ten years' worth of romantic girlish plans and dreams. Here's where you start all over, Susan, my girl.

"Susan—" he mumbled, turning toward her. "You don't understand. . . . I'd better tell you all about it. . . . When you hear my side—"

"Not now, Lance," she said firmly. "You're not in any condition to talk right now. And we'll be at the house in a minute."

"But some other time may be too late. I tell you they're going to kill me!"

"Who? Why?" She could feel only exasperation and weary contempt for his weakness.

"Some boys that—a gang that—" His hand fumbled at his lips. "Oh, you wouldn't understand anyway!"

"When you're feeling better you can tell me about it. Maybe I will understand. What you need right now is a good night's sleep. . . . Here we are. Can you manage all right by yourself?"

"Sure—sure—I'll be all right," he muttered as the taxi stopped before the door. "Don't want to wake the aunts. . . . Just a minute till I find my key. . . ."

The driver gave him an arm up the steps and waited until he had gone inside and closed the door. "He'll be all right," he said kindly when he returned. "Just a bit groggy still. Where to now, miss?"

She gave him her address and sagged back wearily in the seat and closed her eyes. For an instant too long the door did not close, and she opened her eyes as a tall masculine figure climbed in and sat down beside her.

"Forgive me, Miss Carey," he said with a faint smile. "I just want to apologize for walking out on you. It seemed the thing to do, at the moment."

She drew a deep breath and let it out again. "Well, Mr. Whoever-you-are, you seem to know all about us!"

"My name is Fiske—Grayson Fiske. Here's my card." He must have had it ready, in his overcoat pocket. It was too dark to read it, and Susan thrust it into her bag.

"Well, Mr. Fiske, am I to assume there's more to this than meets the eye?"

"Possibly—in a way—"

She faced him with eyes that searched his features in the dim light. "So it wasn't entirely coincidence that you happened to be right there at the crucial moment. . . . You recognized Lance. You knew where he lived. . . . Does he know you?"

"We've met."

"You didn't want him to see you; that was it, wasn't it? Why not?"

His lips curled slightly. "We're not exactly—friends. It seemed better to avoid—unpleasantness. Let's let it go at that, shall we?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Something very odd is going on, and I want to know what it is. . . . Do you know who struck Lance and knocked him out?"

"I don't know—no."

"But you might make a good guess? Please be honest with me. Did you know it was going to happen? Is that why you were so

interested in watching a lot of silly plaster sheep? Waiting for it to happen?"

"No. Believe me, Miss Carey." His voice was warmer, and abruptly not so evasive. "To be perfectly frank, I happened to see you two, walking up Beacon Street. When I saw you alone, a little later, I decided to hang around, just in case"—he made a vague gesture—"well, call it a hunch of some kind—"

"Lance thinks somebody is trying to kill him," she broke in. "Do you know who it is? Do you know why? Was that your hunch—that you thought it was going to happen?"

He shook his head, soberly. "Lance has made enemies—I suppose most of us have, at some time. Mine haven't killed me yet, and I don't suppose his will. His imagination must be working overtime."

"Do you know a man named Max Tully? Or somebody who drives an orange-colored car? Or a brassy-looking blond girl in a rather ratty fur coat and a red hat—"

"Hold on, now. Just wait a minute! Max Tully—yes, I know who he is, but he doesn't plan to murder Lance, if that's what is in your mind. The orange car—and the blonde—no, I don't know anything about them."

"Well, can you tell me this—where does the Whiffenpoof Song come into all this?"

A strange expression flashed across his face. "Whiffenpoof?"

"Yes—the Yale song—you must know it. There's a perfect epidemic of it going around, and Lance gets in a panic every time he hears it. Will you tell me why?"

He shook his head, and his lips twitched in a teasing smile. "I'm afraid I can't answer that. One thought does occur to me—Lance is a Harvard man, isn't he?"

She flung out her hands in a gesture of exasperation. "I don't know why I thought you might help me! Why should you—a perfect stranger—"

His gloved hand came down on hers, and his touch was firm and strong, quieting her overwrought nerves. "Don't expect the impossible. There are some things I can't do—such as answering questions when I don't know the answers. But if you ever need help—real help—I'm your boy. My phone number is on that card I gave you. Don't hesitate to use it, if ever you need me."

They had not realized, either of them, that the taxi had stopped

before the apartment house where she lived. The driver opened the door.

"This the place you get out, miss?" he inquired. Then he looked at them more narrowly. "Or shall I drive around the block, maybe?"

"No, I'm getting out," she smiled. On the sidewalk Grayson Fiske took her hand and looked down soberly into her eyes.

"I meant what I said. Don't forget."

"I won't. And thank you again, Mr. Fiske."

"My friends call me Gray."

For an instant laughter sparked between them. "And mine," she said, "call me Susan."

And suddenly a clock struck twelve, and there was a sound of distant bells chiming.

"Merry Christmas, Susan," he said. "And a happy New Year. I hope it will be that for you. Good night."

C H A P T E R E I G H T

As Lance had anticipated the house was silent and apparently empty when he opened the door with his latchkey. The aunts never permitted anything to interfere with their sewing day at the hospital, and Mary always took her afternoons out on Monday. It left the house deserted, but as the aunts said, "With the servant problem what it is, one can't have things as one would wish. We prefer to have Mary here when we need her, and allow the bells to be unanswered on Monday afternoon, if they should ring. No one makes afternoon calls nowadays, and with a little forethought one can arrange to have deliveries made at another time."

"Anybody home?" Lance called at the foot of the stairs, just to make certain. There was no answer, and he hung his coat and hat in the cloakroom under the stairs and glanced at the grandfather clock. It was twenty minutes of three, and before Velma arrived he must decide what to do about her.

As if he didn't have enough on his mind, without having her pop up out of the past, with this ridiculous story about a child! He didn't

believe a word of it; but how was one to go about disproving a yarn like that? It was possible, of course; that was the hell of it. . . . Little Butch needed a daddy, did he? And little Butch's mummy needed money—a lot of money. Was it to be one or the other, or would Velma refuse to be satisfied with anything less than both? If he gave her money—enough money—

Lance groaned and ran his fingers through his hair. How the devil could he get his hands on enough ready cash to satisfy Velma's demands? His capital was tied up in the business, and Channing Wills, the company treasurer, was an old crony of the aunts. At the first hint that Lance wanted to withdraw any sizable amount old Wills would gallop over here and pour the story into their horrified ears, and then the fat would be in the fire!

Scowling, he paced up and down the hall. After all, it was his own money—he had the right to use it as he saw fit. He rubbed his cheeks nervously, trying to assert, in his own mind, a spirit of independence.

Abruptly he halted, as for the first time he noticed a package on the table beside the front door. It bore his own name and had evidently come in the morning mail. He picked it up and tore off the wrapping absently. His mind still absorbed in the problem of Velma and her demands, he strolled into the drawing room and tossed the torn wrapping paper on the cannel-coal fire which smoldered in the fireplace. The paper caught and flared up briefly.

He frowned, a bit puzzled, as he looked down at the box of candy, elaborately packaged and decorated with poinsettias and red ribbon, wondering who in the world could have sent it to him. Then he noticed the card which had slipped to the floor and picked it up and stood staring at the conventional printed greeting.

"Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year."

Below, another line was scrawled. "And good luck, as always."

He lifted the cover and slowly the color drained out of his face as he looked at the neat rows of tiny bottle-shaped liqueur chocolates, each wrapped in colored foil, red, green, gold, silver, blue. He knew the brand—they had always been favorites with him—but now he looked at the inviting array as at some paralyzing, inescapable horror.

"Oh, my lord!" he whispered.

A cautious scratching sound at the front door roused him from

that icy grip of panic. He crammed the cover on the box and dropped it on the table and strode out into the entrance hall. He could see Velma's red velvet hat through the glass in the upper part of the door. He turned the handle and opened it.

"Well, it took you long enough! I thought you were going to be watching for me," she said, and lifted her painted lips expectantly.

So that's the way she wants to play it, he thought. All right—it's a game two can play. He put his arms around her and bent to her. Her lips felt wet and insistent, and he repressed a shudder of distaste as they clung to his. His arms tightened about her, and he felt her body respond, deliberately sensuous.

"Well, my!" she gasped, when he released her. "You haven't forgotten how to kiss, have you, big boy?"

"Depends on who I'm kissing," he drawled. "No doubt about it, Velma, you've got something they leave out of the gals they put together on Beacon Hill."

Her eyes had the drowsy look of a complacent cat. "I'll bet Susan gets the censored version."

"You are speaking of the woman I am going to marry," he said with exaggerated dignity.

She giggled. "Oh yeah? Then what do you propose to do about me?"

"Kiss you again," he said, and did so.

Presently she pushed him away. "Now you quit it, Lancey," she said caressingly, and brushed her tousled hair. "This is all very, very nice, but we got a little business to transact, you and me. Remember?"

"That's right," he said easily. "We've got Butch's future to take care of. Well, that's fair enough. How much?"

"Hunh?"

"I said *how much?* You've got it figured out, I suppose. How much is it going to cost to set Butch up right? Go easy on me—I'm just a poor boy trying to get a start, you know."

"Yeah, so I've heard. . . ." Looking up at him, her yellow eyes were no longer drowsy and sated; they had an avid rapacious glitter. "Shucks, Lance, I ain't trying to hold you up. I wouldn't know, right now, what might turn up later on. Neither would you. A lot of things might happen; and I'd hate to keep coming back to you for more, every time we got into an emergency. So I was thinking

—if we was married, and just kind of took things in our stride, like other folks do——”

The pupils of her eyes were tiny points of black, with yellow rays spraying out like glittering pinwheels of menace, and they watched him with sly wary calculation, waiting for his reaction. And suddenly he felt loathing for her that was like actual nausea. He hoped it didn't show in his face.

He said, frowning a little, “I don't know, Velma—I've got Susan to think of——”

She sniffed contemptuously. “Oh, her! Tell her you changed your mind.”

“I don't quite see how I could——”

She giggled maliciously. “That's easy. I can handle it for you, if you don't want to do it yourself. When she hears about Butch she won't be so crazy about going on with it.”

Hatred of her, and disgust, welled up in his throat. He said huskily, “Full of cute ideas, aren't you?”

“Sure I am—and that's not all.” She was close to him again, her fingers playing with his hair. “Relax, sweetie. Take it easy. It won't be so bad—just take my word for it. You and I were a pretty good team, back in the old days—remember?”

“Oh, sure.” His lips curled. “We don't want to make a mistake though, that's all. I'm thinking of you, Velma honey, as well as myself. Don't forget what I told you about living here in Boston—with my aunts. I'm afraid you'll hate it. . . .”

She shrugged. “I'm willing to take a chance. Once we're married, I'll guarantee to take care of the aunts. Nobody's going to dole out pennies to me. You just make the money, Lancey, and I'll find a way to spend it.”

“I guess you will, at that,” he chuckled, and drew a long deep breath. “Okay, kid, you win.”

Her eyes flew wide, scarcely believing. “You—you'll do it? You're not kidding?”

“Sure I'll do it. Why not? I was kind of losing my enthusiasm about Susan anyway—she's a—a pretty cold-blooded type—blue-blooded, you know. Not much fun.” He laughed a little wildly.

Her eyes were sharp, watching him. “You trying to put something over on me, Lance? You'd better not.”

He touched her cheek. "Of course not, baby. Just give me a couple of days to straighten things out. . . . Where are you staying?"

"Over on Pinckney Street—a rooming house." She gave him the number. "I wanted to be close by . . . and the hotels in this burg run high. I had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to get here at all. That's all due for a change, ain't it?"

"You bet. As soon as I get things fixed I'll move you over to the Sheraton Plaza—or the Ritz—anywhere you want. Like that, won't you?"

"You said it! Boy, am I going to start living! . . . When am I going to see you?"

"Wednesday or Thursday. I'll phone you. What's the number?"

"I don't know—name of Williams—you can look it up. And listen, Lancey, don't pull any fast ones on me. I know how to fight back."

He grinned. "You're telling me! Don't worry, honey, I'm beginning to feel pretty good about this myself. You and I had some swell times—and we'll have some more. Oh, by the way, is Max in town?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea."

"You haven't seen him?"

"Mercy, no! He wrote me where to find you—and that's all I want out of Maxie." She struck an exaggerated pose and raised her eyebrows. "Maxie, my deah, is definitely uncouth—oh, veddy, veddy! He will not be welcome at my soirees."

He forced a laugh. "I'm with you there, baby. Maxie was one of the fortunes of war—but the war's over now. You'd better be on your way, honey. My aunts are due to get back almost any minute now, and we'll avoid a lot of fuss if they don't see you until after we're married. . . . Oh, wait a minute! I've got something for you."

He crossed the room deliberately and picked up the box of candy from the table. At exactly what point in the conversation it had occurred to him to give it to her, he could not have told. He put it into her hands. "Take this along with you—sort of a delayed Christmas present."

"Oooh, candy!" She lifted the cover. "Or is it? I never saw any like this——"

"Liqueur chocolates. I think you'll like them."

"Like brandy and stuff—inside them? I've heard about them, but I never had any. Gee, I'll say I'll like them!"

She started to take out one of the tiny foil-wrapped bottles, but he stopped her. "Hey, wait a minute! Don't eat them now—you never take liqueurs until after dinner! Lord, Velma, you've got a lot to learn!"

"I don't see why not," she pouted. "They're candy, aren't they?"

"Certainly not—at least, you don't eat them as candy," he improvised swiftly. "They're after-dinner sweets, and they must never be eaten at any other time. It simply isn't done, Velma."

"Gosh, I'd rather have a regular box of candy! What do you expect me to do—take the box under my arm when I go out to eat?"

"Oh lord, no! They'd certainly put you down as a hick from the sticks. You leave the box in your room and eat a couple when you get back from dinner." He put an arm caressingly about her, leading her to the door. "You'll have to learn a lot of things, if you're going to be the Queen of Beacon Hill, so you'd better start right now, darling. Just let me steer you, and in a little while you'll do the right thing without even thinking about it. Is it a deal?"

She turned to him swiftly. "Gosh, Lance, you're a prince! I—I do want to be a lady—a real honest-to-god lady. I'll do anything you say. And don't you worry—I'll make you proud of me, no kidding!"

She kissed him swiftly on the lips and went down the front steps, with the box cradled in her arm. Lance closed the door and stood for a moment leaning against it, his forehead resting on the cold glass.

"Oh God!" he breathed.

The telephone rang, and he straightened up, his heart thudding as if in response to some menacing signal. It shrilled again, and he crossed the hall and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hello—"

No one spoke, but he could hear the faint indefinable vibrancy which told him the line was alive.

"Hello! Hello! Who is it? What do you want?" he demanded edgily.

Then faintly he heard the song, somewhere in the distance, ". . . poor little lambs . . ."

"Hello! Hello!" he shouted. "Why the hell don't you say something—"

"That you, Lance?" said a cool impersonal voice in his ear. "I was just wondering if you'd made your will. It might be a good idea, don't you think?"

"Say, who is this?" he yelled. "Damn it, why don't you come out in the open and fight like a man?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I got to have a man to fight with. I'm funny that way."

The connection was broken. Lance fumbled the instrument into its cradle with a shaking hand. Then he ran up the stairs to his own room, found the bottle of scotch hidden on the closet shelf, and lifted it to his lips.

C H A P T E R N I N E

It had been very quiet in the bookshop all day—the inevitable lull of the post-Christmas season. Occasionally a regular patron of the lending library drifted in to change books and stand at the desk for a few moments in desultory conversation. Shortly after midday Mr. Turner appeared, sat down at the table in the corner of the shop as had become his custom, with his history books piled in front of him, and began to read, making notes from time to time on a pad of yellow paper.

Susan tidied the shop and dusted the books, and busied herself for a time with her records, which proved a rather futile occupation, as she was by nature a methodical person and always kept her card files and ledgers up to date. By the middle of the afternoon she found herself wishing that Mr. Turner would take time out for a little chat, but he seemed so engrossed in his studies that she had not the heart to interrupt him. It had felt like snow all day, and now, she noticed, a few tiny white flakes were chasing each other across the sidewalk.

She felt restless and unhappy. She tried to tell herself that it was only the usual feeling of depression which followed the busy holi-

day season, but the actual cause, she knew, lay deeper than that, and must sooner or later be faced with honesty and courage. During the gay weekend with her cousins in the country, she had put it out of her mind deliberately, but now she could postpone no longer the problem of Lance, and the future.

Actually, there was no decision to be made. It had been forming nebulously in her mind for weeks, like the snow out there, she thought, watching the white flakes drifting lazily down. Just a chill in the air at first. Then, out of nowhere, the coldness taking visible form, but so fleeting, so evanescent, that the white powdery substance melted at a touch. And suddenly, one hardly knew when, it was an icy blanket of reality that changed the face of the world.

That was what had happened on Christmas Eve. Sitting beside Lance in the taxicab, she had suddenly known that the intuitive doubts and questions had become cold solid reality, and that she was not going to marry Lance.

That knowledge was quite definite. But it involved a course of action on her part that was not so clear-cut. How did one end an understanding of ten years' duration without bitterness? How could you explain such an action to two old ladies who had looked on you all these years as practically a member of the family without letting them know that between them they had robbed their beloved nephew of his manhood? How tell Lance she could not marry him without letting him know that through a series of almost trifling happenings, her confidence in him—even her respect for him—had gone?

She had noticed the change in him almost as soon as he returned from Korea. Not so much a change as a crystallizing of the weaker traits of his character. Before he went away he had been a charming boy, indecisive and vacillating and a bit spoiled, but so gay and lovable that one overlooked his less likable qualities. He had come back a stubborn, moody man, with an unreasonable resentment against the forces which had disrupted his pleasant life. Susan had tried to tell herself that it was only a natural reaction against the experiences he had undergone, and that he would adjust in time to civilian life. It was not until the last few days that she had seen the craveness that was close to hysteria and realized with a shock that Lance Hardy was a moral and physical coward.

What was he afraid of? The Whiffenpoof Song—a hatless man

looking at him across the heads of the street crowd—a girl in a cheap fur coat. . . . The actual menace of the shot from the speeding salmon-colored car. . . . The inexplicable attack on the Common on Christmas Eve. . . . And yet she could not believe either of these attacks was intended to kill. It would have been only too easy for them to have succeeded.

There was only one conclusion to be reached from the evidence—Lance had enemies who were subjecting him to a campaign of petty terrorism, and they had already succeeded in reducing him to a condition close to abject panic. To what end? Panic only? Or, when the cruel fun had lost its thrill would there be only one satisfaction left—death? Hardly realizing what she was doing, Susan struck a match, and as she held it to her cigarette she saw that her hand was shaking.

"Is there something wrong, Miss Carey?" Mr. Turner was looking up at her over his glasses with concern.

She shook her head and managed a faint smile. "Oh no—I was just thinking—"

"Dear me! A beautiful young woman like you should not have such thoughts. You must forgive me, but I've been watching you, my dear, and I'm sure there is something troubling you—"

"No, really, Mr. Turner. . . . It's just that—" she broke off with an audible gasp, staring out at the swirling snow through which she could dimly discern the shape of a salmon-colored car, parked at the curb across the street. She gulped down a painful lump in her throat and pushed back her chair.

"I—I'm going out a minute—"

"In this storm? I'm afraid you'll catch cold, my dear—"

"I shan't be but a minute." She flung on her coat and thrust her feet into galoshes and dashed out, bareheaded. Mr. Turner rose and stood at the window, watching as she crossed the street to the salmon-colored car and stepped around behind it to read the number plate. As she did so, the car door opened and a young man leaped out and ran across the street toward the shop, the carpet of snow muffling the sound of his steps.

On an impulse he himself hardly understood the elderly man stepped behind the screen that shielded the door of the inner room, so that the shop was apparently deserted when the young man entered. In two strides he stepped to the desk and dropped a piece

of paper on it. Then he was gone again, slipping away along the sidewalk, his figure swiftly lost in the smother of white flakes. When he had gone Mr. Turner walked across to the desk and stood for an instant looking down at the bit of paper with a puzzled scowl on his lined face. The black scrawled words stared up at him.

"Ask Lance what the Whiffenpoof Song means."

"Dear me," mused Mr. Turner. "What an odd performance that was. Now who, I wonder, is that young man—and why is Miss Susan so interested in his car? . . ."

Susan looked at the number plate and made a mental note of it. Then she stepped up on the sidewalk and looked in. There was no one in the car, but the front door on the other side was hanging open, as if the driver had just stepped out. On the back seat was a square black box which might have been a record player. For several moments she stood there waiting, hoping the driver would return, while the wind whistled and the white flakes settled like a sparkling veil over her dark hair. At last she gave it up and went back to the shop. Tossing her head to shake off the snow, she bent over the desk to write on the date pad.

"I just want to make a note of this number before I forget it," she murmured. Then she saw the scrawled message lying on the desk, and her body stiffened. "Where did this note come from?"

"A young man just came in with it," said Mr. Turner.

"What did he look like? What did he say?"

He shook his head ruefully. "I'm sorry—I didn't really get a good look at him. Actually, I don't believe he knew I was here—I had just stepped behind the screen to wash my hands."

Thoughtfully, frowning a little, she folded the bit of paper into a tiny square and put it in her pocket. Then she shook her coat, hung it on a hanger, and sat down at the desk. Looking out of the window, she saw that the salmon-colored car had gone. Presently she drew the telephone closer and dialed a number.

"Is Mr. Hardy there?" she asked. . . . "Oh, he's gone for the day? . . . No—no message, thank you." She replaced the receiver in its cradle, thoughtfully. Then, after a moment's consideration, she lifted it again and called another number. It was answered almost immediately.

"Oh, Lance, I'm so glad you're there! I didn't really expect you

would be, at this time of day. I was afraid one of the aunts would answer. You're alone?"

"Yes, I'm alone. What's the matter, Susan?" His voice sounded tense, edgy.

"Lance—I want to know what the Whiffenpoof Song means."

For a long moment there was silence. Then he said angrily, "I don't know what the hell you're driving at, Susan—"

"What does it mean, Lance?"

"Not a damn thing, so far as I know—"

"What does it mean to you?" she insisted, steadily. "And to the man who drives that salmon-colored car?"

His voice suddenly sounded shrill. "I don't know, I tell you! Say, what do you know about it anyway? Who's been talking to you—"

"What are you afraid of, Lance?"

"Afraid? Me? Say, somebody's been filling you up with a pack of lies. . . . Was it Max?" he demanded suspiciously.

"No, nobody has told me anything—except you yourself. . . . Never mind, Lance. I guess I'd rather not know anything about it."

"Wait a minute! Susan, I—I need you—don't let me down! I'm going through hell—"

There was abject pleading in his voice, but she could not summon any warmth in response. "I'm sorry, Lance—"

"Wait! Listen! You don't understand. . . . They're going to kill me, Susan—"

Her hand seemed to freeze on the instrument, and for a moment she could not force her voice to answer.

"Do you hear, Susan?" he repeated shrilly. "It wasn't my fault—I swear it wasn't! They're crazy, I tell you! I don't want to die—I don't want to die—but they're going to kill me—"

She closed her eyes, listening to that quavering, frightened voice; trying to force her mind to accept the deadly meaning of his words, and at the same time achingly conscious of the deeper, more shocking hint of something that lay behind them. "I'm sorry, Lance. I wish there were something I could do," she repeated through stiff lips, and hung up the receiver.

She must have been staring blindly into space for some time. Mr. Turner, she realized suddenly, was looking at her with kindly worried eyes, and she managed a wan smile.

"What does a girl do when one of her friends gets himself into a—a dreadful mess? Try to play Little Miss Fix-it—or follow her better judgment and leave it strictly alone?"

"It's been my experience that every man has to solve his own problems. I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. Lance Hardy is in trouble?"

She nodded. "He thinks somebody is trying to kill him."

"Dear me! I should think, in that case, it was a matter for the police."

Her lips twisted. "I should think that would have occurred to him. I can't help but feel that he is taking it too seriously. There have been several little episodes lately—"

"Episodes?"

"Silly things, like singing the Whiffenpoof Song—"

"A Yale song, is it not? I believe I have heard it—"

She nodded. "For some reason, it seems to upset him when he hears it. And there have been a couple of more serious things. A shot—that might not have been aimed at him at all. And the other night down on the Common—Christmas Eve—somebody hit him and knocked him out. He was all right again in just a few minutes. If they had wanted to kill him they could have done so, quite as easily."

"Hm—yes. So it would seem. I doubt if the police would take the matter too seriously. It sounds to me like someone with a grudge—but hardly a murderer. . . . May I ask you a personal question, Susan? It's none of my business, of course, but I'm an old man, and a nosy one. I've been wondering—is he the man you are going to marry?"

"It's funny you should ask that, right now," she said with a faint smile. "We've always—it's been understood, ever since we were children. But just lately—well, I've changed my mind. No, I'm not going to marry him."

"I'm glad," he said simply. "I've been a college professor most of my life, and I've known a great many young men. I rather pride myself on being a good judge of character. I do not think you would be happy as Lance Hardy's wife. It relieves my mind to know that you have already reached the same conclusion."

He glanced at his watch. "Dear me, I had no idea it was so late.

I have an appointment at half past four—one of my very rare social engagements. I should hate to miss it."

He returned the books he had been using to their proper place on the shelves and put on his coat and overshoes. On the way out he paused beside Susan's desk to consult the telephone directory.

"Just as I thought," he murmured. "Marlboro Street, not far above Arlington but nevertheless quite a little walk. It is fortunate, is it not, that I enjoy tramping through the snow?"

With a gentle good night he went out into the storm.

C H A P T E R T E N

The front door of Mrs. Williams' boarding house was always left unlocked for the convenience of the residents, who took the responsibility for the security of their own apartments. Velma, returning from her solitary dinner in an inexpensive little restaurant just around the corner, stepped into the shadowy hall where one discouraged light blub shone dustily, and started up the stairs. Behind her in the shadows someone moved, and she let out a stifled squeal as she jerked around.

"Hi, Velma."

She gave a giggle of relief. "Good gosh, Max, what'd you jump out at me like that for? You scared the living daylights out of me. Come on up."

She unlocked the door at the head of the stairs and they went in. She had left a light burning, and its dim glow revealed bed-sitting-room, furnished cheaply and with complete disregard of aesthetic values. A maroon studio couch, a highly varnished oak bureau with a streaky mirror, an ancient morris chair, and two wicker arm-chairs painted blue, with faded chintz seat cushions, were the principal articles of furniture. In one corner of the room yawned the empty shelves of a mission oak bookcase, and the standing lamp flaunted an imitation parchment shade with a cubist design in primary colors. Limp rose-colored curtains hung at the windows and the floor was covered with an almost new carpet, the predominant

colors of which were salmon, tan, and a sickly pea green. "Make yourself comfortable," said Velma, hospitably indicating one of the armchairs, as she took off her hat and coat and put them in the closet.

"Thought I'd just drop in and see how you made out with Lance." Max lit a cigarette and shook out the match.

"Fine. Better than I thought I would. Here, use this for an ash tray." She handed him the cover of a tin soapbox. "I've got to admit, Max, I had him all wrong."

"Yeah?" He sounded interested.

She nodded. "I went over there expecting to have to put on the screws—and believe me, I was all ready for it. But he kind of took the wind out of my sails. I got to admit he's a square shooter. I put out a kind of a feeler about us getting married, just to see what he'd say. I thought he'd blow his top, of course, and then we'd get down to cases and talk turkey. Well, will you believe it, he hardly turned a hair. He gave me a little cheap talk, and then he said okay, so we'd get married."

"Married! The hell he did."

She nodded complacently and touched her brassy curls. "Matter of fact, Max, he really likes me. We always did get along pretty good, him and me. It's been a long time, but I guess I've still got what it takes. I gave him a little reminder, and he came right back for more."

"Look here, Velma, I won't stand for it!"

"*You won't!*" She laughed. "What do you think you can do about it?"

He scowled angrily. "I got some rights. How about Miss Carey? Ain't he going to marry her?"

"Not now, he isn't."

"That's what you think! Be your age, Velma. He's just stringing you along. A fellow like Lance ain't going to marry a girl like you."

"What's the matter with me? Don't you make any nasty insinuations, Max Tully——"

"Oh, keep your shirt on, sweetheart. I just meant that you'd be kind of out of your depth in the social circles he moves in, if you know what I mean."

"I can learn," she said stiffly. You'd be surprised."

"I bet you could, at that," he conceded sourly. "But look here, Velma, you're not really going through with it, are you?"

"You bet I am. Why not?"

"You're not in love with the guy."

"What's love got to do with it?"

"There are ways to get what you want without tying yourself up—"

"There ain't any substitute for a wedding ring, when it comes to cashing in on a rich man's dough, and you ought to know it. We can use the money, can't we?"

His hand gripped her wrist. "You can't do it, kid! You know how I feel about you—and you promised—"

"I'll keep my promise, Max honey. This won't take me long—just give me a few months and I'll get a divorce—you can depend on that." She drew his head down to hers and kissed him on the lips. "You know what that means, don't you? Now don't be such a sourpuss. Have a piece of candy." She reached for the box on the table and lifted the lid.

"Pretty ritzy, aren't you?" he said sulkily as he selected a piece wrapped in blue foil.

"They're after-dinner sweets. Look out when you bite into it—the juice'll squirt all over you. They got brandy and stuff in 'em."

He put the bit of chocolate into his mouth and masticated grumpily. "Where'd you get them?"

"Lance," she said airily. "Christmas present. . . . Go easy, you can't eat these like regular candy. One more's all you get."

"I could go for these in a big way. Guess I'll take a green one this time—no, one of these red ones."

"Me, I'm sticking to the purple ones until they're all gone. They're out of this world. And don't you try to horn in on them, either." She closed the box and put it back on the table.

"Listen, Velma," he said. "I'm not talking about you and me now, but if I were you I'd think twice before I married the guy."

Her eyes narrowed, hostilely. "Tell me one good reason."

"I hate to see you do it without knowing what you're getting into. He's got enemies—"

"Who hasn't?"

"I'm not kidding. This is serious. He's liable to get himself bumped off any time."

"Who by—you?"

"Oh hell, no. I got my own future to think of." He ran his fin-

gers through his dark bushy hair. "But take my word for it—his number's up. I can't tell you any more than that."

"So what?"

"Well, you get married, and the chances are you're going to find yourself in the middle of a murder case."

She shrugged. "I ain't going to kill him. That is, provided somebody else does it first. Sounds like a swell deal." She gave him a faint grin. "Being the widow of a rich man would suit me fine. You too, wouldn't it? What are you grousing about?"

"You're a cold-blooded little witch, aren't you? Well, you're going to make up your own mind, I guess, no matter what I say."

"You took the words right out of my mouth. . . . What's the score, Max? What'd he do?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't know."

"Of course you know! Look here, I won't talk—I'm a tomb."

He eyed her, scowling. "Well, if it ever got around that I'd told you—— He pulled a fast one, a few years ago in Korea. . . . Saved his own hide and let the guys he was with get captured. They didn't like it—not after sweating out the war in a prison camp, they didn't."

"Cut out that line about the other guys—you were one of them, weren't you? What'd you wait all this time for?"

"I tell you it was the other fellows. I've got nothing to do with it. They only got back a few months ago. And then it took a little while to find him."

Her lips pursed. "So he's a rat as well as a stinker. Oh well, he's still rich. . . . Listen, Max, take the other guys a message from me, will you?"

"No soap, kid. I don't even know where they are."

"Says you. Well, if you should happen to find out, ask them to do me a favor, and hold up the execution for a few days—long enough for me to get married. I'll make it worth their while, as soon as I get my hands on some real money."

"It's an idea," he said thoughtfully. "I might be able to fix it myself, if I thought you might change your mind."

"Not a chance."

He shrugged. "Just the same, I'll see what I can do. . . . Well, I'd better be moving. So long, kid. I'll be seeing you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"*Why, Lanny, you didn't eat your omelet!*" said Aunt Amy. "Was it overcooked?"

"No, it was fine. I didn't want it."

"Let me make you a fresh slice of toast——"

"No, thank you. Nothing more."

"But, Lanny, you need a good strengthening breakfast—you work so hard——"

"I tell you I don't want anything! Can't you understand? I'm not hungry!" he snapped with unusual irritation, and thrust back his chair.

As he strode out of the dining room the two old ladies looked at each other in consternation.

"Dear me! What can be the matter?" Aunt Cissy murmured.

"His nerves are all on edge. He would never speak to us like that unless he was half sick. He must be under a strain—something to do with the business, I suppose."

"He hasn't been himself for some time. Not a bit like our dear sweet-tempered boy."

"It was the war. There is something radically wrong with a form of government that can force a sensitive, delicately nurtured boy like Lance into the hardships and brutalities of war. Of course, it was the Democrats—I suppose it was what one must expect when such power rests in the hands of——"

"Now, Amy, you must try not get all worked up over it again. There was nothing we could do—our consciences are clear. We certainly did our best to prevent it."

"Well, it was a crime, what it did to our Lanny. He came back a different boy, so moody and so—well, we might as well admit it—so difficult! But we must remember that it isn't his fault."

Cissy nodded unhappily. "Sister, I've been thinking—after all he has gone through he ought to have things made easier for him. He seemed to think, when he came back, that he wanted to go into active business life, but I'm sure he didn't realize the drudgery, the confinement. We should never have permitted it."

"I think you are right. After all, he doesn't need to—there is plenty of money. He ought to be free to devote himself to cultural pursuits, to travel——"

"I doubt whether he would care to travel—not for a long time, anyway, after his war experiences. And there is plenty to occupy him, right here in Boston. Why, even Friday afternoons—do you realize how seldom he accompanies us to the Symphony concerts? Something always seems to interfere."

"We must arrange it," said Amy with a decisive nod of her silver head.

Lance took the stairs two at a time and shut himself in his own bedroom. As a precaution against the worried intrusion of his aunts he turned the key in the lock. Bless their dear old hearts, this was one time when he couldn't stand their everlasting fussing. He hadn't slept a wink all night, and every nerve in his body felt exposed, like the spines of a porcupine. He lit a cigarette with shaking hands and threw open a window to let the smoke out. An icy wind blew in, but he hardly noticed the chill as he marched up and down the room, trying to quiet the incessant churning of his thoughts.

It was the hellish uncertainty of the thing that was the worst. The campaign of petty terrorism to which he had been subjected for the past week had reduced him to a state where he suspected some deadly menace in the most ordinary happenings of his daily life. Probably there wasn't a damn thing wrong with those chocolates.

Whatever happened, no possible blame could attach to himself. His behavior had been perfectly normal. Somebody had sent him a Christmas box of candy through the mail. He didn't want it, so he had given it to Velma. It was as simple as that, and there was no reason why he should work himself up into a state of panic over it. But—if he could only be sure——

There was a telephone extension on his night table. He stopped his nervous pacing and looked at it. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and took the directory from the shelf and turned over the pages. Williams. . . . There were hundreds of them, it seemed. His cold stiff forefinger ran down the columns, hunting for the address Velma had given him.

He missed it on the first hurried scrutiny. Then he went back over the names more slowly and found it. Williams, Mrs. Mary T.,

and the correct address. He closed the book and began to dial the number jerkily. . . . CH 3 . . . 372 . . . He did not finish. Clumsily he put down the instrument and resumed his nervous pacing.

Any way you looked at it, it would be a mistake. Suppose, by some crazy stretch of the imagination, there were something wrong. Suppose the person who answered the telephone—Mary T. Williams, or one of the other lodgers—went to call Velma, and found her. . . . The telephone call would be the first thing the police would work on; they'd ask a lot of awkward questions, and he'd have to explain about the box of candy. His whole connection with the affair, innocent though it was, would be thrown into false perspective. Whereas if he kept his head and behaved like a reasonable intelligent man they might never trace the candy back to him at all. If by some fluke they did, he could then explain the way it had happened and establish his own complete ignorance and innocence.

Or suppose the far more likely thing happened, and Velma herself answered the telephone. What would he say? She didn't expect him to call until he was ready to report that he'd given Susan the brush-off and that no further difficulties stood in the way of their marriage. If he called her up now she'd expect a progress report, of course, and he had nothing to tell her. He hadn't made any progress, and he didn't intend to make any. He was just marking time, waiting. . . .

And if nothing happened? What if the days went by and she got tired of waiting? Lance flung his cigarette stub out of the window and slammed it shut, and his jaw was set in a grim ugly line. He hadn't made any plans for such a contingency.

He looked at his watch, remembering suddenly a ten o'clock appointment at the office. He could just about make it. He unlocked the door and ran down the stairs, to find the aunts hovering in the lower hall, waiting for him. He kissed them, one after the other.

"Sorry if I was peevish, darlings," he said lightly. "I didn't sleep very well—got a bit of a headache—"

"But do you think you should go out? Your color isn't a bit good this morning, Lanny—"

"Do let me telephone the office and tell them—"

"Oh, I'll be fine as soon as I get out in the fresh air. Got to run now. I've got an appointment."

The day followed its customary routine. A succession of clients

kept him busy during the morning, and as usual on Tuesdays he lunched at the Parker House with a group of business acquaintances. He bought an afternoon paper in the lobby and scanned the headlines swiftly, but there was nothing of any special interest to him. In the middle of the afternoon he switched on his radio to listen to the local news summary, and snapped it off again. His nerves were beginning to jangle again.

Shortly after four he telephoned Susan. He had not seen her since Christmas Eve. Following his lifelong custom, he had spent Christmas Day at home with his aunts. He had had an uncomfortable feeling that he was letting Susan down, but he couldn't face the alternative—the long hurt silent days that were sure to ensue if he inflicted such a disappointment on his aunts, and the period of sweet smothering forgiveness that would follow. And Susan, understanding as always, had offered no objection, and gone off amiably to spend the weekend with some relatives in Dedham. You could always depend on Susan to be a good sport about things like that. When they were married, and she was living right in the same house, there wouldn't be any more petty conflicts of loyalty, thank the Lord.

A faint uneasiness stirred him as he dialed the number of the bookshop. Every time lately when he tried to talk about getting married she managed to change the subject. And on Christmas Eve he had been aware of an odd, rather definite change in her; as if in some mental bookkeeping she had struck a final balance and found him in the red. Her behavior after the attack in the Common had been strange, and disturbing. One would have expected her to be distressed and worried about him, but she had shown only the most perfunctory concern and wouldn't even listen when he tried to explain. She seemed more interested in some puzzled speculation in her own mind than she was in the peril that threatened him. It wasn't exactly flattering.

But it was understandable. She could hardly be expected to believe he had been marked for murder: she probably thought he'd merely taken a tumble on the ice and cracked his own head. Now that he thought it over, he must have been rather incoherent. And that telephone call yesterday afternoon hadn't improved matters any. It had caught him in a bad state of nerves, coming as it did right after Velma's visit and the other call which had followed im-

mediately after, advising him to make his will. Recalling his talk with Susan, he wasn't proud of the performance. He must have sounded like a kid scared of a bogeyman, and running to his mother for comfort. No wonder she hung up on him. He must be more careful in the future.

Susan's voice, when she answered the phone, was cool and a trifle remote. "Oh, hello, Lance. Anything wrong? Did you want something?"

"Yes, I wanted to talk to my girl. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, I'm rather busy—"

"I guess you can snatch a minute to talk to me, can't you? I—er—I just wanted to apologize for putting on that act yesterday. I'd just had rather a disturbing call—"

"You don't have to explain, Lance. I realized you were very much upset about something—"

"I'm afraid I sounded like a—"

"Lance, are you in trouble? I mean *really* in trouble?"

"You mean—that drivel I gave you yesterday?"

"You said you were afraid somebody was going to kill you. Did you really mean that?"

"Oh lord, no." He laughed heartily. "You shouldn't take such things too literally."

"If it wasn't true what did you say it for?"

"Well, I was in a bit of a swivet at the time. I don't mind admitting that that business the other night threw a scare into me. And there have been a couple of other things—"

"Such as—the Whiffenpoof Song?"

"Well—actually, that is a bit puzzling, but—"

"If you are being threatened, Lance—if you really feel that your life is in danger, why don't you go to the police?"

"The police?" His voice sharpened. "My God, I don't want the police in my hair. I'll kill my own snakes."

For a long moment she did not answer. He said defensively, "I suppose you're thinking I didn't sound much like killing any snakes, yesterday—"

"Please let's not talk about that, Lance. You'll have to do as you think best, of course. But it does seem to me—"

She was talking on, reasonably, but he hardly heard what she said. There was a detachment in her manner today, an impersonal

coolness even in her concern for him. It was as though she were discussing the problems of a stranger. A spasm of panic gripped him at the sudden realization that he was losing her—that the old spontaneous, comradely relationship was lacking.

But he couldn't get along without Susan! He needed her warmth and sympathy and understanding. In all the years since their childhood it had never failed him; and now, in the torment of apprehension and suspense that dogged his days and nights, he needed it more than ever. He had to have it, even if it meant telling her the truth. She would understand—when he explained how it had all happened she would realize that he had been the innocent victim of forces quite beyond his own control. . . .

"Listen, Susan darling," he broke in urgently. "I've got to talk to you. Right away—this afternoon—"

"I'd rather not see you just now, Lance—"

"I've got to talk to you, Sue! You've got a lot of crazy ideas in your head—I can tell! I've got to explain—tell you what's back of it all! Things that happened—while I was away—"

"I wonder if it's wise, Lance? Wouldn't it be better just to leave it alone—?"

"No, it wouldn't! Please, Sue! Meet me somewhere where we can talk—the cocktail room at the Parker House—we can find a quiet corner there. . . . Don't let me down, Sue! I need you—"

There it was again, that abject plea for someone to cling to, someone to carry the burden he was too weak to shoulder for himself. At the other end of the line Susan drew a deep breath.

"All right, Lance. What time?"

He glanced at his watch and calculated swiftly. "Quarter past five. I'll get there a few minutes earlier and get a corner table. . . . I knew you wouldn't fail me, Susan. You're my sweetheart."

He pushed away the telephone and dropped his head in his hands. His hunch was right. All these weeks—months—since he got back, Susan had been withdrawing from him by almost imperceptible degrees, and these past few days, since he had been under this dreadful nervous strain, had finished the job. Maybe somebody had told her something—she acted as if she knew. . . . Probably right at this minute she was figuring out a nice kind way to tell him she wasn't going to marry him. Susan would be kind. But once she had made

up her mind she would be adamant in her decision. He groaned softly. It wasn't until this moment, faced with the possibility of losing her, that he realized how much she meant to him. Without the solid reality of her love, without her reassuring influence to steady him, he would be like a Sabre jet out of control.

Then, close beside him on the desk, the buzzer sounded. He flipped the button and his secretary spoke.

"Mr. Max Tully is waiting on the other line. Will you take the call now, Mr. Hardy?"

He clenched his hands until the nails bit into the flesh. I can't take it! I can't take any more! his frantic mind protested soundlessly. Then he reached for the telephone.

"Yes, put him on," he said.

"Hi, there, Lance." Max's voice was a matter-of-fact friendly drawl. "Long time no see. How are you, fella?"

"Well, Max!" He tried to make his voice match the other man's. "I had no idea you were in this part of the country. Been here long?"

"Oh, a couple of weeks. Funny thing, I happened to catch a glimpse of you the other night, up on Beacon Hill. Wasn't sure it was you, at first. Then I remembered you came from Boston. Looked you up in the phone book, and there you were. How's every little thing? You married yet?"

"No, not yet." What could he say? How could he broach the dangerous subject and find out whether it was Max who was responsible for the persecution? If he was he certainly wouldn't say so. And if by any chance he knew nothing about it, it would be utter folly to put the secret into his hands. Lance had no illusions about Max Tully. From past experience he knew that Max had a well-developed faculty for turning other people's secrets into a source of advantage to himself.

It was Max himself, however, who solved his dilemma. "Seen any of the other boys?" he asked. "They're all here in Boston, you know."

"No, I didn't know." His lips felt stiff as they framed the words. "You mean—Jerry—and Fitz—"

"Yeah, and Cramer. Gray Fiske too—they're all around town. Haven't heard from any of them?"

Lance shook his head dumbly. He wet his lips and forced himself to speak. "No, I—I haven't seen any of them."

"Well, as a matter of fact, that's what I called up for. Thought you ought to know they're all here in town, panting for your heart's blood. Take a tip from me, fella. Watch your step."

He swallowed. "Look here, Max, I never had a chance to explain what happened. . . . It wasn't what you guys thought. . . . I'd have cut off my right arm before I'd have let them take you, if I'd realized what they were up to. They certainly fooled me, and then there was nothing I could do—"

"Skip it, Lance. You don't have to explain nothing to me. You were smart, and you got out of the trap—we didn't. Just the fortunes of war, you might say."

"Then—you don't harbor any grudge against me?"

"Hell, no. Like I said, you were just lucky. But you may as well know the rest of 'em don't feel that way. The way they've got it worked out, you must have had something to do with that patrol getting hold of the theme song. If they hadn't whistled it—and made us think it was you—"

"I can explain that," Lance broke in. "I'll tell you what happened, Max—"

"Look, fella, why don't we get together? I'd like to get the straight of it—then maybe I could slip the word along to the other boys. You busy right now?"

Lance looked at the clock. "I've got a date with my fiancée a little later, at the Parker House—"

"Fine. Tell you what—I'm not far from your neighborhood—why don't you meet me at the South Station subway in—say—ten minutes? That'll give you time to walk down. We can ride up to Park Street together; we might even have time for a quick one before your date shows up. Okay?"

Lance hesitated. It would be a lot simpler for Max to join him here and walk up to the Parker House with him, instead of making him hike off in the opposite direction, to the South Station. But if he offered any objections Max would think he didn't want to meet him.

"All right, Max. Ten minutes. Where'll I find you?"

"Right on the platform. I'll be watching out for you. Be seeing you."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Already, at half past four, the subway station was jammed with crowds of shoppers, train passengers, and early commuters, all hurrying to avoid the five o'clock rush hour. Lance tossed his money into the hopper and joined the jostling throng that poured down the stairs. He seldom used the subway—never at the busy hours of the day—and he had not realized what a maelstrom it was, and how hopeless it was to try to find anybody in the surging mob that bore him helplessly toward the edge of the platform. What a crazy place for an appointment!

A train was loading at the moment, and he was shoved right and left by grim panting men and women who elbowed their way through the bottleneck as though the gates of heaven were about to be shut in their faces. He braced himself, trying to hold his place, but he was borne on, almost to the open doors of the car; to his relief they closed before him and the train moved slowly out of the station.

The pressure behind him relaxed slightly, and he craned his neck, trying to find Max over the heads of the crowd. He tried to work his way along the edge of the platform in an effort to get clear before the next train came in, but his courteous murmurs of apology met only angry stares and irritated mutters from the tightly packed throng determined to hold a front-line position, and elbows nudged him, warning him that such individualistic behavior was not to be tolerated.

"I beg your pardon!" he said firmly. "I wish to get out. I do *not* wish to board the train."

"Then you're in a hell of a spot, buddy," a roughly dressed man observed, squaring his burly arms.

There was a sudden violent pressure in the small of his back, and a shove that threw him off balance. For an instant, a breathless eternity of horror, he swayed dizzily, trying to recover his equilibrium. Then with a shriek he crashed down into the track pit.

The fall stunned him for a moment. Bruised and shaken, he lay where he had fallen, with the hard square corners of the cross ties

grinding into his shoulder and hip, and his face resting beside one of the gleaming rails. Above him on the platform he was dimly conscious of men shouting and women screaming. There was a faint humming sound along the rail, close to his ear. It seemed to grow more insistent, boring into the lethargy of shock. . . .

"Hey, Lance! Lance! For God's sake, fella——"

He opened his eyes. Along the edge of the platform faces swam dizzily, looking down. Then a man vaulted down into the pit and Max was there beside him, yanking at his prostrate body.

"Come on, fella, pull yourself together—you got to get out of this—we ain't got much time——"

"I can't—I can't——" he moaned.

"Listen, guy, there's a train coming—don't you hear it?"

Suddenly his brain was clear and he heard the sound that hummed along the rails, louder now, like a scream of warning. He scrambled desperately to all fours.

"Watch out—careful now——" Max panted, helping him.

"Give us a hand, you guys——"

Men were leaning down, and a dozen hands were outstretched; they grabbed him and hauled him up. He stood shaking, dizzy, surrounded by a crowd of strangers, blurred, featureless.

"You all right?" somebody asked with rough solicitude.

"Yeah—I guess so——"

Then the train was thundering in, roaring down the track like a juggernaut of destruction. "Max!" he screamed.

"Okay, fella, I'm right here," said Max, whacking him on the shoulder. His face looked white and there was sweat running down his temples. The doors of the train were open and the crowd was pressing in, the near tragedy forgotten in the familiar scramble.

"God, that was a close one!" said Max. "What happened?"

"Somebody pushed me."

"Yeah?" Max's black eyes bored into his. "See who it was, did you?"

He shook his head. "No—there was too much of a crowd. But they pushed me—on purpose—I could tell——"

"Let's get out of here," said Max. "You ain't in any condition to fight this subway mob, and neither am I. We'll go up and get a taxi."

As the cab crawled slowly through the late-afternoon traffic Lance lay back and closed his eyes. He felt utterly exhausted and bruised from head to foot. Max was talking, but Lance's shocked mind hardly grasped what he was saying.

"Call it a miracle. . . . If I hadn't happened to catch sight of you and started to fight my way over. . . . Saw you when you pitched over the edge . . . could kick myself from here to breakfast—ought to have looked around and seen who done it, but I had other things on my mind right then. . . ."

"You saved my life, Max," he mumbled.

"Lucky I was there. . . . It ain't hard to figure out who it was."

He nodded dully. "They're going to kill me, Max. They almost did it this time."

Max shook his head heavily. "I didn't believe they were serious, but by God they really meant it. They're crazy—"

Lance drew a deep breath. "That's not much comfort, Max. . . . Did you tell the driver to go to the Parker House?"

"Hell, you ain't going to no Parker House, the state you're in! Look at you, black grease all over your overcoat—your pants torn—must have left your hat down there in the tracks. And we'd ought to fix up that cut on your face—it's oozing blood and it's all dirt—liable to get infected. I told him to take us to my place. It ain't far. We'll get you cleaned up and you can get another cab back to the Parker House. Okay?"

He nodded and closed his eyes again. "Okay, Max. I certainly appreciate this."

In a few minutes—in his relaxed, exhausted state Lance couldn't be sure exactly how long—the cab stopped, and Max said, "Well, here we are. Come along, guy."

He climbed out stiffly as Max paid the driver, and looked about him curiously. It was a down-at-heel neighborhood of dingy brick houses with untidy entryways, torn window shades, bedraggled curtains, and a general atmosphere of dilapidation. Glancing along the block, he noticed a tiny cluttered variety store of the type generally referred to as a "hole-in-the-wall," a small dirty garage and a rough parking lot with two or three nondescript cars at the front, and in the rear a tangle of rusting, dismantled wrecks.

"This where you live, Max?"

The other man laughed as he took him by the elbow and steered him across the sidewalk. "Temporarily. Ain't much like your place, I guess."

The house, Lance thought suddenly, had a vaguely untenanted look about it. It was hard to tell exactly what gave that impression, unless it might be the staring, unshaded windows and the absence of untidy debris. Max unlocked the front door and they went in. The hall was bare and cold and uncarpeted, with a battered staircase. Max jerked a thumb. "Up—right to the top."

Lance halted, suddenly uneasy. "Say, Max, I appreciate this, but I don't think I'll—"

"Go on up," Max said tersely, and prodded him with a fist that suddenly seemed to have authority behind it. "Up one more flight."

The door on the landing opened and an elderly woman looked out. She wore a black wool dress and a gray sweater and her white hair was neatly arranged. In her younger days she must have been a good-looking woman, Lance thought; the traces of beauty still lingered in the dark eyes, the brow, the straight well-shaped nose. Definitely a more superior type than one would expect to find in such a house. It was vaguely reassuring.

"Are you all right, Son?" she said.

"Sure, Mom. This is Lance Hardy—the guy I told you about—we were buddies in Korea. . . . My mother—"

She did not make any acknowledgment of the introduction, but he thought her lips set a little more firmly, and her eyes were like scraps of jet, hard and cold. She stepped back into the room and closed the door. The two men went on up the stairs, and Max unlocked the door at the top. They stepped inside, and as he glanced around the little room Lance drew in a swift breath of apprehension and flung around toward the door. But Max had closed it and stood with his back against it, with an odd little smile on his lips.

"Make yourself at home, Lance."

"Say, what is this? Don't tell me you live in a place like this."

It was a bare little chamber under the eaves, with nothing in it but a cot with a thin mattress on it, a chair, and a table with, incongruously, an electric plate and a saucepan on it. An electric light bulb hung from a long cord in the middle of the room. He glanced at the window, which was bare of shades or draperies. It was not yet wholly dark outside; it seemed very odd that no light filtered in.

Then he understood why the little room seemed so dark and constricted, like a closet—or—or a prison cell. The window was boarded up with a heavy wooden shutter.

"No, I don't live up here," said Max pleasantly, "but you're going to."

"What—what the devil do you mean?"

"Well, it's like this, Lance." Max's tone was reasonable and quite friendly. "Jerry and his side-kicks have made up their minds to kill you. I ain't for it. I value my own hide too much. And it don't seem economically smart, if you know what I mean. So it seems to me the best thing is for you to settle right down here, where you'll be perfectly safe, until they cool off. Don't that make sense?"

"Here? In this—this— Why, nobody could live here—not for a single day—" Lance's voice went up a bit shrilly.

"You'd be surprised how people can live—not for a day, or a week, but years. . . . Two years and a half, Lance—" Max's voice had a new metallic bite in it.

Lance stared at him in sudden appalled comprehension. "Max—you aren't going to— You wouldn't—"

"Don't come unglued, fella," Max drawled. "It ain't a good idea. We found that out. . . . What you got to worry about, anyway? I simply don't want you to get killed." He grinned suddenly. "I figure you'll be worth more to me alive than dead."

"What do you want? How much—"

Max shook his head. "Unh-unh. That's just a little dividend, you might say—we'll talk about it when the proper time comes. But right now I've got to save your life, and incidentally give you just a little lesson in the way the unlucky ones get along. You're still lucky, at that." He jerked a thumb at an inner door. "You've got a john in there—all to yourself—and running water. You better appreciate it. There've been times when I had to crawl out to the latrine on my hands and knees."

"For God's sake, Max—"

"You won't freeze to death. You may be cold, but you won't freeze. Mom will see to that. Ought to be a comfort to you to know that. Nobody cared whether we froze or not—some of us did. . . . In here—" He opened another door, and Lance saw a tiny box of a closet, with something in the corner that looked like a full flour sack. "In here, you've got plenty of rice. You'll be surprised

to find out how long a fellow can live on rice—when he hasn't got anything else. You may get sick of it, but after all, that's a minor detail. We'll get you some more before you run out—so don't worry about starving to death. If you're a good boy we might even get you some salt, in a month or two. Or maybe some vitamin pills, so you won't get beriberi. That's what I call pampering the perish-ing clay!"

"You can't do this to me!"

"Oh no? Who says I can't?"

"Your mother—she looks like a decent woman—she wouldn't stand for it—"

"You don't know my mother. You get this, guy. My mother didn't like what happened to me in Korea. And she don't like what she's heard about you. She's got ideas about you having something to do with my spending two and a half years in prison camp. Anything I decide to do about it is all right with her."

"You—double-crossing rat!"

"So that makes two of us."

"You had this all planned, didn't you, when you got me to meet you? My God—I see it all now! You shoved me off that subway platform yourself! Didn't you? *Didn't you?*"

Max smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. "I had to figure out some way to get you here. Saving your life seemed like a good idea. And it worked, didn't it?"

With a snarl like a wounded, cornered animal, Lance sprang at him, to drag him away from in front of the door. Max's hand whipped out of his coat pocket, and there was a small ugly gun in it, leveled at Lance's heart.

"Watch it, guy," he said, with a sudden grate of menace in his even voice. "I'm not fooling."

The gun was steady, threatening, in his right hand as with his left he unlocked the door and took out the key. He swung the door open and stepped backward through it, and the wicked snub-nosed little gun, like a part of his own hand, flicked a jaunty little gesture of farewell.

"So long, fella. I'll be seeing you—in a week or two."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For perhaps the twentieth time Susan looked at her watch. It was almost half past five, the busiest time in the cocktail lounge, and the waiter was coming toward her table again. He was one of the older waiters and had been a familiar adjunct of the Parker House staff for many years—ever since the days she had lunched there with her father and mother on Fridays between noonday service at the cathedral and the afternoon Symphony concert. But underneath the habitual deference of his manner she was beginning to sense a faint impatience. She had been occupying a choice corner table for at least twenty minutes, and the martini she had ordered still stood untouched before her.

"Is your martini quite satisfactory, Miss Carey?" he murmured, hovering.

"Yes indeed, Matthews. I'm waiting for Mr. Hardy. He must have been delayed."

"If you aren't drinking immediately I'll just remove this and bring you a fresh one when he comes. And may I bring you a cup of coffee while you are waiting?"

"Thank you—that would be very nice."

In the lobby Grayson Fiske folded his newspaper and laid it in the corner of the big divan. He mounted the steps to the cocktail lounge, located Susan at the corner table, and threaded his way down the room to her side.

"Good afternoon, Miss Carey. Are you expecting someone?"

She glanced up swiftly. "Why, how do you do, Mr. Fiske. Do sit down. Lance was to meet me here, but he must have been delayed." She smiled ruefully. "You must think I spend my life waiting for Lance."

"It's my good luck. Have you ordered?"

"I was holding back. My mother always told me no lady ever drinks alone. . . . Yes, Matthews, you may bring the martini now. And you, Mr. Fiske——"

He gave his order. "I hope Hardy didn't have any bad aftereffects from that bump he got the other night. He must have hit a

patch of ice under that light snow; the footing was very treacherous—”

She looked at him levelly. “You know very well he didn’t slip on the ice. He was struck—hit on the head—”

His eyebrows went up. “I’m sure that’s what he thought—but he could have been mistaken. A spill like that is pretty sudden, and he got a bad knock—”

“Don’t let’s play games, Mr. Fiske. He really believes somebody is trying to kill him. And in view of several things that have happened, I’m beginning to think he’s right.”

“What kind of things?”

A sudden frown creased her forehead and she looked at him uncertainly. “I’m not sure I ought to tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Well—I don’t really know you, do I? You say you and Lance know each other, but—”

His gray eyes twinkled. “But you’re not sure but what I’m trying to pump you—with lethal intent. Is that it?”

She flushed. “Forgive me, but—”

“You’re quite right, Miss Carey. I shouldn’t have asked. In fact, it was rather presumptuous of me to force myself on you like this—”

“I didn’t mean it that way at all. It just doesn’t seem quite the thing to discuss Lance’s private affairs with another person.”

“Suppose we wait until he gets here and let him tell me himself, if he chooses to do so.”

“I thought the other night that you wanted to avoid meeting him.”

He nodded. “It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now I’m not so sure. Possibly a good frank talk might clear the air—bring things out into the open.”

“Things? What kind of things?”

“It seems to me this is where I came in. Aren’t we getting dangerously close to discussing Lance’s private affairs? . . . How about another martini?”

She looked at him, frowning. Then she picked up her bag and gloves. “No, I must run along. I’m sure Lance can’t be coming so late as this, and I have a dinner engagement.”

He signaled to the waiter to bring the check and, when it came,

laid a bill on the tray and rose to help Susan on with her coat. She seemed, all at once, anxious to be gone.

In the lobby she held out her hand. "Thank you, Mr. Fiske," she said briefly. "And good-by."

"Wait a minute, Susan. May I still call you Susan?"

She looked at him questioningly. There was no warmth now in her eyes.

"Chilly weather we're having," he said gravely. "Seems to have turned cold all of a sudden."

"Really, Mr. Fiske, I—"

"I'm afraid I took advantage of our very slight acquaintance. I apologize—"

She shook her head impatiently. "Not at all—"

"I expected Lance to show up, and I wanted to see him. That's my only excuse—"

"There's nothing to apologize for. The mistake was mine. I rather took your friendship for granted, didn't I? I should have remembered that our meeting was extremely casual—and rather unconventional—"

"Now hold on a minute! You're all mixed up, Susan my girl. Friendship has nothing to do with who introduced who to whom, and where. You ought to know that. We were friends when we hung over the rail looking at those plaster sheep down on the Common the other night. Weren't we?"

She bit her lips and gave her head an unhappy little shake. "I thought so, then. But—there's something very strange—very mysterious-going on; and you know all about it. You may even be part of it; you may even be the one who is threatening Lance's life. It may be true—that he's in mortal danger. And you—with all your protestations of sudden friendship—may be trying to use me—to find out—"

His gloved hand closed over hers with a sudden pressure that silenced the swift spate of her words.

"You don't mean that. You know better, Susan." His eyes looked down into hers with a little twinkle of reproachful humor, and a sincerity that swept away her doubts.

Her lips twisted in a sorry smile. "I guess I do, really. If you turn out to be a monster at heart I shall never trust my judgment again."

He sobered. "Let me say this. I don't know *all* about these mysterious happenings. I may have some ideas. I'd like to hear the story from Lance's own lips, and I might be able to do something about it. I'm not even sure of that. But one thing I do know—I have no right to tell you any more than that. . . . When you see him, tell him I want to talk to him—urgently—and give him my telephone number. Will you do that?"

Susan nodded. "I'm sorry—Gray. Sometimes a girl lets her loyalties run away with her common sense."

"Lance is a lucky man to be the object of such loyalty. I hope he appreciates it. . . . Oh, by the way—I lied."

"You did? When?"

"When I said my only reason for butting in on you was because I wanted to see Lance. That was true—but my other reason was stronger. I wanted to talk to you."

The corners of her mouth went up in a demure little smile. "I'm afraid you didn't get much satisfaction out of it."

"You'd be surprised. . . . Friends, Susan?"

She nodded. "Friends, Gray."

C H A P T E R F O U R T E E N

It was odd that Lance hadn't telephoned, Susan thought, pouring herself another cup of coffee. He should have called before now to apologize for not keeping the appointment at the Parker House, and explain what had happened to prevent it. He was usually punctilious about such things.

She pushed away her breakfast tray, lit a cigarette, and scanned the headlines of the Boston *Herald* with desultory interest. Her mind was not on the perils of the international situation or the rapidly mounting deficit on the M.T.A. Her eyes glanced from one column to the next, but she was thinking about Lance and his inexplicable behavior. He had been so insistent, so determined to have a frank talk with her without delay. And now this strange silence. She wasn't angry about it, but she was puzzled, and

in spite of herself, apprehensive. It was so unlike Lance to be inconsiderate.

It was by the merest chance that she noticed the item tucked away inconspicuously on one of the inside pages. She glanced at it casually and flicked over the page. Then her heart seemed to skip a beat. She turned back and read the short item again.

An unidentified young man jumped or fell from the platform of the subway at the South Station during the rush hour last night and was saved from certain death by the prompt and heroic action of a friend, who jumped down into the track pit and rescued him from the path of an incoming train. The accident occurred at about 4:45 when the subway was crowded with commuters. In the rush of home-going crowds the two young men disappeared from the station without disclosing their identities. According to witnesses, neither of them appeared to be injured. An expensive gray felt hat, practically new, which was picked up later by a guard at the scene of the near-tragedy, bore the initials LMH in the sweatband.

The paper dropped from Susan's hand, and she reached blindly for a fresh cigarette and lit it shakily, hardly aware of what she was doing. A new gray hat—with the initials LMH. . . . Lance's hat was new, and gray, and his hats were always marked with his initials. Four forty-five yesterday afternoon. . . . The time was right. But the subway, at the South Station—what in the world could he have been doing there? Lance had a snobbish contempt for the subway, and Susan had never known him to use it. And it was an odd route for him to take, anyway—extremely odd. His office on Devonshire Street was about midway between the Parker House and the South Station—if anything, it was nearer the hotel. He could have walked the few blocks in half the time it would take to walk down to the South Station, wait for a train, ride to the Park Street Under-station, mount the two long flights, and walk up Tremont Street to the hotel.

Susan gazed out of the window with thoughtful, puzzled eyes. The only thing she could think of was that he had gone to the South Station to take a train somewhere, away from the city. But that theory was full of holes. In the first place, he wouldn't have

made an appointment at the Parker House if he was going away. If something had come up to change his plans, he would have telephoned. And if he were going to take a train, he wouldn't have been in the subway station.

It was at that moment that the telephone rang, and Susan sprang to answer it. That would be Lance, of course, making his apologies and his explanation. But at the sound of the quavering, worried voice Susan's momentary relief died.

"Susan? This is Aunt Amy. Do you know where Lanny is?"

"Why—no. Isn't he at home?"

"He didn't come home last night. We haven't heard a word from him since—yesterday morning. Something—something dreadful must have happened!"

"Oh, I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, Aunt Amy. I talked to him quite late yesterday afternoon—about half past four—and he was perfectly all right. Something must have called him away unexpectedly."

"Now, Susan!" The old lady's voice was edgy. "You don't think for one minute that Lanny would have gone away without letting us know!"

"Perhaps he tried. You don't always hear the telephone, you know, when you and Aunt Cissy are both upstairs, and Mary is down in the kitchen."

"Dear me—" She sounded not so certain. "I suppose it *might* have happened. We both *did* take a little nap. But if he didn't get us the first time why didn't he call again?"

"He might not have had time. Maybe he had to catch a train," she improvised. "Something might have come up very suddenly."

"But where would he go, like that—"

"Oh, those things are always happening in business! You're just fortunate if it hasn't happened before. An important client might have died suddenly, or something like that, and somebody from the firm would have to go at once."

"But Lanny knows how we worry!" Aunt Amy wailed. "If he's fifteen minutes late—"

"Now, Aunt Amy dear, you mustn't get upset and nervous. He might have gone—well, say to Chicago—and he couldn't very well call you from the train. Or if he went by plane—"

"Oh no, not by airplane! Sister and I would *never* consent to his

going anywhere by airplane, and Lanny wouldn't disregard our wishes, no matter how important it was. It's so dangerous, you know——”

In spite of her own anxiety Susan felt an impulse to giggle. Lance, who had flown fifty bomber missions, wasn't allowed to travel by plane, because it was dangerous!

“Well, by train, then. By the time he reached his destination it would be too late to call you. Or he may have had a lot on his mind and simply forgot.”

“Not Lanny. He would *never* let business interfere. If he couldn't reach us by telephone, why didn't he send a telegram?”

“He might have told his secretary, and she forgot.”

“Sister and I have always felt that she was a very slipshod young woman. She ought to handle his affairs without troubling him with so many details. We will insist that he discharge her right away and get someone more efficient. Imagine forgetting anything as important as——”

“I didn't say that she *did*—I merely meant that all kinds of things might have happened.” Susan felt sudden exasperation. “I really don't think you need to worry, Aunt Amy. I'm sure you will hear from him soon. You'll let me know when you do, won't you? . . . And now I really must go. I'm going to be late getting to the shop as it is. Good-by, dear, and don't worry. I'm sure Lance is quite all right.”

But the day wore on, and there was no word from Lance. In mid-afternoon her anxiety became so acute that she could keep it to herself no longer, and she telephoned his office. Miss Boardman, Lance's secretary, sounded harassed.

“No, Miss Carey, Mr. Hardy isn't here. He hasn't been in all day, and he had several important appointments. I don't quite understand how he could have forgotten. I hate to call him at home, but I really think——”

“I wouldn't do that if I were you, Miss Boardman——”

“Oh, I know. I have strict orders never to call him at home, but really, I don't quite know what to do. Mr. Wills is getting rather —well, disturbed, you know——” She gave a worried little laugh. “Mr. Hardy always calls, when he isn't going to be in, and tells me what to do about things. And he has another client coming in, in a few minutes—a very important client——”

"Couldn't you call and postpone the appointment?"

"I suppose I could try. But if Mr. Wills finds out, I'm going to be the one he cracks down on." The girl let out a gusty breath of worry and irritation. "I simply can't go on covering up for Mr. Hardy indefinitely, Miss Carey. I've got my own job to think about."

"Yes, of course." Susan came to an abrupt decision. "I think, Miss Boardman, you'd better explain the situation to Mr. Wills. You see, Mr. Hardy is not at home. He didn't go home last night, and there has been no word from him all day."

"You mean—he's *disappeared*?" the girl gasped.

"I suppose that's what you'd call it. His aunts are very much worried. What time did he leave the office last night?"

"About half past four, I think."

"I talked to him shortly before that and made an appointment to meet him at the Parker House. Did he mention where he was going—have any other calls to make——"

"No, he didn't even say good night when he went out. I thought it was funny. . . . Oh, I just remembered! He had a telephone call—a Mr. Perry—or Sully—something like that——"

"Was it Tully?"

"Yes, that was the name! Mr. Max Tully. As soon as he had finished talking to him he went right out."

"I see. . . . I think you'd better tell Mr. Wills all about it. I'm at my shop if he wants to get in touch with me."

Slowly she replaced the receiver on its hook. Mr. Turner was looking at her with concern in his eyes.

"I couldn't help overhearing, Susan. I thought you had been rather disturbed all day. Did I understand you to say Mr. Hardy has disappeared?" He shook his head, frowning. "Dear me, that's very strange—and distressing, in view of all the circumstances."

"He had a call from a man named Max Tully. I've seen him. Lance doesn't like him. I—I thought he was afraid of him."

"Dear, dear! I wonder—I don't mean to interfere in your affairs, Susan—but it seems to me this is a matter for the police."

She nodded. "I think so too, but after all, I'm not the one to make the decision. Mr. Wills, his business partner, is a very old friend of the family. He will talk to the aunts, and they will decide

what to do." She permitted herself a faint smile. "I don't think they will call in the police—not now, anyway."

"I still think," he said with an insistence which betrayed his own concern, "that some action should be taken at once. These aunts of Mr. Hardy's, from what I have heard about them, hardly seem the type to act with promptness and decision."

"No—neither is Mr. Wills, I'm afraid." Abruptly she opened her handbag and drew out the card Grayson Fiske had given her. She dialed his telephone number. Waiting, she glanced across at Mr. Turner. "I'm calling a mutual friend of ours—at least it will be some comfort to talk it over with him. . . . Hello. . . . Gray? This is Susan Carey. I'm taking you at your word. . . . Yes, I do need help, or at least some advice. If you're not too busy right now. . . . Yes, I'd love a drink—I think I need one. . . . I'll take a taxi right away. The Bellevue, in fifteen minutes."

As she hung up the receiver Mr. Turner gave her a satisfied nod and smile. "That is very sensible, my dear. It is always a help to share one's anxieties. Now run right along. If you will trust me, I will be very happy to put away the books and tidy the shop, and be sure to turn out the lights and lock the door when I leave."

"You're a dear," said Susan, and went to the closet for her hat and coat. "If the aunts or Mr. Wills should telephone, please tell them I'll get in touch with them in an hour or so."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Grayson Fiske was waiting for her at the door of the Bellevue when her taxi stopped at the curb, and he ushered her into the quiet, conservative old hotel. In a secluded corner, with drinks before them, he looked at her with a questioning smile.

"Well, what's wrong, Susan?"

"Lance hasn't shown up since yesterday. He didn't go home last night. I think something has happened to him, Gray."

The smile faded from his eyes. "That's bad. When was he last seen, do you know?"

"He left his office about half past four, so his secretary says, right after receiving a telephone call from a man named Max Tully——"

"Max! Good lord——"

"You know him?"

"Yes, I know him. But I hadn't looked for trouble from that quarter."

Susan opened her handbag and took out the newspaper clipping and passed it to him. "This was in the *Herald* this morning. I think it was Lance."

He read the short paragraph swiftly and his face hardened. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "It doesn't make much sense, does it? If it was Lance, he must have gone there to meet Max. Seems an odd place for it, but there was undoubtedly some reason——"

"If he'd been killed, I might understand it. But apparently he wasn't hurt. Some friend rescued him—let's assume for the moment that it was Max. So it wasn't a deliberate attempt at murder; he must have fallen, or been shoved inadvertently by the crowd——"

"I don't believe that. It would be just too much of a coincidence!"

He shrugged. "I find it hard to buy, myself."

"Max might have tried to kill him, and somebody else saved him."

"I can't see Max Tully committing murder—or even trying to. He isn't exactly an endearing character, but he wouldn't endanger his own hide. Max's risks are all calculated ones, with all the risks on the other fellow's side. . . . I can't see him, either, jumping down into the subway tracks to rescue Lance. It isn't in character."

"And I still can't imagine what Lance could have gone to that subway station for. He could have walked up to the Parker House in far less time. And the subway wouldn't take him anywhere but back uptown, to Park Street——"

"He might have gone in the other direction," he pointed out. "He might have gone to Ashmont, and from there he could get a bus to Brockton, Taunton, Providence—if he wanted to get out of Boston it would be a much less conspicuous route than if he took a train."

"But why would he want to leave Boston? And why make that appointment with me?"

"Smoke screen, possibly—for reasons known only to himself. Not a very considerate one."

"Gray," she said soberly, "you told me the other night that Lance had enemies. You knew, I think, who they were, and you felt pretty sure they were going to make trouble. That's why you gave me your card and told me to get in touch with you if I needed help. Don't you think the time has come to tell me what it's all about?"

He lit a cigarette and pulled on it thoughtfully before he answered. At last he shook his head and leaned forward, his elbows on the table between them, and his eyes were grave and solicitous.

"I'm sorry, Susan, but I can't."

"Why not? You don't expect me to believe at this point, do you, that you know nothing about it?"

"No, of course not. I think I know who's back of it, and why, but I can't tell you."

"Are you protecting someone, Gray? Is that the way you prove your friendship?"

He smiled at her gently. "Yes, Susan. You may not understand that right now, but you will someday, I think. I've got to do what seems best for everybody concerned."

She gave a sigh of frustration and annoyance. "I thought you'd do something to help me find Lance, not just talk in riddles!"

He put his hand down on hers. "You misunderstood me. If my hunch is right, I'll find him. If I'm wrong—well, in that case, telling you what I suspect would have served no good purpose, would it?"

"Oh, you've got me all mixed up! Whatever it means, you sound very convincing."

He gave her hand a warm pressure before he released it. "I'll get onto it right away. Trust me, Susan. . . . Now I think it would be a good idea to call the aunts and get the latest news, don't you?"

It was Channing Wills's dry, nasal voice which responded to Susan's call from the lobby booth. "Yes, what is it?" He sounded curt, irritable.

"This is Susan Carey, Mr. Wills. Have you heard from Lance?"

"No. What's this nonsense you told Miss Amy—that one of our clients had died suddenly in Chicago? Where did you ever get such a preposterous story? There's not a word of truth in it."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Wills!" She choked down a hysterical giggle. "I—I just told Miss Amy that something like that *might* have happened—trying to keep her from worrying——"

"Tchah! Rather an irresponsible fabrication, I must say, Miss

Carey. And it has done nothing to allay Miss Hardy's fears, I assure you. Or mine. I must confess I fear the worst."

"What do you mean, Mr. Wills?"

"I mean"—his voice was solemn, portentous—"that I suspect foul play."

Susan drew a deep quivering breath. "So do I, Mr. Wills. I have some information that I should pass on to the police when you—"

"Police! My dear girl, you aren't proposing, I hope, to bring the police into this affair?"

"Why, I thought— Aren't you going to—"

"Most certainly not! Do you realize the notoriety—the cheap publicity—"

"But what *are* you going to do?"

"I have already," he said stiffly, "engaged a firm of private-inquiry agents to investigate the matter. A Mr. William Story will be in charge of the case. He will call upon you this evening at your apartment, at which time you may tell him anything which seems pertinent. If that will be entirely convenient to you?"

"Yes indeed. Quite convenient," she choked, and fumblingly replaced the telephone instrument in its cradle. She turned impetuously to Gray, her eyes blind with sudden tears.

"Mr. Wills is quite annoyed about the whole thing. He fears foul play. And if it's quite convenient to everybody concerned and doesn't interfere with anybody's previous engagements, Mr. William Story, a private-inquiry agent, will make a few very private inquiries."

"Oh lord! Fatuous old fool. . . . Hold it now, my dear. I know just how you feel, but don't let it get you. Private-Eye Fiske is on the job too. We'll pursue a little investigation of our own. Come on, I'll put you in a taxi."

He stood for a moment at the open door of the cab, looking at her as though unwilling to let her go. "I know it's foolish to say 'don't worry,' Susan. I'll have news for you—one way or another—very soon. I'll get in touch with you at the first possible moment."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

With a groan Lance turned over on the hard bare cot and clenched his teeth at the grinding squeak of the rusty springs. Every movement he made brought forth those jangling sounds which at the beginning had set his teeth on edge, and now, after three days and nights—or was it four?—were like the rasp of a file across exposed nerves.

Dully he stared up at the small triangular opening cut in the wooden shutter which admitted just enough light to keep his prison from utter darkness. All he could see was a scrap of cloudy winter sky. He felt chilled to the bone, and his feet were like blocks of ice. He kicked off his shoes and jackknifed his knees, trying to warm his feet under the inadequate cover of his overcoat, and for what seemed a very long time he lay still, tense against the creaking protest of the rusty cot to every movement.

When his cramped body could stand the unnatural position no longer he sprang to his feet and crossed the bare little room to feel the radiator in the corner. It was faintly warm. He picked up one of his shoes in the frantic impulse to bang on the pipes with it. It was the only way he had found to give vent to his fury at the utter impotence and indignity of his position. Then with a groan he dropped the shoe to the floor again. He had tried that once before, the first day. There had been no answer to his hammering, but in a little while the radiator had gone stone cold, and it had remained that way for the better part of a day. He had really suffered with the cold then. It wasn't worth the poor satisfaction it gave him.

He put on his shoes and began to pace up and down the room. Against the backing of the wooden shutter the windowpane mirrored the dark indistinct reflection of his own face, pallid, wild-eyed, and unfamiliar in the rough scrub of beard. His shirt was gone—he had been using it for a towel. His overcoat and trousers were torn and grease-stained from his fall in the subway, and now, after sleeping in his clothes night after night, he looked like a hobo.

And he was hungry—God, he was hungry! It must be at least

twenty-four hours since he had eaten, and his stomach was like an echoing cave, but the thought of cooking and eating any more rice gave him a sensation of acute nausea. As a child he had detested the stuff, even in the form of the rice custard puddings filled with raisins which the aunts had considered a most nourishing dessert for a growing boy. During his months in the Far East he had had to eat rice pretty regularly, in spite of his distaste for it. But the idea of eating any more plain unseasoned boiled rice was something he simply couldn't face, even though his whole body was crying out for food. He poured some water into the saucepan and heated it, and gulped it down. The flat taste of it was revolting, but it warmed him and eased temporarily the gnawings of hunger.

Then he sat down in the straight uncomfortable chair, put his feet upon the cot, and set himself for the hundredth time to turning over in his mind the whole fiendish chain of circumstances which had brought him here, and the apparent hopelessness of his predicament.

His disappearance would, of course, have created quite a stir by this time. When he failed to keep his appointment with Susan at the Parker House she would have known something had happened to him; he would certainly have let her know if something had prevented him from meeting her. And the aunts would be frantic when he didn't come home that night. The first thing they would do would be to get in touch with Channing Wills at the office. He, in turn, would consult Bradford Howes, the lawyer. They would talk to Susan, and Susan would tell them about the attacks on him, and his conviction that he was going to be murdered. And they would hire a high-class firm of private detectives and try to keep the thing hushed up.

But surely by this time they would have notified the police, and there would be a full-scale search going on for his dead body. The aunts would be prostrated over it, of course; they had a firm conviction that there was something shocking, disgraceful, in the idea of being involved in a police investigation.

If only Susan had listened when he tried to tell her the whole story! She would have known then that his life was threatened by the other members of his old bomber crew, and she would have been able to give the police a lead. The whole wretched Korean business would come out, of course, but Lance was past really car-

ing about that. Nobody could prove that he was in any way responsible for the other boys getting captured. It would be simply their story against his, and the word of a man of his standing was certainly entitled to more consideration than the vindictive accusations of a bunch of hoodlums. Everybody would realize that they were just sore because he hadn't been captured too and wanted to vent their spite on somebody for the tough time they'd had. Surely he wouldn't have any trouble putting the thing in the proper light, once he was free.

Lance's hand went mechanically to his pocket for a cigarette and came away empty. For the moment, engrossed in his thoughts, he'd forgotten that he hadn't any. The pack he had in his pocket when he came had gone the first day. God, what he'd give for a good smoke!

Gray Fiske. . . . He remembered now, Max said Gray was here in Boston too. He scowled thoughtfully. Gray wasn't in the same class with the others; in private life he was a solid citizen—son of a wealthy industrialist of some kind, as he remembered. And he was a rather convincing chap in his own right. He might make a bit of trouble if he chose to throw his weight in with the other boys.

No, he couldn't quite see Gray Fiske being a party to the murderous plans of a lot of crack-brained soreheads. He might have been a bit sore at the time and had the idea that Lance might have managed things better. To be perfectly honest, looking back on that far-off disastrous day, in the light of all that had happened since, Lance was willing to concede that if he were in the same position again he might act differently. When a man is in a damn tight spot and has to make a quick decision it isn't always the best one.

But Gray wasn't the kind to hold a grudge and try to get even after all this time had passed. He'd be a good sport about it and figure it was all water over the dam.

Lance wished he could know the answer to one big question—whether or not Max Tully was in league with Jerry and the others. He said he wasn't, but you couldn't believe a word Max said. If this was Max's private, personal vengeance, the situation wasn't necessarily hopeless. Sooner or later he'd have to let him out. Max had promised to come back "in a week or two"—Lance gave an involuntary shudder at the prospect—and when he did Lance would insist

on coming to some kind of terms. Max must have a price, and whatever it was he'd agree to it. Once he was out of this hellhole of a prison he'd be in a position to do some constructive bargaining, but until he was free he'd agree to anything Max wanted.

But on the other hand, if Max and Jerry and the others were all in it together—Lance closed his eyes and swallowed a cold hard lump of panic. All they had to do was keep him here until the hue and cry died down. Then they could kill him and quietly dispose of his body.

That was something he mustn't let himself think about or he'd go stark crazy. He sprang to his feet, shoving back the chair with a violence that sent it crashing against the wall, and marched furiously up and down.

The feverish spurt of activity didn't last long. Suddenly light-headed, he reeled against the wall and stood there for a moment swaying dizzily. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and dropped his head in his hands.

What the hell was the matter with him? He had cramps in his stomach and purple and green spots before his eyes, and the dim grubby little room seemed to be rotating slowly around him. If he didn't know better he might think he'd swallowed poison. But that was manifestly impossible. His present diet didn't lend itself as a vehicle for the administration of poison. That was one thing that could be said for it.

Poison. . . . Why did the thought of poison have to come suddenly to his mind with the smashing impact of a blow? During the past endless days and nights he had pushed it away from him, refusing by the sheer determination of his will to remember. But now it was here in the room with him—the brutal knowledge of the gamble he had taken; the horrifying question to which he could not know the answer, so long as he was shut up in this prison. Were the chocolates poisoned—or weren't they? Had he won his gamble—or lost?

Win or lose—either way, where did he stand? To know that Velma was gone out of his life forever and no longer threatened his marriage to Susan—what an unspeakable relief that would be! But would Susan marry him, even if he were free? If her recent attitude toward him was anything to go by, she wouldn't.

And constantly, just below the surface of his mind, lurked the

horried possibility of the ultimate disaster. He crushed down the fear, but still it crawled coldly along his nerves. Suppose Velma should die, and by some incredible mischance they should trace the chocolates to him and blame him for her death! They might even call him a murderer!

The dark little room spun dizzily before his eyes, and he swayed in sudden weakness. After a moment his vision cleared, but he knew that he must have food. With a muttered oath that was like a groan he staggered into the grimy little lavatory, dumped some rice into the saucepan and covered it with water, and set it on the electric plate to cook.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Velma lay on the couch idly turning over the pages of a movie magazine. She was wearing a sleazy "hostess gown" of flowered rayon, and a pair of dirty pink satin mules dangled from her bare feet.

"That babe . . ." she murmured, scowling at a full-page colored portrait. "What's she got, I'd like to know? Just a common, ordinary-looking girl—blue jeans and a cotton shirt—no make-up—not even a permanent! She certainly ain't got any glamor. And look at the way they're building her up, like she was the answer to every man's prayer or something! Just pull—that's all!"

She flung down the magazine petulantly, on top of the untidy pile that lay on the floor beside the couch, kicked one of her mules across the room, and exhaled a bored, angry sigh. For the past three days she had only left her room to snatch an occasional hasty meal, lest she miss the telephone call from Lance when it came. He had promised to get in touch with her on Wednesday or Thursday, and here it was Saturday morning, and still he hadn't called. She'd had visions of getting all duked up in some swell new clothes and going out to some swanky spot to see the New Year in. But no such luck. She'd sat here in this rotten little room all by herself—and all New Year's Day too. And she was getting damn sick of it. If he thought for one minute that he could pull a fast one and get away with it—well, he had another think coming!

It was at that instant that the telephone rang in the hall below, as if in response to her impatience. She sprang to her feet, scooped up the pink mule, and dashed down the stairs. Mrs. Williams, her landlady, was plodding stolidly down the hall to answer it, but Velma was there ahead of her, and she shrugged and turned back to her own apartment at the rear of the first floor.

"Hello," said Velma. "That you, Lance?"

"Hello, honey. Sorry to disappoint you. This is Max."

"Oh. . . . Well, what do *you* want?"

"Just thought I'd call up and see how you were getting along. Aren't married yet, are you?"

"No, I ain't! Though I don't know what business it is of yours. I'm going to be though—you can bet your last dollar on that."

"Oh yeah? Don't be too sure, honey."

"What do you mean by that crack?"

His chuckle had a note of sly knowing malice in it. "I just don't want you to be too disappointed, girlie."

"Say, what is all this, anyway? You know something?"

"Well, not exactly, but I can make a pretty good guess. Your dreamboat has disappeared—"

"Disappeared!" she squealed shrilly. "He's been murdered!"

"Now wait a minute, Velma. That bunch that were after him, they don't know any more than we do. They're pussy-footting around his house and his office—everywhere he'd be likely to be—trying to pick up his trail. Mad as hops they are to think he's managed to give them the slip. If it's an act, well, all I can say is, it's a damn good one."

For a long moment Velma was silent, digesting the startling news. "Then it ain't me he's running away from—it's them," she said.

"If he'd intended to marry you he could have called you up before he went, couldn't he? He'd know darn well you wouldn't give him away."

"Yeah—you got something there. . . . I'll get even with that skunk, if it's the last thing I do!"

"Forget it, Velma. Just thank your lucky stars you don't have to marry him."

"Oh yeah? You wouldn't be so damn cocky about it yourself if you'd just been cheated out of a nice fat pay-off!"

"There are other ways—not so much trouble and a lot more fun."

"Meaning what? Got ideas, have you?"

"Sure I have, sweetie pie. You'd rather marry me than that heel, wouldn't you?"

She made a low mirthless sound of laughter. "Sure I would, except for a great big if. We been all over this before, Max, and you know how I feel. I got to have money. Maybe it's like you said, I'm just a dirty little gold digger, but I don't care. That's the way it is. I've been stinking poor all my life, and I'm sick of it—damn sick of it! I'd marry the devil himself, if I got enough out of it. It's just our tough luck, Maxie—but you simply ain't got what I got to have!"

"But suppose I got it? Plenty!"

"How?"

"Never mind how—that's my little problem. Would you marry me then?"

"Well—I might—but you've got to show me. I don't take nothing for granted any more—not even from you, Maxie."

He chuckled softly. "Maybe I will, at that. I'll be over and tell you all about it in a little while. Don't go away, baby."

Velma hung up the receiver and mounted the stairs slowly, her shrewd little mind busy with the intriguing possibilities which Max had suggested. If Max had suddenly acquired money—plenty of it, he said—she felt sure he hadn't come by it legitimately. He simply didn't have the brains, or whatever you had to have, to earn real money. And there was one sure thing—if there'd been a rich uncle in the background, and any prospects of inheriting a sizable chunk, he'd have told her about it before now. Come to think of it, he didn't say he had it; he said he was going to get it. And the way he said it sounded like a good joke somewhere. Like a shakedown that he felt sure was going to work.

Well, that's all right too, Velma told herself as she sat down again on the studio couch and lit a cigarette. It's really none of my business how he gets the money, just so long as he gets enough of it. Other things being equal, he's darn right I'd rather marry him than Lance. We're the same kind. A lot of fellows would shy off from marrying a girl when they found out she was a gold digger, but not Max. He knows you can't eat love, or buy mink coats with it; and he knows there's only one way a girl like me can get it. He didn't

blame me for turning him down the first time he asked me. He wouldn't stand in my way when I had a chance to get my hands on a good wad.

But if Max and I had enough to have some fun with, we could have a swell time together. When you come right down to it, Lance was a drip. Even when he climbed down off his monument and wallowed in the gutter along with the common folks, he never let them forget that he was made of fancy goods, and they were just plain scum.

It would be hell, she thought, living in that stuffy old tomb on Beacon Hill with those two harpies. It would be months—years, maybe—before the divorce came through, and she and Max could get married. There was no doubt but what Lance would co-operate. He'd certainly start things cooking as soon as he found that the Butch business was just a phony line. But those things take time. On the whole it was better to settle for less and not pay such a hell of a price for it.

Just the same it was a lousy trick to play on me. Like Max said, he was just stringing me along, hoping I'd get off his neck and give the whole thing up, and then he could marry Susan Carey, like he meant to the whole time. Well, that's where he made his big mistake! Maybe I ain't going to get him, but I'll fix it so he won't get his precious Susan either!

Velma flung open the door and ran down the stairs again, her mules slapping noisily on the wooden treads. She consulted the battered telephone book and dialed the number of the bookshop. A woman's voice answered, low-pitched and pleasant.

"Hello!" said Velma. "Is this Susan Carey?"

"Yes, this is she. What can I do for you?"

"Well, you don't know me, but I know all about you. You're engaged to marry Lance Hardy, aren't you?"

"Why, really, I—— Who is it speaking, please?"

Velma swallowed hard over a lump of uneasiness that interfered momentarily with speech, and cleared her dry throat. Her little pointed chin set itself stubbornly. There was something about the other girl's voice, so low and courteous and well-bred, that made it unexpectedly difficult to go on as she had intended. This Susan girl was too good for a heel like Lance, and she was just doing her a kindness by letting her know it.

"My name is Velma Larkin. I used to know Lance when he was at the airfield down in Alabama, right near where I live. I used to know him real well. Maybe I know a thing or two about him that you don't know."

"That is possible," said Susan.

"Well, aren't you interested?"

"Not specially." Susan's voice had a faint smile in it. "I imagine I know things about him that you don't know, Velma. I'm sure he'd tell me anything really important."

"Him? Not a chance! So you don't want me to give you the low-down?" she snapped bitterly.

"No, I don't think so. But thank you just the same."

"Well, I was just trying to do you a favor, but if you don't want it, it's quite all right with me. If you change your mind, I'm at the Williams' house, 980 Pinckney Street. On the second floor, first door at the top of the stairs."

"Thank you," said Susan. Then, about to hang up the receiver, a sudden startling thought occurred to her, and she cried breathlessly, "Wait a minute, Velma. Are you trying to tell me—do you know where Lance is now?"

There was a long silence. Then Velma said, "Wouldn't you like to know?" and hung up her receiver.

"I guess that'll bring her," she giggled softly to herself as she went back up the stairs to her room.

The box of liqueur chocolates lay on the table. She had tried to make them last a long time, rigidly restricting herself to two pieces after each meal. For some reason known only to herself she had picked them out by colors—all the purple ones first, then the cerise, the blue, the gold, in the descending scale of her own fondness for the colors. There weren't very many of them left, and most of them were that poisonous green that she especially disliked. Oh well, you couldn't eat the wrappers, and the candy inside was all good.

Velma picked out a green one, unwrapped it, and popped it into her mouth.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Susan cradled the telephone slowly, her forehead crinkled with perplexity and uneasiness. This was the first thing which had happened in the seemingly endless days and nights since Lance's disappearance which had seemed to offer even the remotest clue to his whereabouts. Every line of inquiry seemed to have come to a dead end. Gray's "hunch" had proved fruitless. He had been in touch with certain unidentified and mysterious parties from whom he had hoped to get some information, and reported, with some chagrin, that they knew nothing about Lance's movements: in fact, they were just as anxious to find him as Gray was.

William Story, the private detective, confessed himself baffled. He had found the apartment in the Coolidge Corner section of Brookline where Max Tully lived, but it was deserted. According to the building superintendent, Tully had gone away on a trip with his mother and left no forwarding address. He had not said when he would return.

Aunt Amy and Aunt Cecelia had taken to their beds, shattered with grief and anxiety, but indomitably refusing to permit the matter to be reported to the police, despite Susan's earnest pleading and the exasperated insistence of Bradford Howes, their lawyer. Channing Wills supported them in their stubborn stand.

A customer came into the bookshop, and for a few mintues Susan was occupied with the familiar routine of discussing the weather, recommending a new historical novel, and making the proper notations on the rental library card. The woman chatted a few moments longer and departed.

At the table in the corner Mr. Turner glanced up from the book he was reading. During the past few anxious days, Susan had been grateful for his frequent visits to the shop and his unobtrusive sympathetic concern about Lance's disappearance. A lonely man, he had in a sense come to enter into her problems as if they were his own, and on the rare occasions when they were alone together in the shop it was a relief to talk to him. She turned to him now impulsively.

"I had the strangest telephone call just now, Mr. Turner. I don't quite know what to do about it."

"It concerned Lance?"

"Yes, in a queer, unpleasant way. Some woman, who apparently had something she wanted to tell me about him. She said it would be doing me a favor."

He smiled faintly. "Something disagreeable, I have no doubt. It usually is, I have found, when people go out of their way to force such favors on one. She was a stranger to you?"

Susan nodded. "Her name was Velma something—Larkin, I think. She said she knew Lance when he was training at the airfield down in Alabama, and she hinted she was prepared to make all kinds of shocking disclosures about him. She sounded vindictive—spiteful—"

"Did she mention a price?"

"A what?" Susan stared at him for an instant, puzzled. Then her eyes widened in comprehension. "Oh, you mean she might have wanted to sell her information! No, she didn't put it on that basis, but she might have been leading up to it. I told her I wasn't interested. But just at the end it occurred to me that she might know where he is—possibly that was what she really wanted to tell me. So I asked her, and she said 'Wouldn't you like to know?' and hung up."

"Dear me! That is odd, isn't it? Perhaps, my dear, you should have allowed her to tell her story."

"I hate spiteful gossip, and I just don't want to listen to it! But—how do you suppose she found out about me? She knew my name, and exactly where to reach me, and that I was supposed to be engaged to Lance."

"It seems safe to assume that Lance told her. And that presupposes that she has been in touch with him recently."

"Oh—" Susan caught a swift breath and her eyes flew wide. "I just remembered! There was a girl—Christmas Eve. . . . She looked just the way this Velma sounded. . . ."

Mr. Turner listened with interest as she told him about the first time she had seen the girl, peering into the window; and about the second encounter with her, on the Common, and the mysterious attack on Lance which had followed his interview with her. He shook his head thoughtfully.

"Under the circumstances it might have been wiser to hear what she had to say. It's a pity you don't know where to reach her."

"Oh, but I do. She gave me the address, and I jotted it down here on my pad. You think I ought to go over there and talk to her, don't you?"

"Well, my dear, I hardly like to advise you, but it does seem to me that somebody ought to contact her. I wonder if perhaps—the police——"

"No." Susan shook her head decisively. "I doubt if the police would learn a thing from her. And Lance would have every right to resent it. Whatever there may have been between them in the past is his own business." She smiled faintly. "If I were really going to marry him, I might have some excuse for interfering, but as I'm not I think it behooves me to watch my step. Don't you?"

"Well, possibly, if it had to do only with the past. If she was in any way responsible for the attack on him on Christmas Eve, if she threatened his very life, then in view of his disappearance it seems to me the police ought to know it."

Susan shook her head, unmoved by his gentle argument. "I simply can't bring the police into it until I've talked to her and found out just what she wants and what she has to tell me. I can't help but think she's acting on a malicious desire to hurt him, and perhaps to keep me from marrying him. In that case, she'd better get it out of her system. It won't hurt me—now."

"Maybe you're right," Mr. Turner agreed.

"It's almost twelve o'clock. I think I'll shut up the shop right away. The day after New Year's there won't be any business—there's only been one person in here all morning. I wouldn't have opened up at all, except for Lance. I thought he might possibly try to get in touch with me here, or there might be some word about him——"

"You are still very fond of him, aren't you, Susan?"

Quick tears sprang to her eyes, but she smiled through them ruefully. "Of course I am. I have been all my life, and I suppose I always shall be. It's the mother in me."

For an instant Mr. Turner's eyes lost their vagueness, and he looked at her searchingly. "There are women who find quite adequate satisfaction in being mothers to their husbands."

"But I'm not one of them. No, I couldn't possibly marry Lance,

now that I know exactly what he's like. . . . You know," she went on musingly, "love is a funny thing. It seems to me it can have an existence all its own, quite apart from the object of it. I loved something that didn't exist. Now I know that the Lance I expected to marry all those years was just a lovely dream I had, and that there was nothing there at all. But the love still goes on. The *real* Lance—well, I have no feeling about him whatsoever." Her eyes crinkled up in a funny little grimace. "I don't make sense, I guess——"

He smiled back at her. "Yes, my dear, you make yourself eminently clear."

He gathered up his books and carried them to the shelves, and by the time she was ready he was there beside her, with his coat and hat on. She looked at him in sudden compunction.

"I'm driving you out! You don't need to go now, Mr. Turner. Why don't you stay right here and read? Just see that the door is locked when you leave."

"I'm going with you, Susan."

"Oh no, really——"

"I can't permit you to go alone, my dear. You might find it extremely unpleasant—or even dangerous."

"But after all, it isn't your problem. I don't know why I should worry you with it, anyway."

He gave her a gentle smile. "Don't begrudge me the satisfaction of trying to help a little, Susan. I have been feeling rather unnecessary for quite a long while now, since my wife died and I retired. After a lifetime crowded with young people's problems I find it rather a lonely business to have only myself to worry about."

Susan let out a soft breath that had unexpected relief in it. "You're a dear! I didn't know it, but I—I think I was a little bit scared to go alone. I feel a lot better now. Let's go!" She hooked her arm in his companionably as they went out into the crisp winter sunshine.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The outer door of Mrs. Williams' lodging house was unlocked as usual. Max let himself in and tiptoed cautiously up the bare wooden stairs. Not that there was any real reason why he shouldn't make a call on Velma Larkin if he wanted to. But up to now he was sure nobody had the faintest suspicion that he was involved with her in any way—or with Lance—and he intended to keep it that way. By this time the police must be working on Lance's disappearance. There had been nothing in the newspapers about it, but that kind of people would fix it so there wouldn't be, of course. If the police started nosing around here, and by some crazy fluke found out there was a connection between Velma and Lance, Max didn't want to be drawn into it. It wouldn't be so good to have the landlady or one of the other lodgers identify him as a recent visitor.

At the top of the stairs he scratched lightly on the panel of the door and whispered her name softly. There was no response from inside the room, and he made an exasperated sound under his breath. She knew he was coming; couldn't she have stayed in long enough for him to get there?

For a moment he stood scowling, undecided. Then he turned the handle tentatively, and to his surprise found the door unlocked. She must have stepped out for a minute, for cigarettes or something. He pushed open the door and walked in.

She was sprawled on the studio couch, apparently sound asleep. Her tawdry flowered negligee had slipped off one shoulder and a scuffed pink mule dangled from a bare foot. The other leg had slid off the edge of the couch, and hung in flaccid abandon, exposed to the thigh. Max's lips curled in a faint smile as he crossed the room. Dead to the world, she was, and she'd be wild when she woke up and found out he'd seen her in a state like this. He wondered as he approached whether she might be drunk. There was something in the pose of the limp form, with outflung legs and arms, that didn't look like normal sleep.

"Hey, Velma baby, wake up," he murmured, and rubbed her

cheek gently. Then with a sharp intake of breath he stiffened, and involuntarily his hand jerked away.

"Velma!" His voice was a queer husky croak.

He straightened up slowly. His breath whistled through his nostrils and his eyes were suddenly aflame with horror. "Holy smoke!" he muttered. "She's dead!"

He rubbed his hands together, as if the feel of that strangely lifeless flesh were something he could wipe away. It was horrible, ghastly, the way it changed when the spark of life went out of it, even though it was still warm. It must have happened within a few minutes. He shook his head to clear away the fuzziness. Good lord, it couldn't be more than half an hour ago he talked to her, and she was all right then.

But people didn't just die like that—certainly not a strong, healthy girl like Velma! There wasn't anything wrong with her heart—if there were she'd have said something about it. Why, if she had a little bit of a headache she played it for all it was worth in sympathy. Max felt slightly ashamed at the swift critical thought. After all, she was dead, poor kid, and you ought to remember only the good things about her.

And she had a lot of them, when you came right down to it. You couldn't ask for better company; she was jolly and cute and full of fun, and real pretty when she got herself fixed up right. And she sure knew how to make a fellow forget all his troubles, when she really let herself go. And she was honest—at least about the things that really mattered. You had to hand her that. Yes, Velma was a grand kid, and she suited him fine. They might have had a swell life together.

Max's eyelids stung unexpectedly, and he swiped at them with a clenched fist. Damnation! If he'd had any idea a thing like this might happen he'd have done differently. She'd been hell-bent to get her hands on a good-sized wad of Lance Hardy's money, and he hadn't put up much objection to it. In fact, it seemed like a pretty good idea at the time. She would have given Lance one whale of a headache, and the whole thing would have been over in a few months, and then they could have been married and lived on Easy Street. But he knew damn well that if he'd really worked on her he could have persuaded her to give the thing up and get married right away—and the hell with Lance.

Looking down on that still face, he gritted his teeth in sudden futile rage. It was all Lance's fault. If it hadn't been for him none of this would have happened, and she would be alive right now. They'd have got married when he stopped off in Alabama to see her on his way back from Korea, and he'd have taken that job he was offered in Mobile. This filthy New England winter climate was hard on a Southern girl like Velma. Maybe she was more delicate than he'd realized.

She looked sweet and young lying there as if she were asleep, with her eyelids half closed. The lashes feathered down till they almost touched her cheeks, and they were longer and thicker than he'd ever noticed. Her lips were parted, and they looked faintly smiling as if she were just going to speak to him.

With shaking hands, Max straightened her twisted body. He lifted the dangling leg and covered it with her negligee, and arranged the folds over her shoulders. Then he bent down to raise the outflung arm and lay it across the other on her breast, in the decent pose of death. The hand was closed in a tight little fist, and gently he pried open the fingers, trying to make them look relaxed. A tiny scrap of green dropped to the floor.

For a startled instant he stared down at it. It had a metallic sparkle, and somewhere, not very long ago, he had seen something like it. A scrap of colored foil; and there were other colors—red and blue and purple—

His breath sucked in with a sharp sibilance, as he remembered. It was here, in this room, a box of candy with each piece wrapped in bright-colored foil. The box of candy *he* gave her for a belated Christmas present!

Something stabbed his consciousness with a violent jolt and his brain seemed to spin in dizzy revolutions as he gazed down at her. For a moment his eyes refused to focus, and her face swam in a blurred haze as he tried to steady his reeling thoughts. If it were true—and this sudden overpowering conviction told him that it *was* true—it was the answer to everything.

Whatever the poison was, it was quick—instantaneous. She couldn't have suffered—not with that peaceful, half-smiling look on her face. There was something that acted that way—you read about it all the time in the whodunits—too fuzzy right now to remember the name of it, but they always spoke about the smell. . . .

He bent stiffly and sniffed at Velma's parted lips, and his breath went out in a slow, shuddering exhalation. That was it—an odor like bitter almonds.

His head swiveled slowly and his stunned, red-rimmed eyes went to the cluttered table before the window. The open box was there, and the cover was lying beside it. She had eaten most of the candy, and almost all the pieces that were left were wrapped in this same vivid green foil. That was like Velma, he thought with hazy irrelevance; she had a habit of eating one thing at a time—all her meat, then the potato, then the other vegetables, one by one. Like a child, she ate first the things she liked best. She'd done the same thing with the box of candy—started out with the purple ones. . . .

In his shock and horror he was slow in coming to full realization. Somewhere deep inside him a hard cold kernel of emotion stirred and swelled, and seemed to grow warmer as it expanded. Like the balloons they used to send up at the fairgrounds, when I was a kid, he thought hazily. They built a fire under it, and as the hot air filled the casing it grew and grew until it was a great fat billowing thing that tugged at the ropes that held it and finally burst loose and bounded away from the earth like a wild unchained beast.

He was breathing hard and fast, and the swelling sensation in his chest felt as though it would choke him. It was warmer now—it was hot; and it seemed to scald his throat. And suddenly that swelling agony was rage—white-hot, flaming rage.

"You—damned—lying—murdering—b—!" he whispered between clenched teeth, and every word had the concentrated essence of his fury in it. "You were going to marry her, were you? Oh yeah? You double-crossing, yellow-bellied son of a—"

There were no words for the thing he was trying to say. A sob of agonizing frustration jerked through his body, and he swallowed the bitter taste of nausea and pounded impotently on the table with a clenched fist.

Slowly the searing violence of passion subsided and the red haze faded from before his eyes. His vision was clear now, and his brain felt drained of emotion. He observed the steady inexorable operation of its cold sly cunning as an interested bystander might watch a phenomenally clever mechanism at work. Obedient to its suggestion he picked up the box and put on the cover.

"You had a lot to pay for, Lance Hardy," he breathed. "But this is something else. You're going to die for this."

He had forgotten that he had left the door ajar, until he heard the opening of the street door at the foot of the stairs and caught the low murmur of voices. For an instant he stood rigid, straining to listen. Yes, they were starting up the stairs——

In half a dozen noiseless strides he was across the room and out in the narrow hall. He paused at the railing where it twisted to run up to the floor above, and listened. A man's voice was speaking.

"You'd better go in alone, Susan. She will talk to you more frankly, I'm sure, without a third person present."

Silently Max slipped around the newel post and crept up the stairs and crouched there halfway up the second flight. When Susan and Mr. Turner reached the landing the little hall was vacant.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The door of Velma's room swung inward at Susan's knock. She made a little grimace of surprise over her shoulder at Mr. Turner as she tapped again on the panel.

There was no sound from within the room, and she spoke hesitantly. "Miss Larkin? May I come in? It's Susan Carey——"

She caught her breath as she saw the girl lying on the couch. At first sight she thought, as Max had done a few minutes earlier, that Velma was asleep.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she apologized, and cleared her throat, expecting the other girl to wake. When Velma did not stir, Susan stepped closer and touched her shoulder.

She drew back hastily and her face went white. "Mr. Turner!" she called, and there was a sharp edge of apprehension in her voice. "Mr. Turner! Come here, please!"

He was in the doorway, questioning. "I think," she whispered breathlessly, "I think—there's something wrong with her——"

He hurried to the couch and bent over the still figure. In a moment he lifted his head and looked at her, and at the expression in

his eyes Susan drew a deep quivering breath and sat down limply in the nearest chair.

"Is she—is she——"

He nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so, my dear." He tried for a pulse at her wrist and throat and slipped his hand inside the negligee to feel for a heartbeat. He shook his head, and, picking up the hand mirror from the dresser, held it to Velma's lips. He laid it down again quietly.

"She's dead. Within a few minutes——"

"Of course—I just talked to her——"

"Yes, to be sure. There might have been a possibility that someone else spoke to you—or that this was not the girl calling herself Velma Larkin——"

Susan shook her head. "No, this is Velma Larkin—she's the girl we saw on Christmas Eve. . . . We ought to call a doctor, shouldn't we?"

"Yes, I suppose so. . . . This seems very strange—apparently she died in her sleep. A sudden attack—and yet—for such a young woman, to have the heart suddenly stop. . . . It could happen, no doubt, but I—I don't like it. . . ."

She stared up at him with suddenly questioning eyes. "What do you mean?"

His thin shoulders went up slightly. "Nothing—nothing definite. It merely seems—odd. . . . Yes, we must call a doctor."

His voice trailed to silence as he glanced at the floor. He stooped and picked up a tiny wad of green foil and smoothed it out carefully.

"What's that?" asked Susan.

For a moment he did not answer. He held the little square of shining green to the light and read the trade-mark impressed in the foil, "Chocolats Giroux." Then he lifted it to his nose and smelled it. He looked at the still form on the couch, and, as Max had done, bent over it and sniffed at the parted lips. Only then did he turn to Susan, and his face looked shocked and very pale.

"I think, Susan, that this is a matter for the police."

She gasped. "Police! But—but why?"

"Is there a box of candy here in the room? Chocolates?"

Her eyes darted swiftly around the sparsely furnished room, and she shook her head. "No, I don't see any. But why——"

"Look in the drawers—the suitcase there under the couch——"

She made a hasty search and shook her head. "No—no candy. But why—what makes you think——"

"This came from a French liqueur chocolate—I know the brand. Tiny chocolate bottles filled with liqueur—look, you can see the shape of the bottle——"

"Yes, I know what they are, but——"

"It was lying right here by the couch, as if she had just eaten it and dropped the foil on the floor beside her. And there is a slight odor of cyanide on it; and a much stronger odor of cyanide on her lips. Like bitter almonds. It is a very swift-acting poison."

"You mean——" She shuddered and touched her tongue to lips that were suddenly dry. "Are you trying to tell me that she—she was *poisoned*?"

"That's the way it looks. Will you stay here, Susan, while I go and call the police? I saw a telephone in the lower hall as we came in."

She nodded dumbly and he left the room, and she heard his footsteps, careful with age but hurrying, descending the uncarpeted stairs. Then she turned and looked again at the still figure on the couch.

Poisoned. In the last few minutes, since Susan talked to her on the phone.

Susan was trying not to think. Trying to hold at a distance the suspicion that was battering at her consciousness, demanding recognition. She knew, with some detached fragment of her mind, that once she admitted it she would be face to face with something intolerable.

The girl was a total stranger; it was no responsibility of Susan's to try to look into the circumstances which had led to her death. They would undoubtedly trace back into some unknown area of Velma's life with which Susan could have not the remotest connection. All that was the work of the police——

If she had actually been poisoned. Mr. Turner might so easily have been mistaken about that. It might have been a simple heart attack. That was what it probably was.

But . . . Susan closed her eyes, fighting against that insistent thought that clamored to be heard. Velma Larkin had wanted to tell her something about Lance—something important—something

that would injure him. Something that, at the very least, would destroy his happiness—or so Velma had thought. She had not known that Susan was not going to marry him anyway. . . . Neither had Lance known it, with any certainty. And in the few minutes which had elapsed, before she could pass on her malicious information to Susan, she had been killed. . . . Poisoned. . . .

But it couldn't be—not Lance. It was preposterous to think him capable of such an act. And it would have been a physical impossibility for him to have been here anyway, under the circumstances. . . .

Would it? There was a sudden cold painful lump in her throat. He could have been here all the time—here in this tawdry little room with Velma Larkin—while they were searching for him. If that were true it would answer many questions.

But not all of them. It would still leave the enigmas of the attack on the Common—the petty persecutions—the inexplicable threat of the Whiffenpoof Song—the fear of actual death.

Lance couldn't possibly have loved Velma Larkin; he was too fastidious to become seriously interested in a girl of her type. Could she, then, have had some hold on him so strong that nothing short of death could make it possible for him to be free of her? Was he so entangled in the mesh of menace that he must make the choice between Velma's death and his own?

Mr. Turner was coming back up the stairs; his feet were heavy and slow, as if the climb taxed his strength. He was panting slightly as he came into the room.

"The police will be here shortly. There's a doctor right across the street; the landlady has gone for him. . . . No, he can do nothing for her, I'm sure, but it's the proper thing in the circumstances. . . . Here he comes now—"

It was a young, redhead man in a white coat who ran briskly up the stairs and strode across the room to the couch. He dropped his bag on the floor, yanked out a stethoscope, and bent over the inert figure. After a moment he straightened up, his round face grave, frowning.

"This woman is dead."

Mr. Turner nodded. "Yes, I know. I have called the police. They will be here very soon. We will appreciate it if you will stay until they arrive."

"The police!" He cast another look at the body and bent over it again.

Then they heard the outer door fling open, and heavy steps pounded up the stairs, and two burly, uniformed patrolmen strode in.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - O N E

The two patrolmen, dispatched to the scene in their prowly car on orders from headquarters, took command of the situation with methodical efficiency. With a few brisk questions they elicited the few preliminary facts they needed for their prompt report to headquarters—the names and addresses of Susan and Mr. Turner, the time of their arrival and discovery of the body, the fact that the dead woman was not a friend or even an acquaintance, and that neither of them could offer any information which seemed, at the moment, of importance.

"Anything been touched?"

Susan shook her head. Mr. Turner interposed, "Except for this, Officer. I picked up this bit of colored foil from the floor beside the couch. Apparently it was taken from a piece of chocolate candy. Notice the name on it?"

"Humph! Show me where you found it."

"Right here, where she might have dropped it from her hand as she lay on the couch. It was tightly crumpled—I smoothed it out."

The man grunted again. "Don't you know you're supposed to leave things alone? Don't look to me like she could have dropped it out of her hand, with her arms folded on her bosom. Oh well, that ain't my job, thank the Lord. . . . Okay, you two wait outside till the homicide squad gets here. They'll want to talk to you. . . . What do you make of it, Doctor?"

The doctor picked up his bag and stuffed the stethoscope into it and gave a slight shrug. "The woman is dead—that's all I can tell you. I only arrived a moment before you did. It's a case for the medical examiner."

"Thanks. I wouldn't know that, of course, without being told,"

the patrolman drawled with heavy sarcasm. "Stick around, brother, he'll be here in a few minutes. You don't need to tell *me* anything—save your breath to tell it to him."

The young doctor's face flamed with anger, but he managed to control it admirably. "Here is my card, Officer. My office is right across the street, and I have patients waiting for me. Tell the medical examiner he'll find me there any time he wants me." He picked up his bag and departed.

The officer gave a sour chuckle and winked at his partner. "Cocky, ain't he? . . . You stay here, Moynihan, while I call headquarters. . . . I thought I told you two to go on outside."

"Surely you don't expect us to sit on the stairs, do you?" Susan did her best to summon a friendly smile. "If you don't mind, we'd rather go back to my bookshop—it's right down on Charles Street—they can find us there——"

"Unh-unh." He shook his head with decision. "Sorry, lady, but you stay right here until they're through with you. Come on now, I've got to turn in my report."

He herded them before him out into the hall. A stout woman in a rumpled pink cotton house dress was laboring up the stairs. She paused on the landing, panting, her pudgy face flushed with irritation.

"Can't come up here, lady," said the policeman.

"What do you mean I can't—in my own house? I'd like to see you stop me. What are you doing here anyway? This is a respectable lodging house, I'd have you know; I'll have no police in it." Her sharp little eyes peered out between folds of flesh, darting this way and that. "Where's the doctor? What's the matter with the girl? That Miss Larkin, ain't it? What ails her? If she's going to be sick she can't stay here."

The patrolman shook his head cheerfully. "Now don't you worry, ma'am. She ain't going to be sick. She's dead."

"She's—what?"

"You heard me. I said she was dead. Under suspicious circumstances. . . . You the landlady?"

She nodded, her fat red hand fumbling at her lips. "What—what happened to her?"

"Well, don't quote me, ma'am, but if I was to give an opinion I'd say she'd been poisoned—real bad." He shook his head at her

chidingly. "That ain't nice, you know—not in a respectable lodging house. Apt to give the place a bad name."

"Why, you—you—what are you trying to insinuate? Nobody ever got poison in my house! I've never had any trouble with the police—never—"

"Well, you got trouble now, Dimples." He grinned and gave her fat shoulder an offhand pat as he went past her down the stairs. "Don't blow a gasket, ma'am. I was just kidding. But I can't let you go in there just now. Take these two downstairs, will you, and give them a place to sit down for a few minutes."

She drew a long tremulous breath. "Saints preserve us!" she murmured, and put out a shaking hand to the banister to steady herself. "Yes, come along down."

She opened a door and ushered them into a cluttered little room with battered furnishings; chairs and tables which had become too shabby even for her rented rooms, and were now relegated to her own apartment, a temporary way station on the route to ultimate destruction.

"Sit down," she said drearily, and looked at Mr. Turner. "You're the one told me to get the doctor, ain't you? Did you call the police?"

"Yes. It's too bad—but these things do happen. Try not to distress yourself. You aren't to blame."

She sniffed and rubbed her nose with a forefinger like a sausage. "I certainly ain't. I can't be responsible for everything that goes on—if I tried to I'd go crazy. I run my house respectable—nobody can't say I don't—but what they do in their own rooms is their own business. . . . That Miss Larkin—why, you'd never know but what she was a real nice decent girl. Kept to herself she did—I hardly laid eyes on her all the while she was here—and to think that she'd turn out like this!"

"It hardly seems fair to blame her for getting killed, does it?" Susan pointed out gently. "Nice decent people do get murdered sometimes, I suppose." But more often they're not so nice, she reflected silently. Velma Larkin hadn't impressed her as an especially admirable type; but it was better to try to forget that now.

Mrs. Williams looked at her as if she had said something startlingly illuminating. "Why, I guess you're right, at that! I've always had a feeling I hadn't ought to leave the front door unlocked;

but what are you going to do—lodgers going in and out at all hours? I suppose I'd ought to give them all keys. One of these hoodlums you read about in the papers must have just walked in and killed her. Nobody's safe these days, even in their own house—you read about something every day or two; innocent people getting shot and beaten up and strangled to death."

Neither Susan nor Mr. Turner thought it necessary to point out that none of these things had happened to Velma Larkin. The method of her killing had not been one that a chance intruder might use.

Time dragged by. At intervals they heard heavy feet on the stairs, crisp one-sided conversations on the telephone outside Mrs. Williams' door, the murmur of men's deep voices upstairs. The landlady's distressed monologue droned on.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T W O

At last there came a tap of knuckles on the door and a uniformed man pushed it open. He glanced at Mrs. Williams, catalogued her unerringly, and turned to the others. "Will you please come up, miss? And you too, sir. You're the ones who found the body?"

"Yes." Susan glanced at her wrist watch and saw that it was almost two o'clock. They followed the officer up the stairs.

There were several men in the room. A photographer stood at the table before the window, packing up his equipment, and another man was busy doing something to the arms of the shabby Morris chair—taking fingerprints, no doubt. A sheet covered the body on the couch now: it lay very straight and symmetrical, like an effigy on a marble tomb.

The sandy-haired man with gold-rimmed spectacles must be the medical examiner; a battered physician's bag was on the chair beside him. He was talking soberly with a tall grizzled man in a well-cut gray suit, who seemed to be the person in authority. His gray eyes were keen, and his thin-lipped austere face had a look of intelligence and determination. Watching him briefly from the open doorway, Susan thought that the investigation of Velma's death was

in competent hands. Very little would escape those shrewd gray eyes, and he would carry out his task with tenacity and inflexible purpose. That was the way it should be. It was foolish, and altogether reprehensible, to wish, as she did for one impulsive instant, that he didn't look quite so competent.

The medical examiner picked up his bag and went out, giving them a jerky nod as he sidled past them. The gray-haired man turned to them with a brief, businesslike smile.

"Come in, please. My name is Morrison—Sergeant Morrison, detective attached to the Bureau of Criminal Investigation. You are Miss—" He flipped the pages of a little black notebook.

"Susan Carey. And this is Mr. Turner."

He nodded. "You were friends of the—of Miss Larkin?"

"No. Neither of us knew her."

His eyebrow went up. "I understood you came to call on her."

"She telephoned to me and asked me to come."

"You say you didn't know each other—"

Mr. Turner cleared his throat. "If I might interrupt—Susan, my dear, I think it would be more helpful to Sergeant Morrison if you explained the circumstances quite frankly."

The detective's thin lips twitched. "Thank you, sir. The question-and-answer method gets results, but it does waste time."

Susan managed an apologetic smile. "I didn't mean to be difficult, but I hardly know where to begin. A friend of mine disappeared a few days ago, quite mysteriously. Lansing Hardy. We've been awfully worried about him—"

"Disappeared? Has it been reported?"

"To the police, you mean?" Susan shook her head. "No, it hasn't. I felt that it should be, but after all I had no authority to do anything about it. His aunts—he lives with two elderly aunts—absolutely refused to have the police brought in. They're very—well, conservative, you know—"

He nodded crisply. "I know the type—consider it a disgrace to avail themselves of the protection they pay taxes for. That kind'll go to any lengths trying to muddle through by themselves. Oh well, skip it. The name, you said, was Lansing Hardy?" He made a swift notation. "And the address?"

"Eight-seventy Mt. Vernon Street."

A swift grin flashed across his austere face. "It would be . . .

So the two dear old ladies are just sitting there on Beacon Hill worrying about their boy——”

“Oh no. They consulted their lawyer—Bradford Howes, of the firm of——”

“I know him.”

Mr. Howes engaged a private detective by the name of William Story. He's been working on it for two or three days.”

He nodded. “Competent man—but of course he hasn't got the facilities. . . . Go on.”

“Well, Velma Larkin apparently knew Lance, and he must have mentioned my name. She telephoned to me this noon—a little before twelve—and said she had something to tell me about Lance and asked me to come and see her. So naturally, I came right over. I thought she might know where he is.”

“Mm. . . . Where were you when you got this message?”

“At my bookshop, on Charles Street.” She gave him the number. “Mr. Turner happened to be there, and he offered to come along with me.”

“Why?”

She looked up at him, puzzled. “Why? Well, it seemed like a rather strange message——”

“A threatening message?”

“Oh no!” she said, a little too vehemently. “Just—odd.”

“Just what did she say?”

She hesitated. “I don't remember exactly. She said she could tell me something about Lance that I ought to know—or I'd like to know—I'm not sure which. I thought from the way she spoke that she wanted to pass on some petty, malicious gossip, and I said I wasn't interested. She said she was just trying to do me a favor and gave me this address, just in case I changed my mind. And then the thought occurred to me that perhaps she knew where he was. I asked her, and she said ‘Wouldn't you like to know?’ and hung up. So I decided to come right over. Do you blame me?”

“No—for some reason she seems to have been very anxious to get you here. She used sound psychology——”

“But perhaps she *did* know!”

“Yes, that's quite possible. On the other hand——” He glanced at Mr. Turner. “You thought Miss Carey might need protection?”

He smiled faintly. “Shall we say moral support? I fear I should be

physically unequal to anything more active. I thought from the general tone of the young woman's remarks that the interview might be unpleasant, and it might be less so if a third person were present."

"I see. . . . Miss Carey—forgive the question—what's your relation to Mr. Hardy?"

"We're very old friends—lifelong friends." Susan's brown eyes were direct.

"Nothing more?"

"No. . . . She might have thought there was, I suppose."

He nodded, brusquely dismissing the subject. "All right. Now—how long was it from the time she telephoned until you got here?"

"Not long. Less than half an hour."

"And you found her dead. Doesn't that strike you as a rather remarkable coincidence?"

"What—what do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Didn't the thought occur to you—or to you, Mr. Turner?—that someone might have been very anxious to keep her from talking to you? So anxious, in fact, that he might have been willing to kill her, to prevent it?"

Susan touched her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. "I—I don't—"

"Let's be frank, Miss Carey. Who is the most obvious person?"

She shook her head, a little desperately. "Not Lance. He disappeared—last Tuesday—"

Sergeant Morrison's lips curled humorlessly. "When you say he disappeared you mean simply that you don't know where he is. He's somewhere, that's sure—so why not here?"

"But—I know Lance—I've known him practically all my life. He couldn't have done a thing like that."

The detective looked at her with a strange expression in his eyes. "Perhaps you didn't know him as well as you think. I've met up with some incredible cases. One of the most brutal murders I ever worked on was committed by a sweet little old lady of seventy-seven."

Mr. Turner nodded thoughtfully. "I imagine any human being is capable of murder—if the provocation is great enough."

The sergeant's face hardened. "In this case there's evidence of pretty cold-blooded behavior. The way it looks, the murderer must

have given her a piece of poisoned candy and stood there and watched her eat it, and die. Then he rearranged the body, crossed her hands on her breast, and walked out, taking the rest of the candy with him. If it hadn't been for that bit of tin foil you found on the floor, there wouldn't have been a thing to show how the poison was administered. The P.M. would show the chocolate in the stomach, of course, but that would hardly be conclusive evidence. Now at least we know how she got it, and we've got something to start on."

Susan shuddered. "Not Lance—he couldn't have done that!"

Just then there were footsteps on the stairs, and a man in white appeared in the doorway. Sergeant Morrison glanced at him and gave him a nod.

"Miss Carey, if you and Mr. Turner will step outside for a minute, there's a little job to be done here. You might walk up to the next landing—"

Mr. Turner's hand gently steered her out into the hall and up the second flight of stairs. In the hall was a second man in white, and as they passed she saw the bulky shape of the thing they carried between them. She stood taut, trying not to listen, but hearing nonetheless the brisk passage of the men into the room, and a moment later their return, more slowly, and the heavy-footed careful descent of the stairs.

"All right now," said Sergeant Morrison, and they went back into Velma Larkin's room. The body was gone, and the maroon couch cover was neat as if it had never lain there. The detective was crisply businesslike. "One more question, Miss Carey, and I want an honest answer. What is it about Mr. Hardy's disappearance that you haven't told me?"

Susan's eyes opened wide. "Why, what makes you think—"

"Don't try that line, please." For the first time he showed impatience. "I wouldn't have gotten far in my job if I hadn't learned to put two and two together and get some kind of an answer. There is obviously some connection between this murder and the mysterious disappearance of Lansing Hardy. I think he killed Velma Larkin, but I could be wrong. If I am, there's still a connection, and one that I don't like. I think you had some knowledge that made you afraid to come over here and talk to her alone. Mr. Turner knew it, and came along with you—for moral support, so he

says. . . . There is also one very obvious possibility which we haven't mentioned up to now—”

“Oh now, really—” Mr. Turner interposed hastily.

Sergeant Morrison went on as if he had not been interrupted. His eyes were suddenly gimlet-sharp, boring into hers. “What did you do with the rest of the candy, Miss Carey?”

“What did I—” she gasped, and her face went white. “You aren't trying to suggest that I—that we—”

“I'm merely suggesting that it's a possibility which has to be considered. We don't know Hardy was here; we don't know anybody else was here. You two were. Nobody saw you come in, so far as I can discover. You might have been here half an hour before you 'discovered' the body, and telephoned headquarters. I have only your word for it that you didn't know this Velma Larkin. You may have had good reason to kill her—if there ever is a good reason for murder—”

Susan shut her eyes and shook her head desperately against the enormity of the thing he was saying. “No! No! I didn't know her—I told you the absolute truth about that.”

“You never saw her in your life, until you saw her lying there on the couch, dead?”

“No, believe me, I—” Then she caught her breath and her hand flew up to her lips in a swift gesture, as she remembered. “That isn't quite true. I saw her, but I never spoke to her, except over the phone today.”

“You saw her—when?”

“On Beacon Hill, Christmas Eve. Later that night, Lance and I saw her again, down on the Common, when we walked down to look at the Nativity tableau. She seemed to be watching us rather oddly, as if she were spying on us. Lance went over and spoke to her. He knew her, it seems. I didn't know that until today.”

“And when she telephoned, you knew at once that it was the same girl?”

She shook her head. “I didn't actually know it, until we came in here and saw her.”

“But the truth is that after Hardy went to talk to her you realized that there was something between them. You quarreled. And in the course of it he told you something that made you want to kill her.

When she called you and gave you her address it was just the opportunity you were waiting for. Am I right?"

The fabrication was so ridiculous that Susan laughed with a complete naturalness that was convincing.

"No, you couldn't be more wrong, Sergeant Morrison. I never quarreled with Lance—I guess I'm not the quarreling kind. If as you say, there was 'something' between them, it was no affair of mine. I'm not in love with Lance—I never have been. I'm fond of him—we grew up together, you see—and we always had sort of a vague idea that we'd get married someday. But not any longer. I simply don't feel that way about him."

"When did you decide that—when you found out about his affair with Velma Larkin?"

"Oh, please!" she said wearily. "I've told you the truth—can't you let it go at that?"

"I find it hard to reconcile your statement that you no longer care for him with your very apparent anxiety about him that you say brought you over here to talk to this girl. And the way you rise to his defense, in spite of the evidence—it doesn't make sense."

"I just told you I'm fond of him. You don't lose your affection for a lifelong friend when you decide you don't want to marry him. There's nothing very strange about that, is there? And I *am* worried about him—frightfully worried. I'm afraid—afraid—" To her horror she felt tears sting her eyelids and heard the sudden quaver of her voice.

He looked at her with a new intent gleam in his eyes. "What are you afraid of? That he killed this girl?"

She shook her head. "No, Sergeant Morrison, I'm afraid that he has been killed."

"Have you any reason to think so?"

She swallowed hard, trying to hold back the threatening tears. "I can't—I just have a feeling—"

"Susan, I think the sergeant should know all about it. This is no time to try to hold back any facts, however irrelevant they may seem." He turned to the sergeant. "Lance Hardy was convinced that he was marked for murder. He was attacked on the Common on Christmas Eve, just after speaking to Velma Larkin."

"What do you mean—attacked?"

"Struck down from behind and rendered unconscious for a few minutes. It was not, I am sure, intended as a lethal blow. It seems to have been merely one episode in a deliberate campaign of terrorism—"

"Good lord, this is a fine time to tell me!"

Mr. Turner smiled apologetically. "It seemed to me we were making progress as fast as could reasonably be expected. The whole situation is very involved, and I felt that you were dealing with it most competently, in taking up the immediate issue first. Susan and I will be happy now to give you what background information we have—though it is a question how much of it is relevant to the present problem."

"Anything is relevant, in a murder investigation," the sergeant snapped, but it was evident that he was mollified by the old gentleman's tactful little speech. "You say Hardy was being systematically persecuted. Who by?"

"That, I am sorry to say, we don't know."

"Lance tried to tell me," Susan broke in contritely, "but I kept putting him off. If I'd only let him! I had an appointment to meet him the day he disappeared, and he was going to tell me the whole story. But he never kept the appointment, and I haven't seen him since."

"What *do* you know? You say there was a series of things—"

"Well, it began," said Susan, "a few days before Christmas, when somebody shot at him from a car. Then the attack on the Common, Christmas Eve. There were other things, I think; I don't know exactly what they were, but he grew more and more nervous and upset. And the Whiffenpoof Song was somehow mixed up in it—"

"The *what?*?"

"It's a Yale song—'We are poor little lambs who have gone astray . . .'" she hummed the phrase.

"Oh yes, I know the thing. What did that song have to do with it?"

"I don't know, but they kept singing it, and every time Lance heard it he seemed to be—frightened. And then the other day they parked the car in front of my shop and—"

"What car?"

"Oh, it's all so complicated, and I seem to get ahead of myself!"

They—whatever they are—drive a salmon-colored car. They carry a record player in it, which plays the Whiffenpoof Song."

"You're kidding!"

"Oh no, I'm not. I've seen it, and it was playing when they shot at Lance, up on the embankment. And as I was saying, they stopped in front of my shop the other day—the day of the snow-storm—and put a note on my desk telling me to ask Lance what the Whiffenpoof Song meant. . . . Oh, I just remembered! I took down the registration number of the car! I intended to give it to Lance, the next time I saw him—I wrote it down on my desk pad. But—"

"Well, now we're getting somewhere!"

Susan shook her head ruefully. "I'm frightfully sorry, but I haven't got it. I went to find it, to give it to the detective, Mr. Story, and it was gone. It must have gotten torn off the pad by mistake."

Morrison gave a disgusted snort. "A big help that turned out to be! Who tore it off?"

"I must have done it myself, in a moment of mental aberration," she confessed. "There were several other notes on the page, and I suppose I just ripped it off when I got through with them. I can't see how I could have been so careless!"

"You don't remember the number, of course?"

She shook her head. "It was a Massachusetts plate, and a six-digit number. The first one was a nine. I do remember that much."

"Fine! Fine! That certainly simplifies things a lot. Now it's narrowed down to a mere hundred thousand. We can run through those easy, looking for all the salmon-colored cars."

"I'm terribly sorry!"

The corner of his mouth went up. "Never mind—even that is a help. It'll be something to keep the boys busy. And we may get at it another way. There aren't too many cars that color on the road. Happen to notice what make it was?"

"No—but it was one of the less expensive ones, I think."

He nodded and jotted something down in his notebook. "We'll get it. . . . It's a bit screwy, though."

"What's screwy about it?" Susan asked curiously.

"Driving a car that color—to commit murder in. They must be damn fools. . . . Anything else?"

Susan nodded. "Yes—and it may be the most important thing of all. The day Lance disappeared—last Tuesday afternoon—I talked to him on the phone and agreed to meet him in the cocktail room at the Parker House at quarter past five. He was then in his office on Devonshire Street. He never kept the appointment.

"The next morning there was a report in the paper of an accident in the subway at the South Station during the rush hour—an unidentified man fell, or was pushed, off the platform and was barely rescued from in front of an incoming train by another man, who jumped down and helped him climb out. He wasn't hurt, apparently, and he went away with the man who had rescued him, without anybody finding who they were. Some of the witnesses reported it to a guard and said they thought the two men knew each other. Afterward, they found the man's hat on the tracks—it had the initials LMH inside. . . . Nobody has seen Lance since."

"Hm-m-m. That's interesting—very interesting. Fell—or was pushed. Got an idea that was it, haven't you?"

She nodded. "I think they really tried to kill him. But if so—who was the man who rescued him? And why should he have disappeared, if it was one of his friends?"

"You must know who his friends are."

She smiled faintly and shook her head. "He must have hundreds of friends and acquaintances. He's lived in Boston all his life."

Morrison stroked his chin, frowning. "What was he doing in the South Station subway? Seems like an odd route to the Parker House, especially at the rush hour. He could have walked to the Parker House in half the time."

She nodded. "He almost never uses the subway, even when it's the most convenient way to go places. Oh, I've gone over and over it in my own mind! There's something awfully queer about it——"

"Unless he went there by prearrangement, to meet someone. It was a perfect spot to stage a murder and make it look like an accident. He wouldn't have been such a fool, unless he knew the person and trusted him."

She nodded soberly. "I called his office the next day, and his secretary told me that just before he left the office on Tuesday he had a telephone call from a man named Tully—Max Tully. He may have gone to the South Station to meet him."

"What makes you think so? Do you know him?"

"No, but I've seen him; Christmas Eve, on Beacon Hill. A dark, bushy-haired young man. From something Lance said, I think he might be involved. Lance didn't like him, but there might have been some reason for them to meet."

"Know where he lives?"

"No, I don't know anything more about him."

Morrison shrugged. "Oh well, we'll find him. I've got enough to keep me busy for a while. Where can I reach you over the weekend?"

He noted their addresses and telephone numbers in his book and snapped an elastic band around it. "If anything else occurs to either of you which might be a help, get in touch with me at headquarters. Just give your name—they'll find me."

"Then you're not going to arrest me for Velma Larkin's murder?" said Susan.

He grinned at her, and for an instant he looked very human and likable. "Not right now. But watch your step."

"And if you find out anything about Lance, will you please call me?"

"I'll let you know. I expect you to do the same for me. Understand?"

She nodded, and her eyes were suddenly wide and dark. "Yes, Sergeant Morrison, I understand."

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T H R E E

Max Tully's mother looked up from the sweater she was knitting when he walked into the room. She was sitting in a low wooden rocker, and though the window overlooked nothing but the automobile graveyard and the vacant lot beyond, she had drawn the chair a little way back, so that she could not be seen if a chance eye should turn in that direction.

"So you're back, Son. All quiet up above, there hasn't been a sound out of him all day." Then as she noticed the expression on his face, she stuffed the knitting into her bag and rose hastily. "What's wrong, Max?"

"He killed her."

She stared at him, her black eyes puzzled. "Who?"

"That damned rat," his head jerked in the direction of the ceiling.
"He killed Velma. Poisoned her. She's dead."

Her strong, rather severe face had the look of chiseled marble, and her lips tightened as she looked at him. "How could that be, Son? He hasn't been out of that room for four days."

"He did it, I tell you. I know. Damn his soul——"

She stood motionless, looking at him. Her voice was very low, almost as though she were talking to herself. "If he did, she brought it on herself—I knew all the time that you'd have no good out of her——"

"For God's sake, Mom——"

Her eyes softened just a bit, and she put her hand on his arm. "I know, Son. You loved her, didn't you?"

"Yeah," he said harshly. "More than I knew, till I saw her lying there dead." He flung away from her abruptly. "God, what a fool I was!"

"That won't do any good now," she said, and her quiet steady tone recalled him. "The question is, what are you going to do now —about *him*?"

"Send him to the electric chair."

"That's all very well, but do you *know*? Have you got actual proof?"

"Sure I have. Plenty."

For a long moment she stared out of the window, her black eyes narrowed and brooding. She said steadily, "If he's a murderer we've got to get him out of the house. I don't want to have to answer questions about what he's doing here—and you don't either. They'd call it kidnaping, I suppose, if he told the story." A thought twitched her stern lips. "He might even persuade them we were hiding him, knowing he was wanted. We'd be accessories after the fact. That would be—rather ironic, wouldn't it? Max, we've got to get him away from here."

"I'll get him away," he said savagely.

"Will you notify the police?"

"All in good time, Mom. Right now there's something I've got to do, and I want you to come with me. I want a witness."

"A witness to what?"

"You'll understand. I'll tell you all about it later; right now there isn't time. Come along."

She had not noticed the box he carried under his arm until they stopped outside the attic door. He held it behind him then, and she saw that it looked like a candy box decorated with poinsettias and red ribbon.

"Unlock it, Mom." He had his gun in the other hand.

Her eyes glinted sternly. "No shooting, Son. Whatever happens."

His mouth contorted in a contemptuous grin. "Don't worry. He's yellow. I won't have to shoot."

He turned the knob and the door swung open. Lance was lying on the cot, but at the sound of the opening door he sprang to his feet.

"You let me out of here!" he screamed. "I'll get even with you, Max Tully, if it takes the rest of my life!"

"Shut up." He kicked the door shut and walked across the sordid little room. His voice sounded pleasant. "Mom and I thought we'd come up and see how you were getting along. Perfectly comfortable, are you? Warm enough? Maybe you'd like a change of diet—a fellow does get sick of rice—gets to thinking of all the nice rich tasty foods he'd like—"

Lance ran his tongue over his gray lips. "Max—" he mumbled. "Max—for the love of God—I'll do anything—anything you say—to make things right. If you want money—"

"Oh now, Lance, I ain't a blackmailer. You like candy? You used to eat a lot of it when we were in the service. How about some chocolates?"

"Chocolates!" Lance whispered. "God, I'd give my soul for a—"

"You said it, boy," said Max, and held out the open box to him. "Have one?"

For a moment that seemed endless Lance stood as if turned to stone, staring down at the almost empty box with the handful of tiny foil-wrapped bottles in it. His scrubby unshaven face was lead-colored.

"What's the matter?" said Max. "I thought you liked candy. Go ahead and take one."

Lance shook his head in a queer frantic way, and his lips writhed, as if he could not force a sound from them. His head jerked again, desperately.

"No, I—I don't want any," he managed to say.

"Why not? You don't think there's anything wrong with them, do you?" Max thrust his face forward, a few inches from Lance's, and hissed the words venomously. "You don't think they're poisoned, do you? *Do you?*"

"Poisoned!" Lance squeaked. "Why should I think that? I don't—I never saw them before!"

"You know damn well they're poisoned! No wonder you wouldn't take any, you damned murderer!"

"Murderer!" Lance whispered. "I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't—"

"You gave it to Velma—that box of poisoned chocolates. She told me so. Don't try to deny it—"

"I didn't—I didn't know they were poisoned—"

"Aaah, save it for the birds! What kind of a sap do you think I am? You thought it was a nice safe easy way to get rid of her, didn't you?"

"No, I—I swear, Max—"

"Well, you got rid of her all right!"

Lance touched his lips with a shaking hand. "What do you—you mean she's—she's—"

"Yeah, she's dead, you stinking b—! That was what you wanted, wasn't it? Well, you've got it—and how do you like it?"

"But I didn't know, Max! You've got to believe me!" Lance's eyes were wild and his voice was hoarse. "Somebody sent that box to *me*. I was the one who was meant to be poisoned!"

"Rats! You expect me to believe that?"

"But it's the truth—I swear it!" he sobbed.

"All right—then what did you give it to Velma for? You knew better than to eat them yourself, didn't you? If you think they are all right, why don't you take one now? It don't wash, Hardy—it just don't wash."

Lance dropped down on the edge of the cot and buried his face in his hands. "What do you want me to do, Max?"

"Get the hell out of my house."

"But—aren't you going to—to do anything—"

"I'll do plenty, when the right time comes," said Max. "Get out. Get out, I say!"

For a long moment Lance stared at him, frantic, bewildered.

Then without a word he brushed past the woman who stood by the open door and clattered down the stairs to the street. Max followed. He snatched up a newspaper in the kitchen of the second-floor apartment, folded it hastily around the candy box, and handed it to his mother, who came more slowly down the stairs.

"Take this, Mom, and guard it with your life. It's going to send him to the chair. Keep that paper around it—don't want your fingerprints on it. Mine are—but we can't help that."

"What are you going to do now—notify the police?"

He nodded. "As soon as he gets away from this neighborhood. Pack up your things, Mom, and go on back home. I'll pick up the suitcases later. Better take the box of candy with you."

"I know what to do. I'll take care of everything here. Son—be careful."

He touched her cheek. "You're a brick. Don't worry."

He ran down the stairs and the outer door closed.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - F O U R

Lance Hardy was still in sight, walking fast. He passed the automobile graveyard and the empty lot, and hesitated at the corner, looking up and down as if trying to orient himself. Then he crossed the street and darted into the grocery store on the opposite corner. A moment later he emerged and hurried away down the street. He did not look back.

On Cambridge Street, three blocks down, he swung aboard a trackless trolley, and behind him Max swore under his breath and began to run. At the intersection a couple of blocks ahead the bus stopped for a red light, and Max almost caught up with it. An empty taxi was at the curb, and at that moment the driver came out of a nearby newsstand with the evening paper, glancing idly at the headlines as he crossed the sidewalk. Max flung open the taxi door.

"Hey, driver, make it snappy, will you?" he called. "I'm in a hurry!"

"Relax, Joe. We ain't going to no fire," drawled the driver, deliberately slow, and paused to give his tires a leisurely inspection.

"For God's sake, man——"

The driver glanced at him. At the look on the other man's face his expression altered almost comically and he flung open the door and catapulted to his seat. "Okay, buddy. Where to?"

"Follow that bus—the yellow one——" Max pointed. The driver nodded and swung into traffic. Already the bus was some distance away, rolling along briskly. The Saturday-afternoon traffic was not heavy, and the driver threaded his way adroitly through it, gaining swiftly on the vehicle ahead.

"That's close enough," said Max. "Keep behind it, and I'll tell you when to stop."

"Somebody steal your wallet?" the driver drawled out of the corner of his mouth. "Or is your wife running away with another fellow?"

"What?" said Max. "Oh yeah—yeah."

Lance left the bus at Lechmere Square. As the door swung open he leaped to the ground and stood for a moment hesitating on the sidewalk, looking around in feverish haste. His eyes rested for an instant on the gleaming sign and plate-glass front of a restaurant across the way. In the taxi, halted behind the bus, Max smiled grimly as he saw Lance rub a hand over his unshaven face and try to smooth his rough tousled hair. Then he turned up his coat collar closer about his collarless throat and entered a small, poorly lighted lunchroom.

"I'll get out here. Keep the change," said Max, and handed the driver a bill.

"Thanks. Hope you catch him," the man said, and drove on.

Max found a telephone booth in a drugstore almost across the way from the lunchroom and dialed a number swiftly. Through the glass he could keep an eye on the lunchroom door and see Lance if he came out. But he didn't think he would—not for some time.

"Jerry?" he said tersely, when a voice answered his call. "This is Max. Still looking for Lance?"

"You bet I am! Do you know where the hell he is? He sure gave us the slip—he hasn't been home for——"

"What makes you think he isn't dead?"

"Dead! What the devil are you talking about?"

Jerry sounded worried. Better let him sweat for a couple of minutes. "Didn't you expect him to die when you sent him that box of candy?"

"What candy? I didn't send him no—"

"That's what *you* say. I know better, Jerry."

"What you trying to tell me, Max? Quit horsing around." Jerry's voice was husky, and he seemed to be having trouble with his breathing. "Max—give it to me straight! You're not kidding? He's—dead?"

"Nah—he isn't dead; not yet, worse luck! But you're in trouble, Jerry. Bad trouble."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"He knew better than to eat that candy. Nobody but a damn fool would, after what you'd been putting him through. But he pulled a fast one. He gave it away—to a girl—and she's dead."

There was a long silence. Max said, "You there, Jerry?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. Listen, Max, this hasn't got nothing to do with me—or the other boys. If he got a hold of some poisoned candy it's just too bad—"

"Aw, skip it, Jerry. Don't give me that—save it for the police."

"Say, are you threatening me? Max, I swear to God if you tell the police—"

"Aw, forget it. What do you think I called you up for—blackmail or something? I'm just tipping you off. I hate the bastard just as much as you do—more, maybe. I knew that girl he killed. I knew her—real well, Jerry. Get me?"

"Hell, Max, that's a shame—"

"Listen, Jerry. If you play the thing right you'll be in the clear, and he'll get his—real nice and legal. . . . You didn't leave any fingerprints on that candy box, did you? You or the other boys?"

"Fingerprints? Good God, no! Max, I swear by all that's—"

"Okay, okay. I just thought I'd ask. I might have known you wouldn't be careless. . . . Well, I just thought I'd better warn you how things stand. You can take it from here—I'm checking out. I don't want to get mixed up in it."

"Wait a minute, Max! How the hell can I do anything about it, if I don't know where he is?"

"He's getting a square meal in a lunchroom in Lechmere Square—the Coffee Pot. He's just gone in, and he'll probably be there

some time. He's real hungry—been on a restricted diet for a few days. You coming over?"

"You bet I am. Are you right there?"

"Yeah—across the street. Watch your step, Jerry. The police are after him for murder—if they ain't they soon will be. I don't know as I'd get into it if I was you—might be better to leave the whole thing lay. I don't see how they can pin it on you, no matter what he says——"

"Stay there, will you, and keep an eye on him? It'll take me a little while——"

"What you going to do when you get here?"

"Hell, how do I know?" Jerry laughed shortly.

"Just bear in mind that you don't have to kill him now. He'll go to the electric chair anyway. That's better than you, Jerry."

"Oh, sure. I'll just make certain he don't get lost on the way."

"There's one other thing I might mention. That car of yours—still driving that orange-colored job?"

"Yeah——"

"It's pretty flashy, Jerry. If I was you——"

"I guess you may have something there. I'll leave it in the garage—Fitz has got an old jalopy we can use. Bit of luck—he's right here now. Be seeing you, Max."

Max hung up the receiver and stood for a moment, scowling at the instrument, considering his next move. His lips narrowed in a grim smile.

"May as well let Jerry have his bit of fun. He won't lose him," he muttered, and dialed police headquarters.

"I have some information about the murder of Velma Larkin, on Pinckney Street—it's been reported, of course. . . . Yes, I felt sure it had been. The man you want is named Lansing Hardy, and he lives at 870 Mt. Vernon Street. His office is at 1220 Devonshire—Hardy, Wills and Thompson. You can no doubt pick him up at one place or the other. He gave Miss Larkin a box of poisoned candy. I have the remains of the box, and I will produce it as soon as you have him in custody. I'll watch the papers."

"Say, who is this? What's your——"

Max quietly hung the receiver in its cradle. He was grinning as he stepped out of the booth and left the drugstore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The food in the Coffee Pot was surprisingly good. After an ample meal of steak, french-fried potatoes and apple pie, Lance felt restored to something like his usual physical condition. He shoved away the empty dishes and, with his third cup of coffee before him, lit a cigarette and considered his situation.

The first thing to do, of course, was to take a taxi home and get into some decent clothes and have a shave. Then he felt that he would be able to cope with the extremely awkward predicament in which he found himself. In his present battered, filthy state he couldn't seem to put his mind on it. Have to call up his lawyer, of course; have him come up to the house and explain about that wretched box of candy, and have him handle it.

It might be better—it probably would—not to take any action at all for the present. Let the police come to him with their questions if they wanted to. He'd already come to that decision a hundred times in the past few days—he'd better stick to it. His release from that hellhole of an attic had come with such unexpected suddenness that he felt bewildered. The last thing in the world he had expected was that Max would let him go like that, with no mention of money, no *quid pro quo*—

Max was scared, of course. Afraid of getting involved in that business of the poisoned chocolates. Afraid, at the very least, of a kidnaping charge.

And well he might be! That was one thing that could be set in motion without delay, just as soon as he could get hold of Bradford Howes. Yes, in all the circumstances it seemed like an excellent idea to take the initiative, where he was unquestionably the injured party. In that way, they could lead straight into the matter of the poisoned chocolates, and he himself would be on the right side of the fence—the accuser. They would find the candy box in Max's apartment, and he'd have to explain how he got it. He must have been in Velma's room. They'd find his fingerprints there. He knew she was dead—murdered—

The cigarette dropped from Lance's nerveless fingers, and lay unheeded on the table. It was as if he had suddenly waked from a drugged coma and found himself, clearheaded and completely rational, facing the truth with eyes that saw it for the first time in every appalling detail.

Velma had eaten the candy and died. And before she died she had told Max that Lance had given it to her. It must be the truth—he couldn't possibly have known it otherwise. Unless Max himself had sent the candy in the first place. Maybe he had. Maybe, somehow, it could be pinned on him.

If he had, would he have acted as he did, coming straight to Lance with the remains of the box? Deliberately involving himself in the mess? It seemed like an insane thing to do—but then, Max must have had a perverted mind, to plot such a sadistic revenge for an old, imagined injury. Those years in the prison camp must have made him crazy. Maybe his hate was so rabid that he didn't care what happened to himself, so long as he dragged Lance down to destruction with him.

Damn it, they'd call it murder, and regardless of where the poison came from in the first place, it would be Lance they'd blame for Velma's death. Max had made certain of that with devilish cunning, when he invited him to eat one of the chocolates. He'd given himself away stupidly; he realized that now. And the old woman, Max's mother, was a second witness to the fact that he knew the candy was poisoned; suspected it was, at least. But even now he couldn't see what else he could have done. If he'd eaten it he'd have been dead now.

Lance shoved back his chair abruptly and strode to the cashier's desk beside the door to pay his check. He must get away from here—get home—hide—make some kind of plan—

He pocketed his change and turned to the door, and went rigid, his hand on the knob. Max Tully was standing in a doorway across the street halfway along the block. His head was turned away at the moment, but there was no mistaking that stocky figure in the heavy brown overcoat, and the black bush of his hair. As Lance watched, Max stepped to the curb where a car was just pulling up; an old red car with dented rusty fenders. The window was open, and Max spoke to the man who sat in the front seat beside the driver, and his hatless head gestured in the direction of the Coffee

Pot. After a moment's conversation he walked briskly away, and the car edged along the curb until it was directly opposite the lunchroom. Frank Fitzpatrick was driving the car, and it was Jerry Morgan who sat beside him.

Lance's heart was pounding. He turned back to the cashier's desk. "Is there a men's room here?"

She nodded. "Right through that door."

It was a tiny box of a closet, and there was no door leading out to the rear, as he had hoped. The only window was high up in the wall, and about a foot square. He went back to the lunchroom. The cashier eyed him curiously.

For once luck was with him. A huge van was coming down the street. When it was directly in front of the Coffee Pot Lance opened the door and darted down the street, keeping the van between him and the waiting car. He would have liked to look back and see whether he had been observed, but he didn't dare turn his head.

There was no taxi anywhere in sight, and he couldn't risk waiting for one. He crossed the street to the Lechmere station, an island in the middle of the square. He did not notice the burly fair-haired man who loitered inconspicuously nearby, as he waited impatiently for the train. When he boarded it John Cramer was in the next car.

In the turmoil of his thoughts Lance had forgotten his unshaven face and dirty, disheveled condition until a woman, laden with bundles from her day's shopping, looked at him with obvious distaste and edged away from him in the crowd. He yanked his collar closer about his bare throat. Lord, what a bum he must look! If only he could get home without meeting anyone he knew!

At Park Street he left the train and leaped up the stairs. There were taxis lined up at the stand in Tremont Street—heading the wrong way, worse luck, but it didn't really matter, so long as he could conceal himself until he reached the house. He flung open the door of the front cab.

"Eight-seventy Mt. Vernon Street——"

The driver eyed him dubiously and jerked a thumb. "Take one over there—it'll get you there quicker——"

He climbed in. "Go ahead——"

"Have to go clear down to Boylston——"

"I know—that's all right."

The driver shrugged, flipped his flag, and started off. Behind them the second cab swung out from the curb.

The Saturday-afternoon traffic was very heavy, and Lance gritted his teeth and clenched his fists as the taxi edged the interminable length of Tremont Street, halted for the endless succession of lights at the corner of Boylston, and again at Charles. He was quivering with tension when at last they swung into Mt. Vernon Street.

"What number did you say?" the driver asked grumpily. Evidently he didn't think much of his chance of a tip.

"Eight-seventy—in the middle of the block," Lance snapped. "The house with the—"

He caught his breath. There was a police prowler car pulled up beside the curb, directly across the street from the house, with two uniformed men in it.

"Don't stop. Drive on!" he cried.

"Hey, what's the big idea?"

"I've changed my mind. I'm not going to stop here—"

"Well, for God's sake!" The driver brought the car to a standstill. "So I buck the traffic all over the city of Boston, and you change your mind! What kind of a dope do you take me for?"

Lance crouched lower in the seat. "You'll get paid. Don't stand there—please drive on—"

"You're darn right I'll get paid!" The man dropped his hands from the wheel in surly obstinacy. "I stay right here till you make up your mind again—and this time you'd better be right. Or get out. That'll suit me fine. I can get plenty of fares that know where they're going."

"Take me to—to Washington and Essex—I just happened to remember I've got an errand to do there, before I come home," Lance improvised hastily. He could not have told exactly why he chose that particular spot. Instinctively he had picked a place which was sure to be busy, late Saturday afternoon, and he could lose himself in the crowds of scurrying shoppers and entertainment seekers. It was well outside his customary orbit, and he would be unlikely to meet anyone he knew. And it was on the borderline between the shopping district and the poorer section of cheap shops, warehouses, and grimy lodgings, where no one would pay any attention to an unkempt collarless man in wrinkled clothes with a five-day growth of beard on his face.

Lance leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. His body was limp, heavy with exhaustion, and his mind felt like a wet sponge, sodden, incapable of thought. He hardly noticed the erratic driving of the taximan, who gave vent to his grievance by furious bursts of speed, sudden jolting stops, and reckless twistings this way and that through the heavy traffic.

The cab stopped with jerky suddenness that almost threw him through the glass. "Okay—this is where you get out," said the man. "That'll be two ten—and you're getting a bargain. Step on it—I can't stand here."

Lance handed him three dollars, and his weary silent gesture rejected the change. The man's eyes widened as he looked at Lance's well-filled wallet, and cast a curious glance at his face. Then he shrugged. "Thanks," he said ungraciously, and drove away.

Lance stood on the sidewalk with the jostling crowd milling about him, and wondered dizzily what he was going to do next. The marquee of a moving-picture house, a short distance away, drew his eyes. He stared at it for a moment. Then he went to the ticket booth, bought a ticket, and went in.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - S I X

As it happened, he had come in just as the new show was starting. As he dropped into a seat the lights went out, and in the grateful darkness he sagged back in his chair and closed his eyes. He had never been so completely exhausted in his life. For almost two weeks he had been under a constant nervous strain, increasing in tension with each new terrifying episode. The encounter with Velma had been in its own way even more unnerving than anything else that had happened, and in the days which had elapsed since he handed her the box of candy a new fear had gnawed constantly at his heart, unadmitted but none the less real. And the ordeal of hunger, cold, and terror which he had undergone during the past few days had shattered the last remnants of his strength and courage. He had no reserves with which to meet this new appalling situation.

He had almost forgotten where he was, in the relief of the momentary security, lost in the darkness, safe from observation. A sudden roar of sound brought him erect in his seat, and he opened his eyes on pandemonium. He gripped the arms of his seat, panting, trying frantically to control the wild confusion in his senses, convinced that he had lost his reason. He was a lost soul in a purgatory of noise and violence. He was whirling through space at crazy erratic velocity, sweeping upward to the stars, plunging at screaming speed into the abyss; while all about him in the darkness other lost souls shrieked and moaned.

The dizzy vortex which whirled about him slowed momentarily, and somewhere a girl giggled. Lance flung a frenzied glance about. In the half dark he saw that the people about him were roaring, gasping, wiping their eyes as if exhausted by laughter. But they were not mad—they were merely enjoying an extraordinary and strangely exciting experience.

And suddenly he realized the truth. By chance he must have dropped in at the theater where Cinerama was being shown—the new motion-picture technique that everybody was talking about. He had heard them say something about the “rollercoaster ride”—that one had an uncanny sense of being part of the picture—actually *in* the roller coaster—

With a sob of utter exhaustion Lance sagged in his seat. That impression of insanity had lasted only a moment, but it had left him shaken and unnerved. He dropped his head in his hands, covering his ears to try to shut out the noise.

The confusion died, and there was soft music—a boys’ choir—an orchestra—a large chorus singing the Hallelujah Chorus. . . . He was only vaguely aware of it, but insensibly his taut nerves relaxed, and for a time he drowsed, almost on the verge of sleep. After a long time he became conscious of soft murmurs of astonishment and delight, and he opened his eyes. He seemed to be in an airplane, flying over a smiling, golden land, and he heard an orchestra playing, and singing voices in rich harmony. The stirring words, tuned to the magnificent scenery, had a majesty, a wonder, that reached some hidden, unsuspected reservoir of emotion within him. “O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain . . .”

For a little while he watched as that beautiful land rolled away beneath the plane in an unending sweep of city, prairie, mountain

range, canyon, and a sentimental nostalgic melancholy touched his mind. This was America, his heritage. His native land, for which he had risked his life in Korea, endured those dreary months at the training field in Alabama. Surely he had won the right to its peace and protection. Instead, he was hounded through the streets, exiled from his home like a criminal—he, Lance Hardy—Tears of self-pity filled his eyes.

The majestic panorama ended at last and the lights came on. Lance roused from his bitter lethargy and looked around. John Cramer was sitting across the aisle. He turned his head and looked at Lance with stolid expressionless eyes.

Lance got to his feet and stumbled blindly out of the theater. It was dark when he reached the street, and the tumult of traffic was gone. Only an occasional car went by, toward the deserted shopping district. A dilapidated red car was parked at the curb. For an instant he froze, staring at it. Then he turned and ran, head down, like a terrified animal.

Even as panic spurred his feet to flight, a rational segment of his mind seemed to move with cool clarity, planning, calculating. Washington was a one-way street; he could escape the red car easily, before it could negotiate the maze of one-way streets and get back on his trail. This was unfamiliar territory, but in a vague way he knew something about it. Somewhere off here to the left was Chinatown—Broadway—Harrison Avenue—

There must be a subway station somewhere in this neighborhood, but he hadn't the vaguest idea how to find it. A taxi—But if by some stroke of luck he found a taxi cruising in this unlikely section of town, where could he go? Susan's apartment? The police would undoubtedly be watching that too. A hotel? Not in his present unkempt condition; that was quite out of the question.

A barbershop—if he could find one open at this time of night, and get shaved and cleaned up generally—find some little shop where he could buy a collar and tie—

On second thought, that might not be such a good idea either. His disreputable appearance was, in a way, a disguise. Jerry and Fitz and John knew the condition he was in, but the police didn't. They'd be looking for an immaculate, well-groomed young man in custom-tailored clothes. This way he was comparatively safe from the police; all his energy and ingenuity would be needed to elude

Jerry and the other boys. They wouldn't, he thought, co-operate with the police. Theirs was a private vengeance.

But how long could he elude them? And how long would it be before the police dragnet closed about him and swept him out of his anonymity? He knew very little about actual police methods but he was well aware that the searching tentacles of the law could creep into every nook and cranny of the city—that a wanted man could hardly slip through the cordon of surveillance which could be cast about the great city—that a fugitive could not escape apprehension forever.

He had no destination in mind as he hurried, twisting this way and that, through a maze of dark, almost deserted streets. He had never been here before. A block away, at the intersection, he saw a spatter of neon lights, and people; he darted into an alley, and emerged on another dark street, and went on at a trot, slowing to a hurried walk when he met an occasional person. A man in uniform stood on a street corner just ahead. Lance turned back sharply, and the blood pounded in his ears like hammer strokes as he slipped into the recessed doorway of a dark shop and stood, shaking, until the policeman strolled away out of sight.

He couldn't go much farther. He was panting and his legs quivered from the unaccustomed exertion, and though it was a cold night his body was wet with perspiration. He wiped his forehead with a shaking hand.

Then he saw the sign across the way, beside the doorway of a down-at-heel brick building—"Rooms—\$1.00 a night." He crossed the street, mounted the short flight of steps, and rang the bell. A man opened the door. He wore a dirty T shirt and his suspenders were dangling, and he eyed Lance with surly speculation.

"Yeah?"

"Can I get a room?"

"Sure—if you've got money to pay for it. In advance."

Lance nodded wearily and started to take out his wallet. A momentary impulse of caution flicked his numbed mind. The taxi driver had seen the sheaf of bills, and his eyes had goggled suspiciously. Better not let this man see it too. "I've got money. Take me up to the room and I'll get it for you. I've got it—tucked away."

"Okay," said the man, and led the way up the dark stairs. "Watch the rail. It's got to be fixed."

They went up three flights of stairs, and he opened a door and yanked on an overhead light by a long string. It was a small, grubby cubicle furnished only with a cot covered with a dirty blanket, and a wooden chair with ragged cane seating. The uncurtained window was crusted with grime. Lance glanced around with dull eyes. So he was swapping one filthy little cell for another—but what difference did it make? At least he was free to leave this one any time he chose.

"The john's one flight down, end of the hall," said the man. "That'll be one dollar."

"Step outside and I'll get it for you. Shut the door."

"Hey, whaddaya think I am—a robber?" the man snarled, but he backed out of the room. Lance kicked the door shut, took two dollar bills out of his wallet, and opened the door.

"Here you are. I'll pay you for two nights. I want to be left alone, understand? I'm tired, and I want to sleep till Monday morning."

"Sleep till doomsday for all I care," the man muttered, and went off down the stairs.

Lance kicked off his shoes, tossed his overcoat on the chair, and dropped on the cot, and pulled the greasy blanket up over his shoulders.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - S E V E N

It was night again when Lance roused himself. All day he had lain in a semiconscious state between sleeping and waking, too weary in body and mind to move or think. But now, abruptly, he was wide awake and it was intolerable to lie a moment longer in the sagging, wretched little cot. He threw off the fusty blanket and sprang to his feet.

He pulled on the light and surveyed his face in the six-inch, cloudy mirror on the wall. He would not have recognized his own face if he hadn't known it was attached to his body. He thought wonderingly that the rough stubble of beard altered his whole personality—turned him into a depraved, vicious-looking character, and his red-rimmed eyes had a scared look. He didn't even feel like him-

self. All his life he had accepted as a matter of course his position as one of the favored ones, cushioned by wealth and inheritance from rough contact with an unfriendly world. Now that protective shield was gone, and he was entirely on his own, and he was afraid. He stared again at his own face in the mirror, appalled at what he saw, and at the sickening knowledge that burned in his brain. Yes, he was afraid—deathly, paralyzingly afraid—incapable of taking any action whatever. But he must do something—anything—to end this agony of suspense.

Presently he crept down the stairs to the bathroom, tidied himself as well as he could with the inadequate facilities, and returned to his room. For a long time he stood at the grimy window, staring down at the dark street and the blank unlighted windows of the surrounding buildings, trying to order his churning thoughts. Gradually a plan took shape in his mind. A decision, rather, as to his next move. Beyond that his mind was a blank.

He was going to Susan. Never in his life, when he went to her with a problem, had she failed him. She wouldn't fail him now. If he could only get to her unobserved, she would know what to do. He'd have to tell her about Velma, of course, and he'd have to explain about the poisoned chocolates. She would believe him when he said he hadn't really intended to kill Velma—that he himself was the one Jerry and the others had intended to kill—that they were the ones who had murdered Velma. She'd understand—and she would know how to fix things.

She was the only person in the world whom he could depend on—he realized that now. The aunts would be no use in a situation like this. Bradford Howes was a stiff-necked, hidebound old fogey. So was Channing Wills. They'd view the whole thing from a strictly legalistic standpoint, and if it landed Lance in jail, facing trial for murder, why, it would be just too bad. They would deplore the unfortunate consequences to the firm of Hardy, Wills and Thompson, but once the legal wheels started turning they'd wash their hands of the whole affair. He might even end up in the electric chair.

But Susan was different—she was human. More than that, she was in love with him. If worse came to worst she'd help him get away—out of the country—to Mexico—or South America—

His wrist watch told him that it was ten minutes past midnight when he tiptoed down the stairs and let himself out into the dark street. He felt restored by his long sleep, and walked briskly in the direction he thought would take him to Washington Street. When he came to an all-night lunchroom he went in, ate some hamburgers and a piece of pie, and casually asked directions.

"You're on Broadway," said the short-order cook, and indicated the route with his thumb. "Straight on the way you're headed—it'll take you right to Park Square. Familiar with the city, bud?"

Lance nodded. "I know my way from there. Thanks."

The streets were quiet at this late hour of a Sunday night, but there were enough people on the sidewalks so that he did not attract any attention. He reached Park Square, cut across diagonally to Boylston Street, and turned into Charles.

Insensibly his spirits lifted as he strode briskly along between the Common and the Public Garden. This was his own bailiwick. Right ahead was Beacon Hill; his own home was there, just up the hill behind that row of sedate brick houses. It was ridiculous to have let himself get into such a state of panic; to imagine that he had any cause for such ignominious flight from the law. He was Lansing Hardy, scion of an old and highly respected family, coming home late, as he had done thousands of times before. Actually, there was no real reason why he shouldn't go straight up to the house. It could have been only by chance that the police prowler car was halted nearby, yesterday afternoon. It would certainly be gone now.

He dismissed the idea regretfully. Better not take any chances, at this point. Jerry and the other boys were still looking for him, and they were persistent devils. It would be quite in character for them to stand watch over the house night and day, knowing that some time he would return.

His original plan was still best. Susan's bookshop, deserted over the weekend, was the last place they would expect to find him. And he knew how to get in. Once inside he would be safe; and he could hide there until Susan opened the shop in the morning.

He crossed Beacon Street. Several blocks farther along he turned to the left, and went along a narrow alley until he reached the door at the back of Susan's shop. He picked up a rock, padded it

with a fold of his heavy overcoat, and calmly shattered a small square pane of glass. He reached in and slid back the bolt and let himself in.

There were towels and soap, and a comb and brush, in the immaculate little toilet room at the rear of the shop. He ran a basinful of scalding water and luxuriated in a hot sponge bath, the first real cleansing he had had for nearly a week. Too bad, he thought, that Susan had never put in a shower. And she might have left a razor there, just in case he might ever want to use it. But even so, he felt refreshed and far more self-respecting when he donned his coat again. There was nothing he could do about his missing shirt; he would simply have to keep his coat collar turned up.

There was one other thing he wanted to do before he settled down to the waiting hours. Susan kept a small revolver in her desk. It was Lance himself who had insisted on it, because of the frequent holdups in small shops, especially those operated by women. Susan hadn't really cared for the idea; she had insisted that she'd let them remove the shop bodily from its foundations and take it away before she'd fire a gun. And if you had no intention of shooting, she pointed out, it was silly to show the gun at all. But he had insisted, and purchased it for her, and brought her the necessary forms to fill out. He hadn't dreamed at the time that he would be the one who would need it.

A little light came into the shop from the street light outside, enough to show him the way to the desk. He opened the top left-hand drawer and fumbled at the back of it. The gun was there, in the box as it came from the store, and the small heavy box of cartridges was beside it. He loaded the chambers and slipped it into his pocket. Then he moved a comfortable chair behind the screen, placed another chair to put his feet on, and settled down to wait.

He slept again, more soundly than he had done for almost a week, his tension quieted by the reassuring sense of security. When he woke it was almost eight o'clock. People were passing in the street, and he knew that he must not show himself, so he wandered back and forth between the little toilet room and the constricted space between the screen and the wall, chain-smoking to dull his rising hunger.

Nine o'clock came, and Susan had not arrived. An early customer rattled the front door knob and went away. His raw nerves

began to throb again. Where in the world could she be? It was part of the devilish luck that dogged him, that today of all days she should be late—that she was not where she ought to be when he needed her.

It was twenty minutes of ten when at last he heard her key in the door, and sprang forward to meet her, almost frantic with impatience.

"Susan—" he whispered as he stepped from behind the screen, but she did not hear him. Her back was turned, and she was speaking to someone outside in the street.

"If you're coming in you'd better run the car into the alley. You'll get a ticket if you leave it there."

Lance darted back behind the screen. Susan hung her coat and hat in the closet and went past him into the toilet room to smooth her hair at the mirror. She looked white and tired, and there were dark smudges under her eyes. Lance watched her through the crack, his heart thudding, torn between uncertainty and urgency. There was no time to lose; but he must not show himself with a third person about to come in. There was nothing to do but wait until she was alone again.

Susan sat down at the desk and put her handbag in the drawer and began to arrange her paraphernalia for the day's work. Then the door opened again, and Lance, watching, drew a quivering breath as he saw Gray Fiske coming in. He laid his hat on the desk and looked down at her with a troubled smile.

"Susan, I don't like to leave you. Suppose he should come here?"

"Don't worry, Gray. I'll be all right."

"He's desperate. Lord only knows how he managed to elude the police all day yesterday, but he can't go on much longer without help. And you're the one he would naturally turn to."

She nodded. "Yes, I know, Gray. I have a feeling he'll come here—if he can get here. But there's nothing to be worried about. Lance wouldn't hurt me."

Gray's mouth tightened. "Don't bank too much on that. A man of his type is wholly unpredictable when he gets in a tight place. That was what happened in Korea. He's in another bad jam now—the worst he's ever been up against—and he won't let anything—or anybody, even you, Susan—interfere with saving his own skin. A cornered rat—"

She dropped her head for a moment on a tightly clenched fist.
"Poor Lance! He—he isn't entirely to blame——"

"He's to blame," said Gray, "for giving that girl a box of poisoned candy——"

"Oh, I know. But I can still feel sorry for him, can't I? When I think of what's ahead for him——"

Behind the screen Lance listened with rage seething in his heart. His hand was in his pocket, and the touch of the little gun in his fingers was pleasant, reassuring. A gun was a thing you could depend on. You knew what it would do in an emergency. It wouldn't let you down——

Gray was leaning over the desk, speaking earnestly. "Susan, you aren't going soft and feminine on this, are you? He's killed a woman, in cold blood. There's nothing worse than poison—a man who would deliberately do that is a menace to everybody he comes in contact with. And there's no doubt, from what Max has said, that he's guilty."

Susan's head came up. "You don't have to convince me, Gray. I understand, and I'll do what I have to. I don't subscribe to the theory that a murderer must pay his debt to society—it's ridiculous to suggest that society could be paid for Velma Larkin's death by sending Lance to prison, or even to the electric chair. I think a murderer is like a mad dog—the dog isn't to blame for being mad, but just the same he's got to be put where he can't do any more harm. If he comes here I know what to do."

Gray's hand gripped her shoulder for a moment. "It's a pretty tough assignment for you, my dear."

She gave him a sad weary little smile. "It makes me feel like the worst kind of a heel, Gray. If I wasn't absolutely convinced that he's guilty—if there were any other possible way out—if I thought he would even—kill himself——"

He shook his head. "He wouldn't do that. Believe me, Susan, he's utterly incapable of suicide. It takes guts——"

"Yes, I know. And no matter how desperately he tries to run away, he can't escape. He'll be caught and have to face the consequences."

"The sooner the better. It's the kindest way. . . . You understand about the signal? It's right here at the edge of the desk—just

press that button and then try to keep him talking until the police get here. I feel as though I should stay——”

“No, Gray. He'll never come in if you're here. Please go—I'll be all right. I'm going to unlock the back door—I have a feeling he'll come that way. Hadn't you better see if you can find Jerry and the other boys?”

“Yes, that business has gone far enough. The police haven't connected any of them with this so far, and if I can just locate them I may be able to keep them out of it entirely. They're a good bunch of guys—I've been through hell with them, and I know—and I don't really blame them for anything they've done. They had a nasty score to settle with Lance, and I'm only thankful they didn't succeed in killing him. He knew the candy was poisoned, and he gave it to Velma. That makes it a clear-cut case of murder with premeditation, and if they don't do anything more foolish, I don't think Lance's accusation that the boys sent it to him will be taken very seriously. I'll take a swing around the most likely spots—I imagine they're still prowling the streets——”

“Oh no, you won't!” Lance stepped out from behind the screen, the little gun level in his hand. His rage and desperation were beyond reason. “You aren't going anywhere, Gray.”

“Lance!” Susan gasped. “Why, you—I hardly knew you——”

“I look real funny, don't I, Susan? Stay right where you are, Fiske—and keep your hands away from that desk! Put them where I can see them—that's better! So you're going to turn me in—you two!”

“Lance,” said Susan, “you can't run away forever. Max has been to the police—he has told them everything; about Korea, and how he tried to punish you—shutting you up in that attic with nothing but rice and water——”

“Tell them about Jerry and the others too, did he—and how they tried to kill me?”

“No, he didn't bring them into it—just his own part. He had to tell them that, to explain how he found out that you knew the candy was poisoned. He gave the rest of the box to the police, and they found out it was poisoned—your fingerprints were on the box——”

“Why didn't he tell them the boys sent them to me in the first place?” he cried shrilly.

"You made up that part of it, didn't you, Lance?"

"Made it up?" he screamed. "It's the truth, I tell you! They tried to poison me—I swear it, Susan! but I was too smart for them——"

"It wasn't very smart to give them to Velma, Lance. You killed her—and you know what that means."

"I didn't know—I wasn't sure——" he protested.

"Never mind about that now. Lance, you'll have to give yourself up—it's the only way——"

"The only way?" He laughed stridently. "That's what you think! I'm going to get away and you're going to help me, Susan——"

She shook her head. "No—I'm sorry, Lance——"

He came toward them across the shop, the gun steady in his hand. "Put on your hat and coat—don't touch that buzzer, unless you want a slug through your hand! I mean it—I'm not fooling!"

Susan pushed back her chair and got to her feet. Her lips were white. "Lance," she breathed incredulously, "you're talking to *me*—Susan! Snap out of it, Lance—you're not yourself!"

"That's where you're wrong," he muttered. His eyes had a strange wild gleam. "I know what I'm doing all right. You had me fooled for a long, long time, but not any longer. I know just what you are now, you double-crossing little——"

"You've got it all wrong, Lance," Gray put in quietly. "Susan is just trying to do the best thing for you——"

The gun swung toward him. "You shut up! I'm talking to Susan. Or do I have to shut you up?"

"Please, Gray—let me handle this," Susan said quickly. "Lance, we've been friends for a long time. You must trust me——"

"Trust you!" He laughed harshly. "Not any more! I trusted you all right—the only person in the world I thought would stand by me—what a sap I was!"

She took a step nearer to him. Her eyes were brimming with tears. "It's because I—I care so much for you, Lance, and I know there's only one thing for you to do now. You can't run away forever—they're going to arrest you, no matter what you do. Don't let them find you like this. Go to meet it like a man—with self-respect and dignity, Lance. Please put down that gun. I'll get you a razor and some clean clothes, and——"

"Don't make me laugh, Susan! What do you think I am?

a coward? There's a lot of fight left in me still. I'm going to outwit them, and you're going to help me. If you care so much for me you'll do as I say. Fiske's car is outside—I heard you say so—you're going to drive me to Mexico——”

“Mexico! You're absolutely crazy, Lance! What chance do you think we'd have of getting out of Boston—let alone Mexico?”

“Crazy, am I? Not crazy enough to give myself up. We're wasting time. I told you to get your hat and coat——”

She stood motionless beside the desk, looking at him with steady eyes. “I've already told you, Lance, I'm not going with you. And you're not going either. I'm going to call the police——”

“Keep away from that buzzer!” he screamed.

“No, Susan!” Gray Fiske cried.

“Lance wouldn't shoot me,” she said quietly, and moved around the desk.

He laughed, a shrill, crazy whinny, and leveled the gun. “Oh yes, I would! I'll kill you—kill you both if I have to—I won't let you stop me——”

Then Grayson Fiske leaped forward, and Lance whirled with a snarling cry, and fired. Fiske staggered back, his hand clapped to his shoulder, and Susan snatched up a heavy glass ash tray and flung it with the accuracy of desperation. The gun clattered to the floor, and Susan whirled to the desk, yanked open the left-hand drawer, and rummaged frantically.

“It isn't there, Susan. I got there first,” said Lance, with a husky, ugly sound in his voice, and deliberately retrieved the gun from the floor. He stood erect, and his eyes had the opaque glassy look of complete irrationality. He said flatly, “So you won't help me. So I've got to kill you——”

Fiske was there between them. He was swaying a bit, and there was a widening patch of blood seeping through the sleeve of his coat, but there was a savage, reckless determination in his eyes.

“You'll have to kill me first, Hardy,” he said through set teeth.

“That suits me just fine,” said Lance, and whipped the gun in in his direction.

They saw his hand tighten on the grip, and his knuckles grew white. But even as they watched, standing rigid in a spell of helpless waiting, the roar of the explosion came, rocking the shop. Lance's eyes widened, and he stared down at the gun, with his

finger just touching the trigger. He looked at Susan, and muttered, "But I didn't—I didn't shoot it——"

Then his lips twisted in a grimace of amazement, and the gun fell out of his nerveless hand, and with a queer little gasp he dropped to the floor and was still.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

For a moment of shock they did not move, staring down at that huddled figure. Then, aware of another presence in the room, they both whirled about sharply. Mr. Turner had stepped from behind the screen, with a revolver in his hand.

Susan's voice was horrified, breathless, "Mr. Turner! You—you killed him——"

"That was my intent," he said, and walked across the shop. He laid his revolver down no a chair and bent over the huddled shape. In a moment he straightened up. "Yes, he is dead. I am sorry I had to shoot him in the back. Symbolically, I suppose, it might be considered appropriate, but I should have preferred to give him suitable warning and let him hear what I had to say before I killed him."

He turned to Susan and made a courteous little motion with his hand. "You may press the buzzer now, Susan."

"But Mr. Turner—how did you—why—I don't understand——" she stammered. Her eyes were stunned and sick.

"Please call the police."

She shook her head desperately. "Not until you explain why—how——"

He walked around the desk and calmly pressed the button. "This is not the time for procrastination, my dear. I will make a statement when the police get here."

"Better get out of here, Turner," Gray gasped. "Give me that gun of yours. I'll tell them I shot him—no sense in you getting dragged into it."

"But I am in it."

"Sure—and you saved our lives, but if I had shot him it would

have been a simple case of self-defense." He rocked a bit on his feet as he spoke. "With you, there'll be a lot to explain——"

"But, my dear boy, I prefer it that way. There are things which should be explained——"

"Oh, have it your own way," said Gray, and his voice was oddly thick and wavering. "You stubborn—old—thus-and-so——"

"Gray!" Susan screamed, and springing forward she caught him in her arms. He sagged against her weakly, for a moment; then without a sound he slid, unconscious, to the floor. She dropped down beside him, cradling his head on her lap.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Turner, and knelt beside him. "I'd better look at that wound. I know something about such things. Help me off with this sleeve, Susan. Well, well, it's quite a mess, isn't it?"

She watched white-faced as he explored the blood-soaked area. "Is it—bad, Mr. Turner?"

He gave her a reassuring smile. "He will think so, I'm afraid, before he's through with it. The collarbone is shattered, but fortunately that is one of the things that can be mended. And he has lost a good bit of blood—that is why he fainted. I think I can staunch the flow temporarily, if you will hand me some facial tissues—I believe you have some in your desk."

She flung open a drawer, brought him the box, and dropped to her knees again beside Gray. "He—he isn't going to die?"

"Die?" He chuckled softly as he applied a wad of folded tissues and bound it tight with a clean handkerchief. "Dear me, no, child. A bit of plasma will fix him up all right. He'll be around in a couple of days as good as new. Have to keep this arm immobilized for a few weeks, that's all."

Her head went down and her wet cheek touched Gray's. "Oh, thank God!" she whispered. "I—I didn't know until just now—how much I——"

In her arms Gray stirred. "A few weeks, did you say, Turner?" His voice was weak, but there was a quiver of a smile in it. "That's tough. Too bad it isn't a leg. I'm going to need both my arms—got a girl I want to put 'em around."

"Oh, you—you idiot!" she whispered, and held him closer.

"Ouch!" he said. And after a moment, "I didn't know it either, honey, until I saw him point that gun in your direction. Oh, Susan! Susan!"

Then the door burst open and Sergeant Morrison strode in, followed by two burly patrolmen. "Good God!" he exclaimed, staring at the group on the floor. "What is this—a massacre? Where's Hardy—didn't you get him?"

"He's there, the other side of the desk," said Mr. Turner. "He's dead. I killed him."

"You!" Morrison stared at him unbelievingly. "You say *you*—"

Gray struggled to a sitting posture. "He saved our lives, Sergeant. Hardy got me—here in the shoulder—before—"

"I should have killed him in any case," said Mr. Turner calmly. "You will find my gun there on the chair. I bought it for the purpose of killing Hardy. In fact, that was the sole reason for my coming to Boston in the first place. I have been merely waiting for what seemed the most suitable opportunity."

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle!"

"Give me a hand, will you, Morrison?" said Gray. He got to his feet and sat down in the chair Susan hastily pushed forward. "Let me explain. He's slightly off his rocker, and no wonder. It's quite a shock for a man of his age, you know—"

Mr. Turner smiled ironically. "I'm quite in command of my faculties, I assure you. I killed Lansing Hardy with premeditation, as a matter of personal vengeance, and with full appreciation of the consequences to myself. I should not wish to escape them." He turned again to the detective. "I would like to make a statement. Will you have one of your men take it down?"

"Plenty of time for that later on, sir—"

"I prefer to make it now."

Morrison shrugged and looked at the uniformed officers. "Either of you men know how to take shorthand?"

They shook their heads. "I'll take it," said Susan, and went to the desk. She was very pale but her hand was steady as she picked up a pencil and made some preliminary notations. Then she lifted her head and looked at the old gentleman. "I'm ready, Mr. Turner," she said gently.

"Thank you, Susan, my dear. This is not easy for you, I know. . . . My name is Harrison B. Turner, until a few months ago professor of chemistry at Burnside College in Nebraska. I wish to state of my own volition, and without duress of any kind, that I shot and killed Lansing Hardy—and that no one else was in any

way involved in my action. I did so with premeditation and full understanding that in the eyes of the law I was committing murder. When I made the decision to kill him I accepted the inevitable consequences.

"Through sources of information which were available to me, I learned when Hardy returned to Boston after his release from the air force. As soon thereafter as I could arrange my affairs I came to Boston and looked about for a place where I would be likely to meet Hardy. I found Susan's bookshop."

He paused and met Susan's eyes. "That is one of the things that I regret—that I imposed on the friendship with which she favored me. And may I say, Susan—you needn't write this down—that for a little while, after I came to know you, I was tempted to abandon my project; I felt that I could not bring tragedy into your life. But not for long. I realized very quickly that to a girl of your qualities marriage to Lansing Hardy would bring far deeper tragedy than his death. But I was very glad when you told me you had decided not to marry him. I knew then that I had been right about you—that you could never look to a man like Lansing Hardy for the fulfillment of your life's happiness.

"Shall we go on? I also deeply regret now that I chose the method I did for my abortive attempt to kill him. When I sent him that box of chocolates—"

"*You sent them?*" Susan gasped.

"Yes, certainly. I inserted the poison in the candies by means of a hypodermic needle—in the ones wrapped in green foil. I considered the possibility of the accidental poisoning of an innocent person, but I thought it was quite safe, knowing that you, Susan, never touch chocolate, and that Hardy's two aunts have an almost fanatical prejudice against it, so much so that he dared not take a box of candy into the house. Lance himself was passionately fond of it. For some reason he suspected the candy was poisoned and deliberately gave it to Velma Larkin, thereby committing murder himself. But unwittingly I myself was responsible for her murder.

"I bought the gun then, at a pawnshop near Scollay Square. I had determined to shoot him at the first opportunity, and I had the gun with me when I came here this morning, hoping I would have an opportunity to use it before he was apprehended by the police. When I approached the front door I saw him here in the shop,

with a gun in his own hand. He seemed to be threatening Susan and Grayson with it. I hurried around to the rear door and found a small pane of glass broken—by Hardy, I imagine. I let myself in and was just in time to avert another tragedy—though not soon enough, unfortunately, to prevent him from shooting Grayson in the shoulder."

Sergeant Morrison let out an explosive breath. "Well, I give up! A nice old gent like you! What did you do it for? What did Hardy ever do to you?"

Mr. Turner's lined face looked grim as he met the other man's eyes. "Pete Littlefield was my stepson. I loved him as much as if he'd been my own."

"Pete Littlefield—who's he?"

"He was the navigator of my bomber crew," Gray put in. "He died in the prison camp."

"Oh-oh! I begin to get it. And the way you've got it figured, Lance Hardy was the one who put him there."

"I know he was," said Mr. Turner calmly. "One of the other men brought me a message from him. Before Pete died, he made this man promise to see that I got it. Yes, Lansing Hardy was responsible—there is no question of that. . . . His death broke my wife's heart. She died shortly after."

"Hm-m-m. I see." Morrison stroked his chin. "This guy who brought you the message—which one was he? I'd better have a talk with him——"

Mr. Turner shook his head. "I can't give you his name. I can't repay his kindness by involving him in my own personal act of vengeance. I must ask you, Sergeant, to take my word that he had no part in the death of Lansing Hardy—that he had no knowledge that I intended to kill him."

"Okay—so talking to him won't do any harm, will it? I can't leave a lot of loose ends dangling—you ought to know that. We can find out who he is without much trouble. It'll go a lot easier for you if you co-operate——"

"I'm sorry," Gray mumbled thickly, and swayed in his chair. "I'm afraid I'm going to goof out again."

With a little cry Susan ran to his side and caught him in her arms, supporting him. Over his head she looked at the detective with blazing eyes.

"You'd let him sit here and bleed to death! Call the hospital—

Phillips House—tell them it's an emergency—a matter of life and death—have them get the operating room ready—he's got to have a transfusion——”

Morrison jerked his head at one of the patrolmen. “Get an ambulance.” He looked at Susan and his lips twitched slightly. “I expect they'll know what to do.”

“Possibly,” said Mr. Turner mildly, “a little cold water——” and stepped behind the screen. The others bent over Gray's unconscious body.

“Better lay him flat on the floor,” said the sergeant. “Give me a coat—keep him warm—suffering from shock, I should say, as much as anything. Better leave him quiet, Miss Carey—fussing over him isn't going to do him much good. . . . Burke——”

“Yes, sir.” The second patrolman stepped forward from his post beside the door.

“Give me another wad of that tissue. . . . Now put your fingers here—keep a good steady pressure—that's right.” He held out a hand to Susan and drew her to her feet. “Don't worry. He'll be all right.”

Susan gave a long shuddering sigh. “How stupid can you be? We should have got him to the hospital right away—but he seemed so——so—— *What was that noise?* Like somebody—falling——”

“My God—the old man!” roared Sergeant Morrison, and flung aside the screen and dashed through the open door.

Mr. Turner lay in a crumpled heap on the floor of the toilet room. Beside his limp outflung hand was a scrap of shining green foil.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - N I N E

It was late Tuesday afternoon when Susan walked down the wide corridor on the seventh floor of Phillips House and halted at the open door of Grayson Fiske's room. He was sitting up in bed. His arm and shoulder were a bulky mass of white, supported by a sling, but otherwise he looked quite like himself. His eyes lighted when he saw her.

"Well, bless your heart, Susan! Come in here and let me look at you." He gripped her hand in his sound one as she sat down beside him, and his eyes studied her face solicitously. "You don't look too hot yourself—you're the one who should be in bed."

"No, Gray, I'm all right. How do you feel?"

He made a reassuring O-sign with this thumb and forefinger. "They're going to let me out of here tomorrow, I hope. It's rotten luck, having to lie here and let you go through the mess alone. I hate like the devil to let you down."

"Don't worry about that. Sergeant Morrison has been very kind. There's been almost no publicity—the way things worked out he was able to keep the worst of it out of the papers."

"Thanks to Mr. Turner."

She nodded, and quick tears filled her eyes. "He was such a dear—I still can hardly believe it."

"He must have been slightly cracked on that one subject. Pete's death—and then his wife's. I feel responsible, in a way, for not realizing what was in his mind. And yet—I don't know. He was the last person in the world you'd suspect of being a cold-blooded murderer. I didn't know what was in Pete's letter when I brought it to him. And his reaction when he read it seemed perfectly normal—the way any father would feel—"

"*You* brought it to him?"

He nodded. "Sure—I told Morrison all about it when he was in, a little while ago. . . . It's a funny thing—I didn't even suspect he had any ulterior motives when I met him outside your bookshop one day just before Christmas. He spoke of our meeting as a very happy coincidence, and I assumed that was just what it was. I was a bit disturbed for fear he would run up against Jerry or one of the other boys, but I thought it was most unlikely that he would, or that they would tell him anything about Lance if he did, dumb cluck that I was!"

She shook her head dazedly. "And Lance, of course, didn't know who he was. It's all so confusing——"

He smiled, without humor. "Yes, isn't it? I got really worried when he called me up and told me somebody was trying to kill Lance—I thought he was getting dangerously near the truth, and I was afraid if he did learn it it would just refresh his grief about Pete's death——"

"He called you and told you that!" she exclaimed incredulously.

He nodded. "He merely said Lance was afraid somebody was trying to kill him—that he was being threatened in various ways—and because he was your fiancé, he wondered if there was anything I could do to protect him. He apologized for interfering, and put it all on the basis of his fondness for you. Actually, I think, he didn't want any of the boys to kill him before he had a chance to do it himself."

"When was that—when he called you?"

"The afternoon Lance disappeared—the day he was planning to meet you at the Parker House. That's why I high-tailed it over there." Gray smiled. "You didn't think that was just a coincidence too, did you?"

"I didn't think much about it, I was so glad to see you." For a moment she was silent, thinking. "He'd already sent Lance that box of poisoned candy. And when Lance disappeared he must have thought he was lying dead somewhere. It must have been a horrible shock to him when he found Velma, and knew his candy had killed her."

"The poor old chap. He must have held out that one piece of poisoned candy for himself. I'm glad he had the chance to use it—it was so much the best way." After a moment he went on soberly, "I'm sorry for the two old ladies, Hardy's aunts. It's an awful thing for them."

"I told them," Susan said, "that a man suddenly went berserk in the shop and shot Lance. It was true in a way, and Sergeant Morrison let me tell it that way. And I told them he was visiting a wartime buddy, while he was missing. They insisted he must have been suffering from amnesia, or he would have let them know where he was. They said he had a bad headache the last time they saw him. Even so, it's a dreadful shock and grief for them; they have lost the only thing that gave them a purpose in living. They loved him so. Those are always the ones who suffer most."

"And Lance gets off scot free. How about Velma's death?"

"It was Mr. Turner who poisoned the candy. I'm afraid he is the one who will have to be blamed for her death, but I think that's the way he would want it. Of course the whole story is in the police records. And I don't think Lance got off scot free; I think he made settlement in full. I'm only thankful that we could keep the whole truth from the aunts——"

"The whole truth," Gray said soberly. "That's something they must never know. Something we'd all better forget."

"Gray—what really happened—in Korea?"

He shook his head, wordlessly.

"I've got to know, Gray, before I can close the book. Don't you understand?"

"Raking over dead coals never did any good, Susan. Lance has paid any debt he might have owed." Then under her direct gaze he nodded somberly. "All right, Susan. You have a right to know. It's a very simple story. We had to make a forced landing in enemy territory. We hid out for a few days, trying to sneak back to our own lines. We were practically starving, and Lance offered to go down to a nearby village and see if he could rustle some food. While he was gone a patrol surrounded us and captured us. Lance escaped."

She frowned, puzzled. "But I don't see why, in that case—Gray, where does the Whiffenpoof Song come in?"

"Phil Payton, the pilot, was a Yale man, and he was always singing the thing. It came to be something of a theme song for the whole crew. When Lance left us it was agreed that he should whistle it when he came back, to identify himself. When we heard the whistle we whistled back. But it wasn't Lance—it was the enemy patrol."

Susan sprang to her feet and turned to the window, staring out blindly. Gray went on ruminatingly, "I've always been sorry we couldn't have found out from Lance at the time exactly what did happen. I don't believe it could have been quite what it seemed: there must have been extenuating circumstances—pressures, perhaps, that he couldn't resist. One has no right to pass judgment—not if you've been through it and see some of the things that happened. . . . Susan dear, are you crying? I shouldn't have told you—"

"No, it's all right," she said, and gave him a white quivering smile. "I had to know. Lance wasn't a bad man, Gray, he was just—weak. And I think in the end he suffered quite as much as any of you did."

"I'm sure of it. I'm glad of one thing—that Jerry and the other boys are in the clear. And so are they." He was grinning wryly as he picked up an envelope from the bedside table and handed it to her. "That came in the mail a little while ago. Read it."

She drew out the folded sheet of cheap lined paper, and her eyes widened in astonishment as she glanced at the pencil-scrawled message and read the signature. Then she read it aloud, a trifle breathlessly.

Dear Gray:

Glad to hear that punk was off the beam—as usual. Never made target in his life, and it would of been just too bad if he'd done it this time. Funny thing, the way it worked out. When I clobbered him Christmas Eve I'd of killed him right then, only we had other plans first. Too bad I didn't, then he wouldn't of killed that girl. I got a crazy letter in the mail the other day. It just said 'Don't kill him. It will be taken care of without any assistance from you.' I bet it was the old professor Pete's stepfather. Afraid we'd horn in on his racket. Well the bum's dead and I can't say I'm sorry I didn't do it. Like you said, about now I'd be making a date with the hot seat, and I got other things I'd rather do. When you get on your feet come around to the joint and have a beer with the gang for old times. Best from Fitz and Jack. Same from

Yours truly
"Jerry."

She folded the letter slowly, and there were tears in her eyes as she looked up at Gray. "I'm glad they didn't do it, too."

"They're good joes," said Gray.

"It was Mr. Turner, of course, who sent them that letter."

"But how did he know where to send it?" Gray said, scowling. "He must have found out a lot more than I thought—"

"He must have traced Jerry through the registration number of the salmon-colored car. It was parked outside my shop one afternoon and I wrote the number down on my desk pad. Later it disappeared, and I told Sergeant Morrison I must have torn it off by mistake. But I felt sure I hadn't. Mr. Turner must have taken it, trying to protect the boys, to make it hard to trace the car. He must have looked up the name and address of the owner and found out that he belonged to Pete's crew. He wanted to keep them from committing murder. He preferred to do it himself and pay the penalty."

There was a long silence in the room. It was Gray who finally broke it. "Do you mind if I ask you a very personal question, Susan?"

"Why, of course not!"

"A few minutes ago you said the ones who suffered most were those who loved Lance. Were you speaking of yourself?"

She lifted her head and met his eyes bravely. "It depends on exactly what you mean by love. I knew him through and through; all the lovable qualities—and he had them, Gray—and all the weaknesses. And in spite of everything he had done I was fond of him. That's what they say about a friend—one who knows all about you and loves you just the same—"

"I thought you said you were *fond* of him. There's a big difference—"

She nodded. "A tremendous difference, Gray—"

"When I conked out with that bullet in my shoulder, I had a hazy—or should I call it crazy—idea that for a moment we did a little science-fiction juggling of time and space, and projected ourselves into a dim, distant, and very satisfactory future. The present isn't so good, I know; you've got a lot to forget—a lot of readjustment to make. I don't want to crowd you, darling, but—do you think we might get back there again—say in another three or four months—"

"Why waste all that time?" Susan's eyes were suddenly twinkling through tears.

"Do you mean—"

"I mean"—there was a choke in her throat that made her words husky, breathless—"I mean that the past is gone, and the future is *now*. And it isn't going to take me any three or four months to find out that I—that I—oh, you great big oaf, quit laughing at me! You know darn well that I—"

She stopped short, and her eyes were suddenly ferocious. "You don't expect me to say it first, do you?"

The teasing twinkle left his eyes swiftly, and he drew her closer. "Why say it, sweetheart? You know that I do, don't you?"

She nodded. "Me too. Wildly," she said, and dropped her head on his good shoulder.

BACKFIRE

B Y

EDNA SHERRY

Published by special arrangement with Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc.

ONE

HE DROVE DOWN THE HIGHWAY, BLIND WITH FURY. TREES, ESTATES, CARS flashed past but he saw none of them. It was a miracle that he did not crash since control of the car was purely instinctive.

His eyes were turned inward, seeing only the wreckage of everything he had built up in the last fourteen years, when, at seventeen, he had begun his dogged campaign for a place in the sun. Twenty minutes ago, he was sitting on top of the world. He had money, position, popularity and an enviable future. Now all of it was threatened, rocked to its foundations by a word; and no way to save it. He burst out savagely:

"The witch! I could kill her!"

The tempest of rage shook his body so that the car zig-zagged dangerously. With the ingrained prudence which was the bedrock of his nature, he cut over automatically to the right and drove up on the grass verge, where he sat waiting for his agitation to die down.

Passion and excitability had never been a part of his makeup or his program. It clouded the mind and blurred the edges of the will. The thing to do, he told himself, calmly, was to sit here until the anger burned itself out and his brain was at its dextrous best, so that he could plan how to handle this monstrous thing that faced him.

He used a favorite method to quell the tumult within him—he reviewed the long uphill road he had traveled from his bitter beginnings at the bottom to his present enviable position so close to the summit. The memory of his extraordinary rise never failed to fill him with pride in his own achievement. And just now, he needed the bolster of pride and self-esteem badly. . . .

As a boy, he had always hankered for schooling because he hated the farm work which his father expected him to carry on after him, and sensed that education might help him to escape it. There were bitter quarrels about this but Charles always won, for two reasons; first, because his will was stronger than the gaunt, work-driven old man's, and second, because, though unwilling, Charles was a deft,

quick worker and his father, Axel Lundgren, had a vague fear that sooner or later in this alien, independent atmosphere of America, his son might forsake him and strike out on his own. He did not give in with a good grace but he acquiesced silently, so long as Charles milked his quota of cows before he caught the bus for the three-mile-distant high school and repeated the chore after he came home.

Charles thought no further than graduation from Arundel High School, for the stark reason that there was no college within two hundred miles of their Wisconsin farm, and to ask his father to maintain him away from home for four years was unthinkable. But in his junior year, events occurred which caused an upheaval in Charles' thinking, feeling and whole outlook on life.

He met Melanie Werner.

She belonged to the swank Cedar Hill set who drove to school in smart convertibles, whose sub-deb parties were reported in the Arundel *Gazette's* society column, and who stuck together, not snubbing the run-of-the-mill students, simply not seeing them. They were a world unto themselves.

Melanie was a lovely little thing, not too brainy, with a facile smile that won her friends from the lowliest gas-station attendant who serviced her car to the most attractive boy of her own crowd. Charles was no exception. She was in his Science class and from the first day, she filled his thoughts and dreams. That her school work was atrocious was no fault in his eyes: it gave him the chance to volunteer help, to prepare her homework charts and graphs and consequently to receive a few words and smiles from her delicious lips. When she herself wangled a change of seats so that she could be beside Charles in class, his heart seemed to burst. They cheated shamelessly in written tests and Melanie passed her Science.

But appetite being what it is, an hour a day was soon not enough for Charles. He joined the Dramatic Society because Melanie was one of its brighter lights. It was a fruitful move. He was tall, well-muscled, and had, it appeared, both personality and a flair for acting. In six months, it went without saying that in any production, Charles and Melanie would have the leads. Charles trod on air.

In June, the Dramatic Society always gave its most ambitious production of the year. That year the coach chose a Civil War play with the innocuous time-honored theme of the Southern belle and her Northern soldier, torn between sectional patriotism and passion.

Melanie sent grandly all the way to Milwaukee for her pale green crinoline costume and the coach outdid herself in stage-setting, digging up old mahogany pieces and oil lamps in an effort to be authentic.

Rehearsals were daily rapture to Charles and he would hurry home to milk the cows, still wrapped in a cloud of enchantment. Only one flaw spoiled the perfection of the days. Whenever the coach announced a break, half a dozen Cedar Hill members of the cast would buzz with talk about the birthday party Melanie was giving a few nights after the date of the play. With a sharpness which was physical pain, he ached to be invited. He knew it was an impossibility but the knowledge did not lull the hunger. It filled his thoughts, waking and sleeping, and grew with beanstalk speed into a symbol.

The night of the play arrived. The auditorium was packed. (Charles thanked his stars that his parents showed neither interest nor intention to attend.) The footlights worked, the curtain rolled, the actors did remarkably well and the audience was keenly responsive. The scene drove on to its climax. Melanie's stage-parents gave their ultimatum to their daughter's Northern lover—fight for the South or give up the girl. Head up, shoulders back, Charles made his decision. He kissed Melanie's hand in farewell, turned with military precision and moved to the exit. Behind him, Melanie, torn but true, threw off her Southern bigotry and rushed after him.

It was then that the dreadful debacle occurred. In her urgency, she crashed into the center table, the oil lamp swayed and toppled, flame and oil licking up from the hem of her wide skirt. She was supposed to give a cry of anguish at her lover's exit but the shrieks that assailed Charles' ears were no part of the script. He turned and saw the green dress a sheet of fire. The others on the stage stood paralyzed and the audience gave a roar of horror. Charles moved.

It was over before Melanie's parents could climb over the footlights. Melanie's wire hoop skirt saved her from a singeing but Charles' hands and wrists were flayed by flame. Confusion crowded the next half hour. There was a doctor in the house and Charles' hands and arms were swathed in miles of trim bandage. Charles had an impression of a husky-voiced man and a tearful woman thanking him and then disappearing with their hysterical daughter. The

doctor drove Charles home, helped him off with his clothes and gave him a sedative, muttering self-conscious phrases about heroism and spunk.

Then Charles was alone in bed, fiery stabs tearing up and down his arms. The sedative began to work, the pain grew dull and Charles was able to give himself up to a half-waking golden dream: he had saved Melanie's life, she would invite him to her party.

At home, he was a good deal less than a hero. He was merely an added burden to his already overburdened mother. And his father, disgruntled at the temporary loss of his assistant, called him a fool for his crazy behavior. Charles scarcely heard. His whole being was concentrated on the mail-box. Finally, two days after the night of the play, the letter arrived. Charles, sullen under his father's criticism, was suddenly radiant when the old man threw the letter onto the supper table. Due to his bandaged hands, he could not open it himself and it was agony to watch his father's clumsy hands tearing at it. Axel withdrew the note and as he tossed it across to his son, a hundred-dollar bill fell out. He snatched at it greedily while Charles read the gracious note from Mrs. Werner, thanking him, praising him and begging him to accept the small token enclosed.

Charles turned dead white. He looked pinched, frantic and ten years older. As he watched his father fold the bill with acquisitive fingers, he yelled fiercely:

"Give me that! It goes straight back to those animals!"

This was one argument that Axel won. He pointed out that Charles' services were lost to him for several weeks. It was only right that he—Axel—should be remunerated. He tucked the bill into his vest pocket with a maddening grin.

Charles never saw Melanie again. The term was over before his hands had healed, and in the fall, he heard that she had gone to a finishing school in the East. But she had left her mark. With a venom far too old for his years, Charles gritted his teeth and swore to get even with all the Werners, all the Cedar Hills, all the filthy frustrating taboos and demarcations in the world. He would dedicate his life to getting to the top and to spitting down on those below him. The trivial incident changed an apparently normal boy into a twisted virulent force. Or perhaps the bad seed was already in him and would have come to fruition in some other way. But it

was the fact that from the age of seventeen, Charles Lundgren never again had a single completely generous or warm impulse toward any human being.

His parents' death in quick succession the following year during a flu epidemic implemented his oath. He did little mourning. The strongest emotion he felt was satisfaction at the fortunate timing. Education was a weapon and he could now arm himself. He sold the well-kept thrifty little dairy-farm for a sum that, with care, would see him through college and law school.

From his first day at Dartmouth, he had moved cautiously, considering for a long while before picking out Larry Payne as best friend; the boy who might do him—Charles Lundgren—the most good in the future. Larry was a poor excuse for a pal, with his mind on piffling things like painting and poetry, but with a total blind-spot when it came to mathematics. But the blind-spot was Charles' lever. He set himself to gain intimacy with Larry, as he had done with Melanie, by helping him in math, doing his homework for him and cramming him like a Strasburg goose, just before exams.

It had paid off. Larry gratefully took him home to Highcliff for the Easter holidays and Charles met his father, the great Lionel Payne, financial wizard, chairman of a dozen corporations and—it was rumored—a strong, unseen hand even in government.

Charles began a second campaign; respectfully but worshipfully, he paid court to Payne, forgoing the tennis and dancing parties to listen to the old boy hold forth. Away from the corner of Broad and Wall, Payne was human and he was flattered by the interest of this intelligent boy with the winning smile and the lavish tribute of admiration and deference. He gave his disappointing son unaccustomed approval for his choice of friend and told him to invite Charles again. Through the years, Charles hung on to the connection and by the time he graduated *cum laude* from law-school, he was on sufficiently good terms to bring his problem to Lionel Payne.

"The Dean recommends the top ten of the class to good law firms. But you see, sir, something else enters into it besides marks."

"What is that?"

"Background. Family. Tradition. I've got none of them, sir. I'm alone in the world. No money but what I'll earn."

"You mean the Dean didn't recommend you in spite of being third in your class?"

"Oh, no, sir. He recommended me, all right. But not to the firm I want."

"H'm. So you think you're a judge?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I've made it a point to study the important outfits. Connor and Levy are money-makers but they're—well, flashy. It's not what I want, sir."

"What do you want?"

"A chance with Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane," Charles said readily.

"Nobody can say you lack ambition," Payne said with sardonic humor. Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane, one of the most respected firms in the country, were Payne's own lawyers.

"Is that bad, sir?" Charles asked with his charming grin. Then he sobered. "Forget it, sir. I have no right to come to you, trading on your past kindness. It's just that I believe so hard in aiming at the best that I lost sight of what's done and what isn't. I'll do okay at Connor and Levy."

Payne eyed him speculatively for a long time. The old financial warrior was no fool. For a moment, it crossed his mind that all those years of Charles' babying of Larry, of sitting at his own feet so devotedly, had been leading solely to this point; that Charles was a wily young adventurer, using him as a rung in the ladder of ambition. He scanned Charles' face with its strong features, Scandinavian blue eyes, resolute chin and thick mop of blond hair and came near to blushing at his own ugly cynicism. The lad was a go-getter, just as he himself had been in his youth, doubling and trebling the already considerable inheritance of the Payne line. Nothing wrong with that. He wished to God Larry had a touch of it. And if the boy had no roots and no money, who would blame him if he tried to scale the heights by asking a leg-up from his friends?

The result was that Payne dropped a word to Lyman Lane at his club and Charles became one of the firm's bright young men. In seven years, he had risen slowly but steadily until now, as "associate," he was in line, along with Peter Schuyler, for a junior partnership.

The pattern had never changed. Every move he made was with purpose. As soon as he could afford it, he had moved to Highcliff-on-Hudson, the exclusive suburb where the Paynes lived. Through

Larry, he had made the Country Club, become one of the "crowd," met Kit Verhooven and married her. . . .

As he waited in his car on the grassy verge, this review of his steady solid rise quieted the tumult in him. He started the motor and pulled back into traffic. But he stayed in the right-hand lane, driving slowly, still reviewing, but now with his mind on the immediate past of half an hour ago. . . .

He saw his handsome home, set in its ample grounds, up the long driveway from the Highway. But Kit loved the view of the Hudson and so had chosen one of the bedrooms at the back of the house, with its long sweep of lawn enclosed in privacy by a stand of tall trees on either side. The back lawn sloped more steeply as the ground approached the edge of the cliff, ending in the abrupt drop to the gully, fifty feet below, with Anglers' Creek and the old disused road at the bottom. A steep flight of steps led down to it at the end of the lawn, but from the house you couldn't see that, or the Creek or the road. They were just a hidden ledge halfway down the cliffside, which plunged on down to the sparkling sunlit Hudson.

The pleasing mental picture held more than the lawn and the Hudson. It took in the bedroom itself with Kit sitting up in bed, her breakfast tray over her knees, alternately sipping her coffee and slitting the envelopes of her mail with the well-worn silver paper-cutter which had been a gift from Peter Minuit to one of her forebears. One part of Charles' mind disapproved of the picture; a wife should be up and about at eight in the morning, should sit opposite her husband at breakfast (a man needed a listener as he laid out the strategy of the coming day) instead of dawdling in bed like a decadent French favorite of one of the Louis'.

But another part of his mind ate it up: here he was, born a nobody, son of immigrants who never did learn the language till the day they died, hard-toiling peasants who would have gaped at sight of the luxurious room, at Kit's delicate beauty in her even more delicate nightdress, at the priceless Spode china on the silver tray. Even Kit's dawdling in bed, waited on by that crabbed old family retainer, Martha, flattered his sense of being at last on the top rung of the social ladder where this luxury of idleness was a matter of course. The very paper-cutter added to his sense of well-being. His —Charles Lundgren's—wife stemmed from a Verhooven who had

received not only the silver trifle in Kit's hand but a grant of land that took in all of what was today Highcliff-on-Hudson. Five acres of that grant was now his—well, Kit's—a wedding present two years ago from Kit's grandfather. What more could a man ask, especially with things looking so bright at the office as well? He honestly believed (not merely thought wishfully) that he would get the prospective junior partnership, not Peter Schuyler, for all Pete's background and aristocratic connections. Work was a factor. And Charles' work was miles ahead of the easy-going Peter's. Wasn't it Charles—not Schuyler—whom Lane had sent to Washington on the complicated Standish case? Wasn't it Charles whom the wealthy widows whose estates the firm managed were beginning to ask for, sometimes even in preference to Lyman Lane himself?

They liked Charles' deferential interest and his smile. That smile of his was a part of his equipment. Through a boyhood mishap, he had chipped off a corner of a front tooth. For years he had been self-conscious about it and tried to hide it, until one summer, at a houseparty at Larry's, a forthright girl had commented on it:

"You look so honest, Charles, I'd trust you with my last dime. I think it's that chip off your tooth. It gives you such a young unworldly air."

Charles weighed this before his mirror and decided the girl was right. Years later, when he could afford the most artful of porcelain crowns, he refused to have it changed. It seemed to have paid off. The widows trusted and depended on him, although whether or not on account of the small missing chip, he did not know. But he did know that they meant a substantial cut in fees in addition to his salary. Lane was fair in such cases. . . .

He veered from thoughts of the office back to this morning at home. The day had begun well. Kit had looked up from her mail and said:

"The Deans want us for dinner Saturday night."

"Good. Looks like my self-sacrifice last week is paying off."

"Your—?"

"I played a round of golf with him. Is he terrible! But he put out a couple of feelers. It won't hurt me any with Lane to nail him as a client. To say nothing of the fee in any case I bring in."

Kit said slowly—(was it admiration or criticism in her tone? He couldn't be sure):

"You never do anything without a purpose, do you, Charles?"

"No, I don't. I hate waste motion. And I detest people who never figure out beforehand the results of their actions."

She had nodded then. She was intelligent enough, he gave her that, once you pointed out the truth to her.

"Then you want me to accept." It was not a question.

"I certainly do."

"The only thing is, we don't know them very well and I understand their dinners are rather formal—place-cards and so on. I should hate to disrupt their seating arrangements at the last moment."

"Disrupt—? Oh, you mean your grandfather."

"Yes."

"Now look, Kit," he said reasonably. "I'm not cold-blooded. I've just as much sensibility as the next man. But I don't blink facts. The poor old boy is for it. It's deplorable, of course—no, not even that—the deplorable part was when this cancer first attacked him—but we've got to face it that his imminent death is as certain as sunrise. It could be today, tomorrow, next week or next month—"

"That's what I meant—"

"Let me finish. When it comes, it comes. And I know we'll both welcome it as a release for the poor old chap. But it's unhealthy sitting around, waiting for it, counting on it, regulating your whole schedule by it. Life is for the living, my dear girl."

"I know," she said wearily. Then she smiled a queer unhumorous smile. "I'm afraid I shan't be much of a help to you as a bright young guest, though. The thought of G.F. rises up like Banquo at the feast—"

"That's morbid, Kit."

"Yes, you're right. I'll be thankful too when his suffering's over. But it's so terribly sad and I'm no good at hiding my feelings."

He stopped tying his tie—a Bronzini, of course—and laid an encouraging hand on her shoulder.

"You can do it, I know. It's important to me. Horace Dean has a good deal of legal work to bring in."

"All right, Charles." The odd smile quirked her lips again. "I hope you land him." Then she moved away from under his hand, reached across to her bed-table, picked up a sealed envelope and held it out to him. "Charles, I'd like this letter to go Special Deliv-

ery. I shan't be going to the village today so send it off from the office, will you?"

Her request was reasonable enough and casually courteous, but to Charles' specially sensitized ear, it smacked of the autocracy he hated. It was an echo of the old days when Melanie would say carelessly: "Do get that chart done today, please. I should have handed it in long ago." He had stood for it willingly from Melanie out of sheer adolescent love. From Kit, he resented it because the capacity for loving had disappeared from his makeup.

But his smile held. It was good policy to oblige Kit and keep her satisfied. You oiled and greased the block and tackle which was lifting you to the top, didn't you? He enjoyed this secret attitude toward Kit. There was sharp savor in using her without her being aware of it. This hidden relish as well as his actual need for her help made it easy for him to maintain his devoted attitude toward her both publicly and privately.

He took the letter from her with a good-humored: "Of course, my dear."

He pulled the tie tight, slipped on his jacket, nodded goodbye to Kit and ran lightly downstairs to his breakfast, pleased with himself, pleased with old Martha's perfect service, pleased with the gracious roomy house, pleased with life itself.

He took his time reading the *Herald-Tribune* because it didn't do for as prominent an associate as he to get to the office too early. Nine o'clock for the bright young lads in the cubby-holes but a quarter to ten for Charles Lundgren, no earlier, no later. The same held true for Peter, but lately—with Rosemary Schuyler in her eighth month—Peter wandered in at his own sweet will. It disgusted him the way Pete took the whole firm into his confidence. Charles had no desire to hear of the exact moment when Rosemary had "felt life" or had a passion for dill pickles or salted peanuts. But what really enraged him was to hear Pete discuss such unsavory matters with Lane himself. The maddening thing was the way the dignified head of the firm dropped into easy chuckling intimacy and adduced ancient examples from his own married life. That was where Pete ran away and hid from Charles. Even if and when he was a full-fledged member of the firm (and he would be some day) Charles could never never achieve that effortless tacit equality which existed between Pete and Lane, in spite of their differences

in age and position in the firm; the intangible thing that made them insiders and Charles an outsider.

He finished his breakfast and the paper, brushed his teeth in the downstairs lavatory, shrugged into his magnificent fleecy overcoat—the January day was brilliant but cold—and called up a final good-bye to Kit. Lightheartedly, he went out to the garage and backed out his handsome Chrysler. He never took the train, he always said he preferred to make the forty-minute trip “under his own steam.” Mixed up with his preference was an obscure distaste for being a commuter, a suburban cog in the Manhattan industrial machine, at the mercy of a train-schedule. Until his marriage, he had been a slave to the 8:27 from Highcliff. Driving was much more lordly.

He was halfway down the long front drive which led into the Highway when he remembered he had left Kit’s letter on the hall table. He cut the engine and walked back to the house, rather than bother to turn the car. The three-minute walk was a pleasure in the crisp air.

He let himself into the house, picked up the letter and was turning to leave, when the phone rang. There was an extension practically under his hand on the hall-table and automatically he picked up the receiver. Before he could speak, a solemn male voice said:

“The Driven Snow Hand Laundry.”

He was about to hang up when he heard Kit chuckle.

“It’s okay. You can talk. He’s gone.”

Charles froze to the receiver.

“Oh—then—good morning, lovely. How are you?” The voice was no longer solemn.

“How do you think? Isn’t it Thursday?” There was a lilt in Kit’s voice that was new to him.

“I’m just calling to check. The redoubtable Martha’s off on her occasions?”

“Right.”

“Two o’clock, as usual?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there.” The voice, one Charles couldn’t place, deepened to seriousness: “Kit, darling, have you spoken to him yet?”

“Oh, please. Don’t start that again—”

“That means you haven’t.”

"I told you I wouldn't while G.F.—"

"I know. I still don't understand it."

"Oh, darling, it's simple enough. I won't leave town while G.F. needs me. And while I'm here, there's no sense in precipitating such an unpleasant situation."

"It's unpleasant enough now, God knows, Kit. How do you think I feel—sneaking in the back way on maid's day out?"

"I know. It's horrid either way. But I simply couldn't go through the days and nights, perhaps for weeks, if I told him now."

"He'd probably move right out."

"Charles? You don't know him. Oh, no. He'd work on me, try to dissuade me—he has use for me, you see. I'm as valuable as an alpenstock in his climb. So he'll fight to keep me. I just couldn't take it, darling."

"You'll have to take it sometime."

"But not for long. Once G.F.'s gone, I'll leave for Reno as soon as you like."

"Sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure. How can you ask?"

"Sheer funk, my lovely. From where I stand, all these delaying actions look a bit ominous. I have this ghastly feeling that you're comparing the two of us and still haven't made up your mind whether to go or stay."

All lightness and all bitterness dropped out of her voice. Only a level earnestness was left:

"Listen to me, please. Get it through your head that if I'd never met you, I still wouldn't stay as Charles' wife one day longer than I have to. I decided that months ago and nothing can change me."

"So I'm just an extra dividend," he said lightly.

She laughed, throwing off her seriousness.

"You're much more. You're a melon—and I'm the only stockholder. Now stop worrying, darling. There's not a thing to worry about. But I still won't tell him until a day or so before I go. Do I sound selfish?"

"You do, honey, thank God. It's about time you thought about yourself a bit and had a life of your own. And I'll stop pestering you. Tell him when you like. Meantime—two o'clock."

"And drive carefully, dear. The old road's tricky with ice on the ground."

"Will do. I damn near skidded into the Creek last time."

Charles waited until he heard the click as Kit hung up, before he put the phone down. He let himself noiselessly out of the house although there was really no need for care. Kit's bedroom at the back was out of earshot. Luckily, she couldn't see him go down the front drive to his car, even if she had looked out of her window. . . .

He fished a dime out of his change pocket and slowed down at the toll-house entering the West Side Highway. The wild rage that had gripped him had simmered down to a cold core of purposeful calculation. His analytical mind posed a problem without passion: Kit was divorcing him as soon as old Verhooven died. How did that affect him, Charles? He tabulated:

(a) He was done for socially. All of Highcliff would side clannishly with Kit, right or wrong: she was one of them. Charles would lose his charming home, his influential wife, his carefully-achieved circle of friends. He doubted if he could even count on Larry Payne's loyalty when it came to a choice between Kit and himself. They stuck together, these maddening insiders. All doors were open to Kit Verhooven's husband but how many to that nobody, Charles Lundgren?

(b) He would lose the benefit of the Verhooven fortune. And he needed it. His earnings were, as yet, comparatively small. Only Kit's allowance made it possible for them to live even on the scale they did. And the present scale didn't suit him, comfortable though it was; the cook-housekeeper Martha, a cleaning-woman three times a week and the borrowing of a waitress from the Verhooven establishment when they gave a dinner. Picayune. Charles had much grander ideas. He had intended to implement them with Kit's inheritance. Divorce would nullify all that.

(c) His position at Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane, only beginning to be solid, would suffer immeasurably. He was in line for a partnership by virtue of hard work and ability. But Lane was an old fogey, a stickler for convention and tradition. Divorce was anathema. And Charles could not lift a finger to stop Kit. If he didn't protest the suit, he was tabbed as the culprit and he would be in disgrace in Lane's eyes; if he did contest, with countercharges against Kit (even though he could prove them up to the hilt) he would be stigmatized as a boor, a bounder, a hopeless outsider for smirching a

lady's name! Either way, the cards were stacked against him, he would be passed over and Pete Schuyler would get the partnership. And he would be passed over again and again in the future, with other bright young men promoted over his head.

Everything that Charles had worked so carefully to achieve through the long, often bitter years, was in process of being wiped off the slate by one intolerable gesture. It was characteristic of him that normal rage at a wife's infidelity took a minor—almost a non-existent—place in his thoughts. There was no room in his schedule for women, sex and the usual male reaction to marital lapses. The main consideration was that the rise of Charles Lundgren was in jeopardy. Something must be done.

He went down the ramp, drove East and left his car in his usual parking lot opposite Radio City. He accepted his stub from the checker, Al, with his customary pleasant Good Morning, walked the short distance to his office, resolutely attuning his mind to his work. Deliberately, he put all thought of the situation into a sealed compartment, not to be examined until he could give it his full attention.

When he reached his office, one of his first acts was to ring for Miss Wood, his secretary, and give her Kit's letter to stamp and mail. He was still giving his impersonation of an ideal husband. Instinct told him that this was wisdom until he had perfected some plan to scotch Kit's monstrous intentions. An ironic smile tightened his lips as he considered that if she had not used him that morning as an errand boy, if there had been no letter to forget and return to the house for, he would have missed that devastating phone call. Her own arbitrary demands had given him a powerful weapon: he was forewarned.

TWO

AT 8 O'CLOCK THE SAME EVENING, ADAM WARING STOOD ON THE SIDE-walk before the Morton Theater and looked up at the marquee. Hundreds of electric lights proclaimed:

IN LINE OF DUTY
with
GLENN STEVENS
300TH PERFORMANCE TONIGHT

The same incredulous gratified grin stirred Adam's lips as on the night the play first opened. It was still a matter for wonder with him that strangers by the hundreds converged on the theater, willing to pay to see this inconsiderable bit of fiction which he had fabricated out of yellow paper, a beat-up old typewriter and a few talks with Hank Riesner.

The thought of Hank changed his intentions. Instead of seeing the play—or part of it—for the hundredth time, he would drop in on Hank. The poor guy must be champing at the bit, out of action with his arm in a cast.

Adam stopped into a liquor store for a fifth of good Scotch, then took a taxi to 12th Street. He lay back in the cab, a slim dark young man, not handsome, but alive with his intense love and interest in life.

As the taxi threaded its way through the theater traffic, Adam closed his eyes, the better to savor his memories. This was a new habit of his, since his meeting with Kit a few weeks ago. He saw so little of her in actual hours that his yearning for her was a hunger which he tried to alleviate but never fully satisfied by a review of their short but fabulous relationship. Sometimes he went over the most recent hours he had spent with her, re-living their talk and their friendly intimate silences. Tonight he went back to the first time he had ever seen her. . . .

He had been spending the weekend with Victor Bryan, his producer, at Highcliff. On the Saturday, Vic and Bess had given a cocktail party and Adam had met a succession of pretty girls and handsome young matrons. (Bess Bryan, a born match-maker, was doing her damnedest for Vic's latest young playwright.) Adam enjoyed himself because he liked people, especially when they were as attractive a lot as these. But no one of them stood out and he found himself in a corner, momentarily alone, with the slightly cloying feeling that he had eaten too much dessert.

And then he saw Kit at the bar across the big crowded room,

talking to Vic. Her short ash-blond hair framed her face in a kind of gauzy picturesque disorder. The face itself was not the most beautiful in the room. The nose was too short, the curving mouth too wide and the chin too stubborn. But even across the room, the wide-spaced gray eyes with their startling dark lashes and arched brows, stirred Adam to an instant excitement. For a long moment, he stared, immovable, just taking her in.

By the time he pulled his wits together enough to approach them for an introduction, something took place which immobilized him again, to watch astounded: a guest engaged Vic's attention and he went away. Alone, the girl turned to the bar, took a highball glass, filled it brimful of whiskey and started out of the room, through the arch and down the little cross-hall which Adam knew led to Vic's study. Adam came to life and made his way through the crowded room like a halfback carrying the ball. He opened the study door quietly, went in and closed it behind him. Kit was standing in the middle of the room. (Even in that moment of intense interest, the author in him noted critically that the hack-writers who used "birch tree" to describe the slim swaying grace of a lovely body were right.)

As he watched, Kit took a sip of the whiskey, shuddered violently and set the glass down on Vic's desk. Adam said:

"But why?"

She turned her head, not at all startled.

"I thought I'd get drunk," she said, her lips curving upward. "Didn't you ever want to get away from it all?"

"No, never. Not if you mean people, what they do and say. And why they do and say it." He came all the way into the room.

"Everybody?"

"Anybody."

"But some are so empty."

"Nobody's empty. There's always something."

"Suppose the something isn't—good?"

"It's still interesting."

"You really love people, don't you?" she said curiously.

"I find them absorbing."

"That's a nice trait."

"It is?"

"Yes. It means you're not always thinking of yourself. What

would you make of someone who never says or does a thing except for one single solitary selfish purpose?"

"Well, such people miss a lot, I should think. But they're still interesting to watch. They call that 'drive,' I believe."

"Drive!" she echoed with sudden bitterness. "A great quality! All the rags-to-riches biographies stress it. But do they ever stop to consider what happens to the people in the path of 'drive'? They're like victims of a tornado, mowed down or carried along or slammed against walls. And the tornado doesn't feel a thing."

"So much the worse for the tornado," he smiled. "It must be hell living without ups and downs. Never 100 per cent happy or even 100 per cent sunk."

She grinned suddenly and made a gesture toward the highball glass. She said:

"For a moment, I was 100 per cent sunk. I thought whiskey was a good idea."

"Much better ideas," he said easily. "Tell me."

"Inflict a stranger?"

"Certainly. Nobody can unburden to friends. You kick yourself forever after."

She eyed him with interest.

"That's true," she nodded. "How did you know?"

"You think you're the first person on earth to have troubles?"

"I suppose not. But one's own do loom up like elephants."

"What's your name?"

"Kit Lundgren."

"Swedish. Accounts for the hair."

"Certainly not. The Dutch are blondes, too."

"But Lundgren—"

"My husband."

"Oh, God, you're married?" The words were wrenched from him.

"Not very," she said wryly.

There occurred in Adam a kind of silent explosion: this girl was his, every fiber in him met and merged with hers. Kit Lundgren had set her mark on him as no other girl ever would.

"Start at the beginning," he said.

She dropped into a chair and he sat down opposite her. She stared down at her clasped hands, considering. Finally, she said slowly:

"Did you ever know anyone without any emotions at all?"

"Nobody human."

"Then I suppose Charles isn't human." She pondered this a moment and then said: "Yes, that would cover it. He's a dynamo. All he generates is power."

"Was he always like that?"

"Must have been. Only I was too stupid to know it. How could I have been such an ass just two short years ago!"

"Go back a bit. What kind of a kid were you?"

"Pretty dumb, I guess. Full of moonshine. I wallowed in Grimm's *Fairy Tales* till it fell apart. Of course, I was always the Princess and looking for the Prince."

"Then what?"

"I graduated from Grimm's *Fairy Tales* to *Morte d'Arthur*. Fairy princes were in the discard. Now I was looking for a knight in shining armor. What an impossible brat I must have been!"

"I'll bet you were a honey," he said softly.

She gave him a surprised interested look. Color crept up into her fair skin. Adam's pulse went to 120.

"How long did the knights-in-armor stage last?" he asked, rather breathlessly.

"I'm ashamed to say I never quite got out of it." She twisted her hands in a kind of self-disgust. "Now I look back," she said cheerlessly, "I see that's why I was carried away by Charles."

"Attractive?"

"Oh yes, in a rugged arresting way. And when he smiles, he's Charm Incarnate," she said cynically. "Everybody likes him."

"Not me. Go on."

"Do I have to? You must know how boys are when you're eighteen or nineteen. Casual, offhand, thinking a kiss goodnight and a hearty hug are the proper caper after an evening out. Practically a habit, like a drink at the nineteenth hole."

"So Charles had a different technique."

"The first time he brought me home from an evening out together, he—kissed my hand to thank me. I was thrilled to my marrow, wherever that is."

"Of course, he sent violets instead of orchids."

"You know much too much!"

"I know more: nobody understood him."

"Not quite," she flashed back, delightedly. "He worked the

'lonely' hook. He and I were two forlorn and solitary souls reaching out for each other. He kept telling me how he needed me." She gave a short tart laugh. "He needed me, all right. He and his 'drive'!"

"What else?"

"That's really all. Don't get the idea I'm mistreated. He's a pleasant husband, full of small attentions. But all the time I have this feeling why he's handling me so carefully. I'm useful to him. He's got a thing about Society—Capital S—and it happens that my family name of Verhooven's rather solid around here."

"Stuffed shirt."

"It's more than that. It's like living with a shell. Nothing affects him but the one thing—to get on, to achieve, to beat the other fellow—"

"Well, that's another angle. The books say there's nothing wrong with ambition."

For the first time, she showed fire. The gray eyes darkened.

"Yes, there is! When every word and smile is doled out for what it will get him! When I'm only valuable for how hard I can push him up the ladder! When I'm to pick my friends with an eye to who can do him the most good. When there's no passion—either love or hate—in his whole scheme of things!" The fire ebbed. She said dully: "I'm sorry. You're so easy to talk to."

"Keep going."

"That's all. It's just such a dreary feeling—Today, I was sort of overwhelmed." She grinned weakly toward the glass of whiskey. "But that's no answer. I detest the stuff."

"There are answers, though. For civilized people who can't get along. Light out and free yourself."

"You'll think I'm Calamity Jane," she said whimsically. Then her voice deepened with pity. "My grandfather's incurably ill. He's only got me and my aunt. I can't 'light out'—yet. He comes first."

"If it'd been me," he nodded understandingly, "I'd have downed the whole glass."

"This has been much better. I can't thank you enough."

"Thank me?"

"Yes. Oh, yes," she said softly. "I've never been able to talk to anyone this way—even Aunt Irene. I wonder why. Who are you? Tell me about yourself, won't you?"

"My name's Adam Waring."

"The writer?"

"Good Lord, you mean somebody remembers a playwright's name?"

"'In Line of Duty' is a wonderful play."

"Good escape stuff," he shrugged, embarrassed.

"I was on the edge of my seat."

"All right, good suspense. But—"

"Don't you go running it down. It has a terrific idea—the cop torn between his sworn duty to capture a murderer had having his own child kidnapped if he does. My fingernails were wrecks after Act II."

"Well, that's a plug, if ever there was one."

"And the background, the police routine. How did you get so knowledgeable?"

"I've got a friend who's in Homicide. We had our war together. He briefed me on all that.—Mind if I take a sip of that stuff?" He found he was trembling—an effect of that internal explosion.

"Go ahead. Do you like it?"

"Not specially. But—" He rose suddenly and stood over her. His voice was gruff with feeling. "Kit, you've bought yourself a slave. A friend, a lover, an undying champion, whatever you want—"

She rose too and faced him. Her gray eyes were wide and luminous.

"Is this how it happens?" she asked breathlessly.

She made a move to go frankly into his arms but Adam stepped back.

"Keep off, lady." He managed a grin but his heart was pounding. "This is for keeps. I don't like samples. Bits and pieces left over from your damned adding-machine."

"You mean you're not seeing me again?"

"Of course I'm seeing you. As often as you'll let me. But until you're free and clear, we're strictly in the talking state. We keep our hands to ourselves. And a good two feet of respectable air between us."

"You're grand," she said, touching his coat-sleeve shyly.

"Better get back to your husband while I'm still feeling durable." She laughed up at him, her gray eyes crinkling.

"He's in Washington. Did you ever make hay in January?"

"It's one of my talents."

"Then drive down the Highway four miles and turn off to the right. You'll see a sign 'Zum Weissen Roessl'. It's a stuffy little place that specializes in something called Sauerbraten. But nobody I know goes there. We can talk."

"I'll clear with Vic and be on my way."

The taxi ground to a stop before Hank Riesner's door.

Lieutenant Riesner of Homicide lived one flight up in a converted private house. His bachelor apartment consisted of one room, so large that his twin studio couches in one corner, and his kitchenette, masked by a Venetian blind, in another, were practically lost in the shadows.

Adam found him, awkwardly trying to fill his pipe with his right hand alone. His left arm was strapped to his chest, immobilized by plaster and bandages. He was a tall red-headed man of about thirty-nine, some seven years older than Adam. He had a well-cut mouth and a sudden attractive smile which few people knew about, because he smiled so seldom. He had little triangular sharp green eyes which didn't miss much. They didn't miss the aura of happiness that surrounded Adam. His greeting was dry:

"What're you walking on air for?"

"Who? Me?" he said, as transparent as cellophane to Hank.

"Yeah, that's who. Musta closed the movie deal for that lousy play of yours." He spoke in the lingo he often used as a protest against Adam's choice of profession although he was by no means an illiterate man.

"Oh, that," said Adam. "The movie deal was settled weeks ago. Only thing holding it up is how to spread the payments over enough years so taxes don't grab it all." He took the pipe from Hank. "Here, let me." He filled it, put it into Hank's mouth and held his lighter to it, an efficient but cheap thing. It was characteristic of Adam that his enormous royalties had made practically no change in his expenditure and mode of living. The one luxury he had indulged in was to stop grinding out science fiction for the pulps and give his entire time to trying to follow up "In Line of Duty" with what he considered a worth-while play. He opened the bottle of Scotch, rummaged in the kitchenette for glasses and ice and mixed two drinks. Then he sat down across from Hank and said:

"Cheers. How's the arm?"

"They're cutting off the cast tomorrow."

"Swell."

"Oh, yeah?" said Hank, sourly. "A lot you know. It'll be in a sling for another two weeks and I gotta exercise with a crummy little rubber ball."

"What you get for being a hero," Adam grinned heartlessly.

Hank shrugged with his good shoulder.

"Occupational hazard. Same as Klieg lights ruining a star's eyes."

"And at least you can show something for it. You got your man."

"And then some." Hank indulged in a sheepish grin. "It's no longer *Acting Lieutenant Riesner*. I'm the real M'Coy now."

"Fair enough. Do I have to salute when I talk to you?"

"Watch your tongue or I'll run you in for disrespect." Then he added disgustedly: "Course there's a string to it. The Chief says I gotta take a full month sick-leave. Says if I so much as stick my nose in the office, he'll demote me."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Hell, what'm I gonna do twiddling my thumbs for four weeks?"

"Get out of town. Soak in some Florida sun. You can use it after that hair-raising gunbattle—"

"Look, kid. We get any month's vacation after Omaha Beach? Whatsa matter, you going soft?"

"We're ten years older now, Hank. Can't take it so well."

"Well, I can't take Florida. I don't like heat or sun or palms or cockroaches as big as sardines."

"Fifty million Americans wrong?"

"Maybe I could just about bear it if you came along."

A slow tide of red washed over Adam's face. Hank eyed him sharply. He said acidly:

"So that's it."

"So that's what?" said Adam belligerently.

"Dumb of me to think a movie contract could make you look like that. What's she like?"

"Hank—she's—" He pulled up. "What's who like?" he snorted.

"Who you fooling? You got a moon-look on your puss that spells nothing but dame, boy." He dropped his Brooklynese and spoke naturally. "Suppose you tell me all about it. I only hope to God you haven't tangled with some temperamental stage type."

"No. She's—Look, Hank. You're right. I have met someone—the one—"

"When was this?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Took you three weeks to decide you're in love?"

"I decided the first ten minutes. In fact, the first minute."

"At that speed, you should be married and starting a family by now."

"It's—not quite that simple."

"Married, eh?"

"Look, Hank," Adam said helplessly. "Would you just as soon drop it? As soon as I can, I'll tell you all about her. But—"

"You can tell me what she's like, can't you?"

Adam's face lit up. Hank would have died before putting it into words but his thoughts ran: still the same clean kid who saved my life in '44. That gal better be good.

"You'll love her, Hank. She's—everything. Lovely and sweet and gallant, sort of. She's even got a sense of fun."

"Even! Don't you know that comes first, dope?"

"Well, she's got it. And she needs it. She's had a rough deal. But that won't last." He grinned. "And don't you go getting shot again the next few months. I'll be needing a best man."

Hank relapsed into his jargon:

"Hey, where the hell's that bartender? Don't a guy get a re-fill to drink to this 24-carat wonder?"

THREE

CHARLES SAT OPPOSITE KIT AT DINNER THAT NIGHT, CHATTING WITH HIS usual ease and urbanity. He was no "street angel and house devil." He never dropped his guard. He treated Kit to as much geniality and as many smiles as he used on prospective clients. He took the tenderest care of all his possessions; he always kept his shoes in shoe-trees, never raced the Chrysler's motor, kept Kit smooth by the oil of flattery. All these were useful props to be kept at maximum efficiency.

But the whole picture had changed. He felt as a man does in an optometrist's office; one lens is dropped into the eyeglass frame and

the chart of letters across the room is a gray blur; another lens is substituted and the letters stand out clear and black. Up to now, his view of the situation between them had been distorted and fuzzy. The phone call, that morning, had been the right lens, clarifying everything. Kit knew. All his secret amusement at using her had been an illusion, engendered by the wrong lens. Through the right lens, he saw that, even knowing, she had gone on contemptuously helping him from her unassailable position. The blow to his ego was enormous. It was the Werners' hundred-dollar bill all over again.

But much more was involved now. Just as Kit's social position was miles above Melanie's—what was she, after all, he saw now, but the daughter of a well-to-do furniture manufacturer?—so was the issue at stake here. Instead of a birthday party, it was Charles' whole career, the patient solid edifice which he had been building for fourteen years. If Kit carried out her intention to divorce him, she destroyed him utterly. It couldn't be allowed to happen. Somehow he must dissuade her, prevent her. He burned inwardly at his helpless humiliating position but self-interest won out over the luxury of rage. With his automatic self-control, he smiled at her across the table and said:

"That's a good color for you, Kit."

She was wearing a beige wool dress not many shades lighter than her hair. As he looked, he was faintly astonished to note how attractive she really was, as women went. There was something cool and poised and serene about her, a sort of sureness without arrogance. Good breeding, he thought bitterly. Generations of living at the top of the heap.

She smiled at his comment.

"It's three years old and nearly threadbare. Larry finally converting you?"

"Larry?"

"Color values. Tone nuances."

"That rubbish! Can't a man pay a compliment to his wife without having Larry's long-haired patter thrown up at him?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. You know, it's always been a mystery to me that you and Larry ever got to be such friends at college."

"He's a very sweet guy, really, under that 'arty' pose."

"Pose? You don't give up a fortune and live in a converted barn without servants for a pose."

"It won't last. Larry's weak and old Payne's just giving him enough rope. I'll lay odds he'll be back with his father before the year's out."

"I hope not."

"Why? Larry's not fit to buck life on the scrap of money his mother left him."

"He and Meg are happy."

"That won't last either. They live on lamb stew and chopped meat, I'm told. And scrounging lifts without a car of their own."

"Do roast beef and Cadillacs spell happiness?"

"No. But doing without 'em is the alarm-clock that wakes one out of love's young dream." He shot a glance at her to see if she appreciated his epigram but she was looking down.

"Larry sold a picture this week, Meg says."

"For twenty dollars," he shrugged. "What will that get him?"

"Independence, Charles. Faith in himself. Backbone. Something he's never had with his tyrant of a father."

"Old Payne's no tyrant. Merely a realist. He knows the only lever in life is money. And he's right."

"That's rubbish."

"Well, I don't actually mean a stack of greenbacks, my dear. I mean the power money gives you."

"And why power? It's such a—dead thing."

"Dead or alive, you've got to have it to succeed in life."

"And success? Is that so necessary?"

"Wake up, Kit. You talk like a child. What's life for if you don't wring everything you can out of it?"

"Charles," and her voice had sadness in it, "doesn't it ever occur to you that success means what you contribute to life as well as what you get from it?"

He smiled.

"You're nearly as impractical as Larry. You people who have always had everything can afford to be. You know where you can run for help when the going gets tough."

"We'll never agree. Better drop it."

He was more than willing. He had his difficult and delicate job to

do. Somehow he must bring her back under the spell of his influence and will, as she had been when he married her. He had to go carefully, making his appeal to what he called her mawkish sentimentality. And he had to move obliquely. Not for worlds would he admit eavesdropping at that phone call.

He leaned across the table and laid his hand on hers. It twitched in an effort to withdraw and the implication infuriated him to the point where he wanted to crush it until the bones ground together. None of this showed in his face or voice as he said gently:

"Kit, dear, what's happened?"

"Happened!" She was startled.

"To us. For weeks—months—we've been moving away from each other."

He waited but she did not speak.

"I blame myself." He smiled in self-deprecation. "I've neglected you for my work—"

Her hand moved again but he clung to it. He went on:

"But it wasn't because work was more important to me than you are. You know that, I'm sure. It was because I was trying to get somewhere—bring home to you the trophies that women value from their lovers—I wanted to make you proud of me. Silly, wasn't it?"

"Please, Charles—" He didn't like the note in her voice. There was no emotion in it, merely restiveness. But he persisted. Even now, he could not envisage failure; his faith in his own star was too strong.

"I was all wrong. I see it now. Instead of gratifying you, my work has driven a wedge between us."

"Your work? Was that it?" Now he detected a faint touch of irony. It rattled him but he had to go on. He had to succeed.

"I see the danger in time. Oh, darling, I've taken so many wrong turnings. But you must believe I took them all out of my love for you—"

She looked squarely at him, her dark eyebrows raised just enough to indicate cool skepticism. She said nothing but the look unnerved him, put him off form and made him less clear-sighted and skilful than usual. He hurried on with inartistic clumsiness:

"I've done us both a great wrong. As if material things like promotion and success matter. What matters is us." He bent his head in humility and dropped his voice to a vibrant whisper, playing

his trump card: "Oh, darling, you were so right and I was so wrong. What we need is a tie—a link—a child to bring us together again. Kit, my love, will you give me another chance?"

He waited, head bowed, but she did not speak. The silence hung between them. At last, he had to look up to read her answer from her face. He was hoping to see her flushed with confusion, agitation, emotion. Instead, she was pale but composed, and even as he looked, she gave a small involuntary shudder of fastidious distaste.

He had his answer. For the first time, he realized fully that his time had run out, that any power he had ever had over her was gone. Her words on the phone that morning were not just words. Nothing he could say would move her from her decision. She was throwing him out like a ruined nylon, callously indifferent to what it meant to him.

Then she straightened up in her chair, purpose in every line, in her squared shoulders, her tightened lips. She began to speak in a flat uninflected monotone:

"Charles, we had better face facts. I wasn't going to speak of this yet—"

He panicked, suddenly, unreasoningly.

"Not now," he said loudly. He pushed back his chair and rose. At all costs, she must not go on, she must be muzzled before she said more. He didn't know why this must be, but it was crystal-clear to him that it was so. "Think it over," he said in a rush. "This is too important for hasty settlement." He was nearly babbling. "If people would only reason things out logically before rushing into action—"

"Very well, Charles." He heard relief in her voice and remembered bitterly more of her telephone talk: she preferred silence until she was packed and ready to go to Reno.

She rose too, putting an end to the scene.

"If you don't mind," she said. "I think I'll walk across to the House. If G.F.'s awake, I'll see him for a minute."

"Oh? You haven't seen him today?" he asked carefully.

"Yes, of course. I had lunch with him at his bed-side." (And you were back here at 2 o'clock to admit your lover, he thought savagely.) "If he's asleep, I'll visit with Irene."

Again the obscure feeling of fright assailed him.

"Kit," he said appealingly, "will you remember that this problem of ours is our problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps I'm foolishly sensitive but I would rather you wouldn't discuss our private affairs with anyone until—" He let the idea hang undefined.

A look of compassion crossed her mobile face. He writhed inwardly. Nobody pitied Charles Lundgren.

"Why, of course not, Charles."

"You promise?"

"Certainly I promise."

"Thank you. Run along then. I can use the time for some work on a case."

She slipped into a beaver coat and went out. She found herself trembling with agitation and realized that Charles' theatrical mouthings had re-opened an old wound which had never quite healed.

She would never forget the night, early in their married life, when, with a beautiful candor, she had said she wanted a child. He had withdrawn his arms from about her and had sat up in bed. His voice had been kind but as pedantic as a schoolmaster's:

"Out of the question. I don't intend to saddle myself with dead weight until I am in a position to handle it. I'm just barely an associate as yet, with no assurance of a partnership for some time to come. If and when that happens, I'll consider it."

She had laughed, not taking him seriously.

"Charles, darling, it's nothing to joke about—"

"I agree. On the contrary." He went on patiently: "My dear, I've given this careful thought. First things first. And my career is the very first thing."

"But that's ridiculous. We can afford it, Charles."

"I can't afford to lose my charming hostess for a solid year."

She had been shocked to the core. She had not wept, she had not stormed. She had then and there retired into a shell as impenetrable as his own. For nearly two years, they were like two affable, civilized summer-boarders, rocking on a hotel porch. They rarely lacked for small talk but for Kit, all intimacy and all hope was at an end. To her, the most dreadful thing about it was that Charles seemed unaware that there was a change. The surface relationship suited him perfectly. . . .

As she went through the hedge-gate separating her property from her grandfather's, she deliberately threw off these ugly memories and turned with relief to rewarding thoughts of Adam; to the precious hours they had spent together.

In the three weeks they had known each other, their activities had been the reverse of amorous. They had gone skating on Central Park Lake, eating hot-dogs in the steamy skate-house; they had visited the Planetarium; Adam had read her the first act of his new play. The three Thursday afternoons when Martha was out they had spent at Kit's house. And they had talked. Continuously, endlessly, yet never talked out. They explored, they compared, they agreed, they disagreed, they laughed. Above all, they laughed. Every moment was a moment of fun, of well-being, of togetherness.

Adam told her about his parents, his father a professor of English in a freshwater college in Ohio; his mother who had invoked supercilious comments from the aesthetic faculty-wives because she raised scallions instead of flowers and read *The New Yorker* instead of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Kit felt she was going to love his mother. They made outlandish plans for the future, decided on fantastic places to spend their vacations, dug up hilarious names for five children. . . .

She had traversed her grandfather's immense park-like grounds and reached the House, as it was known in Highcliff. It was an immense affair, built of rough dark red stone with cupolas and towers, wide stone-pillared verandas and upstairs balconies. It should have looked gingerbreadly but it did not. It looked like the solid, dignified built-to-last castle her great-grandfather had planned eighty years ago.

She ran up the wide stone steps, unlocked the heavy door and entered the house. The big rooms on the ground floor were gloomy, their light curtailed by the wide verandas. Upstairs it was better. A good many of the rooms had been closed up, but Irene's suite of bed-room and sitting-room was cheerful with light furniture and gay colors.

Irene was reading when Kit came in. She put down her book and rose.

"Hi," she said. "Glad you're here. He's a bit depressed tonight. You'll do him good."

Irene was thirty-five, small, slender, a compact bundle of courage and common sense. She had a sharp tongue which spared no-

body and a soft heart of which she was acutely ashamed. She did kindnesses with a gruff air and abhorred the word Thanks. In 1942, as a WAC, she had been assigned to Kit's uncle, Major Martin Verhooven, at an English air-base. He fell in love with her salty personality and married her in three months. When news of his death over Berlin at the very end of the war came to her, she waited only to be demobilized to come to the House. She said simply to Martin's father:

"He loved you and he loved me. Let's make the best of it together."

For ten years, she had kept house for the old man and mothered Kit, a child of twelve at the time. She and Kit were the best of friends.

Kit nodded, took off her coat and went across the hall to the enormous bed-room which housed the small stricken man whom Kit had loved all her life. He had brought her up, following the car accident which had killed her parents when she was four years old.

Nurse Cox brightened when Kit peeped into the room. She, too, welcomed Kit from the standpoint of therapy.

"Well, now, isn't this nice," she said with professional cheer. "A little visit from Miss Kit and I bet you'll pop right off to sleep afterwards." She left them together and Kit came and sat at the old man's bed-side. She took the thin hand in both her own and said:

"How's my best boy tonight?"

The faded blue eyes in the waxen face managed a twinkle.

"Two visits in one day. I must be sicker than I feel."

"You're sickeningly modest, that's all. I was bored to death with Charles so I sneaked out for some fun."

He gave this an absent smile while he studied her face intently. At last he said:

"Tell me, Katrina, are you happy?"

She met his eyes squarely.

"Yes, G.F. darling. Very very happy."

"I see truth in your eyes, my child. I am glad. Tell Charles I thank him."

This time, Kit's eyes dropped and she changed the subject quickly. She was glad when Nurse Cox came back into the room.

"Well, now," she said gaily, "I think we'll have a spot of sleep after all this social whirl."

Kit rose obediently. She kissed her grandfather gently on the forehead. It was wet with the sweat of effort which the short chat had cost him.

Kit went back to Irene and slumped into a chair.

"Irene, I just can't bear to lose him!"

Irene's cool dark eyes swept over her.

"You'd be surprised what you can bear when they load you down."

"To see him suffer—it just isn't fair—"

"You're asking fairness in this shell-game?" she asked dryly. Then she laid a hand on Kit's shoulder. "He's had a full life, Kit. Most of it good. Nothing lasts forever."

"Doesn't love?" Kit asked suddenly, surprising herself. She was longing to share her story with Irene. But she was ashamed to be glowing and pulsing with the joy of life, even while her heart was wrung with grief for her grandfather. Besides, telling about Adam involved telling of her feeling about Charles, and she had just given her word not to discuss it. She went on lamely: "I mean—I'll always love G.F. Even if the *person's* not there, love stays."

"That's true enough," Irene said. "Martin has . . . stayed. But it's a thing I didn't think you'd realize."

"Why not?"

"You have to—" she began ironically. "Never mind. I'd best shut up before I make some cracks I'll be sorry for."

"Go ahead. I don't mind," said Kit placidly.

"How is Charles?"

Kit laughed outright.

"Well, that's a crack if ever there was one! Irene, honey—"

But Irene held up a hand.

"Kit, do you need advice?" she asked quickly.

"Advice? No. Oh, no. I'm—"

"Then shut up. I oughtn't to hear."

"I don't believe you need to," said Kit slowly.

"You've got a mind of your own," Irene said tartly. "Make it up yourself. It's nobody else's business."

"You're right. And I have." She picked up her coat and chuckled. "We wouldn't get rich, would we, if *True Confessions* paid us by the word?"

"Too many words cause half the trouble in this world. If you run into a snag, you can talk all you want. I'll be here."

"Right. Well—see you tomorrow."

FOUR

WHEN KIT LEFT HIM, CHARLES WENT INTO HIS STUDY. HE HAD A SMALL law library there and he took down a volume at random to serve as a stage prop in case Kit came in. But he had no intention of reading. He had a tough hour of thinking ahead of him.

He began to pace the comfortable warmly-furnished room, sorting out his ideas.

His position was desperate, well-nigh hopeless. He scourged himself with unaccustomed blame for his own short-sightedness in not having had a child long ago. A Verhooven heir would now have been an anchor to windward. Kit would have thought twice before kicking out her son's father, especially when her own infidelity would have transferred to him all legal rights to the child. It would have given him a powerful trading point. But Charles never wasted much time criticizing Charles. The thing to do was to face facts as they were and manipulate them.

The first fact was that Kit saw through him and disliked what she saw. She had stated it dispassionately over the phone that morning and had declared that she was divorcing him as soon as her grandfather was dead. Tonight he had tried to reach her through her emotions and all he had evoked was a shudder of aversion. Not even hatred. That would have been easier for him to take than the humiliating disrelish she had shown. Suppose he appealed to her honor, her sportsmanship, her loyalty—all those piffling things which her caste made such a song about and which were luxuries Charles could not afford. Would she stay? He knew she would not. In her pampered echelon, the operative word was self-indulgence. The Kits and the Melanies of this world took what they wanted. Kit wanted this unknown lover and intended to have him, come hell or high water.

The lover.

Surely, here was a weapon. Suppose Charles bided his time, caught Kit and her lover *in flagrante*, beat her in Court on an adultery charge and befooled her publicly. (He would enjoy that). What good would it do Charles? None whatsoever; worse than none. It would put him beyond the social pale for doing what "wasn't done." And it would hurt him immeasurably with Lyman Lane: a "cad" who would besmirch a woman was not partnership timber in the eyes of the old fogey.

If he kept watch, traced the lover and warned him off? Would that stop Kit? It would not. Her words over the phone came back to him with maddening conviction:

"If I'd never met you, I still wouldn't stay as Charles' wife a day longer than I have to. I decided that months ago and nothing can change me."

No. The lover was not the crux, merely the icing on the cake. The duel was between Kit and himself. And Kit was invulnerable, encased in the armor of her class, her money, her unassailable position. There were no cracks in the armor, no way to bend her to his will, no way to save Charles Lundgren from being cast down from his enviable heights, his hard-won present and his promising future.

Again, impotent anger flooded through him as it had that morning on the Highway, and again he burst out savagely:

"The witch! I could kill her!"

He stopped dead in his pacing, the echo of his own words in his ears. His rugged face hardened to granite. He drew a sharp hissing breath.

"I could kill her," he whispered.

And suddenly he knew that deep in his subconscious mind, the idea of killing Kit had been waiting patiently and slyly for the right moment to rise to the surface. He knew now why he had panicked half an hour ago when Kit started to tell him she was leaving him. A shrewd instinct, far below the level of thought, had told him to stop her, to preserve the *status quo* at all costs and to extract a promise from her not to discuss their situation with anyone. Why? So that after she was murdered—a murder by no stretch of the imagination to be connected with Charles Lundgren—there must be no doubt in the world's mind that death had disrupted a perfect marriage and had left behind a devoted and heartbroken

husband. There it was, as complete and practical as a jinn, sprung from its bottle.

There was one drawback: the lover knew. But he was very vulnerable. He visited Kit on Thursdays when the house was empty. If Charles eliminated Kit on a Thursday, the crime might even be fastened on the other man. And why should this home-wrecker get off scot-free? It would be poetic justice for both of them to pay. But instantly he discarded the idea. If the lover were to pay, the whole story would have to come out. And if the whole story came out, Charles would be revealed in the eyes of the world as a betrayed husband, a figure of fun, something to be snickered at. Not for Charles Lundgren. The lover was quite safe.

But the lover would not know that. If Charles timed the murder to follow so closely on one of his illicit visits as nearly to overlap, the other man would realize his own danger as a suspect and would keep his mouth shut in self-preservation. At the very worst, if the lover did speak up, he could only testify that Kit contemplated divorce. And how much credence would be given to his words in the face of Charles' well-publicized devotion? Moreover, he would have to admit that Charles knew nothing about it and therefore had no motive to commit murder. But more was involved than a suspicion of murder. The merest breath of scandal and doubt was enough to shake Charles' position on the ladder. The lover was a damnable risk. But a risk he had to take.

He ground his teeth at Kit's invincible position. He could not strike a single effective blow at her from any angle.

Except death. Anonymous death.

He dropped into a chair with something like a groan. He hated the idea of murder because he was wise enough to know how small the chances of bringing it off without detection really were. The police were like the mills of God in the couplet. They ground and ground until the last crumb was pulverized. They didn't have to be brilliant. Time, facilities and the public were on their side. They could make mistake after mistake and yet succeed in the end. Eventually, some lead, some inadvertent chance would put them on the right track; the track that would lead to the arrest, trial, conviction and execution of Charles Lundgren. It was a bad gamble.

But the alternative was nearly as bad. At this moment, with progress so assured, it was unbearable to be cast into the outer darkness

of insignificance. If Kit divorced him, he could consider himself lucky if Lane kept him on at all. And if he did keep him on, he saw himself as the office-hack, the hard worker, given the dirty jobs, never those leading to distinction or even mention. Every big office has a competent drudge who knows the law better than the head of the firm himself; a balding, spectacled worker-ant who shuffles between his desk and his furnished room, forever unhonored and unsung.

Again, not for Charles Lundgren. Even a bad gamble was better than that. It would have to be murder.

He ran his tongue across his dry lips. Murder was big time stuff, playing for keeps. If he had to kill, he must put all his considerable mental power to work to do a perfect job.

How did one kill a wife and remain totally in the clear?

Poison? An overdose of sleeping-tablets? It happened occasionally in Kit's circle with some unhappy or desperate wife, and unless a flagrant letter of farewell belied it, was glossed over as accident. But even though he was untroubled by the police, Charles knew the silent condemnation passed on the victim's husband—the pursed lips and turned shoulders of the women, the convenient preoccupation of the men when it came to a drink or a round of golf. Not a word need be spoken. But the husband of a woman driven to suicide was socially done for.

Charles reveled in his life at Highcliff; he loved the golf and tennis at which he had perfected himself from college days on. It gratified him intensely that he was constantly in demand at either game. It was not unthinkable that in time, such an outstanding athlete and rising young legislist might hope to become one of the Directors of the Country Club. The women liked him too, for his unfailing courtesy and possibly for the fact that he was hard to get. His incorruptibility was a challenge to them. (The truth was, women meant nothing to him. His passion was for power; his aphrodisiac, advancement.)

Well, at present his position was strong, bolstered as it was by the important Verhooven connection, and to a degree by his own qualities. But as widower of Kit Verhooven, suicide, it would crumble like a sand-castle before a wave. The raised eyebrows would mean:

"Why did she do it? What sort of wretch is hiding behind that

smooth exterior? There must be something to have driven poor darling Kit. . . ."

Poison was out.

Anything to do with guns was out for the same reason. Besides, Charles owned no gun and to buy one now would be asking for it. And guns were foreign to him. (That trick knee of his, manfully acquired in the Dartmouth-Pennsylvania game had stood him in good stead all through the war: he had done clerical work at Fort Dix for the duration.)

He played with the idea of tampering with Kit's Ford, so that when she drove it alone at her rather reckless speed, she would crash and be killed. But he remembered the man in Maryland who had been executed for his wife's murder on the evidence of a tiny pebble wedged under the accelerator of the car. He knew there was nothing that an amateur like himself could do to a car which could not be detected later by the professional eye of a mechanic. Wisely, he decided to utilize only such of his skills as were equal to, if not superior to, those of his opponents.

His principal skill was the law. And the law told him that the only real defense in a murder case was impregnable alibi. If he could so arrange it that he appeared to be unequivocally in one place while Kit was being murdered in another, he thought he might bring it off.

It would not be easy. He knew well that the husband of a murdered woman—especially a rich one—was the first suspect in the eyes of the police. They might handle him civilly (he was, after all, a Verhooven in-law) but they would snoop and dig and ferret so that if there was the tiniest loose end left untied, they would eventually lay hold of it and follow it back to its other extremity—Charles Lundgren.

He rolled a sheet of paper into his typewriter and began to make notes in a pidgin shorthand of his own invention, which, even if transcribed, would be innocent-appearing. He mentioned no names and specified no actions. Capital letters signified persons and lower-case letters the necessary operations to be undertaken. He was still working when he heard Kit come in and go upstairs without disturbing him. At eleven o'clock, he heard the back door close as Martha returned. He came out of his study and said cordially:

"Hello, Martha. Have a good day off?"

"Yes, sir. Very pleasant. Would you or Miss Kit be wanting anything?"

"Mrs. Lundgren's gone to bed. I've been working—" He gave her a nice smile. "You know something? I'm hungry. I don't like bothering you—"

"That's all right, Mr. Lundgren. I'll make you a sandwich."

"If you're sure it's no trouble—"

"No trouble. Would you be liking some beer with it?"

"If it's all the same, I'd rather have coffee. I still have an immense amount of work to do."

FIVE

AFTER HIS LONG NIGHT OF PLANNING, CHARLES BEGAN TWO NEW ROUTINES. He occasionally stayed late at the office, sometimes until seven or seven-thirty, so that on the all-important day of Kit's murder, it would not seem unusual if he did so. On the nights that he went home at five—the customary closing-hour for the whole office force—he often brought work home with him and unless Kit had made some social engagement for the two of them, he retired to his study under plea of work. This had two objectives. First, he wanted to spend as little time alone with Kit as possible. He was afraid that, impulsively, and in spite of what she had said over the phone to her lover, she might bring up the subject of her intention to leave him. He wanted to avoid this at all costs. He knew Kit well enough to realize that by her quixotic standards of fair play, she would keep her promise and tell nobody of her proposed move until she had first told Charles. And it was of the first importance that nobody should dream that the Charles Lundgrens were not the model young couple they appeared to be. Secondly, on the evening before Kit's proposed death, Charles would have a solid job of work to do in his study. His new routine of out-of-office work would make this seem natural and therefore cause no comment.

He hated the next step he had to take. It was melodramatic and undignified. But it was necessary. He went to a theatrical costumer on 45th Street and bought a red wig. He made no heavy-handed

explanations. But as he tried on the curly, bushy head-piece for size, he grinned at the girl who waited on him and said:

"Going to be mighty hot dancing in this thing."

He hid it in a drawer of his office desk and locked the drawer.

He began to scan the furnished apartment ads in the paper and settled on one on West 71st Street. In his lunch hour, he took the subway to the place, pausing in the men's room at the 72nd Street station to put on the red wig. It changed him astonishingly, even with a hat on. An untidy lock escaped from the brim onto his forehead and shaggy scrolls of coarse red hair met his coat collar behind. He would have preferred black hair as less clownish but his fair skin and light brows and lashes would have been too striking by contrast.

The superintendent of the house showed him a dingy two-room and kitchenette apartment, flimsily furnished and not over-clean. The rent was \$110 a month and it could be had for two months.

"People comin' back from Florida in March," the slovenly superintendent explained, yawning.

"That suits me," said Charles. "I'll be leaving for the Coast by then."

"Y'understand there ain't no service."

"That suits me, too" said Charles. "I don't care for strangers all over the place while I'm out. What arrangements do you have for mail?"

"Mail-boxes in the front hall. You get a key."

Charles paid \$220 in twenty dollar bills. A day or so before, he had withdrawn \$1500 from his personal account. His plan involved the outlay of a considerable sum. But compared to the benefits which should accrue, it was a minnow to catch a whale.

Laboriously, the superintendent made out a receipt to James Scott, the name Charles supplied. As he did this, he stopped and looked up.

"I'm supposed to get references," he said belatedly.

"I see," Charles said easily. "Well, I'm Eastern agent for Swan and Manley, plumbers' supplies. Main office, 62 Market Street, San Francisco. They'll okay me."

"Frisco? Nobody here in town?"

"No, I'm a stranger in New York. I'm setting up an Eastern branch and I don't know many people here yet."

"Well, I don' know—"

"Make up your mind," said Charles curtly. "I've got to settle this today because I checked out of my hotel. If you've got any doubts—" He stretched out a tentative hand toward the sheaf of greenbacks which the other still held. The man moved the money out of reach, remembering that \$22 of the \$220 was his commission for subletting the flat. He gave an ingratiating leer.

"I guess it's okay. Anybody can see you're class." The expensive overcoat outweighed the untidy hair. He finished the receipt and handed it to Charles together with a latch-key and a mail-box key. He didn't even ask Charles to repeat the name of the San Francisco firm.

Charles left the place, disgust and triumph fighting for first place in his mind. Triumph won. He told himself that he must disregard the frowsy details of his plan. He had what he wanted: a new identity. James Scott of West 71st Street could now transact official business entirely dissociated from Charles Lundgren of Highcliff-on-Hudson.

The first business was the purchase of a used car. He had never bought a used car before; in fact, had never owned any car until Kit had given him the Chrysler just after their marriage. He scanned the Classified Telephone Directory and chose a dealer close enough to the office to be reached in his lunch hour.

The next day he walked over to the selected place—far West on 54th Street—taking note, on the way, of a garage which was also convenient to the office. Near Eighth Avenue, he stepped into a busy Automat, went to the wash-room and donned his wig. Nobody so much as glanced at him.

The ease of the actual purchase and transfer of the car astonished him. He asked for a small dependable car, stressing sturdiness rather than style. After a trial-run up 10th Avenue, he settled on a 1953 Plymouth. Back at the car lot, he broached the question of license plates as nonchalantly as he could. The dealer's answer surprised him:

"I can get them for you. Take an hour or so. Come back later, pick up the car and drive right out." He produced a certificate of sale, a form marked MV50, and began to fill it out, specifying the make, style, year, serial and engine numbers of the car. He looked up at Charles and grinned: "Guess I don't need your birth certifi-

cate. You're no teenager trying to get by as driving-age. What's the name, did you say? James Scott . . . Right . . . Address?" Charles supplied the 71st Street number. "Fine. You come in any time after three and she's all yours." Charles did have one bad moment when the dealer held out the certificate, saying: "Now if you'll just sign here and here where I checked—"

But Charles' resourcefulness was equal to the occasion. He pulled off his glove and signed with his left hand. The result was a scrawl like some immature schoolboy's and Charles darted a worried glance at the dealer for any sign of distrust. But the man took the form and said only:

"Southpaw, eh? Ever bother you driving?"

"Not a bit," said Charles coolly. "May as well pay you now." He took out his ostrich wallet and counted out \$900 plus the license plate fee, got a receipt and walked out.

He was furious with himself. He had been so certain that the Motor Bureau would demand a *bona fide* address to which to mail the license plates. Here he had spent \$220 for an apartment he would not have needed, and what was worse, had exhibited himself to the superintendent in the outlandish wig when there had been no necessity for it. It was obvious that neither the dealer nor the Motor Vehicle Bureau had any intention of checking on the address he had given. He was angry at his own ineptness. His mistake was not critical but it frightened him to realize that he was not the masterly strategist he had considered himself when he had typed out the various items of his program for murder.

From now on, he decided, he would take nothing for granted. Dozens of small actions must be weighed and rehearsed before the actual day when they must be performed with deadly precision. For instance, the time consumed in walking from the office to the garage of his choice must be measured in minutes and seconds. Other vital movements must be likewise tested. The elapsed time of the trip from New York to Highcliff must be clocked. He was usually a leisurely driver and he knew that the twenty-three miles took him just under three-quarters of an hour. Now he would test the exact minimum in which the distance could be made while not exceeding the speed limit. The last thing he could afford was to be stopped on the highway on the crucial trip.

He reached the garage, inquired about space and arranged to

bring his car in late that afternoon. He paid in advance for a month without service. He used another busy lunchroom lavatory to remove the red wig, then walked back to his office building where he had a hurried sandwich at Moline's, the restaurant which occupied the ground floor.

Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane was a conservative firm, housed in a building which had been modern thirty years ago but which today was a pygmy compared to the dazzling metal and glass structures which surrounded it. It was on Fifty-fourth Street near Fifth Avenue, facing north, and its layout, both on the ground floor and on the fifth floor which the firm occupied, lent itself beautifully to Charles' plan.

Approaching the building from the west, before reaching the main entrance, Charles could enter through a small seldom-used door, walk down the short west corridor and find himself at the fire door which opened on the stone steps leading upward. If he climbed four flights, he had only to walk through the south corridor to reach the entrance to Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane's reception room. Since he had to pass the elevators, it entailed some risk of being seen. But he had an alternative and much more private re-entry back to the offices: through the west corridor where an emergency door led directly into Lane's private office. Since there was a connecting door between Lane's office and his own, he had only to be reasonably careful to ensure getting from the street to his office without being seen by any one in or out of the offices. And since the crucial moment of such a trip was going to be after hours, the risk would be considerably lessened. Naturally, Lane kept this emergency door bolted, but Charles would see to it that it was open on the all-important evening.

The simplicity of the arrangement gave him a feeling of smug righteousness: some Providence, interested in the advancement of Charles Lundgren, had supplied the necessary architecture to facilitate his plan. He would be a worm and a fool not to make use of it.

During the next week, he made the trip up and down the fire stairs a few times, both to time the operation and to test his own nerves. He was sure that he had not been noticed. And he was pleased to observe that his heart-beat had not accelerated unduly.

After the Plymouth was garaged on the afternoon of the day of

purchase, he had only one more procedure to rehearse. Ironically, it was the overheard phone call which put this idea into his head. Kit had reminded her lover to drive carefully over the "old road." It offered Charles an added bit of safety in an already circumspect design.

Highway-on-Hudson lay on a bluff overlooking the Hudson. The Highway, as it passed it, rose in a series of well-graded inclines. But three miles South, outside a village called Hawes' Ferry, there was a fork in the road. Driving North from New York, the right fork was the Highway; the left plunged down along the foot of the bluff, skirting Anglers' Creek. It was practically a ledge interrupting the cliff's further descent to the Hudson. This road, a desert of dust in the summer and a washboard of iron-hard ruts in the winter, had been a wagon road in the old days when Highcliff was virgin woodland, owned by long-dead Verhoovens. It was disused now except for the neighborhood boys who sometimes fished or swam in Anglers' Creek in the summer. The estates towering above it could not be seen from the old road and what was more important, the road could not be seen from the houses. Stunted pine trees, snatching a foothold on the slope, masked it completely. Some of the estates had carved flights of steep stairs from the edge of their grounds to the creek below and Kit's was one of these. If Charles branched off onto the old road outside of Hawes' Ferry, he could make the last miles of his journey without the risk of being seen by any of his commuting neighbors of Highcliff.

He had never put his Chrysler to the harsh job of jouncing over the old road but in the interests of secrecy, he tried it one of the evenings when he stayed late at the office. When he reached the foot of the steps leading up to his own grounds, he looked about for cover to hide a car for the time he would have to spend in the house. Cover was plentiful behind a growth of bushes beside the road. He took out a powerful flashlight and examined the road itself. The frozen earth gave no signs that a car had passed over it. He turned the car, drove back to the fork and took the Highway, arriving home in the orthodox way.

Now he had nothing more to do but to await the death of Kit's grandfather.

SIX

AS THE DAYS PASSED AND OLD VERHOOVEN LINGERED WITH REMARKABLE vitality, Charles used the time to entrench himself even more strongly than before in the public eye as a model husband and general good fellow. Without overdoing it, he conveyed in small ways that Kit came before his own pleasures and preferences. For instance, he side-stepped one of Arnold Bleecker's famous stag dinners and poker games, with a graceful regret:

"Look, Arnold, you know how I'd like to be there. There's more real fun to the square inch at your parties than anything Highcliff can scrape up in a year. But I hate to leave Kit—"

"For God's sake, Charles! One evening!"

"I know. But she's taking this business of her grandfather pretty hard. She doesn't say much but it's not good for her to be alone."

"Can't she be with her aunt?"

"Sure, I guess so. But—hell, Arnold, when you love a gal, you want to be the one to make things easy for her."

"Love is a wonderful thing," Arnold the bachelor observed ironically.

"Do you a lot of good to find out for yourself. There was a time when I didn't realize—"

"Spare me the harrowing details, bud," Arnold groaned. But he was impressed. And when he repeated the story to his guests to account for Charles' absence, he added:

"Showed nice feeling. We all thought Lundgren was a lucky devil to bag Kit. You ask me, she was just as lucky."

Charles knew that he was none too popular with Irene Verhooven and he took steps to improve her opinion of him. For example, after leaving the office one day, he bought a best-seller at a Fifth Avenue book-shop and on his way home, stopped in at the Verhooven house.

"You must have a lot of time on your hands these days," he said to Irene. "Never going anywhere and sticking so close to the house. Maybe this'll help pass a couple of hours. I understand it's top-notch."

"Why, thank you, Charles. That's very thoughtful." But her inveterate forthrightness made her add: "I must look like the wrath of God to make you all that devoted."

He masked his anger behind a candid grin. He said:

"I know you're a fast reader, so I'll be borrowing it from you soon. It's really an investment."

When he left, Irene stood for a moment, the book in her hand.

"Could be I've misjudged the guy," she thought. "Comes of being a sour old character with a crab-apple for a heart." But she wasn't at all sure. She had had the same doubts as her father-in-law when Kit had fallen in love with Charles. She believed that the girl had been swept away by his looks and his old-fashioned homage. His attitude toward Kit had been a novelty in a generation where casualness and nonchalance were the approved approach to lovemaking. It was just the sort of thing to carry a romantic like Kit by storm. Irene had watched anxiously during the two years that followed. She could find no fault in Charles. He was just as devoted, just as punctilious in his relation to Kit as on the day he married her. Nevertheless, watching, Irene thought:

"But what the hell else is he? If only once, for the love of Pete, he'd be rude or disagreeable—show some sort of feeling behind that gentlemanly facade!"

But if Charles did not change, Kit did, and very soon. To Irene's shrewd eye, the small signs of bewilderment and disillusion were plain. And the conversation they had had the other night, cryptic though it was, had told Irene a good deal: Kit's eyes were finally opened, she saw Charles as the shell he really was, and she was making up her mind to clear out and salvage the future. That was as far as Irene's interpretation went. To her, the new glow in Kit's eyes spelled merely anticipation of a coming freedom. It never occurred to her that it was the reflection of an inner fire, kindled by another man.

Charles began to encourage an even greater cordiality toward Larry and Meg Payne. Meg, a school-day chum of Kit's, was worth hanging on to, not as the ineffective Larry's wife, but as a member of a prominent New York family in her own right, who might do Charles some good in future. He had no patience with Larry for breaking with his father in order to stand on his own feet as an artist, but he felt that the break was temporary; Larry had been too

used to luxury and the habit of disregarding expenditure, to struggle along on his microscopic income for long. And Lionel Payne would not last forever. Larry, as his sole heir, would some day be an asset to Charles.

He suggested to Kit that it was a kindness to the courageous young Paynes to have them in a couple of times a week for dinner.

"The guy's so stiff-necked," he said. "You can't offer him a loan. And Meg's just as crazy. She won't accept a dime even from her own people. But at least, we can see that they get a decent meal now and then." Kit knew too, that Charles gave a lift back and forth to Larry when he went to New York to see art dealers and that he urged Larry to have dinner with him on all these occasions. She was surprised at her own cynical reaction to all this: she asked herself what lay behind this seemingly generosity. If she were slightly shocked at her own new hardness, she shrugged it off as unimportant.

To Charles, his tactics were, to put it mildly, anything but unimportant. Quite aside from their future value to him, Larry and Meg loomed large in his plan.

At the office, there was also spade-work to do. He was even pleasanter than usual to the elevator-boys, the parking-lot attendant and the waiter who usually served him at Moline's. A little extra tipping and a show of interest in their private affairs insured that he stood out among the hurrying crowd of workers in the building, so that later, official testimony about the movements of Charles Lundgren would be clear-cut and positive. It didn't hurt, either, to have the good-will of these people. There was a thing called "slant" in the telling of any story that was intangible but important. In case of any small slip in his program, he wanted this slant to be for, not against him.

In the office itself, he paid more attention to the routine of the eighteen people who made up the office force. There were Lyman Lane, Peter Schuyler and himself, with seven young lawyers whose names, up to now, Charles had hardly taken the trouble to differentiate. There were five typists in the pool, a secretary apiece for Lane, Peter and himself and two others to take care of the junior men's work. There was a switchboard girl, a receptionist and an office boy.

He was pleased to note that the seven girls were accustomed to

cover their typewriters and slip off to the women's rest room by five minutes to five. By five past, they had all vanished for the night. Lyman Lane had a queer old-world prejudice against overtime for the girls. Indeed, in a courtly, fog-*ish* fashion, he deplored the presence of girls in business altogether; besides which, knowing that several of them were married, he insisted mildly but firmly, that they reach home before their husbands. If Charles disapproved of this, the girls did not. They adored Lane and took turns in supplying the single red rose which always graced his desk. The office boy was no problem; regularly, at a quarter to five, he left for the post-office with the day's mail.

Lane himself was even less a problem; he played bridge at his club from five to seven, before going home to his wife and daughter who lived in one of the few remaining private dwellings on Fifth Avenue—one that had housed Lanes for several generations.

Nor was Pete Schuyler a worry. These days, Pete's services to the firm were sketchy, to say the least. He was constantly calling up his wife, Rosemary, inquiring how she felt and he occasionally slipped off to their apartment on 63rd Street during lunch hour, returning to the office scandalously late. Lane merely smiled benignly: the sweet child was pregnant, fulfilling nature's noblest design and Peter was showing nice feeling. It was unthinkable that Pete would be on the premises any night after five.

The junior men were different. Mild as Lane was, these bright young men had to prove their right to bask in the glory of Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane. If it took them longer than from 9 to 5 to complete their day's work, they stayed late. Charles began to watch their routine. One of them, a young man named Starr, appeared to be of Charles's own stripe; ambitious and unafraid of hard work. On two evenings when Charles himself stayed late, young Starr was still at his desk. But he occupied the very last cubicle in the juniors' row, farthest from Charles, and it would be unlikely that he would have cause to enter Charles' office even if he were working on the crucial night.

Another of them, Christopher Muir, the senior of the seven, had worked after five on one occasion that Charles knew about. Muir had known that Charles was in his office but he had not come near him. Charles fervently hoped that this pattern of conduct was the rule. At worst, if one of them came to his office on the night and

found it empty, it was simple enough to say that he had been in the men's room at the moment. It was improbable that any of them would hover about his door, waiting for him to return. The juniors did constitute a frightening risk, but then the whole plan was a series of tremendous risks.

Never was there such an unwilling murderer. There were times when he could not believe in the reality of his own intentions. He had always been a law-abiding person; his position had never been secure enough to flout either law or convention. From the moment he entered Dartmouth, his conduct had been conservative and correct. The "right thing" was an idol before which he laid many bitter sacrifices. He had schooled himself so long in self-denial, self-control and an appearance of integrity, that the idea of committing murder had the wildness of a Disney fantasy.

The sight of the grotesque red wig brought a shudder of revulsion to him. The owner's certificate of the *sub rosa* Plymouth, tucked out of sight in the handsome wallet Kit had given him, brought on a fit of abject trembling. But the indomitable ambitious slave-driver in his makeup would crack a whip over his panic, the whip of ridicule. Did he want to be a laughingstock in the eyes of the world when Kit left him for another man? More, did he want to lose his pleasant home, his snug niche in the Highcliff community, his chance of advancement in Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane? The slave-driver would furl the whip and whisper softly: they're all yours if you have guts enough to hang onto them. All it takes is two minutes of courage. And doesn't she deserve it, the two-faced little witch?

Outrage at the injury to Charles Lundgren's destiny which Kit was contemplating stiffened his nerves. The trembling ceased and he went back to his planning, the better fitted for it for the moment of hesitation. Never, never could he survive the smash of all his years of labor. Detection and death were almost preferable. But there would be neither detection nor death, he told himself doggedly. The farm boy who had raised himself by his own bootstraps to the top of the ladder, wasn't going to be kicked off by a fit of squeamishness. Kit's death was necessary to the rise of Charles Lundgren.

Unfortunate but essential.

SEVEN

DAY BY DAY, OLD MAARTEN VERHOOVEN GREW WEAKER AND WEAKER. On Wednesday, February 3rd, he slipped quietly into his last sleep.

Charles drew a deep breath of resolution. The time was here.

Outwardly, he was the perfect husband, the prop and stay, the Head of the Family to the two bereaved women, the dependable source of comfort, service and know-how. It was he who arranged all details of the obsequies from the choice of the casket to the funeral music. It was he who supervised the opening up of half a dozen unused bed-rooms at the House to accommodate any arriving relations and old friends who might want to stay over. It was even he who gave the orders for extra quantities of food to be sent in, when he saw that the Verhooven housekeeper of forty years' standing was too disorganized by her master's death to perform with her usual competence. There were dozens of calls on his judgment and he muffed none of them.

There was really no need for this extreme efficiency. Kit and Irene were sad but by no means overcome. They looked on old Verhooven's death as a blessed release for him. And both of them were quite capable of handling the details which Charles took upon himself. But it had a certain effect. Servants, close friends and outsiders were impressed by Charles' thoughtfulness and attentions. Irene found them slightly cloying. When he slipped a footstool under her feet, or guided her gently with a hand under her elbow, her thanks were dry. But she made no comment.

Kit, on the other hand, was at first conscience-stricken and ashamed. Up to now, she had felt that her decision to leave him would rankle because he would lose the momentum she could give him in his upward climb. Now, when he was showing such tenderness and sensibility toward her, she wondered for a fleeting moment if she were wrong. Perhaps his coldness was not coldness at all but the restraint of inhibition, due to the hard road he had had to travel. Perhaps he loved her but was ill at ease because of the differences in their origins and backgrounds. Perhaps he was merely shy . . .

But she was level-headed and had only to "look at the record" to know that her first judgment was sound. Charles was still Charles, she told herself severely, the same frigid, calculating egotist he had always been. And if he was taking a nice attitude at the moment, it was with an eye to the effect he produced on others. She knew how he loved the approval of outsiders. She thought it was rather pathetic. Of course it never occurred to her that in his present display, there was anything sinister; that he was building up an array of character witnesses against the time when he might need them.

She was so proof against his tactics, once she had assessed them, that without a qualm, she made an opportunity to get to a phone alone and call Adam Waring at the Algonquin. She told him her news and said:

"I'm terribly sad—but glad, too. He's at rest after all the misery. We're overrun with people. I can't see you now but as soon as I can, I'll call you. There are a thousand things to talk over. There's nothing to stop me now."

"I'll be here," he said.

"It's a little like getting a parole. The end of the sentence is in sight," she said shakily.

The funeral which took place on Sunday, the 7th of February, at the old Highcliff Dutch Reformed Church, was impressive. Maarten Verhooven, while primarily a country squire, had had, in the course of a long life, a finger in many pies, financial, social and charitable. He had been well-loved and was now well-mourned. The little church was filled with distinguished figures in addition to family, friends and a large turnout of villagers. The funeral oration was sincerer than most such eulogies.

Charles Lundgren, grave, dignified, a tower of strength to the two principal mourners, made an excellent impression on all who saw him. Lyman Lane, although twenty years younger than the dead man, was a member of several of the same clubs. He drove up from New York both from a sense of fitness and from personal choice. He observed Charles' excellent bearing with approval. Charles was closer to the partnership he hankered for than at any time in his association with Lane.

After the interment, Irene, Kit, Charles, Cyrus Brent, Verhooven's lawyer, and a sprinkling of distant relatives, drove back to the House for the reading of the Will. Something in this Victo-

rian procedure pleased Charles. He felt part and parcel of an established tradition. He was growing roots in the rich soil of American aristocracy and he was more than ever determined to keep his place in this attractive garden.

The Will itself infuriated him. There were numerous bequests—to servants, to old friends, to the three or four young grand-nieces-and-nephews who were the last of the Verhooven connection aside from Kit. The House was bequeathed to the community of Highcliff to be turned into a Public Library. Its valuable furnishings which included a remarkable collection of Dutch paintings, and the twelve acres on which the House stood, were to be sold and the money used for the upkeep of the Library. Charles received a legacy of \$10,000. The residuary estate was left in equal shares to "my beloved granddaughter Katrina Verhooven Lundgren and Irene Matthews Verhooven, as dear to me as any daughter."

The grand-nieces-and-nephews, after partaking of tea or something slightly stronger, departed in their handsome convertibles for New York or Connecticut. The opened-up bed-rooms might have been left in their dust-sheets for all the use they were put to. Mr. Brent stayed on a little longer to give Kit and Irene a detailed account of Verhooven's holdings. It appeared that after taxes, they should each have something like \$900,000.

Charles did what is known as a slow burn. Here was one in-law left nearly a million, and another—himself—a paltry ten thousand. Here was Kit's inheritance, which, very shortly would be Charles' inheritance, cut in half by the intrusion of this rank outsider who had wormed her way into the old man's good graces. His anger was increased by the knowledge that he could do nothing whatsoever about it. Kit's spontaneous kiss of congratulation to Irene told him that any contest of the Will was out of the question. Kit's disinterestedness in money (imbecility, Charles called it) was well known to him. There wasn't a calculating bone in her body. She not only would not question this rape of her rightful fortune, she rejoiced in it. And Charles, who any moment now would be told that his stay in Eden was over, could not exert the slightest influence over her.

Well, \$900,000 was not to be sneezed at either. It was a far cry from the bleak little Wisconsin farm of his birth. After some thought, he even welcomed the unfairness of the Will. Its insulting

discrimination against him stiffened his resolution. Now there was not only a strategic necessity for Kit's death, there was the pleasure of striking back to avenge the outrage of passing over Charles Lundgren as a creature of no account.

He knew he must act fast. Kit's life-span shrank to four days. The murder had to take place on a Thursday, the only day when he could count on Kit's being alone in the house. He put himself in Kit's place and figured her mental processes. It was now Sunday and he knew she had not seen her lover since at least Wednesday, the day of Verhooven's death. With local friends paying condolence calls during the next few days, it was safe to suppose that she would neither meet him outside nor risk having him at the house. But by Thursday, he guessed that her prudence would give way to her impatience. Putting himself in her place, he figured that she would insist on Martha's taking her usual day off and risk a rendezvous at the house. Their treacherous scheme had to be implemented. There were details of train-schedules or plane-flights, legal aid to engage, hotel accommodations in Reno—a hundred things to decide. And the unknown lover had sounded impatient over the phone.

Right or wrong, he had to pin-point Thursday as the day of the murder. If he were right, he would be ready and would carry it out according to his careful blueprint. If he were wrong, and Martha was in the house at the crucial time, Charles would simply refrain from action and would not show his hand. In that case, he would play for time, make some cogent appeal to Kit to keep the *status quo* for a little longer. If he told her that the partnership deal was in actual process and that it would hurt him immeasurably if she left him openly before negotiations were completed, he was sure she would agree. She was sickeningly soft-hearted and he knew exactly how to play on her sympathies. At worst, it meant a week's reprieve for Kit. But when, on the following Thursday, she did die, Charles would figure as the stricken, heart-broken husband in the eyes of the world.

On Monday, February 8th, Charles returned to the office. He was received, it seemed to his gratified imagination, with an access of respect on all sides. The husband of Verhooven's heiress was a person of importance. Even Lyman Lane indicated that Charles had risen a rung in the ladder: on his way out at noon, he put his head in Charles' door and said:

"Coming to lunch, Charles?"

Ordinarily, Charles would have jumped at the chance. In his whole time with the firm, he had only had lunch three times with Lane. But he used his new stature to indicate his equality with the head of the firm as well as to make a show of diligence:

"Wish I could, sir. But in the three days I was at home, the work has piled up. I'll run downstairs later for a bite when I've got some of this licked."

Lane nodded approvingly and said:

"Right. Some day soon, though."

Charles had deliberately stressed the amount of work on his desk: this week he must leave some important work undone, so as to have a valid excuse for staying late in the office on Thursday. Actually, he would take it home Wednesday evening and do it there, so that, if there was later any question as to how he had put in his time on Thursday from five to seven-thirty in the office, he would have a formidable array of finished work to show. This was the best he could devise, after much thought, to account for the crucial time. It wasn't perfection but it would have to do.

And then he had one of those strokes of luck which again convinced him that Providence was working with him. Tuesday morning, his inter-com buzzed and Lane said:

"Charles, will you step in here a minute?"

Charles knocked as a matter of form before he opened the connecting door between the two offices. He found Lane pacing up and down the room, dictating to Miss Wardle, his secretary. As Charles came in, Lane smiled and said:

"Perhaps you can help us out, Charles. I'm composing my speech for this Lincoln Day dinner. I want to include a quotation from the Gettysburg Address and my memory's gone back on me. Do you know it verbatim?"

"I believe I do, sir."

"Good. That's more than Miss Wardle and I do. And when one quotes, you know, one must be exact. Now that bit about 'they have not died in vain'—I haven't got it quite straight."

Without effort, Charles quoted as Miss Wardle took it down:

". . . 'that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of

freedom; and that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.' "

"Of course." Lane shook his head deprecatingly. I used to know that word for word."

"It must be very gratifying to be asked to make the address," said Charles tactfully.

"It is indeed," Lane agreed. Then he smiled whimsically. "But it has its drawbacks. As I said, my memory is not what it was. It's going to be harder for me to memorize it than to compose it."

"Why don't you just read it, sir?"

"We—ell, they are telecasting the whole affair. Reading from a script would somehow spoil the effect of spontaneity before the cameras."

"Really? We'll certainly listen in."

"How is your sweet wife?" He had met Kit several times, at office parties and once at a formal dinner at his Fifth Avenue home. He approved highly of her, both as a personality and as a symbol of distinction.

"Couldn't be better, thanks. You know she is one of your fans."

"I assure you, Charles, it is mutual. A delightful girl."

"Isn't she?" he said ingenuously. "Every day I find new things—" He pulled up with a sheepish little grin. "Sorry. When I get on the subject of Kit—Well, I'll leave you, sir, to get on with your speech."

Back in his own office, Charles had food for reflection. His first reaction was a belittling comment on the older man. For all his high-minded mouthings, Charles thought, he's just a vain little peacock. He and his telecasting. I bet he'll pose for hours at his mirror to see which side of his profile goes better "before the cameras."

For a couple of minutes, Charles lost himself in an entrancing dream: Lane, at sixty was the last survivor and sole head of Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane. In imagination, he cast forward a few years when Charles Lundgren, the *actual* head of the firm, would be the man who was invited to make the Lincoln Day dinner speeches. And what a much more imposing presence he would be! Tall, arresting, dignified, yet with the ever ready flash of charm in his smile, instead of the finicking pedantic little *poseur* who now held the title. He saw himself rising before the distinguished assemblage at the Waldorf. . . .

He pulled himself up. This was not the time for dreams. The news about Lane's speech was sheer gravy which Charles could use in his plan to magnificent advantage. Here was a far more cogent reason for him to stay late in the office on Thursday than mere indeterminate office-work. He knew that on Wednesday and Thursday, Lane would have to be in Court on an important Utilities case.

Well, if Providence continued to smile just a little bit longer, the Lincoln Day speech would not only act as a reason for Charles to stay late in town, it would serve to show him up as the heart-rending victim of his own devotion to duty. With luck, Lane would practically be jockeyed into taking him into the firm as a restitution for Charles' tremendous loss. But it needed some doing. Even with luck, it required careful strategy and hair-trigger precision. But he was not dismayed. The chips were down and the stakes were high. He had not worked for fourteen years to reach this point, only to have it swept away for the lack of a little boldness.

On second thoughts, he denied Providence the credit for this windfall. It was neither luck nor coincidence, he concluded. It was his own genius for recognizing and using opportunity.

When he reached home on this Tuesday evening, he was relieved to find that Irene was dining with them. More than ever, he wanted no tête-à-têtes with Kit, no showdown, after which she might feel free to tell others that she was leaving him. It was plain to him that as yet Irene knew nothing of Kit's shameless infidelity and Charles used the dinner-table talk to convince her that all was well between him and his wife. He talked gaily of an Easter jaunt to Bermuda and invited Irene to go along. He dropped a veiled but roguish hint that he was going to redecorate the south bedroom with scenes from Mother Goose. He saw the flood of color that dyed Kit's face and was sure that Irene would read it as a sign of modesty, not guilt.

He was not so pleased when, after dinner, the Deans and Tim and Carol Kent dropped in to pay belated condolence calls. Charles had to stay and play the devoted husband, the mainstay of the little woman in her sorrow, while he was itching to retire to his study to start work on the important job which must be completed before Thursday.

Wednesday was torture to Charles because it consisted solely of waiting for Thursday. He applied himself doggedly to desk work

and to a couple of the lucrative widows who came in for advice. His charm was as pervasive as ever but it was mechanical. His whole soul was straining toward action, toward the dozens of tiny complicated intermeshing details which had to be carried out, but which had to wait until the actual day of the murder.

He was able to check on one important detail by slipping into Lane's office after he had left for Court. Sure enough, as he had hoped, the finished and typed speech lay on his desk, open to Page 2, as if Lane had been doing a spot of memorizing before he left the office. He noted the length—nine pages of double-spaced type-script—which meant, in Lane's measured rather pompous delivery, about ten or twelve minutes' speaking time, he figured. He hunted about and found no carbon copy. He hoped fervently that there was none. His fingers itched to tear the thing up then and there, but his disciplined mind knew that the time was not yet.

The day finally ended and Charles went home, his briefcase full of office stationery. There were no guests that evening and he spent an uneasy dinner-hour, keeping the talk to casual trivialities. There was a tension in Kit which told him that the moment he dreaded was at hand. As soon as he rose from the table, he fore-stalled it:

"Why don't you run over to the House for a while?" he said pleasantly. "I'm up to my ears in work."

"I will. But Charles, before I go, I want to talk to you—"

"What've you been doing during dinner?" His smile was playful.

"Please, Charles—There's something important—"

"Not now, dear, if you don't mind—"

"I do mind. I've got to tell you—"

"Kit," he said compellingly. "I've an important job of work to do. It must be done tonight and it's complicated and difficult. I've got to give it every bit of my mind and skill. A good deal depends on it. I might even say that my whole future depends on it. I don't want to attack it with my thoughts half on it and half on whatever it is that's troubling you."

Kit bit her lip. His plea was nearly unanswerable but her own urgency was strong, too. Still, she thought, the thing she had to tell him would be a terrific shock. If he's really got this vital job to do . . .

His voice, gentle and placating, broke in on her:

" . . . you understand, I'm certain. But tomorrow, I'll come home early. And I promise we'll devote the whole evening to Kit and her troubles. Okay?"

She shrugged and gave up.

He was just turning over in his mind how to broach the next item on his agenda, when Kit saved him the trouble. As Martha came in to clear away the coffee-cups, Kit said:

"Look, Martha, tomorrow's Thursday. I want you to take your day off as usual—"

"I wouldn't think of it, Miss Kit, with visitors and the upset—"

"The upset's over and even if there's a caller or two, I don't need you. You missed last Thursday, of course. But there's no reason why you shouldn't go tomorrow."

"Well, it does happen my young niece is acting in a Lincoln Day pageant at her school—But I'll roast a chicken and make some potato salad—"

"No need, Martha," Charles put in kindly. "It's time Mrs. Lundgren had a bit of diversion herself." He always stressed the "Mrs. Lundgren." He disliked the "Miss Kit" which Martha, as her nurse since childhood, always used. "I'll take her out to dinner tomorrow night."

"Thanks, Charles, but I'd rather Martha did prepare something. I want to stay at home alone with you tomorrow night."

"Anything you say, dear."

One by one, the pieces were falling into place. He had been right again: Kit had insured that the house would be empty tomorrow so that she could receive her lover.

After Kit left for the House, Charles went to his study to work. But first he dialed a number and was relieved when Larry Payne came on the line.

"Larry? Charles here. Can I give you a lift to town tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow? That's Thursday—Well, no, Charles, but thanks all the same."

"No dealers to see?"

"As a matter of fact, I do have a date with one late in the afternoon."

"Well then—?"

"Meg's going in with me on the 3:00. I'll see my man and then we're due at a cocktail party at Meg's sister's."

Charles had known this. He and Kit had received a card for it, too. He said:

"Fine. I'm working late tomorrow. If your party's over by seven-thirty or a quarter to eight, drop in at my office and I'll give you a hitch home."

"Swell, Charles. We'll be there. And thanks a million."

One detail out of the way and an important one. Larry and Meg were going to be shield and buckler when it came to the point of alibis. Charles would have preferred not to call them until the very day of the murder but he had to make sure of them. There was the risk that Meg and Kit might meet by chance on Thursday and Meg drop the fact that Charles was staying late in town—a direct contradiction to his promise to Kit to be home early. Then he gave a short bark of laughter. He need have no fear. Kit would be in no position to offer a denial. Kit would be quite dead.

Keyed up by his own cleverness and organization, he settled down to write a Lincoln Day speech.

EIGHT

ON THURSDAY, AT TWO, ADAM PARKED HIS CAR ON THE OLD ROAD AT the foot of the steps leading up to Kit's back garden. He ran noiselessly up the steps, cushioned as they were by a pad of fallen pine needles. The trees that bordered each side of the long stretch of ground hid him from any neighbor eyes. He could only be seen from the house itself.

Kit had been watching for him and opened the kitchen door even before he reached it. They shook hands, which was absurd in view of the light in their eyes. There was delight and hunger in both their faces. Kit drew him inside and locked and bolted the kitchen door.

"The front door's locked too," she said with the air of a stage manager. "We'll go down to the games-room which hasn't any win-

dows. If there are callers they can ring their heads off. Oh, Adam, it's been so long. I nearly forgot what you looked like."

His eyes clung to hers as if he could not stop looking.

"And I had forgotten how beautiful you are," he said. "But you look . . . different."

"It's the earrings," she laughed. "Irene gave them to me this morning. She says she looks like a circus rider in them." The earrings were topazes from each of which fine gold spikes radiated to give an impression of tiny sunbursts. She wore a rust-colored dress with a tight bodice and a full skirt. Her gray eyes were luminous under the winged dark eyebrows.

"That's it," said Adam. "I've never seen you in earrings before. You look like a blond gypsy."

"I'm as happy as one," she said with a lilt in her voice.

In the basement games-room, she had a pungent cedar log-fire going in the fireplace. Before it was a low couch, facing a low table. On the table, a purring electric percolator appealed to sight, smell and ear.

"I thought you'd be cold," she told him. "And you'll adore these little cakes."

"I adore you," he said still staring. "Darling, I've about reached my limit. I can't take any more of this."

"You don't have to. The waiting's over."

"You told him?"

"I'm going to. Tonight."

"But I thought—"

"I know, Adam. It's over a week, you're going to say. Aren't you?"

"Well, yes. It does seem to me you'd have done it by now."

"There was never a good chance."

"With two people alone in a house? Honey, you're not changing your mind?"

"Of course not! Get it through your head, Adam. I love you. I can't wait to put everything on a decent basis. But there just wasn't a single time when conditions were right."

"Conditions had to be right?" he asked skeptically.

"Oh, Adam, don't be like that."

"Like what?"

"Sulky, temperamental—"

"Darling, it's not temperament. It's sheer funk. I'm so damned scared it won't come true."

"It will," she said serenely. "In a few more hours. I tried hard to tell him last night but he said he had a terrifically important job to do—"

"I don't get it. All this homework for a lawyer."

"Oh, it was true, all right. At eleven, when I came home from Irene's, he was typing like mad. I never even heard him come to bed. But he promised solemnly to listen tonight."

She stirred her coffee, hesitating how to bring forward her new thought.

"Look, Adam. We're so happy, we've got everything and Charles has nothing."

"He had you," he pointed out.

"I mean—the things he values really haven't value. He's so empty. But if success and money mean so much to him—I was thinking—wouldn't it be right if I shared my money with him—?"

"Of course," he agreed promptly. Then he considered. "But he won't take it."

"Certainly he will."

"No. No man would. You know, Kit, you're not firing an employee with severance pay. He's your husband."

"He's—Charles. I'm sure he'll take it."

"If he's got a grain of backbone, he'll knock you down when you suggest it."

"Not if I put it to him tactfully."

He set down his coffee-cup with decision.

"I'm the one without backbone," he declared. "Look, honey. This whole thing is my job, not yours. I'm not leaving here at four-thirty as usual. I'm staying and I'm doing the telling—"

"No, no, no!"

"Yes."

"Please, please, Adam." She was really agitated. "You don't understand Charles. I do. He has a terrific amount of pride—"

"Damned egotism, you mean."

"All right, egotism. But it's the only thing he has got. If you take that away from him, you—you shatter him. I don't want to destroy him. He never meant to hurt me. He can't help the way he is. He won't like it that I'm leaving him, he'll be losing too many useful

aids. But it won't be unbearable, especially with nearly half a million dollars to the good. What he never never could stand would be for a third person—a stranger—you, especially—to see his pride deflated, his ego shriveled—You mustn't!"

"All right, all right. Calm down, honey. If it's all that important to you, I'll sneak out the backway at 4:30 and leave the dirty work to you," he said acidly.

"I'll bet you are going to be temperamental. Authors!" she snorted with a grin. "I do fall for the most impossible men." She broke off as the sound of a doorbell rang through the house. Their eyes met and held. Then they both began to grin like conspirators.

"It's the back door," Kit whispered, although she could have shouted without being overheard. "I didn't order anything today. Let 'em ring."

"Probably the Fuller Brush Man," Adam chuckled softly.

"Well, he'll get the brush today."

They waited for another peal but whoever it was did not persist. The bell did not ring a second time. They became absorbed again in each other. They made plans for Kit's trip to Reno, they discussed the rosy future. Kit spoke of Irene and the good relationship between them.

"You'll love her. She's so real, so square. She pretends to be hard-boiled but she's got a heart like a house."

"She sounds swell, I think I'll marry both of you."

"You could do worse."

"Okay. Now can we please talk for a bit about her niece-by-marriage?"

Too soon it was four-thirty and Kit urged him to leave.

"Charles said he'd be home early," she said at the kitchen door.

"Kit, please let me stay. This really is my business."

"It isn't, Adam. It's mine. I'm letting him down and I owe it to him to do it as gently as possible."

"It's a rotten job. I hate it for you."

"I'll manage," she said steadily.

"Nervous?"

"Well, a little," she admitted.

"Take a good hooker of whiskey," he suggested.

She shook her head.

"I'll need my wits about me. I know what I'll do. I'll take a nice long hot bath. That always calms me down."

"Well, bolt the door after me," he grinned, opening the kitchen door. "That Fuller Brush Man might come back."

"I'll do that."

"And I'll call you first thing in the morning."

He heard the key turn in the lock and the bolt shoot home in its socket. He went down the path, whistling.

NINE

AS CHARLES DROVE DOWN THE HIGHWAY IN HIS IMPERIAL ON THURSDAY morning, he eyed the weather speculatively. It was very cold but the sky was a leaden expanse that promised snow. A few degrees rise in temperature would make the use of the old road risky. It wouldn't do to leave tire tracks in the snow for the police to find. He wasn't unduly afraid that they could ever be traced back to him but this murder was to look like a prowler's job and who ever heard of a tramp operating in a car? Still, there was one good thing about the overcast; by 5 P.M. it would be dark. Darkness was his powerful ally.

He cast a look of actual affection at the briefcase on the seat beside him—another ally. Then he frowned with concentration, going over in his mind, the many intricate delicate steps he must take during the day ahead of him. If he neglected even the smallest of them, the whole beautiful unsubstantial edifice would totter and come down about his ears. But he had no intention of neglecting anything. His plan was as clear as a blueprint. He had only to follow it coolly and methodically and success would crown it.

He drove his car into his usual parking-lot, agreed with the attendant that it looked like snow, received his stub and left.

When he reached his office, the first thing he did was to buzz for his secretary. He had a paper ready for her and asked:

"Will you take this into Mr. Lane, Miss Wood. Ask him to check it before I send it out."

"Mr. Lane left for Court ten minutes ago, Mr. Lundgren."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. On his way out through the pool, I heard him tell Miss Wardle. He said he wouldn't be back before four."

"I see. Well, it'll have to wait then. Thank you."

So far, so good. He had just wanted verification that Lane's office was empty. He gave Miss Wood time to get back to the typists' pool, then opened the connecting door into Lane's office. The Lincoln Day speech lay on the desk, just as it had yesterday, except that now it was open to Page 3. (Lane would never have been known in theatrical parlance as a quick study, he thought.) He folded and pocketed the manuscript, then searched the In and Out baskets, the desk-top, the drawers and even the waste basket for a carbon copy. There was none.

As he went back to his office with this major hurdle accomplished, he was neither surprised at his luck nor grateful to the gods. By this time, he was, in his own estimation, a god himself, directing his destiny and juggling the fate of others at will. Success was simply foreordained.

But immediately, he had an unnerving jolt. He was hardly back at his desk when Pete Schuyler burst into his office without benefit of knocking. The sweat started on Charles' forehead and lip. How could he have been so careless? He should have checked on Pete before going into Lane's office. But a moment later, he saw with smug complacency, that no harm was done. Pete was engrossed in his own tremendous news:

"The doctor says it'll be tonight or tomorrow sure. My God, Charles, those cartoons about expectant fathers don't tell the half of it. I'm fit to be tied!"

Charles gave him one of his nicest smiles.

"Pete, get out of here. You're doing nobody any good, the state you're in. If you've got any work that's urgent, bring it in. I'll finish it. Rosemary needs you a hell of a lot more than we do today."

"Well, I'll stick around till lunch," he temporized.

"Nonsense. Make yourself scarce. And the best of luck to Rosemary. You might ring Kit and me up at home tomorrow as soon as you've got some news."

"I'll do that, Charles. And thanks a lot. Rosemary'll whoop with joy when she sees me. The poor kid's nervous as hell but too game to show it."

At a quarter to twelve, Charles went to lunch. Before he rang for the elevator, he went to the Men's room. He peered under the half-doors of the cubicles to be assured that he was alone. It was too early for the usual noon rush. He locked himself in a cubicle and tore Lane's speech into scraps which he flushed down the drain. Then he took the elevator down to Moline's on the ground floor. He had a pleasant word for Howard, the elevator boy and Mike, the car-starter.

In the restaurant, he took his usual table and was served by his usual waiter, Henri. Charles chatted with him as he ate a substantial lunch. He knew he wouldn't have much more to eat that day and ordered with forethought. He left a generous tip. Henri, too, figured in his plans and the big tip was insurance.

After lunch, he strolled half a block to another office building where there were phone booths in the lobby. He called the garage where he had stored the Plymouth. He was pleased that he got the same man who had rented him the space.

"This is James Scott."

"Who?"

"The owner of the '53 Plymouth."

"Oh, yeah—ain't seen you around—"

"I've been out of town. I want to use the car this afternoon."

"It'll be here."

"Would you have it downstairs ready to drive out? I'll be in kind of a hurry. I'm leaving for New Hampshire for the weekend and I want to make time."

"Sure. I'll have it right on the floor. What time?"

"Four-thirty or thereabouts."

"Will do."

"And check the battery, please. It's been a few weeks since I drove it."

"Right."

"If it's run down, you'd better re-charge it."

"Pretty short notice. Tell you what. If it's dead, I'll put in a rental and re-charge yours over the weekend. Then we can switch 'em back on Monday."

"Fine." Charles smiled to himself. There would be no switching back on Monday. The Jupiter Garage would have seen the last of James Scott and the Plymouth by five o'clock.

At four, Lane came back from Court. Charles kept his outer door open and at two minutes past four, he saw Miss Wardle rush through the corridor to Lane's door. At ten past four, Lane came through the connecting door into Charles' office, as ruffled as Charles had ever seen him.

"Charles! My speech—you haven't seen it—?"

"Your speech? Your Lincoln Day—"'

"Yes. Yes. It's gone. Vanished off my desk."

"Impossible, sir!"

"Don't tell me!" There was almost a shrewish note in his voice.
"I left it on my desk and it's not there."

"Miss Wardle—?"

"I've asked her."

"Your briefcase. You probably took it to Court with your papers."

"I've already looked. Not there. Not anywhere. We've looked everywhere. It's gone. You say you've not been in here?"

Charles gave him a look compounded of hurt pride and shock. Lane saw it and was instantly apologetic.

"Well, of course, I don't mean—I just thought if you had been in, you might have seen it. Then we could pinpoint the time of the —er—loss."

"I'm sorry. I haven't been in your office at all today."

"I'll try Pete—"

"Pete's left for the day."

"Oh, dear—"

"You can get him at home, I'm sure."

"I'll do that." Slightly calmer at the hope of a fruitful line of action, Lane unbent further: "You must forgive me, Charles. All I meant was that you might have been tempted to read it and so took it into your office."

"I wish I had, sir. Then it would be accounted for. But surely, there's a carbon—"

"That's exactly the point. There isn't. I didn't see any need for one when Miss Wardle asked me."

"Shall I call Pete or will you?" asked Charles on a breath of relief. (But he had known there would be no carbon, he told himself. It was in his stars.)

"I will. It must be one of his silly practical jokes. If it is, I shall give him the rough side of my tongue."

While Lane was phoning, Charles sat and thought: the puffed up little popinjay. What have I been so reverential about all this time? I'm twice the man he is. He's only where he is because he inherited what his grandfather and his father built up. The firm just travels on its own momentum. When I'm in the saddle. . . .

Of course Pete knew nothing about the missing speech. The seven juniors were questioned, the typists, the switchboard girl, the receptionist, the office boy. Without result everyone searched his or her desk in case the script had suddenly acquired automotive power. Lane asked if any client or other outsider had gone through to his office. None had. At long last, Lane faced the fact that the script was irrevocably gone.

He sank into a chair at his desk, beaten and piteous.

"What can I do?"

"Surely, you can reconstruct it in a couple of hours tonight, sir?" Charles suggested.

"That's just what I can't do. My wife is giving a dinner for eighteen people tonight." He glanced at his watch. "It's twenty minutes to five. I'm late already because I promised her to order the flowers. It slipped my mind this morning and I forgot to tell Miss Wardle. I can just about make it if I take them home in a taxi. I had set aside all tomorrow to memorize my speech—but to compose it too—"

"Couldn't you tell a white lie and plead illness?"

Lane shot him an irritable look.

"This is an important occasion. I can't shirk a civic duty."

"Have you some old speech you could refurbish perhaps?"

"Certainly not," Lane snapped. Then he added naively: "This is the first time I've been asked to address a Lincoln Day event." Charles bit back a grin and sat with downcast eyes. Then suddenly, he looked up, alive with an idea. Lane said fretfully: "Well?"

"It's just a thought, sir," Charles said modestly. "I wouldn't dream of suggesting it except *in extremis*."

"Well? Well?"

"I realize it's a poor makeshift—"

"What is?" Lane was close to shaking it out of him.

"Would you allow me to try my hand at it, sir? I know your

general style of diction pretty well—you could outline the points you want covered—it wouldn't take me more than two or three hours—"

"Why, Charles—" Hope chased the gloom from Lane's face.

"I'll work right here in the office and drop the finished speech at your house later this evening so that you can edit it yourself and have all day tomorrow to memorize it."

Lane considered. Here was a way out and Charles did have a facility with words which was, Lane conceded, nearly as adroit as his own. He made up his mind.

"This is very handsome of you, Charles. I hate to ask it—"

"I only hope I can turn out something acceptable, sir."

"I'm sure you will. But all these hours of extra work—"

"I'm only too glad to be of help."

"I assure you I shan't forget it." He glanced again at his watch.
"Now, here is the gist of my speech—"

At five minutes to five, Lane left, with a smooth brow and a buoyant step. At the door he turned:

"I wish I'd kept Miss Wardle to help you. It's a thing I hate to do but in an emergency—"

"No need, sir. I compose right on the typewriter and I'm pretty fast at it."

"Good.—Eh—Charles, you don't think there's anything unethical about this, do you—I mean, not using my own work—"

Charles grinned boyishly.

"By the time you finish slashing my rough effort, it will be your own work, I'm quite sure."

"I'm not so sure, Charles," Lane said handsomely. "I think very highly of your ability." He put on his hat almost cockily. "Well, good hunting. And thanks again."

Charles sat back, inflated with his own cleverness. Then a contemptuous smile touched his lips. What fools people were. How easy to manipulate. For a man of brains like himself, it was like handling a lot of marionettes. You just had to study their weaknesses and play upon them. Lane would deliver any sort of drivel rather than be done out of his little hour before the cameras. Not that Charles' speech was drivel. It was a sound job, probably better than Lane's own effort.

He pulled himself up and looked at his watch. Two minutes past

five. No time to lose. He glanced out of the window. It was quite dark. He rose, went to his outer door into the corridor which led into the typists' pool with the reception room beyond it. Both were empty. On a holiday eve, the girls were even more prompt than usual in leaving. He glanced behind him at the other end of the corridor. The door to the library was closed for the night. He strolled on to check on the juniors' rooms. All of them were closed except the first one, Muir's, and that was empty, although the light was still on.

He had the place to himself.

Back in his own office, he closed his door, got out the red wig, put on his hat and overcoat, left the lights on and went through to Lane's office. With gloves on, he pushed back the bolt of the emergency door which led out to the West corridor, slipped through and opened the fire door at the end of it. He decided against using a restaurant wash-room to assume his disguise. At 5 o'clock these places would be at their emptiest. An employee might have time to see him going in with blond hair and out with red. There was less risk if he used the fire stairs to make the change. He did this between the last two flights, trusting to the dark and the radical change in his appearance not to be recognized, so close to his home-ground. He strolled out into the street.

A block from the office, he lengthened his stride until he was making top speed without causing comment. He reached the garage at twelve minutes past five. The first thing he saw was the Plymouth, facing streetward. He went to it directly, got in and started the motor. As he rolled toward the exit, the garage man came to the door of the office in the corner and called to him. Charles didn't catch it but waved to the man and nodded. The man waved back. Then Charles was on 53rd Street, driving West. Another hurdle accomplished.

He went up the ramp, entered the West Side Highway and accelerated up to the speed limit. The traffic was light; he was a little ahead of the evening rush. He had his dime ready at the toll-house and kept his head averted for the two seconds of the stop. Then he was on his way, driving steadily and fast but never exceeding the legal limit. He refused to think on the trip: divided attention might slow him down and every second counted. Outside of Hawes' Ferry, he scanned the Highway before he took the left fork to the old

road. The traffic here was so light that he was sure he was not observed. The old road was abominable. Its ruts jolted the Plymouth much more than they had the Chrysler. He prayed fervently that the car would stand up for the trip back and forth. He blamed himself now for buying a used car instead of a new one. It was petty economies like this that could undo a man. True, the Plymouth felt sturdy enough under his hand. But the road was all downhill. How would it act on the return trip with the long steady upward climb?

A mile from the house, the first snowflakes spattered the windshield. Startled, he peered out at the road. Nothing was noticeable yet on the rough strip but here was a dangerous complication. How would it affect him? Should he turn around and go back to the Highway and enter his home by his own driveway? He vetoed that. He would lose time and besides, tire tracks in snow would show up on the driveway as plainly as on the old road. With a violent shift from god-like self-esteem to panic fear, he was on the point of abandoning the undertaking altogether. He could turn around, drive back to town, reach his office and forget the whole desperate enterprise.

Then he thought of Kit up there in the house, probably scanning plane connections, packing blithely, kicking him out of his hard-earned position like some unsatisfactory servant. Making him a laughing-stock before the world.

A grotesque argument clinched his decision: he had spent more than \$1100 to put this deal over. He wasn't going to sit by idly and throw that investment out of the window. And look at the returns if he carried it through. Nine hundred thousand dollars. He crushed back his terror.

At the foot of the steps up to the house, he turned the car cityward and drove it behind a clump of bushes. He pulled off the red wig, thrust it in his pocket and got out of the car. The road was still dark and the steps just beginning to be starred with flakes here and there. At the top of the steps, he looked up. The house was dark except for Kit's bed-room. He skirted the splashes of light which cast bright spots on the back and side garden. He went around to the front door and let himself in noiselessly, keeping his gloves on. He must reconnoiter. Martha might have stayed after all, Irene could have run in for a moment. . . .

It was all right. Kit was alone in the house. He went to the front door again, opened and closed it with an honest householder's bang. He ran up the stairs and into the bed-room.

Kit was sitting before her vanity table, lipstick in hand. She wore the white terry-cloth robe which she always used after a bath. She raised her eyes and saw him, reflected in the mirror.

"Hello," she said, "You are early."

He came and stood behind her, smiling.

"As good as my word."

Her face deepened to gravity. She began to rise. But he held her down lightly with his two hands on her shoulders.

"Don't move. You look very pretty in the mirror."

"Charles. Please. I told you I must talk to you—"

"So you did."

"I've put it off far too long."

"You sound very serious."

"It is serious." Her troubled eyes met his in the mirror. "And—and painful, I'm afraid."

"Painful?" he said softly. "True. But it will only last a minute." His hands leaped from her shoulders to her throat.

She never had a chance, hemmed in as she was by the sides of the vanity table. Her desperate hands clawed at his fingers but made no impression on the heavy pigskin of his gloves. She struggled to push her chair back and rise but his body behind it prevented it. And all the time, he pressed on her soft slim throat with an iron grip. The clawing became an aimless fluttering of her fingers. Then her hands dropped impotently to her lap. She sagged sidewise, a dead weight. In his ignorance as to how soon death should occur, he continued the pressure until his own fingers screamed with pain.

At last, he let her go and she slumped further but imprisoned as she was in the small space, she remained seated, her back to the room. He reached out over her shoulder to the jewel-case which stood on the vanity table. Clumsily, he scooped up the glittering handful but his aching fingers bungled it and a few pieces dropped at his feet. He gathered them up and stuffed them in his pocket. Then he pulled out three or four drawers of her bureau, dumped the contents on the floor and kicked them around until the room looked a shambles.

He tore off one glove and picked up her wrist, feeling for a

pulse. There was nothing. He dropped her hand, put the glove on again and after considering a moment, lifted her and eased her body to the floor where she lay on her back, blank eyes staring at the lights. He gave a swift glance about the room. Not a sign that he had been here. He scuffed his way across the deep-piled carpet to erase any identifiable footprints. He ran down the stairs, into the kitchen and out of the house.

At the foot of the outdoor stairs, he crossed the road to the side of Anglers' Creek, intending to throw the jewelry into its depths. But a sudden thought held his hand. He snapped on his cigarette lighter and scanned the narrow stream as best he could. Sure enough, it was frozen over from edge to edge. He would have to get rid of them somewhere else later. He started the car for the trip back to town. As he turned on his lights and headed South, he saw that the snow had begun to stick. The depth of the ruts were still dark but the high spots showed up already in thin white lines. In two minutes, his windshield was so thickly covered that he had to turn on the wiper.

He gave a short self-satisfied laugh. This was going to be a real snow. He could be as careless as he liked. Whatever tracks he left would be covered up within an hour by an innocent white blanket.

The Plymouth began to labor in high, so he shifted to second as the road climbed. His fingers were beginning to lose their numbness and come alive again. He reached the fork. The Highway was practically clear. Only a few eddies of snow blew across it like puffs of smoke. He drove evenly. He did not dare attract attention now. Before, it would have been deplorable; now, it would be fatal, with murder already done. The road seemed interminable. He was frantic to be back in his office.

There were two things more to do first—get rid of the jewelry and of the disgusting red wig. He considered casting them all to the winds, just to be free of them. But that was out. If this was to be considered murder by a thief, it would never do to have the jewels found and identified later. No thief tosses away booty after he has killed for it. The wig, too, could be traced back to the costumer's and the girl might easily remember the tall blond buyer. Where and how did one get rid of guilty impedimenta?

After the toll-house, the Highway ran along the Hudson. Should he park for a few moments, climb the railing and throw the damned

things in the river? It was too risky, too noticeable. And he couldn't spare the time. Every second counted. Deliberately, he refrained from looking at his watch. He was afraid that if he was later than his schedule, he would be tempted to speed. He told himself to keep his head, take one thing at a time and hope for the best.

At last, he drove down the ramp, took an Eastbound street and began to scan the curb for a parking place. He couldn't afford to leave the car too far West; it would increase the time of his last lap on foot. But near Sixth Avenue, he began to panic. Fifty-second Street was a street of restaurants and it was a holiday eve. It was after six o'clock and the no-parking restriction was lifted. There was a continuous line of parked cars, bumper to bumper. He had come too far. The Plymouth became a white elephant, an old man of the sea, a millstone around his neck to strangle him . . . strangle . . . Kit . . . murder . . . police . . . arrest . . . execution . . .

In a cold sweat of mortal funk, he pulled the car into the only free space he saw—directly in front of a fireplug. Again he mastered his terror. What did it matter? Once he was clear away from the car, the cops could plaster it with tickets. That was James Scott's affair, not Charles Lundgren's. He gave a quick glance up and down the street. There were people, but none dangerously close. And they all had their heads down against the thickening fall of snow. The last thing they were concerned with was the ordinary exit of a driver from his car.

In a flash, he was out of the car and away from it. He felt in his pocket, folded the jewelry into the red wig and at the first corner, stooped quickly and thrust the bundle into a sewer at the corner. He walked on rapidly. At his office building, after a sharp glance around, he slipped through the small entrance door, down the west corridor and up the fire stairs. On the fifth floor, he opened the fire door a crack and peered through. There was no one in sight. In a split second, he had opened Lane's door, bolted it again and stood, catching his breath after the climb and the harrowing strain. He was safe. Back in the office. Mission Accomplished.

He looked at his watch. Six-thirty-two. He had bettered his calculated time by three minutes. He had figured that the best he could do was to be back by six-thirty-five. Splendid.

He pulled off his hat and overcoat. They were both slightly damp

from melting snow. He hung them up. By the time Larry and Meg arrived, they would be dry. He ripped off his jacket, rolled up his shirt-sleeves and mussed his hair a trifle—the picture of a man hard at work but breaking off to ask the elevator boy to send out for a bite to eat. He opened his outer office and stopped dead. He felt as if a giant fist had hit him in the stomach.

Down the hall, someone was busily using a typewriter.

TEN

HE CLUNG TO THE DOOR-KNOB, HIS KNEES BUCKLING. HIS EARS RANG AND his heart pounded like a swimmer who comes to the surface after too long under water. The bitter bile of failure rose in his throat. Everything ruined by this unexpected blow. All his skill and ingenuity gone for nothing. He was close to tears of rage. Then from some depth, he scabbled up a last reserve of defiance. Obstinate, he set his jaw. He wasn't going to let this setback rob him of his rewards, after all his planning, all his efforts, and after the grisly job which was the climax. Never would he forget the gruesome feel of soft flesh under his fingers. Unless that act had results, it was merely a foul disgusting murder, not a necessary step in the progress of Charles Lundgren's career.

He speculated on who was typing down the hall, whether whoever it was had opened Charles' door within the last hour and a half and found him absent, how seriously the so-far smooth program had been wrecked. One thing was sure: he had to face it, learn as much as he could in order to parry it in self-protection.

He tiptoed back to his desk, snatched up his briefcase, dumped his Lincoln Day speech and the rough notes he had made at home last night, in a busy-appearing show on his desk. He uncovered his typewriter and thrust one of the half-finished sheets into it. He rehung his overcoat so that the damp spots did not show and shoved his hat out of sight. Then he went to his outer door and opened it noisily. He saw that the light was on in the first of the junior lawyers' cubicles—Muir's—and the door was open. He strode down

the corridor and stopped in Muir's doorway with a surprised grin:
"Hello, there. I thought I was holding the fort alone."

Muir stopped typing and looked up. He was a short stocky man of Scotch birth, with curling auburn hair and direct blue eyes. He was the tax expert of the firm and Charles' dealings with him had been confined to tax solutions of the estates branch of the business. Socially, he knew nothing whatever about Christopher Muir.

"I've been here," said Muir.

"Ever since closing? Funny, I didn't hear you."

"In the law library awhile, looking up a precedent Mr. Lane will be needing in Court on Monday." (So that was why the library door had been closed!)

"Been out to eat?" asked Charles.

"Not yet. I've only got a page or so to do. I'll eat when I've finished. There's a Champion cafeteria on 57th Street." (He sounded a lonesome sort of guy. Charles had been through that phase himself before he moved to Highcliff. Perhaps he could turn it to account.)

"Well, look. I'm just sending down for a bite. Glad to have you join me. Better than eating alone or at a table with strangers."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Lundgren."

"Hey, hey. Charles is the name, Chris," he said with one of his good smiles. "How's a hot roast beef sandwich and coffee?"

"That'll be fine Mr.—Charles."

"Any dessert?"

"No, I thank you."

Charles crossed the reception room to the outer door and rang the elevator bell. While he waited, he glanced at his watch. Six-thirty-nine. The elevator door opened, Howard still on duty. He looked tired and a little sullen. Charles slipped a dollar bill into his hand and said:

"Howard, would you step into Moline's a minute? Ask for Henri and tell him to bring up two hot roast beef sandwiches and two pots of coffee. Let him charge it to me. Mr. Muir and I are working late."

"Why, sure, Mr. Lundgren," the boy said, pocketing the bill.
"And thanks a lot. Rare or medium?"

"Henri knows how I like it."

The elevator door closed and Charles stopped again at Muir's door.

"On its way," he announced. "Better eat in my room, it's bigger."

Muir nodded, his fingers still flying over the keys.

Charles went back to his office and sat down, considering. What had he learned? Practically nothing. Apparently Muir accepted it as fact that Charles had been here all along. It was natural enough. Charles' door had been closed and the three main offices were sound-proof. Unless Muir had actually opened Charles' door, he could not know that the room had been empty from three past five until six-thirty-two. Probably he couldn't even hear the typewriter through the closed door. Charles had left his lights on. Would Muir have seen a line of light under the door as he passed from the library back to his own office? If he had, would he do anything about it? A canny Scot might just be thrifty enough to open the door and put them out to save the firm electric bills. But the lights had still been on when Charles returned, so probably Muir had never opened the door at all. He seemed a man to mind his own business altogether. Thank God it wasn't young Starr with his officious interest in everything that went on. At the worst, if Muir had looked in, Charles could always say he had been in the Men's room. No, that wouldn't do. Even if Muir had been in the library when he went out, the Scot would have had to see Charles returning, once he was back in his office, typing and facing the pool through his open door.

It was a muddle. He would probe deeper while they ate, learn what was what, so that he would know what he had to fight.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed as he considered a method of offsetting all suspicion in Muir's mind. There was a stark risk to it but the benefits outweighed the danger. If he could carry it out successfully—and he had full confidence in his own abilities—it would turn Muir from a liability to an asset.

Henri came into the office with a tray, followed by Muir. Charles swept away the papers on his desk to make room and they were served nearly as comfortably as in the restaurant itself. Charles tipped him, scrawled his name on the bill, saying:

"We'll leave the tray at the elevator, Henri."

Henri left. Muir, apparently a sincere trencherman, ate with

relish, Charles noticed. Nothing like treating a man decently to get him on your side. He said lightly:

"A fine way to spend a holiday eve, eh, Chris?"

"I do not mind," Muir replied, munching. "I would only be at home with a book, if I weren't here."

"Not married?"

"Oh no. I've got a distance to go before—" He broke off as Charles clapped a hand to his head and pushed back his chair.

"Good Lord! I've got to phone my wife—"

"You'll have to go out then. The switchboard's off for the night."

Charles stood, the picture of dismay. Then he snapped his fingers.

"No, I don't. Lane's got his own private wire." He opened the door into Lane's room, switched on the lights and went to one of the phones on his desk, leaving the door open. He stood with his back to his own office. He kept a finger on the button to prevent connection and dialed once.

"Operator . . . I want Highcliff 026 . . . This number? Compton 3-4612. . . . Hello. Kit? . . . Darling, I'm terribly sorry but I'm tied up here at the office . . . I did, honey. The line was busy and then it went right out of my head . . . No, he's no slave-driver. Actually, it isn't office work at all . . . you'll laugh when I tell you . . . Well, he's scheduled to speak at a Lincoln dinner tomorrow and he lost his speech . . . no, not laryngitis, the speech he was going to make . . . that's right . . . so I volunteered to pinch hit. I'm well on the way . . . Look, dear, I'm giving Larry and Meg a hitch home. What do you say we all go to the Inn . . . It is? I haven't even looked out the window. Well, snow never took my appetite away. You be ready around nine and we'll pick you up . . . See you, baby." He came back to his own office and picked up his sandwich.

"Some women would have blitzed the wire," he said, on a note of fondness. "If ever you do marry, Chris, pick a reasonable woman."

"Mrs. Lundgren is more than just that, I'm thinking. I met her at the Christmas party and I thought you were a very lucky man."

"I'll tell her that. She'll love it. What's more, you're right. I couldn't be luckier." He was debonair and casual but all the time he was watching Muir avidly. The direct blue eyes seldom left

Charles' face. There was absolutely no expression in them. What was behind them? The Scots were supposed to be canny, hard to wheedle and convince. Was Muir swallowing Charles' hospitality and his easy explanations whole, or was he keeping his own counsel, knowing all the time that they were lies? It wouldn't matter now, but after Kit's body was found and the horror spread in the papers, would this stolid unreadable man put two and two together and fasten a noose around Charles' neck? Of course not! That phone call left no doubt at all—Muir was bound to say that Kit was still alive at (he glanced at his watch) a quarter to seven. A beautiful piece of work, that joke about laryngitis, just the inconsequential exchange natural between husband and wife.

But had the fake phone call gone over? If it had, Charles was 100 per cent safe. And he was all but sure it had. If Muir had suspected, even his poker-face would have reflected some of his doubt. The phone call marked Charles as being in New York at six-forty-five with Kit still alive in Highcliff. Larry and Meg would complete his alibi up to the moment when the three of them discovered the body.

The only flaw was the toll-call. Even if it was investigated, it couldn't matter too much. Charles had plans for insuring that the official time of Kit's death would be pin-pointed at seven or thereabouts. So what bearing would his actions twenty-three miles away have? Suppose some painstaking detective did discover that there was no record of a toll-call. If Charles couldn't talk his way out of that one, he was not the man he knew himself to be.

He set down his coffee cup and said:

"Sorry to hurry you, Chris, but I must get on with the job. If you're not finished, take the tray into your own room, do you mind?"

Muir complied, returning to close Charles' door.

Alone, Charles leaned back weakly. There was a dull nausea roiling his stomach. His fingers still registered the feel of Melanie's throat. . . . His spine crawled with sudden ice. *Melanie?* It was Kit he had killed. Why did the two run together into one composite image with a single soft white throat which had to be crushed? His mouth worked like a child's just before it bursts into tears. He was close to hysteria and to a need for the comfort of confession. But he raked up some final reserve of will power. He squared his shoulders

and wiped his hands hard across his sweating face to brush away the ghastly fantasy. I'm no murderer, he told himself doggedly. This queasiness is just my natural decency recoiling from a deplorable act. God knows I didn't want to kill. It was self-defense, that's what it was, sheer self-defense. It was her life or mine. And mine is a much more valuable life. But why think of Melanie at such a time? Why?

He went shakily to the small concealed bar in the corner of his office and poured a stiff drink. He was an abstemious man and the drink took hold quickly. In a few minutes, his disquiet died down and he was his cold efficient self again.

With renewed energy, he attended to the tiny details that killers often overlook to their undoing. He began by examining his shoes. Sure enough, he discovered a few pine needles caught between the uppers and the soles. The steps leading up from the old road were practically carpeted with them. He collected them carefully and raising his window softly, tossed them to the wind. He examined his gloves for signs of Kit's frantic scrabbling. There was nothing. There was no worry about blood; there had been none. He inspected his overcoat for powder or other traces of makeup. Nothing. Kit must have just come out of a bath, there had been nothing under the terry-cloth robe. He remembered now, she had had a lipstick in her hand. Of course, it must have dropped almost at once—he believed he had heard the small clatter as it hit the floor. Had it touched him as it dropped? Again he scanned the front of his overcoat for a mark. Again nothing. Nothing at all to connect him with that staring lifeless thing on the floor.

He went to his typewriter and began to strike the keys in a meaningless pattern. If by chance, Muir had his ear to the door, perhaps it would register even through the sound-proofing. Charles did not delude himself or minimize the shrewdness of the police. He knew that every word of the account he would give them later would be scrutinized, investigated, tested. It had to be armor-plated with no crevice open to the prying of some sharp cop.

At seven-thirty, he unrolled the sheet of paper from his typewriter, crumpled it and thrust it in his pocket to get rid of later. The notes he had made at home Wednesday night, he dropped into his waste basket, perfect proof to anybody of the work he had done on Lane's speech between five and seven-thirty on Thursday February 11th in

his office. He gathered up the eight sheets of the speech itself along with its carbon copy and thrust them loose into an envelope. He was just rolling his typewriter back to its corner when Larry and Meg Payne came in. He looked at his watch. Seven-forty-three.

"Right on the dot," he greeted them. "I'm just through." He glanced at their snow-sprinkled coats. "You look like Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus."

"It's marvelous out," said Meg. "We walked from 57th Street. The snow's so dry, it squeaks." She stamped her ballet-type, heel-less shoes to get rid of the snow that clung to them. She was a wholesome, attractive girl, unspoiled and as unlike the usual debutante as could be imagined. She adored Larry and believed in him. It stuck out of every word and look.

"Had any dinner?" Charles asked.

"We're full of canapes. Rhoda had a wonderful party. Couldn't eat a thing."

"You will, by nine." Charles saw Muir in hat and overcoat beyond the open door. "I just spoke to Kit and told her we'd all go to the Inn to eat—Come in, Chris—"

"I just want to say goodnight," said Muir.

Charles introduced him to Larry and Meg.

"We're leaving, too. Can I drop you off?"

"Thank you, no. You go North, I believe. I live in Chelsea."

"Well, we can all ride down in the elevator together." Howard took them down and Charles said to him: "Still on, Howard? You've had a long day."

"Overtime, Mr. Lundgren. The night boy's sick. I'm off at nine though. Anybody stays after that, he walks down."

"Well, you can sleep late tomorrow," said Charles.

They parted with Muir on the sidewalk and made their way to the parking-lot. There was an inch or two of snow on the ground now and it was still falling. At the parking-lot, they all crowded into the wide front seat. As they drove to the exit Al, the checker, came out of his small office to take Charles' stub.

"Got your money's worth today," he said to Charles with a chuckle. "Your twelve hours is pert' near up."

"You're right. And you were right about the snow, too, Al. Good-night. Get back under shelter."

He drove up Fifth Avenue.

"I've got to stop at Lane's home," he told them and explained why. "I won't be a minute."

But Lane had left word with his butler to be called when Charles arrived and it was five minutes before Charles could free himself. The burden of Lane's talk was that he wouldn't forget this example of Charles' devotion to duty.

It was past eight when they struck the Highway and Charles drove slowly and carefully. He was in no hurry. The tires crunched dryly over the snow.

"Look, Larry," said Charles with design. "I've been wanting to talk to you two. Do you mind if I get a bit personal?" (Surely, if questioned later, Larry and Meg would declare that no man with a fresh murder on his mind, could have talked in this objective temperate manner.)

"You know you can say anything to me," said Larry.

"Fine. Well, here it is. I think you should give up this art business and go back with your father."

"But listen, Charles—"

"Money doesn't mean a thing," Meg put in.

"I'm not talking about money," said Charles. "I'm thinking of something very different."

"Well, what?"

"Your father himself. He's an old man, Larry, and you're his only son. And he isn't a well man, as you know. Look it in the face. How much more time has he got? Maybe you ought to think of that before you plunk ahead with this 'living your own life' stuff."

"Why can't he let Larry do what he's made for?" said Meg crossly. "Instead of trying to twist him into a banker. Larry just doesn't fit the part."

"Meg, I wasn't a very good son. I hated farming the way Larry hates Wall Street. And I wanted education the way he wants to paint. I didn't let anything stop me. And I've been luckier than I ever dreamed of. I've got everything—position, a future and Kit. I couldn't be happier. Except for that nagging regret for the way I bucked my father's wishes. I'd give a lot today to make it up to him —now that it's too late."

There was a silence. Then Meg said forthrightly:

"You mean we should sit around and wait for his death before we do as we please?"

"I mean, give him a little pleasure and comfort while there's still time. I believe it's just as important as slapping paint on canvas."

"Maybe Charles is right, Meg," Larry said slowly. "From Dad's angle I must be pretty much of a washout. But such as I am, I'm all he's got. I never thought of it like that, but he must be kind of lonely."

"Larry darling, you're so—good."

"I guess Charles is the good one, opening my eyes."

"Okay, okay," Charles laughed. "Cut out the bouquets. You've both got a right to tell me to mind my own business—"

"I never went wrong listening to you, Charles. Not since our first days at Dartmouth. I've got a lot to thank you for."

Reminiscences of college carried them over several miles. Meg accounted for a few more by recalling her own schooldays with Kit. At last, the handsome foursquare fieldstone house loomed ahead at the top of the hill. As Charles turned into the driveway, the house was dark except for a splash of light on the side lawn. Kit's corner bed-room had windows facing South as well as West.

Under the last twenty minutes of talk, Charles had been thinking furiously. He had wondered what the situation was. He half expected the house to be lighted up, with police cars already cluttering the drive. If Irene had come over and discovered. . . . But apparently she had not. Now at the familiar usual aspect of the house, a grisly thought assailed him: suppose he had not actually killed Kit; suppose she had slowly revived during the last three hours and in the next five minutes would rise to accuse him. . . .

He gritted his teeth, stopped the car and ushered them through the front door and into the living-room.

"Sit down a minute and I'll hustle Kit up. Then we'll all have one for the road before we start for the Inn."

He went up the broad staircase, every muscle screaming in protest. He quailed in abject fear. But he went on. He reached the bed-room and let out his breath, gasping with relief. Kit lay where he had left her, still and hideous, her blank eyes staring at the ceiling. Instantly he was reanimated, the blood pulsing through his veins in strong vigorous strokes.

He had one last important item to attend to. The west window, facing out over the Hudson, was an immense picture window, composed of numberless small panes which could be tilted open for

ventilation by means of thin metal rods, much as a transom above a door can be opened and shut by pressure on a vertical rod. Swiftly but with noiseless care, Charles now opened two of these panes, letting in an icy blast from the river. The office law-library contained volumes on medico-jurisprudence and Charles, having noted an interesting and useful item, now put it into practice. The opening of the panes took him less than ten seconds. That done, he stepped into his new role, for the first time, with an audience to impress. He let out a tremendous agonized roar.

In seconds, Larry, with Meg at his heels, was rushing into the room. Charles was crouched beside Kit babbling over and over:

"Kit! Kit! Kit! Nol! Nol! Nol! Nol!"

Meg swayed against the side of the door, ashen. Larry, unexpectedly steady and clearheaded, took charge. One look at Kit's throat and a touch of her hand told him she was past help. Somehow he got Charles to his feet and out of the room. Meg pulled herself together enough to grasp his other arm and they half-dragged Charles down to the living-room again.

Larry lost no time. To an *obbligato* of crazed maunderings from Charles, he called the police:

"Come at once to the Lundgren house. There's been a murder. Mrs. Charles Lundgren has been strangled to death."

The curtain was up, the spotlight was on. Charles Lundgren was launched in the star part of his life.

ELEVEN

CAPTAIN MILO HART OF THE STATE POLICE AT HIGHCLIFF BARRACKS straightened his tie and tightened his belt. Murder. The first in five years in his district. And Mrs. Charles Lundgren. Maarten Verhooven's granddaughter. Top drawer stuff. Here was no affair for underlings. Snow or no snow, this was a matter for the Captain himself. He began to bark sharp orders, calling for fingerprint and camera men. He alerted his sergeant and a couple of troopers. In minutes, his sedan was rolling south toward Highcliff.

"Stop at Green's," he ordered his driver. "It's on the way and

we'll take him right with us." Dr. Green was Chief Medical Officer for the district.

Captain Hart was a tall, good-looking, well-groomed man, military in bearing and in his small stiff white mustache. He was an admirer of the British and consciously patterned himself on the severe but courteous style of their top brass. He liked the notion that he could have stepped, quite without makeup, onto the stage as Chief Constable in any thriller of the English countryside. If he had one failing, it was snobbishness. The rich, the wellborn, the highly-placed were, *ipso facto*, above suspicion in his book. And on the few occasions when he had had to arrest one of the elite, he felt as disillusioned as a six-year-old learning the horrid truth about Santa Claus. But he was far from being a stupid man. He was a competent officer with an excellent record. And if he did not hold with the new school which considers psychology an important part of police work, he was a bulldog for facts and he got results. In his years of crime-detection, he went on the theory that the obvious suspect was the culprit. And he was not far wrong. He was known among his subordinates as a lime-light hound, rarely giving any of his men credit where it was due.

It was this man whom Charles had to face in the critical hours before him. All the odds were in Charles's favor. Hart knew him as a Verhooven in-law, a man of standing and a generous subscriber to all police benefits.

Twenty minutes after Larry's call, Hart, Sergeant Wegger, Dr. Green, a small shrewd able man, and the troopers entered the Lundgren house. The tableau had not changed greatly. Larry, pale but composed, opened the door. Meg had, by now, dissolved into heartsick weeping. And Charles sat, dazed and stricken, beyond words or tears.

Larry identified himself to the Captain (another big shot above suspicion) and told his story with convincing agitation. Hart dispatched the troopers to search the house and grounds. He, Green and Sergeant Wegger went upstairs. Hardened though they all were by the nature of their calling, they were nevertheless truly shocked by the sight that met their eyes. Angrily, Green opened his bag and knelt beside Kit.

"Damned outrage!" he muttered. "I've seen her a hundred times

running about in her little red Ford. Pretty kid, she was. Very pretty."

Hart, waiting for Green's findings, examined the room.

"Sergeant, take notes," he said. "Deceased in bathrobe only, probably about to dress. Room ransacked and in great disorder. Jewel box empty—"

"He overlooked the diamond on her finger," said Green, looking up.

"Make a note of that," Hart told Wegger. "Two panes of West window open." He strode through into the bathroom, looked, returned. "Bathing-cap on wash-stand, confirming impression deceased was just out of bath when attacked—"

Ross, one of the troopers, appeared to report with suppressed excitement:

"No forcible entry anywhere in the house, Captain, but the kitchen door is unlocked and just barely pulled to. Without a doubt, sir, the means of entry. King is dusting the knob for prints."

"What about the front door?" asked Hart.

"Self-locking, sir. Couldn't be opened from the outside except by a key."

"Cellar door—basement entry?"

"Everything locked, sir, and undisturbed. Only the kitchen door."

"Any tracks on the kitchen floor—snow, mud—footmarks?"

"Not that I saw sir. I'll tell King to check."

"Do that." Ross saluted and went away. "Damned carelessness, leaving doors unlocked!" He looked across at Green who was capping his thermometer. "What do you say, doctor?"

"Death by strangulation and a particularly ferocious job. Looks to me like the hyoid bone's fractured—but I can tell more after the post. Victim attacked from behind—thumbmarks on the nape of the neck, fingers on the front of the throat."

"Chance of prints?"

"Not a chance," Green snorted. "Even the goddam prowlers know enough nowadays to wear gloves."

"What about the time?"

"Anywhere from two and a half to three and a half hours ago." He looked at his watch. "Nine-thirty. Makes it sometime between six and seven. Probably closer to seven."

"How do you make that out?"

"*Rigor's* well started. In a cold room like this, two and a half hours would be about right to reach the present stage."

"Give me that again, doctor. I'm no medic."

"The onset of *rigor mortis* depends a good deal on the temperature of the room. The colder it is, the quicker it sets in. In an ice-box like this, I figure seven P.M., give or take a little. In a warm room, it might take an hour longer to reach the present state of *rigor*. But with those windows open—Close 'em, will you, Wegger—there's a hell of a draft down here on the floor."

At a nod from Hart, Wegger closed the two panes, careful to use his handkerchief on the metal rods.

"Well, Cap, that's about all I can tell you now. Tomorrow okey for the post?"

"Yes. Wegger, tell Ross to run the doctor back home. And send young Payne into that small study downstairs. I'll get the details from him and give the husband a while to pull himself together."

In Charles' study, Larry gave the Captain a clear account of the evening's events, beginning with the Paynes' arrival at Charles' office, the meeting with Muir, the short trip to the parking-lot, the drive home and the horrible discovery at the end of it. Hart thanked him and was about to let him go when Larry said:

"Captain, someone ought to tell Mrs. Verhooven—Mrs. Lundgren's aunt. It's going to be a frightful shock to her."

"Quite right, Mr. Payne. I'll see to it at once."

Larry went back to the living-room and Captain Hart, careful though he was of the sensibilities of the elite, proceeded to do his job in a thorough, policeman-like manner. He called New York Homicide and asked co-operation. He requested a checkup on every point that Larry had touched; he suggested that New York contact the checker at the parking-lot, the elevator boy Howard, Christopher Muir, Lyman Lane and Meg Payne's sister, for corroboration. Then he set the machinery in motion for every vagrant, bird-of-passage and tramp within twenty miles to be picked up for questioning. Every ill-favored tavern, every joss-house, every bus and rail terminal and all traffic officers were alerted. The net was wide-flung but the meshes were fine enough to catch any suspicious night-wanderer in its web. When Ross returned from taking Green home, Hart sent him next door to bring over Irene Verhooven. By now,

the ambulance had arrived and had removed what was mortal of Kit Lundgren from her home.

Hart could not remember a more uncomfortable hour than the one which followed. It seemed to his unimaginative temperament that agony piled on agony with each new person who had to be informed of the tragedy. Charles, appearing to do his best to control himself, answered Hart's questions with the blank eyes and hollow voice of a zombie. He had little to add to Larry's story.

When Irene arrived, her horror and shock were the more terrible for the restraint she imposed on herself. She seemed to grow ten years older in as many seconds. She, too, had nothing to add to the sum of Hart's knowledge except the fact that from three P.M. until six-thirty, she had been occupied in showing the Verhooven paintings to a representative of the Wildenstein Galleries. After his departure, she had eaten her dinner, served by a maid, and then retired to her sitting-room until Ross had come for her. She did give Hart an accurate list and description of Kit's jewels. There wasn't very much; Kit was never one for ornamentation or trappings: a modest strand of real pearls, a diamond clip or two, a few small pins and the topaz earrings which Irene herself had given Kit that morning. Hart immediately sent Wegger to broadcast this to the Press and the pawnbrokers, both local and Metropolitan.

At eleven, the cook-housekeeper, Martha Spietz arrived, heard the news and collapsed at Hart's feet in a dead faint. Hart had seldom seen such spontaneous and sincere grief as assailed everyone whose lives Kit had touched on.

This sincerity bolstered his solid belief that the murder had been committed by a prowler who, surprised by Kit, had throttled her in panic and rushed away as he had come—by the kitchen door. It accounted for the unworkmanlike job of robbery he had done, snatching the contents of her jewel box but overlooking the ring on her finger and the seventy dollars in her handbag, which Wegger had found, hanging on the knob of a closet door. Nevertheless, Hart's thoroughness led him to make another call to New York, asking Homicide to check with Wildenstein's representative and Martha's sister whom the housekeeper had been visiting in town.

Added to this, he compiled a list of every able-bodied man in the neighborhood who had any connection with the Lundgren household; the visiting gardener, the chauffeur and handyman at

the Verhooven house, all delivery boys who served the Lundgrens. Every alibi was checked and re-checked, late into the night. All to no avail except to confirm Hart's original opinion that the murder was the wanton act of a passing intruder. He expressed this conviction to the reporters, both local and Metropolitan, who had, by now, swarmed to the door for news of this ghastly sensation.

The photographer and fingerprint men finished their work. Hart went back to his barracks to continue his efforts throughout the night. Larry, Meg and Irene stayed with Charles. Nobody went to bed. At three-thirty, a shaking, bowed Martha served them all with coffee and sandwiches. Charles touched nothing. When anyone spoke to him, he appeared to listen politely, but stared unresponsively as if they were using an unknown language. Irene brought him a barbiturate and begged him to take it. He took it in his hand, looked at it with dull eyes and let it fall from nerveless fingers. The hours crept by until it began to grow light.

In the harsh gray dawn, Charles, his eyes covered with his hand, sat huddled in the chair from which he had not moved all night. In spite of his long-sustained pose of vacuity, thought was boiling through his mind. Now that the first acid test was over, doubts and fears assailed him like demons with red-hot pincers. It had all been too easy. Nothing could work as perfectly as it seemed to be doing. You didn't take a trip of twenty-three miles back and forth without somebody seeing you. Who would step forward tomorrow and mention the Plymouth turning off the Highway into the old road, with Charles at the wheel? In the near-dark of the Highway, the red wig was no disguise. His distinctive profile was surely recognized. Who would turn up to say that a tall man in a camel's hair coat had thrust a package into a sewer near his office? What was behind Muir's cagy Scotch stare? Did he know that Charles was absent from his office during the critical hour? Would the fire stairs at the office show Charles' snowy footprints to proclaim how he had got in and out unseen? Suddenly, an icy fist clutched his heart—right now, in his wallet, he was carrying James Scott's ownership certificate to the Plymouth. What if Hart had searched him? He rose, and without a glance right or left, plodded into the downstairs lavatory. Nobody questioned him, nobody followed him; they were all too considerate to upset his equilibrium in any way. In the lavatory, he shredded

the certificate into bits and flushed it down the drain. The crumpled sheet of notes in his pocket followed it. He wiped cold sweat from his forehead and plodded back to his chair. What else had he forgotten? What snares lay coiled to trap his unwary feet?

He was dead tired. If he could only sleep for a little, refresh his exhausted brain and his shuddering body. But sleep was a luxury a heartbroken husband could not afford. For days, he must sit, hollow and worn, without rest, without food, the picture of an inconsolable man.

So be it. If he had done everything else, he could do this, too. And the more he needed rest, the hungrier he forced himself to be, the more convincing the picture would be. It was well worth it.

TWELVE

ADAM WARING WAS NOT AN EARLY RISER, BEING ONE OF THOSE WHO DO their best work after midnight and finally fall into bed to sleep until they wake naturally, no matter how far the sun is over the yard-arm. It was, therefore, a surprise to him when he opened his eyes on Friday morning and saw that his wrist watch read only five minutes past eight. He held it to his ear to see if it had stopped but even with the motion, his mind came fully awake and he knew with delight, why he had roused so early.

Today was the beginning of the new and happy order of things for himself and Kit. The deceit, the double-dealing, the hole-in-corner meetings were things of the past. By now, Kit had told her husband the truth and, unpalatable though it might be, he could do nothing about it. No doubt, he had packed a bag and left the house within minutes after hearing Kit's forthright decision and had accepted it with as good a grace as he could. A momentary touch of pity crossed Adam's mind for the man who had lost so immeasurably much in losing Kit. But his good midwestern common sense soon assured him that Lundgren was neither capable nor deserving of the luck he had had and which he had frittered away. No man who weighed the desirability of having a child of Kit's against the

odds of business advancement had need of pity. He would, in fact, not know what to do with it.

With his insatiable interest in all living creatures, Adam speculated a moment on Charles Lundgren as he knew him through Kit's descriptions. What did he live by, what verities made up his unwritten creed, what really mattered to him? Could a man really value a rise in salary and a name on a door above the sweet and spontaneous companionship of a girl like Kit?

Adam shrugged, swung his feet out of bed and felt for his slippers. What did he care? It was all water over the dam. Lundgren had had his chance and muffed it. And his loss was Adam's gain. Adam felt no need for twinges of conscience. He had not been a home-wrecker or a cuckoo in the nest. Already, that first day, when he had watched Kit fill a glass with whisky in a childish revolt against her fetters, she was lost to Lundgren. Even if Adam had never appeared on the scene, Kit would have left him as soon as her grandfather's death had given her freedom of action.

His hand went out to the phone. He ached to hear her voice, to learn exactly what had occurred last night and if it was too soon for him to take his place beside her, openly and proudly. Had Kit told her husband she was in love with another man? Was Lundgren spiteful enough to make her suffer for it? Perhaps. Kit had mentioned his over-weaning egotism. Should he be discreet for Kit's sake and wait until she called him? That might be wiser. They had waited so long, they had controlled themselves so manfully—how many times had it been torture not to take her in his arms!—Another hour or two. . . .

He picked up the phone and asked for Room Service, ordered a hearty breakfast and the morning papers, then went to the bathroom for a shower. He sang in the shower and whistled as he shaved. He chose his clothes with a new attention: as Kit's husband-to-be, he must make a good impression. There was this Irene, her aunt, to gain favor with. Kit loved her, so Adam must win into her good graces. The whistle was ear-splitting as the waiter wheeled in the breakfast-cart.

He buttered and soused his waffles with sirup, sugared and creamed his coffee, signed the check and heard the door close behind the waiter before he reached for *The Tribune* and stood it against the coffee-pot.

Kit's face looked up at him from the print and a thick black head-line:

PROWLER STRANGLES HIGHCLIFF HEIRESS

The print wavered and faded. He came as close to a blackout as is possible and still suffer an excruciating knife-thrust. He found himself staggering aimlessly about the room, his head squeezed between his pressing hands. With a cry of anguish, he snatched at the paper. His eyes, bloodshot and lightning-struck, took in phrases:

" . . . alone in the house . . . burglar surprised . . . killed in panic . . . jewels missing . . . engagement ring untouched . . . kitchen door open . . . dragnet out for prowlers . . . husband prostrate . . . time of death near 7 P.M. . . . Captain Milo Hart of State Police . . . granddaughter of Maarten Verhooven . . . "

Only one thing registered. Blindly, Adam snatched a coat, tore out of the hotel into the street. He gave the taxi-driver Hank Riesner's address.

At the sound of the doorbell, Hank turned down the light under the bacon and the coffee pot and opened the door. At the sight of Adam, he stared, nonplused. He had seen him under many trying and deadly conditions but never had he seen the look of horror and sickness that he now showed. He swung the door wide, took his arm and pushed him into an armchair.

"Sit there," he said. "Talk can wait." He splashed a drink into a glass and added: "Get this down."

Adam pushed it away.

"Talk can't wait," he said hoarsely.

"Okay. Talk."

Adam talked. As if pictures and memories could ease the intolerable pain that racked him, he flooded the room with a spate of words. There was no chronology to his narrative; he skipped from the skate-house in Central Park to the scene in Vic Bryan's study the first time he met Kit. He described her loveliness in the present tense as if his mind rejected the idea of her death. He babbled about *Sauerbraten* at *Zum Weissen Roessl* and compared the taffy they pulled in her kitchen to her ash-blonde hair. He went into minutest detail about yesterday afternoon from the moment he arrived at two and they went down to the games-room to the moment when he left her so reluctantly to break the news of her leaving to her

husband. At last, spent and breathless, he thrust the newspaper at Hank.

"There. Read it. It's lies. All lies."

Hank read with the fast intake of a cop who deals primarily in facts. He looked up.

"What do you mean—it's lies?"

"No burglar or prowler killed her. I know."

"Keep talking."

"That door wasn't open. The house was locked up like a fortress at four-thirty when I left. I made her do it. I heard the key turn and the bolt shoot home. Hank, you've got to help."

"Sure I'll help. Just say what you want."

"Somehow the police will have to know the house was locked, that no tramp could get in—only—Hank, for God's sake, how can I tell them without fouling up her name? You know what the world is—the dirty slurs the papers will cast—me sneaking in to see her like that— You know cops, too—who's going to believe I never so much as held her in my arms. Oh, God, Hank, in spite of her loneliness, someone hated her—no stranger—no casual crook—"

Hank rose, poured two cups of scalding bitter black coffee and brought them over.

"Drink that, will you." Adam obeyed mechanically. "Now, hear this, kid. I'm a cop. A Homicide officer. You come and tell me you left her at four-thirty, locked in. The paper says no forcible entry but the back door was open and just pulled to. A couple of hours later, she's dead."

"Well?"

"Do you know your danger?"

"My danger— What are you talking about?"

"I go to this Captain Hart. I tell him what you told me. He doesn't know you the way I do. You're just the boyfriend she's been playing around with. Well, she's decided to ditch you and stick to her husband. She tells you so around four-thirty or later. So what do you do? You see red, you get your hands on her throat, you walk out the back door—"

"Hank—damn you—!" Adam interrupted.

"Take it easy," Hank said quietly.

"If you think that—"

"I don't, you fool. I know you. But—"

"But what? Somebody deliberately crushed the life out of her— Oh, God, Kit—Kit—I'm going to find him and make him pay—"

"You won't find him if you're locked up, boy."

Adam rose, his body tense.

"Okay. Thanks for listening. I won't bother you any more, you—you gawdam cop—" He started for the door. Hank grabbed his arm and threw him back in his chair.

"Shut up, you dope," he barked. "Sit there and listen to me, will you. Sure, I'm a cop. And you're a—God help us—playwright. Packing 'em in, ain't you, with that stinkin' piece of junk 'In Line of Duty.' Where a cop goes ahead with his job of nailing a murderer even though it's a matter of life or death to his own kid. You dumb idiot, you think cops shed their feelings when they climb into uniform? Sure, they talk tough. Or don't talk at all. But what goes on behind? Did I ever turn your stomach thanking you for hauling me back to safety on Omaha Beach? Did I ever blat garbage about owing you my life? You bet your life I didn't. But I'll tell you this: cops are people, goddam it. I'm off duty and my time's my own. And the hell with Captain Milo Hart and his prowlers. You want the guy who killed your girl and I'll get him for you if I break every rule in the book doing it."

"Okay, Hank. I needed that," Adam said at last. He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes and wiped them surreptitiously on his trousers. He went on dully: "Hearts do break, I guess. Or get squeezed to death. Hank, I could crack right now so easy, I could start raving. You want to save my mind, give me something to do, keep me busy—"

"I'll give you plenty. Everything depends on you. I'm going to pick your brains, dig around in your mind, root out every word that ever passed between you and Kit; and build up a prehistoric mastodon from an eyetooth. Now, then, are you up to thinking? To giving your whole body and soul to the problem?"

"That's all I want to do—all I'm fit for."

"Good. Take it impersonal. It's a case. A puzzle. So what have we got? One single positive fact: the house was locked up like a drum. Whoever got in had a key. Right?"

"Yes."

"Any ideas?"

"Of course. Her husband. Who else? He came home, she told him she was divorcing him so he killed her."

"No good. Read the paper. He worked late in town. He left New York around eight with these—ah—Paynes, when she was already dead an hour or two. He's alibi-ed up to the hilt."

"There's something wrong right there. Kit made me leave promptly at four-thirty because he'd promised to be home early to listen to her. She'd been trying all week to tell him but he was always too busy or someone came in—anyway, he told her definitely he'd be home early yesterday."

"Well, he wasn't. Hart never gave out such definite info to the press boys without being dead sure of his facts. The husband's out. Who else had a key, do you know?"

"The housekeeper Martha who worshipped her. Maybe her aunt Irene who was her great friend."

"No woman did what was done to her. Who else?"

"Nobody that I know of. It has to be her husband. He's the only one who'd have a grudge or a motive to kill her."

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, look. He's a nut on success—nothing matters to him except getting ahead—Kit was sure he only married her because she could help him along through her social position and money and background. Well, last night, she told him he was losing all that—"

"Yeah, but he loses it if he kills her, doesn't he?"

"Maybe he went berserk when she told him—"

"This cold fish with his eye on the top of the ladder?"

"He wouldn't be cold where his own interests were at stake. Look at it like this: here's an abnormal guy who puts his career ahead of everything. Here's a sample: he refused to have a child—said he couldn't afford to carry dead weight until he was more solid with the firm."

"Plenty of guys feel like that."

"His main reason was that it would deprive him of his hostess for a year. How do you like that?"

"Cold is right."

"Kit called him *unhuman*. She stood him for two years and couldn't take any more. So now she decides to light out. He's completely helpless. She holds all the aces. She has the money, she has the prestige. If he loses his hold on her coat-tail, he loses everything.

You know what these small country communities are. He even loses his home—her grandfather gave it to her. He's worked like a dog to get where he is, both socially and in his profession. He's going to love it, isn't he, to be made a laughing-stock of, his wife walking out on him because he's a stuffed shirt. It'd about kill him. Kit realized it—she had qualms about hurting him, the qualms any decent girl would have in the circumstances. She was offering him half her money to make it up to him."

"Wait a minute—what do you know about her money?"

"She inherited a good bit last week when her grandfather died."

"She ever mention any will?"

"Not to me."

"Any relations?"

"No one close."

"Then will or no will, the husband probably gets the pot."

"I suppose so."

"There's a husky motive right there."

"Not if Kit told him she was giving him half legitimately. And to be fair, she never said he was mercenary. His bee is power."

"A psycho?"

"Only in the sense that all megalomaniacs are nuts."

"Well, we're arguing about Betsey Ross' beard. The guy's in the clear so if he has a motive as big as a house, he's still got to be on the spot to commit the crime. And he wasn't."

"This Hart can be wrong."

Hank began to fill his pipe. When he had it going, he said:

"We started with one fact. Now we've got two."

"How's that?"

"One: the house was locked up. Two: her husband promises to be home early but stays late in town, twenty-odd miles away from the scene of the crime."

"Where does that get us?"

"Nowhere—yet. Our trouble is, we don't know enough. I better be moving."

"Where to?"

"My Chief, first of all. I've got to horn in on all this in an unofficial off-the-record way. I've got to keep this business about the locked door dark to save Kit's name and to save your hide, but I've got to jump right in the middle of it somehow."

"Can you do that?"

"I can make a damn good try."

THIRTEEN

CAPTAIN GREGORY FARR OF HOMICIDE WEST WAS INITIALING A STACK OF reports when, without benefit of knock, his door opened and Hank Riesner walked in. The Captain looked up, smashed a ham-hand with a loud clap down on the reports and glared.

"What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Florida getting some fat on your ribs."

Hank turned on his sweet smile.

"Cap, one of my ancestors was an Eskimo. I just can't take the heat."

"I told you to stay out of here till the first of March."

"I got lonesome. I just dropped by to say hello."

"Well, say it and scram. The doc said you should take it easy. And you're going to, if it kills you."

"Kinda hard work taking it easy. Ever try it?"

"I expect to try it for good in ten months when I retire."

"You ever find that mink ranch you were looking for?"

"Well, there's two I—" Again the enormous hand slapped down. "Hank, you son of a gun, what are you after?" he roared.

"Not a thing, Cap. I told you the truth. It's pretty dull work seeing a couple of movies a day and counting the hours to the next meal. I'm telling you, I just dropped by out of lonesomeness."

"How's the arm?"

Hank flexed the fingers of his left hand proudly.

"Practically like new. If you had a little mild job of work, I could do it without batting an eye."

"Nothing doing. March first."

"Okay, okay. I just suggested it. What do you hear from your boy, Cap?"

"The kid's pretty good—as good as anybody can be in the Far East these days—"

"Home soon?"

"Who knows? With one thing after another coming up—"

"Funny, ain't it, Cap," Hank said with guile, "the three of us—you in World War I, me in the second World War and now Tim—" He slid into a chair.

"It gets lousier all the time," said Farr sourly. Hank drew a satisfied breath. He had deliberately steered the talk into the channel he planned. It was now only a question of skilful management to get what he wanted. "No such thing as honest war nowadays. Sheer butchery. No rules. No respect for international codes. No regard for non-combatants. Not even any consideration for the enemy. In 1917 you put on a uniform and knew who you were fighting. No bloody block-busters or A-bombs that rained down from five miles up in the sky. You dug into your trenches and the Boches did the same. And the toughest side pushed ahead and took the other fellow's trench. And if a Boche yelled 'Kamarad' you took him prisoner and fixed up his wounds and gave him a meal and no god-dam Buchenwalds or brainwashing about it."

"Too right, Cap," said Hank, egging him on. "And you knew who you were fighting with as well as against. A buddy was a buddy."

"You said a mouthful." Farr was really in his element now, riding his well-known hobby.

"I've read a lot of World War I stuff—no-man's-land—two three right guys volunteering to go over the top and capture a machine gun or whatever—Was that the M'Coy or just slick magazine drivel?"

"It was the M'Coy all right. And nobody knows it better than I do," said Farr, rising like a trout to the bait. "Two of us did just that one night in '18. We were nearly on top of them when the tracer bullets began to pick us out."

"You're still here, I see," Hank fed him the line as if he had never heard the story before.

"Yeah. And why? Because, like you said, a buddy was a buddy those days. This kid with me saw it coming. Grabbed me and knocked me flat into a crater-hole. Then he threw himself, big as he was, plunk on top of me." Farr gave a queer soft nostalgic laugh. "A bullet caught him straight across the behind. To this day, he's got a groove you could lay a pencil in and has to sit down kinda careful. That's thirty-seven years ago. Today, the guy's president of a ten million dollar corporation and I'm a lousy Homicide dick. But we

never missed a Thursday night together from then till now. You don't get that stripe of buddy these rotten days."

"Yes you do, Cap. Wars change. And weapons. But not human nature. No matter what the number of the war is, right guys keep popping up to show that the human race ain't all rotten. I wouldn't be here if one of 'em hadn't saved me at the risk of his own life."

Farr eyed him with a sharp knowing stare.

"So that's the build-up. What are you after, Hank?"

"You got me, Chief," Hank said simply. "I owe him and he's asking for payment."

"Put it on the table."

"Some of it I will. This Highcliffe murder. He's interested."

"It's wrapped and taped. Just a matter of hours before they pull in the killer if they haven't already. They called on us to check the alibis of the husband and his friends at this end. Everything's kosher. Kelly was up half the night nailing it."

"My buddy isn't convinced."

"I can't do a thing for you. It's not our case."

"What kind of a guy is this Captain Hart?"

"Good orthodox man. Little bit touchy about credits."

"He can have all the credit if he lets me potter around."

"He's sure it's a prowler and he won't relish any other theories. Makes kind of a thing out of his dignity."

"All right, I'll steer clear of him until I get something to trade with. Will you fix it up with Kelly for us to do some noising?"

"You're supposed to be getting your strength back."

"Cap, thirty-odd years from now, I'd still like to be seeing my buddy and able to look him in the eye."

"Why's he interested?"

"I can't tell you that."

"You can tell me anything."

"Nope."

"Gawdam it. Talk to Kelly yourself. I'm up to my ears in work and I don't want to know what you're at till March first. Hear? Now get out."

Hank grinned and got out. He sought Detective Kelly and found him pounding his typewriter. He glanced over Kelly's shoulder.

"That the Lundgren report you're doing?"

"Yes, Lieutenant." Kelly rose. "How are you feeling, sir?" Hank

was something of a hero to the Squad since he had brought the killer Tony Petelli in more than a month ago.

"Fine, just fine, Kelly. I'm interested in that. Soon through?"

"Yes, sir. I phoned up the main points last night. Captain Hart asked for a written report so I'm sending this up to him."

"Carbon?"

"Two of them, sir."

"Good. I'll take one."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Yeah, Kelly. You had to tackle this late last night. What did you do? Personal calls or phone?"

"I saw the parking-lot attendant and the superintendent. The rest were gone but the supe gave me the elevator boy's address and this Mr. Muir's and Mr. Lane's. I got them on the phone. The supe took me up to the Lane premises and I looked Lundgren's office over. The guy had been working all right. The charwomen hadn't been in yet and his waste basket was full of the stuff he was working on. I took it along in case Highcliff wants it."

"They won't. They're sure it was a prowler."

"Then it'll be wrapped up soon. These hoboes are dumb eggs."

"Ever have a hunch, Kelly?" Hank grinned and Kelly grinned back.

"Sure I have, sir. But I don't act on 'em. It's a short jump back to uniform."

"Well, I'm taking a chance. Keep this under your hat. I'm going to dig a little. Unofficially, even after Captain Hart gets his report."

"Yes, sir. At that, it does look awful shipshape."

"You mean the husband?"

"Yes, sir. Everybody saw him and alibis him for every second of the time."

"That's my hunch, Kelly. Innocent people have gaps in their stories because they don't know they're going to be stories." This was as good a peg as any to hang his interest in Lundgren on, without bringing Adam into it.

"Well, good hunting, sir. And take it easy, why don't you? Any leg work, I'll be glad to oblige."

"Thanks. I may call on you. Did you talk to this Captain Hart personally?"

"Yes, sir. To him and his sergeant—Wegger, the name is."

"How'd they strike you?"

"Wegger sounded pretty regular."

"And the Captain?"

"Well, a little toplofty, sir. But I could be mistaken."

"You're not. Thanks again, Kelly. And as I said, what Captain Hart don't know won't hurt him. Can't have the State Police laugh up their sleeve at Homicide West if it turns out to be a prowler after all."

Hank took a taxi back to Twelfth Street where Adam was waiting for him. Adam had made use of the time by writing out a long-hand narration of everything that had to do with Kit and the people around her since he had known her. There were long dialogues that were heartbreakingly recall and record but in the end the catharsis did him good. When Hank came in, he noticed that Adam's color was better and the blank look was gone from his face.

"I made a deal with the boss," Hank announced. "I can go as far as I like at this end. I just have to be careful about stepping on Captain Milo Hart's toes. Seems the gent's kinda sensitive. And he's sold that it's a prowler. Let's look over this report of Kelly's and see where we go from there."

Hank decided to take nothing for granted, so, even though Kelly reported his verbatim interview with Al, the checker-out at the parking-lot, Hank went up to Radio City and covered the same ground.

Al was on duty and stated positively that Lundgren's Chrysler had checked in at nine thirty-five on Thursday morning and had checked out at seven fifty-five on Thursday night. During the intervening hours, it had not moved from its parking place and Al would swear to that on a stack of bibles.

"Jeez, I read about the poor guy's wife," he said. "What a tough break and him such a nice guy. It don't hardly seem fair."

"Nice guy, is he?"

"They don't come better. Always pleasant, not a bit snotty like some of these types that think they can throw their weight around for their buck and a quarter."

Hank thanked him and left. There was nothing there. If Lundgren had got home early as he promised he would, it was not in the Chrysler. Hank enumerated the various ways he could have reached Highcliff without his car: train, bus, taxi. He would have to go into

the laborious time-tables and taxi trip-records if necessary, but first he wanted a clearer picture of Thursday afternoon and early evening.

It was a holiday—Lincoln's Birthday—and Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane was closed. Hank consulted Kelly's report and took a taxi to Fifth Avenue and 70th Street. Lyman Lane was in, and to Hank's astonishment, as close to tears as a man could be without actually breaking down:

"I feel a most intolerable sense of guilt, Lieutenant Riesner," he said, practically wringing his hands.

"How is that, Mr. Lane?"

"If it hadn't been for my carelessness—or—well, someone's—"

"Suppose you give it to me from the beginning."

"It was this speech—an address I am to make tonight at the Waldorf. While I was in Court yesterday, it was unaccountably mislaid or lost. I missed it about 4 o'clock. We tore the office apart hunting for it but it was gone."

"The only copy there was?"

"Yes, unfortunately. And due to certain circumstances, I had no time to compose another speech. So Charles—Mr. Lundgren—very helpfully suggested staying overtime and writing a new one. If only I had not agreed! He would have left for home at five, like the rest of us and would have been at home to prevent this abominable murder."

"Let's see. Highcliff's about a forty-five minute trip."

"Just about. Less even, I believe."

"That would have brought him home at a quarter to six. He may have been too late even then."

"Oh, no, Lieutenant. I've talked to Charles on the phone this morning and to this Captain Hart who is in charge up there. The murder was committed at about 7 o'clock."

"They told you that?"

"Captain Hart did. That is to say, the Medical Officer fixed the time. I tell you I am heartsick. If I hadn't taken advantage of Charles' co-operation and sense of duty, that dear girl would be alive today. I don't know what I can do to make it up to him."

"I don't think you should blame yourself, Mr. Lane. You couldn't know what was going to happen."

"True, true. But somebody's sheer carelessness—"

"Have you any idea whose?"

"I haven't. The whole thing is quite inexplicable. Miss Wardle, my secretary, is as dependable a young woman as I have ever employed. I would vouch with my last breath that it was not her fault."

"Who had access to your office?"

"Anybody. Everybody. But who would want to steal a thing like that? It is absurd. No. The thing was somehow brushed off my desk and into the rubbish—"

"But surely you looked in the waste baskets?"

"We looked everywhere. And it was nowhere."

Hank left with a real flea in his ear. Here was a third fact to add to the two he had: the kitchen door was not unlocked; Lundgren had promised to be home early but wasn't; a script was unaccountably missing and Lundgren had volunteered to stay late and replace it. Of course, this third fact canceled out the second, giving Lundgren good reason for not being home early.

But the inexplicable loss of Lane's speech bothered Hank, as it would any experienced detective. Still, he couldn't hook it up with a murder twenty-odd miles away. If this had been a gangster killing, he could see that it might have been used to give Lundgren an absolute alibi while a hired thug committed the actual murder. But a man of Lundgren's caliber—intelligent, calculating, ambitious—would never go out on a limb to the extent of putting himself in a crook's power.

As a matter of strict logic, Hank finally admitted, the lost speech really strengthened Lundgren's position instead of weakening it. It gave him a genuine excuse for breaking his promise to Kit. Besides, the situation only arose late in the day—close to 5 o'clock. He could hardly have up to Highcliff, kill his wife and write a Lincoln Day speech for Lane in the time. And he did write one. Hank had Lane's word for that.

Only the thought of Adam, waiting at home, all but bowled over by misery and shock, prompted him to go on with his probing.

There was this Muir whom Kelly had contacted by phone. His address was a couple of miles away in the Chelsea district. Hank walked over to Madison Avenue and called his number. Muir was at home and agreed to see Hank in half an hour.

The Muir apartment reminded Hank of his own, except that it

was neater by far. The building was a reconstructed private house and in its day, must have been an elegant one. The floor was parquet and it glistened with wax and loving care. The two windows glittered with cleanliness and every ashtray was speckless. The big room smelled faintly of finnan haddie and the man who opened the door to him appeared equally Scotch. Hank feared he would be as taciturn as his countrymen were supposed to be. But he was mistaken. Muir was a lonely man and it was a novelty to him to receive the flattering attention which Hank gave him. Added to that, he was a mathematician who reduced everything to exact figures, and a man gifted with what is known as total recall.

"Of course, Mr. Muir, you understand all this is mere routine. Mr. Lundgren is entitled to be protected by facts and I believe you are our main source of the facts which will put him in the clear."

"When was the murder committed?" he asked cautiously.

"About seven o'clock."

"Then he's in the clear. I was with him from twenty-five minutes to seven until a quarter to eight."

"Well, that sounds pretty conclusive. Would you mind giving me the story in detail?"

Muir didn't mind. He packed a pipe methodically—Hank wondered if it was Barrie's Latakia—and proceeded to give a verbatim report of the evening before, from 6:35 on. Hank commented inwardly that Muir would be lost without his watch; at every stage of the story, he was able to give the exact time. Hank listened with close attention and when Muir finally said: "I believe that covers it," Hank suggested with careful casualness:

"Now I wonder, Mr. Muir, if you'd begin a bit further back—say, at five o'clock as soon as everybody had gone."

Muir bristled and turned bright red.

"You do not need to hide your purpose under a show of civility, sir. It is my alibi you are after, is it not?"

"No, Mr. Muir. Please get that right out of your head."

"Then what do the earlier facts matter?"

"Well, confidentially, Medical Officers can be wrong. Suppose, due to certain factors, the M.O. was an hour or so out of the way and the murder was committed at, say six o'clock instead of seven. For Lundgren's own protection, we want him covered from start to finish."

"Or exposed," said Muir acutely.

"Or exposed," Hank agreed. "Although frankly, it looks like there's not a chance in the world of that. His car never moved from the parking-lot until close to eight P.M."

Pacified, Muir cast his mind back:

"At five, the whole office force had gone—or so I thought. It seems Mr. Lundgren was still in his office but I was unaware of it at the time. At five, I went into the law library to look up a precedent. I was in the library until 5:15—"

"You saw nobody during that time?"

"I wouldn't see anyone because I had closed the library door."

"I see. Go on, please."

"At 5:15 I went back to my own office—"

"Now just a minute. Then between 5 and 5:15 Lundgren could have left the office without your seeing him?"

"He might."

"You see? Right there, we'll have to check—elevator boy and so on."

"That will be unnecessary."

"How is that?"

"Let us suppose Lundgren did go out between 5 and 5:15. I wouldn't have seen him, true. But from 5:15 on, I was seated at my typewriter with my door open facing the typists' pool and nobody could have got back without my seeing him."

Hank pulled at his ear.

"Didn't leave your typewriter for a few minutes, say, to go to the Men's room?"

"I did not move from my chair. And not a mouse could have crossed the typists' pool without my seeing it."

"Well, that's that. Lundgren ought to be grateful to you. You've given him a clean bill of health."

"I can do better still."

"How's that?"

"The Medical Officer was not wrong. Mrs. Lundgren did not die at six o'clock."

"What . . . ?"

"She was alive at a quarter to seven."

Hank's jaw dropped an inch. Kelly's report made no mention of this.

"Let's have it," he rapped out.

"At a quarter to seven Mr. Lundgren called his wife on the telephone in my presence. He told her he would be late. He said he would be home by nine and that they, along with these friends, the Paynes, would go out for a late dinner together."

"Where were the Paynes when he phoned?"

"They had not yet come but he was expecting them. They arrived at 7:30."

Hank rose.

"That covers everything, I guess," he said slowly. "And your story's been very helpful. It pinpoints one extremity of the time of the crime almost down to minutes."

"I am glad to be of use. It is bad enough for a man to suffer such an appalling loss without being suspected of having a hand in it."

"Well, as I said, our object wasn't to involve an innocent man but to get evidence that he was in the clear. And you've given us that with a vengeance." He thanked Muir again and got out of the place. He considered seeing Howard Pym, the elevator boy, but it seemed futile. Muir had knocked the props from under any case that might be constructed against Lundgren.

Because he hated facing Adam with unpalatable news, he delayed by walking the distance to 12th Street, pondering Muir's story but inevitably coming back to the conclusion that Lundgren was out of it. Near his home, he stopped into a supermarket and bought an enormous steak with the fixings. It was five o'clock and dark when he arrived with his bundles. He found Adam pacing the floor.

FOURTEEN

THE STEAK HAD BEEN REDUCED TO A CLEAN-SHORN BONE WHICH ONLY A dog could have relished, before Hank would bring up the subject that occupied both their minds. He saw with satisfaction that Adam had eaten a decent meal and that some of the tension had gone out of him. Coffee steamed in the cups before them and he got his pipe going and watched Adam light a cigarette, before he began:

"It's no good, boy. The guy's as clean as a whistle."

"Let's have it all."

Hank went into the story of his afternoon from start to finish. Adam listened without comment, his jaw getting squarer and squarer, his eyes more and more stubborn.

"Well, that's it. The guy's covered like a tent," Hank said.

"Covered is right. What's under the cover?"

"Now, look, boy. Don't let's be muscle-bound about this. You've got your knife out for the husband because he let Kit down and he's a cold fish. Granted. But that doesn't make him a murderer."

"There is a murderer. Who else would it be?"

"Well, we're not throwing in our hand. We'll sniff further."

"It's Lundgren. I know. Concentrate on him."

"I'm telling you he couldn't have done it. She was alive at a quarter to seven. And from then on, he was in somebody's company without a break until they found her."

"Who says she was alive? This Muir. How do we know he's not in it with Lundgren?"

"I wish you'd been with me. Muir's as Scotch as an oatmeal cake. He wouldn't juggle with the truth to save his grandmother. You'll just have to accept it, kid."

"I don't and I won't."

"Okay. It's easy enough to check on Muir, if you want."

"Check? How?"

Without answering, Hank rose and picked up the phone book. Adam watched him as he ran down the page of L's. He turned over a few pages, still under the letter L. Then he dialed operator and asked for a certain department of the telephone company. When he had the proper authority, he said:

"This is Lieutenant Riesner of Homicide West. I want a list of all toll-calls made from Compton 3-2800 and from Compton 3-4612 on Thursday February 11th."

"Yes, Lieutenant. Shall I call you back?"

"No. I'll hang on."

"Just a moment then."

Hank said to Adam:

"Those numbers are Lane, Lane, Clayton and Lane—the switchboard—and Lyman Lane's private phone. Lundgren hasn't got a separate wire."

"I see."

"You're dead sure Kit was alone in the house when you left?"

"Positive."

"Then if a toll-call was completed at a quarter to seven as Muir stated, you'll have to concede she was alive then and Lundgren has to be out of it. You can't very well accuse the phone company of being in cahoots with him."

"Hardly."

Before Hank could say more, the phone official was back on the line:

"Lieutenant, here is the list of toll-calls from the numbers you asked for. On Compton 3-2800, there is a call to Washington, D. C., a call to Albany and a call to Philadelphia. From Compton 3-4612, no toll-call at all is recorded for February 11th."

"I see. Thank you." He hung up slowly and turned to Adam almost in a daze. "No toll-call to Highcliff on record. What the hell gives?"

"Well, you checked on Muir all right!" Adam tried to keep the triumph out of his tone.

"I'd have banked on him from here to Christmas. I still can't believe—Look, maybe Highcliff's one of those suburbs you can dial—you know?—you don't have to get operator but they charge you two or three calls for it. We'd better find out."

"Save your efforts." Adam's tone was satirical. "I've called Highcliff every morning for the past five weeks. And you can't dial it."

"Well, it's your round, Adam. There was no phone call. Either Muir's in it with him or he was diddled somehow. I'll see Muir in the morning again."

"What will you gain? He'll lie some more and what's worse, he'll smell a rat and alert Lundgren."

Hank didn't answer. He sat frowning in thought. Finally, he went again to the phone and dialed Homicide West.

"Hello . . . who's this? . . . Oh, Schwartz. Riesner talking. Kelly around? . . . Well, let me have his home phone, will you . . ." There was a wait while Adam watched with interest. Then Hank scribbled on a pad next to the phone. "Right . . . Sure, feeling fine again, thanks . . . see you soon."

He got Kelly just as he was going to bed after the extra hitch he had put in the night before on the Lundgren and Payne alibis.

"Kelly? . . . Riesner. Did you send that report up to Captain Hart yet? . . . Fine. Now, look, don't send it. Bring it here instead . . . no, no, 8:30 in the morning's okay. You get your sleep . . . you've got my address, have you? . . . Right . . ."

"What's the gen?" Adam asked, using an old Army word.

"Care to drive me up to Highcliff tomorrow?"

"Glad to. What for?"

"This non-existent phone call might pay off. Our main trouble is we don't know enough. All we've got are the New York fringes of the case that Kelly dug out. What I need is the full file from the Highcliff end."

"Where does the phone call figure?"

"We swap. I bring Captain Hart a juicy lead and he obliges with a carbon of the M.O.'s report, the interviews, the whole works."

"I see. Swell!" Adam looked as if he had had a shot of adrenalin. "What's more, maybe he'll stop pottering around with prowlers and move in on Lundgren."

"Well, I'll certainly put a flea in his ear."

But the next morning, in Hart's private office in the neat white barracks at Highcliff, he got a jolt. Captain Hart greeted him cordially, listened to him courteously and then laughed at him heartily.

"Oh, come now, Lieutenant, this is a bit thick," he said still smiling. "You're proposing to suspect a man on the strength of telephone company records?"

"He's supposed to have phoned his wife at 6:45 and it's proved he didn't."

"Proved? My dear chap, don't you know yet that these people are forever making errors? How often is your own bill wrong?"

"Never in my favor." Hank said wryly.

"True enough. It's usually the other way about. But it could happen. In this case, it did happen."

"You mean you think Lundgren phoned and it was simply not recorded?"

"What else?" Hart shrugged.

"But you can't just let it go at that," Hank protested.

Hart reddened but held back the reprimand he was justified in voicing at this violation of protocol by a Lieutenant to a Captain.

"Naturally, I shall investigate," he said stiffly. "Sixty per cent of an officer's time is wasted running down false leads."

"False?"

"Immaterial, shall we say? The District Attorney would take a poor view of such evidence. He would say he'd be laughed out of Court. And he would be right."

"It'd be Lundgren's word against the phone company's."

"And not a juror in the box would give the company right. No doubt all of them would have had the same sort of trouble with their own bills." Hank looked so dashed that the Captain's geniality returned. "But have no fear. I'll talk it over with Mr. Lundgren. It is only right that he should be informed of this unfortunate muddle, although I hate to intrude on the poor chap's grief at the moment."

"On second thoughts, Captain," Hank said quickly, "there's no point in asking him. If it's a simple mistake, he'll know no more about it than we do. And if there really was no call—no use putting him wise that we know."

Hart ran a knuckle along his tiny trim white mustache. His erect well-kept figure straightened to ramrod stiffness. In a voice dripping with kindly condescension, he said:

"My dear boy, I think you will agree that I am a good bit older than you and in certain latitudes, unquestionably more experienced." At Hank's stare, he raised a hand and smiled. "Oh, I know, I know. Manhattan West probably handles more homicides in a week than Highcliff in a lifetime. But isn't it the fact that what you get are the gangster killings, the street stabbings, the waterfront massacres? Oh, you do well at them, I give you that, but when it comes to a case among civilized people like this, it is more my line of country. The rule of thumb is no longer in effect; there are intangibles, disciplines, taboos, things that these people simply do not do. A sound man like Lundgren would no more strangle his wife in such beastly fashion than he would grow wings and fly."

Hank bit his lip in utter disbelief at such twaddle from a peace officer. But he was up here for a purpose and he intended to carry it out. He said politely:

"If I've misjudged the situation, Captain, it's because I know so little about it. Perhaps, if I had a look at the file, read the interviews, got the whole picture—"

"Why, certainly, Lieutenant. Only too glad. You people have been most civil and helpful in lending a hand. And I take it in

very good part that you brought up the report in person. If you will speak to Sergeant Wegger on your way out, he will give you a full copy of the reports."

Hank thanked him, hesitated and made one last effort to reach Hart.

"Captain," he said quietly, "I understand that the kitchen door was unlocked when you came on the scene."

"Quite so. Deplorable carelessness." He shook his head sadly.

Again Hank hesitated. He simply could not tell this blind posturing snob about Adam. It would be throwing him to the wolves. But his conscience did bother him. He said:

"Aren't we assuming something there? The door could have been unlocked because the murderer left through the kitchen. But there's nothing to show that it was open for him to enter by."

"Have you a better suggestion to offer, Lieutenant?" Hart asked blandly.

Hank gave up. He forced a smile and said:

"I suggest that I read the file and stop wasting your time."

"Not a bit of it, old boy. Glad to see you any time. Come in again when you are up this way. Just now, of course, I'm a bit pressed. There are seven people cooling their heels inside, waiting to be questioned. I've no doubt we shall write *finis* to the case in a matter of hours."

Hank escaped and picked up the reports he wanted from Wegger. He spent a few moments with the Sergeant, deliberately establishing an *entente cordiale* against the future. Then he rejoined Adam who was waiting in the car. Adam raked him with questioning eyes. Hank wiped his forehead and gave vent to language which would have done credit to a pirate.

"Well? Well? What did he think?" Adam prodded.

"Think? That ham? He doesn't think. He lectures."

"Come on, Hank. What happened?"

Hank gave him a rundown. He finished:

"Between salaaming to the local gentry and giving an imitation of a British field marshal, he's just too damned busy to bother solving a murder."

"You mean to say—"

"I mean to say that if I brought him an eyewitness to the murder,

he'd put him under a lie-detector before he'd believe a Highcliff Brahmin could do anything so ungentlemanly as homicide."

"You're kidding. The man's after all a Captain. He must know his stuff."

"He probably does. My chief said he was a good orthodox man. But when it comes to the elite, he's got a blind spot. Lundgren doesn't know his luck. He's got police protection of a new kind. Anything short of a confession will just be laughed off merrily."

"But Hank, what can we do?"

"Very little," Hank said soberly. "Hart's in charge. What he says goes. I'm just a nosy outsider looking for glory. He can slam the door in my face any time he wants."

"You mean you're going to give up?"

"Hell, no. I'd like to get Lundgren if only to give Hart a swipe in the eye."

"But how can you go about it?"

"First off, we go through these reports Wegger gave me with a finetooth comb."

"Oh, sure. We'll find something. I know it."

"You and the wellknown wishful thinking," Hank said ironically. Then his voice hardened to emphasis. "Now look, kid, the worst way to break a case is to set up a theory and twist your facts to fit it. It's no good. You're hellbent to nail Lundgren for this crime. Because you hate his guts—"

"No. Because he had a terrific motive. And because it's the kind of thing a fanatical self-seeker would do rather than lose all he's worked so hard for."

"Okay. We'll grant him motive. Now take him on the opportunity side. A can hate B and wish she was dead. But if B turns up dead and A had no possible chance to kill her, you can't pin the crime on A. Lundgren was in sight of people from 6:30 on, the night of the murder and his wife was killed around seven."

"You're throwing out the telephone business?"

"No. I'm filing it for future reference. Hart's a pompous ass, kid, but he could be right on this. The phone company could have made a mistake. The operator, interrupted talking to her boyfriend, could make the connection to Highcliff and then go back to her own call and forget to mark it up."

"Hooey!"

"Maybe. And if Lundgren looked guilty otherwise, I'd put it on the scale against him. But Muir who struck me as 100 per cent honest, says he phoned. I still think a good move would be to question Muir some more about it."

"No. You may be sold on Muir's honesty but I'm not. I don't think we should make any move that would alert Lundgren at this stage. And if you talk to Muir, it's bound to get back to him."

"Now, don't go ostrich on me. We'll get nowhere with our heads in the sand. Cases are solved by asking questions, by asking more questions and keeping on asking questions."

"Well, do me a favor and hold off a while with Muir. The way to catch Lundgren is to have the trap set and ready before you put him wise. Otherwise, he'll talk his way right out of it. He's a slick article, I'm telling you. And if he's forewarned, he'll have all the answers."

He broke off suddenly and Hank glanced at him curiously. He saw that Adam's jaws were clamped together and that his throat was working. They had passed through the charming red-brick village of Highcliff and were a mile or two beyond it; Hank followed Adam's glance which had left the road and was fixed at a point to their right. Hank saw a short turn-off, a tall hedge, a pair of iron gates and a long rising snow-covered expanse with a handsome field-stone house at the top, gleaming in the winter sunshine.

As plainly as if Adam had spoken, Hank knew it was the Lundgren house, that somewhere behind the wide windows, the girl Adam loved had been killed. The sight of the house and of Adam's set face worked an odd change in Hank. The murder ceased to be a case; it became a crusade. He swore to himself to get Kit's murderer—Lundgren or another—if it took him a lifetime.

FIFTEEN

AT ONE O'CLOCK THEY WERE BACK IN HANK'S APARTMENT. BOTH MEN were so eager to get at the Highcliff reports that they drove straight through without stopping for lunch. Hank dug out a couple of boxes of sardines and a ripe Camembert cheese. They both voted

for coffee instead of beer, with the idea of keeping their heads clear for thought.

Lunch over, Hank picked up Wegger's yellow folder, dividing up the reports between himself and Adam. There was the M.O.'s report from Green, the interviews with Lundgren, the Paynes, Irene Verhooven and the housekeeper Martha Spietz. There were interrogations of the Lundgren handyman and gardener, the Verhooven chauffeur and gardeners and all delivery boys who served the Lundgren household. Whatever they might say about Hart's ability, there was no doubt about his diligence. He and the whole barracks personnel must have worked around the clock since Thursday evening.

They read in silence, then exchanged scripts until both of them had read the complete file. Hank looked up and said:

"Well? Any ideas?"

Adam's eyes were blazing with excitement.

"You bet!" he said almost in a shout.

"Let's have it." Hank had a few ideas of his own but he wanted to hear from Adam first.

"This medical report setting the time of death at seven on account of *rigor mortis* being so far advanced. That stinks."

"How so?"

"I left Kit at 4:30. Dressed. She was wearing a dark red dress and these earrings her aunt gave her. She expected Lundgren early and she was nervous. Said she was going to take a hot bath to calm herself down. Call it 4:35. Now how long can anyone soak in a tub? Half an hour—an hour at the outside. That brings it to 5:35. She puts on this terry cloth robe with nothing under it. Now you mean to tell me that from twenty-five minutes to six until seven o'clock when the M.O. says she was killed, she's going to stay in a bathrobe?"

"She might."

"No. She was keyed up for a tough interview with Lundgren. If you know anything at all about women, you'd know she'd dress for it. Clothes, even a formal costume would give her the kind of self-confidence she needed. She wouldn't hang around an hour and a half in a hunk of toweling to talk to him."

"What are you trying to prove?"

"This: M.O. or no M.O., she was killed a lot earlier than seven P.M.

"Now, look, kid. The M.O. report is plain routine. You can depend on it. This Dr. Green sounds pretty knowledgeable but any beginner would know that much."

"Let me finish. He says the temperature of the room determines *rigor* pretty exactly. That with the room so cold, death must have taken place around seven, no more than two and a half hours before he saw her."

"Well?"

"Let's go back to Kit and build it up. She takes this hot bath to calm herself. Soaks for a half hour or an hour, take your pick. Gets out. Goes into the bedroom and starts making up her lips. The report says it was found on the floor under her."

"What are you getting at?"

"Hark back to Thursday evening. It was damned cold. There was a hell of a wind. I know because I walked over to the Airline office to inquire about flights—" He bit his lip and waited until he could control his voice before he went on: "Now picture yourself getting out of a hot tub, your pores all open and nothing on but a cotton bath-robe. Do you open even one section of the window—let alone two—and take a chance of getting a chill? I'm telling you, Kit never opened that window."

"Smart, Adam. Good reasoning. I'll buy it. But it gets us nowhere. The burglar could have opened it."

"Why would he?"

"Who knows? Maybe we're dealing with a maniac."

"A maniac who's smart enough to wear gloves and leave no prints? Who has sense enough to know the value of diamonds—?"

"Hold it. He left the diamond on her finger, the money in her handbag and the silver downstairs. You ask me, the whole thing could be the work of a nut."

"Or a plant to look like a nut."

"You mean Lundgren?"

"Yes."

"Well, break it down. Say Lundgren did it. He couldn't have done it after 6:30. He was with somebody every minute after that. Even if you doubt Muir, there was the elevator boy, the waiter and the Paynes."

"I'm saying he did it before 6:30."

"All right. Between 5 and 6:30 nobody did see him, it's true.

Well, if he did do it then and opened the window, he was asking for it."

"Why was he?"

"Read Green's report. If the window had been open say from six o'clock on, instead of seven, *rigor* would have been much further advanced than it was. Green would have said the murder was done at six *when Lundgren had no alibi*. The guy's too smart to put himself on such a spot."

"He could have opened it at nine when he came home with the Paynes just before the police got there."

Hank stared at him thoughtfully.

"To throw dust in Green's eyes? Could be." He rifled through the Highcliff reports. "Here's Payne's interview:

Q: When you reached the house, Mr. Payne, what happened?

A: Charles went up to get his wife.

Q: Where were you and Mrs. Payne?

A: In the living-room.

Q: Then what happened?

A: After a second or two, we heard Charles give a terrible scream—a roar, sort of—

Q: And then?

A: We rushed upstairs.

Adam snorted.

"A 'second or two'! Maybe it was ten seconds—thirty seconds—who's counting?—and how long does it take to open a window?"

Hank snapped his fingers.

"We can check another way." He jumped to the phone and asked operator for the Highcliff barracks. When he was connected, a tired voice said:

"State Police, Highcliff. Sergeant Wegger speaking."

Hank heaved a sigh of relief. He was anxious to keep out of Captain Hart's way.

"Oh, hello, Sergeant. Lieutenant Riesner here. Been reading over your reports. They're good. I got a very clear picture of the scene of the crime."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just one thing struck me. Those windows that were open—"

"You mean the prowler could have used them to get in by? He couldn't, Lieutenant. They're little 6 by 12 inch panes."

"Were they wide open?"

"Pretty wide. They let in plenty of cold air."

"And some snow, too, I suppose?"

"Snow?"

"On the floor or window-seat."

"Why . . . no, sir. As I recall, there were a few wet dots on the floor that could have been melted snow-flakes but no real accumulation."

"It didn't strike you there ought to have been?"

"There wouldn't have to be. Not if the wind were East."

"And was it, do you know?"

"I don't, sir. But any storm up here usually does come on an East wind."

"Well, it isn't important. Just a thought that occurred to me. You must be pretty busy up there. I won't keep you. Thanks again." He hung up and began rummaging on the floor of his closet. He said to Adam: "The snow began about six that night. If the killer opened the windows or Kit did, there should have been a small drift of snow on the floor by 9:30. Adam, you may have something." He hauled out a Westchester phone book triumphantly: "I knew I had one of these things around. It's three years old but people don't move around much in the country. Let's see now . . . Green—Green—Dr. Green—we'll give this number a try. I didn't like to put too big a flea in Wegger's ear by asking him for the M.O.'s number." He asked the operator for the number he had found and a minute later was connected with the M.O. himself. Hank introduced himself, apologized for disturbing him and then said:

"Doc, could you settle a little argument for me? We've been lending a hand on this Lundgren case and kicking around the time of the crime here in the office. Is it such an exact science that you can practically pinpoint the hour of death?"

"Pinpoint, no. But there are a few good reliable rules to go by."

"Such as?"

"The relation between the temperature of the room and the state of *rigor mortis* in the deceased."

"Are there special figures—exact ratios between the temperature and the condition of the body?"

"Not exact, so to say. It's a thing a medical man gets to know by

experience. That bed-room was like an ice-box. Given that temperature, a cadaver would have reached the state of *rigor* in which I found it after about two and a half hours. That fixes the time of death around seven P.M. That help you any?"

"Yes, doc, it's quite clear. But if for the sake of agrument, we presume the room was warm—"

"It wasn't. There was a devil of a wind blowing in on me."

"Yes. But suppose it hadn't been?"

"If the room had been at ordinary temperature, say 68 to 70 degrees, it would have set time of death back by at least an hour, around six P.M. That answer you?"

"Yes, it does. And thanks."

"Quite welcome."

"Oh—just one more thing, doc." Hank said casually and asked the question which was the real point of his phone call. "What effect would say fifteen or twenty minutes of extreme cold have on your calculations?"

There was a pause. Hank could almost hear Green's mental processes. While the shrewd little doctor had no great respect for Hart's British airs and graces, he did have a strong sense of loyalty and *esprit de corps* for the Highcliff organization. And here was this Metropolitan busybody, trying to inject some cockeyed theory straight out of a whodunit into an open and shut case. Did he think the State Police were a bunch of morons? Green said dryly:

"I'm a little busy just now, Lieutenant. Some day when I have time on my hands, I'll draw you a graph."

Disconcerted, Hank tried to save his face by nonchalance:

"Now you're kidding me, doc. Well, I'll tell these guys down here to quit arguing about something they don't know beans about."

"Do that," said Green noncommittally and hung up.

Hank grinned at Adam and said:

"How to make enemies and alienate people. The doc's on to us. He thinks we city slickers are trying to jump the gun and steal their thunder."

Adam was not amused. He was only interested in whether the M.O.'s explanation would bolster his own stubborn convictions. Hank went over what Green had told him, finishing:

"Looks like we're answered, kid. Wegger says there wouldn't be

snow on Kit's floor if the wind was East as it likely was. And Green knows his onions. I guess we have to accept seven o'clock as the time of the crime. Which lets Lundgren out."

"For you, maybe. Not for me."

"You've got nothing to back it up."

"Oh, yes I have. Captain Hart can laugh off that toll call. But I don't. I say the phone company doesn't make mistakes like that. I say the call was a deliberate trick of Lundgren's to set forward the supposed time of the crime."

"That's the writer in you talking. The books are full of gimmicks like that but in real life—" He broke off, frowned and chewed his lip. He went on slowly: "There is something, at that, to back you up. Right in those reports."

"What?"

"Just this: the snow that night started about six. At seven, it was already sticking to the ground. Then why didn't Hart's men find traces of it on the kitchen floor?"

"That's right! Because the murderer got in and out before it snowed. Hank, that's proof!"

"It doesn't make it Lundgren."

"Well, try him for size. A motive as big as a barn."

"Go on."

"Well, here's a guy, lousy with alibis after 6:30—Muir, elevator boy, waiter, car-checker, the Paynes. It's a parade, not just an alibi. But I don't see one crumb of evidence as to where he was between 5 and 6:30. He could have left his office at 5, got up there, committed the murder and been back by 6:30. I've made the trip often. Call it 35 minutes each way. That leaves him twenty minutes to—to do what he did—"

"It'd take him longer. He didn't use his car."

"Well, train or bus—"

"Much slower. And it's a mile and a half from the station to the house. The housekeeper said so in her statement. He'd have to take a taxi at that end and if he had the sense God gave geese, he wouldn't dare, in his own village."

Adam sagged dispiritedly. Hank dropped his eyes to hide the pity in them, but in his lexicon, truth figured in capital letters. He went on firmly:

"What's more, kid, between 5 and 6:30, Lundgren is alibi-ed by the very best kind of evidence."

"What are you talking about?"

"What we cops call physical evidence: the speech he wrote for Lane. You're a writer yourself. If you had to turn out an original eight or nine page script between 5 and 7:30 when the Paynes arrived, how much time would you have left over to commit a crime twenty miles away?"

"Okay. You win." Adam dropped into a chair and sat, black and brooding, while Hank kicked himself mentally for taking away the only prop that was keeping Adam from cracking. The poor, mixed-up kid, he thought. He's got this bee about avenging his girl's death and Lundgren's elected because he was a lousy husband. Now I've pulled that out from under him and he's got nothing to tide him over a tough time. I've got to give him something to hang onto. And at that, there are plenty of fishy angles to the case. I could do with a few answers myself. Aloud, he said:

"Look, Adam, you want Kit's murderer, don't you?"

Adam looked up but his eyes were dull.

"I don't want some poor sucker of a prowler that Hart uses for a goat," he said sullenly.

"You're right there. Prowler is out. You know why? Green says she was strangled from behind. Thumb marks on the nape of the neck, fingers on the throat. Well, you can't make me believe she was obliging enough to turn her back on a prowler just so he could do the job without getting his face scratched up."

The dull eyes brightened a trifle.

"And she would turn her back on Lundgren," Adam said.

"Or anybody else she knew well. You know, Adam, our trouble is that we don't know enough about Highcliff and Kit's circle. This thing could have been the work of some frustrated lover of hers—or some crank who had a grudge because she was rich—"

"She wouldn't let anybody like that in with only a bath-robe—"

"If he opened the door a crack and he forced his way in—"

"So he kills her at the front door," Adam jeered with more and more animation. "And then carries her upstairs. For God's sake, Hank, to me, it's open and shut. It has to be Lundgren, no matter what you say in his favor."

"There's no question of favor. Certain facts clear Lundgren and we've got to face them. But here's one against him that I'd like an answer to."

"What's that?" Adam said quickly.

"This business about the Paynes. I'll read the bit I mean." He flipped through the report and found what he wanted. "Here in his story to Hart: Payne: 'We reached the office at 7:30 as we'd arranged. Charles was just finished and waiting for us.'" Hank looked up. "Anything strike you there?"

"Nothing special."

"The operative word is 'arranged'. Lundgren was due home early. He doesn't know until nearly 5 that he's staying to pinch hit on Lane's speech. Now with all the excitement in the office and a rush job to do, is he going to take time out to locate Payne at some cocktail party just to tell him he'll give him a hitch home?"

"Hank! That's right!"

"And if he didn't call up, when was it arranged? Look, you've got an in up at Highcliff, this Bryan, your producer. Go up there and visit him, do a job of snooping, meet this Larry Payne and find out how come he knew Lundgren was staying late in town when up to 5 o'clock, Lundgren shouldn't have known it himself."

"Wait a minute. I've got a better idea."

"Shoot."

"Kit's aunt. This Irene Verhooven. I never met her but Kit says . . . said she's a prince. I could go to see her—she loved Kit—she'd help. And she'd be able to do a million things you and I couldn't do."

"You mean you'd tell her you were here till 4:30 Thursday?"

"I'd tell her everything."

"And if she decides you could have committed the crime yourself and runs to Hart?"

"I'll take that chance."

"It's a pretty big one."

"Not with a real person like this Irene according to Kit."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"I'll risk it."

"Then let's see. Today's Saturday. The funeral's tomorrow. How about you going up there Monday?"

"All right with me."

"She may even know some little thing that doesn't mean a thing to her but might give us a lead."

"If she does, I'll get it out of her. Hank, you think I'm eaten up with bitterness and just looking for somebody to take it out on. It's not that. Crimes are the outcome of character. And Lundgren's whole lousy unhealthy character points him out as the author of this one. I'm so sure he did it, I can't rest till I pin it on him and see him strapped in the Chair for it."

SIXTEEN

ADAM DECIDED TO PHONE IRENE VERHOOVEN BEFORE HE WENT TO HIGH-cliff. When he got her on the line, he said:

"Mrs. Verhooven, this is Adam Waring."

"Waring? Do I know you?"

"No, you don't—"

"The name sounds familiar."

"Maybe you heard it from Victor Bryan. He produced a play of mine."

"Possibly. What is it, Mr. Waring?"

"I wonder if you'd see me today—"

There was a pause while Adam held his breath.

"Mr. Waring, there has been—great trouble—a death in the family—I'm hardly up to seeing visitors—"

"I am a friend of Kit's—a close friend—"

"You . . ."

"It's important that I see you, Mrs. Verhooven."

"Important? I don't—" She sounded startled.

"Yes. I won't keep you long. But I beg you to give me a few minutes."

"Very well. Come at two this afternoon. You know how to get here?"

"Oh, yes. You're right next door to Kit."

Irene's usually firm controlled voice broke a little:

"You—you speak as if she were still—"

"She is, for me. She'll always be."

The unorthodox end to the phone call broke the ice of their meeting. Irene received him in her own sitting-room, apparently accepting him at his own valuation. When they were seated, she said:

"Kit never spoke of you, Mr. Waring. Tell me about your friendship."

He did, fully and with feeling. The truth of what he said throbbed in every word. When he was finished, Irene was silent for a few moments, turning it over in her mind. At last, she said thoughtfully:

"Of course. This is the answer. Kit hinted at new happiness. I thought it was just her decision to free herself from her marriage. I didn't dream there was anyone—you—in the background."

"You thought leaving Lundgren was sufficient cause for her happiness, Mrs. Verhooven?"

"You can call me Irene. If you were so close to Kit—"

"Thanks—Irene. But please answer my question."

"About Charles? Do you know him, Adam?"

"No."

"He's a—queer sort. There's absolutely nothing you can put your finger on. He's correct, he's courteous, attentive, obliging—but his smile is all teeth and never reaches his eyes. And I'm quite sure that Kit was wretched with him. Disillusioned. She found something lacking in him."

"Yes. What he lacked was humanity."

"I believe you're right. Did she tell you that?"

"Yes. She said he didn't love her. Couldn't love her because he hadn't got it in him to love anybody. She said he only valued her because she was useful to him."

"How sharp of Kit. Poor poor child—I could have been of much more help to her than I was. I deliberately kept from discussing him with her because I didn't want to influence her in any decision she was thinking of. But—"

"Evidently you don't care for him."

"He gives me the creeps. You can't reach him—there's nothing there."

"His ambition's there."

She shrugged.

"Why are we discussing him? You're Kit's friend. You wanted to see me about something important—"

"On the afternoon of Kit's death, I was with her at the house. I left her at 4:30 and she locked and bolted the kitchen door behind me."

"Well?"

"How did the murderer get in?"

She stared open-mouthed at him for a long moment. Then she started up from her chair, galvanized by shock. She had a quick mind and all the implications of Adam's question flashed through her brain without further explanation. She exclaimed brokenly:

"Oh, no!—he couldn't!—he—Or could he?—I wonder—"

"I believe he did, Irene."

"But how? He wasn't here. That's proved."

"I'm not so sure." He told her everything that he and Hank had discovered, discussed and dissected. He finished: "There are too many coincidences. Too much that just doesn't happen unless it's made to happen." He rose and faced her, his body tense. "Irene, I adored Kit. I always will. I believe he killed her because she was snatching away all the help he needed for his climb to the top. I can't rest until I find out how he did it, until I bring it home to him and make him pay with his life for what he did."

She was terribly shocked but strangely, not surprised.

"Why do you tell me?"

"Because Hank and I need your help."

"Anything! Anything!" she said with sudden anger. "If he did that to Kit, I can't rest either until he—he pays for it!"

He motioned her gently back into her chair and sat down, too.

"Here's the situation. We've got to grope in the dark because this Captain Hart's rather a difficult proposition—"

"He's a stuffed shirt," she snapped. "But he's still an efficient policeman. Surely, he'll co-operate if you can show him evidence—"

"We haven't got evidence yet. We have only moral certainties—at least I have. Hank isn't so sure. He says the facts all shout that Lundgren couldn't have done it. If Hank's so hard to convince, Captain Hart will be much tougher. A Verhooven in-law is a kind of Caesar's wife to him. Together—you, Hank and I—have got to ferret out evidence to convince Hart, because, in the last analysis, he's the only one who can take official steps."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Snoop. Ask questions. First of all, talk to the Paynes. Hank says

it's peculiar that they showed up at 7:30 to be driven home when Lundgren himself didn't know until nearly 5 o'clock that he'd stay late in his office. Find out from them when he got in touch with them and made the date. We can't do that without raising a suspicion of Lundgren's guilt. And we don't want a whisper at this stage. But you can. They're friends, aren't they? It's natural for you all to rehash the whole miserable business. Would you do that?"

"Of course I will. But don't expect too much. Larry is Charles' friend. He's a nice simple lad and for years, he's leaned on Charles' judgment. It would take an earthquake to make him believe in Charles' guilt."

"He doesn't need to believe in it. In fact, he mustn't. Nobody should. Our whole strength will be to work in the dark, pick up items that build toward a case and then pounce. If Lundgren's alerted in any way, he'll prepare himself with slick answers. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes. But—" A shudder ran over her small sturdy body. "I always thought he was cold and self-seeking, but that's a long way from committing a filthy murder because she was leaving him. He's not the impulsive type. I can't see him losing his head from rage."

"I don't believe he did it in rage," said Adam slowly. "I've thought it over all these nights when I couldn't sleep. And the whole ghastly scheme seems premeditated to me. We don't know enough yet to see the pattern but I think the thing was planned in cold blood a good while before Thursday night."

"But why? He didn't know she was going to leave him."

"I'm wondering about that."

"But how could he? You said yourself Kit hadn't told him."

"Last Friday, while Hank was out interviewing Muir and other people, I kept myself from flying to pieces by writing out a detailed account of the whole friendship between Kit and me. One thing struck me—how careless we were."

"Careless? How?"

"Well, going to this 'Weissen Roessl' a few miles away from Highcliff. Somebody might have seen us and told Lundgren. If that's true, he may have had us watched after that. And the open way I phoned her every morning. If there was a private detective involved, Kit's phone may have been tapped. When I look back, I see a dozen ways I was to blame."

"Stop that! We've got no time or use for might-have-beens and self-castigations. What's past is past. And I've got work to do. Give me your phone number so I can reach you and then go away. I'm seeing Meg and Larry today."

SEVENTEEN

IRENE HURRIED OVER THE THREE MILES TO THE PAYNES, HARDLY SEEING the snow-covered country she drove through. Her quick mind was busy, arranging, discarding, re-arranging what she could say to them to account for a visit—her first one—to these friends of Charles', the very day after Kit's funeral, without giving the visit suspicious significance.

At a charming white farm-house, standing in a dozen acres of ground, she turned into the driveway, past the house and on back to where a sturdy red barn stood like a Christmas card in its snowy background. As she drove in, she noticed that high up, a big square had been cut in the wall of the loft and a huge window had been set in the space; undoubtedly turning the loft into a studio for Larry. The little fact cheered Irene. It gave evidence of his determination to stand on his own feet. And if that were so, a man of so much character would stand for the right in the case of Kit's death, no matter where the chips fell. Larry would be no willing accessory before or after the fact.

To her relief, they were both home. If they were surprised at her visit, they hit it. Meg, who had known Irene since the time when she and Kit were schoolmates, kissed her with feeling.

"Oh, Irene, I'm so glad you've come. It must be ghastly in that huge old house alone after all this—"

"I didn't come to weep on your shoulder, Meg. I need your help."

"Anything, darling. Come in. I'll make some coffee and you can tell me. Larry, take her things and make her comfortable."

Irene looked around.

"Well, you've done wonders with this place," she said.

All the stalls had been removed and the whole ground floor was

one big room except for a boxed-off corner which was the kitchen. Half a dozen good pieces of furniture—from Meg's family—made the room cozy but uncluttered. A warm maroon-colored rug hid the boards of the barn floor. There was no electricity but the four or five oil lamps with their delicate China globes were practically museum pieces. A big oil heater at each end of the long room kept out the cold effectively.

Larry, who had been putting up book-shelves, laid down his hammer and nails and sat down opposite Irene.

"I've been with Charles all morning," he said soberly. "The poor chap's nearly off his head."

"I know," said Irene with a hypocritical sigh.

"He blames himself, you know. Says if he hadn't been putting his work ahead of everything else, he'd have been home in time to deal with the beast who killed Kit."

"He's not the only one, Larry. Martha reproaches herself for taking Thursday off. And Lyman Lane does the same for causing Charles to stay in town—"

"But that's not true—" Larry put in.

"Even I might have prevented it if I hadn't been in such a hurry to have the paintings at the House valued, just on the day that Kit was home alone."

"You mustn't. It gets you nowhere and just tears you to pieces."

"Is Charles alone now?"

"I made him promise to try and get some sleep. He looks ghastly."

Meg came in with coffee and cookies. Larry jumped up and took it from her, setting it on the handsome coffee-table before them. While Meg poured it, Irene said:

"I'm not going to keep you people. I see you're busy. I'll tell you why I came. Meg, you know about father Verhooven's will—leaving the House for a Library."

"Yes. I think it was wonderful of him. It'll be grand for the village."

"Yes. But there's an immense amount of work involved before we can get it running. Kit would have been a great help to me but—Well, I thought I'd enlist a few of her friends to take her place and naturally I thought of you first."

"I'll be glad to help, Irene."

"Well—" Irene looked about her. "I don't know. When I see what you've done to this place and what a lot more there is to do, it's hardly fair to ask you—"

"Nonsense!" Larry cut in decisively. "That can wait. Charles, Kit, all of you Verhoovens, have been bricks to us. Anything you ask comes first. Right, Meg?"

"Yes indeed, Irene, you've no idea how kind Kit and Charles have been to us—constantly asking us to dinner—forever calling up to find out if we wanted a hitch into town—"

Irene's heart jolted. She said as evenly as she could:

"Yes, I know. Even the very afternoon Kit died, he called you to go home with him—"

"Well, not the very afternoon," said Larry. "It was Wednesday night—the night before—He phoned and wanted to take us into town that morning."

Irene held her breath.

"You went?" she managed to get out.

"No. We took the 3:00 in. But we did arrange to come home with him after Rhoda's party. That's why I said Lane shouldn't reproach himself. Charles was going to stay late, speech or no speech."

Irene's throat was too dry to speak. She was grateful when Meg picked up the ball:

"I'll get Carol Kent and Wilma Jocelyn to help. They'll be glad to, for Kit's sake."

Irene got away as quickly as she decently could and drove home fast. Her heart was going like a trip-hammer. Adam Waring had given her a job to do—an important job, he and this detective Hank believed—and within an hour, almost without effort, she had the answer. Larry, so loyal to Charles, had walked right into the trap, unaware of the powerful ammunition he had innocently handed Charles' hunters.

She ran her car into the garage and rushed to the phone. At the Algonquin, she drew a blank. Then he tried Hank's number which Adam had given her. A strange voice answered her.

"This is Irene Verhooven," she said.

"Hello, Mrs. Verhooven. Adam's just been telling me—"

"Oh, then you're Lieutenant Riesner?"

"Hank to us three plotters, please."

"All right, Hank. Look. You had a problem. I've got the answer."

"Already? Well! We Homicide birds will have to step some to keep up with you."

"I was lucky."

"And the answer?"

"On Wednesday night Charles phoned the Paynes here in Highcliff. They arranged to ride home with him Thursday evening."

A loud whistle shrilled over the wire into Irene's ear.

"Lady, you're a wonder."

"Is it so important?"

"It's a point. A straw to show how the wind's blowing."

"It is fishy, isn't it? Adam says Charles promised Kit to be home early and yet, the night before, he knew he was going to stay late in town."

"Yes. It might even be more than a straw. Let's change that figure of speech, shall we? Let's say now, where there's smoke, there's fire."

"I agree. As Adam says, there are too many coincidences."

"They're sure piling up, Mrs. Verhooven—"

"Irene, Hank. Us plotters can't be formal."

"Good."

"What do you want me to do next?"

"Well, this housekeeper Martha. Find out who suggested Thursday off for her. If it was Lundgren, it's some more smoke."

"She might even have heard a word that shows that Charles knew Kit was leaving him."

"I doubt that. He's too cagy for that."

"You're right. I was there for dinner, I think on the Tuesday night before Kit—and Charles was holding forth about a trip to Bermuda at Easter and getting a nursery ready—"

"Camouflage to be remembered later just as you are remembering it."

"Can anyone be such a fiend?"

"It took a fiend to do what was done, Irene."

"Look, Lieu—Hank—oughtn't we three get together?"

"I think it's a perfect idea."

"Why don't you and Adam drive up here tomorrow?"

"Fine."

"Morning or afternoon?"

"Whatever you say."

"Afternoon then. I won't ask you for lunch. I don't even want the maids to start figuring who you are and why you're here. When you come, it might be a good idea to say you're from the Parke-Bernet Galleries—in case it gets back to Charles."

"You get ten for smartness. If Adam's right about Lundgren, he's as dangerous as a coral snake. Keep your doors locked!"

"I'll do that. Till tomorrow, then."

With all her sadness, with all the potential horror staring her in the face, Irene could not understand the queer exhilaration which took possession of her. She felt more vibrant and alive than she had for ten years. She put it down to the man-hunt in which she was so unexpectedly engaged. But she did go to her clothes closet and ponder on what to wear for tomorrow. She finally picked a dress which she knew did her no harm at all.

When Hank hung up, he turned to Adam and said:

"Quite a gal, your friend Irene."

Adam gave a faint grin.

"Whose friend? For a guy pushing forty, you certainly made hay in about ninety seconds."

"Come off it. The Cabots speak only to God."

"Irene was a WAC from Texas. A stenographer at the airbase when her C.O. fell for her. He was the Vere de Vere, the descendant of all the patroons. Irene's just plain folks."

"Shut up, you bloody matchmaker. Did you get what she told me?"

"Not exactly. Something important though, wasn't it?"

"Maybe. Lundgren knew Wednesday evening he was staying in town the next night."

"When he told Kit—! Hank, that does mean something."

"It could."

"Lay it out in full and see where it gets us."

"Well, say you're right, boy. That it's a deep dark premeditated crime. That the hour and a half between 5 and 6:30 was used to race up to Highcliff, commit the murder, race back and appear to have been working the whole time in his office when the Paynes arrived."

"But to risk phoning the night before—"

"It was a slip. A bad one. But understandable. Here's my idea of

it: Lundgren was so intent on using the Paynes that he was over-eager. He didn't know then that Muir was going to work late and alibi him. He relied on the Paynes finding him up to his ears in work. Now he had a lot of ticklish chores and split-second timing to do on Thursday. Whatever he could tick off his list earlier as attended to, he did. I figure the phone call on Wednesday night to the Paynes was one of the ticks."

"But the script didn't disappear till Thursday."

"No. But Lundgren thought he could make it disappear."

"Hank, you've got me beat a mile. God knows I'm blood-thirsty enough about this, ready to believe the worst. But that's too thin. How could he know the script would be there to steal or that there wasn't a carbon?"

"A gamble. Criminals are the biggest gamblers on earth. But if it hadn't been the script, he'd have stayed in town on some other pretext—extra work or something. But he was going to stay, come hell or high water—for public consumption."

"But he's smart. He must have known Payne would tell."

"Supposing. Lundgren could always say he had planned to work overtime, script or no script."

"But he told Kit—"

"Boy," said Hank gently. "He knew Kit wouldn't be around to contradict him. It's his hard luck that she told you he'd be home early. It may fry him."

"But there's still the script to take care of," Adam said gloomily. "Could he have written it after he got back—from 6:30 to 7:30 when the Paynes arrived? Pretty tight fit—but no getting around it—he did write it—"

But Hank was not listening. His green eyes shone like a dog's in the dark. His mouth opened a little, in surprise at the thought that had come to him. Adam stared at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Hank looked at his watch.

"Quarter to seven. Lane ought to be home at this hour."

"Hank, what is it?" Adam caught some of his fire.

"Kid, don't ask me. It's too cockeyed—no sane human being would rig up such a—"

"Tell me anyway."

"Nope." Hank grinned. "I got my standing as a Homicide cop

to protect. But listen, boy, if what I'm dreaming up is true—if Lundgren dreamed up the same thing before me—we've got him on toast. There's a trail to be picked up as plain as an old maid. Now I've got to phone Lane and Kelly and Muir—So just keep your shirt on and I'll tell you when I've got something."

EIGHTEEN

WHEN HANK SAW LANE AT HIS HOME AT 7:30, HE RAN INTO A SNAG. THE lawyer was annoyed at being interviewed again. Police and publicity were anathema to him. And when Hank asked him inexplicably for the Lincoln Day speech, he turned positively peevish. Hank told himself that the toplfty little gent was scared silly that the Press would find out that the speech was ghost-written by an underling and hastened to reassure him that it would be held strictly confidential. When Lane still balked, Hank turned on his rare smile and said:

"Mr. Lane, I know exactly how you feel. But I'm not a free agent. My Chief is thorough and a tough man to convince. As a lawyer, you know that when a woman is murdered, the prime suspect is the husband. My Chief takes the same view. He realizes that Mr. Lundgren has an unquestionable alibi, but before he clears him entirely, he wants all the evidence. Not merely direct evidence from witnesses or circumstantial evidence of which there's plenty, but real evidence as well. And he considers this speech real evidence. Proof that Lundgren was so occupied in composing it in his office from 5 o'clock on, the day of the murder, that he couldn't have been in Highcliff or anywhere else and still have written it."

"Of course he wasn't in Highcliff. The whole idea is ridiculous," Lane snapped.

"I agree, Mr. Lane. And I'd like to see him cleared beyond a doubt. Now I believe that if I submit the physical evidence of the speech to my Chief, it would convince him and he would write off Lundgren as a possible suspect. But of course, if you don't feel like letting us have the speech—"

That turned the trick and five minutes later, Hank left the house, the Lincoln Day speech in a manila envelope under his arm.

"Now for Muir," he said to himself. But Muir did not answer his phone. Hank next called Kelly and asked him to bring the contents of Lundgren's waste basket, which Kelly had salvaged the night of the murder, to his 12th Street apartment. He went home and called Muir at intervals up to 11 o'clock without success.

In the morning, he went to the Lane offices, and much as he disliked showing himself where word might leak back to Lundgren, time pressed too much to delay it. As he entered the reception room opposite the elevators, he saw at once that Muir had been accurate: his door, marked "C. Muir" faced the typists' pool through which Lundgren would have had to pass to get to his office. Muir couldn't have missed him.

The receptionist went through the usual routine about an appointment.

"My name is Riesner. Will you ask Mr. Muir if he can spare me a few minutes?"

She flipped a tab, spoke, listened and said graciously:

"Go right in, Mr. Riesner."

Closeted in Muir's cubicle with the door closed, Hank heaved a sigh of relief. So far, so good. "Mr. Riesner" would mean nothing to Lundgren even if he heard of it.

Muir's straight blue eyes clung to Hank's face but he waited for the other to speak. Hank said:

"Hope I'm not disturbing you, but there are one or two things we hardly touched on the other night."

"Such as?"

"Well, the phone call Mr. Lundgren made to his wife."

"What do you want to know?"

"For a starter, just what was said?"

Muir obliged with his total exactness, quoting the small joke Lundgren had made about Lane's losing his speech, mentioning the expected arrival of the Paynes and the plan to pick up Mrs. Lundgren and have late dinner at the Inn.

"This was at a quarter to seven, I think you said?"

"It was."

"Where were you both at the time?"

"In Lundgren's office, eating together."

"He interrupted his meal to call?"

"It happened like this: Lundgren had just asked me if I was married. And the question suddenly reminded him that he had to ring up his own wife. I told him he would have to go out as the switchboard was closed down for the night. That fashed him for a moment until he remembered Mr. Lane's private phone which is not connected with the switchboard. He left the desk and went into Mr. Lane's office—"

"Now just a minute. You told me you were in the room when he phoned."

"I was, for all practical purposes. The door between the two offices was open, the light was on, he was not fifteen feet away and I heard every word he said."

Muir stopped talking and Hank sat silent, debating with himself and weighing up Muir. At last he came to a decision:

"How was Lundgren standing?"

"Right there at Mr. Lane's desk."

"Facing you?"

"No. He faced the desk. His back was to me."

"Then you couldn't see—Let's put it like this: if he'd had his finger on the phone button which prevented a connection, you wouldn't have known it?"

The blue eyes stared and Muir's mouth opened a little.

"Man! What are you saying?" he gasped.

"Whatever I'm saying, Muir, is strictly confidential," Hank rapped out. "Understand that."

Muir's face turned a dark angry red.

"If he killed that bonny girl, I would do anything in my power to see he is brought to justice. I would not lift a finger to save him from the hangman."

"I thought I could rely on you. Now, please remember, it's important, if Lundgren's guilty, not to give him an inkling until we can build a case that'll stick."

"I understand." Muir ruminated for a while. "Then you think the phone call was bogus to set the time of death forward?"

"Possibly."

"And you think he did it earlier?"

"If he did it at all, it would have had to be between 5 and 6:30 when you first saw him."

"Six-thirty-five," corrected Muir.

"That makes an extra five minutes. One hour and thirty-five minutes to get up there and back when he showed himself."

"It could be done in that time?"

"Just about."

"But I would still have had to see him come back in through the typists' pool—" His jaw dropped and the blue eyes goggled. "Man, man! I would never make a detective."

"What is it?" asked Hank, his heart pounding.

"The fire door out of Mr. Lane's office. I never gave it a thought because it's never used. A kind of emergency door, always locked except in case of fire."

"Come out in the hall and show me."

"No need. I can take you into Mr. Lane's office. He's away in Court."

"But I don't want Lundgren alerted."

"Lundgren's not back to work yet."

"Come on then."

They went out of Muir's door, crossed a corner of the typists' pool, went through the inside hall, past a door marked "P. Schuyler" to a door marked "C. Lundgren." Muir opened it and Hank found himself in a good-sized office with a connecting door in both right and left walls. Muir gestured to the right hand door.

"That leads to Mr. Schuyler's office." He pointed left. "And that to Mr. Lane's." He opened it and crossed Lane's office to the far door. "This is the door I meant. It leads out to the west passage and the fire stairs. With Mr. Lane's office empty, Lundgren could have unlocked the emergency door and got out and back as he pleased."

Hank unbolted the door, went out into the short corridor and investigated but found nothing useful. The fire stairs were evidently swept daily. He came back in again, his face white with suppressed excitement.

They left Lane's office, closing the door, and went back into Lundgren's room. There, Hank did a strange thing. Under Muir's curious eyes, he went to the desk, tore a sheet of paper off a pad, uncovered the typewriter and standing before it, typed with two fingers:

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

Silently, the two men went back to Muir's office. Hank closed the door and spoke in a low tense voice:

"We're a little late getting all this, Mr. Muir, but not too late. I think Lundgren murdered his wife and it's only a question of time till we pin it on him. I believe you're an honest upright citizen and I'm trusting you to help us by keeping all this as dark as night."

"There'll be no word from me to anybody. Depend on that." Hank held out his hand and Muir gave him a firm clasp. "That canty smiling lassie. I hope he burns in hell!"

Hank left the Lane offices, treading on air. Things were really shaping up. Adam's hunch looked like paying off. Obstacles to his theory were falling like tenpins. Opportunity was now added to motive. There were still some snags to overcome, points to verify and facts to establish. But he had a firm conviction that he had hold of the thread that would lead straight back to Charles Lundgren, murderer.

The thing deserved celebration. On his way back to 12th Street where he was meeting Adam to go up to Highcliff to see Irene, he stopped into a bar for a drink. At eleven in the morning, the place was pleasantly empty and Hank sipped his Scotch, full of exhilarating thoughts, hardly conscious of the few people around him or the television, droning behind him. Suddenly, he stiffened as words hit his mind with the impact of bullets:

". . . solution of the Lundgren murder case with the arrest of Thomas Vork, chauffeur of the late Maarten Verhooven, the dead woman's grandfather. Part of the loot stolen from the Lundgren home at the time of the murder has been found in Vork's possession. . . . In Washington, at his press conference today, the President . . ."

Hank bolted blindly into the street. Through gritted teeth, he muttered:

"As our too, too British friend Hart would say—that's torn it!"

NINETEEN

IRENE OPENED THE DOOR TO THEM AND TOOK THEM UPSTAIRS TO HER cheery sitting-room. Covertly, she took in Hank's appearance and

liked what she saw. He was no beauty but the small triangular green eyes were quick and understanding, the tall frame well-knit and full of power, and the sudden unexpected smile warming.

She herself looked her worst. She had been crying and her eyes were still red. Her small face was pale and showed signs of strain and distress. But in spite of these drawbacks, Hank had not been in her company ten minutes before the essence of her personality, her sincerity, her independence, her originality of mind came through and interested him.

For a moment, she busied herself with an electric percolator and a luscious-looking chocolate cake on the coffee-table.

"You've had a chilly drive. I imagine you can use a cup of coffee." When they were seated, she added somberly: "You've heard?"

"Just the bare fact of the arrest," said Hank. "Can you fill us in?"

"Oh, yes," she said bitterly. "I'm right at the center of things. I've just come from the barracks—identifying-corroborating—it's been hideous—"

"Suppose you begin at the beginning."

"With the case against Thomas or Thomas himself?"

"The case, I think."

"Well, Captain Hart and his men have been throwing their weight around without respect for anyone's privacy. Sunday—while everyone down to our very window-cleaner was at the funeral—Hart did a massive job of entering and searching. He ransacked every maid's room in the house looking for the missing jewelry."

"He had a warrant?"

"I have an idea Charles gave him permission. Next day was more of the same. He went through the gardeners' cottages, the chauffeur's apartment over the garage—" All the warmth went out of her voice. "In a closet in Thomas' apartment, they found Kit's mink stole. Hart sent for me to identify it."

"And you did?"

"It was Kit's all right. But that doesn't make Thomas the murderer! It's impossible!" She started up from her chair in an access of sharp feeling. "I'd stake my life on Thomas' honesty and decency. He's utterly incapable of even conceiving of such a ghastly—I'd as soon suspect myself."

"Tell us a little about him."

"He was my husband's orderly during the war. He worshipped Martin and Martin trusted him to the limit."

"A man could deteriorate. Or your husband could have overestimated him."

"Not Thomas. Perhaps this will give you an idea of the man. After Martin crashed, the Government sent his belongings back to us. But at the time of that last flight, it happened that Thomas had taken Martin's wrist watch—a very valuable one—to be repaired. It was weeks before Thomas remembered it and collected it from the jeweler. When he was demobilized, his ship docked in Boston. Before going to his own home in Vermont, his first act was to come all the way down here to bring me the watch."

"Could be he used the watch as an entering wedge. That's more than ten years ago and he's still got a soft berth here."

"Rubbish! There's not a calculating bone in his body. Father Verhooven kept him that day for hours talking about Martin. And when he discovered that Thomas was good with motors, it was he who proposed the chauffeur's job. Thomas was afraid he wasn't grand enough to drive a Rolls. The whole thing's ridiculous. There isn't a decent soul in all Highcliff. And why on earth would he want to steal? He's comfortably off here—"

"Gambling—unusual expenses—a hunk of fast money—"

"He's about the least money-minded person I ever met. Father Verhooven used to raise his salary every year. And regularly, Thomas protested. He always asked: 'Are my services worth any more now than they were last year?' It just doesn't hang together."

"There's still the clear fact that he had the fur stole."

"Nobody's denying it but—"

"What's his story?"

"It isn't a story!" she retorted with a flash of indignation. "It's an explanation and the only reasonable one possible."

Hank suppressed a grin of appreciation at her likeable champion-ship. He said:

"Well, whatever it is, let's have it."

"Thomas was at Kit's service as much as ours. When they went out to dinner, Charles liked the idea of sailing up to the door in a Rolls with a chauffeur. And Kit used it now and then herself. Well, Thursday—the day of her death—she did an errand for me. Every

so often, we collect all the magazines, reprints and popular novels that one reads but doesn't care to keep, and send them to the Veterans' Home at Dryden. With Father Verhooven's illness, we'd neglected it rather and an immense quantity had accumulated. So instead of taking her Ford, Thomas drove her over in the big car that morning. Kit wore a suit and the mink stole. The day was colder than she thought, she told Thomas, so he turned on the heater and ran down the glass between the front and the back of the car. That's all he can tell us but he figures the car got too warm and Kit slipped off her stole. At any rate, after he brought her home and had had his lunch, he went down to the garage to sweep out any scraps of paper in the car from the magazines and so on. He found the fur on the back seat. He walked across to Kit's with it but nobody was home. So he brought it back and took it upstairs to his wife."

"Oh, a married man? What's she like? A spender?"

"A lovely person. When Thomas was sure his job was permanent here, he went back to Vermont and married a childhood sweetheart. A year or two after he brought her here, she was stricken with polio—"

"That's the sort of thing I meant—unusual expenses—"

"Nonsense. For one thing, Father Verhooven settled all doctors' bills. For another, that was years ago. Anna recovered, although she still wears braces and isn't too strong."

"All right. Go on with his story."

"Anna put the stole on a hanger and hung it in a closet, intending to return it to Kit the next morning. Well, next morning, as you know, Kit was—dead. They were as prostrated as the rest of us—they'd both seen her grow up under their eyes and they adored her. In all the shock and horror, the fur went completely out of their minds. They never gave it another thought until Hart confronted them with it and asked them where the rest of the loot was."

She faced Hank with fire in her eye.

"And I'll tell you this," she said hotly. "You can believe the worst but I'm going to engage the best legal aid in the country for him. What's more, I intend to go on the stand and tie myself in knots as a character witness. For once, I'm snobbish enough to be glad my name's Verhooven. It'll carry some weight with a jury."

"I can do better than that," said Adam quietly.

"You?" She turned to him with wide eyes.

"I can testify that he did ring the back door bell. Kit and I heard it and deliberately didn't answer it."

"Oh, Adam, that's wonderful! I can't thank you enough—"

"Thank me? For helping to see that an innocent man isn't railroaded—?"

Hank cut in mildly:

"I don't believe it'll get as far as a trial."

"You don't know Hart!" she said angrily. "He's licking his chops. Solving a sensational case within days. And the victim somebody expendable. Not one of his 'men of distinction.' And Charles is just as bad. He's up at the barracks now egging Hart on with faint praise that damns and mud that sticks when he talks of Thomas."

Hank leaned forward intently.

"He's at the barracks now?" he asked.

"Yes. Closeted with Hart."

"He's got a typewriter over there at his house?"

"Why, yes," she replied, puzzled.

"Get over there fast. Write something—anything—on his typewriter and bring it back. If he comes in, make some excuse—your own typewriter broke down—Get it? And tell Martha to keep mum. If what I believe is true, Thomas isn't in any danger."

She nodded, ran in to her bed-room and came out pulling on a Persian lamb jacket. She asked no questions. She was a WAC obeying orders.

"Pour your own coffee as soon as it's ready. I'll be back in fifteen minutes." And she was gone.

They didn't. They sat and smoked in silence. The only time either of them moved was when Adam pulled out the percolator plug to keep the coffee from overcooking. He too was careful to ask no questions. He knew Hank would tell him everything when he was ready. This was all part of Hank's excitement and mystery of last night.

Irene was as good as her word. In a quarter of an hour, she was back, her cheeks faintly flushed with haste and cold. She slipped out of her jacket and handed Hank a sheet of paper. He took the two manila envelopes he had brought with him and spread some of the

contents on a corner of the coffee-table. There was a page of the famous—or infamous—Lincoln Day speech, one page of scrappy notes and phrases from Lundgren's office waste basket, the sheet Hank himself had typed on Lundgren's typewriter and the paper Irene had just brought him.

"Come and look," he said. "I want to compare the type. We're no experts but—"

"I'm pretty good at it," said Irene, as she leaned close. "My first job after secretarial school was in a department store demonstrating typewriters. I had to project the good points of each make to the customers. I got so I could tell what machine a page of type was done on. At least, the well-known makes."

"Then you're our girl," said Hank. "Go into action."

She scanned the sheets intently. Then she pointed to the speech and notes. "Those two were written on an Underwood, I'm almost certain, just as this sheet of mine is. That line 'Now is the time for all good men'—I can't be sure but I'd guess a Remington Noiseless. Does that tell you anything?"

"It tells me you're as smart as a whip. Were all the three written on the same Underwood?"

She picked up the pages and studied them carefully.

"I'm sure they were. The uppercase 'H' has a corner chipped off. It shows on all three. And the lowercase 'a' is out of line on all of them."

"Plug in the coffee again, Adam," Hank said. "I've got a lot to say and it'll take time. I'll start with this: I'm as certain as I'm sitting here that Lundgren killed his wife and I know how he managed it."

He told them all that he had discovered since yesterday, how, step by step, tiny point by tiny point, he had felt his way back along the path Lundgren had taken. He finished:

"It comes to this: somehow he knew Kit was going to divorce him. Where would that leave him? Kaput. A silly discredited discarded husband. It would affect his social life and his professional standing with a pukka firm like Lane's. But if he could kill her and make it seem like a crime of violence by a burglar, he's sitting pretty. Lane reproaches himself, even goes as far as to say that Lundgren's devotion to duty deserves a promotion into the firm. Lundgren's also a sympathetic character in the neighborhood, bereaved and even picturesque. His friends will rally round. His social

position's salvaged. And—a very big 'and,' by the way—he gets Kit's money. What more do you want in the line of motive?"

"But, Hank," Irene objected. "How could he know that the speech would be there to steal?"

"I think that was just gravy. A windfall which he was smart enough to turn to his own purpose."

"Let me get this straight," she said. "You think he knew early in the week that there was a speech. That he planned to steal it on Thursday. And in order to have free time to commit the crime, he composed a speech on Wednesday night to have ready—"

"There's the speech on that table, typed on his home typewriter."

"Wait—" Adam cut in. "I know he did. Kit told me so. She said when she came home from here Wednesday evening, he was 'typing like mad.' Those were her words—"

"It's not my idea of Charles," Irene said doubtfully. "He'd never concoct such a fantastic plan. Too many ifs."

"I didn't say he concocted it," said Hank. "I think it fell into his lap. Probably his idea was simply to stay in town Thursday pretending to catch up on office work. He told Payne the night before he was going to. Right?"

"Well?"

"Then this speech thing comes up. He's sharp and sees he might use it—if he can manage to steal it. So he writes a speech to be prepared in case. If he can't steal it, nothing's lost. Anything fantastic about that?"

"Well, no, especially as he did write a speech at home."

"Okay. The thing works out. He's scheduled officially to write a nine-page speech between 5 and 7:30. The speech is already written owing to Master Mind Lundgren's foresight. So he uses the time for his own private enterprise. Is that fantastic?"

"Stop it, Hank. I surrender," Irene said with unusual submissiveness.

"Then we'll get on. He slips out through the emergency door, does the job, comes back the same way, goes out to speak to the elevator boy at 6:35 when he has another helping of gravy—Muir. The guy was shot with luck. At first sight, Muir acted as an unbreakable alibi for him."

"Not any longer," said Adam. "The phony phone call to Kit at 6:45 shows him up as guilty as hell."

"Right."

"Well, what are we waiting for? I move we see Captain Hart right away."

"What for?" asked Hank.

"What—? To arrest Lundgren, that's what for," said Adam impatiently. "And to get that poor guy Thomas off the hook."

"Keep your shirt on, boy. We've got to have a case."

"We've got a case."

"Nope."

"But—"

"What have we got?" Hank's tone was sardonic.

"A dozen strong unanswerable points."

"Name one."

"I will. The locked kitchen door."

"Your say-so. And who are you? A home-wrecker, a womanizer who sneaked in back doors but didn't have the guts to come forward as soon as his lady-love was—"

"Cut that out, will you!"

"I'm giving you Hart's reaction."

"There are plenty of other angles," said Adam, not too mollified.

"Go ahead."

"The scripts. The fact that the speech was written and ready the night before."

"Okay. We'll say the office force knew that Lane was going to make a Lincoln Day speech. A brainy ambitious guy like Lundgren wonders what a person says on an occasion like that, has a free evening available and tries his own hand at turning out a speech, just for practice."

"Twaddle!"

"Sure. But if he says it and sticks to it, a jury can't send him to the Chair for it, no matter what they really believe."

"There's the phone call. You can't get around that."

"He'll claim the company simply didn't record the toll-call. And I told you Hart's reaction to that. It could happen. Again they have to give him the benefit of the doubt. In America, a man's considered innocent until he's proved guilty."

"The emergency door—"

"Anybody see him go in or out of it? Anybody see him arrive

at Highcliff between 5 and 6:30? No, sir. If they had, they'd have come forward long ago."

"That's all quibbling. With the contributory evidence we've got—" Adam began but Irene cut in:

"Quiet, please, Adam. Hank says he's guilty but that we still haven't got a case. I'm sure he knows. Hank, what do we do now?"

"We work.—Better shut off that percolator. The coffee must be as strong as love. Look. We've come a good ways in less than a week. And on the one single fact that the kitchen door was locked. We've got our hands on the thread that leads to Lundgren some of the way. All we've got to do now is go the whole length of it."

"But how?" asked Irene.

"We've got to place him up here at the time of the crime."

"But you said yourself if anyone had seen him—"

"Something else comes first."

"What?"

"How did he get here?" Adam and Irene stared at him. He added: "We know his car never moved from the parking-lot until 8 P.M."

Irene nodded. She said slowly:

"I see. It had to be some other way—train, bus, taxi—"

"Right. We'll break that down. Trains. We'll need timetables—"

"They're at my finger-ends," said Irene. "The Highcliff trains leave Grand Central every hour on the hour."

"They do, eh?" Hank considered. "Well, no trains."

"How do you know that?"

"Lane was giving him pointers on the speech until close to 5 o'clock. He couldn't have got to Grand Central from 54th Street in time for the 5 o'clock train. And the 6 o'clock would bring him up here close to 6:35. He was definitely in his own office at that time. No good."

"He wouldn't dare take a train anyway," Irene said. "He's well-known here. The station-master would have seen him and Hap Clark who runs the only taxi. Kit's house is a mile and a half from the station. And if he walked it, it'd take up too much time."

"Where's the Highcliff bus stop?"

"Right opposite the station."

"Then that's out, too. As you say, he couldn't walk the mile and a half in the time along with everything else."

"He couldn't have flown somehow, could he?" she asked.

"Until we have helicopter service, an hour and a half wouldn't cover the trip to and from the air-field."

"Then it must have been a taxi."

"It could have been. But I have my doubts. It'd be too big a chance. Either the taxi driver would have come forward after the headlines or Lundgren would have bought himself a beautiful case of blackmail for life. Still, we'll go into the taxi situation at the New York end. More work for Kelly."

Suddenly Adam said:

"Wait. What about a Drive-Urself?"

"Ever hire one?"

"No. Why?"

"You got to give 'em pretty near everything from your vaccination certificate, your operator's license, your business connections down to two or three references from solid citizens—well, not quite that bad but more than Lundgren would dare to give."

"Hank!" Irene's dark eyes were snapping. "He bought a car! That's what he did!"

"Now you're getting pretty fancy. Buy a car for one short trip?"

"Certainly. Suppose it cost a thousand dollars. He was playing for big stakes."

"And what would he do with it afterwards?"

"Ditch it in the Hudson."

"Not in Manhattan, he couldn't."

"Well, anywhere on the road down."

"In that case, where's his transportation back to 54th Street? He only had an hour and a half, remember."

"How about ditching it right in the street?" asked Adam.

"In a restricted area like—Hey, wait a minute, maybe. Let's piece this together front end to. Let's say he does buy a car, used probably. Second hand cars are less tricky. With a new car, a guy would give his address so the agent could let him know when the car comes through from the plant. But a used car—it's there and you drive it right off the lot."

"Hank, that's a needle in a haystack," Adam said. "There are hundreds of used car dealers. Why not go straight to the Motor Vehicle Bureau?"

"You think he'd use his right name?" Hank asked mildly.

There was a baffled silence for a long while. Hank drank his coffee and polished off his chocolate cake. At last, he said:

"Well, let's get on."

"Oh? Where's there to get to? If he uses a phony name—"

"We've got him buying a used car, probably weeks before the night he needs it. He has to keep it in a garage. And the garage has to be handy to his office because he has to get away jumping at 5 P.M. on the night of the murder. Irene, we'll need some pictures of him. Got any?"

"Yes, I have. Several snapshots and a big one taken when he and Kit were married. That's two years ago but he hasn't changed any."

"That'll do. I'll get some prints run off. We'll scour the town around his district, visit every garage and show his picture. If that's the way he did it, it's only a question of time and leg-work."

"I can do that," said Adam.

"Nope. This is police routine backed by a badge." He considered for a moment and then went on: "Well, we've got him with a car and a garage. Let's say it's 5 P.M. on the murder day. He gets out the car, dashes up to Highcliff as fast as he can, drives to his house—Golly, the chances he took. Any of his neighbors commuting by—"

"Not necessarily," said Adam. "He could have used the old road the way I always did."

"What old road?"

Adam explained in detail and Hank listened thoughtfully.

"All right," Hank said. "He parks below those stairs, comes up, lets himself in at the front door, does the job, goes out the back, leaving that door open, gets down to the car and hustles back to town. Can he do it in the time? Thirty-five minutes each way for the trip. In all, he had ninety-five minutes. That leaves him twenty-five minutes to get to the garage in the first place—say, five minutes—another ten to commit the crime when he gets up here—that leaves him ten minutes to ditch the car afterwards, walk back to 54th Street, climb four flights of stairs, go in through the emergency door and come out of his office to where Muir saw him, looking like he'd been sweating over a typewriter for an hour and a half. Some close figuring. It's hard to believe but I do believe it." His green eyes gleamed with excitement. "And that gives us our best lead yet."

"How?" Irene looked impatient enough to shake it out of him.

"Time was so short, he had to ditch the damned car close to his office." Hank turned sharply to Irene. "Where's he been all these days? Ever go out for an hour or two?"

"Not even for a minute or two except for the funeral Sunday. Martha says he sits staring ahead of him or else paces the floor. Today's trip to the barracks is the first time he's left the house."

"Swell. That means he couldn't have done anything about the car."

"Then it's still parked there—" Adam said.

"Oh, no. That's a restricted area. It'd be towed away by the Department of Sanitation by morning."

"Where to?"

"The East Side Car Pound."

"Where's that?"

"Twenty-second Street and the East River. Here's how it works. The car's towed away and impounded until the owner calls at the precinct to inquire after it. The desk officer at the precinct checks with the Pound. If the owner pays his fine, the towing charge and the storage, he gets his car back from the Pound."

"But in this case—"

"Right. Lundgren won't claim it. He wants it to stay lost."

"What happens to it then?"

"After thirty days the owner is notified that the car will be auctioned off if not claimed."

"But we don't know the owner—I mean, what name he used. How can it help us?"

"By that time we should have located the garage and got an identification through Lundgren's picture. We'll have the make and license number of the car from the garage man, go down to the Pound and find the car. There we get the motor and serial numbers, contact the Motor Vehicle Bureau and find out the name he bought the car under and the name of the dealer to whom they issued the license plates. We show the dealer Lundgren's picture. If it checks again, he's tied up tight to a *sub rosa* car and will have to do quite a bit of explaining. And more important, no matter what name he used, he had to sign the MV50 owner's certificate and his handwriting will be on it." He rose. "Come on, Adam. Let's cut the chinning and get into action."

"Can't I help?" asked Irene.

"You've done plenty already."

"But just to sit here—".

"Well, dig up those pictures. And if there's anything else, I'll let you know." While she found the pictures for him, he added: "Meantime, keep your eye on Lundgren. If he does anything peculiar—significant—"

"I'll stick to him like a brother."

"That's not so good either," Hank objected. "The man's a cold-blooded killer. Just watch yourself and don't take any chances, will you please?"

She grinned at him.

"I'll do that," she said. "But by hook or by crook, I'm going to manage to see Thomas and tell him he's quite safe." The words were hardly out of her mouth when the phone rang. She lifted the receiver and said: "Yes? . . . Oh, Charles." They watched her face change from curiosity through disbelief to pure shock. She listened for a good while, then said only: "I—see," and hung up slowly. She turned to the two men and spoke in a flat tone.

"Hart's been holding Anna, Thomas' wife, too, as an accessory. Thomas just told Hart that if they let her go, he'll sign a full confession." Her voice caught. "Oh, Hank! What do we do now?"

"We go on," he said grimly. "And we better be good if we hope to dent Hart's thick skull."

TWENTY

ON WEDNESDAY, HANK AND KELLY WERE IN AND OUT OF GARAGES, IN THE neighborhood of the Lane offices. The garage they wanted had to be close. Five or ten minutes, the time which Hank figured was the most that Lundgren had to spare to get to his car on the murder night, precluded any more distant garage. They began with those nearest the office building and worked outward. Kelly took the East Side and Hank the West.

It was nearly noon when Hank hit a garage on 54th Street just West of Ninth Avenue, called the Jupiter Garage. He was begin-

ning to lose hope as he got further and further away from their central point. But he went in, showed his credentials and took out one of the copies of Charles' pictures which he had had printed.

"I'm looking for somebody who might have garaged here a few weeks ago. Here's his picture."

The man looked at Hank after he examined the picture.

"Relation of yours?" he asked.

"What makes you think that?"

"The red hair." The man's eyes stayed on Hank's red thatch.

"Red—" In disgust, Hank reached for the picture but the man was studying it carefully.

"Yeah," he said. "This looks like him. Only he musta hadda haircut when it was taken. He ain't back yet." He laid two fingers across the top of the photograph. "Sure, it's him. Good-lookin' feller."

"What was his name?" Hank felt like a released balloon.

"Can't say off the bat. I can look it up. It was a few weeks ago like you said but his month ain't up yet or I'da sent him a bill."

"Look it up, please."

They went into the walled-off office beside the door. After a few moments' search in a ledger, the man said:

"Here it is. James Scott, 706 West 71st Street. 'Fifty-three Plymouth. License number, BX 962416." He pointed to a notation in the ledger. "He's using one of our batteries."

"How come?"

"Well, when he called up to have the car on the floor—"

"What day was that?" asked Hank, scarcely breathing.

"Let's see—I recollect it was a holiday eve—only one so far this month is Lincoln's Birthday—musta been February eleventh."

"What time of day?"

"Late. Five or so. I wasn't watching no clock."

"And how did he happen to be using your battery?"

"He was worried his own might be run down because the car had stood here a couple weeks without using. So I said—on the phone this was—I'd put in a rental and charge his over the weekend. But he ain't back yet. Prolly takin' a longer vacation."

"You're sure this is the man?" Hank tapped the picture.

"Yeah, all but the hair. He sure needed a barber both times I saw him. Big hank o' hair down on his forehead like Hitler. But he

smiled a lot, like in this pic and I remember that chip off his front teeth."

"You'd swear to that?"

"What's he done, mister?" the man countered inquisitively.

"I'm a Homicide man," Hank said tersely.

"Jeez! And he looked like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth!"

"This is strictly confidential, you understand."

"Yeah, yeah. I won't open my trap. But what do I do when he comes in?"

"He won't."

"But if he should?"

"Call this number—WAtkins 9-8241 and ask for Lieutenant Riesner or Detective Kelly. But don't let him hear you."

"Sure not. I get it. I won't let him smell no rat. That was a brand new battery."

"We'll see you get it back as soon as we can."

Hank got the man's name and address and left. He met Kelly for lunch as prearranged and told him the news.

"After lunch, you take a run up to 71st Street and I'll go over to the Car Pound," he said. "Meet you at 20th Street, later."

"We're sure getting warm, Lieutenant," Kelly said, his eyes sparkling.

At the Car Pound, Hank identified himself and asked for the man in charge.

"Do you have a car here, '58 Plymouth, license number BX962416, picked up late February 11th or any time February 12th?"

Again a ledger came into play.

"Here it is. Parking violation. Parked in front of a fireplug. Hauled away 11:40 P.M. February 11th."

"Where was it picked up?"

"Fifty-second Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues."

"May I see it please?"

In a moment, Hank was looking at the Plymouth. With his handkerchief, he opened the door to the driver's seat.

"Won't do you no good to be fussy," the man said. "The Sanitation people and the boy who handled it here must've smeared it good."

"And probably this bird didn't leave any prints in the first place."

"Murder car?"

"Maybe."

"Thought so with Homicide asking around."

"Do you have a flashlight I could borrow?"

The man supplied one and Hank went over the inside of the car as well as he could without touching anything. All he found was a small clump of pine needles on the floor near the accelerator pedal. He pointed to them and said:

"See those pine needles? Remember them, please. They may help put a man in the Chair." On his next trip to Highcliff, he must investigate the old road Adam spoke of, he thought. Nobody got pine needles into a car on city streets. He closed the car door and lifted the hood. Sure enough, on the battery, there was a small sticker marked "Property of Jupiter Garage." He dropped the hood and said:

"Got a big tarpaulin? I want this car covered and sequestered until our laboratory men get here. And if anyone comes to claim it, stall him while you phone us."

"Right, Lieutenant. I was wondering about a clean little deal like this Plymouth unclaimed for so long. Usually, they squawk right away and come in for their cars in a day or so."

Hank thanked him and left. He went downtown to Worth Street to the Motor Vehicle Bureau, pulled a few wires and left with a photostat of the owner's certificate of the Plymouth, signed by James Scott of 706 West 71st Street. He also got the dealer's name to whom the license plates BX962416 had been issued. His next call was at the used car lot on 54th Street. The dealer, of higher than average intelligence and with a remarkably good memory, was voluble when shown Lundgren's picture.

"Sure, I remember him. January's a slow month and he was my only sale that day. That's how I recall him so well." He studied the picture. "The face is the same, that's for sure, all but the woolly hair. It was comic, stuck out of his hat back and front. But you can't miss the face itself—sort of Swedish I thought he was, although his name was Scott." He snapped his fingers. "I can tell you more—the guy was left-handed. I noticed it when he signed. And I remember his wallet. It was a beaut. Not alligator, some kind of leather with circles and a dot in each one—"

"Ostrich?" Hank suggested.

"That's it. Just slipped my mind for a moment. Ostrich with little gold corners like triangles."

"Well, thanks a lot. You've been very helpful. And please keep all this under your hat for the moment."

"Sure. I understand. The guy in much trouble?"

"Quite a lot, I think."

When Hank got back to 20th Street, Kelly had already arrived.

"Well, what did you find?" Hank asked.

"A pretty phony setup, sir. James Scott rented the place for two months. But the superintendent hasn't seen hair or hide of him since the day he took it. I made him take me into the dump and you could see at a glance it hadn't been lived in. Thick smooth dust everywhere and the Frigidaire not even turned on. Not a stitch of clothes in the closet."

"Just an accommodation address. I wonder why he needed one. What did he say to the picture?"

"Wasn't sure. He did remember the guy wore a camel's hair coat. But what struck him most was the red hair. He wondered why such a well-dressed fellow had such shaggy hair."

"Another tough job coming up, Kelly." Hank grinned. "How many theatrical costumers and wigmakers do you reckon there are in New York?"

"I get you," Kelly grinned back. "I'll be needing arches."

"Maybe we can save your feet. When we get that far, we'll advertise and let them step forward and tell."

Hank sat thinking for a while and then went in to see Captain Farr. He believed it was time to lay his case before his Chief.

The Captain listened, his eyes hooded, his cigar dying between his fingers. When Hank was finished, he said:

"All those shenanigans with the car and the apartment and the garage are mighty strong contributory stuff. But try to nail the guy for Murder One and he'll hand you a spiel about a love-nest and buying a car on the q.t. for his girl-friend and using a false name to keep his wife and his boss from finding out. It'll be phony as hell but you can't prove different. You still haven't placed him in Highcliff or in the murder room. So you still haven't got a case."

"But the speech—written on his typewriter at home—"

"Like you said, he'll claim he did it for practice and just hap-

pened to have it on tap when it was needed. A good defense lawyer'll kid the pants off the D.A. if he tries to make the speech a hanging matter."

"But good Lord, Chief, it's open and shut—"

"Sure it is. This Lundgren is as guilty as hell. But what does it get you? I don't have to tell you—look at our files of open cases, dozens of 'em where we're morally certain exactly who committed the crime. But morally certain's no damn good. We can't touch 'em because of the cockeyed legal red tape, precedents, exceptions and God knows what all. We police work our tails off to nail a criminal and the D.A. shakes his and yaps: 'It won't stand up in Court.' You know as well as I do there's dozens of murderers walking around as free as air just because some dead-and-gone judge back in 1788 ruled out certain types of evidence and we're still ruling 'em out today. It's enough to make a man resign and take a nice easy job in a submarine."

"That's all true, Chief. But where do we go from here? Does Lundgren get away with it? And Hart railroad an innocent man to the Chair—and smack his lips over it at that? You can't open a newspaper without a picture of Hart grinning like some cat on a canary diet."

"Innocent men don't often go to the Chair." Then his heavy eyebrows met in a frown. "But there's one bad feature to this thing. Seems Highcliff's one of those clannish little holes where every inhabitant's related to the next man, if it's only seventh cousin once remove. Now this Vork had the bad luck to be born somewhere else. And as he's only lived there ten or twelve years, he's still an outlander and capable of any sort of crime in local eyes. These Verhoovens were big shots up there and the villagers want somebody's blood for the girl's murder. So this stranger's just tailored for the part. I understand they're holding indignation meetings up there, even muttering lynch-law. The grapevine says there's talk about moving Vork to the County jail for safety's sake."

"But good Lord, Chief!" There was fright in Hank's eyes.

"Yeah. You got it. The man won't get a fair shake from any jury of Highcliff natives."

"I'll have to go up there," Hank said soberly.

"Maybe you better. But whether it'll do any good or not—" Farr shrugged.

"Trouble is," Hank said gloomily, "Hart's so sold on Lundgren as an ornament to society—"

Farr gave him a sly look from under his hooded eyes.

"Yeah, well, if you're the man I think you are, son—"

"Yeah," Hank echoed in complete understanding.

"Do the best you can," said Farr, concluding the interview. "Take him your information and try to open his eyes. And don't take it too hard if you fail. It's Hart's baby and you've done all you could. What's more, you've done real well. Picking all that out of the air from just a kitchen bolt."

TWENTY-ONE

THE NEXT DAY, THURSDAY, EXACTLY A WEEK AFTER THE MURDER, ADAM drove Hank up to Highcliff again. On the way, Hank said:

"I'd like to look at that old road you talked about, if we can do it without being spotted by Lundgren. He's still home grieving, the bastard."

"That's easy. The road's completely hidden from the house."

"Well, stop at the foot of those steps you mentioned."

When they reached the spot, Hank got out, took a good look around, went to the steps and brushed away snow. Sure enough, underneath, he found a cushion of last year's pine needles. He picked up a handful, put them in an envelope and got back into the car.

"Okay. Next stop, His Nibs, Captain Hart."

Adam waited in the outer room with a trooper at the desk while Hank was shown into Hart's private office. Hank was much more nervous than he appeared to be. He figured Hart for the bulldog type; once he had a bone in his teeth, it would take dynamite to make him let go. In this case, Thomas Vork was the bone. Was Hank's evidence dynamite? As they shook hands, Hank said pleasantly:

"Well, Captain, I see you've had plenty of action up here lately."

Hart smiled benignly.

"Yes, the Lundgren case is solved and the murderer safely in custody."

"Fast work," said Hank with careful lightness. "Pity Irene doesn't agree."

"Eh?—Irene—?"

"Mrs. Verhooven. Vork's employer."

"You—you know her?" asked Hart, taken aback.

"Irene?" Hank threw it away. "Oh, sure. Old friends. She tells me this arrest is a colossal mistake."

Hart twirled his small mustache, torn between a new respect for Hank and his own complacency.

"Mr. Lundgren doesn't think so."

"Oh—Lundgren." Hank's tone consigned Lundgren to the status of a slug. "Who listens to Lundgren?"

Hart blinked.

"I rather think he carries a bit of weight in the district," he said stiffly.

"Weight? Lundgren? Without his wife behind him? You're kidding, Captain."

"Nonsense! The man is quite a figure in his own right—a brilliant up-coming young lawyer—"

"Oh, brains." Hank made brains sound like a stain on the character. He went on confidentially: "Captain you know this Highcliff breed as well as I do. You could be a Mongolian idiot but if you belong, the clan sticks by you. But if you're a rank outsider like Lundgren, it's thumbs down. They swallowed him for Kit's sake but without her, he'll crawl right back into the woodwork where he came from."

"You are saying—?" The Captain's mouth was slightly open.

"For that matter, even if she'd lived, he was done for. The marriage was pretty well on the rocks."

"Now there I know you're wrong," Hart said, regaining his aplomb. "There hasn't been a murmur from any source—"

"Kit saw to that. She felt her grandfather was too ill to be disturbed by her troubles. It was one of those secrets we all knew but nobody mentioned. Lundgren was on the way out, either way."

Hank's careless certainty had its effect. The Captain was convinced. Lundgren's stock slumped to zero.

"Lieutenant, you amaze me," he said.

Hank dropped his airy manner. He said in clipped tones:

"Sit back, Captain. I'm going to amaze you a lot more." And began his story. He wasn't far along before Hart interrupted him angrily:

"Why wasn't I informed about the kitchen door?"

He was so much in the right that Hank did his best to placate him:

"You would have been, Captain, if I'd been sure. But there were a dozen ways that door could have been opened after 4:30. Until I could get my teeth into something solid, I didn't want to clutter you up with non-essentials. Shall we leave that angle for the moment?" He hurried on with his story.

As the Captain listened, Hank could almost see his mind working. There was chagrin that he had made a mistake in holding Vork, and relief that he had such a spectacular substitute as Lundgren—now that Charles' aristocratic halo had been painlessly removed. But Hank also saw that Hart resented fiercely the withholding of the facts about Adam, the locked door, the phone call to Larry Payne the night before the murder. With understandable acerbity, Hart said:

"If you'd come to me as you should have done with these matters as you discovered them, I never would have held Vork at all."

"Forty hours after the murder," Hank reminded him mildly, "I made a special trip up here to tell you about the phony toll call to Highcliff."

"At the time, I didn't know what a nasty bit of work this Lundgren was," Hart replied plaintively. "Even now, I am flabbergasted. The whole affair sounds like a shilling shocker. Yet the evidence is convincing."

"As far as it goes, Captain."

Hart looked surprised, reflected and then nodded. He was, after all, an efficient policeman when he wasn't blinded by blue blood.

"Too true," he said. "We haven't placed him at the scene of the crime."

"And I doubt if we will. If anyone had seen Lundgren in that Plymouth we'd have heard of it long ago."

"Quite." The Captain worried his mustache. "But what is our next step?"

"You couldn't get Lundgren in here and do a little job of—er—persuasion? Maybe get a confession?"

Hart threw himself into his favorite role—Chief Constable of an English countryside, champion of fair play even in a man hunt.

"Come, come, Lieutenant. There are certain basic decencies. It isn't done, you know. Besides," he added naively, voicing the real snag, "I doubt if we should get anywhere. A man who could think up a cinema plot like that and carry it out with the coolness he has shown, isn't going to break under any sort of questioning."

"You're right there," said Hank gloomily. "So we're stymied."

There was an arid pause. Then Hank saw the Captain's face brighten with interest.

"Now I wonder about that—" he said slowly.

"You've got an idea?"

"Possibly. Possibly. It just might work—"

"What might?"

"Lieutenant, I suggest we apply one of our fundamental axioms."

"What axiom?" Hank asked restively.

"We both know that most murderers would never be caught if they simply sat still after the crime."

"Well?"

"It is when they try to gild the lily, make some further move, that we get onto them."

"So?"

"Lundgren has sat still from the start. Hasn't made a single move. I propose to jockey him into making one."

"If you can, you're good. How are you going about it?" Hank asked skeptically.

"There is such a thing as fighting fire with fire. This whole crime is fantastic. I suggest that we be just as fantastic."

"Mind giving me a few details?" Hank tried to hang on to his patience.

"Not at all. What I have in mind is this—"

When Hart finished, Hank was full of doubts and objections. But Hart muzzled him by a simple starchy reminder that he was in charge of the case. The Captain brought the session to an end by a barely-concealed dismissal:

"Well, Lieutenant, you've done a splendid job even if you

stretched the code of teamwork a bit thin. But any further activity on your part might do more harm than good. It is even desirable that you do not show yourself in the village for the rest of the day. Our countryside hereabouts is very agreeable. I suggest a spot of sightseeing until I need you. You can safely leave things in my hands."

Hank had no choice but to comply. When he joined Adam in the outer room, the younger man had a look of suppressed excitement. He whispered to Hank:

"Hank, take a look at that little guy."

Hank saw a small pale man sitting on a bench against the wall, wearing a plaid windbreaker and a cap.

"He came in a while ago, all het-up, asking for Captain Hart. The trooper at the desk said Hart was busy, but the little guy was insistent. He said he had to see Hart right away, it was important. Hank, stick around. I think the little guy knows something."

Hank took a second look. The small man had the look of a tradesman, a grocer or some such. Hank said:

"I doubt it. Probably some trouble of his own—a garbage violation or a parking ticket. Why should it have to do with Lundgren?"

"But we could wait and find out."

"Boy, we're not so *persona grata* around these parts, especially you. Hart was foaming at the mouth because we didn't tell him a week ago about the kitchen door. And I've been told off in the best British accent to mind my own goddam business."

"Then this is all? We're out of the case?"

"Not quite. Come on. I'll tell you what's on the fire for Lundgren. See what you think of it."

When Hank finished, Adam said:

"So we're to admire the scenery while he cooks up this cockeyed drivel?"

"You got anything better to offer?" Hank shrugged.

"I guess not," he said glumly.

"Then let's drive over to White Plains and have ourselves a decent lunch."

Adam hesitated, then said:

"Look, Hank, I ought to be in town for a couple of hours. We're running a rehearsal to cut out some lines in ACT II. What do you

say if I drop you off at Irene's—she'll give you lunch. And I'll pick you up after rehearsal."

"That's okay." It suited Hank fine.

Irene was delighted to see them. While Hank called up Captain Farr to report the morning's results, Adam and Irene talked quietly. Then Adam left them and drove on down to New York.

Meantime, Charles Lundgren was at home, chafing inwardly at his enforced inaction. It had been a wearing week. He could not let down his guard for an instant. Before visitors—and there had been gratifyingly many—it was easy to play the heartbroken husband. An audience pepmed up his performance as truly as it did a professional actor's. But there were many hours alone which were beginning to tell on his nerves. He couldn't draw a natural breath on account of Martha. He had to leave his food nearly untouched and he was beginning to be savagely hungry. He smoked incessantly to reduce the craving for food and his mouth felt hot and disgusting.

He was itching to get back to the office but Lane had been up for the funeral and had insisted that Charles take a week or two off. He had no choice. Lane might be shocked if he came back too early or too eagerly to business. One fact gave him comfort in his tiresome role—Lane had definitely hinted at changes when Charles felt up to tackling work again. What could he mean except a partnership? The thought brought a sparkle to his eyes which he remembered to quell instantly. Martha, the old fool, with her long lugubrious face, expected him to beat his breast without a break. Well, it couldn't last forever. Slowly, the day wore itself away. At 7 o'clock, Martha served and then removed the practically untouched dinner. Why did she have to serve all his favorite dishes, he thought savagely?

He closed his eyes and reviewed his achievement. It was his only entertainment these days.

He had brought it off. Brilliant imagination, expert planning and iron determination had carried through a genuinely perfect murder. The Plymouth, the one thing tied to him, must have been towed away long since. If, a whole week later, it had not been connected with the murder, it never would be. James Scott was relegated to limbo from which he would never return. Kit was where she deserved to be for her treachery. In a matter of weeks, he, Charles Lundgren, son of a couple of ignorant immigrants, would

be practically a millionaire, his social position safe and the coveted partnership almost assured.

The bogey of the unknown lover was a thing of the past. Even if he had gone to Captain Hart with a tale that the Lundgren marriage was not the ideal match people believed, and that Kit was contemplating divorce, he hadn't a scrap of proof to bolster it up. But he had not gone. Otherwise, Charles, hypersensitive to any breeze of suspicion blowing his way, would have felt it. The lover was very sensibly keeping mum, so as not to involve himself.

There was nothing at all to fear from Captain Hart. He had his murderer and was strutting around like a pompous rooster. It was tough on Thomas but that wasn't Charles' fault. The real responsibility lay with Kit. If she hadn't probably been in bed with her lover at the moment Thomas brought back her fur stole that afternoon, she would have answered the door bell and there would have been no case against Thomas. At that, it was just as well to give Hart, the D.A. and the villagers their pound of flesh. Anything to steer attention away from Charles. And Irene spoke of engaging J. C. Bergamn, the best in the business. The clannishness of these people! It even extended to their servants—their loyal retainers. His jaw set sullenly as he thought of them: the Verhooven clique, Melanie and her Cedar Hill crowd, even the Lane-Pete Schuyler close corporation. He smiled humorlessly. He promised himself, when old Payne died and Charles was in control of Larry's fortune, there'd be a Lundgren-Payne faction. . . .

His plans for the future were interrupted by the phone. It was Irene.

"Hello, Charles, how are you?"

"All right," he said in a dead tone, going into his role. More than anyone else, he had to be careful with the sharp-witted Irene. Not that she could have the slightest suspicion of him, but he wanted to keep on good terms with her. He had uses for her in Highcliff, social and—a new horizon for him—possibly political. With Kit's money, earning was no longer so vital. A good Republican, a sound lawyer in an impeccable firm, might have a future of greater power in government than in private practice. In Highcliff, a Verhooven could help him enormously.

"If I'm disturbing you—are you busy—?" said Irene.

"Busy! No. I've nothing to be busy about, Irene."

"Now, Charles," she said, with really very decent sympathy, he thought. "You must begin to snap out of it. It's tragic, I know. But we do have to live with the living."

"I'm trying. I just need a little time."

"Of course. But you must make a start. I'll bet you're over there alone, brooding."

"I am alone."

"I, too. And to tell you the truth, a little depressed and heartsick myself about Thomas. Come over here for a while, why don't you?"

More posing, more putting on an act, he thought. But anything was better than sitting here with that damned Martha sticking her head in the door every two minutes with some maudlin tale of Kit's perfections.

"All right," he said. And then with his usual policy: "And thanks for thinking of me."

She opened the door to him herself and led him into the big somber library. The heavy drapes were drawn and only a few lamps turned on. The room gave him the shivers. Irene eyed him solicitously.

"You do look wretched, Charles. You've lost pounds. I'll bet you haven't been eating."

"Eating!" He repudiated anything so mundane.

"Well, how about a bracer? I could use one myself. I'll mix us both a drink. Will you get some ice cubes from the kitchen? The maids are all out. Poor things haven't left the house since—"

"Thanks, I don't want a drink, Irene." He didn't dare. On an empty stomach, a drink could loosen his tongue, break down his pose, uncover the yawning abyss.

"Well, take that big chair and relax." She curled up in another opposite him.

"You look a little pale yourself," he said.

"I'm all right," she said, not looking it.

"You're taking this business of Thomas too hard," he told her. "If the man's guilty—"

"You actually think he is?"

"What else can I think? The man's confessed."

"Charles! A lawyer giving weight to that confession? You know as well as I do he only did it to get Anna out of the mess."

"As a lawyer, I'm giving weight to the evidence. Kit's fur hidden away in their closet."

"Rubbish! I believe Thomas' story about that."

"You're very loyal but you mustn't let your feelings run away with you."

"It isn't only my feelings—" she began and broke off.

"What then?" he asked quickly. He was instantly alert to any angle of the situation since it might have bearing on him.

"Nothing. Nothing."

"There is something. I'm sure."

"Well—" She grinned sheepishly. "No. I just can't."

"Of course you can."

"I'm ashamed to tell you. You'd think I was touched in the head."

Here was a good chance, he thought, to get solid with her, to overcome the intangible resistance he had always felt in her. He said sympathetically:

"Irene, my dear, we're the only two left of the clan. We have to stand together. Something's troubling you and you must let me help."

"Thanks, Charles. You're very kind. And I do need help or at least, advice."

"I'm entirely at your service, you know that."

"Well, look. You'll agree I'm pretty level-headed—even hard-boiled—"

"Level-headed, I'll grant," he said with a faint air of courtliness.

"I'm a down-to-earth realist—never had patience with psychical stuff—seances, table-rappings, materializations—pure bunk. Claptrap for women with too much time on their hands."

"I agree with you fully."

"Yes, well. Don't laugh. But it's happened to me."

"What has?" He stifled a yawn. He had nothing to fear from this nonsense.

"You'll say I need a psychiatrist. And maybe I do. What with Father Verhooven's long siege and then this horror with Kit—my nerves are probably shot—"

"But what's happened?"

"These . . . scenes," she said in an embarrassed tone.

"Scenes?"

"I just can't get it out—it's too cockeyed."

"Tell me anyway. It'll do you good to get it out in the open."

"Well, lately, I haven't been sleeping much—I took a sedative once or twice but I hate the stuff—so for the last few nights I've done without."

"Go on," he said intensely bored.

"As soon as I close my eyes I see him."

"See whom?"

"This red-headed man."

"Red-headed man!" he echoed, galvanized.

"Yes. I know I'm a fool but it's so real—"

"Go on," he repeated numbly.

"It's like pictures behind my eyelids. I never see his face but every move he makes is as clear as if it were television."

"What-moves-does-he-make?" His mouth was dry. While half his mind told him that this was an idiotic coincidence, the other half cringed at the words "red-headed man."

"He kills Kit," she whispered.

Charles pulled himself together. In a flash, he wondered if Irene had seen him come up from the old road to the house that night and was trying to trap him. But instantly, he remembered that he had removed the red wig before he came up the steps. Was there such a thing as second sight? Nonsense! But there was such a thing as telepathy, thought transference. Possibly a strong mind like his own could leave an impression on a sensitive highstrung woman like Irene—but Irene wasn't highstrung—

"Tell me all about it," he said evenly.

"It starts in New York," she said, her eyes wide and bland. "I see him rent an apartment. Then he buys a car—a small car, it is—I can't see what kind but it's black and not new. He puts it in a garage. That's all I saw the first night."

"It happened more than once?" His voice was thick but he was relieved to see that Irene was too disturbed to notice.

"Oh, yes."

"The same thing?"

"No. Different pictures each time. The next time he's in an office, taking a pamphlet—no—a sort of manuscript—he takes it away and destroys it—"

"You see his face this time?" he asked softly.

"No, I never see his face. Just what he does."

"What else does he do?" The hairs on his neck were rising.

"I see a door—"

"A door!"

"In the office where the manuscript was. He unbolts it and goes out of it and down some stairs. Then he is in the little car—driving fast—closer and closer to Kit—" She sprang out of her chair and he too rose. He spoke soothingly:

"Irene, you're hysterical. You don't know what you're saying."

"Am I going crazy, Charles?"

"You're overwrought. Get hold of yourself. It's all imagination."

"But it's so real. I see everything he does—I see him on the old road—in the—yes, it's coming clear now—the car—it's a Plymouth—I see him coming up the outside steps—he doesn't go near the back door—he goes to the front—he has a key—he comes in—he goes upstairs—where Kit is—"

Charles took an iron grip on his jumping nerves. All the implications of the situation were crystal-clear to him. He realized that the police had traced every one of his secret actions—the car, the garage, the speech, the emergency door. But his sharp metallic brain grasped one thing more: they had staged this wild scene tonight between him and Irene. Why? To trap him. To jockey a confession from him. That meant that in spite of all they had learned, they still did not have a case against him. The knowledge was an immense advantage; he would play it for all it was worth.

He interrupted Irene's excited babbling with quiet firmness, certain that whatever he said was being overheard by hidden policemen:

"Irene, my dear, pull yourself together. I'm surprised to see a sensible woman like you go overboard this way. You do indeed need a psychiatrist, my dear girl. We'll see to that as soon as possible. Meantime, I insist that you take one of those sedatives, whether you like them or not."

Irene eyed him from under her lashes. The man was incredible. Hank had been right; this corny takeoff on Hamlet and the Players was no good. And yet, that first mention of a red-headed man had struck home. She had seen Charles flinch before he pulled himself together. Perhaps if she had one last try—

Before she could speak, the heavy drapes at the window parted

and Captain Hart stepped forward, followed by Wegger and Adam. Hank, still behind the curtain, gnashed his teeth. He had tagged Hart as a fool for staging the scene in the first place. But now, when the thing had curdled under their noses, he cursed the Captain for alerting Lundgren by showing himself. A moment later, he was shocked beyond words as he listened incredulously to Hart:

"Charles Lundgren, I arrest you in the name of the law for the murder of—"

"Ah, the good Captain," Charles interrupted with devastating honey in his tones. "The mouse trying to play the lion. The sprat sent to catch the whale. You would be amusing, my dear Captain, if you weren't so pathetic."

Hank, listening, agreed unhappily with Charles. Reluctantly, he too came forward into the room, in time to see Hart draw himself up in his best British military pose. Quietly, stolidly, but implacably, he repeated:

"Charles Lundgren, I arrest you in the name of the law for the murder of your wife Katrina Lundgren and I warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence against you."

Charles smiled, a pitying superior smile.

"Captain, don't they teach you the meaning of the word evidence before they chuck you into uniform? Is it senility or are you just arrest-happy? First, that decent upright citizen Thomas Vork and now me. I should recommend a psychiatrist for you too, my poor fellow. Good night, sir. Come back when you have a case."

The Captain should have been in ruins, Hank thought. Every word that Lundgren said was painfully true. They still didn't have a case and that mumbo-jumbo tonight had put Lundgren on guard. They were worse off than ever. But the Captain, with a calm self-confidence which Hank felt was grossly misplaced, said:

"Have you anything to say before you are taken away?"

Charles reached for a cigarette, lit it and puffed with enjoyment. In a leisurely manner, he said:

"Anything to say? No, I don't believe so. Except to tell you that you have my sympathy. The D.A. isn't going to like this, you know. I know him well—we play golf together—and he is a stickler for evidence. And when I tell him about this imbecile farce you put on here tonight—"

"Sergeant," Hart said quietly.

Wegger snapped handcuffs on Charles' wrists. Charles flushed a dark furious scarlet.

"You dare!" he shouted. "This is an outrage!"

"Quite," said Hart imperturbably, while Hank suppressed a groan. He shot a glance at Adam to see if he too realized the annihilation of all their work. But Adam was watching interestedly, without misgivings. The kid's just an amateur, Hank thought; it takes a cop to see that Hart's done the one thing to insure Lundgren's getting off scotfree with no more than a pale stain on his character for leading a double life with a *sub rosa* apartment and car.

The handcuffs had brought Charles to boiling-point. He spat at Hart:

"I'll break you for this! I happen to have a little influence in this community. I'll see to it that you are brought up on charges, expelled in disgrace, hounded off the Force, stripped of your uniform, a laughingstock—" He choked on his own rage.

It was then that the front door bell rang loudly. Wegger answered it and returned immediately with a trooper and a small pale man in a plaid windbreaker and cap. Hank frowned and tried to remember if this was the same little man who had intrigued Adam that morning at the barracks.

Hart turned and said urbanely:

"Yes, Ross, what is it?"

The trooper saluted.

"Captain, this man—"

Irene cut in:

"Why, it's Mr. Goldmark—"

". . . has something of importance to submit in the Lundgren murder."

"Yes?" Hart was really purring now. "Mr. Goldmark, is it? Well, what have you to say, my friend?"

Hank's green eyes narrowed. What was Hart pulling? Did he have an ace up his sleeve? And had he kept it from Hank because Hank had withheld his findings from the Captain until that morning?

The small man cleared his throat and began with a mixture of excitement at the situation and awe of his surroundings:

"I work for the Oxford Cleaning and Dyeing shop in the village. We got most of the trade in the neighborhood. We got a regular service, calling and delivering. Yesterday was my day to call at the Lundgrens and the housekeeper give me two suits of Mr. Lundgren's for cleaning and pressing."

"Yes? Yes? Go on," said Hart benignly.

"People are funny," said Goldmark. "They clear out the pockets all right but they never think of the cuffs—"

"Cuffs!" Hank echoed, startled.

"The pant cuffs. Many's the quarters and dimes we find in the bottoms of trousers. We got orders to examine them and send back anything we find."

"You found something yesterday?" Hart fed him the line.

"Yes, Captain. This." A dye-stained hand shot out with a topaz earring lying on the palm. "I read the description in the *High-cliff Sun* and I thought—"

"Well. What have we here?" said Hart blandly. "It looks like one of Mrs. Lundgren's missing earrings which Mrs. Verhooven gave her the very day of the murder." He peered more closely. "Ah, yes. All those fine small gold spikes. They would catch in the material and would not be easily dislodged." He turned directly to Charles, seeming suddenly taller, more erect, more British than ever. "Mrs. Verhooven gave those earrings to her niece the day of the murder after you had left the house for New York. The only time one of them could have fallen into your trouser-cuff was when you rifled her jewel case to make it appear murder by a burglar after you had killed her. I believe," he added suavely, "one may safely call this earring evidence. And I rather fancy that the D.A. will agree that we do have a case."

The physical evidence broke Charles. All his suppressed fear of the law, his essential cowardice and his shock at the petty bauble that had brought down his beautiful edifice—all these swamped him. He raged, he slobbered, above all, he babbled. His words tripped over each other in a kind of irresistible urge to pour out the full hideous tale. When Wegger and Ross led him out to the police car, he was sobbing:

"I had to! I had to! She was destroying ME!"

Hart, still the quintessence of all Chief Constables, turned to Irene:

"Mrs. Verhooven, may I say that you showed remarkable pluck? I was proud to be working with you." Then to Hank, affably but from the heights: "Lieutenant, my compliments. You did a painstaking job of detection, even if you did not strike at the heart of the matter." He smiled and held out his hand. "I felt from the start that our best lead was the jewelry. We country police officers may be slow but we are very, very sure." He inclined his head and followed his men out.

Hank, red in the face, made an elaborate bow after him.

"Colonel Brunch of Ham-on-Rye," he said caustically.

"Hank," said Irene with some amusement. "Don't be sore."

"I'm sore about you," he told her sourly. "That stagestruck barn-stormer knew he had the case in the bag this morning as soon as he spoke to Goldmark here. But he let you go through that lousy scene tonight, just so he could put on his act and hog the limelight."

"I didn't mind the scene," she said soothingly. "My only regret is that Charles didn't try to throttle me. I'd have enjoyed using the judo they taught me as a WAC and breaking a few of his bones."

"I've got other things to be sore about," he grumbled.

"Oh? I'd like to know what."

"Well, look at us!" he said sardonically. "The Three Fabulous Sleuths. All we need is a magnifying glass and deer-stalker caps to put Sherlock Holmes in his place. Celebrating by the hour at the top of our lungs and wearing out feet to the bone running to garages and car pounds. Terrific. Piling up the facts and Lundgren could have laughed in our faces till the crack of doom if it hadn't been for the million-to-one chance of Goldmark finding—"

Mr. Goldmark dumbfounded Hank by uttering a loud snicker which he tried to turn into a sneeze.

"It's okay, Bill," Adam grinned. "Laugh all you want. You did fine."

Hank goggled.

Irene interrupted quickly.

"This is Mr. Granger, Hank, of the case of 'In Line of Duty.' They're using an understudy in the show tonight."

"You mean you two and Hart put on an act with phony evidence—"

"Not Hart," said Adam. "I mean—he didn't know either—"

"Suppose you give it to me in Basic English."

"Well, when you told me what Hart had on the fire, with Irene trying to scare a confession out of Lundgren, I knew it was no good. A five-year-old could have seen through it. So I knew we had to go one better if we expected to nail him. It was that little guy at the barracks this morning that gave me the idea. I thought, why can't there be another little guy—with an earring in his pocket. While you were phoning your Chief, Irene told me they came from Bergdorf's. Bill here was glad to help out. Of course, there wasn't any rehearsal but we waited till after five so the cleaning shop would be closed and Hart couldn't check till morning. I dropped Bill, complete with windbreaker and dye stains on his hands, near the barracks and he spilled his tale to Hart. That's about it, I guess."

"And why did I have to be kept in the dark, may I ask?"

"Well, look, Hank, I didn't know if cops would hold still for a trick like that, so I—"

"And if it hadn't worked out? You'd have looked pretty tomorrow morning."

Adam grinned broadly.

"Hell, impersonating a pants-presser can't be much of a misdemeanor. Bill and I were willing to take a chance."

Hank gave him a hearty shove.

"You doggoned playwright! So now a couple of rank amateurs show me up. Break the case while Lieutenant H. Riesner sits on his tail behind a curtain. Wonderfull!"

"Stop it, Hank," said Irene sharply. "You were wonderful. We all were. First of all, Adam, with his writer's knowledge of human character. He knew it had to be Charles. The crime and the person fitted each other. And no witnesses, no appearances, no so-called facts could move him. Then you. Once he'd wound you up, you were terrific. You formed theories and then went out and proved them—"

"And what did it get me?"

"Hank," she said more gently, "you did a much harder thing than nailing a murderer: you convinced Hart. You opened a mind that was closed, sealed and triple-locked. If you hadn't had all those facts to tell him—the car, the phone call, the speech, the typewriters, even the lack of snow in Kit's bedroom—Charles would have fobbed him off with some slick tale that the earring fell into his trouser cuff

while he was trying to revive Kit. And Hart would have swallowed it! He'd have gone right on putting poor Thomas through hell. Come out of it, Hank. You're a disgrace to the team."

"And you?" he grumbled. "I suppose you were just along for the ride?"

"Not at all," she said composedly. "I did my share. That was a darn good scene tonight. I scared the wits out of Charles with my cockeyed tale. I got him off balance. Softened him up for Hart's bombshell. We were all good. So stop glooming."

But Hank was still gloomy inside. He had known Irene three days. And she was the first woman who had ever touched his imagination and stirred his feelings. The case was over. He would go back to New York to his chill bald routine and she would be up here at Highcliff living a life totally remote from him. Their paths would never cross.

But he didn't know Irene. It was at the door when she was bidding them all good night that the accolade came. Hank shook hands and said flatly:

"Well, good bye."

"In Texas, where I come from," she said, "they have a pleasant way of saying good bye."

"Yes? What's that?"

She met his eyes squarely.

"They say: 'Hurry back.'"

THE END

(continued from front flap)

him. Yet obviously his movements were under the surveillance of a *number* of people.

First: there was that curvaceous creature (so *definitely* not his type) in the cheap fur coat. Second: there were his Korean war buddies, who swore revenge. And third—in spite of Hardy's elegant Boston background—there were the police—who suspected him of murder!

BACKFIRE

by Edna Sherry

IS IT POSSIBLE to commit a *foolproof* murder? There certainly seemed no alternative for Charles Lundgren, if he hoped to keep his place at the top of the business (and social) ladder.

It must, of course, be the *perfect* crime; with the *perfect* alibi. And *no clues*. As for the victim—well, that would be telling. . . . And no one tells it better than Edna Sherry in this unusual novel of terror and suspense.

THE DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB

Flower Hill, Roslyn, N.Y.

THE DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB



**You'll find no better pick-me-up
Wherever you may be . . .
Than the latest triple volume
From the DBC.**

Detective, mystery and suspense novels by the foremost exponents of that highly specialized craft. Cream of the current crop—low-priced and tip-top.

**THE DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB
FLOWER HILL, ROSLYN, N. Y.**